The ‘Shakespeare’s Unteachable Words’ session at the 2016 World Shakespeare Conference came into being, as many good things do, during a conversation I had with Lucy Munro. We wondered together if we could imagine a panel that could combine my interest in pedantry with her current research on oaths, and it became a bit of a game to find a conceptual framework that was broad enough to contain our multitudes. Since, as the article that follows here will make clear, my own writing was beginning to revolve around difficult words (such as honorificabilitudinitatibus) and nonsensical constructions in the early printings of Love’s Labours Lost, the idea of language that resisted ordinary acts of teacherly explication started to rise to the surface. Could there be such a thing, we asked ourselves, as a word or a class of language that was in some sense resistant to standard pedagogical practice? Do early modern oaths have a power that we can no longer identify or reasonably transmit? Do Latinate nonsense and scholastic in-jokes have a reasonable place in our world any more? And, as Indira Ghose went on to ask as she joined us in our efforts, is there any way to properly locate for our students the language of ‘honesty’ and ‘honour’ so central to early modern England’s nascent ideas about class? These questions are all subsidiary lines stemming from what became our central theme: did Shakespeare write any unteachable words?

My own approach to this problem was directed in part by a few of Jacques Rancière’s ideas about pedagogy, set out in the early pages of The Ignorant Schoolmaster. For Rancière (writing, admittedly, from a subject position defined by the French academy of the 1980s), the classroom is a scene of enforced stupidity or ‘stultification’, the term translator Kristen Ross uses for Rancière’s ‘abrutir’. While those of us who are firmly interpellated into pedagogical scenarios by our own lifetimes of teaching and learning might see the act of teaching as a gift, or as a process of endowment, Rancière’s analysis finds darker tones in the meeting of two minds:

There is stultification whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another. A person—and a child in particular—may need a master when his own will is not strong enough to set him on track and keep him there. But that subjection is purely one of will over will. It becomes stultification when it links an intelligence to another intelligence. In the act of teaching and learning there are two wills and two intelligences. We will call their coincidence stultification.1

While this assessment is perhaps less directly applicable to the often conversational, dialogic classrooms of the early twenty-first century Anglophone world, the premise is worth holding up as a refractive lens for the problem of pedagogy in Shakespearean

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on marginal glosses and past classroom lessons to guide me through semantic problems as I wend my way through *Hamlet* for the 700th time. Horribly, the practical conversations I use to put my students at ease about ignorance simply reinforce the point: I know a lot about how to learn Shakespeare. Rancière’s terms are rough, but necessary and clarifying. Even at my charming professorial best, I stultify.

Out of all Shakespeare’s comedies, *Love’s Labour Lost* may be the one that is most interested in the relationship between ignorance and pedagogy. From the almost immediate failure of the King’s Academy to the jests that are volleyed back and forth and back again between lords and ladies and foresters and pages and clowns, nearly everyone in the play gets a chance to enact the Rancièrean exchange. Even the character named ‘Dull’ gets in a decent zinger at one point. And in what may be the clearest sign of the play’s pedagogical engagements, a long list of critics have used the play to discuss the relative intelligence of Shakespeare himself, sorting through its classical in-jokes in pursuit of the school-boy life of Stratford’s natural genius. Of course, the focal points of all this in the play are the pedantic, pretentious, scholar-figures of Holofernes and Nathaniel, both of whom love nothing more than to explicate everything around them and every hard word they hear. These two characters are exemplary models for a certain kind of glossorial authority that we in our own roles as scholars, teachers, and editors often adopt as we curate or present Shakespeare’s texts for readers and students. What follows here rests on the premise that we can

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2 Rancière’s ur-Ignoramus is Joseph Jacotot, who, in the 1820s ‘taught’ a group of Flemish speakers French despite his inability to speak Flemish. He gave his students a bilingual translation of *Telemaque* and told them to learn what they could. Within six months, the story goes, they all understood French.

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learn quite a bit about our own silent assumptions pertaining to related forms of editorial and scholarly authority by pursuing the parallel courses that appear between our work and those of the ludicrous scholars in the forest of Navarre. We can, I will suggest, think more clearly about our own pedagogical biases if we look to the words or phrases in Shakespeare’s plays (and especially in Love’s Labour’s Lost) that resist explanation, that may be unteachable in some way, and that mock us, as we push back against them.

