

‘[T]heir Tales are sweet’: a queer social history of fishwives in early modern London.

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How is it that no one will believe that the whale swallowed Jonah when every day Jonah is swallowing the whale? I can see them now, stuffing down the fishiest of fish tales, and why? Because it is history. Knowing what to believe had its advantages. It built an empire and kept people where they belonged, in the bright realm of the wallet . . .¹

Near London Bridge, where the river had frozen to a depth of some twenty fathoms, a wrecked wherry boat was plainly visible, lying on the bed of the river where it had sunk last autumn, overladen with apples. The old bumboat woman, who was carrying her fruit to market on the Surrey side, sat there in her plaids and farthingales with her lap full of apples, for all the world as if she were about to serve a customer, though a certain blueness about the lips hinted the truth.²

¹ Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.*, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 91–2; originally published in 1985.

² Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Granada Publishing, 1977), 23.

Abstract

The history of fishwives has been studied from archival and from literary sources, but rarely have both bodies of evidence been analysed side by side. This thesis uses a wide range of contemporary sources, especially manuscript records and pamphlets, to refine the history of fishwives in and around London between roughly 1580 and 1630.

First, this thesis argues that the term fishwife referred to a wide range of actors and practices. This significantly complicates our approach to the history of fishwives. Secondly, the thesis applies the insights of queer history to the case of fishwives, and argues that fishwives were seen as sexually non-normative. This shows that the queer dynamics that have been demonstrated in relation to elite and literary subjects also operated at lower social levels, though in different ways. Thirdly, the thesis situates the history of fishwives in relation to political culture, and argues that fishwives were conceived as part of and practically contributed to a national body politic.

This thesis thus makes two key contributions. Substantively, fishwives are demonstrated to have been a more diverse and complicated group than has been realised. Methodologically, queer theory is shown to be useful to social historians, as it helps to illuminate the lives of working women.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and that I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Introduction: Fishing for trouble

In early modern London, fishwives were sexualised figures. The stereotype of the fishwife as loud and lewd was rehearsed and acted upon in serious and comedic settings. Donald Lupton in his 1632 pamphlet, *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed*, described fishwives as ‘creatures soone up, & soone downe’ who ‘are free in all places’.¹ Lupton was mildly amused by this perceived looseness among fishwives. The Hospital of Bridewell was not. Notorious as a house for bawds, prostitutes and vagrants, Bridewell was responsible for implementing the orders on fishwives which issued regularly from the Court of Aldermen and the Common Council at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A typical example is the case of Alice Price, who was presented to Bridewell by the inhabitants of High Holborn in 1599. Her crime was being ‘an notorious drunckerd and a Comon whore and a Rayler and distirber of all thinhabitants’. She was ‘ordered to be kept untill next Court and then he which had thuse of her body is promised to be brought in by the said inhabitauntes.’² The inhabitants and the court of Bridewell saw Price’s behaviour as sexually unacceptable. In literature and practice, this was a common conclusion to make about fishwives.

Superficially, this sexualised stereotype resembles another group of fishwives, the ‘mad-merry Western wenches’ who journeyed upriver together during Lent, 1620.³ These fishwives, ‘having made a good market, with their heads full of Wine, and their purses full of coine, were desirous to goe homeward.’⁴ In their wherry, they told tales of adultery, love and sex. Their ‘tongues . . . like Bell-clappers, they never leave ringing’.⁵ When they arrived at their destination, they ‘went straight to the signe of the Beare, where they found such good liquor, that they stayed by it all night’.⁶ As may be obvious from the narrative structure of their encounter, these fishwives were fictional. They featured in the 1620 pamphlet *Westward for Smelts*, which is one of the longest and most detailed early modern texts on fishwives. Out late, not working, unaccompanied and raucous, their behaviour was problematically sexual, as the fishwife stereotype would lead us to expect. But closer examination of the *Smelts* fishwives reveals fault lines in this simplistic type. Not only are the ‘Western wenches’ fictional; they also differ from the likes of Price in their wealth,

¹ Donald Lupton, *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed and Quartred into Seuerall Characters*. (London, 1632), 94, printed mistakenly as “49”; 92.

² BRHAM, BBHC vol. 4, fo. 147v.

³ *VWestward for Smelts. Or, the Vvater-Mans Fare of Mad-Merry Vvestern Wenches* (London, 1620), [A].

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, F2.

their mobility, and their pleasurable destination. This comparison suggests that in spite of a shared sexual language to describe fishwives, the term referred to a diverse range of people. A key starting point for this thesis is the interplay between the homogenising language used to talk about fishwives, and the underlying diversity of fishwives' social realities.

The other thing that this comparison suggests is that fishwives were embedded in multiple historical contexts. As working women, fishwives are part of the history of women's work, its gendering, and its changing nature over time.⁷ 'Fishwives' seem always to have been women, and interpretation of their behaviour was often highly misogynist. The history of gender, and of its functioning in the London context, is therefore a key background to the study of fishwives.⁸ Fishwives are also part of the history of London's early modern population explosion, and the changing markets and increased regulation that went along with it.⁹ Patricia Fumerton argued that working women including fishwives should also be seen in relation to the mobility, migration and vagrancy which characterised London in this period.¹⁰ Another crucial aspect of the London context is its particularly voluminous print culture, and the gendered and sexual meanings contained within cheap pamphlet literature.¹¹ Given the fact that very different fishwives were considered in a sexual way, the history of sexuality is another a fundamental critical context for this study.¹²

⁷ Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd, 1968); Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁸ Laura Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult in Early Modern London," *History Workshop Journal* 35, no. 1 (1993): 1–21; Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Laura Gowing, "'The Freedom of the Streets': Women and Social Space, 1560-1640," in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, ed. Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 130–47; Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁹ A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640* (London: Methuen, 1985); A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay, eds., *London 1500-1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (London; New York: Longman, 1986); Steve Lee Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); David Rollison, "Exploding England: The Dialectics of Mobility and Settlement in Early Modern England," *Social History* 24, no. 1 (1999): 1–16; Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime, and Control in the Capital City, 1550-1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Patricia Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), Ch. 2.

¹¹ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992); Pamela Allen Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

¹² Especially Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Laurie Shannon, "Nature's Bias: Renaissance Homonormativity and

Studying fishwives thus requires the integration of many different concerns, from the ways in which economically vulnerable groups negotiated political power to the ways in which sexual deviancy was construed. As such concerns indicate, the critical stakes are high: anyone interested in labour's political agency, in economic discrimination, in gender politics, or in queer history has something to learn from the case of early modern fishwives.

What little historiographical work has been done on fishwives provides an excellent starting point for this endeavour. Paul Griffiths documented the regulatory history of fishwives using the Bridewell courtbooks, and argued that 'Fishwives were characterized as sour-minded, sour-mouthed, and flirtatious . . . No other street-seller came close to their questionable reputations.'¹³ In an unpublished essay, Margaret Dorey argued that the representation of fishwives differed from economic realities and was inspired by misogyny.¹⁴ In particular, Dorey contended that 'the dichotomy of legal traders protecting the health of the citizens and city against the dangerous practices of unregulated hawkers and illegal small traders was more a product of rhetoric than fact.'¹⁵ Pamela Allen Brown, Constance Relihan and Christi Spain-Savage explored the gendered and geographical particularities of fishwives' literary representation.¹⁶ Brown showed that 'fishwife' functioned 'as a generic term' for hucksters, and is thus of more general literary significance.¹⁷ Relihan argued with reference to *Westward for Smelts* that fishwives 'operate[d] on the margins of the literary world', and were 'seen as a disruptive force in need of regulation'.¹⁸ Spain-Savage posited that 'the relegation of fishwives to Billingsgate in the cultural consciousness figuratively kept them from the official London fish markets, which undoubtedly facilitated their actual exclusion.'¹⁹ Works by Danielle van den Heuvel and by Alena Buis, Spain-Savage and Myra Wright called attention to diversity amongst fishwives, especially the fact that fishwives came from very different economic classes.²⁰

Elizabethan Comic Likeness," *Modern Philology* 98, no. 2 (2000): 183–210; Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, 42 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹³ Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, 124.

¹⁴ Margaret Dorey, "Lewd, Idle People Selling Corrupt, Unwholesome Food? The Construction of Street Hawkers as the Corruptive Other in 17th Century London Records" (Unpublished essay, 2008).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶ Pamela Allen Brown, "Jonson among the Fishwives," *Ben Jonson Journal* 6 (1999): 89–107; Constance Relihan, "Fishwives' Tales: Narrative Agency, Female Subjectivity, and Telling Tales out of School," in *Early Modern Prose Fiction: The Cultural Politics of Reading*, ed. Naomi Liebler (New York; London, 2007); Christi Spain-Savage, "The Gendered Place Narratives of Billingsgate Fishwives," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 56, no. 2 (2016): 417–34.

¹⁷ Brown, "Jonson among the Fishwives," 92.

¹⁸ Relihan, "Fishwives' Tales," 56–57.

¹⁹ Spain-Savage, "The Gendered Place Narratives of Billingsgate Fishwives," 420.

²⁰ Danielle Van Den Heuvel, "The Multiple Identities of Early Modern Dutch Fishwives," *Signs* 37, no. 3 (2012): 587–94; Alena Buis, Christi Spain-Savage, and Myra E. Wright, "Attending to Fishwives: Views from Seventeenth-Century London and Amsterdam," in *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World*, by Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Farnham: Routledge, 2015).

Van den Heuvel showed that multiple kinds of fishwife worked in Amsterdam, while Buis et al compared Dutch and English stereotypes. They concluded that ‘[i]f Dutch fishwives had a centralized position in the industry, English ones were systematically consigned to the periphery’ as a result of ‘an entrenched societal unease regarding women street sellers’.²¹

This work gives an excellent sense of the cultural significance of the fishwife as a type. Much of the historiography is focused on establishing matters of fact and the contours of the fishwife stereotype. This is essential to our understanding of fishwives, but it also serves to naturalise an overly simplistic notion of what a fishwife was. Working from the scholarly base already laid down, it should now be possible to explore the more complex and conflicting aspects of fishwives’ identity. We need to clarify the ways in which fishwives were seen, especially sexually, and how and why these perceptions differed.

Another aspect of current historiography which can now be expanded upon is the rich bank of source references collected by scholars of fishwives. These scholars have usually considered either archival or literary sources, without fully integrating the insights from both. This limits our understandings of fishwives’ lives and histories, but by building on the work of both historians and literary scholars, a more complex history can now be written.

The tendency to focus on one body of evidence is not confined to the history of fishwives. Rather it is part of a wider methodological gap between historical and literary scholarship, which often leads to the neglect of different source types. There is a narrowness in much historical work on sexuality, which does not take into account the breadth of sexual possibilities that literary work has shown existed in the early modern period. On the other hand, in scholarship on sexuality there is a lack of attention to working women.²²

This makes studying fishwives and their literary and archival, sexual and historical lives more difficult. Judith Bennett argued that ‘[i]n queer studies, social history is “queer”’.²³ Bennett proposed an increased focus on people who were more real than imagined and more ordinary than extraordinary: in other words, a social history of sexuality to complement the rich literary one we already have. This vision rightly identifies what is

²¹ Buis, Spain-Savage, and Wright, “Attending to Fishwives,” 192, 185.

²² See Ch. 2 below for further discussion.

²³ Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1/2 (2000): 1.

lost in a narrowly literary history of sexuality, but retains the dichotomy between the literary and the social. Fishwives inhabited a world, and left an evidential trail, which is incorrigibly both. Their study requires not just the more historical approach advocated by Bennett, but a deeper integration of social and literary concerns where sexuality is concerned. Making literary and archival sources relate, and working out how such sources speak to one another, if at all, is the fundamental methodological work of this thesis.

Queer history can help to bridge the distance between literary and social concerns. ‘Queer’ usually denotes both sexually non-normative and ambiguous, but this does not entail only studying minority groups. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued that in the modern period a minoritising approach to sexuality coexists with a universalising one. This latter approach holds that the historical binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality is of defining importance to everybody, not only to minority groups.²⁴ In this thesis, I shall take a universalising approach, and use queer to refer to sexuality wherever it is non-normative and ambiguous. A minoritising approach would require the existence of a distinct minority group. This is unlikely for the period in question, and in any case assuming at the outset that fishwives constituted such a group would foreclose the outcome of the thesis.

The conceptual content of ‘queer’ is particularly suited to historical work. A queer study works against the grain of socially normative sexualities. This means not reading heterosexually (or for that matter, homosexually): these identities are anachronistic to the seventeenth century, and reductionist in the twenty-first. Instead, many queer historians study the function and meaning of sexualities, for whom. Queering is thus a quintessentially historicist move: to read queerly is to read with the assumption that sexuality is historically and culturally contingent.²⁵ This historicism has been reinforced by Valerie Traub’s opposition to ‘queering the past’, and advocacy of ‘discovering the terms by which the past articulated its *own* queerness.’²⁶ Fishwives, in pamphlets and administrative records, were depicted as sexually deviant. Historicising their sexuality, by using ‘queer’ to gain conceptual purchase, allows us to move beyond methodological dichotomies between the literary and the historical, and focus upon the actors themselves and the meanings of their actions.

²⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2008), 40.

²⁵ See Bennett, “Lesbian-Like,” 10–12.

²⁶ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 40.

Of course, 'queer' is not an early modern concept. It is important to note that neither are such terms as 'economic' or even 'social', in the way that such terms are currently used - not to mention 'heterosexual'. Moreover, contemporary words like 'wayward' and 'lewd' bore some of the connotations of 'queer'. Nevertheless, it is true that there was no early modern term which had the same conceptual function as 'queer'. There are two main ways in which words might be used of a period which lacked them. First, a word could be used to indicate some externally true state of affairs, which contemporaries may not have named or known about, but which had independent existence. I shall not use 'queer' in this way, to describe a transhistorical set of 'things', be they categories, acts, relations or identities. This reifies 'queer' and strips it of its historicising potential. The second way in which modern words can be usefully applied to the past is as a perspective, a challenge. In the case of 'queer', we can use the insight that sexuality is variable to question our assumptions of the past as well as the present, and broaden our understanding of early modern sexual possibility. Rather than seeking to prove that 'queerness' existed in the past, I am asking the question, what do we find when we seek forms of sexuality which early modern people found deviant, ambiguous and hard to understand? The answer to this question helps move beyond the sexualised stereotype of the fishwife, to a more subtle understanding of how sexuality was practiced and understood by fishwives and their contemporaries.

Building upon scholarship on fishwives, gender, and sexuality, we are left with several outstanding questions. Methodologically there are two important concerns. First, the relationship between the literary representations, archival records and experiences of fishwives themselves needs to be worked out. Secondly, there is a question about the relationship between sexuality, gender and class in the way that fishwives were perceived in their society. What did the economic deviancy of some fishwives have to do with their sexual deviancy, and how did it matter that they were women? These issues will run throughout this thesis. Substantively, the thesis is concerned with two principal issues. Firstly, how deviant or normative were the sexualities of fishwives in the early modern period? Secondly, how were fishwives actively involved in the sexual and social politics they lived through?

This study begins around 1580, when references to fishwives and other hawkers began to multiply in ballads, plays and archival sources. It ends around 1630, to provide a sufficient time-frame around the central pamphlet *Westward for Smelts*. Geographically, the focus is restricted to the City of London, and 'London' shall refer to the City unless

otherwise stated. This allows focused attention on the City records concerning fishwives, as well as a detailed analysis of a print culture which was heavily metropolitan. Importantly, the City provided a very particular economic context for female workers. Men in possession of the freedom of the City had the right to trade. Their wives retained femme sole status, unusually for early modern England, where women often lost the right to work independently of their husbands upon marriage.²⁷ In the City there were therefore more women who were eligible to work than in many other places. Moreover, the population of London and its suburbs was growing rapidly at this time.²⁸ It remains controversial whether this population growth made the freedom of the City more or less exclusive.²⁹ Nevertheless, it seems clear that the period saw rising concern over the boundaries of licit economic activity.³⁰ Ian Anders Gadd and Patrick Wallis argued that company history in this period was ‘as much about exclusion as inclusion’, and such a description might also be applied to the London economy in general.³¹ Fishwives in the City of London were part of this particularly charged economic situation, and it is in this context that the history of their regulation must be placed. Because of the significance of *Smelts* as a source on fishwives, some of the Western towns mentioned in the pamphlet will also be discussed, but the main focus is on the City fishwife. It is probable that the meanings attached to fishwives in other towns and cities were very different, and this thesis does not draw direct conclusions on fishwives outside the City.³²

There is a rich range of sources on City fishwives. The Repertories of the Court of Aldermen, held by the London Metropolitan Archives, contain orders on fishwives as well as a range of contextual material on hucksters and market abuses. Complementing this, the Journals of Common Council, also at LMA, record more formal acts and ordinances.

²⁷ Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds*, 36–42; McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620*, 2005, 16; Eleanor Hubbard, *City Women: Money, Sex, and the Social Order in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 189.

²⁸ See Vanessa Harding, “The Population of London, 1550–1700: A Review of the Published Evidence,” *The London Journal* 15, no. 2 (1990): 112 for an overview of available estimates.

²⁹ See for instance Valerie Pearl, “Change and Stability in Seventeenth-Century London,” *The London Journal* 5, no. 1 (1979): 3–34; Valerie Pearl, “Social Policy in Early Modern London,” in *History & Imagination: Essays in Honour of H.R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (London: Duckworth, 1981), 115–31; Mark S. R. Jenner, “Guildwork,” in *Guilds, Society & Economy in London, 1450-1800*, ed. Ian Anders Gadd and Patrick Howard John Wallis (London, 2002), 163–66.

³⁰ Ian Anders Gadd and Patrick Wallis, eds., *Guilds, Society & Economy in London, 1450-1800* (London, 2002), 5; Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, 124.

³¹ Gadd and Wallis, *Guilds, Society & Economy*, 7.

³² For some continental examples, see Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, “Fishmongers and Shipowners: Women in Maritime Communities of Early Modern Portugal,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 7; Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, “From Mere Survival to Near Success: Women’s Economic Strategies in Early Modern Portugal,” *Journal of Women’s History* 13, no. 2 (2001): 58–79; Heuvel, “The Multiple Identities of Early Modern Dutch Fishwives”; Buis, Spain-Savage, and Wright, “Attending to Fishwives.”

Occasionally the Remembrancia also contain letters about fishwives. I have consulted the Journals and Repertories from 1580 to 1630 using the nineteenth century indexes to locate relevant material. For the courtbooks of the Company of Fishmongers, held by Guildhall Library, the Calendars have been used to locate material over the same period. Though not responsible for fishwives, the Fishmongers were engaged in similar labour and breaches of order, so their records provide useful contextual evidence. The policing of fishwives was the responsibility of Bridewell Hospital, whose courtbooks are filled with offending fishwives. Not all of the courtbooks survive, and indexing within surviving books is patchy.³³ To locate relevant materials I have followed the references of other scholars, particularly Griffiths' *Lost Londons*.³⁴ Most of the records on fishwives found in this way date from the 1600s. No courtbooks survive from 1580 until 1598, and there is another gap from 1610 to 1617. In addition to these sources, I consulted the Southwark Guildhall Manor Presentments of Courts Leet and the Cornhill Wardmote Inquest Book for presentments involving fishwives and similar traders. I also searched for widows' wills from the upriver towns mentioned in *Smelts*.

Some notable evidence has not been consulted. It is probable that parish registers and church court records contain relevant information, but due to the difficulty of locating such evidence, a search has not been attempted. The Sessions records for London survive very patchily up until around 1660. These records contained information on the prosecution of trade offences and may have included cases relating to fishwives, but due to their fragmentary, I have not consulted these records.³⁵

Literary sources have been used in a looser, longer time frame, to situate texts within their print histories. Fishwives feature in pamphlets, plays, poetry and prognostications. Usually these references are fleeting and generic, but this means that they reflect concisely what cultural work fishwives performed. In a handful of cases, treatment is more detailed, nowhere more so than in *Westward for Smelts*, an anonymous pamphlet published by John Trundle. In this text, six fishwives are depicted travelling upriver in a wherry, taking turns to tell tales of love and sex. Because of its unusual treatment of fishwives, and its consistent engagement with sexuality, *Smelts* has been chosen as a case study for this thesis. A range of contextualising materials have been consulted: the titles published by *Smelts*' printer,

³³ Paul Griffiths, "The Structure of Prostitution in Elizabethan London," *Continuity and Change* 8, no. 1 (1993): 53.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ The Middlesex Sessions survive much more fully, but the indices to the calendars for the years 1612-1618 contain no references to fishwives. See William Le Hardy, ed., *County of Middlesex: Calendar to the Sessions Records, 1612-1618*, 4 vols. (London: C.W. Radcliffe, 1935).

John Trundle; the works of John Taylor, the water-poet, active from the 1610s onwards; contemporary jestbooks; and the intertexts of the tales in *Smelts*, namely fabliaux, nouvelle collections, and especially Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Further intertexts include city comedies, which were prevalent from the 1600s onwards; gossip literature of the same period and texts on the nature of women from the late 1610s. Some texts published slightly after 1630 have been consulted, where the publication date is later than the work, the content is the culmination of relevant earlier dynamics, or a particularly rich commentary upon fishwives is offered.³⁶ This source base is wide ranging and diverse, which poses a challenge for conceptual unity, but also offers the opportunity to demonstrate how the worlds of the courtier, the poet, the fishwife, and the scholar interrelated.

In this introduction, I have used the term 'fishwife' as if it were self-explanatory. Chapter 1 complicates this unity and problematizes the fishwife. I argue that there were many kinds of fishwife, and that contemporary conflicts over their definition are a key part of their history. In Chapter 2 I undertake a queer reading of *Smelts*, and a detailed analysis of the archival materials on fishwives. The argument is that all kinds of fishwife were understood as sexually deviant, but in different ways according to economic factors. Chapter 3 explores the political involvements of fishwives, and argues that actively and metaphorically, fishwives queered the nation, reimagining it in alternative, sexual ways. Placing fishwives themselves at the centre of analysis reveals that historical groups can be far more diverse and complex than first meets the eye. Fishwives performed important material and cultural labour, and lived and loved in a sexual system very different from our own. Attention to the queer parts of their lives disrupts our own world through a more accurate presentation of that of early modern fishwives.

³⁶ See especially Lupton, *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed*.

Chapter 1: The meaning of the word ‘fishwife’

Introduction: Women and work

What is a fishwife, anyway? Scholarship on women’s work has long dealt with the problem of occupational labels, which were less often applied to women than men. Partly this was because marital labels were such a dominant way of describing women. The narrower range of work open to women also made occupational labels a less useful distinguishing factor than they were for men.¹ The especially multi-occupational nature of women’s work is another reason that occupational labels were less widely applied to them.² In addition, women’s work was particularly dependent on life-cycle. The number of women recorded in employment at any one time may considerably underrepresent the population of women that had worked or would do so in future.³ Historians have also complicated male occupational labels, revealing that many men undertook a variety of tasks, and were referred to by different labels in different contexts.⁴ As this scholarship would suggest, defining the ‘fishwife’ is complicated. The purpose of this chapter is to show how variously the term was used, and to explain the political, economic and sexual reasons for such usages.

The meaning of the word ‘fishwife’ is often assumed, partly because scholars have sought to answer other questions. For instance, Griffiths’ account of the official campaigns against fishwives and other groups aimed to describe broad trajectories of regulation, and did not interrogate the definition of fishwives as a group.⁵ Dorey’s essay showed well how different groups of huckster overlapped. However, focusing on those things which all fishwives and hucksters shared served to minimise differences between fishwives themselves.⁶ In Sean Shesgreen’s study of the cries of London, fishwives are even called

¹ Michael Roberts, “‘Words They Are Women and Deeds They Are Men’: Images of Work and Gender in Early Modern England,” in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England*, ed. Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 138.

² Margaret Pelling, *The Common Lot: Sickness, Medical Occupations and the Urban Poor in Early Modern England: Essays* (London: Longman, 1998), Ch. 7, 8; McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620*, 2005, 6.

³ Sue Wright, “‘Churmaids, Huswyfes and Hucksters’: The Employment of Women in Tudor and Stuart Salisbury,” in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England*, ed. Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 116.

⁴ See Roberts, “‘Words They Are Women and Deeds They Are Men’: Images of Work and Gender in Early Modern England,” 138; Pelling, *The Common Lot*, 169, Ch. 9; J. Corfield and Derek Keene, *Work in Towns, 850-1850* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), 215; John Patten, “Urban Occupations in Pre-Industrial England,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 2, no. 3 (1977): 301–302; Laurence Fontaine, *History of Pedlars in Europe* (Cambridge, Polity P, 1996), Introduction and Ch. 1.

⁵ Griffiths, *Lost Londons*.

⁶ A huckster is a hawker or streetseller. Dorey, “Lewd, Idle People.”

‘fishmongers’ and sausage sellers ‘butchers’.⁷ Buis, Spain-Savage and Wright went some way towards problematizing the category by comparing Dutch and English fishwives, but in doing so presented a homogenised picture of ‘the’ English fishwife as a peripheral survivor.⁸ Van den Heuvel avoided this by focusing solely on Dutch fishwives and their specialised markets with divergent gender splits.⁹ This chapter seeks to extend to an English setting van den Heuvel’s contention that ‘a multitude of different types of fishwives were present in Dutch urban society.’¹⁰

As in any study of occupational labels, the nature of available sources poses a large problem. It is often difficult to get behind the words used in sources, to the work that women actually performed. In the first place, the quantity of evidence changes over time. The Repertories and Journals I have consulted contain more entries relating to fishwives for the 1580s and 1590s. Orders concerning fishwives disappear from the Journals over the 1610s, but continue in the Repertories into the 1620s. The gaps in the Bridewell records have already been mentioned. The only relevant probate material I have located dates to the 1640s. More fundamentally, the nature of the records themselves alters over time. The Bridewell courtbook presentments become more numerous and less detailed.¹¹ The Repertories become more formal later in the period. They also seem to have been reconstructed from notes, and may have been compiled well after the event, as the Journals probably were. How such sources relate to reality is therefore hard to determine, and records may reflect more about archival practices than changes in the marketplace. These general problems are compounded by the almost total lack of sources written by or for fishwives, the near impossibility of tracing individual fishwives through different types of record, and the problem of working out which people who were *not* called fishwives are relevant to their discussion.

Given these problems, sources must be handled with care. Contextual information and literary associations help us to understand the possible meanings of the word ‘fishwife’. The variable nature of the evidence is also rendered less significant by the fact that contemporaries themselves explicitly struggled with and wrote on the definitions of ‘fishwife’. This means that in spite of changing usage across sources, there is still comparable evidence on how contemporaries were thinking about fishwives. The orders in

⁷ Sean Shesgreen, *Images of the Outcast: The Urban Poor in the Cries of London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 28–30.

⁸ Buis, Spain-Savage, and Wright, “Attending to Fishwives,” 192, 199.

⁹ Heuvel, “The Multiple Identities of Early Modern Dutch Fishwives,” 589.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 588.

¹¹ Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, 22.

the Repertories and the Journals sought to define particular kinds of fishwife, while the records of the Fishmongers' Company avoided the label altogether. That the meaning of fishwife was a contemporary issue allows us to use such divergences to understand the function of the term 'fishwife', and the reasons for its use.

The central argument of this chapter is that the word 'fishwife' referred to a great variety of people, and that (not) calling someone a fishwife served particular political ends. Section I begins with a narrative history of fishwives, and then shows the diverse groups of people to whom the term referred. Section II argues that the use of the word 'fishwife' was instrumental. Attaching negative connotations to the term and then applying it to particular kinds of people served the political and economic interests of the City authorities and the Company of Fishmongers. Section III turns to the ways in which fishwives were nevertheless regarded as a single community by contemporaries. In particular, fishwives were often collapsed into a single category of sexual lewdness. A great variety of women and of work was in this way subsumed under the label of 'fishwife'.

Section I: 'They change every day almost': kinds of fishwives

Fish was an important part of the diet of medieval and early modern London, both in the form of sea fish brought upriver and freshwater fish brought down. There were fish markets at Old Fish Street and New Fish Street from the mid thirteenth century, and at the Stocks from the end of the same century.¹² Also in the late thirteenth century, the Company of Fishmongers was incorporated with a monopoly on the retail of fish. However, from 1388 at least, female 'birlesters' were permitted to sell oysters, mussels and salted fish in the streets.¹³ Over the ensuing centuries, their remit expanded, so that by the sixteenth century, fishwives were selling fresh fish too.¹⁴ From the 1550s onwards, the Court of Aldermen and Common Council began to take a more active role in regulating these traders.¹⁵

In November 1584, an 'Order for Fysshewyves' provided that the governors of Bridewell would license and badge 'as fewe as conveniently they maye' to sell fish in an orderly manner.¹⁶ Complaints over the failure to implement this act followed almost immediately, and calls for reformation continued for the rest of the decade.¹⁷ In April 1590,

¹² Ian W. Archer, Caroline M. Barron, and Vanessa Harding, eds., *Hugh Alley's Caveat: The Markets of London in 1598: Folger Msv.a. 318*, 137 (London: London Topographical Society, 1988), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹⁵ Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, 128.

¹⁶ LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 115.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, fo. 544; 22, fo. 52v., 164v.; Jor. 22, fo. 338v.

an act ‘for reformation of disorders amongst Fishwives’ was made, which reiterated the licensing criteria of 1584, as well as limiting the number of licenses to 120.¹⁸ Unlike the 1584 order, the implementation of the 1590 act may have been too successful, as by the end of May it was necessary to increase the number of licenses to 160.¹⁹ The 1590s were years of dearth and inflation, and there is evidence of continued efforts to restrict the activities of fishwives.²⁰ Friction occurred most spectacularly not in the courts but in the streets, during the food riots of June 1595. Apprentices seized the wares of fishwives and sold them at regulation prices.²¹ In 1599 overseers of fishwives were briefly appointed.²² From the mid-1600s, orders on fishwives began to increase again.²³ The next important intervention came in 1611, with another ‘acte concerning fishwives’, which essentially repeated the 1590 act in more detail.²⁴ After this act, official legislation on fishwives dwindled, though individual complaints continued to occupy the Repertories into the 1620s.²⁵ The history of the (recorded) regulation of fishwives is thus weighted towards the start of our period, especially the 1580s and 90s. The records of the Fishmongers' Company also have fewer entries on the regulation of the fish market in general as the period progresses.²⁶ The Cornhill Wardmote Inquest Book follows a similar chronology, with market offences presented less frequently after around 1600.²⁷

Even this basic narrative history implies that ‘fishwife’ had multiple possible referents, as there were both licensed and unlicensed fishwives. Indeed, the appropriate definition of the fishwife was a contemporary concern. Most of the evidence concerns fishwives who broke the rules, so we know comparatively little about licensed fishwives.²⁸ The Journals give a strong impression of the unlicensed fishwife: in an order of 1585, they were described as ‘lewd and ill disposed women’, who ‘dailye in verie greate disorder repaire to billingsgate to buy fishe . . . And doe as well commit sundrie horrible abuses’.²⁹ This vocabulary remains constant over the period. The act of 1590 described ‘many of them

¹⁸ Ibid., fo. 378v.-80.

¹⁹ Ibid., fo. 389.

²⁰ LMA, Rep. 22, fo. 176v., 345; 23, fo. 384, 514v.; Jor. 22, fo. 385v., 406.

²¹ LMA, Rem. II, no. 97.

²² See Archer, Barron, and Harding, *Hugh Alley's Caveat*; GL MS5570/1, 289. This manuscript has page rather than folio numbers.

²³ LMA, Rep. 27, fo. 10, 252v.; 28, fo. 159; 30, fo. 175.

²⁴ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 300-302.

²⁵ LMA, Rep. 30, fo. 310v.; 31.1, fo. 186v.; 34, fo. 10; 42, fo. 214v.-15; 44, fo. 138; see also Jor. 28, fo. 303v.; 29, fo. 187.

²⁶ Worshipful Company of Fishmongers, *Records of the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers: Calendar to the Minute Books*, vol. 2 (London, 1934), 18.

²⁷ LMA, MS 4069/1.

²⁸ As Reinke-Williams pointed out in Tim Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), Ch. 4.

²⁹ LMA, Jor. 21, fo. 418.

being very yong, and not onely of lewde and wicked life and behavior themselves but procurers and decevores of others also servauntes and such like to sundry wicked accions'.³⁰ Later, in 1615, unlicensed fishwives were still described as 'idle & loose persons'.³¹ Such language defined the unlicensed fishwife as young, disorderly, and in need of regulatory discipline.

The criteria for obtaining a license as a fishwife also remained stable: age, honesty and marital status. The order of November 1584 required licensed fishwives to be 'none unmaryed or under thage of xxx yeares at y^e least and suche as shalbe honest of good name & fame and so reporteyd of by theyre Neighbour'.³² These core requirements were repeated in orders and acts in 1585, 1590, and 1611.³³ From 1590 onwards, qualifications were made more restrictive. To receive a license fishwives needed to be 'wives or widdowes of Freemen and of honest fame and behavior . . . and so certified and reported by the Alderman of the ward or his Deputie and six other honest and substanciall Inhabitauntes'.³⁴

These licensing restrictions are a double-edged sword for the historian. Contemporaries clearly thought that the licensing criteria were appropriate to fishwives. However, the repeated re-enactment of legislation implies that in reality, fishwives typically did not fulfil such criteria. It should not be assumed that the impression of fishwives given in legislative materials was in fact representative of ordinary fishwives. Evidence unmediated by these legislative principles is scarce, but there were still unmarried, younger fishwives at the end of our period. For example, in Bridewell in 1621, Alice Martin and Margaret Powell were 'brought in upon Mr Alderman Gores comand for Vagrant young wenches that sell fish in the streetes'.³⁵ The idealised definitions propounded and reiterated by the Court of Aldermen thus relate only partially to fishwives on the streets, but did provide a conceptual framework through which contemporaries perceived fishwives.

In the City, this framework was rendered visible through the medium of badges, which from 1584 licensed fishwives were ordered to wear.³⁶ An order in 1596 elaborated

³⁰ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 378v.

