

Translating Shakespeare into English: A Debate

In the January, 2010 issue of *American Theatre*, an issue focusing on the work of major voice teachers for theatre, there also appeared a provocative essay by celebrated linguist John McWhorter arguing on behalf of the “translation” of the plays of Shakespeare into modern English. *A World of Voice* obtained Professor McWhorter’s gracious permission to reprint his essay and asked Professor David Crystal to respond to Professor McWhorter’s proposal. David Crystal is famous both as a historian of the English language and also as a scholar of Shakespeare’s language (see his interview by Paul Meier on “original pronunciation” in this issue). Crystal’s reply led to a debate in sequential commentary by both eminent linguists. The final comment is by Ben Crystal, actor and co-author—with David Crystal, his father—of the glossary *Shakespeare’s Words*. Ben Crystal assesses the translation issue from the performer’s standpoint. (eds.)

Essay by John McWhorter

The Real Shakespearean Tragedy

It’s been 400-plus years. Is it time to translate the Bard into understandable English?



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It’s a Thursday evening and you’ve gotten home early to eat a quick dinner with your spouse before driving downtown for a night of theatre. A friend has given you tickets for *King Lear*. Freshly showered and nicely dressed, you slip on your coats, have a nice twilight drive, park, glide into the theatre and take your seats. The lights dim, the audience quiets down, you squeeze your partner’s hand, and up goes the curtain.

The actors playing the Earls of Kent and Gloucester and Gloucester’s son Edmund stride on in vigorous conversation, and you savor the finery of the costumes, the rich voices of the performers, the beauty of the set. And ah, the language, the language. We churl bumble around butchering the language with our *Billy and mes* and *hopefullys* and *Who did I see?’,* but here at last is the language at its most sublime. We have to remember to thank Maria for the tickets.

What a difference 20 minutes can make. Lear has made his first appearance and exited, and now his three daughters are discussing him. Goneril advises that:

The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.

Regan replies:

Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent’s banishment.

Goneril continues:

There is further compliment of leave-taking between France and him. Pray you, let’s hit together.

Isn’t it great to be here at the theatre enjoying some of the mightiest drama civilization has to offer? Yet it has been a long day. It’s going to take some concentration to follow this, well, to be sure, gorgeous and profound, but, if we may, rather *dense* language. It seems like we get thrown little curveballs every second line. What does *engrafted* mean? How about *therewithal*? Well, forget it—the line has passed. “Starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent’s banishment”? Oh, she means “starts” like shocks, with the banishment being an example, I guess. “There is

further compliment of leave-taking"? What compliment? What are they all going to "hit" together? And this is only three ordinary lines. Shakespeare!

We all esteem Shakespeare, but how many of us actually *dig* him? In 1955, Alfred Harbage beautifully captured the mood of most audiences at Shakespeare performances as "reverently unreceptive," "gratified that they have come, and gratified that they now may go." One is not supposed to say such things in polite company, but it is an open secret in America that frankly, for most people Shakespeare is boring. I, for one, as an avid theatre fan, will openly admit that while I have enjoyed the occasional Shakespeare performance and film, most of them have been among the dreariest, most exhausting evenings of my life.

It may be an overstatement to say that every member of a Shakespearean audience is wishing they had brought a magazine. But most of the people who truly get the same spontaneous pleasure and stimulation from Shakespeare that they would from a performance of a play by Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams or David Mamet are members of certain small subsets of the general population: people of letters (literature professors, English teachers, writers and Shakespeare buffs) and "theatre people" (actors, directors, producers, dramaturgs and playwrights). For the rest, the language of Shakespeare remains lovely in snippets, but downright tiresome as the vehicle of an evening-length presentation.

In response to this, many argue that Shakespeare's language merely requires well-honed acting technique. While it is true that inflection and gesture can clarify some of the blurry points in a Shakespearean passage, what emphasis, flick of the head or swoop of the arm could indicate to us what Goneril's "further compliment of leave-taking" means? No amount of raised eyebrows, bell-jingling or trained pigeons could coax, for instance, "The cod-piece that will house / Before the head has any, / The head and he shall louse; / So beggars marry many" any further from the Hungarian that it is to us today, and I have graciously giggled along with many an audience in utter bafflement at such witticisms from Shakespearean Fools.

It is true that Shakespeare's comedies are in general somewhat less of a chore than the tragedies. This, however, is in spite of the language, not because of it. Because comedy lends itself to boffo physical pratfalls, outrageous costumes, funny voices and stock situations, an evening of *Twelfth Night* or *The Comedy of Errors* is usually easier on the derrière than one at *Julius Caesar* or *Henry V*. However, a great deal of the language remains equally distant to us, and even the comedies would be infinitely richer experiences if we had more than a vague understanding of what the characters were actually saying while climbing all over each other

and popping out from behind doors.

The common consensus seems to be that what makes Shakespearean language so challenging is that the language is highly "literary" or "poetic," and that understanding the plays is simply a matter of putting forth a certain "effort." Shakespearean language is indeed poetry, but it is not this which bars us from more than a surface comprehension of so much of the dialogue in any Shakespearean play. Many of our best playwrights, such as Eugene O'Neill, David Mamet, Tony Kushner and August Wilson, put prose poetry in the mouths of their characters, and yet we do not leave performances of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Glen-garry Glen Ross* or *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* glassy-eyed and exhausted.

Some might be uncomfortable with an implication that the most challenge that should be expected of an audience is the language of the aforementioned playwrights, since after all, Shakespeare presents us with the extra processing load of unfamiliar vocabulary and sentence structure. But stage poetry can challenge us without being as dimly meaningful as Shakespearean language so often is to us. A fine example is David Hirson's *La Bête* (see *American Theatre*, June '91) set in 17th-century France and composed *entirely* in elegant, overeducated verse. Two-and-a-half hours of this certainly requires a close attention which Neil Simon does not—there is a challenge to be risen to here. Yet it is utterly delightful because the effort pays off in complete comprehension.

