SHAKESPEARE, WORD-COINING AND THE *OED*

CHARLOTTE BREWER

We do not need to be historical lexicographers or experts in Early Modern English language to guess that Shakespeare was an experimenter with language. The inherent relish in combinations of words such as 'butt-end of a mother's blessing' (*Richard III*, 2.2.98), 'summer-seeming lust' (*Macbeth*, 4.3.87), 'fleshment of this dread exploit' (*Lear*, 2.2.120), 'To lip a wanton in a secure couch' (*Othello*, 4.1.70), 'paddling palms and pinching fingers . . . virginalling / Upon his palm' (*Winter's Tale*, 1.2.117, 127–8), 'underpeep her lids' (*Cymbeline*, 2.2.20), 'Come, you spirits . . . / unsex me here' (*Macbeth*, 1.5.39–40) – to take a random handful of many possible examples – is self-evident, and readily appreciated by any modern reader or auditor of his plays. And if we turn to what is still the most comprehensive authority on English vocabulary for the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in order to see just how innovative Shakespeare was in using such characteristically vivid words and compounds, we often find good justification for the intuition that Shakespeare was lexically creative. On countless occasions he is identified there either as the sole user of the locution in question, or as the first user, with other writers coming after him whether in conscious imitation or coincident adoption of the same usage. So, in the examples above, Shakespeare is uniquely cited for *summer-seeming*, *fleshment* and the verb *virginal* ('to tap with the fingers as on a virginal'); and he is recorded as the first person to use *butt-end* in a non-literal sense, *lip* to mean 'kiss', *paddle* to mean 'finger idly or playfully', *under-peep* and *unsex*. The more of Shakespeare's words one

looks up, the more one discovers that, time after time, according to the *OED*, he turns out to have used language in wholly individual ways or (more often) to have originated usages that subsequently became established in the language.

Pursuing individual words in this way is interesting but scarcely adds up to a general picture. Can we come up with a systematic and reliable estimate of how many new words Shakespeare contributed to the language? And what assumptions are involved in investigating this subject? This article attempts to begin to answer this question, in the first place by considering the character and reliability of our main investigative tool, the *OED* itself, and secondly by reviewing its successive record of a number of first citations from Shakespeare – i.e. words and usages recorded by *OED* as first used by this writer. The *OED* was originally compiled over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and although it was supplemented in the 1970s and 1980s with more modern vocabulary, its treatment of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries remained unrevised and uncorrected until 2000.[1] In this year, online publication began of

---

[1] There are a handful of exceptions to this generalization, where the four Supplement volumes edited by R. W. Burchfield (Oxford, 1972–86) newly identified senses, current in twentieth-century English but unrecorded in *OED1*, whose history could now be traced back to earlier centuries and for which pre-nineteenth-century quotations were therefore inserted or rearranged. Often these were sexual senses, for example, *die* meaning 'experience a sexual orgasm', added to the Supplement in 1972, with Shakespeare cited as first user ('*Much Ado* iii. ii. 70 *Claudio*. Nay, but I know who

the first stages of an entirely new version of *OED*, often referred to as *OED3* (the previous two editions being *OED1*, published between 1884 and 1928, and *OED2*, published in 1989, which amalgamated *OED1* with supplementary twentieth-century vocabulary). At the time of writing (July 2011), *OED3* has revised about a third of the alphabet in a consecutive series of entries over letters *M* to *R*, along with revisions of many other entries dotted across the alphabet (amounting to around 30 per cent of the original dictionary in all). This means the majority of entries have remained unrevised from their original form, as composed 80–125 years ago. This present unevenness in *OED*'s treatment of Shakespeare – a mixture of Victorian and Edwardian scholarship, now out-of-date, with utterly recent research – places a series of important qualifications on any conclusions we draw from *OED*'s testimony. Not least, we need constantly to bear in mind that *OED*'s testimony is at present a 'moving picture', which will not stabilize for another couple of decades, when *OED3*, or the third edition of the dictionary, is relatively complete.

OED1 AND OED2

To try to unravel the complexities involved in assessing *OED*'s evidence on Shakespeare, we should begin by considering the circumstances under which the bulk of today's *OED* was compiled – that is, those prevailing in the 1880s to 1920s. The plan for constructing this enormously ambitious dictionary is simple enough to state: read through as many printed works as possible from 1150 to the recent past, extract quotations showing how words had been used from their earliest use to their latest, and deduce from these the senses of words as manifested throughout their history. Texts of all kinds were drawn upon to determine when a word came into the language and what it meant – novels, plays, poems, printed letters and diaries, histories, newspapers, works relating to arts, sciences, commerce, crafts and so on – but overall there was a strong literary bias. This was due partly

to the availability of literary texts for all periods, and partly to the predominant view in the late nineteenth century (as both earlier and later) that literature had an especially formative role in creating and preserving the nation's language – so that *OED*'s chief editor, James Murray, named 'all the great English writers of all ages' as his principal quotation sources.[2] Shakespeare's unparalleled cultural and literary status in British culture meant that the original *OED* editors (and their hundreds of volunteer readers) were extremely keen on recording his language in as much detail as possible, and almost every word attributed to him got into the dictionary one way or another, sometimes several times over. This virtually comprehensive treatment was not meted out to anyone else, of any period: however generous *OED* has been to other great writers who used language in singular ways (Milton, Carlyle, James Joyce), it has drawn the line at recording *all* their vocabulary. It follows, inevitably, that the original *OED* – and therefore the second edition too, since it didn't revise any of the pre-1800 material in *OED1* – will have exaggerated the significance and extent of Shakespeare's contribution to the language. New words of the period, if used by Shakespeare, would have been more likely to be found in his writing than in that of other authors who were less closely trawled by the lexicographers, and hence Shakespeare rather than anyone else will have been recorded by *OED* as their first user. And Shakespeare's once-off usages – made-up words which didn't catch on in the language

