OLIVIA'S HOUSEHOLD

IF Shakespeare's plays, as is generally admitted, are incomparably greater than their sources, their greatness must inhere mainly in his changes and additions. Most scholars have attributed this precious residue to the dramatist's imagination, which, they seem to suppose, created it from nothing. Certainly his imagination informed the whole: but the additions that he built into his originals, supplying motivation and verisimilitude, he took from the life around him; for this was the material that both he and his audience knew best: thus he elizabethanized the stories that he used, and made them reflect the popular attitude toward the characters and the themes that he portrayed; for, in an age of little learning, he could not hope, even had he wished, to educate his audience to a different point of view. Dogberry, as a constable, must be stupid; Henry V must appear as a national hero; and interest on money in The Merchant of Venice must be hateful—all to accord with contemporary fact or opinion. But modern readers see such characters and themes quite out of focus, and interpret them in modern ways.

Since the low comedy of Twelfth Night—the doings of Malvolio, Sir Toby and the rest—owes little or nothing to Shakespeare's sources, Olivia's unruly household would seem to be Shakespeare's own, and so was presumably conceived in terms of Elizabethan life. To the modern point of view, it presents strange inconsistencies: Maria, a chambermaid, marries a knight who is uncle, or at least cousin, to her noble mistress, and their union is applauded as appropriate; Sir Toby treats his niece's house as if it were a public inn, and brings to it an uninvited guest to whom he insists he will marry her; Sir Andrew prosecutes his wooing by unseemly carousals in his lady's kitchen; and Malvolio, the only sober man in all this crazy company, is locked up as insane. This surely is mad romance; and yet the dialogue reads like other realistic low comedy in Shakespeare. The attitude toward Malvolio is peculiarly confusing. All right and reason seem on Malvolio's side: Olivia herself assures us that he is an invaluable steward; and, in a house of mourning, he surely

4 See the present writer, "Usury in The Merchant of Venice," M.P., about to appear.
5 Twelfth Night, Furness var. ed., iii, iv. 7 and 65 et seq.
seems quite justified in putting down the riot of Sir Toby and his rout and in giving what protection he can to the person and the feelings of his youthful mistress. But Shakespeare is obviously against him: Fabian and Maria come to Sir Toby's aid; we are expected to laugh at the practical jokes they all play on the unhappy steward; and, in the end, even his mistress gives him but scant requital. Some scholars would call Malvolio a Puritan, and say that this fact explains the dramatist's antipathy; but the charge of Puritanism is only the casual fling of a detractor; and at that he is only "sometimes" a "kind of Puritaine": had he really been one, Maria would hardly have qualified the phrase. The text, moreover, does not depict a Puritan but a man attached to the gauds and vanities of this world. Although "sad and civil," Malvolio had disported himself in yellow stockings even before the forged letter had urged him to do so; and he hoped in the fullness of time to occupy a "day-bedde" and to toy with "some rich jewell; and, most significant of all, the anger of Sir Toby and "the lighter people" is aroused, not against his religion or even his sober demeanor, but against his ambition to become his mistress' husband, a most un-puritanical desire. If Malvolio be a Puritan, the fact is incidental. Why, then, did Shakespeare and his audience despise him?

In the turbulent Middle Ages, when one's house was perforce a castle, armed retainers on whom one could rely were worth their board and keep; and, quite in the tradition of Beowulf's followers, they feasted in the hall, braved in doors and out, and scorned all servile duties. With them it was a word and a blow; and the word was commonly an oath. Some were "prowde and euill natured"; and yet were tolerated because they were good fighters or because their fathers were important vassals. The humble wayfarer and any traveller of note with his whole retinue were entertained as at a public inn; and, over this boisterous

6 Critics generally agree, e.g., E. P. Kuhl, PMLA, XLVII, 904.

7 Chaucer's Host similarly accuses the Parson of being a Lollard (C. T., Shipman's Prok., 11). Maria's fling was quite natural, for Puritans were supposed to be unfriendly toward servingmen. See W. Basse, Sword and Buckler, (London, 1602) stanza 45.

