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Sour Beer at the Boar's Head: Salvaging Shakespeare's Alewife, Mistress Quickly

Christina Romanelli 

Department of English, Meredith College, Raleigh, NC 27607, USA; cromanelli@meredith.edu

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Abstract: Using William Shakespeare's character Mistress Nell Quickly as an example, this article contends that familiarity with both the literary tradition of alewives and the historical conditions in which said literary tradition brewed aids in revising our interpretation of working-class women on the early modern stage. Mistress Quickly, the multi-faceted comic character in three history plays and a city-comedy, resembles closely those women with whom Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have lived and worked in their day-to-day lives. Rather than dismissing her role as minor or merely comic, as previous criticism largely has, scholarship can embrace this character type and her narrative as an example to complicate teleological progressions for women.

Keywords: Mistress Nell Quickly; Alewives; William Shakespeare

1. Introduction

Mistress Nell Quickly is sometimes the Queen of England or Fairyland, sometimes the hostess of the Eastcheap tavern, and always the purveyor of brain tickles. Appearing in four plays, but rarely in the criticism of those plays, Quickly is frequently written off as an idiot or gull. This article reads Quickly as part of a literary tradition of working-class alewives in order to bring our understanding of the historical conditions that created Shakespeare's tavern mistress to our interpretations of her roles in the plays. Both the anonymous ballad of Kynd Kittock and the final few speeches of the Chester harrowing play present women who are or were married but answer for their own life choices and actions in the face of cosmic judges—St. Peter above and Satan below. These alewives are literally in the afterlife, but their own afterlives, or the literary tradition they inspire, corroborate historical evidence about the “real world” conditions of working women. Viewing Quickly in light of this literary tradition, we can see that, contrary to the wealth of criticism that says women are only important as widows or wives, women's actions, both economic and social, were often considered integral to the public good and independent from their husband's actions. Rather than dismissing Quickly's roles as simply comedic (and therefore not necessarily logical or coherent) or as low-class and localized, here I attempt to elevate Quickly's multiplicity by considering how her interactions can help us drastically revise our characterization; contrary to our current scholarly consensus, she is a sarcastic, witty woman who is participating in a long-term con with her partner (but not husband) Falstaff. Fleshing out Quickly's character enables both literary critics and historians to see how Shakespeare's work commented upon and influenced late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century culture. As Michelle Dowd asserts, “Fictional stories play an integral role in a society that was both transformed and deeply troubled by women's increasingly diversified labor within England's proto-capitalist economy.”¹ Shakespeare's Mistress Quickly, as a product of this turbulent time, is unique in the canon for her economic

¹ Dowd, *Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Dowd 2009, p. 2).

independence and feminine wit. She represents her working-class, early English countrywoman in the drama that defined her age.

In this article, I argue that the character type of the alewife, peripherally and anachronistically considered a profession, is a strong and independent female role that represents many of Shakespeare's audience members and contemporaries in her multiplicity, allowing them to identify personally with the action of the play and feel a sense of belonging in the histories' nation-building narratives. Mistress Nell Quickly, as an example of this type, exists in a codependent literary relationship with her partner, Sir John Falstaff, that, I argue, is even more playful and humorous when it is seen as part of a coherent narrative arc. I conclude by suggesting that literary scholars might look to the biographies and histories of women in the period to appreciate more fully the female roles in Shakespeare's plays. Although she has been frequently interpreted as an idiotic form of comic relief, Mistress Nell Quickly can be seen as an integral and productive member of Eastcheap society as are the earlier alewife characters. Scholars frequently refer to her lack of intelligence as her defining character trait.² Two of these frequent references to Quickly's brain power warrant further mention because of their implications. Noting that Quickly "would have received no instruction in foreign languages" in his discussion of the role of the motto of the Garter in the final masque of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Maurice Hunt argues that "her real life counterpart [a doctor's servant performing in a country masque] may have been able to mouth a widely-recognizable six-word French maxim without possessing either the confidence or knowledge to paraphrase it in English."³ In her recent article on sack in the same play, Barbara Sebek writes that "Mistress Quickly unwittingly calls up the very commodities for which the Canaries were widely known." In both of these cases, Quickly's malapropisms are used as evidence that she would not have understood the context surrounding her roles in the community. On one hand, she may not have understood the message behind a common cultural reference, and on the other, she would not have known where the imports she buys for the doctor or sells in her tavern were made. Furthermore, her malapropisms are used to make a claim about what would have been the case for real women living and working in England.

Without a doubt, Quickly's language in all four plays is noteworthy both for its mangling of the standards and its comic effect. However, her improper use of words is not enough to assume that she does not possess other kinds of cunning and intelligence. Though Wendy Wall has championed literate women in the early modern period, contending that "early English recipes constituted and now bear witness to a rich and previously unacknowledged literate and brainy culture, one in which women were predominantly, though not exclusively, involved," non-literate women were also very productive members of English society.⁴ Sandra Clark eloquently argues for a different definition of women's wit that contrasts with verbal dexterity. She describes this wit as a "cleverness of action rather than of speech" that "incorporates resourcefulness, craftiness, cunning, and guile, and . . . an ability to turn situations to one's own advantage."⁵ It is precisely this ability to turn situations to her own advantage

² The most damning evidence against Quickly's intelligence is her frequent malapropisms, which are likened to Falstaff's anarchic energy. Larry Champion writes, "Undoubtedly her leading comic quality is her linguistic ineptness resulting in flagrant and continual malapropisms . . . No one, not even Dogberry or Verges, is in this respect the equal of Mistress Quickly, whose speech is riddles with such error." ("The Evolution of Mistress Quickly," (Champion 1965, p. 106)) Jean Howard notes that "Malapropisms, to those who know better, make the speaker appear foolish. Yet they also can disrupt the institutions that depend on clear predictable communications." ("The Second Part of Henry the Fourth," (Howard 1997, p. 1251).) It seems that the assumption of foolishness has far more weight over time. Describing Quickly as "unruly" and a "surplus character," Elizabeth Pittenger writes, "The master's language [Latin] has been translated into that other English, the 'substandard' language of Quickly." ("Dispatch Quickly," (Pittenger 1991, p. 401).) Rebecca Lemon notes that "Falstaff preys on his friends . . . Quickly is forced to sell her tavern's plate and tapestries to keep from prison." ("Sacking Falstaff," (Lemon 2016, p. 120).) Barbara Arnett describes Quickly's speech as "the attempt of an uneducated woman to speak in a way which is fitting for the company which frequents her inn." ("Mistress Quickly," (Arnett 1979, p. 219).) Roy Battenhouse applauds Mistress Quickly for recognizing Falstaff's goodness at his death despite "her limits of comprehension." ("Falstaff as Parodist and Perhaps Holy Fool," (Battenhouse 1975, p. 46).)

