

Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama

SHAKESPEARE AND (ECO-)PERFORMANCE HISTORY

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

Elizabeth Schafer



Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History

Seismic shifts in the theatrical meanings of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* have taken place across the centuries as Shakespeare's frequently performed play has relocated to Windsor across the world, journeying along the production/adaptation/appropriation continuum.

This (eco-)performance history of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* not only offers the first in-depth analysis of the play in production, with a particular focus on the representation of merry women, but also utilises the comedy's forest-aware dramaturgy to explore Mistress Page's concept of being 'frugal of my mirth' in relation to sustainable theatre practices. Herne's Oak – the fictitious tree in Windsor Forest where everyone meets in the final scene of the play – is utilised to enable a maverick but ecologically based reframing of the productions of *Merry Wives* analysed here.

This study engages with gender, physical comedy, and cultural relocations of Windsor across the world to offer new insight into *Merry Wives* and its theatricality.

Elizabeth Schafer is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama

Series Editor: Helen Ostovich

McMaster University, Canada.

This series presents original research on theatre histories and performance histories; the time period covered is from about 1500 to the early 18th century. Studies in which women's activities are a central feature of discussion are especially of interest; this may include women as financial or technical support (patrons, musicians, dancers, seamstresses, wig-makers) or house support staff (e.g., gatherers), rather than performance per se. We also welcome critiques of early modern drama that take into account the production values of the plays and rely on period records of performance.

Shakespeare's Hobby-Horse and Early Modern Popular Culture

Natália Pikli

From Playtext to Performance on the Early Modern Stage

How Did They Do It?

Leslie Thomson

Imitation and Contamination of the Classics in the Comedies of Ben Jonson

Guides Not Commanders

Tom Harrison

Playgrounds

Urban Theatrical Culture in Shakespeare's England and Golden Age Spain

David J. Amelang

Living Death in Early Modern Drama

James Alsop

Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Elizabeth Schafer

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Studies-in-Performance-and-Early-Modern-Drama/book-series/SPEMD

Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Elizabeth Schafer

First published 2024
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa
business*

© 2024 Elizabeth Schafer

The right of Elizabeth Schafer to be identified as author of this work
has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or
reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical,
or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including
photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval
system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks
or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and
explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9780367474218 (hbk)

ISBN: 9780367494162 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003046028 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003046028

Typeset in Sabon LT Pro
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

For Maddy Jones

'Heaven give you many, many merry days!'



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>x</i>
1 Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History: <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	1
2 ‘A Most pleasaunt and excellent conceited Comedie’: Early Performances of <i>Merry Wives</i> and the 1602 Quarto	17
3 ‘Wives May Be Witty and Yet Honest Too’ (4.2.96): Eliza Vestris and <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	37
4 ‘The Truth Being Known’ (4.4.62): Ellen Terry and <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> , 1902	57
5 ‘More of the Quarto Than is Usual’: Terry Hands’s <i>Merry Wives</i> , 1968, 1975, and 1995	78
6 ‘The Fords and the Pages Were Obviously Tory Voters’: Bill Alexander RSC, 1985, and ‘Girls Hug’ Rachel Kavanaugh RSC, 2002	100
7 Geoffrey Rush’s <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> , Brisbane, 1987	121
8 ‘All Gold and Bounty’ (1.3.65): Leila Hipólito’s <i>As Alegres Comadres</i> , 2003	138
9 ‘Merriness Unbridled’: Christopher Luscombe’s <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> at the Globe, 2008, 2010	154

viii *Contents*

10	'And nightly [. . .] Look you sing' (5.5.66): Richard Jones's <i>Falstaff</i> , Glyndebourne, 2009, 2013	170
11	'Sir John Goes into the Basket': Physical Comedy in <i>Wanawake Wa Heri wa Winsa</i> , Shakespeare's Globe, London, 2012	188
12	Looking for Herne's Oak	204
13	The Epilogue	218
	<i>Appendix: Ellen Terry's Very Merry Wives</i>	224
	<i>Index</i>	230

Figures

- 3.1 ‘Scene from “*The Merry Wives of Windsor*” at the Haymarket Theatre’ (*Illustrated London News*, 27 January 1844). On the left are Eliza Vestris and Louisa Nisbett as the wives. Robert Strickland is Falstaff-as-the-Witch of Brainford. 49
- 4.1 Ellen Terry as Mistress Page in Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1902 *Merry Wives* (Haymarket Theatre, London). 65
- 5.1 Brenda Bruce as Mistress Page and Elizabeth Spriggs as Mistress Ford in Terry Hands’s 1968 RSC *Merry Wives*. 86
- 6.1 Janet Dale as Meg Page, Lindsay Duncan as Alice Ford, and Peter Jeffrey as Falstaff in Bill Alexander’s RSC production, 1985. 104
- 6.2 Lucy Tregear as Meg Page and Claire Carrie as Alice Ford in Rachel Kavanaugh’s 2002 RSC *Merry Wives*. 113
- 7.1 Hazel Phillips as Mrs Page and Justine Anderson as Alice Ford in Geoffrey Rush’s *Merry Wives* (Queensland Theatre Company, 1987). 123
- 8.1 Zezé Polessa as Sra Lima and Elisa Lucinda as Sra Rocha in Leila Hipólito’s 2003 film, *As Alegres Comadres*. 148
- 9.1 Serena Evans as Meg Page, Christopher Benjamin as Falstaff, and Sarah Woodward as Alice Ford in Christopher Luscombe’s 2008 Globe *Merry Wives*. 166
- 10.1 Alice (Dina Kuznetsova), Nannetta (Adriana Kučerová), Mistress Quickly (Marie-Nicole Lemieux), and Meg (Jennifer Holloway) in Richard Jones’s 2009 Glyndebourne production of Verdi and Boito’s *Falstaff*. 175
- 11.1 Chichi Seii as Bi Page, Mrisho Mpototo as Falstaff, and Lydia Gitachu as Bi Ford in *Wanawake wa Heri wa Winsa*, 2012. 189
- 11.2 Chichi Seii as Bi Page and Lydia Gitachu as Bi Ford in *Wanawake wa Heri wa Winsa*, 2012. 191
- 12.1 Herne’s Oak in Opera North’s 2023 *Falstaff*. 213

