Malvolio’s Yellow Stockings: Coding Illicit Sexuality in Early Modern London

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In her survey of the symbolism of yellow for apparel in early modern England, M. Channing Linthicum argues that “Certainly, yellow was not limited to the costume of one type or condition of person” (“Malvolio,” 93). So too, stockings in this period were also not limited since they varied in terms of material, design, color, and usage. As Joan Thirsk points out, “many different kinds of stockings were made to suit all purses and purposes” (“Fantastical,” 59). Nevertheless, the wearing of yellow stockings had particular resonance, as two well-known usages suggest. The wearing of yellow stockings may be most commonly associated with two contexts: the children at Christ’s Hospital, which opened in 21 November 1552 and was officially founded on 26 June 1553, and the dramatic figure Malvolio in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, the first performance of which was 6 January 1601/2. Indeed, evidence of this sartorial practice from other literary and legal texts supplements and refines our understanding of their meaning by indicating the sexual symbolism of wearing yellow stockings in early modern London. Specifically, this evidence indicates that some early modern Londoners understood the wearing of yellow stockings to signal illicit sexuality and marital betrayal.

While precisely when the children at Christ’s Hospital started wearing yellow stockings remains hazy, the use of this sartorial practice by Shakespeare’s Malvolio is easier to date. In act 2, scene 5 of Twelfth Night, while Malvolio fantasizes about being “Count Malvolio . . . sitting in my state . . . in my branched velvet gown, having come from a day-bed, where I have left Olivia sleeping . . . telling them I know my place, as I would they should do theirs” (35–54), he learns of Olivia’s supposed desire for this attire in the letter Maria dropped to bait him:

If this fall into thy hand, revolve. In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em. Thy fates open their hands, let thy blood and spirit embrace them, and to inure thyself to what thou art like to be, cast thy humble slough, and appear fresh. Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants. Let thy tongue tang argu-
ments of state; put thyself into the trick of singularity. She thus advises thee, that sighs for thee. Remember who commended thy yellow stockings, and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered: I say, remember. Go to, thou art made, if thou desir'st to be so. If not, let me see thee a steward still, the fellow of servants, and not worthy to touch Fortune's fingers. Farewell. She that would alter services with thee. (2.5.143–58)¹

The letter confirms Malvolio's own suspicions, as he comments on the stockings: "She did commend my yellow stockings of late, she did praise my leg being cross-gartered, and in this she manifests herself to my love, and with a kind of injunction drives me to these habits of her liking" (2.5.166–70).³

The scholarly debate about the meaning attached to the color of Malvolio's stockings in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night is more varied than for the children at Christ's Hospital. Yet, in the many discussions of Malvolio, surprisingly many readers do not comment on the apparel Olivia supposedly requests, leaving the particular color of his stockings to "what you will." Of those few scholars who do address the color of Malvolio’s stockings, some, for instance, attempt to contextualize the color with respect to contemporary attitudes to yellow. Leslie Hotson, for example, interprets this issue within the context of contemporary politics: "Queen Elizabeth (whose own personal colours were white and black) abhorred yellow. For six years yellow had been the colour of danger in her Court—being flaunted by the faction of the Duke of Norfolk until his attainder and execution in 1572. And the flag of her arch-enemy, Spain, was yellow" (113). Because yellow stockings could also suggest marital status, J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, the editors of the Arden Twelfth Night, note the incongruity of Malvolio wearing yellow stockings—which they identify as the attire of the "'jolly young bachelor'" (71)—when he so clearly desires not to be a bachelor, but to be "Count Malvolio" by marrying up the social hierarchy.⁶

