Act 2, scene 1 of Much Ado About Nothing presents us with a masquerade, in which the following exchange occurs between Don Pedro and Hero:

DON PEDRO (to Hero) Lady, will you walk a bout with your friend? 85
HERO So you walk softly, and look sweetly, and say nothing, I am yours for the walk; and especially when I walk away.
DON PEDRO With me in your company?
HERO I may say so when I please. 90
DON PEDRO And when please you to say so?
HERO When I like your favour; for God defend the lute should be like the case.
DON PEDRO My visor is Philemon's roof. 95
Within the house is Jove.
HERO Why, then, your visor should be thatched.
DON PEDRO Speak low if you speak of love.

They move aside

The sense of the passage has created considerable puzzlement, perhaps most conspicuously so when Hero says that Don Pedro's visor "should be thatched" (1. 96). For example, Sheldon Zitner, from whose edition I quote the passage, says about lines 94-7:

Don Pedro and Hero speak in the rhymed "fourteeners" (lines of 14 syllables, or two lines alternating 6 and 8 syllables) of Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's Metamorphoses. Ovid tells the story of the old peasant couple Philemon and Baucis, who shared their meagre meal with the disguised Jupiter and Mercury and became by-words for humble virtue. The Prince's words [i.e. 11. 94-5] are clear enough, but Hero's comments and his response [i.e. 11. 96 and 97] are not. Newcomer thought Hero joking at Don Pedro's baldness, his lack of "thatch." But if his visor (mask) is a roof, she may be observing only that it lacks a thatch. His request that she lower her voice if she is speaking of love is inappropriate in either case. The words have inspired the lyrics of a popular song.1

An earlier edition, by F. H. Mares, in some respects offers more help. He too explains that the story of Baucis and Philemon is found in Golding's translation of Ovid (1567), Book 8, quoting the most relevant passage: "one cottage afterward / Received them, and that was but a pelting one indeed, / The roof was thatched all with straw and fennish reed." He refers to Newcomer's view, but then adds the following important comment:

Hilda Hulme argues that "thatch" could also mean "pubic hair" and that even if this is "not fit for Hero to say, it may be for some of the audience to hear" (p. 150). Shakespeare uses "thatch" for false
I believe that Hulme is thinking in the right direction, but too tentative and vague. Whether or not "thatch" could mean "pubic hair" (and I shall argue that indeed it could), what no commentator appears to have observed is that some sexual meaning must be present—that we cannot understand the passage without grasping a double entendre. When Hero says "Why, then, your visor should be thatched," Don Pedro replies with "Speak low if you speak love." This statement makes no sense unless we assume the following: (1) that Hero intentionally makes a comment about "love," and (2) that Shakespeare could confidently expect his audience to interpret the allusion as sexual, or at least felt that there would be no doubt on that score once Don Pedro is seen to say, in effect, "Keep your voice down, if I am right in thinking that you are talking about sex."

In other words, I do not consider that Hero's idea that the visor should be "thatched" is open to a whole series of optional interpretations, as Mares appears to believe. Newcomer thinks of an allusion to Don Pedro's baldness, which Mares does not discard. And although Mares does quote Hulme's interpretation, he seems to see it as one of several possible ones and to approve of Hulme's notion that the statement may not be "for Hero to say." Furthermore, his reference to Timon of Athens is presumably meant to raise the possibility that yet another association may have to be considered, namely that of "thatch" with "false hair."

I am convinced that the sense of "thatch" as "pubic hair" is a necessary one for us to perceive if we are to comprehend the totality of the meanings in the passage, and that thoughts about Don Pedro's baldness or about false hair are ultimately beside the point.

At a later stage in this paper I shall analyse the whole passage, and thus discuss the bawdy sense of "thatch" within its overall context, but primarily we need to consider whether "thatch" could in fact, as Hulme suggested, carry the sense of "pubic hair," and not just in this instance, but also in others—or else it is unlikely that an audience listening to this passage would readily have understood the joke. In order to determine the answer to this question, we should of course first of all consult Hulme's book to see just what she says about the matter. That turns out to be somewhat different from what Mares's words might lead one to expect—not because Mares quotes inaccurately, but because Hulme offers relevant material that he does not draw attention to.

