

Chapter 1

Shakespeare the Metalinguist

David Crystal

"Metalanguage" is a term originally devised by twentieth-century philosophers to mean "a language for talking about language." It thus subsumes all the terminology of linguistics and the language professions (such as speech pathology), as well as the everyday vocabulary through which people talk about spoken, written, and signed language. At one extreme, it includes such technical terms as *syntax*, *iambic*, and *genre*, and at the other, such popular notions as *word*, *nickname*, and *ABC*. The notion has proved to be a fruitful one, especially in such areas as children's language acquisition and the teaching of reading, where the early ability to talk about language ("metalinguistic awareness") is considered to be a robust indication of later literacy ability.¹ It has been less exploited in relation to literature, though an investigation of an author's use of metalanguage is invariably illuminating.²

When did the English language develop its metalanguage? If we were to draw up a chronology, we would find quite a few items from Anglo-Saxon times (e.g., *speech*, *rune*, *word*, *shout*, *greeting*), rather more from the Middle English period (e.g., *grammar*, *consonant*, *chatter*, *dialogue*, *chronicle*, *prayer*, *poet*), a significant spurt in the sixteenth century, and then a huge growth as a result of nineteenth-century philology and twentieth-century linguistics. It is the sixteenth century that provides the focus for this chapter. Shakespeare lived at a time of great lexical development in English. Research in historical lexicography indicates that about four times as many words came into English between 1500 and 1700 than did between 1200 and 1500. In real (albeit approximate) terms, we are talking about a growth from around 100,000 words in 1500 to 150,000 in

1600.³ And many of these new words had to do with language, reflecting the concerns and trends of the day, which included the growth of new literary forms, the movement to standardize orthography, and the long-running "ink-horn" debate over the use of Latin and Greek loanwords. As a brief illustration, here are the dates of the first recorded instances of terms having to do with punctuation, as established by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We find *punctuation* and *comma* recorded in the 1530s, *dash* in the 1550s, *apostrophe* and *colon* in the 1580s, *full stop*, *period*, and *point of interrogation* in the 1590s, and *hyphen* and *period* in the 1600s. While allowing for the inevitable approximation that such dates convey, it is evident that the metalanguage of writing was in the process of formation during Shakespeare's lifetime.

Shakespeare's Metalanguage

Shakespeare's writing gives us a good sense of the stage of development that metalanguage had reached at the end of the sixteenth century. There are around four hundred metalinguistic items in his plays and poems. The subject of this volume, *genre*, is not among them; this word did not arrive in English (from French) until well into the eighteenth century. However, it is plain that the notion of "a work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose" (as the opening *OED* definition of *genre* puts it) was well established by Shakespeare's time. We can see it in the Royal Patent for the King's Men, issued May 19, 1603, which permitted them to play "Comedies Tragedies histories Enterludes Moralles Pastoralls Stageplayes and suche like"⁴—a categorization that Polonius amplifies in his rambling account of what the players are able to perform: "pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral..." (*Hamlet* 2.2.391).⁵ But no generic term had yet emerged to talk about these phenomena. Shakespeare did have quite a choice of nouns to express the notion of "kind" or "sort"—such as *fashion*, *stamp*, *suit*, *garb*, *colour*, *mould*, *vein*, and *savour*—but they were all very general in application and none had a particularly literary slant. Also available to him were *species*, *genus*, *type*, and *order*, all new in the late sixteenth century, but these words were rapidly being appropriated by scientists. *Category* (1588) was in the hands of the logicians. *Class* (1664) had not yet arrived. *Style* and *dialect* (both 1577) were indeed language-specific, and both are found in Shakespeare, but each had developed senses away from the general notion of "kind."

