

“Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious”: Theatre between Court and Country

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According to Hungarian literary scholars László Kéry and Marcell Benedek, Adam from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and Bence from János Arany’s *Toldi* are much alike (Benedek 200, Kéry 184). Both old servants are brave, honest, and faithful to their masters. Be that as it may, a more conspicuous resemblance can be found, and that is the similarity between the main protagonists: Orlando and Toldi. Shakespeare’s character has two siblings, but his older brother treats him just as poorly as does György Toldi his brother Miklós. Despite his noble birth, he keeps him as a servant, denying him the possibilities of learning. Also, as it becomes clear in the first act, Orlando’s physical power is outstanding since he manages to beat Charles, the wrestling champion, without any real effort. This scene can easily conjure up Toldi’s fight with the Czech champion, where the hero kills his enemy due to his extreme strength. Moreover, the Hungarian hero manages to survive the attacks of various beasts, as does Orlando, who saves his brother from a lion. Nobility of heart is a main attribute of both of the protagonists; Toldi proves to be merciful towards his Czech opponent (who then attacks him from behind, so eventually Miklós kills him out of self-defense), and Shakespeare’s hero risks his life to save his brother who previously plotted against him. Both of the heroes prove to be morally superior to their elder siblings. As Oliver confesses to the audience, he is well aware of his brother’s higher ethics and good manners; they are the reason for which he wants to destroy him.

A deeper investigation of the relationship of the two works might be worth the effort,¹ yet this paper, however, has a different purpose. The above mentioned similarities can lead us to a different issue, which is the conflict between the court and the country. In Arany’s *Toldi*, we can see how the text builds up an opposition between the morally corrupt culture of the court and the authentic, innocent, and honest country. Miklós Toldi was raised by the rustic world, and he represents the uprightness and moral integrity of the Hungarian folk in contrast with the court filled with corruption and intrigue. As Pál Gyulai states in his critique of *Toldi*, in the protagonists soul, one can find the “simplicity, naivety, and innocence of the Hungarian character” (qtd. in Milbacher 412).

The question this paper intends to explore can be formulated as follows: can we say that Orlando is also a representative character of the higher morals of the country? Is he braver, smarter, etc. than his brother *because* he was raised outside of the court? Did

1 Nevertheless, in his paper Péter Dávidházi has proven that the Hungarian poet and translator did not know the text of *As You Like It* at the time when he was writing *Toldi* (199).

Shakespeare in *As You Like It* write the apology of the country and a criticism of the Palace? In the following I am about to investigate these issues.

For a superficial reader, the answer to all my questions might be a simple “yes.” In the first scene, Orlando is complaining about his brother keeping him “rustically at home,” and denying him an education (1.1. 217); yet, we get to know from Oliver himself that Orlando is an excellent young man, which is exactly the reason why he wants to destroy him:

OLIVER. I hope I shall see an end of him: for my soul, yet I know not why, hates nothing more than he. Yet he's gentle; never schooled and yet learned; full of noble device; of all sorts enchantingly beloved; and, indeed, so much in the heart of the world, and especially of my own people, who best know him, that I am altogether misprised: but it shall not be so long; this wrestler shall clear all: nothing remains but that I kindle the boy thither, which now I'll go about. (1.1.217-18)

It might seem that Orlando's good character was at least preserved by the country, while his brother was corrupted at court. The Palace may be more dominant and powerful, but regarding morals, the country deemed subordinate proves to be superior. The text shows this opposition on a horizontal, geographic level as well, since the contrast of the court and the forest also means the collision of cultural levels. The forest, being free of any social power conventions, becomes an antithesis to Oliver's world; moreover, this place has a certain mystical power to change characters arriving from the court.

The green world in Shakespeare's works is usually the place where the transcendental and the magical mingles with the everyday life, where ritual transformations can happen and sons and daughters can escape parental authority. This is not the case in *As You Like It*, however, as Peter Erickson points out, the fathers remain in power even in the forest (47). What is more important here is that the forest in the sixteenth century provided a place for folk festivals (132).² In fact, people celebrated Midsummer's Night in the woods, lighting bonfires, and gathering rare seeds. Perhaps it would be an exaggeration to say that the green world is the symbolic milieu of folk culture, but it can be clearly seen that it is the counterpoint of the court. We can trace this opposition throughout the text; for example, at court, wrestling is part of the entertainment; courtiers like Le Beau enjoy the sight of weeping fathers whose sons died in the fight against Charles. In contrast, in the green world of Arden hunting and killing do not serve as sport, they are necessary evils to ensure the survival of the fugitives.

