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‘[S]he-Mercury’: Broadening Female Neighbourly Networks in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

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ABSTRACT

Recent critical attention to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has emphasised the feminist impulse of the play, stressing the way it celebrates female gossip networks. Important as they are, those studies, however, privilege the gossip network between the two prosperous, middling-sorts wives of the title, in the process marginalising the many working women the play depicts as members of a wider female neighbourly network and occluding the crucial roles they play in the success of the wives’ plots. When critics do attempt to attend to a wider female network, they often link the wives to the (off-stage) queen, thus further isolating them from their immediate neighbourly interactions. This article redresses this imbalance by showing that female neighbourly networks in the play, as they were in early modern culture, are much broader and socially diverse than has hitherto been acknowledged. Challenging dominant critical readings of Mistress Quickly as a garrulous, busybody, and drawing on the findings of social historians’ recent research into the lived experiences of early modern female servants, I argue that she is positioned in the play as a social actor, an active participant in her neighbourhood, an ingenious manipulator, and a significant member of the local female networks.

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Recent critical attention to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has rightly emphasised its feminist impulse, stressing the way it advocates for women’s right to mirth without the contemporary attendant suspicion of promiscuity.¹ Various critics have convincingly demonstrated how Mistress Page’s statement, ‘Wives may be merry and yet honest too’, fundamentally shapes the play’s depiction of female

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¹Critics have long agreed that this comedy’s first performance on or about 23 April 1597, was in connection with the Feast and Installation of new Knights of the Order of the Garter. For studies that consider how it intersects with the *Henry IV* plays, see Roberts, *Shakespeare’s English Comedy*; White, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and T.W. Craik’s introduction to his edition of the play, 1–63.

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friendship, or gossip, networks.² Lisa Hopkins's words are representative of this body of criticism: the play 'not only illustrates the women's firm friendship' and their right to be merry, but also shows 'that husbands can be taught'.³ Similarly, Cristina León Alfar has argued that 'the communal spectacle that corrects the erring Falstaff is staged as a celebration of the wives' agency', adding that 'as a spectacle dependent on the bonds forged between these two women, it authorizes a view of the marital bond strengthened by a female driven mirth'.⁴ Insightful as they are, those studies, however, tend to privilege the gossip network between the two prosperous, middling-sorts wives of the title, in the process marginalising the many working women the play depicts as members of a wider female neighbourly network and occluding the crucial roles they play in the success of the wives' plots.⁵ Natasha Korda's important observation about the erasure of working women from the history of the early modern playhouse also applies to the critical reception of the play: 'Although traces of women's work were everywhere in the professional theatre, as they were within the culture at large, then as now, they often went unnoticed or unacknowledged'.⁶ Thus Phyllis Rackin and Evelyn Gajowski's celebration of the critical reception of the play in the twenty-first century for its 'insist[ance] on the play's significance as a positive representation of the lives of actual women in Shakespeare's England' neglects the fact that the 'actual women' this body of criticism privileges are the two middling-sorts wives.⁷ When critics do attempt to attend to the play's wider female network, they often link the wives to the (off-stage) reigning queen praised in the final scene of the Folio version for her exemplary virtue and housewifery, thus further isolating them from their immediate social surroundings and neighbourly interactions.⁸ This article redresses this imbalance by showing that female neighbourly networks in the play, as they were in early modern culture, are much broader and socially diverse than has hitherto been acknowledged. The play depicts the wives' female network as embracing marginalised, stigmatised, and working women. Unnamed laundresses, an unnamed maidservant, a cunning woman, and a neighbouring housekeeper prove essential to the success of their plots. This article focuses on Mistress Quickly as a working,

²Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ser. 3, 4.2.100. Further quotations are cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line number. Quotations from the Quarto version are cited by signature.

³Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage*, 64. See also Clark, 'Wives May Be Merry and Yet Honest Too', 249–67; Alfar, 'Let's Consult Together', 38–50.

⁴Alfar, 'Let's Consult Together', 39.

⁵See, for example, Gay, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*, 32. Natasha Korda describes the wives' plots in terms that completely obliterate any extra-domestic involvement: 'their actions render any outside intervention superfluous' (*Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, 83).

⁶Korda, *Labors Lost*, 2.

⁷Rackin and Gajowski, ed., *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 16.

⁸Typical of such readings is Penny Gay's comment that 'the humiliation of the fat knight' would have been 'particularly pleasing to the imperious Elizabeth, who tolerated no presumptions of love or power from her male favourites' (*The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*, 31). See also Holderness, 'Cleaning House', 37.

lower status woman who constitutes a significant aspect of the wives' social world and on whose labour, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and co-operation they depend for the success of their various schemes.⁹ The purpose is not to romanticise those relationships, but to restore to critical visibility a working woman whose inclusion challenges critics' exclusionary conception of the play's wives', and early modern women's, female networks.

Social historians have shown that early modern women did not strictly form bonds with women of similar social status. As Amanda E. Herbert argues, 'it is artificial to separate entirely the lives of laboring, middling, and aristocratic women'. She further adds that:

Higher-status women were at times dismissive of and hostile toward servants and poor women, but they were not necessarily estranged from the lower-status individuals who surrounded and served them: agricultural laborers, chambermaids and artisanal craftswomen, women who supplied milk, who were shopkeepers, who did laundry, or who worked in kitchens and sculleries, and even those who sought relief through alms. [...] Despite their differences, these women could work in cooperation and collaboration, could share complex associations, and could be implicated in common goals.¹⁰

Diaries of early modern women register this aspect of female networks in the period. Margaret Lady Hoby's, for example, records her interactions with local people in Hackness, Yorkshire, which often show her attending to their injuries and providing medical help.¹¹ Social historians have also identified, through incidental details in the legal archives, examples of employers and servants engaged in work, as well as recreational, activities together.¹² *The Merry Wives* confirms historians' conclusions and reflects contemporary social practice in its depiction of female networks. Resonating with the lived reality of early modern women, the Windsor female network extends beyond that involving Mistress Ford and Mistress Page. I focus on Mistress Quickly, who, when discussed in the literature at all, is often equated with vulgarity, promiscuity, and ignorance.¹³ In recuperating this wider network and investigating its nature and role in the play, I show that the play depicts this working woman as performing

⁹While Lamb (*The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*) has correctly identified the absence of the working women from critical studies of the play, her attempt 'to restore to visibility the low domain' remains limited by her reading of Mistress Quickly and the wise woman of Brentford as 'signify[ing] a degraded version of the feminine', 140.

