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POOR WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE

Poor women do not fit easily into the household in Shakespeare. They shift in and out of marriages, households, and employments, carrying messages, tallying bills, and making things happen. Rarely the main characters, they are always there somewhere, evoking the ever-present problem of female poverty in early modern England. Like the illegal farthings that carried their likeness, poor women both did and did not fit into the household and marriage market. They are both essential to and excluded from the economy. They are both present and absent on the early modern stage. In the drama, they circulate between plots, essential because they are so mobile, but largely unnoticed because of their mobility. These female characters represent the changing gender and economic roles at the bottom, as England shifted from feudalism to empire in the span of Shakespeare's lifetime. We find their dramas played out in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

FIONA MCNEILL is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Oklahoma. She has contributed to publications such as *Renaissance Drama*, edited by Wendy Wall and Jeffrey Masten (1999), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of English Literature*, edited by David Scott Kastan (2006), and *Gender and Oral Traditions in the Early Modern Period*, edited by Mary Ellen Lamb and Karen Bamford (2007). This is her first book.

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*In memory of my grandmothers,
Agnes Mercer McNeill and Hilda Cameron Stirling,
who both remembered the poorhouse.*

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