A Clown in the Dark House: Reclaiming the Humor in Malvolio's Downfall

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In his *User's Guide* to William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Michael Pennington epitomizes a common modern-day interpretation of Malvolio's "dark house" interrogation during act 4:

> Feste now applies his resources to making Malvolio wish he were dead. Punishing him . . . he repaints rather as might Edvard Munch or Lewis Carroll, familiar figures in a terrifying light—the pastoral cleric as bloodsucker, the innocent fool as mental defective, between them making the man of some honor gibber. . . .By the time Feste is finished with him, all he really doubts is his ability to survive.[1]

Pennington's depiction of Malvolio's imprisonment as nothing short of torture stems from a growing antipathy for the prison scene and identification with Malvolio's psyche over the past two hundred years. Henry Irving's 1884 production put the steward in "a dungeon worthy of *Fidelio*." Jacques Copeau in 1914 preferred the image of Malvolio's desperate fingers clawing at a grate. Bell Shakespeare Company in 1995 had Malvolio stuffed in a portable dumpster that Feste beat with a baseball bat.[2] In 2005, Diana Denley of the Globe Center Australia paraded a black-hooded Malvolio onstage, echoing Iraq's Abu Ghraib Prison.

While dark themes can provide nuance in comedy, these images of torture seem out of place in Illyria, and the resulting psychologically wounded cries of a barely surviving and fully justified Malvolio can so sour the final moments of the play that they ultimately rob the audience of a satisfying conclusion. Over the centuries, lost references and changing theatrical priorities have distorted the perception not only of Malvolio and his downfall, but also of the focus, function, and comedy of his subplot. Re-examining Shakespeare's language and the social contexts of Malvolio's downfall, and exploring original staging alternatives,

refocuses the steward's subplot to reveal an ongoing domestic competition, which both delights in its humor and more importantly serves the larger story of *Twelfth Night.*

Critics and audiences once loved the somber steward of the Countess Olivia for his role as the play's antagonist, against which the play's sympathetic characters could rail. John Manningham, in his diary of 1601, delights in the tricks played on Malvolio, calling it a "good practice."[3] Dr. Samuel Johnson described him as truly comic and remarked that pride justified his fall.[4] By the Romantic age, however, Malvolio became a character of serious drama, and several great tragedians specialized in playing the emerging star turn of Malvolio. Modern editors nullify the playwright's specific choice of his Puritanism saying that "he is an example not of its vices but of its follies, a person to be looked upon not with scorn or hate, but with amusement tempered with respect, and even with pity."[5]

Shakespeare created Malvolio as a hypocritical Puritan and overly ambitious social climber that his audiences most likely would have scorned and hated. Most early modern theatrical audiences, it is safe to assume, did not like Puritans, who worked to close theaters. Although puritanical in opinion, Malvolio is also vain, pompous, and uncharitable, not to mention highly ambitious and covetous—in short, a hypocrite. Further, like Macbeth, he strives to leap out of his station in the Great Chain of Being and ascend from private servant to public ruler—to be Count Malvolio. Active social ambition created chaos and upset in the early modern world picture; it was a trait not to be admired, but rectified.

Malvolio's conflict within Olivia's home represented the changing social dynamics of English country life. The great feudal households of the middle ages almost disappeared with the English Renaissance. Households no longer could support companies of barely related nobles and useless knights, long-term guests, and huge support staffs. This diminishment of the feudal household created tension between its remaining members. Noble-born retainers and lower-ranking servants all vied for position. Audiences, according to Draper, would have recognized in Olivia's household the medieval model with a licensed jester and dependent relatives in conflict with a lower class, but valued servant. In difficult economic times, when dismissal meant homelessness and hunger, an ambitious and puritanical serving man, such as Malvolio, could present a tangible danger.

Feste, the lovable freelance entertainer, must contend with that danger in act 1, scene 5, thus providing the perfect opposite to the

unsympathetic Malvolio. If Malvolio professes through inference to live by the Church and its precepts, Feste prefers simply to live by the church itself. If Malvolio has no humor, the clown's profession is all humor. Where Malvolio deceives himself about everyone, Feste exposes deception in everyone. These perfectly contrasted characters and their personal and professional rivalry combine with Toby's fight for household position in a subplot that climaxes in act 4, scene 2, and continues to the final scene of the play.

