

The Political Conscious of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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## The Political Conscious of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

ANDREW BARNABY

the purpose of playing . . . [is] to hold as 'twere the mirror up  
to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and  
the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

*Hamlet* (III.ii.20–4)

When in *As You Like It* the courtier-turned-forester Jacques declares his desire to take up the vocation of the licensed fool, he is immediately forced to confront the chief dilemma of the would-be satirist: the possibility that his intentions will be ignored and his words misconstrued as referring not to general moral concerns—the vices of humankind, for example—but rather to specific realities, persons, events (II.vii.12–87).<sup>1</sup> Given that Jacques has just demonstrated a laughable inability to grasp the barbs of a true practitioner of the satiric craft (*Touchstone*), we must be wary of taking him as a reflexive figure of Shakespeare's own vocation. But the lines undoubtedly show Shakespeare's discomfort with the recent censoring of satiric material (including a well-publicized burning of books in June of 1599),<sup>2</sup> and his own earlier experience with *Richard II*, as well as Ben Jonson's recent jailing for the "seditious and slanderous" content of the *Isle of Dogs*, had certainly made him familiar with the danger posed by those readers who misread the typical as the straightforwardly topical. Despite his simple-mindedness, then, Shakespeare's Jacques does in some way reflect a working playwright's

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continual anxiety that his works might be misconstrued as deriving meaning not from his intentions but from ideas and events beyond the signifying scope of his labors.

The modern equivalent of this reader-writer conflict resides not in the competing interpretations of author and court censor but in those of author and scholar-critic. But the necessity of facing up to such interpretative discrepancies has for the most part been obscured by the reigning critical methodology in Renaissance studies, New Historicism, and in particular by its inability to formulate a convincing explanatory model for the processes of acquisition by which texts come both to represent and to participate in the larger discursive systems that determine them. Although it would be counterproductive to dismiss the very impressive critical achievements of New Historicism, we might yet need to consider what we are to make of writing itself as a purposeful and perspectively limited activity: what of writers as the agents of meaning within their own textual compositions? what do we do when what we can reconstruct of authorial intention runs counter to “cultural” evidence? and, more broadly, how precisely can any literary work be understood to signify historical reality?

In taking up these issues, Annabel Patterson has recently argued that it has become necessary to “reinstate certain categories of thought that some have declared obsolete: above all the conception of authorship, which itself depends on our predicating a continuous, if not a consistent self, of self-determination and, in literary terms, of intention.” And she adds specifically of poststructuralist criticism of Shakespeare that the “dismissal of Shakespeare as *anybody*, an actual playwright who wrote . . . out of his own experience of social relations” has shown itself to be both incoherent methodologically and reductive at the level of historical understanding.<sup>3</sup> Such out-of-hand dismissal precludes the possibility of understanding how the early modern period actively conceptualized and debated its cultural forms or how an individual writer may have sought to engage in those debates.

The remainder of this essay will focus on how *As You Like It* (and so Shakespeare himself) does consciously engage in debate concerning the crises points of late-Elizabethan culture: the transformation of older patterns of communal organization under the pressures of new forms of social mobility, an emergent market economy, and the paradoxically concomitant stratification of class relations; the more specific problems of conflict over land-use rights, the enclosure of common land and its

attendant violence, poverty and vagrancy.<sup>4</sup> In considering how modern historical understanding might itself seek to articulate this engagement, moreover, I shall be arguing that the play's meditation on the unsettled condition of contemporary social relations is precisely, and nothing more than, an interpretative response to the perceived nature of those conditions.

To recognize that what we have in Shakespeare's play can never be anything but a rather one-sided dialogue with social conditions then current is not to deny that the play is, in crucial ways, at once topical and discursively organized. But it is to acknowledge that such topicality and discursivity are necessarily transformed by the historical condition of writing itself. What we are left with, then, is not a symbolic re-encoding of the entire sweep of current circumstances (as if the play could encompass the full historical truth of even one element of Elizabethan culture in its own tremendous complexity). Shakespeare does indeed address the peculiar historical circumstances of late-Elizabethan culture, and that engagement is evidenced in the formal elements of his play (most particularly in its pastoral form, an issue that will be examined in greater detail in subsequent sections). But if *As You Like It* is historically relevant it is so primarily because it can be read as a rhetorical (and so intentional) act in which one writer's sense of things as part of history becomes available to his readers in the purposeful design of the play. It is to an understanding both of that design and of the limitations of current critical practice that the following discussion is directed.

## I

The play begins with Orlando's complaining of his mistreatment at the hands of his older brother, Oliver, who has refused to fulfill the charge of their father, Sir Rowland de Boys: it was Sir Rowland's wish that his youngest son receive both a thousand crowns and sufficient breeding to make a gentleman of himself, despite being excluded from the much greater wealth of the estate because of the law of primogeniture. But Oliver has treated Orlando as a servant instead, and, in likening himself to the prodigal son (I.i.37–9), Orlando seeks both to remind Oliver that, unlike his gospel counterpart, *he* has yet to receive his promised inheritance and to register, for the audience as well as for Oliver, the discrepancy between his noble birth and his current circumstances.

