



People sometimes say that they can spot a *Williamism* - a Shakespearean word creation - at 100 paces. O give me leave to doubt. Let's take the well-known 'triple whammy' expressed by the Ghost of Old Hamlet, reflecting on the cruel way he was made to depart this world 'unhoused, disappointed, unaneled' (1.5.77). Are there any Shakespearean first usages here? Choose now, before reading on.

People often go for the first and the third. If you did this, then you were right about *unaneled* (meaning 'without having received the last sacraments'), but wrong about *unhoused* ('without the Eucharist'), which was used by Thomas More 70 years before. And if you disregarded *disappointed*, you would have been wrong there too. For, in the sense of 'unfurnished, unprepared', this is indeed a *Williamism*. Some editions actually print the word as *dis-appointed*, which more clearly suggests its link to other 16th- and 17th-century usages as *ill appointed* and *well appointed*.

Pick a word, any word...

David Crystal warns against plausible-looking *Williamisms*.

It's examples like *disappointed* which make it impossible to answer the question, How many new words did Shakespeare add to the language? You can't easily quantify Shakespeare in this way, because his linguistic inventiveness is not so much to do with the creation of new words as with the using of already existing words in new ways. Introducing new senses, in short. *Disappointed* already existed in the language in the sense of 'frustrate expectation' – the verb arrived from French some time in the 1400s. But in the sense of 'improperly fitted out', the first known use is the *Hamlet* one.

To develop an intuition about Shakespeare's pervasive linguistic originality, you have to go behind the words and look at the senses. In my last article, I quoted some lines from *Hamlet* which were empty of Williamisms:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
 Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
 Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
 Thou comest in such a questionable shape
 That I will speak to thee.

The content words are all much earlier than Shakespeare, and in their intended senses in this passage there is nothing linguistically novel about them. But it would be wrong to dismiss them as irrelevant. For there may well be other contexts in which these same words turn up, but with different meanings which are indeed novel.

Take *angel*. In its sense of 'divine messenger', this is Anglo-Saxon in origin. It occurs in the 10th-century Lindisfarne Gospels. But in the sense of 'lovely being' – a person resembling an angel – the *Oxford English Dictionary's* first citation is in fact Romeo's reaction on hearing Juliet's first words: 'O, speak again, bright angel' (2.1.68). Or take *wicked*. In its sense of 'bad in moral character or conduct', this is a usage from the early Middle Ages; but in a weaker sense, meaning 'mischievous' or 'sly', the first known use is Rosalind/Ganymede's description of Cupid as 'that same wicked bastard of Venus' (*AYLI* 4.1.201).

Grace is even more interesting, as it has so many meanings: the *OED* distinguishes over 20. Its original sense, of 'pleasing quality', is known from the 14th century. But when we look at some of the other senses of this word, we find no less than three instances where a first usage is attributed to Shakespeare.

- Theseus, out hunting, comes across the sleeping lovers. Rather egoistically, he concludes that they 'came here in grace of our solemnity' (*MND* 4.1.133). This is the first known example of the phrase *in grace of* (meaning 'in honour of').
- In the prologue to Act II of *Henry V* (l. 28), grace

appears in a more concrete sense: the Chorus, referring to the conspiracy against Henry, remarks that 'by their hands this grace of kings must die'. The meaning here is something like 'ornament', 'source of excellence'.

- Then there is a theological application, where the word is used to mean 'the source of grace' – that is, God himself. The only two citations in the *OED* are both Shakespeare's. The orphan Helen swears by it: 'I will tell truth, by grace itself I swear' (*All's Well* 2.1.218). And so does Malcolm, concluding *Macbeth* with a nice double usage (5.2.38):

this and what needful else
 That calls upon us, by the grace of grace
 We will perform in measure, time, and place.

Of course, in all discussions of this kind we have to remember that the citations in a historical dictionary, such as the *OED*, are to be taken with a wee pinch of salt. The compilers of that dictionary did a wonderful job, but they were inevitably selective in the sources they used. Nobody has gone through *all* of the extant literature from the Early Modern English period to check whether a particular word was used by anyone else before Shakespeare used it. Any of the words I've been calling Williamisms might have had some currency in earlier Elizabethan English.

At the same time, even if an earlier usage were found, it wouldn't necessarily deny a creative Shakespearean role. It's perfectly possible for a new word to be invented more than once – sometimes more or less simultaneously, sometimes separated by years. Just because Thomas More used *unhoused* in the 1530s, and probably (given its technical usage) others too, makes it likely that Shakespeare had heard it before. But it's also a possibility that he didn't know it, and coined it independently.

That's the trouble with studying Shakespearean neologisms. You end up never being sure about anything. Sometimes you feel like Iago's description of Cassio, 'a finder of occasion, that has an eye can stamp and counterfeit advantages, though true advantage never present itself' (*Othello*, 2.1.242). But you discover some interesting things along the way. And you always feel you're encountering something new. As my old university teacher, Hilda Hulme, said, in her insightful book, *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language*: 'it is not easy to argue about Shakespeare's meaning without being excited by it'. Thumb-pricking stuff, indeed.