

Staging the Alphabet in Shakespeare's Comedies

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Are you not lettered?" Armado asks the pedantic schoolteacher Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*. What does it mean to be "lettered?" Shakespeare's Comedies frequently refer to individual alphabetic letters and they often stage scenes of literacy, but the critical literature still lacks a systematic study of how these alphabetic references contribute to the meaning of the plays.¹ This article demonstrates four significant results from such a study: 1) the Comedies provide a safe space for characters to experiment with language play as part of the coming-of-age process in a literate world, with an evolving relationship between letter and self; 2) the letter references reveal a broad range of literacy options in the early modern English-speaking world, as well as a broad range of letter play available to alphabetically literate cultures; 3) we are shown the effects of a pedagogical system that promotes a view of letters as self-sufficient pieces of language that can operate independently from words; and 4) Shakespeare uses alphabetic homophones—both letter/word homophones, like "I" and "Ay," as well as homonymous words, like "letter" and "character"—to develop fundamental ideas about the nature of poetry and the art of drama. In this article, I focus primarily on three comedies that grapple the most intensely with letters: *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Love's Labors Lost*. These works demonstrate that Shakespeare's wooden "O" is far from wooden: his plays test and affirm the elasticity and plasticity of alphabetic letters, including the wide variety of uses for which they may be deployed.

Because Shakespearean comedy in general places so much importance on writing and the interpretation of writing within interpersonal communication, the staged acts of literacy acquisition and moments when characters become aware of their alphabetic literacy take on special significance. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia's ripping up and piecing back together letters into words constitutes a pivotal learning experience for her: anagramming an epistolary letter allows her to express hidden desires and grapple with questions of identity. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio also anagrams (an epistolary) letter to create a fantasy identity, and his eavesdroppers' homophonic commentaries on the alphabetic letters he mentions reveal ways that letters can teach readers and audiences about poetics and dramatic art. By staging scenes of early literacy and poetic creation, *Love's Labors Lost* highlights pedagogical structures that served to heighten an early modern awareness of the presence of individual letters within words. We see that being lettered means, all at once, to possess the ability to read words made out of letters, to participate in a cultural discourse arising out of shared words, and to have passed through an education ritual that marks the minds and bodies of its participants.

A cluster of coming-of-age, identity-experimentation themes envelop the alphabet passages in the plays: the challenges of integrating scholarly learning into one's life; the availability of letters to express or work through desires; the relationship between letters and self; and managing the aleatory in language. An account of letter play—such as letter homophones, alliteration, anagrams, Roman numeral letters, and alphabetic shapes—gestures towards the broad extent of alphabetic effects and issues throughout the entire Shakespearean canon. Being lettered certainly has its pitfalls; displays of an unreflective and impractical erudition make *Love's Labors Lost's* pedant Holofernes a buffoon. But to be unlettered is simply dangerous; the same play's Jaquenetta and Costard cannot read letters written to or about themselves. To be unlettered as well as overly lettered is to expose oneself to ridicule, at the very least. Letters are one way characters come to terms with the meaning and role that scholarly knowledge gained through education—a training in how to put letters together meaningfully, at least at its start—will play in their lives.

I. How Thou Art Lettered: Letters On, In, As, and Around the Body

One early modern understanding of the lettered human imagines him or her as physically covered with writing, inside and out.² *Love's Labour's Lost*, for example, provides plentiful examples of this.³ Metaphors of book ingestion further the idea of a written interior or an incorporate alphabet: Nathaniel disparages Dull to Holofernes, "Sir, he hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book. / He hath not eat paper, as it were, he hath not drunk ink" (4.2.21-22). In a play that increasingly materializes language, the goal of study becomes, as it were, proper ingestion: letters materially become a part of the human body. The noblewomen jestingly call Rosaline "beauteous as ink" and "fair as a text" (5.2.41-42), and the lady herself—whose very name suggests rubrication on a page—describes make-up pencils as writing colored letters on a face to cover up O-shaped syphilitic pock marks (5.2.43-46).⁴ Armado suggests that his metamorphosis through love is a potential transformation into not merely a sonnet-writer, but into the very sonnets he proposes to write: "Assist me, some extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure I shall turn sonnet. Devise wit, write pen, for I am for whole volumes, in folio" (1.2.162-64). The Princess calls the King "Navarre and his bookmen" (2.1.226); likewise, Dull says to Nathaniel and Holofernes, "You two are bookmen" (4.2.31). Mote, in following Armado, describes himself, "Like the sequel, I" (3.1.123). The range of these comparisons shows the breadth and depth of the lettered human metaphor.

II. Loving Letters

The pun on the word "letter" expresses the close relationship between writing in general and the alphabetic letter. Although the relationship between alphabetic and epistolic letters is synecdochic, the use of the same word for each implies a closer relationship of equivalency. The following two extended alphabetic "letter episodes" from *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Twelfth Night* both occur in the context of love letters. The letters (alphabetic) in letters (epistles) spotlight the desires of readers rather than the words of writers. Characters use the letters of love letters in order to come to terms with desires they do not understand.

We might expect a love letter to offer primarily a glimpse into the innermost emotions and desires of its *author*. While the private

letter itself makes for a very personalized form of writing, the particular genre of the love letter sends its addressee an even more intensely personalized expression of emotion. The lover aims to infuse his or her presence and desire into the love letter. The readers in the following two passages see their own bodies and the bodies of their desired ones in the letters, and rearrange the letters so as to put themselves in closer proximity to the (hoped for) lover. *Readers*, rather than authors, articulate their erotic desires through these love letters. Julia's imaginative reading of Proteus's letter and especially Malvolio's imaginative reading of a letter he mistakenly thinks comes from Olivia's pen are self-revealing in these two most extended treatments of anagrams in all of Shakespeare's plays. Are their acts also an implicit commentary on the many ways readers more generally interpolate their own desires into a text? The characters' private desires made public in quirky and awkward manipulations of alphabetic letters direct attention to how they struggle to privately inhabit the publically available alphabet.

