

# TEMPESTUOUS WORDS

David Crystal celebrates the linguistic inventiveness of *The Tempest*.



Illustration Belle Mellor

Some of Shakespeare's most vivid word-creations turn up in *The Tempest*. My favourite is Trinculo being described as *reeling ripe* – so drunk he's staggering about. But that has to compete with such evocative adjectival compounds as *cloud-capped* (towers), *strong-based* (promontory), and *pole-clipped* (vineyard), or the noun compound *demi-puppets*, or the verb compound *weather-fend* (defend against the weather). These feel like the product of a linguistically creative mind.

Undoubtedly, some of the first recorded usages found in this play are coincidences: Shakespeare just happens to be the first person we know to have written them down. When the spirits sing *the watchdogs bark*,

*bow-wow* (1.2.385), it might come as a surprise to know that this is the first time we see both *watchdogs* and *bow-wow* written down in English (the latter in the remarkable Folio spelling, *bough-wawgh*). But they would have been in the language long before that, as would Ariel's *grumbings* and Gonzalo's *leaky* (ship / wench). And the same probably applies to *blue-eyed* (hag), *grass-plot*, and Caliban's *high-day* (i.e. a variant of *hey-day*, meaning a day of celebration). But some of the new compounds have an uncertain status: are Caliban's *footfall* and Ariel's *mid-season* everyday local expressions or poetic adaptations? It's difficult to say.

In total, there are 45 novel forms in *The Tempest*. We see new prefixed words in *betrim* (to trim something), *discase* (take off clothing), *over-topping* (being over-ambitious), and the splendid *over-stink* (drown the smell of), describing the foul water into which Ariel leads Stephano and the others. There are new suffixed words too: *baseless* (fabric) and *printless* (foot), *razorable* (chins), and the adverbs *instinctively*, *rootedly*, and the mouth-twisting *chirurgeonly* (like a surgeon). That last is not the only polysyllabic monster: note also *expeditious* (sail) and *unmitigable* (rage).

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Several of the most descriptive new words relate to natural phenomena: *bosky* (acres), *mountain winds*, *pignuts*, *sedged crowns*, *unshrubbed* (down), *closing* (waters), and the mysterious and much-debated *pioned and twilled brims* (possibly, trenched and woven with sticks to prevent erosion). *Windring* (brooks) is another puzzle. Was this a misprint for *winding* or a poetic blend of *winding* and *wandering*? And editors have thrown in the towel over *scamels*, the (presumably) species of shellfish that Caliban promises to find for Stephano and Trinculo.

We see a few new parts of speech formed by changing a noun into a verb, a favourite creative device of Shakespeare: *bass* (my trespass), *hand* (a rope), and *throe* (agonize, as if in childbirth), and two instances of a verb becoming an adjective: *scandalled* (company, i.e. 'shameful'), *suffered* (labour, i.e. 'endured'), and *collected* (meaning 'composed, calm'), as in Prospero's words to Miranda: 'Be collected'. And there is a lovely case of a metaphorical extension, when Prospero tells her about his earlier life, and the days when he decided 'who t'advance and who / To trash for overtopping'. How to express the notion of restraining people who are over-ambitious in court? The metaphor is from dog-handling while hunting: to check a hound with a leash. Its etymology is obscure, but its dramatic impact is not. It adds support to any characterization of Prospero as a tough ruler. You don't mess with him, as the other characters in the play soon learn.

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