³¹ LMA, Jor. 29, fo. 187.

³² LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 115.

³³ LMA, Jor. 21, fo. 418; 22, fo. 379, 385v.; 28, fo. 300-301v.

³⁴ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 385v. For more on marital status, see Chapter 2.

³⁵ BRHAM, BBHC 6, fo. 231.

³⁶ LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 115. See also Rep. 31.1, fo. 186v.; Jor. 28, fo. 303v.

that ‘the Thresorer and Governours of Brydewell shall cause badges of lead with the Armes of this Cittie the yere of our lorde and two lettres for the names of the partis that shall weare them to be presently made’.³⁷ The badges were an attempt to fix names to a mobile community, and to render them in some minor capacity ‘official’ fishwives, trading with the arms of the City upon their breasts. To ‘badge’ or to ‘bodge’ also meant to hawk, so the fishwife is partially commodified through this initiative, stamped with ownership.³⁸ Steve Hindle has described similar badges worn by the poor as ‘a form of *livery* . . . that functioned as a symbol not only of subordination but of patronage.’³⁹ As with other measures on fishwives, Bridewell was responsible for the administration of the scheme. The repeated orders from the City authorities that Bridewell should act make it unclear how thoroughly the measures were implemented. As late as 1611, the treasurer of Bridewell was being ordered ‘to pay unto Mr Anthony for the said badges vjd a peece’.⁴⁰

None of the (very few) images of fishwives in this period show fishwives wearing badges. Given that the purpose of Hugh Alley’s *Caveat*, a manuscript prepared in 1598, was to complain against irregular traders (see Figure 1), and that he may have used generic prototypes, it is to be expected that in his drawings fishwives are badgeless.⁴¹ The early cries of London, which seem to have had a less political, more aesthetic purpose, do not depict badges either - though like Alley’s drawings, these images are small (see Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4).⁴² As with licensing criteria generally, the attempts of the Courts of Aldermen and Common Council to define fishwives may not have influenced contemporary practice much.

³⁷ LMA, Rep. 23, fo. 514v.

³⁸ LMA, Rep. 30, fo. 310v.

³⁹ S. Hindle, “Dependency, Shame and Belonging: Badging the Deserving Poor, c.1550-1750.,” *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (2004): 29.

⁴⁰ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 300v; Rep. 30, fo. 310v.

⁴¹ Archer, Barron, and Harding, *Hugh Alley’s Caveat*, 32–33.

⁴² See Natasha Korda, “Gender at Work in the Cries of London,” in *Oral Traditions and Gender in Early Modern Literary Texts*, by Mary Ellen Lamb and Karen Bamford (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 122–23; Shesgreen, *Images of the Outcast*, 17, 19–23, 36.



Figure 1: New Fish Street in Hugh Alley's *Caveat* (1598), fo. 10.



Figure 2: Wainfleet Oysters, *Cries of London*, late sixteenth-century woodcut.



Figure 3: Shrimps and maids, *Mayds in your smocks*, late sixteenth-century engraving.



Figure 4: Haddock, sprats and cod; *Mayds in your smocks*, late sixteenth-century engraving.

Even if the badges were widely adopted, they did not straightforwardly legitimise fishwives. Certainly clothing restrictions could be legitimising in particular official contexts. One thinks of the livery of the aldermen in Alley's *Caveat*,⁴³ or of the numerous references to dress code in the records of the Company of Fishmongers.⁴⁴ More relevant to fishwives was the introduction in 1611 of dress restrictions on company alms people. The Fishmongers' Court of Assistants ordered that 'gownes of brode Clothe' be worn, and alms people were 'to were fitt & convenient badges upon them as dyvers almesmen of other Companies do'.⁴⁵ Many people were rendered socially visible through badges at this time, so in itself badging did not mark fishwives as unusual.⁴⁶ However, there were also older and far less legitimising markers, like the white rod for fornicators, the blue mantle or hood for bawds, and the distaff for scolds that offenders carried when carted.⁴⁷ These symbols of transgression are the flip side of the City badge, but how far apart were they really? The chronology of fishwives' badges coincides with the late sixteenth-century shift described by Hindle in the meaning of paupers' badges, from 'tokens of approval' to 'symbols of humiliation'.⁴⁸ This chronology suggests that for fishwives, badges may have functioned more to stigmatise than to legitimise. The border between legitimate and illegitimate fishwifery remained slippery, and negative connotations attached to both the licensed and the unlicensed. Not only was the implementation of regulation on fishwives incomplete, but the value judgements which regulation implied were also ambiguous. Contemporary attempts to separate fishwives into different groups reveal persistent diversity among fishwives in terms of age, behaviour and sexual status; and demonstrate the difficulty of defining fishwives conclusively.

Thus far, discussion of the term 'fishwife' has been restricted to women selling fish. In fact, fishwives overlapped with other occupational groups within the retail sector. First of all, the boundaries between different kinds of wares were more permeable in the early modern period. There was some contemporary uncertainty on which creatures counted as fish. An example appears in May 1615 in the courtbooks of the Fishmongers' Company, when John Haughton was arrested for leaving London to buy fish before it reached the market. He 'saith that he went to mete prawns & no other fishe *as though prawns were no fishe*'.⁴⁹ The disdain of the scribe does not diminish the fact that Haughton thought this

⁴³ Archer, Barron, and Harding, *Hugh Alley's Caveat*.

⁴⁴ GL MS5570/1, 89, 121, 201, 281, 400.

⁴⁵ GL MS5570/2, 25.

⁴⁶ Hindle, "Dependency, Shame and Belonging."

⁴⁷ Gowing, "'The Freedom of the Streets': Women and Social Space, 1560-1640," 141.

⁴⁸ Hindle, "Dependency, Shame and Belonging," 8.

⁴⁹ GL MS5570/2, 140; my emphasis.

move worth a try. Similar categorical ambiguity is demonstrated in Timothy Bright's 1586 *Treatise of Melancholie*, in which sea fish 'are either of the monsters of the sea; or such as more properly are to be called fish.'⁵⁰ Because of this uncertainty around the definition of fish, even women selling what we now think of as 'fish' may not have been understood by contemporaries to sell fish alone.

Secondly, there were other labels for women who sold fish. Terms like 'oysterwife' or 'oysterwench' were common. A rarer example appears in the courtbooks of the Fishmongers' Company in October 1623. The court referred to 'the buyers of Fresh sea-fish at the waterside Comonly caled Harrye Carriers', and considered the City orders for the same. A 'harry carry' was probably a cart used to transport fish, and harry carriers were the people who used them.⁵¹ Like fishwives, harry carriers were not 'to sett downe at any places or neere Billingsgate or many other places, or Markett within the Citie but to crie there Fish through the streets from place to place'. Moreover, the yeomen of the waterside, who were part of the Lord Mayor's household and responsible for market regulations, 'should suffer noe yong Huswife nor any other but such as should be allowed of for that purpose to buy fish in that kind'.⁵² The orders on harry carriers sound so similar to those on fishwives that it is possible that the terms are being used synonymously. Even if this is not so, it is clear that people doing similar work possessed different occupational labels. Fishwives thus overlapped with other occupational groups undertaking similar work.

Thirdly, those called fishwives also sold many other things. Women selling fish one day might sell oranges, nuts, or flowers the next. As Marjorie McIntosh pointed out, women were less likely than men to specialise in a particular commodity, as they dealt on a smaller scale.⁵³ The 1611 act forbade fishwives from buying any more than they could carry.⁵⁴ Huckster work was seasonal, which also made it likely that individuals would undertake multiple roles over the year.⁵⁵ Lupton wrote of fishwives' wares that 'They change every

⁵⁰ Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie: Containing the Causes Thereof, & Reasons of the Strange Effects It Worketh in Our Minds and Bodies* (London, 1586), 12.

⁵¹ "Harry-Carry, N.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/84386>.

⁵² GL MS5770/2, 489. On the yeomen of the waterside, see Betty R. Masters, "The Mayor's Household before 1600," in *Studies in London History Presented to Philip Edmund Jones*, ed. Philip E. Jones, Albert E. J. Hollaender, and William Kellaway (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), 106.

⁵³ McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620*, 2005, 196; see also Eric Wilson, "Plagues, Fairs, and Street Cries: Sounding out Society and Space in Early Modern London," *Modern Language Studies* 25, no. 3 (1995): 32; Natasha Korda, *Labors Lost: Women's Work and the Early Modern English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 153.

⁵⁴ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 301.

⁵⁵ Sara Pennell, "'Great Quantities of Goseberry Pye and Baked Clod of Beef': Victualling and Eating out in Early Modern London," in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, ed. Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 235;

day almost', and that fishwives sold 'all sorts of Fish, or Hearbs, or Roots, Strawberries, Apples, or Plums, Cowcubmers, and such like ware'.⁵⁶ The expansive phrase 'such like ware' is mirrored in legislative texts. The 1590 act 'for reformation of disorders amongst Fishwives' named those who 'shall sell any Oysters, muscles, Cockelles, nuttes, Ploumes or other Victualles fish or fruite whatsoever'.⁵⁷ This is especially conspicuous given that the title of the act explicitly references fishwives. Likewise, the 1611 act was entitled 'An acte concerning fishwives' and referred to 'buyers Carriers & sellers of Oysters Fische fruite onyons & other vitualls'.⁵⁸ An order of 1605 concerned 'Huckstres of fishe',⁵⁹ so some sellers of fish were seen as just another type of huckster. Even more strikingly, explicit use of the word 'fishwife' did not preclude reference to sellers of other commodities: a 1585 order 'Against women for buyinge of fishe at Billingesgate not beinge licensed' concerned 'all suche fishewives, as should use to Carrie abrode any kinde of fishe, frute, or suche licke thinges'.⁶⁰ Such examples could be repeated many times over.⁶¹

This is not to suggest that hucksters were a homogenous group. Fishwives *were* differentiated from other hucksters in certain situations. In Ben Jonson's 1612 play *The Alchemist*, the fishwife is the bottom of the pile. Trying to trick a widow into marriage, Face declares 'She will cry Straw-berrie else, within this twelve-month'. Subtle replies, 'Nay, Shads, and Mackrell, which is worse.'⁶² Natasha Korda has shown that the fishwife was used as a foil to the sexualised figure of the milkmaid in ballads.⁶³ In the 1612 *Turners dish of Lenten stuffe*, a fishwife cries 'Musckles lylly white: /Hearings, Sprats, or Pleace, / or Cockles for delight.' But the writer comments, 'She had need to have her tongue by grease / for she rattles in the throat.' By contrast, the milkmaid's whiteness is part of her sexual attraction, and her words are desirable: 'Oh the wench went neatly, / my thought it did me good: / To see her cheery cheekes, / so dimpled ore with blood. / Her wastecoate washed white: / as any lilly flower, / would I had time to talke with her / the space of halfe an houre.'⁶⁴ Here different kinds of huckster are being played off against one another, much

for a later period, see Tim Hitchcock, "Pauper Professions," in *Down and out in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 49–74, especially 52.

⁵⁶ Lupton, *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed*, 92–93.

⁵⁷ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 379; my emphasis.

⁵⁸ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 300v.; my emphasis.

⁵⁹ LMA, Rep. 27, fo. 10.

⁶⁰ LMA, Jor. 21, fo. 418.

⁶¹ See for example LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 53, 73, 115; Jor. 29, fo. 187.

⁶² Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist* (London, 1612), I[4].

⁶³ Korda, "Gender at Work," 128; Korda, *Labors Lost*, 155–58.

⁶⁴ W. Turner, *Turners Dish of Lentten Stuffe, Or, A Galymaufery* (London, 1612). I am grateful to the English Broadside Ballad Archive of the University of Santa Barbara for their transcription. See "Turners dish of Lentten stuffe," English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA), accessed February 12, 2016, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20092/xml>.

as hucksters and their cries did in the marketplace. This also plays upon distinctions between town and country, as in Richard Derrington's pair of early seventeenth-century songs, 'The City Cries' and 'The Country Cries'. While the former contains fish cries, the latter features sexualised milkmaids who go milking 'their heels to shake' and 'for their sweet-hearts' sake'. 'The Country Cries' also disassociates itself generally from fish through its Easter setting and celebration of the end of Lent.⁶⁵

But such distinctions between hucksters were not hard and fast. This is illustrated by the same 'cries of London' consort songs from the early seventeenth century. In Derrington's 'The City Cries', all of the fish cries are grouped together, but they are sung by different voices.⁶⁶ In the anonymous 'The Cry of London', only treble voices sing about fish, but these cries are interspersed with those for other wares.⁶⁷ In Orlando Gibbons' 'The Cries of London' there is no association at all between voices or fish,⁶⁸ and in Thomas Weelkes' song of the same name, fish cries are grouped together and sung by the same voice, but as there is only one singing part, so are all of the other cries.⁶⁹ Hucksters were far from a homogenous whole, but neither were their constituent groups.

Moreover, as well as selling other goods, some fishwives probably sold sex. Much of the evidence linking fishwives with prostitution is found in the Bridewell courtbooks. The fishwives committed to Bridewell were sometimes 'whores' in the loose, early modern sense. In June 1606 'Elizabeth Phillipps fishwief a nightwalker' was committed.⁷⁰ Mary Aldridge was admitted in November 1629 and 'reputed to be a lewd woman a Fishwoman'.⁷¹ Bridewell was known as a house of correction for whores and bawds as well as vagrants, and in the early seventeenth century briefly and scandalously contained a brothel.⁷² A Journal entry of June 1605 described the governance of Stanley around 1600, when 'such lewde women as were committed unto them for their wicked life . . . weare suffred to intertayne any that would resorte unto them in as great loosenes as they would

⁶⁵ Philip Brett, *Consort Songs* (Stainer and Bell, 1967), 133–57.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 127–32.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 114–26.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁰ BRHAM, BBHC 5., fo. 108v.

⁷¹ BRHAM, BBHC 7, fo. 151.

⁷² John Twyning, *London Dispossessed: Literature and Social Space in the Early Modern City* (Basingstoke, etc, Macmillan, 1998), 26–27.

have done abroade in their lewde houses'.⁷³ Fishwives' association with Bridewell thus encouraged the idea that fishwives were prostitutes.

Literary commentators also assumed that fishwives sold sex. Often 'fishwife' or 'oysterwife' and 'whore' are equivalent terms in lists of lewd women. In Taylor's 1639 *Iuniper Lecture*, a dissatisfied wife lists women who are luckier than her as 'a Bawd, Quean, Punke, Tib, Trash, Trull, or Trully-bub, Oysterwife, or Kitchen-stuffe Slut'.⁷⁴ In Henry Parrot's 1626 pamphlet, *A Cure for the Itch*, when paying for drink at the tapster's, 'Your Puncke or Oyster-wench (excepted onely) may score it at all times vpon bare trust'.⁷⁵ 'Bare trust' implies nudity and sexual favours in exchange for drink. This evidence of overlap between fishwives and prostitutes supports Faramerz Dabhoiwala's thesis on prostitution in later seventeenth-century London, that 'for most . . . sex trade simply grew out of, and fitted into, their existing social and economic circumstances'.⁷⁶ The overlap between fishwives and prostitutes is another example of the fluidity of the practices to which the occupational label 'fishwife' referred.

The work of fishwives, hucksters and prostitutes overlapped in an economy of makeshifts. This shows that 'fishwife' was not an exclusive or stable occupational term. It also indirectly evidences the poverty of women involved in such hand-to-mouth employment. Other sources suggest this too. Ian Archer's study of London demonstrates that the riverside and extramural parishes were the poorest ones.⁷⁷ Lupton romanticised fishwives' hand-to-mouth existence, writing that each day they 'get something, and spend it Iovially and merrily'.⁷⁸ In a 1614 work on fishing, *Englands way to win wealth*, Tobias Gentleman wrote in praise of Dutch fishwives. Their charm for Gentleman lay in the fact that they were 'not such women as the fishwiues of Billingsgate, for these Netherland women do lade away many waggons with fresh fish daily . . . I haue seene these women Merchants haue had their Apornes full of nothing but English Iacobuses'.⁷⁹ The wealth of these Dutch women, whose control over English currency Gentleman nevertheless

⁷³ LMA, Jor. 26, fo. 339.

⁷⁴ John Taylor, *A Iuniper Lecture: With the Description of All Sorts of Women, Good, and Bad*, 2nd ed. (London, 1639), 95.

⁷⁵ Henry Parrot, *Cures for the Itch* (London, 1626), A3.

⁷⁶ Faramerz Dabhoiwala, "The Pattern of Sexual Immorality in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century London," in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*, ed. Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 95, 98, 101.

⁷⁷ Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability*, 150.

⁷⁸ Lupton, *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed*, 91.

⁷⁹ Tobias Gentleman, *Englands Vvay to Vvin Vvealth, and to Employ Ships and Marriners: Or, A Plaine Description of What Great Profite, It Will Bring Vnto the Common-Wealth of England, by the Erecting, Building, and Aduenturing of Busses, to Sea, a Fishing* (London, 1614), 16.

criticises, is what sets them apart from Billingsgate fishwives, who scarcely reached the accolade of ‘women Merchants’. The licensed and unlicensed fishwife, the fishwife as huckster and as prostitute, were all associated with poverty.

However, *Westward for Smelts* presents yet another kind of fishwife, and a very different one. There is an obvious geographical distinction: the ‘mad-merry Western wenches’ in *Smelts* embark from Queenhithe, not Billingsgate, and head upriver to their husbands and homes in the Western river towns.⁸⁰ In reality, fishwives from the Western towns did bring their river catches to Queenhithe, which was closer.⁸¹ These fishwives are mobile, like their counterparts in the City, but on a different scale, not up and down streets, but up and down rivers. This greater distance implies greater costs for travel, and also greater quantity of fish. This being so, as well as representing geographically distinct fishwives, *Smelts* concerns a different class of person. Remember that the fishwives in the pamphlet had ‘purses ful of coine’ for their drinking spree.⁸² Contrast this with Lupton’s portrayal of City fishwives: ‘If they drinke out their whole Stocke, it’s but pawning a Petticoate in Long-lane or themselves in Turnebull-streete for to set up againe.’⁸³ The fishwives in *Smelts* are considerable tradeswomen, who make a profit and not a bare existence from their fish.⁸⁴

Moreover, the kinds of fish that were sold by City fishwives and their Western counterparts were likely different. The *Smelts* fishwives probably sold exclusively freshwater fish. City fishwives were more likely to have sold sea fish, given the greater quantities of sea fish being imported into Billingsgate.⁸⁵ This is significant as different kinds of fish were assigned different worth. While there was some disagreement on whether sea or freshwater fish were healthier,⁸⁶ most writers agreed that fish which lived in flowing

⁸⁰ *Westward for Smelts*, A1.

⁸¹ For a contemporary account of the function of Queenhithe, see John Taylor, *The Carriers Cosmographie*. (London, 1637), C[4].

⁸² *Westward for Smelts*, A1.

⁸³ Lupton, *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed*, 92.

⁸⁴ Abreu-Ferreira has shown that wealthy fishwives existed in early modern Portugal, too. See Abreu-Ferreira, “Fishmongers and Shipowners.”

⁸⁵ Joseph Monteyne, “‘Scales of Fish Where Flesh Had Been’: Words and Images in Billingsgate Market,” in *From Still Life to the Screen: Print Culture, Display, and the Materiality of the Image in Eighteenth-Century London* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013), 19.

⁸⁶ Ken Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (London; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 122; A. Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in Early Modern English Medicine, 1550-1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 203; David Gentilcore, *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe: Diet, Medicine and Society, 1450-1800* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 19.

water were better.⁸⁷ More clearly, there was consensus that salted fish was less healthy. While freshwater fish could also be salted to preserve them, because of the greater distance of London from the sea it is probable that City fishwives were more closely associated with salted fish than their Western counterparts. Tobias Venner's 1620 *Via Recta* claimed that 'fish of long salting, (as is our common salt fish) is unwholesome, & much inferiour unto fresh fish.'⁸⁸ As a consequence of its lesser wholesomeness, salted fish was also associated with the poor.⁸⁹ Venner wrote that 'The salt or pickled Herring, is of harder concoction, and giveth a saltish and unprofitable nourishment. They are good for them that want better meat.'⁹⁰ Attention to the sorts of fish sold further evidences the class differences between the fishwives described in *Smelts* and in City records.

If the kind of fishwife represented in *Smelts* were located in other evidence, it would show that 'fishwife' had a very broad application, and referred to groups of different origins and wealth. Direct evidence on what I shall call 'Western fishwives' is scarce, but it exists. A search of the probate materials in the towns mentioned in *Smelts* (Brentford, Strand-on-the-Green, Richmond, Twickenham, Hampton, and Kingston) proved largely fruitless. However, there were two wills which involved the wife or widow of Western fishermen. These women may plausibly have been seen as fishwives in the sense used in *Smelts*. Both examples come from the 1640s, after our period ends. It is likely however that at least some of the testators' working lives took place before 1630. The widow Agnes Hughes wrote her will in 1642 in Kingston-upon-Thames. Hughes bequeathed a number of household items, including 'unto Elizabeth Reynoldes the wife of John Reynoldes of Kingston Fisherman a flockbedd and bolster'.⁹¹ This is the only named bed in the will, implying that Elizabeth Reynolds, who may well have worked with her husband in the fish trade, was important to

⁸⁷ Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*, 260; Tobias Venner, *Via Recta Ad Vitam Longam, or A Plaine Philosophical Discourse of the Nature, Faculties, and Effects, of All Such Things, as by Way of Nourishments, and Dieteticall Obseruations, Make for the Preseruatiō of Health* (London, 1620), 75.

⁸⁸ Venner, *Via Recta*, 86.

⁸⁹ Gentilcore, *Food and Health*, 56; Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England 1600-1770* (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 84.

⁹⁰ Venner, *Via Recta*, 81.

⁹¹ "Agnes Hughes, Kingston-upon-Thames, 1642.," *Ancestry: London, England, Wills and Probate, 1507-1858*, accessed August 30, 2016, http://interactive.ancestry.co.uk/1704/31787_A046613-00088?pid=407588&backurl=http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc=3DAdV1%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource%26usePUBJs%3Dtrue%26gss%3Dangs-g%26new%3D1%26rank%3D1%26gsfn%3Dagnes%26gsfn_x%3D1%26gsln%3Dhughes%26gsln_x%3D1%26msypn__ftp%3DKingston%2520Upon%2520Thames,%2520Surrey,%2520England%26msypn%3D1677592%26msypn_PInfo%3D8-%7C0%7C0%7C3257%7C3251%7C0%7C0%7C0%7C5286%7C1677592%7C0%7C0%7C0%26MSAV%3D0%26cpxt%3D1%26cp%3D11%26catbucket%3Drstp%26uidh%3D353%26msypn__ftp_x%3D1%26msypn_x%3DXO%26pcat%3DROOT_CATEGORY%26h%3D407588%26recoff%3D8%25209%26db%3DLondonWills%26indiv%3D1%26ml_rpos%3D1%26requr%3D9288966289260544%26ur%3D0&treeid=&perso_nid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=AdV1&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true.

Hughes. This suggests that some Western fishwives at least may have been a position to benefit from the wills of relatively affluent widows.

A John Reynolds of Kingston, probably the same Elizabeth's husband, appeared in the Repertories in October 1630. The waterbailey presented Reynolds and other Western fishermen for building stops in the river. The Kingston men with him were William Ward, Richard Jennings and a Robert Benson.⁹² Earlier still in 1618, a lease between William Knightley and John Paltock, both of Kingston, had mentioned 'that tenemente nowe in thoccupacion of Robert Benson fisherman'.⁹³ This is relevant because in 1641, another Kingston widow made a will. Her name was Johan Benson, and her son Robert was made executor. This is the only source that I have found that was written by a woman who may have been called a fishwife in the sense of the *Smelts* wives. Apart from the siren calls of the imagery in the nevertheless highly conventional phrase, 'I am fully perswaded & do constantly believe that all my sinnes are washed away', this will does not yield much significant content. Benson bequeathed goods to five grandchildren, all of whom received beds: she died a very comfortably off woman.⁹⁴ Probate evidence suggests that some Western fishwives enjoyed a far greater prosperity than their London counterparts.

As well as direct evidence on fishwives in Western towns, there is contextual evidence associating Western towns with political problems linked to fishwives. Fishermen were in increasing trouble with the Court of Aldermen for introducing stops and hatches into the river, fishing out of their bounds, and fishing for fry. The water bailiff was the mayoral officer responsible for policing these abuses, and for enforcing all regulations concerning conservancy.⁹⁵ This work included onsite inspections, and though he also ventured eastward (having business there on five occasions in 1613 and three in 1614, for instance),⁹⁶ Western trips took up more of his time. A selection of occasions upon which the water bailiff was involved in Western waters includes 1599, 1611, thrice in 1613, twice in 1614, 1615, twice in 1624, 1626, and 1630.⁹⁷ The 1633 edition of Stow's *Survey* reported that 'not many yeeres since', the City had cleared seventy-nine stops in the river

⁹² LMA, Rep. 44, fo. 352.

⁹³ Kingston History Centre, Kingston, KC3/2/58: William Knightley's lease to John Paltock, 1618.

⁹⁴ "Johane Benson, Kingston-upon-Thames, 1641.," *Ancestry: London, England, Wills and Probate, 1507-1858*, accessed August 30, 2016, http://interactive.ancestry.co.uk/1704/31787_A046290-00408/416754?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.co.uk%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults.

⁹⁵ Masters, "The Mayor's Household before 1600," 102–103.

⁹⁶ LMA, Rep. 31.1, fo. 114v., 118, 139v., 147, 227v.; 31.2, fo. 254v.-55, 282v., 383.

⁹⁷ LMA, Rep. 24, fo. 420v.; 30, fo. 102; 31.1, fo. 145v., 181-81v.; 31.2, fo. 208-208v., 272v., 391v.-92, 409; 32, fo. 45-45v.; 38, fo. 221v., 255v.; 40, fo. 420v.; 44, fo. 352, 360v.

westward.⁹⁸ In 1606 and again in 1607, fishermen were chosen from each town ‘Westerne from London Bridge to Stanes’ and ‘sworne for the yere next ensuing to make diligent and true presentment to the Lord Maior once everye moneth’ of any offences.⁹⁹ On both occasions, the space under Kingston was left blank – perhaps for a lack of obedient fishermen. In 1613 the Court of Aldermen even decided to print ‘certen orders concerning the conservacy of the said Ryver and to be observed by the Watermen and other Fishermen westward’.¹⁰⁰

Western fishwives were only indirectly associated with these political problems. By contrast, London fishwives were often intimately connected to the political conflicts that took place in and around Billingsgate. Billingsgate is relevant to London fishwives in general because the latter were associated with this market regardless of where they actually worked. Thus in 1582 the Court of Aldermen references orders on fishwives in general as ‘thorders hearetofore taken by this Courte towching the Fyssshewyves or [boroughsters] at Billingesgate’.¹⁰¹ Billingsgate was the largest wharf for receiving sea fish.¹⁰² The most prominent association of Billingsgate was with forestalling, both by fishwives and fishmongers. To forestall was to pre-empt the market by buying goods before the market started from those who would otherwise have sold their wares themselves.¹⁰³ In the Repertories, forestalling and engrossing (or buying up all or most of a commodity at market to push up the price)¹⁰⁴ are both linked to Billingsgate and to fishwives. For example, orders were written in March and in April 1597 on ‘fishwives & others ingrossing fish at Billingsgate’.¹⁰⁵ Other political interests which did not directly concern fishwives also intersected at Billingsgate. The watermen were in perennial conflict with the Farmer of the Gravesend Barge, and appeared before Court of Aldermen in 1601 and 1627.¹⁰⁶ In 1605, the court had to settle disputes over the Billingsgate dock, prohibiting ‘anye lighter or lighters [to] be suffred at anye tyme hereafter to lye or remayne within the sayd dock, without licence’.¹⁰⁷ While ‘Western’ fishwives were only indirectly related to upriver fishing disputes, Billingsgate fishwives were directly implicated in regulatory City politics.

⁹⁸ John Stow, *The Survey of London: Containing the Original, Increase, Modern Estate and Government of That City, Methodically Set down*, ed. Anthony Munday (London, 1633), 19.

⁹⁹ LMA, Rep. 27, fo. 197; 28, fo. 60-60v.

¹⁰⁰ LMA, Rep. 31.1, fo. 102. I have not located any copies of this printed order.

¹⁰¹ LMA, Rep. 20, fo. 323.

¹⁰² Monteyne, “‘Scales of Fish Where Flesh Had Been’: Words and Images in Billingsgate Market,” 19.

¹⁰³ Archer, Barron, and Harding, *Hugh Alley’s Caveat*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ LMA, Rep. 24, fo. 48, 56. See also Jor. 22, fo. 378v.

¹⁰⁶ LMA, Rep. 25, fo. 189v.; 41, fo. 301v.-302.

¹⁰⁷ LMA, Rep. 26.2, fo. 506v.

The probate evidence and these contextual associations thus suggest that the kind of fishwife presented in *Smelts* not only existed, but was a different kind of person to City fishwives, licensed or unlicensed, hawking fish or fruit. So far, this section has shown that ‘fishwife’ referred to a range of different people and economic activities. A final area to note is that even between similar kinds of fishwife, there was often conflict. Most of the evidence cited so far was recorded by men, as Margaret Pelling noted is nearly always the case with occupational labels.¹⁰⁸ Turning to the actions of fishwives in conflict redresses this imbalance somewhat, and further demonstrates the lack of homogenous community amongst those called ‘fishwife’.

Far from forming a uniform group, fishwives were in direct economic competition with each other and each other’s cries. This is one of the reasons that fishwives are associated in literature with noise and scolding. The 1635 ballad *An Excellent New Ditty* concerned ‘the poore women / that cry fish and Oysters’, going to sell their souls to the devil. But the women ‘kept such a noyse, / Each brabled with other, / which first should have choise. / As that their noyse frighted / the Devill of Hell’, who fears that ‘In pieces among them / my body they’l teare’.¹⁰⁹ The association between fishwives and scolding can also be traced in the archives, particularly in the 1618 order that ‘a Cucking stoole shalbe forthwith made and sett up at Billingsgate docke for the punishment of Wenches Yonge girls fish wives hearbes wives and such like that repaire thither for fish oysters and other victuals contrarie to an act of Common Councell’.¹¹⁰ Though the reasons given here for the cucking stool are economic, by the early seventeenth century associations with scolding were strong.¹¹¹ For instance, in Trundle’s ballad *A Mad Crue*, printed in 1625, the appropriate character to ‘gallantly on the Cucking-stoole ride’ is ‘She that by scolding still payes all her debts, / To the ease of her belly, sore sicke of the frets’. Such behaviours are explicitly related to fishwives by Trundle: at the end of this verse, ‘Well, quoth the *Oysterwench*, that shall be tride.’¹¹² The cucking stool was also associated with cuckoldry and sexual misconduct.¹¹³ Bridewell commissioned a stool in June 1628, ordering it to be ‘set up in some convenient place about this hospitall’.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ Pelling, *The Common Lot*, 158.

¹⁰⁹ *An Excellent New Ditty: Or, Which Proveth That Women the Best Warriors Be, for They Made the Devill from Earth for to Flee* (London, 1635).

¹¹⁰ LMA, Rep. 34, fo. 10.

¹¹¹ Lynda E. Boose, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1991): 185.

¹¹² *A Mad Crue, Or, That Shall Be Tryde* (London, 1625), original emphasis.

¹¹³ Korda, *Labors Lost*, 178.

¹¹⁴ BRHAM, BBHC 7, fo. 78v.

Fishwives' close proximity and direct economic competition probably helped to fuel conflicts. Lupton wrote jovially that 'when they have done their Faire, they meet in mirth, singing, dancing, & in the middle as a *Parenthesis*, they use scolding'.¹¹⁵ A vivid entry in the Bridewell courtbooks for October 1628 concerned the 'Fishe women' Anne Vaughan and Elizabeth Price, committed 'for abusing themselves and scoulding and for that they were taken fighting with another woman pulling one another by the haire of the head and blaspheming gods name'.¹¹⁶ Such market fights can be evidenced amongst the huckster community more generally. In Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, Envy introduces himself as 'begotten of a Chimney-sweeper, and an Oyster wife'.¹¹⁷ The fruit sellers who sat at the Exchange were presented to the Cornhill wardmote in January 1610. The problem was that 'divers yong women & maid servants do live in that idle course of life & sit there at unlawfull houres in the night tyme & intice of many brawles to the disquieting of the neighbors'.¹¹⁸ Here it is implied that the competition may be sexual as well as economic. Such competition between fishwives and hucksters in general further undermines the idea of fishwives as a coherent group.

Moreover, not all fishwives were competing on an equal footing. There were significant differences in status amongst fishwives themselves, which is further evidence that fishwives were a complex and diverse group of people, rather than a coherent community. It seems that more substantial fishwives employed maids to sell fish for them, often without license. For instance, in June 1601 'Johan Proctor Fishwyfe and Jane Wilkinson alias Gryffin were committed ~~for~~ to this hospitall for keeping of wenches and maydes to crye fishe about the Citty, being prooved that the said Johan Proctor had iij maydes.'¹¹⁹ Interestingly, only Proctor is called 'fishwife': possibly maids were less likely to be seen as fishwives in their own right. Employment relations were structured fundamentally by age. The 1611 act ordered that fishwives buy no more than they could carry, 'provided that this order shall not extend to such of the said women so to bee nominated & appointed as shalbee above the Age of ltie [50] yeares or decrepitate as the said women doe not use anie person for the carriadge thereof other then a streete porter'.¹²⁰ The porter was not strictly speaking employed by the fishwife, but some fishwives did employ staff. In March 1597 'Iudith Colman was admitted for Ione Lambert dwellinge in the

¹¹⁵ Lupton, *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed*, 93.

¹¹⁶ BRHAM, BBHC 7, fo. 93.

¹¹⁷ Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragicall History of D. Faustus* (London, 1604), C[4].

¹¹⁸ LMA, MS4069/1, fo. 118v.

¹¹⁹ BRHAM, BBHC 4, fo. 242.

