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Gulled into an "I"-word, or Much Ado About a Pronoun

D'Orsay W. Pearson

University of Akron

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Despite the warning of the editors of the 1975 New Arden *Twelfth Night* that the M.O.A.I. sequence of Maria's riddle for Malvolio is "a sequence of letters expressly designed to make Malvolio interpret them as he does, thus prolonging the comic scene," and that "attempts to wring further meaning from them are misplaced" (Lothian and Craik 68), there is a strong probability that the letters, rather than being a meaningless sequence, were intended by Shakespeare as a fairly simple orthographic joke—one which expands Malvolio's characterization as a socially ambitious closet sybarite, deficient in a social accomplishment expected of those who would move within the aristocratic class he dreams of joining. The M.O.A.I. of the riddle can be interpreted by reference to attempts to correct contemporary illiteracy in English and to contemporary literacy in French, which as well resolves a textual crux (II.iii.136) that has plagued editors since Rowe: does Maria vow to gull Malvolio into *an* *ayword* or a *nayword*?

In the last half of the sixteenth century, English pedagogues from Richard Mulcaster to Edmund Coote complained about the deplorable state of the English language as employed by the native Englishman, a complaint still being echoed by John Brindsley in 1617. When we speak glibly of the "triumph of the vernacular" during the English Renaissance, we are likely to forget just how significant a triumph it was. Latin and some Greek dominated the grammar schools such as Merchant Taylors, where Mulcaster was for a time master. The universities, too, concentrated on Hebrew and the classical tongues, with the result that English and the modern foreign languages were all but ignored. To correct this deficiency in instruction in their native tongue, a number of English scholars, including Mulcaster, Francis Clement, Coote, and Brindsley wrote treatises on the teaching of
language and on English pronunciation, spelling, and grammar, to aid instructors in the petty schools, where the teaching of the alphabet, syllabification, and pronunciation was a major focus of the curriculum. The writers of these treatises followed similar approaches. First, the student was to be taught the alphabet, then the vowels and consonants, the diphthongs, and syllabification. Clement wrote:

A vowell is a letter, which giueth a perfect & full sound of himselfe: And of them there be fiue: a.e.i. (or y.) o.u. It giueth, I saye, a perfect and full sound, not onely for that it standeth many tymes for a syllabe by it selfe alone: as in these: A·dam, E·uah, I·mage, y·nough... but also because without some of these the consonants give no sound...

(11-12)

Not only could a vowel function as a syllable by itself, a combination of two vowels—the diphthong—also could function as a single syllable. In setting up rules for syllabification, Coote posited as his general rule the following:

Marke how ma·ny vo·wels you haue in a word, and in·to so ma·ny syl·labls must you di·uide that word....

(16)

Lessons in recognizing and sounding vowels, consonants, and diphthongs were supplemented by oral recitation of specific consonant-vowel syllables, for example, "ca, ce, ci, co, cu, which giue these diuerse sounds: ka, se, si, ko, ku" (Clement 13); then came the actual spelling of words, in which students were encouraged to follow what was apparently an established educational technique: spelling syllable by syllable, and pronouncing as one went. Clement cites this example for imagine:

he must take for the first syllable, but only the vowell, i, saying i by it selfe, because m, hath a, the vowell after it. For the second syllabe he hath m, and a: for g, he may not take to them, because i, the vowell, followeth: therefore to the third syllabe he must take the three letters, which remaine, g, i, and n. Then he can now spell it thus: i by it selfe, m, a, ma, ima: g, i, n, gin, imagin.

(14)
Since theorists encouraged repeated oral drill in these techniques and approaches, many of the young men and some young women (Simon 376; Baldwin 9–30) born in the last quarter of the century who attended dame and petty schools undoubtedly knew them by rote.

Any playgoer trained in this tradition would be conditioned to respond to the M.O.A.I. of Maria’s riddle by counting vowels and dividing syllables, rather than by attempting to solve an obscure anagram. The combination contains three vowels and one consonant. Divided into syllables, however, the combination suggests a two-syllable word, since *ai* is a diphthong.

Spelled and pronounced orally (or mentally) one would produce m, o, *mo*, a, i, possibly [ɛː] or [eː], both Middle English pronunciations attributed to Shakespeare’s era (Dobson II, 777–82), or [æːi] or [æː] (Cercignani 230–42). This is certainly no Elizabethan English word. But it does constitute a *word* in a contemporary language.

