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*M.O.A.I. "What should
that alphabetical position portend?"
An Answer to the Metamorphic Malvolio**

by PETER J. SMITH

This paper is an attempt to answer the riddle set up by Malvolio's cryptic question which occurs in the box-tree scene (2.5) of Twelfth Night. The essay surveys a number of alternative solutions proposed by critics, editors, and actors. All are found, in their own ways, to be wanting: some are exposed as literal minded, too arcane, reliant upon language games that are unavailable to a theater audience or flawed by chronology. As the first step in decoding the puzzle, the paper rehearses a Renaissance view of semantics, according to which sense arises from utterances quintessentially — not, as modern linguistics would have it, approximately. Language, that is, is shown to signify inherently rather than conventionally. This linguistic veracity is shown to condemn Malvolio as he repeats an acrostic which he doesn't perceive, even while he utters it. The paper proposes that M.O.A.I. alludes to Sir John Harington's The Metamorphosis Of A Iax.

Act 2, scene 5 — the "box-tree scene" — is the comic climax of *Twelfth Night*, yet despite its usually rapturous reception in the theater it contains a number of textual cruces which so far have eluded satisfactory explanation. In the scene, the posturing Malvolio stumbles across the love letter (forged by Maria) and, overlooked by Fabian, Toby, and Andrew, attempts to decode its cryptic message. As I wish to discuss the episode in detail, it will be necessary to quote a sizeable chunk:

SIR TOBY: O peace, and the spirit of humours intimate reading aloud to him.

MALVOLIO (*taking up the letter*): By my life, this is my lady's hand. These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus makes she her great P's. It is in contempt of question her hand.

SIR ANDREW: Her c's, her u's, and her t's? Why that?

* I am indebted to Alan Brissenden who alerted me to his work on the history of *As You Like It* and to Catherine Burgass, Greg Walker, Roger Warren, and the anonymous *Renaissance Quarterly* referee who read drafts of this essay and made valuable suggestions. During 1997, earlier versions were presented at the Universities of Sheffield Hallam, Hawaii at Manoa, Tours, New South Wales, Newcastle, Monash, and La Trobe, and I am grateful to Steven Earnshaw, Philip Shaw, André Lascombes, Richard Madelaine, Mark Gauntlett, Clive Probyn, and John Gillies respectively for their invitations and to members of the seminars. Finally, the publication of this piece by the Renaissance Society of America is fitting tribute to the intellectual vitality and cultural warmth of Richard J. Larschian, Jim Panos, Peg Panos, and my colleagues and students at the University of Massachusetts, 1996-97.

MALVOLIO (*reads*): "To the unknown belov'd, this, and my good wishes." Her very phrases! By your leave, wax — soft, and the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal — 'tis my lady. To whom should this be?

He opens the letter

FABIAN: This wins him, liver and all.

MALVOLIO: "Jove knows I love,

But who?

Lips do not move,

No man must know."

"No man must know." What follows? The numbers altered. "No man must know." If this should be thee, Malvolio?

SIR TOBY: Marry, hang thee, brock.

MALVOLIO: "I may command where I adore,

But silence like a Lucrece knife

With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore.

M.O.A.I. doth sway my life."

FABIAN: A fustian riddle.

SIR TOBY: Excellent wench, say I.

MALVOLIO: "M.O.A.I. doth sway my life." Nay, but first let me see, let me see, let me see.

FABIAN: What dish o' poison has she dressed him!

SIR TOBY: And with what wing the staniel checks at it!

MALVOLIO: "I may command where I adore." Why, she may command me. I serve her, she is my lady. Why, this is evident to any formal capacity. There is no obstruction in this. And the end — what should that alphabetical position portend? If I could make that resemble something in me. Softly — "M.O.A.I."

SIR TOBY: O ay, make up that, he is now at a cold scent.

FABIAN: Sowter will cry upon't for all this, though it be as rank as a fox.

MALVOLIO: "M." Malvolio. "M" — why, that begins my name.

FABIAN: Did not I say he would work it out? The cur is excellent at faults.

MALVOLIO: "M." But then there is no consonancy in the sequel. That suffers under probation: "A" should follow, but "O" does.

FABIAN: And "O" shall end, I hope.

SIR TOBY: Ay, or I'll cudgel him, and make him cry "O!"

MALVOLIO: And then "I" comes behind.

FABIAN: Ay, an you had any eye behind you you might see more detraction at your heels than fortunes before you.

MALVOLIO: "M.O.A.I." This simulation is not as the former; and yet to crush this a little, it would bow to me, for every one of these letters are in my name.¹

¹Shakespeare, 1994, 145-49, lines 80-133; cited hereafter as "Oxford ed." All quotations from *Twelfth Night* (except otherwise indicated) are from this edition. Quotations from other Shakespeare plays come from Wells and Taylor.

Maria's mock love letter has caused frustration for generations of Shakespearean scholars. The New Variorum is full of responses which are as far-fetched as they are plenteous.² In respect of her *c*'s, *u*'s, *t*'s, and *P*'s, Steevens noticed that neither *c* nor *P* appear in the superscription of the letter, though he offered no explanation for their presence here. Malone proposed merely that "This was perhaps an oversight in Shakespeare," though he was silent as to why the playwright may have chosen *these* four letters, two of which do and two of which do not appear in the address. Ritson postulated that the letters do not appear because Malvolio has not read all of it out. He supplies the following which he suggests was "the usual custom of Shakespeare's age: 'To the Unknown belov'd, this, and my good wishes, with Care Present.'" W. A. Wright is skeptical, though: "If Ritson's supposition be correct, no more needs be said on the point; but I have grave doubts about it." Innes also disapproved of Ritson's solution, opining that Malvolio's failure to read out the whole of the address "would not fit well with so precise a character." He continues rather vaguely, "Probably Shakespeare merely named letters that would sound well, knowing that no audience would detect a discrepancy." But the internal rhyme of *c*, *t*, and *P* is hardly significant in itself, nor does it explain the choice of the remaining letter *u* which fails to rhyme with the others — why not *b*, *d*, *e*, *g*, or *v*, which do rhyme and all of which appear in the address?

Aguecheek's repetition of the sequence and its resulting emphasis implies that it is more than just a random collection of letters: "Her *c*'s, her *u*'s, and her *t*'s? Why that?" Clearly the audience is meant to be aware of this particular combination of letters, and as early as 1793 Blackstone commented queasily, "I am afraid some very coarse and vulgar appellations are meant to be alluded to by these capital letters."³ For an audience listening to rather than reading the play, a word of three letters could easily be assimilated and Andrew's repetition makes doubly sure: *c*, *u*, *t*, or *cut*, as most recent editions acknowledge, was a Renaissance synonym for *cunt*, of which the printed instances in the sixteenth century were largely confined to Scotland. *Cut* appears in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* as a double entendre underlying Lady Kix's lament on her childlessness: "Can any woman have a greater cut?"⁴ In *Twelfth*

²Shakespeare, 1901, 166. Cited hereafter as "Variorum."

³Shakespeare, 1975, 67. Cited hereafter as "Arden ed."

