

Shakespeare's lively and precocious young children do not seem to be especially linguistically inventive. Despite their adult ways of talking, they don't go in for the kind of lexical creation I have been calling Williamisms – words whose first recorded usage is found in Shakespeare. The Boy in *Henry V* (3.2) has a 250-word speech with not a Williamism in sight. Mammilius? Nothing. Rutland? Nothing. Young Macduff, young Coriolanus? Nothing.

I was beginning to think that looking for child Williamisms was one of those pointless exercises, when Arthur saved the day. In *King John* (4.1), the young prince is faced with Hubert, who is threatening to put out his eyes. The urgency of his situation fosters eloquent pleas, and as part of his rhetoric we find three newly minted compounds:

Are you more stubborn-hard than hammered iron?
(4.1.67)

What need you be so boisterous-rough? (4.1.76)
Fierce fire and iron are said to be

Creatures of note for mercy-lacking uses. (4.1.120)
Arthur uses *boisterous* again a few lines later – as an adjective this time (it has the force of an adverb above – 'boisterously').

Then feeling what small things are boisterous there [i.e. in the eyes]

Your vile intent must needs seem horrible. (4.1.94)
Boisterous is a Williamism, in one of its senses, and also

a 'false friend' – a word whose familiarity fools us, because its meaning has changed. In modern English, it means 'exuberantly high-spirited', but this sense didn't

develop until a century after Shakespeare was writing. When we talk about children being boisterous today, we are more amused than upset. It has positive connotations now.

In Shakespeare's time, all the uses of the word were negative. Its meaning of 'violent, tempestuous, savage' was already in the language, but he is the first recorded user of it to mean 'painful, rough to the feelings', as when Arthur talks about his eyes. He had earlier used it in this way in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Romeo moans about Rosaline. Love for him is 'too rude, too boisterous, and it pricks like thorn' (RJ 1.4.26). And we see it again later in *As You Like It*, when Rosalind condemns Phoebe's love letter as being 'boisterous and cruel' (4.3.32).

In Shakespeare's time, all the uses of the word 'boisterous' were negative.

Shakespeare uses *boisterous* 17 times. For the most part, it is in its older senses in the context of war, rebellion, fighting, and weapons:

- Westmorland talks of 'the harsh and boisterous tongue of war' (*2H4* 4.1.49)

- the Duke talks about a 'stubborn and boisterous expedition' (*Oth* 1.3.225)

- Richard talks about a 'boisterous late appeal' between Bolingbroke and Mowbray (*R2* 1.1.4) and about 'boisterous untuned drums' (1.3.134)

- Orlando talks of 'a base and boisterous sword' (*AYL* 2.3.32)

- Henry IV talks of snatching honour 'with boisterous hand' (*2H4* 4.5.191)

- Rosencrantz talks of 'boisterous ruin' if a king falls (*Ham* 3.3.22)

- And Pandolph talks of sceptres being snatched and 'boisterously maintained' (*KJ* 3.4.136)

Inclement weather could be boisterous too – the opposite of 'calm'. In *Richard III*, a citizen talks about a 'boisterous storm' (2.3.44). And in *Timon of Athens*, Apemantus harangues Timon with 'the bleak air, thy boisterous chamberlain' (*Tim* 4.3.223). Waves and seas could also be boisterous, but Shakespeare doesn't use these collocations.

Animals could be boisterous, especially horses. Pirithous talks of the 'boisterous and rough jadery' of the horse that throws Arcite (*TNK* 5.4.72) and Adonis curses 'his boisterous and unruly beast' (*Venus* 326). It is always bad behaviour, where animals are concerned – violent, unchecked.

We feel the modern sense approaching when the word is applied directly to a person. Shakespeare does this only once, when Edward talks of 'boisterous Clifford', who has slain Rutland (*3H6* 2.1.70). But there is still some distance to go, for the meaning here remains totally negative – 'fiercely violent'. It was only during the 16th century that this negative force ameliorated, so that by around 1700 *boisterous* could be used along with such positive words as *humour* and *mirth*. It is just a short step from here to adults behaving boisterously, with unchecked exuberance, and another short step from there to boisterous children – which is where we came in.

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Young Arthur helps **David Crystal** find one of Shakespeare's false friends.

Being boisterous

