

# THE LANGUAGE OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

*by*

IFOR EVANS

*Provost, University College, London*

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TO  
SIR ALBERT STERN

## INTRODUCTION

THE literature in English on Shakespeare's use of language is small when compared with the many studies of his characters, of his stage technique, and of all the bibliographical problems which surround the text of his plays. Through incidental references Dryden, Samuel Johnson and others said notable things about his language, and the way it was employed in the plays, but they did not approach the question systematically, or as a separate theme. Here they realised was something impressive and unusual, and it is clear from a number of passages, some of which are quoted in this volume, that Johnson had thought closely on the whole problem.

One of the earliest studies, as Professor F. P. Wilson has recently indicated,<sup>1</sup> was W. Whiter's *A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeare*, 1794 with, "(1) Notes on *As You Like It*, and (2) An attempt to explain and illustrate various passages on a new principle of criticism, derived from Mr. Locke's Doctrine of *The Association of Ideas*". Whiter did give a number of examples of Shakespeare's use of imagery, particularly of his repeated employment of the same cluster of images. Whiter had no uncertainty as to the importance of his own work: 'I have endeavoured to unfold the secret and subtle operations of genius from the most indubitable doctrine in the theory of metaphysics. As these powers of the imagination have never, I believe, been adequately conceived, or systematically discussed, I may perhaps be permitted, on this occasion, to adopt the language of science and to assume the merit of DISCOVERY'. Unfortunately, Whiter was left neglected both by the romantic critics and by more recent writers.

It has been one of the happy features of modern criticism, possibly following Coleridge's discussions in *Biographia Literaria*, that a new and rewarded attention has been given to these questions. Two studies appeared in the middle 'thirties, Professor Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery*<sup>2</sup> and Dr. Wolfgang Clemen's *Shakespeares Bilder*.<sup>3</sup> These two volumes gave the

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare and the Diction of Common Life* (1941).

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it tells us* (1935).

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespeares Bilder, ihre Entwicklung und Funktionem in dramatischen Werke* (Bonn, 1936); *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (London, 1951).

general direction to recent studies of Shakespearian language. They both concentrated on exploring Shakespeare's use of imagery, which remains the most memorable single element in his language. While Clemen attempted to set his comments on imagery within the general problem of dramatic writing, Professor Spurgeon, who was using statistical methods, was concerned rather in estimating what could be discovered of Shakespeare's thought, personality and taste from the language he employed.

Apart from a lecture by Professor Ellis-Fermor, *Some Recent Research in Shakespeare's Imagery*<sup>1</sup> I feel that Professor Spurgeon's work has not been generously received in either England or America. It is true that she pursued her method so ruthlessly that some of her results were rather naive, and the spirit of mockery can play successfully over some passages in the study. But her work, if considered justly, must be regarded as a whole. We all use the volume, even those who have treated it with less than the respect it deserves. The work of Spurgeon and Clemen has shown that there were many further problems to be considered. Already, earlier than either of these, George Rylands in *Words and Poetry* (1928) had studied, most successfully, the development of Shakespeare's language as it was shown in his imagery. Wilson Knight in *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), *The Imperial Theme* (1931) and in other studies made imaginative speculations on the relation of the imagery, particularly what Professor Spurgeon called an 'iterative imagery' to the meaning of the tragedies as a whole. F. P. Wilson brought his great resources of knowledge of the whole problem of Shakespearian language, as far as the limits of an Academy lecture would allow, into *Shakespeare and the Diction of Common Life* (1941). More recently E. A. Armstrong in *Shakespeare's Imagination* (1946) made some interesting discoveries of the associations in Shakespeare's language worked out in a psychological method, happily and unaggressively employed. He approached the problem somewhat as Whiter had done in the eighteenth century.

There has also been a revival of a close study of Shakespeare's linguistic training and background, especially in T. W. Baldwin's *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (1944) and in Sister Miriam Joseph's *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (1947). Both authors emphasise Shakespeare's knowledge and

<sup>1</sup> Oxford University Press (1937).

