

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘Tongue-tied, our queen?’: The Anatomy of a Pun

Roger Holdsworth

Linacre College, University of Oxford

roger.holdsworth@linacre.ox.ac.uk

Early modern English was not short of terms with which to characterise the disorderly female. Some (*termagant*, *virago*) emphasise an urge to dominate, others (*scold*, *shrew*) loud and quarrelsome speech. Many more focus on sexual misconduct, and demonstrate by their sheer number the period’s obsession with the idea of the sexually aberrant woman. They include (not a complete list) *aunt*, *baggage*, *bawd*, *callet*, *cockatrice*, *collop*, *dowdy*, *doxy*, *drab*, *giglet*, *gixy*, *goose*, *guinea hen*, *harlot*, *hussy*, *jade*, *jezebel*, *jilt*, *madam*, *meretrix*, *minx*, *moll*, *nymph*, *pug*, *punk*, *quail*, *quean*, *rig*, *siren*, *slattern*, *slut*, *stale*, *strumpet*, *trollop*, *trull*, *wagtail*, *wanton*, and *whore*.

Many of these terms invite analysis, but one, *quean*, merits special attention. It is common in the literature of the period. In the drama alone the *Literature Online* database finds it 274 times in 149 plays performed between 1580 and 1700, and that is not counting examples where the spelling is *queen*. It is also a standard insult in popular speech. In Laura Gowing’s survey of London court records dealing with disputes, often between neighbours, involving accusations of sexual slander, *quean* comes second only to *whore* as a ground of complaint, and inspires some baroque formulations. Londoners are heard calling each other *blackarsed quean*, *brazenfaced quean*, *codpiece quean*, *daggletailed quean*, *hackney quean*, *saddlenose quean*, and *wrymouth quean*, beside which the more common intensifiers, such as *base*, *nasty*, and *subtle*, seem hardly defamatory.¹

Critics and editors of early modern literature, if they notice the use of *quean* at all, content themselves with a simple gloss (usually ‘whore’ or ‘harlot’). This is not adequate. The

¹ Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 59, 79-87, 89, 94-7, 109-10, 113-16.

word possessed complex possibilities of sense and implication which authors frequently called on, and to which modern readers and theatre audiences need to be alerted. They arise, of course, from the pun on *queen* which *quean* always offers. The two words have distinct Old English roots, and in medieval English were pronounced as well as spelled differently, but never so differently that their contrasting senses could not be provocatively aligned. Thus around 1400 Langland could note that inspecting the bones in a charnel house will not allow you to distinguish ‘a quene fram a queene’.² Death has completed a merging of these polarised social categories to which language was already pointing. (The less arresting male version of this commonplace is the pairing of king and clown.) Then, from the sixteenth century onwards, opportunities for the ironic confusion of the two words multiply, as they begin to be pronounced identically. After around 1520, simply from hearing *queen* or *quean* you could no longer tell which was meant.³

This phonetic merger afforded early modern misogyny a useful tool in its task of advertising the dangers and defects of women. Most obviously, it served both to declare and denounce a universal female aim of gaining quasi regal power over men. Already a truism in Chaucer, where ‘Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee’, the idea is still a cornerstone of misogynist thought over three centuries later – in Pope, for example, where ‘ev’ry Lady would be Queen for life’.⁴ The homonym not only implies that such ambition is grotesquely misplaced (queans would like to be queens); it points to the innate libidinousness which is held to drive most women, particularly those of high status (queens are likely to be queans). In both cases, a tiny spelling change, entailing no change of pronunciation, reveals the truth.

The homonym also functions as a reminder that monarchs and prostitutes are professionally akin. Both need to be actors; both ‘play’ a fabricated self. For Elizabeth I, who remarked that ‘we princes are set on stages’, and whose ‘exercise of power was closely bound up with her use of fictions’,⁵ this meant projecting a royal persona heightened with an aura of the sacred, so that her subjects, even those – probably the majority – who remained conscious that such image-making was a performance, were

² William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, ed. by George Russell and George Kane (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 8.46.

³ See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *quean*, *n.*: ‘In standard English the two sounds [*quean* and *queen*] merged in the early modern period’.

⁴ ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’, 1038, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); ‘Of the Characters of Women’, 218, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. by John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963).

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 166-7.

willing to take the performance for the truth. The aim was to produce the same spellbound response as that of this observer of the coronation of Margaret of Valois, wife to the French Henry IV: ‘Majesty appeared upon her, and about her... she seemed, not a Queene, but a Goddess... *this was rightly to play the Queene*’.⁶ To play the queen wrongly would be to give an impression of mere imposture, of being merely ‘the pretended queen’, as Elizabeth’s enemies repeatedly called her.⁷

Prostitutes, too, are fully invested in the business of simulation, as the standard term ‘play the quean’ tacitly acknowledges, however abusively meant. Like queens, and like players who are literally ‘set on stages’, they must impress and please their clientele, construct a persona, fake their feelings, and sustain a role (in their case that of the responsive woman genuinely aroused by her current customer). They, too, cannot pick and choose for whom they perform, but must ‘play the queanes with any that will, provided always that they be paid their fee’.⁸ And as in the palace and the theatre, collusion in the fiction, an answering suspension of disbelief on the part of the consumer (subject, spectator, or customer), is required for the make-believe to work.

These and other aspects of the *queen/quean* homonym are discussed more fully below, but we might first ask why its expressive potential has been so consistently neglected. Several assumptions, none of which survives scrutiny, can be blamed. One is the notion, much favoured in the eighteenth century, that wordplay is a frivolous activity and no serious writer would wish to make it a channel for his ideas. William Empson and Molly Mahood demonstrated years ago that the opposite of this is true.⁹ Another is the idea of ‘taboo’, invoked by psychologists when they claim that as users of language we are intolerant of double meanings, and seek always to replace them with single ones. According to Edmund Leach, we prefer to ‘repress concepts that have some kind of semantic overlap’, especially when confronted with aggressive forms of ambiguity such as the potential pun on *queen* and *quean*:

A familiar type of purely linguistic taboo is the pun. A pun occurs when we make a joke by confusing two apparently different meanings of the same phonemic pattern. The pun seems funny or shocking because it challenges a taboo which

⁶ Pierre Matthieu, *The Heroic Life and Deplorable Death of the Most Christian King Henry the Fourth*, trans. Edward Grimeston (London, 1612), p. 28 (author’s italics).

⁷ See Natalie Mears, *Queenship and Political Discourse in the Elizabethan Realms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 222, 225, 226.

⁸ Francis White, *The Orthodox Faith* (London, 1617), p. 199.

