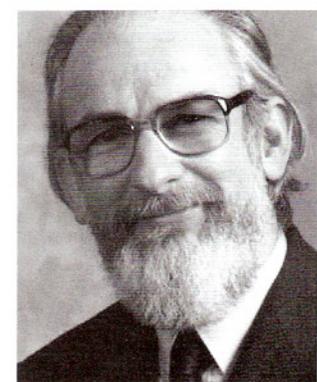


shakespeare's false friends 3

a world full of lovers



With more than 2000 references to **love** and over 125 references to **lover**, you'd be forgiven for thinking Shakespeare was obsessed with sex. But **David Crystal** warns you not to jump to conclusions.

Lover

I don't suppose anyone would ever bother to look up the word **lover** in a dictionary; but if they did they would get a range of examples like these:

Ermintrude had many lovers when she lived in Italy.

A few days later they became lovers.

The newspaper claimed that he and the congressman were once lovers.

She feared her lover would not return.

Pretty obviously, we are talking about sex in each of these cases – and, moreover, sex between people who are not married and including all possible male/female combinations. The word conveys a sense of the passion and emotion involved in such liaisons. If the parties concerned are already married, of course, there is a strong hint of the illicit. We are entering a world of secrets, subterfuge, and discovery. It is a word which appeals to newspapers and novelists alike.

Love, in its various forms – **loving**, **loved**, **lovest**, and so on – is really common in Shakespeare; it turns up in the plays about two thousand times. And when people fall in love, they are naturally enough called **lovers**.

Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth

says Duke Theseus about Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, and Helena, at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act 5 Scene 1 l.28). They are people in love, no more. The word suggests nothing sexual about their relationship. When Shakespeare was writing this play, in the mid-1590s, the word **lover** didn't have any illicit connotations. Or maybe they were just on the

*(n.) companio
all] Romans, country
V.ii.14; 2H4 IV.iii.13; 1*

point of coming into the language. The first recorded instance of the word in the sense of 'paramour' is not until 1611, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Thou hast played the harlot with many lovers.

This appears in the King James Bible – in *Jeremiah* (3.1).

By that time, **lover** had been in the language for over 300 years. It is first recorded in 1225, and it soon developed a range of senses. But none of them was sexual. The original sense, as you'd expect, was 'someone enamoured of a person of the opposite sex'. The word then developed an everyday sense of someone who was a companion, comrade, or dear friend. Your mates were your lovers. And there was a spiritual sense too: God could be your lover, and you could be a lover of God.

These were still the major senses when Shakespeare was writing. So you have to be especially careful not to read a

lover (n.) companion, comrade, all] Romans, countrymen, and lo V.ii.14; 2H4 IV.iii.13; MV III.iv.17; 1

sexual sense in when someone refers to someone else as his lover. You need the sense of 'comrade' when the old counsellor Menenius refers to the general, Coriolanus, in this way (*Coriolanus*, Act 5 Scene 2 l.14). He tries to persuade some soldiers on watch to let him go into a house in order to talk to Coriolanus:

**I tell thee, fellow,
Thy general is my lover.**

And when Ulysses says to Achilles 'I as your lover speak' (*Troilus and Cressida*, Act 3 Scene 3 l.214), there's no suggestion that either of them is gay.

This sense of 'friend' turns up several times in *Julius Caesar*. When Brutus harangues the crowd with 'Romans, countrymen, and lovers, hear me for my cause' (Act 3 Scene 2 l.13), he isn't singling out 'people in love' as a particular target for his rhetoric. He is simply appealing to everyone as his friends. And the same point applies when Artemidorus writes a letter to Caesar, warning him of plots, and closes it with the words, 'Thy lover' (Act 2 Scene 3 l.8). He isn't suggesting that they've been having an affair. Nor have Brutus and Cassius, when Brutus describes them as having been 'lovers in peace' (Act 5 Scene 1 l.94). Nor have Brutus and Caesar, when Brutus says 'I slew my best lover for the good of Rome' (Act 3 Scene 2 l.45).

There's even an occasion when the non-sexual sense of **lover** is contrasted with a word where sex is definitely part of the meaning. This is in the poem sequence called *The Passionate Pilgrim* (item VII), when the poet asks of a lady:

Was this a lover, or a lecher whether?

In other words, which of the two was she – someone chaste and true in her love, or someone unchaste and untrustworthy?

There are about a dozen places in Shakespeare when you need to be specially aware that **lover** is a false friend; but in all of his uses – I've counted around 125 in all the plays and poems – you need to forget about sex. The plots can get very confusing, otherwise.

David Crystal is Honorary Professor at the University of Bangor. This series uses the database compiled for David and Ben Crystal's book *Shakespeare's Words* to explore some of the false friends in early modern English.