In the course of rebuking Oliver for being so remiss in his fraternal duties, Orlando violently, if briefly, seizes his brother. In his finely nuanced reading of the play, Louis Montrose has argued that, in its explosive suddenness and aggressiveness, Orlando's action captures the essential tension caused by the culturally charged nature of the sibling conflict over primogeniture in Renaissance England, where younger sons of the gentry were excluded from the greater wealth of family estates in increasing numbers.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the symbolic associations of the violence complicate the political inflections of the scene. For, in context, the violence does not just move from younger brother to older brother but also from servant to master and from landless to landowner, and these associations extend the cultural scope of the already politicized conflict. As Montrose suggests, in the broader discursive contextualization of the scene, Orlando's alienation from his status as landed gentleman serves "to intensify the differences between the eldest son and his siblings, and to identify the sibling conflict with the major division in the Elizabethan social fabric: that between the landed and the unlanded, the gentle and the base."<sup>6</sup>

Richard Wilson has recently elaborated on this argument by suggesting that the play's central conflicts reenact the particular tensions unleashed in Elizabethan society by the subsistence crisis of the 1590s. According to Wilson, in its "discursive rehearsal" of the social hostilities generated out of the combination of enclosure and famine (especially severe in the years just prior to the play's composition and in Shakespeare's native Midlands), the play becomes complexly enmeshed in the "bitter contradictions of English agricultural revolution," a struggle played out in the various conflicting relations between an enervated aristocracy, a rising gentry, and a newly dispossessed laboring class and effected primarily by the emergence of a new market economy.<sup>7</sup>

As compelling and historically informed as Wilson's reading is, however, it is yet undermined by its vagueness concerning how the play actually represents these issues. That Wilson wants and needs to posit the dialogic encounter of text and context as the site of the play's (and his argument's) meaning is evidenced by his own critical rhetoric. As we have just noted, he refers to the play as a "discursive rehearsal" of a multifaceted sociocultural history; elsewhere he writes that "the play is powerfully *inflected* by narratives of popular resistance"; that "social conflict [over famine and enclosure] *sears* the text"; that Duke Senior's situation in the forest of Arden "*chimes* with actual

projects” associated with the capitalist development of the woodlands; that the play “*engages in the discursive reevaluation of woodland*” that emerged as part of the rise of a market economy in late-Renaissance England.<sup>8</sup> The problem with this type of phrasing is that it never renders intelligible the processes by which text and context come into contact. We are dealing, in short, with the theoretical problem of how precisely a literary work may be said to allude to, reflect, meditate on, or even produce the historical forces that form its enabling conditions.

To put the issue another way, Wilson’s reading is stranded by its inability to assess what we might call the play’s signifying capacity. While I am not disputing that the particulars of enclosure and famine (and more generally the social transformation of late-Elizabethan society) constitute the proper historical backdrop of the play, Wilson consistently scants the historical conditions of writing and reception, and he therefore has no means of assessing the work of the text as a site of meaning.<sup>9</sup> Eschewing any reliance on the text’s own coherence or Shakespeare’s possible intentions as explanatory models, Wilson’s argument relies instead on the juxtaposition of select formal elements of the play (plot details, bits of dialogue, character motivation, etc.) with a dense evocation of historical details that appear circumstantially relevant to the play’s action. While this mode of argumentation—what Alan Liu has recently termed a kind of critical *bricolage*<sup>10</sup>—yields some perceptive insights into the workings of the play, social reality, and the discursive networks connecting them, what it really produces is a series of strange allegorical encounters in which the play is said to provide shadowy symbolic re-encodings of a broad spectrum of historical realities: legal edicts, demographic statistics, anecdotes from popular culture, institutional practices, persons, events, and even vast structural changes in the organization of English culture.

To get a clearer sense of this method we might consider just a few of his more suspect interpretative findings. For example, according to Wilson, Rosalind’s lack of “holiday humor” in *Lii* stems not from her father’s banishment but from her recognition of a broader crisis of the aristocracy (particularly centered on a new “aristocratic insolvency”), and this even though her own subsequent banishment is read as a symbol of the expulsion of tenant farmers from common lands; and later her cross-dressing becomes an “impudent challenge” both of rural poachers to “the keepers of game” and, more generally, of class and gender trespassers to the patriarchal hierarchy maintained by the Elizabethan upper orders. The “obscure demise” of Orlando’s

servant, Adam, figures the rising “mortality rate” in rural England due to the late-1590s dearth, even though Adam does not die (he merely disappears as a character—a point to which we shall return). Orlando’s carving of his beloved Rosalind’s name on the forest trees is said to symbolize a Stuart policy of marking trees as part of the surveying that preceded royal disafforestation; and this is so even though such a policy post-dates the composition of the play and even after Wilson has described Orlando as a gentleman-leader of popular resistance for whom the damaging of trees was a potent sign of protest.<sup>11</sup> In almost all of the examples he gives, the text is so overdetermined by contradictory historical realities that it becomes virtually unreadable; despite his historicizing efforts, Wilson seems to repeat the very argument of those he terms “idealist critics” who see the play as “free of time and place.”<sup>12</sup>

The argument’s lack of coherence appears to derive primarily from Wilson’s attempt to analyze what he calls the play’s “material meaning.” Although he never says precisely how we are to understand the phrase, his one effort at glossing suggests that it is something known only in the negative, as that which is concealed or evaded by the text’s explicit statements.<sup>13</sup> This is an odd notion, given the ease with which Wilson finds the text making explicit statements about the social situation;<sup>14</sup> indeed, given his practice, it makes more sense to take the term “material” in its traditional Marxist sense: the “historical” as located in a culture’s dominant mode of production. In the case of *As You Like It* the “material” would then include the cultural struggle over agrarian rights, the conversion of woodland to arable land, and the broader movement of a regulated to a market economy (seen especially in the capitalization of land-use rights), and this “material” history would provide the base from which the manifestations of superstructure (including the play) would derive meaning.

The problem with this formulation is that it both reduces the play to a straightforward (albeit jumbled) allegory of “history as it really happened” and avoids the theoretical problem of how (or where) the play actually represents this history. Addressing precisely this hermeneutic problem in relation to the Shakespearean text (and so offering a different sense of “material meaning”), Patterson properly asks: “how do words relate to material practice?” And she notes that Shakespeare himself “used both ‘abstract’ and ‘general’ as terms to denote his own form of material practice, writing for a popular audience, the ‘general,’ and abstracting their experience and his own into

safely fictional forms.”<sup>15</sup> Such a critical stance depends on several related notions: that Renaissance writers were quite capable of comprehending the cultural situation of their own productions; that these productions must be read as forms, that is, as organized, fictionalized, and generically regularized abstractions of perceived realities; that any discussion of form must consider the representational practices by which historical situations are reproduced aesthetically; and that, as abstractions, forms take their meaning from a variety of interpretative exchanges—between author and world as an act of perception, author and reader/audience as a rhetorical act, reader/audience and world as an act of application—and therefore cannot be explained by recourse to the notion of a general, all-encompassing discursive field. To view fictional form as a significant material practice in its own right is to see that it at once signifies historical realities and constitutes its own reality, that it is both constative and performative; it thus “both invite[s] and resist[s] understanding in terms of other phenomena.”<sup>16</sup>

