

**Sexual Allusions
in the Works of
William Shakespeare**

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2000

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1. ***A short history of perceiving bawdiness in the works of Shakespeare***

Shakespeare is considered one of the greatest poets of English Literature. In his tribute to Shakespeare from the First Folio from 1623, Ben Jonson tries but fails to praise him appropriately: “While I confesse thy writings to be such, As neither *Man*, nor *Muse*, can praise too much”¹. Leonard Digges emphasises the importance of Shakespeare’s works for future generations: “Till these, till any of thy Volumes rest Shall be exprest, ... Be sure, our *Shake-speare*, thou canst never dye, But crown’d with Lawrell, live eternally”².

The amount of literary criticism on Shakespeare and the many performances of his plays show how right Digges was. But with the changing attitudes and world views of different generations of readers and scholars also the interpretation and understanding of Shakespeare’s works underwent considerable changes.

One aspect most controversially dealt with, is the appearance of indecencies in Shakespeare’s works. Michael Macrone, editor of *Naughty Shakespeare*, in a comment on his book points out that “long before we enshrined Shakespeare atop the cultural canon, he was a popular writer who packed his Globe with rowdy masses by offering up delicious doses of sex, violence, crime, horror, profanity, and more”³. The following passage taken from *King Lear* showing some examples of harsh Shakespearean insults might help to support Macrone’s claim: “*Oswald*. What dost thou know me for? *Kent*. A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; ... a whoreson, one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd, in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a ... beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch.”⁴ It is striking that many of these insults like *bawd*, *pandar*, *son of a ... bitch* or *whoreson* refer to sexuality. It is amazing how lewd and bawdy they are.

“A bawdy joke contains humorous references to sex” states the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*⁵. The old form *baude* of the graded adjective *bawdy*, nowadays a synonym for *lewd*⁶, originally meant joyous, *gay*⁷. More frequent was the noun *baudery* meaning jollity. *Baude* was loaned from the Old French *baud*. After the transfer from French to English, *bawd* was also applied to pander. It seems to have been compounded with a different *bawd*, earlier *bad*, which meant cat, pussy or

¹ Alexander, p. xxviii

² Alexander, p. xxx

³ Macrone

⁴ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, II.ii.11-9

⁵ Sinclair

⁶ cf. Sinclair

⁷ cf. Simpson, Weiner

rabbit and was also used in slang sense. Shakespeare himself still used the word in both senses. While *Mercutio* means a hare when he cries out “A bawd, a bawd, a bawd !”⁸, the claim “We must be married, or we must live in bawdry”⁹ does not promise any jollity. The reference here is to indecent sexual behaviour.¹⁰

Not at any period following the Renaissance, people told each other bawdy stories and talked freely about sexual experiences. How did later generations of readers and scholars of Shakespeare deal with these indecent insults and sexual references in his plays? Some references are less obvious, but have more wit. Who did take interest in revealing such puns and who would rather try their best to ignore them?

While the Renaissance period is known as a rather liberal time, in the 18th century people could still speak more liberally than during the reign of Queen Victoria. In the Victorian Age sexuality was no concern of public discussion, it was a taboo and its references in literature have not been dealt with.

From the 1890th on, homosexuals like Oscar Wilde and others tried to prove that Shakespeare was a homosexual. Therefore, they concentrated on references to homosexuality which was an issue even more restricted than sexuality in general. Their strongest argument was that in the Sonnets Shakespeare cheerfully addresses a man. Yet it seems they have failed to give enough evidence to prove that Shakespeare himself was a homosexual¹¹.

Around that time a first “Dictionary of Slang and its Analogues” was released. However, *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* from 1888 to 1928 still ignored many sexual words¹². Eric Partridge, who released both an etymological dictionary as well as several dictionaries on English slang words, was the first scholar to examine the issue of bawdiness in Shakespeare in an almost non-restricted way. When his book *Shakespeare’s Bawdy* was first released in 1947, it was only at an edition of 1000 pieces on a rather high price¹³. At this time school editions of Shakespeare’s plays were still bowdlerised. In the 1950th the issue seemed to be of a greater interest and a much larger second edition was published.

The 1960th brought the sexual revolution and the opportunity to speak freely on sexuality. A third edition of Partridge’s guide was released in 1968. Influenced by Partridge, scholars like E. A. Colman now also worked on the psychological dimension of bawdy references in Shakespeare and examined the question whether bawdiness supports the dramatic success of a play¹⁴.

⁸ Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II.iv.126

⁹ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, III.iii.84

¹⁰ cf. Shipley, p. 87

¹¹ Partridge, p. 12 ff.

¹² cf. Foreword to Partridge, p. vii

¹³ cf. Foreword to Partridge, p. vii

¹⁴ cf. Colman, 1st chapter

It seems that nowadays Shakespeare's bawdy wits are getting more and more popular. Under the slogan "Wish to speak of certain body parts at faire but have no idea what else they were called?", selected entities from Eric Partridge's glossary¹⁵ are published on the Internet for use at one's own risk¹⁶. Furthermore, three columns of words can be found with which anyone can easily create his or her 'individual Shakespearean insult'¹⁷.

But there is more to Shakespeare's bawdy wits it than merely combining naughty adjectives with naughty nouns. As a Renaissance writer he had an exceedingly wide and varied vocabulary including a huge amount of images for indecent expressions. It is the concern of this essay to show that Shakespeare used both the many different meanings and connotations of a single word as well as the whole range of words suitable for describing a certain subject or situation to create his extremely witty puns and allusions on sexual issues.

