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“Enfranchised” Language in Mulcaster’s *Elementarie* and Shakespeare’s *Henry V*

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of early literary theory and practice in Renaissance England, which focuses specifically on Shakespeare’s language use. The end of the sixteenth century in England experienced a linguistic revolution as Latin was gradually replaced by vernacular English. Renaissance rhetoricians such as George Puttenham and Thomas Wilson patriotically argued that English was capable of employing figures of speech to express complex ideas. Yet in this period the vernacular was in a process of formation, demonstrated by Richard Mulcaster’s *Elementarie* (1582). He argued for the expansion of the lexicon according to “enfranchisement”: the welcoming and naturalizing of foreign words from Latin, Greek, Spanish, French and Italian into English (1582: 172).¹ The *Elementarie* reveals how language was being shaped in a period of massive linguistic change. This is especially visible in the dynamic creativity of Shakespeare’s linguistically-inventive drama, made possible by the transition from Latin to a protean vernacular. He staged the difference within English itself and its mixing with foreign languages. This is particularly prevalent in *Henry V* (1599) with the representation of French and regional dialects, where linguistic exchange and semantic negotiation bring linguistic difference to the fore and the lexical parts become all the more plastic. This article seeks to examine what happens when English is set alongside foreign tongues: why they are used, how they are represented, and how they interact. It will argue that this attention to foreign language demonstrates English inviting rather than excluding strange tongues for the health of the linguistic body and the enhancement of expression.

Mulcaster and Unstable Language

In her study of sixteenth-century language, Jane Donawerth begins by arguing that in the Renaissance there was believed to be no gap between word and thing, that it is a relation ordained by God. She says, “God himself acknowledges that men are also creators: by bestowing names that characterize things, men make an imitation of the order and significance of God’s creation...By learning why a certain name was imposed on a thing, one may actually learn something of the nature of the thing itself” (1984: 30).² Language is solid, authoritative and stable, contrary to Mulcaster’s depiction of language in the *Elementarie*. He advocates a normative orthography, offering a table of some eight thousand words in “correct” spelling, revealing the lack of the standardised or accepted use of language. His theory of language is based on “ordinary” use, where “new occasions brede new words”, where language can change to express new experience (1582: 138). For this reason he promotes the use of English above Latin, describing the latter as “absolute, and free from motion, it is shrined up in books and not ordinary in use” (1582: 177). There is a sense of sanctity of a language “shrined”, untouchable and immovable, in opposition to English. Despite being concerned with the “right writing of our English tung”, he explicitly defends custom and the prerogative of language to change (1582: titlepage).

On Renaissance etymology, Donawerth states “one was delving into deep mysteries by studying words, learning what former wise men thought of the things they named” (1984: 31). Yet this is contrary to the sense we get from Mulcaster, that new occasions form new words, available to everyone to create, not just “wise men”, and as travel and therefore human experience expands, so does our vocabulary. Mulcaster chooses to use the vernacular –spoken by all– rather than Latin –spoken by the learned. He does not ring-fence language and knowledge to a select few male scholars, but opens it up to those who use it, forming his perception of language as it is “observed in daily experience” (1582: 246). Ben Jonson takes a less democratic stand: “Custome is the most certain mistress of language[...] yet when I name custom, I understand not the vulgar custom; for that were a precept no less dangerous to language than life, if we should speak or live after the manners of the vulgar: but that I call custom of speech, which is the consent of the learned” (1903: 414), to which Donawerth agrees: “when any man can invent his own meaning for words, words also lose their validity” (1984: 33). For Shakespeare, his use of prose, more relevant to ideas of “ordinary” language, suggests that words certainly do not lose their validity when placed in the throat of every man or woman. Both Mulcaster and Shakespeare share a democratic approach and it seems that Mulcaster especially is raising questions about the ownership of language.

