

# Twelfth Night: Pushing the Status Quo

Monika Haines

For England, the sixteenth century was a time in which literature, arts, and social life were flourishing. William Shakespeare showcases the Elizabethan era by implementing cultural aspects from his time period throughout his plays and poems. In particular, he was able to capture the innerworkings of class structures within a society. In *Shakespeare: A Marxist Interpretation*, Aleksandr A. Smirnov explains that at the start of the sixteenth century aristocracy was at large in England. They were given a place among the Parliament, seats within the court, and titles to vast amounts of land. This type of government left the majority of power in the hands of the wealthy. Smirnov made the connection that Shakespeare's works included aristocratic elements due to that being the favored form of government at the time. This structure helped develop the basis for a theory created by Karl Marx that examines the relationships between social classes (Smirnov). Marxist theory focuses on three different classes: the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat. These classifications were used to describe members of the nobility, gentry/middle, and working classes. Marx's break down of social classes can be used to analyze and explain a character's behavior within the play. Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* reveals how the distribution of power can impact members of both the bourgeoisie and proletariat classes. This can be done by observing how the actions and motivations of the various characters are altered when attempting to grasp for more power.

At the bottom of the hierarchy is the proletariat and/or the working class. There are three characters from Shakespeare's play that belong to this class: the steward Malvolio, the

waiting-gentlewoman Maria, and the fool Feste. While Feste is happy with his life of roaming, Malvolio and Maria have hopes to one day move up in the world. Malvolio seemed to believe pushing his assigned limits of power and relying on the idea of fate would help him to advance in society. While the Countess Olivia is still in a mourning state, Malvolio is put in charge as head of servants. The amount of trust that Lady Olivia puts in him is not taken lightly by others. While the knights Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are enjoying a rather loud nightcap with both Maria and Feste, Malvolio attempts to scold and reprimand them for their behavior. Sir Toby, Olivia's uncle, challenges Malvolio's authority by asking, "Art any more than a / steward?" (II.3.114-115). When Malvolio realizes that the nobleman has indulged too much to adhere to any reason, he turns his attention to Maria. He proceeds to express that she too should feel obligated to prevent such an "uncivil" event from occurring and follows up with a promise to tell Olivia about her failure to do so (II.3.122). What Malvolio was unsuccessful at realizing was that his attempt at overpowering the mingling social crowd would result in him eventually being publicly humiliated. More specifically, those of the middle class agreed that Malvolio seemed to have forgotten where his place among society was.

After Malvolio's failed attempt to show authority over members of the bourgeoisie class, Maria took it upon herself to devise a plan that would both teach Malvolio a lesson and limit Sir Toby's behavior of excessive indulging. Her grand scheme involved forging a letter in her Lady's handwriting that would include a confession of love towards Malvolio

and instructions she wished for him to follow. Pointedly, the letter asked him to be “cross-gartered” and wear “yellow stockings” when approaching the Countess (II.5.157-158). Those who were a part of the scheme believed that if Malvolio were to follow the letter to the “t” then he would make a fool of himself, and Olivia would terminate his services. Although Maria was the brains behind the plot against Malvolio, she kept the peace among classes. She chose to remain in the shadows and play both fronts. In *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare’s Comedies*, Elliot Krieger expresses that Maria only wished for Sir Toby to simply limit himself and for Feste to be careful when excusing his transgressions (Krieger 118). This was achievable because her scheme kept both men occupied by having them become silent observers of Malvolio’s demise. For a member of the proletariat, her ability to captivate the attention of Sir Toby and control his habits did not go unnoticed. Both Sir Andrew and Sir Toby concluded that Maria possessed qualities similar to the queen “Penthesilea” (II.3.175). Essentially, they gathered that Maria’s work ethic and intelligence resembled the likes of the aristocracy. In addition to that, Maria was a dutiful servant for the Countess Olivia and was able to keep up her Lady’s wishes for maintaining the accustomed mourning decorum. Throughout *Twelfth Night*, Maria demonstrates her ability to successfully engage with members of the nobility without trying to undermine their authority.

Once Malvolio obtained the letter planted by Maria, his fantasy to move up began to feel both real and attainable. After reading the letter, Malvolio quickly came to the realization that the contents within the letter were destined to be. Once following the instructions written, he began to believe that his earlier proclamation of one day becoming “Count Malvolio!” was finally coming true (II.5.34). Krieger discloses that Malvolio is under the impression that he will be able to “jump class not as a result of the actions with the everyday world of

time that he is ordered to perform but through the transformation of the everyday world into a world of wish-fulfillment, of projected desire” (Krieger 122). Unlike Maria, it can be assumed that Malvolio does not feel as if he needs to work up into a higher-class position. Instead, he feels as if a spot among the bourgeoisie and/or the aristocracy is owed to him. His unfortunate birth status prevents him from being able to partake in any indulgent behavior. By becoming Count Malvolio, he would be given the authority to become the head of the estate, re-establish the accustomed order, and have power over those opposed of him. Unsurprisingly, Malvolio specifically claims that if he were to marry the Countess Olivia, he would make a show of his power by enforcing Sir Toby to perform “curtsies” every time the knight approaches him (II.5.60).

Out of the four involved in the nightcap incident, it is to be assumed that Sir Toby had the most to gain from the appearance of Malvolio going mad. As a member of the bourgeoisie, Sir Toby does not want to risk losing Olivia’s favor. Because he is from Olivia’s blood, Sir Toby had been granted access to all of the finery available at the estate (II.3.78-79). Krieger conveys that “only a privileged social class has access to the morality of indulgence” (Krieger, 99). Throughout Shakespeare’s play, on multiple occasions, Sir Toby is judged by each class for his excessive “quaffing” (I.3. 14) and “drunkenness” (II.3.73). However, he sees no issue with his lifestyle and simply only wishes to maintain it. One way that Sir Toby attempted to uphold his luxurious lifestyle was by pushing the idea that his good friend Sir Andrew Aguecheek would be a good fit for his niece, the Countess. He was quick to explain many of Sir Andrew’s appealing qualities. Some of them being that he earns “three thousand ducats a year,” can play the *viola da gamba*, and is fluent in more than one language (I.3.22-26). Although, it is clear that Sir Toby is most enthusiastic about the amount of gold that Sir Andrew would bring in. If the

nobleman was given Olivia's hand in marriage, Sir Toby would have the ability to oversee all of Sir Andrew's actions taken while being the appointed head of the estate. Thus, leading Sir Toby to have a large amount of influence over members of the both the aristocracy and bourgeoisie.

Overall, it can be concluded that the ruling nobility and middle classes believed in the preservation of their benefits and level of authority that came with their birth status. Shakespeare was able to use the character of Sir Toby to showcase what motivations members of the bourgeoisie have. On the other hand, a handful of the working class sought out opportunities to ascend the hierarchy and fight against their assigned class status. The steward, Malvolio revealed that advancement was not ideal for those who believed overpowering those around them

and only relying on destiny instead of putting in any effort. The gentle-woman Maria demonstrated how being a diligent worker and making the right connections would make it possible for a member of the proletariat to advance to the bourgeoisie class. Truthfully, it was her display of wit and dependability that made her a desirable candidate for the gentry. Like Maria, William Shakespeare worked for everything he earned. His continuous work and dedication turned him into one of the most recognizable writers in history. Shakespeare both created and maintained his own legacies. It is to be understood that no one is stuck in the social class to which they were assigned to at birth. *Twelfth Night* illustrates that there is a way to both advance and maintain one's desired position among societies social classes.

## WORKS CITED

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