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English 220-49

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Malvolio’s Storyline

 A simple steward to the Countess Lady Olivia, Malvolio comes off as a minor character at first glance in Shakespeare’s, *Twelfth Night.*  Yet with his name meaning “ill-will” in Italian, his ambition and virtue become his weakness, as he aspires to rise out of his social class. He is the fundamental backbone of the comedy portrayed in the play despite his Puritan nature, as he becomes entangled in a joke that ultimately brings about his downfall. Possessing such virtue, he looks down upon those who engage in the festivity accompanied by the holiday, Twelfth Night, and believes they have no depth to them. Ironically, he is the one who allows those characters to show their true colors through his own pretentious actions; albeit he remains focused on himself. He serves as an antithesis in a play where everyone else is affected by relationships developed with other characters. By turning a serious character into a joke through irony, Shakespeare is able to add humor to the play, thus, justifying Malvolio’s role within the scope of a romantic comedy.

From the start of the play, Malvolio’s negative attitude towards the other characters is revealed as he believes that he is superior to them due to his virtue. His hostility is shown when Olivia is enjoying the company of the Fool and asks Malvolio if he agrees, to which he replies: “I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal. I saw him put down the other day with an ordinary fool that has no more brain than a stone” (Shakespeare I.v.81-84). Malvolio is shocked that Olivia, being of high status, finds joy in the fool’s jokes. Malvolio offends Feste, out rightly calling him stupid--- a “barren rascal”. He then goes on to use a metaphor and indirectly compares Festes’ intelligence to that of a rock, implying that there isn’t much depth to him besides his mediocre jokes. Yet it is important to note that Feste has not wronged Malvolio in any way prior to this encounter. Therefore, Malvolio’s words towards Feste were superfluous and only served as a detriment towards his own character. His behavior is ironic because he is nothing but a servant yet easily offends members of the household, showing how highly he thinks of himself. This very nature makes the joke played on him by Maria and the others more comedic as he can’t take a joke himself yet becomes the center of one.

Sir Toby further highlights Malvolio’s irony of his alleged superiority as he reveals a common hatred for the steward shared by the other members of the house. After Malvolio insults him for his drinking and ruins the fun for everyone else, Sir Toby retaliates by saying, “Art any more than a steward? Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” (Shakespeare II.iii.114-115). Toby implies that the others don’t like him for trying too hard to be a “goody-two shoes” and as hard as he may try, he won’t get in the way of their festivities. He attempts to mirror the actions of a noble person, yet in doing so he only becomes more of a nuisance to them. Toby makes it known to the steward that his influence is zero to none because the virtue he believes he has tied in with his pretentiousness doesn’t reflect his social status. Rather, he possesses a great amount of ignorance that makes him susceptible to the comedic ventures of Sir Toby, Maria and the other household members.

Malvolio, constantly being taunted by the others, wants to increase his social standing so that he can stop such behavior. His delusions of socially elevating his status are vivid as he fantasizes about the day he will become “Count Malvolio” (Shakespeare II.v.34). He aspires to marry Olivia, solely for the purpose of acquiring power. Thus, with his name meaning “ill-will” his intentions aren’t as pure as love should be. Shakespeare creates a vivid image of Malvolio’s delusions that allow us to realize how foolish such a “serious” character really is. He longs for the days where he sees himself, “…calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown…” (Shakespeare II.v.46-48). Such aspirations exceed those of a steward’s status, as he sees himself wearing fancy material, having servants tend to him rather than it being the way it truly is. This luxurious imagery portrays the amount of self-love Malvolio possesses rather than wanting to marry Olivia for genuine reasons. As mentioned earlier, his attempts of acting like a noble person are noted yet his delusions counter that of an actual noble. And with this, Shakespeare makes us feel less sympathetic for Malvolio because his intentions aren’t pure, thus becoming more comedic.