As texts such as Ben Jonson’s Preface to *Volpone* suggest, for Renaissance writers this invitation and resistance is played out primarily (though not exclusively) in ethical terms.<sup>17</sup> The citation from *Hamlet* that stands as my epigraph makes a similar point: “to hold . . . the mirror up to nature” is to engage in moral discrimination, distinguishing virtue from vice in acts of praise and blame. Such acts might themselves be understood as historically relevant; indeed, Hamlet’s earlier assertion that actors are “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time” (II.ii.524–5) suggests that dramatic representations were expected to speak to contemporary history (albeit in “abstract and brief” form). Leah Marcus takes this point even further in her claims that “local meaning was at the center” of Renaissance literary practices, and that what contemporaries “attended and talked about” concerning a literary work was its “currency . . . , its ability to . . . ‘Chronicle’ events in the very unfolding.” But, as she also points out, Renaissance “poets and dramatists [typically] looked for ways to regularize and elevate topical issues so that they could be linked with more abstract moral concerns.”<sup>18</sup> In *As You Like It* that ethical sensibility, “regularizing and elevating” a pressing cultural debate over current social conditions, is marked especially in the play’s engagement with the traditions of pastoral, where pastoral must be understood as a form obsessively concerned with the related questions of social standing (the constant re-marking of distinctions between gentle and base) and moral accountability.<sup>19</sup> It is to an attempt to assess the

moral and political commitments of the play, as well as the representational strategies it employs to render these commitments intelligible, that we now turn.

## II

The three plays that Shakespeare wrote in 1599—*Julius Caesar*, *Henry V*, and *As You Like It*—are all variously concerned with aristocratic identity, an issue cited, probed, redefined in late-Elizabethan culture in “a vast outpouring of courtesy books, poetry, essays, and even epics,” all directed toward “the fashioning . . . of the gentleman or the nobleman.”<sup>20</sup> *Julius Caesar* looks at the issue as a crisis of aristocratic self-definition in the face of Tudor efforts at political and cultural centralization; the play examines this crisis and moralizes it in terms of a questioning of the continued possibility of aristocratic excellence (defined primarily in terms of humanist notions of virtuous civic action).<sup>21</sup> *Henry V* explores the relationship between aristocratic conduct and national identity in the context of militarist expansionism, but this focus is extended to an examination of the aristocratic capacity for responsible leadership of commoners and the popular response to that leadership.<sup>22</sup> As critics have recently argued, both plays are concerned with the nature of historical understanding itself, and especially with examining the possibilities and limits of applying knowledge of the past—already an interested rhetorical activity—to present concerns.<sup>23</sup> Like *As You Like It*, then, both plays are interested at once in the vexed relation between aristocratic culture and the broader workings of political society and in the representational and interpretative practices by which fictional accounts serve as mediatory sites of informed public concern over contemporary affairs.

*As You Like It* returns the meditation on aristocratic conduct to the domestic sphere where, as we have seen suggested, it focuses on the related issues of inheritance practices, agrarian social structure, and the current controversy over land-use rights. Right from its opening scene, in fact, the play introduces us to its particular interest in the problem of aristocratic definition. Indeed, despite Orlando’s complaints against the system of primogeniture which denies him his brother’s authority, the real source of his frustration is that his “gentlemanlike qualities”—the very marks of his class, so crucial in a deferential society—have been obscured by his having been “trained . . . like a peasant” (I.i.68–70). Throughout the opening scene, in fact,

what Orlando is most concerned with is the possibility that his status might be taken away simply by its not being properly recognized. In its particular locating of Orlando's predicament, then, the play's opening scene initiates a line of inquiry that will both inflect the rest of the play and share in a culturally charged debate: by what markings is it possible to identify the true aristocrat?

But the issues of status and its violation, of place, displacement, and recognition—all so central to the play's comic vision—are not confined to the interactions among the upper orders. For they are raised as part of an exploration of the customary bonds between the upper and lower orders as well. And, as the relationship between landowner and landless servant depicted in the opening suggests, the play also puts in question the nature and meaning of aristocratic conduct toward social inferiors. Shakespeare, we shall see, interlaces the depiction of violated noble status with a depiction of the displacement of laboring classes (represented in the opening scenes by both Orlando and Adam) from their traditional places in the service of the rural nobility.

The play's concern with the related issues of social standing and displacement, aristocratic conduct, and the moral bonds connecting high and low, is further developed in II.iii. Upon returning from Frederick's court, Orlando is secretly met by Adam who warns him of Oliver's villainous plot:

this night he means  
To burn the lodging where you use to lie,  
And you within it.

(II.iii.22–4)

Amidst the special urgency of the moment, Adam's warning is enveloped in a broader meditation on what has happened in the wake of Sir Rowland's passing. So he addresses Orlando:

O unhappy youth,  
Come not within these doors! Within this roof  
The enemy of all your graces lives.  
Your brother—no, no brother, yet the son  
(Yet not the son, I will not call him son)  
Of him I was about to call his father—  
.....  
This is no place, this house is but a butchery;  
Abhor it, fear it, do not enter it.

