

Marion Gymnich / Norbert Lennartz (eds.)

# **The Pleasures and Horrors of Eating**

The Cultural History of Eating  
in Anglophone Literature

In cooperation with Klaus Scheunemann

With 7 figures

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## Eating Words: Some Notes on a Metaphor and its Use in *Much Ado About Nothing*

It is a familiar fact that Shakespeare's audience went to hear (rather than see) a play.<sup>1</sup> Still, even though (or because) those who attended a performance stood or sat listening to words, they were witnesses to actual events taking place on the stage. Like Horatio, they were thus able to attest to "the sensible and true avouch" of their "own eyes" (*Hamlet* 1.1.60–61). Furthermore, when listeners were told, for example, to think that they were seeing horses as the actors spoke of them,<sup>2</sup> they were reminded of their ability to transform the spoken word into a *res*; to turn the 'sign' into a 'thing'.<sup>3</sup> The pictures appearing before the eyes of the listeners' minds are products of the words spoken on the stage, just as much as the dramatic characters themselves, and the way they act and interact with each other and handle physical objects, originate in the words uttered by their author. The stage is unique among the mimetic arts in having words produce a reality to be perceived (at least potentially) by all the senses as well as the imagination. To Shakespeare, this 'magic' quality is a cause of wonder<sup>4</sup> and linguistic self-re-

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1 See e.g. the Chorus (Prologue to Act 1) in *Henry V*: "Admit me Chorus to this history;/ Who, Prologue-like, your humble patience pray,/ Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play" (*Henry V*, Prologue 32–34), or Ben JONSON's *The Staple of News*, where the "Maker" (i. e. the poet) bids the Prologue say, "Would you were come to hear, not see a Play" ("Prologue for the Stage" 1–2).

2 The Chorus (Prologue to Act 1) in *Henry V* tells the audience, "Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them" (*Henry V*, Prologue 26).

3 The relation between words and things is a vast topic, branching out from Plato's *Cratylus* and Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, and defies brief annotation. For a survey of debates immediately relevant to Shakespeare's time, see COUDERT, Allison. "Some Theories of a Natural Language from the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century." In: Albert Heinekamp and Dieter Mettler (eds.). *Magia Naturalis und die Entstehung der modernen Naturwissenschaften*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1978. 56–118. See also VICKERS, who emphasizes the influence of the Aristotelian distinction between word, concept and thing (VICKERS, Brian. "'Words and Things' – or 'Words, Concepts, and Things'?" Rhetorical and Linguistic Categories in the Renaissance." In: Eckhard Kessler and Ian Maclean (eds.). *Res et Verba in der Renaissance*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002. 287–335).

4 Cf. *The Tempest*, where Shakespeare has, for example, "Admired Miranda" (*The Tempest* 3.1.37) and Ferdinand wonder at the magic of an author, Prospero, producing events (and

flection; Shakespeare's stage, as the Chorus of *Henry V* shows, is thoroughly aware of its own mode of existence. And just as the familiar comparison of the world to a stage is so convincing because the stage 'is' the world, the close link between *verba* and *res* characteristic of drama carries conviction because it is relevant to language use in general. In other words, we can believe that it is Don Pedro of Aragon whose visit is announced at the beginning of *Much Ado About Nothing* because we believe in the referential function of words, and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the "Don Pedro" of the stage is created by the very announcement of his name;<sup>6</sup> conversely, when we remember that the man we are going to meet is not 'really' Don Pedro of Aragon we may become aware of the fact that the relation of *verba* and *res* is a precarious and possibly a deceptive one.

In these notes, I would like to focus on one specific example of the way in which Shakespeare reflects, by means of his characters and their speech, on the notion of *verba* being either different from or identical with *res*, the latter including persons, material and immaterial things, as well as actions, i. e. everything that is not language. One of the methods by which this reflection is brought about is to use metaphors which suggest the materiality of language (or rather utterance) itself.<sup>7</sup> The metaphor of *eating words* belongs to a larger group of figurative expressions which serve to do so, as they connect language in the abstract with the act of enunciation, which is human, physical, and concrete. The writer's "hand"<sup>8</sup> and the poet's "breath"<sup>9</sup> are examples of these expressions;

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characters) by means of his words (and Ariel's song). Ferdinand, who is under Prospero's spell, is presented to Miranda like a performer on the stage: she is to "advance" (i. e. lift) the "fringed curtains" of her eyes to see him (*The Tempest* 1.2.409), and Prospero is delighted that the action develops just as his "soul prompts it" (*The Tempest* 1.2.421).

