



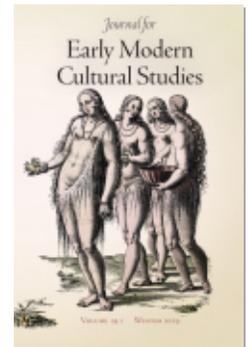
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# Salty Language:

## Herring and Intemperate Appetites in Shakespeare's London

ROSAMUND PAICE

### ABSTRACT

References to herring in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries provide insights into the language of the London streets and reveal something of street-life at the turn of the seventeenth century. Unlike fresh fish (an expensive commodity), smoked and pickled herring was cheap and associated as much with the habits of an ale-drinking underclass as with fasting. More common—readily available and associated with the vulgar—than other fish, preserved herring was integral to the commercial and social life around the Thames. This pervasiveness of the herring, and its urban and social alignments, imbued it with a figurative value. For writers of the period, herring gained currency as a symbol of unmanliness and indiscriminate (sexual) appetites. A stock-in-trade of the taverns, it took in alehouse associations with disorder and sexual liaisons (including prostitution). Herring references uncover the unmistakable whiff of innuendo, revealing playful categories of masculinity, from the sexually exhausted “shotten herring” to interchangeable and ungentlemanly “pickled herring.” Herring-related deaths (including Thomas Nashe’s description of Robert Greene’s “fatal banquet of Rhenish wine and pickled herring”) underscore that there is no such thing as an innocent herring in the hands of the London writers.



Among the many Shakespearean jokes likely to be lost on modern audiences is a seemingly insignificant exchange in *Twelfth Night* (1602). Asked if he is Olivia’s fool, Feste replies, “No, indeed, sir, the Lady Olivia has no folly. She will keep no fool, sir, till she be married, and fools are as like husbands as pilchards are to herrings—the husband’s the bigger” (3.1.31–34). Shakespeare frequently plays with the idea of men as fish: famously, in *The*

*Tempest*, Trinculo's first encounter with Caliban causes him to question whether he is "a man or a fish? dead or alive?" (2.2.24). The joke in *Twelfth Night*, however, turns on familiarity with the bodies of two particular fish. As Dan Brayton explains, "Just as there is little apparent difference between a pilchard and a herring, so, too, do a fool and a husband resemble one another: the former is merely a smaller version of the latter" (138). In contemporary Britain and America, Feste's joke is likely to be obscure. While the familiarity of cheap fish to early seventeenth-century audience-goers allowed Shakespeare to draw on subtle differences, the pervasiveness of the fillet today means that many do not know what the fish they are eating looks like. Moreover, in contrast to contemporary understandings, fish was "generally considered inferior to meat by the early moderns because it was thought to be less nourishing" (Fitzpatrick 81), hence its traditional association with Lent. This association was invoked in Thomas Nashe's celebration of the Yarmouth herring industry, *Lenten Stuffe* (1599), and, as Brayton has pointed out, it is notable that "nearly half of Yarmouth's herring was transhipped to fishmongers in London" (159). Both pilchards and herrings were particularly low and inexpensive fare, as, for example, Thomas Cogan notes in his *Haven of Health* (1584) when he says: "Hearing [herring] is a fish most common and best cheape . . . Pilchards be of like nature to hearings which kind of fishes as they be small in quantitie, so be they small in value" (146). Far from being associated with healthy and aspirational living, pilchards and herrings were mostly available in preserved forms that were highly salted and associated with the capital's streets and taverns. Feste's analogy, then, suggests that husbands are not only the biggest fools but also cheap and readily available.

This article argues that references to herring by London-based writers at the turn of the seventeenth century function as markers of a very particular kind of street-life in existence in London at this time. While not in full agreement with Brayton's arguments about the herring industry's geographical connections, this article supports his contention that herring, in Shakespeare's day, were "a literary commonplace so familiar that he could use them as a metaphorically available yet polysemous emblem of the street, the space of circulating bodies and commodities where appetite, sexuality, and cheapness converged" (141). Indeed, in returning to and moving beyond Shakespeare, this study reveals a broader community of writers interested in the figurative potential of the herring—including both those whom we today regard as "literary" and pamphleteers of a lower order. All of them clearly understood the

significance of the herring in ways that take it well beyond simple foodstuff, exposing shared understandings of the herring's literal and symbolic value, and evidencing a relish for the associations of this fish with markets in piscatorial and human flesh. While such creative uses of the herring appear never to have entered mainstream discourse (being absent, for example, in legal and historical accounts), taken together they serve as an example of how communities can share and develop a richly allusive language of the streets, and how that language can become lost with the street-life it expresses.

