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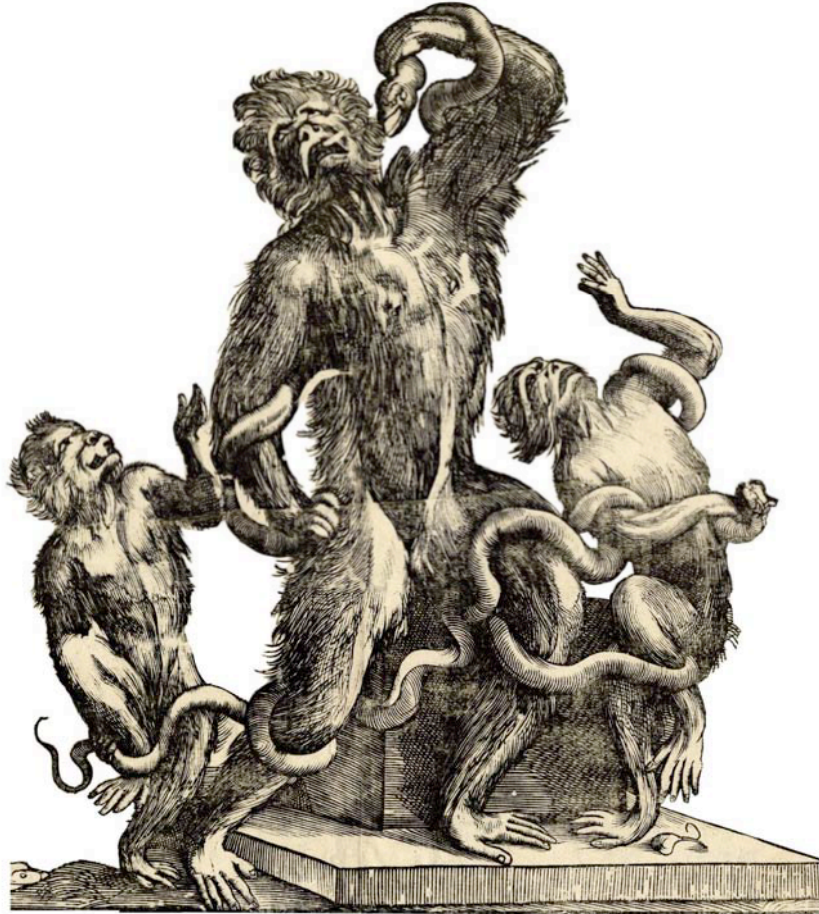
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PURLOINED LETTERS

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF QUOTATION STUDIES

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Speciale Shakespeare

"SACRO SPECCHIO DELLA MODA": WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, VOCE DEL POTERE /
"A GLASS OF GODLY FORM": SHAKESPEARE AS THE VOICE OF ESTABLISHED POWER

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MATERIALI / MATERIALS

IOLANDA PLESCIA

SHAKESPEARE, THE FATHER OF ENGLISH? A REVIEW OF THE VOCABULARY QUESTION

1. *Introduction*

Among the many ways in which Shakespeare has been considered a 'father' of English culture, the idea that he had a material creative impact on the very fabric of his country's language, contributing a vast number of neologisms and idiomatic expressions to it, is one of the hardest to debunk. Such an idea, which David Crystal was one of the first to call a myth[1] – and which comprises two separate myths, one related to Shakespeare's lexical inventiveness and the other to the size of his vocabulary – may have been encouraged and enhanced by the proliferation of citations around Shakespearean texts, which have lent special authority even to his most trivial utterances. This mythical account of Shakespeare's language is alive and well in the digital age, appearing time and time again especially online, but also in some important scholarly sources: it seems to serve specific

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[1] D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare's Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 2-10.

cultural purposes which the present review article aims to discuss, taking into account a small but representative selection of influential books on Shakespeare's language that have maintained the exceptionality of the playwright's vocabulary in quantitative terms. The examples are all the more significant since the quality of their scholarship is undoubted, which is not always the case with the more popular sources.

A quick Google search on the query "Shakespeare and language" will return the reassuring information that Shakespeare is not only the father of English literature (with a handful of dissenters arguing in favour of Chaucer), but the actual progenitor and producer of the English language as we know it. Scores of popular websites will report some version of this story:[2]

"His impact endures not only in the way we express ourselves, but how we experience and process the world around us. Had Shakespeare not given us the words, would we truly feel 'bedazzled' (*The Taming of the Shrew*)? Had he not taught us the word 'gloomy' (*Titus Andronicus*), would it be a feeling we recognised in ourselves?"[3]

The eternal chicken-or-egg question – does the concept pre-exist language or is it language itself that produces the word and the concept? – is here roundly answered in favour of language: in this commentator's view, Shakespeare has given us words so powerful that they allow us to conceive, and therefore feel, emotions we would not have been able to identify otherwise. Another paragraph of the article quoted above, a BBC feature written in the year of Shakespeare's 450th birthday, is entitled

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[2] On 'clickbait websites' reporting the story, but also serious academic articles on the subject, see J. Hope, *Who Invented Gloomy? Lies People Want to Believe About Shakespeare*, in *The Shape of a Language*, edited by I. Plescia, "Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies", III, 2016, pp. 21-45 (in particular p. 22, notes 3 and 4).

