



What's in a Shakespearean name?  
A great deal, as **David Crystal**  
discovers in the first thorough study  
of the subject.

## Where Dull is dull, but Feeble is brave

Put yourself in Shakespeare's position. You are writing a play about dukes and lovers and fairies. What will you call your duke? What your lovers? What your fairies? Does it matter? Laurie Maguire answers with a resounding yes. 'Names matter', she says, 'and names are matter' – by which she means they are entities which can take on lives and voices of their own. So the fact that he chose to call his duke Theseus and one of the lovers Helen(a) is intriguing, when we bear in mind (as an Elizabethan audience would) the messages that these names conveyed.

In Elizabethan England, Maguire points out, the name *Helen* was as distinctive then as such names as *Adolf* or *Saddam* are today. Imagine writing a play in which one of your characters is called *Adolf*. The choice of the name cannot be ignored: it makes some sort of statement. For the Elizabethans, *Helen* had only one meaning: Helen of Troy; and its connotations would have been well understood – 'ravishing beauty', 'strumpet', 'disaster'... Moreover, to call your duke *Theseus* sets up another set of expectations – for in Plutarch's account Theseus, the great womanizer, rapes Helen. So what would an Elizabethan audience have made of a situation in which a Theseus and a Helen are brought together? And what are the dramatic implications today? How might our awareness of the cultural 'baggage' carried by names affect our understanding of the plays and the way we produce them? These are the sorts of issue Laurie Maguire explores in this fascinating book.

In one respect, what Maguire is telling us is not new. It is self-evident that our expectations are being shaped when we encounter a constable called *Dull*, and a wide range of characters have names which clearly are meant to tell us something – *Fang*, *Fidele*, *Perdita*, *Pistol*... Indeed, often the characters themselves comment on the appropriateness of their names (as when Celia and Rosalind choose their new disguise names), or jokes are made at their expense (Falstaff tells Pistol to 'discharge'). But such observations have generally been made as isolated points, and what Maguire has done in this book is show how our reactions to individual names can be integrated into a general onomastic account.

There is no simple determinism. The naming behaviour we encounter in the plays is complex indeed. Maguire demonstrates clearly how Shakespeare avoids 'onomastic predestination'. Characters struggle with their onomastic inheritance, 'trying through deeds to thwart or merit the associations of their label'. Francis Feeble is actually the brave one. Silence is actually quite garrulous (when drunk).

Maguire's approach forces us to look afresh at names that are not so obviously meaningful. Her book is a series of case studies. *Helen* is discussed in a chapter on mythological names. *Kate* is the subject of a chapter on diminutive names. Patronyms are the focus of a chapter on Montagues and Capulets. And place-names (we are not talking only of people in this book) are discussed in a chapter on Ephesus.

What is the issue about Ephesus? The motivation here is to explain why Shakespeare changed his source from Epidamnus to Ephesus. Maguire points out that Ephesus had a tradition of non-submissive women (St Paul directs his letter on wifely submission to those at Ephesus) and a reputation for duplicity. It is an ideal place to set a play about confusions between pairs of twins, she argues. And the duplicity, interestingly, she shows to extend well beyond the Antipholuses and Dromios.

The book is endlessly informative. Is *Angelo* an apt name for a goldsmith? Yes, because *angels* were gold coins. Is there anything interesting about the fencer who impressed Claudius? Yes, he is called *Lamord*, 'the death'.

And Laertes makes an antonymic pun: 'Upon my life, Lamord'.

Maguire also turns the argument on its head. If names convey identities, then the more names a character has, the more unknowable that character becomes – a proposition she explores

with reference to the several names attributed to *Katherine/Kate/shrew*... And if a change of name conveys a new identity, what are we to make of a situation where someone's name is changed but they continue to be referred to by the old one – as with the Bastard (aka Sir Richard Plantagenet) in *King John*?

The case-study approach allows us to focus in real detail on a few plays, and that is its strength. The downside, of course, is that several plays (and character names) get no mention at all. (It would have been helpful to have a separate index of names.) But I found that the increased onomastic awareness that comes from reading this book is something I immediately began to apply to other contexts. You look on names in a new light – and not just in Shakespeare.

*Shakespeare's Names*, Maguire says, is 'primarily a book for language lovers'. I think that sells it short. The language element is its motivation, its rhetoric, its structure. But its end is not a linguistic investigation – at least, not in my sense. If I had ever dared to write a book with this title, it would have been full of things that Maguire doesn't mention at all or only in passing, such as the complex syntax of proper vs common nouns, or their original pronunciations in relation to metrical structure; and the terminology would have been somewhat different (the term *aptonym* (or *apronym*) gets no mention, for example). But that was the joy of it for me. It made me think outside my little box. Her detailed account of performances – a bilingual production of *Romeo and Juliet*, an unusual production of *Shrew*, the alternative ways to play various scenes in *Comedy* – are hugely illuminating. This is a book as much for theatre lovers as for linguists. And anyone who tries to be both will be delighted that she has written it.

*Shakespeare's Names*, by Laurie Maguire, is published by Oxford University Press, price £24.99

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