

# Twelfth Night: Act 2, Scene 3 - Olivia's House (Late Night)

Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 10, 2026

<CharacterChips characters={"Sir Toby", "Sir Andrew", "Feste", "Maria", "Malvolio"} />

## Summary

Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Feste are making noise late at night in Olivia's house: drinking, singing, and enjoying themselves. Maria tries to quiet them, warning they will anger Olivia. Malvolio enters in his nightclothes, furious. He threatens to tell Olivia and have them all dismissed. He addresses Sir Toby with contempt, reminding him that he is a guest in the house and not its master, and he dismisses Feste entirely.

After Malvolio leaves, Maria reveals her plan. She knows Malvolio's weakness precisely: his vanity, his private belief that everyone around him loves him, his conviction that he deserves to rise above his current position. She will forge a letter in Olivia's handwriting and leave it where Malvolio will find it. The letter will suggest that Olivia is in love with him and will give him instructions to follow to win her. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are immediately enthusiastic. They will plant the letter in Olivia's garden and hide to watch Malvolio find it.

Sir Andrew then mentions that he is nearly out of money and cannot stay much longer without marrying Olivia. Sir Toby encourages him to stay, in language that reveals more interest in Andrew's continued funding than in his actual prospects.

## Analysis

This scene is the pivot of the comic subplot. Malvolio has made himself the enemy of three people who have both the motive and the ability to punish him for it, and Maria's plan is the result.

Maria's assessment of Malvolio is the scene's sharpest piece of characterisation. She describes him as "an affectioned ass that cons state without book... the best persuaded of himself, so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him." This is not simply an insult; it is a diagnosis. She has identified the mechanism of his vanity with surgical accuracy, and the letter she proposes will be constructed entirely out of that mechanism. She does not need to lie about who Malvolio is: she only needs to reflect his own image of himself back at him.

The comparison Maria draws between a forged love letter and Orsino's real love letters is quietly important. She says she will drop "some obscure epistles of love" in Malvolio's path: the same method Orsino uses, sending messages of love through intermediaries. Maria's version is more honest in at least one way: she openly describes it as a trick. Orsino's messages are equally contrived, though he would not describe them that way.

Sir Toby's management of Sir Andrew is a small but consistent thread through this scene. He does not encourage Andrew to leave; he encourages him to stay and keep his money in circulation. The cheerfulness of the scene, the singing and drinking and laughter, sits alongside a layer of manipulation that is easy to miss.

## Themes

- **Deception and vanity:** Maria's scheme works because it exploits Malvolio's existing beliefs about himself. A trick built on a person's self-image requires no lies: the victim does the deluding.
- **Social class and resentment:** Malvolio's condescension toward Sir Toby and his contempt for Feste are what motivate the prank. The scene shows how social hierarchy generates resentment when it is enforced with cruelty rather than fairness.
- **Disorder versus order:** Malvolio represents order and propriety; Sir Toby represents festivity and noise. The play consistently treats Malvolio's enforcement of rules as humourless and self-serving rather than genuinely principled.
- **Manipulation and friendship:** Sir Toby's handling of Sir Andrew reveals that the friendship is not real. Andrew provides money; Toby provides optimism that has no basis. The scene shows the comic subplot's darker edge alongside its comedy.