Mandrakes and Whiblins in *The Honest Whore*

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In Act I, scene ii of Thomas Dekker’s *The Honest Whore* (1604), there occurs a dialogue between Viola, the wife of the linen-draper Candido (designated as *Wife*), and her brother Fustigo, in which there is the following exchange:

_Wife_: I am married to a man that hath wealth enough, and wit enough.

_Fust_: A linnen Draper I was tolde sister.

_Wife_: Very true, a grawe Citizen; I want nothing that a wife can wish from a husband: but heeres the spite, hee haz not all things belonging to a man.

_Fust_: Gods my life, hee’s a verie mandrake, or else (God blesse vs) one a these whiblins, and thats woorse, and then all the children that he gets lawfully of your body sister, are bastards by a statute.

_Wife_: O you runne ouer me too fast brother, I haue heard it often said, that hee who cannot be angry, is no man. I am sure my husband is a man in print, for all things else, saue onely this, no tempest can moue him. (II. 54–66)

Fustigo’s sentence “Gods . . . statute” has not been adequately explained. Some commentators seem to believe that its meaning does not offer a problem, while others confess themselves baffled. To the latter category belongs the most recent explicator known to us, Gordon Williams, in his huge, three-volume work, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespeare and Stuart Literature.* Williams quotes the sentence in his entry on *mandrake*, and calls the use of that word “more problematic” here than in the famous passage where Falstaff remembers how the whores called Justice Shallow a mandrake (a passage to which we shall return later). In Williams’s view, Viola’s complaint that

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her husband "haz not all things belonging to a man" is interpreted by Fustigo as meaning that he is impotent. Williams believes that the sentence under consideration contains "an implied contrast"; "but unless the brother is taken to refer generically to husbands (either over-sexed or impotent creatures: the latter a usual gloss for whiblin in this passage) the meaning is unclear."  

It seems hard to believe that Fustigo is referring generically to husbands. Fustigo explicitly uses hee. There is no hint that he is saying, "Candido, like all husbands, is either over-sexed or impotent." And in any case this reading does not solve the key problem of interpretation here, namely, that the supposed meanings of mandrake and whiblin do not fit the context. To identify the problem accurately, we need to consider that context in some detail.

When Viola says that Candido "haz not all things belonging to a man," she intends this to mean that he does not (as a man should) get angry, as she explains in her next speech ("O... him"). Fustigo, however, takes "hee haz not all things belonging to a man" differently when he hears it. To him, it indicates something about Candido’s sexual performance—presumably, that Candido is impotent, or that he has no sexual interest in his wife. But in that case the idea that a mandrake is "over-sexed" does not fit. For how could an over-sexed husband be impotent, or why would he turn away from his wife? The notion that a whiblin is someone impotent runs into a different problem: how could an impotent man beget any children, leave alone "bastards by a statute"?

In what follows, we aim to demonstrate that the word mandrake does not refer to an over-sexed man, and that a whiblin is not impotent. We shall suggest alternative interpretations of these words which we believe will make Fustigo’s statement meaningful. Let us begin with the more obscure term, whiblin.

Williams is certainly right in saying that the word whiblin has usually been taken to mean an impotent creature. But it is necessary to examine how strong the evidence for this interpretation actually is. The earliest commentator to favor it appears to be Robert Nares, in his early nineteenth-century Glossary (1822). Nares (under whiblin) quotes Fustigo’s sentence specifically, though only as far as "woorse," which may be significant, as he does not explain how Viola’s children might come to be bastards. He appears to concentrate specifically on the con-

