

SHAKESPEAREAN TITLE-PLAY

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The meanings of Shakespeare's titles are still prime fodder for the scholarly gristmill, and the extent to which they may facetiously involve conscious or unconscious paronomasia is a matter of specialized concern. I know of at least four instances in which wordplay can be inferred, and invite readers to supply others:

- * The subtitle "What You Will" in Twelfth Night might be shorthand for "what you [would have from] Will." This conjecture is supported by the fact that he indulged in wordplay on his Christian name in several sonnets.
- * Much Ado About Nothing, first registered in 1600, has the variant spelling Adoo for Ado. In [1], I suggested that Adoo might be a shortened version of A.D.[16]00.
- * In [2], I proposed that The Tempest subliminally hints at the tempering of the pest, namely Caliban, granting some standard Renaissance connotations of this verbal and noun in Jacobean times.
- * The Winter's Tale contains the most notorious stage direction in Shakespeare, "Exit, pursued by a bear," followed by the news that it consumed Antigonus. Is black humor on this topic already evident, proleptically as it were, in the title? The hint would be in the last word with its double entendre on tale and tail, alluding in a throwaway manner to the final appendage of the animal. Shakespeare was well aware of such sly, uncouth humor (consider "thereby hangs a tale" in As You Like It). Hence, the bear effect in the wintry romance may well be thought of as itself laying bare further titular innuendo.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] "Love's Labour's Won and the Occasion of Much Ado," Shakespeare Survey 27 (1954), pp. 105-110. (Also see "Much Ado," TLS, 1 Aug 1975, p. 875, and "Shakespeare's Carte Blanche-Appropriated by Marston," English Studies 56 (1975), pp. 390-92.)
- [2] "Caliban Converted; or, The Tempest as the Tempering of the Pest," Shakespeare and Renaissance Association of West Virginia Convention April 1987 (included in the Proceedings, Selected Papers 13 (1988), pp. 33-38).