8 Twelfth Night, ii, iii. 136 et seq.

9 Ibid., ii. v. 155. Cf. 188.

10 Ibid., ii. v. 49 et seq.

11 Ibid., v. i. 358.

12 Ibid., ii. v. 45 et seq. See Tolman, Falstaff (New York, 1925) p. 146 et seq.

13 Basse, op. cit., stanza 14.


17 Cuyile Life, ed. cit., p. 40.

18 Ibid., pp. 64 and 92.
crew, the lord of the manor ruled, like Cedric in Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. By
degrees, however, the feudal lord and his family withdrew to the greater
quiet of a soler or upper parlor, sun-room or conversation-place, which
was sometimes provided, like the gallery at Penshurst, the seat of the
Sidney family, with a small spywindow through which the master might
keep an eye on the doings in the hall below. Olivia’s establishment,
though it has clearly progressed beyond this point, still has “fellowes”
or “Gentlemen” such as Fabyan, who share the rough license of the hall
with Sir Toby and his guest; and Malvolio, as intermediary, takes the
place of the spy-window.

The end of private warfare had brought the nobles out of their castles
into the more convenient but narrower confines of the Tudor house.
They no longer required a host of idle men-at-arms, and could not easily
maintain them. Servants became more purely useful, and, especially
in town houses, entertainment of strangers ceased to be the rule. The
servingmen were fewer, were more gorgeously attired for display,
and gradually evolved into the footmen of the eighteenth century. The real
work of the house was done by “subservingmen,” bakers, brewers,
“chamberlaines,” and the like. Lord Burghley advised his son to keep
few servants, and give them not only board and lodging but also wages
regularly paid. Thus the household was evolving from a feudal to an
economic basis; and waiting upon a lord became by degrees a “slavish”
task. The servingmen complained; and many were cast off to wander
the roads. Meanwhile, the flood of gold from South America increased
the cost cost of living, and made hard times for landed families with

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19 See the present writer, “Chaucer’s ‘Wardrobe,’” *Eng. St.*, LX, 238 et seq.
21 *Twelfth Night*, i. v. 38 and 70.
22 Basse, *op. cit.*, stanza 56 et seq., stresses the hard work of valet, etc.
24 Basse, *op. cit.*, stanzas 19, 27, 31, 44 et seq. The standing of servingmen and pages was
evidently growing worse. Armed retainers were hardly permitted in London because it
was within the “verge.” The Huntington Library, which owns the unique copy of W.
Darell’s *Short Discourse of the Life of Servingmen* (1578), would not permit scholars access
to this pamphlet while the present paper was preparing. It has recently appeared under
the editorship of Dr. L. B. Wright (*S. P.*, xxxi, 115 et seq.); and it supports the generaliza-
tions gathered from other sources in the present study.
Cf. the livery of Gobbo which was to be “More garded than his fellowes” (*Merchant of
Venice*, ii. ii. 149).
27 *Advice to a Son*, att. Burghley, reprinted in *The Parental Monitor* (London, 1792),
p. 146.
et seq.
29 Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
fixed incomes; and, as early as 1579, the anonymous author of *Cyuile and Vncyuile Life* urged even the rural gentry to dismiss their "tall fellows," and with these moneys live at court where they might perfect themselves and their sons in gentlemanly arts, and where a coach would obviate the need of six or eight servingmen in attendance on the street. The cost of this yearly visit brought more than one county family to ruin; and *Timon of Athens* reflects the fall of a great house attempting to support its ancestral liberality under the changing economic system. Thus Elizabethan servants, employed more and more for work rather than prowess, were "passing from a condition of status to one of contract"; Shakespeare would seem to have transferred to Illyria a household in the midst of this transition, with a licensed "fool," well-born retainers, dependent relatives and uninvited guests as in the Middle Ages, and also apparently with a staff of actual servants headed by the all-too-competent Malvolio, who could not but look askance at the free and easy manners of the rest.