---

loues him . . . and in despight of all, dies for him. *Prince*. Shee shall be buried with her face vpwards'); *possess* to mean 'have sexual intercourse with (a woman)', added in 1982, with Shakespeare cited as second user ('*A.Y.L.* iv. i. 144 Now tell me how long you would haue her, after you haue possest her?'). On *OED1*'s occasional reluctance to specify sexual senses of words see further below, also Charlotte Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language: The Living* OED (New Haven and London, 2007), pp. 203–5, 289 n35 (on *possess* and William Empson) and Lynda Mugglestone, '"Decent Reticence": Coarseness, Contraception, and the First Edition of the *OED*', *Dictionaries*, 28 (2007), 1–22.

[2] See further Charlotte Brewer, 'The Use of Literary Quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *Review of English Studies*, 61 (2010), 93–125.

for whatever reason (the technical term is *hapax legomena*, Greek for 'once-spoken') – will also have been more likely to get into *OED* than those created by other writers of the time. *1 Henry IV*, 2.1.76, for example, mentions 'Bourgomasters, and great Oneyers', and *oneyers* is a baffling word which the first *OED* editors didn't attempt to define, but which they entered in the dictionary nevertheless, noting that its 'origin and meaning [was] uncertain' (the first edition of *OED* included around 300 examples of such apparently unique usages in Shakespeare's writings).[3]

The unusualness of Shakespeare's treatment in the *OED* emerges when we look at comparative figures: with his 33,000-odd quotations (often several in the same entry) he is easily the most cited writer in the dictionary, towering over the next most cited author Walter Scott (just over 15,000 quotations), who is in turn followed by Milton and Chaucer (11–12,000), Dryden (8,000), Dickens (7,000) and Tennyson (6,000).[4] Almost certainly these figures tell us about the relative cultural importance of these writers in the late nineteenth-century rather than about their contribution to the language. But that is not to say that Shakespeare – and probably some of the other writers too, particularly Milton and Chaucer – have not influenced the language significantly. Given Shakespeare's unmatched cultural standing, his vocabulary and especially his phrases have often been picked up and reused just because they were his: *OED3* has recently revised the entry for *oneyer*, which it suggests means 'sheriff', and has found three twentieth-century examples of the word which allude to Shakespeare's original use, and there are many other such instances – *out-Herod Herod*, meaning to outdo Herod in cruelty and evil, for example.[5]

OED's pre-eminence as a record of English vocabulary means that its treatment of Shakespeare has been extraordinarily influential on histories of the language and on studies and editions of Shakespeare's works. Even when scholars have been able to turn up occasional omissions or errors in the *OED* – dialect words used by Shakespeare which antedate or postdate *OED*'s record, for example –

such studies have inevitably relied on *OED*'s unparalleled scholarship for the bulk of their analysis, whose validity they are obliged to take on trust.[6] And after the second edition was digitized in the 1990s, and became available in searchable electronic forms (a succession of CDs, with online access to the database 2000–2011), it became much easier to access its data on Shakespeare systematically and to begin to quantify this writer's recorded contribution to the language (according to the *OED*). The fullest treatment of such electronically accessible evidence was Crystal's analysis of *OED2* in *The Stories of English*. Searching an edition of the CD-Rom, he found that Shakespeare was recorded as the first person to use over 2,000 lexemes (a useful linguistic term which can be applied to the item of vocabulary recorded in the head word of a dictionary's entry, and avoids counting different

---

[3] As counted by David Crystal, *The Stories of English* (London, 2004), p. 320. Under *oneyers OED1* quoted the Folio text (reproduced here) but assigned the First Quarto date (1598). The Oxford Shakespeare emends 'Oneyers' (spelled thus in the Folio but 'Oneyres' in the First Quarto) to '"oyez"-ers (or, in 'original' spelling, 'Oiezres'), a conjectural nonce-word: see Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford, 1987), p. 334.

[4] Figures derived from the online version of *OED2* available up to March 2011 which has now been removed from public access (see further below). See further Charlotte Brewer, 'Examining the *OED*' (http://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk/main/). All *OED3* data quoted in this article is taken from the website www.oed.com, at latest in its June 2011 form, and elsewhere at the date indicated.

[5] For a list of Shakespearian phrases which have become standard modern idioms – 'to the manner born', 'more in sorrow than in anger', etc. – see Crystal, *Stories of English*, pp. 330–1.

[6] See Hilda M. Hulme, *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language: Some Problems of Lexical Meaning in the Dramatic Text* (London, 1962); Vivian Salmon, 'Some Functions of Shakespearian Word-Formation', *Shakespeare Survey 23* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 13–26; Bryan A. Garner, 'Shakespeare's Latinate Neologisms', *Shakespeare Studies*, 15 (1982), 149–70. Qualifications and doubts about *OED*'s reliability in treating Shakespeare have from time to time been expressed, from W. S. Mackie, 'Shakespeare's English: And How Far It Can Be Investigated with the Help of The "New English Dictionary"', *Modern Language Review*, 31 (1936), 1–10, through to Jürgen Schäfer, *Documentation in the O.E.D: Shakespeare and Nashe as Test Cases* (Oxford and New York, 1980) and beyond.