It is the French pronoun *moy*, now *moi*, which currently we pronounce as a single syllable: [mwa]. Ample evidence exists to demonstrate that the *oy* of such words as *moy, joy, moyen, roy*, was pronounced differently by Elizabethan Englishmen. Claude Hollyband (Claude Desainliens), Elizabethan tutor of French, master of a successful French language school in St. Paul’s churchyard, and author of several successful sixteenth-century French–English texts, gave the readers of The French Littleton the following instruction for pronouncing *oy*:

Oy, as if you should write it so, oë, with an open é.

moyn, moy, toy, soy.
a monke, I, thou, he,
say, moëne, moë, toë, soë, &C. . . .

(Miiii⅛).

James Bellot echoed Hollyband’s instructions: “Oi, and oy, must be sounded *Oe*. The E. being sounded masculine” (A3⅛).

John Eliot’s Orto-épia Gallica, or Eliots Fruits for the Frenche (1593), stresses both this pronunciation and the connection between *ai* (*ay*) and *oy* (*oi*). A feature of his work, which has been cited by critics as a Shakespearean source (Yates 52–72; Lever 80), is the marginal columns of French letters and diphthongs and their equivalent English pronunciations. *Oi, oy, ai, and ay* all feature the stressed or “masculine” *e, ai* and *ay* being sounded as é, oi and *oy* as oë (see all even-numbered pages, 66–172). Another feature of Eliot’s work is his frequent recourse to triple-column dialogue, one French, one French spelled phonetically, and then English. The dialogue for getting up in the morning includes the following:
Give me a cleane shirt first.

This dialogue illustrates both the *ai* (*baille*) and *oy* (*moy*) pronunciations and suggests a sound range for the “masculine e.”

Hollyband, like many of his contemporaries, resorted to Latin to clarify how the “masculine e” should be sounded. Readers of his *Frenche Schoole Maister* were told:

> We haue in Frenche, e, masculine, & e, feminine in the ende of sundrie wordes: e, masculine is marked with an accent sharpe in this sorte, é, and is pronounced plainly as in Latin, *me, te, se, de*. . . .

(Dobson notes the difficulty of establishing a value for this French “masculine e” with reference to contemporary pronunciation of either English or Latin, but suggests that association of the “foreign e” with the Latin e would result in a pronunciation of [e:] or [ɛ] (II, 623).)

The interpretation of M.O.A.I. as *Moy, I, Myself*, fits into the context of Maria’s riddle and the text of *Twelfth Night* more logically than anagrammatic interpretations which have been suggested. Malvolio is early characterized by his employer, Olivia, as a man “sick of self-love” (I.v. 89), confirmed in the rightness of his own opinions. He exhibits a narrow, joyless morality, condemning sensuous enjoyment and revelry, especially in Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria, to the extent that Sir Toby challenges him, “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” (II.iii.114-15). Maria reads him most clearly:

> The devil a Puritan that he is, or anything constantly, but a time-pleaser, an affectioned ass . . . the best persuaded of himself, so crammed (as he thinks) with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him. . . .

(II.iii.146-48, 149-52)

On that latter ground she determines, “If I do not gull him into a nay-word [an ay-word] and make him a common recreation, do not think I have wit enough to lie straight in my bed” (II.iii.135-38). An *ay-word* (an I[ə]-word) would describe her result; she gulls him with a first-person
pronoun—moai = moe = moy = I myself—as well as making him the butt of
Olivia's household.4

How appropriate an I[ə]l-word is to Malvolio is not completely revealed
until II.v., the riddle scene, when, thinking himself alone, Malvolio reveals the
depth—or height—of his own self-love, his sensuality, and his ignorance.
Before his discovery of the riddle, he declares that his ambition is to be
"Count Malvolio" (35); his fantasies of power, both as noble and as husband,
range ambitiously from heroic sexuality—"having come from a day-bed, where
I have left Olivia sleeping" (48–49)—to arrogant noblesse oblige—"Toby ap-
proaches, curtsies there to me—" (61). In these self-revealing monologues,
he employs a high percentage of first-person pronouns; of the two hundred
and fifteen words (excluding articles) in his speeches in II.v before his
discovery of the riddle, twenty-five, or 11.62 percent, are forms of the first-
person pronoun. As "imagination blows him" (II.v.42–3), this percentage
increases to 11.62 (52–55); 15.15 (58–61); and 18.18 (65–66 and 69–71).5
Shakespeare here employs repetition to emphasize characterization; that
repetition also prepares the audience subliminally for the coming riddle.

