

Imagination bodies forth

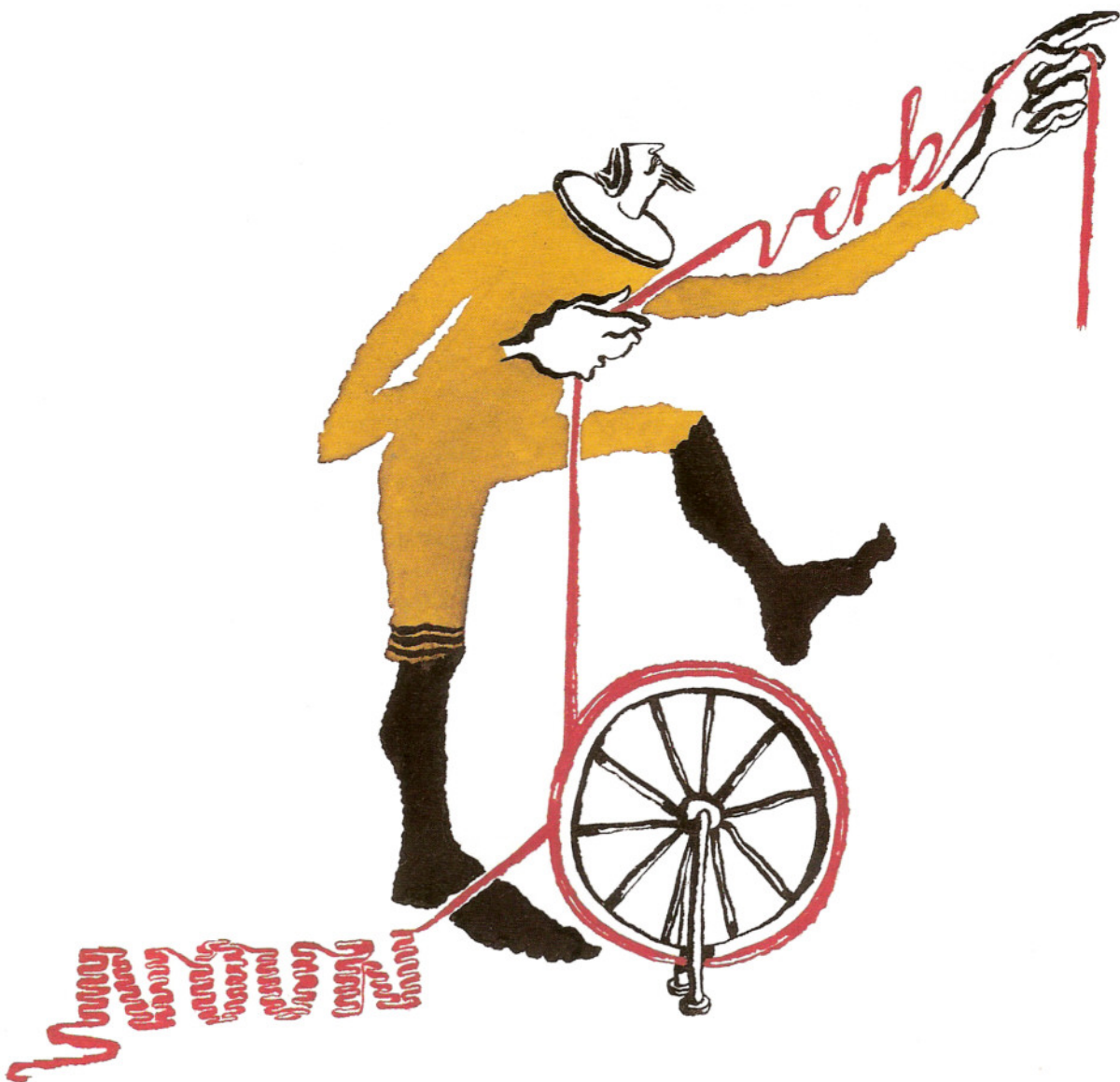
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In scene 17 of the Quarto text of *King Lear*, there's a striking image when Kent explains to a Gentleman why Lear is refusing to meet Cordelia (4.3.42):

A sovereign shame so elbows him...

Elbow as a noun had been in the language since Anglo-Saxon times, but as a verb, with the sense 'thrust with the elbow' or 'jostle', its first recorded usage is this one. The notion of shame digging away at you in the ribs makes a fine dynamic figure, and it's also rather special for a linguistic reason.

