

A Note in Reply to Alastair Fowler*

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Many readers of *Connotations* will share my delight to find one of the undisputed masters in the field of literary hermeneutics putting his mind to the riddle of Maria's letter. Accordingly, if I beg to raise a few doubts concerning Professor Fowler's suggestion, this should be regarded as something like the contribution of a pupil who esteems his teacher no less for giving him a chance to disagree.

Professor Fowler takes exception with Leslie Hotson's answer to the riddle, extending his objections to "other solutions proposed in *Connotations* 1.2, 1.3, and 2.1" (269). This comes as a bit of a surprise since no suggestions about the riddle were made in *Connotations* 1.3 and 2.1. Professor Fowler may have been thinking of Professor Tobin's (aptly) quoting a passage from Gabriel Harvey's *Ciceronianus* which underlines the parallel between Harvey and Malvolio, both being entranced by capital letters. But Tobin expressly says that "here is not the key to unlocking the meaning of 'M.O.A.I.'"¹ In *Connotations* 1.2, John Russell Brown has indeed proposed a solution to the riddle,² but since he does not treat it as an acronym, Fowler's objections do not apply to him either.

On the other hand, Professor Fowler's own proposal does not fully convince. It is based on three assumptions, first, that "M.O.A.I." is an anagram because anagrams were more common than acronyms; secondly, that this anagram "for any educated Elizabethan puzzle-solver . . . would have had one immediately obvious meaning: namely, OMNIA"; and thirdly, that OMNIA implies the tag OMNIA VANITAS.

All these assumptions are purely conjectural. Perhaps anagrams were more common than acronyms, but this does not prove a particular

*Reference: Alastair Fowler, "Maria's Riddle," *Connotations* 2.3 (1992): 269-70.

sequence of letters to be an anagram. Quite the opposite may be true. If, for example, the love of abbreviations was not a general phenomenon but characteristic of a particular type or group (lawyers, for example, or pedants like Harvey), this group might be satirized by using absurd abbreviations. In addition, Fowler's alternative is misleading: "M.O.A.I." hardly works as an acronym since *moai* does not read easily as a word. It may be an anagram, or an abbreviation with each letter being spelt out separately (a pronunciation suggested by the full stops). Professor Fowler's proposal, by the way, only makes sense if it is regarded as an abbreviation as well as an anagram, i.e. if OMIA is read as an abbreviation for OMNIA VANITAS. But then all other possible combinations of the two techniques may be equally correct.

If "M.O.A.I." is an anagram, we may wonder why Maria is using four letters when five are meant. The four letters might just as well be read as *moia*, an Italian exclamation translated by Florio as "*tush, fye, plough, gup, no no, what? and is it so? Good Lord. Also, let him dye.*"³ I do not think that this is an answer to the riddle, but it shows the arbitrary nature of this kind of solution. Moreover, OMNIA may, perhaps, be *seen* in "M.O.A.I.," but certainly not heard. The audience only knows Maria's letter from listening to Malvolio reading aloud, and even the most skilful of actors cannot pronounce a tilde over the M.

Perhaps the least convincing of Professor Fowler's assumptions is the third one. The fact that in a particular manuscript of Primaudaye's *French Academy* appears the marginal inscription OIA VANITAS does not suggest that this is meant by "M.O.A.I." in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Even if we grant that "M.O.A.I." stands for OMNIA there is no evidence that a continuation is alluded to, or that VANITAS was the most common continuation. (And even if it were, again we do not know whether the most common is the right one in this particular context.) A glance into Hans Walther's compendium of Latin *sententiae* and proverbs will remind us that there were hundreds of tags beginning with *omnia*,⁴ many among them quite as common as "Omnia vanitas," for instance "Omnia mutantur" (from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) or "Omnia dat Dominus," "Omnia mors equat" "Omnia mea mecum porto," and so on. When it comes to the Bible, *omnia* figures at least as prominently, for example, in 1 Corinthians 9:22 as in Ecclesiastes 1:2. Lastly, OMNIA VANITAS

does not really fit into the context of the fictive letter. Vanity may be the dominant trait of Malvolio's character, and an embodiment of vanity may supposedly sway the life of the fictive writer of the letter. But "omnia vanitas" is a phrase *lamenting* the vanity of the world, and this does not quite make sense in Maria's "dish o' poison." What is required by the context is a name *exposing* Malvolio's conceit, his dream of being the beginning and the end of all things.

This leads us back to the "critical hypothesis" which started the discussion about Malvolio and Maria's letter in *Connotations*.⁵ In Professor Leimberg's article, a solution to "M.O.A.I." has been offered which has the advantage of being simple, of requiring only the four letters given in the text, and of fitting the context. It requires no combination of techniques, being neither acronym nor abbreviation: the letters themselves, in their right order, are forming the message. They are spelt out most effectively by Malvolio, exposing his desire to become the Pantocrator of his little world, its A and O, while indeed, in Fabian's words, "'O' shall end" when his mockers "make him cry 'O'" (2.5.133-34). As an echo or overtone of this perverted tetragram or divine name of I'M A-O, an all-comprising OMNIA may well be included, but so may abbreviations like I.O.M. (Iupiter Optimus Maximus),⁶ resembling the capitals cherished by Harvey, or the letters IAΩ as the Greek version of the name of Jahwe.⁷

Maria's "fustian riddle" works so well because it really allows Malvolio to try and discover his name in it, at the same time revealing the absurdity of his self-love. Malvolio's own words, however, tell us what makes it so difficult to read "M.O.A.I." as an anagram of his name: "'M'—But then there is no consonancy in the sequel; that suffers under probation" (130-31). He realizes that "every one of these letters are in my name" (141)—but not all the letters of Malvolio's name are in the riddle. Two consonants are missing, L and V, indicating what is really lacking in him who is neither lover nor beloved.

NOTES

¹J. J. M. Tobin, "A Response to Matthias Bauer, 'Count Malvolio, Machevill, and Vice'," *Connotations* 2 (1992): 77.

²"More about Laughing at 'M.O.A.I.' (A Response to Inge Leimberg)," *Connotations* 1 (1991): 187-90.

³John Florio, *A World of Words* (London, 1598; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1972) 229.

⁴In the medieval part of his work alone, mostly derived from Renaissance collections, *omnia* tags cover numbers 19949a to 20102. See Hans Walther (ed.), *Proverbia sententiaeque latinitatis medii aevi: Lateinische Sprichwörter und Sentenzen des Mittelalters in alphabetischer Anordnung*, vol. 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).

⁵Inge Leimberg, "'M.O.A.I.' Trying to Share the Joke in *Twelfth Night* 2.5 (A Critical Hypothesis)," *Connotations* 1 (1991): 78-95.

⁶See Adriano Cappelli, *Dizionario di abbreviature latine ed italiane*, 6th ed. (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1987) 469, where a number of additions to "I.O.M." are given. "A." could mean "Augustus," "Aeternus" etc. The similar abbreviation "D.O.M.A." (probably "Deus Optimus Maximus Aeternus") was used, for example, by Andreas Libavius on the title pages of his works, e.g. his *Alchemia* (Frankfurt, 1597).

⁷See Franz Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1925) 39.