

Rebusing the Fartuous Word: Malaforms and Malaprops in Shakespeare

By Scott Kaiser

You won't find the word "malaforms" in the dictionary, but it most certainly ought to be there.

What do I mean by a malaform?

A malaform is the unintended creation of a new word by a speaker who has mangled the pronunciation of a perfectly good existing word.

A good example of a malaform in Shakespeare is this line spoken by Dogberry, in *Much Ado About Nothing*:

Dogberry: Adieu. Be **vigitant**, I beseech you. ADO 3.3.94

Dogberry's mangling of the perfectly good word "vigilant" into a word that does not appear in any dictionary is what I would call a malaform.

But isn't that a malaprop, you ask? Well, yes and no.

Let me explain the distinction I'm advocating between a *malaform* and a *malaprop* by first reviewing the history and use of the malaprop.

The word *malaprop*, you will remember, originally comes from the French *mal à propos*, meaning inappropriate. The use of the term *malaprop* to describe perfectly good words used imperfectly can be traced back to the appearance of Mrs. Malaprop in 1775 in the play *The Rivals*, by Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

Most of Mrs. Malaprop's verbal gaffes still resonate in the theatre as if they were written for a hot new TV sitcom, like this one:

Mrs. Malaprop: He is the very **pine-apple** of politeness!

She means "pinnacle," of course, not pineapple. Here's another doozy:

Mrs. Malaprop: She's as headstrong as an **allegory** on the banks of the Nile.
(*She means alligator*)

Since *The Rivals*, most people know a malaprop when they hear one, and many can be heard in modern life. The living baseball legend Yogi Berra is famous for making ludicrous statements such as this:

It ain't the heat; it's the **humility**.
(He means humidity)

And modern politicians are often found guilty of mouthing this type of misstatement:

Dan Quayle: Republicans understand the importance of **bondage** between a mother and child.
(He means bond)

Our forty-third president has created a cottage industry with his prolific use of malaprops, which have been faithfully recorded in Jacob Weisberg's book *Bushisms*:

George W. Bush: Reading is the **basics** for all learning.
(He means basis)

George W. Bush: We cannot let terrorists and rogue nations hold this nation **hostile** or hold our allies **hostile**.
(He means hostage)

George W. Bush: I am mindful not only of preserving executive powers for myself, but for **predecessors** as well.
(He means successors)

Of course, Shakespeare, never having seen *The Rivals*, and never having heard George W. Bush, would not have called these slips of the tongue *malaprops*.

According to Sister Miriam Joseph, in her sublime study *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, he might have known them as a form of the rhetorical device *cacozelia*. Sister Miriam defines *cacozelia* as "the ignorant misapplication of words," such as in this line, where Dogberry unwittingly misapplies not just one word, but two:

Dogberry: Marry, sir, I would have some **confidence** with you that **discerns** you nearly. ADO 3.5.2
(He means conference and concerns)

Another definition of *cacozelia* is provided by Richard A. Lanham in his book *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*: "a vulgar error through an attempt to seem learned," which Dogberry demonstrates in this example:

Dogberry: Comparisons are **odorous**. ADO 3.5.16
(He means odious)

Or, Shakespeare might have studied the rhetorical figure *acyron* in school, which Sister Miriam defines as "the use of a word repugnant or contrary to what is meant," as in this Dogberry example:

Dogberry: Dost thou not **suspect** my place? Dost thou not **suspect** my years?
 ADO 4.2.74
(He means respect)

No matter what he called them, Shakespeare loved to use them. Most often we hear them in the comedies, with characters like Dogberry, who proves, without question, that he is the very pine-apple of Shakespeare's malaprop-makers in examples like these:

Dogberry: You are thought here to be the most **senseless** and fit man for the constable of the watch; therefore bear you the lantern. ADO 3.3.23
(He means sensible)

Dogberry: Only get the learned writer to set down our **excommunication**, and meet me at the jail. ADO 3.5.63
(He means examination, or communication?)

