

The Name "Bottom" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract

This essay discusses the surname of Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The esteemed (and vast) *Oxford English Dictionary* denies that the name could in Shakespeare's day mean "buttocks, backside." By citing a variety of contemporaneous and subsequent texts, I argue that the *OED* is wrong; that the name connoted not only "buttocks" but also "arse"; and that the word "ass" may have been pronounced (not by everyone, but by many) very similarly to "arse," as is the case in rural and westerly parts of England today. So, when Quince says to the metamorphosed ass-headed weaver, "Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated," he means not merely "You are transformed"; he also means "Your name, 'Bottom,' has been translated, physically, via 'arse' into 'ass.'" If this argument is valid, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is even better coordinated and wittier (linguistically, thematically, and visually) than it has been deemed to be. It may then prove, however, even more difficult for translators of its text into foreign languages.

For today's British speakers of English, the connotations of the word "bottom" include "buttocks" and, vulgarly, "arse" or "bum": the last term meaning "posteriors or sitting part" and not, as in the U.S., "beggar, loafer, tramp." Consequently, British readers may assume that "buttocks," "arse," or "bum" were in William Shakespeare's mind when he conferred the surname "Bottom" on the thespian weaver of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Alas, the esteemed and usually authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary* declares that "bottom," in the sense of "posteriors" or "sitting part," dates only from the late eighteenth century. Ignoring James Boswell's recollection that in 1781 Dr. Johnson occasioned mirth with his reference to a woman who had "a bottom of good sense," the dictionary cites as the earliest instance Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia*, 1794-1796: "So as to have his head and shoulders much lower than his bottom."¹ The problem becomes more complicated when Peter Holland annotates the name "Bottom" in his edition of the play. Holland observes:

A "bottom" was the core on which the weaver's skein of yarn was wound; Shakespeare used it in this sense in *Two Gentlemen* 3.2.53 (as a verb) and *Shrew* 4.3.134-5, "a bottom of brown thread." Caxton, in his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, had Ariadne give Theseus

a "botome of threde" to help him find his way through the labyrinth. (Shakespeare 1998, 147n)

Holland then offers the following intriguing speculation:

No one has yet proved convincingly that the word "bottom" could at this date refer to a person's behind; if it could, then the transformation into an ass (arse) would seem almost a literalizing of Bottom's name. (147n)

Here, with some trepidation, I consider the possibility of such "literalizing." I ask, first, whether "Bottom" could indeed connote "bum," and, secondly, whether it could also connote both "arse" and "ass." If the answer to either or both questions is "yes," *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes an even better play, for the work is then revealed to be far wittier (linguistically, thematically, and visually) than we may have deemed it to be.

In an essay published in 2000, I remarked of Bottom: "His name means 'core (or spool) of yarn' (appropriate to a weaver) as well as suggesting 'buttocks.'" My endnote — appropriately, not a footnote — added:²

It obviously suggests "buttocks" to modern audiences. Holland, p. 147, says that there is no proof that "bottom" had that meaning when Shakespeare was writing. I think it would be unwise to underestimate Shakespeare's associative talents, particularly where the human body is concerned. "Bottom," at that time, could certainly refer to the base of anything and to the capacious curvature of a ship, so an association with "buttocks" seems natural enough. (Sutherland and Watts 2000, 213-14)

Such bawdry would be entirely in keeping with a comedy in which Wall's "hole" and "stones" are also Snout's anus and testicles. Then, in Peter Ackroyd's recent novel *The Lambs of London*, we find the following discussion of Bottom's surname:³

"So Shakespeare did not mean bottom? [. . .] His nether end?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Ridiculous, Selwyn. What about his line, '*I will move storms*'? That is the cue for a fart if ever there was one." (Ackroyd 2005, 150)

Of course, we have obvious evidence that Shakespeare could associate a comic character with buttocks. In *Measure for Measure*, we encounter Pompey Bum, and Escalus (on hearing his name), predictably remarks:

Troth, and your bum is the greatest thing about you; so that, in the beastliest sense, you are Pompey the Great. (Shakespeare 2005, 2.1.201-202)

Nevertheless, to use the surname "Bum" as evidence that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Bottom has a name that could connote "buttocks" seems, again, to be blocked by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which declares:

The guess that *bum* is "a mere contraction of bottom," besides its phonetic difficulties, is at variance with the historical fact that "bottom" in this sense is found only from the 18th c. (*OED*, entry for "bum")

Fortunately, the dictionary's supposed "historical fact" is open to challenge. In Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593), Venus seductively addresses Adonis thus:

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.

