

YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN: DOGBERRY

**You are thought here to be the most senseless
and fit man for the constable of the watch..."**

—Dogberry, Act 3, Scene 3

Shakespeare uses language like a jazz musician plays with musical notes; Sometimes he follows the rules, but sometimes he makes up new rules. Shakespeare's characters use words not only to communicate, but to create a certain mood, express their emotions in new ways, or paint a complex picture of a person or situation.

Poor Dogberry! He seems to love words—his speeches are full of complex and certainly interesting phrases and turns of thought—but he doesn't seem to really understand the words he's saying. He often substitutes one word for another, which is called a "malapropism." Malapropisms usually result in jokes.

Sometimes a malapropism is substituting an incorrect word that sounds a lot like the word one really means. For example, when Dogberry asks his sidekick Verges not to compare things to each other he says, "Comparisons are odorous." He means to say "odious," which means hateful or disgusting, but instead he says "odorous," which means smelly. Don't you just hate when comparisons are lying around in the garbage smelling up the place?

Another example is when the malapropism is substituting a word that means the exact opposite of what is intended. For instance, when Dogberry is accusing the conspirator Borachio he says, "O villain! Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this." He is trying to tell Borachio that he will be punished by God for his villainy, so he means to say something similar to "condemnation," but instead he uses "redemption," which means "rescue or recovery." The mix-up has a comic effect.

Another textual indication of Dogberry's state of mind is an inability to keep things in order. For example, when listing the many offenses of the lawbreakers, he says, "Moreover they have spoken untruths; secondarily, they are slanders; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and, to conclude, they are lying knaves."

For Students: Shakespeare was First

The word "malapropism" comes from a 1775 play called *The Rivals* by Richard Brinkley Sheridan, in which a character named Mrs. Malaprop—whose name comes from the French phrase *mal à propos*, meaning not to the purpose—makes the same kind of verbal mistakes as Dogberry. But this tendency, embodied so fully by Dogberry in the 1500s, was known to Renaissance crowds as a "dogberryism."