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Twelfth Night and the Philology of Nonsense

Adam Zucker

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Twelfth Night *and the philology of nonsense*

ADAM ZUCKER

Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid.

Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*¹

DO OR NOT DO?

Twelfth Night imagines a universe of people getting things wrong. Its characters are nearly all mistake-makers and bumbler; its plot runs on fuel mixed from erroneous judgments and poor decisions; and its resolution relies heavily on poorly considered marriages sanctified, to put it generously, by an atmosphere of astonished befuddlement. It is a play, in other words, that creates art or aesthetic theatrical experience out of the elaborate depiction of error.² This puts it into the same category as Shakespeare's most direct explorations of comic conventionality, such as *The Comedy of Errors* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But there is in *Twelfth Night* an invitation not just to consider error in the sense of a formal or narrative necessity as Donatus, Horace, and other codifiers of comic theory put it, but also to think about the social, aesthetic, and linguistic shadings of error in its most abject forms. I am referring here not simply to poor judgments, honest mistakes, or ironic Erasmian Folly, but to the true soul-splitting stupidity that exists mainly as a question or a relational quantity in the work of Avital Ronnell, Robert Musil, and other philosophers who have tried to track it down.³ It might be identified, to adopt the terms of Carla Mazzio's recent work, as a strategic, yet unintelligible or inarticulate affect that can seem

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991 [1987]), 6.

² For a longer discussion of this point, see Porter Williams, 'Mistakes in *Twelfth Night* and Their Resolution: A Study in Some Relationships of Plot and Theme' in *PMLA* 76 (1961): 193–9.

³ This sense of stupidity is difficult to encapsulate in straightforward terms. For a brilliant attempt, see Avital Ronnell's *Stupidity* (University of Illinois Press, 2002). Robert Musil emphasizes the subject's contingency and unapproachable unity in his essay 'On Stupidity' (in *Robert Musil: Precision and Soul*, trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 268–86). To give some sense for the difficulty of the topic, Musil suggests 'that something can be stupid, but doesn't have to be; that meaning changes

to sit entirely outside of the relationships out of which aptitude is formed, even as it structures the logic of sensibility itself.⁴ And, as Rancire suggests, that affect can be located not only in comic forms, but in the environments (textual, performative, material) that shape the experience of scholars and students. *Twelfth Night*, I will argue here, helps us grapple with this obscure, but definitive presence in our lives by staging certain kinds of nonsense that we frequently fail to recognize as such.

There is a particular word in the play that points the way towards this feeling of difficult, meaningful confusion, and it will serve as an organizing idea in much of what follows here. That word is ‘baffled’. It comes up twice in Malvolian contexts in the play, most strikingly in the shining place of honour at the centre of Olivia’s assessment of all that has been done to her steward. In the play’s final scene, after Malvolio presents his list of grievances and Fabian admits to the outlines of the plot against him, Olivia offers him a sliver of sympathy: ‘Alas, poor fool, how have they baffled thee!’ (V.i.363).⁵ Modern audiences and readers are likely to agree with this assessment. Malvolio has been entirely overmastered by Maria and her co-plotters, and he ends the play confused, misdirected, and, more directly, cut out of the shared circuit of common knowledge that defines wit and its attendant social dominance in Shakespearean comedy. Olivia, from the audience’s perspective, is right: Malvolio has been baffled, at least, in our common sense of the word.

One of the great pleasures of *Twelfth Night*, in this situation at least, is that we, the audience, have not been: we are in on the baffling processes here. The play shares in the tendency of most Elizabethan comedy to reveal its own mechanisms of intrigue in explicit detail as they occur. Not only are audiences in league with Toby and Maria when it comes to the manipulation of Malvolio, we are also clear from the outset of the action that Cesario is Viola; we quickly learn that Sebastian is alive and slowly making his way through Illyria; we see that Olivia has fallen for the wrong twin; and, along with all this, we know that somewhere out there is a recognition scene waiting to happen. And while the rise of tragicomic plotting with its unexpected revelations would eventually bring what we now call ‘surprise endings’ into Shakespeare’s narrative architecture and Jacobean drama more generally, *Twelfth Night* is not really that kind of play. The

with the context in which something appears, and that stupidity is densely interwoven with other things, without a thread sticking out anywhere that would allow the weave to be ripped apart with a single pull’ (275).

⁴ My work here is deeply indebted to Carla Mazzio’s *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), esp. 1–93. Other writing that has influenced this article in direct and indirect ways includes Anne Prescott, *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) esp. 42–85; Zachary Lesser’s work on the vagaries of glossing in the second chapter of *Hamlet After Q1: An Uncanny History of the Shakespearean Text* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 72–113; and Stephen Booth’s reading of *Twelfth Night* in *Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson’s Epitaphs on His Children, and Twelfth Night* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Though an exploration of the word ‘nonsense’ itself lies outside of the purview of this article, my sense of it was deepened by Kay Ryan’s ‘A Consideration of Poetry’, in *Poetry*, 188 (May 2006), 148–58.

