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

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The “beloved community” did not
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break the chains of oppression that had

... 'It is 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,
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

The "penalty of Adam," the burden of the patriarchal world, has been lifted from the woods, he finds that patriarchy, change, but not even the harshest word "peril" of the "envious court."

When Orlando first arrives in the woods, he is compelled to slip into a patriarchal companion, Adam, is near starvation attempting to claim the supremacy of believing powerful men possess: "I will bring thee not something to eat, I will diest before I come, thou art a mocked man, Orlando has been socialized to from his oppressive brother, he becomes automatically tries to seize food from him to share. The egalitarian values are utterly foreign to him, so he is astounded calmed by this uncommon generosity of life does not find time threatening:

... But whate'er you are
That in this desert inaccessible
Under the shade of melancholy;
Lose and neglect the creeping
... Let gentleness my strong

Orlando, thus, makes the connection and freedom from the oppressive consequences he sees that freedom from patriarchal action results in freedom from the pain of oppression. Adam is not in danger entered a realm where his needs will way of life actually extends his time.

In the forest, perceptions of time to authoritarian control. Thus, Orlando opportunity to negotiate the concept will affect their relationship. The love upon their first meeting in the forest, man:

ROSALIND: I pray you, wha

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It is no wonder that Orlando is:

but one shamed that was
but one dead that is willing
to do no wrong, for I have none to
injury, for in it I have nothing.
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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: Pray you, sir, 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... (II.i.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.i.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.

In his article “The Way to Arden: Attitudes Toward Time in As
You Like It” Rawdon Wilson, too, posits the idea that time as the characters move from the
patriarchal to the egalitarian world of the forest “is a shift from a public to a private sl
pace, where the latter becomes possible only through the loss of the former” (p. 19). However, Wilson
acknowledges that there is a limit to the development of a “private” world, where time empowers the previously oppressed
men. “One leaves the play certain that life is the same—convincing that the lessons of the
play have been learned—yet he does not take the next step by suggesting that devaluing the
feminine in order to restructure society with an emphasis on male privilege. However, there is no question that change does occur. Duke Frederick is
not the same man as he was in the beginning. He has a new enterprise and from the world” (V.iv.71).

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