Shakespeare’s
_Twelfth Night_ wordplay

This chapter examines two aspects of _Twelfth Night_ which support my suggestion that Shakespeare wrote the play for performance before the Queen. One is his repeated intrusion of anagrams; the word-game was popular at Court, and the Queen herself known to play at it. The second is the previously unrecognized subject of Feste’s ‘gracious fooling’ to which Andrew refers on the night of their confrontation with Malvolio (2.3). Both would have been of particular amusement and interest to Elizabeth.

Before deconstructing the anagrams in _Twelfth Night_ the modern reader should understand the rubrics of the game – the ‘posie transposed’ – as it was played by Elizabethans. For that purpose we have a rulebook formulated by the author, literary critic, and serial rapist George Puttenham (1529–90). In _The Arte of English Poesie_ (1589), he laid down the rules of the game based on transposing the letters of a word (or phrase) to form another:

One other pretie conceit we will impart vnto you and then trouble you with no more ... the posie transposed or in one word a trans- pose, a thing if it be done for pastime and exercise of the wit without superstition commendable inough and a meete study for Ladies.¹

The ‘pretie conceit’ to which Puttenham refers as a ‘pastime and exercise of the wit’ was the game with words and their letters that we call anagrams. The fact that Puttenham chose to devote two pages of his treatise to the anagram speaks to the game’s popularity in Elizabethan England. Here he explains how the game is played:

They that use it for pleasure is to breed one word out of another not altering any letter nor the number of them, but onely transposing of
the same, wherupon many times is produced some grateful newes or matter to them for whose pleasure and service it was intended: and because there is much difficulty in it, and altogether standeth upon hazard, it is computed for a courtly conceit.²

By definition, an anagram is a word, name, or phrase – or complete sentence – formed from another by rearranging its letters, neither adding nor omitting any letter. Among the superstitious, an anagram created from someone’s personal name or title was thought capable of providing an insight into the true character of that person, or even rendering a prediction of her or his future fortune. Contriving and interpreting anagrams was a game for the well-educated with the leisure to play it, a ‘courtly conceit’.

Puttenham did not invent the game. The anagram had a long history; some think it as old as Moses. Puttenham traced the sport to the Greek Lycophron (third century BC), poet and curator of plays at the library of Alexandria. In the Middle Ages anagrams were an accepted means of interpreting Scripture. Two of the best-known survivals are, first, the opening words of the ‘Hail, Mary’:

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.
Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

As an anagram, the Latin becomes:

Virgo serena, pia, munda et immaculata.
Serene virgin, holy, pure and immaculate.

The other, perhaps more famous model is based on Pilate’s question to Jesus, ‘Quid est veritas?’ – ‘What is truth?’ – which becomes the anagram ‘Est qui vir adest’ – ‘It is the man before you.’

The game was also popular in Italy and France. Catherine de Medici (1519–89) was a fan. Louis XIII (1601–43) employed a Royal Anagrammatist, Thomas Billon, who created from the names and titles of courtiers anagrams which were both entertaining and (believed to be) revelatory.³ French writers sometimes created noms de plume by anagramming their own names. John Calvin (1509–64) turned ‘Calvinus’ into Alcuinus (V and U were considered interchangeable) after the early English theologian (AD 740?–804). François Rabelais (1494–1553) fashioned himself Alcofribas Nasier. In fact, Calvin and Rabelais exchanged bitter
anagrams of each other’s names. Calvin referred to Rabelaesius as *Rabei laesus*, the ‘mad man’. Rabelais dubbed J. Calvinus a ‘*Jan Cul*’, that is ‘Jackass’ (hardly an anagram, but effective).

Puttenham recorded that Queen Elizabeth herself took pleasure in turning courtiers’ names into anagrams (note the absent H and the doubled S replacing Z in the Queen’s name):

being informed that her Maiestie [Elizabeth] tooke pleasure sometimes in desciphring of names, and hearing how diuers Gentlemen of her Court had essayed but with no great felicitie to make some delectable transpose of her Maiesties name ...

