



CLEVER DICK The Bell Shakespeare Company's production of *Richard III*, with Anna Volska, John Bell (as Richard), Robert Meldrum and Darren Gilshenan.

## Shakespeare's words

Is the language of Shakespeare really so difficult for modern ears to understand? Only a fraction of his vocabulary comprises strange or obsolete words, says **David Crystal**

TO MODERNISE OR NOT TO MODERNISE: that is the question. I'm talking about Shakespeare, of course, where every year or so someone makes a splash by saying that Shakespearian English is largely unintelligible and needs translation to make sense to a modern audience or reader. It's happened most recently in an article in a magazine called *Around the Globe*, a splendid periodical published by the London theatre, Shakespeare's Globe. The writer was arguing that the English language has changed so much since Shakespeare's time that he's now a foreign language to most people. So the best we can do is translate him into Modern English – get a modern author to do it, like Tom Stoppard or Seamus Heaney.

Well, when this article appeared I

thought I'd take a look at the question from a linguistic point of view. And Shakespeare was very much on my mind at the time, because my actor son Ben and I had just published a new glossary and language companion to the Bard: it's called *Shakespeare's Words*. This was a two-pronged attack on the topic. I looked at the vocabulary from a linguist's point of view, and Ben looked at it from the theatrical angle. What we did was work our way through all the plays and poems, line by line, and every time we came across a word or phrase which presented even the slightest degree of difference in meaning or use from that found in Modern English, we highlighted it, worked out its meaning, and put it into a database. It took us quite a time to complete the job, as you can

imagine – three years, in fact – and we ended up with about 50,000 words highlighted. That may sound like a lot, but when you consider that there are nearly a million words in the whole of the Shakespeare canon, it's not as many as it seems. But more on that in a moment.

It was certainly time for a new glossary. The last big one – the one I used when I was studying Shakespeare at college – was compiled by the Victorian lexicographer, Charles Talbot Onions, and that was nearly a hundred years ago. Since then, things have changed. Take all the Latin words in Shakespeare, for instance. In Victorian times, educated people had studied Latin in school – not so today, so they need to be carefully glossed. Or take the words which have changed their meaning – like Goths.



NO MISTAKE Anna Volska and Ross Skiffington in *The Comedy of Errors*. Author David Crystal believes English has changed little since Elizabethan times.

There are Goths in *Titus Andronicus*, referring to the South European Germanic tribe; but to a modern youngster, Goths are people with black eye make-up and a weird taste in music. And of course we mustn't forget that in the past century new plays have been added to the Shakespeare canon – most recently *Two Noble Kinsmen*, which had a production at the Globe a couple of years ago, and *King Edward III*, which played in Stratford last year.

If we use the data in our book, I think we can shed some light on the modernisation question, which is usually debated with very few statistical facts on either side. And it is all a question of fact. Modernisers make their case by finding difficult examples like “super-serviceable, finical rogue” – from *King Lear* – while people who *don't* believe Shakespeare needs modernising use examples like Hamlet's “To be or not to be; that is the question.”

To my mind, the question is very simple: how much of Shakespeare's language is like the *King Lear* example, and how much is like the *Hamlet*? If most of his words are genuinely difficult because

the language has changed, the modernisers win. If they aren't, their opponents do. So I've been doing some counting.

The basic question is: How many words are there in Shakespeare which have changed their meaning between Elizabethan English and now? Notice I say “changed their meaning”. Shakespeare uses plenty of words which haven't changed their meaning but are still difficult. Classical references are a good example. Do you remember in *Romeo and Juliet* the sentence which Paris uses to explain why he hasn't mentioned his feelings to the grieving Juliet: “Venus smiles not in a house of tears”? Well, it makes no sense until you know who Venus is. And she turns out to be the same goddess of love today as she was 400 years ago. In other words, this isn't a linguistic problem – it isn't a matter of language change. It's a matter of general educational knowledge. People ought to know who is the Greek goddess of love, just as they should know what is the capital of Turkey or who is the president of Russia.

So back to the real question: How many words are there where there is a

difficulty of understanding because of the way the language has changed between then and now? What proportion of Shakespeare's vocabulary is Elizabethan – 50 per cent? 40 per cent? 60 per cent? To work this out, the first thing you have to know is how many different words there are in Shakespeare as a whole. It's not as many as you might think. Only just over 20,000 – that's assuming you can count for instance *take*, *takest*, *takes*, *taking*, *taken* and *took* as variant forms of the same word. Of course, Shakespeare did some pretty amazing things with those 20,000. Most modern English users have twice that many, but on the whole they don't do very many exciting things with them.

When I looked at our glossary, I found only 3000 of these words presented some sort of problem because of differences between the English of Shakespeare's time and today. That's only 15 per cent. And even this figure is a bit excessive. The true figure is much lower, because that 3000 includes every word which is different, even those which are so slightly different that I don't think anyone would have a

difficulty understanding them. When Horatio says to the sentries in *Hamlet*, "But look, the morn in russet mantle clad/Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill", there are several older words like that – *morn* instead of *morning*, *yon* meaning *yonder*, *o'er* meaning *over*, *clad* meaning *clothed*. They form part of my 3000, but I don't think they pose a real problem of intelligibility. They don't need translation.