¹²⁰ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 301.

parishe of [litell] Alhallowes to sell fishe for her beinge a lame and aged woman.'¹²¹ Others did so without seeking license, like Proctor and Wilkinson. I have found no direct evidence of employment conflicts amongst fishwives, but the case of a herbwoman's servant suggests the kind of problem that could arise. In September 1622, Susan Edes was brought to Bridewell 'for a vagrant and Comon gweste' and was 'ponished & sent home to her Mistress a hearbwoman from whence shee runneth away'.¹²² The cause of Edes' flight is not given, but the case demonstrates that the interests of servants and mistresses were not always aligned. The inequalities between fishwives and their 'wenches' may have provided circumstances for dispute and exploitation. More fundamentally, some fishwives were mistresses and some servants. This shows that the term 'fishwife' referred to women performing very different economic roles.

Legislative records present a polarised view of licensed and unlicensed fishwives whose relation to economic realities remains vexed. Moreover, within the same records as well as between sources, 'fishwife' as a term overlapped with other kinds of huckster. It seems likely given the widespread nature of the evidence that these overlaps were genuinely present in the multi-occupational working lives of women, as the wider history of women's work suggests.¹²³ The case of *Smelts* shows that a 'fishwife' could be a much more substantial trader, and come from further afield. Finally, there was significant competition and conflict among fishwives, undercutting any simplistic notion of their community. 'Fishwife' was a more fluid term than current historiography on fishwives suggests, and referred to a very diverse group of people.

Section II: Naming fishwives

If the women and the work to which 'fishwife' referred were so various, why was the term used at all? What was the purpose of calling, or failing to call someone a fishwife? This section argues that the term 'fishwife' worked instrumentally to further political, gendered ends. This interpretation aligns with scholarship on women's work, which has argued that gender was a key determinant of how labour was considered.¹²⁴ Fishwives were situated at the intersection between market abuses, sexual lewdness, gendered disorder and vagrancy. Identifying and regulating fishwives was thus a potent way for City bodies to assert their

¹²¹ BRHAM, BBHC 4, fo. 11.

¹²² BRHAM, BBHC 6, fo. 298.

¹²³ Pelling, *The Common Lot*, Ch. 7, 8; McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620*, 2005, 6.

¹²⁴ Merry E. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, The Douglass Series on Women's Lives and the Meaning of Gender (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

authority. Specifically, focusing on fishwives deflected attention from the abuses of wholesalers and the guilds (to which the Aldermen and Common Council belonged), and from the inaction of the authorities on such matters.

At the risk of stating the obvious, ‘fishwife’ referred to a woman. This should not be taken as inevitable, but be viewed as the result of a series of definitional conflicts, and as a telling piece of evidence about the power (or lack thereof) that the term fishwife conveyed. As Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman put it, ‘There was nothing inherently female or male about any activity’.¹²⁵ Although I have found no references to men as ‘fishwives’, in Bridewell in May 1603,

John Abbott of St Sepulchers parish London porter being putt in Court & examined how many Servauntes he keepes to goe about with the fish or other wares saith he keepes none but Joane Lucas now prisoner in this house, and that he nor his wife have not anie licence to sell fishe.¹²⁶

Abbott may have been styled a porter, but he still kept people to sell fish on the streets, and possibly did so himself. Many of the female fishwives who ended up in Bridewell may have had other primary occupational labels, just like Abbott.¹²⁷ Moreover, the acts concerning fishwives explicitly applied to men. The 1590 act referred to ‘wives, widdowes ~~and~~ woemen men and maideservauntes’,¹²⁸ while the 1611 act used the ambiguous construction ‘shee or they’.¹²⁹ In Alley’s *Caveat*, the only fish in the picture of Billingsgate is carried by a man (see Figure 5).¹³⁰ The same economic activities were referred to in gendered ways. Like fishwives, fishmongers sold fish, yet the literary type that attached to fishwives had no masculine, fishmongering equivalent. I do not mean to suggest that restrictions on fishwives were ‘imposed because they are women’, as Merry Wiesner Wood cautioned

¹²⁵ Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, “Women’s Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets in Europe, 1500- 1900,” *Economic History Review* xlv, no. 4 (1991): 612–13.

¹²⁶ BRHAM, BBHC 4, fo. 378.

¹²⁷ For other references to porters of fish, see GL MS5770/2, 430, 567.

¹²⁸ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 378v.

¹²⁹ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 300v.

¹³⁰ Archer, Barron, and Harding, *Hugh Alley’s Caveat*, 53.

against.¹³¹ But they were *called* fishwives partly because they were women, and the negative connotations attached to the term justified official restrictions on their activity.

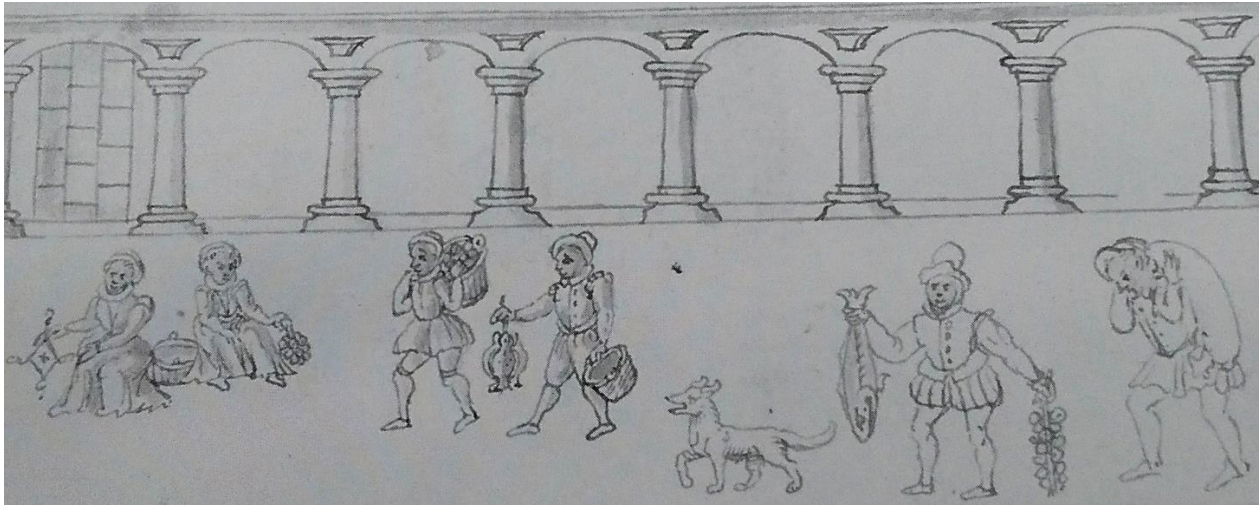


Figure 5: Billingsgate in Hugh Alley's *Caveat* (1598), fo. 9.

The term fishwife was thus exclusively used of women, even where men performed the same work and committed the same crimes. The particularising gendered and moral meanings attached to the word 'fishwife' meant that fishwives' abuses could be regulated without entailing the same regulation for offences committed in other quarters. This was highly convenient politically. In the mid-Tudor decades, the City government seems to have taken a more active role in the suppression of market abuses by wholesalers.¹³² But the early modern economy was changing. As London and its suburbs expanded and depended on increasingly complex arrangements for food provision, the role of middlemen became essential to the survival of the city.¹³³ Victuallers became more important as the population of the city increased.¹³⁴ The growing economic importance of middlemen did not mean that

¹³¹ Merry Wiesner Wood, "Paltry Peddlers or Essential Merchants? Women in the Distributive Trades in Early Modern Nuremberg," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 12, no. 2 (1981): 12.

¹³² Archer, Barron, and Harding, *Hugh Alley's Caveat*, 26.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 11; F.J. Fisher, "The Development of the London Food Market, 1540-1640," in *Essays in Economic History: Reprints*, ed. Eleanora Mary Carus-Wilson (London: Arnold, 1954), 146-49.

¹³⁴ A. L. Beier, "Engine of Manufacture: The Trades of London," in *London 1500-1700: The Making of the Metropolis*, ed. Roger Finlay and A.L. Beier (London; New York: Longman, 1986), 147-49.

rhetoric against them ceased. However, practical restrictions on such traders became increasingly directed at petty traders like fishwives, rather than substantial wholesalers.

This process had two main advantages for those in positions of authority. First, identifying and regulating fishwives deflected attention from the inaction of City government on wholesalers.¹³⁵ Acts regulating petty traders coincided with food riots in the 1590s, demonstrating the gap between magisterial rhetoric and effective regulation of the market.¹³⁶ Fishwives and others were in a sense prosecuted in lieu of larger wholesalers, as Linda Woodbridge argued in the case of pedlars.¹³⁷ This explains why so many regulations were passed about hucksters in the 1590s, which were a time of hardship and increased pressure on City authorities.¹³⁸ It seems unlikely that the small-scale endeavours of fishwives were really economically damaging, even in the famine-struck 1590s: rather, along with foreigners and other hucksters, fishwives were convenient scapegoats for the frightened authorities.¹³⁹ Fumerton has described these campaigns as persecution, rather than prosecution.¹⁴⁰ Increasing regulation of fishwives went hand in hand with increasing negligence where large-scale middlemen were concerned. Fishwives served as a proxy for other, less controllable disorders like dearth or powerful fishmongers.¹⁴¹ A good example of the latter comes from January 1615. In the Journals, fishwives were described as ‘the principall meanes of [all] euill [rule to] the [scandall] of the [inhabitants] of this City’.¹⁴² In the same month, the Lord Mayor wrote to the Privy Council that ‘wee have it by Common Experience, that the fishmonger, howe faier a shewe soever hee will seeme to make, hee doth still make an extraordinarie use of this time in the price of all manner of Fysh’.¹⁴³ Clearly fishmongers were also responsible for disorder, particularly economically. But in the public setting of Common Council, it was convenient to name fishwives as the cause of ‘all evil rule’. This dynamic also explains why London fishwives were more directly associated with political problems than their Western counterparts, despite the latter’s potentially close relation to some serial fishing offenders. The City authorities held direct jurisdiction over London fishwives. Associating such fishwives with

¹³⁵ See Archer, Barron, and Harding, *Hugh Alley’s Caveat*, 26.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Linda Woodbridge, “The Peddler and the Pawn: Why Did Tudor England Consider Peddlers to Be Rogues?,” in *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture*, ed. Craig Dionne and Steve Mentz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 157.

¹³⁸ Archer, Barron, and Harding, *Hugh Alley’s Caveat*, 24–26.

¹³⁹ Korda, “Gender at Work,” 120; Korda, *Labors Lost*, 149.

¹⁴⁰ Fumerton, *Unsettled*, 16.

¹⁴¹ See Dorey, “Lewd, Idle People,” 11–12.

¹⁴² LMA, Jor. 29, fo. 187.

¹⁴³ LMA, Rem. IV, no. 13.

market abuses served political ends which did not apply in the case of larger traders, including Western fishwives.

The second way in which the association of fishwives and market abuses benefited those in authority is that it deflected attention from the misdemeanours of wholesalers. This served the interests of the Company of Fishmongers. The Company of Fishmongers were not responsible for the regulation of fishwives, and their courtbooks seldom mention the group. I have found only one reference, in the early 1600s, a time during which market abuses by fishmongers themselves were particularly rife. In July 1601, under the heading ‘Overseers of Fishewyves considered’, the company paid Hugh Alley for removing fishwives from Cheapside and other markets.¹⁴⁴ The reasons for this removal are not stated explicitly. It probably stemmed partly from economic competition. Like pedlars, fishwives were part of the development of a consumer economy, rather than being mere marginal actors.¹⁴⁵ As Eleanor Hubbard noted, although fishwives were portrayed as unnecessary intermediaries, they performed the essential function of undercutting fishmongers, allowing the poor access to fish.¹⁴⁶ Another factor is that the abuses associated with fishwives were practiced by fishmongers as well, namely forestalling, engrossing and selling bad fish.¹⁴⁷ Dorey has shown that forestalling was recorded far oftener in relation to fishmongers, contrary to the rhetoric of the City governors and others.¹⁴⁸ For example, the fishmonger Thomas Atkins was committed ‘for forestalling of two hundred Coddess’ at Billingsgate in 1600 – a feat of which few City fishwives can have been capable.¹⁴⁹ The records of the Company of Fishmongers contain numerous examples of forestalling and engrossing.¹⁵⁰ Another crime was the sale of bad fish, which was associated with fishwives, but recorded more commonly in relation to fishmongers (see Chapter 3).¹⁵¹ Identifying fishwives as a group associated with market abuses thus shielded the Fishmongers from negative attention.

¹⁴⁴ GL MS5570/1, 289.

¹⁴⁵ Fontaine, *History of Pedlars in Europe*, 5–6.

¹⁴⁶ Hubbard, *City Women*, 190; see also Woodbridge, “The Peddler and the Pawn: Why Did Tudor England Consider Peddlers to Be Rogues?,” 150 on peddlers more generally.

¹⁴⁷ See notes 150 and 151 below.

¹⁴⁸ Dorey, “Lewd, Idle People,” 11, 14–15.

¹⁴⁹ LMA, Rep. 25, fo. 101.

¹⁵⁰ For some examples, see GL MS5570/2, 128, 130, 263–64, 398–99, 405, 408, 430, 540, 563, 611, 647.

¹⁵¹ Dorey, “Lewd, Idle People”; For fishwives, see LMA, Rep. 28, fo. 301; 21, fo. 115; Jor. 22, fo. 378v.; Jack Daw, *Vox Graculi, or Iacke Davves Prognostication* (London, 1622), 57; Thomas Dekker and John Webster, *Vvest-Vvard Hoe* (London, 1607), A[4]. For fishmongers, see GL MS5570/1, 201, 203, 342, 414, 511, 518, 582; GL MS5570/2, 42, 140, 218, 247, 348, 491.

One way to test these arguments is to turn to women who were *not* referred to as fishwives, and consider whether the reasons given here can explain this absence. The most important group who were not called fishwives are those men and especially women recorded in the pages of the courtbooks of the Fishmongers' Company. That such people could have been considered fishwives was indirectly recognised by the 1590 act of Common Council, which

Provided alwaies . . . that this act nor any thing therein conteyned shall not in any wise extend, ~~h~~ or be preiudiciall to any person or persons lawfully occupying or using or which at any time hereafter shall lawfully occupie or use the Trade of Fishmonger. . .¹⁵²

That it was necessary to exclude fishmongers from the purview of the act suggests that contemporaries recognised that their activities were similar enough to cause confusion. This can also be seen in the Cornhill Wardmote Inquest Book. In December 1589 and again a year later, 'all hucksters at Billingsgate Fishmongers Fishwyves & all others' were 'presented for buying victuals before they come to the gate'.¹⁵³ Fishmongers and fishwives appear as separate items in this list, but they both seem to fall under the category of 'hucksters at Billingsgate', and are guilty of the same market abuses. Comparison of fishwives and fishmongers also appears in a slightly later petition from the 1660s, entitled 'The Humble Peticion of Mary Hinde, Anne Burgin, Judeth Clerke and Margaret Holmes'.¹⁵⁴ Burgin, Clerke and Holmes positioned themselves alongside fishmongers as equally worthy. They asserted that 'your petitioners buy their Fish at Billingsgate of them that bring it thither in Boates after the same manner as the Fishmongers do'.¹⁵⁵ Presumably this manner entailed larger quantities of fish than were handled by street sellers. Some fishwives at least thought that their activities bore comparison with those of fishmongers. Taken together, this evidence suggests that the work performed by some fishwives and fishmongers was very similar. But their occupational labels were different.

¹⁵² LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 380.

¹⁵³ LMA, MS4069/1, fo. 49, 52v.

¹⁵⁴ LMA, Misc MS/90/16. For dating suggestions, see Dorey, "Lewd, Idle People," 9, n. 42.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Widows of fishmongers may also have behaved similarly to fishwives. For instance, on 17 January 1605, the Court of Assistants dealt with the case of one widow Hemyng who ‘taketh up barrelled Fishe & selleth it ungaged & taketh up holland Linges & other fishe made fishe & outcast together & so selleth it contrary to the orders’.¹⁵⁶ Years later in December 1620, a woman of the same name was granted alms, ‘albeit it be thought that she hath no great nede yett in regard of her ymportunaty & contynuall exclamation It is agreed that she shall have from Christmas next xvjd a weeke’.¹⁵⁷ Fishmongers’ widows were well able to compete with fishwives in ‘exclamation’. Company almswomen were often former fishmongers, and caused increasing concern in the 1610s and 1620s over their disorderly behaviour. Compare Price, the fishwife presented to Bridewell in 1599 as ‘an notorious drunckerd and a Comon whore and a [Rayler and] distirber of all thinhabitants’,¹⁵⁸ with widow Bodye, presented to the fishmongers’ Court of Assistants in 1622 because she ‘doth wildly abuse her self there in hangyng upon men of great creditt who comme to vewe the hospitall offryng to kisse them and raylyng in her dronkennes’.¹⁵⁹ The latter was not called a fishwife in spite of the possible appropriateness of the term. Such naming strategies disassociated the company itself from irregular traders: Common Council legislation linked irregularity with fishwives, and the company pointedly did not call its own irregular traders fishwives. Considering groups who were *not* referred to as fishwives further illuminates the political and economic instrumentality of the term, and how it served the interests of City governors and the Fishmongers. The word ‘fishwife’ had more to do with class than fish, at least in certain circumstances.

In an obvious sense, ‘fishwife’ was an economic, occupational label. However, its (non-)application was influenced by other political and gendered factors. That someone was called a fishwife did not necessarily mean that selling fish was their main occupation, as the evidence on hawking in section I suggests. Equally, that someone was not called a fishwife did not mean that they didn’t sell fish. This section has argued that the application of seemingly neutral economic labels actually served gendered and political purposes, for the authorities and the Fishmongers.

¹⁵⁶ GL MS5570/1, 414.

¹⁵⁷ GL MS5570/2, 399.

¹⁵⁸ BRHAM, BBHC 4, fo. 147v.

¹⁵⁹ GL MS5570/2, 467.

Section III: '[L]ewd and evyll disposed women': collapsing distinctions

The diversity of possible referents of the term 'fishwife', as well as the vested interests involved in its use, renders the study of 'fishwives' as a group more complicated. Nevertheless, the term 'fishwife' was used by contemporaries in a wide variety of circumstances, without the need for explanation or qualification. The Western wives in *Smelts* and the inmates of Bridewell were all called 'fishwives' without confusion. Although the occupational activities of fishwives were highly diverse, there were things that all fishwives shared. In particular, all fishwives were associated with wares and words, both of which were understood as sexually lewd by contemporaries. There were thus fairly standard sexualised connotations to the word 'fishwife' in spite of the diversity of people to which the term referred. This highlights the misogyny that operated throughout early modern society. It also demonstrates that sexuality is of fundamental importance to understanding the history of fishwives as a group.

All fishwives dealt in fish to some extent. Historians have noted the association of women and their wares in many contexts.¹⁶⁰ Buis, Spain-Savage and Wright argued that fishwives were 'often compared to the fishy bodies they sell,' although they overstated this somewhat to heighten the novelty of their conclusion that in fact, fish and women are quite different.¹⁶¹ This insight notwithstanding, contemporaries did see selling one's wares and selling oneself as similar. Lustfulness was linked to the food that one consumed,¹⁶² and there were 'analogies between sexual and gastronomic gratification'.¹⁶³ The relation between fishwives and fish was not negligible, and can be strongly evidenced at a linguistic level. 'Wares' meant 'commodities', but both words also referred to genitals.¹⁶⁴ 'Fish' was an ancient sexual symbol, representing both the penis and the vulva.¹⁶⁵ 'Fishmonger' was another word for wench or bawd.¹⁶⁶ 'Fishing' meant copulating,¹⁶⁷ and because of the predatory logic of much writing on sexuality at this time, was often used as a metaphor for human sexual enticement. For example, in the 1635 pamphlet *A Bawd*, Taylor described

¹⁶⁰ Shesgreen, *Images of the Outcast*, 27.

¹⁶¹ Buis, Spain-Savage, and Wright, "Attending to Fishwives," 177, 184.

¹⁶² Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 144.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁶⁴ Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, vol. 3 (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 1501–1503; Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 21; Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, vol. 1 (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 282–85.

¹⁶⁵ Relihan, "Fishwives' Tales," 55–56; Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 1:491; Joan Fitzpatrick, *Renaissance Food from Rabelais to Shakespeare: Culinary Readings and Culinary Histories* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 133.

¹⁶⁶ Relihan, "Fishwives' Tales," 56; Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 1:496.

¹⁶⁷ Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 1:494.

the title character as one who is ‘a cunning Angler, and gets her living by hooke or by crooke, shee hath bayts for all kinde of *Frye*’.¹⁶⁸ ‘Tail’ meant the tail of a fish or the genitals of a person.¹⁶⁹ When in October 1620 the fishmonger’s apprentice Nathaniel Prestbury ‘did of late openlye in the markett place at Stocks throwe Cuttinges Tayles & bones of Fishe at other apprentices . . . & did hitt dyverse strangers being there . . . so as no man cold stand or passe by without a Clap in the face with a fishe Tayle’, he was being disorderly. When a member of the Company tried to stop him, Prestbury ‘bidd him kisse his Tayle & rayled on him’.¹⁷⁰ Now he was being witty as well as rude. This kind of linguistic slippage between the bodies of fish and the bodies of people was another way in which fishwives were figured as a homogenous group of sexualised women, in spite of their also being a diverse group of workers.

Many words associated with the fish trade in particular carried sexual connotations. ‘Salted’ meant lecherous,¹⁷¹ and salted fish were also associated with drunkenness as they encouraged thirst.¹⁷² Stale fish was a threat affecting all vendors of fish, and ‘stale’ described both bad food and sexually used women.¹⁷³ For example, in *Westward Hoe*, it is declared: ‘Let a man loue Oisters for their water, for women though they shoulde weepe licour enough to serue a Dyer or a Brewer, yet they may bee as stale as Wenches, that trauaile every second tyde betweene Grauesende, and Billingsgate.’¹⁷⁴ It is unclear whether the stale wenches here are fishwives or prostitutes, but in the light of the frequent collapsing of the two groups, this is less important. The double meaning of the word stale is particularly significant because a key purpose of market regulation was to police the boundary between fresh and stale food.¹⁷⁵ As we have seen, the City also regulated the sexual ‘staleness’ of fishwives, prohibiting unmarried vendors and punishing extramarital relations. That the City authorities regulated the commodities that fishwives sold in both senses of the word complicates the distinction between the economic and the sexual and renders ambiguous what is actually being sold, the woman or the fish. Fishwives’ association with stale fish reinforced their deviant economic and sexual status.

¹⁶⁸ John Taylor, *A Bavvd: A Vertuous Bawd, a Modest Bawd: As Shee Deserves, Reproove, or Else Applaud* (London, 1635), B[5].

¹⁶⁹ Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 3:1355–58.

¹⁷⁰ GL MS5770/1, 592.

¹⁷¹ Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 3:1192.

¹⁷² Pennell, “‘Great Quantities of Goseberry Pye and Baked Clod of Beef’: Victualling and Eating out in Early Modern London,” 237–39; Pelling, *The Common Lot*, 47.

¹⁷³ Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 3:1303–1304.

¹⁷⁴ Dekker and Webster, *Vvest-Vvard Hoe*, A4.

¹⁷⁵ See Chapter 3 for more on bad fish.

Particular fish also had sexual connotations. Oysters, wine, sex and Billingsgate were closely associated, in a luxurious network that poorer fishwives were unlikely to be able to access in reality. In Jonson's *The devil is an asse*, first performed in 1616, Iniquity promises the devil, 'I will bring thee to the Bawds, and the Roysters, / At *Belins-gate*, feasting with claret wine, and oysters'.¹⁷⁶ A common jest on oysters was that 'they are ungodly, because they are eaten without grace, uncharitable because they leave nought but shels, and unprofitable because they must swim in wine.'¹⁷⁷ Oysters themselves were widely regarded as an aphrodisiac, compounding the link between lust and the vendors of such goods. The fourth edition of William Vaughan's *Approved directions for health*, published in 1612, declared that oysters 'provoke appetite and lechery'.¹⁷⁸ Likewise Nicholas Breton's 1597 *Wits Trenchmour* claimed that 'Oysters are stirring meate'.¹⁷⁹ A later collection of jests that referenced the Trundle literary scene was more sexually explicit:

Oysters are of strong operation,
Known to both Sexes of our Nation;
They're fishes of such rare perfection,
That they in flesh make an erection;
And gives to mouthes wants teeth such strength
That theyle devour a whole yards length . . .¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Ben Jonson, *The Divell Is an Asse* (London, 1641), B.

¹⁷⁷ *Scoggins Iestes* (London, 1613), E7; Richard Tarlton, *Tarltons Iests* (London, 1613), A2.

¹⁷⁸ William Vaughan, *Approved Directions for Health, Both Naturall and Artificiall*, 4th ed. (London, 1612), 43.

¹⁷⁹ Nicholas Breton, *Wits Trenchmour: In a Conference Had Betwixt a Scholler and an Angler* (London, 1597), C2.

¹⁸⁰ W. D et al., *Wits and Drollery* (London, 1656), 84, second occurrence of that page number.

The reference to vaginas as ‘mouthes wants teeth’ further evidences of the link between vocal promiscuity, exemplified by the fishwives’ cry, and sexual promiscuity. That some fishwives sold oysters compounded their ambivalent sexual reputation.

Another fish with sexual associations was mackerel. One of the clauses of the 1611 act stipulated that fishwives should not buy from boats ‘before the howers of sixe of the clocke in the morning or after the howers of sixe of the clocke in the evening (mackerells to bee bought at Billingsgate or Queenehith in the Mackerell season onelie excepted.)’¹⁸¹ This emphasises the seasonal and hence reproductive nature of the mackerel trade.¹⁸² Mackerel may have been particularly likely to be stale. It was hard to preserve, though it could be pickled.¹⁸³ According to R. Michell, in England mackerel was almost always eaten fresh. Michell also claimed (without citation) that there are more references to stinking mackerel in English literature than to any other fish.¹⁸⁴ One such reference appears in Henry Peacham’s 1636 pamphlet, *Coach and Sedan*. A man in the market picks up a mackerel and begins whispering to it and holding it to his ear. The fishmonger demands, ‘do you make a foole of my fish, and of your selfe’? The man replies he has been asking the fish how long it was since he was at sea: ‘hee tells mee not these three weekes’.¹⁸⁵ Mackerel also meant bawd.¹⁸⁶ For example, in *Westward Hoe*, Gozling calls the bawd Mistress Birdlime ‘*Maquerelle*’, to which she replies disingenuously, ‘I am no Mackrell . . . Bawd! I defie thee’.¹⁸⁷ Mackerel meant whore, too. In Beaumont and Fletcher’s play *Women Pleas’d*, Penurio acts as procurer for courtiers. He describes the women he brings them as ‘a pack of wry-mouth’d mackrel Ladies’ that ‘Stink like a standing ditch’.¹⁸⁸ The association between fishwives and mackerel thus links the reproductive cycles of fish and the potentially reproductive activities of people. Fishwives’ association with their wares enhanced the transgressive quality of their sexual and economic behaviour.

¹⁸¹ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 301v.

¹⁸² R. Michell, “The European Fisheries in Early Modern History,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe: The Economic Organization of Early Modern Europe*, ed. E. E. Rich and Charles Wilson, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 138.

¹⁸³ Jennifer Stead and C. Anne Wilson, “Necessities and Luxuries: Food Preservation from the Elizabethan to the Georgian Era,” in *Waste Not, Want Not: Food Preservation from Early Times to the Present Day*, Food and Society ; 4 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 80–81.

¹⁸⁴ Michell, “The European Fisheries in Early Modern History,” 168.

¹⁸⁵ Henry Peacham, *Coach and Sedan: Pleasantly Disputing for Place and Precedence: The Brewers-Cart Being Moderator* (London, 1636), D2.

¹⁸⁶ Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, vol. 2 (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 837–38.

¹⁸⁷ Dekker and Webster, *Vvest-Vvard Hoe*, H.

¹⁸⁸ Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, “*Women Pleas’d*,” in *Fifty Comedies and Tragedies* (London, 1679), 195.

The link between fish and Lent created further ambiguous sexual implications around fishwives. Lent was a time of plenty for fishwives. Jack Daw's *Vox Graculi* prognosticated that fishwives 'shall weare out more Shooes in *Lent*, then in any 2. Moneths throughout the whole yeare'.¹⁸⁹ Fishwives were thus in an ambiguous position, profiting during a time of abstinence. Lent related in complex ways to sexuality. According to Catholic observation, there should be no human sex in Lent.¹⁹⁰ In the Elizabethan period, Lent became a more political and national affair (see Chapter 3). But 'carnality' was still strongly condemned. The link between animal and human, dead and living flesh was strong. This is clear both from royal proclamations on the subject and contemporary literature. In 1584, Elizabeth issued a proclamation which condemned 'such licentious and carnall disorder, in contempt of god and man, and onelie to the satisfaction of devilishe and carnall appetite'.¹⁹¹ Although the proclamation is clear in its own stance to Lent, it indirectly characterises the season as if anything a particularly carnal one, in contrast to the patriotic ideal the proclamation promotes. The text goes on to single out 'such rebellious and obstinate people that more regard there bellies and appeteth then temperance and obedience'.¹⁹² 'Bellies' had a sexual as well as an alimentary connotation, so although the proclamation mainly concerns flesh in the sense of meat, there is a subtext of flesh in the sense of sexual, living bodies.¹⁹³ Similar royal proclamations were entered into the Repertories in 1587, 1588, 1589, 1590 and 1598.¹⁹⁴

Proclamations had an interest in exaggerating Lent's current carnality, as the awfulness of the present situation justified the proclamation and the measures it contained. But such ambiguity over whether Lent was a time of abstinence or carnality is also typical of contemporary literature. Taylor in his 1620 *Iack a Lent* noted that even when fasting was observed, a man might 'eat Fish til his guts crack'.¹⁹⁵ Some writers blamed salty fish eaten in Lent for a rise in births nine months later, as salt was regarded as an aphrodisiac.¹⁹⁶ Even in relation to forbidden meat, Lent was sometimes glossed as a time of sexual and

¹⁸⁹ Daw, *Vox Graculi*, 48; Adam Foulweather, *A Vvonderfull, Strange and Miraculous Astrological Prognostication for This Yeere 1591* (London, 1591), B[4].

¹⁹⁰ G. R. Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives: Peasants and Illicit Sex in Early Seventeenth Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 38.

¹⁹¹ LMA, Jor. 21, fo. 341.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, fo. 341v.

¹⁹³ Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 55.

¹⁹⁴ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 91, 155v-56v., 258, 366v. For further references to Lent see Rep. 23, fo. 38v.; 22, fo. 75; 30, fo. 85. Similar proclamations were made in 1585, 1594 and 1595. See Paul L. Hughes and James Francis Larkin, eds., *Tudor Royal Proclamations* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 1964), ii:503, 510, 535; iii:3, 36, 134, 143, 188.

¹⁹⁵ John Taylor, *Iack a Lent His Beginning and Entertainment* (London, 1620), B.

¹⁹⁶ Alcala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 148.

alimentary excess. In *The chaste maid of Cheapside*, written by Middleton in around 1613, it is suggested that ‘This Lent will fat the whoresons up with Sweetbreds, / And lard their whores with Lambe-stones . . . The Bawds will be so fat with what they earne / Their Chins will hang like Udders’.¹⁹⁷ The boundary between alimentary and sexual flesh is elided in the play when a woman deliberately gets her basket confiscated by promoters through putting a leg of lamb on top of her bastard child (though obviously the child was conceived outside of Lent).¹⁹⁸ *Smelts* is set in Lent, and the time is described in ambiguous sexual terms: ‘no man is licensed to enjoy a flesh-bit, but those who are so weake, that the very sight contents their appetite: yet every man desireth flesh, that is no whore-master.’¹⁹⁹ A ‘bit’ is a term for genitals.²⁰⁰ Even though fishwives sold fish, the appropriate food for Lent, their association with the season linked them to ambiguous sexual and economic practices. Fish thus functioned as a way of collapsing distinctions between fishwives, as all such women were linked to sexualised wares and their seasons.

Fishwives were also associated with words, speech and noise.²⁰¹ This is partly a reflection of the economic work that fishwives performed, as they attracted customers by crying their fish. Acts refer to fishwives ‘Crying and selling’,²⁰² to goods being ‘uttered’,²⁰³ and to those who ‘carrie & crie fishe & otheres thinges’.²⁰⁴ Fishwives’ cries were represented musically in some early seventeenth-century consort songs, with words like ‘new sprats, sprats, sprats, two-pence a peck’ and ‘New oysters, new Wall-fleet oysters; new mussels, new lily-white mussels’.²⁰⁵ Section I showed fishwives were strongly linked to scolding, and Billingsgate was a byword for such excessive language.²⁰⁶ The crowd in *Westward Hoe* was ‘able to drowne the throats of a shoale of fish wiues’,²⁰⁷ linking fishwives to both fish and loudness.

¹⁹⁷ Thomas Middleton, *A Chast Mayd in Cheape-Side* (London, 1630), 21–22.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24–26.

¹⁹⁹ *VWestward for Smelts*, A3.

²⁰⁰ Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

²⁰¹ On noise, see Wilson, “Plagues, Fairs, and Street Cries”; Spain-Savage, “The Gendered Place Narratives of Billingsgate Fishwives.”

²⁰² LMA, Jor. 29, fo. 187. See also Rep. 21, fo. 115.

²⁰³ LMA, Jor. 22 fo. 378v.-79; 27, fo. 205; 28, fo. 300v.-3001. See also 26, fo. 6v.-7; Rep. 20, fo. 32v.; 27, fo. 200v.; 30, fo. 68.

²⁰⁴ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 303v. See also fo. 250.

²⁰⁵ Brett, *Consort Songs*, 102, 134.

²⁰⁶ “Billingsgate, n.,” OED Online, accessed July 22, 2016,

<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.york.ac.uk/view/Entry/19023?rskey=t6MX8p&result=1&isAdvanced=false>; Monteyne, “‘Scales of Fish Where Flesh Had Been’: Words and Images in Billingsgate Market,” 19, 33.

