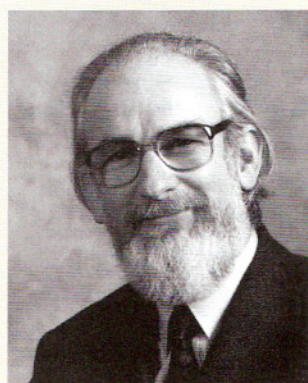


shakespeare's falsefriends2

finding out about the e word



Would clubbers be as keen on taking ecstasy if they knew the origins of the word? **David Crystal** suggests not.

ecstasy (n.) 1 fit, bout

Whoever decided to call the drug MDA 'ecstasy' didn't know much about etymology. Obviously someone noticed the modern meaning of 'intense delight' or 'rapture', and figured that this association would attract the potential purchaser. But the name wouldn't have had the desired effect in Shakespeare's time.

The modern sense was emerging in the sixteenth century; but it was long preceded by a much wider range of senses, and these are the ones found in Shakespeare. To catch the meaning you first of all have to imagine a scale of emotional intensity, with a weak end and a strong end. At the weak end, ecstasy means little more than 'emotion' or 'feeling'. It turns up in this sense a couple of times in Shakespeare's poems. In 'A Lover's Complaint', the woman in the poem is said to experience a 'suffering ecstasy' (l. 69). Here the adjective gives the meaning away: you can hardly be ecstatic, in the modern sense, if you are suffering. This is the full quotation:

If ... there may be aught applied

Which may her suffering ecstasy assuage ...

All this means is: 'I wonder if there is any way to make her feel better'.

You'll find the same sort of use in *Venus and Adonis*, where the poet describes Venus: 'Thus stands she in a trembling ecstasy' (l. 895). And in *Macbeth* (Act 4 Scene 3 l.170), Ross complains about the state of Scotland to Macduff and Malcolm:

It cannot

Be called our mother, but our grave; ...

... where violent sorrow seems

A modern ecstasy.

When sorrow is the normal kind of feeling we experience, Ross is saying, we can hardly talk about Scotland as a 'mother'.

Further up the emotional scale, we find ecstasy having the meaning of 'mental fit' or 'frenzy'. This is well illustrated by the Courtesan's description of the increasingly confused and angry Antipholus of Ephesus in *The Comedy of Errors* (Act 4 Scene 4 l.49). Look how his fit is making him shake, she says:

Mark how he trembles in his ecstasy.

This is the commonest sense of the word in Shakespeare: it turns up eight times, and usually you can get an idea about the stronger meaning by noting the context carefully. From earlier scenes we know that Antipholus is getting very angry, so much so that people are beginning to think he's going mad.

ecstasy (n.) 1 fit, bout of madness, frenzied behaviour CE IV.iv.49 [Courtesan to all, of Antipholus of Ephesus] *Mark how he trembles in his ecstasy*; Ham II.i.102; MA II.iii.152; Mac III.ii.22; Oth IV.i.79; Tit IV.i.124

2 madness, lunacy Ham III.iv.139-40 [Gertrude to Hamlet] *This bodiless creation ecstasy / Is very cunning in.* [Hamlet] *Ecstasy?*; Ham III.i.161, iv.75

3 emotion, state of mind, feeling Venus 895 [of Venus] *Thus stands she in a trembling ecstasy*; Lover 69; Mac IV.iii.170

Sometimes the clue appears in the same sentence, in an emotionally intensifying word, shown as bold in the next quotations:

– In *Much Ado About Nothing* (Act 2 Scene 3 l.152), Leonato talks about Beatrice to Claudio: ‘the ecstasy hath so much **overborne** her’.

– In *The Tempest* (Act 3 Scene 3 l.110), Gonzalo asks Adrian to protect Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian from their apparently violent behaviour: ‘hinder them from what this ecstasy/May now **provoke** them to’.

– In *Macbeth* (Act 3 Scene 2 l.22), Macbeth says to his wife: better be with the dead ... /Than on the torture of the mind to lie/In **restless** ecstasy’.

– And in *Hamlet* (Act 2 Scene 1 l.102), Polonius talks about Hamlet’s strange behaviour to Ophelia: ‘This is the very ecstasy of **love**’.

If you want to follow up some other uses of this sense of the word, take a look at *Othello* Act 4 Scene 1 l.79, and the two cases in *Titus Andronicus*: Act 4 Scene 1 l.124 and Act 4 Scene 4 l.21.

In all these examples, the implication is that someone is ‘beside himself/herself’ with anxiety or fear or passion or some other very intense emotion. You could faint from an ecstasy, or fall into a trance – and indeed it retains this sort of sense in modern psychological medicine, where it refers to a kind of nervous disorder in which the mind is so absorbed in a particular notion that it can’t notice its surroundings.

But the strongest sense of ecstasy is to be found later in *Hamlet*, where the meaning is ‘lunacy’ or ‘madness’. Ophelia reflects to herself sadly about Hamlet’s matured youth (Act 3 Scene 1 l.161):

That unmatched form and feature of blown youth

Blasted with ecstasy

And when Hamlet goes to talk to his mother, we find two clear instances of this sense (Act 3 Scene 4 l.75, 139). The first is when Hamlet tells his mother that he is not mad: ‘sense to ecstasy was ne’er so thrall’d’. He means: my ability to speak good sense has never been put under the control of madness. And the second is when Gertrude says – still thinking Hamlet

is mad, after he has claimed to see the ghost of his dead father – ‘This bodiless creation ecstasy/Is very cunning in’. Madness is good at thinking up visions, she says. And this is where you can get rid of any lingering doubts about this meaning of the word, for Hamlet then makes it perfectly clear: ‘Ecstasy? It is not madness that I have uttered.’ You can’t have a context clearer than that.

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