³ Hunt, "The Garter Motto in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," (Hunt 2010, p. 388).

⁴ Wall, *Recipes for Thought*, (Wall 2015, p. 2).

⁵ Clark, "Wives May Be Merry and yet Honest Too," (Clark 1987, p. 249).

that demands a fresh reading of Quickly's character and tone. Quickly's witty retorts indicate that she is frequently aware of the language used around her, and, among other things, her description of her tavern indicates that she is quite well-versed in the import and export market in England. And, of course, her character is not an anomalistic representative of English women. As historical research about working women shows, she may well have walked out of Shakespeare's favorite tavern and on to his page in *Henry IV, Part 1*.

2. The Women Who Brewed

Alewives played an important historical role between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries because they provided the most popular and affordable potable beverage in early English society. For most of this period, people drank more ale than anything else. Judith M. Bennett explains that this is because "other liquids were unhealthy, unsuitable, or unavailable . . . water was often polluted . . . milk was converted into cheese and butter, and . . . wine was too expensive for most people."⁶ Much of this brewing was done by women who came to be known as alewives. According to the *Encyclopedia of Brewing*, an alewife, "was a female brewer (or sometimes just a beer retailer)."⁷ Even this basic definition collapses distinctions that must be teased apart to understand the historical conditions. Most non-aristocratic women must have been brewers to provide hydration for those living with them, but the retail or selling of the beer to travelers or villagers in a house licensed and specified for that purpose was a different matter. In practice, an alewife was a woman who brewed ale for the consumption of her family and for her neighbors. It was a common collaborative preparation for neighbors to take turns brewing for a small group of families; this home-brewed beer would be sold but only at cost, not for profit. Women did most of this home brewing in Shakespeare's time; William Harrison notes that his wife does most of the brewing in 1577 ("brewing is . . . once a month practiced by my wife and her maid-servants"), and as late as 1615, Gervase Markham notes that the English housewife must know how to brew.⁸ The ubiquitous nature and necessity of brewsters or alewives make it unlikely that the negative social connotations of drunkenness and debauchery can be traced back to this everyday custom. In fact, the omnipresent need for beer makes it very likely that most of the female theater-goers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could brew beer themselves and readily identify with the women who discuss doing so on stage.

It was the social custom of drinking beer produced for commercial consumption outside of one's own home that led to less savory associations for alewives over the course of the period. This was not an immediate process. Though not yet technically a profession, brewing was associated with women, and while drunkenness is a recognizable problem for Shakespeare's audiences, the running of an alehouse was not yet synonymous with debauchery. On the contrary, Peter Clark notes that running an alehouse was one of the few avenues of social mobility for women in the period.⁹ "Landladies," Clark explains, "are found in the important community role of midwives, who apart from their medical duties also led neighbourhood action against people suspected or charged with offending local customs and conventions."¹⁰ As is the case for Mistress Quickly, being a hostess and an alewife would be a step up for women whose opportunities for economic advancement included household service and marriage. For a short time, women could enjoy both economic freedom and social respect in the business of providing beverages and lodging for their countrymen. However, the friendly neighborhood inn can eventually become the pub and perhaps the local bawdy house. Over time,

⁶ Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, (Bennett 1996, p. 17).

⁷ Boulton, *Encyclopaedia of Brewing*, (Boulton 2013, p. 18).

⁸ Harrison and Edelen, *The Description of England*, (Harrison and Edelen 1994, p. 137); Sambrook, *Country House Brewing in England, 1500–1900*, (Sambrook 1996, p. 168).

⁹ Clark, *The English Alehouse*, (Clark 1983, p. 84).

¹⁰ Ibid.

a separation between consumption for hydration and consumption for entertainment created space for the demonization of women as proprietors of profligacy.

Thus, brewing was absolutely integral to English society, but as ale produces undesirable effects, the women who brewed became palimpsests for the writing of social disorders. Scholars disagree about whether or not the derision afforded to alewives can be traced primarily to misogyny or classicism. It seems clear, nonetheless, that narratives of women's labor were sites of turbulence stemming from change and uncertainty. Dowd explains that the varied nature of women's labor in the period is further borne out by historical and demographic studies, which reveal that the characteristic diversity of women's employment was directly linked to the gendered division of labor. In contrast to early modern men, women of the period changed occupations more frequently throughout their lifetimes, meaning that they were more likely than men to participate in multiple sectors of the labor economy over the course of their lives.¹¹

It may be that, though housewifery was an apprenticable skill in early modern England, the variety of women's work precluded the professionalization and accompanying credibility that men were to enjoy in a newly emerging capitalist economy. In her formative historical work on women's brewing, Bennett argues that between 1350 and 1600, women were pushed out of the increasingly professionalized beer industry in part by a propaganda war against alewives. "The attitudes betrayed in these representations," Bennett explains, "might have inhibited the trade of alewives in many ways . . . they dangerously associated alewives with disorder, heresy, and witchcraft."¹² Whether or not early modern Englishmen were affected by negative representations of alewives in the media, Bennett's argument has influenced the reading of ale and beer in Shakespeare's plays. Peter Parolin, for example, finds that Prince Hal's desire for beer is both a masculinizing force and central to his rise to kingship, which, for Parolin, "requires the collapse of the feminine, literally and metaphorically" because beer "comes to national prominence through processes that downgrade and down play women's role."¹³ Disagreeing with the idea that gender is the primary cause of the campaign against alehouses, Ralph Hanna III writes, "Given both the paucity of overt references to alewives in the literature and women's prominence in the medieval brewing trade, the most misogynistic aspect of such depictions may be the general elision of the feminine."¹⁴ Hanna suggests that rather than seeing the literary texts as primarily misogynistic, we might read them as partly classist, since, in *Piers Plowman* at least, Langland "most typically concerns himself with lower-class overindulgence."¹⁵ Certainly the literary texts can be poly-derisive, both misogynistic and classist.

