

On the language of love

Love is an ancient Germanic word, and one of the oldest words in the English language. It appears in some of the earliest texts written in Old English, around 800 AD. Today it has become one of the most commonly used words in the language. Type it into Google, and you get over 2 billion hits.

Shakespeare uses it nearly 2000 times. He uses it 154 times in *Romeo and Juliet* - over half the time between the two lovers. When Romeo and Juliet first meet, their opening scene together is perfectly balanced - each uses the word *love* 11 times.

It's a word that has come to be used in over a hundred different ways. Think of all the phrases and idioms that make use of it: *brotherly love*, *mother-love*, *not for love or money*, *no love lost*, *love at first sight*, *love spoons*, *love seats*, *falling in love*, *falling out of love*... Think of proverbs like *love is blind* or *love and a cough cannot be hid*. *Love teaches asses to dance*, they say in France. *Love everyone except an attorney*, they say in Ireland.

Some of the idioms are poetic - often a bit cheeky. In the 18th century they came up with *love in a cottage* - meaning the couple doesn't really have enough to live on. They also had a culinary joke: *love in disguise*. It's boiled and stuffed calf's heart.

Plants have often been given a *love* in their names, and some are highly poetic. There's a *love bush*, a *love tree*, and a *love vine*. *Love-in-a-mist* is a popular name for a type of passion flower. *Love-in-a-puzzle* is a type of fennel. *Love lies bleeding* is the name of several red-flowered amaranths. *Love-in-idleness* is heartsease. That's the one Oberon tells Puck to find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Some of the old uses are the best. Once upon a time, *love-mongers* would walk around with *love-open eyes*, all *love-pensive*. *Lovertines* would remember their *love-spent* youth. People sometimes called each other *loveling*, and would sing *love-lays* to each other. My favourite old use is *lovewildered* - you're so bewildered about being in love that you've become lovesick. These phrases aren't used any more - but perhaps some of them will gain a new lease of life after this campaign.

Some love proverbs from around the world (from *As They Say in Zanzibar*)

From Scotland: Follow love and it will flee thee; flee love and it will follow thee.

From Poland: The greatest love is mother-love; after that comes a dog's love; and after that the love of a sweetheart.

From Ukraine: Love and blindness are twin sisters.

From Germany: Love takes away the sight, and matrimony restores it.

From France: The only victory over love is flight.

From Spain: If love be timid, it is not true.

From England: Love your neighbour, yet pull not down your hedge.

From Sudan: One thread for the needle, one love for the heart.

From Madagascar: Don't be so much in love that you can't tell when it's raining.

From Ethiopia: When in love, a cliff becomes a meadow.

From the USA: A love-letter sometimes costs more than a three-cent stamp.

From ancient Rome: Lovers, lunatics.