2. Different nuances in the meaning of a single word

A glance to the *OED* will show, that very often there are different nuances of meaning in a single word. The original meaning competes with others which have derived from it by different techniques.

Similarities in appearance, function or manner lead to connotations, so that one expression evokes the association of another term. In a later state, the associated meaning can become an additional meaning of the first word. An example of this would be *tree* describing the file hierarchy in a computer-system. Another source of extra meaning can be words of the same sound, which then blend. This might happen when loan words overlap native expressions of the same sound as in the case of *bawd* (see above). These are just two of the many processes enlarging the meaning of a word.

Shakespeare skilfully used the different ideas inherent to each single word. In order to show to what a large extent he utilised different nuances in meaning, I will now examine his usage of the two nouns *bosom* and *blood* and the verb *seduce*.

2.1 Distinct notions of the word bosom

The Old English form of *bosom* was *bósm*, which is congruent with the corresponding Old Friesian term. The current form correlates with the Dutch word *boezem* which developed from the Middle Dutch *boesem*. Furthermore, it is related to the German expression *Busen*, which developed from the Middle High German *bousem* originating in the Old High German *buosam*.

¹⁵ Partridge, p. 55 ff.

¹⁶ RPFS Rakehells

¹⁷ Lecher

The remoter etymology is unknown. It seems to be of common-Teutonic origin¹⁸. The *OED* considers that the West Germanic form *bôsm-* goes back to *bôsmo-* which could be short for *bôh-smo*. *Bôhu-* would correlate with the Old Aryan word *bhâghu-s* which means bough in the sense of arm¹⁹. According to Partridge's glossary, the Old English word *bog* as well meant shoulder and arm²⁰. "The word [*bosom*] would then ... primarily mean the space embraced by the two arms" the *OED* concludes²¹.

From this intrinsic idea several different meanings have developed. I will now describe the varied usage of the word *bosom* as a noun. Then I will examine the word's verbal meanings, which refer to different actions related to *bosom* as a noun. The noun *bosom* occurs 166 times in the works of Shakespeare which corresponds to a relative frequency of 0.02%. In 29 cases it is used in plural form, four times the genitive form is applied²². There are three main fields of meanings: *Bosom* can be a synonym for the breast as an organ. It can stand for something having a shape related to the silhouette of a breast. Finally, in a figurative sense, it is used as a substitute for the heart as a place of emotions and intimate thoughts.

Although the *OED* marks this notion as archaic, the enclosure between breast and arms, is still one meaning of *bosom*. It is most congruent to the conjectured original meaning.

The most frequent meaning out of the field of references to the breast is the organ itself. An example would be: "Within my bosom, whereon thou dost lie, My boding heart pants"²³. In recent use (first examples from 1959) the plural form *bosoms* also refers to the plural form of breast, hence, to the female breasts²⁴.

From this notion other meanings referring to the breast have developed. The part of a dress that covers the breast is called the *bosom* as seen in "What seal is that that hangs without thy bosom?"²⁵. In a wider sense, it also describes the whole front of a shirt. It is also related to the space included between the covering and breast. Making use of this notion, Proteus exclaims: "Thy letters ... shall be deliver'd Even in the milk-white bosom of thy love"²⁶.

According to an entry in J. Barry Webb's glossary to *Shakespeare's Erotic Word Usage* the meaning of breast as a physical part of the body makes the *bosom* an object of beauty and desire, it thus evokes sexual interest as in the case of the

¹⁸ cf. Partridge, p.69

¹⁹ Simpson, Weiner

²⁰ cf. Partridge, p.69

²¹ Simpson, Weiner

²² cf. Spevack

²³ Shakespeare, *Venus And Adonis*, 646

²⁴ Simpson, Weiner

²⁵ Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, V.ii.56

²⁶ Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona*, III.i.248-50

“milk-white bosom of thy love”. He also refers to the breasts’ life–giving function, since a *bosom* in the sense of breasts is related nourishment. In a wider sense, the *bosom* provides for comfort and carnal pleasure.

In his glossary, Partridge as well states that “the area of the breasts”²⁷ is one meaning of *bosom*. But, unlike Webb, he very much concentrates on *bosom* referring to the female lap. He gives various examples such as “my bosom, as a bed, Shall lodge thee”²⁸.

As an additional meaning of *bosom* Partridge sees the plural form in a wider sense as the sexual organs in general, thus of both women and men. He justifies his argument with a quote from *Timon Of Athens*: “Itches, blains, Sow all th’ Athenian bosoms”²⁹. However, *bosom* in this quote could also be interpreted as a *pars pro toto* standing for a whole person. This notion also appears in the “nest of hollow bosoms”³⁰ in *Henry V*.

Bosom referring to something which has the shape of a breast provides for many different images. It is used “with various associations from the literal sense”³¹. For example, the surface of the ground is referred to as a *bosom*, which can be seen in *King John*: “When I strike my foot Upon the bosom of the ground”³². From a bird’s-eye view a bay can also be expressed as a (sea-) *bosom*. Moreover, it is in a similar way related to depth, to the interior, as a quote from *Richard III* shows: “In the deep bosom of the ocean buried”³³. Finally it can also carry the notion of an enclosure as in “To Julius Caesar’s ill-erected tower, To whose flint bosom my condemned lord Is doom’d a prisoner”³⁴.

