Being bethumped

The neologisms of *Troilus and Cressida* crowd in on David Crystal.

By their nature, Williamisms – or words coined by Shakespeare – are sporadic. If we want our expression to be intelligible, it stands to reason that we had better not introduce too many new words into our discourse at the same time. For the most part, indeed, Shakespearean coinages turn up in ones or twos, dotted about the plays and poems. But occasionally, something rather different happens, and Williamisms fall about our ears in a boisterous storm.

Nowhere is this more evident than in *Troilus and Cressida*, especially in the much-discussed Greek council scene (1.3). Agamemnon sets the tone of what follows in a speech remarkable for its linguistic ornateness, and editions of the play routinely comment on its elaborate character. Here are its opening lines. I show possible Williamisms in italics – though in a couple of cases their status needs some discussion:

> Princes,
> What grief hath set the jaundice on your cheeks?
> The ample *proposition* that hope makes
> In all *designs* begun on earth below
> Fails in the promised largeness: checks and *disasters*
> Grow in the veins of actions highest reared,
> As knots, by the *conflux* of meeting sap,
> Infect the sound pine, and *divert* his grain
> *Tortive* and errant from his course of growth.

The most obvious neologisms are the unfamiliar words, such as *conflux* ('flowing together') and *tortive* ('twisted, tortuous'). There are more of these later in the speech, when he describes the Greek actions as 'the *protractive* trials of great Jove / To find *persistive* constancy in men'. *Protractive* means 'lengthening out'; *persistive* means 'tending to persist'. The two words are close to tautology – but then, the whole of Agamemnon's speech is saying in many words what might be said in a very few.

The other Greek leaders accommodate to him, so that throughout the rest of the scene our ears are bethumped by such new words as *untimbered* ('frail'), *importless* ('unimportant'), *insisture* ('constancy' – though the meaning is debated), *neglection* ('neglect'), *scaffoldage* ('stage platform'), and *exposure* ('vulnerability'). And the coinages continue later in the play: *rejoindure* ('reunion'), *embrasure* ('embrace'), *multipotent* ('most powerful'), *oppugnancy* ('opposition')... No other play has so many.

The classical vocabulary contributes greatly to the grandiose style, which has been variously interpreted. The epic characters need a suitably heroic way of talking, and this is appropriately reinforced by their grand words. On the other hand, the words are indeed *very* grand – so grandiloquent, indeed, that they draw attention to themselves, and thus to the gap between words and actions which lies at the heart of the Greek situation.

But it is not only the unfamiliar-looking words which give this speech its semantically novel character. Several well-established words are being used in new senses. In the above extract, we need to note *proposition* and *designs*, and take a brief look also at *disasters* and *divert*.

Various general senses of *proposition*, such as 'proposal for discussion', had been in English since the 14th century, but here Shakespeare is using the word differently to mean 'something put forward for acceptance' – in short, an 'offer'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives just one other example of this use a few decades later (*the proposition of rewards*). It is a usage which never survived.

Design counts as a Williamism only if we see the word as being used here with a general meaning. In its sense of a specific mental structuring – a 'plan', 'scheme', 'project' – it was already in widespread use when Shakespeare was writing. But in the less specific sense of 'aim' or 'intention' his usage here is the earliest recorded.

Disaster is a Williamism in a different play – when Horatio talks about 'disasters in the sun' (*Hamlet*, 1.1.118). There it means an 'inauspicious sight'. In the more general sense of 'calamity', it was coming into the language in Shakespeare's day, and there are several other people who are known to have used it earlier. However, the word would have been sufficiently fresh in people's minds to add to the overall impression of lexical novelty.

Divert was much older – a 15th-century import from French – and it developed a range of senses in the 16th century. Some of these are Williamisms, including the sense of 'turn awry', which could be relevant here and also later in the scene (1.99) when Ulysses talks about the various horrors which 'divert and crack' the peaceful state of countries.

'Words pay no debts; give her deeds', says Pandarus to Troilus about Cressida (3.2.54). The advice might have been addressed to the Greek commander too, who at this point in the play is much better at words than deeds. Indeed, if this column ever needed a mascot, Agamemnon would have few rivals.

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