¹⁰Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 8. See ch. 3 for a discussion of the early modern kitchen as a space which brought mistresses and servants into close contact. For more recent analysis of female alliances that crossed the class divide, see *Non-Elite Women's Networks across the Early Modern World*. Describing the networks their collection investigates, Cohen and Couling write that non-elite woman, including marginalised women, the poor, members of religious minorities, abused wives, and sex workers, 'connected with peers; other times they relied on those of lesser status or drew on the social and economic assets of patrons and superiors. These networks could arise in a momentary crisis or grow slowly over extended association' (11).

¹¹Beier, *Sufferers and Healers*, 172. On gentlewomen healers, see Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500–1800*, 233–5.

¹²Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 139–43.

¹³See, for example, Mary Ellen Lamb's conception of Mistress Quickly as 'possess[ing] the debased and grotesquely physical body through which early modern ideologies denigrated the poor' (*The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, 140); Hibbard, ed., *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 8. Even critics who identify

a crucial role in the success of the two wives' plots, one that extends beyond merely delivering letters, while, at the same time, cautioning us against romanticising female networks both in the period and in the play, as I suggest in the final section.

'This is My Doing': Mistress Quickly¹⁴

Mistress Quickly, Dr Caius's housekeeper is often reduced in the critical literature to a busybody, 'a garrulous woman who sees herself as a matchmaker', a servant whose sexual promiscuity and dubious morality are suggested, respectively, by the bawdy language which she often unintentionally produces and the false promises she makes to various suitors of Anne Page while pocketing their money. Her garrulousness itself registers her sexual laxity as it taps into the trope of women as leaky vessels and the early modern misogynistic association between the mouth and the vagina.¹⁵ The play certainly offers ample evidence to support those views, equipping her with a large number of malapropisms which centre on bawdy puns and abound with references to the lower bodily strata. Questioned by Falstaff as to whether she is a 'maid', for example, Mistress Quickly's answer indicts both herself and her mother: 'I'll be sworn, as my mother was the first hour I was born' (2.2.36–7), suggesting both the unreliability of both women's words and bodies (did her mother swear she was a virgin after giving birth to her?).¹⁶ Most damning is her appearance beside Mistress Page in the Latin lesson scene when the latter momentarily interrupts her journey to Mistress Ford's house, stopping to observe the progress her son, Will, is making with his Latin as well as halting the play's march to Falstaff's second punishment. It is not difficult to see how, in this scene, the middling-sorts matron and the lowly servant are contrasted by their access to Latin and, by extension, to learning and knowledge. Mistress Quickly, acting, in Wendy Wall's memorable phrase, as 'a machine of sexual bawdry', reduces the various Latin expressions she hears Will and his school master, Hugh Evans, exchange, into sexual puns and expresses horror at what she thinks she hears.¹⁷ 'You do ill', she scolds the schoolmaster, 'to teach the child such words. He teaches him to hick and to hack, which they'll do fast enough of themselves, and to call 'whore 'm' – fie upon you!' (4.1.57–9). As the lesson progresses, she hears 'polecats' (whores) for 'pulcher'; 'carrot' (penis) for 'caret', lewdly approving of it as 'a good root'; 'Jenny's case' (genitals) for the 'genitive

the importance of Mistress Quickly for the advancement of the wives' plot often limit her agency to that of carrying letters (Callan Davies, Introduction to The Oxford World Classics *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 34–5).

¹⁴Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is different to the character found in the *Henry* plays, not least in being employed as a housekeeper, rather than an alewife. For a discussion of the differences, see Kiernander, 'Young Falstaff and the Performance of Nostalgia', 197–8. I only examine the character in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

¹⁵On women's leaky bodies, see Gowing, *Common Bodies*, ch. 1. On the mouth/vagina associations, see Stallybrass, 'Patriarchal Territories', 123–42; Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, 141.

¹⁶This exchange has no counterpart in the Quarto version.

¹⁷Wall, 'Finding Desire in Windsor', 135.

case', concluding that 'Jenny' is 'a whore' (4.1.23–4, 46–7, 51, 54–5). By contrast, Mistress Page seems to be able to follow the lesson. Though her conclusion that her son 'is a better scholar than I thought he was' is perhaps an expression of motherly indulgence rather than objective truth, the schoolteacher does approve of her assessment (is he being mocked for his unsuitability as a teacher?): 'He is a good sprag [smart, clever] memory' (4.1.72–4). No less important, of course, is Mistress Page's acting as a gatekeeper, urging Mistress Quickly to silence every time she intrudes on the scene of (privileged, male) learning from which she is excluded by virtue of her status as a working woman. 'Peace', Mistress Page orders Mistress Quickly after her first intervention, adding further 'Prithee hold thy peace' (4.1.49, 65). She thus adds her voice to Evans's, distancing herself from Mistress Quickly while aligning herself with him, for he had already scolded Mistress Quickly for her interruptions and will carry on doing so throughout the lesson. 'Peace your tattlings', he barks at Mistress Quickly, 'You are a very simplicity 'oman; I pray you peace'; 'Leave your prabbles, 'oman' (4.1.22, 26–7, 43). 'Prattling', 'tattling', and 'rattling' were favourite ways of denigrating women's speech in contemporary conduct literature, ballads, and pamphlets.¹⁸ Status and privilege thus give Mistress Page access to the spaces of male learning, and we witness both middling-sorts mistress and male schoolteacher unite in their access to this learning, excluding, marginalising, and deriding the lower status servant as ignorant and bawdy. This is an example of the way class divides and complicates the bonds shared by women who make up the play's female neighbourly networks and to which I will return in the final section.

Nor is this depiction particularly unique or surprising. Early modern drama offers many examples of female servants acting as moral, social, and racial foils to their mistresses, thus setting off the supposed superiority of the latter. We need only think of Hero and Margaret in *Much Ado about Nothing* where Hero's maidenly fears of her wedding night ('God give me joy to wear it', she sighs, indicating the wedding gown, 'for my heart is exceeding heavy') are mocked and contrasted by her uninhibited and, we are encouraged to believe, morally inferior servant ('"Twill be heavier soon by the weight of a man"), a statement that enrages and embarrasses the bashful mistress who scolds: 'Fie upon thee, art not ashamed?'.¹⁹ The exchange is specifically designed and placed to stress Hero's chastity and Margaret's sexual laxity. In what follows, I show that the reading of Mistress Quicky which has dominated critical responses to the character, inserting her exclusively within such dramatic traditions, is reductive and limiting. Such a reading effectively and misguidedly cuts her off from the wider Windsor community and isolates her from other women in her neighbourhood, bringing her into the discussion only to reduce her to the role of foil.