⁴Middleton, 1968, 2.1.138. The Oxford editors of *Twelfth Night* also cite Webster's induction to *The Malcontent* (lines 25-26) for another instance of this pun, 146. The

Night, as Toby reassures Andrew that he will be successful in his wooing of Olivia, provided he send for more cash, he declaims, "Send for money, knight. If thou hast her not i'th'end, call me cut" (2.3.175).⁵ The lewd play on having her "i' th' end" makes the prospective insult all the more fitting.

Cut was also used as a verb, signifying, euphemistically, sexual activity. Commonly it appears in the verb phrase "cut a caper" as in *Pericles*: Boul't's advertising of the virginal Miranda so excites Monsieur Veroles (whose name derives from *vérole*, the French for "pox") that "He offered to cut a caper at the proclamation" (scene 16.103). Dancing and dalliance were commonly linked, as in Henry Hutton's account of a "Letcher" which describes whoring in jiggling terms: "hee'l cut a caper, neatly prance, / And with his Curtail some odde Galliard dance."⁶ In *The Sun's-Darling* by Ford and Dekker (1656), the Italian dancer is described lewdly as "one that loves mutton so well, he alwaies carries capers about him; his brains lie in his legs, and his legs serve him to no other use then to do tricks, as if he had bought em of a Jugler."⁷ The dancer himself deploys dance jargon to brag of past conquests; he knows "Corantoes, galliardaes [and] amorettaes dolche dolche to declamante do bona robaes de Tuscana."⁸ In *Twelfth Night*, as Toby and Andrew drink away the early hours boasting of their dancing prowess, their conversation thinly masks an obsession with sexual potency. Note the presence not only of the verb-phrase "cut a caper" but the mention of the "galliard" as a coded reference (as in the examples above) to fornication:

SIR TOBY: What is thy excellence in a galliard, knight?

SIR ANDREW: Faith, I can cut a caper.

SIR TOBY: And I can cut the mutton to't.

SIR ANDREW: And I think I have the back-trick simply as strong as any man in
Illyria. (1.3.112-16)

proverbial formulation "come cut and long-tail," meaning "in any circumstances" (referring to animals with cropped and long tails, i.e., all animals) is also evocative of female and male genitals (see *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 3.4.46).

⁵Both Arden and Oxford eds. note that *cut* here may also mean a gelded horse. The *OED* notes the insult but is not decisive in relation to its etymology: "It is doubtful whether the sense is 'cut-tail horse' or 'gelding.'"

⁶Hutton, B 1.

⁷Foard [sic] and Decker [sic], 12-13.

⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

The sexual connotations surrounding *galliard* (“dalliance”), *cut* (“cunt”), *caper* (“copulate”), *mutton* (“prostitute”), and *back-trick* (“sexual mastery”) thicken the lewd tone of the exchange.⁹

Given the scurrilous nature of her “c’s, her u’s, and her t’s,” it is hardly surprising that “makes she her great P’s” can be glossed, in the words of the Oxford editors, as “urinates copiously.”¹⁰ Toby uses *make* in the verb-phrase “make water,” meaning “to urinate” (1.3.122). But Aguecheek is oblivious to the sexual and urinary connotations of the words (*cut* and *pee*) formed by the letters Malvolio reads and his bafflement is of a piece with the practice throughout of demonstrating his ignorance by having him say or repeat things which the audience can — and he cannot — understand (compare his misprision over Mistress Mary Accost and, later, “what is ‘Pourquoi?’ Do, or not do?”). Despite the almost universal acceptance of *P* for “pee” in modern editions, it is worth pointing out that the *OED* lists the first printed instances of the word as 1902 (noun) and 1879 (verb). Contemporary evidence suggests that *P* stands for “prick,” as in John Taylor’s *A Common Whore* in which the letter appears alongside the rather obviously vaginal *O*: “[the whore] Hath much more understanding of the *French*, / If she hath learn’d great *P*, *O* Per se *O*. / She’le quickly know *De morbo Gallico*.”¹¹

It may be that *P* is being used in *Twelfth Night* as a euphemistically abbreviated form of *piss* which the *OED* cites as *c.* 1386 (noun) and *c.* 1290 (verb) but another possibility is that “makes she her great P’s” is a version of *make-peace* defined by the *OED* as “One who or something which makes peace” (1516). At the beginning of *Richard II*, for instance, Gaunt attempts to appease the belligerent Bolingbroke, “To be a make-peace shall become my age. / Throw down, my son, the Duke of Norfolk’s gage” (1.1.160-61). In light of the absence of evidence of a contemporary urinary meaning and Shakespeare’s pacific use of the term in *Richard II*, we might read “These be her very c’s, her u’s, and her t’s, and thus makes she her great P’s” as a description of the ways in which Olivia deploys her sexual charms (here crudely embodied by her cunt) to appease or satisfy: “Olivia cannot know that . . . without her consent,

⁹For *mutton*, see *Measure for Measure* (Shakespeare, 1988), in which Lucio nudgily remarks that the Duke “would eat mutton on Fridays” (3.1.440). For *back-trick*, see Tilley, S842 who cites “steel to the back” as a euphemism for “sexually potent.” In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff justifies his sexual appetite: “When gods have hot backs, what shall poor men do?” (5.5.11). Note also “the beast with two backs” as an image of copulation (*Othello*, 1.1.118).

¹⁰Oxford ed., 146.

¹¹Taylor, 1635, A6. For the vaginal *O*, see *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.3.88-90.

her private parts will be on display for everyone's amusement."¹² Neither, of course, is Malvolio portrayed as saying this consciously, but an audience hearing it would be able to contrast such a piece of crude gossip with Olivia's fugitive and cloistered virtue: "like a cloistress she will veiled walk" (1.1.27). In her explanation of the riddle, Leah Scragg has suggested that a second-order quibble, which underlies the bawdy, is available for an especially acute audience member. She proposes that the letters spell out *cut-p[urser]*: "While laughing at the incongruity of 'cut' and 'pee'. . . the members of the audience are thus encouraged to visualize 'cut-P----' and in doing so a seventeenth-century spectator may well have been prompted to transfer an anxious hand to his side."¹³ Despite the number of cases Scragg cites of pick-pocketing episodes from contemporary plays, the implication that an unruly Shakespearean comedy, the very title of which is suggestive of carnivalesque revelry, may be an early version of a neighborhood watch, seems dourly implausible.

The density of sexual reference during the scene makes the killjoy Malvolio and the idiotic Andrew objects of the audience's knowing scorn. They are ridiculed as the result of a conspiracy between a suggestive playwright and an alert audience. This ironic deflation of a character from their own mouths is the staple stuff of ribald comedy and can be seen at its most obvious in recent times in the *Carry On* films or *Up Pompeii*. As the joke becomes more sophisticated, so the danger that the audience will fail to pick it up increases and so does the possibility that it will get lost. Such has been the fate of "M.O.A.I." — a joke, as I will suggest, that was readily assimilable in its own day but which has reduced modern commentators to the level of the bewildered Malvolio.

