‘Think on my words’

‘You speak a language that I understand not.’ Hermione’s words to Leontes in The Winter’s Tale are likely to ring true with many people reading or watching Shakespeare’s plays today. For decades, people have been studying Shakespeare’s life and times, and in recent years there has been a renewed surge of interest into aspects of his language. So how can we better understand Shakespeare? How did he manipulate language to produce such an unrivalled body of work, which has enthralled generations both as theatre and as literature? David Crystal addresses these and many other questions in this lively and original introduction to Shakespeare’s language. Covering in turn the five main dimensions of language structure – writing style, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and conversational style – the book shows how examining these linguistic ‘nuts and bolts’ can help us achieve a greater appreciation of Shakespeare’s linguistic creativity.

‘Think on my words’
Exploring Shakespeare’s Language

David Crystal
Contents

List of figures and tables \hspace{1cm} page vii
Preface \hspace{1cm} ix
Abbreviations \hspace{1cm} xi

1 ‘You speak a language that I understand not’: myths and realities \hspace{1cm} 1
   The quantity myth \hspace{1cm} 2
   The invention myth \hspace{1cm} 8
   The translation myth \hspace{1cm} 10
   The style myth \hspace{1cm} 15

2 ‘Now, sir, what is your text?’ Knowing the sources \hspace{1cm} 22
   Texts \hspace{1cm} 22
   Printing \hspace{1cm} 27
   Manuscripts? \hspace{1cm} 31
   Shakespeare’s language? \hspace{1cm} 40

3 ‘In print I found it’: Shakespearean graphology \hspace{1cm} 42
   The alphabet \hspace{1cm} 43
   Capitalization \hspace{1cm} 48
   Space-savers \hspace{1cm} 53
   Spelling \hspace{1cm} 58

4 ‘Know my stops’: Shakespearean punctuation \hspace{1cm} 64
   Exclamation marks \hspace{1cm} 72
   Parentheses \hspace{1cm} 78
   Apostrophes \hspace{1cm} 83
   Italics \hspace{1cm} 88
   Inverted commas \hspace{1cm} 94
   Hyphens \hspace{1cm} 96

5 ‘Speak the speech’: Shakespearean phonology \hspace{1cm} 100
   The way they said it \hspace{1cm} 101
   Prosody \hspace{1cm} 105
   Why pentameters? \hspace{1cm} 112
| 6 | ‘Trippingly upon the tongue’: Shakespearean pronunciation | 125 |
|   | The evidence | 130 |
|   | Insights | 143 |
| 7 | ‘Think on my words’: Shakespearean vocabulary | 146 |
|   | Easy words | 147 |
|   | Metrical constraints | 150 |
|   | Difficult words | 152 |
|   | False friends | 156 |
|   | Old and new words | 159 |
|   | Coinages | 161 |
|   | Clusters | 165 |
|   | Repetitions | 168 |
|   | Signposts | 171 |
|   | Collocations | 173 |
|   | Perspective | 175 |
| 8 | ‘Talk of a noun and a verb’: Shakespearean grammar | 178 |
|   | Similarities and differences | 181 |
|   | Nouns | 184 |
|   | Adjectives | 186 |
|   | Verbs | 188 |
|   | Pronouns | 193 |
|   | Word order | 199 |
| 9 | ‘Hear sweet discourse’: Shakespearean conversation | 207 |
|   | Verse and prose | 208 |
|   | Metre in discourse | 219 |
|   | Varieties of language | 221 |
|   | A legal example | 224 |
|   | Epilogue – ‘Your daring tongue’: Shakespearean creativity | 230 |
|       | Appendix: An A-to-Z of Shakespeare’s false friends | 234 |
|       | Notes | 245 |
|       | References and further reading | 247 |
|       | Index | 249 |
List of figures and tables

Figure 1: A page from the First Folio  page 28
Figure 2: Shakespeare signatures: a, Public Record Office; b, Guildhall Library, Corporation of London; c, British Library; d, e and f, Public Record Office  32
Figure 3: Type-setting instance of Shakespeare’s name in the First Folio  34
Figure 4: Transcript of part of the Shakespearean section of Sir Thomas More: British Library  36

Table 1: Shared lines related to the number of verse lines in the plays  116
Table 2: Proportions of verse and prose in the plays  210
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

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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
xii  List of abbreviations

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