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Malvolio's Manipulated Name

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Abstract

The way Malvolio's name in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* relates to the code he gives us, *M.O.A.I.*, suggests some kind of correlation or metathesis. The most provocative solution is a recondite French origin, notably by way of Montaigne (but also in terms of Malvenù in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*).

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My title means rather more than that the steward Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* has a malformed name. Instead it means that he has one which, as we shall see, was manipulated by the dramatist presumably from *The Faerie Queene* and Montaigne, although that is meant only as a calculated, circumstantial deduction.

In any event, whereas Malvolio's *nose* has received prominent attention,[1] his name has been more of a muddle. Shakespeare's calling attention to it is, however, clear enough as in the analogous, familiar name play on "M.O.A.I." (2.5.107, 110, 120, 139).[2] Various proposed decodings of this abbreviation have included "*M*y *O*wn *A*dored *I*dol" and (in a more learned manner) "*M*are *O*rbis *A*er *I*gnis" (Water-Earth-Air-Fire); even John Marston's abbreviated initials transposed (*IO:MA*); somewhat more pertinently to the plot "*I AM O*livia";[3] and of course the suggestion the letters are "simply the first, second, and second from last letters" in the name *Malvolio* itself.[4] Because no clear-cut consensus exists as to etymology, something additional may now profitably be appended as a postscript.

First, let us recognize that the obscure lettering is also in the name *Olivia*, which is in itself a partial anagram of *Viola*, the name of the person to whom she is attached. Insofar as the encoded lettering comes via Maria (whose letters are also partly in Malvolio's name), these three women are, in effect, symbolizing his nemesis. It has likewise aptly been noted recently that, "[i]ronically, M O A I has all the ingredients of egocentricity: English 'I,' Italian 'MIO,' 'MIA,' 'IO,' and French 'MOI' " (Petronella 143). Whereas these findings are most recent and somewhat helpful, new ones can now be added which are more to the point.

While Malvolio is correct that the jumbled letters happen to be ones also in his own name, they are there by virtue of what has been called anamorphosis, but can also be dubbed metathesis, a switching that Shakespeare invested in otherwise: hence "garmombles" is, in effect, a metathetic variation of *Mömpelgart* in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; the name *Falstaff* is a variant form, in part, of *Fastolfe*;[5] *Othello* is such a form of *Othoman* but also an anagrammatic version of *Otho* and *Leo* (Fleissner, "Moor" 143); and *Caliban* is a somewhat jumbled version of *cannibal* (no doubt symbolizing his own drunken nature). But the point can be made that metathesis in itself is meaningless, that the entire purport of the jest played on Malvolio is to make him vainly try to discern intrinsic meaning when there may be none present; this point would then be underscored through Sir Toby's use of similar "learned" language which appears also relatively meaningless in itself: *Pigrogromitus, Vapians*, and *Queubus*.[6] The so-called M.O.A.I. conundrum would thereby be incapable of genuine solution because none would verifiably exist.

Yet in spite of or even because of such mumbo-jumbo concerning Malvolio and his acronym, as it were, his formal nomenclature itself may ironically have had notable significance for his creator which has not yet been satisfactorily explained. Upon first reading, we may notice that the prefix *Mal-* conjures up such an analogous name as that of *Malevole* in another drama, *The Malcontent* (both names being germane here); however, this figure is not comic, and if any debt is indeed present, it would most probably be that of Marston to Shakespeare, hardly vice versa.[7] Probing a bit further, we observe that Malvolio has something in common with Shylock, both being strongly puritanical loners, looked down upon by society, and at least initially composed as comic or satirical characters. It is of curious passing interest that Shylock's own name has occasioned some of the oldest name-hunting recorded in the annals of scholarship.[8] Moreover, Malvolio's puritanism emerges in his torturing the text of Maria's letter "to make it yield a suitable meaning, much in the style of Puritan theologizing" (Bevington 395, quoted by Petronella 139).

As a starter, let us note that evidently Malvolio's name was meant to be taken as a sort of variant of the meaning of the subtitle, *What You Will*. In short, if an "ill will" (*Mal* and *volio*) be generated because of the steward, the audience is free to take for themselves "what [they] will" from this. His attitude is clearly in contrast to the presumed merriment associated with the twelve nights of Christmas. For what it may be worth, Sir Henry Herbert underscored this import by renaming the comedy as

Malvolio in his Office Book for 2 February 1623: "At Candlemas Malvolio was acted at court, by the kings and servants";[9] further, because Shakespeare indulged in such well-known name play on *Will* in several sonnets, his subtitle evidently was not merely "throw-away" but meant that the spectator-reader is to take "what [he] will" from Will—hence thereby also from Malvolio as Will. Such a deduction should not, however, give readers license to do wholly as they please, but only as Shakespeare wanted (the allowance in the Epilogue, "as please you," taken into account). To underscore the latter point, let us consider a plausible source he used, one which bears on the meaning.

