The literary language of Shakespeare

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Longman
London and New York

Longman Group Limited
Longman House
Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex, UK

Published in the United States of America
by Longman Inc., New York

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First published 1982

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hussey, S.S.
The literary language of Shakespeare.
1. Shakespeare, William – Language
I. Title
822.3'3 PR3072

ISBN 0-582-49228-9

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hussey, S. S., 1925-
The literary language of Shakespeare.
Bibliography: p. 203
Includes index.
1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Language.
2. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Style. I. Title.
PR3072.H86 822.3'3 81-20889
ISBN 0-582-49228-9 AACR2

Set in 10/12 pt Linotron 202 Bembo
Printed in Great Britain by
William Clowes (Beccles) Ltd, Beccles and London

Preface

'Please,' a despairing sixth-former asked her teacher after her first inconclusive encounter with Shakespeare, 'haven't you got any plays in *proper* English?' It would be folly to deny that understanding what Shakespeare says is yearly becoming more difficult for the beginner and equally naive to suppose that one short book will put everything right. Yet a proper appreciation of any great writer must begin with his language. Why does he put it in that particular way at that particular point in the play? To say that a writer is great because he exploits the linguistic conventions of his age is to risk a truism. Yet the further back we go, the greater the risk of partial or unsound literary judgements, simply because those conventions may be unfamiliar or even unrecognised. Although we cannot be sure what Shakespeare's own speech was like (any more than we can Chaucer's), we can distinguish, from his own work and that of his fellow Elizabethans, a number of accepted styles in use around the turn of the century. From these Shakespeare selects to achieve a range of characterisation, description or conversation far beyond that of even the best of his contemporaries. Since they are norms, he can also deliberately deviate from these styles to produce a type of language remarkable simply because it is so unexpected in that particular context.

There are, of course, books on Shakespeare's language which illustrate in detail the main features of his vocabulary, grammar, syntax and phonology. What they do not attempt is to demonstrate how these same features achieve the stylistic effects they do. Several articles, often limited to individual plays, have recently begun to make this approach to Shakespeare, but, so far as I know, no one book has yet taken it as its subject. Naturally I have been able to illustrate only some of these effects, and certain plays perhaps receive less attention than they merit. It is virtually certain, too, that from the vast albatross of Shakespearean criticism (even criticism of his style) I shall have failed to pluck some of the choicest feathers. But I have tried to acknowledge the work of those writers whom I have found most helpful. I have profited too from the stimulus of sharing courses in Early Modern English Language with my colleague, Dr A. J. Gilbert. Messrs Longman have shown a care and courtesy beyond that which any author has a right to expect.

Some of these ideas were set out in an inaugural lecture given in the University of Lancaster in December 1976. I am grateful to those who listened on that occasion.

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List of abbreviations

Shakespeare is quoted from the New Penguin edition where available at present (September 1981), otherwise from the Signet edition (for *TA, LLL, MWW, TC, TNK, Hen VIII*) and from *Elizabethan Verse Romances*, ed. M. M. Reese (1968), Routledge, for *VA*.

In the list of abbreviated titles below, I have also added approximate dates. These are conservative in that they sometimes represent the first known production rather than the possible date of composition. It is the probable order of the plays rather than the date of any one or two of them that is important for my argument.

1 Hen VI	*1 Henry VI*	1591
2 Hen VI	*2 Henry VI*	1591–2
3 Hen VI	*3 Henry VI*	
R III	*Richard III*	1592
VA	*Venus and Adonis*	1593
TS	*The Taming of the Shrew*	1593–4
TA	*Titus Andronicus*	
CE	*The Comedy of Errors*	
TGV	*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*	
RL	*The Rape of Lucrece*	1594
LLL	*Love's Labour's Lost*	
KJ	*King John*	
RII	*Richard II*	1595
RJ	*Romeo and Juliet*	
MND	*A Midsummer Night's Dream*	
MV	*The Merchant of Venice*	1596
1 Hen IV	*1 Henry IV*	1597
2 Hen IV	*2 Henry IV*	1598
MA	*Much Ado About Nothing*	
JC	*Julius Caesar*	1599
Hen V	*Henry V*	
AYLI	*As You Like It*	
MWW	*The Merry Wives of Windsor*	1600
TC	*Troilus and Cressida*	
Ham	*Hamlet*	1601
TN	*Twelfth Night*	1602
AW	*All's Well That Ends Well*	1604
MM	*Measure for Measure*	

