

Malvolio: a Detestable Prig with Honest Nobility.

Malvolio, his name literally branding him with the quintessence of “ill will,” is the embodiment of priggish sobriety; a wooden puritan who enjoys nothing better than ruining the revelry of others during the eve of Epiphany. He is the selfish steward of order, whose overweening goals of elevating his social rank, and ultimate humiliation as a result, seem to provide little more than an amusing subplot to the Olivia-Viola-Orsino love triangle in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. However, this interpretation is by no means the only way the audience may view Malvolio. For while there may be no change or development in Malvolio’s stiff and selfish character, there is room for a change in the reader’s view of the lowly steward of Olivia’s house. Throughout the play, Malvolio remains true to himself, exemplifying a dedication to his own ambitions and convictions in the face of whatever ridicule or punishment is thrown in his way. With this in mind, a change can be marked in the reader’s initial interpretation of Malvolio, as a man the reader would rather use “a stonebow, to hit him in the eye,”¹ to a man who earns the audience’s sympathy, respect, and a kind of honest nobility. Finally, the things that happen to Malvolio reveal a truth about the celebration of *Twelfth Night*, giving Shakespeare’s play something much more than just what seems to be a happy ending.

Before the change in the audience’s opinion of Malvolio can be understood, one must first come to see what initially makes Malvolio so distasteful. Just after Maria attempts to quiet the singing Sir Toby Belch and hush his fellow drunken merry-makers, Malvolio enters and displays a part of his contemptible nature: “Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady’s house...Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?” (2.3.82-86) With his denouncement of the others’ revelry, Malvolio effectively shows his detestable, straitlaced Puritanism. Malvolio calls the gentlemen revelers lowly “tinkers,” unskilled pot-menders, who incoherently jabber, insulting their nobility in his attempts to get them to hush or leave Olivia’s house. Malvolio appears condescending in his asking of the men’s honesty and respect, seeming to think himself above the noblemen, adding an air of arrogance where he, as a servant, has no right to. He is not only a man who objects to all types of carousing, from singing to drinking, but he is also one who enjoys indicting others as being responsible for the activities he despises. This is shown later when he accuses

¹ Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. Ed. Jonathan Crewe. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. 2.5. 43.
(Subsequent references will appear in text)

Maria of supporting Feste and the nobles' drinking, threatening to tell the gentlewoman Olivia of Maria's supposed contempt for Olivia's authority (despite the fact that it was Maria who attempted to quiet the partiers).

With these actions being some of the first of Malvolio's that the audience witnesses, our initial impression of him is of a snitch who maintains a profound contempt for others' pleasures. Malvolio's order-loving spirit contrasts greatly with the mood of the Feast of the Epiphany (from which *Twelfth Night* takes its name) which is characterized by anarchy, underscored with song and drenched in ale. At this time in the play, the reader's disdain for the steward parallels that of Maria, Sir Toby, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who soon decide to play a practical joke on Malvolio as retribution for his insults and spoiling of their fun. However, the audience and the three merry-maker's contempt for Malvolio extends beyond his detestable priggishness, and boils over into another part of the steward's character.

The second aspect of Malvolio's nature which makes him initially so utterly distasteful is his arrogant and selfish ambition. After Maria has placed her forged letter in Malvolio's path and hidden behind a "boxtree" with her companions (Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian), Malvolio, thinking he is alone, speaks of his desires:

Having been three months married to her,
sitting in my state –

Calling my officers about me, in my
branched velvet gown; having come from a daybed,
where I have left Olivia sleeping –

And then to have the humor of state; and
after a demure travel of regard, telling them I know my
place, as I would they should do theirs, to ask for my
kinsman Toby –

Toby approaches; curtsies there to me – (2.5. 41-42, 44-46, 49-52, 58).

