

SHAKESPEARE'S BAWDY



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*A LITERARY & PSYCHOLOGICAL
ESSAY
AND A COMPREHENSIVE
GLOSSARY*

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Preface

IN the 18th Century, this book, or one like it, could have been published; in the Victorian period, not; up till (say) 1930, it would have been deprecated; nowadays, it will—as it should—be taken very much as a matter of course. (The apparently provocative title is merely a convenient abridgement of 'Sexuality, Homosexuality, and Bawdiness in the Works of William Shakespeare'.)

If Shakespearean criticism had not so largely been in the hands of academics and cranks, a study of Shakespeare's attitude towards sex and his use of the broad jest would probably have appeared at any time since 1918. 'Pederasts and pedants have been the curse of Shakespearean biography and criticism' (Hesketh Pearson, 1942): the academic critics (except Professors Dover Wilson and G. Wilson Knight) have, in the main and for most of the time, ignored the questions of homosexuality, sex, bawdiness: with one or two notable exceptions, they have been pitifully inadequate. The non-academic critics have done better on the homosexuality, but none of them has dealt fully, or even satisfactorily, with the normal sexuality and the bawdiness. As I am neither pederast nor pedant, I may be able to throw some light upon a neglected, yet very important, aspect of Shakespeare's character and art.

In order to avoid a too tedious catalogue-effect in the Essay, I have compiled a Glossary of such terms as fall 'within the meaning of the Act'. This Glossary will, I hope, have a value beyond that of a list, however comprehensive; even a value beyond that of the usual conscientious glossary.

The verse-numbering is that of The Shakespeare Head edition, which possesses the merit of presenting the plays in their chronological order.

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INTRODUCTORY

AMONG the most generally interesting and particularly provocative books upon Shakespeare since (say) 1925 are Dover Wilson's magistral edition of Shakespeare's Works, H. Granville-Barker's brilliant Prefaces, G. Wilson Knight's profound studies, Hugh Kingsmill's thoughtful *The Return of William Shakespeare*, Chambers's authoritative *William Shakespeare*, and, in another order, Kenneth Muir & Sean O'Loughlin's *The Voyage to Illyria* and Hesketh Pearson's popular, wind-fresh *A Life of Shakespeare*. (This selection is not intended to belittle such important books as those by Edgar I. Fripp and Leslie Hotson.) None of them,* however, attempts a serious study of the main subject treated in the ensuing pages, whether in the sketch that is this essay or in the glossary, which, self-contained, deals with many themes that, even at this date, could not be handled in an essay designed to meet the needs of students of literature and of lovers of Shakespeare. This is not an *in camera* monograph for professional sexologists.

* * *

Little-minded men and women, [as *The Times Literary Supplement* said in a leader entitled 'Artist and Public' in its issue of August 17, 1940], write and paint their rubbish and the public laps it up, to the degradation of its taste. But the large-minded artist will always find within himself a great deal in common with the common people. *We have given up supposing that Shakespeare's sensational plots and bawdy jokes were only a high-brow's concessions to the groundlings.*† The modern consciousness of responsibility to the public in general will incline the large-minded artist to brave any exquisite sneers at the seductions of popularity, of royalties, of the box-office and so forth, and to make the most, not the least, of everything in him which is common

* Several of those books do, inevitably, touch briefly upon Shakespeare's attitude towards sex and bawdiness: and in a notable manner. At the risk of appearing egotistic, I intend to set forth the views of only one person.

† The italics are mine.

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to all men. It is no business of the artist, as artist, to educate the public. It is the very core of his business so to present his vision of truth that it can be shared and trusted by as many as possible when first he puts it forth, and by more and more as the public is trained in knowledge and judgment.

All this is almost what Shakespeare himself might have said for he knew what he was about in his plays and his poems; knew, too, that his work would survive. He sometimes regretted making himself 'a motley to the view' in his role of actor: he never expressed a doubt of posterity's opinion of his writings; he had good reason not to fret on that score.

No writer of even half the stature of Shakespeare could doubt that posterity would correctly appraise his worth; although perhaps only a second Shakespeare could adequately evaluate William Shakespeare. Much has been written about his 'universal mind'. But what of his universal soul, his universal sympathy, his universal manhood?

