Malvolio and Shylock: Shakespeare’s “Problem” Characters

In Shakespeare’s two comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, there are many similarities including improbable romances, cross-dressing women, and bumbling fools. However, the most interesting element that these two plays share is not comic at all – rather, the use of two characters who are distinctive in that they seem not to fit into the comedic setting at all. In *Twelfth Night*, this character is Malvolio, the steward that serves the lady Olivia; in *The Merchant of Venice*, this character is Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Both Malvolio and Shylock bear remarkable similarities in that, although gilded with a thin veneer of comedy, they are in reality tragic figures who have been ostracized from the societies in which they live, and therefore understandably express resentment and frustration.

In his paper, “The Problem of Malvolio,” Edward Cahill writes, “Malvolio alerts us to the necessity of comedy and to the profound implications of its failure” (62). In other words, Malvolio is an example of what can happen when one takes life a little too seriously; indeed, he is the only “serious” character in *Twelfth Night*, surrounded by people who are all determined to revel as much as they can in the bewitchment and excitement that love can bring. Standing in contrast to these high-spirited characters, Malvolio is, as the steward of Olivia’s household, a symbol of the order that is so gleefully being thrown into shambles within the play.
Malvolio’s opposition to the disorder of the play is made known almost as soon as he is brought on stage when discussing Feste, the fool, “I protest I take these wise men that crow so at these set kinds of Fools no better than the Fools’ zanies” (1.5.86-88), to which Olivia’s response is to tell Malvolio essentially that he is full of himself. This exchange is significant, as it immediately establishes that Malvolio is not happy with the kind of disruption and high spirits that Feste (and the play’s title) represents, as well as revealing that he is not warmly thought of by other characters in the play. This dynamic is indicative of the interactions that Malvolio has throughout the rest of the play – he is resentful and disapproving of the chaos that is being allowed to sweep through Olivia’s household, and does what he can to contain it by way of advising his mistress and trying to assert his authority over the other characters like Sir Toby and Sir Andrew by curbing their drunken carousing.

If he were simply a simple spoil-sport, Malvolio would be a fairly flat character; however, one is given insight into the complexities of his personalities through the joke that Maria and Sir Toby decide to play on him, in making him believe that he has a chance to marry Olivia. If he were really such a strait-laced Puritan who cared about law and order, Malvolio would immediately recognize the impossibility of a steward – a higher-ranking servant, but a servant nonetheless – marrying a titled woman. But his eagerness to believe that Maria’s forged letter is really a declaration of Olivia’s love indicates that he is not as opposed to the forces of infatuation and love as he would like the other characters to believe. “To be Count Malvolio” (2.5.34) is what he muses to himself, and fantasizes about the privileges he would be able to enjoy as lord of the estate, with real authority that he would be able to use to keep order over the disorderly
members of the household. In his daydreams, Malvolio is revealed not only to be just as susceptible to the forces of chaos as the other characters, but he is also made to seem surprisingly sympathetic; he is, after all, a man whose very job is to keep order – a requirement which, when he tries to fulfill it, earns him only mockery and scorn. That he is so eager to indulge in an unrealistic fantasy of marrying Olivia does not necessarily make him naïve or hypocritical – it is an indication of just how frustrated he is with his current situation as the enforcer of order in a continually disorderly house.

Malvolio becomes even more sympathetic when the practical joke gets out of hand; thinking that he must act in certain ways before Olivia to convince her of his love, he dresses in yellow stockings, continually smiles – a dramatic change from his typical dour appearance – and makes references to the letter he believes that she has written, of which she has no knowledge. Olivia concludes that Malvolio must be mad, and allows him to be locked into a dark room, where Maria and Sir Andrew try to convince him that he has lost his mind. This treatment, as well as the realization that he was the victim of such a cruel prank in front of an unrepentant household, is essentially public humiliation – a punishment given to a man guilty only of for falling for a practical joke.

In her paper, “Twelfth Night’s ‘Notorious Abuse’ of Malvolio…” Allison P. Hobgood states: “…many of Shakespeare’s characters experience shame, but none so thoroughly as Malvolio” (3). This is undeniably true, as he is put through an arduous night in which he is made to defend his sanity – and therefore, his very sense of self – over and over to people who continually tell him that he is out of his mind, and then he is laughed at once again, when the joke is revealed. From the point of view of the other characters, Malvolio is getting his come-uppance for being too Puritanical and strait-laced; however,
from Malvolio’s perspective, it is a punishment that he receives essentially because he was only trying to do his job. Although certain other of Twelfth Night’s characters provoke sympathy, Malvolio is the real victim of the play, as he has lost the battle before it has even begun; he will always be at odds with the rest of Illyrian society, simply because his job forces him to oppose the chaos of the play, and his attempts to join in with the fun and frivolity are met with laughter and punishment.

In The Merchant of Venice, it is not merely his profession that separates Shylock from the society in which he lives, but also his culture. As a Jewish moneylender, Shylock occupies a curious position in the Roman Catholic Venetian society – he is despised because he is not a Christian, but his ethnicity allows him to practice a vocation that is forbidden to Christian merchants. Therefore, while hated and distrusted, Shylock is also a necessity to those around him, continually resulting in situations where he must interact with those who despise him in order to financially survive. As Heather Hirschfeld comments in her paper, “We All Expect a Gentle Answer, Jew”, Shylock “…is made to answer to characters who simultaneously invite and impede [him]” (70). Thus, one can imagine the immense amount of strain that Shylock must deal with on a daily basis, understanding that his livelihood depends on his interaction with people who scorn and even spit on him.

Despite the religious differences, one can imagine that earlier in his life, Shylock did not think badly of the Christians he did business with; this is indicated with when he agrees to loan Antonio money, saying, “I would be friends with you and have your love…” (1.3.149). Antonio, on the other hand, despises Shylock and assures him even while negotiating the loan that although Shylock is doing him a favor by overlooking the
lack of collateral, he will continue to treat him as badly as ever. With this statement in mind, it is easier to understand Shylock’s stipulation that Antonio give him a pound of his own flesh if he is unable to repay the three thousand ducats – Shylock is reacting to a substantial blow to his pride, made even more painful because his efforts to act amicably are met with derision and scorn.

The exchange between Antonio and Shylock is significant, as it highlights a struggle that Shylock has been fighting for a long time, one that he is destined to ultimately lose. Throughout his life, he has been shunned by the Christian community, yet forced to interact with them – thereby ensuring that he be reminded daily of the contempt that the merchants feel for him. As Shylock’s gesture toward Antonio indicates, he is not a hateful and unforgiving person by nature; on the contrary, he is a man who is willing to forget religious differences and come to an understanding with the merchants with whom he does business. However, it is clear that his feelings have never been reciprocated, a fact that he is all too aware of when he reminds Antonio of the wrongs that the merchant has inflicted upon him in the past. Shylock’s later obsession with Antonio’s repayment of his debt, continually voiced with the words, “I will have my bond,” thus take on a deeper import, as one realizes that it is not simply the money or the flesh that Shylock means – it is vindication for years of abuse.

As if Shylock’s anger and frustration toward the Venetian merchants is not enough, a blow is given to him that hits extremely close to home when he is betrayed by his own daughter, Jessica. She not only elopes to marry a Christian man – ironically, a friend of Antonio’s – but steals money from her father’s household and takes the ring that Shylock’s wife had given to him and immediately trades it for a monkey. Upon learning
this, Shylock displays a considerable amount of misery and vulnerability in saying, “I
would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys” (3.1.121-122). One can imagine
that for a man who has struggled in vain to fit into a society that repeatedly rejected him,
a betrayal by one of his kin is the final blow. Although not written into any scenes,
Shylock’s anger and grief must be overwhelming as he contemplates that his daughter
has chosen the society that refuses to accept him over her own flesh and blood. This grief
almost certainly plays into his transformation into the blood-hungry tyrant who demands
Antonio’s life – again, Shylock is not by nature a bloody or hateful man, but years of
abuse by the Venetian society, finally compounded with his own daughter’s embrace of
this society and religion over his own bring to a halt his conciliatory efforts toward
Antonio and presumably any other Christian merchants. His grief and anger feed into his
desire to somehow be reconciled for all that he has endured in his lifetime, and thus he
insistently calls for his bond.

In his paper, “The Merchant of Venice: A Modern Perspective” Alexander Leggatt
describes the escalation of the events surrounding Shylock as “…a terrible demonstration
of the ways we teach each other to hate so that prejudice moves in a vicious circle” (216).
Indeed, one sees this incarnation of prejudice in Shylock’s relentless insistence for
revenge on Antonio; it is clear that he seeks not only to fulfill the requirements of the
bond, but also to extract vengeance on the merchant who has come to symbolize years of
abuse, discrimination, and – most recently – betrayal that he is otherwise powerless to
stop. Tragically, the final outcome with Shylock serves only to heighten his feelings of
discrimination and resentment, when, as his suit against Antonio is denied, he is forced to
convert to Christianity and thereby forbidden to continue in his profession of
moneylending. As an added insult, half of his wealth is given to Jessica and her new husband, facilitating the comfort of the child who has abandoned him. At the close of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is truly left with nothing – he has no friends, no employment, and no religion. It is no wonder that he excuses himself from the crowd by saying, “I am not well” (4.1.13); this is easily the greatest understatement of the entire play, spoken by a man who has just had his entire life taken from him by a society that refuses to see him in any light except that of a villain.

The characters of Malvolio and Shylock are not dissimilar – both are misunderstood by their surrounding societies and therefore are understandably resentful. Malvolio’s resentment is seen in his continual scorn of Feste, Sir Andrew, and other characters who embody the chaos and wildness that it is his job to curtail; Shylock, on the other hand, expresses his resentment in his sinister insistence that he be given “his” bond – Antonio’s flesh. Both characters experience frustration at the continual lack of understanding and empathy with which they are treated; after all, it is hypocritical for Maria and Sir Toby to take such delight in punishing Malvolio for indulging in the same madcap romantic spirit with which they gorge themselves, and the Venetian society treats Shylock no better, failing to understand his anger at the life-long discrimination that he has endured. While on the surface it seems that Malvolio and Shylock are the villains of these two plays, a closer look reveals that they are actually the victims.

The two comedies *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* are well-known as comedies, but their “problem” characters of Malvolio and Shylock hint at the darker side that is present in each play. Both of these characters are outsiders, shunned by their societies and unable to reconcile at the close of events. The resentment that is expressed
by Malvolio and Shylock is understandable given the treatment that each endures by his society, neither of which ever demonstrates any empathy for the two dark figures that are so mercilessly persecuted. In jarring contrast to the comedic escapades that take place with other characters in these plays, Shylock and Malvolio are victims who are never able to express their own perspective or gain any understanding from their peers, and their frustration and resentment is unfortunately only seen as indication of their villainous nature.

Works Cited


Hirschfeld, Heather. “’We All Expect a Gentle Answer, Jew’: The Merchant of Venice and the Psychotheology of Conversion.” English Literary History 73 (Spring 2006): 61-81.


Works Consulted
