

“ ”

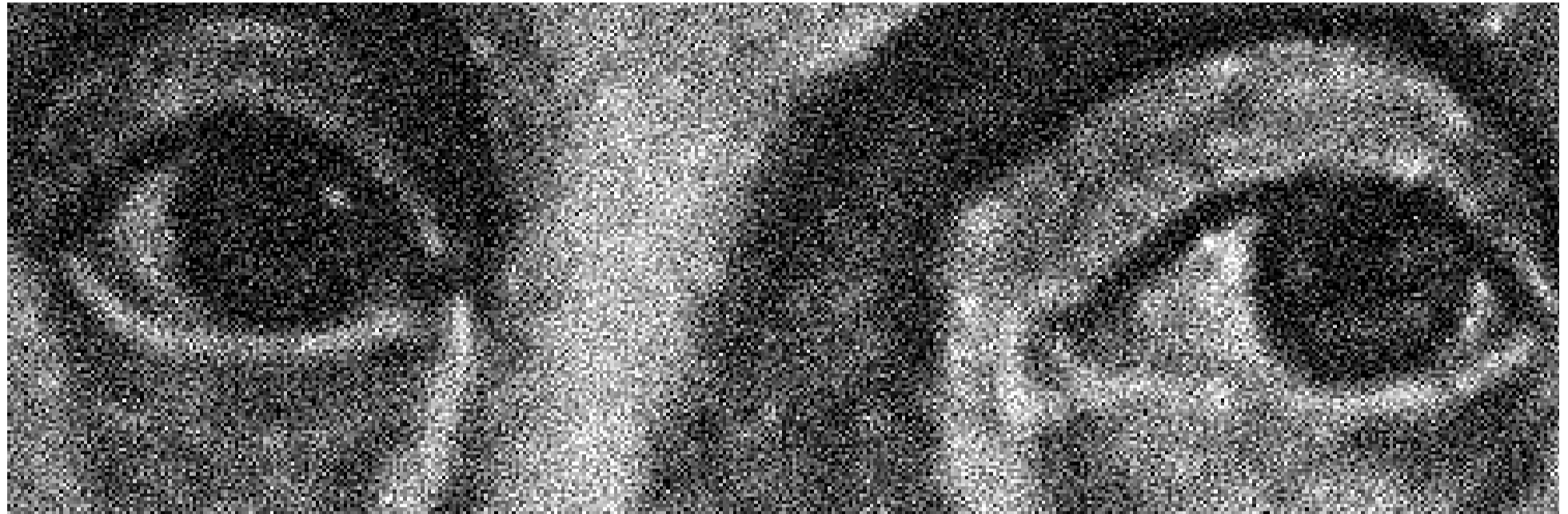


New York. As part of a revenue boosting strategy The New York Post plan to launch 'Addictionary' on their website. Visitors will be able to create new words and assign definitions to them. People can rate and comment on words created by others.

Japan. President Obama's speeches are a best-seller in Japan — as an aid to learning English. The textbook "The Speeches of Barack Obama" has sold more than 400,000 copies in two months, a big hit in a small country.

Cornwall. Apparently Cornish, once deemed extinct, is coming back from the brink of extinction. A band of Cornish language activists are pulling out all the media stops to raise enthusiasm for the ancient tongue.

Wales. Pedestrians have been confused by a road sign telling them to look different ways in different languages. A temporary road sign in Cardiff urged English speakers to look one way before crossing the road, and Welsh speakers to look the other way.



# Shakespeare's lexicon

When, in a monumental rant, a sanctimonious critic accused me of being so frugal with the luggage he might puke, I, blushing and numb, hinted that I only negotiate with the tranquil and the majestic and never cater for the obscene or lacklustre. Not the most compelling opening sentence is it? Poetic or not it does have distinct literary credentials; every adjective, verb and noun in it was, apparently, invented by Shakespeare. Estimates put his additions to English at between 1,700 and 3,000 words. Compared to Marlowe at 80 words, Milton at perhaps 20 and Chaucer no more than 50, the Bard of Avon was a neological phenomenon. You might imagine his inventiveness sprang from lack of vocabulary – not knowing the proper word he made one up! But, that is far from the case. By any standards Shakespeare had a vast vocabulary. In his complete works he used over 31,000 different words. (Most of us use less than 12,000 in our lifetimes and, according to Harold Bloom, Racine, the great french dramatist, born just 20 years after Shakespeare died, used a mere 3,000). But are the estimates accurate and if so, what was driving him?