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3 Ibid., 2:850.
nection between “whiblins” and “hee haz not all things belonging to a man,” for his gloss of whiblin reads: “seems, by the context, to mean a eunuch.” However, he gives no supporting evidence for this statement, such as other instances of the use of the word in this sense, although he does quote one of the other few known occurrences of whiblin, as follows: “In another place, it seems to be put for whinyard, or sword: Come, sir, let go your whiblin [snatcheth his sword from him].—R. Brome, Lovesick Court, v, 1.” Nares’s Glossary was to have tremendous influence, and was reprinted in 1859 with additions by James O. Halliwell and in 1882 with additions by Halliwell and Thomas Wright. These lexicographers added a further instance of whiblin to Nares’s list, namely “Planting the Ile of Dogs with whiblins, corwhichets, mushromes, and tobacco.—Taylor’s Workes, 1630,” with the comment, “Here it has apparently a different meaning.” Although no attempt was made to conjecture what this different meaning might be, whiblin seemingly had a new sense each time it was found—a sense inferred from the immediate context only.

Alexander Dyce made explicit use of Nares’s gloss of whiblin when he edited The Honest Whore in his edition of The Works of Thomas Middleton (1840). “Perhaps,” he says, the word means “eunuch.” Curiously, Halliwell did not include whiblin at all in his Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words (1847). But we find a new note of confidence in J. S. Farmer and W. E. Henley’s Slang and its Analogues Past and Present (1890–1904). They declare without hesitation that whiblin could mean (1) “eunuch” (in The Honest Whore), and (2) “sword” (in the Brome example). Here what was put forward tentatively by Nares in 1822 comes to have categorical status, as though what Nares had guessed has somehow been proved by analysis of further examples, while in truth nothing of the kind had occurred.

W. W. Skeat and A. L. Mayhew’s Glossary of Tudor and Stuart Words (1914) includes significant new material on whiblin. A distinction is made between two supposedly separate nouns, whiblin (1) and whiblin (2). Whiblin (1) is glossed as “a trick, device,” and reference is made

5 We quote from this 1882 version (London: John Russell Smith).
6 London: Edward Lumley, 1840; vol. 3.
7 This dictionary was reprinted frequently; we refer to the 5th ed. (London: Gribbins, 1901).
8 There is a modern reprint (New York: Kraus, 1965), from which we quote.
10 The numbers are not used in this way by Skeat and Mayhew, who list the two words.
to the obsolete verb *whibble*, meaning “to lie (Dorset),” and the noun *quiblin* “a trick.” It is of interest to note that while *whibble* is, as Skeat and Mayhew indicate, listed in Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary*, the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) treats it simply as a variant (in various grammatical capacities) of *quibble*. *Whiblin* (1) is illustrated in Skeat and Mayhew’s *Glossary* as occurring in a passage from *The Insatiate Countess* (written c. 1608) by John Marston and others, which we shall later discuss in some detail. *Whiblin* (2) is listed by Skeat and Mayhew as a different noun, apparently found only in the *Honest Whore* passage, and they gloss it as “an impotent creature; a term of contempt.” They associate the word with *whimling*, another insulting term meaning “a poor creature.” They argue that *whimling* is probably the same word as *wimbling*, also written *wimbbling*, used in the English Midlands of plants that are long, thin, and of feeble growth. Again, they refer us to the *English Dialect Dictionary* for further confirmation on *wimbling*, and again their reference is accurate. We shall later return to the possible links between *whiblin* (2) and *whimling/wimbling*.

What at this stage we hope to have made clear is how it came to be believed by a good many scholars that *whiblin* in the *Honest Whore* passage could mean a eunuch or an impotent creature. In essence, these scholars have assumed that Fustigo’s *whiblin* had to be a eunuch because they considered that such a sense was implied by the immediate context, although in fact the context appears to rule out rather than support the possibility that a *whiblin* is a eunuch, for a eunuch cannot beget children. And no one has been able to demonstrate that the word occurs with the sense of “eunuch” anywhere else. What began as a conjecture on Nares’s part has increasingly, but unjustifiably, come to be accepted as fact by his successors. Thus Williams’s interpretation, in his recent *Dictionary of Sexual Language*, is representative, not unusual, as is Cyrus Hoy’s, who, in his extensive annotation of Bowers’s text, offers the gloss “‘An impotent creature; a term of contempt’ (Skeat and Mayhew, citing this example).”