A different reference is *bosom* standing for belly. Again, the similar shape evokes the association. The same principle works with *bosom* describing the curvature of a sail before the wind, which, according to the *OED*, applied poetically. Shakespeare wittily uses these two images in the following passage from the *Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “When we have laugh’d to see the sails conceive, And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind; Which she [the Indian boy’s mother] ... Following -- her womb then rich with my young squire -- Would imitate”³⁵. There is early reference, that because of its shape the womb has also been called the *bosom*³⁶. Shakespeare does not use this associative meaning directly, but it might play a role

²⁷ cf. Partridge, p. 69

²⁸ Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen Of Verona*, I.ii.114

²⁹ Shakespeare, *Timon Of Athens*, IV.i.28-9

³⁰ Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, II.Cho.21

³¹ Simpson, Weiner

³² Shakespeare, *King John*, IV.i.2-3

³³ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I.i.4

³⁴ Shakespeare, *Richard II*, V.i.2-4

³⁵ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, II.i.128-32

³⁶ Simpson, Weiner

in combination with Partridge's claim that the use of *bosom* alludes to the female lap. The comparison in the recent quote will support this argument.

Other associations to the curved recess of a breast are *bosom* describing the hold of a ship, the cavity of the stomach, a chamber of the heart or an angle in which two bones meet.

In a figurative sense, *bosom* as a synonym for the heart is considered a place of emotions and intimate thoughts. Moreover, it is also the seat of counsel as used in phrases like "Emptying our bosoms, of their counsel sweet"³⁷. The idea of intimacy and privacy can be found in the phrase "To lock it in the wards of covert bosom"³⁸ meaning to keep secret. Similarly, the *bosom* keeping intimate thoughts is applied when *Emilia* invites *Cassio*: "you shall have time To speak your bosom freely"³⁹. Emotions centred in the *bosom* range from positive feelings as in *King John*: "His words do take possession of my bosom"⁴⁰ up to anger and rage seen in *Measure For Measure*: "you shall have your bosom on this wretch"⁴¹. If someone tries to manipulate feelings and desire, he or she again aims at the *bosom*. An example for this is *Egeus*' claim "This man has bewitch'd the bosom of my child"⁴². The quote "Nature shows art, That through thy bosom makes me see thy heart"⁴³ illustrates that *bosom* is not only a synonym for heart, it is also seen as closely related to the heart.

Grammatically, *bosom* also functions as determinant for various composites carrying one of the many different meanings shown above, such as *bosom-friend*.

The verb *to bosom* is used in Shakespeare very rarely. However, it stands for very different actions related to the different ideas and concepts of the noun *bosom*.

Referring to the physical notion, the original meaning can be found in *to form a bosom*, thus to form an enclosure between arms and breast. *To put into the bosom* means to put something into this space. *To take into the bosom* then means to take someone into this cavity between arms and breast, thus to embrace them. This meaning is closely related to *being bosom to bosom*, which is as well shortly referred to as *to bosom* as can be seen in a quote from *King Lear*: "I am doubtful that you have been conjunct And bosom'd with her"⁴⁴. Partridge here reveals an erotic connotation: Since *bosom* can also mean *lap*, *to bosom* could also mean being lap to lap⁴⁵, which could then be interpreted as copulation. *Regan's* suspicion

³⁷ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.i.216

³⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure For Measure*, V.i.10

³⁹ Shakespeare, *Othello*, III.i.55-6

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, *King John*, IV.i.32

⁴¹ Shakespeare, *Measure For Measure*, IV.iii.131

⁴² Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.i.27

⁴³ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.ii.104-5

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V.1.12-3

⁴⁵ cf. Partridge, p. 69

would then mean, that she suspects *Edmund* of not only embracing but having sex with her sister.

Another meaning going back to the *bosom* as the breast is *to bosom* as to wound or hit in the bosom.

The idea of the *bosom* as a place of intimate thought is the origin of *to bosom* standing for *to hide in the bosom*, thus to keep secret. This can be found in *Henry VII* when *Norfolk* advises *Buckingham* and *Abergavenny* to “Bosom up my counsel”⁴⁶. Moreover, it can also mean to have familiar intercourse, which again goes back to the impression of intimacy and privacy.

2.2 The word blood providing variant images

The word's Old English form *blód* is congruent with the Old Friesian form and correlates with Low German *blôd* and Dutch *bloed*. Like *bosom*, it originates in a common Teutonic term – the Old Teutonic masculine word *blôdo* which is related to Old Aryan *bhlatóm*. The common Early Modern English spelling was *blood*, *bloud* or *blud*. The long vowel *ó* has been shifted to /u:/ as in *food*, was then shortened to /ʌ/ as in *good* in the 16th century and finally changed into the current pronunciation /bld/. It is related to the words *bloody*, *bloodily*, *bloodiness*, *blooded*, *bloodied*, *bloodless* and *blooder*. Additionally, there are many compounds such as *blood-brother*, *blood-soaked*, *blood-consciousness* ect.. Shakespeare uses the word 688 times, which is a relative frequency of 0.08%. It occurs less often in the comedies than in the histories and tragedies, which seems to be related to the topics of death and bloodshed.

The literal meaning of blood is “the liquid circulating in the arteries and veins of man and ... animals”⁴⁷. Besides the different meanings referring to this biological aspect, *blood* can carry the information of a common origin. Finally, it is also considered the seat of temper and passion.

Again, Shakespeare uses the word with many of its different inherent meanings. The literal sense can be perceived in *Westmoreland's* statement that “drops of blood were in my father’s veins”⁴⁸. The expression *to the blood* means that the outer skin is violated until blood flows, it does not occur in Shakespeare. In hunting the phrase *in blood* expresses that a head of game is full of life while *out of blood* means it is lifeless. In *Henry IV* Shakespeare plays on this expression: “If we be English deer, be then in blood”⁴⁹.