Within this limit is relief enough,
 Sweet bottom grass and high delightful plain,
 Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
 To shelter thee from tempest and from rain. (lines 231-38, pp. 15-16)

Eric Partridge glosses "bottom grass," or as he prefers, "bottom-grass," as follows: "*bottom growth*, 'thick, short grass in meadows, below the longer and comparatively sparse growth' (Wyld), also (*bottom* = the human posterior) 'the hair growing in and about the crutch'" (Partridge 1968, 69-70).

Even stronger evidence can be found. In Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (first recorded in 1599, printed in 1600), Sybil tells Rose this:

My Lord Mayor your father, and Master Philpot your uncle, and Master Scott your cousin, and Mistress Frigbottom, by Doctors' Commons, do all, by my troth, send you most hearty commendations. (Dekker 1979, scene 2, lines 22-25, 98-99)

In their comments on this passage, the editors R. L. Smallwood and Stanley Wells say initially of "Philpot," "Scott," and "Frigbottom":

The first and last names are so clearly meant to be bawdily comic that it may not be far-fetched to suggest that *Scott* puns on "scut," meaning "short tail . . . hence, posteriors or

pudend" (Partridge); though, of course, Scott, unlike the others, appears in the play (sc. ix). (Dekker 1979, 99)

Then, looking particularly at "Frigbottom," the editors comment:

Dekker's compound. *Frig* is first recorded in 1598, meaning "wriggle" or "tickle"; the fully sexual meaning seems to be a later development (see *O.E.D.*, 1972 Supplement). *O.E.D.* first records *bottom* as "posteriors" in 1794, but clearly it has a related sense here. (99)

OED Online, however, shows that "the fully sexual meaning" of "frig" was *not* "a later development" by citing John Florio's "frig," 1598 ("*Fricciare*, to frig, to wriggle, to tickle"), under the heading "*frig*, v. [. . .] 3. Freq. used with euphemistic force. a. trans. and intr. = FUCK v. 1. b. To masturbate." Randle Cotgrave's *Dictionary of the French and English Tongues* (1611) glosses "*Fringue*" as follows: "to leacher, or lasciuiously to frig with the taile, in leachering."⁴ Furthermore, those modern editors, Smallwood and Wells, find that "bottom" then clearly had a sense "related" to "posteriors."

Thus, the surname of Mistress Frigbottom is equivalent at least to "Wrigglebottom" or "Tickle-Bum," and possibly to some grosser name such as "Wank-Fanny," and, most likely of all, to some name invoking sexual intercourse (perhaps anal, though not necessarily so), such as "Shag-Hole." These days, English parents sometimes refer euphemistically to a female child's "front bottom," and a precedent for this usage can be found in William Stepney's *The Spanish School-master* (1591), which glosses *yjada* (in modern Spanish *ijada*, loin) as "the bottom of the belly"; while a confusion of back and front is witnessed by John Florio's *Queen Anna's New World of Words* (1611), which glosses "*Malfóro*" thus: "the divels arse, a mischievous hole, taken for a woman's quaint."⁵ By indicating that "Doctors' Commons," the lawyers' college, provides Mistress Frigbottom with customers, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* reinforces the bawdy interpretation; for "Commons" could also connote "brothels": *Measure for Measure* refers to "abuses in common houses." In context, that woman's surname provides further evidence that, in Shakespeare's day, "bottom" could indeed mean "posteriors," "bum," or "nether regions"; it indicates that the *OED*'s date for that meaning, 1794-1796, may be two centuries too late; and it enriches *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In that comedy, Shakespeare exploits various connotations of "bottom," and we now find that they include not only "core or spool of yarn or thread," "foundation in reality," "substance," and "limit," but also "bum." We may recall Robin Goodfellow's gleeful words, in act 2, scene 1, about the aunt who mistakes his crouching form for a foot-stool:

Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,

And "Tailor!" cries, and falls into a cough. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2.1.52-53)

("Tailor" here probably means "My tail": i.e., "My prat", as in the modern "pratfall," "prat" meaning "buttock" or "buttocks" since at least 1567.)⁶ Furthermore, by permitting the association of "bottom" with "arse," Mistress Frigbottom goes half-way to verifying Holland's speculation that the metamorphosis of Bottom into an ass is a literalizing of the weaver's name.

The difficulty that remains, however, is that, in Shakespeare's works generally, "ass" refers either to the quadruped, the beast of burden, or, metaphorically, to a foolish person. Partridge claims that sometimes "ass" implies "arse," but his examples seem generally unconvincing: "Asses are made to bear, and so are you" in *The Taming of the Shrew*, 2.1; the "Judas" mockery in *Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2; "Then came each actor on his ass" in *Hamlet*, 2.2; "Thou borest thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt" and "May not an ass know when the cart draws the horse?" in *King Lear*, 1.4; and "the fall of an ass, which is no great hurt" in *Cymbeline*, 1.3 (Partridge 1968, 59).⁷ In that sequence of citations, the meanings "beast of burden" and "fool" seem fully sufficient. Current American usage, in which the spelling and sound of "ass" denote the human backside far more frequently than they denote the quadruped, may mislead some readers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In his guide to Shakespearean studies, Russ McDonald quotes William Harrison's *Description of England* (1587) thus on the topic of men's clothing (including breeches):⁸

[W]e [. . .] bestow most cost upon our asses, and much more than upon all the rest of our bodies, as women do likewise upon their heads and shoulders. (McDonald 1996, 250)

This appears to supply the missing link in the argument: the costly breeches cover "asses." Unfortunately, however, McDonald has silently modernized and Americanized Harrison's spelling, which originally gave "arses" and not "asses," so this instance fails.⁹ Fausto Cercignani (while noting an "uncertain" example) offers a range of evidence that, in Shakespeare's works, "ass" has a short "a," as in "hat" (Cercignani 1981, 87, 93-94), whereas (predictably, given the contrasting etymological origins) the customary long "a" for "arse" is indicated when, in *Romeo and Juliet* 2.4, the Nurse seems momentarily to think that "arse" begins with "R."¹⁰ The following exchange from John Lyly's *Endimion* seems to confirm the aural distinction:

Top[has]. Learned? I am all *Mars and Ars*.

Sam[ias]. Nay, you are all *Masse and Asse*.

Top. Mock you mee? [. . .] Am I all a *masse* or *lumpe*, is there no proportion in me? Am I all *Asse*? is there no wit in mee? *Epi*, prepare thee to the slaughter.

Sam. I pray sir heare vs speake! we call you Masse, which your learning doth well vnderstande is all Man, for *Mas maris* is a man. Then *As* (as you knowe) is a weight, and we for your vertues account you a weight.

Top. The Latine hath saued your lyues [. . .] (*Endimion*, 1.3.91-102, in Lyly 1902, 3:28)

Entangled though the comic punning may be, it seems to preserve, and partly to depend on, a contrast between the "arse" sound and the "ass" sound. Lyly's *Midas*, too, seems to offer confirmation:

Apollo [*addressing Midas*]. I will leaue thee but the two last letters of thy name, to be thy whole name; which if thou canst not gesse, touch thine ears, they shall tell thee.