- 5 Cf. the first words of the play, spoken by Leonato: "I learn in this letter that Don Pedro of Aragon comes this night to Messina" (*Much Ado About Nothing* 1.1.1–2).
- 6 Speech acts are part of the picture; on the stage, they are endowed with an illocutionary and perlocutionary force that both testifies to and derives its credibility from its existence in the real world. Nevertheless, they are to be distinguished from the fact that words, in a play, produce the reality of things and events. For the whole complex, see ch. 4, e.g. 177 in ELAM, Keir. *Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse. Language Games in the Comedies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984: "It is only the conversation whereby characters *talk* themselves and their world into existence that allows us to explore the dialogic exchange as a form of *praxis*."
- 7 VICKERS ("Words and Things.") reminds us of the difference between the rhetorical distinction of *res* (subject matter) and *verba* (style, verbal dress of thought) on the one hand, and the linguistic or philosophical distinction of language and reality. While this is doubtlessly correct, it is the very play with both fields that characterizes Shakespeare's poetic reflection on the use of language in *Much Ado About Nothing* and elsewhere. Thus the question of (rhetorically) empty or appropriate words is (metaphorically, comically) linked to the question of words being substantial or insubstantial.
- 8 While still pretending not to be foolishly in love, Benedick (*Much Ado About Nothing* 5.4.91–92) admits that Beatrice's and his own "hands" (i. e. actions as well as the sonnets they have

metaphors which are in fact metonymies if the written or spoken utterance is regarded as a process in which the body is involved, and not to be separated from the verbal statement as the result of that process. They suggest that the author's words are actions and that they have, when spoken, an – albeit fleeting – material presence. In Sonnet 85, for instance, the poet only seemingly contradicts this view when he comes to the conclusion: "Then others for the breath of words respect, / Me for my dumb thoughts, speaking in effect." I do not take this to mean that being silent is better than speaking but that words which are (merely) breath are to be contrasted with a form of speaking that comprises both thinking and doing.<sup>10</sup> In a comical form, stress is laid on "effect" by Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* when he says of Beatrice, "She speaks poniards, and every word stabs. If her breath were as terrible as her terminations, there were no living near her, she would infect to the North Star." (*Much Ado About Nothing* 2.1.226–29)<sup>11</sup>

Metaphors, as we know, may lose some of their rhetorical energy when becoming too familiar and conventional.<sup>12</sup> Of particular interest in this respect is

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written) have established facts: "A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts." HUNT, who stresses ethical aspects of language use in the play, comments on the passage as follows: "Rather than showing their hands *against* their hearts [...], Beatrice's and Benedick's amorous handwriting complies with the hidden yearnings of their hearts" (HUNT, Maurice. "The Reclamation of Language in *Much Ado About Nothing*." In: *Studies in Philology* 97,2 (2000): 165–91. 184). GOLDBERG, writing about *Hamlet*, discusses the issue of (social) character-formation by handwriting (GOLDBERG, Jonathan. "Hamlet's Hand." In: *Shakespeare's Hand*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. 105–31).

9 Most exaltedly, Gallus in Ben Jonson's *Poetaster* speaks of "the sacred breath of a true poet" (*Poetaster* 4.2.32–33).

10 On the one hand, the effect of the dumb thoughts can be regarded as the (only) way in which they speak; on the other hand, the dumb thoughts are by no means silent but speak in an effective manner. It is also possible to regard "speaking" as dependent on "me" rather than "thoughts"; in this case the "speaking in effect" is contrasted with the (mere) "breath of words"; the effect is made possible by the dumb thoughts.

11 The serious variant of this is Hamlet's "I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (*Hamlet* 3.2.387). Curiously, Beatrice's "infecting" speech (or breath) echoes Latin "infectus" (according to COOPER, Thomas. *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae*. Hildesheim: Olms, 1975 [1578], "undone: unmade: not finished"; under "factum" he cites Virgil, "Facta atque infecta canebat [...]. To report things as well that be done, as that be not done"). This is quite pertinent to a rather dark comedy focusing on slander, i. e. the report of something not done as something done.

