

Prefixes are so common and 'ordinary' that we tend not to notice them until someone uses one in an odd way. 'We'll have to re-tyre the car', I heard the other day, which led to a joke about 'retiring'. In fact their ordinariness hides considerable subtlety in meaning and use, and offers many opportunities for authors to coin new words. I could do it now. If I stood in the Globe yard to the point of hospitalized exhaustion, the diagnosis might be one of *overglobing*, or possibly *overyarding*. I confidently assert that no-one has ever used those words before in English (and probably never will again, for is it possible in truth to overglobe? I think not).

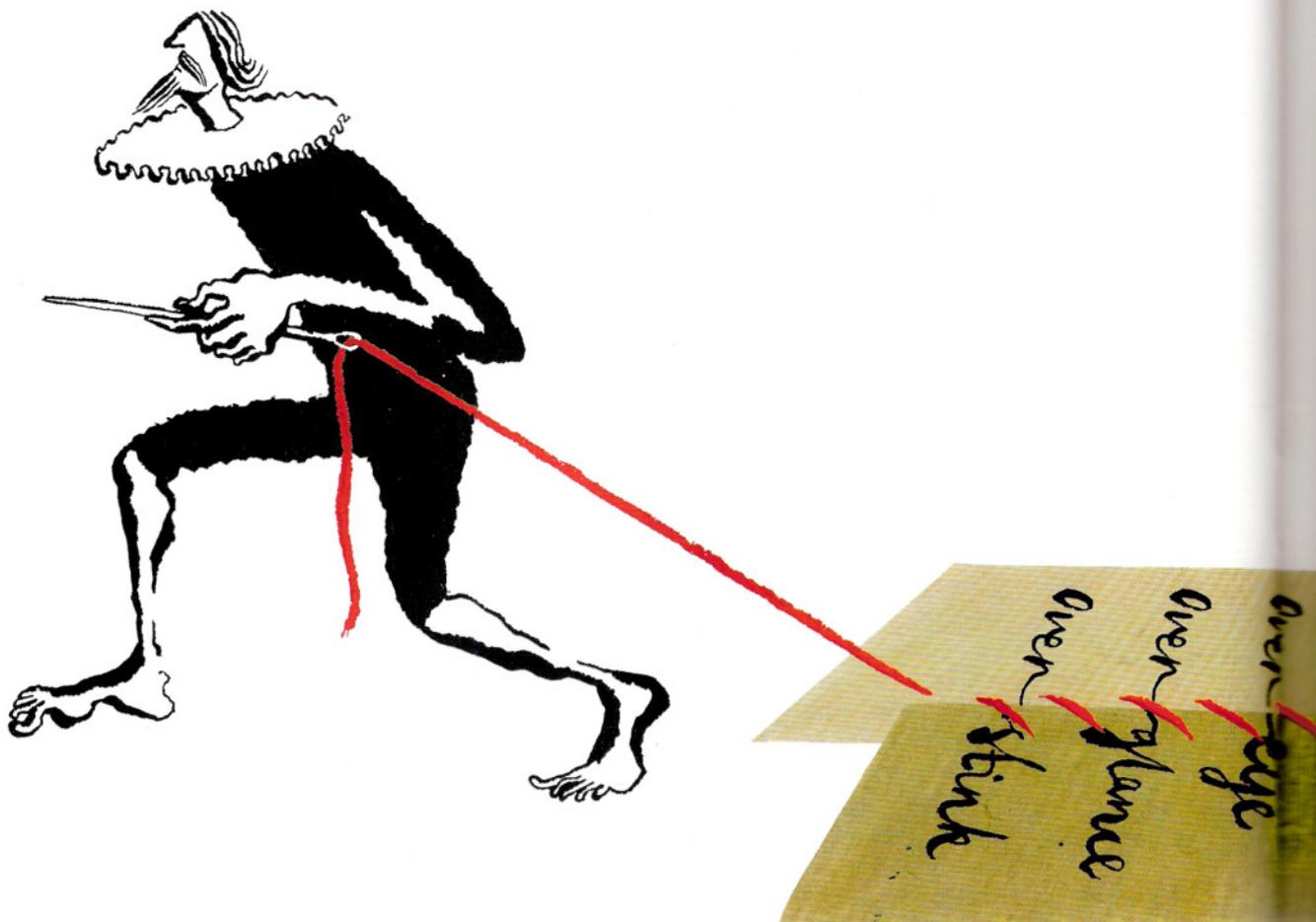
What first recorded uses of *over* (often appearing as *o'er*) do we find in Shakespeare? One cluster has the meaning of 'excessively, to an unwanted degree', preceding an adjective or verb. Many of these coinages have since entered the language (often written with hyphens), such as *overcool*, *overcredulous*, *overkind*, *overpay*, *overripen*, and *overrate*. A few have been replaced by a modern expression, such as *overhold*, meaning 'over-value': 'if he overhold his price so much,' says Agamemnon of Achilles, 'We'll none of him' (*Troilus and Cressida*, 2.3.132). And there are three instances which are rather more daring.