No, froufrou words and syntax, and the artificiality of meter, are not in themselves what makes Shakespeare such an approximate experience for most of us. The problem with Shakespeare for modern audiences is that English since Shakespeare's time has changed not only in terms of a few exotic vocabulary items, but in the very meaning of thousands of basic words and in scores of fundamental sentence structures. For this reason, we are faced with a language which, while clearly recognizable as the English we speak, is different to an extent which makes partial comprehension a challenge, and anything approaching full comprehension utterly impossible for even the educated theatregoer who doesn't happen to be a trained expert in Shakespearean language.

No one today would assign their students *Beowulf* in Old English—it is hopelessly obvious that Old English is a different language to us. On the other hand, the English of William Congreve's comedy *The Way of the World* in 1700 presents us no serious challenge, and is easily enjoyable even full of food after a long day. The English of the late 1500s, on the other hand, lies at a point between *Beowulf* and Congreve, which presents us with a tricky question. Language change is a gradual process with no discrete

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boundaries—there are no trumpet fanfares or ending credits in the sky as Old English passes into Middle English, as Middle English passes into Shakespeare's English, or as Shakespeare's English passes into ours. Thus our question is: How far back on a language's timeline can we consider the language to be the one modern audiences speak? At what point do we concede that substantial comprehension across the centuries has become too much of a challenge to expect of anyone but specialists?

Many readers may feel I am exaggerating the difficulty of Shakespearean language. However, I respectfully submit that Shakespeare lovers of all kinds, including actors and those supposing that Shakespeare simply requires a bit of extra concentration, miss much, much more of Shakespeare's very basic meanings than they have ever suspected, far beyond the most obvious head-scratchers:

In October 1898, Mark H. Liddell's essay "Botching Shakespeare" made a similar point to mine—that English has changed so deeply since Shakespeare's time that today we are incapable of catching much more than the basic gist of a great deal of his writing, although the similarity of the forms of the words to ours tricks us into thinking otherwise. Liddell took as an example Polonius's farewell to Laertes in *Hamlet*, which begins:

And these few precepts in thy memory
Look thou character.

We might take this as, "And as for these few precepts in thy memory, look, you rascal you!", conveying a gruff paternal affection for Laertes. Actually, however, *look* used to be an interjection roughly equivalent to "see that you do it well." And character—if he isn't telling Laertes that he's full of the dickens, then what other definition of *character* might he mean? We might guess that this means something like "to assess the worth of" or "to evaluate." But this isn't even close—to Shakespeare, *character* here meant "to write"! This meaning has long fallen by the wayside, just as thousands of other English words' earlier meanings have. Thus "And these few precepts in thy memory / Look thou character" means "See that you write these things in your memory." Good acting might convey that *look* is an interjection, but no matter how charismatic and fine-tuned the performance, *thou character* is beyond comprehension to any but the two or three people who happen to have recently read an annotated edition of the play (and bothered to make their way through the notes).

Polonius tells his son to "Beware of entrance to a quarrel; but being in / Bear't, that the opposed may beware of thee." We assume he is saying "Avoid getting into arguments, but once you're in one, endure it." In fact, *bear't* meant "make sure that"—in other words, Polonius is not giving the

rather oblique advice that the best thing to do in an argument is to "cope," but to make sure to do it well.

"Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement." Turn the other cheek? No—to take a man's censure meant "to evaluate." Polonius is advising his son to view people with insight but refrain from moralizing. "The French are of a most select and generous chief"? Another blob we have to let go by with a guess. *Chief* here is a fossilized remnant of *sheaf*, a case of arrows—which doesn't really help us unless we are told in footnotes that sheaf was used idiomatically to mean "quality" or "rank," as in "gentlemen of the best sheaf."

And finally we get to the famous line, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." Have you ever wondered why the following line is less famous—the *reasons* why one shouldn't borrow or lend? "For loan oft loses both itself and friend / And borrowing dulls the edge of *husbandry*." So the reason one shouldn't borrow is because it interferes with the raising of livestock? Actually, husbandry meant "thrift" at the time. It does not anymore, because the language is always changing.

Polonius's speech is by no means extraordinary in terms of pitfalls like these. Indeed, almost any page of Shakespeare is as far from our modern language as this one. So shouldn't one simply read a Shakespeare play beforehand in order to prepare oneself to take in the language spoken? The fact is that one cannot simply "read" this speech without constant reference to annotations. How realistic or even charitable is it to expect that anyone but specialists, theatre folk and buffs will have the patience to read more than a prescribed dose of Shakespeare under these conditions? And ultimately a play is written to be performed, not read, and certainly not deciphered. A play that cannot communicate effectively to the listener in spoken form is no longer a play, and thus no longer lives.

The tragedy of this is that the foremost writer in the English language, the most precious legacy of the English-speaking world, is little more than a symbol in our actual thinking lives, for the simple reason that we cannot understand what the man is saying. Shakespeare is not a drag because we are lazy, because we are poorly educated, or because he wrote in poetic language. Shakespeare is a drag because he wrote in a language which, as a natural consequence of the mighty eternal process of language change, 500 years later we effectively no longer speak.

Is there anything we might do about this? I submit that here as we enter the Shakespearean canon's sixth century in existence, Shakespeare begin to be performed in translations into modern English readily comprehensible to the modern spectator. Make no mistake—I do not mean the

utilitarian running translations which younger students are (blissfully) often provided in textbooks. The translations ought to be richly considered, executed by artists of the highest caliber well-steeped in the language of Shakespeare's era, thus equipped to channel the Bard to the modern listener with the passion, respect and care which is his due. (Kent Richmond, a professor at California State University—Long Beach, has been quietly doing just this with his *Shakespeare Translation Project*. (<http://www.csulb.edu/~richmond/Shakespeare.html>))

"But translated Shakespeare wouldn't be Shakespeare!" one might object. To which the answer is, to an extent, yes. However, we would never complain a translation of *Beowulf* "isn't *Beowulf*"—of course it isn't, in the strict sense, but we know that without translation, we would not have access to *Beowulf* at all.