The most important point made by Hulme which Mares fails to mention concerns the question how we might have to interpret the allusion to "Jove" in Don Pedro's statement "My visor is Philemon's roof. / Within the house is Jove." It is this statement which provokes Hero's "Why, then, your visor should be thatched." Like many scholars, Hulme associates these speeches with Jacques's aside about Touchstone: "O knowledge ill-inhabited; worse than Jove in a thatched house." She goes on to say, however: "What the word Jove suggests to people like Falstaff and which aspect of the god's activities comes first to mind has already been shown (p. 112)."

So what do we find on page 112 of Hulme's excellent study? She reminds us, there, that Falstaff calls for the help of Jupiter in _The Merry Wives of Windsor_.

Rember, Jove, thou wast a bull for thy Europa...a swan for the love of Leda...a fault done first in the form of a beast-0 Jove, a beastly faul—and then another fault in the semblance of a fowl; think on't, Jove, a foul fault. (5.5.3-11)

Hulme hints (rather than fully states) that in her view fault has the bawdy sense of "intercourse," and Jove that of "perpetrator of intercourse." I agree that the mention of "Jupiter" or "Jove" in such a passage as this would readily have made an Elizabethan audience think of an archetypal lecher, and I do not think it coincidental that an example mentioned by Eric Partridge in his _Shakespeare's Bawdy_, occurs—significantly, for our purpose—in _Much Ado_. The most detailed study of Renaissance and later "bawdy," published only comparatively recently, Gordon Williams's _A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature_, oddly does not list "Jupiter" or "Jove," but under the entry "bull" offers so many examples of the association between that sexual beast and Jupiter that it is safe to conclude that the notion of "Jove" as a lecher was commonplace.

In other words, it is not just Don Pedro's speech "Speak low if you speak of love" immediately after Hero's "Why, then, your visor should be thatched" which draws attention to sex: immediately before he is saying something like "My visor may be humble, and suggest I'm like Philemon, but underneath it all I'm burning with sexual desire." Clearly, as Hulme implies, Shakespeare's use of the word "Jove" in "My
visor is Philemon's roof, / Within the house is Jove" lends support to the supposition that "thatch" has a sexual meaning.

But would an Elizabethan audience have associated the word "thatch" specifically with "pubic hair"? Hulme quotes some good examples to support her view that this bawdy meaning of "thatch" was indeed part of the less decent language of the time; as she contends, it is unmistakable in the following Scottish proverb current around 1550-1600: "To an old suter ane yong maid answereid Good shit / You shat not thatch my new hous with old straw" (p. 117). Here, although Hulme chooses not to state the point explicitly, the young maid must mean that it would not be appropriate for her to be thatched, i.e. "covered" (sexually), by the pubic hair of an old man. Another example Hulme quotes occurs in a song:

Lads pour out Libations from Bottles and Bowls, The Mother of All-Saints is drank by All-Souls.
Here's the Down Bed of Beauty which upraises Man, And beneath the Thatch'd House the miraculous Can. (149)

It does not matter that the song was collected in 1772 (as Hulme points out) and probably post-dates Shakespeare: it appears to embody traditional imagery which probably had wide currency for some considerable time. It is interesting that Williams, under "can," lists the bawdy sense of "vagina," referring to this example among others; he thus incidentally clinches Hulme's argument that "thatch" could mean "pubic hair" although he does not discuss "thatch" as a separate entry.

I now wish to demonstrate in quite another way that in our Much Ado example Hero's "thatched" must allude to "pubic hair." We can approach the matter effectively by asking ourselves where Hero imagines the thatch on Don Pedro's visor to be present. Here I shall just briefly go back to Newcomer's to my mind naive notion that Hero might be joking at Don Pedro's baldness, his lack of "thatch." While in a speech sandwiched between two which both refer to sex Hero cannot possibly be referring just to baldness, Newcomer is right to wonder about the exact place, on the visor, where the thatch might be located. As he did not think of any bawdy possibility, he may be forgiven for, likewise, failing to grasp the fact that the hair is to be thought of, not as occurring at the top of the mask/face, but at its bottom.

How does all this come about? It is time we turn to the OED, for although that wonderful dictionary is generally too prudish to provide much direct assistance when we try to interpret bawdy allusions, it does offer a great many other meanings which can help us even in this area of research. Under thatch v., 3 we find something we need, i.e. "fig. To cover as with thatch," one of the relevant citations being "1604 MIDDLETON Father Hubbard's T. Wks. (Bullen) VIII. My chin was well thatched with a beard." In other words, the word "thatch," when used metaphorically to refer to facial hair, could obviously refer to a beard.