(II.iii.16–28)

Marking the logical consequence of the sibling conflict set in motion in the opening scene, Oliver's "unbrotherly" act is viewed here as particularly heinous, totally unnatural, a kind of abomination; indeed, as Montrose notes, we hear in this struggle the echoes of the original fratricide, the elder Cain killing his younger brother Abel.<sup>24</sup> But the fratricide is clearly rewritten in the cultural context of Renaissance inheritance practices, for we note that Oliver's "sin" is figured particularly as a repudiation of the familial duties and obligations emanating from a line of inheritance between noble father and noble son. Sir Rowland's heir, in effect, perverts the very link between nature and human social order—the family—and thereby disavows the very foundation of his inheritance. Oliver's unbrotherly dealings mark the violation of more than just the person of his brother; they are symbolically broadened to assimilate the house itself, symbol of both the family and the larger estate as an extension of the family. In dishonoring his place within the family, Oliver threatens the very cultural inheritance that extends a sense of place to those outside the family. Adam thus identifies Oliver's special villainy as a violation of kinship ties that both reenacts human history's primal scene of violence and marks the loss of that "place"—the noble manor—whose very purpose is to locate the various lines of interaction defining the social order.<sup>25</sup>

In II.iii, then, younger brother and elder servant are linked together in their experience of the psychically disorienting effects of displacement, a loss registered particularly in the feelings of estrangement they voice over their impending exile (II.iii.31–5, 71–4). There is something extremely conservative in this nostalgic evocation of tradition, of course, but it is important to insist that the image of "proper" social relations that Shakespeare depicts does not offer merely a moralized restoration of traditional cultural forms but provides rather an extended meditation on the political economy that should at once reveal and sustain the moral economy.

As an example of this concern, Shakespeare's complex adaptation of the gospel parable he so carefully etches into the opening scene deserves greater attention. We noted earlier that at the very outset of the play Orlando's self-figuration as the prodigal son is intended to register the discrepancy between his noble birth and his current circumstances. But the very lack of applicability of the parable to Orlando's case—unlike the prodigal son he has neither squandered his inheritance nor even received it—is even more significant within the play's moral and political vision. This discrepancy is critical primarily because it

reconfigures the parable's central focus on the interaction of family members from how each of the two brothers interacts independently with the father to a direct confrontation between them. At the most obvious level, this change has the effect of politicizing the fraternal struggle by making it a conflict over the now-deceased father's patrimony, whereas in the parable the fraternal conflict is less about inheritance per se than with the sibling rivalry over the attentiveness of the still-living father. Shakespeare, that is, transforms a story concerned with the nature of a future "heavenly" kingdom into a decidedly human, indeed, political affair.

More specifically, the retelling provides a completely different context for understanding the roles of the two brothers within the parable. For example, whereas the parable faults (even as it treats sympathetically) the elder brother's uncharitable attitude toward his younger brother, the play, by contrast, renders this animosity, and the behavior that attends it, unsympathetic; indeed, Shakespeare appears to conflate two different parts of the parable by rewriting the elder brother's (now perverse) behavior as the cause of the (now innocent) younger brother's degradation. Living among the hogs and eating husks with them, Orlando appears as the dutiful son, toiling long years without just recompense. Although the play never quotes the parable directly on this point, Shakespeare subtly borrows from the parable the elder brother's complaint to his father—"All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours"—and reassigns the context to Orlando's frustration with Oliver's unfair treatment of him. And as Orlando is no longer responsible for his fallen circumstances, so his situation ceases to represent a moral failing—a lapse in personal ethical responsibility—and comes instead to mark a political and economic awareness of the social mechanisms that lead one into such penury.

Oliver's role is thereby refigured (loosely to be sure) as "prodigal." In the parable, of course, it is the elder brother who laments that while he has never "disobeyed any orders" of the father, his prodigal brother enjoys all the special privileges even after "swallowing up [the father's] property." But Shakespeare makes the true bearer of privilege appear prodigal precisely because, while he has done nothing to earn his portion of the estate (other than being the eldest son), he has enjoyed its benefits without sharing them with his hard-working brother. And even as the play merges the Judeo-Christian primal scene of violence—Cain's killing of his younger brother Abel—with the

Christian parable of the difficult demands of brotherly love, it also recontextualizes the elder brother's failure of charity in the political relations not just between elder and younger sons (already politicized in Renaissance culture) but also between masters and servants, landed and landless, gentle and base. Moreover, while the opening scene stages, in the guise of Orlando's violence, a threat to the overturning of traditional authority, the subsequent scenes stage a recognition of what is more precisely in need of transformation: the aristocratic figure who fails to fulfill the obligations of status and custom, and especially to maintain cultural stability by sustaining the moral (and political) value that accrues to social place.

It is within the context of such unbrotherly dealings and their symbolic affiliation with social injustice conceived on a broader scale that Duke Senior's praise of rural life at the opening of act II has its strongest resonance:

Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,  
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet  
Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods  
More free from peril than the envious court?  
Here feel we not the penalty of Adam.

(II.i.1-5)

Exiled to Arden by his usurper-brother, Frederick, Duke Senior moralizes his own violated status as a paradoxically edifying experience, one in which the recovery of a communal (fraternal) ethic, in opposition to a courtly one, marks the return to a prelapsarian condition.

We must pause over such an idealization, of course. For it is possible to read the "pastoral" vision here as merely mystifying the class consciousness it appears to awaken. Montrose asserts, for example, that Renaissance pastoral typically "puts into play a symbolic strategy, which, by reconstituting the leisured gentleman as the gentle shepherd obfuscates a fundamental contradiction in the cultural logic: a contradiction between the secular claims of aristocratic prerogative and the religious claims of common origins, shared fallenness, and spiritual equality among . . . gentle and base alike."<sup>26</sup> For a modern reader especially, the very social structure maintained in Duke Senior's Arden weakens the political force of his claims for ethical restoration. From this limited perspective, that is, Duke Senior bears a remarkable resemblance to the gentleman-shepherd of so many Elizabethan pastorals, who, "in the idyllic countryside" is most determined to

“escape temporarily from the troubles of court.” As Montrose adds, “in such pastorals, ambitious Elizabethan gentlemen who may be alienated or excluded from the courtly society that nevertheless continues to define their existence can create an imaginative space within which virtue and privilege coincide.”<sup>27</sup> The duke’s idealization of the leisured life of the country would then, despite its egalitarian appeal, serve to re-emphasize the division between baseness and gentility and to celebrate aristocratic values in isolation from a broader vision of how those values serve as the foundation of an entire network of social relations.