Described earlier by Toby as an "overweening rogue," Malvolio displays his egotistical aspirations in his desire to be Count Malvolio. The language Malvolio uses shows Shakespeare's intention to accent the steward's self-centered traits. Throughout nearly all the lines of his speech, the steward utilizes clusters of 'mes', 'mys', and 'Is' (for example, "Calling my officers about me, in my..."). With these clusters, it can be seen how "Malvolio is indulging himself in emotional and mental masturbation."² He is completely obsessed with the development of his own greatness and elevation of his social rank through his marrying of Olivia, an idea which Maria's letter later tricks him into thinking is a real possibility. In fact, Malvolio is so taken with

² Edmondson, Paul. *The Shakespeare Handbooks: Twelfth Night*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 123.

daydreaming about his desires that for some time he does not notice the presence of Maria's letter on the ground before him. The nobles, Fabian and Maria cannot help but laugh at and insult Malvolio from their hiding place. His aspirations of marrying Olivia and leaving her sexually exhausted in her "daybed," lecturing his attendants on his knowledge of the importance of his position and state, and having Sir Toby bow before him seem to be an utterly ignorant, amusing, and impossible set of scenarios. Despite the amusement, however, Malvolio's speech also strikes emotion into Sir Toby who wishes "O for a stonebow, to hit him in the eye!" (2.5. 43) and curses "Fire and brimstone!" (2.5. 47) in his anger over Malvolio's arrogant speech. The audience also shares in the hiding tricksters' amusement and annoyance, enjoying the comeuppance that Malvolio receives, albeit unknowingly, at the hands of the revelers behind the hedge, and later at the hands of the fake letter. For the reader, Malvolio is getting what he deserves: retribution for his straitlaced sobriety, and ridicule for his ignorant and egotistical assumption that he may ever become a head of state, or be a sexual superman.

Now that it is clear what makes Malvolio initially so distasteful, one may now come to understand how this first audience interpretation changes. Malvolio's arrogant, self-centered aspiration functions as much more than a point of disdain and a cause for laughter. For while this selfish ambition brings the reader amusement and satisfaction when Malvolio is ridiculed and humiliated, it is this same ambition, coupled with Malvolio's convictions, that paved the way for the audience's feelings of sympathy and respect for Olivia's steward.

Malvolio is a man who allows his ambitions to overcome his good sense, drawing sympathy from the audience. He changes from a wooden embodiment of joylessness and Puritanism, to being joyful in the pursuit of a dream that everyone, but him, knows is impossible. After having read the fake letter of Olivia's love, written by Maria, and having been sent for by Olivia, Malvolio joins the noblewoman in her garden:

OLIVIA: Why, how dost thou, man? What is the matter with thee?

MALVOLIO: Not black in my mind, though yellow in my legs. It did come to his hands, and commands shall be executed. I think we do know the sweet Roman hand.

OLIVIA: Wilt thou go to bed, Malvolio?

MALVOLIO: To bed? Ay, sweetheart, and I'll come to thee.

OLIVIA: Why, this is very midsummer madness (3.4. 22-28, 52).

Upon seeing Olivia for the first time since before his reading of the letter, Malvolio is intent on communicating to her that he has received what he thinks was her correspondence, and that he returns her affection. Malvolio forfeits what his good sense would tell him about Olivia's mood, made somber in her mourning for her dead brother, and instead smiles, going cross-gartered,

wearing yellow stockings with nothing “black” or melancholy on his mind. Malvolio leaves his sense even farther behind when he twists Olivia’s comment about him getting some rest into a sexual innuendo, using “come” in its suggestive meaning. With Malvolio’s zealous pursuit of showing Olivia his love for her, the reader begins to wince, feeling pity for each act that Malvolio commits that the reader knows is not the true desire of Olivia. The audience feels sorry for this pathetic man who remains so dedicated to fulfilling his ambition based on what he thinks is the truth of the letter, not a desire to hit him with rocks from a stonebow. The steward is so convinced that Olivia’s love for him is real that despite her denouncing his actions as reaching the height of madness (“this is very midsummer madness”), Malvolio nevertheless seeks to force her actions to fit his overweening desires.

