

## Who Invented ‘Gloomy’? Lies People Want to Believe about Shakespeare

*Jonathan Hope*

Would you like a cocktail? I recently came across a recipe for one on Twitter:

The Fencer

2 parts gin

1 part Cointreau

1 part Campari

1 part dry vermouth

stir with ice and garnish with a twist of orange

Much as I like cocktails, I would probably not have noticed the recipe had it not been introduced with this fact of the day: “apparently fencing was 1<sup>st</sup> coined by Shakespeare and comes from the French word ‘defence’”<sup>1</sup>. A Shakespeare and language-associated cocktail seemed too good to miss, so I checked the derivation of ‘fencing’ in the on-line *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). The first example of the word ‘fencing’ in the OED is from Richard Mulcaster’s guide to the education of children, *Positions*, published in 1581, when Shakespeare was an unpublished seventeen-year old<sup>2</sup>. So Shakespeare did not invent the word ‘fencing’. The cocktail, however, is excellent.

---

<sup>1</sup> The tweets can be seen at [pic.twitter.com/jASc55dLRb](http://pic.twitter.com/jASc55dLRb). The recipe was posted by Merlin Griffiths (@MerlinFDC4) and the etymology came from Fred Sirieix (@fred-sirieix), citing a book by the drinks historian David Wondrich (@DavidWondrich). All internet sites accessed 31 December 2016 unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> See OED ‘fencing, *n.* 1’ (<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/69227>). As should become clear, I am not claiming that Mulcaster invented the word either – simply that it was

I found this Twitter exchange fascinating, since it is such a good example of a very common belief about Shakespeare. If there is one thing people know about him, it is that he invented many of the words we use today. From clickbait websites, to those that cultivate an air of serious journalism, to serious on-line introductions to Shakespeare, the internet is full of lists of them, not to mention references to his (supposedly) exceptionally huge vocabulary<sup>3</sup>. When I meet someone new and tell them what I do, there's a very high chance their response will be something about how creative Shakespeare was, and how he invented 'all those words'. We can hardly blame the general public for this: there are serious academic articles that 'prove', generally by nothing more than assertion, that Shakespeare is characterized, lifted out of the mass of writers, by his creativity with words, and specifically by his facility with coining. Popular, and not so popular, introductions to the history of English attest the same 'fact' – few ideas about English literature are so widely held, or so persistent<sup>4</sup>.

Spoiler alert: Shakespeare did not invent an unusual number of words. If you have a busy schedule you can stop reading now. But if

---

in circulation before Shakespeare used it. Perhaps ironically, at the time of writing (December 2016), Mulcaster's Wikipedia entry claims that he invented the word 'footeball' – which is also false, as the citations in OED 'football, *n.* 1' demonstrate (<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72687>).

- <sup>3</sup> For examples of clickbait sites, simply search on "Shakespeare invented words"; a site with pretensions to authority is *The Huffington Post*, and I discuss this post in detail below: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/14/shakespeare-words\\_n\\_4590819.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/14/shakespeare-words_n_4590819.html). As an example of a serious, and in many respects quite good, introduction to Shakespeare, see <http://www.bardweb.net/language.html> – though note two false claims (that Shakespeare invented 3000 words, and had an abnormally large vocabulary) on that page. For refutations of claims about the size of Shakespeare's vocabulary see Hugh Craig, "Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62: 1 (2011), pp. 53-74, and Ward E. Y. Elliot and Robert J. Valenza, "Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Did It Dwarf All Others?", in Jonathan Culpeper and Mireille Ravassat, eds, *Stylistics and Shakespeare's Language: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, London, Continuum, 2011, pp. 34-57.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, see Robert N. Watson, "Coining Words on the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage", *Philological Quarterly*, 88 (2009), pp. 49-75, and "Shakespeare's New Words", *Shakespeare Survey*, 65:1 (2012), pp. 358-77; Charlotte Brewer, "Shakespeare, Word-Coining and the OED", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 65:1 (2012), pp. 345-57. Melvyn Bragg's 2003 popular history, *The Adventure of English* (London, Hodder & Stoughton), states: "Shakespeare claimed himself as 'A man on fire for new words'" (p. 144) – both a misquotation and a misattribution of *Love's Labour's Lost*, where Don Armado, not Shakespeare, is said to be "A man of fire-new words" (l.i.176).

you study Shakespeare, or if you teach students about the history of English, or if you are interested in the burgeoning use of digital tools and quantitative methods in literary studies, you might find what comes next interesting and useful. I want to consider the persistence of this idea, and show how recent digital resources allow anyone – including undergraduate students – to debunk poorly evidenced claims in serious and non-serious sources.

First, let's kill some zombies. I am considering the myth about Shakespeare's linguistic creativity to be what is known as a 'zombie idea'<sup>5</sup>. That is, an idea that people cling to, or which sporadically reappears, despite refutation. Like zombies in a movie, zombie ideas keep on reviving, shambling into view with a taste for fresh brains to infect. And like zombies in a movie, zombie ideas generally have a point of origin – usually a secret government research lab which has been doing things it shouldn't with genetics and monkeys. In this case, the evidence points to the rightly respected *Oxford English Dictionary*, which began publishing in 1884, and completed its first edition in 1928. The OED is a monumental, and humbling, piece of Victorian scholarship, which is still the first point of call for work on the history of any English word. Developing Samuel Johnson's practice in his dictionary of English of illustrating words by citing examples of usage, the OED has quotations from each stage in a word's history, and for each new meaning as they develop. These citations were collected by an army of readers in a process which has been written about and dramatized many times. If used as they were intended, these citations constitute a fantastic resource for the history of English word meanings.

