‘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
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Preface

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

Holyhead, March 2007
### Play and poem abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ado</td>
<td>Much Ado About Nothing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ant</td>
<td>Antony and Cleopatra</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWW</td>
<td>All’s Well That Ends Well</td>
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<td>AYLI</td>
<td>As You Like It</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cor</td>
<td>Coriolanus</td>
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<td>Cym</td>
<td>Cymbeline</td>
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<td>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</td>
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<td>MV</td>
<td>The Merchant of Venice</td>
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<td>Oth</td>
<td>Othello</td>
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<td>Per</td>
<td>Pericles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Richard II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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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