

On Shakespeare, Syphilis and His Naughty Synonyms for Penis

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Why did Shakespeare use so many naughty synonyms for penis in his plays?

Methods: Shakespeare's canon of 38 plays was scanned for his word play for penis.

Results: Six broad types of naughty synonyms for penis can be categorized. These include: anatomy, sports, warfare, gardening and farming, domestic items and miscellaneous. 22 examples are offered from 16 plays namely, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *Cymbeline*, *Henry IV (Part 2)*, *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Troilus and Cressida*. I propose four reasons. (1) raging syphilis disease in Europe during the quarter century (1588-1611) in which these plays were written, (2) sheer dramatic entertainment for the peasant audience, (3) Shakespeare's linguistic creativity, and (4) Shakespeare's interest in sex-related metaphors. The Latin word 'penis' came to be used in English only 77 years after Shakespeare's death. Shakespeare could have introduced 'penis' into his plays, because he did use many Latin words and phrases in his plays.

Conclusion: The omission of 'penis' word among Shakespeare's canon cannot be explained by the playwright's lack of Latin knowledge.

KEY WORDS

male sexual organ, plays, reproductive system, syphilis

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare, the foremost playwright in English language, died on April 23, 1616, at the age of 52^{1,2)}. This year marks the fourth centenary of his death. The city of London, where Shakespeare practiced his trade between 1590 and 1614 probably had a population between 250,000 to 350,000. Starvation, diseases including bubonic plague and venereal diseases were rife. Almost a third of the population were poor and life expectancy for men was less than 40 years. Infant mortality was high³⁾.

Why did Shakespeare use so many naughty synonyms for penis^{3,4)} in his plays?

METHODS

Shakespeare's canon of 38 plays was scanned for his word play for penis⁵⁻⁷⁾. The names of plays are indicated in italics. Following the style of Zekman and Davis⁸⁾, Arabic numerals are used for act, scene and line, separated by dots. It should be noted that the number of the line varies according to the different editions of Shakespeare's works, belonging to different periods.

RESULTS

A classification of Shakespeare's naughty synonyms for penis (derived from Partridge⁹⁾) is shown in Table 1. Six broad types can be noted. These include: anatomy, sports, warfare, gardening and farming,

domestic items and miscellaneous.

Twenty two examples from the six types are illustrated below. Play characters which speak these penis synonyms are also indicated.

TYPE 1: Anatomy: Using a different anatomical name of nearby regions (but not, nose) as euphemism for penis.

(1) **lag end** [*Henry VIII*, 1.3.32-35]

Sir Thomas Lovell: And understand again like honest man,
Or pack to their old play fellows. There, I take it,
They may, *cum privilegio*, 'oui' away
the *lag end* of their lewdness and be laughed at.

The Latin phrase, *cum privilegio* means 'with privilege'. 'oui' = wear away.

(2) **loins** [*Julius Caesar*, 2.2.319-321]

Ligarius: By all the gods that Romans bow before,
I hear discard my sickness. Soul of Rome,
Brave son derived from honourable *loins*.

(3) **nose** and instrument [*Othello*, 3.1.3-4]

Clown: Why, masters, ha your *instruments* been in
Naples, that they speak i'th' *nose* thus?

In the above-stated lines from clown character, nose is used as double entendre; first, nasal bones are damaged by syphilis during the late manifestation of the disease. Secondly, nose is used as a synonym for penis. The reference to Naples means that syphilis was then rife at Naples (Neapolitan), and French called this disease as Neapolitan disease.

(4) **tail** [*Cymbeline*, 4.2.145-146]

Belarius: If we do fear this body hath a *tail*

Received on December 28, 2015 and accepted on April 12, 2016

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Table 1. Classification of Shakespeare's naughty synonyms for Penis

Type	Examples
1 anatomy	lag end, little finger, loins, nose, tail
2 sports	Cupid's arrow, hook, horn
3 warfare	bugle, dart, lance, pike, pistol, poll-axe, potent regiment, standard, sword, weapon
4 gardening and farming	holy thistle, pizzle, popp'rin pear, potato fin-ger, prick, root, stake, stalk, thorn
5 domestic items	bauble, cock, cod piece, distaff, instrument, jewel, needle, organ, pen, pin, pipe, stump, tool, yard
6 miscellaneous	member, pillicock, R (probably an euphemism for prick), Roger, thing

derived from sources: Partridge⁴, Schmidt⁹

more perilous than the head.

TYPE 2: Sports: Engaging in sex is equated to sports like activity between the sexes.

(5) **Cupid's arrow** [*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.205-209]
Romeo: Well, in that hit you miss. She'll not be hit with *Cupid's arrow*; she hath ian's wit, and, in strong proof of chastity well armed, from love's weak childish bow she lives unharmed.

(6) **horn** [*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.235-238]
Starveling (tailor): This lantern doth the horned moon present?
Demetrius (suitor to Hermia): He should have worn the *horns* on his head?
Theseus (Duke of Athens): He is no crescent, and his *horns* are invisible within the circumference.

TYPE 3: Warfare: Mate attraction is equated to warfare from male's perspective of persecuting an attractive member of opposite sex.

(7) **pistol** [*Henry IV (part 2)*, 2.4.108-114]
In this particular play, a character's name itself is Ensign Pistol, and he is identified as an 'irregular humorist'.
Ensign Pistol: God save you, Sir John
Sir John: Welcome, Ensign Pistol. Here, Pistol, I charge you with a cup of sack. Do you discharge upon mine hostess.
Pistol: I will discharge upon her, Sir John, with two Bullets.
Sir John: She is *pistol-proof*, sir, you shall not hardly offend her.