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the following:

Peter Lindsay Evans, whose magisterial and meticulous MPhil thesis on the performance history of *Merry Wives* has been invaluable to me.

Rosane Beyer do Nascimento for discussing Brazilian feminism, machismo, and racism with me and for being a merry wife.

Mark Thornton Burnett for introducing me to Leila Hipólito's film. And thanks to Leila Hipólito for explaining some of the more localised Brazilian references to me via email.

Ian Julier for looking after me at Glyndebourne. John Severn for many email conversations on the finer points of both high- and lowbrow Victorian musical theatre.

Royal Holloway colleagues David Bullen, Chris Megson, Emma Cox, Dan Rebellato, and Jacky Bratton, who have offered constructive suggestions along the way.

David Lindley, Helen Ostovich, and Laurie Maguire for lively discussions over the *Merry Wives* quartet. Rob Conkie and Vicky Angelaki for encouragement. Michael Steppat for advice. Thank you, Randall Martin and Helen Gilbert for reading and responding to arborcentric polemics. I thank Matthew Frost at Manchester University Press for understanding and Nora Williams for helping me navigate permissions.

Thanks to Geoffrey Rush for devoting hours to detailed discussion about his *Merry Wives* even though a quarter of a century had passed since he staged the play.

Royal Holloway drama department for supporting my sabbaticals. HARI for supporting a performance of Ellen Terry's *very Merry Wives* and the British Shakespeare Association (BSA) for hosting a reading of this playlet at the 2018 conference in Belfast.

All the archives who have supported my work, especially the library and archive at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust; Shakespeare's Globe; the National Theatre archive; and the V&A Performance Collections.

Thank you to Maddy Jones, Emily-Jayne Saunders and Lynne Biles for research assistance and proofreading. Foxparke Jim for many walks in Windsor Great Park as well as along the entire length of the Thames, including Reading, Maidenhead, Windsor, Eton, and Datchet. Thank you to Vincent Jones, without whom...

I especially thank my two Richards: Richard Proudfoot, who agreed to supervise my PhD on *Merry Wives* way back in 1983 and has lived with the consequences ever since; and Richard Cave, who has been a constant and inspirational support and who, despite the demands of general editing the Oxford University Press complete plays of Richard Brome, found time to offer constructive, detailed, and theatrically intelligent criticism all along the journey.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

1 Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History

The Merry Wives of Windsor

I was then frugal of my mirth
(2.1.27)

In writing this performance history, I face a dilemma: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* needs a serious, attentive, and invested performance history, but in the context of the current climate crisis, does planet earth need a performance history of *Merry Wives*? Publishing a performance history inevitably has resource implications in terms of, for example, paper consumption,¹ internet, server and data centre costings, conference attendance, and research travel. Yet could a performance history of *Merry Wives*, a forest-aware play written during a period of deforestation in England, a play that invites eco-criticism, help enable useful, if potentially unsettling, discussions around voracious consumption in Western performance practices and the seductiveness of spectacle as opposed to frugal theatre-making? Could an (eco-)performance history make a helpful contribution? If so, what would it offer?

1. Why Do the Merry Wives and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Need a Performance History?

I will return later to the play's potential to speak theatrically to the climate emergency, but initially, I focus on the fact that *Merry Wives*, a deeply theatrical play that can boast one of the most impressive records of performance of all Shakespeare's plays, has never been explored in detail by means of its performance history. This is particularly regrettable because *Merry Wives* only comes alive when it is inhabited by living, breathing, sweating, prat-falling actors, deploying brilliant comic timing, precision proxemics, clowning, and gagging. As reviewer Charles Spencer put it, *Merry Wives* 'works far better on stage than it reads on the page' (*Daily Telegraph*, 30 January 1995), and when *Merry Wives* is explored through the lens of performance and theatre history, instead of through the paradigms of literary criticism or literary history, the play can be valued as it deserves.

