

WHAT'S SO FUNNY: LETTERS AS COMEDIC DEVICES IN SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTH*
NIGHT AND LOVE'S LABOR'S LOST

by

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ABSTRACT

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While letters and writing appear in many of Shakespeare's plays, his comedies *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost* use letter-writing uniquely, as a medium of linguistic-stylistic humor to attack Elizabethan anxieties and procure laughter from his audience. Maria's forged letter to Malvolio is commonly regarded as the humorous center of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, as the cleverly penned epistle leads its recipient to act in a ridiculous manner; in *Love's Labor's Lost* letters lead to comic results, especially as the king and his men, who have taken a vow to avoid women, unwittingly reveal to each other that they have all broken this promise. In both plays, the reading of letters creates comedic situations.

This paper also discusses Shakespeare's use of the medieval art of the *ars dictaminis* for humorous purposes as he plays upon Elizabethan anxieties about writing, particularly those related to fluctuations in social order and issues with the delivery and reception of letters.

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PREFACE

Letters play a role in a variety of Shakespeare's plays: Hamlet's quick editing allows him to escape his intended fate, Beatrice and Benedick's true feelings are revealed through their missives, and Bertram lays out his impossible ultimatum for Helena in a letter. In each of these instances, Shakespeare utilizes letters as anyone else would, as a means of communication. With his comedies *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, however, Shakespeare employs communiqués in an entirely different way as vehicles of humor in their own right. Letters in these plays serve as a medium of linguistic-stylistic humor to attack Elizabethan anxieties and procure a kind of self-conscious laughter from his audience.¹ Many scholars commonly regard Maria's forged letter to Malvolio as the humorous center of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, as the cleverly penned epistle leads its recipient to act in a ridiculous manner; in *Love's Labor's Lost* letters lead to comic results, especially as the king and his men, who have taken a vow to avoid women, unwittingly reveal to each other that they have all broken this promise. In both plays, the reading of letters creates comedic situations for the characters involved (i.e. Malvolio's behavior after reading Maria's letter in *Twelfth Night*) or for the audience's appreciation (i.e. the dramatic irony of observing the king and his men reading their secret love letters in *Love's Labor's Lost*). However, Shakespeare uses the letter device to wring laughter from his audience not only through the more conventional approaches mentioned above, but also from the way in

¹ Much has been made of the letters in these plays, particularly *Twelfth Night*, both in terms of their effects in the play and in their larger cultural context. For information on the social ramifications and functions of early modern letters, see Roger Chartier, *Correspondence: models of letter-writing from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century*, trans. Christopher Woodall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Susan Whyman *Sociability and Power in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural Worlds of the Verneys 1660-1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); James Daybell "Recent Studies in Sixteenth-Century Letters," *English Literary Renaissance* 35 (2005), 331-62. The role of letters in maintaining relationships is discussed in Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); David Bergeron, *Reading and Writing in Shakespeare* (Newark: University of Delaware Press and London: Associated University Presses, 1996); Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Jeffrey Masten, "Toward a Queer Address: The Taste of Letters and Early Modern Male Friendship," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10 (2004), 367-384. For an in-depth study of letter-writing manuals and the ways they compare to Shakespeare's plays, see Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

which he plays upon Elizabethan anxieties about writing, particularly those related to fluctuations in social order and issues with the delivery and reception of letters.²

As the primary comic device in *Twelfth Night*, the epistle creates humor by means of three devices: first, the format in which it is written is strongly associated in Shakespeare's time with the overly formal, antiquated medieval *ars dictaminis*. Second, the writer is a servant whose writing convincingly passes for that of a higher-class individual, a feat unlikely to have actually occurred in Elizabethan England, as the literacy rate was dramatically lower for servants and laborers than for the upper classes.³ Finally, the servant in question is a woman, and women in general, much less female servants, were rarely writers in Elizabethan England since women's literacy overall was severely restricted and writing often deemed unnecessary, as I shall discuss later. The social inversions produced by the letters in *Twelfth Night* form a world that reflects a "carnavalesque" atmosphere that generates a kind of counter-culture. Shakespeare's use of jesting and the carnival spirit present in *Twelfth Night* creates an Elizabethan world turned upside down; servants can have the upper hand over masters and women can take on roles usually reserved for men. This kind of inversion of the normal social structure overturns the strictures of Elizabethan hierarchy, providing a catharsis for a culture in which both church and state dictate one's place in society. The vehicle of social inversion lies squarely in the letters, particularly Maria's; Shakespeare takes every opportunity to build instances of inversion, from the style and wording of the actual letters and the manner in which they are (mis-)delivered. Shakespeare sees that letters have the potential for humor, both in

² *Twelfth Night* in particular has been debated by a variety of scholars who describe it as anything from a "happy comedy" to a dark comedy. Two of the main models for comedy available to Shakespeare include Roman comedy and the 16th c. Italian *commedia dell'arte* and *commedia erudite*. Shakespearean comedy builds on these but thrives due to a cheerful lack of proper decorum. For more discussion, see John Dover Wilson, *Shakespeare's Happy Comedies* (1962); Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York, 1965); Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love* (London and New York: Methuen, 1974); Michael Mangan, *A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies* (London: Longman, 1996); Alexander Leggatt, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); R.W.Maslen, *Shakespeare and Comedy* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006); Penny Gay, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ David Cressy, "Levels of Illiteracy in England, 1530-1730," *The Historical Journal*, 20: 1 (1977), 1-23.

their own right and in the way they are employed, and he exploits this to great comic advantage in *Twelfth Night*.

An even stronger example of the humor inherent in the actual format and delivery of letters appears in *Love's Labor's Lost*, a play that presents a perhaps more mundane view of Elizabethan life than the carnivalesque imaginings of *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare experiments with writing formats in this play, displaying for his audience the traditional *ars dictaminis* writing style but robbing it of its traditional formality and stature. He accomplishes this feat by having Don Armado, arguably the most ridiculous character in the entire play, employ the *ars dictaminis* to write grandiose letters to the illiterate object of his affections, Jacquenetta. By reducing the *ars dictaminis* style from something formal and educated to a medium for humor, Shakespeare inverts the usual perception of the *ars dictaminis*. Indeed, when the king's gentlemen later write to their upper-class amours, they abandon the *ars dictaminis* in favor of a less formal style which serves as a foil to the *ars dictaminis*. While their letters absolutely produce laughable results, less humor exists within the wording of the letters themselves. The very absence of ostentation in the king's men's letters hilariously underscores the hyperbolic letters written by Don Armado. By contrasting the vernacular-style, well-written letters of Berowne and the other lords to Don Armado's epistles, Shakespeare mocks the idea that formal styles such as the *ars dictaminis* should be indicators of a higher social status. *Twelfth Night*, in its carnival spirit, allows Maria to get away with using writing to move up the class ladder, but *Love's Labor's Lost* retaliates by holding Don Armado's formal writing up to ridicule, even by those of a lower social class than the Spanish gentleman, such as the peasant Costard.

Through the letters in *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, Shakespeare challenges his audience's concepts of letters and letter-writing as the sole property of the elite to be used only in the most formal situations. Don Armado, though not truly low class, is decidedly below the king and his men, and while the majority of Shakespeare's upper-class audience was literate, even social superiors were not always able to write; for the lower classes and women in

general, the ability to write was more the exception than the rule. By fashioning letters that, by their very arrangement and language, solicit laughter from all classes, Shakespeare presents this exclusive art form of the upper classes as a target for ridicule by even the most illiterate, lowest classes in his audience. The letters themselves produce a social inversion that parallels those already inherent in the plots *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost* and allows those who cannot write to ridicule, rather than revere, those who can.

For those who could write, Shakespeare's treatment of letters in these two plays may have evoked a kind of uneasy laughter, a recognition of their own fears, especially in regards to the delivery and reception of letters; in both plays, Shakespeare generates laughter by exploiting anxieties common to his audience: the accuracy of letter delivery and the correct interpretation of the writer's intent by the reader. Gary Schneider describes the Elizabethans' various concerns regarding written communication as including "interception, miscarriage, and delays in delivery" as well as "the representative capacities of the letter itself."⁴ Modern writers may associate these anxieties more strongly with electronic communication than the more mundane "snail mail," but when discussing Elizabethan England it is important to remember that the concept of a postal system was still relatively new. Although an expansive postal system had been created under the direction of Henry VIII, it was really only intended for use by royal couriers and official state business and was not used for carrying private letters until 1635.⁵ According to Philip Beale, most of the mail circulating throughout Tudor England was carried by servants, merchants, friends, letter-carriers of varying reliability and other unofficial means.⁶ Letters carried by these means were often miscarried, whether by accident or design, producing

⁴ Gary Schneider, "Politics, Deception, and the Workings of the Post: Some Features of Epistolarity in Early Modern England," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, (2002 Summer; 28:1) 99.

⁵ Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 122.

⁶ Philip Beale, *A History of the Post in England from the Romans to the Stuarts*, (London: Ashgate, 1998). For more information on Elizabethan postal systems, see Bernard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. Kevin Repp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Gary Schneider, "Politics, Deception, and the Workings of the Post;" Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*. In his chapter "Shakespeare and the Carriers," Stewart discusses the similarities between Shakespeare and Richard Quiney, a fellow Stratford man and the eventual father-in-law of Shakespeare's daughter Judith, drawing conclusions about Shakespeare's likely uses of and experience with letter carriers by comparison to Quiney.

a general sense of unease and distrust within many Elizabethans. As Alan Stewart points out in *Shakespeare's Letters*, "the period in which Shakespeare is writing is importantly removed from our modern understanding of letters, fixated on notions of privacy and personal subjectivity, and anonymous postal systems."⁷ Both *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost* feature a miscarriage of letters, with Maria's letter deliberately mis-delivered in the former and Berowne's letter accidentally finding the wrong recipient. As Yukiko Takeoka claims, "the letters almost never demonstrate an ideal communication process."⁸ Shakespeare's manipulation of the device of the miscarried letter elicits humor from letters, not only because of the results of the deliveries, but also because the general distrust of the postal system held widespread sway with Elizabethans of all classes.

Building humor around a society's common insecurities is a classic element of jesting, approved in even the earliest texts on jesting and wit, and Shakespeare cleverly targets Elizabethan issues with social order, writing, and the postal system to evoke a kind of laughter that reaches his audience on a deeper level than the obvious twists these letters create in the plot of each play. The letters of *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost* certainly provide the audience opportunity for laughter at their structure and content as well as the outcomes they create. Shakespeare's use of these letters as comic devices, however, extends beyond the written words themselves; through the letters, he builds humor through comedic situations as well as what Sandor Rot terms "linguistic-stylistic means."⁹ Rot divides Shakespearean humor into three categories: comedic situations, humorous characters, and linguistic-stylistic comedy.¹⁰ Humanists of the early modern period were captivated by the classical definitions of jesting and humor, turning to the great names in ancient rhetoric – Cicero and Quintillian.¹¹ Elizabethan humorists built from the old traditions but with an eye toward social hierarchy, and "jests of the

⁷ Stewart 8.

⁸ Yukiko Takeoka, "The 'Letter' as a Device of Discommunication in *Twelfth Night*," *Shakespeare Studies* (Tokyo, Japan, 1996):51.

⁹ Sandor Rot, "On the Philological Essence of Shakespearean Humour," *MLS* 13:3 (1983): 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 63.

period typically dramatize encounters between people of divergent social origins...and play on the anxieties and tensions that almost invariably occur when different kinds of people occupy the same social space.”¹² This paper will examine the ways the style and wording of the letters in both *Twelfth Night* and *Love’s Labor’s Lost* add to the overall comedic situations, especially through jesting and the establishment of a carnivalesque atmosphere, and will expand Rot’s linguistic-stylistic branch of humor to include the *ars dictaminis*.

¹¹ Anne Lake Prescott, “Humour and Satire in the Renaissance,” *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Vol.. 3 (1999): 284.

¹² Chris Holcomb, *Merry Making: The Rhetorical Discourse on Jest in Early Modern English*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001): 433.

