

# Lexical Ambiguity and Wordplay in Shakespeare

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The title of the present article is "Lexical Ambiguity and Wordplay in Shakespeare", but the word 'ambiguity' is in itself an instance of vague meaning. For this reason, I will begin by making clear what I mean by lexical ambiguity. Ambiguity can be applied to different levels of the language, so three different kinds can be traditionally distinguished:

- a) Syntactic ambiguity: when a sentence can be analysed in several distinct ways, so 'he hit the man with the umbrella', where the sequence 'with the umbrella' is a prepositional phrase that can either modify 'the man' (so, 'the man with the umbrella' stands for 'the man carrying the umbrella') or it can be an adjunct meaning the instrument with which the man was hit.
- b) Grammatical ambiguity: when a word can be interpreted as belonging to two different grammar categories or, within the same part of speech, it can be understood as conveying different grammatical features. For instance, the verb *upset*, being alike in its present and past forms, can be realised as present or past tense in a sentences like 'his comments upset her'.
- c) Lexical ambiguity: when the words have two or more possible meanings. Su posits 'pure lexical ambiguity derives mainly from two sources: polysemy and homonymy' (Su 1994: 32).

I will concentrate mainly on the last type of ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, and highlight how Shakespeare uses this device to play on words. It will be seen how this ambiguity can be obtained by means of the sources mentioned by Su, but there are others that turn out to be equally effective, that is to say, antonymy, synonymy, paronymy, etc.

## 2. REASONS FOR PUNNING

Before attempting a classification of the linguistic mechanisms used by Shakespeare to achieve a humorous effect, I would like to focus on the reasons that can explain the use of this kind of playing upon words. Why did writers like Shakespeare wish to pun, what are the reason for it? There are different factors that can account for this desire:

- 1) First of all, it was a common procedure in Elizabethan writers. From his very first plays Shakespeare exhibits a close knowledge of rhetorical devices, which were

usually included in the textbooks of the period, even if this type of humour was despised later by scholars like Samuel Johnson who claimed a quibble was to Shakespeare 'the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it'. Despite these opinions, it is nowadays recognised as a major poetic device, which is comparable in its effectiveness with the use of recurrent or clustered images (Mahood 1988: 11).

Other reasons adduced by Mahood for the use of punning are:

2) The fact that 'Shakespeare plays with verbal meanings, not because the rethoricians approve of wordplay, but because his imagination as a poet works through puns, or because his characters are placed in situations where it is natural for them to pun, or because puns help to clarify the particular view of life that he seeks to present in a particular play. Shakespeare quibbles as a poet, as a dramatist, and as a dramatic poet; and these divisions, though in part arbitrary, give us three means of approaching to the functions of his word play' (Mahood 1988: 20-21).

3) Thirdly, 'another psychological function of word play which everyone has witnessed or experienced is its use to gain relief from a state of emotional tension' (Mahood 1988: 32). The same view has been followed by other scholars like Hussey (1982: 140-141), who comments on the momentary relief from tension which is provided by punning in the play scene. In this respect Shakespeare notoriously puns in the gravest circumstances. Thus when Mercutio is bleeding to death and says

Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man  
(*Romeo and Juliet*: III.i.103-104)<sup>1</sup>:

The author is playing upon *grave* meaning 'important' or more recently 'serious', and *grave* as a noun, a synonym for *tomb*.

Although critics generally deal with puns by relating them to characters' attitudes, the inclination to pun does not seem a feature of character; Lady Macbeth cannot be considered a funny woman, and she puns as she plots using paronymous words (*guild-guilt*):

If he do bleed  
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal;  
For it must seem their guilt (II. ii. 56-58)

A very similar pun based on the homophony between *gilt* and *guilt* is used in *Henry V*:

Have for the gilt of France, - O guilt indeed!  
Confirm'd conspiracy with fearful France  
And by their hands this grace of kings must die. (II.Prologue.26-28)

4) The final reason adduced by Mahood (1988: 41) lies in the fact that 'the vital wordplay in Shakespeare's writing is that between the characters and their creator, between the primary meanings of words in the context of a person's speech and

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<sup>1</sup> References to Shakespeare's plays and sonnets are quoted from Craig's edition (1919).

their secondary meanings as part of the play's underlying pattern of thought. The chief function of the pun is to connect subject and object, inner force with outer form, the poetic vision with the characters in action that are its theatrical embodiment. The play's the thing -not the elusive mind of the playwright nor the illusory minds of his characters.

Wordplay is one of the most effective means towards the ironic interplay between character and may be anticipatory or retrospective, may imply a difference of values between what the speaker is allowed to say for himself and what the writer and his audience think, or it may simply intensify or widen the speaker's meaning to give it significance beyond the moment of speech'.

