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FROM A TO “Z”: WRITING A DICTIONARY OF SHAKESPEARE’S INSULTS

Nathalie VIENNE-GUERRIN

L’objet de cette étude est de poser les bases théoriques qui président à la conception et à l’écriture du dictionnaire de l’injure shakespearienne préparé par l’auteur. Si l’insulte shakespearienne donne lieu à des anthologies divertissantes commercialisées avec succès, elle n’a pas jusqu’ici fait l’objet d’une recherche scientifique systématique. Ce manque révèle à la fois la nécessité d’une telle entreprise et aussi, probablement, les difficultés qui lui sont propres. Utilisant notamment les travaux d’Évelyne Larguèche sur “l’effet injure”, nous montrons tout d’abord que l’objet de ce dictionnaire est d’élucider ce qui *fait* injure dans le théâtre shakespearien. Dans un deuxième temps, nous soulignons que ce dictionnaire adopte nécessairement une perspective linguistique pragmatique, qui n’exclut pas ce que Jean-Jacques Lecercle a formulé comme étant “l’autre versant de la langue”, “le reste”. Notre propos est de montrer que par son essentielle instabilité, la langue de l’injure mène au cœur de la richesse et de la théâtralité de l’œuvre shakespearienne.

The purpose of this study is to present the theoretical bases of a work in progress, the author’s forthcoming dictionary of Shakespeare’s insults. If Shakespeare’s insults have so far produced bankable entertaining anthologies of wit, they have not been the object of any systematic scientific research. This statement shows the relevance of such a book and at the same time suggests that the enterprise is paved with specific difficulties. Notably using Évelyne Larguèche’s work on the “insulting effect”, we first show that the aim of this dictionary is to elucidate what words have an insulting content and effect in Shakespeare’s plays and why. Then we show that this dictionary cannot but adopt a pragmatic linguistic approach which does not exclude what Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls “the other side of language” or “the remainder”. We strive to show that, by its essential instability, the language of insults is at the heart of the richness and theatricality of Shakespeare’s plays.

There are many Shakespearean dictionaries, of numerous kinds and formats, on a great variety of topics: you can consult dictionaries of *Music in Shakespeare*,¹ *Shakespeare’s Military Language*,² *Shakespeare’s Legal Language*,³ *Shakespeare’s Religious Language*,⁴ *Shakespeare’s Books*,⁵ *Shakespeare’s Non-standard English*,⁶ *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*,⁷ *A Dictionary of Shakespeare’s Sexual*

¹ Christopher R. Wilson and Michela Calore, *Music in Shakespeare. A Dictionary*, London and New York, Thoemmes, 2005.

² Charles Edelman, *Shakespeare’s Military Language. A Dictionary*, London and New Brunswick, The Athlone Press, 2000.

³ B.J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, *Shakespeare’s Legal Language. A Dictionary*, London and New Brunswick, The Athlone Press, 2000.

⁴ Chris R. Hassel Jr, *Shakespeare’s Religious Language. A Dictionary*, Athlone Shakespeare Dictionary Series, New York, London, Continuum, 2005.

⁵ Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare’s Books. A Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources*, London and New Brunswick, The Athlone Press, 2001.

⁶ Norman Francis Blake, *Shakespeare’s Non-Standard English. A Dictionary of his Informal Language*, London and New York, Continuum, 2004.

⁷ Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare’s Bawdy*, London and New York, Routledge, 1947.

Puns and their Significance,⁸ *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*,⁹ *The Arden Dictionary of Shakespeare Quotations*,¹⁰ *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language*,¹¹ *The Shakespeare Name Dictionary*,¹² just to mention a few of them. Many books enter Shakespeare's work through the door of words. Yet, there has never been any scholarly dictionary of Shakespeare's insults. It is a "bankable", because entertaining, topic, but the pleasure of insults seems to prevail over their study. This aspect of Shakespeare's art has so far been mostly reduced to entertaining collections of anthologies. There are various playful little books quoting Shakespeare's insults for lawyers, for teachers, for doctors, for the office,¹³ there are fridge magnets with Shakespearean insulting words on them, there is a "Shakespearean insults generator" on the Internet.¹⁴ Ashley Montagu devoted a chapter to "Swearing in Shakespeare" in his 1967 book, *The Anatomy of Swearing*¹⁵ and Geoffrey Hughes and Hugh Rawson include many references to Shakespeare's insults in their books on swearing and invective.¹⁶ However there is no dictionary of Shakespeare's insults... yet. This simple statement may evidence that writing one is necessary

⁸ Frankie Rubinstein, *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and their Significance*, Houndmills and London, Macmillan, 1984.

