That Shakespeare invented – or, at least, successfully promoted – more new English words than anyone else in history is a truth universally acknowledged.¹ But how and why did he do that? An otherwise superb exploration of ‘Some Functions of Shakespearean Word-Formation’ identifies many technical purposes – ‘To ensure coincidence of metrical and lexical stress’,² for example – but does not attend to what were surely important functions for Shakespeare: to draw paying customers to his plays by appealing to their need for cutting-edge social tools, and to articulate the complexities of mood and consciousness that are a hallmark of his literary achievement. This double business – selling to a wide popular audience, while also serving a fathomless interior intellect – may seem contradictory, but the combination is surely essential to Shakespeare’s greatness.

The shared life of the vernacular, granted new range and prestige by the printing press, was extended by the English stage; as poets, notably Spenser, reached backward for archaisms, perhaps to appeal to a fading aristocratic economy of patronage, playwrights pushed ahead. The Elizabethan theatre was a ‘knowledge marketplace’,³ and a key commodity in that market was lexical. English was evolving rapidly, not only because print and trade were accelerating exchange with other languages (to which English has always been unusually receptive) and because social and technological revolutions were requiring new terminologies, but also because the disappearance of grammatical inflections in English allowed words to be easily converted from one part of speech to another, as Shakespeare liked to do, by what linguists call ‘zero derivation’⁴ and Renaissance rhetoricians called anthimeria. As I have argued

¹ Like the precept that opens Pride and Prejudice, this is more assumed than proven. Others such as Thomas Nashe and (as a translator) Philemon Holland were also aggressive minters of words. But (unlike associated claims about the supposedly extraordinary size of Shakespeare’s overall vocabulary) it is probably true, even if – because the OED was overly reliant on Shakespeare from its inception – the numbers are inflated by over-reliance on the OED; see Jürgen Schäfer, Documentation in the O.E.D. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), and Jonathan Culpeper and Phoebe Clapham, ‘The Borrowing of Classical and Romance Words into English: A Study Based on the Electronic OED’, International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 1 (1996), 199–218. I will therefore be using several databases – most often, Literature Online (http://lion.chadwyck.com) and EEBO – to determine how new or uncommon certain words or usages probably were among other writers in Shakespeare’s lifetime.


⁴ Geoffrey Hughes, A History of English Words (New Jersey, 2000), p. 149, notes that such conversion becomes ‘possible only after the loss of grammatical inflections’. Much of that loss is already evident in Middle English, but the Elizabethans were well situated to exploit its near completion. See also Dick Leith, A Social History of English, 2nd edn (New York, 1997), p. 99: ‘the loss of distinctive form for, say, nouns and verbs, could offer enormous syntactic possibilities for a poet and dramatist like Shakespeare’.
elsewhere, these new products were manufactured and sold by Shakespeare and his rival playwrights.  

Scholarship on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama has almost entirely overlooked a battle for market-share in this sideline business of compiling and vending a fresh verbal repertoire at a moment when social advancement and humiliation were extraordinarily dependent on mastering the latest tricks of speech. Thomas Dekker’s satiric 1609 ‘How a Gallant should behave himselfe in a Play-house’ observed that ‘The Theater is your Poets Royal-Exchange, upon which, their Muses (ye are now turnd to Merchants) meeting, barter away that light commodity of words . . . your Groundling, and Gallery Commoner buyes his sport by the penny, and, like a Hagler, is glad to utter it againe by retailing.’ That upwardly mobile commoner is advised to ‘hoord up the finest play-scrapes you can get’ in order to banter with gentlewomen. In The Return from Parnassus (1599), Gullio values poets, especially Shakespeare, because he can ‘take some of there wordes and applie them to mine owne matters by a scholastical imitation’. Public-theatre dramatists therefore sought, like Chapman’s Monsieur D’Olive, to ‘have my chamber the Rende-vous of all good wits, the shoppe of good wordes, the Mint of good jests, an Ordinary of fine discourse’ (1606; sig. B2v). Even if these lexical innovations were only a small bonus added to the main value of the product, the competitive situation helps to explain several quirks in the so-called War of the Theatres (involving Jonson, Marston and others), as well as the ‘inkhorn controversy’, the publishing of the first English dictionaries and guides to the ‘canting’ languages of London’s criminal underclass, and the economic language persistently associated with the literary ‘coining’ of new English words.

Costard’s folly in mistaking ‘remuneration’ and ‘guerdon’ for units of money in Love’s Labour’s Lost (3.1.128–68) contains an element of insight. In the alchemy of the Shakespearian stage, words could be turned to gold – could be coined. Calling Don Armado’s neologisms ‘fire-new words’ (1.1.176) suggests a minting of metal. Mocking pretentious verbal mannerisms to the paying audience at such a verbally mannered play as Love’s Labour’s Lost was an audacious act of brinkmanship on Shakespeare’s part, calculated to let him

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5 Robert N. Watson, ‘Coining Words on the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage’, Philological Quarterly, 88 (2009), 49–75, analyses the purveying of the rapidly evolving English language to a partly illiterate audience at theatres around 1600. The topic united a philological approach with what is commonly supposed its opposite, namely, an emphasis on drama’s social functions and material conditions. The thesis was that dramatists competed in a theatrical economy that was partly a store of new words and a demonstration of new ways of assembling them. The basic rules of marketing applied: convince customers that your product can turn them into suave, sexy and successful people, whereas competing products would sicken or humiliate them. Groundlings must have wondered whether they too would seem heroic, or instead simply ridiculous, if they mimicked Tamburlaine’s ‘high astounding terms’ (Tamburlaine, Part I, 1587–8, Prologue). The latest and most ear-catching modes of speech were especially precious – and precarious – in a city of sudden social mobility such as London c. 1600.


7 As if in ironic fulfilment of this point, the 2008 Scripps National Spelling Bee prize was won by spelling ‘guerdon’. Shakespeare seems aware that Costard is doing what the audience would also be doing: recognizing the words as presumptively nouns by their endings (the obvious ‘-ation’ and the less obvious ‘-on’). Donka Minkova, private communication, 2009, reports that all English words ending in ‘-on’ are nouns, except ‘common’ and ‘wanton’.

8 With a noteworthy persistence, the coining of words was associated with the coming of money in this period. Jonson, in Timber, or Discoveries, calls custom ‘the most certaine Mistresse of Language, as the publicke stampe makes the current money’ (Ben Jonson, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford, 1947), vol. viii, p. 622). In Christ’s Tears Over Jerusalem, vol. 4 of The Complete Works of Thomas Nashe, ed. Alexander Grosart (London and Aylesbury, 1883–4), p. 6, Nashe even argues that the characteristic English monosyllables are like small change, and that his more elaborate diction enables his countrymen to trade profitably in larger sums. For a more extensive discussion of this point, see David Crystal’s entry in The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 60–1.

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have his fancy Euphuistic layer-cake and – through Berowne’s renunciation of Russian performances and French courtesies in favour of ‘russet yeas, and honest kersey noes’ (5.2.413 ff.) – forswear it too. In fact, many of the words that characterize Armado’s excess turn up elsewhere in Shakespeare’s works in all earnestness. Love’s Labour’s Lost provides the interest of both high Latinate neologism (through the schoolmaster Holofernes) and the more free-wheeling continental variety (through Armado), while at the same time taking a dismissive commonsensical position against the vanity of such literary innovations when balanced against domestic common sense and the biological facts of life. It does the accused Costard no good to change the wench to a damsel, virgin, or maiden: the sentence is the same (1.1.276–88). The linguistic show-offs can’t stop renaming naming: Nathaniel’s ‘intitulated, nominated, or called’ is framed by ‘Armado hight’ in the opening scene and Holofernes’s ‘ycleped’ in the final one, encompassing some twenty other uses of ‘name’ itself. When Holofernes and Armado use affected neologisms to attack each other’s affected neologisms, they replicate a contradiction that pervaded the Elizabethan ‘inkhorn controversy’. If many of the OED’s first-use citations from this play, but few from Hamlet, can be antedated by electronic database searches (as Charlotte Brewer has provisionally noted), it may reflect the difference between a comedy that was mocking some recent ways of talking, and a tragedy that struggled to articulate some nascent ways of thinking.