Most Elizabethan writers, unlike the author of *Cyuile Life*, bewail the passing of a free table; and Sir Toby's protest lest "cakes and ale" should be no more is doubtless a slur, not on Malvolio as a Puritan—but rather against him as an enemy of ancient English liberality by which Sir Toby got his board and keep. In *Timon* also, Shakespeare laments the passing of this feudal virtue; and, in *Lear*, the dismissal of the old King's retinue was the special occasion for reproach against his daughters. To the Elizabethans, all this was commonplace, and needed a mere reference; and, like Shakespeare, they sympathized with the dismissed retainers and those that suffered from the change. They lamented the decline of liberality, the "incertaintie of service," the growing severity of masters who would use any excuse to relieve themselves of one more hungry mouth; England was indeed the "Purgatory of Servants;" and Feste might well beware of Olivia's displeasure for his unpermitted absence, when merely

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30 See the present writer, "The Theme of *Timon of Athens,*" *M. L. R.,* xxix, 20.  
31 *Cyuile Life, ed. cit.,* p. 34 et seq.  
33 N. B. the apology for absenteeism, *ibid.,* pp. 62–63.  
34 Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 151.  
36 See the present writer on *Timon* previously cited.  
38 *Twelfth Night,* ii. iii. 114.  
39 Markham, *op. cit.*, pp. 127, 129 et seq.  
40 Peacham, *op. cit.*, sig. C3; and Overbury, *Characters,* "A Serving-Man."  
43 *Twelfth Night,* i. v. 3 et seq. Maria significantly remarks that for Feste "turning away" would be "as good as hanging"; for he would have to steal, and so be hanged.
the "breaking of a Bulrush" might cast one out upon the highway. Thus a "great swarm" of masterless men turned thieves and beggars; but, despite severe laws, servants were careless and corrupt; and, since they were "predestinate to want" in their old age, some would, like Bacon's steward, commit constant peculation, even to the ruin of their masters. So the noble household was growing into a Renaissance court in little with servants hired for their industry and skill, and a few gorgeously attired gentlemen, such as Viola and Fabyan, accomplished in the courtly arts and sometimes supported in part by allowances from their fathers' estates.

Social change per se shocked the Elizabethan sense of fixed security, and threatened civil wars like those in France and the Netherlands. The "swarms" of "sturdy beggars," who lived, like Falstaff's crew, on their wits, men blamed upon the new upstart nobility, just sprung from trade and unschooled in the virtue of free-giving. Breton and Brathwait would have the upper classes renounce the Italianate manners of the court and return to their estates as formerly. The Elizabethans saw society as divinely immutable; and, whether one peruse the oration or Ulysses on "degree" or Baldwin's *Morall Philosophie*, this feeling, sanctified by the Fifth Commandment, is regularly the same:

Where servants [a]gainst maisters do rebell
The common-weale may bee accounted hell.

Nevertheless, the age was full of "aspyring minde," such as the hopeful son of Old Gobbo; and this transition in domestic life went on.

The gently born, indeed, were struggling for their very livelihood in

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44 Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
46 Harrison, *op. cit.*, Bk. II, Chap. xi.
47 S. Rowlands, *Knave of Spades* (?1610), ed. Hunt. Club, No. XXII (1874); and *The Night Raven* (1620), No. IX.
49 Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 144. On the increasing servility of servants, see also T. Scott, *Four Paradoxes of Arte* (1610), sig. C4; and Markham, p. 146.
52 Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 126. See also Stonex in *Schelling Ann. Papers*, p. 271.
54 *Troilus and Cressida*, I. iii. 75 et seq.
58 Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
the households of the great; and a realization of the play in the light of this struggle requires a survey of the social status of each of the *dramatis persona*.