⁹ Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*, Newark, University of Delaware Press; London, Associated University Presses, 1999.

¹⁰ *The Arden Dictionary of Shakespeare Quotations*, compiled by Jane Armstrong, Arden, 1999.

¹¹ Gordon Williams, *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language*, London and Atlantic Highlands, Athlone, 1997.

¹² J. Madison Davis and A. Daniel Frankforter, *The Shakespeare Name Dictionary*, London, Routledge, 2004.

¹³ Since the publication of *Shakespeare's Insults, Educating Your Wit*, ed. Wayne F. Hill and Cynthia J. Ötchen, Vermilion, 1995, Shakespeare's insults have been a source of innumerable funny goodies such as magnets, posters, aprons, games, mugs, t-shirts, calendars. To get an idea of the range of commercial products based on Shakespeare's insults, see, for example, on amazon.com.

¹⁴ <http://www.literarygenius.info/a1-shakespearean-insults-generator.htm>

¹⁵ Originally published by Macmillan in 1967 and reprinted in paperback, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, chapter 8, p. 136-153.

¹⁶ See Hugh Rawson, *A Dictionary of Invective, A Treasury of Curses, Insults, Put-Downs and Other Formerly Unprintable Terms from Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, London, Robert Hale, 1989; Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing. A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA, Blackwell, 1991 and *An Encyclopedia of Swearing. The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in The English Speaking World*, Armonk, NY, and London, M. E. Sharpe, 2006. In the more recent *Holy Sh*t. A Brief History of Swearing*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, Melissa Mohr only very rarely refers to Shakespeare, which, incidentally, reveals that insults are not to be equated with foul language.

and legitimate and at the same time reveal the difficulty of such a venture. The reasons for writing such a dictionary are not self-evident and the purpose of this article is to emphasize some of these reasons and to outline *my* way "towards a dictionary of Shakespeare's insults".¹⁷ To do so, I will first formulate the purpose of such a dictionary¹⁸ and then I will present its theoretical bases.

1. WHY AN OTTER? (1 *HENRY IV*, III.III.126)

Shakespeare's theatre is often a source of theoretical findings and formulations. One dialogue in 1 *Henry IV* seems to epitomize the questions that Shakespeare's insults raise and to justify the need for such a dictionary. Here is the exchange:

SIR JOHN. [...] Go, you thing, go.
 HOSTESS. Say, what thing? what thing?
 SIR JOHN. What thing? why, a thing to thank God on.
 HOSTESS. I am no thing to thank God on, I would thou shouldst know it.
 I am an honest man's wife, and setting thy knighthood aside, thou art a knave to call me so.
 SIR JOHN. Setting thy womanhood aside, thou art a beast to say otherwise.
 HOSTESS. Say, what beast, thou knave, thou?
 SIR JOHN. What beast? why, an otter.
 PRINCE HARRY. An otter, Sir John, why an otter?
 SIR JOHN. Why? she's neither fish nor flesh, a man knows not where to have her.
 HOSTESS. Thou art an unjust man in saying so. Thou or any man knows where to have me, thou knave, thou!
 PRINCE HARRY. Thou say'st true, Hostess, and he slanders thee most grossly. (1 *Henry IV*, III.III.115-132)¹⁹

The comedy of what can be considered as a flyting scene rests here on the discrepancy between the emission and the reception of the insult. When Falstaff says to the hostess: "Go, you thing, go", her question,

¹⁷ I am referring here to Norman Blake's article on his way towards a Dictionary of Shakespeare's Non-standard English: "Towards a Dictionary of Shakespeare's Informal English", *Symposium on Lexicography X, Proceedings of the Tenth International Symposium on Lexicography May 4-6, 2000 at the University of Copenhagen*, edited by Henrik Gottlieb, Jens Erik Mogensen, and Arne Zettersten, De Gruyter, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 2002, p. 1-18.

