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Queries and Notes

THE RIDDLE IN *TWELFTH NIGHT*

LEE SHERIDAN COX

Did Malvolio work out the riddle of M.O.A.I as Maria expected him to? Did Shakespeare include in this conundrum a second answer, one which Sir Toby and Fabian immediately arrived at but which Malvolio in his preoccupation with himself missed, to Toby's disgust and Fabian's amusement?

I suggest that M. O. A, I stands for I AM O (Olivia). Turning a phrase around is one of the oldest and simplest riddle devices, and Fabian calls this a "fustian riddle", indicating that it is a type of riddle so commonplace that he and Toby have no trouble solving it. When Malvolio says, "If I could make that resemble something in me,—softly! M. O. A. I—" Toby says, "*O!* aye, make up *that*", and he adds, ". . . he is now at cold scent." Toby apparently suggests that if Malvolio is going to try to make the letters resemble something in himself, he is off the track. But Fabian reassures Toby, and when Malvolio says, "M—why, that begins my name", Fabian says, ". . . the cur is excellent at faults"—Malvolio's very mistakes will still lead him in the right direction. Then when Malvolio, upset because the arrangement of vowels is not the same as that in his name, says, ". . . A should follow, but O does", Fabian (possibly losing faith in Malvolio's continued excellence at faults) says, "*And O shall end, I hope*", indicating that he trusts the steward will be completely convinced that Olivia is the writer, that *O* stands at the end of the riddle.

As it turns out, Malvolio jumps to the conclusion that Olivia is the author without this particular clue offered by the riddle and is more ridiculous in his self-love in seeing *only* his own name there. When the riddle is interpreted I AM O, the thought in the quatrain seems more logically developed: "I may command where I adore,/ But silence like a Lucrece knife,/ With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore" leads to "I AM O' doth sway my life" (the fact that I am Olivia rules over my actions and keeps me silent), whereas "'Malvolio' doth sway my life" is not as logically introduced by the preceding lines.

Is it not a possibility that Shakespeare gave one riddle two answers and by having Malvolio come to the desired conclusion by way of the wrong answer underscored the foolish self-importance of the steward?

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