

Shakespeare's characters express some familiar ideas about Englishness, as **David Crystal** discovers.

# To be Englished rightly

Earlier this year, at Shakespeare's birthday time, I was asked to contribute to a Radio 3 programme about Shakespeare and Englishness – an appropriate topic. I thought, for a day on which the recognition of a patron saint and a patron poet coincide. I was not expecting to encounter any Williamisms – first recorded uses of a word by Shakespeare – in my ruminations on the subject. But, as it turned out, I was wrong.

Shakespeare explicitly talks about England or the English just over 500 times in the plays – 506 times, to be exact. It's one of his main themes. He uses the word *England* 323 times and *English* – meaning both the people and the language – 165 times. We have *Englishman* 18 times and *Englishwoman* just once, in *Henry V*, when Henry uses it in his wooing scene to describe Princess Katherine.

As we might expect, the vast majority – 85 percent, in fact – appear in the history plays, in contexts to do with battle and glory and nationhood. Over a hundred appear in *Henry V* alone. This is all rather predictable. But if we're interested in Shakespeare's presentation of Englishness, the historical domain provides only part of the picture. I find the minority allusions rather more interesting. What are English people really like, according to some of his characters?

Well, for a start, they are all good drinkers. This is what Iago has to say about it, as he persuades Cassio to get drunk, in Act 2 Scene 3 of *Othello*. He has just led the company in a rousing drinking song.

Cassio: 'Fore God, an excellent song.

Iago: I learned it in England, where indeed they are most potent in potting. Your Dane, your German, and your swag-bellied Hollander – drink, ho! – are nothing to your English.

Cassio: Is your Englishman so expert in his drinking?

Iago: Why, he drinks you with facility your Dane dead drunk; he sweats not to overthrow your Almaine; he gives your Hollander a vomit, ere the next pottle can be filled.

Your swag-bellied Hollander – there's a Williamism. The adjective means 'pendulous bellied, someone with a hanging paunch'.

So the English are good drinkers. They are also reserved, hopeless at languages, and have no clothes sense. In *The*

*Merchant of Venice*, Nerissa asks Portia what she thinks of Falconbridge, the young baron of England.

Portia: You know I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him. He hath neither Latin, French, nor Italian, and you will come into the court and swear that I have a poor pennyworth in the English. He is a proper man's picture, but, alas, who can converse with a dumb show? How oddly he is suited! I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his bonnet in Germany, and his behaviour everywhere.

The English hopeless at foreign languages? Nothing much changed there, then.

A fair number of the English must also be thieves, at least according to the Porter in *Macbeth*:

Knock, knock, knock! Who's there? Faith, here's an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose. Come in, tailor; here you may roast your goose.

And, as if this was not enough, the English are all mad too. 'Why was he sent into England?' asks Hamlet about Hamlet in *Hamlet*. And the First Clown replies:

Why, because 'a was mad. 'A shall recover his wits there. Or, if 'a do not, 'tis no great matter there.

Hamlet: Why?

First Clown: 'Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are as mad as he.

But my favourite allusion to Englishness in Shakespeare is nothing to do with the supposed English character. It is a linguistic point. One of Shakespeare's most important stylistic traits is the way he takes a noun and uses it as a verb. 'Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle!' says York to Bolingbroke in *Richard II* – here both 'grace' and 'uncle' are being used as verbs as well as nouns.

Just once, in the entire canon, Shakespeare uses 'English' as a verb. Or at least, Sir John Falstaff does. Here he is in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1.3.39):

Briefly, I do mean to make love to Ford's wife. I spy entertainment in her. She discourses, she carves, she gives the leer of invitation. I can construe the action of her familiar style; and the hardest voice of her behaviour – to be Englished rightly – is 'I am Sir John Falstaff's'.

'To be Englished rightly.' This is the first recorded use of this word in this sense as a verb in English, so it counts as a Williamism.



Some passages illustrate coinages repeatedly, almost as if he was in a particularly word-creating mood that day. A good example is this speech of Mowbray's, from *Richard II*, in which he reflects on what will happen to his English language once he is banished.

The language I have learnt these forty years,  
My native English, now I must forgo,  
And now my tongue's use is to me no more  
Than an unstringèd viol or a harp...  
Within my mouth you have engaolèd my tongue,  
Doubly portcullisèd with my teeth and lips,  
And dull unfeeling barren ignorance  
Is made my gaoler to attend on me...  
What is thy sentence then but speechless death,  
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?

The whole speech is a highly crafted, poetic piece, with image flowing into image as Mowbray struggles to express his desperation. But what is especially interesting, I think,

is that there are so many neologistic usages in it. Two new verbs, for a start: *engaolèd* and *portcullisèd*, both highly striking images. There are less obvious neologisms too. *Unstringèd* is one, and believe it or not, so is *speechless*, in the way it is used here. Then there's *unfeeling* (meaning 'unsympathetic'), and *barren* (meaning 'unresponsive'). There is perhaps an irony that someone about to be banished should be so inventive in his use of the language.

That one short passage yields half a dozen Williamisms. It's an extraordinary achievement, to have invented so many words and senses that shaped the character of the language. Most of us would be delighted if we had managed to invent just one.

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