M. M. Mahood

# SHAKESPEARE'S WORDPLAY

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# PREFACE

In this investigation of Shakespeare's wordplay, I have sometimes found myself straying into fields of study which were new to me; but I have had the good fortune to meet with experts who, whatever they might think of the purpose of my journey, have generously given time and trouble to putting me on the right track. Dr Michael Argyle has kindly helped me to find out what the psychologists have to say about puns. I have been privileged to draw upon Dr E. J. Dobson's knowledge of Elizabethan pronunciation in order to verify the handful of homonymic puns which are discussed here. In disentangling the meanings of semantic wordplay, my prime debt has been to the printed labours of Alexander Schmidt, Dr C. T. Onions, the compilers of the *New English Dictionary*, and to Dr J. Dover Wilson in the notes and glossaries to his New Cambridge edition. Mr Redmond O'Hanlon, who has in preparation a Dictionary of Shakespearean Puns, has readily and patiently answered all my queries. I am especially grateful to Mr John Crow for many helpful suggestions and comments made when this study was in the draft stage. Part of Chapter One has already appeared in *Essays in Criticism*, and is reprinted here by kind permission of the Editor, Mr F. W. Bateson.

M. M. Mahood

# I

# THE FATAL CLEOPATRA

Wordplay was a game the Elizabethans played seriously. Shakespeare's first audience would have found a noble climax in the conclusion of Mark Antony's lament over Caesar:

> O World! thou wast the Forrest to this *Hart*,
> And this indeed, O World, the *Hart* of thee,

just as they would have relished the earnest pun of Hamlet's reproach to Gertrude:

> Could you on this faire Mountaine leaue to feed,
> And batten on this *Moore*?[1]

To Elizabethan ways of thinking, there was plenty of authority for these eloquent devices. It was to be found in Scripture (*Tu es Petrus* . . . ) and in the whole line of rhetoricians, from Aristotle and Quintilian, through the neo-classical textbooks that Shakespeare read perforce at school, to the English writers such as Puttenham whom he read later for his own advantage as a poet. Dr Johnson's protest that a quibble was to Shakespeare 'the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it' itself contains a pregnant quibble. Cleopatra was fatal in being both the death and destiny of Antony; and however Shakespeare's puns may have endangered his reputation with the Augustans, he was destined by his age and education to play with words.

Puns were repugnant to Johnson because a linguistic revolution as far-reaching in its effects as the Great Rebellion separated his verbal habits from Shakespeare's. Half a century after Shakespeare's death, Eachard put forward as a possible reform in education: 'Whether or no Punning, Quibling, and that which they call Joquing, and such other delicaces of Wit, highly admired in some Academick Exercises, might not be very conveniently omitted?'[1] The great aim of Eachard and his contemporaries was to make language perspicuous. It had accordingly to be freed of such prismatic devices as synonyms, metaphors and puns, Eachard sought to drive puns from the pulpit, Cowley's *Ode on Wit* celebrated their expulsion from poetry and the *Spectator* tried to blackball their admission to Augustan Society —to judge from the conversation of Swift and his friends, with small success.

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[1] Unless otherwise stated, quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from Methuen's 1910 facsimile of the First Folio and quotations from the poems are from the New Variorum Edition, edited by Hyder Rollins (*The Poems*, 1938; *The Sonnets*, 1944). I have not reproduced the italics from these texts, but have italicised the words played upon. Line and scene references are to W. Craig's one-volume Oxford edition.

Johnson's 'great contempt for that species of wit' is the aftermath of this Augustan cult of correctness and *le mot juste*. Yet Johnson's experience as a lexicographer quickened his response to the alternative meanings of words. The alertness which makes him spot (to give one example) the wordplay on *planta pedis* in 'some o' their *Plants* are ill rooted already' (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.vii.1-2) will not allow more serious punning to pass unnoticed. 'Perhaps here is a poor jest intended between *mood* the *mind* and *moods* of musick' in Cleopatra's

> Giue me some Musicke: Musicke, moody foode of
> vs that trade in Loue, (II.v.1-2)

and while he is 'loath to think that *Shakespeare* meant to play with the double of *match* for *nuptial*, and the *match* of a *gun*' he does nevertheless respond to the Citizen's pun in *King John*:

> for at this *match*,
> With swifter spleene then powder can enforce
> The mouth of passage shall we fling wide ope,
> And giue you entrance. (II.i.447-450)

Although Johnson occasionally finds a quibble which is not allowed by modern editors—as in *Richard III*, III.i.128: 'You meane to beare me, not to beare with me', where he sees an improbable pun on *bear* the animal—he deserves our thanks

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[1] *The Ground and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy* (1670), p. 33.

