

## Shakespeare's TWELFTH NIGHT

In their note on Maria's costume directives to Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, the editors of the Arden Shakespeare remark that "both articles of dress [cross-garters and yellow stockings] seem chosen for their conspicuousness rather than for their significance" (71). They thus appear to reject the anecdotal reasons Leslie Hotson adduced for the choice of color and style (among other things, Elizabeth I's hatred of yellow and its association with the Duke of Norfolk [113]).

Although I find Hotson's suggestions plausible, they are so closely connected with the play's first production at Whitehall that they would have baffled a general audience when it entered the repertory. If, as he suggests, the yellow stockings poke fun at Sir William Knollys, who is "a jealous-foolish husband," how could the average playgoer have related that detail to Malvolio, who isn't?

Yet Shakespeare, who could have altered the color reference in later productions (that at the Middle Temple in 1602, for example), chose not to and so, it seems clear to me, must have been thinking along more general lines. As a practical man of the theater, moreover, he would have known that yellow stockings imposed a burden on the wardrobe department. Marchette Chute has pointed out that because Elizabethan dyes were very unstable, the popularity of "orange-tawny" had a lot to do with its dependability (143). Because orange is quite as conspicuous as yellow, and has the same syllable count, why didn't Shakespeare change to orange when Sir William Knollys was no longer in sight? There must, in my opinion, have been a significant *thematic* reason to offset the inconvenience entailed in keeping yellow.

If Hotson's reading seems too narrow, that of the Arden editors seems too broad. Had Shakespeare been aiming for conspicuousness alone, he could have suggested something utterly outlandish—like the fashions that Don Pedro mocks in *Much Ado About Nothing* (151). I argue that the yellow stockings and cross-gartering are significant as a *combination*, especially if we accept that the garters are black or, at the very least, a dark color that contrasts with the yellow ground. For his early appearances in the play, Malvolio probably wore a "base-coat" as part of his steward's livery. His puritanism would have dictated that both coat and hose be dark, probably black. Upon his entrance in act 3, scene 4, because he is approaching Olivia as a prospective partner, Malvolio would almost certainly have discarded the coat in favor of a doublet, from which would protrude yellow legs banded with a darker fabric. The stately mien of the earlier acts would likewise have given way to something flurried and mobile: "Why dost thou smile so, and kiss thy hand so oft?" (94). Malvolio, like Bottom, has been translated—translated into wasp. The doublet equates with the thorax, the cross-gartered legs with an abdomen

striped in black and yellow, the fluttering hand gestures with wings. It is even possible that perpetual smiles enjoyed by Maria would cause him to widen his mouth and so raise the pitch of his voice, a pitch closer to that of an annoying buzz.

What would be the thematic value of such a correlation? Elsewhere in Shakespeare, wasps are associated with usurpation and sexual aggression. *The Rape of Lucrece* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* yield such instances. Malvolio's desire to follow a certain yeoman of the wardrobe by marrying his mistress would therefore lend point to his wasplike conversion. Given his opposition to festivity at an earlier point of the play, we might also want to connect waspishness and puritanism. The *OED* definition for "waspish" (an adjective that originated in the mid-sixteenth century) is not far from the mark where Malvolio is concerned: "Quick to resent any trifling injury or affront; irascible, petulantly spiteful."

Although there is no explicit reference in the text itself to point to the wasp analogy, at least two elements in Maria's letter harmonize with the metaphor, even if they do not endorse it. The first concerns her injunction that Malvolio cast his "humble slough" (70). The Arden editors connect this sloughing with snakes (70), but snakes do not undergo a change of state. Insects, on the other hand, do. The *OED* records a late-seventeenth-century use of "slough" connected with insect metamorphosis. Donne's "Death's Duel" provides a point of comparison: "a wasp or a serpent out of a carrion" (171). Donne assumes that maggots are larval wasps, an assumption shored up by the riddle in Judges. If that is so, whether or not we are persuaded by my projected wasp imagery, we should connect Malvolio's sloughing with the graduated improvement of the insect cycle, not with the skin-shedding of a snake. And if, furthermore, Malvolio did indeed slough the "base-coat" of his stewardship for his "tryst" with Olivia, this would have dramatized a change of state and even produced a visual pun on the notion of baseness. In her letter to Malvolio, Maria also urges him to let his tongue "tang arguments of state," which might or might not resonate with the sense of "tang" as it relates to an insect's sting. Coincidentally, *The Taming of the Shrew* contains a ribald exchange between Katharina and Petruchio about the exact location of the wasp's sting (208). She opts for the tongue.

My conjecture that the cross-gartered yellow stockings generate a wasp image, though it has no explicit support in the play itself, does at least address the conjunction of the items—a conjunction stressed so heavily that it must mean something. John Gouws has also addressed the combination, suggesting a semiotic clash between gallantry (yellow stockings) and puritanism (cross gartering, 479). But if gallantry were the issue, would it not have made more sense to build on an association made earlier in the play, when Sir Andrew says his legs look well in "damned coloured stock" (18)? That line contains a

crux of its own, which Rowe resolved as “flame colour’d” on what Wilson saw as dubious “graphological grounds” (quoted in Arden, 18). However, Wilson’s own reading—“donne-coloured”—hardly seems to accord with the taste of a man who delights in ginger and who hates puritans with a passion. Because I am not a textual scholar, I cannot tell whether there would be graphological or other objections to “damson-coloured,” which is the emendation I am inclined to offer. Be that as it may, whether the stock be damned or flame or damson, it provides an explicit connection between color and gallantry—a connection that Shakespeare did not develop when he had Maria recommend *yellow* stockings to her gull.

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#### Quevedo’s SALMO XVIII

Todo tras sí lo lleva el año breve  
de la vida mortal, burlando el brío  
al acero valiente, al mármol frío,  
que contra el Tiempo su dureza atreve.

Antes que sepa andar el pie, se mueve  
camino de la muerte, donde envió  
mi vida oscura: pobre y turbio río  
que negro mar con altas ondas bebe.

Todo corto momento es paso largo  
que doy, a mi pesar, en tal jornada,  
pues, parado y durmiendo, siempre aguijo.

Breve suspiro, y último, y amargo,  
es la muerte, forzosa y heredada:  
mas si es ley, y no pena, ¿qué me aflijo?

—Francisco de Quevedo