

Shakespeare's Bawdy Language



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Shakespeare is renowned around the world as the great dramatic poet and playwright whose thirty-six plays are now deservedly translated into more than forty languages. “No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of *The Works of William Shakespeare*” (Harrison, 1991: 11).

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old to Modern English had taken place. Rigid notions about standards and standardized positions had not yet been established in grammars. However, the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare's linguistic inventiveness. In the power of the word Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant to experiment with the language. Surely, Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment and to indulge lavishly.

In 1818, Thomas Bowdler, an English editor, published an edition of Shakespeare's works in which bawdy words and expressions were omitted because Shakespeare's works could not “with propriety be read in a family” (Hulme, 1962: 97). Since this work of Bowdler's was introduced, the term ‘bowdlerism’ has been a part of the English vocabulary. Here is an example of ‘bowdlerism’ from “Othello”.

Yago: *Your daughter and Moor are now making the beast with two backs.* (1.1)

Bowdler's attempt at ‘improvement’ results in the following: *Your daughter and Moor are now together.*

Michael Macrone states that the dramatist lived in a “naughty time and worked in a naughty business. As he began his career in London, sometime in the late 1580s, civic leaders and religious authorities considered the theatre extremely disreputable and even dangerous. In 1594, Lord Mayor of London pleaded with Queen Elizabeth's Council to tear down all the theatres, for they were places of meeting for all vagrant persons and masterless men that hang about the City, thieves, horse-stealers, whoremongers, cheaters, cony-catching persons, practisers of treason, and other such like ” (Macrone, 1983: 134).

Here are some examples from Shakespeare's lewd lexicon:

Assail, assault, verb and noun, respectively for laying siege to a lady's chastity.

Front her, board her; woo her; assail her; Sir Toby urges. (Twelfth Night, 1.3)

Praising the chaste Imogen as **goddess-like**, Pissanio notes that she resists **such assaults/As would take in some virtue** (Cymbeline, 3.2)

Bawdy language is also used by Shakespeare in his Sonnets: **Beauteous thou art**, the

Bard writes to his Young Man, **therefore to be assailed. (41, 6)**

Some readers may feel it is distasteful to investigate the bawdy aspect of the *Sonnets*, for their central theme and greatest beauty are love and friendship in the fullest meaning of these experiences. But the fullest and healthiest and richest fraternity is erotic fraternity.

*So am I as the rich whose blessed key
Can bring him to his sweet up-locked **treasure**,
The which he will not every hour survey
For blunting the fine point of seldom **pleasure**.
Therefore are feasts so seldom and so rare. (Sonnet 52)*

“Treasure” and “pleasure” are erotic puns in Renaissance diction connoting sexual innuendo and at least sexual foreplay.

Bawd, bawdry, bawdy, bawdy-house

The old form **baude** of the adjective **bawdy**, which is nowadays a synonym for **lewd**, originally meant **joyous, gay**. The noun **baudery** meaning **jollity** was more frequently used. **Baude** was loaned from Old French **baud**. Having been transferred from French to English, **bawd** was also used in the meaning of **pander**. It also meant **cat, pussy** or **rabbit** and was also used in slang. Shakespeare himself still used the word in both senses. In *Romeo and Juliet* Mercutio cries out “A bawd, a bawd, a bawd! So ho!” (2.4). “Bawd” means “prostitute” and is also hunter’s slang for “hare.” “So ho” is a hunter’s cry upon spotting the quarry. Romeo asks him what he has spotted, and Mercutio answers with a string of double-entendres: “No hare, sir; unless a hare, sir, in a Lenten pie, that is something stale and hoar ere it be spent” (2.4). A “lenten pie” is one to be eaten during Lent, when you aren’t supposed to eat meat; “hare” is slang for “prostitute”; “hoar” sounds the same as “whore” and means “a female prostitute”; “stale” is another slang word for “prostitute”. The non-bawdy meaning of what Mercutio has just said is “No hare unless it is the kind of hare that someone might fill lenten pie with, in which case it would be ‘stale and moldy’ before it was eaten.” The bawdy meaning is “No hare, unless it is the kind of whore who is only good enough when you cannot get someone better.”

Another example is from Henry IV, when in a nostalgic mood, Falstaff asks Bardolf to sing him a bawdy song. Meanwhile he reminisces about his youth when he went to a bawdy-house ‘not above once in a quarter of an hour’. (3.2)

The word **blood** is also used with reference to sexuality. Instances may be observed in **Othello**: “Merely a lust of the blood” (1.3) and in **The Comedy of Errors**: “My blood is mingled with the crime of lust”. (2.2)

Very often ‘blood’ is associated with sexual passion especially in combination with the notion of ‘heat’. In early medical theories the ‘blood temperature’ was related to liveliness and sexual condition (Webb, 1989: 12), which finds its manifestation in the word **hot-blooded**.