Often compared to a Puritan, Malvolio abandons all sense of his dignity when it involves the chance for him to achieve a higher social status. Olivia, being in a state of mourning due to the loss of her brother, calls for Malvolio so that his serious nature can coincide with hers. He approaches her, wearing yellow stockings and cross-garters and smiles at her, much to her confusion. When she asks what is wrong with him, he confidently defends himself, “Not black in my mind, though yellow in my legs. It did come to his hands and commands shall be executed…” (Shakespeare III.28-30). Malvolio informs her that he will obey everything “she” told him to do in the letter. His passionate tone shows how confident he is that the letter was addressed for him due to his egocentrism, shutting down any worries Olivia may’ve addressed of him not being okay. The dramatic irony within this scene adds humor to the play because Olivia hates all these things yet Malvolio is trying to impress her thinking this will make her fall in love with him more. This is especially ironic as Malvolio disapproves of foolishness yet acts foolish himself due to his delusions and ambition. Throughout the play, he insults the others for laughing at jokes and having fun, yet resorts to it himself when it involves something he wants. Shakespeare makes us dislike Malvolio for the purpose of the comedy as his misfortune is a result of his conceited actions.

Throughout the play, Malvolio criticized others for not having any depth yet his storyline serves as a means of allowing those same characters such as Feste to flourish. If it was not for the stewards chase for power, Feste wouldn’t have shown his true colors. As the joke being played on Malvolio escalates to the point of Sir Toby locking him in a dark room, Feste attempts to convince Malvolio he is insane. As he does this, he brings about an interesting comparison that is oblivious to Malvolio by stating that “…there is no darkness but ignorance…” (Shakespeare IV.ii.44-45). By using a metaphor, Feste connects the darkness Malvolio is currently in, to the whole scope of the play. On a surface level, Malvolio was in the dark about the joke as a whole, ignorant to the fact that a countess like Olivia would never marry a steward. And when we dive deeper into Festes’ words, we can see how Malvolio’s chase for power led him to act foolishly as he was blinded from reality. Therefore, we see Festes’ intelligence as he wisely tailored his words to reflect the steward’s actions. It is also funny to note that at the beginning of the play, Malvolio was the one insulting Feste, whereas in this scene, Feste is the one tinkering with Malvolio. Ultimately, the irony in the scene shows that Malvolio is not as smart as he claimed to be nor is he superior which spotlights Festes’ intelligence.

Malvolio fails to transform as a character and serves as an antithesis to the other characters. In a play where everyone expresses a love or deep emotional connection with someone else, Malvolio only loves himself. Sir Toby and Maria despise him because of how conceited he is and thus want to teach him a lesson by forging a letter appealing to Malvolio’s self love and the power he craves. He doesn’t genuinely love Olivia. Rather, he loves the power associated with a person of her status. Once he escapes the dark room he was held in, he says his final words of the play, “I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you!” (Shakespeare V.i.401). With this, it is evident that Malvolio is angry at the other characters for turning him into a fool, believing he was abused. The metaphor, “…whole pack of you!”, creates an image of him being surrounded by a group of people who are against him and whom he is different from. He fails to recognize the whole purpose of the joke, and doesn’t try to win the approval of the other characters because he is confident in his virtue. He is an outcast amongst the other characters, as he only finds love with himself whereas Olivia, for example, was mourning in the beginning yet manages to find love with Sebastian and receives her happy ending. Naturally, we would be sympathetic towards the way he was treated. However, he is a comedic character because his nature prevents him from acknowledging the lesson he was intended to learn.

Formulated with different aspects of irony, Malvolio’s storyline is one of utter importance for the development of the play’s comedic appeal. Aspirations of the simple steward lead to his downfall, as the chase for power made him subject to the ignorance he claimed the others possessed. Thinking he was superior to them, Malvolio harms his own character while in return helping the traits of Feste, and Olivia become more evident. Although his character is tormented in a variety of ways from wearing yellow stockings to being locked in a dark room, the fact that he remains pretentious is what makes him such a vital role within the comedic scope of the play. It would be expected that after such a serious offense, one’s character would be evaluated to wonder as to why they deserved such a punishment. Malvolio, on the other hand, only feels pity for himself--- that such a virtuous soul endured such a hardship. He executes the theme of foolishness perfectly as he manages to deceive himself more than he deceives other characters.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night.* Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperback, 2009. Print