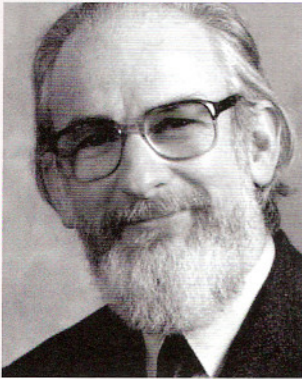


# shakespeare's false friends 4

## being rude



Violent, raucous, uncultured or ignorant – according to Shakespeare you're just plain rude. **David Crystal** explains.

If someone says to you, 'Don't be rude,' you've done one of two things. Either you've been daringly impolite – like putting your tongue out at someone. Or you've been rather indecent, having just said a naughty word or told a dirty joke.

**Rude** is quite a common word in Shakespeare. It turns up over 70 times in the plays and poems. What you have to remember is that it is *never* used in the modern sexual usage, and hardly ever in the impolite sense either. (The same point applies, incidentally, to the related words **rudeness** and **rudely**.)

I know of only four occasions when the word means 'impolite' or 'offensive'. One is in *As You Like It*, when Duke Senior tells off Orlando for being 'a rude despiser of good manners' (Act 3 Scene 7 l.93). It was understandable. Orlando had just barged in and demanded the food off the Duke's plate! Another is in *Henry VI Part 2*, when the Kentish squire Alexander Iden encounters the rebel Jack Cade in his garden, and says: 'rude companion, whatsoe'er thou be' (Act 4 Scene 10 l.29). Seeing as Cade has just called Iden a villain, and threatened to shove his sword down his throat, **rude** is really rather mild. Iden's obviously a decent chap. The third occasion is when Falstaff calls Prince Hal 'a rude prince' (*Henry IV Part 2*, Act 1 Scene 2 l.96), and the fourth is when a character talks about 'rude behaviour' in *Henry VIII* (Act 4 Scene 2 l.103).

The only hint of a sexual sense is in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 2 Scene 3 l.24), when Friar Laurence says 'Two such opposed kings encamp them still/In man as well as herbs – grace and

rude will'. Here rude means 'of the flesh, uncontrolled'. But this is still quite a long way from the modern meaning.

Everywhere else, prepare for differences. The word applies to both people and things.

### Rude people

#### THE 'VIOLENT' MEANING

When Ulysses says 'the rude son should strike his father dead' (*Troilus and Cressida*, Act 1 Scene 3 l.115), the son is hardly being just impolite! Here the word means 'violent', 'harsh' or 'unkind'. Peasants, rebels, and brawls can all be rude in this sense. Someone talks about 'rude fishermen' in *The Comedy of Errors* (Act 5 Scene 1 l.358). And Cade's army is described as a 'ragged multitude' in *Henry VI Part 2* (Act 4 Scene 4 l.33). Hands, tongues, eyes, and breath can all be rude, because of the violent things they can do.

#### THE 'UNCULTURED' MEANING

Anyone uncultured or ignorant could be called rude. Puck calls the rustics 'rude mechanicals' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act 3 Scene 2 l.9), and Prince Hal, according to his dad, has been frequenting 'rude society' (*Henry IV Part 1*, Act 3 Scene 2 l.14). Nobles often call ordinary people rude, in fact: Warwick talks about the 'rude multitude' (*Henry VI Part 2*, Act 3 Scene 2 l.135) and a few lines later Suffolk describes the members of the commons as 'rude unpolished hinds'. Somebody from Inde (= India) is said to be 'a rude and savage man' in *Love's Labour's Lost* (Act 4 Scene 3 l.220).



## THE 'INEXPERT' MEANING

This sense appears only a handful of times, but you will need to know about it when you hear Othello describing his ability to tell a story: 'Rude am I in my speech' (*Othello*, Act 1 Scene 3 l.81). Pandarus describes his own musical ability as 'Rude, in sooth' (*Troilus and Cressida*, Act 3 Scene 1 l.55). And when Romeo describes his hand as 'rude' compared to Juliet's (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1 Scene 5 l.51), he is criticising himself as an amateur in love.

## THE 'RAUCOUS' MEANING

This meaning also has just a handful of uses. You'll hear it when Bassanio criticises Gratiano for being 'too rude and bold of voice' (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act 2 Scene 2 l.168), or when the Bastard describes Peter of Pomfret as using 'rude harsh-sounding rhymes' (*King John*, Act 4 Scene 2 l.150). Here, **rude** means 'cacophonous'.

## Rude things

Applied to things, the word chiefly meant 'rough' and 'wild': hedges, walls, and castles can all be rude. Caesar talks about 'The roughest berry on the rudest hedge' (*Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 1 Scene 4 l.64) and Henry Bolingbroke tells Northumberland to 'Go to the rude ribs of that ancient castle' (*Richard II*, Act 3 Scene 3 l.32). Briars are said to be 'rude-growing' in *Titus Andronicus* (Act 2 Scene 3 l.198).

The waves could be rude too – here the word means 'stormy'. The word collocates especially with sea and wind. Albany talks about the 'rude wind' blowing in Goneril's face (*King Lear*, Act 4 Scene 2 l.30), and King Richard uses it in a famous line: 'Not all the water in the rough rude sea/Can wash the balm off from an anointed king' (*Richard II*, Act 3 Scene 2 l.54).

If you travelled back in time and met Shakespeare, and said you were going to tell him a rude joke, he wouldn't have known what you meant. Apart from the fact that the word 'joke' didn't exist in his day (it is first recorded in English in 1670), he would think you were just going to tell him something uncultured or harsh-sounding – or, of course, that you were apologising for not being able to tell it very well.

---

David Crystal is Honorary Professor at the University of Bangor.

This article uses the database compiled for David and Ben Crystal's *Shakespeare's Words*.

---

**rude** (*adj.*) 1 violent, harsh, 1  
to King, of Cade] *His army*  
*peasants, rude and merciless;* (C  
V.v.105; TC IV.iv.40

2 rough, wild, harsh-look  
Northumberland] *Go to the*  
l.iv.64; KJ IV.ii.257, V.vii.27; R

3 [of wind or water] stormy  
to Goneril] *the dust which th*  
III.i.20, 27; H8 III.ii.364; MNC

4 uncivilized, uncultivated  
Duke to Provost, of Barnardine  
*willingly to die;* Cym III.vii.38;

KJ I.i.64  
5 impolite, offensive AY II.  
*thou ... a rude despiser of good*  
IV.ii.103

6 ignorant, unlearned, 1  
Holofernes] *in the posteriors*  
*call the afternoon;* H5 I.i.55; 1H

7 amateurish, inexpert, lack  
*Rude am I in my speech;* 2H6  
TNK III.v.121

8 cacophonous, raucous,  
Gratiano] *Thou art too wild,*  
Oth III.iii.352; R3 II.ii.38; TC I.

9 uncontrolled, unruly, of t  
*by brain-sick rude desire;* RJ II