

Critical Drinking: Analyzing *Twelfth Night*'s "Drunken Rogue"

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## Critical Drinking: Analyzing *Twelfth Night*'s "Drunken Rogue"

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes Sir Toby Belch—a knight and notorious alcoholic in *Twelfth Night*—and uncovers Shakespeare's social critique about excessive consumption as an abuse of power. Alcohol was essential to the Elizabethan diet, but Shakespeare's plays employ characters that take drinking to excess. A surface-level reading of Sir Toby highlights the use of drunkenness for comedic effect without delving into issues surrounding abuse; I argue that a close reading of Sir Toby reveals a deeper critique of social behavior and warns audiences about the negative effects of overindulgence. First, I provide a historical analysis of alcohol consumption in Elizabethan culture to establish a baseline of its use within the different social classes; overconsumption was often overlooked in the aristocracy but was considered socially unacceptable in the lower classes. Next, I use character analysis to unpack the traits of the Shakespearean drunk and Sir Toby's role in society. By dissecting his character, I argue that his extreme consumption is an abuse of his position. Finally, I draw connections between Sir Toby's character and the Elizabethan aristocracy to reveal how characters like Sir Toby function as a critique of the ruling class's abuse of power. This paper considers how Shakespeare's works might question issues of social class and exploitation through a character who is overlooked due to his comical antics, concealing how seemingly harmless behavior can be an abuse of power.

Keywords: *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare, drunkenness, social critique, Sir Toby Belch, alcoholism

Imagine being a meal prepper in Elizabethan England: you would need to allot two pints of beer or ale per person per day because men, women, and children would each consume an estimated dozen or more pints per week (Greenblatt). Alcohol consumption plays an integral role in human history. In both Elizabethan England and Shakespearean plays, drinking is a dominant theme because alcohol was the beverage of choice due to a diseased water supply. Shakespeare often incorporates drinking in his plays, frequently for comedic effect. However, his depiction of alcohol consumption offers more than a quick laugh at the drunk's expense; Shakespeare addresses both the psychological and sociological effects of drunkenness in Elizabethan society. An example of this duality is found in *Twelfth Night's* Sir Toby Belch, who boldly accuses his doctor of being "a rogue, and a passy-measures pavan" because he is unable to attend to Sir Toby due to being drunk, which is ironic because Sir Toby is a notorious drunkard who goes on to condemn both alcoholism and himself when he claims, "I hate a drunken rogue" (5.1.187-92). The drinking in *Twelfth Night* reflects the cultural norms, but Sir Toby's drunkenness reveals deeper character flaws and behavior that is destructive to both self and society. Analyzing Sir Toby's character breaks through his surface-level humor and delves into a serious critique of the aristocracy and excessive consumption as an abuse of health and power.

Alcohol was a cultural staple in Elizabethan England, and Shakespeare's works reflect that lifestyle. According to scholar Albert Tolman, "the life which [Shakespeare] portrays is interspersed with drinking almost as systematically as the punctuation marks break up a printed page" (82). While this hyperbolic statement is not necessarily credible because punctuation in Shakespearean works changes depending on the edition, it reiterates that drinking was quite prevalent in Shakespeare's plays. Some critics view the humorous nature of drunkenness as a mere reflection of the culture and not a critical issue because it is simply good social fun. Critic Sean Benson claims that "Shakespeare's plays likewise allow for, and perhaps even implicitly encourage, social drunkenness as a lubricant for fellowship, especially if practiced in the company of fellow believers" (148). Benson views social drinking as acceptable, and points out that should a character take their merry-making too far, they are viewed with "a sympathetic eye" because it's "harmless occasional excess" (151) and "social drunkenness

among believers—comic and raucous as it is—not only takes place but can, under the right circumstances and with the right intentions, constitute good Christian fellowship" (157). *Twelfth Night* supports Benson's claims when there are no lasting consequences to teach Sir Toby—or the audience—about the harm to both self and society that comes from overindulgence.