As a *pars pro toto*, *blood*, just like *bosom*, stands for a whole person, especially a

⁴⁶ Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, I.i.112

⁴⁷ Simpson, Weiner

⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, III.*, I.i.97

⁴⁹ Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, I.*, IV.ii.48

young man as “all the hot bloods between fourteen and five and thirty”⁵⁰.

In a transferred sense a blood-alike liquid such as juice, the sap of plants or a river can be called blood. There is one reference in *Timon Of Athens* when the protagonist suggests the *Banditti*: “Go, suck the subtle blood o’ th’ grape”⁵¹.

God’s blood as well as Christ’s blood is referred to in oaths. An example is the exclamation in “Sblood”⁵² in *Henry V*, which seems to be short for ‘by His blood’. *To let blood* describes the medical treatment of giving blood, of bleeding. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost* *Rosaline* explains: “Is the fool sick ? ... let it blood”⁵³. But it can also mean to make someone bleed in order to kill them. This idea is applied when *Gloucester* states in *King Richard III* that “His ancient knot of dangerous adversaries To-morrow are let blood”⁵⁴. In this field of bloodshed and manslaughter the notion of guilt plays an important role: “he [Romeo] slew Mercutio. Who now the price of his dear blood doth owe?”⁵⁵. As a consequence, from guilt as expressed by the *price of blood*, an urge to revenge develops, which can be seen in the same play when *Lady Capulet* exclaims: “For blood of ours shed blood of Montague”⁵⁶. Another strong league of *blood* and guilt is in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when *Hermia* suspects *Demetrius* of having killed *Lysander* and the accused defends himself saying: “I am not guilty of Lysander’s blood”⁵⁷.

There is also a sexual reference to blood, since as a result of the sexual act blood is mingled. Thus *Leontes* realises that “To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods”⁵⁸. The mingling of bloods also suggests the notion of genetic origin and heritage. The *EOD* explains that *blood* as “the part of the body which children inherit from their parents and ancestors”⁵⁹ is identical to the members of a family and distinct from those of other families. Hence, a distinct origin plays an important role, which can be seen in comments like “right noble is his blood”⁶⁰ as well as in *Lady Capulet’s* claim quoted in the last paragraph. It is also used for larger groups of people, for example when referring to a Nation as mentioned in *Henry VI, II.*, the “blood of Englishmen”⁶¹, or to a religious community as in *Henry VI, I.*: “our Christian blood”⁶².

The third group of meanings of the word *blood* consists of references related to

⁵⁰ Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, III.iii.121

⁵¹ Shakespeare, *Timon Of Athens*, IV.iii.427

⁵² Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, IV.viii.8

⁵³ Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, II.i.183-5

⁵⁴ Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, III.i.182-3

⁵⁵ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, III.i.179-80

⁵⁶ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, III.i.146

⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, III.ii.75

⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, I.ii.109

⁵⁹ Simpson, Weiner

⁶⁰ Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, V.i.256

⁶¹ Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, II.*, III.i.311

temper and passion. The OED comments that this usage of *blood* as “the supposed seat of emotion [and] passion” is very frequent in Shakespeare⁶³. The piece of wisdom “The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o’er a cold decree.”⁶⁴ suggests that the power of passion defeats sense, which can also be seen in *The Tempest*: “the strongest oaths are straw To th’ fire i’ th’ blood”⁶⁵.

It also connotes the quality of lust, which can be found in *Othello*: “merely a lust of the blood”⁶⁶ and in *The Comedy Of Errors*: “My blood is mingled with the crime of lust”⁶⁷.

Very often, when *blood* is referred to as sexual passion, it is in combination with the temperature of a person's blood. In early medical theories the blood's temperature is related to liveliness and sexual condition⁶⁸. Today it is rather associated with the heat produced by physical activity as connoted in expressions such as *hot-blooded*. The same connotation can be found in *Love's Labour's Lost*: “thou heat'st my blood”⁶⁹. In the poem *Venus And Adonis* the image is even stronger: “her blood doth boil, And careless lust stirs up a desperate courage...”⁷⁰.

The early idea of sexual condition related to vividness seems to be employed when both sexual condition and the blood's temperature are related to youth. Reference is for example in *Romeo And Juliet*: “Had she affections and warm youthful blood, She would be swift in motion as a ball”⁷¹. Yet, in *Love's Labour's Lost* the innocence of youth cannot stand up to sexual experience: “The blood of youth burns not with such excess As gravity's revolt to wantonness”⁷².

In contrast, calm and cold blood symbolises the absence of passion. “You cannot call it love; for at your age The heyday in the blood is tame”⁷³, Hamlet concludes while the *Duchess of Gloucester* asks *John of Gaunt*: “Hath love in thy old blood no living fire?”⁷⁴.

Besides the discussed noun *blood* there is also the verb *to blood* which is not used by Shakespeare. The most frequent meaning is to bleed. In some restricted circumstances it gains an extra meaning. For example, it means to mingle with blood in the leather industry or to give a hound a first taste of blood for hunting.

