Malvolio’s Defense

by David P. Gontar (September 2014)

I. Recollections of Mr. Malvolio

Twelfth Night has always been one of Shakespeare’s most popular and beloved comedies. Our affection for this brilliant and endearing play extends to its characters, including its villain, Malvolio, the steward of Lady Olivia. This is unusual. Audiences are not drawn to bad guys, and no one goes out of his way to speak on behalf of *Much Ado About Nothing’s* Don John or Duke Frederick in *As You Like It*. What makes Malvolio different? Our response to him is reminiscent of how we felt as youngsters about Captain Hook in Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, or Eeyore in Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories. These were adversaries, to be sure, but they didn’t seem to unsettle. No one loves *Othello’s* Iago or Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. Yet some of our most renowned critics have taken special pains to present Malvolio in a good light, or at least in the best light possible. And perhaps the leading question concerning *Twelfth Night* has always been about him, and how to account for his elusive charm. He is often regarded as a sort of curmudgeonly grandfather. There’s a part of us that wants to reach out to him and include him in our celebration of this lovely and touching comedy. The risk is that in seeking to rationalize Malvolio’s appeal we may stray too far and gloss deficiencies which should count against him.

But how is he deficient? Let us count the ways.

1. Malvolio is hostile.

We are introduced in Act 1, Sc. 5 when Malvolio is asked by Olivia about Feste the jester, a clown who had been employed by her late father. Feste is disenchanted because his wit is not appreciated by Olivia, who is in interminable mourning for her recently deceased brother. These are the first words we hear from him.

> OLIVIA
>
> What do you think of this fool, Malvolio? Doth he
> not mend?
>
> MALVOLIO
>
> Yes, and shall do till the pangs of death shake him.

Infirmity, that decays the wise, doth ever make the
better fool.
(I, v, 69-73)

There is nothing in the text to account for this harshness. It sounds as though Malvolio harbors a death wish for a mere household entertainer. Notice that Olivia's inquiry is beneficent. She is suddenly pleased by Feste's humor and solicitude for her feelings about her brother, and notices that the clown's demeanor is improving. Instead of following her lead, the steward seizes the opportunity to denounce Feste, making an unpleasant scene. For one who professes dedication to her, this shows a surprisingly callous disregard for Lady Olivia. Taken aback by Malvolio's intemperance, Feste gives a witty counterpunch.

FESTE

God send you, sir, a speedy infirmity for the better
increasing your folly. Sir Toby will be sworn that I am
no fox, but he will not pass his word for twopence that
you are no fool.

OLIVIA

How say you to that, Malvolio?
(I, v, 78)

Unfazed, Malvolio continues his unprovoked tirade.

MALVOLIO

I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a
barren rascal. I saw him put down the other day with
an ordinary fool that has no more brain than a stone.
Look you now, he's out of his guard already. Unless
you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged.
I protest I take these wise men that crow so at these
set kind of fools no better than the fools' zanies.

OLIVIA

O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste
with a distempered appetite. To be generous, guiltless,

and of a free disposition is to take those things for
birdbolts that you deem cannon bullets. There is no
slander in an allowed fool, though he do nothing but
rail; nor no railing in a known discreet man, though
he do nothing but reprove.

FESTE

Now Mercury indue thee with leasing, for thou
speakest well of fools.
(I, v, 74-94)

Malvolio insults Feste for lack of intelligence and belittles those who might appreciate his banter, that is, the nobility of the household (Olivia, Sir Toby Belch, her uncle, and his friend, Sir Andrew Aguecheek). Of course, no one is responsible for their measure of intelligence. That is something to remember. And for a servant to deride the houseguests in this manner is rude and impertinent. Finally, Malvolio seems to think that on account of having been demoralized by a rival clown, Feste is deserving of further humiliation in front of Lady Olivia. That is logic twisted by hate.

Olivia's reaction is mild but direct. She chastens him for being so self-centered, and points out that, after all, a jester's job is to poke fun at dour people. Those jibes are not meant to hurt but to prompt courtiers to lighten up. Unfortunately, Malvolio doesn't take the hint. Throughout the entire play he remains obdurate in his hostility and in fact says not one engaging or pleasant thing to anyone, except his fawning when duped into fatuous civility by Maria's prank. Confined to a dark house as a madman, he is importunate and for the moment a friend in need. Once at liberty he learns he's played the fool himself, and his rage knows no bounds. Though some find in this a tincture of humanity, it is nothing new, and merely underscores the anger we see him exhibit in Act 1.

