

Twelfth Night: Maria

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Maria is Olivia's waiting-gentlewoman and the cleverest person in the comic subplot. The letter scheme that humiliates Malvolio is entirely her invention. She identifies his weakness, designs the trap, specifies the behaviour he must perform, and executes the plan while Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian watch. She is the engine that drives the subplot's central action, and she does it with confidence and precision.

Who She Is

Maria is sharp, quick-tongued, and observant. She reads people accurately: her diagnosis of Malvolio as "the best persuaded of himself, so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies" is as precise as anything Feste says about him. She sees immediately that his self-love is the mechanism of his downfall, and she designs the trap accordingly.

She is also navigating a social position that is significantly below the characters she outthinks. As a waiting-gentlewoman she is a servant, dependent on Olivia's household for her position. Her intelligence gives her influence that her rank does not, and she uses it. The letter scheme is partly entertainment and partly the action of someone who resents Malvolio's contempt for people below him.

Her wit makes her Feste's closest equivalent among the subplot characters. She matches him in the early exchanges and understands his value in a way Malvolio does not. When Feste is threatened with dismissal she does not join Malvolio's complaint: she knows what the fool is worth.

Her Arc

The midnight scene: When Malvolio enters to silence the revellers, Maria reads him instantly. She sees the self-love, the relish in his own authority, and the exactness with which he would believe a letter telling him what he already wants to hear. She tells Sir Toby she has a plan and describes it with complete confidence. The plan is already fully formed.

Writing the letter: Maria writes the letter in Olivia's hand so convincingly that Malvolio does not question its authenticity. The letter is a masterpiece of targeted manipulation: it flatters exactly what Malvolio believes about himself, specifies behaviour that will make him ridiculous, and leaves him no reason to doubt it. Every line is calibrated.

The watching: In the box-hedge scene she does not speak much. She has designed the mechanism and set it running. She watches it work.

The resolution and marriage: At the play's close, Maria has married Sir Toby. This is presented as a reward for the letter scheme. It is not presented as a love match. She disappears from the final scene entirely: she is not present for Malvolio's release, Olivia's acknowledgement of what happened, or the general reconciliation. Her absence is as pointed as her earlier presence.

Key Quotes

Quote	Scene	Significance
"The best persuaded of himself, so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies."	2.3	Her diagnosis of Malvolio: exactly correct, and exactly the vulnerability she will exploit
"I know my physic will work with him."	2.3	Confidence in her own plan: she understands Malvolio well enough to predict his response precisely
"My purpose is indeed a horse of that colour."	2.3	She confirms Sir Toby's guess about her plan with a wordplay that signals her enjoyment of her own cleverness

Dramatic Techniques

Dramatic irony runs through everything Maria sets up. She knows the letter is forged; Malvolio does not. The audience watches the trap assembling and waits for it to close. The irony is Maria's creation: she has put the audience in a position of superior knowledge and given them time to enjoy it.

Competence as comedy is Shakespeare's technique for Maria. Her intelligence is played for comedy rather than drama because it is deployed against Malvolio. The precision of her plan is funny because the plan is a prank. But the precision is real: she is genuinely more capable than most of the people around her.

Absence from resolution is a deliberate dramatic choice. Maria is not in the final scene. The play shows Olivia reading Malvolio's letter with shame and asking what happened, but Maria is not there to face that question. She has received her prize and exited.

Thematic Significance

Maria raises questions about gender and intelligence that the play does not fully answer. She is the cleverest strategist in the comic subplot, but her intelligence is deployed in service of a prank, and her reward is marriage to the man she has been helping throughout. She does not get credit, power, or recognition: she gets Sir Toby.

She also represents social ambition in a form the play treats as acceptable. She is a servant who schemes her way to marriage with a knight: her social position rises significantly through the play. Compare this with Malvolio, who fantasises about becoming Count, and is punished for the fantasy. Maria achieves something closer to what Malvolio wants, by a route the play presents as comedy rather than transgression.

Exam Tip

Maria is most useful in essays about gender, social class, or the relationship between comedy and cruelty. For gender: she is more capable than Sir Toby but acts in his service; her intelligence shapes the plot but her rewards are conventional. For social class: her rise through marriage contrasts directly with Malvolio's punishment for aspiration. For the letter scheme: always note that Maria designs it alone and that the men watch.