

ALE WIVES, OLD WIVES, WIDOWS AND WITCHES: THE OLDER WOMAN IN ENGLISH RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

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It is the object of this paper to analyse and evaluate the rôle and function of the older woman in English literary writings of the Renaissance period, that is to say, in works written approximately between 1500 and 1625. The theme is related to other studies of the present writer, dedicated to the same end, but dealing with the earlier periods of Old and Middle English Literature¹. It may be of some interest, I believe, to see to what extent the rôles played by the older woman in the Renaissance period coincide with our findings referred to the earlier literature, or to what extent there are innovations or amplifications thereof in a period obviously much shorter, but on the other hand, undeniably much richer in literary manifestations of all kinds, and in fiction, and in the drama in particular.

First of all, however, we must define what we mean by “older woman”, which is, indeed, a loose term, age, of course, being an extremely relative concept in the history of mankind. The rôle, for example, played by Lady Capulet in Shakespeare’s play has not been taken into consideration because on her own admission, she was brought to bed of Juliet at Juliet’s age -i.e. fourteen, and is, therefore, only twenty-eight, but, in fact, a certain flexibility would seem to be in order. What we have in mind, roughly speaking, are middle-aged women who may be wives and mothers of some

¹ Shaw, Patricia, “Loathly Ladies, Lither Ladies and Leading Ladies: the rôle of the Older Woman in Middle English Literature”, *Actas del Primer Congreso Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Lengua y Literatura Inglesa Medieval (SELIM)*. Universidad de Oviedo (1989); and id., “Monster-Mothers and Minster-Mothers: the rôle of the Older Woman in Anglo-Saxon Writing”, *Actas del Segundo Congreso Internacional de SELIM*. Universidad de Córdoba (1990).

years standing, and elderly to old women tending towards the “gammer” variety. In other words, women who are, generally speaking, in clear contrast to the young, marriageable or seducible heroine who has tended to occupy the forefront of imaginative literature, at least, until the twentieth century and the advent of the Mrs. Moores, the Mrs. Ramsays, or, indeed, in our day, the protagonists of novels by Fay Weldon or Margaret Drabble.

In the restricted corpus of the Anglo-Saxon period, and referring to works of pure imagination, we already find the seeds of the types of older women who make a more frequent appearance in Middle English Literature: that is to say, the hag species or “loathly lady” supremely embodied by Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf*, the “lither” or villainous older woman represented by Dionysias in the fragmentary *Apolonius of Tyre*, the licentious old bawd personified by Ælfric’s Aphrodisia, and the domineering virago exemplified by Cynewulf’s unattractive Saint Helena, without forgetting the scattered references to witches found in the *Charms*, and even in Alfred’s *Laws*. There are really no attractive literary rôles assigned to the older woman in the whole Anglo-Saxon canon.

The same may be said with regard to the Middle English period: there do not seem to be any instances of elderly women being cast in sympathetic rôles: apart from a few anodyne characters, like the Maries in the mystery plays, the older women who make their way into the literature of the period tend to fall into the above-mentioned categories of loathly ladies (in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, for example), lither ladies (the wicked mothers-in-law or step-mothers of the romances), lewd ladies (like Dame Siriz), or leading ladies of the domineering, hen-pecking species such as Noah’s wife, and, supremely, the Wife of Bath. With the exception of this latter, such characters really possess very little life of their own -their presence is justified in the respective works by the functions they perform *vis-à-vis* other more relevant characters: the loathly ladies are in any case really beautiful young damsels bewitched, and exist merely to put the knight’s “truth” to test, the wicked stepmothers or mothers-in-law serve to trigger off the hero or heroine’s wanderings when sent into exile, the lewd, bawdy characters like Dame Siriz are there to put some woman’s virtue on trial or to help some enamoured suitor to achieve his ends, and the viragos to give their male creators the opportunity to criticize the defects of women in general.

A tentative survey of a series of representative works of the Renaissance period proves, we believe, that on the whole, females “of a certain age”, or frankly advanced in years, continue to perform a series of unsympathetic and perfunctory rôles, the increase in number and variety of the texts, in fact lending themselves to an amplification of disagreeable literary possibilities: thus, as will be seen, the ranks of the “monstrous regiment” of hags, viragos and villainesses of the earlier literature are swollen by a further cohort of older and elderly women either given to the bottle, or to bawdry, or to both! It is perhaps worth remembering in this context, that there is a significant lack in Renaissance literature of older women performing what would obviously be one of their most sympathetic rôles -that of a daughter’s loving mother. This lack is notorious in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and fiction, where motherless heroines abound (think of Miranda, Portia, Jessica, Beatrice, Hero, Ophelia, Isabella and Mariana, Rosalind and Celia, etc in the Shakespearean canon). Since the works are set in, and are a product of, a patriarchal society, the mother-figure is unnecessary, generally speaking, for the development of the plot, and, indeed, her absence gives the heroines more scope to exercise their liberty and acquire the independence which makes the English Renaissance heroine so attractive, but the fact remains that the older woman is thus deprived of the opportunity of performing a sympathetic literary rôle, a rôle, incidentally, whose possibilities are manifest, as will be seen, in the handful of examples of the mother-figure, principally mothers of *sons*, who actually *do* make their way into Renaissance literature. It is interesting to note that these mother-figures are often widows, and as such act as surrogates for the father-figure, whose functions they can assume.

A *caveat* must also be added to these observations: it is a truth universally acknowledged that vice is, from a literary point of view, far more productive and interesting than virtue: it is hardly surprising, therefore, if the *virtuous* older woman should tend to be limited to playing perfunctory rôles, however interesting or original in character she may be, or, indeed, to playing none at all -or at least, that is how things tended to be before Mrs. Moore was converted into an Indian goddess, and Mrs. Ramsay “triumphed again” at the beginning of this century. There are, obviously, exceptions: exceptions of a kind which we do not find exemplified in the earlier literature, and it will hardly come as a surprise to find Shakespeare, the “chameleon poet”, with his universal sympathy, adopting occasionally a more positive attitude to the dramatic possibilities of the virtuous member of the age-group which concerns us here.

However, before commenting on these rare instances of exemplary elderly womanhood, a look should perhaps be taken at some of the more disagreeable manifestations of the older woman which find their way into English Renaissance literature.

The tradition of the older woman as hag or loathly lady is maintained and, indeed, carried to horrific extremes in the “ribald fantasy”² *The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummyngge*, composed by Henry VIII’s poet-laureate, John Skelton, in, probably, about 1517, whilst in exile from a London menaced by an epidemic of the sweating sickness, and in conditions, therefore “very likely those in which the Decameron was born.”³ In this 624-line fabliau-like poem, written in characteristic “Skeltonics” and possibly based on an old fifteenth century poem concerning a gathering of “gosyps” similar to, one imagines, the Malmsey-drinking group that Noah’s wife is loth to leave in the Chester pageant, Skelton presents a series of memorable vignettes, a veritable rogues’ gallery of repulsive female portraits, *habituées* of the tavern (the “tunnyng” of the title), presided over by Elynour Rummyngge, a *vetula* of “lothely lere” (l. 12), “well worne in age” (l. 8), who is a virago, witch and loathly lady all rolled into one, for “The devyl and she be syb” (l. 100).