The critical fortunes of "M.O.A.I." have been even less illustrious than those of her "c's, her u's, and her t's," which undoubtedly is the more readily solved riddle. Halliwell casually proposed "My Own Adored Idol, or some such words, or cipher . . . imitated from similar enigmas which were current at the time."¹⁴ Other critics have surmised that Malvolio was a cipher for a real person. Fleay, for instance, advanced the thesis that Malvolio was a coded version of John Marston: "At any rate, there is a singular likeness between the names of Malevole [in Marston's *Malcontent*] and the steward Malvolio, and a still more singular agreement between IO: MA:, Marston's abbreviated signature, and the

¹²Callaghan, 437.

¹³Scragg, 5. Despite its proximity, Scragg has nothing to say on "M.O.A.I."

¹⁴Variorum, 168.

M.O.A.I. of the letter addressed to *MalvolIO*.¹⁵ The proposed alliterative correspondence between Marston's abbreviated signature and the letters in Malvolio's name sounds tenuous, not least because the order in which the letters occur is quite different (and unexplained). In addition, the suggestion of intertextual influence is flawed by chronology. *The Malcontent*, which was published in 1604, was not written before 1602, whereas *Twelfth Night* is usually dated to 1601. It would not, therefore, have been possible for Shakespeare to have modeled Malvolio on Marston's Malevole.

Another more plausible identity behind the cryptogram was proposed by Percy Allen in 1937: "Malvolio, attempting to link the letters 'Moai' with his own name, perceives that 'there is no consonancy in the sequel . . . A should follow but O does.' Substitute the name 'Montaigne' for 'Malvolio,' and there *is* consonancy; because the letters Mo-ai are the first letters of the two syllables of *Mont-aigne*."¹⁶ Montaigne's own interest in onomastics, reflected in his essay "Of Names," might make him a particularly appropriate solution to this riddle, though one wonders how easily it could have been picked up by an audience which had not yet had the benefit of Florio's "Englished" version of the *Essais* (published in 1603). Finally, Gabriel Harvey's "admission that he was entranced with capital letters," suggests to J. J. M. Tobin that he lies behind the pedantic steward.¹⁷ Harvey's *Ciceronianus* does indeed contain the bizarre confession, "It is hard to believe how strangely fascinated I was by these emblems of capital letters," but whether that is enough to link Harvey to Malvolio (who does not seem at all interested in the letters for their own sake) is quite another matter. In addition, such an association suggests no plausible reason for Shakespeare's use of *these* capital letters rather than any others.

The enigma continues to draw unlikely solutions. In 1954 Leslie Hotson proposed that the letters refer to the four elements: "To tease Malvolio, Maria has cleverly chosen those designations for the elements whose initials appear in his name: *Mare*-Sea, *Orbis*-Earth, *Aer*-Air, and *Ignis*-Fire. *M.O.A.I.*"¹⁸ The Arden editors are unimpressed, asking why *Mare* and *Orbis* have been used as opposed to the more usual *Aqua* or *Terra*.¹⁹ Eight years later, Lee Sheridan Cox advanced another possibility:

¹⁵Ibid., 168.

¹⁶Allen, 675.

¹⁷Tobin, 70.

¹⁸Hotson, 166.

¹⁹Arden ed., 68.

"I suggest that M.O.A,I stands for I AM O (Olivia)."²⁰ This interpretation never explains the mis-ordering of all four letters beyond the inanity that "[t]urning a phrase around is one of the oldest and simplest riddle devices."²¹ Cox proposes that Fabian's "'O' shall end, I hope" indicates that "he trusts the steward will be completely convinced that Olivia is the writer." Usually glossed, since Samuel Johnson's edition, as the hangman's noose (see both Arden and Riverside), the "O" that Fabian is hoping for is also clearly the "Oh" of lament that he anticipates Malvolio making when all is discovered. This is supported by Toby's insistence that Malvolio will be made to wail, if not in sorrow then in pain: "Ay, or I'll cudgel him, and make him cry 'O!'" Moreover, given the proximity of Orsino's court, the abbreviation of Olivia's name to their shared first initial is somewhat careless since there is nothing to stop the initials reading "I am O (Orsino)." And if it is appropriate that *O* should come at the end (hence, according to Cox, the significance of Fabian's line), then Orsino would be a better candidate than *Olivia*. Given the importance of its terminal position, Cox fails to explain why *O* comes second in the original sequence of four letters. Cox's over-elaborate deciphering has been taken to task by R. Chris Hassel Jr., who ventures that "since almost none of us could have deciphered Cox's riddle, we can hardly laugh at Malvolio for his similar failure."²² If Hassel accuses Cox of an overly intricate solution, his own is so blatant as to be hardly worth noting: "M.O.A.I. are simply the first, last, second, and second from last letters in his name."²³ There needs no critic to come from the page and tell us this, since even Malvolio knows as much: "every one of these letters are in my name" (2.5.133).

The virtue of simplicity is something missing from other attempts to decode the riddle. D'Orsay W. Pearson, for instance, suggests that M.O.A.I. "is the French pronoun *moy*, now *moi*, which currently we pronounce as a single syllable: [*mwa*]."²⁴ Ingeniously, Pearson notes that Maria in F1 talks not of gulling Malvolio into "a nayword" (Oxford ed., 2.3.126) but into "an ayword." The former reading is more usual, as

²⁰Cox, 360. The irregular punctuation is Cox's.

²¹Ibid., 360.

²²Hassel, 356.

²³Ibid., 356.

²⁴Pearson, 121.

ayword appears neither elsewhere in Shakespeare nor in the *OED*.²⁵ Pearson's reading allows him to argue that Maria "gulls him with a first-person pronoun — *moai* = *moe* = *moy* = *I myself*."²⁶ Not only is Pearson's suggestion weakened by the absence of *ayword* from any other source but it is undermined by an alternative meaning of the prefix when it does appear. The *OED* lists *ay-lasting*, *ay-when*, and *aywhere*. In all of these cases the meaning of the prefix is "ever" (thus "everlasting," "always," and "everywhere"). This is the most common sense of *aye* as illustrated by the proverbial "This world is not for aye."²⁷ Thus if F1 (and Riverside) are followed, the meaning of gulling Malvolio into "an ayword" is more likely to be that he'll be permanently aware of his having been, in modern parlance, conned; "he'll never live it down."²⁸

Less plausible still is Inge Leimberg's suggestion, in *Connotations*, that "'M.O.A.I.' is an anagram (and a very simple and obvious one at that) of Rev. 1:8."²⁹ The biblical text is of course, "I am Alpha and Omega." Even if we grant its transmutation to "I'm A and Ω," eliding the verb in order to produce I and M, the letters come in the wrong order and we are stuck with the extra word *and*.³⁰ Leimberg supports her reading by a reference to Erasmus's *Laus Stultitiae* in which a similar anagrammatic trick involving the letters *A*, *M*, and *O* occurs. But a Greek solution via a Latin text in an English play might reasonably be thought to be beyond the capabilities of Shakespeare's audience (indeed beyond

²⁵*Ayword* is however retained by the Riverside ed. which notes that the sense attached to *nayword* when it is used in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2.2.122 and 5.2.5) "seems to be 'password'" (418). That sense appears to be inappropriate here.

²⁶Pearson, 122-23.

²⁷Tilley, W 884. The maxim is also used in *Hamlet*, 3.2.191.