EMPTY WORDS

The boundaries between stupidity and intelligence in Love Labour’s Lost are often drawn by the material diversity of language, by unusual transactions between words that do things with their semantic content and words that mean nothing but do things just by simply being there. Characters across the play’s social spectrum use meaningless phrases to prove themselves in battles for the momentary currency of cleverness. In the first act, for example, Berowne ends a set of manly rhyme-wrestling within the newly forged Academy of Navarre with a phrase that no one around him understands:

**King.** How well he’s read, to reason against reading.
**Dumaine.** Proceeded well, to stop all good proceeding.
**Longaville.** He weeds the corn and still lets grow the weeding.
**Berowne.** The spring is near when green geese are a-breeding.

(1.1.94–7)

When questioned about his joke, Berowne agrees with Dumaine that the phrase is ‘In reason nothing’, but it has just enough substance ‘in rhyme’ to fit into place. It is formally decorous, in other words, but it lacks functional semantic content. This combination turns out to be a deeply effective one. Berowne wins the boys’ game by enacting, illustrating and exaggerating its meaninglessness. The ornate, lyrical wit most loved by the Academy is powerfully punctuated by Berowne’s ability to stop making sense. As a result, his nonsense helps construct a central organizing feature of the play’s social hierarchy: Berowne’s privilege is marked out, in part, by his ability to deploy semantically empty (and novel) language without being stained by it.

At the other end of the play’s imagined spectrum lies Costard, usually named in the early texts’ speech-headings as a rustic ‘Clown’, whose job in the play is mainly to mis-deliver letters, misunderstand elaborate diction and get caught canoodling with Jaquenetta. Costard is also, however, the speaker of the linguistic equivalent of the pedantic Holy of Holies, the longest latinate term in all of Shakespeare and, indeed, one of the sixteenth century’s favorite emblems of ludicrous suffixation: honorificabilitudinitatibus. The literal meaning

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5 Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Love’s Labour’s Lost are taken from H. R. Woodhuysen, ed. The Arden Shakespeare (London, 1998).

6 Occasionally, critics will mistake the social logic of the play for the true state of things. Here is one editor on the play’s novel diction: ‘Armado and Holofemes between them are responsible for the majority of these new words; but Biron is the third most important contributor to the total and, while their new words smell of the inkhorn, his do not. They appear as natural growths from the native soil of plain English usage. They need no gloss and have never needed one.’ G. R. Hibbard, ed. Love’s Labour’s Lost (Oxford, 1990), pp. 36–7. What does an inkhorn smell like?

7 For a (the?) thoroughgoing survey of the appearance of honorificabilitudinitatibus in medieval and Renaissance contexts, see the entry on the word on, strangely enough, Wikipedia.com. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honorificabilitudinitatibus (accessed May 2016). Thank you, anonymous contributors. Also relevant: Noel Malcolm’s discussion on ‘Macaronics, word-coining, gibberish, and coining’ in the introduction to The Origins of English Nonsense (London, 1997), where he points
of the word is something like ‘the state of being able to accept honours’, but, importantly, this definition has absolutely nothing to do with the word’s effect in the text. While there are many people in the play who speak Latin (more or less), Costard is definitively not one of them (see 3.1.132–6, where he decides that ‘Remuneration’ is ‘the Latin word for three farthings’). Costard uses honorificabilitudinitatibus not to indicate someone’s honorificabilitudinitatrix, but rather to tell a joke about Moth’s size:

I marvel thy Master hath not eaten thee for a word, for thou are not so long by the head as honori

Costard works with honorificabilitudinitatibus like a modern English-speaking child works with anti-disestablishmentarianism: to him, it means no more and no less than ‘extremely long word’. It is a sound to be spoken with as many syllables as possible and then, figuratively, to be eaten.

There is, of course, a joke here for learned audience members or readers who might have encountered the word in other contexts, since the less-than-scholarly Costard would not be expected, from their perspective, to speak this way. Patricia Parker argues that moments like these in Love’s Labour’s Lost critique the values and language of elite culture by deflating or ‘deforming’ them. This is true, but a differently valenced leveling effect is also at work. Audience members and readers (both in Shakespeare’s time and in ours) need no particular education to laugh at the sound or sight of a huge word. Difficult Latin, in other words, can be funny to audiences who do not speak a word of it. It can be absolutely empty of content but still do its job.