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Oth	*Othello*	
KL	*King Lear*	1605
Mac	*Macbeth*	1606
AC	*Antony and Cleopatra*	1607
Cor	*Coriolanus*	
Tim	*Timon of Athens*	
Per	*Pericles*	1608
Cym	*Cymbeline*	1610
WT	*The Winter's Tale*	1611
Temp	*The Tempest*	
TNK	*The Two Noble Kinsmen*	1613
Hen VIII	*Henry VIII*	

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CHAPTER ONE

Is this Shakespeare's language?

What the 'real' language of Shakespeare – his own language – was like, we will probably never completely know. He came to London from Stratford before 1592, in which year he was sufficiently established for his fellow writer Robert Greene, embittered by poverty and ill-health, to attack him in print:

> . . . an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers heart wrapt in a Players hide*, supposes he is as well able to bumbast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Iohannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrie.[1]

In the middle of a long speech in *3 Henry VI* (possibly performed the year before) York calls the Queen a 'tiger's heart wrapped in a *women's* hide!' (I.iv.137). There is no firm evidence for dating any of his plays before 1590–1. He was not a university man, as were many of his contemporaries: Marlowe, Greene and Nashe, for instance. His father, indeed, although a prominent Stratford citizen and merchant, was perhaps illiterate – at least, he signed documents with his mark. There is a tradition that, in his earlier years, William was a schoolmaster 'in the country'. From a literary point of view this is so much more attractive, if less romantic, than the other story which has him holding horses outside the theatre. Certainly his first plays already exhibit a close knowledge of rhetorical devices of the kind found in contemporary school textbooks, but this of course is not proof. It is possible to make informed guesses at many of the circumstances of Shakespeare's career,[2] but several tantalising questions must remain unanswered. Did his wife and children stay at Stratford? If so, perhaps he visited them fairly regularly; he certainly retained some business connections in the town. Yet he lived in London, close to the theatres in which he worked, first in Bishopsgate near the Theatre and later on the Bankside near the Globe in Southwark. He acted in plays as well as wrote them (Greene's attack is on both the player and the playwright). Tradition has it that he played Adam in *As You Like It* and the Ghost in *Hamlet*; he certainly appeared in at least two of Ben Jonson's plays. So, whatever Warwickshire may have contributed to his own language, he was presumably understood on the London stage.

We might have hoped for more from Christopher Sly, the drunken Warwickshire tinker who, in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, is persuaded that he is a 'lord indeed' and, in the country house, 'wrapped in sweet clothes', surrounded by attentive servants, 'wanton pictures' and music sweeter than that of Apollo or caged nightingales, dreams he sees a play, 'a kind of history', performed by the sort of strolling players who might have captivated the young Shakespeare. But although the local names are present (Wincot was four miles from Stratford and a Sara Hacket was baptised there in 1591):

> What, would you make me mad? Am not I Christoper Sly, old Sly's son of Burton-heath, by birth a pedlar, by education a cardmaker, by transmutation a bear-herd, and now by present profession a tinker? Ask Marian Hacket, the fat ale-wife of Wincot, if she know me not. If she say I am not fourteen pence on the score for sheer ale, score me up for the lyingest knave in Christendom. (Ind. II.16–23)

indications of specifically Warwickshire language are disappointingly absent, as they are from the further Sly scenes found in *The Taming of A Shrew*.

The large *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) is compiled almost entirely from printed accounts for Shakespeare's time and its localisations for dialect words are usually very tentative. We lack a Tudor and Stuart dictionary of the kind which might provide more extensive (and more recently documented) coverage over a more limited period. We can, however, get a little help from Warwickshire documents, such as the parish accounts recording the detailed spending by public officers. These are valuable because they are clearly localised and dated, and for most of the seventeenth century they are not influenced by the spread of standard English which reduces their linguistic usefulness later. Two examples quoted by Dr Hilda Hulme, who has made a special study of these records,[3] will illustrate the kind of help they can give in appreciating Shakespearean usage. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (IV.iii.8), the retainers of a suspicioussounding German duke wish to hire horses from the Host of the Garter inn. The Host replies

> They shall have my horses, but I'll make them pay; I'll sauce them. They have had my house a week at command. I have turned away my other guests. They must come off. I'll sauce them. Come.

