'Think on my Words'
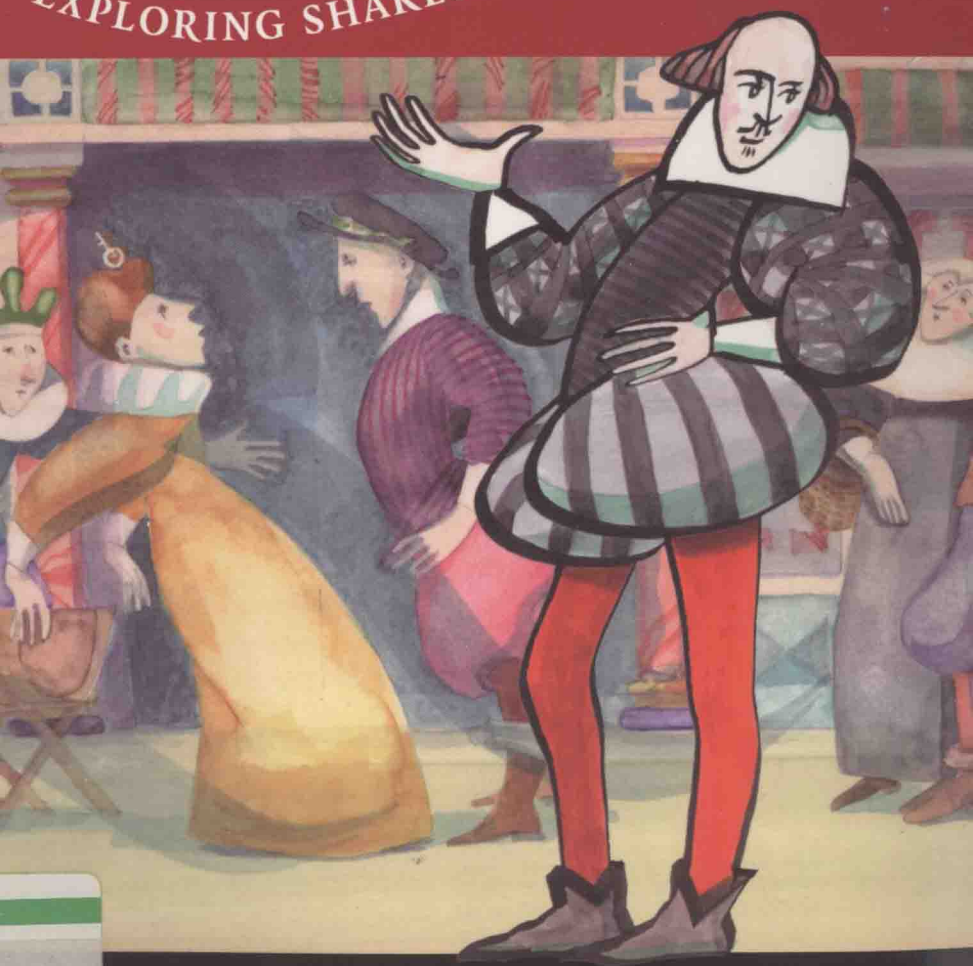
EXPLORING SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

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'Think on my words'
Exploring Shakespeare's Language

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Preface

The title of this book means what it says: it is an exploration of Shakespeare's language, not a comprehensive survey. It is an introduction from a particular point of view. Books and anthologies with the words *Shakespeare* and *Language* in the title are numerous, and they represent a coming together of several traditions in theatre, literary criticism, philology, and linguistics. Mine is basically a nuts-and-bolts approach, governed by one basic principle – that one should never examine a linguistic nut or bolt without asking 'what does it do?' And 'what does it do?' means two things: how does it help us understand the meaning of what is said (a semantic explanation), and how does it help us appreciate the dramatic or poetic effect of what is said (a pragmatic explanation)? I have found my own understanding immensely enhanced by the kind of approach I employ. I just hope I have managed to convey something of that insight in these pages.

I have used three First Folio sources: the edition of the plays held at the Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, my copy of the 1910 Methuen facsimile, and the Norton facsimile. For my statistical data, I have used the concordance which was compiled to accompany the *Shakespeare's Words* website (www.shakespeareswords.com). The spelling of quotations is modern in Chapters 1 and 2, but after the description of Elizabethan orthography in Chapter 3, most quotations come from the First Folio or contemporary texts.