¹⁸ This dictionary is to be published in 2015 by Continuum (now Bloomsbury) in the Shakespeare Dictionaries series (series general editor Sandra Clark).

¹⁹ *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Boston, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.

“what thing, what thing?”, shows that she asks for an explanation of the abusive word “thing”. She wants to understand what meaning Falstaff attributes to the word.

In a very stimulating book on insults, entitled *L'Effet Injure. De la Pragmatique à la psychanalyse*,²⁰ Évelyne Larguèche offers a very useful terminology. She makes a distinction between what she calls “l’injure non spécifique” (non specific insult, that is to say words of abuse that are not related to any characteristic, or to any feature of the person who is abused) and “l’injure spécifique” (specific insult, i.e. an insult that translates, reflects or is based on a characteristic of the abused person). If we apply this terminology here, we could say that Falstaff emits a word in a “non specific mode” while the Hostess wants the word “thing” to mean “some-thing” specific. In other words, there is a comic discrepancy between the playful and the serious modes of insulting. For the hostess, these words of abuse are not simply substitutes for something negative (what Évelyne Larguèche calls “substituts de négatif”);²¹ they are insults whose meaning lies in the speech *act* rather than in the *word*, that is to say rather than in any precise semantic content. For the hostess, words of abuse should *mean* something.

The same idea appears in Hal’s reaction when he hears Falstaff call the Hostess “otter”: “why an otter?” The incongruous, extravagant nature of the image could suggest that it is not connected to any of the Hostess’s characteristics and that the word is here only a “verbal gesture” of abuse (what Larguèche calls “un geste verbal”).²² Yet Hal wants Falstaff to put meaning in the word, which he does by defining precisely what he means: “Why? She’s neither fish nor flesh; a man knows not where to have her”, an answer which reflects how Edward Topsell, in his *Historie of four-footed beasts*, describes the otter.²³ The hostess, in her turn, ironically freezes the content of the insult in a sexual

²⁰ Paris, PUF, 1983.

²¹ Évelyne Larguèche, *L'Effet Injure*, p. 98 et sq. On this, see my article, “L’injure et la voix dans le théâtre de Shakespeare”, *Shakespeare et la voix*, ed. Patricia Dorval and Jean-Marie Maguin, 1999, p. 193-208, URL:

<http://www.societefrancaishakespeare.org/document.php?id=403> (accessed 4 August 2013).

²² Évelyne Larguèche, *Injure et sexualité. Le corps du délit*, Paris, PUF, 1997, p. 95.

²³ Edward Topsell, *The historie of foure-footed beastes*, London, 1607, STC (2nd ed.) / 24123: “it liueth both on the Water and on the land... Their outward forme is most like vnto a beaver, sauing in their taile, for the taile of a beaver is fish, but the taile of an otter is flesh.” (p. 572).

meaning, saying "Thou art an unjust man in saying so. Thou or any man knows where to have me, thou knave, thou!"

This scene reveals the tension in Shakespeare's insults: they give the impression that they do not need to be explained as they are speech *acts* rather than *words* but, at the same time, they are pregnant with meaning, as the example of the otter shows, and need to be interpreted. Insults precisely exist only when they are interpreted. There's no insult without interpretation. This example also illustrates how insults may oscillate between a playful mode and a serious mode, being both abuse, or "no abuse"²⁴ (as Falstaff says in *2 Henry IV*, II.iv.316), depending on the way they are delivered or received.