Dogberry: O villain! Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting **redemption** for this. ADO 4.2.57
(He means damnation)

Dogberry: By this time our sexton hath **reformed** Signor Leonato of the matter. ADO 5.1.254
(He means informed)

Bottom, of course, is the other champion mal-appropriator, as illuminated in these examples from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Bottom: But I will **aggravate** my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale. MND 1.2.81
(He means moderate, or mitigate)

Bottom: We will meet, and there we may rehearse most **obscenely** and courageously. MND 1.2.108
(Perhaps Bottom means unseen, without being seen?)

Bottom: O, wherefore, Nature, didst thou lions frame,
 Since lion vile hath here **deflower'd** my dear MND 5.1.292
(He means devoured)

Bottom: But I pray you, let none of your people stir me. I have an **exposition** of sleep come upon me. MND 4.1.39
(He means disposition)

Launcelot Gobbo and his father clearly share a genetic propensity for malaprop-making, as seen in these examples from *The Merchant of Venice*:

Gobbo: He hath a great **infection**, sir, as one would say, to serve. MV 2.2.125
(*He means affection*)

Launcelot: In very brief, the suit is **impertinent** to myself, as your worship shall know by this honest old man MV 2.2.137
(*He means pertinent*)

Gobbo: That is the very **defect** of the matter, sir. MV 2.2.143
(*He means effect*)

Launcelot: I do beseech you, sir, go. My young master doth expect your **reproach**. MV 2.5.20
(*He means approach*)

And Elbow, like Dogberry, enforces the law with these pronouncements in *Measure for Measure*:

Elbow: My wife, sir, whom I **detest** before heaven and your honor—
MM 2.1.69
(*He means protest*)

Elbow: I do lean upon justice, sir, and do bring in here before your good honor two notorious **benefactors**. MM 2.1.50
(*He means malefactors*)

Elbow: First, and it like you, the house is a **respected** house; next, this is a **respected** fellow; and his mistress is a **respected** woman. MM 2.1.162
(*He means suspected*)

Costard reaches above his station with these winners in *Love's Labor's Lost*:

Costard: Sir, the **contempts** thereof are as touching me. LLL 1.1.190
(*He means contents*)

Costard: And therefore welcome the sour cup of **prosperity**. LLL 1.1.313
(*He means adversity*)

And Launce delivers these ill tidings in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

Launce: Sir, there is a proclamation that you are **vanished**. TGV 3.1.218
(*He means banished*)

The Merry Wives of Windsor boasts several superb malaprop-makers, such as Bardolph, who stumbles over his tale with this retort:

Bardolph: Why, sir, for my part, I say the gentleman had drunk himself out of his **five sentences**. WIV 1.1.175
(He means five senses)

Or, the Host of The Garter Inn, who serves up this palatable sample:

Host: For the which, I will be thy **adversary** toward Anne Page. WIV 2.3.94
(He means emissary, or advocate?)

Or Slender, a suitor to Anne Page, who makes this engaging statement:

Slender: But if you say, “Marry her,” I will marry her; that I am freely **dissolved**, and **dissolutely**. WIV 1.1.251
(He means resolved and resolutely)

Or Mistress Quickly, who puts out these juicy morsels:

Quickly: She does so take on with her men; they mistook their **erection**. WIV 3.5.40
(She means direction)

Quickly: Good faith, it is such another Nan; but, I **detest**, an honest maid as ever broke bread. WIV 1.4.150
(She means protest)

Shakespeare did not restrict his use of malaprops to the comedies alone. They appear in the histories as well, such as when the self-same Quickly commits these verbal misdemeanors in *Henry the Fourth, Part Two*:

Hostess Quickly: And he is **indited** to dinner to the Lubber’s Head in Lumbert Street, to master Smooth’s, the silkman. 2H4 2.1.28
(She means invited)

Hostess Quickly: Murder! Murder! Ah, thou **honeysuckle** villain, wilt thou kill God’s officers and the King’s? 2H4 2.1.50
(Perhaps she means homicidal?)

This vice of Quickly’s continues after marriage, in *Henry the Fifth*:

Hostess: O well-a-day, Lady, if he be not hewn now, we shall see willful **adultery** and murder committed. H5 2.1.37
(Perhaps she means assault, or battery?)

