


1989

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Recommended Citation

Litt, Dorothy E. (1989) "Nominal Jests in Shakespeare's Plays," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 16, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol16/iss1/5>

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NOMINAL JESTS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS*

Dorothy E. Litt

Nominal jests were very popular among the *literati* of the English Renaissance. The plays and poems of the period are studded with name-play, and Shakespeare, with his lively mind, excelled at the game.¹ Much has been written of his jests on his own name in the Sonnets² and on his name usage in the plays.³ Although much name-play may at times seem trivial or obvious, when it appears in a consistent pattern linked to the play's function we may gain insight into Shakespeare's method and purposes. My first two examples are of name duplication which serve as foreshadowing devices.

It has for long been noticed that in **1 Henry IV** young Hal is contrasted with his nominal counterpart, Harry Hotspur;⁴ what has not been noticed is that this rivalry extends beyond matters of martial courage to include Hotspur's wife Kate. Hal hints at this without naming her, as he mocks Hotspur and his Kate:

I am not yet of Percy's mind, the Hotspur of the north, he that kills me some six or seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast, washes his hands, and says to his wife, "Fie upon this quiet life! I want work." "O my sweet Harry," says she, "How many hast thou kill'd today?" ...I prithee call in Falstaff. I'll play Percy, and that damn'd brawn shall play Dame Mortimer his wife. (2.4.101-110)

Significantly, Hal does not "play Percy" at this time. His "play extempore" (2.4.280) is postponed for two hundred and sixty-five lines, then altered so that Hal plays himself to Falstaff's King Henry IV, and reversed so that Hal plays the king to Falstaff's Hal (2.4.376-481). This exchange of names and roles closes with Hal's promise and threat to banish "old Jack." The scene establishes, in future order of business, the path he is to follow: to "play Percy" to Kate; to play, indeed to become, the king; and to cast off Falstaff. In due order he outplays Percy in battle, is crowned, casts off Falstaff, vanquishes his French adversary and goes on to "play Percy" to his own Kate. At the end of **2 Henry IV** we are reminded of this nominal link as the Epilogue promises to "make you merry with Fair Katherine of France" in the sequel to come (28-29). The formal "Katherine" suggests the hierarchical relationship between the so-called "Dame Mortimer" and the Princess of France.

In **Henry V** the king passionately woos Princess Katherine, naming her "Kate" thirty-one times in two hundred sixty-seven lines (5.2.107-373), recalling that equally passionate moment long before when another Harry and another Kate lovingly conversed; then the name "Kate" had been repeated seven times in twenty-seven lines.⁵ It is not unusual for a nominal echo to carry across from one play to another in Shakespeare's histories; what is unusual is that it is so subtly and wittily done. It seems clear to me that the linkage between the two Kates was in Shakespeare's mind when he first wrote **1 Henry IV** for, although the wife of the historical Henry V was indeed named Katherine, the historical Hotspur's wife was named Eleanor in Shakespeare's source.⁶ Looking back to the earlier play, to the love scene between Hotspur and his wife, indelibly impressed on the mind of anyone who has seen the play performed, it seems that Shakespeare added a golden touch to the scene, only to endow it with greater luster in its recapitulation as "this star of England" (Epilogue 6) wins his bride and promises to continue the Lancastrian dynasty with a boy:

half French, half English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk
by the beard... (5.2.208-9)

fully fulfilling his earlier pledge to "pay the debt I never promised" (**1 Henry IV** 1.2.209).⁷

In *As You Like It* appears a more onomastically complex example. A number of names are either duplicated or paired, foreshadowing in differing ways events which are yet to come.

Orlando and his father share one name, for Orlando is the Italian for Rowland. Jacques comments on this when he superciliously names Orlando "good Signior Love" as Orlando, taking note of Jacques's French name, in turn dubs him "good Monsieur Melancholy" (3.2.292–294).⁸ Through bonds of blood, name, and character with old Sir Rowland de Boys, Orlando is engaged in a quest to prove himself worthy of bearing his father's name.⁹

This quest is heralded by nominal repetition: Orlando speaks of himself as the **youngest son** of Sir Rowland (1.1.56–57), and **Sir Rowland's son** (1.2.232); Celia speaks of him as **Sir Rowland's youngest son** (1.3.28); Adam expands this: "O you memory/ Of old Sir Rowland's" (2.3.3–4); and Orlando twice speaks of the "spirit" of his father in him (1.1.22–23; 1.1.70–71). This bond, which he and the others all insist upon, incurs Duke Frederick's enmity (1.2.226), reinforces Rosalind's love (1.2.235–239), and automatically earns him the love of Duke Senior (2.7.191–196).

