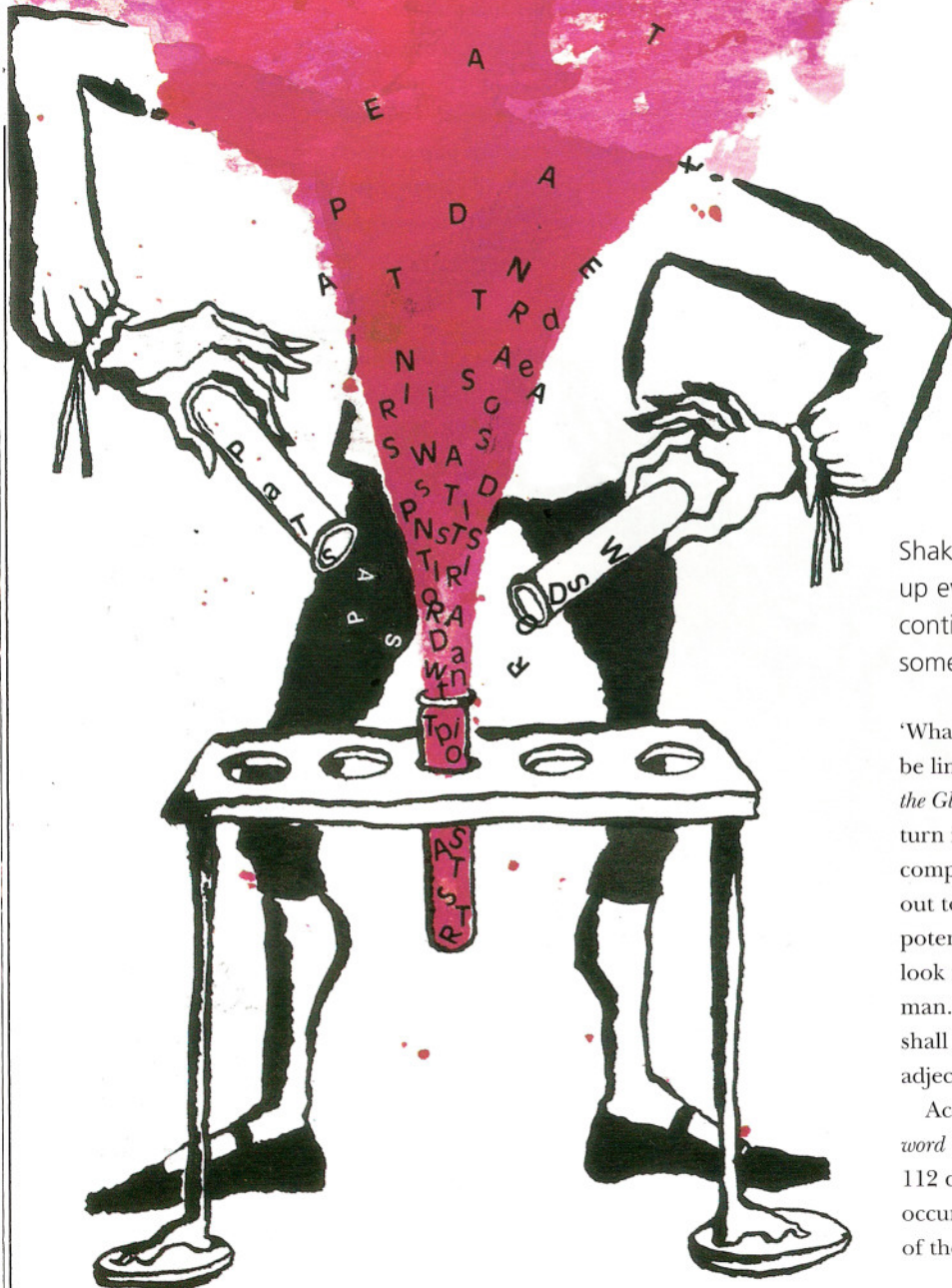# One word more

Illustration Belle Mellor

Shakespeare's personal vocabulary pops up everywhere in his work. David Crystal continues his search for *Williamisms* in some unpromising places.

'What can you do with a word like *word*, if you want to be linguistically creative?' In my last piece for *Around the Globe* I gave two answers to this question (you can turn it into a new part of speech, or use it to build new compounds). But, there is a third answer, which turns out to be much more productive than the others in its potential for original expression. You will find it if you look in unexpected places − as you would for any third man. (There may even be Williamisms in sewers, as we shall see.) *Word* is a noun − so let's look at the adjectives.

