

M.O.A.I. deciphered at last

In *Twelfth Night* 2.5, the billet-doux which gulls Malvolio proclaims,

*I may command where I adore,
but silence like a Lucesse knife:
With bloodlesse stroke my heart doth gore,
M.O.A.I. doth sway my life.* (100–3)

For four hundred years the cryptic letters *M.O.A.I.* have remained a stubborn, even notorious crux. In his Arden Series 3 edition, Keir Elam declared, ‘This fustian riddle has proved ... as much a trap for critics as for Malvolio.’¹ Indeed, *M.O.A.I.* personifies the definition of a crux: ‘A difficulty which it torments or troubles one greatly to interpret or explain’ (*OED*). Among notable scholars tormented or troubled, J. O. Halliwell-Phillips thought *M.O.A.I.* ‘purposely meaningless, or intended for, My Own Adored Idol, or some such words ... [or] cypher’.² Fredrick Fleay saw a vision of ‘IO: MA, [John] Marston’s abbreviated signature’, then grumbled, ‘These anagram conceits are so common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as to need no further notice.’³ Modern commentators have fared no better. L. S. Cox unearthed ‘an anagram of ‘I am O[livia]’.⁴ Leslie Hotson felt the play of four elements: ‘*Mare* – Sea, *Orbis* – Earth, *Aer* – Air, and *Ignis* – Fire’.⁵ Lothian and Craik dodged the bullet: ‘Attempts to wring further meaning from [*M.O.A.I.*] are misplaced.’⁶ Elizabeth Donno gave the crux a wide birth, merely comparing Orlando’s ‘Thy huntress’ name that my full life doth sway’ (*As You Like It* 3.2.10).⁷ In 1984, Elam perceived ‘Malvolio’s hermeneutic labours as a parody of the earnest anagrammatic endeavours of Renaissance magi to discover the sacred Tetragrammaton’.⁸ In 1991 another quasi-religious

epiphany struck Inge Leimberg: ‘What Malvolio ought to have seen at a glance ... is his own image mirrored in a very simple anagram reflecting the creed of man fallen off from the love of God and thrown into the outer darkness of self-love: “*Eritis sicut deus,*” says the devil, and Adam *homo* promptly replies: I’M A & O!’ [Alpha and Omega].⁹ By contrast, in 1998 Peter Smith sounded an earthy ‘key in the Renaissance conception of meaning’ leading to ‘Sir John Harrington’s Ovidian parody *Metamorphosis of Ajax* [A Jakes = privy]’.¹⁰ A decade later, Elam summed these sorties: ‘Despite the unenviable fate of the steward, and despite the unflattering image of interpretation that the episode represents – Shakespeare’s twitting of ‘mice-eyed decipherers’ – the fustian riddle has proved an equally fatal attraction to the comedy’s spectators and commentators.’¹¹ And there the case has stalled until now.

One aspect of Shakespeare’s presentation of the M.O.A.I. crux – a tactic which makes its puzzle particularly alluring and vexatious – is its insistent repetition. Most of Shakespeare’s foolers occur only once, for example Hamlet’s ‘dram of eale’ (Second Quarto (Q2), throughline 1432) and the playwright’s tantalizing allusion to the words Cicero said and Casca dared not repeat (*The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* 1.2.299). By comparison, Shakespeare’s presentation of the forged letter and M.O.A.I. crux – the turning-point in the play – is appropriately elaborate.

For centuries, M.O.A.I. has tenaciously resisted solution. And Shakespeare’s harping only enhances its magnetism. The four enigmatic letters are repeated five times, at 2.5.102, 106, 115, and 131 plus Malvolio’s attempt to decipher them one by one as the conspirators echo him. Figure 4 shows how this appears in the Folio. Clearly, Shakespeare is intentionally goading his auditors to play along; repetition is a playwright snapping his fingers at us, a way of saying ‘Listen up!’ and challenging auditors to rake for his meaning.

In fact, M.O.A.I. has eluded Shakespeare’s commentators for four hundred years because of a small but significant alteration of his source. But the cryptic letters *were* meant to be recognizable to at least some of his first auditors.

Harvey, Malvolio, and M.O.A.I.

