

Some Shakespearean Boxes (*Troilus and Cressida* V. i. 15-6)

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Although the Quarto version of *Troilus and Cressida* is preferred by most editors as copy-text for the play, they depart from it at V. i. 15-6 in favour of the Folio. Thersites addresses Patroclus thus in the Quarto: "Prithee be silent box I profit not by thy talke, Thou art said to be *Achilles* male varlot". The Folio substitutes "boy" for "box", and editors accept this on the grounds that *x* and *y* were easily confused in secretary hand. Nevertheless, it can be argued that "box" is the correct reading, as several contemporary analogies make clear.

These lines are spoken during a violent quarrel in which Thersites insults the young Patroclus by calling him Achilles' "male varlet" (with an obvious pun on "harlot") and his "masculine whore". "Box", as those familiar with G. A. Wilkes's *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* will know, is an indecent term for "the female genitals (listed by Partridge as 'low English and Australian: C20')",¹ but Wilkes has pointed out elsewhere that the term seems to have existed as early as the seventeenth century as a variant of the more familiar "case".² He cites Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), where a black box containing a marriage-contract changes hands several times during the intrigue, and in particular he draws attention to Wasp's warning to Littlewit: "Good Lord, how long your little wife stays! Pray God, Solomon, your clerk, be not looking in the wrong box, Master Proctor" (I. iv. 23-6).

Shakespeare's plays offer at least one quite unambiguous instance (also noticed by Partridge) in *All's Well That Ends Well*, when Bertram announces his decision to go to the wars rather than honour the marriage with Helena which has been forced on him by the King. Parolles (a character similar in some ways to Thersites) urges him on:

To th' wars, my boy, to th' wars!
He wears his honour in a box unseen
That hugs his kicky-wicky here at home,
Spending his manly marrow in her arms,
Which should sustain the bound and high curvet
Of Mars's fiery steed.

(II. iii. 274-9)

A passage in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* probably relies on the same meaning of "box". In I. iv. Dr Caius comes blustering home (and thus disturbs Mistress Quickly and Simple who are intriguing in the matter of Ann Page) making an inexplicable demand for his "boitier vert; a box, a green-a box. Do intend vat I speak? a green-a box" (I. iv. 42-3). Green is often the colour worn by prostitutes, and in the colloquial phrase "green gown" (OED *green* A 1g) it is associated with sexual encounters in the meadows where maidens soil not merely their honour but also their dresses. It would be quite characteristic therefore for this rather slapdash play to indulge in such gratuitous obscenity to enliven Dr Caius's homecoming.

The Quarto reading of "box" in *Troilus and Cressida* V. i. 15 (appropriate to Patroclus as a "masculine whore") should therefore be retained, as it is in the forthcoming *Challis* text of the play. The Folio's "boy" is another instance of "Folio sophistication", arising, probably, from the fact that this meaning of "box" seems to have been much less familiar than its ubiquitous synonym "case".

1 G. A. Wilkes, *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*, Sydney 1978, box n.

2 G. A. Wilkes, "Insurgents and Survivors: The Language of a Colonial Culture". *Proceedings of the Australian Academy of the Humanities*, 11 (1980-1), 105.