Other critics, however, address the elements of social critique running through Shakespeare's work. By analyzing the social status or the socioeconomic limitations between characters in the play and members of the audience, the abundance of alcoholism in Shakespeare's work reveals the theme "that alcoholic drinks are good things when used in moderation, but bad things when used to excess" (Trawick 56), which explains why "the drunkenness of some character is an essential feature of the plot, and in most of these cases one feels a distinct note of disapproval" (Tolman 84). By creating characters who exhibit the negative effects of inebriation, Shakespeare criticizes unwanted social behaviors regarding alcohol without making overt political or religious statements that would alienate the varying demographics in his audience. Author George Light furthers this argument by stating that "drink and drunkenness were concerns of great interest in late-Tudor and early Stuart England. Typically the problem of excessive drinking was demonized as something alien and other" (161). If drinking to excess was seen as socially unacceptable, and audiences were meant to view drunkards—both in plays and in life—with condemnation, why is drunkenness a common feature in Shakespearean plays, and why are there little to no consequences for those who overindulge, like Sir Toby, who bumbles his way through the play only to end up with a bump on the head? Where is the disapproval and condemnation of his character? Uncovering Shakespeare's social critique first requires historical context.

In Shakespeare's day, illness and disease were exacerbated by lack of access to healthy food and clean water. Author Stephen Greenblatt writes that "vitamin deficiencies were rampant. Some but not much relief from pain was provided by the beer that Elizabethans, including children, drank almost incessantly" (3-4). Insufficient diet, poor health, and death were a reality for all but the wealthiest, and even they were not always exempt from these hardships. Shakespeare's audience, his actors, and his family would have been subject to this instability, and as such, his plays reflect the use of and

dependency on alcohol. In *Shakespeare and Alcohol*, Buckner Trawick states that “over 500 references to and tropes of drinking testify to alcohol’s ubiquity in early modern diet and social life” (8). While not all these references were to excessive use, it still shows how integral alcohol is to the society depicted in Shakespeare’s plays. According to Benson, it was such a common element that “Luther even permitted its use in baptism: ‘If in an emergency there’s no water at hand, it doesn’t matter whether water or beer is used’ ” (147). Alcohol was critical to life and was incorporated into religious activities and celebrations. However, the high demand for alcoholic beverages and lack of brewing or distilling resources made outsourcing a necessity.

Dependency on importation, coupled with the taxes and restrictions placed on imported goods, increased the uncertainty of supply, which increased social unrest, so it is prudent that plays and other public communications illustrate the irresponsibility of drunkenness. Greenblatt explains that “English authorities were also deeply concerned throughout the period about the effects of a taste for luxury goods on the balance of trade” (5). If the peasantry were to overindulge like the aristocracy, the entire system would collapse due to the supply’s inability to meet the public’s demands. By limiting access to imported goods through taxes and inflation, the aristocracy could not only keep the higher-quality items to themselves but could also keep the peasantry firmly in their place.

Shakespeare highlights these social concerns by integrating economic details such as specific types of alcohol or the origin of the product into the play: Sir Toby says to Sir Andrew, “O knight, thou lack’st a cup of canary. When did I see thee so put down?” to which Sir Andrew responds, “Never in your life, I think, unless you see canary put me down” (1.3.73-75). The labels “sir” and “knight,” reveal that both men are of a higher social class because they are affluent enough to be drinking “a cup of canary,” which is wine imported from the Canary Islands. According to “Canary Island Wine and Its Historical Trading Links” by Oliver Horton, “millions of litres per annum [were] once shipped to England and drunk by royalty, aristocrats and writers. It was a sweet, fortified wine in those days, often referred to as Sack or Malmsey, the nickname given to the Malvasia grape. It was Shakespeare’s drink of choice and was mentioned in no fewer than three of his playwrights.” Sir Toby’s social status is important because it sets him apart from

the commoners and puts him above the sumptuary laws of the era. Greenblatt comments on the fact that “conspicuous consumption that was tolerated, even admired, in the aristocratic elite was denounced as sinful and monstrous in less exalted social circles” (5). Members of the audience would have recognized this social class distinction, and for the lower classes, it would have been clear that Sir Toby’s drunkenness and behavior, despite being comical, were not meant to be mimicked but rather avoided by the lower classes. Although Sir Toby is a comical character who never suffers punishment for his drunkenness, the audience would have perceived his behavior as only being permissible for someone of his status. The peasantry would see drunkenness as a dangerous waste of two essential commodities: money and alcohol.