Mid. What hast thou done *Apollo*? the eares of an Asse vpon the head of a King? (John Lyly, *Midas*, 4.1.138-42, in Lyly 1902, 3:143)

These examples appear to refute Partridge's assertion that "'ass' [. . .] is pronounced arse" (Partridge 1968, 75). Helge Kökeritz remarks: "Short forms of *ace* and *grace* seem almost essential for the puns *ace-ass* and *grace-grass*, unless we assume considerable distortion of the vowel in *ace* and *grace* [. . .] for the sake of the pun" (Kökeritz 1953, 176).¹¹

It may seem probable, therefore, that, in the late sixteenth century, "bottom" could connote "bum" (and thus "arse"), but not "ass." Nevertheless, in English west-country rural and working-class parlance, with which I have long been familiar, "ass," like the liturgical "mass," has often been pronounced with a long or medium-to-long "a," producing an elongated syllable, "aahss," close to a rhyme with "arse" (in which the "r" varies, depending on the speaker, between audibility and inaudibility).¹² Hence, bearing in mind the trace of doubt conceded by Kökeritz and Cercignani, I think it would be rash to rule out the occurrence of that pronunciation amid the evolving diversity of Elizabethan English. (*Love's Labour's Lost*, notably 4.2 and 5.1, amply testifies that the pronunciation of English words then was a complex "site of struggle.") An ambiguous shift into rhyme in the anonymous *The Taming of a Shrew* may perhaps offer an instance of that long "a," and is certainly further evidence of the swift associability of "ass" with "arse":

Val[eria] Well, will you plaie a little?

Kate I, give me the Lute.

She plaies.

Val. That stop was false, play it againe.

Kate Then mend it thou, thou filthy asse.

Val. What, doo you bid me kisse your arse?
Kate How now jack sause, your a jollie mate,
 Your best be still least I crosse your pate,
 And make your musicke flie about your eares.
 Ile make it and your foolish coxcombe meet.
 (*The Taming of a Shrew*, in Bullough 1957, 1:82)

The question here, obviously, is: "Where does the rhyming pattern begin?" If the words "Then mend it" begin a rhyming couplet, then here "asse" (i.e., "ass") is substantially homophonous with "arse"; but, if the start of the pattern is "How now," it isn't. In this passage, choosing between two couplets and one is difficult. Nevertheless, the notion that, in Shakespeare's day, "ass" and "arse" made a homophonic pun has gained support, notably from such commentators as Frankie Rubinstein, Annabel Patterson, and Mario DiGangi.¹³ Of course, Laurence Sterne would eventually exploit the homophone in *Tristram Shandy*: "Well, dear brother Toby, said my father [. . .], how goes it with your Ass? [. . .] My A— e, quoth my uncle Toby, is much better" (Sterne 1996, 413). For our purpose, timely evidence is provided by Peter Levins's *Manipulus Vocabulorum* (1570),¹⁴ which rhymes the following words: "Asse," "Brasse," "Glasse," "Grasse," "Masse," and "Passe": on the whole, a clear victory for the long "a," even though we may concede a local (northern English) preference for the short form. Thus we may infer that, although its pronunciation varied, "ass" was verifiably, in certain social, cultural, and geographical locations, homophonous or almost homophonous with "arse." A more general observation is that, as a dramatist, Shakespeare had soon learnt that bawdry is the astringent prophylactic that protects a contrasting lyricism from the sentimental. In *Romeo and Juliet*, too, the interplay of ardently enhancive love-poetry and vigorously reductive bawdry (as in "O that she were / An open-arse") lends the power of thematic paradox to the evolving tragedy.

Shakespeare relished significant names. Iago's name, ominously for Othello the Moor, is not Italian, but Spanish, so that it evokes Spain's patron saint: Santiago Matamoros, or Saint James the Moor-Slayer. When Romeo first meets Juliet, he is disguised as a pilgrim, a guise true to his name because *romeo* is Italian for "pilgrim to Rome"; and, of course, she is called "Juliet" because she was born in July. I think it should therefore remain a possibility that Bottom's asinine disguise, too, has onomastical aptness. His name, which certainly connotes "bum," can also connote both "arse" and "ass." When Quince says to the metamorphosed weaver, "Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.1.108, Shakespeare 2002), he quite possibly means

not only "Poor fellow! You are transformed" but also "Heaven help you! Your name, 'Bottom,' has been translated, physically, via 'arse' into 'ass.' Horridly, the word is made flesh."