employment of the forms of rhetoric and logic regularly taught in the Latin textbooks in the Tudor grammar schools. Sister Joseph presents the general theory of composition current during the Renaissance, and illustrates Shakespeare's employment of it. The studies of Baldwin and Sister Joseph emphasise the complexity of the background of Shakespeare's language and the difficulty of distinguishing his personal contribution from patterns which were traditionally at his disposal. Sister Joseph tabulates numerous passages in Shakespeare's plays which correspond precisely with the figures of Tudor logic and rhetoric. It is not, of course, necessary to conclude that Shakespeare was conscious on all occasions in this practice, but she does emphasise that he was far more conscious than a modern audience, with a different training, would imagine. Further, he came at a time, when despite all this precision of terms, the language itself was free and unformed and ready for an adventurer. The terms of grammar, logic and rhetoric were derived from the Latin textbooks and from those who imitated them, and the freedom came from the very genius of the English language at that period. From this contrast grew Shakespeare's opportunity as George Gordon noted: 'Shakespeare was to do what he liked with English grammar, and drew beauty and power from its imperfections. In the rankness and wildness of the language he found his opportunity, and exploited it royally, sometimes tyrannically.'<sup>1</sup>

In the present study I have made use of these earlier studies. I have emphasised that imagery, however brilliant and original, is only one part of Shakespeare's language. Much that was most moving in his plays was written in the simplest language without any dependence on those great sources of imagery which he had always at command. I came to this study with the belief that some of my predecessors, whose work I have so much admired, thought too often of Shakespeare's language as something detached from the theatre, and separate from the problems of the dramatist.

I have followed through the plays, commenting on the problems which faced Shakespeare. As a dramatist he was always in a sort of splendid peril, for language so delighted him that he loved words for their own sake and it was as if they knew his weakness and were ever ready to overpower him. He was in danger as a

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare's English* (1928).

dramatist of being overwhelmed by the exuberance of his own verbal genius. In some of the plays he was able to release all his linguistic energies freely into his creation as he did in *Love's Labour's Lost*. At times he was analytical and self-critical in his use of language and the results are to be found in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* and in some of the other plays. At times there seems a unity between the critical and creative elements and this leads to the linguistic triumph of *King Lear*.

I have found it necessary to make a frequent distinction between the language of simple, and direct statement where Shakespeare is so effective, though his achievement here has never been sufficiently praised, and the language of true or false persuasion where the formal embellishments of language are exploited. I have used the term *rhetorical* for this second way of writing. It is true that *rhetoric* was also used in the Elizabethan age for the formal rules and arts of language, and I have also employed the term, *rhetoric*, where necessary, in that sense. Yet I know no term, other than *rhetoric* which will define the ornate way of writing which Landor defined as the *opaque* style. I think no ambiguity exists in the text, but I felt that this amount of explanation might be necessary.

We, in this age, have been able to welcome verse back into drama on the stage. The poetic dramatist is not merely writing verse, but verse that can be employed in the theatre. This Shakespeare did supremely, but he was always tempted to do much else.

I have had to accept a certain chronological order for the plays, but there is little in my argument that depends on the precise order which I have employed. In a volume such as this, quotations must play an important part, and so, for ease of reference, I have had to fall back upon a modernised text and I have used the *Globe* edition.

In a work on Shakespeare one is always indebted to one's predecessors, both the living and the dead, and where I have failed to make an acknowledgement I would ask to be forgiven. As Dryden said in introducing a far more original piece, this is a discourse mainly drawn from the discoveries of others. I would add, less modestly, that one or two of the ideas are my own derived from a quarter of a century of study of this theme. What I have tried to emphasise throughout is that language in drama must be



referred to the effect that it can make in the theatre. Far too much English criticism appeals to the reader in the study rather than the man or woman in the theatre who stood or sat around that Elizabethan stage and listened to a dramatic action.

I.E.

For some time now this volume has been out of print. In preparing this new edition I have much expanded the chapters dealing with the history plays. I have been increasingly impressed by the place which they occupy in the development of Shakespeare's writing as a dramatist.

January, 1959.

I.E.

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	vii
I THE BEGINNING IN WORDS: <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	I
II FROM WORDS TO ACTION AND FROM WORDS TO PEOPLE: <i>The Comedy of Errors; The Two Gentle- men of Verona; The Taming of the Shrew</i>	17
III THE EARLY HISTORIES: <i>Henry VI</i> (Parts I, II and III)	31
IV <i>Richard III</i> and <i>Richard II</i>	44
V <i>King John</i>	59
VI <i>A Midsummer-Night's Dream</i>	70
VII <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	78
VIII <i>Henry IV</i> (Parts I and II) and <i>Henry V</i>	87
IX THE MIDDLE COMEDIES: <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor; The Merchant of Venice; Much Ado About Nothing; As You Like It; Twelfth Night</i>	101
X <i>Hamlet</i>	116
XI <i>Measure for Measure; All's Well That Ends Well; Troilus and Cressida</i>	132
XII <i>Othello and Macbeth</i>	148
XIII <i>King Lear</i>	171
XIV THE ROMAN PLAYS: <i>Julius Cæsar; Antony and Cleopatra; Coriolanus</i>	185
XV <i>Cymbeline; The Winter's Tale; The Tempest</i>	201
INDEX	215