Now – a bit of scholarly explication. If one wanted to be especially pedantic (and of course, I do), one could present a series of philological facts pertaining to this word. It appears in mainly scholastic contexts with varying degrees of irony beginning in the eighth century; it is used, most famously, by Erasmus in his Adages to poke fun at someone who loves long words and it had become by the later sixteenth century a clear marker for jokes about pedantry and ludicrous latinate terms. Fair enough. But while I am interested in all this, I am not sure it helps us understand the power of the term in Love’s Labour’s Lost. By the time we get to Shakespeare’s day, the word’s meaning or distant historical context has little to do with its purposes. John Marston, for example, uses it in The Dutch Courtesan in 1605 to let Crispinella compare another character’s annoying ‘discourse’ to ‘the long word honorificabilitudinitatibus: ‘a great deale / Of sound and no sence’. Erasmian jokes and clerical winks are besides the point. No one seems to care what the word means at all.

The gigantic hollowed-out space of honorificabilitudinitatibus makes it seem a bit like a container waiting to be filled when it appears in Love’s Labour’s Lost. As a result, it has a fairly strange position in the work of people who feel that empty spaces should not exist in Shakespeare’s plays. The term, most strikingly, became an elaborate staging ground for believers in the Baconian hypothesis. Following Isaac Hull Platt, Edward Durning-Lawrence and others saw in honorificabilitudinitatibus a central clue in the all-too-obvious ciphers that Sir Francis had left behind in the plays [Illustration 10]. Elizabethan courtiers certainly enjoyed playing games with anagrams but, as

out the link between Latinizing word games and Rabelais (p. 105). See also Anne Prescott, Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England (New Haven, 1998).

Parker’s argument in ‘Preposterous Reversals’ (cited above) is worth quoting at length: ‘If from the perspective of the higher social orders in this play, the appropriate response to Costard’s (or Armado’s) imperfect mastery of “manner and form” is mockery and ridicule, from another perspective these deformations, turnings, and varyings reflect on far more than the lower orders in the play: the “high” is brought “low” not only by the iterations of parodic mimicry but through exposures (such as the cheeky servant Moth’s) of how open to manipulation are the forms themselves (how “preposterously” led by bodily desire, rather than, more loftily, the other way around), when such turning or varying becomes a means through which the pretensions of the aristocrats are themselves deflated’ (p. 439).

Sir Edward Durning-Lawrence, Bt. Bacon is Shake-Speare (London, 1910), p. 102. See also Isaac Hull Platt, Are the
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and that therefore the true solution of the meaning of the long word “Honorificabilitudinitatibus,” about which so much nonsense has been written, is without possibility of doubt or question to be found by arranging the letters to form the Latin hexameter.

HI LUDI F. BACONIS NATI TUITI ORBI

These plays F. Bacon’s offspring are preserved for the world.

It is not possible to afford a clearer mechanical proof that

THE SHAKESPEARE PLAYS ARE BACON’S OFFSPRING.

It is not possible to make a clearer and more definite statement that

BACON IS THE AUTHOR OF THE PLAYS.


Rabbinic ciphers aside, I do think the appearance of this word in the early printed editions of Love’s Labour’s Lost is a kind of clue – just not the sort that Durning-Lawrence and his co-religionists wanted it to be. The 1598 Quarto of Love’s Labour’s Lost (Q1) does, in fact, draw attention to the non-semantic force of the word by emphasizing its material letters-forms. Nearly every bit of Latin in the play is set in italics. Costard’s honorificabilitudinitatibus is a notable exception.11 Typographically speaking, in other words, the word does not perform as ordinary Latin. And why would it need to? The


10 These anagrams (along with hundreds of thousands of other possibilities) can be revealed through tedious weeks and months of letter-arranging, or by visiting the Internet Anagram Server at http://wordsmith.org/anagram/ which does the job in three seconds or so.