More sympathy from the audience comes with Malvolio’s squeezing of Olivia’s movements to fulfill his own desires. After Olivia exits in search of her cousin, Sir Toby, Malvolio is left to present a soliloquy:

She sends him on purpose, that I may
appear stubborn to him; for she incites me to that in
the letter...
Why, everything adheres together...
Nothing that can be can come between me
and the full prospect of my hopes (3.4. 62-64, 73, 76-77).

Despite Olivia’s later quickness in going to meet Cesario (Viola in disguise), leaving Malvolio as a second priority to be tended to by Toby, Malvolio exemplifies an ability to remain true to himself through upholding his ambitions and desires no matter what. He does this by attempting to stretch and contort Olivia’s actions into fitting the context of the letter which paves the way for his ambitious future as a glorious nobleman. He thinks that Olivia intends to bring Sir Toby so that Malvolio may show his wish to comply with the letter and be surly and rude to the noblewoman’s cousin. In reality, Olivia intends to bring Sir Toby to look after what she thinks is her mildly mad steward, while she goes to meet her present crush, Cesario. Sympathy from the audience comes with their view of Malvolio as changing from a priggish upholder of rules to the personification of the power of self-delusion. He thinks that “everything adheres together” when, in truth, Olivia’s actions have no relation to the context in which Malvolio thinks of them. The reader feels sorry for Malvolio in his inability recognize Olivia’s movements as anything other than affirming the truth of the letter and her love for him. They feel sorry for the steward’s conviction that nothing can come between him and the full completion of his hope to raise his social status (hopes which have no basis in reality). In these ways the audience may see Malvolio as something other than an egoist impressed at his own charisma and proud that someone else has finally noticed it. Rather, he is a man with a crush who thinks his affection has been returned,

only to later discover that it was all a cruel farce. But since this joke is not yet known to the steward, he stands by his own ambitions, dedicating himself to the pursuit of his desires, no matter what barriers he confronts. For Malvolio, “ill will,” has now become the poster boy for willed, wishful thinking. The steward exemplifies another strong conviction that elicits from the audience not just a sense of sympathy, but, more importantly, a feeling of respect.

Unfortunately for Malvolio, the ridicule and trickery employed against him by Maria, Sir Toby, Fabian, and Feste does not end with the forged letter, but builds into an over-drawn and severe comeuppance. This punishment, however, despite the extreme humiliation of Malvolio and the resulting increase of sympathy from the audience, proves to put Malvolio into a position that warrants respect from the reader. After the four coercers have locked Malvolio in a dark room within Olivia’s house, Feste, as “Sir Topas” the curate, visits the imprisoned steward and Malvolio explains to him what has happened:

MALVOLIO: They have here propertied me; keep me in darkness, send ministers to me, asses, and do all they can to face me out of my wits.

MALVOLIO: Good fool, help me to some light and some paper. I tell thee, I am as well in my wits as any man in Illyria (4.2. 91-93, 104-106).

The tricksters from Act II have taken their practical joke too far. Malvolio tells how they have made him a prisoner (tightly binding him), sent Sir Topas (Feste in disguise) to intellectually confuse him into madness, and have generally done their best to aberrate Malvolio from his five wits. Feste, as Sir Topas, has intellectually challenge the steward, using words that are associated with light to describe the utter blackness of Malvolio’s cell, attempting to drive Malvolio to madness in confusing his understanding of light and dark. The Clown has also preposterously questioned Malvolio as to the opinion of Pythagoras on the wildfowl, grading the steward’s answer as false when he seems to answer rationally and correctly. While these events arouse sympathy in the reader for the victim of a cruel and over-drawn joke, they also speak to the remarkable conviction of Olivia’s steward. Despite all their attempts to assure him otherwise, the incarcerators have been unable to make Malvolio think that he is mad. In this way, Malvolio maintains his conviction that he is not a madman, stating “I am as well in my wits as any man,” despite the extreme influences of the others, and being locked away for what seems to be a considerable amount of time. Malvolio stays true to himself in the face of difficult odds, going from enjoying his own mental masturbation in Act II, to sustaining terrible mental torture in Act IV. It is because of this that Malvolio warrants respect from the reader. With his wits about him, Malvolio begs Feste for a pen and paper with which to prove his sanity through text, a medium granted to him more prized and valid than any form of speech.

