



Illustration Belle Mellor

When we talk of Shakespeare's lexical creativity (what in this series I have been calling Williamisms), we usually think of his facility in coining new words. But there are other ways of being inventive with vocabulary. We can take an old word and change its meaning – as happened to *mouse* when computers arrived. Or we can take an old word and use it in a new way. It is no longer only birds who *twitter* and *tweet*. The associated words tell us a great deal. There's a famous aphorism in linguistics: 'we know a word by the company it keeps'.

Although *sense*, in its meaning of 'signification', had been in English since around 1400, its meaning of a faculty of sensation and the associated feelings or perceptions was less than a century old when Shakespeare began to write. It has a first recorded use of 1526. So we might imagine it to be ripe for exploitation when the Elizabethan poets and dramatists took up their quills. And this is what we find.

Shakespeare pushes the word in several new directions. The distinctions are subtle, but they are real. They are especially noticeable in *Othello*, where we can tease out no less than five related nuances, all first recorded usages:

- a dutiful nuance, when Roderigo tells Brabantio that he would not play or trifle with him because of his 'sense of all civility' (1.1.132)
- an appreciative nuance, when Cassio describes the tempests, high seas, and howling winds allowing Desdemona safe passage 'as having sense of [her] beauty' (2.1.71).
- a discerning nuance, when Othello asks Iago, 'What sense had I of her stolen hours of lust?' (3.3.335).
- an emotional nuance, when Othello addresses Iago as one 'That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong' (5.1.32)
- an opinion-giving nuance, when Othello tells Iago he would rather have him live, 'For in my sense 'tis happiness to die' (5.2.287).

In addition, Shakespeare is the first recorded user of the word to mean 'all of the five senses', when the King calls on sleep to 'weigh my eyelids down / And steep my senses in forgetfulness' (2 *Henry IV*, 3.1.8). And in *Love's Labour's Lost* (1.1.57), we see him using it in the phrase *common sense* – here meaning 'unschooled perception', not the modern meaning of 'everyday practical wisdom':

Berowne: What is the end of study, let me know?

David Crystal hears Shakespeare talking sense.

IN EVERY SENSE

King: Why, that to know which else we should not know.
Berowne: Things hid and barred, you mean, from common sense?

The linguistic use of *sense* to mean 'signification, interpretation' was also rapidly developing at this time. People were beginning to use 'in – sense' as an idiomatic phrase, meaning 'according to a particular interpretation'. In *The Rape of Lucrece* (line 324) we read that 'He [Tarquin] in the worst sense consters their denial', and in *The Taming of the Shrew* (5.2.140) we hear Katherine affirming that a woman's frown is 'in no sense meet or amiable'. There is a new idiom, too, in the phrase to *speak sense*, meaning 'produce sensible discourse'. We find it for the first time in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2.1.118) when Pistol advises Page to take on board what Corporal Nym has said to him: 'Believe it, Page. He speaks sense'.

As for *sense's* lexical companions, in its early days we see it being used with fairly mundane adjectives, such as *outward*, *external*, *quick*, *sharp*, *blunt*, *true*, and *lively*. Shakespeare thinks differently, as these vivid collocations show:

- King to Helena, referring to his 'healthful hand, whose banished sense / Thou hast repealed' (*All's Well That Ends Well*, 2.2.46)
- Iachimo, on emerging from his hiding-place to see sleeping Innogen: 'The crickets sing, and man's o'er-laboured sense / Repairs itself by rest' (*Cymbeline*, 2.2.11)
- Hamlet, to Horatio, observing the gravemaker: 'The hand of little employment hath the daintier sense' (*Hamlet*, 5.1.69)
- Cordelia asks the gods: 'Th'untuned and jarring senses O wind up / Of this child-changed father!' (*King Lear*, 4.7.16)
- Menteith talks of Macbeth: 'Who then shall blame / His pestered senses to recoil and start' (*Macbeth*, 5.2.23)
- Brabantio describes his daughter: 'Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense' (*Othello*, 1.3.63)
- King Richard reflects: 'Feed not thy sovereign's foe, my gentle earth, / Nor with thy sweets comfort his ravenous sense' (*Richard II*, 3.2.13)
- Sonnet (112.8) 'That my steeled sense or changes right or wrong'

If we are to know a word by the company it keeps, then Shakespeare introduces *sense* to some unpredictable but highly atmospheric bedfellows.

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