11 A qualification: the appearance of this word in roman type may have its roots in the exigencies of typesetting, rather than being a bit of print-shop or scribal interpretation – it is the final word on a line of prose, and there is no room for it on the next one down. It’s possible that setting the word in italic type would have made it too long for the text block. It is also possible that the shop was running low on italic letters when they set this Latin-heavy forme. That said, the effect of the decision, whatever its cause, is to visually set this particular bit of Latin apart for a reader. For an excellent recent discussion of typographical variation in the printing of non-English in early modern playbooks, see Marjorie Rubright, ‘Dutch impressions: The narcissism of minor differences in print’, in Doppelgänger Dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch Relations in Early Modern English Literature and Culture (Philadelphia, 2014), pp. 110–61. Thanks also to Claire Bourne for directing me toward the typographical oddities of early printings of Love’s Labour’s Lost.
nonsensical quality of the word is just as funny as its more abstruse scholastic reference – and for today’s audiences it is certainly funnier. If we grant as much, Costard’s joke performs in type and in sound as a levelling mechanism, inviting all kinds of people, learned and not, to laugh at its thirteen syllables. Sixteenth-century jokes that are organized by Latin and pedantry, in other words, are not only aimed at people who have spent time in school. The satirical thrust of nonsensical language does not always map onto or reinforce the kinds of social stratification that people invested in educational competencies sometimes take for granted in the Shakespearean text. Lynne Magnusson’s ideas about the pleasures of linguistic multiplicity in Love’s Labour’s Lost and Parker’s sense of the play’s preposterous effects hold true even, or perhaps especially, when words themselves do extra-semantic work.12

These ideas might help shed light on one of the oddest editorial cruxes in Love’s Labour’s Lost. It is found in the conversation between Holofernes (here, ‘Peda’, for the stock figure ‘Pedant’) and Nathaniel (here, ‘Curat’) about Don Armado, whose ornate rhetorical stylings are simply too ‘peregrinat’ for their taste (square brackets indicate my insertions):

PEDA. I abhorre such phanatticall phantasims, such insolcable and point devise companions, such rackers of ortagриphie, as to speake dout sine [b], when he should say doubt; det when he shold pronounce debt; de b t, not det; he clepeth a Calfe, a Caufe: a halfe, haufe: neighbour vocatur nebour; neigh abreviated ne: this is abhominable, which he would call abbominable, it insinuateth me of insociable and point devise companions, such rackers of ortagриphie, as to speake dout sine [b], when he should say doubt; det when he shold pronounce debt; de b t, not det; he clepeth a Calfe, a Caufe: a halfe, haufe: neighbour vocatur nebour; neigh abreviated ne: this is abhominable, which he would call abbominable, it insinuateth me of inf [s?]amie: ne intelligis domine, to make frantique lunatique?

CURAT. Lais deo, bene intelligo.

PEDA. Bone boon for boon prescian, a little scratcht, twil serve.13 (1598, F4r)

There are many typographical and syntactical mysteries in this passage (including the most ironic weird spelling in the Shakespeare canon – ‘ortagриphie’), but it is the final bits of Latinesque nonsense that interest me here. ‘Bone boon for boon prescian, a little scratcht twill serve’ is a showpiece of a textual tangle, and most editors view it as having been unravelled. Theobald, in his edition of 1733, decided that Holofernes was responding to and correcting an error in Nathaniel’s speech. He emends the line to ‘Bone? Bone for bene; Priscian, a little scratcht; ’twill serve’ (where ‘Priscian’ refers to the author of a well-known Latin grammar text).14 Of course, all this assumes that Nathaniel has actually made the mistake of saying ‘bone’ for ‘bene’ one line earlier, which is not the case in Q or F. In order for Theobald to make sense of Holofernes’s line, he had to un-edit Nathaniel’s line and insert a grammatical error of his own into it. Bad Latin abounds, even when things look to have been set aright.

