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## MARY COWDEN CLARKE AND HER EAST END INJUN

BY DORIS V. FALK

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EVER since its publication in 1855, *The Song of Hiawatha* has been irresistible to parodists. One instantaneous response to it appeared in 1856 under the imprint of George Routledge and Company, one of the most active English publishers—and pirates—of Longfellow's work.<sup>1</sup> The little book sold for a shilling, and was entitled *The Song of Drop o' Wather*, by Harry Wandsworth Shortfellow. It is further described on the jacket as "A Companion to Longfellow's 'Hiawatha,'" and after the title, as "A London Legend." This rowdy, good-humored burlesque was followed by a spate of *Hiawatha* parodies. In 1879 the editors of the *World* sponsored a contest in which were entered one hundred and thirty-five parodies of a portion of the poem. (Lewis Carroll won third prize.)<sup>2</sup>

As revealed in the inscription and the signature on the title page of the Rutgers Library copy, Harry Wandsworth Shortfellow was, of all people, a decorous Victorian lady, Mary Cowden Clarke. She is known, of course, as the compiler of the first concordance to Shakespeare, and as the author of other books and essays on the subject of

<sup>1</sup> By 1900, Routledge had sold a total of 716,000 copies of various works of Longfellow, including *Hiawatha*. (Clarence Gohdes, "Longfellow and his British Publishers," *PMLA*, LV [December, 1940], p. 1179.)

<sup>2</sup> Clarence Gohdes, *American Literature in Nineteenth Century England* (New York, 1944), p. 104.

To Professor Hiram Corson  
with cordial respect & regard  
from  
Mary Cowden Clarke

Village Novels:

Genoa.

October 1889.

THE

SONG OF DROP O' WATHER.

Half-title of *The Song of Drop O'Wather*, with  
Mary Cowden Clarke's inscription to Professor Hiram Corson.

THE  
SONG OF DROP O' WATHER.

BY  
HARRY WANDSWORTH SHORTFELLOW.

*(Mary Cowden = Clarke)*

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LONDON:  
G. ROUTLEDGE AND CO., FARRINGTON STREET.  
NEW YORK: 18, BEEKMAN STREET.  
1856.

Title page of *The Song of Drop O'Wather*, signed  
by Mary Cowden Clarke.

Shakespeare, including *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* and *Shakespeare Proverbs; or The Wise Saws of our Wisest Poet Collected into a Modern Instance*. With her husband, Charles Cowden Clarke, she edited and annotated Shakespeare's works and compiled *The Shakespeare Key* from their own notes and observations. Among her other works, to name only a few, was *World-Noted Women; or, Types of Womanly Attributes of All Lands and Ages*, *The Iron Cousin; or Mutual Influence* (a novel), books, stories, and essays for children, literary essays, and a memoir, *My Long Life, an Autobiographic Sketch*. Mrs. Cowden Clarke wrote also a quantity of verse, most of it didactic or sentimental, in a totally different key from that of *The Song of Drop o' Wather*.

A full-length portrait of Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke is to be found in Richard Altick's witty and sympathetic study, *The Cowden Clarkes* (Oxford University Press, 1948). They are remembered now, of course, not for their own voluminous literary accomplishments as much as for their membership in the literary and artistic circles of their time, recorded in their *Recollections of Writers*, in the collection of letters from Mary Cowden Clarke to Robert Balmanno (*Letters to an Enthusiast*, London, 1902), and in scattered letters and essays. Charles is known traditionally as the discoverer and mentor of Keats, but the couple's acquaintances and correspondents included most of the important names in English letters in the nineteenth century. They numbered among their friends not only writers—Leigh Hunt, the Lambs, Dickens (to suggest only a few names), but musicians—Liszt, Mendelssohn; actors—Macready, Kean, the Kembles; publishers, and of course, scholars. With the publication of the concordance and other Shakespearean studies they achieved world-wide acclaim, corresponded with admirers in America, and were visited by American literary men, including Emerson.

