

A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery  
in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature

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A-F

*A Dictionary of  
Sexual Language and Imagery  
in Shakespearean and Stuart  
Literature*

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VOLUME I A-F

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Gordon Williams



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To Rose



# Introduction

The samples of sexual language and locution garnered here are designed to assist the reader of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts to identify metaphor and elucidate meanings. But larger possibilities are offered by this charting of recurrent and shifting linguistic patterns over a period of two centuries. Major areas of literary expression as well as the more ephemeral sources of broadside, pamphlet and newsbook have been combed; religious and secular, technical and popular, all contribute to the picture of this crucial early modern period. For it is the period as a whole to which sexual usage provides access, through that pervasiveness which leaves no aspect or activity untouched. This is true of every period in recorded history, though in an agrarian culture, geared to seasonal change, human sexuality is perhaps dominantly acknowledged as part of that cyclic process which governs life at every stage. Hence the language of husbandry and that of soil management are staple elements of sexual vocabulary from ancient times, but the increased complexity of early modern society finds a corresponding growth in modes of sexual expression. What follows is a limited and highly selective account of the period covered, intended merely to indicate why it is so exceptional in the development, and certainly the record, of such expression.

The key factor in the new complexity is the printing press, consequences of its invention being quickly felt and profound. It came into being as a result of pressures which ultimately led to the Reformation; but print acquired its own dynamic, proving a decisive shaper not only of that Reformation but of sixteenth-century European life generally. During the incunabular period, 80 per cent of print was in the learned languages. But vernacular development was not to be held back in the sixteenth century, during which, it has been estimated, the English language almost doubled itself with borrowings from foreign sources. The sexual vocabulary is unlikely to have been growing at a slower rate than other linguistic categories, since it covers a subject of the widest concern. It is also one hedged about with anxiety. The Judaeo-Christian tradition of sexual guilt results in two contrasting pressures: towards crudity and towards evasion. But yesterday's evasion is today's vulgarity. 'A captain?', exclaims Shakespeare's Doll Tearsheet, 'God's light, these villains will make the word as odious as the word "occupy"' (*2Henry IV*, II.iv.143); and *OED* notes how standard use of **occupy** declined sharply in seventeenth-century print. Such a process creates a continuing demand for fresh euphemisms; and indeed, it is two-way, as the shock expression softens with familiarity.

Although the medieval Church exhibits no single strand of thought on the subject of sexuality, part of the weave was its perception as a necessary evil consequent upon the Fall. This, and the paterfamilias idea, had been subject to significant challenge since the fourteenth century. But the impetus given

to this liberalizing tendency by fifteenth-century humanism was abetted in Northern Europe during the next century by the forces of Reformation. The role of the printing press is crucial. It became a useful ploy to identify sexual repression with a Church controlled by celibates; and the prevailing attitude amongst the Roman Catholic hierarchy towards the printing press only helped to boost the Church's illiberal image. Its hostility is entirely understandable; freedom of expression and authority, religious or secular, are never easy bedfellows. Hitherto, the only mass medium of communication had been the pulpit, carefully controlled by the Church. But the Church's hold on the printing press, never decisive, was further weakened by the Reformation. Attempts to regain control by way of censorship found focus at the University of Cologne, where the imprimatur first came into use; it is logical that the tools of censorship should be fashioned close to the region where printing had been developed and was especially strong. The multiple reproduction made possible by the printing press allowed, for the first time, the quick spread of ideas diverging from those held by the Church. By its means, family relationships were redefined and sexuality became a powerful weapon of subversion. For although Lutheran thinking, which took marriage rather than celibacy to be the natural state, still regarded sex as sinful, other sections of the Protestant wing came to identify the natural with the good. So too, those European societies exhibiting a fresh concern with the rights of subordinates, wife and children, within the family unit offered a direct challenge to papal authority and the idea of social hierarchy as divinely ordained.

