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## The Representation of Puritans in William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night

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**The Representation of Puritans in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*****Rachid MEHDI**Department of English, Faculty of Art  
Abderahmane-Mira University of Bejaia, Algeria**Abstract**

This article is a study on the representation of Puritans in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; or, *What You Will*, one of his most popular comic play in the modern theatre. In mocking Malvolio's morality and ridiculous behaviour, Shakespeare wanted to denounce Puritans' sober society in early modern England. Indeed, Puritans were depicted in the play as being selfish, idiot, hypocrite, and killjoy. In the same way, many other writers of different generations, obviously influenced by Shakespeare, have espoused his views and consequently contributed to promote this anti-Puritan literature, which is still felt today. This article discusses whether Shakespeare's portrayal of Puritans was accurate or not. To do so, the writer first attempts to define the term "Puritan," as the latter is quite equivocal, then take some Puritans' characteristics, namely hypocrisy and killjoy, as provided in the play, and analyze them in the light of the studies of some historians and scholars, experts on the post Reformation Puritanism, to demonstrate that Shakespeare's view on Puritanism is completely caricatural.

**Keywords:** caricature, early modern theatre, Malvolio, Puritans, satire

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## Introduction

Puritans had been the target of many English writers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>i</sup> The latter tended to depict these religious people as being zealous, precisians, pompous, and hypocrites. William Shakespeare joined these anti-Puritan writers with immense skill to ultimately denounce the rigid standards of Puritans for morality. In his famous comic play *Twelfth Night*, which first played in 1602, the playwright mocked these zealous believers, who used an ostentatious morality to justify their superiority over others. Malvolio, as critics suggest in their searching account of portraying this character, is indeed a tool to mirror the sober Puritan society in early modern England, whose colossal vanity, egotism and hypocrisy entice other characters in the play to humiliate him. After clarifying the real meaning of the word "Puritan" and providing a brief overview of the Puritans (what was a Puritan?), the writer will examine how Malvolio is used by the author to highlight his opposition felt towards Puritan Reformation. Then, more importantly, the writer will analyze to what extent was the author objective and impartial in satirizing the Puritans. Finally, the writer will discuss the impact of the author on later generations when dealing with the Puritan thematics.

## What is a Puritan?

The word "Puritan" as a label was usually a term of reproach and contempt. Indeed, it was originally used to scorn people regarded as "precisians," and hypocrites. Yet, though the pejorative connotation of the word, the term was to be adopted later on by the members of the movement. Despite the fact that it is highly difficult to define the term Puritan in a precise way, because it is ambiguous and misleading, modern historians have succeeded to give us some accurate definitions. The definition of the well-known expert on Puritanism, Bremer, seems to us simpler, "puritans were those who sought to reform themselves and their society by purifying their churches of the remnants of Roman Catholic teachings and practice then found in post-Reformation England during the mid-sixteenth century" (Bremer, 2009, p. 2).<sup>ii</sup> The question then arises: how could these Puritans cleanse the Established Anglican Church of Elisabeth I from the supposed pollution of "Romish" superstition? The answer is twofold.

First, the Puritans endeavoured to conform themselves to the primitive Christianity, which really glorified Jesus Christ. They admired the exegesis of the early fathers, most notably Clement, Origen, and particularly Augustine. In wanting to imitate the first Christians of the early or apostolic Church, many Puritans followed an austere lifestyle and lived by its strict moral code, mixed with and paralleled by oppressive work discipline. Puritan ministers strongly warned believers not to entertain themselves, and theatre was one of their targets. Famous writers, such as John Reynolds (1549-1607), William Prynne (1600-1669), William Perkins (1588-1602), a leading Puritan theologian, and Philip Stubbes (1555–1610),<sup>iii</sup> never ceased to claim that theatre was synonymous with debauchery. For this reason, Puritans were regarded as killjoys who condemned pleasure of all kinds: sexual intercourse, alcohol, tobacco. The list of "vanities", such as dancing, music, sports, games, bright clothes ... were all defined as grave sins meriting cruel punishment. No surprise that God's punishment over sinners, therefore, was a central theme of Puritan literature. Preachers reminded the hearers of the threat of hell if they did not observe the Mosaic law of the Ten Commandments.