12 LAKOFF and TURNER, in their chapter on "The Dead Metaphor Theory" (LAKOFF, George and Mark TURNER. *More Than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. 129–31) refute the notion that "those things in our cognition that are most alive and most active are those that are conscious" (129). To LAKOFF and TURNER, however, "alive" is synonymous with "deeply entrenched" and "automatic". This may be true; nevertheless a metaphor may have a completely different, striking effect for being anything but automatic; cf. QUINTILIANUS, Marcus Fabius. *Institutio oratoria. Ausbildung des Redners*. Edited and translated by Helmut Rahn. 2 vols. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988. 8.6.4 on metaphor both being used unconsciously and being "iucunda atque nitida".



the sphere of food and eating, which comprises the senses of smell and taste. It is quite fruitful when it comes to linking the material and the immaterial, body and mind in the field of language and thought, but many of the metaphors hardly attract any notice any more. We speak of *food for thought*, for example, or of *devouring* a book.<sup>13</sup> The *sweetness* of a sound or singer<sup>14</sup> is well known; applied to verbal utterances or poets, however, the expression is less common today than when Shakespeare was praised as “mellifluous, & hony-tongued”<sup>15</sup> or simply called “sweetest”.<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare himself makes fun of this metaphor in *Twelfth Night* when Sir Andrew and Sir Toby comment on Feste’s song, calling his voice “mellifluous” and his breath “Very sweet and contagious”; they even allude parodically to Shakespeare’s own famous dictum in Sonnet 23, “To hear with eyes belongs to love’s fine wit”, when they claim “To hear by the nose, it is dulcet in contagion.” (*Twelfth Night* 2.3.52 – 55)<sup>17</sup> Analogous to the poet spreading the sweetness of his words, gathering honey is a familiar image of poetic imitation and the search for inspiration.<sup>18</sup>

Among the images of language as something nourishing, tasty, or odoriferous entering or leaving the mouth, the notion of *eating words* seems to be less common than, for example, the sweetness of song or discourse; accordingly, we

13 See the other examples in LAKOFF, George and Mark JOHNSON. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. 46 – 47. For eating and drinking as sources of metaphor, see NEWMAN, who does not reserve a section for the target domain of language but includes it under the heading of “intellectual nourishment” (NEWMAN, John. “Eating and Drinking as Sources of Metaphor in English.” In: *Cuadernos de Filología Inglesa* 6,2 (1997): 213 – 31. 219 – 20).

14 See OED “sweet,” *a.* and *adv.* 4.

15 MERES, Francis. *Palladis Tamia*. London, 1598. STC 217:07. fol. 281<sup>v</sup>. Honey is a traditional image of eloquence; a striking example is SPENSER’s Belpheobe (“Sweet words, like dropping honny, she did shed”; *The Faerie Queene* 2.3.24).

16 MILTON, “L’Allegro” l. 133 (“Or sweetest Shakespeare fancy’s child”). The relevant entry in the OED, “sweet,” *a.* and *adv.* 5.c., starts with Chaucer’s “General Prologue” (“Somwhat he lipsed for his wantownesse To make his englissch sweete vp on his tonge”) and ends with a quotation from Francis’s 1748 translation of Horace.

17 Elam, the Arden editor, mentions the possible allusion to Meres but omits to refer to Shakespeare’s own synaesthetic model in Sonnet 23 (on this, see LEIMBERG, Inge. *What may words say...?: A Reading of The Merchant of Venice*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, forthcoming 2010; and BAUER, Matthias. “‘A Litanie’: John Donne and the Speaking Ear.” In: Norbert Lennartz (ed.). *The Senses’ Festival: Inszenierungen der Sinne und der Sinnlichkeit in der Literatur und Kunst des Barock*. Trier: WVT, 2005. 111 – 27. 113).