But I am more interested in the text’s obvious problems than in their solutions. Where did this jumble come from? Was it the product of someone’s mistake? If so, what is the nature of the error that led to it? These are not easy questions to answer with any certainty. The chain of transmission for the playtext is, as always, a bit of a mystery. There is general agreement that Q1 was based on the kind of manuscript we have come to call authorial ‘foul papers’, but even if this was definitively proven to be the case, we would have no idea how many people were involved in the series of events that led to the Bome-ing and the boon-ing.15 Did someone in William White’s print shop misread the manuscript copy? Did someone mis-transcribe a playhouse or authorial manuscript

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13 I’ve amended ‘u’ to ‘v’ but otherwise kept the spellings in Q1.
15 On the difficulties inherent to the designation ‘foul papers’ along with other terms used to describe lost print-shop manuscripts, see John Jowett’s brief discussion in ‘Editing Shakespeare in the twentieth century’, in Shakespeare Survey 59 (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 1–19; pp. 9–13; and Paul Werstine’s more thorough critique of those terms as they were set out by W. W. Greg, Early Modern Playhouse Manuscripts, esp. p. 50.
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when he made a copy for the publisher? Was Shakespeare himself the source of the mess? Or was some other reviser, editor, actor or transcriber part of the chain of transmission? Exactly whose stupidity are we dealing with here?

Since we will never positively know the answer to this question, it might be worth lingering on the fairly solid premise that whoever set the type for the 1598 and Folio versions of Love’s Labour’s Lost likely did not see erroneous stupidity here. The extant copies of Q1 Love’s Labour’s Lost, as Paul Werstine has demonstrated, show evidence of stop-press corrections and, while it is unclear whether or not the forme that contains ‘Bome boon for boon prescian’ was ever corrected (no variant states have been found), Werstine suspects that whoever dealt with the typesetting for Love’s Labour’s Lost had some knowledge of Latin. With that in mind, he suggests the play’s many extant errors in Latin case, number and spelling might have been left uncorrected on otherwise corrected formes because they were assumed to be part of the conventional, stage-pedant satire aimed at Holofernes and Nathaniel. And while other kinds of errors in Q1 Love’s Labour’s Lost were changed when the Folio text was set (possibly, though not certainly, from a corrected or supplemented version of Q1), the strange passage was reprinted as — and it was retained in F2 (1632), in which other errors in foreign languages that were retained in F1 were amended. For at least a few early readers of Love’s Labour’s Lost, then, ‘Bome boon for boon prescian’ seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing for Holofernes to say. That inexplicable line at that moment seemed to them to be as intelligent or, at the very least, as intelligible as anything else in the text they were creating. Scholars, apparently, sometimes say absolutely meaningless things.

POETIC NONSENSE

The kinds of questions Stephen Orgel pursues in his foundational brief essay ‘The Poetics of Incomprehensibility’ are clearly relevant here, though in a slightly different key. What if our impulse to make sense out of nonsense hides an important facet of a Shakespearean text? What if our ‘commonsense’ decision to perform our/ Shakespeare’s learnedness by clarifying obscurity and emending the impossible interferes with other kinds of meaning that shaped the reception of Shakespeare’s plays in print and performance? For Orgel, these questions are inspired by cranky passages by modern editors’ Burkhardtian assumptions that the English Renaissance existed as ‘an integrated culture that still spoke a universal language’, Orgel has a tendency to preserve, if only partially, an underlying authority in the person of an intelligent Shakespeare: in every bit of textual obscurity, he suggests, ‘the playwright must ... have meant something’. As we have seen, however, in the case of Love’s Labour’s Lost, it is in no way clear that the earliest readers of the play would have felt this way. ‘Bome boon for boon prescian’ is not obscure,

16 Paul Werstine, ‘Variants in the First Quarto of Love’s Labour’s Lost’, Shakespeare Survey 12 (Cambridge, 1979), 35–47. Werstine’s supposition is based on the skill showed by White’s shop with printing Latin text in other books, in addition to his observation that Latin goes uncorrected on formes which show evidence of careful proofreading elsewhere. This was, in his assessment, a case of educated non-correction.


18 On F Love’s Labour’s Lost, see Stanley Wells, ‘The copy for the Folio text of Love’s Labour’s Lost’, Review of English Studies, n.s. 31, 130 (1982), 137–47 along with the critique of Wells’s conclusions by Sonia Massai in Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 144–9. It is worth noting, too, that the title page of the 1598 edition advertises that the play has been ‘Newly corrected and amended’, suggesting that there may be a lost earlier edition of the play (Q0). If so, then this odd passage in the 1598 edition might have already survived one round of edits – though since we have no idea what the text of Q0 looks/looked like, it is impossible to say for sure.


exactly. It does not prove an emotional state or confuse for the purpose of plot development. It is more like a bearer of non-signification, unlearned and not smart, yet passed over or accepted in edition after edition, meaning be damned.

