

# UNPACKING THE MERRY WIVES

Robert Brazil

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**S**HAKESPEARE'S play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, is filled with fascinating enigmas. This comedy, set in the environs of Windsor Castle, weaves together a street level story of love, lust, greed, competition and humiliation with a commentary on society that, while it spoke directly to the concerns of its contemporary late sixteenth-century audience, abounds with references that are extremely suggestive today to students and researchers of the Oxfordian theory. Because *Merry Wives* was first printed in 1602, most standard commentators on Shakespeare consider it to be a mid-career play, written while the author was at the height of his powers, roughly simultaneous with *Hamlet*. Yet everything about the play, including the sensibility, the crude style, and the too-old contemporary allusions, suggests that it was an earlier work, its topical references and concerns those of the 1580s, with some 1590s references added to a later revival, to become an interesting anachronistic revival by 1602. The central ideas and plot elements in *Merry Wives* involve the high stakes wooing of young Anne Page by three suitors, the farcical wooing of Mrs. Ford by three other suitors, the complex humiliations of Falstaff, Master Ford, Slender, Doctor Caius and others, and Master Ford's fear that he will be cuckolded.

As the play begins, Shallow, Slender and Hugh Evans are walking into the village in front of Page's house. Shallow states that he won't change his mind, he is going to make a Star Chamber affair out of Falstaff's offense, introducing a subplot that has little apparent relevance to the main plot, but which is filled with accurate descriptions of county lawsuits and disputes and the archaic Latin-based bureaucracy associated with the process. Edward de Vere was steeped in this world, and the numerous surviving documents which detail Oxford's business affairs show much more affinity to the matters described in *Merry Wives*, than do the small-claims-court paper trail associated with Shaksper of Stratford.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the patter among the three men is just a frame for some jokes involving puns on Heraldic terminology. Clearly the author is familiar with the arcane language of the Heralds.

## **Merry Wives Time Frame**

Although many commentators feel that *Merry Wives* is the only one of the Shakespeare plays in which the time, place, and social conditions depicted are contemporary to the Elizabethan era (Asimov 421), the play is linked by several characters: Falstaff, Bardolf, Pistol, Shallow, and Mistress Quickly, to the Henry IV plays and their time period. *2 Henry IV* ends with Henry IV's death and the coronation of Henry V in 1413, while *Henry V* features the battle

of Agincourt, which took place in 1415. Falstaff is alive at the end of *2 Henry IV*, but is declared to be dead in *Henry V*. So the imagined setting for *Merry Wives* must be either 1414, or earlier, but not later. Still, there are problems assuming such a clean continuity for the Falstaff character. At the close of *2 Henry IV*, Falstaff and his crew await an audience with their drinking buddy Hal, now King of England; whereupon their former friend gives them a “royal snubbing” and packs the lot of them off to jail. The close of the play features an Epilogue spoken by a dancer:

First my fear, then my curtsy, last my speech. My fear, is your displeasure; my curtsy, my duty; and my speech, to beg your pardons. One word more, I beseech you. If you be not too much cloy'd with fat meat, our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katherine of France; where, for anything I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already 'a be killed with your hard opinions; for Oldcastle died a martyr and this is not the man. My tongue is weary; when my legs are too, I will bid you good night.

The author takes this opportunity to let the audience know there is another Falstaff play in the works, although the play described sounds like one that would feature, rather than exclude, Falstaff. The author is also taking the opportunity to do some spin control on the Falstaff/Oldcastle slander problem.<sup>2</sup> The dancer in the Epilogue forecasts that Falstaff will die in the play to come, but as it turns out, those death scenes were either deleted or never written. What remains is this: *Henry V*:II:3:

Eastcheap. Before the Boar's Head tavern  
Enter PISTOL, HOSTESS, NYM, BARDOLPH, and Boy.  
HOSTESS.     Prithee, honey-sweet husband, let me bring thee to Staines.  
PISTOL.       No; for my manly heart doth yearn.  
                  Bardolph, be blithe; Nym, rouse thy vaunting veins;  
                  Boy, bristle thy courage up. For Falstaff he is dead,  
                  And we must earn therefore.

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- BARDOLPH.    Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in  
                  heaven or in hell!
- HOSTESS.       Nay, sure, he's not in hell: he's in Arthur's bosom, if  
                  ever man went to Arthur's bosom.

*Merry Wives of Windsor* features Falstaff as an aged veteran. The year 1414 works, but that is not the same as saying it is the year Shakespeare had in mind. Perhaps the author didn't care that he had already killed Falstaff off in *Henry V*, and just brought him back in an "what if" mode. There is a "legend" that Queen Elizabeth asked "Shakespeare" to write a play that would show Falstaff in love, implying that she knew the character from seeing the *Henry IV* plays first. This legend turns out to have no legs at all, and is in fact rarely repeated in biographies of Shakespeare or Elizabeth (Ogburn 392; Asimov 421).<sup>3</sup>

If we keep in mind the time setting as being around 1414, there are some serious glitches in *Merry Wives* in terms of macro-temporal continuity. The Star Chamber wasn't instituted until 1487 by Henry VII (*Americana* 25 608). Several popular books are alluded to: Surrey's poetry collection (1557) and a Riddle book. But no popular printed books or *any* printed books were available in 1414, which predates Caxton's first print job in England by more than fifty years, while the gap between 1414 and 1557 (the first edition of Surrey's poetry) is 143 years. A sophisticated London audience of 1602 would have noticed the time-slips, which for them would be something like us seeing an American Civil War play with a character who wished he had his Beatles Records. Then, as now, the intent would be humor, and Shakespeare was successful. The time shift also allowed the author to veil sixteenth-century observations and personal allusions behind fifteenth-century buffoonery.

