

The Internet provides some amazing tools with which to explore Shakespeare's language, says **David Crystal**.

Search, Seek, and Know

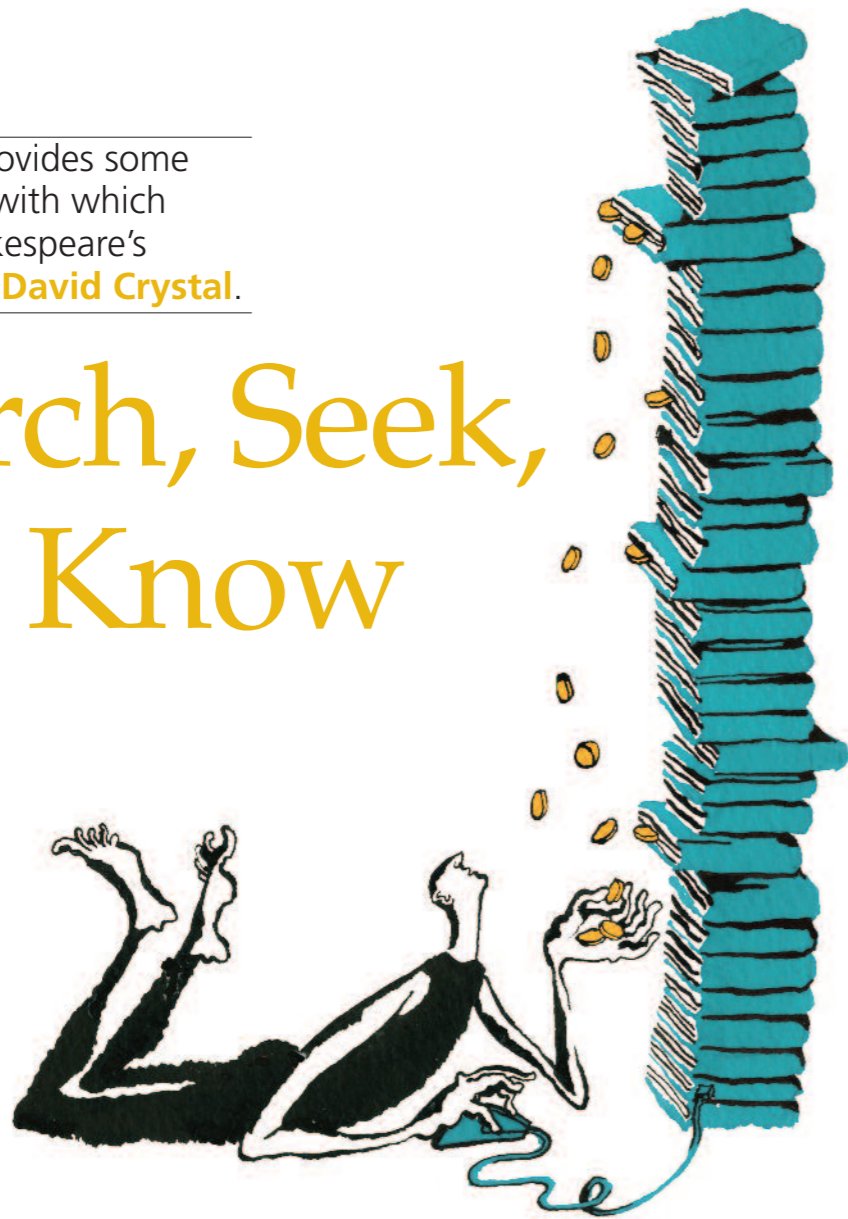


Illustration Belle Mellor
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People sometimes say that there's nothing new we can learn about Shakespeare; but when it comes to language, nothing could be further from the truth. Any reader of this magazine can discover a brand-new, original fact about Shakespearean language in five minutes. Here's how you do it.

First, find a website which contains the Shakespeare canon and has some good search software. I use the one Ben Crystal and I devised to accompany the book *Shakespeare's Words*. The website has just been completely rebuilt and is now freely available to individual users. You can find it at <http://www.shakespeareswords.com>.