We might note further how Duke Senior’s aristocratic rhetoric appears to de-radicalize its own most potent political symbol: the image of a prelapsarian fraternal community. As Montrose and others have pointed out, from the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 onward popular social protest in England often challenged class stratification by appealing to a common Edenic inheritance. Powerfully condensed into the proverb, “When Adam dalf and Eve span, who was then the Gentleman?” such protest offered a radical critique of aristocratic privilege, both interrogating the suspect essentialism inherent in the notion of “degree” and reversing the valuation of labor as a criterion of social status.<sup>28</sup> Duke Senior’s speech, however, does neither: it never questions the “naturalness” of his rank within the fraternal community (which never ceases to be hierarchically organized) nor does it champion labor as a morally edifying and communal burden. For Duke Senior, the retreat to a prelapsarian condition becomes rather the site from which to critique court corruption and decadence.

Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the reformist, populist impulse embedded in that critique. For, as act I depicts it, the condition of fallenness that exists in Frederick’s court is defined primarily by its persecution of those members of the nobility—Orlando and Rosalind—most popular with the people (I.i.164–71, I.ii.277–83). Moreover, Orlando and Rosalind are conceptually linked to Sir Rowland himself, so universally “esteemed,” as Frederick tells us, and so an enemy (I.ii.225–30). Frederick’s function as the play’s arch-villain is registered therefore, like Oliver’s before him, by a lack of respect for the memory of that overdetermined father whose recurrent, if shadowy, presence in the play provides a “local habitation and name” to a broader cultural ideal: the forms of customary obligation that link gentle and base in pastoral fraternity, an evocation of religious communion that emphasizes social dependency and reciprocity even as it does not thereby reject society’s hierarchical structure.

Much of the value (both moral and political) associated with that community is symbolized in Duke Senior's phrase "old custom" and its own associations with popular protest. As Patterson remarks, even when such protest did not advocate structural changes in the social order, an appeal to the authority of "origins" (again, often condensed into the recollection of a common Edenic origin) "was integral to the popular conception of *how* to protest, as well as providing theoretical grounds for the 'demands,' for the transformation of local and individual grievances into a political program."<sup>29</sup> *As You Like It* makes it clear that the duke's use of the phrase cannot be seen as privileging the rights of the nobility alone; indeed, Adam's subsequent lament over his exile (II.iii.71–4) is designed to set out the meaning of "old custom" from the perspective of the rural servant. Linking together a sense both of the immemorialness of custom and of its historical embeddedness by reference to his age and associating that further with the original Edenic dispensation through his name, Adam's speech marks how an appeal to customary practices could serve the interests of the lower orders.

In the tradition of popular protest, an idealization of the past could serve as the focal point of protesters' awareness of current social injustice, even as the perception of injustice was rarely separated from an appeal to the moral economy taken to subtend the political one. This ethical evaluation of the mutual interests of the upper and lower orders is powerfully figured in the tableau that closes act II: Duke Senior, Orlando, and Adam gathered together at a life-sustaining meal. Here, the problem of rural poverty (old Adam is starving to death) is answered in the nostalgic evocation of "better days," when paupers were "with holy bell . . . knoll'd to church, / And sat at good men's feasts" (II.vii.113–5). The meal, reimagined as a Sabbath-day feast, symbolizes the restoration of social communion especially as this is founded on those culturally sustaining lines of authority in which servants and masters properly recognize each other with reciprocal "truth and loyalty" (II.iii.70), the very qualities that were the hallmark of the days of Sir Rowland.<sup>30</sup>

In focusing on the paired plights of Orlando and Adam up through the end of act II, the play defines that perception of injustice, and of the moral obligations of the community, from the perspective of the lower orders and their first-hand experience of the effects of enclosure and eviction, dearth and hunger. Moreover, what Wilson misreads as Adam's subsequent "demise" (his disappearance from the play after act II) can be better understood as Shakespeare's attempt to give even more nuanced

attention to the plight of the lower orders. In replacing Adam with the shepherd, Corin, as the play's test case, Shakespeare refocuses the issue of the condition of rural laborers in a character whose situation more obviously typifies such conditions in their particular relation to enclosure and eviction, especially in the face of the new commercialization of the land.

Significantly, Shakespeare puts the words describing the bleak prospects for rural living into Corin's own mouth; he thereby suggests a clear-sighted popular consciousness of the current situation. So Corin has earlier described his living in response to Rosalind's request for food and lodging:

I am shepherd to another man,  
 And do not shear the fleeces that I graze.  
 My master is of churlish disposition,  
 And little reaks to find the way to heaven  
 By doing deeds of hospitality.  
 Besides, his cote, his flocks, and bounds of feed  
 Are now on sale, and at our sheep-cote now  
 By reason of his absence there is nothing  
 That you will feed on.

(II.iv.78–86)

Hunger is again the central issue, but the exchange subtly shifts attention away from the almost incidental hunger of disguised aristocrats (who can afford to “buy entertainment” [line 72]) to the plight of the rural laborer whose suffering derives from the very condition of his employment (significantly, in the service of an absentee landlord). As Lawrence Stone summarizes the historical situation described here:

the aristocracy suffered a severe loss of their landed capital in the late-Elizabethan period, primarily because of improvident sales made in order to keep up the style of life they considered necessary for the maintenance of status. When they abandoned sales of land and took to rigorous economic exploitation of what was left in order to maximize profits, they certainly restored their financial position, but at the expense of much of the loyalty and affection of their tenants. They salvaged their finances at the cost of their influence and prestige.