Let's start by dispelling the myth that it is only later generations that have found Shakespeare hard. I was taught that to the rambunctious audiences of the day Shakespeare was as clear as Coronation Street. He could have them rolling in the aisles or spouting tears at his whim.

But that wasn't the case. He was always difficult! His text, with its 'thee's and 'thou's may sound odd to modern ears, but we get the gist. It's in understanding what he means that the difficulty lies and it always did. The preface to Shakespeare's First Folio advises readers to read him 'again and again' and if after that you still don't like him, well you must be a bit thick. From the very beginning it was clear that this was work you had to work at and if you didn't, you weren't going to get much out of it. On the other hand, if you did, you would find enough, 'both to draw and hold you.'

So, did Shakespeare really coin 3,000 new words? If so, with an already prodigious vocabulary, why did he? It all depends on what you mean by the word 'coin'.

If to 'coin' means to spring straight from an author's head like Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky, then the answer is 'no', Shakespeare didn't coin anything like 3,000 of those. Nor did he intend to and that's the key difference.

Who can say what 'Brillig' is or 'slythy toves' are? There's no glossary, nor roots in any known language. They mean whatever we want them to mean but Shakespeare never let himself off the hook like that. He was always saying something specific and as clearly as he possibly could.

That's not to say he didn't 'gyre' and 'gimble' occasionally. Through his work he scattered a collection of odd sounding, but very familiar, onomatopoeias. Out of the air Shakespeare plucked the words 'whizz' and 'twang', 'gnarled' and 'swash', purely for their sound effects.

The 'twang of a bowstring', the 'whizzing arrow', the 'swash of the buckle'. It's hard to imagine many a Boy's Own adventure without a soundtrack by William Shakespeare.

If, on the other hand, 'coined' doesn't mean pure invention so much as 'freshly minted' then the answer is more equivocal. In Shakespeare, we do find the first written mention of many words. They may have been his own or he may have simply been the first person to write them down. He would certainly have been hearing a lot of new words around at the time. English was going through a tumultuous change; in many ways the whole language was being refashioned.

English had long been considered fit only for the uneducated; a poor relation to French and Latin since the Norman invasion of 1066. By the 16th century, England was a growing force in Europe with a new sense of national pride. After the arrival of the printing press and the mass production of cheap books literacy was exploding. With a ready market of readers, English once more became the language of literature. But was it up to it?

Shakespeare, was one of those who, finding English too crude, looked elsewhere for suitable words. The literati borrowed from all over Europe and beyond. The great treasure trove was the classics. Since the Renaissance in Italy a century earlier, Europe had gone mad for classical literature. It was these ancient Greek and Latin texts that would be used to ennoble our brutish common tongue.

Between 1500 and 1650 around 30,000 words were added to the lexicon. In time foreign ornaments became so fashionable that the upper classes were virtually incomprehensible to common folk.

The English were positively drunk on words – as extravagant and foppish as the fashions of the day. Take this extract from a letter written by a gentleman of the 1560s.

'Pondering and expending and revolting with my selfe, your ingent affabilities and ingenious capacity for mundane dexteritie...'

This kind of verbiage was meant to flatter those who understood it and overawe those who didn't. And, like now, there were many who were shocked at what they saw as vandalism. Thomas Chaloner, a writer himself, berated those who 'search out four or five disused words of antiquity.' Sir John Cheke, sounding reminiscent of George Orwell, wrote 'our tung sholde be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangled with borrowings of other tungs' (sic). Presumably not noticing that 'mixt', 'mangled' and 'pure' were themselves borrowed.

George Pettie noted the irony when he pointed out that though we may promote the virtue of plain and common English both 'plain' and 'common' have Latinate roots.