Unfortunately, the citations have very frequently been misread: in particular, the 'first citation' for a word, or sub-meaning of a word, has mistakenly been taken as being the 'first use' – the earliest example of the word the OED readers could find. This is unfortunate, because the OED readers and editors were not making claims about priority: citations are exemplary rather than evidential. They were chosen to give clear examples of the word's use, not to mark the 'invention' of a word – but the layout of examples in a chrono-

---

<sup>5</sup> On zombie ideas see, for example, Steven Poole <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/jun/28/why-bad-ideas-refuse-die> – adapted from his book *Rethink: The Surprising History of Ideas*, London, Random House, 2016.

logical list at the least allows the impression that the first citation is the 'first use' of a word<sup>6</sup>. Compounding this, OED readers and editors, for understandable reasons to do with the availability of texts, and cultural capital, tended to focus on 'great works' and 'great writers' when searching for, and selecting, citations – and of course, Shakespeare comes at the head of any list of 'greats'. This means that Shakespeare features as the first citation for a very large number of head words and sub-meanings – and this has mistakenly been taken as evidence that Shakespeare 'invented' these words and meanings. Many of the on-line lists are directly or indirectly compiled from OED searches showing all the words where Shakespeare is the source of a citation – and this accounts (along with simple plagiarism) for the similarity in numbers quoted (currently most sites claim around 1700 or 1300 words for Shakespeare, though this used to be 3000, before people began to be aware of the issues with the OED 'evidence').

If we have now identified the source of the zombie plague as the OED, we also need to account for the difficulty of killing this idea. Every film needs a sequel, and for a zombie film to have a sequel, the 'cure' can never be complete – at least one zombie must be left to re-ignite the outbreak after most have been destroyed. 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)<sup>7</sup>. People are desperate to 'save' his position as a creative genius despite the

---

<sup>6</sup> Of course, as the compilers of the OED knew well, the very notion of identifying the 'first use' of a word is chimerical – which is why they did not attempt to do it. The patchy survival of print from early periods means we cannot know if earlier printed examples of any word have been lost. And even if we had a full print record, many words must 'first' be recorded in manuscript – and many more must be used in speech before they are written in any medium. So, laying aside the problems with the incomplete data sets we have, the attempt to identify 'first uses' runs against linguistic reality.

<sup>7</sup> Some sites are quite careful about the basis of the evidence for their claims, and note the problems that arise if you confuse 'first citation' with 'first use' – <http://www.pathguy.com/shakeswo.htm> is an example, and would make a good starting point for university teachers who want to set students checking claims. There is also now a genre of refutation sites, which seek to correct the much-repeated

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 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? (And how ironic that we revert at this point to a claim that is essentially quantitative, in this most humanistic of endeavours!)

I suspect that myths about Shakespeare's vocabulary will never really die – they are too attractive. But if we are to have any hope of keeping the outbreak under control, then I think we must act like zombie killers, and try to smash in the heads of every zombie we can find. Exemplary articles pointing out the evidential issues in general terms will not do it. Nor will isolated papers (like this one) which pick a single set of claims and debunk them. Unless and until every zombie has its head bashed in, the idea will continue to rear up from the grave. There are at least 1700 words to be checked/heads to be bashed. You will be relieved to hear that I am not going to check them all in this essay – but what I suggest is that we encourage students and bloggers to hunt these zombies for us. The next section of the essay will show you how.

### *Huffington Puffington*

For our exemplary piece of zombie-killing I have chosen an article from *The Huffington Post* entitled "13 Words You Probably Didn't Know Were Invented By Shakespeare"<sup>8</sup>. The article is typical of its type, claiming in its first paragraph that

---

claims – <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-shakespeare-didnt-invent> shows that ten words frequently identified as Shakespeare coinages can be found earlier: *assassination*, *bold-faced*, *uncomfortable*, *deafening*, *bedazzle*, *puke*, *hurry*, *frugal*, *eyeball*, *inaudible*, *premeditated*; and <http://io9.gizmodo.com/no-william-shakespeare-did-not-really-invent-1-700-eng-1700049586> discusses how the vocabulary myth arose. Also worth noting: <https://letterpile.com/books/Did-Shakespeare-Invent-and-Make-up-English-Words-and-Phrases>.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/14/shakespeare-words\\_n\\_4590819.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/14/shakespeare-words_n_4590819.html) – first published 14 January 2014, updated 15 March 2014. Interestingly, in view of my comments on the persistence of the zombie myth even in the face of refutation,

Shakespeare can be credited for the invention of thousands of words that are now an everyday part of the English language (including, but not limited to, 'eyeball', 'fashionable', and 'manager').

I chose this article because *The Huffington Post* aspires to a degree of reliability, and because the post actually does a reasonable job of citing the evidential basis for its claims. Here, for example, is what it has to say about the word 'gloomy':

**Gloomy**

**Definition:** Somewhat dark: not bright or sunny.

**Origin:** "To gloom" was a verb that existed before Shakespeare converted the word into an adjective in a number of his plays.