¹⁸See, for example, *Anything for a Quiet Life*, sig. A1v; *Cupids Messenger*, sigs. C4r–C4v; Burton, *The Rowsing of the Sluggard in Seven Sermons*, sig. L4v.

¹⁹McEachern, ed., *Much Ado about Nothing*, 3.4.23–6.

Drawing on the findings of recent social historians' research into the lived experiences of early modern female servants, I argue, instead, that Mistress Quickly is positioned in the play as a social actor, an active participant in her neighbourhood, and a member of the local female networks. Moreover, her involvement in the wives' revenge plots, especially her impressive success in persuading Falstaff to visit Mistress Ford where he faces humiliation and punishment again and again, reveals her to be an ingenious manipulator and exploiter of early modern society's cultural scripts and misogynistic views. She is nowhere reduced to the domestic space of the household in which she is employed or restricted to solely interacting with its members.²⁰ The play depicts Mistress Quickly as a significant member of the wives' extended female support network and as fundamental to the success of their plots against Falstaff.

Mistress Quickly occupies a liminal position between servant and household mistress, a fact that enables her mobility and active participation in the Windsor community as well as her role as confidante for the merry wives of the title.²¹ When we first hear about her, it is through the Parson, Sir Hugh Evans, who, like the wives, considers her the perfect go-between and facilitator of marriage negotiations between the Justice of the Peace, Master Shallow's foolish cousin, Slender, and Anne Page, the wealthy heiress and (thus?) love interest of all single men in the play.²² Evans informs Simple that Mistress Quickly is 'in the manner of his [Dr Caius's] nurse, or his dry nurse, or his cook, or his laundry, his washer, and his wringer' (1.2.3–4). Mistress Quickly herself will later on confirm this job description, informing Simple that she 'may call him [Dr Caius] my master, [...] for I keep his house, and I wash, wring, brew, bake, scour, dress meat and drink, make the beds and do all myself' (1.4.88–91). In the Quarto version, she also stresses her labour as crucial to the maintenance of her master's household, telling Simple that Dr Caius 'puts all his priuities in me. [...] / Washing, brewing, baking, all goes through my hands, Or else it would be but a woe house'. In this version of the play, Simple quips: 'by my faith you are a good staie to him'.²³ The sexual connotations of 'priuities', as in private parts, 'all go[ing] through my hands', and 'staie', suggesting a thing or a person who supports or props up another, as critics have argued, link with her tendency to produce sexually charged malapropisms and stress her sexual uninhibition and moral dubiousness.²⁴

²⁰Mansell, 'Beyond the Home', 24–49; *Female Servants in Early Modern England*.

²¹Peter Laslett describes servants as the most mobile members of the early modern population (*Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations*, 72).

²²Agents and go-betweens were a significant part of the courtship process in the period (O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint*, 90–100, 105). As illustrated by Mistress Quickly in this play and by Iago's insinuations about Cassio's involvement in Othello's wooing of Desdemona, suitors sometimes doubted their motives. On go-betweens, see Cook, *Making a Match*, ch. 5; O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint*, ch. 3.

²³Shakespeare, *A Most Pleasaunt and Excellent Conceited Comedie, of Syr Iohn Falstaffe*, sig. B3r.

²⁴OED Online, 'stay', n., sense 1a. Helen Ostovich argues that this sexually-charged description of her labour 'trivializes, devalues, and marginalizes the services she does provide for her [...] employer' ('Bucking Tradition in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1602', 100).

I want to add to those readings, however, that Mistress Quickly's sexual innuendos perfectly capture her liminal position within Dr Caius's household. Serving a single man (he is attempting to change this fact by wooing Anne Page), Mistress Quickly steps into the position of household mistress, complete with potential sexual intimacy. Nor was a servant's assumption of wifely duties unusual in the period.²⁵ As Jane Whittle's research has shown, 'female servant[s] employ[ed] in the households of single or widowed men carr[ied] out the work tasks normally allotted to a wife'.²⁶ Moreover, we see her exercising the authority with which early moderns invested household mistresses. For example, she takes control over all sorts of domestic activities which, even in wealthy households, were the prerogative of the mistress, such as supervising washing, cooking, and managing domestic servants.²⁷ We see her exercise authority over another household servant, Rugby. She seems to order him around and to have access to provisions with which she ensures his compliance and obedience. Attending to Simple, she instructs Rugby: 'What, John Rugby! I pray thee go to the casement, and see if you can see my master, Master Doctor Caius, coming'; 'Go; and we'll have a posset for't soon at night, in faith, at the latter end of a sea-coal fire' (1.4.1–2, 7–8). While it was not unusual for higher ranking servants in elite households to supervise inferior servants, often to the chagrin of the latter, especially when they were male, in the absence of a mistress in the Caius household, Mistress Quickly seems to step into this role.²⁸

Mistress Quickly's description of the nature of her labour in Dr Caius's household positions her as the mistress of the household in other ways. It was proverbial in the period that a wife's 'work is never done', a trope elaborated on in a contemporary ballad which purports to be written by such an endlessly exhausted wife. Framed as a lament overheard by a passerby, the ballad opens by contrasting a maid's life to that of a wife's: 'Maids may sit still, go, or run, / But a Womans work is never done'. The ballad then proceeds to reproduce the wife's lament:

I heard a married Woman say,
That she had lived a sollid life,
Ever since the time that she was made a wife.
For why (quoth she) my Labor is hard,
And all my pleasures are debarred:
Both Morning, Evening, Night and Noon,
I'm sure a Womans work is never done.

²⁵Sexual abuse was a sad reality of many early modern female servants as social historians have shown. See, for example, see Meldrum, 'London Domestic Servants from Depositional Evidence, 1660–1750', 47–69. For pregnancy as a real risk faced by maidservants, see Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 50–3. For a microhistory of a female servant made pregnant first by her master then by his son, see Gowing, 'The Haunting of Susan Lay', 183–201. Capp considers the possibility that maidservants sometimes took the initiative in such relationships (*When Gossips Meet*, 155–65).

²⁶Whittle, 'Housewives and Servants in Rural England, 1440–1650', 67.

²⁷See, for example, Moody, ed., *The Private Life of an Elizabethan Lady 1599–1605*, 62, 167, 99.

²⁸Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 164–5. On hierarchy between servants, see Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England*, 212–3.

