"disfigure” dissected: a close reading of the comedy of errors and the taming of ...

Within The Comedy of Errors by the venerable William Shakespeare, there comes a hectic bit in the first scene of the fifth act whereupon a lowly messenger brings disturbing news to Adriana: " Mistress, upon my life I tell you true / I have not breathed since I did see it / He cries for you and vows, if he can take you / To scorch your face and to disfigure you" (5. 1. 180-4). The usage of the word ' disfigure' within this specific passage strikes particular intrigue as it is being used to describe the supposed malicious intent of the aforementioned messenger's master, thus meriting further dissection of said word.

' Disfigure' is primarily Latin in origin, with the root word being ' figura,' which translates unquestionably to ' figure.' The Oxford English Dictionary cross-references ' figura' with ' figure' as " the form of anything as determined by the outline; external form; shape..." (" Disfigure"). Due to the widespread utilization of ' figure' throughout literature as well as everyday conversation, the exact age of the word ' figura' remains a mystery to this day. Usage of ' disfigure' as a verb gained prominence through the old French word ' desfigurer,' which eventually took on the form of ' disfigure' that we see within modern English. One can also find similar varieties of this word in Spanish and Italian.

Digging further into the meaning of ' disfigure,' the intent of the verb is " to mar the figure or appearance of, destroy the beauty of; to deform, deface" (" Disfigure"). ' Disfigure' shares similar meaning as well as old French etymology with the word ' damage.' To damage something is " to do or cause damage to; to hurt, harm, injure; now commonly to injure (a thing) so as to lessen or destroy its value" (" Damage"). The primary difference

between the two words is that ' damage' refers specifically to harm and injury whereas ' disfigure' could potentially be utilized in both a physical and metaphorical sense. This raises an interesting point regarding the quoted passage from The Comedy of Errors. Specifically, the text refers to someone who allegedly desires to " scorch [Adriana's] face and disfigure [her]" (5. 1. 184). With the use of ' scorch,' one has a blunt reference to physical marring, which could lead a reasonably observant reader to deduce that the application of ' disfigure' after ' scorch' could have more of a multifaceted, if somewhat malicious meaning. Seeing as ' disfigure' can reference defacing or defilement, Shakespeare's usage of it in the text could very well be taken as a hint that the person whom the messenger is warning Adriana about could possess intent to rape her or otherwise mar her character on a level far more vicious than just physically burning her face.

Another slightly similar, Shakespearean utilization of ' disfigure' can be found in The Taming of the Shrew with Grumio telling Hortensio: "… [Petruccio] will throw a figure in [Katherina's] face and so disfigure her with it" (1. 2. 111). What should catch the eye of even the casual reader is the utilization of ' figure' and ' disfigure' within the same sentence. Here we have the passage referring to ' figure' as a figure of speech while ' disfigure' is used to suggest that said figure of speech will be used as a means of degrading Katherina by way of an acid-tongued insult. This draws reference to an earlier point raised as to how the word ' disfigure' can have meaning beyond that of physical injury or impairment.

Referring to the online Shakespeare Concordance, ' disfigure' is used only once within The Comedy of Errors and once in The Taming of the Shrew,

these usages being in the passages cited throughout this essay. One could fairly easily ascertain from these relatively sparse applications of ' disfigure' that Shakespeare for the purpose of highly specific inflection, namely the degradation of two female characters. Why the female characters are being singled out in these instances draws into the light the idea that to ' disfigure' something can be interpreted as the idea of the destruction of beauty, namely the effeminate beauty of these aforementioned female characters by means both physical and mental. Ipso facto, Shakespeare's placement of ' disfigure' within The Comedy of Errors and The Taming of the Shrew is delivered with the sharpness of a cruel, calculated witticism.

Pulling apart sentences and boiling words down to their individual shades of meaning can aid spectacularly in garnering a clear, profound understanding of a given text, author, and perhaps even time period. While some might initially cast off the word ' disfigure' as a reference to the physical macabre, delving into The Comedy of Errors and The Taming of the Shrew, one can find that this curious word contains inferences to both physical desecration and mental degradation. Though the usage of ' disfigure' in these texts is directed at female characters, the intent of this essay is to make an observation as opposed to paint William Shakespeare as outright misogynistic given that the time in which the referenced plays were written considerably predates most modern feminist thought. Whether one is a merely casual or highly critical reader, it is nothing if not imperative to read for more than face value, to explore sentences for multitudes of meaning, and to dissect words down to their most precise insinuation and application.   Works Cited

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