**Quote:** "Forced in the ruthless, vast, and gloomy woods?" – *Titus Andronicus*

The article was first published in January 2014, and was then revised in March of the same year. I assume the revisions were to acknowledge the problems there are with evidence for 'first use' of a word, since the third paragraph from the site contradicts the headline and first paragraph quoted above:

It's hard to say whether or not Shakespeare was the first to *use* many of these words, but in most cases he has long been believed to be the first to write them (although *the widespread digitization of books has led to a few interesting discoveries from earlier sources*)<sup>9</sup>.

The posting is thus a good example of the persistence of these false claims, even after their problematic basis has been pointed out. People really, *really*, want this myth to be true – and typically if

---

a note at the end of the post reads: "CLARIFICATION: This post has been modified to reflect varying views about the nature of word origins". The post has also been the subject of a well-informed refutation by Ammon Shea – <http://blog.dictionary.com/spurious-neologisms-shakespeare/> – though the refutation is in general terms, rather than explicitly showing that each word is wrong.

<sup>9</sup> There is a hyperlink at the end of the passage to <http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-08-19/did-william-shakespeare-really-invent-all-those-words>. Like the debunking articles, listed in footnote 7, this is a well-informed piece, but it concentrates on the general principles that make 'first use' evidence problematic, rather than dismantling each individual claim.

the evidential problems are acknowledged, there will be a gradual slippage back from terms like 'popularized' or 'made known' to 'invented' and 'coined'.

Pointing out the general issues with attempting to identify first uses of words, as many sites and articles have done, simply does not work: people default back to individual cases, and the contagion begins to spread again. The only possible remedy is to kill each individual case: hammer the point with repetition. So that is what I will do with the claimed first uses in the *Huffington Post* article. Although the title refers to "13 Words" invented by Shakespeare, the evidence for which is laid out in the main body of the post, there are an extra three claimed inventions in the first paragraph ('eyeball', 'fashionable', and 'manager'), so I will include them in my zombie hunt.

Here is the full list of words claimed as Shakespeare 'inventions' in the article in the order in which they appear:

eyeball	fashionable	manager
gloomy	laughable	majestic
lonely	radiance	hurry
generous	frugal	critical
courtship	zany	undress
rant		

There is no indication in the article of where this list came from, but similar lists are repeated frequently by other on-line sources – and we can assume that they have been drawn from first-citations in the OED.

As evidence for this, and to give an example of the debunking method I am outlining here, I will begin with the OED entry for 'eyeball'. At the time of writing (December 2016), the on-line OED splits the entry into two sub-meanings, 1a and 1b: 1a has 'eyeball' meaning the pupil and iris together (or later the visible part of the eye), while 1b has 'eyeball' meaning the whole eye, particularly when removed from the head. For meaning 1a, the first citation is dated 1575, and is taken from William

Patten's *Calendar of Scripture* – published when Shakespeare was eleven years old. For meaning 1b, the first example is Shakespeare, dated 1593 (*Lucrece*). So Shakespeare can hardly be said to have invented this word – why have people claimed that he did? One very useful feature of the on-line OED is the information it provides about how recently any entry was revised. In this case, a blue note at the top right of the dictionary window tells us that this entry has recently been updated: “This entry has been updated (OED Third Edition, June 2014)” – and we can see by clicking on “Publication history” that the update was made to the on-line edition in December 2016. Clicking on “Previous version” opens the previous, unrevised entry in a new window, and reveals that the OED until recently had a Shakespeare example as first citation for each of the meanings (1a and 1b) – *Venus and Adonis* 1592 and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1590 (sic)<sup>10</sup>.

We can now see why on-line, and even scholarly, articles have been claiming ‘eyeball’ for Shakespeare: they are treating a first-citation in the second edition of the OED as evidence for first-use. Unfortunately for them, Shakespeare's 1590s uses have now been ante-dated with Patten's from 1575.

This is an excellent example of the shifting nature of the evidence for dating words: the OED is continually being revised as new materials are searched, and earlier instances of words and meanings are discovered. This is bad news for those who want to treat the OED citations as evidence for the earliest known instance of a word, but very good news for those who want to debunk spurious claims for Shakespeare neologisms, because we can use the OED, the source of the original contagion in many instances, as a cure. Simply looking up claimed Shakespeare inventions in the on-line OED now reveals many of them to have been in use before his birth or writing career began.

If we do this with the words in the above list, in addition to ‘eyeball’, we can ante-date another four by using the current version of the OED<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> OED ‘eyeball, *n.* 1.a. and 1.b.’ – <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67301> (the earlier version of the entry is at <http://www.oed.com/oed2/00081253>). The current entry notes that it is “Occas[ionally] difficult to distinguish” the two senses – something I would agree with, and this is a good illustration for students, and others, that dictionary entries are theories about language rather than objectively ‘true’ descriptions.

<sup>11</sup> Dates for texts are as given in the relevant edition of the OED. Especially in the case of Shakespeare, these are often now considered to be wrong, and I have marked those that are notably out of line with current thinking, ‘sic’.



## **Radiance**

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** A quality of brightness and happiness that can be seen on a person's face

**Origin:** Derived from the Latin "radiantem," meaning "beaming"

**Quote:** "For by the sacred radiance of the sun" – *King Lear*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the second edition of the OED had an example from Shakespeare (dated 1601) as the first-citation for this word:

1601 Shakes. *All's Well* i. i. 99 In his bright radience and colaterall light, must I be comforted.

<http://www.oed.com/oed2/00196084>

**Correction:** The current edition now ante-dates that instance with examples from Marlowe (1593) and Chapman (1598):

a1593 Marlowe tr. Ovid *Elegies* (c1603) iii. x. sig. F, Thine eyes whose radiance burnes out mine.