Because the name of Malvolio is that of a steward, it would follow that the poet could easily enough have derived it, however obliquely, from that of another notably named menial servant in the annals of English literature. One that comes immediately to mind is the porter dubbed appositely *Malvenù* in Spenser's epic, *The Faerie Queene*. The onomastic correlation with the play is in that Malvenù—playing on French *bienvenu* 'welcome'—is depicted at the very entrance to the House of Pride in *The Faerie Queene* (1.4.6), and, for what it is worth (which is rather notable here), the first of the Deadly Sins represents clearly Malvolio's own outstanding problem, unless it be instead that he takes himself simply too seriously, but that can be discerned as a side-effect of pride too. Indeed, it is a commonplace that Shakespeare appropriated Spenser extensively elsewhere; for instance, the story of Claudio and Hero in another such comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*, derives from the epic (Halliday 327), as does part of the plot of *King Lear*. Why not *Twelfth Night*?

As a final neatly intriguing bit of evidence, the initials *E. K.*, which adorn Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, have prompted likewise much debate—and thus could have been also somewhat behind the sport made of the letters *M.O.A.I.*, as related, however tangentially, as we now may notice, to Malvolio's cognomen. Thus Malvolio's name was manipulated, let us say, by way of Malvenù's and not merely malformed by the process. Moreover, if Spenser took over Malvenù's name, he did so much more on the level of unconscious than conscious echolalia. In support, another hint of Malvolio's egocentric behavior is discernible enough in the actions of Braggadochio in *The Faerie Queene*—again on a more general than specific level. The import of this character and his influence is evident enough from mention made of him in the play *Edmund Ironside* (indeed an issue important with

regard to the dating of that controversial play), but I would not contend that this supports Shakespeare's use of Spenser, for the overall style of the anonymous play is inferior (albeit it apparently was somewhat indebted verbally to *Richard II*).

Such a Spenserian correlation was closer at hand than the Italian entertainment *Il Sacrificio*, which, as the New Arden editors point out, included the character of Malevolti.[10] As the name of a Puritan, *Malvolio* conjures up a form of self-denigration which is then ironically turned in upon itself when he falsely believes Olivia has given her humorless steward a warrant to expose his ego on her behalf. His self-importance obviously is responsible for his believing he has license for such self-indulgence. When he finally leaves the stage, claiming he will be avenged on the whole "pack," the import of his name takes on its most literal significance. Whereas Malvenù's name invokes a bad welcome, Malvolio's finally stands for a bad goodbye.

Lastly, some comments are in order regarding recent and not so recent scholarship on the self-indulgent steward. Vincent Petronella's essay has a number of helpful remarks such as the following pertaining to the New Historicism: "[Malvolio's] fashioning of self is in relation to something alien, an illusion, but it is a mock of self-fashioning, a distortion of self-fashioning itself" (144). Stephen Greenblatt's book also comes to mind. Leslie Hotson's ingenious but doubtful etymology of *M. O. A. I.* as wordplay on the name of Mall Fitton (108) might be mentioned, if only in passing. (Fitton was light-haired, not dark as the Dark Lady of the *Sonnets* must have been, and she was sixteen in 1592, when most scholars think the poems were first being written, and so hardly married then.) J. J. M. Tobin's finding an allusion in the code to Gabriel Harvey's fascination with capital letters is cogent enough but does not come to terms with the names themselves. Shakespeare could well have derived the *character* of Malvolio from Harvey, not to mention the play on letters, but have taken the Puritan's *name* from a different source. With this in mind, it still seems plausible enough that the abbreviated lettering was intended as a cipher for *Montaigne*, the counsel given regarding Malvolio's behavior derivative of the *Essais* (3.3 and 3.7), albeit the name itself relating to the essay "Des Noms," where the words "*mal volontiers*" are soon to be found (Guttman 92). This erudite position was set forth by Allen Percy in a letter to the *TLS* but overlooked in the extensive bibliographies in the Shakespeare issue of *Names*. In brief, Percy claims that the "fustian riddle" which in

"*M.O.A.I.* doth sway my life" could also imply that "Montaigne influences Shakespeare strongly." The argument runs as follows (sounding somewhat better than the proposed play on the abbreviation for Marston's full name in reverse cited earlier):

> 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 *Mo*nt-*ai*gne. (675)

Although such a reading may sound at first like a private joke arising, say, from wit-combats in the Mermaid Tavern, Percy notes well that the French essayist was himself concerned in "Des Noms" with such cryptograms, as with the names of *Nicolas Denisot* and *Alsinois*: "Conte d'Alcinois (cf. Count Malvolio) is an anagram for 'Nicolas Denisot.' "

Whereas members of the general audience would not have been expected to detect such codification, it holds remarkably well, given Percy's supportive argument:

> Further, the short essay on Greatness, which follows immediately in that scene, and the rules for Malvolio's future self-conduct, are taken from the third vol. of the *Essays*, first published in 1588; the two drawn upon being III.3, "De Trois Commerces," and III.7, "De l'Incommodité de la Grandeur."