Further subliminal preparation for the riddle occurs when Malvolio first
discovers it:

By my life, this is my lady's hand. These be her
very C's, her U's, and her T's, and thus she makes
her great P's.

(87–89)

It is accepted that the letters Malvolio names constitute a bawdy orthographic
joke, and Sir Andrew drives the joke home by asking, "Her C's, her U's, and
her T's, why that?" (II.v.91), reinforcing the joke and giving the audience time
to absorb and react to it. Similarly, Malvolio repeats the M.O.A.I. sequence
four times (109, 112, 122, 139), as well as repeating the individual letters once
each in the course of dialogue. Malvolio's efforts to puzzle out the letters
and the comments of his unseen auditors can be interpreted as an effort
on the dramatist's part to make the intended word clear. Malvolio ponders,
"If I could make that resemble something in me! Softly! M.O.A.I.—" (120–23),
to which Sir Toby responds, "O ay, make up that" (123). And again:

Mal. M—But then there is no consonancy in the
sequel; that suffers under probation. 'A'
should follow, but 'O' does.

Fab. And 'O' shall end, I hope.

Sir To. Ay, or I'll cudgel him, and make him
cry 'O'?

Mal. And then 'T' comes behind.
Fab. Ay, and you had an eye behind you, you might see more detraction at your heels than fortunes before you.

(130–38; my italics)

Thus the dialogue itself seems to stress the meaning of the word Malvolio seeks to wring to his own advantage: end...ay; behind...ay; O ay.

Furthermore, moy as I-word does fit the riddle to Malvolio, even as he ironically tries to wrench the sequence to do so, though in the wrong way.

He reads:

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.

(106–9)

Malvolio is meant to assume the message is from Olivia, and so he interprets the riddle as applying to her; it as well applies to himself. He seeks to command—Sir Andrew, Toby, Maria, Cesario, even Olivia herself over the question of the clown—but aside from those underlings he orders about as steward, he can really command only where he obviously adores: himself. His “love” for his mistress is narcissistic self-love, and it is very clear, both from the percentage of I-words in scene v and from the play as a whole, that self-interest, or I myself, “doth sway [his] life.”

Again, if we attempt to apply lines 107–8 to him, silence is an appropriate descriptive term; the full verbalization of his egomania has been expressed in his conversation with himself, for though the other characters see him as self-loving and holier-than-thou, the presumptuous nature of his ambition has never been articulated. He is prompted to break that “silence” only by Maria’s letter.

Malvolio’s failure to recognize the word he spells aloud four times adds to his characterization. Shakespeare appears to have employed the mo[e:] pronunciation at least twice during the late 1590s to suggest an individual clever and cunning, but neither of apt intelligence nor highly educated. In Henry V, Pistol confronts the French soldier Monsieur le Fer in a scene in which the comedy lies in Pistol’s almost total lack of comprehension of the Frenchman’s dialogue. When the soldier pleads, “O prenez miséricorde! ayez pitié de moi” (IV.iv.12), Pistol replies, “Moy will not serve, I will have forty moys” (IV.iv.13). The Englishman clearly understands moy as mo’ or moe (more), plus the masculine e as the name of a negotiable commodity. Pistol’s pretensions are reflected in his inflated, Marlovian ranting; Malvolio’s in his ambition for rank and power. Certainly, as one who aspires to gentility,
he lacks knowledge of a language which constitutes an expected grace of that class.

The editors of the New Arden edition are partially correct in their commentary on the letters in the riddle—they are there to allow Malvolio to behave exactly as he does. But they are also there to offer a commentary on Malvolio's real aspirations, just previously revealed. His illiteracy is a definite facet of his overall characterization; the disparity between what he dreams of and what he is fitted for is made even more clear.

If Shakespeare worked an orthographic French joke into an English context, would his audience have recognized it? Modern speakers of English, arrogant in their certainty that "English as a second language" is the order of things, exhibit in the main a high degree of language illiteracy. It would be a mistake, however, to transfer to Elizabethan England the assumption that other eras have been equally illiterate. Evidence exists which suggests that a knowledge of French, at least a rudimentary knowledge, was widespread in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, especially in London.

