

The character sketch of Malvolio (For Part II, ENG 'Hons')

OR

Malvolio

'Twelfth Night', though a perfect comedy, seems to verge on tragedy to various critics. It creates fun, but is underlined with a tragic note. The treatment of Malvolio in the ^{magical-scene} ~~magical scene~~ and the load of unrequited love that Viola has to bear as Cesario are brought with tragic essence. Malvolio's function is comic and he becomes a tool of humour both for Sir Toby and the audience. The dramatist exposes to ridicule his inordinate passion for ambition. His desire to rise to the rank of a Count by marrying his mistress is exploited by Sir Toby and Maria to genuinely comic height. The way he is gulled and tortured comically compares him to Falstaff, and critics sometimes hold the view that like Falstaff he is more sinned against. He disallows revelry and fun in his lady's house because he knows that Olivia is in sackcloth and ashes due to her brother's death. She had abjured mirth and interred herself as a mark of mourning. Naturally, there was nothing unbecoming in his behaviour. Sir Andrew is on the other pole. Although a cousin of Olivia he believes in life and fun, he uses Sir Toby as his purse by giving him false hopes about Olivia. In consequence he duces Malvolio and lays the trap in ^(collusion) ~~collusion~~ with Maria very ingeniously.

Thus, Malvolio belongs to the ~~two~~ ^{two} traditions of the humanistic and the comic

Approach. According to the Arden Editor, "Malvolio, in the last century and in the present, has sometimes been seen as a man too ill-used for our comforts." William Hazlitt was, in fact, the first to remark that 'poor Malvolio's treatment is a little hard'. But he admits that despite this the treatment does not upset the comic balance of the play. The forged letter of love of Maria is a beautiful and effective dramatic device by ~~and~~ means of which Shakespeare puts Malvolio's excessive passion on the rack. The scene describing his reactions is a masterpiece of the incongruities of human behaviour. In fact, the Malvolio theme justifies the title of the play. Sir Andrew desires to 'make the welkin dance' in drink, dance and merriment. Malvolio's interruption whets up in Sir Andrew the passion of revenge and retaliation. In this his behaviour is quite in keeping with the deep loyalty that he pledges to his mistress. Even Olivia, after she learns the whole episode of his befoolment, does not take much exception of it.

One can contrast the implications of love as an uncontrolled passion in Malvolio and Orsino. In both the cases it is comical albeit different in degree. Critics hold that Orsino's one-sided love for Olivia and Viola's tenacious advocacy of it

are in the romance tradition. But on the other hand, Malvolio's passion betrays an excessive credulity and makes him susceptible to the trap. Mr. Nevill Coghill has aptly remarked that in Shakespeare marriage 'is an image of happiness that ends his comedies almost as invariably as death ends a tragedy'. He uses marriage often as a play to bring harmony out of complications, and the beauty of his comedies lies in the perfection of its execution. The Malvolio episode is coloured by this passion of love and courtships of the play. His treatment in the dark room looks to be pathetic to some, no doubt. Mr. Barber is one such: "But he is certainly pathetic if one thinks about it, because he is so utterly cut off from every one else by his anxious self love". But the view is a bit off the mark and a shade too humanistic. The dramatist's weightage is more on the technical side than on the realistic side. To be more clear the episode lends the play a comic overstone that is essential to maintain its balance. The playwright's intention is to ridicule the ~~stern~~ puritanical dislike of life and fun as reflected in Malvolio. This approach likens him to Shylock whose complete and ruthless disregard of life and its values is set to 'naught' in 'The Merchant of Venice'. The Arden Editors, however, address the balance of this comparison commendably.

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They say that the comparison 'is not unreasonable, though it should be born in mind that Shylock is a danger and Malvolio merely a nuisance'.

In the ultimate analysis Malvolio's defeat and discomfiture in the play is a *sen qua non*, because it is a comedy. According to Harold Jenkins 'While Shylock is a threat to life itself, Malvolio is a threat to the enjoyment of it'. As such he can ill-afford to disturb the comic balance and the atmosphere of Jollity and union. Naturally he is overserious and obtrusive attitude has to be subtly shoved out of the play's event-complex. It is this ambivalence in the play of both the comic and the tragic or pathetic that marks out *Twelfth Night* as the last comedy before the dramatist's entry into the dark period of the tragedies.

The End

Prashant