



Shakespeare makes subtle use of one common suffix, as his wordship **David Crystal** explains.

It was *foxship* that first caught my attention. A brilliant coinage, used by Volumnia in *Coriolanus* (4.2.18) as part of her put-down of Sicinius:

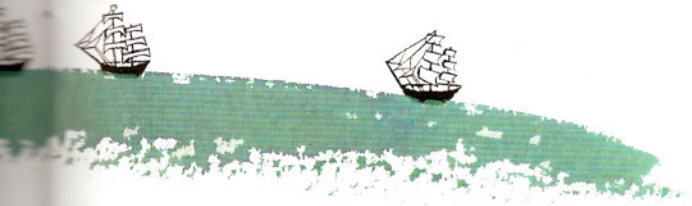
Was not a man my father? Hadst thou foxship
To banish him that struck more blows for Rome
Than thou hast spoken words?

She is accusing him of low cunning, slyness – the supposed qualities of a fox. And it is the suffix *-ship* that does it. We are familiar with *lordship*, *kingship*, *craftsmanship*, and many other words which express the state or quality of something, but the suffix is usually attached to humans or human behaviour, or notions which affect humans, such as *hardship*. We don't say *dogship* or *catship*, unless we are giving someone a mock title. *Foxship* is a subtler usage.

Foxship happens to be a Williamism, a word whose first use is Shakespearean according to the records of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We can be pretty sure that it was a genuine Shakespearean coinage, because – leaving aside its dramatic effectiveness as an insult – it doesn't appear again in *OED* records until 250 years later, in mid-Victorian England. And it made me wonder: are there any other *-ship* Williamisms of comparable effect?

Shakespeare uses the *-ship* suffix on 26 different words, and just 8 of them are Williamisms. Let's look at the non-Williamisms first. If we grade them in terms of frequency, (the number of instances are shown in parentheses) we would have to start with the titles, *lordship/lordships* (136), *worship/worships* (115), and *ladyship/ladyships* (45), followed by *friendship/friendships* (52), *fellowship/fellowships* (20), *soldiership* (9), and *courtship* (8). Then we would encounter a cluster of forms that are used just two or three times:

I saw eight -ships...



captainship (2), *companionship* (2), *horsemanship* (3), *mastership/masterships* (4), *Protectorship* (3 times in *2 Henry VI*), *stewardship* (2, both in *Richard II*), and *workmanship* (3, with two of them in *Venus and Adonis*).

That would leave a handful of forms that are used just once each: *attorneyship*, *bachelorship*, *consulship*, *cowardship*, *foxship*, *hostess-ship*, *mistership* (a malapropism for *mistress-ship*, used by the Clown in *Titus Andronicus*), *Moorship*, *rectorship*, *Regentship*, *spectatorship*, and *township*.

In passing, it might be worth pointing out that, of all the *-ship* words, just over a third of them occur in *Coriolanus*: *ladyship*, *fellowship*, *worship*, *consulship* (and *consulships*), *companionship*, *mastership*, *rectorship*, *spectatorship* – and, of course, *foxship*. (Whether this novel observation adds any fresh insight into the play I leave it for others to determine.)

So how many *-ship* usages are Williamisms? Just eight, if we exclude *mistership* as a malapropism: *attorneyship*, *bachelorship*, *courtship*, *foxship*, *hostess-ship*, *Moorship*, *rectorship*, *spectatorship*. *Hostess-ship* is actually not listed in the *OED*. It is used by Perdita when she takes on 'the hostess-ship of the day' (*The Winter's Tale*, 4.4.72).

Only one of these words, *courtship*, has since become a frequently used word in the language. But *courtship* is a very special case, because no less than four of its senses are Williamisms:

courtliness of manners

'Trim gallants, full of courtship and of state' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.363)

the state befitting a court or a courtier

'More honourable state, more courtship' (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.3.34)

the paying of acts of courtesy to a dignitary

'Ourself and Bushy

Observed his courtship to the common people'

(*Richard II*, 1.4.23)

paying court to a woman

'Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts

To courtship' (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2.8.43)

It is unusual to see Shakespeare employing a word in so many different ways so soon after using it for the first time.

So, do any of these Williamisms rival *foxship* for its semantic pointedness? Just one, it seems to me.

It occurs when Iago bitterly reflects on the way Othello has promoted Cassio:

He in good time must his Lieutenant be

And I – God bless the mark! – his Moorship's Ancient.

(*Othello*, 1.1.32)

This is the derogatory use of *-ship*, often employed in a gently mocking or humorous way, but here used with a real biting edge. It is a unique use of the suffix in Shakespeare, and, by that token, especially memorable.

David Crystal OBE is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, and the author with Ben Crystal of *Shakespeare's Words*. He has recently contributed an introductory essay on Shakespeare's language to the second edition of *The Oxford Shakespeare*. His book on the 2005 experiment in the original pronunciation of *Romeo and Juliet* is reviewed on page 43.