

ABSTRACTS
THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR RESEARCH SEMINAR
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Cristina León Alfar, “‘A woman of quick sense,’ or Mirth and Consequences: Stories, the Gossip Network, and Women’s Agency”

In this essay, I set *The Merry Wives of Windsor* alongside *Troilus and Cressida* as contrasts in women’s verbal agency and struggle against false narratives. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* stages the success of Mistresses Ford and Page, whose friendship enables their campaign against Falstaff to take back their story and to write a story about him, creating a shift in the discourse on female virtue that opens the possibility for a revised notion of proper femininity. While Cressida shows a tendency toward merriment, her mirth cannot dislodge Troilus’s or the Greek soldiers’ narrative about her. In varying degrees, all these men assume her bodily availability to them, whether in an unsanctioned tryst or as they pass her around the camp to be kissed. Staged as a scene of rape, Cressida avoids some kisses by mocking her Greek rapists. However, literary history has misrecognized that resistance as coquetry, reading her as one of Ulysses’s “sluttish spoils of opportunity” (4.5.62). Cressida’s story is constructed by men whose vision of her as just one more whore of Troy is politically motivated. Yet Cressida’s use of mirth to distance herself from the play’s warriors invites some investigation, especially in light of the agency the merry wives achieve from merriment. The network or community the wives form enables their agency and opens the opportunity for the play’s deconstruction of a binary between virtue and mirth. While Cressida’s mirth teaches the men nothing new about women, it registers her discomfort with the precariousness of her role in and contempt for the men’s battle over women’s bodies. Thus reading *Troilus and Cressida* through *Merry Wives* offers alternatives to Ulysses’s assessment of Cressida and allows us to understand the play as staging a female narrative about the unreliability of male honor and loyalty.

Charlotte Artese, “‘Have I encompassed you?’: Men’s and Women’s Uses of ‘The Blood-brother’s Wife’ Folktale in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*”

The source for the main plot of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* can be found in the international folktale “The Blood-brother’s Wife.” The Italian and English novellas sometimes considered as sources or analogues of the play are among the literary versions of the folktale, which occurs in oral tradition in India, the Middle East, North Africa, and most of Europe. In the folktale, one man confides in another man about his love affair, not realizing (although the other man does) that his mistress is the other man’s wife. The husband asks the lover when he is next to visit his mistress, planning to surprise the two lovers. When he tries to do so, however, his wife cleverly hides her lover, who later relates his close call to the husband. This episode is repeated with a different hiding place or method of escape. The play provides two enactments of the folktale. Falstaff and Ford take on the roles of the lover and husband. Meanwhile, Mistress Ford performs the role of the wife in the folktale, conscious that she is acting out a fiction: she is only pretending to take Falstaff as her lover and is only pretending that their rendezvous is interrupted by Ford, forcing her to hide and disguise Falstaff. The resulting structure creates an identification of the men’s plot with the folktale, and the wives’ plot with Shakespeare’s play, which likewise encompasses “The Blood-Brother’s Wife” folktale.

Rachel Ellen Clark, “Reprinting *The Merry Wives* in 1630: Q3, Nostalgia, and the Caroline Courts”

Inasmuch as the stationer Richard Meighen is famous at all, it is for his involvement in the publishing cartel behind Shakespeare’s Second Folio in 1632. Yet two years before, he published the third quarto of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, following the version of the text that had been published in the First Folio. This essay explores why Meighen might have chosen to publish that version of *Merry Wives* in 1630, arguing that the F1/Q3 version of the play connects fortuitously with the emphasis on peace, courtly ceremony, and chaste wifeliness that had come to dominate court culture after the duke of

Buckingham's assassination in 1628 and the treaties that concluded the wars with France and Spain in 1629 and 1630 (respectively). The presence of the fairy masque and its emphasis on the Order of the Garter, I suggest, intersect with a burgeoning Elizabethanist discourse that bloomed as Henrietta Maria became more powerful at court and that portrayed Elizabeth as a sort of typological forerunner for the newer queen. Furthermore, the play embodies a Caroline version of the myth of Merry Old England, drawing on nostalgic versions of English national culture in a way that enfolds even the French Catholic queen. By doing so, *Merry Wives* contributes to a strand of recuperative nostalgia for the Elizabethan era that permeated the print culture of the 1630s, a nostalgia that -- far from representing simple "oppositional" attitudes -- actively negotiated different ways of being English.