⁶² Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, I.*, V.i.9

⁶³ cf. Simpson, Weiner

⁶⁴ Shakespeare, *The Merchant Of Venice*, I.ii.20

⁶⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.i.52-3

⁶⁶ Shakespeare, *Othello*, I.iii.333

⁶⁷ Shakespeare, *The Crime Of Errors*, II.ii.140

⁶⁸ Webb, p. 12

⁶⁹ Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, I.ii.30

⁷⁰ Shakespeare, *Venus And Adonis*, 555-6

⁷¹ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, II.v.12-3

⁷² Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, V.ii.73-4

⁷³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.iv.68-9

⁷⁴ Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, I.ii.9

2.3 Diverse applications of seduce

The word *seduce* is of Latin origin. It consists of the word *ducere* meaning to lead and the prefix *se* connoting away, apart. The intrinsic meaning of the word then must be to lead away, to lead apart⁷⁵. Moreover, *seduce* seems to be influenced by the inflected form *séduis* of French *séduire*, since an early spelling from 1477 was *seduised*⁷⁶. Shakespeare used the verb 13 times. Hence, the relative frequency is less than 0.01%. Related words are *seducer* (with one reference in Shakespeare), *seductor*, *seductress*, *seductionist*, *seduction*, *seductive*, *seductively*, and *seductiveness*.

In Shakespeare's works seven passive and four active forms can be found. Additionally, there is one reference each as an attribute and as an infinitive form⁷⁷. Although these are comparatively few references which Schmidt explains as meaning to mislead, to corrupt and to deprave⁷⁸, different meanings of the word can be distinguished.

The original usage was to persuade someone to desert a service or an allegiance, yet there is no reference of that in Shakespeare. It can also mean to lead someone away, to decoy someone from a place. When *Warwick* asks "Where slept our scouts or how are they seduc'd ... ?"⁷⁹ he suggests that they have been lead away from their guard.

In a wider sense, it means to lead a person away from the right belief and make them to do something wrong, immoral or foolish. This transferred idea is applied when *Cambridge* states that "For me, the gold of France did not seduce"⁸⁰.

In a transferred sense, *to seduce a woman* means to make her surrender to a man's power and give away her chastity. In a wider sense it is also used to express a woman surrendering to love-making in general. In *All's Well That Ends Well* *Mariana* speaks of men of which "many a maid hath been seduced by"⁸¹. The appalling situation of a woman that has been seduced is described in *King Richard III* "A care-craz'd mother ... Made prize and purchase of his wanton eye, Seduc'd the pitch and height of his degree"⁸². The clearest image for the sexual part of seduction gives *Lady Faulconbridge* in *King John*: "By long and vehement suit I was seduc'd To make room for him in my husband's bed"⁸³. Both the sexual aspect as well as the emphasis on the meaning of leading away from the right belief by

⁷⁵ cf. Partridge, p. 180

⁷⁶ cf. Simpson, Weiner

⁷⁷ cf. Spevack

⁷⁸ cf. Schmidt

⁷⁹ Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, III.*, V.i.18-9

⁸⁰ Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, II.ii.154-5

⁸¹ Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, III.v.21-2

⁸² Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, III.vii.184-8

⁸³ Shakespeare, *King John*, I.i.253-5

persuasion are the central idea when the ghost of *Hamlet's* father talks about his brother of "that adulterate beast, With ... traitorous gifts -- ... [and] wicked wit ... that have the power So to seduce! -- won to his shameful lust The will of my most seeming virtuous queen"⁸⁴.

There has also been the idea of a woman seducing a man as connoted in the word *seductress*. Nowadays this usage has almost disappeared. The word is rather used with a more positive connotation of winning by charm or attractiveness. Finally, to practise seduction, to use seductive means is also referred to as *to seduce*.

3. Various expressions for the same body parts

English is a mixture of native, Scandinavian, Germanic, romantic and other foreign elements. As a consequence, there are often several words expressing the same meaning. Sometimes they exactly refer to the same, in other cases minimal differences and connotations can be found. For example, in the average case, Latin words were used on a higher poetical level, while Anglo-Saxon vocabulary is more often used in scenes of lower style⁸⁵.

It is doubted that even in Shakespearean times the whole audience would have realise every allusive pun⁸⁶. Being almost "everything to everyone"⁸⁷, the universal mind Shakespeare provides varied images on different stylistic levels ranging from indecent jokes to witty allusions. This variety of expressions for the same meaning can also be found for references to sexual parts of the body and actions related to the sexual organs. Since it would need a whole book to describe all the sexual references in Shakespeare, the examination in this chapter is restricted to the mentioning of the female and the male genitals.

3.1 References to the female genitals

Since there are much more references to the female sexual organs than to the male ones, it would take up more than this chapter to describe the references to all female organs related to sexuality. Therefore, I will restrict my research to the female genitals, i.e. the vagina and the womb, which were "to Shakespeare of considerably greater importance, and significance singly than all the rest of woman's sexual features collectively"⁸⁸. Following Partridge, there are 68 synonyms to what he calls the *pudend*⁸⁹. The allusions range from implicit⁸⁹ to explicit references. In a further paragraph Partridge deals with expressions playing rather euphemistically

⁸⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.v.42-7

⁸⁵ cf. Blake, p. 43

⁸⁶ cf. Blake, p. 42

⁸⁷ cf. Partridge, p. 4

⁸⁸ Partridge, p. 21

⁸⁹ Partridge, p. 20 ff.

on the vagina as an entity.

An example for an implicit mentioning of the female genitals is *Mercutio* speaking of *Rosaline's* lap: "By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh, And the demesnes that there adjacent lie"⁹⁰. There is a similar imagery with *dial* describing the female lap as a goal in *King Henry IV, I*: "Unless ... clocks [were] the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench ... , I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day"⁹¹.

