

Glossing the RSC Shakespeare: Some Selected Examples

The RSC Shakespeare is unique amongst editions of the complete works in its comprehensive on-page gloss. In preparing the notes for the RSC edition, full advantage has been taken of new electronic databases containing thousands of sixteenth-century texts. This has enabled really thorough searching for the meanings of words and has allowed us to see how they functioned in a massive variety of contexts: in plays, poetry, popular ballads, legal records, medical books, advice manuals, letters, dictionaries and so on. Notes on the plays and poems are designed to:

- illuminate the many-layered meanings of words, which have frequently been ignored or glossed only briefly in other editions
- explain technical terms relating to medicine, the law or the military
- gloss slang and sexual language that has been ignored or censored in earlier editions
- introduce relevant contextual material relating to the politics or culture of the period
- clarify literary/biblical references, historical/classical allusions and proverbial remarks
- consider the theatrical potential of words or phrases and open up new staging possibilities
- be written in concise and accessible English

Glosses appear beneath the text, with a slash indicating alternative senses and commas illustrating related shades of meaning. In the edition itself, glosses are accompanied by line numbers. Ellipses indicate that material has been removed for the purposes of these examples; text in square brackets has been inserted for the purposes of the examples and does not appear in the edition. The glosses below address both new material and words whose meaning has been noted before.

SPECIALIST LANGUAGE – MEDICAL, LEGAL, MILITARY

1.) From *Hamlet*, 3.2.151-2

Hamlet's line comes during the performance of the play Hamlet hopes will provoke his uncle Claudius to reveal his guilt at having murdered Hamlet's father. Claudius killed the former king by pouring poison into his ear.

BAPTISTA: ... None wed the second, but who killed the first.

HAMLET: Wormwood, wormwood.

Wormwood *i.e. that's bitter (the sharp-tasting plant was also used to purge the digestive tract of worms, so there may be a suggestion of bringing forth gnawing guilt; it was given to the patient in a preparation poured into the ear)*

2.) From *Macbeth*, 2.2.78

Following the murder of King Duncan, Lady Macbeth encourages her distraught husband to wash his bloody hands.

LADY MACBETH: ... A little water clears us of this deed.

clears *cleanses/legally exonerates* **deed** *act/crime (puns on 'dead'; spellings were interchangeable and 'deed' was a northern form of 'death')*

3.) From *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.117-119

Romeo kisses Juliet as he prepares to die by poison.

ROMEO: ... And lips, O you

The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss

A dateless bargain to engrossing death!

dateless bargain *eternal contract (stamped with an official seal)* **engrossing** *all-consuming/monopolizing (with legal connotations: 'to engross' is 'to write in a manner appropriate to legal documents')*

SPECIALIST LANGUAGE – MEDICAL, LEGAL, MILITARY (CONTINUED)

4.) From *King Lear*, 4.5.93-103

Edgar and Gloucester (his ailing, blinded father) meet King Lear, who is wearing a crown of weeds and is clearly out of his mind.

EDGAR:... But who comes here?

The safer sense will ne'er accommodate

His master thus.

LEAR: No, they cannot touch me for crying: I am the king himself.

EDGAR: O thou side-piercing sight!

LEAR: Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press-money. That fellow handles his bow like a crow-keeper. Draw me a clothier's yard. Look, look, a mouse! Peace, peace, this piece of toasted cheese will do't. There's my gauntlet: I'll prove it on a giant. Bring up the brown bills. O, well-flown, bird!

I'th'clout, i'th'clout: hwegh! Give the word.