I should not care to say that, during his life, Shakespeare was 'all things to all men',* for that stock-phrase has, in certain circles, come to have *une signification assez louche*, but he does seem to have been 'most things to all decent men'. Throughout his writings, as obviously in his life, Shakespeare reveals, occasionally in an explicit, generally in an implicit way, that in his spirit, his mind, his emotions, he strove to reconcile those opposites which, in fact (as sometimes he perceived), made him 'the myriad-minded', the universal-spirited, the catholic-emotioned man he so dazzlingly, so movingly, was in life and in print. In his general outlook and in his attitude towards sex and towards bawdiness, he shows that he was both an idealist and a realist; a romantic and a cynic; an ascetic and a hedonist; an etherealist and a brutalist; a philosopher and 'the average man'; a saint and a sinner; a kindly tolerator and a Juvenal-satirist; an Illuminate and a Worldly-Wise; a strict moralist and a *je-m'en-fichiste*; a glowing optimist ('How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world') and a Werther-cum-Hardy victim of *Weltschmerz*; a believer in a God-lovelied heaven and a pedestrian with feet scarce-lifting from earth all too earthy; the most lambently lyrical and dew-sweet of poets (*Romeo and Juliet*)

* 'I am made all things to all men', 1 *Corinthians*, ix 22. For the Greek original and the Vulgate rendering, see my *A Dictionary of Clichés*.

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and the most materialistically *terre à terre* of soured prose-writers (Pompey, Apemantus, the Porter in *Macbeth*); the most exacerbated libido-driven, yet expert, sensualist and—via *l'homme moyen sensuel*—the purest, most innocent novice; the subtlest thinker and the simplest emotionalist; an Ariel of the further empyrean and a Caliban of the nearest mud; a dialectical Portia and a love-living Juliet; a Cordelia and a Goneril; an Imogen and a Gertrude; a Cleopatra and a Miranda; an Antony and a Brutus; a Coriolanus and a tribune, a married man—a bachelor—a monk. He was in his life, as he is to us now, all these persons and many more, with all the intermediary types and stages thrown in, with all *their* variations and nuances of character and temperament.

Not so strange, then, that Shakespeare's spirit, mind, and body, as expressed in his life and his works, should have been the arena on which was fought an almost continuous battle between forces the highest and the lowest, the best and the worst, the most spiritual and the most anti-spiritual; nor is it strange that he should bitterly have resented that compromise which he was obliged to make rather more often than was consonant with his deep-based contempt for compromise. Shakespeare was at the back of my mind when, in 1939, I wrote* a passage elaborating this theme: the tragedies of unavoidable compromise and of 'the world's slow stain'.

If ever there were a man filled with the joy and sap of life, it was Shakespeare; and if ever there were a man compact of spiritual needs and loveliest and noblest aspirations, it was Shakespeare. He could muse and meditate with the most meditative, also could he talk and do things with the best conversationalist and the most energetic man of action. Thinker, yet not remote from the stressful hurly-burly; dreamer, yet practical businessman; deliberate sater of that desirous, sex-hungry body, yet merciless contemner of his own yielding; condemning too his dark mistress, yet continuing to love the woman she might have been—and, for his happiness, should have been; never finding the ideal love, yet forever seeking it, for he knew that such love is, this side heaven, man's most abiding joy and content and safety; expressing the physical aspect of love in its most intimate details, either with frank joyousness and

* In a long essay on *The Spectator*, published in San Francisco by the Book Club of California.

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animal spirits or with a self-reviling brutality and as if moved by an irresistible need to cleanse, not merely his bosom but his entire system, of this most perilous stuff, yet with his eyes upon a starry portal that might allow him, spirit-weary, mind-lorn, body-aching, to enter a house of tranquillity: complete and enduring union with such a woman as could joyously, unquestioningly, bring him the peace and the bliss of perfect understanding, unreserved sympathy, and an unflawed understanding. He never found that woman, that home, that peace.

If the world blamed him for the frankness that spared nothing, he did not care: he might almost have been the epigrammatist that declared, 'A dirty mind is a constant joy', or the literary critic that, of a novel by Maupassant, had the courage to say, 'A book about cads, for cads; but jolly good reading'*: nevertheless, he deeply cared that, however often and however outspokenly he might describe the dirt, he should also praise that to which he aspired: the true, the beautiful, and the good.