²⁸Another possibility arises from the fact that "an ayword" on stage would sound like "an eye-word" as demonstrated by the quibbling at "Ay, an you had any eye behind you . . ." Although the *OED* has no entry for *eye-word* there may be a double entendre, sexual or anal, on the idea of a backward eye. This would make Malvolio's "let me see, let me see, let me see," especially ironic. Urine was used to alleviate problems with the eye which would link with "thus makes she her great P's." (Note Surly's sardonic expression of disbelief, "if my eyes do cozen me so . . . I'll have / A whore, shall piss 'em out, next day," Jonson, 2.1.43-45.) Finally the assumption that a knowledge of French "was widespread in the last quarter of the sixteenth century" (125), upon which Pearson's explanation must rely, is far from safe. Pistol in 4.4 of *Henry V* and even the King in the wooing scene, seem painfully ignorant of the language.

²⁹Leimberg, 1991¹, 85.

³⁰In a subsequent article, Leimberg, 1991², 192, insists that "the original 'and' in 'M.O.A.I.' is very often, or even usually, lacking in iconography . . . and therefore will not be missed."

the playwright himself if we accept the word of Ben Jonson on Shakespeare's linguistic limitations). When Leimberg explains the ordering of the letters via a complicated number/letter coding, she becomes unconvincing, particularly as she prefaces her numerology with the cavalier remark, "letters and numbers are interchangeable anyway." In a later number of the same journal, John Russell Brown answers Leimberg, but his solution is again unsatisfactory. He rightly draws attention to the gnarled logic of Leimberg's essay: "a good riddle has one solution which is blindingly obvious once it has been found . . . Professor Leimberg's solution is not of this kind."³¹ Brown's explication is disarmingly simple and has the merit of effrontery. *M* stands for Malvolio, *O* stands for "the Oh! of sexual anticipation, pleasure, and/or surprize . . . The 'A' of the riddle would be another exclamation, as resistance or hesitation is overcome: a more positive Ah! . . . and 'I' would . . . represent Olivia giving her full assent."³² Brown continues, "The whole riddle is thus a covert dramatisation of the sexual fantasy which supposedly drives Olivia and 'sways her life.'" Faced with the brazen logic of this account, according to which the riddle is reduced to the grunting of sexual climax, the reader is entitled to ask in what sense is it "covert"?

One might have thought that an actor's perspective on the problem would be germane here. After all, critics and editors can avoid problems that elude them, whereas an actor has to make sense of every word or justify its being cut. Donald Sinden, who played Malvolio for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1969, in a production directed by John Barton, is illuminating in respect of her "c's, her u's, and her t's." He notes how he "Naughtily . . . abbreviated the original text" of "and her t's" to "n her t's" producing a letter "n" between the leading "cu" and the final "t" and so updating the Renaissance obscenity *cut*.³³ On "M.O.A.I.," though, his remarks are less enlightening:

I ask if the audience know the word — 'MO-AH-EE?' . . . While Fabian and Sir Toby speak I try to work it out; "MO-AH-EE doth sway my life." Nay, but first let me see, let me see'; the next two lines being cut [FABIAN: What dish o' poison has she dressed him! SIR TOBY: And with what wing the staniel checks at it!] he continues, "I may command where I adore." Why, she may command me,' he tells the audience, 'I serve her; she is may [sic] Lady. Why this is evident to any formal capacity, there is *no* obstruction in this' — spoken so quickly it

³¹Brown, 187-88.

³²Ibid., 189-90.

³³Brockbank, 55. Partridge anticipates Sinden's elision of "and": "Note that Shakespeare has not, after all, omitted the *n* . . . *cunt* is spelt out clearly enough" (160-61).

elicits a laugh. ‘What should that alphabetical position portend? If I could make that resemble something in *me*’ . . . “M” comma “O” comma “A” comma’, and he shows the commas to the audience the while; what a fool he has been not to notice before! So what does it all mean? ‘M’, he queries. A great light dawns. The eyes pop. The ‘M’ dissolves into ‘M’ m M A L V O L I O’, he ventures in a whisper. Don’t they understand?’ “M” . . . why, that begins MY NAME!’ So that is clear for the ‘M’, ‘but then there is no *consonancy*’ (no consonants) ‘in the sequel. That *suffers* under probation . . . “A” *should* follow but “O” *does*! The [sic] “I” comes behind.’ More thought: “M.O.A.I.” etc.³⁴

This prolix and confused commentary is clearly an attempt to recreate the dawning of the idea on the puzzled steward, but it also unfortunately betrays Sinden’s own ignorance of what it is he is saying (“no *consonancy*,” for example, means that there is no coherence or consistency in what follows. It does not mean that there are “no consonants”). His Malvolio moves from gibberish — “MO-AH-EE” — through a tortured attempt to make the letters “resemble something” in him, but by the end of the extract — and the paragraph ends here as the essay moves on to discuss “here follows prose” — we have only secured a satisfactory explanation for the first letter. Sinden has nothing to say about “O. A. [or] I.” His own failure to solve the riddle, or at least acknowledge its mystery, is betrayed by the limp “etc.” with which the paragraph ends.

Given the difficulty of solving this conundrum, as illustrated by this survey of contrived explanations, the temptation is to leave well alone. The Arden editors gloss “M.O.A.I.” as “a sequence of letters expressly designed to make Malvolio interpret them as he does, thus prolonging the comic scene.” And, they advise sternly, “Attempts to wring further meaning from them are misplaced.”³⁵ Cynthia Lewis shares this critical acquiescence. In a bizarre article which sets out a stall and then kicks it over, she notes that the character names (Viola, Malvolio, Olivia) are near anagrams of each other, then goes on to propose that they are no more than “empty ruses.” “M.O.A.I.” is simply a vacuous trick: “Shakespeare’s anagrammatic names . . . are meant to challenge the audience in much the same way as M.O.A.I. challenges Malvolio . . . the more we flatter ourselves that we see meaning in the anagrams, the closer we resemble the ludicrous Malvolio.”³⁶ Vincent F. Petronella is less defeatist, noting of the anagrammatic nomenclature that “[b]y Act III of the play, the Malvolio-Olivia-Viola triangle is fully established, visually, emotion-

³⁴Ibid., 57. (Editor’s note: The typography of the source has been retained in this quote.)

³⁵Arden ed., 68.

