

Voicing the Inside-Outsider: Performing Shakespeare's ESL Characters

In this talk, I want to identify a potentially overlooked category of ESL – or English-as-a-Second-Language – speakers in Shakespeare's plays. In dramatic worlds populated with foreigners – French or English ambassadors, Roman conquerors or Greek senators – most of whom speak exactly like their hosts, a small subset stands, and perhaps sounds, apart from the hegemony. In this brief overview, drawn from recent productions I have acted in or directed, I shall consider some arguments for, and thematic implications of, voicing the inside-outsider. I draw on Cleopatra, Armado, and Shylock to define the broad spectrum of voiced outsiders in Shakespeare's plays, and their relative status as ESL speakers in milieu where the *lingua franca* is anything but English: Greek in Egyptian Alexandria, French in Basque Navarre, and Italian in the Venetian Republic. Which is to say that the "E" in ESL, Shakespeare's English, represents the dominant "power" language of the play's setting, which is itself an alien imposition: E=SL², we might say.

Shakespeare rarely inscribes his characters with the brogues, twangs, drawls, or snorts of regional dialect, so Orlando's observation that Ganymede possesses an "accent something finer than [one] could purchase in so removed a dwelling" as the Forest of Arden, seems to rely on the facility of his actors. It is notable, therefore, that on the few occasions Shakespeare delineates speakers phonetically – as with the Captains in *Henry V* or Edgar's disguised Cornishman in *King Lear* – they are often ESL characters in plays that deal explicitly with nation-building and the yoking of Celtic- and Gaelic-speaking peoples under a common tongue. With almost Shavian rigor, Shakespeare's text makes plain that, at the time of the play's composition, only one of those Captains would have been raised speaking English: and, "look

you,” it certainly wasn’t Fluellen. Elsewhere, I want to suggest, Shakespeare takes a subtler approach, incising idiom in the varying heights and rhythms of verse and prose, or in the grammatical and rhetorical idiosyncrasies of the foreign-born speaker.

Having acquired rather than absorbed the dominant tongue, Shakespeare’s ESL characters are exacting, inventive, exuberant English speakers, none more so than Cleopatra. A Greek overlord of an Egyptian empire increasingly imperiled by Roman expansion, Cleopatra’s *polyglossia* articulates the historic shifting of cultural tectonic plates. Shakespeare knew of Cleopatra’s extraordinary linguistic skills from Plutarch, who describes her bewitching voice as “an instrument of many strings [with which] she could pass from one language to another; so that there were few of the barbarian nations that she answered by an interpreter.” Not even the troglodytes, apparently. This fluency was “all the more surprising,” Plutarch notes, “because most of the kings, her predecessors, scarcely gave themselves the trouble to acquire the Egyptian tongue, and several of them quite abandoned the Macedonian.” In effect, Cleopatra never speaks her native tongue during the course of the play that bears her name.

Once we comprehend Cleopatra’s status as an ESL speaker, we begin to appreciate the facility with which she toggles between an earthy Egyptian with her courtiers – “He words me, girls, he words me”-- the metrically prosaic and rhetorically precise Latin of her Roman guests – “we / Your scutcheons and your signs of conquest, shall / Hang in what place you please” – and the richly abstract “Asiatic” Greek favored by Antony and herself: “Eternity was in our lips and eyes, / Bliss in our brows bent; none our parts so poor, / But was a race of heaven.” There’s no hint of grammatical uncertainty or stylistic awkwardness, no otherness in Cleopatra’s expression; just the kind of tonal and idiomatic variation that speaks of linguistic mastery born

of political necessity, and the capacity to transcend the vernacular even in the moment of her dissolution.

The texts of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Merchant of Venice*, by contrast, seem to embed phonetic markers delineating the outsider, though in different ways and for dramatically different ends. As his name declares, Don Adriano de Armado is indisputably Spanish, but he is different from Shakespeare's other Spaniards: the Aragonese of *Much Ado*, King John's Blanch, and Henry VIII's first wife, Katherine of Aragon. Nothing in their language suggests that these are pronounced ESL speakers, with Katherine going so far as to reject Wolsey's Latin as a "strange tongue [that] makes my cause more strange, suspicious." Armado not only speaks Spanish (where Pistol and Dogberry mangle it), dedicating the outcome of the pageant to "la fortuna de la Guerra"; textual clues also imply he *sounds* Spanish. The illiterate Dull and Costard both struggle to pronounce a name they've *heard* that Navarre *reads* perfectly well, and which Boyet, in the 1598 quarto, articulates with an intervocalic, or Castilian, "d" as "Armatho." Gustav Ungerer has argued that Armado's curious welcome "Chirrah!" imitates a Castilian attempt to pronounce "sirrah," much as Middleton, with scatological glee, would later play on "chitty faces" (shitty feces) for urban folk. Whether Armado, whose "fancy diction," as Russ Macdonald calls it, has encouraged generations of comic actors to perform him with an "ostenTAti-ous" Spanish accent, was intended as a satiric ethnotype, no longer seems pertinent or particularly gracious. Of greater interest is how Armado's aural other-ness echoes and amplifies the linguistic traits of his host nation.