Making *shame* the subject of a clause in English is somewhat unusual. We normally 'have shame' 'put something to shame', and say things like 'it's a shame' and 'for shame'. Even in Shakespeare, we don't find many examples of *shame* as a subject. And when we do, it's almost always with a conventional range of



verbs: *shame* 'speaks', 'derides', 'mocks', and 'proclaims'; it also 'lives' and 'sleeps', 'detains', 'pursues', and 'drives' people on. *Elbow* is the one exception. The line is so striking because two things are happening at once: not only is *shame* being used in an active sense, but there is additional energy deriving from the unconventional verbal use of *elbow*.

When nouns become verbs they always add extra energy to lines. The process is technically called *word-class conversion*, or *functional shift* – the idea being that one part of speech is changing its function, and becoming another. Noun-to-verb conversion has been known throughout the history of English, but it seemed to be especially popular during the Elizabethan period. One such usage, illustrated by 'Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle' (*Richard II*, 2.3.86), is found in several authors. Massinger uses it in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* ('Cause me no causes', 'Virgin me no virgins', 'End me no ends'), Beaumont and Fletcher have 'Vow me no vows', and Ben Jonson has 'O me no O's'. It seems to have been something of a literary catch-phrase at the time.

Shakespeare had a particular penchant for noun-to-verb conversion, and several of his usages are *Williamisms*, the first recorded instances in the language. The parts of the body provide a good area of illustration. Apart from *elbow*, he is the first to use *lip*, *hand*, and *jaw* as verbs. The first two had been nouns in English since Anglo-Saxon times, and *jaw* since the 14th century. The verbal usage introduces a strong element of animatedness or vigour to the utterances, making them much more vivid and memorable.

Lip first takes on the sense of 'kiss' in two plays. Iago squeezes a negative implication out of it when describing Desdemona's supposed behaviour to Othello (4.1.70):

To lip a wanton in a secure couch
And Cleopatra presumably has a more positive connotation in mind when describing her hand to the Messenger (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.5.30):

a hand that kings / Have lipped
Hand, in the sense of 'lay hold of' or 'handle', is also in two plays: the Boatswain complains to Gonzalo, in the tempest at the beginning of *The Tempest* (1.1.21):

if you can command these elements to silence and
work peace of the present, we will not hand a rope
more

And Paulina threatens Leontes' lords in *The Winter's Tale* (2.3.64):

Let him that makes but trifles of his eyes
First hand me.

Jaw, in the sense of 'seize by the jaws' or 'devour'

is first recorded in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (3.2.7), in the Gaoler's Daughter soliloquy - one of the scenes thought to be by Shakespeare:

I reckon not if the wolves would jaw me, so
He had this file

Try replacing *jaw* by other related monosyllabic verbs that would have been available to Shakespeare, such as *eat*, *chew*, and *bite*. *Jaw* is so much more powerful.

These three body-part verbs aren't the only candidates for Williamisms, but in all the other cases I have found, the Shakespearean innovation relates not to the very first use of the noun as a verb but to one or other of the verb's various senses. *Foot*, for example, had been used as a verb since the 1400s, but in its sense of 'set someone up in a place', 'obtain a foothold', the first usage is in *Henry V* (2.4.143), when Exeter tells King Charles of Henry's arrival:

For he is footed in this land already
And in the sense of 'strike with the foot', the first usage is in *The Merchant of Venice* (1.3.117), when Shylock reacts angrily to Antonio's request for money:

You, that did void your rheum upon my beard,
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold

Eye, *heel*, *breast*, *mouth* ('an thou'lt mouth, / I'll rant as well as thou', *Hamlet*, V.i.280), *tongue*, *brain* (both together in 'such stuff as madmen / Tongue, and brain not', *Cymbeline*, 5.5.239), *back*, *arm*, *knee*... All have their innovative uses.

But not all parts of the body. Although *cheek* and *neck* were in use as verbs in the 16th century, Shakespeare makes no use of them, nor did he employ verb uses of *shoulder* (14th-century), or *chest*, *finger*, *thigh*, and *tooth* (all 15th-century). Some of his contemporaries were the first to use *leg*, *toe*, and *thumb* as verbs, but he didn't. He did use *ear*, *face*, *nose*, *rib*, and *stomach* - and body itself - as verbs, but he wasn't the first to be recorded as doing so. And of course several body words weren't used as verbs until later. Milton is the first to use *brow* in this way. For *ankle* as a verb we have to wait until 1896; for *skull* until 1941. Some body-parts have never been used as verbs: there are no recorded instances of *to hair* or *to wrist*, and I don't recall ever hearing such usages. There's scope for lexical innovation yet.

As Theseus said: 'imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.14). Word-forms previously unknown, too, it seems.