The wife's grievances centre on her domestic duties that require 'ris[ing] up early in the morn' to 'sweep & clease the house' and to 'make a fire', making her husband's breakfast, preparing her children for school, cooking dinner, knitting, washing, making beds, attending to crying children at night, and performing sexual services. In all of this, she asserts, 'Theres (sic) never a day from morn to night, / But I with work am tired quite'. This litany of domestic woes, cliched in the proverbial endlessness of a woman's work, is adopted by Mistress Quickly when she responds to Simple's bawdy-charged comment in the Folio version, 'Tis a great charge to come under one body's hand', with the affirmative 'Are you avised o' that? You shall find it a great charge, and to be up early and down late', closely echoing the wife of the ballad (1.4.92–6). Similarly, in the Quarto version, Mistress Quickly's tiring toil is stressed in Simple's comment: 'I beshrow me, one woman to do all this, Is very painfull' (sigs. B3r-B3v).

Importantly the version of the Fairy Queen played by Mistress Quickly in the masque which constitutes Falstaff's final punishment positions her clearly as household mistress. Strikingly, this 'queen' is exclusively interested in the piety and industriousness of household servants and in the cleanliness and presentability of domestic spaces. Thus Pistol, impersonating a fairy, instructs a fellow fairy: 'Cricket, to Windsor chimneys shalt thou leap: / Where fires thou find'st unraked and hearths unswept, / There pinch the maids as blue as bilberry— / Our radiant queen hates sluts and sluttery' (5.5.43–6).²⁹ Another fairy, the disguised Sir Hugh Evans, similarly orders 'Pead [Bead]':

Go you, and where you find a maid
That ere she sleep has thrice her prayers said,
Raise up the organs of her fantasy:
Sleep she as sound as careless infancy:
But those as sleep and think not on their sins,
Pinch them, arms, legs, backs, shoulders, sides and shins (5.5.49–54).

Mistress Quickly, as the Fairy Queen, orders her servants to make sure 'every sacred room [...] stand[s] till the perpetual doom, / In state as wholesome as in state 'tis fit, [...] / The several chairs of Order look you scour / With juice of balm and every precious flower' (5.5.579, 61–2). Critics have often read Mistress Quickly here as standing in for Elizabeth I and, through her thorough investment in the wholesomeness of bodies and spaces, offering her a flattering image of herself as an industrious, pious, and sober mistress of her own household/realm.³⁰ I believe that Mistress Quickly is more immediately positioned as a careful housewife, a role that she has played in Dr Caius's household throughout the play.

²⁹In the Quarto, the role is played by Anne Page.

³⁰Though some critics have doubted Mistress Quickly's appeal to the Queen as a version of herself. See Freedman, 'Shakespearean Chronology', 190–210.

Policing servants' sexuality and interactions with the opposite gender, as the Mistress Quickly-cum-Fairy Queen does in the masque, were recognised aspects of the household mistress's role. John Dod and Robert Cleaver, to cite one example, insisted that the household mistress

must have a diligent eye to the behauiour of her seruants, what meetings and greetings, what tickings [ticklings?] and toyings, and what words and countenances there be betweene men and maides, lest such matters being neglected, there follow wantonnesse, yea folly, within their houses, which is a great blemish to the gouernours.³¹

Significantly, the punishment of 'pinching' that Mistress Quickly metes out to negligent and lustful maidservants was recognised in the period as a common form of punishment visited on unsatisfactory servants by their mistresses. In one telling example from 1650, a distressed female servant, Susan Lay, believes that her deceased mistress's angry ghost (the servant was impregnated by her master and left the baby he fathered literally at his door) appears to her one night:

It was three days after Priscilla's [the mistress's] burial and Susan, dismissed from her service, was sleeping in her master's barn. The ghost appeared to Susan for three nights in a row, all in white; on the third night it called out to her, 'Sue, Sue, Sue', and as it left, pinched her on the arm.³²

Perhaps the best piece of evidence positioning Mistress Quickly as household mistress is the visual and textual parallel the play sets up between her and Mistress Ford when both attempt, the latter only with feigned horror, to prevent their respective household heads from detecting the presence of a strange man in the household. Thus in Act 3, scene 3, Mistress Ford, pretending to be concerned for Falstaff's well-being more than her own reputation were her husband to discover the knight in his home ('I fear not mine own shame so much as his peril'), asks Mistress Page frantically: 'What shall I do?', before they both pretend to light on the idea of concealing him in the buckbasket ready to be carried to the laundresses (111–113). Similarly in Act 1, scene 4, Mistress Quickly, surprised by the return of her master, Dr Caius, and afraid of his reaction to finding her with Simple in his home, anticipates: 'We shall all be shent [disgraced; ruined]', before lighting on the idea of concealing Simple in her master's closet (where he, unlike Master Ford, will find the intruder into his home): 'Run in here, good young man, go into this closet—he will not stay long' (34–35).³³ The parallel between Dr Caius's jealousy and outrage at finding a man in his closet and Master Ford's 'mad' anticipation of finding a

³¹Dod and Cleaver, *A Godly Forme of Houshold Government*, sigs. F5r-F5v.

³²Gowing, 'The Haunting of Susan Lay', 183. Capp (*When Gossips Meet*) also cites an example from the legal record of a tailor's servant who said she had run away from her employers' house 'because her dame used her hardly and pinched her and kicked her' (178–9).

³³The Quarto version has Simple hide in the counting house, thus suggesting an economic dimension to Dr Caius's outrage (B3r).

man in his house as he searches every corner and nook is striking for the way it places Mistress Quickly and Mistress Ford in equal positions of vulnerability to male violence and paranoia, highlighting the home as an unsafe space for Windsor women, while at the same time playing on early modern anxieties surrounding, in Natasha Korda's words, 'women's unsupervised supervision of the household'.³⁴ Before bringing the two women together on stage, then, the play constructs a wider context for the male abuse directed at Mistress Ford, one that brings Mistress Quickly, her lower status neighbour, into its orbit. Status, in other words, does not protect women from male violence and suspicion in this community. As such, it comes as no surprise when Mistress Quickly becomes an accomplice and active agent in Mistress Ford and Mistress Page's plot to punish both a lecherous knight and a jealous, violent household master.

