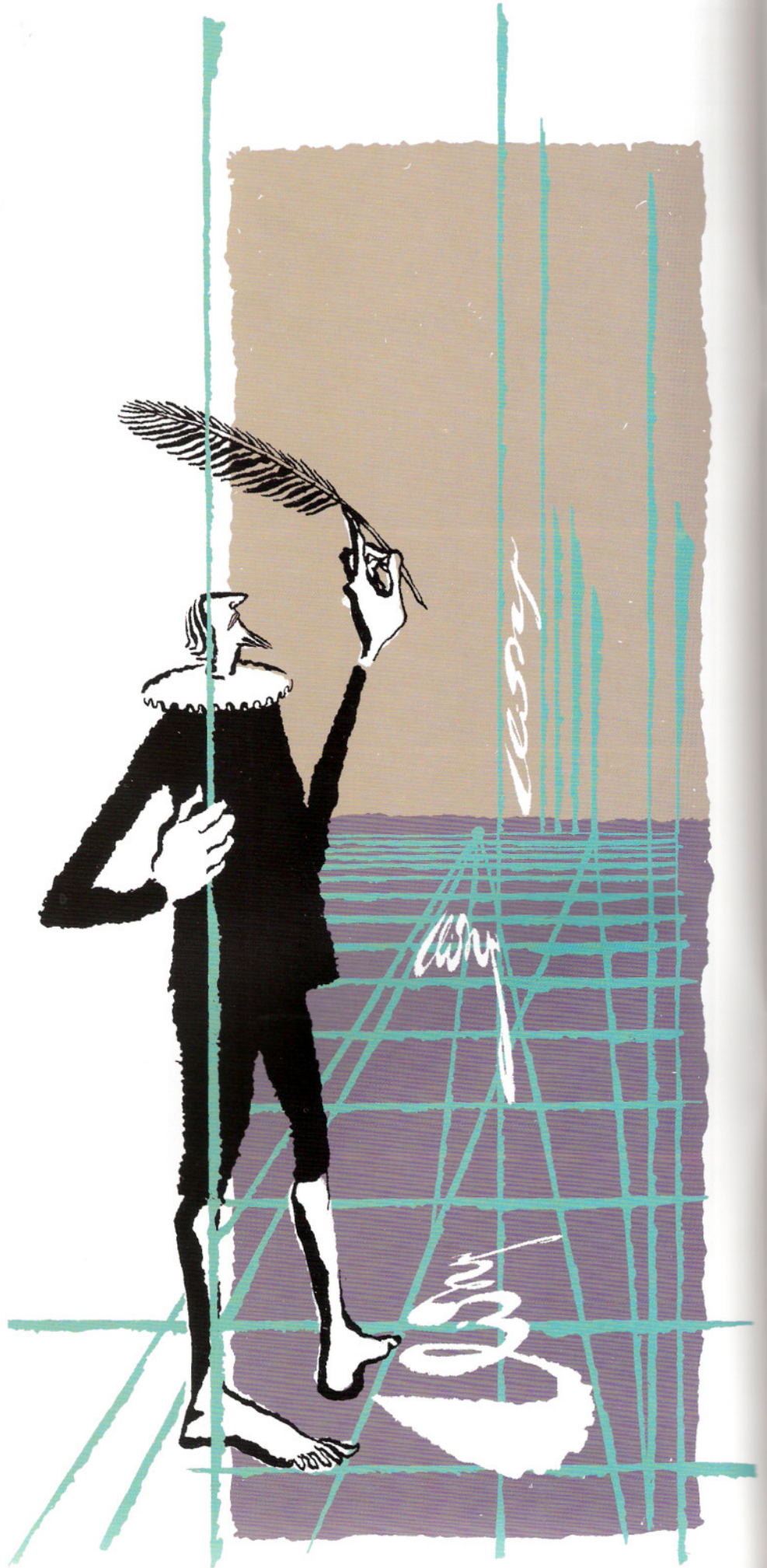


David Crystal

Catch this



A recurring theme of these articles on *Williamisms* – words whose first recorded use is by Shakespeare – is that it isn't enough to look just at the words he used. We need to look 'behind' the words, to note the way they are used in particular senses. Shakespeare didn't coin all that many fire-new words, but he did use older words in a remarkable number of fresh ways.

