

Note

SHAKESPEARE'S WILL, LAMBSWOOL, AND PUCK'S JOKE

Only three items are mentioned specifically in Shakespeare's will: his 'brod silver & gilt bole', a sword, and, notoriously, the sole-mentioned legacy to his wife, the second-best bed. Other chattels (the rest of the plate and his clothes) are bequeathed *en masse*. Only the bowl is referred to twice (the second time as a 'broad silver gilt').¹ It is left to his daughter Judith, who had recently married a vintner, Thomas Quiney. Most commentators see the bequest as a touching gesture, perhaps of an item which held shared memories for father and daughter, but say no more.²

Shakespeare's plays only use the word 'bowl' for drinking, not eating, and this is presumably the case for the bequest. Bowls are drunk from by individuals (such as Richard III, Brutus, Wolsey, and Pericles) and by groups. Shakespeare's own bowl is 'broad' (so presumably for communal use), and a luxury item: either silver with some gilding, or wholly gilded silver. Remembering that bowl might help erase a little of the ageism in Puck's report of how,

Sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl
In very likeness of a roasted crab,
And, when she drinks, against her lips I bob
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale'
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream* II.i.44-7).

Capulet tells the Nurse to keep her stories for sitting over a 'gossip's bowl' (*Romeo and Juliet* III.

v.183), and Winter sings of how people group around the fire, 'When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, V.ii.95). These occasions use bowls for communal pleasure, to be gulped from and passed on (as when wassailing).

Arden 2's editor, David Roberts, cites several contemporary references to lambswool, in which roasted crab apples are plunged into hot ale or wine (itself sometimes spiced and sugared).³ These sources do not, however, state why the drink is called lambswool. The name comes from the way the apples are roasted until they split open, and their pulp froths over the skin; this is used to float on top of the bowl of drink. So the gossips are not playing a weird game of bobbing for apples, but drinking a sweet, hot liquid covered by a soft, sour, whitish head, and Puck is suggesting that he hides as a whole apple, beneath this barm. As well as being very sour, crab apples are little, hard, and full of pips: unpleasant to chew and a choking hazard for anyone, dewlapped or no. Does Shakespeare's will suggest that he was remembering, like Puck, a favourite sweet-sour prank in his family?

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¹ J.O. Halliwell-Phillips, *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* (London, 1883), 238, 240.

² For instance, Halliwell-Phillips, p. 246; L. Potter, *The Life of William Shakespeare* (Malden, 2012), 406; J. Rogers, *The Second Best Bed: Shakespeare's Will in a New Light* (Westport, 1993), 33.

³ W. Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. D. Roberts (London, 1956), V.ii.95 n.