forms of the same word, such as plurals or varying verb forms, twice over) – 2,079, to be precise, which he narrowed down to 2,035 after excluding malapropisms and nonsense words. Given that Shakespeare's entire recorded word stock comes to something under 20,000 lexemes (a figure extracted from Spevack's concordance of Shakespeare, whose total of 30,000 words used by Shakespeare counts different forms of the same lexeme and therefore needs to be shrunk down), this finding is, on the face of it, quite breathtaking: *OED*'s evidence suggests that one in every ten of Shakespeare's lexemes was a new usage, a proportion matched by no other post-medieval writer whose usage is intensively recorded in the *OED*.[7] Similarly, no other post-medieval writer is recorded as having so many new usages in absolute terms either. The nearest contenders from his own period seem to be Philemon Holland, with around 1,000 first citations, i.e. half as many – though as a translator from classical sources he is a special case – and the prose writers Thomas Browne and Henry More (*c.*830 and 690 respectively), both of whom use a much more academic and difficult lexis than Shakespeare. Ben Jonson (*c.*560) and Sidney (*c.*400) trail way behind as his nearest contemporary poetic and/or play-writing rivals, and the most lexically productive writers (according to *OED*) from later periods – Milton (*c.*650), Carlyle (*c.*565), Coleridge (*c.*520) – cannot come close to Shakespeare's record either.[8]

But how far can we trust the *OED*'s witness here? As we might expect, many complicating considerations come into play (fully recognized by Crystal). First of all, as already indicated, *OED*'s preferences for citing Shakespeare, along with the reduced number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts available over the time *OED1* was compiled, will have resulted in the dictionary favouring Shakespeare over his contemporaries. Fresh reading in other works of the time may reveal – in fact, *does* reveal – that Shakespeare was not the first person to use some of these 2,000-odd lexemes attributed to him in *OED2*. So *newsmonger*, for example, can be found a few years earlier in Thomas Nashe, as can *merited, protractive,*

reprieve, repure, roguery, sportive – all words revised since Crystal's analysis by *OED3*, which in many other cases too has managed to antedate *OED*'s record quite considerably – *ratcatcher*, first recorded by *OED* in *Romeo and Juliet* (3.1.74) in 1592, has now been found in an earlier text of 1565; *ransomless* (*Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.274) has now been antedated with an example in Lydgate's *Troyyes Book* of 1425; *melted* in the sense 'liquefied by heat' (*Henry V*, 3.5.50), has been pushed back not just to the fifteenth century but is also now illustrated with a quotation from an Old English text. (In fact, however widely you read, you can never be sure that you have found the first example of a word – it is always potentially antedatable, so that many of such new findings by *OED3* may themselves be superseded). Secondly, even when fresh reading does not unearth preceding examples, we have to be careful about what we deduce from Shakespeare (or anyone else) being recorded as originator of a word. The *OED* confines itself to printed sources, so it is quite possible that a 'new' word will have been in oral use for some time before being used by Shakespeare, and one can see that newly current vocabulary would have had a special value for his audience, just as the use of buzzwords or innovative coinages do in newspapers, journals, cinema, television, plays, novels, and poetry today. As Crystal pointed out, Shakespeare is unlikely to have invented the word *clack-dish* (for a bowl with a lid that beggars 'clacked' to encourage donations) – a word also recorded in Middleton only five years later – and surely cannot have been the first person to swear 's*Blood* ('by God's blood'), though his plays are cited as first, second and third use respectively (in 1598, 1599 and 1604), or to use the term *madame* to refer to French women (*Henry V*, 3.5.28: 'By Faith and Honor, Our Madames

---

mock at vs').⁹ More individualistic coinages would seem to be unusual words such as *conceptious*, *rejoindure*, *reprobance* (and many others). But here again we may pause. These words look unusual not least because they have not survived today. We can guess that Shakespeare may have made them up, but can we really say that he thereby contributed to the language, given that such words have never achieved general currency (and in the case of *conceptious* and other such *hapax legomena* may have got into the *OED* only because they were used by Shakespeare)?¹⁰ The problem of identifying a really successful neologizer begins to make itself plain: the more successful the word coiner – i.e. the faster that coinages are seized on and enthusiastically adopted by the rest of us – the harder it is to be sure that one particular person has been sole originator of a specific usage (two or more people may have coined a word simultaneously).

To tackle some of these considerations, and in particular to take into account *OED*'s likely bias in citing Shakespeare over his contemporaries, Crystal devised an ingenious method of sorting and discriminating among Shakespeare's neologisms as recorded by the *OED*. Studying the dictionary record for each of the 2,035 items, he compared the rate at which the word (or sense) was subsequently recorded from another source – the reasoning being that if a word was recorded again within a few years of Shakespeare's usage (as in *clack-dish* and *'sBlood* above, also *'slid* 'God's eyelid', *ajax* 'privy', etc.), then Shakespeare was a lot less likely to have been its originator than if the word didn't turn up again for several decades or so. The results of this analysis are most interesting: 640-odd lexemes had a presence in the language within twenty-five years of Shakespeare first using them; a further 1,100 or so, first used by Shakespeare, are recorded again only after twenty-five years. It would seem fairly safe to say that those in the latter category were invented by Shakespeare, but that a reasonable proportion – say a half? – of the first category may have been in the process of entering the language independently. So Crystal suggests we add up as follows: 300 lexemes recorded in *OED only* in Shakespeare (so presumably invented by him),

plus 1,100-odd first recorded in Shakespeare but not used again for a significant time, plus 320-odd (i.e. half of 640) that Shakespeare may have made up and which were swiftly adopted by his contemporaries. That gives us a total of around 1,700 or so lexemes altogether – still a really enormous number for a single individual to have made up.