While alcohol was considered a safe and even healthier alternative to water, constant use to the point of excess was damaging to one’s health and had several negative side effects, side effects which Shakespeare notes in his plays by making his alcoholic characters have problems other than drunkenness. In the article “‘Fluster’d with Flowing Cups’: Alcoholism, Humoralism, and the Prosthetic Narrative in *Othello*,” professor David Wood writes that “Shakespeare’s representation of alcohol and its effects correspond[s] with medical theorizing on the topic from the period, which demonstrates that Shakespeare’s investment in mimetic characterization hinges on his use of available discourses for such characterization.” The depiction of characters suffering the side effects of alcoholism not only reveals Shakespeare’s dedication to accuracy in his writing but also that he was conscientious of making sure that the audience knew the costs of living like his characters.

In his book *Alehouses and Good Fellowship in Early Modern England*, Mark Hailwood explains that people believed “alcohol allegedly caused such physical maladies as gout, pleurisy, palsy, dropsy, infertility, the loss of female beauty, and impaired memory and physical capabilities” (483). In addition to these ailments, the characters in Shakespeare’s plays who were known to overindulge were most often cast as being overweight, flatulent, rowdy, and crude. In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby Belch is shown to suffer several of these ailments; his name alone symbolizes his gassiness due to constant overeating and drinking. In a conversation between Sir Toby and Maria, the gentlewoman of Olivia’s house, Sir Toby says, “Confine! I’ll confine myself no finer than

I am," to which Maria responds, "That quaffing and drinking will undo you" (1.3.9-13). In the footnote for "confine," Greenblatt explains that it has a dual meaning and refers both to Sir Toby's apparel and his obesity. Maria's reply reminds the audience of the harmful, if not fatal, effects of being severely overweight and an alcoholic.

Shakespeare continues his social critique through characters' actions and dialogue. In a scene featuring Feste (the Clown), Olivia, and Sir Toby, both Feste and Olivia reveal their negative, although tolerant, opinions of Sir Toby:

CLOWN. Thou hast spoke for us, madonna, as if thy eldest son should be a fool. Whose skull Jove cram with brains, for—here he comes—

*Enter SIR TOBY*

one of thy kin has a most weak *pia mater*.

OLIVIA. By mine honor, half drunk.  
What is at the gate, cousin?

[...]

SIR TOBY. 'Tis a gentleman here. [*He belches*] A plague o'these pickle herring!  
[*to CLOWN*] How now, sot?

CLOWN. Good Sir Toby.

OLIVIA. Cousin, cousin, how have you come so early by this lethargy?

SIR TOBY. Lechery? I defy lechery.  
There's one at the gate. (1.5.103-16)

In this conversation, Feste alludes to the fact that Sir Toby acts like a foolish child who depends on Olivia even though Sir Toby is her uncle. Feste also points out that Sir Toby "has a most weak *pia mater*," which, according to Greenblatt, is a reference to the membrane around one's brain; thus, Feste is implying that Sir Toby is brain-damaged or unintelligent. Olivia then remarks that Sir Toby is "half drunk" and asks him why he is already so intoxicated, which implies his alcoholic nature. She feels it is too early in the day to be inebriated

and questions his "lethargy," but Sir Toby mistakes the word for "lechery," which illustrates his impairment and sensitivity toward condemnation of his proclivities.

Further analyzing the physical ramifications of alcoholism, Wood claims that "Shakespeare's drunken dramatic characters confirm that thermal escalations play a central role in the way in which the early modern English conceived of drunkenness. These psycho-physiological effects include the flushing of the face and other caloric descriptors accompanying the drinking of alcohol" (27). The "caloric descriptors" that Wood discusses are evident in Olivia's question about Sir Toby's lack of energy and drunken state. The diction used within the text and the appearance of Shakespeare's characters on stage make the critical message about avoidance of overconsumption clear to the audience.