Like many new businesses, the buying and selling of verbal riches involved risks as well as opportunities. The final scene of Love’s Labour’s Lost attacks, as mere regurgitators, those who seek socio-economic advantage by pilfering witty speech. Berowne thus belittles, yet also envies, Boyet, and puns on ‘utters’ as both ‘saying’ and ‘selling’:

This fellow pecks up wit as pigeons peas, And utters it again when God doth please. He is wit’s pedlar, and retails his wares At wakes and wassails, meetings, markets, fairs.

And we that sell by gross, the Lord doth know, Have not the grace to grace it with such show. (5.2.316–21)

For every such Boyet, there must have been many boys who lacked the suavity to succeed in this manoeuvre; amorous plagiarists abound but do not thrive in Renaissance drama. For every Henry V, who wins Katherine’s favour by deflating the grand rhetoric of formulaic courtship and mocking his own efforts to reach from English into French, there must have been dozens of Navarres who earned only the mocking laughter, not the submissive hands and disputed lands, of the princesses they courted in a high literary style. Although he is not one of the fools in plays from this period who acknowledge learning their overblown verbiage at the theatre – such as Tomkis’s Trinculo, who woos ‘with compliments drawn from the plays I see at the Fortune and Red Bull, where I learn all the words I speak and understand not’ – Andrew Aguecheek offers a memorable cautionary example, vowing to master “Odours,” “pregnant,” and “vouchsafed” – I’ll get ‘em all three already’, but unable to handle ‘accost’ or (despite his vaunted linguistic skills) ‘pourquoi’ (Twelfth Night, 3.1.89–90, 1.3.46–56, 88–9). Shakespeare and his colleagues were already making the basic joke of Cole Porter’s song ‘Brush up your Shakespeare’: no classy dame is really going to fall for a street-tough just because he can quote (in an incongruous accent) a few exalted words from Elizabethan drama.

At the risk of complicity in a professorial tendency to underrate the sheer playfulness of plays and to overrate their pedagogical intent, this article will emphasize Shakespeare’s diligence and ingenuity as a teacher of vocabulary in a one-large-room schoolhouse. Through Holofernes, he could make fun of the sixteenth-century humanist

11 Oxford English Dictionary, definitions verb 1.II.5.a and verb 1.I.12 (e.g. Romeo, 5.1.68); this pun recurs at 4.4.185 of The Winter’s Tale; both link back to the sense of ‘coin, issue currency,’ verb 1.I.2a.
12 Thomas Tomkis, Albumazar (1614), 2.1.
2. Shakespeare’s Technique

However small his Latin and less his Greek, Shakespeare proved a daunting competitor for the scholar-neologists of his time. His commercial success in his own time, like his influence on modern English, depended partly on a talent for finding the right degree of variation to make neologisms attractive – and offering contextual definitions that made them comprehensible. In an era of multicultural anxieties, remaking English from within (by exchanging parts of speech or adding prefixes and suffixes) proved at least as effective as high humanist importations, and Shakespeare was willing to attempt both, willing even to jumble them together.¹⁶

Though, to my unhappy surprise, I have not found any satisfactory list of the famous Shakespearean neologisms,¹⁷ many instances can be located simply by noticing that seeming redundancies are often actually glossaries. The system was far from flawless, and about a third of Shakespeare’s neologisms have not survived.¹⁸ But he cares for his young conscientiously, surrounding them with their kin, and there are few hapax legomena – words strutted once on stage, and then heard no

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¹⁵ T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare’s Small Latein and Less Greeke* (1944) and Stuart Gillespie’s *Shakespeare’s Books* (New Brunswick, 2001) have helped clarify that these diminutives are misleading by modern standards. Jonson was always ready to take a more-classicist-than-thou stance, but Shakespeare received and demonstrated a good classical education.
¹⁷ Garner, ‘Latin–Saxon Hybrids’; also Garner, ‘Shakespeare’s Latinate Neologisms’, in *A Reader*, pp. 207–28; Jürgen Schäfer, *Shakespeare’s Stil: Germanisches und romanisches Vokabular* (Frankfurt, 1971); and the more recent and accessible David Crystal, ‘Think on my Words’: Exploring Shakespeare’s Language (Cambridge, 2008). A perfect list may be impossible, since we certainly cannot recover and date the full spoken lexicon of the period, and what to count as a new and distinct word is open to many different interpretations. Jeffrey McQuain and Stanley Malless, *Coined by Shakespeare* (Springfield, 1998) is written for a non-academic audience and deals with a limited set of words (many of which were not quite as new as it supposes), but still helpful.
more – among his many creations. Regan’s neologistic claim that she is ‘alone felicitate’ in Lear’s affection is prepared by her synonymous claim, two lines earlier, that she is ‘an enemy to all other joys’ (1.1.73–5). When Goneril urges Lear ‘A little to disquantity your train’ (1.4.227), Shakespeare accompanies the new verb with enough discussion about numerical reduction to make the meaning obvious: one hundred, fifty, twenty-five, ten, five, one, zero (this is a particularly bold example, because Latin would not permit ‘dis-’ to be added to verbs; but Goneril is not much for rules, and often puts a thin veneer of sophistication over her transgressions). The definition of ‘decimation’ – a word Shakespeare probably learned from North’s translation of Plutarch, but otherwise unknown in this sense during the sixteenth century – becomes similarly mathematical: a senator urges Alcibiades, ‘By decimation and a tithæd death, /...take thou the destined tenth’ (Timon, 3.5.31–3). Falstaff’s ‘dwindle’ was another novelty for the idea of diminution (here spatial rather than numerical), but Shakespeare offers plenty of help: ‘Bardolph, am I not fallen away vilely since this last action? Do I not bate? Do I not dwindle? Why, my skin hangs about me like an old lady’s loose gown. I am withered like an old apple-john’ (1 Henry IV, 3.3.1–4). The only other recorded use before 1610 was also by Shakespeare (if the scene is), and again he nestsles it amid synonyms: ‘dwindle, peak, and pine’ (Macbeth, 1.3.22).

Consider the two uses of a more elaborate word, once in a new form and once in a still-rare one:

1. Sir Toby. Am not I consanguineous? Am I not of her blood? (Twelfth Night, 2.3.74)

2. Cressida. I have forgot my father. I know no touch of consanguinity, No kin, no love, no blood, no soul, so near me As the sweet Troilus. (Troilus, 4.3.22–5)

Earlier in Troilus and Cressida (1.3.106), Ulysses discusses ‘The primogenity and due of birth’ (the Folio has the equally unprecedented ‘primogenitive’ here); so we may sense Shakespeare repeatedly offering Latinate replacements for Teutonic roots (such as ‘blood’ and ‘birth’) as the classical story stands in satirically for Renaissance England – though Jonson would surely observe that Shakespeare ought here to be using Greek rather than Latin forms. In fact, the first scene set in the Greek camp is replete with doublets (within a single speech at 1.3.4–29, Shakespeare gives us ‘Tortive and errant’, ‘Bias and thwart’, ‘artist and unread’, and a half-dozen others) and with neologisms derived from both classical languages. Presumably Shakespeare is signalling – along with a shortfall of language that matches the inefficacy of vows – the alien character of that world, in this weirdly alienating play. This is, and is not, English.

Antony offers an instant gloss when he complains that his former followers ‘discandy, melt their sweets’ (Antony, 4.13.22). ‘Dwarfish’ was extremely rare elsewhere in the literary record – Marlowe’s Hero and Leander provides a lonely but prominent precedent – but not in Shakespeare, who seems to have enjoyed its sound (like Marston, he enjoyed playing with blunt, body-based Teutonics, as well as with grander classical constructions) and made its meaning obvious every time. He makes special use of its Teutonic bluntness when Hermia complains that Helena hath urged her height,

And with her personage, her tall personage,
Her height, forsooth, she hath prevailed with him – And are you grown so high in his esteem
Because I am so dwarfish and so low?
How low am I, thou painted maypole? Speak,
How low am I? I am not yet so low
But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes. (Dream, 3.2.292–9)

Hermia mockingly replaces ‘height’, based in Old English and German, with the Norman-French

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21 E.g. ‘this dwarfish war, these pigmy arms’ (King John, 5.2.135–5); ‘a giant’s robe / Upon a dwarfish thief’ (Macbeth, 3.2.21–2). Even with the simpler form, Shakespeare offers guidance: Berowne calls Cupid ‘This Signor Junior, giant dwarf’ (Love’s Labour’s Lost, 3.1.175).
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‘personage’, then corrects it back to ‘height’, to deride Helena’s implied assumption that stretching implies superiority. Aided by the courtly etymology, the length of ‘personage’ implies hauteur based on height; and the assonant suggestion that Helena will cease to ‘prevail’ when Hermia wields her ‘nails’ performs the same kind of work, as the tough little monosyllables chase the lengthy speech to its close.