In a play that makes us think about the way language is taught and learnt, performed and parodied, used and abused in the pursuit of love, lust, status, and security, Armado,

desperate to join Navarre's wing of L'Academie Francaise, is the pupil *par excellence*, parroting the language of power with the zeal of the autodidact. As a result, he becomes a sounding board reverberating upon the prolix princes and pedagogues. Where he promises "whole volumes in folio," the lords actually deliver them in strained sonnets. While they find him comically impenetrable, the lords 'Armado' themselves to entertain the ladies as Muscovites, an effort that falls on deaf ears. And when the bookmen condemn his verbosity, their terms redound resoundingly upon themselves as the "ridiculous, and thrasonical" Worthies. The alien Armado emerges as the synecdoche of the prevailing alien-ness of courtly language; the "ethnotype," in Melodie Garcia's words, "becomes the type."

While Armado and Holofernes' fifth act meeting is indeed "a feast of languages" in which, Costard quips, they have "stolen the scraps," an accented Spaniard's ESL status reminds us that Armado is the pupil and Holofernes the professor of such defective linguistics. In his efforts to become a "familiar," Armado digests his lessons all too well. But unlike Berowne, a reluctant mature student who struggles to acquire the "russet yeas and honest kersey noes" of plain-speaking, Armado continues to learn. He succinctly castigates the facetiousness of his aristocratic audience, does the right thing by Jaquanetta, and his words close the play with an authority born of inclusion: "You that way, we this way." The outsider graduates to the "little academe" as a teaching fellow.

While voicing the outsider can articulate transcendence or assimilation, as I have demonstrated, it also has the capacity to reinforce alterity and prejudice, which perhaps explains the divergence of opinions among scholars and actors about how Shylock, one of Shakespeare's most culturally fraught figures, speaks. Where John Gross hears "the same

flawless English (standing in for Italian) as the other characters,” the metricist George T. Wright acknowledges Shylock’s “unmistakable individual speaking voice,” and Brian Vickers praises an “innovative” prose dense with figures of repetition and symmetry that is “applied like a knife edge to convey the absolute separation between Jew and Gentile.” For actors anxious to avoid racial stereotyping the issue, then, becomes how far to play the ethnotype: Is Shylock Jewish, Jew-ish, or something “other”?

In their famously opposed readings of the role for the RSC, where David Suchet views Shylock as an “outsider *because* he is Jewish,” Patrick Stewart portrays an “outsider who *happens* to be Jewish,” and who adopts the overly refined accent of the club man to better assimilate. While Stewart’s portrayal doubtless critiques the power of social exclusion, his reading nevertheless contradicts what Shylock actually says: “I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you and so following. But I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you.” Acceptance and respect are one thing, acculturation entirely another. John Harrell’s depiction here offers something closer to Suchet’s, who drew upon his cultural roots in North London while Harrell processed the sights and sounds of his parents’ neighborhood on New York’s upper east side. Leaning into the rhythms of the language, Harrell’s Shylock performs ‘Jewish-ness’ only as a parodic indictment of Antonio’s perceived bigotry:

Shall I bend low, and in a bondman’s key,
With bated breath and whispering humbleness
Say this: “Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last,
You spurned me such a day; another time
You called me dog, and for these courtesies,
I’ll lend you thus much moneys.”

Harrell’s nuanced voicing captures the liminality of a figure embedded in, but not quite of, his society.

Where Harrell favors Shakespeare's textual clues as notes sounding an ethnic melody, in preparing Shylock for Quill Theatre in Richmond six months earlier, I drew on certain ESL indicators in the text to voice the "other" as an immigrant. Bemoaning his daughter's theft, in a telling detail Shylock recalls "a diamond cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfurt." However limited Shakespeare's knowledge of the status of Jews in Europe, conditions at home must have reflected travel restrictions abroad, which would have prevented Shylock readily journeying to Frankfurt. But he could have been born there, an Ashkanazi Jew who came to Venice with his young wife to join the German nation, the oldest of the three "tribes" operating in Venice, and the only one allowed to lend money. Playing Shylock as a German who speaks differently even from his fellow Jews -- neither Jessica nor Tubal share his ESL traits -- I sought to create a resonantly powerful outsider, an intruder deemed parasitical by the body-politic.

Rhetorical features support an ESL interpretation. Like Armado, who talks of Holofernes "educating youth" (as in, all of them), Shylock struggles with irregular plurals -- his repeated "thus much moneys," or the curious herd of "muttons, beefs, or goats" -- precisely because, being irregular, they are more readily absorbed than learnt. Shylock's evocative proper noun for a "wilderness of monkeys" also speaks to a rhetorical quality he shares with Cleopatra and Armado, what I term the hyperbolic metaphor, which attempts, not always successfully, to harness the linguistic power of George Puttenham's "dark" figure of Transport. "Shut up my house's ears," he commands a bemused Jessica, before clarifying: "I mean my casements," or windows. In the play's thematic terms, it is precisely Shylock's uncertain mastery of the abstractions of his learnt language that betrays him in the Venetian law courts, where his "pound of flesh" payment is literalized, exactly de-metaphorized; while, conversely, he is

condemned for attempting to take a life, metaphorically encoded in Venetian law as “a drop of Christian blood,” the extraction of which never killed anyone. Inescapably dissident and dissonant, the accented Shylock reminds Anglophone audiences that the inside-outsider invariably capitulates to the native speakers who self-authorize the linguistic rules of power.