⁹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930); M.M. Mahood, *Shakespeare’s Wordplay* (London: Methuen, 1957).

ordinarily forbids us to recognise that the sound pattern is ambiguous. In many cases such verbal taboos have social as well as linguistic aspects. The word *queen* has a homonym *quean*. The words are phonetically indistinguishable (KWĪN). Queen is the consort of a King or even a female sovereign in her own right; quean formerly meant a prostitute... Although these two words pretend to be different, indeed opposites, they really denote the same idea. A queen is a female of abnormal status in a positive virtuous sense; a quean is a person of depraved character or uncertain sex, a female of abnormal status in a negative sinful sense. Yet their common abnormality turns both into 'supernatural' beings... The taboo which allows us to separate the two ambiguous concepts, so that we can talk of queens without thinking of queans, and vice versa, is simultaneously both linguistic and social.¹⁰

But while this taboo might work in a casual or automatic way in ordinary, unrehearsed, unstructured conversation, in the linguistically sensitised domains of the literary text or the spoken play the presence of verbal ambiguity is more apt to be magnified than reduced, let alone banished altogether, so that its effect is more likely to be that described by Derek Attridge:

The pun is not just an ambiguity that has crept into an utterance unawares, to embarrass or amuse before being dismissed; it is ambiguity *unashamed of itself*, and this is what makes it a scandal and not just an inconvenience. In place of a context designed to suppress latent ambiguity, the pun is the product of a context deliberately constructed to *enforce* an ambiguity, to render impossible the choice between meanings, to leave the reader or hearer endlessly oscillating in semantic space.¹¹

Beyond this we might claim that with *quean*, where sound, spelling, and sense (since a quean, too, is a special kind of woman outside the social norm, possessing her own kind of power) all suggest an affinity with *queen*, no context will ever be quite strong enough to make *queen* entirely unheard. Trying not to register even a remote echo of the word's respectable twin invites comparison with the psychologist's joke, 'Count to ten without thinking of a rabbit'.

¹⁰ Edmund Leach, 'Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse', in *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. by Eric H. Lenneberg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1964), pp. 23-63 (pp. 25-6).

¹¹ Derek Attridge, 'Unpacking the Portmanteau, or Who's Afraid of *Finnegans Wake*?', in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. by Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 140-155 (p. 141).

One further reason for critics' failure to explore the expressive potential of *quean* is the belief that the spoken language, and therefore live theatre, are poor vehicles for wordplay. Howard Felperin claims that

wordplay thrives in the dilated duration of response opened up by reading; hence it is a *writerly* device that demands our full *readerly* attention... The theatrical performance of a Shakespearian play must always generate a more limited field of meaning, by virtue of the interpretative options it must leave unexplored, than the printed text.¹²

It is certainly true that – focusing again on *quean* – there are cases where seeing the word written rather than hearing it spoken is essential to the operation of the pun. The title-page of *The Remarkable Prophecies*, a mock-almanac for the year 1665 modelled on the Arthurian legends, promises to include the tale of Lancelot and 'Quean Guinivere'; and that of *The Cuckoo's Nest*, an anti-Parliamentarian satire of 1648, advertises a dispute between 'Quean Fairfax and Lady Cromwell', in which the two women are imagined competing for the crown.¹³ Heard rather than read, 'Quean' in both texts would be understood only as 'Queen', with a consequent reduction of meaning. Guinevere's adulterous liaison with Lancelot would not *ipso facto* make her a whore, and the wife of Fairfax would be guilty only of absurd ambition, not also of a scandalous sex life.

Quean/queen ambiguities in the drama, however, contradict the idea that puns always work better when read. Although the two words were pronounced the same from the early 1500s, they continued on the whole to be distinguished by spelling. Therefore, when a reader encounters either word in its written form, there will be an inducement to give priority to the meaning the spelling represents, whether or not a pun is intended by the writer and/or encouraged by the context. This is not the case with plays experienced in the theatre. Dramatists write with the reception of the spoken text in mind, in the knowledge that an audience must make sense of the dialogue by hearing it; it does not see it written down. (A simple difference, but one not always recognised by critics of the language of drama, who tend to operate as readers and to miss linguistic effects available only to listeners.) Context, of course, will usually dictate that no alternative sense of a word is relevant, and discourage the actor from trying to introduce one; by, for example,

¹² Howard Felperin, *Beyond Deconstruction: The Uses and Abuses of Literary Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 191-2.

¹³ Thomas St. Serfe, *The Remarkable Prophecies* (Edinburgh, 1665); Mercurius Melancholicus, *The Cuckoo's Nest at Westminster* (London, 1648).

a knowing deepening of the voice to signal that ‘quean’ is to be heard underneath ‘queen’. But in the absence of such guidance the auditors of a play enjoy a liberty of interpretation greater than a reader’s. Hearing ‘KWĪN’, they have a range of choices as to what they take the sound to represent: one sense but not the other; one sense with the other beneath it; or both senses and neither predominating.

Early modern plays constantly open up new perspectives on their action and characters by bundling these senses together and making them hard to disentangle. When Follywit in Middleton’s *A Mad World, My Masters* dresses up as the prostitute Frank Gullman and tells his companions, ‘As I am a quean, you were best have a care of me and guard me sure’ (3.3.137-8), the printed text of 1608 offers this spelling, but an auditor is invited to hear ‘queen’ as well as ‘quean’, since just as queans were protected by their pimps, no monarch appeared in public without his or her bodyguard.¹⁴ The quip underlines Follywit’s tendency to gleeful self-congratulation, his belief that he is on top of everything. As it turns out, his confidence is misplaced (he should have taken a warning from his own name of Follywit as well as from Frank’s of Gullman), for he ends up outwitting himself by marrying the very prostitute he has impersonated. A Shakespearean example of this conflation of senses occurs in *1 Henry IV*, where Falstaff calls Mistress Quickly ‘sweet Queen... my tristful Queen’ (2.5.357-9). He is being affectionate as well as jocular, but the joke includes a reminder of one of her activities as ‘hostess’ (a common euphemism for bawd or procuress) of the Eastcheap tavern, and thus of the fat knight’s parasitic dependence on vice and petty crime. In the follow-up play, *2 Henry IV*, Falstaff removes this doubleness of sense: Mistress Quickly becomes a ‘quean’ whom he is inclined to throw in the gutter (2.1.40).

Writing the pun into his script, the dramatist must of course opt for one spelling rather than the other. His choice might indicate that he regards one sense as uppermost (assuming the spelling has survived unaltered during the text’s journey from stage to print), or it might obscure an intention to have both senses contribute equally. In Edward Sharpham’s *The Fleer* the spelling in the printed text, the quarto of 1607, is *quean*:

The Cittie is like a Comodie, both in partes and in apparell, and your Gallants are the Actors: for hee that yesterday played the Gentleman, now playes the Begger; shee that played the Wayting-woman, nowe playes the Queane; hee that played the married-man, man now playes the Cuckolde; and shee that played the Ladie, nowe plays the Painter. Then for their apparell, they have change too: for

¹⁴ *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor *et al.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). Unless otherwise indicated, all Middleton references and quotations follow this edition.

shee that wore the Petticote, now weares the Breech; hee that wore the Coxcombe, now weares the feather; the Gentleman that wore the long Sworde, nowe weares the short Hanger; and hee that could scarce get Velvet for his Cape, has nowe linde his Cloake throughout with it.¹⁵