18 A classic example is HORACE’s *Carmina* IV.2.27 – 32, “ego apud Matinae more modoque [...] carmina fingo”; cf. George HERBERT’s “Oh Book! infinite sweetnesse! let my heart/ Suck ev’ry letter and a hony gain” (“The H. Scriptures I”, lines 1 – 2; HERBERT, George. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. Edited by C.A. Patrides. London: Dent, 1974. 76). For a modern instance, see Robert BLY’s poem “Words Rising”: “We are bees then; our honey is language” (BLY, Robert. *Eating the Honey of Words: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Perennial, 2000. 181).

tend to be much more aware of what the speaker says. The very absurdity of the action literally described by this expression makes it graphic and concrete. My case in point is the famous moment in Act four of *Much Ado About Nothing* when Benedick and Beatrice for the first time confess their love to each other. This pair of master linguists is suddenly confronted with the question of how to link their love of bandying words to something quite real, i. e. a loving union of their lives. In short, Shakespeare dramatizes the very problem I have just addressed.

- BENEDICK I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?  
 BEATRICE As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you. But believe me not – and yet I lie not. I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.  
 BENEDICK By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.  
 BEATRICE Do not swear and eat it.  
 BENEDICK I will swear by it that you love me, and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.  
 BEATRICE Will you not eat your word?  
 BENEDICK With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee.  
 BEATRICE Why then God forgive me!  
 BENEDICK What offense, sweet Beatrice?  
 BEATRICE You have stayed me in a happy hour, I was about to protest I loved you.  
 BENEDICK And do it, with all thy heart.  
 BEATRICE I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.  
 BENEDICK Come, bid me do anything for thee.  
 BEATRICE Kill Claudio. (*Much Ado About Nothing* 4.1.267 – 88)

If things, *res*, and actions, *acta*, are proverbially defined as *non verba* – in sayings such as “Facta, non verba!”<sup>19</sup> – then “nothing”, *non res*, is “words”. Benedick and Beatrice love words (one of the two being actually named after the definition of rhetoric, which is *ars bene dicendi*)<sup>20</sup> but that means that they love ‘no things’,

19 COOPER (*Thesaurus*) defines “Factum” as “A deede: a thyng done or made”, indicating the proximity of thing and action. WALTHER’s and SCHMIDT’s collection of proverbs is full of examples contrasting facts with words. The example cited is from WALTER, Hans and Paul Gerhard SCHMIDT (eds.). *Proverbia sententiaeque Latinitatis medii ac recentioris aevi. Nova series*. 3 vols. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982 – 86. 7: 801, no. 36831; others include “Non verbis, sed factis opus est” (WALTHER, Hans (ed.). *Proverbia sententiaeque Latinitatis medii aevi*. 6 vols. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963 – 69. 3: 413, no. 18697a, with a reference to Ovid), “Non ex verbis res, sed verba e rebus prudens estimate” (WALTHER and SCHMIDT. *Proverbia*. 8: 735, no. 38912b) or “Non verbis, sed factis spectari vult Grecia” (WALTHER and SCHMIDT. *Proverbia*. 8: 810, no. 39013).

20 See QUINTILIAN 2.17.32; ISIDORE 2.1.1; LAUSBERG, Heinrich. *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik*. 2 vols. Munich: Hueber, 1960. § 32. HUNT (“The Reclamation of Language.” 191) suggests “Speak Well” as the “secondary etymology of his name” but does not refer to the standard definition of rhetoric. To HUNT, Benedick’s use of language is paradigmatic of a development or learning process shown in *Much Ado About Nothing*; language as a tool used for the selfish pursuit of power is to be replaced with “a palpable new understanding refined in the crucible of hearsay and slander” (HUNT. “The Reclamation of Language.” 191).

and make much ado about them. In fact, the exchange makes us realize that the title of the play juggles with the notion of doing versus speaking.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, it is not surprising that Beatrice is (or pretends to be) a little distrustful of Benedick's claiming that he loves "nothing" in the world so well as her. The innuendo, familiar from Shakespeare's Sonnet 20, is obvious; at the same time the modern reader is reminded of Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, who is admired by the King for being able to see "nobody" on the road.<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare's use of "nothing" is too complex to be treated briefly; but we are familiar with its potentially threatening quality of meaning actually "something" from Iago's equivocation "Nay, yet be wise; yet we see nothing done" (*Othello* 3.3.435), which prepares the undoing of Desdemona.