According to Partridge, *secrecy* carries some sexual reference in phrases like *secret parts* and *secret things*. The connotation might go back to the original meaning of Latin *secretus* describing something set apart⁹². Hence, *secret parts* are hidden in some place apart, just like womb and vagina are hidden inside the female body. The sexual allusion is most obvious in *Twelfth Night* where the secrecy of *Viola's* sexual identity is compared to the secrecy of maidenhead, also playing on the hymen as part hidden inside the vagina (see below): "What I am and what I would are as secret as maidenhead to your ears"⁹³. *Secret parts* are mentioned in *Hamlet*: "*Hamlet*. Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours? *Guildestern*. Faith, her privates we. *Hamlet*. In the secret parts of fortune?"⁹⁴. Furthermore, in *The Winter's Tale* *secret things* can be found: "Show those things you found about her, those secret things, all but what she has with her"⁹⁵.

Thing itself can be interpreted as an implicit reference to the female genitals in the following passage: "*Falstaff*. Go, you thing, go *Hostess*. Say, what thing? what thing? *Falstaff*. What thing! why, a thing to thank God on. *Hostess*. I am no thing to thank God on, ... I am an honest man's wife"⁹⁶.

In contrast to rather implicit references to the female genitals as an area of sexual interest there are also explicit references to distinguished parts of the organs such as the hymen, the mons veneris and the labia. Though *maidenhead* is generally used as a synonym for maidenhood, it is still closely related to its second meaning, describing the membrane in the vagina being destroyed when having sexual intercourse for the first time. Because a non-violated hymen is a sign for virginity, it seems to be of special interest. The quote "there shall not a maid be married, but she shall pay to me her maidenhead ere they have it"⁹⁷ shows Shakespeare's usage of the double sense, since *Cade* is at the same time interested in the maid's virginity

⁹⁰ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, II.i.18-21

⁹¹ Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, I*, I.ii.4-11

⁹² cf. Partridge, p. 179

⁹³ Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, I.v.203-4

⁹⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.ii.231-34

⁹⁵ Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, IV.iii.682-3

⁹⁶ Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, I*, III.iii.115-20

as in the violation of her maidenhead, as indicated by the verb to pay, hence, to leave to him.

In *Venus And Adonis* Venus compares her body to a park: “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.” Here, *mountain* might refer to the breasts or the tights. Considering the comment “Stray lower”, it probably also refers to the less dry mons veneris. Another allusion might be implied in *buckler*. A *buckler* according to Partridge is the boss on a shield, which again can evoke the impression of the mons veneris⁹⁸ as in “give us swords, we have bucklers of our own”⁹⁹ where swords might refer to the male generative organ (see 3.2).

In the following image *velvet leaves* seems to allude to the labia: “Playing in the wanton air. Through the velvet leaves the wind, All unseen, can passage find; That the lover, sick to death, Wish’d himself the heaven’s breath”¹⁰⁰. Here the wind seems to succeed in what the lover aims at, the passage through the velvet leaves, hence, entering the vagina.

A large group of expressions are related to the vagina as an entity. Many of them are rather euphemistic. A few of them, like *hole* and *pond*, are based on shape-metaphors. *Launce* makes use of this similarity in shape to distinguish the sex of his shoes when comparing them to his parents: “This shoe, with the hole in it, is my mother, and this my father; a vengeance on’t!”¹⁰¹. A similar word play in *Romeo And Juliet* supports this image: “I would have made it [the tale] short: for I was come to the whole depth of my tale”¹⁰². When *tale* puns on *tail* (see 3.2) and *come* is associated with ejaculation (see 3.2), then *whole* presumably puns on *hole* as an image for the vagina. Another expression emphasising the aspect of the female lap as an entity is *pond*. When Leontes suggests: “she [a man’s wife] has been sluic’d in’s absence, And his pond fish’d by his next neighbour”¹⁰³, he refers to cuckoldry, meaning that she has had sexual intercourse with another man.

Some references, such as *bosom* and *belly*, are less spatially definite. Still they play on the idea of an entity. As seen in 2.1, *bosom* can be understood as the female lap as in “my bosom, as a bed, shall lodge thee”¹⁰⁴. The same idea is applied to *belly* in “So you may put a man in your belly”¹⁰⁵. *Belly* as the female genitals can also be

⁹⁷ Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, II.*, IV.vii.116-8

⁹⁸ cf. Partridge, p. 196

⁹⁹ Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, V.ii.18-9

¹⁰⁰ Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, IV.iii.100-4

¹⁰¹ Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona*, II.iii.17-9

¹⁰² Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, II.iv.93-4

¹⁰³ Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, I.ii.194-5

¹⁰⁴ Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona*, I.ii.114-5

¹⁰⁵ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, III.ii.208

found related to protecting from sexual violence, i.e. rape: “*Pandarus*. ... a man knows not at what ward you lie. *Cressida*. Upon my back, to defend my belly”¹⁰⁶. Furthermore, there are rather euphemistic references to the female genitals. A *bird's nest* is one of these allusions: “a ladder, by the which your love Must climb a bird's nest soon when it is dark”¹⁰⁷. This image might also refer to pubic hair. In *Othello blackness* is just as well an issue of sexual allusion. *Iago* speculates: “If she be black, and thereto have a wit, She'll find a white that shall her blackness hit”¹⁰⁸. *Hit* seems to allude to copulation and the *blackness* then again appears to be the female lap¹⁰⁹.

A very poetical image is *rose* as used in *As You Like It*: “He that sweetest rose will find Must find love's prick and Rosalinde.”¹¹⁰. Its velvet, fleshy leaves are compared to the labia¹¹¹. Moreover, a rose's semen is hidden in the cavity behind those leaves which could lead to a further comparison to the womb.

3.2 Words related to the male sexual organs

There are less descriptions of the male sexual organs than of the female. Still, Shakespeare uses a large variety of expressions to refer both to the penis as well as to the scrotum and the testicles. There are 45 synonyms to the penis ranging from euphemistic everyday expressions substituting for what people do not want to name to rather witty allusive suggestions.