The spread of literacy during the sixteenth century is undeniable, though the process seems to have been extremely unsteady; but certainly in the densest areas of population a brisk trade in street literature was developing. As well as providing entertainment, it might embody information, controversy, social advice and moral instruction; it was an important moulder of public opinion, and not only in the direction of orthodoxy. As demand for information grew, it required not only a transformed book trade to cope but a corresponding growth in the vernacular language. It was through the agency of print that the issues underlying the English Civil War sharpened so rapidly. Impact was in the direction of a new particularity, a tendency begun in the thirteenth century with the European recovery of Aristotle. But the sixteenth century was the century of acceleration; and the seal was set by that mode of thought usually styled Cartesian. The psychological consequences were vast, exhilaration and disquiet went hand in hand. These strains are clearly evident in the language, and sexual language (always seeking to straddle anxiety and abandonment) is a notably sensitive indicator. If the change evident between the end of the fifteenth century and that of the sixteenth is profound, the decades from the death of Elizabeth I to that of Charles II are no less remarkable. Those English civil wars charted by Shakespeare were part of the medieval feudal pattern, a tight vertical structure without a corresponding horizontal one. They were fundamentally different from THE Civil War, as that definite article helps to indicate. This was no longer a matter of opposing feudal factions, but of ideologies.

What the sexual language of Restoration court society illustrates above all is a maimed elite, still reeling from the shock of being challenged – and

defeated – by a bunch of farmers and shopkeepers. The rivalry between country and town, between court and city, is rehearsed often enough in the writings of the late Elizabethans. But there is a new urgency in the Restoration, born of a need to expunge a recent, deep humiliation in an orgy of excess spiced with revenge. Their wounds fester into malice, as they frenetically lock themselves into a present of drinking and swiving to shut out a past of intolerable defeat. What these court wits wrote and what they did do not necessarily coincide, but enough may be glimpsed from contemporary record to suggest that sexual revenge, through cuckolding of city wives or rape of country girls, was more than a court pose; it embodied a deep need to salve the wounds to Cavalier masculinity. If the ultimate fear is of emasculation, the sex described is often a self-punishing martyrdom, full of violence and disgust.

Restoration libertinism provides something of a paradox. It was acquired by the Royalists during their sojourn on the European continent, but what they brought back hardly represented a challenge to authority. It was the property of the new power-holders, a weapon of counter-revolution used against a group which had helped to promote the real sexual, as well as religio-political, revolution. This libertinism was allied with a spirit of reaction which, amongst other things, turned the clock back on feminine emancipation. Indeed, as part of the paradox, women are poorly regarded, and sex itself (in much court writing, if not practice) has substantially lost its fun aspect. No longer a necessary evil, it became represented as a necessary drudgery. Demonstrations of prowess must be interminably repeated, and the ever-demanding, endlessly voracious vagina becomes focus of the bitterest feelings. Woman's superior sexual stamina was a traditional source of disquiet as well as humour, and medieval antifeminism embroiled menstruation in its patterns of disgust. But there is a new dimension to the harping on natural emissions, which become the repulsive suppurations of disease (**clout, flowers, menstruous, slime**). Sodomy provides an alternative to the hateful vagina; indeed, homosexual sodomy dispenses with the woman altogether. While such ideas smack of aristocratic bravado, they also register the fact that religion, with its moral sanctions, had lost some of its grip on sophisticated minds. Sexual purity was ideologically tainted, which itself provided some impulsion in the opposite direction.

But more than this, Copernicus and recent history combined to give a sense of universal instability and the impermanence of things, of institutions. In an Absurd world there is nothing binding, nothing forbidden. The psychology of these Cavalier wits is strangely like Iago's, exhibiting the same desperate need to transmute everything into the nasty and brutish, a process conceived as stripping away hypocrisy to lay the realities of human nature bare. Horrified relish at the seaminess thus revealed exhibits in Iago-like delight in being as gross and filthy as they can, excitedly determined to see all sexual relations as disgusting as well as trivial. Shakespeare's Iago fell foul of the Doctrine of Generality to which many Restoration critics subscribed; so there is irony in the resemblance between this dramatic character who fails to act with the bluff honesty expected of a soldier and those who had fought and lost for the Stuart cause, as well as that newer generation which bore the added humiliation of having been too young to fight. The true-to-type idea has its elitist aspect; but this does not in itself account for the strong