The nominal pattern is reinforced by heroic deeds: at the outset Orlando defeats the wrestler, devotes himself to old Adam's welfare in Arden, and saves the life of his wicked brother Oliver. He wins the love and respect of Oliver, his former enemy, so conclusively that the latter promises to give over his inheritance to Orlando. Oliver, moreover, establishes Orlando as the family head, not only in lands but in wisdom, as he asks his younger brother for "consent" to marry Aliena (5.2.8–9).¹⁰

This pattern of prefiguring through name duplication recurs in the naming of the two dukes by the one title. The elder, driven out of power by his younger brother, is named Duke Senior, onomastically establishing his prior claim to the title and adumbrating his ultimate restoration to it by the play's end. Whereas, moreover, the usurper has been given a Christian name, Frederick, the senior Duke has no other name and is therefore named only for his claim to the title.

Nominal duplication operates differently for the two women of the play. Each chooses a second name for her venture into the forest of Arden. Their names, rationally chosen, also adumbrate events to come. Celia decides to name herself Aliena, as "something that hath reference to my state" (1.3.127), a state in which she deserts her father and his court. The alienation she personifies takes on a more profound meaning when she falls in love with and subsequently marries Oliver;¹¹ it is the kind of alienation of which Cordelia speaks when she defies her father. A more somber aspect appears in the fact that she and her father are never reunited. Although we are told that he resides in another part of the forest, he does not appear at her wedding and we have no indication that she means to seek him out or, indeed, that he had any thought of her when he decided to become a hermit.¹² She is never called by her court-name, Celia, in the forest, signalling her alienation from a court to which she will never return as a princess. Even when she meets her uncle, Duke Senior, he, who knows her only by her court-name, greets her as "my dear niece" (5.4.147).

By contrast, Rosalind's court-name is kept alive in Arden by Orlando's verses, which advertise it on every tree. Touchstone parodies them by repeating her name; Jacques, tiring of finding it everywhere, decides he dislikes the name (3.2.265).

Her forest-name is more playfully chosen: she names herself for Jove's cup-bearer, Ganymede. She thereupon invokes Jove's name to define and redefine herself and Orlando, first in her self-naming: "I'll have no worse a name than Jove's own page" (1.3.124). Her second reference identifies Jove with love and with her own feelings:

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Jove, Jove! this shepherd's passion
Is much upon my fashion. (2.4.60–61)

Her third reference is more telling. It occurs as she and Celia gaily engage in a metaphorical naming of Orlando:

Celia. I found him under a tree, like a dropped acorn.
Rosalind. It may well be call'd Jove's tree, when it drops [such] fruit. (3.2.234–37)

This light-hearted exchange operates on several levels. (1) It establishes two views of Orlando: Celia's cool, objectified *acorn* (a mere boy) is countered by Rosalind's more colorful *fruit* (a full-grown man). (2) The concatenation of acorn–Jove's tree–fruit is redolent of Ovid's tale of the Golden Age:

And men themselves contented well with plaine and simple food,
That on the earth by nature's gift without their travell stooede,
Did live by Raspis, heppes and hawes, by cornelles, plummes and cherries,
By sloes and apples, nuttes and peares, and lothsome bramble berries,
And by the acornes drop't on ground from *Joves* brode tree in field.
(Shakespeare's Ovid 1:117–121)

Rosalind's is a golden age of love, in contrast to Jacques's pessimistic, indeed iron, age: "the lover,/ Sighing like furnace" (2.7.147–148).¹³ (3) Rosalind recognizes that her forest name is inevitably paired with Jove's; her choice therefore signals a name-quest; it is unlike Orlando's for a right to bear his father's name; it is a quest for Jove. Her view of Orlando, then, as the fruit of Jove's tree is self-correcting: it denies him divinity, while affirming in his humanity some godlike qualities nevertheless; an acorn from Jove's sacred tree is its fruit. It is, moreover, not Jove but his tree's fruit – some distance removed from godhood.