Lady Macbeth’s rejection of ‘compunctious visitings of nature’ (1.5.44) is escorted by multiple definitions of natural conscience, and Banquo’s ‘exposure’ arrives already defined as nakedness, in opposition to hiddenness: ‘when we have our naked frailties hid, / That suffer in exposure’ (2.3.125–6). For an antonym to ‘exposure’, Macbeth places a new adjectival form between two less novel versions: ‘cabined, cribbed, confined’ (3.4.23). Isabella’s reference to Angelo’s ‘circummured’ garden is attended by redundant, over-determined imagery of surrounding walls (Measure, 4.1.27–32).

Prospero’s obsessive anxieties allow Shakespeare to offer redundant contexts for a nearly-new word, ‘sanctimonious’, and a brand-new word, ‘abstemious’. Prospero admonishes Ferdinand that, until he first presented it, he did so with plenty of explanatory parallels:

- Salisbury. this is the bloodiest shame,
  The wildest savagery, the vilest stroke
  That ever wall-eyed wrath or staring rage
  Presented to the tears of soft remorse.
  (King John, 4.3.47–50)

‘Invulnerable/vulnerable’ turns up four times, with due explanatory diligence performed in each instance:

1. King Philip. Our cannons’ malice vainly shall be spent
   Against th’inulnerable clouds of heaven.
   (King John, 2.1.251–2)

2. Ariel. The elements
   Of whom your swords are tempered may as well
   Wound the loud winds, or with bemoaked-at stabs
   Kill the still-closing waters, as diminish
   One dowl that’s in my plume. My fellow ministers
   Are like invulnerable. If you could hurt,
   Your swords are now too massy for your strengths
   And will not be uplifted.
   (Tempest, 3.3.61–8)

   As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air
   With thy keen sword impress as make me bleed.
   Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests;
   (Macbeth, 5.10.8–11)

4. Mancellus. For it is as the air invulnerable,
   And our vain blows malicious mockery.
   (Hamlet, 1.1.126–7)

Hamlet – the dysfunctional home of ‘words, words’ – abounds with instances. The tautology in ‘windy suspiration of forced breath’ (1.2.79) is also a built-in glossary. When Claudius agrees with Laertes that ‘No place indeed should murder sanctuarize’, Shakespeare has already established the vivid and specific image of murder in a church in the previous line, and then rephrases the meaning in the next one: ‘Revenge should have no bounds’ (4.7.100–1). When the Ghost calls Claudius an ‘adulterate beast’ (1.5.42), Shakespeare again packs the gift in more extensive and familiar definitions of the crime. We know that ‘malefactions’ must be bad doings, even if we miss the etymology, by the example that follows (2.2.593–4). Nor would anyone have had much trouble
understanding ‘survivor’ or ‘condolement’ — the latter also used and instantly glossed in Pericles, but with a different meaning22 — thanks to the way Shakespeare has Claudius frame them:

‘Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, To give these mourning duties to your father; But you must know your father lost a father; That father lost, lost his; and the survivor bound In filial obligation for some term To do obscureous sorrow. But to persever In obstinate condolement is a course Of impious stubborness, ‘tis unmanly grief' (1.2.87–94)

To help ‘survivor’ survive (it was seldom used outside of legal discussions), Shakespeare will revisit it in Coriolanus, 5.6.17–8: ‘the fall of either / Makes the survivor heir of all’. ‘Impious’, we will see, receives extensive aid through ‘pious’, which is itself repeatedly defined. An exception proves the rule: Shakespeare might have been able to save ‘cerements’ — a rare term for burial wrappings — had his parallelism not misleadingly implied that it was merely a synonym for ‘sepulcher’:

Hamlet. Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death, Have burst their cerements, why the sepulchre Wherein we saw thee quietly enurned Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws To cast thee up again. (1.4.28–32)

Another technique emerges when Claudius (at 3.1.169) worries about ‘the hatch and the disclose’ of whatever Hamlet is brooding over. Claudius uses two words unfamiliar as nouns to help us recognize not only what they mean, but also how he is redeploying them: the former one of the first such uses in English (along with Shakespeare’s similar ‘the hatch and brood of time’ in 2 Henry IV, 3.1.81), the other only the second, according to the OED (indeed, even as I write this, Microsoft Word’s grammar-checker is protesting the placement of ‘disclose’ as a noun). This double verb-to-noun move is reversed when Hamlet warns Gertrude not to let rationalization ‘skin and film the ulcerous place’ (3.4.138). When the Ghost worries about making Hamlet’s ‘knotty and combined locks to part’ (1.5.18), the familiar first term illuminates the second, which was apparently a neologism, though it has since become common. To support ‘pious’, which was then extremely unusual (especially outside theological tracts), Polonius warns Ophelia against ‘unholy suits’ proffered ‘like sanctified and pious bawds’ (1.3.129–30); Polonius later laments that ‘with devotion’s visage / And pious action we do sugar o’er / The devil himself’ (3.1.49–51); and during the subsequent decade Shakespeare repeatedly offers ‘pious’ conjoined with synonyms such as ‘holy’ and ‘saint-like’.

So, in addition to the thematic function of this doubling of nouns (and sometimes verbs) as masterfully traced by William Empson, George T. Wright, Frank Kermode and Patrick Cheney,24 and the pairing of Germanic and Romance roots masterfully tracked by Jürgen Schäfer,25 the rhetorical structure called ‘hendiadys’ also allowed the definition of new words by edging towards synonymia simplex. Linguists who assume that synonyms exist to permit alliteration and prevent repetitiveness tend to neglect this pedagogical function.26 Even


23 ‘Pious,’ which the Literature Online database suggests was almost never used in the sixteenth century, became a decade-long project for Shakespeare. Duke Vincentio’s speech to Friar Thomas goes from ‘My holy sir’ to ‘Now, pious sir’ (Measure, 1.3.7–16). Belarius in Cymbeline speaks of ‘pious debts to heaven’ (3.3.72). Norfolk’s sarcasm about Cardinal Wolsey builds (with references to souls and angels and submissive blessings) towards the then-unusual word: ‘How holily he works in all his business, / And with what zeal! . . . / . . . is not this course pious?’ (Henry VIII, 2.2.23–36). Two scenes later Queen Katherine is praised as ‘saint-like . . . and pious’ (2.4.135–7). See similarly Macbeth, 3.6.27 and Timon, 4.3.136–41.


25 Schäfer, Shakespeare Stil.

26 Inna Koskenniemi, Repetitive Word Pairs in Old and Early Middle English Prose (Turku, 1968), p. 109, similarly assumes
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Rosencrantz – half of a human hendiadys – joins in with ‘mortised and adjoined, /... small annexment, petty consequence’ (3.2.20–1).

Other plays employ the same tactic: for example, ‘Th’inaudible and noiseless foot of time’ (All’s Well, 5.3.42), ‘fertile and conceptious womb’ (Timon, 4.3.188) or ‘Countless and infinite’ kisses (Titus Andronicus, 3.1.58). ‘Critical’ – though occasionally used in astrology and medicine – almost never carried the sense of ‘censorious’ until Theseus rejects ‘some satire, keen and critical, / Not sorting with a nuptial ceremony’ (Dream, 5.1.45–5). Sometimes, with a not-quite-new word, an escorting synonym is sufficient: ‘most courtly and fashionable’ (Timon, 5.1.26–7), or ‘ceremonious and traditional’ (Richard III, 3.1.45). ‘Affined’ was almost unknown, so it generally travels with an assistant: ‘affined or leagued’27 (Othello, 2.3.211), and ‘affined and kin’ (Troilus, 1.3.24).