I predict that if theatre companies began presenting Shakespeare in elegant modern translations, a great many people would at first scorn such productions on the grounds that Shakespeare had been "cheapened" or "defiled," and that it was a symptom of the cultural backwardness of our society and our declining educational standards. However, especially if they were included in season ticket packages, audiences would begin to attend performances of Shakespeare in translation. Younger critics would gradually join the bandwagon. Pretty soon the almighty dollar would determine the flow of events—Shakespeare in the original would play to critical huzzahs but half-empty houses, while people would be lining up around the block to see Shakespeare in English the way Russians do to see an *Uncle Vanya*.

Then would come the critical juncture: A whole generation would grow up having only experienced Shakespeare in the English they speak, and what a generation they would be! This generation would be the vanguard of an American public who truly loved Shakespeare, who cherished Lear and Olivia and Polonius and Falstaff and Lady Macbeth and Cassius and Richard III as living, breathing icons like Henry Higgins, Blanche DuBois, Big Daddy, George and Martha and Willy Loman, rather than as hallowed but waxen figurines like the signers of the Constitution frozen in a gloomy painting.

No longer would producers have to trick Shakespeare up in increasingly desperate, semi-motivated changes of setting to attract audiences—*A Midsummer Night's Dream* in colonial Brazil, *Romeo and Juliet* shouted over rock music in a 90-minute MTV video, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* on motorcycles, *Twelfth Night* at a 7-Eleven. Producers do this to "make Shakespeare relevant to modern audiences," but the very assumption here that the public needs to be reminded of this relevance is telling, especially since the assumption is so sadly accurate. A more effective way to make Shake-

speare relevant to us is simply to present it in the English we speak.

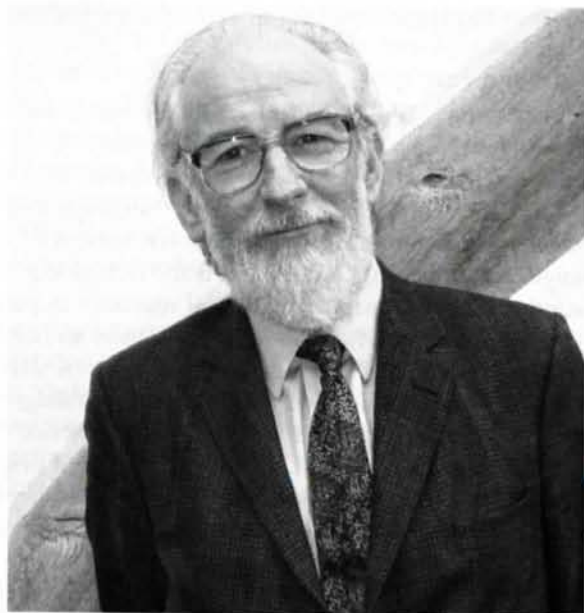
Indeed, the irony today is that the Russians, the French and other people in foreign countries possess Shakespeare to a much greater extent than we do, for the simple reason that unlike us, they get to enjoy Shakespeare in the language they speak. Shakespeare is translated into rich, poetic varieties of these languages, to be sure, but since it is the rich, poetic *modern* varieties of the languages, the typical spectator in Paris, Moscow or Berlin can attend a production of *Hamlet* and enjoy a play rather than an exercise. In Japan, new editions of Shakespeare in Japanese are regularly *best-sellers*—utterly unimaginable here, since, like the Japanese, we prefer to experience literature in the language we speak, and a new edition of original Shakespeare no longer fits this definition. In an illuminating twist on this, one friend of mine—and a very cultured, literate one at that—has told me that the first time they truly understood more than the gist of what was going on in a Shakespeare play was when they saw one in French!

The glory of Shakespeare's original language is manifest. We must preserve it for posterity. However, we must not err in equating the preservation of the language with the preservation of the art. Perhaps such an equation would be the ideal—Shakespeare through the ages in his exact words. In a universe where language never changed, such an equation would be unobjectionable. In the world we live in, however, this equation is allowing blind faith to deprive the public of a monumental treasure.

We must reject the polite relationship the English-speaking public now has with Shakespeare in favor of more intimate, charged one which both the public and the plays deserve. To ask a population to rise to the challenge of taking literature to heart in a language they do not speak is as unreasonable as it is futile. The challenge we must rise to is to shed our fear of language change and give Shakespeare his due—restoration to the English-speaking world.



To Modernize or not to Modernize: There is no Question



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I really don't know what world John McWhorter is living in. It doesn't seem to bear any relationship to mine.

Most of the people who truly get the same spontaneous pleasure and stimulation from Shakespeare that they would from a performance of a play by Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams or David Mamet are members of certain small subsets of the general population: people of letters (literature professors, English teachers, writers and Shakespeare buffs) and "theatre people" (actors, directors, producers, dramaturgs and playwrights). For the rest, the language of Shakespeare remains lovely in snippets, but downright tiresome as the vehicle of an evening-length presentation.

Leaving aside the question of the aptness of McWhorter's analogy (I've often seen audiences leave modern plays with very long faces), his generalization is breathtaking in the way it ignores the Shakespeare world I know. Has he never been to a performance at Shakespeare's Globe, where, day after day, audiences interact enthusiastically and vociferously with the actors on stage, and packed houses cheer for several minutes at the end of the play? These are people

who would not take kindly to being described as members of one of his subsets. Nor evidently has he experienced the typical response seen even in the more refined atmosphere of the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford when crowds of youngsters, bussed in from their schools, cheer their way through several curtain calls, and leave chattering and enthusing about what they have just seen.

Not so long ago, I overheard (in an interval at the Globe) a group of inner-city teenagers furiously arguing about whether Lear was right to kick Cordelia out. Goneril and Regan were clearly prats in their eyes. Did they understand every word they had heard? No. Did this stop them having a great theatrical time? No. Had it turned them off Shakespeare? No. Should I have pointed out to them that 'John McWhorter says your experience must have been tiresome because you didn't understand Goneril's use of *long-engruffed*?' No. And why were some of these cool teens trying hard not to cry (and failing) when they heard Lear's final speech?

And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more;
Never, never, never, never, never.
Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips!
Look there! Look there!

How does that relate to this?