CHAPTER 1

COMEDIC SITUATIONS: JESTING AND CARNIVAL

As a rhetorical device, jesting has enjoyed a long history. Noted rhetoricians such as Cicero and Quintilian touched on the subject in their writings, indeed a good portion of Book Two of Cicero's *De Oratore* is devoted to jokes and jesting.¹³ Cicero, unlike other politicians and rhetoricians of his day, felt that jesting was a very useful rhetorical device, one that could be used for a variety of purposes. In particular, he advocates the use of a well-timed jest (or other form of wit) as a powerful weapon in a debate that a talented orator can use to various ends.¹⁴ Jestings, as Cicero sees it, can be used to build up the orator's ethos, so that the audience sees him as an accomplished, talented speaker; it can relax and entertain the audience, winning them over to the speaker's side; but most importantly, for Cicero, jesting can be used as a verbal spear to pierce an opponent's argument's strength, or even the ethos of the opponent himself. Jestings is to be used as a weapon to defeat one's enemies just as surely as a sword – better than a sword, in some cases.

1.1 The Letter as Jest in *Twelfth Night*

The social hierarchy of Shakespeare's time, while perhaps less rigid than that of previous generations, still maintained a clear line between master and servant. Despite these well-defined social boundaries, servants did have at least one way to even the scales a bit: jesting. In *Twelfth Night*, the servant Maria uses jesting in just such a manner to gain the upper hand over Malvolio, the steward of the house and a servant of the highest ranking in the home. A serious figure devoted to order and propriety at the outset of the play, Malvolio quickly incurs Maria's wrath with his snobbish airs and killjoy attitude. Rather than resorting to name-calling,

¹³ Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2 vols., Trans. H.M. Hubbell. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942).

verbal squabbles or physical violence, Maria invents a plan that would have appealed to Cicero's ideas on jesting. She deliberately sets out to play a practical joke upon Malvolio as a form of revenge; she intends to use a jest – the forged letter supposedly written by Olivia – to defeat her opponent:

TOBY: What wilt thou do?

MARIA: I will drop in his way some obscure epistles of love, wherein the color of his beard, the shape of his leg, the manner of his gait, the expresse of his eye, forehead, and complexion, he shall find himself most feelingly personated. I can write very like my lady your niece; on a forgotten manner we can hardly make distinction of our hands.

TOBY: Excellent. I smell a device.

ANDREW: I have't in my nose too.

TOBY: He shall think by the letters that thou wilt drop that they come from my niece, and that she's in love with him.

MARIA: My purpose is indeed a horse of that color.

ANDREW: And your horse now would make him an ass.

MARIA: Ass, I doubt not. (*TN* 2.3.143-158)

Through Maria, Shakespeare proves that while jests can be fun, they can also be put to a more serious use as weaponry of sorts. The forged letter is not merely a joke amongst friends, designed to pass the time in an amusing manner or to make everyone involved laugh. On the contrary, Maria's intention is to use the letter, the jest, as a weapon against her adversary Malvolio; she fully intends to "make him an ass" by leading him to think Olivia wrote him a love letter, and she creates this hoax not only for amusement but also to serve as a comeuppance for the puritanical steward. Once she has crafted the letter, she arranges for her co-conspirators Sir Toby and Sir Andrew Aguecheek to hide themselves and watch Malvolio read the letter, so that they can see the joke carried out to its full intent; she instructs the two men to "observe

¹⁴ Ibid.

[Malvolio], for the love of mockery, for I know this letter will make a contemplative idiot of him. Close, in the name of jesting.”(TN 2.5.16-18) Shakespeare does not have Maria arrange a more overt attack on Malvolio, take violent action against him, or solicit another to challenge him openly; if *Twelfth Night* were a tragedy, one of these avenues would be appropriate, but, since the play is a comedy, Shakespeare instead gives Maria a clever jest to avenge herself against her opponent. While Maria may be inferior to Malvolio in terms of class, she far outranks him in wit and uses this superiority to her advantage when she crafts her jest.

The uses of jesting depend largely on the purpose behind the jest, whether as a form of attack against an adversary or as a form of entertainment, but Cicero, Quintilian, and later rhetoricians had very strict views on what the proper subjects were for jesting. One of the most influential works on jesting during the early modern period, Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, provides a detailed outline of jesting in a royal court, the reigning European government system of the Renaissance. Castiglione’s book outlines proper uses and forms of jesting and is careful to differentiate between the buffoon (a kind of professional fool looked down upon by the aristocracy) and the courtier, who should be witty without being unseemly. In *The Book of the Courtier*, the fool or buffoon is not a position to which one should aspire, although Castiglione admits that “it appears that people like this are in demand at the Courts.”¹⁵ He draws a clear line between the gentlemanly courtier, who should come from the aristocracy and always keep an eye toward decorum, and the fool, who may well come from the lower orders of society and betray this upbringing through his buffoonish actions. Shakespeare illustrates this distinction in *Twelfth Night* through Maria and Malvolio, giving Maria the attributes of a courtier and Malvolio those of the fool. For the characters of *Twelfth Night*, behavior is the key to distinguishing the courtier from the fool. Maria is not, of course, literally a courtier nor is Malvolio an official fool; the play’s actual fool, Feste, with his witty banter comes closer to being considered a courtier than a fool in terms of humor and behavior. While Maria crafts a

¹⁵ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (Trans. George Bull, 1967) (London: Penguin Books, 2003): 156.

successful jest when she writes the letter, Malvolio renders himself an easy target for derisive laughter when he obeys the false missive's instructions to demean himself by dressing in such a ridiculous manner. Shakespeare condones the use of sophisticated jesting and rewards Maria expansively for her jest; Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, her social superiors, praise her wit broadly, and Sir Toby even goes so far as to marry her out of admiration for the jest. For the fool, though, Shakespeare offers only scorn, as the other characters blatantly ridicule him and even have him locked up on suspicion of insanity.

Whether a lowly fool or a polished courtier, though, the proper "place" or subject of jesting remains the same; it is based not on social status, but on some kind of deformity, some kind of fault. Cicero writes that jests should be based on "the unseemly or ugly."¹⁶ Castiglione expands on this idea, claiming that "the source of the ridiculous is to be found in a kind of deformity; for we laugh only at things that contain some elements of incongruity."¹⁷ English rhetorician Thomas Wilson also approaches the idea of what jests should cover, writing that the "occasion of laughter ...is the fondnes, the filthines, the deformitie, and all such euill behaiour, as we see to be in other. For we laugh alwaies at those things, which either onely or chiefly touch handsomely, and wittely, some especiall fault, or fond behaiour in some one body, or some one thing."¹⁸ Wilson finds it acceptable to laugh at a person's physical appearance; "Somtimes we iest at a mans bodie, that is not well proportioned, and laugh at his countenance, if either it be not comely by nature, or els he through folly can not well see it."¹⁹ Although Wilson is referring to physical deformities, when many other authors use the word "deformity," it is important to understand that they rarely mean some kind of physical deformity, especially one that is beyond a person's control. According to Keith Thomas, Elizabethans in particular felt that "deformity and suffering were matters for compassion not laughter," as these were misfortunes

¹⁶ Original Latin *turpitudine et deformitate*. From Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2 vols. Trans. H.M. Hubbell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), as quoted in Chris Holcomb, *Merry Making: The Rhetorical Discourse on Jest in Early Modern English* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Castiglione 155.

¹⁸ Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique*, 1560, Ed. G. H. Mair. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909. Transcribed by Judy Boss (The University of Oregon, 1998). <<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rbear/arte/arte3.htm>>, 165.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 165.

over which people often had no control.²⁰ More often, the proper subject for ridicule was a deformity of behavior or nature: excessive pride or greed, unrestrained sexual appetite, stupidity or cupidity. Deformities of these sort produce the best jests, especially when their owner is unaware they exist; the fact that Malvolio thinks himself righteous and does not see his own flaw makes him a much better target than if he had some awareness of his faults and worked diligently to overcome them. Because of these deformities, social status can be pushed temporarily aside, and those of lower social standing may crack a joke at the expense of their social betters; servants have the (infrequent) opportunity to gain the upper hand, if they have the intelligence and nerve to take advantage of the situation at hand. The clever and saucy Maria, of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, is just such a servant.

A gentlewoman-in-waiting to the lady Olivia (and therefore her social inferior), Maria is gifted with an intellect and spirit that likely few real-life servants possessed. Women during Shakespeare's day were not often highly educated, and gifted writers such as Queen Elizabeth, Lady Arbella Stuart, Elizabeth Tolbert and other noblewomen were exceptions rather than the rule. David Cressy has shown that illiteracy was widespread throughout England, but even more so for women than men.²¹ Boys were frequently more educated than girls, and even for boys writing was not a high priority in most schools. The traditional elementary education of the Tudor and Stuart era focused more on reading than writing; children were taught to read first, and often ended their education once that skill had been mastered. If writing was taught at all, it was only after reading had been mastered, at which point many students' educations came to an

²⁰ Keith Thomas, "The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England," *TLS* 21 (January 1977): 78.

²¹ Cressy analyzed various records of the time period, including depositions and marriage licenses, to compile information on the likely literacy levels in Renaissance England. His determination of literacy (or lack thereof) is based upon signatures on these records; if a person could sign his or her name, rather than simply making a mark, Cressy takes this for a sign of literacy. His research suggests that levels of literacy were linked to occupation as well as gender and social standing, thus a man of the gentry would be more literate than a woman or a man of lower social standing. Heidi Brayman Hackel builds on Cressy's work in "Rhetorics and Practices of Illiteracy," in *Reading and Literacy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Ian Frederick Moulton (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2004).

end.²² Only those boys who were being trained for the highest professions continued to work with writing skills as part of their education.

Although women did receive some education in Elizabethan England, it is highly unlikely that it would have included a strong foundation in writing. According to Cressy, women in Shakespeare's day "were not normally taught to write, although there may have been some intermittent provision for them to learn to read. The fully literate woman was a rarity."²³ While the average woman was expected to know a great many practical things, writing was very rarely one of those valued skills. A survey of women's signatures on documents drafted between 1580 and 1700 reveals an 89 percent illiteracy rate; of the more than 1,000 women studied by the survey, 89 percent could not even write their own names.²⁴ Very few formal "schools" existed for girls, other than the relatively few chantries whose doors were open to both genders during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Chantries were chapels located on church property, yet operated independently of the main facility and offered educational opportunities to the community, especially the poor and their children. When these chantries were dissolved in the 1530s, few were later re-opened, and those that did were often grammar schools for boys only.²⁵

A woman's education during the early modern period depended largely on her family's social status, and a girl might be taught a variety of skills. For the working classes, the skills a girl learned tended more toward the practical side, and reading (if taught at all) was balanced by an equal portion of needle-work or other skills she might need for being a wife and mother. Women of higher social standing were encouraged to learn to read, but also to gain knowledge of more useful skills. Early modern scholars such as Juan Luis Vives considered reading "the best occupation" for women and "counsel[ed] it first of all," but also paired this important skill with sewing, knitting, cooking, and other household skills. Since women were not expected to

²² Ibid. 2. See also Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children*, ed. Barker, xiii; Gottlieb, *The Family in the Western World*, 166; Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters*, p 76-83.

²³ Ibid. 9.

²⁴ Cressy 5.

perform any tasks that would require them to read, literacy was secondary to these more sensible abilities. Women's literacy was to be restricted to the Bible or other materials society deemed suitable and was generally limited to reading only, with few women of the middle and lower classes learning to write.²⁶

For the upper classes, though, the educational opportunities were a little different. The nobility and upper gentry of Elizabethan England went beyond the standard home or church education for their daughters and provided additional learning opportunities through the use of private tutors, scholars hired to teach aristocratic ladies within their homes. James Daybell's study of early modern women's letter writing reveals that letter writing "extended from royal women, such as Arbella Stuart, through women of the nobility and gentry, to members of the middling classes."²⁷ However, this group of "highly literate" women generally only learned basic reading and such writing as would be necessary for familiar correspondence, nothing on par with what their male counterparts might learn for a specialized or professional position.²⁸ As Christian-based humanism began expanding its influence in schools, women found themselves even more shut out than before, as humanism stressed the importance of controlling women and advocated "marriage as a corrective to the inherent evil and corruption of women."²⁹ Marriage was one of only two options open to women as acceptable "careers" in this time, the other being service in the home of a noble lady. For either occupation, reading was an acceptable skill, but writing was rarely a necessity. Cressy's study of literacy in this time period

²⁵ Kenneth Charlton, *Women, Religion, and Education in Early Modern England* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999).

²⁶ Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: a Sixteenth-Century Manual*. Trans. and ed. Charles Fantazzi. (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000) 59. While Vives does not discourage women from learning to write, he does stress the importance of what she learns to write. The appropriate subject material for women's writing instruction is to be religious in nature, such as the Bible, and is to be copied. He does not present any indication that he feels a woman should write anything of her own creation, and is adamantly opposed to the notion of a woman serving as a teacher, especially a teacher of boys.