Two policies, one economic and one politico-religious, combined during the period to bring a large number of native French to England, and particularly to its cities: Southampton, Norwich, Sheffield, Dover, and London. The first of these was Lord Burleigh's policy of making England a self-contained, self-supporting nation, independent of manufactured imports (Rowse 123). French-speaking tapestry weavers and French steel-working artisans, for example, were encouraged to come to England to set up industries that the nation lacked. Naturalization of these citizens was not a deliberate part of the plan; many held "letters of denization," which recognized their alien status but did not give them citizenship rights. Since the time of Edward VI, these "strangers" had been privileged to attend church services conducted in their own language, services open to Englishmen as well. In London, the French church was on Threadneedle Street; membership figures for the last half of the sixteenth century are unavailable, but in 1635 the church numbered 1,400 members; the Flemish church, also French-speaking, 840 (Briggs 111). And this was after the Edict of Nantes in 1598 undoubtedly had drawn many refugees back to their homeland; the figures probably rose again in the years prior to the revocation of the Edict in 1685. I have not seen any estimates of the number of French citizens in London in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, but the Privy Council in 1574 encouraged "strangers" to move into provincial cities and towns, because London was overcrowded with them. It has been estimated that in 1582, Canterbury's population included 5,000 speakers of French (Briggs 101).

Second was the policy of sheltering refugees from the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in France—the Catholic League, so called, and the Protestant League. Especially after the St. Bartholomew's Eve Massacre in Paris in 1572, when many of the leading French Huguenots were
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killed after they had gathered to attend the marriage of their chief noble, Prince Henry of Navarre, to the daughter of the French king, the number of French Protestant refugees in England increased. Many of these were skilled tradesmen, scholars, and merchants, who brought with them money, marketable skills, and letters of introduction to prominent Englishmen. Some undoubtedly were taken into respected English households. Some opened French language schools in the various towns. Others opened businesses, and continued to pursue their crafts.

Examples should suffice to show the nature of their influence. First is William Shakespeare himself, son of a glover in a small country town, educated in that town's grammar school, and lacking a university education. One of his better-educated peers sneered at his "little Latin and less Greek," but we have no contemporary records indicating that anyone voiced surprise at his use of French in his plays. The French court physician in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* lapses into any number of French phrases and sentences. The princess Katherine and her maid carry on a French conversation of some sixty lines in *Henry V*. Various characters in this same play voice French exclamations; and in IV.v., the humor of the scene between the French soldier and the braggart, Pistol, depends almost entirely upon Pistol's misinterpretation of the soldier's French, although he himself speaks one line, "Owy, cuppele gorce, permafoy" (37).

Where did Shakespeare learn his French? C. W. Wallace was the first to suggest, in 1910, that it was from his landlord Christopher Montjoy of Silver Street, Cripplegate, with whom he lived from 1598 to about 1604. Katherine Lambley, in her study, *The Teaching and Cultivation of the French Language in England During Tudor Times*, suggests that this is an instance of "indirect influence" (125); Montjoy, a French tiremaker, also numbered in his household his wife, his daughter, and his French apprentice.

Another Englishman from the lower middle class who learned French was Edmund Spenser. Spenser attended the Merchant Taylors School, received his degree from Cambridge, and served for a time as secretary to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, before becoming secretary to the lord lieutenant of Ireland. Among Spenser's earliest literary efforts is the translation into English from French of some sonnets by DuBellay. Spenser scholars have often puzzled over where he learned his French; it obviously had not been a part of his formal education. More than likely, Spenser learned it in one of the many French schools that sprang up in London in the second half of the sixteenth century, schools that catered to the ambitious sons of middle-class Englishmen. Merchants and merchants' sons who wished to carry on commerce with the French ports learned French, and French appears to have been an unwritten prerequisite for promotion in Elizabeth's governmental and diplomatic service (Lambley 67). Spenser, who
had diplomatic as well as poetic aspirations, quite probably viewed learning French as essential to his career.