### Slender and his books

In Act I, scene 1, a bored and pathetic Slender wishes he had his copy of *Songes & Sonnets*. This watershed book of poetry in the English language was written by Edward de Vere's poet uncle, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (c. 1517-1547), who was executed at age thirty by a dying, paranoid Henry VIII when a minor misunderstanding was inflated by the maneuvering of Surrey's political enemies into a charge of treason. *Songes and Sonnets*, the first edition of Surrey's poetry, was published posthumously as a miscellany by Richard Tottel in 1557, when Oxford was seven. The martyred Surrey was the husband of Frances de Vere, Oxford's paternal aunt, so it is reasonable to conjecture that the life and creative work of this uncle were a major influence on a boy who grew up to write some pretty good sonnets himself, in the same style popularized by his uncle. Tottel's *Miscellany* was such a hit that it was immediately reprinted, and before the year was out, was reset into a second edition. Its enduring pop-

ularity is evidenced by the frequency with which it was reprinted over three decades. There were quarto editions of *Songes and Sonnets* in 1559, 1565, 1567, 1574 (when there were two), 1585, and 1587. But there were no further reprints after 1587 until Edward Arber's scholarly edition in 1870 (Robinson 48).

Note the dates. *Songes and Sonnets* was brought back into a commercial revival in the period between 1585 and 1587. There were, however, no editions published throughout the 1590's or by 1602, when the supposed composition and audience for *Merry Wives* are conventionally dated, so the topical allusion to Surrey's poetry would probably not have been particularly meaningful to a 1602 audience. For this and other reasons, a mid-1580s real-date for the writing and first production of *Merry Wives* makes more sense.

E. T. Clark observes that when Slender wonders where his riddle book is, we are getting an authorial tip that there are riddles to be found throughout the play (Clark 524). Thus, when Slender's servant Simple tells him that the riddle book was lent to "Alice Shortcake," we have reason to guess the presence of a riddle. Who is "Alice Shortcake"? One answer might be the Alice, Countess of Derby who married Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, in 1579.<sup>4</sup> Lord Strange (1560-94) was also the patron of the extremely popular acting company that provided much of the entertainment at Court during the late 80s and early 90s (Chambers 2: 76, 99, 118), so that, in that respect at least, he had to have been Oxford's colleague or rival.

### **Hugh Evans**

The very first words spoken in *Merry Wives* (by Shallow) are: "Sir Hugh, persuade me not." Shakespeare's Hugh Evans, who speaks with a comic Welsh accent, is a transparent representation of the Earl of Oxford's theater manager, Henry Evans, a Welshman who taught the Children of Paul's troupe. In *Merry Wives*, it is Sir Hugh who rehearses the children in the Fairy masque which ends the play.

Henry Evans started out as a scrivener and theatrical hanger-on. In the years 1584-1586, the Earl of Oxford arranged to lease a large hall in the liberty of Blackfriars for use as a playhouse, subletting the downstairs to the fencing master, Rocco Bonetti, for his fencing school. A complicated paper trail on this still exists, showing payments that connect Oxford as patron, John Lyly as go-between and proprietor, and Henry Evans as theater manager (496-8; Smith 156). Their troupe of young actors was created by combining the Children of Paul's with the Children of the Chapel, the combined group sometimes referred to as "Oxford's Boys." They were not just making random entertainments; throughout the 1580s, they performed regularly for the Queen and her Court and for private audiences. Hugh Evans adds to the likelihood that *Merry Wives* would have been most topical around 1586.

In III:1, Hugh Evans launches into a cracked song, “To shallow rivers”

EVANS. Pless my soul, how full of chollors I am, and trempling of mind! I shall be glad if he have deceived me. How melancholies I am! I will knog his urinals about his knave’s costard when I have goot opportunities for the ork. Pless my soul!  
 [Sings] To shallow rivers, to whose falls  
 Melodious birds sings madrigals;  
 There will we make our peds of roses,  
 And a thousand fragrant posies.  
 To shallow . . . Mercy on me! I have a great dispositions to cry.  
 [Sings] Melodious birds sing madrigals—  
 Whenas I sat in Pabylon—  
 And a thousand vagram posies.

This song in *Merry Wives* is a drunken variation on the famous song/poem attributed to Christopher Marlowe, “Come live with me and be my love.” Marlowe’s career was at its peak in the late 1580s. The key verse is:

And we will sit upon the rocks  
 Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,  
 By shallow rivers, to whose falls,  
 Melodious birds sing madrigals.