³⁶Lewis, 37, 35.

ally, and onomastically. In the name of Malvolio is Olivia, and in the name of Olivia is Viola.³⁷ Despite his clear-headed exploration of the analogous relationship between the anagram and the Renaissance fad for anamorphism in the visual arts, Petronella settles for the tortuous and uninteresting diagnosis that Malvolio is “acting out the Lacanian mirror stage” and thus the “anagram is a conversion of one signifier into another signifier, and in this regard represents Lacanian ‘lack.’”³⁸ In spite of such ingenuity, the overwhelming tendency of editors is either to admit defeat (as in the case of Arden) or to remain silent (Riverside). Most recently (and disappointingly), the Oxford editors completely ignore the puzzle, though peculiarly they take the trouble to gloss the unproblematic verb which occurs in the same line: “*sway* rule.”³⁹

* * * * *

It is important to observe that there is a notable hermeneutic distinction between her “c’s, her u’s, and her t’s” and “M.O.A.I.” In the first case the joke arises from letters picked out of the superscription at random, as it were, by Malvolio (we have already seen that two of the characters he picks are not even there). In the second case, “M.O.A.I.” is what he reads; in the story of the play, Maria has written *these letters in this order*. This means that in the first instance the joke arises from the dullness of Malvolio and Andrew, who unwittingly expose their own simple-mindedness by failing to notice the obscenity that they are spelling out. In the second case, however, the joke originates from Maria, whose letter Malvolio is now reading. This has two implications. Firstly, “M.O.A.I.” is less spontaneous; as Malvolio wrestles to make the letters appropriate to him, so the audience is given time to decode the joke for itself: compare the duration of the pondering over this combination of letters with that over her “c’s, her u’s, and her t’s” which is only repeated once for the slower members of the audience. In contrast, “M.O.A.I.” or constituent letters are repeated eighteen times. The second implication is that because the characters are part of the main body of the letter, the joke is mediated through an explicitly *written* text and is therefore more literary.

As the first step in decoding the puzzle we need to establish what kind of puzzle it is. In spite of Lewis’s claim that the anagrammatic quality of the names of the *dramatis personae* is an irrelevance, evidence from

³⁷Petronella, 139.

³⁸Ibid., 143, 142.

³⁹Oxford ed., 147.

the period demonstrates that naming and anagrams were of particular importance to Renaissance philosophers who were attempting to settle one of the most profound semantic dichotomies: is language a convenient and conventionally shared approximation for meaning or does it possess “positive terms” (a concept which Saussure devised and rejected as a possibility)? That is, is the name for something a token of its quintessence? The debate is grounded in Plato’s *Cratylus*, which records the argument between the eponymous speaker, who is convinced “that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names,” and the skeptical Hermogenes, who insists that “no name belongs to any particular thing by nature but only by the habit and custom of those who employ it and who established the usage.”⁴⁰ William Camden’s *Remaines of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine* (1605) contains a chapter on “Anagrammes” in which he demonstrates their talismanic efficacy. Camden writes: “The onely *Quint-essence* that hitherto the *Alchimy* of wit coulde draw out of names, is *Anagrammatisme* . . . which is a dissolution of a Name truly written into his Letters, as his Elements, and a new connexion of it by artificiall transposition, without addition, subtraction, or chang [sic] of any letter into different words, making some perfect sence applicable to the person named.”⁴¹

Camden cites over fifty examples of these lexical miracles in Latin, Greek, and English, including “Charles Iames Steuart. CLAIMES ARTHVRS SEATE,” and “Elizabetha Regina Angliæ, ANGLIS AGNA, HIBERLÆ LEA [To England a lamb, to Spain a lion].”⁴² These puzzles were considered to be more than mere amusements. Larzer Ziff has noted the “folk belief in the animism of language. The meaning of words on this level was not arbitrary but organically connected with the essence of the thing signified by the word. Adam had named the creatures of the earth after their kind, which meant that he did not indifferently call the leopard ‘leopard’ and the ant ‘ant,’ but that he saw the leopardness of the leopard and named it accordingly.”⁴³ This linguistic essentialism went all the way up to the highest of animals: as Camden puts it, “names are divine notes, and divine notes do notifie future events . . . each mans

⁴⁰Plato, 7 and 11. For a discussion of the *Cratylus* debate, see Barton, 7-13. I have found it necessary, elsewhere, to take issue with some of Barton’s assertions about Shakespeare’s comparative indifference towards matters onomastic (see Smith, 129-31).

⁴¹Camden, 150.

⁴²Ibid., 153, 154.

⁴³Ziff, 119.

fortune is written in his name."⁴⁴ It may be particularly appropriate, given Malvolio's much-disdained Puritanism (2.3.130, 132, 136) that, according to Jeffrey Walker, this kind of linguistic game was especially characteristic of this religious group: "the anagram and the acrostic were used alongside hymns, sermons, and ballads to provide some sense of order in the Puritan world."⁴⁵ Maurice Hunt reads the episode in terms of popular anti-Puritanism: Malvolio's "juggling the alphabetical letters of the code to suggest his own name reflects conformists' accounts of puritans willfully twisting the literal sense of biblical passages to create meanings justifying their narrow beliefs."⁴⁶

In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), George Puttenham had attributed a didactic role to anagrams: their purpose, he wrote, "is to insinuat some secret, wittie, morall and braue purpose presented to the beholder, either to recreate his eye, or please his phantasie, or examine his iudgement, or occupie his braine or to manage his will either by hope or by dread . . . and therefore giue them [that is, anagrams] no litle commendation."⁴⁷ Puttenham also points out that the anagram has particularly romantic associations, functioning as a kind of code which can only be deciphered by the courtier and his lady. He notes the frequency of "amorous inscriptions which courtiers vse to giue and also to weare in liuerie for the honour of their ladies, and commonly containe but two or three words of wittie sentence or secrete conceit till they be / vnfolded or explained by some interpretatiō."⁴⁸ A number of points arise here which are especially significant for Malvolio. To begin with, Camden's principle that the anagram should fit the speaker "without addition [or] substraction" contrasts humorously with the efforts of the desperate steward who is so eager to realize his fantasies that he is prepared "to crush this a little." In fact to make the inscription "bow to" him, he has to ignore the order in which the characters occur as well as supply the remaining letters of his name. A Renaissance audience in possession of a reasonable rate of literacy and accustomed to the onomastic fidelities of the anagram would readily see the distinction between its inner magic and its

⁴⁴Camden, 150. Onomastic revelations were not always fortunate. Governor Thomas Dudley was the recipient of a poem which tactlessly insisted on the brevity of his life — the anonymous poet reassembling the letters of his name to form the glum "Ah old, must dye" (cited in Ziff, 119).

⁴⁵Walker, 256.

⁴⁶Hunt, 282.

⁴⁷Puttenham, 108.

⁴⁸Ibid., 102.

crude deformation here.⁴⁹ Secondly, whereas the anagram is supposed to “examine his iudgement” and demonstrate the intelligence of the decoder, Malvolio’s perversion of it is solely to “please his phantasie.” The Horatian commonplace “to teach and to delight,” which informs so many of the period’s satires, both poetic and dramatic, is here distorted as Malvolio’s imagination runs away with his reason. Finally the knowing confidence of the yellow-stockinged Malvolio’s cryptic utterances, “Some are born great,” etc., is a parodic reworking of the intimacy associated with this kind of lovers’ puzzle and their “two or three words of wittie sentence or secrete conceit.” Malvolio behaves as every keen lover ought to. The fact that his instructions are a cruel hoax is something of which he is, at this stage anyway, blissfully unaware.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the object of Maria’s letter is to effect in the stubborn Malvolio a kind of transformation, a mutation in terms of physicality and personality from the stiff resolve of the buttoned-up steward to the ecstatic fancy of the cross-gartered lover. The capacity of love to change identities is a constant motif in Shakespeare and is foregrounded in the opening lines of *Twelfth Night*. As Orsino laments his own enforced transformation, he compares himself to the unfortunate Actaeon: “O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first / Methought she purged the air of pestilence; / That instant was I turned into a hart, / And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds, / E’er since pursue me.” (1.1.18-22) As is well known, the reference is to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, that staple resource of Shakespearean myth and mutation. In Book III, Ovid famously tells how the hunter Actaeon caught sight of the bathing goddess Diana. To prevent him telling of her nakedness, she turns him into a stag and he is torn to pieces by his own hounds. Ovid calls Diana Titania, since she and her twin brother Phoebus, whom Ovid calls Titan, are the grandchildren of the Titans Coeus and Phoebe. This is the source of Shakespeare’s naming of his faerie queen in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the Ovidian pliancy of eroticism and bestiality is seen most fully in this play in the “translat[ion]” of Bottom the weaver. But it is also, albeit parodically, implicit in *Twelfth Night* as the plotters, just like Puck, relish the mischievous consequences of their practical joke. Their purpose is to “make [Malvolio] an ass” (2.3.157),

