

No. 2 'A Jail, A Jail' in Dekker's 2 *Honest Whore*, II.i

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Thomas Dekker's 2 *Honest Whore* was almost certainly written soon after 1 *Honest Whore* (published in 1604). However, the sequel was not published until 1630, in a quarto printed by Elizabeth Allde for Nathaniel Butter, at a time when London saw a wave of activity in the publishing of plays. There is no indication that Dekker was closely involved in the process of publication, as appears to have happened in the case of 1 *Honest Whore*, although the 1630 quarto of 2 *Honest Whore* was probably based on authorial foul papers. The text contains a number of errors which one would expect in a quarto of this kind – in essence publishing errors. I should like to discuss one such error in this brief paper.

In Act II, Scene i (or, more technically, on C4^r), we see how Matheo, the husband of the honest whore, Bellafront, speaks ill of his father in law, Orlando, who, disguised as a servingman, enthusiastically takes part in this attack on himself. Their bout of vituperation includes the following:

Math. A Iayle, a Iayle.

Orl. A Iew, a Iew, sir.

Math. A dog.

I quote from Fredson Bowers' edition of the play, in vol. II of *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker* (Cambridge University Press, 2nd rev. ed., 1964), II.i.128-30.

Surely 'A Iayle, a Iayle', by way of abuse, is odd. Why would Matheo call Orlando 'A Jail, a Jail'? Yet, in the absence of any comment from Bowers, or – more significantly – the scholar who provided an extraordinarily detailed and superb commentary on Bowers' edition, Cyrus Hoy,¹ this is how readers are likely to interpret 'A Iayle, a Iayle'. If we turn to the most recent modernised text, Hazelton Spencer's in his *Elizabethan Plays* (Boston, 1933), we do in fact find the phrase there as 'A jail, a jail' (II.i.165).

This is how Q's phrase has been consistently interpreted by modernising editors, with one notable exception. In 1840, Alexander Dyce published 2 *Honest Whore* in vol. III of his edition *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, apparently without realising that, although Middleton had contributed to 1 *Honest Whore*, he had no hand in its sequel.

Dyce was an exceptionally learned and intelligent editor, who is entitled to more respect than twentieth century scholars have generally accorded him. He

1. *Introductions, Notes, and Commentaries to texts in 'The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker' edited by Fredson Bowers* (Cambridge University Press, 1980). The material on 1 and 2 *The Honest Whore* is in vol. II.

saw that 'A jail, a jail', as printed by his modernising predecessors,² made no sense, and suggested an emendation for 'layle', namely 'javel' (i.e. worthless fellow), a word now probably obsolete, but, as *OED* shows (under *javel*¹), well represented at the time *2 Honest Whore* was written.

Curiously, no editor has accepted Dyce's suggestion, not even capable modernisers like Spencer or W.A. Neilson, in his *The Chief Elizabethan Dramatists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1911). Yet there are good grounds for believing that Dyce was right.

Not only does 'javel' make better sense than 'jail', but we have to consider the possibility that the two words might have been readily confused in the early seventeenth century. Such is indeed the case. For *javel*¹, *OED* records such forms as *iavelle* and *iavall* (both 16th c.). Immediately below *javel*¹, *OED* has an arresting entry for an obsolete form *javel*² which is a by-form of *jail* formerly found in northern and Scottish usage, and of which it records such variants as *iavelle* (15th c.) and *iauill* (15th and 16th c.). Under *jail* itself *OED* does not record any variants which could so easily have been mistaken for forms of *javel*¹.

What is likely to have happened, then, is that Dekker, who was born around 1570, wrote something like *iavelle*, as a form of *javel*¹ (i.e. worthless fellow). Supposing the compositor worked directly from Dekker's authorial foul papers, this workman (whether himself from the north of Britain or not) did not understand that *iavelle* (or a similar form) was meant to represent *javel* in the sense of 'worthless fellow', but took it to be a variant of *javel*² the by-form of *jail*, and then turned what he read into *layle*, which he trusted his readers would interpret as *jail*.³

The subsequent editing history of *2 Honest Whore* shows that the compositor's trust was not mistaken: even after Dyce, readers went on to accept Q's 'layle' as a form of *jail* rather than seeing it as a mistake for *javel*¹. The time would now seem to have come to honour Dyce by accepting his emendation.

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2. Bowers usefully lists the various editions of *1* and *2 The Honest Whore* in the Textual Introduction which he prefaces to each play. Of course he also discusses the original quartos, though I find much to disagree with in his approach to *1 The Honest Whore*. His textual apparatus is, moreover, strangely deficient. But he does provide a valuable 'old spelling' edition of Dekker's dramatic works.
3. *OED* lists yet another obsolete form of *javel*, i.e. *javel*³. This means 'a quantity of stalks of flax, corn, etc. laid in the sun to dry' (= *GAVEL sb.*²). I doubt that Q's *layle* represents this 'javel'. Admittedly, the variant *iavul* (17th c.) is listed, and in any case confusion with a form of *javel*¹ = worthless fellow, or *javel*² = the by-form of *jail*, could no doubt have occurred. This *javel*³ (indicating something dried out) could, also, in its own way serve as a term of abuse for an old man. But the sense fits the context less well than does 'worthless fellow', and as according to *OED* this *javel*³ does not occur before c. 1600, Dekker is less likely to have had it in mind. Even so, the possibility cannot be ruled out.