

Shakespeare and Malapropisms

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"Malapropism" was named after Mrs Malaprop, a character in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), who had a habit of using words incorrectly. Malapropisms, however, were not originated by Sheridan, because long before Sheridan, i. e., in 1590s, Shakespeare created many characters who were addicted to them. Any writers did not create these characters (or at least consciously) before Shakespeare. Hardin Craig made a valuable remark about this: "there are excellent fantastically talking clowns in Greene, Peele, and Porter; but nowhere in early comedy have I been able to find a malaprop who directly suggests Bottom, Mistress Quickly, and Dogberry."¹ Bottom, Mistress Quickly and Dogberry are, of course, Shakespeare's creations. So malapropisms are peculiarly Shakespearean. And we know that many malapropisms were created by such writers as Fielding and Smolett after Shakespeare, but even till now Shakespeare is the most important writer in the history of English literature who has created them in large numbers with so many functions. It must be remembered as well that they are not merely the misused or misheard words to Shakespeare. It is deplorable, however, that there is not a single paper exclusively written about Shakespeare's malapropisms. So I hope it is not in vain for me to think about them in the following pages.

I. The Birth and Development of Malapropisms

Shakespeare's comedies are a treasure house of malapropisms. His earliest comedies like *The Comedy of Errors* (1592-3) or *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593-4), however, do not have any malapropisms. They are found in *Love's Labour's Lost* (1594-5) for the first time, and moreover, in large numbers. What are the reasons for a great flood of malapropisms in *Love's Labour's Lost*? I cannot but think of particular languages then in fashion and Shakespeare's greedy interest in them.

George Puttenham, author of *The Art of English Poesie* (1584), left behind a valuable remark about "ill maner of speach."

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Ye haue another intollerable ill maner of speach, which by the Greekes original we may call *fonde affectation*. . . . (young schollers) will seeme to coigne fine wordes out of the Latin, and vse new fangled speaches, thereby to shew themselues among the ignorant the better learned.²

I guess that “intollerable ill maner of speach” gives Shakespeare one of the clues to write *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, because he attempts the experiments of languages including “ill maner of speach” by using words of *fonde affectation*, words from Latin, words displaying one’s learning, and words of mixed functions in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, a play of “a great feast of languages.” Let us look at some examples as follows :

Nath. Videsne quis venit?
Hol. Vido, et gaudeo.
Arm. Chirrah! (To Moth.)
Hol. Quare Chirrah, not sirrah?

(*Love’s Labour’s Lost* 5. 1. 31-36)³

They here speak Latin only to show off their learning. As long as they talk among themselves who can well understand Latin each other, they do not cause embarrassment to any dramatic characters. An unlettered man like Costard, however, is in a different position. He speaks in bad Latin to Armado and Holofernes who respond with Latin and words of *fonde affectation* :

Cost. Go to ; thou hast it ad dunghill, at the fingers’ ends, as they say.
Hol. O, I smell false Latin ; dunghill for unguem.
Arm. Arts-man, praemulate, we will be singled from the barbarous.

(5. 1. 81-85)

They leave Costard in confusion. There is another example as well :

Biron. There’s thy guerdon ; go.
Cost. Gardon, O sweet gardon! better than remuneration, a ’leven-pence farthing better : most sweet gardon!

(3. 1. 171-74)

Costard tries to understand words derived from Latin and mistakes them. His misunderstanding is caused by Holofernes, Armado and Biron who display their knowledge of Latin. And there is another example :

Hol. The allusion holds in the exchange.

Dull. 'Tis true indeed ; the collusion holds in the exchange.
(4. 2. 42-43)

Dull tries to understand a word of affectation (not Latin) and mistakes it. Therefore we can say that it is a short step from Latin or words from Latin or words of affectation to their ignorant misapplication called malapropism. It is a logical conclusion that Shakespeare comes to originate malapropisms, following the above steps. At any rate these examples serve for the original pattern of Shakespeare's malapropisms.

Going ahead, Shakespeare comes to think of errors such as arise from mishearing of various expressions and makes malapropisms of mishearing such as "The tied were lost" in response to "You'll lose the tide" (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 2. 3. 39-41), or such as "In thy tail" in response to "In thy tale" (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 2. 3. 54-55). These examples are not Latin, nor the words from the display of learning, nor words of fond affectation, which we saw before. Malapropisms deriving from the original pattern begin to enlarge the scope of application not only in the above examples but also in the following examples. Characters who ludicrously misused words required their partners in the beginning because they made mistakes in response. They become, however, independent soon, and positively commit errors, which increase in large numbers with many functions.

