‘Think on my words’
Exploring Shakespeare’s Language

David Crystal
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Table 1: Shared lines related to the number of verse lines in the plays 116
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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

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<td>Richard III</td>
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<td>WT</td>
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**Other Abbreviations**

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