The inscription to Hiram Corson in the Rutgers copy of the parody is one small indication of the Cowden Clarkes' link to American literary scholarship. In her memoir, *My Long Life*, written when Mrs. Cowden Clarke was eighty-seven years old, she recalls her exchanges with American scholars and Professor Corson's visit to the Villa Novello in Genoa, where the family had lived since the 1860's:

From America I have received . . . continued courtesies and kindnesses . . . Dr. Horace Howard Furness sends me each volume of his magnificent 'Variorum Edition of Shakespeare' as it is successively published; Dr. W. J. Rolfe has sent me his 'Friendly Edition of Shakespeare' with generous hand, calling me its godmother because I gave it that name; Professor Hiram Corson has presented me with the books he has written on that and other poetical subjects, besides paying me a visit here when he came to Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Presumably, Mrs. Cowden Clarke also presented Professor Corson with copies of her more respectable works.

*The Song of Drop o' Wather* is a riotous beggar's opera, deliciously funny in itself but naturally more pointed when read next to the original. The format follows that of the early editions of Longfellow closely, complete with Notes and Vocabulary and lacking a preface only because "there is no preface in the great 'Indian Edda' which occasioned this poem." Always tactful, Mrs. Cowden Clarke pays her respects to Longfellow in the introduction to her "Notes," trusting that the charm of his poem will be "no more disparaged by the present sportive trifle, than the sublimity of Shakespeare has been lessened by the burlesques and parodies that have been made from time to time upon his great dramas." But the comparison of Longfellow to her idol must have seemed a bit disproportionate and she concluded with the sly qualification: "The mere fact of burlesquing a work avouches its excellence—certainly its popularity."

Longfellow's "Hiawatha's Childhood" begins with an account of the grandmother, Nokomis, who gives birth to his mother when her grapevine swing—on the moon—is cut by a jealous rival and she falls to earth. "Drop o' Wather's Childhood" begins here also, but the lady in question is his mother, Norah, an Irish slattern who is pushed by a playful girl-friend through the swinging door of the Half-Moon pub into the gutter, where she gives birth to our hero:

Downward through the darkening twilight,  
In the days long time ago, now,  
In the last of drunken stages,  
By the Half-Moon fell poor Norah,  
On the pavement fell poor Norah,  
Just about to be a mother. (p. 9)

A typical dead-pan footnote, in exact imitation of Longfellow's notes, explains "Half-Moon":

<sup>3</sup> Mary Cowden Clarke, *My Long Life* (New York, 1896), pp. 236-237.

Page 9. *By the Half-Moon, etc.* This is the sign of a public-house—a frequent sign in London—and not an allusion to the planet Luna, or to the Turkish Crescent. (p. 112)

“Drop o’ Wather,” so named “’Cause his mother never touched a/ Drop of Water in her lifetime,” begins his career on the shores of Big-Thame-Water with an education in the lore of the slums and the mysteries of thievery:

Of all prigs he learned the language  
 Learned their gag, and all their secrets,  
 Found out all their haunts and dodges,  
 Picked up where they hid their booty,  
 How they packed the swag so closely,  
 Why they fought so shy and wary;  
 Talked with them whene’er he met them,  
 Called them ‘Drop o’ Wather’s Brothers.’ (p. 13)

The cant terms from this passage are identified in the vocabulary just as Indian terms are in the vocabulary to *Hiawatha*: e.g. “Prigs, thieves”; “Gag, talk”; “Dodge, a trick”; “Swag, plunder.”

Drop o’ Wather’s initiation rite into the brotherhood of thieves takes place when he filches a lady’s purse and is bitten by her lap-dog, Pudgy-Wheezy. This exploit parallels Hiawatha’s wrestling match with his father, Mudjekeewis, the West Wind. The rite in *Hiawatha* continues with the hero’s visit to the arrow-maker in order to court his daughter, Minnehaha, Laughing Water. Drop o’ Wather pays a visit to the tassel-maker’s daughter, the giggling Minnie Harper, or Frisky-whisky.

Drop o’ Wather’s next ordeal, like that of his counterpart, is his “fasting.” That is, he is starving when Bob Dabbin, a young member of the pickpockets’ gang (in *Hiawatha*, a young god named Mondamin), comes to his rescue. Bob Dabbin reappears later in the narrative when Drop o’ Wather reciprocates by protecting him from the police. Other friends of Drop o’ Wather are Chinny-panpipes, the organ-grinder, and Queershin, the neighborhood strongman and acrobat. Their equivalents in *Hiawatha* are

Chibiabos, the musician,  
 And the very strong man, Kwasind.

