Remember thy friends

David Crystal
God keep me from false friends' (Richard III, 3.1.135).
If only Prince Edward's wish could come true in language study, everything would be so much easier.
But it cannot. One of the biggest dangers any language learner has to guard against is the insidious 'false friend' - the word that welcomes you into the language, all charm and delight, making you think you know it well, then drops you in the soup, when you realise you have just totally misunderstood what someone has just said, or said something yourself that you never meant to. It's the same with Elizabethan English. The most dangerous words in Shakespeare are the ones which fool you into thinking you know them already.
And then you find you don't.
Some of these false friends turn out to be Williamisms - words whose first recorded use (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) are Shakespeare's. I discussed a couple in my last article, and here are a few more.

Humorous is a nice example. Today the word means 'disposed to humour - funny, comical, droll', but it did not take on that meaning until the end of the 17th century. If you don't know this, of course, there is a real risk that you completely misinterpret a line. 'I am known to be a humorous patrician', says Menenius (Coriolanus 2.1.46). There is no intent on his part to enter into competition with Feste. Humorous here means 'capricious, moody, temperamental', and in this sense it is a Williamism. Its first recorded usage is actually 15 years before Coriolanus, in Love's Labour's Lost (3.1.170), when Berowne bemoans his fate in falling in love, after previously being so much against it - 'A very beadle to a humorous sigh'.

Of course, sometimes the context is so clear-cut that it would be most unlikely for anyone to be fooled by the old sense. In As You Like It, the courtier Le Beau warns Orlando to watch his back. Duke Frederick has taken against him, and the advice is to leave the court as soon as possible.

Yet such is now the Duke's condition
That he misconisters all that you have done. And Le Beau adds: 'The Duke is humorous' (1.2.256). The negative tone of the preceding remarks makes it obvious that humorous here couldn't possibly mean 'jocular'. And when Jaques, later on, affirms to Rosalind that 'my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness' (4.1.18), we are saved from the misleading sense both by the word sadness and also by what we already know of Jaques' melancholy character.

David Crystal OBE is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. His books include The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language and Language and the Internet.