2 *Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History*

My performance history, like any performance history, offers a partial and subjective approach; coverage has to be selective, and I use a case study methodology in order to focus on what the play's title declares to be the major business of the play:² merriness, particularly the intrinsically theatrical merriness practised by Mistress Page and Mistress Ford as they navigate through prejudices against, and assumptions about, women who are actively merry.³ When Mistress Page acknowledges that the wives 'often jest and laugh' (4.2.97)⁴ she also takes pains to spell out:

We'll leave a proof, by that which we will do
Wives may be merry and yet honest too.
(4.2.95–6)

This recognises the reality that early modern women who jested, laughed, and were merry risked their honesty being called into question. A contemporary schoolboy pun paired 'merry tricks' with 'meretrix', Latin for prostitute,⁵ and the merry, active, and assertive wives need to be scrupulous in maintaining their reputation for honesty, honour, and respectability precisely because they are so adept at merry tricks. Certainly, Master Ford has to learn the lesson that his wife, despite her merriness, is 'yet honest too' (4.2.96). This makes it all the more significant that at the end of the play, Mistress Page blesses the marriage of her daughter Anne by wishing Anne's new husband, Fenton, 'many, many merry days' (5.5.237); if Fenton's marriage is characterised by merriness, that implies that Mistress Fenton will be, like her mother, a merry wife.

The wives' merriness is intensely theatrical, and this also involves risk. As they repeatedly outwit men, especially Ford and Falstaff, the wives plot, script, act, direct, stage manage, design costumes, and improvise. Such talents could present real dangers for historical early modern women because their reputation for genuine, authentic, and unquestioned honesty mattered. And it appears that Mistress Page has passed on her theatre-making skills: Anne Page, the merry wife in the making, like her mother, is adept at plotting, directing, and stage managing action. Anne gets exactly what she wants by acting, in all senses of that word. Just as Mistress Page leads Falstaff on, pretending to acquiesce, so Anne leads her mother and her father on by pretending to acquiesce with them both.

Shakespeare takes Anne's predicament seriously even if he does not give her many lines, and it is tempting to dwell on the fact that around 1598–9, when *Merry Wives* was written and first performed, Master William and Mistress Anne Shakespeare, like Master George and Mistress Meg Page, had the future of a 16-year-old daughter to think about. The notion of an Anne (Hathaway? Page?) making a rash marriage to a wastrel becomes more dizzying when the presence in the play of a younger boy named William is acknowledged. Anne Page certainly needs her wits about her: Shakespeare

does not spell out why Anne's grandfather did not trust her parents with the £700 he has left her (a sum worth about £100,000 today),⁶ but Page is brutally clear that he is threatening to disinherit Anne to pressure her into marrying Slender; if Fenton marries Anne, he will take her 'simply' (3.2.70), that is, like Cordelia, without any dowry. Page's wealth 'waits on my consent, and my consent goes not that way' (3.2.70–1). Anne's inheritance from her grandfather enables her to choose her husband for herself and defy both her parents' wishes, but in the early modern period, the stakes for any Annes were very high; once married, divorce would not be an option and Anne's husband can legally do what he likes with her £700. Indeed, in 4.6, Fenton seems to be spending some of Anne's money in advance, promising £100 (£17,000) to the Host, 'more than your loss', that is, the cost of the stolen horses, in gold (4.6.5), if the Host will help Fenton elope with Anne.

In plotting to marry the husband she wants, the penniless aristocrat, Fenton, Anne is implicitly aided and abetted by Mistress Quickly, but Anne's organisational skills are on display. Although Anne is due to play the role of Fairy Queen in the public shaming of Falstaff in Windsor Forest (4.4.70, 4.6.20), Quickly substitutes for her so that Anne has the opportunity to steal away and marry Fenton. Anne secures the services of the 'lubberly' (5.5.184) postmaster's boy that Slender marries 'i'th'church' (5.5.185) at Eton, employs the 'garçon' (5.5.204) Caius marries 'at the deanery' (5.5.201), arranges costumes for both boys and for herself, and directs the boys how they must act. Meanwhile, Fenton has to ask the Host to help him book the church and vicar (4.6.47–8). Overall, *Merry Wives* both explicitly and implicitly shows groups of merry women working together – Anne Page and Mistress Quickly; Mistress Page, Mistress Ford, and Mistress Quickly⁷ – staging performances, and getting results. Falstaff may have the most lines⁸ and may kick-start the action by propositioning the wives, but in this comedy, it is improvisational theatre-making skills that drive the narrative and these are the preserve of the women. By the end of the play, Anne has also demonstrated her skill as a theatre-maker, graduated to the rank of merry wife, and is ready to embark on a life of 'many, many merry days' (5.5.237).

Other characters try to make a claim to merriness: when Falstaff attempts to seduce the wives in order to be 'cheaters' (1.3.66) to them and swindle them out of money, he begins by sending both wives a letter claiming shared merriness with them; 'you are merry, so am I; ha, ha, then, there's [. . .] sympathy' (2.1.7–8) and the Host of the Garter later describes Falstaff as a 'merry knight' (2.1.208). Justice Shallow identifies the Host himself as 'merry' (2.1.196). Nevertheless, the metrics of merriness rarely feature in literary assessments of *Merry Wives*, even though they are fundamental in the theatre, given the expectations that are raised by the play's title.