The rank of the Duke (or Count) Orsino and of the Countess Olivia, and of Viola and Sebastian, who are respectively permitted to marry them, is beyond all question; and Viola, even in her disguise, is one of Orsino's "gentlemen." "Signior Fabyan" would seem to be a minor courtier or servingman, whose services were merely body-guard and personal attendance. He talks aptly of court etiquette and the laws of arms—things that Malvolio must learn by reading "politic authors"—and Sir Toby accepts his mild reproof, as he certainly does not accept that of Malvolio. Fabyan, presumably the younger son of a good family, like Falstaff, had apparently been raised a page in the household of his overlord, Olivia's father, and had later graduated to the degree of man-at-arms. A similar system accounts for Maria's being a "gentlewoman", for, like many girls of the better class, she had doubtless been sent early from home to get "her education under a great countesse"; and so, since her parents were unable to provide a dowry, she had remained in the household as "chamber-maid" to the young heiress, a personal attendant like Nerissa. Though money was the usual basis for marriage among the upper classes, Maria, without any *dot* achieved for herself a "gentleman" of even knightly status; and everyone applauded her coming nuptials with Sir Toby. Maria then belonged within the charmed circle of the gently born.

The case for Sir Toby and Sir Andrew is equally certain. If the former is strictly Olivia's "uncle," he is probably a younger brother of one of her parents; but, being the scion of a great house, he was not obliged, like Fabyan, to accept the lot of servingman, but apparently divided his time between the paternal roof and the wide world, where, one judges, he has lived, like Falstaff, by his wits; for soldiers could hardly live otherwise. Somewhere, probably in the wars—for Sir Toby had no money to buy it—he has come by the honors of knighthood; and somewhere also—certainly not in the wars—he has also picked up Sir Andrew

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69 *Twelfth Night*, 1. v. 107 et seq.
70 Ibid., ii. v. i; and iii. iv. 281.
61 Ibid., iii. 12 et seq.
62 Ibid., ii. v. 85.
63 Cuyle Life, p. 25, refers to this system as common in France.
71 Ibid., 1. iii. 41 et seq.
64 *Twelfth Night*, 1. v. 172 et seq.
66 *Twelfth Night*, 1. v. 199 et seq.
67 Ibid., 1. iii. 51. See also Furness ed., p. 39 n.
69 *Twelfth Night*, 1. iii. 41 etc.
who has the usual Elizabethan urge to make a wealthy marriage. The nobility needed money to maintain their position; and, between their fixed incomes and the rising prices, they were reduced to every shift. Younger sons like Sir Toby were a particularly distressing problem; and even the heir of the family fortune like Sir Andrew was constrained to make a prudent match. Sir Toby abets this laudable ambition, very much as Iago did the amorous projects of Roderigo—for a price. But he is a poor match-maker; for, like Petruchio, he all too amply illustrates the boorish country “gentleman” of the day:

Fit for the Mountaines, and the barbarous caves,
Where manners nere were preach’d.

Gentility to the Elizabethans, however, was essentially a question of birth rather than conduct; and, though Bishop Andrews and the lawyers might inveigh against brawling, yet the populace associated it with the glories of martial life and the old days of chivalry. Sir Andrew, as a coward and a gull, was despicable; but Sir Toby had the respect of all the characters in the play, and so presumably of the audience.

Within this charmed circle of high birth, however, Malvolio did not belong. Feste, to be sure, calls him “Master Malvolio”; Olivia once pityingly refers to him as “poore Gentleman,” though she elsewhere mentions him as a “servant”; and he is quite willing to allude to himself as a “gentleman,” and to reprimand Viola as an equal. On the other hand, he raises no protest at being termed “a steward, the fellow of servants”; Sir Toby and Maria from their social eminence, sneer at his “ridiculous boldness”; and he addresses the two knights, certainly not from mere courtesy, as “My masters.” He is not on so low a plane as Saltonstall’s “chamberlaine” of an inn; but his origins can hardly have been better than the yeoman who married the “lady of Starchy” and to whom he compares himself.