EDGAR: Sweet marjoram

The ... thus *were he (Lear) in his right mind, he would never permit himself to dress like this (or possibly 'Gloucester's senses will not be able to withstand seeing his master like this')* **touch** *accuse, blame/lay hands on*
press-money *money paid to military recruits when they were conscripted (Lear seems to imagine he is recruiting an army)* **crow-keeper** *scarecrow/person employed to frighten crows from the crops* **Draw ... yard** *draw your bow to its fullest extent (the length of a longbow's arrow, which, at thirty-six inches, was the same as the length of a cloth-seller's measuring rod)* **piece** *puns on* **peace** **gauntlet** *armoured glove thrown down as a challenge to a duel*
prove it on *make good my cause against* **brown bills** *long-handled weapons, painted or varnished brown and topped with axe-like blades; or soldiers carrying such weapons (the sense of 'beak' may give rise to the image of a bird)* **well-flown, bird** *the language of falconry, here used to describe an arrow's flight* **I'th'clout** *cloth at the centre of an archer's target* **hewgh** *perhaps Lear imitates the sound of an arrow as it flies through the air and hits the target* **watch** *password (continues Lear's military fantasy)* **Sweet marjoram** *Edgar invents a password that relates to Lear's headgear and to the plant's alleged medicinal properties in treating brain disorders; it was also used to treat shortness of breath, from which Lear suffers elsewhere in the play*

SPECIALIST LANGUAGE – MEDICAL, LEGAL, MILITARY (CONTINUED)

5.) From *Hamlet*, 5.1.77-83

Hamlet speculates on the former identity of a skull.

HAMLET: ... This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries: is this the fine of all his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in this box; and must the inheritor himself have no more, ha?

statutes *legal documents that secured a debt on land and property (roughly similar to a mortgage)*
recognizances *legal documents that formally acknowledged a debt* **fines ... recoveries** *legal processes concerned with securing the outright ownership of land;* **double vouchers** *refers to the practice of having two people vouch for a claimant's ownership of the land* **fine ... fines** *end of his fines (the sense of **fine** then shifts to 'elegant, handsome', and then to 'finely powdered')* **vouch** *guarantee* **the ... indentures** *land (i.e. his grave) only as long and wide as a legal document* **pair of indentures** *two copies of an agreement drawn up on the same sheet of paper, which was then halved along a zigzag line to form documents that, when placed together, were a unique match* **conveyances** *deeds relating to the transfer of land and property (plays on the sense of 'light-fingered theft, sleight of hand')* **lie** *plays on the sense of 'fib'* **box** *deed-box/coffin* **inheritor** *i.e. owner*

SLANG AND SEXUAL LANGUAGE

1.) From *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*, 2.1.10-25

MISTRESS QUICKLY: Alas the day. Take heed of him: he stabbed me in mine own house, and that most beastly. He cares not what mischief he doth, if his weapon be out. He will foin like any devil. He will spare neither man, woman, nor child.

FANG: If I can close with him, I care not for his thrust.

MISTRESS QUICKLY: No, nor I neither. I'll be at your elbow.

FANG: If I but fist him once, if he come but within my vice —

MISTRESS QUICKLY: I am undone with his going. I warrant he is an infinitive thing upon my score. Good Master Fang, hold him sure: good Master Snare, let him not 'scape. He comes continually to Pie-corner — saving your manhoods — to buy a saddle, and he is indited to dinner to the Lubber's-head in Lombard Street, to Master Smooth's the silkman. I pra'ye, since my exion is entered and my case so openly known to the world, let him be brought in to his answer. A hundred mark is a long one for a poor lone woman to bear, and I have borne, and borne, and borne, and have been fubbed off, and fubbed off, from this day to that day, that it is a shame to be thought on. There is no honesty in such dealing, unless a woman should be made an ass and a beast, to bear every knave's wrong.

stabbed *hurt financially/penetrated sexually* **house** *inn/vagina* **weapon** *sword/penis* **foin** *thrust* **close with** *fight/embrace sexually* **fist** *punch/masturbate* **come** *advance/orgasm* **vice** *grip* **undone** *ruined financially/sexually, in terms of reputation* **going** *departure/sexual activity* **infinitive** *i.e. infinite, huge* **thing** *item/penis* **score** *tavern bill, accounts/vagina* **Pie-corner** *area in London famous for cooks' shops, saddlers and prostitution ('pie' and 'corner' were both slang terms for the vagina)* **manhoods** *honours/penises* **saddle** *horse's saddle/whore* **indited** *i.e. invited* **exion** *action/vagina* **case** *lawsuit/vagina* **hundred mark** *£66/large penis* **borne** *been patient/borne the weight of a man during sex* **fubbed off** *fobbed off/fucked* **dealing** *behaviour/sexual activity* **wrong** *wrongdoing/shaming penis/illegitimate child*

