

Illustration Belle Mellor

One of the most frequent questions which arrives on my email doorstep – I exclude the spam asking me whether I am satisfied with my anatomy, physiology, and neurology – is this. Is it possible to arrive at a definite figure for Shakespeare's innovative vocabulary – what in this series we call Williamisms? No, I reply, and here's why.

In an ideal world, all the words in all the surviving books and manuscripts from the Jacobethan period would be catalogued. It would then be possible to see who used a word first. But only a tiny percentage of that period's literature (in the broadest sense) has been sampled by the main historical dictionary projects, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *OED* editors, naturally enough, gave Shakespeare's works a pretty thorough scrutiny, so he has a large number of quotations assigned to him – 29,305, to be precise. Most of his contemporaries didn't receive such a full treatment. It is therefore always possible for a word which is recorded for the first time in a Shakespeare poem or play to turn up in other works at an earlier date. In fact, this kind of discovery is being made all the time, and the number of words we can confidently ascribe to Shakespeare is falling.

Lonely is an example. The *OED* gives it first to Coriolanus, when he tells his mother 'I go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon' (4.1.30). But in *The Tragedie of Antonie*, a translation of Robert Garnier's *Antoine* by Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke, we find 'By fields whereon the lonely Ghosts do treade'. This was first published in 1592, some 15 years before *Coriolanus* was written. Probably the Countess wasn't the first to use the word either. But whatever the Williamism total was before, after learning this fact it is now one less.

But imagine we did have all the words in all the Jacobethan works catalogued, and we discovered there that a particular word was, indisputably, recorded first in something of Shakespeare's. It would not mean that Shakespeare actually coined the word himself. It could have been a word in general use which he just happened to write down before anyone else – and in a manuscript which has survived.

Some of the first usages assigned to Shakespeare were definitely in widespread popular use. He is the first person recorded as using the oaths 'sblood ('God's blood') and 'slid ('God's eyelid') but it would be absurd to suggest that he invented such everyday expressions. Nor is he likely to have invented *clack-dish* – a wooden dish with a lid that beggars 'clacked' as they invited contributions – though the use by Lucio in *Measure to Measure* (3.2.120) is the first recorded in the *OED*.

And what about this possibility? That, after an evening in the tavern, a particular word takes the fancy of two playwrights, so they both go home and incorporate it into their current project. When we find a word – especially an interesting, creative word – turning up in two texts both assigned to the same year, something like that probably happened. Both Shakespeare and Jonson are recorded using *tightly* in 1598; both Shakespeare and Marston used *condolement* in 1602.

On the other hand, the coinages *anthropophaginian* and *exsufflicate* are so unusual that they do suggest a personal

touch. And when we see a particular pattern of interesting word-formation recur, we do begin to develop a sense of personal creative energy: *out-Herod*, *outfrown*, *outpray*, *outswear*, *outvillain*... The problem for the innovation-counter is plain: how to decide which of the various 'first recorded usages' are like 'sblood and *clack-dish* and which are like anthropophaginian and *outswear*?

I've been doing some fresh analysis and counting, and this is what I've found. The total number of 'first recorded Shakespearian usages of words' in the *OED* is 2035 – excluding proper names, humorous malapropisms, and nonsense-words, such as *gratuity* and *impetico*. Let's start with the plausible Williamisms. Of these, there are 309 words where Shakespeare is apparently the only user. They vary from vivid and imaginative coinages (such as *out-craft* and *unshout*) to 'workhorse' items needed to express an everyday meaning (such as *well-saying* and *unimproved*). Here is a selection from the first half of the alphabet for this category: *acture*, *anthropophaginian*, *attemptsable*, *bepray*, *besort*, *bitter-sweeting*, *candle-holder*, *chirurgionly*, *conceptionous*, *correctioner*, *demi-puppet*, *directitude*, *disproperty*, *enschedule*, *felicitate*, *justiliarian*, *incardinate*, *insultment*, *irregulus*.

We might say with a fair degree of confidence that Shakespeare coined these. They do not feel like items which were in everyday usage.

And we might feel equally confident that Shakespeare was the originator of words which were not used again until centuries later. There are another 302 items which have no further recorded uses until 'rediscovered' by 19th-century Romantic writers, such as Scott and Byron, who gave them a new lease of life: examples include *antré*, *cerements*, *overtéem*, *rubious*, *silverly*, *unchary*, and *water-drop*. We could add these to our list of 'Shakespearian definites' with reasonable confidence.

On the other hand, there were 644 words used by other writers within a generation (25 years) of the usage first appearing in Shakespeare. How many of these would have been in common use? They are actually a mix of the mundane and the creative, as this selection from the two ends of the alphabet shows: *abstemious*, *adulterate*, *after-time*, *a-height*, *a-high-lone*, *ambassy*, *ambuscado*, *anchovy*, *arch-villain*, *atomy*, *attorneyship* ... *weather-bitten*, *well-beseeming*, *well-conceited*, *well-foughten*, *well-ordered*, *well-read*, *well-refined*, *widen*, *wind-shaked*, *winnowed*, *worm-hole*, *zany*. To deny Shakespeare a formative role in all of these words would be going too far, but to say he invented them all would be going too far in the other direction. The answer will lie somewhere in between.

Sometimes there are clues about creativity. A person who coins *crimeful* is likely to coin *crimeless*; and we find this pairing in the list of Shakespeare attributions, as well as *as useful / useless*, *upstairs / downstairs*, and *skye / skyish*. Being the first to use a word in two grammatical functions is another clue: *besort* as a noun and a verb; *impress* as a noun and a verb; *grumbling* as an adjective and a noun. But for the most part, there are no clues; and it would be a foolish person indeed who would try to impose a criterion of imaginative creativity on such a list, and decide which usages were Shakespeare reporting everyday usage and which were his personal coinages.

If we accept all recorded first usages as being individual Shakespearean innovations, we have a total of 2035. If we deny him all 644 words which had a presence within a generation of his first using them, we have a total of 1391. How to interpret 'somewhere in between'? If we arbitrarily halve the difference, we end up with 1713. This is a figure, rounded down, which has been mentioned from time to time. A BBC Website, for instance, says 1700.

That's an estimate of Shakespeare's lexical creativeness – but not of his permanent influence on the English language. This is a different story, for nearly half of these words do not survive into modern English – words like *adoptious*, *agued*, *aidance*, *allayment*, and *annexment*, and so on. And a number of others have a very limited use, such as *buskined*, *dog-weary*, *letter*, and *well-flowered*, as well as word-class changes such as the verb uses of *belly* and *bower*, whose present-day status as living items might well be queried (none have any 20th-century *OED* citations). There are in fact only about 800 clear-cut cases – such as *abhorred*, *abstemious*, *accessible*, *accommodation*, *acutely*, and *assassination* – where we might say that Shakespeare has had a permanent influence on the word-stock of the English language.

This is a much smaller total than many people expect. But it is still hugely impressive. Most of us would be delighted if we contributed even one word to the future of our language.

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A public count

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