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Maria’s Letter and the Gulling of Malvolio:
A Strategy to Create Laughter

Yayoi Miyashita
Maria’s Letter and the Gulling of Malvolio: A Strategy to Create Laughter

Yayoi Miyashita

1. Introduction

Shakespearean drama is composed mainly of the speeches of the characters and a small number of stage directions. But there runs a deeper stream of dramatic design underneath the apparent reflection of the characters’ intentions, which gives his plays a meaningful substance. In this small essay, I shall examine how dramatic design works in Shakespeare’s plays — in spite of the characters’ intentions — through the handy, but very illustrative, example of Maria’s letter and Malvolio’s reaction to it.

The gulling of Malvolio is one of the most exquisite coups de théâtre in Shakespeare’s plays, and has been a source of attraction for both actors and audience. It has rarely been noticed, however, that there is embedded in Maria’s letter and Malvolio’s reaction to it a very cunning system which engenders the audience’s laughter. The aim of this essay is to lay bare this calculated system which is obscured by the forward movement of the scene.

2. Malvolio’s Character before He Reads Maria’s Letter

In anticipation of the letter scene, a dramatic preparation is made concerning Malvolio’s character: in the early part of the play, his haughtiness and self-righteousness are exaggerated. On the level of the characters’ awareness, these characteristics arouse hostile feelings in Feste, Sir Toby and his company, and this leads to Maria’s plan to write a letter to punish him. On the dramatic design level, however, his haughtiness and self-righteousness are deliberately exaggerated in order to produce a great change in Malvolio when he reads the letter. And this big fall of Malvolio increases the audience’s laughter in the letter scene.

When Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Feste, with Maria joining them later, are drinking and having a riotous merrymaking in the night in 2.3, Malvolio cuts in the midst of it with his righteous claim:

MALVOLIO My masters, are you mad? Or what are you? Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady’s house, that ye squeak out your coziers’ catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you? (2.3.81-87)

Here Malvolio’s haughtiness is highlighted by his claim of the reversal of status. Although he is no more than a steward to Olivia, he asks Sir Toby, “what are you?”. He then criticises their drunkenness and riotous singing, and says that they are just as “tinkers” or “coziers”. His grand and pompous wordings enhance his haughty character.
Maria, however, knows that his strict attitude to the others comes from his posture as a puritan. She also knows that it is not a genuine belief but just a pose when it is convenient for him: “Marry, sir, sometimes he is a kind of puritan.” and “The dev’l a puritan that he is, or anything constantly but a time-pleaser.” (2.3.130, 136-37, emphasis added). Maria’s opinion is confirmed when Malvolio’s strict attitude as a puritan melts into a ludicrous, daydreaming lover in the letter scene. His haughtiness changes into his pseudo aristocratic manners, and self-righteousness into his self-centred viewpoint which causes him to make a forced interpretation of the content of the letter so that it will match his hopes and expectations. The more grossly these characteristics are depicted at first, the greater change Malvolio shows when he reads the letter, and the more fun the audience enjoys.

3. An Introduction to the Letter Scene: Malvolio’s Aspiration for Aristocratic Status

When Malvolio appears on stage in 2.5, he abandons his former attitude as a puritan, and shows himself as a totally different person. When Maria puts Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Fabian into the box-tree, she explains, “He [Malvolio] has been yonder i’ the sun practising behaviour to his own shadow this half-hour”. The length of time that Malvolio spends in practising manners and the phrase “to his own shadow” add ridiculousness and illustrate his daydreamer aspect very succinctly. Then Malvolio shows his delusional world in his own explanatory words:

MALVOLIO ’Tis but fortune, all is fortune. 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. Besides, she uses me with a more exalted respect than anyone else that follows her. What should I think on’t?

