The Case of the Missing 'C-U-T' and the Enduring 'P' Problem: Untranslatable Humour in a Micro Scene in *Twelfth Night*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is mainly based on translations of a micro-scene in *Twelfth Night*, focusing on Malvolio's reading of Olivia's forged letter in Act 2, Scene 5, lines 87-90. The significance of this scene relies on the absence of the obscene connotations implied in the letter sequence 'C-U-T' and the phrase "her great P's". Through examining the scene in Arabic, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish translations, the paper shows that although these letters are often kept in most translations, their connotations have generally been rendered ineffective. This pattern reflects a dependence on orthographic fidelity at the expense of theatrical function. Drawing on contemporary humour-centred models, theatre-translation theory, and the politics of non-translation, the paper argues that the loss of humour in such texts is not a matter of untranslatability, but rather a consequence of institutional constraints that discourage dramaturgical authorship in canonical drama.

KEYWORDS**:** dramaturgical equivalence, humour and taboo in translation, Shakespeare in translation, Theatre translation, translator authorship

Introduction: The Dramaturgical Failure of the Formalist Model

The translation of Shakespearean comedy more than often requires a choice between preserving the literal form of a pun or a joke and capturing its real theatrical impact in performance. This tension is at its highest in Act 2, Scene 5 of *Twelfth Night*, when Malvolio accidentally finds a forged letter and identifies its author by the handwriting, particularly by noting and articulating aloud the shapes of the letters 'C-U-T' and 'P.' Although these letters appear as innocent

orthographic marks on the page, when read aloud in succession, they form a phonetic reference to the Elizabethan slang word 'cut' (a vulgar term for female genitals) and "great P" (another reference to urination). This incident unwittingly forces the (Puritan) Malvolio to articulate obscenities he prides himself on suppressing. However, before questioning the various linguistic traditions that have dealt with this 'C-U-T-P' sequence, I first provide a brief clarification of the analytical framework that I use to inform and guide this discussion throughout this article. Terms like formal equivalence and fidelity to form are mainly used as descriptive diagnostics to analyze the strategies employed by translators—namely, the reproduction of the source text surface features (letters, syntax)—and to point out why these strategies generally fail to reproduce the comedic function. Indeed, these terms are not intended as normative or prescriptive goals. Similarly, the term 'dynamic equivalence' describes the desired effect of the counter-proposal: to elicit a comparable comedic recognition and laughter in the target audience, regardless of form. Finally, the use of 'the original' refers not to an untouchable, hierarchically superior 'source' document, but rather to the dramaturgical construct and its intended effect on the Elizabethan audience (the subversive sexual joke and Malvolio's oblivious humiliation). The paper's focus is thus on maintaining the function of the scene, not the form of the letters.

This theoretical tension between form and function is frequently present at the centre of translating Shakespeare due to Shakespeare's bawdy wordplay, embedded deeply in the phonetic, semantic, and cultural fabric of Early Modern English. This dilemma is nowhere more acute than in *Twelfth Night*, where sexual innuendo frequently operates through indirection, misreading, and what Elizabethan audiences would have recognized as the charged opposition between "nothing" and "thing", two terms referring to female and male private parts. In the aforementioned Act 2, Scene 5, Malvolio's reading of the forged letter hinges on the 'C-U-T-P' sequence—letters that are rarely absent in translation but are repeatedly stripped of their obscene force. Across various languages, translators tend to preserve this orthographic surface (the formal equivalence) while abandoning the scatological allusion that provides the scene's theatrical life. What disappears, therefore, is not the literal text, but the sudden phonetic swerve from courtly decorum into the genital and excretory "nothing" that the original audience would have recognized. Ultimately, the problem posed by this sequence is not one of essential untranslatability, but of a systematic "non-

translation"—an institutional reluctance to prioritize the dynamic equivalence of Shakespeare's bawdy effect in performance.

To begin with, Eugene Nida (2003) distinguishes between formal equivalence, which focuses on reproducing the form and content of the source text, and dynamic equivalence, which aims to reproduce the impact of the original text on the target audience. In the case of Shakespeare, particularly in scenes driven by allusions and phonetic innuendo, fidelity to form often sacrifices communicative impact. Friedrich Schleiermacher's classic distinction between moving the reader toward the writer or the writer toward the reader underlines the central risk in theatre: a failure to move the text toward the audience's linguistic reality robs the language of its performative power.