II. The Communicatory Problem

Malapropisms are usually supposed to become confused in their meanings, because they deviate from the correct uses beyond the allowable limit. In Shakespeare's plays, however, supplementary devices are provided for a spectator to understand what malapropian characters originally wanted to say.

All his successors gone before him hath don't, and all his ancestors that come after may
... (The words in Gothic letters are malapropisms.)
(*The Merry Wives of Windsor* 1. 1. 14-16)

The words after misuse serve as a device for clearer understanding in the above quotation. Sometimes the preceding words make us understand the errors :

... and therefore welcome the sour cup of prosperity!
(*Love's Labour's Lost* 3. 1. 315)

If we do not have any subsidiary clues, then can we not understand what characters originally wanted to convey? The context serves now as a clue for understanding. Let us look at the following conversation.

Dog. Are you good men and true?

Verg. Yea, or else it were pity but they should suffer salvation, body and soul.

Dog. Nay, that were a punishment too good for them, if they should have any allegiance in them, being chosen for the prince's watch.

Verg. Well, give them their charge, neighbour Dogberry.

Dog. First, who think you the most desertless man to be constable?

First Watch. Hugh Otecake, sir, or George Seacole ; for they can write and read.

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 3. 1-12)

The conversation goes smoothly without giving any disturbance to a spectator when two speakers, strangely understanding each other (or misunderstanding each other), misuse words one after another.

After all Shakespeare's malapropisms have a distinctive quality of being easily understood regardless of clues. Why do they have this quality? It is because, I think, this quality is closely related to an amusing effect. An amusing effect is created by an immediate response, so he thinks it necessary to make a spectator notice errors immediately, and in consequence errors must be clear, sometimes more magnified than necessary. In other words Shakespeare has no choice but to make malapropisms understood without great difficulty (even if they become complicated) when he thinks to create the persons of language slips as dramatic characters. And this is the main difference between Shakespeare's malapropisms (or any literary malapropisms) and the language slips in our everyday life. The language slips in our everyday life pass unnoticed sometimes.

III. The Classification and Motives of Malapropisms

Malapropisms can be classified into two main types and subsidiary types. Type I consists of malapropisms of antonyms and its examples are as follows :

I would have confidence with you that decerns you nearly.

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 5. 3)

Is our whole dissembly appeared?

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 4. 2. 1.)

thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this.

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 4. 2. 57-58)

I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove.

(*A Midsummer-Night's Dream* 1. 2. 83-85)

Well, if ever I do see the merry days of desolation that I have seen some shall see.

(*Love's Labour's Lost*, 1. 2. 164-65)

If it please your honour, I know not well what they are : but precise villains they are, that I am sure of ; and void of all profanation in the world that good Christian ought to have.

(*Measure for Measure*, 2. 1. 53-56)

My wife, sir, whom I detest before heaven and your honour.

(*Measure for Measure*, 2. 1. 70)

The misused words are "decerns," "dissembly," "redemption," "aggravate," "desolation," "profanation," and "detest" which are originally meant to be "concerns," "assembly," "damnation," "make softer," "happiness," "reverence," and "respect," respectively. Many malapropisms of Shakespeare belong to this type.⁴

Type II consists of malapropisms which are similar in form or sound to the correct words initially expected.

Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehend two aspicious persons.

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 5. 51)

... by this time our sexton hath reformed Signior Leonato of the matter.

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, 5. 1. 261-63)

I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split.

(*A Midsummer-Night's Dream* 1. 2. 31-33)

I have an exposition of sleep come upon me.

(*A Midsummer-Night's Dream* 4. 1. 41)

I will tell your worship more of the wart the next time we have confidence.

(*The Merry Wives of Windsor* 1. 4. 170-72)

The misused words are "comprehend," "aspicious," "reformed," "Ercles," "exposition," and "confidence," which are originally meant to be "apprehend," "suspicious," "informed," "Hercules," "disposition," and "conference," respectively.⁵ Malapropisms of this type which developed directly from the original pattern of Shakespeare's malapropisms referred before, are made from mishearing or misunderstanding or ignorance.

Arm. Sirrah Costard, I will enfranchise thee.

Cost. O, marry me to one Frances.

