F for Frustrating,
E for Ennui

Shakespeare's grammar has been an unfashionable subject for well over a century. The latest contribution to the field looks unlikely to assist much in its revival, regrets **David Crystal**.

There is a renaissance taking place in the study of Shakespeare's language. In the last five years – after decades of neglect – scholars have turned once again to the language of the plays and poems, searching for new insights in the light of 20th-century research. The critical focus of Frank Kermode's *Shakespeare's Language* (2000) has been supplemented by major studies of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, dialogue practice, and artistic performance. *Shakespeare's Grammar*, by Jonathan Hope, is the latest, dealing with a domain which, before 2002, was the most neglected area of all. Twentieth-century Shakespeare scholars had only Abbott's grammar, published as long ago as 1869.

Hope must have said '*sblood*, at the very least, when, with his book nearly complete, Norman Blake's *A Grammar of Shakespeare's Language* came out last year. 'Typical', he reflects in his introduction. No grammar for 130 years, then two come along at once! But the books are very different. Blake's is a typically thorough, close-packed account of over 400 pages, with copious illustrations and bibliographical references, and a much wider coverage. Hope's is introductory and selective, around 200 pages, with lots of white space, and focusing on the basic structure of just two areas – the noun phrase and the verb phrase.

Actually, the 'meat' is much less than 200. There are 30 pages of introduction, glossary, and indexes and 14 blank pages, and of the remaining 166 another 10 pages comprise sections of text repeated *literatim*. You are right when you get

a sense of *déja vu* on pages 94-97, for instance, because exactly the same text – examples, discussion and all – has already been printed 20 or so pages previously. It is a practice Hope adopts throughout the book. I found it space-wasting and irritating, especially when the repetition adds nothing to what occurs earlier. At one point he says 'Finite versus non-finite verbs are covered more fully in section 2.1.6'. They aren't – the later section is virtually identical. Hope goes in for repeated explanation – a brief account in an overview, then a fuller account in a later section. Quite rightly, he is trying to show us the 'wood' of Shakespeare's grammar, rather than just the 'trees' – the numbered lists of points so beloved of Abbott, Brook, and others. And we do need to develop a sense of the way grammar works as a whole. But the whole what? The whole of Shakespeare? of literary writing in Early Modern English? of all of Early Modern English? This is the problem facing all writers on Shakespeare. To understand (a) what is distinctive about Shakespearean English, you need to see him in the context of (b) what other literary authors did; then these authors have to be seen in the context of (c) the language of the period as a whole, Early Modern English (EME); and then that period has to be related to (d) Present-day English, to highlight the differences. Any statement you make has to relate unambiguously to one or other of these dimensions, otherwise we don't know where we are. That's the main problem facing non-specialist readers of this book. An early heading is illustrative. It reads 'The structure of the noun phrase in English'. But which English? (a), (b), (c), or (d)?

Sometimes we can see that a point is definitely (a). 'Shakespeare does use non-human *who* at a higher rate than other writers'. But when Hope says 'Some OE plural forms [such as *eyne*] survive in Shakespeare' he doesn't mean just him. Other writers used *eyne* too – it's (b) or (c). And what would you make of this? 'The progressive be + -ing construction can be found in Shakespeare, but in contexts which suggest it is informal – prose rather than poetry, comedy

rather than tragedy'. This looks like (a), but it goes well beyond that. In dozens of places the issue is left unclear.

Hope is a courageous man who has set himself an impossible task by trying to do too many things at once. He wants to write a grammar 'without assuming any detailed linguistic knowledge'. He wants to produce a reference grammar so that editors can check up on an individual point. He wants readers to 'get a sense of ' the interrelatedness of grammatical features. He wants to compare his approach to Abbott's. And he wants to introduce a stylistic perspective.

It can't be done. For a start, with grammar you just can't 'assume no detailed knowledge'. Hope uses a glossary convention to get him out of trouble, printing technical terms in bold on their first occurrence. But a glossarial approach can't make up for a general grasp of grammatical structure, which you need *before* you approach Shakespeare. In any case, it conflicts with the reference function, which allows a user to dip into the grammar at any point and thus not see the terms emboldened. And always, in an approach like this, terms end up unglossed (e.g. *cline*, *pro-verb*, *dummy*, *hypercorrection*).

The only way to understand Shakespeare's grammar is to learn something about grammar first, then use that knowledge to focus specifically on the author, or on EME. This of course is what kids are at last doing in the UK National Curriculum. But now Hope presents us with a different sort of problem. Most British schools use a type of grammar which focuses on clause structure (recognized by such expressions as Subject-Verb-Object, or SVO). Blake's book clearly relates to this tradition; but Hope's doesn't. Not an SVO to be seen. Aspects of clause structure emerge somewhat sporadically towards the end of the book, but the approach as a whole is difficult to tie in with current pedagogical orthodoxy. As a linguist Hope is entitled to use any approach he likes, of course, but it is a pity he didn't choose a model which would be easier for teachers (or, for that matter, editors) to integrate with their other work.

I found this a frustrating book.

There is a lot of insight in it, but you have to hunt for it. And there are some curious omissions. On the plus side, there is a really illuminating introduction to the context in which Shakespeare was writing, which ought to be obligatory reading. Several EME features are very well explained, such as compound adjectives (*sudden-bold*), the *her/their* distinction, the ethical dative (*this river comes me cranking in*), and the *thou/you* distinction. Surprisingly, some noticeable EME features don't get discussed, such as elided *the* (th'), or the use of *an* before consonants. Several major features get very thin treatment, such as word-class conversion (*uncle me no uncle*) or the use of the – *th* ending (only the somewhat atypical *hath* and *doth* are illustrated).

Hope has tried to do too much in a small space. I found the routine allusions to Abbott's approach a total distraction: there's enough to do without worrying about where and why Abbott went wrong. I found the stylistic dimension inappropriate: each of the noun phrase and verb phrase sections of the book is preceded by a 'stylistic overview', presumably to help motivate readers. But as style is an effect arising from *all* aspects of language, several of the effects being discussed there are nothing to do with grammar at all (but with vocabulary, for instance).

I sense Hope giving up towards the end. The last chapter does no more than give a basic exposition of various points of grammar. Much of it lacks Shakespearean examples or any discussion of EME effects. The valuable insights of earlier chapters are no more. It is a shame that a book which starts out so excitingly should conclude with such *ennui*.