In the 1600 poetry collection, *England’s Helicon*, a similar set of verses sending up the “shallow rivers” song is credited to “Ignoto” (MacDonald 192-3). The lyric is set facing, or following “Come live with me” and is certainly a response or thematic continuation of that song. Here are several stanzas from the Ignoto poem:

If all the world and love were young  
 And truth in every shepherd’s tongue,  
 These pretty pleasures might me move,  
 To live with thee and be thy love.  
 The flowers do fade, and wanton fields  
  
 To wayward winter reckoning yields,  
 A honey tongue, a heart of gall,  
 Is fancies spring, but sorrows fall.  
 Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of roses,  
 Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies,

Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:  
In folly ripe, in reason rotten. . . .

In *Merry Wives*, Evans has garbled the original song and its Ignoto echo and mixed in a hint of Psalm 137. The Ignoto poem is thought by Miller and others to be by Oxford himself (1: 618-44).

*Merry Wives* ends with the Fairy show played by young boys and directed by Hugh Evans. The fairy song “Pinch him. . . .” was itself “pinched” from the Fairy Song in *Endymion*, the Lyly play from the same 1580s period.

*Endymion* dates are in debate; it was first published in 1591, but E. K. Chambers is confident that the statement on the 1591 first quarto title page: “played before the Queens Majestie on Candlemas Day” could only refer to a performance in 1588 (Chambers 3: 415-16). Lyly was Oxford’s secretary throughout the 1580s, and is connected to him through payments relative to the Blackfriars theater and the management of the Paul’s/Oxford’s Boys. J.T. Looney was the first to suggest that Oxford wrote the lyrical songs in the Lyly plays, which, if true, means that he “pinched” his own work, something he did often (Miller 1: 269-84).

### Rugby matches and mismatches

The author of *Merry Wives* is able to slip the name “Vere” into the dialogue in three separate places through Dr. Caius asking, in his heavy French accent, “Vere is \_\_\_\_\_ ?” In one instance in I:4, the joke has an extra punch:

CAIUS.           Oui; mette le au mon pocket: depeche, quickly. Vere is dat knave,  
Rugby?

QUICKLY.       What, John Rugby? John!

Most of the servants in *Merry Wives* have the names of former earls of Oxford, Jack, John, or Robert, which may be the author’s way of pointing out that what was high has become low, and what low, now high.

The word *Rugby* brings up only one connotation to modern readers: the energetic football game. But this Rugby dates only from the nineteenth century when the game was invented at the Rugby School (*Americana* 23: 863). The town, Rugby, in Warwickshire, is a football kick away from Bilton manor on the Avon River. Bilton manor was brought into the Oxford estates when John de Vere, the fifteenth Earl of Oxford, married Elizabeth Trussel. When John, Edward de Vere’s father, the sixteenth Earl, died, Bilton was one of the estates left in trust to provide income for his widow, Oxford’s mother. So John Rugby is apt, if Edward’s father or grandfather is implied (Miller II 359-69).

The simplest solution of the “Rugby” riddle, the continuous references to John Rugby in *Merry Wives*, is that they are allusions to one of the many earls of Oxford named John, one associated with the Bilton that was near Rugby and Dunsmore Heath. The de Vere connection to Warwickshire, to the play, *The Tragical History of Guy Earl of Warwick*, to the legend of the Dun Cow of Dunsmore, and to the portrayal of Bilton/Dunsmore by Michael Drayton in *Poly Olbion* are elucidated by Stephanie Caruana in *The Spear-Shaker Review* (1: 11); the same map which shows a Spear-man near Bilton has no trace of the village, Stratford-on-Avon, where it “should have been,” had Shaxper made the village famous (2: 1).

Forced to be anonymous, it appears to have been Oxford’s delight to “sign” his work by inserting puns on his name somewhere in the play. Caius’s outrageous accent gives him the opportunity to insert the requisite puns on Vere in several places. There is a great deal of this in I:4. When John Rugby makes an exit, Mistress Quickly says:

An honest, willing, kind fellow, as *ever* servant shall come in house withal.

And from Caius at various times:

Pray you, go and vetch me in my closet un boitier *vert*-a box, a green-a box.

Oui, mette le au mon pocket: *depeche*, quickly. *Vere* is dat knave, Rugby?

It is no matter-a *ver* dat.

In III:1:

*Verefore* will you not meet-a me?

In IV:5:

*Vere* is mine host de Jarteer?

And again in V:5:

*Vere* is Mistress Page?

### Ringwood

In *Merry Wives* II:1, there is a reference from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to the mythological hunter, Actaeon, and his pack of dogs, among which is one named “Ringwood.”

PISTOL.           He woos both high and low, both rich and poor, Both young and old, one with another, Ford; He loves the gallimaufry. Ford, perpend.

FORD.            Love my wife!



PISTOL.           With liver burning hot. Prevent, or go thou,  
                       Like Sir Actaeon he, with *Ringwood* at thy heels.

*Ringwood* is a name unique to the first English translation of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*. The historical credit goes to Arthur Golding, but there is mounting evidence that the brilliant and youthfully exuberant translation was actually done by Golding's nephew, the teen-aged Edward de Vere. Many Oxfordians find it unlikely that the starchy Calvinist did more than edit or guide, with possible disapproval, his nephew's bawdy translation, one that set a new standard for bizarre extrapolation.