An episode in *Troilus and Cressida* suggests that one and the same term can be used both in a "specific" and "non specific" way:

THERSITES. I'll decline the whole question: Agamemnon commands Achilles, Achilles is my lord, I am Patroclus' knower, and Patroclus is a fool.
 [PATROCLUS. You rascal.
 THERSITES. Peace, fool, I have not done.
 ACHILLES. He is a privileg'd man. Proceed, Thersites.
 THERSITES. Agamemnon is a fool, Achilles is a fool, Thersites is a fool, and, as aforesaid, Patroclus is a fool.]²⁵
 ACHILLES. Derive this; come.
 THERSITES. Agamemnon is a fool to offer to command Achilles, Achilles is a fool to be commanded [of Agamemnon], Thersites is a fool to serve such a fool, and this Patroclus is a fool positive.
 PATROCLUS. Why am I a fool?
 THERSITES. Make that demand of the prover, it suffices me thou art.
 (Troilus and Cressida, II.iii.52-68)

In this passage, where we can read a parody of Ulysses's speech on "degree",²⁶ Achilles asks Thersites to explain why he calls them "fools", trying to find the specificity of the word, that is to say to what extent the word applies to the person who is abused. He tries to put meaning in a word that is so banal that it seems to be void of any precise meaning. Thersites gives the word "fool" a precise content and direction, applying each occurrence to something specific. But when Patroclus asks: "Why am I a fool?", Thersites makes a distinction between particular sorts of

²⁴ On this question, see Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, "Les jeux de l'injure dans *Henry IV*", *Shakespeare et le jeu*, ed. Yves Peyré and Pierre Kapitaniak, 2005, p. 185-199. URL: <http://shakespeare.revues.org/713>, accessed March 2012.

²⁵ The text between square brackets is from the folio edition.

²⁶ *The Riverside Shakespeare*, *ibid.*

folly and a form of folly that is “positive”, i.e. that cannot be specified. The word “positive”, deriving from the Latin verb *ponere*, meaning “to place, to put, lay down” (*OED*), refers to something that cannot be questioned or explained, something that is absolute, and paradoxically, for a fool, something perfect. Some characters are called fools for a precise reason; for others, the word seems to be self-sufficient and the insult cannot be explained. For Thersites, Patroclus is a fool *per se*.²⁷

The two passages reveal the essential ambivalence of insults. They suggest that insulting words do not need to be elucidated and yet need to be, that a word of abuse can be meaningful and at the same time meaningless, specific and non specific, a word and a deed. In trying to elucidate the meaning of insults, one does, in a way, what Shakespeare does when he has Kent abuse Oswald, calling him “Thou whoreson Z, thou unnecessary letter” (II.ii.63). As signalled by the editors of the play, the word “Z” is insulting because in Shakespeare’s world, it was considered a useless letter that did not exist in Latin and was often replaced by “S”. According to Mulcaster, in a chapter on consonants in *The First Part of the Elementarie*, “Z is a consonant much heard amongst us, and seldom sene. I think by reason it is not so redie to the pen as s, is, which is becom lieutenant generall to z.”²⁸ What is interesting in the example of the “Z” is that Shakespeare here clarifies the meaning of a word that could be obscure by titling the insult and providing a sort of explicative footnote. It is this footnote that allows the spectator to understand that this “Z” is not only part of what Marvin Rosenberg describes as the “comic verbal pyrotechnics of Kent’s catalogue of denigrations”²⁹ but that it allows Kent to relegate to the margins of dictionaries a menial character that the folly of Lear’s world has placed at the centre of society. Writing a dictionary of Shakespeare’s insults amounts to asking oneself, like Hal, “Why an otter?”, like Patroclus, “Why a fool?”, or like Edgar in *King Lear*, “Why ‘bastard’? Wherefore ‘base’?” (I.ii.6). Insulting words are not mere projectiles, indifferent verbal ammunition but are infused with meanings that only emerge in particular contexts.

That is why this dictionary needs to be a “pragmatic dictionary”.

²⁷ The expression is used by Alexander about Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida*, I.ii.15.

²⁸ Richard Mulcaster, *The First Part of the Elementarie which entreateth chefelie of the right writing of our English tung*, London, 1582, STC (2nd ed.) / 18250, p. 123.

²⁹ Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, p. 146.

2. A PRAGMATIC DICTIONARY

When writing a dictionary of Shakespeare's insults, one is led to isolate words that are bound to be considered and studied in specific contexts of enunciation. Shakespearean insults often come in whole strings and it is very difficult to examine them in isolation, to unravel them, to break them apart. And when you do so, you sometimes feel you disfigure them. But this dissection work is common to all dictionaries and is the way to re-membering.