²⁷ James Daybell, *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450-1700* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) p 3. Daybell also discusses women's letter writing extensively in *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁸ Alice T. Friedman, 'The Influence of Humanism on the Education of Girls and Boys in Tudor England', *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol 25, No 1/2 (Spring-Summer, 1985): 57-70.

²⁹ Ibid. 59. See also Keith Thomas' article on education and literacy in early modern England, "Literacy in Early Modern England," in *The Written Word*, ed. Greg Baumann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

reveals a clear link between occupation (or social standing) and literacy. Members of the clergy and gentry have a consistently higher literacy rate than yeomen or the laboring poor.

It is possible for *Twelfth Night's* Olivia, as a member of the aristocracy, to have been taught to write well enough for family correspondence and some household documentation; such a skill level would not have seemed fantastical to an Elizabethan audience. Many letters and diaries of aristocratic women, such as Lady Arbella Stuart, who wrote over 100 letters that reveal an extensive knowledge of Latin and "a poignant longing for liberty" still survive.³⁰ As a gentlewoman-in-waiting to Olivia, Maria herself would likely have been gentry, as ladies-in-waiting were often the unmarried daughters of lower-ranking nobles. Ralph Berry explains that Maria's status as a lady's gentlewoman carried a particular set of circumstances recognizable to an Elizabethan audience; she was "the daughter of a gentleman who lacked dowry potential."³¹ Maria would have received more education than the other servants in the house; however, the probability that she was taught to write much more than her own name is very low. Even if the two women were educated together, it is unlikely that Maria would have been able to write so skillfully that her letter could be mistaken for her mistress's, especially when considering tone and vocabulary. Though a gentlewoman-in-waiting's handwriting would very likely match her mistress's if they learned together, her natural choice of syntax and diction would probably differ enough from a high-born lady's to create reasonable doubt as to the letter's true author.

Shakespeare does not intend to use Maria as a model of women's education, though; only a special woman could take down the steward of the household, and Shakespeare gives Maria such strong writing abilities to show her intelligence and specifically her wit, the weapon that allows her to accomplish just such a feat. Maria's ability to copy Olivia's handwriting and to mimic her lady's speech well enough to fool Malvolio are the tools that allow her to breach class

³⁰ Patricia Demers, *Women's Writing in English: Early Modern England*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Beginning on p. 199, Demers discusses diaries and letters as genres of early modern women's writing. In each example, though the letters and diaries focus on the kind of daily life common to women of almost any social class, it is interesting to note that the authors of these letters are always gentry or nobility. The absence of letters written by common women seems to suggest that such a thing did not exist.

³¹ Ralph Berry, *Shakespeare and Social Class* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1988), p 70.

boundaries and entrap Malvolio. Malvolio claims to recognize Olivia's "very phrases... and the impressure [of] her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal" (*TN* 2.5.82-96). However, as Stewart explains, the phrases that convince Malvolio that Olivia is indeed the writer are "absolutely standard for the day, and in any case, Maria would know what Olivia's habitual phrases were."³² Nor is the Lucrece seal-ring design a device unique to Olivia, as it was "perhaps the most clichéd" of all the images women used.³³ This familiarity with Olivia, and indeed women's literacy in general, allows Maria to successfully delude Malvolio as to the letter's true author. Shakespeare uses her letter as a device to create a clever, spirited woman who is a dangerous person to displease, as many of the male characters come to realize. Not just any servant, Malvolio is the steward, the manservant of highest standing in a noble household. When he makes an enemy of the brilliant Maria, she uses her intellect to reveal him as an object of ridicule, exposing his various "deformities" through her carefully crafted letter.

Malvolio establishes his deformities early in the play; in an atmosphere of relative gaiety, other than Olivia's mourning, he is the dour kill-joy who would stop the festivities. This character flaw is enough to earn him the enmity of not only Maria, but also of Olivia's kinsman Sir Toby; however, this sternness pales in comparison to Malvolio's deepest-seated character deformities – pride and vanity:

MARIA: The devil a Puritan that he is, or anything constantly but a time-pleaser; *an affectioned ass*, that cons state without book and utters it by great swarths; the *best persuaded of himself*; so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him; and on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work.³⁴

Maria uses the term "Puritan" pejoratively in her description of Malvolio. To their detractors, Puritans were an egotistical lot, believing themselves God's elite, refusing the concept of the Catholic church's authority, and constantly seeking some sign of God's calling to them. Maria

³² Stewart 59.

³³ *Ibid.* 59.

knows her target well, turning Malvolio's Puritan practices against him so that when he reads her false letter, he is "bent upon discovering his own justification," as J.L. Simmons puts it.³⁵ Malvolio reads his own name in the mysterious "MAOI" in the letter's superscript, and "having once discovered his name, Malvolio is assured of his extra- ordinary calling. His greatness thus comes not from his birth or from his achievement; it is literally thrust upon him."³⁶ Malvolio's Puritan viewpoint proves a liability, for Maria all too easily reveals the deformities of vanity and arrogance concealed beneath its proper exterior.

Maria's letter also unmasks another, more insidious deformity in Malvolio's character: his lust for the lady Olivia herself. As David Wilbern has noted, in addition to Malvolio's musings about leaving Olivia sleeping in their bed, his interpretation of the fake letter reveals his carnal desires when "his spelling lesson betrays the crudest carnality."³⁷ The "spelling lesson" refers to Malvolio's infamous means of identifying Olivia's handwriting, wherein he notes "her very c's, her u's, and her t's;" this bawdy pun, referring to an Elizabethan slang term for female genitalia, manifests Malvolio's sexual attraction to Olivia.³⁸ His carnal fantasies are well hidden from the lady herself, as he does an admirable job of concealing such private desires when in public; however, Maria's letter once again serves as the means of exposing Malvolio. As Wilbern points out, "Malvolio's careful division between act and desire, reason and fantasy, collapses when he falls into Maria's trap."³⁹ As he reads Maria's letter and inadvertently reveals his lust for Olivia, Malvolio exposes not one but two deformities: lust for Olivia as a woman and lust for her social

³⁴ *Twelfth Night*, 2.3.136-142. Italics reflect my emphasis.

³⁵ J.L. Simmons, "A Source for Shakespeare's Malvolio: The Elizabethan Controversy with the Puritans," *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (May, 1973): 183. More discussion of Malvolio as a Puritan may be found in Joseph Hunter, *New Illustrations of the Life, Studies, and Writings of Shakespeare* (1845); Penny Gay, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*; C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959); Albert H. Tolman, *Falstaff and Other Shakespearean Topics* (Kessinger Publishing, LLC., 2005); Keir Elam, *The Arden Shakespeare: Twelfth* (Arden Shakespeare, 2008).

³⁶ *Ibid.* 186.

³⁷ David Wilbern, "Malvolio's Fall," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol 29, No. 1 (Winter, 1978): 86.

³⁸ *Twelfth Night*. 2.5.86-87. Critics have offered a variety of explanations for this Elizabethan pun. While most scholars agree that Shakespeare is making a sexual joke referring to female genitalia, some have offered new readings including castration themes, sexual suggestion, and even thievery. For information on the castration theme, see Jonathan Goldberg, "Textual Properties," SQ 37 (1986), 213-17; Dymna Callaghan, "The castrator's song: female impersonation on the early modern stage," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 26 (1996), 32-53. For sexuality and voyeurism, see Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: NY, 1993). For information on the "cut" – "cutpurse" connection, see Leah Scragg, "Her C's, her U's, and her T's: why that?" A new reply for Sir Andrew Aguecheek," *Review of English Studies*, 42 (1991), 1-16.

status. Whether or not Maria is aware of the first of these, she is clearly very aware of the second, and she uses her formidable writing skills to appeal strongly to this deformity; her ability to mimic Olivia's higher social status is the letter's truest trap for Malvolio, as he immediately launches into fantasies of becoming higher class through a possible marriage to Olivia. Shakespeare provides his audience a quick laugh with the first of these two lusts; he uses the second to explore Elizabethan anxieties over social hierarchy.

Under Henry VIII, the class structure in Tudor England was rigid and narrowly defined. From king to commoner, "one's identity was fixed at birth, and one's civil, even moral, obligation was to stay put and submit to one's betters."⁴⁰ During Elizabeth's reign, however, "the determinants of social identity at all levels of society became increasingly ambiguous" as the country "experienced dramatic increases in both social and geographic mobility."⁴¹ Elizabethans were faced with a novel question: would this new fluidity in the social hierarchy prove beneficial or destructive? In *Twelfth Night*, social mobility is a vital subject in the play, and as Berry notes, "three of its personages marry upward (Sebastian, Viola, and Maria), and two seek to (Sir Andrew and Malvolio)."⁴² While Shakespeare does not fully condemn or condone changes to one's class, those who fail to make the social climb are harshly treated, especially Malvolio. Shakespeare repeatedly marks Malvolio in particular as a subject of ridicule throughout the play, and if his deformities were the fuel that drives Maria to write her letter, his pretentious ambition is Shakespeare's primary target for ridicule; while Maria, as the clever courtier, is rewarded for the social inversions her letter creates, Shakespeare again lampoons the fool (Malvolio) for attempting to do the same. Being the steward of Olivia's household is not enough for Malvolio; he dreams of being married to her and therefore the lord of the house. Combined with his generally negative attitude, this deformity sets him wide open as a target for a well-turned jest, and when Maria's cleverly penned letter finds its way into Malvolio's hands,

³⁹ Wilbern 87.

⁴⁰ Chris Holcomb, "A Man in a Painted Garment": The Social Functions of Jest in Elizabethan Rhetoric and Courtesy Manuals," *Humor* 13-4 (2000): 431.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 431.

Maria successfully executes a practical joke – one that spans the remainder of the play – at the expense of a man who is her social superior, at least within the bounds of the household service staff.

Like all rhetorical devices, jesting is meant to be used to some end, in this case ridicule, and Maria employs this device quite skillfully when she writes the feigned love-letter. She plays mercilessly upon his hidden deformity, the pride that lets him think he could somehow wed the lady Olivia, and reveals this flaw for all to see. Though Malvolio's sour attitude is apparent to all, it takes Maria's letter, her practical joke, to bring what is perhaps his greatest deformity to light. Since his first entrance, Malvolio has stood apart from the merriment surrounding Maria, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and especially Sir Toby Belch; while the others jest and carouse, Malvolio scowls and reprimands. Interestingly, once his deformities are exposed as the appropriate object of ridicule, Malvolio, unwittingly and even unwillingly, finally begins to join in the spirit of festivity, or carnival, which permeates the play; though the representative of propriety, Malvolio is the target of the jest and the vehicle of the comedy. Maria may be the creator of the witty jest, but Malvolio is the character around whom Shakespeare builds the comic situations so tightly that even his threats of revenge cannot completely sour the mood of the gay company at the play's dénouement.

1.2 Carnival and the "Carnavalesque"

It is important to note that *Twelfth Night's* title refers to the holiday Twelfth Night, a time of carnival and celebration in Tudor England, where misrule ruled, so to speak, and social order was overturned. During this time of year, it was a common practice to elect a Lord of Misrule to be the "king" of the festivities and oversee the carnival atmosphere.⁴³ The idea of a "carnavalesque" atmosphere comes to life perhaps most vividly in Francois Rabelais' *Fourth Book* (of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*), which personifies Carnival and Lent to show the

⁴² Berry 73.

⁴³ Elizabeth Chesney Zegura, ed., *The Rabelais Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004). The Lord of Misrule was a common person, not a member of the gentry or aristocracy, who would be crowned "king" for a day and

difference in spirit between the two. Carnival is a time of celebration, festivity, and – most importantly – confusion of social and political roles. Rabelais' *Fourth Book* utilizes several chapters to engage in an extended metaphor in which the Andouilles (representing Carnival) wage an unending (after a failed peace treaty) war against a monster called Quaresmeprenant (representing Lent).⁴⁴

In his *Fourth Book*, Rabelais examines the idea of the literal Lent and Carnival periods, highlighting the radical differences between the Lenten period, when people were somber and serious, and the Carnival period, with its emphasis on everything festive – food, wine, and revelry. For much of early modern English life, the church was the dominant authority, but carnival or festival times allowed the people to go beyond this authority. While “the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no [literal] second life,” the carnival season was driven by laughter and “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”⁴⁵ The difference between the organized, church-officiated celebrations, such as Lent, and the laughter-driven carnival periods, centered around this suspension of the social hierarchy that normally drove early modern society and gave rise to the idea of a “second life.”