Actaeon's dogs were given colorful names in the original Greek version, names that were adapted by Ovid for the Latin version. But, as Betty Sears has pointed out, the English translator took the names into a new dimension (Sears 9-10). The final dog is named *Ringwood* in the original Vere/ Golding translation (not "Kingwood" as is given in the modern reprint edited by Nims; 20). In the original the line is given: ". . . the tother Chorle who ever gnooring went, And *Ringwood* with a shyrle loud mouth the which he freely spent, with divers mo whose names to tell it were but losse of tyme."

*Ringwood* is the invention of Vere/Golding; it's not in Ovid. Teasing out the name *Ringwood* from implications in the Latin and Greek was a clever creative move on the part of the translator:

"*et acutae vocis Hylactor quosque referre mora est. . . .*"

"*et acutae vocis Hylactor*" = "and shrill voiced Barker"

"*quosque referre mora est*" = "and others whom it were to long to name."

As Betty Sears points out in her 1997 publication "Harts, Hounds, & Hedingham," *Ringwood* was the name of a forest in the environs of Castle Hedingham, ancestral home of the earls of Oxford. Sears offers a compelling study of the Vere connections with the names of the dogs in Actaeon's pack that were altered by the English translator for the 1567 version of *The Metamorphoses* (Book 3, lines 200 and forward). Andrew Hannas, a Latin scholar, has contributed the following analysis:

Actually, there is an etymological suggestion, though probably not accurate, of *wood* in "Hylactor" [from Greek hylakteo- 'bark, howl,' etc.], as "hyle" in Greek means "wood[s], forest" (Liddell-Scott). "Ringwood" could be a colorful if somewhat fanciful attempt to give "barker" by its "etymology"—a dog that "howls in the wood"—as opposed to merely rendering the name as that of a familiar forest.<sup>5</sup>



### Ford / Brooke

Throughout the play Master Ford makes a big show of fearing he will grow cuckold-horns himself, a suggestive pun for Oxford, whose contretemps with his wife and her family over the rumor that she had cuckolded him while he was away in Italy was made, as he angrily termed it, “the fable of the world” (Fowler 248). This Ox-Ford assumes the identity of “Brooke,” a ruse to determine the strength of his wife’s fidelity, by trying to seduce her while dressed as another man. Ford’s concern over his potential cuckolding gives rise to numerous “horn” jokes. At the end of the play, Falstaff, adorned with huge antlers, has been publicly humiliated by his reaction to the fairy display. Master Ford tells Falstaff that because of his horns, he (Falstaff) is both an ass and an ox. Ford’s wordplay suggests he himself is an Ox-Ford, too:

MRS. FORD. Sir John, we have had ill luck; we could never meet. I will never take you for my love again; but I will always count you my deer.

FALSTAFF. I do begin to perceive that I am made an ass.

FORD. Ay, and an ox too; both the proofs are extant.

Although Arthur Brooke receives the credit for the 1562 poem *Romeus & Juliet*, the acknowledged source for the later Shakespeare play, there is a possibility that Oxford wrote the poem himself as a teenager (Ogburn 449).<sup>6</sup> Thus, Oxford may have disguised himself as Master Brooke years earlier, as a means to getting his first version of *R&J* published. Arthur Brooke is mentioned in a contemporary document as having died at sea. The motif of falling into the water is also echoed in *Merry Wives* when Falstaff, hiding in a laundry basket, is heaved into the Thames. If “Brooke” as the cover-name for Master Ford were just an innocent, random choice, it is hard to explain why it was changed to “Broome” when *Merry Wives* was re-edited for the First Folio in 1623. In the Folio, with “Brooke” changed to “Broome”, the many water puns are lost, which is the reason, no doubt, why most stage productions prefer the “Master Brooke” of the earlier version.

### Ann Page and her suitors

In a scenario developed in detail by both J. T. Looney and Ruth Lloyd Miller, Ann Page represents the teen-aged Anne Cecil, before she became the wife of Edward de Vere (Miller 1: 212-14, 475-77; 2: 161-76). In the opinion of these leading Oxfordian scholars, the primary subtext of *Merry Wives* is a nostalgic review of the rivalry for the hand of young Anne Cecil.

Edward de Vere had known Anne Cecil long before he became engaged to her, having been in her father’s custody as a ward of the Crown since the age of twelve, and so they may well have had a brother-sister relationship initially, simply out of proximity. Anne was thir-

teen-years-old in 1569 when her father, (still plain “Sir William” at the time), began fishing for a rich, high-ranking husband for his daughter. Negotiations took place between Cecil and Sir Henry Sidney, father of young Philip Sidney, with regard to a marriage between their children. Philip and Anne were also acquainted, as he had been a guest at Cecil House on several occasions in the 1560s. He was admitted to Gray’s Inn in 1567, where he became young Oxford’s classmate (Duncan-Jones 46-53). Thus Sidney and Oxford were rivals at school, as poets, and for the hand of Anne Cecil. The financial rewards of such a marriage would be far greater for Philip than for Anne.

In *Merry Wives*, Oxfordians see a reflection of Philip Sidney in the youthful suitor Slender, while Oxford is represented by Fenton. With Sidney as Slender, Slender’s uncle, the unscrupulous Justice Robert Shallow, can be seen as Sidney’s uncle, the powerful Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who, as the Queen’s favorite, was a law unto himself in England.