⁴⁹Briggs estimates that the literacy rate among males in London was over fifty per cent (109). The Reformation stress on the Word of God, the collapse of the ecclesiastical monopoly of literary and religious texts that followed the dissolution of the monasteries, and the growth of private libraries all support this estimate. For further evidence, see Hackel, *passim*; and Mowat, *passim*.

an appropriate objective in the light of Maria's earlier description of him as "an affectioned ass" (line 137), and one which is anticipated in her petulant "Go shake your ears" (line 117). William C. Carroll has identified the mulish metamorphosis as a symptom of semantic confusion: the "puzzles which Shakespeare stresses in his comedies [occur] where language and action relentlessly pursue logic into paradox. Questions of boundary, shape, language, and identity inevitably arise when men become asses."⁵⁰ Carroll proposes that the perplexities of language are triggered by desire and that alteration is the inevitable result: "Each of Shakespeare's comic lovers is transformed: some become more generous, some more foolish, some more dangerous, one becomes literally an ass, dozens become figurative asses."⁵¹ Desire, language, and shape-shifting are thus folded in on each other, as precisely illustrated by the cases of Bottom and Malvolio. Unlike Bottom's supernatural transformation, however, Malvolio's is crushingly unconsummated, a devastating con-trick without the ethereal pleasures of a liaison with the queen of faerie. That awaiting Malvolio is a metamorphosis not of delicate poetry but of the bleakest prose and it is initiated by a failure to understand language.

It is in terms of a kind of linguistic metamorphosis that Puttenham describes the instabilities of discourse, the medium through which Malvolio's transformation is to be effected. Language "receaueth none allowed alteration, but by extraordinary occasions by little & little, as it were insensibly bringing in of many corruptiōs that creepe along with the time."⁵² Language, that is, both diachronically (through elaboration, amelioration, etc.) and synchronically (through metaphor, figurative use, etc.), is in a state of constant metamorphosis — uncertain, slippery, anagrammatic: "A sentence is but a chev'rel glove to a good wit, how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward" (3.1.11-13). Such a diction, effervescent with the absurdities of transparent barricadoes, "clerestories toward the south-north" (4.2.38), and the crazy metempsychoses of avian grandams, is an idiom from which the somber steward is fittingly barred. Bound in a dark house, he is desperate to petrify language, to arrest its incremental change by committing it to paper: "help me to a candle and pen, ink, and paper" (4.2.82). The letter he intends to write to his lady is an attempt to fix the meanings of the one "she" wrote to

⁵⁰Carroll, 5.

⁵¹Ibid., 31.

⁵²Puttenham, 144.

him; “Entirely possessed by the letter, Malvolio can only reclaim himself by investing himself in writing.”⁵³

The emotional distance between the intensity of Ovidian love, love which changes things, and the misplaced delusions of Malvolio, whose outward affectations reveal rather than disguise his inward obduracy, is signaled by the distinction between the effortless and constant changing of the natural world and the forced and sudden transformation of Malvolio’s speech and costume. For Ovid’s Pythagoras, metamorphosis is as fundamental as life itself: “Our bodies also ay / Doe alter still from time to time, and neuer stand at stay. / We shall not be the same we were to day or yesterday.”⁵⁴ Unlike the gentle gliding of one shape into another which occurs in the *Metamorphoses*, Malvolio’s shape-shifting is labored, even clumsy: “This does make some obstruction in the blood, this cross-gartering” (3.4.20). His pseudo-metamorphosis voices itself not in the sublime poetry of Ovid or Orsino but in asinine utterances: “Sweet lady, ho, ho!” (3.4.17), “O ho” (line 62), “Aha” (line 91), etc. It is no surprise to find that the linguistic correlative of his coarse physical transformation is wrenched and hammered until it fits Malvolio — the anagram “crush[ed]” until it takes the shape of his name. The wrestling with the anagram is profoundly narcissistic as Malvolio dwells on the centrality of himself. His febrile self-regard is a kind of linguistic auto-eroticism as he toys with the letters which constitute his identity. As Carroll writes, “[r]eading . . . becomes an effort to double oneself, to find in letters something that ‘resemble[s]’ oneself There must be a text behind the text, then, but the other text is still just one’s own reflection.”⁵⁵ The infinitesimal shifting of language and form described by Puttenham and Pythagoras is battered by the mulish Malvolio into egotistical points of forced change. This particular point — “M.O.A.I.” — offers the promise of a subtle and refined metamorphosis at the same time as it becomes an infamous dirty joke, as crude and obvious as Malvolio’s yellow stockings. “M.O.A.I.” too changes shape — not to an ill-ordered collection of letters which happen to be in Malvolio’s name but to a text which celebrates, as does *Twelfth Night*, the misprision and comedy of metamorphosis itself, *The Metamorphosis Of A IAX*.⁵⁶

⁵³Goldberg, 217.

⁵⁴Ovid, 190v.

⁵⁵Carroll, 89-90.

⁵⁶In the British Library copy (shelved at c. 21. a. 5) the name appears on the title page as A IAX. Subsequently it appears both as A IAX and A IAX (for example at B 4v,

In 1596, about four years before *Twelfth Night* was first performed, Sir John Harington published his satirical tract on the flushing toilet, *A NEVV DISCOVRSE OF A STALE SVBIECT, CALLED THE Metamorphosis of A IAX*. The pseudo-Ovidian title is drawn from the Latin poet's account (which appears in Book XIII of *Metamorphoses*) of the Grecian warrior's metamorphosis into a purple flower. Ajax had contended with Ulysses's superior rhetoric in an argument over who should inherit Achilles's armor. After a bitter exchange, the captains decided to grant the award to Ulysses. Ajax, unable to accept the loss of honor, "drawes his sword and saies: / Well: this is mine yet: vnto this one claime *Vlysses* laies. / This must I vse against my selfe: this blade that heeretofore / Hath bathed beene in Troiane blood, must now his maister gore, / That none may *Ai*ax ouercome saue *Ai*ax."⁵⁷ Ovid tells how "Anon the ground bestained where he stood, / Did breed the pretie purple flowre vpon a clowre of greene, / Which of the wound of *Hyacinth* had erst ingendred beene." This moment of high tragedy is itself comically metamorphosed by Harington's farcical version:

GRGreat Captaine AIAX, as is well knowen to the learned, and shall here be published for the vnlearned, was a warriour of Græcia; strong, headdy, rash, boisterous, and a terrible fighting fellow, but neither wise, learned, staide, nor Politicke. Wherefore falling to bate with Vlisses, & receiuing so fowle a disgrace of him, to be called foole afore company, and being bound to the peace, that he might not fight with so great a Counsellor; he could indure it no longer, but became a perfit mal-content, viz. his hat without a band, his hose without garters, his wast without a girdle, his bootes without spurs, his purse without coine, his head without wit, and thus swearing he would kill & slay; first he killed all the horned beasts he met, which made Agamemnon and Menelaus now, more affraid then Vlisses, whereupon he was banished the townes presently, and then he went to the woods and pastures, and imagining all the fat sheepe he met, to be of kin to the coward Vlisses, because they ran awaie from him, he massacred a whole flocke of good nott Ewes. Last of all hauing no bodie else to kill, poore man killed him selfe; what became of his bodie is vnknown, some say that wolues and beares did eate it, and that makes them yet such enemies to sheepe and

B 5, D 5, D 8v as well as the header on F 6, etc.). In the Bodleian copy which is shelved at MAL 509 (and is used for this essay) the title is clearly printed as A IAX on the title page, the headings on pages A 8 and 1, and the majority of the running headers on the recto leaves. (Whether printed AIAX or A IAX, the word[s] would consist of two syllables.)

⁵⁷Ovid, 166.

cattell. But his bloud as testifieth *Pouidius* the excellent Historiographer, was turnd into a Hiacint, which is a verie notable kinde of grasse or flower.⁵⁸

Harington continues with a story, borrowed from Rabelais, of a “young Gentleman” who, having self-administered several laxatives, “commanded his man to mowe an halfe acre of grasse, to vse at the priuy.”⁵⁹ The owners of the field attempted to protect their hay by informing the gentleman that “it was of that ancient house of A IAX,” but the young man was unimpressed and “in further contempt of his name, vused a phrase that he had learned at his being in the low Countreys, and bad *Skite vpon AIAIX*.” Mysteriously he was immediately “strike[n] in his posteriorū with S. Anthonies fier.” This embarrassing complaint is cured only after a voyage to Japan and the resolution not to use the grass of Ajax as toilet paper “but rather, teare a leafe out of Holinsheds Chronicles.”⁶⁰ In reverence to the memory of the Grecian warrior, the gentleman “built a sumptuous priuy, and in the most conspicuous place thereof, namely iust ouer the doore; he erected a statue of AIAIX, with so grim a countenance, that the aspect of it being full of terror, was halfe as good as a suppositor.” The place was called “A-IAX: though since, by ill pronounciation . . . the accent is changed, and it is called a Iakes.”⁶¹ Several pages later, Harington offers another ribald etymology. This time an old man, “being somewhat costiue, at the house groned so pittifully” that his friends asked him what ailed him: “He told them, he ayled nothing, but onely according to the prouerbe, he complained, that age breedes aches . . . oh saith he, maisters make much of youth, for I tell you age akes, age akes. I feele it, age akes. Vpon which patheticall speech of his, deliuered in that place, the younger men that bare him speciall reuerence, termed the place age akes: which agrees fully in pronounciation, though it may be since, some ill orthographers haue mis-written it, and so now it passeth currant to be spoken and written A IAX.”⁶² The transformations of the name of a Grecian warrior or a platitude on old age into a term for the lavatory offer instances of the kinds of linguistic metamorphoses that animate Puttenham’s discussion and *Twelfth Night*. Like Feste, Harington is a “corrupter of words” (3.1.34).

⁵⁸Harington, A 8-8v.

⁵⁹Ibid., B 1.

⁶⁰Ibid., B 1v.

⁶¹Ibid., B 2.

⁶²Ibid., B 4v.

Whatever its etymology (and the *OED* describes its origins as “unascertained”), the word *jakes* / *iakes* / *iax* was in common parlance from at least the early half of the sixteenth century.⁶³ Montaigne, in Florio’s translation, offers us an example of the term when discussing the use “of a commodious aiax or easie close-stoole.”⁶⁴ Shakespeare himself uses the word unequivocally to mean “privy” when Kent loses his temper with Oswald and threatens to tread the steward “into mortar and daub the wall of a jakes with him” (*The Tragedy of King Lear*, 2.2.65). The term also appears at the end of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* during the masque of the Nine Worthies, in which Nathaniel performs the role of Alexander the Great: “O, sir, you have overthrown Alisander the Conqueror. You will be scraped out of the painted cloth for this. Your lion that holds his pole-axe sitting on a close-stool will be given to Ajax” (5.2.569-72). In the middle ages, Alexander’s coat of arms was taken to be a lion sitting on a chair, holding a battle-axe. The chair has been transformed into a close-stool or commode while the coat of arms itself is proffered to a jakes. Shakespeare was evidently fond of this lavatorial pun. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Thersites remarks that, in anticipation of his fight with Hector, “Ajax goes up and down the field, as asking for himself” (3.3.237) — that is, for a jakes or privy.

The Metamorphosis of A IAX was extremely popular. In the year of its publication it went through no fewer than four editions. “An Apologie,” which Harington wrote to preclude the objections to the book’s scurrility, went through three editions, and the anonymous reply, *Vlysses upon Aiax*, went through two editions in 1596. The book enjoyed a wide circulation and references and allusions to it as well as parodies of it have been found in the work of John Davies, Thomas Bastard, Thomas Nashe, Henry Hutton, John Day, John Marston, Ben Jonson, John Taylor, and Thomas Nabbes.⁶⁵ That a number of these allusions occur over several (and, in some cases, many) years, demonstrates the notoriety of Harington’s text. For example, in 1620, nearly a quarter of a century after the publication of *The Metamorphosis*, John Taylor applauds it: “A learned Knight, of much esteeme and worth, / A pamphlet of a Privy did set forth, / Which strong breath’d Aiax was well lik’d, because / Twas writ with

⁶³The *OED* lists instances up to 1969 including one from Joyce’s *Ulysses*. On the interchangeable use of *i* and *j*, the *OED* notes: “In Dictionaries, the I and J words continued to be intermingled in one series down to the 19th c.” In Shakespeare’s work, the letters were not distinguished until the publication of F4 in 1685 (see Pitcher, 16).

⁶⁴Montaigne, 557.

⁶⁵Smith, 145-50.

wit and did deserue applause."⁶⁶ Nabbes's allusion comes in his *Microcosmus: A Morall Maske*, which was not published until 1637, over forty years after that of Harington's work.⁶⁷ *The Metamorphosis of A IAX* was not only renowned among contemporary writers but — if Alan Brissenden is correct — it was a text much worried over by censors, politicians, and even Elizabeth herself.