Brayton associates the herring particularly with Southwark, which he describes as “a space structured by the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities—licit and illicit—used to feed appetites of various kinds” (159). The production and distribution of fresh and preserved fish at the turn of the seventeenth century, however, was not associated with Southwark, but rather with the area around New Fish Street (also known as Bride Street), which ran north of Southwark, across London Bridge, and the emerging fish market at Billingsgate (also north of the River Thames).<sup>1</sup> Southwark had its own market in Boroughside, but the number of butchers recorded as living in the area in 1622 (fifty, as compared to the six recorded as living in the Clink and Paris Garden liberties) indicates that this market was associated primarily with a trade in meat.<sup>2</sup> Although fishwives hawked their wares in the area, there is nothing in the nature of the Southwark parish of St Saviour's (which took in the Paris Garden and Clink liberties as well as Boroughside) to suggest it was where large hauls of herring were brought ashore or processed: it had, as Boulton notes, “no docking facilities for large ships and therefore had few maritime connections” (70–71). In fact, Boulton's account of occupational structures (taken from parish records from the early decades of the seventeenth century) shows that the most significant area of employment for those in the Clink and Paris Garden liberties (46.7 per cent) and in St Saviour's (33.7 per cent) was “Transport and unskilled labour” (66) with watermen accounting for “39.8% of all the occupations in the two liberties” (69). As Brayton observes, then, when Viola (as Cesario), says “westward ho” (3.1.132), she echoes the watermen “advertis[ing] transport upriver” (143), and so it would not have been the Illyrian coast that would have sprung to mind, but rather the immediate Thames locale.

Herring was a significant commodity within the wider picture of London, however. Fish of the genus *Clupea* (including herring and pilchards) were plentiful in the seas around the British Isles, and the trade in these fish was so

important in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that fierce competition with the Dutch (who could access the same waters and who dominated the carrying trade) grew into serious trade disputes. A sign of the importance of the herring trade to Britain was the significant contribution that it made to the state coffers: John Selden's *Of the Dominion or Ownership of the Sea* (1652) observes "how mightie the publick Revenue, and Customs of that State are encreased by their fishing, may appear in that above thirtie years since, over and above the Customs of other Merchandise, Excises, Licences, Wastage, and Lastage, there was paid to the State, for Custom of Herring, and other salt-Fish, above three hundred thousand pound in one year" (491). The pervasiveness of the herring would have been particularly notable along the banks of the Thames downstream from London Bridge: as Julie Sanders maintains, "Not only was the river a focal point in terms of activity—trade and transportation were hugely dependent on it—and a major sight on anyone's journey through London, but the sonic, olfactory, and haptic, as well as optic, experience of it would have struck the imagination forcefully" (27). Among the most pungent of foodstuffs, herring—fresh, decaying, salted, and smoked—was in the Thameside air.

With lower-class occupations dominant in the Liberties, preserved fish would have featured heavily in its inhabitants' diets. Markedly poorer than their Boroughside neighbors, these men and women would not have been the target market for the meat sold by butchers in the thriving market of Borough High Street. Given the lack of refrigeration, fresh fish, too, was expensive and so primarily a foodstuff of the moneyed. By contrast, preserved herring—salted or smoked—was a cheap and readily available product, and a stock-in-trade of the tavern and its more humble counterpart, the alehouse. There, herring would have been part of a broader picture of licit and illicit consumption.

Although brothels were outlawed in 1546, the trade in flesh continued, and the area around the Globe retained its reputation as a locus of seedy sexual encounters. In Nashe's *Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil* (1592), for example, Pierce commends to the protection of the Devil "our uncleane sisters in *Shoreditch, the Spittle, Southwarke, Westminster, and Turnbull streete,*" hoping that the Devil "will speedily carrie them to hell, there to keepe open house for all young Divels that come, and not let our ayre be contaminated with theyr six-pennie damnation any longer" (51). Yet, as Nashe makes clear, places of "'ill rule', 'ill resort', 'ill houses', 'alehouses' and 'bawdy houses'" (Salkeld

154) existed right across London, including in places like Shoreditch, where Shakespeare had resided in the 1590s before his move to Bankside. The association of taverns with moral disorder, and their function as a space for assignations then, was certainly not restricted to Southwark.<sup>3</sup> More fundamentally, as Salkeld has demonstrated, there was “a long established association of food and sex in English tavern life” (29): in the taverns, Dekker and Middleton’s *Gull (The Roaring Girl)*, c. 1607–1610) states, a man could enjoy his “supper amongst girls and brave bawdy-house boys” (2.1.113–15). It is in this wider context that the herring—consumed alongside human flesh in taverns and alehouses across the City of London and the Southwark parishes south of the river—gained currency as a symbol of cheap sexuality and indiscriminate appetites.

Most of the herring catch was preserved with salt, and, of the three possible forms of salting fish, only pickling was common by the late sixteenth century. Dry salting herring was considered inferior, as the fat content of the fish (particularly high during the autumn spawning season) made this process inadequate for transportation of the fish over anything but short distances. Brining called for continual tweaking of the salt solution in which the herring were soaked as the fish absorbed the salt, affecting the ratio of skin to brine, and so the results were often poor. The pickling process, notes Brian Fagan, “combined salting with brining in barrels” (54–55), and led to a much more dependable result. The modern-day pickled herring is regarded as a delicacy, but the pickling processes of Shakespeare’s day are a far cry from those currently used, and the resulting foodstuffs would be equally unfamiliar to a modern palette. In today’s pickling process, herrings are normally soaked and rinsed in fresh water after their initial brinings, and are then kept in a solution of vinegar, salt, and sugar. By contrast, accounts of the standardized brining system from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century produced a product that was, as Tobias Venner described it in his *Via Recta* (1620), “of harder concoction, and giveth a saltish and unprofitable nourishment” (81).