(*Love's Labour's Lost* 3. 1. 123-24)

Remuneration! O that's the Latin word for three farthings.

(*Love's Labour's Lost* 3. 1. 141-42)

'Hang-hog' is Latin for bacon, I warrant you.

(*The Merry Wives of Windsor* 4. 1. 51)

They are often made from the existing words similar in form or sound,⁶ but sometimes made from neologisms :

Adieu, be visitant, I beseech you.

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 3. 100)

It shall be suffigance.

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 5. 57)

“Visitant,” and “suffigance” are quite new words, which are originally meant to be “vigilant,” and “sufficient.”⁷ The others come into being from misuse of terms of respect,⁸ and inaccurate grammatical relationship caused by the location of words⁹ and parts of speech,¹⁰ and so forth.

Next we must clarify how malapropisms are intended. Some characters have intention to make a bluff :

Dull. I myself reprehend his own person, for I am his grace’s tharborough.

(*Love’s Labour’s Lost* 1. 1. 184-85)

Dog. Dost thou not *suspect* my place!

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 4. 2. 76)

It is amusing to find that, contrary to their intention, they are often mocked because of their misuse of words. They are lower-class officials like Dogberry (*Much Ado about Nothing*), Verges (*Much Ado about Nothing*), Dull (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*), Elbow (*Measure for Measure*) and Shallow (*Henry IV*).

Even among this kind of persons we have ones who are sometimes wise enough to ridicule others.

Dull. Signior Arme--Arme--commends you. There’s villainy abroad : this letter will tell you more.

Cost. Sir, the contempts thereof are as touching me.

(*Love’s Labour’s Lost* 1. 1. 188-92)

Speed. What an ass art thou! I understand thee not.

Launce. What a block art thou, that thou canst not! My staff understands me.

(*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 2. 5. 25-28)

Costard mistakes “contempts” for “contents (of a letter),” and imperturbably expresses a contempt for Dull. Launce intentionally misunderstands what Speed says, and makes a fool of him. But of course many of them who are addicted to malapropisms are not wise. They are often the embodiment of stupidity. When we compare the following quotations :

Secton. Which be the malefactors?

Dog. Marry, that am I, and my partner,

(*Much Ado about Nothing* 4. 2. 3-4)

Arm. Sirrah Costard, I will enfranchise thee.

Cost. O, marry me to one Francis,

(*Love’s Labour’s Lost* 3. 1. 121-22)

we can know the differences of two characters. Dogberry foolishly misunderstands "malefactors" to his disadvantage, while Costard cleverly misunderstands to his advantage. Costard now is a wise clown, but, ironically enough, the very existence of Costard greatly characterizes Shakespeare's malapropisms and causes them to disappear at the same time. Costard's family consists of clowns including Launce (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*), Lancelot (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and Pompey (*Measure for Measure*).

Shakespeare also makes malapropisms clarifying the reality. Bottom, Quince, and Quickly, who are workingmen or a workingwoman, often cause a simple laugh by their errors, but sometimes misuse words complicatedly.

Quin. Marry, our play is The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby.

(*A Midsummer-Night's Dream* 1. 2. 11-13)

Quince makes a mistake, but she casually reveals what a normal sentence cannot transmit. When we think deeply, tragedy may be comedy after all. It is interesting to find that the real aspect can be made clear by a nonsensical expression such as Quince's misuse.

IV. Disappearance of Malapropisms

Malapropisms enjoy great prosperity in *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Measure for Measure*. We cannot, however, find them in Shakespeare's tragedies nor in his romantic comedies, nor in his dark comedies except *Measure for Measure*. Malapropisms are destined to disappear after 1600. Shakespeare, whose interest in high sounding words prompted him to make malapropisms, quickly lost his interest in both of them after 1600. It is an interesting fact that the birth and disappearance of his malapropisms coincide with those of his high sounding words.

Now the reasons of disappearance of his malapropisms must be made clear. First, it can be related directly to the growth of Shakespeare's clowns. As we have seen, clowns of low social position and little intelligence, or workingmen or workingwomen, use or hear words incorrectly from their ignorance or misunderstanding. Nevertheless they sometimes could express a contempt for others, or make a fool of others, or clarify the reality. They sometimes became wise.