SLANG AND SEXUAL LANGUAGE (CONTINUED)

2.) From *All's Well That Ends Well*, 1.1.127-129

PAROLLES: ... Your date is better in your pie and your porridge than in your cheek. And your virginity, your old virginity, is like one of our French withered pears: it looks ill, it eats dryly.

date *fruit/age/penis* **pie** *plays on the sense of 'vagina'* **porridge** *plays on the sense of 'vagina'* **cheek** *i.e. as a sign of age* **French withered pears** *old fruits/syphilitic vaginas* **eats dryly** *tastes dry*

3.) From *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.61-64

MERCUTIO: Thy wit is a very bitter sweeting: it is a most sharp sauce.

ROMEO: And is it not then well served into a sweet goose?

MERCUTIO: O here's a wit of cheverel, that stretches from an inch narrow to an ell broad!

sweeting *sweet apple* **sharp sauce** *biting riposte/bitter sauce for food* **And ... goose?** *alludes to the proverb 'sweet meat must have sour sauce', but shifts the sense of sauce to 'semen' so that served plays on the sense of 'served sexually' and goose on the sense of 'prostitute'* **wit** *plays on the sense of 'penis'* **cheverel** *easily stretched leather* **ell** *forty-five inches/penis*

4.) From *The Life of King Henry the Eighth*, 2.3.44-51

OLD LADY: 'Tis strange: a threepence bowed would hire me,

Old as I am, to queen it: but, I pray you,

What think you of a duchess? Have you limbs

To bear that load of title?

ANNE: No, in truth.

OLD LADY: Then you are weakly made: pluck off a little:

I would not be a young count in your way,

For more than blushing comes to...

bowed *bent, worthless/puns on 'bawd'* **queen it** *play the queen/be a prostitute ('quean')* **bear ... title** *endure the title of duchess/support the weight of the duke during sex/receive the duke's semen/give birth to the duke's child* **pluck off** *come down (in aspiration; literally 'undress')* **count** *i.e. lower than a duke; puns on 'cunt'* **way** *path/condition (of being a virgin)*

MULTIPLE MEANINGS

1.) From *Macbeth*, 5.5.24-25

MACBETH: Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage...

shadow *insubstantial thing/illusion/ghost/actor (a ghostly sense transforms **walking** into 'haunting'; the theatrical meaning is picked up in **fools** and **player**)* **frets** *wears out/worries his way through/rants and rages (in the manner of a melodramatic actor)* **poor** *wretched/unskilled*

2.) From *The First Part of Henry the Fourth*, 2.3.20-22

HOTSPUR: O, I could divide myself and go to buffets, for moving such a dish of skimmed milk with so honourable an action!

go to buffets *come to blows (with myself)* **moving** *trying to persuade* **dish ... milk** *i.e. weak, cowardly person*
action *course of action/military enterprise/rhetorical gesture/division in a logical argument*

3.) From *The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.220-222

Leontes, here addressing his son, is wrongly convinced that his pregnant wife has been unfaithful. She has just left to accompany his brother (whom Leontes suspects of being her lover) on a walk.

LEONTES: ... Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays, and I
Play too, but so disgraced a part, whose issue
Will hiss me to my grave.

plays *amuses herself/is busily engaged/practises deceit/has sex (in the next line the sense shifts to 'perform a role')*
so ... part *i.e. the cuckold, butt of jokes* **issue** *outcome/action/offspring (i.e. the unborn child)*

4.) From *Troilus and Cressida*, 2.1.2-5

THERSITES: Agamemnon, how if he had boils, full, all over, generally? ... And those boils did run? Say so: did not the general run? Were not that a botchy core? ... Then there would come some matter from him: I see none now.

