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SHIFT OF MEANING

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BY J. COPLEY

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Preface

The general reader of modern English literature often fails to recognize that a word may have had a totally different meaning for its sixteenth-, seventeenth-, eighteenth-, or even nineteenth-century writer. The difficulty is not with those words that have dropped out of normal circulation—they are at once recognizable, and a dictionary can be used. The difficulty is with those words whose forms are familiar but whose meanings have undergone considerable change through the centuries. Such words only will be found in this strictly selective list. I have limited myself to a discussion of some 250 words—verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs—which, in my experience as lecturer and teacher, cause most misunderstanding. Under each entry I have attempted to trace, wherever possible, the progression of meaning from Elizabethan to modern times. Each heading contains (*a*) a brief etymology of the word concerned, with emphasis on meanings that have since disappeared, (*b*) a discussion of important earlier meanings, with examples, and (*c*) if necessary, a short note on later developments of meaning. The illustrations have been selected from a fairly wide range of authors from Elizabethan times to the beginning of the nineteenth century, and their purpose is to *illustrate*; in choosing them I have avoided as far as possible duplication with *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Spelling and punctuation remain unmodernized; I have followed the readings of the best modern editions such as the *Oxford English Texts*. In most cases these are based on the text of the earliest edition extant;

where a subsequent edition is employed this is indicated in the reference. References for Donne's sermons are to the edition of G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson (University of California Press, 1953), and the dates to which they are attributed are also taken from that edition. The date given is that of the completion of the work concerned. The introduction is intended to serve as a guide to the words that follow.

The volume should be of help to the general reader, to the student reading English for G.C.E. (Advanced and Scholarship levels), and to the arts undergraduate. It was prepared with the needs of the overseas students of English literature especially in mind.

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Abbreviations

AF	Anglo-French
EF	Early French (1500–1700)
LL	Late Latin (200–600)
ME	Middle English
MF	Medieval French (1200–1500)
ML	Medieval Latin
OE	Old English
OF	Old French
ON	Old Norse

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wanton
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wit
worm

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Introduction

A large number of words in this volume formerly had a wider range of meaning than they possess today; they have now become more specialized in use. *Accident* has been narrowed down from any *happening* to an *event with unfortunate consequences*. Swift was not thinking of unpleasant experiences when he wrote in his *Journal to Stella*: 'I'll . . . confine myself to the accidents of the day.' *Success* has moved in the opposite direction, from the earlier meaning of *result*, *issue* (fortunate or otherwise). Satan, in *Paradise Lost*, even after his defeat,

> . . . aspires
> Beyond thus high, insatiate to persue
> Vain War with Heav'n . . . by success untaught . . .

Science used to indicate *knowledge in general*. Gibbon writes of Oxford in his *Autobiography* that 'the principal colleges appear to be so many palaces, which a liberal nation has erected and endowed for the habitation of science'. A little later on he regrets that Oxford gave him so little: 'In the discipline of a well-constituted academy, under the guidance of skilful and vigilant professors, I should gradually have risen from translations to originals, from the Latin to the Greek classics, from dead languages to living science.' A *desert* was formerly any *wild, unpopulated area*. Lady Wishfort in Congreve's *Way of the World* has a great urge to 'retire to Deserts and Solitudes; and feed harmless Sheep by Groves and *purling Streams*'. It has taken on now a more

precise geographical significance. A *worm* was once any *creeping creature*; in *Sir Gawayn and the Grene Knyght* it is a *dragon*:

> Sum whyle wyth wormes he werres, and with wolues als. . . .

Disease used to mean *lack of ease, discomfort, distress*. Spenser commends the happy life of shepherds,

> Leading a life so free and fortunate,
> From all the tempests of these worldly seas,
> Which tosse the rest in daungerous disease . . .

He is not thinking of *disease* in the modern medical sense; neither is Chaucer when he makes Pandarus refer to the unhappy love of Troilus as a 'disese'. To *enamel* has been banished from the language of poetry: the enamelled grass, the enamelled green, the enamelled field, the enamelled mead, have given way to enamelled kitchen ware. *Toys* have been relegated to the nursery. An *undertaker* used to be *one who undertook any enterprise*.