But if "thatched" were to mean, in Hero's speech, "covered with a beard," we must still ask ourselves how the bearding of the visor is to be envisaged, and what a beard might have to do with pubic hair. Evidently, as Don Pedro says "Speak low if you speak of love" in response to Hero's "Why, then, your visor should be thatched," he takes her to mean that they will do something amorous, together, which will somehow ensure that his visor will instantly acquire a beard. Thus put, my proposition is that he understands Hero to be offering her "thatch," her "beard" in the sense of "pubic hair," to him in order that his visor—in effect a metaphor for his face—may be provided with what has hitherto been lacking. In other words, he interprets her as suggesting oral sex.

To put this proposition further to the test, it will be useful to consider whether elsewhere, in the less decent language of the time, the word "beard" could mean "pubic hair," as Shakespeare appears to have that idea in mind. And in this case Gordon Williams comes to the rescue. For although he fails to list "thatch," he does have an entry for "beard," which he glosses as "pubic hair," adding "Implicit is the oft-noted relationship between facial and pubic features." He illustrates this bawdy sense of "beard" with many examples.

One of those examples is from Shakespeare, and it is a very interesting one, which will usefully support our interpretation of Don Pedro's "thatched" visor. In Twelfth Night, Viola, in her disguise as Cesario, gives Feste a coin. He thanks her with "Now Jove, in his next commodity of hair, send thee a beard!!" To this Viola replies: "By my troth, I'll tell thee, I am almost sick for one—[aside] though I would not have it grow on my chin" (3.1.44-8). As in the case of "thatch" in the Much Ado passage, Shakespeare's play on the word "beard" here has not been adequately explained by those scholars who have chosen
to comment on this witty verbal exchange between Feste and Viola. Bevington, glossing "sick for one," explains: "(1) eager to have a beard (2) in love with a bearded man." While this is no doubt correct as far as it goes, the explanation cannot really do justice to what follows:

FESTE Would not a pair of these have bred, sir?
VIOLA Yes, being kept together and put to use. (49-50)

Bevington glosses "put to use" as "put out at interest," but, although that notion is applicable to two coins, it is not immediately obvious how two beards would "breed" money. Feste, I suggest, opines that a pair of pubic "beards" used in intercourse would have borne fruit, though presumably he also means—more straightforwardly—that two coins, together, are more profitable than one. Partridge comments, under "beard": "Viola and the Clown pun, rather obscurely yet with obvious bawdiness, upon beard in its ordinary sense and upon beard as 'hair growing upon the mons Veneris,' or, rather, 'pubic hair,' especially in the words 'being kept together and put to use.'" However, according to Williams, in his comments under "beard," Viola's "I am almost sick for one" means that "she is eager to reach sexual maturity."

I agree with both Partridge and Williams that "beard" here for one thing means "pubic hair," but I would explain the sexual import of Viola's words as follows. I take her to say, when she complains in her aside that she is "almost sick" for a beard: "Although you, Feste, are suggesting that it might be nice for me to have a beard growing on my face, I wish I could enjoy the feel of a beard differently, viz. as a result of sexual contact." When she adds "I would not have it grow on my chin" she surely means both (a) "I would prefer Orsino's facial beard to touch my chin" and (b) "I would prefer his genital 'beard' to rest on mine." For those members of the audience who might not have immediately understood the allusion to intercourse, Shakespeare makes Feste say: "Would not a pair of these [i.e. pubic 'beards,' as well as coins] have bred, sir?"

In any case, whichever way we interpret this *Twelfth Night* passage, it appears to prove conclusively that Shakespeare was capable of using the word "beard" as a euphemism for pubic hair, both male and female, and this fact is relevant to our interpretation of Don Pedro's "thatched" visor. We can feel confident that, just as Shakespeare knew the common usage of the word "beard" to suggest "pubic hair," he also knew—and, interestingly, could justifiably assume that his audience knew—that the word "thatch" could carry the same sense. Furthermore, in both the *Twelfth Night* passage and that from *Much Ado* Shakespeare exploits the fact that the image of a "beard" or "thatch" can refer to the pubic hair of either sex. Thus when Feste refers to a beard which Jove might send Viola, she does not envisage that as in any sense "hers," literally, pace Williams's notion that she wishes to reach sexual maturity. Rather—because her sexual longings already are mature—she wishes Jove to send her Orsino's "beard" (at two different levels). And an important reason why commentators appear to have misunderstood the image of the thatched visor in *Much Ado* is no doubt that they have assumed that Shakespeare wanted us to think of the "thatch" as somehow Don Pedro's, while in fact we are to think of it as Hero's.