There may, in fact, be a potentially learned reason for this nonsensical phrase to have seemed properly, even artfully, placed in the lines of Holofernes. There was a healthy tradition of poetic nonsense in the period, a tradition that sat adjacent to the satirical portraits of pedants and needless Latinate complexity in early modern England. Here, for example, is a commendatory poem written by Thomas Randolph for the 1630 edition of James Shirley’s play The Grateful Servant. The voice Randolph adopts borrows more than a bit from the figure of the stage-pedant:

I cannot fulminate or tonitruate words;  
To puzzle intellects my ninth lase affords  
No sychophoronian buskins, nor can straine  
Gargantuan lines to Gigantize thy veine,  
Nor make a iusiurand, that thy great playes  
Are terra del fo’gos or incognitæs.  
Thy Pegasus in his admirable carreere  
Curvets on Capreolos of nonsence here.21

Randolph’s jokey fustian pedantism is an off-shoot of the rich vein of seventeenth-century nonsense poetry documented at some length by Noel Malcolm in his anthology The Origins of English Nonsense.22 Much of this poetry dances along the borderline of referential intelligence, though it is always, in the end, meaningless. Take this snippet from a John Taylor poem printed in his pamphlet Sir Gregory Nonsense: His Newes from no place:

Then did the Turnetripe on the Coast of France  
Catch fifteen hundred thousand Grashoppers,  
With fourteeene Spanish Needles bumbasted,  
Pooch’d with the Eggs of fourscore Flanders Mares,  
Mounted upon the foot of Caucasus,  
They world the football of conspiring fate23

Given this ludicrous mess, it might not be surprising to learn that Taylor’s epistolary preface in Sir Gregory Nonsense begins with a familiar salutation to the pamphlet’s entirely imaginary dedicatee, Master Trim Tram Senceles: ‘Most Honorificabilitudinitatibus’ (A3r). Nearly ten years earlier, Taylor had experimented with pedantic nonsense verse in a text that explicitly named the ‘no place’ from which Sir Gregory hailed: Odeomb’s Complaint: Or CORIATS funeral Epicedium . . ., which was printed in London, despite the mock colophon at the foot of the title page, ‘Printed for merrie recreation, and are to be sold at the salvation in Utopia. 1613.’ This pamphlet opens with a verse apology that makes Taylor sound at times like Berowne expounding upon the formal decorousness of his meaningless ‘green geese’ crack: ‘I know my Dactils, and my Spondees well; / My true proportion, & my equal measure’ (A3r). The point is more or less proven by the pamphlet’s collection of nonsense poems written, ostensibly, to mourn the death of Thomas Coryate, author of the infamous travel text Coryats Crudities (1611). That book, in turn, is a veritable mother lode of nonsense verse that sounds quite like the impossible Latin of Holofernes. Among its many prefatory poems, Coryats Crudities contains several written in authentically structured nonsensical foreign languages. The most famous of the bunch is titled ‘In the Utopian tongue’, by Henry Peacham, and it begins with this truly mystifying couplet: ‘Ny thalomin ythsi Coryate lachmah babowns / O Asian Europans Americ-werowans.’24 Not to be outdone, Taylor included an ‘Epitaph in

21 James Shirley, The Gratefull Servant (London, 1630), A3r. The text gives ‘sychophoronian’; pedants of my stripe will like to know that this is a misreading for ‘lychophonian’.


the Utopian tongue’ in Ondcomb’s Complaint, which begins ‘Nortumbulum callimiquash onys- 
tolton quashate burash. / Scribuke woshtay solusabay perambulatushte’ (B3n).25 That poem 
seats alongside an ‘Epitaph in the Barnmooda ton-
gue, which must be pronounced with the accent 
of the grunting of the hogge’ (a brief sample: ‘Animog trogh deradrogh manmogh hogh 
Flondrogh calpsoghe’ (B2v)).26

These experiments in quasi-exotic, placelessly 
foreign nonsense poetry tempt the scholar in all of 
us by being almost language. Like Bone boon for boon prescian, the Utopian or ‘Barmooodan’ lines of 
Taylor and Peacham arrange phonemes in believable sequences, luring readers (and editors) into 
trying to solve the puzzle of translation. The few 
times I have presented these poems on slides in 
public lectures, I have poked fun at my audience 
members, knowing that many of them were doing 
their best to parse them out or solve their seeming 
mysteries (I asked – they were). But as far as I can 
tell, the pieces of these puzzles add up to no more 
and no less than a particularly effective kind of 
 scholar bait, an emptiness that acts on us, that 
jibes at us, that tests us with its nothing. If words 
can have agency, these are just begging to be 
glossed.