In his Oxford edition of *As You Like It*, Brissenden notes the irregularities that surround its entry in the Stationers' Register. The title is written on a fly-leaf and lacks the name of the stationer or a record of the accompanying fee. Nor is the year recorded: "there was no formal entry for *As You Like It*."⁶⁸ Next to the group of titles which includes *As You Like It* is written the instruction "to be staid" — in other words the permission for printing these plays was to be delayed or prevented. Brissenden observes that of the four titles that appear in this group, the other three were all in print within a year. Only *As You Like It* remained unprinted (that is until its inclusion in F1 in 1623). While its non-appearance and the "gagging-order" can be put down to the reluctance of the Chamberlain's Men to see the play in print and thus render it vulnerable to piracy by another company, Brissenden advances an altogether more compelling explanation. Harington, godson to Elizabeth, was a captain of horse in the army of the ill-fated Earl of Essex who, in July 1599, had left on the Irish campaign. Harington returned to court to report on the mission's failure and "the Queen, furious, sent him packing."⁶⁹ Brissenden notes how Harington's *Metamorphosis of A IAX* had already aroused the displeasure of the queen and that, since its publication, Sir John Harington had become popularly known as "Sir Ajax." In light of the Queen's renewed disapproval of Harington and the infamy and indecency of his book, the suppression of *As You Like It* can be attributed to no fewer than four reasons: "first, the name Jaques itself, with its lavatorial/Harington associations; second, the fact that Harington was the Queen's godson; third, the satirical qualities of the role; fourth, the relationship of Harington with the Earl of Essex, who was out of favour with the Queen even before he went to Ireland."⁷⁰

The prominence of Harington's text, attested by Brissenden's carefully argued case, has two major consequences for *Twelfth Night* (usually

⁶⁶Taylor, 1623, B 1v.

⁶⁷Nabbes, D 3.

⁶⁸Brissenden, 2.

⁶⁹Ibid., 3.

⁷⁰Ibid., 3.

dated to the year after *As You Like It*) and especially Malvolio's acrostic: first, that Shakespeare's "M.O.A.I." was a deliberate echo of the title of *The Metamorphosis of A IAX* and second that he intended it to be recognized as such. The comic effect of the fastidious Malvolio alluding to a text that is not only scatological and shameless in the extreme but that is also, officially, the object of state and monarchical disapproval is deviously fitting. While he racks his brains over this mysterious anagram, he is repeatedly spelling out the abbreviated title of one of the most notoriously obscene works of the day.

The reluctance of modern criticism to see indecency in Shakespeare's idyllic comedy has frequently been remarked upon. Dymphna Callaghan notes that "the raw physical humour [of *Twelfth Night*] often disconcerts critics who favour the ethereal lyricism held to be the definitive characteristic of romantic comedy."⁷¹ Brissenden echoes this: "The more that is learned about the meanings of words the clearer it becomes that Elizabethans found bawdy punning publicly acceptable and entertaining in a way lost by the nineteenth century but rediscovered in the twentieth."⁷² In the box-tree scene, Renaissance obscenity fuses with "the Elizabethan love of verbal games and acrostics"⁷³ to provide an answer to one of the most taxing of Shakespearean conundrums. Harington's title supplies the only instance of the letters *M, O, A, and I in this particular order*. None of the elaborate solutions surveyed at the outset of this essay can claim as much.

Finally, the popularity of *Twelfth Night's* acronymic games can be illustrated in two plays that are clearly indebted to Shakespeare's comedy. In 1607, Dekker and Webster's *West-ward Ho* was published, containing the following exchange on the handwriting of Mistress Honisuckle:

IUSTI: . . . I trust ere few daies bee at an end to haue her fal to her ioyning; for she has her letters *ad vnguem*: her A. her great B. and her great C. very right D. and E. dilicate: hir double F. of a good length, but that it straddels a little to wyde: at the G. very cunning.

HOUY [sic]: Her H. is full like mine: a goodly big H.

IUSTI: But her: double LL. is wel: her O. of a reasonable Size: at her p. and q. neither Marchantes Daughter, Aldermans Wife, young countrey Gentlewoman, nor Courtiers Mistris, can match her.

HONY: And how her v.⁷⁴

⁷¹Callaghan, 435.

⁷²Brissenden, 35.

⁷³Oxford ed., 50.

⁷⁴Decker [sic], B 4v.

Peppered with just the same nudging sort of double-entendre as her “c’s, her u’s, and her t’s,” the passage clearly recalls Malvolio’s pondering on his lady’s handwriting. One year later, in Middleton’s *The Famelie of Love*, the very same letters that so tax Malvolio reappear as Geradine attempts to seduce Maria (a name borrowed perhaps from the author of “Olivia’s” letter just seven years earlier):

GER.:Here me exemplify loues Latine word
 Together with thy selfe
 As thus, harts ioynd *Amore*: take *A* from thence,
 Then *more* is the perfect morall sence?
 Plurall in manners, which in thee doe shine
 Saintlike, immortall, spotles and diuine.
 Take *m* away, *ore* in beauties name,
 Craues an eternall Trophee to thy fame,
 Lastly take *o*, in *re* stands all my rest,
 Which *I*, in *Chaucer* stile, do terme a iest.⁷⁵

What starts out as a macaronic and sophisticated language game peters out into the Chaucerian ribaldry of “tak[ing] *o*” and “in *re* [i.e., ‘thing’] stand[ing],” where *o*, *thing*, and *stand* have obvious sexual meanings.⁷⁶ Again, the combination of bawdy and lexical manipulation is strongly reminiscent of *Twelfth Night*. The fact that the specified letters (A, M, O, and I) are exactly the same as those that intrigue Olivia’s steward and which have foxed generations of literary critics, suggests that the correspondence is more than a coincidence.

It is in his introduction to the philosophy of Saussure that Jonathan Culler describes the tantalizing appeal of such linguistic games as well as the overwhelming desire of readers and audience to search for solutions: The most interesting semiotic objects are those which insistently intimate their relation to sign systems but are hard to place and resist easy interpretation. They don’t quite fit the system’s categories; they seem to escape it, to violate what one takes to be its rules. But since we are governed by the semiological imperative, *Try to make sense of things*, we struggle with the refractory or evasive object, straining and extending our notions of significance We encounter here a point . . . about literature: if an explicit semiotic code provided interpretations for literary works, literature would have little interest.⁷⁷

⁷⁵Middleton, 1608, D 2-2v.

⁷⁶For *O*, see n. 11 above. For *thing* as a euphemism for genitals in Chaucer, see *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, lines 121 and 510 (Chaucer, 106, 112). In *Twelfth Night*, see 3.4.290-91. In *Macbeth*, the Porter quibbles over *stand* when he describes the influence of alcohol on sexual potency: it “makes him stand to and not stand to” (2.3.33).

⁷⁷Culler, 115-16.

While we might comfort ourselves with Culler's "semiological imperative," which justifies our determination to wrestle with such lexical puzzles as "M.O.A.I.," we should also note the sobering analogy which arises between our mission in this and that of the love-sick Malvolio confronted with Maria's ingenious letter. In this way the greatest challenge of *Twelfth Night* might be to compel its audiences and commentators to reassess their knowing superiority to Shakespeare's foolish steward and to recognize in his metamorphosis a symbol of their own wavering interpretations. If, as Culler concludes, the significance of literature lies in its refusal to comply with a single interpretive shape, *Twelfth Night*, which insists on the inevitability of metamorphosis, is literature indeed.

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