

# Dialecte coach wanted: applye within



*King Lear* contains Shakespeare's only 'stage dialect'. It repays close study, writes **David Crystal**.

I've heard all kinds of regional accents used in productions of the plays. Some work well; some don't. The problem with any modern regional accent is that it immediately brings with it all the cultural baggage it has accumulated over the years. A good example was the Birmingham accent which all the mechanicals adopted in the recent RSC production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It got lots of laughs – but for the wrong reason, because people added all the negative stereotypes that have accumulated around Brummy speech in the past 50 years or so. The mechanicals are funny enough without having to give them a supposedly funny accent as well. I felt uncomfortable when I heard it, I must say. Theatre ought to be destroying stereotypes, not reinforcing them.

But whether we talk about British regional pronunciation (accent) or regional grammar and vocabulary (dialect), there is precious little of it in Shakespeare. And when we do hear regional speech, we find that the speakers are by no means uneducated yokels. The people in Shakespeare's most famous dialect scene all have education and seniority – Fluellen, Macmorris, and Jamy in *Henry V* (3.2). And when we encounter uneducated rural characters, we find no local dialect speech at all. Shakespeare's country people are honest, well-meaning,

dignified folk – the shepherds in *As You Like It*, the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the villagers in *The Winter's Tale* – and they are not portrayed in a demeaning rustic speech style (though other dramatists of the period sometimes did so).

Which is why we should pay special attention to the one occasion when Shakespeare does use a 'stage dialect'. This is in *King Lear*, when Edgar, in the guise of a mad country beggar, defends his blinded father against the approach of Goneril's steward Oswald. Normally, the disguised Edgar speaks in a non-regional way, though in an accent that prevents his father recognizing him. But when he confronts Oswald, he switches into a regional persona. 'Let go his arm', demands Oswald, to which Edgar replies:

EDGAR: 'Chill [I'll] not let go, sir, without vurther 'cagion. [occasion]

OSWALD: Let go, sir, or thou diest.

EDGAR: Good gentleman, go your gate, and let poor volk pass. An 'chud ha' been swaggered [should have been bullied] out of my life, 'twould not ha' been so long as 'tis by a vortnight. Nay, come not near th'old man. Keep out, 'che vor' ye [warrant/warn you], or I's' try whether your costard [head] or my baton be the harder; I'll be plain with you.

OSWALD: Out, dunghill!

EDGAR: 'Chill pick your teeth, sir. Come, no matter vor your foins [sword-thrusts].

Edgar's remarks amount to a mere 75 words, but they are unique.

The two versions of *Lear* – the 1608 Quarto and the heavily revised Folio – display several differences. Q *sir* becomes F *Zir*, Q *cagion* becomes F *'casion*, Q *swagger'd* becomes F *zwaggerd*, Q *ile* becomes F *ice*, and so on. The above text – from the Oxford edition by Wells and Taylor – is actually an editorial collation, a selection of forms from both Q and F.

What regional features do we see? The most noticeable one is the use of *ch-* in *chill*, *che*, and *chud*, along with the voicing of initial *f* in *volk* and *vortnight*. The Folio compilers seem to have been dialect-aware: they extended this practice to include *vor*, and applied it to all the words beginning with *s-* *zir*, *zo*, and *zwaggerd*. What is odd is that they printed *foynes*, not *voynes*. The word was not new:

it had been in English since the 15th century. Perhaps it was felt to be too specialized or too 'high' a level for dialect treatment. But there is another possible explanation.

I don't think Edgar was accommodating to his new accent very well. Perhaps he had used up all his phonetic energy in being Poor Tom! If we assume the text to reflect authorial intention, his failure to say *foins* as *voins* is suggestive of someone who is unsure what to do. He shows a similar uncertainty over the use of 'I'll', which turns up as both *chill* and *ile* in the Quarto. In earlier speeches in the play, Edgar only uses *Ile*, so he is definitely trying to be different when talking to Oswald. The Folio version takes this intent a step further, regionalizing the *ile* forms as *chill* and (an unexpected but nonetheless possible dialect form) *ice*. Given the determined way in which Edgar approaches the dialect, we might expect him – as a non-native dialect speaker – to overuse one regionalism rather than to opt for several. The fact that he doesn't do so suggests that he may not be as good at dialects as he thinks he is.

A more prosaic explanation is of course possible: *ice* may be a compositor error, a misreading of *l* for the elongated *s* graph which was normal at the time, followed by a sound-association which caused the substitution of a *c*. Such two-stage errors, though somewhat unusual, do happen in typesetting. But there

is one piece of textual evidence which supports the hypothesis that Edgar could have done with some dialect lessons. When he is accompanying Gloucester to a Dover cliff-top, he evidently loses his accent altogether:

GLOUCESTER: Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speak'st

In better phrase and matter than thou didst.

EDGAR: Y'are much deceived. In nothing am I changed But in my garments.

GLOUCESTER: Methinks y'are better spoken.

Edgar then changes the subject, doubtless making a mental note to appoint a good dialect coach to the court once the civil war is over. You just never know when one might come in handy.

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