Despite the lack of a generic term, different kinds of language are clearly in evidence among Shakespeare's metalinguistic terms. We see

them in the words used to talk about the everyday "products" of written language:

absey book, almanac, annals, bill, brief (as noun), calendar, catalogue, chronicle, commentary, copy, epistle, epitaph, folio, history, humour-letter, instrument, inventory, letter, letters-patent, memorandum, muster-book, muster-file, note, note-book, opus, pamphlet, paper, parchment, passport, proclamation, quarto, register, roll, schedule, scroll, testament, treatise, table-book, will

And they are evident also among the words used to talk about literary writing:

acrostic, adage, blank verse, caesura, chorus, comedy, cue, eight and eight, eight and six, elegy, epigram, epilogue, figure, foot, interlude, masque, maxim, metaphor, moral, ode, pageant, pastoral, play, poem, poesy, poetry, posy, prologue, prose, proverb, rhapsody, riddle, satire, saw, saying, simile, sonnet, staff, stanza, tragedy, verse

There was also a growing metalanguage to talk about kinds of speech events:

advertisement, ambassade/ambassage/embassy, augury, carry-tale, catechize, conjure, conversation, dialogue, diatribe, discourse, discuss, disputation, dub, expostulate, expound, forswear, gossip, greeting, grumble, hyperbole, interjection, oration, orator, oratory, oyez, parley, perjure, peroration, prate, prattle, preach, prophecy, table-talk, unsay, word-of-mouth

These are all either nouns or verbs, but adjectives are of particular interest, when they occur, because they act as signposts to the existence of a recognized "kind" of language. When Viola says her speech to Olivia is "poetical" (*Twelfth Night*, 1.5.187), Venus talks of her tears running "chorus-like" down her cheeks (*Venus and Adonis*, 360), or the Chorus says he is "prologue-like" (*Henry V*, 1.33), there is an assumed awareness of a linguistic entity. Compounds are important, too, for the same reason. A *love-letter* is different from an "ordinary" letter, and we may assume that some sort of distinctive identity is also present in a *love-book*, *love-discourse*, *love-line*, *love-news*, *love-prate*, and *love-rhyme*.

There are always two dimensions to the identification of any linguistic entity: formal (i.e., its sound, shape, and structure) and functional (i.e., its meaning, use, and effect). Several of Shakespeare's metalinguistic terms have to do with the formal features that could be used to identify a genre.

We find words relating to the presence or absence of the parts of a document or to the way it is written:

addition, article, chapter, court-hand, entitle, envoy, hand, index, inscription, leaf, postscript, Roman hand, superscript, superscription, suraddition, title, title-leaf, titleless, title-page

or to the sound of speech:

accent, cadence, consonant, elision, iambus, inflection (of the voice), measure, metre, rhyme, rhythm, sound, syllable, trochee, vowel

or to features of grammar:

accidence, accusative, case, declension, decline, gender, genitive, grammar, nominativus, noun, phrase, plural, Priscian, pronoun, sentence, singular-iter, syntax, termination, verb, vocative

or to features of vocabulary:

alias, ayword, by-word, epithet, epitheton, forename, lexicon, name, nameless, nayword, nickname, over-name (as verb), polysyllable, suraddition, surname, term, watchword

Under the heading of functional features, we find a wide range of words identifying various kinds of linguistic activity, both as action and product:

abridgement, abstract, argument, cipher, cital, construe, decipher, define, drollery, flattery, interpret, message, miscall, misinterpret, misquote, mis-speak, misterm, mockery, moralize, news, nominate, number, oath, oath-able, oath-breaking, precept, prolixity, rhetoric, rumour, scan, soothsay, topic, translate, translation, verbal, verbatim

We see language words expressing an emotion or evaluation:

babble, bibble-babble, blab, chat, chatter, consonance/dissonance, drawling, fair-spoken/foul-spoken, gabble, gibber, mouth (as verb), mumble, murmur, mutter, rattle, thou (as verb), rave

And stylistic levels can be reflected in the metalanguage, such as the "high" level in the following:

bookish, by the book, clerk-like, clerkly, court-word, diction, ink-horn mate, King's English, literated, pedantical, scholarly, well-spoken

There is a great deal of metalanguage in the plays and poems—more like five hundred items, if we include the associated terminology of singing (e.g., *ballad*, *carol*, *catch*, *canzonet*, *ditty*, *dump*, *lullaby*, *prick-song*) and religious texts (e.g., *catechism*, *creed*, *gospel*, *homily*, *invocation*, *parable*, *prayer*). The interesting undertaking is to explore what Shakespeare does with it.

