

**THE FIRST SKETCH OF  
SHAKESPEARE'S MERRY  
WIVES OF WINDSOR**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649473953

The First Sketch of Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor by James Orchard Halliwell

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EDITED BY  
JAMES ORCHARD HALLIWELL, ESQ.

F.R.S., HON. M.R.I.A., F.S.A., F.R.A.S., &c.

Φασι δε και Αρατον πύθεσθαι αυτου [Τιμωνος], πως την 'Ομηρου ποιησιν  
ασφαλως κτησαστα' τον δε ειπειν, Ει τοις αρχαιοις αντεγραφοις εντυγχαναι,  
και μη τοις ηδη διαρθωμενοις.

*Diog. Laert., lib. ix., in vit. Timon.*



LONDON:  
PRINTED FOR THE SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY.

1842.

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THE SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY.

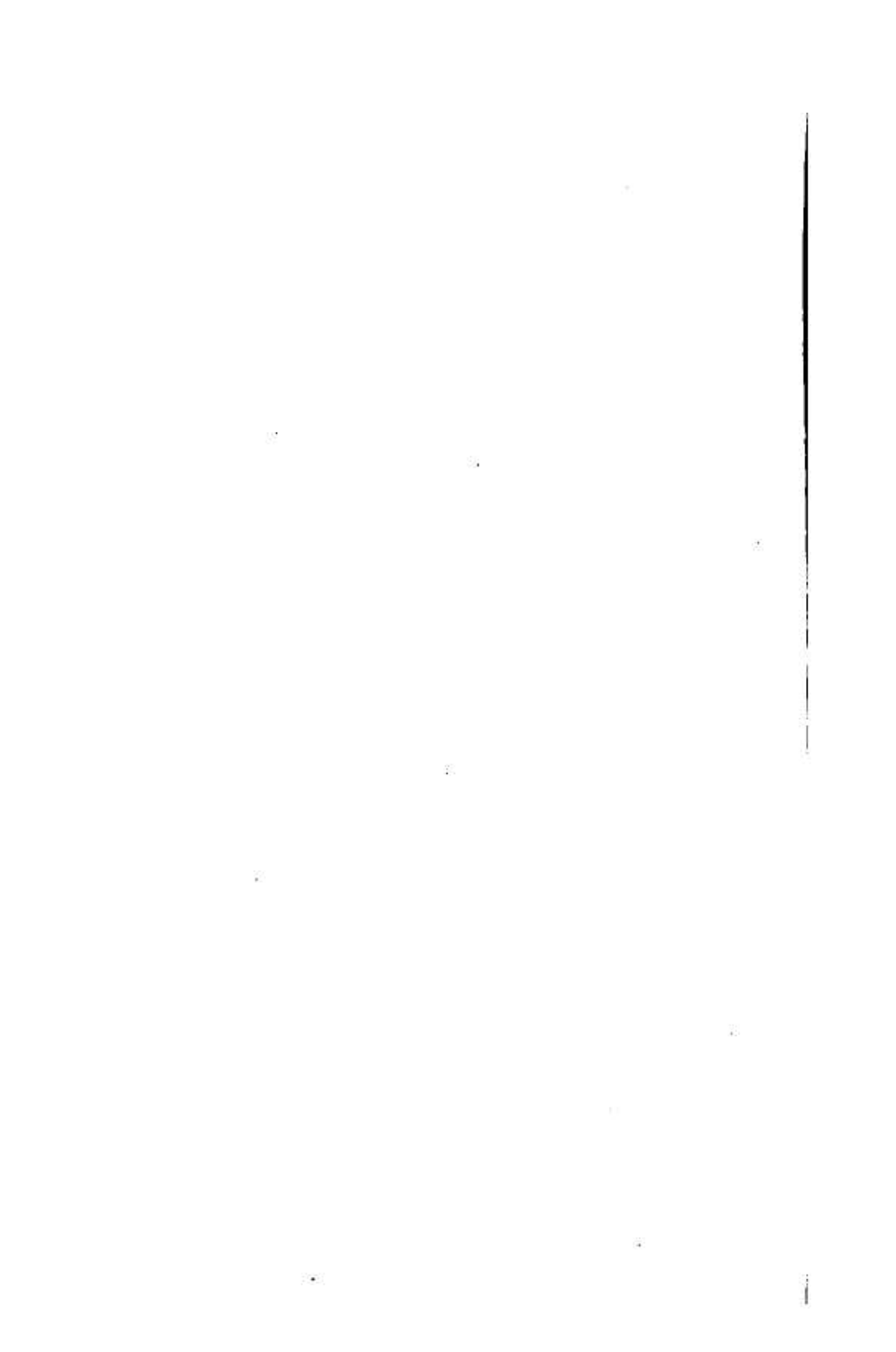
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## INTRODUCTION.