The *OED* interprets *to pay sauce* as 'to pay dearly', but can only date this usage between 1678 and 1718. Even if we turn to *As You Like It* (III.v.67) where Rosalind says

> If it be so, as fast as she answers thee with frowning looks, I'll sauce her with bitter words.

we still only perceive the metaphor of an unexpectedly hot seasoning. The parish accounts of Solihull (Warwickshire) for 1666, however, contain the following record:

> Thomas Palmer & my selfe went before to vew the timber & caused sawers to look on it. 0–0–4
> Another time I took 2 Carpenters to looke on it and to saw it & I found ye sauce worse then the meat. 0–0–8

Surely, as Dr Hulme remarks, one would expect to pay less for the sauce than for the meat, just as the churchwardens expected to pay less (not more) to the carpenters than to the real wood cutters, the *sawers*. Hence the meaning can be elaborated from 'to pay dearly' to 'to pay more than you expected'. The furious Host of the Garter is determined to obtain his revenge by deliberate overcharging. Again, the accounts of the Stratford Corporation for 1582–3 read

> Payd to davi Jones and his companye for his pastyme at Whitsontyde xii s iii d.

where *pastyme* is clearly not merely 'entertainment' but some kind of dramatic entertainment. When Gertrude, worried about Hamlet's melancholia, asks (III.i.15):

> Did you assay him/To any pastime?

it is natural that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should at once think of actors:

> Madam, it so fell out that certain *players*/We o'er-raught on the way.

This is fascinating, and shows how quite usual words could acquire a special use so that a joke or an extra layer of meaning becomes apparent. Yet it is inevitably limited in its extent, nor do we know how widespread these dialectal usages were. Did they seem, to London au-

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diences, simply 'country' as opposed to 'normal' usage and not Warwickshire dialect at all?

In one way, however, the Elizabethan play-text may come between Shakespeare's own language and the modern reader. It is natural for the latter to assume that the text he reads is in all respects – act and scene division, lineation, spelling and punctuation – what Shakespeare wrote. An author today will correct his own proofs (or at least designate a responsible person to do it for him) so that the published version of the work will represent what author and editor have agreed should appear. But we have no fair copies of the plays which are demonstrably in Shakespeare's own hand. The first collected edition, the First Folio, was published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, and was compiled by two of his fellow-actors and business associates, John Heminges and Henry Condell. A volume of 'collected works' by the author himself was a rarity at that time, and drama was perhaps not thought of as sufficient of a literary form to justify such care and exactness. Ben Jonson, whose interest in language is shown by his English-Latin grammar (covering pronunciation, morphology and syntax) and whose reputation was very dear to him, is the exception in issuing in 1616 the first volume of the *Workes of Beniamin Jonson*. When a playwright sold his play to a company he ceased to be responsible for it. The company in turn tended not to publish unless they needed the money or unless the play was no longer a box-office success, for publication might mean a production by a rival company.

The First Folio (F1) contains thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays, sixteen of them appearing in print for the first time. The Sonnets, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* are not included, and *Pericles* was added in the 1664 copy of the Folio. But during Shakespeare's lifetime, seventeen plays were published in quarto and a quarto text of *Othello* appeared in 1622. The sheets of a quarto are printed on both sides and folded twice to give eight pages per gathering (or quire); in a folio each sheet is folded only once. The quarto versions which are reasonably accurate are known as 'good' quartos and the six which are seriously corrupt, textually, are called 'bad' quartos. *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* exist in both good and bad quartos, as well as in F1. In their address 'To the great Variety of Readers', Heminges and Condell claim that their texts are greatly superior to previous bad quartos and indeed represent Shakespeare's own version:

> where (before) you were abus'd with diuerse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of iniurious

> imposters, that expos'd them; euen those, are now offer'd to your view cur'd, and perfect of their limbes; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceiued them.