Anne Gill, "‘Try nurse’ or ‘Cupid’s carrier’: Was Mistress Quickly a Bawd?"

This paper examines the differences in the presentation of Mistress Quickly between the 1602 quarto and the 1623 First Folio editions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and argues that, despite clear problems over the provenance of the quarto edition, these differences demonstrate a change in attitude towards older women after the accession of James I.

The quarto edition of *Merry Wives* portrays an older woman who is a house servant, an intimate of the "merry wives" and Anne Page, whose role as messenger between the wives and Falstaff demonstrated that she was part of the female conspiracy to fool the old man rather than acting independently for her own gain. Thomas Dekker's *Westward Hoe*, a play performed and printed in the first years of James's reign, portrayed a very different older woman -- an independent sexual procuress whose relationship with city wives was explicitly venal. I would argue that this dramatic characterisation, which can be seen to a lesser extent in many plays performed in the first decade of the seventeenth century, affected the expectation of players and audiences when depicting older women, particularly those of a lower social class.

My premise is that when this obviously popular play was performed in the years between 1602 and 1623, either Shakespeare, or the players themselves, considered it necessary to provide additional material to make Mistress Quickly fit the popular conception of the single, subservient, older woman, that is, she must be a bawd.

Bradley Greenburg, "‘A mere scutcheon’: The Discourse of Honor and Its Discontents in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*"

My paper for the seminar explores the way *Merry Wives* repurposes characters, plot lines, and tropes to bridge the gap between the first three plays of the Henriad and *Henry V*. If Giorgio Melchiori is correct that the action of the play comes between *Henry IV Part 2* and *Henry V*, then we might expect the playwright to make use of comic structure to extend the life of Falstaff. I look closely at Falstaff's diversion into comedy after he has been summarily dismissed from the English court at the close of *Henry IV*. To do so, I isolate the way two concepts -- sex (specifically, female sexuality) and honor -- intersect, interact, mutually reinforce one another, and lead by comedic ways to historical conclusions. Rather than assume that *Merry Wives* is a one-off comedy with no relationship to Shakespeare's interests in historical and historiographic subjects, I try to demonstrate a continuity with the larger project of the Henriad.

Fran Helphinstine, "Shakespeare's Shrewd Women: Witty and Quick Witted"

In several of Shakespeare's comedies, young women achieve their desired marriage by the display of wit and quick-witted action. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* the young Rosalind and Celia practice witty banter as prelude to quick-witted responses to Orlando's view of women as a ploy to win his hand in marriage; in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick, on his return from the wars, first seeks the delights of Beatrice's witty insults before being trapped by her quick-witted plan that saves Hero and wins her a husband; in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio transforms the insults of a more mature Katherine into their opposite to gain her as wife who speaks to his wager that she is at heart that opposite. We are left to wonder about their lives as wives. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page

indicate they are frugal with their mirth when other males visit their home; but when Falstaff makes unwarranted advances to both of them, they want to teach such men as well as jealous husbands a lesson. Although Mrs. Page's first impulse is to "exhibit a bill in parliament for the putting down of men," Mrs. Ford vows she would even spend one day in hell to be knighted, that is to have male privilege. As a team they achieve both ends by resorting to their merry nature, their witty keenness in discerning those elements of a situation that relate to what is comic and talent for making effective comment on them. Through their quick-witted devices, the jealous Mr. Ford is brought to marital shame by other men on two occasions, when they search his home, finding no Falstaff. Their wit also receives a knightly transformation when a knight, albeit Falstaff, claims that "my admirable dexterity of wit, my counterfeiting the action of an old woman, delivered me" (4.6.110). However, an act of parliament could not render the public shame suffered by Falstaff, a deer in horns, which the wives easily create from a well-known folk tale. Appropriately, near the end, Mrs. Page can address the husband of the newest wife in Windsor -- Anne Page -- with "Heaven give you many, many, merry days!"

