

NOTE: HAMLET'S "BARE BODKIN" AND SLOVENE *BODALO*

In Hamlet's soliloquy the words "bare bodkin" (III, i, 76), unfamiliar to the speaker of Modern English, for the Elizabethan audience denoted a sharp, pointed instrument for piercing an object, differing from a dagger in being narrowly cylindrical rather than having a flat blade.¹ (The word had in Shakespeare's time a second meaning: a small pointed instrument for piercing holes in cloth, as in *Winter's Tale* (III, iii, 86): "Betwixt the firmament and it you cannot thrust a bodkin's point."²) To refresh the reader's memory, the passage (*Hamlet* III, i, 70-76) runs:

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?

The Slovene translation by Oton Župančič runs:

Kdo nosil bi prezir in bič svetá,
pritisk mogočnih, mož ponosnih tlako,
neuslišane ljubezni bol, pravice
odlašanje, objest uradov, brce,
ki podlež daje skromni jih kreposti,
če bi lahko se upokojil sam
že z golo iglo?³

The translator, it must be noted, has not rendered *bodkin* correctly, giving it the second meaning above [= *igla*], when the equivalent should be *z golim bodalom*.

Bodkin first appears in Middle English about 1300, in a poem entitled "Reinbrun, gij sone of Warwike," but in a form somewhat different from the Shakespearean one:

Gold and seluer thai broughte meche,
Badekenes and pane riche.⁴

In the Middle English period the word was trisyllabic, *boidekin* or *boitekin*, but in Early Modern English it became disyllabic: *bodkin*, *botkin*. Though used in the Elizabethan era and later, *bodkin* puzzles the etymologist, since the suffix *-kin* evidently denotes a small object, but the element *bod-* has not been connected with any known Middle English root.

As luck would have it, *bodkin* corresponds perfectly to the Slovene word, which is unquestionably its cognate: *bodálo* "dagger, bodkin, poignard, awl," a word that in Slovene is etymologically transparent, deriving from the verb *bôsti bôdem* "to prick, pierce, puncture, stab," with cognates throughout the Slavic and Baltic languages: Czech *bodati bodám* "to prick, sting, prod; to thrust, stab; to puncture; to sting, bite," Russian *bodát' bodáju* "to butt," Lithuanian *bèsti bedù* "to stick, thrust, drive into." The eighth edition of the *Slovensko-angleški slovar* by Janko Kotnik even renders *bodalo* by *bodkin*.

Other derived forms in South Slavic are Slovene *bodica* "prickle, thorn, spine, point," Serbo-Croatian *bòdež*, *bódež* "dagger, poignard, dirk, stiletto, bodkin" (in Kajkavian, "foe"),⁵ and Macedonian *bodež* "shooting, stabbing pain." Albanian has borrowed from Slavic, probably from a Macedonian dialect, its *bodéc* "goad," which is paralleled in

meaning by Russian dialect *bodálo* “goad.”⁶ In West Slavic, Czech and Slovak both have *bodák* “bayonet,” while Czech has *bodec* “sharp point, tip, prod; stiletto; chisel; prickle, spine, thorn” and *bodlina* “prick, thorn, spine; feather, quill; awl-point,” Upper Sorbian *bodžak* “bayonet; fang, tusk,” Lower Sorbian *bódawa* “pointed hatchet, chopper,” and Polish *bodziec* “goad, stimulus.” In Czech *bodat se končíři* means “to fight with rapiers.”

All these words derive from the Indo-European root **bhodh-*, **bhedh-* “to pierce, prick, puncture,” well represented in Slavic, but restricted in Germanic to semantically more remote forms such as Old Norse *boð* “battle,” a term with many compounds in Skaldic poetry, English *bed* and German *Bett*⁷, English *body*, and German *Boden* “ground, soil”⁸ and probably also *Bühne* “stage.” Since any influence of Slovene on early Modern English is out of the question, English *bodkin* must be interpreted as an isolated instance of a semantic development that is richly attested in West and South Slavic.

By a remarkable coincidence, the root occurs in both English and Slovene renderings of I Kings 18:28, which in the Vulgate reads: “Clamabant ergo voce magna et incidebant se iuxta ritum suum cultris et lanceolis donec perfunderentur sanguine.” The Coverdale Bible (1535), the first complete translation into Early Modern English, renders this verse: “And they cried loude, and prouoked them selues with knyues & *botkens*, (as their maner was) tyll the bloude folowed.” The Slovene version published at Ljubljana in 1914 under the auspices of the British and Foreign Bible Society offers: “In vpijejo glasno in se po svoji šegi *bodejo* z nožmi in sulicami, da je kri po njih tekla.”⁹

As the soliloquy has been the object of some rather close statistical analyses of the percentage of Germanic, relative to that of Romance or Latin elements in Shakespeare’s vocabulary,¹⁰ etymologists may now convincingly add *bodkin* to the share of the native English in the Shakespearean lexicon.

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NOTES

1. Reginald Scot, *The Discouerie of Witchcraft* (London: W. Broome, 1584) 347: “to thrust a bodkin into your haed without hurt.” See also the second illustration between pp. 352 and 353: “To thrust a bodkin into your head, and through your toong, &c.”
2. C.T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*, enlarged and revised ed. by Robert D. Eagleson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 25.
3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*. Prevedel Oton Župančič (Ljubljana: Državna založba, 1963) 59.
4. Julius Zupitza, ed., *The Romance of Guy of Warwick* [= *Early English Text Society, Extra Series* 59 (1891) 632.]
5. Petar Skok, *Etimologijski rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika I* (Zagreb: Jugoslavenska Akademija Znanosti in Umjetnosti, 1971) 191-92.
6. A.M. Seliščev, *Slavjanskoe naselenie v Albanii* (Sofia: Izdanie Makedonskogo Naučnogo Instituta, 1931) 158, 286, 323; Norbert Jokl, “Slaven und Albaner,” *Slavia* 13 (1935) 305; Eqrem Çabej, *Studime etimologjike në fushë të shqipes II* (Tirana: Akademia e shkencave e RP të Shqiperisë, Institut i gjuhësisë dhe i letërsisë, 1976) 277, 505.
7. Hadwig Posch, “Die Ruhestätten des Menschen, Bett und Grab, bei den Indogermanen,” *Wörter und Sachen* 16 (1934) 1-47.
8. Walter Porzig, “Boden,” *Wörter und Sachen* 15 (1933) 112-33.
9. *Sveto Pismo starega in novega zakona* (Ljubljana: Kleinmayr & Bamberg, 1914) 335.
10. Jürgen Schäfer, *Shakespeares Stil: germanisches und romanisches Vocabular* (Frankfurt/Maiun: Athenäum, 1973) 29-30, 34. The problem had earlier been posed by George P. Marsh in a course of lectures delivered in Columbia College in New York in the 1858-59 academic year, and published as *Lectures on the English Language* (New York: Scribner, 1860) 120, 124-26.