A third group, comprised of the gentry and the nobility, were less affected by the two policies. Yet the highest percentage of French literacy probably existed within this group; French tutors were, if not commonplace, frequent in such households, and French was widely used among the nobles and gentry both in conversation and correspondence (Lambley 68-75). Anne Boleyn had a French governess and corresponded with both her father and her royal suitor in French (Lambley 71-72); her daughter, Elizabeth, was fluent in French as well as Italian. And Elizabeth’s courtier, Sir Philip Sidney, according to the Huguenot scholar Hubert Languet, never spoke a syllable of French incorrectly (Lambley 63) and frequently corresponded in French rather than in Latin with his Huguenot friends who remained in France.

Thus, there were four groups in England, especially in London, who had some awareness of the French language: native Frenchmen; Englishmen who through direct contact with them in their households and businesses learned anything from the occasional word to fluent and idiomatic, if sometimes ungrammatical French (Shakespeare); members of the merchant class desirous of trading abroad and bourgeoisie anxious to rise in diplomatic service; and the gentry and nobility.

Coincidentally, these groups overlap those most recently posited as constituting the “privileged” audience of the Elizabethan theatres:

The nobility, the gentry, the wealthier merchants, and the professionals (advocates, clerics, teachers, military officers, and an occasional physician), together with their wives and children...

who had the money and leisure to attend daytime performances (Cook 16). Shakespeare’s French orthographic joke would have been comprehensible to a majority of this audience.

Since Maria gulls Malvolio into an “I” word, the Folio reading of II.iii.136 is correct, not a compositor’s error:

If I do not gull him into an ayword, and make him a common recreation, do not think I have witte enough to lye straight in my bed...

(Hinman 279)

The assumption that the Folio text is incorrect and must be emended continues to affect modern editions other than the New Arden. For example, Hardin Craig and Hershel Baker accept the *ayword* emendation, while G. Blakemore Evans follows the Folio reading. *An ayword* is not one of those
“genuine misprints” which “clearly must be corrected, or, at least, emended into something intelligible” (McKerrow 34); within the context of Maria’s revenge, it makes sense. Maria breaks Malvolio on the wheel of a first-person pronoun, as she forewarns she will do.

NOTES

1. All line numbers and quotations for Twelfth Night are from the New Arden edition listed in “Works Cited”; quotations from Henry V are from The Riverside Shakespeare.

2. This pronunciation, familiar in the French provinces in the sixteenth century (Price 74-75), is still employed in rural Quebec.

3. For a variety of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interpretations, see the New Variorum Twelfe Night, p. 129. Among more recent interpretations are Leslie Hotson’s, that the letters stand for “Mare-Sea, Orbis-Earth, Aer-Air, Ignis-Fire; (165-66); Hoepfner, who proposes they stand for ‘Malvolum omnino amore [sui] infelix facitur,” or “Malvolio all through self-love is made ill-fated” (193); Cox who proposes another anagrammatic reading, “I am O[livia]” (360).

4. According to the OED, “at first was always written I”; both ay and aye were homonyms for eye. Cited as an example is a line from Drayton’s Idea 57: “Nothing but No and I, I and No” (1594). Textual critics have generally glossed Maria’s phrase as “a by-word,” though there is no precedent for this, Shakespeare being the first, if Fl is correct, to employ the locution.

5. Individual speeches of other characters reveal a high incidence of personal pronouns; see, for example, Viola’s soliloquy, II.iii.17-41; references to I, me, and my account for 8.58 percent of the speech; references to Olivia as she, her, constitute 5.05 percent, and references to womankind as we, our, 2.02 percent. However, the incidence of I and my, the dominant pronouns in Malvolio’s dialogue, is unusually high. Spevack, in The Harvard Concordance, lists the relative frequency of my as 1.478 percent, of I as 2.3971 percent.

6. Most studies still cite the 1567 London census; see, for example, Hunter (45); Hunter does cite a Flemish population of 60,000 in 1593, but without noting that many of these spoke French (45).

7. Dr. Caius not only lapses into French, his English has been called “an authentic French dialect” (Stender 135).

8. Lever appears to have misapplied Lambley’s comment on the French of Shakespeare’s plays—that it contains just enough mistakes to make it unlikely that a Frenchman helped to write it—to Shakespeare’s acquisition of French, which, Lever suggests, was self-acquired, probably from Eliot’s Ortho-epia Gallica (80).

9. The New Variorum Twelfe Night contains a number of editorial comments on controversy over the passage.

WORKS CITED