²⁰⁷ Dekker and Webster, *Vvest-Vvard Hoe*, H3.

If fishwives were associated with loudness, loudness was associated with sexual lewdness. The link between speech and unchastity was pervasive in early modern culture.²⁰⁸ Accusing someone of being ‘a whore of her tongue’ was a common insult.²⁰⁹ References to this slippage between speech and sex abound in early modern literature. For one example, *Vox Graculi* predicted ‘Infirmities also in the tongue; for some shall doe nought but lie, and oftentimes with those they should not.’²¹⁰ There are also many instances where such slippages are directly related to fishwives. In Dekker and Massinger’s 1620 play *The Virgin Martyr*, the drunkard Spungius is briefly reformed. During his short-lived conversion, Spungius declares that ‘the sound of Score a pottle of sack, is worse then the noyse of a scolding oyster wench, or two Cats incorporating.’²¹¹ The oysterwench’s voice is linked to animal sexuality. Robert Wilson in his 1591 pamphlet *Martine Mar-Sextus* wrote that ‘it is with our hackney authors, as with Oyster-wiues, they care not how sweetely, but how loudly they cry, and coming abroad, they are receaued as vnsauory wares’.²¹² The oysterwives themselves are received as sexually ‘unsavoury wares’ as a result of their loudness/lewdness.

The fullest example of this relation between fishwives, speech and sex is *Westward for Smelts* (see Figure 6). In its title, the wives are described as ‘wenches whose tongues, albeit like Bell-clappers, they neuer leaue Ringing, yet their Tales are sweet, and will much content you.’²¹³ ‘Tales’ is a pun on story and genitalia, establishing the link between speech and sex within the pamphlet. A bell-clapper as the tongue of a bell has a phallic undertone, but also gestures to oral sex. This link between sex and speech collapses distinctions between fishwives, as they are all associated with wordiness and wantonness.

²⁰⁸ Bly, *Queer Virgins*, 8; Laura Gowing, “Language, Power and the Law: Women’s Slander Litigation in Early Modern London,” in *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England*, ed. Jennifer Kermode and Garthine Walker (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 35; Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women*, 141, 155–56; Danielle Clarke, *The Politics of Early Modern Women’s Writing* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 25; Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 182.

²⁰⁹ Peter Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance the Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 126.

²¹⁰ Daw, *Vox Graculi*, 33.

²¹¹ Philip Massinger and Thomas Dekker, *The Virgin Martyr: A Tragedie* (London, 1631), G[4].

²¹² Robert Wilson, *Martine Mar-Sixtus: A Second Replie against the Defensory and Apology of Sixtus the Fift Late Pope of Rome* (London, 1591), A[4].

²¹³ *Westward for Smelts*, Titlepage; emphasis in original.

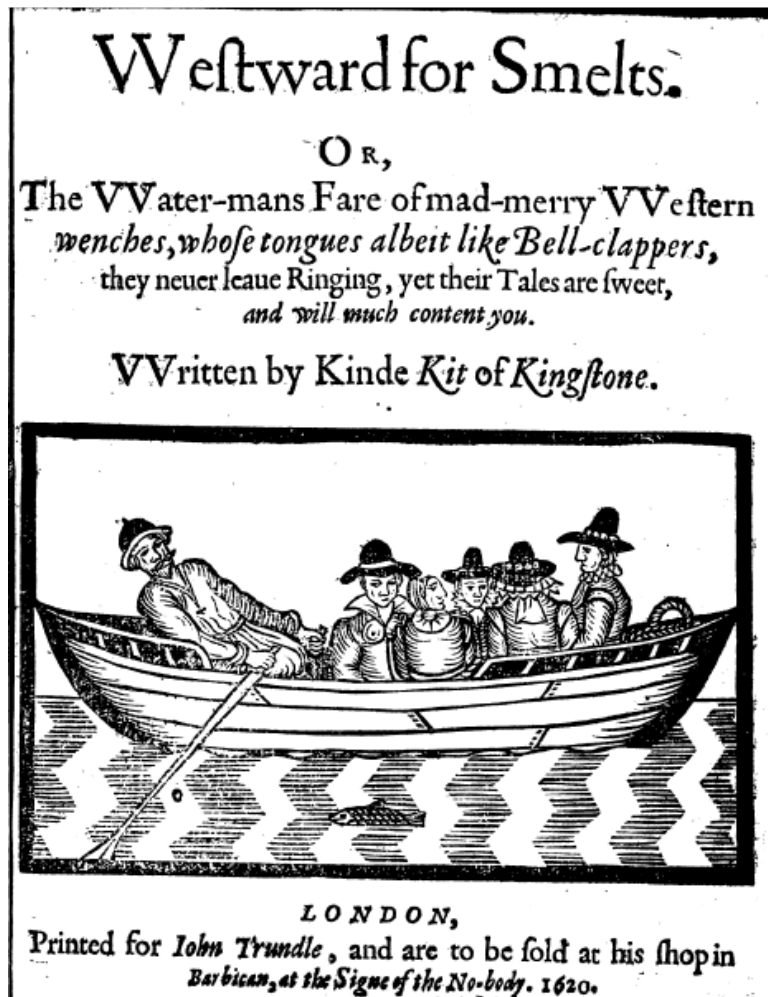


Figure 6: *Westward for Smelts* (London, 1620).

The word fishwife accrued standard, sexualised connotations through the association of fishwives with wares and words. Such thinking functioned to collapse significant economic distinctions between fishwives. Taylor in his 1623 pamphlet, *The World Runnes on Wheelles*, reported that he had heard of six oysterwives who hired a coach, which Taylor depicted as a symbol of luxury and sexual lewdness. During their trip,

they were so be-Madam'd and be-Mistrist, and Ladifide by the Beggars, that the foolish women began to swell with a proud supposition or Imaginary greatnesse, and gave all

their money to the mendicanting Canters; insomuch that they were feigne to pawne their Gownes and Smocks the next day to buy Oysters . . .²¹⁴

The pawning of smocks suggests prostitution. Taylor draws attention to the difference between the fishwives' actual economic precariousness and the status they seek to appropriate. The shared characteristic between the fishwife in the coach and the fishwife on the street is sexual availability. While Taylor seeks to uphold class distinctions, the fishwives he described do not apparently recognise any such difference. Again, *Smelts* offers the most detailed example of the erasure of class distinctions through sexualisation. These Western wives were probably among the most privileged sort of fishwife. Yet the framing of *Smelts* emphasises lowly class origins. The pseudonymous author, Kinde Kit of Kingstone, is styled as waterman, a tradesman depicted alongside other hucksters in consort songs.²¹⁵ The waterman's boat was 'a social leveller' in early modern London, creating conversations between watermen and gentlemen.²¹⁶ In the tales themselves, class is de-emphasised in comparison to *Smelts*' intertexts (see Chapter 2). Focusing on the shared sexual lewdness of fishwives in *Smelts* and in other sources entails decreased attention to economic status.

Ultimately, this sexualisation collapsed distinctions between all women, not just between fishwives. In the c. 1612 ballad *I Have Fresh Cheese and Creame*, a milkmaid is contrasted to a fishwife: 'She sung not like an Oyster whore, / That ratleth in the throat'. However, the milkmaid herself also betrays whorish qualities: 'her Ware she opened straight / To any that would buy', and the singer wants to spend the night with her, although she remains aloof.²¹⁷ Market women, even given their differing desirability, are all whores in this ballad. In *An Excellent New Ditty*, the conclusion reached by the devil is not simply to avoid the fishwives who have overwhelmed him, but all women: 'I am willing / to deale among men, / But nere will have dealing, / 'mongst women agen.'²¹⁸ A proverb current at least until the early sixteenth century held that 'Fish and women are better and sweeter in

²¹⁴ John Taylor, *The World Runnes on Vyheelles: Or Oddes, Betwixt Carts and Coaches* (London, 1623), B4.

²¹⁵ Brett, *Consort Songs*, 121, 129.

²¹⁶ Bernard Capp, "John Taylor 'the Water-Poet': A Cultural Amphibian in 17th-Century England," *History of European Ideas* 11, no. 1–6 (1989): 540.

²¹⁷ *A New Ballad Intituled, I Have Fresh Cheese and Creame* (London, 1612).

²¹⁸ *An Excellent New Ditty*.

the tail'.²¹⁹ The characteristics that fishwives shared, or were thought to share, were coloured by sexualised and gendered thinking, which ultimately fed into negative perceptions of all women.

The erasure of class distinctions and stereotyping of all women reveals the fundamentally misogynist nature of such thinking. Laura Gowing argued that collapsing distinctions between women in this way was a misogynistic method of obscuring class boundaries.²²⁰ Historians should avoid replicating such homogenisation, and attend to the real differences among fishwives. Nevertheless, the sexual history of fishwives is remarkably homogenous on a superficial level. I seek to resolve this problem in Chapter 2 by examining specifically *sexual* difference among fishwives. For the purposes of this section, the key point is that in spite of the many differences between them, contemporaries still thought of fishwives as a single, sexualised group. This functioned through fishwives' association with wares and words, which were strongly linked to sexual lewdness.

Conclusion: 'It depends'

The definition of the word 'fishwife' was a contemporary problem. A fishwife could be licensed or unlicensed, and her work overlapped with that of other hucksters. Not only this, but there were significant class and geographical differences amongst fishwives, as well as direct conflict between them. The use of the term to refer to such a diverse range of people was determined not simply by the economic role of the person in question, but by gendered political interests.

The meanings attached to the word fishwife and the purposes of naming people as such is likely to have been very different in different places. It should by now be clear that it would be inappropriate to conclude this chapter with any unitary definition of 'fishwife', even within the City context. Rather, investigation has shown that fishwives were socially 'queer': contemporaries were concerned by the fluid definition of these women. There are important political reasons not to extend the application of 'queer' infinitely beyond the realm of sexuality, but it applies to the social construction of fishwives at least as an

²¹⁹ Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 135.

²²⁰ Laura Gowing, "Women, Status and the Popular Culture of Dishonour," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1996): 226, 234.

analogue. As with so many questions of definition, the answer to ‘What is a fishwife?’ is, ‘It depends’ – but this is in itself an important historical conclusion.²²¹

For fishwives, it depended on the changing nature of the early modern economy, the political interests of the City and the Company of Fishmongers, and widespread misogyny. This analysis has added to the historiography of women’s work, and of fishwives, by not only complicating the application of the term ‘fishwife’, but seeking to explain the causes of such usage. Occupational labels were political and sexual ascriptions as well as economic ones, and their application was often instrumental. Strikingly given the diverse meanings of ‘fishwife’, the term carried a fairly standard range of sexualised connotations. This renders sexuality a key problematic in studying different kinds of fishwife together, as it linked them more persuasively for contemporaries than any economic role did. The functioning of these sexual understandings is the concern of the next chapter.

²²¹ This is Moi’s famous answer to the question, “What is a woman?”. See Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman?: And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), x.

Chapter 2: Swimming against the stream: fishwives and queer sexuality

Introduction: Wayward (fish)wives

The fifty-fifth jest in the 1532 pamphlet *Tales, and quicke answers* is entitled ‘Of hym that sought his wyfe agaynst the streme’. It tells the story of a husband whose wife drowns. Their neighbours wonder to see the husband search for his wife up- rather than downstream. The husband explains, ‘she was so waywarde and so contrary to every thyng, while she lyvedde, that I knowe very well nowe she is deed, she wyll go a gaynste the streame.’¹ This chapter asks how fishwives were considered sexually ‘waywarde’, and why. Current historiography shows that the term fishwife carried sexual connotations.² But the different ways in which fishwives’ sexuality was imagined have not been interrogated. There is a danger of simply replicating early modern misogyny on the lustfulness and lewdness of all women.³ This is exacerbated by the fact that most scholarship on fishwives only seriously considers one of archival or literary sources. Comparison of the two reveals very different understandings of what was queer about fishwives – queer in the sense of sexually non-normative and ambiguous.

Studying what was queer about fishwives contributes to historical and literary scholarship on women and sexuality. In historical work, it is rare for non-heterosexual relations to be considered.⁴ For example, Geoffrey Quaife’s *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives* briefly notes homosexual relations between men, but fails to even mention the possibility of women loving women.⁵ In *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* meanwhile, Martin Ingram wrote that it was rare for the authorities to punish ‘extramarital sex which fell short of full intercourse.’⁶ The implication of this undefined phrase is that readers will assume that ‘full intercourse’ is penetrative (and probably heterosexual) sex. Amy Louise Erickson’s *Women and Property in Early Modern England* described the case of a single woman who left small bequests to three female friends, one of whom wrote her will. The woman’s executor was a local carpenter, who Erickson

¹ *Tales, and Quicke Answers: Very Mery, and Pleasant to Rede* (London, 1532), F. For the same jest, see also *Pasquils Iests, Mixed with Mother Bunches Merriments* (London, 1604), B2.

² See especially Griffiths, *Lost Londons*; Spain-Savage, “The Gendered Place Narratives of Billingsgate Fishwives,” 419.

³ See Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 22–23.

⁴ For a notable exception, see the section “Female intimacies” in Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 64–73.

⁵ Quaife, *Wanton Wenches*, 246.

⁶ Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640*, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 240.

suggests may have been a friend or sweetheart.⁷ The possibility that any or all of the women involved may have been sweethearts does not occur. My point here is not that the historians mentioned are necessarily homophobic. Rather, their interpretations of sexuality are surprisingly narrow given the range of early modern sexual possibilities that literary scholars have demonstrated.

If there are problems with this historical work, scholarship on early modern sexuality also has limits. There is a lack of work on the sexuality of poorer groups, especially working women. Most of the canonical works in the field concern men.⁸ Of those notable exceptions that focus on female sexuality, especially Traub's *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, none devote sustained attention to working women.⁹ This is largely due to the literary focus of such work, which biases conclusions to the wealthier and more literate classes. Moreover, the literature examined is usually of a particularly elite kind. Taking the relatively cheap pamphlet *Smelts* and archival sources on fishwives as my evidence, and applying the insights of queer theory to them, adds new dimensions to both literary and historical scholarship on early modern working women and their sexuality.

Section I takes *Smelts* as a literary case study. Reading the pamphlet alongside its intertexts and other sources, I argue that *Smelts* suggested erotic intimacies between women. Section II argues that historical fishwives were seen as sexually deviant in a different way, according to their relationship to legitimate work. Together, these sections unpick the obvious, that fishwives were considered lewd, and tell a more complex history of how this lewdness operated in different sources and groups.

Section I: '[W]ee will sleepe for company': women loving women in *Westward for Smelts*

The term fishwife had a standard set of sexual associations which were applied to all fishwives, at least superficially. Chapter 1, section III showed that both City and Western

⁷ Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 193.

⁸ Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 2nd ed. (London: Gay Men's Press, 1988); Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Gregory W. Bredbeck, *Sodomy and Interpretation: Marlowe to Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodomities: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁹ For instance, A. Harriette Andreadis, *Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics, 1550-1714* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1; Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 21; Theodora A. Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

fishwives were considered lewd. Indeed, words like ‘wayward’ and ‘lewd’ were used broadly to describe ambiguous, deviant behaviour, and can often be read as approximate to the modern usage of ‘queer’. But not all lewdness was the same, and close analysis of the pamphlet suggests that something very particular is happening in *Smelts*. Most of the tales had been told many times before in English and in other languages. There is thus a cultural script to the stories, a way in which we and contemporary readers could expect them to be told. However, the *Smelts* tales all differ from their intertexts in ways which consistently signal female homoeroticism and indicate the appropriateness of queer reading. I am not arguing that *Smelts* gave ‘incontrovertible descriptions’ of such eroticism, rather that it was strongly suggested and a plausible contemporary reading.¹⁰ This section begins with an introduction to *Smelts* as a pamphlet. Then I consider the tales of the wives of Brainford, Richmond and Twitnam to show how alternative homoerotic plots are suggested. Similar sexual dynamics operate throughout the whole pamphlet, in the frame and the character of Kit. While *Smelts* varies considerably from its intertexts, other contemporary pamphlets contain similar female homoerotic potential. This section concludes with a discussion of some of these texts, and argues that both *Smelts* and early modern literature in general contain a greater diversity of sexual understandings than has been realised.

Westward for Smelts is a forty-four page pamphlet that was printed for John Trundle by George Purslowe, and entered into the stationers’ register on 15 January 1620.¹¹ Purslowe was a printer and bookseller in London from 1614 to 1632, working near the East end of Christ Church.¹² Trundle was a London bookseller from 1603 to 1626, and from 1613 worked in Barbican at the sign of the Nobody, where *Smelts* was sold.¹³ Trundle had a reputation for bawdy pamphlets and ballads, but published a diverse range of works.¹⁴ Gerald Johnson argued that Trundle was more notorious than he was financially successful, which explains why he printed cheaper and more ephemeral pamphlets of old and foreign origin – all of which characteristics fits *Smelts* well.¹⁵ The pseudonymous author of the pamphlet is ‘Kinde Kit of Kingstone’, who also features as the waterman in the narrative

¹⁰ Theodora A. Jankowski, “. . . in the Lesbian Void: Women-Women Eroticism in Shakespeare’s Plays,” in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymna Callaghan (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000), 310–11.

¹¹ Edward Arber, ed., *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554-1640*, vol. iii (London, 1876), 663.

¹² Ronald Brunlees McKerrow, *A Dictionary of Printers and Booksellers in England, Scotland and Ireland, and of Foreign Printers of English Books, 1557-1640* (London: Blades, East & Blades, 1910), 222.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁴ See Gerald D. Johnson, “John Trundle and the Book-Trade 1603-1626,” *Studies in Bibliography* 39 (1986): 177–99; Mark S. R. Jenner, “Plague on a Page: Lord Have Mercy Upon Us in Early Modern London,” *The Seventeenth Century* 27, no. 3 (2012): 225.

¹⁵ Johnson, “John Trundle and the Book-Trade 1603-1626,” 198.

frame.¹⁶ The title page sports the pamphlet's only woodcut, depicting five fishwives in a boat rowed by a waterman (see Figure 5). This image fits the content of the pamphlet so neatly (only missing out one fishwife, presumably for reasons of space) that it is likely that it was commissioned for *Westwards for Smelts*. The pamphlet survives in three copies, all published in London in 1620, and now housed at Harvard University, the Folger Shakespeare Library and Trinity College, Cambridge.¹⁷

The premise of *Smelts* is that six fishwives are taken from Queenhithe westward up the Thames by Kinde Kit, the waterman. Kit sings his passengers a song, and they respond in turn with six tales or novelle. Each tale is preceded by a verse description of its narrator, given by Kit, and followed by discussion of the story by the other fishwives in the boat. The fishwives are from Brainford, Standon-the-Greene, Richmond, Twitnam, Kingston, and Hampton. The tales told by the first three fishwives follow plots found in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, as tales VII.viii, II.ix, and VII.iv respectively. The latter three tales have Boccaccian elements, and the journey is Chaucerian in form. Ian Munro argues that *Smelts* could be read as part of a series of Boccaccian/Chaucerian pamphlets, beginning in 1590 with *Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie* and *The Cobler of Caunterburie*.¹⁸ *Smelts* was published in the same year as the first full English translation of the *Decameron*, which was entered into the register in March 1620.¹⁹ Possibly the author of *Smelts* had access to some of this text. The wife of Standon-the-Greene's tale tells the 'wager' plot, as does Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, which was probably written around 1610 and first printed in 1623.²⁰ This has led to some speculation of an earlier publication date for *Smelts*. In 1773, George Stevens claimed to have seen a 1603 edition of *Smelts*, and F.P. Wilson argued that a 1604 play refers to the pamphlet.²¹ The stationer's register does not contain an earlier entry, so this seems to be simply speculation. Regardless, the tales in *Smelts* have a rich intertextual history.

¹⁶ Brown has suggested that this might be a dig at Christopher (Kit) Marlowe. See Brown, *Better a Shrew*, 105.

¹⁷ "Westward for Smelts" (London, 1620), Capell. Q.8[4], Trinity College Cambridge; "Westward for Smelts" (London, 1620), STC 25292, Folger Shakespeare Library; "Westward for Smelts" (London, 1620), STC 25292, Harvard University.

¹⁸ Ian Munro, ed., *"A Woman's Answer Is Neuer to Seke": Early Modern Jestbooks, 1526-1635* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), xxii; Richard Tarlton and Robert Armin, *Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie* (At London, 1590); *The Cobler of Caunterburie, or An Inuectiue against Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie* (London, 1590).

¹⁹ Arber, *A Transcript of the Registers*, iii:667; Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron: Containing an Hundred Pleasant Nouels.*, vol. 1 (London, 1620).

²⁰ William Shakespeare, "All's Well, That Ends Well," in *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (London, 1623), 230–54. I have used the 1623 edition throughout as there is not scope in this thesis to survey Shakespeare scholarship and editions in detail.

²¹ Brown, *Better a Shrew*, 107, n. 66.

Several of the tales in *Smelts* differ in suggestive ways from their intertexts. The first tale is told by the wife of Brainford. The story is set in Windsor and follows the ‘substitution’ plot. A young woman who is ‘something wanton’ has married an old man who is ‘something jealous’.²² The husband goes on a journey, and the wife takes a lover to revenge her husband’s jealousy. An old woman acts as bawd for the lovers. The husband returns earlier than expected, only to find his wife absent. When she returns from her lover’s house, the husband in a rage ties his wife to a post, ‘vowing she should stand there al night, to coole her hote blood.’²³ That night, the old woman sneaks in and takes the wife’s place to allow the lovers to meet. The husband wakes in a rage, and thinking in the dark that the bawd is his wife, cuts her nose to mark her as a whore. In the morning, his wife, who has been restored to the post, is unscathed. The husband is convinced ‘that the heavens will not suffer the Innocent to suffer harme’, begs forgiveness, and gives his wife ‘more libertie than before’.²⁴

This tale has a long history, going back at least to the Sanskrit fable collection *Panchatantra*, written between 100 BCE and 500 CE.²⁵ This was available in English from 1570 in Doni’s *Morall Philosophie*. Other versions include Somadeva’s eleventh-century *Katha sarit sagara*, the thirteenth-century French fabliau *Li fabliaux des tresces*, tale XXXVIII in the fifteenth-century *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles*, and tale VII.viii in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. English versions appear in *The deceyte of women* (1557), *The made men of Gotam* (1565), *The Cobler of Caunterburie* (1590), and the early seventeenth-century plays, *Women Pleas’d* and *The Guardian*.²⁶ The closest of these stories to Brainford’s tale are those by Somadeva, Doni and especially Boccaccio.

There are several differences between Brainford’s tale and its intertexts. First, the status of the substitute varies across different versions. In many, the substitute is of inferior status to the wife. In the *Decameron*, she is a young maid, who unwillingly stands in for her mistress in exchange for pay.²⁷ The same is true of the story in *The Cobler of*

²² *VWestward for Smelts*, B.

²³ *Ibid.*, B2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, B3.

²⁵ Somadeva Bhatta, *The Ocean of Story, Being C.H. Tawney’s Translation of Somadeva’s Katha Sarit Sagara*, ed. Norman Mosley Penzer, trans. Charles Henry Tawney (London, 1924), 225; “Panchatantra,” *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford University Press, January 2005), 306.

²⁶ See Appendix for full references.

²⁷ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decamerone*. (Florence, 1483), np; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decamerone* (Vinegia, 1522), 197v.; Giovanni Boccace, *Le Decameron*, trans. Antoine Le Macon (Paris, 1558), 669; Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron: Containing an Hundred Pleasant Nouels.*, vol. 2 (London, 1620), 43; Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Modell of Vvit, Mirth, Eloquence, and Conuersation* (London, 1625), 11.

Caunterburie.²⁸ Indeed, in some versions the substitute is even a butt of the joke. In *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles* and *The deceyte of women*, which follows the former closely, the substitute is the wife's neighbour and a young widow. The wife pretends to be sexually exhausted by her husband, and the neighbour agrees to stand in as a sexual substitute, only to be bloodily beaten instead.²⁹ However, there are also some versions of the tale with less unequal relationships between the wife and the substitute. Some editions of the *Decameron* have simply 'un altra femina' or 'another woman' rather than a maid,³⁰ and in *Li fabliaux des tresces* the substitute is 'une soe amie', or 'one of her friends'.³¹ *Smelts* fits this latter pattern, as the substitute is simply 'a woman in the towne' who acts as 'the procurer of her friend'.³²

But *Smelts* is the only version of the story that I have found in which the substitute herself suggests the swap: 'Content you, said the old Wife, I will bide the brunt of all'.³³ This is not perhaps an entirely disinterested offer: as part of the resolution of the tale, 'the old had gold for her wound'.³⁴ Moreover, the bawd regrets her offer once the husband gets angry: she 'wished (with all her heart) her selfe out of doores, and his Wife in her old place'.³⁵ Nevertheless, in all other versions that I have found, the wife initiates the substitution, not the bawd. In *Smelts*, the bawd is older than the wife, unlike in other versions, and exercises more agency. Comparison of different versions of the tale thus shows a more equal relationship between the two women than is usual.

The second important variation between Brainford's tale and its intertexts is the treatment of speech. Chapter 1 noted how speech was commonly glossed as a sexual activity, including in *Smelts*' title. In the *Decameron*, sexualised speech is shared between the wife and her male lover, Roberto: 'softly she would open to him, and there in private converse with him'.³⁶ But in Brainford's tale, speech and implicitly its sexual dimension are shared between the wife and the old woman. The wife 'gave the old woman a key which would open her doore, by which meanes shee might come to the speech of her at any time

²⁸ *The Cobler of Caunterburie*, I3.

²⁹ Franklin Sweetser, ed., *Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1966), 263–65.

³⁰ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decamerone* (Brescia, 1536), 299v.; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decameron* (Venice, 1554), 321; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decameron* (Florence, 1573), xii; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, ed. Lionardo Salviati (Firenze, 1587), 381.

³¹ M. Méon, ed., "Li Fabliaux des Tresces," in *Nouveau recueil de fabliaux et contes inédits, des poètes français des XIIIe, XIIIe, XIVe et XVe siècles*, vol. 1 (Paris: chez Chasseriau, 1823), 347.

³² *Vestward for Smelts*, B.

³³ *Ibid.*, B2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, B3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, B2.

³⁶ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 2:42.

of the night'.³⁷ The key in the door is a potentially sexual metaphor. It is also striking that the night-time meetings envisaged in this passage are between the women, not the 'lovers'. Another instance of this occurs on the husband's unexpected return. The wife 'had appointed the old Woman to come and call her that night: Seeing her Husband, you may iudge what a taking this poore Woman was in'.³⁸ Although this assignation between the women is plausibly motivated by the sexual relation between the wife and her lover, this is not made explicit.

The erotic potential of speech between women spills out of the tale into the frame at the end of the story. Brainford, supposedly an external narrator, comments that the cut on the bawd's nose healed so well 'that you can scarce see it on my nose'.³⁹ Brainford thus ruptures the separation between tale and frame, revealing herself to be the bawd in the story.⁴⁰ Afterwards, 'knowing that excuses would but make her more suspected, she held her tongue'.⁴¹ This implies that there is more to be let out of the bag about Brainford, potentially including an erotic relationship between herself and the wife in the story. Taken together, the unusual treatment of the bawd's status and of speech in *Smelts* creates erotic potential between the women in the tale (and in the boat) that is not present in other versions of the story.

The next tale in *Smelts* is told by the wife of Standon-the-Greene, and is discussed in Chapter 3. The third tale, told by the wife of Richmond, is very similar to Brainford's. Again, I will outline the plot and intertexts, before analysing variation from other versions and its implications. In Richmond's tale, a jealous old man marries a young damsel. He mistreats her, such that his wife has 'so miserable a life with him, that she rather wished to be with the dead'.⁴² She complains to her friend and they arrange to meet at night. The wife takes the key from under her husband's pillow, and visits her friend while her husband is asleep. One night however, the husband wakes to find his wife gone. At first he does nothing, and treats his wife better for a while. He waits for the next time she leaves, and locks her out of the house. The wife returns to find the door locked, and pleads with her husband, claiming she has 'beene at a womans labour'.⁴³ This fails to convince the husband,

³⁷ *VWestward for Smelts*, A5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, B–B2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, B3.

⁴⁰ See Marguerite de Navarre, *L'Heptaméron des nouvelles* (Lyon, 1581), 719 for a similar breach of narrative frame.

⁴¹ *VWestward for Smelts*, B3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, D.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, D2.

so the wife pretends to drown herself by throwing a great stone into the well. The sound brings her husband ‘hastily out of the doore to helpe her’, whereupon the wife steps into the house and locks *him* out.⁴⁴ The wife sends for her family and declares her husband has been out whoring, whereupon the couple divorce.

Like Brainford’s tale, this story has many intertexts. The parent version is probably of ninth-century Persian origin.⁴⁵ It is found in *The Seven Wise Masters*, available in English in the seventeenth century. The English version of this collection is set in Rome, as is the late thirteenth-century French text, *Li roman des sept sages*. The tale also appears in Petrus Alphonsi’s twelfth-century *Disciplina Clericalis*, in the *Decameron* as tale VII.iv, and in Deloney’s *Jack of Newburie* (1619).⁴⁶

There is one key variation between Richmond’s tale and the other versions of the story: the gender of the friend. In all other versions, the wife goes out to see her lover, who in all but one case is explicitly male. In the *Decameron*, the lover is ‘suo amante’ and ‘un giovane’,⁴⁷ ‘un fort honeste ieune homme’,⁴⁸ and a ‘young Gallant’, described using masculine pronouns.⁴⁹ The only version where the wife has an ungendered ‘Paramour’ is *The Seven Wise Masters*, but here the lover receives no extended attention.⁵⁰ Not so in Richmond’s tale: here the wife’s friend is explicitly female, and described as ‘her Pew-fellow (which was a wench that would not be out-faced by her Husbands great looks)’.⁵¹ That the gender of the wife’s friend is different in Richmond’s tale in itself foregrounds female intimacies. Even more strikingly, their relationship remains potentially sexual, and is treated as adultery by both spouses. The pew-fellow suggests ‘if wee cannot finde sport to passe away the time, wee will sleepe for company’.⁵² ‘Company’ and ‘sport’ both had sexual overtones,⁵³ and sleeping together was an intimate and ambiguous pastime.⁵⁴ The women only meet at night, and the husband characterises his wife’s behaviours as ‘night-

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Karen E. Rowe, “To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale,” in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 61.

⁴⁶ See Appendix for full references.

⁴⁷ Boccaccio, *Il decamerone*, 1522, 189v.

⁴⁸ Boccace, *Le Decameron*, 1558, 641.

⁴⁹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 2:31.

⁵⁰ *Here Beginneth Thystorye of the Seuen Wyse Maysters of Rome* (London, 1555), D.

⁵¹ *VWestward for Smelts*, D.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work*, 135–50; Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 3:1291–92.

⁵⁴ Alan Bray, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England,” in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 42; Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 60–70.

walking'.⁵⁵ Moreover, the husband reads the wife's absence as proof of adultery, calling her 'Whore' many times.⁵⁶ The wife also seems to view her behaviour as adulterous. While the husband awaited his chance, he treated his wife better than usual, 'which made her to beleeve the Proverbe is true (Cuckolds are kinde men) for before she played loose with him, she never had that good usage at his hand'.⁵⁷ She also mockingly demands her husband to 'bee a patient Cuckolde' once she has locked him out.⁵⁸ Richmond's tale is an adultery plot, both in its literary history and in the unique treatment of the relationship between the wife and pew-fellow in *Smelts*. The story, like that of the wife of Brainford, differs from its intertexts in ways which foreground the sexual potential of female relationships.

The next story is told by the wife of Twitnam. In this short tale, an envious hermit is sceptical of the holiness of the king, who after all has a wife. The king agrees to let the hermit 'be served in all points as the King her Royall husband was' by the queen.⁵⁹ After a disappointingly frugal supper, the hermit and the queen go to bed. The hermit makes repeated sexual advances on the queen, only to be plunged into a tub of cold water on each attempt. He finally gives up, 'halfe drowned'.⁶⁰ The hermit learns to respect the king better, and not to 'looke into other mens lives'.⁶¹

The only intertext I have located for Twitnam's tale is tale CXXXV in *The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry*, written in French in the late fourteenth century, and published in English in 1484. Remarkably given the bawdy nature of *Smelts* overall, Twitnam's tale is much less explicit than its intertext. In *La Tour Landry*, the lady advances upon the hermit rather than the other way round: 'the Lady undyed her clothes and leyde her self by him / and beganne to embrace and [take] hym'. After his first dowsing, 'the lady embraced hym ageyne so moche that he gate hete'.⁶² At the end of the tale, we find that the royal couple always keep a cold bath in their chamber, for use 'as soone as she or he is chauffed' - 'excepte one daye of the weke' for procreative purposes.⁶³ This implies that in spite of their holiness, they still have desires. In *Smelts* however, the royal couple do not

⁵⁵ *VWestward for Smelts*, D2. For the sexual connotations of nightwalking, see Paul Griffiths, "Meanings of Nightwalking in Early Modern England," *Seventeenth Century* 13, no. 2 (1998): 212–38.

⁵⁶ *VWestward for Smelts*, D2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, D3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, D[4].

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Geoffroy de La Tour Landry, *Here Begynneth the Booke Which the Knyght of the Toure Made: And Speketh of Many Fayre Ensamples and Thensygnementys and Techyng of His Doughters*, trans. William Caxton (Westminster, 1484), Miiii.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, M[v].

have sex at all. After their first son was conceived, they ‘willingly agreed . . . not to touch one the other after any carnall manner’.⁶⁴ Moreover, any routine use of the tub to restrain sexual impulses is not mentioned, diminishing the emphasis on the wife’s own sexual impulses. This might imply that the queen in *Smelts* does not have any, or that she does not have them for her husband – or for men in general. This latter possibility is supported by the presence of female servants in *Smelts*. In *La Tour Landry*, the lady manages the hermit alone: when he gets too excited, ‘she prayd hym that he wold for the love of her goo and wasshe hym’.⁶⁵ In Twitnam’s tale, the lady calls on four waiting women, who forcibly dunk the hermit.⁶⁶ There is thus characteristically a greater emphasis on female solidarity in the *Smelts* version, which might shade into erotic solidarity given the greatly reduced (hetero)sexual depiction of the queen.