Mikhail Bakhtin expands this idea of the “carnavalesque,” moving it beyond its literal Lent-versus-Carnival interpretation and into a more general usage as a form of counter-culture. For Bakhtin (and arguably for Rabelais as well), the idea of the carnival represents freedom and creativity, when the normally rigid, structured, often unpleasant world comes grinding to a halt and a kind of frenzied frivolity takes over, inverting the normal social order and rearranging the whole society into one that was “sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal,

allowed to give orders to all, including his social superiors, during this time of celebration. This Lord was chosen to enhance the atmosphere of not only festivity but also social inversion, which was a major part of the carnival merriment.

⁴⁴ Zegura 28.

⁴⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 9-10.

and political” culture that normally reigned.⁴⁶ Those involved in the carnival atmosphere led a kind of temporary second life, where festivity (rather than religion or monarchy) rules supreme. Carnival is not something that otherwise orderly, proper people observe on a stage; rather, “they live it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom....Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants,” as Bakhtin argues.⁴⁷ Carnival times offered people a second life, one of “a festive laughter” that is “universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone” rather than simply the aristocracy only or the peasants only.⁴⁸ The entire world is set on its ear during carnival times, since laughter was something of an anomaly in early modern England, due to the enforced seriousness of early and early modern Christianity.⁴⁹ The laughter of Carnival provided what Indira Ghose describes as “a safety valve for social tension as well as a liminal space of liberty from authority, an escape from norms.”⁵⁰

1.3 The Carnavalesque in *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost*

Shakespeare develops this sense of carnival in both *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, literally naming the former of these comedies for an official carnival time, and, in both plays, suspending to some extent the normal rules. *Twelfth Night* explores the possible outcomes of social inversions as Maria's letter brings her to the social standing of her mistress and later wins her a noble husband, while Malvolio imagines himself as a member of the upper class and aspires to cross social boundaries that remain locked against him. *Love's Labor's Lost* achieves the carnivalesque in a much subtler way, as Shakespeare bends the normal social routine first through the plot, with the king's vow to eschew the company of women and

⁴⁶ Bakhtin 5.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 73. Bakhtin provides a 'history of laughter' that outlines the serious attitude toward life that the church had imposed upon the people of all ranks. He then describes the roles of carnival, Rabelais' works, and other laughter-related events and their impact on the society.

⁵⁰ Indira Ghose, "License to Laugh: Festive Laughter in *Twelfth Night*." *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*. Ed. Manfred Pfister. (New York: Rodopi, 2002): 35.

the subsequent failure of the king and all his men to follow this rule, and second through his portrayal of Don Armado, at once a member of a higher class and an object for ridicule.

By giving his comedy *Twelfth Night* a title so highly indicative of the carnivalesque, Shakespeare creates the expectation of social inversion within the play, and he does not fail to deliver; in this play, Shakespeare elects his own Lord or rather Lady of Misrule: the character Maria. Through her forged letter, Maria operates in her temporary role of “misruler” quite handily. The letter she creates for the joke against Malvolio does not achieve its results through happy accident; it is *deliberately* created to invert the social order of the household by knocking Malvolio down from the respectable steward of the house to the object of mass ridicule. Malvolio becomes the butt of a joke shared not only by the aristocratic (at least in name) Sir Andrew and Sir Toby, but also by Maria and Feste, the fool. As Shakespeare’s Lady of Misrule, Maria must engage Malvolio, the representative of norms and strictures, in a mock battle, which she must of course win.⁵¹ Maria succeeds admirably by using her letter to reconstruct the typical social order and twist it into an inversion that at once elevates her and lampoons Malvolio.

Malvolio represents the dour, drab, serious, “real” world outside of the carnival atmosphere, and he remains separated from the frivolity at the opening of the play; however, even before he finds the forged letter, the carnival mood begins to work on him. He allows himself to dream of the possibilities of being married to Olivia, a situation that would radically affect his social standing. Fantasies of married life with Olivia herself begin his journey into the carnival spirit as he muses about “calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown; having come from a daybed, where I have left Olivia sleeping.”⁵² It would seem that the carnival mood is *finally* affecting him, allowing him to abandon his normal devotion to order and propriety and indulge in dreams that blatantly alter the normal social order.

An even stronger example of Malvolio’s fantasies of social inversions comes immediately after the lines above; here Malvolio turns his thoughts as to how he would treat Sir

⁵¹ Ghose 38.

⁵² *Twelfth Night*, 2.5.44-46.

Toby, who has always been his social superior, if Olivia were to become his wife. He begins by imagining that Toby (no longer “Sir” to Malvolio in this flight of the imagination) would approach him and curtsy; Malvolio surrenders even further to the lure of the carnival when he imagines himself giving Sir Toby advice, a highly familiar act:

MALVOLIO: I extend my hand to him thus, quenching my familiar smile with an austere regard of control –

TOBY: And does not Toby take you a blow o’ the lips then?

MALVOLIO: Saying, “Cousin Toby, my fortunes having cast me on your niece, give me this prerogative of speech.”

TOBY: What, what?

MALVOLIO: “You must amend your drunkenness.” (*Twelfth Night* 2.5.62-70)

By giving this advice to Sir Toby, whom he addresses as “Cousin Toby,” Malvolio clearly demonstrates that he is giving in, at least in his thoughts, to the prevailing spirit of carnival. While his imagined advice is as puritanical as ever, Malvolio has started entertaining thoughts of social inversion, in which he has the authority to address Sir Toby in a highly familiar manner and even admonish him for his behavior. Shakespeare has a particular role in the carnival world set aside for Malvolio: that of the fool; to get him there, though, will take more than a few fancies inspired by the opening lines of Maria’s letter.

Shakespeare achieves his aim when Malvolio follows the ridiculous instructions in Maria’s letter and becomes the physical representation of the carnivalesque, as he dons yellow stockings and goes about cross-gartered; in short, he becomes a comic or fool character, or, what Bakhtin calls, the clearest representation “of the medieval culture of humor...the constant accredited representatives of the carnival spirit.”⁵³ The clothes make the man, literally in this case, and Malvolio faithfully adheres not only to the bizarre dress code of the letter but also to its directions regarding his behavior toward the household. Like Castiglione’s fool, Malvolio is a

⁵³ Bakhtin 8.

pathetic creature, who inspires neither respect for his style nor admiration for his wit but rather disgust at his behavior and derision at his attire. Malvolio's transformation into a buffoon, one of the hallmark characters of the carnival, is complete, and the catalyst that tipped the scales and brought him from thought to action is none other than the central rhetorical device of the play – Maria's letter. Through Maria's letter, Shakespeare sets up carnivalesque social inversions not only for his Lady of Misrule, but also the foolish Malvolio. Maria benefits socially from the inversion, winning Sir Toby as a husband; Malvolio, though, fails to achieve any gain in social status and is actually brought quite low, becoming a laughingstock for many of the other characters.

In *Love's Labor's Lost*, while Shakespeare does not create the expectation of a true carnival season such as *Twelfth Night*, he does generate a carnivalesque atmosphere through the King of Navarre's commandment. The king declares that he, Berowne, Dumaine and Longaville shall spend their days studying, fasting, sleeping only a little, and most importantly, eschewing the company of women; naturally, this decree coincides with the arrival of the princess and her retinue. Though social order is not necessarily overturned on a grand scale, the men do defy societal rules (specifically, that of their king) as they sneak about behind his back to write love letters to their ladies. A small amount of social disorder creeps into the play, lending the "carnavalesque" spirit, when the king unwittingly emulates his love-stricken men by writing a communiqué of his own to the visiting Princess of France; though he does not, of course, literally change his social status as king, he does put himself on the same level as his men, all of them sneaking around behind each other's backs to write to their ladies. Love is the great equalizer in this situation, the Lord of Misrule so to speak.

CHAPTER 2

LINGUISTIC-STYLISTIC HUMOR: THE ARS DICTAMINIS AND OVERLY-POETIC LANGUAGE

In *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, one of the most overlooked sources of comedy surrounding the letters lies not in their use within the plot, but in the diction of the epistles; Shakespeare employs the medieval writing style known as the *ars dictaminis* as his primary source of humorous wording in *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, and although in the latter he also includes overblown, flowery, romantic language to achieve laughter, the humor in these plays comes from the antiquated arrangement of the words as much as the words themselves. I propose that Shakespeare's jests that are built around the *ars dictaminis* expand the category of humor Rot identifies as "linguistic-stylistic," pertaining to word-play in various forms – puns, malapropisms, witty exchanges between characters.⁵⁴

Shakespeare's use of the *ars dictaminis* for linguistic-stylistic humor is an ironic approach, and to distinguish the irony in Shakespeare's use of the *ars dictaminis*, we must first understand the history of the tradition. The *ars dictaminis* began as a very prescribed discipline that adhered closely to the Ciceronian layout for rhetoric (speeches, originally). The early medieval letters written in this style had a very specific structure and were employed by only a select few for very specific purposes, most often related to matters of church, state, commerce, or some combination of these. Many of the existing letters from the medieval period, the height of the *ars dictaminis* style, are correspondences between members of the clergy including communiqués between Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Bernard of Clairvaux, whose letters reveal not only familiarity with the formality and structure of the *ars dictaminis* but also a deliberate use of "concrete rhetorical strategies" and flexibility of "literary formulae...depend[ing]

on the gender and socio-religious stature of the recipient."⁵⁵ Likewise, much medieval correspondence between clergy and figures of state also followed the formula of the *ars dictaminis*, as demonstrated by letters sent from Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, to Matilda of Scotland at the start of the 12th century.

Regardless of the relationship and/or socio-religious situation(s) of the writer and recipient, the structure of the *ars dictaminis* was organized to read much like an oration, as indeed medieval letters were often read aloud. Letters in the *ars dictaminis* tradition began with a salutation, much like modern letters; unlike modern letters, though, the salutation was far more than "Dear Mr. Smith," or anything so informal. Instead, the salutation was meticulously worded in accordance with the social status of both the sender and the recipient. *The Principles of Letter Writing (Rationes dictandi)*, an anonymous piece written in 1135 in Bologna, Italy, expressly prescribes a five-part letter format, beginning with a salutation that is "an expression of greeting conveying a friendly sentiment not inconsistent with the social rank of the persons involved."⁵⁶

The salutation was a vital part of the *ars dictaminis*, one to which early medieval writers gave much importance, perhaps the most importance of the entire letter. As the first lines that the recipient would read, the salutation needed to establish an ethos that would make the recipient open to the rest of the letter, which carried a petition of some sort. Salutations were very elaborate in the *ars dictaminis*, to the point that modern readers would find them so grandiloquent as to appear insincere or even sarcastic, but in the medieval period, these highly structured greetings were taken very seriously. Hildegard of Bingen addresses Bernard of Clairvaux as "O venerable father Bernard... highly honored by God" and praises him for his ability to "bring fear to the immoral foolishness of this world and, in [his] intense zeal and burning love for the Son of God, gather men into Christ's army to fight under the banner of the

⁵⁴ Rot 66.

⁵⁵ Gilliam T. W. Ahlgren, "Visions and Rhetorical Strategy in the Letters of Hildegard of Bingen." *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*. Ed. Karen Cherewatuk. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993): 46.

cross against pagan savagery."⁵⁷ Her words impart her true respect and reverence for him in a manner consistent with the dictates of the *ars dictaminis*; her words carry no sting of sarcasm, nor do they carry insincerely flattery, at least no more than is standard in the *ars dictaminis*' salutation.

This flattery, more accurately praise, is a necessary part of the salutation, and indeed of the *ars dictaminis* overall, especially when communications are passing between a social (or especially political) inferior and his or her lord. If a subject were to write to his lord (keeping in mind the high illiteracy rates among the lower classes, this would most likely be a member of the aristocracy writing to the king), he might begin by first acknowledging his lord's greatness; he might address the letter "To his most honored and gracious lord," for example. He would likely follow this with a positive description of himself, such as "N–, his most loyal follower," before ending the salutation with some indication of his ongoing fidelity, perhaps "declares his continuing devotion."

Such inflated language may seem understandable, if a bit overdone, in a letter attempting to curry a superior's favor; however, even when writing to a social equal or a close friend, informal intimacy was not a part of the *ars dictaminis*. Letters between close friends might begin with a more clearly affectionate but no less formal salutation, such as "To N–, the dearest of friends, whose friendship knows no limitations," while letters between social equals (or at least those of similar rank) such as Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, and Matilda of Scotland still held firmly to the formal praise required in the salutation; Anselm addresses Matilda as "glorious queen of the English, reverend lady, most beloved daughter." Anselm's greeting is both mildly affectionate and deeply respectful, a perfect opening for a clergyman to address a sovereign.