⁵ All citations of *Twelfth Night* are taken from *The Arden Shakespeare Twelfth Night*, 3rd series, ed. Keir Elam (London: Cengage Learning, 2008).

sense of befuddled wonder at the events of the final scene belongs mainly to the play's characters. We already know who's who and what's what. We do not, at first glance, share in Malvolio's befuddled state.

But if the narrative course of *Twelfth Night* is somewhat less than baffling to an audience watching it all happen, the language of the play is another story altogether, especially for modern readers and viewers. The rapid, punning jests that colour so much of the dialogue in *Twelfth Night* are very difficult to understand, let alone laugh at, in performance or on the page. As Barbara Freund has suggested, the play uses Sir Andrew Aguecheek to model a version of this linguistic confusion.⁶ He can be seen as a sympathetic figure for a modern audience's potentially uncomfortable experience of the play, and his verbal incompetence often mirrors our own, whatever our level of expertise. One of Aguecheek's more obvious errors is particularly significant for my interests here. During our introduction to him in his first scene with Toby and Maria, he asks what may be the play's most embarrassing question:

Andrew: I'll ride home tomorrow, Sir Toby.

Toby: *Pourquoi?*

Andrew: What is *pourquoi*? Do or not do? (I.iii.86–9)

It is easy enough to laugh at this moment, especially if you have the good fortune to understand more French than Aguecheek does. This is a language joke that does a fine job of yoking audience members into the community of knowledgeable jesters organized by Toby and Maria; it is a simple sign of Aguecheek's ignorance that, like Malvolio's harsh prudishness, guarantees a kind of social separation of alliances and puts most audience members on the privileged side of the play's divide. We know what *pourquoi* means! We like cakes and ale!

But Aguecheek's confusion with foreign languages is actually a significant indicator for *Twelfth Night* and the history of its editorial reception in particular. The play's idiot, as it turns out, is not alone in his difficulty with romance languages. Just moments before Aguecheek fails his French exam, Toby tests us all with an exclamation to Maria that directs her attention to Aguecheek's imminent entrance on stage: 'What, wench, *Castiliano vulgo*, for here comes Sir Andrew Agueface' (I.iii.41–2).⁷ Relatively speaking, there are few editorial problems in *Twelfth Night*, but Toby's outburst is one of them. Nobody, and I mean nobody, has ever been able to figure out precisely what 'Castiliano vulgo'

⁶ Cf. Barbara Freund's assessment in 'Twelfth Night and the Tyranny of Interpretation', *ELH* 53 (1986): 'Although he can cut a caper and has the backtick as strong as any man in Illyria, in a verbally constituted and language-governed environment Andrew does not shine. Indeed, his incurable logo-deficiency and his repeated victimization by lexis make him the ultimate underachiever' (480–81). *Pace* Stephen Booth, who argues otherwise ('Audiences to *Twelfth Night* do not, and therefore should not, feel like fools looking at fools, or jackasses looking at jackasses') in *Precious Nonsense* (148), nearly all of us are in the same boat as Andrew when it comes to *Twelfth Night*.

⁷ Though I am not going to quibble about it here, the punctuation in the Folio is very different from Elam's reading in the *Arden*: 'What wench? *Castiliano vulgo*: for here comes Sir Andrew Agueface' (1623, Y2v).

means, or even, for that matter, what language Toby is speaking when he says it. Assuming that it's a Latin/Spanish/Italian hybrid, the phrase translates to something like 'A Castilian, commonly put', which is odd enough as it is; in its context (that is, as an exclamation that begins to turn Maria's attention to Aguecheek's approach), it is entirely nonsensical. That is not to say that Shakespearean explicators have not done their best to explicate the phrase. Furness's *New Variorum* (1901) rehearses, with typical bemusement, the failures of nearly two centuries of guesswork: Hanmer (1743–4) and Warburton (1747) emend 'vulgo' to 'volto', to turn the phrase into the mysteriously imperative, 'Put on your Castilian face!' While this idea presented later editors with a site for interpretation (What *is* a Castilian face? Is it serious? brave? Do other playwrights refer to Spanish faces in some way?), there is no evidence that 'Castiliano volto' was a functional idiom in England in any case (as Furness drily points out, 38).⁸ Halliwell (1856) suggests that 'Castiliano vulgo' is the correct reading (he thinks Toby might be telling Maria to speak 'in common Spanish, that is, in familiar language'), and editors have more or less followed suit since. Keir Elam, in the most recent *Arden*, admits to the ambiguity, putting forth Mahood's theory that the phrase means 'Speak of the Devil' only to reject it for his own guess that the phrase refers to a variant for the word 'castellan' ('castilian'), or castle-dweller, and, thus, to an expression used to greet fellow drinking companions.⁹

With all this in mind, I'd like to return for a moment to my opening epigraph:

Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid.