The problem with Shakespeare for modern audiences is that English since Shakespeare's time has changed not only in terms of a few exotic vocabulary items, but in the very meaning of thousands of basic words and in scores of fundamental sentence structures. For this reason, we are faced with a language which, while clearly recognizable as the English we speak, is different to an extent which makes partial comprehension a challenge, and anything approaching full comprehension utterly impossible for even the educated theatre-goer who doesn't happen to be a trained expert in Shakespearean language.

Do you recognize Lear's speech from John McWhorter's description? Nor do I. And, while you're reflecting on the point, try turning that passage into an 'elegant modern translation'.

'Many readers may feel I am exaggerating the difficulty of Shakespearean language.' No 'may' about it. Of course we can cherry-pick difficult passages - especially those spoken by upper-class characters who use a high register of the language. But to go on to say, having selected some tricky lines in Lear, 'almost any page of Shakespeare is as far from

our modern language as this one' is the kind of exaggeration that a linguist really ought to be avoiding. Linguists are usually able to see that there are two sides to a stylistic issue, and I don't understand why John McWhorter has been unable to do so in this case. Of course, he's not alone in trying to paint a black-and-white picture. For decades, modernizers have been using examples like 'super-serviceable, finical rogue' (*King Lear*) to make their case. Their opponents use examples like 'To be or not to be; that is the question' (*Hamlet*). To my mind, the question is straightforward: how much of Shakespeare's language is like the former, and how much is like the latter? Thanks to the studies of Shakespeare's grammar and vocabulary that have been made in the 2000s (such as Norman Blake's *A Grammar of Shakespeare's Language* (2002) and my own *Shakespeare's Words*, with Ben Crystal (2002)), I think it's now clear that only a relatively small proportion of the vocabulary would fall into the 'need to translate because the language has changed' category, and even less of the grammar.

Let's begin with vocabulary. The fundamental question is: how many *different* words are there in Shakespeare - that is, words which have changed their meaning between Early Modern English and now. Notice that, in any argument based on language change, the question is one of difference, not difficulty. Shakespeare uses plenty of words which haven't changed their meaning but are still difficult: Classical allusions are a good example. There is no linguistic problem in the sentence which Paris uses to explain why he has not mentioned his feelings to the grieving Juliet: 'Venus smiles not in a house of tears' (*Romeo and Juliet*, 4.1.8), but it makes no sense until you know who Venus is. She turns out to be the same goddess of love today as she was 400 years ago. This is not a matter of language change. Similarly, Shakespeare gives us plenty of difficult and challenging thoughts, and these remain difficult and challenging today, but often this is nothing to do with the language they are expressed in. 'To be or not to be' is a case in point. Difficult thoughts are not a matter of language change, either.

So how many 'different words' are there in Shakespeare? Ben and I list about 3000 in *Shakespeare's Words* (2002). They include everything from really difficult items, such as *engruffed*, *incarnadine*, and *finical*, to words which would hardly give you a second thought because they are so close to modern words, and in some cases continue to be used in special contexts (such as poetry or religion) - such as *morn* and *bedazzle* - as well as those words where the metre has prompted a variant coinage, such as *vasty* instead of *vast* ('the vasty fields of France' in the opening Chorus to *Henry V*). So the really interesting question is: how many of these different words pose a *true* difficulty of comprehension. There are two types of candidate. First, there are words

which are totally opaque - like *finical*, where no amount of guessing will produce a correct interpretation. Second, there are words which look easy but which are seriously deceptive - the 'false friends' - such as *merely* meaning 'totally' or *ecstasy* meaning 'madness'. I don't know of any complete count, but I shall be very surprised if the combined total passes a thousand. That's about one in twenty of Shakespeare's total vocabulary.

However, I'm not sure that even this figure is very meaningful, because it ignores those cases where a word is intelligible at one level and not at another. Much of the insult-language is like this. When Kent harangues Oswald (*King Lear* 2.2) as being 'a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, *finical* rogue', we may not know what *finical* is, or several of the other words, but we jolly well know that Kent is not paying Oswald a compliment. The same point applies to modern English. If I call you a *blithering idiot*, you know the strength of my feeling - but if I were to ask you what *blithering* actually means, you probably wouldn't be able to answer. Can you tell me what *fell* means in one *fell swoop*? And what about *burley-burley* (from the opening scene in *Macbeth*)? Few could define this, but at a pragmatic level we can easily guess what it means.

It's crucial to take the pragmatics into account, because we need this perspective to help explain the notion of 'level of response'. Any lines from Shakespeare can be responded to at different levels. The more we know about the detailed meaning of every word in the text, the more we are likely to get out of the play, of course. But it does not follow that the only legitimate response to a play (or any use of language) is at this level. If 'full comprehension' is the only criterion of legitimate language use, then we'd all better stop talking to each other right now. The crucial point to appreciate about the interaction between Lear and his three daughters, in the opening scene, is that Goneril and Regan are hiding behind insincere words, whereas Cordelia is not. It is simplistic to think of their high-blown waffle as just a matter of language change: the groundlings wouldn't have been able to understand much of it either. The two daughters' rhetoric is there to make a contrast with Cordelia, whose simple 'Nothing' is soon to follow, along with her explanation with its effective lines:

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all?...
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all..

Which bit of that did you find tiresomely unintelligible, exactly?

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Another example of a variable level of response comes when we find ourselves grasping just part of the meaning of a sentence. Take Toby Belch's offer to Maria, 'Shall I play my freedom at tray-trip ...?' (*Twelfth Night*, 2.5.183). We may have no idea what *tray-trip* is (many such Elizabethan practices are shrouded in mystery), but the collocation with *play* shows that it must be some kind of game. Collocations provide major clues to meaning - something that modernizers regularly forget. Translators well know that meaning does not lie only within a word, but actually comes from an examination of a whole sentence. It is the sentence that, literally 'makes' sense of words. This point is often lost sight of when modernizers talk about Shakespeare's 'difficult words'.