Maryanne Kowaleski’s study of south-western fisheries in late medieval England makes clear that, even by the fifteenth century, most herring would already have been subjected to the first stage of the salting process before arriving in English ports. Richard W. Unger provides details of this stage of the process, and its impact on the length of time herring fishing busses could be at sea, in his essay on the Dutch herring trade; and the same applied to the English trade shortly afterwards, as the successes of the Dutch were replicated:

Soon after the herring were caught, the packer eviscerated the fish, mixed them with salt to form a brine, and then packed them into casks with more salt. The contribution of Low Countries fishermen was to adapt this method for use on board ship, which meant that the herring had to be repacked when it was brought to port. By doing the work of preserving at sea, Dutch fishermen could stay away from shore longer. (255)

The herring shrank during this process, as the salt drew out its liquid content, and the barrels of herrings at this first stage of packing were called “sticks.”<sup>4</sup> When the barrels were opened, the “pickle” (which in those days was always brine) was drained, more fish at the same stage of the process were added to fill the barrel to the top, and pickle was added again to fill the space. Both Fagan and Kowaleski note that the on-shore process was largely undertaken by teams of women.<sup>5</sup>

Smoked herring is also familiar to us today, but again involves different processes from its early modern counterpart. Today’s kippers generally undergo a brining process of minutes, and an oak-smoking of hours. As Fagan notes, however, “such light preservation would have been unthinkable” (48) in the days before the railways transformed the speed by which produce could be transported. The smoking process in early modern England began with fish being dried or salted onboard the herring busses, and the subsequent commercial production on land involved the use of large smokehouses in which the fish were hung on poles for several days while they were alternately cold-smoked and rested. The heavier the smoking, the better the chances of killing bacteria and the longer the life of the resulting product: red herring, for example, is the result of a particularly heavy smoking. Such heavy smoking also desiccated the fish, rendering it hard, even sticklike, comparable to modern-day jerky in both texture and salt content.

Smoked and pickled herring served as the early modern equivalent of today’s crisps, peanuts, pork scratchings, and jerky, a fact to which Venner bears witness in his remark that “Red Herrings . . . are onely good to excite thirst, and to make the drinke very acceptable to the pallat and throat” (81). It is their thirst-inducing quality that Christopher Marlowe draws on in *Doctor Faustus* (1604), when he names the godparents of Gluttony as “Peter Pickle-herring,” the tough and equally salty “Martin Martlemas-beef,” and “Margery March-beer” (2.3.141–44).<sup>6</sup> John Cooke, in his *Epigrammes* (c. 1604), refers to pickled herring and Martlemas beef as “those salt meates [that] do steale

down drinke” (no. 29), and Samuel Rowlands’s *Letting of Humours Blood in the Head-Vaine* (1600) also attributes to pickled herring the “vertue, eaten salt and raw, / To pull drinke to it.” In turn, alcohol consumption inevitably lowered inhibitions. Rowlands goes on to tell readers that:

Tis a very Whetstone to the braine,  
A march-beere shewer that puts downe April raine;  
It makes a man active to leape and spring,  
To daunce and vault, to carrowle and to sing:  
For all exploytes it doth a man inable,  
T’out leape mens heades, and caper ore the table [. . .]. (Satyre 6)

This picture of excess, however, remains one of good-natured, companionable silliness.

Nicholas Breton’s Angler in *The Wits Trenchmour* (1597) links herring to sociability when he tells of a time “when fishes could speake”: he explains that a king was to be chosen from among the fishes, and, in the list that follows, the herring is described as “com[ing] with his millions of attendants, but his readines to beare them company, at all times, and at all services, made them with generall consent to goe to his side, & so receaved his tytle” (12).<sup>7</sup> Nashe also associates herring with company in his dedication of *Lenten Stuffe* to the tobacconist and versifier “Lustie” Humphrey King: there he proclaims the suitability of the narrative to its dedicatee on the basis of a parallel between the latter as “King of good fellowshippe” and the herring as “king of fishes” (iii).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the company with which herrings were associated was multiple, and points toward the potential for the herring to encourage collective indulgence.