1598 G. Chapman tr. Homer *Seauen Bks. Iliades* xviii. 192 Their guides a repercussive dread Took from the horrid radiance of his refulgent head.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157230>

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

## **Generous**

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** Freely giving or sharing money and other valuable things

**Origin:** From the Latin "generosus," meaning "of noble birth"

**Quote:** "Free me so far in your most generous thoughts / That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house / And hurt my brother" – *Hamlet*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the second edition of the OED had an example from Shakespeare (dated 1588 – sic) as the first-citation for this word:

1588 Shakes. *L.L.L.* v. i. 96 Most generous sir.  
<http://www.oed.com/oed2/00093601>

**Correction:** The current edition now ante-dates that citation with a 1574 instance from Edward Hellowes' translation of Antonio de Guevara's *Familiar Epistles*:

1574 E. Hellowes tr. A. de Guevara *Familiar Epist.* 43 Worship and contention doe neuer accompanie in one generous personage.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77535>

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

## Zany

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** Amusingly unconventional and idiosyncratic

**Origin:** Derived from the Italian “zani,” which came from “Zanni,” a version of the name “Giovanni”

**Quote:** “Some carry-tale, some please-man, some slight zany” – *Love's Labour's Lost*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the second edition of the OED had an example from Shakespeare (dated 1588 – sic) as the first-citation for this word:

1588 Shakes. *L.L.L.* v. ii. 463 Some carry-tale, some please-man, some slight Zanie, ...That... knowes the trick To make my Lady laugh.  
<http://www.oed.com/oed2/00290935>

**Correction:** The current edition now ante-dates that instance with a 1596 example from Thomas Lodge, having corrected the date given to Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* to 1598:

1596 T. Lodge *Wits Miserie* M iv b, Here marcheth forth Scurilitie... the first time he lookt out of Italy into England, it was in the habite of a Zani.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/232693>

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

## Rant

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** To talk loudly and in a way that shows anger: to complain in a way that is unreasonable

**Origin:** Derived from the Dutch “randten,” meaning “talk foolishly”

**Quote:** “I’ll rant as well as thou.” – *Hamlet*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the second edition of the OED had an example from Shakespeare (dated 1602) as the first-citation for this word:

1602 Shakes. *Ham.* v. i. 307 Nay, and thou’lt mouth, Ile rant as well as thou.

<http://www.oed.com/oed2/00197286>

**Correction:** The current edition now ante-dates that instance with a 1602 example from Ben Jonson, and matches the Shakespeare example with a 1604 instance from John Marston, having revised the date given to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to 1604:

1602 B. Jonson *Poetaster* iii. iv. 164 He will teach thee to teare and rand.

1604 J. Marston *Malcontent* iv. iv. sig. G2, O do not rand, do not turne plaier.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158100>

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

Five words down – all erroneously claimed as Shakespeare neologisms because scholars misinterpreted the significance of the OED first-citation. Luckily these are easily debunked thanks to the ongoing revision of the OED. Before I go on to address the remaining eleven words, let’s note the sources of these earlier OED examples. ‘Eyeball’, ‘radiance’, and ‘generous’ all now have first-citations from translations, while ‘zany’ and ‘rant’ come into English from Italian and Dutch respectively. In addition to poor use of OED ‘evidence’, the whole Shakespeare-as-neologiser myth is based on a misunderstanding of where words come from: they are not ‘invented’ out of

nothing by creative writers – they are more likely to be found and adapted into the language by translators. It is also striking that ‘rant’ enters English print in the work of several playwrights at around the same date – Jonson, Marston, Dekker, Webster, Shakespeare – groups of users and types of writing are more important to the establishment of new words than individuals.

Of the remaining eleven words in the list, most remain the first citation in the current on-line OED – presumably the reason they were claimed as Shakespeare inventions in the first place. However, we should not read anything into the fact that these instances have not yet been ante-dated by the on-line OED. The revisions are on-going, and indeed, perpetual: some entries in the on-line dictionary still date from the first paper edition in the nineteenth-century, and even when they have all been revised, the process of revision will continue. We should also remember that first-citations are not attempts to record the earliest known use of a word (striking evidence of this is coming up).

The good news is that we do not have to wait for the on-going revision process to find out if the remaining claimed Shakespeare inventions really are his creations. The advent of open-access digital resources allows us, and our students, to join in the work of revising the OED, searching tens of thousands of books in seconds to test the claims of the Shakespeare neologist acolytes. In what follows, I will use two search engines to search slightly different versions of the EEBO-TCP data set. EEBO-TCP is a fully searchable corpus of 60,000 early modern printed texts published from 1450-1700. Although it does not include every single text printed in the period, it does represent a very large sample, and search engines allow us to search its six million words for instances of claimed Shakespeare neologisms<sup>12</sup>.

## ***Gloomy***

From the *Huffington Post* article:

---

<sup>12</sup> For information about EEBO-TCP see: <http://www.textcreationpartnership.org/tcp-eebo/>. The search-tools I will use are *Early Print* – <http://earlyprint.wustl.edu/> – and *JISC Historical Texts* – <https://historicaltexts.jisc.ac.uk/home>. *Early Print* is freely available to any one; *JISC Historical Texts* is only available through UK academic institutions (if you have access, you could also use the ‘full text’ search facility on Pro-Quest’s commercially available EEBO interface).