appeal exerted by the typical and general over the individual and particular, a flat denial of the new empiricism. But it does indicate that even those dedicated to the orgiastic life cannot fail to observe some standards; the rake as culture hero is burdened with responsibility. More important is the need to compensate for the loss of the old absolutes, to offset that bewildering fragmentation revealed in the new pluralism of social and political thought or the explosion of religious sects. Hobbes asserted the essential identity of human nature; and the literary critics, seeking legislative authority for their activity, turned with an unerring capacity for irony to that least doctrinaire of thinkers, that very same Aristotle whose return to the European consciousness had provoked a modernist alternative to the Augustinian scheme.

So the intellectuals stand behind the court wits, though it is the latter who supply a mode of sexual expression which, by its very ambivalence, suit present-day need. Thus much of the substance of modern sexual usage is already in place by the end of the seventeenth century. This is not to say that no tension existed in Chaucer's day. It is sometimes asserted that his contemporaries were at ease with bawdy utterance in a way that Shakespeare's were not; but his mock-apology for the *Miller's Tale* invites qualification. None the less, substantial change is to be expected following the advent of print. Involved is not only the disseminating power of the press but the weight conferred by print, both factors of official concern. Since there is no distinct line dividing sexual and political subversion, there can be none between political and moral censorship. When Kenneth Tynan broke what was known in the trade as the 'fuck barrier' on British television, it was a calculated act of subversion which reverberated in Parliament. Trog's cartoon comment in *The Observer* (21 November 1965) is a significant one. He depicts a public bar where a drinker holds forth to a cloth-capped companion (the gaps providing their own dimension of irony): 'I 'ad a few —ing drinks in the —ing boozzer then I —ed off 'ome an' turned on the —ing telly an' — me if Ken —ing Tynan don't open 'is —ing mouth an' come out with this —ing four-letter word for sexual intercourse.' This distinction between what is acceptable in informal speech and that which has the authority of the television medium is pretty much what might be expected between sixteenth-century oral habits and printed language. On the whole — and certainly in discursive writing of Shakespeare's day — the blunt monosyllable gets into print chiefly by way of punning allusion. At least this is the pattern of English publishing; the Scots evidently took a more relaxed view, and the admission of words like *cunt* into sixteenth-century Edinburgh print means that they had less of a subversive edge north of the border.

Although the effect of the printing press was towards standardization of word and image, cultural and political factors ensured that the Lowland Scots dialect should retain its identity and, indeed, flourish in the first century of print. It is at its most striking in the poetry of the great Bannatyne and Maitland collections, though its distinctive modes of sexual expression are still importantly represented by Drummond in the seventeenth century. But radically different lifestyles produce corresponding divergences in linguistic habit even where the London dialect has formal domination. Although writing remains very much the preserve of the educated classes, the trade in street literature exhibits a huge growth in demand for print accessible to the untrained reader. When the oral tales of the tavern appear



in broadsheet guise, their medium of expression presumably stands in some relation to lower-class speech, but there is also evident strong middle-class interest in the language of other social groups, notably underworld argot. This is no mere disinterested curiosity. The period following land **enclosure** in the reign of Henry VIII was one of mass unemployment, forcing many people outside the ordinary legal and moral restraints in order to survive. The enormous increase in the itinerant and criminal population impinged disagreeably on the lives of those able to maintain a more settled existence, who sought information about this threat to their well-being in order to meet it.

But interest continued unabated long after the immediate crisis had passed; and underworld situations and slang became a profitable subject for the seventeenth-century writer, Greene, Rowlands and others setting a pattern for the generation of Head and Kirkman. They profess to be taking the lid off an underworld subculture; but assessed in that way, most of what was written is as superficial as many a modern journalistic exposé. Readers of Dekker, for instance, do well to remember Pendry's warning 'that we are in danger of giving him . . . too little credit for literary creation, too much for realism'. The likes of Dekker retail a language resembling that of the *Minder* television series, which effectively persuades the outsider of its authenticity, though its relationship to the actual speech patterns of the metropolitan subculture is highly problematical. Since the whole point of an underworld argot is to deny access to straight society, it is scarcely credible that a language delved into by mid-sixteenth-century sociologists like Copland and Harman should still be the mainstay at the end of the seventeenth century.