Given that Nashe’s polemics against Harvey so heavily invested Shakespeare’s design for Malvolio – suffusing the steward’s

in me? Softly, *M.O.A.I.*
To O I, make vp that, he is now at a cold sent.
Fab. Sowter will cry vpon't for all this, though it bee
 as ranke as a Fox.
Mal. *M. Maluolio, M.* why that begins my name.
Fab. Did not I say he would worke it out, the Curre
 is excellent at faults.
Mal. *M.* But then there is no consonancy in the sequell
 that suffers vnder probation: *A.* should follow, but *O.*
 does.
Fa. And *O.* shall end, I hope.
To. I, or Ile cudgell him, and make him cry *O.*
Mal. And then *I.* comes behind.
Fa. I, and you had any eye behinde you, you might
 see more detraction at your heeles, then Fortunes before
 you.
Mal. *M, O, A, I.* This simulation is not as the former:
 and yet to crush this a little, it would bow to mee, for e-
 uery one of these Letters are in my name. Soft, here fol-

4 *Twelfth Night*, act 2, scene 5, from the Bodleian First Folio

character and the incident which brings him to ruin – it seems appropriate to sift Nashe's writings for clues to the meaning of *M.O.A.I.*, the letters which lure Malvolio to destruction. I will show that their meaning and connection with Harvey can be discovered in Nashe's (and Harvey's) accounts of an incident in the career of the latter – one well known to Elizabethans who had followed their pamphlet war.

During 26–31 July 1578, Queen Elizabeth and her retinue were on progress at Audley End, a palatial estate in the immediate vicinity of Saffron-Walden, home town of Gabriel Harvey and some thirteen miles from Cambridge, where he was Fellow of Pembroke College and Reader of Rhetoric. On 27 July at Audley End, members of the university including Harvey held a Latin disputation before Howard, Leicester, Oxford, and other visiting grandees. The events of that afternoon were immortalized in Latin verse by Harvey, and by Nashe in not one but two of his books.

Nashe's first telling appeared in *Strange Newes*, his pamphlet issued in reply to Harvey's deeply offensive *Four Letters and Certain Sonnets* (1592), which had vilified both Nashe and the memory of his recently deceased friend and collaborator, Robert Greene. Nashe prefaced his account of the incident at Audley End with a warning to the nobility: 'Lette all Noblemen take heede how they giue this Thraso the least becke or countenance, for if they bestowe but halfe a glaunce on him, hele straight put it verie solemnly in print, and make it ten times more than it is.'¹² That is, should a grandee show the socially ambitious Harvey even the slightest regard, Harvey is likely to publish a book declaring them fast friends. Then Nashe turns to an occasion involving the Queen, the Earls of Leicester and Oxford, and Harvey:

Ile tell you a merry ieast. The time was when this Timothie Tiptoes made a Latine Oration to her Maieste.¹³ Her Highnes as shee is vnto all her subiects most gracious; so to schollers she is more louing and affable than any Prince vnder heauen. In which respect of her owne vertue and not his desert, it pleased hir so to humble the height of hir judgement, as to grace him a little while he was pronouncing, by these or such like tearmes. Tis a good pretie fellow, *a lookes like an Italian*; and after hee had concluded, to call him to *kisse her royall hand* [my emphasis]. Herevppon hee goes home to his studie, all intranced, and writes a whole volume of Verses; first, *De Vultu Itali*, of the countenance of the Italian; and then *De Osculo Manus*, of his kissing the Queenes hande. Which two Latin Poems he publisht in a booke of his cald *Ædes Valdinenses*, proclaiming thereby (as it were to England, Fraunce, Italie, and Spaine) what fauour hee was in with her Maieste.¹⁴

Clearly, Nashe did not have Harvey's text before him. He was writing from memory and mis-remembered Harvey's Latin. Harvey had written: 'de Regiae Manus osculatione' – which Nashe remembered as '*De Osculo Manus*'. And Harvey had written 'deque, eo, quod vultum Itali habere' – which Nashe turned into '*De Vultu Itali*'.

Four years later in *Have with you to Saffron-Walden*, Nashe revisited Harvey's fateful encounter with the Queen. In this telling, Nashe begins by assuring us that, though seeming incredible, the anecdote is wholly true.