Such a reading is supported by recent scholarship on chastity. Chastity has often been taken as given, and assumed to be non-erotic.⁶⁷ Recent work has problematized chastity and suggested that it could also be sexual. There is a weak case that chastity was sometimes sexual as it was based on distinctions between the married and the unmarried, which were increasingly ambiguous especially in London.⁶⁸ A stronger case is that chastity was also understood through the distinction between penetrative and non-penetrative sex. If in patriarchal early modern society the sexual was reduced to the penetrative, then non-penetrative sexual activity would not be unchaste. Traub argued convincingly that chastity and non-penetrative sexuality could be linked,⁶⁹ and so chastity could have erotic potential, especially between women.⁷⁰ Theodora Jankowski too has conceptualised ‘virginity as coincident with desire’ rather than in opposition to it.⁷¹ This more refined understanding of chastity allows for the possibility of erotic relations between Twitnam’s ‘vertuous and chaste Dame’ and her waiting women.⁷² There is no strong case for this reading, particularly as Twitnam’s tale is so brief. But such a reading does explain the diminishing of the queen’s sexual agency in relation to the hermit and her husband as a diminishing of her heterosexual desire, rather than her desire in general. This is in keeping with the generally bawdy nature

⁶⁴ *VWestward for Smelts*, D[4].

⁶⁵ *La Tour Landry, Here Begynneth the Booke Which the Knyght of the Toure Made*, Miiii.

⁶⁶ *VWestward for Smelts*, E.

⁶⁷ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 127–28.

⁶⁸ Dabhoiwala, “The Pattern of Sexual Immorality in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century London,” 92.

⁶⁹ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷¹ Jankowski’s position in Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan, and Dymphna Callaghan, *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13; Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*.

⁷² *VWestward for Smelts*, D[4].

of *Smelts*. Such a reading also places the Twitnam tale in dialogue with those of Richmond and Brainford on the subject of women loving women, and explains the otherwise unnecessary addition of the four waiting women. There is much that is convincing about this sexual reading of chastity.⁷³

That three tales in *Smelts* have such erotic resonances by chance seems unlikely. Turning to the pamphlet overall, it too exhibits potentially queer erotic linkages, in the title and the character of Kit. ‘Westward for Smelts’ is a somewhat obscure phrase that seems to refer to being caught/out. In the 1608 pamphlet *The Great Frost*, two men discuss the Thames being frozen over. One asks the other, ‘have none gone westward for smelts (as our proverbiall phrase is?)’. He is answered with stories of misfortune, including falling into holes in the ice and drowning.⁷⁴ ‘Smelt’ was another word for simpleton, possibly because the fish was thought to be easily caught due to its greed.⁷⁵ This meaning links misfortune to sexual misconduct, as greed and lust were intertwined. The word ‘smelt’ was also ‘associated with woman in her sexual capacity’.⁷⁶ In *Westward Hoe*, Judith describes the wives’ escapade as ‘being gone Westward for smelts all night.’⁷⁷ This sexual dimension can be explained with reference to the habits of the fish itself, which was probably only ever found westward in the breeding season. The smelt is in fact anadromous, spending most of its life in the sea and returning to freshwater only to spawn.⁷⁸ The fish was referred to both as a freshwater and a sea fish by contemporaries, showing that they knew of its ambiguous status.⁷⁹

The title of *Westward for Smelts* thus has many meanings. There is a misogynist one, which depicts the fishwives and their heroines as idiots and anticipates their come-uppance. But there is also a sexual undertone which is particularly associated with women,

⁷³ There is a danger in erasing asexual possibilities by overemphasising the erotic in texts like *Smelts*. I have not located any historical treatments of asexuality, and without fuller exploration of how it functioned in this period, all that can be said here is that such a reading is possible, without passing comment on its relative plausibility.

⁷⁴ *The Great Frost* (London, 1608), B2.

⁷⁵ Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 3:1258.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Dekker and Webster, *Vvest-Vvard Hoe*, D2.

⁷⁸ “Smelt: *Osmerus Eperlanus*,” *JNCC: Joint Nature Conservation Committee*, accessed September 29, 2016, <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5667>; “European Smelt (*Osmerus Eperlanus*),” *MarLIN: The Marine Life Information Network*, accessed September 29, 2016, <http://www.marlin.ac.uk/species/detail/146>; J. Freyhof, “*Osmerus Eperlanus*: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2013: e.T15631A4924600,” 2013, <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/15631/0>.

⁷⁹ Breton, *VVits Trenchmour*, C2; John Taylor, *The Praise of Hemp-Seed* (London, 1620), 64.

the illicit, and the ambiguous. Reread through the cumulative effects of the tales of Brainford, Richmond, and Twitnam, these undertones take on a more particular, homoerotic meaning. The fishwives whose tongues ‘never leave ringing, yet their Tales are sweet’, are after all sharing their speech, their tales, and potentially their tongues and genitals, with one another.⁸⁰ The title thus frames the pamphlet itself as a potentially erotic female exchange.

The character of Kit, and particularly his literary associations, also suggest queer sexual concerns in the pamphlet. Kit is a waterman and gendered male. On the frontispiece, Kit has a beard (see Figure 7). Watermen in this period had a literary reputation, through the works of John Taylor, the water-poet. However, in Taylor’s work, the gendered position of the waterman is unstable because of the feminising effects of service. In the 1621 *Taylor’s Motto*, Taylor writes of the waterman that ‘though he be not of female kind, / Yet he’s most like unto a Whore I find: / For both, the more unready that they be, / Both are most ready for their trade we see’.⁸¹ Watermen are also likened to bawds in Taylor’s 1635 *A Bawd*: ‘As the Watermen rowes one way, and looks another, so a *Bawds* words and meaning doe very seldome goe together.’⁸² This association between watermen and female sex workers thus goes beyond the fact that watermen frequently ferried prostitutes, to elide their behaviours.



Figure 7: Kinde Kit, frontispiece of *Westward for Smelts* (London, 1620).

⁸⁰ *Westward for Smelts*, frontispiece.

⁸¹ John Taylor, *Taylor’s Motto: Et Habeo, et Careo, et Curo* (London, 1621), D[7].

⁸² Taylor, *A Bawd*, B[6].

An even queerer resonance of Kit's status as a waterman is a linkage with Sappho. Taylor frequently commented that '*Sappho* a Poetesse, a Lady fam'd, / Did wed a Waterman was *Phaon* nam'd'.⁸³ Superficially, this link between Sappho and watermen associates Kit with Phaon. Even so, Kit's gender becomes queerer, as Phaon was frequently linked to effeminacy. Phaon is described as 'a beardless youth'⁸⁴ with a 'young effeminate face',⁸⁵ and addressed as 'thou that neyther art / a boy, nor man in sight'.⁸⁶ Of course this relates to age as well as gender, but the two are connected. Sexuality is also part of this characterisation, as Phaon is so beautiful 'that man in man might love'; and that Sappho 'fear'd *Mars* might dote on thee.'⁸⁷ Whether a man might love Phaon because he is beautiful or because he looks like a woman is undetermined, as is Phaon's gender identity. Kit's status as a man is less stable in the light of such associations.

As well as being linked to Phaon, Kit was associated with Sappho herself through the writing and singing of verse. Kit opens the journey by singing a song, and prefaces each tale with a verse description of the fishwife telling it. Taylor was primarily a poet, and Sappho was famous as a poetess. Although 1620 predates the conscious use of Sappho as a symbol of female desire identified by Harriette Andreadis, Sappho's sexual history was available in English in translations of Ovid's letter from Sappho to Phaon.⁸⁸ In a 1567 translation, Sappho lists female lovers and references 'a hundreth mo / whom (shame ylayd aside) / I fancide erste'.⁸⁹ This is rendered as 'hundreds more with whom my sins are knowne' in a 1637 version.⁹⁰ John Donne's 1633 poem *Sappho to Philaenis* was even more explicit, when Sappho tells her female lover Philaenis, 'of our dallyance no more signes there are, / Then *fishes* leave in streames'.⁹¹ Kit's gender is unstable in ways which associate the character with homoerotic intimacies. Kit is not directly referred to in relation to Taylor or to Sappho/Phaon, so these associations are only latent in *Smelts*. However, they were the most prominent ways of thinking about watermen in a literary context. The cumulative

⁸³ Quote from Taylor, *Taylor's Motto*, D[6]; see also John Taylor, *A Cast over the Vvater* (London, 1615), C[3]; John Taylor, *A Common Vvhore: Vvith All These Graces Grac'd: Shee's Very Honest, Beautifull and Chaste* (London, 1622), B.

⁸⁴ Ovid, *The Heroicall Epistles of the Learned Poet Publius Ouidius Naso*, trans. George Turberville (London, 1567), 112.

⁸⁵ Ovid, *Ovids Heroicall Epistles*, trans. John Sherburne (London, 1639), 153.

⁸⁶ Ovid, *The Heroicall Epistles*, 1567, 112.

⁸⁷ Ovid, *Ovids Heroicall Epistles*, trans. Wye Saltonstall (London, 1637), 140.

⁸⁸ Andreadis, *Sappho in Early Modern England*, 51–52.

⁸⁹ Ovid, *The Heroicall Epistles*, 1567, 109.

⁹⁰ Ovid, *Ovids Heroicall Epistles*, 1637, 138.

⁹¹ John Donne, *Poems, by J.D. Vvith Elegies on the Authors Death* (London, 1633), 167.

effect of the variations of the tales in *Smelts* and the literary associations of watermen suggest that the pamphlet overall is concerned with queer sexuality.

A final point on Kit is his origin: Kit and one of the fishwives come from Kingston. It is therefore worth considering the content of the wife of Kingston's tale in relation to Kit. In Kingston's story, a young wife with an old husband asks her confessor for permission to take a lover 'that her husband might not die without issue'.⁹² The confessor, hoping he will be chosen, grants her permission, saying 'the sinne was but little'.⁹³ The woman chooses another man, and the confessor starts spying on her. He learns the lovers' password, obtains access to the lady's chamber and rapes her under pretence of being her true lover. When she discovers his identity, the woman admits the confessor into her chamber once more, where she has her servants 'with a sharpe knife . . . cut out one of his genitours'.⁹⁴ The tale concludes, the confessor 'ventured to steale no more flesh', and the wife and her lover continue in quietness.⁹⁵ I have not found direct intertexts for this story, though castration plots occur in *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles* and in William Painter's *Palace of pleasure beautified*.⁹⁶ Given the content of the tale, Kingston is clearly a pun on 'stone' meaning 'testicle'. Kit's song at the opening of *Smelts* is about a servant who views his mistress undressing but 'to this goddesse durst not speake'.⁹⁷ Kingston's tale thus links to Kit's opening song as both are about men disabled from licit sexual activity. Although Kingston's tale is less open to queer reading than the other stories, it does concern queer sexual activity where normative sex is construed as marital, reproductive and non-clerical. Reading back onto Kit's character, the epithet 'of Kingstone' suggests Kit is constitutionally queer, unable or unwilling to engage in the normative sexual economy. This further supports the argument that Kit's presence as narrator frames the pamphlet as a whole in terms of queer sexuality.

Smelts is a highly unusual pamphlet. The tales differ from their intertexts in ways which emphasise non-normative erotic potential, especially between women. The title and narrator also suggest queer undertones. However, *Smelts*' erotic potential is not unique.

⁹² *VWestward for Smelts*, E2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, E3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Anonymous, *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles* (Paris: Garnier, 1890), 291–94, 356–59; William Painter, *The Palace of Pleasure Beautified* (London, 1566), li–MM.iii.

⁹⁷ *VWestward for Smelts*, A[4], see Chapter 3.

Other contemporary texts follow similar patterns. I shall now discuss *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Elinor Rummig*, and *Westward Hoe* to show how the queer dynamics in *Smelts* were culturally legible in a wider context. It is worth spending time on these works, as they suggest that representations of sexuality in early modern pamphlets were broader than has been recognised. Scholarship on female homoeroticism in early modern literature focuses mainly on more elite texts.⁹⁸ Cheap literature has been examined in terms of male homosocial bonds,⁹⁹ and female power.¹⁰⁰ While the sexual aspects of these texts have been widely studied, the sexuality considered has been limited to that between men and women.¹⁰¹ Moreover, most scholarship on female homosocial bonding in the form of gossip has failed to consider the sexual potential attached to gossip relationships.¹⁰² The rest of this section expands upon this work, showing that not only *Smelts* but also other cheap texts contained queer erotic potential.

Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, written around the turn of the century, is set in Windsor and concerns adultery, just like Brainford's tale. In the play, Falstaff is cross-dressed as 'the fat woman of Brentford' or 'Gillian of Brentford'; Brentford being another spelling of Brainford.¹⁰³ On seeing Falstaff thus disguised, the Welshman Evans remarks, 'I like not when a o'man has a great peart; I spea a great peard under his muffler.'¹⁰⁴ This has obvious resonance with the wife of Brainford's character, who is glossed in Kit's verse description as 'Much like a sow, / That sindg'd had bin, / Appear'd her chin, / For it was hayr'd.'¹⁰⁵ *The Merry Wives* is thus linked to *Smelts* through setting, subject matter and Brainford's character. Most significantly, *The Merry Wives* also entertains the possibility of women loving women. Mistress Page addresses Mistress Ford

⁹⁸ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*; Jennifer Drouin, "Diana's Band: Safe Spaces, Publics, and Early Modern Lesbians," in *Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze*, ed. Vincent Joseph Nardizzi, Stephen Guy-Bray, and William Stockton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate PubCompany, 2009), 85–106.

⁹⁹ Tim Reinke-Williams, "Misogyny, Jest-Books and Male Youth Culture in Seventeenth-Century England," *Gender & History* 21, no. 2 (2009): 324–39.

¹⁰⁰ Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women*; Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁰¹ Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women*, Ch. 7; Brown, *Better a Shrew*, Ch. 3.

¹⁰² Brown, *Better a Shrew*, Ch. 2; Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work*, Ch. 5; David Pennington, *Going to Market: Women, Trade and Social Relations in Early-Modern English Towns, C. 1550-1650* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), Ch. 8; Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); an exception is Jankowski, ". . . in the Lesbian Void: Women-Women Eroticism in Shakespeare's Plays."

¹⁰³ Depending on the version. See Mary Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson* (London: Routledge, 2006), 140; and Robert Copland, *Iyl of Braintfords Testament: Newly Compiled*. (London, 1567).

¹⁰⁴ William Shakespeare, "The Merry Wives of Windsor," in *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (London, 1623), 55.

¹⁰⁵ *VWestward for Smelts*, A4; see also *The Cobler of Caunterburie*, I2.

as ‘sweete heart’ and the two women are affectionate.¹⁰⁶ Mister Ford suggests jokingly that ‘if your husbands were dead, you two would marry.’ Although Mistress Page rebuffs him with, ‘Be sure of that, two other husbands’, this still raises the idea of sexual relations between women.¹⁰⁷ *The Merry Wives* suggests that the subtext of loving relations between women was culturally legible beyond the *Smelts* pamphlet, and may have been particularly associated with places like Windsor and Brainford.

The cultural reach of stories of female intimacy is further demonstrated in *Elinor Ruming* by John Skelton, a pamphlet written in the early sixteenth century. There are strong affinities between Brainford and Ruming, who has a face ‘Lyke a roste pigges eare / Brystled with here’ (see Figure 8).¹⁰⁸ Like Brainford, Ruming reveals too much of her own sexual history. Ruming says of her and her husband that ‘Whan we kisse and playe / In luste and in likyng, / He calleth me his whiting’ – a kind of fish – and ‘swetely together we lye, / As two pygges in a sty’. Ruming, like Brainford, suddenly decides she had said too much, and hastily declares, ‘To cease me semeth best / And of this tale to reast’.¹⁰⁹ At the end of *Smelts*, in the midst of a heated discussion, Brainford makes peace with the prospect of ale: ‘let us leave this *pro* and *contra* . . . for yonder is *Kingstone* . . . whose Ale is of great strength and force . . . let us not be factious, and contend for trifles; but let us seeke to enjoy that which we came for, mirth’.¹¹⁰ Similarly, as an alewife, Ruming enforces ‘dronken peace’.¹¹¹ As characters then, the two are of a type.

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, “The Merry Wives of Windsor,” 54.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰⁸ Quotes from John Skelton, *Pithy Pleasaunt and Profitable Workes of Maister Skelton, Poete Laureate* (London, 1568), I[8]; see also John Skelton, *Elynour Rummin, the Famous Ale-Wife of England* (London, 1624), A[4].

¹⁰⁹ Skelton, *Pithy and Profitable*, Kiiii; Skelton, *Elynour Rummin*, B2.

¹¹⁰ *VWestward for Smelts*, F–F[1].

¹¹¹ Skelton, *Pithy and Profitable*, K[vi].



Figure 8: *Elinor Rumming*, frontispiece of John Skelton, *Elynour Rummin* (London, 1624).

Strikingly, the tavern space in *Elinor Rumming* is exclusively female, and that it possibly provides a space for sexual activity. This is complicated as Skelton simultaneously sexualises the tavern goers and is repulsed by them: ‘Some wenches come unbrased, / Wyth theyr naked pappes . . . Lyke tawny saffron bagges . . . All scurvy with scabbes’.¹¹² While recognising the misogynist function of such descriptions, we should not assume that all readers would have identified with Skelton’s disgust. Later, after one woman has nearly defiled the place, ‘Than began the sport / Amonge that dronken sort / Dame Elynoure sayd they / Lende here a cocke of hay / To make all thyng cleane / Ye wot well what we meane’.¹¹³ This is perplexing: the woman has *not* defiled the place, so why is hay needed to make things clean? Given the sexual connotations of ‘sport’ and the suggestive ‘Ye wot well what we meane’, a possible reading of this passage is that some of the (already half-naked and substantially inebriated) women have decided to make a night of it. In this reading, the hay is needed so that the women can lie down together, to sleep or to have sex. In more than one pamphlet then, the Brainford/Rumming literary type presided over intimate relations between women. This is thus a more widespread thematic concern.

Westward Hoe offers another example of the potential for female sexual relations in contemporary literature. In this play, the wives trick their would-be lovers, and describe

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Kii–K[iii]; Skelton, *Elynour Rummin*, B.

¹¹³ Skelton, *Pithy and Profitable*, Lii; Skelton, *Elynour Rummin*, C.

their pranks as ‘a stock to maintain us and our pewfellowes in laughing at christenings, cryings out and upsittings this 12. Month’.¹¹⁴ *How* they trick the gallants is highly suggestive. One of their number, Claire, pretends to be ill and all three women retire to a locked bedroom. When faking illness, Claire cries to her female friends, ‘let my clothes be utterly undone; and then lay mee in my bed.’¹¹⁵ Significantly given the literary associations of Brainford women discussed above, Claire also remarks ‘I doubt that olde Hag *Gillian* of *Braineford* has bewitch me.’ When their husbands come to find them, the wives refuse to open up at first, declaring ‘we hug one another in bed and lie laughing till we tickle againe to remember how wee sent you a Bat-fowling.’¹¹⁶ Precisely what is entailed by hugging and tickling is not specified, but the word tickling was ‘used variously of sexual activity and urges’.¹¹⁷ Given the association between women and fish (and not any fish – smelts) in this play, tickling may well have a pleasurable and/or predatory connotation, as with tickling fish. Another plotline in *Westward Hoe* also raises the possibility of sex between women. Tenterhooke makes the whore Luce play guess who, and she strings off a list of clients which culminates in her female bawd, Mistress Birdlime.¹¹⁸ The gossip relationship between the wives in *Westward Hoe* is potentially sexually charged, and the pleasure they intend to give their pew-fellows might include vicarious sexual pleasure.

All of the examples I have given in this section, *Smelts* included, are complex. They are not ‘about’ queer sexuality, and most of them have obvious normative sexual readings as well as latent queer ones. However, this does not mean that suggestive evidence can be simply discarded. Attention to *Smelts*’ literary history reveals a series of variations from the pamphlet’s intertexts. Taken together, these divergences create a consistent potential for queer eroticism, especially between women. In the tales of the wives of Richmond and Brainford, intimacies between women are foregrounded. In Twitnam’s tale too, there is a potential for sexual relations between women, as well as for a lack of sexual desire in general. Moreover, the title and Kit’s characterisation, read alongside Kingston’s tale, situate the whole pamphlet in a queer space where gender fails to mean in a straightforward manner and normative reproductive functions are curtailed.

This reading of *Smelts* has implications for the way we interpret contemporary pamphlet literature more generally. As texts like *The Merry Wives*, *Elinor Rummig* and

¹¹⁴ Dekker and Webster, *Vvest-Vvard Hoe*, G[4].

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, H[4].

¹¹⁷ Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 3:1388.

¹¹⁸ Dekker and Webster, *Vvest-Vvard Hoe*, E2.

Westward Hoe has shown, queer sexuality was latent in many cheaper early modern texts. This implies that the sexual content of this pamphlet literature may be broader than current scholarship reflects. Given the particular forms of female eroticism in these texts, there is also reason to suspect that gossip relationships more generally may have sometimes been erotic. *Smelts*, unlike many of its intertexts but like some other cheap pamphlets, implied sexual relations between women. To what extent is this kind of queer dynamic characteristic of fishwives more generally?

Section II: How queer(ly) London fishwives worked

As Chapter 1 showed, there were superficial links between the sexuality of *Smelts*' fishwives and that of historical ones. This section argues that in fact sexuality operated very differently in these two contexts. While playing upon culturally available notions of the lewd fishwife, the queer dynamics in *Smelts* are located primarily in female intimacies. Such behaviours in *Smelts* are non-(re)productive, relating to leisure and non-penetrative sexual practices. By contrast, in the case of historical fishwives, queer sexuality was linked to economic role. For these fishwives, sexual status determined whether their labour was seen as work or not. Conversely, whether their activities were seen as work impacted their sexual reputations. Beginning with a contextual history of fishwives' work, this section charts how economic and sexual status interlinked for different kinds of fishwife, especially the licensed and the unlicensed.

Throughout this period the authorities thought that there were too many fishwives, and aimed to curb their numbers. This is therefore a key context for understanding fishwives' work. The perceived excessive numbers of fishwives heightened the need to exclude some from the trade, and so to scrutinise fishwives' sexual behaviour as a means of differentiation. The orders of 1584 and 1585 described 'the unnecessarye number',¹¹⁹ 'the great & superfluous number',¹²⁰ and the 'great number of lewd and ill disposed women' who worked as fishwives.¹²¹ In 1588 Bridewell was reminded by the Court of Aldermen to implement the 'restraynt of the excessive number of Bu[rlesters] of fische'.¹²² But the most serious engagement with the number of fishwives came in 1590.

¹¹⁹ LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 53.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, fo. 73.

¹²¹ LMA, Jor. 21, fo. 418.

¹²² LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 544.

The act of 1590 was dated 15 April and began by recognising ‘the great and excessive number of persons . . . which have bine permitted to carrye and convey fish fruites and other victualles . . . the number of which people are of late yeres soe wonderfully increased’.¹²³ On 28 April, a group was appointed to allocate an appropriate number of fishwives to each ward,¹²⁴ and they submitted their recommendations on 13 May.¹²⁵ The total was 120. This was entered into the Journals on 15 May in an attempt to reform the ‘sundry abuses committed within this Cittie and [the] liberties thereof through the permission of an excessive number of persons dailie carrying buyeing and selling fish fruites and other victualles in every streete and lane’.¹²⁶

However, this entry soon had to be altered, for on 29 May, an order was written ‘for the encrease of the number of Fishwives within this Cittie’. Regulating the number of fishwives was clearly a slippery business: ‘the saide number of Cxx persons are not competent nor sufficient to [serve] this Citti’.¹²⁷ This shows that the authorities recognised that the City *needed* fishwives, or at least, a certain number of them. More importantly, it suggests that the authorities did not have a sound knowledge of how the fishwives’ economy functioned. As we shall see with fishwives’ sexual status, the City governors found the practices of fishwives hard to pin down. On 29 May the quota was raised to 160, and someone retrospectively altered the Journal entry of 15 May (see Figure 9 and Figure 10). This necessitated appointing a group on 2 June to reallocate fishwives to each ward.¹²⁸

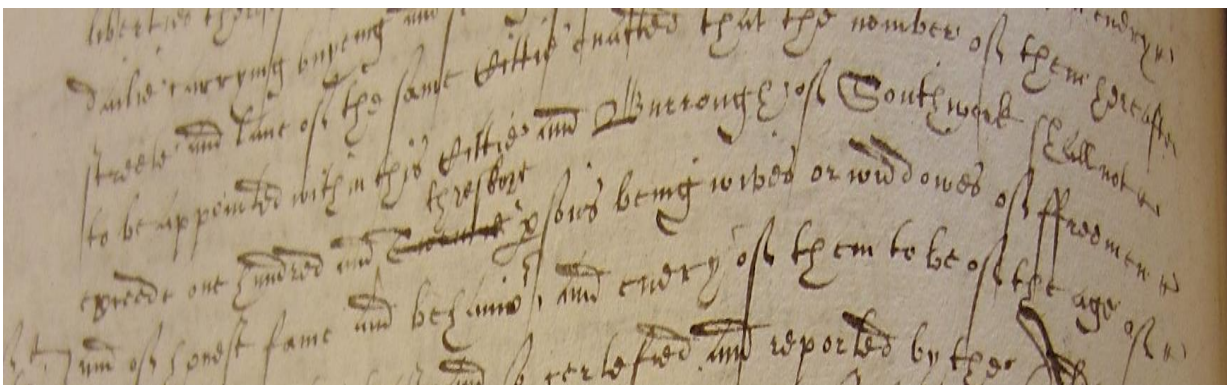


Figure 9: ‘one hundred and <threskore>’, LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 385v.

¹²³ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 378v.

¹²⁴ LMA, Rep. 22, fo. 164v.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, fo. 172.

¹²⁶ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 385v.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, fo. 389.

¹²⁸ LMA, Rep. 22, fo. 176v.

Aldermen ordered each alderman to survey his ward and present a list of the number of fishwives currently operating there, in order that ‘the unnecessary multitude of them should be presently suppressed’.¹³¹ If further action was taken, it did not make it into the Repertories. But a 1611 act repeated concern over ‘the great & excessive number of men women widows & maids which have been tolerated & permitted to carry & convey, oysters Fishes fruits Roots, & other victual’.¹³² In the same year, aldermen were again asked to count the fishwives in their ward, ‘to find some speedy Course may be taken for the Allowing of so many and suppressing of the rest’.¹³³ Excess in numbers was a perennial concern in the regulatory history of fishwives.

If fishwives were seen to literally reproduce other fishwives, then their excessive numbers would constitute a directly sexual concern. This is only very rarely implied however. Chapter 1 cited the c.1660s petition in which fishwives claimed to ‘have sat and Sold Fish above 40 yeares. and their Mothers before them as long a time’.¹³⁴ A similar claim to matrilineal succession of market workers is found in Richard Derring’s pre-1616 consort song, ‘The City Cries’, in which the crier of kitchen stuff sings ‘My mother was an honest wife, and twenty years she led this life’.¹³⁵ These implicit references to the direct reproduction of market workers by their mothers are rare, so regulating excessive numbers does not seem to have meant regulating sexual practice directly.

The real reason that I have dwelled on this context so extensively is because the rhetoric of excessive numbers reveals striking unclarity around the marital status of fishwives. Marital status was meant to be a key division between licensed (married or widowed) and unlicensed (single) fishwives. However, these orders suggest that there were excessive numbers of fishwives of all marital statuses. The 1590 act referred to ‘the great and excessive number of persons viz wives, widdowes ~~and~~ women men and maidservantes’.¹³⁶ Similarly, the 1611 act complained against ‘the great & excessive number of men women widows & maids’.¹³⁷ In these two acts, even men are included under the bracket ‘fishwife’, in spite of the fact that as Chapter 1 argued, no individual men appear to have been referred to as such.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 300.

¹³³ LMA, Rep. 30, fo. 175.

¹³⁴ LMA, CLA/011/AD/01/013.

¹³⁵ Brett, *Consort Songs*, 135.

¹³⁶ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 378v.

¹³⁷ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 300.

Moreover, in many records on fishwives, the marital status of the women is not stated at all, in spite of its supposed legitimising function. That sources like the Bridewell courtbooks sometimes mentioned that a fishwife were also a ‘maid’, ‘servant’ or ‘wench’ might imply that unqualified use of the term ‘fishwife’ was an indication of marriage. But though this makes married status more probable, the implication is unlikely to have been universal. Of around forty-four individuals I have found who were committed to Bridewell and described as selling fish, ten are called wenches, eight servants, and two married. This leaves over half with an unspecified marital status.¹³⁸ Some sources, like the Cornhill Wardmote Inquest Book and the Southwark Guildhall manor presentments, never qualify the label ‘fishwife’ with any marital status.¹³⁹

This is highly surprising. We would expect marital status to be recorded explicitly, both because of the orders on fishwives and because of the wider significance of marriage as an economic status. Chapter 1 cited the 1584 order specifying that fishwives should be ‘none unmarried’;¹⁴⁰ a requirement repeated in the orders and acts in 1585, 1590, and 1611.¹⁴¹ However, the same order of 1584 blamed simply the ‘great number of lewd and ill disposed women’ who worked as fishwives, and not a particular marital group.¹⁴²

Marital status was a fundamental marker of licit women’s work more generally.¹⁴³ There were economic reasons for this. As Amy Froide put it, when the authorities licensed women workers, ‘they acted not out of any conviction that ever-married women had the right to engage in trade, but because they believed in supporting the household and the family economy.’¹⁴⁴ Discussing the fact that some of the broadsheet cries of London have equal numbers of male and female hawkers, Eric Wilson commented that this functioned to ‘align productive economy and the reproduction of heterosexuality (the City Fathers might call this, in both cases, good husbandry)’.¹⁴⁵ Using marital status as a marker of legitimate work helped to preserve the patriarchal household economy.

¹³⁸ Though these include women who kept servants or who lived with other women. It could be inferred that the former were married and the latter single, but this seems like guesswork.

¹³⁹ LMA, MS 4069/1; CLA/043/01/009.

¹⁴⁰ LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 115.

¹⁴¹ LMA, Jor. 21, fo. 418; 22, fo. 379, 385v.; 28, fo. 300-301v.

¹⁴² LMA, Jor. 21, fo. 418.

¹⁴³ Abreu-Ferreira, “From Mere Survival to Near Success,” 68–70; Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 55–59, 73; Amy M. Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Introduction; Hubbard, *City Women*, 4; Pennington, *Going to Market*, Ch. 5.

¹⁴⁴ Froide, *Never Married*, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Wilson, “Plagues, Fairs, and Street Cries,” 34.

If marriage was so generally considered a marker of legitimate economic activity, why were there also seen to be excessive numbers of married fishwives? Of course, the qualifications for the license designated only a particular subset of married women, the honest; but it is still striking that marital statuses are listed so promiscuously in measures for restricting the number of fishwives. This tension may be partly explained by problematizing marital status itself. Recent scholarship has shown that marital categories were less monolithic than has been thought.¹⁴⁶ Erickson in particular demonstrated the ambiguity of marital labels from 1500 to 1900 and beyond.¹⁴⁷ It is important to note too that the suffix ‘wife’, as in fishwife, did not imply that a person was married, but simply that they were a woman.¹⁴⁸ It is possible then that contemporaries simply expected marital status to be more of a patchwork than we do now.

There is another explanation for the perception that there were excessive numbers of married fishwives. Not only did the license requirements state that appropriate married fishwives must be honest: from 1590 they also stipulated that they must be married to *freemen*.¹⁴⁹ Confusion of marital labels may have rested upon clarity over fishwives’ civic status. *Femme sole* status only attached to citizen’s wives, so immigrant wives were not permitted to work independently of their husbands. They would have been unlicensed just as unmarried women were. In this interpretation, unlicensed fishwives are synonymous not with the unmarried, but with the immigrant and potentially vagrant. As Fumerton argued, ‘one did not need to be vagrant to be treated like a vagrant or to feel unsettled.’¹⁵⁰ I will now show the ways in which fishwives and vagrants were similar, that in both cases the boundary between work and idleness was defining, and that association with vagrancy had sexual implications.

Fishwives, especially the unlicensed, were similar to vagrants. Fumerton argued for the consideration of mobile working women in London alongside vagrants as part of the ‘unsettled’ population.¹⁵¹ Working women were seen as ‘out of place’ because they were not under patriarchal economic authority, just like vagrants.¹⁵² Given that the authorities

¹⁴⁶ Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Froide, *Never Married*; Amy Louise Erickson, “Mistresses and Marriage: Or, a Short History of the Mrs.,” *History Workshop Journal* 78 (2014): 39–57.

¹⁴⁷ Erickson, “Mistresses and Marriage,” 52.

¹⁴⁸ Jonathan Goldberg, “The Merry Wives of Windsor: What Do Women Want?,” in *Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Madhavi Menon (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2011), 239.

¹⁴⁹ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 385v.

¹⁵⁰ Fumerton, *Unsettled*, 32.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xviii, Ch. 2.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 15–16.

perceived an excess in both vagrants and fishwives at around the same time, this seems especially plausible.¹⁵³ Bridewell was responsible for incarcerating both groups. Sometimes the Bridewell records imply that fishwives were committed for direct acts of vagrancy. Think of Martin and Powell, the ‘Vagrant young wenches that sell fish in the streetes’.¹⁵⁴ The case of Elizabeth Basley also suggests that fishwifery and vagrancy could blend into one another. In May 1606, Basley, ‘a Fishwives servant’, confessed ‘that one Allen a Collier had the use of her body about v yeres since’.¹⁵⁵ An Elizabeth Basley was committed to Bridewell eight months later in January 1607, this time described not as ‘a Fishwives servant’ but as ‘A vagarant taken and sent in by the wach of queenehyth’.¹⁵⁶ This may have been a different Basley, but the name and time period fit closely. Moreover, Queenhithe was a place for buying fish. The Basley case suggests that some fishwives may have been seen primarily as vagrants in certain circumstances. Such evidence shows that vagrants and fishwives were associated.