In the play, Malvolio's reading of Olivia's forged letter—based on the suggestive sequence of letters 'C-U-T' and the phrase "her great P's"—is a major critical site where the play's theatrical vitality meets, in Michael Macrone's (1997:124) words, the historical "naughtiness" of the Elizabethan liberties. Macrone describes Shakespeare's comedies as "a realm of fantasy, a 'holiday' from the tedious and oppressing everyday world of forced marriages and male domination" (ibid.). As Eric Partridge argues, Shakespeare's "bawdy jokes" were not just "high-brow concessions to the groundlings", rather an essential articulation of an artist who sought to reach the "common people" through a "universal manhood" (1961:3–4). Because Malvolio stands for the collision of Puritan restraint and the theatre's 'bawdy talk', his phonetic blunder is the central mechanism, in Stephen Greenblatt's words, of a "mock exorcism" and social embarrassment (1988:115).

Modern scholarship confirms that Malvolio's reading of the 'C-U-T' and 'P' refers to the "inherent meaning" of a jakes (lavatory), drawing a line, as Keir Elam sees it, from the "genital to the excretory" (2008:16–17). Now, to translate this sequence through a literal, formal equivalence—preserving the English letters while sacrificing the scatological point—is to ignore, in Greenblatt's term, the "strategic, happy swerving" of nature's "bias" (1988:68). Instead, an "organic form" of translation, as James S. Holmes (1970:96) advocates, may ensure that Angela Tarantini's "gestural element" remains "embedded in the words" (2021:148). Thus by prioritizing

a target-language vulgarism, the translator acts like the author, or to use Partridge's idiom, as a "large-minded artist" who ensures the joke's theatrical survival in the real world (1961:3).

Selection of Translations and Corpus Delimitation

The selection of translations examined in this study—Arabic, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish—is based on a combination of linguistic, cultural, and methodological considerations rather than a claim of comprehensiveness. Given that each of these linguistic traditions has an extraordinary number of translations of *Twelfth Night*, the present selection does not aim to be statistically representative. Instead, it is intended as a diagnostic sample to shed light on the recurring translation strategies and limitations when encountering a specific example of phonetic and taboo-laden wordplay. Thus, when similar neutralization, formal replication, or semantic displacement strategies emerge in such heterogeneous texts, the translation challenge cannot simply and solely be attributed to phonetic incompatibility, rather it must be understood as methodological or maybe ideological as well.

Moreover, the selection of these texts is well informed by the name and fame of their translators: Most of these translations are well-recognized texts by established translators within their national boundaries. The Italian Goffredo Raponi (2007), the Spanish Jaime Clark (1873), the Turkish Sevgi Sanlı (2007), are all well-known and central figures in their countries. Their translations have contributed to how Shakespeare is seen in those literary systems. Also, the same can be said about the Russian Yuri Lifshits' (2007) as well as the German Rudolf Schaller's (1996) and Heiko Postma's (2014) translations. Broadly speaking, their approaches, regardless of whether one agrees with them or not, represent established and influential legacies in translation. Finally, the Egyptian Mohamed Enani's (2023) Arabic translation is also included because of its academic nature and excessive use of paratext—a situation that highlights the tensions between philological fidelity and commitment to dramatic functionality.

Toward a Performative Model: The Humourcentric Approach

One way to overcome the tendencies of prioritizing stagnant literary forms in translation is to adopt what Zabalbeascoa and Attardo describe as "humourcentric" model (2023:13). A model

that favours the real-world stage reality of the target text. For Massimiliano Morini (2022:128), translating for the stage is about the "embodiment" of language This view aligns with Tarantini's (2021:203) for whom the text must function as a "language-body" that serves the actor's physical presence and the audience's real-time perception. It is under this framework that the Malvolio sequence must be viewed as a performative event built on "incongruity" (Raskin cited in Kostopoulou & Misiou 2023:2). For when the character on stage identifies the 'C's,' 'U's,' 'T's,' and the "great P," the resulting laughter is a common reaction to the collision of high-status pretention with unintentional vulgarity.

Adopting this model also requires quite a shift from fidelity to orthographic appearance of the source text toward what Jiří Levý calls "selective accuracy" (cited in Brodie & Cole 2017:3), in which the translator must choose whether to be accurate to the English letters or to the functional effect of the sequence. By giving priority to the scene's "Skopos" (Zabalbeascoa & Attardo 2023:14)—that is, its intended function within performance—the translator moves beyond the linguistic surface to find, in Vandaele's term, a relevant "comic analogy" (2023:59). In practice, this entails finding a phonetic sequence in the target language that can possibly elicit a comparable moment of shock, laughter or recognition in the audience. In this performative light, the translator becomes a "co-author" (Brodie & Cole 2017:1–3), ensuring that the "great P" lands as a sharp, subversive blow to the character's dignity rather than a hollow phonetic quirk.