In contrast, calm and cold blood symbolizes absence of passion. “You cannot call

it love; for at your age /The heyday in the blood is tame” Hamlet concludes when the Duchess of Gloucester asks (Hamlet, 3.4); “Hath love in thy old blood no living fire?” (King Richard, 2.1)

Sexual excitement and passion are associated with the image of ‘riding a horse’ in sonnets 50 and 51. Eric Partridge in his *Shakespeare’s Bawdy* highlights more than a hundred erotic horse-metaphors in the plays which seem to be summed up in Cleopatra’s cry: “O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!” In *Venus and Adonis* a dozen stanzas develop a miniature erotic allegory between two horses representing Venus and Adonis, Adonis being unable to deal properly with his horse: “He will not manage her, although he mount her.”

In thinking about Shakespeare’s audience, two factors are of paramount importance. First, despite the mix of class and caste, the group was predominantly uneducated, and secondly, it is grossly inaccurate to assume that Shakespeare’s largest, most appreciative audience was drawn from the aristocrats and the educated. “It was with the common people that he achieved resounding success. For his livelihood and for the survival of theatre as he knew it, Shakespeare, the consummate artist, played to them all” (Lipson, 1985).

Therefore Shakespeare’s allegorical sexual references are accessible for a rude and unpolished stratum of society and are generally put into the mouths of low and ignorant people.

*Hie you to church; I must another way,
To fetch a ladder, by the which you love
Must climb a **bird’s nest** soon when it is dark.
I am the drudge and toil in your delight,
But you shall **bear the burden** soon at night.* (Romeo and Juliet,2.5)

Here, in her bawdy and comic manner, the Nurse instructs Juliet to get married promising to handle the details that will enable Romeo and Juliet to consummate their marriage. She says that she will get a ladder and Romeo will be able to climb up to Juliet’s room to visit her “bird’s nest” - a sexual allusion. She also says that she needs to do all this work for Juliet’s delight, but refers to the sexual act as Juliet’s “burden” to bear at night.

Another example is when Juliet had fallen and bruised her forehead, and the Nurse’s husband had picked her up and made a joke, which three-year-old Juliet made even better:

*“Yea,” quoth he, “Dost thou fall upon thy face?
Thou wilt fall backward when thou hast more wit;
Wilt thou not, Jule?” and by my holidame,
The pretty wretch left crying and said “Ay.”
To see, now, how a jest shall come about!
I warrant, an I should live a thousand years,*

*I never should forget it: "Wilt thou not, Jule?" quoth he;
And, pretty fool, it stinted and said "Ay." (1.3)*

For a woman to "*fall backward*" means to have sex. The Nurse thinks the story is so funny she tells it twice, laughing and probably imitating the cute, innocent way the child said "Ay."

Before criticizing Shakespeare for using bawdy language, one must first take into consideration the needs of the Elizabethan stage. The growth of permanent theatres offered a benevolent environment not concerned with perfection. What theatre wanted was vigour and movement, barbarous shapelessness and irregularity, and these can be found in Shakespeare's plays, which were the product of untutored instinct, not of formal rule.

There are many, however, who would think it best not to give too much attention to this particular area of artistic language. V.K. Whitaker states that "no writer is more moral than Shakespeare in fundamentals. His jests are often as bawdy as any, and he can hunt with a perverse pertinacity for off-color implications in familiar language. But these are on the surface of the man and of his theatre" (Whitaker, 1953: 41).

In the context of the above, it is worthwhile to notice that Shakespeare's bawdy language can 'arouse' difficulties for translators too. In other words an unsolvable problem springs up: how to transfer Shakespeare's bawdy imagery to the possession of another language, another culture? The Armenian translators believed it was necessary to remove matter that was considered indelicate or otherwise objectionable by cleansing morally harmful, offensive or erroneous language. Consequently, in many respects, the imagery or dramatic irony and the figurative, rich language that Shakespeare is so noted for have been lost. So have the fundamental writing principles of contrasting characters. And all these have been sacrificed for the sake of innocence. The translators saved the Bard from himself not allowing the Armenian reader to see, feel or know the intensely rich meaning or purpose Shakespeare wanted his works to have.

References:

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Ի տարբերություն գրական լեզվի գործառնական դրսևորումների, որոնք դուրս չեն գալիս գրական լեզվի նորմի սահմաններից, գեղարվեստական լեզուն իր ինքնատիպությունն ապահովում է տվյալ գրողի անհատական ոճին բնորոշ տարամիտումներով, տվյալ դեպքում՝ գռեհկաբանությունների օգտագործմամբ: Սակայն, գեղարվեստական խոսքին վերապահվող այս ազատությունը, որից էլ օգտվում է Շեքսպիրը իր ստեղծագործություններում, բացարձակ և ինքնանպատակ չէ: Տվյալ դարաշրջանում անպարկեշտ և գռեհիկ համարվող բառերի ու արտահայտությունների առատ կիրառումը պայմանավորված է նաև անգլերենի յուրահատկություններով, լեզվակիրների ազգային-գեղագիտական մտածողությամբ և պատմամշակութային զարգացման առանձնահատկություններով: Յուրաքանչյուր կերպար խոսում է իր լեզվամտածողությամբ, իր աշխարհայացքին, հասարակական դիրքին ու միջավայրին բնորոշ լեզվով: Դրանով էլ Շեքսպիրի գրական հերոսները կենդանություն են ստանում, դառնում վառ անհատականություն: