“The treatment of Malvolio in ‘Twelfth Night’ makes it impossible to view the play as a satisfactory comedy. Discuss.”

Initially, the trick concocted by Sir Toby and Maria in ‘Twelfth Night’ does not seem particularly out of place for a comedy; it appears to be little more than a spitting attempt to humiliate the steward Malvolio in front of his mistress. However, the plot escalates throughout the play, and the seemingly light-hearted cross-gartered yellow stockings ultimately lead Malvolio into forcible restraint in a dark room, accused of insanity. Malvolio’s treatment in the later scenes raises a question – where is the line drawn as to what can be defined as comedy?

Shakespeare doesn’t strive much to portray Malvolio as a likable character. In fact, Malvolio’s name means “ill will” in Italian, referencing his disagreeable nature. He doesn’t even attempt to feign friendliness or politeness to anyone aside from Olivia; ultimately he comes across as a pompous and unsympathetic enforcer of authority. Malvolio’s negative disposition towards others is revealed in his first few words of the play - Malvolio insults Feste’s wit, calling him a “barren rascal.” [1.5.79]. Malvolio’s words come across as hostile, especially since Feste hadn’t wronged him beforehand. This forms our first impression of Malvolio, and he does little to redeem himself as the play progresses. The unprovoked strictness of his nature makes the audience less likely to sympathise with him, making his downfall more humorous, since it could be seen as a form of comeuppance.

Malvolio’s reaction to Maria’s forged love letter unveils that he has very high ambitions for himself. Despite being a simple steward, he desires to marry Olivia, almost exclusively so that he can socially elevate himself – having aspirations of becoming “Count Malvolio” [2.5.32], as he puts it. He envisions himself “sitting in [his] state” [2.5.42], “in [his] branched velvet gown” [2.5.44], almost likening his ambitions to becoming a king. After reading the fake letter, the thoughts that come to his mind are not of love, but of treating Sir Toby with contempt and washing off “gross acquaintance” [2.5.158]; essentially, he is looking forward to being socially superior to others, rather than the fundamental idea of being married. Malvolio’s dubious motives for marrying Olivia make his character appear less-than noble; as a result, the manner in which he is treated later in the play could be seen by an audience as being more justifiable for a comedy.

Despite being a lowly servant, Malvolio seems to hold a very high opinion of himself in regard to others; when Fabian, Maria and Sir Toby jestingly feign belief that Malvolio is possessed by the devil, he sternly responds to their quips by retorting “You are idle, shallow things; I am not of your element” [3.4.119]. The language Malvolio uses here reflects his personality – he is well-spoken, but pompous – and displays how he sees himself as being above others; in Act I Scene V, Olivia even makes the comment that Malvolio is “sick of self-love” [1.5.86]. The way he falls to the trickery of Maria’s letter without question shows the extent of his self-delusion; his perception is twisted so that he believes everything will turn out the way he envisions it. Malvolio’s close-mindedness to his ambitions is shown in Act III Scene IV; Malvolio believes that his assumptions about Olivia’s interest in him are correct, simply because she referred to him as “‘Fellow’, not ‘Malvolio’” [3.4.74], while completely ignoring the fact that she inferred he was suffering from “Midsummer madness” [3.4.53]. Comedy is created from his extreme self-delusion, while his self-righteousness inhibits any sympathy the audience might feel for him; since it is Malvolio’s egocentrism that allows him
to believe the fake love-letter, it could be perceived as being his own fault that he fell for the trick, making his misfortune more comical, rather than pitiful.

Another notable characteristic of Malvolio is that he is an avid Puritan. Historically, Puritans opposed plays and theatres, seeing them as magnets for vices and immorality. Thus, Malvolio’s treatment in ‘Twelfth Night’ could be seen as a criticism of Puritan ideology by Shakespeare. Due to the views of Puritans regarding theatre, the audiences of ‘Twelfth Night’s’ original performances would most likely consist of people who opposed Puritanism. As a result, an audience of the time might not sympathise with a Puritan character like Malvolio; in their eyes, his treatment might have little detriment on their view of the play as a satisfactory comedy.

Regardless of the way Malvolio’s personality is portrayed, it cannot be denied that the scheme of Maria and Sir Toby becomes quite cruel as the play progresses, and the lengths to which he is prepared to go to realise his dreams begins to garner pity for him. As the play advances to the later scenes, Malvolio’s treatment by his puppet-masters strays away from that of a practical joke, and more towards torment.