Taverns welcomed a diverse clientele—not just local residents, but those who sought them out for their atmosphere and refreshments—and of course sea-weathered traders. Thomas Moffett’s *Health’s Improvement* (1655) notes that “Herrings are an usual and common meat, coveted as much of the Nobility for variety and wantonness, as used of poor men for want of other provision” (153). Likewise, Nashe’s *Lenten Stuffe* hails the fish as a kind of social leveller:

Behold it is every mans money from the King to the Courtier; every housholder or goodman *Baltrop*, that keepe a family in pay, casts for it as one of his standing provisions. The poorer sort make it three parts of

their sustenance, with it for his dinnier the patchedest *Leather piltche laboratho* [possibly a misprint of *laborat homo*, working man] may dine like a Spanish Duke, when the niggardliest mouse of biefe will cost him sixpence. (27)

Such comments undermine the view of herring consumption offered by M. A. Katritzky, who contends that “Wealthy and fashionable drinkers accompanied their after-dinner sack or wine with pickled oysters, anchovies, *botargo*, and caviar,” comparing them with “poor folk” who “not just during Lent, but all year round . . . did not observe the cultivated niceties of limiting alcohol and fish combinations to the concluding course of social repasts, [and instead] ate preserved herring with their beer” (163). Clearly, wealthy and fashionable drinkers *did* partake of herring. Moffett’s association of herring consumption with “variety and wantonness” is in tune with Robert Appelbaum’s argument that, since herring was considered low in nutritional value, “the governing idea was that . . . if you had other choices, you ate it simply out of gluttony . . . [and] gluttony was underscored by the fact that those who had choices often ate herring not as part of a regular meal but as a snack, particularly at taverns” (213).

Opening up these material contexts and cultures highlights indulgent appetites and exposes a suggestive interplay between the licit and illicit. It also foregrounds the fishiness—questionable behaviors and associations with fish—of several of *Twelfth Night*’s characters and their behavior. Indeed, a whiff of the Thames trades is present even in the play’s opening lines. After aligning music with food (“If music be the food of love”), and calling for “excess of it, that surfeiting / The appetite may sicken and so die” (1.1.1–3), Orsino listens for only four lines before calling a halt to the performance:

Enough, no more,  
 ’Tis not so sweet now as it was before.      [*Music ceases*]  
 O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou  
 That, notwithstanding thy capacity  
 Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there  
 Of what validity and pitch soe’er,  
 But falls into abatement and low price  
 Even in a minute. (1.1.7–14)

Where Orsino's opening metaphor tells us that it is only through surfeit that the appetite can be reformed, his assessment of the spirit of love brings in an alternative, commercial understanding of excess: far from being associated with rarity, Orsino's sense of love is linked to an excess that results in devaluation, and so must be suspect. Since Orsino's analogy turns on market forces, that which enters the sea and decreases in quality and price is perhaps best understood in terms of perishable commodities transported in ships. Food fits that profile, and also plays out further the "food of love" metaphor, and the greatest proportion of all the foodstuffs moved around in ships on the Thames was the fish that had of course originally come out of the water.

It is, however, in relation to Olivia's household that cheap fish become a material problem. Observing Sir Toby "half drunk," Olivia asks him "What is he at the gate, cousin?" and, when he replies that it is "A gentleman," she seeks from him further details. Sir Toby's (lack of) further clarification introduces an editorial belch: as Appelbaum notes, the editorial directive to the actor playing Sir Toby to "make some kind of noise of indigestion here" (202) is present in editions from the eighteenth century onward. Hence, the Arden edition reads, "'Tis a gentleman here. [*Belches*] A plague o' these pickle-herring!" (1.5.112–17). The directive prompts readers to understand Sir Toby's "pickle-herring" in the way that Appelbaum does, that is, as the cause of his belching, and certainly this is part of the joke: in *The Wits Trenchmour*, the Angler describes fish as "by nature windy," by which his conversation partner, the Scholler, realises he means "either breeding of the chollicke, or blowing of the backpipe." Evidently, Sir Toby is familiar with pickled herring, and, as he clearly has choices as to what he eats, that familiarity reveals his participation in alehouse culture. That in turn fits with the picture of him as an imbiber of alcohol who is excessive—since he feeds his desire for beer by his consumption of salty snacks—and indiscriminate—since his thoughts skip between wine and ale in quick succession (moving from "a stoup of wine" [2.3.13] through "cakes and ale" [113] and back to "a stoup of wine" [117]). His willingness to align with all levels of society as long as merriment is to be had—cavorting, as Coddon notes, "not only with his fellow titled tosspot Sir Andrew Aguecheek, but also with his social inferiors" (314)—is symbolised in the variety of his drink and food. He indulges in the cheap ale and herring of the taverns, in wine that was beyond the means of the poor, and even in luxury wines like Malmsey that were imported from the Canary Islands and known as "canary" (1.3.78).

