

Topic: Malvolio and the Puritan debate

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Puritanism in England

Let me clarify at the beginning that **while examining the term Puritan** in *Twelfth Night*, we need to keep in mind that it **had none** of the **1630s association or connotation.**

The Puritan movement in England began during the reign of Elizabeth I, with the **intention of “purifying” the Anglican Church. Puritans were Protestants who were not satisfied with the Reformation of the Church of England and demanded more reforms and cleansing of the Anglican Church. They wanted a complete dis sever with the Roman Catholic Church, insisting upon a simplification of Church rituals, clergy and were opposed to “popish idolatry”. They focused on a godly life, free of useless priestly interference. Initially they were a minority group, mostly Lutherans, but with time Calvinism gained currency. It**

is also important to remember that the Puritans were divided in small factions. During Elizabeth's time, Puritans with extremist views were often repressed and persecuted.

By the time Shakespeare began writing/directing/producing his plays, the Puritan movement had become stronger and inclined towards Calvinism. These Puritans emphasized on personal piety and were averse to all kinds of frivolous exercises. In fact, when theatres started coming up in London, the Puritans were instrumental in forcing the authority to construct the playhouses outside the city precincts. This opposition must not have gone down well with playwrights and this could be one reason why Shakespeare incorporated the torture of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

In *Twelfth Night*, Maria uses the term “Puritan” to describe Malvolio. This is a general hostility towards Malvolio because like Puritans of the time, he disapproves fun, festivity and frivolity of all kinds in the household. In reality, Malvolio as the Steward of the house is responsible for a general discipline and smooth sailing which is impossible in the presence of Sir Toby. And this is something we understand and approve as audience as well. But one needs to understand that in a comic plot all anti-comic elements are inevitably opposed and eventually defeated.

[So, we need to locate the actual reason of the inherent antagonism between Malvolio (the anti-festive force) and the revelers under Sir Toby (pro-festive force).]. ** Refer to discussion on Olivia's household.