It must be pointed out, however, that the majority view has not gone

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consecutively but as separate entries. In their entry on *whimling*, however, they do speak of “whiblin (2).”


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totally unchallenged. Most importantly, perhaps, it was not accepted
by the OED, which identifies whiblin as obsolete and of doubtful origin
and meaning, "perh. a slang term denoting 'thingumbob,' 'what-d'ye-
call-t,' but cf. whibble and quiblin." With specific reference to the Hon-
est Whore sentence (quoted in full), OED calls attention to its entries on
whifling, an obsolete word glossed as "an insignificant creature," and
whimling, also obsolete, and explained as "a miserable or insignificant
creature." OED's references to whifling and whimling are obviously not
unhelpful to those who would interpret whiblin as "an impotent crea-
ture," but do not necessarily support those scholars either. OED's own
gloss, "thingumbob," certainly does not elucidate Fustigo's sense.

We shall now proceed to argue what we think the meaning is, at least
in The Honest Whore, by discussing OED's examples, of which there are
only four, all of which we have already mentioned. The examples occur
in (1) The Honest Whore, (2) Marston's Insatiate Countess, (3) John Tay-
lor's The World runnes on Wheeles, and (4) Brome's Lovesick Court. The
object of our exercise at this point is to try and lay bare the meaning
of whiblin in Marston, Taylor, and/or Brome in the hope that this pro-
cess will perhaps reveal a meaning of this word which all scholars will
agree on, and which will also be appropriate to The Honest Whore.

Starting, then, with the example from The Insatiate Countess, we note
that OED, illustrating its interpretation of whiblin as "thingumbob,"
quotes from the primary source (printed in 1613), which reads: "A rare
whiblin. To be reueng'd, and yet gaine pleasure in 't." It will be recalled
that Skeat and Mayhew glossed this instance of whiblin as "a trick, de-
vice," and that they related the word to quiblin "a trick" and whibble
"to lie." As the OED also refers to these words, we find it difficult to
see why it does not raise the possibility that whiblin does indeed have
the meaning of "trick" in The Insatiate Countess. In his Revels edition of
the play, Giorgio Melchiori, commenting on the word there (in a note
to II.ii.102), glosses it as "trick, device," adding, "the word is used in
a number of senses, cf. Dekker 1 Hon. Whore, Lii: 'Hees . . . of these
whiblins.' Here it is the equivalent of 'quibbling,' found in Jonson and
Chapman, for 'quibbling, ingenious deception,' cf. East. Ho, III.i.295:
'Tis a trick rampant! 'Tis a very quiblin.' " It seems to us indeed legiti-
mate to treat quiblin and whiblin as closely related forms, and the more
so because OED considers whibble to be a variant of quibble. We also con-
cur with Melchiori's view that quiblin and whiblin quite obviously have

much the same meaning in *The Insatiate Countess* and *Eastward Ho*, and we note that Skeat and Mayhew gloss *quiblin* as meaning “trick” in Ben Jonson’s *Tale of a Tub*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and *The Alchemist*. OED itself uses the last two of these instances, as well as that in *Eastward Ho*, to illustrate its gloss of *quiblin* as “a pun or quibble, a trick.” As the meaning of *quiblin* appears to be so definite, and as *whiblin* so clearly seems to be a variant of this word in *The Insatiate Countess*, might its sense be as unambiguous in the other instances of *whiblin* quoted by OED?

