



# Our English Dead

In the sixth of a series of articles on words invented by Shakespeare, David Crystal examines some of the less robust of these *Williamisms*.

It isn't just artists and poets who become noticed after they are dead. Williamisms do too. Take this speech by Rosencrantz (*Hamlet* III.iii.21), where he unwinds a metaphor about the need to keep the king safe.

Majesty, he asserts, is like a huge wheel,

To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things  
Are mortised and adjoined, which when it falls  
Each small annexment, petty consequence,  
Attends the boist'rous ruin.

Every word is alive and well today – bar one. So, for the Williamist, the interesting question is: how should we react to annexment (RIP)? Is it another bold imaginative use, full of dramatic force that is now lost? Or something else?

To see what was going on, here's a modern example. In the 1920s, a new verb came into the language – to outplace, meaning 'displace' or 'oust'. By the 1970s it had developed another sense – to find new employment for workers who had been dismissed.

And before too long, people started talking about the state of affairs which results from this action. 'You have been outplaced? Then you are in a situation of -'. A noun was needed. And eventually *-ment* was added to do the job. The usage stuck: in the 1990s we even have an 'outplacement industry'.

It might not have been *-ment*. In modern English, several suffixes are available to make nouns from verbs. The new word might have been *outplaceage*, *outplaceal*, or *outplacement*, for instance. But *outplacement* won, because we were all already comfortable with *placement*, which has been in the language for over 150 years. This is a common pattern in the history of vocabulary. We have a verb, to express an action. We need a noun to name the state of affairs involved. We choose a suffix to do the job. Usually, one suffix stands out, perhaps because it's more frequent than the others, or is already being used in similar words. It isn't often that we are in two minds about which suffix to use.

But at the time when Shakespeare was writing, people were often in two minds. During the 16th century, tens of thousands of new words came into the language, many having to do with the Renaissance need to talk about states of affairs, processes, and results. There were several suffixes available then, as now, but they were in real competition with each other. You can sometimes see the competition in the texts.

Look at what happened to *annex* (borrowed from French c.1425). The Rosencrantz speech was written in 1600, or soon afterwards. But in *A Lover's Complaint* (208), also written around that time, it is *annexion* ('With the annexions of fair gems enrich'd'). In the *OED*, Shakespeare is the earliest record, for both usages. Annexation was also in the air, though it isn't recorded until 1611.

You can see the value of *annexment*. *Annexion* would have been a poor candidate for the Rosencrantz line, because it didn't fit the metre. But either word could have become the eventual standard usage. In fact, of course, *annexation* won. The *OED* gives us only one other record of *annexment*, by Coleridge. This is one of those Williamisms that never survived.

There are lots of other examples. 'My condolences', we say now. But the forms available in the first years of the 17th century were *condolement*, *condoleance*, and *condoling*, as well as *condolence*, all from *condole*, which had come into English about a century before. In fact, Shakespeare uses *condolement* only, as when Claudius says: 'But to persever/In obstinate condolement is a course/Of impious stubbornness' (I.ii.92). This *Hamlet* usage is a Williamism – or perhaps I should say a half-Williamism, as John Marston is credited by the *OED* as also using the word in the same year, 1602. (Of course, if you date *Hamlet* earlier, then you can get rid of the 'half!')

So, when we talk about Shakespeare's new words, we should note that they are not always brilliant or poetic or dramatic coinages. Neologisms such as *annexment* or *condolement* – and also *fleshment* (*Lear*, II.ii.120), *excitement* (*Hamlet*, Quarto, IV.iv.49), *insultment* (*Cymbeline*, III.v.140), and many more – are of a rather different calibre from most of the ones we have been discussing so far in this series. 'Unsex me here' and 'en jail my tongue' have a considerable dramatic impact. *Annexment* and *condolement* haven't. They are just 'ordinary' usages, with no particular effect. If Shakespeare is the first attested user, this is just a fluke – it could have been anyone writing at the time.

But knowing they are 'ordinary' doesn't make them worthless. On the contrary, they help to provide a linguistic mood, or flavour, in a speech or scene. And they also provide a setting within which we can see linguistic jewels shine more brightly. The dynamic words in Claudius's speech are the adjectives, not the nouns – 'filial obligation... obsequious sorrow... obstinate condolement... impious stubbornness... unmanly grief'. And Rosencrantz's *annexment* takes its place in a speech full of legalistic jargon – a candidate, if ever there was one, for an Elizabethan Golden Bull Award.

*Annexment, condolement, insultment...?* Dead, then. But not forgotten.