Once Rosalind meets with Orlando her name-quest ends. She mocks his "deifying"¹⁴ the name of Rosalind on trees (3.2.363) – a thrust at her own denial of godhead to him (Jove's tree's fruit) – and goes on to insist that he call her by that name. She no longer needs to bear the name that was emblematic of her quest for him.

The play contains other examples of paired names, the mysteries of which have yet to be revealed. There are two Oliveres and two Jacqueses; one of each pair is brother to Orlando. A very popular ballad, "Sweet Oliver,"¹⁵ is either quoted or parodied by Touchstone when he drives off Sir Oliver Martext (3.3.99–101). Perhaps in that ballad, now lost, might be discovered the secret of the paired Oliveres. All that I have found the two paired sets of names to have in common is that one of each pair leaves the forest while the other remains; Martext is driven out whereas Oliver de Boys says he means to remain there (5.2.12); and Jacques de Boys presumably leaves the forest (we never learn why he entered it) while the melancholy Jacques stays on.

It is also a puzzle to me that Shakespeare, whose Theseus defined the creative act as one which "gives to aery nothing/ A local habitation and a name" (*Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.16–17), has chosen not to name the duchy of the play, although we are told it is somewhere in France (1.1.143). We are left in no doubt of the name of the forest of Arden. Perhaps this pairing of places, one named and one unnamed, had a special meaning which is now also lost to us.

My last example is the name of Bottom, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His name serves a mercurial function as it takes on new meanings in the play's progress. To his fellows and himself he is Nick Bottom,

the weaver, the leading man in their little company of amateur players. Within that circle his name establishes him as a fellow craftsman, whose surname represents the tool of his trade.¹⁶

A process of belittling begins when Puck places an ass's head on him. After his night with Titania, Oberon speaks of him as a "hateful fool" (4.1.49), and Titania, now freed from her spell, cries: "O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now" (4.1.79). This signals his role at the bottom of the play's hierarchy.¹⁷

Upon awakening, he tries to recapture the memory of the previous night, only to utter a confused and garbled version of St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians on the limitations of man's senses. He has been spiritually transformed. His experience, wholly sensual, brings him a sense of spiritual elevation (in sharp contrast to the denigrating views of Oberon and Titania) which places the humble ass above the play's hierarchy. Jan Kott concludes that, being translated into an ass, he translates St. Paul in his own way (31); and Ronald Miller deems this one of the supreme moments of the play (265–266). St. Paul's views on fornication may, moreover, have led Shakespeare mischievously to transform a purely sexual experience into an apocalyptic vision.

A new function for his name appears in Bottom's project for a ballad to be written of his experience and to be named for him "Bottom's Dream," establishing him as eponymous hero to be sung of in a ballad. A new profundity is introduced as he explains that it is to be named so because "it hath no bottom" (4.1.216). The folio text prints the word *bottom* in lower case, suggesting the human bottom as synecdoche for the body in contradistinction to the soul. His dream is therefore without a bottom because it is a spiritual experience, like that of St. Paul. On another level we may find an aesthetic judgment: the ballad, a work of art, has no bottom for it is unfathomable, never fully to be understood.¹⁸

The universality of Bottom-as-ass is again signalled in the last act of the play, when "Pyramus and Thisbe" is performed before the Athenian court. Bottom, as Pyramus, is once more a lover and hero. Now, however, he is not the only ass, for his entire company is now branded as "many asses" (5.1.153) by Demetrius. The little troupe has been elevated by having been chosen to perform before this august assemblage, just as Bottom had been selected by Puck for the ass's head.¹⁹ Once more, just as Oberon and Titania had reviled Bottom, the Duke and his young nobles mock and taunt the ass-players. As befits asses, they exhibit true humility, proving as impervious to flattery as to scorn.

Shakespeare ends his play with a sly jest which has further nominal resonance: Theseus demurs at Bottom's offer to present an epilogue: "No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse" (5.1.355–356). Bottom asks the Duke if he would "see" the epilogue (5.1.353). Standing before him, resurrected from death as Pyramus, in his own person as Bottom, he personifies Epilogue, just as Moonshine and Wall had been personified within their little play.