The pickled herring to which Sir Toby refers, however, have an additional alignment with the “gentlemen” that appears when the words are unobstructed by the later editorial belch. The association of unsatisfactory men with herring elsewhere in this play (Feste’s herring-husbands) suggests that Sir Toby is also drawing an analogy between the gentleman at the gate (who is, in fact, Cesario, and so not a gentleman at all) and pickled herrings. Moreover, since “o” can be a contraction of either “on” or “of,” “A plague o’ these pickle-herring!” might mean that the knight is cursing the herring/herringsmen (“A plague o[n] these pickle-herring!”) or referring to the greatness of their number (“A plague o[f] these pickle-herring!”), or both.<sup>9</sup> Sir Toby’s use of “these” rather than “this,” then, not only implies that the fish are repeating on him (due to his over-indulgence), but also suggests the repeated intrusions of men-fish into the domestic space.<sup>10</sup> In denigrating Olivia’s suitors as pickled herring, Sir Toby’s reference draws on the commonness and pervasiveness of the herring, hinting at how frequent such visits have become, and that the “gentlemen” are not as gentlemanly as they at first appear. This question over gentlemanliness surfaces again when Sir Toby notes that “the behaviour of the young gentleman [Cesario] gives him out to be of good capacity and breeding” (3.4.179–81): the fact that Cesario is actually Viola remains a potent reminder in the play that it is not only dubious male suitors who can pass as gentlemen.

What, then, are pickled herring doing encroaching on Olivia’s well-to-do estate? Alehouses, as Vic Gammon notes, “tended to be male-dominated spaces, and drinking and drunken women risked losing their status as respectable members of the community and perhaps worsening their marriage possibilities” (126). It seems at first that Malvolio is right: Sir Toby is “mak[ing] an alehouse of my lady’s house” (2.3.87–88). However, Olivia seems capable of doing this herself. Abjuring the advances of a Duke, Olivia’s appetite craves her social inferior, Cesario, an androgynous “gentleman” who looks so similar to Sebastian that she mistakenly marries the latter. Indeed, Olivia’s confusion over the gender identity of the object of her desire is in keeping with the herring’s reputation. Nashe opens *Have With You To Safefron Walden* (1596) with an appeal to “olde Dicke of Lichfield” who, he claims “studied a whole year to know which was the male and female of red herrings” (“The Epistle Dedicatorie” [1]); and, in *Lenten Stuffe*, Nashe plays with the boundary between male and female by comparing the allure of a male-gendered herring to that of Helen of Troy: “As loude a ringing miracle as the

attractive melting eye of that strumpet can we supply the[m] with of our dappert *Piemont Huldrick Herring*, which draweth more barkes to Yarmouth bay, than her beautie did to *Troy*" (32).

It appears, then, that Olivia has a penchant for beings of indeterminate gender, who are of lower status than she, and are interchangeable as herring. We might even say that her lack of understanding of alehouse culture makes her especially susceptible to this kind of seeming man, both common (so common that two of them are indistinguishable) and novel or foreign (or, as Brayton says of Viola and Sebastian, "strange fish redeemed from the sea" [143]).<sup>11</sup> Her lack of self-control is evident in two clear expressions of intemperate appetite: firstly, she falls for a woman dressed as a man; secondly, in her haste to marry and consummate the relationship (that is, "consume," in a now-obsolete sense),<sup>12</sup> she fails to move beyond the superficial, and so realise that Sebastian is not Cesario. She rushes gluttonously into her herring-husband meal without any sense that she has plucked the wrong (yet in heteronormative terms, right) fish from the pickling barrel.

Curiously, Valentine's description of Olivia's mourning for her brother identifies the latter as another of her herring men. Echoing the curing process by which herring were pickled in Shakespeare's day (even down to the fact that the process was carried out by women), Valentine's describes how she "water[s] once a day her chamber round / With eye-offending brine," and does so "to season / A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh / And lasting in her sad remembrance" (1.1.28–31). This account suggests that Olivia is preserving her brother's memory by rote, and that the product of her behavior is as commonplace as preserved fish; it also signals the futility of her mourning, as pickling her brother's love in this way cannot "keep [it] fresh," even if her acts of preservation may make it last longer. Moreover, her use of her mourning as a reason for not marrying, the fact that Orsino sees her love for her brother as competition to be "killed" (1.1.35), and her subsequent attraction to interchangeable herring-men combine to create a disturbing alignment between her mourning for her brother and her sexual desire.

These fishy alignments in *Twelfth Night* suggest ways in which human desire itself has become a dubious and perishable commodity, and are consistent with the many other ways in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries depict lovers and marital partners in terms of a fish market, with "merchants and merchandise, peddling and peddled [...] invoke[ing] a market in cold flesh" (Brayton 144). Moreover, although Gordon Williams documents "fish"

(126) as a slang term for a female sexual partner, or for whore, the herring itself appears frequently in relation to men and questions of manliness. For example, an anonymous pamphlet poem entitled *Cornu-copiae* (1612) explicitly connects smoked herring and salted hake (poor Johns) to the inadequate male sexual partner: it is no wonder that young wives cheat on their desiccated old husbands, it tells us, "For in a dri'd red herring, and poore *Johns*, / Remaines more virtue then in old men's bones" (6). *The Owles Almanacke* of 1618, on the other hand, prognosticates a strange inversion of the normal order of things, in which "Every maid will bee in love with fish, and old men will make much of Hearing [Herring]" (35). Olivia's love of fishy seeming-men, then, suggests itself as one of *Twelfth Night's* inversions of the normal order of things.