[3] H. Anderson, *How Shakespeare Influences the Way We Speak Now*, "BBC CULTURE", 21/10/2014 (https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140527-say-what-shakespeares-words).

"Famous phrases", and uses quotations from a number of Shakespeare plays to argue in favour of his influence over our everyday use of language. Among other often cited expressions, the common phrase "to be in a pickle", indicating a difficult predicament, is attributed to *The Tempest*, without any further indication of the location of the citation. It is true, as a quick online search will show, that Alonso asks Trinculo "How camest thou in this pickle?", at 5.1.282, and receives this answer: "I have been in such a pickle since I saw you last" (l. 283). Yet an equally easy search in the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives at least three similar uses in Heywood, Tusser, and Foxe before Shakespeare.[4] It is as if the mere mention of a Shakespeare quote, even one lacking any precise coordinates, must be taken by the reader on its own authority, with no further questions asked.

Such claims are even more striking when one considers that the author of the article is better informed than most. In fact, she goes on to concede that, yes, digital humanities scholars and linguists have recently corrected some of the ideas that have been held about Shakespeare's language over time:

"Scholars have argued back and forth over just how many of these words and phrases Shakespeare actually coined, and how many he merely popularised by bedding them down in a memorable plot. In the past few years, quantitative analysis and digital databases have allowed computers to simultaneously search thousands of texts, leading scholars to believe that we may have overestimated his contribution to the English language. According to a 2011 paper by Ward EY Elliott and Robert J. Valenza […], new words attributed to Shakespeare have probably been over-counted by a factor of at least two. The *OED* is coming to reflect this: in the 1950s, Shakespeare's tally of first-use citations stood at 3,200. Today, it's around 2,000".[5]

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[4] W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, edited by V. Mason Vaughan and A. T. Vaughan, in *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, edited by R. Proudfoot, A. Thompson, and D. Scott Kastan, London, Thomson Learning, 2010. OED. "pickle, n., II 4 a", *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2022, *sub voce*.

[5] H. Anderson, *How Shakespeare Influences the Way We Speak Now*, cit.

However, the feature misses the point of the new inquiries, happy to settle for 2,000 first-used words rather than 3,200 ("Not that 2,000 is bad going, especially when so many of those words saturate our everyday speech"). The point being that, as quantitative investigations progress thanks to the ever-increasing masses of searchable text provided, for example, by *Early English Books Online*,[6] discovering antedatings of words previously, and joyously, attributed to Shakespeare, that number is destined to keep shrinking. And what will we be left with then? If we persist in explaining even part of Shakespeare's greatness with his creative contribution to the language in terms of word-coining, is his cultural standing not destined to diminish in the future? This, I suggest, is one of the reasons why mainstream media outlets and some scholarly works are equally reluctant to accept the idea that Shakespeare's ability to pull words out of his artistic hat has been blown out of proportion. The fact that a major British media outlet such as the BBC website should publish such a piece is significant in this respect: it parallels other patriotic celebrations of the greatest English writer of all time which can be found splashed all over the Internet.

I would like to suggest here that the appearance of Shakespeare as a demiurgical wordsmith at the peak of the English Renaissance, when the language was reaching its modern shape from a structural point of view and responding to a national cultural project of enrichment and search for linguistic prestige, serves to fuel a larger myth of creation of the English language, termed by Richard J. Watts as "the myth of greatness".[7] Watts has argued persuasively that many apparently factual accounts of the history of English adopt a teleological perspective which looks at the

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[6] See https://www.english-corpora.org/eebo.
[7] R. J. Watts, *Language Myths and the History of English*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 139-141.

development of the language through lens tainted by an ideology of greatness, giving rise to a number of misrepresentations which all serve to bolster the overarching myth of a supposed "superiority of English". One of the examples to which he points is the widespread choice to preface a number of changes in vowel pronunciation which began in the 15th century with the adjective 'great' – the Great Vowel Shift – which he sees as an attempt to portray the phenomenon as unitary and sweeping, ushering in the modern age. A convenient description for a complex linguistic issue which, he contends, must be studied at a more local level. In much the same way, using a few unsubstantiated quotations to cast 'Shakespeare the neologiser' as the main character of a (hi)story in which great weight is placed on the specific period of early modernity provides a convenient explanation for what is perceived as the 'peak' of English language development – the climax of the story, so to speak.

