ETYMOLOGY AND THE INVENTION OF ENGLISH IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

How did authors such as Jonson, Spenser, Donne and Milton think about the past lives of the words they used? Hannah Crawforth shows how early modern writers were acutely attuned to the religious and political implications of the etymology of English words. She argues that these lexically astute writers actively engaged with the lexicographers, Anglo-Saxonists and etymologists who were carrying out a national project to recover, or invent, the origins of English, at a time when the question of a national vernacular was inseparable from that of national identity. English words are deployed to particular effect – as a polemical weapon, allegorical device, coded form of communication, type of historical allusion or political tool. Drawing together Early Modern literature and linguistics, Crawforth argues that the history of English as it was studied in the period radically underpins the writing of its greatest poets.

HANNAH CRAWFORTH is a lecturer in Early Modern Literature at King's College London, where she is also one of the founding members of the London Shakespeare Centre. She has published articles in a range of journals and edited collections, and is textual editor for the Norton Shakespeare's new edition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

ETYMOLOGY AND THE INVENTION OF ENGLISH IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

HANNAH CRAWFORTH

Lecturer in Early Modern Literature, King's College London

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107041769

First published 2013

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Crawforth, Hannah Jane, 1980– author.
Etymology and the invention of English in early modern literature / Dr Hannah Crawforth, Lecturer in Early Modern English, King's College London.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-04176-9 (hardback)
1. English literature–Early modern, 1500–1700–History and criticism.
2. English language–Early modern, 1500–1700–Etymology. 3. Poetics. I. Title.
PR428.L35.C73 2013
820.9'357–dc23 2013018455

ISBN 978-1-107-04176-9 Hardback

Contents

Preface

> … as if thought plunged into a sea of words and came up dripping.
> Virginia Woolf on the 'word-coining genius' of the Elizabethans

Etymology looks to the past to shape the future, deriving new insight about the meaning and usage of words from a detailed examination of their origins. In this Janus-faced aspect it fundamentally resembles the structure of the Renaissance itself, which draws life from the reanimation of its own past. In what follows I will suggest that the excavation of etymologies is one of the most important activities carried out by – and devices available to – Early Modern writers. But it is first necessary to say a few words about why one would write, or read, a book about etymology at all. For as a critical discipline etymology surely belongs to an era long since past, beloved of the Germanic philologists who dominated the nineteenth century, and put to rest by Saussure and his followers, who posited a more sophisticated model of language that values not just the diachronic but also the synchronic. And yet etymology will not go away. From the New Critical emphasis on paying minute attention to the words on the page, which in excluding all knowledge extraneous to the text itself sought to give new weight to the question of precisely what that text means, to the linguistic pyrotechnics of deconstruction, which performs intricate pirouettes around the meaning of a central term, etymology has persisted throughout the history of English literary studies. It is no exaggeration to say that we might conceive of our own scholarly discipline as one that is both born out of and underpinned by etymology. For, at root, etymology is concerned with the one single question that preoccupies literary critics more than any other: what, and how, do words mean?

Medieval studies, with its textual emphasis and particular interest in the practices of editing, has addressed the place of etymology in its own discipline more openly than most literary-critical fields, and the debate around the New Philology that has been so important to the recent flourishing of theoretically astute scholarship on Old and Middle English texts

has explicitly considered the place of word histories in its own practice. But Renaissance studies has not yet applied the most important insight offered by the New Historicists who have so influenced the field over the past thirty years (and who have been so often criticized for their lack of nuanced attention to the words on the page) to the most fundamental aspect of Early Modern texts: their language. This present study seeks to historicize our approach to the language of Renaissance literature by addressing how Early Modern writers themselves conceived of the past lives of their words. It is one of the most remarked-upon features of the literature of the English Renaissance that its language displays an unusual playfulness, exuberance or even perversity. My epigram, taken from Virginia Woolf's 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play', captures precisely the kind of virtuosity that readers associate with the writing of the Tudor–Stuart years, the particular linguistic brilliance that typifies the literature of the period – its elaborate puns and metaphors, crystalline images, striking diction, formal inventiveness and hidden layers of meaning.[1] My contention in this book is that the 'word-coining genius' central to the texts of Early Modern writers is possible because they work at a moment in which the history of their language is first beginning to be documented. Woolf's description also evokes the contradictory nature of this endeavour: they are creating something out of what is already there; the sea their thought 'plunged into' is no new invention and yet it washes over them, creating their language afresh, drenching each idea in the dewiness of novelty and the saltiness of the past.

