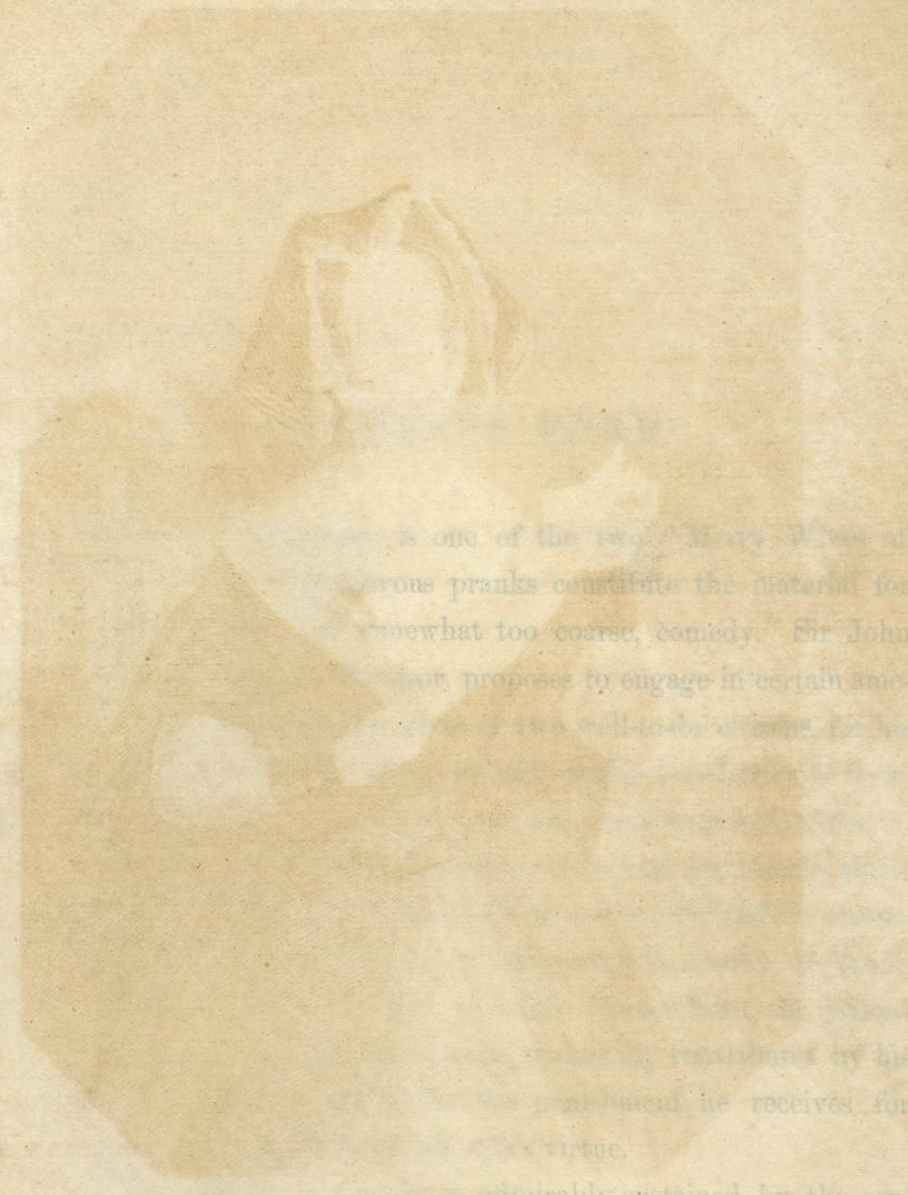




Mistress Ford.

MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR. ACT 2. SC. 3.



is one of the two. Merry Wives of Windsor pranks constitute the material for somewhat too coarse comedy. Sir John Falstaff proposes to engage in certain amours with two well-to-do citizens for the purpose of obtaining money for his debts. The plot is admirably sustained by the sententious remarks for the hand of "Sweet Anne" and the famous coadjutor and fellow-comedian, Mistress Quickly, who is the only character in the play who is not a member of the Falstaff household.



MISTRESS FORD

MISTRESS ALICE FORD is one of the two "Merry Wives of Windsor" whose mischievous pranks constitute the material for that very amusing, but somewhat too coarse, comedy. Sir John Falstaff, sojourning in Windsor, proposes to engage in certain amorous speculations with the wives of two well-to-do citizens, for his own pecuniary benefit. He accordingly indites love-letters to those jovial dames, who, being fast friends, at once inform each other of the audacious affront offered to their virtue, and together contrive a suitable revenge. By their excellent devices Falstaff is encouraged in both his suits, only to be betrayed into a series of humiliating situations, to the effect of which Master Ford, the jealous spouse of our quick-witted heroine, materially contributes by his counter-plotting, as well as by the punishment he receives for his groundless suspicions of his wife's virtue.

