Malvolio: The Puritan Scapegoat

In Shakespeare’s comic play *Twelfth Night*, the character of Malvolio is written as a reflection of the Puritan society in Elizabethan England, whose egotism and hypocrisy entice the other characters in the play to utterly humiliate him. The cruel approach to Malvolio’s downfall reflects the aversion some felt towards the Puritan religious sect because of their rigid moral standards, hypocrisy, and egotism, and their controversial influence on Elizabethan England.

The term *Puritan*, whether meant in the religious, political, social, or moral sense, was one that triggered enormous contention and repulsion. Such is exemplified in a statement made by King James I, who describes the Puritans as “a sect rather than a religion--ever discontented with the present government and impatient to suffer any superiority” (Hill 22). Similarly, the Bishop Curle describes a Puritan as “such an one as loves God with all his soul but hates his neighbor with all his heart” (Hill 24).

However, the Puritan doctrine of Elizabethan England cannot be so freely stereotyped as one of rebellion, virtue, and egotism as the above quotes suggest. Puritanism originally reflected the demand for new order in the church and government, as well as a revision of social life and supremacy (Little 86). One of the earliest calls for church reformation comes from William Tyndale, who recalls, “In the Catholic churches now we hear but voices without significations, and buzzing, howlings, and cryings as it
were the hallooing of foxes or baiting bears” (Knappen 47). The Puritans aspired to reform the generic, standardized sermons which plagued the church and replace it with sincere sermons that applied the word of God to the present circumstances (Little 90).

The church system of distributing the word of God as an identical message to every congregation was abhorred by the Puritans, who believed the central church authority was robbing the word of God of its communal meaning (Little 90).

Thomas Cartwright, who is credited as the head reformer of Elizabethan Puritanism, further developed the Puritan system of thinking through his conclusion that submission to God’s word must be brought about by a moral sense of duty, by free-willing individuals (Little 87). Therefore, Cartwright concluded, “No man can glorify God in anything but by obedience; and there is no obedience but in respect of the commandment and word of God: therefore it followed that the word of God directed a man in all his actions” (Little 87).

Cartwright further determined that the church congregation must be organized so that God may command his church by the staff of his word only (Little 89). The act of preaching the word of God must in turn be a social experience, which does not serve the preacher or the individual, but the community.

The Puritans, though slight in number, posed a significant threat to old English order in their demand for reformation of the church. As head of the nation, Queen Elizabeth asserted authority over church government (Haller 7). During Queen Elizabeth’s reign, the general consensus was that the church should be maintained by the state. Yet, Queen Elizabeth was notably uninvolved in religious matters, preferring not to disturb people as long as they upheld their allegiance to her as church governor (Haller
Because Elizabeth favored political stability over religious controversy, she wasn’t in favor of any big changes for the church. As a result, the church fell short in the eyes of the Puritan reformers, who expected the church to provide the people with an education, guide them morally, and act as a spiritual comfort (Haller 47).

Upset with the uniform qualities of the church under the direction of Queen Elizabeth, the church reforming Puritans promised “a new way of life, overrunning all the divisions which from time to time seamed its surface and threatening in each of its manifestations to disrupt the existing society” (Little 81). With their promise to reform the church, Puritan preachers began to grow sufficient in numbers, expanding their circle of influence.

In spite of the momentum the Puritan church reformation movement enjoyed, the Puritan doctrine was vastly rejected by the general populace (Knappen 342). What turned people off most to the Puritan movement was their perceived extreme standards of morality. The Puritan doctrine held forth that every singular act was liable for ethical consideration, and any inclination towards folly was to be eradicated (Knappen 343). The Puritan doctrine also suggested frequently analyzing oneself for any improper or sinful conduct; the demand for purity was so high that one was expected to believe himself suspect of sins unknowing to even himself (Knappen 344).

