"A man of fire-new words"

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Shakespeare and the creation of new English words

Shakespeare is widely acknowledged and admired for his creativity with language, and noted for contributing new words and idioms to the English language (type into Google "words invented by Shakespeare" and any number of lists appear). However, exactly which words and idioms can truly be said to have been originated by Shakespeare is a topic of longstanding and often spirited debate.

The main sources of information on the first use of a particular word are dictionaries providing citations of early uses, notably the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). However, the lexicographers who compile dictionaries have finite resources and cannot possibly read every document still in existence from earlier historical periods, and there may also have been earlier sources which are now lost to history, or as yet undiscovered. More and more texts from the late 16th and early 17th centuries (when Shakespeare was writing), and from earlier dates, have been converted to digital, electronically-searchable formats in recent years, for example in the Literature Online (LION) and Early English Books Online (EEBO) databases. From these,

we now know that some of the words which the OED cites as first used in Shakespeare's work are actually found in texts from earlier dates, in works by other writers. The number of words and idioms believed to have been coined by Shakespeare (if we take 'coined' in the widest possible sense, to include all manner of word-formation methods and the use of existing words in a new sense), is therefore likely to be reduced over time, as new evidence comes to light.

Nevertheless, scholars who have analysed Shakespeare's language using large electronic collections (or 'corpora') of his work generally agree that while his creativity certainly includes the addition of new words and idioms, a great deal more of his genius lies in the way that he used words, for example by pushing and extending meaning boundaries, including via analogy or metaphors.

Alongside arguments over the number of new words and idioms coined by Shakespeare are claims about the exceptional size of his vocabulary, relative to his peers and/or to present-day English speakers. Here, again, advances in computer technology have enabled scholars working in computational linguistics to measure and compare the

number and variety of words used by Shakespeare compared to other contemporaneous dramatists and other writers. This has shown that although Shakespeare certainly introduces a lot of words into his work which he has not used previously, so did other writers of his day – and other writers also contributed new words and idioms to the English language. The Early Modern period (approximately the years 1500-1750) was one in which the English word stock expanded greatly to accommodate and describe new ideas and concepts. Dramatists and other creative writers, whose work offered a veiled commentary on current affairs as well as popular entertainment, were therefore well placed to be at the forefront of linguistic innovation, and indeed it would have been a tool of the trade which helped to carve out their success. Some commentators of the day argued that this benefited and enhanced the English language, whilst others objected to the introduction of what they called 'inkhorn' words. Prescriptivism – the view that language should be used or not used in particular ways – was alive and well in Shakespeare's day (as indeed it is now).

Pull-out Shakespeare's language

Problems in determining exactly who first said what, and when

Quantifying and proving the coinage of words and idioms by Shakespeare (or indeed anyone else) is by no means straightforward. It depends on exactly what we mean, how we count it, and what evidence we have to go on.

To begin with, there is a difference between coining a word and introducing it into a language. Not every linguistic innovation penned by Shakespeare was taken up into wider use; some were created specifically for stylistic effects in particular contexts. Others were coined so as to fit the rhythm or metre of lines of verse (in many plays, some dialogue is in verse and some in prose; often characters of high social rank have dialogue in verse). Of the new words which did pass into general use, some have survived into present-day use while others have not, and some of those which survive have altered in meaning since Shakespeare used them in his work ('false friends', as David Crystal terms them).

Having made the above distinctions, we then need to be clear about whether we are including:

- Forms of the same headword or lexeme individually or separately (that is, all the forms of a particular word).
- Variant spellings of a word individually or separately (in the period in which Shakespeare was writing, English spelling was not standardised in the way that it is today, so a word might have several variations in the way people spelled it, e.g. have/haue).
- Compounds (e.g. to *morrow*: one or two words?).
- The use of an existing word in a new way (e.g. a word which already exists as a noun being used as a verb for the first time).
- Proper names.
- Foreign words.
- Nonsense words.
- Malapropisms (words deliberately misused, semantically speaking, for humorous effect: a strategy Shakespeare employed to create the impression of a character who typically uses words in the wrong sense, e.g. Mistress Quickly in The Merry Wives of Windsor).

It's also important to consider that, regardless of the earliest written evidence for a new word or idiom, it may well have existed in spoken use beforehand. For example, David Crystal points out that the first OED citation of the expression *'sblood* ('God's blood') is in Shakespeare's play Henry IV Part I (1598), but, as an expression/oath used to add emphasis or make a point, it would have been something people were already using in speech. Popular and successful dramatists would have included language familiar to the audiences of the day, as well as surprising them with some new and interesting coinages. Additionally, playwriting was a collaborative process at this time, and it is known that Shakespeare worked with other dramatists in the construction of some of his plays (e.g. Henry VIII). Increasingly sophisticated software tools which can map out individual language styles have enabled scholars of authorship to be more certain about the likelihood of particular stretches of text being written by Shakespeare or by someone else. Nevertheless, there remains room for speculation about who may have come up with particular language innovations in co-authored works.

While uncertainty will inevitably remain over exactly how many new words Shakespeare contributed to the English language, perhaps that is not what really matters when we try to understand his creativity. What we can be sure of is that Shakespeare was a particularly gifted linguistic craftsman and a skilled manipulator of English words in use at the time he was writing.¶

Find out more

Books

Crystal, D. and Crystal, B. (2002). Shakespeare's Words. A Glossary and Language Companion.

Crystal, D. and Crystal, B. (2005). The Shakespeare Miscellany. London: Penguin.