

## Nicknames and Nonce-names in Shakespeare's Comedies

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NICKNAMES, in the modern sense of substitute, gratuitous, and more or less leechlike forenames, are by no means abundant in Shakespeare's comedies. We certainly appear to have a genuine nickname, though, in Sugarsop, i.e. 'sugarplum' (in *The Taming of the Shrew*, IV.i.91), the concluding name in a series of first names spoken by Grumio as he directs Curtis to call forth the servants to greet Petruchio and his bride.<sup>1</sup> Likewise in *Pericles* (II.i.12-14) two of the fishermen address each other as Pilch 'leather jacket' (?) and Patch-breech. Possibly *these* should be termed quasi nicknames.

Under this designation we could include the names of several of the more or less clownish characters in the comedies: Speed, Moth (pronounced like *mote*, either word being admirable to suggest diminutiveness), Costard (a kind of large apple—applied humorously to the head), Elbow, Froth, Touchstone, and Verges ('verjuice'—with dialectal pronunciation). Verges, however, may have been a surname; Dogberry pretty clearly was.

As students of names are well aware, nicknames are a fertile source of surnames. *Shakespeare* itself is an example and gives us the pattern for *Falstaff* and *Martext*. The appropriateness of the name is, in this last instance, surely meant to be relished, as is true of such names as Aguecheek, Belch, Shallow, Slender, Mistress Quickly (quick + lie), Mistress Overdone, Alice Shortcake, and Kate Keepdown. Often the surnames, as in the cases of Anthony Dull and Peter Simple, are so patly descriptive as to be nicknames in effect. And the effect is heightened when, as is usually true, the surname is used throughout the play to the virtual exclusion of the

forename. In the case of one clownish character, though, Pompey (in *Measure for Measure*), we learn his surname (Bum 'bottom') only when he is brought before an examining magistrate.

Names like Shylock strike us as surnames. However, it has recently been suggested that Shylock is a (contemptuous) descriptive term rather than a true name. Norman Nathan points out that Tubal never calls Shylock by name—also that neither Lorenzo nor his friends use the word Shylock in Jessica's presence.<sup>2</sup>

Assumed names are sometimes descriptive in the manner of nicknames; note Imogen's *Fidèle* (in *Cymbeline*). In *As You Like It* Celia, choosing a name for herself in her self-imposed exile, decides upon *Aliena* as "Something that hath a reference to my state."

Nicknames include familiar forms of Christian, or given, names. More than a dozen different pet forms and diminutives are to be found in Shakespeare's comedies. Kate, a diminutive of Katherina, comes to mind at once, as does Meg, derived from Margaret. The pet form Nell, in *The Comedy of Errors*, might come from Ellen, Eleanor, or Helen;<sup>3</sup> but in *Troilus and Cressida* when Paris speaks of "my Nell" he is of course referring to Helen. Nan is a pet form of Ann, and Maud (coming through French) of Matilda. Maudlin is from the French Madeleine, which goes back to Magdalen. Nick (Bottom) is a pet form of Nicholas, and Robin (Starveling) is a diminutive of Rob, a pet form of Robert. Dick (in Sir Toby's "Dick surgeon") is a nickname for Richard, as Tom is an abbreviation of Thomas. Ed, an abbreviation of Edward, appears in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in the dialect form Yead. Malkin, a diminutive of Moll, a pet form of Mary, had, before Shakespeare's time, become a common noun with the meaning 'kitchen-maid' (*Pericles*, IV.iii.34). Likewise Tib, from Isabel, had taken on the meaning 'a low woman,' as in Marina's lines (*Pericles*, IV.vi.175-76):

". . . doorkeeper to every  
Coistrel that comes inquiring for his Tib."

Jack, a pet form of John, is used in at least four ways: (1) as a forename (Jack Rugby in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*); (2) as a general term for *man* (always coupled with Jill—as in the final scene of *Love's Labour's Lost*); (3) in the compound Jack-a-Lent 'puppet,'

found twice in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; (4) as a term of contempt (= 'knave') in such phrases as these:

- "play the flouting Jack" (*Much Ado About Nothing*)
- "these bragging Jacks" (*The Merchant of Venice*)
- "Jack priest" (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*)
- "Every Jack-slave" (*Cymbeline*)
- "play'd the Jack with us" (*The Tempest*)

Similar to the nicknames, except in the quality of permanence, are the nonce-names—ranging from slightly disrespectful to openly scornful—which various characters fling at one another or apply to someone not present. As might be expected, *Much Ado About Nothing* provides several examples. Beatrice, at the very outset, refers to Benedick with a fencing term, *Signior Mountanto* (he pays her back shortly with *Lady Disdain* and *my Lady Tongue*), and later speaks of Claudio as Count Comfit ('comfit'). The nonce-names Monsieur Love (in Act II) and Lord Lackbeard (in Act V) reflect the changing attitude of Benedick toward Claudio. The scorn in *Pedascule* ('little pedant'), which Hortensio hurls at Lucentio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, is as obvious as the expression is amusing. In *As You Like It* Jaques and Orlando close a diverting bout at repartee, during which they have desired to be better strangers, with:

- "I'll tarry no longer with you. Farewell, good Signior Love."
- "I am glad of your departure. Adieu, good Monsieur Melancholy."

In *Pericles* Helicanus characterizes a flattering lord with *Signior Sooth here*; in *The Tempest* Stephano calls Caliban *Mooncalf*, and Antonio speaks of Gonzalo as *this Sir Prudence*. Ulysees' reference, in *Troilus and Cressida*, to Achilles as *Sir Valour* contains more than a grain of irony, whereas the context in *The Comedy of Errors* makes it quite clear that Dromio of Syracuse's name for the greasy kitchen-wench Nell, Dowsabel ('*douce et belle*'), is ironically applied.

The nonce-name shades off almost imperceptibly into the abusive epithet. In *Measure for Measure* (III.ii.52) Lucio addresses Pompey as *Trot* (literally 'old woman'); in about half the editions which I have consulted the initial *t* of *Trot* is not capitalized. So far as I have observed, no editor capitalizes the initial *c* of *crack-hemp*

('gallows-bird'), a name which the outraged Vincentio in *The Taming of the Shrew* hurls at his dissembling servant Biondello.

From the rich store of nounce-names in Shakespeare's comedies a few more examples will suffice. In the concluding scene of *All's Well That Ends Well* Helena addresses Parolles as *Good Tom Drum*. In *Measure for Measure* Mistress Overdone is announced by Lucio, a fantastic, as *Madam Mitigation*. The Host, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, taking advantage of the French physician's limited knowledge of the ways of English, addresses him as *Mounseur Mockwater*. Benedick speaks of the conscience as *Don Worm*, thus reminding us of the medieval practice of representing the conscience under the symbol of a serpent. And when, in *The Winter's Tale* (II.iii.74-75), the incensed king upbraids Antigonus with

"Thou dotard! thou art woman-tir'd, unroosted  
By thy dame Partlet here"

our minds flash back to happier scenes in an incomparable tale told by a certain nun's priest.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The numeration of acts, scenes, and lines is that of the New Cambridge Edition, *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, edited by William Allan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill and published in 1942 by the Houghton Mifflin Company.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Nathan, "Three Notes on *The Merchant of Venice*," *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, Vol. 23, pp. 152-173.

<sup>3</sup> See E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (New York, 1947) under the entry *Nell(y)*.