Type a word into the Search box. That will tell you how often it is used and where it turns up in the plays and poems. It's the sort of thing you see mentioned in many a book and article on Shakespeare, usually to

indicate the importance of a particular theme in a play or the way certain words can be a character-note. Let's try it with *money*.

Money (along with *moneys* and *moneyed*) appears 202 times in the plays. It doesn't appear at all in the Poems. Now that might be interesting straight away, depending on why you asked the

question in the first place. But if you refine the search, it's bound to get a bit more intriguing.

Which play would you say makes most references to money? Don't read on until you've made a choice.

Most people opt for *The Merchant of Venice*. That's what I did, before scrolling down the list of results. Indeed, there are 21 instances in *Merchant*, which is one of the highest results. But it isn't top. There are 27 instances in *The Comedy of Errors*. Yes, of course, come to think of it...

You can carry on like that, if you're so inclined. What's next most frequent after these two? You might think *Timon of Athens* (with 20), in view of the plot, and you'd be right. But would you expect *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to be fourth in line, with 19?

Let's take the investigation a stage further.

If it's *Merchant* you're interested in, who do you think is going to use the *money* words most often? Shylock? You go to Advanced Search now, and find the box which allows you to search for an individual speaker. Type in 'Shylock'. You're right. He uses the word ten times, which is indeed far more than anyone else – five

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of them in a single speech (in Act 1 Scene 3 – 'Signor Antonio, many a time and oft / In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances...').

You can probe the results from the opposite point of view. Which plays *don't* refer to money at all? *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for a start. Why should money be mentioned in a fairy world? And the non-fairies are definitely interested in other things than money. Nor is it mentioned in *Macbeth* or *Richard III* or *Troilus and Cressida*. I can imagine someone maybe developing an argument about what drives characters on – money? power? But that's for you to decide. The point I'm making here is much simpler and more direct. I never knew, until just now, that there was no mention of money in *Macbeth*. Nor, I bet, did you.

You can see that it doesn't take long to unearth some new facts about vocabulary usage. Now it's up to literary and theatrical minds to take over from the linguistic. Can you make anything of these findings, or are they entirely trivial? There's no doubt that the exercise can become ridiculous very quickly. Could anyone see anything interesting in the result that there are 25,425 instances of *the* in the canon? Probably not – though one never knows!

It's much more sensible not to work from a statistic to a hypothesis, but the other way round. That's how scholars have explored the canon over the years. They start with an interesting idea – about colour words, perhaps, or plant names, or legal expressions... – and look for the evidence. The availability of powerful search tools means that you can compile this evidence today much more quickly and thoroughly than ever before. And something new is virtually guaranteed to come up with each search. For instance, there's been quite a lot of illuminating analysis of the way the word *nothing* threads its way through *King Lear*. But what about other plays? Type it in. There are actually more instances of this word in *The Winter's Tale* (33, as opposed to 31 in *Lear*). I can imagine someone making something of that.

Having said all this: Beware taking statistics about word frequency in Shakespeare too literally. Their status depends on which texts have been taken into account. The *Shakespeare's Words* database includes *King Edward III*, for example, and also *The Passionate Pilgrim*. It uses a total of 39 plays. If you want to exclude certain texts from your search, you can of course do so, but that's your decision.

And one more thing. Never say 'Shakespeare uses such-and-such a word 33 times'. That's going a step too far – as, for all you know, you might be ascribing to him what was actually a usage of Middleton or Fletcher or whoever. It's always best to describe your activity more judiciously. You are exploring 'Shakespearean language' or 'the Shakespeare canon'. But as long as you're judicious, you will almost every time find yourself agreeing with the Clown (in *All's Well that Ends Well*): 'The search, sir, was profitable'.

David Crystal OBE is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, and author with Ben Crystal of *Shakespeare's Words* and *Think on my Words: Exploring Shakespeare's Language*.

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