The act of measuring and perfecting oneself constantly turned people off from the Puritan movement, as many viewed it as egocentric. Additionally, the Puritans rejected the authority of the church through the notion that every man must interpret the Bible for himself, a controversial statement which many felt put too great an emphasis on the individual (Knappen 346).
The Puritans called for social reformation as well, as one sermon debunks the current moral standards for the “outrageous seas of adultery, whoredom, fornications and unseemliness that have overflowed the world, so much so that this vice among many is counted no sin at all, but rather a pastime, a dalliance and but a touch of youth; not rebuked but winked at; not punished but laughed at” (Wood 83). The Puritans rooted this moral neglect in the popular culture’s enjoyment of taverns, gaming houses, whore houses, and playhouses, the latter identified as “the great beast…the monster of many heads” (Haller 31). Because Puritan standards for morality were absolute, any act that did not glorify the word of God completely was sinful. Therefore, attending taverns and plays were disapproved of by the Puritans, a statement that gave them the reputation as “kill-joys”.

The Puritans’ understanding of the popularity of drama and theatre provided the reformers with an audience of listeners. The ideas of categorical sin and analysis of moral behavior no longer interested the public, whose dramatic interest favored more towards the idea of sin itself, and the psychology of spiritual struggle (Haller 32). To appeal to the drama the public craved, the Puritans described the drama of inner life as warfare of the spirit in their sermons, and elaborated on the psychology of sin and redemption (Haller 32). By using the dramatic elements of theatre, just as William Shakespeare, the Puritans were able to draw crowds of people to listen to their sermons.

The Puritan preacher did not appeal through rationalism and academic education; instead he used the emotional, vivid expressionism found on the Elizabethan stage (Haller 256). By adapting their sermons to fit the attitude of the public, the Puritans were able to increase their popularity. The Elizabethan public were apt to ignore convention in
favor of the excitement of poetic and dramatic representation on human character and experience (Haller 32). Ironically, the very people who traveled to hear preaching of the Puritan doctrine were the people who flocked to the Globe theatre (Haller 32).

Sermons demonstrated vivid dialect and used the art of provocative, persuasive, poetic speech found on the stage, as the drama of sin and salvation, as well as the war between Satan and Christ, gripped the audience (Haller 34). The Puritan legend of the Christian waging warfare and the epic of the fall and redemption of man was not an unintentional theme; observers were quick to see the drama in the situation and returned to be entertained again. It was the Puritan knack for showmanship and dramatic postures that ignited their movement (Haller 250).

The hypocrisy of the Puritan’s use of dramatic sermons to cultivate followers was not lost on William Shakespeare. By satirizing the character Malvolio as the Puritan kill-joy in the play *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare was able to revenge the Puritan rejection of theatrical performance as well as reflect the hostilities felt towards the Puritans in Elizabethan England. Although Malvolio is never revealed as a true Puritan, he embodies the perceived qualities of the Puritans, such as egotism, hypocrisy, rigidity in moral standards and ambition.

Malvolio’s unpopularity is first demonstrated through his interaction with the characters in the play. The perceived Puritan characteristics of self-importance and pompousness are exemplified in Malvolio’s character when he interrupts a merry, nighttime party by storming into the room and declaring, “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?” (II.iii.83-86).
Malvolio’s enjoyment in breaking the mood is evident as he continues to jibe each character individually, starting by reporting to Sir Toby, “If you can separate yourself and your misdemeanors, you are welcome to the house; if not, and it would please you to take leave of her, she is very willing to bid you farewell” (II.iii.93-97). Relishing in his authority, Malvolio adds one last warning towards Maria, threatening, “If you priz’d my lady’s favour at anything more than contempt, you would not give means for this uncivil rule; she shall know of it by this hand” (II.iii.115-118). Shakespeare satirizes the Puritan sect by molding the character Malvolio into the ‘morality police’ who enjoys criticizing others. Malvolio’s intentions for gaining favor over the other servants in Olivia’s eyes through his morality and sobriety are associated with the Puritans.

Malvolio aligns himself with the Puritan sect because of his overt harshness to other characters, his desire to deliver bad news, his obsession with power and control, and his great disdain for anything joyful. Such is brought to light by Maria, who openly states of his behavior, “Marry, sir, sometimes he is kind of a puritan” (II.iii.131). However, when Sir Andrew decides to beat up Malvolio on the pretense of being a Puritan, Maria resists the phrase, concluding, “The devil a Puritan that he is, or anything constantly but a time-pleaser; an affection’d ass that cons state without book and utters it by great swaths; the best persuaded of himself, so cram’d, as he thinks, with excellencies that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him; and on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work” (II.iii.137-143).

