

# Manka revania dulce: Shakespeare as language planner

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Shakespeare's plays, like many other plays of his time, are full of examples of language difference. He was interested in language in all its aspects – hardly surprisingly, given that plays are structures made out of speech; indeed in Shakespeare's day there was precious little else but speech and costume and a bare stage – and an audience that knew about rhetoric and the importance of public speaking, since such questions were central to pedagogical practice. The English language, under the influence of printing, rising literacy rates, and urbanization, was beginning to stabilize (Steinberg 1961), among the cacophony of voices that made up the London of Shakespeare's time – full of migrants from the provinces, Protestant refugees from the continent, sailors and merchants from other countries. And the language was just beginning to be heard beyond the shores of the British Isles, starting to take its place among the languages of Europe and the languages of colonization. “You learned me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse,” says Caliban in *The Tempest* (1.2.361-2).

The plays are not just made of language: the flow of language itself, the syntax of drama, is a major factor in our response. Many of the plays deal directly with the power of language – *Love's Labors Lost*, with its ongoing metaphor of language as currency; *King Lear*, with the famous silence of Cordelia at the opening of the play and the threat that language itself, deformed by greed and the breakdown of sovereignty, will collapse under the burden of misrepresentation; above all, *Henry V*, which presents the expanding geographical space occupied by Englishness – pushing out against the languages of the Celtic fringe on the one hand and invading the settled complacency of France on the other.

This syntax of drama, the way the action follows certain generic expectations or, in the context of those expectations, violates them in specific ways, depends on a common understanding – on the creation of a community of understanding both on the stage, and between the characters and the audience. When Cordelia refuses to answer Lear, refuses to tell him how much she loves him – there in the open council chamber as though love were a matter of policy – what makes her refusal to answer so alarming is the fact that she threatens not just assumptions about language within the court, but also the very forward movement of the play: if we cannot agree on what words mean, how can we proceed? In *King Lear*, language frequently seems to be skittering into incomprehensibility – in the occasional dialect of Kent and of Edgar (when standard

English is corrupt, “truth must to kennel,” and the language of the people takes over), in the riddling of the fool.

Difference of linguistic code in *King Lear* is mostly a matter of dialect – non-standard forms used by a Kent or an Edgar to signify their separation from the court.<sup>1</sup> But there are numerous places in Shakespeare’s plays where languages collide, and it is these places that I want to examine here. Such linguistic collisions often symbolize other kinds of instability, related to politics, class, or expository strategy, and they afford us insight into the larger issues in the plays in question. Let’s begin with a few examples. Consider the following instances of language difference, beginning with *Henry V*:

- An English king invades France. The French nobles are confident that they will repulse him, but worried none the less. The French princess decides that she had better learn English. We watch her struggling with the language, and, when the war is over, struggling to express her submission to the handsome English king.
- Jack Cade and his band of English rebels capture Lord Say, one of the counselors to Henry VI (in *Henry VI Part 2*). They accuse him of having lost territory in France, having set up a printing press and a paper mill, knowing the difference between a noun and a verb, and – speaking Latin. He is duly beheaded.
- On the border between Wales and England, Hotspur, Worcester, Mortimer, and the Welsh leader Owen Glendower plot rebellion against Henry IV. Mortimer has recently married Glendower’s daughter, but unfortunately she speaks no English and Mortimer speaks no Welsh. Her father serves as interpreter.
- When Valentine, in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, is seized by outlaws on the road between Verona and Milan, the outlaws are impressed when he says that he enjoyed studying languages when he was growing up. They promptly decide to make him their chief.
- In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, when the Welsh parson, Hugh Evans, cross-questions the young William Page on his knowledge of Latin, the poor lad, whose answers are quite good, is confused by the parson’s heavy Welsh accent, while Mistress Quickly thinks Evans is speaking some version of English. Doctor Caius, a French physician, in the same play, also has difficulty with English pronunciation.
- The schoolmaster Holofernes in *Loves Labors Lost*, in addition to his tendency to make up words and to talk at enormous length without saying much, is apt to wander off into Latin or Italian, to the confusion of his audience.

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<sup>1</sup> On dialect in Elizabethan literature, see Paula Blank, *Broken English: Dialects and the Politics of Language in Renaissance Writings* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996).

- Julius Caesar, taking a blow from the assassin Brutus, turns to him in wonder and sadness at this, the “most unkindest cut of all.” “Et tu, Brute?” he asks, and dies.
- The poet Gower, the narrator of *Pericles*, aware that his story covers many countries, asks his audience to forgive him for having everyone appear to speak the same language: “We commit no crime / To use one language in each several clime / Where our scene seems to live” (4.4.5).
- In a judgment that will come back to haunt him, Richard II banishes the quarreling Mowbray for life and Bolingbroke for ten years. Mowbray laments his exile and the fact that, away from the English language, his speech will be imprisoned in his throat and he will be unable to communicate.
- When the braggart and cowardly soldier Parolles in *All’s Wells that Ends Well* loses his drum to the enemy, he declares that he will take it back, hoping that no one will take him up on his declaration. When his fellow soldiers do, he is forced at least to pretend to do so. His comrades stage a mock ambush that night, pretending to be members of a foreign army speaking a foreign language that they make up as they go along. Parolles breaks down and tells the supposed enemy all the secrets of the camp.

Ten episodes, and each one about language difference. What do they tell us about attitudes to languages in Shakespeare and his contemporaries?