⁵⁶ Anonymous of Bologna, "The Principles of Letter-Writing", *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, ed. James J. Murphy (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001): 5-25.

⁵⁷ *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen : Volume 1*. Hildegard.; Baird, Joseph L.; Ehrman, Radd K. (New York, Oxford Oxford University Press (US), 1998): 27-28.

Following the salutation was a section termed *benivolentiae captatio* or *exordium*, the Securing of Goodwill, in which the writer attempts to present himself (or herself) favorably to the recipient of the letter; favorable reception could be curried in a variety of ways, chief among them either modestly describing one's accomplishments and/or praising the virtues and accomplishments of the recipient.⁵⁸ Though a distinct component of the five-part structure of the *ars dictaminis*, the *exordium* was often quite similar in vein to the salutation; both pieces served the purpose of putting the recipient of the letter in the proper frame of mind to continue on to the purpose of the letter. In an epistle sent from unnamed nuns of the Admont cloister to an absent patron, the *exordium* penned by these nuns recalls the respect and admiration they once held in the patron's heart and expresses regret at his absence:

The Lord knows that ever since we were so deserving as to make your acquaintance, the memory of your love never receded from our hearts. We grieve not a little, and in grieving we lament from the depths of our hearts because for a long time we have neither chanced to see you nor heard reliable information about you.⁵⁹

By expressing their dismay over the long absence of their missing patron, the nuns gently press the reader to feel an analogous sense of loss in the hope that the patron will act on this feeling and resume correspondence with them. They gently reprove the absent patron by mentioning that they have not even heard anything reliable about (or from) him. Their gentle remonstrance is carefully worded so that they do not push the patron away, but rather draw him back in and help him resume correspondence with them. The nuns end their *exordium* with a final effort to soften the reader to their petition by proclaiming their joy at having rediscovered the missing patron, declaring themselves "consoled women, because [they] have found a faithful and trustworthy messenger" through whom they may "send [their] very selves" to the patron.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ James J. Murphy, ed. *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001): 17. The securing of good will technically includes the salutation as well, as both parts of the letter work to affect the recipient's feelings toward the sender.

⁵⁹ In the late 1800s, a monk and librarian by the name of Jakob Wichner found a collection of twelfth-century nuns' letters wrapped around a late-fifteenth century wine service; these letters are examined in Alison I. Beach, "Voices from a Distant Land: Fragments of a Twelfth-Century Nuns' Letter Collection." *Speculum* (Vol. 77, No. 11, 2002): 34-54.

⁶⁰ Beach 43.

The nuns' *exordium*, eloquently worded and seemingly sincere, forms a nice median between those found in the letters of Hildegard of Bingen to Bernard of Clairvaux and Anselm to Queen Mathilda. Hildegard's *exordium* is quite simply one sentence that reads "I beseech you in the name of the Living God to give heed to my queries."⁶¹ Her *exordium's* brevity is not without an eloquence of its own; she calls upon the highest authority, "the Living God," to secure Bernard's goodwill and solicit his help, and as a man of the cloth he can hardly deny her forthcoming request when framed in such terms. A counterpoint to Hildegard's concision may be found in the *exordium* of Anselm's letter to Mathilda of Scotland, when he begs:

Let me speak briefly, but from the heart, as to that person whom I desire to advance from an earthly kingdom to a heavenly one. When I hear anything about you which is not pleasing to God or advantageous to you, and if I then neglected to admonish you, I would neither fear God nor would I love you as I should.

Anselm's *exordium* clearly indicates, through use of the word "admonish," that the remainder of his missive will contain material that his reader may not wish to hear, but by expressing his affection and admiration for Mathilda in both the salutation and now the *exordium*, he has paved the way for his coming criticism by instilling in her the sense that he cares about her reputation on earth as well as her spiritual salvation and that he is working to protect both with what he will next tell her.

With the reader now in the proper frame of mind, the next step of the *ars dictaminis* was the narration, whose purpose was to provide "an orderly account of the matter under discussion, or, even better, a presentation in such a way that the materials seem to present themselves."⁶² If the salutation and *exordium* were often flamboyant and lyrical, the narration varied greatly in its intensity, sometimes as consciously concise as to be the opposite of the preceding parts, sometimes equally or even more grandiose. The writer could spend relatively little time on the narration, especially as compared to the salutation; in many cases, the

⁶¹ *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen : Volume 1*. Hildegard.; Baird, Joseph L.; Ehrman, Radd K. New York, Oxford Oxford University Press (US), 19: 27-28.

narration comprises only a few perfunctory lines of the overall letter. For example, in a letter written from a medieval Oxford student to his master, the narration is so wrapped up in the petition (the fourth part of the *ars dictaminis*) as to be almost indistinguishable as its own section:

This is to inform you that I am studying at Oxford with the greatest diligence, but the matter of money stands greatly in the way of my promotion, as it is now two months since I spent the last of what you sent me. The city is expensive and makes many demands; I have to rent lodgings, buy necessaries, and provide for many other things which I cannot now specify.⁶³

For this writer, whose purpose is to ask for money, a brief narration is likely the best approach, especially in light of the “other things” he mentions; too much information here might be counterproductive to the following section – the whole point – of the letter: the petition. Having described the situation, now the writer could ask for something, marking the petition phase of the letter. Medieval *ars dictaminis* manuals identify several distinct classifications of petition, each with a specific goal. When asking for a favor, petitions are considered supplicatory and are a favorite amongst minors in particular; petitions can also be didactic in nature, threatening, admonishing, advisory, reproving, exhortative, or direct.⁶⁴

Oftentimes the petition and narration are intertwined throughout a letter, as in both Hildegard's and Anselm's letters. Hildegard weaves her petition, a plea for Bernard's interpretation of her visions, repeatedly through her narration to the point that there is no clear division between the narration and the petition; the combination of these two integral elements of the *ars dictaminis* covers several paragraphs of the letter and reveals the passion – almost desperation – of Hildegard's plea for Bernard's help. Likewise, Anselm's letter to Mathilda of

⁶² Murphy 18.

⁶³ Charles H. Haskins, "The Life of Medieval Students as Illustrated by their Letters." *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 3, No.2 (Jan., 1898), 210.

⁶⁴ Murphy 19.

Scotland entwines narration and petition as he reminds her of her stature while simultaneously begging her to change those behaviors he finds beneath her:

After I left England I heard that you were dealing with the churches in your hands otherwise than is expedient for them or for your own soul. I do not wish to say here how you are acting – according to what I have been told – because to no one is it better known than to yourself. Therefore I beseech you as my lady, advise you as my queen and admonish you as my daughter – as I have done before – that the churches of God which are in your power should know you as mother, as nurse, as kind lady and queen. I do not say this concerning those churches alone but about all the churches in England to which your help can be extended.⁶⁵

Like Hildegard, Anselm deftly incorporates his petition with his narration, managing to be admonishing, complimentary, and supplicatory all at once. Both writers strengthen their overall arguments by pairing these two sections of the *ars dictaminis* so fluidly that they are indistinguishable, giving the petition – the heart of the letter – an extra potency to plead the writer's case before ending the letter.

Writers followed the petition with the final piece of the five-part format, the conclusion. Concluding a letter was relatively simple; style manuals advised the writer to remind the recipient of "the usefulness or disadvantage possessed by the subjects treated in the letter" and to end with a gracious farewell.⁶⁶ The opposite of the narration in terms of location, the conclusion served much the same purpose; as the narration was the writer's first opportunity to put the reader in the desired frame of mind, the conclusion was his or her last word, last chance to end the letter in the appropriate tone. Anselm does this simply, writing, "May almighty God always guide you so that he may repay you with eternal life."⁶⁷ Hildegard's letter likewise draws on divine authority when she writes, "Farewell, be strong in your spirit, and be a mighty

⁶⁵ *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi, Opera Omnia*, ed. F.S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1946-63), ep.346, 5.284-85; translation and annotation from *The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Walter Fröhlich, Cistercian Studies 142, 3v (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990-94), 3.75-76.

⁶⁶ Murphy 19.

warrior for God. Amen.”⁶⁸ Writers might choose to remind the writer of the relationship between them, with sons bidding farewell to their esteemed fathers whom they respect and obey. No matter the relationship between writer and reader, the conclusion gave the writer one last attempt to control the reader’s interpretation of the letter.

When all parts of the *ars dictaminis* are used correctly, the end result is a written speech of Ciceronian proportions, with each part fitting into the whole like a puzzle to create what was often quite a long missive. Style manuals such as *The Principles of Letter Writing* did allow the writer to shorten the letter by leaving out parts; the conclusion was often discarded, as was the *exordium*; if the letter was not asking for anything - if it was simply for communication - then the petition was unnecessary. Even the all-important salutation could be left off, especially if the writer wished to communicate displeasure with the recipient by deliberately omitting this often-obsequious section of the letter.⁶⁹ Regardless of whether any section was removed from the letter, the overall effect of the *ars dictaminis* style was to render the epistle a very formal, if formulaic, piece of elaborate design; since these letters passed between heads of church and state, they were often important documents of the highest regard.

In Shakespeare's hands, however, this stately medium undergoes a radical transformation into an object of ridicule; when letters in this style appear in *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, they are used for humorous intent rather than serious. Shakespeare knows his audience well; Elizabethan England was a place of increasing social change, with Humanists and other forward thinkers holding anything reminiscent of the feudal past more and more under derision and disapprobation. For Shakespeare, when a letter is meant to be found humorous, the *ars dictaminis* is the most obvious style to use, especially when combined with

⁶⁷ *Sancti Anselmi*.

⁶⁸ *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen : Volume 1*. Hildegard.; Baird, Joseph L.; Ehrman, Radd K. New York, Oxford Oxford University Press (US), 1998, p 27-28.

⁶⁹ *The Principles of Letter Writing* also describes ways in which a writer may choose to repeat parts of the letter, for example interspersing narration with Securing of Goodwill throughout, or move parts around so that they are not in the traditionally accepted format for the *ars dictaminis*.

overly verbose language; together, these two elements are almost guaranteed to render an epistle ridiculous to Shakespeare's audience.

2.1 The *Ars Dictaminis* in Shakespearean Comedy

Love's Labor's Lost and *Twelfth Night* each feature a variety of letters, and the more comic Shakespeare's intentions for a letter, the more likely that it will be penned in the *ars dictaminis* style. In *Twelfth Night*, Maria's forged letter is the primary vehicle of humor in the play, and while the events to which it leads are certainly entertaining, the letter itself contains a different level of humor that emerges as it goes through the format of the *ars dictaminis*. The salutation of Maria's letter, which will be discussed later, indisputably lacks the finesse of those included in the *ars dictaminis*, but in the exordium that follows, Shakespeare gives his readers a hint of the social inversion(s) that are to come: "If this fall into thy hand, revolve. In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em."⁷⁰ In characteristic *ars dictaminis* fashion, this *exordium* seeks to flatter the reader and convince him of the reader's regard; though she may be above him in social status, she appears to feel that he can be her equal and begs him not to fear rising to such a level. Between the not-so-subtle hint that is the title of the play and the exordium in this letter, the audience knows that Shakespeare is setting up a carnivalesque inversion of the normal social order in the coming acts of the play.

While the letter lacks a clear narration section, it undeniably includes a variety of increasingly ridiculous petitions that Shakespeare uses to clue the reader in to his intent to transform Malvolio into the carnival figure of the fool. First, "Olivia" requests Malvolio amend his behavior to suit her wishes:

Be opposite with my kinsman, surly with servants. Let thy tongue tang arguments of state; put thyself into the trick of singularity. She thus advises that sighs for thee.

⁷⁰ *Twelfth Night*, 2.5.135-138.

Remember who commended thy yellow stockings and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered.”⁷¹

Not only are these requests ridiculous in their own right, but Shakespeare also couches them in the *ars dictaminis* role of petition, something generally reserved only for serious matters; by putting these frivolous requests into such a traditionally staid format, Shakespeare wrings even more laughter from his audience as they hear the difference between the serious form of the letter – for which Malvolio falls– and the ludicrous intent of the petitions. Malvolio’s failure to see this distinction is part of what makes him Shakespeare’s fool; Shakespeare firmly entrenches Malvolio in the role of the fool by blinding him to the truth behind not only the letter’s sender and the intent of the petitions but also the incongruity between their formal background and their frivolous use.