## CHAPTER I

### THE BEGINNING IN WORDS:

#### *Love's Labour's Lost*

**E**VEN if *Love's Labour's Lost* was not the first of the plays it must have been among the earliest, and it is concerned almost wholly with words. Unlike the later comedies and romances this brilliant and original piece has no *story* plot. The King of Navarre and his three companions take an oath to keep themselves apart for three years to study, and above all 'not to see a woman'. To them come the Princess of France and her ladies and, each in turn, the men break their oath. The whole is very prettily conceived, with a regularity in all the essential concerns of the unities, but with the real charm and beauty lying in an atmosphere of sophisticated society displayed through an elegant variety of verbal entertainments.

Something Shakespeare derived from his contemporaries, and more precisely from John Lyly, and he had come to the stage when words were one of the major excitements and adventures of alert and creative minds. So he fell upon a plot, or rather an elegant device, which was cunningly and dramatically maintained, so that language might have the necessary situations for diverse and entertaining employment. It is with words, not with plot and characters that the play lives. They are words sought for their own sake, words dancing to unexpected rhythms, and twisting themselves into fantastic shapes, words robbed from the rhetoricians, and strung out, half-mockingly, into patterns borrowed from the grammarians, with images and conceits already made popular by the sonneteers, and words handled lovingly, and placed into new contexts, with a beginning of an awareness of their illimitable power.

He thinks consciously about the delight of words and compares them to costumes worn with a studied pride in their magnificence, to taffeta and silk, and velvet luxuriously woven with a triple pile:

Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,

Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation,

Figures pedantical.

(v.2.406)

Even in this earliest phase he knew the difference between the pleasure derived from these elegant varieties and from 'russet yeas and honest kersey noes' (v.2.413). Already he had seen the great conflict, ever to pursue him in his employment of language: on the one hand all the temptations and opportunities of a sumptuous diction, with cohorts of proud words, and, on the other, all the dramatic strength which could be gained in simple and direct statement.

He knew that there were words and phrases which had in some strange way a power beyond their immediate context, as if the imagination were holding in reserve resources which it could not use within the present pattern. Walter Pater noticed this,<sup>1</sup> and quoted some of the most striking examples: 'below the many artifices of Biron's amorous speeches we may trace sometimes the "unutterable longing" and the lines in which Katharine describes the blighting through love of her younger sister are one of the most touching things in older literature.'<sup>2</sup> Again, how many echoes seem awakened by those strange words, actually said in jest: 'The sweet war-man [Hector of Troy] is dead and rotten; sweet chucks, beat not the bones of the buried: when he breathed, he was a man' (v.2.665).

In this early play the battle of words was thus already set, and the trial of strength between elegance, bravura, action, contemplation, discipline, extravagance and tenderness continued to the end.

His mind delighted in coloured and decorative extravagances, and his ear responded to all the commensurate devices of sound. One can see the image of this fresh and glowing creation of words in his own description of Armado:

a most illustrious wight,  
A man of fire-new words, fashion's own knight.

(i.1.178)

Despite the few phrases which explore some unplumbed depth he had not yet developed a high seriousness in employing words. In this early exercise it is the enjoyment that is supreme, the breathless playfulness, almost as if language were an intoxicating merriment. Later he was often to consider the danger of words, as in *The Merchant of Venice*:

<sup>1</sup> *Love's Labour's Lost* in *Appreciations*.

<sup>2</sup> Act V, Scene II.

The fool hath planted in his memory  
 An army of good words; and I do know  
 A many fools, that stand in better place,  
 Garnish'd like him, that for a tricky word  
 Defy the matter.

(iii.5.71)

Here no such considerations restrain him, and 'the army of good words' makes onslaught where it will.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, more than anywhere else, the mechanics of language, grammar, logic and rhetoric dominated his attention. It was as if he had just escaped from the class-room into the theatre. Thus the language of logic entered into the very protestations of love, as with Longaville:

Did not the heavenly rhetoric of thine eye,  
 'Gainst whom the world cannot hold argument,  
 Persuade my heart to this false perjury?

