

Getting distracted

David Crystal

It's the sort of thing teachers are always going on about. Concentrate. Focus. Keep your attention on the point at issue. Don't let yourself get distracted.

That's the verb sense: if you have 'been distracted', somebody or something has made your attention wander from one thing to another. And the adjective sense is similar: people who 'feel distracted' have an absent-minded or anxious air. They are unable to focus or think clearly.

The modern sense is quite mild, we might reflect. If we see Mr Smith walking 'distractedly' 'along the corridor, we might worry about his bumping into something or going into the wrong classroom, but we will not call a doctor. He's not going mad.

Not so, in Shakespeare's time. *Distracted* came into English, at the end of the 16th century, both as a verb and adjective, and it had a much stronger set of meanings. The strongest involved a reference to great mental disturbance. People who were distracted were seriously perplexed and confused, even to the point of madness.

Shakespeare himself is the first recorded user of the verb and adjective in this sense. In *Henry IV Part 2* Falstaff is questioned by the Lord Chief Justice about Mistress Quickly's complaints. Falstaff tries to suggest she is mad, using *distract* as a verb: 'poverty hath distracted her', he claims (II.i.105). He doesn't mean that being poor has made her absent-minded; he means it has made her insane. If this is so, then (he hopes) her charges against him will have to be dismissed. However, he doesn't fool the Lord Chief Justice.

And in *The Comedy of Errors*, written four or five years before, we see the first recorded use of *distracted* as an adjective in this strong sense. Adriana and others have rushed to see the Abbess, who is sheltering Antipholus the husband in her abbey. Everyone supposes Antipholus to be mad, and this is how we must interpret Adriana's reply when the Abbess asks, 'wherefore throng you hither?' (V.i.38):

To fetch my poor distracted husband hence.
My poor mad husband.

Shakespeare seems to have liked using the adjective in this sense, for it is his main use of the word. Hamlet, having just met his father's ghost, refers to his head going round and round as a 'distracted globe' (*Hamlet*, I.v.97), and later in the play Rosencrantz tells Claudius that Hamlet 'does confess he feels himself distracted' (III.i.5). In *The Tempest*, the spirit Ariel has so worked on Prospero's enemies that they have been driven into a trance, unable to do anything, and he reports to Prospero: 'The King, / His brother, and yours, abide all three distracted' (V.i.12).

The 'totally confused' sense is well illustrated in *Macbeth*, when Lennox tells Malcolm what he saw when he went into the bedroom of the murdered King Duncan. He found Duncan's attendants with their hands and faces covered with blood: 'they stared and were distracted' (II.iii.101). Hardly surprising, if you had just been woken up and found your master dead and blood all over you. We need something a bit more powerful for the meaning of *distracted* than 'not paying attention' here.

We must be careful not to be distracted (in today's sense) by the modern meaning, which can slip in without our noticing it. Towards the end of *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus has just spent an uncomfortable few minutes observing his lover Cressida, whom he had thought would stay faithful to him, responding to the advances of his enemy Diomedes. He is absolutely furious!

O Cressid! O false Cressid! False, false false!

So, a few lines later, when Ulysses shows him the way out of the Greek camp, Troilus is still in a state of shock:

Ulysses: I'll bring you to the gates.

Troilus: Accept distracted thanks.

This sounds as if he is saying 'What was that again?'. But we can be sure this sentence means far more than that.

The sense of total confusion is the usual Shakespearian one, referring to the feelings of an individual or of two or three people seen as individuals. Just once, the word is used to talk about a large anonymous group. This is in *Hamlet*, where Claudius says of Hamlet, 'He's loved of the distracted multitude' (IV.iii.4). Here the word means 'foolish' or 'unreasonable'. And just once, it is used in relation to things. This is towards the end of *All's Well That Ends Well* (V.iii.35), when the King of France, delighted to see Bertram, says: 'to the brightest beams / Distracted clouds give way'. Here the word has an even more forceful meaning: 'torn apart' or 'rent asunder' - reflecting its original Latin meaning (*dis* + *tractus* - 'draw in different directions').

This last meaning did not stay in the language for very long. There are no reports of anyone using the word in this sense 50 years later. Perhaps they were distracted?