By way of conclusion, Maria’s letter ends simply with " Farewell. She that would alter services with thee, THE FORTUNATE-UNHAPPY.”⁷² In keeping with *ars dictaminis* tradition, the conclusion seeks once more to flatter the reader as it claims that “Olivia,” a gentlewoman, would gladly trade places with the servant Malvolio and that her uncertainty of his returned affection for her makes her “the fortunate-unhappy.” Shakespeare takes this one last opportunity in Maria’s letter to further ensure that his audience sees Malvolio’s arrogance and vanity, for it is these flaws that allow Malvolio to believe that a member of the gentry would gladly “alter services” with a steward.

Shakespeare utilizes not only the content of the Maria’s letter, but also the *ars dictaminis* style itself to ridicule Malvolio and draw him into the role of the fool, at once demonstrating his own ability to follow such a rigid structure and ridiculing those who have perhaps clung to its mandates even when writing personal letters. While the lampooning of Malvolio would have been equally humorous regardless of the format of the letter, Shakespeare is not content with the obvious, physical humor to which the letter leads. He seeks to add an

⁷¹ *Twelfth Night*, 2.5.141-146.

⁷² *Twelfth Night*, 2.5.144-146.

extra layer of humor to the situation by making the format of Maria's letter as amusing to his audience as the material of the letter; to an audience no doubt much more familiar with private letters, as the majority of Elizabethans who could write often had much more cause to write familiar letters than those relating to commerce or affairs of state, the formal structure of the *ars dictaminis* must have seemed so exaggerated - especially when applied to private use - as to render it ridiculous. Shakespeare deliberately chooses the *ars dictaminis* style to underscore the humor of the letter, making it not only the medium through which humorous events are wrought but also as a jest in its own right; the audience laughs at the letter itself, before even seeing how ridiculous Malvolio appears, because the letter is presented in such a ludicrously old-fashioned and overly formal fashion.

Maria's forged letter is not the only missive in *Twelfth Night* to be formatted in the *ars dictaminis* style; the same can be said for the letters sent by Sir Andrew Aguecheek to Cesario and by Malvolio to Olivia. Sir Andrew's letter follows the traditional format to roughly the same extent as that of Maria's letter; the main difference is that while Maria's letter is intended to provoke comic response both on its own and in the results it creates, Sir Andrew's letter is humorous for what it reveals about his character. His letter, a challenge to the (supposed) youth Cesario, begins with a salutation that simultaneously turns the *ars dictaminis* on its head but also reinforces it; rather than flowing smoothly in the kind of flattering, metaphorical word-art of a standard salutation following the style of the *ars dictaminis*, Sir Andrew's letter begins harshly: "Youth, whatsoever thou art, thou art but a scurvy fellow."⁷³ Despite its brevity and the negativity it carries, the salutation is nonetheless present, marking this letter from the first line as - potentially - an epistle of the *ars dictaminis* style. Sir Andrew is, of course, completely wrong about Cesario, and his cold greeting of this "scurvy fellow" is the reader's first sign within the frame of the letter that Shakespeare has another fool for us; Malvolio adopts the role of fool by believing in and acting upon the directions of Maria's letter, but Sir Andrew also claims this role,

⁷³ *Twelfth Night*, 3.4.140.

as he often contradicts himself and confuses the reader, proving his inability to use the *ars dictaminis* as a formal means of communication.

Our newest fool follows his curt greeting by eliminating the *exordium*, proceeding immediately to a narration that is no more detailed than those generally found in the *ars dictaminis*, where using the fewest words possible seems almost a virtue. Sir Andrew's brief narration takes the form of a grievance, where he complains that Cesario "comest to the lady Olivia, and in my sight she uses thee kindly: but thou liest in thy throat."⁷⁴ The letter's content is an abundantly evident source of levity, the narration nonsensical and contradictory, claiming that Cesario is a liar, but then declaring that "that is not the matter" for which Sir Andrew challenges Cesario, never explaining exactly what the aforementioned matter actually *is*.⁷⁵ While no one can deny that Cesario has been lying – to everyone, for that matter – Sir Andrew has it all wrong, and his expression on paper gives the audience another chance to see him acting in a comic manner, especially as he moves on to the petition phase of his letter. This section is not so much a plea or enquiry as it is a threat, vowing that he "will waylay thee going home; where if it be thy chance to kill me Thou killest me like a rogue and a villain."⁷⁶ Though he is using a serious format to issue a serious threat, the reader finds it difficult – if not impossible – to take Sir Andrew's threat seriously; Sir Andrew declares his intent to attack Cesario on his way home, taking the role of a villain and coward, rather than calling Cesario out in a proper duel, and furthermore avers that, if Cesario should manage to kill him during this underhanded attack, Cesario will be the scoundrel. From his inane behavior throughout the play as Sir Toby's "wingman" to the convoluted and self-contradictory phrases in this letter, Shakespeare portrays Sir Andrew as yet another fool in carnivalesque Illyria. Shakespeare places Sir Andrew's inability to express himself clearly through the *ars dictaminis* in direct contrast with Maria's talent within the same genre, and once more underscores the difference between the sophisticated courtier and the bumbling fool.

⁷⁴ *Twelfth Night*, 3.4.145-147, 149-150.

⁷⁵ *Twelfth Night*, 3.4.140-141.

Shakespeare further satirizes Sir Andrew by having him write a conclusion that is likewise brief and clearly carries his sense of outrage at what he assumes to be Cesario's desires regarding Olivia, but in so oxymoronic a manner as to create confusion, rather than sending a clear message:

Fare thee well, and God have mercy upon
one of our souls. He may have mercy upon mine, but
my hope is better, and so look to thyself. Thy
friend, as thou usest him, and thy sworn enemy,
Andrew Aguecheek.⁷⁷

The conclusion is paradoxical, simultaneously reassuring and threatening Cesario; so ridiculous is the content of the letter that even Sir Toby Belch, no great intellectual himself, determines not to deliver it on account of its being so "excellently ignorant" that Cesario "will find it comes from a clodpole."⁷⁸ Is Sir Andrew friend to Cesario or enemy? Certainly the bulk of the missive indicates the latter, but the final line of the conclusion opens up new possibilities, depending on how Cesario treats Sir Andrew. While Sir Andrew's letter follows the *ars dictaminis* style throughout, it misses the overall point of this traditional style; rather than seeking to achieve a specific, stated goal by carefully crafting a praising and polished artwork of letter-writing, Sir Andrew's letter uses sharp, derogatory language to address an unclear point before leaping into a statement of (rather threatening) purpose and ending with such a convoluted conclusion as to leave the reader in a state of bemusement. Shakespeare deliberately manipulates the tradition of the *ars dictaminis* here to suit his purposes; he means to show Sir Andrew in a farcical light, and by having this character write such a counterproductive letter he achieves an extra layer of humor. As if it were not enough that Sir Andrew is Sir Toby's foppish drinking partner, he is also now a functionally illiterate literate; he can write a traditionally formatted letter, but he has no concept of how to put such a structure to correct use. Shakespeare uses the disparity revealed

⁷⁶ *Twelfth Night*, 3.4.145-147, 149-150.

⁷⁷ *Twelfth Night*, 3.4.148-152.

by this letter as a measure of Sir Andrew's absurdity, using his inability with the *ars dictaminis* as an indicator of his status as a fool; by electing to have Sir Andrew pen this ridiculous letter in the formal style of the *ars dictaminis*, Shakespeare once again leads his audience to the conclusion that the *ars dictaminis* is inherently a preposterous letterform, one that may easily be used - outside of legitimate business pursuits - for comedic ends.

Unsurprisingly, of all the letters in *Twelfth Night*, it is the captive Malvolio's missive to Olivia that carries the strongest sense of anger. The anonymous author of *The Principles of Letter Writing* maintains that a writer wishing to show his anger or scorn would be best served by either completely skipping the salutation or reducing the salutation to a mere listing the names of the intended recipients.⁷⁹ Shakespeare holds true to this formula by making Malvolio's accusatory letter to Olivia bear no greeting other than a terse "madam" halfway through his first sentence:

By the Lord, madam, you wrong me, and the world shall
know it. Though you have put me into darkness and given
your drunken cousin rule over me, yet have I the benefit
of my senses as well as your Ladyship. I have your
own letter that induced me to the semblance I put on, with
the which I doubt not but to do myself much right or you
much shame. Think of me as you please. I leave my duty
a little unthought of and speak out of my injury.

The madly used Malvolio.⁸⁰

Throughout the letter, the language of the enraged Malvolio is clipped and concise, employing as few words as possible to express his sense of unjust treatment. As a Puritan, Malvolio would generally avoid the kind of verbosity common to the *ars dictaminis*, preferring instead the plain style for his own missives; however, we can still see the pattern of the *ars dictaminis* dictating

⁷⁸ *Twelfth Night*, 3.4.165-167.

⁷⁹ Murphy 20.

the structure of his letter. His nearly nonexistent salutation is entwined with a sort of anti-*exordium*, where rather than attempting to secure goodwill, he blatantly declares any lack of regard for her goodwill, preferring instead to make it widely known that she has wronged him. The narration that follows this anti-*exordium*, if you will, declares that Malvolio has been maltreated by Olivia and especially Sir Toby, but that he is still as sane as they are. His petition is quite simply that they use the letter he thinks she wrote him as proof that he is not insane, and then he ends the missive as curtly as he began, with "the madly used Malvolio."

Despite the character's serious intent for writing and his clear outrage at the events he has endured, Malvolio's letter generates neither feelings of sympathy nor an air of sobriety. His use of the *ars dictaminis* should lend such gravity to the epistle, but Shakespeare does not intend this letter to create any such response. We are meant to view Malvolio as a comedic, even contemptible, character throughout the play. By having Malvolio, a high-ranking servant but a servant nonetheless, choose the formality of the *ars dictaminis* to express his indignation, Shakespeare takes a final opportunity to paint Malvolio as a ridiculous character; rather than disputing the charges that Malvolio seeks to rise above his station, his choice of the *ars dictaminis* confirms it. Malvolio wants so desperately to present himself as a serious and even noble figure, and, by opting for the *ars dictaminis* as the format of his complaint letter, he thinks he has achieved this goal. The letter seems quite reasonable, projecting his anger and sense of mistreatment quite clearly—the purpose for which the letter was designed; however, the letter comes across as absurd in its formal treatment of so petty an issue as the joke. Rather than silencing and shaming his tormentors, Malvolio's letter provides them even more fodder for ridicule.

Twelfth Night demonstrates Shakespeare's apparent belief that the *ars dictaminis*, especially when combined with overly poetic language, can be used to comedic ends in and of itself, not just through the effect(s) these letters have on the characters involved with them. No

⁸⁰ *Twelfth Night* 5.1.294-302.

letter written in this style escapes unscathed; Shakespeare deliberately uses the *ars dictaminis* to expose Sir Andrew and Malvolio for the fools they are as they blunder their way through writing and/or reading these epistles.

2.2 The *Ars Dictaminis* in *Love's Labor's Lost*

Shakespeare gives his strongest critique of the ancient tradition of letter writing in *Love's Labor's Lost*, a play that features no fewer than six letters, as he uses the *ars dictaminis* to lampoon a character even more foolish than Malvolio or Sir Andrew: Don Adriano de Armado. The letters written according to *ars dictaminis* style in *Love's Labor's Lost* - those of the ridiculous Don Armado- create comedy by their extravagant wording as they move through the parts of the *ars dictaminis*. Before the audience ever gets the chance to laugh at Don Armado for Jacquenetta's refusal of his attentions, Shakespeare has already brought his spectators an opportunity for levity by allowing them to hear Don Armado's letters; the wording and format of the letters themselves are amusing in their own right, independent of the events that follow. Shakespeare means to cast Don Armado in the role of fool and, even worse, "Other," and skillfully deploys the *ars dictaminis* as a weapon to attack not only the character himself but also the "Other" that he represents: the Spaniard.

Elizabethans either held those they considered "Other" in contempt or harbored deep-seated animosity toward them. Although their sovereign and her court maintained friendly relations with France and remained cordial with Spain for many years, the common feeling amongst the general public was decidedly xenophobic, and according to A. J. Hoenselaars, "clashes between Englishmen and foreigners [were] rampant."⁸¹ No nation was safe from Elizabethan prejudices; Felicia Hardison Londre claims the Elizabethans usually felt that the French were a snobbish lot who "set an unattainably high standard of excellence," and the Russians "could safely be regarded as figures of fun."⁸² These disparagements, however,

⁸¹ A. J. Hoenselaars, *Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992): 27.