The technique itself was hardly new. The juxtaposing of synonyms, arguably derived from William Caxton’s fifteenth-century translations, emerged as a tool for teaching Latin in Erasmus’s De Copia (1512), developed into a kind of thesaurus-function, and then into a stylistic quirk of sixteenth-century humanist rhetoric.28 When he could not find an English synonym that would be familiar to ordinary readers of his 1550 translation of Peter Martyr Vermigli’s Latin treatise, Nicholas Udall ‘added such circumstance of other words, as might declare it and make it plain’.29 Sir Thomas Elyot’s Boke of the Governour (1531) ‘sensibly followed the practice established from Middle English of pairing neologisms with established words and phrases to make the new-comers comprehensible’,30 a practice continued in Puttenham’s domestications of Latin rhetorical terms. Thomas Cooper’s Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae (1563) – a book which Shakespeare clearly knew, perhaps from the copy a schoolmaster bequeathed to the Stratford grammar school – could have suggested not only Shakespeare’s thesaurus-like method of explaining new words, but also many of the specific instances cited here, including ‘abstemious’, ‘condolence’, ‘consanguinity’, ‘adulterate’ (Cooper offers the Hamlet-friendly example of ‘adultry with his brothers wife’), ‘affined’, ‘compunctious’, ‘audacious’, ‘suspiration’ and perhaps ‘relume’, by glossing their Latin roots into English.

No one, however, seems to have taught by tautology as industriously as Shakespeare himself. Nor were others as ingenious in using hendiadys to establish the meaning of the plays as well as of the words: when, just before the first battle-scene in Henry V, the Chorus says that every Englishman of ‘pith and puissance’ has joined the invasion of France (3.0.21), the near-synonyms not only match the itinerary of the expedition they describe and help define each other, they also capture in miniature exactly the difference between blunt Anglo-Saxon earthiness and Gallic vainglory that the play repeatedly suggests will enable the ‘bastard Normans, Norman bastards’ (3.5.10) to conquer the French. This trick of sliding from the native term to its exotic near-synonym would become crucial to Shakespeare’s characterization of Othello just a few years later.

The production and elucidation of neologisms seems to drop off significantly in Shakespeare’s
late plays. Perhaps the boom of verbal innovation was tapering off in England (the tic of copia had certainly gone out of fashion); perhaps the extended absence from London in 1607–10 posited by Jonathan Bate\textsuperscript{\text{31}} withdrew Shakespeare from what was left of the neologistic ferment; perhaps he was well enough established that he no longer needed to offer vocabulary as a supplement to the other pleasures of his plays; and perhaps his innovative energies went instead into the syntactical rigours of his late verse, which Russ McDonald has explored so masterfully.\textsuperscript{\text{32}} Perhaps, in the building of the new English language, Shakespeare eventually moved from brick-making towards early-postmodern architecture.

\textbf{3. \textsc{Shakespeare’s Verbal Palette}}

Shakespeare’s neologisms – and this category inevitably includes words he did not absolutely originate but helped to popularize – were certainly not merely items for display and sale. Like several of his younger contemporaries,\textsuperscript{\text{33}} he waged protracted campaigns on behalf of some locutions that filled gaps in his expressive palette. The previous section briefly traced his development of several words (‘compunctious’, ‘abstemious’, ‘exposure’, ‘critical’, and ‘pious’) that articulate a boundary between the ethical, thoughtful, withheld or withheld inner self, and an external world consisting of that self’s objects and obstacles. His half-dozen efforts to sustain the dying sense of ‘revolve’ and ‘revolving’ as pondering an idea at length – turning it over in the mind – suggest the same need. Twice ‘revolve’ comes paired with ‘ruminate’ (\textit{Henry VI}, 5.7.101, \textit{Troilus}, 2.3.185–6), as it does in Cooper’s gloss on \textit{ruminatio} – and ‘ruminate’, while not new as a term for human meditation, was evidently returning from obscurity, since it appears in a series of fashionable new words that the foolish Juniper mishandles in Jonson’s \textit{The Case is Altered} (published in 1609, but probably written in the late 1590s).\textsuperscript{\text{34}} Shakespeare seems to have seized on this revived verb for the process of thoughtful, artful planning, and dutifully explained it: ‘Then she plots, then she ruminates, then she devises’ (\textit{Merry Wives}, 2.2.294–5), ‘ruminate strange plots’ (\textit{Titus Andronicus}, 5.2.6), ‘ruminated, plotted’ (\textit{Henry IV}, 1.3.268), ‘Sit patiently and inly ruminate’ (\textit{Henry V}, 4.0.24), ‘To ruminate on this so far until / It forged him some design’ (\textit{Henry VIII}, 1.2.181–2), ‘a studied, not a present thought, / By duty ruminated’ (\textit{Antony}, 2.2.144–5), ‘speak to me as to thy thinkings, / As thou dost ruminate’ (\textit{Othello}, 3.3.136–7), and ‘the sundry contemplation of my travels, in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness’ (\textit{As You Like It}, 4.1.17–19). These add up to more uses than the \textit{Literature Online} database shows in all the plays of Shakespeare’s competitors combined.

The boundary these words explore corresponds to a pervasive scholarly recognition of Shakespeare as a withdrawn figure (a Romantic biographical tradition developed by Dowden, and more recently, with an emphasis on philosophical scepticism, by several other fine scholars),\textsuperscript{\text{35}} and as an inventor of human interiority and


\textsuperscript{32} One possible deduction from Russ McDonald’s excellent study of \textit{Shakespeare’s Late Style} (New York, 2006) is that those final works show an author more determined to please his own rhetorical intelligence with difficult innovations than to offer socially viable forms of speech to his audience.

\textsuperscript{33} Jones, \textit{Triumph of the English Language}, p. 272 n. 1: ‘The Elizabethans borrowed from necessity, vanity, or sheer exuberance. One senses a different spirit, something akin to the metaphysical, a seeking for the strange and out of the way, perhaps a striving for certain imaginative or sound effects, in the borrowing of men like Burton, Donne, Taylor, and Browne.’

\textsuperscript{34} Ben Jonson, \textit{The Case is Altered}, 1.4.16; in Ben Jonson, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford, 1947), vol. iii.

subjectivity (a more recent and high-theoretical view). In other words, several of Shakespeare’s most assiduous developments of vocabulary would seem to confirm, at a microscopic level, some of the largest speculations about his character and characterizing practices.

Shakespeare makes three further attempts (four, if we count ‘retirement’) to invent and promote new words for the concept of pious retreat or isolation, of withdrawal from the world compelled by principle or psychology. ‘Lonely’ is now so common that it is hard to believe that it once needed such direct definition, but it did: hence, ‘I go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon’ (Coriolanus, 4.1.30–1) and later, ‘I keep it / Lonely, apart’ (Winter’s Tale, 5.3.17–18). Observers of Prince Hal ‘never noted in him any study, / Any retirement, any sequestration / From open haunts and popularity’ (Henry V, 1.1.58–60). Othello invents another noun form to prescribe, for the dangerously social and passionate Desdemona, ‘A sequester from liberty; fasting, and prayer, / Much castigation, exercise devout’ (3.4.40–1). ‘Reclusive’ gets similar conceptual support:

Friar Francis. you may conceal her, 
As best befits her wounded reputation, 
In some reclusive and religious life, 
Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries. 
(Much Ado, 4.1.242–5)

Both the glossary function and the contemplative emphasis are stark when the Bishop of Winchester condemns Gloucester for coming ‘with deep premeditated lines? / With written pamphlets studiously devised?’ (1 Henry VI, 3.1.1–2). In a clearly Shakespearian section of Two Noble Kinsmen (1.1.134–7), the audience receives similar guidance with an otherwise unknown form of the same word, followed by a rare one grown from the same root: ‘what you do quickly / Is not done rashly; your first thought is more / Than others’ laboured meditation; your premeditating / More than their actions.’

Perhaps I am cherry-picking my instances – many of Shakespeare’s new words lack this intellectual character – but he does seem to spend a remarkable amount of neologistic energy on expressing these mental states, or more tellingly, states of mental reservation: we may add ‘deceptious’ (Troilus, 5.2.125), ‘denotement’ (Othello 2.3.310), ‘tranquil’ (Othello, 3.3.353), ‘dishearten’ (Henry V, 4.1.112, and Macbeth, 2.3.32–3), ‘the pauser, reason’ (Macbeth, 2.3.111), and ‘give preceptual medicine to rage’ (Much Ado, 5.1.24). Those who believe that Shakespeare was a recusant may be especially inclined to add ‘equivocator’ (extensively defined in Macbeth, 2.3.8) and ‘equivocal’ to this list; they may also be intrigued to learn that the only evident precedent for Shakespeare’s use of ‘rumination’ was in the works of the famous Jesuit Robert Parsons.