This association was significant as it changed the ways that fishwives’ work and sexual status were seen. Fumerton drew attention to the fact that vagrants and people considered vagrant also laboured.¹⁵⁷ Korda likewise argued that informal work was not seen as real work at all in the early modern period, and that informality was the fundamental paradigm of all women’s work.¹⁵⁸ In archival records, fishwives are referred to as ‘idle & loose persons’ and as those who ‘do live in that idle course of life’.¹⁵⁹ In a striking case of November 1603, Magdalen Foster, Elizabeth Fowler and Alice Denn alias Rutt were presented at Bridewell. They were described as ‘iij vagrant wenches who under cullor of beinge Fishewiues doe loyter and nightwalke and sell fishe without Licens’.¹⁶⁰ Their work selling fish did not confer upon them the real status of fishwives (they are only ‘under cullor’), nor protect them from accusations of loitering and nightwalking, which were both linked to vagrancy.

What does the link between some fishwives and vagrants have to do with sexuality? Firstly it helps to explain the confusion in marital statuses between licensed and unlicensed fishwives. An implicit reliance on the civic status of fishwives to determine their suitability

¹⁵³ Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, 38.

¹⁵⁴ BRHAM, BBHC 6, fo. 231.

¹⁵⁵ BRHAM, BBHC 5, fo. 101v.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, fo. 160.

¹⁵⁷ Fumerton, *Unsettled*, xix.

¹⁵⁸ Korda, “Gender at Work,” 119; Korda, *Labors Lost*, 21–22.

¹⁵⁹ LMA, Jor. 29, fo. 187; MS4069/1, fo. 118v.

¹⁶⁰ BRHAM, BBHC 4, fo. 416.

makes sense of what otherwise appears a highly confused categorisation. Association with vagrancy had further sexual implications too. It is important not to lazily assume that vagrancy always implied sexual deviancy.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, both within and without marriage, vagrants were in a problematic sexual position. The authorities actively fragmented affective and potentially sexual bonds between vagrants, including through preventing or splitting up marriages.¹⁶² Vagrant sexuality was definitionally unacceptable, threatening bastard children and their financial cost to the settled population. The urban poor, including fishwives, shared this sexual status with vagrants, servants and apprentices.¹⁶³ Such groups were not encouraged to marry, and any sexual activity outwith marriage was deemed unacceptable. Their sexuality thus became definitionally queer.

These associations ring true in some cases of the sexual practice of fishwives. Basley had sex with Allen; Foster, Fowler and Denn were presented for nightwalking. In November 1628, Suzan Slugger, ‘a servant to one in Southwark a Fisherwoman’, was ‘taken in the night lying under a stall by the watch’. It was agreed she should ‘be sent thither [i.e. to Southwark] by Harrison the Marshalls man and if there she dwell not to be returned hither [to Bridewell].’¹⁶⁴ Slugger’s crime is not labelled, but clearly overlaps with the problem of vagrancy. Comparison to another Bridewell case shows that it was also potentially sexual in nature. A year earlier in October 1627, Anne Lancaster, who was not a fishwife, had been ‘taken in the company of Edward [Farrors?] in the night in drinke’. The pair ‘were found together in a stall where she selleth things at 12 of clocke at night’.¹⁶⁵ The late hour and the sexual connotations of the word ‘company’ make this case more explicit.¹⁶⁶ That in Slugger’s case no other person was mentioned suggests she was alone, at least when the watch found her. Nevertheless, being under a stall late at night created the potential for sexual activity. While crimes of vagrancy cannot be reduced simply to sexual crimes, they had a sexual dimension which contemporaries viewed with deep suspicion.

The queer sexual status attached to vagrancy impacted upon fishwives, particularly unlicensed ones. To an extent, it also bled into the reputations of licensed fishwives, as it complicated marital status in general and rendered marriage a less clear indicator of economic legitimacy. The fact that selling fish was not always considered work may have

¹⁶¹ As Griffiths argues of nightwalking in Griffiths, “Meanings of Nightwalking in Early Modern England,” 213.

¹⁶² Beier, *Masterless Men*, 65–68; Fumerton, *Unsettled*, 9.

¹⁶³ Fumerton, *Unsettled*, 17.

¹⁶⁴ BRHAM, BBHC 7, fo. 97; square brackets editorial.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, fo. 44v.

¹⁶⁶ On company, see Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work*, 135–50.

pulled down the respectability of all fishwives, just as the fact that not all marriages were deemed appropriate weakened the legitimising power of marital status. The circular relationship between legitimate work and legitimate sexual status thus impacted on all fishwives. Nevertheless, the queer status of vagrants and those like vagrants attached particularly to the unlicensed.

The queer aspects of the sexuality of historical fishwives were very different to those in *Smelts*. Fishwives' sexual practices were interpreted in the light of ideas about excessive numbers, the nature of marriage, vagrancy and legitimate labour. Their relationship to legitimate work was what made some London fishwives queer for contemporaries, rather than their relationships with women. Marital and so sexual status combined with civic position determined whether fishwives' labour was considered work or not. In turn, the status of fishwives' work impacted on how they were viewed sexually. An unlicensed fishwife, seen as idle and vagrant, could have no legitimate sexual status. This in turn prevented her from seeking a license. This circular process, although it affected the reputations of all fishwives, rendered unlicensed fishwives particularly queer for contemporaries. Not only was the sexuality of historical fishwives seen in a different way to that of *Smelts*, but sexuality was also subject to different dynamics for licensed and unlicensed fishwives.

Conclusion

Fishwives were a diverse group, but the differences between them were frequently elided by their perceived sexual lewdness, as shown in Chapter 1. Studying the sexuality of fishwives, it is important not to perpetuate the assumption that all fishwives belonged to a single sexual category, with all the misogynist baggage such a position carries. This chapter has shown that on closer examination, what was queer about fishwives was very different in the archives and in *Smelts*. In most of the tales in *Smelts*, and in the pamphlet as a whole, intimacies between women were the kind of erotic deviancy. The sexuality of historical fishwives was queer insofar as the fishwives were associated with illegitimate work.

Not only do different sources record different kinds of sexual deviancy: the reactions to such deviancy were also different. The fishwives in *Smelts* are celebrated, and their queer behaviour is written to amuse and perhaps to pleasure. In most of the tales, these potentially queer women come out on top. By contrast, actual fishwives were both economically regulated and physically punished for their queer practices.

These divergent reactions can also be explained economically. The implications of historical fishwives' sexual practice were serious, both because they were real rather than fictional, and because they were potentially reproductive and so costly. The women in *Smelts* are fictitious: but even their real counterparts (whose potential existence should not be foreclosed) would probably not have been threatening to their contemporaries. The heterosexist definition of chastity with reference to penetration alone, combined with the lack of reproductive potential in relations between women, rendered such relations less problematic. This also partly explains why there are no archival examples of fishwives loving fishwives: if such women existed, their presence is unlikely to have been 'worth' recording from an official perspective. Such an interpretation concurs with Traub's argument that the early modern period was particularly open to desire between women, which was not registered as threatening until the later seventeenth century.¹⁶⁷ Traub also argued that 'the reticence surrounding homoerotic activity contrasts sharply with the *lack* of impunity in cases of heterosexual transgression'.¹⁶⁸ While 'reticence' is an odd word to use in relation to fishwives and gossips, the general point tallies well with my findings.

This chapter has sought to address the intersection between the history of working women and the history of queer sexuality. I have shown that queer studies can be extended to include working women, adding a new class dimension to queer history as well as a queer dimension to social history. I have also demonstrated that what was queer worked differently in the past. 'Queer' is an even more capacious category than has been realised, either in historical work which assumes that records of 'heterosexual' transgression are not queer, or in literary work which focuses on 'homosexual' relations. I hope it is clear that I am not trying to reinstate a heterosexist historical approach by implying that practices now considered heterosexual were queer in the early modern period. I have argued as I have found – and there is also a political power to recognising (comparatively) less deviant spaces for those practices which are queer today. However, ultimately my argument contributes more to historical understandings of fishwives than to queer politics. It is thus a reassessment both of the usefulness of queer theory to historical analysis, and of historical analysis to queer theory and practice.

¹⁶⁷ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 19, 356.

¹⁶⁸ Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 109.

Chapter 3: Bodies politic: a queer-born nation?

Introduction

Chapter 1 showed that ‘fishwife’ had sexual and political meanings as well as economic ones. Chapter 2 problematized the sexual content of the word ‘fishwife’. Chapter 3 turns to the political dimension of the history of fishwives. What were the political implications of fishwives’ multiple economic and sexual roles? I answer this question with reference to both *Smelts* and historical fishwives, and show that fishwives were involved in a wide range of politics, including at a national level. The work that fishwives performed as cultural signs helped to construct and sometimes reframe imagined national boundaries. Moreover, the practices of fishwives had direct political implications, including on the way fishwives were regulated economically and sexually.

Recent scholarship has shown that ‘politics’ has multiple meanings. Much of the impetus for expanding and pluralising definitions of the political has come out of feminism and the insight that ‘the personal is political’.¹ Totalising analyses of the political oppression of women have been rejected in recent work on gender, patriarchy and popular politics in favour of a more nuanced, intersectional approach.² In this chapter I follow Joan Scott’s definition of the political as ‘the sense that different actors and different meanings are contending with one another for control’.³ This definition simultaneously recognises the conflictual nature of politics and allows for its location in multiple sites, from Privy Council to privy. The work of social historians on ‘popular politics’ has also shown that there are multiple kinds of politics.⁴ Importantly, it is now clear that a far greater range of people were politically engaged than the narrow sections of society represented in court or Parliament.⁵ Those excluded from formal government were not excluded from politics in

¹ Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), ix.

² On gender and patriarchy, see Erickson, *Women and Property*; Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Gowing, *Common Bodies*; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 267; on popular politics, see for example Tim Harris, “The Problem of ‘popular Political Culture’ in Seventeenth-Century London,” *History of European Ideas* 10, no. 1 (1989): 43–58; Ethan H. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³ Quoted in Keith Wrightson, “The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England,” in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, ed. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1996), 11.

⁴ See Wrightson in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle, *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1996); Tim Harris, *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001).

⁵ Adam Fox, “Rumour, News and Popular Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England,” *The Historical Journal* 40, no. 3 (1997): 597–620; Harris, “The Problem of ‘Popular Political Culture,’” 44.

its entirety.⁶ Scholars like Ethan Shagan and Tim Harris, following Keith Wrightson, have further demonstrated that authorities needed co-operation from their subordinates in order to exercise their power in the first place.⁷

Studying ‘popular’ politics remains a challenge however. Chapter 1 demonstrated that fishwives were not a homogenous group, and recent work on popular politics has similarly complicated the ‘popular’. Both because of the elite origin of most of our sources, and because of the dynamic nature of early modern society, ‘popular’ politics are always mediated and informed by elite concerns.⁸ Literary scholars like Mary Ellen Lamb have shown that the popular was appropriated and to an extent created by elites.⁹ Harris suggested that rather than artificially isolating the popular, a more fruitful approach is to study the interrelation of popular and elite politics.¹⁰ Studying the political involvement of fishwives entails studying their relation to the powerful.

In addition to these approaches to politics, work on sexuality has demonstrated that sexuality and politics were deeply entwined. This too is implied by ‘the personal is political’, and has long been obvious in such cases as Henry VIII’s quest for an heir. Queer history has gone beyond the patriarchal institutions of heterosexual marriage to demonstrate how male homoeroticism was embedded in court politics, and similar work on Elizabeth I has shown how androgyny and queer virginity were expressed through her royal power.¹¹ However, this queer historiography has yet to be extended to the poorer sort. This chapter seeks to combine the work of social and queer historians, and write a queer popular politics of fishwives.

Section I argues that a political commentary on nation, and on James VI and I’s sexual and foreign policy, is latent in *Smelts*. The framing of the pamphlet overall, the wife of Standon-the-Greene’s tale and the literary context of *Smelts* contribute to a feminised,

⁶ Harris, *The Politics of the Excluded*, 1.

⁷ Shagan, *Popular Politics*; Harris, “The Problem of ‘Popular Political Culture,’” 49; Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁸ B. Scribner, “Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?,” *History of European Ideas* 10, no. 1989 (1989): 175–91; Harris, “The Problem of ‘Popular Political Culture’”; Tim Harris, *Popular Culture in England, C. 1500-1850*, Themes in Focus (Houndmills, Basingstoke, etc, Macmillan, 1995), 14–18.

⁹ Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson*.

¹⁰ Harris, *Popular Culture*, 10.

¹¹ On homoeroticism in politics, see Bray, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England”; DiGangi, *The Homoerotics*, 9; Bray, *The Friend*; On Elizabeth, see Shannon, “Nature’s Bias”; Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 12–3; Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, Ch. 3.

queered reimagining of nation. This implies that some cheap bawdy pamphlets resonated more with court and national politics than has been recognised.

Section II turns from the politics of literature to the politics of City fishwives. The section distinguishes between fishwives as literary figures and as social agents for clarity's sake. The actions and representations of fishwives were mutually informing, and this distinction is not meant to imply absolute division between 'real' fishwives and their representation. I argue that fishwives as cultural signs were represented as cultural intermediaries between sea and land, men and women. This positioned them as political markers. Many other traders were imagined in a similar way, so the argument contributes more widely to our understanding of political participation in the City of London. The section then turns from cultural understandings of fishwives to their political actions. Fishwives negotiated their own regulation, and on at least one occasion entered into debate on the boundaries of nation. This shows that what and who is political is contested. The fishwives of *Smelts* and of the streets were involved in different kinds of politics, but both performed influential work towards the definition of various bodies politic.

Section I: Waging love in *Westward for Smelts*

The historiography of cheap pamphlet literature has contributed greatly to our understanding of early modern conceptions of gender and sexuality, as well as to the meanings and uses of literacy and print.¹² This section builds on such scholarship and reads *Smelts* closely to argue that such pamphlets had a further, political dimension. While *Smelts* is not simply a political commentary, the text has political implications and was clearly influenced by its political context. I use contemporary literature and knowledge to situate these readings, and argue that *Smelts* commented indirectly on the nation and on James' foreign and sexual politics.

The section does not attempt to make a direct argument about the readership or authorship of *Smelts*. This is primarily due to a lack of evidence on these issues. Moreover, Lamb, Tessa Watt, Joy Wiltenburg and others have shown what a complex issue the readership of cheap pamphlets is.¹³ It is essential to realise that in spite of being a cheap, 'lower' genre, pamphlets were not exclusively or necessarily read by the poorer sort. When I argue that *Smelts* demonstrates that court politics had a wide social reach, I mean strictly

¹² Brown, *Better a Shrew*; Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women*; Watt, *Cheap Print*.

¹³ Watt, *Cheap Print*; Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women*, 38; Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson*.

that court politics were embedded in a wide range of literary genres, without assuming cheap pamphlets were bought only by the poor.

Part a considers the framing of *Smelts* overall. The setting, translation and narrative frame all reimagine the nation in a queer way. Part b reads the wager plot in *Smelts*, which is Stand-in-the-Green's tale, as an indirect commentary on James' sexuality and pacifism. Part c places these readings contextually, to show that the political resonances in *Smelts* were present in other pamphlets around 1620. There were queer political ideas latent in *Smelts* and pamphlets like it, suggesting that a broad range of literature engaged with such queer conceptions of nation.

Part a: Queer queens

Smelts is a complex pamphlet that does not have a singular political agenda. Nevertheless, the literary composition, setting and frame of the pamphlet connect it to nation. Placing *Smelts* in dialogue with contemporary texts and discourses, as early modern readers may have done, reveals its potential to reconfigure ideas of nation in queer ways. First, the literary placement of *Smelts* (its frame, origin and setting) is feminising and nationalising. Secondly, Kit's opening song uses the language of Elizabethan queer virginity, aligning the pamphlet with Elizabethan sexual politics. The section concludes with a comparison of Kit's song to *A Midsommer Nights Dreame*, to demonstrate that such political associations were more widespread. Ultimately, these associations were part of the common cultural commentary comparing Elizabeth with James.

The pamphlet's literary context and setting draw upon the national and the feminine. This can be seen in *Smelts*' relationship with Chaucer and with translation, as well as in the setting itself. The Chaucerian frame situates *Smelts* in a debate on old and new Englishness. By the late sixteenth century Chaucer's role as a father figure for English literature was established.¹⁴ The 1590s pamphlets *The Cobbler of Canterbury* and *The Tinker of Turvey* used a Chaucerian river journey as a frame for a set of tales, just like *Smelts*. *The Cobbler* explicitly recognised a Chaucerian debt, claiming to be 'Imitating herein old Father Chaucer', who is implicitly the father of English literature.¹⁵ However, as well as having 'bin more canonised for his workes, than' anyone else, Chaucer was also seen as an old-

¹⁴ Frederic Ouvry, *The Cobbler of Canterbury: Frederic Ouvry's Edition of 1862*, ed. H. Neville Davies (Cambridge: DSBrewer, 1976), 20.

¹⁵ *The Cobler of Caunterburie*, A3.

fashioned, masculine presence.¹⁶ Samuel Rowlands in his 1602 pamphlet, *Tis Merrie when Gossips meet*, criticised Chaucer for this: ‘of blithe Wenches scarcitie he hath / Of all that Crue none but the wife of Bathe’.¹⁷ *Smelts* was written in a narrative tradition that was seen as old and English, but with a new cast of characters: fishwives. The ideas surrounding Chaucer associated the old and the masculine, and so implicitly the feminine and the new. *Smelts’* narration by fishwives is thus particularly (early) modern because of their femininity. This is also signalled within *Smelts*, when the Wars of the Roses are characterised as ‘that innocent time, when women had not the wit to know their owne libertie’.¹⁸ The implication is that women in the time of *Smelts* do have this wit, and so have taken up narration. The Chaucerian frame of *Smelts* situates the pamphlet as part of an updated, feminised English nation.

The fact that many of the tales in *Smelts* had been translated is another way in which the pamphlet commented on nation. Translation is never explicitly acknowledged in *Smelts*, but five of the six tales were originally written in other languages. The tales of Brainford, Richmond and Standon-the-Greene have Boccaccian as well as other counterparts;¹⁹ Twitnam’s tale is predated by a French text;²⁰ and Hampton’s story appeared in Bandello.²¹ The tales are nevertheless all set in England and the characters have English names.²² This is pointed given that most of the tales are translations, which some readers might have recognised. In the frame of *The Cobler of Caunterburie*, which shared *Smelt’s* river setting, one of the boat passengers is reading *Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie*, which contained Boccaccian stories. Another passenger declares dismissively, ‘most of them [the tales] are stolne out of *Boccacce Decameron*’.²³ It was plausible then that boat passengers might know Boccaccio when they saw it. The readers of *Smelts* might also have recognised the tales as translations, and understood the way that *Smelts* nationalised its material, obscuring foreign difference by re-placing the tales in English and in England.

Another way in which the setting of *Smelts* points to national concerns is through its setting on the Thames. The Thames was frequently used as a symbol for nation, and was a site of royal processions. Interestingly, the Thames was often figured as androgynous,

¹⁶ Robert Greene, *Greenes Vision: Vvritten at the Instant of His Death* (London, 1592), C3.

¹⁷ Samuel Rowlands, *Tis Merrie Vvhen Gossips Meete* (London, 1602), A2.

¹⁸ *VWestward for Smelts*, C[4].

¹⁹ See Appendix for full references.

²⁰ La Tour Landry, *Here Begynneth the Booke Which the Knyght of the Toure Made*.

²¹ William Painter, *The Second Tome of the Palace of Pleasure* (London, 1567); Matteo Bandello, *Certaine Tragicall Discourses*, trans. Geoffrey Fenton (London, 1567).

²² Relihan, “Fishwives’ Tales,” 54–57.

²³ *The Cobler of Caunterburie*, B.

especially once the Isis had joined it, upstream of the towns named in *Smelts*. In the 1633 edition of John Stow's *Survey of London*, the Thames is 'a chiefe honour to the whole Land' and is referred to as both feminine and neuter: the section is entitled, 'Of the Ancient and famous River of *Thames*, whence it deriveth her head or originall, and so conveyeth it selfe on'.²⁴ Another example is Taylor's 1632 pamphlet, *Taylor on Thame Isis*, in which Isis finds that 'her lovely Tame doth meet with her, / There Tame his Isis doth embrace and kisse / . . . Hermaphrodite in nature and in name.'²⁵ That Kit is from Kingston-upon-Thames is also significant. Kingston had been a place where kings were crowned, as was known by contemporaries like Taylor.²⁶ Even Kit's profession was linked to national affairs, because London watermen were especially likely to be pressed into the navy, as Taylor himself had been.²⁷ Only Kit's song and Kingston's tale do not have foreign counterparts, further highlighting the national significance of the place. The setting of *Smelts* on the Thames locates it within a royal and national imaginative space, which is also fraught with ambiguous sexual meaning. The literary context and setting of *Smelts* thus related the pamphlet to new, feminising and queer ideas about the nation.

This nationalised setting foregrounds the erotic rather than the geographic as exotic: what is strange about the tales is not their far-flung setting as it is in other versions, but the ways in which sexuality functions. This draws attention to queer sexuality rather than queer place. In doing so, *Smelts* simplifies and homogenises what is 'English'. For the Western fishwives in the boat are 'foreigners' themselves in London under the early modern definition of the word (see section II). Richard Sears therefore described *Smelts* as presenting a 'non-normative nationalism',²⁸ while Relihan argued that it constituted a 'floating female utopia' in which anchorless foreigners constructed a political identity.²⁹ Foregrounding queer sexuality over queer place indirectly renders England a queer place by constitution, defined not in opposition to other places but by the characteristically queer sexual dynamics it contains.

I shall now turn to Kit's opening song to explore the particular kind of nation that *Smelts* imagined. First of all it is worth noting what the song is *not*: the fishwives ask Kit

²⁴ Stow, *The Survey of London*, 14.

²⁵ John Taylor, *Taylor on Thame Isis: Or The Description of the Tvvo Famous Riuers of Thame and Isis* (London, 1632), A7.

²⁶ John Taylor, *A Memorial of All the English Monarchs: Being in Number 150. from Brute to King James* (London, 1622), D[7–8].

²⁷ Thomas Stuart Willan, *River Navigation in England 1600-1750* (London: F. Cass, 1964), 110.

²⁸ Richard A. Sears, "Rogues and the Utopian Imagination in Early Modern English Literature" (Ph.D., Indiana University, 2010), 68.

²⁹ Relihan, "Fishwives' Tales," 57.r

‘not to cloy their eares with an old Fidlers Song, as *Riding to Rumford*, or, *All in a Garden Greene*.’³⁰ I have not been able to locate the text of *Riding to Rumford*. *All in a Garden Greene* was the first line of a ballad first published in 1563, entitled *A merrye new ballad, of a countye wench and a clowne*. The text celebrates the non-consensual sexual relation between the two characters, and concludes:

Lord how her colour
went and came for shame,
As other mayds
having done the same.
Though they make a showe,
and say often ‘No!’
yet, before yow goe,
they will take it, tho
they crye ‘fye awaye!’³¹

The fishwives’ rejection of such ballads suggests that they find such sexual morals both commonplace and distasteful. Before Kit’s song has even begun, it is signalled that the pamphlet may resist the kind of normative sexual understandings of *All in a Garden Greene*.

In Kit’s own song, the language invokes peculiarly Elizabethan ideas around queer virginity, and so implies a queer, female, Elizabethan-style nation. Kit’s song is about a serving-man who observes his mistress undressing. It is erotic, but the narrator takes little pleasure in the encounter: ‘Still I stood obscured, / And these sights indured’. A ‘straight’

³⁰ *VWestward for Smelts*, A3.

³¹ Andrew Clark, *The Shirburn Ballads, 1585-1616* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 222.

reading of the song would present the narrator as unable to act upon his desires, partly because of class barriers, and thus rendered miserable by a disclosure which emasculates him. Such a reading is certainly plausible, but there are alternate ways of understanding the singer's mixed feelings. Even before the mistress begins to undress, the speaker felt that 'of pleasant sights I had my fill.' When she undresses further, the singer 'wayl'd my hap'. After this, the sense of conventional desire with which the song begins ('Fairer than the fairest, / Brighter than the rarest . . .') collapses. The song concludes:

'Therefore will I rest contented,
With private pleasures that I viewed;
And never with love will be tormented,
Yet love I her for that she shewed.'

The singer is content with seeing and does not desire more. Why does he both love and not love the woman?

One explanation of this is that the 'private pleasures' may have been private to the woman: she was masturbating. Kit's song has already been interpreted as a 'closeted masturbatory fantasy' – but for Kit exclusively.³² However, the lines 'Then 'gan her hand for to uncover / Her whitest neck, and soundest pap' allow the reader to interpret the erotic pleasure as belonging either to the hand uncovering, or to the voyeur. In the former case, this episode would form part of the singer's sexual education, being shown that a body could please itself. If the woman was masturbating, perhaps the singer was troubled not by his own inaction, but because he did not find women sexually attractive. This reading would explain not only the speaker's tormented rather than pleased reaction but also why the speaker says 'I love her for that she shewed', and that he 'never with love will be tormented'.³³ This also suggests an equivalency between male and female genitals, which is appropriate given the unknowable nature of those genitals themselves, especially in the

³² Brown, *Better a Shrew*, 105.

³³ *Westward for Smelts*, A[4].

light of Kit's ambiguous gendered position (see Chapter 2). Remember also Kit's initial description of Lent as a time when 'no man is licensed to enjoy a flesh-bit, but those who are so weake, that the very sight contents their appetite: yet every man desireth flesh, that is no whore-master.'³⁴ Kit himself is just such a one who is contented by 'the very sight'. Perhaps he does not desire that kind of flesh, or any flesh but his own.

The phrase 'private pleasures' makes this reading especially productive. A key word search in *Early English Books Online* shows that 'private pleasures' were often understood as sexual in a non-penetrative way. In Helkiah Crook's *Mikrokosmographia*, in the section on the hymen, it is noted that during menstruation, breaking the hymen will induce less pain. Readers are warned that this could lead to false accusations of premarital sex when menstruating brides do not experience pain on their wedding night. This is especially likely, as 'the ioy and priuate pleasures of affianced young folkes, as also their dancings and frolicke diet with such like, do often by moouing the body accelerate and hasten such purgations, and being come do cause them longer to endure'.³⁵ Though apparently mutual, 'private pleasures' are here clearly understood not to actually break the hymen. Though the hymen is considerably more at risk in Robert Greene's *Philomela* (1592), 'private pleasures' are still associated with chastity: 'a secret loue impeacheth not chastity . . . Priuate pleasures haue neuer inioyned vnto them anye pennance, and shee is alwaies counted chast enough that is chary enoughe'.³⁶ Here chastity is recognised as a socially constructed behaviour, which can be appropriated even by women with broken hymens. 'Private pleasures' are still associated with the non-penetrative through the behavioural or social chastity they permit, and penetration is only penetrating if it is known. In the light of recent scholarship on the socially constructed nature of chastity and the queer potential of virginity in the early modern period,³⁷ these connotations render the actions of the mistress in Kit's song queerer and associate them more closely with non-penetrative sex and masturbation. The pleasure in the song can be read as either the speaker's or the mistress'. The singer's anticipation that his mistress would reject him if he offered himself and so implicitly does not desire him further emphasises her erotic self-sufficiency.³⁸

This reading is backed up by Ian Moulton's evidence in *Before Pornography*. Moulton has shown that watching others have sex and masturbate was often portrayed as

³⁴ Ibid., A3.

³⁵ Helkiah Crook, *Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man, Together with the Controversies and Figures Thereto Belonging* (London, 1616), 236.

³⁶ Robert Greene, *Philomela: The Lady Fitzvaters Nightingale* (London, 1592), D2.

³⁷ Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*; Bly, *Queer Virgins*; Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*.

³⁸ *VWestward for Smelts*, A[4].

part of sexual initiation in erotic literature, including specifically as a way of learning to masturbate.³⁹ Moulton cites an erotic manuscript gifted by a woman to a man in the mid-seventeenth century. The man, Feargod Barbon, wrote a poem to the donor of the manuscript, which construes the gift as an erotic exchange, potentially involving masturbation:

This Booke wast given me by A frende
To Reade And overlooke
Because she often Did Commende
The pleasure that shee tooke
By readinge it . . .⁴⁰

Barbon continues, ‘To read it for her sake / I have performed what she required’.⁴¹ Gowing too noted that ‘watching sex, and talking about it, were acts of sexual expression.’⁴² Watching, reading and speaking about sex were all part of sexual education. Kit’s song may have been read as a commentary on this kind of masturbation, particularly as the title of *Smelts* flagged the pamphlet as salacious.

I have spent so long on the masturbatory potential of Kit’s song as it relates the pamphlet to what I shall call Elizabethan queer virginity. The simultaneously chaste and erotic behaviour of the mistress in Kit’s song is very similar to Elizabeth’s own sexual self-construction. Jankowski argued that adult virgin women inhabited a queer space in early modern culture,⁴³ while Traub demonstrated that chastity was not synonymous with asexuality.⁴⁴ Traub also argued that Elizabeth manipulated her own erotic capital outside

³⁹ Ian Frederick Moulton, *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 130–50.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 64–67, the manuscript is the British Library Harleian MS 7332.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 107.

⁴³ Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 4, 6.

⁴⁴ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 131.

the logic of penetrative sexuality,⁴⁵ and Grace Tiffany described Elizabeth as a ‘political androgyne’.⁴⁶ This scholarship situates Elizabeth as a queer queen, representing herself as a chaste, erotic and self-sufficient ruler.

The shared characteristics of Elizabeth and the mistress in Kit’s song are made particularly clear through comparison with Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Nights Dreame*. Written in the 1590s, the play is generally thought to contain one of the few references in Shakespeare’s work to Elizabeth herself.⁴⁷ Oberon describes ‘A faire Vestall, throned by the West’ who Cupid attempts to hit with his arrow.⁴⁸ ‘But I might see young *Cupids* fiery shaft / Quencht in the chaste beames of the watry Moone; / And the imperiall Votresse passed on, / In maiden meditation, fancy free.’⁴⁹ The play’s plot is crucially enabled by the continuance of the ‘imperiall Votresse’ in ‘maiden meditation’, as the flower that is hit instead is used as a magical plot device. The role that this Elizabethan figure plays is thus very similar to the role I have argued was taken by the woman in Kit’s song. Both figures remain unscathed by phallic sexuality, and enable the text which follows. The ‘watry Moone’ in *MND* speaks to the fluvial setting of *Smelts*. The literary associations between Kit’s song and the Virgin Queen are strong. They align *Smelts* with a queer Elizabethan sexual politics. The presence of high political associations in *Smelts* suggests that such ideas had a broad cultural currency.

The link between *Smelts* and Elizabeth might even be implied by the frontispiece, which appears to show one of the fishwives’ breasts suggestively (see Figure 11). Low-cut garb was regarded as characteristic of fishwives more generally. Henri Estienne criticised attorney’s wives for looking ‘like an oyster-wife, for that they wore their gownes so open before, that a man might haue almost seene their bellies.’⁵⁰ Bared breasts were associated with immorality, but also with motherhood and with courtly fashions.⁵¹ Elizabeth herself was famous for showing her bosom. In 1597, the French ambassador de Maisse described her wearing a petticoat ‘open in front, as was also her chemise, in such a manner that she

⁴⁵ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁶ Grace Tiffany, *Erotic Beasts and Social Monsters: Shakespeare, Jonson, and Comic Androgyne* (Newark: London: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 45.

⁴⁷ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 152.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, “*Midsummer Nights Dreame*,” in *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (London, 1623), 149.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Henri Estienne, *A World of Vvonders: Or An Introduction to a Treatise Touching the Conformitie of Ancient and Moderne Wonders*, trans. Richard Carew (London, 1607), 42.

⁵¹ Sarah Toulalan, *Imagining Sex: Pornography and Bodies in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 78–79.

often opened this dress and one could see all her belly, and even to her navel'.⁵² Maids wore more revealing clothing, so Elizabeth's exposure emphasised her maiden status. It also drew attention to her breasts as those of the mother of the nation.⁵³ In Elizabeth's case, revealed breasts pointed to her anomalous marital status. As Chapter 2 showed, in many circumstances fishwives were also of ambiguous marital status. The fishwife on the frontispiece of *Smelts* is drawn to look like a fishwife, not Queen Elizabeth. But the fashion recalls the ambiguous marital status enjoyed by both Elizabeth and early modern fishwives.



Figure 11: A fishwife, frontispiece of *Westward for Smelts* (London, 1620).

Smelts is opened by a queer virgin, the mistress in Kit's song, who bears literary affinities with Elizabeth. This situates the pamphlet as part of a national political dialogue contrasting James and Elizabeth. The fishwives embark at *Queenhithe* and end up in *Kingston*, after all. In Traub's formulation, James was a patriarchal ruler associated with sodomy, whereas Elizabeth was a self-pleasuring female ruler.⁵⁴ *Smelts* pitted queer,

⁵² Quoted in Herbert Norris, *Tudor Costume and Fashion* (Courier Corporation, 2013), 721.

⁵³ Louis Adrian Montrose, "A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power, Form," in *Rewriting the Renaissance the Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 67.

⁵⁴ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 154.

feminine, bellicose Elizabethan sexual politics against misogynist, sodomitical, pacific Jacobean ones. Crucially to the political context of *Smelts*, Elizabeth went to war; whereas James styled himself as peace-maker. This section has shown how the self-pleasuring queen resonated with *Smelts*' framing. The next shall show how *Smelts* engaged with contemporary perceptions of James, and the political implications of such commentary.

Part b: The wager plot as a call to war

This section argues that Standon-the-Greene's tale offers a political commentary upon both James' foreign policy and his sexuality. I do not mean that this is explicitly how *Smelts* was written or read, though both are possible. Rather I am arguing that such sexual and political associations had a wider cultural resonance than has been realised, and could be reshaped and appropriated in cheap, bawdy pamphlets like *Smelts*.