OED’s third example is a very intriguing one. John Taylor’s *The World runnes on Wheeles* (1623) occurs in *All the Workes of John Taylor the Water Poet*, collected by the author and printed in 1630. We quote the relevant context below:

I like em [i.e. publications] better that are plaine and merrily written to a good intent, then those who are purposely stuffed and studied, to deceive the world, and vndo a Country, That tells vs of Proiects beyond the Moone, of Golden Mines, of Deuices to make the Thames run on the North side of London (which may very easily be done, by removing London to the Banke-side) of planting the Ile of Dogs with Whiblins, Corowichets, Muschroemes, and Tobacco.

Initially it appears as though at the end of this passage Taylor is talking about the impossibility of growing plants on the Isle of Dogs. Probably he saw mushrooms and tobacco as peculiarly absurd choices for such a project. As there is doubt about the meaning of “Whiblins,” and “Corowichets” does not look familiar, it at first seems logical to think that these words, too, must refer to things that grow. But “Corowichets” is a form of carrithwitchets. This noun is glossed by OED as “a pun, quibble; a hoaxing question or conundrum,” and the passage from Taylor is used to illustrate the definition. The meaning of this word, then, is clear and unambiguous. And if “Corowichets” in Taylor’s list of nouns means “quibbles,” “Whiblins” is likely enough to have the sense of “tricks” rather than to refer to plants.

Richard Brome’s *The Lovesick Court* (perhaps produced c. 1633) provides the passage which OED offers as its fourth example:

> Philocles: Gone, past recovery, but he shall not pass without my company.  
> He offers to kill himself.

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14 R. W. Van Fossen, the editor of the Revels *Eastward Ho* (London: Methuen, 1979), glosses *quiblin* as “perfect trick” (note to III.ii.295).

15 Cited from the facsimile reprint by the Scolar Press (Menston, 1973), II.234/1. Our quotation is rather longer than OED’s.

16 OED lists the date as before 1652, the year of Brome’s death.
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Disanius: Wilt thou die mad too?
Come, Sir, let go your whiblin.

Dis. snatcheth his sword away.
He has yet
Some breath. Run for Physicians.\textsuperscript{17}

It is easy to see how Nares came to think that \textit{whiblin} means “sword” here. But a difficulty with his conjecture is that \textit{whiblin} does not appear to have this sense anywhere else; and, as in the other instances of \textit{whiblin} we have considered, a sense like “trick” fits the context perfectly: “Come, sir, abandon your trick.” Brome, who was Jonson’s pupil, may well have in mind a phrase from \textit{The Alchemist} quoted by \textit{OED} under \textit{quiblin}: “This is some trick; Come, leave your quiblins, Dorothee.”\textsuperscript{18}

We conclude, then, that all instances of the word \textit{whiblin} which are quoted by the \textit{OED} as later than \textit{The Honest Whore} are variants of \textit{quiblin} and have some such sense as “trick” or “deceit.” Given this circumstance, the commonly held view that Fustigo is talking about eunuchs is left without any real support. Surely we must take seriously the possibility that in \textit{The Honest Whore}, too, \textit{whiblin} has some such sense as it has in the other three \textit{OED} examples. The evidence for Nares’s supposition, is, after all, very slight. He conjectured from the context of Fustigo’s sentence that \textit{whiblin} might mean “eunuch.” But while it is true that a eunuch may be described as a man who “haz not all things belonging to a man,” this does not tally with Fustigo’s statement that a \textit{whiblin} will beget children (and bastards at that). Nares did not claim that he had any evidence other than his understanding of the context for his interpretation. The fact that others turned his conjecture into a statement of fact proves nothing. And neither, it seems to us, can scholars derive any certainty from the formal similarity between \textit{whiblin} and the words Skeat and Mayhew have associated with it, that is, \textit{whimling} and \textit{wh(h)imbling}. Such a similarity might be suggestive if the context of Fustigo’s sentence unambiguously steered us toward the view that a \textit{whiblin} is a eunuch, and if other examples of that sense could be found. Since neither is the case, it is a reasonable supposition that in the event there is no connection between a \textit{whiblin} and, say, a \textit{whimblin}—that, more likely, Skeat and Mayhew would not have thought of such a con-

\textsuperscript{17} Vol. 2 of \textit{The Dramatic Works of Richard Brome} (London: John Pearson, 1873), 157 (V.i). \textit{OED}’s quotation from the primary source is shorter but otherwise identical.