How what **full** *everywhere/big, swollen* **generally** *all over (puns on Agamemnon's military rank as **general**)* **run**
seep (sense then shifts to 'run away') **Say so** *say it were so* **botchy core** *boil-covered body/flawed (i.e. cowardly)*
*heart (**core** may pun on 'corps', i.e. 'soldiers stationed on guard'; it can also mean 'hardened mass in the centre of a boil')* **matter** *pus/significant subject matter, reason*

PERFORMANCE POTENTIAL

1.) From *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.188-198

The play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is being performed, in which one character represents a wall with a hole in it. Traditionally, actors have indicated the hole with their fingers. In fact, the language reveals that the hole is suggested by the actor spreading his legs, making for a much funnier piece of on-stage action.

THISBE: O wall...

My cherry lips have often kissed thy stones

Thy stones, with lime and hair knit up in thee.

stones plays on the sense of 'testicles' **lime** pronounced 'limb', thus playing on the sense of 'penis' **hair** plays on the sense of 'pubic hair'

Having asked the wall to show her its 'chink' ('anus'), Thisbe goes on try and kiss her lover through the hole, but complains that instead of lips, all she kisses is the wall's 'hole' ('arsehole').

2.) From 3.2.36-38

Caliban encourages Stephano and Trinculo to overthrow his master, Prospero, but is tormented by Trinculo as he tries to speak.

STEPHANO: Trinculo, if you trouble him any more in's tale, by this hand I will supplant some of your teeth... interrupt the monster one word further, and by this hand, I'll turn thy mercy out'o'doors and make a stockfish of thee.

in's tale as he tries to speak (**tale** may pun on 'tail', suggesting that Trinculo has just kicked Caliban in the backside)
supplant uproot (plays on the sense of 'usurp') **turn ... o'doors** banish any feelings of mercy (i.e. and beat you; or may suggest the emptying of Trinculo's drinking vessel) **stockfish** dried cod (beaten before cooking)

CONTEXTUAL MATERIAL

1.) From *The Life and Death of King John*, 5.7.62-63

BASTARD: The dauphin is preparing hitherward,
Where heaven he knows how we shall answer him:

preparing hitherward *on his way here/preparing to come here* **heaven he probably originally 'God'**,
*altered because of the 1606 Parliamentary 'Act to Restrain the Abuses of Players' which sought to put an
end to blasphemous language on stage*

2.) From *Much Ado About Nothing*, 3.2.15-

BENEDICK: I have the toothache.

DON PEDRO: Draw it.

BENEDICK: Hang it.

CLAUDIO: You must hang it first and draw it afterwards.

DON PEDRO: What, sigh for the toothache?

LEONATO: Where is but a humour or a worm.

Draw extract **Hang it** *expression of angry impatience* **hang it** *teeth were hung up outside barbers' shops as
advertisements for the dental work carried out there; Claudio also refers to the hanging, and drawing
(disembowelling) of a criminal* **Where** *where there is* **humour ... worm** *toothache was thought to be caused
either by the descent from the head into the tooth of one of the four bodily humours (fluids), or by a worm in the tooth*

3.) From *The Second Part of Henry the Sixth*, 4.8.1-2 & 21-22

Alarum. Enter again Cade and all his rabblement

CADE: Up Fish Street, down St Magnus' Corner, kill and knock down: throw them into Thames!

Sound a parley

... [Cade's followers are offered a pardon if they give up the fight; Cade remonstrates with them]

CADE: ... Hath my sword here broke through London gates, that you should leave me at the White Hart in Southwark?

Location: *near London Bridge, on the north side of the River Thames* **Alarum** *trumpet call to arms* **rabblement**
riotous followers **Fish Street** *on the north side of London Bridge, across the river from Southwark* **St Magnus'**
Corner *site of St Magnus Church, by London Bridge at the bottom of* **Fish Street** **parley** *trumpet summons for
negotiation between opposing sides, during which fighting was to stop* **White Hart** *an inn on Borough High Street
in Southwark, south of the Thames, at which Cade had lodged; here its name puns on 'white heart', i.e. 'coward'*

CONTEXTUAL MATERIAL CONTINUED

4.) From *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 5.5.1-18

Falstaff prepares for what he thinks will be a secret romantic rendezvous in a wood, unaware that he is about to be tricked by Mistress Ford and Mistress Page.

