

TWO NOTES ON SHAKESPEARE

Fontibell and Fountains

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Abstract

In *All's Well that Ends Well* (4.2.1), Bertram addresses Diana as *Fontibell*. This intentional misnaming may be part of his attempt to seduce her by reference to her sex organ, as *Fontibell* can be interpreted as "beautiful vagina."

Act 4, scene 2, of *All's Well that Ends Well* opens with:

BERTRAM: They told me that your name was Fontibell.

DIANA: No, my good lord, Diana. (lines 1-2)¹

As has been noted, *Fontibell* means "beautiful fountain" (Levith 97) — though it would not be amiss to suggest a double entendre, "beautiful font or basin."

No one, as far as I have been able to discover, has mentioned a reason for Shakespeare's invention of the name or, for that matter, why Bertram does not know her name, since he has solicited her earlier. Helena gives evidence of this attempted seduction when speaking to the Widow about Bertram:

May be the amorous Count solicits her
In the unlawful purpose.

To which the Widow replies:

He does indeed. (3.5.68-70)

Surely Bertram's greeting in act 4, scene 2, is not an inquiry about her real name, and there is no evidence that anyone has in fact told Bertram that her name was *Fontibell*.

In Shakespeare, *fountain* can mean "vagina." In fact, he was not the first to employ the word with this connotation; it also appears in the *Geneva Bible*, which Shakespeare frequently utilized, in a section of

Leviticus condemning specific sexual acts:

The man that lieth with a woman . . . , & openeth her
fountaine, and she open the fountaine of her blood, they
shall both be cut off from among their people. (20:8)

Clearly, the word *fountain* here means “vagina.” (See also Mark 5:29.)

Othello is using the word in the same way when he says of Desdemona:

The fountain from the which my current runs
Or else dries up: to be discarded thence,
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in. (*Othello* 4.2.59–62)

The specificity of the extended imagery leaves no doubt that Desdemona’s sex organ is intended in Othello’s words.

In *Venus and Adonis* Venus says:

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.
(lines 231–34)

Eric Partridge appears to consider “fountains” as referring to breasts (117). But line 234, with “lower” and “fountains,” surely suggests the vaginal area; and lines 232 and 233, with the words “park” and “dale,” may imply “vagina.”

Thus, when Bertram chooses to call Diana *Fontibell*, he is continuing his previous solicitation by untruthfully suggesting that others have said that she has a beautiful sex organ. When she replies, “No, my good lord, Diana” (4.2.2), she is not only telling him her name, which he should already know, but discreetly reminding him that she shares the values of the goddess of chastity. He answers with “Titled goddess” (4.2.2), though that hardly dampens his pursuit.

While the words *font* and *fountain* both derive from the same Latin word, the former entered Old English directly from Latin (in the sense of a baptismal font) and the latter entered Middle English through French. But in the seventeenth century *font* was commonly used in the sense “fountain,” and, according to the *OED*, was probably a variant of *fount*, rather than an extension of (baptismal) *font*. It is likely that no real distinction was made between them, however.

In inventing the name *Fontibell*, Shakespeare was obviously aware of the goddess Diana's relationship to fountains. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind says:

I will weep for nothing [i. e., without cause] like
Diana in the fountain,² and I will do that when you are
dispos'd to be merry. I will laugh like a hyen, and
that when thou art inclin'd to sleep. (5.1.153-57)

The mythical Diana performed her ablutions with water from a fountain alongside her secluded cave. When Actaeon strove to look at her naked beauty, Diana threw water on him and stag horns grew out of his head (Bulfinch 33-34). Rosalind's analogy is that, like Diana at the fountain, she will frustrate the sexual desires of Orlando.

As for the linking of Diana and Fontibell in *All's Well*, Shakespeare is showing that Diana Capilet will frustrate Bertram's desire for her, just as the goddess Diana frustrated Actaeon.

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Notes

1. All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.
2. In her note to this passage (*Riverside* 392), Anne Barton says that there may be some specific reference here, that is, to a specific fountain. Apparently, statues of Diana were common features in Renaissance fountains.

Works Cited

- Bulfinch, Thomas. *Mythology*. New York: Crowell, 1970.
- Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*. Madison: U of Wisconsin, 1969.
- Levith, Murray J. *What's in Shakespeare's Names*. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1978.
- Partridge, Eric. *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. New York: Dutton, 1960.
- Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.