The references to costume in the play, moreover, point to such an

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71 See the present writer, “The Theme of Timon of Athens,” M. L. R., xxxix, 20.
72 See Cynile Life, ed. cit., p. 23 et seq. In the Middle Ages, many younger sons had gone into trade in London, but this was now rather frowned upon. See W. Besant, Stuart London (London, 1903), p. 173 et seq.
73 Twelfth Night, iv. iii. 198.
74 Cynile Life, ed. cit., pp. 57, 88, etc.
75 Twelfth Night, iv. iii. 49–50.
77 See the present writer, “The Theme of Timon of Athens,” ed. cit.
78 Twelfth Night, iv. iii. 90. This is, of course, mere stuff of courtesy.
79 Ibid., v. i. 296.
80 Ibid., iii. iv. 5–6.
81 Ibid., iv. iii. 88.
82 Ibid., ii. ii.
83 Ibid., ii. v. 120.
84 Ibid., iii. iv. 40–41.
85 Ibid., ii. ii. 93.
87 Twelfth Night, ii. vi. 44–45.
interpretation of his status. The dress of the Elizabethan upper classes was generally both diverse and conglomeration,\(^88\) as Portia's description of her English suitor would imply; but the lower orders, still bound by custom if not by sumptuary laws, seem generally, in the country districts at least, to have been conventionally garbed according to social rank. The city servant, like Launcelot Gobbo, expected to be "lapt in Lyverie,"\(^89\) and was envied for his fine clothes;\(^90\) but his country colleague still told the world his calling by the blue coat he wore;\(^91\) and Malvolio's yellow stockings and cross-garters seem in the 1590's\(^92\) to have had a plebeian connotation. Maria herself suggests this when she compares his costume to that of a country pedagogue;\(^93\) Porter's *Two Angry Women* (1599) took cross-garters as the sign of a servingman;\(^94\) and Overbury likewise associated them with a "gentleman-usher,"\(^7\) whom he apparently classed below a footman.\(^95\) Yellow stockings seem to have been the mark of a boorish country yeoman.\(^96\) Malvolio then in the very act of his social ascent, is gulled into appearing in the uniform, partly of the humble yeomanry from which he sprang and partly of a household servitor, the very class from which he is trying to escape. This is an irony even finer than Ben Johnson's treatment of the incongruous coat-of-arms with which Sogliardo, like Malvolio, attempts to acquire gentility.\(^97\) If the Italianate fantastic of the day, such as Osric in *Hamlet*, were stuff for merriment,\(^98\) surely a mere steward who decked himself out with an irony so dramatically inopportune, and at the same time tried to assume the airs and graces of his betters, who is seen "practising behaviour,"\(^99\) and who declares himself "point-devise the very man,"\(^100\) was indeed the stuff of comedy! Thus Malvolio prepares himself to lay down the law to Sir Toby and Maria, whom he already


\(^{89}\) Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

\(^{90}\) Basse, *op. cit.*, stanzas 46–47.


\(^{92}\) Most of the evidence on this cited in the variorum ed. is of too distant a date to have much bearing. This doubtless accounts for its being so conflicting.

\(^{93}\) *Twelfth Night*, iii. ii. 75–76. Such a costume suggested low social class rather than Puritanism (Wright in ed. var., 174), or amorous intentions (Cf. "Miss Linthicum, M.P., xxy, 87 et seq.").


\(^{95}\) Overbury, *Characters*, "Foote-man."

\(^{96}\) *Ibid.*, p. 65. Malvolio's former appearance in yellow stockings suggests his rural origin. Household retainers were often of yeoman stock (*Cucile Life, ed. cit.*, 40).

\(^{97}\) See A. H. Nason, *Heralds and Heraldry in Jonson's Plays* (New York, 1907), p. 89 *et seq.* Characteristically enough, Jonson's heraldic method of satire is more learned but less dramatic than Shakespeare's use of costume.