The Malvolio Scene and the Mechanics of Bawdy Humour

To understand why modern translations generally fail, one must first come to terms with the sheer "naughtiness" of the original Elizabethan stage. The short speech in Act 2, Scene 5 is not merely a clever pun; it is in fact a constructed trap designed to force the arrogant Malvolio into a public, physical articulation of the obscene. When Malvolio utters the letters 'C, U, and T,' he is not just spelling; he is performing what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2012:312) calls a linguistic "swerve" into the taboo emphasized further by a reference to her 'P's' seen by Elam (2008:242) as "piss" and "abundant urination". As mentioned earlier, the implied references to genitals and excretion in Malvolio's reading of the letters, moving from the anatomical to the functional, is important for the real world of the theatre, not only because it generates laughter but also because

it undermines the character's sense of dignity. Sadly and hilariously, by forcing Malvolio to emphasize "the great P's," Maria's forgery forces the Puritan to pronounce a scatological reality he normally seeks to suppress. The failure to translate these lines represents a refusal to participate in that 'strategic, happy swerving' (Greenblatt 1988:68) where courtly language is punctured by the bawdy. By giving priority to a sanitized literalism over Partridge's 'universal manhood', these translations essentially detach the play from the very 'common people' it was written for and intended to provoke. Therefore, if a translator provides only the 'C-U-T' and disregards the letter 'P,' they have seriously undermined the structural integrity of the joke rendering the scene ineffective, and transforming a moment of social exorcism into an odd, phonetic quirk that makes no sense in the target language. This failure is what we observe in the "orthographic" caution of the canonical translations (Nida 2003:122).

Cross-Linguistic Analysis: The Unruly Pun in Translation

The somewhat consistent failure to translate the 'C-U-T' and 'P' lines into other languages is often dismissed by academics as a mere linguistic mismatch. However, what we are trying to show is that such justifications constitute a shield for a deeper methodological misalignment: that is a general privileging of form over effect. We begin by examining the 'Orthographic Literalists'—those translators who opt for preserving the English letters at the cost of the scene's theatrical soul. In João Ferreira Duarte's 'typology', many literal solutions are better described as "non-translation" by "repetition", where a "source text is carried over unchanged into the target text," a practice that "often reflect[s] the uneven relations between cultures" (2000:96). In fact this is what we see in the Italian translation by Raponi (2007), where the translation reads: "*Sono le sue le 'c', le 'u', le 't', ella scrive così la 'P' maiuscola*…". [These are her 'c's', her 'u's', her 't's', she thus writes the capital 'P'…] (my translation). It is obvious here that the translator employs a strategy of formal equivalence that effectively kills, or in a softer term, confiscates the joke (Nida 2003). In the real world of the theatre, an Italian audience hearing 'ci,' 'u,' and 'ti' hears only the alphabet. There is no "swerve" into the taboo. As Lawrence Venuti (2012) might argue, this is an instrumental model of translation that treats language as a transparent medium, ignoring the fact that Shakespeare's letters are not neutral symbols, but phonetic triggers.

The Spanish translation is not any better. Clark (1873) translates the line: "*Son sus misma ces, y sus ues, y sus tes; y así hace las pes mayúsculas.*" [These are her c's, her u's and her t's. And that is how she makes her capital p's] (my translation). By observing what centuries ago John Dryden (2012:38) termed a "metaphrase", Clark offers his audience a literalism that is basically unfaithful to the dramatic energy of the play. As Morini notes: "a dramatic performance" should not be considered "a mere 'translation' of a play: theatrical events are complex *Gesamtkunstwerke*, where the written words, their interpretation by actors, the actors' physical qualities, the soundtrack and the lighting all contribute to the final effect" (2022:55). Thus, ignoring the play's vulgarity is accordingly a betrayal of its dramatic vitality. Clark's choice apparently is a 'safe' choice, but in the theatre, safety is tantamount to failure.

Rudolf Schaller's (1996) German translation does not go any further than presenting another contrast between effective "canonical" literalism and unsuccessful "dynamic" innovation. The translation is indifferent to the scene's phonetic necessity: "*...das sind genau ihre C's, ihre U's und ihre T's; und so macht sie die großen P's*". [Those are her C's, her U's and her T's; and so she makes her big P's] (my translation). In this way, Schaller's translation ends simulating what looks like textbook example of the fidelity trap. By keeping Malvolio's letters intact, he makes sure that the German audience remains oblivious to the implications of the linguistic signs. This is similar to an act of editorial domestication, where the translator acts as a gatekeeper, protecting what Schleiermacher (2012:56) considers the "purity" of the text at the expense of the audience's laughter.