In her response to Benedick, Beatrice equates "nothing" with "the thing I know not", which evokes the context of Antonio's initial speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, in which he admits "That I have much ado to know myself" (*The Merchant of Venice* 1.1.7).<sup>23</sup> Love, as a step from words to deeds, to actual commitment, is what Beatrice indeed does not know yet. Beatrice is speaking the truth when she says that she is what he is, since she loves words as much as he does; accordingly, she confesses "nothing" and does not deny it. Her cousin is uppermost in her mind: Hero has been the victim of slander, i. e. one of the most serious cases of words deviating from things. A "breath", as Leonato says to Borachio, has "killed" his "innocent child" (*Much Ado About Nothing* 5.1.253–54). Words, in Hero's case, have not been loved but misused. Benedick, ignoring what Beatrice says, does not help closing the gap, for he protests too much.<sup>24</sup> His

21 See *OED* "ado" n. 1., 3. and 4. Moreover, it is a critical commonplace to regard the word "Nothing" of the title as a paronomasia of *noting*, which hints at the role played by (misleading) perception and observation, causing e.g. the slander of Hero. See DAWSON, who identifies Hocky as "the first critic to discuss the pun in any detail" and points out that, in "the world the play creates [...] attention is directed as much to the way meaning is produced as to what the meaning is" (DAWSON, Anthony B. "Much Ado About Signifying." In: *SEL* 22 (1982): 211–21. 211). HUNT points out Claudio's words in 4.1.17–18 ("O, what men dare do! What men may do! What men daily do, not knowing what they do!"), which "incidentally describe Leonato's presumptuous theft of his own speech as much as they do Borachio's bold stealing Hero's honor" (HUNT. "The Reclamation of Language." 178). In fact, Claudio's words are an example of "a-do" about nothing, or of nothing(s) about doing – "interjections", as Benedick calls them (18).

22 "'I see nobody on the road,' said Alice. 'I only wish I had such eyes,' the King remarked in a fretful tone. 'To be able to see Nobody! And at such distance too! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!'" (CARROLL, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. Edited by Roger Lancelyn Green. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 198–99).

23 On the complex of words in Antonio's speech (the interplay of *knowing*, *owing*, *doing* and *ado*), see LEIMBERG's commentary on the speech in *What may words say...?*

24 The comedy of the scene is stressed by LENGELER, Rainer. *Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing als Komödie*. Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Vorträge G

oath, "By my sword," immediately awakens Beatrice's distrust. We remember that in Act one she made fun of him when she said that she promised "to eat all of his killing" (*Much Ado About Nothing* 1.1.41–42), a proverbial phrase<sup>25</sup> indicating that she holds him to be a braggart rather than a valiant soldier. She moreover called him a "valiant trencher-man" and "no less than a stuffed man" who "hath an excellent stomach" (*Much Ado About Nothing* 1.1.48, 55, 48–49). Accordingly, she now associates the sword with eating rather than with valiant action when she says "Do not swear and eat it". Here she already implies that Benedick may be going to eat his words, i. e. "retract in a humiliating manner",<sup>26</sup> but he manages to shift the ground slightly and links the eating to the sword, "I will make him eat it that says I love you not". Thereby he makes another attempt to dispel Beatrice's doubts and to insist on the proximity of word and thing, 'thing' here meaning 'deed'; the mouth emitting a slanderous word will be punished by having to eat Benedick's sword. Eating is what in this scene links "sword" and "word", which could still be used as a proper rhyme in Shakespeare's time;<sup>27</sup> the two words are furthermore linked in the proverb, first documented in the *Ancrene Riwe* around 1200, "Words cut (hurt) more than swords" (*OEDP*). In addition, the audience remembers Benedick's earlier exclamation that Beatrice "speaks poniards" (*Much Ado About Nothing* 2.1.227). We see here unfold a conceptual triangle of eating, speaking and hurting, which in spite of the serious claims for which it is used never loses its comic potential. Cooper's 1578 *Thesaurus* cites Plautus for a similar metaphorical link between eating and beating, "Edere pugnos", and provides what to a modern ear sounds like an ingeniously punning English equivalent: "To be buffeted";<sup>28</sup> John Donne in his third Satire holds up to ridicule those who are courageous only for worldly

314. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992. 25–26. SMITH regards the command "Kill Claudio" as a turning point in Benedick's and Beatrice's development (cf. SMITH, Denzell S. "The Command 'Kill Claudio' in *Much Ado About Nothing*." In: *English Language Notes* 4 (1967): 181–83).

25 See McEachern's note in the Arden Edition.

26 *OED* "eat" v. 2.c.