**A. "Do what you will": Graphic Paper Sex and Suicide
in *Two Gentlemen of Verona***

Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* refers frequently to the visual and physical properties of writing. One of the servants claims that the news in a letter is "the blackest news that ever thou heard'st" simply because it is written in black ink.⁵ Julia describes her maid Lucetta as "the table wherein all my thoughts / Are visibly charactered and engraved" (2.7.3-4). Anagrams play a part in this visual and physical focus: Silvia's suitor Thurio evokes the relationship between "sonnet" and "onset" (3.2.92-93), characters debate whether "stand under" is the same as "understand," and Julia pieces back a torn-up epistle letter by letter. This last episode is the focus of my discussion.

Julia's anagrammatic rearrangement of a love letter from her suitor Proteus in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* unlocks the latent emotional and sexual energy potential of inert alphabetic letters by a) activating them through reading, and b) manipulating their material qualities. Letters of both kinds—epistolary and alphabetic—become a way to express or author desire. The materiality of writing becomes key to Julia's re-authoring of the text, where she physically tears up the love letter in order to create free-floating alphabetic letters that she can anagrammatically

rearrange. This rearrangement and self-authoring has long-term effects for her: she initially tears her own name out of the letter, then spends the rest of the play trying to reinsert herself back into Proteus's heart disguised as his page. In a scene that plays heavily on the homography of the word "letter" (as epistle, as member of the alphabet), Shakespeare also seems interested in testing another homographic ABC term: character. How do characters—mere alphabetic marks on the page of a play-script—transform into psychologically complex characters, brought to life by human actors?

Julia's introduction in the first act of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* focuses on the extreme difficulty she has in articulating her feelings about Proteus to her maid Lucetta. When Lucetta mentions him as her favorite in a list of Julia's potential suitors, the heroine appears to reject him categorically, as he has not spoken much to her of his suit. When she sighs, "I would I knew his mind" (1.2.33), Lucetta hands her a letter from him. At first she petulantly refuses to look at the letter, instantly regretting her foolishness and calling the maid in again on a pretext. She rips up the missive without looking at it; but when left alone, Julia grows determined to piece Proteus's words back together, letter by letter, if need be. By physically destroying the original text, she re-orders it and re-authors it to express what she prefers it to say. The letter through which she would "know his mind" in fact becomes a site for revealing her own as she discovers in the letters and words her and her beloved's bodies. Alphabetic letters become the site of an imaginative sexual and suicidal fantasy. A standout feature in this passage, other than the amusing paper sex at the end, is the sheer physicality of her interaction with this paper and the writing on it. Julia begins with a make-out session:

O hateful hands, to tear such loving words;
 Injurious wasps, to feed on such sweet honey
 And kill the bees that yield it with your stings.
 I'll kiss each several paper for amends.

[She picks up some of the pieces of the paper]

Then she starts to re-author the letter; having not only torn it up and reordered it, she rewrites her epithet and tears herself out of the paper:

Look, here is writ 'Kind Julia'—unkind Julia,
 As in revenge of thy ingratitude

I throw thy name against the bruising stones,
Trampling contemptuously on thy disdain.

By piecing the letters back together in a letter she has never read, Julia opportunistically takes advantage of the disorder to re-author the letter in accordance with her wishes. She alters the epithet to her name, “kind Julia,” to its opposite, “Unkind Julia!” Here we see her also distancing herself from herself (“I throw thy name . . .”) as she must later when altering her identity.

Certainly the wish to read her lover’s declaration or sense his presence in the letter fuels Julia’s attempted restoration of the text. Her desire to access Proteus physically through his written words leads to the eroticization of his letters. She perceives in them the presence of bodies. She starts fantasizing about taking Proteus to bed, clasping him to her bosom:

And here is writ ‘Love-wounded Proteus.’
Poor wounded name, my bosom as a bed
Shall lodge thee till they wound be throughly healed;
And thus I search it with a sovereign kiss.

Having torn up the letter, Julia “coincidentally” finds the epithet “love-wounded Proteus” (115) and quickly becomes aware of her own act of wounding the name—and, by extension, the body—of her beloved. Julia kisses the pieces of paper and soothingly (and erotically) cradles Proteus’s “wounded name” in her décolletage. Her anagrams reflect or even affect the order of the material world as alphabetic letters flesh out into body parts.⁶ With that realization, she commits paper suicide:

But twice or thrice was ‘Proteus’ written down.
Be calm, good wind, blow not a word away
Till I have found each letter in the letter
Except mine own name. That, some whirlwind bear
unto a ragged, fearful, hanging rock
And throw it thence into the raging sea.

Again she destroys her name in its paper effigy, calling for a particularly violent triple demise through a whirlwind, a ragged rock, and drowning.⁷ Dangerously, she threatens to tear herself out of the letter altogether with the last epithet she finds—“To the sweet Julia”—but quickly changes her mind. Back from the brink of paper suicide, she gears up for her raciest move yet:

Lo, here in one line is his name twice writ:
‘Poor forlorn Proteus,’ ‘passionate Proteus,’

'To the sweet Julia'—that I'll tear away.
 And yet I will not, sith so prettily
 He couples it to his complaining names.
Thus will I fold them, one upon another.
Now kiss, embrace, contend, do what you will.