I tooke me these three words ...

*Elissabet Anglorum Regina.*

Which orthographie (because ye shall not be abused) is true & not mistaken, for the letter zeta, of the Hebrewes & Greeke and of all other toungs is in truth but a double ss hardly vttered, and H. is but a note of aspiration onely and no letter, which therefore is by the Greeks omitted. Vpon the transposition I found this to redound.

*Multa regnabis ense gloria.*

By thy sword shalt thou raigne in great renowne.

Then transposing the word [*ense*] it came to be

*Multa regnabis sene gloria.*

Aged and in much glorie shall ye raigne.

Both which resultes falling out vpon the very first marshalling of the letters, without any darknesse or difficultie, and so sensibly and well appropriat to her Maiesties person and estate, and finally so effectu-
ally to mine own wish (which is a matter of much moment in such cases) I tooke them both for a good boding, and very fatalitie to her Maiestie appointed by Gods prouidence for all our comfortes.²

Puttenham is quite pleased with his creations, particularly with the ease with which they came to hand, and interpreted that as a good omen for Queen and people. He speaks of these being his first two solutions among *five hundred tries*.³ Clearly, anagrams was a game for the leisure class.

Another indicator of the popularity of anagrams can be found in *The Works of William Drummond of Hawthornden* (1711). A Scots poet and essayist, Drummond (1585–1649) is best remembered for
his conversations with his visitor Ben Jonson in 1613, who himself glanced at the popularity of anagrams among the leisure class in *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman*:

*Cent.* ’Tis true, Mavis: and who will wait on us to coach then? or write, or tell us the news then? make anagrams of our names, and invite us to the Cock-pit, and kiss our hands all the play-time, and draw their weapons for our honours? (4.3.45–6)

In Drummond’s essay ‘On the Character of a Perfect Anagram’, he laid down rules for anagramming personal names. One is of immediate interest: ‘It was said that no Letter should be taken away; yet, if there be any great Reason … a Letter may be doubled, as when two Letters appeare in a Name one may be abolished, so one of Necessity may be doubled.’ That is, any letter which is present may be repeated more than once, and a letter appearing more than once can be reduced to one appearance.

Certain letters – S and Z, U and V – were considered identical and therefore interchangeable. I will show that in creating his anagrams for *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare followed these rules. I will also show that some of his anagrams burlesque the conflict between the rival Julian and Gregorian calendars.

**How Olivia got a brand new name**

Shakespeare’s most unmistakable signal of his anagrammatical intent in *Twelfth Night* are the names of his leading ladies. According to Elizabethan rubrics, OLIVIA and VIOLA are anagrams of each other. Both employ all and only the letters A, I, L, O, and V – with Olivia utilizing the letter I twice (as Drummond allowed and as Puttenham did when he anagrammed Elizabeth’s name).

Not incidentally, Viola = violet, a flower associated with resurrection since antiquity. Cybele was said to have created violets from the blood of her beloved Attis, who was killed while hunting a wild boar – events replayed in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*. In Christian legend violets sprang spontaneously from the graves of saints and virgins. So Shakespeare built his fraternal twins’ link with resurrection into the daughter’s very name.

Though their names are anagrams, the two women are of very different stations. Viola’s condition is merely ‘gentle’, while Olivia is a countess and virgin ruler of a household and estate.
Shakespeare gives us several reasons to receive Olivia as an imaguncula of Queen Elizabeth, the most conspicuous being Feste’s nickname for his mistress, ‘Madonna’. The word is Italian, and means ‘lady’ or ‘my lady’. But to the ears of Elizabethans (and us) it recalls the Madonna, Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus and Virgin Queen of Heaven. As noted, Elizabeth was styled ‘the Virgin Queen’. Though Shakespeare could have set Olivia mourning for the death of her brother only, instead she has both a father and brother lost, as had Elizabeth in Henry VIII (d. 1547) and Edward VI (d. 1553).

