MISZELLE

TOM, DICK AND … JACK IN THE OED AND IN “SONNET 128”

BY

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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.”

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, 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”.

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.

2. Cf. this conversation between a barber-dentist and his victim: “Petulus: [A]l 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).
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:

Cornego: [...] [H]aue I tickled my Ladies Fiddle well?
Baltazar: Oh, but your sticke wants Rozen5 to make the strings sound clearely: no, this double Virginall, 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 Virginalls, 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 John 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.
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.).
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 Iacks 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.