In contrast to Schaller's translation, Postma (2014) attempts to arrive at, what Holmes (1970:96) has labeled as, an "organic form" by breaking down the vulgar German word '*Muschi*' into its '*S-C-H*' triad [Thus she makes her S-C-H…]. However, as Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1998) observe, even a modest pursuit of dynamic equivalence can be delayed by a mechanical awkwardness. Although Postma's '*S-C-H*' pronunciation lacks the phonetic naturalness of the original, listeners may arrive at the lewd German term if they pay attention to the 'I' sound (pronounced [ee]) used in place of the 'P' in the original. Above all, both Schaller and Postma completely ignore the 'P' problem. In Elam's expression, the "excretory trajectory" is left unaddressed, which indicates that the scatological circuit remains broken regardless of whether the translation is classical or experimental (2008:17).

Where some translators cling to letters, others attempt to 'fix' the joke by replacing the sexual with the mundane. Lifshits's (2007) Russian translation renders the 'C-U-T' letters in Cyrillic to spell "soup" (СУП) as perceived by Andrew, Malvolio's interlocutor:

> *МАЛЬВОЛИО: Клянусь жизнью, почерк миледи. Узнаю эти «с», «у», «т», это большое «п». Вне всякого сомнения, это ее рука*. [MALVOLIO: I swear on my life, it's my lady's handwriting. I recognize those "s", "u", "t", that big "p". It's hers, without a doubt].
>
> *ЭНДРЮ: Что это за «с», «у», «п»? Какой-то «суп»...Ничего не понимаю!* [ANDREW: What's this "s", "u", "p"? Some kind of "soup"... I don't understand a thing!] (my translation).

This type of semantic displacement risks changing Malvolio's characterization: he is no longer seen, in this context, as a man betrayed by his own suppressed desires, rather he sounds on stage and the page as a fool obsessed with 'soup'. By transforming the 'vagina' and 'jakes' into "soup," Lifshits, funnily manages to exchange an instant of social humiliation for a childish absurdity. However, whether Lifshits intends it or not, his "sanitization" of the target text (to borrow Venuti's (2012:273) term undermines what Elam defines as the inherent, scatological meaning of the original.

Sanlı's (2007) translation also exhibits clear signs of literal, almost blind adherence to the English alphabet in the source text that equally contributes to the subversion of the dramatic function. The 'C-U-T-P' sequence is mechanically translated as: "*İşte onun C'leri, U'ları, T'leri. Al sana, şu büyük P'ler tıpatıp onunkiler gibi*". [These are her Cs, Us, Ts. Here you go, these big Ps are exactly like her's] (my translation). As the letter 'C' in Turkish is pronounce /*dʒ*/ as in [Jack or judge] the phonetic connection to the English 'c-u-n-t' is not just lost—it is rendered nonsensical to a Turkish reader or audience. Here, Sanlı's fidelity to the orthographic surface of the text acts as a barrier, barring the 'ludic' implications from crossing into the target culture.

Finally, like most of the other examined translations, Enani's (2023) version produces a mirror image of the letters in the source text into a different script—replacing the English letters with *si:n* (س) for 'C', *waw* (و) for 'U', *ta* (ت) for 'T', and *ba* (ب) for 'P'. To an Arabic ear, however, these letters feel "hollow" because they carry the sound without the original's cultural

suggestions. In one of his footnotes, oddly enough, the translator admits that the audience will not grasp the implications of the letters in the theatre. Therefore he supplements his translation with paratext in the form of extensive footnotes to bridge the semantic and cultural gaps between the translated text and the original one only for the readers, and not for the actors or the audience in the theatre. While Walter Benjamin (2012:76) might argue that such a translation keeps the joke from truly "surviving" on stage, the use of excessive paratext proves that Enani guarantees the survival and "afterlife" of the original only on the page rather than on the stage.

To carry on with these structural causes of failure, we can look closer at the Italian and Russian examples. In Raponi's (2007) Italian translation, a theatrical void is created by the translators' decision to remain faithful to the literal 'C-U-T-P' sequence. Bassnett (1998:92) points out the absurdity of expecting a translator to "re-encode" secret theatrical signs across different systems, noting that "theatres are not consistent [and] conventions vary radically from culture to culture." By remaining true to the English alphabet, Raponi ignores this cultural variance, sacrifices the functionality of the scene and denies the Italian audience the passage to the joke. The 'ludic' quality that is essential to the original text evaporates because the Italian letters *ci*, *u*, and *ti* have no "gestic" energy or bawdy significations.

While the Italian example demonstrates faithfulness to the original text, the Russian translation by Lifshits (2007)—the "soup" (*СУП*) joke—exhibits a methodological breakdown that is less about script and more about a lack of poetic courage. While generating a phonetic equivalence, he chooses a word entirely lacking the original's sociolinguistic implications. Since the humour and characterization in *Twelfth Night* heavily relies on the collision between the 'Sacred' and the 'Profane'; Lifshits substitution of the original sequence with "soup" acculturates the play in such a way that cuts off what Lefevere (1998:114) describes as the **"**ugly exotic little cactus edge**"** of the source. In doing so, Lifshits reduces Malvolio, though briefly, to a caricature of simple hunger rather than a repressed, lustful Puritan. In line with Itamar Even-Zohar's (2012:163–165) observations that translations often take a 'peripheral' or secondary role in a culture, Lifshits chose to play it safe and conservative, using traditional language that avoids the raw, physical energy of Shakespeare's original work.

Counter-Proposals and Theatrical Risk

In contrast to these literalist practices that neutralize the dramatic function of the text, translators could have followed what Nida (2003:159) describes as "dynamic equivalence"—where the essence of the humour is recreated rather than directly transferred. This could have been done through selecting letters that retain or allude to the bawdy humour of the Shakespeare's text. For instance, in Turkish, rather than the literal 'C,' 'U,' and 'T,' the translator could have used 'A,' 'M,' and 'K' to allude to the vulgar term *amcık*, without spelling it out loud and without breaking any taboo. 'A-M-K' sequence in Turkish is as innocent and as loaded to a Turkish audience as a 'C-U-T' sequence to a contemporary English-speaking audience. To solve the 'P' problem, the subsequent "great P" could be substituted with the letter Ç (for *çiş*–piss).

Similarly, in Spanish, a dynamic and functional equivalence may use letters that carry a genuine potential for a taboo charge—such as '*C*', '*O*', and '*Ñ*', or '*Ñ'*, '*C*' '*O*',—to hint at the taboo word *coño*, followed by an alphabet that may lead to '*pis* or *pija*' for the 'P' in the original. By doing so, translators would give the scene, in Jackson Mathews's words "a life of its own" (cited in Nida 2003:161). This approach is akin to Tarantini's Practice as Research (PaR) model where the translator eventually acts as a practitioner-researcher who acknowledges that the "action" and the "gestural element" can and should be seen as "'embedded' in the words" (2021:148). Such adaptive strategy is not limited to Turkish or Spanish. The same principle could—and should—be applied to Slavic and other languages, provided the translator is willing to embrace not only the hermeneutic model but also the need to stay alert to what Thomas Wilks describes as "intersemiotic translation from page to stage" (cited in Brodie & Cole 2017:164).

In Italian, instead of the sexually innocent 'C-U-T,' a dynamic equivalent might evoke the word '*fica*' through a strategic selection of letters, for example a sequence of F-*C*-*A*. We are aware that such a substitution may demand a bold departure from the source form, but such recommended departure can always be justified by sociolinguistic and performative logic: For in performance, what matters is not the visual form of the letters; what matters rather is the effect the letters may/ produce on stage. Similarly, in Russian, a more faithful, dynamic, or intersemiotic translation seeks to evoke '*pizda*' or similar high-impact slang through the suggestive phonetic reading of the letters. For the translator should know that the absence of the original letters in Malvolio's

mouth is not a loss if the emotional and dramatic effect—that is, the shock of recognition and the shared laughter of the audience—is preserved. As Venuti notes of the conservative tradition in translation, such "discursive strategies flouted conventional notions of equivalence" to avoid "offending the delicacy of [the] Language" or causing "moral offense" (2012:17). By prioritizing conventional decorum over the vitality of the source, these translators produced works that were "clearer and more stylistically felicitous... but also bowdlerized" (ibid.). In this sense, a vulgar Russian pun would be more "faithful" to Shakespeare's scene than Lifshits's literal "soup" ever could be.

Applying Even-Zohar's (2012) polysystem theory, we can see that translated Shakespeare often occupies a central, conservative position in the target culture's literary system. Because the author is seen as a 'pillar' of world literature, the translations are often forced to adhere to primary models of decorum. Innovation—such as the counter-proposals suggested for Turkish (*A-M-K*) or Spanish (*C-O-Ñ*)—is often relegated to the 'periphery' or to 'experimental' fringe theatre. However, the 'P' problem demonstrates that the centre cannot hold. When the 'canonical' translation (like Schaller's 1996 German version) fails to produce a laugh, the play loses its power as a comedy. As Bassnett and Lefevere (1998) observe, if the translator is too loyal to the source culture's 'monumental' status, they fail to allow the text to innovate within the target system. To truly translate Shakespeare is to allow him to be profane in the target language. If the translator cannot find a way to make Malvolio's humiliation as obscene and comic as it was in 1601, they are not translating; they are merely archiving a static text.

Discussion: Translation, Canon, and Performance

The apparent, repeated inability or unwillingness to effectively translate the 'C-U-T' and 'P' sequence into other languages is often attributed structural differences between languages or matters of cultural sensitivity. Yet I believe these justifications may obscure the deeper issue, which is a widespread practice of privileging form over effect, or to put it in different words, a loyalty to the visible structure of the text at the expense of its performative energy.