Any word can have an insulting effect and thus it may seem pointless to try and isolate particular insults and to freeze them into a dictionary. The question is: given that any word can become an insult, notably on stage, what is the point of writing a dictionary of insults? George Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesie*, gives food for thought on this issue, that is on the malleability and instability of words and on the idea that all words are potential insults. Trying to restore the honour of a much criticized poetic art, Puttenham offers a reflection on insults in chapter VIII, entitled "In what reputation Poesie and Poets in old time with princes and otherwise generally, and how they be now become contemptible and for what causes":

For as well Poets as Poesie are despised & the name become, of honorable infamous, subject to scorne and derision, and rather a reproch than a prayse to any that useth it: for commonly who so is studious in th' Arte or shewes him selfe excellent in it, they call him in disdayne a *phantasticall*: and a light headed or phantasticall man (by conversion) they call a Poet.³⁰

Puttenham goes on to say that the word "Poet" has acquired derogatory connotations and that everybody can use the term as an insult:

[...] they doe deride and scorne it [excellent art] in all others as superfluous knowledges and vayne sciences, and whatsoever devise be of rare invention they terme it phantasticall, construing it to the worst side and among men such as be modest and grave, & of little conversation, nor delighted in the busie life and vayne ridiculous actions of the popular, they call him in scorne a *Philosopher* or *Poet*, as much to say as a

³⁰ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, London, 1589, STC (2nd ed.) / 20519.5, p. 13-14.

phantasticall man, very injuriously (God wot) and to the manifestation of their own ignorance, not making difference betwixt termes.³¹

This passage shows that no word is insulting in itself but that all terms can become insulting and can take on pejorative connotations in a particular context. The poet is so often the target of insults that the word “Poet” itself becomes offensive. Words can be “constru[ed] to the worst side”, Puttenham writes. Shakespeare illustrates this idea in *Much Ado About Nothing* when Don Pedro tells Benedick how Beatrice “trans-shape[d]” his “particular virtues” (v.i.167) or when Benedick comments on Beatrice’s “forcible” wit, saying that she “frighted the word out of his right sense” (v.iii.50-51).³² The process of connotation is also made explicit when Posthumus exclaims at the end of *Cymbeline*, “Every villain / Be called Posthumus Leonatus, and / Be ‘villain’ less than ‘twas!” (v.vi.223-4).³³ In *2 Henry IV*, Doll Tearsheet expresses the same idea when she is revolted because Pistol is called “Captain”:

MISTRESS QUICKLY. No, good Captain Pistol, not here, sweet captain.
DOLL TEARSHEET. Captain? Thou abominable damned cheater, art thou not ashamed to be called captain? An captains were of my mind, they would truncheon you out, for taking their names upon you before you have earned them. You a captain? You slave! For what? For tearing a poor whore’s ruff in a bawdy-house? He a captain? Hang him, rogue, he lives upon mouldy stewed prunes and dried cakes. A captain? God’s light, these villains will make the word as odious as the word ‘occupy’, which was an excellent good word before it was ill sorted; therefore captains had need look to ‘t.
(*2 Henry IV*, II.iv.134-46)³⁴

Shakespeare here uses the very process of connotation, how words acquire connotations when they are “ill-sorted”. If the word “Captain” is applied to a villain or a “slave”, then it can become synonymous with “villain” or “slave”, the word “captain” being, as it were, contaminated by the reality of the person it designates. Language is contaminated by

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³² See Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, “Contredire ou dire tout contre : Injure et contradiction dans *Much Ado About Nothing* », *La Contradiction*, ed. Michel Bandry and Jean-Marie Maguin, Montpellier, Publications Montpellier 3, 2003, p. 129-46.

³³ On insults and the process of connotation in *Cymbeline*, see my article, “His meanest garment!” (*Cymbeline*, II.iii.133): *Cymbeline* et la mémoire des mots”, Société Française Shakespeare, 2012, <http://shakespeare.revues.org/1956>.