In light of all that he has been through, Malvolio can be seen as having gained, no matter how limited, a kind of honest nobility. In Malvolio's last speech of *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare communicates to the audience room for a possible different interpretation of the priggish steward of Olivia. After Feste is ordered by Olivia to read Malvolio's letter aloud, she demands that he be brought before her, and the tormented steward enters the court, demanding answers:

Well grant it then,
And tell me, in the modesty of honor,
Why you have given me such clear lights of favor,
Bade me come smiling and cross-gartered to you,
To put on yellow stockings, and to frown
Upon Sir Toby and the lighter people;
And, acting this in an obedient hope,
Why have you suffered me to be imprisoned,
Kept in a dark house, visited by the priest,
And made the most notorious geck and gull
That e'er invention played on? Tell me why. (5.1. 328-338)

It is clear that Malvolio, still thinking that the forged letter was from Olivia's hand, wishes to know why he has been so ill treated by the woman he thought loved him and would enable him to increase his social standing. The most important element of this speech, however, is the fact that it is written in verse. Having spoken entirely throughout the rest of the play in prose, this marks a possible change most likely in the way that Shakespeare wants the reader to view the steward. In light of Malvolio's directness in asking why he has been so hurt and humiliated, and taking into account the fact that verse in *Twelfth Night* has, up to this point, been reserved solely for the nobles, one may now come to see Malvolio's interpretation as being one of a kind of honest decency rather than of priggish Puritanism. While Malvolio, without a doubt, has his faults, he nevertheless remains more ambitiously motivated than Sir Toby, more self-confident than Sir Andrew, more independent than Fabian, and less scornfully aggressive than Maria. The audience may now see Malvolio as the embodiment of a man who stands by his ambitions and convictions no matter what ridicule or harsh embarrassment is placed in his way.

From a man seen as the epitome of contemptible, straitlaced order and selfish arrogance, to one who is seen as embodying a kind of honest nobility, it is possible for the audience's view of Malvolio to change greatly from Act I to Act V. For the steward projects out characteristics the audience and each of the other characters have but do not want to be faced with, and while at first we hate him for it, we cannot help but feel disdain for the unjust punishment he receives. The events that Shakespeare has made happen to Malvolio tell a harsh truth about the celebration of the Eve of the Epiphany. Through Malvolio's humiliation, embarrassment, and mental torture, it

is revealed how the steward of sobriety must be sacrificed in order to ensure that others may enjoy the revelry and high spirits that embody the celebration of Twelfth Night. This fact is affirmed by Toby in his plotting to lock Malvolio in the dark room: “We may / carry it thus, for our pleasure and his penance...” (3.4.130-131). This gives *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* something much more substantial than just a happy ending where concealed loves are made known and lost siblings are reunited. It shows that even in a world turned upside-down by the festive chaos of the Feast of the Epiphany, there is still life’s cruel reality that some must suffer for the pure amusement of others. With this truth, however, comes its opposite which Sebastian questions after Sir Andrew strikes him: “Are all the people mad?” (4.1. 26). Sebastian’s statement forces the audience to wonder: where is the sanity of those who get enjoyment from others’ pain? How can Maria, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Feste, and Fabian be considered as acting rationally and sanely? While these questions are left open-ended, as Shakespeare certainly intended them and his play to be, what can most assuredly be seen in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and in the audience’s interpretation of it, is the social upholding and redemption of a scapegoat. It is the steward of “ill will” who suffers in *Twelfth Night*, and while some may view his comeuppance as well deserved and warranted, there is room to see Malvolio as more victim than victimizer, as a man dedicated to his ambitions and convictions no matter how contemptible or far-fetched they may be.