Twelfth Night 2 Essay, Research Paper

The roles of Malvolio and Sir Toby in Twelfth Night

In Twelfth Night, the contrasting roles of Malvolio and Sir Toby Belch help the play develop to the fullest possible extent. In one respect, the two characters work as purely comedic players, bringing joy to the audience in the form of drunkenness and pranks. But beyond the lighter surface of the play lies a deeper meaning: Toby and Malvolio have very different views of life. The divergent appearance of these two figures gives the viewer of the play a standard by which to judge the other characters, and in so doing makes the play easier to follow. Malvolio embodies the complex side of an average person, while Sir Toby represents the simple, easily amused side of humanity. Malvolio’s role in this respect is more difficult to comprehend; he deceives himself into thinking that Olivia is in love with him, thereby contributing to his own misery. These aspects of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night contribute to the realistic portrayal of each character, while at the same time bringing out the play’s comedic overtones.

Malvolio brings a powerful presence to the play when he is forced to play the fool. He who at one point defined the word puritan now finds himself in a new role: that of a cross-gartered lover. In this way, he shows himself to be a hypocrite: he “lowers himself” to the level of Toby when he becomes a player himself. Maurice Charney describes the role of Malvolio quite well, saying: “The most obvious effect of this structure is to focus attention upon Malvolio and to make him a central figure at every stage.”(Charney, 160) He tries to step into an entirely different realm, one of mastership over servantry. He is socially inferior to Olivia, causing his hopes to be looked at as mere presumptions. What Malvolio fails to see is that his marriage to Olivia should be dismissed as nothing more than a dream of power (Malcolmson, 36).

Sir Toby displays the characteristics of a comedic role as well. In some cases, he livens up the play with purely sophomoric phrases. He professes characteristics of what some may call “dumb wit”. C.L. Barber makes the point very clear when she says: “Sir Toby is witty without being as alert as Sir John; he does not need to be:” (Barber, 24)

Olivia: Cousin, cousin, how have you come so early by this lethargy?

Toby: Lechery? I defy lechery! There’s one at the gate.

Olivia: Ay, marry, what is he?

Toby: Let him be the devil if he will. I care not!

Give me faith, say I. Well, it’s all one. (I.v.131-137)

Swaying in the same direction, Toby tends to stress the “lower” aspects of the body rather than the “higher” ones. He partakes in “gentlemanly liberty” (Charney, 161), living the life that he feels will lead to greater happiness now rather than later. This philosophy brings a lot of laughable moments to the play (Barber, 250). Apart from this philosophy, Sir Toby begins to develop a taste for the “sport” of prank playing. In one of the play’s most ironically amusing moments, Olivia commisions Toby, one of the prank’s key players, to cure Malvolio of his insanity. Toby decides to take his new found hobby to another level by baiting Sir Andrew and Cesario into what may be loosely defined as a “fight” (Ornstein, 165). Like Malvolio’s stance on life, Toby’s approach to life brings yet another outlet for comedy to the play. In their conflicting quests for power and comedy, though, Malvolio and Toby do more than make the play funny. They also modify other characters in regard to love and longing.

In terms of love, the sentiments of Malvolio and Sir Toby violently oppose each other, and in that right help the viewer of the play to understand the world of Shakespeare’s fabrication. In the words of Maurice Charney, “Shakespeare’s world doubles or mirrors our own world.” (Charney, 161) In this respect, the figures of Malvolio and Sir Toby may represent the different sides of love as seen through the eyes of various characters; the vast degree of difference in views between the two characters aids in emphasizing the feelings and intentions of other characters. For example, Malvolio parallels Cesario because both are servants that would give their all to be wed to their masters. Malvolio also helps to modify Duke Orsino, because, as phrased best by Christina Malcolmson, “Both are self-absorbed men for whom mastery consists in the exercise of power at the expense of the consideration of others.” (Malcolmson, 37-38) In the same fashion, but on a very different level, the size of Sir Toby’s gut coexists on the same plane as the Duke’s expansive desire for love (Bloom, 142). Such is the case in the play’s opening words, when the Duke says:

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)

These relationships push the play along, giving the viewer a level on which to connect with each of the players. But while Sir Toby does play quite an important role in the modification of other characters, his character lacks the deep, involved misery withheld by Malvolio.

Malvolio’s mind works differently from any other Shakespearean player, spawning his own misery with its own natural tendency to deceive itself. Bertrand Evans deftly remarked on this in her book, Shakespeare’s Comedies, writing: “Malvolio is self-deceived up until the moment when he picks up the letter, when his own gaudiness lights the fire of the prank.” (Evans, 131) In a manner of speaking, Malvolio is in a haze of his bad judgment; if he were able to recognize his own flaws, he could become a better balanced man, but still he lies in his own single-mindedness. In denying such petty things as “cakes and ale”, he is at the same time shutting out what Maurice Charney calls the “second oral world of drama” which represents a sizable part of real life (Charney, 161). Conceptually, this serves to give the viewer of the play a reason to get emotionally involved on both sides of Sir Toby’s pranks, as opposed to seeing only the comedic side. Olivia stresses this point from her point of view in the fourth act, declaring:

I am as mad as he (Malvolio),

If sad and merry madness equal be. (IV.iv.15-16)

Olivia knows how hurt Malvolio will be upon seeing that the whole of the situation is a hoax, helping the beholder of the play to better understand the tender side of Olivia. Consequently, it is obvious that Malvolio is interested in doing the things that he stands so firmly against, because none of the pranks would have had any effect on him unless he were interested in making love to Olivia.

In conclusion, the other characters of Twelfth Night would not be as clearly understood if Mavolio and Sir Toby had not been as all-encompassing as they were. Malvolio modifies the dangerously self-absorbed side of each character, while Sir Toby modifies each player’s lighter, happier overtones. The standard that the two stellar characters give the spectator helps the play run more smoothly, and leaves nothing to be desired in terms of cleanliness and clarity. Toby’s tricks and Malvolio’s awkwardly worded speech add comedy, while the more elaborate side of Malvolio makes the viewer try to understand what is going on inside his head. Every frame of reference upheld by Toby and Malvolio urges the play’s spectators to get more involved in the play, and keeps them amused Toby’s pranks and Malvolio’s clumsiness.