However, other readers interpret the color with respect to the dramatic contexts. Terence Hawkes, for example, sees them as part of the "carnavalesque regalia" (172), while C. L. Barber comments that they are "part of the vengeance taken . . . to make him try to be festive" (255). Rodney Stenning Edgecombe argues that the yellow stockings are part of an outfit, which suggests that Malvolio is "translated" into an insect, specifically a "wasp" (200). Yet other readers of the play argue that the color of his stockings indicates the love for himself and Olivia. Alexander Leggatt calls the stockings part of "the external shows of love" (245), while Cristina Malcolmson maintains they are indicative of Malvolio's "self-love" (48). Linthicum's position on why Malvolio's stockings are yellow points in the direction of what contemporary literary and legal evidence suggests. While she notes that "Yellow in hose or footwear had three meanings in drama: love, marriage, and jealousy after marriage," she concludes that "Malvolio's yellow hose of course indicate love" (Costume, 48).
Other literary works employ the symbol of yellow hose as well. The topic of marital relationships and yellow hose appears in a contemporary ballad entered in the Stationers’ Register in 1586 entitled “Merry Jest of John Tomson and Jakaman his wife, / Whose jealousy was justley the cause of all their strife.” Unlike Linthicum—who notes this ballad in her study of yellow but does not interpret it as a key to Malvolio’s sartorial practice—Hotson and James O. Wood point to it as a gloss on Malvolio’s jealousy. Hotson, for instance, identifies yellow as “the proper wear for jealous-foolish husbands” (113). However, rather than yellow hose denoting a jealous husband in the ballad, they seem to signal a husband’s desire to return to bachelorhood and his wife’s jealousy. As the opening verse of the ballad states:

When I was a Batchelour
    I liv’d a merry life;
But now I am a married man,
    and troubled with a wife,
I cannot doe as I have done,
    because I live in feare;
If I goe but to Islington,
    my wife is watching there.
Give me my yellow hose againe,
    give me my yellow hose;
For now my wife she watcheth me—
    see, yonder! where she goes.

(Roxburghe, 2:137)

This explanation of the man’s wearing of the yellow hose as a marker of his desire to be a bachelor again follows all eighteen verses. Additionally, in one verse, the jealous wife dons the yellow stockings as well:

For yellow love is too-too bad,
    without all wit or pollicie;
And too much love hath made her mad,
    and fill’d her full of jealousie.
Shee thinkes I am in love with those
    I speake to, passing by;
That makes her weare the yellow hose
    I gave her for to dye.

(Roxburghe, 2:141)

Wood interprets the wearing of yellow stockings by the wife in this ballad (along with another instance included in Thomas Dekker’s II Honest Whore) in terms of domestic jealousies. According to Wood, the yellow-stockinged wife in the ballad serves “as a possible prototype for Malvolio, the hovering spoilsport woman in yellow stockings” (14).
Other early modern literary and legal evidence contributes further to the
understanding of wearing yellow stockings as a signal of jealousy and illicit
sexuality by pointing to its gendered meaning. More specifically writers use
this device in order to show that private matters have been exposed to public
scrutiny. In this context, a wife dons yellow hose in order to signal the illicit
sexual practices of her husband. One early modern lyric, c. 1550, reprinted
in Sir John Hawkins's *A General History of the Science and Practice of
Music* (3:39), suggests the possible threat to a husband if his wife wears yel-
low stockings:

I.
The bachelor most joyfullye,
   In pleasant plight doth passe his daies,
   Good fellowshipp and companie
   He doth maintaine and kepe alwaie.

II.
With damsells braue he maye well goe,
   The maried man cannot doe so,
   If he be merie and toy with any,
   His wife will frowne, and words geue manye,
   Her yellow hose she strait will put on,
   So that the married man dare not displease his wife Joane.
   (Hawkins, 3:37–38)

This lyric indicates that wives could both reveal and disguise the infidelity of
their husbands and their own consciousness of that infidelity. In this context,
they could conceal the stockings beneath their long skirts, but reveal, at any
moment, a sign that they are aware of their husbands' extramarital activities.
This lyric not only provides a literary instance assigning meaning to the
wearing of yellow stockings, but also makes clear that the practice was so
well known so as to be used in popular culture.

The practice of wearing yellow stockings as a public nonverbal marker of
a husband's adulterous activity, exposing him and his behavior to public
scrutiny and ridicule, reverses the usual direction of public humiliation. Un-
like husbands of unfaithful wives, who were conventionally made the butt of
humor by their wives' behavior, a betrayed wife could, by wearing yellow
stockings, both expose her husband and make him the object of public levity.
Thus, this lyric illustrates one way in which wearing yellow stockings can
serve as a marker of female cuckoldry.