Nor do a lot of the swear words, or insult language. I mean, take that scene in *King Lear* where Kent harangues Oswald as being "a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue". Now, you may not know what *finical* is, or several of the other words, but you jolly well know that Kent is not paying Oswald a compliment. The force of the words comes across well enough, even if you don't know the exact meaning. It's the same with modern English. If I call you a "blithering idiot", you know the strength of my feeling – but if I were to ask you what

and think it means "delight" when in fact it means "madness". There are several hundred of those also.

When you add them all up, I conclude that the case for modernisation is supported by only a thousand or so words – between 5 and 10 per cent of Shakespeare's vocabulary. Turn this on its head. Modern English speakers already know about 90 per cent of Shakespeare's words. Not a very strong case, it seems to me, for a general modernisation policy.

So, this is my answer to some of the claims made by the modernisers. They say we need to modernise because language changes very fast. I say we don't, because it doesn't. English changed very rapidly between Chaucer's time around 1400 and Shakespeare's, so the case for translating Chaucer is quite strong. But the period between 1600 and the present day is one of the slow-moving periods of English linguistic change. So, when modernisers say Shakespeare's language is losing its

modernise, there is no question. Rather than modernise Shakespeare, I think all our effort should be devoted to making people more fluent in "Shakespearean". If Shakespeare were a foreign language, we would solve the problem by devising appropriately graded syllabuses in Elizabethan English and writing carefully graded introductions, phrase books, and other materials – just as we would in the real foreign-language teaching world. Well, I think that 10 per cent or so should be dealt with in the same way. It's certainly an impediment, so let's deal with it, seeing it as an opportunity and a challenge to be overcome, not as a barrier to be evaded. Let's make the kids fluent in Shakespearean.

But when did you see Shakespeare's language dealt with in this way? It's never been done. Rather most people continue to deal with difficult words as they bump into them in reading a play. They encounter an unfamiliar word in Act I Scene 1 of a play – say *bootless*, as "Tis bootless to complain" – look it up, work out that it means "unsuccessful", and read on. By the time they encounter it again in Act III Scene 2, or in a different play, they've forgotten what it meant the first time, and they have to look it up and work out the meaning all over again. And as *bootless* turns up 28 times in Shakespeare's plays, that means 28 different look-up occasions. What a waste of time. Nobody could ever learn French like that, continually looking a word up every time they hear it. The obvious approach is to learn the meaning of *bootless* in advance, get it into the brain, and then every time you encounter it you know it. There aren't that many words to be learned. Over a year or two, kids in school could easily learn all of them.

That's what I mean by "learning Shakespearean". And that's why Ben and I spent our three years compiling *Shakespeare's Words*, to provide people with the basic data they need in order to carry out this task. Once you've done it, the sense of achievement is tremendous, and yields a reward which is repeated every time you encounter one of Shakespeare's plays. ☑

*David Crystal and Ben Crystal are the authors of Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion (Penguin, \$70). This is an edited version of David Crystal's recent program, "Does Shakespeare's English Need Translating?", for Radio National's Lingua Franca, presented by Jill Kitson (Saturdays, 3.45pm, repeated Fridays, 2.15pm).*

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"blithering" means, very few people would be able to answer (it literally means "senselessly talkative").

How many of the Elizabethan words pose a *true* difficulty of interpretation? There turns out to be not so many at all. There are two types of candidate. First, there are words which are totally opaque – like *incarnadine* and *finical*, where no amount of guessing will produce a correct interpretation. We've no idea what they mean without looking them up. That's why we need a glossary. There are several hundred of these. And second, there are words which look easy but which are seriously deceptive – the "false friends", as they're called. They're words which deceive because you look at them and they seem familiar, so you think you know their meaning, but in fact they mean something else. You know the sort of thing – you see *bootless* and you think it means "without boots", whereas in fact it means "unsuccessful". Or you see the word *ecstasy*

meaning, I don't think so. On my count, over 90 per cent of the words used in Shakespeare's day have not lost their meaning. Employing a Tom Stoppard or a Seamus Heaney to translate the texts would be a waste of time, 90 per cent of the time.

And it would be even more of a waste, really, because Shakespeare himself acts as our translator on many occasions. Actually I see no harm in translating those cases where a really difficult word becomes the focus of dramatic attention, and where there would be no poetic loss. In *Twelfth Night*, for instance, Viola, disguised as Cesario, talks to Olivia about pity being akin to love. "No, not a grise," she says. Many directors do actually replace *grise* by "step" or "bit", without anyone (bar a few scholars) noticing. But in *Othello*, the Duke says to Brabantio, "Let me... lay a sentence/Which as a grise or step may help these lovers/Into your favour." A grise or step? That's Shakespeare doing his own translation.

So, for me: to modernise or not to