‘Quean’ here is not ‘quean’ or ‘queen’ but both. Social life, contemporary thought insisted, depended on everyone knowing their place and staying in it. Sharpham shows that the theatre teaches otherwise. Social identities, whether understood in terms of class, wealth, gender, profession, or sexual prowess (long swords versus short ones), are not static and innate, but temporary impersonations, subject to the same dizzyingly abrupt alteration that for the actor is the normal condition of existence, as he discards one role and takes on the next. Urban life becomes a series of haphazard shifts up and down the social scale, and Sharpham’s pun illustrates this by propelling the waiting-woman in both directions simultaneously, to the topmost point and the lowest. He adds to the difficulty of deciding which direction we should follow by constructing a context which favours ‘quean’ (since a ‘painter’ was also a prostitute), but choosing a profession which encourages the alternative sense, since a waiting-woman was a queen’s companion.¹⁶

Thomas Heywood puts the identity of *quean* and *queen* in their spoken form to even bolder use in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. The main question in the play is the culpability of Anne, Frankford’s wife, who begins an affair with her husband’s friend Wendoll. Heywood wants to discourage a rush to judgement, and to suggest instead that Anne’s conduct can be explained and assessed in different ways. Accordingly, he creates a scene where the audience is repeatedly challenged to decide what exactly is being said, and what this reveals about the speakers’ attitudes and motives. Unknown to the lovers, Frankford has discovered the truth. The three sit down to play cards and, in an exchange full of innuendoes both conscious and inadvertent, cut the deck to determine who will deal next:

Anne. What are you, Master Wendoll?

Wendoll. [*cutting the cards*] I am a knave ...

Anne. [*cutting*] I, a queen.

Frankford. [*aside*] A quean, thou shouldst say...

¹⁵ *A Critical Old Spelling Edition of the Works of Edward Sharpham*, ed. by C.G. Petter (New York: Garland, 1986), 2.1.124-34.

¹⁶ Compare, for example, Francis Thynne, *Animadversions* (1598), ed. by F.J. Furnivall (New York: Scribner, 1875), p. 22: ‘Elizabethhe, a waytinge womanne of Quene Philippe’; and Thomas D’Urfey, *The Comical History of Don Quixote* (London, 1694), p. 31: ‘the Lady you see yonder... cheif Lady, or Waiting-woman to the Queen’.

Anne. Shuffle, I'll cut. [*aside*] Would I had never dealt!

Frankford. [*deals*] I have lost my dealing.

Wendoll.

Sir, the fault's in me.

This queen I have more than my own, you see...

Frankford. You have served me a bad trick, Master Wendoll.¹⁷

What is happening here? Is some unseen force at work – fate, or merely the convenience of the dramatist – ensuring that Wendoll and Anne draw the very cards, knave and queen, that best declare their betrayal of Frankford? Or are they themselves (shamelessly, or driven by conscience?) privately signalling to one another their complicity in adultery, by pretending to have drawn the cards which match the identities they now feel they possess? Similarly, is the extra card in Wendoll's hand, by holding which he breaks the rules of the game, really a queen, or is he claiming that it is in order to continue the wordplay? Anne's drawing a queen, and her announcement that she 'is' one, are the cue for Frankford's *sotto voce* comment, 'A quean, thou shouldst say'. But as *queen* and *quean* are phonically indistinguishable, how could she have said 'quean' other than by saying 'queen'? Equally, in order to say the innocent word she must say the guilty one. The linguistic trap which the pun springs on Anne here is a version of the sexual and moral entrapment she suffers in the larger play, where the very qualities of obedience and submissiveness to male authority which make her the perfect wife (a kind of queen) turn her into a quean, when she responds compliantly to Wendoll's seduction.

Not all uses of the *queen/quean* pun declare their presence as insistently as this, or even allow us, because of the vagaries of spelling in the period, to be sure that it is present at all. An amusing example of what might happen to either word in its transmission from speech to text is provided by one of the lawsuits over allegations of slander compiled by Laura Gowing, in which one William Dawson is recorded as declaring of his neighbour Joan Granger that 'she lived like a quean for he payed scott and lott in the parish and she payed none'.¹⁸ The court clerk, writing the statement from dictation, assumed that the complainant was saying 'quean', and spelled the word accordingly; but was that because 'quean' was a term he constantly heard as he took down the evidence of litigants accusing one another of slander or sexual misdemeanours, and on this occasion William Dawson was actually saying 'queen'? Even prostitutes at this date, if they were householders, had to pay local taxes ('scot and lot'), whereas queens did not, so 'queen' actually makes better sense.

¹⁷ *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, ed. by Margaret Jane Kidnie (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 8.167-75 (accidentals amended).

¹⁸ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, p. 90.

Plays, too, can leave us guessing. Two plays by John Ford illustrate the difficulties. In *The Laws of Candy* the villainous Gonzalo professes love to Princess Erotia and offers to help her gain the crown. The earliest text (the play first appeared in the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio of 1647) reads thus:

I meane
To make you Empresse of my earthly fortunes,
Regent of my desires, for did ye covet
To be a reall Queene, I could advance you...
But say your mind, and you shall be a Queene.
Erotia. ...I were a Queene indeed then.¹⁹

Queen is the appropriate spelling here, but it is surely possible that *quean* is to be heard as well. ‘A Queene’, rather than just ‘Queene’, hints at this sense, as does ‘a reall Queene’, which introduces the idea that there are other kinds of queen that Erotia might become. Her own comment, ‘I were a Queene indeed then’, implies that she is privately conscious of this possibility, and intends to avoid it, which indeed she does, regretting the ‘too passionate thoughts’ (the erotomania predicted by her name) which would have turned her into ‘a Monster’ rather than ‘a vertuous wife’ (5.1.386, 399). Commentators are, however, content with the single sense, and do not detect any wordplay.

The second Ford play, *Perkin Warbeck*, poses a different problem. Lamenting that his daughter will be forcibly married to Warbeck, Huntly clearly uses *quean* at least once to express his dismay, but again the only spelling in the original text of 1634 is ‘queen’, and it is not possible to be sure when *quean* takes over:

I never was ambitious
Of using Congeys to my *Daughter Queene*:
A Queene, perhaps a *Queene*?²⁰

The italics and the sketchy punctuation add to the confusion. Huntly is saying that he has never been inclined to bow (use congees) to his daughter, as he would have to if she

¹⁹ *The Collected Works of John Ford*, ed. by Brian Vickers *et al.*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2017), 4.1.160-75. *The Laws of Candy* may have been co-written with Philip Massinger, but Ford is the author of this scene.

²⁰ *Perkin Warbeck*, ed. by Peter Ure (London: Methuen, 1968), 2.3.45-7; quoted here from the 1634 quarto text.

became Queen, and by his final ‘*Queene*’ he must mean ‘quean’, with the idea that such a marriage, to a man his daughter does not love, might amount to whoredom (especially if, as is possible, Warbeck is married already). But question marks at this date could be either question or exclamation marks, so the last line might be modernised as ‘A quean, perhaps a quean!’ rather than ‘A queen? Perhaps a quean!’ And is ‘*Daughter Queene*’ a compound noun (‘daughter-queen’), or does Ford intend ‘...my daughter. Queen?’ Possibly he had no clear idea himself, but knowing that in performance *quean* would have to be signalled by a change of tone, left it to the actor to decide which combination of senses best expressed the character’s anxiety.