\textsuperscript{18} In F. H. Mares’s Revels edition of \textit{The Alchemist} (London: Methuen, 1967), \textit{quiblins} is glossed as “tricks, quibbles” (note to IV.vii.110).
nection if they had not first assumed that the word *whiblin* had the sense which Nares had guessed it might have. Similarly, *OED* would presumably not have referred to *whiffing* and *whimling* (both meaning “insignificant creature”) as uniquely relevant to the *Honest Whore* example if there had been general scholarly agreement that *whiblin* means “trick.”

The central question, therefore, becomes now: Does it make sense to interpret Fustigo’s “whiblins” as “tricks” (or “quibbles”)? We quote his sentence again:

Gods my life, hee’s a verie mandrake, or else (God blesse vs) one a these whiblins, and thats worse, and then all the children that he gets lawfully of your body sister, are bastards by a statute.

In our view, there is no difficulty about glossing “whiblins” as having a sense closely related to what it has in the other *OED* examples, and similar to the accepted meaning of *quiblins*. Candido, Fustigo conjectures, is either a *mandrake* or else refuses to have sex with his wife because he is a trickster, a cheat, a double-dealer, a person who plays on words to the extent that he pretends to be something other than he is.

Quite what form of double-dealing does Fustigo have in mind? It is something very bad (worse than being a *mandrake*), because his dishonesty may make illegitimate all the children that he begets lawfully upon Viola’s body. Under what circumstances would this happen? Surely if he is a bigamist. That would make him a serious double-dealer indeed: someone who pretends to be lawfully married to Viola but in fact has a wife, and thus a bed-fellow, already. So long as the facts are not discovered, he would be a “lawful” father of Viola’s children if ever he fathered any (as Fustigo assumes he will); but those children would become “bastards by a statute” if his dishonesty came to light, as only the children of the first marriage would have legal status.

Fustigo’s reference to “a statute” suggests that he may have a specific, and probably topical, legal ruling in mind. Such is indeed the case: he is alluding to the Bigamy Act of 1603, passed not long before the *The Honest Whore* was written. This Act, Caput 11 of the first year of James’s reign, was meant “to restrain all Persons from Marriage until their former Wives and former Husbands be dead.”

It took a very stern view of bigamy: “every such Offence shall be Felony, and the Person and Persons so offending shall suffer Death as in the Cases of Felony” (l.2). However, the Act attempted to protect what might otherwise become

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19 See vol. 3 of *The Statutes at Large: from the First Year of King James the First . . .* (London: Charles Eyre [et al.], 1786), 9.
innocent victims of the offence. Thus it specified under Section IV “That no Attainder for this Offence, made Felony by this Act, shall make or work any corruption of Blood, Loss or Dower, Or Disinherison of Heir or Heirs.” Attainder, as OED explains, refers to “the legal consequences of judgement of death ... in respect of ... felony, viz. forfeiture of estate real and personal, corruption of blood, so that the condemned could neither inherit nor transmit by descent” (definition 1). In other words, a bigamist, if treated like other felons, would as a result of “corruption of blood” not be able to pass on his estate to his legal heirs, and, as this was clearly felt to be unfair to those heirs, the statute sought to protect them.

Fustigo’s point, then, is that this recent statute has significantly altered the previous state of affairs. In the past, bigamy was practiced freely and without necessarily making much difference to people’s lives. As Lawrence Stone explains, bigamy “was not even a civil offence at all before 1603, and many individuals ran away and married again without risk of being caught and often with a clear conscience.”20 As a result, there was much confusion. The statute speaks of “Persons being married, run out of one County into another, or into Places where they are not known, and there become to be married, having another Husband or Wife living” (I.1). Fustigo warns his sister that now things are different: in this neat modern world, one may find that what one thought of as one’s lawful children may come to be disinherited and declared bastards as a result of the discovery of a previous marriage which has precedence in law.