The novice reader, however, may well be nonplussed at Percy's further contention that "Shakespeare must have read the French edition of Montaigne because Florio translates names beginning with *M* into 'those that begin with *P*. . . .'" For, of course, *Montaigne* too begins with the requisite *M*. In following this up, I discerned a misprint (Percy's "begin" should be "began" [312]), but I also discovered a wealth of helpful data. The point is that in the very first paragraph of his rendition of "Des Noms" Florio singled out common names beginning with the letter *P* (actually alimentary terms) whereas Montaigne had done the same thing with *M* (1: 292; for what it is worth, a more modern edition has *B*). Shortly after that, the French essayist tells how important it is to have a smooth-sounding name, for that way it will be forgotten by others only "mal volontiers" (unwillingly). Hence Shakespeare presumably was attracted to the singling out of this solitary letter in the original version and so could easily have associated it not only with the fuss made over *M* in "M.O.A.I." but with a sort of French etymology of *Malvolio* itself following shortly.

The fact that Shakespeare could have read Montaigne in the original as well as Florio's version has been settled affirmatively by Robert Ellrodt's well-received paper at Stratford-upon-Avon (later published) with its careful research. And could he have even seen Florio's translation when it was published only several years after *Twelfth Night*? If so, only in manuscript. Too much has been made of the supposed Shakespearean autograph in the British Library copy of Florio's *Essays*. The latest word on the subject is that of Charles Hamilton, whose main title to fame has been in discerning that the supposed Hitler *Diaries* were forgeries. Referring to the distinguished paleographer Edward Maunde Thompson as having already published on the signature as a fake, Hamilton went into more detail on its alleged spurious nature, observing that "the forgery is based upon the signature on the bottom of page 2 of the will," for "the *W* is much too large for the rest of the signature," his conclusion being that evidently "the forger was not familiar with the secretary script and did not know precisely how the letters should be written" (Hamilton 243, 245).

One animadversion to a personal debt to Montaigne here might be that Shakespeare would hardly have wanted to identify himself in any way with the character of Malvolio. Yet "*M.O.A.I.* doth sway my life" is said by the steward only in quoting the riddling missive he has received, one which he egotistically misinterprets; hence the inherent meaning could still be that Montaigne is the principal swayer of Shakespeare's creativity in producing the comic figure, if not the sole influence. (Greater influence may then be detected in *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*.) It can be added that Montaigne's skepticism concerning conventional faith ("Que scais-je?") is then reflected, if not also refracted, in the dramatist's fun in handling the Puritan element in Malvolio's character. With this Francophile allusiveness now at hand, it is further tempting to suspect that he was indebted *both* to "Des Noms" and to *Malvenù*, whereby the French connection would be reinforced.

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Notes

1. See Wood 38–39. Feste's allusion (2.3.25–27) may be based on Erasmus.
2. Reference to Shakespeare's plays is by act, scene, and line number in the Pelican edition.

3. Lee Cox (360) offered this anagrammatic suggestion to the list of possibilities cited in the Variorum. The vowels in Malvolio's name as well as in the abbreviation do point to his being a grossly exaggerated reflection of both Olivia and Orsino.

4. Chris Hassel (356), finding Cox's riddle hard to decipher, offered this simplified version.

5. See the two articles by Willson; see also Davis and Williams. Samuel Crowl of Ohio University has suggested to me additional name play on *Fats-laff*. Cf. also *Shake speare...Fall staff*. Similar metathesis is suggested in the *Olivia/Viola* juxtaposition.

6. These three names appear in 2.3.23. *Pigrogromitus* suggests pig Latin and may be a pun on the word *grammaticus*, but no completely cogent etymology has been put forth. *Vapians* possibly had the connotation of "vapid" as from Latin *vapidus* 'flat-tasting.' Although *Queubus* relates to "queer," the best overall explanation for all these terms is that the dramatist was parodying the learned style of Robert Greene or, in the light of the final conclusion of this essay, Spenser's archaisms.

7. See my "Shakespeare's *Carte Blanche*." The proposal is that Marston imitated the subtitle of *Twelfth Night* in composing his own play entitled *What You Will*.

8. See Lower and Halliwell. In my update ("A Key") I suggest that the name relates to that of *Shacklock* but certainly not to the suggested name of *Shilocke*. See also the bibliographies (Coates; Rajec) that appeared in the 1987 special issue of *Names* on Names in Shakespeare, although these bibliographies are incomplete and sometimes have misleading glosses.

9. Cited in Halliday 300. Although Malvolio is hardly the protagonist, he is the most interesting character.

10. See Lothian and Craik xxix; also Levith 3.

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