Debates over phrases like 'Castiliano vulgo' make Rancière's point for him. In some very simple, ordinary sense, the exact translation of these words is entirely irrelevant for the action of *Twelfth Night*, especially in performance. They serve their point simply in their explosive, meaningful noise. Sir Toby has a soft spot for romance languages (his probing 'pourquoi' confirms it), and he uses them around Aguecheek to draw lines between the two of them, indicating, firstly, his own sophistication, and secondly, Aguecheek's lack thereof. It is more than possible to figure out what 'Castiliano vulgo' is doing in the play without the guide of a gloss or a teacher: its basic effect is to let audiences know that any

⁸ Horace Howard Furness (ed.), *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Twelfth night, or, What you will* (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1901).

⁹ See Elam, note to I.iii.41 (173). Elam's suggestion is by far the most convincing of the bunch. I should say also that there are many reasons for an editor to deviate from the spelling of words in languages other than English in the Folio – 'Pourquoi,' for example, appears there as 'Pur-quoy' (1623, Y2v). On the 'Speak of the Devil' reading, see also J. F. Killeen, 'Twelfth Night, I. iii. 42: "Castiliano vulgo"', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28 (1977), 92–3.

relationship to foreign languages – even hybrid, possibly nonexistent ones – is a marker in the field of cultural competencies that defines and produces the play's imagined Illyrian court.¹⁰

That field is staked out not only by Toby, but also by other characters in *Twelfth Night* who fake it, linguistically. Feste is the most active of the bunch. Playing the part of Sir Topas, he greets the imprisoned Malvolio with the play's other Spanish/Latin hybrid phrase, '*Bonos Dies*' (IV.ii.12). Elam calls this either 'bad Latin' or 'bad Spanish', but in either case, it is another loose reference to romance languages that charts out modes of courtly or religious knowledge. Aguecheek's recollection of one of Feste's jokes works in similar ways: 'In sooth, thou wast in very gracious fooling last night, when thou spok'st of Pigrogromitus, of the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus' (II.iii.20–23; whether or not Sir Andrew is mangling or accurately repeating Feste's mock lecture is besides the point here). And, of course, Feste himself famously attributes his epigrammatic line – 'Better a witty fool than a foolish wit' – to the entirely fictitious (but believably named) 'Quinapalus' (I.v.33–4). While nonsense names are not quite the same thing as nonsense words, they function in similar ways when it comes to the social logic of the text and its appeal to audiences. As is the case with 'Castiliano vulgo', the sound of 'Quinapalus' does more work – both within the imagined world of the play and for the audiences who encounter it – than its infinitely receding literal meaning ever could.

Scholarship, editorial debate, and the pedagogical apparatus of historical philology are not known for their acceptance of semantic dead-zones in Shakespearean contexts.¹¹ But, as *Twelfth Night* suggests, both textual criticism and dramatic performance can be propelled by baffling elements that need not be clarified in any way to do their job. My discussion of 'Castiliano vulgo' and its investigators is an exaggerated synecdoche for that idea in its broadest expression. We (that is, I, along with the specialist readers of this article and the many editors, researchers, wonderers, and arguers who have come before us) circle around a term that is clearly in the right place. We attempt to figure out its function, its place in the machinery, and we see if we can keep that machine running. But as we reverse engineer *Twelfth Night*, we might at times feel comfortable celebrating when its motor sparks to life, whatever our position of mastery over the design and meanings of the text. In this regard, Aguecheek's utterly idiotic question – 'Do or not do?' – might be one we ask ourselves every time we have to decide whether or not to clarify the meanings of the nonsensical in an early modern text.

¹⁰ On the cultural capital that adheres to the study or knowledge of foreign languages in early modern London and its drama, see Nina Levine's work in *Practicing the City: Early Modern London on Stage* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). On the particularly Italian contexts for Illyrian civility, linguistic and otherwise, see Elam's introduction in the *Arden*, 58–67. And for the Continental influence on ideas about civility more generally in England (linguistic and otherwise), see Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 79–106.

¹¹ For a discussion of this pattern that has shaped my thinking here, see Stephen Orgel, 'The Poetics of Incomprehensibility', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991), 431–7.

I hope the very presence of the words you are reading now indicates how I usually choose to answer that question. The way I see it, the embarrassing impossibility of textual mastery that lingers over Sir Toby's baffling exclamation is a clue to a larger mystery, contributing to the comic force of *Twelfth Night* in ways that can help us clarify the place of ignorance and unknowing both in our own work and in the broader theatrical or social contexts of Shakespeare's day. In the remainder of this article, I will use two of these contexts – the sound of nonsense in late Tudor and early Jacobean city comedy, and a confusing reference to confusion in *Twelfth Night* itself – to suggest ways in which we might make a place for the disorienting affect of nonsensical signification in a historicist approaches to early modern comedy. Again, the editorial response to 'Castiliano vulgo' lights the way forward: Furness himself, near the end of his discussion, concludes that we will probably never know what the phrase means, and W. A. Wright goes even further in the first Cambridge edition of the play (1863): 'It is probable that these words have as much meaning now as they had in Shakespeare's time, and that is none at all.'¹² These claims are actually much easier to support with historical and literary evidence than any of the other theories put forth over the years. If the phrase is, in fact, a bit of exotic-sounding nonsense, gaining meaning through its dialogic context and its sonic force, it would take its place alongside the many, many other examples of that mode of speech in early modern English drama, a large number of which either represent or enact comic errors.