Second, in addition to the insistence on emulating the first Church, the Puritans heavenly professed to rely only on the Scripture, in opposition to the Tradition, human constitutions, and

other authorities (that is to say *Sola Scriptura*). Their emphasis on the Bible as being the unique source of the authentic belief, since it was the inspired Word of God, has led some scholars to define Puritanism as the “Bible movement” (Parker, 1994, p. 98) or the “People of the Book” (Jeffrey, 1996, p. 266). The Puritan conviction of the authority of the Bible is evidenced (a) in their hate of the innovation: they denounced, for example, the “popish” ceremonies, customs, and vestments, prescribed by the Anglican Church, because these had not a biblical warrant. A large number of Puritans disliked *The Book of Common Prayer* as it was regarded as “an imperfect book culled and picked out of the popish dunghill” (Hook, 1839, p. 72), that is, unscriptural; (b) in their disagreement with the medieval spiritualist interpretation of the Scripture practiced in Catholicism: Puritan’s literalist hermeneutics rejected indeed the Catholics’ fourfold sense of Scripture, because the latter was personal and at the opposite ends with the teaching of the Bible, which exhorts not to seek beyond the letter. Yet, Roman Catholic Church advocated that God expressed himself in oblique language, consequently, only erudite people trained in theology could have access to the Holy Writ. Puritans were scandalized by such claim, accusing Catholics of tempting to legitimize their priestly monopoly on the interpretation of Scripture. To Protestants in general and Puritans in particular the Bible should be accessible to all believers, illiterate or erudite, because it “is clear to any reader on all matters essential to salvation and Christian morality” (Ryken, 1990, p. 13), and it should be interpreted literally. Within the context of accessibility of the Bible to everyone Milton writes: “The very essence of Truth is plainness, and brightness [...] The scriptures protesting their own plainness and perspicuity, calling to them to be instructed not only the wise and learned, but the simple, the poor, the babes” (Milton, 2007, p. 813).

### Shakespeare’s satire on Puritans

Malvolio is used as a tool by Shakespeare to satirise the Puritan movement. Early in the play, Maria qualifies him as a Puritan: “Marry, sir, sometimes he is a kind of puritan” (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 47). And, all people of the play vehemently dislike him, because he is pompous and arrogant, as suggests the etymology of the term “Malvolio”: “[T]he name, broken down to its Italian roots (*mal* = ill; bad; evil; and *voglia* = will; desire) means both ‘ill-will,’ playing on the Comptroller’s intolerance for fun and laughter; and ‘evil desire’” (Silverbush & Plotkin, 2002, p. 399). The nickname actually implies “that Puritan attitudes are essentially misanthropic and self-serving” (Marcus, 2006, p. 53). Indeed, among all characters of the play, Malvolio, Olivia’s steward, is the only who seems to be too serious, grave, and nearly unhappy. He is always dressed in black, an allusion to the Puritans who wore dark, drab clothing of that time. He embodies the high noble value. But when an occasion is offered to him to come close to the Countess Olivia, he completely changes his behavior, forgetting his moral principles.

The people who hate him, try to think of a ruse to mock him. So they decide to leave a forged, fake letter in the garden path, making him believe that Olivia is madly in love with him. When Malvolio is walking alone in the garden, fantasizing to be the Count by marrying to the Countess Olivia, he discovers the letter. He reads it and thinks that it was written by his mistress Olivia. Though the poem of love is unclear, he is absolutely convinced that it is destined to him, and Olivia loves him. The author of the letter says she cannot speak openly the name of her secret beloved. And the author ends the poem with these words: “M, O, A, I, doth sway my life” (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 63). He thinks that “M” could refer to “Malvolio,” but feel unable to explain why it is followed by “O”, instead of “A”. Yet he maintains that this anagram is referring to his name,

because it contains all the letters of his name. After the poem, the author exhorts him to take off his black clothes and, instead, wear yellow stockings, cross-gartered, and appear in public. And, he should also be more superior with servants, and smile everywhere. Malvolio immediately executes the orders. When Malvolio comes in this ridiculous costume to see Olivia, she is in fury, because she strongly dislikes yellow stockings, and cross-garters; besides, Malvolio spends his time smiling foolishly, while Olivia is deeply in a sad mood. Olivia thinks he is becoming mad, "Why, this is very midsummer madness" (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 86).