\(^{99}\) *Twelfth Night*, ii. v. 10.

\(^{100}\) *Ibid.*, ii. v. 125–126.
John W. Draper

disdains as his inferiors, for truly he presumes to skip over not one but even two or three social classes in his speedy ascendance, leaving behind him the grades of burgess, gentleman, and knight, to become consort to a very countess, his former mistress: but the covering of his legs betrays his origin and station. Such ambition was preposterous; and yet Markham’s denunciation of younger sons who become serving-men and rise beyond their class, proves the realism of the situation: and, in an age when the feudal aristocracy was disintegrating, even a Duchess of Malfi might marry thus far beneath her, though with dreadful consequences. The yeomen wereimpinging upon the landed gentry, and a chamberlain, as the most intimate and personal servant of an up-to-date lady—especially a chamberlain who had been used “with a more exalted respect” than her other followers—might feel that he could hope for better things. Malvolio’s plan was a bold one; and the fact that it was not impossible would make it all the more obnoxious to the Elizabethans.

Indeed, so thoroughly did realism permeate Shakespeare’s art, especially in the plays about 1600, that he reflects almost every contemporary aspect of the transition from feudal to modern society. This suggests great breadth of observation and at least some insight into the causes and effects connected with these changes, an observation and an insight hardly to be found in his forerunners and early contemporaries, who seem usually to have made little effort to give the old stories they used a particularly Elizabethan application and theme. “This therefore is the praise of Shakespeare,” as Dr. Johnson declared, “that his drama is the mirror of life.” Indeed, he reflects the changes of the day in almost every social class. Henry IV shows the old feudal army in decay; and Othello, a few years later, pictures the new, professionalized military life. The Shrew and Much Ado present the independent lady of the Renaissance, flaunting her freedom but meanwhile succumbing to the bonds of wedlock. Timon depicts a great family ruined by the economic changes of rising capitalism. The Merchant of Venice shows the same forces at work a step below on the commercial plane. Orlando, in As You Like It, illustrates the problem of the younger son, who could no longer embrace

101 Ibid., ii. v. 50 et seq.; and iii. iv. 93 et seq.
102 Harrison, op. cit., ii. v; Markham, op. cit., 131 et seq.
103 Harrison, op. cit., ii. v.
104 N. Breton, Forte of Fancie (1582), Works, ed. Grosart. i. 15.
105 Twelfth Night, ii. v. 15 et seq.; and iii. iv. 5 et seq.
106 See var. ed., p. 157 et seq.
107 On his punishment, see J. C. Bucknill, Psychology of Shakespeare (L. 1859), p. 249.
the career of knight or monk, but must somehow make his way; and, in *Twelfth Night*, the retainers of a noble household are outraged at the fear of losing their "cakes and ale" and at the upstart steward who would aspire to their mistress' hand. In the end, he is properly chastised; for Shakespeare, like Aristophanes, is regularly with the conservative party: he no more approved of Malvolio than he did of the usurping dukes in the *Tempest* or in *As You Like It*; Malvolio represented a fundamental change in Elizabethan life, a change that swept thousands into want and evil courses; and Shakespeare makes him express this change in particularly blatant and offensive form.\(^\text{109}\)

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\(^{109}\) P. Meuschke and J. Fleischer in "Jonsonian Elements in 'Twelfth Night'" (*PMLA*, XLVIII, 722 et seq.) would make Malvolio a borrowing from Jonson: his character is rather too vivid for this; and his place toward the end of a long evolution of Shakespeare's servants suggests that he is rather Shakespeare's own development. (See the present writer, "Shakespeare's Rustic Servants," *Shak. Jhb.*, LXIX, 87.) Furthermore, most of the similarities noted are commonplaces of contemporary life, many of them fairly common in earlier drama. Finally, it is both a social and a dramatic improbability that Shakespeare would model his concept of an Elizabethan servant on Jonson's of an Elizabethan knight (pp. 738–739).