

A forensic stylistic challenge

David Crystal sets you an anachronism-spotting challenge



I magine you read that someone claims to have discovered a lost play by Shakespeare. You ask to see an extract, and this is what they send. Can you prove that it must be a forgery, by finding words or idioms that did not exist in Shakespeare's time? (Clue: There are eight items to find.)

John

When I return with victory from the field,
I'll see your grace; but I will go to George
And meet him at the inn-house in the park,
For there he plans to eat and parle with me.

Elinor

My darling boy, my sweetie, take thou care
If with him at his luncheon you do sit
For when he's full of drink, inebrious,
He's nothing to be trusted, and his wiles
Can trap a boy as innocent as thee.

John

I fear not, mother, but will heed your word
I am no silly billy like to George.
And if he starts a broil to gain my end
I have the necess'ry to end his life.
He'll go to meet his maker ere I flee.

Elinor

Stay yet awhile another day with me.
'Tis ugly weather to go out so far
And country paths are treach'rous in the wind.

The answers are on page 50

If you're going to create a forgery, at least get the vocabulary right! And the same point applies to anyone writing plays or novels set in earlier times. This is where the Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary proves to be invaluable, for that enormous work brings together the lexical items that were available at a given time to talk about a particular theme. Any author wanting to avoid lexical anachronisms would do well to check it out.

A recent example where this didn't happen... In the first season (2010) of *Downton Abbey*, Episode 4, we hear O'Brien saying "That's Her Greatness done and dusted for the night" and Mary saying Sybil was "banging on about her new frock". The series is set in the early 1900s, but the first idiom isn't recorded until 1953, and the second not until 1979. I don't suppose many people noticed, though. ¶

Find out more

Books

David Crystal (OUP) *Words in Time and Place: Exploring Language through the Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press).

Articles

The Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary (2014) 'How can you see 470,000 words?', in *Babel* No6.

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Solution to the puzzle on page 37

Eight items have a first recorded use at least one generation *after* Shakespeare:

'Inebrious' – 1837

'Inn-house' – 1694

'Luncheon' – 1652

'Meet his maker' – 1933

'Necess'ry' – 1772

'Silly billy' – 1834

'Sweetie' – 1778

'Ugly weather' – 1744