When it comes to offering a physical description of Elynour and her commères, Skelton truly outgowers Gower and it is obvious that these repulsive old women, based though they may be on the real life clientèle of such sordid dens as “The Running Horse” tavern at Leatherhad, like the “auncian dame” of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or Elde in Chaucer’s (?) *Romaunt of the Rose*, perform an allegorical function as representations of ugliness and old age,⁴ as well as the didactic one of discouraging “amorous desire, a feature which the author stresses on more than one occasion,”⁵ by a horrific evocation of all that is most sordid and repellent

² Pollet, Maurice, *John Skelton Poet of Tudor England*. Translated by John Warrington (London: Dent, 1971) 105.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ As Maurice Pollet actually points out, Elynour Rummyngge is, as it were, the anti-Jane Scrope, whose praises in Skelton’s *Book of Phyllyp Sparowe*, consist in a series of variations on the theme of youth and beauty: they may thus both be considered as partially allegorical figures.

⁵ Pollet 106.

about an ageing and undisciplined female anatomy, in some cases “marked with the stigmata of a vice that no doctor could fail to diagnose.”⁶ Skelton dedicates 90 lines at the beginning of the poem to describing Elynour’s repulsive physical appearance and her filthy garb, and follows this up with a series of illustrations of her domineering nature and her sluttish habits, including that of mixing hendroppings into the ale-mash, which, according to her, endows her ale with rejuvenating properties, a truth, she adds, borne out by her own continuing appeal for her husband:

Whan we kys and play
 In lust and in lykyng
 (...)
 Than swetely toghether we ly,
 As two pygges in a sty.

(ll. 221-2; 233-4)

The image is very appropriate, for pigs are very much to the fore in this “tunnyng”, where swine roam at liberty, drinking from the swilling-tub and rubbing their rumps against the benches, and, indeed, Elynour’s wrinkled face is compared to “... a rost pygges eare brystled with here” (ll. 20-1).

Skelton’s evocation of her repulsive physical appearance is, indeed, a virtuoso performance consisting, as it does, in a sustained litany of loathly attributes: a hefty (“tonnysh”) woman, she is droopy and drowsy, scurvy and lousy, wrinkled and blowsy, with lubber lips, a crooked, dripping nose and slack chin; she is, likewise, bleary-eyed, grey-haired, heavy-jawed, wide-gummed, heavy-hipped, crane-legged and splay-footed which explains why she needs shoes with heels “As brode as two wheles” (l. 84), with which to drive “downe the dewe” (l. 82) just as the Wife of Bath has “... on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe”, Elynour’s weighty and complicated headgear being likewise reminiscent of Chaucer’s indomitable pilgrim’s ten-pound “coverchiefs”.

The slatternly *habituées* of Elynour’s establishment described collectively at the end of the *Primus passus*, single or married and not necessarily all old, are birds of the same feather, with their uncombed hair, their unlaced bosoms, and their scabby unwashed faces. After offering this

⁶ Pollet109.

general panorama, Skelton in the following *passi* presents a series of individualised portraits, the majority of which are of repulsive and undisciplined old women: waspish Joan, an unnamed “foule slut” with stinking breath and a rumbling belly, drunken Alice who speaks through her nose and, on this occasion, “pyst where she stood”, half-witted Kit, hook-nosed Margery Milkduck showing off her sturdy legs, another old woman, half-doctor half-witch who could sail to Bordeaux “With the feders of a quale” (l. 453), and thick-lipped, onion-sided, dropsical Maud Ruggy, “foggy-fat” and racked with the palsy, to sleep with whom, comments Skelton, would make you vomit (“cast his craw”) and to see whom naked would make your head ache! Following on Maud’s heels, there comes limping another old woman, who being lame of an ulcerated chilblain, trips over the dintel, falling so !... wyde open / That one might se her token” (l. 497), which Elynour, incidentally, “Lyke an honest dame” bids her to cover up! It would, in short, be difficult to find elsewhere in English literature a more horrifying set of variations on the theme of the *Ebria, squalida, sordida femina* as Skelton puts it in the Latin colophon to his “libellum”, or “trifel”, than those who stagger, trip, or stride over dame Elynour’s threshold, nor one more calculated to induce misogyny! And, in this context, we may note that Thomas Nashe in his *Pierce Penniless*, at the end of the century, suggests as his idea of hell for a lecher, that he be “constrained (the more to augment his misery) to have a congress every houre with haggess and old witches.”⁷ A similar situation faces the knights in the “loathly lady” stories!

A similarly Hogarthian evocation of older women given up to carousing is to be found in Act III, Sc. 2 of Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, on the occasion of the christening of Mrs. Allwit’s last born which she presides over from her bed, and which is celebrated with great abundance of comfits and wine, both of which her nurse and her neighbours and gossips partake of to such excess, that one of them likewise falls flat on her face. When they finally leave, the room is in a complete shambles, the stools upturned, the rushes filthy and the floor soaking wet! The object of Middleton’s satire here is not only *ebria, sordida, squalida femina*, but, above all, *femina puritana*, since these drunken women belong to one of the

⁷ Nashe, Thomas, *Pierce Penilesse, His Supplication to the Divell* (1592). Elizabethan and Jacobean Quartos, ed. G.B. Harrison (Bodley Head Quartos), (Edinburgh University Press) 96.

stricter dissenting sects, and have here, as it were, been letting their hair down!

Like Skelton, Nashe, in his *Pierce Pennilesse*, (1592), refers to an ale-wife, in this case a well-known figure in Elizabethan London, Mother Bunch, as likewise adulterating her goods:

... others by slime as frogs, which may be alluded to
Mother Bunches slimie ale, that hath made her, and some
other of her fil-pot facultie so wealthie.⁸

Mother Bunch, in fact, acquired fame not only as an ale-wife, but also as a witch, or at least as one skilled in magic arts, above all, when these were applied to amorous activities, rather like dame Siriz; and as such, she acquired also literary fame of a sort, as is shown by the fact that her name appeared at the head of a chap-book extant in Samuel Pepys' collection:

Mother Bunch's / Closet / newly broke open. / Wherein is
discovered many Rare Secrets of / Art & Nature; / Tryed and
Experienced by Learned Phylo / sophers, and recommended to
all inge / nious Young Men and Maids / Teaching Young-Men
(in a Natural way) / how to get *Good Wifes*, & Maids Good
Husbands...⁹

Although printed in the 1680s, the material in Pepys' chap-books dates, much of it, back to the sixteenth century.

Indeed, the association of old women with witchcraft is a constant in many cultures, and hardly surprising in a country whose king had written a treatise on *Demonologie*, (1597), in which the subject is treated at some length. It is hardly surprising, either, that when Shakespeare wrote a play to please that king, witches should play an essential part in it, and should be described as "withered" women, "wild in their attire", with "choppy fingers", "skinny lips" and "beards", all attributes, of course, of old age, and characteristic of the hag species. The rôle of witch or prophetess is, in fact,

⁸ Nashe 96.