(1.2.106-30, *emphasis mine*)

Thus the soliloquy culminates in, literally, a “graphic” sex-act. Julia takes delight in the proximity of Proteus’s names on the paper to “the sweet Julia” and in the sensuality of his handwriting: “So prettily / [Proteus] couples [the name ‘Julia’] to his complaining names.” In Julia’s hands, those lettered pieces of paper offer a safe space to dramatically enact her erotic desires, hidden hitherto perhaps even to herself. She has manipulated everything about this letter: she cuts herself out of it at certain places, she creates anagrams in her search for “each letter in the letter,” and she takes advantage of the medium of paper to create her own private erotic theater. The letters first have things done to them, but by the end of the scene they become an addressee —“do what you will”—and have assumed a life and will of their own.

The paper-sex sounds frivolous, but her private letter theater touches on the foundations of drama itself: paper and ink become the tools for turning letters into words, and words into characters. Moreover, what happens with the writing and rewriting of this letter happens with Julia’s character. First, she really is “torn out” of Proteus’ affections and her name is replaced by Silvia’s in future love letters. A whole scene is devoted to the moment when the two women meet and their love tokens—letters, rings, and images—to and from Proteus threaten to become substitutes for each other. Second, Julia actually turns herself into a page. Whereas she re-authored the male page with the letter, she now becomes the male page. Julia maneuvers through male writing and male gender roles to articulate her own feelings and achieve her goals. Finally, at the end of the play, as she did at the end of the letter, she strongly reinserts her name as she reasserts her identity:

Proteus: But how cam’st thou by this ring? At my depart
 I gave this unto Julia.
Julia: And Julia herself did give it me,
 And Julia herself hath brought it hither.
Proteus: How? Julia?
Julia: Behold her that gave aim to all thy oaths
 And entertained ‘em deeply in her heart.

How oft hast thou with perjury cleft the root?
O Proteus . . .

. . .

It is the lesser blot, modesty finds,
Women to change their shape than men their minds.
(5.4.95-103,107-8)

Julia's name is repeated four times in succession: the lovers get back on the same page. And again, even in her penultimate line, Julia stages her cross-dressing act in terms of writing, or unreadable writing, on a page: "It is the lesser blot." Where there once were holes in Julia's ripped up letter, now there are blots. Both holes and blots make reading difficult, but her statement seems to indicate that, while form may obscure content, the presence of content (men's unchanging minds) is more important.

Love in this play serves as both a hindrance to learning and as a catalyst for self-growth that dialectically lends experiential meaning to what one reads about it in books. The rest of the play focuses on the tension between love and learning between the two male protagonists. Valentine chides Proteus at first for neglecting his studies to pursue love, but himself soon falls victim to the same behavior. His page, Speed, frames the transformative "learning of love" as a knowledge opposed to alphabetic literacy. "You have learned, like Sir Proteus, . . . *to sigh, like a schoolboy that had lost his ABC*; . . . And now you are metamorphosed with a mistress, that when I look on you I can hardly think you my master" (2.1.16-17, 19-20; italics mine). Sandwiched between the "mortally" serious comparisons of suffering from a pestilence and mourning a beloved grandma's death, the sighing of a schoolboy who has lost his ABC appears pretty weighty. Books or the horn-book were not cheap, but losing the ABC poses a more serious threat: the threat of lost or at least temporarily delayed literacy through negligence. How can one "regain" the ABC book and still find love? The characters' problems at the Milanese court, where they have gone to receive a gentleman's education, represent some of the problems students face as they move towards adulthood and seek to align their emotions, thoughts, and physical and mental desires with what their school education has shown is expected from two gentlemen.

B. What Should That Alphabetical Position Portend: Malvolio & Olivia's "Hand"

Who owns the letter(s) Julia holds in her hands? Letters, both epistolary and alphabetic, are always to some extent a communal good. Catherine Belsey has commented on this quality of the epistolary medium:

The letter can never ensure its own secrecy. However cryptic it is, however coded, designed exclusively for the recipient, if the message is intelligible, it is always able to be intercepted, read, misread, reproduced. Since it is necessarily legible to another, who does the letter belong to? To the sender, the addressee, or an apparently irrelevant unspecified third party?⁸

While legibility cannot be the determining condition for ownership, underlying Belsey's question of ownership is the notion of a letter as a special kind of property whose regulation must take its qualities as a token of exchange into account. If Proteus owns the letter, then it has been given to Julia as a gift. If Julia owns the letter, should she be under obligation to preserve the gift in its original state? If the ownership is mutually shared, who maintains the authorial rights to it? The letter to Julia from Proteus becomes a means of managing exchanges between characters. Letters, as physical objects, may be intercepted by anyone, and written in the medium of a shared language and alphabet, may be read by anyone literate in both. Writing, therefore, encourages readerly revision even as it threatens to spin out of writers' and readers' control. All three plots of the plays under consideration rely on this quality of letter-writing.

Like the epistolary letter, alphabetic letters by nature invite readers to invest them with meanings. In her description of ABC books, Patricia Crain points out that the "the verbal and visual tropes that surround the alphabet cloak the fact that the unit of textual meaning—the letter—lacks meaning in itself."⁹ Letters accrue semiotic possibilities because they are at heart empty symbols whose function it is to take on meaning. Crain seems amazed by "the way in which the alphabetic functions appear to extend themselves, draw meaning to themselves, and create the powerful motifs that characterize alphabetic texts."¹⁰ Because of their endless semiotic possibilities as shapes, sounds, and words,

alphabetic letters too always seem a human technology slightly beyond human control.