I have used the word “language planner” in my title to indicate that Shakespeare’s was a period in which England was establishing the English language as a unifying factor in a still emergent kingdom. Conventionally, the year 1485 was understood as the time when the great civil wars of the fifteenth century came to an end – as though the default condition was peace and civil turmoil interrupted that peace. This view of the fifteenth century and before was espoused by the regime that Henry VII established in 1485 because Henry and his successors were eager to establish their legitimacy and the legitimacy of their mode of government, reliant on a high degree of centralization and the systematic limitation of the power of the nobles (whom today the newspapers would call warlords). In a properly functioning commonwealth, the Tudors declared, these warlords would know their place: rebellion was an offence not just against the king but against God, since the king is God’s viceroy on earth.

### **Cultural difference in the British Isles**

The English kingdom that Henry won in 1485 was in fact a kingdom of distinct regions. The region around London was peaceful and prosperous, with fields and forests fed by the tributaries of the Thames, the river itself as a means of communication, and opportunities for capital investment by the members of the court and the colleges and religious houses -- but out beyond that central area things were less clear. In the Southwest, the Cornish had won Henry’s respect during his time as an exile in Brittany,

but their old Celtic language was failing fast and their agriculture was faltering, though their mines presented interesting possibilities for investors.<sup>2</sup> To the west was Wales, where the Welsh language was widely spoken, and where the nobles of the Welsh Marches – the area on the border between England and Wales, were a frequent problem: witness the scene in *Henry IV* Part 1 to which I have alluded – in which rebels from the north under Hotspur and others seek to make common cause with rebels from the west, including Mortimer, Earl of March. These nobles were descended from the Norman conquerors who arrived in England in 1066, and they moved slowly but steadily westward, particularly when in the thirteenth century Edward I pacified Wales and in 1284 formally annexed it.

To the north was the vast tract of the north country, where communications were poor, population was sparse, and the border between England and Scotland, vague at the best of times, was a place of constant tension. Throughout the previous centuries, English incursions north of the border were common, and Edward I came close to annexing Scotland, only to die in 1307 at Carlisle, on the English/Scottish border and have his son return to London and his favorite Gaveston (famously presented in Marlowe's *Edward II*).<sup>3</sup> Many of the northern families, among them the Percys, the family of Hotspur and his father Northumberland (*Henry IV* Part 1), were not above playing England off against Scotland and Scotland against England. The Scottish royal family traditionally maintained close contacts with France. They spoke Lowland Scots for the most part – either a dialect of English or a separate language, depending on one's point of view, but in fact a branch of the Northumbrian dialect of Anglo-Saxon also used in the north of England (Blank 1996:153). In the Highlands to the north and west, Scots Gaelic, closely related to Irish, was spoken.

Contact between Scotland and Ireland was close. Ireland had been settled by nobles from Wales under Edward I and later, who had gradually integrated themselves into the Irish population. Known as the Old English, they maintained an uneasy relationship with the English crown, often turning to confrontation and, in the sixteenth century, to open rebellion, as Henry and his successors sought to assert control. They spoke a variety of English, but most of the native Irish spoke their own Celtic language.

### **One Nation, One Language**

We are accustomed to the idea that the association of one nation and one language was a creation of the Romanticism of the late eighteenth century, led particularly by the Germans Herder and Fichte and bringing about the nationalist movements of the

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<sup>2</sup> See P. Berresford Ellis, *The Cornish Language and Its Literature* (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974; F.E.Halliday, *A History of Cornwall* (London: Duckworth, 1959). On the expansion of English rule into the Celtic reaches of the British Isles, see Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> On the expansion of English power during this period, and its subsequent contraction, see R. R. Davies, *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles 1093-1343* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

nineteenth century; but in reality they merely revived a much older idea. Some credit Dante with first raising the *questione della lingua* – the notion that Italy needed a single language to unite its various (politically independent) parts – in the *De vulgari eloquentia* of around 1303, and hence describe him as the first language planner. In effect, Dante was seeking to create a common literary language, a language that would unite the elite. Lo Bianco, using terms drawn from the field of language planning, describes Dante’s work as “an early instalment in self-conscious corpus and status planning” – the planning of the language itself (the corpus) and the social and political role of the language (status).<sup>4</sup> Dante’s suggestion that such unity be effected through a common idiom other than Latin was the first stirring of the gradual assertion of regional and national languages as complete and all-encompassing idioms – an assertion advanced rapidly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the economics of printing, which had the effect of vastly expanding literacy in the local languages of urban centers, and by the use of this expanded literacy as the basis for the expansion of the rule of law, of bureaucracy and accounting systems, of liquid capital and the money economy, and all the apparatus of the nation state that required recording and communication over distance.

The languages that emerged from this process were increasingly standardized, though out beyond them were wide ranges of local dialects. A long dialect string linked most of the Romance languages, stretching from Portugal in the west, through Castilian Spain, Catalonia, and southern France, and down through Italy to Calabria and Sicily in one direction and up through central France to Normandy in the other. The traveler in Shakespeare’s day must have encountered an almost limitless range of Romance linguistic utterances in these various local languages, and must have learned to improvise in response. No wonder that Valentine is such a good candidate for captain of the outlaw band in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: you can’t rob travelers very efficiently if you can’t communicate with them, and perhaps a knowledge of foreign languages is also helpful in running what may be a multilingual gang.

