



Nothing for
ages and then
two at once

Words invented by Shakespeare – his *Williamisms* – are unevenly spread within his plays. And just as well, says David Crystal.

‘Here come the clusters’ says Menenius in *Coriolanus* (IV.vi.136). The clusters he is talking about are the citizens, scared stiff at the news of Coriolanus’s return. But *clusters* is a linguistic concept too.

Shakespeare’s original words quite often behave a bit like buses are supposed to do. You see none for hours, then two arrive at once. Here is Hamlet, seeing his father’s ghost for the first time, and uttering several lines of emotional reaction (I.iii.20). Williamisms are conspicuous by their absence.

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. I’ll call thee Hamlet,
King, father, royal Dane. O answer me!
Let me not burst in ignorance...

Not a single one in sight. From the Anglo-Saxon period we have the content words *angel*, *answer*, *blast*, *bring*, *burst*, *call*, *come*, *father*, *health*, *heaven*, *hell*, *king*, *shape*, and *speak*; from the Middle Ages we have *airs*, *charitable*, *damned*, *defend*, *goblin*, *grace*, *ignorance*, *intent*, *minister*, *royal*, *spirit*, and *wicked*; and just one word from the late 16th century, *questionable* (meaning ‘someone that may be questioned’ – the modern sense of ‘doubtful’ isn’t recorded before 1607 in the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

Then there’s a shift:

but tell

Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,
Hath burst their cerements.

Suddenly we have two Williamisms: *hearsed* and *cerements*.

Cerements is an unusual word, from the French *cirer* ‘to wax’, originally meaning ‘waxed wrappings for the dead’, ‘winding sheets’. It didn’t catch on in English straight away, but in the early 1800s – according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* files – it suddenly appears again as a fashionable reference in several writers, such as Byron and Scott. There are no *OED* references after 1880, but the word is still listed in many modern dictionaries, and an Internet search for it this year on Altavista produced over 250 hits (chiefly poetic or religious – several, in fact, explaining the usage in *Hamlet*), so it can hardly be considered obsolete.

Hearsed is more familiar. The noun *hearse* is known since Chaucer. It originally referred to the elaborate framework of candles and other items placed over a coffin. Shakespeare was the first to use it in the sense of ‘coffin’ or ‘bier’: ‘Stand from the hearse’, says the First Plebeian in *Julius Caesar* (III.ii.163). Its use as a verb also dates from this time: Shakespeare is the

second citation for *hearse* meaning ‘carry to the grave in a hearse’ (in *Merchant*, III.i.83: ‘Would she were hearsed at my foot’, says Shylock of his fled daughter) and the *Hamlet* line is the first citation for its usage as a past participle – ‘placed in or on a hearse’.

Ten lines on, Horatio refers to the ghost’s beckoning ‘As if it some impartment did desire’, and this is followed by Marcellus saying ‘It waves you to a more removed ground’. *Impartment* (= ‘communication’) is a clear Williamism; as is *removed* (= ‘remote, secluded’), though the *OED* citation is from *As You Like It* (III.ii.332): ‘Your accent is something finer than you could purchase in so removed a dwelling’, says Orlando to Rosalind/Ganymede. Another two in quick succession.

In the scene before, Polonius is haranguing Ophelia, telling her not to believe Hamlet’s vows, ‘For they are brokers, / Not of that dye which their investments show, / But mere implorators of unholy suits’ (I.iii.129). Shakespeare is the first to use *investment*, in any of its senses, the first citation coming from *Henry IV Part 2* (IV.i.45): ‘You, Lord Archbishop, whose white investments figure innocence’. And the *Hamlet* line is the only *OED* reference attested for *implorator* (= ‘one who implores or supplicates’). Two more again.

It’s perhaps not surprising that we should encounter clusters of Williamisms, as we experience the plays. Shakespeare isn’t being insightful and profound in every line – that would hardly be possible, or desirable. But when he does opt for an original and intricate thought, it often takes more than one invented word to express it. That is one of the chief reasons why, when reading a text, you can find yourself repeatedly using a glossary in order to understand some passages, and being able to ignore it completely with others.

Williamclusters are a predictable consequence of what happens when a brilliant author is under creative pressure and rises to the occasion. They inevitably make certain passages more difficult to understand, and students of Shakespeare have been known to panic, when coming across them. But, forewarned, forearmed (as Shakespeare’s contemporary, Robert Greene, put it). So, be not dismayed, masters – as Sicinius recommends, after Menenius has left. Go home, and show no sign of fear.

Illustration Belle Mellor