Hilda Hulme, my Shakespeare teacher at university, said in her insightful book *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language*: 'it is not easy to argue about Shakespeare's meaning without being excited by it'. Or explore it, even, now that we have such powerful electronic

search capabilities. Every time I do even the most menial search of my Shakespeare database, I discover something I have never noticed before. It is an excitement open to anyone who wishes to increase their understanding of Shakespeare and his works.

DAVID CRYSTAL

Holyhead, March 2007

Play and poem abbreviations

Ado	*Much Ado About Nothing*
Ant	*Antony and Cleopatra*
AWW	*All's Well That Ends Well*
AYLI	*As You Like It*
Cor	*Coriolanus*
Cym	*Cymbeline*
Err	*The Comedy of Errors*
Ham	*Hamlet*
1H4	*Henry IV Part 1*
2H4	*Henry IV Part 2*
H5	*Henry V*
1H6	*Henry VI Part 1*
2H6	*Henry VI Part 2*
3H6	*Henry VI Part 3*
H8	*Henry VIII*
JC	*Julius Caesar*
John	*King John*
KE3	*King Edward III*
Lear	*King Lear*
LLL	*Love's Labour's Lost*
Lover	*A Lover's Complaint*
Luc	*The Rape of Lucrece*
Mac	*Macbeth*
MM	*Measure for Measure*
MND	*A Midsummer Night's Dream*
MV	*The Merchant of Venice*
Oth	*Othello*
Per	*Pericles*
R2	*Richard II*

R3	*Richard III*
Rom	*Romeo and Juliet*
Shr	*The Taming of the Shrew*
Sonn	*Sonnets*
STM	*Sir Thomas More*
Temp	*The Tempest*
TGV	*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
Tim	*Timon of Athens*
Tit	*Titus Andronicus*
TN	*Twelfth Night*
TNK	*The Two Noble Kinsmen*
Tro	*Troilus and Cressida*
Ven	*Venus and Adonis*
Wiv	*The Merry Wives of Windsor*
WT	*The Winter's Tale*

OTHER ABBREVIATIONS

a	adjective
adv	adverb
int	interjection
n	noun
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
pr	preposition
v	verb

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List of figures and tables

I 'You speak a language that I understand not': myths and realities

There is a story that, if you travel into the most isolated valleys of the Appalachian Mountains in eastern USA, you will find people who still speak the language of Shakespeare. They are said to be the descendants of those early settlers who left England for Virginia in 1606, when Shakespeare was age 42. Several settlers, it seems, moved inland and away from the larger centres of population. And there, the story goes, cut off from the changes in society and language which would take place in the seaboard cities, and rurally conservative by temperament, generation after generation carried on speaking the tongue that the pioneers brought with them.

The story varies a bit, depending on who is telling it. In some accounts, it is Roanoke Island, off the east coast of Virginia, where you will hear pure Shakespearean English – or 'Elizabethan English', as it is often put. In others, you do not have to leave the British Isles. Just turn off the main road in Northern Ireland, or in County Kerry, or in deepest Warwickshire, and there it will be, unchanged, unchanging.

Anyone who believes this has, as Thersites says of Agamemnon, 'not so much brain as ear-wax' (*Tro.* 5.1.49). It is a myth. Speech never stands still – not even between two generations, let alone the sixteen or so that separate the reigns of the first and second Queen Elizabeth. Listen to the speech of young and old people from the same part of a country, and you will hear all kinds of differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Wicked! It was the same in Shakespeare's day. He even refers at one point to language change taking place within a generation. Mercutio sneeringly describes the way Tybalt speaks: he calls him one of the 'new tuners of accent' (*Rom.* 2.4.29).

It is true that the language used in some parts of a country will change less rapidly than others. There is always a grain of truth inside

a myth. Isolated communities will indeed be more conservative in the way they speak. But no community is so isolated that it is immune from contact with those who speak differently from themselves. And the evidence? All you need do is listen to the modern communities. In the BBC television series *The Story of English* (1988), the programme makers visited Roanoke. What we heard was regional, rural, but definitely modern American English. Not a *forsooth* in earshot. No *thou*s or *goeth*s. And the accent – as we will see in Chapter 6 – was some distance away from that used in the early 1600s.

The idea that the English of Shakespeare's time is rurally alive and well in modern times is a remarkably persistent myth. I hear someone come out with it, on the radio or in the press, every few months. It's a myth born of ignorance of the basic facts about the way language changes. And the chief problem in approaching the language of Shakespeare, to my mind, is that a whole spider's web of myths has grown up around it, which has to be brushed away to enable our eventual linguistic encounter to be with something real.

