

Did malvolio deserve
to be treated so
harshly essay



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The story of twelfth night is formerly the story of two twins, - Viola & Sebastian, who become shipwrecked, &, both believing the other is dead, adopt new lives in this foreign country. Viola, however, perhaps sensibly considering the 1600th view of women, decides to dress up as a boy, - coincidentally, she looks extraordinarily like her brother Sebastian. Viola gets herself a position in Duke Orsino's court. Duke Orsino has, in fact, fallen in love with the countess Olivia, who's brother & father have recently died. It is in Olivia's household that the part of the story that we will be focussing on happens.. We meet some new characters there:

Feste - Who is the court Jester

Fabian - One of Olivia's household.

Maria - Olivia's waiting woman

Sir Andrew Aguecheek - Who is Sir Toby's companion.

Sir Toby Belch - Olivia's uncle.

Malvolio - Olivia's head Steward.

Malvolio, as you will probably find out is extremely narcissistic, very bumptious, often complacent & has a lot of contempt. It is excruciatingly easy to see exactly why he is disliked, but, during the play, the other characters, during a particular awkward scene, are pushed just that little bit too far by Malvolio & plot their revenge.

The revenge on Malvolio is devised mainly by Maria,(Olivia's maid), but with the help of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Fabian ; Feste. The plot is too get their own back on Malvolio by a devious trick.

What happens is that Maria, who's handwriting is extraordinarily like that of the countess Olivia's, writes a love letter as sorts, to " the dearly beloved." - In it she writes about the one who she adores, ; commands, that, if her feelings are returned, then the one to whom the letter is addressed should show it in " their smiles", by wearing yellow cross gartered stockings, ; by making it obvious that " the dearly beloved" is above everybody else, even those higher than themselves. Malvolio, of course, with his egotistical nature, when he finds the letter in his path, sealed with Olivia's wax seal, immediately thinks the " dearly beloved" refers to him, & that the letter is from Olivia.

He, of course, opens it. He consequently follows the instructions Maria has written & behaves quite unhinged, - completely humiliating himself. Maria however, & Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Feste & Fabian, who are all in on the plot, do not however stop there. They all go out of their way to completely ruin Malvolio's life. They lock him up in a small, dark room all alone, ; not only convince everyone else, but, also try ; convince Malvolio that he is completely mad. Feste even appears to him as a priest. Back in the 15th or 16th century, the audience would have just laughed at Malvolio, but, as a 21st century reader of the play, do I think that Malvolio was treated too harshly?

On one hand, you could say that Malvolio completely deserves what happened to him. There are countless examples of him walking all over the other characters in the play, ; treating them as objects, not as people. He appears to be cold ; unfeeling, ; throughout the play makes a lot of enemies.

We first meet Malvolio fairly near the start of the play, on about page thirty. The scene is set as Malvolio walking with Olivia through the grounds of the house. She is cross at Feste, the court Jester because he has been gone several days, ; they have heard nothing from him.

Feste is firstly talking to Maria who says “ Yet you will be hanged for being so long absent...” – Feste replies, instead of worrying, jovially, – “ Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage..” This instantly shows him as a good, fun loving character, who always looks on the bright-side, ; the audience would immediately warm to him as he would almost certainly have a huge smile on his face.

Olivia ; Malvolio then appear. Olivia is at first, understandably cross at Feste, but not seriously though. She orders her servants to “ take the fool away,” but Feste tries to cheerfully change her mind about her indignation towards him. After talking for a while, Feste asks “ Good Madonna, give me leave to prove you a fool” You would expect Olivia to be dismissive over this, but instead she is amused ; intrigues by him. Feste, is of course, true to his word, proves her to be a fool. – On this she turns to Malvolio, asking his opinion on Feste.

“ What think you of this fool, Malvolio? Doth he not mend?” – Olivia has already forgiven Feste, ; now just laughs at him.

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Malvolio however, instead of agreeing with Olivia as you might expect, replies “ Yes, & shall do until the pangs of death shake him.” He contradict Olivia, who is a lot higher up than him, ; is even rather arrogant toward her!

The next example we see of Malvolio’s arrogance is when he is replying to Feste’s banter.

“ I marvel your ladyship takes such delight in such a barren rascal.... I take these wise men, that crow so at these set kind of fools, no better than the fools’ zanies.” In this example, Malvolio not only insults Feste, - but also Olivia, who is lady of the house. He says that she is no better than a fools’ “ zanies” - Which are clowns that assist a fool. - How dare he be so arrogant towards those above himself!

Olivia’s reply is “ O, you are sick of self love Malvolio, & taste with a distempered appetite.” What Olivia is trying to say is that she notices his arrogance ; his lack of fun ; enjoyment, ; frankly, she doesn’t like much like it.

The next character to be at the receiving end of Malvolio’s narcissistic ways is Viola, dressed as Cesario. He/ she has given Olivia a ring from Count Orsino ; Olivia has asked Malvolio to return the ring to Viola. But, again, he does it with a lot of arrogance ; self importance. Although he is merely a servant, when he catches up with Viola, he gives her a lecture “...you might have saved me my pains by taking it away yourself.” - It’s not really his place to lecture her. - Olivia holds her in high regard. Finally, Malvolio just throws the ring on the ground. This is disrespectful & rude!

The next time we meet Malvolio is at night, – Sir Andrew Aguecheek & Sir Toby Belch have just entered Olivia's house. It is the dead of night, ; they are joined by Feste. They are a bit raucous, but basically are just having a good time ; enjoying themselves, – singing ; having fun. Maria joins them shortly afterward ; it is a small party of four.

Malvolio's opening line to Sir Andrew & Sir Toby is:

“ My masters are you mad?” – This might be Malvolio's own opinion, but he is merely a steward, ; Sir Toby ; Sir Andrew are far above him. He makes his disgust known the second he walks in through the door.

“...but to gabble like tinkers?... squeak out your coziers' catches without any mitigation...?” Malvolio's disgust is unavoidable. He talks to those far above him as if he were speaking to a child. He gives them no opportunity to reply & speaks out of his office.

Malvolio's next comment is also out of place, arrogant ; rude. “ My lady bade me to tell you... If you can separate yourself & your misdemeanours, you are welcome to the house, if not, ... very willing to bid you farewell.” Olivia has probably not, in so many words said this, ; yet, Malvolio is repeating it, acting with a lot more authority than he possesses. He is acting like he is master of the house. He is taking it too far ; is acting contemptuous!

Toby, very understandably is not accustomed to this type of behaviour ; gets quite angry at Malvolio. He replies “ Art any more than a Steward? Does thou think that because you are virtuous, there will be no more cakes & ale?” – Toby is voicing the opinion of perhaps many people. He is one of the only

ones brave enough, or important enough to be able to stand up to Malvolio's bullying ways, & in a lot of ways, he is right. Malvolio is only a steward, & yet, he struts around, & in many a way, acts as if he himself is master of Olivia's household, which, of course, he is not.

The next person Malvolio upsets is Maria. When he realises he can not bully Sir Andrew or Sir Toby, he turns on the one person he does have power over. “.. if you prized my ladies favour with any more than contempt, you would not give means for this uncivil rule; she shall know of it by my hand.” He blackmails her. She is the only one he can control ; has power over, so he tries to threaten her. He tells her that if she carries on serving them ; allowing there raucous behaviour to continue, he will go to Olivia ; tell her exactly what Maria has been up to.

She replies to him, but quietly, so he can not hear. She tells him to “ go shake his ears.” - Perhaps Maria's contempt for Malvolio is a clear indication of all the servants repugnance for Malvolio. - It would certainly appear so!

Everyone has a clear reason to hate Malvolio, - he has done nothing to appeal to anyone, except maybe Olivia, but he has given, even her, reason to dislike his selfish attitude. It is extremely easy to argue that someone needs to teach him a lesson! But, it doesn't stop there.

Maria drops the letter on the pathway outside, Malvolio enters on the scene, but, before he even catches sight of the letter, he is already spouting to himself.

“ Maria once told me she did affect me” - He has no reason to believe that Olivia would like him any more than professionally. He is after all portrayed as a rather miserable, perhaps ugly man who is very severe, ; not exactly the sort of person you imagine a countess falling in love with!

Then, Malvolio begins day dreaming “.. To be Count Malvolio..” He begins explaining exactly what he will do, - exactly what will happen when he is count. Toby, Andrew ; Fabian, all concealed within hearing distance, are, extremely understandably, not too happy with it either!

He begins talking about Sit Toby. “ Cousin Toby..... You must amend your drunkenness!” “ You waste the treasures of your time with a foolish knight...” - Malvolio is only a steward. How can he dare even begin to contemplate these things!? He has seen no sign of Olivia having any interest in him whatsoever, ; already, he is narcissistic enough to believe that he could ever end up being her husband.

At last he finds the letter. Here, in some ways, it can be argued that Malvolio deserves any fate that comes to him as a result of what the letter may contain as he never should have opened it in the first place. It is addressed to “ to the unknown beloved, this, & my good wishes” - The letter is not addressed to him, it doesn't say his name, there is no indication whatsoever that it is even meant for Malvolio, & yet, still, he automatically assumes it is meant for him. If he wasn't so contemptuous, then he never would have opened the letter, ; he wouldn't be in the situation he gets himself into at the end of the play.