As Venuti (2012:6) puts it, much of modern translation practice remains grounded in the "instrumental model". This model treats language as a transparent medium for conveying meaning. Venuti points out that:

> [t]heories based on the instrumental model treat translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant contained in or caused by the source text, whether its form, its meaning, or its effect; they assume an empiricist concept of language as directly expressing thought or referring to reality" (ibid.).

In this context, the translator's goal is to reproduce a fixed content or form—be it letters, syntax, or surface meaning. However, Shakespeare's pun cannot possibly survive meaningfully under such a model, because its point is not simply in its words alone, but in their impact on a live audience who grasps and interacts with these words. Therefore, reducing the sequence 'C-U-T-P' to similar empty letters in other languages flattens Shakespeare's theatrical language into pointless orthography.

Instead, Venuti and Schleiermacher among others argue that a hermeneutic model—offers a more useful approach. Such a model sees translation as an interpretation where the translator takes measured, context-sensitive choices. Venuti maintains that this model treats translation as an act that "varies the form, meaning, and effect of the source text" because language is "mediated by cultural and social determinants" (2012:6). In fact it goes without saying that this variability is necessary if the translator is to meet Schleiermacher's goal of translation, a goal translators were asked to pay attention to almost two centuries ago: "the translator must take it as his goal to furnish his reader with just such an image and just such enjoyment as reading the work in the original language would have provided the well-educated man" (cited in Venuti 2012:51). In the case of *Twelfth Night*, to achieve this "enjoyment," the translator should have abandoned using the letters 'C-U-T-P' verbatim and instead opted for crude expressions in the target language that carry the same comedic effect. Almost a century ago, Benjamin (2012) urges that the translator's task is not to replicate, but to awaken the theatrical resonance of the text in a new language and culture, thus echoing Schleiermacher's hermeneutic model that sees the translator as a mediator between cultures, not simply carrying one intact into another. In this light, the failure to reproduce Malvolio's humiliation in performance is a failure not of language but of imagination—of a hesitance to embrace the translator's dual role as interpreter and artist.

The proposed dynamic strategy which necessitates the replacement of the source's bawdy English with modern target language slang is likely to raise concerns—some can be legitimate and real in certain political, social, cultural contexts—of appropriateness particularly in places

where Shakespeare is seen as a highly sanctified, canonical figure. No denying it that Shakespeare occupies a very different position in the 21st-century literary system than he did during his lifetime, a position that was more populist, commonplace and occasionally barely tolerated. Therefore, the biggest existential question is this: Do contemporary audiences around the world who watch *Noche de reyes*, *La nuit des rois*, or any other performance really expect to read or hear sexually suggestive references, or not? This is a challenge that positions the translator as a mediator not just between languages, but between the intent of a historical performance and its contemporary cultural reception. In certain places, producers and publishers may not feel positive at all about including high-charge slang, for fear of negative criticism or endangering performances often attended by school groups. This self-imposed constraint, acting in Venuti's term as a form of editorial **'**domestication**'**—which he sees as **"**an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values" (2002:15)—further renders the translated text ineffective.

However, Morini presents another voice in the world of theatre translation stipulating that to shun the play's vulgarity is basically unfaithful to its dramatic energy. He believes that dramatic performance should not be seen as a "mere 'translation' of a play" (2022:55). For him, it is a complex intersection of spatial and temporal arts. Following Anne Ubersfeld, Morini suggests that the "classical" demand for semantic "equivalence" between a playtext and its performance is "very likely… an illusion" (2022:55–56). The translator's choice, however, is not something between vulgarity and purity, but between keeping the laugh or whatever hinted at by the original text (dynamic equivalence) or preserving the letters (formal equivalence). If the translator's goal is the theatrical survival of the text through what Pavis describes as a successful "dialectic of exchanges" (cited in Morini 2022:58), the translation then must keep the spirit of subversion and confrontation. As Morini observes through Pavis's "hourglass" model, any attempt to filter out the source culture's provocations risks rendering the translation into a "mill" that grinds the original into a "different powder", ultimately failing the "sociological, anthropological and cultural constraints" that describe a living stage performance (2022:59).

A somewhat striking contrast emerges when we examine some translators' approaches to the play's title and its text. While, as Elam asserts, the original English title points to the twelfth night after Christmas, a time generally seen as a "synonym of carnivalesque revelry" and the

"folly of misrule", in Spanish (*Noche de reyes*), the phrase 'Twelfth Night' is translated as "Night of the Kings" (2008:18). This makes it obvious that the retitling of the play in the Spanish adaptations evokes local equivalents of the same festive spirit. Though in doing so, the translators apply dynamic equivalence (Nida 2003), prioritizing cultural resonance and audience recognition over direct translation, they also show that creative freedom is often limited to the paratexts—titles, introductions, and summaries—while the essence of the dramatic text often remains subject to strict formalism when it comes to recreating the play's risqué humour.

