

**“IF WE OFFEND, IT IS WITH OUR GOOD WILL”:¹ MALAPROPISMS,
MISPRONUNCIATION AND GARBLING OF LANGUAGE IN SHAKESPEARE'S
PLAYS**

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This paper will focus on how Shakespeare often introduces characters with language challenges or difficulties in his plays. These come in a range of forms and include, to name but a few, malapropisms with unintentional comic effect, non-native English speakers whose mispronunciation of English provides much amusement and misunderstandings and various other garblers of the English language. These verbal failings are usually viewed as Shakespeare poking fun at the ignorance of commoners or foreigners, in contrast, of course, to the more eloquent voices of their social superiors. One can, however, view these utterances as a subversive means of ridiculing or deflating the pompous language of the rich and powerful. Perhaps these garblers are yet another kind of wise clown or fool used by Shakespeare, so effectively in the comedies in particular, to comment insightfully on the events transpiring on stage.

¹ References to Shakespeare's works are from The Norton Shakespeare.

“IF WE OFFEND, IT IS WITH OUR GOOD WILL”: МАЛАПРОПІЗМИ, НЕПРАВИЛЬНА ВИМОВА ТА СПОТВОРЕННЯ МОВИ В П’ЕСАХ ШЕКСПІРА

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У статті зосереджена увага на п’єсах Шекспіра, в яких персонажі мають певні мовні проблеми і труднощі. Вони виявляються у різноманітних формах і стосуються, наприклад, малапропізмів з ненавмисним комічним ефектом, а саме персонажів, які не є носіями англійської мови, чия неправильна вимова викликає багато сміху, призводить до непорозумінь, а також інших різних спотворень в англійській мові. Зазвичай ці словесні недоліки вважають глузуванням Шекспіра над невіглаством простолюдинів чи іноземців, на відміну від, звісно ж, більш красномовних голосів людей із вищим соціальним статусом. Проте ці висловлювання можна розглядати як руйнівний засіб висміювання чи приниження пафосної мови багатіїв та можновладців. Спотворення, виявлені у мові мудрих блазнів або дурнів й доволі успішно використані зокрема в комедіях Шекспіра, покликані більш влучно змалювати події, які розгортаються на сцені.

Introduction. Shakespeare’s plays contain a rich, varied range of fools. These include professional fools or jesters, often wearing the uniform of the profession: Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, King Lear’s unnamed fool). These would have undoubtedly been played by actors such as Will Kempe who specialized in these types of roles and would have probably improvised at times. These same actors could have also taken a turn at various characters I categorize under the label of clown/simpleton/country bumpkin (Lancelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*, Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Slender in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*). Yet another group of characters consists of foreigners whose mispronunciations provide comic entertainment (Fluellen and Katherine in *Henry V*, Evans and Caius in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*). Middle-aged women of the world are often figures rife with comic potential (Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mistress Quickly in the three Henry plays from the Second Henriad) with the humour only enhanced, of course, by the fact that they were originally male actors playing in drag. Shakespeare is also fond of including clever servants (Grumio in *The Taming of the Shrew*) and Miles Gloriosus soldier types such as Pistol, (again in the Second Henriad) in his plays. Finally, we have the category of pedants/moralists (Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Polonius in *Hamlet* and Jacques in *As You Like It*) whose pomposity and wise sayings end up having the opposite effect. This is by no means meant to be

a definitive categorization, but they do amount to arguably the most well-known stock comedic types in the plays. This paper will focus, however, on foolish characters who overlap in terms of types, but who are all characterized by their amusing use and misuse of the English language.

The verbal devices which will be the focus can be sub-divided into the following areas. The first, the category of the malapropism, takes its name of course from Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s comedy of manners *The Rivals* from 1775 which includes the delightful character of Mrs. Malaprop whose unintentional verbal gaffes provide much amusement and entertainment. This particular kind of utterance is also known as a Dogberryism, which is in reference to the comic constable in *Much Ado About Nothing*, to be discussed in more detail below. Although Shakespeare’s character appears almost a century earlier, the Sheridan derived term seems to have become established first. These malapropisms can be further divided into garbling of language and verbal gaffes (something comes out wrong from what is intended), slips of the tongue or what we would now call Freudian slips).

On a related note, Shakespeare also occasionally introduces foreign characters whose mispronunciation of an English word or phrase creates misunderstandings, often involving unintended sexual innuendo. These at times revolve around what we now refer to in linguists as false friends. Shakespeare also makes use, particularly in the history plays, of what I refer to

as parroting or mocking wherein an individual lower on the social skill repeats the grand phrasing of an aristocratic or noble personage (“Once More Unto the Breach”, Henry V, 3:1:1). This technique also has much in common with what we would now refer to as passive/aggressive behaviour and language.

Finally, Shakespeare’s plays are rife with puns and quibbles where often the more verbally gifted individual ridicules a less witty character beneath them on the social scale (Mercutio’s merciless mocking of the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Hamlet’s bullying of Polonius, the verbal banter between Petruchio and Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Northrop Frye in his seminal text *Anatomy of Criticism* has this to say on the matter: “Renaissance comedy, unlike Roman comedy, had a great variety of such characters, professional fools, clowns, pages, singers, and incidental characters with established comic habits like malapropism or foreign accents” (Frye, 162).

Research material and methods. My own approach in this paper will be to draw attention to what I refer to as alternative/marginalized/dissident/subversive voices. The focus is often on episodes or throw-away scenes which mirror or parallel a more important scene in a play and which foreshadow or echo events which have already taken place or which are yet to come. I also attempt to draw attention to that most Shakespearian of paradoxes, most eloquently voiced by the professional jester Touchstone: “The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool” (As You Like It, 5.1: 31–32) or echoed by Feste “I wear not motley in my brain” (Twelfth Night, 1.5: 52–53). I have argued elsewhere that rich, fruitful readings of the plays can often be provided by focusing on minor characters (women, children, servants, working-class types), these being characters, of course, which Shakespeare had a free reign with unlike most of the main personages (Livingstone, 2011). I am indebted to insights provided by a range of critical theory, most obviously in this particular paper to Festive/Carnival theory (C. L. Barber, Northrop Frye). Feminist (Jean E. Howard, Phyllis Rackin) and Marxist (Robert Weimann, Louis Montrose) readings have also drawn deserved attention to the underdogs and disadvantaged in the plays. Post-Colonial Approaches (Leslie Fielder, Edward W. Said) have focused attention on foreign characters in the play and attempted to redress established stereotypes and racist assumptions regarding their depictions. The contributions of Cultural Materialism (Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore) and New Historicism (Stephen Greenblatt) have also done much to stir the pot and re-evaluate the time-honoured and often fossilized approaches of the past. Finally, I am indebted to the classic text *Shakespeare’s Bawdy* by Eric Partridge which introduced me to Shakespeare’s “potty mouth”

and helped demystify and humanize his often overly revered use of language.

Results and discussion. The Prologue to the Pyramus and Thisbe play performed by the Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* serves as an excellent introduction to the topic and the technique. To put this speech into context, one must recall the fact that the lovers have experienced a transformation in the forest the night before and are completely unaware of what has actually happened to them. Prior to the play performance by the groundlings led by Bottom, who will be discussed in more detail at a later point, Duke Theseus arrogantly proclaims the following to his fresh bride Hippolyta: “I never may believe/These antique fables, nor these fairy toys. Loves and madmen have such seething brains” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 5.1: 2–4). He goes on to dismiss poets, lovers and madmen as all similarly disillusioned, and this coming from a mythical character himself on his wedding night.

One of the actors, delivering the Prologue to the play, has come out to beg the audience members for patience with their amateur attempts, perhaps even addressing in certain performances an aristocratic or royal audience. His speech reeks, however, of mock humility and thinly disguised contempt and aggression directed arguably at the fictional characters on the upper scale of society, but also at the actual Elizabethan elite.

If we offend, it is with our good will.

That you should think, we come not to offend,

But with good will. To show our simple skill,

That is the true beginning of our end (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 5.1: 114–118).

The Prologue’s garbled language actually communicates the exact opposite of what would be expected. Instead of apologizing for raising any hackles or controversy, he seems to be rubbing it in their noses.

Consider then, we come but in despite.

We do not come, as minding to content you,

Our true intent is. All for your delight

We are not here. That you should here repent you (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 5.1: 119–122).

This apology for the shortcomings of the play could actually be interpreted as the mechanicals’ direct challenge to the social order of the day. It could also be viewed as Shakespeare’s own thinly veiled expression of disgust concerning the wealthy patrons he is forced to cater to despite their ignorance concerning art and poetry.

I will argue that the earlier mentioned Dogberry character, a constable police officer in the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, serves a similar purpose to the previously discussed passage. This play borders on a problem play as the ‘happy ending’ is problematic to say the least. The treatment of Hero is difficult to make

palatable for a contemporary sensibility. Despite his seeming ignorance and stupidity, Dogberry is the one who discovers the evil plot launched by Don Juan. In other words, the ‘fool’ once again saves the day, while the ‘sophisticated’ nobles are completely clueless with their behaviour and misjudgment almost leading to tragic results. Dogberry’s stupidity and verbal gaffes could be read as a commentary on, or a mirror of, the people in charge. In this first appearance, he is providing instructions to his subordinates on how to proceed with the police work at hand.

Dogberry. You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch; therefore bear you the lanthorn. This is your charge: you shall comprehend all vagrom men; you are to bid any man stand, in the Prince’s name.

Second Watch. How if ‘a will not stand?

Dogberry. Why then, take no note of him, but let him go, and presently call the rest of the watch together and thank God you are rid of a knave (Much Ado About Nothing, 3.1: 28–30).

The absurdity of the entire political system is exposed here where justice is a mockery and an innocent young woman almost pays the price of death for superficial gossip and misjudgments. Dogberry’s line in the following act: “O villain! Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this” (Much Ado About Nothing, 4.2: 58–59), where he seems to substitute the word redemption for damnation, provides an astute commentary on a world where society is ruled by corrupt aristocrats who would be common criminals if not for their wealth and social status.

Finally, Borachio’s commentary near the end of the play “What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light” (Much Ado About Nothing, 5.1: 242–244) demonstrates the paradoxical nature of justice in the play. Dogberry’s final words also provide a final jumbled contemptuous commentary on the ignoble behaviour of the so-called nobility: “I humbly give you leave to depart; and if a merry meeting may be wished, God prohibit it! Come, neighbor” (Much Ado About Nothing, 5.1: 340–342). Despite his rather absurd name, Dogberry is in many respects the most admirable and insightful character in the play.

The Nurse (a wet nurse and nanny it seems) in *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most memorable minor characters in all of Shakespeare. Like her kindred spirit Mistress Quickly discussed below, she has a delightful talent for mixing up her words with often perverse results. Her dialogue with Peter, one of the servants in the Capulet household who has witnessed her humiliation at the hands of Mercutio when delivering the love letter to Romeo from Juliet, demonstrates her genius for unintentional sexual innuendo.

Nurse. And ’a speak anything against me, I’ll take him down, and ’a were lustier than he is, and twenty such Jacks; and if I cannot, I’ll find those that shall. Scurvy knave! I am none of his flirt-gills; I am none of his skainsmates. And thou must stand by too, and suffer every knave to use me at his pleasure! (Romeo and Juliet, 2.4: 152–158).

Practically everything she says is accidentally sexually suggestive, implying she is ready and willing to take on all comers. Peter’s response is equally inane, consisting of one of Shakespeare’s most popular sexual puns making reference to a weapon as a nickname for a penis. “I saw no man use you at his pleasure. If I had, my weapon should quickly have been out, I warrant you” (Romeo and Juliet, 2.4: 159–161).