By means of this scene, Shakespeare wants to unveil the real personality of Puritans. In his mind, Puritans were unhappy and grave. Like Malvolio, Puritans were, for the author, all dressed in dark and drab-colored clothing. Also, they were killjoys who condemned music, alcohol, and entertainment, as it is illustrated at the beginning of the play, when Olivia asks Malvolio for his opinion on the jester:

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. Look you now, he's out of his guard already; unless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged. I protest that these wise men, that crow so at these set of kind of fools, no better than the fools' zanies. (Shakespeare, 1997, pp. 24-25)

Another example which shows Malvolio's hatred for all pleasure is when he interrupts a joyful party 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?" (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 45). Malvolio's arrogant contempt towards the jester's jokes or songs highlights Puritans' repugnance of/to the recreation and leisure. As mentioned above, many preachers exhorted from the pulpits followers, instead of wasting their time in amusement and leisure, to devote themselves to God's Law. Theatre is regarded as a real creation of the devil. Worse still, the anti-theatrical Puritans claimed that "theatre defied the second commandment against graven images" (Davis, 1998, p. 221). To denounce Puritanism, Shakespeare satirize Malvolio, by ridiculing his Puritanical philistine spirit and pompous rhetoric, "Lo, how hollow the fiend speaks within him!" (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 87) "What, man! 'tis not for gravity to play at cherry-pit with Satan" (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 88).

Another characteristic that Shakespeare wants to impute to Puritans in *Twelfth Night* is hypocrisy. This hypocrisy is illustrated in many ways: (a) Malvolio has always shown the desire to live a pious life: moral values seem to be his priority. But, basically, his strong wish is to be someone important and superior, so he could dominate others. While he is daydreaming in the garden to become a Count "To be Count Malvolio!" (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 59), he is fantasizing to get control over others and subject them, "Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown, having come from a day-bed, where I have left Olivia sleeping" (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 60). This discordance between his inner hope to live luxuriously and his external pious behavior is an allusion to Puritans who were, as far as Shakespeare is concerned, hypocrites, never expressing genuine sentiments. For the author, Puritans were quite selfish who advocated noble virtues simply to mask their genuine desire to climb the social ladder. (b) To please Olivia, Malvolio is ready to abandon his "moral" principles: he takes off his black clothes and wear yellow and bright stockings, and he ceases to be grave and smiles every time. This behavior is completely at the opposite ends with Puritanical tradition, as the writer has said earlier. This transformation of

Malvolio reveals how his religious behaviour is used to serve a personal, rather than a devotional end. Malvolio's turncoat attitude demonstrates how much Puritans are "hypocritical egotist and social climber who adjust [their] behavior according to how the wind blows" (Johnson, 2008, p. 14). (c) Malvolio's interpretation of Maria's letter illustrates the hypocrisy of the steward because he neglects the key rule Puritan hermeneutics. The first Puritan writers and theologians had insisted on literal interpretation of the Scripture, because figurative interpretation would surely lead to misunderstanding of God's word. William Tyndale, for example, stresses the point in these words:

Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the Scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto of thou cleave thou canst never err, or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. (Tyndale and Firth, 1831, p. 339)

Consequently, Malvolio, as a Puritan fellow, should logically stick to the Puritanical tradition of literalist hermeneutics, instead of interpreting the anagram M, O, A, I figuratively. He disturbs the order of the anagram, which was at the expense of the puritan orthodoxy, only for personal end. As Benson points out, "Shakespeare uses Malvolio's reading as a way of touching on the Reformation dispute over hermeneutics" (Benson, 2017, p. 46). Indeed, according to the detractors of Puritans, the latter, for personal reasons, were eager to break the rules of Puritan exegesis.