(2.5.21-26)

He first fancies that Olivia might love him. But soon his aspiration for the status of a count is introduced as a more important factor for him:

MALVOLIO To be Count Malvolio! (2.5.32)

He imagines that Olivia’s love for him opens the way for him to become a count, and he pictures a concrete situation in his daydream:

MALVOLIO Having been three months married to her, sitting in my state—

MALVOLIO Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown, having come from a day-bed where I have left Olivia sleeping—

MALVOLIO 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. (2.5.41-52)

In Malvolio’s imaginative world, he has got expensive belongings proper to an aristocrat, sexual relations with Olivia, and a status higher than Sir Toby. Here arises a question, however, to what extent Malvolio is certain about the realization of his fancy. He gives a previous example that “the Lady of the Strachey married the yeoman of the wardrobe” (2.5.36-37). But when the audience sees Malvolio’s reaction to the first and second parts of Maria’s letter after he recognizes Olivia’s hands, “To whom should this be?” and “If this should be thee, Malvolio?”, it becomes clear that his conviction may not be so strong (2.5.90, 97-98). The implications in the letter insinuate themselves into a little crack between Malvolio’s aspiration and his uncertainty about its realization. It leads Malvolio from the situation whereby he already has an aspiration to become Olivia’s husband and a count — but with little confidence at first — to the last recognition that Olivia loves him. What the audience enjoys is not only the fact that he is easily taken in, but also the process in which he is being entrapped step by step.

4. The Dramatic Design Planted in Maria’s Letter and Malvolio’s Reaction

Maria writes a letter in order to “gull him [Malvolio] into a mayword and make him a common recreation” (2.3.126-27), and so it should reflect Maria’s intention and nothing else. However, it is composed of 5 sections as I show below, and if we skip the inserted speeches of Malvolio and Sir Toby’s party, it soon becomes clear that her letter lacks the coherence that a letter as a whole should have:

1) A Superscription
To the unknown belov’d, this, and my good wishes. (2.5.87-88)

2) The First Verse
   Jove knows I love,
   But who?
   Lips, do not move,
   No man must know. (2.5.92-95)

3) The Second Verse (“The numbers altered.”)
   I may command where I adore,
   But silence like a Lucrece knife
   With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore.
   M.O.A.I. doth sway my life. (2.5.100-03)

4) Prose
   If this fall into thy hand, revolve. In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em. Thy fates open their hands, let thy blood and spirit embrace them, and to inure thyself to what thou art like to be, cast thy humble slough, and appear fresh. Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants. Let thy tongue tang arguments of state; put thyself into the trick of singularity. She thus advises thee that sighs for thee. Remember who commended thy yellow stockings, and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered. I say remember, go to, thou art made if thou desir’st to be so; if not, let me see thee a steward still, the fellow of servants, and not worthy to touch Fortune’s fingers. Farewell. She that would alter services with thee,

   The Fortunate Unhappy. (2.5.134-50)

5) A Postscript
   Thou canst not choose but know who I am. If thou entertain’st my love, let it appear in thy smiling, thy smiles become thee well. Therefore in my presence still smile, dear my sweet, I prithee. (2.5.163-67)

At the beginning of the letter, it says that the person whom “I” love must not be known. But in the fourth section, it makes clear that the person is “a steward”, and in the fourth and the last sections, it gives him a commandment how to behave. This lack of consistency is latent and is hard for the audience to notice because of the insertion of Malvolio’s reaction which smooths out the gaps of each section. In addition, the audience is so involved with the forward movement of the scene that they do not notice the oddity of the letter.

Each section of the letter draws out Malvolio’s reaction, and the re-reaction of Sir Toby’s party. From the first situation where Malvolio asks to whom the letter is addressed to the conclusion where he firmly believes in Olivia’s love for him, each section of the letter carries out its own function and manipulates Malvolio’s understanding. In order to carry out this dramatic design, it is necessary that every factor of the device should be known to the audience. Therefore, Sir Toby’s words come thus, when Malvolio finds the letter:

   SIR TOBY 0 peace, and the spirit of humours intimate reading aloud to him. (2.5.80-81)

Sir Toby wants to know the content of the letter so that he can see how successfully Maria’s plan goes. As for the dramatic aim, however, it has a more profound purpose: to give the audience the full knowledge of the content of the letter, Malvolio’s reaction and the re-reaction of Sir Toby’s party.