On the whole, however, it is clear that brewsters were neither completely eradicated nor universally derided in Shakespeare's world. Pamela Sambrook notes that while the rise of commercial brewing tended to exclude women, "Brewsters [female brewers] were still needed in the domestic situation."¹⁶ This is a fact borne out by Quickly's description of her services to Dr. Caius discussed further in the next section. Richard Unger notes, "The alewife was a common figure in England from the high Middle Ages at least, and perhaps earlier . . . by the sixteenth century in England, it was widows who dominated in the operation of small alehouses."¹⁷ Here again, Quickly's work in the tavern after the death of her husband corresponds to Unger's claim. Alewife appearances in comic literature of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries reveal their tremendous power over the living conditions of the community. The early sixteenth-century precedent for Mistress Quickly's character shows female tavern owners or workers in the process of being judged on their cumulative

¹¹ Dowd, *Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, (Dowd 2009, pp. 2–3).

¹² Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, (Bennett 1996, p. 135).

¹³ Parolin, "'The Poor Creature Small Beer': Princely Autonomy and Subjection in 2 Henry IV," (Parolin 2016, p. 32).

¹⁴ Hanna III, "Brewing Trouble: On Literature and History—and Alewives," (Hanna 1996).

¹⁵ (Hanna 1996).

¹⁶ Sambrook, *Country House Brewing in England, 1500–1900*, (Sambrook 1996, p. 166).

¹⁷ Unger, *Beer in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, (Unger 2004, p. 227).

life's work. The interplay of historical and literary evidence indicates a complex role for alewives in England.

The two examples of alewives in the afterlife isolate the character type in a fictionalized place of judgement, thereby giving readers the opportunity to see a decontextualized, cosmic assessment of their personalities and actions. The ballad of Kynd Kittock, which has been attributed to William Dunbar, depicts the speaker's grandmother, or "gudedame," just after death as she travels to the gates of heaven, spends some time there, and then leaves because she does not like the taste of heaven's ale.¹⁸ Kynd Kittock's story shows independence, resourcefulness, and confidence. Like Mistress Quickly, Kynd Kittock is described as "gay" and "gend," or happy but simple, and though she "dredit nought in hevin for to duell," she drank so much that she is likened to a "caldrone cruke cler under kell," or a cauldron crook under creek water. The speaker, while not sanitizing his grandmother's reputation, is certainly not demonizing her. Even before the reader learns that she spends eternity brewing, Kynd Kittock is clearly and closely associated with drinking. In a claim that might seem appropriate for Sir Toby Belch or the great Falstaff himself, the people say of Kittock that "scho deit of thrist, and maid a gude end" (she died of thirst and made a good end).

Obviously meant to be humorous, this ballad offers several interesting points of conversation. One, the alewife, Kynd Kittock, is conspicuously on her own, and her interest is for ale rather than men. She was married, we might assume, because the speaker describes her as his grandmother; however, upon her death, there is no discussion of her getting to heaven to see her husband or other family members. Instead, she grabs the tail of a snail ridden by a newt (ask) and heads to heaven, stopping only at a nearby alehouse to drink her "missour and mair." After serving as "oor Ladyis hen wif," Kittock finds "the aill of hevin wes sour" and sneaks out to her previously patronized nearby alehouse. When St. Peter, whom Kittock "held at strif," will not grant her reentry into heaven, she leaves to spend her eternity working in the alehouse down the road. Kittock's complex relationship to authority is maintained throughout. She makes God "lewch his hairt sair," or laugh his heart sore; Mary takes her into her service. Saint Peter, however, does not have patience for the mischievous grandmother, as he "hat hir with a bluc" when she tries to come back from the bar. She therefore spends the rest of eternity "ran the pitscheris to pour, /Thair to brew and to baik." The confidence Kittock displays directly after death is matched by her adaptability in changing circumstances. On her own merit, she believes she deserves heaven, but when circumstances prevent her happiness in the saintly community, she easily begins working somewhere else, making a paradise of her local alehouse. Interestingly, the afterlife is not a place of punishment or reward but a place of rather normal work; she *works* wherever she is, a trait she shares with Shakespeare's alewife, Mistress Quickly.

Similarly, the Chester Alewife's story highlights negotiation in front of cosmic judges. This section of the Harrowing play offers a first person, albeit fictional, account of an alewife's bad behavior; it is a confession that details the problems with ale production and illustrates the shift from the alewife taking personal responsibility to her renegotiating her role as torturer and "girlfriend" of Satan.¹⁹ The existence of the Chester alewife is interesting as its own piece of historical evidence in the social damnation of alewives. David Mills explains that though the 1607 manuscript does not contain the story of the Chester Alewife, the coda "seems to belong to a period in 1533 when Chester's mayor, Henry Gee, re-enforced the laws controlling the quality and sale of alcohol in the city."²⁰ "But the alewife," Mills notes, "was also a figure in the midsummer show and hence introduces a more 'popular'

¹⁸ Bannatyne et al., *The Bannatyne Manuscript* (Bannatyne et al. 1896, p. 382).

¹⁹ The mystery plays, originally associated with Corpus Christi Day in England, were a product of the late fourteenth century through the early seventeenth century, though they changed considerably over the two-hundred-year span. Even though the feast was abolished in 1548 as papist propaganda, the plays retained their popularity until the sixteenth-century Protestants censored them (Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, (Mills 1992, p. xii)). Mills explains that "such plays lived on only through their influence on the new drama, particularly the history play" ((Mills 1992, p. xii)).

²⁰ Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, (Mills 1992, p. 303).

element."²¹ In the Chester harrowing, the alewife is sent to hell *after* the harrowing. She then speaks a forty-eight-line confessional monologue which makes her an early, early English precursor for a character like Charles Dickens's Jacob Marley.²² Notably, she also arrives in the afterlife without a man, nor does she seem to be seeking one, former or future. A standing marriage is not a prerequisite for this woman's operation of her business, nor is a husband there to take the fall for her sins, a trait the Chester alewife shares with Quickly at the end of *Henry IV, Part 2* when she is arrested on behalf of a crime she commits with her future husband, Pistol. These conspicuously single women challenge our presumption that women did not operate publically or socially outside of marriage in the period. These alewives might be married to ale rather than to men.

Additionally, the Chester alewife and Quickly share their initial ideas about the men in their lives and the impact those men might have on their businesses. Though in the last stanza of her monologue, the Chester alewife affectionately refers to Satan as "my sweet master, Sir Satanas," her early emotions are not so positive: "woeful am I with thee to dwell . . . Endless sorrow and pains cruel I suffer in this case." The alewife's speech takes us through the course of her own fall from grace, beginning with her as "a taverner, a gentle gossip and a tapster, of wine and ale a trusty brewer." Her early sins include failing to carefully measure her cups and selling gross-tasting ale. However, she progresses from charging too much for a sub-par product to truly "marring" the product: "And when I was a brewer long, /with hops I made my ale strong; /ashes and herbs I blend among/and marred so good a malt." This "cutting" of her product which made it too strong is what lands her in the underworld jail, shaking her cups and ringing her cans as a warning to all who follow after her. Unlike the speaker in the ballad, the Chester alewife proclaims her own warning to her colleagues and peers. Just after the harrowing, which rendered hell useless and empty, she repurposes the place for cheating workers, especially those who deal in ale and wine "hurting the common weal." She says, "Therefore this place now ordained is/for such ill-doers so much amiss. /Here shall they have their joy and bliss, exalted by the neck." The people who have the power to control the drinking supply and abuse that power are now the primary denizens of hell. They will be up their necks in cheating and stealing and hurting people, essentially transferring their earthly sins to hellish punishments.