**Definition:** Somewhat dark; not bright or sunny

**Origin:** "To gloom" was a verb that existed before Shakespeare converted the word into an adjective in a number of his plays.

**Quote:** "Forced in the ruthless, vast, and gloomy woods?" – *Titus Andronicus*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the current edition of the OED has a 1594 example from Shakespeare as the first citation for this word:

1594 Shakespeare *Titus Andronicus* iv. i. 53 The ruthlesse Vast and gloomie woods.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79096>

The entry was first published in 1900 and has not been updated.

**Correction:** A search for 'gloomy' in *Early Print* finds more than thirty ante-datings! Dates include 1566, 1568, 1573 (3 instances), 1577, 1579, 1581 (3 instances), 1582, 1583, 1585 (6 instances), 1587 (3 instances), 1588 (3 instances), 1589 (3 instances), 1590 (9 instances). These include examples in major texts such as translations of Seneca, the Bible, Robert Greene, *The Faerie Queene*, and George Peele<sup>13</sup>.

This striking result is another reminder that OED first-citations were chosen as *examples* of usage – not attempts to record the earliest known use. It would be ridiculous to suggest that OED readers and editors had missed all of these earlier uses: more likely they were aware of some at least, but decided to use Shakespeare as an example because of his status.

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

## Majestic

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** Large and impressively beautiful

<sup>13</sup> To repeat this search: (1) go to <http://earlyprint.wustl.edu/>; (2) click on 'EEBO-TCP Key Words in Context'; (3) for 'Corpus' select 'Regularized spellings'; (4) in 'Search Pattern' enter 'gloomy'; (5) click on 'View Words'.

**Origin:** From “majesty,” which appeared in the 1300s, meaning “greatness”. “Majestical” was first used in the 1570s.

**Quote:** “This is a most majestic vision” – *The Tempest*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the second edition of the OED had a 1601 example from Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar*) as the first citation for this word (sense b.):

1601 Shakes. *Jul. C. i. ii.* 130 It doth amaze me, A man of such a feeble temper should So get the start of the Maiesticke world.

<http://www.oed.com/oed2/00138724>

**Correction:** The current edition has re-dated *Julius Caesar* to ‘a1616’ (i.e. written some time before Shakespeare’s death in 1616), and has as its first citation a 1606 example from John Davies:

1606 J. Davies *Bien Venu* sig. Bi<sup>v</sup>, Showes most maiestick, fit most Maiestie.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/112609>

The currently accepted date for *Julius Caesar* is 1599, which would place Shakespeare’s use before that of Davies. However, a search using *Early Print* returns instances from 1594, 1596 (2 instances), 1597 (4 instances), 1598 (2 instances), and 1599 (7 instances – all non-Shakespearean)<sup>14</sup>:

marshalling their stately blasons in **maiestique** method  
(John Dickenson, 1594, *Arisbas*, A20406, G3<sup>v</sup>)

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

## Manager

From the *Huffington Post* article:

The term is claimed in the text of the post as a Shakespeare invention, but no evidence is given (it is not one of the thirteen words which make up the main body of the article).

<sup>14</sup> To repeat this search, follow note 13, and substitute ‘majestic’ for ‘gloomy’.

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the second edition of the OED had a 1588 (sic) example from Shakespeare (*Love's Labour's Lost*) as the first citation for this word:

1588 Shakes. *L.L.L.* i. ii. 188 Aduē Valour, rust Rapier, bee still Drum,  
for your manager is in loue.  
<http://www.oed.com/oed2/00139554>

**Correction:** The current edition has re-dated *Love's Labour's Lost* to 1598, and gives as a first citation John Florio, also dated 1598:

1598 J. Florio *Worlde of Wordes* A manager, a handler.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113219>

However, *Early Print* and *JISC Historical Texts* return an instance from 1572 in John Leslie's *A Treatise of Treasons*<sup>15</sup>:

the chiefe **Manager** of your affaires professeth, the yearely fleesing of  
the Subiect  
(A21247, f. 101)

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim – not a Shakespeare invention*

## Lonely

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** Sad from being apart from other people

**Origin:** "Alone" was first shortened to "lone" in the 1400s.

**Quote:** "Believe't not lightly – though I go alone / Like to a lonely drag-  
on that his fen" – *Coriolanus*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the current edition of the OED has a 1616 example from Shakespeare as the first citation for the word:

---

<sup>15</sup> To repeat this search on *JISC Historical Texts* you will need to be able to log-in from a UK academic institution. If you are able to do this: (1) go to <https://historicaltexts.jisc.ac.uk/home>; (2) in the search bar enter 'manager'; (3) select 'Advanced Search'; (4) under 'Collections' select 'EEBO (1473-1700)'; (5) in the results page you can order by date, but note that the underlying metadata has inconsistent date formats which can result in rogue entries at the start and end of lists. Where I cite words from texts in the EEBO-TCP data set I give the TCP text number – in this case A21247.