Adam H. Kitzes, "When it happens to an Author who has been a long time dead...": Inventing the Life of Shakespeare through *The Merry Wives of Windsor*"

According to legend, Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* had its origins in a command from Queen Elizabeth to furnish an additional Falstaff play which featured the knight in love -- an order to which the playwright complied in less than two weeks. For this anecdote, we have two sources. John Dennis introduced it in the Preface to his play, *The Comical Gallant*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's comedy; after a disastrous performance, Dennis tried to salvage his efforts by printing the script and attaching a formal critical essay, which explained his own endeavors and further elaborated on the state of taste among his contemporaries. Seven years later, the anecdote resurfaced in the Preface to Nicholas Rowe's complete edition of the plays, where it served as part of a larger collection of anecdotes that Rowe presented as the first formal biography of the late playwright. As information about Shakespeare goes, this anecdote holds roughly the status of malicious gossip. While few people believe its authenticity, countless critics have repeated it, often to justify an unfavorable view of the play; more broadly, critics who have attended to Falstaff as a character routinely ignore the play in their analyses. This tradition is unfortunate, for not only has it done untold damage to the play's fortunes (as Giorgio Melchiori observes), but it obscures our understanding of the factors that led such diverse figures as Dennis and Rowe to make use of it in the first place. In this essay, I explore those reasons, arguing that the legend appealed in part because it could sustain such radically distinct projects as Dennis' theatrical adaptation and Rowe's critical edition. To that extent the Falstaff legend marked a critical juncture in the historical reception of Shakespeare's plays: even while the plays continued to appeal, their cultural conditions had grown remote enough to demand new inquiry into the playwright's life; and while both Dennis and Rowe clearly wanted to appeal to a tradition of Shakespeare as a living author, they faced fundamental differences in belief over just how to carry it out.

Kathleen McLuskie, "Old tales and 'idle-headed eld': Roles for time in *The Merry Wives*"

This paper explores the different roles for time in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It addresses the capacity of Shakespeare's plays to move between the shared present of the theatrical experience, the narrative time of the action, and the invocation of the historical time of social change that informs its contemporary reproduction.

It begins by addressing the role of time in the utopian narratives of feminism and the ways that their genres complicate the binary of present and past. I argue for a distinction between the historical time of real social change, the narrative time of the play's action, and the shared present of theatrical experience. I show how these distinct roles for time not only operate between the text and the present but also inflect the ways that the characters frame their own relationship to time within the narrative. I then draw attention to the differences in this account of time offered in the two texts of the play (F1 and Q1) and suggest that critical responses to those differences are themselves inflected by expectations arising from attempts to locate the play in historical time.

The aim of the paper throughout is to acknowledge but also resist the implied teleology of the familiar opposition between the present and the past, exploring instead the complex relationships between text, narrative, and time as they are mediated by material changes in theatre and in print.

Carol Thomas Neely, ““Strange things in hand’: A Queer/Feminist Interpretation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*”

My essay accepts Eve Sedgwick’s characterization of queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (*Tendencies* 25). It grows out of my frustration with the see-sawing binaries -- agency and interpellation, national and local, women and men, heteroerotic and homoerotic, political and domestic -- that shape much literary criticism including feminist and Shakespearean (and my own). I hope to evade these binaries by examining desire’s “straying” and “unraveling” (Madhavi Menon, *Shakespeareer* 6) in order to queer the boundaries of gender, age, rank, sexuality and marriage in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The play’s many older single men (and one woman) and its many young boys, just like its married and to-be-married characters, seek strange pleasures through bawdy insults and bodily revenge, through domination and abjection, through imagined and self-satisfying cuckoldry, adultery, and fetishism. All these pleasures circulate and are fulfilled within triangles of desire that develop between men who bond to exchange women and boys and between women who bond to exchange men, women, and boys. Straying pleasures are caught up and unraveled in the revenge comedy’s concluding Windsor Park rituals. The wives share, empower with horns, and humiliate Falstaff, whose satisfaction is to be lustily pinched and burned by boys dressed as fairies; three men are married to cross-dressed boys; marriage as cuckoldry provides the happy ending.

Marianne Novy, “Female Tricksters in *Merry Wives* and *Twelfth Night*”

The readiness of Ford to believe in his wife’s infidelity, along with the readiness of Falstaff to believe she has encouraged him, might lead one to believe that women are outsiders in the world of *Merry Wives*. But Mistress Page and Mistress Ford are so clever at tricking Falstaff that they clearly are more insiders, and he is the humiliated outsider, though he is invited to join in the merriment at the end. The mischief that Mistresses Ford and Page do to Falstaff probably has its closest Shakespearean parallel in the mischief that Maria does to Malvolio in a play probably written a few years later. Both Falstaff and Malvolio are punished most for their presumption in pursuing a woman. In both cases the man shows interest in a woman who has not solicited it, and is led on to shame by misleading messages. Mistresses Page and Ford get what they want in their stratagem, Falstaff’s defeat and Ford’s apology; Maria gets Malvolio’s defeat and marriage to Sir Toby.