DUKE SENIOR. Come, shall we go and kill us venison?
And yet it irks me, the poor dappled fools,
Being native burghers of this desert city,
Should, in their own confines, with forked heads
Have their round haunches gor'd. (2.1.222-23)

2 Fischer-Lichte also shows that these festivals were condemned as satanic rituals by the Puritans (133).

While the sight of the mourning father counts as entertaining at court, the hunter feels sorry for his prey in Arden. Also in the woods, Jaques' saying that Duke Senior does "more usurp" (2.1.223) than his brother—and we know this from the report of the First Lord—remains unpunished. It seems that unlike at court, here the person in power has no intention to suppress criticism. Also, Jaques frequently makes critical remarks about court life, for example, when he compares compliment, the symbolic act of courtesy, to an "encounter of two dog-apes" (2.5.225). So according to Jaques, culture—the purpose of which was to tame the natural instincts and habits of human beings—has only made their animalistic behavior stronger. However, it is not only he but Senior Duke himself who makes remarks on the immorality of the court life.

DUKE SENIOR. 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,—
 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: these are counsellors
 That feelingly persuade me what I am.' (2.1.222-23)

Here, the figure indirectly describes the court as a place where lying and pretending are skills one must cultivate to survive; according to Gábor Klaniczay, this notion appears in the works of both Machiavelli and Castiglione (79). In opposition, the green world proves to be a place where the individual gains unquestionable knowledge about him/herself. Just as the forest in *Midsummer's Night Dream*, Arden Wood becomes a liminal territory, radically altering the protagonist's experiences of the world, thereby leading him/her back to his/her hypothesized inner self. Here, the tyrant abandons his power and becomes a hermit, while the vicious brother atones for his sins, and is transformed into a loving and protective sibling. The depraved character of certain protagonists is only the product of their life as nobles, while the magical aura of the forest can reach and enhance the true benevolent nature of the character.

In sum, the text delineates an opposition between the court and the country; we can see this in the conflict between Orlando and Oliver, and in the differences between life at court and in the woods. It is not uncommon in literature and theatre history to view Shakespeare as a typical country man who praises rural values and criticizes the corruption of court. Stephen Greenblatt is one of several critics to view Shakespeare in this manner:

[H]e had deep roots in the country. Virtually all of his close relatives were farmers, and in his childhood he clearly spent a great deal of time in their orchards and market gardens in the surrounding fields and woods and in tiny rural hamlets with their traditional seasonal festivals and folk customs. When

he was growing up, he seems to have taken everything about this rustic world, and he did not subsequently seek to repudiate it or pass himself off as something other than what he was. (19)

In Greenblatt's interpretation Shakespeare is the son of the rustic world; therefore, with his inborn talent and originality, he represents the contrast of this world with that of the court. It seems from all this that *As You Like It* emphasizes the moral superiority of the country over the court.

Country Men as Clowns: Bottom, and his Company

A closer reading of the comedy leads to the deconstruction of the above mentioned interpretation (according to which in *As You Like It* the positive, honest country fights its battle against the negative, corrupted court). Although Duke Senior describes his situation as a life in Paradise where one does not feel "the penalty of Adam," and develops a connection with his/her true self, his choice of words sometimes undermines his description. Introducing Jaques's famous soliloquy, the Duke Senior tells him that "[T]his wide and universal theatre / Presents more woeful pageants / than the scene / Wherein we play in" (2.7.227). The world being a stage is a universal experience, therefore it becomes a mistake to think that in the green world one can find the essence of his/her true self; the individual cannot act out of a role, therefore authentic knowledge is just an illusion.

Moreover, the historical-cultural context, if it is being taken into consideration, can unsettle an interpretation aiming to show Shakespeare's works as critical of the aristocracy. As a member of the King's Men, the Bard was part of a theatrical system depending on the magnanimity of the Palace. Also, the problem becomes more sophisticated if we ask, *which* country folk *As You Like It* represents. Orlando and Adam are obviously idealized characters, such as Toldi in Arany's work. However, it is important to notice here that the origin of the Hungarian hero is a considerably different character. As Róbert Milbacher points out, in Péter Selymes Ilosvai's text (this was the source of Arany's work), Toldi "has no remorse," he even eats that raw liver which someone throws at him to prove his animalistic nature (410). He has no intentions to be a knight, and while Arany's Toldi proves to be merciful towards his enemies, the "original" figure does not hesitate to kill them. So Arany had "freed" the character from certain folk elements, such as references to the body functions which are qualified as disgusting or obscene from the perspective of a cultural level considered to be "higher." Orlando and Toldi are trapped in a paradox; while losing the rustic aspects of their character, they are to represent the moral high ground of the country in opposition to the court.