The underplot of the play is admirably sustained by the sentimental enterprises of three suitors for the hand of "Sweet Anne Page," daughter of Mistress Page, the famous coadjutor and fellow-sufferer of Mistress Ford; and Mistress Quickly, who, to her "respectable" calling of woman-of-all-work in a bachelor's establishment, adds the more questionable profession of go-between in

all the amorous affairs—honorable or to the contrary—of her village, plays no insignificant part in the laughable conspiracies of which the comedy consists.

The piquant original of these speaking “presentments” of Mistresses Ford and Page, existed, we have reason to believe, in the person of the beautiful Mrs. Davenant, hostess of the Crown Inn at Oxford, in whose sprightly company the Poet spent so many merry hours on his journeys from London to Stratford.

Without displaying any of those dainty refinements of character and manner which must always enter into one’s ideas of a lady, Mistress Ford commands our good-natured sympathy by her many happy traits: her kindness of heart, her sound sense, her lively temper, and a certain jovial heartiness which pervades every thing she does or says.

To her conjugal honesty, so ill rewarded by her provoking husband, we pay a tribute of respect as genuine, if not so exalted, as that elicited by the more poetic chastity of the Princess Imogen; and it must be conceded that, notwithstanding the sacrifice of dramatic effect, her manner of punishing the “greasy knight” is far more practically sensible than provoking a duel to heal her wounded honor, or sacrificing her life to prove her husband a fool.

It is plain that Mistress Ford is a buxom beauty, in a state of remarkable preservation—“fat, fair,” and very near “forty,” but blest with the elastic spirits attendant on that robust health which makes English matrons the finest in the world. Allowing ample latitude for exaggeration, this matchless harangue of Gossip Quickly, on the importunities suffered by the handsome Merry Wife,

quite glibly testifies to her exceeding comeliness, and suggests a very possible coquetry on her part, sufficient to avert from her poor, dear Ford a little of the contempt he appears to merit:

Fal. Well! Mistress Ford:—what of her?

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Quick. Marry, this is the short and the long of it: you have brought her into such a canaries, as ’tis wonderful; the best courtier of them all, when the court lay at Windsor, could never have brought her to such a canary. Yet there has been knights, and lords, and gentlemen with their coaches—I warrant you, coach after coach, letter after letter, gift after gift—smelling so sweetly, (all musk,) and so rushling, I warrant you, in silk and gold; and in such alligant terms; and in such wine and sugar of the best, and the fairest, that would have won any woman’s heart; and I warrant you, they could never get an eye-wink of her.—I had myself twenty angels given me this morning; but I defy all angels, (in any such sort, as they say,) but in the way of honesty:—and, I warrant you, they could never get her so much as sip on a cup with the proudest of them all; and yet there has been earls, nay, which is more, pensioners; but, I warrant you, all is one with her.

For a nicer personal description, though with even more liberal allowance for the flattery of the would-be gallant knight, we transcribe the first love-scene between him and the Merry Wife:

Fal. *Have I caught thee, my heavenly jewel?* Why, now let me die, for I have lived long enough; this is the period of my ambition.—O this blessed hour!

Mrs. Ford. O sweet Sir John!

Fal. Mistress Ford, I cannot cog; I cannot prate, Mistress Ford. Now shall I sin in my wish: I would thy husband were dead; I’ll speak it before the best lord—I would make thee my lady.

Mrs. Ford. I your lady, Sir John! Alas, I should be a pitiful lady.

Fal. Let the court of France show me such another; I see how thine eye would emulate the diamond; thou hast the right arched bent of the brow, that becomes the ship-tire, the tire-valiant, or any tire of Venetian admittance.

Mrs. Ford. A plain kerchief, Sir John: my brows become nothing else; nor that well neither.

Fal. Thou art a traitor to say so: thou would'st make an absolute courtier; and the firm fixture of thy foot would give an excellent motion to thy gait, in a semi-circled farthingale. I see what thou wert, if Fortune thy foe werenot; Nature is thy friend:—Come, thou canst not hide it.

Mrs. Ford. Believe me, there's no such thing in me.

Fal. What made me love thee? Let that persuade thee there's something extraordinary in thee. * *

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