The challenges to understanding presented by *quean* do not end with questions about whether and where the word is being used. They extend to the kind of woman the word denotes. When Follywit says that ‘my grandsire keeps an uncertain creature, a quean’ (*A Mad World, My Masters*, 3.3.34), or Gasparo in Middleton’s *The Witch* refers to a ‘doubtful creature... A quean my master keeps’ (3.2.14, 38), by *uncertain* and *doubtful* they mean both ‘unknown, not identified’ and ‘morally dubious or suspect’.²¹ But both contexts imply a further sense: ‘puzzling, hard to define’. This idea, of the alarming otherness of the sexually uncontrolled and uncontrollable woman, occurs in the Bible, where she is the ‘strange woman’ of Proverbs and other books, and it is invoked constantly in early modern literature, where she is ‘a creature that had need to be *twice defined*, for she is not that she seems’,²² ‘a creature onely shap’t like a woman’.²³ Existing outside the sanctioned categories of maid, wife, and mother, she is self-fashioned, ‘her owne *creatresse*’,²⁴ and ‘looks at no lawe... thinkes of no Lord, admits no commaund’.²⁵ When this creature is specifically a ‘quean’ the inevitable suggestion of ‘queen’ intensifies the sense of threat, and the allure, which her determined independence from male authority confers.

The period’s standard way of accounting for the phenomenon of the powerful woman was in terms of excessive sexual desire: female political ambition was merely a redirected form of female lust. Elizabeth I’s enemies regularly resorted to this tactic, branding her

²¹ With these uses of *uncertain*, the second of which is not recognised by the *OED*, compare the bastard Spurio in Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, 1.2.134, who laments that his mother was ‘an uncertain woman’, and the Courtesan of *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, who complains that her ‘state’ is ‘yet uncertain’ (4.4.10-11).

²² Thomas Tuke, *A Treatise against Painting and Tincturing of Men and Women* (London, 1616), K1r.

²³ Robert Daborne, *The Poor Man’s Comfort* (c. 1610), quarto text (London, 1655), H1v.

²⁴ Tuke, *Treatise*, K1r.

²⁵ Nicholas Breton, ‘An Unquiet Woman’, *The Good and the Bad, or Descriptions of the Worthies and Unworthies of This Age* (London, 1616), E3r.

‘the wanton queen’ who had never married because she could not ‘confine herself to one man’, and whose unnatural status as a female ruler expressed itself in a taste for unnatural couplings: she had prostituted herself ‘even with blackamoors’.²⁶ From this perspective a queen was always and already a quean, and the association is common. Commentators on the ancient world, for example, list female figures from legend or history (favourites include Agrippina, Cleopatra, Clytemnestra, Helen of Troy, Jezebel, Messalina, Pasiphae, Penthesilea, and Semiramis) and then profess uncertainty as to whether they are better classified as queans or queens.²⁷ The Bible encouraged the same connection. Ezekiel 16:30, in the Geneva version, reads:

How weake is thine heart, saith the Lord God, seing thou doest all these things,
even the worke of a presumptuous whorish woman?

The Geneva editors, never slow to denounce female presumption, add a marginal note, ‘*Or, that wil beare rule*’, thus pointing to the age’s most shocking case of such presumption, a woman on the throne. It was then virtually inevitable that a later commentator, paraphrasing the Geneva passage, would combine the three ideas – female sovereignty, hubris, and whorishness – by means of the *queen/quean* coupling: ‘a *Sultanesse* or *Queen*, who, if withal a *quean*, what will she not dare to do?’²⁸

The expositor’s question accords the immoral woman a resolution and self-belief which is far from the intended effect. Attempts to assert chastity, silence, and obedience as the ideals of female behaviour often misfire in this way, so that departures from these qualities start to seem more humanly fulfilling than conformity to them. The desire to denounce female mobility, for example, soon runs into trouble. According to Proverbs it is a mark of the harlot that ‘her paths are moveable... [she] can not abide in her house. Now she is without, now in the stretes, and lieth in waite at everie corner’ (5:6; 7:11-12). The idea gives rise to ‘streetwalker’ as a term for prostitute (first recorded in this sense

²⁶ Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2nd edition, 2013), pp. 81, 85.

²⁷ See Henry Cockeram, *The English Dictionary, or An Interpreter of Hard English Words* (London, 1623), K8r; Stephen Jerome, *Moses His Sight of Canaan* (London, 1614), Y6r; and Ercole Tasso, *Of Marriage and Wiving* (London, 1599), C2v.

²⁸ John Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition... Being a Third Volume of Annotations upon the Whole Bible* (London, 1660), p. 433. With the Geneva note, compare John Knox’s notorious denunciation of female sovereignty published two years earlier: ‘To promote a woman to beare rule... is repugnant to nature, contumelie to God’ in *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (Geneva, 1558), B1r.

by the *OED* in 1591), as well as the saying ‘A house and a woman suit excellently’.²⁹ Female movement also supplies a metaphor for female mental and emotional skittishness, as in Thomas Brown’s claim that ‘Woman’s mind, / Is never fixt, or to one Point inclin’d’, or Pope’s castigation of ‘the moving Toyshop’ of women’s hearts.³⁰ Fictional plots, however, particularly those devised for the theatre, naturally prefer characters who move to stationary ones, and are disinclined to treat female motionlessness as something to celebrate. Husbands who cage up their wives, such as Jonson’s Kiteley, Corvino, and Morose, or Middleton’s Harebrain and Leantio, do not fare well, and are portrayed as deserving not to.³¹ Othello, already disposed to regard Desdemona as a statue (he likens her skin to ‘monumental alabaster’) makes her a perfect example of female immobility by killing her. ‘No more moving’, he tells her corpse (*Othello*, 5.2.5, 102). In *The Winter’s Tale* Paulina restores to life the supposedly dead Hermione, also the victim of a false charge of whorishness, by conjuring her into movement: ‘Descend... Approach’, she commands her statue, which it duly does (5.3.99). Generally in the drama the fact that ‘Women are moving Creatures’³² is not automatically an occasion for complaint: there is a recognition that their ability to move men emotionally depends on their ability to move. Queens and queans share this mobility: like a queen, ‘a quean... can walk without a man’, whereas ‘poor gentlewomen’ cannot.³³ The label ‘a loose woman’ offers a relevant pairing of senses: *loose* can mean promiscuous, sexually wayward, but also ‘at liberty, no longer confined’.

A particular female bodily movement causes even greater male alarm: the movement of a woman’s tongue to produce speech. Early modern conduct books, aiming always to present female submissiveness as both admirable and in accord with the natural order of things, respond predictably: the more silent the woman, the more virtuous; the readier to speak, the more disorderly. Robert Cleaver makes reticence the pre-eminent test of a woman’s character:

The evill and unquiet life that some women have, and passe with their husbands, is not so much for that they commit [that is, behave reprehensibly] with, and in their persons, as it is for that they speak with their tongues... The best meanes

²⁹ N.H. Keeble, *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 76.