There are some important things to note about this monologue in conjunction with the ballad. Firstly, the alewives are held accountable for their own actions separately from any male authority. The characters think and act for themselves and are punished accordingly. Secondly, their actions are legitimately important to the community as a whole. Kynd Kittock brews, bakes, and keeps hens for others. She is providing food and drink to a larger community both on earth and in heaven. The Chester alewife overcharges for a necessity, but more importantly, her alterations to the drink itself can cause serious illness. She says that she is going to be in hell "with all mashers, mengers of wine, in the night/brewing so, blending against day-light" because "Such new-made claret is cause full right/of sickness and disease!" Thirdly, taken together, the fact that these women are judged for the negative repercussions of their conscious actions on a vulnerable society suggests that there is a tradition on which to draw for Shakespeare's creation of Mistress Quickly who appears relatively unattached and dangerous in three out of her four plays. She is not simply a stupid woman who follows along with Falstaff for his benefit; instead, she may be conniving in her own right, despite her gender and her low birth. The characterizations of Kynd Kittock and the Chester alewife as independent and integral to community function are not isolated instances. While these may be the funniest, most lighthearted presentations of alewives, there are several others that indicate that women's power in

²¹ (Mills 1992, p. 303).

²² Dickens may provide other possible "afterlives" for these female characters. Arnett suggests Richard Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop as a reinvention of Mistress Quickly (Arnett, "Mistress Quickly," (Arnett 1979, p. 219)). Following these trails may help to do the work Rackin suggests in creating other critical narratives for Shakespeare's female characters.

this role was threatening enough to society to launch a veritable smear campaign against the role.²³ Furthermore, historical accounts of women in the period indicate that women of the subsistence-wage level and middling-sort exercised a great deal of independence in their economic activity that resulted in independent travel and even marriage negotiations.²⁴ Thus reading the alewives' stories indicates that brewsters (which made up a great deal of women of this class status) were both free to participate in economic ventures independent from men and were threatening in the carrying out of their duty because of their influence over so basic a necessity as potable beverages.

3. A Coherent Mistress Quickly

Contrary to the idea that the low comedy of the history plays is a Shakespearean afterthought, Quickly may have a biography and a narrative trajectory in these four plays. Some readers have just assumed that she is not the same person.²⁵ Others chalk it up to either idiocy or generosity of spirit.²⁶ One way to resolve this myriad of inconsistencies is to first create a logical narrative for the character that Shakespeare brings into the four plays and to reimagine the performance of that character as tremendously sarcastic and ironic. If we assume a logical trajectory for Mistress Quickly, she begins her character life in *Merry Wives of Windsor* where she is the servant of Doctor Caius.²⁷ Positioning this play as a prequel makes logical sense because Quickly is a servant who eventually rises to become a hostess and tavern owner over the course of the intervening years, a trajectory of upward mobility that is supported by the research. Also, she does not apparently know Falstaff well in this play, whereas she knows him extremely well in the history plays.

The Merry Wives of Windsor, William Shakespeare's 1602 comedy, the only one set in the English countryside, features two witty wives who, with the help of the gopher and sometimes-Latin-translator, Nell Quickly, trick their wooer repeatedly before shaming him in front of the entire town in a modified form of the skimmington ritual, a social shaming of a man who is proven less powerful and sophisticated than his wife.²⁸ The butt off the cuckold joke is none other than the famous Sir John

²³ For more information about the multiple presentations of alewives in literature, see (Bennett 1996, pp. 122–44) and (Hanna 1996, pp. 7–12). Bennet suggests that it is because of the alehouse's "association with prostitution" that the city of Chester orders that "no woman between the ages of 14 and 40 years could keep an alehouse" in 1540 (Bennett 1996, p. 122). Unger intimates similarly when he says that women who ran alehouses "had bad reputations" (Unger 2004, p. 228).

²⁴ See the discussion of Lena Cown Orlin's article "Anne by Indirection" below and Vivien Brodsky Elliott's suggestion: "The migrant bride pattern of a later age at first marriage and a small age-difference between partners implies greater freedom of choice of spouse and a more active role for women in the courtship and marriage process" (*Single Women in the London Marriage Market*, (Elliott 1980, p. 89)). The cited works by Dowd and Wall also challenge the idea that women had no economic agency in the period.

²⁵ For example, Gretchen Sween writes, "What is bizarre and interesting about Mistress Quickly is that, as opposed to Falstaff who appears to be two different people, one in the history plays and another in a comedy, she seems to be a different person every time we encounter her" ("True Complaint—Shakespeare, Law, and Other Whimsies." (Sween 2013)). Champion says that the Hostess Quickly in *Merry Wives* "is in name only the garrulous wench of Eastcheap" ("The Evolution of Mistress Quickly," (Champion 1965, p. 107)).

²⁶ James Bulman, for example, writes that though Quickly is obviously in love with Falstaff and wants to marry him, she is "apparently not jealous of Falstaff's affection for a younger woman" (*Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, (Bulman 2002, pp. 170–71)).

²⁷ This is an opposite trajectory to the one Barbara Arnett adopts in her short paper on Quickly. She writes, "Mistress Quickly was born on the stage in 1594 and died there in 1600" ("Mistress Quickly," (Champion 1965, p. 215)). Arnett argues that "Shakespeare seems to be unwilling to renounce altogether the character of Quickly that he had created so successfully and to compromise by giving her name and some of her linguistic resourcefulness, possibly as an afterthought, to the messenger cum servant required by his new plot" (Arnett 1979, p. 219). She concludes her paper by describing Quickly's "translation": "Mistress Quickly, already seriously diminished in this play, having lost the extraordinary humanity for which she will always be remembered in the Histories, leaves the stage unnoticed for the last time" (Arnett 1979, p. 220.)