This is frankly advertising copy; in fact the quality of a text available to the printer, whether of F1 or of any quarto, varied considerably. Shakespeare, no doubt, had his original rough copy (or 'foul papers') and this sometimes seems to lie not far below some of the good quartos. In these, the stage directions are often of a 'literary' nature, of the kind which might assist the author's memory rather than be of great use to the producer, and the designation of minor characters shows that Shakespeare was thinking of the type of character rather than of an individual. The stage-direction at I.i.69 of *Titus Andronicus*, for example, after listing the characters who actually enter at that point, concludes 'and others as many as can be'; just how many can be decided later by the producer. *All's Well* (II.iii.182) has 'Exeunt all but Parolles and Lafew, *who stay behind, commenting on this wedding.*' The succeeding lines make the last part of this direction, which I have italicised, perfectly obvious. An author, perhaps breaking off at this point, might need a reminder of what he had intended; the prompter would almost certainly delete it. In the stage-directions of the quarto of *Much Ado*, Dogberry and Verges are sometimes given their proper names, sometimes called 'Constable' and 'Headborough', and sometimes (IV.ii) 'Kemp' and 'Cowley', the actors for whom the parts were written. The printer might at best receive a fair copy of the authorial manuscript, like those made for some of the plays in F1 by Ralph Crane, a professional scribe, who probably produced the copy for *The Tempest*, the first play in F1 and which is well set out, and others such as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. His copies have full division into acts and scenes, although few stage directions, and one of his identifying features is his extensive use of brackets and hyphens.

The other source of printer's copy was the theatre prompt-book. The prompter (or book-keeper), as well as tidying up the stage-directions, especially marking entrances and exits, might himself make interpolations or cuts, perhaps for a particular performance or to reduce the size of a travelling company through the elimination of minor characters. The Folio text of *Richard II*, for example, was printed from a quarto that had been checked against a theatre copy. Its stage-directions are therefore businesslike, indicating entrances and exits clearly. One of the most uncompromising (yet perfectly adequate) stage directions in Shakespeare is that which begins Act II of *Pericles*: 'Enter Pericles, wet.' The F1 text of *King John*, on the other hand, has infrequent stage-directions and these are not conspicuously theatrical in character; it was probably set up from a copy of an authorial manuscript.

Where we are fortunate enough to possess both the Folio and a quarto text, we can use one to throw light on the other, but even so they may vary considerably. The quarto of *Henry V* omits the prologue, choruses and epilogue; the F1 text of *Hamlet* omits one of the soliloquies, 'How all occasions . . .' Some bad quartos were probably put together illegally ('stolne and surreptitious copies') by one or two of the actors. Their attempts at memorial reconstruction of the whole play show a good recollection of the parts these actors themselves played but a tendency to fill out the lines less clearly remembered. Here is the opening of the best-known of all Hamlet's soliloquies as it appears in the bad Q1:

> To be, or not to be, I there's the point,
> To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
> No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes,
> For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,
> And borne before an euerlasting Iudge,
> From whence no passenger euer retur'nd,
> The vndiscouered country, at whose sight
> The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd.

If an actor was responsible for this, it was probably not Hamlet himself who would have remembered better.

The bad quarto of *2 Henry VI* is entitled 'The First part of the Contention betwixt the two famous Houses of Yorke and Lancaster, with the death of the good Duke Humphrey: And the banishment and death of the Duke of Suffolke, and the Tragicall end of the proud Cardinall of Winchester, with the notable Rebellion of Iacke Cade: And the Duke of Yorkes first claime unto the Crowne', and it contains echoes of Marlowe's *Edward II* and *Arden of Feversham*.

But what about a situation in which the comparative textual value of Folio and quarto(s) is unclear? The 1608 quarto of *King Lear* contains about 300 lines not in F1 which in its turn includes some 100 lines not in the quarto. These differences go far beyond mere variations in phraseology. Did Lear die believing Cordelia was still alive? The Folio suggests he did:

> Why should a Dog, a Horse, a Rat haue life,
> And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
> Neuer, neuer, neuer, neuer, neuer.
> Pray you vndo this Button. Thanke you Sir,

> Do you see this? Looke on her. Looke her lips,
> Looke there, looke there. (V.iii.306–11)

But the quarto (which, incidentally, prints the speech as prose) omits the last two lines of the Folio text:

> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat of life and thou no breath at all. O thou wilt come no more, neuer, neuer, neuer, pray you vndo this button, thank you sir, O, o, o, o.