In *As You Like It* Orlando and Adam lack all kinds of carnivalesque features, such as references to the body functions. However, in other works by Shakespeare we can see that rural people are often comical, half-witted figures and the butt of the audience's laughter. Just like the original Toldi, they represent a lower level of human culture. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we can also find the opposition of the court and the country,

but here Bottom and the other galoos serve as a contrast to highlight the superiority of the court. Bottom (whose name refers to the weaver's working tool, but to the behind of a person as well)³ is a representative of carnival culture, and is thereby a vulgar-comical contrast to Oberon's transcendental world. Bottom has a deconstructive role, since Titania's love for him degrades all her transcendence. However, as Mikhail Bakhtin points out, degradation has a positive feature; it leads the one who is degraded to a new beginning or rebirth. Her love for Bottom transformed into a donkey-headed monster brings Titania back to Oberon. A character's ability to face his or her carnivalesque counterpoint re-establishes the aristocratic order.

The tradespeople's rustic world *A Midsummer Night's Dream* serves as an anti-structure, the encounter with which helps strengthen higher values. According to Stephen Greenblatt,

The laughter in act 5 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—and it is one of the most enduringly funny scenes Shakespeare ever wrote—is built on a sense of superiority in intelligence, training, cultivation, and skill. The audience is invited to join the charmed circle of the upper-class mockers onstage. This mockery proclaimed the young playwright's definitive passage from naïveté and homespun amateurism to sophisticated taste and professional skill. (26)

The professional theatre company achieves a legitimate status by ridiculing the amateurism of simple folk. The presentation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with all the transformations and magical scenes requiring special stage techniques, becomes more admirable when it unveils the incompetence of an unqualified group which is planning to stage a much easier play. The naivety and honesty of the folk—which in *As You Like It* are in positive contrast with the corruption of the court—here ruin the production of the tradespeople (when, for example, they ensure the audience that the wall and the lion are not real). Compared to the professional (thereby financially court-dependent) company and their sophisticated production, this naivety and honesty become ridiculous; in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the rustic is characterized as something “low,” thereby enhancing the superiority of the court.

It can be clearly seen that the text supports the Palace and the aristocracy by ridiculing country life and by making hidden compliments: Greenblatt points out examples for such praise in the speech of Oberon (22). All this was necessary for a company to legitimize its position in the eyes of the court; without the support of the noble class, actors

were classified officially as vagabonds; they practiced a trade that was routinely stigmatized and despised. As ‘masterless men’—men without a home of their own or an honest job or an attachment to someone else's home—they could be arrested, whipped, put in the stocks, and branded. (This is why they described themselves legally as the servants of aristocrats or as guild members.) And yet

3 For more views on Bottom's name, see Kállay 47 and Kott 69.

the heart of their enterprise was a representation of the upper classes persuasive enough to delight a discriminating audience that included real gentlemen and ladies. (Greenblatt 39)

This is the reason why it is naïve to assume that Shakespeare could afford to directly criticize the court, since such behavior could have led to the elimination of the company. However, the heterogeneity of the audience creates a sophisticated situation, since besides the noblemen, tradesmen and other representatives of the folk were also spectators at the Globe, and the production had to meet the expectation of all classes. Therefore the text has to create a balance between the two opposites. In what follows, let us reinvestigate the delicate technique by which the play achieves that certain balance.

“Why, if thou never wast at court, thou never saw’st good manners”

A close reading of *As You Like It* can reveal contradictions that aid the deconstruction of the binary opposition of the court and the country. Despite the well-articulated criticism of the court, the idealization of the rustic world is superficial. The re-examination of Orlando’s first dialogue reveals that the protagonist characterizes rustic life as un-educated (“for my part, he keeps me rustically at home, or, to speak more properly, stays me here at home unkept”). Not soon after, during the first verbal duel with his brother, Orlando emphasizes the same.

OLIVER. Now, sir! what make you here?

ORLANDO. Nothing: I am not taught to make anything.