Shakespeare was, physically, a pagan; also, he took a lively, very curious interest in sex. He was no mere 'instinctive' sensualist, but an intellectual voluptuary and a thinker keenly, shrewdly, penetratingly, sympathetically probing into sex, its mysteries, its mechanism, its exercise and expertise, and into its influence on life and character. And being the world's most supple as well as most majestic (he could out-play Milton on the verbal organ), subtlest as well as strongest writer, he expressed his views on love and passion and sex, with a power and pertinence unrivalled by other great general writers and with a picturesqueness unapproached by the professional amorist writers; the latter excel him only in technical details and in comprehensiveness, and then only because he was not concerned to write a *bréviaire divin de l'amour*, an *ars amoris*, a *Married Love*.

Before we pass to some account of the non-sexual bawdy, of homosexuality, and of sex in Shakespeare, let us obtain a prefatory idea of his approach to and treatment of sex by looking at that system of imagery which he exhibited in English and which was imitated by the 17th Century amatory poets, the 18th Century amorists, and by such 19th Century writers as Meredith (a little), Swinburne (much), and Maurice Hewlett (continuing into the

* I quote from memory and with conscious inaccuracy; that, however, is the true sense of the reviewer's verdict.

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present century): the geography and topography of the female sexual features.*

Vaguely topographical is the passage at *Romeo and Juliet*, II i 17–33, but as it is insufficiently general and various for our present purpose, it must be omitted. Much superior is the passage at *Venus and Adonis*, verses 229–240, where Venus, passionately hugging Adonis, seeks thus to convert his reluctance to ardent desire and amorous deeds:

‘Fondling,’ she saith, ‘since I have hemm’d thee here
Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:
Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry,
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

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

The general sense is clear: clear, too, is most of the imagery. I do not care to insult anybody’s knowledge or intelligence by offering a physiological paraphrase, nevertheless the inexpert reader would perhaps do well to consult the following terms in the glossary: **park, deer, feed, mountain, dale, fountain, bottom-grass, plain, hillock, brakes.**†

And, likewise ‘in the order of their first appearance’, the glossary will, at **country, Ireland, buttocks, bogs, heir, cliff** (sense 1), **Spain, Belgia, Netherlands, low**, prove not unuseful to those who, rightly or wrongly, have less than complete faith that the acuity of their perceptions will, in its full signification, elucidate every sexual reference in the famous passage at III i 110–136 of *The Comedy of Errors*, where Antipholus of Syracuse and Dromio of Syracuse discuss the monstrously fat kitchen-wench that is being considered by the latter as a bride:

* That the same has, in English, never been done for men’s is significant: social inhibitions, the restriction of women’s emancipation to the spheres of politics and the professions, are the main causes: but a female ‘geographer’ will probably arise within the next twenty years.

† Heavy type in this Essay: words to be found in the Glossary.

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Antipholus. Then she bears some breadth?

Dromio. No longer from head to foot than from hip to hip: she is spherical, like a globe; I could find out countries in her.

Antipholus. In what part of her body stands Ireland?

Dromio. Marry, sir, in her buttocks: I found it out by the bogs.

Antipholus. Where Scotland?

Dromio. I found it by the barrenness; hard in the palm of the hand.

[*With reference to agricultural infertility and to the legendary close-fistedness*]

Antipholus. Where France?

Dromio. In her forehead; arm'd and reverted, making war against her heir.

Antipholus. Where England?

Dromio. I look'd for the chalky cliffs, but I could find no whiteness in them; but I guessed it stood in her chin, by the salt rheum that ran between France and it.

Antipholus. Where Spain?

Dromio. Faith, I saw it not; but I felt it hot in her breath.

Antipholus. Where America, the Indies? [I.e., *the West Indies*.]

Dromio. O, sir, upon her nose, all o'er embellish'd with rubies, carbuncles, sapphires, declining their rich aspect to the hot breath of Spain; who sent whole armadoes of caracks to be ballast at her nose.

Antipholus. Where stood Belgia, the Netherlands?

Dromio. O, sir, I did not look so low.