FALSTAFF: My doe with the black scut! Let the sky rain potatoes, let it thunder to the tune of Greensleeves, hail kissing-comfits and snow eryngoes. Let there come a tempest of provocation, I will shelter me here.

MISTRESS FORD: Mistress Page is come with me, sweetheart.

FALSTAFF: Divide me like a bribed buck, each a haunch: I will keep my sides to myself, my shoulders for the fellow of this walk, and my horns I bequeath your husbands. Am I a woodman, ha?

doe *female deer/mate/whore* **scut** *tail/vulva* **Greensleeves** *a popular love song* **potatoes** *sweet or Spanish potatoes were considered aphrodisiacs* **kissing-comfits** *confectionary for sweetening the breath* **eryngoes** *candied roots of the sea holly; a type of sweetmeat viewed as an aphrodisiac and particularly effective for older people*
provocation *sexual stimulation* **sweetheart** *puns on 'sweet hart' (i.e. male deer)* **Divide ... buck** *in order to conceal the theft, stolen (bribed) deer were cut up and divided rapidly amongst the poachers* **fellow ... walk** *gamekeeper of this part of the wood* **woodman** *hunter/womanizer/lunatic*

5.) From *King Lear*, 2.2.11-14 & 22-23

OSWALD: What dost thou know me for?

KENT: A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave, a lily-livered, action-taking whoreson ... Draw, you rogue, for though it be night, yet the moon shines: I'll make a sop o'th'moonshine of you...

knave *rogue/servant* **broken meats** *scraps of food* **three-suited** *servingsmen were permitted to have three outfits a year* **hundred-pound** *far more than a servant's income; possibly a contemptuous reference to those who bought knighthoods from James I for £100* **worsted-stocking** *i.e. servant/unable to afford silk stockings (worsted is a woollen fabric)* **lily-livered** *cowardly, with a bloodless liver (the organ thought to be the seat of strong emotions)*
action-taking *litigious* **whoreson** *bastard (son of a whore)* **sop o'th'moonshine** *i.e. beat you to a pulp (so that you resemble either a soggy piece of bread lying under the moon's light, or the blancmange pudding called moonshine)*

CLARIFYING HISTORICAL/CLASSICAL BACKGROUND OR LITERARY/BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS

1.) From *The Third Part of Henry the Sixth*, 3.3.187-94

GLOUCESTER: I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall,
I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk,
I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,
Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,
And, like a Sinon, take another Troy.
I can add colours to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machevil to school.

mermaid *the siren of classical mythology was said to sing sweetly in order to draw sailors onto rocks where they would drown* **basilisk** *mythical reptile whose gaze had the power to kill* **Nestor** *Greek leader who fought at Troy; famed for his wisdom and eloquence* **Ulysses** *King of Ithaca and hero of Homer's Odyssey; noted for his cunning* **Sinon** *in Virgil's Aeneid, the man who pretended to desert the Greeks and persuaded King Priam of Troy to admit the wooden horse into the city, as a result of which Troy was destroyed* **Proteus** *the sea god Neptune's herdsman, who had the ability to change shape at will* **set ... school** *teach Machiavelli a few things* **Machevil** *an intriguer, an unscrupulous schemer (from Niccolò Machiavelli's The Prince, a sixteenth-century treatise perceived as advocating ruthless political cunning)*

2.) From *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.1.175-179

Benedick energetically declares his loathing of Beatrice.