(iv.3.60)

Shakespeare's training had taught him all the complex nomenclature for grammar and the figures of speech, but fortunately, he came at a period when, despite all the elaboration of the rules, language itself was in a state of flux, when grammar and spelling were both uncertain. As G. S. Gordon has written: 'One exhilarating result of the linguistic licence of the century was, in its later years at any rate, a period of almost complete freedom'.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the patterns which he detected in contemporary artifice he satirised, but he was fascinated even when he mocked, so that it is difficult precisely to draw the distinction between his own language and his parody of current excesses. 'They have been at a great feast of languages,' says Moth (v.1.39) of Holofernes and Nathaniel, and indeed this is true of all the characters: they have all lived long 'on the alms-basket of words' (v.1.41). Language is for them a game to be played as they might play a game of tennis. After Katharine and Rosaline have had a pretty exchange of phrases the Princess says: 'Well bandied both; a set of wit well play'd' (v.2.29). Holofernes and Nathaniel enjoy together their 'sweetly varied epithets', and when Holofernes gives his verbal portrait of Armado so memorable does Nathaniel consider it that he takes out his notebook to record the 'most singular and choice' epithet with which it concludes.

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare's English* (1928).

Out of this great welter of language, this rapier play of words, Shakespeare was later to develop his own imaginative diction highly metaphorical, and, at its best, disciplined for the service of drama. But the fascination of words themselves, their sound and shape, their music and their arrangement, remained with him to the end as a power capable in moments of danger of overwhelming any other purpose he might have in hand. The vitality in Shakespeare's language means that there is ever this struggle to retain control 'to beget a temperance in a storm of passion'. Even in the most mature plays a character can be led away on one occasion or another by the *fata morgana* of a phrase. It is as if Shakespeare were riding some spirited animal, capable of moving with beauty and swiftness, but whose power remains a problem calling for dexterity and concentration. Samuel Johnson described the temptations which beset Shakespeare in one of the most memorable of all the passages in his *Preface to Shakespeare*:

A quibble is to *Shakespeare* what luminous vapours are to the traveller! he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of his disquisition, whether he be enlarging knowledge or exalting affection, whether he be amusing attention with incidents, or enchainning it in suspense, let but a quibble spring up before him and he leaves his work unfinished. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.

Some of the topical affectations and pretensions of speech are so precisely satirised that they can be easily identified. The King's opening speech is in the language of the sonneteers:

When, spite of cormorant devouring Time,  
The endeavour of this present breath may buy  
That honour which shall bate his scythe's keen edge  
And make us heirs of all eternity.

(i.i.4)

The rhythm and imagery of the sonneteers dance in and out of the verse as if constantly to remind the audience that the mood of the whole is one of pseudo-seriousness. In the Fourth Act

Nathaniel reads a sonnet which Armado has written for Jaquenetta and later Longaville reads a sonnet of his own composition, and both of these William Jaggard seized upon for the miscellaneous collection of sonnets which in 1599 he published as 'The Passionate Pilgrim by William Shakespeare'.

As Walter Pater realised, this play with the mannerisms of the sonnet had its own half-discovered beauty: 'Such modes or fashions are, at their best, an example of the artistic predominance of form over matter; of the manner of the doing of it over the thing done; and have a beauty of their own. It is so with that old euphuism of the Elizabethan age—that pride of dainty language and curious expression, which is very easy to ridicule, which often made itself ridiculous, but which had below it a real sense of fitness and nicety; and which, as we see in this very play, and still more clearly in the Sonnets, had some fascination for the young Shakespeare himself.'

Armado's language is more pedantical and affected than that of the sonneteers:

A man in all the world's new fashion planted,  
That hath a mint of phrases in his brain;  
One whom the music of his own vain tongue  
Doth ravish like enchanting harmony.

(i.1.165)

In a self-conscious way he explores the remoter territories of speech seeking the 'high born words' which he considers admirable. He runs through a triple series of phrases, obeying that rhetorical principle of triplicity, employing it here satirically, though later Shakespeare used it for other purposes: 'I do affect the very ground, which is base, where her shoe, which is baser, guided by her foot, which is basest, doth tread' (i.2.172).

So self-conscious is Armado in his language that he is ever ready to add comment and explanation on his verbal procedure, and so when Moth asks why he should be called a 'tender juvenal' Armado replies: 'I spoke it, tender juvenal, as a congruent epitheton appertaining to thy young days, which we may nominate tender' (i.2.13).

Some critics, notably Frances M. Yates<sup>1</sup> and Miss M. C. Bradbrook<sup>2</sup> have, most ingeniously, discovered satiric portraits of individuals behind the various characters in the play. 'Armado',

<sup>1</sup> *A Study of Love's Labour's Lost* (1936).