The itinerant's activities and canting language find their way on stage, too. Day and Chapman suggest that a beggar in a play-title was a selling point and Beaumont and Fletcher's *Beggar's Bush* and Brome's *Jovial Beggar* go further, including canting songs which are not only anthologized – sometimes in expanded versions – but are taken over by the specialists in documentary and fictional treatment of low life such as Richard Head. Lists of cant terms appended to their works expand into B.E.'s *Dictionary of the Canting Crew*, or that of Grose nearly a century later. But both include 'Terms Ancient and Modern', and the problem of disentangling one from the other has been damagingly ignored. It is reasonable to assume that the rapacious borrowing from predecessors by, in their turn, Dekker, Head, and B.E. indicates limited access to primary sources; though the latter knew enough not to be taken in by the ghost word **dopey**, which Grose found in Dekker and passed on to twentieth-century collectors. Fieldwork is too time-consuming for the bread-and-butter compiler, and possibly its results would prove unsaleably humdrum compared with the old tried material set in a new frame, so the impression is of an incredibly stable slang. But informal language does exhibit remarkable durability as well as evanescence, both phenomena having their interest.

'Harvey Smith' came into heavy use some years back as a term for the Churchillian gesture made publicly by that celebrated horseman; but by 1984 it was no longer admissible to Green's *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*. The late seventeenth-century use of Rigby for 'homosexual' (**filthy disease**), which had a comparable journalistic impact, similarly lapsed along with memory of the episode. On the other hand, Kray's *Book of Slang* notes US

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currency for 'lobster' (soldier), a term prompted by the articulated armour worn by Cromwell's cuirassiers in the Civil War. Still earlier – and even more remarkable, since it seems to have left no trace in post-seventeenth-century English slang – is 'picket hatch' for brothel (**pickt-hatch**). Neither of these words is noticed by Robert L. Chapman's *American Slang*. The pattern would seem to be common; so many examples of seventeenth-century slang have reappeared in the modern American vernacular that unrecorded survival is the most satisfactory explanation. Words disappearing from British use after being exported to America evidently stayed viable there without leaving any written trace. Their re-emergence in a more relaxed era of print has brought the pattern full circle with their readoption in Britain.

### *Tools and procedure*

The indispensable tool for any student of the language is the *Oxford English Dictionary*. But Farmer and Henley's *Slang and its Analogues* is a mine of information and Halliwell's *Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words* can also shed light. Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang* yields nothing on early sexual use which is not provided – usually more adequately – in the works already mentioned together with B.E.'s *Dictionary of the Canting Crew* and Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. While Farmer and Henley are not consistent in providing citations, Partridge shows scant interest in supplying means for a user to test an entry by back tracking. There is little correcting of predecessors, and when he declares Farmer and Henley's coital definition of **fugel** 'wide of the mark', it is he, not they, who is wrong. Worst of all is the spurious precision of his dating. Quite a few early terms end up being assigned to the nineteenth century because Farmer and Henley happen neither to have given a citation nor applied their stock label 'old'. **Roe** and **rem in re** are examples, while *jolt* and *pendulum* (**pendant**) are both described as 'low' C19–20. The former is a product of the fashion for **coaches** imported towards the end of the sixteenth century, and no doubt Farmer and Henley found the latter in Dryden's *Persius*. The 'whore' definition for **rumper** comes from misreading Farmer and Henley, the kind of error bound to arise in a work of this scope. But, while taking up the hint about the Rump Parliament, he still assigns the use to the C19–20; and this really is serious, since he regularly takes a categorical line in the absence of dating evidence.