This is a most attractive analysis. The problem with it, unfortunately, is that it places too much weight on *OED*'s consistent recording of quotation evidence. Sometimes the lexicographers chose to print two or more quotations from the same decade to illustrate a particular usage, and sometimes they left a gap of several decades or more at a time – the official policy was to have only one quotation per century! It is hard to explain this inconsistency except as the result of different editors working over many years; but certainly it is unwise, even today, to treat *OED* as a corpus which registers frequency of use, and can therefore be used to measure how quickly a usage becomes adopted in the language. This means that some of the neologisms attributed to Shakespeare and not recorded in the dictionary again over the next twenty-five years – and therefore eligible, according to Crystal's analysis, to be regarded as bona fide inventions by Shakespeare – may well have existed in other late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century sources known to the lexicographers, but that they chose (for cultural, i.e. non-linguistic reasons) to print the Shakespeare quotation in the *OED* rather than the 'non-Shakespeare' quotation.¹¹

---

⁹ Entries, dates and quotations for all these terms are cited from *OED2* (unchanged from *OED1*).

¹⁰ *conceptious* (*Timon of Athens* 4.3.188) is recorded only in Shakespeare; *rejoindure* (*Troilus and Cressida* 4.4.35) is subsequently recorded in 1650 and 1749; *reprobance* (*Othello* 5.2.216) was used again in 1878 by Swinburne, in an echo of *Othello*.

¹¹ Three examples will variously illustrate the point. *OED1* cited *Measure for Measure*, dated 1603, as the first example for *merited* ('you may most vprighteously do a poor wronged Lady a merited benefit'; 3.1.202), followed by a quotation of 1797 (Frances Burney's diary). *OED3* has now antedated the Shakespeare quotation with one of 1593 from Nashe and one of 1602 from Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* (1602), the latter work quoted 775 times elsewhere in *OED1*. Did

So was Crystal too generous with his figure of 1,700 Shakespearian neologisms? In fact, as he himself observes, he may not have been generous enough. This is because the pre-2011 searchtools in the *OED* identified only one quotation in a dictionary entry as being the first recorded evidence of use, regardless of how many senses the entry had in total. But under the verb *ruin*, recorded from 1585, Shakespeare is listed as the first user (in 1613) of four of its sixteen distinct senses; under the adjective *unfledged*, he is the first to use three of its four distinct senses; he is the first to use the noun *water-fly* both literally (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.58) and metaphorically (*Hamlet*, 5.2.84, of Osric: 'Dost know this water-fly?', also *Troilus and Cressida*, 5.1.30, 'how the world is pestered with such waterflies'); and so on.[12] This looks like lexical creativity of quite a significant sort – but we can only discover it if we happen to look the word up and count the Shakespeare quotations manually, as *OED2* electronic searches did not identify the *ruin* examples at all, and found only the *Hamlet* instances (since they are the earliest ones) of *unfledged* and *water-fly*. These examples can be replicated many times over, and any casual browsing of the *OED* will reveal that Shakespeare pops up again and again as the first quoted example of individual senses identified in an entry, if not the oldest sense itself. Using existing words in new ways may well be just as significant a form of lexical innovation as inventing a word in its entirety – indeed this technique is arguably more significant, since it develops the resources of the language in directly communicative ways. Many of Shakespeare's most striking examples of inventive language use do just that: so *Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.2.234, 'She made great Cæsar lay his sword to bed. / He ploughed her, and she cropped', supplies the *OED* entries for *plough* and *crop* with their first examples of specific senses for each of these verbs, although the verbs themselves had both been long established in the language before Shakespeare chose to exploit them in this way.[13] But it was impossible to extract any quantitative information about such instances of Shakespeare's lexical innovation from the electronic tools with which *OED2* was supplied.

OED3

All this is changing as the new version of *OED* gathers steam. This long overdue revision of the first edition has so far covered around a third of the alphabet, and is transforming every element of the dictionary as it goes – identification of headword, etymology, pronunciation, recording of spelling variants, selection and dating of quotations, and finally the analysis of the history and development of a word's senses which the newly amassed and configured quotations enable.[14] A sustained and expanding reading programme is fuelling many of the changes taking place, and it is this which promises to contextualize, and (one might expect?) to correct, *OED*'s representation of Shakespeare. Since the first edition was completed, our knowledge of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century language and literature has greatly increased: there are many more editions in print, of a far wider range of sources (scientific, technical, historical, colloquial) than there were a hundred years ago, and consequently much more linguistic material, especially non-literary material, available against which to measure and assess Shakespeare's vocabulary use.

---

the *OED1* lexicographers simply miss the Marston usage, or did they choose to cite Shakespeare's example rather than Marston's, despite the fact Marston's was earlier, and that printing both quotations would have given a better idea of the word's currency? By contrast, *OED3* will always print the first example of usage found but they may then, just like *OED1*, skip many years before printing a second example, even if they know that such exists. Thus in revising *majestically*, *OED3* antedate Shakespeare's first quotation of 1596 (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4.359) with one from another author of 1595. The next quotation they print for this word is 1670 – so they drop the Shakespeare quotation altogether. Yet in revising *movingly*, *OED3* print the original Shakespeare quotation *and* put in two others of around the same date. If one were to try to infer relative rates of usage from these entries one would be misguided.

12   *OED* quotes no other metaphorical examples of *water-fly*.

13   This characteristic has often been observed; see e.g. N. F. Blake, *Shakespeare's Language: An Introduction* (London, 1983), pp. 51–5.

14   See John Simpson, Edmund Weiner and Philip Durkin, 'The *Oxford English Dictionary* Today', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 102 (2004), 335–81; Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language*, pp. 237–55.