⁹ Samuel Pepys' *Penny Merriments...* Selected and Edited by Roger Thompson, Constable (London, 1976) 65.

one that is not infrequently assigned to the elderly woman in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama: indeed, Middleton's play *The Witch*, (produced in 1610-1616), as its name suggests, introduces the figure of Hecate, protectress of enchanters and witches, as an aid to a murder plot, and as has been pointed out, "part of the interest of the play lies in the comparison between this Hecate and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*."¹⁰ One must be careful, though, here, for the Elizabethan managers may well have conceived of Hecate, not as an old witch, but rather as an ageless goddess. The name of a well-known Elizabethan fortune-teller, *Mother Bombie*, provides the title for John Lyly's Plautine comedy, and in *Endimion*, he introduces an enchantress, Dipsas, who is characterised by her "hoary hairs", her "one tooth" and "a chin (that) almost toucheth her knees", as well as, like Shakespeare's weird sisters, her evil intentions:

... were it in my power to place affections by appointment,
I would make such evil appetites, such inordinate lusts, such
cursed desires, as all the world should be filled both with
superstitious heats, and extreme loves. (1. 4)

Drunkenness, evil intentions and a turn for invective are likewise ascribed to Psiteria, in Gascoigne's translation of Ariosto's comedy, *Supposes*, a rather sketchy character, who, however, is described in the *dramatis personae* as "an old hag", and declared to be an "old witch" and an "old whore" by one of her enemies. The function of such enchantresses and witches is to mislead in some way or other the principal actors in the play (as *Macbeth* is misled by the weird sisters) -they have really no character of their own, their evil-doing being obviously a convention to get the plot moving.

There is, however, an interesting exception in this clutch of crones: the eponymous *Witch of Edmonton* in the play by Dekker, Ford and Rowley, performed probably in 1621/1623. The part of Elizabeth Sawyer, the old woman in question, was probably written by Dekker, and in this tragicomedy, revolving round bigamy and murder, the most sympathetic treatment is given precisely to the "witch", portrayed as an ignorant, helpless old woman driven to witchcraft by the persecution of her neighbours, for Elizabeth Sawyer sells her soul to the devil, not for knowledge, like Dr. Faustus, but to be revenged on those who have falsely accused her of

¹⁰ Charles Lamb, for example, has indicated the differences between them in his *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets contemporary with Shakespeare*, 1808.

witchcraft. Dekker tended to see the best in people, and it is characteristic of him that he should have interpreted his “witch” as a victim of society, rather than the embodiment of gratuitous evil.

This popular attitude which identifies elderly, unattractive females with witches is, of course, satirised in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where we learn that Mrs. Ford’s maid’s aunt -a fat woman from Brainford- is accused by Mr. Ford of being a witch whom he will beat if he catches her in his house; and, indeed, when Falstaff appears disguised as this personage, Ford is quick to call her “a witch, and an old cozening quean,” who, as a fortune-teller, works by “charms, by spells, by the figure and such daubery as this”, and Sir John is beaten out of doors to the tune of “you witch, you rag, you baggage, you polecat, you ronyon” (4. 3)!

The loathly lady rears her ugly head again in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, which is, of course, full of mediaeval reminiscences and allegorical monsters, some with womanish attributes: *Impotence* and *Impatience*, for example, are embodied by “two wicked Hags / With hoary Lockes all loose and visage grim” (2. 11), and *Envy* and *Detraction*, (5. 12), are evoked as two loathly ladies, “two old, ill-favoured Hags”, “Two grisly creatures”, by a description which recalls that of Chaucer or Gower in their loathly lady tales. Especially interesting in this context, however, is the character of *Duessa*, who represents, apparently, the Roman Catholic Church (in Book I), and Mary, Queen of Scots (in Book II). She is presented as a “false sorceress”, who in the first Book constitutes an interesting case of the loathly lady in reverse: she appears to the knight Fradubio to be such a “faire Lady” that she can compete in beauty with his own lady-love, Fraelissa, and, indeed, eventually becomes his paramour. He “... in the witch unweeting joyd long time” (1. 2. 40), until on the day marked out for witches “to do penance for their crime”, he sees her in her true shape, as she really is, that is to say, as a loathly lady and “divelish hag”:

A filthy foule old woman...
 (...)
 Her nether parts misshapen, monstrous
 (...)
 But they did seeme more foul and hideous
 Then womans shape man would beleeve to bee.

(1. 2. 41)

Of course, it is not necessary to acquire the status of a witch to become an evil-doer, and there are several examples of elderly villainesses or “lither ladies” to be found in Renaissance literature. Thus, in Sidney’s *Arcadia*, or rather, in the “*New*” *Arcadia*, wicked Queen Cecropia, seeing herself deprived of the crown of *Arcadia* by Basilius’ daughters, the heroines of the romance, does not scruple to abduct them, together with the disguised Pyrocles, and hold them captive in her castle, where she attempts, by the most cruel devices, to make one or other of the girls marry her son. Some years later, Shakespeare was to present a similar situation in *Cymbeline*, (1610/1611), in which Imogen’s “step-dame false” is furious that the girl’s secret marriage to Posthumus has made it impossible for her to marry her own son, as was her wish. Described by Imogen as a “tyrant”, and by Doctor Cornelius as “malicious”, the queen is a born dissembler who insists to Imogen that:

... you shall not find me, daughter,
After the slander of most step-mothers,
Evil-eyed unto you... (1. 1)

whilst, in fact, preparing a vial of poison for Imogen’s husband’s consumption, which, she assures the audience, in an aside, Imogen herself:

Except she bend her humour, shall be assur’d
To taste of too. (1. 5)

With her dying breath, this venomous creature confesses to her doctor all her evil intentions and sentiments, including her abhorrence of her husband and her desire to kill him by slow poison. The motivation for all this malice springs, however, from a maternal sentiment -a perverted love, but maternal nevertheless: her wish to see her foolish son elevated to the throne. Her melodramatic affirmations apart, however, this anonymous queen has little consistency and is really there to provide the excuse for the separation of the young couple, and the trial of fidelity subsequent on it, which constitutes the main plot.

To the same category of wicked women belongs the sketchily introduced Old Queen of Navarre in Marlowe’s *Massacre at Paris*, (1600), determines “to dissolve with blood and cruelty” her own daughter’s marriage, and Dionyza, familiar from the Old English *Appolonius of Tyre*, in Shakespeare’s *Pericles*: she is Marina’s foster-mother, and orders the girl to

be killed because in beauty she outshines her own daughter -another case, therefore, of perverted mother-love. Like Lady Macbeth, she overrules her more humane husband who feels instant remorse for having abandoned the helpless victim, and who accuses Dionyza of being “like the harpy”:

Which for to betray dost with thine angel face,
Seize with thine eagle's talons. (4. 4)

A more realistic murderess makes a brief appearance in Deloney's *Thomas of Reading*, (1599), in the person of the hostess of the inn at Colebrook where Thomas spends the night. We learn that she and her husband dedicate themselves to murdering their richer patrons by means of an ingenious device involving a trap-door and a cauldron. We do not know her age, but as we learn that the couple have “despatched” some sixty customers over the years, she is obviously experienced -at least in the art of murder! Particularly interesting about this anonymous character, is her similarity to Lady Macbeth and, indeed, the similarity of the whole scene to that of Duncan's murder in Shakespeare's play. Like Lady Macbeth, it is she who encourages her husband when he decides “it is not best to meddle” with Thomas: “What man (quoth she) faint you now? Have you done so many and do you shrink at this?”