Mistress Quickly, who appears in both the *Henry IV* plays and in *Henry V*, has a similar gift of gab. She has an ongoing ‘toxic’ relationship with Falstaff, who repeatedly takes advantage of her good nature. He also teases her incessantly, with the humour only enhanced by her inability to comprehend the nature of the insults.

Falstaff: Why? She’s neither fish nor flesh; a man knows not where to have her.

Quickly: Thou art an unjust man in saying so; thou or any man knows where to have me, thou knave, thou!

Hal: Thou say’st true, hostess, and he slanders thee most grossly (Henry IV part 1, 3:3: 135–141).

Hal, the future Henry V, joins in the banter with great enthusiasm, again with the poor Mistress Quickly oblivious to her own absurdity.

In *Henry IV part 2*, she finally loses her patience with Falstaff’s incessant borrowing of money and abuse of her and recruits two constables to have him arrested. Fang and Snare, the absurdly named police officers (again demonstrating affinities with the earlier mentioned Dogberry), set off with her to apprehend Falstaff.

Fang: Snare, we must arrest Sir John Falstaff.

Quickly: Ay, good Master Snare, I have entered him and all.

Snare: It may chance cost some of us our lives: he will stab.

Quickly: Alas the day. Take heed of him: he stabbed me in mine own house, and that most beastly. He cares not what mischief he doth, if his weapon be out. He will foin like any devil, he will spare neither man, woman nor child (Henry IV part 2, 2:1: 8–17).

Quickly’s repetition of the words ‘stab’ and ‘weapon’, with their sexual implications, only increase in absurdity due to the fact that she is completely unaware of what she is saying.

The final example of Quickly’s genius and poetic skill comes from *Henry V* when she reports the death of Falstaff to his cronies: Pistol, Nym and Bardolph.

Quickly: Nay, sure, he's not in hell. He's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. 'A made a finer end and went away an it had been any christom child. 'A parted even just between twelve and one, even at the turning o' the tide: for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a babbled of green fields (Henry V, 2:3: 9–17).

This speech, despite its verbal gymnastics, eloquently conveys her affection for the deceased while also conveying a comic mood even in death. John Keats famously referenced the lines “babbled of green fields” in his letter to James Rice of 1820 prior to his own premature death.

J. Howard and P. Rackin in their classic feminist reading of the history plays draw a parallel between the characterization of Mistress Quickly and Princess Katherine in *Henry V*. “Even Katherine’s language – a mangled English that is riddled with inadvertent sexual double entendres – has a prototype in Quickly’s malapropisms” (Howard and Rackin, 209). In the first appearance by the French Princess Katherine in *Henry V*, she is oddly brushing up on her English, with the help of her lady in waiting Alice, in the middle of the invasion of her country by Henry. Her difficulties at pronunciation and vocabulary of the English language are comic but also disturbing due to the sexual nature of the puns.

Katharine. Ainsi dis-je; d'elbow, de nick, et de sin.
Comment

appelez-vous le pied et la robe?

Alice. De foot, madame; et de coun.

Katharine. De foot et de coun! O Seigneur Dieu!
ce sont mots de

son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et
non pour les dames

d'honneur d'user. Je ne voudrais prononcer ces
mots devant les

seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. Foh! le
foot et le coun! (Henry V, 3.4: 47–55).

Katherine is, of course, shocked by the similarities between the English words and vulgarities in her native French. Howard and Rackin also draw attention to the frequent references to rape in the play and particularly the objectivization of the Princess herself in the above-cited dialogue. “In learning English, the French princess is symbolically stripped of her clothing” (Howard and Rackin, 210).

Yet another character in the *Henry V* play, the Welsh captain Fluellen, has an issue with pronouncing the letter ‘B’ which comes out as ‘P’, with once against unintentional comic results. In the following passage he discusses military history and tactics with a fellow officer Captain Gower.