In particular, searchable databases (Early English Books Online, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, and many collections of nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts) now give the lexicographers access to a much more sizeable proportion of the material that issued from printing presses from 1485 onwards. At the same time, substantial research has been carried out both on Shakespeare's language (in numerous scholarly editions of his plays, for example) and on Early Modern English more generally, and the lexicographers have been able to draw upon this scholarship as well as upon the raw lexical material available in all these newly visible texts. So is Shakespeare's reputation as linguistic innovator par excellence in the English language going to be sustained, increased or undermined?

The answer is that Shakespeare's key role in the language is certainly being sustained – and in some respects at least, it is being increased; though a number of qualifications and explanations apply to this verdict, not least in view of the fact the *OED3*'s revision is unfinished and that its character seems to be changing as it moves through the alphabet. What follows is an attempt to create as much clarity as possible at this stage.

A caveat is in order first of all, rendered necessary by substantial changes which have taken place on the *OED Online* website since research for this article was originally carried out. To discover what *OED3* is doing to *OED2* in its record of Shakespeare (or of any other author or text, or indeed any other respect one can think of), we need to compare like with like: to take the entries that *OED3* has revised and measure them systematically against the equivalent ones in *OED2* so as to contrast and compare. But on 1 April 2011 the dictionary's publisher Oxford University Press took down the separate electronic version of *OED2* from its website, making such searches impossible. This is most regrettable. The data presented here is therefore taken from comparisons of the two versions which were by good fortune made prior to that event, in November 2010. As *OED3*'s revisions continue to progress through the alphabet, it will be impossible to measure and assess its treatment of *OED2* in any

comparable way in future, unless OUP decides to re-introduce an electronically searchable version of *OED2* which can be set against *OED3*.[15]

The March 2011 removal of *OED2* from public access was part and parcel of a general make-over and relaunch of *OED Online*, most of which took place in December 2010. This included a striking new feature which allows one, for the first time ever, to count up all the times an author is cited as the first user of an individual *sense* of a word. The innovation addresses the point made at the end of the previous section of this article, that the limited electronic searches possible on *OED2* will have significantly under-rated the degree to which the first edition represents Shakespeare as lexically innovative. Shakespeare's total of first uses of a sense, at December 2010, was 8,207, an immense figure – especially bearing in mind, as noted before, that his total word- (or lexeme-) stock was around 20,000. The nearest post-medieval competitor was again the translator Philemon Holland, but this time, rather than having half Shakespeare's total – as was the case when we were counting first use of a *word* – he had less than a third: he was cited 2,456 times as first user of a *sense*. Holland was followed in ever-decreasing proportions by Walter Scott (2,267), Milton (2,149) and Carlyle (1,830).[16] While Shakespeare's markedly increased pre-eminence in lexical productivity in this respect looks very significant, we must remember that these figures told us about *OED2* plus *OED3*. That is, they are derived from a state of *OED* which merged the *unrevised* three-quarters of the dictionary with the *revised* one quarter as it stood at the end of 2010. Perhaps Shakespeare's count of new senses is going

---

[15] OUP are most helpful in their responses to individual researchers and have kindly made a downloadable form of *OED2* available to individual users on request. However this has primitive search tools and cannot be used to conduct the systematic searches required (e.g. of first quotations) to make comparisons between the second and third editions. On the relaunched website one can also click through, entry by entry, to the previous (*OED2* version): but the *OED2* pages are not cumulatively searchable.

[16] Jonson came in at 1,742, Spenser at 1,709, Browne at 1,640.

first usages not because of *OED3*'s new lexical discoveries but because of its new dating policy. Plays cited from the first folio, published in 1623, are now dated '*a1616*' (i.e. 'before 1616', Shakespeare's date of death), which means that a number of *OED2*'s first citations have been demoted on arguably artificial grounds. *OED2* quoted *Julius Caesar*, which it dated 1601, as the first example of *majestic* ('the Maiesticke world'),[19] and in fact a Swiss doctor, Thomas Platter, recorded seeing a production of this play in 1599. But since the first copy of *Julius Caesar* is the 1623 Folio, in *OED3* Shakespeare has been pipped to the post for this word by a 1606 quotation from *Bien Venue* by John Davies of Hereford. Similarly, first citations from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, commonly reckoned Shakespeare's first play and thought to have been written around 1590, have in a number of cases surrendered their status to other texts, also cited in *OED2*, since the play is now dated *a1616* (*OED3* takes the Oxford Shakespeare edition as its base text, though like its predecessors it looks in detail at textual variants and prints in original spelling).

One is not surprised to find *OED3* reducing Shakespeare's count of neologisms. It is more startling to discover that the revision is simultaneously recording additional, newly identified neologisms. Somewhat disappointingly, many of these (3 out of 8 in ss1, and 4 out of 6 in ss2) turn out to be due to methodological changes: *OED3*'s splitting a first-edition entry into two or more new entries, throwing into new prominence a quotation previously tucked away in a sub-entry. So the verb *re* (used in *Romeo and Juliet* as a humorous threat to a musician, 4.4.144–5: 'I will carry no crotchets. I'll re you, I'll fa you'), recorded by the first edition under the noun *re*, now has its own separate entry. In both editions it is the only quotation for this sense, but could not be electronically identified as such in *OED2* owing to the limited search tools available for this edition. The same is true, one way or another, of *mappery*, previously recorded under *map*, *made-up* ('consummate', as in *Timon of Athens*, 5.1.97: 'he's a made-up villain', previously recorded under the past participle *made*), *memento mori* (*1 Henry IV*, 3.3.29–30), *repairing* ('opposites of

such repairing nature', *First Part of the Contention*, 5.5.27), *reprobance* (*Othello*, 5.2.216), and *reeling ripe* (*Tempest*, 5.1.282). Much more potentially exciting is the handful of freshly identified new usages that have come to light under *OED3*'s newly directed search beam.