The play's sympathetic interest in merry women who act, both theatrically and assertively, in opposition to the inappropriate desires of men also creates potential for the wives to be seen as proto-feminist protagonists.⁹ They

4 *Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History*

could be aligned with bourgeois or liberal feminism, as they are doing well in the political and class system they inhabit and would be unlikely to want to change it. The wives appear to be what would today be described as aspirational middle class, or in early modern terms (like Shakespeare himself), belonging to the middling sort. Mistress Quickly, a working, service-class woman – ‘I wash, wring, brew, bake, scour, dress meat and drink, make the beds’ (1.4.90–1) – testifies eloquently to Mistress Page’s class-based privilege:

Never a wife in Windsor leads a better life than she does; do what she will, say what she will, take all, pay all, go to bed when she list, rise when she list, all is as she will.

(2.2.111–14)

Both wives are well educated, as they can both read and compare their letters, which many women could not in the early modern period;¹⁰ Mistress Page has ensured Anne has learnt to write. By the end of the play, Mistress Ford is in a similar position of strength to Mistress Page, after Master Ford submits to his wife in public, with witnesses. This moment is Ford’s equivalent to Katherina’s submission at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, but Ford goes further than Katherina when he grants Mistress Ford total freedom to act as she wants in the future.

Pardon me, wife. Henceforth do what thou wilt:
I rather will suspect the sun with cold
Than thee with wantonness; now doth thy honour stand,
In him that was of late an heretic,
As firm as faith.

(4.4.6–10)

How high the stakes are here is suggested by Master Page’s interruption:

’Tis well, ’tis well; no more.
Be not as extreme in submission
As in offence.

(10–1)

Performance history has to note that in the theatre, directors and performers have the chance to focus on this crucial moment, which is unique in Shakespeare, to foreground it or to bury, subvert, obscure, even cut it. These staging decisions will have a significant impact on how audiences read Shakespeare’s story of the Fords’ marriage, gender relations, the wives’ proto-feminism, and how this impacts their ability to deliver merriness.

Mistress Ford’s vigorous, merry, and ultimately therapeutic response to her extremely unmerry marital predicament, of having a husband who is

intensely jealous and controlling, resonates with recent debates in the wake of the #MeToo movement. The wives quite literally have a comic 'Me Too' moment when they compare the letters they have received from Falstaff (2.1.). But the situation becomes murkier when, disguised as 'Master Brook', Ford gives money to Falstaff so that 'Brook', armed with 'detection' of Mistress Ford's guilt, can 'drive her then from the defence of her purity, her reputation, her marriage-vow, and a thousand other her defences which now are too too strongly embattled against' him. (2.2.238–42). That is, 'Brook' proposes pressuring, possibly blackmailing, Mistress Ford into having sex with him. Elsewhere, Ford threatens to 'torture' (3.2.36) his wife, and Mistress Quickly tells Falstaff that Mistress Ford is 'beaten black and blue, that you cannot see a white spot about her' (4.5.107–8). If Quickly is telling the truth, rather than improvising here, Mistress Ford is also being harassed by 'knights, and lords, and gentlemen, with their coaches' (2.2.60–1) plus 'earls, nay, which is more, pensioners' (2.2.73), who will not accept that her 'no' means 'no'. Whether the audience can laugh at this or not will depend on setting, casting, direction, costume, pacing, and whether or not the action is triggering for individual members of the audience.¹¹ Mistress Ford refuses to be a victim and, while curing Ford of his neuroses is not part of the wives' initial agenda, when the opportunity to demonstrate he is delusional arises, they seize it. They improvise fast and they work together to 'scrape the figures out of' Ford's brains (4.2.202–3). While other plays by Shakespeare feature women's leagues, a group of women working together to get what they want – for example, *All's Well That Ends Well* or *The Winter's Tale* – no other Shakespeare play approaches *Merry Wives* in terms of offering a vision of empowered women using theatrical merry making to discipline men (Falstaff, Ford) and to achieve significant freedoms and autonomy within the institution of marriage.

The merry women of Shakespeare's comedy in effect direct and stage manage a farce starring Falstaff and Ford, and this farce employs many staples from the genre: the chase, comic violence, pratfalls. Jessica Milner Davis (2–3) states:

Farce favours direct, visual, and physical jokes over rich, lyric dialogue (although words are not unimportant in farce and can be crucial to its quarrels, deceptions and misunderstandings), and it declares an open season for aggression, animal high spirits, self-indulgence and rudeness in general.

The play's farcical elements make its theatrical virtues particularly hard to discern when a solely literary approach is adopted. How critical the distance between page and stage can be is demonstrated by Nancy Cotton's virtuoso but entirely literary critical exploration of the linguistic violence against women in *Merry Wives*. The thoughtful nuance demonstrated in Cotton's

6 *Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History*

reading can seem irrelevant when the play is staged;¹² if Ford has a slight, unimpressive physique while Mistress Ford is played as a strapping karate black belt, then the play's merriness is less likely to be damaged by the vileness of what Ford is saying. Factors such as soundscape, costume, proxemics, and the journey the production has taken the audience on up until that point in the action all have the potential to reposition any linguistic violence in the text and make it 'merry'.