Malvolio's letter-reading scene in *Twelfth Night* exhibits all the dangers and powers of taking ownership of letters, both epistolary and alphabetic. Malvolio's desire to see himself as the addressee of the letter forged deliberately by Olivia's servant Maria to trick him provides one of the most humorous moments of the play and prompts the most extended treatment of the most kinds of letter-play in the entire Shakespearean canon. The steward Malvolio's officious pretension and goody-two-shoes ambitions at Olivia's court have annoyed the three drinking buddies, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian. In revenge, Maria has suggestively counterfeited her mistress Olivia's hand to encourage the steward in a set of behaviors particularly disagreeable to Olivia. The letter-play in this letter-reading scene consists of two kinds: two anagrams and a series of homophonic puns based on the letters in the anagrams. The homophonic puns shed light on the poetic qualities of letters, a characteristic I will discuss at length later. A closer look now at the first kind of letter-play reveals how Malvolio, like Julia, seeks himself and the realization of his desires through alphabetic letters.

Malvolio sees proof for the connection between humans and letters already in what he presumes to be Olivia's handwriting on the exterior of Maria's letter. "By my life, this is my lady's hand. These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus makes she her great P's. It is in contempt of question her hand" (2.5.77-80). The shapes and even sizes of the letters bear for Malvolio testimony to Olivia's calligraphy. His comments make an explicit connection between character (lettering) and character (personality). Drawing letters supposedly at random from the letters or words on the sealed letter, Malvolio unconsciously creates an anagram that points even further towards his desire for Olivia's authorship, as well as his desire to be with her sexually.¹¹ The anagram spells out the Renaissance word "cut," a slangy term for female genitalia, an interpretation augmented by the fact that the great P's imply urination.¹² In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia anxiously gathers "each letter in the letter" as if alphabetic letters were body parts, and couples in a sexual fantasy her written name with Proteus's. In *Twelfth Night*, the productivity of spelling—linking letters together to form the word "cut"—is also associated with the pleasure of sex. In his daydream prior to the letter-scene, Malvolio imagines

“having come from a day-bed, where [he has] left Olivia sleeping” (2.5.43-44). The plurality of the c’s, u’s, and t’s suggest Malvolio has imagined this fantasy many more times than just once.¹³ The popular figured alphabets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reinforce the notion of spelling as a copulatory activity: Peter Flötner’s 1534 *Menschenalphabet* shows human couples creating letters together and was widely copied across Europe. The very beginning of the alphabet, Flötner’s letter A, consists of a naked Adam and Eve locked in an embrace, linking human copulation with letters to suggest the sexual nature of letter copulation underlying words.

In the body of the (epistolic) letter, the (alphabetic) letter continues to serve as a means through which Malvolio expresses his desire and his ambitions. A little prefatory verse offers up for his consideration a series of baffling initials, which the eavesdropping Fabian deems, “A fustian riddle” (2.5.98). “I may command where I adore / But silence like a Lucrece knife / With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore. / M.O.A.I. does sway my life” (2.5.94-97). Malvolio repeats the last line with the initials before reading and interpreting the rest of the poem, commenting longest on that final line. “And the end—what should that alphabetical position portend? If I could make that resemble something in me. Softly, -‘M.O.A.I.’” (5.2.106-8). The steward aims to make the letters resemble something in him. What interior state can a sequence of letters resemble? Malvolio wants to force a connection between himself and the letters, just as he had forged the connection between Olivia’s letters and her persona. The question, “What should that alphabetical position *portend?*” already anticipates the steward’s conclusion that the letters form a partial anagram of his name.¹⁴ Sure enough, after thinking through the order of each letter, the steward concludes himself to be the addressee:

‘M.’ Malvolio—‘M’—why that begins my name

...

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

...

And then ‘P’ 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.

(5.2.112, 115-116, 119, 122-24)¹⁵

Owning the letters of his name (“my name”), Malvolio reasons he must be the intended M.O.A.I. Said quickly, the letters almost sound like the word *my*. He repeats the set of letters four times, anagramming like Julia as if to will himself into them. The identification of letters in his name focuses attention on the parts of his name: he is the *male*-volio, the male will.¹⁶

To prompt this reading, Maria has capitalized on the ways writing overwhelms the control of its writer and even the control of its readers. She takes advantage of the confused ownership and the general legibility of (epistolary) letters to stage Malvolio’s letter-reading. She “reproduces” in counterfeit her mistress’s letters to provoke “reproductive” sexual fantasies in Malvolio. But Malvolio’s coincidental reading of “cut” exceeds even the expectations of the letter’s orchestrators, and the eavesdropping characters do not hear the joke. (Sir Andrew repeats “Her c’s, her u’s, and her t’s? Why that?” 5.2.81.) The anagrammic CUT, P, and MOAI become sites for the expression of Malvolio’s fantasies of ambition and sex. As with Proteus and Berowne’s letters, the reading of love letters’ letters helps to manage or negotiate relationships of power between characters. All of these qualities of letters reinforce what we have encountered before in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; what makes *Twelfth Night*’s letter scene distinct is movement of different kinds of staged letter-play between the play’s meta-dramatic frame.

III. A Poetics of the Letter

Critics have long sought to tie the various meta-dramatic frames to the letter-play, with varying amounts of success. They have questioned why only the audience is in on the CUT, P joke, or whether the MOAI joke offers any guidance for reading the partial anagrams comprising the character names of “Malvolio,” “Olivia,” and “Viola.”¹⁷ How can a focus on letters add to the critical interpretation of the relationship between the letter scene and the anagrammatic names? In other words, what larger implications for the play does that alphabetical position portend? In the following readings I differ from other critical responses in that I do not attempt to determine if the alphabetic elements occur as part of a unified system of meaning or if they simply take one form of joking and try it out in multiple variants. Instead, I first ask, at what understanding of letters can we arrive from examining these

various anagrams? I then bring that understanding of alphabetic *letters* to bear upon the interpretation of the plays.

