

Saying what can't be said

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Illustration Belle Mellor

I got lexicographer's block the other day. It's a vile condition, brought on when you are faced with a word and you can't find a good way to define it. This is where lexicography is definitely not, as Dr Johnson put it, 'dull work'. It is intriguing, infuriating – anything but dull. The more creative the writer, the more it happens. With Shakespeare, it happens rather often.

The nuisance word this time was *unshout*, from *Coriolanus* (5.5.4). The First Senator, not a little relieved at the news that Rome is not going to be destroyed by Coriolanus (formerly known as Caius Martius) and the Volscians, recommends that the people:

Unshout the noise that banished Martius.

The sense is obvious enough, but try giving the verb a dictionary definition. Dr Johnson had a go: '*unshout*: to annihilate, or retract a shout'. Well, yes, that reveals the 'reversative' meaning of the prefix *un-*, but it doesn't really capture the surreal dynamism of the verbal action that the people are being asked to perform – 'I want you to unshout – now!' Perform the act of unshouting! It can't be done, of course. Nor can it be done in retrospect. *Unshout* is literally nonsense. But it is meaningful, powerful, dramatic nonsense. And it is all conveyed by *un-*.

Unshout is a *Williamism* – a word whose first recorded use, according to the *Oxford English*

Dictionary, is Shakespeare's. Indeed, *Coriolanus* is the only citation listed there. Nobody seems to have dared to be so daring with this verb thereafter. And the same applies to several other verbs prefixed by *un-*. *Unbolt*, in the sense of 'explain', is another example. That's from *Timon of Athens* (1.1.53), where the Poet replies to the Painter, 'I will unbolt to you'.

Shakespeare seems to have had a penchant for using *un-* in interesting ways. There are 314 instances in the *OED* where he is the first citation for an *un-* usage.

Most of them are adjectives (e.g. *uncomfortable*, *uncompassionate*, *unearthly*, *uneducated*), and there are a few adverbs (e.g. *unaware*, *unheedfully*) and nouns (e.g. an *undeserver*), but there are no less than 62 instances where the prefix has been added to an already existing verb. Like *unshout* is *unspeak*, *uncurse*, *unswear*, and the remarkable *undeaf*:

Macbeth 4.3.123: Malcolm to Macduff:

Even now I put myself to thy direction, and
Unspeak mine own detraction

Richard II, 3.2.137: Scroop to Richard:

Again uncurse their souls

King John, 3.1.245: Philip to Pandolph:

Unswear faith sworn ...?

Richard II, 2.1.16: John of Gaunt to York:

My death's sad tale may yet undeaf his ear.

Unswear also turns up in *Edward III*, when Edward says to Warwick, 'Thinkst that thou canst unswear thy oath again?' Shall we allow this, as a Williamism? The suggested date of the play, according to the Cambridge edition, is 1590-4 (earlier than the *OED*'s 1596), and thus in a similar time-frame to the also uncertainly dated *King John* (which the *OED* gives as 1595). But the usage is in Act 2, Scene 1 (line 327), one of the scenes thought to be by Shakespeare, so it is a respectable claimant.

There are other dramatic images: Lady Macbeth calls on the spirits to 'unsex' her (1.5.39). Bolingbroke castigates Bushy and the others for their misleading of Richard, 'By you unhappied' (3.1.10). Iago, searching for a simile to show how appalled he is at the fight involving Cassio, opts for 'As if some Planet had unwitted men' (2.3.176). The First Senator, who seems to have a liking for the *un-* usage, worries that the inflammatory words of Sicinius will 'unbuild the city' (*Coriolanus* 3.1.197). The tone is not always high drama. There is surely sarcasm in Agamemnon's question to Ulysses about Achilles (*Troilus and Cressida*, 2.3.166):

Why will he not, upon our fair request,

Untent his person, and share the air with us?

And there is elegant beauty, too, when the First Lord reports Celia's absence (*As You Like It*, 2.2.7): 'They found the bed untreaured of their mistress'.

Repeated quotations from *Coriolanus*, *Richard II*, and *Macbeth*, I see. Is that significant? If you check the novel uses of 'un- + verb' against the dates of the plays as given in the *OED*, there is indeed a trend. Some 30% of these Williamisms are in just four plays – *Richard II*, *Macbeth*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Hamlet*. Some of the novel uses, of course, apply only to just one sense of a verb. For example, unbend in other meanings ('release, relax') is known from well before Shakespeare; but he is the first to use it in the sense of 'weaken', when Lady Macbeth says to her husband, 'You do unbend your noble strength' (2.2.45). For the record, here are the 18 verbs:

Richard II: uncurse, undeaf, undeck, unhappy

Hamlet: uncharge, unhand, unmask, unpeg

Troilus and Cressida: unlock, untent, untie, unveil

And *Macbeth*, in the lead with six instances: unbend, unfix, unmake, unprovoke, unspeak, unsex.

I sense a *hmm* coming on. The last three of these plays are all 1600 or later, that year felt to be so significant by Frank Kermode (in *Shakespeare's Language*) and presumably by all Globetrotters. Is there any difference in Shakespeare's usage, pre- and post-1600? Indeed there is. Using the *OED*'s dates, there are 24 instances in the 20 plays pre-1600, with seven plays not containing any instance at all. Post-1600 there are 38 instances in 18 plays, with just four not having any examples (*Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*). Half the lexical creativity with this form, in fact, appears between 1600 and 1607.

The odd one out, in this scenario, is *Richard II*. But what does Kermode say? Commenting on the famous 'I have been studying ...' speech (5.5), he observes: 'one might foretell, from this point of vantage, a hugely different style'. And Stanley Wells, in his Penguin edition, describes the language of *Richard II* as both 'immensely complex and unusually self-conscious'. *Un-*, it seems to me, in its tiny way – not even 'one little word', a prefix only – has a part to play in fuelling these grander linguistic intuitions.

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For details of David Crystal's lecture *Shakespeare's Coinage* see page 46.