It might seem unfair to scrutinise the generalist position of a celebratory BBC article so closely, but the attitude described is prevalent in other outlets that are dedicated to the appreciation and cultivation of Shakespeare's work. For example, the very first hit in the Google search mentioned above brings us to the website of the Royal Shakespeare Company, which states that

> "[…] the early modern English language was less than 100 years old in 1590 when Shakespeare was writing. No dictionaries had yet been written and most documents were still written in Latin. He contributed 1,700 words to the English language because he was the first author to write them down".[8]

Here the figure has dropped further and sounds more plausible – 1,700, a number still endorsed by David Crystal in 2008[9] – and the position

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[8] See https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare/language
[9] D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare's Language*, cit., p. 9.

is articulated more clearly: Shakespeare is defined not as a coiner of words but merely as the first to have set them down in writing. The idea that an author can contribute to a language by being the first to set words down – or rather, by being the first to be able to claim a recorded entry, surviving in time – is a more reasonable way of thinking about linguistic innovation, since it will never be possible to be sure about who the first person to utter an expression was. Here too, however, imprecise quotations are floated around to support the grand claim that Shakespeare "invent[ed] completely new words" and "was the first person to use" a number of words, such as "unfriended", which is found in *Twelfth Night* supposedly for the first time, in Antonio's speech at 3.3.5-11:

> "I could not stay behind you: my desire,
> More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth:
> And not all love to see you (though so much
> As might have drawn one to a longer voyage)
> But jealousy what might befall your travel,
> Being skilless in these parts: which to a stranger,
> Unguided and unfriended, often prove
> Rough and inhospitable." [10]

Again, no effort to provide the exact quote is made, nor are any additional sources used to fact-check: in this particular case, *OED* gives two occurrences of 'unfriended' used in the same sense before Shakespeare ("Not provided with friends; friendless"), one by Thomas More in his *History of Richard III*, and one by Roger Ascham.[11] Linguists and historians of English have been challenging the number and scope of this kind of contributions for some time now, with persuasive arguments.

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[10] *Twelfth Night*, edited by J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, in *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, edited by R. Proudfoot, A. Thompson, and D. Scott Kastan, London, Thomson Learning, 2010.

[11] "unfriended, adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2022, *sub voce*.

This article, then, proposes a reflection upon the reasons why we apparently prefer to believe linguistic myths about Shakespeare, supported by randomly quoted passages, than to ask more cogently where exactly his linguistic creativity lies. In order to do this, it firstly provides a brief review of studies that have presented rational evidence for not believing the Shakespearean vocabulary myth. I understand such studies as an attempt to deconstruct the all-encompassing, tidy, unifying – in Watts's sense – idea of Shakespeare as creator of a vast number of individual words. The article then moves on to consider persisting depictions of Shakespeare's vocabulary as exceptional, asking why this disproven theory is perpetuated even in intelligent and influential works of the past two decades. This is work by scholars who provide fine, linguistically-informed readings and pay attention to social and political contexts, who display impeccable philological acumen in other respects, but for whom renouncing the underlying vocabulary myth seems impossible. While most scholars, audiences and readers will probably agree that gauging the impact and importance of Shakespeare's language entails much more than counting words, the debate on his linguistic inventiveness has, surprisingly, largely hinged on repeated truisms rather than on a re-examination of other areas of creativity which do not necessarily involve introducing new lexicon into English.

2. *Sizing up Shakespeare's vocabulary*

For almost two decades now, the myth of Shakespeare as creator and possessor of an unequalled vocabulary has been disputed by a small but growing number of scholars dedicated to what Jonathan Hope has called "zombie killing", that is, correcting mistaken ideas about the size and composition of the playwright's vocabulary which keep resurrecting,

especially in online sources: a 'zombie idea' is defined by Hope as one "that people cling to, or which sporadically reappears, despite refutation".[12] Besides Crystal, I focus here in particular on three relatively recent studies, by Jonathan Hope (2016), Hugh Craig (2011), and Ward Elliott and R. J. Valenza (2011), which can be taken as vantage points, since the authors have reviewed the previous existing positions and carried out new digital analyses, to which the reader may turn to find information on earlier skeptics of the 'enormous vocabulary theory' (including perhaps the most famous among them, Jespersen), who seem to have gone largely unheeded.[13]

Most recently, developing a previous argument on the notion of Shakespeare as creative genius deriving from a Romantic understanding of what an author must be, Hope set out in a 2016 article – aptly titled *Who Invented Gloomy?*[14] – to deflate the myth of invention attached to a number of words attributed to Shakespeare in a variety of sources:

"It is a curious fact of the great Shakespeare vocabulary myth that many of the sites spreading it, and even some academic articles, are aware of the problems with taking OED first citations as evidence. Nonetheless, a few sentences after they acknowledge the problems, most revert to the zombie language, defaulting to a position where Shakespeare is still a coiner or inventor of new words (or phrases). People are desperate to 'save' his position as a creative genius despite the known problems with the 'evidence' they cite. So why won't the idea die? In this case, the one zombie which escapes the purge is Romanticism. Our model of poetic genius stems from a Romantic view of the writer (one rather alien to Renaissance notions of writing) which stresses

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[12] J. Hope, *Who Invented Gloomy? Lies People Want to Believe About Shakespeare*, cit., p. 23.

