



Illustration Belle Mellor

What does Shakespeare have to say about Germany and the Germans? **David Crystal** conducts a lexical tour of the territory.

German Hunting

In *Henry IV Part 2* (2.1.1434) Falstaff advises the Hostess about her soft furnishings:

for thy walls, a pretty slight drollery, or the story of the Prodigal, or the German hunting, in waterwork...

Nobody knows exactly what painting Falstaff is referring to – doubtless one of the hunting scenes popular in 16th-century Europe. It's surprising, really, that Germans get any mention in Shakespeare at all. The names had not long arrived in English. The earliest recorded instance of *German* as a noun is 1530 and as an adjective in 1552, both referring to the country and its people. Before that, people talked about *Almain* (cf French *allemand*) and *Dutchland* (cf *Deutschland*). If they wanted to make a distinction between Germany and the Netherlands they would talk about *High Dutchland* and *Low Dutchland*. *German* referring to the language didn't appear until the 18th century. It was called High Dutch before that.

Things started to change in the second half of the 16th century. As the United Provinces of the Netherlands moved towards independence (becoming a republic in 1588), so words such as *Dutch* and *Dutchman* were increasingly restricted to talking about the 'Low' regions, and *German* and *Germany* began to be used for the 'High' ones. It must have been quite confusing in Shakespeare's youth. But by the time he was writing, the situation was a lot clearer.

That *Almaine* and *German* were synonymous, at least for some people, is clear from Iago's comparison of the drinking abilities of different peoples (*Othello*, 2.3.73). First he distinguishes between

Your Dane, your German, and your swag-bellied Hollander ... are nothing to your English.

Then, when Cassio queries this, he amplifies, but with a lexical switch:

Why, he drinks you with facility your Dane dead drunk; he sweats not to overthrow your Almaine; he gives your Hollander a vomit, ere the next pottle can be filled.

Ergo, German = Almaine.

The people in *King Edward III* seem to be halfway between old and new terminologies. King Edward thinks in old terms: he instructs Derby to 'solicit / The Emperor of Almaine in our name' (1.1.152). But,

according to *King John* (3.1.24), he also has friends in Nederland,

Among those ever-bibbing epicures,

Those frothy Dutchmen puffed with double beer.

And Parolles also seems to be halfway between the two systems (*All's Well that Ends Well*, 4.1.69):

If there be here German, or Dane, Low Dutch,

Italian, or French, let him speak to me ...

But the new terms are clearly in the mind of the Archbishop, advising Henry about going to war with France (*Henry V*, 1.2.52):

... the land Salic is in Germany,

Between the floods of Sala and of Elbe.

And they are plainly recognized by Portia and Nerissa (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1.2.79):

How like you the young German, the Duke of Saxony's nephew?

and by mine Host of the Garter, cozened by a group of 'three German devils, three Doctor Faustuses', though he can hardly believe it (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 4.5.66):

Do not say they be fled. Germans are honest men.

In the same play, Dutch also seems to have settled into its modern meaning for Falstaff (3.5.109):

It's surprising, really, that Germans get any mention in Shakespeare at all.

I was more than half stewed in grease, like a Dutch dish, to be thrown into the Thames.

The reference seems to be to the Dutch overuse (to English taste) of butter in cooking.

And the reference is definitely to Holland when Lafew remarks in passing (in *All's Well that Ends Well*, 2.3.40), 'Lustique, as the Dutchman says...' – a catch-phrase used by Barnaby Bunch in a play full of Dutch words and allusions, *The Weakest Goeth to the Wall* published in 1600, and evidently still in the forefront of people's minds when *All's Well* was written two or three years later.

But what is the case with Don Pedro (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 3.2.29), reviewing the character of Benedick?

There is no appearance of fancy in him, unless it be a fancy that he hath to strange disguises; as to be a Dutchman today, a Frenchman tomorrow, or in the shape of two countries at once, as, a German from the waist downward, all slops, and a Spaniard from the hip upward, no doublet.

He seems to be saying that he is 'all German' one day and 'half German' the next. *Dutchman* could certainly be used in the sense of *German* in the late 1590s. It was still being glossed in that way 20 years later. The English lexicographer John Minsheu published his *Ductor in linguas* ('Guide into tongues') of 1617, and in it we find 'Duchman or German' cross-referenced to *German*.

Are there any German-related first recorded uses in Shakespeare (Williamisms)? Just a phrasal one. In *Love's Labour's Lost* (3.1.187), Berowne describes his shock at being in love with

A woman, that is like a German clock,

Still a-repairing, ever out of frame...

The Quartos and First Folio have *cloak*, but *clock* is what we find in the later Folios and in modern editions. He's referring to the elaborate devices containing automata, considered in England to be attractive but unreliable. No *Vorsprung durch Technik* in the English consciousness yet.

David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, and the author with Ben Crystal of *Shakespeare's Words* (and its accompanying website www.shakespeareswords.com). His latest book on Shakespeare is *Think on My Words: Exploring Shakespeare's Language*.