2. Malvolio is petulant and dishonest

Viola disguised as Cesario arrives at Olivia's house. Malvolio, never having seen this fellow before, announces him in gratuitously disparaging terms (I, v, 133-156). After hearing Orsino's message from Cesario and becoming infatuated with this youth, Olivia instructs Malvolio to catch up with him on the road and give him a ring and invitation to return.

MALVOLIO

(*offering a ring*)

She returns this ring to you,
sir. You might have saved me my pains to have taken
it away yourself. She adds, moreover, that you should
put your lord into a desperate assurance she will none
of him. And one thing more: that you be never so
hardy to come again in his affairs, unless it be to report
your lord's taking of this. Receive it so.

VIOLA

She took no ring of me. I'll none of it.

MALVOLIO

Come, sir, you peevishly threw it to her, and
her will is it should be so returned.

(*He throws the ring down*)

If it be worth stooping for, there it lies, in your eye; if
not, be it his that finds it.
(II, i, 5-16, following the Stratford Town Edition, 1904)

What accounts for this patronizing and abrasive discourse? Viola has done no harm to him, nor has Orsino. Cesario is not a person of authority but a mere courier. What is the point of this proud man's contumely? The accusation that Cesario "peevishly threw" the ring to Olivia is a transparent fabrication, and the act of tossing it to the ground is ironic in light of Malvolio's use of the word "peevishly," which aptly describes his own disposition, not Cesario's. This ill deportment was certainly not authorized by Olivia, who, unbeknownst to Malvolio, has just fallen in love with Cesario. Out of Olivia's sight and hearing, Malvolio behaves disgracefully toward Cesario, this after being gently admonished by her for mistreating Feste.

3. Malvolio is Resentful and Accusatory

In Act 2, Sc. 3, when Sir Toby, Feste and Sir Andrew sing noisy tavern ballads late at night, they are angrily chastised by Malvolio, who in the process unjustly accuses Maria of allowing or encouraging the disturbance.

MALVOLIO

Mistress Mary, if you prized my lady's favour
at anything more than contempt you would not give
means for this uncivil rule. She shall know of it, by
this hand.
(II, iii, 117-120)

What is the basis of this charge? It was Maria who first sought to make these three merrymakers keep quiet. ("What a caterwauling do you keep here!" II, iii, 69) In accusing her of complicity with this minor disturbance, Malvolio again either speaks recklessly out of ignorance or is deliberately mendacious. Not only does he lash out at Maria but declares his intention to bear false witness as to her alleged misdeed to Olivia. It isn't hard to see that, lacking any capacity for enjoyment, relaxation or fellowship, Malvolio is envious and resentful of those who manage a modicum of happiness in life. Sir Toby hits the nail on the head.

SIR TOBY

Art any more than a steward?
Dost thou think because thou art virtuous
there shall be no more cakes and ale?
(II, iii, 109-111)

4. Malvolio is a Snob and a Gold Digger

This brings us to Act 2, Sc. 5.

The famous trick Maria plays on Malvolio, allowing him to find a letter apparently written by Olivia which makes him believe she is in love with him, reveals even more of his unfortunate personality. Through his monologue we are allowed to see that he regards himself as not only superior to members of the household staff, but to everyone else, including the aristocracy. Yet it is nobility he hankers after – for himself. He will take advantage of Olivia's love to marry her and become: "Count Malvolio." (II, v, 33) Olivia will be useful to him as the springboard to social advancement and at the same time to sexual indulgence. It is obvious he has no actual regard for her at all. Here Shakespeare allows Malvolio to freely indulge in fantasy.

MALVOLIO

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 day-bed where I have
left Olivia sleeping –
And then to have the humour 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.
Seven of my people with an obedient start
make out for him. I frown the while, and perchance
wind up my watch, or play with my –
some rich jewel. Toby approaches; curtsies there
to me.
I extend my hand to him thus, quenching my
familiar smile with an austere regard of control –
Saying, 'Cousin Toby, my fortunes, having cast
me on your niece, give me this prerogative of speech' –
You must amend your drunkenness.'
Besides, you waste the treasure of your time
with a foolish knight' –
(II, v, 42-75, with omissions)

In other words, Steward Malvolio dreams of being a lord not to 'read politic authors' and maintain order and prosperity in his realm, but to pull rank on persons he loathes. He is the quintessential snob. Further, although in reading Maria's letter he becomes persuaded that she loves him, not once does he express any love for her. His "lady" is there strictly to provide power and sexual gratification. Hearing this, we understand why he had no trouble scanting her instructions when he thought he could get away with it. In fact, believing himself better than she, he has for Olivia not a jot of respect.