 **TEMPLE TRANSLATIONS**  
precision in legal and financial documents

speechmarks  
Editor: Phillip Ellington  
Temple Translations  
Translation House  
2 Bridewell Place  
London, EC4V 6AP  
tel: 020 7842 0171  
fax: 020 7842 0172  
www.templetranslations.com



## Shakespeare's lexicon

Where better to display their newly reinvented language than in the theatre, that great melting pot of Elizabethan culture. Shakespeare, Jonson, Marlowe, Spencer were all at the centre of London theatre and that meant the epicentre of new language. It was here that nobles and commoners met, separated only by the price of their seat. And it was here that the hottest new words could 'strut and fret their hour upon the stage.' New language was heard by common man and lords alike, but, class distinction was still a line drawn very carefully.

Shakespeare gave his 'posh' new words almost exclusively to his leading characters, his Kings and Queens. Minor parts stuck to humbler, older words. When he did put noble words into their mouths they usually came out wrong – an arch sniggering at class pretensions that anticipated Mrs Malaprop, by a hundred and fifty years.

Against this background of an upwardly mobile language and the relative artistic freedom of the stage Shakespeare was in his element. No Latinised dandy, he drew on every source he could find. Even words from his own Black Country dialect, like 'baton' jostled cheek by jowl with Virgil and Ovid.

In these few examples we can see how Shakespeare constructed new sense from borrowed fragments.

Take 'Operant' – 'Sauce his palate with thy most operant poison!', from Timon of Athens. 'Operative' already existed but Shakespeare thought it clumsy and not precise in denoting the agent as opposed to the actor. So, he constructed a more elegant and precise form.

And 'Primogenitive', a compound word, or lexeme, formed from the Latin 'primo' meaning first and 'genitivus' meaning 'that which is born'. Shakespeare frames the two meanings to express the hereditary claim of the first born. A meaning we still use today both as an adjective and a noun.

What about 'Articulate'? From its Latin root 'articulus' meaning a 'clause in a contract' Shakespeare created a new verb to mean to 'set forth in a contract' from which we derive our modern sense of 'coherently organised'.

He coined some losers too: 'tortive' and 'perisive', 'unplausive' and 'vastidity'. Meaning 'honour', was 'honorificabilitudinatus', not surprisingly, this, the longest word he ever invented, is no longer with us.

Shakespeare wrote 38 plays, 154 sonnets and a few other poems. They have never been out of print and are translated into every major language. The most popular play, Macbeth, has a performance starting somewhere in the world, every four hours!

The Oxford English Dictionary lists over 14,000 quotations and his 'to be or not to be' is thought to be the best known quotation in any language, ever.

Around half of Shakespeare's new words are still in use today and feel more rooted in history than sprung from any one man's 'invention'. If we can't say exactly how many words we should attribute directly to him we can at least say is that in a language notorious for theft the Bard was the Prince of Thieves.

further reading  
Coined by Shakespeare  
McQuain, Jeffrey and Stanley Malless.  
Merriam Webster

The Adventure of English  
Melvyn Bragg  
Sceptre

English. Its life and times  
Robert Claiborne  
Bloomsbury

### Shakespeare in brief

Widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's preeminent dramatist.

Surviving works consist of:  
38 plays  
154 sonnets,  
2 long poems, and several others

Christened on the 26 of April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon by one John Shakespeare, a glover and his wife Mary daughter of gentleman-farmer Robert Arden.

Marries Anne Hathaway at the age of 18 and fathers three children.

From 1585 and 1592, establishes a successful career in London as actor, writer, and part owner of a company of players.

His first play, Henry VI, Part One was written sometime around 1590 when he would have been about 25 years old.

Won popularity with King James I who gave his acting company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men a patent allowing them to perform. Shakespeare renames his company, The King's Men, in James' honour.

Most of the known work was produced between 1589 and 1613.

His early plays were mainly comedies and histories then mostly tragedies including Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth, until about 1608.

Retired back to Stratford around 1613, where he died on the 23 April 1616.