³⁴ The text that is used here is René Weis’s Oxford edition (1997) which uses the Q version. The F version does not include “as the word ‘occupy’, which was an excellent good word before it was ill-sorted”.

reality, words becoming pregnant with connotations. It is precisely what happens to the word "honest"³⁵ in *Othello*.

If any word can become an insult, then what is the point of writing a dictionary of insults? Insults should perhaps best be analysed through a thematic approach rather than a lexical one. "I am your theme" says Falstaff at the end of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (v.v.159), suggesting that the insults he has to bear are variations on a theme. One may distinguish several privileged thematic fields: socio-political ("bastard", "base", "villain", "traitor", "Turk", "Jew"), moral ("cuckold", "wittol", "cornuto", "whore", "coward", "flatterer"), physical ("huge bombard of sack", "bowcase", "maypole", "minus"), intellectual ("loggerhead", "fool", "block"). One can also delineate several privileged types of imagery: animal imagery ("dog", "ass", "horse", "toad", "otter", "canker-blossom", "spider"), reifying imagery ("woolsack", "bombast", "tailor's yard", "latten bilbo", "Banbury cheese", "bacons", "tallow", "apple-John"), the domain of myth and literature ("Amaimon", "Vice", "Vanity", "Satan", "Semiramis", "Mephostophilus", "Jezabel"). Each of the words mentioned here constitutes an entry into Shakespeare's language and it is precisely *because* words of insults come and go, depending on their context, and because they often offer very complicated clusters of meaning that a dictionary is useful. It will allow the reader to stop on these particular words and to see how they work in particular contexts. This dictionary must be a "pragmatic" dictionary, it rests on a "pragmatic" approach to language:³⁶ it must take into account the context of enunciation both large and narrow, who says the words, who receives them, what their effect is. This pragmatic approach is in tune with Renaissance texts on the tongue. For example, in *The araignement of an unruly tongue* (1619), George Webbe adopts what can be considered as a pragmatic approach of language when he writes about the murderous tongue:

³⁵ On the word "honest", see notably William Empson's analysis in his book, *The Structure of Complex Words*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989, chapter 11, "Honest in *Othello*", p. 218-249.

³⁶ In *Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. Jef Verschueren, Jan-Ola Östman et Jan Blommaert (Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995), Jef Verschueren defines pragmatics as "a perspective on language rather than [...] a component of a linguistic theory" (p. 1). For this pragmatic approach to insults see, for example, Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen, "Diachronic speech act analysis. Insults from flyting to flaming", *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, Vol. 1. 1 (2000), p. 67-95. See also Larguèche, *L'Effet injure*.

In which respect wee may further indict the *tongue* for murther (manslaughter is too light a terme to be given unto it). There is no murther like unto the murther of the *tongue*; of such *tongues* the Prophet *Ezechiel* testifieth; *They carry tales to shed bloud* [Ezech.22.9.]. And the Psalmist saith; *They cut like a Razor*, yea, *They are very swords* [Psal.55.2.]. Therefore Jeremies adversaries did this way wreake their malice upon the Prophet, *Come and let us smite him with the tongue* [Jer.18.18.]. An evill *tongue* doth murder three at once: 1. The partie whom he doth defame. 2. The partie unto whom hee doth defame him. 3. Himselfe that is the defamer. And therefore doth describe this bloody *tongue* to bee alwayes armed with a threefold weapon, an *Arrow*, an *Hammer*, and a *Sword* [Pro.25.18.]; an *Arrow* to wound the partie whom hee would defame in his absence whiles he is farre off; an *Hammer* to knocke him on the head with a false report unto whome hee doth make the report; a *Sword* to stab his own Soule in committing that evill which God doth hate.³⁷

By taking into account the addresser, the addressee, the target and the witness, this description is not far from what Austin will call “illocutory effects”.³⁸ One does things with words. This pragmatic perspective is inscribed in the Renaissance tongue treatises that describe the deadly effects of the tongue.³⁹ Not all words of abuse have an insulting effect (what Évelyne Larguèche calls “l’effet injure”). The exchanges between Hal and Falstaff for example in *1 Henry IV* can be considered as “no abuse”. But whether words be received as “abuse” or “no abuse”, their insulting content, potential and effect need to be explained. This dictionary will take into account the various degrees of directness in insulting, that range from the direct “thou art a villain” (*Romeo and Juliet*, III.i.60), to the reference to a third person (“That a monster should be such a natural!”, *The Tempest*, III.ii.32-3), through expressions of anger such as “Zounds” which, even if they are more general, have an insulting impact on the hearer.