[13] A concise but exhaustive recap of historical attitudes to the size and inventiveness of Shakespeare's vocabulary is found in K. Johnson, *Shakespeare's Language: Perspectives Past and Present*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2019, pp. 71-79. On Otto Jespersen's position, see W. E. Y. Elliott and R. J. Valenza, *Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Did It Dwarf All Others?*, in *Stylistics and Shakespeare's Language: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by J. Culpeper and M. Ravassat, London, Continuum, 2011, pp. 34-54 (especially pp. 36-37).

[14] J. Hope, *Who Invented Gloomy? Lies People Want to Believe About Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 21-45.

originality, and 'newness'. What could better confirm our sense of Shakespeare's superiority to other writers than the notion that he 'creates', in some substantial way, modern English?"[15]

Some of the misattributed words are in very common use today: *eyeball*, *fashionable*, *gloomy*, *laughable*, *generous*. Hope thus proceeds to describe a simple, empirical process that anyone can follow to antedate such words and thus re-attribute them. In some cases, it is sufficient to revisit the entry for the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as I have done to fact-check the quotations given in the BBC and RSC articles discussed above, for some Shakespearean first citations have already been corrected in its own, subsequent revisions: this is the case of the word *eyeball*, for example, recently reattributed to William Patten, author of *The Calendar of Scripture* (1675).[16] In others, Hope points to repositories of digitised texts such as the *Early Print*, *JISC Historical Texts* and *EEBO-TCP*[17] which, if searched properly, will turn up, in some cases, dozens of antedatings (antedatings which, as mentioned, are increasingly being taken into account in the *OED* itself). Hope's invitation is that students and researchers begin to check all the words currently attributed to Shakespeare as first uses, or first recordings, if not inventions.

The novelty of the resources Hope indicates, and the speed and accuracy with which they can now be searched, is such that even David Crystal's 2008 exposé of the "invention myth" now appears outdated.[18] As we have seen, Crystal then upheld the view that about 1,700 out of the

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[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

[16] "Eyeball, n., 1.a" *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2021, *sub voce*.

[17] *Early Print – Curating and Exploring Early Printed English*, a collaborative project of Northwestern University and Washington University in St. Louis, https://earlyprint.org; *Historical Texts*, https://historicaltexts.jisc.ac.uk; Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup.

[18] D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare's Language*, cit., pp. 8-10.

OED first citations attributed to Shakespeare might plausibly be his inventions[19] – a number that Hope invites us to question. However, the merits of Crystal's argument against invention lie not in this particular estimate, certainly destined to shrink as progress is made in antedating, but rather in the historical contextualisation he provides, stressing how lexical creativity, mostly achieved through affixation and suffixation of Greek and Latin borrowings imported by the thousands especially thanks to translation, was a feature of the entire early modern age, and not of Shakespeare's work alone.

Along with the invention myth, Crystal also proceeded to demolish the "quantity myth"[20] – the idea, that is, that Shakespeare possessed a vocabulary unsurpassed by any other author before or after him – by pointing out that while he did have a large vocabulary when compared to his peers, the English language has expanded considerably over the centuries after Shakespeare's death, so that it becomes logically impossible to defend the claim that his vocabulary was vaster than any writer's. The clarity, and common sense, of such an observation is such that one wonders how it is still possible to find this very claim in otherwise trustworthy sources such as histories of English and serious treatments of Shakespeare's language. There may be, in this case, some degree of confusion between actual invention of words and Shakespeare's acceptance of foreign words into the language, his welcoming, multilingual stance, in tune with the Elizabethan translation movement that enriched the language in size and scope, but which was looked upon with suspicion by an opposing party of purists. While such new words must of course be

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[19] In the meantime, many words have been antedated, and Jonathan Culpeper has since adjusted the figure to 1,502, a number which seems destined to shrink considerably, as discussed below.

[20] D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare's Language*, cit., pp. 2-7.

distinguished from coinages, they are part of the same drive towards renovating the English language and testify to the multilingual environment in which Shakespeare worked.

Other studies have tackled the issue of size, especially with the aid of digital tools, since Crystal's book. In 2011, Hugh Craig compared Shakespeare's vocabulary, which he estimated to be around 20,000 different words, to that of his contemporaries, by quantitatively analyzing a corpus comprising twenty-eight plays generally accepted as Shakespearean against about a hundred plays by other writers. While the results confirmed that Shakespeare's vocabulary was larger than that of his peers, he emphasised that more of his plays survive than those of any other contemporary playwright: he was possibly more productive than everyone else, but the larger available sample proves only that "he had more opportunity to use different words".[21] Furthermore, by standardising the samples under scrutiny, so that segments of the same length (the first 10,000 words of plays) are analysed and "playwrights with large or small canons are neither at an advantage or a disadvantage",[22] Craig concludes that Shakespeare is actually quite typical in the average number of different words he uses:

"For the secrets of Shakespeare's undoubted greatness, it seems we must look elsewhere than in a prodigiously rich vocabulary in the particular terms we have been examining – that is, the number of different words he uses and the number of new words in a given work. Jespersen and Crystal were right to be skeptical about the myth about Shakespeare's vocabulary, but they did not make comparisons with Shakespeare's peers and so attributed Shakespeare's large vocabulary to an exceptional range and variety of situations in his drama. The truth is much simpler: Shakespeare has a larger vocabulary because he has a larger canon".[23]

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[21] H. Craig, *Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality*, in "Shakespeare Quarterly", LXII, 2011, p. 60.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

The claim – bolstered by other experiments in the second part of Craig's article – that Shakespeare's language is "an extraordinary achievement with the regular resources of the English of his day rather than a linguistic aberration"[24] is based on the kind of numerical data that scholars are now in a position to analyse quickly and efficiently. Yet the idea that Shakespeare had the largest vocabulary of all time stubbornly persists.