**a1616** Shakespeare *Coriolanus* (1623) iv. i. 31, I go alone Like to a lonely Dragon, that his Fenne Makes fear'd, and talk'd of more then seene.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109971>

**Correction:** Searches in *Early Print* and *JISC Historical Texts* give numerous earlier examples, notably: Stephen Hawes, 1554, *The Historie of graunde Amoure*; Philip Sidney, 1590, *Arcadia*; Philip Sidney, 1593, *Arcadia* (8 instances); Edmund Spenser, 1596, *The Faerie Queene*<sup>16</sup>:

Your beauty cleare, and **lonely** lokes swete My hart did perce  
 (Hawes 1554, A02817, Kiiii<sup>r</sup>)  
 By fields whereon the lonely Ghosts do treade  
 (Mary Sidney Herbert (tr.), Robert Garnier, 1595, *Tragedie of Antonie*, A01502, G3<sup>r</sup>)

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim – not a Shakespeare invention*

## **Hurry**

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** Move or act with haste; rush

**Origin:** Likely derived from the verb “harry”

**Quote:** “Lives, honors, lands, and all hurry to loss.” – *Henry VI Part 1*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the current edition of the OED has a 1594 example from Shakespeare as its first citation:

**1594** Shakespeare *Venus & Adonis* (new ed.) sig. Fijj<sup>v</sup>, A second feare...  
 Which madly hurries her, she knowes not whither.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/89605>

**Correction:** However, *Early Print* returns an instance from 1591 (Richard Turnbull, *An exposition vpon the canonicall Epistle of Saint Iames*)<sup>17</sup>:

<sup>16</sup> To repeat these searches, see notes 13 (*Early Print*) and 15 (*JISC Historical Texts*), substituting the search term ‘lonely’ as appropriate.

<sup>17</sup> To repeat these searches, see notes 13 (*Early Print*) and 15 (*JISC Historical Texts*), substituting the search term ‘hurry’ as appropriate.



This is also a great point of vngodlines...[to] **hurrie** after new men, and let our ordinarie Pastors... preach and speake to the walles (Turnbull, 1591, A14032, f.97<sup>v</sup>)

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim – not a Shakespeare invention*

## **Frugal**

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** Careful about spending money or using things when you do not need to

**Origin:** From the Latin “frugi,” meaning “useful, proper, worthy, honest”

**Quote:** “Chid I for that at frugal Nature’s frame?” – *Much Ado About Nothing*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the current edition of the OED has an example from Shakespeare, dated at *a*1616 (sic) as the first citation:

**a1616** Shakespeare *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1623) ii. i. 26, I was then Frugall of my mirth.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/75062>

**Correction:** However, *Early Print* and *JISC Historical Texts* return instances from 1542 (Erasmus, *Apothegmes*); 1548 (Erasmus, *Paraphrase vpon the Newe Testamente*); 1550 (Richard Sherry, *A treatise of schemes*); 1551 (Thomas Wilson, *The rule of reason*); 1553 (Cato, *Preceptes of Cato*); 1561 (Cicero, *Those fyue questions*); 1571 (Plutarch, *A president for parentes*); 1580 (Humphrey Gifford, *A posie of gilflowers*); 1584 (Jean Calvin, *A harmonie vpon the three Euangelists*); 1586 (Angel Day, *The English secretorie*), amongst others<sup>18</sup>:

*Plato* in deede was a frugall man and a great sparer or housbād (Erasmus, 1542, A00316, kii<sup>v</sup>)

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim – not a Shakespeare invention*

<sup>18</sup> To repeat these searches, see notes 13 (*Early Print*) and 15 (*JISC Historical Texts*), substituting the search term ‘frugal’ as appropriate.

## Critical

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** Expressing criticism or disapproval

**Origin:** From the Latin “criticus,” which referred specifically to a literary critic.

**Quote:** “For I am nothing if not critical” – *Othello*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the current edition of the OED has a 1600 example from Shakespeare as the first citation for this word:

1600 Shakespeare *Midsummer Night's Dream* v. i. 54 That is some Satire keene and criticall  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/44592>

**Correction:** However, *Early Print* returns instances from 1569 (Cicero); 1576 (Levinus Lemnius, *The touchstone of complexions*); 1584 (Richard Cosin, *An answer to the two first and principall treatises*); 1587 (Levinus Lemnius, *An herbal for the Bible*; William Fulbeck, *A booke of christian ethicks*); 1596 (Thomas Nash, *Haue vwith you to Saffron-vvalden*), amongst others<sup>19</sup>:

IF I did not gentle Reader trust more to thy friendly courtesy then to mine own skill and judgment, I would not with hazard of my fame have enterprysed the diuulgacion of this my simple travail to the gazing view of every scrupulous and critical beholder  
 (Thomas Newton (tr.), Cicero, 1569, *The worthy booke of old age*, A18823, †5<sup>v</sup>)

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

## Courtship

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** The activities that occur when people are developing a romantic relationship that could lead to marriage or the period of time when such activities occur

**Origin:** “Court” was first used to mean “woo” in the 1570s; prior, it

<sup>19</sup> To repeat these searches, see notes 13 (*Early Print*) and 15 (*JISC Historical Texts*), substituting the search term ‘critical’ as appropriate.

was used to mean "king's court, princely residence," derived from the French "cort"

**Quote:** "To courtship and such fair ostents of love" – *The Merchant of Venice*

**Comment:** 'Courtship' has a range of meanings, given eight sub-entries in the OED, four of which have a first citation from Shakespeare. The sub-meaning specified in the *Huffington Post* article is OED 'courtship', n. 6.a., "The action or process of paying court to a woman with a view to marriage; courting, wooing", for which the first-citation is as follows:

1600 Shakespeare *Merchant of Venice* ii. viii. 44 Be merry, and employ your cheefest thoughts to courtship, and such faire ostents of loue  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43258>

**Correction:** The closeness of meanings between the senses of the word make it important to check the full context when searching for uses before Shakespeare. *JISC Historical Texts* is best for this, but both *JISC* and *Early Print* give the following examples<sup>20</sup>:

Why Sir Knight, where learned you so little **courtship**, as when the fairest in the Westerne world passeth before you, you make no gentle gesture or salutation?