Literature Online shows only two instances of the word ‘dejected’ in plays prior to 1599, but four others appeared by 1600 – a good indication that it was a word coming into fashion (perhaps because melancholy was also). Shakespeare made sure it was always well defined, either by context or by counter-point:


37 The First Folio reads ‘Louely’, probably an accidental inversion of the ‘n’ in reading or typesetting process; the fact that Hanmer could tell this emendation was needed shows how clearly Shakespeare has signalled the idea of ‘lonely’. ‘Lonely’ appears fairly often in the works of the famous Jesuit Robert Parsons. ‘Reclusive’ gets similar conceptual support:

Friar Francis. you may conceal her, 
As best befits her wounded reputation, 
In some reclusive and religious life, 
Out of all eyes, tongues, minds, and injuries. 
(Much Ado, 4.1.242–5)

38 Notice that ‘castigation’, then quite rare, receives a gloss here as ‘exercise devout’, in a context emphasizing chastity. At 1.3.345, Iago uses ‘sequestration’, but seems to mean ‘sequel’.

39 Parsons also surrounds the neologism with related ideas to a degree that not even Shakespeare normally attempts: ‘to beare it in mynde, to ponder in harte, to studdie & meditate upon it both day and night . . . to make it our cogitation, our discourse, our talke, our exercise & our rumination’: Robert Parsons, A Christian directory (1585), p. 9.
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1. *Hamlet.* No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
   Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
   Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief
   That can denote me truly. (Hamlet, 1.2.80–3)

   To be worst,
   The low’st and most dejected thing of fortune,
   Stands still in esperance . . . (Lear, 4.1.2–4)

3. *Scarus.*
   Is valiant, and dejected, and by starts
   His fretted fortunes give him hope and fear . . .
   (Antony, 4.13.6–8)

Shakespeare persistently teaches his audiences that ‘speculation’ has to do with seeing, but also with the limitations and partiality of seeing—an important topic for an endlessly questioning playwright in an era whose revival of classical scepticism emphasized visual differences and distortions. For what is kept unreliably unseen, Shakespeare launches ‘undivulged’, and sends several paraphrases after it to make sure the meaning cannot be missed:

*Lear.*
   Tremble, thou wretch
   That hast within thee undivulgèd crimes
   Unwhipped of justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand . . .
   close pent-up guilts,
   Rive your concealing continents . . . (Lear, 3.2.51–8)

Shakespeare also spends considerable effort, especially in the history plays, developing antonyms to mark the polar opposites on a spectrum running from rebellious boldness to humble yielding. ‘Audacious’ was fairly scarce until Shakespeare made it a project early in his career, always signalling a combination of daring and insubordination. Duke Theseus prefers ‘the modesty of fearful duty’ to ‘saucy and audacious eloquence’ (Dream, 5.1.101, 3). Somerset admonishes York, ‘Obey, audacious traitor; kneel for grace’ (2 Henry VI, 5.1.108). Love’s Labour’s Lost offers ‘audacious without impudency’ (5.1.4–5) and ‘fear not thou, but speak audaciously’ (5.2.104). ‘Submissive’—essentially an antonym of ‘audacious’—is another early but temporary favourite, nurtured through its infancy.

This palette allowed Shakespeare to explore some boundaries repeatedly embattled in his plays: between inward and outward selves, between perception and knowledge, between passion and deliberation, and between self-assertion and assimilation into the social order. In *Othello*, Shakespeare discovers a new way to integrate this expansion of the lexicon with his exposition of a character in the grip of those dilemmas.

4. **The Case of Othello**

It is easy to understand ‘fleers’ when Iago speaks of the ‘fleers, the gibes and notable scorns’ that the arrogant Cassio will cast on a disdained mistress (4.1.81). Before Othello laments, ‘I know not where is that Promethean heat / That can thy light relume’, Shakespeare gives us eight lines on the problem of restoring extinguished lights (5.2.12–13). But here the glossy game turns tragic, with doublings providing a microcosmic index to the divided affiliations that tear the hero apart.

Character criticism has often been dismissed in recent years on the grounds that plays are really ‘only words’, but words can be constitutive of character, both on stage and off. C. S. Lewis’s complaint that Shakespeare’s near-repetitions (and those of other Elizabethan dramatists) offer mere ‘variation’ where Milton’s involve ‘construction’ overlooks not only the pedagogical function of Shakespeare’s synonyms but also the way those doublings construct Othello’s character, by implicitly

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40 E.g. *Troilus*, 3.3.100–6; *Macbeth*, 3.4.94–5; *Lear*, 3.1.15; *Othello*, 1.3.270, 3.3.365.
41 Although the Literature Online database finds only 27 entries for ‘audacious’ in sixteenth-century prose, poetry, and drama, the fact that ‘audaciousness’ was in use by 1599 suggests that the root word was well enough established for the compound to be viable.
42 1 Henry IV, 4.3.43–7; 1 Henry VI, 3.1.8–15, 25–6; 4.1.124–7.
43 1 Henry VI, 3.8.3–12; Love’s Labour’s Lost, 4.1.89; Shrew, Induction, 1.51.
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reflecting the doubleness the hero must endure inwardly and project to the world outside.

Othello’s efforts to introduce himself to the Senate in his new role as Venetian husband, as they overlap with Shakespeare’s efforts to introduce him to us in his full hybridity, provide a particularly telling example – and one that shows the interpretive as well as historical potential of attention to neologisms. Both for Shakespeare’s purposes and for Othello’s own, Othello must seem both exotic and accessible – a double-bind often lamented by racial-ethnic minorities, who find themselves required to stand out and yet to assimilate, at once to exemplify and reject the stereotyped expectations of the majority. After a disarmingly simple first line – ‘Tis better as it is’ (1.2.6) – Othello’s first speech contains three neologisms, each created by attaching an ordinary Anglo-Saxon prefix to change a common word into a new part of speech:

My services which I have done the signory
Shall out-tongue his complaints. ‘Tis yet to know –
Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,
I shall promulgate – I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reached. For know, Iago,
But that I love the gentle Desdemona
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine . . .

(1.2.18–27)

‘Out-tongue’ uses an outré tongue to override – might one hear a trace of Shakespeare the anti-Petrarchan here? – the mere ‘complaints’ of a Venetian insider. Othello then amplifies ‘boast’ into ‘promulgate’ (or the Quarto’s ‘provulgate’), and familiarizes ‘unhoused’ with ‘free’, and ‘circumscription’ with ‘confine’. Thereafter, Othello – unlike Shakespeare’s deliberately less appealing African characters such as Aaron or Morocco – often employs a compressed form of the socially driven practice that linguists call ‘code-switching’, juxtaposing a common word with a new or rare one of similar meaning, making him a kind of familiar stranger, appealing in both aspects of the oxymoron.

Hendiadys often implies a neologism residing in the unarticulated space between the paired words; in Othello’s case, it implies an uninhabitable oceanic space between his two worlds. Sometimes this tactic involves pairing an Anglo-Saxon word with a Romance-language import; sometimes it involves pairing an idiomatic with a non-idiomatic usage of native words, with the charm of a foreign speaker offering us a fresh look at the contingency of our speech. Not all the highlighted phrases below include an outright neologism in the pairing (though some of Othello’s other words here, such as ‘hint’ at 1.3.165, were surprisingly rare), but they suggest the many ways Othello gathers customary and unaccustomed language together in this scene in order to represent himself effectively. To these ‘Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors, / My very noble and approved good masters’, he will ‘a round unvarnished tale deliver / Of my whole course of love, what drugs, what charms, / What conjuration and what mighty magic’ he used on Desdemona (1.3.76–92). He told her

Of moving accidents by flood and field.
Of hair-breath scapes i’th’ imminent deadly breach . . .
And of the cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi . . .

of some distressful stroke

That my youth suffered.