I have a tale at my tongue's end of this hobby-horse [Harvey] revealing & domineering at Audley End when the Queen was there, to which place Gabriel (to do his country more worship & glory) came

ruffling it out, hufty-tufty, in his suit of velvet ... You will imagine it a fable, percase ... but it is 10 times more unfallible than news of the Jews rising up in arms to take in the Land of Promise, or the raining of corn this summer at Wakefield.¹⁵

Nashe then proceeds to denounce Harvey's soaring ambition: at Audley End 'did this, our *Talatamtana* or Doctor Hum, thrust himself into the thickest ranks of the noblemen and gallants, and whatsoever they were arguing of, he would not miss to catch hold of, or strike in at the one end, and take the theme out of their mouths.'¹⁶

Having characterized as preposterous Harvey's velvet attire and arrogance, Nashe passes to another of his recurring themes, Harvey-the-sensualist: 'In selfsame order was he at his pretty toys and amorous glances and purposes with the damsels, & putting bawdy riddles unto them, etc.'¹⁷ Nashe now approached his main event.

After Harvey concluded his Latin oration 'by some better friends than he was worthy of [probably the Earl of Leicester] ... he was brought to kiss the Queen's hand, and it pleased her Highness to say (as in my former book I have cited) that he looked something like an Italian'.¹⁸

The effect on Harvey of Elizabeth's courtesy and (rather faint) praise was electric. Nashe reports that he 'ran headlong violently to his study, as if he had been borne with a whirlwind, and straight knocked me up a poem called his *Ædes [Gratulationes] Valdinenses*, in praise of my Lord of Leicester, of his [Harvey's] kissing the Queen's hand, and of her speech & comparison of him, how he looked like an Italian'.¹⁹

Harvey's 'poem' comprised four Latin 'letters' to the the Queen, Leicester, Essex, and Sir Philip Sydney and certain other noblemen; it was published in September 1578 by Henry Binneman (London). In his 'letter' to the Queen, Harvey recalled the great encounter: '*Liber Primus: To Queen Elizabeth. Epilogus, de Regiae Manus Osculatione: deque eo quod vultum Itali habere, ab excellentissima Principe diceretur.*'²⁰ That is, 'Book One: To Queen Elizabeth. The epilogue, of the kissing of the hand of the Queen: and that he was said by this most excellent Princess to have the appearance of an Italian.' Harvey's key phrases – '*Manus Osculatione*' and '*Vultum Itali*' – would provide the basis for Maria's conundrum. But first, another word from Nashe about Harvey's penchant for outlandish attire.

Some forty lines later in *Saffron-Walden*, Nashe offers a bravura portrait of Harvey's atrocious sartorial taste. 'His father he undid [impoverished] to furnish him to the court once more, where presenting himself in all the colours of the rainbow, and a pair of mustaches like a black horse-tail tied up in a knot, with two tufts sticking out on each side, he was asked by no mean personage, *Unde haec insania? Whence proceedeth this folly or madness?*'²¹ This passage may have provided Shakespeare's and Maria's cue for cajoling Malvolio into yellow stockings cross-gartered.

How M.O.V.I. became M.O.A.I.

The inspiration for Maria's M.O.A.I. was Harvey's '*Manus Osculatione ... Vultum Itali*', a sequence of words which begin with the letters M.O.V.I. But if this is so, how did M.O.V.I. become M.O.A.I.?

The V. became A. via a seventeenth-century version of the game that Americans call 'Telephone' and pre-PC Britons call 'Chinese Whispers'.²² In that parlour pastime a line of people whisper a message one to another. The message, which began as simple and sensible, becomes more garbled with each re-transmission, and emerges at last as laughable gibberish. Here is how Harvey, Nashe, and Shakespeare played the game:

1. In 1578 Harvey had written: '*Manus Osculatione: deque eo quod vultum Itali habere*'.
2. Fourteen years later in *Strange Newes* (1592), Nashe, clearly working from memory and without Harvey's text before him, wrote: '*De Vultu Itali*, of the countenance of the Italian; and then *De Osculo manus*, of his kissing the Queenes hande.' Note that Nashe (a) reversed the order of the phrases; (b) miswrote '*Vultu Itali*' for Harvey's '*vultum Itali*'; and (c) reversed the word-order of the latter phrase while mangling Harvey's '*Manus Osculatione: deque*' into '*De Osculo manus*'. Nashe also translated the former phrase as both 'a looks like an Italian' and 'of the countenance of the Italian'.
3. Four years later in *Saffron-Walden* (1596), Nashe, again writing from memory but without reprising Harvey's Latin, twice expressed the phrase as 'he lookt something like an Italian' and 'he lookt like an Italian'.²³

If Tobin is correct, *Saffron-Walden* is the text Shakespeare mined for ammunition for *Twelfth Night*.