All three women show some household power from the beginning; however, for two of them their trickster power or its staging is limited. Mistress Page can’t get her daughter married to Master Caius; Maria is absent from the scene where Malvolio reads her letter and doesn’t bait him as Feste does in his disguise as Sir Topas, and the marriage to Toby is announced by Fabian in her absence. (Ironically, Toby is close enough to Falstaff in characterization -- though less witty -- that Maria’s happy ending is a kind of domestic parody of the fate that would have been a nightmare for the Merry Wives).

Susan O’Malley, ““May we, with the Warrant of Womanhood and the witness of a good conscience, pursue him with any further revenge?”: Feminist Citizen Revenge Comedy in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*”

The Merry Wives of Windsor is filled with a tangle of revenge plots: Shallow seeks revenge on Falstaff for stealing a deer; Slender seeks revenge on Falstaff and his three men; Nym and Pistol desire revenge on Falstaff for being let go; Dr. Caius wants revenge on Evans for loving Anne Page; Dr. Caius and Parson Evans want revenge on the Host of the Garter Inn; Mistress Ford and Mistress Page plot two private and one public shaming revenge on Falstaff for his wooing of them with identical letters. These last three examples of revenge by Mistresses Ford and Page are the focus of my paper. Taking the terms

in my title, “feminist,” “citizen,” and “comedy,” and building on previous criticism by Natasha Korda, Rosemary Kegl, Jeanne Addison Roberts, Peter Erickson, Pamela Allen Brown, Coppelia Kahn, Anne Parten, Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, I reread the revenge plots of *Mistresses Ford and Page* and ask the following questions. Is revenge gendered? Is there a tradition of feminist revenge? What happens when feminist revenge is confined within the boundaries of comedy? And what happens when the revengers are middle-aged, economically very comfortable, English women of the “middling sort”?

Helen Ostovich, “Bucking Tradition in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1602: Not a bad quarto, really”

My paper rejects the “bad quarto” label on *MWW* Q, and demonstrates that Q is a reliable and distinct version of *MWW*, alert to performance values, alive to the farce of the Falstaff role, as well as the absurd English mangled by Welsh and French speakers, and initiating the witty language also evident in the 1623 folio. An experiment in city comedy, the play shows us an alliance of merry wives, especially the transformation of Mrs Ford from a frustrated wife to a self-assertive woman who equals or exceeds Mrs Page (and Mrs Quickly) in managing her domestic and community life.

The Q text focuses on the prop that also dominates the Folio; the buckbasket, metaphorically or metonymically representing women, appears in three scenes to humiliate and correct wrong attitudes in men. Falstaff is reduced to the level of his farcical sexual desires when, leaping into the buckbasket to hide from her husband, he is squeezed into Mistress Ford’s sweaty sheets and smocks. Master Ford’s irrational jealousy is also ridiculed when, in a second search for Falstaff, he attacks the laundry-basket, and scatters its contents before his neighbours. The final revelation of Falstaff as the ‘buck’ depends on community action to keep Windsor families unsullied.

Q’s reliance on women’s wit in the play, from their first words in scene 1, reverses the usual dramatic and literary assumptions about women and the sexuality associated with laundry by expressing confidence in women’s ability to expose male folly. Q’s direct focus on the merry wives, including stage directions omitted in F, reveals a somewhat different play from F’s nostalgic celebration of the Fairy Queen.

Rachel Prusko, “Who hath got the right Anne?": Gossip, Resistance, and Anne Page in Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives*”

My paper reads Anne Page in light of the play’s propensity for gossip. We come to know Anne, early in the play, not through her own words but through the gossip about her: Mistress Quickly insists, repeatedly, that she “know[s] Anne’s mind,” informing Fenton that Anne is “an honest maid” but given to “allicholy and musing” (1.4.99, 143, 146). Indeed the play is much concerned with ways of knowing, and to that end characters frequently engage in gossip, both as an oral form, and, when inscribed in letters, a literate one. Constantly circulating among the characters, such words and texts have a destabilizing effect: knowledge of self and other in the *Merry Wives* is ever a precarious, uncertain matter. Falstaff, that “dissembling knight,” works to persuade Mistress Ford that “there’s something extraordinary in thee” (3.3.63-65); Ford mistakes himself for a cuckold; Shallow must woo on Slender’s behalf; and Anne herself, only “seemingly obedient,” is not what she appears to be.