In a striking image during the 'beggars all description' speech, Cleopatra is described as 'o'erpicturing' Venus (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2.205) – 'surpassing, excelling'. There is an unusual usage when Costard describes Nathaniel, who has taken the role of Alexander in the 'Nine Worthies' scene, as being 'a little o'erparted' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.581) – in other words, 'taken on too difficult a part'. What is unusual is that the prefix is here being used with a word which is normally a noun. And it is this usage which, it seems to me, reinforces the argument that the First Folio 'o'er-office' is a legitimate verb in *Hamlet* (5.1.78), meaning 'lord it over':

This might be the pate of a politician which this ass now o'er-offices.

It is often replaced in editions by Q2's (much more boring) 'o'er-reaches'.

The other main sense of *over-* is to express the spatial notion of 'from above' or 'covering', as seen in *overhang*, *overgrowth*, and the noun use of *overview* (all Williamisms). Most of these coinages actually haven't entered the language, having been replaced by later constructions where *over* comes after the verb – for instance, *overglance* has been replaced by *glance over*, and *over-dyed* by *dyed over*.



As a result, the older forms have a greater dramatic impact when we encounter them, as with *overcanopy* (= 'form a canopy over'), *overeye* ('cast an eye over'), and quite a few 'covered with' verbs – *overgreen* ('o'er-green my bad' in *Sonnet* 112.4), *overred* ('Go prick thy face and over-red thy fear', *Macbeth*, 5.3.14), *oversnow*, *overstain*, *overveil*, and others.

Yet another sense of *over-* is to express an intensive meaning of 'completely, utterly', as in modern *overjoyed*. Less common in Shakespeare, we see it vividly used when Ulysses fears that Achilles' pride might 'overbulk us all' (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.320) – 'swell up so greatly as to suppress us'. It is also there in *overname* ('name in succession'), *overweathered* ('damaged by exposure to the weather'), and *overpowered*.

I have two favourite *over-* usages. One is *overstink*: 'the foul lake / O'erstunk their feet', says Ariel to Prospero (*The Tempest*, 4.1.184) – that is, 'stank so much that the stench drowned the smell of their feet'. And the other may not be a prefixal usage at all. At the beginning of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1.1.25), Valentine tells Proteus 'you are over-boots in love'. It means literally 'in over your boots', that is, 'following a reckless course'. It is hyphenated

in this way in the Oxford and Penguin editions, following the First Folio, but not in Arden, where *over* appears as a preposition (*over boots*). I think it has to be a prefix, given the contrast with *over-shoes* in the previous line ('more than over-shoes in love', says Proteus). *Over-shoes* is recorded in English from 1579. *Over-boots* has no separate entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*; but it feels like a Shakespearean piece of wordplay.

I have given over. I will speak no more. Except to say that, for someone who explored the heights and depths of *over-*, there is surprisingly little by way of Shakespearean first recorded usage for *under-*. I found 36 cases of novel *over-* usage, and only eight of *under-*: *underhonest*, *undercrest*, *underpeep*, *underprize*, *undervalue*, and the three ranks *under-fiend*, *under-hangman*, and *under-skinker*. I can't think why. *Under* is used much more frequently in English than *over* (over 30 percent more often, in the British National Corpus). I would have expected it to be the other way round.

Enough, with over measure.

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Shakespeare's genius with the humble prefix can be pretty overpowering, says **David Crystal**.

# Over-read it at your pleasure

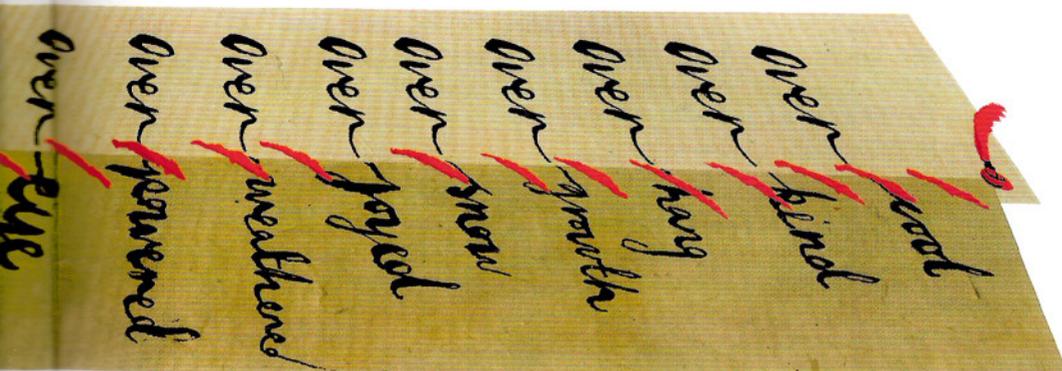


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