Mrs. Cowden Clarke follows Longfellow’s description of these two in “Hiawatha’s Friends” very closely, using many of Longfellow’s

lines and substituting the phenomena of city life for those of the forest. She then omits reference to "Hiawatha's Sailing" and moves on to "Hiawatha's Fishing"—"Drop o' Wather's Filching." Even in Longfellow's version this chapter is comic. Hiawatha is fishing for a sturgeon, but the sturgeon tells his friend, the pike, to take the bait. When Hiawatha sees the pike he throws him back with the following litany.

Esa! Esa!<sup>4</sup> Shame upon you!  
 You are but the pike, Kenozha,  
 You are not the fish I wanted,  
 You are not the King of Fishes.

The Pike's feelings are hurt at this rejection, as are those of Ugudwash, the sunfish, who is subjected to the same treatment. Hiawatha challenges the sturgeon who rises to the surface in wrath and swallows "Both canoe and Hiawatha." Hiawatha, with the help of his pet squirrel, manages to wreak havoc in the sturgeon's insides, thereby killing him. He is finally rescued from the carcass by some hungry seagulls.

Drop o' Wather goes fishing in the pocket of one of his victims for a gold watch. The watch tells a purse of red Morocco to take the hook (of Drop o' Wather's "filching tackle"). Disgusted at this, Drop o' Wather "muttered through his shut teeth":

'Asy! asy! [easy] Bad luck to you!  
 You are but the purse Morocco;  
 You are not the prey I wanted,  
 You are not the First-rate Ticker!' (p. 35)

He does not throw it back, however. His next catch is a Russian leather pocketbook, which he also insults, then tucks away. When he finally hooks the watch,

In its wrath it darted upward,  
 Bell-like clear it struck the hour,  
 Drew its owner's roused attention  
 To the theft of Drop o' Wather. (p. 37)

The owner raises a hue and cry and Drop o' Wather plunges down a dark alley just as Hiawatha dives—involuntarily—into the belly of

<sup>4</sup> According to Longfellow's vocabulary, "Esa" means "shame upon you."

the sturgeon. He makes his getaway, with the help of his bull-dog (shades of Bill Sikes!), but alas,

Dropped the jeweled First-rate Ticker  
Smash upon the hard stone pavement. (p. 37)

The law, however, is now on his trail, and the plot, such as it is, thickens.

In the next two books, Drop o' Wather woos and weds Minnie Harper. The wedding guests are a collection of cockney Damon Runyon characters who celebrate the occasion very much as Hiawatha's friends do, with games, revelry, and tall tales. In *Hiawatha*, the spinner of these is the "marvelous story-teller," Iago, who tells (in Book XII) a story called "The Son of the Evening Star." In *Drop o' Wather* he is Jack Longbow, who tells the tale of "The Ghost of the Star and Garter." Longfellow's tale told by Iago begins:

Can it be the sun descending  
O'er the level plain of water?  
Or the Red Swan floating, flying,  
Wounded by the magic arrow,  
Staining all the waves with crimson,  
With the crimson of its life-blood,  
Filling all the air with splendor,  
With the splendor of its plumage?  
Yes; it is the sun descending,  
Sinking down into the water;  
All the sky is stained with purple,  
All the water flushed with crimson!

Jack Longbow has a similar invocation:

Can it be the rum descending  
In that glass of pure spring water?  
Yes it is the rum descending,  
Sinking down into the water,  
Staining all the drink with crimson,  
With the crimson of the spirit,  
Turning all the white to splendour,  
Splendour of the old Jamaica;  
Ay, the grog is coloured deeply,  
All the water flushed with crimson! (p. 56)

Longfellow's narrator is inspired by the descending Evening Star to recount a sentimental legend of lovers. Under the influence of the

descending rum, Mrs. Cowden Clarke's Longbow, with considerable leering and lip-smacking, reels off a verbose yarn about a wild party in which one of the guests has a hallucination. Actually, Longbow's own personality emerges from his story, while Longfellow's Iagoo is simply a talking wooden Indian.

From his initiation and wedding, the original Hiawatha proceeds—naturally—to the fertility rite of "Blessing the Cornfields." Longfellow bravely and discreetly faced the immodest implications of these, nor did Mary Cowden Clarke shrink from them. The results, in both their poems must be recorded for posterity.