Malvolio's letter-by-letter progression and his willingness to undo that order gesture towards various alternative ways of progressing through the play to find meaning for ourselves. "Ultimately," asserts Andrea Bachner in "Anagrams in Psychoanalysis," "the work of interpreting is highly anagrammatical. It is a work of bricolage, of disassembling and recombination."¹⁸ For example, the letter-play may invite readers or viewers to pit the sequentiality of reading/seeing the play against the non-sequential act of interpretation, in which we revisit and reconsider names, words, places, and events outside of the play's order of acts and scenes. Or it may draw us to consider the effect of representing certain events sequentially on the stage or page, which are meant to occur simultaneously in time. Anagrams and letter homophones may draw attention to elements of simultaneity in the plot.

Malvolio's ostensibly unintentionally sexual "her c's, her u's, her t's, and thus she makes her great P's" testifies to a potentially rich alphabetic subtext that the Shakespearean play invites readers and viewers to explore. This is not to say that we should go through the plays like Malvolio does his letter, picking out letters at random and making words. We should consider, however, the sounds and appearances of letters in the play. Joel Fineman's book-length treatment of the invention of poetic subjectivity in the *Sonnets* hears the *I-Ay* homophone (that is, the first person pronoun and the synonym for yes) as an integral element in the creation and expression of that subjectivity.¹⁹ Fineman's claim must necessarily base itself in the *Sonnets*, but Shakespeare's language in the plays is insistently homophonic, to a variety of effects and purposes.²⁰

In an alternate reading of what that "alphabetical position" should portend, Sir Toby and Fabian riff off Malvolio's M.O.A.I. spelling to both reposition the letters and link each letter to an individual word. The framing of this very humorous scene, with Malvolio sounding out "random" letters while the three eavesdroppers make meaningful words from those letters, demonstrates the way this alphabetic subtext may function: letters are picked up from one discourse, and "repositioned" in another, parallel one. I reproduce here the orthography of the First Folio, which by its use of the letters instead of the words visually highlights the scene's letters-as-words phenomenon.

Malvolio: Softly, **M.O.A.I.**

Sir Toby: **O I**, make vp that, he is now at a cold sent.
(2.5.106-7)

Malvolio: **M.** But then there is no consonancy in the sequell
that suffers vnder probation: **A.** should follow,
but **O.** does.

Fabian: And **O** shall end, **I** hope.

Sir Toby: **I**, or **Ile** cudgell him, and make him cry **O.**

Malvolio: And then **I.** comes behind.

Fabian: **I**, and **you** had any **eye** behinde you, you might
see more detraction at your heeles, the Fortunes
before **you.** (2.5.112-21)

Sir Toby and Fabian's ridiculous "suggestions" for what the letters mean consist of a series of word-puns on the letters O and I. "O" becomes a shout of encouragement (107) or a cry of pain (115, 116). "I" becomes "ay" the affirmation (ay), a further encouragement (107); it becomes "I," the first person singular pronoun (115, 116, 119—these are set up in opposition to their alphabetical antonym, "you" or "U" at 119-21), and "eye" the sight organ (119). Like Malvolio, the two hecklers also anagrammatically reorder letters, which appear within their discursive frame as words. This process exactly fits Andrea Bachner's second point in her description of anagrams: "The anagram is a meeting place of different sign systems and does not have to consist of units of only one of these systems. Transpositions of units from one system into the other are possible."²¹ Here the very basis of anagrams, the letters themselves, move from a system of somewhat random letters from the alphabet to make up Maria's rhyme to a system of potential monograms in Malvolio's interpretation, to a system of letters as words. Similarly, the "her c's, u's, and t's," which for Malvolio and the eavesdroppers sound like a series of letters chosen at random, no longer sound like random letters to the audience. The same may be said of the character name anagrams: on one level, Malvolio, Olivia, and Viola are distinct characters whose names seem merely evocative of each other; on a meta-discursive level, they are derivatives of each other, in the order listed. Given that this scene serves to ridicule Malvolio's mistaken search for meaning within the anagram, how seriously should we consider the unity of the character name anagrams as meaningful? Are we meant to be the third set of fools in these three instances of anagrammatic letter-play?

If we take this variety of letter phenomena together, we see that the play ambivalently answers that question. The kinds of letter-play and the repetition of framing (first, none of the characters “gets” the “c.u.t.” joke, then in the M.O.A.I. bit just Malvolio remains left out) certainly seem designed to bring attention to the name anagrams. Malvolio’s “c, u, t, and P” from Maria’s letter are not purely aleatoric (a quality the name anagrams share), and they do reveal relevant information about Malvolio’s desires. Plus, the sophisticated technique of framing to reposition letters as letters from one level of discourse to letters as words in another hardly seems meant to be uninformative about the levels of discourse operating in the play. Thematically, the threat of uncertain anagrammatic meaning feeds into the drama’s potential chaos of identity, gender, age, love object, social status, and familial relationships. In the end, the play asks us to decide for ourselves whether these connections are “just for laughs” or whether we should seek some deeper connection among these characters.

More importantly for the present purpose, the Malvolio letter scene reveals anagrams and homophones as *conscious* structural and poetic practices. As the scene continues, more and more letter-words emerge, including one which does not derive from the original MOAI: Fabian’s last sentence includes a “you” (U). How do letters become words? When do we hear the elements of letters within words, and what do they make us think of? Sometimes texts draw our attention to letter sounds, or the letter as phoneme, with techniques like alliteration, assonance, or the whole host of rhetorical schemes in Puttenham’s 1589 *Arte of English Poesie*, that add, cut, or rearrange the letters in a word. These instances of letter-as-word in *Twelfth Night* point to a deliberate, yet subtle, underlying *poetics of the letter*.

