

Nick without froth

Shakespeare has a lot to thank Robins for. But, as David Crystal explains, Robins himself owes an important debt to the Jacobethan era – not least, his name.

Following in-depth etymological research, it is possible to demonstrate that a lexical usage which was emerging while Shakespeare was at the peak of his creative powers has manifested itself homonymously in the form of the editor of *Around the Globe*. Further research is needed to pursue the implications of this highly significant finding for lexicography, as indeed, for life in general.

Nobody knows where the word *nick* came from. Some say it is from the Old English words for ‘not I’ *ne ic*, which led to its earliest recorded meaning, ‘deny’. An appropriate anticipation of editorial practice, one must conclude. But by Elizabethan times, it was becoming a really fashionable word, both as a noun and a verb. Massinger, Fletcher, Marston, Middleton, and Jonson all used it, steadily extending its range of senses.

Nor was Shakespeare to be left out. He has it four times, in various senses, one of which is a first usage, a Williamism. When Enobarbus says of Antony, ‘The itch of his affection should not then / Have nicked his captainship’ (AC 3.13.8) this is the first use of the verb meaning – well, no-one is quite sure – ‘maim’? ‘do out of?’ ‘mark with foolishness’?

Shakespeare’s usage demonstrates the appropriateness of the verb for a Nick-named editor. Deadlines are plainly present in the ‘nick of time’ sense, seen when the Third Countryman says that the Gaoler’s daughter ‘Comes i’th’ nick’ (TNK 3.5.74). And word-counts are obviously there in the ‘reckoning’ sense, seen when the Host tells Julia, of Proteus and Silvia, ‘he loved her out of all nick’ (TG 4.2.73).

If more proof were needed: why else should the verb nickname be a Williamism? When the Princess says to the King, ‘You nickname virtue - “vice” you should have spoke’ (LLL 5.2.349), this is the first recorded use of the sense ‘invent names for’.

But I muse: what are we to make of other etymologies, in the nick-regions of the Oxford English Dictionary?

Nick, *n.*² The devil. Usually *Old Nick*. 1643.

nick-pot *n.* 1602. an innkeeper or tapster.

nick and froth *n.* c.1600 a fraudulent bottom in a beer-can, diminishing the quantity of liquor contained within it.

I must admit I have never seen any sign of fraudulence in the Editor’s ability to diminish liquor. And as for froth, no sign of that either, in *Around the Globe*. Maybe the theory needs some more work.