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Early in the last century, eighty-six years after the death of Shakespeare, an unsuccessful comedy was produced at Drury Lane Theatre, under the title of "The Comical Gallant." This play was heralded forth in the bills of the day as the work of Mr. John Dennis, but it was merely an alteration of the "Merry Wives of Windsor,"\* and a very poor attempt at an improvement of that admirable comedy. The author of this performance, however, was sufficiently well satisfied with its merits to undertake the expence of printing it; and it was accordingly published in the year 1702, with a long dedicatory epistle, from which I make the following extract, putting in Italics those portions of it to which

\* The *dramatis persone* are much the same as in the Merry Wives, except that Dennis has added one new character, the Host of the Bull, who is brother to Mrs. Ford; and Fenton is represented as nephew to Mrs. Ford. Dennis has rewritten about half of the dialogue, and materially changed the conduct of the piece.—See Genest's "Account of the English Stage," 8vo., Bath, 1832, vol. ii., p. 248.

I more particularly wish to direct the reader's attention :—

“ When I first communicated the design which I had of altering this comedy of Shakespear, I found that I should have two sorts of people to deal with, who would equally endeavour to obstruct my success. The one believed it to be so admirable, that nothing ought to be added to it; the others fancied it to be so despicable, that any one's time would be lost upon it. That this comedy was not despicable, I guess'd for several reasons; First, *I knew very well* that it had pleas'd one of the greatest queens that ever was in the world, great not only for her wisdom in the arts of government, but for her knowledge of polite learning, and her nice taste of the drama, for such a taste we may be sure she had, by the relish which she had of the ancients. *This comedy was written at her command, and by her direction, and she was so eager to see it acted, that she commanded it to be finished in fourteen days; and was afterwards, as tradition tells us, very well pleas'd at the representation.* In the second place, in the reign of King Charles the Second, when people had an admirable taste of comedy, all those men of extraordinary parts, who were the ornaments of that court, as the late Duke of Buckingham, my Lord Normandy, my Lord Dorset, my late Lord Rochester, Sir Charles Sidley, Dr. Frazer, Mr. Savil, Mr. Buckley, were in love with the beauties of this comedy. In the third place, I thought that after so long an acquaintance as I had with the best comic poets, among the ancients and moderns, I might depend in some measure upon my own judgment, and I thought I found here three or four extraordinary characters, that were exactly drawn, and truly comical; and that I saw besides in it some as happy touches as ever were in comedy. Besides I had observed what success the character of Falstaff had had in the First Part of 'Harry the Fourth.' And as the Falstaff in the 'Merry Wives' is certainly superior to that of the Second Part of 'Harry the Fourth,' so it can hardly be said to be inferior to that of the First.”

This is the earliest notice we have of the above curious tradition, and that Dennis has correctly reported it

I see no reason whatever to doubt. The reader will observe that he gives no special reason *why* the queen commanded Shakespeare to write this comedy; and I believe it is this point that the subsequent narrators of the tradition have amplified without proper authority. In the prologue to the "Comical Gallant," reference is again made to it—

" But Shakespear's play in fourteen days was writ,  
And in that space to make all just and fit,<sup>b</sup>  
Was an attempt surpassing human wit.  
Yet our great Shakespeare's matchless muse was such,  
None ere in so small a time perform'd so much."

Rowe, in 1709, gives rather a more circumstantial account. Speaking of Queen Elizabeth, he says, "She was so well pleased with that admirable character of Falstaff, in the two parts of Henry IV., that she commanded him to continue it for one play more, and to show him in love: this is said to be the occasion of his writing the 'Merry Wives of Windsor.' How well she was obeyed, the play itself is an admirable proof."<sup>c</sup> This evidence was followed by Gildon's account of the same tradition,<sup>d</sup> who, in 1710, jumbled an allusion to

<sup>b</sup> Dryden calls the *Merry Wives* a comedy "exactly formed." See his "Essay of Dramatick Poesie," 4to., Lond., 1668, p. 47; and Langbaine's "Account of the English Dramatick Poets," 8vo., Oxford, 1691, p. 459.

<sup>c</sup> Rowe's *Life of Shakespeare*, 8vo., Lond., 1709, p. 8—9.

<sup>d</sup> Mr. Knight (*Library Edition of Shakespeare*, vol. iii., p. 8) says that Rowe adopted the more circumstantial tradition from Gildon. He had probably forgotten that Rowe's account was published some time *before* Gildon wrote.