

Remember thy friends

David Crystal



'God keep me from false friends' (*Richard III*, 3.1.15). 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 misconsters 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. God save us from false friends, indeed, as Prince Edward affirmed, 'but' – in situations like this, thanks to the context – 'they are none'.

There is another old sense of *humorous*, by the way, and this too is a *Williamism*. It is illustrated by another love-sick individual, Romeo, described by Benvolio as hiding among the trees 'To be consorted with the humorous night' (2.1.31). This too poses little problem. Nights patently don't have a sense of humour, so the word must mean something else. Here it reflects the

original sense of 'humour', and means 'moist, humid, damp'. The same sense turns up in *Henry IV Part 2* (4.3.34), where Henry IV describes Prince Hal as being 'as humorous as winter'.

Revolting is a more serious problem, because all of its four instances in the plays permit the modern sense, and context doesn't help much. The word means 'insurgent, rebellious – someone or something that rebels'. The modern sense of 'repulsive' doesn't emerge in English until around 1800. So bear that in mind when you hear King Richard talk about his 'revolting land' (*Richard II*, 3.3.162), Pandulph describe King John as a 'revolting son' of the Church (*King John* 3.1.183), Bedford refer to the 'revolting stars' (*Henry VI Part 1*, 1.1.4), and the Captain castigate the 'false revolting Normans' (*Henry VI Part 2*, 4.1.87).

The same danger applies to *distracted*, another *Williamism*. These days it usually means having your attention pulled away from where you wanted it to be – a sense which was around in Shakespeare's day. But the usual sense of the word at that time is not this at all. In fact there are two distinct senses, both of which are first recorded in Shakespeare. In one sense, it has the meaning 'crazy, mad, insane'. Adriana bemoans her 'poor distracted husband' (*Comedy of Errors*, 5.1.39). In the other, the word means 'very confused, troubled'. When Troilus accepts Ulysses' offer to take him to the gates, after seeing Cressida fall for Diomedes, he says 'Accept distracted thanks' (*Troilus and Cressida*, 5.2.191). He isn't saying he's feeling mildly inattentive. Nor is Rosencrantz, when he reports to Claudius that Hamlet 'does confess he feels himself *distracted*' (*Hamlet*, 3.1.5). These are people who are seriously troubled in mind. Hamlet himself applies the sense to the whole world when he talks about 'this distracted globe' (1.5.97).

Here's one for our American readers. *Diaper* came in early into English from French, meaning a textile fabric; but in the sense of a towel or napkin, the first use is Shakespeare's in *The Taming of the Shrew* (Induction 1.1.55), when the Lord is instructing his servants how to deal with Christopher Sly: one of them should bring him a silver basin, 'Another bear the ewer, the third a diaper'. There is no suggestion that we are talking about bottoms here, notwithstanding Sly's inebriated state. (British readers may feel reassured to know that there is, to my certain knowledge, no use of nappy in Shakespeare – though they will have to get used to napkin in the sense of 'handkerchief', as in *Othello*.)

And one for the road. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon talks about the lovers being affected by sleep 'with leaden legs and batty wings' (3.2.366). Another *Williamism*, and it means 'bat-like'. Not even fairies would want to suggest that sleep is somehow 'dotty'. That slang sense would indeed appear in English, but not until 400 years later – a 20th-century false friend.

Illustration Belle Mellor

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*.