Mulcaster’s proposal of “enfranchisement” suggests that language is unfixed, infinitely changeable and expansive. Other writers, however, were resistant to the extent of the linguistic variance and deviance this created. For example, John Florio sees the inferiority of English in terms of the mixed origin of its vocabulary, describing the

language as “confused, bepeesed with many tongues: it taketh many words of the latine, and mo from the French, and mo from the Italian, and many mo from the Duitch, some also from the Greeke, and from the Britaine, so that if every language had his owne wordes againe, there woulde but a fewe remaine for English men, and yet every day they adde”(1578: 51 v.). Despite Florio’s multilingual credentials and his extensive works focusing on linguistic crossovers, he still wishes to see languages nationally partitioned and laments the expansion of the lexicon through “enfranchisement”. Similarly, Thomas Wilson argues against borrowing from other languages, advocating that we should “never affect any straunge ynkehorne termes, but to speake as is commonly received” (1553: n. pag.). Wilson states that, specifically, the use of “inkhorn” terms should be avoided: borrowing scholarly or affected Latin terms and inserting them into English. He claims that those who use them produce fundamental misunderstandings even within families: “if some of their mothers were alive, thei were not able to tell what they say” (1553: n. pag.). Significantly, Wilson, like Mulcaster, puts his faith in “ordinary” language use to determine the rules of usage, for it seems no better source existed. Language gathers its meaning from the everyday way it is used, not according to a priori rules. This leaves us with a picture of the vernacular that may more accurately reflect the reality of diverse historical usage, but is less controllable and traceable than if it evolved according to a collection of agreed regulations.

The protean nature of the vernacular in the sixteenth century has been recognised by Paula Blank, who states “[i]n an era in which the meaning of ‘English’ was still in flux, there was a widespread, intoxicating sense that the vernacular was up for grabs, its forms plastic enough to respond to the dictates and whims of individual proponents for change” (1996: 29). The absence of a monolingual vernacular dictionary had implications for the meaning, spelling, pronunciation and etymology of words which were without consensus or standardisation. It can only be estimated how much variance there was in the lexicon, and even after dictionaries were introduced the elasticity within language to bend around corners, to stretch and contract, did not disappear. Equally, the later existence of dictionaries does not mean that all inconsistency is eradicated, that meaning is eternally fixed or that everyone agrees with the definition and uses it in that way; language innovates to stay alive and express our new experiences, as Mulcaster says, “new occasions brede new words” (1582: 138). This is especially visible in poetic language, a place where language is always under pressure, where meaning is not straightforward but substituted and discursive and stretched beyond the demands of straightforward speech.

The influx of thousands of new words from foreign languages in the sixteenth century led to debates about the presence of “barbaric” elements within the national vocabulary. Some early modern writers argued that enrichment was civilising, others that it was vulgarising. Mulcaster encourages Englishmen to imagine foreign words “as the stranger denisons be to the laws of our cuntrie”, perhaps accepting that natural and foreign words may not settle together so easily (1582: 174). He has a practical approach to what could be seen as the adultery of the vernacular: “Is it a stranger? but no Turk. And though it were an enemies word, yet good is worth the getting” (1582 [1925]: 287).

Using the “Turk” as the epitome of the racialised other, he suggests that the quality and usefulness of a foreign word is more important than its strange origin. In this way, linguistic forms are imagined as sites of expansion, both in terms of words and culture, where something new is integrated to form a larger whole. Yet this is not always an easy or comfortable assimilation and a tension exists at the join between two languages. The suspension of a word from one language within another is troubled by the fact that its difference is never completely erased, as Mulcaster admits that even though alien linguistic signs should be utilized, the mother tongue “semeth to haue two heds, the one homeborn, the other a stranger” (1582: 172). This image of a two-headed tongue, indeed a forked tongue, carries undercurrents of double speak, of serpentine magical linguistic manipulation and persuasion, of enchanted language.³ Although Mulcaster’s approach to “enfranchised” language is pragmatic, this disconcerting image hints at the alien and monstrous growth of English as it has evolved. It seems, however, that the pervasive foreign hand renders the monsterring of English to be unavoidable. George Pettie marvels at the abundance of supposed “inkhorn” terms already naturalised within English: “I know not how we should speake any thing without blacking our mouthes with inke” from the inkhorn pot (1581: 3). According to Pettie, everyone speaking is wagging a black tongue.⁴