SLENDER. I had a father, Mistress Ann; my uncle can tell you good jests of him. Pray you, uncle, tell Mistress Ann the jest how my father stole two geese out of a pen, good uncle.

SHALLOW. Mistress Ann, my cousin loves you.

Philip Sidney was “slender” not only because he was skinny, but also because of his slender finances: he had no money. In the play, Slender’s relatives put up land as security to offer Ann a dowry in the form of a jointure worth hundreds of pounds per annum. There are several specific “dollar figures” in the play regarding marriage payments, all of which dovetail with actual numbers in the extant Sidney-Cecil negotiations for the hand of young Anne (Miller 2: 172-6).<sup>7</sup> In I:1, Slender says that he will be poor “till my mother be dead.” The surviving documents show that Sidney’s accounting of those future assets which could be offered to Anne Cecil included a huge amount of money that he would inherit when his mother (Leicester’s sister) died, but only a moderate amount if his father died (172-4).

In *Merry Wives* it is only Fenton who directly courts Ann, and who also understands that he must negotiate with her father. Even if the marriage was arranged from on high and Oxford had no initial romantic interest in Anne Cecil, there is evidence from her father’s letters that Oxford did pursue her by negotiating directly with him (Read 127-8).<sup>8</sup>

There is an odd exchange involving Dr. Caius that gives a comic clue to Ann Page’s identity. Dr. Caius is the third suitor to Ann Page, and to get him out of the way he is told to meet Ann, ready to elope, at Herne’s Oak, where she will be dressed in green; Caius is thus tricked into running off with a boy dressed in green.

FENTON. For they must all be mask’d and vizarded,  
That quaint in green, she shall be loose enrob’d. (IV:6)

MRS. PAGE. Master Doctor, my daughter is in green; when you see your time, take her by the hand, away with her to the deanery, and dispatch it quickly. Go before into the Park; we two must go together.

CAIUS. I know vat I have to do; adieu. (V:3)

Then, after he has been snookered:

MRS. PAGE. Good George, be not angry. I knew of your purpose; turn'd my daughter into green; and, indeed, she is now with the Doctor at the dean'ry, and there married.

CAIUS. Vere is Mistress Page? By gar, I am cozened; I ha' married un garçon, a boy; un paysan, by gar a boy; it is not Ann Page; by gar, I am cozened.

MRS. PAGE. Why, did you take her in green?

CAIUS. Ay, be gar, and'tis a boy; be gar, I'll raise all Windsor.

FORD. This is strange. Who hath got the right Ann?

PAGE. My heart misgives me; here comes Master Fenton.

### Fenton

Master Fenton is described in the play both as a gentleman, and a nobleman. In III:2, Page says of him: "The gentleman is of no having: he kept company with the wild Prince and Poins; he is of too high a region, he knows too much. "Too high a region" can only refer to an aristocrat. In III:4, Fenton himself says: "I am too great of birth."

Fenton speaks poetry, he has a wild past, and though he is low on cash, he is one also who, amazingly, finishes by outwitting the other suitors to Ann Page and winning her hand in marriage. Fenton "smells of April and May" ( that is, he is *spring-like*, or *Ver*).

Interestingly, there was a real person of the era named Fenton who was acquainted with William Cecil, Oxford and Anne. Geoffrey Fenton was stationed in Ireland from 1580 to 1585, and his letters to Walsingham and Cecil are extant (Clark 520-1).<sup>9</sup>

Fenton dedicated one of his books to Anne, a translation entitled: "*Golden Epistles, containing variety of discourse gathered as well out of the remainder of Guevara's works, as other authors, Latin, French, and Italian*" (Williams 189). The first edition was printed in 1575, and was popular enough to be reprinted in 1577 and again in 1582 (Pollard 1: 481). Fenton also translated material that was "used by Shakespeare"; his 1567 translation, *Certaine Tragical*

*Discourses of Bandello*, is cited by Bullough as a likely source for *Othello* (7: 253). In *Merry Wives*, the character Fenton sounds quite like young Oxford, Cecil's ward.

III:4:

FENTON. I see I cannot get thy father's love;  
Therefore no more turn me to him, sweet Nan.

ANN. Alas, how then?

FENTON. Why, thou must be thyself. He doth object I am too great of birth;  
And that, my state being gall'd with my expense, I seek to heal it  
only by his wealth. Besides these, other bars he lays before me,  
My riots past, my wild societies; And tells me 'tis a thing impossible  
I should love thee but as a property.

ANN. May be he tells you true.

And in III:2:

HOST. What say you to young Master Fenton? He capers, he dances, he  
has eyes of youth, he writes verses, he speaks holiday, he smells  
April and May; he will carry't, he will carry't; 'tis in his buttons;  
he will carry't.

PAGE. Not by my consent, I promise you. The gentleman is of no having:  
he kept company with the wild Prince and Pains; he is of too high  
a region, he knows too much. No, he shall not knit a knot in his  
fortunes with the finger of my substance; if he take her, let him  
take her simply; the wealth I have waits on my consent, and my  
consent goes not that way.