1) The Superscription Unit (2.5.82-91)

After Malvolio understands that the hand is Olivia’s, he also finds that the impression of the wax is her Lucrece. This recognition of Malvolio that Olivia is the writer is essential for the development of the whole scene, without which the letter plan would not work at all. What if Malvolio sees that the hand looks something like Olivia’s but realises that actually it is not? It is regulated, however, on the dramatic design level that this kind of thing never happens in the procedure. He grasps that it is written by Olivia, and asks “To whom should this be?” (2.5.90). At this point the dramatic preparation of Malvolio’s daydream has meaning: although he imagines his life as a count very concretely before he finds the letter, he may not be so confident of the realization of his dream.

2) The First Verse Unit (2.5.92-99)

Here, like the superscription section, the letter says that “No man must not know” whom “I” love. This prohibition arouses contrarily some desire in Malvolio that he should know who is the object of the letter. In this unit he goes a step further than in the first unit. He speaks about the possibility that he may be the man: “If this should be thee, Malvolio?” (2.5.97-98).

I use the words “section” and “unit” with the following distinction: the word “unit” to signify one set of a passage consisting of 1) a “section” of the letter, 2) Malvolio’s reaction, and 3) the re-reaction of Sir Toby’s party.
3) The Second Verse Unit (2.5.100-33)

Because the first two sections of the letter poses the question of the identity of the object of Olivia's love, this section works as a riddle as Fabian explains. He says it is a "fustian riddle". The Oxford version of this work glosses "fustian" as "high-sounding but meaningless (literally, cheap imitation silk). Presumably Fabian means that this is the right kind of riddle to lure Malvolio." This riddle, however, is a masterpiece, contrary to Fabian's estimation, which disturbs Malvolio so much and thereby increases the audience's enjoyment.

There are two clues in the riddle: 1) "I may command where I adore"; 2) "M.O.A.I. doth sway my life". Because the first clue is easily guessed, it invites Malvolio to suppose that the second one should also be answered properly. So Malvolio struggles with the alphabetical sequence, M.O.A.I., to make it signify something relating to himself. First he is gratified to find the first letter is M "that begins my name". He then asks himself "'A' should follow, but 'O' does"; "And then 'I' comes behind". He finally "crushes" the alphabetical order a little to "bow" to him, and concludes that "every one of these letters are in my name". In this way, his process of guessing, forcing the meaningless alphabetical order to signify himself, invites the audience's laughter.

This far-fetched conclusion of his is worth noticing when we think of the dramatic design. If Malvolio could not reach this answer, the latter part of the letter sections do not function at all. His conclusion is necessary, therefore, to go to the next section of the letter.

4) The Prose Unit (2.5.133-63)

Before Malvolio reaches the fourth section of the letter, he has convinced himself that the writer is Olivia and that the object of her affections must be himself, although he might not be so confident about the latter case. (He knows that he has manipulated the alphabetical order for his own benefit. Therefore, when he finds the words, "a steward", in the next section, his uncertainty dramatically changes into enthusiasm.) With these grounds being the prerequisites to the next part, the prose begins with an encouragement to receive "greatness". Then the letter gives him orders how to behave: "Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants. Let thy tongue tang arguments of state; put thyself into the trick of singularity". These orders are, however, the very way that Malvolio has behaved hitherto in the play. But it is also clear that these admonitions are totally against the idea of noblesse oblige, and actually Olivia never behaves like this. It is Maria's plot that, if Malvolio should expand his own ugly manners, he will become even more ridiculous. Then the tone of the order changes: "Remember who commended thy yellow stockings, and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered". "Yellow stockings" and "cross-gartered" are what Olivia "abhors" and "detests", as Maria soon reveals at the end of the scene (2.5.188-190). Thus both the orders about how to behave and what to wear are what he should not do and the audience is so informed. Then comes a crucial moment when Malvolio's dreams finally become fulfilled: he finds out that the addressee of the letter is "a steward". After he reads the fourth part of the letter, he swears to become "point-device the very man". However, Sir Toby and his company, and also the audience, know the truth. The grotesque orders are deliberately, and exquisitely, chosen "by Maria", and Malvolio accepts them without any scruple of doubt. It is a dramatic manoeuvre to increase the audience's enjoyment.