In the pivotal scene of their journey, Feste and Toby wreak revenge on the imprisoned Malvolio. While modern interpreters often find this a Malvolio-centric and problematic scene of torture, closer examination of what actually happens, the language used, and the social context of the scene reveals something quite different. The scene breaks into two sections. In the first, Maria and Toby use Feste to minister a mock theological treatment for Malvolio's supposed madness in the form of catechism, a witty process at which Feste has already proven his proficiency. Feste greets Malvolio with a peaceful salutation. Malvolio instantly complains about his treatment, but Feste, disguised as the Curate Sir Topas, reminds him of the gentle handling he has actually received (explored later) and begins a discussion of darkness focused on the idea of ignorance, making a biblical reference to the plagues of Egypt, and prompting Malvolio to reply in kind. Malvolio *joins the game and requests a further verbal test of his sanity*. Feste/Topas provides a clown-rendered, upside-down version of a common religious query about the transmigration of souls. Feste and Malvolio drive the action equally, and the interrogation consists of nothing more than silly questioning. This questioning fulfills Toby's desire for the upper hand and so victorious, he can abandon the device lest he push his niece's indulgence too far.

The second half of the scene turns more personal and often nastier; when alone with Malvolio, the clown seeks retribution for the steward's affront in act 1, scene 5, through a reversal of roles—linguistically giving the haughty steward a dose of his own medicine. The clown's payback manifests itself in two textual reversals of Malvolio's predatory and public shaming of the clown in act 1. Malvolio, in his early uncharitable dismissal of Feste, implies that any wise man who approves of the jester is no better than the jester (1.5.75-76).[6] When Malvolio now wishes to claim the same sanity as the fool, Feste reverses the earlier opinion, calling him "mad indeed, if you be no better in your wits than a fool" (4.2.82-83). Feste's song about an unkind lady who loves another, then,

emphasizes the appropriateness of the punishment in light of Malvolio's earlier words. In act 1, Malvolio mocks Feste for his dependence on Olivia's attention: "Look you now, he's out of his guard already: unless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged" (1.5.73-75). Now, Malvolio has been "propertied," (4.2.84), locked away in a closet out of sight and mind. His lady Olivia is now not occasioning to *him*, and Feste's song points out that she loves another, which either refers literally to Cesario and mocks Malvolio's suit, or refers to Feste, asking the taunting question who holds her favor now? The direct correlation of the language between act 4, scene 2, and act 1, scene 5, reveals a much more even playing field and justified response within the continuum of a larger subplot.

Further, nothing that occurs throughout the scene or its set up resembles serious injury to Malvolio. In fact, throughout his supposed ordeal, Malvolio has received relatively gentle treatment—other than being placed in the dark, which might be argued is a place he has been metaphorically throughout the play. Here is where theatrical interpretation with distressed clothing and additional violent choreography often tips the scale against what the text actually dictates. When first approached as mad, the tricksters prescribe their treatment as "no way but gentleness, gently, gently." Malvolio chooses to be scornful and rude by his own prescription and according to the instruction that he has received in Maria's letter (3.4.74-78). Toby *suggests* that they bind Malvolio's hands, but the text does not reveal they ever do so. Malvolio himself describes his "torment" by a detailed itemization of his wrongs with no mention of any bondage: "imprison'd / Kept in a dark house, visited by the priest" (5.1.330-31) sums up his abuse. Feste, as Topas, responds to Malvolio's accusation of abuse by accurately referencing his own civility, saying, "I call thee in modest terms, for I am one of those gentle ones that will use the devil himself with curtesy" (4.2.28-30). Malvolio has not extended such courtesy to anyone, other than Olivia, throughout the play. When Malvolio later loses his temper and calls his polite captors "asses," Feste merely instructs him to "endeavor thyself to sleep, and leave thy vain bibble babble" (4.2.89). Finally, Feste promises to return with light and writing supplies, which he does. While the overall lesson or trick may be harsh, Malvolio's physical handling is not.

Malvolio's treatment, in fact, appears remarkably gentle when compared with the play's sources. The same theatrical device appears in Barnabe Riche's *Farewell to Military Profession*, where a husband treats his scolding wife as if she were mad. However, the

source is far more brutal. Her dissembling husband and a group of neighbors chain the wife's leg to the floor, bind her arms, scratch her with brambles and *shout* prayers at her.[7] Audiences familiar with Riche's story would expect similar treatment of Malvolio, and such treatment would not shock Elizabethans, given their views of madness, the violent society in which they lived, and the ritual communal punishments common throughout the countryside.

