

In the first of a series of articles, David Crystal examines Shakespeare's additions to the English dictionary

Weighing up Williamisms

Williamism, I think, is a new word in the English language – a neologism. I invented it on 1 January 1997, especially for this magazine, to mean ‘a word which appears for the first time in English in one of Shakespeare’s plays’. For the present topic I do need a more specific term than the very general and rather vague *Shakespearism* – in use since the early nineteenth-century, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, to mean any form of expression peculiar to or imitated from Shakespeare’.

Notice that I say ‘I think’ *Williamism* is neologistic. I have no way of proving that it has never been used before, in this sense. It may have been invented hundreds of times, for it’s certainly a possible English word (*-ism* formations have been in the language for 500 years). All I can say is : (a) after probing my own intuition, I don’t recall ever having heard or seen it before; and (b) a search through a dozen major dictionaries shows no sign of it either.

Apply these criteria to actual Williamisms, and you’ll see the problem. Unlike my point (a), we have no access to Shakespeare’s intuition. We do not know which of his words he would claim to be his own creations. And unlike my point (b), we have

no contemporary dictionaries to refer to (the first major English dictionary with citations – Dr Johnson’s – is still 150 years off). Usually we cannot tell what status a Williamism has. Is it a conscious creation, coined to meet a particular poetic need? Or is it a contemporary usage which has just happened not to survive in an earlier work? In most cases, we shall never know. The *OED* entries give only an earliest citation, and leave it to the reader to speculate about the likelihood of previous usage.

So, let us speculate. *Assassination*, *barefaced*, *countless*, and *laughable* are so familiar nowadays that we might be surprised to learn that they are Williamisms. But were they novel when Shakespeare wrote them down? Doubtless at least some of them would have been in regular use around Bankside. Although *barefaced* is recorded for the first time in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (I.ii.100), *barehanded*, *bareheaded* and *barefooted* are all known from the century before, and I don’t think you would need to be a budding poet in order to apply this well-used word-pattern to the face.

On the other hand, there are many Williamisms where we surely have to reach the opposite conclusion, and recognise a

creative mind at work. Take his many coinages beginning with *un-*. One of the routine uses of this prefix is to allow a verb to express notions of reversal or removal: *un + dress*, *un + bend*. In its everyday use, an *un-*verb presupposes a basic verb, and expresses a logical possibility. If you can *unbend*, you can *bend*. But Shakespeare’s *un-*verbs are often not like this.

- Sometimes he invents a word for which there is **no** basic verb in Elizabethan English. When Lady Macbeth first called on the spirits to ‘unsex’ her (I.v.40), there was no verb to *sex* in the language. Such a verb didn’t come into use until the nineteenth-century biological revolution. *Unsex* probably made quite an impression on the Globe crowds.
- Often the *un-*verb makes no logical sense. A senator invites the crowd to ‘unshout the noise that banished Martius’ (*Coriolanus*, V.v.4). Malcolm promises Macduff he will ‘unspeak mine own detraction’ (*Macbeth*, IV.iii.124). Scrope invites Richard to think again about his allies and to ‘uncurse their souls’ (*Richard II*, III.ii.133). These are dramatically powerful coinages, because they exist only in the imagination. We cannot literally ‘unshout’, ‘unspeak’, or ‘uncurse’: what is said cannot be unsaid. It adds greatly to the rhetorical force of an utterance to make a point by insisting on the impossible.

The investigation of Shakespeare’s neologisms is of more than just philological interest, especially in the context of the Globe, for it helps us develop a sense of the impact this vocabulary might have had on an Elizabethan audience. Just as we instinctively notice a new word today, and applaud or deride it, so it was 400 years ago. ‘That’s good; “mobbled queen” is good’ says Polonius (*Hamlet* II.ii.507) – and we can perhaps imagine groundlings and gallery also nodding approvingly at *unsex* and *uncurse*, then hurling the latest Williamisms at each other as they made their way home.

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Right: Gestures for miming in John Bulwer’s manual for the deaf *Chirologia, or the Naturall Language of the Hand*, 1644

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