Standon-the-Greene's story begins in an inn where some gentlemen are staying. They discuss the vices of women, but one husband defends his virtuous wife, Mistris Dorrill. Another gentleman is unconvinced, the two men argue, and a bet is laid as to whether or not the gentleman will be able to seduce the wife. Through trickery, the man obtains entry to the wife's chamber and steals her crucifix as a false 'signe of his wives disloyaltie'.⁵⁵ The husband believes this proof, and sends his manservant George 'in some private place [to] kill her'.⁵⁶ Mistris Dorrill talks her way out of execution and escapes disguised as a man. At the point of starvation, she is found by Edward IV, and becomes his page. Her husband meanwhile joins the camp of Henry VI. In the aftermath of the battle of Barnet, the disguised Mistris Dorrill recognises the villain. Then, 'opening of his brest, to dresse his wounds, she espied her Crucifix'.⁵⁷ She calls upon the victorious Edward IV to judge a trial. The husband and the villain are sent for, Mistris Dorrill reveals her identity and the truth comes out. The villain is banished, the wife forgives her husband, and 'so lived they ever after in great content'.⁵⁸

This story is familiar as the 'wager plot', which circulated widely in Europe in both oral and written forms. The tale appeared in French romans from the thirteenth century, including *Le Roman de la Rose*, *Le Roman de la Violette*, and *Le Roman du roi Flore et de la belle Jehan*. Boccaccio probably heard the story from such French sources,⁵⁹ and used it

⁵⁵ *VWestward for Smelts*, C.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, C2, brackets editorial.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, C3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, C[4].

⁵⁹ Marcus Landau, *Die quellen des Decamerone* (Stuttgart: J. Scheible, 1869), 48.

as tale II.ix of the *Decameron*. Francesco Sansovino used the plot as tale III.iii of his *Cento Nouvelle*. Christine De Pisan acknowledged the *Decameron* as her source for tale II.52 of *The City of Ladies*, which was first printed in English in 1521. The story was also available in English in Painter's *Second Tome of the Pallace of Pleasure* (1567) and Whetstone's *Rocke of Regard* (1576). It forms the basis of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (written c. 1609-1610). In addition, there was a northern set of intertexts from at least the fifteenth century, in both Dutch and High German.⁶⁰ This tradition was first printed in English as *Frederick of Jennen* in 1518, though the first full copy to survive was printed in 1560. Even more so than the other tales in *Smelts*, Standon-the-Greene's tale partakes in an international and canonical literary tradition. But as in the case of the other tales, the *Smelts* version of the story differs in suggestive ways from its intertexts.

First, the inn in which the plot opens functions differently in *Smelts*. In other version of this tale, men desire women in the inn, even when they do so in a deviant manner. In *Frederyke of Jennen*, beds are provided at the inn so 'that every marchaunt myght lye by them selfe'. One of the merchants suggests, 'let every one of us take us faire wenche to pas the time withall'.⁶¹ This suggestion is replicated in *Le Decameron* with 'quelque jeune garce';⁶² and in Italian versions with 'alcuna giovanetta'.⁶³ In the first English translation of the *Decameron* in 1620 (the same year as *Westward*), all of the merchants are married, and one suggests they each take a woman.⁶⁴ Dioneo's response to the story in the *Decameron* is that 'if they [men] finde women wontonly disposed abroad, the like iudgement they give of their wives at home'.⁶⁵ As Dioneo sees it, the problem that initiates the wager plot is that travel perverts men's desire for women: men conflate the foreign and the native, and become misogynist. In *Smelts* however, the sexual context of the inn is different. No mention is made of the marital status of the men, nor is it suggested that they should take female sexual partners. The gentlemen are all apparently English, and there is no suggestion of foreign corruption. Standon-the-Greene remarks coyly of the husband that 'to be briefe, he went to supper amongst other gentlemen.'⁶⁶ This suggests that there is a longer story of homosocial or potentially homoerotic interaction to be told. The problem

⁶⁰ Josef Raith, *Die Historie von den vier Kaufleuten (Frederyke of Jennen): Die Geschichte von der vertauschten Wiege (The mylner of Abyngton)* (Leipzig: R. Noske, 1936), 26–27.

⁶¹ *Here Begynneth a Propre Treatyse of a Marchauntes Wyfe, That Afterwarde Wente Lyke a Man and Became a Grete Lorde, and Was Called Frederyke of Iennen* (London, 1560), Aiii.

⁶² Boccaccio, *Le Decameron*, 1558, 217.

⁶³ Boccaccio, *Il decamerone*, 1522, 66. See also Francesco Sansovino, *Cento nouvelle* (Venice: Francesco Sansovino, 1566), 52 [sic] - in fact, 54.

⁶⁴ Boccaccio, *Il decamerone*, 1522, 66; Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 1:70v.

⁶⁵ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 1:74.

⁶⁶ *Westward for Smelts*, B[4].

that initiates the plot in *Smelts* is not womanising but supping with gentlemen: in other words, the homosocial environment that the inn creates, and the misogyny it permits.

In this context, the misogyny displayed by the villain in *Smelts* takes on a different sexual charge, of disgust and differentiation, rather than of violent desire. Indeed, the villain expresses no desire for the wife at all, and only ‘vowed either by force, policie, or free will to get some jewell or other toy from her, which was enough to perswade the gentleman that he was a cuckold, and win the wager’.⁶⁷ He does not actually desire to cuckold the husband then: he desires money, and indirectly, to separate the husband from his wife. This contrasts strongly with other versions of the wager plot, where the wife *as a woman* is constructed as an object of desire *for men*. In Italian versions of the *Decameron*, the villain uncovers the wife’s naked body while she sleeps and sees a mole on her breast. He desires the wife so much that he considers raping her, and putting himself in danger.⁶⁸ In *Cymbeline*, Iachimo cites Tarquin’s rape of Lucrecia and wishes ‘that I might touch, / But kisse, one kisse.’⁶⁹ In de Pisan’s *Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes* the villain ‘saw her all naked’.⁷⁰ This scene is even chosen as the image for the tale in Sansovino (see Figure 12). Both *Cymbeline* and the English *Decameron* have the villain discover a ‘small wart upon her left pap’.⁷¹ In *Smelts* however, the mole on the wife’s breast becomes a crucifix she wears close to her heart, discovered chastely ‘on a little table there by’.⁷²

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Boccaccio, *Il decamerone*, 1522, 67v.; Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, 1573, 124.

⁶⁹ William Shakespeare, “The Tragedie of Cymbeline,” in *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (London, 1623), 376.

⁷⁰ Christine de Pisan, *Here Begynneth the Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes* (London, 1521), Mii.

⁷¹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 1:70v.; Shakespeare, “The Tragedie of Cymbeline,” 376.

⁷² *VWestward for Smelts*, C.



Figure 12: III.iii, Francesco Sansovino, *Cento Novelle* (Venice, 1566), fo. 53v.

The denouement of the tale also involves varying degrees of nudity and voyeurism. In the *Decameron*, the wife shows her breasts to reveal her identity,⁷³ as in the English *Decameron* where ‘shewing her brests; she made it apparent, before the Soldane and his assistants, that she was the very same woman’.⁷⁴ In *Frederyke of Jennen*, ‘she did unclothe her al naked sauing a clothe before her membres’ (see Figure 13).⁷⁵ Although *Smelts* is generally bawdy, there is no undress at the end of Standon-the-Greene’s tale: Mistris Dorill simply ‘discovered her selfe to be a woman’.⁷⁶ Queer criticism helps to make sense of this otherwise strange minimisation of the wife’s sexual appeal. Her desexualisation serves to emphasise an alternative sexual community, where women are not desirable to men. The wife in *Smelts* is de-eroticised, to differentiate her from the homosocial world of the inn.

⁷³ Boccaccio, *Il decamerone*, 1522, 70; Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, 1573, 128.

⁷⁴ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 1:73.

⁷⁵ *Here Begynneth a Propre Treatyse*, Diii.

⁷⁶ *VWestward for Smelts*, C[4].



Figure 13: 'she did unclothe her al naked', *Here begynneth a propre treatyse* (London, 1560), Diii.

It is especially striking that the wife in *Smelts* is simultaneously feminised and desexualised. In a heterosexual system, this would be contradictory: the more a woman achieves perfect womanhood, the more heterosexually desirable she becomes. But this characterisation emphasises the masculine setting of the tale in *Smelts*, separating Mistris Dorrill from the homosocial and potentially homosexual environment of the inn. In other versions, the wife is portrayed as more than a woman, excelling her husband in many traditionally masculine activities.⁷⁷ In most versions of the *Decameron*, once the wife has cross-dressed, she is referred to as 'he'. She often receives a new, masculine name: Sicurano da finale, Sicuran de Final, Frederyke. In *Frederyke of Jennen*, she even becomes a military commander. In *Le Decameron*, although 'she' is used when the wife is being agreeable to the ship's captain, afterwards the pronoun 'he' is preferred.⁷⁸ When the wife discovers the villain, it is usually while trading with him.⁷⁹ However, in *Smelts* the wife is referred to using 'she' pronouns throughout, even in direct contexts like 'she was a poore Boy'.⁸⁰ The closest any other version gets to such a use of pronouns is the English *Decameron*, in which the wife is referred to as 'she' in the title, even when acting as man: the wife '(in the habite

⁷⁷ Boccaccio, *Il decamerone*, 1522, 66; Boccace, *Le Decameron*, 1558, 218; Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, 1573, 123; Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 1:69.

⁷⁸ Boccace, *Le Decameron*, 1558, 226–27.

⁷⁹ Pisan, *The Cyte of Ladyes*, M[iiii]; Boccaccio, *Il decamerone*, 1522, 69v.; Boccace, *Le Decameron*, 1558, 227; *Here Begynneth a Propre Treatyse*, Di; Boccaccio, *Il Decameron*, 1573, 127; Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 1:72.

⁸⁰ *VWestward for Smelts*, C3.

of a man) became servant to the Soldane. The deceiver being found at last, shee compassed such meanes, that her Husband *Bernabo* came into *Alexandria*'.⁸¹ But in the text of this *Decameron*, 'he' and 'she' pronouns are used interchangeably once the wife has cross-dressed: 'she was entertained', 'he grew in as great grace with the Soldane', 'she was skilfull'.⁸² The use of feminine pronouns in *Smelts* is more pronounced. In addition, the wife in *Smelts* finds the villain while tending his wounds, a traditionally feminine activity.⁸³ Reading Standon-the-Greene's tale queerly with reference to a potential homoerotic community explains the characterisation of the wife as simultaneously more feminine and less sexual. In *Smelts*, as Chapter 2 showed, sexuality is not exclusively the desire of men for women.

The queer resonances of Standon-the-Greene's tale have political implications. The setting of the tale suggests its relation to national politics. The Boccaccian version is set between Genoa, Paris and Alexandria. In de Pisan's *Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes* the wife becomes a servant to the 'Sowdan of Babylone'.⁸⁴ An English version of the story called 'A Lady of Boeme' is set in Bohemia in the 1450s.⁸⁵ Even the nationalising *Cymbeline* includes a trip to Rome and some foreign merchants.⁸⁶ But like the other stories in *Smelts*, Standon-the-Greene's tale is entirely relocated to England, during the Wars of the Roses.

This means that all of the conflict occurs within the nation, rather than between nations. Additionally, the story has become queerer as well as more English, with the suggestion that 'English' is queer too. The plot in *Smelts* is enabled by the homosocial environment of the inn, where the villain feels free to express his misogynist opinions of women. This hatred of women, and the potential male desire for men, causes the wager to be laid.⁸⁷ The husband feels differently, but his association with such company rubs off on his judgement. The resolution of this problem in *Smelts* is war.

Standon-the-Greene's tale is thus based on assumptions that form an indirect criticism of James' policies. Some contemporaries associated James with excessive male desire and with overly pacific foreign policy. Standon-the-Greene's tale pointedly highlights the dangers of male homosociality and the social benefits of war. Especially

⁸¹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 1620, 1:68.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1:71v.

⁸³ *VWestward for Smelts*, C3.

⁸⁴ Pisan, *The Cyte of Ladyes*, Miii.

⁸⁵ Painter, *The Second Tome of the Palace*, 292–93. This story appears just after another tale entitled "The Lord of Virle", which shares the plot of the wife of Hampton's tale. See 268–91.

⁸⁶ Shakespeare, "The Tragedie of Cymbeline."

⁸⁷ *VWestward for Smelts*, B[4].

given the Elizabethan resonance of *Smelts* overall, and Elizabeth's very different sexual and military policies, Standon-the-Greene's tale can be read as a criticism of James' court culture and continuing pacifism. Specifically, given its publication date, *Smelts* can be read as a contribution to the Bohemian cause, supporting the uprising of 1619-1620.

Part c: A 1620s moment

These readings of Kit's song and Standon-the-Greene's tale are not obvious or necessary. I have demonstrated how these readings render the pamphlet more coherent, and gestured towards their wider cultural resonance. This section contextualises Standon-the-Greene's tale further, and argues that James' sexuality and foreign policy were highly topical in 1620. After considering the wider political and literary context of that year, I turn to the 1620 pamphlets *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir*, which were also deeply concerned with gender, sexuality, and James' foreign policy (see Figure 14). Both Trundle pamphlets, *Hic Mulier* was entered into the stationers' register first, and was a diatribe against women dressed like men. *Haec Vir* was published shortly afterwards and took the form of a dialogue between *Hic Mulier*, the masculine woman, and *Haec Vir*, the feminine man. Comparison of *Smelts* and the *Hic Mulier* pamphlets shows that concerns over James' court and foreign policy were topical, and that other pamphlets made comments on political affairs in oblique ways, with reference to gender and sexuality.



Figure 14: *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir*, frontispiece of *Haec-Vir* (London, 1620).

In 1620, James' pacific position was more than simply a matter of political interest: it was a hot public topic. In 1619 James' daughter Elizabeth and her husband the Elector Palatinate had been translated to the throne of Bohemia. The next year, Spain invaded the Palatinate and by the end of 1620 had defeated the Bohemian uprising too. During this year James was bombarded with appeals from German and Bohemian Protestants. Far from committing himself militarily, James began courting a Spanish match more assiduously, seeking to redress the balance of power. These events were of huge public interest; and peace, war and James' foreign policy position were discussed throughout the country.⁸⁸ According to Thomas Cogswell, 'nothing focused public attention so closely and so long'.⁸⁹ This political situation was not only a general feature of the reign, but an issue of particular importance and topicality in 1620.

From a literary perspective too, 1620 was a significant year. 1620 witnessed the first English translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Alongside *Haec Vir* and *Hic Mulier*, other late entries in the woman debate were published, including *Muld Sacke: Or The Apologie of Hic Mulier*, and the anonymous play *Swetnam, the Woman-Hater, Arraigned by Women*. *Smelts*' engagement with the nature of women is not explicit, but the pamphlet is full of relevant material, which clearly had a contemporary market. There are particular synergies between *Smelts* and *Swetnam, the Woman-Hater*. This play had been performed in 1617 or 1618, and has been analysed as 'a confrontation between the misogynist James I and a revived Elizabeth I'.⁹⁰ Its frontispiece features a female monarch and women wearing the kind of hats that James condemned (see Figure 15 and note 96 below).⁹¹ These are uncannily like the hats worn by the wives in *Smelts* (see Figure 6 and Figure 11), which were characteristic of female street sellers.⁹² Other pamphlets in this genre made similar comparisons, like Esther Sovernam's *Ester hath hang'd Haman*, published in 1617, which praised Elizabeth so as to indirectly criticise James.⁹³ Even more minor themes in *Smelts* had wider appeal in 1620: Taylor published *Iack a Lent His Beginning and Entertainment*,

⁸⁸ Richard Cust, "News and Politics in Early Seventeenth-Century England," *Past & Present*, no. 112 (1986): 69.

⁸⁹ Thomas Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621-1624* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 24, see also 1-23.

⁹⁰ Valerie Wayne, "'The Dearth of the Author': Anonymity's Allies and *Swetnam the Woman-Hater*," in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, ed. Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 236.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Twynning, *London Dispossessed*, 61.

⁹³ Ester Sovernam, *Ester Hath Hang'd Haman: Or An Ansvvere to a Lewd Pamphlet, Entituled, The Arraignment of Women* (London, 1617); Diane Purkiss, "Material Girls: The Seventeenth-Century Woman Debate," in *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*, ed. Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss (London: Routledge, 1992), 85.

which gave a humorous account of Lent, and was followed in 1621 by *Taylor's Motto: Et Habeo, et Careo, et Curo*, which dealt at length with waterman status. *Smelts'* literary and political resonances are particularly strong because of its publication date in 1620.



Figure 15: Hats, frontispiece of *Swetnam, the Woman-hater* (London, 1620).

Hic Mulier and *Haec Vir* were more overtly concerned with court life than *Smelts*. Specifically, they reference the Overbury affair via the yellow ruffs associated with Mistress Turner. The backstory to this scandal was that Lady Frances Howard had divorced her first husband on the grounds of impotency and married Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset and a favourite of James. Sir Thomas Overbury opposed the match and was subsequently murdered in the tower. Several people were hanged, including Mistress Turner, a companion of Howard's and incidentally responsible for the introduction of yellow ruffs to the court. *Hic Mulier* sniped that 'to wear yellow on white or white upon yellow is by the

rules of Heraldry baseness, bastardy, and indignity’;⁹⁴ and there is a reference in *Haec Vir* to ‘iealous yellow iaundis’d bands’.⁹⁵ James himself was hostile to yellow ruffs and to female appropriation of male fashions. In the same year as the *Hic Mulier* pamphlets, 1620, James ordered his clergy to preach against ‘the insolence of our women and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn’.⁹⁶ He was interpreted as condemning yellow ruffs in particular, and the Dean of Westminster refused women entry to religious service for wearing them. At this point James had to clarify that ‘his meaning was not for yellow ruffles but for other manlike apparell’.⁹⁷ Ironically, James’ male favourites had a reputation for effeminate dress. In its inclusion of feminine men, *Haec Vir* is potentially making a swipe at the king’s hypocrisy. These references embed the *Hic Mulier* pamphlets in court culture and scandal.

In Trundle pamphlets, the Overbury affair was also associated with women desiring women, and men men. Trundle had profited from the media storm around the affair in 1615 with the broadside *Mistres Turner* (see Figure 16). The sexualised figure of Lady Pride, breasts bared, was once attractive to Turner herself: ‘that whorish face of thine, which tempted / Me’.⁹⁸ In *Hic Mulier*, women dressed like men are scandalously attractive to men, with their ‘bared brests seducing, and naked armes embracing’.⁹⁹ This raises questions about the nature of male desire. *Haec Vir* makes it even harder to uphold any gender binary: at the beginning of the pamphlet, both *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir* are seeking members of their own sex. *Haec Vir* addresses *Hic Mulier*, ‘Sir . . . you are most happily given unto mine imbrace’; and *Hic Mulier* returns, ‘Lady, I . . . desire to be employed in your service.’¹⁰⁰ Given the ambiguity of the genders of all involved, this ‘desire’ seems definitionally queer. Trundle had form in printing queer desire and court scandal in the same pamphlets then. He also associated sexuality with national boundaries in other works, as in the 1619 *The Hunting of the Pox* (see section II). Gender and sexuality were politicised in numerous Trundle works.

⁹⁴ *Hic Mulier: Or, The Man-Woman* (London, 1620), A[4].

⁹⁵ *Hæc-Vir: Or, The Womanish-Man* (London, 1620), B4.

⁹⁶ Katherine U. Henderson, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 17.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Simon Shepherd, *Amazons and Warrior Women: Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), 84.

⁹⁸ *Mistris Turners Farewell to All Women* (London, 1615).

⁹⁹ *Hic Mulier*, B[4].

¹⁰⁰ *Hæc-Vir*, A3.



Figure 16: *Mistris Turner and Lady Pride, Mistris Turners Farewell* (London, 1615).

As well as commenting on court politics and sexuality, *Haec Vir* makes a call for war.¹⁰¹ At the close of the pamphlet, *Hic Mulier* laments that feminine men:

have demolish'd the noble schooles of Horse-manship . . . hung up your Armes to rust, glued up those swords in their scabberds that would shake all Christendome with the brandish, and entertained into your mindes such softnes, dulnesse, and effeminate niceness . . .¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Michael B. Young, *James VI and I and the History of Homosexuality* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000), 88–89.

¹⁰² *Hæc-Vir*, C2.

Hic Mulier demands that men ‘put on your owne armours: Be men in shape, men in shew, men in words, men in actions, men in counsell, men in example’.¹⁰³ This positive portrayal of war and its impact on gender norms and their sexual implications is a double criticism of James’ foreign policy and his sexual preferences. Indeed, James himself sometimes yoked war and sexuality together, as in one of his last speeches to Parliament in 1624, when he said that ‘unless it be upon such a necessity that I may call it [war], as some say merrily of women, *malum necessarium*, I should be loth to enter into it.’¹⁰⁴ D.R. Woolf argued that politicised comparisons between Elizabeth and James developed around the Palatinate crisis, especially after its loss in 1621.¹⁰⁵ *Smelts* predates this, but only slightly, and may be considered an early example of this tendency. This context renders a reading of Standon-the-Greene’s tale in relation to James’ foreign policy compelling.

It is notable that the treatment of cross-dressing in the *Hic Mulier* pamphlets and *Smelts* is so different, in spite of their similar position on the Bohemian cause. In the *Hic Mulier* pamphlets, cross-dressing and the breaching of gender boundaries form part of the criticism of James. There are more surviving sumptuary orders from the reign of Elizabeth than any other monarch. These orders lapsed under James.¹⁰⁶ Criticising cross-dressing thus fits into a temporal hierarchy that is critical of James. In *Smelts* on the other hand, while the presence of cross-dressing also links thematically to fashion in James’ court,¹⁰⁷ its primary function is to bring war into the plot. Mistris Dorrill’s cross-dressing allows her onto the battlefield, and so enables a pro-war subtext in *Smelts*. Cross-dressing itself is not criticised. In fact, this silence might even be read as a critique of James’ well-known misogyny, or the hypocrisy of favouring effeminately dressed men while restricting masculine dress for women. Attention to cross-dressing and the Bohemian cause shows that gender was instrumentalised in different ways even on the same side of the political debate. It also demonstrates the instability of these readings, which extrapolate from different assumptions in the texts to reach similar conclusions. These readings should be treated as provisional. The literary and political context of the texts nevertheless makes such readings persuasive.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, C3.

¹⁰⁴ A “necessary evil”. Young, *James VI and I and the History of Homosexuality*, 101.

¹⁰⁵ D. R. Woolf, “Two Elizabeths? James I and the Late Queen’s Famous Memory,” *Canadian Journal of History/Annales Canadiennes d’Histoire* 20, no. 2 (1985): 184.

¹⁰⁶ Susan J. Vincent, *Dressing the Elite: Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford, UK ; New York: Berg, 2003), 117; Marjorie B. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), 26, 31.

¹⁰⁷ Vincent, *Dressing the Elite*, 172.

Contextualisation has suggested that *Smelts* was invested in pro-Bohemia, anti-sodomitical politics. The context of the pamphlet in 1620 and the framing of the work as a whole strongly suggest comparisons between Elizabeth and James. Standon-the-Greene's tale is based on assumptions that imply particular political positions on the Bohemian crisis. The tale implicitly criticises James' homosexuality and misogyny, and suggests that war is a solution to both of these problems. My argument is not that the purpose of *Smelts*, or the way that readers interpreted it, was directly related to court politics. Rather a wider point is being made: that this kind of political commentary was widely and deeply understood. It emerged thematically in Standon-the-Greene's tale, and was highly topical in 1620, as the *Hic Mulier* pamphlets demonstrate. Most importantly, discussion of these texts has shown that some cheap, bawdy pamphlets engaged more extensively with contemporary politics than one might expect.

Conclusion to Section I

Women and the lower classes are often imagined to be excluded from nation-building projects.¹⁰⁸ *Smelts* offers one contemporary conception of what their input might look like, and constitutes an unusual reappraisal of the relationship between sexuality, politics and nation. The pamphlet offers a potential reimagining of the contours of nation. The barriers between London and the countryside, and between land and water, are temporarily dissolved, fostering a sense of unity. This unity is elaborated in the pamphlet through queer and female-orientated dynamics which are suggested as characteristic of the imagined nation. Moreover, the storyteller who articulates an implicit commentary on James' foreign policy is female, as is the queer lady who presides over the pamphlet itself. The potentially queer women in the tales discussed in Chapter 2, especially the virginal ones, are in a sense Elizabeth's votaries.

Brainford brings the pamphlet to a close by declaring, 'yonder is Kingstone, whose large and conscionable pots are praised throughout England'.¹⁰⁹ In spite of having travelled from Queenhithe to Kingstone, the fishwives have retained their female orientation: though the primary meaning of 'pots' is clearly ale, 'pot' was also a word for vagina.¹¹⁰ Given Brainford's ex-bawd status and her potential affair with the heroine of her own tale, this

¹⁰⁸ Moulton, *Before Pornography*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ *Vestward for Smelts*, F.

¹¹⁰ Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language*, 2:1078.

pun is plausible. Nation is feminised and queered in *Smelts*, which celebrates female power and queer relationships between women, and criticises male homoeroticism and pacifism.

Beyond these conclusions about *Smelts* itself, this section has implications for the interpretation of cheap bawdy print generally. This literature in and around 1620 was highly engaged with political and national affairs. *Smelts* is a diverse and complicated pamphlet which is not simply a political commentary. But this very ambiguity makes political readings of the pamphlet more important: even in pamphlets where politics was not the main concern, there was a deep understanding of and independence of thought regarding contemporary political issues.

Section II: A different foreign/politics

Smelts is most politically engaged at national and court level. Turning to the political engagements of historical fishwives, the metropolitan level becomes more salient. Chapters 1 and 2 have discussed some of the political aspects of the lives of London fishwives: the economic and political motives for labelling fishwives, and their sexual regulation. Both of these chapters emphasised the agency of those in positions of authority. This section turns to the political power of fishwives themselves, both as it was culturally understood in the City of London, and as it was exercised by fishwives as social actors.

This section seeks to augment the historiography of political participation in the City. Some critics have been overly sanguine in their interpretations of political participation. Steve Rappaport concluded that London remained politically stable because the life odds for an apprentice were good enough, implying that apprentices were the only group who might otherwise have caused political trouble.¹¹¹ Valerie Pearl wrote that in early modern London there was not too little but if anything too much government, as all but the lowest dependent classes were included – these latter including nearly all women and so at least half of the population.¹¹² Although these statements seem unacceptably gender blind, arguing that London was an oligarchy which oppressed all women would equally erase women from political history, as well as neglect the evidence that women did in fact participate in politics. Much of this evidence comes from the civil wars period, but this activism is unlikely to have sprung from nowhere.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds*, 387.

¹¹² Pearl, “Social Policy in Early Modern London,” 117.

¹¹³ Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 311.

The day-to-day political activities of fishwives in the workplace is a part of this pre-history of women's political engagement. Contemporary expectations around fishwives also assumed that they might be politically powerful. This section thus concerns different kinds of politics to those discussed in section I, which showed the wide reach of high politics within cheap pamphlet literature. In section II, the political is taken more broadly, including street politics and metropolitan regulation. The challenge of section I is thus inverted, and the task is to show how wide an implication 'upwards' such 'lowly' concern had.

Part a argues that fishwives as cultural figures were seen as political mediators. Part b examines the political praxis of fishwives and how they negotiated City and on occasion national politics. I argue that fishwives actively participated in their own regulation, and in one notable case voiced their own definition of the foreign. This further problematizes our ideas of the political, and shows that who and what was political was itself a matter to be contested.

Part a: '[W]holosome for mans bodye': political fish/food

Fishwives were cultural mediators. Firstly, fishwives formed a link between sea and land. For an island nation intimately concerned with maritime power, this linkage was important to national imagination. This was also of national importance was through the political function of Lent. The sexual elements of Lent were discussed in Chapter 2, but there were also national connotations to the season. Such linkages were specific to fishwives rather than other traders, and associated them with nation. But as well as mediating between land and sea, fishwives were mediators between men (and women). Fishwives were therefore implicated in concerns about the pox, the plague, and bad fish, all of which endangered a gendered body politic. It is important to note that similar connections applied to other kinds of food trader. Issues surrounding mediation between people and food thus have wider political significance. Fishwives' in between position made them politically as well as sexually charged figures.

Fishing was an industry of national importance, and as such was often used to invoke ideas of nation. A striking visual representation of this appeared in the broadsheet *A briefe note of the benefits that grow to this Realme, by the observation of fish-daies*, published in 1593 and again in 1596 (see Figure 17). The banner showed images of fishermen alongside the national crest. Andrew Boorde's 1542 *Dyetary of Helth* proudly

proclaimed that ‘Of all nacyons & countres, Englande is beste servyd of fysshe’.¹¹⁴ A particularly detailed source on fishing is Gentleman’s 1614 pamphlet, *Englands way to win wealth*. Gentleman argues that fishing is important ‘for the strengthening of this Kingdome against all forraigne invasions’.¹¹⁵ But the martial value of the fishing industry is not simply a feature of the work: it is a national characteristic, too. Men on fishing busses, Gentleman argued, ‘will shew themselves right English’.¹¹⁶ In this pamphlet, the national and military significance of the fishing trade is further complicated by the position of women in the imagined fishing empire. Gentleman notes that an improved fishing trade ‘is a principall place for good Huswives, for spinning of yarne’;¹¹⁷ but his only reference to fishwives is when he compares them unfavourably to their Dutch counterparts, who are wealthier.¹¹⁸ The current state of male English involvement in fishing is also compared unfavourably to that of the Dutch, but the purpose of the pamphlet is to show how this male economic failure can be redeemed.¹¹⁹ No such resolution is suggested for English fishwives, and their role in this nationally important trade remains ambiguous. Like fishermen, fishwives mediated between the sea and the land, and were used to mark national difference, here in contradistinction to the Dutch.



Figure 17: *The importance of fishing, A briefe note of the benefits that grow to this Realme* (London, 1593).

¹¹⁴ Andrew Boorde, *Hereafter Foloweth a Compendyous Regyment or a Dyetary of Helth* (London, 1542), Hi; Andrew Boorde, *A Compendyous Regyment or a Dyetary of Healthe* (London, 1567), E[4].

¹¹⁵ Gentleman, *Englands Vvay to Vvin Vvealth*, 7.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4–5, for example.

A second aspect of fishwives' mediation between water and land was Lent, and fish days generally. David Cressy argued that time was increasingly politicised in this period, and linked to the construction of a national Protestant culture.¹²⁰ The first reason to observe fish days given in *A briefe note of the benefits that grow to this Realme* was nation specific: 'our Countrey is (for the most part) compassed with the Seas'.¹²¹ Although especially in the later seventeenth century the strict observation of Lent was associated with Catholicism, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Lent was still seen as part of the common good. It was officially encouraged, to support the fishing industry and indirectly the navy, and to lower the price of meat, which was thought to be artificially high due to scarcity.¹²² Lent was also imagined to keep the balance between fishmongers and butchers.¹²³ Unsurprisingly, the Company of Fishmongers strongly supported Lent. In 1612, they hoped that 'there Lordships may take liking to contynewe this restraynt every Lent and refer the Care thereof to the Company to the *generall good of the generalty*'.¹²⁴ There is obviously a self-interest in the Fishmongers claiming Lent was beneficial to everybody, but such opinions were widespread. The proclamation on Lent in the Journals in spring 1584 praised 'the great notable comodities growinge by the dew observation thereof'.¹²⁵ Similar language was used in the other proclamations.¹²⁶ Fishwives helped to provide these 'notable comodities' and contributed through their work to a practice that was considered part of the national good. Focusing on the sexual deviancy of fishwives should not obscure their important economic contribution, indirectly acknowledged in contemporary thinking on fishing and Lent.

¹²⁰ David Cressy, *Bonfires & Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), xi; see also R.C.L. Sgroi, "Piscatorial Politics Revisited: The Language of Economic Debate and the Evolution of Fishing Policy in Elizabethan England," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 35, no. 1 (2003): 4.

¹²¹ *A Briefe Note of the Benefits That Grow to This Realme, by the Obseruation of Fish-Daies: With a Reason and Cause Wherefore the Law in That Behalfe Made, Is Ordained. Very Necessarie to Be Placed in the Houses of All Men, Especially Common Victualers* (London, 1593). See also *A Briefe Note of the Benefits That Growe to This Realme, by the Observation of Fish-Daies: With a Reason and Cause Wherefore the Lawe in That Behalfe Made, Is Ordained. Very Necessary to Be Placed in the Houses of All Men, Specially Common Victualers* (London, 1595).

¹²² J. C. Drummond, *The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of English Diet*, revised, and with a new chapter by Dorothy Hollingsworth and a preface by Norman C. Wright. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), 61; Pelling, *The Common Lot*, 42; Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 106; Margaret Dorey, "Controlling Corruption: Regulating Meat Consumption as a Preventative to Plague in Seventeenth-Century London," *Urban History* 36, no. 1 (2009): 26.

¹²³ Michael D. Bristol, "Butchers and Fishmongers," in *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 76.

¹²⁴ GL, MS5570/2, 73; my emphasis.

¹²⁵ LMA, Jor. 21, fo. 341-42.

¹²⁶ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 91, 155v-56v., 258, 366v; Hughes and Larkin, *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ii:503, 510, 535; iii:3, 36, 134, 143, 188.

Fishwives' associations with political Lent were not however uniformly respectable. Although *A briefe note* argued in favour of fast days partly because they helped to support 'Utterers of Fish',¹²⁷ failure to observe fish days is ironically described as the 'cause of great numbers of idle persons . . . this hapeneth by reason of the uncertainty of the sale of Fish'.¹²⁸ Given the common description of fishwives *even when they were selling fish* as 'idle & loose persons',¹²⁹ and the uncertainty in their work, changing wares from day to day, this positions fishwives ambiguously. They are both celebrated a pillars of the fast, and implicated as a potentially harmful by-product of both fasting and failing to do so.