Recent research has challenged the traditional reduction of female domestic servants into their occupations, revealing instead that 'female servants were not confined to the domestic sphere either in their work or their social interactions'. This research has further 'show[n] that female servants' links to the wider community gave them power and agency – limited perhaps, but significant nonetheless – in their dealings with their employers'.³⁵ Charmian Mansell, drawing on Church Court records, has argued for 'The importance of locating female servants' experiences beyond the narrow confines of the domestic sphere', insisting that 'The full range of tasks a female servant might perform – including "domestic" chores, agricultural work and errands – took them beyond the domestic space in which they were employed' for purposes of both work and sociability.³⁶ Borrowing the tools of early modern social historians who have so successfully decentred the household and its patriarchal structures as the defining space of the female servant's experience and situated female servants within the early modern community, I argue that the play's depiction of Mistress Quickly confirms those conclusions.³⁷ Dr Caius's housekeeper spends more time outside her master's home than within, interacting with her neighbours, advancing their projects and plots, and performing social and business-like visits to neighbours' homes, visits that involve her in their lives and intrigues. Thus we see her first evoked, as discussed above, as a perfect messenger, a go-between, in the marriage negotiations between Slender and Anne Page. Delivering messages and carrying letters was, of course, part and parcel of the early modern servant's job description. Mistress

³⁴Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, 92.

³⁵Mansell, 'Beyond the Home', 24. For a study of servants within the Scottish context, which similarly challenges early historical focus on vulnerability and abuse, arguing for servants' agency, specifically in the form of by-employment, see Ewan, 'Mistresses of Themselves?' 411–33; Richardson, *Household Servants in Early Modern England*, 85–7.

³⁶Mansell, 'Beyond the Home', 35; on servant networks, see Richardson, *Household Servants in Early Modern England*, ch 5; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, ch. 8, especially pp. 333–7.

³⁷Mansell, 'Beyond the Home', 25.

Quickly eagerly acts as a love messenger between the various suitors of Anne Page and their love interest, earning herself the designation ‘she-Mercury’ (2.2.76).³⁸ The community then seems to acknowledge not only Mistress Quickly’s mobility and access to neighbours’ homes and lives, but also her rhetorical skills and ingenuity, trusting the important business of their love lives to her.

This function of Mistress Quickly, however, does not exhaust the importance of her role in the play. Far from being a passive messenger between the wives and Falstaff, Mistress Quickly is depicted as an active agent in their revenge plots. The wives rely on her performance skills, for what she delivers is a convincing performance which constructs the wives for Falstaff’s benefit as realistic targets, ready to fall for his seduction. Importantly, the play does not stage a conversation between the wives and Mistress Quickly where they instruct her on how exactly to manipulate the lecher and convince him to visit Mistress Ford again and again even after experiencing humiliation and violence in her home. The how, it seems, is completely left to her, and this is where her ingenuity and resourcefulness are on full display.³⁹ Her involvement in the wives’ plot and role in the success of their revenge against Falstaff displays its own inventiveness and creativity. Mistress Quickly visits Falstaff in The Garter Inn three times, each visit preceding each of his three punishments. Every time she delivers Mistress Page and Mistress Ford’s messages regarding a suitable time when Master Ford will supposedly be away from home, and Mistress Ford will be eagerly awaiting the knight. The latter two visits perform the additional work of convincing Falstaff to go back to the Ford house, despite the humiliation and violence he experienced on his previous visit(s). Mistress Quickly’s active involvement in the wives’ plots, however, extends beyond the simple delivery of a message, for without the narrative she offers Falstaff, constructing the wives as receptive and vulnerable to his advances, the assignments might not have been possible. In her visits, she stresses her own close bonds with the wives registered, as she makes clear to him, in the confidential and personal information to which she has access. For example, she confides in Falstaff her knowledge that Mistress Ford is pining for him (‘you have brought her into such a canary as ‘tis wonderful’ (2.2.57–8)). Similarly, she reveals to him that Mistress Page is ‘as fartuous [virtuous] a civil modest wife, and one – I tell you – that will not miss you morning nor evening prayer, as any is in Windsor, whoe’er be the other’ (2.2.92–4). Having thus established her credibility as a trustworthy gossip of the target wives, Mistress Quickly proceeds

³⁸In addition to the obvious reference to Mercury, the messenger of the gods, mercury was also used medicinally in the early modern period to treat syphilis (*OED*, ‘mercury’, n. 3.7b). Falstaff does not seem to be aware of the way this connotation positions Mistress Quickly (and the wives with whom she is allied) as a means of curing his lechery.

³⁹The lack of specific instructions as to how Mistress Quickly should manipulate Falstaff is particularly noticeable when contrasted with the careful instructions (repeated twice: ‘as I told you before’, says Mistress Ford (3.3.8)) given to the Ford servants as to how they should carry the buckbasket out of the house.

to construct Mistress Ford as amenable to infidelity. Constructing the Fords' marriage as unhappy and abusive, Mistress Quickly casts Mistress Ford in the familiar role of the unhappy, abused wife, vulnerable to seduction. 'Alas!', Mistress Quickly sighs, 'the sweet woman leads an ill life with him [her husband]: he's a very jealousy (sic) man; she leads a very frampold [disagreeable] life with him, good heart' (2.2.84–6). Mistress Quickly thus inserts Mistress Ford within a familiar cultural script that goes back to medieval *fabliaux* and has many analogues on the early modern stage.⁴⁰ In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, wives' sexual promiscuity is often contextualised within abusive or unhappy marriages. Thus, in *The Merchant's Tale*, the context for May's infidelity and her responsiveness to the advances of her husband's apprentice, Damian, is the way she finds herself trapped (literally) in a January-May marriage. When he goes blind, her husband even keeps his hand on her at all times, restricting her free movement. '[N]either when at home nor in the houses / Of his acquaintance, no, nor anywhere', the narrator explains, 'Would he allow his wife to take the air / Unless his hand were on her, day and night'.⁴¹ Needless to say, May cuckolds her husband.

Mistress Alice Arden, in *The Tragedy of Arden of Faversham*, to cite an example from early modern drama contemporary with *The Merry Wives*, paints a similar picture of herself, though for a different purpose, of a wronged wife abused and neglected by her husband. Hoping to secure the assistance of her neighbour, Master Green, in her murderous plot against her husband, she casts him in the role of knight-in-shining armour and herself as damsel-in-distress. 'Ah, Master Greene', Mistress Arden sighs, 'be it spoken in secret here, / I never live good day with him alone':

When he is at home, then have I froward looks,
Hard words, and blows to mend the match withal.
[...]
Thus live I daily in continual fear,
In sorrow, so despairing of redress
As every day I wish with hearty prayer
That he or I were taken forth the world.⁴²

Master Green, of course, steps into the role with relish: 'I shall be the man / Shall set you free from all this discontent' (1.511–12). Mistress Quickly casts Mistress Ford in the role of a similarly abused and unhappy wife. While Master Green is manipulated into 'free[ing]' a distressed wife by killing her husband, Falstaff is manipulated into relieving another distressed wife by cuckolding her husband.