Anyone who has dealt with late-Tudor or Stuart city comedy in particular has run across inflected gibberish meant to approximate one language or another on the stage.¹³ A few favourite examples of mine include the exasperated false French spoken by a servant in Haughton's *An Englishman for My Money* (1598): 'why he may speake *flaunte taunte* as well as *French*, for I cannot understand him' (A4v); the ludicrous nonsense Dutch in the same play ('*Haunce Butterkin slowpin frokin*', A4v); and the more elaborate sequence in Middleton's *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, in which a character fakes his way through a translation of his conversation with a Dutch speaker by spewing gibberish and pretending he's made sense for the sake of a listening person who, like him, understands no Dutch. '*Hoyste kaloiste, kalooskin ee vou, dar sune, alla gaskin?*' he asks a Dutch boy, who tells him, in proper Dutch, that he has no

¹² Cited in Furness, *New Variorum*, 37. See also Catherine Lisak 'Domesticating Strangeness in *Twelfth Night*', in James Schiffer (ed.), *Twelfth Night: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 167–83: 'Corruptions such as "Castiliano vulgo" may remain utterly obscure, except to Sir Toby...' (176).

¹³ For work on this subject in Dutch contexts, see Marjorie Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch Relations in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), esp. Ch. 3, 'Double Dutch Tongues: Language Lessons of the Stage', 89–109; and Andrew Fleck, 'Ick verstaw you niet': Performing Foreign Tongues on the Early Modern English Stage', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 20 (2007), 204–21. My discussion in the following pages is especially indebted to Rubright's suggestion that refracted versions of Dutch on stage could 'complicate the binary of English versus foreign' (108).

idea what has just been said.¹⁴ A few lines later, the con man continues, '*Quisquinikin sadllamare, all pissé kickin sows-clows,/ Hoffe tofte le cumber shaw, bouns bus boxsceeno. . .*' (iii.157–8). It goes on from there, and as the Dutch boy, in Dutch, expresses his increasing fury with the nonsense-spouting joker, the con man offers his own fake translation of the dialogue, in English, to his mark. Though this scene's meaningful foreign nonsense is decidedly more complex and direct than Toby's single outburst, it is instructive in similar ways: a conventional context (in this instance, a New Comic intrigue plot featuring a culturally competent wit and a helpless gull) provides a matrix that helps audiences see the social effect of untranslatable gabble.

Recent scholarship on the diversity of Continental vernaculars on the Tudor and Stuart stage usefully situates the English stage's multiplying cacophony of tongues as a sign or effect of religious, commercial, and, most broadly, transnational mixture in early modern London and its environs.¹⁵ As England's largest city became an increasingly populous centre for the nation's consolidating economic, political, and social networks, immigrants from the Continent established or expanded their presence in neighbourhoods scattered both within and around London's walls.¹⁶ By the turn into the seventeenth century, the city was filled with people struggling to understand one another as speakers of French, Dutch, Italian, and other Continental tongues dealt with a native population that was not, in many cases, able to converse in foreign languages. The resulting mixtures and potential confusion frequently became the stuff of comic drama. While Philip Sidney famously complains in *The Defense of Poesy* that comedy in particular breaks 'the law of hospitality, to jest at strangers, because they speak not English so well as we do', the audiences at London's theatres seemed to be more than willing to laugh not only at the difficulties of the immigrants who lived among them, but also at their own shortcomings as speakers of other languages.¹⁷ Characters who lack competency in spoken

¹⁴ Quotations of *No Wit/No Help like a Woman's* from Thomas Middleton, *The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ In addition to Fleck, Rubright, and Levine (all cited above), see Lloyd Kermode, *Aliens and Englishness in Elizabethan Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Janette Dillon, *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); A. J. Hoenselaars, *Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: A Study of Stage Characters and National Identity in English Renaissance Drama, 1558–1642* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992); Emma Smith, '"So much English by the Mother": Gender, Foreigners, and the Mother Tongue in William Haughton's *Englishmen for My Money*', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 13 (2001), 165–81; and Wilson O. Clough, 'The Broken English of Foreign Characters of the Elizabethan Stage,' *Philological Quarterly* 12 (1933), 255–68.