Thus Shakespeare, ever resourceful, ever keen to reify the abstract, gratifies present-day appetites for both the subtly semiotic and the carnally vulgar. A word becomes a creature; a metaphor becomes literal; a theme is precipitated as an image. He may thereby, however, have created considerable difficulties for people who wish to translate the text from English into other languages, or who forget the range of differences between the English of England (itself dauntingly variable) and that of the U.S. Indeed, the connotations of "Bottom" soon reveal English to be Englishes.

Notes

1. Johnson meant that the woman was "*fundamentally* sensible" (Boswell 1934, 4:99, 20 April 1781; italics in original).
2. *OED* gives 1522 as its earliest date for the nautical "bottom," "the part of the hull of the ship which is below the wales." Ann Thompson's edition of *The Taming of the Shrew* (Shakespeare 1985), p. 130 annotates Grumio's "beat me to death with a bottom of brown thread" thus: "*bottom*: spool, bobbin. (With obscene reference as well.)" There, however, an "obscene" meaning seems a misfit, for once.
3. See William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2002), 5.1.187-88 ("stones") and 197-98 ("hole"). Ackroyd refers to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.2.21-22 ("storms").
4. Entries for "frig" in *LEME: Lexicons of Early Modern English*. Website: <http://www.leme.library.utoronto.ca/>. The word "taile" or "tail" could then mean "nether regions of the body, e.g., anus or vulva," as in "my tongue in your tail" (*The Taming of the Shrew* 2.1), and "penis," as in "thereby hangs a tail" (*Othello* 3.1).
5. Entries for "arse" in *LEME*. Florio's "quaint" equals the modern obscene term "cunt," i.e., the vulva or vagina. Cf. "your quaint Honour" in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress."
6. Cf. "Prick the woman's tailor": 3.2.158-59 of *The Second Part of King Henry IV* (Shakespeare 1966), and notes to lines 149 and 151, all on p. 104. See also entry for "prat" in *LEME*.
7. Occasionally, Partridge seems over-zealous in his truffle-hunt for the bawdy.
8. Cf. Harrison's *Description of England* (1877), 170.
9. There are signs that, since 2000, the common American usage (of which an equivalent in Britain has hitherto appeared only occasionally and euphemistically, notably in William Blake's *An Island in the Moon*), has been in process of wide adoption in England. For instance, in *The Times* (still a highly respectable organ), 26 March 2007, section 2, p. 5, the British columnist

Caitlin Moran wrote: "She wants my [. . .] ass!" meaning there "She wishes to penetrate me sexually!" ("My Life as a Bearded Dwarf," 4-5). Again, in *The Times*, 21 January 2009, Section 2, p. 15, Lisa Verrico, a reviewer, mentioned "an obstacle she overcame by whipping its ass at every opportunity" ("Growing Old Fully Grace"). In 2009, a television comedy series (shown on London ITV1 at 10.35 p.m. on 27 January, for instance) was entitled "Katy Brand's Big Ass Show"; it did not feature large quadrupeds. In *The Times*, 19.2.2009, p. 77, the cricketer Mike Atherton wrote: "it is Stanford's ass now giving a great, whopping moonie." (Another instance of the recent British adoption of an American usage is that the word "dumb" is increasingly employed to mean "stupid" instead of "without speech.") The American "ass" is sometimes merely a derogatory synecdoche for "self," as in "Get your ass over here!"

10. "R" and "arse": see Williams 1950.
11. On p. 167, however, Kökeritz deems the same puns rather more problematic.
12. In rural and working-class areas of Gloucestershire and Warwickshire, this "medium-to-long" pronunciation is familiar. See also Cercignani 1981, 92. On p. 176, Cercignani concedes that the rhyme "*place* (OF *place*): *ass* (OE *assa*)" is "uncertain," though he proceeds to argue for the short "a" on the basis of "the spelling *plasse* in *OED*, thirteenth-fifteenth century." Patricia Parker's "The Name of Nick Bottom" (2003) provides further evidence for some of the claims I offer here, though my argument (which initially pre-dated her essay) differs from hers.
13. Rubinstein 1989, 17-18; Patterson 1989, 66-67; DiGangi 1997, 64-65.
14. Website: Internet archive: <http://www.archive.org/>.

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