All words can be offensive in a given context, particularly on stage, but the purpose of a dictionary of Shakespeare’s insults is to define what words are offensive in Shakespeare’s canon, in what contexts and what makes those words insulting. What do Shakespeare’s insults mean? Some answers will be found in the history and etymology of the

³⁷ George Webbe, *The Araignment of an unruly tongue*, London, 1619, STC 25156, p. 25-27. See Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, ed., *The Unruly Tongue in Early Modern England. Three Treatises*, Madison, Teaneck, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, p. 90-91.

³⁸ See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, second edition, eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2001 (1962, 1975).

³⁹ One finds the same pragmatic perspective in René Benoist’s *Traicté de Detraction murmure calomnie susurration et impropere*, Paris, 1580, sig. Hii^r.

words concerned, that will help elucidate their offensive content. Many words in Shakespeare's works are not insulting *per se*, so there must be something that explains the insulting meaning they carry in particular contexts. The aim of this dictionary is to explore what makes such words as "Achitophel" (2 *Henry IV*, I.ii.35), "senator" (*Othello*, I.i.120), or "otter" (2 *Henry IV*, III.iii.125) insulting in their Shakespearean, dramatic and historical contexts.

Yet insults are so essentially unstable that it makes the writing of such a dictionary complicated and difficult. In *The Violence of Language*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle focuses on what he calls "the other side" of language ("l'autre versant de la langue"), or "the remainder" ("le reste").⁴⁰ In his book, Lecercle bases his reflection on Edward Lear's nonsensical texts. In the case of Lear's *Ursprache*, Lecercle writes, "Language is no longer a mere instrument, it seems to have acquired a life of its own. Language speaks, it follows its own rhythm, its own partial coherence, it proliferates in apparent, and sometimes violent, chaos."⁴¹ Lecercle wants to "treat Lear's letter as an emblem of language": "I shall treat every utterance as an instance of Freudian compromise between two extreme positions: 'I speak language' and 'language speaks' ('c'est moi, le locuteur, qui parle la langue' et 'c'est la langue qui parle')." He goes on:

There is another side to language, one that escapes the linguist's attention [...] This dark side emerges in nonsensical and poetic texts, in the illumination of mystics and the delirium of logophiliacs or mental patients. It is the object of this book to provide a description and a theory of this other side. [...] I have called it 'the remainder'.⁴²

In my view, studying Shakespeare's insults has to do with studying this other side of language. But according to Lecercle's study, the "remainder" cannot be properly treated in dictionaries or encyclopedias. It cannot be studied through a list of entries because "With the remainder, we are back in language, not in *langue*",⁴³ in the Saussurian meaning of the word *langue* that refers to the structured language. "I shall no longer treat language as a scientific object, susceptible of a

⁴⁰ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, translated as *La Violence du langage*, Paris, PUF, 1996.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

comprehensive description in terms of system and coherence, i.e. in terms of Saussure's concept of *langue*".⁴⁴ Jean-Jacques Lecercle explains:

[...] the semantic component of linguistic theories [...] which has the form of a dictionary (a list of lexical entries), simply will not do. It aptly captures the semantic meaning of words, with more difficulty that of phrases and sentences, but it is incapable of dealing with their contextual meaning. Or, in the words of another type of theory, it is good at denotation and hopeless at connotation.⁴⁵

Lecercle here formulates objections to the sort of work I am doing and yet my answer to this is simple: writing a pragmatic dictionary of Shakespeare's insults does not prevent me from analysing and taking into account the "remainder", the other side of language that is inherent in these insults. One can combine lexical and pragmatic analyses with analysis of the remainder. The entries of the dictionary are precisely the gates that can lead to the other side of language, doors that open onto the interpretation of "the remainder" and this book of insults can be the path to an "exploration" that is always a "rediscovery".⁴⁶ To capture the remainder, one must try and imagine "another kind of dictionary", which takes into account and reveals contexts and connotations, which takes into account what these words both *do* and *say*. This book will strive to reconcile the dictionary and the scream⁴⁷.

