

MARTIN
GREEN

The Labyrinth of Shakespeare's Sonnets

THE LABYRINTH
OF SHAKESPEARE'S
SONNETS

*An Examination of
Sexual Elements
in Shakespeare's Language*



BY MARTIN GREEN

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PREFACE

SHAKESPEARE'S Sonnets were published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe. It seems probable that Shakespeare did not authorize, and thus did not supervise, the printing of these poems; the likelihood, therefore, of the printed text's deviating in many instances from the original manuscript is great. Nevertheless, since the Thorpe edition is the text nearest the original manuscript, any serious study of the language of Shakespeare's Sonnets must be based on that edition. For that reason, I have set forth in Appendix I to this book a facsimile of the British Museum's copy of the 1609 edition of the Sonnets.

Although familiarity with the first printed text is important, uncompromising adherence to it is not, for there is often no need to inflict today upon the lay reader either obvious typographical errors, or the curious and unsystematized spellings of yesteryear. Accordingly, the texts of the Sonnets quoted in this book are modernized, albeit very conservatively.

Unless expressly otherwise indicated, all excerpts from the works of Shakespeare other than the Sonnets are taken from the New Cambridge Edition of *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, edited by William Allan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942). Quotations from the First Folio are taken from the Norton Publishing Company's splendid facsimile edition of that work prepared by Professor Charlton Hinman and published in 1968. A dual system of footnote citation is used, references first being to act, scene and line as given in Bartlett's *Concordance*, which is keyed to the 1891 *Globe* edition of Shakespeare's works, and second to the line as numbered in the Norton Facsimile of the First Folio. In Table II in Chapter 6, only the Norton Facsimile numbering is used.

In the quotations from the plays, the names of speaking characters are written in full, even though they are generally not so written in the source from which the quotation is taken. When incorporating passages from Shakespeare into a sentence of my own, I have occasionally altered the terminal punctuation of the quotation, changing a comma or semi-colon to a period, or a period to a comma, as the needs of the sentence require. In no case will this be found to alter the sense of the quotation, or the meaning of any word in the quoted passage.

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PREFACE

from *Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets*, by J. B. Leishman, and the permission granted by Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York, to reprint excerpts from *The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, by R. P. Blackmuir, Leslie A. Fiedler, Northrop Frye, Edward Hubler and Stephen Spender. I also thank the British Museum for permission to reproduce its copy of the 1609 edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

M. G.

ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Antony and Cleopatra
AW	All's Well that Ends Well
AYL	As You Like It
CE	The Comedy of Errors
CO	Coriolanus
CY	Cymbeline
H	Hamlet
1H4	First Part of Henry IV
2H4	Second Part of Henry IV
H5	Henry V
1H6	First Part of Henry VI
2H6	Second Part of Henry VI
3H6	Third Part of Henry VI
H8	Henry VIII
JC	Julius Caesar
KJ	King John
KL	King Lear
LLL	Love's Labour's Lost
M	Macbeth
MA	Much Ado about Nothing
MM	Measure for Measure
MND	A Midsummer – Night's Dream
MV	The Merchant of Venice
MWW	The Merry Wives of Windsor
O	Othello
P	Pericles
PP	The Passionate Pilgrim
R2	Richard II
R3	Richard III
RJ	Romeo and Juliet
RL	The Rape of Lucrece
T	The Tempest
TAN	Titus Andronicus
TC	Troilus and Cressida
TGV	The Two Gentlemen of Verona
TIM	Timon of Athens
TN	Twelfth Night
TS	The Taming of the Shrew
VA	Venus and Adonis
WT	The Winter's Tale

A quibble is to Shakespeare, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures, it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of his disquisition, whether he be enlarging knowledge or exalting affection, whether he be amusing attention with incidents, or enchainning it in suspense, let but a quibble spring up before him, and he leaves his work unfinished. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.

Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765)

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1

THE PRICKET SORE

To Samuel Johnson belongs the credit for articulating not only initially, but most memorably, a great and fundamental truth: that Shakespeare as an individual was peculiarly and unusually fascinated by the quibble, or pun. Although Dr Johnson viewed this addiction to quibbling as a grave stylistic fault, he did not presume, on the basis of its existence, to make any inferences about Shakespeare the man. And Shakespeare's quibbles at all times, much as they have been written of as literary devices, or as aids to Elizabethan word study, have not been deemed to warrant any conclusions about Shakespeare himself, save either that he showed great wit in devising them, or poor taste in using them.

Indeed, that any conclusions about the life of Shakespeare could be drawn from his puns might seem a fantastic and ridiculous proposition. Yet the pun can be a key to factual truth. Consider, for example, the remark of Dr Johnson (who apparently was not himself immune from the call of the quibble) about a university which had a small endowment, but was generous in its distribution of degrees: 'Let the University persevere in its present plan and it may become rich by degrees.' Since we know the factual situation which gave rise to this statement, we immediately perceive the pun, and understand its point. If we did not know the factual situation, we might not perceive the pun, and would therefore not glean from the statement all the meaning that it contains.

But a pun, although not readily perceptible to those ignorant of the circumstances which produced it, is not, if reduced to writing, irretrievably lost, for the potential of the pun-word to convey all of its multiple meanings remains so long as the language of the person who uttered the pun is understood by men. And so today, anyone with a reasonable knowledge of English, and of the several meanings which the word *degree* possesses, might perceive, without knowing anything of the story behind Dr Johnson's remark, that the word is used in this particular sentence in such a way that it could have either, or both, of two meanings. Having identified this equivocation, might not a person who assumes the double meaning to be intentional and therefore purposeful, be able to imagine a factual situation in which both meanings of the pun-word are apposite, and thereby reconstruct in broad outline the incident which occasioned the remark?

And so, in the works of Shakespeare, a man whose addiction to the pun is universally recognized: might we not be justified in attempting, wherever we perceive that a word is used in such a way as to bear two meanings, to construct a factual situation which would give point to both meanings?

In the plays, of course, the results to be attained by this procedure will not be startling, for the playwright necessarily presents to the audience all of the facts that are essential to an understanding of the play. When we hear a pun in the plays, therefore, we are in the position of the person who, with a knowledge of its background, hears Dr Johnson's remark about the university: we know the situation, and immediately perceive the pun; we do not have to attempt, on the basis of the perception of the pun, a reconstruction of the factual situation which produced it. In any event, even if we were to attempt in the plays thus to work backwards, the most we could hope to recover is a factual situation which if it is at all significant to the play is somewhere within its framework expressly stated; we certainly could not expect by this process to recover any facts which might validly be deemed to reflect incidents in the dramatist's life.

The Sonnets, however, are another matter. In the first place, they do not explicitly set forth all of the facts essential to their understanding, and therefore the reconstruction of the situations giving rise to the puns they contain could be rewarding in that it might result in the discovery of facts not elsewhere expressly set forth. In the second place, if the Sonnets are autobiographical, then the facts discovered by this process could be revelatory of incidents in Shakespeare's life.

Whether or not the Sonnets are autobiographical has been much, and inconclusively, debated. I shall cut the Gordian knot by assuming that the Sonnets *are* autobiographical, and proceeding, on the basis of that assumption, to consider what the word-play in the Sonnets might reveal about the life of Shakespeare. This is not a circular process, but is the normal course of scientific inquiry: hypotheses precede experimentation and exploration; the validity of the assumption upon which Schliemann decided to excavate the hill of Hissarlik must be assessed in the light of what was found in acting upon that assumption. So here, on the premise of autobiographicality, let us delve, to see if we find in the artifacts of word-play anything that might vindicate, if only partially, the initial assumption.

By *word-play* I mean the use of a word in such a way that it can have two or more meanings. Word-play lends itself to a number of classifications, but sufficient here is the division of word-play into two categories, which I designate the *pun* and the *metaphor*. By *pun* I mean a word of a certain sound and meaning placed in a context such that

it takes on also the meaning of a different word of the same sound. An example from Shakespeare's plays is Mercutio's dying statement,

Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man.*

Here, *grave* means both 'solemn' and 'burial place'.