Gower. ...the King, most worthily, hath caus'd every soldier to cut his prisoner's throat. O, 'tis a gallant king!

Fluellen. Ay, he was porn at Monmouth, Captain Gower. What call you the town's name where Alexander the Pig was born?

Gower. Alexander the Great.

Fluellen. Why, I pray you, is not pig great? The pig, or the great, or the mighty, or the huge, or the magnanimous, are all one reckonings, save the phrase is a little variations.

Gower. I think Alexander the Great was born in Macedon. His father was called Philip of Macedon, as I take it.

Fluellen. I think it is in Macedon where Alexander is porn (Henry V, 4:7: 9–24).

Fluellen’s transformation of the word ‘big’ into ‘pig’ and ‘born’ into ‘porn’ can serve as Shakespeare’s subtle commentary on the personage of Henry and the problematic ethics of the invasion of France.

The already mentioned Pistol, who accompanies King Henry to France, is a so-called Miles Gloriosus (swaggering soldier) type whose speech and actions are always good for a laugh. In the following scene, he very fortunately manages to capture a French nobleman during the Battle of Agincourt. Pistol’s attempts at speaking French, with his confusion of the French word ‘Dieu’ (God) for ‘dew’ are not only humorous, but also deflate the grandiose rhetoric uttered by the nobles on both sides prior to the battle.

Pistol. Qualitie calmie custure me! Art thou a gentleman? What is thy name? Discuss.

French Soldier. O Seigneur Dieu!

Pistol. O, Signieur Dew should be a gentleman.

Perpend my words, O Signieur Dew, and mark:

O Signieur Dew, thou diest on point of fox,

Except, O signieur, thou do give to me

Egregious ransom (Henry V, 4:4: 4–10).

In contrast to the film versions by Olivier, Branagh and others, Shakespeare’s play features little brandishing of swords and swashbuckling, but instead highlights this absurd exchange, which could be read as a commentary on Henry’s constant invocation of God as seemingly sanctioning his aggression toward a sovereign country.

Shakespeare’s comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, supposedly written at the specific bequest of the Queen herself, is rich in verbal gaffes and blunders. In contrast with most of the other examples mentioned in this paper, however, they mostly seem to serve a mere comic, entertainment purpose. Abraham Slender, cousin to Justice Shallow who also appears in *Henry IV part 2*, is one of the inept suitors to the hand of Anne Page. The opening scene of the play includes this ridiculous exchange wherein Shallow and the Welsh clergyman Sir Hugh Evans are trying to encourage Slender to pursue the young woman. Slender’s response is confusing to say the least.

I will marry her, sir, at your request; but if there be no great love in the beginning, yet heaven may decrease it upon better acquaintance, when we are married and have more occasion to know one another; I hope upon familiarity will grow more contempt. But if you say “Marry her”, I will marry her; that I am freely dissolved, and dissolutely (The Merry Wives of Windsor, 1.1: 240–247).

Very much along the lines of the previously cited speech from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the speaker frequently ends up saying the exact opposite of what we presume he intends. Fortunately, Evans seems to be familiar with the young man's odd approach to language and clarifies things. “It is a fery discretion answer; save, the fall is in the ort ‘dissolutely’: the ort is, according to our meaning, ‘resolutely’. His meaning is good” (The Merry Wives of Windsor, 1.1: 248–250). Evans has, however, his own specific handicap involving dropping the letter ‘w’ and pronouncing his ‘v’ as an ‘f’. This language idiosyncrasy is played for laughs in a later scene where the parson is testing William Page in his Latin grammar. The aforementioned Mistress Quickly is on hand to add additional absurdity to the exchange. Evans asks Quickly to pipe down and addresses his pupil:

Evans: Leave your prabbles, 'oman. What is the focative case, William?

William: O vocativo, O.

Evans: Remember, William: focative is caret.

Quickly: And that's a good root.

Evans: 'Oman, forbear (The Merry Wives of Windsor, 4.1: 50–55).