According to Bartlett's *Concordance*, Shakespeare uses *word* or *words* some 860 times in the plays. And he uses 112 different adjectives along with *word*, most of them occurring just once. You can get an idea about which of these would have been predictable in his day

because of the frequency with which they are used. The commonest is *good words*, which turns up 18 times; *few words* has 11 instances where the collocation is so 'obvious' that no-one would want to make any special poetic claims for it – *words* can be *apt, bad, bitter, dangerous, foul, gracious, hasty, holy, loving, wise*, and much more. Indeed, such combinations as *eager words* and *express words* can be found as far back as Chaucer. There are no Williamisms here.

On the other hand, there are several adjective+noun combinations which seem genuinely innovative, with the *Oxford English Dictionary* listing Shakespeare as its first citation. In *As You Like It* (IV.iii.36), Rosalind describes Phoebe's letter as containing 'Ethiop words, blacker in their effect / Than in their countenance' – words, that is, of the hue of an Ethiopian. In *All's Well That Ends Well* (I.ii.53), the King of France recalls the old Count of Rousillon: 'his plausive words / He scattered not in ears, but grafted them / To grow there and to bear'. In the sense of 'deserving of high praise', *plausive* is a Williamism – and an attractive one at the time to Shakespeare, it would seem, as he uses it again (in the sense of '*plausible*') in the same play (IV.i.29), when Parolles talks about his need for a 'plausive invention'.

A number of other original adjectives were used along with words. Lorenzo reflects after his wit-battle with Lancelot Gobbo (*Merchant of Venice*, III.v.64):

> The fool hath planted in his memory
> An army of good words, and I do know
> A many fools that stand in better place,
> Garnished like him, that for a tricksy word
> Defy the matter.

This is *tricksy* in the sense of 'mischievous' or 'playful' (it also had a pre-Shakespearean sense of 'decked out artfully'). Then there is Horatio's description of Hamlet's *whirling words* (Hamlet, I.v.137), Hermia's description of his own *moving* [= 'touching the feelings'] *words* (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, V.iv.55). *Love's Labour's Lost* provides two compound adjectives: King Ferdinand describes Don Armado as a man of 'highborne words' (I.i.170); and Biron concurs, adding his own epithet, 'fire-new words' (I.i.176). Both are first-time usages in the language – though the *OED* citation for the latter is in fact from *Richard III* (I.iii,254: 'your fire-new stamp of honour').

Who knows how many of the the other adjectives had been used to collocate with words before Shakespeare? Looking down the list, there are certainly some striking combinations: *choleric words*, for instance. In its sense 'of a hot or fiery nature', *choleric* dates from the 14th century, but its senses of 'angry' or 'passionate' were developing only towards the end of the 16th century. As a characteristic of words and

actions, its first recorded use is 1583, and Shakespeare's use comes 20 years later (in *Measure for Measure*, II.ii.134), when Isabella remarks:

> That in the captain's but a choleric word,
> Which in the soldier is flat blasphemy.

The word was familiar, and was in the early years of a new lease of life, with a fresh range of senses. It seems likely that *choleric word* would have had some dramatic impact – though whether it is a genuine Williamism only a concordance of the whole Elizabethan period would show, and this we do not have.

Like *choleric* in their effect, perhaps, were *deliberate, fainting, ignominious, immodest, reproachful*, and *smoothing*, which are all 16th-century developments. It's likely, therefore, that – at least in some cases – Shakespeare's use of these adjectives to describe words was original. Probably compounds such as *wench-like words* and *all-changing words* would have been novel too. But the longer the adjectives have been in English, the less likely they are to be innovative Shakespearean collocations. We may feel *golden words* and *medicinal words* to be effective combinations, but these two adjectives had been around since the 15th century, and it is certainly possible that others had hit upon this association before Shakespeare used them. Readers with a detailed knowledge of early Elizabethan literature may well remember seeing older ones.

And the question-mark is even more relevant for such adjectives as *abominable, effectual, guileful, painted*, and *odious*, which had all been around since the 14th century.

One word more. Hands up those who found the reference to 'sewers', in my opening paragraph, unintelligible! Yet the first citation for *sewer*, in the sense of a discharge channel for waste from towns, is in *Troilus and Cressida* (V.i.72), where Thersites uses it along with *draught* ('cesspool') and *sink* ('privy') in a typical outburst: 'Sweet draught... sweet sink, sweet sewer'. Williamisms infiltrate in the most unexpected places. And here's another, to clinch the relevance of *The Third Man* to Shakespeare studies. If you look in *Merry Wives* (II.iii.14), you will see the Host using a Williamism to Bardolph – a verb meaning 'adulterate (wine, sack, etc) with the seeds of the *Tilia* tree to make it sparkle': 'Let me see thee froth and lime'.

Silence! One word more shall make me chide thee, if not hate thee.