In short, Shakespeare's description of Puritanism was commonplace in post-Reformation England, a period in which strict observance of religion was often associated by anti-Puritans with hypocrisy (Jonson, for example, described Puritans in *Bartholomew Fair* as hypocrite and ignorant) and what a modern reader would recognize as fanaticism. Yet the question arises as to whether the reader should adhere spontaneously to this thesis, when he knows that such claim was mainly advocated by the enemies of Puritanism? The writer is going to discuss this question in the following lines.

### **Shakespeare's caricature on Puritans**

Though many accusations on Puritans were not baseless, but modern objective researches have demonstrated that the anti-Puritan attacks were in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries typically exaggerated. This exaggeration has travelled centuries and managed to reach many people in modern time. Even well-educated ones seem to have been influenced by the early modern anti-Puritan English writers.

It is a mistake to regard Puritanism as being one movement of a single mind. Indeed, recent historians have argued that there is a variety of people from different backgrounds that could be labeled "Puritan". It should be acknowledged that two groups, at least, can be distinguished: (a) Moderate Puritans, who were more influenced by Ulrich Zwingli and William Tyndale, sought to reform the Church from inside. Their leaders were well educated and erudite. (b) Radical Puritans, who were more influenced by John Calvin, endeavoured to reform the Church from outside. The leaders were ill-educated and, because over focusing only on the Scripture, rejected profane literature, especially theatre. It is in this second category that we can find several factions or sects, namely, Separatists, Familists, Ranters, Quakers, Fifth Monarchists, Baptists, etc. Though the leaders of both groups declared several wars against each other, they found a kind of an agreement in the Puritan Revolution in mid-seventeenth century only to fight against the monarchy and the



established Church. Because of the confusion that the term "Puritan" could provide, modern historians and scholars are so careful when they come to use the word. And those who deal with Puritans indiscriminately, as was the case for the early modern English anti-Puritans, are making a great mistake.

The mistake of the overgeneralization can be noted in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Through Malvolio, Puritans were depicted as being social extremists, always dressed in black, unhappy, and killjoy, believing that distractions were sinful. But such stereotype is far from the truth. Puritans, as Bremer observes, wore clothing in every color. They should appropriately dress for their position in society. Laborers wore clothing in brown colour, so dust and dirt were likely not be seen; some Puritans of high status wore from time to time clothing in bright colours; magistrates and ministers were likely to have clothing black, but this was a sign of their distinction since black was the most expensive fabric to make and a sign of high status, not sobriety (Bremer, 2009, p. 51). Also, Bremer argues that portraying Puritans as the enemies of pleasure is a caricature spread by their opponents. It is true that Puritans were urged to subject themselves to a daily discipline (praying and reading the Holy Scriptures), instead of wasting their precious time in pleasure. However, contrary to the way they had been described, they were not killjoys. They favoured recreation that took them into the countryside. Some Puritans took their wives and children on picnics. Fishing was another recreation commended by clerical authors. If Puritans were known of opposing some sports, such as football, boxing, it was because these activities were associated with betting, and they put village against village in bloody violence (Bremer, 2009, pp. 57-58). Likewise, Ryken asserts that it is largely false to claim that Puritans were opposed to sports and recreation. Puritans banned recreation on Sundays and games, not because they opposed to fun, but because they judged these activities to be inherently harmful or immoral (Ryken, 1990, p. 3). Additionally, if Puritans objected to all entertainment and sports on Sundays, because they believed that Sunday is the Lord's Day (Sabbath), in which they ought to commit themselves to religious activity, as it was underlined in the Ten Commandments, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). For this reason, the Puritans were outraged when the *Book of Sports* was ordered by King James to be read in all pulpits in 1617.

By the contrast to the medieval Catholics who favoured the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, Puritans were largely for literal interpretation of the sacred texts. Namely, they considered that the use of literary images, metaphors, allegories, similitudes, riddles, would jeopardize the pure Christian faith. To illustrate, the Puritans cited the ridiculous interpretation by the Catholics of the woman's breast in the Bible ("A bundle of myrrh is my wellbeloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts" (Song of Solomon 1:13).) to the Old and New Testaments. For this reason, Puritans were indeed generally hostile to metaphorization of Scripture. But, not all of them were against imagery. Many great Puritan writers expressed themselves in terms of images, such as John Milton in *Paradise Lost*; John Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (which is one of the most widely read book ever written in English); Benjamin Keach in *The Travels of True Godliness*. These writers emphasized the importance of metaphors and others images to attract the attention of the readers. Accordingly, it is a mistake to claim that all Puritans were literalists.