(Anthony Munday, 1588, *Palmerin D'Oliua*, A08875, Hh1<sup>r</sup>)

so well he could his **Courtship** to the Princesse Minoretta, that she accepted him as her Knight, and fauoured him aboue all other that made loue to her

(Claude Colet, 1588, *Palladine of England*, A19128, f.71<sup>r</sup>)

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

## Undress

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** To take your clothes off

**Origin:** "Dress" comes from the Old French "dresser," meaning "prepare, arrange, straighten, put right." Shakespeare was the first to add the prefix "un-."

<sup>20</sup> To repeat these searches, see notes 13 (*Early Print*) and 15 (*JISC Historical Texts*), substituting the search term 'courtship' as appropriate.

**Quote:** “Madam, undress you and come now to bed.” – *The Taming of the Shrew*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the current edition of the OED has an example from Shakespeare as the first citation:

**a1616** Shakespeare *Taming of Shrew* (1623) Induct. ii. 114 Madam vndresse you, and come now to bed.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/212650>

**Correction:** A more accurate date for *Taming* would be 1590-92, but even so *Early Print* finds an earlier instance in 1566 (Apuleius, *The Golden asse*), and another from 1592 (Robert Greene, *Defence of conny catching*)<sup>21</sup>:

Thus when I had well replenished my selfe with wine, and was now readie unto Venerie not onely in minde but also in bodie, I removed my clothes, and (showinge to Fotis my great impacienie) I said, O my sweete harte take pitie vpon me and helpe me: for as you see, I am now prepared vnto the battaile which you your selfe did appointe, for after that I felte the first arrow of cruell Cupide within my brest, I bent my bowe very stronge, and now feare (because it is bended so harde) least the stringe should breake, but that thou maist the better please me, vndresse thy heare and come and embrace me louingly  
 (Apuleius, 1566, *The Golden Asse*, A20800, Fiii<sup>r</sup>)

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

We began with sixteen claimed Shakespeare inventions. Five were shown to be false claims using the current, updated OED entries, and another nine were shown to be false using search tools that allow us access to the EEBO-TCP corpus. I will end this section by looking at the two remaining words, which present slightly different, and very interesting, problems.

---

<sup>21</sup> To repeat these searches, see notes 13 (*Early Print*) and 15 (*JISC Historical Texts*), substituting the search term ‘undress’ as appropriate.

## Laughable

From the *Huffington Post* article:

**Definition:** Bad in a way that seems foolish or silly

**Origin:** Derived from the verb “laugh.”

**Quote:** “Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.” – *The Merchant of Venice*

**Comment:** Probably claimed as a Shakespeare invention because the current edition of the OED has an example from Shakespeare as the first citation for this word:

1600 Shakespeare *Merchant of Venice* i. i. 56 Theyle not shew theyr teeth  
in way of smile Though Nestor sweare the iest be laughable  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/106251>

*Early Print* and *JISC Historical Texts* also have this instance as their earliest result (the TCP transcribed text happens to be the Pavier quarto, which was actually printed in 1619 and falsely dated 1600, but there *was* a genuine edition in 1600). We know from an entry in the Stationers’ Register that the play had been written by 1598<sup>22</sup>.

So is this our first example of a Shakespeare invention that stands up? Let’s be very clear about what we can claim from this evidence. We have searched the EEBO-TCP corpus, which consists of 60,000 printed texts from 1450-1700. It does not have a copy of everything printed in the period (since much is lost) – and it does not even have a copy of everything printed that survives (since it does not include all the editions of each text that were printed and survive). We have not searched the huge amount of manuscript material that survives from the period because that has not (yet) been transcribed. And of course, we have not been able to search early modern speech because it has disappeared. So we cannot claim that we have found the ‘first use’ of ‘laughable’ in English, or even in English print – but we can say that we have found the earliest known use, given the available data set.

**Correction:** But before we get too excited, let’s look more closely at the OED definition, and the pattern of uses of the word across the seventeenth century. ‘Laughable’ is a very rare word in the period –

<sup>22</sup> To repeat these searches, see notes 13 (*Early Print*) and 15 (*JISC Historical Texts*), substituting the search term ‘laughable’ as appropriate.

surprisingly so, given how common it is today – and it occurs only six times in the EEBO-TCP data set: 1600, 1623, 1693, 1699, 1700 (x2). In fact, we can reduce that number to five, because the 1600 and 1623 instances are the same use by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*: the 1623 result is from Shakespeare's first folio, which includes *The Merchant of Venice*<sup>23</sup>.

So the word appears in EEBO-TCP at the start of the seventeenth century, and then not again for eighty years. Quite a gap – and not really consistent with claims for Shakespeare as a popularizer of words.