¹⁶ For overviews of the demographic and physical expansion of London in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Vanessa Harding, 'The Population of London, 1550–1700: A Review of the Published Evidence', *London Journal* 15 (1990), 111–28, and 'The Changing Shape of Seventeenth-Century London' in J. F. Merritt, *Imagining Early Modern London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 117–43. See also the essays collected in A. L. Beier and R. Finlay (eds.), *London, 1500–1700: The Making of a Metropolis* (Harlow: Longmans, 1986), especially R. Finlay and B. Shearer's work on demography, 'Population Growth and Suburban Expansion' (37–59).

¹⁷ Phillip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 2008), 245.

English appear with increasing frequency alongside their counterparts, oafs like Andrew Aguecheek, who cannot understand the simplest phrases in foreign tongues.

As I have already begun to show in the case of *Twelfth Night*, the meanings of these theatrical transpositions can often depend on the perspective of the scholarly explicator. Janette Dillon, for example, who emphasizes the London public stage's tendency to carve out images of a specifically English Protestant masculinity, argues that foreign vernaculars can

transport the narrative [...] into a time and place that are alien, and which the audience is invited to distrust. This distrust, like the respect, even reverence, that Latin invites, is produced by sound rather than sense; it is a response stimulated in both the illiterate and the educated audience.¹⁸

The noise of the foreign is, for Dillon, part of a broader project of comic abuse, whether or not the literal meaning of the words themselves is understood by anyone, onstage or off. Nina Levine has argued the point in similar terms:

If language is a primary location for staging distinction, it is also a medium within which these distinctions might be confronted and rearticulated in ways that open up rather than resolve the city's so-called alien problem.¹⁹

For other scholars, the sound of foreign languages in London's comic drama participates in the moment's wider project of urban analysis and categorization that made the different inhabitants of a growing city visible to one another.²⁰ Like the books of epigrams, Theophrastan character sketches, and other forms of satirical sociological classification that served as one of the period's formal coping strategies for expansive urban change, city comedy provided its writers and audiences with a series of iterable conventions (narrative, scenic, characterological and otherwise) that could provide stable matrices on which to ravel and unravel the knotted tangle of London life.²¹ The mixture of languages in city comedy helped produce and enact these matrices, even as they offered compressed versions of muddled, yet familiar, urban transactions. Lloyd Kermode's astute work on Thomas Dekker's civic chronicle comedy, *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, might serve as a case in point for this way of thinking: 'Alien confusion', he argues, 'makes *The Shoemaker's Holiday* work.'²² Kermode's

¹⁸ Dillon, *Language and Stage*, 164.

¹⁹ Levine, *Practicing the City*, 83.

²⁰ In addition to the critics cited above see Jean Howard, *Theater of a City: The Places of London Comedy, 1598–1642* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) on the broader formal ramifications of city-set Tudor and Stuart comedy.

²¹ I argue this point at more length in *The Places of Wit in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also the seventh chapter of Lawrence Manley's *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 372–430.

²² Kermode, *Aliens and Englishness*, 133. For the point of origin of this reading of the play, see David Scott Kastan's classic essay 'Workshop and/as Playhouse: Comedy and Commerce in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*,' *Studies in Philology* 84 (1987), 324–37.

analysis of a character's masquerade as a Dutchman and his emphasis on the delighted ridicule with which denizens of a London workshop greet that character's garbled semi-Dutch follows a broader tradition of scholarship that sees in plays like Dekker's a generative, though incomplete, synthesis of diverse urban types. To put it in Kermode's succinct terms, the alien in 1590s comedy is both 'invasive yet inherent in native identity' (121). This combination, in Dekker's gleeful fantasy, is often sounded out through a series of noises that only approximate sense. Here, for example, is how Lacy, the disguised Englishman who pretends to be Dutch, tells his audience (and his co-workers) that his master is arriving: 'See, myn liever broder, heer compt my miester' (x.36). Neither Dutch nor English, neither transparently native nor transgressively foreign, Lacy's hybrid syntax speaks a comic cosmopolitanism into being that Dekker (through Lacy's central influence in the plot) makes into a force for communal integration.

The working 'confusion' Kermode refers to in *The Shoemakers' Holiday*, however, is only partially a product of 'alien' nonsense. Dekker's play revels in higgledy-piggledy speech of all forms, carving out spaces for English doggerel alongside its version of false Dutch. As such, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* clarifies the often overlooked position of foreign-sounding nonsense in broader linguistic and performance patterns of early modern comedy: sometimes the inexplicable, exotic language that baffles us in our encounter with old plays is built out of entirely familiar sounds. A few of the more inventive constructions in Dekker's dialogue, for example, include 'jiggy joggy' (ii.62, used by a chambermaid to refer to the quick pace of her walk); 'pindy pandy' (xvi.132, possibly a reference to sleight-of-hand); and 'flip-flap' (I.i.15, used to denigrate formal clothing).²³ The meaning of these novel phrases is not indecipherable, but, like the false foreign tongues in Shakespeare's, Haughton's, and Middleton's plays, they are built out of exaggerated sonic components, creating aural punctuation marks in performance.