... Shall I keep your hogs, and eat husks with them? What prodigal portion have I spent that I should come to such penury? ... My father charged you in his will to give me good education: you have trained me like a peasant, obscuring and hiding from me all gentleman-like qualities: the spirit of my father grows strong in me, and I will no longer endure it: therefore, allow me such exercises as may become a gentleman, or give me the poor allottery my father left me by testament; with that I will go buy my fortunes. (1.1.217-18)

In this last sentence it becomes clear that only the court can teach the individual appropriate manners, and provide him/her with a good education, and that without an education, man cannot rise above the level of animals. Therefore, Orlando sees his being deprived of a proper education as punishment.

It can also be seen that education—the process during which one learns how to rule and suppress his/her natural instincts—has a great importance in the text. In his book, *The Civilization Process* Norbert Elias analyzes the writings of Erasmus, paying special attention to *De civilitatormum puerilium*. As Elias asserts, this work discusses the individual’s behavior in society, more precisely, the “externum corporis decorum,” that is the decorum of public behaviour (165). Focusing on the tradition of courtly codifications of decorum, Erasmus, as one of the most important social engineers of the Renaissance, determines what constitutes proper manners on every level of social

life and defines what can be considered civilized. According to Elias, Erasmus arrived at his teachings by examining the obvious norms of society. He came to the conclusion that the soil for appropriate manners and decorum can only be found at court. When he recommends the “*civitas morum*” to a young prince, the philosopher is quick to make it clear that the young nobleman does not really need his teachings, since he (i.e. the prince) was brought up among court people and therefore received an excellent education. Besides, as the offspring of a king, he “was born to rule”; according to Erasmus, civilized manners have two requirements: noble blood and, more importantly, the circumstances provided by the court (190-91).

Therefore, whoever is excluded from the court is excluded from culture and civilization as well. The rustic world cannot be morally superior, since being far away from the Palace, it is the dwelling place of barbarians and animals. This is the reason why banishment from court life is most painful for Orlando. His noble birth is his only hope for good manners; Erasmus’ thoughts appear in the protagonist’s words when he speaks about his being the offspring of a duke, therefore having *a priori* the knowledge that makes someone civilized, and a good character.

All of the above is in stark contrast with the notion that Orlando’s moral superiority stems from his connection to the morally superior countryside. It is more correct to say that Orlando is honest, chivalrous, brave, has good manners, and so on, *despite* his lack of a formal education. Therefore, one can generate two conflicting interpretations but neither of them can be accepted as an “authentic” reading of the text. The only thing we know for sure is that *As You Like It* delineates the opposition between the court and the country without siding with either of the two.

From this perspective, the first scene of the third act gains importance; though it seems to be a light burlesque in which the witty Touchstone mocks Corin, this quarrel is an open confrontation of the court and the rustic world.

TOUCHSTONE. Such a one is a natural philosopher. Wast ever in court, shepherd?

CORIN. No, truly.

TOUCHSTONE. Then thou art damned.

CORIN. Nay, I hope, –

TOUCHSTONE. Truly, thou art damned, like an ill-roasted egg, all on one side.

CORIN. For not being at court? Your reason.

TOUCHSTONE. Why, if thou never wast at court, thou never saw’st good manners; if thou never saw’st good manners, then thy manners must be wicked; and wickedness is sin, and sin is damnation. Thou art in a parlous state, shepherd.

CORIN. Not a whit, Touchstone; those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behaviour of the country is most mockable at the court. You told me you salute not at the court, but you kiss your hands; that courtesy would be uncleanly if courtiers were shepherds. (3.2.228)

We can observe the opposition of the two worlds in the way the characters try to ridicule each other’s points. It is important to notice, though, that Corin is not about to emphasize the priority of his scruples. He puts his world on the same level as the court,

seeing them as equals, while Touchstone stubbornly wants to prove the superiority of the Palace. The only thing that Corin is unwilling to accept is the importance of education. According to the shepherd “he that hath learned no wit by nature nor art may complain of good breeding, or comes of a very dull kindred” (3.2. 228); wit comes from nature not just nurture, therefore, the acceptance of the norms of the court alone will not result in high morals or wisdom. By articulating his thoughts, Corin questions the authenticity of nurture—a thought that a true courtier like Touchstone cannot accept.

Touchstone tries to prove the superiority of the court by twisting the shepherd’s words. Not long afterwards, in a romantic rivalry with William, he emphasizes the difference between the use of language in the court and in the country: “Therefore, you clown, abandon,—which is in the vulgar, leave,—the society,—which in the boorish is company,—of this female,—which in the common is woman,—which together is abandon the society of this female” (5.1 238). By using the words “vulgar” and “common,” Touchstone emphasizes the sophistication of the discourse used in the court. Since courtly language can be understood only by those who were raised at the court, it seems that this kind of communication requires a certain knowledge or level of education for one to be able to decode it—while anyone can understand the language of the country. The mode of communication is among the most important fields where the civilized court tries to prove its superiority to the clerical and rustic world (Klaniczay 79). And this is exactly what Touchstone does here; by showing that he knows every word of William’s vocabulary while his opponent understands none of the courtier’s speech, he proves his intellectual superiority, and his opponent has to leave as a clown—exactly what Touchstone calls him.