## English Abroad

It is unlikely that English would have done the traveler much good: the language was still little used beyond the British Isles, and in the ports and on the highways of Europe other languages would have been far more useful. That is why the soon-to-be-exiled Mowbray, in *Richard II*, speaks of his tongue as being “enjailed” within his mouth:

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Lo Bianco, “Globalisation and national communities of communication,” *Language Problems and Language Planning* 29/2 (2005): 109-133. On Dante, see also Blank 1996. On language planning, see, for example, Robert L. Cooper, *Language Planning and Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Bernard Spolsky, *Language Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Sue Wright, *Language Policy and Language Planning* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Cooper divides language planning into three categories, adding acquisition planning to corpus planning and status planning (i.e. acquisition of a language as a second language). This third category need not concern us here.

The language I have learn'd these forty years,  
 My native English, now I must forgo:  
 And now my tongue's use is to me no more  
 Than an unstringed viol or a harp,  
 Or like a cunning instrument cased up,  
 Or, being open, put into his hands  
 That knows no touch to tune the harmony:  
 Within my mouth you have engaol'd my tongue,  
 Doubly portcullis'd with my teeth and lips;  
 And dull unfeeling barren ignorance  
 Is made my gaoler to attend on me.  
 I am too old to fawn upon a nurse,  
 Too far in years to be a pupil now:  
 What is thy sentence then but speechless death,  
 Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath? (1.3.159-173)

Though Mowbray suggests that he is too old to learn another language, the well educated individual would need such knowledge to deal with countries beyond England's borders. When Jack Cade calls for Lord Say's execution for communicating with France, and for speaking Latin, and for understanding the difference between a noun and a verb, he is giving expression to the extreme xenophobia that still manifests itself occasionally in the most heavily anglocentric countries, where knowledge of a foreign language may be seen as a sign of potential disloyalty: John Kerry won few votes in the United States by being fluent in French, and George Bush may have won some because of his manifest lack of fluency even in English. An easy command of language may, under certain circumstances, be cause for suspicion.<sup>5</sup>

### **English Language Policy in Britain**

Just as the crown advanced its hold over outlying areas by a combination of military force and economic development, so it sought to assert its authority by dictating linguistic unity. The Act of Union with Wales in 1536 specifically forbade Welsh speakers from using Welsh in the law courts or from holding municipal office: "... from henceforth no person or persons that use the Welshe speche or langage shall have or enjoy any manner office or fees within the Realme of Englonde Wales or other the Kinges dominions ... onless he or they use and exercise the speche or langage of English" (quoted by Blank 1996:131). When William Salesbury published his *Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe* in 1547 he specifically equated a knowledge of English with loyalty to the crown.

The Statutes of Kilkenny of 1367, approved under Edward III, were an effort to suppress native practices among the Anglo-Norman aristocracy in Ireland:

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<sup>5</sup> In *Henry VIII* much is made of foreign fashions, including an edict specifically condemning French fashions. Wolsey seems at pains to stress his independent Englishness, for example sending the Lord Chamberlain out to talk with a group of supposedly French masquers because "You can speak the French tongue" (1.4.58). The masquers, ironically, turn out to be the King and members of his court.

Whereas at the conquest of the land of Ireland, and for a long time after, the English of the said land used the English language, mode of riding and apparel, and were governed and ruled, both they and their subjects called Betaghies, according to the English law, in which time God and holy Church, and their franchises according to their condition were maintained and themselves lived in due subjection. But now many English of the said land, forsaking the English language, manners, mode of riding, laws and usages, live and govern themselves according to the manners, fashion, and language of the Irish enemies; and also have made divers marriages and alliances between themselves and the Irish enemies aforesaid; whereby the said land, and the liege people thereof, the English language, the allegiance due to our lord the king, and the English laws there, are put in subjection and decayed, and the Irish enemies exalted and raised up, contrary to reason.

Among other things, the statutes prohibited intermarriage, the use of Irish surnames, the settlement of disputes by Irish law, and the use of the Irish language by the English. They had relatively little effect, and so in 1534 Henry VIII issued an act against Irish poets and in 1537 “An act for the English order, habite, and language,” again directed at the so-called Old English in Ireland. In short, what we see under Henry VIII is the consolidation of English rule by the selective rupture of links with the Continent, that is, by the Reformation, and a reassertion of longstanding policies of Anglicization aimed at reasserting the central control first advanced by Edward I and consolidated by Edward III. The Tudors engaged in pretty clearly defined status planning aimed at the anglicization of Britain. This process set off in England and outlying regions a more directly political version of the old *questione della lingua*, in which competing languages and rival versions of English struggled for dominance, reflecting in the process economic concerns particularly. Thus, the Cornish uprising of 1549 against the English prayer book, while fundamentally economic in origin, manifested itself as a conflict between Cornish and Latin on the one hand and the English of metropolitan bureaucrats on the other (Tanner 2004).<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (1991)<sup>7</sup> describes this competitive process as one in which individuals speculate and compete for linguistic capital, a process which includes ideological identification with particular forms and the stigmatization of others.