Finally we can well quote Ewbank (1986: 51), who summarises some of the above mentioned opinions: 'Shakespeare's interest in the arts of language is as practical, as much directed towards function, as that of rhetoricians. His ultimate interest, after all, is to persuade us, the audience, of the human realities of thought and feeling in his plays'.

### 3. KINDS OF PUNS

Regarding the kind of puns that are found in Shakespeare's plays, they are the usual ones at the time. Elizabethan manuals on Rhetoric usually distinguished two main categories of deviation from plain language: *tropes*, like metaphor, hyperbole, pun, metonymy, etc. and *figures*. Rather than concentrate on Rhetoric, this article aims at analysing the linguistic devices used by the author; however, as they are both intertwined, we will refer to some rhetorical figures which are achieved by means of different linguistic mechanisms.

One of the most common types of wordplay is that derived from the use of homonymous and polysemous words. To the first kind, homonymy, belong those lexical items that having a different origin show graphic and phonetic identity. However, it is not always easy to state whether the words had a common or a different origin as sometimes the past history of the word cannot be traced back. So it is difficult to distinguish between polysemous and homonymous words.

The dividing line between polysemy and homonymy cannot always be easily drawn. In fact, when we look a word up in a dictionary is sometimes classified as one entry and some other dictionary may classify it as two different entries. In this way, homonyms can be the result of the splitting up of two different meanings of a given polysemous word. That's what happened in the case of *flower*, spelled with *-ower*, and *flour* with *-our*. They were originally two meanings of the same item (*flower*) which got specialised to such an extent that nowadays nobody would doubt in considering them as two lexical items.

However we can leave out the semantic implications of the subject and concentrate on the uses that Shakespeare makes of these particular devices. By means of homonyms and polysemous lexical units Shakespeare uses a more narrowly defined figure, ANTANACLASIS, which consists of the repetition of a word used in two different meanings, as when Proculeus reproached his son with waiting for his death and the son replied that he was not waiting for it, Proculeus retorted, 'Well then, I ask you to wait for it'. In this sentence *wait for* acquires the double meaning of 1) 'Look forward to it' and 2) 'Lie in wait'.

A compact instance of antanaclasis comes from *Henry V* (V.i.92) 'To England will I steal, and there I'll steal', where the word *steal* has the double meaning of 1) 'to go, move, depart secretly' and 2) 'to take something away from someone'. A similar example is that in *Twelfth Night* (II.iv.73): 'Give me now leave to leave thee' where *leave* has the meaning of 'permission' as a noun, and 'depart' as a verb; another case can be found in *Hamlet* with the word *matter*, which can be interpreted as 'subject, topic' or 'problem, concern', when Polonius asks Hamlet:

POLONIUS: What do you read, my lord?  
 HAMLET: Words, words, words  
 POLONIUS: What is the matter, my lord?  
 HAMLET: Between who?  
 POLONIUS: I mean, the matter that you read,  
 my lord. (II.ii.195-200)

Very closely linked to this, is DILOGY, which is the use of an ambiguous or equivocal word or expression. This is mainly achieved by means of homonymy. Some clear instances of homonymy are found in the sonnet 135, where all the possible meanings of *will* are present in the passage: *Will* as a noun meaning 'desire, wish, capacity to do something, determination'; as a verb with the same meaning and as an auxiliary to indicate future tense; as a short or pet name for William,

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,  
 And Will to boot, and Will in over-plus;  
 More than enough am I that vex thee still,  
 To thy sweet will making addition thus.  
 Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,  
 Not one vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?  
 Shall will in others seem right gracious,  
 And in my will no fair acceptance shine?  
 The sea, all water, yet receives rain still,  
 And in abundance addeth to his store;  
 So thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will  
 One will of mine, to make thy large Will more.  
 Let no unkind 'No' fair beseechers kill;  
 Think all but one, and me in that one Will

A similar pun is created by playing upon the words *lie* in *Richard II*:

That lie shall lie so heavy on my sword  
 That it shall render vengeance and revenge,  
 Till thou, the lie - giver and that lie do lie  
 In earth as quiet as thy father's skull. (IV.i.66-69)

But perhaps the richest example of this form of wordplay is to be found in Cleopatra's speech as she takes the asp from the basket:

Come thou mortal wretch.  
 With thy sharpe teeth this knot intrinsicate  
 Of life at once untie (V.ii.305-307)



Just to conclude it needs to be said that this article gathers just a few examples of the multiple instances of punning found in Shakespeare, attained by these and other devices, like homophony, for example, which has been hardly mentioned. It should also be highlighted the fact that Shakespeare makes use of these and other linguistic mechanisms from his very early plays and though, some of the puns are clearly dated, as not all ages and cultures respond to wordplay as people in Shakesperean times did, many other puns still help to keep the audience's attention and to achieve the desired humorous effect.

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