London Consistory Court deposition evidence points to a similar cultural
meaning for the wearing of yellow stockings. In a deposition repeated before
the London Consistory Court on 4 November 1597, from a defamation suit,
one of the witnesses, Agnes Lambert, exposes a contemporary understanding
of yellow stockings as a garment worn to signal a wife’s jealousy and her knowledge of her husband’s illicit sexual activities. In this case brought by John Crosbie against Roger Johnson and Elizabeth Page, Johnson, the defendant, instructed John Crosbie’s wife, Joan, to “putt on . . . [her] yealowe hose,” since her husband has dallied with her maids and even kissed her daughter while Joan was working. Agnes, aged thirty-four or thirty-five, a servant to the plaintiff John Crosbie, testified that:

as she this deponent was standing by her mistris the wief of that articulate John Crosbie in her shopp in the blakfryers thatarticulate Roger Johnson . . . (who dwelleth in the next howse to her this deponentes maister John Crosbie) Came into the shopp whear she this deponent and her mistris was and sayd unto John Crosbies wief . . . theis wordes or to the like effect Joane thou sittest scraping here in thy shopp and thy husband within . . . a playing with your maydes for I sawe8 him take upp thy dawghter Sara in the yard and . . . kisse her thersfore thou maist . . . goe in and putt on thy yealowe hose againe. (DL/C/215/18⁹)

“Againe” suggests that Joan has worn yellow hose before in similar circumstances; however, this passage is the only one in the extant testimony from this lawsuit that includes a suggestive reference to wearing yellow hose. That Agnes’s mistress Joan Crosbie has worn the hose for the same reason before this incident is in keeping with the rest of the case still, for the claim of defamation does not center on this particular incident between the daughter and her stepfather, but on another, later encounter. Robert Garland testified that Elizabeth Page told Johnson that, while looking through “a little Crevis of a wall or a pale out of . . . his the same Johnsons howse into John Crosbies howse,” she saw John Crosbie “kneeling before [Sara] in his kitchen . . . take upp h[er] Clothes above her knees and ther with his hand . . . feele and grope her” (DL/C/215/44⁰).

In the case of Crosbie v. Johnson and Page, the deposition does not pose the wearing of yellow hose as a threat to the husband, as in the lyric recorded by Hawkins. Nevertheless, the fact that the wife of the lawsuit has worn the hose before, in similar circumstances, in order to expose her husband’s illicit behavior to public scrutiny, indicates that such humiliation did not work sufficiently well enough to stop his behavior. In this passage, Johnson suggests that the wife take action by putting on her yellow hose in reaction to her husband’s extramarital activities. In addition, the deposition clearly suggests the shame, embarrassment, or betrayal that a wife could experience in such circumstances; and it is unclear as to whether Johnson’s report is meant to be helpful to Joan Crosbie or to embarrass her. Moreover, Agnes Lambert’s use of the verb “maist” (in that Joan “maist . . . goe in and putt on . . . [her] yealowe hose”) suggests that the decision to do so is hers. However, if she chooses to do so, wearing the hose will not only call attention to her husband’s illicit sexual behaviors but also serve as her own personal admission
Knowledge of the ways in which this coded behavior functioned in early modern London helps to open up the meaning of Malvolio’s wearing of yellow hose. Reading his sartorial practice in light of other literary and legal evidence both satirizes and subverts his desire for social and sexual dominance. Some scholars, particularly John Astington and Edward Cahill, offer provocative studies regarding the “unresolved masculine identity” of Malvolio (Cahill, 79). While Cahill does not include Malvolio’s clothing in his discussion, Astington ties part of Malvolio’s attire into his discussion on the mocking of Malvolio’s “sexual ambition and incapacity” (32). Consequently he sees the cross-gartering as indicative of Malvolio’s impotent sexuality although he does not discuss the color of Malvolio’s stockings in his reading.

Similarly, Dympna Callaghan argues that “Malvolio’s cross-gartering, his ‘transvestism’ is, then, structurally and symbolically related to gender inversion” (433), but she does not tie in the color of his stockings as part of this “gender inversion.” John W. Draper’s comments on the color of the stockings relate to Malvolio’s misdirected class aspirations. After noting that “About 1600, Malvolio’s yellow stockings” seem to have a “plebeian connotation” (93) in that “Yellow stockings seem to have been the sign manual of a boorish country yeoman” (94), he argues that Maria’s urging of Malvolio to wear yellow stockings embarrasses him with respect to his desire to become “Count Malvolio.” Draper writes: “Malvolio then, in the very act of his social apotheosis, is gulled into donning the habiliments, partly of the humble yeomanry whence he seems to have sprung, and partly of the household servitor, the very class from which he is trying to escape” (94).

