

In the fourth of a series of articles on *Williamisms*, David Crystal considers Shakespeare's most inventive surnames

# Names, names

'With me now', says interviewer John Cleese, in a well-known Monty Python sketch about a man who obsessively contradicts what everyone says, 'is Norman St John Polevaulter.' The name itself gets a laugh. The Python team were expert at concocting silly personal names for their characters – Pythonisms, I suppose we could call them. But Williamisms were there first.

If you collect all the personal names – first names and surnames – of Shakespeare's characters, they divide more or less into two types: the serious and the comic. There's *nothing much to say about Shakespeare's* linguistic creativity under the 'serious' heading. The names of these characters are simply taken from history (*Henry V, Gloucester*) or from the classics (*Chiron, Portia*) or are perfectly standard Romance or British first names (*Antonio, Juliet; Ralph, Alice*) or surnames (*Montague, Aragon; Evans, Page*). Indeed, so ordinary are some of these names that you have to have quite a memory to recall who's who among the lay characters in a given play. What is the name of Antonio's chief friend in Merchant? Brabantio? Stephano? Bassanio? None of these?

It doesn't particularly matter if you got Bassanio wrong. There seems to be no especial linguistic reason for his name, nor can we easily see a difference between a Salanio and a Salerio – or, for that matter, between a Rosencrantz and a Guildenstern, as both King Claudius (in Branagh's film) and Tom Stoppard have in their different ways observed. Such names seem to be arbitrarily chosen – or, at least, they haven't been chosen in order to make an impact on their audience.

If the name Antonio aroused any comment among regular theatre-goers as they left *The Tempest*, it would only have been, 'Is that the fourth or the fifth time Will's called somebody Antonio?' (Fifth, in fact.)

But it's a different story with the names given to the English-nationality minor characters who are comic, ridiculous, or in some way inferior. Here Shakespeare found plenty of scope for wordplay. There are some 40 of these figures in the plays – almost all of them male. Most of their names do a duty as common adjectives or nouns in the language, so they are really puns, yielding a double meaning which the audience would certainly appreciate as a character-note:

- dissolute or foolish gentlemen: *Falstaff* (1H4, etc), *Belch* and *Aguecheek* (TN), *Froth* (MM)
- clergymen, schoolmasters, justices and their associates: *Martext* (AYLI), *Pinch* (CE), *Shallow* and *Silence* (2H4, etc), *Slender* (MW)
- sergeants and constables: *Snare* and *Fang* (2H4), *Dull* (LL), *Elbow* (MM), *Dogberry* (an old name for a kind of tree) and *Verges* (probably a dialect form of verjuice, meaning 'sour-faced') (MA)
- locals, acting in rep during peacetime (MN), and fighting for the king in time of war (1H4, etc): *Quince*, *Bottom*, *Flute*, *Snout*, *Snug*,

*Starveling* (a common word at the time, meaning 'lean' or 'weak'); *Mouldy*, *Shadow*, *Wart*, *Feeble*, *Bullcalf*, *Nym*, *Poins*, *Peto*, *Pistol*, *Bardolph*

- ladies of the town: *Quickly* (1H4, etc), *Tearsheet* (2H4), *Overdone* (MM)
- clowns, jesters and other servants: *Mote* and *Costard* (a large apple, often applied to heads – in effect, 'bighead') (LL), *Feste* (TN), *Touchstone* (AY), *Simple* and *Rugby* (MW), *Speed* and *Launce* (TG), *Gobbo* (MV), *Pompey*, a.k.a. *Bum* (MM), and *Thump* (2H6)

The sonic resonance of these names is very much part of their effect, and has little changed between then and now. Nearly half are monosyllables which pack an onomatopoeic punch, heard at its best in *Fang*, *Pinch*, *Snug*, and *Thump*. All the names with two syllables have their strong stress on the first element – a contrast with most of the foreign names in the plays. And there are only three longer names in the list, all of them also initial-stressed – *Aguecheek*, *Dogberry*, and *Overdone*. The list provides a marked contrast with the typically multisyllabic appellations of the serious characters who live in such realms as Italy, France, and Athens. No Lodovicos or Andronicuses here.

Faceache? Aguecheek, exemplifying the adjective-like noun followed by a noun. Richard E. Grant in Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* Entertainment Films

# names

Given Shakespeare's liking for compound words, it's noticeable that there are very few compound names in this list. But the ones that are there (along with others which can be found within the text of the

plays) are interesting, because they fall into just two types.

*Touchstone*, *Martext*, and *Tearsheet* show a structure which Shakespeare often uses when he invents names for comic purposes, or when he has one character poke fun at another: they all comprise an imperative verb followed by a noun. The name, in effect, acts as a description or instruction about how the character is supposed to behave: 'mar the text', 'tear the sheet'. We can find similar names referred to at various points in the texts – *Starvelackey*, *Pickbone*, *Patchbreach*, *Keepdown*. Benedick calls Claudio 'my lord Lackbeard', in a nice juxtaposition of styles, as he challenges him to a duel (*MA*, 5.i.188).

*Aguecheek* is different. This illustrates Shakespeare's other compound pattern for comic names: an adjective, or adjective-like noun, followed by a noun. This type isn't so common as a character name, but it's there in *Bullcalf*, and it seems to be quite popular among the fairies, *Goodfellow*, *Mustardseed*, and *Peaseblossom* all using it. Within the texts we find several names of this kind, such as *Baldpate*, *Coldspur*, *Peascod*, *Potpan*, *Mockwater*, and *Sugarsop*.

But that's it. I've found only one compound character-name which doesn't fit these two patterns: Mistress *Overdone*, who begins with an adverb and ends with a verb. The reason, I suppose, is obvious – adverbs

being well-known markers of when, where, and how (much).

So, what's in a (sur)name? A great deal, it would seem.

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