The unified hatred towards the imposing, unpopular Malvolio is brought to light, as the characters openly plot how they would create his downfall. Such is evident from Sir Andrew’s suggestion, “Twere as good a deed as to drink when a man’s ahungry, to
challenge him and field, and then to break promise with him and make a fool of him” (II.iii.119-121). However, it is Maria who engineers the best plan for Malvolio’s downfall as she states, “For Monsieur Malvolio, let me alone with him; if I do not gull him into a nay-word, and make him a common recreation, do not think I have wit enough to lie straight in my bed” (II.iii.123-129). The character’s grounding desire to see Malvolio in a state of humiliation reflects the hostilities towards the Puritan killjoy, and sets him up for the role as a scapegoat.

Through a humiliating practice joke, the group intends to reveal Malvolio’s own hypocrisy and fault of character. The medium they choose is of Maria’s creation, who envisions, “I will drop in his way some obscure epistles of love” (II.ii.145). The humiliation will be effective in many ways. Firstly, it will expose Malvolio’s fixation with power, his eager means to get it, and his intention to use the power to humiliate others. Secondly, it will show that he is just as vulnerable to human weakness as all human beings by allowing himself to be flattered by Olivia’s alleged affection for him. Malvolio will also be thought of as a madman and lose all dignity and airs he possesses.

Before the moment of humiliation, Maria emphasizes the delight which they will feel to see Malvolio humiliated when she retorts, “Observe him, for the lock of mockery, for I know this letter will make a contemplative idiot of him” (II.v.15-17). As Malvolio strolls about the garden, his conceit and self love become apparent. Sir Toby and Fabian are quick to cut him down, stating, “Contemplation makes a rare turkey-cock of him; how he jets under his advanc’d plumes!” (II.v.28-29).

Once Malvolio reads the love letter, he is quick to envision a future which leaves him powerful and important, demonstrated as he quivers over the thought, “To be Count
Malvolio!” (II.v.32). As Malvolio continues to fancy in his imagination, the group continues to ridicule him on his large ego, arrogance, and desire for power. Slipping further into the fantasy, Malvolio exposes this desire for power, as evident as he proclaims, “Calling my officers about me, in my branch’d velvet gown, having come from a day-bed—where I have left Olivia sleeping” (II.v.45-46). Malvolio’s desire to be enveloped in expensive velvets and living luxuriously with servants proves his desire to be in a state of more influence, while at the same time he pretends to be pious and Godly.

Sir Toby’s reply of “Fire and brimstone!” conjures up images of Puritan rhetoric (II.v.47). Malvolio continues to demonstrate his unflattering character, as he continues, “And then to have the humour of state; and after a demure travel of regard, telling them I know my place as I would they should do theirs” (II.v.49-50). Malvolio’s desire to tell people where their place is exemplifies the Puritan belief of superiority through morality.

In his final act of imaginative superiority, Malvolio constructs what he would do to Sir Toby, stating he would send “Seven of my people, with an obedient start, make out for him. I frown the while, and perchance wind up my watch, or play with my—some rich jewel. Toby approaches; curtsies there to me” (II.v.54-58). In Malvolio’s fantasies, he continually takes delight in conjuring up humiliation in other people; they are made to be servants, bowing at his feet, as he displays true signs of superiority through status and jewels. He continually imagines himself adorning such extravagancies as jewels and velvet robes, all reflect the image of superiority. To continue, Malvolio gives an order to Toby, stating, “You must amend your drunkenness” (II.v.68).

Shakespeare’s intention for Malvolio’s rant was to expose his true character, which encompasses self-interest and moral fraud. Malvolio’s excess of virtue is not with
good intention; it simply acts as a mask for his true desire to climb the social ladder through the affection of Olivia (King 8).

