O, but one word

In the ninth of a series of articles on words invented by Shakespeare, David Crystal finds Williamisms in some unpromising places.

Take a word. Any word.

Take *word*.

What can you do with a word like *word*, if you want to be linguistically creative? Three sounds, four letters. Not very promising Shakespearean material, you might think. And as it has been in the language since at least 900, it hardly qualifies as a Williamism.

And yet there are things that can be done, even with the most everyday of words, to make them work for their living. You can, for instance, use them in a manner to which, as it were, they are not accustomed. *Word* is a noun. So, change its grammatical function, and let it be used as a verb. There's a nice instance in *Antony and Cleopatra*: 'He words me, girls, he words me' (V.ii.187). This is the first recorded use of that form in the meaning 'ply with words'. And Shakespeare seems to have been the first to use word as a verb in another sense too – to mean 'pad out with unnecessary words'. Here's Giacomo, referring to Posthumus (*Cymbeline*, I.iv.13):

> *This matter of marrying his king's daughter, wherein he must be weighed rather by her value than his own, words him, I doubt not, a great deal from the matter.*

Alternatively, you can make something of an everyday word by using it as a building-block for larger and more interesting creations. Shakespeare has a splendid, albeit irritating example of this: *nay-word* or *nayword*. Mistress Quickly is the first to be recorded using it, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, when she advises Sir John Falstaff about how he could keep in touch with Mistress Page by using his serving-boy (II.ii.122) 'to come and go between you both':

> *And in any case have a nay-word, that you may know one another's mind, and the boy never need to understand anything – for 'tis not good that children should know any wickedness.*

It means a 'watchword'. And it turns up again later in the play, with this meaning very clear, when Master Slender tells Master Page of his own stratagem for communicating with Anne Page (V.ii.4):

> *I have spoke with her, and we have a nay-word how to know one another. I come to her in white and cry 'mum'; she cries 'budget'; and by that we know one another.*

The word turns up again in *Twelfth Night*, but this time in a different sense. Maria promises Sir Toby (II.iii.129):

> *For Monsieur Malvolio, let me alone with him. If I do not gull him into a nayword and make him a common recreation, do not think I have wit enough to lie straight in my bed.*

Here, the meaning seems to be 'byword'. Maria is saying that Malvolio's name will become so famous as to be proverbial.

Why is *nay-word* irritating? The problem is that although the meanings are clear enough, the etymology isn't. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says glumly: 'Of obscure formation: there is no obvious connection with either nay or ay'. I never in my life did hear a challenge urged more modestly. Let's think more precisely on't.

The word may well have been *ay-word* to begin with. *The Twelfth Night* example is actually spelled that way in the First Folio. And it's not difficult to see how people would vacillate between an *ayword* and a *nayword*. There are in fact several instances in English where the boundary between the indefinite article and the noun has moved in this way: what we these days call *an adder* was originally a *naddre*. The initial n- jumped ship in the early Middle Ages.

I can easily imagine *ayword* developing directly out of the situation in which watchwords are used. Imagine: two people meet in secret, and one uses a special word to ask, in effect, 'Is that you?'. Having heard the watchword, you whisper back 'ay!'. It's not difficult to see how a concept of 'yes-word' might have developed, to explain the first meaning. Might this have been what Shakespeare had in mind when he coined it?

The second meaning demands an alternative explanation. How's about this? If Malvolio's name becomes so famous, it will be used on all occasions when people want to talk about foolish people. All occasions, note. Now, 'always' in Middle English was more commonly expressed by the word *aye* or *ay*. It turns up several times in Shakespeare too: 'for aye thy foot-licker', says Caliban to Stefano (*The Tempest*, IV.i.219). There is evidence of *ay* being used in compounds, in the 16th century, such as *ay-forth* and *ay-living*; and Shakespeare uses *aye-remaining* in *Pericles* (Scene 11.61). So, could *ayword* be 'always-word'? Maybe.

One word more, before you go. My title is from *The Tempest* (II.i.301). It reminds me that armchair etymological ruminations can be such stuff as dreams are made on. It would indeed be good to have some other textual evidence for these suggestions. But it's a temptation I never could resist, to speculate about etymology. And it's an honest fault. Bear with my weakness. Be not disturbed with my infirmity. A turn or two I'll walk to still my beating mind.

Illustration Belle Mellor