Shakespeare has deliberately diverted our attention from epilogue as closure, with Bottom as its personification, by having the Duke speak of epilogue as apology: "Your play needs no excuse" (356). But its apologetic function has already been attended to by Peter Quince as Prologue:

If we offend, it is with our good will.
That you should think, we come not to offend,
But with good will. To show our simple skill,
That is the true beginning of our end. (108–111)

"Our end" may be read as *goal*, but also as *placement*, or more precisely, *displacement*, at the top instead of at the bottom of their play, thereby hinting at the central function of an epilogue as closure.

The epilogue which the Duke so glibly dispenses with is most likely that of “Bottom’s Dream.” Bottom had originally planned to sing it “in the latter end of a play, before the Duke” (4.1.217). Presumably that “Duke” was to have been Theseus and “a play” that of “Pyramus and Thisbe.” A new meaning for Bottom’s paradox now emerges, affirming his prescience at that epiphanic moment:

It shall be call’d “Bottom’s Dream,” because it hath no bottom. (4.1.215–216)

Bottom shall never sing of his dream. It shall remain unknown, forever a mystery to him as much as to audiences sharing in his visionary experience:

Man is but an ass, if he go about [t’] expound this dream. (206–207)

Shakespeare, tongue in cheek, valorizes the craftsmen’s play at the expense of his own, as Puck renders Shakespeare’s epilogue; excuses may be redundant for amateurs, but for Shakespeare and his fellow artists an apology remains requisite. Puck’s epilogue is presented less as closure – the company has already been blessed by Puck, Oberon, and Titania – than as apology. Puck, moreover, echoes Quince’s Prologue, repeating the verbs of Quince’s first two lines (*offend* and *think*), giving them greater resonance as they are now delivered with authority and good sense:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended.... (5.1.423–424)

The homely term “mended” is another glance at the mechanicals’ skills and leads to Puck’s confirmation of Bottom’s transformation of mystical experience into dream:

That you have but slumb’red here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream.... (425–428)

Bottom’s paradox may well hold as emblem for Shakespeare’s play, which remains a source of endless complexities and profundity; it is without and yet most happily with its bottom.

The onomastic determinism of names, such as of Kate in the *Henriad*; of Orlando, Aliena, and Ganymede in *As You Like It*; and the accretion of meanings which attach to the name Bottom, all reveal a powerful mind at work, weaving with imagination, wit, good humor, and compassion a magical tapestry.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at a NEMLA meeting in 1986.

NOTES

¹ All references to this and other plays by Shakespeare refer to **The Riverside Shakespeare**, unless otherwise specified.

² *Will* references are indexed in Booth.

³ For a useful compendium of onomastic scholarship, see Levith.

⁴ For the Hal–Hotspur rivalry, see Council 39, *et passim*; Mack xxxii–xxxv; Tillyard 266–267; Barber 200–205. For Hal’s name–quest, see Candido.

⁵ It seems almost as if Hal had been present at the love scene between Hotspur and his wife (1 II IV 2.3.91–117), which occurs immediately preceding Hal’s offer to play Percy (2.4).

⁶ Holinshed in Bullough 4:203–204.

⁷ It is significant that in another of Shakespeare’s sources, **The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth**, King Henry, in a scene which may have inspired Shakespeare, calls the French princess “Kate” ten times (Mack 227–229, 233).

The wooing scene has been criticized by Dr. Samuel Johnson for lacking “the vivacity of Hal” and “the grandeur of Henry” (92). It seems to me that Shakespeare in this scene adds a new dimension to Henry’s personality in this, his first intimate love scene. He advances from awkwardness over language (see reference to “Dame Mortimer” below), to imperial *machismo* on kissing. Candido notes Johnson’s criticism, defending the scene as the culmination of Henry’s quest for a truly denotative name (70).

Hal’s use of the patronym for Hotspur’s “Dame Mortimer” glances at another rivalry, with Edmund Mortimer: “My wife can speak no English, I no Welsh” (1 II IV 3.1.191). Henry’s princess, who speaks little English, may figure as contrast. Mortimer tells his wife: “I understand thy kisses” (3.1.202); Henry tells his bride:

You have witchcraft in your lips, Kate; there is more eloquence in a sugar touch of them than in the tongues of the French council; and they should sooner persuade Harry of England than a general petition of monarchs. (II 5 5.2.275–279)

⁸ This chiasmic pattern of nomination is noted by Poggioli (166–167) as being emblematic of the two views of the pastoral ideal.