The above-mentioned contemporary legal and literary evidence informs the wearing of yellow stockings with a different and previously undetected symbolic irony in alluding to both sexuality and sexual roles. As the lyric recorded by Hawkins suggests, wearing yellow stockings can empower the wife whose husband engages in illicit sexual activities by exposing him to ridicule. In Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, Maria’s letter to Malvolio suggests that wearing yellow stockings will empower Malvolio in his love suit for Olivia. In addition, as both the Lambert deposition and lyric suggest, wearing yellow stockings can serve as a tacit admission of having been betrayed. In that case, the stockings can be seen in the context of Twelfth Night as a symbol of Malvolio’s betrayed affections. After all, Olivia woos Cesario, not Malvolio.

Of course, rather than empowering Malvolio in his love suit for Olivia, wearing the yellow stockings disempowers him and renders him symbolically impotent. First of all, as Maria points out they are a color that Olivia “abhors” (2.5.200). But, the shame that Malvolio experiences in front of Olivia,
while wearing the yellow stockings, fits in with the pranksters’ plan to expose him. Second, even if one interprets Malvolio’s stockings as exposing his betrayal by Olivia, this interpretation still presents Malvolio as shamed. He becomes caught up in a kind of role and gender reversal that ultimately belittles him. After all, it was wives who wore yellow stockings as an admission of a husband’s betrayal. When Malvolio wears them, he takes on the role of the wife, not the dominant role—whether socially, domestically, or sexually—that he desires. The failure of this desire becomes fully visualized in act 3, scene 4 when Malvolio, parading in front of Olivia in his yellow stockings, offers to “thrust” his “greatness upon her.” Her response is hardly the one he desired. Rather, the stockings help to convince Olivia that Malvolio is mad, a belief that ultimately results in his being incarcerated. Thus, an audience such as Shakespeare’s, with such a cultural understanding of this meaning of wearing yellow hose, would have appreciated more fully the way the pranksters’ plan satirizes and subverts Malvolio’s desire for sexual domination. Instead, his yellow stockings communicate subservience and embarrassment.

The threads of evidence provided by contemporary legal and literary texts examined here weave a richly textured, well-knit fabric indicating the complexities associated with the symbolic language of yellow stockings. As the American song suggests, “in olden days, a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking”—and never more so than in early modern London, especially if the stockings were yellow.

Notes

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1. For more information on the making and wearing of stockings, see Carlo Marco Belfanti, S. D. Chapman, Pauline Croft, A. W. Eley, F. W. Fairholt, Jeremy Farrell, Milton and Anna Grass, James Robinson Planche, Richard Rutt, Kay Staniland, Joan Thirsk, C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington, and David L. Wykes. In regard to yellow
stockings in the later sixteenth century, Willett and Cunnington point out that “Bright colours were popular, and worn by all classes. Yellow was very common, also blue, red, green and violet” (Sixteenth, 124). Similarly, Thirsk comments that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stockings “could be yellow, red, green, blue or violet, as well as white, black or grey” (“Fantastical,” 58). For discussions of the yellow stockings kept at Hatfield House, which are alleged to have belonged to Queen Elizabeth, see, for example, Farrell, 10, and Rutt, 67.

2. Scholars identify different dates on which the students at Christ’s Hospital commence wearing yellow stockings. Peter Bloomfield, Rosie Howard, and Pam Legate in Christ’s Hospital in the Year 2000 cite a date of 1553 as the beginning of this sartorial practice (205). However, in The Historic Dress of the English Schoolboy, Wallace Clare parenthetically notes that yellow stockings for Christ’s Hospital children were “introduced in 1638” (12). For further discussions of this sartorial practice, see, for example, Eric Bennett, Alastair Bruce, 120; Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, 289–304; Rosie Howard, Valentine Knapp, Carol Kazmierczak Manzione, E. H. Pearce, John Stow, 1:319; and William Trollope.