27 See DOBSON, E.J. *English Pronunciation 1500–1700*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968. § 16 note 2. Cf. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.2.105–06, where Lysander says: "Where is Demetrius? O, how fit a word/ Is that vile name to perish on my sword!" and later Thisbe in 5.1.329–30: "Tongue, not a word!/ Come, trusty sword, / [...]." Another example is Shallow's question in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 3.1.39–40: "What, the sword and the word? Do you study them both, Master Parson?"

28 On Edward Lear's nonsensical fusion of eating and beating, see Angelika Zirker's essay in this volume. The word *buffet*, in the sense of "A sideboard table" (*OED* "buffet" n.<sup>3</sup> 1.a.) appears as an English word only in the early eighteenth century and as a form of serving a meal only in the nineteenth (l.b.). But then the French expression exists much longer; cf. the interesting reference to drink in COTGRAVE, "Buffeté": "Wrought rough, or shagge, like Buffe; also, buffeted, or well cuffed; also, deaded, as wine that hath taken wind, or hath been mingled with water."

ends: “and must every he/ Which cries not, ‘Goddess!’ to thy Mistresse, draw,/ Or eat thy poysonous words? courage of straw!” (26–28).

Accordingly, Beatrice does not know whether she is to take Benedick seriously but becomes quite serious herself when she now directly asks “Will you not eat your word?” She seems anxious to discover *res* in his words, something to trust and rely upon. Whereas in her first statement, she has still been non-committal (“I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing”), she now, by her very question, admits that Benedick’s words have become some thing. She looks for food, and he provides it, but she is honestly afraid that he might, after all, eat it up himself (somewhat in the manner of Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, who has the dishes removed so that Katherina fears that she will be fed “with the very name of meat” – *The Taming of the Shrew* 4.3.32.). Beatrice wants to devour Benedick’s words, i. e. follow the examples from Plautus and Cicero given by Cooper, “Deurorare dicta alicuius [...] To take good heede vnto wordes” and “Verbum ipsum omnibus modis animi & corporis deuorabat” (he devoured that word with body and soul, or as Cooper translates the phrase, “he tooke that worde marueylous gladly & with great delight”)<sup>29</sup>. But she is not yet quite sure whether he has really given his word or just words that may be taken back. Implicitly, she states that Benedick has done much more than utter nothings, for you can only arrive at the idea of eating words when you believe in their being something. Words, Beatrice’s anxious question implies, may be real food, as in Emily Dickinson’s marvellous line “He ate and drank the precious Words”,<sup>30</sup> or they may be some *Ersatz* that does not still your hunger at all.

No one is less aware of this than Benedick, who reflects on the change Claudio’s speech underwent when he fell in love: “now is he turned orthography; his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes” (*Much Ado About Nothing* 2.3.19–21). Whereas he leaves it open as to whether this is nourishing or not, other Shakespearean characters have no illusions about this. Costard and Moth, for example, who work for the braggart Don Adriano de Armado in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, view Moth’s master and his fellow word-monger Holofernes quite skeptically when they say,

MOTH [to They have been at a great feast of languages, and stolen the scraps.  
Costard.]

29 Cf. COOPER, Thomas. “Deuoro.” In: *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae*. Hildesheim: Olms, 1975 [1578].

30 DICKINSON, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Ralph W. Franklin. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. no. 1715. Emily Dickinson repeatedly takes up the notion of the nourishing word; cf. e. g. the poem “A word made Flesh is seldom / And tremblingly partook” (ibid. no. 1715); see BAUER, Matthias. “‘A word made Flesh’: Anmerkungen zum lebendigen Wort bei Emily Dickinson.” In: Volker Kapp and Dorothea Scholl (eds.). *Bibeldichtung*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2006. 373–92.