I can be more particular. He would often use an *individual* old word in a remarkable number of fresh ways. And such words didn't have to be especially poetic in character. Ordinary, everyday words would be stretched in several directions.

Take the verb *catch*, which is perhaps as ordinary as a word can be. It came into the language probably towards the end of the twelfth century, as a loan word from French. Today, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it has evolved 67 distinct uses – not only different senses of the verb, but also different combinations of the verb with other words (such as *catch fire* and *catch cold*). No less than eight of these uses are first recorded in the plays.

Several are to do with the way the verb expresses the idea of something being seized by the senses or by the intellect – the meaning of 'apprehend'. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Rosaline describes Boyet to her companions in this way (2.1.70):

His eye begets occasion for his wit,

For every object that the one doth catch

The other turns to a mirth-moving jest

This is *catch* meaning 'catch sight of', and it's the first recorded instance of this sense – closely followed by an instance in *Antony and Cleopatra* involving auditory rather than visual perception. Enobarbus warns Antony, who has expressed his intention to return to Rome: 'Cleopatra catching but the least instance of this dies instantly' (1.3.132).

Once you apprehend something, the experience can stop you in your tracks. This meaning of *catch*, to 'grab the attention', is also a Williamism, used in *Troilus and Cressida* by Ulysses in one of his long speeches to Achilles: 'things in motion sooner catch the eye / Than what not stirs' (3.3.177). This is quite close to the meaning of 'captivate' or 'charm', which is virtually a Williamism in *Henry VIII*, when the Lord Chamberlain refers to the way Anne has attracted Henry: 'Beauty and honour in her are so mingled / That they have caught the King' (2.3.77). I say 'virtually', because the *OED* editors have discovered an earlier instance of this usage in Chaucer, but nothing further between 1386 and 1613.

Another related meaning is the one found in *Macbeth*, when Lady Macbeth reflects on her husband's nature (1.5.17):

It is too full o'th' milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way.

Here, *catch* means 'apprehend', once again, but now with the nuance of 'adopting a course of action'. The *Macbeth* example is the first recorded use of this sense.

Some of the more physical senses of *catch* are Williamisms too. Helena, envious of Hermia's attractiveness to Demetrius, embarks on a nice sequence of 'infection' senses early on in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1.1.186):

Sickness is catching. O, were favour so!

Your words I catch, fair Hermia; ere I go,

My ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye,

My tongue should catch your tongue's sweet melody

Here, *catch* means 'acquire as if through a process of infection'. The literal sense of 'picking up a disease' is known from the 1540s; but the extended sense is not recorded until Shakespeare.

Then we have *catch* meaning 'overtake', first used at the very end of *The Tempest* (5.1.319), when Prospero promises the royal party 'calm seas, auspicious gales, / And sail so expeditious that shall catch / Your royal fleet far off'. 'Catch up with', we would say these days. And two old idioms are Williamisms, though neither is used in the same way today: *catch cold* and *catch the air*.

The first is encountered at the very beginning of Shakespeare's play-writing career, in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1.2.136), when Lucetta says to Julia, of torn pieces of letter lying on the floor: 'here they shall not lie, for catching cold'. The meaning is 'become chilled by being exposed to the cold'. The modern sense of *catch cold* – that is, 'catch a disease' – is not attested for almost another century.

Catch the air turns up in the second part of *Henry VI* (3.2.375), when it describes one of Cardinal Beaufort's dying symptoms: 'a grievous sickness took him / That makes him gasp, and stare, and catch the air'. 'Catch his breath', we would say in modern idiom.

As always, with supposed Williamisms, we must be on our guard. Just because Shakespeare is the first person recorded using a word in a particular sense doesn't mean that he was the very first user. With 'ordinary' words such as *catch*, probably he usually wasn't. Very likely the usages were 'around' among his contemporaries. In such cases, our interpretation has to be different, but it is no less significant. Instead of seeing Shakespeare as a word coiner, we have to see him as a word observer. The diversity of first uses of everyday words suggests someone keeping his ear very close to the groundlings.

Shakespeare's eye for the detail of contemporary life and sentiment is often addressed in *Around the Globe*. The analysis of ordinary words points to a writer whose awareness of contemporary linguistic detail is no less acute.

David Crystal OBE is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. David and Ben Crystal's *Shakespeare's Words* was published by Penguin this June, and is reviewed on p.44. They will be talking about the experience of compiling the book at the Globe on 6 November. See *Diary*.