

One meaning well suited

There are Williamisms lurking in Shakespeare's synonyms, as **David Crystal** reveals.

Synonyms are words which have the same meaning – which raises a question: why on earth should a language ever allow this to happen? What is the point of having more than one word to talk about the same thing? It would seem to be a total waste of resources.

In fact, when we look at synonyms closely, we find that they are always slightly different. *Bonnet* and *hood* (of a car) mean the same thing, but one is British and the other is American. The adjectives *kingly*, *royal*, and *regal* mean the same thing, but the first is Anglo-Saxon, the second is French, and the third is Latin, and each has a different stylistic tone. They have also come to be used in different ways in the language. We talk about the *Royal Mail*, not the *Kingly Mail* or the *Regal Mail*. And we do not talk about the *Regal Shakespeare Company*, unless we are making some sort of (not entirely complimentary) point.

Shakespeare uses all three. *Royal* is his normal usage, turning up over 230 times. *Regal* is used just 13 times, always in relation to the formal status of being a monarch: it goes with *throne*, *seat*, *title*, *crown(et)*, *jurisdiction*, *dignity*, and *thoughts*. *Kingly* is a bit more frequent (28 instances), and has a wider range of uses. *Thrones* can be *kingly* too, but so also can *hands*, *eyes*, *heads*, and *ears*, as well as more abstract notions such as *woe*, *doom*, and *thanks*.

There are Williamisms to be found here – first recorded uses in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. When York says 'More kingly in my thoughts' (*Henry VI Part 2*, 5.1.29) it is the first time we see this word being used in the sense of 'having the attributes of a king', 'majestic'. *Royal* has some first uses too. Although the adjective had been around since the 14th century, Shakespeare is apparently the first to apply it to parts of the body: 'Deliver this paper into the royal hand of the king', says Holofernes (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 4.2.139). Shakespeare is also the first to apply it to military contexts in the sense of 'pertaining to the monarch' – 'royal fleet' appears in *Henry VI Part 3* (3.3.253).

When it comes to poetry, there's another reason for having synonyms. If they have a different phonetic structure, they can be used in different poetic ways. You can imagine the different alliterative possibilities in using *kingly* vs *royal*, for instance. And when the words contain different numbers of syllables, the rhythmical differences can be exploited to make up regular poetic lines. It's a huge help to any poet working within a conventional metrical system, such as the iambic pentameter, to have synonyms of different lengths to draw upon.

There are several pairs of synonymous adjectives in the plays and poems which allow that kind of contrast, such