He adds that as part of a “massive shift away from a feudal and paternalist relationship” on the land, “these economic developments were dissolving old bonds of service and obligation,” a process compounded by an “increasing preference [among the

nobility] for extravagant living in the city instead of hospitable living in the countryside.”<sup>31</sup> A figure for the current destruction of the manorial economy, Corin’s master is guilty of all these charges simultaneously: he is absent from the estate; he exploits the (once commonly held) land for profit; he threatens to sell the estate with no concern for his workers’ future prospects; he refuses the ethical responsibilities of his class—hospitable living, the sustenance of the customary culture, leadership of the countryside. The scene’s concern with the immediate need to allay hunger becomes then a stepping-stone to a broader meditation on hunger’s place in the complex socioeconomic transformation of late-Elizabethan culture. From the immediate perspective of the play, moreover, this transformation threatens to become a dangerous social upheaval, the blame for which must be assigned to the moral failure of well-to-do landowners.

As idealistic as it is, then, Celia and Rosalind’s offer to purchase the “flock and pasture” and “mend” Corin’s wages (II.iv.88, 94) retains an element of popular political consciousness; for it suggests that it is still possible for laborers to reap the rewards of faithful service to masters who know how to nurture traditional lines of authority.<sup>32</sup> Shakespeare’s revision of his source text, Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde*, is particularly relevant on this point, not the least for its demonstration of the deliberateness with which Shakespeare addresses the specific issue of economic hardship among the rural poor. In Lodge’s romance, the shepherd (Coridon) offers Aliena and Ganymede the simple comforts of his lowly cottage as part of a traditional extolling of pastoral content:

Marry, if you want lodging, if you vouch to shrowd your selves in a shepherdes cotage, my house . . . shalbe your harbour . . . [A]nd for a shepherds life (oh Mistresse) did you but live a while in their content, you would saye the Court were rather a place of sorrowe, than of solace. Here (Mistresse) shal not Fortune thwart you, but in meane misfortunes, as the losse of a few sheepe, which, as it breeds no beggerie, so it can bee no extreme prejudice: the next yeare may mend al with a fresh increase. Envie stirs not us, wee covet not to climbe, our desires mount not above our degrees, nor our thoughts above our fortunes. Care cannot harbour in our cottages, nor do our homely couches know broken slumbers: as we exceede not in diet, so we have inough to satisfie.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that the sheepcote is for sale (and so, by a stroke of

good fortune, available as a home for the wandering noblewomen) is only incidental to Coridon's prospects; the simple pleasures of his life will hardly be affected by a change in masters. Shakespeare, by contrast, revalues Corin's poverty by tying it explicitly to his economic vulnerability in the new commercial market: as one who, as "shepherd to another," does not "shear the fleeces" he grazes. In associating Corin's straitened circumstances—his limited supply of food is not "inough to satisfie"—with his very lack of authority over the estate (and his master's unreliable ownership practices), Shakespeare's revision of the scene emphasizes the real threat of rural dispossession; he thus makes it clear that "pastoral content" can only result from a functional economic relation between servant and landowner: hence, Corin's concern that his new masters actually "like . . . / The soil, the profit, and this kind of life" (II.iv.97–8).

The conflicted relationship between leisured gentleman and base laborer is symbolically played out in the conversation between Corin and Touchstone in III.ii. Although the confrontation is humorous, it also includes a more serious evaluation of the attendant problems of social stratification, marked especially by the lack of respect shown toward common laborers. As Judy Z. Kronenfeld points out, Shakespeare here transforms the typical pastoral encounter in which an "aristocratic shepherd" (a gentleman pretending to be a shepherd) demonstrates courtly superiority by mocking the "clownish countryman" (or what is really a "burlesque version of the countryman").<sup>34</sup> What Shakespeare depicts instead is an encounter between a lowly court servant (now a pretended gentleman) and a sympathetically realistic shepherd. Touchstone's pretense to gentility in the scene hearkens back to his original meeting of Corin in II.iv. There, in the company of Celia and Rosalind, Touchstone responds to Corin's "Who calls" with the demeaning "Your betters, sir" (lines 67–8): the response mockingly raises Corin to the level of the gentlewomen ("sir") only to reassert the difference in social standing ("your betters") and to place Touchstone in that higher circle.

Touchstone maintains the masquerade in III.ii when he attempts to flout Corin's baseness in a condescending display of courtly sophistication (lines 11–85). But, as Kronenfeld notes, the sophistication comes off as mere "court sophistry," and the emptiness of his claims to superiority is thereby exposed as nothing more than a witty social rhetoric covering over an absence of any clearly defined *essential* differences between gentle and base. Shakespeare thus uses the tradition against

itself, for the typical encounter of aristocrat (pretending to be a shepherd) and countryman—where the contrast is meant to “reaffirm the social hierarchy”—is rewritten to suggest (albeit humorously) the mere pretense of that contrast.<sup>35</sup> It is possible to read the scene as positing that there are no differences between gentle and base, a position which might include the more radical recognition that class standing itself is merely the result of an ideological manipulation of cultural signs. Within the context of the play as a whole, however, it perhaps makes more sense to read it as a moral commentary on class division and especially on the meaning of aristocratic identity: if gentility is as much a social construct as it is a privileged condition of birth, its maintenance requires that it be continually reconstructed through meritorious signs, and these signs are to be made legible in the virtuous conduct shown toward those whose livelihood depends on how the “gentle” fulfill the obligations of their class.