THE QUANTITY MYTH

'Shakespeare had the largest vocabulary of any English writer.' If I had a pound for every time I've heard someone say that, I'd have enough to buy a First Folio. He certainly had a wide-ranging vocabulary for his time, as we shall see, but – 'the largest of any English writer'? That certainly isn't the case. Any modern writer uses far more words than Shakespeare. Indeed, you, reader, if you are understanding all the words I use in this book, command more words than Shakespeare. The reason is the way English vocabulary has grown over the past 400 years.

It's never going to be possible to do precise calculations about how much vocabulary was in use during a particular historical period. The best we can do is count the words in whatever texts remain – and even that is not yet practicable (though it will become more so, one day, as texts increasingly achieve an electronic presence on the Internet). So we have to rely on 'best guesses'. And on that basis it is

thought that there were about 150,000 different words in English by the end of the sixteenth century. Today, the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary* contains over 600,000 different words. There are simply far more words available to be used now, compared with Shakespeare's time.

So how many of these words do you and I use? You can work out the totals, approximately, by using a dictionary. Choose one with about 1,500 pages, such as the *Concise Oxford*: dictionaries of this size contain about 100,000 different headwords. (Headwords are the units in bold type, such as **cat**, **good**, **ask**, and **quick**, which appear at the beginning of a dictionary entry, or sometimes – as with **goodness** and **quickly** – within the entry.) If you go through a small sample of the pages, noting which words you can imagine yourself using, then work out the average number per page, and then multiply by the number of pages in the book, you will get a rough idea of your active vocabulary. Having done this with a few dozen people, over the years, I can say that most of us use at least 50,000 words. That is, we know at least half the words in the dictionary. Think about such clusters as *nation, national, nationally, nationhood, nationalize, nationalization...* It doesn't take long to build up an appreciable total.

The usual figure given for the size of Shakespeare's vocabulary is about 20,000 different words. Today we have over twice as many words at our command – and yet none of us are Shakespeares. The moral is plain. Quantity is not enough. It is not so much the number of words we have as what we *do* with those words that makes the difference between an ordinary and a brilliant use of language. Also critical is our ability to choose the most effective words from the language's wordstock to express our intentions. And, if the wordstock does not have the words we need, we have to be prepared to invent new ones to make good the deficiency, and to use old ones in unprecedented ways. Shakespeare, as we shall see in Chapter 7, is excellent at all this. More than anything else, he shows us how to be daring with language.

Many commentators on Shakespeare's language nonetheless seem to be obsessed with quantity rather than creativity – probably because it is far easier to count than to analyse. But even the task of counting has some hidden complexities, so that we should never take someone's vocabulary estimate at its face value. We have to ask: 'What has the counter counted?' Take the estimate of '20,000 different words' above, and compare it with another widely cited Shakespearean estimate of '30,000 words'. Notice the phrasing. 'Different' words are those which differ in their dictionary meaning. *Cat*, *dog*, and *ask* have different dictionary meanings, as do *bear* ('animal') and *bear* ('carry'). But *cat* and *cats*, although they look different, do not have different dictionary meanings, nor do *ask*, *asks*, *asking*, and *asked*. These are simply different forms of the 'same' word, expressing different grammatical meanings, such as singular and plural or present and past tenses. If you count all of these forms separately, obviously you will get a much higher total than if you do not.

When someone talks about the number of words in Shakespeare, then, it is always important to know what kind of word they have been counting. People who say Shakespeare has 'about 20,000' words are grouping all the variants together. Those who say he has 'over 30,000' words are counting all the variant forms separately. The contrast is very noticeable in Shakespeare because the language of his time had more grammatical variants than exist today. We shall look at this in Chapter 8, but for the moment just consider *bear, bears, bearest, beareth, bearing, boar'st, bore,* and *born*, which are the variant forms of *bear* (ignoring spelling variants) in the First Folio. They count as 'one' under the first procedure, but as 'eight' under the second.

'About 20,000'. That 'about' is an important qualification, for there is quite a large variation surrounding this estimate. The figure is sometimes as low as around 18,000. A lot depends on which works you include as part of the canon. If you include, say, disputed or partially authored texts such as *King Edward III* and *Sir Thomas More*, your

total is going to be appreciably greater than if you do not. But even within the 'core' texts, there are problems in deciding what to count. There are five types of difficulty.