In *The Force of Language*⁴⁸, Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues that it is relevant to take "bad words" as a starting point for a reflection on language:

Bad words, of any type (insults, swear words, aggressive naming) have a certain number of advantages over the usual 'the man hit the ball' tame assertion, in the shape of a simple declarative sentence, evincing elementary linguistic structure. In a word, bad words give us an idea on how to bridge the gap, emphatically indicated in *The German Ideology*, between 'language' and 'the language of real life'. For bad words are

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁷ I am referring here to the title of Jean-Jacques Lecercle's book on nonsense, *Le Dictionnaire et le Cri*, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1995. See also *The Violence of Language*, p. 105: "Language is material not because there is a physics of speech, but because words are always threatening to revert to screams, because they carry the violent affects of the speaker's body, can be inscribed on it, and generally mingle with it, in one of those mixtures of bodies the Stoics were so fond of."

⁴⁸ Written with Denise Riley, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

words, and yet they undeniably partake of the 'language of real life', in the shape of agonistic action, a form of *praxis*. In other words, they have the considerable advantage of inducing us to start the question of language from the point of view of the social situation of interlocution, not the abstract system we have learnt to call *langue*.⁴⁹

Jean-Jacques Lecercle defines four basic features about insults:

1. Insults show that the first function of language is not to exchange information but to name (*naming*). 2. They are a form of speech act. 3. They can hurt, which shows the materiality of language. 4. They are "disconnected", i.e. not integrated into a normal syntax but they build up their own syntax.⁵⁰ For him these features make studying insults a privileged way of entering into language.

In the same way, studying insult seems to me the best way of entering Shakespeare's theatrical language. "Lingua, quo tendis?", "Tongue whither goest thou?": these questions appear in Claude Paradin's *Devises Héroïques*⁵¹ (1557) and in its English translation, *Heroical Devises*⁵² (1591).⁵³ With insults, we are at the heart of the unpredictability, of the non-systematic dimension of the tongue, of the *lingua*, of language. With insults, we are at the heart of an embodied active *lingua*, which is a theatrical tongue par excellence, which can ever take new directions. We are at the heart of Shakespeare's tongue, which is a language that both speaks and is spoken.⁵⁴ This motto, "lingua, quo tendis?" reveals that the Renaissance conception of language includes what Lecercle calls "the remainder". The aim of my dictionary is to try

⁴⁹ *The Force of Language*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66-67. On the instability of insults see Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "Éduquons, c'est pas une insulte. Insulte (et) rhétorique", *Mauvaises Langues !*, ed. Florence Cabaret et Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, Rouen, Presses Universitaires de Rouen, 2013, p. 123-34.

⁵¹ Claude Paradin, *Devises Heroïques* [1557], introduction by Alison Saunders, Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1989, p. 109-110. See: <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/facsimile.php?emb=FPAb070> (accessed on 6 August 2013).

⁵² Claude Paradin, *The heroicall devises of M. Claudius Paradin Canon of Beauieu. Whereunto are added the Lord Gabriel Symeons and others. Translated out of Latin into English by P.S.*, London, 1591, STC 19183, p. 137-38.

⁵³ On this representation of the tongue, see notably Erasmus, *The Tongue*, trans. Elaine Fantham, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 29, 249-412, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1989, p. 366 (LB IV 723B / ASD IV-1 331). See also George Wither, *A Collection of Emblemes* [1635], introduction by Michael Bath, Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1989, Book 1, illust. XLII, p. 42. See:

<http://collection1.libraries.psu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/emblem/id/959> (accessed on 6 August 2013).

⁵⁴ Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, *op. cit.*, p. 103 and sq.

and analyse in what directions these words go, “lingua, quo tendis?” and I hope that it will not transform them into “frozen” words but rather contribute to giving them some new life.

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