COSTARD O, they have lived long on the alms-basket of words! I marvel thy master hath not eaten thee for a word, for thou art not so long by the head as *honorificabilitudinitatibus*. Thou art easier swallowed than a flap-dragon. (*Love's Labour's Lost* 5.1.35–41)

The editors have noticed that Costard (or Shakespeare) puns here “on the pronunciation of Moth’s name as *Fr. mol*”, and we might add that this underlines the rather decrepit state of Armado, who lives on words and feeds others with them; for Costard’s suggestion makes us realize that he is not only an eater of ‘mot(h)s’ but appears to be rather moth-eaten. One might say that the very nature of comedy consists in eating such words, and that we, the audience, partake in the great feast of language(s)<sup>31</sup> when we devour the words of the actors marvelously gladly and with great delight. Bottom, for example, senses this instinctively, when he desires the comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe to be sweet – which is why his fellow-actors are to mind their diet:

And most dear actors, eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath; and I do not doubt but to hear them say, it is a sweet comedy. No more words. Away! Go, away! (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 4.2.39–43)

One really suspects some schoolboy’s joke (on Shakespeare’s part) behind this excessive literalism, or some dog-Latin (on Bottom’s part), for of course anyone looking for “comedi(e)” in a Latin dictionary would find nothing but the past tense of *comedere*, “I have eaten”.

Benedick goes on to dress his metaphor by imagining sauces to his word, none of which will make him eat it, and immediately moves to dangerous grounds again, for when he says “I protest I love thee” he uses a Latin word, *protestari*, that means, according to Cooper, “To denounce or declare openly that a thing is not to be done”.<sup>32</sup> Beatrice immediately takes him up on this when she asks God’s forgiveness for having almost done the same. But the ambiguity is manifold here, for “to denounce or declare openly” is the synonym of another word, which means, according to Cooper, “To utter or put forth: to publish or set

31 On language in *Love's Labour's Lost*, see CARROLL, William C. (*The Great Feast of Language in Love's Labour's Lost*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; especially ch. 1, 11–64), who does not, however, consider closely the metaphor that has provided the title of his book. Elam, in *Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse*, stresses “the extraordinary theatricalization in *LLL* of the material (or precisely, *plastic*) qualities of language” which “finds its main thematic expression in the equation between the phonemic-morphemic features of speech and the human body and its alimentary functions” (ELAM, Keir. *Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse: Language Games in the Comedies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. 258).

32 In *Romeo and Juliet* (2.4.168–75), Romeo tells the Nurse “commend me to thy lady and mistress. I protest unto thee—”, an utterance which is taken up by the Nurse in a (perhaps unwittingly) ironic fashion, as she regards it as a cause of joy to Juliet: “I will tell her, sir, that you do protest – which, as I take it, is a gentleman-like offer.”

abrode”, and this word is *edo*, just the same as *edo* ‘I eat’, even though the preterite is different: *edidi* instead of *edi*. Interestingly, Cooper goes on in his definition of *edo*, *edis* by adding the meaning “to bring forth, to execute, or doe, or to cause to be done”: *edo* in this sense is synonymous with *do* and *ado* and thus the exact opposite of *nothing* and of eating one’s words; it refers to a declaration which is also an action – the very thing Benedick has in mind. The relationship of speaking and acting will be brought home to the audience only a few seconds later, when the scene suddenly takes a serious and potentially tragic turn. Beatrice will ask Benedick to *execute, or do something*: “Kill Claudio”.

This seriousness, however, is not completely unanticipated. It already came in when Benedick swore his oath, “By my sword”. Similarly, Beatrice’s “God forgive me” introduces, together with its mocking playfulness, a quite earnest note. The Arden editor suggests that Benedick may “pun on the more serious oath, ‘God’s word’, which contracts to ‘sword’” and cites Pistol in *Henry V* as a parallel: “Sword is an oath, and oaths must have their course” (*Henry V* 2.1.101). Benedick’s and Beatrice’s exchange which shows, and reflects on, wordplay becoming serious commitment, takes religion into account.

And this is the point where some further investigation into the history of the expression “To eat one’s words” is called for. In particular, the first examples listed by the *ODEP* are quite revealing. One of them, which is also listed by the *OED* as the very first example, is from Arthur Golding’s 1571 translation of Calvin’s commentary on the 62nd Psalm. The verse “Once hath God spoken it, I have heard it twice, that power belongeth unto God” (62:12; 62:11 in the AV) is explained in the commentary as “God eateth not his word when he hath once spoken it” (fol. 236<sup>v</sup>). In this perspective, the word *not* eaten by the speaker is the divine word, and we are surely right in assuming that Golding chose this metaphor for his translation because it alludes to the notion that we are the ones to eat God’s words, not God himself (remember Cooper’s “*Deurare dicta alicuius*”), and because the Psalms themselves offer the concept of eating words. “Taste and see,” as Psalm 34 has it, and in Psalm 119: “how sweet are thy words to my taste”; we are also reminded of Revelation (10:10) where John eats up the angel’s “little book” that tastes “sweet as honey” in his mouth and enables him to speak the prophetic word.<sup>33</sup>

