

The Puritan “Threat” in the “Twelfth Night”: A Study of Malvolio’s Character

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Abstract: This essay examines the character of Malvolio in Shakespeare’s play “Twelfth Night” in relation to the historical and cultural context of Puritanism in Elizabethan England. Malvolio’s puritanical behaviour and ultimate downfall serve as a vehicle for Shakespeare to satirize the rigid moral code of Puritanism and its perceived threat to established themes. The essay discusses the definition of Puritanism and its opposition to theatre, as well as the historical background of Elizabethan England, which heavily influenced Shakespeare’s portrayal of Malvolio. In addition, it analyses how Malvolio’s character represents the Puritan threat to the themes of love and life attitude in the play. Ultimately, the essay argues that Malvolio serves as an icon throughout the play, reflecting the puritanism conflict against the play’s themes and values.

Keywords: “Twelfth Night”; Puritans; Malvolio

1. Introduction

Shakespeare’s play “Twelfth Night” is a masterful work of comedy and satire. One of the most memorable characters in the play is Malvolio, the puritanical steward of the household of Olivia, one of the play’s central figures. Malvolio’s character embodies the tensions and conflicts of Elizabethan England, particularly in relation to the rise of Puritanism and its perceived threat to the established social and religious order.

This essay will examine Malvolio’s character in “Twelfth Night” in relation to the historical and cultural context of Puritanism in Elizabethan England. It will explore Malvolio’s puritanical characteristics, his role in the play, and Shakespeare’s attitude towards Puritanism as reflected in the character of Malvolio. Ultimately, this essay will argue that Malvolio’s character serves as an icon throughout the play, reflecting the puritanism conflict against the play’s themes and values.

2. Malvolio’s Puritanical Characteristics

In “Twelfth Night,” Malvolio’s character serves as a vehicle for Shakespeare to explore the tensions between Puritanism and the established social order. Through Malvolio’s puritanical behavior and his ultimate downfall, Shakespeare satirizes the rigid moral code of Puritanism and its perceived threat to Shakespeare’s understanding of humanity.

2.1 Puritanism Definition

J. L. Simmons proposes in the article that: “The Puritan opposed to all authority; he wants to be the bishop of his individual congregation. But the Puritan surpasses even a papal presumption that whatsoever he speaks must be Canonical. “

Why they oppose theatre is because they thought the theatre promoted Catholics. Theatre and being Catholic was somehow intertwined. Joseph Pearce writes: “Puritans considered the theatre to be a dangerous disseminator of papist idea.” His point can be testified through puritan’s personal statement. William Cranshaw, the puritan, gave a speech at Saint Paul’s cross in 1608, saying: “The ungodly plays and interludes so rife in this nation: what are they but a bastard of Babylon.” His words indicate the puritan resentment towards theatre because of complicated religious reasons.

2.2 Social realm, reflecting Elizabethan historical background

Just as Wang Yiqun holds in the article: “No writer can completely escape the influence of the society and its ideological trends in which they live.” Puritanism is a historical creature, closely related with its social background. Elizabethan period has a great influence

on Shakespeare's creation of Malvolio, as a puritan. We can discover some traits in the play.

Edward Cahill divided the play into "plot" and "subplot". According to his analysis, the main plot invokes a fantastical, almost timeless space, enjoying tremendous emotional freedom. While the subplot is more historically specific, more obviously grounded in Elizabethan social relations.

Around 1600, when Shakespeare wrote "Twelfth Night", there was a great difference between the Religious Reformation and the Renaissance in England. The religious reformers, mainly Puritans, were very dissatisfied with the political and social status quo at that time, which despised the law, lacked rules and regulations, and had excessive material desires. They demanded that the theatre be closed, all entertainment be abolished, and Britain be built into a Puritan religious empire.

2.3 Analysis of how Malvolio's character represents the Puritan threat to the themes in the play

"Twelfth Night" is Shakespeare's most direct attack upon puritanism. The direct charge against puritanism is found in Act II. scene 3, where Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are roaring drunk and Malvolio, with high and mighty air attempts to suppress their boisterousness.

Malvolio: My masters, are you mad? or what are you? Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady's house, that ye squeak out your croziers' catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time, in you?

Sir Toby: . . . Art any more than a steward? Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?

In this play, the puritan "threats" to the main themes are obvious which dramatize their conflicts.