³⁰ Thomas Brown, *Love Given O’er, or A Satire against the Pride, Lust, and Inconstancy of Woman* (London, 1682), p. 8; Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, i.100.

³¹ In, respectively, *Every Man in His Humour*, *Volpone*, and *Epicene*, and *A Mad World, My Masters* and *Women Beware Women*.

³² John Crown, *The Misery of Civil War* (London, 1680), p. 59.

³³ Middleton, *Your Five Gallants*, 5.1.7-9.

therefore that a wife can use to obtaine, and maintaine the love and good liking of her husband, is to bee silent.³⁴

If a primary symptom of female unruliness is verbal excess, it follows that whores, in particular, will be loquacious and verbally aggressive. Matthew Griffith's conduct manual is typical in noting that "'tis the guise of the *harlot* to be ever *babbling*".³⁵ The idea is everywhere in early modern literature, but it is not managed without some strain. While too much speaking is offered as yet another sign of female weakness, female speech is viewed as both dangerous and alluring. The Bible has many warnings about 'the tongue of a strange woman', whose 'wordes burne as a fyre'.³⁶ An early modern term for prostitute is *siren*, the seductress of classical myth whose voice is at once irresistible to men and deadly. As often, female sexuality has first to be demonised before it can be acknowledged.

Quean, as one would expect, figures frequently in complaints about the excesses of female speech. The tone is sometimes jocular, as with 'the quean Dame Chat', a character in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, sometimes shrill, as in Heywood's *Love's Mistress*, where 'a curst queanes tongue, the very feinds still feare'.³⁷ But when *queen* is made available as an alternative sense the contradictory thinking noted above is strikingly apparent. There is a notable example in *The Blazon of Jealousy*, Robert Tofte's translation of Benedetto Varchi's treatise on this topic, to which Tofte added this poem of his own:

A Womans Tongue that is as swift as Thought,
Is ever bad, and she her selfe stark Nought;
But shee that seldome speakes and mildly then,
Is a rare Pearle amongst all other Women.
Maides must be seene, not heard, or selde, or never;
O may I such one wed, if I wed ever.
A Maide that hath a lewd Tongue in her head,
Worse than if she were found with a Man in bed.
Be she best of her Sexe, good all, I hold
She is worse than worst, if once she prove a Scold.
Flye then such Furies as still scold and raile,

³⁴ Rober Cleaver, *A Godly Form of Household Government* (London, 1598), P3v.

³⁵ Matthew Griffith, *Bethel or, A Form for Families* (London, 1633), S3r.

³⁶ Proverbs 6:24; Ecclesiasticus 9:10 (Geneva version).

³⁷ Thomas Heywood, *Love's Mistress or, The Queen's Masque* (London, 1636), K2v.

Queanes of their Tongue, are most Queanes of their Taile.³⁸

One hesitates to find subtlety in something so shoddily written, but the last line, ‘Queanes of their Tongue, are most Queanes of their Taile’, contrives, consciously or not, to expose the muddle at the heart of early modern responses to the idea of the powerful woman. Tofte seems to want to say that women who speak like queans, that is coarsely and aggressively, will also behave like queans when it comes to sex. He is adapting a proverb: ‘*as tongue is, so is taile*’.³⁹ But this meaning requires some forcing, since to arrive at it one has to understand ‘of’, unidiomatically, as ‘in respect of’, or ‘as regards’. What the phrasing more naturally suggests is ‘Queens of...’ meaning ‘those women with power over...’, introducing suggestions of possession and control which radically alter the sense of the line. Read thus, it affirms the very ideas of female autonomy and self-command which the rest of the poem has gone all out to reject.

I began this survey by claiming that *quean* and the wordplay it facilitates are neglected topics in studies of early modern literature. I end by citing further cases of this neglect, in addition to those noted above. All concern plays by major playwrights.

JONSON

In Jonson’s *The Alchemist* Dol Common, one of the trio of tricksters who fool their victims into believing that the alchemical miracle is really possible, is a prostitute whose name turns the tricksters’ motto, ‘All things in common’ (1.1.135), into a bawdily relevant pun.⁴⁰ The alchemist’s laboratory, which the dupes visit in turn, is of course fake, but the brilliance with which the fraud is maintained makes it a genuinely magical place where ‘you may be anything’ (3.2.53), and as they switch between their disguises even the swindlers undergo a kind of alchemical transformation before being returned to their workaday lives. In Dol’s case one of the forms this takes is her presenting herself as the Fairy Queen, so that she can convince Dapper the clerk that his ‘aunt of Fairy’ intends boundless riches to rain down on him. Accordingly she becomes ‘the Queen’, ‘Queen Dol’, ‘Queen of Fairy’, and if she is sometimes absent performing her other roles (such as that of the mad gentlewoman who must ‘suckle’ Sir Epicure Mammon) Dapper is

³⁸ Robert Tofte, trans., *The Blazon of Jealousy* (London, 1615), F2r (punctuation amended).

³⁹ Timothy Kendall, *Flowers of Epigrams* (London, 1577), R1v. See also M.P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), T395: ‘A lickerish tongue a lickerish tail’.

⁴⁰ *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), vol. 3.

assured that ‘the Queen of Fairy does not rise / Till it be noon... Not if she danced tonight’ (1.2.146-7). Jonson plants a series of puns to remind us of the reality underlying the imposture. They include *aunt* (prostitute), *dance* (copulate), and, most of all, *quean*.

MIDDLETON

Thomas Middleton uses *quean* more often than any other Jacobean dramatist; he also plays continually on the homonym with *queen*. The pun is developed very elaborately in *The Lady’s Tragedy*, where it connects main plot and subplot, and where in the former the Tyrant seeks to impose a kind of prostitution on the Lady by doting on her corpse, and the hero Govianus, assisted by the Lady’s ghost, must make the wordplay inapplicable by retrieving the dead body from the Tyrant’s possession. She can then be reinterred in ‘the house of peace from whence she came / As queen of silence’, and be remembered as ‘the queen of spirits’ rather than ‘the whorish ghost of a quean’ (4.3.5-6; 5.2.161, 205-6). No such rescue, linguistic or physical, is possible in the subplot, where the Wife ‘proves a quean’ by taking a lover, and both she and her maidservant, ‘a bold quean’, pay with their lives for their mistaken belief that ‘queans have the kindest husbands’, who will turn a blind eye to their wives’ promiscuity (2.2.11, 83; 4.1.86).

In *Hengist, King Kent* the same wordplay creates comedy when the clown Simon encounters the King and his party and salutes ‘thy grace, thy queen, and thy fair trollops’ (4.1.4). He is speaking truer than he knows, since the villainous and lustful Roxena is one of the group. The pun makes a grim return in the play’s finale where Roxena receives what we are meant to feel is poetic justice by being burned alive, a literalisation of the fires of sexual passion which have consumed her throughout the play: ‘Whom lust crowned Queen before, / Flames crown her now for a triumphant whore’ (5.2.155-6).