The letter, also, has Olivia's wax seal on the back of it, ;, it is in what Malvolio believes to be her handwriting. If he was true to his job, ; if he were to do the right thing, he would automatically go ; hand the letter in, - Like he should do. Unfortunately, he does not.

Fabian comments on the letter: " What dish o' poison has she dressed him!" - He is trying to say that Malvolio walks straight into the trap they had set him, but, if he hadn't been so arrogant, it never would have worked.

The letter reads " Some are born great, some achieve greatness, & others have greatness thrust upon 'em" - Malvolio of course, takes this an indication that he will become " Count Malvolio" - Anyone else, would not believe anything so ludicrous.

The letter orders Malvolio to " Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants; let thy tongue tang arguments of state; put thyself into the trick of singularity.....remember who commended thy yellow stockings ; wished to see thee ever cross gartered" - The letters instructions are very clear, but surely Malvolio should have smelt a rat at the preposterous things he thought Olivia was wanting him to do.

There is an after note on the letter. " If thou entertainest my love, let it show in thy smiles" - This would have been an almost impossible thing for Malvolio, & an almost ironic thing to ask him to do, since Malvolio is pictured throughout the play as a very serious character who would hardly ever smile. He however, perhaps stupidly, did not question that, he was too wrapped up in self love, & picturing what might become.

Another reason why Malvolio must be hated so much in the play & made to suffer & be humiliated so frequently was because Shakespeare created him as a puritanical character that everyone was bound to hate.

Examples of his puritanical nature would be when he enters downstairs to find Sir Toby & Sir Andrew making a noise. " Do you make an alehouse of my ladies house?" - The puritans were renowned for disliking anything to do with fun or enjoyment, - they particularly frowned on drunkenness, or pubs (" alehouses"), & actually, got them banned in the 16th century, although this play was written before then, puritans were still making their clear hate known.

Another example of Malvolio's puritanical ways would be when he is talking to Olivia; " I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal."- Not only did puritans frown on drinking, but they also hated laughter or enjoyment of any kind, which would, of course, be why Feste was so abominable for Malvolio. He is portrayed as puritanical, & puritans believed that Jesus had, in the bible indicated that " laughing in this life can cause eternal damnation of one's soul."

At the time of which William Shakespeare wrote the play " Twelfth night," - Tensions with the puritans were running high, & many people despised them. They would go on to ban bear baiting, festivals, public entertainment, plays, theatres, pubs, even Christmas!

Obviously, they would be particularly hated by Shakespeare, since he himself was a play write. If the puritans had their way, he wouldn't have a career! Also, everyone who went to see the play of twelfth night would have <https://assignbuster.com/did-malvolio-deserve-to-be-treated-so-harshly-essay/>

gone their to enjoy themselves, - something puritans would be trying to change! - Just about nobody there would feel any sympathy whatsoever towards Malvolio.

Also, they were a lot less squeamish in those days against the mad, or the mentally unstable. They would have, instead of finding it uncomfortable, in plays or entertainment, they'd have found it extremely funny & "mad houses" or the such like were treated, instead of as hospitals, more as zoos, where people went to for amusement. If you were "mad" - it was believed you were possessed by the devil, - an interesting concept.

Our last view of Malvolio is him as a broken man. His last few words "Madam, you have done me wrong..." "You must not now deny it is your hand" - Malvolio is getting almost frantic as he realises the truth. - He has been tricked.

Fabian then tries to explain "If that the injuries be justly weighed that have, on both sides passed" - He explains that Malvolio had done wrong to them, they were merely trying to teach him a lesson.

Olivia now speaks to Malvolio - "Alas poor fool, how they have baffled thee!" This is very ironic for Malvolio, considering his contempt for fools & how he has been treated.

Malvolio's last words as he storms out, a broken man, are "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" - This doesn't exactly do a lot to endear him to you. 400 years ago or so, it would have been followed by great belts of laughter. But has society changed?

On the other hand, many could feel far more sympathetic towards Malvolio, & feel it was a huge injustice to treat him as he has been treated.

Take the first time we meet Malvolio for example. - His behaviour is easily justified. Olivia does ask for his opinion; "What think you of this fool Malvolio?" - It could well be argued that, by telling Olivia the truth, Malvolio is being the greatest friend & the greatest servant of them all. If Feste was to be treated harshly, it would serve as a deterrent to any of the other servants who even considered neglecting their duties. It could well be argued that Malvolio is acting extremely responsibly.