### **Henry V: Language and Rape**

In *Henry V* the depiction of the French is not only ideologically driven (they are effete, apparently unable to communicate with one another on anything other than possessions [particularly horses], arrogant, and impotent<sup>8</sup>) but also linguistically driven. As I have already suggested, the geography of the play is expansionist: the composition of Henry’s army includes people apparently from the farthest reaches of the British Isles – Jamie from Scotland, Macmorris from Ireland, Fluellen from Wales. Along with Gower of

<sup>6</sup> Marcus Tanner, *The Last of the Celts* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond & Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Greenblatt notes the Dauphin’s observation at 3.5.28-30, “Our madams mock at us, and plainly say / Our mettle is bred out, and they will give / Their bodies to the lust of English youth”: *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 59.

England, they seem to represent the unity of Henry's British realm. At the same time, the English language invades France along with the English army.

The handling of the linguistic situation in this play is odd because it operates on three levels. The driving fiction behind the play as a whole is that everyone speaks the same language – what one might describe as the monolingual convention that customarily underlies works dealing with more than one linguistic community (and, by the way, that is little studied as a phenomenon). According to this monolingual convention, driven of course by assumptions about the monolingual nature of the audience, all languages are mediated through the common idiom of English.<sup>9</sup> Thus the English speak English, but so do the French, even though we know that they are in fact speaking French. But on a second level we recognize the difference, and from time to time the monolingual fiction recedes, to be replaced by bilingual incomprehension, notably in the famous language-learning scene, 3.4, in which the young Princess Katherine seeks to master the English taught to her by Alice, her lady-in-waiting.

KATHARINE

Alice, tu as été en Angleterre, et tu parles bien le langage.

ALICE

Un peu, madame.

KATHARINE

Je te prie, m'enseignez: il faut que j'apprenne à parler. Comment appelez-vous la main en Anglois?

ALICE

La main? elle est appelée de hand.

KATHARINE

De hand. Et les doigts?

ALICE

Les doigts? ma foi, j'oublie les doigts; mais je me souviendrai. Les doigts? je pense qu'ils sont appelés de fingres; oui, de fingres.

The enumeration of the parts of the body proceeds amusingly and entertainingly, and Alice encourages her pupil:

ALICE

....Sauf votre honneur, en verité, vous prononcez les mots aussi droit que les natifs

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<sup>9</sup> In a recent paper, "Beyond Translation: Towards a Geolinguistic Imagination," Mary Louise Pratt singles out André Dubus' novel *The House of Sand and Fog*, to ask how the author goes about rendering a long internal monologue at the beginning of the novel, delivered by the first-person narrator, whose native language is Farsi. The apparent language of the monologue is English, but somehow we know that this is an English rendering of Farsi. And the plot itself turns on misunderstandings arising from language difference. Similar complexities arise in Brian Friel's brilliant play *Translations*, in which characters speak supposedly in both English and Irish, and indeed misunderstand one another because of this difference of language, yet both languages are rendered on the stage as English.

d'Angleterre.

KATHARINE

Je ne doute point d'apprendre, par la grace de Dieu, et en peu de temps.

ALICE

N'avez vous pas déjà oublié ce que je vous ai enseigné?

KATHARINE

Non, je réciterai à vous promptement: de hand, de fingres, de mails--

ALICE

De nails, madame.

KATHARINE

De nails, de arm, de ilbow.

ALICE

Sauf votre honneur, de elbow.

KATHARINE

Ainsi dis-je; de elbow, de nick, et de sin. Comment appelez-vous le pied et la robe?

ALICE

De foot, madame; et de coun.

KATHARINE

De foot et de coun! O Seigneur Dieu! ce sont mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user: je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. Foh! le foot et le coun!

And thus the scene veers off into a series of misprisions deeply embarrassing to Katharine. Should we conclude, as she does, that English is a crude and vulgar language compared with her polished French? That is what Henry tries to suggest, disingenuously, in the later wooing scene. Or should we simply laugh at this episode of linguistic confusion? It is here that a third dimension of linguistic difference opens up – namely that of language and power. Our amusement at the episode should perhaps be tempered by the realization of its location in the play. The invading English (exclusively male) have yet to subdue the French, but already Katharine (the only female in the play with more than a bit part) is learning the language of the future victor. Furthermore, the episode comes right after one of the more disturbing scenes, in which Henry threatens the recalcitrant inhabitants of Harfleur with the worst excesses of war by unleashing a hungry and angry army on the civilian inhabitants of the besieged city:

I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur  
Till in her ashes she lie buried.  
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,  
And the flesh'd soldier, rough and hard of heart,  
In liberty of bloody hand shall range

With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass  
 Your fresh-fair virgins and your flowering infants.  
 What is it then to me, if impious war,  
 Array'd in flames like to the prince of fiends,  
 Do, with his smirch'd complexion, all fell feats  
 Enlink'd to waste and desolation?  
 What is't to me, when you yourselves are cause,  
 If your pure maidens fall into the hand  
 Of hot and forcing violation?  
 What rein can hold licentious wickedness  
 When down the hill he holds his fierce career?  
 We may as bootless spend our vain command  
 Upon the enraged soldiers in their spoil  
 As send precepts to the leviathan  
 To come ashore. Therefore, you men of Harfleur,  
 Take pity of your town and of your people,  
 Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command;  
 Whiles yet the cool and temperate wind of grace  
 O'erblows the filthy and contagious clouds  
 Of heady murder, spoil and villany.  
 If not, why, in a moment look to see  
 The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand  
 Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters.... (3.3.8-35)