²⁸ Critical conversations about the final scene of *Merry Wives* are primarily concerned with whether the masque celebrates courtly life or denigrates it, promoting the moral virtue of the country over the corrupt court of a variety of historical monarchs. The historicity of these arguments is also interestingly complex. If the court is being shamed, it is presumably Henry IV's court. The king's bad parenting has allowed Falstaff, Pistol, Poins, and other such ruffians, the opportunity to corrupt his son, the eminent Henry V. But if the court is being celebrated, the play is magically transported from its early fifteenth-century context, and Elizabeth I is being praised for her ability to aid women in their fight for chastity in marriage. Much depends upon the dating of the play. If the play, in its entirety, was written for a 1597 induction of the Knights of the Garter and the 1602 Quarto is rough copy with the 1623 Folio reproducing the true facsimile of Shakespeare's words, then Elizabeth's court is clearly being praised by her stand-in's treatment of "sluts and sluttery" (V.v.46). On the other

Falstaff.²⁹ *Merry Wives* is a story that shows more clearly than any other Shakespearean comedy that women were important, had agency and voice, in Elizabeth's England.³⁰ Therefore it makes sense that our alewife would begin her fictional life here. Furthermore, the fact that this same low-class character inhabits the Fairy Queen's costume also shows that women of various social statuses and capabilities worked together to maintain an early modern social order, which, though it may be tending toward a modern idea of separate spheres and feminine domesticity, still celebrated those same females' participation in public life.

We know that women even acted in plays; women in the countryside can and did act as players in local, amateur performances of varying sorts, and these were commissioned for the Queen when she traveled. Elizabeth Zemen Kolkovich turns to the history of Elizabeth I's progresses through the countryside to remind us while "the choice of bawdy, low-ranking Mistress Quickly to play the Fairy Queen can be puzzling . . . in the context of festivals of misrule, Mistress Quickly's performance of a fictional queen makes sense because carnevalesque pageant enables an uneducated servant to borrow an identity far beyond her station."³¹ The ability of a low-class woman to perform as queen in the context of carnival is particularly important to Quickly because, if we do assume that she is the same character in the comedy and the histories, she plays a queen again opposite Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part 1* and, as Peter Greenfield points out, performances featuring a king and queen of misrule (significantly called "kingales") in many parishes throughout the countryside made significant amounts of money and persisted into the early seventeenth century.³² Wall concurs that, in this history, Quickly is the same character as the maid in *Merry Wives*.³³ Wall writes, "In the Folio, Mistress Quickly's role as faux fairy queen extends her role as Shakespeare's most notorious housekeeper . . . Having been introduced so emphatically as a servant, housekeeper, and nurse, Quickly makes the stylized purgation of sin . . . into a purification ritual emanating out of her work."³⁴ Regardless of whether the masque was a parody or celebration of courtly life, Quickly's presence in the fairy costume is especially fitting in the network of women defending their own social order because she was the English housemaid, fulfilling domestic duties not just for the doctor but for the community as a whole.

For Quickly, *Merry Wives* is a sort of greenroom for her later professional life and her relationship with Falstaff. Though she explains to Simple the many jobs she does for Doctor Caius: "I keep his

hand, if the masque at the end of the play was created for the induction completely devoid of the plotline of the wives who shame Falstaff, the 1602 Quarto version seems likely to have included a parody of that masque rewritten for our low- and middling-sort of friends in Windsor. Regardless of dating, however, most critics agree that Quickly's presence in the masque is generally regarded as an afterthought or an accident.

²⁹ Though Giorgio Melchiori begins his introduction of the play by asserting, "This is Falstaff's play," I maintain that this is the women's play (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, (Melchiori 1999, p. 1).).

³⁰ If critics take seriously the idea that Elizabeth may have commissioned *Merry Wives of Windsor* because she wanted a play about Falstaff in love and that Shakespeare worked to please her with this play, it makes sense that this play is a prequel to *Henry IV, Part I*. Though Melchiori insists that "in the chronology of 'history' *Merry Wives* takes place between the action of the Second Part of *Henry IV* and that of *Henry V*," he bases this on the fact that newly-crowned Henry V tells Falstaff and his companions that he must leave the city but that he will provide some sort of allowance for him (Pittenger 1991, p. 21). Melchiori performs some interpretive gymnastics to prove that Fenton may be Peto from the history plays to explain the description of him as too high-born for Ann Page; however, he does little with the possibility that Quickly is the same character. The poor knights of Windsor seem like a likely group to fit that description; however, the chronology does not make sense otherwise. It makes far more sense that Mistress Nell Quickly begins her life in Windsor before marrying and owning a tavern in London. It makes far more sense that Falstaff attempts a complex scheme to con women out of their money through the use of his good looks and charm if he is not the old man who fails miserably at robbing pilgrims. Reading the play as a prequel also explains how it is that Falstaff and Quickly can repeatedly interact without appearing to know each other even though Quickly says plainly in *Henry IV, Part II* that she has "known [Falstaff] these twenty-nine years, come peascod time; but an honest and truer-hearted man . . . Well" (II.i.387–389). Quickly also explains in that same play that she and Falstaff have had a complicated relationship: "thou did'st swear to me then . . . to marry me and make me 'my lady,' thy wife" (II.i.89–91). In the context of an argument about the dating of the plays, it seems a glaring error for our most eminent playwright to forget that characters this close have met previously.

³¹ Kolkovich, "Pageantry, Queens, and Housewives in the Two Texts of 'The Merry Wives of Windsor,'" (Kolkovich 2012, pp. 345–46).

³² Greenfield, "Drama and the Reformation: Two Cases from REED Research." (Greenfield 2017)

³³ Wall, "Why Does Puck Sweep?" (Wall 2001)

³⁴ (Wall 2001, p. 95).

house, and I wash, wring, brew, bake, scour, dress meat and drink, make the beds and do all myself," Quickly specializes in gophering and manipulating men for women (*Wiv.* I.iv.86–89).³⁵ As the tavern hostess, we can assume she does these other tasks as well as the buying and selling necessary to run the business. In addition to the predictable proto-domestic roles she plays, she also ostensibly develops an understanding of what it would mean to be a madam, fashioning herself the sole purveyor of Anne Page's heart and mind. In an aside, she says, "No, I know Anne's mind for that. Never a woman in Windsor knows more of Anne's mind than I do, nor can do more than I do with her, I thank heaven" (*Wiv.* I.iv.113–114). Presumably what she does with Anne's mind is make money off of it, as she tells each of the men (Slender via Simple, Caius, and Fenton) she will act on his behalf with Anne. Though we never see her talking with Anne, she does take her place in the masque at the end of the play so that Anne can sneak away with Fenton to be married without her parents' permission.³⁶ Whether it is the money from dealing in Anne Page's affections or the general association of alehouses with prostitution that gives her the idea to run a bawdy house, Quickly's progression is one of upward social mobility, if not increased respectability, following the logical one presented by her increasingly friendly relationship with Falstaff.