> He shall but be an vndertaker with mee,
> In a most feasible bus'nesse . . .

writes Jonson in *The Divell is an Asse*. Today an undertaker's functions are more restricted. *Purple* is a much more definite colour to us than it was to the eighteenth-century poet. Gray could write of

> The bloom of young Desire and purple light of Love,

and Pope could describe 'lavish nature' painting 'the purple Year'. When John Knox thundered against the 'Monstrous Regiment of Women' he was not tied down to the strict military meaning of *regiment*. The adjective *buxom* has a very limited use with us; we would hardly apply it to the air around us, and we would certainly not use it to describe graceful damsels. 'She is Buxome, fair and tall' of the poet of *England's Helicon* becomes almost a contradiction in terms in twentieth-century English: when the fifteenth-century versifier in his *Salutation to the Virgin* says that her Son 'will be buxome to thee aye', we are quite mystified. *Generous* is now applied to one who is *noble* to a very limited extent—

to one who gives liberally. *Conceit* formerly embraced a wide range of meanings; *self-conceit* covers the modern one. *Genius* is generally used to describe an *extraordinary natural ability* (where imagination and creative power are combined); in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the word normally signified *inclination* or *talent*. (Compare the modern 'He has a genius for gardening.') *Orient*, the adjective used by poets for centuries to describe the beauty of a mistress, the brilliance of the rising sun, the lustre of pearls, the brightness of the morning dew, the mystery of the East, is used in extremely prosaic and limited contexts today.

Sometimes, although the meanings of a word have not changed greatly through the years, one important meaning has come to be abandoned. *Addition* is no longer used in the sense of *title, style of address*. The disappearance of the gold coin commonly called the *angel* meant the end of innumerable punning references: Webster's lines lose much of their power for us today:

> Take your Divels
> Which Hell calls Angels: these curs'd gifts would make
> You a corrupter, me an impudent traitor.

Doctrine can no longer be used to mean *physical action of teaching, lesson*. *Favour* can no longer be understood as *face, countenance*; the significance of these lines from *As You Like It* can easily be overlooked:

> I do remember in this shepheard boy,
> Some liuely touches of my daughters fauour.

Foul is now regarded as the antithesis of *clean*; it is no longer used (except perhaps in the case of the weather) as the antithesis of *fair* as well. Donne's lines:

> Tis lesse griefe to be foule, then to 'have been faire . . .
> Beauty is barren oft; best husbands say,
> There is best land, where there is foulest way

illustrate the wider range of meaning of the older writers. *Spot* now refers to a *physical stain* only; the sense of *moral stain* has been abandoned, whereas the phrase 'withouten

spot', frequently used by the medieval writer to describe the Virgin Mary (or the poet's mistress), has a purely moral significance. In the same way the adjective *brittle* is most frequently applied now to physical substances; Shakespeare's metaphorical use:

> I better brooke the losse of brittle life,
> Then those proud Titles thou hast wonne of me

does not strike a common chord today. The two adjectives formed from *care*, *careless* and *careful*, no longer carry both meanings of *care* (i) *grief*, *suffering*, and (ii) *due attention*; the second only is now to be understood when *careless* and *careful* are used. A 'careful driver' is not a driver burdened with grief. *Carefree* is now employed where *careless* was once the normal adjective. The pastoral poets who continually lament their 'carefull cheere' are liable to be misunderstood twice over.

The study of the classical languages often helped to perpetuate classical meanings in words borrowed into English. The movement away from a study of Latin and Greek has meant that certain words have lost touch with the essential classical meaning. *Clear* is no longer used in the sense of Latin *clārus* (*illustrious*). When Moloch gives his advice to the fallen Angels in *Paradise Lost*—'My sentence is for open Warr'—Milton is thinking of Latin *sententia* (*opinion*). *Horrid* has little of the Latin meaning of *horridus* (*bristling*) in it now. Most modern readers never feel the full force of Milton's 'grots and caverns shag'd with horrid shades'.