⁴⁰Some critics have argued that the main plot of the play, involving wily wives, adulterous women successfully evading detection by their husbands, and resourceful characters, belongs to the *fabliaux* tradition (Hibbard, ed., *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 18–21).

⁴¹Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 448.

⁴²White, ed., *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*, 1.492–505.

Strikingly, Mistress Quickly does not only paint Mistress Ford as unhappy and possibly sexually deprived, but she also stresses her legendary chastity in a move that flatters Falstaff's ego and reassures him that Mistress Ford has fallen for his own, unique charms. 'The best courtier of them all', she tells Falstaff, 'when the court lay at Windsor, could never have brought her to such a canary [as Falstaff has allegedly caused]'. 'Yet', she elaborates,

there has been knights, and lords, and gentlemen, with their coaches, I warrant you, coach after coach, letter after letter, gift after gift, smelling so sweetly, all musk, and so rushling [rustling], I warrant you, in silk and gold, and in such alligant terms, and in such wine and sugar of the best and the fairest, that would have won any woman's heart; and, I warrant you, they could never get an eye-wink of her.

They, she adds, 'could never get her so much as sip on a cup with the proudest of them all – and yet there has been earls – nay, which is more, pensioners – but, I warrant you, all is one with her' (2.2.59–74). Importantly, Mistress Quickly inserts herself within this fake (?) history of courtly attempts on Mistress Ford's chastity, both nudging Falstaff to reward her labour in bringing about the much-desired assignation and continuing to construct herself as privileged insider to Mistress Ford's most intimate secrets.⁴³ 'I had myself', she informs him, 'twenty angels given me this morning; but I defy all angels in any such sort, as they say, but in the way of honesty' (2.2.68–70).

Similarly, on her visit following Falstaff's second punishment, involving him being beaten while disguised as the wise woman of Brentford, and confronted by his anger at both wives, Mistress Quickly constructs Mistress Ford as a victim of domestic violence. 'I have suffered', Falstaff complains upon seeing Mistress Quickly, 'more for their sakes [Mistress Ford and Mistress Page], more than the villainous inconstancy of man's disposition is able to bear' (4.5.100–2). 'And have not they suffered?', Mistress Quickly retorts, 'Yes, I warrant; speciously one of them. Mistress Ford, good heart, is beaten black and blue, that you cannot see a white spot about her' (103–106). This description serves not only to appease Falstaff and assure him that his fate ('I was beaten myself into all the colours of the rainbow' (107–108)) was shared by Mistress Ford. It also works to emphasise the increasing unhappiness of Mistress Ford in her marriage and highlight revenge on her abusive and violent husband as a possible motive for cuckolding him by accepting Falstaff's overtures. Drawing on misogynistic cultural scripts that often linked women's marital unhappiness with infidelity and criminality and casting Mistress Ford as vulnerable and available to Falstaff's sexual overtures, Mistress Quickly performs the same kind of agency of which, as Natalie Zemon Davis has revealed, women testifying in the early modern courts availed themselves, that of 'forming, shaping, and molding' a story: 'the crafting of a narrative'.⁴⁴

⁴³Falstaff does reward her at the end of the scene: 'There's my purse; I am yet thy debtor' (2.2.125).

⁴⁴Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, 3.

Davis reveals the way those narratives often intersected with literary texts and tapped into familiar cultural scripts in order to construct convincing stories.⁴⁵ Like those witnesses, Mistress Quickly exercises agency over the story she is telling. She does not only describe, but also shapes and weaponises various elements in order to effect a specific outcome, in this case fooling Falstaff into believing his suit is eagerly welcomed by Mistress Ford.

Further displaying her ingenuity and showcasing the active role she plays in convincing Falstaff that his advances are welcome, Mistress Quickly recognises that constructing Mistress Page as a similarly unhappy and abused wife will not do. While the unhappiness of Mistress Ford seems to be common knowledge in Windsor, Mistress Page's happy marriage is not in doubt. When the wives first compare the love letters sent by Falstaff, Mistress Ford's first thought concerns her husband's possible reaction given, it seems, previous outbursts of jealousy: 'O, that my husband saw this letter! it would give eternal food to his jealousy' (2.1.89–90). Witnessing her husband's explosive jealousy in Act 3, scene 3, Mistress Ford makes reference to previous outbursts, confiding in her gossip that she 'never saw him so gross in his jealousy till now' (155–156). Mistress Page, on the other hand, she avers, is 'the happier woman', for Master Page, his wife confirms, '[i]s as far from jealousy as I am from giving him cause' (2.1.92–5). Instead of casting Mistress Page in a role that Falstaff may doubt, that of the abused, unhappy wife, Mistress Quickly relies on a different cultural script to mark the woman's availability to his advances.⁴⁶ The topos of the woman-on-top turned adulteress was at least as culturally significant as that of the unhappy wife turned adulteress or murderer.⁴⁷ The woman-on-top, as Natalie Zemon Davis explains, involved women taking on forms of behaviour and characteristics contemporaries associated with men.⁴⁸ Thus, in *Arden of Faversham*, Mistress Arden's infidelity with Mosby goes hand in hand with her refusal to submit to her husband: 'what hath he to do with thee, my love, / Or govern me that am to rule myself?' (10.83–4). Nor was this perception of Mistress Arden's slide into infidelity and murder unique in the period. Contemporary preachers often constructed wifely submission and obedience as crucial for ensuring all forms of order both within and without the home. One commentator argued that a wife's disobedience had disastrous consequences for, among others, all bonds of duty within the household. By being disobedient, wrote William Gouge, wives 'thwart Gods ordinance, peruert the order of nature, deface the image of Christ, ouerthrow the ground of all

⁴⁵Ibid., 31.

⁴⁶I therefore disagree with Maurice Hunt's reading of Mistress Page's supposed, complete freedom to do as she pleases as not 'reflecting her usurpation of her husband's rights in a patriarchal society', but 'compliment[ing] Page's honesty [through] the freedom with which he has entrusted her' ('Gentleness and Social Class in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*', 424). Mistress Quickly presents Mistress Page's marriage in this way deliberately.

⁴⁷I borrow the phrase, 'women on top', from Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, ch 5.