Shakespeare's genius in molding this character is to situate his vices not in a soul bent on destruction, but in a heart so consumed with the prospect of mundane advantages that it is blind to real ambition, usurpation, assassination, rape, and the other deeds we find in real villainy. To put it plainly, Malvolio desires to rise just high enough to look down on others. That is his *raison d'être*. We do not condemn him for the simple reason that there is not enough to condemn. Even his fantasies are meager. Malvolio is like a face painted on a child's

balloon, which puffs with air and then bursts. In short, he is ludicrous.

When he is condemned by Olivia as a madman and locked in dark room many in the audience cringe. After all, what harm has he done? The festive comedy reaches its crescendo, truth is unveiled, and happy marriages follow: Olivia is paired with Viola's twin, the masculine Sebastian, Viola wins Duke Orsino, and Sir Toby runs off with Maria. All is well, except for Malvolio, who emerges from his umbrageous confinement to discover that he has been tricked. 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you," he cries in frustrated anguish. (V, i, 374) We have seen that although he is not dangerous, Malvolio is: petulant, vain, dishonest, vindictive, resentful, accusatory, snobbish, unloving and sexually exploitive. For these behaviors he suffers no more than a single day in darkness. When "revenge" can he expect? Will he take "revenge" on Duke Orsino and Lady Olivia? Even to make such a threat to the nobility of Illyria is impudent and imprudent.

What, then, art thou, Malvolio? Anyone can see he's a stuffed shirt, or, in Gallic terms, a *petit bourgeois* wearing his ego on his shirt sleeve. (See, Jean-Paul Sartre's discussion of 'bad faith' in *Being and Nothingness*, esp. 101-102) Seeking at every moment to clamber on top of his fellows, to be by intimidation more than he is, he becomes manifestly ludicrous. Such a one need not slip on a banana peel to appear absurd. For that slip and fall are already implicit in his attitude and behavior. Rigid and mechanical, he is a rule-sadist who takes advantage of points of order to bully others. We encounter such pompous types every day. Children throw stones at them to see them turn purple and lose their hats. Dogs yap at their heels.

And it is just here that the ambiguity arises. For as he falls, we laugh. Malvolio is so grim he's funny. That is why Maria's postscript induces him to smile. (II, v, 169) On a face that hasn't cracked a smile in forty years, the effort to manufacture one is almost painful to behold, and in a good performance can be a *coup de théâtre* that leaves us rolling in the aisles. That comic dimension is what makes him seem vulnerable and almost likable. But it must be remembered that though we, the invisible audience, are amused, those who must suffer at the hands of such overbearing and manipulative individuals never find anything funny about it. Thus, when he finally does fall, we acknowledge that justice has been done.

The challenge, of course, is for those who have the misfortune to find themselves feelingly impersonated by Malvolio and obliquely pilloried. To recognize yourself in such a character onstage may be an uncomfortable moment. In that respect it is interesting to attend to certain critical writers and observe the lengths to which they go to obfuscate the obvious and rehabilitate a cad.

Out of fairness, let’s hear the voices of those who would advocate for him.

II. Malvolio’s Defense

1. Charles Lamb

Charles Lamb (1775-1834) was an English essayist and poet. In 1823 he reviewed a performance of *Twelfth Night* in which a Mr. Bensley played the part of Malvolio. Lamb wrote an article about English theatre, “On Some of the Old Actors,” in which generous comments were made, not only in appreciation of Mr. Bensley, but of Mr. Malvolio as well. It was published in an issue of *London Magazine* that year, and, like all good things, it is available online. As there are no quotations from the text, it may be wondered whether Lamb actually read the play around the time he saw it onstage and composed his squib “On the Character of Malvolio” (1823). This was the era when, prompted by German scholarship and the fanfare of David Garrick, the English people were awakening to the artistic accomplishment of their native son. The failure to quote raises difficulties, as it may be that Lamb relied in his exposition largely on his impressions as a viewer rather than on close reading. His essay suffers from florid writing and special pleading. It deserves our notice, however, as it remains a staple of discourse about *Twelfth Night* and has had a significant influence (*e.g.*, H.C. Goddard).