How Feste got his name

‘Feste’ is a Shakespearean nonce-word in which commentators have long recognized a hint of ‘festive’, ‘feast’, or ‘festival’, an appropriate connotation for a licensed fool. But Feste would have been recognizable to Elizabeth and her courtiers as the shade of a once-familiar figure at the Queen’s court: the jester ‘her father took much delight in’, Will Sommers (d. 1560); if Olivia is an effigy of Elizabeth, her father was Henry VIII.

Shakespeare could not have known Sommers personally, but he certainly knew his ghost had been dragooned by Thom Nashe as interlocutor of his pageant Summer’s Last Will and Testament. Nicholl believes that the play was performed – perhaps with Nashe in the title role – in October 1592 at Croydon Palace during the bishopric of John Whitgift, perhaps with Shakespeare in attendance. Nashe’s masque begins with the stage direction ‘Enter WILL SUMMER, in his fool’s coat but half on, coming out.’ He declares, ‘Will Summer’s ghost I should be, come to present you with “Summer’s Last Will and Testament.’ The play first appeared in print in late 1600, shortly before Shakespeare began work on Twelfth Night. As we’ll see, Nashe, Sommers, and ‘Summer’ were intimately bound up in Shakespeare’s mind.

The playwright created the name FESTE by rearranging the four letters of the French word for ‘summers’ – ÉTÉS – as E S T E, then prefixed the letter F signifying ‘Foole’, as we might use M. for Mister or Monsieur, or S. for Saint.

F(oole) ÉTÉS = FESTE.

And likewise: Feste = F(oole) Summers = Sommers.
Whether Elizabeth, who spoke six languages including French, could have deciphered this anagram by ear is doubtful; Feste’s name is mentioned only once. So Shakespeare’s Valentine drops a heavy hint to the inspiration for Feste when he describes him as ‘the jester … the lady Olivia’s father took much delight in’ (2.4.11–13). The Queen and her courtiers could hardly disremember the fool who delighted her father for more than two decades. Sommers had served as court fool to Henry VIII from 1525 until the king’s death, then under Edward and Mary; he attended Elizabeth’s coronation on 15 January 1559 before retiring. Sommers died in 1560 and was buried at St Leonard’s, Shoreditch, the parish church of two theatres, the Curtain and the Theatre, which the sometime local resident Shakespeare knew as actor, playwright, and parishioner. James Burbage, Richard Tarlton, and other luminaries of the Elizabethan stage were buried there, as was the infant son of Shakespeare’s brother, Edmund – all perhaps with Shakespeare in attendance. I will show that he remembers St Leonard in Twelfth Night 3.1.

Shakespeare’s saintly anagram

There is another anagram early in the play and, like OLIVIA-Viola, it was easily solved by players who knew the rules. It appears when Feste prays,

Wit, an’t be thy will, put me into good fooling! Those wits, that think they have thee, do very oft prove fools; and I, that am sure I lack thee, may pass for a wise man: for what says Quinapalus? ‘Better a witty fool, than a foolish wit.’ (1.5.29–33)

As to the identity of the mysterious Quinapalus, the Oxford footnote speculates that ‘Feste invents an authority (Quinapalus). Hotson thinks that the name may be pseudo-Italian, meaning “there on the stick” and referring to the figure of a jester … Terry Hands thinks it may be French.’ But once we recognize that Feste and Shakespeare are playing at anagrams by then-prevailing Elizabethan rules, the solution to this crux is easily within reach.

QUINAPALUS = AQUINAS + PAUL.

Following the rules, the two A’s in Quinapalus can be increased to three to reveal ‘Aquinas’ and ‘Paul’. As an Elizabethan audience
would be well aware, both saints had a good deal to say about fools, fooling, and foolishness.