Henry V

Shakespeare took advantage of slippery language and these fractious debates by staging linguistic difference in *Henry V*. Act III Scene 4 focuses on Katherine, Princess of France, and Alice her maid, and is conducted entirely in French with sixty one lines of dialogue. Alice teaches Katherine the names for various body parts:

Kath. Comment appelez-vous le main en
Anglois?
Alice. Le main? Elle est appelée de hand.
(III. 4. 5-7)

The audience is asked to follow an entire scene in another language without translation. Andrew Fleck argues it was important that this scene was performed because it was only through the action of gesture that the English audience would comprehend, for the majority of Shakespeare’s audience “knew no French” (2007: 208), although Shakespeare, without a university education grasped French well enough to dramatise it. Pointing to various body parts onstage, the scene is as much a French lesson for the English audience as an English lesson for the French Princess.

The French was certainly performed onstage. To the disguised King Henry, Pistol asks “*Qui vous là?*” (IV.i.36). In all three quartos, this becomes “ke va la”, with a French phonetic spelling presumably to assist the actors (1599). In fact, all of Act III Scene 4 is written this way, an initially incomprehensible language which is neither French nor English and which needs to be spoken if it is to be understood. It seems,

then, that language and spelling are flexible and the dramatisation of different language is more important than conforming to any received standards, at least for the quartos. The scene is remarkable; foreign language is not inserted sententiously or self-glossed as is often Shakespeare’s method, for example in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s, “*In terram Salicam mulieres ne [sucedant],*” [No woman shall succeed in Salique land] (I. 2. 38-9). Because of the amount of French onstage and the later scenes where English and French are pitted together, the linguistic difference is more present and urgent than quoting from Latin texts. Exchange occurs not just through borrowing and pithily quoting, but by words spoken back and forth onstage. At this point, “language” becomes less of a conversation than an essay.

Pistol’s “*Qui vous là?*” is directed towards the disguised King at the battle of Agincourt (IV. 1. 35). Speaking French in the English camp should be dangerous. It should designate Pistol as being a French imposter or at least a sympathiser, yet the conversation continues and Henry answers Pistol in peaceable terms: “A friend.” (IV. 1. 36) Standing on French soil the night before a great battle, French is not the language of the enemy, but becomes other words to be used within conversation, another way of communicating between two Englishmen. Similarly, on the battlefield the next morning Pistol accosts a French soldier and instead of slaying him (like any good English soldier would), they talk and the mixing of languages continues. Pistol threatens to slit his throat, speaking a kind of quasi French, “*Owy, cuppele gorge, permafoy*”, meaning “yes, cut throat, by my faith” (IV. 4. 37). Pistol’s command to the translating Boy to “Bid him prepare; for I will cut his throat” is significant (IV. 4. 32). He threatens to kill him not by stabbing his heart or maiming any other part of his body, but by removing his power to speak, to speak a different language. The soldier pleads “*O, prenez miséricorde! ayez pitié de moi!*”, to which Pistol replies “Moy shall not serve, I will have forty moys” (IV. 4. 12-3). Pistol takes “moi” for the name of a coin and this linguistic error introduces the idea of making money from this Frenchman rather than gaining glory in his death. This Agincourt is presented as a place not to exchange blood but words and is a comic foil to the place of murderous war in the next scene where Henry commands for “every soldier kill his prisoners | Give the word through.” (IV. 6. 38-9).