(1.3.134–5, 142–3, 156–7)

These struggles, Othello adds, have made ‘the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice-driven bed of down. I do agonize / A natural and prompt alacrity’ for such martial hardships (1.3.229–31). For Desdemona, however, he demands ‘Due reference of place and exhibition, / With such accommodation and resort / As levels with
her breeding’ (1.3.236–8). He asks permission to bring her along to Cyprus, not

to comply with heat – the young affects
In me [or, my] defunct – and proper satisfaction,
But to be free and bounteous to her mind . . .
No, when light-winged toys
Of feathered Cupid see with wanton dullness
My speculative and officed instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation. (1.3.263–74)

This remarkable flurry, in a span of fewer than two hundred lines, seems designed to present Othello, to both the on-stage and off-stage audiences, as cool enough to produce chills, and yet communicative enough to generate the warmth of connection.

Pierre Bourdieu has rightly argued against an excessively decontextualized understanding of language that once dominated the field of linguistics, but his model may benefit from an even more complex model of power and language here replicated by Shakespeare. According to Bourdieu, ‘language is worth what those who speak it are worth, i.e. the power and authority in the economic and cultural power relations of the holders of the corresponding competence’.47 My claim – which gives the tu quoque to Bourdieu’s condemnation of ahistorical linguistics, and reflects in miniature the complaint that Bourdieu’s theory underrates the potential of resistance – is that this speaker (like others in the humanistic Renaissance) will be deemed worth approximately what his language is worth. Othello’s acceptance bears no simple correspondence to his subjugation of his native discourse to that of the dominant community. His position is certainly strengthened at this moment by Venice’s pressing needs for his military abilities. But to reduce language to either a mystification of power or a quantity of capital48 – even including the cultural capital (and the IOUs) Othello’s introductory and valedictory speeches deploy – is to overlook the complex relationships of local buyers and alien sellers, and what rarities those sellers have to offer. ‘Symbolic capital’ may be ‘inseparable from the speaker’s position in the social structure’,49 but a shrewd speaker can negotiate favourable exchange-rates for that capital and thereby improve his accounts.

Othello’s verbal mode fits Mikhail Bakhtin’s category of ‘hybridisation’: ‘a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor’; and this mixing is important not so much for the linguistic forms themselves as for ‘the collision between different points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms’.50 Othello does not aim merely at what Bourdieu would predict: to be believed, recognised, obeyed.51 By making his verbal self partly astonishing and partly recognizable, he intends to be charming – to exercise (as he half-jokingly acknowledges at 1.3.168) an alternative kind of witchcraft through his diction. He replicates, at the level of vocabulary, the charm already cast on Desdemona at the level of story – something that demands admiration (for being

46 Hulme, Explorations, pp. 153–4, suggests that ‘defunct’ here might mean ‘free – of danger, punishment’; so eliminating the emendation of ‘my’ to ‘me’ and the punctuation imposed by modern editions on this sentence would make ‘defunct and proper’ another pairing of the sort I am describing. Othello would then be saying that, with his marriage authorized despite Brabantio’s complaints, his bodily proximity to Desdemona would be legal and suitable, even though that is not, he insists, his motive for welcoming her company.
48 ‘The structure of the linguistic production relation depends on the symbolic power relation between the two speakers, i.e. on the size of their respective capitals of authority’: Bourdieu, ‘The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges’, p. 648.
49 Bourdieu, ‘The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges’, p. 646.
something she in her Venetian domesticity could never experience) but also somehow enables sympathetic identification. To recognize fully the tragedy of 'he that was Othello', audiences must say, with her, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange, / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful' (5.2.290; 1.3.159–60).

Several otherwise excellent scholarly commentators feel obliged to resist this spell and judge it as Iago does (before we have heard Othello speak a word), dismissing Othello's unusual diction as 'bomast circumstance / Horribly stuffed with epithets of war' (1.1.13–14). Lynne Magnusson – elsewhere admirably alert to Shakespeare's recognition of the complex social matrices shaping characters' speech – criticizes Othello for 'bomast...an impulse to linguistic overreaching'. Kenneth Gross diagnoses 'self-conscious excesses of ornament, almost ludicrous neologisms'. George T. Wright (despite having noticed some instances of official documents and ancient romance', and compromises. Sylvia Adamson recognizes that Othello's doublets instead signal his own complications and compromises. Sylvia Adamson recognizes that Shakespeare's matching of high-style words with their low-style synonyms can produce the illusion of a rounded character; but she reads the effect of Othello's diglossia as 'a glimpse of a private man behind the public hero, of a sincere feeling behind the rhetorical splendor'. I see a murkier and more politically constrained division.

If 'hendiadys is a principle that asserts conjunction and thwarts it', so is multiculturalism. If we recognize the double-bind of Othello's social situation, we can find those pairings fully apt to the play's tragic theme. Iago declares 'I am not what I am'; Othello is constantly declaring (as if to a Customs and Immigration officer) more than one self. Frank Kermode characterizes Othello's language as 'innocent pomposity', and notes that to 'use a strange word rather than a familiar one' is something Othello 'does on a good many other occasions'. My claim is that Othello often uses a strange word along with a familiar one that glosses it – a device that Shakespeare had tested on the Ghost in Hamlet, another figure caught between worlds, who must seem unsettlingly alien and distant yet also eligible for sympathy.

What produces Othello's 'language habitus' (to use Bourdieu's term, but to go beyond his limitation of that concept to 'a dimension of class habitus') is his habitation of two worlds, in neither of which he feels fully at home. The locus of Othello's speech is always already Cyprus – indeed, in his speeches to the Senate he may be displaying his unique suitability for that posting, offering a

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53 Lynne Magnusson, "Voice Potential": Language and Symbolic Capital in Othello, in Shakespeare and Language, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander (Cambridge, 2004), esp. p. 219; Magnusson does notice the insistence of doublets in Othello’s introductory speeches, but sees them instead as ordinary embellishments signalling insecurity.
56 Palfrey, Doing Shakespeare, pp. 52–3.
58 Cheney, Shakespeare's Literary Authorship, p. 144.
60 Bourdieu, 'The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges', p. 660.
rhetorical resumé, at the moment he most needs to be needed there – and Cyprus, significantly, is the locale of the secondary bloom of neologisms in the play, as several characters attempt to speak to this liminal territory, claimed by two empires. 61 Throughout Othello, neologistic speech remains a significant index of alienation, and not just for the title character. This may explain why Michael Cassio, scorned by Iago as a vain, over-educated Florentine seducer among the salt-of-the-sea Venetians, has more than his share of minor neologisms, created by small prefix alterations: it marks him as a little bit foreign, and a little bit affected. More centrally, Shakespeare has Iago – the ‘Turk’ disguised as a loyal Venetian, the man who swears ‘By Janus’ in 1.2 – introduce himself through doublets such as ‘duteous and knee-crooking knife’ and ‘timorous accent and dire yell’ (1.1.45; 75, with other examples here and at the end of 1.3) that reveal his characteristic satiric and nativist mode, deftly the pretentions of others by dropping from exotic and exalted terms to their blunt Anglo-Saxon equivalents. He thus does in small what he will do to undo Othello in the plot at large, reducing romance to materiality, and the foreign-word-weaving aristocrat thereby to a mere beast. As with ‘honest’, 62 Iago often balances the old and new meanings of single words to conceal his real intentions, whereas Othello balances old words with new ones to display his complex self.