In my samples, ss1 and ss2, three newly identified additions to Shakespeare's total of neologisms (*masoned, meditance* and *misbecomingly*) come from *Two Noble Kinsmen* and are therefore straightforwardly explained by a change of authorship attribution: *Two Noble Kinsmen* had been read and cited by *OED1* (which recorded twenty-seven first usages from its pages in all, of which seven were from the alphabet range *M–rotness*) but had not ascribed its quotations to Shakespeare.[20] A tiny handful of other additions resuscitate textual variants, e.g. *related* in *Hamlet* 1.2.38, a first Quarto (1603) reading usually rejected by editors, which antedates the record for this word by one year.[21] Others are due to some form of re-analysis of Shakespeare's language. The *OED* records and defines 'words', but the decision as to what constitutes a word is not a straightforward one. When Adonis, in Shakespeare's early poem *Venus and Adonis* (413), described love as a 'life in death', the first edition lexicographers understood the phrase syntactically, but their modern-day descendants have construed it as a single word, anticipating Coleridge's Ancient Mariner's 'The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she' and thus meriting its own entry, with Shakespeare recorded as first user and Coleridge as second. Whether they will do the same with other

---

[19] Followed by *The Tempest* (1610: 'a most maiesticke vision') then by a quotation of 1664 from John Evelyn.

[20] The other first usages identified by *OED1* in *Two Noble Kinsmen* over *M–rotness* were *operance*, *out-breast*, *piglike* and *port* (verb), to which *OED3* has now added *precipitance*, first use of which had in *OED1* been attributed to Milton.

[21] The Q1 reading is not noticed by Wells and Taylor, *Textual Companion*; cf. p. 402 on editorial policy in recording Q1 variants and also pp. 403, 411. A study of which Shakespeare editions were used, with what results, by *OED1* editors, and how *OED* documentation was influenced by Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary* (to which *OED1* editorial notes often refer), would be most useful.

Shakespearian formulations remains to be seen (the hyphenation of Elizabethan compositors is too variable to be relied upon to solve such puzzles). Unsurprisingly, given the length of time over which the original dictionary was compiled, as well as the difficulties of texts and interpretation, the first edition was not always consistent in its decisions about how and whether to treat such terms: *crafty-sick* (*2 Henry IV* Induction, 37), *heady-rash* (*Comedy of Errors*, 5.1.217) and *honest-true* (*Merchant of Venice*, 3.4.46) were recognized as compound adjectives but not *heavy-sad* (*Richard II*, 2.2.30) or *secret-false* (*Comedy of Errors*, 3.2.15);[22] *Cymbeline*'s 'our hence-going' (3.2.63) and *Winter's Tale*'s 'my hence departure' (1.2.450) were recorded but not *Macbeth*'s 'my here-remain' (4.3.149). Whether Shakespeare's rate of lexical innovation in total rises or falls will be in part determined by *OED3*'s policies on such items (all untreated in the revision as yet).

Shakespeare's fondness for macaronic language – dovetailing one language with another, and foreign borrowings of various sorts – may also push up his neologism count in *OED3*, owing to its more generous interpretation of what counts as an English word: so *manus*, as in Holofernes's use ('when he was a babe, a child, a shrimp, / Thus did he [*sc.* Hercules] strangle serpents in his *manus*', *Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.584–5), is now regarded as a bona-fide English word and placed at the head of the new entry, and the same may also happen to *canus*, two lines above (though as yet *quoniam*, two lines below, is untreated: the criterion for inclusion may be whether or not the word has been found in other sources, as is the case with *manus* but not *quoniam*). In my minutely examined set of two sub-samples, only the lexeme *merry-meeting* emerged as a Shakespeare first usage genuinely missed out by the first edition.[23] Defined as 'a festive or convivial gathering', *OED1* had recorded this compound from the 1650s onwards, entirely overlooking *Richard III*'s 'Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings' (1.1.7). Other examples outside the sub-samples include *pleading*, newly spotted in *Venus and Adonis* (217): 'Impatience chokes her pleading tongue', whose record in *OED2* began with a quotation

from Shelley of 1818, and *plebs*, as in *Titus Andronicus*, 4.3.92, 'I am going with my pigeons to the tribunal plebs', which *OED* had previously dated 1835 onwards.

As the figure of 8,207 quoted above would suggest, there is a profusion of examples of *senses* for which Shakespeare is newly identified as first user. Random dipping suggests that a renewed scrutiny of compounds and phrases may contribute importantly to his enhanced role as language-originator. *OED1* had Shakespeare down as the first person to use three examples of *never*, yoked with a participle to make an adjective – 'What never-dying honour hath he got' (*1 Henry IV*, 3.2.106); 'That hand shall burn in never-quenching fire' (*Richard II*, 5.5.108); 'If you refuse your aid / In this so never-needed help' (*Coriolanus*, 5.1.33–4) – but had only dated *never-conquered* from 1631. *OED3* has now turned up 'Vnder that colour am I come to scale Thy neuer conquered Fort', from *Lucrece* (481–2), and though it has antedated *never-dying* (found in a pre-Shakespearian text of 1567) it also add *never-resting* (as in 'never-resting time leads summer on', Sonnet 5, line 5) and *never-surfeited* ('the never surfeited sea', *Tempest*, 3.3.55) to the list of Shakespearian first usages for *never-* combinations.[24]

---

22 *OED1* quoted the *Comedy of Errors* example of *secret* but did not identify the adjective as attached to 'false'. On compound forms see further Salmon, 'Shakespearian Word-Formation'.