The herring motif, however, is not confined to *Twelfth Night*. In *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), Mercutio announces the arrival of Romeo (whom he believes still to be in love with Rosaline) with the words: "Without his roe, like a dried herring. O flesh, flesh, how art thou fishified! Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch flow'd in" (2.4.37–39). Associating Romeo with an unappealing, cheap preserved fish, and a merely imitative and mechanical approach to poetry, Mercutio effectively summarizes this "love" as nothing special. Furthermore, punning on the "Ro" of Romeo's name, Mercutio's remark turns on the idea of a herring that has doubly lost its fluids, and so its value: it has lost its roe (a term used interchangeably in this period to refer to the eggs of the female fish and the milt or sperm of the male fish, and as a slang term for human ejaculate),<sup>13</sup> and so would sell for less than a "full" herring; and it has lost its moisture content, in the process of curing, and so is less valuable than a fresh fish. Williams reads Mercutio's statement as suggesting that Romeo has just had "a draining session with Rosalind" (177), but neither this, nor Brayton's claim that the description paints Romeo as "a limp thing . . . weakened and feminized" (145), seems quite to fit the particulars of the image. Rather, as a roe-less *dried* herring (a heavily smoked herring), Romeo would be unrelentingly stiff and sperm-less, a sexually contradictory image of erect but exhausted manhood.

The connection between unmanliness and the roe-less herring appears repeatedly in plays of this period. The association underlies the twofold joke of Falstaff's statement in *1 Henry IV, Part 1* (c. 1597) that "if manhood, good manhood, be not forgot upon the face of the earth, then am I a shotten herring" (2.4.122–24). The first element of the joke is visual: Falstaff's girth of course makes him the antithesis of a herring that has spawned (shot its roe),

that is, an empty-bellied herring. The joke also turns on a contradiction: if he is not correct in his assertion that manhood has gone from the earth—that is, if manhood remains—then, Falstaff says, he is a shotten herring; that is, exhausted, worthless, a symbol of unmanliness. In *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), Thersites derides Menelaus for being a cuckold by saying that it would be preferable to be a “herring without a roe” (5.1.60) than to be him. Thomas Dekker first drew on the image of the shotten herring in *The Honest Whore, Part 2* (c. 1605 or 1606), in which Mattheo comments on the interchangeability and unmanliness of Orlando Frescobaldo’s serving men when he calls them “four white Herrings [. . .] in blue Coates without roes in their bellies” (4.1). The fact that they are white herrings also indicates something of the class with which they are associated: Orlando can afford his more expensive, fresh white herring, but would not, Mattheo complains, even give him “so much as a cob” (4.1), that is the head of a herring, or the poor leftovers. Indeed, Brayton notes that Edgar, disguised as Tom O’Bedlam, almost gives away his identity in *King Lear* when he speaks of craving a meal of white herring, “for he names a delicacy more familiar to the first sons of aristocrats than to sturdy beggars” (141). A far less wholesome smoked herring is invoked by Dekker in *A Strange Horse-Race* (1613) when he describes “The Character of a Niggard” as “a leane ill-faced shotten-herring-bellied rascall . . . whose filth . . . would scour” ([19]). This Niggard, the image tells us, is emptied of the ideals associated with manly behavior in terms both of goodwill and virility, and, in an ironic inversion of the traditional function of purging could empty (“scour”) others of these qualities too. All of these images map out a hierarchy of manliness, in which the herring without a roe is at a clearly demarked low point on the scale, and in which the dryness of the smoked herring marks an extremity of dysfunction.

The alignment of herring with alehouse culture and dysfunctional or indiscriminate sexual as well as gustatory consumption feeds into a more developed understanding of perhaps the most famous reference to herring in this period: the description of the death of Robert Greene by Thomas Nashe. In 1592, Robert Greene—the man whose posthumously published *Groats-Worth of Witte* (1592) dubbed Shakespeare the “upstart Crow” ([38])—died of a fever at the age of thirty-four. Nashe’s *Apologie of Pierce Pennilesse* (1593) reports that he and William Monox “were in company with [Greene] a month before he died, at that fatall banquet of Rhenish wine and pickled hearing (if thou wilt needs have it so)” (35). It is quite possible that Greene *had* damaged

his health by over consumption of alcohol and salty herring, but in fact it was fresh herring that both Cogan and Venner identify as causing people to “fall into fevers” (80): the bacteria that caused some deteriorating fresh fish to have this effect was killed off in the curing processes of preserved fish. Despite this discrepancy, and despite the closing parenthesis (“if thou wilt needs have it so” is susceptible to multiple interpretations, but some hedging, at least, is apparent), Nashe’s account has been taken literally by modern commentators.<sup>14</sup> Even Katritzky, who provides an extended discussion of herring in relation to early modern London drinking culture and the stage, draws on Nashe’s reference to underscore the “London drinking associations” (164) of pickled herring but does not pursue the possibility of innuendo.