Incidentally, Lady Macbeth would be an obvious candidate for a place in this gallery of “lither ladies”, but one hesitates to include her in the category of older women, on the grounds, primarily, of Macbeth's famous injunction: “Bring forth male children only” (1. 7), which may be taken as meaning literally what he says -that she is still of child-bearing age and probably relatively young. A similar doubt arises as to the approximate age of Lear's elder daughters: since the king's extreme old age is so insisted on in the play, one's immediate impression is that Goneril and Regan are mature women who may have been married for some time. They may well, therefore, fit into our category of older, wicked women. The classification does not rest merely on their lack of charity towards Lear, but also to their active participation in the cruel blinding of Gloucester, the stabbing of the attendant who reproaches them, and the adulterous sexual attraction they both feel for Edmund.

Even more evil is Tamora, Queen of the Goths, in *Titus Andronicus*, who, although the mother of four grown-up sons, is still sexually attractive to both the Roman emperor, Saturnine, and to her paramour of long standing,

Aaron the Moor, by whom, in fact, she has a “dusky” child. In a play notorious for its piling up of horrors, Tamora is directly responsible for her sons’ raping of Lavinia, for ordering the dusky baby to be killed, for the stabbing of her brother-in-law, for sentencing to death two of Titus Andronicus’ sons on a false accusation, but all, in this Senecan tragedy, for Revenge -revenge on Titus and on Rome for the killing of her eldest son, whose life she pleads for at the beginning of the play in a very fine speech which attracts the hearer’s sympathy to her, until her true nature is revealed. In this excessively violent play, where it is difficult to distinguish one male character from another, Tamora certainly dominates the action and represents a “lither lady” of the finest water!

The wicked mother / mother-in-law figure rears her vicious head again in prose fiction at the end of the sixteenth century, and beginning of the seventeenth, in Richard Johnstone’s neo-chivalric romance, *Tom a Lincolne*, (I, 1599; II, 1607?). In a tale supposedly told by Sir Lancelot du Lake, and intercalated into the main story of the adventures of Tom a Lincolne, alias the Red Rose Knight, Valentine, the son of the Greek Emperor, falls in love with Dulcippa, one of his mother’s ladies-in-waiting, and the daughter of a country gentleman, who returns his affection. The Empress, however, catches them one day kissing in the gallery, and “moved in her secret hate” (“thinking it a scandal to her sonnes birth to match in marriage with one of so base a parentage”), swears to “crosse their loves with dismall stratagemes and dreary tragedies”, and decides, finally, after much “tragicall imagination” on the “horrore” of having Dulcippa poisoned by the court doctor. The poor man, terrorised by the “bloody queene” and her threats, for her mind is “fraught with rage and blood”, accepts the task but secretly decides to administer to Dulcippa a sleeping-draught rather than a cup of poison.¹¹ All, therefore, eventually ends well, but it is a foolish story as, indeed, the whole of *Tom a Lincolne* is a foolish story, distinguished only by the number of chivalric commonplaces that Johnstone has managed to squeeze into one single text. As in mediaeval romances, no attempt whatsoever is made to characterise the wicked Empress in any way.

The second part of *Tom a Lincolne*, which from the point of view of narrative power is even weaker than the first, contains two more examples of

¹¹ *Tom a Lincolne* is included in *Early English prose Romances*, ed. W.J. Thoms, 3 vols., London, 1858; rep. New York: Ams Press Inc., 1970, vol. 3.

wicked older women. The reader is aware from the beginning of the story that the eponymous hero is the illegitimate son of King Arthur by Angellica, daughter to the Earl of London, known as the Nun of Lincolne, since she retires to a monastery in that city, the more discreetly to receive the visits of her royal lover. This secret is revealed by King Arthur himself on his death-bed when his son is forty years of age, which means that Angellica must be about sixty and Queen Guinevere (never mentioned, however, by name in the text) presumably older. Arthur's last minute revelations, as might be expected, lead to nothing but trouble, for "the Queene in a raging jalousie fretted at her marriage wrongs" and "protested in her heart to be revenged of the Nun of Lincolne". The widowed queen in her thirst for vengeance is, indeed, compared to "ireful Hecuba" and "jealous Juno" although it takes her two years to make up her mind as to the form it shall take; eventually she sends Angellica, "the vile strumpet", by a messenger, seven different instruments of death, enumerated and classified with ghoulish glee by Johnstone, in order that she may herself choose the one she likes best! After her death, by donning "empoisoned robes", the messenger gives such a glowing report of her patience and magnanimity towards her persecutrix, that the queen is struck with remorse, and having first perversely punished her servitors for obeying her orders, eventually hangs herself from the bed post with the girdle she wore on her wedding-day! The moral, says Johnstone, is that "blood... being guiltlesse shed, is quitted againe with bloode".

More interesting, from a literary point of view, perhaps, is the behaviour of the third member of this trio of wicked older women, Anglitora, daughter of Prester John, and wife to the Red Rose Knight, who, on learning that her husband is illegitimate, thinks him, on this account, "as ominous to her sight as the killing cockatrice", and leaves him forthwith, accompanied by their son, the Black Knight, so named for his "fierce courage". The Red Rose Knight, desolated by this dual abandonment, sets out to find them again. Anglitora, although not very old, is certainly an older woman at this point, with a grown-up son, not unlike Queen Gertrude, whom to a certain extent she resembles. It may be remembered here that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was probably performed in 1603/4 and that it was published in quarto in 1604, whilst the second part of Johnstone's romance did not appear until 1607 (?). Anglitora, her son and an Indian slave having finally disembarked in a strange land, are made welcome by the so-called Knight of the Castle. Anglitora's son goes hunting in the forest where he is to remain lost for several years, whilst his mother and their kindly host give themselves up to

their “wanton affections” and “lewd lives”. The slave, scandalized by his mistress’s conduct, sets sail for England in order to warn the Red Rose Knight of his wife’s infidelity, and the latter immediately seeks her out, appearing eventually at the castle in the guise of a pilgrim. On recognising her husband, Anglitora, aided and abetted by her lover, decides to send the palmer “to his last abiding” by violent death. “At that houre of night when mischiefes are acted”, says Johnstone, in a passage evocative of the atmosphere surrounding the murder of Duncan (including a reference to the “croaking of the night owles”), the “spitefull lady”, Anglitora, chokes her husband, the hero of the romance, to death and buries his body in a dunghill without the gate of the castle, after staking the indiscreet Indian firmly to the ground. The similarity to *Hamlet* so far is slight, but in the following chapter, the scene changes to the forest, where Anglitora’s son has been leading a Tarzan-like existence for seven years. Accompanied by “unnatural portents” (trees violently uprooted, birds falling lifeless from the air), the ghost of the Red Rose Knight, “newly murdered” appears before him, demanding that he revenge his death upon his adulterous mother, and threatening to haunt him for the rest of his life if he does not comply with his wishes. Miraculously led out of the forest at last by an *Ignis Fatuus*, the Black Knight reaches the castle, rescues the slave and has his worst fears confirmed as regards the evil behaviour of his mother. Deciding to wreak his vengeance at midnight, he finds the adulterous couple “secretly sleeping in each other’s arms”, and although he plucks up courage to run his sword through the body of the Knight of the Castle, wavers when his mother implores him, on her knees, to spare her. However, the remembrance of his father’s ghost, and his “angry lookes” threatening him, finally gives him the decision to stab the wicked Anglitora through the heart and thus sacrifice her blood “unto the soule of (his) murdered father”.