It's also worth noting that Shakespeare himself was well aware that some of his words were difficult, which is why he often glosses them, or paraphrases a sentence to get his meaning across. 'No, not a grise', says Cesario (aka Viola) to Olivia, talking about pity being akin to love (*Twelfth Night*, 3.1.121). Turning *grise* into 'step, whit, bit', or some such word is something that directors often do anyway, without anyone (bar a few scholars) noticing, and I don't have a big problem with that. But we mustn't forget that often Shakespeare himself does the translating for us: the Duke says to Brabantio, 'Let me ... lay a sentence / Which as a grise or step may help these lovers / Into your favour' (*Othello*, 1.3.198). Well, thank you, Will. And if you're having a problem with *incarnadine* (*Macbeth*, 2.2.62), be patient for another line and you'll learn what it means: 'making the green one red'.

At sentence level, similarly, we often see Shakespeare approaching a point in a number of different ways. When the Friar explains to Juliet about drinking the potion, he describes the effect thus (*Romeo and Juliet*, 4.1.93):

Take thou this vial, being then in bed,
And this distilling liquor drink thou off;
When presently through all thy veins shall run
A cold and drowsy humour.

Modernizers would stop us there, point triumphantly to *humour* and say how unintelligible it is. But we must listen/read on: 'For no pulse/Shall keep his native progress, but surcease.' *Surcease*? Another possible difficulty, if the listener fails to make the link with *cease*. But keep listening/reading:

No warmth, no breath, shall testify thou livest.
The roses in thy lips and cheeks shall fade
To wanny ashes, thy eyes' windows fall
Like death when he shuts up the day of life.

Wanny, another problem. But anyone who carries on like

this, failing to read the whole passage before sounding off about the comprehension of individual words, is going to miss the point. I have used this passage as an exercise with students, some as young as 10, and none of them ever fail to understand what is happening. I generalize: I defy anyone to hear this passage, presented well in the context of that part of the play, and be unable to give some sort of explanation about what is going on. And if that turns out to be the case, then the argument for universal translation evaporates.

Based on the counts done for *Shakespeare's Words*, I estimate that the case for modernization is supported by only about 5% of Shakespeare's vocabulary. Even if we included all 3000 differences (i.e. including such cases as *morn* and *vasty*) we would still only reach about 15%. Turn this on its head. Modern English speakers already know 85% or more of Shakespeare's words. This is not a very strong case, it seems to me, for a general modernization policy.

The same approach can be applied to other domains of language. How many differences are there between Early Modern and Modern English grammar? A useful source for making a rough calculation is G L Brook's *The Language of Shakespeare* (1976), in which he conveniently sets out points of difference between Early Modern and Modern English in numbered paragraphs. He identifies about 250 points in his chapters on syntax and accidence. This sounds like a lot, until we reflect on just how many grammatical points there are in English - about 3500 described in the large grammar compiled by Randolph Quirk and his associates, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (1985). So less than 10% of Early Modern English grammar is likely to cause a comprehension problem. The vast majority of the grammatical rules found in Shakespeare are the same then as now. I do not know what John McWhorter can be thinking of when he talks about 'scores of fundamental sentence structures' being different to the point of incomprehensibility.

There are indeed islands of difficulty in Shakespeare which arise from a combination of lexical or grammatical unfamiliarity and metrically influenced word order variation; but they are islands within an ocean of accessible meaning. The impression we have to the contrary, I think, arises from the glossarial approach itself, so prominent in the notes to edited texts and a focus of attention in the classroom. This can actually *cause* the lack of comprehension, by stopping us mid-flow and making us concentrate on individual lexical trees, thereby distracting us from the sense of the overall semantic wood. It is a trap that can be avoided by going to see a play before reading it, and then going to see it again after studying it.

As this last remark suggests, nothing in my argument

reduces the value of studying the plays and learning the meanings of the words that are unclear, so that we refine our response to them. The more we understand whole lines, and sequences of lines, the more we will develop our appreciation of character, plot, and atmosphere, and value their status as poetry. There is a phonaesthetic as well as a semantic response which can be achieved only from an awareness of each line as a rhythmical entity, and word-meaning plays its part in that response along with sentence meaning. For example, I've heard an actor 'milk' the three [s] sounds in *surcease* to great effect, reinforcing its sense of cessation. And obviously, the more we understand what *humours* are, the more we will appreciate the all-encompassing power of Friar Laurence's drug. But 'full comprehension' of the words *humour* and *surcease* is not a *sine qua non* of understanding what Friar Laurence is saying to Juliet.

The basic error in John McWhorter's argument is his view that Shakespeare's language is more like Beowulf than Congreve. Look again at my examples above and tell me that's true! The period between 1600 and the present-day is actually one of the slower-moving periods of English linguistic change. So, rather than modernize Shakespeare, in my view our efforts should be devoted to making people more fluent in 'Shakespearean', by devising appropriately graded Early Modern English syllabuses just as one would in any language-teaching world. All modern English speakers have an immensely powerful start, in that they already know some 80 to 90 per cent of the language. That remaining 10 per cent or so is admittedly an impediment, but it should be seen as an opportunity and a challenge to be overcome, not as a barrier to be evaded. We only have to learn what *bootless* means once, and we have removed 22 instances of that barrier at one fell swoop. The sense of achievement, once the energy has been devoted to the task, is tremendous, and yields a reward which is repeated every time we encounter one of the poems or plays.

Response by John McWhorter

Professor Crystal's response to my article is refreshing in actually grappling directly and sustainedly with my main point, which is not that Shakespeare is difficult, but that we can no longer comprehend the basic meaning of an alarming number of the words he uses. The problem is such, I argue, that we are not in a position to be able to even appreciate the difficulty and poetry except in a foggy way, especially when we receive the plays in live performance.

Crystal notes that only about ten percent of Shakespeare's vocabulary is opaque to us in this way, a useful observation. However, the money quote in Crystal's reply is "That

remaining ten percent or so is admittedly an impediment." Who is to say that the decisive barrier that I describe would require more than a ten percent discrepancy in vocabulary? Spoken language goes by very quickly -- if we heard someone dropping a nonsense word into their speech even every fifteen words rather than ten, we would quickly start losing the thread of what they were saying. They would wear us out, fast. The live Shakespearean experience can be seen as analogous.