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for his quick response to Shakespeare's wordplay instead of the blame he sometimes gets for failing to appreciate it. He shows far more perception in the matter than the nineteenth-century commentators. Shakespeare's Victorian editors, whose conflicting interpretations swell the *Variorum* edition, seldom saw[1] that all the meanings of a word might be admissible even though some must take precedence over others. The pun's credit was very low in the last century, in spite of Coleridge's repeated efforts to justify Shakespeare's puns on psychological grounds. Byron's attempts to revive a Shakespearean form of wordplay were little to the taste of the Victorians; and their own wordplay, if it surpassed the cracker-motto ingenuity of Hood, whose Fatal Cleopatra

> died, historians relate,
> Through having found a misplaced asp-irate,

had to hide in the nursery. Jabberwocky could be enjoyed only at seven and a half exactly.

Since then, Addison's worst fears have been realised; we have 'degenerated into a race of punsters'. Where the Augustans disapproved of Shakespeare's wordplay and the Victorians ignored it, we now acclaim it. A generation that relishes *Finnegans Wake* is more in danger of reading non-existent quibbles into Shakespeare's work than of missing his subtlest play of meaning. Shakespearean criticism today recognises wordplay as a major poetic device, comparable in its effectiveness with the use of recurrent or clustered images. The following chapters, although they attempt a fuller treatment of this aspect of Shakespeare's language than it has so far received,[2] are not and could not be an exhaustive and final discussion of the subject. The prosperity of a pun, like that of all poetic devices, lies in the ear of him that hears it; and however faithful to Shakespeare's intentions we try to remain by excluding meanings not current in his day, our acceptance or rejection of certain meanings, and the precedence we give one meaning over another, are bound to be matters of personal and subjective choice. With this in mind I have tried first, by a discussion of the functions of Shakespeare's wordplay, to quicken the reader's response to this aspect of his poetic art and so perhaps to add something to his enjoyment of Shakespeare. The ensuing studies of particular plays are more tentatively offered as a single reader's interpretation of the meaning of each play in the light of Shakespeare's delicate, ingenious and profound play of meanings.

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[1] Except unconsciously. See William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1947), pp. 81-2.

[2] Modern discussions of Shakespeare's wordplay which I have found particularly helpful are: E. E. Kellett, *Suggestions* (1923), pp. 57-78; J. D. Wilson's commentaries in his New Cambridge Edition, and Section IV of his Introduction to *Hamlet*; F. P. Wilson, *Shakespeare and the Diction of Common Life* (1941); Edward Armstrong, *Shakespeare's Imagination* (1946); William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (second edition, 1947) and *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951); Kenneth Muir, 'The Uncomic Pun', *Cambridge Journal*, III (1950) and the same writer's New Arden editions of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*; Wolfgang Clemen, *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (1951); and H. Kökeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* (1953).

## 1

The Art of Criticism, according to Bacon, has three branches: the exact correcting and publishing of authors; the explanation and illustration of authors; and 'a certain concise judgment or censure of the authors published'. Since Bacon's time, critics, although no longer concise in their judgments, have taken a smaller corner of the field of knowledge for their province; and his first function of criticism is now the preserve of scholarship. The mere critic would need a Baconian assurance to trespass into the field of Shakespearean textual study. But a detailed elucidation and appreciation of a Shakespearean play demands that we should be sure just what are the lines we are enjoying and trying to explain; so it may not be out of place here to indicate some of the ways in which a study of Shakespeare's puns can substantiate the findings of the textual scholar.