Two later Middleton plays capitalise on a change in the rules of chess which elevated the queen from being as restricted in its moves as the king to becoming the most powerful piece on the board.⁴¹ In *Women Beware Women* Livia distracts Bianca’s mother-in-law with a chess game, while on the upper stage Bianca is surprised and raped by the Duke. ‘The black king’s mine’, Livia reminds her opponent, ‘And this my queen’. She also points out that ‘Your pawn cannot come back to relieve itself’ (2.2.298-302). The comments apply to Bianca, whose name means white, and who is being forced into a

⁴¹ See H.J.R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 426, 452, 457. The change made possible Queen Eleanor’s retort to Constance in Shakespeare’s *King John*: ‘Thy bastard shall be king / That thou mayst be a queen and check the world!’ (2.1.122-3).

game whose corruptive effects she will not be able to escape. Arranging her capture as a white pawn, Livia will raise her to the status of a black queen (and, Bianca will come increasingly to feel, queen) as the play proceeds.⁴² Livia then achieves a similar promotion for herself in the final masque: having tricked both Bianca and the subplot's Isabella into betraying their marriages, she takes the part of the 'queen of nuptials... good aunt Juno' (5.1.122, 138), where the puns on *quean* and *aunt* turn her acting role into the truth. In *A Game at Chess* Middleton expands the chess parallelism to an entire play, with the result that it is often more difficult to decide when *quean* is not glanced at than when it is. Not every case is as clear as the Fat Bishop's wonderfully sly joke, 'Indeed a queen may make a bishop stir' (5.3.203). Indeed a queen, being more powerful, will force a bishop to move, but the real sense is that everyone, even (or especially?) a celibate Catholic bishop, will be excited by a quean.

SHAKESPEARE

There are only four instances of *quean*, so spelled, in Shakespeare, over 100 times fewer than his uses of *queen*. There are single examples in *2 Henry IV* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, and two in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Perhaps this has lulled editors and critics into believing that Shakespeare is not interested in the pun's potential, for its presence is hardly ever suggested. Brian Gibbons detects it in *Romeo and Juliet* in Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, but has no more to say, and Kim H. Noling explores its relevance in *Henry VIII*, in which Anne Boleyn is said to have 'all the royal makings of a queen' (4.1.89).⁴³ But there are other Shakespearean uses of *queen* where a play on *quean* is highly probable, and two, in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*, where it seems to me certain, and where the doubleness of meaning contributes significantly to our understanding of each play. They are as follows.

3 *Henry VI*

In 3.2.36ff. King Edward, whose reputation as a philanderer will grow between this play and its sequel (*Richard III*), tries to blackmail the widowed Lady Gray into sharing his bed ('To tell thee plain, I aim to lie with thee'), threatening to confiscate her husband's lands if she refuses. When she does refuse he changes tack:

⁴² See *Three Jacobean Revenge Tragedies*, ed. by R. V. Holdsworth (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 18, 255-6. It has not been noticed that Ford copies *Women Beware Women*'s chess game and the wordplay involving *queen* in *Love's Sacrifice*, 2.1.

⁴³ *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Brian Gibbons (London: Methuen, 1980), 109; Kim H. Noling, 'Grubbing up Stock: Dramatizing Queens in *Henry VIII*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39 (1988), 291-306.

One way or other, she is for a king;
And she shall be my love or else my queen.
Say that King Edward take thee for his queen?

She replies that she is ‘too good to be your concubine’, and he protests that he is sincere: ‘You cavil, widow – I did mean my queen’ (3.2.87-99). Edward’s problem is his need to rid his use of *queen* of the suggestion of *quean* that his bullying tactics and the crude implication of ‘One way or other’ have created.

Richard III

At 1.3.239 Margaret, cursing her Yorkist captors as impostors who have deprived her of the crown, turns on Queen Elizabeth: ‘Poor painted queen, vain flourish of my fortune’. Later she remembers calling her ‘poor shadow, painted queen’ (4.4.83). By ‘painted’ Margaret means that Elizabeth is a fake version of her own true royal self, a kind of player queen (in Shakespeare’s plays and poems *painted*, *flourish*, and *shadow* all have strong theatrical associations); but given the intensity of vituperation to which she subjects her auditors it would not be surprising if she were using the *queen/quean* homonym to attack her rival’s honesty in another way as well. ‘Painted’ (adorned with cosmetics) frequently precedes *whore*, *strumpet*, and *harlot*, and Claudius in *Hamlet* likens his ‘painted word’ to ‘the harlot’s cheek’ (3.1.53-5). ‘Painted quean’ is listed five times by *Early English Books Online* between 1606 and 1683.

Hamlet

Glancing at the bawdy sense of *aunt*, Hamlet describes Gertrude as his ‘aunt-mother’ whom Claudius has ‘whored’ (2.2.376, 5.2.65). He tells her as much to her face in the closet scene, when he declares that her ‘act’ has removed ‘the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love’ and replaced it with ‘blister’ – a reference to the branding of whores on the forehead (3.4.41-3). But what exactly does Hamlet take Gertrude to be guilty of? Is he thinking only of his mother’s remarriage, regarding it as a form of whoredom in itself, or is he convinced that, as the Ghost has perhaps said (or perhaps has not), Gertrude was sexually involved with Claudius before her first husband’s death? And if Hamlet believes the latter, should we be as confident about Gertrude’s guilt in this respect as he is? The play does not supply clear answers to any of these questions. Instead, on these and many other matters, it pursues a strategy of frustrating certainty rather than providing it. When, for example, the Ghost calls Claudius an ‘adulterate beast’ (1.5.41), he might be declaring that his wife and his brother were lovers before Claudius murdered him, since one sense of *adulterate* was ‘adulterous’; but the word’s original meaning, still fully current at the date of the play, was ‘false, debased’ (*OED*, adj., 1, 2), so he might merely

be saying that Claudius is treacherous by nature, and not the true king. Moreover, if the Ghost really is charging Gertrude with adultery, this might be because he thinks of himself as still married to her, and therefore of her remarriage as in itself an act of adulterous betrayal. Equally unclear is Claudius's confession that one of the reasons that he 'did the murder' was to be 'possessed' of his brother's wife (3.3.53-4). If he means that he acted as he did in order to possess her sexually, rather than, or as well as, to possess her in marriage, we can again imagine a Gertrude who remained faithful to her first husband up to his death. The question remains open in the finale, where Hamlet accuses Claudius only of incest and murder (5.2.267), and the suggestion of adultery, if that is what it is, is not repeated.

The play may be teasing us further by making *quean* audible in several of Claudius's references to 'our' or 'my' 'queen'. He introduces his new wife to the court as 'our sometime sister, now our queen' (1.2.8). The abrupt juxtaposition of relationships creates a suggestion of brother-sister incest, even though 'sister' could be used to mean 'sister-in-law', and *Hamlet's* first audiences would probably not have viewed remarriage to a brother-in-law as particularly sinful. Elsewhere Gertrude is not only 'my queen' and 'our queen' but 'sweet queen' and 'my sweet queen' (3.3.55; 2.2.54; 4.7.133), appellations applied by Falstaff, Pandarus, and Antony to women whose sexual honesty is in question, and where the *quean* pun may also be hinted at.