The dominant image here is that of rape. The ritual learning of English by the daughter of France is the alternative to, or the consequence of, such threats. In the process, she translates (or rather submits) her body, piece by piece, into the language of the conqueror, ending, with a certain inevitability, by turning the violation of *foutre* and *con* into *foot* and *gown* through a process of linguistic submission that neutralizes the sexual threat but seems, almost violently, to reduce her French identity to a mere appendage of English-language hegemony (we note also that we begin with hands and end with sexual organs). Translation becomes transference of power and obliteration of the source language.<sup>10</sup>

### Language and Identity

The political dimension of the linguistic struggle that I described earlier, before my excursion into *Henry V*, was still notably underway in Britain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, augmented with regard to Scotland by the arrival of a Scottish king in England in 1603, and by a spiralling competition between provincial autonomy and central control that led ultimately to civil war in the mid-seventeenth century. It was accompanied also by intense interest in the issue of identity. Language and identity customarily accompany one another as problematized phenomena,<sup>11</sup> and just as concern

<sup>10</sup> On linguistic hegemony in general see Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, *Linguistic Genocide in Education, or World Diversity and Human Rights* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, John E. Joseph, *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); John Edwards, *Language, Society and Identity* (Oxford & New York: Blackwell).

about language is a natural accompaniment to the linguicentric phenomenon of theater (especially Elizabethan theater), so concern about identity accompanies a literary mode, namely drama, that turns on the assumption of disguised identity, namely play-acting. Again, this is a huge issue, inappropriate for close examination here. I need hardly stress that a play like *Othello* is minutely concerned with questions of identity (and, by the way, also with a grandiloquent hero, who has all the best lines in the play but never figures out the nuances of social interaction in the society that he enters: Othello's eloquence decenters our assumptions about the relationship between language and identity; in this respect the play shares kinship with *King Lear*). In *The Comedy of Errors*, the serious and deeply painful question of individual autonomy and hence individual identity is occluded by the farcical nature of the action (much as the political and gender implications of Katherine's English lesson are occluded by the sheer entertainment of the episode); but always lurking beneath the surface of *The Comedy of Errors*, an early Shakespeare play about the mistaken identity of twins, is our experience of disorientation when our sense of self is invalidated by those around us: our own identity, Shakespeare tells us, is socially and collectively constructed: we know who we are in large part because others tell us who we are. The Antipholuses and Dromios of the play are constantly being mistaken for people they are not – an idea which Shakespeare was to exploit time and again after this early excursion into twinship and identity.

The two issues – language and identity – come together in startling form in *All's Well that Ends Well*, a play probably composed close in time to *Othello* and *King Lear*. Since this is not the best known of Shakespeare's plays, allow me a word on the plot.

Bertram is the son of the Countess of Rossillion. Helena, the orphaned daughter of a famous physician, has recently joined the Countess's household on the death of her physician father. She is secretly in love with Bertram. Bertram, escorted by the good courtier Lord Lafew and by the vainglorious courtier Parolles, leaves to do service at the court of the King of France. The King is deathly ill.

Helena speculates that she might cure the King with her father's medicine. With the Countess's blessing (and knowledge of her love for Bertram) she departs to do so. She gains entrance to the King with Lafew's assistance. In a very moving and magical scene, she says she will cure him. If she does not, he can take her life; if she succeeds, she gets to choose a husband from the King's courtiers.

The cure effected, she chooses Bertram. He is furious: she is not of his class, and he does not love her. But the King obliges him to marry. He heads off to the wars with Parolles, into whose orbit he has fallen, and sends Helena back to his mother's, saying that he will not acknowledge her unless she gets him a child and wears his ring. Helena, mortified that she has endangered Bertram by in effect forcing him to go to the wars, runs off to Florence. There, she meets Diana, who has been the object of Bertram's amorous affections but has remained pure.

The soldiers decide to lay a plot to show up Parolles the boaster. Ensnared in his own boasting rhetoric, he says he will enter the enemy's camp to recover a drum they have captured. They are sure he will come up with some excuse for not doing it. They decide they will ambush him and pretend to be foreign soldiers opposed to the Florentines. Bertram is a willing participant in the plot.

It is decided that Diana will agree to an assignation with Bertram, but Helena will take Diana's place. So Helena lays a plot to catch Bertram<sup>12</sup> even as Bertram and his friends are laying a plot to catch Parolles.

So the young men prepare the ambush. They decide to use a nonsense language to confuse Parolles: "When you sally upon him speak what terrible language you will; though you understand it not yourselves, no matter." "So we seem to know is to know straight our purpose," says the First Lord. They appoint one of their number to serve as an interpreter between this nonsense language and the language of the play.

When Parolles appears, they charge on to the stage uttering blood-curdling cries in their new language: *Throca movousus, cargo, cargo, cargo. Villianda par corbo, cargo.* They seize Parolles and blindfold him. Parolles, supposedly a skilled linguist, is confused.

And I shall lose my life for want of language.  
If there be here German, or Dane, Low Dutch,  
Italian or French, let him speak to me,  
I'll discover that which shall undo the Florentine. (4.1.72-75)

"*Boskos vauvado.* I understand thee and can speak thy tongue," says the soldier appointed to serve as interpreter. "*Kerelybonto.*"

"*Manka revania dulce,*" says the soldier, turning to the First Lord. "*Oscorbidulchos volivorco.*" He replies. The soldier interprets: "The general is content to spare thee yet ... / Haply thou mayst inform / Something to save thy life." Again, Parolles says he is willing to tell all. "*Acordo linta,*" replies the soldier. "Come on; thou art granted space."