5) The Postscript Unit (2.5.163-174)

The letter does not end here. It gives a further advice for him to smile. This is also Maria's lure as she reveals soon: "he will smile upon her, which will now be so unsuitable to her disposition, being addicted to a melancholy as she is, that it cannot but turn him into a notable contempt" (2.5.190-93). The orders to wear "yellow stockings" and "cross-gartered" and to smile work as a preparation for the further entertainment in 3.4 where Malvolio comes to Olivia satisfying these commands.

In this way, Malvolio reads a part of the letter, and then he thinks and tries to give his own interpretation to it. His correct interpretation, however, is a necessary step to go to the next part of the letter, without which the sequence of the letter units would not work at all. Although he responds to the content of each part of the letter on a conscious level, his reaction and interpretation are regulated by the dramatic design.

On the dramatic design level, each section of the letter has its own function. Each affects Malvolio's recognition and advances his interpretation, and it also serves as a prerequisite to go to the next unit. It may be helpful to
show the structure of the letter scene in a diagram:

One Unit
A part of the letter
↓
Malvolio’s interpretation
⇐ prerequisite to go to the next unit
(and the three men’s appreciation)

Next Unit
A part of the letter
↓
Malvolio’s interpretation
⇐ prerequisite to go to the next unit
(and the three men’s appreciation)

And so forth.

Because of this structure and the function I have argued above, the letter lacks the coherence which a letter as a whole should have. Each part manipulates and guides Malvolio’s recognition: it leads him from the first situation where he is not so certain of Olivia’s love for him to his perfect conviction that she loves him. Furthermore, it gives him instructions on how to behave, which drives him into another disaster in 3.4.

If we compare this “actual letter of Maria” with her blueprint in 2.3, the significance of the letter being divided into several sections becomes much clearer:

MARIA I will drop in his way some obscure epistles of love, wherein by the colour of his beard, the shape of his leg, the manner of his gait, the expression of his eye, forehead, and complexion, he shall find himself most feelingly personated. I can write very like my lady your niece; on a forgotten matter we can hardly make distinction of our hands.

SIR TOBY He shall think by the letters that thou wilt drop that they come from my niece, and that she’s in love with him. (2.3.144-55)

Although her intention to gull Malvolio may be similar, they are different at a crucial point. In the actual letter, each section lures Malvolio step by step, and he gradually falls into a deep snare which has been “set by Maria”.

5. Conclusion

While Malvolio’s strict attitude excites hostile feelings in Sir Toby and his company, on the dramatic design level, his haughtiness and self-righteousness are deliberately exaggerated in order to create a big fall for Malvolio when he reads Maria’s letter. When Malvolio appears in 2.5, he already has an aspiration to get Olivia’s love and to become Count Malvolio (the daydream scene). But it can be deduced from his reaction to the first two sections of Maria’s letter that he is not so sure of the realization. The letter insinuates itself into a little crack between Malvolio’s aspiration and his lack of confidence, and manipulates his recognition to his last understanding that he is the object of Olivia’s love. The letter is cunningly divided into five sections, each of which has its own function. Each section affects Malvolio’s recognition and draws out his own interpretation. The functions of the each section and Malvolio’s interpretations, however, are regulated by dramatic calculation. Malvolio’s interpretation of each section of the letter must be correct in order to go to the next unit; and the next unit plays again its regulated role. On the other hand, the audience is privileged to know every detail of this contrivance. Thus they enjoy not only the fact that Malvolio is easily taken in but also the very procedure by which he is ensnared step by step. Although Maria’s letter and Malvolio’s reaction to it should be exclusively the reflection of their intentions, there is embedded a calculated system on the dramatic design level, a strategy to create the audience’s great laughter.

5 Malvolio, however, is totally ignorant of his own real situation, losing himself in enthusiastic happiness. This difference of awareness between Malvolio and the audience may lead to another possible interpretation of Malvolio which pays attention to his quasi-tragic or pathetic facet.