

Topic: *Twelfth Night*

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Malvolio

Very little happens as far as the main plot is concerned in *Twelfth Night*, till Act 3, in terms of action. The love triangle between Orsino, Olivia and Viola-Cesario is clearly spelt out and signs of fruition look impossible at this juncture. Act 3 can be viewed as the middle stage in plot complication.

But if we consider the sub-plot, then by the first two scenes of Act 3, the stage is prepared and well set for the high drama- **the gulling of Malvolio**. Gulling of Malvolio becomes central in terms of festivity and hilarity in most productions. The scene assumes significance because it foregrounds the contest between the **lord of Misrule (Sir Toby) and the Intruder/Killjoy/ Pretender/Keeper of decorum (Malvolio)**. The revellers, Sir Toby,

Maria, Sir Andrew and Feste topple authority represented by Malvolio and the momentary victory is viewed as a triumph of the festive spirit, which is imbued with subversive forces. By extension, it is a triumph of art itself, art that sanctions and legitimizes our inherent desire of an alternative existence (vicarious, also) in a make-belief world. And more interestingly, what better place to have this contest than Ilyria?

Beneath the veneer of fun and frolic, the subplot of *Twelfth Night* is concerned about class. Olivia's household is not only disordered but clearly fraught with tension that is waiting to erupt. It is a competitive world, wily workers are clearly in abundance. Feste, for instance must have fallen out of favour and we note at the beginning in Act 1 scene 5 how he manages to gain Olivia's favour. And Malvolio is certainly not happy about it. He is constantly angry, reprimanding everyone around. And

Olivia's sanction makes him a very dangerous enemy of the people in the household.

The others in the house, in fact, come together sharing their mutual hatred and beneath the hatred there is the fierce competition. Maria's position for instance, is similar to that of Malvolio; they are both **“paid” workers**. (But they do not belong to the lowly servant category- they both belong to the gentleman/woman category) Both Maria and Malvolio have strong social aspirations- if Malvolio is an overt “time pleaser”(2.3) i.e.sychophant, Maria is a clever manipulator, who is ready to go far to win Sir Toby's favour. (We are not clearly told about her intentions of marrying Sir Toby, at this point) . So both want to climb the ladder of success, improve their social status. But because Maria has chosen to side with Sir Toby and the revellers, she is not considered an enemy of the festive spirit.

Malvolio is like Oswald in *King Lear*, who will do whatever it takes to gain promotion. Maria knows and she tells the others how Malvolio has been preparing for his rise in status by picking up skills of a courtier. And it is this weakness, which Maria intends to exploit to teach him a lesson. Maria is confident of her success when she frames (actually forges) the letter, asking Malvolio to gear up in a particular manner.

- **Consider Malvolio as a malcontent.**
- **Explore the name Malvolio.**
- **Examine the charge of Puritanism brought against Malvolio.**
- **Does Malvolio's desire of social improvement or his behaviour merit the kind of treatment meted out to him?**

- **Consider Malvolio's threat at the end of the play. Does that clash with the notion of happy ending in a comedy?**