## Conclusion

Shakespeare's portrayal of the Puritans' religious ways in his play, *Twelfth Night*, was an attack on their strict morality. But, the description of Puritans is rather caricatural, because he relied on incorrect facts to elaborate his satirical work. Malvolio is far from the real picture of Puritanism.

This caricatured depiction of Puritans has had a great impact on many writers and intellectuals throughout generations till today. Two examples illustrate well this aspect: the nineteenth-century writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, depicted Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter* as being hypocrite, arrogant, and joyless, and the twentieth-century writer and critic, Mencken, who campaigned against the Puritans' norms, defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear of that someone, somewhere, may be happy" (Mencken, 1919, pp. 205-206). Anti-Puritan literature, initiated by the post Reformation writers, such as Shakespeare and Jonson, and reinforced by media in modern time, have hugely contributed to the fact that Puritanism is one of the least understood parts of Britain's heritage. For this reason, new researchers try objectively to shed light on the Puritans as they really were.<sup>iv</sup> To do so, they feel obliged to be careful of all the anti-Puritan writers' propaganda. When they come to study the early-modern society in England, they unanimously stress the danger of regarding the term "Puritan" as referring to a homogeneous group of people. Indeed, they recall that the word "Puritan" is an umbrella term which refers to people with the wide variety of ideas and values. The term should be, therefore, nuanced if the researcher wants to study history of Puritanism; and, more importantly, he should make abstraction of the parodies of the anti-Puritan writers. The contradictions of their accusations on Puritans is an obvious evidence that their charges were not accurate. On the one hand, some of the detractors, such as Shakespeare, highlighted Puritans' hostility to the public amusement and zeal for religion, as it was pointed out previously, and on the other hand, other opponents claimed that Puritans were not committed enough in the faith. The great Catholic Thomas More accused his contemporary, Tyndale and his Puritan disciples, to be overly tolerant. The leader of the Quakers, George Fox, despised the 'sporting and feasting' of Puritans (Ryken, 1990, p. 1). Such contradictions give to the reader a clue to reliability degree of credibility of Shakespeare's representation of Puritans. Indeed, recent scholarship argues that Puritans were overall positive towards recreational enjoyment. Roberts is one of the modern scholars who gives some standout examples of these modern scholars who demonstrate that enjoyment and recreation were important aspects of puritan life (Roberts, 2015, p. 2). Many influential Puritans writers encouraged Christians to be joyful. Sibbes, for example, claimed that "Joy is in the habitation of the righteous. It becomes the righteous to be joyful" (Sibbes, 2015, p. 51). Similarly, another Puritan writer, Bernard, advocated a joyful life: "there is a kind of smiling and joyful laughter [...] which may stand [...] with the best man's piety" (Bernard, 1803, p. 57). Shakespeare's representation of Puritans is therefore completely false. Puritans were not like Malvolio, always too serious, joyless fanatic and opposed to laughter.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Among these writers who parodied Puritans, the writer can cite for example John Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605); Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614).

<sup>11</sup> My use of the term "Puritan" is to refer to a broader meaning of the movement. It is therefore used to include the moderate and radical Protestants who sought to reform the established Church of England. For more information concerning the difficulties to define the word, see Hall, B. (1970). *Puritanism: The Problem of Definition*. In G.J. Cuming (Ed.), *Studies in Church History* (283-296). Vol. 2. London: Cambridge University Press; Collinson, P. (2008). *Antipuritanism*. In J. Coffey & C. H. Lim (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (19-33). Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

<sup>111</sup> For the virulent attacks on theatre, see Simon Palfrey, 2014, p. 43-55; Pollard, 2004, p. 118-123.



<sup>1v</sup> Francis Bremer, Patrick Collinson, C. S. Lewis, Christopher Hill, A. G. Dickens, Leland Ryken, and Neil Keeble are examples of the scholars who attempted to rehabilitate Puritanism, avoiding false assessments that could mislead their studies.

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