

Shakespeare coined new words to convey the darkness of *Macbeth*, reveals **David Crystal**.

# Bad bodements

When Shakespeare began writing *Macbeth* (probably in 1605), there seem not to have been enough words in the English language to deal with his protagonist's state of mind and the events relating to it. We find a surprisingly large number of Williamisms (first recorded usages in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) in the Palgrave Shakespeare Handbooks series – 62 of them – most of which feel like genuine coinages on Shakespeare's part, for they clearly relate to the themes and actions of the play.

For a start, there's the word needed for the central event:

If the *assassination*

Could trammel up the consequence (1.7.2)

*Assassin* and *assassinate* were already in use, and other attempts had been or were being made to find a noun for the 'act of assassinating', such as *assassinment*, *assassinacy*, and *assassinay*. But Shakespeare either hadn't come across these or didn't like them. And it is his usage which remained in the language.

Other murder-related words had to be coined. Macbeth says of Banquo and Fleance:

They are *assailable* (3.2.29, 'open to assault')

And we find two new verbs capturing the redness of blood:

The multitudinous seas *incarnadine*,  
Making the green one red. (2.2.62, 'dye with incarnadine')

Go prick thy face and *over-red* thy fear (5.3.14, 'cover with red')  
*Incarnadine* ('flesh-coloured, carnation') had already been used as an adjective and a noun, but this was the first time it had been used as a verb.

Macbeth also needs new words to talk about his own state of mind. He uses *vaulting* to describe his ambition (1.7.27). He hopes that his action will be the *be-all* and the *end-all* (1.7.5). He wants his state to be *founded* as the rock (3.4.21, 'having a foundation'), as broad and general as the *casing* air (3.4.22, 'encasing'). His imagination makes his *seated* heart knock at his ribs (1.3.136, 'fixed in position').

As part of his excuse for killing the grooms, he explains how he ignored reason as a *pauser* (2.3.108, 'one who pauses'). He describes his vision of Banquo's ghost as *unreal* mockery (3.4.106) and his state of mind as *self-abuse* (3.4.141, 'self-deception'). He expresses his belief that he cannot be harmed with two more coinages:

As easy mayst thou the *intrenchant* air (5.6.48, 'incapable of being cut')

With thy keen sword impress, as make me bleed. ...

Let fall thy blade on *vulnerable* crests... (5.6.50, 'capable of being wounded')

His bravery generates more:

... come fate into the list

And *champion* me to the utterance (3.1.71, 'challenge')

We might have met them *dareful* (5.5.6, 'full of daring')

*Direness*, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,

Cannot once start me (5.5.14, 'dreadfulness')

But *bear-like* I must fight the course (5.6.2)

And he responds to Macduff's revelation with one last coinage:

For it hath *cowed* my better part of man (5.6.57, 'dispirited')

Just over half the Williamisms in the play (32) are given to Macbeth.

But three of the most interesting ones are given to Lady Macbeth in her opening speech:

chastise with the valour of my tongue

All that *impedes* thee from the golden round (1.5.26)

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, *unsex* me here... (1.5.39)

That no *compunctious* visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose (1.5.43, 'remorseful')

*Unsex* illustrates one of Shakespeare's favourite word-creation

patterns: prefixing by *un-*. We've already

seen it in *unreal*. Here it is again. And

we find another four instances in this play:

lechery... it provokes and *unprovokes*  
(2.3.27, 'fails to stimulate')

O nation miserable, / With an *untitled*  
tyrant (4.3.104, 'having no title')

... sword... I sheathe again *undeeded* (5.6.30, 'having performed no deeds')

*Unspeak* mine own detraction (4.3.123)

*Compunctious* is notable because he could have used *remorseful*, as in earlier plays (e.g. *Henry VI*). It has the same stress-pattern, so would fit the line. But he had just used *remorse* in the previous line ('Stop up the access and passage to remorse'), and very likely he wanted to find a word which didn't have the same root (try replacing *compunctious* by *remorseful* to see the banal effect it creates). A search in the amazing *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) shows that there wasn't an already existing alternative – so he created one. And it is a good one. The sense of *compunctious* includes a notion of the 'stinging' of conscience, which *remorseful* lacks.

Most of the play's neologisms have a negative connotation. They typically have an ominous or unpleasant ring, especially the adjectives: '*shipwrecking* storms' (1.2.26), '*choppy* finger' (1.3.43, 'full of clefts'), '*stealthy* pace' (2.1.54), '*swfeted* grooms' (2.2.5, 'fed to excess'), '*mousing* owl' (2.4.13, 'mouse-hunting'), '*fitful* fever' (3.2.23, 'full of fits'), '*shard-born* beetle' (3.2.42, 'born in dung'), '*rooky* wood' (3.2.51, 'full of rooks'), '*sweltered* venom' (4.1.8, 'exuded like sweat'), 'thick and *slab*' (of gruel, 4.1.32,

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'semi-solid'), *fiendlike* queen' (5.6.108). Half the Williamisms (31) in this play are adjectives.

The negative tone continues with the noun and verb coinages: 'I'll *devil-porter* it no further' (2.3.16), *water-rugs* (3.1.93, 'rough-haired water-dogs', context: classifying assassins), 'no rubs nor *botches*' (3.1.133, 'flaws'), 'the *hedge-pig* whined' (4.1.2, 'hedgehog', context: witchery), 'untimely *emptying*' (4.3.68), '*uproar* the universal peace' (4.3.99, 'throw into confusion'), *cyme* (5.3.55, context: purgative drugs). For the record, it is also the first mention in an English text of *Bellona*, the Roman goddess of war (1.2.56) and *Norwegian* (1.2.31, 'Norwegian', but here seen as an enemy).

Very few neologisms have a positive meaning in the play, and when they do occur we find them given a distinctly negative spin. Some have a negative element in their structure: 'my *confineless* harms' (4.3.55, 'boundless'), 'a *staunchless* avarice' (4.3.78, 'that may not be held back'), 'the *unshrinking* station' (5.6.81, 'unyielding'). Others are used in a clearly disturbing context: '*aroint* thee, witch!' (1.2.31, 'begone'), 'this *even-handed* justice' (1.7.10, context: a poisoned chalice), 'I have *drugged* their possets' (2.2.6, context: murder), 'suffer in *exposure*' (2.3.124, 'public exhibition', context: frailties), 'the *valued* file' (3.1.94, context: classifying assassins), *summer-cloud* (3.4.110, context: something that overcomes), 'the *galloping* of horse' (4.1.139, context: disappearance of the witches), 'our down-fallen *birthdom*' (4.3.4, 'birthright'), '*minutely* revolts' (5.2.18, 'occurring every minute').

The remaining three are all in a positive context, but one which is strongly ironic in view of subsequent events. Banquo's praise of Macbeth's castle (1.6.4,ff) includes the neologisms 'loved *mansionry*' ('dwelling places') and '*coign* of vantage' ('a projecting corner'). And Macbeth misinterprets the witches' prophecies as 'sweet *bodements*' (4.1.95, 'omens'). If he had had the chance to do a linguistic analysis of his own discourse, he might have suspected something. Neologisms in this play are not good news.

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