One word most frequently found in colloquial usage is *cock*. The original meaning of the Latin loan describes the male domestic fowl. Because of the similarity in shape to a cock's head, the *water-cock* features the same expression *cock* as the determinant. *Cock* as a synonym for penis is related both to the shape of a cock's head as well as to the similarity in function to a water-cock, since they both spend liquid. In *Henry V Pistol* plays both on the state of erection and possibly also on a following ejaculation: “Pistol's cock is up, And flashing fire will follow”¹¹².

Another popular expression is *prick*. In *Romeo And Juliet* the following poetical image is used: “the bawdy hand of the dial, is now upon the prick of noon”¹¹³. As seen in 3.1, *dial* seems to allude to the female genitals. In *Love's Labour's Lost prick* is once again combined with reference to a target. In “Let the mark have a prick in't, to meet at, if it may be”¹¹⁴. *Mark* can be interpreted as a target of sexual

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, *Troilus And Cressida*, I.ii.250-2

¹⁰⁷ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, II.v.73-4

¹⁰⁸ Shakespeare, *Othello*, II.i.132-3

¹⁰⁹ cf. Partridge, p. 67, 120

¹¹⁰ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, III.ii.111-2

¹¹¹ cf. Partridge, p. 176

¹¹² Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, II.i.50-1

¹¹³ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, II.iii.108-9

¹¹⁴ Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.i.125

desire¹¹⁵.

Many images are related to a sharp, long and thin shape connoting acuity. They are taken from various fields such as warfare, sports and chase or gardening and farming. *Dart of love*, as seen in “Believe not that the dribbling dart of love Can pierce a complete bosom”¹¹⁶ originates in warfare. If bosom means lap, hence, the vagina, then the dart must be a penis. A similar case is *sword* in combination with a *buckler* (see 3.1). In a transferred sense, Margaret’s claim “give us the swords; we have bucklers of our own”¹¹⁷ would mean, that they are in need of men. Another reference of sword is *Maria’s* explanation “Dumain was at my service, and his sword”¹¹⁸ where service might allude to sexual satisfaction.

From sports and chase the expression *horn* has been reused because of the shape a horn and an erected penis have in common. Partridge mentions, that the idea might originate in “the legend of amorous Jove self-transformed to the likeness of a bull”¹¹⁹. References to *horn* in the given sense can be found in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “Moonshine. This lanthorn doth the horned moon present - Demetrius. He should have worn the horns on his head”¹²⁰, where *Demetrius’* commentary suggests: not elsewhere, not as a penis as one might have thought. The sexual reference is more obvious in the Forester’s song in *As You Like It*: “Take thou no scorn to wear the horn; ... Thy father's father wore it; And thy father bore it. The horn, the horn, the lusty horn, Is not a thing to laugh to scorn”¹²¹ Considering the combination of *horn* and *to bear* plus the adjective *lusty*, the song becomes a rather bawdy one. A concurring notion is the *horns of cuckoldry* as in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* when Speed answers: “Why then, my horns are his horns, whether I wake or sleep”¹²².

Just like *prick* is an example for words taken from gardening and farming, so is *thorn*, as seen in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, I.iii.130-32 in: “this thorn / Doth to our rose of beauty right belong. And in *All’s Well*, IV.ii.18-20: “When you have our roses, / You barely leave our thorns to prick ourselves”. As mentioned in 3.1, *Rose* in both quotes seems to stand for the female genitals.

Of domestic usage is *pipe* as in “we may put up our pipes and be gone”¹²³. Cock would be another example of a word originally used in the domestic field.

Besides similarities in shape and acuity, some expressions rather refer to a penis’

¹¹⁵ cf. Partridge, p. 146

¹¹⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure For Measure*, I.iii.2-3

¹¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, V.ii.17

¹¹⁸ Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, V.ii.276

¹¹⁹ Partridge, p. 123

¹²⁰ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.i.233-4

¹²¹ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, IV.ii.13-18

¹²² Shakespeare, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, I.i.78

¹²³ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, IV.v.96

functions, i.e. erection and ejaculation. For example, erection is suggested in *stand* when *Speed* asks: “Why, then, how stands the matter with them?” and *Launce* answers: “Marry, thus: when it stands well with him, it stands well with her”¹²⁴. The same connotation can be perceived when *Sampson* says: “Me they shall feel while I am able to stand; and 'tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh”¹²⁵ where *feel* connotes a physical contact, which can even be a sexual experience as supported by his comment. Many expressions given in the paragraphs before feature the same connotation of erection if used with the phrasal verb to put up, as in “put up your sword”¹²⁶ or “put up our pipes”(see above).

In contrast a penis without erection is compared to a *tail* as in “O, thereby hangs a tail”¹²⁷. A pun with *tale* on phonological level can also be found: “Thou desirest me to stop in my tale against the hair”¹²⁸ where *hair* alludes to pubic hair, hence, a reference to the female lap.

Furthermore, there are references to ejaculation as with the verb *to spend*, then meaning to spend sperm as referred to in *All's Well That Ends Well*: “He wears his honour in a box unseen, That hugs his kicky-wicky here at home, Spending his manly marrow in her arms”¹²⁹. A similar meaning is connoted in *to come*, alluding to the experience of a sexual emission¹³⁰. *Margaret* supposes: “Well, I will call Beatrice to you, who, I think hath legs.” and *Benedick* answers: “And therefore will come”¹³¹. There might another pun in *Twelfth Night* where *Malvolio* promises *Olivia*: “To bed! aye, sweet heart; and I'll come to thee”¹³². According to Partridge *to shoot* “vaguely yet indubitably ... insinuates the pointing of the male towards the female generative organ”¹³³. As an example he points out a passage from *Love's Labour's Lost*: “A stand where you may make the fairest shoot”¹³⁴.