A study that carried out various vocabulary tests to explore the same research question was the one produced by Elliott and Valenza in the same year, 2011, mentioned in the BBC piece quoted at the beginning of this article. The study was undertaken at roughly the same time as Craig's and independently came to similar conclusions, arguing that "much of Shakespeare's pre-eminence over others is due to the greater accessibility to his writing. He wrote more than others and was better recorded, catalogued and anthologised. The people who wrote the *Oxford English Dictionary* could get to him like they could not get to other writers".[25] Elliott and Valenza conducted tests thanks to a program, *Intellex*, which they developed in order to measure verbal "richness" in three different ways,[26] looking at large blocks of 40,000 words from Shakespeare, eight of his contemporaries, and Milton. Their results show that "once you remove the gross biases of corpus size from the calculations, it becomes clear that, if anyone's vocabulary dwarfed others in size, it was Milton's, and maybe Spenser's, and not Shakespeare's".[27] They also addressed the invention myth, discussing different ways of counting coinages that may have contributed to it, and showing how the increasing pace of digitisation of other writers' texts, as well as advances in attribution studies, will cause

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[25] W. E. Y. Elliott and R. J. Valenza, *Shakespeare's Vocabulary*, cit., p. 37.
[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 42-45.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

previous estimates of Shakespeare coinages to shrink progressively. The task of going through all the words not yet disproven as neologisms has very recently (2019) been taken up by the team of the *Encyclopedia of Shakespeare's Language Project*, an AHRC-funded project currently underway at Lancaster University and led by Jonathan Culpeper, which has produced the freely accessible *Enhanced Shakespeare Corpus.* A 'spin-off' project funded by the British Academy, with Jonathan Hope as advisor, will carefully scrutinise each instance by using both the *ESC* and *EEBO*.[28] In an online PhD seminar given at Sapienza University in February 2021, Culpeper estimated that fewer than a quarter of the 1,502 words remaining as first citations in the *OED* can reasonably be considered Shakespeare's, and that this number will also continue to shrink once special cases such as nonce words are excluded.

3. *What we want to believe*

It is understandable, if far from accurate, that websites dedicated to providing introductions to Shakespeare should employ language with a triumphant ring to it, and some simplification for the general public is to be expected. However, while it may be necessary to distinguish Shakespeare as a popular icon in the culture of the worldwide web from his standing in academia, many reputable scholarly sources have also tended to subscribe to the myth of exceptionality in vocabulary. It may be that since these sources were still holding outdated positions around the turn of the millennium, those ideas have trickled down in time and have firmly attached themselves to popular websites today, but also to some types of

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[28] For more information on *The Encyclopedia of Shakespeare's Language Project*, see http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/shakespearelang.

academic writing. An extremely successful manual by Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable, for example, used by generations of students of the history of English and which has been updated several times over the years, has kept a rather ambiguous passage about Shakespeare's language through successive editions up to the latest, its sixth, published in 2013:

"It is a well-known fact that, except for a man like the Elizabethan translator Philemon Holland, Shakespeare had the largest vocabulary of any English writer. This is due not only to his daring and resourceful use of words but also in part to his ready acceptance of new words of every kind […]. Some of the words Shakespeare uses must have been very new indeed, because the earliest instance in which we find them at all is only a year or two before he uses them (e.g., *exist, initiate, jovial*), and in a number of cases his is the earliest occurrence of the word in English (*accommodation, apostrophe, assassination* […])".[29]

This position is more nuanced, as is to be expected since the authors of the book are experts in the history of English, aware that language cannot spring suddenly out of the skill of a single creator, however gifted. Shakespeare is not credited here as the inventor of words, but as an open-minded selector who has picked up on what are supposed to be very new items in the language. In this sense, he is interestingly compared to a prolific translator such as Philemon Holland, possibly generating some confusion on the difference between coinage and borrowing, but also usefully highlighting that Shakespeare's was an age in which foreign words circulated and were largely being adopted into English. Still, the quantity myth as defined by Crystal lives on in this paragraph, since the phrase "the largest vocabulary of any English writer", though it possibly was meant to refer to the period under examination in the chapter on the Renaissance in which it appears, can easily be taken, as it stands, for a comprehensive statement involving the entire history of English literature. This is, as

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[29] A. C. Baugh and T. Cable, *A History of the English Language*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2013, pp. 230-231.

