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Time as a Tool of Patriarchal Oppression in *As You Like It*

Michele Herrman

... 'Tis ten o'clock.

Thus we may see ... how the world wags.

'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,

And after one hour more 'twill be eleven;

And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,

And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot;

And thereby hangs a tale. . . (II.viii.22-28).

In the patriarchal court society, which maintains power by perpetuating economic domination, the concept of time presents a problem: No man is immortal, so Time always triumphs. Patriarchal leaders seek to compensate for the fact that they "rot and rot" from "hour to hour" by reproducing the status quo with each generation, passing on wealth and privilege to their first-born sons. Through the process of inheritance, then, men in power defy their enemy, time, maintaining the power structure indefinitely. Since the male elite is able to transcend time, and those below are not, these powerful men are able to use time as a tool of oppression. By presenting time as the enemy, issuing deadlines for submission which must be met in order to avoid capital punishment, the patriarchal leaders prevent their subjects from ever claiming time as their own and from using it for their own advantage. In *As You Like It*, the patriarchy uses its hereditary monopoly on time to coerce Orlando and Rosalind into submission; in the forest of Arden, though, the two lovers are freed from this autocratic construction and disarm the oppressor's weapon by claiming time as their own tool for happiness. They discuss their own relative perceptions of time and negotiate a compromise, forming the basis for an egalitarian relationship, overthrowing the patriarchy in the process.

In a patriarchal society those who lack status and material wealth are without value. Orlando, for example, has no role in society because he is not the first-born son and, therefore, has not inherited anything from his dead father. Oliver uses his status to destroy his younger brother, of whom he is extremely jealous. Oliver has "trained [Orlando] like a peasant, obscuring and hiding from [him] all gentlemanlike qualities" (I.i.63-4), stripping him of any chance for success in the court. As a result, Orlando is a social misfit—a man with no status. Lack of wealth and the proper business connections make his chances for attaining power nil; and since men are defined by these standards in a patriarchy,

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he has no valid role whatsoever. It is no wonder that Orlando is indifferent to death, if not suicidal:

... if I be foiled, there is but one shamed that was
never gracious; if killed, but one dead that is willing to
be so. I shall do my friends no wrong, for I have none to
lament me; the world no injury, for in it I have nothing.
Only in the world I fill up a place, which may be better
supplied when I have made it empty (I.ii.170-176).

The patriarchy can take away the time Orlando has by killing him, as Oliver would very much like to do; or it can make the time Orlando has left so miserable that he welcomes death. In either case, patriarchal control over time through inheritance alienates Orlando from his own life.

In the court of Duke Frederick, the patriarchal monopoly on time has even more dire consequences, for the Duke has enough power to not only alienate his subjects from time but also to use time itself as a tool of oppression. While the Duke is hardly immortal— not above the power of time, himself— his status in the hierarchy allows him to actually surpass the aging process by imposing capital punishment on his subjects. The Duke threatens Rosalind with death, not through any guilt of her own, but simply through her relationship to her father. As in any patriarchal society, the daughter is defined by the status of her father, and since her father is Duke Frederick's enemy, she has no worth. Delivering his ultimatum, the Duke demonstrates his control over time by setting a deadline for Rosalind's flight from the court: "Within these ten days if that thou beest found/ So near our public court as twenty miles,/ Thou diest for it . . ." (I.iii.38-41). As sovereign, the Duke claims time as his executioner, reminding Rosalind again, "If thou outstay the time, upon mine honor,/ And in the greatness of my word, you die" (I.iii.84-5). Honor and greatness, the values used by the patriarchy to justify male dominion, are at stake should the Duke allow a guiltless female to live.

Only in the forest of Arden can the patriarchal dominion, the "briers of the working-day world" (I.iii.11-12), be overthrown, and can a non-threatening notion of time be constructed, based on egalitarian values. Relieved of his patriarchal inheritance by the usurpation of his younger brother, Duke Senior sets the precedent for the discovery that time is not ominous:

... Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court? Here feel
we not the penalty of Adam; The seasons'
difference, as the icy fang And churlish chiding
of the winter's wind, Which, when it bites and blows

upon my body Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and
say 'This is no flattery'. . . (II.i.3-10).

The "penalty of Adam," the burden of competition and materialism in the patriarchal world, has been lifted from Duke Senior's shoulders. In the woods, he finds that patriarchy, not time, is his enemy; the seasons change, but not even the harshest weather proves as threatening as the "peril" of the "envious court."