This technique is brought to the level of character development in the case of Simon Eyre, the play's eponymous shoemaker, who goes on to become the Lord Mayor of London. He speaks what he himself would call a 'gallimaufry' version of English, stuffed full of odd classical epithets, Welsh exclamations, obscure culinary insults, and, not surprisingly, nonsensical phrases. Eyre's response to his wife's (reasonable) request that he speak to King Henry V with respect gives a fine sense for his diction:

Away, you Islington whitepot! Hence, you hopperarse, you barley pudding full of maggots, you broiled carbanado! [...] Go, trip and go, meddle with your partlets and your pishery-pashery, your flews and your whirligigs! (xx.49–55)

²³ Quotations from *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, ed. Anthony Parr (London and New York: A. C. Black and W. W. Norton, 1990).

In amongst the difficult but explicable jokes here about bouncing behinds and various foodstuffs sits the term ‘pishery-pashery’, a construction which Eyre uses three separate times in the play (see also i.125 and 159). In each instance, he’s dismissing someone or something, but in each, it’s entirely unclear what ‘pishery-pashery’ is meant to mock. Clothing? Ornate language? Excess ornamentation in general? ‘Partlets’ are clothing flaps, and ‘flews and whirligigs’ also seem to refer to Margery’s clothing, but there is simply no way to isolate Eyre’s reference here or elsewhere in the text. The usual etymological authorities offer little help: while the *Oxford English Dictionary* does include an entry for ‘pishery-pashery’, suggesting a tentative definition of ‘depreciatory or disparaging talk’, the only recorded usage given there is, of course, *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*.²⁴ It is hard to blame Anthony Parr, a generally very thorough recent editor of the play, for usually leaving the term unglossed.²⁵

Parr’s decision to leave ‘pishery-pashery’ alone in his text might, in fact, be the editorially responsible one. Why not let the nonsense phrase speak for itself to modern audiences and readers? Why race to explicate a construction that fits so smoothly into the dramatic logic of dialogue and character? Would the confusion or feeling of stupidity inspired by nonsensical phrases – foreign and otherwise – be more significant or evocative, more connected to the social action of comedy’s building up and breaking down of communal boundaries, if editors simply let them be? *Twelfth Night* is clearly a very different kind of play than *No Wit/No Help Like a Woman’s* or *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*: Illyria is not London, and the drinkers singing their way through the night at Olivia’s manor are not a band of merry shoemakers. The contemporary urban frame of reference that can locate ‘Quisquinikin sadlamare’ both in performance and in our critical histories sits at a remove from the Italianate word games that shape *Twelfth Night*. But the performed sound of nonsense can operate in similar ways in each of these plays, especially in light of our attempts to clarify one phrase or another. We have reached an odd semantic vanishing point in which early modern England’s conventional jokes about meaningless words disappear into detailed, potentially useless explanations of these words’ meanings. To put it another way, we have reached in ‘Castiliano vulgo’ and ‘pishery-pashery’ a riddle or a presumed question of significance that historical philology and historicist contextualization cannot fully answer. The more we struggle to explicate these words, the more insistently we draw the line between ‘knowing minds and ignorant ones’, the more we work to eliminate the feeling of the unintelligible, the more brightly and clearly these blind spots of knowledge mirror our own ignorance back at us.

²⁴ It is worth noting that out of the 40,000 or so texts indexed by the EEBO-TCP partnership as of May 2014, ‘pishery-pashery’ and its cognates (if it has any!) appear only in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*.

²⁵ In comparison, Parr glosses nearly all of the other doggerel terms in the play, and translates every line of Lacy’s quasi-Dutch.

Twelfth Night does us the favour of staging this problem in some fairly straightforward ways. A crucial effect of the play's more obviously ironic nonsense (as in the 'Vapians' who pass 'the equinoctial of Queubus') is to separate social or cultural action out from literal signification, then to make that division an Erasmian object lesson for the idiot scholars who bluster their way around it.²⁶ Malvolio is the focal point of this pattern, especially in his role as Shakespeare's most strident, studious explicator of meaningless text. The famously empty acrostic that appears in the last line of verse in Maria's forged letter to him – 'M, O, A, I, doth sway my life' – is a radioactive version of nonsense, or even anti-sense: it dashes into jumbled bits all reasonable discourse that works its way up to it.²⁷ The audience, hidden in an imagined box-tree alongside eavesdropping jesters in the garden, watches Malvolio play the part of the ruminating textual scholar who has long since decided what he has to say about the object of his study:

'M.' Malvolio. 'M' – why that begins my name! [...] But then there is no consonancy in the sequel. That suffers under probation. 'A' should follow but 'O' does. [...] And then I comes behind. [...] *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. (III.ii.123–38)