Crystal has noted, a simply untenable position, by virtue of the mere fact that the vocabulary of English has continued to expand after Shakespeare's time. The claim that Shakespeare's use of certain words is the 'earliest occurrence' is also questionable, as we have seen in the previous section – notice here the mention of the pet word *assassination*, nearly infallibly quoted in pieces considering Shakespeare as a neologiser – but it is that initial mis-phrasing on the size of his vocabulary that can be particularly confusing, to students in particular. In this case as well, citations of individual words are not contextualized or related to their source, but given as data to be accepted on its own merit.

If one of the best-known histories of English has consistently represented the quantity myth, it will perhaps not be surprising to find the legend of Shakespeare's exceptionally large vocabulary reverberating at different times even in scholarly sources. It is, however, particularly interesting to find the myth perpetuated in some of the comparatively few books (as opposed to the copious strictly literary inquiries available) that have devoted extensive space to Shakespeare's linguistic world. In the present section I comment again upon three chosen examples, to illustrate the role Shakespeare's words play in narratives about the development of English. The books from which they are taken are different in nature and scope, but all are highly enjoyable and essential reading for anyone interested in Shakespeare's language. One, by Russ McDonald,[30] is the work of an acute and distinguished literary scholar with a keen interest in linguistic effects, produced at the turn of the millennium, when arguments against exceptionality in size were still scarce; the second is Seth Lerer's

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[30] R. McDonald, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

account of the "invention" of English, published in 2007,[31] just before Crystal's 2008 book but after his 2004 glossary, *Shakespeare's Words*,[32] at a time, that is, when systematic inquiries on vocabulary were being undertaken. In both cases, to be fair, it is too early to expect conclusions on Shakespearean vocabulary to run completely counter to the prevalent ones, but they are examples of how even authors who problematise the issue of vocabulary seem less interested in actual numbers than in a general celebration of linguistic inventiveness which fits into a neat narrative of 'greatness': choosing to view the early modern period not as one characterised by specific formal changes and challenges (as are all periods in the history of a language), but in a teleological perspective, as *the* period in which English 'came into its own', implies a need for an agent, a primary cause of change. In the third case, however, Paula Blank's *Shakesplish* (2018),[33] it is interesting to see how the acquisitions of the 2010s studies described in paragraph 2 seem not to have been taken into account in what is in many cases a brilliant, and far from bardolatric, discussion of the relevance of Shakespeare's language today.

The certainty with which Shakespeare is considered to have had an exceptionally large vocabulary, to which he added invented words by the hundreds or thousands, reappears in McDonald's influential *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* (2001), which offers a more balanced than most, but still partial account of Shakespeare's linguistic creativity. While recognising and even stressing the importance of historicisation in looking at an author's use of language, McDonald sets out to discuss Shakespeare's

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[31] S. Lerer, *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007.

[32] D. Crystal and B. Crystal, *Shakespeare's Words. A Glossary and Language Companion*, London, Penguin, 2004.

[33] P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2018.

"remarkable role in expanding the English vocabulary".[34] It is important not to draw hasty conclusions about the extent of this book's research: McDonald is of course fully knowledgeable about his subject matter. He usefully recaps the status of the Shakespearean vocabulary debate in history up to the beginning of the 2000s: critics and readers in pre-digital ages believed in a personal and conspicuous contribution of Shakespeare to the language quite early on, as testified by Francis Meres, who noted in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) that a handful of authors, among whom he cites Shakespeare, had 'mightily enriched' the English tongue.[35] They then shifted, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to skepticism towards Shakespeare's role in the expansion of English vocabulary, a skepticism McDonald considers "inaccurate", but with no further explanation. Celebrations of his word-making skills resurfaced at the beginning of the twentieth century, until finally, McDonald concludes, "recent scholarship has proposed a more judicious estimate of Shakespeare's neologisms", which he limits to Latinate derivations – around 600 words deriving from Latin according to Bryan Gardner.[36] Clearly, the scope of the contribution is greatly reduced, but the main argument stands. This is an example of well-informed scholarship in the context of an extraordinarily rich and useful book; but it is also an illustration of how linguistic myths serve a purpose. Indeed, 'Shakespeare as neologiser' is a character that here features within a larger narrative about the greatness that the English language was seeking to achieve in the early modern period: "Shakespeare was born at the right time. In a fortunate intersection of individual talent and cultural context, his unmatched sensitivity to words combines with the range and plasticity of the English language at this moment in its

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[34] R. McDonald, Shakespeare and the Arts of Language, cit., p. 35.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

development".[37] 'Unmatched' is a word that recurs in accounts of Shakespeare's contribution to early modern English. I do not think that we should deny that the early modern period was a fundamental chapter in the 'story' of English, as long as we are aware of the symbolic potential of watershed dates, exceptional characters, emblematic objects (such as the First Folio or the King James Bible), which however powerful simply cannot, on their own, claim definitive influence on the language, which is a collective enterprise of speech communities subject to constant change.