⁴⁸Davis, *Society and Culture*, 129.

dutie, hinder the good of the family'.⁴⁹ Gouge's emphasis on the far-reaching implications of a wife's disorderliness, encompassing 'all dutie', could be understood in Davis's words: 'At the end of the Middle Ages and in early modern Europe, the relation of the wife – of the potentially disorderly woman – to her husband was especially useful for expressing the relation of all subordinates to their superiors', for 'In the little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the larger matters of political and social order could find ready symbolization'.⁵⁰ A wife's presumption to a position of authority equal with her husband created, in one moralist's words, a monster.⁵¹ This alarmist conception of the disorder that a wife's unchecked authority could unleash was captured in the early modern popular tradition of the world turned upside down.⁵² As David Kunzle observes, the satirical visual literature of the world turned upside down is based on the 'principle of inversion' within a hierarchical relationship, such as that envisioned in the period to exist between husband and wife.⁵³ The motif primarily had a cautionary function, warning inefficient or vicious husbands about the danger posed by the woman on top.⁵⁴ Such images depict husbands minding babies or holding distaffs and women wielding weapons or putting on breeches, a traditional symbol of male authority, in an inversion of the social and cultural norms (Figures 1 and 2).⁵⁵ The dangers posed by the reversal of gender roles are underlined by the insertion of such images within broader contexts of 'unnatural' power dynamics, such as those depicted in images showing animals mastering humans.

Convincing Falstaff that Mistress Page, despite her happy marriage, is also available and corruptible, Mistress Quickly draws on exactly those cultural associations between women's independence and their supposed moral degeneracy. 'Never a wife in Windsor', she informs Falstaff, 'leads a better life than she does: do what she will, say what she will, take all, pay all, go to bed when she list, rise when she list, all is as she will' (2.2.110–3).⁵⁶ She relies on contemporary, misogynistic perceptions of female disorder that saw, in Sandra Clark's words, 'irregular behaviour in one area [as] almost inevitably

⁴⁹Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, sig. Str.

⁵⁰Davis, *Society and Culture*, 127.

⁵¹See *Matrimonial Honour*, sig. Mm3v.

⁵²I am grateful to the anonymous reader of this article for this suggestion.

⁵³Kunzle, 'World Upside Down', 41.2.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 43. On breeches, see Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 83–5. Kunzle ('World Upside Down') reproduces some of the images of the world turned upside down on pp. 46–7. The frieze surviving in Montacute House, Somerset, depicting a husband feeding a baby and a wife towering over him and beating him with her shoe, an inversion for which both are subjected to a ritualistic charivari punishment, references those images. For a discussion of this frieze, see Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England*, 5–6.

⁵⁶Falstaff seems to believe that both women have the upper hand in their marriages and have similar, unrestricted access to their husbands' money: of Mistress Ford, he says, 'the report goes she has all the rule of her husband's purse: he hath a legion of angels'; of Mistress Page, he believes: 'she bears the purse too; she is a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty' (1.3.49–50, 65–6).

lead[ing] to the other'.⁵⁷ By this logic, Mistress Page's domineering of her husband naturally leads to her cuckolding him: her 'will', that is, her power of choice, translates into her 'will', that is, sexual desire. The play does not substantiate Mistress Quickly's claims about Mistress Page's marriage, and, I believe, she specifically conjures up this image of the disorderly woman-on-top to encourage Falstaff to make the cultural jump into imagining her as 'adulteress'.⁵⁸ The trick works, and Falstaff, convinced that both wives are feasible targets, asks Mistress Quickly to 'commend me to them both', marching confidently towards his next punishment (2.2.124).

'Shall we Send That Foolish Carrion, Mistress Quickly, to Him [?]: Alliances and Class

The previous sections sought to challenge the critical focus on the two mid-dling-sorts wives, broadening our view of the female neighbourly network in the play and arguing for the importance of attending to Mistress Quickly, on whose co-operation, ingenuity, and performance and rhetorical skills they depend for the success of their revenge plans. It is easy to romanticise this wider female network as positive, mutually beneficial, and supportive. This final section, however, cautions against such romanticisation, taking a lead from social and cultural historians of the early modern period who have challenged earlier views about, for example, the birth chamber as a site of straightforward female solidarity. Those historians have drawn attention to the way differences in social status, race, religion, ethnicity, employment, and education divided many early modern women.⁵⁹ As Bernard Capp has observed, early modern female networks featured co-operative, competitive, as well as antagonistic elements.⁶⁰ Similarly, I want to draw attention to the way *The Merry Wives* adopts a more ambivalent attitude to female networks than has hitherto been appreciated, given the exclusive critical focus on the two wives' alliance. On the one hand, as this chapter has shown, the Windsor women, both privileged and marginalised, come together as a unified whole which crosses the class divide, working together successfully towards a shared goal. On the other hand, those relationships do not succeed in transcending the class barrier

⁵⁷Clark, 'Deeds Against Nature', 18. Tracing the same cultural associations, Clark also observes the way a wife's adultery is often constructed as leading to murder.

⁵⁸Master Page seems to also believe that his wife is a kind of a shrew when, responding to Master Ford's paranoia about the possibility that their wives are unfaithful, he informs him that if 'he [Falstaff] gets more of her than sharp words, let it lie on my head' (2.1.165-66). I am thankful to the journal's anonymous reader for drawing my attention to this detail.

⁵⁹See, for example, Gowing, *Common Bodies*, especially ch. 5. Gowing also considers the way the history of witchcraft prosecution shows women, as well as men, acting as witnesses and instigators of prosecutions (*Gender Relations in Early Modern England*, 60). Bernard Capp's discussion of the way mistresses whose husbands impregnated a maidservant treated the unfortunate woman is a case in point. Many maidservants in this predicament found little evidence of female solidarity or sisterhood (*When Gossips Meet*, 92-103). For an example of earlier, more rosy views, see Wilson, 'The Ceremony of Childbirth and its Interpretation', 68-107.

⁶⁰Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 373.

between middling-sorts wives and lower status women. The obsession with status among the Windsor men is an aspect of the play which has received ample critical attention.⁶¹ The impact of class affiliation on the women's relationships, however, has not been examined.