On at least one occasion, they were. One nonsen 
se poem in Coryats Crudities presents its own 
helpful scholar in its margins, like Spenser’s ‘col- 
laborator’ E. K. in the Shepheardes Calendar. But 
whereas E. K. generally makes sense, the glossing 
voice in John Hoskins’s ‘Cabalistical verses’ inter 
venes in an entirely meaningless context, 
defining in some detail the word ‘Gymnosophist,’ but leaving unexplained the 
remainder of the poem, including, for example, 
its reference to ‘your equinoctial pasticrust / 
Projecting out a purple chariot wheele’.27

Hoskins’s marginal gloss on ‘Gymnosophist’ 
holds the gesture of annotation up to the satirical 
gaze, manipulating and exposing scholarly credit 
by ironizing it.28 The joke here not only pokes 
fun at pedants who take their classical vocabularies 
a bit too seriously, but it also brings its wide range 
of readers into a knowing community that might 
now recognize, whatever their level of education, 
that there are different styles or dispositions in the 
social field defined by what Carsten Madsen has 
called the ‘hermeneutic gesture’ of the gloss.29

There is, again, a joke for more learned readers 
built into the accessible premise – the first 
‘Utopian’ poem, which appeared in the earliest 
editions of Thomas More’s Utopia, contains the 
word ‘Gymnosophoon’ in the midst of its own nonsense language. But as is the case with 
Costard’s ‘honoriicabilitudinitibus’, one does not really need to be formally educated to learn 
from this glossing joke. A marginal definition of 
nothing can function quite well as a joke on its 
own terms. We do not need to be experts on no-
place for it to do its work.

SENSIBLE IN THE DULLER PARTS

Modern editors and teachers tend to not engage 
with this kind of contextual nonsense when they 
decide how to handle obscure, meaningless pas 
sages in Shakespeare. Generally speaking, we share 
Theobald’s assumption that something as disorgan 
ized as ‘Bone boon for boon prescian’ could not be

25 The tittle in ‘callimiquash’ stands in for the printer’s mark indicating that the word has been shortened to save space on the line (usually an N or M has been omitted). But in this case, it is hard to know exactly what is missing here. What is 
the longer version of this imaginary, non-existent word? Ask John Taylor.

26 For recent work on Coryate and the prefatory poems that appeared in (and out of) his Crudities, see 
Michelle O’Callaghan, The English Wits: Literature and 
102–52; Anthony Parr, Renaissance Mad Voyages: Experiments 
in Early Modern English Travel (Burlington, VT, 2015), pp. 
165–76; and Katharine Craik, ‘Reading Coryats Crudities 
(1611)’, SEL 44 (2007), 43–60.

27 Coryate, sig. e6r. Sir Andrew Aguecheek uses similar lan 
guage as he recalls Feste joking around about ‘the Vapians 
passing the equinoctial of Queubus’ (2.3.23).

28 On the ways in which authors and readers sort through and 
create meaning in glosses, see Jane Griffith, Diverting 
Authority: Experimental Glossing Practice in Manuscript and 

a purposeful or, at the very least, a meaningful element in a Shakespearean text. There are, I have suggested, good reasons for our resistance to nonsense of this sort. But as we pursue attempts to undo textual tangles, we should do so for reasons other than the less-than-clear idea that they (and their entanglers) interfere with our access to the performance of Shakespeare’s learnedness. If we use the Shakespearean text as a screen onto which we project our most knowledgeable selves, if we ignore the cultural place of obscurity or nonsense, we run the risk of reproducing Holofernes’s and Nathaniel’s own pedantic errors in Love’s Labour’s Lost. Those imaginary scholars are infuriated by nonsensical constructions which disrupt their fantasy of an ideal, cogent style. Nathaniel’s assessment of Dull’s capabilities sets out the broader social logic at play here. Listen for the echoes of Rancière’s stuﬁtul brute:

Sir, he hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book. He hath not eat paper, as it were; he hath not drunk ink. His intellect is not replenished. He is only an animal, only sensible in the duller parts. And such barren plants are set before us that we thankful should be— which we of taste and feeling are—for those parts that do fructify in us more than he. (4.2.24–9)

Shakespeare here simultaneously enacts and mocks the familiar pattern in which one person’s presumably poor performance is used to set oﬀ the skills possessed by ‘we of taste and feeling’. Nathaniel does it to Dull. We all do it to Nathaniel, when we laugh at his pretentions. But as we critique the ﬁgure of the pedant, and as we seek to identify or clarify the errors of Holofernes or Nathaniel or Shakespeare or a compositor both in text and in sociable performance, we should be clear that a larger set of relationships is at stake. The satirical ﬁgure of the pedant always offers more than just a satire of pedantry. The gloss always offers more than a helpful explanation. Both help create our understanding of the practice of teaching and learning in which diﬀerent styles and textual markers structure a larger ﬁeld. Our classiﬁcations or ranked judgements of teachers, students, texts, and modes of education can mask (if we adapt a Bourdieuvian frame) a wider network of economic or political relationships that subtend or structure the limits of stylistic possibility built into the educational ﬁeld.30 When we read the pedant in Love’s Labour’s Lost, when we teach the outlines of the early modern educational ﬁeld, when we separate out the stupid labour of a print-house compositor from a hypothetically intelligent Shakespearean copytext, and when we explain the true meaning of a meaningless phrase, we are likewise contributing to the history of our own emplacement within educational institutions and their corollary networks. This process should be named as such.

As I hope I have begun to suggest here, our own performances of knowledge in these contexts are deeply pressured by the incomprehensible hybrid Latiﬁnglish in the early printings of Love’s Labour’s Lost. When we work to erase it, to render the words of our pedants sensible, we draw lines that do not simply reveal the diﬀerences between the stupid and the smart, or the knowing and the unknowing, but rather bring those categories into being.31 It is all too easy to use these categories to ﬁll the empty spaces of St Paul’s churchyard with shadowy compositors and scribes, all standing between us and Shakespeare’s educated genius. It is easy, too, to ﬁll our classrooms with imagined students who cannot understand what our own ﬁne brains have to oﬀer. But rather than honoring ourselves, what if we attempt to ﬁnd a bearing marked by being antihonoriﬁcabilitudinitatibus in these scenarios? Complex knowledge and explication is never the only route to textual, semantic or comic clarity. We do not have to be masters of ﬁgure and trope and Latin to understand the joke of the pedant ﬁgure; we do not have to be well-versed in sententiae culled from Horace or Cicero or simple school-room dialogues to enjoy Love’s Labour’s Lost; we do not have to have been taught by 30 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power, trans. Lauretta Clough (Palo Alto, CA, 1996).
a ponderously self-obsessive language-twister or a terrible punster to get the mockery that is aimed at Holofernes. The point of all these difficult terms, especially in performance as words float into being, is not just to wink at audience members who have been in school. Satirical pedantry, like other forms of art or text that depict differences based on cultural competencies, can incorporate new knowledge communities in audiences and readers, regardless of their previous experience with school-room pedantry itself. If early modern drama really was able to inflect the political life or affiliations of its participants, if drama could re-form social communities into new arrangements without explicitly setting out to do so, stage pedants might be seen as exemplary figures in that process. I hope that lesson can still be learned by us, as we think about our own places in contemporary life as teachers of a subject and, more particularly, of an author who is on the one hand a standard-bearer of privileged culture but is also on the other hand a metonymic figure for a caricatured pedantry within the academy.

In the classroom, we might perform Shakespeare’s unteachable words in ways that permit them to be just that. We might hold up their incomprehensibility not as something that always needs to be squashed out of existence in an edition or explicated into sense but use them rather as the tools they are, use them to animate comic scenarios in which teachers and students share in the pleasure of befuddlement. In our time of deep confusion, we might find ways to let a comic fog do its job, even as we clarify for ourselves and our communities the political stakes of knowledge and our struggle to put it to good ends.