

An Online Guide to Shakespeare the Neologist

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William Shakespeare is considered by many to be the greatest English playwright to date. While best known for his collections of plays and sonnets, having written 38 plays and over 150 poems, what Shakespeare is less famous for is his contribution of words and phrases to the English language. Over 2,000 English words were first recorded in print by Shakespeare.

Shakespeare: Neologist

A neologism is a word that has been created by the person speaking or writing it. The term comes from Greek. "Neo" means news while "-logism" refers to speech or thought. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, over 2,200 English words are neologisms from Shakespeare. This means that the first recorded reference to the word is found in a work by him. The words could have been in use before Shakespeare recorded them, though. Experts such as David Crystal, a linguist, believe that Shakespeare invented around 1,700 words himself. The other words may have been used in verbal communications or recorded on documents that have not survived to the present day.

Many of the words credited to Shakespeare are still in use in modern times. Around 50 percent of the neologisms used in his plays have the same meaning in contemporary times as they did in Shakespeare's day. Not every new word was a success, though. Some words, such as "anthropophaginan," which meant people-eater or cannibal, never became commonly used. Examples of words first created by Shakespeare and still in common use include "frugal," "horrid," and "obscene."

Playing With Words

In addition to creating words, Shakespeare was also responsible for toying with the way certain words were used. As a writer, he had little regard for strict grammatical rules. He would add prefixes to certain words to alter the meaning of the word. For example, he added "un-" to words such as "lock" and "hand," creating "unlock" and "unhand," words still in common use in modern times.

Shakespeare also combined words to create new compounds. "Blood-stained" and "barefaced" are two examples of compound words first used by the playwright. He also regularly changed the meaning of words. While the word "angel" was used for centuries to describe a divine or heavenly being, it was first used to describe a person's beauty in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Another common tactic of Shakespeare was to turn nouns into verbs; a device that is still popular in modern times. He also used verbs as nouns. One example of this is the word "shudder." It was only used as a verb, to shudder, before Shakespeare transformed it into a noun for his play *Timon of Athens*. Shakespeare changed the parts of speech of over 200 words throughout his works.

The Context of Shakespeare's Language

Shakespeare produced his plays and poems during the early stages of Modern English. At this stage, the language was changing from Middle English, used by poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer, to the language it has become today. While Modern English has some similarities to Middle English, it is still vastly different and would be difficult for a speaker in Shakespeare's time to understand.

With language being in a transitional stage at this time, Shakespeare was not alone in creating neologisms and redefining the ways in which words were used. Writers such as Ben Jonson also created new words, such as "defunct" and "clumsy." "Explain" and "acceptance" are credited to the playwright Sir Thomas More and

"modesty" to Sir Thomas Elyot.

Popular Shakespearean Phrases

A number of phrases first coined by Shakespeare gained common usage and are still popular in modern times. In the Oxford Book of Quotations, nearly 10 percent of the quotes are from Shakespeare. Of these phrases, a selection are commonly recognized as coming from the works of the playwright, while others are more surprising. A few of the phrases that were first created by Shakespeare include:

- *Othello*:
 - vanish into thin air
 - green-eyed monster
 - I will wear my heart on my sleeve
 - neither here nor there
 - foregone conclusion
- *Macbeth*:
 - a sorry sight
 - one fell swoop
 - the milk of human kindness
- *Hamlet*:
 - be cruel to be kind
 - flesh and blood
 - in my mind's eye

1. [Resources: Shakespeare's Phrases](#)
2. [Shakespeare's Coined Words Now Common Currency](#)
3. [Everyday Phrases](#)
4. [Shakespeare FAQs](#)
5. [Things We Say Today and Owe to Shakespeare](#)
6. [Shakespeare's Words](#)
7. [Literary Terms and Definitions: Neologism](#)
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