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THE RIDDLE IN *TWELFTH NIGHT* SIMPLIFIED

R. CHRIS HASSEL, JR.

Lee Sheridan Cox, in "The Riddle in *Twelfth Night*" (*SQ*, XIII [1962], 360), has ingeniously interpreted Maria's M.O.A.I. riddle to stand for "I am O" (Olivia). However, Maria's "fustian riddle" is much more obvious ("coarser") than that, and its very simplicity better exposes Malvolio as a self-loving fool. M.O.A.I. are simply the first, last, second, and second from last letters in his name. The steward never gets beyond the first letter, though he humorlessly perceives that "to crush this a little, it would bow to me, for every one of these letters are in my name."¹ The amusing point of the episode is that Malvolio is already so taken with his own attractiveness that he can convince himself Olivia loves him with neither wit nor humor enough to unravel the fustian. Having Malvolio deceive himself lessens our indictment of Toby and his comrades while it enhances our awareness of Malvolio's kinship with Orsino and Olivia, who share his sickness on a more refined level.

Toby's "O, aye, make up that. He is now at a cold scent" (l. 113), suggests that Malvolio is yet to interpret the first letter, not that he is completely off the track. Fabian's "Did not I say he would work it out? The cur is excellent at faults" (l. 118), would seem to imply that Malvolio is beginning to sniff the proper scent ("fault"). When Fabian urges, "And O shall end, I hope" (l. 122), he is suggesting that "O" ends Malvolio's name, a perception necessary to work out the riddle.

Finally, we need to look again at the whole riddling stanza. Cox suggests that if the final line, "M.O.A.I. doth sway my life" (l. 100), is deciphered, "I am O doth sway my life" (the fact that I am Olivia rules over my actions and keeps me silent)," "the thought in the quatrain seems more logically developed." But clearly the last line, which constitutes a new sentence, reads more logically and more metrically (regular iambic tetrameter) as "Malvolio doth sway my life." If Cox's full alternative is injected, "I am Olivia doth sway my life" becomes a pentameter line. In any event, the reflective part of the stanza is completed in the third line: "I may command where I adore,/ But silence, like a Lucrece knife,/ With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore" (ll. 97-99). The last line simply presents the name of her beloved.

Cox is right that Malvolio's self-love perversely produces the correct conclusion. But since almost none of us could have deciphered Cox's riddle, we can hardly laugh at Malvolio for his similar failure. Only because of the riddle's simplicity does his failure become so hilarious and his concurrent self-esteem so laughable.

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¹ All references to *Twelfth Night* are taken from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore, 1969).