The negative connotations surrounding the health of those who drink too much are juxtaposed with the negative political and religious opinions of intoxication. Professor Wood comments on Shakespeare's alcoholics, saying that "each depicts rashness as drunkenly motivated, reworking the well-worn connection between the body and body politic. [...] Such politically pointed representations of drunkenness thus involve for Shakespeare deadly earnest representations of it in some as a disabling disease that should properly be termed alcoholism" (27). The general populace's opinion would have been influenced by state law and religious beliefs, and Shakespeare's plays reflect the balance between the two. In a conversation between Olivia and Feste, Olivia asks, "What's a drunken man like, fool?" to which Feste replies, "Like a drowned man, a fool, and a madman. One draught above heat makes him a fool, the second mads him, and the third drowns him." Olivia then says, "Go thou and seek the crowner and let him sit o' my coz, for he's in the third degree of drink. He's drowned" (1.5.120-25). All three of the descriptions Feste gives of a drunken man are characteristics that are both disorderly and self-destructive. Olivia's comment about "the crowner," which Greenblatt explains is another word for coroner, indicates that she feels her uncle is a lost cause who will surely die soon, a remark which reveals concern for and criticism of those who act like Sir Toby.

In addition to indicating public opinion, Shakespeare's plays reflect the conflict between the Puritan and Christian views on drinking as well. Benson writes:

Sir Toby asks the rhetorical question of Malvolio, ‘Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?’ (2.3.114-16). That Toby defies [Malvolio] suggests that other Christians will continue to enjoy their cakes and ale—traditional fare at christenings, weddings, funerals—and the fellowship that attends social eating and drinking of alcohol [...] despite [Puritan] attempts to suppress such longstanding practice. (156)

Sir Toby’s boisterousness in contrast to Malvolio’s self-righteousness critiques the two religious opinions. Hailwood explains that the “Puritans treated drunkenness as a sin, a violation of the seventh commandment, a profanation of God’s name, a sign of eternal damnation, and a source of strife” (484). This representation of both the Christian and the Puritan beliefs indicates Shakespeare’s attempt at balanced social commentary that alcohol is an essential part of daily life but must be used in moderation rather than abused. Benson remarks that “Toby strikes an oblique or glancing—the typical Shakespearean—blow against those who, like Malvolio, would hollow out the old customs” (156), indicating that Shakespeare was not as restrictive in his views on alcohol as the Puritan community, especially since Malvolio is the one punished in *Twelfth Night*.

Finally, Sir Toby’s last line of the play provides not only a resolution but an indication that Shakespeare is condemning excessive drinking. Sir Toby is injured and asks Feste if he sent for the doctor, but Feste states, “Oh, he’s drunk, Sir Toby, an hour ago. His eyes were set at eight i’th morning,” to which Sir Toby replies, “Then he’s a rogue, and a passy-measures pavan. I hate a drunken rogue” (5.1.189-92). This final revelation about being “a drunken rogue,” especially coming from Sir Toby, indicates that Shakespeare is making overindulgence something to be detested; Sir Toby’s reformation shows that those who do drink in excess need to amend their ways. Shakespeare’s use of humor in creating characters such as Sir Toby Belch opens his work to criticism; however, though some accuse him of supporting drunkenness, a closer analysis of the plays’ cultural context reveals layers of social commentary regarding and even criticizing drunken behavior. These layers indicate that Shakespeare’s use of such characters is an admonitory statement against the overuse of alcohol.

Alcohol was essential to Elizabethan health and wellbeing, but the damaging effects of alcoholism are

obvious in the illnesses and social disapproval that addicts face. Shakespeare presents his audience with insight into the economic restrictions and social hierarchy of the period, and by doing so highlights alcoholism’s harmful effects while also upholding the views of both the Church and the state in order to maintain the social order while providing entertainment to the masses. While this analysis focuses on Sir Toby and the messages that stem from his depiction and behavior, Shakespeare reveals other prominent social critiques and commentaries about health, class, and identity in *Twelfth Night*. Sir Toby is often with Sir Andrew Aguecheek, another aristocrat and drunken fool, who is being taken advantage of by Sir Toby and is too dim-witted to realize it. Sir Andrew is another prime example of how drunkenness affects one’s health and social standing; he is perceived as nothing more than an incompetent fool who is not worthy of marrying Olivia. In contrast, Feste the Clown comes from a much lower social class, and yet he seems to be the wisest character and is one of Olivia’s closest confidants. Shakespeare uses the theme of confused or hidden identity to drive the plot of *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare’s play shows the audience that people are not always who they seem to be and that appearance or social class are superficial constructs that carry too much weight in society.

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