Mother of a grown-up son, who, indeed, affirms that she is of an age when “the hey-day in the blood is tame”, Gertrude, in *Hamlet*, may be considered as another outstanding example of the lither lady who has deceived her husband with his own brother and has, at the least, been a passive accessory to his murderous act, for which some sort of remorse is suggested, when Hamlet’s accusing words enter “like daggers... in (her) ears”. From the powerful wording of the text, we get the impression that Gertrude’s sin is “frailty” rather than villainy, due to her lasciviousness; she would, says Hamlet, “hang on” her first husband,

As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on; (1. 2)

and sexual images abound in his references to her relationship with her second: she posts “with wicked speed” to “incestuous sheets”, and lives:

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
O'er the nasty sty...

One is almost reminded of Elynour Rummyng! However, this is Hamlet's vision of the situation, and, in a way, Gertrude is a shadowy figure, providing part of the motivation for Claudio's ambition and aiding a fillip to Hamlet's general sense of disgust.

A few years later, Middleton was to create a much more impressive example of the wicked and lascivious older woman in the person of Livia in *Women Beware Women*, (1621). Livia, twice widowed, is, at the age thirty-nine, a law unto herself; of a masculine strength of mind, she turns her considerable intelligence to serving the sexual appetites of the Duke of Florence and of her own brother by procuring an originally virtuous young married woman, Bianca, for the former, and his own niece for the latter. Since Livia is herself consumed with sexual passion for Bianca's husband, she “procures” him for herself, by means of her great wealth. She eventually dies at the hands of her incestuous brother, who hopes thus to redeem the honour of the family! Witty, ironical and frank, Livia, like Iago, for example, is almost likeable at times, but there is no denying her villainy: she breaks up a happy marriage by prostituting Bianca, transforms Bianca's mother into a virago, and tricks her own niece into an incestuous relationship with her uncle. Not for nothing did Middleton call the play *Women Beware Women!* It is worth noting that we have here one of the rare examples of a wicked older woman playing the central rôle in the plot and in the play. Indeed, Livia combines in one person *two* of the characteristic rôles assigned, as we are seeing, to the older woman: on the one hand, the lascivious widow or wife, and, on the other, the procuress, the former rôle being a characteristic phenomenon of the Renaissance period, bawds such as Aphrodisia and Dame Siriz having already made fleeting appearances in the earlier literature.

Professional or amateur bawds do, indeed, tend to be identified with elderly women, and the term may be said to embrace as well such characters as elderly nurses who at least encourage their young charges in their

amorous proclivities: thus in Gascoigne's *Supposes*, Polynesta asks her nurse, Balia:

... who first brought (Dilippo) into my chamber? Who first taught him the way to me bed but you? Fie, nurse, fie! (1. 1).

whilst Juliet's old nurse reiterates ad nauseam her husband's joke about Juliet "falling backward" when she comes of age, and shows herself willing to fetch the ladder by means of which Juliet "shall bear the burden soon at night", albeit, thanks to Friar Laurence, it will be a legitimate "burden". A nurse makes a brief but humorously interesting appearance in Marlowe's *Dido Queen of Carthage*, (1594), in the final scene of Act IV in which she leads away "Cupid as Ascanius" to her home, and who, quite gratuitously - except that the child is really *Cupid*- begins to think of taking a lover or a husband, for although she is over eighty and has no teeth, "love is sweet", and she regrets some past refusal on her part to *carpere diem*. Marlowe here, presumably, is demonstrating Cupid's power over all and sundry!

There are a couple of examples of elderly bawds in Shakespeare: the significantly named Mistress Overdone in *Measure for Measure*, who runs a brothel in Vienna, and whose function in the play is to inform the audience of Claudio's arrest (for, of course, a sexual crime), and to lament the recent decline in trade! More essential to the plot is the elderly bawd in *Pericles*, who is the owner of the brothel into which Marina is sold by pirates. She plies her trade with great professionalism and supplies the play with a couple of scenes full of grim humour and grotesque realism; firstly, to make the acquisition of Marina more convincing, she deplores the fact that she cannot attend all her commitments, for:

We were never so much out of creatures. We have but poor three, and they can do no more than they can do; and they with continual action are even as good as rotten. (2. 2)

Grimly humorous, too, are the instructions that the bawd gives to Marina as to how she must behave in her new profession:

Mark me, you must seem to do that fearfully, which you commit willingly; to despise profit where you have most gain. To weep that you live as ye do makes pity in your lovers;

seldom but that pity begets you a good opinion, and that opinion a mere profit. (4. 4)

More black humour awaits the audience in the following scene, in which the bawd discovers, to her horror, that Marina is preaching “holiness” to her prospective clients, and has sent away the Governor “as cold as a snowball!” “Fie, fie upon her!”, she exclaims in rage:

... she is able to freeze the god Priapus, and undo a whole generation, we must either get her ravished, or be rid of her. (4. 6)

However, such grim humour does not prevent Shakespeare from presenting her as a genuine “lither lady”, whose lack of humanity impels her to command one of her pimps to rape Marina: the bawd in *Pericles*, albeit performing a purely functional rôle, is no mere shadowy figure.

A certain protagonism is likewise given to a bawd, the widowed Arsace, in Chapman’s play *The Widow’s Tears*, (produced 1605/6), who is obviously a mature woman, as is also the “widow” of the title; although appearing briefly, Arsace shows herself to have great psychological insight when dealing with the Countess Eudora, and, therefore, to be instrumental to the success of one of the two plots which make up the play. Her cunning words are what induce this apparently unshakeable widow to accept Tharsalio. For, in this play, we find another instance of the lascivious widow, apparently “Like Niobe all tears”, as Hamlet says of Gertrude lamenting her husband’s death, but consenting willingly enough to be consoled by the pleasures of a renewed marital relationship. Both of the plots aim at presenting women as being frail of flesh. Although Eudora has vowed “to preserve till death the unstain’d honour of a widow’s bed”, she finally accepts the younger, and very enterprising Tharsalio, who is after her fortune, when he makes references to his “weight on (her) bed”, or jokes about “tossing in sheets”. There is a notorious scene in the play when the supposedly reformed panderess, Arsace, arouses Eudora’s curiosity and, indeed, her repressed sensuality, by warning her against her suitor on the grounds that he is “... the most incontinent and insatiate man of women that ever Venus blest with ability to please them” (2. 2), capable as she knows professionally of making “nine in a night... mad with his love”: this apparently, is what decides Eudora to accept him!