Putting Metalanguage to Creative Use

The primary purpose of metalanguage is to talk about language, literally and objectively. Most uses of the above words require no literary or stylistic exposition; when we encounter them, the only demand they make of us is to understand their linguistic definition in Early Modern English. But if we restrict our inquiry to historical lexicography, we miss many cases where more is happening than the literal application of the words.

Metalanguage as Plot Device

These are instances where the movement of the plot hinges on a metalinguistic issue, as the following examples illustrate. In *As You Like It* (3.2.331), disguised Rosalind's speech nearly gives the game away to Orlando, who observes:

Your accent is something finer than you could purchase in so removed a dwelling,

and Rosalind has to think quickly on her feet to avoid detection:

an old religious uncle of mine taught me to speak, who was in his youth an inland man...

In *King Lear* (2.2.103), disguised Kent's harangue of Oswald attracts the attention of Cornwall. Kent's affirmation that it is "my occupation to be plain" elicits a sharp reproof from Cornwall, stinging Kent into a high poetic style:

Sir, in good faith, in sincere verity, Under th'allowance of your great aspect...

His adoption of a style that, in his disguised character, he ought not to have been able to use could have led to his discovery. Cornwall is flabbergasted

("What mean'st by this?"), and Kent has to quickly switch the attention back to Oswald:

Sir, to go out of my dialect that you discommend so much. I know, sir, I am no flatterer. He that beguiled you in a plain accent was a plain knave...

Language names sometimes provide the same focusing function as *accent* and *dialect*. In *1 Henry IV*, the row between Hotspur and Glendower comes to a head with a gibe about language (3.1.115):

Hotspur: Who shall say me nay?

Glendower: Why, that will I.

Hotspur: Let me not understand you then, speak it in Welsh.

Glendower: I can speak English, lord, as well as you.

And a similar metalinguistic observation underscores the row between Pistol and Fluellen in *Henry V*, as Gower observes (5.2.71):

You thought because he could not speak English in the native garb, he could not therefore handle an English cudgel.

Metalanguage as Character Note

Metalinguistic comments are often used to underline the linguistic idiosyncrasy of a character. *Love's Labour's Lost* provides several instances. It is a play where people are repeatedly commenting on their own or other people's language abilities. Berowne sneers at "honey-tongued" Boyet (5.2.334) and forswears his own language (5.2.406), promising never more to use

Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,
Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affection,
Figures pedantical.

He describes Don Armado as "a man of fire-new words" (1.1.176). Armado's language does not appeal to Holofernes (5.1.16):

He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument.

Though he is impressed with the Spaniard's description of "the posteriors of this day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon" (5.1.84):

The word is well culled, choice, sweet, and apt.

After listening to the learned exchange, part Latin, part English, between Holofernes and Nathaniel, Mote and Costard are under no illusions (5.1.36):

Mote: They have been at a great feast of languages and stolen the scraps.

Costard: O, they have lived long on the alms-basket of words.

And Constable Dull provides the coda to a scene entirely driven by its metalinguistic content (5.1.142):

Holofernes: Via, goodman Dull! Thou hast spoken no word all this while.

Dull: Nor understood none neither, sir.

Shakespeare often uses metalanguage as a means of reinforcing a social difference between characters. The interesting point here is that the social contrast might have been expressed solely through the way the characters speak, but it is unusual for it not to be underscored by some sort of metalinguistic comment. For example, the words used in the conversation between Hamlet and Osrick mock the artificial ornateness of courtly speech—a parody that is even more apparent when Hamlet takes up Osrick's lexical vein (5.2.112):

Sir, his definement suffers no perdition in you, though, I know, to divide him inventorially would dizzy th'arithmetic of memory...

We might think that such a speech would be sufficient to make Shakespeare's dramatic point, but he does not leave it there. He has Hamlet ask an ironic question:

Why do we wrap the gentleman in our more rawer breath?

and gives Horatio two metalinguistic comments:

Is't not possible to understand in another tongue?

All his golden words are spent.

Similarly, when courtly Touchstone realizes rustic William is a rival for the affections of Audrey, his verbal attack might simply have used courtly language and threats of physical violence, but he begins with a series of thrusts that explicitly recognize the sociolinguistic distance between them (5.1.46):

Therefore, you clown, abandon—which is in the vulgar, "leave"—the society—which in the boorish is "company"—of this female—which in the common is "woman"...