This farcical dimension helps to explain why *Merry Wives* is so often neglected or disparaged in literary discussions of Shakespeare. *Merry Wives* does not sit comfortably with notions of Shakespeare's writing as poetic, philosophical, or inspired. As Eric Weitz comments, much comedy, especially comedy that actually generates laughs:

has by definition declined to take the world seriously through its many historical guises, and for its trouble still tends to receive somewhat less respect than tragedy.

(Weitz 27)

For Weitz, farce is 'dramatic machinery dedicated to causing laughter' (Weitz 28). The farcically inflected text of *Merry Wives* is unlikely to satisfy readerly desires because a farce script, like a choreographic score, needs embodiment far more than it needs literary criticism, history, or theorising.

While physical comedy is at the very heart of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, few traces remain in the play's two published texts of the original comic business; there is far more evidence concerning what Richard Burbage as Ford may have said onstage compared with what he did. And the jokes, the physicality, and the embodied merriness of *Merry Wives* are not universally appealing. Notions of what is funny are culturally specific in geographical and historical terms. Shakespeare's best poo joke – when Caius, responding to Evans's comment, 'I shall make two in the company', states, in his French accent, 'If there be one or two, I shall make-a the turd' (3.3.219) – will not translate well in a French production. Nevertheless, it is hard (not impossible) to kill audience laughter as Falstaff, an arrogant, predatory, entitled, money-grubbing, bulky man is squashed into a basket full of dirty, smelly clothes.¹³ But does this moment *read* in the study as laugh-out-loud funny?

The combination of a relatively, for Shakespeare, atypical but sustained employment of farce techniques,¹⁴ plus a focus on merry, active women characters who drive the plot for most of the play makes *Merry Wives* remarkable in the Shakespeare canon. However, these two features might also indicate why the play has been so marginalised in literary criticism over the years. Kiernan Ryan (136) notes that 'most books about Shakespeare's comedies have continued to cold-shoulder *Merry Wives*', and he lists a host of high-profile (male) critics who have ignored or discounted the play, including George Bernard Shaw, W.H. Auden, C.L. Barber, Northrop Frye, and Harold

Bloom. James Shapiro in his commercially successful *1599: A year in the life of William Shakespeare* uses *Merry Wives* (xxii) as a marker to indicate how far Shakespeare travelled creatively in that year:

at age thirty-five, Shakespeare went from being an exceptionally talented writer to being one of the greatest who ever lived – put another way: . . . in the course of little over a year he went from writing *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to writing a play as inspired as *Hamlet*.

Here, *Merry Wives* signals the starting point of Shakespeare's journey; the implication is that it cannot be seen to be 'inspired' like *Hamlet* despite the fact that the two plays make very different offerings and require very different kinds of theatrical inspiration and skill sets. Shapiro is primarily interested, as so many literary historians have been, in considering *Merry Wives* as a specimen of topical satire; unfortunately, a substantial proportion of all published commentary on *Merry Wives* focusses inordinately on the possibility that the play includes excruciatingly niche satire (Bracy, Green, Roberts) that no theatre-maker hoping to break even would seek to resurrect if producing the play today. It is ironic that when literary historians make *Merry Wives* all about satire that is concerned with men (Lord Cobham, the Duke of Württemberg) or when they attempt to rivet the play to Lord Hunsdon's installation into the Order of the Garter in 1597, this has the effect of directing the critical gaze away from the play's women.¹⁵

The play's leaning towards gynocentrism may explain why *Merry Wives* has, despite being marginalised by Shaw, Auden et al., appealed to several remarkable women critics across history. The playwright and polymath Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, claimed:

One would think that [Shakespeare] had been Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman, for who could Describe *Cleopatra* Better than he hath done, and many other Females of his own Creating, as *Nan Page*, *Mrs Page*, *Mrs Ford*, the Doctors Maid, *Bettrice*, *Mrs Quickly*, *Doll Tearsheet*, and others, too many to Relate?

A list of notable women characters in Shakespeare might be expected to include Cleopatra, but the fact that Cavendish names all four women from *Merry Wives* immediately after Cleopatra is surprising. A century later, another redoubtable woman, Catherine the Great of Russia, paid Shakespeare the compliment, in 1786, of adapting *Merry Wives* into a satire of Franco-philia and Gallomania entitled *This 'tis to Have Linen and Buck-Baskets*.¹⁶ In the nineteenth century, Mary Cowden Clarke, editor of the *Concordance to Shakespeare* (1844–5), published her prequel to *Merry Wives* in 1851, in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, featuring Meg and Alice, the merry maids of Windsor. In 1902, suffragist Rosa Leo Grindon published

her lecture 'In praise of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*: An essay in exposition and appreciation' and opined:

it is a woman's play, . . . emanating from a genius that knew as much of the womanhood of the world as he knew of its manhood. Falstaff's personality looms large on the horizon, and some can see nothing but Falstaff. The ton of corn that lies behind his ton of chaff may need looking for, but it will still be there when the chaff has been all blown away, and the tact and integrity of these *Merry Wives* will take firm hold as the years go by.¹⁷

In the same year that Grindon published this critical appraisal, leading actress Ellen Terry produced the embodied criticism that was her staged interpretation of Mistress Page, in Herbert Beerbohm Tree's *Merry Wives*. This started Terry on her journey towards creating an adaptation of the play; however, despite Terry's renown as a performer of Shakespeare, her very merry *Merry Wives* playlet has been almost entirely ignored critically.¹⁸