A similar situation is presented in Middleton's *More Dissemblers Besides Women*, (c. 1615), in which the widowed Duchess of Milan, who has likewise vowed never to remarry, is also betrayed by her awakened passion, in this case, for a man who loves another, and whom, she decides to renounce, in fact, on that account, and renew her vows of chastity. The older woman's frailty of the flesh is, indeed, likewise castigated in Sidney's *Arcadia*, in the person of Basilius' wife, Queen Gynecia, who falls in love with the disguised Pyrocles, instinctively recognising his manhood under the woman's disguise, which leads her husband into worse folly. Sidney, indeed, exploits the incongruous emotions of the couple to censure what he sees as love run wild, and to instill into his readers the need for seemliness and self-discipline. Gynecia is, indeed, one of the rare examples of would-be adulteresses within our age-group (Alice in *Arden of Feversham* is obviously a younger woman), and her presence in the work is explained by Sidney's didactic bent. Pyrocles describes Gynecia's passion thus:

... love and mischief... have set Gynecia also on such a fire towards me, as will never (I fear) be quenched but with my destruction... all her countenances, words and gestures, are miserable portraitures of a desperate affection.¹²

Gynecia, "carried with the beere of violent love" is madly jealous of her own daughter, for which Sidney, with his desire to delight and instruct, makes sure that she is punished, although at the end of the novel there is a happy ending and a general pardon for all misdemeanours.

It might be mentioned here that this vision of older and experienced women as being sexually insatiable is likewise reflected in the popular literature of the time; in once of the chap-books collected by Pepys, printed in the 1680s but containing much earlier material, called *The Parliament of Women*, the first law passed by this female conclave is:

That instead of allowing Men two wives, women, especially the strongest and greatest Vessels, shall have two or three husbands.

and another clause stipulates that:

¹² *Elizabethan Fiction*, ed. with Introduction and notes by Robert Ashley and Edwin M. Moseley (London and New York, 1963) 164.

... all women should have their Husbands tenants at will, and that they should do them Night service, and have their homage paid before sun-raising, or at every Weeks end, or at utmost between the Quarters, and not a day longer to be deferr'd unless it be in the Dog-days. Then let our husbands remember, though it be a trick of them to forsake our beds in the dog-days, yet let them take notice there is no Dog-nights.¹³

Infidelity is not the only hazard in marriage, and it is hardly surprising that Renaissance literature should continue, as in the Middle Ages, to offer instances of the time-honoured species of the virago or hen-pecking, scolding old wife, ever determined, like the Wife of Bath, to have the *maistrie*. In Deloney's delightful novel, *Jack of Newbury*, (1597), for example, the good young apprentice, Jack, is tricked into marriage by his elderly mistress (another widow with a "likerous tooth"), but is obliged to assert his authority over her or be hen-pecked for life, as he had already foreseen, knowing she would "disdain being governed by him"! Certain of her commères, assuring her that "so lusty a young man":

... would never love her being so ancient.¹⁴

she decides to take him down a peg or two, and spends her time gadding about with friends and acquaintance; when Jack remonstrates with her, she replies furiously that he has been her servant, and he is not going to be her master! After a series of comic marital skirmishes, involving locking each other out of the house at night, Jack decides to leave her to her "wilfulness", calling her a "shrew". She then changes her tune and admits that "women will yield to their husbands where they are not too much crossed", and promises that, having given him her *will*, she will no longer offend him with her *wilfulness*. Jack's old wife has the makings of a latter-day Wife of Bath, but it was Deloney's intention to instruct and delight, and he uses the whole episode to show how a hard-working apprentice may make his way in the world, and how a little give and take is necessary in all satisfactory human relationships. The old wife is never given a name, because she is purely an ancillary to Jack's progress.

¹³ Ashley and Moseley 258-259.

¹⁴ *The Novels of Thomas Deloney*, ed. M.E. Lawlis (Indiana Univ. Press, 1961; rep. G Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978) 22.

A similar scold is Mistress Merrythought in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, (1613), who is constantly irritated by her husband's carelessness as regards money, and the popular attitude to the subject of shrewish women is again reflected in Pepy's copy of *The Parliament of Women*, who include among their laws:

- 1) That Women might vex, perplex, and anyways torment their husbands.
- 2) That Women may twattle as well as their Husbands.
- 3) That Women may feast, Banquet and Gossip when and where they please.¹⁵

Maudlin Yellowhammer, in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, offers another instance of the domineering virago, who rather than hen-pecking her husband, makes her daughter's life a misery, by insisting on marrying her to the disgusting Sir Walter Whorehound. Her tyrannical behaviour to her daughter is worthy of earning her "the slander of *step-mothers*", for being so "evil-eyed" to the young girl, and, indeed, her indulgence towards her foolish son, does remind one again of Cymbeline's queen.

Elderly viragos also tyrannise their servants: thus in Nicholas Breton's little-known picaresque narrative, *The Miseries of Mabillia*, (1606), the unfortunate heroine finds herself working for a thoroughly disagreeable, vituperative and, indeed, repulsive old countrywoman, who in her last illness spits "filthy phlegm" about the chamber, and who, in health, was given to "laying on" Mavillia with a "faggot stick". If Elynour Rummynge is the antithesis of the feminine and desirable, Mavillia's old peasant mistress and her country world are the very antithesis of the idealised pastoral world of the many Arcadian evocations to be found in the narrative prose of the period.

There is nothing very Arcadian either about the rustic world evoked in the early anonymous comedy, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, (1563, or earlier), and the Gammer herself is a cantankerous soul in all conscience, who "chides, blames and beats" her maid, Tib, "all t'hours of the day", and calls her "whore", but has a soft spot for her boy, Cock: it is another case of

¹⁵ Lawlis 258-259.

“women beware women”! Equally vituperative and aggressive is Gammer Gurton’s neighbour, Dame Chat, who may be a little younger, and who, on hearing that she is being falsely accused of theft, is quick to curse the Gammer by means of expressions such as:

The pox light on her whore’s sides, a pestilence and a mischief! (2. 2)

Gammer Gurton gives as good as she gets, calling Dame Chat, a “false quean”, a “false vixen” and a “callet”, and the whole of Act III, scene 3, is taken up by a slanging-match between these two harpies, which constitutes an absolute anthology of Elizabethan invective, both old women accusing each other mutually of being: a drab, an old witch, an arrant witch, a rump, a rig, a callet, a hog, a slut, a cut, a rakes, a jakes, a scald “bald, rotten and glutton”, a bawdy bitch, a withered witch, a turl leather and a vixen!

