

David Crystal sits at the banquet of words in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

# Linguistic feasting



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Language is on everyone's mind, in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Whatever your rank or role, at some point you start to talk about it. Characters are defined by it: Armado is 'a man of fire-new words'. Holofernes and Armado impress with it ('They have been at a great feast of languages'). Costard ruminates about it (*remuneration* - 'that's the Latin word for three farthings'). Holofernes decides that 'posterior of the day' for the afternoon is 'well culled, choice, sweet, and apt'. The reflections are everywhere. How can we best use words to describe our feelings? What are the most appropriate words to use ('Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief'? *Word* and *words* turn up in this play 48 times - far more than in any other of Shakespeare's plays.

With such a theme you'd expect Shakespeare to be at his most lexically inventive. Williamisms - first recorded usages in the *Oxford English Dictionary* - should abound. And they do. There are several original un-forms - three of them from the Princess:

Their several counsels they *unbosom* shall ('disclose', 5.2.141) as pure / As the *unsullied* lily (5.2.352)

In so *unseeming* to confess receipt (2.1.156)

Berowne gives us another:

love is full of *unbefitting* strains (5.2.770)

And Holofernes gives us a whole list:

after his undressed, unpolished, *uneducated*, *unpruned*, untrained, or rather, unlettered, or, ratherest, unconfirmed fashion (4.2.17)

The two italicized words are first-time usages in this play.

There are new compounds with *well*, *out*, and *over*:

A *well-accomplished* youth (2.1.56)

Define, define, *well-educated* infant (1.2.90)

*Well fitted* in arts (2.1.45)

Methinks I should *outswear* Cupid (1.2.62)

a little *o'erparted* ('having too many parts', 5.2.580)

Are we betrayed thus to thy *over-view*? ('inspection', 4.3.173)

I will *overglance* the *superscript* ('heading', 4.2.130)

That last sentence of Holofernes has two Williamisms. And in fact there are several places in the play where two novel usages come in quick succession. Here is another example from Holofernes:

You find not the *apostrophus*, and so miss the accent. Let me *supervise* the canzonet. ('apostrophe', 'look over', 4.2.119)

One from Armado:

Do you not *educate* youth at the *charge-house* on the top of the mountain? ('provide schooling for', 'boarding school' (5.1.77)

One from Costard:

most *incony* vulgar wit; / When it comes so smoothly off, so *obscenely* as it were, so fit. ('delicate', 'offensively', 4.1.143)

And one from Boyet:

Fair ladies masked are roses in their bud; / *Dismasked*, their damask sweet *commixture* shown, / Are angels vailing clouds ('unmasked', 'complexion', 5.2.296)

Mote manages three in this speech:

to *jig* off a tune at the tongue's end, *canary* to it with your feet, *humour* it with turning up your eyelids. (3.1.10)

The three new verbs add action to the nouns: 'to sing or play a jig', 'to dance the canary', i.e. in a lively way, and 'find enjoyable'.

Holofernes also uses *humour* as a verb:

to humour the ignorant, call I the deer the Princess killed a pricket.' (4.2.51).

There the meaning is 'indulge'.

As quite often in the plays, when Shakespeare uses a neologism, he uses it twice. Armado seems to enjoy the word *juvenal* ('youth', 1.2.7, 13). Costard likes *incony* ('delicate', 3.1.133, 4.1.143). Boyet and Holofernes both like *phantasim* ('a fantastic being', 4.1.99, 5.1.18). The Princess likes *short-lived* (2.1.54, 4.1.15). And Shakespeare, it seems, likes words of the *short-lived* type, judging by the following coinages in this play:

Pay him the due of *honey-tongued* Boyet (5.2.334)

That *low-spirited* swain (1.1.250)

Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise, / *Three-piled* hyperboles ('of the highest quality', 5.2.406)

I get the impression that Shakespeare is having a great time creating words, just for the joy of it, in this play. There's a lot of neologism in *Troilus and Cressida* too, but there it is more abstract, reflecting the political nature of the dialogue. Here many of the lexical creations are concrete, vivid or pictorial:

the tender hornes of *cockled* snails ('furnished with a shell', 4.3.314)

The *preyful* Princess ('preying', 4.2.56)

Our court shall be a little *academe*. ('academy', 1.1.13)

A *domineering* pedant ore the Boy (3.1.179)

So sweet a kiss the golden sun gives not... / As thy *eye-beams* ('glance of the eye', 4.3.24)

Saint George's *half-cheek* in a brooch ('face in profile', 5.2.614)

Although not valued to the *money's worth* (2.1.137)

lady-smocks all *silver-white* (5.2.905)

Berowne is like an envious *sneaping* frost ('biting', 1.1.100)

Then will she get the *upshoot* by cleaving the pin (upshot', 4.1.137)

None but minstrels like of *sonnetting* (4.3.156)

some slight *zany* ('comic performer', 5.2.463)

That he was well aware of what he was doing I think is apparent from the comments he puts into some of his characters' mouths.

Nathaniel warmly approves of Holofernes' creations:

He is too picked, too spruce, too affected, too odd, as it were, too *peregrinate*, as I may call it. ('mannered', 5.1.12)

NATHANIEL: 'A most singular and choice epithet.'

Less warm is Dull, who has been listening to Holofernes, Nathaniel, and Armado for some time:

HOLOFERNES: Via, goodman Dull! Thou hast spoken no word all this while.

DULL: Nor understood none neither, sir.

The line always gets a great laugh, as do most of the linguistic jokes in the play. There are large numbers of them. I don't know why he didn't call it *Love's Labour's Language*.

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A revival of the 2007 production of *Love's Labour's Lost* opens at the Globe on 25 September.