This scene, 4.1, and the scene in which Parolles is interrogated, 4.3, serve as bookends for Bertram's supposed seduction of Diana and actual union with Helena. In 4.2 he woos Diana, who has already compacted with Helena for the bed trick. His swearing eternal love for Diana (in accents as hollow-sounding as any in *Love's Labors Lost*) provokes from her the observation that "'Tis not the many oaths that makes the truth, / But the plain single vow that is vowed true," which we can read as a commentary both on Bertram's treachery and on Parolles' volubility. It is agreed that they will meet at midnight for their assignation. When Bertram reappears in scene 3, the First Lord exclaims, "Here's his lordship now. How now, my lord? Is't not after midnight?" By now, Bertram has also already heard of Helena's supposed death (on which more in a moment). Helena is thus both legitimized as wife and dead to the world at one and the same time. As for Bertram, upon receiving a letter from his mother, presumably announcing Helena's death, he has "changed almost into another man," according to the Second Lord.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. the bed-trick in *Measure for Measure*: Marliiss Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994) lists 44 examples in the plays of the period.

Parolles is interrogated: “I will confess what I know without constraint.” “*Bosko chimurcho*,” says the soldier to the First Lord. “*Boblibindo chicurmurco*,” the First Lord replies. And here the farce of the ambush merges with the larger action of the play: not only does Parolles divulge information about the Florentines but he also reveals the secret of Bertram’s dalliance with Diana. Bertram is shown up as unfaithful and, in his way, like Parolles, a liar.

But I want to pause here to ask some questions about Shakespeare’s invented language. We should note, first, that it is Parolles, whose very name tells us that he is all words, indeed all speech (It. *parola*, word, speech), who is shown up by words and speech. Though he speaks many languages, this language is like none that he has ever encountered. In fact, to the best of my knowledge no one has ever made sense of it (probably because it authentically *doesn’t* make sense). Its endings would suggest Romance origins, as would the occasional word: there is no sign of “German, or Dane,” or “Low Dutch” here. Like the anagrams that Malvolio reads in Maria’s fake letter from Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, it often seems just on the edge of making sense (Malvolio [reading]: “M, O, A, I. This simulation is not as the former; and yet, to crush this a little, it would bow to me, for every one of these letters are in my name”). And we, like Malvolio’s theatre audience, as opposed to those who are watching him from behind garden hedges, struggle to make sense of something that does not make sense. If *Manka revania dulce* means “I am content to spare thee yet,” *dulche* seems an appropriate word in such a context; if *Acordo linta* means “I grant you space,” the Italian word *accordo* is the right word for “I grant.” But *manka revania? linto?* And what do we make of such wonderfully flamboyant utterances as *oscorbidulchos volivorco* or *kerelybonto?*

This language so readily made up by the band of soldiers around Count Bertram perhaps resembles one of those dialects they might have encountered in their wanderings between their home in Roussillon on the border of France and Spain, Paris and Marseilles along the way, and at the wars in Florence. It resembles, too, the *lingua franca*, the Romance-based pidgin (a mélange primarily of Italian, French, Spanish and Occitan) employed by the multinational crews of ships and the merchants in the ports primarily in the Mediterranean, and a language no doubt audible also in the port of London.<sup>13</sup> Presumably in the armies of Europe similar pidgins must have grown up from time to time, languages of convenience emerging and dying away as the armies themselves evolved and contracted.

In Shakespeare’s fake language, the process of translation from nonsense language to comprehensible English does seem, in some dark way, to originate in the nonsense language: “I am content to spare thee” follows from *dulche*; “I grant you space” seems a not unreasonable effort to make sense of *acordo linta*. When Shakespeare returns to his nonsense language two scenes later for the interrogation of Parolles, *portotartarossa* seems like a pretty good rendering of “calling for the tortures” – *porto*, “bring,” *tartarossa*, “instruments of torture.” And when the First Soldier, who serves as interpreter, says “*Bosko chimurcho*” to the First Lord, impersonating the general, it makes a certain amount of sense that the supposed general replies with an apparent

<sup>13</sup> See *A Glossary of Lingua Franca* at <http://www.uwm.edu/~corre/franca/go.html>.

inflection “*Boblibindo chicurmurco*.” In short, the nonsense language and the real language are not unrelated, and the creativity of the first gives birth to particular responses in the second. Perhaps that is why, when we move on to the interrogation of Parolles, we shift to a written text: at this stage his responses matter, and so the utterances that stimulate them must make sense.