On a higher literary plane, we have Shakespeare’s two historical viragos: Queen Elinor in *King John* and Margaret of Anjou, who appears in the three parts of *Henry VI*, and then in Richard III. John’s mother, Elinor, has all the makings of a domineering virago, whose gift for vituperation is finely reflected in Act II, Scene 1, in which she quarrels with, and insults, Constance of Brittany. She has little to do in the play, after this early scene. Margaret of Anjou, however, is a character whom Shakespeare developed more and more in the different plays she appears in: fiery and domineering as a young woman, this “Amazonian trull” and “she-wolf of France” is the inspirer of Shakespeare’s celebrated line:

O tiger’s heart wrapped in a woman’s hide!¹⁶

Married to a weak king, and having an illicit affection for the much more intrepid Duke of Suffolk, Margaret, by the time she appears in the third part of *Henry VI*, as a mature woman, is an impressive figure indeed: “Her looks”, on her first entrance in this play, “so bewray her ire”, that the Duke

¹⁶ Parodied by Robert Greene in his attack on Shakespeare in his *Groats-Worth of Witte, bought with a million of Repentance*, 1592: “for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tyggers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Iohannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a country.”

of Exeter and the king himself, try “to steal away”. She is justifiably furious, since the king has, under pressure, disinherited their son: in a powerful speech, she declares herself a rebel, who will seek help from the disaffected northern lords for her just cause: from then on, Margaret becomes a martial matron, merciless in victory, mocking at the vanquished Duke of York, before finally stabbing him to death herself. Victim, in her turn, of the fortunes of war, she pleads her cause in France, and indomitably lays aside “her mourning weeds” “to put armour on”, and encourages her soldiers with a fine stirring speech, which makes her son declare in admiration that: “... a woman of this valiant spirit” would infuse “magnanimity” in the most cowardly breast. Finally captured, and her son killed before her eyes, like the Roman matrons of old, she beseeches her captors to despatch her too -which they refuse to do. Her gift for insult and invective has not lessened in *Richard III*, and Shakespeare continues to assign her long speeches of great rhetorical force, which earn her the epithets of “withered hag”, “false-boding woman” and “lunatic”, from Edward IVth’s three brothers who she commends to God’s hate! In the very fine scene (4. 4), in which Margaret is able to say “I told you so” to Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York, she warns them against Richard, “hell’s black intelligence”, in a series of fiery speeches making her final exit, glorying in her skill “to pierce with words”. Shakespeare, undoubtedly saw her as an admirable character, if an unlovable one!

Having then surveyed some of the less agreeable rôles played by the older woman in Renaissance literature: those of the drunkard, the witch, the lecheress, the bawd, the villainess and the virago, rôles to a greater or lesser degree adumbrated in the earlier literature, and practically the only ones allowed to the older woman therein, the question to be asked is: are there any virtuous, but dynamic, interesting or, at least, dignified, rôles assigned in Renaissance literature to the older woman?

To begin with, it may be said that there are to a greater degree than in the Middle English period a few of what we may call anodyne or perfunctory parts for older women to play within their literary contexts: the parts played by such characters as Margery Mumblecrust in Udall’s early comedy, *Ralph Roister Doister*, (1540), Dame Custance’s nurse, a simple soul whose activities are confined to delivering Ralph’s famous letter to her mistress, or “gammer” Madge, in *The Old Wives’ Tale*, (1595), a kindly and generous body, who is willing to entertain three unexpected guests by telling them “an

old wives' winter's tale" - a tale which barely has she begun to tell, than the action thereof is enacted on the stage- her contribution being really to set the ball rolling! Similarly, Calphurnia's brief appearance in *Julius Caesar*, is exclusively to prophesy in sleep the murder of Caesar, and on that account, as an affectionate wife, to beg him not to go out. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, the widow, Diana's mother, has no function other than being her daughter's companion, and, more or less, protector, and the shelterer of Helena.

The mention of "a winter's tale", of course, brings to mind Shakespeare's bitter-sweet work but here, the older Hermione, who is brought back to life at the end of the play, has no active part to play, although it is true that her brief, final appearance is very sympathetic, demonstrating as it does, her deep affection for her daughter, the hope of finding whom has given her strength to go on living. It is a proof of Shakespeare's infinite dramatic tact that he does not have her addressing any forgiveness speeches to the despicable Leontes.

The dying Zenocrate, in the second part of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, (1590), is like-wise a dignified figure, redeemed from pure conventionality, perhaps, by her continued adoration for her all-conquering husband: her function in the play, both as the young captured slave, and then, as the mature wife and mother, is to endow Tamburlaine himself with a human dimension -manifest in his love for her- to contrast with the ruthlessly mechanical litany of his military exploits. A brief, but to a certain extent, unconventional rôle is assigned to the Abbess -presumably an older woman- in *The Comedy of Errors*, whose function it is to upbraid Adriana, a scold, for making her husband's life a misery!

In fact, the most sympathetic rôles allotted to older women would appear to occur in Renaissance drama (rather than in other *genres*), and to concern above all mothers of sons, either in pieces of pure imagination, or in plays based on historical facts. In the works of imagination, however, this sympathetic rôle is very often restricted to the expression on the part of a bereaved mother (generally, but not always, a widow) of a lament for her dead son, in the form, in some cases, of very fine poetry. This is true, for example, of Isabella's superb pre-suicide speech in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, (1594), (4. 2), delivered whilst she is trying to cut down the trees in the arbour where her son, Horatio, had been found hanging murdered. In

Thomas Preston's *Cambyzes, King of Persia*, (1569?), although the verses are but indifferent, the strength of the passion in the mother's lament over her child, butchered by the cruel king, is equally moving (ll. 579-599), and magnificent is the dirge intoned by Cornelia in Webster's *The White Devil*, (1608), whilst in a state of distraction, reminiscent of Ophelia's in *Hamlet*:

Call for the robin red-breast and the wren
 Since o'er shady groves they hover,
 And with leaves and flowers do cover
 The friendless bodies of unburied men.
 Call unto his funeral dole
 The ant, the field-mouse and the mole,
 To rear him hillocks that shall keep him warm,
 And (when gay tombs are robbed) sustain no harm:
 But keep the wolf far hence, that's foe to men,
 For with his nails he'll dig them up again. (4. 4)

Indeed, the mother of three children, a wicked son and daughter, and this innocent youngest one, Cornelia has one of the few really significant rôles to be played by an older woman in Renaissance drama: her horror at her daughter's licentiousness, and her elder son's pandering activities, expressed in a series of powerful speeches, she clearly dominates Marcello's shrouding-scene by the striking lines Webster assigns to her. She does not, of course, dominate the play -Vittoria Corombona does that!

In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Shakespeare provides a dignified rôle for the widowed Countess of Roussillon to play: she shows deep affection not only for her son, but also for Helena, the daughter of an old friend whom she loves dearly and who replaces the daughter she desired and never had. She, indeed, provides a refreshing antidote to so many evil step-mothers, foster-mothers and mothers-in-law, such as have been mentioned, with her affirmation that:

Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds
 A native slip to us from foreign seeds:
 You ne'er oppressed me with a mother's groan,
 Yet I express to you a mother's care. (1. 3)

She not only approves of Helena as a future daughter-in-law, but is personally responsible for helping the girl to get to Paris, and seek out her

son, and shows a charming side to her nature in her lively repartee with the clown (2. 3).