Unfortunately, feminist critics, who might be expected to be intrigued by a Shakespeare play that focusses on three women sorting out their sex lives, have generally not been impressed by the merry wives. The pioneering anthology of feminist criticism of Shakespeare, *The Women's Part*, ignored the play. Marilyn French was disappointed with them for not being radical enough; Coppelia Kahn and Anne Parten were more interested in male fragility and cuckoldry. Ruth Nevo analysed the transfer of comic power.¹⁹ Phyllis Rackin, coeditor of a critical anthology that sought to address this imbalance, asked in 2005 why *Merry Wives* was so neglected by feminist critics when the infuriating *Taming of the Shrew* was so popular. Rackin suggests that the history of the reputation of *Merry Wives* 'can be plotted on a trajectory almost exactly opposite' to that of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and she suggests that some of 'the same cultural forces have been involved' (64).

This feminist performance history seeks to acknowledge and analyse the cultural and theatrical work carried out by performers, directors, designers and dramaturgs, etc., in enabling *Merry Wives* to thrive in the theatre.

2. What Might an (Eco-)Performance History Offer?

Although this study seeks largely to rehabilitate the wives as significant but often underrated roles, the eco-performance history aspect requires me to resist or critique them for their materialist, privileged, proto-bourgeois lifestyle. New historicist and cultural materialist criticism would see the wives as living in comfort, while others in Windsor labour and starve. Mistress Page's reprehensible attempt to manage her daughter Anne's marriage is entirely focussed on status and money; and Mistress Ford supports her friend in her attempt to marry Anne off to a figure of ridicule, Caius, because of his court connections and wealth. As both Anne's parents attempt to manage her

marriage inappropriately, thereby potentially sabotaging her future and banishing merriness, this irresponsible emphasis on material status connects with environmentally damaging behaviours both in the early modern period, with its sharp rise in material consumption, and during the so-called 'Great Acceleration' after World War Two, when material comforts, wealth acquisition, and self-gratification trumped environmentally sustainable life choices. The Pages ultimately risk the long term happiness, health, and wellbeing of their children but, in *Merry Wives*, the younger generation, Anne and William, resist the future promoted by their parents: William is not compliant in learning Latin, and even though an arranged marriage might bring wealth and status, Anne would rather 'be set quick i' th' earth,/ And bowl'd to death with turnips' (3.4.84–5) than marry Caius. Inspired by Anne's vivid deployment of turnips, my (eco-)performance history will adopt a plant-centric methodology: I will use the landmark tree where Falstaff and the wives are to rendezvous in the final scene, Herne's Oak, to generate an ecological critical commentary. So after each case study, an epilogue offering a view, as it were, from Herne's Oak will create a dialectic with, sometimes a complete undermining of, my performance histories; what I applaud in terms of merriness and gender politics may seem appalling from the point of view of timber usage, deforestation, and carbon footprint. This will unfairly but provocatively scrutinise the productions curated and what they might reveal about then contemporary (un)sustainable theatre practices, particularly in their very different attempts to engage with, or represent, Windsor Forest onstage.

Merry Wives potentially makes a unique offer in terms of thinking about (eco-)performance history. The play was created in a moment of theatrical frugality. Around 1598,²⁰ when *Merry Wives* was written and first performed, Shakespeare's theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, were seriously engaged in recycling, or upcycling, by taking the timbers from their playhouse, The Theatre in Shoreditch, which they dismantled on 28 December 1598, before storing the wood, and then later using it to build the Globe playhouse. Given the increase in timber prices, which was contributing to contemporary deforestation, it made financial sense for the company to recycle The Theatre even though storing the timbers that became the Globe safely could have been challenging logistically as wood rapidly increased in market value.

Whichever playhouse *Merry Wives* premiered in, The Theatre or the Globe, in (eco-)performance history terms, this was a pivotal period in Shakespeare's career; his company were beginning to shift from what could be seen as low-carbon theatre-making, largely bare boards, human body-centred theatre to higher-carbon theatre-making. The direction of travel becomes legible when two plays featuring non-human species, fairies and spirits, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, are compared. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare not only charts climate breakdown in Titania's catalogue of flooded rivers, failed harvests, and seasons out of kilter (2.1.81–117) but he also explores the art of theatre-making at length.²¹ Peter Quince's company faces many challenges as they seek to represent a wall and moonlight onstage, but their solutions are fundamentally in sympathy with Shakespeare's

dramaturgy in the *Dream*; it is primarily words that are used to establish the theatrical context of most of the action, that is, a wood near Athens.

A different dramaturgical approach appears in Ariel's appearance 'like to a nymph o' th' sea' in *The Tempest* (1.2.303). No characters are able to see Ariel apart from Prospero, and his nymph costume is not required by the plot. Given that Ariel reappears only 16 lines after exiting to carry out Prospero's instruction, he does not have time for an elaborate costume change, but the subsequent stage direction acknowledges he now appears '*like a water-nymph*' (1.2.319 SD). Presumably, it is in this water/sea nymph guise that he plays and sings, although '*invisible*', to Ferdinand (1.2.376 SD). Ariel's appearances here are grounded in visual pleasure, for Prospero and for the audience, but his water-nymph costume will also increase a production's financial and carbon price tag. The shared-experience approach to theatre-making, where performers ask audiences to 'on' their 'imaginary forces work' (*Henry V* Chorus 1.18), here becomes entangled with the seductive delights of visually spectacular theatre.