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To make of this a section, it is necessary to include the merely coarse and vulgar element, and even that element has to enlist several words and phrases that are vulgarisms only in the philological sense. Shakespeare was not a Rabelais: he took very little pleasure in the anatomical witticism and the functional joke unless they were either witty or sexual. Scatology he disdained, and non-sexual coprology he almost entirely avoided; if one may essay a fine, yet aesthetically important distinction, Shakespeare may have

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had a dirty mind, yet he certainly had not a filthy mind. But then Keats as well as Byron, Tennyson as well as Swinburne, had dirty minds, and I have yet to hear someone say that Keats, Byron, Tennyson, and Swinburne were the worse poets for having been dead neither above the ears nor below the waist. Dryden was no mealy-mouth; Pope had a sexually malicious mind (that of the frustrated weakling); the austere Milton could, in the Sin-Chaos-Night verses in Book II of *Paradise Lost*, emulate the Sycorax-Caliban material in *The Tempest*; the Poets' Poet, in *The Faerie Queen*, permitted himself some highly suggestive passages. Even the author of *Songs of Innocence* was not so innocent as English men and women seem to expect their poets to be. Not all Scots have been tolerant towards Dunbar and Burns. More briefly: these poets were not so very dirty-minded, after all. They were men, not lay figures.

But to return to Shakespeare's non-sexual bawdy. What does it comprise? Nothing more than a few references to urination and chamber-pots; to defecation and close-stools; to flatulence; to podex and posteriors. Shakespeare was no coprophagist: most of the references are cursory: only three or four references show any tendency on Shakespeare's part to linger over them; where he does linger, it was for the pleasure of indulging such abundance of wit as few commentators and readers have fully* grasped.

The references to urine and urination are hardly worth mentioning,† except for two. Of that clay-footed piece of austerity, Angelo, somebody tartly remarks, 'When he makes water, his urine is congeal'd ice' (*Measure*, III ii 111-112). And in *Macbeth* the Porter, listing urine as one of the three things of which drink is 'a great provoker', ends his enumeration with the concise and witty words, 'In conclusion, [drink] equivocates him in a sleep, and giving him the lie, leaves him' (II iii 26-37), where *lie* means not only 'a falsehood' but also 'chamber-lie' (urine). To which we might perhaps add *Twelfth Night*, I iii 126.

As for defecation, Shakespeare barely touches on it as a bodily process except at siege: at close-stool twice, and twice at jakes, he

* A claim that I am far from being fatuous enough to make for myself; probably I have missed some of Shakespeare's wittiest scabrosities.

† Nevertheless, I suppose that I should be shirking my duty if I did not refer the curious to chamber-lie, charged chambers, jordan, leak, make water, piss, stale (noun, sense 2), and urine.

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refers to the equivalents of the commode and the privy. *Jakes*, however, does in the allusive shape *Ajax*, afford the dramatist the opportunity of making a neat though scabrous pun in *Love's Labour's Lost*, v ii 571-572: and a pun not at all scabrous in *Lear*, ii ii 125-126, 'None of these rogues and cowards But Ajax is their fool', which may fairly be described as 'rubbing their noses in the dirt'. Shakespeare had not that simple type of mind, so common among the 'hearties', which guffaws its delighted appreciation of long and tedious stories about being 'taken short'.

Flatulence was, in Shakespeare's day, the source and the target of humour and wit among all classes: nowadays, its popularity as a subject is, in the main, confined to the lower and lower-middle classes and to morons elsewhere. The days when, as at the end of the 17th Century, a pamphlet dealing with noisy venting and written by a pseudonymous Don Fartaudó could be published and enjoyed and when the ability to play tunes by skilfully regulating and controlling one's windy expressions was regarded as evidence of a most joyous and praiseworthy form of wit,—such days have 'gone with the wind'. At *break wind* there is a punning on *wind* = breath = words on the one hand, flatulence on the other: at *vent* there are two direct statements. In *Othello*, at iii i 6-11, occurs a passage that contains at least four puns: one on *thereby hangs a tale*, one on *wind-instrument*, one on *tail*, a fourth on *tale*, thus:

Clown. Are these, I pray you, wind-instruments?

First Musician. Ay, marry, are they, sir.

Clown. O, thereby hangs a tail.

First Musician. Whereby hangs a tale, sir?

Clown. Marry, sir, by many a wind-instrument that I know.

In *Hamlet* (ii ii 396-401) we read:

Hamlet. My lord, I have news to tell you. When Roscius was an actor in Rome,—

Polonius. The actors are come hither, my lord.

Hamlet. Buz, buz!