IV. The Letter in Pedagogy and Poetry

How attuned may Renaissance ears have been to the presence of letter homophones in the plays? Andrew White Tuer’s expansive two-volume *History of the Hornbook* suggests that any person with even the most basic education would have been sensitive to the sounds of letter-names in texts.²² He points to John Brinsley’s frequent oral repetition of the letter names to form syllables in the 1612 book *Ludus Literarius, or the Grammar Schoole*:

Then teach them to put the consonants in order before every vowel and to repeat the oft over together—as thus:

to begin with b, and to say ba, be, bi, bo, bu . . . [inflects through various consonants]. When they can doe all these, then teach them to spell them in order thus. What spels b-a? If the childe cannot tell, teach him to say thus b-a, ba; so putting first b before every vowel, to say b-a, ba, b-e, be, . . . [etc]. By oft repeating before him hee will certainly doe it.²³

Rather than focusing on the actual sounds letters make in words, this pedagogical method drills letter names over and over. It assumes a closer relationship between the name of the letter and the letter's phonetic value than what actually exists. Mote calls attention to this very pedagogical method through his mockery of the pedant Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*:²⁴

Mote: What is 'a, b' spelled backward, with the horn on his head?

Holofernes: Ba, *pueritia*, with a horn added.

Mote: Ba, most silly sheep, with a horn! You hear his learning. (5.1.42-45)

Mote turns the practice on its head by making meaningful sounds—the sheep's bleat—out of the drill's meaningless syllables. While it may not have proven too effective in learning to read, the method does, however, bring about an alphabetical awareness of the letters as entities, as things with names. The groups of syllables following the alphabet row in hornbooks and reading primers across Europe, including Russia, reflect this educational practice, which may have been common enough to form the basis for a set of poetic practices. I acknowledge that the majority of Shakespeare's audiences could not read, but it may be that the Renaissance ear commanding even the most remedial of literacies was much more attuned to the sounds of alphabetic letters during performance than modern audiences.²⁵ Sir Toby's and Fabian's jibes could heighten sensitivity to the sounds of certain repeated words that non-readers too might appreciate. Thus the letter homophone, like the anagram, can function combinatorially, can allude to a textual code or a governing mode of poetics, and, based on a pedagogical memory of the past, may itself make letter wordplay more memorable.

An extempore poem of the pedant Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost* takes the letter's poetic potential as its inspiration. "I will something affect the letter, for it argues facility," he prefaces the poem (4.2.51). Understanding the poem requires an explanation

of the Renaissance specialized nomenclature for deer that by now has fallen into disuse. Despite the poem's status as a parody of Holofernes' erudition, its opaqueness to present audiences is a tribute to how very much more sensitive early modern ears and eyes may have been to the individual letter within the word.

Ostensibly the poem celebrates the Princess's success at the hunt, honing in on an earlier dispute as to the age and gender of the deer. In that dispute, Nathaniel called the animal "a buck of the first head" (a buck in its fifth year); Dull mistakenly understands Holofernes' Latin *haud credo* as an "auld grey doe" and corrects them both by calling the booty a pricket (a buck in its second year); Holofernes' "sore" is a deer in its fourth year, while his "sorel" denotes a buck in its third year. The letter-poem imaginatively uses alphabet play to enhance this confusion.

The preyful Princess pierced and pricked a pretty pleasing
pricket.
Some say a sore, but not a sore till now made sore with
shooting,
The dogs did yell; put 'l' to 'sore,' then 'sorel' jumps from
thicket-
Or pricket sore, or else sorel. The people fall a-hooting.
If sore be sore, then 'l' to 'sore' makes fifty sores—O sore 'l'
Of one sore I an hundred make by adding but one more 'l'
(4.2.52-58)

How does one "affect the letter," and what kind of "facility" does it argue? This silly but virtuosic poem centers around two primary alphabet phenomena: the doubling of letters as numbers; and alliteration, an increased number of repeated letter-sounds, which in this case are *p*, *s*, and *l*. The problematic tallying up and confusing of numbers as letters and letters as numbers dovetails with the topic of the poem, which itself revolves around a confusion of numbers: the age of the animal slain, the number of animals, and/or the number of wounds. Adding the letter or roman numeral "L" to the word "sore" creates, under Holofernes' alphabetic logic, 1) a new animal, "sorel" (a buck in its third year), or 2) fifty "sores," that is, either fifty wounds upon one animal, or 3) fifty separate deer. The addition of yet another L to the word (sorell) or another roman numeral L (50) throws the numbers even further out of whack. These ambiguities pile up on each other along with the accumulation of L-alliteration, which winds with a

rhyme throughout the speech and its preface.²⁶ L reveals the letter as the point of semiotic increase. “O sore L”: by the end of the poem, it almost seems as if the letter itself has grown sore from all these manipulations.

The moral of the sorrel? Awkwardly humorous in its ostentatious display of wit, Holofernes’ punning rings contrived. His work stands in stark contrast to the Princess’s own much more subtle and naturalized sonnet-meditation on the deer’s demise. The pedant’s poem points to the sheer aleatory productivity inhering within letters, the way it creates connections and things out of “just letters.” A semiotic vacuum surrounds the letter: through its sounds and images, a wounded deer, then fifty, then a hundred rise and fall in the space of a few lines. Hyper-aware of the sights and sound of letters, the schoolteacher ostentatiously draws on their latent productivity.

