In the second of a series of articles, David Crystal examines Shakespeare's additions to the English dictionary

What can this cock-pit hold?

When Shakespeare was writing *I Henry IV*, probably in 1596, he needed a strong, resonant adjective to express the notion of enormous size to put into the mouth of Owen Glendower in the middle of his boasting exchange with Harry Hotspur:

I can call spirits from the – deep (III.i.51)

From a poetic point of view, the choice of adjective is crucial, for the other words are nothing special. The use of *spirits* is conventional, and *the deep* in the sense of 'the depths of the sea' had been in the language for 500 years. Even if we allow this to be the first recorded instance of *the deep* meaning 'the abyss of space', as the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests – anticipating the modern 'deep space' of *Star Wars* – it is probably not how the groundlings would have taken it (unless, of course, the actor had been told to gesture heavenwards).

No, the adjective has to carry the weight of this sentence. And, although we could never know, we might speculate that Shakespeare would have paused at the point where he needed to find an effective word for 'great size'. All poets know about constructing lines with rhythmical place-holders, where they can temporarily think of nothing better than a 'tum -te-tum'. 'I can call spirits from the tum-te deep'. That's what was needed, if the line was to work. So what did Shakespeare have available?

Not much. There was the monosyllabic *great*, of course, which had been part of English since Anglo-Saxon times, and *large* or *huge*, both in common use since the thirteenth century. But, precisely because they were everyday words, they wouldn't have suited a being for whom the earth did shake when he was born. Anyway, they had just one strong syllable. That would have put two strong syllables next to each other: 'the huge deep'? 'the large deep'? It would have destroyed the rhythmical build-up of the line.

Glendower, I imagine, would have loved to use some of the words expressing great size which we know today. Unfortunately, several of these were either unknown or unusual in the English of the 1590s. *Gigantic*, for instance, isn't recorded until 1612, and there is no citation for *tremendous* until 1632. In any case, these have the wrong rhythm. *Massive* was available (it had been in use for nearly 200 years) and had the right rhythm; but it wouldn't have suited the context. It expresses the notion of concrete size upwards, whereas *deep* requires something which emphasises the emptiness all around – the notion of depth downwards (if you take the 'sea' interpretation) or outwards (if you go for 'space'). *Colossal* loses out on all counts: it isn't found until the nineteenth century, it has the wrong rhythm, and it is just as concrete as *massive*.

Shakespeare really had only three options available to him: *immense*, in use for over a century; *enormous*, known for about fifty years; and *vast*, a usage whose first citation in the *OED* is just a couple of decades previously. He would have known all of them. They all contained an element of drama. And they would all have suited the context. But none of them were metrically right. The first would have reversed the expected rhythm. And the second needed an awkward elision to work: *th'enormous deep*. That left *vast*.

Shakespeare liked the word *vast*. He had used it a few times already: the Bastard reflects on the 'vast confusion' awaiting England (*King John*, IV.iii.153) and Theseus comments that the madman 'sees more devils than vast hell can hold' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.9). But *vast* was a monosyllable. It wouldn't fit the metre.

The solution was simple: let Williamisms rule. Make a new word. Use the popular suffix -y, and turn the single-syllabled adjective into a double: *vasty*. People had been adding this suffix to adjectives (much in the way that we use *-ish* today, as in *hungryish)* for over a century. In the fifteenth century we find *hugy*, *leany*, *bleaky*, *fainty*, and many others. Most eventually went out of general use, though *chilly*, *dusky*, *haughty*, *slippery* and a few others are still with us.

Shakespeare must have found this a useful suffix, for it solves his problem elsewhere: there is 'the steepy mount' in *Timon of Athens* (I.i.76) and 'plumpy Bacchus' of *Antony and Cleopatra*, (II.vii.111). And above all – given the choice of play to launch the 1997 season – he uses it again in *Henry V*. Listen to it resound in line 12 of the opening speech, as you sit in the cock-pit, imagining the vasty fields of France.

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Top left: Cockfighting from the *Album Amicorum* of Michael van Meer, 1614-30 Courtesy of Edinburgh University Library