### III

In discussing George Puttenham’s *Arte of English Poesie* in the context of Elizabethan pastoral discourse, Montrose cites Puttenham’s claim that pastoral was developed among ancient poets “not of purpose to counterfait or represent the rustically manner of loves and communication: but under the vaile of homely persons, and in rude speeches to insinuate and glaunce at greater matters, and such as perchance had not bene safe to have beene disclosed in any other sort.”<sup>36</sup> Puttenham’s related concerns with safety and the necessity of dissimulation in a dangerous social environment, the poet’s self-awareness as a cultural commentator, and the struggle to make homely fiction serve the higher ends of instruction bring us back to Patterson’s contention that Shakespeare’s own “material practice” purposely seeks out “safely fictional forms” to achieve its ends. In *As You Like It*, moreover, Shakespeare’s practice turns explicitly to pastoral form, which, we might surmise, is deliberately deployed to “glaunce at greater matters” “cleanly cover[ed]” (as Spenser puts it in the *Shepherdes Calender*) by a “feyne[d]” story.<sup>37</sup>

The precise nature of those “matters” and Shakespeare’s specific ends may be debated, of course. But it is hard to imagine that they are any less comprehensive than those attributed by Montrose to Puttenham. Puttenham, Montrose writes, conceives “of poetry as a body of changing cultural practices

dialectically related to the fundamental processes of social life"; and his "cultural relativism and ethical heterodoxy, his genuinely Machiavellian grasp of policy, are evident . . . in his pervasive concern with the dialectic between poetry and power."<sup>38</sup> It comes as some surprise, therefore, when Montrose later revises this estimation and gives us a Puttenham whose writing only serves the ends of personal aggrandizement within the confined circles of the court, whose sense of his culture's complexity is merely the sophistry of a "cunning princepleaser," and whose grasp of the political purposes of poetry never rises above its merely politic ends. And, as Montrose dismisses the narrowness of Puttenham's courtly orientation, so he dismisses pastoral discourse itself, whose power to "glaunce at greater matters" is suddenly reduced to courtliness in another form: thus, the "dominantly aristocratic" perspective of Elizabethan pastoral becomes but a reinscription of "agrarian social relations . . . within an ideology of the country," which is "itself appropriated, transformed, and reinscribed within an ideology of the court."<sup>39</sup> Pastoral's "greater matters," it seems, are only the matters of the great for whom the masks of rural encomium serve their own (narrowly defined) hegemonic interests. For Montrose, that is, despite pastoral writers' own recognition that their art form is "intrinsically political in purpose," pastoral's central concern with aristocratic identity only serves to mystify the issues of class standing and social relations it appears to raise.<sup>40</sup> As he argues, finally, because Renaissance pastoral "inevitably involve[s] a transposition of social categories into metaphysical ones, a sublimation of politics into aesthetics," it necessarily functions as "a weapon against social inferiors."<sup>41</sup>

Without denying pastoral's aristocratic orientation, we might note that it is only from the reductively binary perspective of the New Historicist that an "elite community" must be opposed to all "egalitarian ideas," or that its members could have "little discernible interest" in the condition of those who serve them.<sup>42</sup> *As You Like It* certainly suggests that such a critical perspective fails to register the possibility of the presence of dissenting voices within the dominant culture. Indeed, if the play is not in full support of the popular voice, it is yet concerned to link an aristocratic crisis of identity to the more vexing problems of the "base." Shakespeare's pastoral world is thus less concerned with celebrating nobles as virtuous than in reexamining the precise nature of aristocratic virtue. And lest we think Shakespeare is the exception that proves the rule, it is instructive to recall the aristocratic Sidney's own brief meditation on pastoral in his *Defence*

of *Poesy*: “Is the poor pipe disdained, which sometimes out of Meliboeus’ mouth can show the misery of people under hard lords and ravening soldiers and again, by Tityrus, what blessedness is derived to them that lie lowest from the goodness of them that sit highest?”<sup>43</sup> That “blessedness,” moreover, is not presumed to be the reality of his culture but only a symbolic idealization challenging his aristocratic readers to a kind of creative, ethically oriented *imitatio*.

Montrose’s Historicism cannot envision this possibility because he denies to Renaissance pastoral writers any critical distance from the courtly aristocracy from which they drew support (including occasional financial support). He goes even further in denying that “the mediation of social boundaries was [even] a *conscious* motive in the writing of Elizabethan pastorals,” let alone that a cultural critique might have been leveled “in terms of a *consciously* articulated oppositional culture.”<sup>44</sup> Such a dismissal of Renaissance writing as a purposeful, socially engaged activity is typical of New Historicist criticism more generally, which matches a methodological subordination of individual intention to larger “systems” of thought with a tonal condescension toward the capacity of earlier writers to comprehend their own cultural situations. Against this effacement of the subject, I would counter that an interest in the historical conditioning of texts is necessarily concerned with the conditions of their being written and being read, with the social processes by which meaning is formulated and communicated, with acts of knowledge as acts of persuasion, with the “rhetoricity” of texts as the essence of their historicity.<sup>45</sup> The reduction of historical criticism to the impersonal voice—to what Foucault once called the “it-is-said”<sup>46</sup>—precludes the possibility of understanding how the movement of ideas within discursive systems requires real readers and writers whose very activities help reveal to us the contours of historical existence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All references to Shakespeare’s plays are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>Celia’s earlier remark to Touchstone—“since the little wit that fools have was silenc’d, the little foolery that wise men have makes a great show” (I.ii.88–90)—obliquely refers to this.

<sup>3</sup>Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 4, 24.

<sup>4</sup>For a concise summary of these changing historical circumstances, see

Lawrence Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution, 1529–1642* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 58–117.

<sup>5</sup>Louis Montrose, “The Place of a Brother’ in *As You Like It*: Social Process and Comic Form,” *SQ* 32, 1 (Spring 1981): 28–54.

<sup>6</sup>Montrose, “The Place of a Brother,” pp. 34–5. That the exchange between Orlando and Oliver is more than just the struggle between younger and older brothers is emphasized by Orlando’s response to Oliver’s insulting question: “Know where you are, sir?” Orlando replies: “O sir, very well; here in your orchard” (I.i.40–1). The condition of “gentility” (marked in the mocking uses of “sir”) is clearly tied to the question of who actually owns the property.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Wilson, “‘Like the old Robin Hood’: *As You Like It* and the Enclosure Riots,” *SQ* 43, 1 (Spring 1992): 1–19, 3–5. For a historical overview of the broader cultural, political, and economic issues conditioning this hostility, see Roger B. Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup>Wilson, “‘Like the old Robin Hood,’” pp. 4, 5, 9; my emphases.