At this point I would further suggest that both passages show us a woman sexually far more aware than critics have been able, or perhaps willing, to see. It appears to offend many modern readers or spectators that we may have to think of women like Viola or Hero as anything other than totally innocuous. Both passages demonstrate that, as Shakespeare portrays them, these women have mature sexual desires, of which they are fully conscious. They are sophisticated in a way which will become the more obvious to us, in the case of *Much Ado* at least, if we consider the significance of the thatched visor further within its context, i.e. as part of the passage I quoted at the outset, 2.1.84-97.

When Don Pedro first addresses Hero, he calls her "friend" (1. 85). Zitner realises that the word is not used in a purely innocuous sense, commenting: "Though the word was then ambiguous (close friend, lover), the context makes its use a curious misstep on Don Pedro's part." I would suggest, however, that what Don Pedro says makes excellent sense if we consider what leads up to the passage. The Prince is engaged in wooing Hero on Claudio's behalf, disguised in such a manner that he will be able to suggest to her at an appropriate point that he is Claudio. From the beginning, he attempts to arouse her interest in the masked man he makes her view. As he puts his plan earlier, in 1.1, to Claudio:

I know we shall have revelling tonight. I will assume thy part in some disguise, 310
And tell fair Hero I am Claudio.
And in her bosom I'll unclasp my heart
And take her hearing prisoner with the force
And strong encounter of my amorous tale.
Then after to her father will I break,

And the conclusion is, she shall be thine.

Thus when in the 2.1 passage the disguised Don Pedro approaches Hero during the masquerade (the "revelling") to ask her to "walk a bout" (a turn around the dance floor) with him, he is putting his scheme into practice. The social occasion provides him with an opportunity for a sexual advance, so it is not at all surprising that, in the role he has assumed, he addresses Hero as though she were his lover: the implication is not, of course, that she already is that, but that he hopes she will be.

At this point we have to remember that Hero, in coquetishly and flirtatiously accepting his invitation, is pursuing an agenda of her own. While Don Pedro intends Hero to believe that the masked man talking to her is Claudio, she is under the firm impression that she is being addressed by Don Pedro himself. In 1.2 Antonio had reported to Leonato that "a man" of his had overheard a conversation between the Prince and Claudio in which, supposedly, "the Prince discovered to Claudio that he loved my niece, your daughter" (11. 10-11). Leonato is only too ready to believe what he is told, and decides to acquaint his daughter with the news: "that [i.e. in order that] she may be the better prepared for an answer if peradventure this be true" (11. 20-1). Just before the present passage occurs, he says to her: "Daughter, remember what I told you. If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer" (2.1.64-6).

To us, today, it may seem curious and docile for Hero to obey her father. But she is to be thought of as an Elizabethan girl who considers that she is given a golden opportunity, and who is understandably keen to have a Prince for a husband. So we should not be surprised when, in this passage, we find her not at all offended at the suggestion that she is the Prince's "friend": she assures the masked man whom she takes to be the Prince that, provided he meets certain conditions, she will be his for the "walk," adding, significantly and suggestively: "and especially when I walk away." Hoping to make sure that she will please, and indeed ensnare, her man, she holds out the prospect that Don Pedro may be hers not only on the dance floor, but also after she leaves it.

Don Pedro wonders whether he may interpret "when I walk away" as encouraging, hence asking 'With me in your company?' (i.e., may I assume we shall have a separate get-together?). That, Hero informs him, will depend on what she thinks of his face (his "favour," line 92), for "God forbid that your face should be like the case"—i.e., in effect, "God forbid that your face should turn out to be as hideous as your mask." As Mares explains in his note on the imagery here, Don Pedro no doubt "wears a rustic or grotesque mask."

Defending himself, or rather the masked man, Don Pedro grants that his mask may not be much to look at, i.e. that it is humble and rustic like the roof of Philemon's cottage. But, he asserts, underneath the inadequate visor he, himself, the real man, is something altogether different. To Hero, the reference to Jove in 'Within the house is Jove' may well come across as confirmation that the masked man is indeed the Prince (the social leader of the community having Jove-like status), but Don Pedro's own point, in acting the role of a lover, is that he is sexually desirous and potent, and this meaning is one which she certainly catches.