Textual scholars are now generally agreed that the so-called Bad Quartos which survive for seven (or counting *Pericles*, eight) of Shakespeare's plays are reported texts, representing either memorial reconstructions of the play for provincial performance by a reduced company, or the botched text produced by a single actor for unauthorised publication. In such a reconstruction we should expect the comic puns which got the laughs to survive, and the more subtle and subdued forms of poetic wordplay to disappear; and this is just what happens in such a play as *Romeo and Juliet.* Most of the quibbling between the household servants and between Romeo and his friends is preserved, but elsewhere there are losses—for example in the marriage scene at Friar Lawrence's cell. In the Good Quarto there occurs this exchange between the lovers:

*Rom.* Ah Iuliet, if the *measure* of thy ioy
Be heapt like mine, and that thy skill be more
To blason it, then *sweeten* with thy breath
This neighbour ayre and let *rich* musicke tongue
Vnfold the imagind happines that both
Recieue in either, by this *deare encounter.*
*Iul.* *Conceit* more rich in matter then in words,
Brags of his substance, not of ornament,
They are but beggers that can count their worth,
But my true loue is growne to such excesse,
I cannot sum vp sum of halfe my wealth. (II.vi.23-34)

The Warwick editor, J. E. Crofts, objects to this passage because lovers at such a moment should not soberly discuss music. He believes this to be one of the places where the Bad Quarto has preserved 'what is evidently a distinct version, less mature in style but probably authentic':

*Rom.* My Iuliet welcome. As doo waking eyes
(Cloasd in Nights mysts) attend the frolicke Day,
So Romeo hath expected Iuliet,
And thou art come.
*Iul.* I am (if I be Day)
Come to my Sunne: shine foorth and make me faire.
*Rom.* All beauteous fairnes dwelleth in thine eyes.
*Iul.* Romeo from thine all brightnes doth arise.

It is not beyond dispute that this is a more plausible version than that of the Good Quarto and Folio; and it seems to me far less Shakespearean. The received text is a beautiful example of what Coleridge finely appraised as Shakespeare's 'never broken chain of imagery, always vivid, and because unbroken, often minute'. Here as elsewhere it remains unbroken because its images are linked by unconscious wordplay. The idea of music in Romeo's lines is produced by a shift in the meaning of *measure* from 'portion or allowance (of corn)' to the sense of tune or harmony, and by the ambiguity of *sweeten* which can apply to both taste and sound. Juliet, by her use of *conceit* to imply fantasy as well as thought, gently mocks the exaggeration of Romeo's words; but her own excitement reveals itself in a similar play of meaning, for she reverts to *measure* in the sense of portion and combines it with the fiscal meanings of *dear*, *rich*, and perhaps with the last element of *encounter*, to make a monetary conceit as hyperbolical as Romeo's musical one. The thoughts of both are quick and stirring, whereas the lovers in the Bad Quarto wearily mark time with a single laboured image until the Friar compels them to move on.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* exists in a Bad Quarto version and its editor's task is complicated by the fact that the only other text, that of the Folio, is in the words of the New Cambridge editor 'strewn with verbal cruxes'. Most editors of the play have felt that the pirated version must be given a hearing; and the presence in its text of puns or vestiges of puns suggests that it is sometimes nearer to Shakespeare's own text than the Folio is. Falstaff, boasting to the disguised Ford that he enjoys the favours of Mistress Ford, is made to declare in the Quarto version: 'they say the cuckally knaue hath legions of *angels*, for the which his wife seemes to me well-*fauored*'. Shakespeare always found the quibble on angel coins irresistible, and here the actor-reporter (unless he wrote more than was originally set down for him) seems to have preserved a comic pun which is lost in the Folio's 'masses of money' (II.ii.289). He shows less skill earlier in the same scene, when Ford arrives at the Garter and is announced as Master Brook. 'Bid him come vp', says Falstaff, 'Such Brookes are alwaies welcome to me.' The remark has no point, but we can see from the Folio, where Brook is called Broom, what the point should have been: 'Call him in: such Broomes are welcome to mee, that ore'flowes such liquor' (158-160). Clearly the Quarto has preserved Ford's original alias even if it has bungled the pun, and all editors accordingly restore *Brook* in place of the Folio's *Broom.*