Dating is of prime importance, and sometimes tricky. In the present work, dating of play-texts usually follows Harbage's *Annals of English Drama*, and the other most difficult class, broadside ballads, relies substantially on the *Short Title Catalogues* of Redgrave and Pollard and Wing. Both represent a compromise, since there is often a gap of years between the composition and publication dates of a play, while ballad datings (when entries are to be found) are seldom precise and often refer to late printings.

The question of texts is also a vexed one. It is probably easier to recognize the eccentric abandon with which Ebsworth omits and rewrites than to register the claim that the 1928 Routledge text of Head's *English Rogue* is 'untouched except for certain necessary typographical corrections' as an admission of heavy bowdlerizing. As a basis for the *OED* project, reliable editions were required, hence the founding of the Early English Text Society and others. But still it fell victim to poor texts (**intrigue**, **armours**) as well

as exhibiting the hazards of indirect citation (following Nares, ‘carry knave’, satirical name for a **coach**, is taken to mean ‘prostitute’). The obvious rule is to cite from a complete text rather than excerpts, and this has been followed in the present work with a few noted exceptions. But there is still the problem that reference back from working notes to source is often impractical. Add to this the fact that anything may serve as metaphor for sex act or equipment, and the danger of over-zeal is all too clear, especially given the Elizabethan reputation for innuendo and tortuous quibble. So exclusion is a vital part of the process. As illustration of the issue, take the question put by one of Jack Cade’s followers in Shakespeare’s *2Henry VI* (IV.vii.120): ‘When shall we go to Cheapside, and take up commodities upon our bills?’, which has been seen to set the trading sense of commodities and bills against the idea of city rape. But although payment of maidenheads is mentioned immediately before, the pun depends not on Cheapside as a source of maids, chaste or unchaste, but as a place of execution. Yet while phallic bills may be discounted as conscious pun, the decapitated heads on their points will kiss at street corners; and a subconscious association of beheading and taking of maidenheads is more than possible in view of the grisly punning which it evoked elsewhere (**execution, maidenhead** 2).

The present aim, however, has not been to explore the subconscious processes below the literary surface, a route calculated to open up almost everything to the possibility of sexual interpretation. Instead, the concern has been primarily to establish certain image forms and verbal uses as a basis for evaluating such other examples as the user may encounter. Again, a couple of Shakespearean instances – his use of **blister** and **roe** (or Jonson’s ‘punque deuce’: **lay** 2) – will suffice to show how such a procedure can reveal further detail in already well-lit areas. Explanation of metaphors has been attempted in terms designed not only to indicate conditions of availability but also to stress the significance of a writer’s choice amongst those that are available.

Sexual expression continually brings into view larger social or political considerations: so the end of civil war allowed the reimportation of **oranges**, while Hausted, *Ad Populum* (1644) 4 is nostalgic for pre-war days ‘Er’e Plunderer was English for a Theife’ (and rapist). Fighting in the **Low Countries** brought soldier distortions comparable with the First World War Wipers and Plugstreet (**Middleborough**), together with other campaign echoes (**leaguer**). Travel further afield opens up fresh perspectives; images of **geographical** discovery applied to the sexual experience dramatically emphasize the revolution in thinking which had been necessary for the implications of a New World to be grasped. Part of the same momentous process is the shift from the old herbals and beast books to modern biology. The botanist, like the lapidarist (**loadstone**), was apt to describe his subject in terms of human sexuality, providing a springboard for the eighteenth-century erotic parodist (**Arbor vitae**; *St. James’s Post* 341, 27–9 March 1717, notes a spurious gardening book issued by Edmund Curll). Religious controversy and bigotry are always productive (**bugger**), since charges of sexual irregularity make a potent weapon against **Jew** or **Jesuit**, or those frequenting the **conventicle** (**Family of Love, fellow feeling, fructify, lecture**).

