

Shakespeare makes subtle use of one common suffix, as his wordship **David Crystal** explains.

It was *foxship* that first caught my attention. A brilliant coinage, used by Volumnia in *Coriolanus* (4.2.18) as part of her put-down of Sicinius:

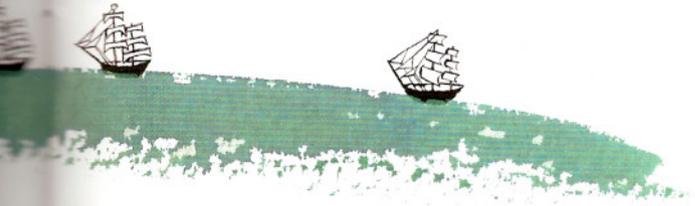
Was not a man my father? Hadst thou foxship
To banish him that struck more blows for Rome
Than thou hast spoken words?

She is accusing him of low cunning, slyness – the supposed qualities of a fox. And it is the suffix *-ship* that does it. We are familiar with *lordship*, *kingship*, *craftsmanship*, and many other words which express the state or quality of something, but the suffix is usually attached to humans or human behaviour, or notions which affect humans, such as *hardship*. We don't say *dogship* or *catship*, unless we are giving someone a mock title. *Foxship* is a subtler usage.

Foxship happens to be a Williamism, a word whose first use is Shakespearean according to the records of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We can be pretty sure that it was a genuine Shakespearean coinage, because – leaving aside its dramatic effectiveness as an insult – it doesn't appear again in *OED* records until 250 years later, in mid-Victorian England. And it made me wonder: are there any other *-ship* Williamisms of comparable effect?

Shakespeare uses the *-ship* suffix on 26 different words, and just 8 of them are Williamisms. Let's look at the non-Williamisms first. If we grade them in terms of frequency, (the number of instances are shown in parentheses) we would have to start with the titles, *lordship/lordships* (136), *worship/worships* (115), and *ladyship/ladyships* (45), followed by *friendship/friendships* (52), *fellowship/fellowships* (20), *soldiership* (9), and *courtship* (8). Then we would encounter a cluster of forms that are used just two or three times:

I saw eight -ships...



captainship (2), *companionship* (2), *horsemanship* (3), *mastership/masterships* (4), *Protectorship* (3 times in *2 Henry VI*), *stewardship* (2, both in *Richard II*), and *workmanship* (3, with two of them in *Venus and Adonis*).

That would leave a handful of forms that are used just once each: *attorneyship*, *bachelorship*, *consulship*, *cowardship*, *foxship*, *hostess-ship*, *mistership* (a malapropism for *mistress-ship*, used by the Clown in *Titus Andronicus*), *Moorship*, *rectorship*, *Regentship*, *spectatorship*, and *township*.

In passing, it might be worth pointing out that, of all the *-ship* words, just over a third of them occur in *Coriolanus*: *ladyship*, *fellowship*, *worship*, *consulship* (and *consulships*), *companionship*, *mastership*, *rectorship*, *spectatorship* – and, of course, *foxship*. (Whether this novel observation adds any fresh insight into the play I leave it for others to determine.)

So how many *-ship* usages are Williamisms? Just eight, if we exclude *mistership* as a malapropism: *attorneyship*, *bachelorship*, *courtship*, *foxship*, *hostess-ship*, *Moorship*, *rectorship*, *spectatorship*. *Hostess-ship* is actually not listed in the *OED*. It is used by Perdita when she takes on 'the hostess-ship of the day' (*The Winter's Tale*, 4.4.72).

Only one of these words, *courtship*, has since become a frequently used word in the language. But *courtship* is a very special case, because no less than four of its senses are Williamisms:

courtliness of manners

'Trim gallants, full of courtship and of state' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.363)

the state befitting a court or a courtier

'More honourable state, more courtship' (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.3.34)

the paying of acts of courtesy to a dignitary

'Ourself and Bushy

Observed his courtship to the common people'

(*Richard II*, 1.4.23)

paying court to a woman

'Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts

To courtship' (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2.8.43)

It is unusual to see Shakespeare employing a word in so many different ways so soon after using it for the first time.

So, do any of these Williamisms rival *foxship* for its semantic pointedness? Just one, it seems to me.

It occurs when Iago bitterly reflects on the way Othello has promoted Cassio:

He in good time must his Lieutenant be

And I – God bless the mark! – his Moorship's Ancient.

(*Othello*, 1.1.32)

This is the derogatory use of *-ship*, often employed in a gently mocking or humorous way, but here used with a real biting edge. It is a unique use of the suffix in Shakespeare, and, by that token, especially memorable.

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