



Laugh oneself into stitches

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Maria:

If you desire the spleen, and will laugh yourselves into stitches,
follow me. Yon gull Malvolio is turn'd heathen, a very renegado;
for there is no Christian that means to be sav'd by believing
rightly can ever believe such impossible passages of grossness. He's
in yellow stockings.

Sir Toby:

And cross-garter'd?

Maria:

Most villainously; like a pedant that keeps a school i' th'
church.

[Twelfth Night Act 3, scene 2, 68–76](#)

The noun "stitch" originally meant "a stab," as with a sharp implement. From this meaning we have derived most other senses of the word, as a noun or verb. One "stitches" cloth by stabbing it with a needle; one gets "stitches" from jogging and experiences stabbing pains. Maria, inviting her cohorts to "laugh yourselves into stitches," refers to the facial contortions and stabbing pains induced by the strenuously aerobic activity of laughing. Such hilarity, in Renaissance psychobiology, was thought to reside in the spleen, also the seat of other sudden passions. What will rouse this organ is the sight of the steward Malvolio who, duped into thinking his employer, the lady Olivia, is in love with him, has also been duped into thinking she has a fetish for yellow stockings and cross-garters. These hideously affected fashions, which are hardly in Malvolio's style, will only help convince Olivia that Malvolio is mad.

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