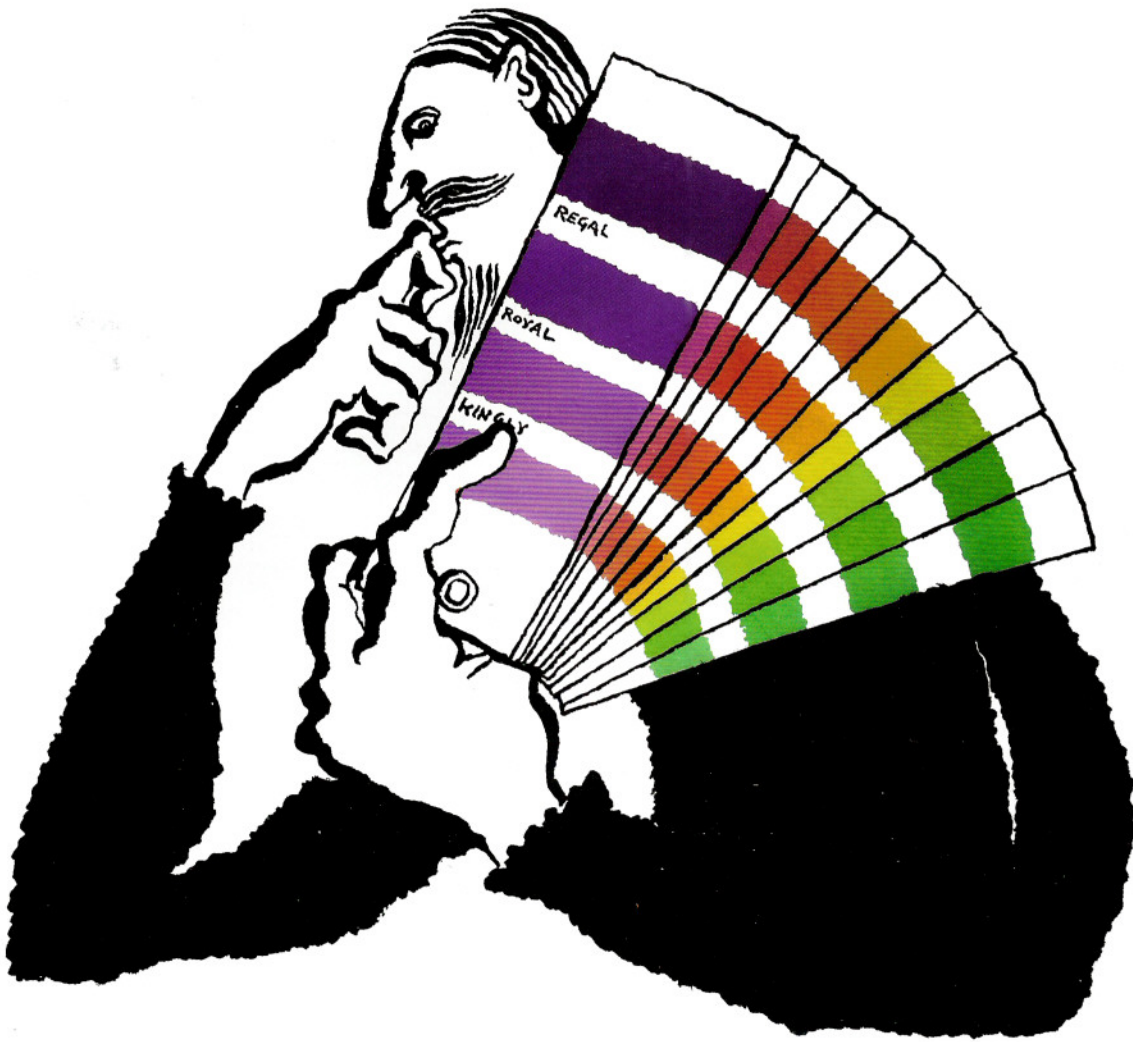


Illustration Belle Mellor

as *beauteous* vs *beautiful*, *wondrous* vs *wonderful*, *kind* and *kindly*, *dread* and *dreadful*, *main* and *major*, *cool* and *cooling*, *gold* and *golden*. The Sonnets show some nice rhythmical contrasts between the last two, for instance:

And often is his gold complexion dimmed (18.6)
As those gold candles fixed in heaven's air (21.12)
vs

Despite of wrinkles this thy golden time (3.12)
Kissing with golden face the meadows green (33.3)

And what if the language does not provide you with an alternative? Why then, you make one up! Shakespeare coins *vasty*, instead of using the already existing *vast*, when Glendower says 'I can call spirits from the vasty deep' (*Henry IV Part 1*, 3.1.50), and there we see the value of that little -y ending in making the line work metrically.

Several other Williamisms are hidden in these synonyms. Achilles uses one when he says: 'My major vow lies here' (*Troilus and Cressida*, 5.1.41). And *cool* and *cooling* make an interesting pair. The first known use of the literal 'temperature' sense of *cooling* is when Tamora talks of a 'cooling wind' (*Titus Andronicus*, 2.3.14). And the first instances of the figurative sense of cool are when King Henry talks of 'the cool and temperate wind of grace' (*Henry V*, 3.3.30), Gertrude talks of 'cool patience' (*Hamlet*,

3.4.125), and Theseus talks of 'cool reason' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.6). Shakespeare also seems to be the first to link 'cool' with 'blood', when Lucius says: 'We should not, when the blood was cool, have threatened our prisoners with the sword' (*Cymbeline*, 5.5.77). Today the idiom has become 'in cold blood', of course.

This figurative usage would evolve into the modern sense beloved of jazz enthusiasts and virtually every contemporary teenager in recent years. I wonder how many of them realize, when they describe something as 'cool', that Shakespeare was there first?

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