Crystal notes that "modernizers" such as myself might "cherry-pick" especially opaque passages -- but then, as he also notes, so might people of his mind. Here, then, Crystal may well choose a passage that happens not to contain any toe-stubbers such as the one from Lear's final speech. However, in response to Crystal's implication that my opinion on this issue is irresponsible coming from a linguist, I submit that he is neglecting what entire running scenes of Shakespearean language are very often like.

"How does that relate to this?" Crystal insists, "this" being my argument, after the relevant passage of Lear's final cry. Well, how does this passage from the beginning of *Measure for Measure* relate to Crystal's implication that I am off my rocker? This is Vincentio -- and this is at the beginning!

Of government the properties to unfold,
Would seem in me to affect speech and discourse;
Since I am put to know that your own science
Exceeds, in that, the lists of all advice
My strength can give you. Then no more remains,
But that to your sufficiency ... (end quote)

and a bit later:

What figure of us think you he will bear?
For you must know, we have with special soul
Elected him our absence to supply,
Lent him our terror, dress'd him with our love,
And given his deputation all the organs
Of our own power.

The problems with now distant word meanings -- how many people will immediately process that to Shakespeare *science* still meant "knowledge" -- just pile all over one another here. No amount of Globe or Barbican acting smarts could get the meaning of these passages across in real time -- and I do not see Shakespeare providing us with "glosses" here, either. Say that the solution is just to cut this part and I simply propose an alternate universe where we alter it in line with how modern English words have evolved.

This sample from *Measure for Measure* is, in fact, typical of a problem Shakespeare scholars have traditionally noted in his late plays, an increasingly dense, inverted, listener-

unfriendly form of phraseology. This vein in the Bard's writing is thought to have been written even over the heads of ordinary playgoers of his time. If most Globe patrons had trouble with this brand of the late plays' writing style, then I doubt the inner city kids Crystal refers to would have much more fun with it. Upon which I submit – if we are to relate to it four hundred years later, is it an insane proposal that the words that no longer mean what they did to Shakespeare be revised? After all, in a passage like the one above, all it takes is a single word to throw a listener for good, never mind “ten percent.”

What world am I living in? (as Crystal asks). Not one devoid of theatrical experience – I am, in fact, quite the “theatre person” as a spectator as well as performer (I have even acted with yeomanly competence in a Tom Stoppard play, complete with dense language and a British accent). As such, I am well aware of audiences enjoying Shakespeare, including young people. Here in New York there were lines around the block for *Hamlet* (or really, Jude Law in *Hamlet*) and (Patrick Stewart in) *Macbeth* most recently.

What worries me is that so often what the audience is taking in is such an abridgement of what Shakespeare meant, or of what one can process only having read the play beforehand. This comes from, in fact, my being a linguist – I seek an ideal of fuller understanding of the words than is possible given the four-plus centuries' remove. Crystal gives a perfect example in the scene where the Friar explains to Juliet about taking the potion. Of course audiences know what is going on in a general sense. My claim is not that Shakespeare is “closer to Beowulf than to Congreve” in terms of comprehension, and I submit that Crystal is falling into straw manism here. Does he really think I am claiming that Shakespeare may as well have been writing in West Saxon?

I am, simply, wishing that *more* people could get more of Shakespearean text in live performance, and I'm not sure my point classifies as “carrying on” as Crystal puts it. Is he truly able to distinguish between being a virgin listener and being a Shakespeare-loving expert on the English language? Quite simply, the line “For no pulse shall keep his native progress, but surcease” is exactly the kind of thing I am calling attention to. Catching the *cease* part of *surcease* and processing that the meaning is “stop” is, for one, something that the untutored listener will quite certainly “fail to make the link” on in real time. And there is more opacity of this kind in the line. *Progress* in modern English most spontaneously has an abstract sense rather than the more literal one of “go on” as applied to a pulse. One gets this having parsed the line on the page – but what about hearing it for the first time? The *bis* is a remnant of Old English's gender marking that could apply to objects as well as people – but to a layman, is one more thing to trip up the listener.

Which he is referred to? Oh well – we move on.

Crystal may even agree here, but suggests better education in Shakespearean language. I understand that, but given the nature of education in the America we live in, it would seem a bleak prospect. Opinions will differ on how realistic or fair it is to expect spectators to attend Shakespeare having done the homework of carefully reading the play first; I, for one, see this, too, as a prescription unlikely of success in a world ever less oriented to print. For these reasons I suggest translation, with all due respect to David Crystal's reply and awesome body of work.

There is, however, in Crystal's reply an air of pique that I have frequently encountered in response to my suggestion. My impression is that this pique is more visceral than intellectual, despite my sincere gratitude for Crystal and his son's quantitative approach to the issue and the line on my bookshelf of Crystal's books.

And in that light, I find myself thinking of two experiences I have had recently. Two friends of mine, one an actor by trade and the other an occasional performer like me who loves the Bard – as I do – were years ago quite dismissive of my insisting that overall, Shakespearean language is alarmingly opaque to modern listeners except in careful excerpt. (Note I mean listeners, not readers.) One of them even got a little snippy as Crystal has.

However, it would seem that the matter was one of an initial irritation which passed, followed by a more temperate reception over the passage of time. Quite by chance, both of those friends have told me without my asking them in the past year – and neither were aware of the article Crystal and I are sparring over now – that upon reflection they understand what I mean.

Is the testy response from people like Crystal more a matter of impulsive recoil at any questioning of the worth of Shakespeare as an artist? Or, to push it a bit, are those who have mastered Shakespearean language so proud of the effort this took that they bristle at a suggestion that the language be rendered such that they could no longer look to it as a mountain they climbed?

If so, I get it. But I also cannot see that I am deaf to poetry, a poor linguist, or out of my mind.

Response by David Crystal

As Elbert Hubbard once said: ‘If you can't answer a man's arguments, all is not lost; you can still call him vile names.’

So, after a promising start in his response, John McWhorter resorts to name-calling. I am, evidently, piquey, snippy, and testy. I think I must be getting somewhere.