In 1623, two of his former theatrical colleagues John Hemminges and Henry Condell, posthumously recorded his work as a dedication to their fellow actor. This collection known as The First Folio is the source from which all published Shakespeare books are derived and is an important proof that he authored his plays.

In the preface to the First Folio, Ben Jonson, probably the most important playwright of the time called Shakespeare 'The wonder of our stage.'

Shakespeare was not so well thought of in his own day as in ours. One critic, Robert Greene described him as an 'upstart young crow', accusing him of stealing ideas from his betters.

Shakespeare was known as a keen businessman to many in his home town of Stratford. His will contained several large holdings of land in the town.

## Full of sound and fury, signifying something.

A man walks out of the theatre after seeing Hamlet for the first time. "I don't know why everybody thinks it's such a good play," he says. "It is full of clichés." Well, he's right, it is, and here's a whole lot more, along with their origins.

A fool's paradise — Romeo and Juliet  
A foregone conclusion — Othello  
A tower of strength — Richard III  
An eye-sore — The Taming of the Shrew  
As white as driven snow — The Winter's Tale  
Bated breath — The Merchant of Venice  
Breathe one's last — Henry VI, part 3  
Budge an inch — The Taming of the Shrew  
Come full circle — King Lear  
Come what may — Macbeth  
Crack of doom — Macbeth  
Dead as a doornail — Henry VI, part 2  
Devil incarnate — Henry V  
Dish fit for the gods — Julius Caesar  
Dog will have its day — Hamlet  
Eaten me out of house and home — Henry IV, part 2  
Elbow room — King John  
Flaming youth — Hamlet  
For goodness sake — Henry VIII  
Give the devil his due — Henry IV  
Good riddance — Troilus and Cressida  
Green-eyed monster — Othello  
Hoist with his own petard — Hamlet  
Hold a candle to — The Merchant of Venice  
Household words — Henry V  
I have not slept one wink — Cymbeline  
In my heart of hearts — Hamlet  
In my mind's eye — Hamlet  
It was Greek to me — Julius Caesar  
Kill... with kindness — The Taming of the Shrew  
Laughing-stock — The Merry Wives of Windsor  
Lean and hungry look — Julius Caesar  
Let slip the dogs of war — Julius Caesar  
Love is blind — The Merchant of Venice  
Milk of human kindness — Macbeth

More fool you — The Taming of the Shrew  
More in sorrow than in anger — Hamlet  
More sinned against than sinning — King Lear  
Murder most foul — Hamlet  
Neither a borrower nor a lender be — Hamlet  
O, Brave new world — The Tempest  
One fell swoop — Macbeth  
Out, damned spot! — Macbeth  
Parting is such sweet sorrow — Romeo and Juliet  
Play fast and loose — Love's Labour's Lost  
Pomp and Circumstance — Othello  
Short and the Long of It — Merry Wives of Windsor  
Short shrift — Richard III  
Something in the wind — The Comedy of Errors  
Sorry sight — Macbeth  
Spotless reputation — Richard III  
Star-crossed lovers — Romeo and Juliet  
Strange bedfellows — The Tempest  
The be-all and the end-all — Macbeth  
The game is afoot — Henry IV, part 1  
The game is up — Cymbeline  
The naked truth — Love's Labour's Lost  
The play's the thing — Hamlet  
The lady doth protest too much, methinks — Hamlet  
The world's mine oyster — The Merry Wives of Windsor  
Tis neither here nor there — Othello  
To the manner born — Hamlet  
To thine own self be true — Hamlet  
Too much of a good thing — As You Like It  
Unkindest cut of all — Julius Caesar  
We have seen better days — As You Like It  
Wear my heart on my sleeve — Othello  
What the dickens — The Merry Wives of Windsor  
What's done is done — Macbeth  
What's in a name? — Romeo and Juliet

### More speechmarks?

If you'd like extra copies of this issue of speechmarks or if you'd like more copies on a regular basis please call our Editor in Chief, Shelby Fraser on 020 7842 0171 or email [speechmarks@templetranslations.com](mailto:speechmarks@templetranslations.com).