Metalanguage as Effect

We do not normally associate metalanguage with literary or dramatic effect. Terms such as those listed in the first part of this chapter are typically academic in tone and hardly seem the stuff that creative linguistic dreams are made of. But Shakespeare's neologisms show otherwise. *Mouth*, for example, generates a slew of effective compounds: *honey-mouthed*, *stretch-mouthed*, *humble-mouthed*, *venomed-mouthed*, and *foul-mouthed*, as well as *mouth-friend* and *mouth-honour*. Similarly productive is *tongue*: *close-tongued*, *honey-tongued*, *lewd-tongued*, *long-tongued*, *maiden-tongued*, *poisonous-tongued*, *shrill-tongued*, *trumpet-tongued*, and *smooth-tongued*. Prefixes and suffixes are frequently used as lexical extensions: *unspeak*, *unshout*, *uncurse*; *outswear*, *out-talk*, *out-tongue*, *outvoice*; *languageless*, *phraseless*, *speechless*, and *tongueless*. These are all first recorded uses in Shakespeare.

We do not have to look far before we find a metaphorical use of metalanguage. An example is Ulysses's description of Cressida (*Troilus and Cressida*, 4.6.56):

There's a language in her eye, her cheek, her lip,
Nay, her foot speaks.

Another is Julia's description of Proteus to Lucetta (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 2.7.75):

His words are bonds, his oaths are oracles.

A third is Iago's interpretation of Desdemona and Cassio's behaviour as lechery (*Othello*, 2.1.257):

an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts.

And a single metalinguistic topic can stimulate an extended metaphorical exchange (*Twelfth Night*, 1.5.211):

Olivia: Now, sir, what is your text?

Viola: Most sweet lady—

Olivia: A comfortable doctrine, and much may be said of it. Where lies your text?

Viola: In Orsino's bosom.

Olivia: In his bosom! In what chapter of his bosom?

Viola: To answer by the method, in the first of his heart.

Olivia: O, I have read it; it is heresy. Have you no more to say?

Viola: Good madam, let me see your face.

Olivia: Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face? You are now out of your text.

The use of *method* to mean "table of contents" was coming into English in the early 1600s.

Metalanguage as Linguistic Novelty

Shakespeare's penchant for word-class conversion (or *functional shift*) has often been noted and is illustrated by such lines as "Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle" (*Richard II*, 2.3.86), where we see nouns being used additionally as verbs. Several metalinguistic nouns are verbed in this way. Cleopatra uses *word* to mean "ply with words" when she observes about Caesar (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.187):

He words me, girls, he words me.

This is the first recorded use of the word in that meaning. And Shakespeare seems to have been the first to use *word* as a verb in another sense too to mean "pad out with unnecessary words" when Giacomo, referring to Posthumus, says (*Cymbeline*, 1.4.13):

This matter of marrying his king's daughter, wherein he must be weighed rather by her value than his own, words him, I doubt not, a great deal from the matter.

Timon of Athens illustrates two further examples of metalinguistic functional shift. Apemantus (2.2.50) addresses a servant with "dost dialogue with thy shadow?" and later in the same scene, Timon begs Flavius, "Come, sermon me no further" (169). *Dumb* appears twice as a verb to express the notion of making someone inaudible or reducing them to silence. Gower reports Marina's charisma (*Pericles*, Chorus 5.5): "Deep clerks she dumbs." And the noisy neighing of a horse makes Alexas inaudible (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.5.48): "what I would have spoke / was beastly dumber by him." In *The Tempest* (3.3.99), Alonso hears the name of Prospero in the thunder created by Ariel and cries that "it did bass my trespass"—utter his guilt as if with a bass voice, and thus proclaim it loudly.

A further feature of Shakespeare's innovative use of metalanguage is lexical rather than grammatical. An important point to appreciate about metalanguage is that the notion can be illustrated not just from individual

words but also from the way individual items combine (*collocate*). Some of Shakespeare's most vivid lexical effects arise from his use of unexpected collocations—a point not lost, for example, on Andrew Aguecheek, when he hears the high style of Viola's address to Olivia (*Twelfth Night*, 3.1.83):

Viola: ... Most excellent, accomplished lady, the heavens rain odours on you!