What Fustigo fears, therefore, is not the passivity of a eunuch, but the activity of a bigamist who has another—truly lawful—partner. If this is so, what does he worry about in the case of a mandrake? Most obviously, Fustigo believes that a mandrake is less bad than a whiblin, but that the sexual nature of a mandrake would still prevent, or disincline, such a man from sleeping with his wife. Viola’s “hee haz not all things belonging to a man” tempts one to think of a mandrake as an impotent person. But such a sense is quite at odds with the fact that from very early times the mandrake has been associated with fertility and sexual prowess. OED offers us only very limited help here. It does inform us under definition 1a that a mandrake is any plant “of the genus Mandragora, native to Southern Europe and the East, and characterized by very short stems, thick, fleshy, often forked, roots and fetid lance-shaped leaves.” The

OED also tells us, "The mandrake is poisonous, having emetic and narcotic properties, and was formerly used medicinally. The forked root is thought to resemble the human form, and was fabled to utter a deadly shriek when plucked up from the ground. The notion indicated in the narrative of Genesis 30, that the fruit when eaten promotes conception, is said still to survive in Palestine." In allusive and figurative uses, the OED says under definition 1b that the word is used as "a term of abuse," and can refer to a "narcotic" or "a noisome growth." Furthermore, it is applied to "The root of white Bryony" (definition 2).

The Honest Whore sentence is quoted under definition 1b, presumably to illustrate the use of mandrake as "a term of abuse." But such a definition is so vague that it does not help us much further. It is useful to know, of course, that the forked root was thought to resemble the human form, because this implies that a mandrake could be used to designate a person. If, moreover, we pay heed to the reference to Genesis 30, the idea that the fruit promotes conception may help us to think of a mandrake as a fertile male. But even that notion hardly explains what Fustigo might mean.

What needs to be realized first of all, in seeking to elucidate Fustigo’s sense, is the fact that the root of the mandrake was often thought of as resembling not just the human form generally, but also, specifically, the human genitalia. This idea—to which the notion of fertility is of course related—is quite ancient. It not only underlies the story in Genesis, which can hardly be understood without thinking of the fecund mandrakes as phallic, but occurs for example in Pliny’s Natural History. Book XXV, chapter 94, should be read along with Book XXII, chapter 9, where Pliny tells us that the root of the eryngium (commonly believed to be identical to the mandrake) "bears a strong resemblance to the organs of either sex; it is but rarely found, but if a root resembling the male organs should happen to fall in the way of a man, it will ensure him woman’s love." Allusions to the mandrake as phallic (rather than vaginal), as an aphrodisiac, and as promoting conception, are frequently found; and they are well documented in, for example, Williams’s Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery. The root was also

21 The Natural History of Pliny, trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley (London: Bohn, 1855–57), vol. 4, 397–98. We refer to this translation rather than the better known one in the Loeb series because the notes in Bostock and Riley provide far more information, for example, on the identification of the eryngium with the mandrake, which is also noted by J. Barry Webb, Shakespeare’s Erotic Word Usage (Hastings: Cornwallis Press, 1989), 74 (under mandrake).
often thought of as resembling the legs of a man, as is seen in Henry Lyte’s translation of Rembert Dodoens’s herbal under the title of A Nieuwe Herball, or Historie of Plantes (1578): “The roote is great and white, not muche unlyke a radish roote, divided into two or three partes, and sometimes growing one upon another, almost lyke the thighs and legges of a man.”