<sup>2</sup> *The School of Night* (1936).

writes Miss Bradbrook, 'fits Raleigh perfectly. The fact that he is a Spaniard is such an insult to one of the sea-dogs that it also serves as positive evidence. The king gives his character at length: he is a literary man and orator, and a writer. . . . The dandy, the planter of Virginia, the spinner of travellers' tales appears at once in "fashion's own knight".' It may well be that Shakespeare was involved in the satire of Raleigh and his friends of the 'School of Night', and many of the minor characters must have meant more to the sophisticated in the contemporary audience than they can do to-day. But the real interest of the comedy lies elsewhere, for its characters are not individuals, only types, intelligible dramatically, even if one has not heard of Raleigh. Miss Bradbrook courageously admits this: 'the play is, on the whole, more concerned with theories of living than with personalities: the satire is not sustained or consistent.'

The 'congruent' side of Armado's 'epitheton' he shares with the schoolmaster, Holofernes, who also is an explorer in the lesser known continents of words. Some who would try to define the shadowy path of Shakespeare's biography would rely on Aubrey for the story said to be told by William Beeston, son of Christopher Beeston, a fellow actor with Shakespeare, that before he came to London Shakespeare was himself a country schoolmaster. T. W. Baldwin is ready to accept Aubrey on this occasion.<sup>1</sup> If one were to credit this theory then Holofernes might be a portrait of an extravagant, fantastic, but ultimately dull-witted pedant. If Shakespeare had been a schoolmaster then the play represents his release from the schoolroom to life and to the theatre, and it would serve as an interpretation of his extraordinary familiarity with the arts of grammar and rhetoric.

Holofernes is a critic of Armado's speech and of his pronunciation. He is different from the courtiers, for he has more of the apparatus of learning, however fantastically it may function and however defective it may be in parts. He is the pedant, displaying his Latin, his knowledge of grammar, and the dullness of his mind, but a dullness rendered comic by the fancy created out of it. Indeed the opening phrases of his criticism of Armado could well be applied to his own utterances: 'He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument. I abhor such fanatical phantasies, such insociable and point-devise compan-

<sup>1</sup> *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke.*



ions; such rackers of orthography, as to speak dout, fine, when he should say doubt; det, when he should pronounce debt—d, e, b, t, not d, e, t: he clepeth a calf, cauf; half, hauf; neighbour vocatur nebour; neigh abbreviated ne. This is abhominable—which he would call abhominable: it insinuateth me of insanie: Ne intelligis, dominie? to make frantic, lunatic' (v.1.18). Later Armado and Holofernes are to be found in a competitive exercise of their comparative skill, for when Armado comments 'the posteriors of this day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon', Holofernes replies: 'The posterior of the day, most generous sir, is liable, congruent and measurable for the afternoon: the word is well culled, chose, sweet and apt, I do assure you, sir, I do assure' (v.1.94). The deficiencies of Holofernes' scholarship are a matter open to argument. It has been asserted with some confidence that he misquotes the opening line of the first eclogue of Mantuan (iv.2.98-9), but it might be suggested that this is possibly a defect of the text rather than a defect in Holofernes' wits. If he misquotes this commonplace tag he is at the same time familiar with more complicated matters, so the jest is not wholly well-founded.

Sir Nathaniel, the curate, shares much of Holofernes' muddled enthusiasm for language. Seldom is he satisfied with a single phrase, and he piles them one upon the other until the resources of his mind are exhausted: 'Your reasons at dinner have been sharp and sententious: pleasant without scurrility, witty without affection, audacious without impudency, learned without opinion, and strange without heresy' (v.1.2). Through Nathaniel, it would seem that Shakespeare, at times, reflects precisely upon some of the linguistic idiosyncrasies of his time. For instance this excitement and ambition about words had led some writers to follow a noun or a verb derived from Anglo-Saxon sources with a synonym of French and Latin origin. It was a habit into which Lord Berners, for instance, had fallen in his introduction to Froissart when he had not the clear model of the French before him: 'for when we (being unexpert of chances), *see*, *behold*, and *read* the ancient *acts*, *gests*, and *deeds* how and with what labours, dangers and perils they were gested and done, they right greatly admonish, *ensigne* and teach us how we may lead forth our lives.' Nathaniel in describing Armado to Holofernes has a similar triple elegance: 'I did converse this quondam day with a companion of the king's, who is *intituled*, *nominated*, or *called*, Don Adriano de Armado' (v.1.7).