Portraying Fenton as one of the associates of Pains and Prince Hal links him to the Boars Head Tavern gang in *1 Henry IV*. The Gads Hill incident of the Henry play, so similar to an actual skirmish in Oxford's early life, furthers the identification of Fenton with Oxford (Ogburn 529). "He speaks holiday," suggests Oxford's Court function, as the author and producer of holiday entertainments for the Court. It is noteworthy that Oxford's Men, an adult troupe from the late '90s, last played the Boars Head in 1602, the year *Merry Wives* was first published (Chambers 2: 101).

No single character in *Merry Wives* is exclusively Oxford. As a suitor he is Fenton; as a jealous husband he is Ford/Brooke; as a weary philosopher and bawd, he speaks as Falstaff.

### Heraldic Aspects

Appropriately enough in a play that weaves its plot around the Garter activities of Windsor Castle, *Merry Wives* begins and ends with discussions that involve Heraldry. In I:1, there is some discussion of Shallow's coat of arms:

SLENDER. All his successors, gone before him, hath done't; and all his ancestors, that come after him, may: they may give the dozen white luces in their coat.

SHALLOW. It is an old coat.

In a magnificent piece of detective work Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn Sr. discovered that the Earl of Leicester's father, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, possessed coat armor that displayed, in one version, *twelve luces*. This tends to cement the proper identification of Shallow with Leicester. Moreover, as Leicester's father lost the Northumberland title before Leicester could inherit it, he himself could not display the luces in his arms. As Shallow says "it is an old coat" (741-2).<sup>10</sup> There is another throwaway exchange about Page's greyhound being "outrun on Cotsall." A dog race that couldn't be judged is the context:

PAGE. I am glad to see you, good Master Slender.

SLENDER. How does your fallow greyhound, sir? I heard say he was outrun on Cotsall.

PAGE. It could not be judg'd, sir.

SLENDER. You'll not confess, you'll not confess.

SHALLOW. That he will not. 'Tis your fault; 'tis your fault; 'tis a good dog.

PAGE. A cur, sir.

SHALLOW. Sir, he's a good dog, and a fair dog. Can there be more said? He is good, and fair.

Because this little bit of banter has nothing to do with the plot, and is not particularly funny, the language and symbols are intriguing. A special greyhound, a "Calgreyhound," was an heraldic symbol used by the earlier Earls of Oxford up to the sixteenth Earl, but was never used by Edward de Vere. His predecessors, the earls John, often used arms with Calgreyhounds as supporters (Dennys 153).<sup>11</sup> The arms of Edward, the seventeenth Earl, feature a Blue Boar and a Harpy as supporters (Ogburn 439). It may be that Oxford was prevented from using the Calgreyhounds because of the loss of certain properties and/or titles, such as

keeper of the Forest of Essex, which may have been associated with those Heraldic animals.

In the play, the greyhound is described as *fallow*, which usually means *un-used*. But the dog is repeatedly labelled “good and fair.” *Cotsall* is an archaic form of *Cotswolds*, the hill country in Gloucestershire. Each word, “Cotsall” and “Cotswolds” is used only once by Shakespeare. I can’t help mentioning the anagram that leaps out of “Cotsall Greyhound”: Greyhound + Cotsall = Calgreyhound Lost!

### The Garter Inn scenes

*Merry Wives* contains another subplot, a peculiar one about Germans who are allegedly cozening and stealing horses in the Windsor area. The point of this strain is apparently to poke fun at the Garter Hierarchy, represented in the play by the Garter Host, who is simply the owner of a tavern named The Garter. Because the real life events that inspired these farcical scenes took place in the 1590s, I believe these scenes were added to the play at that time. It is peculiar that most of the scenes relating to this incident are missing from the 1602 quarto, but were then put back into the text in 1623 (Riverside 315).

Despite the fact that so many of his Vere predecessors were Knights of the Garter, Edward de Vere was never invited to join this exclusive club. While a number of his contemporaries who were below him in rank were admitted to the Order of the Garter, Oxford was snubbed, year after year (Moore 1). Such disrespect from his community of peers must have hurt. Much of the satire in *Merry Wives* may stem from the desire to even the score with the stodgy Garter hierarchy based at Windsor Castle. He also used his playwright’s prerogative to “knight” his manager, Henry Evans, making him “Sir Hugh” in the play.

In the final scene, the Fairy Queen commands the sprites to kiss and bless all the heraldic banners in Windsor castle. This set of banners included the numerous Vere banners of the earlier Earls of Oxford. Note the peculiar gratuitous use of “every,” “fair,” and “evermore” in the blessing prayer.

FAIRY QUEEN: . . . with juice of balm and every precious flower; Each fair  
instalment, coat, and sev’ral crest, With loyal blazon, evermore be  
blest! (V: 5)

There is yet another reference that may relate to Oxford’s family and Heraldic arms:

EVANS. Have a care of your entertainments. There is a friend of mine come to town tells me there is three cozen-germans that has cozen’d all the hosts of Readins, of Maidenhead, of Colebrook, of horses and money. I tell you for good will, look you; you are wise, and full of gibes and vlouting-stogs, and ’tis not convenient you should be cozened. Fare you well. (IV:5)

*Reading, Maidenhead, and Colebrook* were once little villages in the vicinity of Windsor Castle (today they are gritty cities). But Colebrook was also one of the Coats of Honor on Edward de Vere's Heraldic Arms (Dennys 128). Oxford's chronic bad luck and inability to hold on to money and estates cost him a lot of properties that he may have felt he was "entitled" to. Perhaps he felt he had been cozened out of the Colebrook inheritance estates.