Polonius. Upon mine honour,—

Hamlet. Then came each actor on his ass.

Hamlet, already possessed of the news, as, referring to Roscius, he subtly shows the far from subtle Polonius, is irritated by the old busybody's stupidity: to indicate his irritation, he makes that 'rude noise', imitative of the breaking of wind, which, from prob-

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ably even before Shakespeare's acting days, has been 'the gods' and the groundlings' means of showing their disapproval of bad acting, and thus repeats his intimation that he knew all about the arrival of the actors. When Polonius, thinking that this unexpectedly coarse 'raspberry' (or *rarzer*, as the Cockney prefers to call it) signifies the prince's disbelief, solemnly avers, 'Upon mine honour', Hamlet puns on the word **honour** and impugns Polonius's conception of honour by saying, 'Then came each actor on his ass',* thus passing from wind-breaking to the source of the noise.

This brings us, therefore, to Shakespeare's allusions to the **butt** of the human body: the **bum**, **buttocks** or **holland** or **posteriors** or **tail** (sense 3) or **tale** (sense 2) or **rump** or, to adopt the deliberate perversion, **ass**. In addition to referring the reader to the Glossary entries at those terms, I need only remark that, in these passages, Shakespeare is never filthy: he is broad, ribald, healthily coarse, unsqueamishly natural, and unaffectedly humorous, with a humour that would have appealed to that old lady who, on being asked by a youth that had noticed she was squashing one of her parcels, 'Do you know what you're sitting on, mother?', replied, 'I *ought* to, young man: seeing that I've been using it for seventy years'. Shakespeare never exclaims 'Oh, shocking!', never sniggers: he fails—very naturally—to see that there is any occasion to be shocked: and to him the subject calls for a hearty laugh, not a prurient snigger.

3

HOMOSEXUAL

LIKE most other heterosexual persons, I believe the charge against Shakespeare; that he was a homosexual; to be, in the legal sense,

* I owe the 'ass = fundament' explanation to the late Crompton Rhodes. (For further details, see *raspberry* in the 3rd edition of *Songs and Slang of the British Soldier*.)

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'trivial': at worst, 'the case is not proven'; at best—and in strict accordance with the so-called evidence, as I see it*—it is ludicrous.

The charge was first brought in 1889 by a homosexual (Oscar Wilde); it was renewed, exactly a decade later, by another; it was again renewed, at a second interval of ten years, by yet a third; and, roughly three decades later still, the subject—if we ignore several unimportant intermediate attempts—was, not very convincingly, re-opened. The theme has, since the world-war of 1914–1918, been touched on by several notable writers whose heterosexuality is not in doubt.

'With the publication of *The Portrait of Mr W. H.*, the Sonnets came into their own, and homosexuals were heartened to feel that there was no *prima facie* reason why they should not have written *Hamlet*' (Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Thirties*, 1940): they have persisted in thinking so. But as Oscar Wilde, though his *Portrait* provided excellent reading, egregiously failed to substantiate his charge; so too did Samuel Butler, in 1899, with *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, where the 'evidence' is childish; so too Frank Harris, in 1909, with *The Man Shakespeare*, where he dragged the dramatist down to his own level. A more temperately considered case was presented in that modern book to which I have already referred but which, for obvious reasons, I do not intend to particularize: yet, on the evidence presented even there, no jury of twelve good men and true (scholars) would hesitate to bring in a verdict of 'not guilty' and to add the rider, 'This charge should never have been laid'.

To re-examine the 'evidence' adduced by the homosexuals (as pathetically eager to prove that 'Shakespeare is one of *us*' as the Germans are to prove that he was a German) would be a waste of time; but I should like to refer my heterosexual readers—if they have not already consulted them—to Hugh Kingsmill's *The Return of William Shakespeare* and his friend Hesketh Pearson's 'Penguin', *A Life of Shakespeare*, where these two keen-witted, healthy-minded 'debunkers' (who love their Shakespeare) have some trenchant remarks† to make.

* To the counter-charge, 'But then you, perhaps, are blind', I answer: being as yet unimpaired with senility and having, for some thirty years, handled masses of evidence whether explicit or implicit, external or internal, and possessing an open mind, I think that I may, unconceitedly, claim to be a competent assessor and judge.

† Later in this section, I shall quote several of Hesketh Pearson's.