If the *Merry Wives* was the last of the four plays composed, however, it seems that Shakespeare developed new dramatic techniques for rendering Quickly's character legible to the audience as he continued to write her. In this latter play, several of Quickly's lines are delivered while she is obviously on stage alone. For example, when she tells Doctor Caius, "You shall have An," his exit precedes the more sarcastic and biting rest of the line: "fool's head of your own," making it possible for her boss to hear that she is going to obtain Anne Page for him and for the audience (but not her boss) to hear that she thinks her boss is a fool (*Wiv.* I.iv.112–113). In her first scene with Falstaff, stage directions are embedded in her lines in order to show her distrust of Falstaff's associates. Furthermore, the comedic gulling of Falstaff is dependent upon the audience's knowledge that Quickly is in touch with both Ford and Page while Falstaff presumably assumes that she is keeping his pursuit of Page separate from his pursuit of Ford.

Though her lines are fewer and her impact on the plot smaller, Quickly has professionally advanced in *1 Henry IV*. Having left the countryside for the city, she has married and is now running the Boar's Head Inn. Both her marriage and her role as innkeeper/tavern mistress clearly indicate that she has come up in the world because she would have run the inn with servants under her and may even have reached a stature equal to someone like Doctor Caius's wife rather than his servant. She tells us herself that she is "an honest man's wife" though we never see her husband, and her only "wifely" appearance is the meta-performance of Queen Joan of Navarre to Falstaff's Henry IV (*1H4* III.iii.119).³⁷ References to Quickly brewing are notably absent from the history plays; however, she performs a myriad of other ale-wife like duties. Her relationship with Falstaff throughout the play is more instrumental than emotional, a progression from the acquaintance stage of *Merry Wives*, but not

³⁵ All quotations from the Arden Edition of Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, are abbreviated as *Wiv.* (Shakespeare 1999).

³⁶ The scholarly consensus either ignores Quickly's body holding up the costume of the fairy queen or points her corporeal form out only to discuss how unfit it is for such a job. In her discussion of the masque as a skimmington ritual that makes Falstaff "the victim of superior feminine strength," Anne Parten never mentions Quickly in her analysis ("Falstaff's Horns," (Parten 1985, p. 198)). Melchiori insists that Quickly is "a totally different person from the Hostess of the Histories" who would have been named fairy queen late in the process of the original masque's being "awkwardly inserted into the framework of the newly-minted 'citizen' comedy" (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, (Parten 1985, p. 49)). Maurice Hunt notes Quickly's lack of education but stops short of considering her ineligible for the part: "Mistress Quickly would have received no instruction in foreign languages . . . , [but] her real-life counterpart may have been able to mouth a widely recognizable six-word French maxim without possessing either the confidence or knowledge to paraphrase it in English" ("The Garter Motto in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*," (Hunt 2010, p. 388)). John Long asserts that the Quarto version of the masque should be substituted for the Folio version precisely because Quickly's presence in it makes it comedic rather than a genuine courtly affair; he insists that the "comic element is provided by the incongruity of Mistress Quickly as the Queen of Fairies" (Hunt 2010, p. 39). Nevertheless, in both the Quarto and the Folio version it is Mistress Quickly's body that fills out the fairy queen costume and not another higher ranking or more educated character, and this incongruity demands explanation.

³⁷ All quotations from the Arden Edition of Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part 1*, are abbreviated as *1H4* (Shakespeare 2002).

yet the friendship that develops in *2 Henry IV* or *Henry V*. Though it is never made explicit that Hal pays Quickly directly for Falstaff's consumption, it is made clear that he financially supports Falstaff and that Falstaff owes Quickly money and depends on her. Hal and Peto read a receipt from Falstaff's pocket totaling ten shillings and eight pence; Hal's response is clear: "The money shall be paid back again with advantage" (*1H4* III.i.4987–8). In *Merry Wives*, Quickly received tips from Falstaff and her regular pay from the wives themselves, but in the history plays, she receives the money directly from the court, a fact which she and Falstaff learn to exploit.

It is hard to know exactly when the relationship between Quickly and Falstaff becomes a conscious effort at conning. After Falstaff, Hal, and the gang return from robbing the pilgrims, the watch come to the door of the tavern asking for Falstaff. Quickly enters in distress and asks, "The Sheriff and all the watch are at the door. They are come to search the house. Shall I let them in?" (*1H4* II.iv.446–7). These lines indicate that she is perfectly aware of what is happening in her inn. She knows perfectly well that Falstaff has been out robbing people and that the ill-gotten gains are likely under her roof. Yet, just a few scenes later, she complains to Sir John, "Do you think I keep thieves in my house?" (*1H4* III.iii.47–8). It may be that there is a code of honor amongst the thieves she knowingly harbors, rendering it immoral for them to steal from each other, but it seems more likely that she's being sarcastic. Quickly also provides Falstaff with the shirts on his back, an act that further links her with her role as a washwoman and a con-woman. She says, "You owe me money, Sir John . . . I bought you a dozen shirts to your back." (*1H4* III.iii.65–7). When Falstaff complains about the quality of the shirts, Quickly replies, "Holland of eight shillings an ell" (*1H4* III.iii.70–1). In the analysis of details, Quickly's role seems more consistent than inconsistent. She understands well the import and export market, she performs a similar set of common tasks for a working-class woman of her time, and she protects and entertains her clientele throughout. While she may be illiterate and lack scholarly knowledge, she is certainly wise enough to make money on her own and accept responsibility for the running of her establishment without a husband watching over her.