Gabriel Harvey, an outspoken enemy of both Greene and Nashe, gives his own well-known account of Greene’s death in *Four Letters* (1592), in which he catalogues his “his riotous, and outrageous surfeiting.” Harvey tells his readers of Greene’s “banquetting” but also that he was known for his “infamous resorting to the Banckeside, Shorditch, Southwarke, and other filthy hauntes” (10). Harvey’s description fits with the alignment in Nashe’s account of herring and wine. Wine was expensive, whereas pickled herring was the epitome of cheap food. Moreover, the conventional wisdom was that wine and herring did not mix well, and would not have been ideal partners for a banquet: as a pamphlet of 1626 puts it, “A red herring and a cup of Sacke, make warre in a weake stomacke, and the poore mans fast, is better then the Gluttons surfet” (Breton, *Fantasticks*, “November”). While this statement might provide a basis for a literal reading of Nashe’s account of Greene’s demise, indigestion is not death, and the allusion therefore seems to relate better to the contrasting social settings in which Harvey tells us Greene had been “banquetting” (10). Like Sir Toby Belch, Greene moved between high and low society in order to satisfy his desires. Like Sir Toby too, Harvey tells us, Greene engaged in his “riotous, and outrageous surfeiting” at the expense of others, appearing to treat others “at his first comminge” but “departing in every hostisses debt” (9–10). Harvey’s references to “dissolute, and licentious living” and to “unseemely Company,” however, imply that Greene’s gluttony is not simply food-based, and indeed Harvey also reports Greene’s adulterous relationship with “a sorry ragged queane” with whom he had a child (9–10). Overall, then, this extensive list of Greene’s indulgent behaviors offers possible alternative causes for Greene’s mortal fever—beyond an excess of wine and preserved herring: sexual

indulgence, in particular, carried the very real risk of venereal disease, from which death from a fever was an ever-present possibility.

Nashe's story of death-by-herring, then, must be approached dually, taking in the social associations that Katritzky highlights, but also the sexual associations of the herring that were being drawn on by writers like Shakespeare and Dekker. Moreover, other innuendos in the vicinity of this reference make the case for herring innuendo here compelling: daggers are a well-known phallic symbol, and William Monox is introduced in this passage with the parenthetical "(hast thou never heard of him and his great dagger?)" (37); and, shortly afterward, Nashe raises a question over whether or not a Master Bird's "inke-pot have a clear current" (39). If the case for innuendo is accepted, however, then Nashe cannot be referring to a single, or literal banquet; instead, the banquet of wine and pickled herrings is a metonymic combination of Greene's multiple sensual excesses.

Moreover, Dekker, whose use of herring imagery in *The Honest Whore, Part 2* and *A Strange Horse-Race* shows him to be thoroughly alert to the allusive possibilities of this fish, has Nashe attribute his own death to pickled herrings in *A Knight's Conjuring* (1607). The dead Nashe

inveyed bitterly . . . against dry-fisted Patrons, accusing them of his untimely death, because if they had given his *Muse* that cherishment which shee most worthily deserved, hee had fed to his dying day on fat Capons, burnt sack and Suger, and not so desperately have ventur'de his life and shortend his dayes by keeping company with pickle herrings. (80)

To "keep company" is a known euphemism for having sexual intercourse, and Dekker's use of this phrase (and lack of reference to eating) in relation to patrons and tavern fare hints at the prostitution—which of course included male prostitution—associated with London alehouses.

Rowlands's *Letting of Humours* provides a reference to death-by-herring-and-alcohol that proves equally suggestive. It describes three drunkards, the third of whom was one "whom divers Dutchmen held full deare, / [and] Was stabb'd by pickeld Hearings [herrings] & stronge Beere" (Satyre 6, lines 87–88). Because of the herring and alcohol combination—and despite the fact that the combination is of herring and beer, not herring and wine—Katritzky interprets the lines as an allusion to Greene, and again views the passage as a reflection only of drinking culture; although her comment that "the circle of writers,

actors, and others around Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe may have frequented the Southwark taverns of Peter ‘Pickle-Herring’ Van Durant or his fellow Dutchman” (164) leads to a new line of (curiously literalizing) enquiry.

Yet the connection of these herring and alcohol deaths with alehouses also invokes their known association with prostitution: the Dutchmen may be the Dutch tavern-keepers of Southwark, but the description of them holding the drunkard “full deare” is suggestive of an embrace. The additional reference to the drunkard being “stabb’d by pickeld Hearings & stronge beere” not only alludes to the effect of this dietary combination on the digestive system, but also introduces a conventional euphemism for penile penetration (as found in *Henry IV, Part 2*, 2.1.12), and so is likely another allusion to sodomy.<sup>15</sup> This reference to stabbing gives added resonance to the previous reference to being held by “divers Dutchmen.” That herring were in some way associated with sodomitical acts is also implied in *Pierces Supererogation* (1593), Gabriel Harvey’s anti-Nashe diatribe, which refers to “taking a *pickle herring* by the throte and christening it Richard, (for you can christen him at your pleasure) to have swallowed him downe with a stomach” (61). These correspondences suggest that the “Satyre” description is a stock image of a debauched alehouse drunkard. Nashe’s high-and-low, wine-and-herring formula, then, looks more like a variation on a common phrase whose herring innuendo would have been familiar. By implication, Greene’s surfeiting is of a similar nature to those of Rowlands’s drunkard, but goes beyond the commonplace by extending from the cheap alehouse excess of the herring to the realms of the moneyed wine drinkers.

