

## Maria's Riddle\*

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The interesting discussion of Maria's riddle ("M.O.A.I. doth sway my life": *Twelfth Night* 2.5.106) in recent issues of *Connotations* fruitfully returned to Leslie Hotson's earlier insight, that there may be a 'true' solution to the riddle, different from that arrived by Malvolio. Hotson's own suggestion, that M.O.A.I. is an acronym of *Mare Orbis Aer Ignis*, has rightly been rejected, since (1) M.O.A.I. seems not to have been a conventional acronym; and (2) the Four Elements are not specially apt to Olivia. Similar objections, however, apply to other solutions proposed in *Connotations* 1.2, 1.3, and 2.1.

Whereas acronyms were rare in the Renaissance, anagrams on the contrary abounded. Indeed, so popular was the anagram form that in France it was thought worth while to maintain an *Anagrammateur Royal*. For any educated Elizabethan puzzle-solver, the letters M.O.A.I. would have had one immediately obvious meaning: namely, OMNIA. By customary abbreviation 'omnia' could then be intelligibly written 'omia,' 'oia,' 'oma,' or 'oi'; the *m* and *n* being superscribed as tildes or omitted altogether. In *Twelfth Night* Maria does not need the *m*, but retains it as a bait for Malvolio's vanity.

OMNIA was the incipit of many proverbs and tags. One might instance Virgil's OMNIA VINCIT AMOR, which is apt to the context, and to the

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\*Reference: Inge Leimberg, "'M.O.A.I.' Trying to Share the Joke in *Twelfth Night* 2.5 (A Critical Hypothesis)," *Connotations* 1.1 (1991): 78-95; John Russell Brown, "More About Laughing at 'M.O.A.I.' (A Response to Inge Leimberg)," *Connotations* 1.2 (1991): 187-90; Inge Leimberg, "Maria's Theology and Other Questions (An Answer to John Russell Brown)," *Connotations* 1.2 (1991): 191-96; Matthias Bauer, "Count Malvolio, Machevill and Vice," *Connotations* 1.3 (1991): 224-43; J. J. M. Tobin, "A Response to Matthias Bauer, 'Count Malvolio, Machevill and Vice'," *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 76-81.

letters AMO. But no other continuation was so familiar as VANITAS, alluding to Ecclesiastes 1:2. As it happens, there is a close contextual analogue. For the tag occurs, similarly abbreviated, in a copy of Primaudaye's *The French Academy* in the Bodleian Library. On the flyleaf of Antiq. e. E. 67 (27522. e. 3), written in a near-contemporary hand, appears the marginal inscription OIA VANITAS.

I do not for a moment mean to suggest that all the other solutions proposed—some of them very attractive—should be rejected *tout court*. It suits the riddle form, and the dramatic context, that several half-solutions should offer themselves. But it seems to me that the optimally relevant solution is 'OMNIA (VANITAS).' Its aptness is manifold. "'All is vanity' does sway my life" fits Olivia's choice of celibate retirement harmlessly enough. Then, the pointed omission of 'vanity' impudently suggests that vanity in quite another sense sways Olivia, who, like her Steward Malvolio, is 'too proud' (1.5.254). Above all, there is delicious aptness in the solution's being a religious commonplace that Malvolio's vanity keeps him from recognizing.

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