Malvolio’s humiliation begins when he greets Olivia in her waiting room, adorning the attire commanded in the love letter, which stated, “Remember who commended thy yellow stockings, and wish’d to see thee ever cross-garter’d” (II.v.136). As added humiliation, Malvolio is following out the directions in the letter that commands, “If thou entertains my love, let it appear in thy smiling; thy smiles become thee well. Therefore in my presence still smile, dear my sweet” (II.v.155-156). Perplexed by the profound change in her otherwise stern servant, Olivia responds to Malvolio’s obvious affection by stating, “God comfort thee! Why dost thou smile so, and kiss thy hand so oft?” (III.iv.31-32). Malvolio’s every answer to Olivia’s questions came from the alleged love letter, causing her in a state of confusion to cry out, “Why, this is very midsummer madness” (III.iv.53). What began for Malvolio as egotism and vanity develops into a delusion, which convinces Olivia that Malvolio has lost his mind.

Sir Toby, Maria, and Fabian use the opportunity to further torment Malvolio. The group pretends Malvolio is possessed by the devil, stating, “Lo, how hollow the fiend speaks within him!” (III.iv.86). Malvolio, following the advice in the letter to, “Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants” insults the group and storms out of the room (II.v.132). Baited to further the joke, the group plot, “We’ll have him in a dark room in bound” (III.iv.129). The group rationalize that because Olivia believes Malvolio to be possessed by madness, locking Malvolio in a dark room will appear justified. The group’s willingness to continue the cruel joke demonstrates their longing to further discredit Malvolio’s moral front, and expose his self-centered ambition.
Locked in the dark room, Malvolio’s desperation can be felt as he proclaims, “Sir Topas, never was man thus wronged. Good Sir Topas, do not think I am mad. They have laid me here in hideous darkness” (IV.ii.28-30). Feste, disguised as a minister, furthers Malvolio’s powerless state by shouting at Malvolio, “Fie, thou dishonest Satan! I call thee by the most modest terms, for I am one of those gentle ones that will use the devil himself with courtesy. Sayest thou that house is dark?” (IV.ii.31-34). Malvolio’s reply, “As hell, Sir Topas”, suggests that the prison acts as Malvolio’s hell, as he has been stripped of all dignity (IV.ii.35). With Malvolio powerless and desperate, the group appears to have satisfied their want to see Malvolio, the Puritan, lowered to the level of begging for mercy and forgiveness.

After finally emerging from the locked room, Malvolio, infuriated, reiterates the atrocities bestowed upon him by Olivia by stating, “[you] Bade me come smiling and cross-garter’d to you, to put on yellow stockings, and to frown upon Sir Toby and lighter people; and, acting in obedient hope, Why have you suffer’d me to be imprison’d, kept in a dark house, visited by the priest, and made the most notorious geck and gull” (V.i.324-330). Responding to the list of wrong-doings, Feste confesses, “Myself and Toby set this device against Malvolio here, upon some stubborn parts we had conceived him” (V.i.346). Feste’s justification for humiliating Malvolio on the pretense of Malvolio’s strict and pompous ways summarizes the opposition felt towards the Puritan reformation. Because the Puritans were thought to be self-seeking, pompous, and hypocritical, Malvolio’s character, which reflects the perceived Puritan, deserves to be humiliated. Malvolio exits in an infuriated state, promising, “I’ll be reveng’d on the whole pack of you” (V.i.364).
It is difficult to sympathize with Malvolio, even though he is set up for complete humiliation. This is because Malvolio set himself up for his own downfall through his ill-will towards characters who only wanted to have a good time. Malvolio also used a false pretense of morality to justify his superiority over the other characters, and tried to attain his status by being more virtuous than anybody else. By putting Malvolio in a state of utter humiliation, the characters wished to humble the Puritan, and awaken him to the reality that he is inherently human.

The Puritans depicted morals as absolute; there was no room for error in the doctrine that preached complete morality. Shakespeare’s response, by creating a character that reflected the perceived Puritan, and humiliating him to bring out his hypocrisy, egotism, and self-satisfying ambition, allowed Shakespeare to mock the religious sect which was so opposed to Shakespeare’s art, the theatre. For in the end of the play, it is the characters who humble Malvolio who triumph, as Malvolio is left bitter and exposed for his true immorality. In this instance, theatre triumphs over Puritanical ideals.