Sir Andrew (aside): That youth's a rare courtier. "Rain odours!" Well!

Viola: My matter hath no voice, lady, but to your own most pregnant and vouchsafed ear.

Sir Andrew: "Odours"; "pregnant"; and "vouchsafed." I'll get 'em all three all ready.

Metalinguistic terms prove to be a fruitful domain for collocational effect. They are collocated with words from the semantic field of taste, for example. Hamlet considers Horatio to be different from those who "let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.58). Norfolk tells his associates that the King has found matter against the Cardinal "that for ever mars / The honey of his language" (*Henry VIII*, 3.2.21). Falstaff accuses Hal of using "the most unsavoury similes" (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.79). Henry tells Suffolk not to hide his poison with "sugared words" (*2 Henry VI*, 3.2.45). And if we examine a single term more closely—such as *words*—we see a wide range of collocations, from the "most expected" (e.g., *words* are *good, bad, fair, foul, plain*) to the "least expected" (e.g., *words* are *comfortable, golden, hallowed, heart-easing, sportive, whirling*). With verbs too we find the same variation in predictability. We can speak or utter words, but we do not usually *grow* or *arrest* them:

Princess [to King]: We arrest your word. (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 2.1.159)

Richard [to Mortimer]: Some words there grew 'twixt Somerset and me.
(*1 Henry VI*, 2.5.46)

And we find that words can do such remarkable things as *stab* (*Henry V* 4.5.7), *envenom* (*Hamlet* 4.7.102), *bewitch* (*3 Henry VI* 3.3.1120), *disbench* (*Coriolanus* 2.2.69), and *bethump* (*King John* 2.1.466).

Metalinguage as Humor

Perhaps the most surprising use of metalinguage is when it is employed in the service of (often risqué) humor. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* provides several examples. The peace-making Host of the Garter does not want to lose his parson in a duel because he needs his guidance: "he

gives me the proverbs and the no-verbs" (3.1.96)—the words of warning. And the parson is continually being frustrated by others' metalinguistic incompetence (1.1.159):

Bardolph: Why, sir, for my part, I say the gentleman has drunk himself out of his five sentences.

Evans: It is his "five senses." Fie, what the ignorance is!

In the school scene with young William (4.1), the humor is largely based on a series of metalinguistic misunderstandings by Mistress Quickly. She confuses nouns and the colloquial euphemistic form of the oath (*God's wounds* (which in the pronunciation of the time would have rhymed, *wounds* sounding like *nouns*):

Evans: William how many numbers is in nouns?

William: Two.

Mistress Quickly: Truly, I thought there had been one number more, because they say "Od's nouns."

And she misunderstands a Latin term:

Evans: ... What is the focative case, William?

William: O—vocativo, O.

Evans: Remember, William. Focative is caret.

Mistress Quickly: And that's a good root.

This requires some explanation to a modern audience. William is half right. He has understood *vocative*, which is the case you use when you are saying such things as *O father*, *O moon*. But pronouns do not have a vocative case in Latin—hence Evans's reminder. *Caret* is a Latin verb meaning "is missing." Mistress Quickly hears it as *carrot*, which reminds her of *root*. She seems oblivious to the secondary meanings of *carrot* and *root*, both euphemisms for "penis." And if she hears the nuance in Evans's pronunciation of *vocative* she chooses to ignore it. But she cannot contain herself when Evans proceeds to other cases:

Evans: ... What is your genitive case plural, William?

William: Genitive case?

Evans: Ay.

William: Genitive—horum, harum, horum.

Mistress Quickly: Vengeance of Jenny's case! Fie on her! Never name her, child, if she be a whore.