Othello’s near-repetitions serve, not so much to provide Erasmian copia, as to imply Lain- gian schizophrenia; the Shakespearian doublet that William Empson identifies as a type of ambiguity 63 may function here instead as a symptom of dual citizenship. The tension persists even at the micro-level of Othello’s name, decipherable as ‘Ottoman’ with an Italian suffix; 64 and at the overarching level of the play’s title, The Tragedie of Othello, the Moore of Vénice. Othello evinces small resonances of this verbal tic as his split identity reasserts itself around the murder of Desdemona. The temptation scene adds ‘contract and purse thy brow together’, ‘esuﬀicate and blew surmises’, ‘icy current and compulsive course’, and ‘destiny unshunnable’ (3.3.117, 186, 457, 279). His soliloquy opening the final scene, as he prepares the murder, begins with forty-one monosyllables and one bi-syllable before exploding, like a chilly ﬁrework, into ‘monumental alabaster’ (5.2.1–5). He calls the handkerchief – at once the most lowly domestic and most exotically magical item – a ‘recognizance and pledge of love’ (5.2.221), and then tells Desdemona’s corpse that ‘When we shall meet at count [Quarto; ‘compt’, Folio] / This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven, / And fiends will snatch at it’ (5.2.280–2). The moment audiences spend wondering what ‘count’ or ‘compt’ is, before the next line explains it as last Judgment, provides another opportunity to wonder at Othello’s beautiful strangeness just when we have been repelled by his horrible deed – committed partly because he could not reconcile a Christian discourse of gratuitous love (from ‘the divine Desdemona’, 2.1.74) with a paganistic discourse (echoed and ampliﬁed by Iago) that says love must be earned and can be quantiﬁed. 65

When Othello speaks, ﬁnally, of his ‘subdued’ eyes (5.2.357), the adjective is unusual (though not as novel as the OED suggests), but prepared by Desdemona’s use of the common verb form at 1.3.250; and Othello’s combination of the etymological senses (‘deceived’ and ‘purged’) with the homophonic hint of ‘dewed’ is fulﬁlled when the sentence goes on to describe his guilty tears. The domesticated Othello then silences the exotic one – not just in his allegorical construal of his suicide, but also in his terribly simple dying

63 Empson, Seven Types, pp. 88–101.
64 David Schalkwyk, Speech and Performance in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Plays (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 180–1, observes that this name was created ‘supposedly by adding to the ﬁrst syllable of “Oth-oman” the Italianate “-ello”, and goes on to discuss perceptively the dangers represented by such “splitting of self across two names”.
words—‘I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this:/ Killing myself, to die upon a kiss’ (5.2.368–9)—just when he has made us love that verbal exoticism most, set against the blank foil of Lodovico’s official Venetian rhetoric that closes the play. In short—I should say, ‘in other words’—Othello is sold to the audience partly as Shakespearian drama as a whole is sold to the audience: as a purveyor of new words that offer a glimpse into wonderful and terrible new worlds.

Less than two years after Othello first spoke, Thomas Middleton similarly signalled the liminal social status of the usurer Harry Dampit by peppering his ordinary speech with neologisms (thus also linking the morally dubious coining of money to the coming of words). Within that same brief aftermath, Shakespeare himself used the collapse of Lear’s exalted diction into brutally blunt Anglo-Saxon monosyllables in the final scene to convey the plainness with which Lear has come to perceive the brutality of life and death; and used the leap from extreme verbal simplicity into neologistic elaboration to convey Macbeth’s slippage from selfish determination to self-alienating rationalization:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success... (1.7.1–4)

The double character of Macbeth, at war with himself, is similarly signalled by a division between high and low diction when he complains that ‘this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red’ (2.2.59–61). The aptly multi-syllabic ‘multitudinous’—not attested before 1603—is set against its aptly simple antonym ‘one’; in the same pair of lines, Shakespeare alters the form, the former function, and the previous meaning of the rare and difficult ‘incarnadine’, and then defines it vividly in simple monosyllables. The device of delineating characters by their neologisms—as in Love’s Labour’s Lost and Troilus and Cressida—thus becomes a much subtler tool, a brush for tragic portraiture rather than broad comic caricature or satiric disorientation.

5. THE POWER OF SPEECH

Rhetorical knowledge was real power, in the collective mind of Renaissance humanism. Words mattered not only for persuasion in courtship, courtiership, and the law-courts. They mattered greatly in geopolitics, as Shakespeare’s second history tetralogy demonstrates through Richard II’s rhetoric-riddled fall, Prince Hal’s mastery of Eastcheap dialects, his inspirational unification of the British as Henry V, and Princess Katherine’s word-by-word preparation for the subjugation of France (1 Henry IV, 2.5.4–32; Henry V, 3.4). The expansion of world trade and the emergence of vernacular literatures made the development of English into an essential work of patriotism, as many writers eagerly asserted. Words mattered no less in soteriology, where Catholics and Protestants had very different ideas of how words would save, and in which language, but no doubt that they were indispensable for salvation. And they were a matter of survival—for swinging a deal, finding a laugh or a friend, or demanding respect—on the mean streets of Elizabethan London.

The early modern period ‘exhibits the fastest growth of the vocabulary in the history of the English language, in absolute figures as well as in proportion to the total’, with ‘an extremely rapid increase in new words especially between 1570

66 In A Trick to Catch the Old One, Dampit’s personality and social status are both ‘registered in his inventive language: ‘trampler’, ‘fooliaminy’, ‘infortunity’, ‘gernative’, ‘nullipood’. Dampit’s speech is familiar, colloquial, and alien at once. His penchant for neologisms in conventional, if energetic, exchanges highlights the oddity of his role in the community: he is successful within the law but operates beyond its bounds; he is widely known but close to no one’ (Eric Leonidas, ‘The School of the World: Trading on Wit in Middleton’s Trick to Catch the Old One’, Early Modern Literary Studies, 12 (2007), 1–27, esp. 24–5; available at http://extra.shu.ac.uk/ems/j/12–3/leontri2.htm). The technique is different—fewer doublets or lexical affixations—but lexical innovations again signal liminality: a borderline personality in a man of the borderlands.
and 1630’. This corresponds to the prime of the English drama, which drew on those new verbal energies and (after skimming off a little middle-man profit) fed them back into the system. Nearly a third of the neologisms created in English during the entire Renaissance emerged between 1588 and 1612, which is to say, within the quarter-century scope of Shakespeare’s career as a playwright. A mass of newcomers to London, arriving from all over an England far more diverse in its dialects than we can now imagine, would have both faced and presented great linguistic challenges; and – in a society where, as Philip Sidney acutely remarked, Londoners were inclined ‘to jest at strangers, because they speake not English so well as wee doe’ – people would have had special incentives to catch up on the latest parlances.

If writers lured clients by promising social ascent and seductive graces, they also depicted the humiliation of those who acquired their words from some inferior supplier. Shakespeare’s unwitting masters of malapropism such as Dogberry, Bottom, Elbow, Mistress Quickly, and the Gobos constitute a kind of negative advertising. In fact, Shakespeare and his colleagues provide more examples of people embarrassing themselves by trying to echo theatrical grandiosities than examples of people actually succeeding with such echoes. Auditors often recorded appealing locutions in commonplace books; the learning of single words may not have required such a record, but it was a miniature of the same process, prying loose a piece of artful language to take home – where it often ended up looking ridiculous rather than magnificent, as when Polonius savours ‘mobbed queen’ (Hamlet, 2.2.506). Perhaps the rhetorical commodity was then so saleable that drumming up demand was less important than diverting market-share from rival manufacturers.

Alternatively, the predominance of failed mimics may derive from the ambivalence of English Renaissance drama generally towards social volatility: plays implied they could teach the means of social advancement, but they also assured people that their inferiorities would only demonstrate their insufficiencies for higher rank if they tried to ascend through borrowed rhetoric. The malaprops tend to be lower-class characters attempting dignified forms and seeking access to professional vocabularies – Bottoms aspiring to the top – and their mangling of a privileged lexicon made an essentialist case against social leveling. This contradictory function matches the way Shakespearian drama has been presented for centuries: on the one hand, as a resource whereby menial classes could improve themselves into sensibility and respectability, and non-white races could participate in a shared and therefore equalizing human essence, yet on the other hand, as an

67 Görłach, Introduction to Early Modern English, pp. 136–7. The surge was noted in 1668: ‘this last Century may be conjectured to have made a greater change in our Tongue, then any of the former, as to the addition of new words’: Wilkins, quoted by Görłach, p. 138.

68 Garner, ‘Shakespeare’s Latinate Neologisms’, p. 209, Blank, Broken English, p. 40, claims that ‘the period 1500–1659 saw the introduction of between 10,000 and 25,000 new words into the language, with the practice of neologism culminating in the Elizabethan period’; see also p. 44: The period from 1580 to 1619, the era of Nashe and Shakespeare, seems to have been the heyday of neologizing in England.’ Culpeper and Clapham, ‘The borrowing of Classical and Romance words’, endorse a figure of ‘somewhat above 12000’ during the Renaissance, as well as the idea that this constituted a notable acceleration; they also endorse the belief that ‘borrowing from Latin peaked in the period from about 1580–1660’ (pp. 210–11). Nevalainen, ‘Shakespeare’s New Words’, p. 246, observes that ‘English was gaining new functions as a standard language in the public sphere, and was therefore in the process of acquiring a wealth of new vocabulary’ in the Renaissance.