⁸² Felicia Hardison Londre, "Elizabethan Views of the Other." *Love's Labour's Lost: Critical Essays*. Ed. Felicia Hardison Londre. (New York: Routledge, 2001): 327.

almost become complimentary when compared to the raging anti-Spanish sentiment harbored by the Elizabethans. Spain was the enemy, and “the English people [had] hated Spain even when their queen...was married to Philip of Spain.”⁸³ In literature, the Spaniard was often stereotyped as cruel, mean-spirited and cowardly, the denizen of “a cruel and barbarous nation.”⁸⁴ The prevalence of this typecasting in Elizabethan works has led some scholars to question Shakespeare’s portrayal of Don Armado in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, as they claim he presents the Spaniard in a “largely sympathetic” light.⁸⁵ Londre describes Don Armado as “a ridiculous figure, a source of amusement and the butt of many jokes” but seems to feel that this is a gentler characterization than Spaniards usually receive in Elizabethan works. Lynne Magnusson compares Don Armado to the “writers of overblown prose, like the letter-writer spoofed in Thomas Wilson’s *The Arte of Rhetorique* or Gabriel Harvey as caricatured in pamphlet debates by Thomas Nashe” and joins several scholars in declaring Don Armado to be representative of the “braggart soldier” tradition of the Italian commedia *dell’arte*.⁸⁶ Shakespeare is writing a comedy, so a Don Armado that fit the “evil Spaniard” stereotype would be too strong, too negative a character. Instead, Shakespeare targets the Spanish in a subtly stinging manner more in keeping with the mood of a comedy and lampoons the foolish Spaniard, whose very name would recall for Shakespeare’s audience the gratifyingly immense failure of the Spanish Armada.

Far from than painting Don Armado in a sympathetic light, Shakespeare chooses language as his vehicle to satirize the Spaniard, giving the character a verbose manner of writing sure to amuse or annoy in its cheerfully gaudy opulence and fashioning for Don Armado letters that not only draw heavily upon this kind of extravagant vocabulary but also rely upon the outdated, archaic style of the *ars dictaminis*. Between the words he chooses and his loyalty to

⁸³ *Ibid.* 331.

⁸⁴ William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558-1660*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1971): 6.

⁸⁵ Londre 332.

⁸⁶ Lynne Magnusson, “To ‘Gase So Much at the Fine Stranger’: Armado and the Politics of English in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*.” *Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance*. (Aldershot, England: Ashgate: 2008): 53-54.

the tradition of the *ars dictaminis*, Don Armado crafts a letter to the king that is humorous in its own right, separate of any outcomes it may inspire. Starting with extravagant salutations before launching into an explanation so peppered with poetic devices and figurative language as to render them absurd not only to the reader but to the other characters as well, Don Armado's first letter, revealing his complaint about Jaquenetta's indiscretion with Costard, is addressed to the king, whom he addresses as "Great deputy, the welkin's vicegerent and sole dominator of Navarre, my soul's earth's god, and body's fostering patron."⁸⁷ Following the rules of the *ars dictaminis* by addressing the king in such pompous terms Don Armado is attempting to set the stage for the rest of his letter, and indeed he does set the stage, though not in the way he intended; by combining this ornate style with the grandiloquent language Don Armado uses, Shakespeare directs the audience to see Don Armado as a comical character. From the beginning of this letter, Shakespeare deliberately chooses to make his audience's reaction to this character one of humorous contempt.

Shakespeare continues his comedic portrayal of the *ars dictaminis* in Don Armado's brief attempt at the *exordium*, as the loquacious Spaniard endeavors to make himself sound honorable and dignified; "So it is, besieged with sable-coloured melancholy, I did commend the black-oppressing humour to the most wholesome physic of thy health-giving air; and, as I am a gentleman, betook myself to walk."⁸⁸ Shakespeare gives Don Armado an *exordium* that, contrary to its intended purpose, makes its reader sound pompous rather than worthy; had the salutation established Don Armado as a serious user of the *ars dictaminis*, this *exordium* might have been perfectly fine, relying on Elizabethan perception of the bodily humours and their relation to one's health. Unfortunately, since Shakespeare has already shown his audience that Don Armado is a figure of comic relief, the *exordium* comes across as self-important and even ridiculous.

⁸⁷ *Love's Labor's Lost*, 1.1.114-116.

⁸⁸ *Love's Labor's Lost*, 1.1.225-229.

If the reader were still entertaining any doubt about Shakespeare's view of this character, as expressed through the *ars dictaminis*, when Don Armado continues on to the narration of his letter, the heart of the matter, his language becomes so exaggerated that it is both difficult to actually understand his purpose in writing the letter in the first place and easy to see that Shakespeare intends his audience to find this character ridiculous:

About the sixth hour; when
beasts most graze, birds best peck, and men sit down
to that nourishment which is called supper: so much
for the time when. Now for the ground which; which,
I mean, I walked upon: it is y-cleped thy park. Then
for the place where; where, I mean, I did encounter
that obscene and preposterous event, that draweth
from my snow-white pen the ebon-coloured ink, which
here thou viewest, beholdest, surveyest, or seest;
but to the place where; it standeth north-north-east
and by east from the west corner of thy curious-
knotted garden: there did I see that low-spirited
swain, that base minnow of thy mirth that unlettered small-knowing soul,
that shallow vassal, which, as I remember, hight Costard
sorted and consorted, contrary to thy
established proclaimed edict and continent canon,
which with,--O, with--but with this I passion to say
wherewith with a child of our grandmother Eve, a
female; or, for thy more sweet understanding, a
woman.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ *Love's Labor's Lost*, 1.1.

Don Armado's narration is an attempt to explain to the king that he has caught a commoner by the name of Costard consorting with "a child of our grandmother Eve," a woman none other than his own love interest, Jacquenetta. If judged by its contents, this would appear to be a serious letter, an accusation of adultery; by its language, though, Shakespeare transforms it into a physical representation of Don Armado's ridiculousness, as he makes Don Armado stumble through a halting description of when, where, and what he has seen. The narration, rather than lending credence to the upcoming petition, undermines it considerably.

The petition stage of Don Armado's letter is the only part of the entire letter that is not overdone, as he informs the king that he, "as [his] ever-esteemed duty pricks [him] on," has sent the king the very man at the center of his complaint: Costard. Don Armado asks that Costard "to receive the meed of punishment" the king has to offer.⁹⁰ By keeping this crucial part of the letter (the writer's whole point for sending the letter in the first place) so brief, Shakespeare adds to the humor of letter; after such build-up, with the verbose salutation and exordium and the self-consciously pompous narration, Don Armado's petition seems rather anti-climactic. The petition's understatement and its divergence from the overarching style of proceeding parts of the *ars dictaminis* give Shakespeare another opening for humor.

Don Armado's letter to the king is but one example of Shakespeare's apparent application of the *ars dictaminis* for ridicule; another comes in the form of Don Armado's love letter to Jaquenetta, intercepted by the princess. Though this letter lacks the customary salutation, it does indeed begin with an *exordium* as Don Armado praises Jaquenetta's beauty in such poetic and exaggerated terms as to border on the absurd:

'By heaven, that thou art fair, is most infallible;
true, that thou art beauteous; truth itself, that
thou art lovely. More fairer than fair, beautiful
than beauteous, truer than truth itself, have

⁹⁰ *Love's Labor's Lost*, 1.1.256-260, 262-266.

commiseration on thy heroical vassal! The
 magnanimous and most illustrious king Cophetua set
 eye upon the pernicious and indubitate beggar
 Zenelophon; and he it was that might rightly say,
 Veni, vidi, vici; which to annotharize in the
 vulgar,--O base and obscure vulgar!--videlicet, He
 came, saw, and overcame: he came, one; saw two;
 overcame, three. Who came? the king: why did he
 come? to see: why did he see? to overcome: to
 whom came he? to the beggar: what saw he? the
 beggar: who overcame he? the beggar. The
 conclusion is victory: on whose side? the king's.
 The captive is enriched: on whose side? the
 beggar's. The catastrophe is a nuptial: on whose
 side? the king's: no, on both in one, or one in
 both. I am the king; for so stands the comparison:
 thou the beggar; for so witnesseth thy lowliness.⁹¹

Don Armado's praise of Jacquenetta's beauty begins in a common enough way for a love letter, with exaggeration such as "more fairer than fair, beautiful than beauteous," but quickly falls into the same trap Shakespeare set for Don Armado in his first letter; in his efforts to flatter and praise, Don Armado becomes incoherent and ridiculous. His description of the King of Cophetua's meeting with "the pernicious and indubiate beggar Zenelophon" seems completely off-topic and is indeed confusing in the extreme; what is his purpose in writing this? Though Don Armado's motives remain a mystery, Shakespeare's purpose is once again to render Don Armado a ludicrous figure overly given to highly verbose writing that seems almost designed to

⁹¹ *Love's Labor's Lost*, 4.1.61-81.

lose the reader. Certainly if the reader were the illiterate peasant girl Jacquenetta, one wonders what she would make of such a missive, especially the last line of the exordium, where – contrary to the design of the *ars dictaminis* – Don Armado refers to his reader’s “lowliness,” not a term likely to engender warm feelings toward the reader, however true it might be. Rather than obeying the unwritten rule of the *ars dictaminis* that indicates that letters in general and *exordiums* in particular should flatter the reader, Don Armado’s *exordium* ends instead by flattering himself. By giving Don Armado yet another rambling, unfocused letter and furthermore twisting the traditional use of the *exordium*, Shakespeare creates a second, equally absurd letter following the dictates of the *ars dictaminis*, an impression that continues to the very close of the letter: "Thus, expecting thy reply, I profane my lips on thy foot, my eyes on thy picture. and my heart on thy every part. Thine, in the dearest design of industry, Don Adriano de Armado."⁹² Upon hearing this letter read aloud, the princess seems to be speaking for Shakespeare himself when she decries the writer of this communiqué as "a plume of feathers," a "weathercock."⁹³

2.3 Break with Tradition: Shakespeare's Amendment of the *Ars Dictaminis*

Beginning in the late medieval and early modern period, education was heavily influenced by the ideas of humanism, one of which included the refinement of the Latin language, a return to “pure” Latin. According to Judith Rice Henderson, the “classicizing of Latin was a gradual development even in the cradle of the Renaissance, Italy, but it accelerated dramatically in the mid-fifteenth century with the circulation of Lorenzo Valla’s *Elegantiae* in the 1440s.”⁹⁴ As a result of this classicizing of Latin, the *ars dictaminis* fell under new scrutiny, for while the Renaissance humanists respected the structure of the *ars dictaminis*, they quickly attacked the grammar as “barbaric.”⁹⁵ Henderson specifically identifies the “widespread dissemination...of Valla’s *Elegantiarum linguae latinae libri sex* and its imitators after 1470” as

⁹² *Love's Labor's Lost*, 4.1.85-89.

⁹³ *Love's Labor's Lost*, 4.1.96-97.

⁹⁴ Judith Rice Henderson, “Valla’s *Elegantiae* and the Humanist Attack on the *ars dictaminis*” *Rhetorica*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Spring 2001): 249-268.

pivotal in the fading of the *ars dictaminis*, for after the publication of this work, humanists such as Erasmus began heavy criticism of the *ars dictaminis*' grammar. The "preposterous flattery of late medieval salutations" came quickly under humanist attack as such formulas of obsequiousness began to seem more and more ridiculous to scholars.⁹⁶ Since humanism heavily influenced education, *Twelfth Night*'s Maria would not have been taught the *ars dictaminis*; indeed, if she learned to write any kind of letter at all, it would have followed more along the lines of the vernacular letter. The *ars dictaminis* was only used at the highest levels of state, and the specific purpose of the *ars dictaminis* was not simply to send one's aunt an update on her nieces and nephews or to relate the events of the past month to an absent lover or to avow one's undying love. Quite the opposite in fact, according to Malcolm Richardson:

On the whole, when medieval people wrote, they did not write to relate events to each other. Rather, their proto-capitalist culture demanded that they narrate the circulation of commodities. In other words, they sent each other bills.⁹⁷

By the early modern period, Shakespeare's time, however, people had different reasons for writing. Letters were now being sent for a variety reasons other than matters of state or petitions of some sort. Familiar letters were more common, though still limited to those with the educational level to write, read, and understand them. At this point, letter-writing had changed from the medieval *ars dictaminis*, a much-respected form of legal communication between the elite of society, to such a level that it is not inconceivable that a high-born servant such as Maria might use a letter as a practical joke to take down an opponent and to stir up some excitement for sheer entertainment.