BENEDICK: ... I would not marry her, were she endowed with all that Adam had left him before he transgressed. She would have made Hercules have turned spit, yea, and have cleft his club to make the fire too. Come, talk not of her, you shall find her the infernal Ate in good apparel. I would to God some scholar would conjure her...

all ... transgressed *i.e. the delights and dominion of the Garden of Eden before the Fall* **Hercules ... too** *in Greek legend the Queen of Lydia, Omphale, made Hercules dress as a woman and spin wool while she took over his club and lion's skin; turning a roasting spit was one of the lowliest domestic tasks* **Ate** *Greek goddess of discord and vengeance* **conjure** *exorcize (the sending of evil spirits back to hell had to be carried out in Latin so a scholar would be required)*

CLARIFYING HISTORICAL/CLASSICAL BACKGROUND OR LITERARY/BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS (CONTINUED)

3.) From *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, 1.3.127-13

Richard addresses Elizabeth, wife to his brother Edward IV.

RICHARD: . . . Was not your husband
In Margaret's battle at St Albans slain?
Let me put in your minds, if you forget,
What you have been ere this, and what you are:
Withal, what I have been and what I am.

MARGARET: A murd'rous villain, and so still thou art.
Poor Clarence did forsake his father, Warwick,
Ay, and forswore himself – which Jesu pardon! –

husband ... slain historically, Elizabeth's first husband, Sir John Grey, was killed fighting for the Lancastrians, although in 3 Henry VI (Act 3 scene 2) he is depicted as having fought for the Yorkists **battle army St Albans** a town about twenty-five miles from London **ere this** before now **Clarence ... Warwick** Clarence and the Earl of Warwick deserted the Yorkists; Clarence married Warwick's daughter, but later returned to the Yorkist cause, events that are depicted in 3 Henry VI **father father-in-law forswore himself** broke his oath (of loyalty)

4.) From *Troilus and Cressida*, 2.2.79-85

Troilus describes Paris' role in the cause of the Trojan war.

TROILUS: And for an old aunt whom the Greeks held captive,
He brought a Grecian queen...
Is she worth keeping? Why, she is a pearl
Whose price hath launched above a thousand ships,
And turned crowned kings to merchants.

for in retaliation for **aunt** i.e. Hesione, Ajax's mother and sister of Paris' father Priam; she was rescued from a sea monster by Hercules and given to the Greek Telamon; **aunt** plays on a slang sense of 'bawd, old prostitute' **Grecian queen** i.e. Helen (may pun on 'quean', i.e. prostitute) **price ... ships** echoes Faustus' line to Helen in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus ('Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?') **above** more than

CLARIFYING HISTORICAL/CLASSICAL BACKGROUND OR LITERARY/BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS (CONTINUED)

5.) From *Measure for Measure*, 1.3.5-78

CLAUDIO: Thus can the demigod Authority
Make us pay down for our offence by weight
The words of heaven; on whom it will, it will,
On whom it will not, so.

down *immediately* **weight** *in full (literally, weighing rather than counting coins, in order to ensure their true value)*
The ... heaven *according to the Bible (specifically Romans 9:15, in which God says 'I will have mercy on him to whom I will show mercy')*

NAMES

1.) From *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

Mother Prat *a 'prat' is a 'trick' though it was also slang for the buttocks*

2.) From *The Merchant of Venice*

Shylock *perhaps from the Hebrew Shallach ('cormorant'), or from Shiloh (Genesis 49:10 although the word means 'messiah'); connotations of wary secrecy and hoarding (shy lock)*

Gratiano *according to a contemporary Italian dictionary, a name given to a foolish or clownish character in a play*

3.) From *The First Part of Henry the Fourth*, 1.2.27-30

FALSTAFF: ... And is not my hostess of the tavern a most sweet wench?

PRINCE HENRY: As is the honey of Hybla, my old lad of the castle. And is not a buff jerkin a most sweet robe of durance?

hostess *landlady* **Hybla** *Sicilian town famous for its honey* **old ... castle** *carouser (plays on 'Oldcastle', Shakespeare's original name for Falstaff; castle may also play on the sense of 'stocks', instruments of public punishment in which a thief might be confined; a London brothel called The Castle may also be alluded to, appropriately named given that castle was slang for 'vagina')* **buff jerkin** *tight leather jacket worn by sheriff's officers (plays on the sense of 'naked vagina')* **robe of durance** *long-lasting garment (with sexual connotations; durance plays on the sense of 'imprisonment')*