23 Of the 14 new *OED3* first citations found in ss1 and ss2, 9 were attributable to reorganizing existing entries in *OED1/2*, *related* and *merry-meeting* are discussed above, and *masoned*, *meditance*, *misbecomingly* were recorded from *Two Noble Kinsmen* but not ascribed to Shakespeare.

24 *OED3* presently dates *never-resting* from *a*1637 and has no entry at all for *never-surfeited* (though the *Tempest* quotation turns up twice elsewhere in the dictionary, under *belch* and *surfeited*). Curiously, *never-resting* was listed in Schmidt's Shakespeare *Lexicon* of 1874, on which the *OED1* lexicographers were presumably heavily reliant. Shakespeare also uses *never-daunted* (*2 Henry IV*, 1.1.110), *never-ending* (*Lucrece* 935), *never-erring* (*Two Noble Kinsmen*, 1.2.114), *never-heard-of* (*Titus Andronicus*, 2.3.285) and *never-withering* (*Cymbeline*, 5.5.192). *OED1* had recorded *never-daunted* from 1590 but missed the other three, dating *never-ending* from 1667 (*Paradise Lost*), *never-erring* from 1679, and *never-heard-of* from 1600 (*Titus* was dated 1588 or 1594 by *OED1*, so its example

Substantial date-shifting has also taken place: the *OED* Supplement of 1976 had noticed a specific sense of 'new' as applied to snow and ice ('recently formed snow deposit'), which it found only from 1860, but now *OED3* is able to quote *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.2.19: 'thou wilt lie upon the wings of night / Whiter than new snow on a raven's back' (the next quotation is from Thomson's *Seasons*); *pretty fellow* ('fop, dandy'), first recorded in *The Tatler* of 1709, is now documented from 1600 with *Merchant of Venice*, 3.4.63: 'When we are both accoutered like young men, ile proue the prettier fellow of the two'; *night owl*, in the sense 'A person who is up or active late at night' – another definition newly identified in the Supplement of 1976, with quotations from 1847 onwards – is now quoted from *Lucrece*, 'The doue sleeps fast that this night Owle will catch.' All three of these examples may raise dissenting or at least questioning eyebrows: to interpret *night owl* as *OED3* suggests, for example, simply spells out (as a dictionary arguably need not do) the metaphor already present in *dove*.

Sometimes, as with the *never-* compounds, the revision suggests a pattern, indicating either a locution apparently favoured by Shakespeare or (as in the following example) a sensitivity to colloquial speech otherwise unrecorded for centuries. So *OED3* now credits Shakespeare with first use of the familiar form of address *old son* (*Richard II*, 5.3.144: 'Come my old son. I pray God make thee new') – the next example being Dickens[25] – thus matching his similarly first recorded use (in *OED1*) of both *old lad* and *old boy*. Shakespeare retains his first quotation in *OED3* for *old lad* (*Titus Andronicus*, 4.2.120: 'Looke how the blacke slave smiles vpon the father, As who should say, olde Lad, I am thine owne'), a term not used in print again – according to *OED3* – until 1977 (in James Herriot's *Vets might Fly*), but owing to dating conventions has lost *old boy* to Jonson: Tucca, in Jonson's *Poetaster*, of 1602 – 'Thou shalt impart the wine, Old boy' – now trumps Toby Belch's 'Did she see thee the while, old boy, tell me that' (3.2.7), since *Twelfth Night* in *OED3* is dated, in accordance with the new policy, to *a*1616.[26]

A different type of example, likely to proliferate, is due to changed social mores over the last hundred years. *OED3* has now spelled out the specifically sexual senses of *medlar* ('The female genitals', 'a prostitute'), for which *Romeo and Juliet* supplies the first example (2.1.36) 'Now will he sit under a medlar tree, And wish his mistress were that kind of fruite, As maids call medlars, when they laugh alone') and *Measure for Measure* the second (4.3.167, 'They would . . . haue married me to the rotten Medler'),[27] and it has identified a new sense of the noun *mark*, namely 'The female genitals, regarded as a sexual target', for which *Love's Labour's Lost* furnishes the first quotation: 'A mark saies my Lady. Let the mark haue a prick in't, to meate at, if it may be' (4.1.130). Studies such as Gordon Williams's *Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language* (1997) and Jonathan Green's huge *Dictionary of Slang* (2010), the latter supplementing and often antedating *OED* in its collections of historical quotations, may guide the *OED* lexicographers to many more instances of sexual metaphor shied away from in previous editions.[28]

---

of *never-heard-of* should have antedated the 1600 one). *OED3* has now found an earlier instance of *never-ending* (?1592), and of *never-erring* (1589), while it quotes *never-heard-of* from *Edmund Ironside*, which it dates *a*1594 (as compared with *OED3*'s 1594 date for *Titus*). All in all, the evidence suggests that Shakespeare's use of these adjectival *never*-compounds – eleven in all – was innovative and distinctive. Disappointingly, *OED* has not attempted to tackle Ulysses's tricky 'Never's my day, and then a kiss of you' (*Troilus and Cressida*, 4.6.53).

[25] Like *new snow* and *night owl*, *old son* only entered the *OED* in one of the Supplement volumes (1982), with quotations from 1916 onwards.