This inconsistency reveals a larger hesitation in translation practice. It shows translation's willingness to dynamically deal with superficial or surface elements but avoid confronting the more complex, more disruptive aspects of the original text. This strategy of 'safe' translation is further explained by Even-Zohar's (1990:17–21) polysystem theory, which positions translation as an active agent in the literary system of the target culture. In this view, translation is not a passive reflection but a dynamic force. When a system becomes stagnant, it faces "petrification**"**, which Even-Zohar defines as an **"**operational disturbance**"** characterized by a "high degree of boundness and growing stereotypization of the various repertoires" (1990:17). In such cases, the system fails to "cope with the changing needs of the society in which it functions" (ibid.). Translators who adhere to strict formalism essentially produce "secondary" products, where "every individual product... will then be highly predictable, and any deviation will be considered outrageous" (Even-Zohar 1990:21). Conversely, a dynamic translation contributes to an **"**innovatory repertoire**"** by offering **"**primary**"** models, the pre-condition for which is the "discontinuity of established models" (ibid.). Yet, as Octavio Paz observes, while literalism might serve as a "mechanism" or a "glossary", it is "not translation", which is "always a literary activity" (1992:154). Because "up to a point, each translation is a creation and thus constitutes a unique text", the translators must not be reduced to transmitters of sanitized versions (ibid.).

Paz reiterates that translators must act as creators who "convert [the original] into a verbal object that, although different, reproduces it" through the literary procedures of "metonym or metaphor" (1992:155). The failure to recreate the source's creative energy stems from a refusal to adopt the practitioner-researcher role. In this self-reflexive framework, the act of translation is not a mere transfer, but a "method of investigation" (Tarantini 2021:6) into the mechanics of the scene itself. In this framework, the translator is no longer a conveyor of signs, but a researcher tasked with

excavating the previously identified gestural potential. By ignoring these embedded theatrical cues—particularly in the Malvolio sequence—the translator treats the text as a static "glossary" (Paz 1992:154) rather than a living "blueprint" for performance (Bassnett 1991:103).

When a translator like Schaller or Enani opts to use a literal sign over a vulgar one, they not only ignore the **"**intrinsic rhythm**"** (Tarantini 2021:6) of the comedic moment, but fail to elicit the same physical, emotional and intellectual responses as the original. In this way, we end up with a translation that refuses to facilitate what Cristina Marinetti describes as the "negotiation of multiple languages in performance" through a **"**creative juxtaposition" of the text with the "actor's body" **(**cited in Tarantini 2021:199). Malvolio, in the theatrical reality, does not just speak; he performs a series of phonetic gestures. The 'C,' the 'U,' and the 'T' are vocalized shapes that lead to the "great P"—a moment of physical release that is simultaneously a linguistic trap.

We must then ask: Why do these translators—many of them esteemed and renowned academics—consistently choose failure? It cannot be possible that they lack an understanding of Malvolio's persona or the sequence's deeper significance in relation to Maria's letter, the speaker's characterization, and the surrounding dramatic context. We assume that the answer rather lies in the Cultural Politics of Translation. As Bassnett and Lefevere (1998) observe, the translator is often under pressure to maintain the decorum of the canonical author. In many cultures, Shakespeare is a "monument," and monuments are not supposed to talk about "jakes" or "great P's." This self-censorship acts as a form of normative constraint. The translator, fearing that high-charge slang will jeopardize the play's status in classrooms or 'respectable' theatres, domesticates the text. They choose the "Instrumental Model" because it is safe. If the joke fails, they can blame the "untranslatability" of the English language.

As this study has shown, the joke however is not untranslatable; it is simply un-translated. Jason Harding and John Nash's term *non-translation* is useful here because it "hint[s] at the possibility of translation, a possibility that has been declined", thereby marking the text as "a site of confrontation … [and] interpretative dilemmas" (2019:2). Duarte explicitly frames *non-translation* as an object made analytically visible by the functionalist/target-oriented turn, which enables Translation Studies to account for phenomena that are "epistemologically identifiable as

being empirically absent", including non-translation "both at a lexical or a textual level" (2000:111) The limitation is not linguistic, but institutional and artistic—a reluctance to take the creative risk that Shakespeare himself took when he wrote the scene.