2.3.1 Puritan threat to "Love" in the play

Love is one of the main themes in the whole story. But Malvolio's love to Olivia is distorted and stained with morbid self. We can find out the trait in Olivia's retort to Malvolio in Act1 Scene5: "O you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite"; it provides the key to his physiological-moral nature. His narcissism reflects his puritan characteristic --- their firmly believe and support their own religion, excluding all other beliefs and religions.

His love towards Olivia is kind of self-love. His morbid self-love leads him to the opposite side of love since he believes his social identity can be changed throughout his marriage with Olivia. "Lady Starchy married her wardrobe manager." He uses social status as his main evaluation of love, which is the traditional social norm that Shakespeare tries to deny. In addition, his consistent chasing of Olivia's recognition is to improve his own status. After reading the letter, he refuses to answer Maria's question since he has entitled himself as a "noble man", saying: "nightingales answer daws!" He is against the core value of love in the "Twelfth Night" --- a pure and bold love without any limitation of social classes and orthodoxy in that time. Malvolio's puritan characteristic is oppressing and threatening the unorthodox concept of love in the whole story.

2.3.2 Puritan threat to the "Life Attitude" in the play

The Action of "Twelfth Night" is indeed that of a Revels, a suspension of mundane affairs during a brief epoch in a temporary world of indulgence, a land full of food, drink, love, play, disguise, and music. The appearance of Malvolio is discordant with the general atmosphere in the whole play.

Paul Yachnin describes Malvolio's smile like this: "The smiles look ridiculous because Puritans are typically represented on stage as the unsmiling enemies of collective festivity-opponents especially of the pleasures of the playhouse."

The play is indeed that of a Revels, a suspension of mundane affairs during a brief epoch in a temporary world of indulgence, a land full of food, drink, love, play, disguise and music. But when parties come to an end, the reveller eventually becomes satiated and drops heavily into the world again.

In Act I, Scene 1, is very important as a statement of the nature of this movement. Orsino's opening line contains the play's three dominant images. Love, eating, and music are the components of the revelry:

If music be the food of love, play on.

Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,

The appetite may sicken, and so die. (I. i. 1-3)

Nevertheless, Malvolio hinders the celebration because he's trying to force his moral standard upon everyone in the play. That is why he is treated badly and tricked by other characters since they are trying to deplete puritan threat. Paul Yachnin describes Malvolio's smile like this: "The smiles look ridiculous because Puritans are typically represented on stage as the unsmiling enemies of collective festivity-opponents especially of the pleasures of the playhouse." This is characters' punishment and rebel against puritans.

However, Maurice Hunt argues that though Malvolio exhibits certain puritanical traits, such as his anti-festive nature and self-righteousness, "the devil a Puritan that he is", should not be taken as a denial of Malvolio's sincerity in his religious beliefs,

but rather as a characterization of him as a pompous egotist who is only concerned with self-advancement.” Malvolio is not a simple reflection of the stereotype of Puritans in Elizabeth era, but rather, a more complex mixture of self-limitations and arrogance.

2.3.3 Shakespeare’s attitude towards the “threats”

The drama systematically fools the Puritans and displays the dark side of the Puritan character that the author identifies, causing the audience to detest it. This can not only be seen through a certain scene or sentence, but for those who are familiar with Puritanism and criticize Puritans, it is obvious that Shakespeare clearly intended to use Malvolio as an abstract representative of Puritan character, not only to express the worst characteristics in him, but also to add other absurd characteristics to his mind.

In the play, Shakespeare does not completely deny Malvolio. He expresses his sympathy for Malvolio through Olivia’s words, “Alas, they treated you badly!” Humanism’s greatness lies in that he not only saw the suppression of religious disciplines on human nature, but also witnesses the terrifying consequences of excessive emphasis on human liberation during the Renaissance - indulgence and pleasure.

Therefore, Shakespeare, on the one hand, criticizes the hypocrisy of Puritan asceticism through the character of Malvolio. On the other, he also realizes the normative role of some British Puritan religious rules on social morality.

3. Conclusion

In this essay, we focus on Shakespeare’s play “Twelfth Night”, analysing one of its main characters Malvolio. Under a complicated historical background, when puritanism is prevailing, Shakespeare creates a character who’s endowed with puritan characteristics. In this play, he poses direct attack towards this Malvolio’s strict but hypocritical discipline and morbid narcissism. In the play, his attitude towards Maria and Sir Toby and his discourses all lead to his mistreatment. Malvolio reflects Shakespeare’s complex attitude towards puritanism in that era. On the one hand, he criticizes their hypocrisy and denial towards what humanists praise for. On the other, they reduce tedious teaching of the Bible and construct their own religious kingdom.

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