The scene between Feste and Olivia is rife with theological overtones; a few lines later, Feste offers a parody of the Gospel of St Mark: ‘bid the dishonest man mend himself: if he mend, he is no longer dishonest; if he cannot, let the botcher mend him. Anything that’s mended is but patched’ (1.5.41–3). Mark had quoted Jesus about patching: ‘No man sews a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece take away from the old, and the rent be made worse’ (Mark 2:21). This connection would have rung clear during the play’s performance at the Inns of Court on Candlemas; Mark 2:21 is the prescribed Gospel reading for the morning service on 2 February. Shakespeare’s Inn auditors would have heard or read these words that very morning. This is another indicator that Shakespeare had this performance date in mind when he wrote Twelfth Night.  

Feste’s ‘gracious fooling’

Now that we have recognized Nashe-Summer-Sommers behind the mask of Feste, we can turn to the matter of his ‘gracious fooling’. On the night of their drinking bout and confrontation with Malvolio, Andrew recalls that Feste

wast in very gracious fooling last night, when thou spokest of Pigrogromitis, of the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus: ’twas very good, i’ faith. (2.3.20–3)

What were Feste, Andrew, and Toby talking about last night? The first item that jumps out at us is ‘the equinoctial of Queubus’, which by now should not be difficult to recognize as Andrew’s drunken slurring of ‘the Equinoctial Rule of Eusebius’, the decree issued by the Nicaean Council. But how did Eusebius get mixed up with Pigrogromitis and the Vapians?

To parse Pigrogromitis we must first correct a typesetter’s error. Typographical mistakes were common with letters which employ the minim or short vertical stroke, as does ‘m’; here the typositor set an ‘m’ where Shakespeare wrote ‘n’. Once we have corrected the text to Shakespeare’s original ‘Pigrogronitus’, it’s a simple matter to discover the name concealed in this anagram:

PIGROGONITUS = PONT. GRIGORIUS.
‘Pont.’ is an abbreviation of Pontifex. Pigrogronitus is an anagram of the Latin name of Pope Gregory, Pontifex Grigorius, who issued the reformed calendar.

What of the ‘Vapians’? This appears to be an obvious anagram for ‘Pavians’, the mathematicians at the University of Pavia, who included Girolamo Cardano (1501–76), the compulsive gambler who first formulated rudimentary laws of probability. If this inference is correct, we could decipher and paraphrase Andrew’s statement as ‘Pope Gregory and the Pavians ratifying the Equinoctial Rule of Eusebius’ – that is, the Pope’s decision to remove ten days from October 1582 to conform his new calendar with the radix at the time of the Council of Nicaea.

During his travels Feste has learned about the Gregorian reform and has tried to explain it to Toby and Andrew. That Toby sings ‘O, the twelfe day of December’ suggests that he, at least, got the point (see the discussion below). But Andrew drunkenly slurs the words he heard on the previous night – and hasn’t a clue what they meant; that is probably a fair reflection of the way calendar reform was misunderstood by many of Elizabeth’s courtiers. For those with little training in history or maths, calendar reform must have appeared an abstruse, problematical subject. After speaking before Parliament on the subject of the need for calendar reform in 1751, Lord Chesterfield wrote to his son:

I have of late been a sort of an astronome malgre moi, by bringing last Monday, into the House of Lords, a bill for reforming our present [Julian] Calendar, and taking the [Gregorian] New Style. Upon which occasion I was obliged to talk some astronomical jargon, of which I did not understand one word, but got it by heart, and spoke it by rote from a master [crib].

Like Andrew and Lord Chesterfield, many of Elizabeth’s courtiers were entirely flummoxed by calendar reform. But not the Queen.