In order to encourage the growth of crops and to protect them from the crows, it was necessary for Minnehaha to walk naked in a circle around the fields. Longfellow describes her progress:

When the noiseless night descended  
 Broad and dark o'er field and forest . . . .  
 And the Spirit of Sleep, Nepahwin,  
 Shut the doors of all the wigwams,  
 From her bed rose Laughing Water,  
 Laid aside her garments wholly,  
 And with darkness clothed and guarded,  
 Unashamed and unaffrighted,  
 Walked securely round the corn-fields,  
 Drew the sacred, magic circle  
 Of her footprints round the corn-fields . . . .  
 Guskewau, the darkness, wrapped her  
 Closely in his sacred mantle,  
 So that none might see her beauty,  
 So that none might boast, "I saw her!"

The corresponding book to "Blessing the Cornfields" in the parody is "Bilking the Runners" or, as explained in the vocabulary, "balking the constables"—the famous Bow Street Runners. The Runners are searching for Drop o' Wather's friend, Bob Dabbin, and our hero determines to put them off the scent. He instructs his wife to rise from her bed after dark and case the neighborhood for police.

When the noiseless night descended,  
 Broad and dark o'er all the alley . . . .  
 And the Spirit of Sleep, Snugsnoozem,  
 Shut the doors of all the lodgers,  
 Out crept Minnie, only in her—

I won't say what (it was not *frock*)—  
 Out she crept into the darkness,  
 Wakened up, in start affrighted,  
 (Hadn't time to put her gown on)  
 By a noise she fancied Runners,  
 Runners come to seek her husband . . . .  
 Duskylaw, the darkness wrapped her  
 In his decent cloak of shadow,  
 Till she went back to her chamber,  
 Safe to chamber, and to bed too. (pp. 73-74)

In the event that some of his readers might find the description of Minnehaha's trek a little beyond the pale, Longfellow appended a long footnote, citing a quotation from Schoolcraft, including the following sentence: "It was the practice of the hunter's wife, when the field of corn had been planted, to choose the first dark or overclouded evening to perform a secret circuit, *sans habillement*, around the field." Mrs. Cowden Clarke, not to be outdone, counters with a substantial note of her own:

The incident of Minnie's leaving her room in so destitute a condition, would not have been recorded, lest it might shock the polite reader's fastidiousness; but an illustrious writer's example has shown how that may be spared, by adverting to the circumstance in French, and describing his heroine's state by the words '*sans habillement*.' (p. 115)

Needless to say, the runners are bilked, Bob Dabbin escapes and Drop o' Wather has a moment of victory when he lords it over the chief constable, Townsend. In her notes Mrs. Cowden Clarke has a long mock-encomium to this "celebrated Bow-street officer." She describes his "remarkably low-crowned hat, of a resolute and determined cut,—as if it defied contumacy. . . . His top-boots carried the stamp of authority, his blue coat and brass buttons teemed with importance. . . . Townsend's influence was supreme. . . . The common herd dreaded and admired; while patrician exclusiveness adored. Nobility and Beauty smiled approval. Peers of the realm were hand and glove with him; and the Blood-Royal of England exchanged nods with him." (p. 116)

The joke needs a little elucidation for modern readers. John Townsend was a famous Bow Street police officer who served for years as a sort of house detective at Court where it was his duty to protect the King and other dignitaries from thieves and pickpockets.

He became a pet of the King and the royal household and was known to be conceited about his position and to pride himself on his rather peculiar dress. Mrs. Cowden Clarke was mistaken in her description of his uniform but not in her suggestions of his vanity. The Bow Street Runners wore plain clothes and could be identified only by a baton they carried, tipped with a gold crown. The runners had been defunct as an organization, however, since 1839, and Mrs. Cowden Clarke may be excused for confusing them with the Metropolitan Police—especially since Dickens (probably her chief source of information) made the same mistake.<sup>5</sup>

Townsend's usual costume consisted of "a light and loud suit, knee breeches, and short gaiters, and a wide-brimmed white hat given him by George IV."<sup>6</sup> He was noted for imitating in his own clothes the style of dress of the king, and said at one time that "the King took his cut from mine, and many times used to say that till that time he had never looked like a gentleman."<sup>7</sup>

But Mrs. Cowden Clarke's remark that the Peers of the Realm were hand in glove with Townsend had further implications. The Bow Street Runners had been the subject of several investigations by Parliamentary committees, at which Townsend testified. While it was never established that they were actually corrupt, the Runners acquired that reputation by certain collusive practices revealed in the course of the investigation. Often the victims of large thefts—banks, businesses, wealthy individuals—would settle out of court with the criminals. The negotiations were made by the Runners, who located the thieves and received a fee for the transaction.<sup>8</sup> The "Bilking" of the Runners by Drop o' Wather, had, therefore, a certain poetic justice.