### Apis Lapis

*Merry Wives* contains the famous "Lapis" scene, the Latin lesson featuring Hugh Evans and a young pupil. In both this play and *As You Like It*, a young farm boy is given an interesting "quiz and lesson" and in both cases the boys are named "William."

- EVANS. Peace your tattlings. What is 'fair,' William?
- WILLIAM. Pulcher.
- QUICKLY. Polecats! There are fairer things than polecats, sure.
- EVANS. You are a very simplicity oman; I pray you, peace. What is "lapis," William?
- WILLIAM. A stone.
- EVANS. And what is "a stone," William?
- WILLIAM. A pebble.
- EVANS. No, it is "lapis"; I pray you remember in your prain.
- WILLIAM. Lapis.
- EVANS. That is a good William. What is he, William, that does lend articles?
- WILLIAM. Articles are borrowed of the pronoun, and be thus declined: Singulariter, nominativo; hic, haec, hoc. (IV:1)

In Thomas Nashe's *Strange Newes*, there is the famous dedication which says in part : "To the most copious Carminist of our time, and famous persecutor of Priscian his verie friend Master Apis Lapis" (McKerrow 1: 247). Oxfordian researchers have suggested that "Apis Lapis" might refer variously to apes, a bee, or to Apis the mythical Bull/Ox god. The orthodox translation of the rebus is "Bee-stone," but no William Beestone is known that would fit the entirety of the descriptions given by Nashe (Ogburn 725-6). *Apis the Bull* is not mentioned by name in the Bible, though a certain generic "golden calf" is well known.



Any question as to whether the Elizabethans would have known about Apis the Egyptian Bull must be answered in the affirmative, as the Bull god is directly called “Apis” in the Ninth Book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and it appears in the Golding translation.

In the Latin of Ovid :

. . . cum qua latrator Anubis, sanctaque Bubastis, variusque coloribus Apis,  
quique premit vocem digitoque silentia suadet. (Book 9, line 690-691)

In Frank Justis Miller’s translation :

Near her were seen the dog Anubis, sacred Bubastis, dappled Apis, and the god who enjoins silence with his finger on his lips. (Miller, Frank 312).

In the Golding version the author has padded out the Latin in a youthful, extravagant way:

. . . attendant on her were The barking dog Anubis, and the Saint of Bubast, and  
The pydecoat Apis, and the god that gives to understand By finger holden too his  
lippes that men should silent keepe. . . . ( Book 9, line 815).

So the Elizabethans and, more important, the young Oxford, steeped in Ovid, must have known of this mythic figure, Apis. In Egyptian myth, Apis wore a coat of many colors. In the Biblical story, the wearer of a many-colored coat, Joseph, was in exile in Egypt. *Apis* was almost certainly the golden calf worshipped in Sinai by Moses’s wayward flock. *Apis* was the herald of the Egyptian pantheon, that is, he led the procession of the gods. His multicolored apparel, *dappled* or *pied-coat*, is remarkably similar in concept to the garish coats that English heralds wear in ceremonial functions and parades.

*Apis Lapis*, when *Apis* is translated as “ox” or “bull,” becomes “bull stone” or “ox stone.” The Elizabethans used the gallstones of oxen for a variety of purposes, among other things, they were a crucial component of black writing ink.<sup>12</sup> In fact Shakespeare even refers to gall as an ingredient in ink in the plays:

SIR TOBY. Go, write it in a martial hand; be curst and brief; it is no matter  
how witty, so it be eloquent and full of invention. Let there be gall  
enough in thy ink, though thou write with a goose-pen, no matter.  
(*Twelfth Night*: III:2)

POSTHUMUS. Thither write, my queen, And with mine eyes  
I’ll drink the words you send, Though ink be made of gall.  
(*Cymbeline*: I:1)

Thus the person veiled as “*Apis Lapis*” in Nashe’s dedication is identified as a *writer*, both by

the ox gallstone joke and by Nashe's testimony that his "verie friend Apis Lapis" was a "famous persecutor of Priscian." Priscian was the author of an early grammar, one that Oxford and Nashe would both have had to study in school. That oxgalls were also used as a powerful cleansing and cleaning agent<sup>13</sup> may remind us of Jacques statement in *As You Like It*: "Invest me in my motley; give me leave to speak my mind, and I will through and through cleanse the foul body of th' infected world, If they will patiently receive my medicine." Satire was seen by the ancients as a form of medication, a purgative. So we see that "Apis Lapis" is more than just a play on words; it's a kind of Rosetta Stone of metaphor about Shakespeare.

**"they must all be masked and vizarded"**

What you see here is the result of an extended first pass through *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with Oxford detectors turned on. I am grateful to those writers who have contributed some of the kernel ideas that I have begun to develop here. *Merry Wives* is particularly rich in Oxfordian curiosities, and though I am not one who jumps at every use of the words *never* or *true*, when autobiographical material is so overtly present in the plot and themes of a play, as in *Merry Wives*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo & Juliet*, and *All's Well that Ends Well*, this kind of interpretation is hard to resist. \_\_\_\_\_ ♡



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Fowler, Chiljian, and Alan Nelson's website.