Let me try to restore the debate to a polite level and focus on the main point. What I'm charging John McWhorter with is harmful exaggeration. It's exaggeration because he is seriously overstating the amount of difficulty in Shakespeare. And it's harmful because this can make people even more scared of the bard than they were before.

Make no mistake about it. McWhorter is arguing that there is hardly anything in Shakespeare that can be understood. Two quotes from his original piece: 'we cannot understand what the man is saying'... 'the language of Shakespeare remains lovely in snippets.' I take precisely the opposite view, that the language of Shakespeare is difficult in snippets. Moreover, the difficulty isn't spread evenly over the whole canon, as McWhorter seems to think:

Spoken language goes by very quickly -- if we heard someone dropping a nonsense word into their speech even every fifteen words rather than ten, we would quickly start losing the thread of what they were saying. They would wear us out, fast. The live Shakespearean experience can be seen as analogous.

If it were so, indeed we would. But it isn't analogous. The difficult words in Shakespeare don't appear like that. They occur in clusters, or are isolated points of contention. In previous writing I've called them 'islands' of difficulty. The clusters are things like insult strings (as between Hal and Falstaff or Kent to Oswald) or character-related obfuscation (as between Poor Tom and Lear) or topic-related moments (as when Hamlet comments on the nature of man) or plot-related moments (such as a heraldic announcement in a history play) or poetry-related moments (when the metre prompts an unfamiliar word order).

In relation to isolated words, McWhorter doesn't address my point that there are levels of difficulty. For example, 'science' meaning 'knowledge' isn't as difficult as might be thought, because both words share some semantic features, and these are enough to suggest a sense that carries the direction of the speaker's thought. It isn't the 'full comprehension' that he wants, but it's a start. In any case, there's no such thing as full comprehension in a literary work (and it's chimerical even in everyday conversation, as all those books on men and women misunderstanding each other illustrate). Every time I study a piece of Shakespeare, I learn something new (as my regular articles for *Around the Globe* illustrate) and deepen my understanding. This is a general experience for Shakespeare scholars and neophytes alike.

Note that the real issue isn't one of translation, as such, but

I think I already know what the thousands of words are - they're listed in *Shakespeare's Words* - though what 'basic' might mean isn't at all obvious. But 'scores of fundamental sentence structures'? I have no idea what is being claimed here, and this shouldn't take too long to substantiate. So, let's have a list of scores of fundamental sentence structures, please.

Or, try this. Let's accept, for the sake of argument, the necessity of translation. How are these translations to be achieved?

The translations ought to be richly considered, executed by artists of the highest caliber well-steeped in the language of Shakespeare's era, thus equipped to channel the Bard to the modern listener with the passion, respect and care which is his due.

That sounds good. OK, so do it. Which artists does McWhorter have in mind? And, having found some, let's see some examples of their work. I'd love to see a translation which retains the poetic quality of the original, avoids banality, and approaches the 'full comprehension' demanded in his original piece. I have to say that, having read a number of translations into modern English, I find them pretty poor, focusing on plot rather than character, turning characters into stereotypes or pastiches, and losing any sense of poetry. So, my second challenge is to provide a quality translation of one of those difficult pieces of text that he cites. Full comprehension, mind.

Response by *John McWhorter*

I think most readers will agree that in my response I did respond to Crystal's points quite directly. My point that Crystal's response was piquey, snippy, and testy was not levelled as a flimsy substitute for argumentation but as an additional observation, because his response was indeed all three.

And overall, his second response would seem to indicate that we have gotten down to issues of degree and "Where do you draw the line?" regarding which there can be no conclusive resolution in the formal sense.

Except -- Crystal's challenge for me to provide someone who has provided an adequately artistic Shakespeare translation misses the subjunctivity of my point. I wrote that such translations OUGHT to be done / tried. The fact that such translations by proven artists do not exist at present cannot be taken as refutation of my argument.

Translating Shakespeare into English: A Debate

However, it's a straw man point to note that the translation could never equal Shakespeare's text itself. Of course it wouldn't. The question is whether more immediate comprehension of the language would be worth a degree of dilution of the excellence of the original. Opinions will differ -- and likely usually fall on Crystal's side, to be sure -- but again, the particular argument I made stands.



The Translation Debate: an Actor's View



Ben Crystal studied English Language and Linguistics at Lancaster University before training at Drama Studio London. He co-wrote *Shakespeare's Words* (Penguin 2002) and *The Shakespeare Miscellany* (Penguin 2005) with his father David Crystal, and his first solo book, *Shakespeare on Toast* (Icon 2008) was shortlisted for the 2010 Educational Writer of the Year Award. His workshops developing fresh approaches to acting Shakespeare are given around the world and can be found at www.passioninpractice.com. In autumn 2011, he will be playing Hamlet in the first Original Pronunciation production of the play for 400 years, at the University of Nevada, Reno.

I've spent much of the last ten years acting and working on Shakespeare's plays and poems with people from a variety of backgrounds and a spectrum of cultures, languages and abilities. They've ranged from professional actors and drama students through teachers and pupils in high school to neophyte youngsters in Kolkata who simply felt they had an interest in Shakespeare.

The main obstacle I've found across the board has never been one of understanding the text. On the contrary, the barrier that needs to be taken down is what I'd call 'permission'. The blocks surrounding Shakespeare have less to do with comprehension, and more to do with the literary tradition that states these works are there to be read and studied, rather than for the common masses to hear, speak and perform.

Once people have been given this permission - once they realise that these works are crammed with real emotions, difficult decisions and heart-breaking encounters - I've never known the meaning of the words to be a permanent

obstacle. They are thrilled by the lofty heights Shakespeare takes them to. Gradually, the complex ideas unravel. When one stands back and lets the speeches flow, they begin to make sense. Great Shakespeare actors often say that the instinct with poetry is to slow down, whereas the more you make the words your own and 'speak the speech trippingly', as Hamlet says, the easier they are to understand.

It was the same for audience members in Shakespeare's time. When Macbeth utters the words 'If the assassination / Could trammel up the consequence', the Elizabethan audience's collective brain would have sparkled to hear the new and unfamiliar word, *assassination*. They would not, though, have struggled with the meaning, already being familiar with the word *assassin*. Shakespeare knew they'd be able to make the leap, and his audience would know that in going to see one of his plays, such leaps would most likely have to be made.