The reluctance to translate the 'C-U-T-P' line effectively is not merely a linguistic failure but a symptom of the sociolinguistic constraints placed upon the translator. In many of the target cultures discussed—particularly the Arabic and Turkish traditions—the tension between "Standard" (*Fusha* or TRT Turkish) and "Colloquial" (*Ammiya* or Street Slang) registers creates a significant hurdle. As Venuti (2012) affirms, the choice of register is not simply a neutral stylistic act; it is an ideological statement. When Enani (2023) or Sanlı (2007) opt for a sanitized or literal translation, they follow a kind of standard usage that avoids what Rudolf Pannwitz sees as the "experimental literary practice" necessary to translate subversion (cf. Venuti 2012:72). By giving priority to a Standard literary register, they apparently, to use Hilaire Belloc's term, perceive any hint of Elizabethan low humour as a "blemish" (cited in Venuti 2012:73) rather than "a site of formal innovation" (Venuti 2012:71). This choice results not only in domesticating the text, but also in performing what Karl Vossler calls a "cunning stealing" of the author's status while defending the target language against the 'foreign' threat of Shakespeare's actual vulgarity (cited in Venuti 2012:73). As advocated by Pannwitz back in the early 20th century, instead of allowing the translating language to be "[broadened and deepened]" by the foreign one (cited in Venuti 2012:72), they force Malvolio's "great P" into a linguistic straitjacket of decorum, ensuring the monument remains intelligible, and safe for the classroom but theatrically dead.

What this case eventually shows is not a failure of linguistic creativity but rather more a control on how literary translation is institutionally conceived. In theatrical comedy—particularly where humour is phonetic, obscene, and culturally oriented—successful translation cannot and should not operate as transfer alone. It requires a willingness to assume a limited form of authorship, understood here as a dramaturgical responsibility toward the scene's effect. It is also to be clear that such authorship is not an automatic right; it is a conditional capacity. As Gunilla Anderman observes, a play is a multi-dimensional construct where the translator must be able to hear "the voice of the characters" (2005:10) and recognize that "every speaker has an individual and personal way of using their language" (2005:325). By failing to hear the "voice" of Malvolio's phonetic desperation, the literalist translator leaves, to use Anderman's word, the character's

"idiolect" unfinished (2005:325). We also need to address the "performability" trap. While some translators or critics use the term to justify lazy changes, Bassnett critiques the term when it is used as "an excuse to exercise greater liberties with the text than convention allowed" (1991:105). She notes that the concept of a concealed "gestic" text has "defied any definition" and has historically been used to justify handing translations over to monolingual playwrights to be polished for the box office (1991:99).

My proposal for a "humourcentric" model is not the vague, unprincipled "performability" that Bassnett (1991:102) warns against, but a rough attempt to preserve the structural integrity of the joke. This requires an understanding of the text as, to use Bassnett's term again, an interpretative "blueprint" (1991:103). As Rachel Weissbrod notes, **"**every performance, theatrical or cinematic, implies an interpretation of the play" and the "very fact that living actors read the dialogue... involves interpretation**"** (2006:44). Therefore, the real problem lies in the absence of institutional mechanisms that can distinguish these interpretive, theatrically viable translations from those that are formally correct but dramaturgically ineffective. In the absence of such mechanisms, literalist translations drift alongside truly creative works under the same evaluative criteria, reinforcing the illusion that all translation results are methodologically equal. A possible solution lies in practices already adopted by some theatrical venues, such as performance-oriented reviewing. Such models shift attention away from the translator's authority as a name and toward the translation's capacity to function theatrically, allowing invention to be recognized without presuming that all translators can—or should—exercise authorship in equal measure.

Conclusion: The Litmus Test of the "Great P"

Through its continuing journey across languages and cultures, and almost like all the bard's plays, *Twelfth Night,* highlights both its universal appeal and the fragile originality of its comedic elements. This study has shown that Malvolio's 'C-U-T' and 'P' line, though seemingly trivial in structure, is a significant site of theatrical, linguistic, and cultural tension. Its consistent deletion or simplification in global translations reveals more than technical linguistic hurdles; it exposes a significant reluctance in many translation traditions to prioritize effect over form. As we have shown, the 'P' problem serves as the ultimate test for translational success. Without the climax of Elam's aforementioned "trajectory", the phonetic 'C-U-T' is merely a setup for a punchline that

never arrives. Whether through the 'Orthographic Conservatism' of the Italian and Spanish traditions, the "Semantic displacement" of the Russian "soup" joke, or the "Paratextual Substitution" of the Arabic scholars, the result is a systemic failure of dramaturgical imagination. Translation, as Benjamin (2012:76) reminds us, is not about repeating the original but awakening its "afterlife"—its reverberation in new contexts. To achieve this "afterlife," the translator must move beyond mere transfer and acknowledge that, as Duarte (2000**)** argues, the functionalist turn in translation allows us to validate the shadow cast by Malvolio's unspoken orthography—recognizing that what remains unrealized is often where the most vital meaning resides. In this light, the failure to reproduce Malvolio's humiliation is a form of non-translation—a symptom of a target system's refusal to admit the naughty Shakespeare into its canon.

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