

Shakespeare's "Nell"

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IN THE THREE PLAYS depicting the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V, Shakespeare sets before his audience "the hostess of the tavern at Eastcheape," a character whose growth in name – from simply "the hostess" to "Mistress Quickly" and finally to "Mistress Nell Quickly" – parallels a significant development in her delineation as a comic character.¹ The most striking feature of this development is the consistent pattern of events through which she is degraded and through which she is left little more than a common prostitute who dies of the "malady of France." As Shakespeare in *Henry V* sketched her character with more vivid comic pejection, he evidently chose to dub her Nell because the name connoted to his audience a loose woman, a wench, or a strumpet.

Evidence concerning *Nell* and the other variants of *Helen*, though scant, is significant. While there is no entry under *Nell* in Edward Lyford's *The True Interpretation of Christian Names*, published in London in 1655, *Eleanor* is defined as "pitifull from the Greek." As for the reputation of *Helen* in popular usage, Charlotte M. Yonge, in *The History of Christian Names* (London, 1884), states that, although the name remained popular as a result of the proverbial beauty of *Helen of Troy*, the name also connoted "any amount of evil or misfortune."² More recently, E. G. Withycombe in *The Oxford English Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford, 1947), after explaining *Nell* as "a pet form of *Ellen*, *Eleanor*, and *Helen*," asserts without explanation or description that the name "gradually fell out of upper-class use" (p. 105). Significant also is the connotation of the name so consistently suggested in the literature of the period. John Skelton's "bowsy-faced" brewer and

¹ See my article "The Evolution of Mistress Quickly," *Papers on English Language and Literature*, I (Spring, 1965), 99–108.

² p. 68. Miss Yonge further suggests that the reputation of Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and also the legend of Elaine and her illicit pleasures with Lancelot contributed to the pejection of the name.

barkeeper in "The Tunning of Elinour Rumming"; John Rastell's "Little Nell, a proper wench who danceth well," and with whom Humanity is told by Sensuality to eat, drink, and be merry in *The Nature of the Four Elements*; Francis Beaumont's naive and bumbling Nell, the Grocer's wife, in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*; the almost random examples in Renaissance literature which reflect the tradition of Helen as "the supreme pagan incarnation of lust"³ – such instances point to a similar character type and suggest more than one is able to explain as mere coincidence.

Certainly the most convincing evidence comes from Shakespeare, who – in the six dramas in which the name occurs – uses *Nell* consistently to describe a woman of questionable reputation, frequently of the lower class. In *The Comedy of Errors* (III, ii) Nell is "a kitchen wench and all grease" who mistakenly lays claim to Dromio of Syracuse. In *2 Henry IV* the name on three occasions connotes a woman of low social status and of less than desirable reputation. In a letter read comically in Poins' presence (II, iii), Falstaff – obviously envious of Ned's close friendship with his own "Sweet Hal" – warns the Prince to "be not too familiar with Poins; for he misuses thy favours so much that he swears thou art to marry his sister Nell." In a later use of the name (III, ii), Cousin Silence tells Justice Shallow that his daughter Ellen is "a black ousel." In the final act, Pistol, in reporting to Falstaff that Doll Tearsheet and Mistress Quickly have been imprisoned, uses Helen as a synonym for mistress or prostitute: "Thy Doll, and Helen of thy noble thoughts, is in base durance and contagious prison" (II, 35–36). In *Romeo and Juliet* (I, v) Nell is the name of a serving-woman hotly called for to help prepare the Capulets' house for the fateful ball. In *2 Henry VI* Eleanor, the Duchess of Gloucester, "second woman in the realm," is a vicious social climber whose aspirations for her husband involve the throne of Henry VI. Gloucester, forced later to expose her machinations, speaks of "Sweet Nell's" "hammering treachery" which casts her "from top of honour to disgrace's feet" (I, iii). On two occasions in *Troilus*

³ A glance through either Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (Minneapolis, 1932), or Dewitt Starnes and E. W. Talbert, *Classical Myth and Legend in Renaissance Dictionaries* (Chapel Hill, 1955), will reveal the remarkable frequency of the allusion to Helen as the epitome of the disreputable woman.

and *Cressida* Paris dubs his famous paramour "my Nell"; he "would fain have arm'd today, but my Nell would not have it so" (III, i, 150; see also I, 50). Diomed later brands her "bawdy veins" and "contaminated carrion" (IV, i, 69, 71); Ulysses scornfully remarks that Helen can never "be a maid again" (IV, v, 50); and Thersites taunts Ajax with the remark that he has not enough brains "as will stop the eye of Helen's needle" (II, i, 87).