Beyond this individual broadsheet, Lent was fraught with concern over private gain. We have seen how in 1615 the Lord Mayor described how fishmongers 'doth still make an extraordinarie use of this time in the price of all manner of Fysh'.¹³⁰ The Fishmongers were responsible for searching for meat during Lent. This exercise 'doth much concerne the Companies credittes' and put pressure on the Fishmongers 'to keep there wonted prizes of there fishe', in order that 'there Lordships may take liking to contynewe this restraynt every Lent'.¹³¹ London fishmongers were frequently in dispute with London butchers and English fishermen,¹³² and were responsible for undercutting the English fish market by importing Dutch fish.¹³³ They were hardly models of national contribution, in spite of their association with political Lent. Nevertheless, on occasion the Fishmongers too were concerned by private profit during Lent. In January 1601 they considered whether to give a reward to a man who had made a proposal to increase observation of fish days. In principle the members were in favour of a reward, but first they considered 'what his drift is in theis cases, either to doe general good therein, or to bennifett him self onely'.¹³⁴

Chapter 2 showed how fishwives profited during Lent, with all of its ambiguous sexual connotations. Incidents such as the 1595 food riots show how fishwives were sometimes responsible for high prices of fish.¹³⁵ More generally, as fishwives were not punishable by a guild, and Bridewell was often slow to enforce the regulations, prices were

¹²⁷ *A Briefe Note*, 1593.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ LMA, Jor. 29, fo. 187.

¹³⁰ LMA, Rem. IV, no. 13.

¹³¹ GL MS5570/2, 72-73.

¹³² G.R. Elton, "Piscatorial Politics in the Early Parliaments of Elizabeth I," in *Business Life and Public Policy: Essays in Honour of D.C. Coleman*, ed. Neil McKendrick and Richard Brian Outhwaite (Cambridge UP, 1986), 8.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³⁴ GL MS5770/1, 271.

¹³⁵ Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability*, 1, 6. See also LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 115, 544; Jor. 22, fo. 379-79v.; 28, fo. 301-301v.

particularly difficult to enforce upon fishwives. Unlicensed fishwives were not subject to checks at all. Fish days were of national importance in their relationship both to the navy and to the price of eggs.¹³⁶ While the naval part of this linkage placed fishwives in a positive political light, the price part potentially undermined the same, and turned fishwives into national threats, ‘the principall meanes of [all] euill [rule]’.¹³⁷ Fishwives’ mediating position between land and sea implied their national significance, but was also potentially threatening.

As well as mediating between water and land, fishwives were imagined as conduits between people. Many of those they sold to were women, as the cries of London in visual and musical form imply.¹³⁸ However, the more fraught relationship was their perceived sexual and physical mediation between men. This led to concerns over pox and plague, and ultimately over a masculine body politic.

The pox was heavily associated with foreignness. The sixteenth century saw an increase in national names for syphilis.¹³⁹ Often referred to in England as ‘morbus gallicus’, the French disease, it was also thought to originate in the new world. Its incidence in England was thus a worrying sign of interracial liaison and miscegenation. In Trundle’s 1619 pamphlet, *The Hunting of the Pox*, sex with American women is thought to be responsible for pox: ‘The souldiers . . . did covet for to lye / With those strange women’.¹⁴⁰ The pamphlet itself is characterised as contagious, ‘translated out of French and new sent from the Stewes.’¹⁴¹ Translation is figured as a potentially corrupting and sexualised force (something which may have encouraged obscuring the translation of *Smelts*). Morbus Gallicus is a character in *The Hunting of the Pox*, and falls in love with the courtesan Veneris, whose ‘Syre [was] a Dogge of *India* breed, her Dam in stewes brought up’.¹⁴² Chapter 2 demonstrated that fishwives were considered promiscuous and whorelike. This associated them with the pox and so with national transgression. Sometimes the link to the pox was more direct, as in April 1601 when ‘Ione Crane Fishwyfe infected with the foule

¹³⁶ Bristol, “Butchers and Fishmongers,” 82.

¹³⁷ LMA, Jor. 29, fo. 187.

¹³⁸ Brett, *Consort Songs*, 117, 122–23, 131, 135; Andrew Clark, “Appendix 1: A Soung of the Guise of London, C. 1580,” in *The Shirburn Ballads, 1585–1616* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 335–36; Shesgreen, *Images of the Outcast*, 19–20; Korda, “Gender at Work,” 123.

¹³⁹ Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare’s England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 16.

¹⁴⁰ J. T., *The Hunting of the Pox* (London, 1619), B.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, A4.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, B2.

disease [was] ponished & sente to St Thomas hospitall.’¹⁴³ Fishwives mediated sexually between men and nations, threatening the integrity of individuals and the body politic.

The plague was also seen to be exacerbated or even caused by fishwives. Plague and syphilis both undermined humoral ideas of disease as endogenous.¹⁴⁴ Fishwives were one way of making sense of the foreign, external origins of such diseases. Griffiths commented that regulation of fishwives increased during plague because they were seen as dangerous.¹⁴⁵ Partly this is because they were market women and so contributed to crowds where disease spread quickly. In the 1626 pamphlet *A Watchman for the Pest*, Stephen Bradwell advised ‘keepe out of crowds and assemblies of people as much as you may’.¹⁴⁶ In addition, Dorey showed that food traders in general ‘provided the sites and means of excess and sin’, and were deemed sources of moral and physical corruption.¹⁴⁷

However, fishwives were also particularly dangerous because of their association with fish. Fish was regarded as ‘not so wholsome as flesh’,¹⁴⁸ and as ‘unwholsome, and hurtfull to the health of the bodie’.¹⁴⁹ Boorde wrote that fish ‘doth lytell nowrisshe’.¹⁵⁰ It was also thought that bad smells and putrefaction caused plague, so the smell of fish rendered it particularly suspect.¹⁵¹ On 31 July 1606, an order was entered into the Repertories:

Item for that the infection of the plague doth daylye encrease: It is ordered for good consideracons this Court moving that noe manner of Oysters shalbe sold in anye part of this Cittye or liberties thereof for the space of one moneth next ensuing and untill further order shalbe taken . . .¹⁵²

¹⁴³ BRHAM, BBHC 4, fo. 230. See also Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, 132.

¹⁴⁴ Harris, *Sick Economies*, 15; Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in Early Modern English Medicine, 1550-1680*, 299.

¹⁴⁵ Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, 133.

¹⁴⁶ Stephen Bradwell, *A Vvatch-Man for the Pest: Teaching the True Rules of Preservation from the Pestilent Contagion, at This Time Fearefully over-Flowing This Famous Cittie of London* (London, 1625), 23.

¹⁴⁷ Dorey, “Controlling Corruption,” 29.

¹⁴⁸ Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*, 260.

¹⁴⁹ Venner, *Via Recta*, 74.

¹⁵⁰ Boorde, *A Dyetary of Helth*, Hii; see also Boorde, *A Dyetary of Healthe*, Fi.

¹⁵¹ Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in Early Modern English Medicine, 1550-1680*, 89, 136–37, 276, 299–301, 314, 319; Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 161; Drummond, *The Englishman’s Food*, 37.

¹⁵² LMA, Rep. 27, fo. 252v.

Here oysters in particular are the problem, not market crowds. This is strange, as oysters were commonly considered the least bad sort of fish. The oyster does ‘least offend the stomach’,¹⁵³ and ‘carieth with it least suspition of melancholy’.¹⁵⁴ A possible explanation is that it was thought that oysters ‘must not be eaten in those moneths, which in pronouncing want the letter R’ – in other words, the summer months while oysters were breeding.¹⁵⁵ Given this order was given in July, it seems likely that a combination of ideas about fish and plague were at work. Unlike with the pox, fishwives’ mediation in the case of plague was not sexual but alimentary.

The dangers associated with fishwives’ access to men’s stomachs reached beyond plague to bad fish generally. Cold, moist foods were thought to be subject to putrefaction inside and outside body, especially fish and fruit.¹⁵⁶ Anxiety about the age of fish is present in contemporary ballads, as when fishwives cry over-emphatically, ‘New place, new, as new as the daye’.¹⁵⁷ The orders on fishwives usually included injunctions ‘not to buy & sell any [fish] but suche as shall be sweete and wholesome for mans bodye’.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, the 1611 act demanded that fishwives ‘shall not buie provide utter sell or offer to bee sold anie Fishe oysters, fruites or other victuall not sweete or not wholesome for mans bodie’.¹⁵⁹ Bad fish was not simply an individual problem. David Gentilcore argued that national identities were ‘both bodily *and* political conditions’ in the sixteenth century.¹⁶⁰ Because of the persuasiveness of the metaphor of the body politic in this period, bodily and national threats were related. Fishwives thus fit into the more general argument proposed by Wiesner, that what women fed to whom was political.¹⁶¹

The bodies that were endangered by bad fish were figured by contemporaries as exclusively male. Fish must be ‘wholsome for mans bodye’ even though, and perhaps because, women dominated marketplaces and played an important role in buying and preparing food. I contend that women are not simply omitted from this falsely universal

¹⁵³ Venner, *Via Recta*, 81.

¹⁵⁴ Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*, 12.

¹⁵⁵ Vaughan, *Approved Directions*, 43.

¹⁵⁶ Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 102–103.

¹⁵⁷ Clark, “Appendix 1: A Soung of the Guise of London, C. 1580,” 335.

¹⁵⁸ Quoted from the 1584 order; LMA, Rep. 21, fo. 115.

¹⁵⁹ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 301.

¹⁶⁰ Gentilcore, *Food and Health*, 77.

¹⁶¹ Merry E. Wiesner, “Women’s Defense of Their Public Role,” in *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 6.

phrase, but excluded from it.¹⁶² Patriarchy should be treated as a historical rather than inevitable phenomenon. Hilda Smith argued that from 1640, the body politic became increasingly masculine and exclusive in response to the political pressures of the civil wars. In the period covered in this thesis, multiple configurations of the body politic were current. In the case of market abuses, the body to be harmed was exclusively masculine in spite of the female status of many if not most of those involved. This understanding of market abuses is mirrored in contemporary understandings of marital abuses: both adulterated goods and adultery were primarily thought to injure men. The two behaviours were also thought to go hand in hand, conflating sexual and alimentary threat.¹⁶³ The exclusion of women from this kind of body politic should be seen as part of the misogynist dynamic which sexualised and denigrated market women and by extension all women (see Chapter 1).

Bad fish was not an abuse restricted to fishwives,¹⁶⁴ but the victims of it were described as male even when the perpetrators were too. In April 1599, Roger Norry's fishmonger was brought to court for selling fish 'so noysome that no man can abide to come neare it'.¹⁶⁵ That bad food was a problem with national significance is made clear in a 1613 proclamation by the Lord Mayor prior to the meeting of Parliament, which declared that:

in all well-governed Kingdomes, Common-wealthes, Cities, and Countries, care hath ever beene duly had and taken, and commands strictly given in publicke and in priuate, That Breade, Meats, and Drinkes of all sorts, to be solde, uttered, or put to sale, for the sustenance of mankinde, should be good, sweet, sound, and wholesome for mans body .

..¹⁶⁶

Again, the potential victims of unwholesome food are male. More particularly, they are Parliament men, and represent the (masculinised) nation. That food should be wholesome

¹⁶² Hilda L. Smith, *All Men and Both Sexes: Gender, Politics, and the False Universal in England, 1640-1832* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 13.

¹⁶³ Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture ; 1 (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 92–95.

¹⁶⁴ See Ch. 1, n. 120.

¹⁶⁵ GL MS5570/1, 203. See also GL MS5570/1, 201, 342, 414, 511, 518, 582; GL MS5570/2, 218, 247, 348, 491.

¹⁶⁶ *Where, in All Well-Gouerned Kingdomes* (London, 1613).

is here an issue of national moment. Fishwives were excluded from the masculine body politic implied in the rhetoric of bad fish, but they also helped constitute the same through their mediation of the physical well-being of the bodies of men and nation.

This section has discussed the mediating role played by fishwives in particular. It is important to note that other food traders were positioned in a similar way. They too operated between country and city and in some cases beyond the seas. All trade in food was implicated in the negotiation of the boundaries of the household, and by implication the state as household. Chapter 1 showed the fluidity between different kinds of huckster. Dorey demonstrated the concern that attached to all kinds of market trader where plague was concerned,¹⁶⁷ and particularly to butchers.¹⁶⁸ As Emily Cockayne put it, '[u]rban dwellers, rich and poor alike, were at the mercy of others' for their food supply, which added tension to many kinds of market relation.¹⁶⁹ In gendered terms too, there are similarities. Korda argued that the growing numbers of mainly female hawkers were experienced as a threat to formal, guild-based civic masculinity.¹⁷⁰ Fishwives' supposed threat to a masculine body politic was part of a larger political and gendered dynamic.

Attention to the mediating position of fishwives is thus of wider significance, as it illuminates political thought on and approaches to a range of actors in early modern London. Similar histories might well be true of other towns, too. Nevertheless, there were specificities to the position of fishwives. As Buis, Spain-Savage and Wright noted, fishwives were unusual in selling something wild.¹⁷¹ Their mediation between land and sea, and so across the boundaries of nation, positioned them as particularly powerful and threatening. The sexual connotations of fishwives and the dangers attached to fish also made fishwives especially problematic to the health of a gendered body politic. Fishwives' position as cultural mediators helped to construct the contours of this body, from which fishwives themselves were nevertheless excluded.

Part b: The popular politics of London fishwives

The situation of fishwives as mediators of nation, bridges between water and land, and between men, refers largely to cultural understandings of fishwives, rather than to

¹⁶⁷ Dorey, "Lewd, Idle People."

¹⁶⁸ Dorey, "Controlling Corruption."

¹⁶⁹ Emily Cockayne, "Mouldy," in *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England 1600-1770* (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 104.

¹⁷⁰ Korda, *Laborers Lost*, 182–83.

¹⁷¹ Buis, Spain-Savage, and Wright, "Attending to Fishwives," 179.

fishwives' actions. Turning to fishwives as agents, this part of section II seeks to apply Shagan's work on popular politics to the case of London fishwives. Shagan contended that the Reformation was experienced locally,¹⁷² and that like all early modern governance, it was produced through negotiation between governors and governed.¹⁷³ The principle point of this work is that 'the English Reformation was not done *to* people, it was done *with* them.'¹⁷⁴ I shall argue that this can also be applied to the regulation of fishwives. Harris argued that the main way that people are politicised is through the experience of governance – experience that all fishwives had in ample supply.¹⁷⁵ When a fishwife was whipped in Bridewell or badged by the authorities, she was not participating in a consensual political process. Nevertheless, the success or failure of regulation depended to a real extent on the compliance of fishwives themselves.

That the authorities needed at least some fishwives to uphold their orders is obvious: the license would have been meaningless had not some fishwives been willing to pay for it. Obtaining a license was a lengthy process. This is best shown in an order recorded in the Journals in 1612 which it is worth quoting at length. Aldermen were ordered to:

cause such persons within your ward (if anie bee) as have bine or shalbee allowed . . . to carrie & crie fishe & otheres things about this Cittie & suburbes thereof to bee sent . . . to Bridewell And there to register their names with the Clarke of Bridewell, & to receave from the Tresorer of Bridewell a badge of Tynne alreadie stamped & prepared for everie of them to weare for the manifestacion of their allowance And withall to paie such due fines for the badge & registring . . .¹⁷⁶

Without the willingness of some fishwives to undergo this process, regulation would have got even less far than it did. An example of similar cooperation is that in September 1628, 'The Fisherwomen that sell fish at the Corner neare Smythfield barre were all sent for and warned not to stand there any more to sell fish which they have promised to doe'.¹⁷⁷ These

¹⁷² Shagan, *Popular Politics*, 22.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, i.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷⁵ Harris, *The Politics of the Excluded*, 8.

¹⁷⁶ LMA, Jor. 28, fo. 303v.

¹⁷⁷ BRHAM, BBHC 7, fo. 87v.

fishwives may have felt they had little choice in the matter, but they still promise to abide by the orders of the court.

The most extensive consultation with fishwives proposed in the Journals was in November 1607. Aldermen were to find out how many women ‘use to sell aney kynde of fishe or frute’ in their respective wards, along with a host of other information about the women, including ‘whether they bee wives or wydowes of Freemen or Forregnores’. To do this, the aldermen were to ‘Call them [the women] all before you in some convenient place within your ward thereby to enforme your selef particulerley of everye of them their behaviors qualities yeares conditions’. The results were to be written up and submitted.¹⁷⁸ Whether or not this actually took place cannot be proven from the records. It is nevertheless striking that direct consultation was thought the best way to regulate fishwives. A.L. Beier has shown that examinations were increasingly common in the early modern period for all sorts of crimes, and especially for ‘new and exceptional’ ones. Fishwives are a part of this history of the ‘extension of state authority’.¹⁷⁹ In Ben Jonson’s 1620 *Epicoene*, Truewit jokes that Morose ‘has beene upon divers Treaties with the Fish-wives, and Orange-women; and Articles propounded betweene them’.¹⁸⁰ This was not so outlandish a proposal as it seems: to a limited extent this is what the Common Council were doing.

This political participation by fishwives has obvious relevance for the history of City politics, particularly its regulatory politics. It also intersects with national politics. On a single but significant occasion, a group of fishwives petitioned against ‘foreign’ competitors. Though the full text does not survive, in June 1628 a petition was submitted to the Court of Aldermen ‘in the name of the auntient poore Fishwifes in and about this Cittie, whereby complaint is made that fower forraine Fishwifes doe ingrosse and buy upp all fishe to comes to Billingsgate, and doe imploye about two hundred young wenches to sell the same’. The court appeared to take the fishwives’ side of the case, and ordered that measures be found ‘for suppressing of those younge wenches’.¹⁸¹ It is worth noting that Western fishwives like those in *Smelts* would have been classed as foreigners, and may have found themselves in similar conflicts with ‘auntient’ City fishwives.

Although this petition did not address a national political issue, it did concern the proper governing and definition of the foreign in society, and thus had implications for what

¹⁷⁸ LMA, Jor. 27, fo. 205.

¹⁷⁹ Beier, *Masterless Men*, 12–13.

¹⁸⁰ Ben Jonson, *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman: A Comedie* (London, 1620), B2–B[3].

¹⁸¹ LMA, Rep. 42, fo. 214v.

‘national’ meant. In the early modern period, an ‘alien’ was what we would call a foreigner; while a ‘foreigner’ was someone from out of town, someone who was not ‘free’.¹⁸² In practice, the terms were sometimes used interchangeably, and official positions on foreigners and aliens overlapped considerably.¹⁸³ Economic restrictions applied to both groups, and in times of strain, like the 1590s, they were vulnerable to scapegoating, just like fishwives.¹⁸⁴

The position of foreigners in London was contested by contemporaries. Archer has pointed out that for large traders, foreigners meant cheap labour; whereas for small traders, including fishwives, they presented the threat of competition.¹⁸⁵ It is notable that in response to the fishwives’ petition, the ‘wenches’ were targeted and not their employers, who were clearly substantial traders. Common Council encouraged foreign traders, and in the acts of 1590 and 1611, they

Provided also that this act or any thing therein conteyned shall not in any wise extend, to any person or persons whatsoever lawfully bringing fish fruites or other victualles, from any the partes beyond the seas or from any Counties of this Realme of England to any the Markettes of this Cittie . . .¹⁸⁶

The act thus excludes both foreigners and aliens from its remit. *The Laws of the market* was first printed for the City in the early 1560s, and then repeated in 1595 and again in 1620. It included an order that ‘No Huxters shall stand or sit in the Market, but in the lower place and the endes of the Market to the intent they may be perfectly known and the straunger market people haue the preheminece of the Market’.¹⁸⁷ Even an order prohibiting foreigners from trading ‘Prouided alwayes, that this Act or ordinance, or any thing therein contained, shall not extend to any person or persons, for bringing, or causing to be brought

¹⁸² Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability*, 131.

¹⁸³ Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds*, 42.

¹⁸⁴ Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability*, 4, 140.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁸⁶ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 380; 28, fo. 301v.

¹⁸⁷ Quoted from *The Lavves of the Market* (London, 1595), Aiii–Aiiii; *The Lavves of the Market* (London, 1620). Also present in *The Lawes of the Markette* (London, 1562), Aiii.

any victuals to be solde within this Citty' – presumably including fish.¹⁸⁸ In March 1587, the Common Council passed successive orders on libels against strangers, condemning the perpetrators as 'lewde ungodlye and wicked persons'.¹⁸⁹ The City authorities consistently promoted foreign interests over City fishwives'.

The Fishmongers however were periodically concerned with foreign traders, just like the petitioning fishwives. In February 1629, the Company tried with John Davis for his trading with 'Strangers'. These people were 'other Tradsmen as Chandlers Girdlers and others', and some of them were Scottish.¹⁹⁰ Another motion in April 1621 considered 'a bill against strangers', but it was concluded that 'it hath bene formerly attempted and it is thought will hardly nower prevayle against the dutch'.¹⁹¹ In 1617, the Court of Assistants complained that:

there are sundrye persons not free of this Companye that do dwell out of the cittie & nere thereunto who have of late begonne a trade of buying & sellyng of fishe being not lawfull for them so to do which is like in tyme to redound greatly to the preiudice & hurt of this Companye if it be not in tyme prevented . . .¹⁹²

This shows the variety of ways in which words like 'foreigner' and 'stranger' were used, and how they sometimes overlapped with the word 'alien'.¹⁹³ It also shows how the interests of traders in fish, including the fishwife petitioners, could conflict with those of the City authorities on the issue of foreigners.

Like the Fishmongers, the fishwives who brought the petition opposed foreign dealers in fish, and sought to present themselves as normative and 'auntient' against a foreign other. Just because the meaning that these fishwives attached to the word 'foreign' (i.e. from out of town) is not the one that came to dominate understandings of foreignness does not mean that their petition was not an expression of imagined political community

¹⁸⁸ *An Act of Common Councill, Prohibiting All Strangers Borne, and Forrainers, to vse Any Trades* (London, 1606).

¹⁸⁹ LMA, Jor. 22, fo. 97.

¹⁹⁰ GL MS5570/2, 718-19.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁹³ Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds*, 42.

and potentially nation. A history of national politics which only attended to the discourses which became dominant would be highly teleological. In their petition, these fishwives exploited a particular, narrow definition of the foreign to their own advantage. In doing so, they showed that ideas of foreignness could be actively manipulated by fishwives.

Conclusion to Section II

City fishwives as textual figures were seen to mediate between water and land and between the bodies of men, women and nations. This positioned them as important to and potentially dangerous for the body politic, as seen in their association with fishing, Lent, the pox, the plague, and bad fish. Some of these associations were specific to fishwives; others have ramifications for food traders more generally. The body politic imagined by the City authorities excluded fishwives, but these women nevertheless helped to constitute its boundaries. As social agents, fishwives were actively involved in negotiating their own political position, and in one case the position of the foreign in their society. That the conception of 'foreign' offered by the fishwives is not the one that became most common is a reminder that what and who is political is always contested, then and now. Fishwives have a political history that is inherently worth exploring. But they also offer a way into a more inclusive understanding of London politics, and to a longer history of women's political action.

Conclusion: welling up and trickling down

Smelts was a pamphlet which engaged with court culture and foreign policy. If the fishwives who passed in and out of City records thought about such matters, their opinions have been lost. But those fishwives *were* politically engaged, both as symbolic mediators as social actors. In these contexts, the nation was reimaged in alternative and sexual ways: it was queered. Boundaries are figured as sexual and permeable, and are actively negotiated and sometimes reconstituted by those deemed sexually deviant. In *Smelts*, queer relations especially between women become a national characteristic. In the case of fishwives, their function as sexual, alimentary and national mediators called into question the physical integrity of the nation and its (male) members.

There are several important conclusions to be drawn from these political engagements. Firstly, ideas about and agency in relation to nation, sexuality and politics were widespread. Subtle manipulation of topical political concerns is latent in *Smelts* and other contemporary pamphlets. Fishwives as well as other working women and food traders

inhabited an important cultural position as national mediators, and actively participated in a politics which can be called local only with hindsight. Our histories of nation can and should be more diverse. As a case study, fishwives are another way 'in which the politics of the excluded may be recreated historically'.¹⁹⁴ Secondly, the interrelation between 'elite' and 'popular' discourses was two-way. Section I has shown the 'trickling down' of courtly and national political issues, and Section II has shown the 'welling up' of local issues into potentially national concerns. This further complicates the political, and shows the overlapping layers of political life in early modern society.

¹⁹⁴ Harris, *The Politics of the Excluded*, 25.

Conclusion: She who smelt it

The Zoological Society of London is currently completing a research project into the breeding habits of smelts, or *Osmerus eperlanus*. The fish are a UK Biodiversity Action Plan species, as they are now rare. The Thames is home to ‘a small but nationally significant population of smelt.’¹ The preliminary results from 2015 suggest that smelts may have multiple breeding times and places.² As well as being of conservational importance, this is a fitting postscript to my research on the multiplicity of sexual practices associated with a multiplicity of early modern fishwives, in *Smelts* and beyond.

This thesis has presented a history of integration: the integration of fishwives and other groups of working women, of fishwives and broader discourses on queer sexuality, of fishwives and popular politics. Fishwives in and around early modern London were a diverse group of people. They might sell oranges some days, or employ a few hundred wenches to sell fish for them; sleep in the streets, or return at night to their families. Individual fishwives enjoyed various occupational labels, like huckster and whore; and marital labels, like maid, wife and widow. All were vulnerable to the descriptor, ‘lewd’, but lewdness too was used of diverse behaviours. Words did not describe people in a simple way. That someone was called a fishwife could mean many things: it was an economic, social and sexual label. It is part of the historian’s job not simply to reuse such words, but to interpret and problematize their application.

The perceived lewdness of fishwives, and the variety that such lewdness encompassed, is historically significant. First, it shows that queer sexuality operated at lower class levels than those usually studied. Historical fishwives were mainly recorded for their deviant sexual practices. The fictional fishwives in *Smelts* demonstrate that a broader range of sexual practices was depicted in cheap pamphlet literature than has been analysed hitherto. Secondly, the sexualities of fishwives demonstrate the variety of early modern sexual possibilities. What was ‘queer’ fluctuated across sources. An important insight of this thesis is that economic implications were often central to perceptions of sexual deviancy. The sexual behaviour of fishwives resonated with their economic roles in ways that troubled contemporaries. The deviancies of fictional fishwives had no economic

¹ “Smelt Conservation in the Thames,” *Zoological Society of London (ZSL)*, accessed August 15, 2016, <https://www.zsl.org/conservation/smelt-osmerus-eperlanus>.

² Joanna Barker, “The Fish That Smells of Cucumber: Conservation of Smelt *Osmerus Eperlanus* in the Thames Estuary (Interim Report on Results of 2015 Survey Work),” 2015, 5, <https://www.zsl.org/sites/default/files/Interim%20report%20smelt%20conservation%20project%20v4.pdf>.

consequences and so produced literary pleasure rather than regulatory punishment. Economic factors were determining in how transgressive fishwives' sexuality was seen to be. Thirdly, studying the sexualities of fishwives has shown the remarkable convergence of economic, political and sexual matters in this period. Fishing, selling and having sex could all be considered by one piece of legislation, or one pamphlet.

Although I have focused on the historical peculiarities of their situation, this thesis is not just about fishwives. Other food retailers, hucksters, and working women have histories which intersect with the regulatory and sexual histories I have plotted, not least because in many cases fishwives were also members of these groups. It should be possible to extend this kind of queer social history to herbwives, pedlars, and prostitutes; even perhaps to fishmongers and butchers. Moreover, there are implications for the nature of City politics in general. Economic regulation had sexual content, and was done *with* its objects as well as *to* them. This raises questions about the extent of participation in London politics, and whether fishwives were normal or exceptional in negotiating their own regulation. There are also questions of whether it was common for working people to be represented in relation to national politics, especially in cheap pamphlet literature. Fishwives as textual figures were embedded in understandings of nation, commonwealth and the body politic. That contemporaries found fishwives relevant to such political histories suggests that historians have overlooked the breadth of political understandings in this period.

There are some important gaps in this thesis, especially asexuality and postcoloniality. In reading diverse texts for their sexual content, and particularly in reading chastity as potentially erotic, I have neglected the possibility and extent of early modern asexuality. Not everyone has sexual desires, at least nowadays. I have not found any scholarship seeking to historicise asexuality in the early modern period, but it is an exciting and challenging avenue for further work. A second omission in this thesis is postcoloniality. *Smelts* is highly suited to both postcolonial and global readings, as many of its tales are extra-European.³ Richmond's tale is probably of ninth-century Persian origin.⁴ Similarly, Brainford's tale originates from Somadeva's eleventh-century *Katha sarit sagara*.⁵ There

³ See Walter Cohen, "Eurasian Fiction," *The Global South* 1, no. 1 (2007): 100–119.

⁴ Rowe, "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale," 61; see also Heinrich Adelbert Keller, *Li romans des sept sages* (Tubingen, 1836); *Here Beginneth Thystorye of the Seuen Wyse Maysters; The History of the Seuen Wise Maisters of Rome* (London, 1576).

⁵ Somadeva Bhatta, *The Ocean of Story, Being C.H. Tawney's Translation of Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagara*, 269–71, 223–6; see also Thomas North, trans., *The Morall Philosophie of Doni: Drawne out of the*

is potential for postcolonial reorientation of *Smelts* in addition to the sexual reorientation that has been attempted in this thesis. More generally, there is room for further comparative work on fishwives in different contexts. Further study of postcolonial and asexual readings of fishwives and of *Smelt* could prove rewarding.

Methodologically, this thesis has been concerned with the intersection of social and queer histories. But you can't have it both ways. Making queer historical also makes it less politically useful in the here and now. The key insight of queer theory from a historical perspective is the variousness of sexuality, over time and culture. This thesis has in effect replaced behaviours that are now considered heterosexual at the centre of the analysis, because those behaviours were queer for early moderns. This is not a useful conclusion for queer politics in its historically particular, contemporary form. I have argued that women loving women, women becoming men, and androgyny could in certain circumstances be less queer than we would expect, relative to other modes of sexual and gendered expression. I have *not* attempted to argue that these practices were less queer in the early modern period than they are now. As what is queer is not attached to any particular behaviours or expressions, it is very difficult to construct transhistorical indices on which to measure that which is quintessentially unmeasurable, and so to construct comparisons over time. But doesn't this amount to the end of queer history?

That something is unmeasurable, or very difficult to measure, is not a reason to stop talking about it. There is an obvious, matter-of-fact sense in which the early modern period was heterosexist: sexuality was supposed to be marital, and women did not marry women. This thesis has shown that there were also less obvious, less measurable ways in which sexualities considered queer could flourish. It was certainly no golden age, but reducing the early modern to an exclusively heterosexist domain denies the queerness that was experienced by people – by Susan Slusser, the fishwife examined by Bridewell court for lying under a stall. It is also frankly inaccurate, even if the messier picture that I have presented is politically inconvenient. Whether we care about truth or about justice, queerness fluctuated in and out of early modern society, and in and out of the history of early modern fishwives.

Appendix

Westward for Smelts tale

Brainford

Intertexts

Panchatantra (100 BCE - 500 CE).

Somadeva, *Katha sarit sagara* (11th C).

Li fabliaux des tresces (late 13th/early 14th C).

Boccaccio, *Decameron* (1351; English: 1620), VII.viii.

Les cent nouvelles nouvelles (15th C), XXXVIII.

The deceyte of women (London, 1557), 'A new deceyte of late doone in the Cytie of Tours', Gii-G[iv].

Merie tales of the mad men of Gotam (1565), xii tale.

The Philosophy of Doni (English: 1570, fo. 42-45v.).

The Cobler of Caunterburie (1590), 'The old wives tale', I3-K.

Beaumont and Fletcher, *Women Pleas'd* (early 17th C).

Fletcher and Massinger, *The Guardian* (early 17th C).

Standon-the-Greene

Le roman du roi flore (early 13th C).

Le roman de la rose (early 13th C).

Le roman de la violette (early 13th C).

Decameron (1351; English: 1620), II.ix.

De Pizan, *La cite des dames* (early 15th C; English: 1521, *the cyte of ladyes*), 2.52.

Frederycke of Jennen (late 15th C; English: 1518).

Sansovino, *Cento Novelle* (1561), 3.3.

Painter, *The Second Tome of the Palace of Pleasure* (1567), Novel xxviii.

Whetstone, *The Rocke of Regard* (1576), 105-121.

Shakespeare, *Cymbeline* (c. 1609-10).

Richmond

Petrus Alphonsi, *Disciplina Clericalis* (12th C), XIV.

Li romans des Sept Sages (late 13th C; English: 1555, *thystorye of the seuen wyse maysters*, second master's tale), XCIII-CII.

Decameron (1351; English: 1620), VII.iv.

Deloney, *The pleasant history of John Winchcomb* (1619).

The merry Jests of Smug the Smith (1657), E-E2.

Twitnam

La Tour-Landry, *The Book of the Knight of le Tour-Landry* (late 14th C; English: 1484), CXXXV.

Hampton

Bandello, *Novelle* (1554; English: 1567, *Certaine Tragical Discourses*, History 11), 3.17.

Painter, *The Second Tome of the Palace of Pleasure* (1567), Novel xxvii.

List of Abbreviations

BRHAM	Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum, Beckenham.
BBHC	Bridewell and Bethlem Hospital Courtbooks.
CLA/043/01/009	Southwark Guildhall Manor Presentments of Courts Leet.
GL	Guildhall Library, London.
Jor.	Journals of the Court of Common Council.
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives, London.
Misc MS/90/16	CLA/011/AD/01/013: Fishwives' petition, n.d.
<i>MND</i>	<i>Midsommer Nights Dreame.</i>
MS 4069/1	Cornhill Wardmote Inquest Book.
MS5570/1	Worshipful Company of Fishmongers, Court Ledger No. 1, MS5570/1.
MS5570/2	Worshipful Company of Fishmongers, Court Ledger No. 2, MS5570/2.
OED	Oxford English Dictionary.
Rem.	Remembrancia.
Rep.	Repertories of the Court of Aldermen.
<i>Smelts</i>	<i>Westward for Smelts.</i>

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