

Historical background

Henry Condell the man who announces Alexander's injury was an actor and apparently a friend of Shakespeare's and Alexander's. When Alexander Cooke died (very young) his will specified Condell as a trustee of his estate. When Shakespeare died he left Condell money to buy a remembrance ring (this was a common thing to do for friends in Jacobean England). After Shakespeare's death Condell along with others helped to bring together many of Shakespeare's plays into the first collected edition of his works known as the First Folio.

Actors were often involved in scuffles and brawls so it's not at all unlikely that the young Alexander would have got into a fight with other men somehow.

Pupils may be surprised to learn that Shakespeare's audience often found his language as difficult as they do. Whilst many of the classical allusions which we now find hard would have been common knowledge amongst Shakespeare's audience, a lot of the creative and intellectual language would have been challenging.

Part of the reason for this is that historically this was a period during which language was changing rapidly. When Shakespeare's father was a boy, formal education was only for the wealthy. However by the time Shakespeare himself was a boy, formal education was far more commonplace amongst the middle and lower classes. This meant that many more people of Shakespeare's generation were educated and literate than was the case for the previous generation. These newly educated people introduced new words into the language and enjoyed laughing at the older less educated generation.

In lots of Shakespeare's plays there are older characters who are mocked by younger more intellectual young men. For instance in the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* there is a hapless watch man called Dogberry. Dogberry does not understand all these new words though he tries to sound like an educated man he uses the wrong words frequently. He is not great with his numbers and he cannot write. The audience enjoyed laughing at him because they got to feel superior because they 'got' the joke that Dogberry didn't.

Here are a few examples

Here Dogberry is being asked to list the offences of the men he has arrested. As you can see he finds marshalling his argument and making a list quite hard.



William Shakespeare

DON PEDRO

Officers, what offence have these men done?

DOGBERRY

Marry, sir, they have committed false report; moreover, they have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanders; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and, to conclude, they are lying knaves.

Here Dogberry simply uses the wrong word – he means to say that Leonato has been ‘informed’ not ‘reformed’

DOGBERRY

Come, bring away the plaintiffs: by this time our sexton hath reformed Signior Leonato of the matter:

This was also a period of discovery with new worlds and new peoples being discovered and travel increasing. Again this influenced the language as new ideas and items entered the culture. If Shakespeare could not find a word to suit what he wanted to say he simply made one up.

We actually live in a similarly changing linguistic world today. Many people of an older generation struggle to keep up with the coining of new words to suit the new technologies and new social relationships which are now commonplace. It even makes the news when new words gain enough status to enter the dictionary – words such as ‘selfie’ to give a recent example.

Historically it is hard to trace where words originated from. Shakespeare is credited with coining lots of ‘new’ words, but it may be that he was simply the first person to use them in written language. Even today it can be very hard to understand the true etymology of a word. Often words are first used by single groups or communities before spreading gradually to the general population and at some point someone will use that word in print for the first time, although this is rarely the person who actually coined that word. So it is perhaps a little spurious to claim Shakespeare actually invented all these new words, but certainly he was an early adopter of words, sounds and meanings that appealed to him.



William Shakespeare