Elizabethans viewed madness, rather than as a permanent condition,[8] as behavior which contained elements of possession, sin, punishment and disease; and as such, they sought to treat it through religious instruction and ritual, some herbal medicine, and most often physical violence.[9] Thomas More in 1533 writes a description of a lunatic man, whom he "helped":

> All beit that he had therefore bene put up in Bedelem, and afterward by beating and correction gathering his remembrance to him and beganne to come again to himself, being thereupon set at liberty, and walking aboute abrode, his old fansies beganne to fall againe in his heade. . . .caused him, as he came wanderinge by me doore, to be taken by the counstables and bounden to a tree in the streets before the whole towne, and there they stripped him with roddes therfore till he waxed weary.[10]

In this description, Feste's nonsensical catechism of the supposedly mad Malvolio begins to appear in a context of good-natured fun, not extreme torture; and torture was something that Elizabethans knew about.

Violence, like the torture of accused witches and traitors, permeated the Elizabethan culture. The government not only tortured perceived enemies of the state and publicly executed them, but also customized the method of death to the individual's crime, believing in the instructional opportunities of the symbolism of violence. Such ritualized and vicious punishments existed for all levels of crimes. Officials in 1634 punished William Pryne for libel by slitting his nose, cutting off his ears, and branding his forehead with "L."[11] Lesser crimes, however, merited similar violent and public retribution: whores and fornicators were whipped, disorderly drunks were pilloried, and outspoken wives were "ducked" in water or fitted with heavy metal headgear called a scold's bridle.[12] Violence even permeated Elizabethan entertainment, which included bear baiting and cock fights as favorite pastimes. Malvolio's humiliation, through unrequited love and enclosure in a forgotten dark space, not only seems innocuous in comparison, but would also have held satisfying retribution and

even entertainment for an audience sensitive to symbolically appropriate punishments.

Audiences would have further recognized this symbolic correction disseminated by the community from a violent communal phenomenon known as "Charivaris" that prevailed throughout the early modern period across the England and Europe. Communities, asserting a system of collective values, carried out public shaming rituals, which included humiliating processions, public ridicule, and extreme physical punishment, such as beatings, various water tortures, and stoning—all to address perceived aberrant conduct by individuals within the group. Mark Ingram, documenting Charivaris activities, points out that like so much in Elizabethan society, these rituals clearly integrated violence, but they also merged the penal action with an air of festivity.[13] Beyond the correction of inappropriate behavior, Charivaris often focused on figures of authority and included *Lord of Misrule* reversals of societal status. Ingram reports that they "linked with the repertory of festive customs associated with Maytime, Midsummer, the Christmas and New Year season."[14] Charivaris would literally run those officials who offended the holiday spirit out of town on a rail, often Puritans looking to end such idolatrous festivities. The echoes of Charivaris resound in this play named after a holiday feast, in which members of a household community humiliate a puritanical middle manager for shutting down a late night party. *Twelfth Night's* dramatic version of Charivaris, however, hardly lives up to its chaotic and cruel reality.

Act 4, scene 2 remains, then, a scene about revenge, but Shakespeare's embedded and outrageous comic treatment does not come clear until we consider the First Folio's stage direction and its bold theatrical repercussions. The two-word stage direction at the top of the scene ensures Feste's crowning clowning achievement in the play and completes the argument against the torture interpretation. In the First Folio, the stage direction for the scene reads simply, "*Malvolio within*," not "*Enter Malvolio within*." As Mariko Ichikawa, David Carnegie, and John Astington discuss with insightful detail and copious evidence in their respective articles, this stage direction tells us that, according to the most authoritative text for this play, Malvolio *never enters* and is not onstage for the scene.[15] With this scholarship in place, the pertinent question in the discussion of staging act 4, scene 2, is what is the effect of Malvolio's absence? If the audience cannot see Malvolio or his pained reactions, they do not sympathize with his plight, and the scene becomes a showcase for a clown. The actor playing Feste

has the entire stage and audience to himself, which shifts the focus, empathy, and ultimately the story told.

The choice to follow the Folio stage direction further reduces any violence or torturous visual images within the scene. In order to ensure that an onstage Malvolio cannot see, the director must blindfold, cage, restrict, or cast into extreme darkness the poor steward, which strengthens the very empathy that his specified absence reduces. A director must also find a way to bring Malvolio onstage, usually bound, led, dragged or thrown, which negates the textual references to gentleness that Shakespeare wrote with intention. Shakespeare's stage direction prevents any such contradictory visual story.

The story that the "within" stage direction does enhance lies in the world of comedy. The nonsensical topsy-turvy dialogue, a silly disguise, a full stage and audience to himself, and a righteous cause all conspire to provide a theatrical playground to any skillful clown. David Carnegie points out that Robert Armin, presumably the original Feste, specialized in mimicry and "interrogatories," which may explain the scene's structure.[16] Safely out of sight behind a curtain, Malvolio's complaints become the straight man's set up for the clown and his comedic alter ego to dance, sing, create an entire two-character scene with himself, and play with the audience.