Shakespeare plays with the similarity between the bag of coins and the “coined” language, between the exchange of money and the exchange of words. He employs a different style of dialogue, where each thing the French Soldier says is analysed by Pistol. Their words are less a conversation that progresses the action, but more an exchange that pauses to negotiate the meaning of language, for example where Pistol seizes upon the name, Monsieur le Fer: “Master Fer! I’ll fer him, and firke him, and | ferret him” (IV. 4. 28-9). Despite the productive puns that are lucrative for Pistol, the scene is laden with dangerous misunderstandings, and he seems on the point of running his foreign captive through with his sword. Instead Pistol borrows or takes the Frenchman’s language and mixes it with his own. He exits the scene a lot better off, having taken the soldier’s money and his words without giving anything in return. The power relation between the two men results in Pistol linguistically and financially

dominant, his wealth demonstrated by his exploitation of the excesses of language, the wordplay precipitating his profit of more than one kind of “coining”.

Significantly, the Boy, translating Pistol’s words for the Soldier, says “*il est content à vous donner la liberté, le franchisement*” (IV. 4. 52-3). Pistol franchises the French soldier in a moment of political empowerment, linking to Mulcaster’s concept of linguistic “enfranchisement”, of mixing and assimilating language. “[L]e franchisement” therefore suggests making or even coining citizens, problematically in both senses of bestowing and buying citizenship. The word comes from “franc” meaning “free” and is itself the origin of the name of various coins or moneys, originally of France, in the medieval period and throughout the Renaissance (OED, 2011). But its own etymology bears the marks of English violence against the French: the gold “franc” was first struck by John II of France in 1360 to celebrate his return from English captivity after a vast ransom of three million écus was agreed (Curry, 2003: 58). Shakespeare echoes this moment when the French soldier agrees to pay “*deux cent écus*” (IV. 4. 42). These moments of intercultural exchange coin new words and mint new coins, but like King John, freedom is only given on payment of a ransom. In the twentieth century “franchise” came to mean authorisation to trade, adopted by American capitalism where freedom is choice, and it seems that even in the Renaissance the word supported these strangely familiar connections where trade and money equates with freedom.

The scene turns upon the golden coin or franc and its ambiguous representation of freedom and political liberation. Coins given away and received are symbols of franchisement, but are also minted with the violence of one nation upon another. For example, the agreed ransom for King John was actually so cripplingly high that it could not be raised and he voluntarily returned to England to become a self-imposed prisoner; the “free” coin was being spent even as he died in prison.⁵ Words are coined with much the same effect, where language is exchanged in intercultural communication, but is also the site of serious misunderstanding and the adulterous mixing of language. For Jonson, this was to be resisted as much as possible: “we must not be too frequent with the mint, every day coining, nor fetch words from the extreme and utmost ages” (1903: 414). From the political origins of the franc, the word (en)franchisement finds its way into Shakespeare and Mulcaster’s lexicon. The use of the word is underpinned by this political history just as the problems and dangers of linguistic and financial productivity are re-played by Shakespeare.⁶ Richard Wilson argues that Shakespeare is liberated when read from outside of its own culture: “It is with this concept of a mutual ‘dialects of acculturation’ that *King of Shadows* approaches the question of ‘Shakespeare *Enfranchised*’” (2007: 4). But it seems like the outside is already in, the influence of foreign culture is already pervasive within the native English; it is in the fibre of the language that becomes the native tongue. Shakespeare is thus already enfranchised through its awareness of the foreign and its acculturation of language with all its pecuniary associations.

Linguistic difference can be seen in the French “parts” of *Henry V* between the French and English exchanges of Princess Katherine and Alice on the one hand, and

Pistol and the French Soldier on the other. Shakespeare creates a cultural double vision, where English and French emerge together, the signifiers of each language presented simultaneously in speech. Frenchness is within or beneath, overlaid onto Englishness. In the jumble of dialects of Macmorris, Jamy and Fluellen (III. 2), Shakespeare is dealing with linguistic difference found inside as well as outside English and these variants become a source of dramatic material to be used and exploited for particular purposes. As Paula Blank states “[t]he broken English of Renaissance literature sometimes exposes a fault-line in contemporary efforts towards political or cultural commonality, by making the difference of language speak”, which seems to be precisely what Shakespeare is doing (1996: 167). For example, all of Macmorris’s speech but especially his question “what ish my nation?” (III. 2. 122) is so heavily marked with linguistic difference that it must also be implicitly asking “what is my language?”