In some words further meanings have developed and the older ones have tended to disappear. *Lewd* was originally the word for *ignorant* as opposed to *learned*. The alliterative tag 'the lered and the lewede' is common in Middle English literature. The word soon begins to be used as an epithet of reproach; it means *base* until the beginning of the eighteenth century. Since then the word has moved on to mean *base in one particular direction—lascivious*. *Rude* has followed practically the same line of development. Dr Johnson frequently contrasts *elegant* and *rude*, not always to the detriment of the latter. *Uncouth* (*unknown*) also follows a similar

pattern—*unknown*, therefore *unpleasant* (in various ways), *desolate*, *unpolished*. Milton uses the word in *Lycidas* in its earliest sense:

> Thus sang the uncouth Swain to the 'Okes and rills.

When he uses it again in *Paradise Lost* the meaning goes well beyond this:

> . . . who shall tempt with wandring feet
> The dark unbottom'd infinite Abyss
> And through the palpable obscure find out
> His uncouth way . . .

Strange moves somewhat in the same direction; at first it means *foreign*, as in Beaumont and Fletcher's:

> Once more we'll seek our fortune in strange
> Countries; Ours is too scornful for us . . .

—*foreign*, therefore *unfriendly*, *odd*, *unfamiliar*. *Candour* begins as *whiteness*, *purity*, then moves on to *freedom from malice*, *transparent honesty*. Dr Johnson was full of the milk of human kindness when he wrote in the *Idler*:

> All these faults should be for a time overlooked, and afterwards censured with gentleness and candour.

[Both *censure* and *candour* are less soothing words today.]

The emotive undertones of words are constantly shifting. A word can have taken a twist of meaning because of these undertones which has swung it well away from its earlier meanings. *Impertinence* no longer indicates *lack of pertinence*, *sheer triviality*. But this is what it meant to Milton in *Paradise Lost*:

> . . . what is more, is fume,
> Or emptiness, or fond impertinence.

Indifference cannot now be used to suggest the *impartial attitude* of, say, a judge or a critic.

Many words have thus undergone what we might call a moral deterioration. *Officious* and *obsequious* are not used with approval to describe *obedient* and *obliging* servants. A

notorious character is something more than a *well-known* character. *Disgusting* is a stronger word now than it was when Dr Johnson described Milton's style of versification as 'new to all and disgusting to many'. 'Wanton sports' cannot be considered as *innocent* and *playful* activities of the young. The use of *gaudy* carries with it a moral and aesthetic condemnation today. *Silly* has moved a long way from its original meaning in the description of the infant Jesus of the thirteenth-century poet:

> The kinges weren of fer icomen
> Thet seli child for-to sechen.

Silly in the sense of *blessed* is a long way too from the innocence of the *silly shepherds*, the *silly swains*, the *silly virgins*, the *silly flocks*, and the *silly sheep* of the Renaissance pastoral poet.

Other words have taken a turn for the better. *Policy* and *practice* no longer carry with them imputations of *shifty*, *unsavoury scheming*; in these senses they were favourite words of Marlowe's Jew of Malta. To be *shrewd* is not necessarily to be *evil* or *malicious* today. The modern *shrewd* wife is far less objectionable than the medieval one.

> When shrewd wyffes to ther husbands do no offens—
> Than put in a woman your trust and confidence

satirically writes the fifteenth-century poet. *Suggestion* does not itself call up the idea of *temptation*, *incitement to evil*. Yet this is the meaning in the fifteenth-century prayer to the Trinity:

> O water of lyfe, O well of consolacion,
> Against all suggestions dedly and damnable
> Rescow me, gode lord, by thy preseruacion

and it is a fairly common meaning in *Paradise Lost*:

> The first sort by thir own suggestion fell,
> Self-tempted, self-deprav'd . . .

To be *fond* is no longer to be *foolish*, except in certain dialects. A *liberal* man need no longer be a wild free-thinker, prone to sexual licence.

Sometimes whole ranges of meaning take a shift. The adjective *clear*, for instance, is not now attached to persons, but things; it is no longer used for *pure*, *innocent* or *beautiful* women or for *noble*, *illustrious* men. *Luxury* once indicated *sexual incontinence*, as in Ford:

> Must your hot ytch and plurisie of lust,
> The heyday of your luxury, be fedd
> Up to a surfeite . . .

The word pivots on expensiveness rather than sex today.

When ideas change, they carry words along with them. In the old theory of the bodily humours, *complexion* was an important word; as Spenser expressed it:

> . . . euery substance is conditioned
> To change her hew, and sundry formes to don,
> Meet for her temper and complexion . . .