As to the female genitals (see 3.1) *thing* can also refer to the main male sexual organ as a passage from *King Lear* suggests: “She that's a maid now, ... Shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter”¹³⁵.

Bauble bears another connotation if combined to *hole* which, as shown in 3.1, can be interpreted as a reference to the vagina. The following passage from *Romeo And Juliet* features this combination: “this drivelling love is like a great natural, that

¹²⁴ Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen Of Verona*, II.v.20-2

¹²⁵ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, I.i.28-9

¹²⁶ Shakespeare, *King Richard*, I.ii.32

¹²⁷ Shakespeare, *Othello*, III.i.8

¹²⁸ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, II.iv.91

¹²⁹ Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, II.iii.272-4

¹³⁰ cf. Partridge, p. 81

¹³¹ Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, V.ii.20-2

¹³² Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, III.iv.30

¹³³ Partridge, p. 182

¹³⁴ Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.i.10

¹³⁵ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I.v.48-9

runs lolling up and down to hide his bauble in a hole”¹³⁶. Here, the connotation might also play on the Old French word *baubel* meaning a plaything which would correspond to the notion of easiness applied to the nature.

The insult *three-inch fool* tries to mark a short-penis’d man. Shakespeare made use of this offence: When *Curtis* shouts “Away you three-inched fool!” *Grumio* answers: “Am I but three inches? Why, thy horn is a foot, and so long am I at least”¹³⁷. The quote again supports the idea of *horn* functioning as a synonym for the penis.

Less often Shakespeare refers to the *scrotum* and the *testicles*. Punning on both its shape and its function, the scrotum is referred to as a *bag* or a *purse*, for example in *The Winter’s Tale*: “’twas nothing to geld a codpiece of a purse”¹³⁸ where *codpiece* as the part of clothes that covers the genitals seems to be an equivalent to penis. Earlier in the play *Leontes* says “It will let in and out the enemy With bag and baggage”¹³⁹. Here, *baggage* could probably mean the penis while *let in* and *let out* according to Partridge connotes to rape and leave the women¹⁴⁰.

The testicles are compared to ball-like items such as *billiards* in “Let’s to billiards. come”¹⁴¹. Another pun on ball can be found with *bowl*. Since bowling is played with balls, *to bowl* seems to be to play with balls, hence, in a transferred sense to caress the scrotum. We find this in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*: “She’s too hard for you at pricks, sir: challenge her to bowl”¹⁴². There is another possible pun in *The Winter’s Tale*: “If it be not too rough for some [girls, Partridge] that know little about bowling”¹⁴³. *Bawl* again puns on *ball* on the phonetic level. Moreover, there could also be a subtle reference on the level of semantic to the word *testicles*, since *testicles* is related to Latin *testiculi* which literally means ‘little witnesses’¹⁴⁴. Shakespeare uses *to bawl* in this sense in *Henry IV* when *Prince Henry* says: “And God knows whether those that bawl out of the ruins of thy linen shall inherit his kingdom”¹⁴⁵.

Bullets is another expression which has been related to the male generative organs. It can be found in the following passage from *Henry IV, II.*: “*Falstaff*. do you discharge upon mine hostess. *Pistol*. I will discharge upon her, Sir John, with two bullets. ... *Mistress Quickly*. Come, I’ll drink ... no bullets: I’ll drink no more than

¹³⁶ Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet*, II.iv.88-9

¹³⁷ Shakespeare, *The Taming of The Shrew*, IV.i.24-5

¹³⁸ Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, IV.iii.616

¹³⁹ Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, I.ii.205-6

¹⁴⁰ Partridge, p. 134

¹⁴¹ Shakespeare, *Antony And Cleopatra*, II.v.3

¹⁴² Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, IV.i.138-9

¹⁴³ Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, IV.iii.332-3

¹⁴⁴ Partridge, p. 24

¹⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, II.*, II.ii.23

will do me good, for no man's pleasure"¹⁴⁶. Considering the number two, *bullets* might just like balls refer to the testicles. Yet, Partridge points out a more hidden allusion to semen, hence, to sperm, which could be supported by the image of drinking bullets.

4. Versatility and variation, the basis of Shakespeare's witty allusions to sex

It is sometimes hard to follow Partridge's argumentation. When only a single reference is given, it is difficult to justify, that an allusion has been explicitly intended by Shakespeare. We possibly realise modern connotations to a single word used in the everyday life of our time. It is therefore doubtful, that all of Partridge's proposals could stand a scientific examination. Even more doubtful is whether one can ever have full certainty about the allusive intention. After all, it is part of the (word) game, to leave the interpretation to the reader.

However, some allusions such as *cock* seem very obvious. This makes it unlikely that they have occurred by coincidence. Moreover, when several expressions in a passage pun on the same field, for example *swords* and *bucklers* or *rose* and *thorn*, they seem to correspond to each other, which suggests that this meta-correspondence must be constructed on purpose.

What Partridge has definitely proved is how varied and picturesque Shakespeare's imagery is. As shown in 3., he employed an extremely wide and powerful syllabus. This is provided by his versatile usage of a word, which I demonstrated in 2.. As a consequence, influences of difference in class, sex, mood, etc. on the speech of Shakespeare's characters can be identified. Still, the expressions he chose seem very appropriate. It is the high versatility and the manifold variations that enable Shakespeare to allude so skilfully and wittily to sexuality.

¹⁴⁶ Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, II.*, II.iv.114-6

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