The question remains for the director, however, where is *within*? Ichikawa explores this issue with incredible thoroughness. She finds that for its expressive possibilities, better audibility, lack of dungeon-like connotations, and clear representation of a dark room or house, the curtained discovery space provides the best location for the hidden Malvolio.[17] Astington points out that Malvolio can be heard.[18] Carnegie suggests that he can shake the curtains in fury, make them tremble in fear, or even "peep" through to great comic effect.[19] However used, Shakespeare's stage direction provides the strongest evidence yet that he did not intend to interrupt his lyrical comedy with the psychological torment of a noble victim by a nihilistic anti-clown.

The language, context, and direction of the prison scene discourages a story of unjustified torture and tells a story which fits within the bittersweet world of *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare carefully crafted Malvolio and his actions to antagonize his audiences and to provide the ideal target for his dramatic antithesis, Feste, and the other members of Olivia's medieval household. The mock religious catechism that starts the scene and the more personal role reversal of the second half work together to tell a story of a community correcting an aberrant community member,

which early modern audiences recognized and relished. Finally, staged as early texts suggest, the re-emergent comedy of the scene combines with the larger context to clarify Malvolio's journey through the play, creating a subplot more evenly distributed throughout five acts and thematically integrated with the larger story. With this refreshed perspective, the final scene, even with its threat of revenge, refocuses to reveal a cohesive community returning to balance within a whimsical world.

A company's challenge in producing *Twelfth Night* lies in communicating the story by using all of these textual clues, layers of images, and social contexts to make theatrical choices that work for their audience, theater, and artistic perspective. Modern audiences, by definition, bring different social contexts to the play. Theater construction may not offer original staging options like a discovery space. The actors and designers may resonate (or not) with particular elements of the story more than others. A director must use the Elizabethan's perspective as a guiding light, but create her own path. Feste's and Malvolio's competition for Olivia's favor, Malvolio's faults, and the clown's civility and humor provide good starting points where modern equivalents can communicate the older resonances to create a production with humor and relevance for today's audience. Finally, the clues suggest that the playwright placed a clown in the madman's dark house not to torture, but to redeem—ultimately telling a story of comedy, not tragedy, a story appropriately named after the festive holiday *Twelfth Night*, but also called *What You Will*.

Notes

1. Michael Pennington, *Twelfth Night: A User's Guide* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2000), 186-88.

2. David Carnegie, "'Malvolio Within': Performance Perspectives of the Dark House," *Shakepeare Quarterly* 52 (Autumn, 2001), 396.

3. John Manningham, *Diary of John Manningham*, ed. John Bruce (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 18.

4. Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 7, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

5. Cited in John Draper, *The Twelfth Night of Shakespeare's Audience* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), 88.

6. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997). This and subsequent references to Shakeskpeare's plays will be cited in the text.

7. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, eds. *The Arden Shakespeare: Twelfth Night or What You Will* (London: Methuen & Company, Ltd., 1975), xlvi.

8. Carol Thomas Neely, "Recent Work in Renaissance Studies: Psychology: Did Madness Have a Renaissance?" *Renaissance Quarterly* 44 (Winter, 1991): 778.

9. Carol Thomas Neely, "Documents in Madness": Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (Autumn, 1991): 318.

10. Quoted in George Rosen, *Madness in Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 153.

11. Sandra Dwyer Amussen, "Punishment, Discipline, and Power: The Social Meanings of Violence in Early Modern England" *The Journal of British Studies* 34 (January, 1995): 7.

12. Amussen, "Punishment, Discipline, and Power", 9.

13. Mark Ingram, "Ridings, Rough Music and the 'Reform of Popular Culture' in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* 105 (November, 1984): 92.

14. Ingram, "Ridings, Rough Music and 'Reform,'" 94.

15. See Mariko Ichikawa, "'Malvolio Within': Acting on the Threshold Between Onstage and Offstage Spaces," *in Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, ed. S. P. Cerasano (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005). Carnegie, "Malvolio Within,"; John H. Astington, "Malvolio and the Dark House," *Shakespeare Survey* 41 (1988), 55-62.

16. Carnegie, "'Malvolio Within,'" 410.

17. Ichikawa, "'Malvolio Within,'" 138.

18. Astington, "Malvolio and the Dark House," 55.

19. Carnegie, "'Malvolio Within,'" 409.