Taking the point, Hero now suggests that her would-be lover's desires can be accommodated. And we should note that this sexual element is of primary importance in the dialogue at this stage. Hero is not just saying that the visor (or Don Pedro's face) lacks a beard, but is conveying to him that, now that she knows that her sexually ardent "Jove" is hiding behind the mask, she will, once the two of them "walk away," make sure that his visor/face will receive the benefit of contact with a "beard," i.e. her pubic hair. Don Pedro is not slow to realise what she is alluding to, but wishes to be certain that he does indeed understand her correctly, and also urges her to keep her voice down—hence his "Speak low if you speak love."

We should not, of course, take a tantalising dialogue like this too seriously and literally. In any case no sexual contact between Don Pedro and Hero actually occurs: he proceeds to court her according to his plan ("Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won"-2.1.295-6). The passage does reveal, though, that Hero is by no means the naive girl that many have taken her to be, and that she is quite willing to take a very active part in a form of sexual game-playing that—she justifiably hopes—will help
to bring her a desirable marriage. That the husband should turn out to be Claudio, and not Don Pedro himself, does not do away with that fact.

But of course we should not only re-consider Hero's nature, but also that of Shakespeare's language. In passages like these, some of the main points cannot be understood unless we are willing to assume, as some decades after the work of scholars like Partridge and Hulme we are still too often disinclined to do, that sexual punning during the Renaissance was not just a matter of the odd very obvious occurrence, but so pervasive that what frequently eludes our grasp now was formerly a "sexual idiom," a kind of special colloquial language, or at least a sub-set of Elizabethan speech, which must have been widely shared among the Londoners of Shakespeare's time. Although Shakespeare handles this language superbly, he manifestly is not the inventor of it, but draws on a common stock of words and phrases. If a word like "thatch" did not, for his London audience, have an immediately definable sexual sense, in a context like this, it would have been pointless for Don Pedro to say "Speak low if you speak of love." And, no less significantly, in an instance of this sort the sexual meaning provides the primary raison d'être for the language chosen; if we fail to hear that meaning, we misunderstand both the content and the art of Shakespeare's words.

NOTES


2. F. H. Mares, ed., Much Ado About Nothing, the New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), note on 2.1.69-70. The quotation from Hulme is from her Explorations in Shakespeare's Language (London: Longmans, 1962; repr. 1977). Her discussions of the matters in question are part of Chapter IV, "The less decent language of the time," which, though less than desirably explicit and hence at times a little obscure, nevertheless remains a major pioneering statement in the study of what since Partridge's work has generally come to be called Shakespeare's "bawdy." Mares's reference to "Tim." is to the text of Timon of Athens found in G. Blakemore Evans, ed., The Riverside Shakespeare (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

3. As You Like It, 3.3.8-9. In contrast to Hulme, who quotes from the First Folio, I cite from a modernised text, viz. David Bevington, ed., The Complete Works of Shakespeare (New York: HarperCollins, 4th ed., 1992). All quotations from Shakespeare other than those from Much Ado are taken from this text. Fortunately, there are no substantive differences between the passages quoted by Hulme from the First Folio and their counterparts, as quoted by me, in Bevington's edition.

4. Hulme, 150. All subsequent references to this study will be incorporated within my text, and I adopt this procedure also for other works to which I refer more than once.

5. The omissions (indicated by dots) are Hulme's.


8. As A.R. Humphreys explains, adopting the expert view of Alan Brissenden, the dance is almost certainly the slow and elegant pavane, with steps involving turns back and forth. Hence it is appropriate to think of the dance as a kind of walk. See Humphreys's edition for the Arden Shakespeare ("Arden 2," as it is now often called): Much Ado About Nothing (London: Methuen, 1981; repr. with corrections, 1984), note on II.i.79.

9. We are to imagine that, once the Prince and Hero "walk away," he pretends, while further courting her, that he is Claudio, and thus, through his role-playing, makes her fall in love with his young friend, as he announced he would in 1.1.309-16. After that, he reveals his true identity to her (i.e. that he is not Claudio after all, but Don Pedro), and obtains her father's approval for her match with Claudio ("I have broke with her father and his good will obtained"-2.1.2967). I believe that Zither is misguided in suggesting that, to an extent, the Prince woos Hero for his own sexual benefit (Introduction, 40).
10. I owe this expression to the following passage from Hulme's book, a statement with which I wholeheartedly agree: "I hope then that readers will concede that if it is useful and interesting for the non-contemporary to try to recognise within Shakespeare's dialogue elements of proverb-idiom alive in his day but now gone from ordinary language, so too it may be necessary to be alert for elements of sexual idiom, the meaning of which has been obscured by time" (90).