When Orlando first arrives in Arden, a confrontation with death causes him to slip into a patriarchal attitude toward time. When his companion, Adam, is near starvation, Orlando orders him to wait to die, attempting to claim the supremacy over time which he has grown up believing powerful men possess: "I will be with thee presently, and if I bring thee not something to eat, I will give thee leave to die; but if thou diest before I come, thou art a mocker of my labor" (II.vi.9-12). As a man, Orlando has been socialized to take control; as soon as he is away from his oppressive brother, he becomes an oppressor himself. He automatically tries to seize food from Duke Senior, rather than asking him to share. The egalitarian values of nonviolence and cooperation are utterly foreign to him, so he is astounded by the Duke's charity. He is calmed by this uncommon generosity and realizes that this foreign way of life does not find time threatening:

. . . But whate'er you are
That in this desert inaccessible,
Under the shade of melancholy boughs,
Lose and neglect the creeping hours of time,
. . . Let gentleness my strong enforcement be (II.vii.109-112, 118).

Orlando, thus, makes the connection between an egalitarian lifestyle and freedom from the oppressive construction of time; in other words, he sees that freedom from patriarchal control and aggressive modes of action results in freedom from the patriarchal construct of time as a tool of oppression. Adam is not in danger of starving, because he has entered a realm where his needs will be met; in a sense, the egalitarian way of life actually extends his time, rather than constricting it.

In the forest, perceptions of time are relative, rather than subject to authoritarian control. Thus, Orlando and Rosalind have the opportunity to negotiate the concept and determine together how time will affect their relationship. The lovers begin this process of negotiation upon their first meeting in the forest, Rosalind disguised as a young man:

ROSALIND: I pray you, what is't o'clock?

ORLANDO: You should ask me, what time o'day.
There's no clock in the forest.

ROSALIND: Then there is no true lover in the forest,
else sighing every minute and groaning every hour
would detect the lazy foot of Time as well as a clock.

ORLANDO: And why not the swift foot of Time? Had
not that been as proper?

ROSALIND: By no means, sir. Time travels in divers
paces with divers persons. . . (III.ii.286-294).

Orlando has, by this point, realized that the patriarchal, threatening clock does not exist in the forest; however, he needs to learn that time is not utterly relative in matters of love. He is not subject to external authority, but must accept that if he is to have an egalitarian relationship with Rosalind, he must also consider her perceptions of the passage of time, for after all, "Time travels in divers paces with divers persons." Rosalind is determined to teach him this lesson, and her disguise as a man provides her with an excuse to be assertive. This disguise eases the transition from patriarchal relationships to egalitarian relationships; by the time her true sex is revealed, she has proven herself worthy of equal treatment.

In the guise of Ganymede, Rosalind is able to express her own views on the passage of time. When Orlando is late for their second meeting, she is heart-broken; she asks Celia, "But why did he swear he would come this morning, and comes not?" (III.iv.17-18) When he finally arrives, she confronts him on his lateness, so that they can deal with the issue as a couple. She informs him that she will not stand for such rudeness again: ". . . if you break one jot of your promise or come one minute behind your hour, I will think you the most hollow lover, and the most unworthy of her you call Rosalind, that may be chosen out of the gross band of the unfaithful" (IV.i.175-179). However, while it may seem that Rosalind is taking the position of control in determining how the couple will perceive time, Orlando is not utterly submissive. He tells her, "For these two hours, Rosalind, I will leave thee" (IV.i.162). And though she puts up a fight, claiming that she cannot bear to be away from him so long, he remains firm: "I must attend the Duke at dinner. By two o'clock I will be with thee again" (IV.i.164-5). As Silvius sums up, "Love is. . . all patience, and impatience" (V.ii.92). While reaching a compromise over how to perceive time is not easy for the couple, they at least have the opportunity to do it. Back in the patriarchal world of the court, their courtship would be not even take place, because their unequal social status and Orlando's lack of land defy patriarchal values. In the forest they are equals, and have the chance to cope with an issue central to their own private interaction.

You Like It" Rawdon Wilson, too, postulates a shift in attitudes toward time as the characters move from the court to the forest, claiming that it is "a shift from a public to a private standard of measurement in which the latter becomes possible only through the fading into unimportance of the former" (p. 19). However, Wilson fails to address the power relationships implicit in the "public" construct of time, and overlooks the fact that the development of a "private standard of measurement" of time empowers the previously oppressed individuals. He admits that "One leaves the play certain that life in the polity will never be the same—convinced that the lessons of Arden have been real" and concedes that these lessons have involved "stripping value from externals" (p. 24); but he does not take his argument to the next logical step by suggesting that devaluing these "externals" results in the restructure of society with an emphasis on equality rather than first-born male privilege. However, there is no denying that a re-distribution of power does occur. Duke Frederick is "... converted/ from both his enterprise and from the world" (V.iv.155-6), and bequeaths his crown to his reformed brother and restores the land (and thus, the power) of all those whom he had exiled. In this new society, time will not be a tool of oppression, for it has been claimed by two egalitarian lovers for happier purposes.

Reference

Wilson, Rawdon. "The Way to Arden: Attitudes Toward Time in *As You Like It*." Shakespeare Quarterly. Vol. 26, No. 1. Winter 1975. pp. 16-24.