Bertram is nervous as the interrogation begins because he fears that in the meantime Parolles may have confessed certain things about his amours. In fact, there is an odd and troubling dissonance here between the farcical development of the episode and some of the implications for its participants: Bertram’s moral bankruptcy lies increasingly exposed, and Parolles, bombarded by nonsense language, loses his entertainment value as he gains our somewhat dismayed sympathies. We are reminded of the plot against Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, where, at a certain point, Sir Toby, wearying of the whole affair, declares of Malvolio, “I would we were well rid of this knavery. If he may be conveniently delivered, I would he were” (4.2.77-79).<sup>14</sup> We may admire the exuberance of linguistic inventiveness on the part of the soldiers, but at its center lies the assault on identity which, as in *The Comedy of Errors* with its psychologically disorienting mistaken identities, is initially occluded by the farcical situation. Linguistic exuberance may, as Bakhtin suggests in his study of Rabelais, imply the release of inhibition that we associate with carnival; but the linguistic outpourings of a Pantagruel or a Panurge can easily turn to threat.<sup>15</sup>

After the initial nonsense exchanges we move from spontaneous dialogue to a written list of questions provided, we assume, by Bertram. The First Soldier pretends to translate them from the nonsense language, but in fact simply reads them. And this first text is but prelude for another text, found about Parolles’ person and also read by the First Soldier – in this case literally read in the same language. It is a message to Diana warning her not to fall for the blandishments of the count, that is, Bertram. The joke on Parolles turns rapidly into a seriously compromising joke on Bertram: what starts as nonsense ends as embarrassing meaning.

The disorientation of Bertram continues as the play’s action proceeds. He receives word that Helena is dead (a story put out of course by Helena, who renders herself a non-person: just as she keeps the King alive, so she “dies” in order to allow the social order to continue) and Bertram decides to return to Rossillion. Helena, having slept with Bertram and become pregnant, sets out with Diana to Marseilles, where she expects to find the King and explain all to him, but he has left for Rossillion.

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<sup>14</sup> Sir Toby has his reasons for this change of heart and they are not only a consequence of his sympathy for Malvolio; but there comes a certain point where our sympathies shift and farce risks turning into cruelty.

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Daniel Damrosch for this point (Conference on Comparative Literature in the World Today, Columbia University, 28-29 March 2006). Rabelais puts a series of nonsense languages, somewhat reminiscent of Shakespeare’s, in the mouth of Panurge, whom Pantagruel meets in Book II of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (2.9). Note also the neologizing of the man from Limousin (2.6) and the contents of the Library of St. Victor (2.7). On linguistic exuberance and its association with Parolles, see Sheldon P. Zitner, *All’s Wells that Ends Well*, Twayne’s New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 155.

In Rossillion, the King and Bertram talk of marrying a contrite Bertram to Lafew's daughter. But Helena appears, not dead after all, like the miraculous return of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. If she can prove what she claims, says Bertram, "I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" – though the very verbal repetition perhaps suggests a certain mental effort rather than spontaneous love. In any case, it seems pretty clear that she can, though the play ends with just the slightest note of uncertainty.

*All's Well that Ends Well* is a problematic work in many respects, and it is not my purpose here to seek to explain it – beyond perhaps suggesting that it is a comedy turning into a romance, written midway between the apex of Shakespeare's comedies, *Twelfth Night* (from about 1599), and the first of the four romances that came toward the end of his career. The romances turn on the transforming power of the miraculous – lost princesses who are found, wives who come back from the dead, kingdoms miraculously restored. The King of France's health is equally miraculously restored, and perhaps not so much by the medicine that Helena administers as by her own powers to transform. I like to think that she is equally able to transmute the institution of marriage from the deeply unsatisfactory arrangement that is first presented in this play to the true sacrament that possibly lies just beyond the boundaries of the final act.

But the play is unyielding, displaying the same discord among its modes of presentation that characterizes, for example, *Troilus and Cressida*, and, to a lesser degree, *Measure for Measure*. Some critics suggest that Helena, forcing the action to secure the husband she wants, must ultimately go through a process of self-abasement and contrition in order to be fully possessed by him (a phallogocentric reading, if you will, espoused most recently by Lisa Jardine, who is clearly out of sympathy with the play). Some see Helena as a power for good in a debased world: this miraculous healer of the king, must efface herself in order to save her husband (essentially G. K. Hunter's reading, in the Arden edition, and one with which I feel myself in broad agreement). The would-be director of the play is likely to find its greatest challenge in the reconciliation of the romance of the king's healing with the enforced union, and the accompanying sexual intrigue, of Helena and Bertram. It is hard to make Bertram's conduct anything other than ugly, but its beginning lies in Helena's being thrust upon him.

In fact, I prefer to see the play as in part a tug-of-war between two apparently secondary characters, Lafew and Parolles, for possession of Bertram, and in part as Helena's use, first of a kind of sympathetic magic, and then of wily subterfuge, to bring about an outcome that is morally compelling, and that carries through to a further generation the ancient strengths of her native Rossillion. And the nonsense language, which unmasks Parolles, unmasks Bertram too – and it surrounds, in a kind of incipient chaos that will yet yield meaning, the consummation of Bertram's marriage at the very moment when he believes himself free of it: the mad syntax of invented language is belied by the syntax of dramatic action.

### **Monolingual multilingualism**

Our excursion into Shakespeare's languages has taken us through a number of treatments of the relationship between audience monolingualism and multilingual action. In *All's Well that Ends Well*, an English-for-French monolingual setting is punctuated by an episode of mad language-making. In *Richard II* and, in a different way, *Henry VI Part 2*, an English monolingual setting is disturbed by the fact of a non-English-speaking world. Several of the plays seem to run the risk of moving off into uncontrolled multilingualism, or into the debasement of language itself, notably *Love's Labors Lost* – one of several plays in which language becomes a kind of debased currency. Gower's observation about *Pericles*, that a multilingual setting is reduced to monolingualism for the convenience of the audience, is given a different twist in *Henry V*, where two quite different and in fact self-contradictory linguistic strategies are employed, the one a fiction of monolingualism, and the other a representation of difference in language as difference in power. But there is one other variation on the theme of Shakespearean multilingualism that I wish to add to the mix.