It is the evolving character of the hostess, however, which most clearly suggests Shakespeare's connotational intentions for the name *Nell*. Arthur Acheson states flatly that two characters are involved: "In *Henry IV Part I*, the hostess of the tavern is referred to as a young and beautiful person . . . In *Part II*, she is represented as Mistress Quickly, an old, unattractive, and garrulous widow."⁴ While such an assertion is an exaggeration, it does bespeak the qualitative difference between the amorphously sketched hostess of *Part I*, married and reasonably respectable, and Mistress Quickly of *Part II* and *Henry V*, a widow with aspirations for Falstaff but who is willing to settle for Pistol, who vaunts the respectability of her tavern while playing the common procuress for Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet, and who — made the comic butt of various slurs upon her sexual activities — becomes extremely defensive about the purity of her own character, though she subsequently dies "i' the spital of malady of France." In *1 Henry IV* (III, iii) there are numerous references to her honest husband and to the respectability of their inn. In *2 Henry IV*, Falstaff's branding her a "quean" (II, i, 51) and the pun on quick-lie boisterously signal the pejoration in her character as Mistress Quickly.⁵ She now claims to be a "poor widow of Eastcheape" and asserts that Falstaff, whom she has known for twenty-nine years and "who has practised upon the easy-yielding spirit of this woman," has promised to marry her. The circle of acquaintances has widened to include the prostitute Doll Tearsheet, and together they entertain Falstaff before he sets

⁴ *Shakespeare's Lost Years in London, 1586—1592* (New York, 1920), p. 203. He explains the single mention of the name *Quickly* in Part I (III, iii, 88) as a later interpolation during revision.

⁵ There are no spelling variants of "Quickly" in the quarto and folio texts to clarify such a pun in *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. Helge Kökeritz points out, however, that the "y" ending in Shakespeare frequently is rhymed with "eye" and that such practices "would make a pun like *Quickly — lie* almost unavoidable" (*Shakespeare's Pronunciation* [New Haven, 1953], p. 220).

out for Gloucestershire. In V, v, she is carried off to prison with Doll, vaguely on the charge that the brothels are being torn down with the advent of the new king, specifically on the charge that "the man is dead that you and Pistol beat amongst you." In *Henry V* "Nell" Quickly has married Pistol, although in doing so she has been false to Nym, who was trothplight to her – a marriage in itself curious since Dame Quickly in *2 Henry IV* could not abide the sight of Pistol and implored Falstaff to drive him from her inn. While the social gain to have been realized as the wife of Sir John Falstaff is humorously suspect, there can be no question that Pistol is indeed a comedown for this woman. And, of course, Nell reaches the nadir of her social fortunes in the report of her death – in the hospital of venereal disease. The Mistress Quickly of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, who by intrigue manipulates affairs to her own profit, is of no central concern to us here because Shakespeare never uses the name *Nell* in the comedy. This evidence does suggest, however, either that Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives* between *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*, that is, before Mistress Quickly became known as Nell Quickly, or that he specifically avoided the name *Nell* in *The Merry Wives* because of the intended difference in characterization in the comedy.

The question, then, is obvious: did Shakespeare, as he determined the development of the character of the hostess throughout these plays, choose the name *Nell* by sheer coincidence or by conscious design? The evidence appears to lead in a single direction. The classical traditions reflected in the literature of the period, the numerous instances from Shakespeare's contemporaries, and above all the remarkable consistency of character delineation by Shakespeare for which he used the names *Nell*, *Ellen*, and, to some degree, *Helen* suggest that the dramatist was quite cognizant of the psychology of the name and its associated meanings.

And, if one may assume that the name *Nell* implied a woman of easy virtue, as Doll demonstrably did in Shakespeare's day, it is unlikely that either Shakespeare or the printer has erred in having Pistol report in *Henry V* (V, i, 86–87): "News have I my Doll is dead i' the spital of malady of France." Likewise unnecessary is the silent editorial emendation to *Nell* which has been practiced since Johnson's edition in 1765. The probability is that the dramatist used *Doll* (italicized in the folio text) metaphorically for *Nell* in

clear reference to the similar associated meaning and that he punned on the ladies' names even as he reported Nell's death from the disease which all too clearly signaled the extent of her social and moral decline. Such an assumption has the virtue of being at least equally as plausible as J. Dover Wilson's assertion that Falstaff was in *Henry V* as it was originally written, that he had to be written out of the work when Kemp departed from the Lord Chamberlain's Company, and that Pistol's remark (originally to have been Falstaff's allusion to his wench Doll Tearsheet) is a vestigial remnant of the older play which Shakespeare failed to alter.⁶

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⁶ See the New Cambridge edition of *Henry V* (1947), pp. 113–116.