Undeterred by this exchange, Evans continues with his catechism.

Evans: What is your genitive case plural, William?

William: Genitive case?

Evans: Ay.

William: Genitive: horum, harum, horum.

Quickly: Vengeance of Jenny's case; fie on her! Never name her, child, if she be a whore.

Evans: For shame, 'oman.

Quickly: You do ill to teach the child such words. He teaches him to hick and to hack, which they'll do fast enough of themselves; and to call “horum”; fie upon you! (The Merry Wives of Windsor, 4.1: 57–67).

Quickly, a master garbler of language herself, is disturbed by the vulgarities she assumes the boy is uttering under the tutelage of the well-meaning Evans.

The Welsh are not the only nationality subjected to ridicule in the play and elsewhere. The French character of Doctor Caius, yet another unwanted suitor to Anne, also provides delightful laughs in 2:3

Host: Pardon, guest-justice. – A word, Monsieur Mockwater.

Caius: Mock-vater! Vat is dat?

Host: Mockwater, in our English tongue, is valour, bully.

Caius: By gar, then I have as much mockvater as de Englishman. – Scurvy jack-dog priest! By gar, me vill cut his ears.

Host: He will clapper-claw thee tightly, bully.

Caius: Clapper-de-claw! Vat is dat?

Host: That is, he will make thee amends.

Caius: By gar, me do look he shall clapper-de-claw me; for, by gar, me vill have it (The Merry Wives of Windsor, 2.3: 57–66).

The hot-headed Caius has much in common with the earlier mentioned Pistol, not only in terms of temperament, but when it comes to misunderstanding what he hears.

The final passage worthy of mention comes once again from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Nick Bottom is, of course, a comic character, one of the working-class characters referred to as the Mechanicals in the play. We are told he is a weaver by profession, although his true calling or heart seems to be in theatre. While preparing their performance in the forest, Bottom is supplied with the head of an ass by Puck as a practical joke, terrifying his friends and fellow actors who flee in fear leaving him alone in the woods in the middle of the night. Oberon has also instructed Puck to place the love potion on Titania's eyelids resulting in her falling madly in love with the bewildered Bottom. They have a romantic evening serenaded by the other fairy creatures. A number of productions emphasize the sexual nature of the encounter. He awakens the following morning and, unlike the four lovers, still remembers something of what he has experienced the night before. His garbled speech where he not only mixes up the senses, but misquotes the words of the Bible, specifically 1 Corinthians 2: 9–10 is known as Bottom's dream.

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream – past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was – there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had, – but man is but a patched fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen; man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the duke: peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death (A Midsummer Night's Dream, 4.1: 214–229).

The garbled words in Bottom's dream only serve to enhance the beauty. In this paraphrase of the Bible, with its verses speaking of the love of God, he tries to put into words the inexpressible, making love to the Queen of Fairies, and this by Bottom a lowly commoner. What can be a greater tribute to beauty

and love than someone lost for words when faced with the beloved. The 'smooth talker' is, in contrast, merely repeating his rehearsed seduction speech.² Bottom is the only 'mortal' who is at least partially conscious of the mystery which has taken place. And he is of course a poet, placing his dreams down in words for others to see and hear.

Conclusion. Shakespeare's plays contain a wide range of minor humorous characters who are often seemingly inserted in order to provide comic relief. There is more to them, however, than meets the eye as they frequently serve to call into question the primary narratives in the plays. The verbal blunderers outlined above not only provide entertainment, but also offer an ongoing critical commentary on the general plot. The grotesque parade of characters discussed in this paper often have a definite dignity and even beauty behind their superficially inane utterances. Shakespeare's plays are open to multiple readings and interpretations in no insignificant part thanks to the minor characters in the seemingly throw-away scenes.

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² I see a parallel here with the speech given by Viola to Olivia in *Twelfth Night* when the latter dismisses the memorized speech the former delivers from Orsino. Viola's vulnerability, from a position of weakness, strikes a chord with her fellow female Olivia.