She hears *horum* and interprets it as *whore*; *harum* reminds her of *harlot*. *Vengeance of Jenny's case* is a softening of "God's vengeance on Jenny's situation." "A plague on Jenny's case," in other words. But *case* has a secondary meaning, as a euphemism for "vagina." Indeed, to Mistress Quickly's ears, it means little else when preceded by *genitive*—compare *'gina*, with the unstressed syllable dropped, and *genitive*. It would have been even more effective in Early Modern English pronunciation, for in the First Folio, the name of the lady is spelled *Ginye*, which would probably have been pronounced "jijy-nee." She concludes that Evans is talking about the local prostitute and that he is instructing William in ways of calling her over.

Metalanguage as Attitude

Metalanguage evokes attitudes, as can be seen from the way the word *Latin* is used in the plays. These attitudes can be grouped into two broad types: respect and ridicule.

Under the heading of respect, we find instances where Latin is a sign of good breeding, as when Portia tells Nerissa what she thinks of Falconbridge, the young baron of England (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1.2.65):

You know I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him. He hath neither Latin, French, nor Italian, and you will come into the court and swear that I have a poor pennyworth in the English. He is a proper man's picture, but, alas, who can converse with a dumb-show?

The implication is that, if you do not know foreign languages, you are hardly thought to be educated. And this is evident from the strategy adopted by the disguised Lucentio (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 2.1.81), who is presented by Gremio as one of the tutors for Baptista's daughters, as someone "cunning in Greek, Latin, and other languages," and who displays his credentials with a "small packet of Greek and Latin books." He woos Bianca under the cover of Ovid's poetry. This is Latin as a means to an end.

From these examples, we would expect other references to the language to be fulsomely respectful, but this is not what we get. Most uses of the word in Shakespeare are not at all complimentary. In *As You Like It* (3.2.311), Orlando asks disguised Rosalind, "Who ambles Time withal?" and she replies,

With a priest that lacks Latin, and a rich man that hath not the gout; for the one sleeps easily because he cannot study, and the other lives merrily

because he feels no pain; the one lacking the burden of lean and wasteful learning, the other knowing no burden of heavy tedious penury.

Latin is "lean and wasteful learning" here. And it is this nuance, of Latin as the prerogative of a class of people who are educated and superior and who are—in the eyes of the underdog—always trying to keep you down or put one over on you, which is the keynote for most of the other Shakespearean uses. This is what leads to Lord Say's downfall (2 *Henry VI*, 4.7.51):

Say: You men of Kent—

Dick: What say you of Kent?

Say: Nothing but this: 'tis bona terra, mala gens. ["Nice place; shame about the people"]

Cade: Away with him! Away with him! He speaks Latin.

Latin alienates the lower classes. But it can upset the nobility too if used inappropriately, as when Queen Katherine tells Cardinal Wolsey to speak his mind but cuts him off when he chooses to reply in Latin (*Henry VIII*, 3.1.41):

O, good my lord, no Latin!

I am not such a truant since my coming

As not to know the language I have lived in.

A strange tongue makes my cause more strange, suspicious;

Pray, speak in English.

Latin, it seems, can make words seem "strange"—that is, foreign, or alien—and thus "suspicious."

Not surprisingly, then, the term turns up in unexpected places and provides a source of humour, as when Costard receives a coin from Don Armado (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 3.1.128):

Armado: There is remuneration, for the best ward of mine honour is rewarding my dependents.

After Don Armado has left, Costard reflects,

Now will I look to his remuneration. "Remuneration!" O, that's the Latin word for three farthings.

Remuneration is actually from French, though ultimately from Latin. But the etymological issue is beside the point. To the uneducated ear, if a word sounds difficult, it must be Latin.

Another example of metalinguistic obfuscation is in *Henry IV, Part 2* (3.2.65). Bardolph is talking to Justice Shallow, who is most impressed by one of Bardolph's words, which rather takes him aback:

Bardolph: Sir, pardon; a soldier is better accommodated than with a wife.

Shallow: It is well said, in faith, sir, and it is well said indeed too. "Better accommodated!" It is good, yea indeed it is. Good phrases are surely, and ever were, very commendable. "Accommodated": it comes of *accommodo*. Very good, a good phrase.

Bardolph: Pardon, sir, I have heard the word—phrase call you it? By this day, I know not the phrase, but I will maintain the word with my sword to be a soldier-like word, and a word of exceeding good command, by heaven.

Bardolph is unfamiliar with Shallow's metalanguage, but he has his own.

