

# Twelfth night paper essay sample



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The characters of Feste and Malvolio are central to the subplot of Twelfth Night. Malvolio's arrogance forms the basis of a plot, put in place by the other servants of Olivia's household, designed to ridicule and mock Malvolio. Around this, most of the play's comedy is centred, such as in II. 5, in which Malvolio finds a letter supposedly from Olivia, but in fact put in place by Maria, Olivia's servant. As a director, it is essential to ensure that the actors playing Feste and Malvolio capture the essence of their character; otherwise the subplot will not be understood.

A lot of information about how each character should be played can be found within their name, without even consulting the text. Malvolio is Italian and means 'ill-wishing' (the opposite of Benvolio in Romeo and Juliet). From this we can derive that Malvolio is perhaps a nonchalant and moody character, fairly abrupt with his friends and colleagues. From studying the text, we can make further judgements about Malvolio's personality. Olivia says in I. 5, "O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio", suggesting Malvolio is vain and slightly conceited. Other example of Malvolio's arrogance can be found in II. 5.

" Maria once told me she did affect me; and I have heard herself come thus near, that should she fancy, it should be one of my complexion."

[Malvolio: II 23-26]

This clearly shows Malvolio's vanity and supreme self-confidence by assuming that Maria would be attracted to him. In III. 4, he makes himself even more unpopular by saying, " I am not of your element", suggesting he believes himself to be better than other members of the household. He is clearly an ambitious character. In II. 5, he allows himself to fantasize over

what his life would be like, should he marry Olivia and become master of the house:

“...calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown, having come from a day-bed, where I have left Olivia sleeping...”

[Malvolio: II 46-48]

He has little sense of humour and is generally quite a morose character. He appears to take himself and his role within the house very seriously. In II. 3, he threatens to tell Olivia of Sir Toby's drunkenness, “ She shall know of it, by this hand!”, showing his slightly neurotic and controlling side. Due to the nature of the subplot of the play, Malvolio must come across as unlikeable, otherwise, the humour of the play may be considered cruel and unjust. In IV. 2, when Feste ridicules Malvolio and calls him, “ Malvolio the lunatic”, the audience must find this comical and not feel sympathy for Malvolio.

However, although Malvolio is ultimately at the centre of the play's comedy, the subtext reveals a somewhat sad character, perhaps a certain patheticness for wanting something he will never have (namely Olivia). His eagerness to conform to Olivia's supposed ideal (“ I will be strange, stout, in yellow stockings and cross-gartered”) exposes him as being quite foolish and almost pathetic.

Directing the actor who plays Malvolio, I would encourage him to bring all these aspects of his personality to the role either by the overall character deportment, or by more subtle features. Using a dramatic internal monologue, the actor could bring the sadness into the role that is required. Perhaps this moroseness is the reason for his bitter approach to the rest of

the world. Malvolio's overall deportment should be quite stiff, to represent his lack of humour. He should be seen as quite ridiculous, not only in his unfashionable speech (using words such as "element") but also in his dress. He should be seen as more of a psychological misfit rather than a social one.

His vanity and arrogance make him immune to the animosity directed towards him by members of the household to a certain point, but at the end, all the negative aspects of his character must become clear, with perhaps a hunched posture, narrowed eyes and a low voice depicting his anger and desire for revenge. Maria's line, "The house will be the quieter", in III. 4, show that he is a large presence within the house. The actor could represent this maybe playing him as melodramatic and with enunciated, clear speech.

Feste should be played in stark contrast to Malvolio. His name, meaning Festival, also shows us how he should be played, in an excited and confident way. He is a very comical character, leading many of the play's comic scenes, such as in IV. 2, where he visits Malvolio as a curate called Sir Topas. His role within the house, as a jester or fool, tells us about his personality as a confident showman. He sings many songs within the play so obviously he cannot be played as shy and retiring. However, having said his job is that of a fool, he is extremely witty and intelligent.

Robert Armin, who played Feste after he joined Shakespeare's company in 1599, was described as playing Feste as a 'sage fool' or a wise fool. It was his job to mock the pedantry of the learned and entertain everyone with his songs. An example of this mocking can be found in II. 3:

“ I did impetticoat thy gratillity; for Malvolio’s nose is no whipstock, my lady has a white hand, and the Myrmidons are no bottle-ale houses.”

[Feste: II 25-27]

Although at first, these lines appear nonsensical but can be interpreted as showing a disdain for Sir Toby and Sir Andrews’s stupidity and gullibility. The fact that Sir Toby then tips Feste for his “ best fooling”, highlights the control and mental advantage Feste has over the other members of his household. Although Feste is ultimately a servant in Olivia’s house, he very often treats her as if it were she who was the servant, for example in I. 5, when Olivia commands that the fool is taken away, Feste retaliates with, “ Do you not hear, fellows? Take away the lady.”.

This comment is overlooked, even though it is rude for Feste to insult the Lady of the house in this way. Feste’s detachment from any household within the play gives him an almost homeless status. This obviously allows him to be objective regarding all of the play’s developments but also, in contrast with his comic role; this can also evoke pity from the audience. Some actors play him as a Pagliacci, hiding a broken heart behind humour; however, the text doesn’t automatically lend itself to this conclusion.

I believe all aspects of Feste’s deportment on stage must be in contrast with that of Malvolio, due to their differing characters. I would direct Feste, to carry out all his movements in top-speed and all his speech at top-volume, to represent the ‘ showman’ aspect of his life and his job. The audience should see him as a likeable, fun character, whose antics regarding Malvolio are humorous, not unjust. Although, the actor may move quickly around the

stage, given Feste's self-confidence and assurance, when he does talk and argue with people he should be static, giving his opinion in a clear and eloquent way. His underlying disdain of the others in his household could be represented by smirks or sneers while they are not looking.

Overall, it is essential that the actors not only create convincingly their character, but also represent clearly their status within the home. It is vital that the audience do not feel pity for Malvolio but do find Feste humorous otherwise the entire subplot is ineffective. Using the text to make judgements about each character, creating given circumstances and finding any information about appearance are all useful to an actor, trying to create a believable performance. By studying the text deeper, actors can also decide what idiosyncrasies to develop and how to interact with other actors on the stage. These are just a few ideas on how to play the complex characters of Feste and Malvolio.