Although theatre-making in general was on a journey away from low-carbon theatre-making (the Greek amphitheatre, the Japanese Noh stage, *commedia* troupes performing outdoors) to higher carbon (dedicated theatre buildings, melodrama, realism, the mega musical), the fact that Shakespeare's company began playing in the indoors Blackfriars Theatre after 1608 could have affected the carbon footprint of their performances as the more controlled indoor environment allowed for more precise staging in terms of visual effects. Another factor was the increasing influence of the court masques, an elitist, expensive, wasteful art form, that privileged spectacle, display, consumption, and the scenic over verbal scene painting; this genre certainly impacted *The Tempest* as evidenced by Ariel's masque of Iris, Juno, and Ceres.

In addition, *Merry Wives* bears witness, as eco-critics have pointed out, to important developments in environmentally unsustainable real-life practices in the late 1590s, a period of transition and climate disruption. Eco-criticism has noted that the Pages' invitation to 'a country fire' at the end (5.5.239) implies that they can afford expensive wood (Martin 2–3). Similarly, the fact that the Fords' chimney is large enough to be considered as a hiding place for Falstaff implies wealth. Falstaff references a vegetable recently introduced to England, potatoes (5.5.19). Pistol's name evokes developments in weaponry that were, in the Elizabethan more than the Henrician period, having an impact on the environment as saltpetre was produced (Martin 21–2).

I also read Mistress Page's speech about Herne the Hunter as resonating with Titania's climate catastrophe speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Mistress Page states that in winter, at midnight, Herne walks around an oak wearing an animal's horns and he 'blasts the tree' (4.4.32), that is, he attacks it either by lightning or by disease. Herne also 'takes the cattle' and turns cows' milk into blood (4.4.32–3). When Herne is impersonated by Falstaff, there is additional layering because Falstaff is so voracious in the consumption of resource, particularly food and drink, and this is highlighted as he draws attention to his size as 'the fattest' deer 'I think, i' th' forest' (5.5.13).²²

While some eco-critics have teased out thematic strands and explored the historical contexts of the play, they have shown less interest in the pragmatics of performance than in literary nuance; for example, Vin Nardizzi discusses how Falstaff's fingers are configured as wood that could take fire; however, it is more likely from a performance point of view today that whoever is playing Falstaff would be less interested in linguistics and more concerned with health and safety risk assessments as the fairies execute the Fairy Queen's orders 'With trial-fire touch me his finger-end' (5.5.85). Nardizzi does engage with the question of how Herne's Oak might have been staged in the early modern period, and like Randall Martin, he speculates that because Philip Henslowe's company owned several stage trees, Herne's Oak would be physically represented on the playhouse stage at The Theatre (Nardizzi 128; Martin 52). Nardizzi concedes that a physical presentation of a tree is not critical and that the 'actors could easily have assembled at one of the wooden posts supporting the playhouse's so-called "heavens"' and the playhouse's timbering would enable the audience 'to "see" the trees of Windsor Forest throughout the scene of Falstaff's humiliation' (128). Bringing on an item such as a stage tree takes time in performance, and in the lead-up to the Folio's 5.5, there are some very rapid changes of location which depend on the *unlocalised* nature of the Elizabethan stage. Would a company that toured to venues such as St George's Guildhall in King's Lynn really lug on a stage property tree to represent Herne's Oak so that when the Fairy Queen instructs the 'meadow-fairies' (5.5.66) to sing and with the elves and ouphs to execute 'Our dance of custom round about the oak/ Of Herne the hunter' (76–7), there is a tree-like object for them to dance around? Evans, as a Welsh fairy, instructs the fairies to 'lock hand in hand' (78) for their 'measure round about the tree' (80), but the physical theatre of this dance and what the music sounds like will be paramount in terms of performance impact, as well as determining which lines get heard and which do not. Points of connection between *Merry Wives* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (metamorphosed man encounters Fairy Queen in a wood) might even encourage the idea that it is theatrically unsophisticated to be, like the performers of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, literal when thinking about representing nature, whether it be the moon, a wood near Athens, Windsor Forest, or Herne's Oak, onstage.

Herne's Oak is probably fictional, but Shakespeare could be evoking one of the extremely old oaks that stood in Windsor in the 1590s, some of which, such as Offa's Oak or the Conqueror's Oak, still stand in the Windsor Great Park estate today.²³ Herne's Oak appears to be in danger given the proximity of the saw-pit that Mistress Page plans to use in the final tormenting of Falstaff:

Nan Page (my daughter) and my little son
And three or four more of their growth we'll dress
Like urchins, ouphs and fairies, green and white,
With rounds of waxen tapers on their heads,
And rattles in their hands; upon a sudden,
As Falstaff, she, and I, are newly met,

12 *Shakespeare and (Eco-)Performance History*

Let them from forth a sawpit rush at once
With some diffused song

(4.4.47–54)