⁹ The quest is discussed by Erickson (26–28) and by Garber, insightfully, although not for Orlando (55–79).

¹⁰ Oliver’s promise is at the end of the play seemingly contradicted by the Duke and Jacques; for a fuller discussion, see note 11.

¹¹ In her marriage to Oliver there is a suggestion of a more permanent alienation, for Oliver has promised Orlando that he will give up his inheritance to the latter and live with Aliena in Arden as shepherd and shepherdess (5.2.9–12). It is tempting to take this at face value, for it would make complete Celia’s alienation from the court world. Indeed, when she first arrived in Arden she had said, “I like this place,/

And willingly could waste my time in it" (2.4.94–95). Yet Oliver's forthright promise is seemingly contradicted by Duke Senior's declaration:

Thou offer'st fairly to thy brothers' wedding;
To one his lands withheld, and to the other
A land itself at large, a potent dukedom. (5.4.167–169)

Most scholars interpret "to one" to be Oliver and "the other" to be Orlando. The F1 text has no apostrophe after "brothers," which might leave open the possibility that "to one" might be Orlando and "the other" to be Duke Senior himself (and his court). Duke Senior's ambiguity seems confirmed by Jacques's blessing in F1:

you to a loue, that your true faith doth merit:
you to your land, and loue, and great allies.... (Norton 207)

Riverside gives the first line as an address to Orlando and the second to Oliver. The order may well be reversed. On the other hand, Latham (130) reads this crux through her reading of Lodge as a reversal on Oliver's part once he learns who Celia is.

¹² Rosalind suffers no such estrangement; she is reunited with her father at her wedding.

¹³ For the golden world and Ovid, see Thomson 112; for the golden world and Arden, see Fortin 570, 572; for Jove's tree, Thomson 114–115; and for the sacred tree, Fortin 573 ff. For the acorn–boy, fruit–man analogy, see Warburton in *Variorum* (Furness ed. 3.2.230); for food imagery, see Brown 84–85. Rosalind's "fruit" surfaces in response to the preceding words of Celia: "But take a taste of my finding him, and relish it with good observance" (3.2.233–234).

¹⁴ F1 gives "defying," F2 "deifying" (**Riverside** 401).

¹⁵ Farewell, good Master Oliver: not

"O sweet Oliver,
O brave Oliver.
Leave me, not behind thee." (3.3.98–101)

For a full discussion of the ballad and its popularity, see Baskervill 183, *et passim*.

¹⁶ On the literalness of names, see Weller 77, although Weller's view is quite opposite to mine on Bottom's name. For his name's meaning, see Levith and Stroup.

¹⁷ Bevington (91) discusses the ass–head in terms of the dark and affirmative sides of love, and Miller (260), on his role at the "bottom" of mankind.

¹⁸ For the ass–arse pun, see Clayton 110, and Wyrick 444n. Although the leap from *bottom* to *ass* to *arse* is not justified by OED precedent, it seems to me to be an inevitably obvious pun Shakespeare could not have overlooked.

For mysteries without a bottom, see Huston 208–213; for Bottom and divinity, Young 124; for the bottom of God's secrets, Stroup 80–81; on St. Paul, Miller 265–268; for Bottom's dream in relation to a sermon by

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Donne on St. Paul, Hassel 371 ff. and Peters 47; for Bottom as a divinely inspired ass, Myrick 446; as a wise fool, Peters 46.

The passage from St. Paul is in the Geneva version 1 Cor. ii.9–15.

¹⁹ Had Puck not chosen to give Bottom his ass's head, Titania should have spent her night of love with a "lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,/ On meddling monkey, or on busy ape" (2.1.180–181). When Puck reports to Oberon that "Titania wak'd, and straightway lov'd an ass," Oberon replies, "This falls out better than I could devise" (3.2.34–35).

²⁰ Donaldson (29) comments on the two epilogues, but does not expand on the implications involved

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