The next two episodes of the parody concern one Paw-Paw-Keen-eyes—Pau-Puk-Keewis in *Hiawatha*. In both versions he is a good-for-nothing gambler and braggart who, in the original, challenges the other Indians to a game of Bowl and Counters (an Indian game explained at length in Longfellow's notes). In the parody he chal-

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Pringle, "Introduction" to Henry Goddard, *Memoirs of a Bow Street Runner*, edited by Patrick Pringle (London, 1956), p. xxii.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Armitage, *The History of the Bow Street Runners, 1729-1829* (London, n.d.), p. 269.

<sup>7</sup> Pringle, *op.cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>8</sup> Pringle, *op.cit.*, pp. xiv-xv. Armitage, *op.cit.*, p. 267.

lenges the other "brothers" of Drop o' Wather to a card game called Pope Joan, also described in detail. Pau-Puk-Keewis wins the pool, and flushed with victory, happens to pass by Hiawatha's lodge when its owner and family are away. For rather vague reasons the mischief-maker enters and tears the place apart. Paw-Paw-Keeneyes does the same to Drop o' Wather's lodgings. Both heroes return to discover the damage, and vow vengeance. The chase is on, and in Longfellow's tale the fugitive hides underwater with the beavers and is turned into a beaver "Ten times larger than the others" and becomes the beaver-king. He is so large, however, that he cannot escape through the opening in the dam when he is discovered and—inexplicably—recognized by Hiawatha and friends. The hunters beat him to death, but his spirit escapes and goes through various other metamorphoses until he is finally "killed in his own human figure." Longfellow's legend has all sorts of moralistic overtones—the dangers of pride, etc.

The fugitive in the parody takes refuge in a cellar full of tom-cats. Mrs. Cowden Clarke's flair for the realistic thumbnail sketch is nowhere better illustrated than in her description of Paw-Paw-Keeneyes asking the cats to take him in. The first tom-cat has gone below to consult with the others and Paw-Paw is waiting for the verdict:

On the top stood Paw-Paw-Keeneyes  
Kicking heels, and inly swearing  
Swearing to be thus kept waiting;  
Spat upon the steps below him  
On the stone steps leading downward,  
Spat from rage and sheer vexation  
At delay, when time was precious. (p. 90)

The cats grant him asylum in their cellar where he becomes disguised by a covering of dirt. When the cats hear Drop o' Wather approaching they scatter, but since Paw-Paw-Keeneyes is human-size he cannot escape. Under the layer of dirt he is recognized by the infuriated Drop o' Wather who "Layed about him like a madman/ With his bludgeon, his shillelagh." The result is fatal for Paw-Paw-Keeneyes. Drop o' Wather, however, is not without remorse, and Mrs. Cowden Clarke uses the occasion for a Shakespearean allusion:

Then the hero Drop o' Wather  
Felt, for what he'd done, compunction;

Spoke a speech unto the body,  
 Like an Irish howl, or rather,  
 Like Prince Hal to Harry Percy,  
 Hotspur, when he'd fought, and killed him:  
 Spoke and said: 'Ah, Paw-Paw-Keeneyes!  
 Now you're food for worms, my brave boy,  
 Now you're done for I am sorry!

. . .

Ochone, murder! Sure, it's me then,  
 That you've bothered now entirely . . .' (pp. 95-96)

It should be added that Drop o' Wather's compunction is hardly sentimental. Now he has a murder to his credit, as well as thievery, and hanging will be certain if he is caught.

Mrs. Cowden Clarke would have done well to omit the next episode since Longfellow's version is funnier than hers. He tells the story of the death of the athlete Kwasind at the hands of some fairies or pygmies called Puk-Wudjies, who are jealous of Kwasind's great strength. They discover that the strongman's weak spot is his head:

Now this wondrous strength of Kwasind  
 In his crown alone was seated;  
 In his crown too was his weakness;  
 There alone could he be wounded . . .

Even there the only weapon  
 That could wound him, that could slay him,  
 Was the seed-cone of the pine-tree.

