

Shakespeare's false friends

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There is a famous scene in *Twelfth Night*, when Malvolio falls into the trap laid for him by Sir Toby, Maria, and Fabian. He is reading the letter which he believes to be addressed to him from Olivia, and finds part of it written in prose. This section of the letter begins with the instruction (2.5.139):

If this fall into thy hands, revolve.

It is rare to find a production of the play which respects the meaning of *revolve*. Most directors and actors pander to the modern meaning, make the actor look puzzled, and then have him affectedly turn round. Guy Henry did it, for example, in the recent Royal Shakespeare Company production at Stratford. It gets a good laugh. But it must make Shakespeare turn in his linguistic grave.

For *revolve* did not mean 'perform a circular motion' in Shakespeare's day. That sense came in a century later - the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites a first usage of 1713. For Shakespeare, the primary meaning was 'consider, ponder, meditate', and in this sense the usage is a Williamism, for *Twelfth Night* is its first recorded instance. The letter-writer is simply saying to Malvolio: 'think very carefully about what this letter contains'. It wouldn't have made a Globe audience laugh at all.

The 'meditative' sense is clearer in two other plays - one of which actually predates the *OED* citation by about a decade. The first known reference to *Twelfth Night* is on 2 February 1602, when a law-student at Middle Temple referred to a performance he attended. But in *Richard III*, written in the early 1590s, we find Queen Elizabeth asking Queen Margaret how to curse her enemies (4.4.123). She begins:

Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days;
Compare dead happiness with living woe...

And a few lines later, concludes:

Revolving this will teach thee how to curse.

No turning round in circles there. And we have a later example, in *Cymbeline* (3.3.14). Belarius tells Guiderius and Arviragus to take themselves off to the top of a hill, and when they get there,

You may then revolve what tales I have told you
Of courts, of princes, of the tricks in war.

No circling movement likely there either.

There are still resonances of the 'meditative' sense of *revolve* in use today. 'All sorts of ideas revolved in his brain', we can still say. So it would be perfectly possible for a linguistically aware actor to convey the right sense by using an expression or gesture to suggest Malvolio 'turning things over' in his mind - and to squeeze a laugh out of it too.

Revolve, of course, is just one of several hundred 'false friends' in Shakespeare. This is a term linguists use for words which resemble each other in different languages, making you think they have the same meaning. *Demander* in French looks like *demand* in English, so newcomers to the language assume it means 'demand' - only to discover that its force is not so strong; it means simply 'ask'. Several Williamisms are false friends.

A good one is *supervisor*, a word used by Iago in the First Quarto of *Othello* (3.3.400; not the Folio, which has *super-vision*), when Iago is heating up Othello's jealousy, suggesting that Desdemona might be unfaithful. 'You would be satisfied?', he asks, and then suggests a way:

Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,

Behold her topped?

Supervisors are people in businesses who inspect and direct others, in the interests of efficiency. It rather looks as if Iago is saying that Othello should be directing the affair, to make sure it works out all right. But of course it couldn't mean this. *Supervisor* did have its managerial sense in Shakespeare's day, but he was the first to use it in the sense of 'onlooker' or 'spectator', thereby creating a false friend to modern ears. It was not a sense which survived in English for very long.

Williamisms are slippery things. Just because they turn up as the first citation in the *OED* doesn't necessarily mean that Shakespeare really invented them. But the case becomes stronger when we find related uses of a word also recorded as Williamisms. And so it is with the 'supervising' set of words. The first cited use of the verb *supervise*, meaning 'look over' is in *Love's Labour's Lost* (4.2.121), when Holofernes asks Nathaniel if he can have a look at Berowne's letter to Rosaline:

Let me supervise the canzonet.

And the corresponding noun use - so unusual that it is the only citation in the *OED* - is found in *Hamlet*, when Hamlet tells Horatio about the letter written to Claudius to the king of England (5.2.24). It contained, he says, 'an exact command'

That on the supervise, no leisure bated,

No, not to stay the grinding of the axe,

My head should be struck off.

As with the verb, the meaning is simply 'perusal, reading'. 'Do it on sight' is the spirit of the phrase.

There'll be more on false friends anon. But in the meantime, if this should fall into your hands, revolve.

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