Respected Shakespeare scholars Harold Bloom and Isaac Asimov dedicate a good deal of comment in their writings on the major role that Puritanism plays in both the turn-of-the-century period and in “Twelfth Night, or, What You Will” itself as it relates specifically to the eventual treatment of the character of Malvolio.

I share some of these historical facts and astute observations to help us better understand the action of the play centered on the sub-plot of the “dunning” of Malvolio and his angry assurance at the end of the play — “I’ll be reveng’d on the whole pack of you!”

**ACT II, Sc 3, 138-150**

**MARIA** (To Sir Andrew & Sir Toby)
Marry sire, sometimes he is a kind of Puritan.

**SIR ANDREW**
O, if I thought that, I’d beat him like a dog.

**SIR TOBY**
What, for being a Puritan? Thy exquisite reason, dear knight?

**SIR ANDREW**
I have no exquisite reason for’t, but I have reason good enough

**MARIA**
The devil a Puritan that he is, or anything constantly, but a time-pleaser, an affectioned ass that cons state without book, and utters it by great swarths;
the best persuaded of himself, so crammed (as he thinks) with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him: and on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work.

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**ACT V, Sc 1, 334-337**

MALVOLIO (To Olivia)
Why have you suffer’d me to be imprison’d,
Kept in a dark house, visited by the priest,
And made the most notorious geck and gull
That e’er invention play’d on? Tell me, why?

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**ACT IV, Sc 1, 371**

OLIVIA (To Orsino following Malvolio’s exit)
He hath been most notoriously abus’d

Whether Malvolio is indeed a Puritan or simply acts like a Puritan in the eyes of others in Olivia’s household is immaterial. Shakespeare has Maria call Malvolio “a kind of Puritan”.

Bloom elaborates on that word “kind” with:

“The censorious Malvolio, or sham Puritan, is only a screen image that masks his desire to have greatness thrust upon him. Essentially, Malvolio is cursed by the dangerous prevalence of his imagination, and not by the rigid class structures of Shakespeare’s world.
Malvolio is more the victim of his own psychic propensities that he is Maria’s gull. His dream of socio-erotic greatness (‘To be Count Malvolio!’) is one of Shakespeare’s supreme inventions, permanently disturbing as a study in self-deception and in the spirit’s sickness.

What matters most about Malvolio is not that he is Olivia’s household steward but that he dreams so that he malforms his sense of reality and so falls victim to Maria’s shrewd insights into his nature.

[Nevertheless], Maria’s accurate portrait of an affected time server is one of the most savage in Shakespeare.”

But, what about the word “Puritan”? Why so much odious reference to the “kind of Puritan” or “sham Puritan” or “Puritan” period?!

And, why did Shakespeare create this particular character in this single play within the canon to highlight the strong animosity to the Puritan “persuasion”?!

In order to understand the dark tones of this cruel sub-plot we must take a look at the historical moment.

From Isaac Asimov’s assertions we learn that:

“The Protestant Reformation which began to affect England in the reign of Henry VIII settled down at last into a typical English compromise under Elizabeth I. There remained those men of Protestant persuasion, however, who were dissatisfied with the compromise and demanded that the English church be purified of those remnants of Catholicism which it possessed.
These demanders of purification came to be called Puritans and they grew more prominent through Elizabeth’s reign although she remained strong enough to refuse to give it to them even when they gained control of Parliament.

The Puritans were self-consciously virtuous men who were equally conscious of the vices of those who disagreed with them. Stalwartly against serious form of immorality, vice and crime, Puritans tended to be just as stalwartly against trivial forms of these same things. By wasting their efforts on the inconsequential, they antagonized many who would have been willing to join the assault on important issues. Furthermore, their pride in virtue was such that anyone was delighted when a Puritan was caught in sin, and it became easy to equate Puritanism with cant and hypocrisy.

As a professional dramatist and actor, Shakespeare had a specific grudge against Puritans since they denounced the theater as a haunt of sin and vice and an encouragement to idleness. It was their intention to close down the theaters if they could, and a professional dramatist and actor like Shakespeare could scarcely be expected to show Puritanism anything but hostility in consequence.”

So, in that historical setting do we find ourselves with Malvolio (his name translates to “ill will”) who begins his presence in the play as a “normative worthy” only to “undergo radical transformations” (Bloom) as the play unfolds.

Malvolio is Olivia’s capable steward and hard-working business manager; he is also humorless, austere, proud, and easily angered – “a barren rascal” as earmarked by Feste. A man of melancholic “humor”.

“Baiting Malvolio...was not sadistic but cathartic: it enacted again the ritual expulsion of the scapegoat.
“To see the self-destruction of a personage who cannot laugh and who hates laughter in others becomes an experience of joyous exuberance for an audience that is scarcely allowed time to reflect upon its own aroused sadism.” (Levin)

Transported by the supposedly amorous hints of Olivia, Malvolio bursts forth in a rhapsody that is one of Shakespeare’s finest outrages beginning with “…I will be proud…” and ending with “Jove, I thank thee!” (Act II, Sc 5, 160-179)

“Shakespeare carefully keeps Malvolio a politic pagan here as well as a dazed egomaniac unable to distinguish ‘the full prospect of his hopes’ from reality. And then he is ‘carried off by the plotters to be bound in a dark room as therapy for his madness.’ ” (Bloom)

Was Malvolio a Puritan? Or, was he only “a kind of Puritan” or even a “sham Puritan”?

The aspersion seems to matter greatly to the plotters of the gulling.

And his gulling -- unfair abuse or just comeupance?
Named for the twelfth night after Christmas, the end of the Christmas season, Twelfth Night plays with love and power. The Countess Olivia, a woman with her own household, attracts Duke (or Count) Orsino. Two other would-be suitors are her pretentious steward, Malvolio, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Onto this scene arrive the twins Viola and Sebastian; caught in a shipwreck, each thinks the other has drowned. William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night is a romantic comedy written for the Elizabethan stage. The full title is Twelfth Night, or What You Will. Shakespeare wrote the play in the festive spirit of the Twelfth Night of the Christmas season, January 6, as part of events celebrating the holiday season. The play uses mix-ups, pranks, and comic dialogue to achieve its effect. Composition and First Performance. Shakespeare wrote Twelfth Night between 1600 and 1602. Its first documented performance was on February 2, 1602, at the hall of London's Middle Temple, a facility that housed and educated aspiring lawyers. At our feast we had a play called "Twelfth Night, or What You Will," much like "The Comedy of Errors." A good practice in it to make a Steward believe his Lady Widow was in love with him, by counterfeiting a letter. It's interesting that Manningham's diary entry focuses on the Malvolio sub-plot, which isn't necessarily what contemporary readers think of when they reflect on the play. Manningham's entry suggests that, at least for him, the play's ridicule of the social-climbing Puritan figure, Malvolio, was the most interesting and entertaining part of the performance.