It is generally conceived that dramatic characters utter words which the dramatist (Shakespeare) intends them to speak, and that there is no gap between them. However, I think a gap comes into existence between the consciousness of Shakespeare and of his malapropian characters. In Shakespeare's plays words are misused or misheard by illiterate persons, as is shown by the original pattern of Shakespeare's malapropisms, and the meanings and functions of malapropisms gradually develop and malapropian characters such as Costard finally become

mature and wise. "Intelligent malapropian character" is a great literary achievement, but essentially, a contradiction in terms. I think Shakespeare acutely felt the limitation of malapropisms when he attained to their full development, and began to hasten the growth of wise fools who never misuse words. So malapropian characters disappear before the great growth of conscious fools or clowns such as Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night* or a fool in *King Lear*. As Viola says of Feste : "this fellow is wise enough to play the fool" (*Twelfth Night* 3. 1. 67), Shakespeare's fools come to have higher intelligence than wise men, and say many things--reveal the real nature, for example--with their strong consciousness. So once again Shakespeare's consciousness is consistent with his characters' (fools', for example) consciousness. This means that Shakespeare cannot allow them to use or hear words incorrectly any longer.

Secondarily the disappearance of his malapropisms can be attributed to the facts that he throws off his high sounding words and comes to have a mature style after 1600. After having greedily attempted every possible expressions in his early years, Shakespeare begins to rid of superfluous expressions and imply more meanings with economical, subdued and natural expressions. The importance of silence to which Hamlet says : "The rest is silence." is incompatible with the world of the malapropisms.

NOTES

- 1 Hardin Craig, "Shakespeare and Wilson's Arte of Rhetorique, An Inquiry into the Criteria for Determining Sources," *Studies in Philology*, XXVIII (1931), p. 88.
- 2 George Puttenham (Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker, eds.), *The Arte of English Poesie* (rpd. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 251-52.
- 3 All quotation from Shakespeare's plays are from (William George Clark and William Aldis Wright, eds.) *The Works of William Shakespeare* (rpt. London, Macmillan & Co., 1961), Lines and scene references are to this Globe edition.
- 4 The additional examples are as follows : *Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 3. 3. "salvation" (damnation), 5 "allegiance" (treason), 10 "desartless" (qualified), 16 "by nature" (acquired), 37 "tolerable" (intolerable), 189 "obey"(order), 3. 5. 12 "blunt" (sharp), 34 "excepting" (respecting), 4. 2. 76 "suspect" (respect), 81 "piety" (treachery), 5. 1. 261 "the plaintiff" (the accused), 295 "youth" (old man), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 1. 1. 14 "successors" (ancestors), 15 "ancestors" (successors), 1. 4. 79 "lost" (acquired), *Love's Labour's Lost* 1. 1. 316 "prosperity" (affliction), 1. 2. 169 "silent" (eloquent), *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* 1. 2. 2. "generally" (individually), 3. 1. 63 "disfigure" (present), *Measure for Measure* 2. 1. 88 "varlets" (honourable men), 89 "honourable man" (varlet).
- 5 The additional examples are as follows : *Much Ado about Nothing* 4.2. 69 "opinioned" (pinioned), *Love's Labour's Lost* 1. 1. 184 "reprehend" (represent), 191 "contempts" (contents), *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* 3. 1. 40 "defect" (effect), 5. 1. 200 "Shafalus" (Cephalus).
- 6 The additional examples are as follows : *Love's Labour's Lost* 3. 1. 172 "gardon", 4. 2. 44 "collusion", 5. 1. 84 "unguem," *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 2. 3. 4. "prodigious," 41 "the tied," 56 "tail," 2. 5. 25 "understand," 3. 1. 281 "master's ship," *The Merchant of Venice* 2. 2. 152 "defect," 2. 5. 20 "reproach," *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 4. 1. 29 "polecate."
- 7 The additional examples are as follows : *Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 3. 26 "vagrom" (vagabond), 4. 2.

- 38 "eftest" (most convenient), *Love's Labour's Lost* 5. 1. 44 "honorificabilitudinitatibus" (in the state of being capable of honour).
- 8 The additional examples are as follows : *Merry Wives of Windsor* 2. 2. 41 "vouchsafe," *Much Ado about Nothing* 5. 2. 332 "correct yourself," 335 "humbly."
- 9 The additional examples are as follows : *Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 5. 22 "poor," *Measure for Measure* 2. 1.47 "poor."
- 10 The example is as follows : *Much Ado about Nothing* 3. 5. 64 "examination."

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