

MISZELLE

TOM, DICK AND ... JACK IN THE *OED* AND IN "SONNET 128"

BY

REGULA HOHL TRILLINI

The *Oxford English Dictionary* expends nearly 6,000 words on defining and exemplifying 39 distinct meanings of the noun *jack* (with numerous sub-meanings), but does not so much as hint at a metaphorical use of the word which is common in Elizabethan and Jacobean texts and completely determines Shakespeare's "Sonnet 128". What is given in the *OED* is the technical definition of *jack* on which that metaphor and many puns derived from it are based: "An upright piece of wood fixed to the back of the key-lever [of a virginal or harpsichord], fitted with a quill which plucked the string as the jack rose on the key's being pressed down."¹

The conspicuous bobbing of the virginal jacks – one of which shoots up for every note that is played – made them a standard simile for chattering teeth,² but associations evoked by the name of the keyboard instrument obviously foregrounded a different semantic field. Although the term *virginals* probably derives from the Latin *virga* for 'stick' rather than *virgo* for 'virgin', dictionaries from the early seventeenth century onwards perpetrate the folk etymology that the instrument is, in Dr. Johnson's phrase, "so called, because commonly used by young ladies".³ These young ladies, in combination with the masculine associations of the name *Jack* and the upward-thrusting movement of those sticks in the keyboard mechanism, made that meaning inevitable which is best illustrated by a quack's promise that an aphrodisiac will

Fill your honour full of most noble itches,
And make Jack dance in your Lordships breeches.⁴

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*. Second Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), vol. VIII, p. 163.

² Cf. this conversation between a barber-dentist and his victim: "*Petulus*: [A] my nether teeth are lose, and wag like the keyes of a paire of Virginals. [...] *Dello*: [...] I cannot tune these Virginall keyes. *Petulus*: They were the Iackes aboue, the keyes beneath were easie." (John Lyly, *Midas* [London 1592], 3.2, fol. D).

³ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London 1755; reprinted New York: AMS, 1967), vol. 2, fol. 29F.

⁴ John Fletcher, *The Loyal Subject* (London 1647), 3.5 (n. p.).

This passage alone would probably warrant the inclusion of a 40th meaning for *jack*, but there are many other examples. *Jack* puns may be elaborated with further musical terms:

Cornejo: [...] [H]aue I tickled my Ladies Fiddle well?

Baltazar: Oh, but your sticke wants Rozen⁵ to make the strings sound clearely: no, this double Virginnall, being cunningly touch'd, another manner of Iacke leaps up then is now in mine eye.⁶

In other texts, non-musical obscenities complete the scenario, as in the succinct description of a 'fallen' woman as "a paire of Virginals, alwaies with Iackes at her taile".⁷ *Tail* has indeed been used as a slang word for the female pudendum since the fourteenth century (as recorded by the *OED*). One particularly sophisticated joke exploits this reference to pun on song titles, implying the *jack* innuendo by the name 'John' and substituting explicit mention of the virginals by the word *musical*: "Shees wondrous musicall too [...] she euerie day sings *Iohn for the King*, and at *Vp tailes all*, shees perfect."⁸

When a city goldsmith in the comedy *Michaelmas Term* shoos his daughter away from his own conversation with the servant 'Shortyard' (another double-entendre), his order was sure to get a laugh from the audience: "O my sweet Shortyard! – Daughter, get you vp to your Virginals."⁹

This background forms a crucial subtext for the main conceit in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 128", which addresses the beloved sitting at the virginals:

How oft, when thou, my music, music play'st

[...]

Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap

To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,

[...]

Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,

Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss.¹⁰

If the jacks' obscene significance is disregarded, this poem can be mistaken for the "pretty picture [...] of the poet standing politely, but hopefully, beside the lady at the virginals".¹¹ From the late 1970s, it began to be mentioned among Shakespeare

⁵ The resin (usually colophonium) applied to a violin bow before playing.

⁶ Thomas Dekker and Samuel Rowley, *The Noble Souldier* (London 1634), fol. F3.

⁷ Thomas Dekker, *The Honest Whore II* (London 1630), 1.1.2141, fol. H4 r.

⁸ Edward Sharpham, *The Fleire* (London 1623), 3.1.150 (n. p.).

⁹ Thomas Middleton, *Michaelmas Term* (London 1606), 2.3 (n. p.).

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 128". *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 1772–3.

¹¹ A. E. Rowse, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 267.

scholars that 'politely' is not an adequate description for the hopes of the speaker in this sonnet,¹² but commentators who rely exclusively on the present edition of the *OED* as their source may still be tempted into a too-dainty interpretation. Colin Burrow's comment that "[l]ike agile courtiers, the jacks leap to kiss the player's hand",¹³ seems comically innocent, particularly as the verb *leap* is another standard indecency, most famously in Prince Hal's term *leaping-houses* for brothels in *Henry IV Part I*,¹⁴ but also in the passage from the *Noble Soldier* quoted above, or in the following passage from Dekker and Middleton's *The Honest Whore*: "This was her schoolmaister and taught her to play vpon the Virginals, and still his Jacks leapt vp, vp".¹⁵

As a matter of fact, the 39 meanings which the *OED* does give for *jack* create an analogous unintentional 'ex negativo' joke because all definitions (with the exception of a few animal names) center on the two core semantic fields MASCULINITY ("applied to a man, or the figure of one") and the associated MODERATE-SIZED OBLONG OBJECT ("applied to things which in some way take the place of a lad or man"). Given mentions of *jack* as a proper noun, generic address and any kind of 'common' man such as serving-man, policeman, lumberjack, and the knave of trumps as well as *Jack the Lad*, a carefree and brash young man in 19th-century naval songs, it would certainly be appropriate for the *OED* to add an even more 'laddish' meaning to its long list of Toms, Dicks, and ... Jacks.

Zusammenfassung

Das *Oxford English Dictionary* definiert fast 40 Bedeutungen des Wortes *jack*, übergeht aber die obszöne Bedeutung, die durch zahlreiche Wortspiele in elisabethanischen und jakobäischen Dramen belegt ist. Die Assoziationen, die besonders der Begriff *virginal jacks* für hüpfende Stäbchen in der Mechanik des (oft von jungen Mädchen gespielten) Virginals hervorrief, müssen auch bei Interpretationen von Sonett 128 berücksichtigt werden, in dem der Sprecher auf die *jacks* eifersüchtig ist, die die Handfläche der musizierenden Geliebten kitzeln.

¹² Cf. Katharine Wilson, *Shakespeare's Sugared Sonnets* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), p. 293, Stephen Booth ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977/1978), pp. 438–9; and Gail Kern Paster's note 80 to Thomas Middleton, *Michaelmas Term*, ed. by Gail Kern Paster (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 102.

¹³ William Shakespeare, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrows (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), note p. 636.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *1H4*, 1.2.9 *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 849.

¹⁵ Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Honest Whore I* (London, 1605), 1.13.[500], fol. 14 r.