Sexual references to the **Dutch** during the seventeenth century provide a

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graph of changing international relations. Allusions to the **Turk** are complicated by exotic fascination coupled with a fear that only gradually subsided after Lepanto; and mentions of the **Italian** also exhibit a double response. But the arrival of an Italian homoerotic culture shows up in the emergence of terms like **catamite** and **Ganymede** at the end of the sixteenth century. This differs from the court culture of the later seventeenth century, which conspicuously does not extend acceptance to practising homosexuals at other social levels. Court culture transcends, while lower-class deviation embodies, that detested social fragmentation. The resultant hounding, however, does bring into print for the first time some of that subculture's vernacular (**marriage**). But the two great obsessions of the time were pox and cuckoldry. The former, product and symbol of expanding horizons, quickly generated a formidable vocabulary of its own; the latter, in its paranoid form, arrived from southern Europe with an already developed imagery.

Investigation has taken in manuscript as well as printed sources, but the times when a Thomason tract or similar item has yielded a completely unsuspected expression give a hint of how much must never have been recorded at all. Pre-nineteenth-century use of **dick** for penis has left only the most fleeting impression; and terms like *dipping one's wick* (**candle**) or *spunk* (**tinder**) are recorded only from a time well after the conditions which brought them into use had disappeared. But the sexual imagination of the Tudors and Stuarts has left a strong imprint, indispensable evidence for the period at large.

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# How to use the Dictionary

Reference to authorship has sometimes been simplified so as to show which text of, say, *The Revenger's Tragedy* has been used rather than who wrote it. Commoner translations are indicated by the translator's name followed by that of the author in italics: e.g. Urquhart's *Rabelais*; where feasible, they appear in the bibliography under the author's name. Entries are indicated in bold type, cross-referencing to primary and secondary uses being distinguished by 'see' and 'cf.' respectively. To avoid cumbersome repetition, 'q.v.' has been used when the immediately preceding word is the subject for cross-reference.

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# Abbreviations

abl.	ablative
Add.	Additional manuscript
adj.	adjective
adv.	adverb
anon.	anonymous
B.E.	B. E., <i>A New Dictionary of the terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew</i>
BL	British Library
<i>Bull. Inst. Hist. Med.</i>	<i>Bulletin of the History of Medicine</i>
C (with figure)	century
<i>c.</i> (with date)	about
<i>CPR</i>	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i>
<i>CSP</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers</i>
cto	canto
d.	died
dial.	dialect
dict.	dictionary
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
Du.	Dutch
D'Urfey VI.207	refers to vol. and page of <i>Wit and Mirth</i>
ed.	editor
edn	edition
<i>EDD</i>	<i>English Dialect Dictionary</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History</i>
Eng.	English
<i>EPP</i>	<i>English Popular Poetry</i>
etym.	etymology, etymologically
ex	from
F & H	Farmer and Henley, <i>Slang and its Analogues</i>
fem.	feminine
fig.	figurative
Fr.	French
Ger.	German
Gk	Greek
Grose	F. Grose, <i>A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue</i>
Harl.	Harleian manuscript
Heb.	Hebrew
ibid.	same location
intrans.	intransitive
It.	Italian
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
Lat.	Latin
lit.	literal

masc.	masculine
ME	Middle English
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
med.	medieval
MHG	Middle High German
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Modern Philology</i>
MS.(S)	manuscript(s)
<i>N&amp;Q</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
Norw.	Norwegian
NY	New York
obs.	obsolete
OE	Old English
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OF	Old French
OHG	Old High German
ON	Old Norse
OSw.	Old Swedish
pl.	plural
<i>POAS</i>	<i>Poems on Affairs of State</i>
<i>POSO</i>	<i>Poems on Several Occasions</i>
ppl	participial
pple	participle
Q	quarto
rev.	revised
rpt(d)	reprint(ed)
sb.	substantive
Sc.	Scandinavian
S.D.	stage direction
sing.	singular
<i>SND</i>	<i>Scottish National Dictionary</i>
Sp.	Spanish
<i>Sh.Q.</i>	<i>Shakespeare Quarterly</i>
st.	stanza
suppt	supplement
s.v.	see under
Sw.	Swedish
tr.	translation; translated by
trans.	transitive
transf.	transferred
UP	University Press
US	America(n)
vb, vbl	verb, verbal

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