Shakespeare also used malaprops in his romances. The Clown in *The Winter’s Tale* offers up this jewel:

Clown: Ay; or else 'twere hard luck, being in so **preposterous estate** as we are.
WT 5.2.148
(*He means prosperous a state*)

And sometimes malaprops worm their way into Shakespeare's tragedies, such as when the Clown slays 'em with this one in *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Clown: Truly I have him, but I would not be the party that should desire you to touch him, for his biting is **immortal**. Those that do die of it do seldom or never recover. ANT 5.2.247
(*He means mortal, or deadly*)

Each of these examples contains a malaprop, because, as the OED says, it demonstrates a "ludicrous misuse of words, especially in mistaking a word for another resembling it."

A *malaform*, on the other hand, is the unintentional *distortion* of a word or phrase, often with humorous consequences.

In other words, where a *malaprop* is the imperfect use of perfectly good words, a *malaform* is the mangling of perfectly good words into imperfect ones.

Once again, for modern examples, it is easiest to cite statements made by George W. Bush, whose rare talent for malaforms is well documented. In each of these examples, GWB has coined a word that *sounds like* the word he intended to say, but would be impossible to find in any dictionary:

George W. Bush: They **misunderestimated** the compassion of our country. I think they **misunderestimated** the will and determination of the commander-in-chief, too.
(*He means underestimated*)

George W. Bush: The United States and Russia are in the midst of a **transformationed** relationship that will yield peace and progress.
(*He means transformational, or transforming?*)

George W. Bush: Governor Bush will not stand for the **subsidation** of failure.
(*He means subsidization*)

George W. Bush: Whether it **resignates** or not doesn't matter to me, because I stand for doing what's the right thing, and what the right thing is hearing the voices of people who work.
(*He means resonates*)

In Shakespeare, it is Dogberry, already the canon's maestro-of-malaprops, who holds the high office of malaform-maker-in-chief. As evidence, witness each of these examples, in which the officer mangles a perfectly good word into a transformationed mess:

Dogberry: Yea, marry, that's the **eftest** way. Let the watch come forth.
ADO 4.2.36
(*He means deftest*)

Dogberry: Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two **aspicious** persons
ADO 3.5.46
(*He means suspicious*)

Dogberry: This is your charge: you shall comprehend all **vagrom** men
ADO 3.3.25
(*He means vagrant*)

Dogberry: It shall be **suffigance**. ADO 3.5.52
(*He means sufficient*)

Dogberry: Is our whole **dissembly** appeared? ADO 4.2.1
(*He means assembly*)

Dogberry isn't the only word-warper in Shakespeare. Mistress Quickly, who misuses many a proper word in *Merry Wives*, is also quick to corrupt virtuous words into malaforms, such as these:

Quickly: But indeed she is given too much to **allicholy** and musing.
(*She means melancholy*) WIV 1.4.154

Quickly: She's as **fartuous** a civil modest wife, and one, I tell you, that will not miss you morning nor evening prayer, as any is in Windsor WIV 2.2.97
(*She means virtuous*)

Quickly also shamelessly perverts this modest word in *Henry the Fourth, Part Two*:

Hostess Quickly: Your **pulsidge** beats as extraordinarily as heart would desire
2H4 2.4.23
(*She means pulse*)

In addition, we have characters like Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson in *Merry Wives*, who makes an ungodly muddle of this English word:

Evans: You must speak **possitable**, if you can carry her your desires towards her.
(*He means positively*) WIV 1.1.236

And Petruchio's servant Grumio, who makes hash of a word in *The Taming of the Shrew*:

Grumio: Is there any man has **rebused** your worship? SHR 1.2.7
(*He means abused*)

And Sir Andrew, who foolishly flubs a word in *Twelfth Night*:

Sir Andrew: We took him for a coward, but he's the very devil **incardinate**.
 TN 5.1.182
(He means incarnate)

And Lepidus, who loses control of a word in *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Lepidus: Nay, certainly I have heard the Ptolemies' **pyramises** are very goodly things; without contradiction I have heard that. ANT 2.7.35
(He means pyramids)

Now that you know the difference between a *malaform* and a *malaprop*, I urge you to be vigilant, to make certain that you use the two distinct terms in the efiest possible manner, and to be aspicious when hearing someone rebuse the proper terminology.

Then, perhaps, we shall see the word *malaform* appear in a suspected dictionary on a bookshelf near you.

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