SHAKESPEAREAN LINE-BY-LINE ACROSTS

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In Act 1, Scene 1 of “The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth”, the Duke of Gloucester says:

Have you yourselves, Somerset, Buckingham,
Brave York, Salisbury, and victorious Warwick,
Receiv’d deep scars in France and Normandy?
Or hath mine uncle Beaufort and myself,
With all the learned Council of the realm
Studied so long, sat in the Council House,
Early and late, debating to and fro
How France and Frenchmen might be kept in awe?

BROWSE is an example of a line-by-line acrostic—presumably accidentally formed by Shakespeare. He used the word in Act 3, Scene 4 of “Cymbeline” (“There is cold meat i’ the Caue. We’l brouz on that...”) and a form of the word in Act 3, Scene 3 of “The Winter’s Tale” (“If anywhere I have them, ’tis by the seaside, browsing of ivy”).

Or was it deliberate? There seems no reason for this word to be introduced—it has no relation to the story. In “Are Acrostic Messages Real?” in the Aug 1985 Word Ways, I devised an empirical formula for predicting the likelihood of a line-by-line acrostic of a specified length:

Expected number of words i letters long = \(2.2 \frac{nS}{26^i}\)

where \(i\) is the number of letters in the acrostic, \(n\) is the number of \(i\)-letter words in the dictionary used, and \(S\) is the number of lines examined. Examining a set of 1000 consecutive lines in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, I noted 110 two-letter words, 74 three-letter words, 6 four-letter words and one five-letter word (CHAPS); the above formula predicts 124, 68, 9 and 1, in good agreement. More recently, I performed a similar analysis of the 2156 lines of the 154 Shakespeare sonnets, finding 228 two-letter words, 159 three-letter words, 12 four-letter words and again a single five-letter word (TITAN, in Sonnet 140); the formula predicts 253, 146, 19 and 1. If we apply the formula to the approximately one hundred thousand lines in Shakespeare, about 3 of the 4056 Pocket Webster six-letter words should appear in acrostics. What would a computer study of line-by-line acrostics turn up in Shakespeare?

In the 1960s, Martin Gardner sent me a note by the famed British palindromist Leigh Mercer, giving 23 examples in five different languages of long line-by-line acrostics found in Shakespeare. He did not give the source of this information, but it seems likely that these were found by contributors to the British magazine Notes & Queries (where Mercer sent his palindromic discoveries in the 1940s, as discussed in “Leigh Mercer, Palindromist” in the Aug 1991 Word Ways).

In their attempt to find long acrostics, contributors played fast and loose with the definition of an allowable acrostic. The TITANIA acrostic, discussed in “Are Acrostic Messages Real?”, includes two letters at the beginning of one line: T,I,T,An,I,A. The WANT MY BABY acrostic, discussed
by James Kovalik in “The Titania Acrostic Revisited” in the Aug 2003 Word Ways, utilizes the first two letters of a line for MY, reads T,N,A,W from the four preceding lines, and B,A,B,Y from the four following ones. In addition to BROWSE, Notes & Queries people found two other English words and an English phrase:

T,A,O,H,S (SHOAT reversed) on lines 208-12 in Act 2, Scene 2 of “Anthony and Cleopatra”
P,O,T,I,On on lines 343-46 in Act 5, Scene 2 of “Anthony and Cleopatra”

The longest line-by-line acrostic found by N&Q people was in Greek, in Act 1, Scene 2 of “Romeo and Juliet”:

Ben: At this same ancient feast of Capulet’s
    Sups the fair Rosaline whom thou so lov’st;
    With all the admired beauties of Verona.
    Go thither, and with unattainted eye
    Compare her face with some that I shall show,
    And I will make thee think thy swan a crow.

Rom: When the devout religion of mine eye
    Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fires;
    And these, who, often drown’d, could never die,
    Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars!
    One fairer than my love? The all-seeing sun
    Ne’er saw her match since first the world begun.

A twelve-letter acrostic, according to the formula previously given, has an infinitesimal chance of appearing in Shakespeare. Apparently the discoverer took considerable liberties with the Greek language; besides twice changing a W to a U (since W does not appear in Greek), he synthesized the word out of smaller elements—SUGKAIO is “to catch fire” and CAUMA is “burning heat”. The suffix –ATON is a way to change a verb to a noun in Greek, and the prefix A- is an initial negation (such as MORAL to AMORAL). Does his creation mean “something that is not burnt”? (Perhaps he was inspired by the existence of the word “burnt” in the third-to-last line.)

There are a number of Latin acrostics—NOVATUS, SALTAT, SALTADO, NAVIOSA, TITfUBE, TRITT A, TACUIT, VESCUS—that are equally suspect. In fact, only vesus, meaning "small", seems indisputably Latin. Vesus appears as WESCWS in Act 4, Scene 1 of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”. Would this acrostic also have qualified had it been WESCUS, VESCWS or VESCUS? Alternate spellings certainly make it easier to find acrostics!