<sup>2</sup> The powerful Brooke family in Elizabeth's era was descended from Sir John Oldcastle (c. 1377-1417), the historical companion to Henry V. Oldcastle became Lord Cobham when he married the Lady Cobham in 1409. Before Shakespeare's *1 & 2 Henry IV*, in the conventional chronology, there was an anonymous popular play called *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*. In that play, the Falstaff-type character is plainly named "Sir John Oldcastle." Evidence of the name remains in the existing texts of Shakespeare's play, as in *1 Henry IV*: (1:2:47) where Hal calls Falstaff "my Old lad of the Castle." In the second quarto of *2 Henry IV*, one of Falstaff's speeches is mislabelled "Old," suggesting that a proof-reader neglected to change an "Oldcastle" to "Falstaff." For these reasons, it is believed that the Brooke family (the Elizabethan era Lords Cobham) exerted influence and forced "Shakespeare," or the theaters and publishers dealing with his plays, to change the name of the character in the Henry plays (Campbell 589).

<sup>3</sup> Asimov states that the first reference to the Elizabeth-Shakespeare-"Falstaff in Love" rumor was in a comment by critic and dramatist John Dennis in 1702.

<sup>4</sup> This may be another reference to Heraldic shennanigans. Alice's maiden name was Spencer, but as her family worked its way up the ladder of wealth and influence, her father managed to have the prosaic family history welded onto that of the noble Despencer or Despenser family, of French origins. In French, larder or storeroom is *depense*. So Alice De(s)pense(r) gives Alice Larder. It remains to be shown whether Larder would really remind a contemporary reader of Shortcake, which was primarily a Lard cake. The Spencers were extremely wealthy, and so Alice would have "depensed" patronage (cake?) to needy writers, though her dispensations may have seemed a trifle "short" during the late 90s when she was struggling to obtain what she considered her fair share of her late husband's estate. Long after Oxford's death she was frequently eulogized for her generous patronage of writers, among them, John Milton. In a complex series of lawsuits over the inheritances following Ferdinando's death in 1594, the widowed Countess had to split much of the wealth and land with her daughters, and with her deceased husband's younger brother, William Stanley, who became the sixth Earl of Derby shortly before he married Oxford's eldest daughter Elizabeth de Vere, in 1595. Several of Oxford's letters, including the important Cannon Row letter of Sep. 6, 1596, complain that William was not providing Elizabeth's allowance on time (Bagley 67-70; Fowler 496-523).

<sup>5</sup> From a private letter from Hannas to Brazil.

<sup>6</sup> See also Stephanie Hopkins Hughes, "The Real 'Shakespeare in Love.'"

<sup>7</sup> Miller names the manuscript source: Hatfield MSS I, 415; Duncan-Jones refers to Lansdowne MS 10, 193.

<sup>8</sup> Historical evidence of Oxford's interest in Anne is to be found in William Cecil's letter to the Earl of Rutland, dated August 15th 1571. The original letter is classified Cal. Rutland MSS I, 95, and is reproduced by Conyers Read (127-128). The Cecil's letter states:

I think it doth seem strange to your Lordship to hear of a purposed determination in my Lord of Oxford to marry with my daughter. And so, before his Lordship moved it to me I might have thought it, if any other had moved it to me but himself. For at his own motion I could not well imagine what to think, considering I never meant to seek it nor hoped of it. And yet reason moved me to think well of my Lord, and to acknowledge myself greatly beholden to him, as indeed I do. . . . Now that the matter is determined betwixt my Lord of Oxford and me, I confess to your Lordship I do honour him so dearly from my heart as I do my own son, and in any case that may touch him for his honour and weal I shall think him mine own interest therein. And surely, my Lord, by dealing with him I find that which I often heard of your Lordship, that there is much more in him of understanding than any stranger to him would think. And for mine own part I find that whereof I take comfort in his wit and knowledge grown by good conversation.

<sup>9</sup> Clark also cites the Calendar of State Papers for Ireland 1583-84.

<sup>10</sup> The Senior Ogburns cite Woodward's *Heraldry, British and Foreign*, for the dozen lucas in John Dudley's arms.

<sup>11</sup> An illustration of the Calgreyhound on the older Vere arms can also be found in Anderson (137).

<sup>12</sup> There are several surviving Elizabethan era publications that contain recipes for ink that contain ox gallstones. The relevant portion of "A Booke of Secrets . . . written first in Italian, and now newly translated into English," by W.P., London, Edward White, 1596" can be found on the web at <<http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/ink/html/booke.html>>

Another original source is "A Very Proper Treatise: The Arte Of Limning, 1573," which can be located on the web at <<http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Library/2036/LIM2.HTM>> See also Thompson, *Manuscript Inks*. Credit goes as well to Oxfordian researcher Richard Kennedy who first wrote about the ox-galls in posts to the private Oxfordian internet forum, *Phaeton*, in 1998.

<sup>13</sup> The OED offers: "Ox-gall, the gall of the ox, used for cleansing purposes, also for painting and pharmacy; so ox gall-stone."

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