The O, *o, o, o* is the usual indication of a long-drawn out death-cry on stage. So this is probably an actor's interpolation. But of what? Lear's own dying groans or a realisation that Cordelia is in fact dead (in which latter case he would of course be looking at Cordelia)? If our modern stage direction (at 256) reads 'Enter Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms', this does not solve the puzzle, for the *dead* was added by the eighteenth–century editor Nicholas Rowe. Of the two surviving versions of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (both published some years after Marlowe's death) the 1604 text almost certainly represents memorial reconstruction by a group of actors. The 1616 text is longer and more coherent, but this will not do either for it seems to be based on a prompt-book which has been subject to a good deal of revision and perhaps some augmentation by other hands. In such cases today's editor is faced with a dilemma and must simply select on the best textual, linguistic and dramatic principles he can.

Even if the printer received good copy, he might himself contribute some errors, either through carelessness, or through a desire to correct apparent nonsense, or to achieve a typographically tidy page. The first kind is comparatively easy to spot and rectify, the second and third more difficult to detect because they may produce a plausible reading. Not only writing but also spelling was a personal matter (as may be seen from the quotations and titles above) and contracted forms, not marked by punctuation as now, were frequent. Furthermore, the printing of a text may have been divided between two or more compositors working simultaneously and each with his own idiosyncracies. Clearly a knowledge of the palaeographical and linguistic habits of Shakespeare's age is an indispensible part of the modern editor's equipment. We have some knowledge of a few typically Shakespearean spellings, largely from his contribution to the play of Sir Thomas More. This play, in a unique manuscript and originally written in one hand, perhaps in the mid 1590s, was augmented and corrected by five other hands, one of which is thought to be Shakespeare's. He contributed the early part of Act II, scene iii, in which More pacifies the citizens, and, less certainly, More's soliloquy which opens Act III, scene i.

Where F1 is printed from a good quarto, textual criticism is correspondingly easier, but in any event the task of reconstructing what Shakespeare actually wrote is far less hopeless than some of the above remarks may have suggested. Printers, prompters, scribes and unauthorised actors may all have helped to obscure what Shakespeare intended, but we now have a far better knowledge of Elizabethan handwriting, stage conditions, the whole printing process (even to the extent of identifying scribes such as Ralph Crane and individual compositors from their linguistic mannerisms and minor damage to their typefaces) and, finally, contemporary language than our predecessors had. The editor will supply act and scene division where these are either not marked or demonstrably erroneous, silently regularise speech prefixes (Lady Macbeth for 'Lady' and Armado for 'Braggart'), correct mislineation and verse printed as prose, supply stage-directions and indicate locale. He will almost always use modern punctuation. Elizabethan punctuation, especially in the quartos, is less than today's reader is accustomed to and frequently rhetorical in its aim (as an aid to the actor speaking the lines) rather than grammatical (for the convenience of the reader). The amount and the style of modern punctuation is important, for punctuation is itself a form of interpretation; the editor is himself contributing here to the way we understand the text. In his aim of reconstructing as closely as possible what Shakespeare wrote, the editor should remember that Shakespeare at times wrote below his best and should resist any temptation to remove every awkwardness of expression. He must always give his reasons for his choice between variant but possible readings. In this book I quote from the New Penguin texts where these are available and from the Signet texts otherwise, not only because these are easily accessible but because they provide (the New Penguin especially) a sound text and the evidence on which that text is based.

Our modern texts, therefore, represent a reasonable approximation to what Shakespeare wrote. In most cases it will no doubt be what he actually wrote, although we cannot always be sure just what the words sounded like on stage (there was certainly a good deal of punning, for example) or how closely drama recaptured the spoken idiom. Drama selects from the language of its time, and although at times it may approach colloquial English more than other kinds of writing, it has also of necessity to concentrate its material more than, say, the narrative poem or the novel. And the essence of drama is to sound spontaneous, to be spoken as if it were *not* written. The features of the spoken language it contains will be partly deliberate and partly unconscious. For all these reasons this book perforce deals with the *literary* language of Shakespeare.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *A Groats-worth of Wit, Life and Complete Works of Robert Greene*, ed. A. B. Grosart (edn of 1964), Russell and Russell, New York, Ch. XII, p. 144.
2. A recent attempt at biography is Bradbrook (1978).
3. Hulme (1962), pp. 45–6, 337–8. For *sauce*, compare *Dr Faustus*, I.iv. 11–12.

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