By *metaphor* I mean any word placed in a context such that it takes on the meaning of a different word of a different sound. An example of this is in Romeo's plaint:

O, tell me, friar, tell me,
In what vile part of this anatomy
Doth my name lodge? Tell me, that I may sack
The hateful mansion.†

In context, clearly, *mansion* means 'body'.

I shall hereafter use the term *referent* to indicate the meaning of a word which seems initially or principally to be intended. To adopt language devised by James Brown for other purposes, the referent is the 'meaning for the pun word which applies literally to both the syntax and sense of the sentence . . . and which permits a reader to find the sentence meaningful even though he does not see the pun in it.'¹ I shall use the term *inferent* to designate the additional meaning or meanings which can be ascribed to a word because of the context in which it appears. In the examples just given, 'solemn' is the referent of *grave*, and 'burial place' the inferent; 'stately residence' is the referent of *mansion*, and 'body' the inferent. The term 'homonymic inferent' will designate the inferent of a pun, and the term 'metaphorical inferent' will designate, of course, the inferent of a metaphor.

It is through identifying words that are placed by Shakespeare in a context such that they can have two meanings, and then by considering the inferential meanings of such words, and the situations which might make both the referential and inferential meanings appropriate, that I propose to extract from the Sonnets information about the life of Shakespeare. In this two-step procedure, often the mere identification of a pun or metaphor affords instant insight into the situation which produced it, and illuminates or gives a fillip to what seemed to be an obscure or insipid sentence.

To demonstrate the techniques by which I shall attempt to identify word-play, and the illuminating effect of the mere identification of inferents, I shall, before proceeding to the Sonnets, examine a puzzling poem in *Love's Labour's Lost*. As printed in the First Folio, the poem reads:

*RJ: 3, 1, 101
1531

†RJ: 3, 3, 105
1921

The prayfull Princesse pearst and prickt
 a prettie pleasing Pricket,
 Some say a Sore, but not a sore,
 till now made sore with shooting.
 The Dogges did yell, put ell to Sore,
 then Sorell iumps from thicket:
 Or Pricket-sore, or else Sorell,
 the people fall a hooting.
 If Sore be sore, then el to Sore,
 makes fiftie sores O sorell:
 Of one sore I an hundred make
 by adding but one more L.*

Although not without rhyme, this jingle, to modern readers, is almost completely without reason. Every annotated edition of the play attempts to inject some meaning into the poem by two explanations: the first, usually in the form of a quotation from a play called *The Returne from Parnassus, or the Scourge of Simony*, published in 1606, but acted by the students in St John's College in Cambridge some years earlier, is that 'a Bucke the first yeare is a Fawne, the second year a Pricket, the third yeare a Sorrell, the Fourth yeare a Soare, the fift a Bucke of the first head, the sixth yeare a compleat Bucke. . .';² the second explanation, a bit less exotic, is that L (or el), in addition to being a letter of the alphabet, is the Roman numeral for fifty.

Equipped with this knowledge, the reader can go back through the poem and derive—perhaps—some mild pleasure from changing a four-year-old deer (sore) into either a three-year-old deer (sorel), by adding the letter 'l', or into fifty or a hundred four-year-old deer (sore L or sore LL) by adding, either once or twice, the numeral L. But still, something seems to be missing.

What is missing is the elementary identification of the homonymic and metaphoric inferences. As I shall presently show, in Shakespeare's vocabulary, *sore* could mean 'vulva', and *el* could mean 'penis'. These inferential meanings, apparently not hitherto perceived, immediately illuminate the poem, and deliver it of its cryptic burden: the description of a sexual encounter, and of ensuing venereal infection.

The equation of *sore* to 'vulva' in Shakespearean usage is relatively easy to demonstrate: in the ninth poem of *The Passionate Pilgrim*, the 'queen of love' attempts to prevent Adonis from hunting in a certain area:

"Once," quoth she, "did I see a fair sweet youth
 Here in these brakes deep-wounded with a boar,
 Deep in the thigh, a spectacle of ruth!

*LLL: 4, 2, 58
 1215

See, in my thigh," quoth she, "here was the sore."