V. Character from Character: A Theater of Letters

The single stroke of an L evokes a hundred deer. Some three combinations of the letters M-A-L-V-O-L-I-O designate three characters in a play. Julia rips alphabetic characters out of a letter and must re-author her own character onto or as a “page.” A thorough analysis of the connections between the body and letter, and the mind and letter takes on particular urgency when we consider that all of Shakespearean theater (and not only Shakespearean) arises out of an assembly of carefully ordered letters.

And yet, Holofernes’ performance of literacy is staged as a kind of illiteracy, for Mote continually outmaneuvers him in pedagogical language games. Why? The surface answer replies topically that Holofernes cannot easily distinguish between the uses and play of letters for their own sake and the role of letters in other kinds of meaning-making, though the two are related. In other words, he struggles to distinguish between letters in their autotelic and heterotelic roles—i.e. letters exist unto themselves as members of an alphabet, and they exist as instrumental members working together to produce the holistic unity of words, among other uses. In the beginning pedagogical phase of the Renaissance classroom, letters are put forth autotelically as a worthy object of learning unto themselves. (Hence Holofernes’ confusion when Mote starts making meaning out of the nonsensical “ba” letter lesson: “Ba, most silly sheep, with a horn! You hear his learning” [5.1.49]). But in order to make sense, most of the time individual

alphabetic letters must recede into the holistic unity of words and sentences.

A deeper answer to why Shakespeare's plays exhibit ambivalence toward literacy drives at the ongoing conflict between art and life: performance-based Renaissance pedagogy and all kinds of theater both aim at what Julie Stone Peters describes as "the performance of the book."²⁷ The Comedies show characters in the coming-of-age process, grappling with the discrepancies between what they have learned in their formal educations and their own experiences: characters find themselves comparing their feelings for each other with what they have been taught about love in books. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Love's Labor's Lost*, alphabetic letters offer one means of managing the distance between "U" and me.

The playful uses of letters in these three works reveal ways in which the Comedies offer a safe space to subvert authorial meaning, to test and play and cavort and take risks with the breakdown of language within the human-alphabet connection—all without the severe penalty of a tragic, nihilistic conclusion as seen in tragedies like *King Lear* and *Titus Andronicus*. That Armado poses the question "Are you *not* lettered?" instead of "Are you lettered?" implies that literacy is the default state. And literacy is a one-way street; once you start down it, you take up a destiny of letter shapes and alphabetical orders. The Comedies present that path as dynamic and negotiable, a place where knowledge may be productively ripped up and discarded as new ideas supplant the old order, or where letters and orders may be tried on for size.

Notes

1. Some work in that direction includes Jonathan Goldberg, "Romeo and Juliet's Open Rs," *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 218-35; David Willbern, "Shakespeare's Nothing," *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 244-63; Travis D Williams, "The Story of O: Reading Letters in the Prologue to *Henry V*," *Shakespeare Up Close*, ed. Russ McDonald, Nicholas D. Nace and Travis D. Williams (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 9-16; Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Work considering the letters in *Twelfth Night* is cited below in the discussion of that play. In locating the many references to alphabetic letters in the plays, I have gratefully relied upon research by Dirk Delabastita, who helpfully catalogued all such moments in the Shakespearean dramatic canon: Dirk Delabastita, "Translating Shakespeare's Letter Puns," *Rimbaud's Rainbow: Literary Translation in*

Higher Education, ed. Peter Bush and Kristen Malmkjær (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1998), 145-56.

2. For numerous examples of letter-like figures, see Massin's *La lettre et l'image: la figuration dans l'alphabet latin, du huitième siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) and Joseph Kiermeier-Debre and Fritz Franz Vogel, *Menschenalphabete: Nackte Models, Wilde Typen, Modische Charaktere* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2001).

3. Unless otherwise noted, I use the Arden 3rd editions for the *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* citations, and the Norton first edition for the *Twelfth Night* and other citations.

4. Cf. *Antony and Cleopatra's* character *Scarus*, who naturalizes the alphabet in the wounded body through the shape and sound of his wound or "scar": "I had a wound here that was like a T, / But now 'tis made an H" (4.8.3-4). During battle, his T-shaped wound receives another gash, making it look like a sideways H. With the increase in size, the wound also increases in pain, represented neatly by the pun on the letter name H, pronounced like "aiche," or *aobe*. The scar as his namesake, Scarus's identity lies intimately tied to this letter-shaped wound.

5. Cf. *Cymbeline*. Pisanio, upon receiving instructions to murder Imogen cries out, "O damned paper, / Black as the ink that's on thee!" (3.2.19-20). The Arden editors of *Two Gentlemen* cite the expression as proverbial (fn 221).

6. The language used to describe letters and type takes its cues from human body parts, attributing bodies, arms, faces, and feet to the ABC's.

7. The violence of this letter drama is reminiscent of beginning readers' reaction to the frustrations of reading. Surrounded by an increasingly alphabetic world, students crave a measure of control over the letters: they would rather see letters controlled than have letters control them. Chris Van Allsburg's late twentieth-century children's alphabet book, *The Z Was Zapped*, offers an enlightening parallel to Julia's behavior. The book depicts an alphabet drama occurring in twenty-six "acts" performed by the Caslon *players* (in reference to the font), in which each page positions a letter upon a stage, the victim of some gruesome act of violence. Turning the page, *ta-dab!* the act is named in an alliterative sentence written in the passive voice: "The Z was Zapped." "The N was Nailed and Nailed again." "The Q was neatly Quartered." The book is popular with the under-eight set, children who, having themselves been forced to perform the alphabet with varying degrees of success, delight in seeing the letters themselves "perform" under duress. Chris Van Allsburg, *The Z Was Zapped: A Play in Twenty-Six Acts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

8. Catherine Belsey, "The Name of the Rose in *Romeo and Juliet*," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 23 (1993): 126-42.

9. Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America* from *The New England Primer* to *The Scarlet Letter* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000).

10. *Ibid.*, 84.

11. Critics have long disputed why only one U and neither a C nor P appear within the writing from which Malvolio supposedly draws them: "To the unknown beloved, this, and my good wishes" (2.5.82-83).

12. Modern productions usually emphasize the "and" to produce the more recognizable joke on "cunt."

13. Andrea Bachmer, "Anagrams in Psychoanalysis: Retroping Concepts by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Jean-François Lyotard," *Comparative Literature*

Studies 40.1 (2003): 1-25. These anagrams bear much resemblance to the Freudian *Trennwitzge*, “jokes that work through segmentation of the phonematic content of their texts, like ‘Anti? Oh nee’ {‘Antigone—ancient? Not really’}, ‘buona parte’ {‘a large part of—Napoleon Buonaparte’}, ‘O na, nie’ {‘onania—o no, never’}.” This list comes from Bachner’s article, p. 6.

Desire entirely eclipses its object to settle on the letter itself in this scene from *Much Ado About Nothing*:

Beatrice: By my troth, I am exceeding ill: heigh-ho!

Margaret: For a hawk, a horse, or a husband?

Beatrice: For the letter that begins them all, H. (3.4.44-46)

14. People have long considered letters and their permutations to have magic, fortune-telling prophesies. For an overview of letters and magic in primarily the ancient world, see Franz Dornseiff’s *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1925). A contemporaneous example comes from George Puttenham, in his 1589 *Arte of English Poesie*, who creates his own anagrams of Queen Elizabeth’s name, linking it to prophesy: “Also I imputed it for no litle good luck and glorie to my selfe, to haue pronounced to her so good and prosperous a fortune . . . which though it cannot be said by this euent any destinie or fatal necessitie, yet surely is it by all probabilitie of reason, so likely to come to passe” (110). George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Dodge Willock and Alice Walker (1589; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936).

15. I have omitted the lines of Malvolio’s eavesdroppers, interspersed throughout, to focus on Malvolio’s reasoning.

16. Some read this as the completely italianate “ill-will.”

17. Lee Sheridan Cox argues that the subtext within the anagram reads, “I am O,” in “Queries and Notes: The Riddle in *Twelfth Night*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13.3 (1962): 360. R. Chris Hassel, Jr., argues against this interpretation in “Queries and Notes: The Riddle in *Twelfth Night* Simplified,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25.3 (1974): 356. Peter J. Smith proposes an alternative reading (“I am Ajax”) based on the Ajax figure who turns up in the play and on contemporary events in England: “M.O.A.I. ‘What Should That Alphabetical Position Portend?’ An Answer to the Metamorphic Malvolio,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51. 4 (1998): 1199-224. Leah Scragg moves to the larger context of early modern playgoing in her reading of CUT, P as a warning against cutpurses in “‘Her C’s, Her U’s, and Her T’s’: Why That? A New Reply for Sir Andrew Aguecheek,” *The Review of English Studies* 42.165 (1991): 1-16.

18. Bachner, “Anagrams in Psychoanalysis,” 22. Many thanks to Andrea Bachner for pointing out the relevance of her article to several of my arguments here.

19. Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye: The Invention of Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). He stresses the importance of repetition with a difference in the epideictic poetic tradition and the way the tradition calls attention to its own repetitions and epideictic nature. Subjectivity is bound up in its modes of speaking about itself. He reads Shakespeare’s language as “dupliciously verbal as opposed to singly verbal,” as it is in other Renaissance poetry. “The result is a poetics of a double tongue rather than a poetics of a unified and unifying eye, a language of suspicious word rather than a language of true vision” (15).

20. I borrow the phrase “insistently homophonic” from David Willbern’s “Shakespeare’s Nothing,” as he talks about the semiotics of “nothing,” including “Oh” as emblematic of the homophones “hole” and “whole.”

21. Bachner, “Anagrams in Psychoanalysis,” 2.

22. The hornbook consists of a printed or handwritten alphabet, several rows of syllables, and The Lord’s Prayer, covered with a protective layer of horn and affixed to a wooden paddle. For an extensive examination, see Andrew White Tuer, *History of the Horn-Book*, 2 vols. (London: Leadenhall Press, Ltd.; New York: C. Scribener’s Sons, 1896).

23. John Brinsley, *Ludus Literarius, or The Grammar School*, ed. E. T. Campagnac (1612; Liverpool: The University Press, 1917).

24. Tuer’s *History of the Hornbook* first drew my attention to the similarity of the Brinsley text to the following passage.

25. See Keith Thomas’s article describing a range of literacies in early modern England: “The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England” in *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, ed. Gerd Baumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 97-131.

26. The L-sound, particularly as end-rhyme, seems to derive its inspiration from the end-rhymes of the Princess’s sonnet discussing the slaying of the same deer. Having end-rhymed four of the sonnet’s sixteen lines—kill, ill; skill kill—she finishes the sonnet with a final couplet, “As I for praise alone now seek to spill / The poor deer’s blood that my heart means no ill” (4.1.34-35). Compare Holofernes’ exhibitionist wit, which thinks nothing of imagining the death of a hundred sores, with the Princess’s own introspective reflection on the morality of mortality for the purposes of attaining praise.

27. Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book, 1480-1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114. “Renaissance education, like Renaissance theatre, aimed at teaching the proper performance of the book . . . The promulgation of classical and other kinds of learning was inseparable from its performance, imbibed through dramatic enactment, rhetorical performance, disputation, grammatical analysis, enunciation, memorization, and scholarly gloss.”