Troilus and Cressida

Puns are especially at home in *Troilus and Cressida*, for doubleness – contradiction, paradox, the state of being 'bifold' (5.2.144) – marks this play at every level. Dividing itself between a war plot and a love plot, seeming unsure whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, featuring a heroine who 'is and is not' one person (5.2.146), lacking an ending, it offers no 'rule in unity' (5.2.141) whereby what is disparate and conflicted yields reassuringly to convergence and a discovery of ordered purpose. Its language mirrors these uncertainties. It displays, the New Cambridge editor notes, 'a marked rhythm of inflation and deflation', as those caught up in the war voice sharply opposing opinions of it, and of the woman over whom it is being fought.⁴⁴ At various times Helen is 'a theme of honour and renown' (2.2.198), 'a deadly theme' (4.7.65), 'the heart-blood of beauty, love's invisible soul' (3.1.31), and 'a flat tamed piece... contaminated carrion' (4.1.64, 73).

⁴⁴ *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 25.

There is a remarkable episode in 3.1 where Shakespeare may be enlisting the *queen/quean* homonym in order to capture this inflationary/deflationary verbal movement in a single phrase. Pandarus, chatting bawdily with Helen, calls her ‘sweet Queen’ with a frequency that takes flattery to the verge of hysteria: ‘sweet Queen ... sweet Queen, you are pleasant with me... Go to, sweet Queen... Sweet Queen, sweet Queen, that’s a sweet Queen... What says my sweet Queen, my very very sweet Queen... What says my sweet Queen?’, and so on, a further five times (3.1.44-137). The effect is to include Pandarus in the habit of mind exhibited by the other men of the play, whereby women are regarded as items for purchase or ingestion, and spoken of as pearls or sweetmeats. Accepting that Shakespeare means us to hear *quean* as Pandarus’s excited recitation proceeds adds a darker note to the banter, allowing us to see the contempt for women that underlies all the inflated reverence. Is Pandarus conscious of the pun? His self-chosen role as satiric commentator suggests that he is, as do his fondness for covert mockery and his attitude of ‘gloating humour’ which ‘pulls down the tone of any scene in which he appears’.⁴⁵ Strip away the coating of praise and he becomes another Thersites, privately echoing the latter’s savage summing-up of the play in the previous scene: ‘All the argument is a whore and a cuckold’ (2.3.65).

Antony and Cleopatra

At 1.1.50-53 Antony pretends to lose patience with Cleopatra, who is teasing him by pretending to prefer state business to a night of dalliance with Antony:

Fie, wrangling queen,
Whom everything becomes – to chide, to laugh,
To weep; how every passion fully strives
To make itself, in thee, fair and admired!

Editors are silent, but we can be sure that *quean* is present here. Indeed, it is likely that the Globe audience, not seeing the word as written, heard this as the primary sense. Not only do other early modern authors describe Cleopatra as a *quean*,⁴⁶ or include her in lists of famous *queans* of the past (see above, note 27), ‘wrangling’ (quarrelling noisily) is what whores, harlots, strumpets, and *queans* are constantly said to do. Compare the anonymous broadside *The Several Places Where You May Hear News* (1640): ‘scolding sluts care not to work, / Like wrangling *queans* they fight’. One of the four appearances

⁴⁵ *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by David Bevington, revised edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 63, 65.

⁴⁶ For example, *The Fifth Book of the Works of Francis Rabelais*, trans. by P. M. (London, 1694), p. 201: ‘*Cleopatra* that *Egyptian Quean*’.

of the *quean* spelling in Shakespeare employs *wrangling*: ‘as a scolding quean to a wrangling knave’ (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, 2.2.21-2).

Emphatically established in the lovers’ opening exchange, *quean* continues to offer a mocking alternative to *queen* for the rest of *Antony and Cleopatra*, contributing to the protean inconsistencies, the ‘infinite variety’ (2.2.241) of Cleopatra’s character. When Antony declares that ‘I must from this enchanting queen break off’ (1.2.117), is he thinking only, or even primarily, of Cleopatra’s royal title? Similarly, arranging one last spectacle, the display to public view of her own corpse, Cleopatra demands, ‘Show me, my women, like a queen’ (5.2.223). It is clear which sense she intends, but how far do we allow *quean* to inject an ironic alternative?

The Winter’s Tale

After a long exchange with his friend Polixenes in which he tries to make him prolong his visit, Leontes gives up and turns for support to his wife Hermione, who has been neither spoken to nor spoken of until this moment, and whose relationship to the two men we only now learn. Leontes’ curt command, ‘Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you’. (1.2.27), has not troubled critics, but the doubleness of meaning it carries makes it one in a sequence of innuendoes which indicate that Leontes enters the play already convinced that his friend and his wife are lovers. That it is too late to save him from his suspicions is established in the play’s first scene, where two courtiers discuss the closeness of the two royal friends. From infancy, one courtier tells the other, ‘there rooted betwixt them such an affection which cannot choose but branch now’ (1.1.19-21). The triple pun on *branch* is ominously predictive. The friendship may (and will) eventually ‘branch’ (grow, flourish), but it will also branch by dividing, going in different directions. Worse, the division will result from a branching, a cuckolding, as one friend imagines the other has equipped him with cuckold’s horns. Critics have missed this meaning, but Shakespeare’s audience would not have, as it was very common. In closely contemporary plays, compare *Cupid’s Whirligig* (1607), ‘is not my hair turned to horns... I branch... I branch, do I not?’; *The Insatiate Countess* (1607-8), ‘Strumpet his wife, branch my false seeming friend’; and *A Christian Turned Turk* (1609-12), ‘I am so branched ... to climb up Cuckold’s Haven’.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Sharpham, *Cupid’s Whirligig*, 1.1.145-8, in *A Critical Old Spelling Edition of the Works of Edward Sharpham*, ed. by C. G. Petter (New York: Garland, 1986); Marston, *The Insatiate Countess*, 1.1.453, ed. by Giorgio Melchiori (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Daborne, *A Christian Turned Turk*, 6.407-16, in *Three Turk Plays*, ed. by D.J. Vitkus (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

The pun is doubly important, as it not only associates Leontes with a charge of adultery before he enters the play, but hints that its origin lies in the early intimacy of the two men. As Polixenes tells Hermione in the following scene, the boys were once ‘twinned lambs’, but when she ‘crossed the eyes of my young playfellow’ (note the play on *cross*, pass across, but also block, frustrate) their ‘innocence’ was lost, and ‘stronger blood’ propelled each of them to a separate, heterosexual future (1.2.69-81). Hermione took Leontes away from Polixenes then, and now Leontes fantasises a version of the same separation being repeated. Hence the bitter ambiguity of his question, ‘Is he won yet?’ (1.2.88). His real meaning, audible only to himself, is not ‘Have you persuaded him yet?’ but ‘Have you seduced him yet?’, or perhaps more precisely (since his jealousy is focused not on his wife’s infidelity but the loss of his friend), ‘Have you stolen him from me yet?’⁴⁸