This fading of the importance of the *ars dictaminis* can be linked to a variety of factors, but perhaps the most important of these factors, for England at least, was the rise of royal missives and private business letters as the preferred formats for writing. While the Chancery

⁹⁶ Ibid. 250.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 251.

⁹⁷ Malcolm Richardson, "The Fading Influence of the Medieval *Ars Dictaminis* in England After 1400", *Rhetorica*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Spring 2001): 225-247.

continued to use the *ars dictaminis* in formal communications with other countries, especially Italy, at home in England the private letter grew in popularity.⁹⁸ These letters were written in the vernacular, unlike the *ars dictaminis*, which used Latin as their language, and did not adhere to the rigid, five-part structure of the *ars dictaminis*; they were shorter, focused on one topic, and far more concise than the elaborate, extensive *ars dictaminis*. The popular vernacular letters began to appear in noticeable amounts around 1420 AD⁹⁹, and letters written by literate citizens (gentry, merchants, and lawyers) in the fifteenth century “show no direct awareness whatsoever of the *ars dictaminis*.”¹⁰⁰ By the time Shakespeare was writing his plays, the influence of humanism in education had effected a change in the way people wrote letters; although business letters still more or less followed the *ars dictaminis*, the overwhelming majority of letters sent were private letters, which were written in a more conversational, informal manner. The formality behind the traditions of the *ars dictaminis* had changed so completely that in his play *Twelfth Night*, servants can use letter-writing for practical jokes. Maria’s letter serves a very real rhetorical purpose in the play by demonstrating the uses of letter-writing during Shakespeare’s time and showing how the purposes and format for writing had changed since the inception of the *ars dictaminis*, with its specific usage and formal style.

In contrast to the *ars dictaminis*’s traditional five-part approach, Maria’s fake letter has no such formal salutation but begins only with “To the unknown beloved, this, and my good wishes.”¹⁰¹ Olivia is a member of the aristocracy, Malvolio is not, and yet there is no sense of the social order being preserved in the salutation of “Olivia’s” letter. If she had really written a letter proclaiming her love for Malvolio, perhaps she may have wanted to express the idea that he was her equal or maybe even her superior; “Olivia” could have started the letter with a flowery address that showed such thoughts. Rather than addressing “my most deserving love”

⁹⁸ Ibid. 227.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 228. Especially the war-report letters of Henry V. These lent authority to epistles written in the English language, and those who needed to write – gentry, merchants, lawyers – quickly adopted this idea of sending letters in their own language.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 230.

¹⁰¹ *Twelfth Night*, 2.5.87-88.

or "the master of my heart," this letter's salutation refuses even to attempt the kind of obsequiousness generally found in the salutations of most formal letters. Since the underlying purpose of the salutation of the *ars dictaminis* was to preserve the social order, the simple greeting of the forged letter at the heart of *Twelfth Night* is a strong suggestion that Maria's letter is not a part of this ancient tradition.

While there are similarities between the forged letter and the ancient *ars dictaminis*, few would categorize Maria's letter as a pure example of *ars dictaminis*. Its basic style follows some of the same outline as the *ars dictaminis*, but the stylistic differences are great, especially in the salutation. Of course, even if "Olivia" had tried to write "her" letter in the *ars dictaminis* style, the salutation part may have been challenging to write in the correct manner for the simple fact that the *ars dictaminis* was not designed to be the template used for writing love letters.

In *Love's Labor's Lost*, Shakespeare makes the *ars dictaminis* the sole property of his comic relief character, Don Armado. Berowne, Longaville, Dumain and King Ferdinand also write and send letters within the scope of the play, but since Shakespeare intends for these to be likable characters, their writing style is decidedly different from that of the loquacious style so often employed by Don Armado. Rather than continuing with the *ars dictaminis*, the king and his men write much more modern, vernacular-style letters. Berowne's is the only epistle to bear any form of salutation, and this is limited simply to "To the snow-white hand of the most beauteous Lady Rosaline."¹⁰² Likewise, he writes the only conclusion that we are shown in any of the king's men's letters - a simple "Your ladyship's in all desired employment, Berowne."¹⁰³ Each of the letters penned by Ferdinand and his men to their ladyloves contain poetic language, but without the exaggeration of Don Armado's letters. The king's men are better writers, able to craft rhyming couplets full of figurative language and classical allusion without falling into a parody of themselves the way Don Armado does in his letters. Shakespeare's preference again seems to be for a vernacular letter, rather than one that follows the strictures of the *ars dictaminis*.

¹⁰² *Love's Labor's Lost*, 4.2.138-139.

¹⁰³ *Love's Labor's Lost*, 4.2.141-142.

Certainly Maria's letter in *Twelfth Night* also reflects both of these influences, as it is clearly written in English, rather than Latin, and is fairly concise. As Maria is a gentlewoman-in-waiting, she is evidently not a member of the Chancery and would not have had any knowledge of or use for the *ars dictaminis*. Furthermore, as a citizen writing a letter in the late sixteenth century, it is unlikely Maria would have known anything about the *ars dictaminis*, not only from lack of usage across the country, but also from her own educational experiences, such as they may have been.

2.4 Conclusion

While much has been made of the letters in *Twelfth Night* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, the vast majority of the discussion has focused on the ways in which the letters function within the plot (i.e. the results they produce). Certainly the letters in these two plays do produce comedic plot twists, but Shakespeare understands that their potential for humor goes far beyond this. The point of this paper has been to reveal Shakespeare's treatment of letters in these two comedies to generate laughter through both comedic situations and linguistic-stylistic means via the *ars dictaminis*.

Letters in *Love's Labor's Lost* and *Twelfth Night* are central to the greatest comedic situations in each play, not only in terms of the plot twists they produce, but also because of the way they reach an Elizabethan audience on a personal level. Shakespeare's understanding of his contemporaries' ambivalence and even anxiety regarding the delivery of letters comes through in the plot device of the miscarried letter. Elizabethans distrusted the postal system, a fact that Shakespeare exploits in both plays, exploring the various ways that *communications can break down through the post*. Letters are miscarried in *Love's Labor's Lost*, letters' true senders are obscured in *Twelfth Night*, and one letter (Sir Andrew's) is deliberately misplaced before it can reach its intended recipient. Furthermore, the letters create a variety of social inversions that both scandalize and excite an Elizabethan audience; scandalize because theirs is a very class-conscious society, but excite because for the first time in generations, social

mobility was at least a remote possibility. For some characters, like *Twelfth Night's* Maria, the social inversion she creates through her letter works to her advantage, winning her an aristocratic husband; for others, their social-climbing ambitions fail to come to fruition.

Finally, Shakespeare takes on the venerated tradition of the *ars dictaminis* and transforms it into a vehicle for humor, ironically proving simultaneously that he himself is quite capable of crafting letters in the very style that he is satirizing. By presenting the *ars dictaminis* as a style that may be appropriated for comedic purposes, Shakespeare transforms this dignified style into a medium that touches on the class and gender anxieties within his audience. His awareness of these issues and his insight into how letters and the writing thereof can reveal common Elizabethan insecurities allow Shakespeare to create comedy in novel ways in these two comedies.

APPENDIX A

LETTER FROM HILDEGARD OF BINGEN TO BERNARD OF CLAIRVEAUX

O venerable father Bernard, I lay my claim before you, for, highly honored by God, you bring fear to the immoral foolishness of this world and, in your intense zeal and burning love for the Son of God, gather men into Christ's army to fight under the banner of the cross against pagan savagery. I beseech you in the name of the Living God to give heed to my queries.

Father, I am greatly disturbed by a vision which has appeared to me through divine revelation, a vision seen not with my fleshly eyes but only in my spirit. Wretched, and indeed more than wretched in my womanly condition, I have from earliest childhood seen great marvels which my tongue has no power to express but which the Spirit of God has taught me that I may believe. Steadfast and gentle father, in your kindness respond to me, your unworthy servant, who has never, from her earliest childhood, lived one hour free from anxiety. In your piety and wisdom look in your spirit, as you have been taught by the Holy Spirit, and from your heart bring comfort to your handmaiden.

Through this vision which touches my heart and soul like a burning flame, teaching me profundities of meaning, I have an inward understanding of the Psalter, the Gospels, and other volumes. Nevertheless, I do not receive this knowledge in German. Indeed, I have no formal training at all, for I know how to read only on the most elementary level, certainly with no deep analysis. But please give me your opinion in this matter, because I am untaught and untrained in exterior material, but am only taught inwardly, in my spirit. Hence my halting, unsure speech.

When I hear from your pious wisdom, I will be comforted. For with the single exception of a certain monk in whose exemplary life I have the utmost confidence, I have not dared to tell these things to anyone, since there are so many heresies abroad in the land, as I have heard. I have, in fact, revealed all my secrets to this man, and he has given me consolation, for these are great and fearsome matters.

Now, father, for the love of God, I seek consolation from you, that I may be assured. More than two years ago, indeed, I saw you in a vision, like a man looking straight into the sun,

bold and unafraid. And I wept, because I myself am so timid and fearful. Good and gentle father, I have been placed in your care so that you might reveal to me through our correspondence whether I should speak these things openly or keep my silence, because I have great anxiety about this vision with respect to how much I should speak about what I have seen and heard. In the meantime, because I have kept silent about this vision, I have been laid low, bedridden in my infirmities, and am unable to raise myself up.

Therefore, I weep with sorrow before you. For in my nature, I am unstable because I am caught in the winepress, that tree rooted in Adam by the devil's deceit which brought about his exile into this wayward world. Yet, now, rising up, I run to you. And I say to you: You are not inconstant, but are always lifting up the tree, a victor in your spirit, lifting up not only yourself but also the whole world unto salvation. You are indeed the eagle gazing directly at the sun.

And so I beseech your aid, through the serenity of the Father and through His wondrous Word and through the sweet moisture of compunction, the Spirit of truth, and through that holy sound, which all creation echoes, and through that same Word which gave birth to the world, and through the sublimity of the Father, who sent the Word with sweet fruitfulness into the womb of the Virgin, from which He soaked up flesh, just as honey is surrounded by the honeycomb. And may that Sound, the power of the Father, fall upon your heart and lift up your spirit so that you may respond expeditiously to these words of mine, taking care, of course, to seek all these things from God—with regard to the person or the mystery itself—while you are passing through the gateway of your soul, so that you may come to know all these things in God. Farewell, be strong in your spirit, and be a mighty warrior for God.

Amen.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen : Volume 1.* Hildegard.; Baird, Joseph L.; Ehrman, Radd K. New York, Oxford Oxford University Press (US), 1998, p 27-28.

APPENDIX B

LETTER FROM ANSELM, ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, TO MATILDA OF SCOTLAND

To Matilda, glorious queen of the English, reverend lady, most beloved daughter: Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, sending the blessing of God and his faithful service with prayers. Let me speak briefly, but from the heart, as to that person whom I desire to advance from an earthly kingdom to a heavenly one. When I hear anything about you which is not pleasing to God or advantageous for you, and if I then neglected to admonish you, I would neither fear God nor would I love you as I should.

After I left England I heard that you were dealing with the churches in your hands otherwise than is expedient for them or for your own soul. I do not wish to say here how you are acting — according to what I have been told — because to no one is it better known than to yourself. Therefore, I beseech you as my lady, advise you as my queen and admonish you as my daughter — as I have done before — that the churches of God which are in your power should know you as mother, as nurse, as kind lady and queen. I do not say this concerning those churches alone but about all the churches in England to which your help can be extended. For he who says that "each one will receive according to what he has done in his body whether good or evil" does not exclude anyone.

Again I beg, advise and admonish you, my dearest lady and daughter, not to consider these things heedlessly in your mind, but, if your conscience testifies that you have anything to correct in this matter, hasten to correct it so that in future you will not offend God, as far as this is possible for you through his grace. Concerning the past, if you see that you have failed in your duty, you should make him favorable towards you. Surely, it is not enough for someone to desist from evil unless he takes care, if possible, to make amends for what he has done. May almighty God always guide you so that he may repay you with eternal life.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ *Sancti Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi, Opera Omnia*, ed. F.S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1946-63), ep.346, 5.284-85; translation and annotation from *The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Walter Fröhlich, Cistercian Studies 142, 3v (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990-94), 3.75-76. Online at Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, <<http://epistolae.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/letter/405.html>>

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