[26] Cf. *my boy*, newly attested from the 1594 First Quarto text of *Titus Andronicus*, 4.1.109 '(Ay, that's my boy! Thy father hath full oft For his ungrateful country done the like') – significantly antedating *OED*'s previous record of this term, from 1902 onwards. (*OED3*'s entry begins with a quotation from Gascoigne of 1575, referring to a dog). *Old lad* also occurs in *1 Henry IV*, 1.2.41: 'As the honey of Hybla, my old lad of the castle'.

[27] Three further seventeenth-century quotations are supplied.

[28] Green identifies many sexual senses, unrecognized by *OED*, in Shakespeare's language, furnishing them with an historical lineage in subsequent or previous writers. The dictionary

How can we use all this information in ways that help us better understand Shakespeare's works? One technique, under-exploited in Shakespeare criticism so far, is to compare rates of neologisms in the different plays – though we must also keep an eye on how that neologism rate is changing between *OED2* and *OED3* as the revisers (re-)read texts by Shakespeare's contemporaries and predecessors. *Hamlet*, for example, is recorded as having 23 neologisms in *OED2* over *M–rotness*, compared with 18 in *OED3*; by contrast *Love's Labour's Lost* has 33 neologisms in this same stretch in *OED2*, now reduced to 14 in *OED3*. Whatever conclusions may be ultimately drawn from those figures and proportions (and comparison is immediately beset with complications the moment one looks at the detail, since as before *OED3* has found new neologisms in this alphabet range while antedating *OED2*'s examples), and however risky it is to use them to predict the direction of travel of *OED3*'s revision of the remaining three-quarters of the alphabet, it is easy to see that *OED3* is changing the lexical landscape so far as Shakespeare is concerned. Another technique would be to attempt to discriminate between the value and significance of different neologisms. This may look promising but is not straightforward. Are coinages like *miching malicho*, *mobled*, *imploratory*, *primy* (all from *Hamlet*, all recently revised in *OED3* and confirmed in their status as neologisms) more significant, because more unfamiliar to us today, than the new verb *pander* (also from *Hamlet*)? Or should it be the other way round?

Setting detail aside, is it still justifiable to claim Shakespeare as more influential on the English language than any other writer? All the evidence presented in this essay would confirm that this is so – and that his status is resoundingly affirmed by the most up-to-date lexical scholarship. A substantial doubt persists, however, largely because Shakespeare remains the writer most intensely quoted in the *OED*, and almost certainly the most intensely scrutinized one too. The new *OED* website tells us he has just over 1% of its total number of quotations, but anyone who looks up sets of non-scientific or non-technical words systematically in the dictionary will be struck by his unmatched dominance of entry after entry. To take, as a random sample, the words in the sentence beginning this paragraph: he is quoted once in the *OED2* entry for *setting* (for first usage of a sense), 5 times in that for *aside* (once for first usage), 20 times for the pronoun *it* (4 times for first usage), 6 times in the entry for the adverb *still* (3 for first usage), twice for the verb *claim* (once for first usage), 11 times for *as* (once for first usage), 12 times for the adjective *more* (once for first usage), 3 times for *English* (once for first usage), 7 times for *language* (3 times for first usage). The suspicion must remain that a portion of Shakespeare's influence, as recorded by the *OED*, is the preference for Shakespeare as a quotation source independently of the lexical value (or contribution) of his language. Since *OED3* is rarely discarding Shakespeare quotations as it revises, this influence is hardly likely to fall off – indeed, so far *OED3* is increasing the number of Shakespeare quotations, not reducing them.[29]

It is not surprising that a writer whose usage is subjected to such meticulous and exhaustive scrutiny will be found to have originated many new senses. The witty coinage *uncolted*, for example, created by Prince Harry in retorting to Falstaff's rebuke when his horse has been taken away (Falstaff: 'What a plague mean ye to colt ['trick'] me thus?' Prince: 'Thou liest, thou art not colted, thou art uncolted'; *1 Henry IV*, 2.2.37), which puns on *colt* to mean 'horse' as well as 'trick', has not since been used in the language; it would almost

---

is not yet electronically searchable but a list kindly sent me by the editor includes *beef* ('vagina': *Measure for Measure*, 3.1.323: 'Troth, sir, she hath eaten up all her beef, and she is herself in the tub'), *lance* ('penis', *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.280: 'The Grecian dames are sunburnt and not worth / The splinter of a lance'), *lap* ('vagina', *1 Henry IV*, 3.1.224: 'Come, Kate, thou art perfect in lying down. / Come, quick, quick, that I may lay my head in thy lap'), and many more examples.

[29] A count kindly carried out for me by *OED* staff on 29 July 2010 recorded an increase of 597 Shakespeare quotations over the alphabet range *M–rococoesque*. Of these new quotations 20 were from *Two Noble Kinsmen* (so newly attributed to Shakespeare rather than, necessarily, new to the *OED*).

certainly have gone unrecorded by *OED* if found in another writer's work, not least because it is clearly motivated by the immediate verbal and physical context (Falstaff's use of the verb *colt* in connection with his losing his horse). The same is true of many of the words and phrases already mentioned, such as *night owl* or *new snow*, newly admitted to the dictionary owing to fresh semantic analysis. Shakespeare's language continues to be scoured for puns and metaphors which it is always ready to yield, but which other poetic texts too might easily offer were they similarly examined: all poetry works through connotative suggestion, and its language will therefore surrender to many possible interpretations.[30] If *OED3* were to decide, as it progresses through the alphabet, to scrutinize the language of other writers with the unremitting intensity and thoroughness it has applied to Shakespeare, it is certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility that his record might be challenged.

---

[30] See e.g. *OED3*'s fine distinctions of sense giving Shakespeare newly identified first quotations s.v *pent* (adjective, sense 2), *move* (verb, 25h), *obscure* (verb, 2b).

357