I've just finished performing Edgar in *King Lear*, in a castle in south-west Austria. The audience were primarily second-language English speakers, from all walks of life, but we performed entirely in English - aside from a German prologue who introduced the characters at the beginning of the show. Comprehension was not a problem. When it came to a more difficult speech of Edgar's, I certainly had to work harder:

Yet better thus, and known to be condemned
Than still condemned and flattered, to be worst.
The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear:

In isolation, this is tricky to understand. In performance, when 'thus' clearly refers to Edgar's physical state (covered in dirt, wearing a filthy, torn blanket); when *known to be condemned* refers to him, as he's still in disguise and on the run; when *still condemned and flattered, to be worst* refers to Lear, whose company Edgar has just left; when I can express notions of 'dejection', 'hope' and 'fear' by my face and body - what is there to be translated?

But if one does translate, which version does one translate from? This speech differs wildly depending on whether you head to the Quarto or the Folio. The vocabulary choice of *esperance* over *experience* will lead you down different paths, as will the various punctuation differences. Many people disregard the Quarto texts, some worship the Folio (being the product of two of Shakespeare's lead actors and colleagues), and some disregard the early-modern English punctuation altogether. Shakespeare has left us enough choices to make, before we start modernising words.

The next problem facing the translator is obvious: which meaning of a word to choose? Here is Kent Richmond's

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The Translation Debate: an Actor's View by Ben Crystal

version of Edgar's speech:

Better like this, to know that one's despised,
Than still despised and flattered. For the worst,
The lowest thing, the most cast down by fortune,
Is always hopeful, never fearing loss.

To take the last word of the first line: *condemned* / *despised*. *Contemned* (both the Folio and Quarto spell the word with a *t* rather than a *d*) is indeed defined in the OED as *despised*, which a modern audience would probably understand to mean *hated*. But Edgar is not simply 'despised' - he has actually been condemned - to death, if caught. The translation has narrowed the sense of what Edgar is saying, and in so doing has lost half of Edgar's point. And the latter half of this version is more a reinterpretation than a translation. I struggle to make sense of it, in relation to what has been happening by this point in the play.

The best example of endless interpretation is perhaps the most famous: Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be, that is the question' speech, on which I had someone email me this very week. The meaning of the line is, at first glance, very simple, and requires little thought. Scratch at the surface, or begin to explain the line to someone else, as I tried to do in my response to my correspondent, and it becomes a very different matter.

The speech is an onion, with many layers of meaning (talking about life and death, action and passivity, endurance and submission) which will all change depending on how the actor playing Hamlet has interpreted the character up to that point in the play. This, surely, is one of the principal joys of Shakespeare. Certainly there are specific words in that speech whose meaning is unclear to a modern listener, but if actors are worth their salt they will have discovered this meaning in rehearsal, and will be able to convey it through the way they express themselves - through their body, voice, and intention.

I don't know anyone who can say they've 'mastered Shakespearean language' - and I include myself in this. Surely one of the most wonderful aspects of encountering Shakespeare is the way the meaning will slip and slide out of your reach. I personally don't relish the idea of 'full comprehension' of the language. One of the reasons we're even having this discussion is because the plays, the characters, and the things they say are open to endless interpretation, to peoples and cultures around the world.

A few years ago I met the late and great comic actor Ken Campbell. He also thought that there were bits of Shakespeare that were so impenetrable as to be unperformable. I challenged him live on radio to pick any piece of Shakespeare, and claimed I would not only perform it a few days

later to a full house at the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe, but that it would present the audience there with no comprehension problems. He agreed to pay me £50 if the audience response showed I'd done it.

He picked Touchstone's lawyers speech, towards the end of *As You Like It* (Penguin text):

I did dislike the cut of a certain courtier's beard. He sent me word, if I said his beard was not cut well, he was in the mind it was: this is called the Retort Courteous. If I sent him word again it was not well cut, he would send me word he cut it to please himself: this is called the Quip Modest. If again 'it was not well cut,' he disabled my judgement: this is called the Reply Churlish. If again 'it was not well cut,' he would answer, I spake not true: this is called the Reproof Valiant. If again 'it was not well cut,' he would say, I lie: this is called the Countercheck Quarrelsome: and so to the Lie Circumstantial and the Lie Direct.

Certainly not the easiest speech for any modern actor to tackle - but then, where did this idea come from, that Shakespeare, one of the greatest dramatists, who often deals with incredibly complex ideas, should be easy? It *should* be hard work. It *was* hard work. But it was hard work for *me*, to find a way to speak Touchstone's speech and make it clear to the audience, to make it accessible without dumbing it down. (I got my £50.)

Dumbing down is a problem. It's all too easy to add lewd or inappropriate visual jokes, as many modern productions of Shakespeare do, in lieu of working hard to make sense of what is actually being said. An alternative, of course, is to forget all that, and celebrity-cast the lead parts: then the audience won't give two hoots about the production they're watching, as they're more excited to see Captain Picard (Sir Patrick Stewart), Gandalf (Sir Ian McKellen) or Jude Law a few metres from them (all a producer's joy, as doubtless the show will sell out). How hard do we need to work as theatre practitioners, if a full house is pretty much guaranteed, and the lead could just as well be reading the phone book?

The theatrical profession needs to work harder at Shakespeare. We need to stop thinking his plays are easy to bring to a modern audience, or that we should make them easier. Modern audiences must learn to work a little bit, not expecting everything will be handed to them on a silver platter in bite-size pieces. If easy-to-swallow drama is looked for, watch a soap-opera. If challenging, powerful and intelligent drama is sought, come to Shakespeare - and the way *he* wrote it.

The modern Shakespearean actor's objective is to take as much of this work off the audience's shoulders as possible.

back, a scientist in Liverpool discovered that, when you read Shakespeare, the extra work that the poetry and the unfamiliar words require makes part of the temporal lobe of your brain light up. Taking the time to work at Shakespeare, evidently, makes you smarter.