Metalanguage as Trope

Every so often, metalanguage becomes, as it were, the chief motif of a scene or exchange. In *Henry V*, we see French/English translation as the focus of the "teaching" scene between Catherine and Alice (3.4) and the "hostage" scene between Pistol, the Boy, and Monsieur Le Fer (4.4), and the final scene, in which Henry woos Catherine (5.2.98, ff), is entirely driven by his metalanguage:

Will you vouchsafe to teach a soldier terms...if you will love me soundly with your French heart, I will be glad to hear you confess it brokenly with your English tongue...I know no ways to mince it in love, but directly to say "I love you"...I have no cunning in protestation...I speak to thee plain soldier...A speaker is but a prater, a rhyme is but a ballad...Now fie upon my false French! By mine honour, in true English, I love thee...break thy mind to me in broken English: wilt thou have me?

In *Hamlet* (3.2), we hear his insightful conversation with the players about the theatrical practices of the time:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you—trippingly upon the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier had spoke my lines...it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters...It out-Herods Herod...Suit the action to the word, the word to the action...

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, we hear Benedick's metalinguistic reflections, such as when he describes the change in the character of lovesick Claudio (2.3.18):

He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier, and now is he turned orthography. His words are a fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes.

And again later, when he unsuccessfully tries his own hand at love-poetry (5.2.38):

I was not born under a rhyming planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms (5.2.38).

But it is in *Love's Labour's Lost* that we find metalanguage developed to unprecedented lengths. It is there in the opening words:

Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives,
Live registered upon our brazen tombs ["set down in written form"]

and in the final lines:

The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo.

And language, in some shape or form, is a recurring motif. We hear it, for example, in the opening account of Armado (1.1.162, 176):

A man in all the world's new fashion planted,
That hath a mint of phrases in his brain...
A man of fire-new words, fashion's own knight.

And his language is later explored in full metalinguistic detail by Holofernes and Nathaniel (as already illustrated). There are several lively linguistic discussions, notably between Armado, Mote, and Costard about the meaning of *envoi* (3.1.69) and between Holofernes and Dull over the meaning of *haud credo* (4.2.11). Holofernes is full of neologistic metalanguage when he reads Jaquenetta's letter (4.2.120):

You find not the apostrophus, and so miss the accent. Let me supervise the canzonet... I will overglance the superscript...

All six of the main content terms here are first recorded instances by Shakespeare in the *OED*. Additionally, metalinguistic debate is not solely a male practice. The princess and her ladies are just as adept, as we see in their allusions to contemporary orthographic practices when they discuss their lovers' messages (5.2.38):

Rosaline: ... O, he hath drawn my picture in his letter.

Princess: Anything like?

Rosaline: Much in the letters, nothing in the praise.

Princess: Beauteous as ink—a good conclusion.

Catherine: Fair as text B in a copy-book.

Rosaline: Ware pencils, ho! Let me not die your debtor,

My red dominical, my golden letter,

O, that your face were not so full of O's!

B was a large and ornate letter in the formal style of handwriting known as text hand; the initial letter of *Sunday* was printed in red in contemporary almanacs; *O* refers also to facial spots or blemishes. Brunette Catherine and dark-haired Rosaline are taunting each other about the color of their hair and complexion and using metalanguage to sharpen the jibes.

Metalanguage as Genre

One genre that has been well studied is Shakespeare's use of legal vocabulary.⁶ We find terms from criminal law (e.g., *accusation*, *sentence*, *execution*), civil law (e.g., *statute*, *franchise*, *counsellor*), commercial law (e.g., *surety*, *indenture*, *audit*), and the many terms to do with the hearing of a case (e.g., *cause*, *party*, *petition*, *redress*, *action*, *witness*). Most legal terms are not metalinguistic at all: they relate to the people or areas of behavior involved—*attach*, *traitor*, *battery*, *burglary*, *chattels*, *constable*, *debt*, *fine*, *fee farm*, *heir*, *inherit*, *jury*, *justicers*, *murder*, *precedent*, *treason*, *usury*, and so on. But "the law is a profession of words,"⁷ and those terms that specifically relate to language hold a special place. They include such items as the following:

aforesaid, alias, allege, charge, decree, evidence, hearing, hearsay, injunction, letters patent, libel, oath, perjure, plead, resolution, slander, statute, suit, swear, warrant

It should be noted that not all modern legal metalinguistic terms are found in Shakespearean English, as some, such as *alibi* and *dictum*, did not develop until later centuries.