What do you do when, as in the episode of Jack Cade in *2 Henry VI*, language knowledge is a marker of social class but the imagined language of the play is something other than English? This is the situation in *Julius Caesar*. Cicero speaks Greek, which Cassio cannot understand:

CASSIO. Did Cicero say anything?

CASCA. Ay, he spoke Greek.

CASSIO. To what effect?

CASCA. Nay, and I tell you that, I'll ne'er look you i' th' face again. But those that understood him smil'd at one another, and shook their heads; but for mine own part, it was Greek to me. (1.2.278)

Of course, the play's fiction is posited on the assumption that Cassio and Casca and everyone else in the play, when they speak English, are in fact speaking Latin: the play is written in English-for-Latin. The best educated of the Romans were also conversant with Greek, could read Greek texts and looked to the Greeks as the precursors and founders of the greatness of Roman civilization.<sup>16</sup> So in Rome Greek was an elite language, much as Latin was an elite language of the educated classes of Shakespeare's day (some had studied Greek, but Latin was of course basic to any education beyond the most elementary).

The resentment that springs from ignorance of such elite languages, a failure to understand, leads to anger and violence, most notably and disastrously in *2 Henry VI*, where Lord Say's ability to communicate in foreign languages is enough to condemn him to immediate execution by an angry mob: "He can speak French and therefore he is a traitor" – linguistic xenophobia (xenoglossophobia as it were; the exercise of what today is called language discrimination). Skill in languages is identified with the ruling classes, who command the means of communication.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, J. N. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Casca is an outsider. Brutus, on the other hand, has the education and the sophistication that make him a member of the elite. It is highly significant that Caesar speaks in Latin to Brutus, in those most famous words at the time of his death, *Et tu, Brute?*. It is not that, at the moment of his death, Caesar utters a tag in Latin (as opposed to the Latin-as-English of the rest of the play), because this is some moment of truth or of a famous and therefore untranslated utterance. In effect he says to his assassin: “I see that you, Brutus, *a member of my class*, have also betrayed me.” Language choice is a key element in this message. The tag is derived ultimately from Suetonius, the Roman historian, who in his life of Caesar, describes Caesar’s death in these terms: “And in this wise he was stabbed with three and twenty wounds, uttering not a word, but merely a groan at the first stroke, though some have written that when Marcus Brutus rushed at him, he said *in Greek, kai su, teknon* ‘You too, my child?’” Shakespeare is one of those who imagine him speaking. Thus, as the play is written in English-for-Latin, so Caesar speaks in Latin-for-Greek – a neat translation along a linguistic class continuum.<sup>17</sup>

## Epilogue

No examination of difference of language in the drama of Shakespeare’s day would be complete without mention of perhaps the most remarkable example of multilingual chaos in this period, Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, which confronts the implications of language difference in a truly amazing and bewildering way.<sup>18</sup> Hieronimo, the mad hero of the play, plans the presentation of a play at court in which he slays the object of his hatred, Lorenzo, in actuality. (Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* separates this event into two pieces: a play to catch the conscience of a king and a fencing match that results in actual death: the two are one and the same in Kyd.) These are Hieronimo’s instructions to the players:

Each one of us must act his part  
In unknown languages,  
That it may breed the more variety.  
As you, my lord, in Latin, I in Greek,  
You in Italian; and for because I know  
That Bell-Imperia hath practised the French,  
In courtly French shall all her phrases be.

Hieronimo himself will deliver an epilogue in English.... Thus he controls the entire communication network of the play. He calls the play-within-the-play “The Fall of Babylon” and evidently sees himself as a kind of scourge of god, a little like Marlowe’s Tamburlaine. This play that Hieronimo presents is, then, *a play that makes no sense*.

<sup>17</sup> As for the famous utterance *Et tu, Brute?*, the tag in that form appears to originate in the little-known anonymous play *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*, first printed in 1595. So much for antiquity.

<sup>18</sup> Paula Blank offers a number of other examples of the exploitation of language difference in the plays of Shakespeare’s contemporaries. Some revolve around difference in language varieties (most notably the stage Welshmen who appear not just in Shakespeare but in Jonson’s masque *For the Honor of Wales* and in Thomas Dekker’s *The Welsh Ambassador* and elsewhere), others actually include foreign language text (e.g. fake Dutch in the fifth act of Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*).

The text that has come down to us is in English, so presumably the performance is *multilingual in the fiction* but monolingual in the acting, English-for-multilingualism, as it were. So what is the nature of this device? Do we see on the stage a play in English that we are to imagine is in a variety of languages, or do we see on the stage a play in various languages whose text we accordingly cannot understand? One thing is clear: the action collapses into a kind of fictional Babel, under cover of which Hieronymo takes bloody action. Later Hieronymo will declare: “First take my tongue, and afterwards my heart,” and he himself commits an act of linguicide, of self-glottophagia, when, in his ravings (“Hieronymo is mad again”), he bites out his own tongue: the play ends in a kind of disintegration of language.

And this act of autoglossectomy is a good point at which to end this discussion, lest it spiral outwards to embrace the abundant heteroglossia of the drama, of the marketplace of language, and of the incipient alienation that marks the emergence of the early modern in Elizabethan England. It was a creative but troubling time, and it expressed itself in creative but troubling language.

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