Twelfth Night Essay, Research Paper

Tris Warkentin

Shakespearean ComedyTwelfth Night, question 3

12/17/99

Shakespeare?s Twelfth Night has many different characterizations for the many different characters in the play; Orsino and Olivia represent the Renaissance and the dangers facing it, Viola represents the overindulgence of the Renaissance and the Puritan minimalism represented by Malvolio, the madman. While the other characters represent constant images throughout the play, Malvolio changes. He goes from being a bleak and plain Puritan to a colorful and raving madman, bent to woo his mistress, Olivia. The letter placed by Maria to deceive him into charming Olivia is a turning point in the play. At this point, Malvolio shifts from his Puritan self to a flamboyant, insane, and definitely non-Puritan character type. When considering Malvolio?s character, we must consider three factors that define Malvolio?s behavior through the course of the plot. These details are; his Puritan self, his extravagant self, and the overriding cause of his madness.

At the beginning of the play, Malvolio has many of the characteristics of a Puritan. This is visible in many different ways; his attitude towards music, his attitude towards food, and his diction. When Malvolio hears music he reacts in a negative manner, one reflected by all of the “evil” characters in Shakespearean literature:

“My masters, are you mad? or what are you? Have ye

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

coziers’ catches without any mitigation or remorse

of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor

time in you?” (II,iii,87-93)

The same drab view about music is reflected in Malvolio the Puritan?s views on food. When the jolly characters of Maria and Sir Toby are celebrating, Malvolio again reveals his Puritan views, when Toby calls for a strong draught of wine; “Mistress Mary, if you prized my lady’s favour at any/ thing more than contempt, you would not give means/ for this uncivil rule.” (II,iii,123-125) This minimalist Puritan view is also reflected in Malvolio?s diction. The very first words out of Malvolio?s mouth are Puritan indeed. Olivia is talking about how jolly the clown is, and asks Malvolio if he agrees that the clown is enjoyable to watch. Malvolio replies that “infirmity, that decays the wise, doth ever make the/ better fool.” (I,v,77-78)

Malvolio later receives a letter, which he believes is from his mistress, Olivia. This note, crafted by Maria, led Malvolio to believe that Olivia lusted after him, much in the same manner that he secretly lusted after her. From the point that he reads the letter forward, his views and diction are permanently changed. The first words we hear from his mouth after he opens the letter speak of emotion, something that Malvolio never spoke of before the letter: “Sweet lady, ho, ho?/” (III,iv,19) And we see a role reversal; Malvolio, who is usually somber, becomes the joyful one, and Olivia is the one asking “Smilest thou?/ I sent for thee upon a sad occasion.” (III,iv,20-21) From this point on, Malvolio seems to have a new view about the world; he talks about his emotions, and his desires, something he never talked about before he received “Olivia?s” letter. Before the letter, he was merely interested in serving the interests of others, and seemed to have no ability to reason for himself, even when it came to his love for Olivia: ‘Tis but fortune; all is fortune. Maria once told/ me she did affect me: and I have heard herself come/ thus near, that, should she fancy, it should be one/ of my complexion.” (II,v,22-25) But after the letter, he seems perfectly capable to make his own decisions, and asserts his emotions: “I think we do know the sweet Roman/ hand.” (III,iv,31-32) Olivia thinks him crazy, and asks if he wants to go to bed to rest, and Malvolio replies, taking the initiative to woo her: “To bed? Ay, sweet-heart, and I’ll come to thee.” (III,iv,,34) For the first time, we see Malvolio take action, rather than just acting as a cut-and-dry stodgy Puritan.

Although Malvolio undergoes a rapid transformation, there is one character trait that definitely stays ingrained throughout the play; Malvolio?s ego. Throughout the play, Malvolio sees himself as a powerful character, one who has the possibility to rise to the very top rank of society. We can see this in his presuming to be able to woo Olivia. He dreams of “Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet/ gown; having come from a day-bed, where I have left/ Olivia sleeping,–” (II,v,45-47) In the course of the play, Malvolio is also accused of being insane, and is eventually sent to the asylum for it. This madness and ego makes him willing to even forsake his puritan ways and devote himself to the pursuit of Olivia. Thus, he really is crazy, but it is not for being Puritan, nor is it for being flamboyant in his attempts to woo Olivia. Rather, his insanity stems from his overwhelming ego, and his shameless self-love. This ego drives both his illogical Puritan actions, as well as his illogical non-Puritan actions.

In sum, Malvolio undergoes a great shift in character. While he shifts from Puritan to radical, it is a total overhaul of his thought processes and his attitude. However, one underlying factor did not change between the first and the second Malvolio; they were both egotists. This egotism drives Malvolio to constantly overstep his bounds, and drives Olivia to exclaim: “O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste/ with a distempered appetite.” (I,v,92-93)