If we are still doubtful about the religious origin of the proverbial phrase, “to eat one’s words”, however, we should look once more into the *ODEP* and follow up the very first reference (which is not in the *OED*). This is from 1551 and is to be found in Thomas Cranmer’s treatise called *An Answer [...] vnto a crafty and sophisticall cauillation deuised by Stephen Gardiner [...] against the trewe and godly doctrine of the most holy sacrament of the body and blood of our sauour*

33 Cf. “And have tasted the good word of God” in Hebr. 6:5 (AV).

*Iesu Christe*. Cranmer defends himself against his opponent's attack by telling him, "Brynge you forthe some place in my booke, where I saye, that the lordes supper is but a bare signification without anye effecte or operation of god in the same, or else eate your woordes agayne".<sup>34</sup> Cranmer's sarcasm is here based on the very fact that he wants to stress, namely that to him the lord's supper is not, as his Roman Catholic antagonist has held him to have maintained, a mere word without any *res*, a "bare signification". Eating the host is eating the Word that was made flesh (John 1:14). Cranmer uses the metaphor (to eat one's words) sarcastically in order to remind his reader of the literal truth of eating the divine word, which is a synonym, and not a metaphor, of being "fedde and nourished with CHRISTES verye fleshe and bloode" (172). At the same time, he emphasizes that the *res* is not a material object but an action or operation, a "ministration and receiuyng".

This mystery, alluded to by the invocation of "God" in the context of eating words, becomes the model for the exchange between Benedick and Beatrice. Words are not to be insubstantial nothings. Nor are they, as Beatrice makes clear, to be physical substances that can be eaten again by the speaker. They become food only in the process of ministration and receiving, and that means when they do something. We see this first when the issue is Benedick's and Beatrice's mutual confession of love, and later when Beatrice demands punishment (or revenge) for the murderous slander of Hero. As regards the declaration of love, we see this most clearly when Beatrice says "I was about to protest that I loved you" and Benedick replies "And do it" (*Much Ado About Nothing* 4.1.284–85), implying that she should do both, protest and love him, that *res* and *verba* should be one.

The word 'eaten' in this sacramental sense must be internalized; it should not, as the false Angelo in *Measure for Measure* confesses to himself, stay just in the speaker's mouth: "Heaven in my mouth," says Angelo, "As if I did but only chew his [i.e. heaven's] name,/ And in my heart the strong and swelling evil/ Of my conception" (*Measure for Measure* 2.4.4–7). In our scene it is Benedick who introduces the heart, albeit quite conventionally: "And do it, with all thy heart." Beatrice's answer takes away the conventional note, as it is clad both in a breathtakingly simple phrase and an ingenious paradox: "I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest." The remarkable sequence of 14 monosyllabic words (followed by the disyllabic "protest") is the appropriate verbal expression of the plain earnestness which has replaced earlier role-

34 CRANMER, Thomas. *An Answer of the Most Reuerend Father in God Thomas Archbishop of Canterburie, primate of all England and metropolitan vnto a crafty and sophisticall cauillation deuised by Stephen Gardiner doctour of law, late byshop of Winchester, against the trewe and godly doctrine of the most holy sacrament of the body and blood of our sauour Iesu Christe*. London, 1551. STC 211:05. 172.



playing.<sup>35</sup> Beatrice does the very thing she says she cannot do (protest, in the sense of affirming solemnly) while at the same time she does not protest (i. e. “declare openly that a thing is not to be done”) but has totally absorbed Benedick’s words of love. For a moment, the border line between word and thing seems to have vanished;<sup>36</sup> the word in the mouth is at one with the conception somewhere inside.

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35 I would thus like to complement HUNT’s view, who stresses that Benedick “becomes disposed to woo Beatrice in plain, direct, unequivocal language” (HUNT. “The Reclamation of Language.” 189).

36 VICKERS cites Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society of London* (1667) as an example of “the classical belief in a proper economy of style, ‘when men deliver’d so many things, almost in an equal number of words’” (VICKERS. “‘Words and Things.’” 303).

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