The characters involved in the tricking of Malvolio often speak of him fairly maliciously, implying that they harbour considerable resentment toward him; for example, Sir Toby refers to Malvolio as a “niggardly sheep-biter” [2.5.4] – essentially describing Malvolio as being worthless and wretched. It is worth noting that, although it is true that Malvolio spoiled the fun of the characters in Olivia’s courtyard (and by no means did it politely), he was in fact doing his job, and didn’t explicitly do anything fundamentally wrong; drawing into question whether or not the other character’s resentment towards him was justified. Though his attitudes arguably may have been deserving of some form of comeuppance, the level of punishment he receives might be perceived as being too excessive for his actions, particularly by present-day audiences, as Puritanism is not prominent in modern society, thus removing any vilifying effects Malvolio’s Puritan status could have had on original audiences.

During Act IV Scene II, Malvolio essentially becomes a powerless victim, as he is locked in a dark room while desperately attempting to prove his sanity to a disguised Feste. The play is structured in such a way that it allows us to see the transition in Malvolio from pompous to desperate in this scene, as his distressed attitude is a sharp contrast to the self-assured way he acted during his previous appearance in Act III Scene IV. Malvolio’s despair in Act IV Scene II could have the effect of making the audience pity him, and as such reducing or negating the comedy of his situation in the scene. The darkness becomes a representation of Malvolio’s supposed insanity; when Feste attempts to convince him that the room is actually light, Malvolio retorts “I say this house is as dark as ignorance” [4.2.45], showing that he knows he is sane, and that, in his view, it is with ignorance that he is accused of insanity. On one hand, his ardent belief that he is sane creates connotations of his self-righteousness, possibly reaffirming the audience of any negative views they might have held against him, and allowing the scene to seem more well-deserved than malicious. Equally, however, his continued refusal to accept that he is anything but sane could generate respect for his perseverance in the absurdity of his situation – taking away from the comic value of the scene.
Some might not consider ‘Twelfth Night’ to be a true comedy due to Malvolio’s treatment; this is because, usually, important characteristics of Shakespearian comedy were that – despite any hardships – there would be a happy ending, and any problems were resolved. This isn’t really the case in ‘Twelfth Night’ for Malvolio; he doesn’t achieve any of his desires, those that deceived him are not punished, and he receives neither compensation nor apology for his suffering. Olivia, however, does express some level of sympathy towards him: “Alas, poor fool, how they have baffled thee!” [5.1.363]. “Poor fool” would usually refer to a poor fellow, as a gesture of pity, though in this scenario Malvolio could be seen as literally being a fool, as it is revealed to the other characters that he was tricked. The fact that Olivia says “How they have baffled thee!” is ironic, as Malvolio vowed to baffle Sir Toby at [2.5.58]. Thus, even Olivia’s sympathy has connotations of Malvolio’s grief and victimisation in its language. Notably, Malvolio speaks in prose for almost the entire play. However, during his last scene (Act V Scene I) he speaks poetically in verse, a contrast to prior scenes, and a reflection of the strong emotion he is experiencing. Malvolio’s altered speech not only gives his words greater effect, but also grants his character new depth – causing the audience to feel more pity for the hardships outlined in his monologue at [5.1.324]. This cumulates in his last actions of the play; he storms off after cursing the other characters (“I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you!” [5.1.371]). The metaphor of “the whole pack of you” in his final words creates imagery of the other characters surrounding him in opposition; he is an outcast, and his ending is reflective of that. Malvolio’s part in the play ends in a way you might not expect from a Shakespearian comedy, seeming slightly out of place among the other characters’ cheery endings – perhaps furthering views that Malvolio’s treatment harms the comedy of the play.

Hardships are commonplace in Shakespearean comedies; though Malvolio’s hardships are perhaps worse than most, greater emphasis is usually placed on the ending in regard to the perception of a play as a comedy. Although Malvolio emerges at the end of the play worse off than the rest of the characters, and as such, doesn’t necessarily achieve a happy ending, being proved sane, and having the plot of those that schemed against him revealed means that – at least – Malvolio’s ending is certainly not akin to that of a tragedy. While Malvolio’s treatment differentiates ‘Twelfth Night’ from some other Shakespearian comedies, and perhaps lessens the comedic value for some audiences, it certainly doesn’t make it impossible to appreciate the play as a comedy.