Shakespeare seems to give metalinguistic terms an orienting role, using them as a way of introducing a point in the plot that turns on a legal issue. For example, although the aim of the trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice* is very definitely not linguistic in character, with its recurring references to money, flesh, and death, it is motivated by a written document expressing an obligation of debt (a bond), and the opening dialogue between Shylock and the Duke is metalinguistically grounded (4.1.33):

Duke: ... We all expect a gentle answer, Jew.

Shylock: I have possessed your grace of what I purpose,
And by our holy Sabbath have I sworn
To have the due and forfeit of my bond...

Shylock continues to base his argument on linguistic grounds:

If you deny it, let the danger light
Upon your charter and your city's freedom.

Portia takes up the linguistic challenge:

I have spoke thus much
To mitigate the justice of thy plea...

and appears to accept Shylock's metalinguistic view:

There is no power in Venice
Can alter a decree established.
'Twill be recorded for a precedent...

Despite repeated requests, Shylock reaffirms his position in linguistic terms:

An oath, an oath! I have an oath in heaven;
Shall I lay perjury upon my soul!

And in his reliance on language lies his downfall. Asked if he will have a surgeon nearby to help Antonio, he replies,

Is it so nominated in the bond?

So he is hoist with his own petard when Portia responds with the same metalinguistic argument:

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
The words expressly are "a pound of flesh."

We expect legal words to turn up when the subject matter is to do with law. There is no particular surprise if Portia uses legal language so efficiently in her persona as Balthasar. The important point to appreciate is that it is not just lawyers, or people well-versed in legal affairs, who use it. All kinds of characters, from highest to lowest, sprinkle their speech with legalisms, and the metalanguage plays its orienting role here too. For example, Launce has written out all the attributes of his milkmaid ladylove on a piece of paper, and he begins with "the catalogue of her conditions" (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 3.1.271). When the gravedigger presents Hamlet with another skull, Hamlet decides it is that of a lawyer, and although his speech refers to many aspects of the lawyer's role (such as a buyer of land), it begins with two metalinguistic terms for quibbling equivocation (5.1.96):

Where be his quiddits now, his quilletts, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?

And legal metalanguage is there at the very beginning of *Coriolanus*—a play whose legal language has been studied in depth.⁸ The opening speakers may be a "company of mutinous citizens with staves, clubs and other weapons," but they are relying on legal metalanguage to make their point:

First Citizen: Before we proceed any further, hear me speak.

All: Speak, speak.

First Citizen: You are all resolved rather to die than to famish?

All: Resolved, resolved.

First Citizen: First, you know Caius Martius is chief enemy to the people.

All: We know't, we know't.

First Citizen: Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price. Is't a verdict?

Shakespeare the Metalinguist

As has often been said in relation to Shakespeare's language, it is not the number of words he used (less than twenty thousand)⁹ that made him who he is, but how he used them. The same point applies to his use of

metalanguage. It is not the size of this vocabulary that is impressive; Shakespeare's four hundred or so items would be easily exceeded by any contemporary treatise on poetry or rhetoric, such as George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589). It is the way he puts metalanguage to artistic use in such areas as plot, character, atmosphere, and genre, and in such innovative ways, that makes him, to my mind, the first real metalinguist.

NOTES

1. For language acquisition and literacy, see Bryant and Bradley.
2. For example, Crystal (forthcoming).
3. Crystal, *Think on My Words*, 305, 317.
4. Cited in Gurr's *The Shakespeare Company*, 254.
5. All citations are taken from the Penguin editions of individual plays and follow the convention of citing the first line of any quotation.
6. See, for example, B. J. and Mary Sokol.
7. Mellinkoff, *The Language of the Law*, vii.
8. For example, Tanselle and Dunbar (1962).
9. See Chapter 1 of Crystal, *Think on my Words*.