It is common to see the mandrake as a symbol of sexual prowess in Falstaff’s speech on Justice Shallow in Act III, scene ii of 2 Henry IV. Williams adopts this interpretation, and it is interesting to see that, in his entry on mandrake, he moves from discussion of this passage to Fustigo’s sentence, where the use of the word strikes him as “more problematic.” We believe that the meaning of mandrake is problematic in both cases. It is certainly helpful, however, to consider the passages together, and it is possible to suggest a specific meaning which Williams does not raise but which appears to be appropriate to both speeches. We first quote a significant portion of Falstaff’s speech about Shallow:

Lord, Lord, how subject we old men are to this vice of lying! This same starved justice hath done nothing but prate to me of the wildness of his youth and the feats he hath done about Turnbull Street, and every third word a lie, duer paid to the hearer than the Turk’s tribute. I do remember him at Clement’s Inn like a man made after supper of a cheeseparing. When ‘a was naked, he was, for all the world, like a forked radish, with a head fantastically carved upon it with a knife. ‘A was so forlorn that his dimensions to any thick sight were invisible. ‘A was the very genius of famine, yet lecherous as a monkey, and the whores called him mandrake. ‘A came ever in the rearward of the fashion, and sung those tunes to the overscutched huswives that he heard the carmen whistle, and swre they were his fancies or his good-nights. (III.ii.302–17)

Falstaff’s description of Shallow’s prating of “feats . . . about Turnbull Street” (a street of ill-repute in Clerkenwell) as “every third word a lie” suggests that Shallow was not nearly as much of a success with the whores as he has boasted, and does not seem to support Williams’s comment that the whores, in designating Shallow a mandrake, alluded to “the plant’s aphrodisiac reputation as well as its shape.” Rather, the key to their notion of Shallow is likely to lie in the nature of his lechery. Shallow’s lechery is like that of a monkey, Falstaff says, and more

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22 Cited in Nares’ Glossary under mandrake.
importantly, "'A came ever in the rearward of the fashion.' Shallow was keen, but his sexual performance was abnormal. Commentators usually do not account for "'A came ever in the rearward of the fashion,' and Williams is no exception. Yet, somehow, this statement must have meaning, and we consider that the authority to provide the most likely explanation is Eric Partridge. Williams has a very low opinion of Partridge, but we feel that he is unwise to pay so little attention to the earlier scholar's work (or indeed that of many other twentieth-century commentators on sexual language and imagery in the Renaissance)."  

In his ground-breaking *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947), Partridge suggested that "'A came ever in the rearward of the fashion" contained "some obscure sexual allusion ... perhaps [Shallow] was insatiable and monstrously perverted in his sexual practices," and he mentioned Wyld's view that the form *mandrake* "shows association with *man* and *drake* in sense of 'dragon, monster.'" Nares, in his note on *mandrake*, had already commented on the likely significance, in England, of the component *man* in the word, and, with reference to Falstaff's speech, had said: "It [the mandrake] was sometimes considered as an emblem of incontinence; probably, because it resembled only the lower parts of a man." It does seem evident that in Falstaff's speech the word must have a very negative sense, and in revising his *Dictionary of Slang*—which he first published in 1937 but continued to correct—Partridge eventually came to gloss it more decisively. He arrived at the conclusion that the word meant 'A bugger (in the legal sense): among folk of the road: prob. since C.17. In Nov. 1948, an octogenarian didkei [i.e., gipsy, cf. OED 'didicoi'] was heard, in S.W. England, to remark of a certain man: 'E's a bloody mandrake. 'E's a bugger, that's what 'e be, a bugger. Small boys and such.' (My distinguished informant wishes