[1] Virginia Woolf, 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play', in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 72–83, 81.

Acknowledgements

This book began life as a PhD dissertation under the care of Jeff Dolven and Nigel Smith, the most generous advisors imaginable, and with whom I am lucky to enjoy ongoing conversations that have continued to shape my thinking, writing and teaching. Their questions have always been provocative, their insights unfailingly acute, and their advice ever honest and kind. I have appreciated the long leash they have afforded me and this project, as we roamed together widely, and the time and attention they have unhesitatingly given at exactly the right moments. To Leonard Barkan I owe thanks for the fact I came to study Early Modern Literature at all. Lisa Jardine provided me with an academic home when far from Princeton, and continues to be an extraordinay mentor. Richard and Marie Axton have given me far more than I can ever repay, including a library to inspire envy.

I am grateful to the following people for discussions from which my work has benefitted immeasurably: Robyn Adams, Oliver Arnold, Laura Ashe, JK Barret, James Bickford, Jan Broadway, Gordon Campbell, Christopher Cannon, David Colcough, Thomas Corns, Rosanna Cox, Lara and Tim Crowley, Kathleen Davis, Katrin Ettenhuber, Rachel Galvin, Chanita Goodblatt, Anthony Grafton, John Hale, Abigail Heald, Aaron Hostetter, Arnold Hunt, Chris Jones, Joshua Katz, Sean Keilen, Russ Leo, John Leonard, Rhodri Lewis, David Matthews, Jeff Miller, Joe Moshenska, Dan Moss, Kathryn Murphy, Thomas Pavel, Graham Parry, Graham Pechey, Will Poole, Isabel Rivers, David Sedley, Bill Sherman, Alan Stewart, Susan Stewart, Jennifer Summit, Sarah van der Laan, Sophie van Romburgh, Sonia Velazquez, Angus Vine, David Wallace, John Watkins, Leah Whittington, Michael Wood and Henry Woudhuysen.

I was made to feel welcome at Princeton by Diana Fuss, Bill Gleason, Pat Guglielmi, and the contemporaries and friends from whom I have learned so much, especially Renée Fox, Ian Segal and Casey Walker. My colleagues and students at King's College London have sustained me

and seen this project to completion; I owe particular thanks to Hannah Crummé, Rose Dixon, Sarah Dustagheer, Tullia Giersberg, Sarah Lewis, Sonia Massai, Josephine McDonagh, Gordon McMullan, Jan Palmowski, Ann Thompson, Mark Turner and Jennifer Young. Lucy Munro, who joined our Department as this book neared completion, shares many of my intellectual interests and has been an ideal reader for it.

Research for this dissertation was generously funded by the trustees of the Procter and Jacobus families, the Princeton Graduate School, the Mellon Foundation, the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters, Queen Mary, the School of Arts and Humanities and English Department of King's College, London, the Axton Housing Trust, the Hadrian Green Scholars' Benevolent Fund, my two inspiring and much-loved grandmothers and many other donors of meals and caffeine who wish to remain anonymous. I am grateful to them all.

Sarah Stanton and her team at Cambridge University Press, including Becky Taylor and Emma Walker, have been a delight to work with on preparing this book for print. I am grateful to them for their hard work and guidance. Rob Wilkinson and copy-editor Nancy Campbell have been remarkably patient and diligent in ensuring the manuscript reached the press in the best possible state. As with the other recipients of my thanks here, they deserve no blame for any errors, which remain entirely my own.

This book is for my family. Sarah Rees, David Green and Suetonia Palmer have made me part of theirs. Chloé, Joe, Laurie and Cary Elwood are the dearest of odd families. My parents, Sue and Graham, and my sister, Ellie, gave me my obsession with funny words and everything else one could ask for too. I am particularly grateful to them for (quite literally) holding my babies while I completed this book. It is no exaggeration to say that this book would not have been written without the love, support and extraordinary patience of Hadrian Green. Our darling sons, Lucian and Rufus, arrived in the final years of work on this book. Next to them these pages pale into insignificance.

Note on the text

Owing to this book's interest in the origins and developments of language I have here preserved original spellings when quoting from early printed texts and manuscripts.