It is precisely to this narrative quality of most accounts of the history of English, perhaps, that we can turn to explain the continued belief in Shakespeare's exceptionality in vocabulary. If the adventure of early modern English as a language is told as a story, it needs its heroes: this, to my mind, is the most basic explanation for this recurring 'zombie idea'. The significance of the 'Shakespeare as neologiser' character is evidenced in a beautiful chapter by Seth Lerer in his book *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*.[38] Lerer shows he is perfectly aware of the centrality of the character as he opens his chapter with these words: "Shakespeare. The very name evokes the *acme* of the English language" (my emphasis).[39] Lerer discusses Shakespeare's ability as a selector of old and new vocabulary who was not afraid to introduce his audience to lexis that was unfamiliar either because it was already obsolete, or because it had yet to gain currency. At the same time Lerer, like McDonald, is not shy in affirming that "Shakespeare was a master of the grand vocabulary. Acutely sensitive to learned Latinate formations, but at the same time alert to the Anglo-saxon roots of English, he coined words and phrases at a rate

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[37] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[38] S. Lerer, *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*, cit.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

unmatched by any previous or subsequent author" (my emphasis).[40] The claim is not qualified in any way, nor are any studies on the 'rate' with which words were coined in the early modern period referenced in a note. While Lerer's discussion of chosen examples of Shakespeare's verbal prowess – his use of the modal verbs *will* and *do*, for example, or of the pronoun *thou* – is fascinating, and the chapter is a wonderful example of critical sensitivity to language, the statement quoted above remains categorical, a truism which merits no closer scrutiny. The comprehensive declaration that Shakespeare's skill and speed in coining words was unparalleled "by any previous or subsequent author" seems to complement Baugh and Cable's assertion of the playwright's superiority in terms of vocabulary to the entire roster of writers in the English language, including those that came after him. A remarkable, but linguistically improbable, feat: "Shakespeare coins a word and, in the process, leads us into English literary and linguistic history"[41] – this is a contention that could easily be upheld if instead of 'coinage' we were thinking in terms of 'picking up on', 'popularising', or 'foregrounding', especially since the 'first use' myth is so difficult to validate.

One such word, considered a neologism by Lerer and which recurs in many other online and scholarly sources, is the previously mentioned *assassination*, taken from a celebrated passage of *Macbeth* (I, 7, 1-3): "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly. If th'assassination / Could trammel up the consequence […]". This seems to be a constant example, of which commentators, including Crystal, are particularly fond. But if one checks the recently updated entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, before the 1623 Folio mention of

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[40] *Ibid.*, p. 125.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

'assassination' the word pops up in the title of a 1610 translation from the French – "A lamentable discourse, vpon the paricide and bloudy assasination: committed on the person of Henry the Fourth".[42] This entry was not present in the previous version, *OED*2 (1989). Determinations of this sort – the word might have been floating around in the first decades of the 17th century, but who was the first to put pen to paper and record it for posterity, and can that be considered 'invention'? – are contingent upon external factors such as dating issues. Our verdict will in fact depend on whether we believe *Macbeth* was actually written around 1606-7, before the translation, and whether we believe the 1606 version did contain that particular word, but in the absence of a 1606 text, and with only the Folio to go by, it is impossible to be sure which came first. Be that as it may, I want to suggest that much more important than establishing whether or not Shakespeare was the very first to use the word is Lerer's observation that this relatively new, Latinate lexical item is placed by Shakespeare within a mostly Germanic lexical context, and is thus effectively foregrounded:[43] it is not surprising, however, that the catchier, alluring idea of Shakespeare as an inventor should take hold on popular consciousness, much more than fine readings of his use of different roots and lexical sources can. In fact, the need for a linguistic champion becomes all the more clear in Lerer's conclusion that "if Shakespeare has been seen as the apex of linguistic usage, then it is Hamlet that remains the exemplar of modern character".[44] This striking parallel with the epoch-defining Hamlet seems to me to support the idea that in such a linguistic narrative Shakespeare is evoked mainly as a symbolic figure. The point is especially important since so

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[42] "Assassination, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2021, *sub voce*.
[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

much of linguistic history is woven precisely around symbolic, watershed moments and characters, as mentioned, but also on new beginnings and 'firsts': the role of Alfred the Great in the Old English period as the 'first' translator, or fosterer of translation; the Norman invasion as the conventional start of Middle English; the arrival of the printing press inaugurating the early modern period; and yes, the birth of Shakespeare, the 'first' to use new words.

