Shakespeare makes subtle use of one common suffix, as his wordship David Crystal explains.

It was fossip that first caught my attention. A brilliant coinage, used by Volumnia in Corioliuus (4.2.18) as part of her put-down of Siciuus:

Was not a man my father? Hadst thou foxship
To banish him that struck more blows for Rome
Than thou hast spoken words?

She is accusing him of low cunning, slyness – the supposed qualities of a fox. And it is the suffix -ship that does it. We are familiar with lordship, kingship, craftsmanship, and many other words which express the state or quality of something, but the suffix is usually attached to humans or human behaviour, or notions which affect humans, such as hardship. We don’t say dogship or catsip, unless we are giving someone a mock title. Fossip is a subtler usage.

Fossip happens to be a Williamism, a word whose first use is Shakespearean according to the records of the Oxford English Dictionary. We can be pretty sure that it was a genuine Shakespearean coinage, because – leaving aside its dramatic effectiveness as an insult – it doesn’t appear again in OED records until 250 years later, in mid-Victorian England. And it made me wonder: are there any other -ship Williamisms of comparable effect?

Shakespeare uses the -ship suffix on 26 different words, and just 8 of them are Williamisms. Let’s look at the non-Williamisms first. If we grade them in terms of frequency, (the number of instances are shown in parentheses) we would have to start with the titles, lordship/lordships (186), worship/worships (115), and ladyship/ladyships (45), followed by friendship/friendships (52), fellowship/fellowships (20), soldiership (9), and courtship (8). Then we would encounter a cluster of forms that are used just two or three times:
I saw eight -ships...

captainship (2), companionship (2), horsemanship (3),
mastership/masterships (4), Protectorship (3 times in 2 Henry VI), stewardship (2, both in Richard II), and workmanship (3, with two of them in Venus and Adonis).

That would leave a handful of forms that are used just once each: attorneyship, bachelorship, consultship, countship, fowship, hostess-ship, hostership (a malapropism for mistresseship, used by the Clown in Titus Andronicus), Moorship, rectorship, regentship, spectatorship, and township.

In passing, it might be worth pointing out that, of all the -ship words, just over a third of them occur in Coriolanus: ladyship, fellowship, worship, consulship (and consuls), companionship, mastership, rectorship, spectatorship - and, of course, fowship. (Whether this novel observation adds any fresh insight into the play I leave it for others to determine.)

So how many -ship usages are Williamisms? Just eight, if we exclude mistership as a malapropism: attorneyship, bachelorship, countship, fowship, hostership, Moorship, rectorship, spectatorship. Hostership is actually not listed in the OED. It is used by Perdita when she takes on the hostership of the day (The Winter's Tale, 4.4.72).

Only one of these words, countship, has since become a frequently used word in the language. But countship is a very special case, because no less than four of its senses are Williamisms:

courtliness of manners
‘Trim gallants, full of courtship and of state’ (Love's Labour's Lost, 5.2.263)
the state befitting a court or a courtier
‘More honourable state, more courtship’ (Roméo and Juliet, 3.3.34)
the paying of acts of courtesy to a dignitary
‘Ourself and Busby
Observed his courtship to the common people’ (Richard II, 1.4.23)
paying court to a woman
‘Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts
To courtship’ (The Merchant of Venice, 2.8.43)

It is unusual to see Shakespeare employing a word in so many different ways so soon after using it for the first time.

So, do any of these Williamisms rival fowship for its semantic pointedness? Just one, it seems to me. It occurs when Iago bitterly reflects on the way Othello has promoted Cassio:

‘He in good time must his Lieutenant be
And I - God bless the mark! - his Moorship's Ancient.’
(Ohello, 1.1.32)

This is the derogatory use of -ship, often employed in a gently mocking or humorous way, but here used with a real biting edge. It is a unique use of the suffix in Shakespeare, and, by that token, especially memorable.

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