She showed hers: he saw more wounds than one,
And blushing fled and left her all alone.*

Thus *sore*, meaning 'wound' or 'gash', is a readily understandable, if not erogenous, metaphor for 'vulva'.³

Ell is an equally understandable metaphor for 'penis'. *Ell* is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a measure of length equal to 45 inches. It is, consequently, like a yard, only longer. And, as is well known, in Elizabethan times, when a spade was called a spade, the 'penis' was called the *yard*; thus in *The Questyonyary of Cyrurgyens*, 'Enprynted at London, by me Robert Wyer' in 1542, at the page marked with the signature k.iii., appears this exchange:

Demaunde. What is the pigneum? Answere. Pigneum in Arabyke is to saye the ars hole. And it is the place betwene the ars & the yerde whiche is a seame that foloweth the coddess and the stocke of the yerde.

An obvious example of this use of *yard* by Shakespeare is in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

Armando. I do adore thy sweet grace's slipper.

Boyet. Loves her by the foot.

Dumain. He may not by the yard.†

The referent of *yard* here is 'measure of length'; the metaphorical inferent is 'penis'. Once a 'measure of length' is conceived of as being a metaphor for a penis, then *any* measure of length – within reason, of course – can also metaphorically represent a penis. So it is that an *ell* is a 'yard'.

The proof of these conclusions is that the poem is carefully structured so that reading 'penis' for *ell* and 'vulva' for *sore* at appropriate places makes astonishingly good sense. Consider the first two and a half lines:

The prayfull Princesse pearst and prickt
a prettie pleasing Pricket,
Some say a Sore,

The inferent of *pray* in 'prayfull' is undoubtedly 'prey', a common enough pun, as in

they pray continually to their saint, the commonwealth; or rather, not pray to her, but prey on her ‡

Pearst was pronounced in Shakespeare's time as we pronounce 'pursed' today, and thus occasioned puns like

Master Person, *quasi* Person? And if one should be perst, Which is the one?*

and

If Percy be alive, I'll pierce him.†

The title of Thomas Nashe's work, *Pierce Penilesse*, is clearly to be understood at one level as 'Purse Penniless'.

Consequently, while the referent of *perst* is 'pierced', its inferent is 'pursed', a word which can mean 'wrinkled' or 'contracted' as in

[Thou] didst contract and purse thy brow together. . . .‡

Through denoting 'to wrinkle' or 'to contract', *purse*, to the Elizabethan mind, was suggestive of the vulva, characteristics of which are that it is involuted or wrinkled, and it can contract. In *The Englishmans Treasure*, published in London in 1586, Thomas Vicary says of the uterus, at pages 53 and 54, that

it hath a long necke lyke an urinall, and in every necke it hath a mouth, that is to say, one within, and an other without. . . . Furthermore the necke that is betweene these two foresayde mouthes, in her concavitie hath many involutions and pleates, joyned together in the manner of Rose leaves before they bee fully spread or rype, and so they bee shut together as a Purse mouth, so that nothing may passe forth but urin, untill the tyme of chylding.

And Helkiah Crooke, in his *Microcosmographia*, published in London in 1615, at page 234 describes thusly the 'necke of the wombe':

It hath a deep cavity and wide, (whence *Fallopious* calleth it the bosome of modesty) but the mouth or entrance of it is much narrower. It reacheth from the inner [reference to a diagram is here omitted] orifice of the wombe, to the outward Orifice [another reference to a diagram is here omitted] or very lap and privity, and being long that the seede of the man may be brought to the orifice of the wombe it receyveth the yard fitly like a sheath, wherefore the amplitude is answerable to that it must contain & is not broader then the right gut. It becommeth in the time of coition longer or shorter wider or narrower as the yard is; and according to the womans appetite more or lesse turgid, more open or more contracted & direct; wherefore the length of it cannot be limited no more then the length of the yarde; and though it be continued with the bottome, yet it hath a divers substance from it. For it is Membranous and Nervous, that it may better be enlarged or contracted, neither too hard, nor too soft.