But there is something else. *The Huffington Post* glosses 'laughable' with its modern sense, 'bad in a way that seems foolish or silly' – yet Shakespeare's use of it is not in this sense. Here's the full context:

Nature hath fram'd strange fellows in her time:  
Some that will evermore peep through their eyes,  
And laugh like parrots at a bag-piper:  
And other of such vinegar aspect,  
That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile  
Though Nestor swear the jest be **laughable**.  
(I.i.51-56)<sup>24</sup>

Here 'laughable' means 'provoking amusement' – 'genuinely funny', rather than the modern meaning of 'ridiculous; pathetic'. The OED conflates these two meanings in its gloss, but acknowledges that there has been a meaning shift: 'Able to be laughed at; amusing. Now chiefly: ludicrous, absurd'. Really these should be separate sub-entries under the lemma 'laughable' – with Shakespeare the first citation for a meaning that is now obsolete. Indeed, it is impossible to say from EEBO-TCP when the modern sense of 'laughable' arises because the flurry of uses at the end of the seventeenth century are all in the non-modern sense. Thus Dryden (1693) in *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis* has

<sup>23</sup> The EEBO-TCP project attempted to avoid duplicating texts like this in their transcriptions, but many slipped through – especially plays, which are often published singly, and then again in collected volumes.

<sup>24</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, eds Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan, London, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1998.

Scaliger will not allow Persius to have any Wit: Casaubon Interprets this in the mildest Sense; and confesses his Author was not good at turning things into a pleasant Ridicule; or in other words, that he was not a **laughable** Writer.

And Jean de La Bruyère (1699) in *The characters, or, The manners of the age* has "He is merry, very **laughable**", as does Scarron, **The whole comical works of Monsr. Scarron** (1700):

I can assure you that it made all the Company laugh very heartily, and that I have laughed at it since, whether it be really **laughable**, or because I am one of those who laugh at a very small Matter

So, while Shakespeare *is* the earliest printed instance of the word we can currently find, his meaning is not the one that has come into modern English.

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim* – not a Shakespeare invention

## **Fashionable**

From the *Huffington Post* article:

The term is claimed in the text of the post as a Shakespeare invention, but no evidence is given (it is not one of the 'thirteen' words which make up the main body of the article).

**Comment and Correction:** Like 'laughable' (see above), 'fashionable' has several meanings – unlike 'laughable', however, the OED does separate them into different sub-headings.

The first sub-meaning in *OED*, 1.a., is a now obsolete, literal one: "Capable of being fashioned, shaped, or moulded". The first citation of this sense is 1607, and is not from Shakespeare – <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/68392><sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>25</sup> Though Shakespeare does use 'unfashionable' in this literal sense in *Richard III*:  
 I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,  
 Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,  
 Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time  
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up –  
 And that so lamely and **unfashionable**

The first sub-meaning in OED with a Shakespeare citation is 4.a., “Of persons: Observant of or following *the fashion*; dressing or behaving in conformity with the standard of elegance current in upper class society” (this entry was first published in 1895). A Shakespeare use from 1609 is the first citation for this sense, although the second citation is from the same year:

1609 Shakespeare *Troilus & Cressida* III. iii. 159 A fashionable hoaste.. slightly shakes his parting guest by th' hand.

1609 W. M. Man in Moone sig. F4, A finicall fellow he is, and very fashionable

However, *Early Print* and *JISC Historical Texts* return an instance from John Day's *The ile of guls* (1606): “if any one rise (especially of any **fashionable** sort) about what serious busines soeuer, the rest thinking it in dislike of the play, tho he neuer thinks it, cry mew”<sup>26</sup>.

It is also notable that there are several instances of ‘fashionable’, 4.b. ‘Of things’ which ante-date its use of people – especially from George Chapman (1605).

**Verdict:** *incorrect claim – not a Shakespeare invention*

To sum up: I began with sixteen words claimed as Shakespeare coinages and have shown that none of them stands up as a Shakespeare invention. In future work, I will continue to look at other claimed Shakespeare coinages, and I encourage other scholars to set their students to work on this task. My bet is that a very high percentage – if not all – can be ante-dated from the new data sets we have available.

But there is more to this work than simply dismantling the great Shakespeare vocabulary myth. We can learn something about how language and culture work. For example, many of the words examined here seem to enter English, not from the brain of Shakespeare, but

---

That dogs bark at me, as I halt by them –  
(I.i.18-22, *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, cit.).

OED ‘unfashionable’ has this Shakespeare use as the first citation for sub-meaning 2., but it is hard to see how this meaning differs from sub-meaning 1., the first citation for which is from 1563 (<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/213215>).

<sup>26</sup> To repeat these searches, see notes 13 (*Early Print*) and 15 (*JISC Historical Texts*), substituting the search term ‘fashionable’ as appropriate.



from the work of translators – often many years before Shakespeare was born, or started to write ('eyeball', 'radiance', 'generous', 'frugal', 'critical', 'courtship', 'undress'). It is striking that three of the words covered ('rant', 'zany', 'fashionable') pop up suddenly in many dramatic texts within a couple of years. The picture that emerges for me from this, is not one of Shakespeare single-handedly inventing, or even popularizing, words, but of him as a typical member of an artistic community, one which responds to and reflects the rapid changes going on in the vocabulary of English at the time. It is hardly surprising that professional playwrights making a living in the commercial theatre, seeking to attract popular audiences, are quick to pick up on linguistic fashions – and it is linguistically naïve of us to seek to locate the 'origin' of words in a single individual. Languages are collaborative, communal efforts – words come into being thanks to the morphological and phonetic resources of the language, and its cultural contacts, not because a few users are divinely gifted wordsmiths.