Nonetheless, Quickly's roles must be performed with assiduous attention to where she directs each of her lines if her character is to be anything other than wildly inconsistent because the asides and stage whispers make it possible to convey sarcasm and the dramatic irony of much of her manipulation. These performance techniques would make her wit and intelligence clear throughout the plays. The comedy demands a great deal of winking throughout all four plays, but nowhere is this more necessary than in *2 Henry IV*. One of the moments that proves pivotal for understanding Quickly's character is at the beginning of this play where she attempts to have Falstaff arrested in front of the Chief Justice. As is the case when we read the alewife speeches, we learn a great deal about a character when she is in front of a judge. In this speech, Quickly purports that Falstaff has offered to marry her in an attempt to get money from the Chief Justice or Prince Hal (*2H4* II.i.73–90).³⁸ She is speaking in the street between Falstaff and the Chief Justice, two very opposite men in terms of personality and morals. The speech begins with the common pun on Falstaff's weight. Falstaff asks what the "gross sum" is that he owes her, and she replies, "thyself and the money too" (*2H4* II.i.82–84). She continues to say that he "dids't swear . . . to marry" her while she was cleaning the wound Prince Hal gave him for comparing the king to a country minstrel (*2H4* II.i.85–93). Quickly, as a widowed business owner, is here at the apex of her career with as much power as her real-life counterpart is likely to have as a woman in early modern London.³⁹ Her widowhood is an important context because it mitigates the apparent idiocy of her inconsistent moves. Quickly is attempting to have Falstaff arrested for debts just before loaning him more money: "Well, you shall have it, though I

³⁸ All quotations from the Arden Edition of Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part 2*, are abbreviated as *2H4* (Shakespeare 2016).

³⁹ See above references to Unger's statement that widows owned most of the alehouses in the sixteenth century, and Elliott's argument: "Widows were at a high premium in the London marriage market, and for many a young journeyman without capital, marriage with a widow was a tempting means of gaining economic independence and freeing himself from subordinate status under a master" (*Single Women in the London Marriage Market*, (Elliott 1980, pp. 83–84)).

pawn my gown. I hope you'll come to supper; you'll pay me all together?" (2H4 II.i.157–9). In this same scene, she tells the Chief Justice that Falstaff swore to marry her, and then she turns around and asks Falstaff, "Will you have Doll Tearsheet meet you at supper?" (2H4 II.i.162–3). It seems clear that she mentions the marriage offer in front of the Chief Justice, not because she loves Falstaff romantically, but in order to garner the Chief Justice's sympathy for her cause. That Falstaff is unscrupulous with money everyone already knows, but the idea that he is betrothed to her simultaneously paints Falstaff as even more morally reprehensible than the Chief Justice previously thought, thus raising her status as plaintiff. Her lines have to be ostensibly directed to Falstaff while truly being delivered to the Chief Justice. Further it seems she must have Falstaff's full cooperation in the con.

Quickly's focus on money, an economic concern she shares with the Chester alewife, is clear in the details she includes to support her point in this case. She emphasizes the expense she has gone to in order to help Falstaff. She mentions the "parcel-gilt goblet," her "Dolphin chamber," and the "sea-coal fire" (2H4 II.i.86–7). She thus paints a picture of Falstaff sitting in her best room drinking out of a gold painted goblet by an imported fire. The butcher's wife comes in to borrow from her vinegar stores to prepare a dish of shrimp, a detail in her memory that gives her another witness, mentions indirectly Falstaff's "gross sum" by noting his constant hunger, and shows that she must maintain stores to feed her customers (2H4 II.i.92–97). She closes not with the mention of marriage but with the specific sum of thirty shillings to put a definite and possible number into the Chief Justice's mind (2H4 II.i.101). Quickly maintains a necessary balance between presenting herself as a shrewd and capable business woman and garnering sympathy. It is only by delivering the lines in a way that might be simultaneously convincing the Chief Justice that she does and convincing the audience that she does not (through aside gestures, winks, etc.) want to marry Falstaff that Quickly's next offers to loan Falstaff more money and set him up with Doll make any sense at all. The delivery must capitalize on the dramatic irony.

In this scene, Quickly shares with the earlier alewives a focus on women's work and the common weal. In this short speech, Quickly mentions her house-keeping knowledge of serving food and maintaining fires, her nurse-like medical knowledge of washing wounds and recovery care (avoiding shrimp), and her social prowess in maintaining relationships with other wives around her. Falstaff's offer to marry her and keep her away from "such poor people" seems poor recompense compared to her multi-talented caring for him (2H4 II.i.99). His title is the only thing he has to offer her (he's already indebted to her); thus, the marriage contract should be read as a performance meant to con the Chief Justice. This is not the first time that Quickly calls Falstaff out in front of people who may be able to pay for the losses she accumulates associating with him. In fact, it is her continual public complaints that make her lifestyle possible; without people like Prince Hal and the Chief Justice paying Falstaff's debts, most of Eastcheap would likely be out of business. Quickly must use her understanding of the complex social situation at the center of these plays in order to maintain her household and her business.

Quickly is arrested at the end of *2 Henry IV*, but she reappears at Falstaff's deathbed in *Henry V*, a fact which, while not acquitting her, means that she was at least not put to death for her crimes. We see the contradiction between her professional and economic agency versus her legal autonomy when she is arrested. Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin argue that Quickly's marital and financial status in the plays is thematically significant. "Quickly's remarkably unsteady relationship to the marriage state signals the gender trouble she embodies," they write in *Engendering a Nation*. Howard and Rackin add, "There seems, finally, no way for the entrepreneurial urban woman to exist in the Shakespearean history play except on terms of criminality. Quickly exits the play as a common whore."⁴⁰ Derek Cohen also maintains that Quickly's arrest is evidence of a villainous, classless character. Calling the moment "chilling," Cohen argues, "These characters we have been prepared to laugh at have really

⁴⁰ Howard and Rackin, *Engendering a Nation*, (Howard and Rackin 2002, p. 180).

meant what they've been saying all along. They really do kill people."⁴¹ Given the fact that Quickly begins the play petitioning the representatives of the law and has, in previous situations, avoided arrest and participated in local, unofficial punishments for socially problematic behavior, it seems that her relationship to criminality is at least complicated and indefinite. Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of Quickly's relationship with Pistol and her subsequent arrest for his crime is that she calls him a swaggerer, exclaiming that she "cannot abide swaggerers," then appears married to him in *Henry V* (2H4 II.iv.109 and H5 II.i.17–18).

Regardless of her "criminal exit," though, Quickly does reappear as the beneficiary of the king's "competence of life" allowance. Even after banishing Falstaff ten miles outside the city (where Quickly apparently accompanies him), Hal (now King Henry) decrees, "For competence of life I will allow you, /That lack of means enforce you not to evils," and he tells the Chief Justice directly, "Be it your charge, my lord, /To see performed the tenor of my word" (2H4 V.v.64–70). At the end of her narrative, we find Quickly outliving her partner in crime and eulogizing him but still not married to him. She sends Falstaff to Arthur's bosom with emotion that clearly indicates a life-long friendship. At this point, the roles are reversed, and Quickly has the opportunity to judge both King Henry and Falstaff. Speaking of her friend and perhaps co-conspirator of thirty-plus years, she laments that "The King has killed his heart" (H5 II.i.82) and exclaims that she is "sure he's not in hell. He's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom" (H5 II.iii.9–10).⁴² It seems logical that her long-time friendship and association with Falstaff, a known drunk, pickpocket, and rogue is made possible by financial remuneration she receives from outside sources. Regardless, it seems clear that she has, in turn, acquitted Falstaff on his deathbed of the many complaints she's brought against him over the course of four plays. Beginning her story in *Merry Wives* rather than focusing on her final exit shows that Quickly's fictional life includes arbitrating justice, performing as a member of the community mitigating the possibly harsh repercussions for thievery life Falstaff's.