The next example where it has been argued that Malvolio acted out of his place could also be argued against. It is when he is giving the ring back to Viola. He believed that she had given it to Olivia. If Viola would not take the ring from him, then, if he left it on the floor, then she would be sure to take it. Also, when he says "you might have saved me my pains to have taken it away yourself," Malvolio is being extremely honest. It isn't really his job to clear up after young men courting for another duke.

The next example where it has previously been stated that Malvolio acted out of place, is when Sir Andrew, Sir Toby, Maria ; Feste are in the kitchen, singing loudly, drunkenly, making a huge noise, on the other hand, it could very easily be argued that Malvolio acted bravely, - courageously on his behalf! Although Sir Andrew ; Sir Toby were higher up ; more important than him, he still stood up to them. He did the best ; most responsible thing he possibly could, although he might not have gone about it in the most subtle way, he still did what he thought was right, ;, for that, he has to be admired!

“ Is there no respect of place?” - All Malvolio wants is for Sir Toby ; Sir Andrew to think of somebody else for once, they’re making a huge noise without thinking of anyone else, & Malvolio is merely pointing this out to them. Also, Olivia was in mourning for her Father & her brother, after their deaths. It would hardly be suitable for her, still mourning to be woken up by drunken singing!

Another argument that Malvolio deserves the harsh treatment he got is his miserable ways. He is pictured as a very severe person, who liked the colour black & rarely smiled, but, then again, if you think about it, - Olivia’s household was in mourning. Malvolio was perfect for her. He was reliable, sensible, organised. What more could Olivia ask for?

When Malvolio finds the letter, he could be seen to be a little self obsessed, but then again, perhaps he just nurtured that slight hope, that dream, that one day, he might get lucky, one day, he might be count Malvolio. - He has come so close to that, that, perhaps his bold ways are insecurities on his behalf ; he is merely wishing against wish that his dreams would come true.

In this day ; age of the 21st century, we could probably feel a lot more sympathetic towards Malvolio. We don’t have the same opinions towards puritans, & we realise, that in a lot of places the 16th century audience might see Malvolio as stuck up, horrible, or arrogant, we might just see him as doing his job. These days, we have learnt to respect the mentally unstable & care for them. The fact that Malvolio was stuck in a tiny room for days on end, being convinced that he was mad would seem almost impossible for us

to apprehend! Today, as a modern audience, we would obviously feel a lot more sympathy towards him.

A variety of different people picture Malvolio in different ways, & portray him differently, - some obviously feeling more sorry for him than others. Take a modern play of twelfth night for example. We have watched a few different productions of it.

In one production, Malvolio is shown as skinny, arrogant, & quite pompous, he is dressed all in black & is, throughout the production, pictured wearing his chain of office. This sort of interpretation of Malvolio would not get a lot of sympathy from the audience. Every time he spoke he was cruel & cold, - This directors view of him shows, in my opinion that the director believed Malvolio deserved everything he got, as there is no other side to him, no smile but a forced one, - no reason to feel sorry for him.

In another production we saw however, Malvolio is pictured as rather different. He is quite a fat character. - A huge contrast to the skinny one we previously saw. He is a rather bumbling, rather dim character, which would fir in with when he discovered the letter form Maria/ Olivia & he was trying to work out the initials of M. O. A. I, - it took him an incredibly long time. He is a lovable character, whom you feel incredibly sorry for, & the director has made it so you feel more empathy towards Malvolio, - connecting you more to the play. I think that he, at least, believed that Malvolio was done wrong.

After looking at both viewpoints on malvolio however, I'm still not exactly sure what I believe. I do believe that MALvolio was far too arrogant ;

contemptuous ; really did need somebody to bring him back down to earth. I
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believe he did need a lesson teaching him, but I'm not sure Sir Toby & Maria went about it the right way, &, even if they did, - I think it went too far!

At first, I think the letter was an amusing joke, gulling Malvolio into self humiliation, but think, after they nearly convinced him he was mad, & locked him up, I think it went way too far! I don't think you should be able to just play with people's feelings that way. I am sympathetic to Malvolio & believe it went too far, but on the other hand, I do, of course realise that anybody in the 15th or 16th century, at the time when the play was written wouldn't have had as much sympathy. They would have loathed Malvolio's puritanical ways, - after all, the puritans did go on to get Christmas cancelled! - The idea of anybody being able to convince another that they were mad would have made them laugh out loud & they would have found it extremely amusing.

In conclusion, I believe that Malvolio was treated too harshly, but I do, of course, see all the different points of view, & believe that he was extremely contemptuous & self righteous, & for that, he needed bringing back down to earth!