Leontes begins an inner monologue of hidden meanings, at once accusatory and self-tormenting, as soon as he enters. As with Othello, this draws him into coarser and coarser fantasies of misogynistic loathing, in which he figures as both victim and facilitator. He is ‘the allowing husband’ (1.2.184), implicated in the depravity he denounces. His first words to his friend, ‘Stay your thanks a while, / And pay them when you part’ (1.2.9-10) are a veiled threat. Invoking the proverb ‘Praise at parting’, they imply, banteringly on the surface, that Polixenes should spare his expressions of gratitude until he is on the point of leaving, as he may regret being so effusive.⁴⁹ Broad sexual innuendoes follow. To Polixenes’ suggestion that he has outworn his welcome Leontes replies, ‘We are tougher, brother, / Than you can put us to’t’ (1.2.15-16), glancing heavy-handedly (as it would have seemed to the play’s first audiences) at *put to it*, ‘subject to sexual intercourse’. When Middleton’s Harebrain, vowing to keep a strict eye on his wife, declares ‘I’ll put her hard to’t’ (*A Mad World*, 1.2.69), he plays inadvertently on the phrase’s bawdy sense, indeed he helps to actualise it, since his jealousy drives her into an adulterous affair. Compare also ‘widows are seldom slow to put men to it’ in Barry’s *Ram Alley*, and ‘some [women] will not give a penny for their sport / Unless they be put to it’ in Fletcher and Rowley’s *The Maid in the Mill*.⁵⁰ Leontes gets away with his crude play on words through his apparent employment of the royal we, so he seems to be referring only to himself (though understanding him in that way makes the reference homoerotic, which has its own relevance). If we take his ‘we’ and ‘us’ as normal plurals the covert meaning includes

⁴⁸ Shakespeare is fond of this ominous use of *win*: cf. *Richard III*, 4.4.357, ‘win my daughter to thy will’; *Hamlet*, 1.5.45, ‘won to his shameful lust’; *Macbeth*, 1.3.121-23, ‘win us to our harm... Win us with honest rifles’; Sonnet 144.5, ‘win me soon to hell’. For its punning use in *The Winter’s Tale* (persuade / captivate sexually), cf. *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.128, ‘Pray heaven she win him’.

⁴⁹ Tilley, p. 83. Shakespeare repeats this use of the proverb in his next play, *The Tempest* (3.3.39).

⁵⁰ Barry, *Ram Alley* (London, 1611), E2r; Fletcher and Rowley, *The Maid in the Mill*, 3.2, in *Comedies and Tragedies by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher* (London, 1647), p. 13.

Hermione: she will have sex with Polixenes as much as he likes, and still be ready for more.

Leontes then turns his fire on Hermione, abruptly demanding that she ask Polixenes to stay: 'Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you' (1.2.27). The full impact of this line will only be registered if we remember not only that Hermione has been standing silent and ignored until this moment, but her existence was suppressed in the previous opening scene as well. There we hear two male courtiers discussing two male friends and their two male offspring, and no women, wives or otherwise, are mentioned. It is as if the play were briefly restoring the all-male paradise of their boyhood which Leontes and Polixenes hanker for, as well as granting the ultimate wish – complete female absence – of misogynist thought. 'Well had it been for the world if there had never been an Eve', Richard Brathwaite suggested, taking further the advice of St Paul: 'they that have wives be as though they had none'.⁵¹

The play brings Hermione into existence with her entrance at the start of the next scene. It does not identify her, however, or involve her in the opening exchanges, which consist entirely of the two men speaking to and about one another. Is she the wife of one of the men? She is heavily pregnant, but if one of them is the father, which one is it? Polixenes' opening references to his nine-month stay, the 'burden' of royalty, and the fact that 'we have left *our* throne' (Shakespeare is again exploiting the potential ambiguity of the royal we) seem to identify him as the husband and father-to-be, so for a moment we make the same mistake as Leontes as to the paternity of the child in Hermione's womb, and share his false vision of the truth. Shakespeare then maximises the shock when she is finally included in the dialogue and her identity is established, for it is in terms which simultaneously brand her as a whore, and which do indeed link her with Polixenes, but not in the way we had supposed. Leontes' 'Tongue-tied, our queen?' establishes that she is his wife after all, and there is an innocent cover to his words, since he seems simply to be asking (though aggressively enough) 'Why are you silent?' But he is again cultivating a double language. 'Tongue-tied' can suggest the hiding of a guilty secret: compare *Julius Caesar*, 1.1.61, 'tongue-tied in their guiltiness', and Philemon Holland's *Roman History*, 'tongue-tied... by a conscience guilty of foul offences'.⁵² Much more than this, Leontes' oddly formal 'our queen' (affectionate talk between intimates is hardly an occasion on which to employ the royal we) enables him to dwell privately on what he takes the situation to be: Hermione is not only Leontes' queen but 'our quean', the treacherous whore whom he and his supposed friend are sharing. Again a crude sexual meaning is

⁵¹ Richard Brathwaite, *Art Asleep, Husband? A Boulster Lecture* (London, 1640), p. 5; 1 Corinthians 7:29.

⁵² Philemon Holland, *Roman History* (London, 1609), p. 77.

concealed behind an innocuous one. Since Polixenes and Hermione can only judge from what they hear, and *queen* and *quean* were pronounced identically, Leontes has the perfect cover.⁵³

There is yet more poison concealed in Leontes' question. As a quean Hermione ought not to be tongue-tied, hence his feigned surprise at her silence: queans use their tongues all the time, because they are loud and talkative, and because they are skilled at employing them as part of their trade. As Robert Tofte puts it, 'Queanes of their Tongue, are most Queanes of their Taile'. Richard of Gloucester means more than Mistress Shore's singing ability when he credits her with 'a passing pleasing tongue' (*Richard III*, 1.1.95), and note Iago's salacious joke about Emilia: 'her tongue she oft bestows on me' (*Othello*, 2.1.104). Leontes will later deny any double sense to the *queen/quean* homonym, hearing and intending only 'quean' when he scoffingly agrees that Hermione is a 'Good queen' (2.3.59). It is not until a female voice intervenes, in the form of Paulina's 'your good queen... good queen, my lord, good queen, I say good queen' (2.3.58-60), that the play begins to fight back against the force of the pun.

⁵³ For further discussion of the implications of understanding Leontes' 'our queen' in this way, which is at variance with the accepted view, see Roger Holdsworth, 'Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton and the Strange Inner Life of the Imaginary Cuckold', *Fictions*, 19 (2020), *Shakespeare's Narrative Modes*, 41-58. A form of Leontes' jibe occurs in Marston's *The Fawn*, where Zuccone, another imaginary cuckold, insists that his wife be called 'our lady', with the same suggestion of shared sexual ownership; see *The Fawn*, ed. by David A. Blostein (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 2.1.224-8.