There is no real harm in such narrations, of course, provided that we recognise them as such. But even more recent books on Shakespeare's language, written after the advent of digital resources used for antedating, such as Paula Blank's thought-provoking *Shakesplish* (2018), stick firmly to the idea that Shakespeare did invent words, while conceding a lower figure – here limited to 600, mostly identified with first occurrences reported in the *OED*. Blank is exemplary in that her entire book is in a sense concerned with contemporary myth-making and misunderstandings associated to Shakespeare, and she is interested in those processes of identification which make us ('us' to her is the contemporary American public, I should stress) badly want to recognise Shakespeare's language as our own despite the difficulty and foreignness it sometimes exhibits. She is acutely aware throughout her discussion that "Shakespeare's linguistic originality has always been at the center of our appreciation of the playwright's intelligence".[45] She does discuss Jonathan Hope's argument that Shakespeare "inventing words and wielding a gargantuan vocabulary" is a myth, probably derived from notions of genius and originality we have inherited from the Romantics, quoting his conclusion that it is "our own, historically conditioned, aesthetic values that lead us to assume that Shakespeare must have exceeded his contemporaries in linguistic invention

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[45] P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, cit., p. 147.

and potential".[46] Yet, while appreciating this awareness of historicity, Blank simply cannot accept the demise of the neologising Shakespeare character and offers this dubious objection: "until we actually discover alternative sources for words currently attributed to Shakespeare, Hope's argument remains fallacious. The fallacy, as Shakespeare would have known it, is *ad ignorantiam* – the claim that not knowing if something is true is taken as proof that it's false. If we concede that many entries in the *OED* may be wrong we must also concede, barring evidence to the contrary, that they may also be right".[47] A tenuous defence at best, in an otherwise extremely informative, rich and brilliant discussion of what Shakespeare's language means to modern audiences. It would be unjust, as I have written in a review of this book,[48] to reproach Blank for not being able to see Hope's 2016 article on antedatings, which does in fact provide evidence of where to find the words previously attributed to Shakespeare, since she prematurely passed away that year.[49] But perhaps it is an interesting testament to her love of Shakespeare's words that she cannot completely let go of the vocabulary myth, when she is perfectly aware of its pitfalls, which she discusses at the end of her book when dealing with idiomatic expressions ("What's remarkable about these lists [in trade books and internet sites] is how often they attribute idioms to Shakespeare that he

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[46] The assertion is Hope's (J. Hope, *Shakespeare and the English Language*, in *English in the World: History, Diversity, Change*, edited by P. Seargeant and J. Swann, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 68), quoted in P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, cit., p. 148. On the over-representation of Shakespeare in the *OED*, see J. Schäfer, *Documentation in the O.E.D.: Shakespeare and Nashe as Test Cases*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 148.

[48] I. Pescia, review to P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, cit., in "Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies", VII, 2020, pp. 241-247.

[49] Her book was edited and prepared for publication by her friends and colleagues Erin Minear, Erin Webster, and Elizabeth Barnes.

didn't actually invent").[50] So much so that she considers the interest in invented idioms as an inherently American obsession:

"The overenthusiasm of people who make these ascriptions is based on a shared Modern American desire: wanting Shakespeare to have invented as much of our language as possible. We love it when we think we've been talking Shakespeare all our lives, just as he's been talking us".[51]

4. *Coda. Where to look for Shakespeare's creativity?*

The selection I have discussed of influential books on Shakespeare's language which from the turn of millennium on have maintained the exceptionality of the playwright's vocabulary in terms of size and inventiveness has illustrated the motives which may have hindered the spread of more accurate estimates of the phenomenon; motives which, as stated, have to do with upholding and cultivating a story of the development of English that moves progressively towards 'greatness' – until global status is achieved. The key player, the hero of this story is Shakespeare, and evidence to the contrary must be dismissed, albeit in good faith. Admittedly, far from being able to uncover all instances of perpetuation of the myth, this review piece has limited itself to selecting works and passages that particularly exemplify such biases, but it may be a starting point for further inquiry into contemporary language attitudes and ideologies in connection with Shakespeare.

At the same time, it must be said that the dismantling of Shakespearean linguistic myths, while useful and necessary if we are concerned with the truth, has more often than not been limited to a *pars destruens* thus far, and the question remains as to where Shakespeare's

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[50] P. Blank, *Shakesplish*, cit., p. 190.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

creativity actually lies. Crystal has argued that is it the unusual, unexpected way that Shakespeare has of using the words available to him – for example employing functional shift and attaching new meanings to words – that has induced awe in readers and audiences; so much so that we should treat his language as a foreign one that needs to be learned on its own terms, and which requires familiarising with rhetorical and poetical structures.[52] Hope has written extensively on Shakespeare's use of syntax, and on his striking ability to endow the inanimate with a life of its own.[53] More work needs to be done, however, on this *pars construens*: for example looking at the ways in which Shakespeare, far from fixating on the new, also seems to enjoy using words that were already obsolete in his time, dug up from the past, which in a way exert the same kind of fascination of the unfamiliar on us (and presumably on his contemporary audiences). It seems likely, in any case, that the myth of Shakespeare's colossal command of language will continue to populate websites and even some academic writing for years to come, and I suspect that Paula Blank's reflections on our need to believe we 'speak Shakespeare' should by no means be limited to Americans.

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[52] D. Crystal, *Think On My Words. Exploring Shakespeare's Language*, cit., p. 15.

[53] J. Hope, *Shakespeare and Language. Reason, Eloquence and Artifice in the Renaissance*, London, Methuen, 2010, pp. 138-169.