Later, Mistress Page confirms that the pit is being used as the equivalent to a theatrical green room: ‘They are all couched in a pit hard by Herne’s oak’ (5.3.13–14). This saw-pit, where mature oaks were reduced to manageable timber, helps signal the transition that Windsor Forest was experiencing as it metamorphosed towards becoming the considerably deforested Windsor Great Park that exists today. Randall Martin (46) – after noting that, in ‘an enlightened but token gesture’, Elizabeth I took ‘the first documented steps towards actively regenerating crown woodland’ at Windsor – sees the saw-pit (48) as ‘a dark reflection of the Crown’s commercialized violence against its own woodland resources and conservationist principles’. Many mature oaks were being felled in the 1590s to fuel newly flourishing industries such as building, glass making, and saltpetre,²⁴ as well as longer established industries such as ship building, and the saw-pit stresses this fact. The saw-pit could have been evoked in the early modern playhouse by using the trap, but it is rarely represented in modern performances.²⁵ And if the saw-pit is not staged, will audiences register its significance? Eco-criticism may dwell on the meanings of the saw-pit, but (eco-)performance history would want to know if the saw-pit made any impact on the reviewers or audience.

3. Into the Woods

Eco-scolding historic theatre-makers of the past for their reckless consumption and eye-watering carbon footprint is not constructive, but it is still important to acknowledge, as Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* (83) remarks of a production of *Macbeth*, ‘Many living things were harmed in the making of this production’. In seeking to excavate insights, to glean understanding via an unconventional ‘View from Herne’s Oak’, I recalibrate the theatrical achievements discussed in the main body of the chapter. I acknowledge that the nomenclature of ‘Herne’s Oak’ is not ideal; however, naming a *Quercus robur* after a malicious ghost that ‘blasts’ (4.4.32), the tree every midnight might be read as emblematic of the damage inflicted during the Anthropocene.

Merry Wives has morphed into pantomime, opera, film, television, musical, and zoom theatre, and the first edition of the play, the 1602 Quarto, suggests that adapting, remixing, and updating began early in the play’s history. Q1 is discussed in detail as a document of performance rather than, as is more usually the case, a bibliographic battleground, in Chapter 2. The probable date of the play’s first performance and the Folio text of 1623 are also examined. Chapter 3 examines Eliza Vestris’s 1840 *Merry Wives* and the star performer’s remarkable, but under-remarked, engagement with the play. Chapter 4 focusses around Ellen Terry’s performance as Mistress Page in Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1902 pictorial production and the creative

generation of Terry's *Merry Wives* playlet. Chapter 5 looks at Terry Hands's inventive, and seminal, use of the Quarto over a period of nearly 30 years. Chapter 6 explores Bill Alexander's 1985 RSC *Merry Wives*, set specifically in September 1959. This production began a fashion for setting the play in the post-World War Two period but Alexander's party-political critique of the wives is thrown into relief by contrasting his directorial choices with those made by Rachel Kavanaugh in her 2002 RSC *Merry Wives* which deployed a post-war setting to very different effect. Chapter 7 focusses on physical comedy in *Merry Wives* and examines the production directed by Lecoq-trained Geoffrey Rush in 1987, a production which wrote back to empire and added post-colonial politics by relocating the action to Windsor, Brisbane, 1947. Chapter 8 analyses Leila Hipólito's *As Alegres Comadres* (2003), the only feature film of the play, noting its feminism alongside the challenges of reading Brazilian race politics in relation to the setting of nineteenth-century colonial town, Tiradentes, Minas Gerais. Chapter 9 assesses the 'Merriness unbridled' of Christopher Luscombe's *Merry Wives* at the Globe, 2008, revived in 2010.²⁶ The live broadcast and DVD of this production have given it significant international reach, and the influence of Luscombe's production is traced through the impact it had on the UK Shakespeare Schools Festival. In Chapter 10, the Boito-Verdi adaptation, *Falstaff*, is briefly considered before exploring the production directed by Richard Jones at Glyndebourne in 2009 (revived 2013), which wrote Shakespeare's play back into the opera, refocussed on the women characters, and imported queerness. Chapter 11 returns to physical theatre with *Wanawake wa Heri wa Winsa*, directed by Sarah Norman and Daniel Goldman for the 2012 Globe to Globe Festival, a production performed in Swahili, which reinvigorated the play's *commedia dell'arte* origins. Chapter 12 offers a commentary on and critique of recent productions in terms of environmental sustainability politics. The Epilogue then considers shifts in identity politics in a cluster of recent productions and the emergence of Anne Page as a force to be reckoned with.

Productions of *Merry Wives* are always, also, part of what is still an ongoing debate about women, comedy, and laughter. In documenting funny, and merry, representations of the Windsor women for over five centuries, this performance history inevitably, if often implicitly, offers a cultural history of prejudices about women and what they should, and should not, be doing. Directors today, whether they critique the wives' class privilege, celebrate their theatre-making, or bowdlerise their jokes, are always confronting, or working with, an enduring misogynist stereotype: that women cannot, or should not, be funny.

Notes

- 1 See Wilson-Powell (8–9) for a discussion of 'Is this book green?'
- 2 Both the Quarto (Q1) and the Folio (F) have the merry wives in the play's title. See Chapter 2.