So one day when Kwasind is drifting along in his canoe, sound asleep, they bombard him with pinecones and accomplish his demise. I am really not sure whether Longfellow was serious about all this or not. In any case, the crippling of Queershin in the parody at the hands of some competing Punch and Judy puppeteers is flat compared to the death of Kwasind. Mrs. Cowden Clarke, however, was aware that her resources were dwindling and went straight to "Drop o' Wather's Departure" from here, whereas Longfellow lingered for three more episodes.

Hiawatha does not paddle off into the sunset until he is convinced that the tribe are in the good hands of Christian missionaries. Drop o' Wather, however, is not concerned for the welfare of the gang, but only for his own skin. He dreams that the law has caught up with him and that he has been sentenced to hang, but in his dream his

sentence is commuted at the last minute to transportation. The dream inspires him to voluntary transportation to Australia. At the conclusion of the parody he is aboard ship with his old mother, Norah, and his wife, Minnie, while all the gang are waving goodbye.

Thus departed Drop o' Wather,  
Drop o' Wather, the fine fellow,  
With his trust of doing better,  
With, at least, that firm intention,  
To the regions of the New World. (pp. 110-111)

It is not surprising that because of the wide disparity between *The Song of Drop o' Wather* and her other writings Mrs. Cowden Clarke's authorship of the poem has been questioned. R. W. King in a review of Richard Altick's *The Cowden Clarkes* notes that the sections of the parody quoted by Altick are "not only very much above her other verses in technical competence but also very much (and very refreshingly) below them in 'propriety.'"<sup>9</sup> King requested evidence other than entries of the parody under Mrs. Cowden Clarke's name in the British Museum Catalogue and in Halkett and Laing. (It is also listed among her works in the Library of Congress catalogue, in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and in other similar standard references.) The most telling primary evidence is the bracketed signature under the pseudonym in the Rutgers Library copy. However, in a letter to her American admirer, Robert Balmanno, Mrs. Cowden Clarke refers to an "early copy" of the parody which she had sent him. She encloses some additions and corrections in her handwriting, and expresses the hope that he has been able to find a publisher for the book in America. If so, she asks him to send the corrections on to the publisher.<sup>10</sup> The new material consists of the complete "Apology for There Being No Preface," a few minor re-wordings, and a passage of thirteen lines to be interpolated in "Drop o' Wather's Childhood." All these additions and corrections are included in the present edition. Evidently Mrs. Cowden Clarke succeeded without Balmanno's help in persuading her previous publisher, Routledge, to bring out the book.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Review of English Studies*, n.s. I (October, 1950), p. 373.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Mary Cowden Clarke to Robert Balmanno, dated April 25, 1856. I am indebted to Mr. Giles Dawson, Curator of Books and Manuscripts at the Folger Library, for copies of the letter and the additions.

<sup>11</sup> The nature of the "early copy" sent to Balmanno is still a mystery. I have been able

One final piece of evidence of authorship is to be found in the music to some of "The Songs of Chinny Panpipes." Mrs. Cowden Clarke was the daughter of Vincent Novello, whose devotion to the musical education of the British public led to the establishment by his son of Novello and Company, music publishers. The family firm was responsible for the publication of these rather jingly compositions by Edward L. Hime. The advertisement page of the music contains an ad for *The Song of Drop o' Wather* which takes up about one-third of the space at the top of the page while the remaining space consists entirely of advertisements of works by Mary Cowden Clarke.<sup>12</sup> Surely this is hint enough of the identity of Harry Wandsworth Short-fellow.

The portrait of Mrs. Cowden Clarke which emerges from memoirs, letters, and other biographical documents is that of a person of great charm, humor, and vivacity, who could turn her hand to a variety of activities, literary and otherwise. She shared in the musical interests of her family—one of her sisters was Clara Novello, a celebrated opera singer—but her favorite avocation was acting, and her most prolonged continuous theatrical experience was the period she spent touring with Dickens' amateur troupe.

