O,
but one word

In the ninth of a series of articles on words invented by Shakespeare, David Crystal finds Williamisms in some unpromising places.
Take a word. Any word.

Take word.
What can you do with a word like word, if you want to be linguistically creative? Three sounds, four letters.
Not very promising Shakespearean material, you might say, but Malvolio's name will become so famous as to be proverbial.

Why is may-word irritating? The problem is that although the meanings are clear enough, the etymology isn't. The Oxford English Dictionary says glumly: "Of obscure formation: there is no obvious connection with either may or ay'. I never in my life did hear a challenge urged more modestly. Let's think more precisely on't.

The word may well have been may-word to begin with. The Twelfth Night example is actually spelled that way in the First Folio. And it's not difficult to see how people would vacillate between an may-word and a may-word.

There are in fact several instances in English where the boundary between the indefinite article and the noun has moved in this way: what we these days call an adder was originally a nadder. The initial n-jumped ship in the early Middle Ages.

I can easily imagine may-word developing directly out of the situation in which watchwords are used. Imagine two people meet in secret, and one uses a special word to ask, in effect, "Is that you?". Having heard the watchword, you whisper back 'ay'. It's not difficult to see how a concept of 'yes-word' might have developed, to explain the first meaning. Might this have been what Shakespeare had in mind when he coined it?

The second meaning demands an alternative explanation. How's about this: If Malvolio's name becomes so famous, it will be used on all occasions when people want to talk about foolish people. All occasions, note. Now, 'always' in Middle English was more commonly expressed by the word aye or ay.

It turns up several times in Shakespeare too: 'for aye thy foot-licker', says Caliban to Stefano (The Tempest, IV.i.199). There is evidence of ay being used in compounds, in the 16th century, such as eyeforth and ey-liiving; and Shakespeare uses eyere-maining in Pericles (Scene 11.61). So, could may-word be 'always-word'?

Maybe.

One word more, before you go. My title is from The Tempest (II.i.301). It reminds me that armchair etymological ruminations can be such stuff as dreams are made on. It would indeed be good to have some other textual evidence for these suggestions. But it's a temptation I never could resist, to speculate about etymology. And it's an honest fault. Bear with my weakness. Be not disturbed with my infirmity. A turn or two I'll walk to still my beating mind.

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