Parodied foreigners appear throughout the plays heavily written with the marks of linguistic difference, but Shakespeare’s real outsiders speak perfect English. For example, the “monster” Caliban lyrically details the “[s]ounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not” (III. 2.136). Richard Bradford points out that “[p]aradoxically Caliban speaks only in blank verse, that stylistic symbol of high culture and sophistication”, highlighted all the more when he converses with Trinculo, the Jester, and Stephano, the drunken butler, whose speech is firmly situated in prose. Similarly Othello declares “Haply, for I am black | And have not those soft parts of conversation”, declaring his lack of eloquence in eloquent terms, his otherness in a native voice (III. 3. 263-4). He does not speak a dialect identifying his foreign origin, nor is his English confused or mistaken. It seems that at particular moments of real cultural difference, the marks of linguistic difference are elided for the foreigner to proclaim their own strangeness. If “[a]ll the world’s a stage” then every language must be heard there, and can be heard where languages crossover, words are adopted, etymologies mix and new expression is found, giving a potent global sense (II.7.139). Yet even as Shakespeare grasps linguistic difference he makes it sound strangely familiar and natural. Mulcaster expresses this in terms of colour, a metaphor particularly relevant to Othello, that if language “be a stranger, and incorporate among us, let it wear our colours, so it will be one of us” (1582: 246).

Notes

1. “Enfranchisement” is itself borrowed from Old French. See the OED at <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/62181#eid5402421>> [accessed 5 April 2011].

2. Yet Shakespeare does not always use names to symbolise the thing they represent. For example, the names of some characters are not connected to their identity, such as “Petruccio” in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594), whereas the name “Cordelia”, with its connection to “cordis” meaning heart, marks her as a true-hearted character and represents the sincerity of her love for Lear in *King Lear* (1605). Ben Jonson, however, makes his nominal associations much more evident than Shakespeare. In *Volpone* (1606), the main characters are named after their

identities: “Volpone” means cunning fox; “Corbaccio” means crow, a wealthy man; and “Voltore” means vulture, a scavenger. Laurie Maguire discusses whether a word reveals an essence with Shakespeare’s use of “Helen” in several plays, claiming that the name first and foremost signifies Helen of Troy. But Maguire also looks at its other associations and its inconsistent orthography which complicates and affects this supposed direct signification (2007: 74-119). Anne Barton examines the naming behaviours of comic dramatists in the Renaissance, noting that Shakespeare’s onomastic habits tend to point to “affinities” of character rather than “overruling definition” (1990: 108).

3. The witches in *Macbeth* (1606), with their incantations of doubleness in “double, double, toil and trouble”, invoke the “adder’s fork and blind worm’s sting” (IV. 1. 16). The choice of the adder is significant for here the tongue is deadly. The “fork” or division into two parts is a metonym for the tongue itself, emphasising its bipartite nature. Shakespeare used the same device previously in *Measure for Measure* (1604) where Vicentio says to Claudio “Thou’rt by no means valiant; | For thou dost fear the soft and tender fork | Of a poor worm” (III. 1.16). Untrustworthy, serpentile speech finds its archetype in Genesis, where the beguiling words of the Snake lead to the fall of man. In the early modern period the threat of the forked tongue expressed itself in the belief that the tongue of the snake carried the “sting”.

4. If everyone has a black tongue it no longer becomes a mark of linguistic difference.

5. King John died in 1364 (Holmes, 2000: 26).

6. The relation between money and language as a site of exchange, as language as a currency, is also noted by Richard Wilson who points out that the connection between franc and frankness, the quality of being candid, is reflected in *King Lear* where Cordelia marries France with truth as her only dower (1.1.108), (Wilson, 2007: 262 n. 14).

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