Before she established a personal friendship with Dickens, Mrs. Cowden Clarke had long been a worshipper of his books; later she became a regular reader of and contributor to *Household Words*. In this publication and in *Oliver Twist*, particularly, she found ample source material for *Drop o' Wather*: the language and techniques of the pickpockets, as well as the attitude toward the Bow Street Runners. In her theatrical association with Dickens, recorded in *My Long Life* and in the *Recollections of Writers*, she shows the ebullience demonstrated in the parody. She had been playing Mrs. Malaprop in some private theatrical performances when she was introduced to Dickens by Leigh Hunt. Mary Cowden Clarke suggested herself—modestly, of course—for the part of Dame Quickly in Dickens' production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and was accepted. She

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to find no trace of any published edition other than the Routledge one, so presumably the early copy was either in manuscript or was privately printed for circulation among the author's friends. If any reader should know of such a copy or edition I should appreciate the information.

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Professor Richard Altick for providing me with the music and for calling my attention to this evidence of authorship.

became a success as a comedienne with the troupe and played a variety of roles throughout the late spring and summer of 1848, sometimes “co-starring” with Dickens himself. “It is something to remember,” she writes, “having been tucked under the arm by Charles Dickens, and had one’s hand hugged against his side! One thinks better of one’s hand ever after.”<sup>13</sup>

Her interest in the theatre continued throughout her life. At the age of seventy-two she again performed as Mrs. Malaprop, and with understandable glee she informs us that she wore the same dress as she had thirty-odd years before. She takes a smug delight in quoting one of the workmen present at the performance as saying, “That isn’t really an old woman, it’s a young woman *got up* old.”<sup>14</sup>

The memoirs and letters are rich with humorous anecdotes about famous people, and while they are never suggestive or off-color they reveal a well-developed sense of humor. In *My Long Life* she tells a story about the actor Edmund Kean. In her own words:

I heard that Liston [John Liston, the comedian] once laid a wager with Kean (who said that nothing could disturb his seriousness while on the stage) that he could succeed in making him laugh even there. Once, when Kean was playing *Rolla*, a procession of veiled Virgins of the Sun had to enter and pass before him. The first virgin, as she passed, suddenly raised her veil, confronted Kean with the irresistible visage of Liston, and the wager was won, for Kean went off into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.<sup>15</sup>

She goes on to remark that she had once heard Liston’s wife sing. “She had a very sweet voice, a fair complexion, and a dumpling figure, which caused some wag to say she looked like a fillet of veal upon castors.”<sup>16</sup>

*The Song of Drop o’ Wather* is not mentioned in *My Long Life*, but the omission is hardly surprising. Mrs. Cowden Clarke probably regarded it as a bagatelle to be shared with friends but not important enough to be made a matter of public record. She is, indeed, very modest in the references to her own writings in the memoir and devotes most of her attention to the cultural events in her life and to anecdotes concerning well-known people. She records, too, of course,

<sup>13</sup> Mary and Charles Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (New York, ca. 1878), p. 313.

<sup>14</sup> *My Long Life*, p. 216.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

the chief domestic events in her life with constant emphasis on her happy marriage to her "ever-youthful Charles." (She was always aware that he was twenty years older than she.) But even these play a comparatively minor role in the memoir, and none of the revelations could be called intimate. She devotes exactly a paragraph to the death of her husband—at the age of eighty-nine—and only occasionally suggests her loneliness in subsequent pages. It is also possible however that *Drop o' Wather* was not a part of her past of which she was particularly proud as an old lady. At the end of the memoir she describes her pastimes in old age. The account of her reading speaks for itself:

Speaking of literary pursuits, I may mention that much of my reading, latterly, has been peering into favourite old books, with sparing perusal of modern ones; and I refer to the fact of my retaining the conscientiousness that was encouraged in me by my dear mother while I was a child, for the sake of showing how in old age the same characteristic exists. A volume of farces, which has its table of contents marked by her with a pencilled cross against those pieces she forbade me to read, has caused me never to peruse those particular farces. Coarseness has ever been my abhorrence; for well does Shelley say in his noble 'Defence of Poetry,'—'Obscenity is blasphemy against the divine beauty in life'; and Sir John Lubbock, in his charming book, 'The Pleasures of Life,' says,—'The soul is dyed by its thoughts; we cannot keep our minds pure if we allow them to be sullied by detailed accounts of crime and sin.'<sup>17</sup>

Surely *The Song of Drop o' Wather* could not be considered coarse, but it does contain a somewhat detailed account of crime and sin. One wonders if perhaps Mrs. Cowden Clarke in her late years regretted having "sullied" the public mind.

<sup>17</sup> *My Long Life*, pp. 267-268.