

Twelfth Night

William Shakespeare

Lecture: 01

Title and Subtitle

Krishnakali Basu (Ghosh)
Associate Professor
Department of English
Barrackpore Rastraguru Surendranath College

The title of Twelfth Night instantly recalls the eve of Epiphany, i.e. the twelfth night of Christmas. It is usually believed to be the Day of Revelation when the Magi visited the Baby Jesus and announced the Saviour's arrival in the planet. Yet, however, this Shakespearean play has nothing to do with Epiphany, baptism and Christ's birth. In the Church of England the Twelfth Night of Christmas, the last day of Christmas festivities was celebrated on January 5th with the Twelfth Night Cake followed by the proclamation of Lord and Lady of Misrule who led the party, drinking and debauchery. It was one of the very few times of the year when servants were allowed to mix with their masters, sometimes even switching roles through disguises or by virtue of their lot in the cake cutting ceremony. In the play Feste the Fool, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew can all be considered versions of Lord of Misrule, while Maria bears strong resemblance to the lady of Misrule. They are essentially Olivia's dependents but act like masters and mistress of her house. Sir Toby's reply to Maria is case in point when Maria tells him about Olivia's discontent of Toby's behaviour, "Why? Let her except, before excepted" (act i sc iii). The topsy-turvy social order is found also in Malvolio's ambition to marry his mistress Olivia and thus become the lord of her estate: "There is example for't ; the lady of the Strachy married the yeoman of the wardrobe".(Malvolio's soliloquy act iii sc v)

Recalling the convention of the Ancient Roman Festival of Saturn, Twelfth Night celebrates the saturnalian spirit that implicates a temporary suspension of rules and social order. It is set against the typical austerity preached and practised by the Puritans of the era: "Dost thou think, that thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" Sir Toby's curt reply to Malvolio is a case in point (act ii sc iii). There is only one mention of the Twelfth Day of December in Sir Toby's song in act ii sc iii which invites Malvolio's interference and subsequent conspiracy against him. On the other hand, mentions of "What you will" occurs twice in the play, once by Sir Andrew and then by Olivia. The typical saturnalian mood is conveyed through the play's subtitle What You Will, i. e. Do as you please, or even who cares, let the chaos reign. And chaos reigns in Illyria. Most of the Illyrians are sick of self-love and suffer from exaggerated emotion. Each is confined in his or her own understanding, characters are mostly extroverts yet unable to communicate between each other. The Illyrians love to hide their own selves and delight in natural disguise without knowing what they want


in real life. No work, no goal, no cause make the Illyrians appear crazy, over - sensitive, sick of self-love ; yet lovable and not even unfamiliar too.

Last but not the least, judging the play only by its saturnalian or yuletide spirit will ignore the message it finally conveys. The audience or the readers cannot avoid that responsibility as the playwright's challenge to interpret the play as they might please, is made apoparent through the play's subtitle. In this connection the end of the play is significant and very different from those of other romantic comedies of Shakespeare.

In the final scene all characters meet on the street giving up their self-confinement and misunderstandings are cleared by the arrival of the Eureka moment or the moment of epiphany when Antonio asks Sebastian " How have you made division of yourself ? " Or, as Orsino says, "One face, one voice, one habit and two persons, / A natural perspective that is and is not". It would not be quite far-fetched to recall Genesis 1:27, "So God created man in his own image,... male and female he created them." Once epiphany is reached illusions cease to continue and reality, though forced, must be accepted without much complaints. Marriage involves greater social responsibilities and we are left with the assurance that Illyrians will grow mature and responsible though the "notorious wrong"-doing towards Malvolio is treated with much light-heartedness as part of Christmas fun-making. Twelfth Night is finally a comedy and Shakespeare insists upon the fact that the world is essentially a happy place and it is not only our right but our duty to make ourselves happy. Thus, Malvolio, the tormentor of happiness is made unhappy, while his persecutors remain rewarded. Yet finally, the solitary figure of Feste on the stage singing of the wind and the rain suggests the reintroduction of reality ; once the festivities are over social norms are back in place to frown upon chaotic behaviour.

Both titles, therefore, are important to the play as a whole elucidating its theme and message and involving the audience in the action.

[Wards: 808]

** Contact through  if necessary

+91 7980327471 (Time: 4 to 9 P.M.)