As If: Essays in As You Like It

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What does Jaques telling us about Touchstone telling time tell us about them?

Not long after hearing the report about Jaques’s curious moralizing on, or empathizing with, the deer, we hear another report from Jaques himself, this one on hearing a “motley fool thus moral on [and certainly not empathize with, although he wags along with] the time” (2.7.29). This is, presumably, Touchstone, whom we’ve already encountered. These secondhand descriptions of the characters of Jaques and Touchstone, uttered within the drama by other characters with angles and interests of their own, are strangely static and strangely revelatory, almost like introductions in the list of *dramatis personae*, or like film stills that render some implication of narrative or relationship by freezing it in place. It is clear that Jaques identifies with the motley fool he sees, perhaps in the same way he identifies with the deer, and with similar limitations. But where the deer apparently gives Jaques an opportunity for moralizing on his own, the fool can apparently see, or say, something that Jaques cannot apprehend without him. In response Jaques neither speaks nor weeps, but laughs; he returns to the Duke to ask the favor of putting on motley himself, so he can take the role of the fool on his own (perhaps he, or the play, is looking ahead to his
speech later in the scene on the many parts a man plays in his
time?

The fact that Jaques here takes on the task of moralizing the
touchstone pulls these two figures together within the play’s worlds. Touchstone and Jaques are linked as
the two most pronounced outsiders in Arden and the most outspoken critics of everyone else in the play. Their roles
otherwise, though, are very different. Even in the accounts
of the weeping deer and the clock in the forest, Jaques’s effort to
moralize the deer contrasts sharply to Touchstone’s ataraxia,
merely observing the passing of the time and noting “thereby
hangs a tale” (2.7.28) without offering even to say what it is.
Jaques’s tears are one kind of empathy, and so is his laughter
at Touchstone, but they seem as careful as his moralizing;
Touchstone’s letting-be, his acknowledgement that he, too, wags
with the time, ripening or rotting, whether he will or not, is a
very different sort. Touchstone, merry, earthy, hot after Audrey
like “the horse his curb” (3.3.73–74), is quick with a quip to pick
out the errors of others. He is a partner in fooling, and shines
in the back and forth of conversation, where his questions and
sharp observations nearly socratically lure those he talks to into
the absurdities of their shared world. Jaques, in contrast, is a
soloist: sullen, pensive, given to elaborately set speeches and
imaginings, more often the butt of laughter than its instigator,
and seeking above all to amuse himself. He is also the Rorschach
test of the play. One nineteenth-century critic observed, “[H]e
came to life again a century later as an English clergyman; we
need stand in no doubt as to his character, for we all know him
under his later name of Lawrence Sterne,” the author of *Tristram
Shandy*; in 1856 the French intellectual George Sand made him
the central character in her adaptation of the play, and he is,
depending on who you want to listen to, “the first light and
brilliant pencil-sketch for Hamlet,” “Hamlet *avant la lettre,*” or
“So much removed … from Hamlet.”

But in this play of liking, what do Touchstone and Jaques
like? Both are quibblers and wordsmiths, although Jaques
works harder at edifying and Touchstone at deconstruction.
Touchstone seems to have almost no interest in the “as if” questions posed by the other characters, although (or because) he is the character who most clearly indicates their parameters. For him, they seem a thoroughly disenchanted instrument: they either work as he wishes (as when he chases William off with his doubletalk) or not (as when Corin’s resolute literal-mindedness seems to stump even Touchstone). If anything, Touchstone prefers a playfully Ovidian uncoupling of words and worlds in which language generates its own internal conundrums and touches the world not at all. When he says to Audrey, “I am here with thee and thy goats, as the most capricious poet, honest Ovid, was among the Goths” (3.3.5–7), his words intricately call attention to themselves. Goats and Goths are near homophones, and capricious (from Latin caper, or goat) links the poet Ovid to both even as the sentence asserts his difference. But it has almost nothing to say about anything in the world, beginning with the fact that Ovid was notoriously not “honest” in any sense — any more than Touchstone is like him. Jaques, in contrast, seems to have been almost taken over by the as-if games he plays. There does not seem to be much in his life beyond his as-if thought experiments, and he tends to forget that they are, in fact, experiments.

The names of Touchstone and Jaques serve as an index to the difference of what they do in the play. A touchstone was a kind of dark stone that was used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to test the purity of gold or silver alloys. Drawing the metal across the stone left a streak, the color of which varied depending on the precious metal content. It indicates, in other words, the value of something else, without having any value of its own. Jaques is of course a variant of Jacques; as Jacques it fits the intermittently French setting of Arden, and it is also the name of Oliver and Orlando’s middle brother (and it is astonishing, if logistically daunting, to imagine that somehow he might be such a brother, unrecognized). But a jaques or jakes — both spellings appear — is also a common Elizabethan word for a privy. This is another humble device with an important function. It receives
the filth that people produce as they go about their lives and removes it out of their way.

Touchstone, like Feste in *Twelfth Night*, is a “corrupter of words” and a cartographer of the possible, investigating what can be through the great virtue of “if,” the word that posits a condition and simultaneously denies its reality. To invert the terms of Feste’s and Touchstone’s office, Jaques is more of a conserver of notions than a corrupter of words; he costively preserves and holds onto matter and then reveals it in unexpected depth and intensity. Like Touchstone, he can peel back the pretensions and assumptions of those around him, but he tends to replace them with assumptions of his own, generally more bitter but no more complete. He is so assured of the profundity of what he says that it becomes for him simply and obviously right. Jaques knows no “if”, only “is.” This makes him a kind of fundamentalist of thinking: he can imagine other worlds, but he does not know he is making them up, and above all he cannot imagine that what he imagines might be wrong. He can “suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs” (2.5.10–11), but never notices that this means that every song will be the same to him.

Like his namesake, Touchstone measures the value of other’s words and deeds. Sometimes his test shows them to be wanting; sometimes, perhaps, they pass. He does not produce anything of value; he gauges the value of what others do. Jaques, like his namesake, is literally full of shit — unpleasant and unproductive. It may thus be harder to appreciate Jaques than Touchstone. It looks a little as if whatever Jaques touches turns to trash or as if all he does is paddle in excrement. But these are not only his own excrements, and perhaps he protects the others who also produce them from their most noxious effects.