Built into Malvolio's triumphant close reading are verbs that should send fear into the heart of every critic who has worked hard to weave a reasonable, persuasive narrative out of the threads of complex source texts. He will 'crush this a little', will he? And it will 'bow' to him? With these rough verbs, the steward acts out his wished-for sovereignty upon four helpless letters.²⁸ *Twelfth Night* expends some effort, as John Huntington has put it, 'relentlessly working on the discrepancy between [Malvolio's] desires and his possibilities within the social field'.²⁹ His intense, disorderly destruction of anagrammatic nonsense not only enacts that discrepancy, but stains it with an outrageous willingness to use what we now call 'critical thinking' for less-than-virtuous aims. This is what makes the steward such a troubling model for our engagement with difficult

²⁶ I am far from the first to suggest as much. See, recently, Stephen Booth's work on the play in *Precious Nonsense* (cited above), which bears directly on my reading of Malvolio.

²⁷ See Peter J. Smith's rehearsal of the attempts to decipher Maria's epistolary code in 'M.O.A.I. "What Should That Alphabetical Position Portend?" An Answer to the Metamorphic Malvolio', *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (1998), 1199–215 (I do not endorse his closing points); and a brief piece by Cynthia Lewis that suggests 'M. O. A. I.' is meant to be an indecipherable riddle: "A Fustian Riddle?": Anagrammatic Names in *Twelfth Night*, *English Language Notes* 22 (1985), 32–7.

²⁸ Mark Robson sheds light on the chains of interpretation and transformation here: 'It is ironic, then that in [Malvolio's] desire to make the letter resemble something in himself, he is forced to transform that self, both in appearance and conduct, if he is to follow the letter-writer's advice and claim his reward. He must become an anagram of himself.' 'The Ethics of Anonymity', *Modern Language Review* 103 (2008), 350–63 (at 351).

²⁹ John Huntington, 'Chapman's Ambitious Comedy', *ELR*, 43 (2013), 128–52 (at 134).

language in the play. Poor Sir Andrew contains within himself a reservoir of blank linguistic miscomprehension, making nonsense out of (potential) sense. No one likes to imagine him or herself this way, but if you do not speak French, well, you do not speak French. Malvolio, on the other hand, works very hard to make sense out of nonsense. And as he reverses the Aguecheekian process, he appears, horrifyingly, to know exactly what he is doing wrong.

The steward is punished for his analytical abilities in ways that eventually shade into the sadistic territories of skimmington and bear-baiting, but before he is sent to his dark hole of a prison, he puts on his ridiculous stockings and smiles his unnatural smile.³⁰ In the depths of that cross-gartered buffoonery, he is likened by Maria to 'a pedant that keeps a school i' th' church' (III.ii.71–2). More than any other, this line crystallizes the mocking tone of the play, bringing its sharp point to bear on the little pedant in us all. The more I grapple with the intricate jokes and linguistic black holes built into *Twelfth Night*, the more I begin to identify with scholars who have spent lifetimes quibbling over words that very likely mean nothing at all. The more I identify with these scholars, the more *Twelfth Night* insults me, and the more embarrassed I become about my own relationship to the difficult language of the text, foreign or otherwise. This is not, I should say, a terrifically pleasant encounter with comedy. It feels bad. But before I give up on it, I will return to the crucial word in *Twelfth Night* with which I began this article: the word that registers the uncomfortable combination of humiliating affect and overmastered effect that closes out the Malvolio plot; the word that similarly points the way towards my own strained feelings for *Twelfth Night* and for early modern comedy more generally. That word, of course, is 'baffled'.

When Olivia suggests in Act Five that Malvolio has been 'baffled' by Maria and the others, she is not really calling him 'out-witted' or 'flabbergasted' or, 'confused', which is, generally, how audiences today hear the word. Though the term was just beginning to mean 'hoodwinked' or 'cheated' by the late sixteenth century, its more dominant uses all constellate around performances meant to disgrace and openly humiliate people, often men of rank. Spenser's knights are occasionally baffled in *The Faerie Queene*, usually by having their shields or images reversed in a public display meant to punish them for their lack of honour.³¹ A more elaborate description of the act appears in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, appended with the marginal note 'Baffulling what it is among the Scots':

a man is openlie perjured, and then they make of him an image painted, reversed, with his héeles upward, with his name, woondering, crieng, and

³⁰ On this point see Stephen Dickey, 'Shakespeare's Mastiff Comedy', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42 (1991), 255–75 (esp. 264–75); and Jason Scott-Warren, 'When Theaters Were Bear-Gardens; Or, What's at Stake in the Comedy of Humors', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54 (2003), 63–82.