Lamb is waist-deep in error from the very start:

(i) “Malvolio is not essentially ludicrous. He becomes comic but by accident.”

Such a casual pronouncement can be salvaged thus: Malvolio <u>is</u> essentially ludicrous, but comic by accident. This was explained above. Applying the language of psychology, Malvolio’s makeup combines a manipulative impulse with obsessive compulsive traits. He is plainly a melancholy (depressive) personality who finds it nearly impossible to deal with others in a tolerant and relaxed manner. He is incapable of love. He is borderline paranoid. He is single at an advancing age, without friends and has no sexual relations. His demeanor is inflexible and armored against any natural feeling other than resentment and envy. He is oral aggressive and uses his authority to control and abuse subordinates while sniping at those who rank above him. As a consequence of these underlying dispositions, he is mechanical, rigid, and easily discomfited. He compensates for his inner emptiness through dreams and fantasies, which always take the same form: seeing himself above others and in a position of authority. In reality he is a servant. In his reveries he is very much a monarch, a monarch whose chief delight is in treating those beneath him with derision. The incessant contrast between what Malovolio is and what he wishes to be renders him ludicrous. He is absurd and incommensurable with those around him, and it is not surprising that he is found “mad” by his peers, for to a large extent he

does indeed suffer from serious emotional unbalance.

However, as long as he is able to function with the circumscribed limits of the household in which he is major domo and a person of influence, he remains merely ludicrous. It is only on those occasions when he falters (that is, as the gull of Maria's scheme) that he becomes comic. That is to say, when we first meet Malvolio he is operating within his boundaries as he seeks to excoriate first Feste the jester and then Viola/Cesario. Here there is no comedy as such, but only its potential, based on the preposterous self-presentation we are offered. Maria's plot in relation to him is the "accident" (banana peel) on which this mechanical tyrant slips and falls, a comic pratfall.

Lamb continues.

> (ii) "He is cold, austere, repelling, but dignified, consistent and, rather of an overstretched morality."
>
> (iii) "But his morality and his manners are misplaced in Elyria (sic)."

Cold, austere and repellant he is, and consistently so. But dignified? Let's look in the dictionary. "Dignity: the state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect; composed or serious manner or style; a sense of pride in onself; self respect; a high or honorable rank." (*Oxford American College Dictionary*, 381) The dictionary doesn't say "imagining oneself to deserve honor" but the state of being worthy of such. Malvolio's tantrums and outbursts are the very opposite of being "composed." He loses his composure regularly. Contrast dignity with pomposity: "affectedly and irritatingly grand, solemn, or self-important: *a pompous ass*." (Oxford, 1057) That is our Malvolio, a pompous ass. Lamb is wrong.

Lamb would have us credit to Malvolio's account something called "morality." This must be confined to Malvolio's distaste for drinking and partying. But teetotalism is not morality. Nor is refusal to socialize, laugh and sing in social gatherings. Morality means in this context the decent and honorable treatment of other people. Like the physician who takes the Hippocratic Oath, each of us is enjoined "to do no harm." But Malvolio has a toxic constitution which prompts him to be harmful throughout the day. He publicly upbraids Feste for no apparent reason. He is rude to Olivia, insulting of Viola. In fact he's a liar and a bearer of false witness, a tattler and a snitch. Yet Lamb is willing to find "morality" in Malvolio.

Lamb is wrong.

(iv) "[H]is pride or gravity (call it what you will) is inherent, and native to the man, not mock or affected . . . . His quality is at best unlovely, but neither buffoon nor contemptible. His bearing is lofty, a little above his station, probably not much above his deserts."

Viewing Malvolio as a congenital snob as opposed to one formed by happenstance is hardly an excuse. But the main problem with Lamb's analysis is that it remains without textual support. It hangs as mere assertion, without any foundation whatsoever. He can say whatever he wishes and apparently expects that none will take exception to his revelations. Malvolio exhibits no affectations, you say? Of course, he is no more than a household domestic who believes he's the rightful count of the realm. What could be affected about that? He is "at the best unlovely" would seem to mean that his ugliness is the most exemplary thing about him, but what of that? After all, he is "neither buffoon nor contemptible." If not, why bother to mention those qualities, which someone (unnamed) must be attributing to him? The passages cited above from the text show Malvolio to be, to the contrary, both a classic buffoon *and* eminently contemptible.