<sup>9</sup>Wilson’s lack of interest in what the text itself does to produce the meanings he finds in it is perhaps not so surprising given his attempt, formulated elsewhere, to theorize the fundamental irrelevance of literature to the forces of history and culture that must always supersede it. See his Introduction to *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama*, ed. Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 1–18. It should be noted that Wilson considers himself a “Cultural Materialist” rather than a “New Historicist,” and in that Introduction he seeks to differentiate the critical assumptions governing their respective practices. But the mode of argumentation employed in his essay on *As You Like It* does not bear out the differences he alleges.

<sup>10</sup>Alan Liu, “The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism,” *ELH* 56, 4 (Winter 1989): 721–71, 721.

<sup>11</sup>Wilson, “‘Like the old Robin Hood,’” pp. 4, 6, 9, 10–11, 13, 18.

<sup>12</sup>Wilson, “‘Like the old Robin Hood,’” p. 3 and n. 15. Liu remarks that “the limitation of the New Historicism is that in its failure to carve out its own theory by way of a disciplined, high-level study of the evolution of historically situated language, its discoverable theory has been too assimilable to the deconstructive view of rhetoric as an a-, trans-, or uni-historical figural language” (p. 756). Although his own critical practice employs precisely this kind of formalism, Wilson himself makes much the same complaint about New Historicist critics, whose elision of historical referent in favor of the “textuality of history,” he asserts, aligns them with New Critics (*New Historicism and Renaissance Drama*, pp. 9–10).

<sup>13</sup>Wilson first uses the phrase, without defining it, on p. 3 of “‘Like the old Robin Hood’”; later he cites Foucault’s observation that “in every society discourse is controlled and redistributed to avert its dangers and *evade its formidable materiality*.” As an instance of this, Wilson notes that “pastoral discourse . . . will conceal the real revolution in the forest economy” (p. 17; my emphases). (Inexplicably, although in his Introduction to *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* Wilson again notes Foucault’s claim for the “‘formidable materiality’ of all discourse” [p. 9], he does so as part of his critique of the overly abstract post-Marxist practice of Foucault and other French intellectuals, especially as this tradition has become the philosophical foundation of American New Historicism.) For discussion of the trope of revelatory “concealment” within post-structuralist criticism, see Richard Levin, “The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide,” *PMLA* 105, 3 (May 1990): 491–504, 493–4.

<sup>14</sup>One example: Touchstone's quip to the bumpkin, William, concerning their rival claims on Audrey—"to have, is to have" (V.i.40)—means, we are told, that a new concept of property ownership is now superseding traditional agrarian rights based on the notion of collective possession (Wilson, p. 18).

<sup>15</sup>Patterson, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>See Preface to *Volpone*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–52), 5:18–9. Having been jailed again in 1604, along with Chapman and Marston, for the anti-Scottish sentiments of *Eastward Ho!*, Jonson used the Preface to chastise readers for their propensity for assigning topical meanings to his plays: by substituting local for more general meanings, Jonson thought, his readers would necessarily fail to appreciate the moral lessons of his writing and so not see how his meanings were to be used for their own edification and improvement.

<sup>18</sup>Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 26, 41.

<sup>19</sup>For discussion, see Louis Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form," *ELH* 50, 3 (Fall 1983): 415–59, esp. 425, 433.

<sup>20</sup>Wayne A. Rebhorn, "The Crisis of the Aristocracy in *Julius Caesar*," *RenQ* 43, 1 (Spring 1990): 75–111, 81.

<sup>21</sup>For discussion, see Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 198–236.

<sup>22</sup>For discussion, see Patterson, pp. 71–92.

<sup>23</sup>Hampton, pp. 210–4; Patterson, pp. 83–90.

<sup>24</sup>Montrose, "The Place of a Brother," p. 46.

<sup>25</sup>On the importance of the noble manor to the aristocratic ethical ideal, see Don E. Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

<sup>26</sup>Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," p. 432.

<sup>27</sup>Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," p. 427.

<sup>28</sup>Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," pp. 428–32; Patterson, pp. 39–46.

<sup>29</sup>Patterson, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup>For discussion of the cultural importance of the meal as a marker of "serviceable" authority in the Renaissance, see Michael Schoenfeldt, "The Mysteries of Manners, Armes, and Arts': 'Inviting a Friend to Supper' and 'To Penshurst,'" in *The Muses Common-Weale: Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1988), pp. 62–79.

<sup>31</sup>Stone, pp. 68, 72, 84.

<sup>32</sup>The promise of increased wages for Corin recalls the 500 crowns Adam has saved under Sir Rowland (II.iii.38). Although Orlando goes on to extol Adam's virtue as "the constant service of the antique world, / When service sweat for duty, not for meed!" (lines 57–8), we see that dutiful service rightfully expects proper compensation.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas Lodge, *Rosalynde*, in *As You Like It* (A New Variorum Edition), ed. Howard H. Furness (Philadelphia, 1890), p. 338; spelling slightly modernized.

<sup>34</sup>Judy Z. Kronenfeld, "Social Rank and the Pastoral Ideals of *As You Like It*," *SQ* 29, 3 (Summer 1978): 333–48, 344.

<sup>35</sup>Kronenfeld, pp. 345, 344.

<sup>36</sup>Quoted in Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," p. 435.

<sup>37</sup>Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender*, "September" (lines 137–9), in *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 453.

<sup>38</sup>Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," pp. 435–6.

<sup>39</sup>Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," pp. 438–44, 426, 431.

<sup>40</sup>Montrose first makes this point in "'Eliza, Queene of shepheardes,' and the Pastoral of Power," *ELR* 10, 2 (Spring 1980): 153–82, 154.

<sup>41</sup>Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," pp. 446–7.

<sup>42</sup>Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," p. 427; for broader discussion, see Kevin Sharpe, *Politics and Ideas in Early Stuart England* (London: Pinter, 1989), esp. chaps. 1–2, 6, 10.

<sup>43</sup>Quoted in Kronenfeld, p. 334.

<sup>44</sup>Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," pp. 427, 432; my emphases.

<sup>45</sup>For discussion of the promise of this kind of "rhetorical" criticism, see Liu, p. 756.

<sup>46</sup>Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 122.