It is important to notice, at the same time, that Touchstone is an ambiguous representative of the court; as we have seen earlier, in the first scenes of the drama, the character appears as a sarcastic critic of the Palace. Being a fool, Touchstone speaks a language with playful contradictions and enigmas, and thereby confuses/challenges the intellect that interprets him. Therefore this figure cannot find his place in either of the two worlds as he summarizes at the beginning of his dispute with Corin:

TOUCHSTONE. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. As it is a spare life, look you, it fits my humour well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach (3.2.228).

Touchstone’s arguments invite two different interpretations: the character can be seen as an apologist for the court who emphasizes the importance of education; on the other hand, Touchstone’s behavior might be regarded as a sarcastically performed parody, with the help of which the character mocks the philosophy of the court and turns it inside out. While stressing the superiority of the court Touchstone opens up a way to simultaneously ridicule the Palace. The rhetoric of the fool both claims and denies values at the same time; during the dispute the text starts to move on the centerline of the court/country opposition, and it becomes impossible to secure its meaning at any one point.

Thus, *As you Like It* counterbalances the criticism of the court with the ridiculing of country life, but does not commit itself to either of them. It reveals the contours of two opposing cultural horizons which are constantly questioning each other's structures, but the text does not provide an interpretation emphasizing the primacy of either. The drama is more likely meant to give a balanced view of country and court life, making it acceptable to both urban and to "rustic" viewers. Meanwhile, this strategy deprives Orlando of an autonomous identity; being defined by both his origin and the rustic world that he inhabits, the character finds himself on the borderline of both horizons. As the son of Sir Roland, he cannot feel commonality with the country folk, but the court will never accept him either, because of his lack of education. Orlando is in a position where it is impossible for him to find solid ground upon which to construct his identity.

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare destroys his main protagonist's position by delineating the opposition of the court and the country, but not taking a stand by either of them. We can hardly see Orlando's reinstatement at court as a happy ending; from the perspective of the country the hero gives up the values of the rustic world with the help of which he became the positive contrast to his inferior brother. On the other hand, viewed from the court, Orlando lacks the proper education that would make him culturally acceptable for the Palace. His marriage to Rosalind would secure his position in this environment but the character of the female protagonist is somewhat controversial as well.

Theatre and the World—Roles and Identities

It can be concluded that *As You Like It* resists character-criticism, since the text itself denies the existence of the essential self. Jacques, in his famous soliloquy describes human life as existence in role-playing, where there is no true face behind the mask.

JACQUES. All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. (2.7.227)

One is born into a role defined by the contemporary cultural context and cannot find his/her true identity, just secure the appropriate role. Oliver replaces the role of the "evil brother" with that of the "good sibling," and in the romantic relationships everyone recognizes and accepts his/her position. However, the epilogue presented by Rosalind undoes this re-establishment of the roles; "If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not" (5.4.242). It would be a serious mistake not to take into consideration that in the Elizabethan era male actors played every role, including the female ones and it is vital to notice that according to the text *it is in fact* Rosalind (not the actor) who makes that utterance. Throughout the text, the reader connects this name with a female figure, who disguises herself as a man. During the epilogue the drama does not reveal a distance between the actor and the role, moreover the first sentence shows the speaker as a

woman: “[i]t is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue” (5.4.242). The foul-up of the roles does not stop at the end of the drama. Rosalind’s status is not re-established, therefore, s(he) cannot certify Orlando’s position in the court.⁴

Instead of any restoration of identity *As You Like It* shows the characters’ oscillation between roles. Rosalind commutes between male and female roles, and Orlando is trapped in a no man’s land on the borderline of the Palace and the rustic world. While *Toldi* supports the country in opposition to the court, Shakespeare’s drama displays an infinite movement between the two. The text eludes every interpretive strategy aiming to prove the drama’s commitment either to the court or the country. The balancing movement of the text and the swaying between the two horizons result in the dissemination of the protagonist’s identity.

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4 William C. Carrol comes to the same conclusion about the “androgyny” of the female character at the end of the play (137).

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