He has his nose in the air, as though he breathed an atmosphere more refined and salubrious than other creatures. Remember this?

MALVOLIO

Go hang yourselves, all. You are idle shallow things, I am not of your element. You shall know more hereafter.
(III, iv, 121-123)

This pseudo-regal bearing is "probably not much above his deserts"? Then how foolish is Olivia not to change her dark mourning gowns for white and marry him, making him a count consonant with that lofty bearing!

(v) "His careless committal of the ring to the ground (which he was commissioned to restore to Cesario) bespeaks a generosity of birth and feeling."

It is here in the discussion that charity would bid us avert our eyes, as Charles Lamb begins to adopt some of the worst features of Malvolio. Again, did he read the play, or just hope no one did? Malvolio's gesture is not a "careless committal of the ring to the ground." It is hurled down by Malvolio in a moment of spite. The ring belongs to Malvolio's lady. He was instructed by her to give it to Cesario, the young man she loves. When Cesario indicated quite

honestly that it wasn't his and he didn't want it, Malvolio was duty bound as agent of the donor (Olivia) to return it to her. By casting it in the dirt he risked damaging it or losing it altogether, which demonstrates how easily he flouts the will and prerogatives of his "lady," the woman he would wed. Worse, he states to Cesario's face that he threw it peevishly at Olivia (I, v, 13) when it should be obvious that Cesario knows full well that this utterance is a lie. Malvolio's behavior here is that of a lunatic. Are we so sure, then, that he did not belong in that dark house after all?

But hearken to Charles Lamb: Malvolio's handling of the ring "bespeaks a generosity of birth and feeling." What could this mean? Malvolio is patently dissembling when he accuses Cesario of throwing the ring at Olivia, and there appears to be a strange echo of that dissemblance in Lamb's characterization of Malvolio's deeds as "bespeaking generosity of birth and feeling." It is almost as though the base qualities of Malvolio are being mimetically absorbed and recapitulated by Charles Lamb, whose account of the scene in question is grossly misleading.

> (vi) "Even in his abused state of chains and darkness, a sort of greatness seems never to desert him."

Again, such a sentence could have been written by Malvolio himself had he been conducting his defense "in proper person." But query, what sort of greatness is this? For we know that 'Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em." (II, v, 39-40) The idea of "greatness" is the bait dangled by Maria that Malvolio snatches at to transform himself into the superlative man, the *Übermensch*. The only "greatness" which never deserts him is the delusion of greatness.

> (vii) "I confess that I never saw the catastrophe of this character, while Bensley played it, without a kind of tragic interest."

And there it is: for Charles Lamb, Malvolio, at least as portrayed by Mr. Bensley, is a tragic hero. His comic aspect is but an apparition, you see. Considering his dignity, his gravitas, his brave morality, his generosity of birth and feeling, there can be little doubt that he is a genuinely tragic figure, even though he is seems quite ordinary and endured no more than a slap on the wrist by spending a day in a dark chamber whose purpose was therapeutic, not punitive. The truth is, there is a fourth category of greatness: Some lunge at greatness, grasp it for an instant, and fall on their faces.

A better adjective than "tragic" to apply Malvolio is the one used in the second Act, fourth scene by the sad Duke Orsino to characterize Feste's song of romantic lamentation ("Come away, come away, death"): "<u>silly</u>."

ORSINO

O fellow, come, the song we had last night.
Mark it, Cesario, it is old and plain.
The spinsters, and the knitters in the sun,
And the free maids that weave their thread with bones,
Do chant it. It is silly sooth,
And dallies with the innocence of love,
Like the old age.
(II, iii, 41-47)

“Silly” had a far richer sense in Elizabethan English than it has currently, and was related to the Germanic “Seel,” or soul, as in the Shakespearean adjective “seely,” which became “silly.”

Crystal and Crystal in their Shakespearean glossary provide this entry.

silly (adj.)

1. helpless, defenceless, vulnerable;
2. feeble, frail, weak;
3. foolish, stupid, ludicrous