The most famous of these vestigial puns occurs in the first tavern scene of *Henry IV* part 1, where the title 'my old lad of the castle', given to Falstaff by the Prince, is a survival of the time when Falstaff was still called Sir John Oldcastle. There is here no question of a choice of texts, for soon after the play's first production the name was changed by Shakespeare, probably at the instigation of Oldcastle's descendants to whom he apologises in the epilogue of part 2. The Quarto of part 1 is a 'good' one, and the differences between it and the Folio are small; but it is interesting to see how, on one occasion, the wordplay supports the authority of the Quarto which is the basic text for modern editions. In this same first tavern scene Poins enters to the Prince and Falstaff with the greeting:

> Good morrow sweete Hal. What saies Monsieur remorse? what saies Sir Iohn Sacke, and Sugar Iacke? howe agrees the Diuell and thee about thy soule . . .

The Folio changes the punctuation of this passage to make 'Jack' an isolated apostrophe to Falstaff: 'What sayes Sir Iohn Sacke and Sugar: Iacke? How agrees the Diuell and thee about thy Soule . . .' (I.ii.125-7). But in following the Folio punctuation (with the modern mark of exclamation replacing the Elizabethan use of the interrogation mark) all subsequent editors have lost the wordplay of the Quarto. Poins is punning on *jack* in the sense of a tankard. Shakespeare had already used the quibble in *The Taming of the Shrew*, IV.i.51—'Be the Iackes faire within, the Gils faire without'—and Sir John Sack-and-Sugar Jack makes an apt soubriquet for Falstaff.

Occasionally the choice between divergent texts is made the more difficult by the possibility that the variants represent a subdued form of wordplay. This may be the case with Hamlet's first solitary outcry: 'Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt!' The Good Quarto, which is the basis of modern editions such as the New Cambridge, reads 'sallied flesh', and on evidence which includes Polonius's words later in the play—'You laying these slight sallies on my sonne . . .'—Dr Wilson considers this a misprint for 'sullied'. 'Sallied' and 'sallies' may however be considered not as misprints but as alternative spellings.[1] Reynaldo is perhaps being told to besmirch Laertes' reputation by small sallies of wit or by brief sorties of detraction; while 'sallied flesh', although its dominant meaning must be 'sullied', may also contain the sub-meaning 'solid' which replaces 'sallied' in the Folio text. If so, what we have here is not a pun so much as a portmanteau word, for if Shakespeare delights to break one word into a spectrum of meanings he is equally ready at other times to fuse two or more words into a complex meaning. Sometimes the two words are already homonyms. In a phrase such as 'the great prerogatiue and *rite* of loue' (*All's Well*, II.iv.43) and some seven or eight similar phrases, *rite* means both 'rite' and 'right' together; and although Shakespeare frequently puns on *metal* and *mettle*, there are many places in the plays where the two words coalesce into one significance. Other portmanteau words are made from distinct elements. The Messenger in *Hamlet* likens Laertes' invasion of the palace to the ocean's 'inpittious haste' because he is both impetuous and pitiless to those who bar his way. Perhaps the richest example of this form of wordplay is to be found in Cleopatra's speech as she takes the asp from the basket:

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[1] I am grateful for this to Mr J. Crow who cites as a parallel Dekker's *Patient Grissil*, I.i.12: 'Then sally not this morning with foule lookes', which may be a sally-sully portmanteau. See the full discussion by Fredson Bowers in *Shakespeare Survey* 9 (1956), pp. 44-8.

> Come thou mortal wretch,
> With thy sharpe teeth this knot *intrinsicate*
> Of life at once vntye. (V.ii.305-7)

Here, as I. A. Richards has shown, *intrinsicate* is not just 'intricate'. 'Shakespeare is bringing together half a dozen meanings from *intrinsic* and *intrinse*: "Familiar", "intimate", "secret", "private", "innermost", "essential", "that which constitutes the very nature and being of a thing"—all the medical and philosophic meanings of his time as well as "intricate" and "involved".'[1] The same kind of fusion takes place when Hamlet is made to telescope into a single word two of his insistent thoughts—that his flesh is polluted, and that it is a wearisome burden which he would be glad to shed. The editor's problem is to decide which meaning should dominate in a modernised version.

An ear for Shakespeare's wordplay can often help the editor when he is confronted by a crux in a unique text. For example,

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[1] *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), pp. 64-5.

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