With the gradual abandonment of that theory, the outer manifestation of the original *complexion*, Spenser's 'hew', began to take on the meaning of colour—*texture of the skin* (particularly of the face). Modern advertisers of cosmetics seem to be approaching the theory of humours in reverse—they insinuate that beauty of soul can only be attained by enhancing the beauty of its outer manifestation. In this context also *humour* has undergone a radical change of meaning. To be *precise* in the seventeenth century was often to possess Puritanical traits; 'you will say shee is . . . a Puritane if she be precise' writes Deloney. To show *enthusiasm* in the eighteenth century was to make a display of unbecoming religious emotion. 'Enthusiasm and hypocrisy,' declares Smollett, 'are by no means incompatible. The wildest fanatics I ever knew were real sensualists in their way of living, and cunning cheats in their dealings with mankind.' *Precise* is not associated at all with religious matters today, and *enthusiasm* only if they are specifically mentioned; in any case, *enthusiasm* is now mentioned with approval rather than disapproval.

In some cases, the physical meaning of a word has given place to a metaphorical use. Formerly it was possible to *err*

(or *wander*) quite literally; now the word is confined to other uses. *Lucid* was a common word with poets, applied especially to water. Gray wrote of the 'lucid Avon', but today we confine ourselves to a 'lucid argument'. To *offend* originally had much more of *physical* than *mental* violence about it.

Some words, and very often specifically poetic ones, have lost their emotive intensity. Lyly writes of 'affection hauinge caughte holde of my hearte, and the sparkles of loue kindled my liuer . . .', and by *affection* he means *passion, sexual desire*. *Balmy* was once a favourite adjective of the poets; in Thomson's *Spring*:

> . . . the lily of the vale
> Its balmy essence breathes . . .

But now the word has been destroyed for us by the growth of a new and unfortunate association over the last hundred years. The poetic *gales* that gently blew through seventeenth and eighteenth century nature poetry have been swept aside by the dangerous prosaic *gales* of the weather forecaster.

Over-use can, of course, destroy the effectiveness of a word. The former wide range of meanings applied to *nice* have gradually lost all significance; it has now become the vaguest epithet of approval. This tendency is most obvious in those words which were once used because they evoked a feeling of *reverence, awe, fear*. Consider these two passages from Spenser and Milton:

(i)

> *Echidna* is a Monster direfull dred,
> Whom Gods doe hate, and heauens abhor to see;
> So hideous is her shape, so huge her hed,
> That euen the hellish fiends affrighted bee
> At sight thereof, and from her presence flee:
> Yet did her face, and former parts professe
> A faire young Mayden, full of comely glee;
> But all her hinder parts did plaine expresse
> A monstrous Dragon, full of fearefull vglinesse.
>
> To her the Gods, for her so dreadfull face,
> In fearfull darkenesse, furthest from the skie,

And from the earth, appointed haue her place,
Mongst rocks and caues, where she enrold doth lie
In hideous horrour and obscurity,
Wasting the strength of her immortall age.

Faerie Qveene (1596) 6 : 6 : 10–11

(ii)

. . . hee with his horrid crew
Lay vanquisht, rowling in the fiery Gulfe
Confounded though immortal: But his doom
Reserv'd him to more wrauth; for now the thought
Both of lost happiness and lasting pain
Torments him; round he throws his baleful eyes
That witnessd huge affliction and dismay
Mixt with obdurat pride and stedfast hate:
At once as farr as Angels kenn he views
The dismal Situation waste and wilde,
A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv'd onely to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades . . .

Paradise Lost (1663) 1 : 51–65

A number of words here meant much more to these poets than they do to us—*baleful*, *confounded*, *direful*, *dismal*, *dismay*, *doleful*, *dread*, *dreadful*, *fearful*, *hideous*, *horrible*, *horrid*, *horror*, *huge*, *monstrous*, for example. But by the eighteenth century such words were being neatly tied up into convenient parcels of poetic diction. Today a considerable proportion have been relegated to the position of being vaguely unpleasant adjectives of polite conversation: *confounded*, *dismal*, *dreadful*, *fearful*, *hideous*, *horrible*, *horrid*, *monstrous*, can all be used in colloquial antithesis to *nice*.