The substance of it is somewhat fungous or spongie, like that of a

*LLL: 4, 2, 85
1247

†IH4: 5, 3, 59
2950

‡O: 3, 3, 113
1720

mans yarde, for as it was necessary that the yard should bee distended to fill this, so it was necessary that this in coition should be so contracted and straightned that it might straightly embrace the same, which happeneth by reason of many small Arteries which fill the passage with spirits, and so it becommeth narrower.⁴ Wherefore in women that are full of lust, or in the time of anie womans appetite it strutteth, and the Caruncles⁵ swell outward (which in Cowes and Bitches is so apparent, that their privities seeme to bee very much enflamed) and the Cavities grows very straight [narrow]. In yong wenches it is more delicate and soft, and becommeth everie day harder, so that those that have often conceived and old women, have it hard callous & as it were gristly, by reason of the often attrition and the frequent flowing of their courses. Whereupon *Herophylus* compared it to the weazon or winde-pipe. This when it is not distended is rugous [folded, or wrinkled], if it be much stretched it becommeth smooth and slippery, unlesse it be in that part which endeth in the lap; but in the entrance of the passage and in the forepart, there are many round folds for the greater pleasure of lovers which commeth from the atrition of them by the nut [glans] of the yard.

And so here, the *pursing* referred to in the poem is undoubtedly the contraction of the vaginal orifice as a result of the engorgement and swelling of the labia and of the tissues surrounding the vagina, a contraction denotive of sexual arousal.

On the level of its inferents, then, these two and a half lines from the 'prayfull Princesse' poem mean that the princess, on the hunt, becoming sexually aroused, caused to be penetrated with a penis (i.e., 'prickt') a pretty pleasing 'Pricket' (prick-it, the object of a prick?), which is a thing some people call a 'sore'.

Now, the whole of the third line, and the fourth line:

Some say a Sore, but not a sore,
till now made sore with shooting.

This means: some people call a pricket (that is, a vulva) a 'sore', but this vulva was not a-sore (that is, diseased) until now (as is about to be described) made diseased by sexual intercourse ('shooting').

The fifth line,

The Dogges did yell, put ell to Sore,

brings both lust and the male element on the scene, for Shakespeare seems to have equated dogs with desire, and to have associated the noise made by dogs with the human penis. The equation of dogs with desire is made and explained in *Twelfth Night*, where Orsino mentions the first time he saw Olivia:

That instant was I turn'd into a hart;

And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
E'er since pursue me.*

The association of the noise made by dogs with the penis is illustrated in this exchange between the Nurse and Romeo:

Nurse. Doth not rosemary and Romeo begin both with a letter?

Romeo. Ay, nurse: what of that? Both with an R.

Nurse. Ah, mocker! that's the dog's name. R is for the – No; I know it begins with some other letter – and she hath the prettiest sententious of it, of you and rosemary, that it would do you good to hear it.†

Eric Partridge wrote of this passage that 'the "R" is generally explained by the dog's *ar* (or growling): this is correct; but *R* is also short for *Roger*, a dog's name, and also a slang term (*Roger* or *roger*) for the penis – note the Nurse's "it".'⁶

Just as in *Romeo and Juliet* *R* both signifies a noise made by dogs and alludes to a slang term for 'penis', so here, *yell*, in addition to signifying a noise made by dogs, is itself similar in sound to a word used by Shakespeare, and perhaps his contemporaries, to designate the penis – that word being, of course, *ell*.

The dogs' yelling raises more than the idea of 'penis', it also raises the penis, for *put ell to Sore*, in addition to meaning 'applied the penis to the vulva' means also 'caused the penis to rise (soar).'

And as a result of this,

then Sorell iumps from thicket:

that is, then a diseased penis (sore ell) rises from its bed of pubic hair. (*Brake*, which means 'thicket', is used in this same sense in *Venus and Adonis*:

"Within this limit is relief enough,
Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,
Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
To shelter thee from tempest and from rain:
Then be my deer, since I am such a park;
No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark."‡)

Lines seven and eight are:

Or Pricket-sore, or else Sorell,
the people fall a hooting.

Line seven appears to mean: or is it really the vulva (pricket) which is sore (diseased), or the penis which is sore? Line eight is a break in the story to depict the lewd delight of the hearers of the

*TN: 1, 1, 21
26

†RJ: 2, 4, 219
1300

‡VA: 235