(8) **potent regiment** [*Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.6.93-96]
Maecenas: Only the adulterous Antony, most large
In his abominations, turns you off,
and gives his *potent regiment* to a trull
that noises it against us.
The word 'trull' then meant, a lewd and worthless woman.

(9) **Weapon** [*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.32-34]
Samson: My naked *weapon* is out. Quarrel,
I will back thee.
Gregory: How - turn thy back and run?

Check the humorous adjective 'naked' in front of the penis-synonym 'weapon' by Samson, and the retort by Gregory.

TYPE 4: Gardening and farming: These metaphors are also prevalent in farming societies in setting up and building a nuclear family.

(10) **holy-thistle** [*Much Ado about Nothing*, 3.4.74-75]
Margaret: Moral? No, by my troth, I have no moral meaning. I meant plain *holy-thistle*. You may think perchance that I think you are in love.

(11) **popp'rin pear** [*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.36-38]
Mercutio: O Romeo, that she were, O that she were an open-arse, and thou a *popp'rin pear*

(12) **potato finger** [*Troilus and Cressida*, 5.2.55-57]
Thersites: How the devil luxury with his fat rump and potato finger tickles these together!
fry, leachery, fry

(13) and (14) **prick and thorn** [*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4.25-28]
Romeo: Is love a tender *thing*? It is too rough
Too rude, to boist'rous, and it *pricks* like *thorn*.
Mercutio: If love be rough with you, be rough with love
Prick love for *pricking*, and you beat love down.
Note that in Romeo's two lines, three penis-indicative synonyms are used as puns

TYPE 5: Domestic items: Those items prevalent in a household can be easily understood by illiterates as well.

(15) **bauble** [*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.81-85]
Mercutio: now art thou Romeo, now art thou what thou art by art as well as by nature, for this driveling love is like a great natural that runs lolling up and down to hid his *bauble* in a hole.

(16) **Cock** [*Henry V*, 2.1.45-51]
Pistol: The solus in thy most marvellous face,
The solus in thy teeth, and in thy throat,
and in thy hateful lungs, yea in thy maw pardie-
and in which is worse, within thy nasty mouth
I do retort the solus in thy bowels,
for I can take, and Pistol's *cock* is up,
and flashing fire will follow.

(17) **instrument** [*The Taming of the Shrew*, 3.2.62-65]
Hortensio: Madam, before you touch the *instrument*
to learn the order of my fingering,
I must begin with rudiments of art,
to teach you gamut in a briefer sort
In this situation, Hortensio (an amorous man disguises himself as music teacher Licio) and tells his pupil Bianca the above stated lines.

(18) **Little jewel** [*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 4.4.]
Proteus: I hope thou wilt How now, you whoreson peasant where have you been these two days loitering?
Lance: Marry, sir, I carried Mistress Silvia the god you bade me.
Proteus: and what says she to my *little jewel*?
Lance: Marry, she says your god was a cur.

(19) **yard** [*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.661].
Boyet: Loves her by the foot
Dumaine: He may not by the *yard*.
TYPE 6: Miscellaneous

(20) **Pillicock** [*King Lear*, The Folio Text, 3.4.72-]
Edgar: *Pillicock* sat on *Pillicock* Hill; alow, alow, loo, loo
Fool: This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

(21) **'R'** [*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.199-204]
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.
Romeo: Commend me to thy lady.

(22) **thing** [*As You Like It*, 4.1.113-115]
Rosalind: Are you not good?
Orlando: I hope so.
Rosalind: Why then, can one desire too much of a good *thing*?

DISCUSSION

Shakespeare had used between 25,000 and 29,000 different words in his 38 plays and poems^{1,2}, for his 1,280 characters⁶. What could be the probable reasons for Shakespeare's indulgence on this sort of syn-

onyms for penis? I propose four reasons. (1) raging syphilis disease in Europe during the quarter century (1588-1611) in which these plays were written^{9,12}, (2) sheer dramatic entertainment for the peasants who gathered to watch his plays, (3) Shakespeare's linguistic creativity^{3,4}, and (4) Shakespeare's interest in sex-related metaphors. All four reasons are complimentary to each other. That Shakespeare himself had suffered from syphilis had been hypothesized by Ross¹³.

The audience who patronized Shakespeare's plays were semi-literate and rather unsophisticated, by modern standards. Historians also note that they could be unruly⁷.

Thus, it may not be wrong to infer that Shakespeare probably used his literary wand in thrall to silence his unruly audience.

The Latin word 'penis' came to be used in English only 77 years after Shakespeare's death. According to the authentic Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest use was in 1693. Shakespeare could have introduced 'penis' into his plays, because he did use many Latin words and phrases in writing his plays. Schmidt's lexicon provides four distinct varieties of Latin use by Shakespeare; 71 single words, 16 phrases and sentences quoted from other authors, 22 popular and proverbial phrases and 18 composed by the poet himself⁹. In addition, medicine related Latin words or phrases which appear in Shakespeare's plays include *manus* (hand), *pia mater* (i.e., brain), *sanguis* (blood), *unguem* (nail) and *Medice, te ipsum* (Physician, heal thyself)⁹.

CONCLUSION

The omission of the Latin 'penis' word for male sexual organ among Shakespeare's canon cannot be explained by the playwright's lack of

Latin knowledge.

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