³¹ See the entry on the term by Michael Leslie in A. C. Hamilton (ed.), *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 206–07.

blowing out on him with hornes, in the most despitefull manner they can, in token that he is worthie to be exiled the companie of all good creatures.³²

Thomas Nashe transposes this formal process of humiliation into joking contexts in *Have With You to Saffron Walden*, where he imagines that people in some distant future ‘may baffull and infamize my name when I am in heaven, & shall never feele it’.³³ And, most importantly of all, Malvolio himself uses the term in this sense, directly after crushing the mash note he assumes is from Olivia:

Daylight and champaign discovers not more. This is open. I will be proud, I will read politic authors, I will baffle Sir Toby, I will wash off gross acquaintance, I will be point-device the very man (II.v.156–9).

In the midst of the play’s most pointed joke about misinterpretation and bad performance, it is only fitting that today’s audiences misrecognize the premise of Malvolio’s plans. Earlier in the scene, before he reads Maria’s letter, the steward spins out his languid fantasy of leaving the countess to her post-coital nap in order to finger a jewel and chastise Sir Toby for his poor behaviour (40–78). Here, that fantasy is enriched by the notion of bafflement, the public disgrace of a knight, permitting Malvolio to grant himself the rank he hopes to achieve. Olivia’s use of the term as she caps Malvolio’s humiliation is therefore much more caustic than it is ordinarily taken to be. Her steward may have been baffled like an armoured knight, but he will never, ever be one.

Our own trouble with the word ‘baffle’ – our need for the gloss, the explanatory note, the critical tradition – might push us to reconsider what, exactly, qualifies as ‘foreign nonsense’ in early modern English drama. The famous passage from Sidney’s *Defense* on his distaste for accent jokes in comedy hints at this broader problem:

the great fault, even in that point of laughter, and forbidden plainly by Aristotle, is, that they [that is, authors of dramatic comedy] stir laughter in sinful things, which are rather execrable than ridiculous; or in miserable, which are rather to be pitied than scorned. For what is it to make folks gape at a wretched beggar, and a beggarly clown; or against the law of hospitality, to jest at strangers, because they speak not English so well as we do?³⁴

Sidney suggests that it is inappropriate – sinful, even – to laugh at people simply because they do not speak English ‘so well as we do’. This is fair enough at first glance. But who, precisely, composes Sidney’s ‘we’ in this sentence? The

³² I quote from *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, Vol. 6 (London: 1587), 827. Text/page number accessed via the Oxford Holinshed Project (www.cems.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/).

³³ Thomas Nashe, *Have with You to Saffron Walden* (London, 1596), sig. E4r. See also ‘A New Year’s Gift to Master G. R.,’ a terrible, terrible poem in Humfrey Gifford’s collection *A Posie of Gilliflowers* (London, 1580): ‘... if I flinch, cry on me open shame,/ And where you come, doe baffull my good name’ (sig. Q4v).

³⁴ Sidney, *Defense* 245.

question is begged in *The Defense*, but, at our 450-year remove from Sidney's moment, it feels a bit more pressing. One comforting, tautological response to the question might just leave it be: *we* are Sidney's 'we', simply by virtue of reading and teaching his text. But, perhaps obviously – and this is especially clear for those of us who actually do teach *The Defense* – we can never really be that 'we'. We do not speak English as Sidney spoke English, and we will never speak it 'so well' as he did, by his standards. The syntactical, semantic, and referential patterns that organize English (in its many forms) today have little to do with Sidney's own, and they divide us from his rhetorically inclusive pronoun. If we are to understand the tendency to 'jest at strangers' in early modern comic contexts, we will also have to learn, occasionally, to laugh at ourselves. From the vantage point of the sixteenth century, *we* are a clutch of idiotic outsiders, constantly struggling to find our way through linguistic territories we can never entirely hope to master.

Are we all Malvolios, as Stephen Booth suggests in a slightly different context?³⁵ Are we all Aguecheeks, forced by history or basic incompetence into a position in which we do not even know what we do not know? I would not want to overstate the claim. But being baffled is certainly a common outcome of *Twelfth Night* and early English comedy more generally. Our problems comprehending or translating the terms within it – in nonsensical foreign languages or in English itself – can render us similar to the characters on stage. But while those characters get to disappear, we have to decide what to do with ourselves and our various failures. I will conclude simply by suggesting that if we let ourselves be bullied out of our places as critics, teachers, writers, and thinking audience members, if we storm off stage swearing revenge on the pack of them, we will miss an important chance to reflect on the historical, material contexts of our bafflement. The word 'baffle', after all, has a political history built into it, one shot through with aggressive rituals of disenfranchisement and visual abjection. It is likewise an incorporating force pertaining to and signifying the deepest modes of identification and rejection that performed humour enables. As *Twelfth Night* represents and referentially enacts these processes, it can, I hope, help us think more clearly about our own pedagogical relationships and our own encounters with (or reproductions of) nonsense in our classrooms and around our conference tables. We may be rendered silent, or stupefied, by an unintelligible sense of wonder or confusion built into theatrical or literary experience. At the very least, we can provide a sensible context for this inarticulate outcome.

University of Massachusetts Amherst

³⁵ Booth, *Precious Nonsense*, pp. 149ff.