The proper date of Christmas

This brings us to Toby’s song, ‘O[h], the twelfe day of December’ (2.3.83). Commentators’ guesses at the significance of Toby’s verse run the gamut from improbable to absurd. But the solution to this crux is quite simple and must have been instantly apparent to
Elizabeth and at least some of her courtiers while attending a play called *Twelfth Night* on the Julian 27 December.

Gregory had excised only ten days from the calendar – whereas the Sun had run thirteen days ahead of the Julian calendar since Caesar imposed his reform in 45 BC. Consequently, in Julian England the true anniversary of the birth of Christ – Christmas – was 12 December, that is, \(12 + 13 = 25\). Clearly, calendar maths and disconnects among the Julian, Gregorian, and Caesar’s original calendars were in the air that evening in Illyria when Toby, Andrew, and Feste woke up the house and provoked the ire of Malvolio.

As has become apparent, once the context of the Julian-Gregorian calendar controversy is recognized, solving Shakespeare’s anagrams in *Twelfth Night* becomes child’s play. Scholars who have been reluctant to accept Shakespeare’s intense interest in calendar lore and chronometry may wish to reconsider their views.

But here’s a good question – how could Elizabeth and her courtiers guess that the comedy that evening concerned calendar reform? Well, if someone took you to the theatre on the Julian 27 December, the Feast of St John – which your almanac told you was 6 January, Twelfth Night – and you discovered that the name of the play was *Twelfth Night* – and a major domo announced the play by proclaiming ‘Your Majesty, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*’ – well, I suspect some of us would instantly be in on the joke. Surely, Elizabeth was.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
5. ‘The same letters being by me tossed & tranlaced fiue hundreth times, I could never make any other, at least of some sence & conformitie to her Maiesties estate and the case.’ *Ibid.*, 93.
8 Ibid.
13 Not incidentally, in Act 5 Shakespeare jokes about the rigid linking of scriptural readings to specific dates. Feste declares that ‘a madman’s epistles are no gospels, so it skills not much when they are delivered’ (5.1.270–1), a wink at the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer which required that passages of Scripture be delivered on particular days.
14 Andrew’s drunken slurring of ‘Eusebius’ into ‘Queubus’ may have been inspired by Shakespeare’s recollection of a passage in Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveler, or the Life of Jack Wilton*. Jack persuades a hapless Captain to embark on a fool’s mission to enter the enemy camp and assassinate the French King. The King wisely insists that his officers search the Captain: ‘In was Captain Gog’s Wounds brought, after he was throughly searched; not a louse in his doublet was let pass but was asked Queuela and charged to stand in the King’s name ….’ (McKerrow, *Nashe*, II.223.12). *Queuela* is a curious construction, perhaps a Nashean wordplay. McKerrow thinks it derived from *Qui va là?* – meaning ‘Who goes there?’ – the familiar challenge. From Nashe’s neologism Shakespeare fashioned Andrew’s *Quebus* – that is, ‘Queu–bus’. Andrew, who has never heard the name but once and cannot remember it, is saying ‘whatshisname-bus’.
15 Though the solution seems simple enough, Shakespeare’s reference to ‘the Pavians’ is something of a conundrum. The principal work on calendar reform was not done by Cardano and the Pavians; rather, it was led by the Veronese mathematicians Aloysius Lilius (1510–76) and Pietro Pitati (fl. ca. 1550) and the German Christopher Clavius (1538–1612). By 1603–04 Shakespeare seems to have become aware of the link between mathematicians and Verona; his ‘great arithematician’ in *Othello*, Michael Cassio, is Veronese, not Florentine as the liar Iago suggests. See my essay “Mention my name in Verona”: Is Cassio

16 Charles Sayle, ed., *Letters Written by Lord Chesterfield to his Son* (New York: Walter Scott, 1900), 199.

17 Between Caesar’s reform in 45 BC and Gregory’s in 1582, the Sun had run ahead of the Julian calendar $12.71 = 13$ days. The math is: $(45 + 1582) \div 128 = 12.71$. 

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