Far from being an afterthought, Nell Quickly and Falstaff seem to be two of Shakespeare's characters about whom he gave the most thought. They appear in four different plays together and are almost alone in the canon in representing social mobility (both upward and downward) and the interaction of the middling sort with the aristocracy, something that seemed important at least professionally for Shakespeare. This is the complex and strange symbiotic relationship between the character of Falstaff and the female representative of Eastcheap life. Quickly is with Falstaff when Hal tricks him, when the Chief Justice degrades him, when he leaves for battle, and when he dies. She serves as his shadow throughout the plays, highlighting both his destructive tendencies and his charm, but she is not his victim. Mistress Quickly needs to think very quickly indeed to manage a lawyer, a pickpocket, and a prince to her advantage. In that early *2 Henry IV* scene discussed above, she certainly manages the Chief Justice. He responds to Falstaff's bloviating by stating that he has his number: "Sir John," he says, "I am well acquainted with your manner of wrenching the true cause the false way" (2H4 II.i.108–9). Perhaps Mistress Quickly too must go about things "the false way," but she certainly manages to make a living doing it. Quickly remains tavern mistress, alewife, madam, bordello owner, and friend. Her multitudinous roles are extremely gendered, but Shakespeare does not dismiss them. Her exit lacks drama and panache perhaps, but it is a testament to the essential role that her real-life counterpart would have played in the maintenance of the entire community.

4. Real Life Counterparts

Ultimately, looking closely at Quickly as an alewife gives us an opportunity to open an entire character type and set of tropes for interpreting Shakespeare's female characters that reverses the power dynamic between men and women in certain economic situations and highlights the kind of quick

⁴¹ Cohen, "The Culture of Violence in 2 Henry IV," (Cohen 1993, p. 67).

⁴² All quotations from the Arden Edition of Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, are abbreviated as H5 (Shakespeare 1995).

thinking that these women did to maintain the health of their early modern drinking communities. Shakespeare would not have had far to look for alewife models. In her article, “Anne by Indirection,” Lena Cowen Orlin uses a cognate, Elizabeth Quiney, to discuss the possible living situation and daily life of Anne Hathaway Shakespeare in Stratford while her husband was in London. Here Quickly’s speeches are corroborating evidence for the work of real women in the period. Orlin notes that Quiney supervised the training of maltsters, ran “a sort of general store and personal buying service,” including clothing, “acted as a civic host,” and “grew money by lending, invested by borrowing, and constantly juggled the funds payable against those due in (as well as those despaired of).”⁴³ Orlin suggests that Elizabeth Quiney, and by extension Anne Hathaway Shakespeare and women like her, solved problems through critical thinking despite constantly changing circumstances and very few norms for making a living. If we replaced Quiney with Quickly, these actions could be a summary of what the latter does on stage in Shakespeare’s plays. Quickly brews, buys and resells shirts, puts up lodgers, and lends and collects money. In light of this rigorously collected historical evidence, it is necessary to revise our idea of Quickly as too dumb to manage her inn, her brothel, or her friends and husband.

Anne Shakespeare was almost certainly an alewife, suggesting that her husband would have known intimately a woman with similar traits to the Chester Alewife, Kynd Kittock, and his own creation of Nell Quickly. Orlin writes, “Anne may have trained young Stratford women in the business of brewing, as well as that of malt-making; excavations at New Place have turned up stone pads which, archeologists suggest, may indicate an onsite brewhouse.”⁴⁴ In her biography of Anne Hathaway Shakespeare, Germaine Greer writes, “Ann[e] could have set herself up as an alewife or have used her smidgin of capital and what she had learnt as the eldest daughter of a farming family to set herself up as a market trader.”⁴⁵ In regards to the January 1598 discussion of fixing the price of malt in order to prevent profiteering, Greer explains, “William Shakespeare was listed as holding ten quarters of malt. In fact he was in London; the malt was Ann[e]’s business.”⁴⁶ Her discussion of this facet of Anne’s life corresponds exactly with Orlin’s; New Place was large enough for a “purpose-built brewhouse” and Anne was “in the first rank of Stratford housewives, along with the likes of Bess Quiney.”⁴⁷ Just as we have had to revise our understanding of Shakespeare’s will (and the second-best bed) based on the context new historical research has brought to light, we need to revise our understanding of Quickly’s role—her malapropisms and her intelligence—based on the knowledge that she may be the character in Shakespeare’s plays that mostly closely resembled Shakespeare’s wife.

Rereading Mistress Quickly’s relatively minor roles in the context of the much more important roles of alewives in the period may help to make her character more comprehensible to modern audiences. Even now, a barmaid is never just a barmaid, but in the time of Shakespeare, modern assumptions about the consumption of alcohol will hinder any attempt to interpret the purveyors of this substance on the stage. In as much as any character might represent real living humans of the period in which it is produced, Quickly’s character must be read as more than a silly hostess because her historical role was multifaceted and integral. Phyllis Rackin concludes, “If changing the ways we imaging Shakespeare’s women will help us to change the ways we imagine ourselves, the reverse is also true. The women we see in his plays are inevitably limited by the range of possibilities we can imagine for ourselves.”⁴⁸ Quickly both embraces her domestication and subverts it in order to further her own ends throughout the four plays in which she appears. She masters the domestic roles while simultaneously finding ways to change her circumstances within and around these roles. If Kynd

⁴³ Orlin, “Anne by Indirection,” (Orlin 2014, pp. 433, 435, 436, 439).

⁴⁴ (Orlin 2014, p. 447).

⁴⁵ Greer, *Shakespeare’s Wife*, (Greer 2009, p. 167).

⁴⁶ (Greer 2009, p. 228).

⁴⁷ (Greer 2009, p. 229).

⁴⁸ Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, (Rackin 2005, p. 137).

Kittock and the Chester alewife can translate their earthly professions into viable positions in the social structure of the afterlife, should we not offer Mistress Nell Quickly the same opportunity in the critical afterlife of her story?

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