That female bonds are transitory and fragile is a trope which appears frequently on the early modern stage, registering contemporary patriarchal suspicion of, and hostility to, such bonds and constituting a male fantasy which desires their dissolution. We need only think of Beatrice-Joanna and her waiting woman, Diaphanta, in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling* where the intimate bond they forge over a bed-trick to fool Beatrice's husband into thinking his wife a virgin is dissolved as soon as it is accomplished when both women turn against each other. Neither mistress nor servant is depicted as loyal. Diaphanta disobeys her mistress and stays in the bridal bed beyond the agreed time: 'Pardon frailty, madame', she pleads, 'In troth I was so well I e'en forgot myself' (5.1.77–8). Her mistress, for her part, immediately turns against her. Feeling impatient about the servant's delay, Beatrice-Joanna turns to verbal aggression: 'This strumpet serves her own ends, 'tis apparent now' (5.1.2). Before De Flores, her lover and accomplice, suggests setting Diaphanta's chamber on fire so as to force her out of the bridal bed, her mistress has already made the decision to rid herself of the inconvenient servant who knows too much: 'No trusting of her life with such a secret' (5.1.6). De Flores's suggestion is welcomed immediately by the agitated mistress who licenses the murder: 'do what thou wilt now' (5.1.33). As Margot Heine-mann writes, 'it is she, not De Flores, who first decides that Diaphanta must be killed as untrustworthy'.⁶² Similarly, the brief moment of intimacy that Desdemona and Emilia share in *Othello* over the confidences they exchange about men, women's lot in patriarchal society, and views on marital faithfulness evaporates when Desdemona, before dismissing Emilia, retreats into her world of superior morality ('So, get thee gone'; 'Good night, good night. God me such usage send / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!' (4.3.57, 103–104)). Before this moment, Emilia had already, though unwittingly, betrayed her mistress by concealing her lost handkerchief, the item that will act as the only 'ocular proof' of infidelity Othello will have. Having handed it over to her husband, Iago, she lies to her mistress about her knowledge of its whereabouts: 'Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?'; 'I know not, madam' (3.4.23–4).⁶³

⁶¹See, for example, Hunt, 'Gentleness and Social Class in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*', 409–32.

⁶²Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre*, 177.

⁶³The play, of course, also registers contemporary anxiety about bonds between household mistresses and their male servants when it depicts Mistress Ford instructing her servants, John and Robin, to transport the buckbasket, complete with lecherous knight inside, to the laundresses in Datchet Mead. Master Ford falls prey to this anxiety when he rails: 'there's a knot, a gang, a pack, a conspiracy against me' (4.2.107–08). The danger of the mistress-servant bond is explored in *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham* (1590s). For *The Merry Wives'* engagement with the genre of domestic tragedy of which *Arden* is an example, see Collington, 'I Would Thy Husband Were Dead', 184–212.

In *The Merry Wives*, the female network seems to be divided by differences in status, despite the fact that this factor recedes to the background for most of the play, only becoming visible in brief, yet crucial moments. One such moment was discussed above in relation to the Latin lesson scene where Mistress Quickly is marginalised and silenced by the socially superior Mistress Page and Hugh Evans. Another appears in Act 3, scene 3, when the wives decide that Falstaff's first punishment in the buckbasket is not enough and that another is in order. 'Shall we', suggests Mistress Ford, 'send that foolish carrion Mistress Quickly to him, and excuse his throwing into the water, and give him another hope, to betray him to another punishment?' (178–180). That Mistress Ford describes Mistress Quickly as 'foolish' and denigrates her as a 'carrion', that is, 'whore', hardly suggests sisterhood or solidarity.⁶⁴ Instead, it suggests calculated use of the woman's skills, resourcefulness, and mobility. In fact, the only time the play shows Mistress Ford offering Mistress Quickly hospitality is when she needs to discuss plans with the woman for ensnaring Falstaff: 'Go in with us [...]: we have an hour's talk with you' (2.1.150–51). Mistress Quickly herself is hardly more invested in an imaginary, supportive, class-transcending sisterhood. As discussed above, she engages in self-serving activities, promising to help three different suitors win the hand of Anne Page and profiteering from advancing the wives' plots when she visits Falstaff. Tellingly, Mistress Page does not seem to trust her enough to confide in her her preference for Dr Caius as a son-in-law, or to enlist her help in her final plan to marry her daughter off to him on the night of Falstaff's final punishment in the park. The lack of solidarity within the female network the play depicts is further complicated by age and the authority women have access to as mothers. Thus Mistress Page, despite her campaign in favour of women's independence and freedom from male control and suspicion, has no qualms arranging a marriage for her daughter, Anne, to a man she loathes: 'The Doctor is well moneyed, and his friends / Potent at court: he, none but he, shall have her, / Though twenty thousand worthier come to crave her' (4.4.86–8).

My analysis of the wider female network in the dramatised Windsor reveals that the play depicts women's networks as supportive, and, to echo Mistress Page, yet fractured too.⁶⁵ In depicting women working collectively to punish Falstaff, the play speaks to the lived realities of early modern women as documented by social historians. 'Collective violence by women', as Bernard Capp observes, 'occurred most frequently in attacks on individuals perceived as threats to the local community'. Female networks were often activated, as Capp elaborates, in 'attack[s] [on] keepers of bawdy houses, cheats, and outsiders

⁶⁴Lamb (*The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, 141) suggests that Mistress Ford's denigration of Mistress Quickly seeks to 'distinguish the careful self-discipline of the wives' bodies from the abundant fleshiness attributed to hers'.

⁶⁵For a similar conclusion, see Frye and Robertson, eds., *Maids and Mistresses*, 5.

who had abused the peace and good name of the community'. Capp cites examples of women's collective action against intruders and transgressors that closely resonate with the collective action on which the female network in *The Merry Wives* embarks, such as that recorded by Simon Forman, the astrologer, who was set on in 1590 by a crowd gathered by a woman he had wronged. In a diary entry on 28 May, he noted that 'there rose a great brawl by Bess Vaughan against me: I was like to have come to much trouble by it, and to have been killed. I changed my lodging often'. Bess and her gossips punished his ill treatment of her and forced him to flee the neighbourhood. Similarly, when a Welsh lawyer railed at some London shopkeepers in 1620 to vent his frustration over a runaway thieving servant, 'All the women in the street hard by Holborn conduit did beat him very sore and abuse him vilely'.⁶⁶ 'The agency exercised by elite and ordinary women alike in this period', Capp concludes, 'grew out of their networks and alliances, whether at court or within a local community'.⁶⁷ Collective action by women was by no means unusual in early modern communities, and it is at the heart of *The Merry Wives*' punishment of Falstaff's lechery and Master Ford's abusive patriarchal management of his household. Broadening our understanding of the female network in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to include a lower status working woman as well as the middling-sorts wives reveals a community working together and relying on each other's support. Early modern female networks, in the play as well as in the culture which produced it, were sources of support and solidarity, but they could also be divided by factors such as class, status, and self-interest.

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⁶⁶Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 312–3; Capp, 'Distaff Power', 15–31. See also Walker, *Crime, Gender, and Social Order in Early Modern England*, ch. 3.

⁶⁷Capp, 'Distaff Power', 29.

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