4. For discussions focusing on the cross-gartering, see John Gouws and James F. Forrest, who connect cross-gartering with Puritan attire. John Astington also focuses on the cross-gartering, but reaches a different conclusion: “his binding is a symbolic sign of his impotence, of his having been made a festival eunuch” (29). In light of contemporary usage, one could also see the color of his stockings as a demasculinization of Malvolio.

5. Some readers note the contradiction in Malvolio remembering that Olivia “did commend my yellow stockings of late, she did praise my leg being cross-gartered” (2.5.166–68) and Maria’s later comments that “tis a colour she abhors, and cross-gartered, a fashion she detests” (2.5.198–200). Paul N. Siegel explains this apparent contradiction in terms of Malvolio’s state of mind: “Malvolio is so carried away, put ‘in such a dream’ (189) by the letter, that he actually imagines remembering Olivia complimenting him on his yellow stockings and cross-garters” (222).

6. Barbara Everett also notes that “Malvolio’s investment in yellow stockings may bring with it all the by now (in 1601 or 2) accreted ambiguity of the fashionable courtly love-romanticism, a mode always ‘out of date’, distasteful, to those of true refinement and sensibility” (192). Some readers of the play point out that the color supports Malvolio as a Puritan. J. L. Simmons maintains that Malvolio “reveals himself to be a Puritan both in the sober black attire and in the absurd yellow stockings and crossed garters” (194). However, here Simmons suggests it is more the contrast in the colors than a belief connected with yellow that suggests Malvolio’s religion. Siegel argues just the opposite in regard to this color reflecting Malvolio’s Puritanism. “The Puritans in their sedate sobriety objected to the showy new fashions of dress. Possibly, yellow stockings, also old-fashioned, were, therefore, one of the items in which they were not ‘conformable’ in their apparel and were, with cross-garters, part of their attire when they wished to appear in their best clothes” (222). Contrastingly, G. P. Jones notes that the stockings are “of an unpuritanically colorful hue” (23). In
fact, Maria’s later reference suggests that yellow indicates his heathenism, rather than Puritanism: “Yond gull Malvolio is turned heathen, a very renegado; for there is no Christian that means to be saved by believing rightly can ever believe such impossible passages of grossness. He’s in yellow stockings” (3.2.66–70).

7. Also see Wood, 11–15. For other discussions of this song in relation to Twelfth Night, see Hotson, 106; Linthicum, “Malvolio,” 88; and Gustav Ungerer, 96–97.

8. In the manuscript an inkblot obscures the original word the scribe began to write; sawe is inserted following the blot.

9. In the manuscript passages, ellipses mark omissions, and square brackets indicate my insertions.

10. Other readers who discuss Malvolio’s sexuality include Jean E. Howard, Ruth Nevo, and Ungerer, but they do not connect the particular color of his stockings to his sexuality. In her discussion of clothing and sexual identity in early modern England, Howard comments on the shame that can result when a male wears female attire: “For a man, wearing women’s dress undermined the authority inherently belonging to the superior sex and placed him in a position of shame” (25). When she addresses the play, she identifies the source of Malvolio’s humiliation in terms of class aspirations rather than gender reversals and does not connect the particular color of his stockings to her argument: “The class-jumper Malvolio, who dresses himself up in yellow stockings and cross garters, is savagely punished and humiliated, echoing the more comically managed humiliation of Olivia, the woman who at the beginning of the play jumped gender boundaries to assume control of her house and person and refused her ‘natural’ role in the patriarchal marriage market. The play disciplines independent women like Olivia and upstart crows such as Malvolio” (34–35). Nevo discusses the disruption of sexual identity in Twelfth Night: “Sexual identity has been in some way disordered, frustrated, displaced, diverted or deficient in every one of the chief dramatic personae, and in the chief buffoon-imposter Malvolio” (214). However, she does not include Malvolio’s stockings as part of that inversion. Nevo writes: “And Malvolio strutting and preening and being unctuously coy in yellow stockings and cross garters is doubly ludicrous to the extent that he is doubly deluded” (211). Ungerer points to the references in the play in which dramatic figures identify Malvolio with a woman suggesting Malvolio’s “sexual and moral perversion” (97).

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