Such textual herrings reveal their fishy playfulness and underscore the problems of taking herring literally in early modern Southwark and the City of London. More common than any other fish, it was an integral part of London’s commerce and social life. Signs of the production systems used to get it from sea to stomach abounded, with herring busses, pickling barrels, and smoke houses all common sights in the London landscape, and smoked herring hanging in the air. References to herring at the turn of the seventeenth century, then, are founded in a working understanding of the trade and consumption practices associated with the preserved forms of this fish, and play with ideas of food-based *and* sexual gluttony. Such allusions to herring are evidence of shared knowledge used similarly by writers of distinct camps (spanning, for example, the Nashe-Harvey divide): they reflect the fish’s symbolic and monetary value, and seem calculated to conjure images of the

various consumptions of the alehouse—licit and illicit alike. They evoke the vulgarity of the streets, and are indicative of a language that is not found in authorized discourse. Although they offer a modern reader perhaps no more than a sketched outline of the street-life participated in by writers and audiences in Shakespeare's day, they underscore how the details of past material cultures can enrich our engagement with early modern writings—and even help to shed light on obscure Shakespearean jokes about pilchards and herrings.

#### NOTES

1. Old Fish Street and the Stocks market were by this time in decline as centers of the fish trade. Fishmongers' Hall, the headquarters of the Fishmongers' Company, was just to the west of the intersection between New Fish Street and London Bridge, between the river front and Thames Street. The Fishmongers' Company itself does not seem to have been identified with the cheapness of preserved fish (despite its having been formed by the merging of the Stock Fishmongers and Salt Fishmongers Companies united in 1536). Rather, the Fishmongers were associated with the profits arising from what was considered "political Lent": for example, Gerard Malynes refers to "the correspondence and long intercourse between the Societie of Gold-smiths and Fishmongers . . . For Saint Duns-tane the Bishop, termed to be the Patron of the Company of Gold-smiths, had no other Elixer or Philosophers stone, than the Gold and Silver, which by the benefit of fishing was obtained, whereby the Kingdomes Plate and Bullion was procured" (249; see also Munday 15).

2. See Boulton 69, n. 28.

3. See Boulton 270 and Salkeld 106.

4. See Sharpe.

5. See Fagan 55–56 and Kowaleski 446.

6. See also Bulman 237–38, n. 100. On the toughness of Martlemas beef, see Cooke [29].

7. Nashe's tale about a battle between birds and sea creatures in *Lenten Stuffe*, crafts his own version of the herring being elected king of the fishes: "the herring, from that time to this, hath gone with an army, and never stirs abroad without it" (31). Here Breton's "company" is transformed from companionability into its military usage. This transformation is likely to have been deliberate, since Breton had already been satirised by Nashe as "*Pan* sitting in his bower of delights" in the latter's preface to Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* ("Somewhat to reade for them").

8. Although *Lenten Stuffe* is thematically connected to Yarmouth, its author, dedication and place of publication link it to London, and it is therefore important to include it within the purview of this study.

9. That "plague" was understood at this time in reference to volume as well as to disease is evidenced by its use to signal a vast quantity of hail at Revelation 16:21.

10. The use of "these" undermines Katritzky's argument that Sir Toby's mention of "pickle-herring" (160) is "a possible reference to the European [stage] clown" (161) Pickelher-ring. Moreover, references to the Pickelherring clown figure, as Katritzky herself notes, are not seen before the 1610s, and then emerge only in what is now Germany and Austria.

11 Given that Viola and Sebastian each think that the other has drowned, their fishiness might also be compared to that of Hero and Leander in Nashe's reworking of the myth in *Lenten Stuffe*. In this version, Leander's drowning renders him "sodden to had-docks meate," with "blew jellied sturgeon lips." After Hero follows him to her death, the gods decide that, having "drowned in the sea, stil to the sea they must belong" (45–47), and so turn Leander into a ling, and Hero into a red herring.

12. "Consume, v.2." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press. December 2018. Web. 21 February 2019.

13. See Williams 262.

14. See, for example, Bate 14.

15. The "strong beere" Roberts has in mind is presumably "dagger ale," one of the cheapest and strongest of the beers available at the turn of the seventeenth century, thought to have been named after the Dagger tavern in Holborn (see Gascoyne 37; Sieveking 77). In his preface to Greene's *Menaphon* (1599), Nashe celebrates the effects of alcohol on poetry, taking issue with the "desperate quipper" who would condemn the "dagger drunkenness" of poets whose post-dinner stanzas are "full pointed with a stab" ("To the Gentlemen Students" 9–10). The reference may also be intended to signal "bear," used as a symbol of female carnality and a common euphemistic term for a prostitute in this period (Williams 38–39; Shugg 297).

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