A splendid example of an older woman playing a magnificent and really determining rôle, is to be found in the character of Volumnia, Coriolanus' mother in Shakespeare's play: Macbeth's injunction to "bring forth men-children only" would be eminently appropriate too for this martial-minded and patriotic Roman matron, who glories in her son's wounds, and who encouraged him, when he was but "tender-bodied" and "the only son of (her) womb", "to seek danger where he was like to find fame" (1. 3). She is enchanted that her little grandson "would rather see the swords and hear the drum, than look upon his school-master". An indomitable figure, of great dignity and intelligence, Shakespeare has Volumnia face the difficult problem of trying to persuade her impetuous son to woo the Senate diplomatically, that he may become consul. As she explains:

I have a heart of mettle, apt as yours,
But yet a brain that leads my use of anger,
To better vantage. (3. 1)

At the end of the play she has the more difficult task of persuading him to sign a peace with Rome, rather than betray his country, as leader of the Volscians. Shakespeare assigns to her, for this purpose, one of his finest speeches, in which she brings all the resources of her forceful personality and intelligence to bear on influencing Coriolanus for his own good and that of his country. She wins the day, but, of course, in the last instance, the decision she has wrung out of him leads inexorably to his death. Particularly fine, as well, are the two speeches pronounced by Coriolanus, on going into exile, in which he eulogises his mother's former valour, her "ancient courage", reminding her that she was "wont to say" "if (she) had been the wife of Hercules / Six of his labours (sh'd) have done, and sav'd / (her) husband so much sweat". Seldom, as we have been seeing, do we hear such tributes dedicated to an older woman.

Another determining rôle allotted to an older woman is to be found a few years later in *A Fair Quarrel*, (1617), by Middleton and Rowley. Lady Ager, the mother of a grown-up son and seven years a widow, is falsely and maliciously accused of having been unfaithful to her husband in his lifetime. Her son, Captain Ager, wishes impetuously to defend her honour and his

own (as a putative bastard) in a duel. Lady Ager, at first highly incensed on hearing of the insult, then begins to fear for her son's life, and in order to prevent him from fighting, makes the supreme sacrifice of admitting to him (falsely) that the accusation is just. This being the case, he will not insist on fighting. Lady Ager is, therefore, the protagonist of an extremely dramatic situation, although, since the play is a comedy, it is finally resolved more or less satisfactorily: she is, however, one of the rare examples of an older woman being essential to the plot of the play she appears in, and of being given some excellent lines to deliver!

There are, of course, as we have mentioned, some mothers of sons in Shakespeare's history plays who perform pertinent rôles, although it is not always easy to judge their age: thus, the widowed Constance, Arthur's mother, in *King John*, is, probably, still quite young; she is certainly presented in a most sympathetic light, both as a loving mother and a prudent counsellor, albeit capable of being moved to a fiery response by Queen Elinor's cruel taunts. Shakespeare has endowed her too with some fine emotional speeches, above all on the capture and abduction of her young son by the English. Similarly, the "old" Duchess of York, albeit making a brief appearance in Richard II, is spurred to passionate speeches in order to save her son's life.

It is, finally, Shakespeare, too, who offers us a delightful play completely protagonised by older, or, at least, mature women, a protagonism reflected in the title: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Practically the whole of the action revolves round the jokes these lively, intelligent, and essentially honourable married women think up in order to be revenged on Sir John Falstaff, for his paying his addresses, not to one, but to both of them, simultaneously. On receiving their respective love-letters, both, as it were, examine their consciences, to see if they have given him any encouragement, and satisfied of their innocence, set out to pay him back, and, in the case of Mrs Ford, to see if she can, once and for all, put paid to her husband's foolish and totally unjustified jealousy. In this play, composed, as rumour would have it, at Queen Elizabeth's request, because she wanted to see Sir John Falstaff in love, the fat knight has little to do but be the victim of these merry women, so incensed at his daring that Mrs Page affirms that she will "exhibit a bill in the parliament for the putting down of men!" All the initiatives in the play are taken by "the wives" including the evocation of a ghostly forester, in the final scene, although in this case, they can count on

their husbands' support. For, although the wives are merry, they are yet prudent, and know exactly when their menfolk should be brought into the secret. True it is that Mrs Page does not immediately support her daughter's choice of a husband, but, from her point of view, Dr. Caius is the more prudent match. Nor does she waste time crying over spilt milk when Ann *does* marry Fenton, but good-heartedly blesses them saying:

Heaven give you, many, many, merry days, (5. 5)

and, in fact, in an earlier scene, had already assured Fenton that she would question her daughter, and take into account her feelings on the matter. The play is one of the most delightful in the whole canon, and proves that Shakespeare at least saw the dramatic possibilities for comedy too offered by older, experienced women.

Mistress Quickly is but a "maid" in *The Merry Wives*, presumably quite young, and desirous of getting married, but Shakespeare, of course, had already incorporated her into the action of *Henry IV*, Parts I and II, in the second of which she is obviously older and a widow. Shakespeare endows her with some delightful malapropisms, and her sparring sessions in her tavern with Falstaff and also with the law, enliven the play considerably. Although essentially there as a foil for Falstaff, she yet manages to have a recognisable personality of her own. *Henry V*, written probably the same year as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, finds her married to Pistol, and Shakespeare assigns to her one of his most idiosyncratic yet moving speeches, that describing the death of Falstaff, now, as she endearingly affirms "in Arthur's bosom".

In conclusion, then, it may be affirmed, from a survey of some of the most representative works of the period, that, although the literary rôles assigned to the older woman in earlier periods continue to be allotted to them in the Renaissance, i.e. there continue to be witches, villainesses and viragos, there are, however, a few instances in which these rôles are not included purely for the convenience of the plot or to contribute to the development of other major characters, but offer the opportunity to see an older woman as a fully-rounded character with a determining part to play in the action: such are, the "lither lady" Livia, and probably, Tamora, the virago, Margaret of Anjou, and the victimised witch of Edmonton. To these categories must be

added, in the Renaissance, the new rôles of the intemperate or lascivious older woman, generally speaking, unredeemably disagreeable rôles.

Whereas, however, in Old and Middle English literature, we find no actively sympathetic parts to be played by the older or old woman, we do find, in the Renaissance, with the amplification of literary *genres* and, above all, thanks to Shakespeare and his talent for reflecting human nature in its multiple manifestations, some instances, at least, of sympathetic, and even unconventional determining rôles to be played by the older woman, principally, as loving mothers of sons. Not only do we have the funeral laments assigned to otherwise uncharacterised mothers, but, we also have the essential rôles such as those played by Cornelia, Lady Ager, the Countess of Roussillon, Constance or Volumnia, without whom the plays would be inexistent. They are women whose emotions we can identify with, just as it is possible to do so with the older heroines of numerous twentieth century novels, and in the case of Mrs Ford and Mrs Page, we can take delight in the fact that youth is not always allowed to monopolise the comic page, that the “merry war” between the sexes is not restricted to the Beatrices and the Benedicks, but may be waged by those with more marital experience, and perhaps to more purpose, for the pleasure of an audience convinced by Shakespeare that, as Mrs Page puts it:

Wives may be merry, yet honest too!