69 Sir Phillip Sidney, An apologie for poetrie (1595), sig. K3r. Cf. Blank, Broken English, p. 3: ‘The Renaissance saw the rise of dialect comedy, and juxtaposing a peasant dialect with the King’s English was, often enough, played for laughs. One of the first genres to incorporate dialect was the early sixteenth-century popular jest book; many jests hinge on provincials and foreigners being unable to speak the language properly.’

70 Adamson, ‘Literary Language’, in The Cambridge History of the English Language, ed. Roger Lass, vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 539–95, 573–6, perceives a bias in the modern tendency to call the verbal novelties of lower-class characters ‘malapropisms’ and those of higher-class characters ‘neologisms’; but this accusation seems to me to overlook the ways that Shakespeare marks the malapropisms as comically erroneous (and usually antonymic) rather than innovative.
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implicit (and sometimes explicit) validation of aristocratic culture and Eurocentrism.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre offered verbal rungs for a social climb, even if there was always danger of a humiliating fall. As Cathy Shrank observes, Renaissance reformers of English such as Thomas Wilson worried that ‘language overburdened with foreign neologisms threatens to drive apart, not bring together, the national community by hindering communication, particularly for the less educated, accentuating social difference’. Wilson’s solution is to ‘banishe al suche affected Rhetorique’, but a ban was unlikely to hold when the use of such rhetoric conferred status. Instead, we see a progression: ‘Where, in the 1540s, Andrew Borde used “difficult” Latinate words to flatter an educated elite, and in the 1550s Wilson sought to remove them, the dictionary writers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were concerned to explain and “democratize” them.’ We may trace a parallel evolution in the English drama of the same era, moving from the university wits to the public-theatre playwrights, and it may explain why the elaborate classicist neologisms of Marston – clearly designed to ‘flatter an educated elite’ – were mocked by Jonson (who makes a Marston-figure vomit up such indigestible terms in Poetaster) and eventually superseded by Shakespeare’s determination to offer a public audience the power of a rapidly expanding language. If Renaissance drama ‘retails elements of high culture to the middling sorts’, one such element was surely lexical.

The lyrics accompanying the famous ‘Othello music’ exemplify transmission of vocabulary laterally, by reaching across into a foreign culture – a version of colonial commerce. The high-humanist innovations in English are versions of domestic social-climbing. Learning downward was also important, however: partly for the sheer pleasures of billingsgate (many teachers now arrange ‘railing’ or ‘flyting’ contests, using insults culled from the plays, to introduce schoolchildren to the energies of Shakespearian language), but also to avoid being gulled or cozened (two verbs the drama itself helped popularize) by the many predatory schemers who – aided by the anonymities of the new urban landscape – lurked as parasites, using a secret ‘cant’ or jargon.

The street-slang lesson Prince Hal offers to Poins, Shakespeare offers to us at the same time: “They call drinking deep “dyeing scarlet”’ (1 Henry IV, 2.5.14–15; see also 2 Henry IV, 4.3.68–71). A popular early Elizabethan tract also offered translations of a new criminal language ‘halfe myngled with Enlishe when it is familiarly talked’ — a lowly version of Othello’s mixed parlance. Tricksters lived on the boundaries of normal speech. A poem in dialogue form depicting a con-artist pretending not to know English – ‘me non spek englys by my fayt / My servaunt spek you what me saye’ — may anticipate Princess Katherine’s coy tactics in the final act of Henry V distinctly enough to remind us that the niche of obscured language has always been a haven for disempowered people. Opening that niche to the ruling class through coney-catching guidebooks presumably limited the effectiveness of that sanctuary. Doubtless there was an element of salesmanship, even a kind of linguistic protection-racket in offering defences against criminal language at least partly invented by the author. We need not take these tracts at face value, as purely objective revelations of real dangers, to

72 Shrank, Writing the Nation, p. 190. Adamson, ‘With Double Tongue’, p. 209, perceives a shift from early dictionaries which are fundamentally remedial and focused on written language, to those of the later eighteenth century, which provide ‘the social aspirant [with] instruction in prestige forms of speech’. I believe that the theatrical instances I have been describing bridge the gaps between those two types.
74 G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire (London, 1993), pp. 97–100; for my purposes, it seems noteworthy that Knight claims that Othello offers ‘no fusing of word with word, rather a careful juxtaposition of one word or image with another’.
76 Robert Copland, The hye way to the spyttell hous (London, 1535–1567), sig. C4r.

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recognize that they sold access to an emerging lexicon, and thereby control over a perceived threat from below.

That the theatre was a marketplace – and vice versa – is not a new idea. Materialist readings of Shakespeare’s theatre have become prominent, even dominant, in recent years. Yet no commercial analysis of what Dekker called ‘that light commodity of words’ has emerged. Perhaps the fact that language is evanescent, almost inmaterial, has discouraged analysis of how it was sold, and how that trade affected the class-system. Yet Bakhtin himself recognized that the rapidly evolving common language was essential to the marketplace of the Renaissance, and to its hierarchies.

Western cultures have long relied on popular writers to enliven their verbal style and update their lingo; and recent research suggests (and literature professors will like to believe) that an extensive vocabulary may be sexually alluring, just as complexity of song can be as important a display for a mate-seeking nightingale as plumage is for a peacock. Disputes over which kinds of verbage were healthy and which were merely garish – George Gascogne aspired ‘to make our native language commendable in it selfe, than gay with the feathers of straunge birdes’ – only confirm that there were incentives for the right kind of display. The phenomenon I have been describing is hardly unique to Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

That does not mean, however, that it is entirely trans-historical. Other types of rhetorical self-help books evidently became saleable around the year 1600 in England: along with the aforementioned exposés of ‘canting’ terms came collections of similes for all occasions, and handbooks promising new and improved ways of writing letters, poems, and sermons. In popular medical texts, ‘An aid to comprehension was occasionally provided by word pairs, with the foreign terms followed by common equivalents or interpretations.’ English dictionaries are another genre that emerged during Shakespeare’s years as a playwright. The first, Robert Cawdrey’s Table Alphabetical of Hard Usual English Words, appeared in 1604, the same year that Othello was first performed; in 1623, the year Shakespeare’s First Folio was published, Cockerm’s English Dictionarie included a Latinizing section where ‘any desirous of... a more refined and elegant speech... shall there receive the exact and ample word to express the same’. Shakespeare’s ascent to the rank of gentleman was a direct result of economic developments—the social fluidity produced by urbanization and emergent capitalism—but also an indirect result of that fluidity as it coincided with the diachronic evolution of language.

The question so central to ongoing controversies in the social sciences as well as the humanities—whether the chief work of cultures is performed by individual will and genius or instead by large impersonal collective historical forces—is replicated in miniature when we ask whether Shakespeare’s astonishing productivity of lasting neologisms was an index of his greatness or, instead, of his moment. The safe answer may also be the correct one: both, irredicibly so. Clearly others tried to become large-scale merchants of new ways of speaking, but they did not succeed on Shakespeare’s scale, because (I believe) they lacked his instinct for making neologisms accessible and memorable, and for linking them to the settings of the plays and the psychology of the speakers. No wonder, then, that the schoolman Robert Greene complained about this ‘upstart crow, beautified with our feathers’. Artful words—including ‘ruminate’, which Shakespeare may have learned from Greene—were the plumage of the new social elites, and those who could produce them in quantity and quality could find thousands of customers on the South Bank.


80 Götzlach, Introduction to Early Modern English, p. 148.

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Clearly these diction-lessons are part of a broader trade in *habitus*-upgrades for an era of social fluidity: ‘as merchaundise, so also new words’, according to the influential 1561 translation of Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*.82 Although the emphasis in the sixteenth century was more on words than on syntax,83 the teaching of rhetoric (professed explicitly by Peacham and Puttenham, and indirectly by Shakespeare and his rivals) often involved larger units. What Shakespeare accomplished by combining words far outweighs what he accomplished by inventing them. But the study of neologisms offers a narrow aperture that brings an overlooked aspect of early modern theatre and Shakespearian technique into focus. This aperture may also bring into view, if not yet into focus, the question of what teachers of language and literature – of vocabulary and sensibility – may have to offer in the marketplaces of the twenty-first century.

82 *The courtyer of Count Baldesar Castilio*, trans. Thomas Hoby (1561) sig. C1r.