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24 See Williams, *Dictionary of Sexual Language*, xii. We have found no mention in Williams's book of Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947; rev. ed. 1968, from which we quote); E. A. M. Colman, *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare* (London: Longman, 1974); James T. Henke, *Renaissance Bawdy (Exclusive of Shakespeare)* (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1974); later rev. as *Courtesan and Cuckolds: A Dictionary of Renaissance Dramatic Bawdy (Exclusive of Shakespeare)* (New York: Garland, 1979); Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and Their Significance* (London: Macmillan, 1984); and J. Barry Webb, *Shakespeare's Erotic Word Usage*. All of these books have valuable material to offer, which should be taken account of by anyone interested in Renaissance bawdy. Thus Henke, for example, in his *Renaissance Bawdy* is clearly wrong when he wonders whether "whiblins" in Fustigo's sentence might mean "homosexuals," but he does focus on the need for us to find specific explanations for "mandrake" and "whiblins" in this speech, and he is right to question the majority view that *whiblins* means "eunuchs."

25 See *mandrake* in *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. 

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to be nameless.)” Partridge goes on to complain that when his Shakespeare’s Bawdy first appeared, “several ivory-tower’d scholars accused me of seeing evil where none existed.”

Partridge’s gloss of mandrake as a “bugger” makes excellent sense in the case of Falstaff’s speech. The whores found Shallow objectionable, Falstaff suggests, not only because he was over-lecherous, but also because he always came “in the rearward of the fashion.” And the idea that a mandrake is someone who practices anal intercourse fits Fustigo’s sentence superbly. Presumably a mandrake was often homosexual, and that is probably what, as a first possibility, Fustigo takes Candido to be. We can thus paraphrase Fustigo’s sentence as follows: “God’s my life, he’s a bona fide homosexual, or else, God bless us, one of these double-dealers—i.e., a bigamist—and that’s worse, for then all the children that he gets in a seemingly lawful way by you, sister, will afterwards (once the other marriage is discovered) be declared to be bastards according to the recently established Bigamy Act.”

We are well aware that the word mandrake was associated with a great many beliefs, but we have concentrated on those notions which we believe to be vital to an understanding of the Honest Whore passage. A good deal of work on the mandrake still remains to be done. For example, few Renaissance scholars appear to have paid attention to William T. Thiselton-Dyer’s comment that the mythical properties of mandragora were introduced to English readers in an eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon translation of the De virtutibus herbarum of Apuleius Barbarus, and the various herbals described by him also remain little studied. Similarly, Partridge’s concept that the word mandrake was slang for “bugger” appears to have been largely unexplored.

Nevertheless, to us, Falstaff’s and Fustigo’s speeches both seem to employ the word mandrake in this sense, and we find the passages mutually supportive on this point. In other contexts, admittedly, the sense seems less specific; at least, we have not so far found any further passages in which the idea of a “bugger” appears to be so predominant. However, an intriguing passage in Dekker’s Satiromastix may make clearer sense if it is acknowledged that a mandrake may be a homosexual. In L.ii.393–95, Captain Tucca says: “come my deare Mandrake, if Skeldring [“begging” and “cheating”] fall not to decay, thou

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shall flourish: farewell my sweet Amadis de Gaule, farewell.” Hoy interprets mandrake here as “a term of abuse,” but such a definition is both vague and, it seems, out of tune with the tone of the passage. As the speaker is addressing another male, and calls him “deare Mandrake,” it is quite conceivable that he is not abusing him at all, but expressing affection (even if somewhat ironically), and that mandrake has the sense of “bugger” or “homosexual.”

We would be among the first to admit, though, that the meaning of the word mandrake will inevitably depend on the context in which it is found. In many cases it will not be seen to have any bawdy sense at all. Where it does, however, we feel that modern readers should be receptive to the idea that it may have what we have argued to be its sense in Falstaff’s and Fustigo’s speeches, that of “bugger” or “homosexual.” As for whibilin, we believe we have shown that its meaning in all instances recorded in the OED is much the same, namely that of quiblin (i.e., a “trick” or “trickster,” etc.); and we consider that this is likely to have been the word’s sense during the few decades when it was used. We also feel confident that Fustigo’s speech contains a hitherto unnoticed allusion to the Bigamy Act of 1603.

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