- We have to decide whether a word is a compound or not. When Edgar calls Oswald a 'base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three sui- ted, hundred pound, filthy worsted stocking knave' (*Lear*. 2.3.14), do we count this as twelve words (if all hyphens are omitted) or as eleven (if just *worsted-stocking* is hyphenated, as the Arden edition does) or as ten (if it is *filthy-worsted-stocking*, as the Penguin edition has it) or as nine (if *three-suited* and *hundred-pound* are separately hyphenated, as in Penguin) or as eight (if it is *three-suited-hundred-pound*, as in Arden)? (for the First Folio version, see p. 99).
- Do we include all editorial emendations, modernizations, and variants between Folio and Quarto texts (p. 23)? What exactly is being 'sledded' (*Ham.* 1.1.63) – *poleaxe* or *Polacks* or something else? Is it *auncient* or *ancient*? The total will grow if we include every variant.
- Do we include proper names? These are usually excluded in word-counting exercises, as they relate more to encyclopedic knowledge than to linguistic intuition. Just because I know the words *Hamburg* and *Frankfurt* does not mean that I can speak German! On the other hand, some proper names do have more general significance – as in modern English *Whitehall* (in the sense of 'the civil service'). This means that perhaps we should include such words as *Ethiop* ('person with a dark complexion') in our total.
- Do we include foreign words? Shakespeare uses 288 Latin word-forms, 310 French word-forms, and 36 Spanish or Italian word-forms (it is sometimes difficult to decide which language it is). When characters are definitely speaking a foreign language, the words might reasonably be excluded, but it is not always clear when something is foreign, as when the gravedigger says *argal*

(= Latin *ergo*, 'therefore', *Ham*. 5.1.19) or Polonius says *videlicet* (= 'that is to say', *Ham*. 2.1.61). Are these better treated as loan words into English – much as we talk about 'a tour de force' or 'a je ne sais quoi' today?

- Do we include onomatopoeic 'words', as when Edgar shouts *sesey* (a hunting cry, *Lear*. 3.4.97) or Doll Tearsheet says (or should it be burps?) *hem* (*2H4*. 2.4.29).
- Do we include humorous forms, such as malapropisms? When Mistress Quickly says *allicholy* as a variant of *melancholy* (*Wiv*. 1.4.148), is this the 'same' word or a different one?

Depending on how we answer these questions, our Shakespearean total will vary by a thousand or so.

But 20,000 cannot be very far from the truth. And it will certainly do to focus our attention on the linguistic reality that it represents. For 20,000 *was* a large vocabulary, in its day. If we compare a work of a similar size to the Shakespearean canon, the contrast is striking. There are 884,647 words in the Riverside edition, according to Martin Spevack's *Concordance*; and there are around 880,000 words in the 1611 King James Bible. But if we exclude all the proper names in the latter, we find that the Bible uses only some 6,000 different words. It is of course a very different genre, and the translators deliberately cultivated a conservative style; but the contrast is nonetheless noteworthy. Shakespeare uses over three times as many words.

Why is Shakespeare's vocabulary so large? Partly because he wrote so much, but mainly because of what he wrote about. It is the difference between people, situations, and subject-matter which generates different kinds of vocabulary, and Shakespeare is acknowledged to be unmatched in the range of his characters, settings, and themes. Here is Montjoy the herald addressing King Harry (*H5*. 3.6.122).

Now we speak upon our cue and our voice is imperial. England shall repent his folly, see his weakness, and admire our sufferance. Bid him therefore consider of his ransom, which must proportion

the losses we have borne, the subjects we have lost, the disgrace
we have digested – which in weight to re-answer, his pettiness
would bow under.

If you write only historical plays, your vocabulary is going to be
focused on the kind of things that kings and princes talk about.
Conversely, if you write only street-comedy, a very different kind of
vocabulary is going to appear. Here is Doll Tearsheet haranguing
Pistol (*1H4*. 2.4.119):

> Away, you cutpurse rascal, you filthy bung, away! By this wine,
> I'll thrust my knife in your mouldy chaps an you play the saucy
> cuttle with me! Away, you bottle-ale rascal, you basket-hilt stale
> juggler, you!

If you write love stories, that will motivate a further lexical domain.
Here is Mercutio satirizing Romeo the lover (*Rom*. 2.1.9):

> Cry but 'Ay me!' Pronounce but 'love' and 'dove'.
> Speak to my gossip Venus one fair word,
> One nickname for her purblind son and heir,
> Young Adam Cupid, he that shot so trim
> When King Cophetua loved the beggar maid.

And if you write about the most profound kinds of mental conflict,
you will employ words that go well beyond the everyday. Here is one
of Hamlet's reflections (*Ham*. 3.1.85):

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action.

If you do all of these, and more, inevitably you will end up with a
lexical total that makes you stand out from your contemporaries.