4. Five years later in 1601, Shakespeare replaced the phrases in their original order. But, relying on *Saffron-Walden* and without access to Harvey's Latin, Jonson's man of 'small Latine and lesse Greeke' translated Nashe's 'lookt like an Italian' as '*Aspectu Itali*' and wrote *M.O.A.I.*²⁴ Recalling that Harvey wrote in Latin but having only Nashe's Englishing before him, Shakespeare wrote *M.O.A.I.* for '*Manus Osculatione ... Aspectu Itali*'.

That is how the royal *M.O.V.I.* became the fatal *M.O.A.I.* which has cost so many commentators so much face. Shakespeare, unaware of his mistranslation, could have expected his royal auditor and her courtiers who had read Nashe to get his joke. Because the Queen had said that Harvey 'lookt like an Italian' Shakespeare gave his character an Italian name.

One final note: recovering the link between *M.O.A.I.* and Harvey's kiss of Elizabeth's hand throws a fresh and delicious light on the final sentence in Maria's letter (2.5.150–3): '*Go to, thou art made if thou desir'st to be so; if not, let me see thee a steward still, the fellow of servants and not worthy to touch Fortune's fingers*' – or kiss them, for that matter.

Notes

- 1 Keir Elam, ed., *Twelfth Night*, The Arden Shakespeare, Series 3 (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 243n.
- 2 J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps, *Shakespeariana* (London, 1841).
- 3 F. G. Fleay, *Shakespeariana* (London, 1884), I.136.
- 4 Lee Sherman Cox, 'The Riddle in *Twelfth Night*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13 (1962), 360.
- 5 Leslie Hotson, *The First Night of Twelfth Night* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 166.
- 6 J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, eds, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, The Arden Shakespeare, Series 2 (London: Thomson Learning, 1975), 68n.
- 7 Elizabeth Story Donno, ed., *Twelfth Night or What You Will*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 91.
- 8 Keir Elam, *Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse: Language Games in the Comedies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 159–64.

- 9 Inge Leimberg, “‘M.O.A.I.’: Trying to Share the Joke in *Twelfth Night* 2.5 (a Critical Hypothesis)”, *Connotations* 1.1 (1980), 84.
- 10 Peter Smith, ‘M.O.A.I.: “What Should That Alphabetical Position Portend?” An Answer to the Metamorphic Malvolio’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998), 1199–1224.
- 11 Elam, *Twelfth Night*, 16.
- 12 Ronald B. McKerrow, *The Workes of Thomas Nashe*, 5 vols (London: Sidgwick & Jackson 1904–10, repr. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), I.276.
- 13 Harvey did not make his oration before the Queen, a detail Nashe corrected in *Saffron-Walden*.
- 14 McKerrow, *Nashe*, I.276–7.
- 15 *Ibid.*, III.73–4.
- 16 *Ibid.*, III.75.
- 17 *Ibid.*, III.75–6.
- 18 *Ibid.*, III.76.
- 19 McKerrow, *Nashe*, III.77.
- 20 Alexander Bulloch Grosart, ed., *The Works of Gabriel Harvey* (London: privately printed, 1884–85), I.xx xv.
- 21 McKerrow, *Nashe*, III.79.
- 22 ‘In Britain the game is called Chinese Whispers ... In France, the game is sometimes referred to as The Arab Game and ... The Russian Scandal Game.’ ‘Chinese Whispers.com’, www.chinese-whispers.com (accessed 11 May 2013).
- 23 McKerrow, *Nashe*, III.76.20, III.78.5.
- 24 *Vultus*, n.m., expression of the face, countenance, look or aspect. *Aspectus*, n.m., appearance, aspect, mein. *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae, tam accurate congestus, ut nihil pene in eo desyderari possit, quod vel Latine complectatur amplifimus Stephani Thesaurus, vel Anglice, totes aucta Eliotae Bibliotheca; opera et industria Thomae Cooperi Magdalenensis* (London: Bertheleti, 1565).