The paper suggests that gossip in the play disrupts more than it constructs subjectivity, and that it therefore offers Anne, who would otherwise be “disposed of” by her father, a measure of resistance. While gossip is itself a form of resistant behavior, constituting a “democratic voice” in James C. Scott’s terms, Anne as its central subject reaps the benefits of its circulation. Gossip disperses knowledge and eliminates the possibility of a single, defining narrative; it prevents containment or categorization of this teen-aged girl. The increasing prominence of the “minor plot” involving Fenton and Anne, not merely a device of the dramatic structure, reveals Anne’s capacity for choice and self-fashioning.

Emily Sloan-Pace, “‘All [her] acts are queens’: The Meeting of the Monarchy and the Middling Classes in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*”

While Prince Hal may only warrant a passing reference in the decidedly middle class space of *Merry Wives of Windsor*, the specter of monarchy, and particularly that of Queen Elizabeth, appears repeatedly, primarily in relation to the character of Mistress Quickly. Quickly is a minor yet significant player in the drama who comes to be aligned with Elizabeth, transforming from malapropistic maidservant into a Fairy Queen speaking in rhymed couplets while doling out punishment to Falstaff. The setting of Windsor creates two explicit monarchical allusions; Windsor was the location of one of many royal palaces, and perhaps more importantly, served as the meeting (and founding) place of the Knights of the Order of the Garter. The Order of the Garter was one of the nation’s highest honors, and Elizabeth presided over the Garter feast at which this play debuted in 1597. Through her work for Dr. Caius, a would-be member of the Knights, Quickly operates in the peripheries of monarchical space. In the final scene of the play, the mistress performs a skimmington on Falstaff, punishing his attempted cuckoldry while elevating her status to Fairy Queen. In the wake of Spenser’s epic poem, the Fairy Queen is an identity readily associated with (and cultivated by) Elizabeth herself, and Quickly’s movement into a version of this character aligns her with the woman on the throne. Quickly ends the play transformed into a victorious “monarch” presiding over the fat knight Falstaff in the woods of Windsor; the allusions to Queen Elizabeth are subtle yet potent, and render Quickly a far more sophisticated character than critics, and Falstaff, would have us believe.

Kay Stanton, “The Revengers’ Comedy: *Merry Wives* as a Feminist ‘Parallel Universe’ of the *Henriad*”

If Falstaff is the parody king in the subplot of the *Henriad*, reigning in the Eastcheap tavern as Henry IV reigns at court, Hostess Quickly is in a sense its “queen” -- in fact, she is twice called such by Falstaff as he impersonates the king in the tavern playacting scene of *1 Henry IV*, II. iv. (373, 375). Yet if Henry IV is king of England through usurpation of the previous patriarch’s power and by subversion of Mortimer’s right of succession through the female, Falstaff not only usurps patriarchal power as symbolic replacement “father” to Hal, but also reigns in the tavern by subverting the female right to rule there of Hostess Quickly. Within the history play genre, or “universe,” Nell Quickly is disempowered, as are the other female characters, but in the comedic “universe,” she becomes a “queen” presiding over female-determined revenge on Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Since Northrup Frye, critics have recognized Shakespeare’s employment of a “green world,” a site for alternative prospects of characters to be explored, and since Phyllis Rackin’s works discussing female characters in the history plays as “antihistorians,” feminist critics have begun to acknowledge that Shakespeare subverts historical “reality” through the challenges to its veracity that these female voices present. This paper argues that the intersections between the *Henriad* and *Merry Wives* may be read as Shakespeare’s anticipation of string theory’s hypothesis of parallel universes, with Falstaff and Quickly serving as fulcrums: Falstaff challenging “history” with a “green world” alternative “universe,” with Falstaff’s realm itself challenged by an “antihistorian” realm of Quickly and the other empowered women of *Merry Wives*.