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Husks and Venison: A Reading of *As You Like It*

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Summary

Two food images in *As You Like It*, 'husks' and 'venison', symbolize the two groups in the social hierarchy of early modern England. 'Husks' appears in the lines spoken by one of the main characters and represents the financial plight he is in. On the other hand 'venison' was a food for kings and it represents the relief from the discriminating society of the play. The circumstances under which the male main character is will be examined in its social background.

Keywords primogeniture, food hierarchy, pastoral effect

Elizabethan England was an age that developed a variety of dishes contrary to what people in the twentieth century tend to assume. As for food materials such as meat, 'the nobility of England (whose cooks are for the most part musical-headed Frenchmen and strangers)'¹ enjoyed more kinds than we do. In an aristocrat's household, we sometimes see even swan and peacock cooked for feasts. Ordinary people as well had a variety of food that they could get 'without spending much money.' People started to eat vegetables in the period, which had been regarded as food for the poor and for those in the monastic life, and they had greens, roots, herbs, fruits, and nuts cultivated in their gardens or gathered in hedgerows, fields, and woods.²

Shakespeare's works depict the eating culture of the age. We see

such a word as 'kickshows' which was derived from French 'quelque chose' meaning 'fancy dishes' in English; Canary, Rhenish, Sack, Claret and Madeira as imported liquor; dried herring, anchovis, sprat, eels, grape, mulberry, cherry, onion, lime, apples, cheese, a variety of corn and many more food items in his works, not to speak of pork, mutton or beef which we have today. Interrelationship with the outer world and the vigor for cultural expansion among English people were naturally reflected in the author's writing of food into his works.

He seems to have used food effectively giving the audience chances to build up the dramatic perspective according to their own experience and imagination nourished in the age. Food was a tool for him to draw what life people in his works were leading. Two words in *As You Like It*, 'husks' and 'venison', seem to symbolize the two completely different conditions of human life which the Elizabethan audience must have imagined through them. The play is categorized into romantic comedy where the plot progresses towards the happy marriages of the main characters. The plot of *As You Like It*, however, pivots upon the hunger of Orlando, one of the main characters and his faithful servant Adam. Their plight was one in which Elizabethan audience also could have been. This essay is to explore the Orlando plot and to search for a meaning of the play as understood in Elizabethan circumstances, focusing mainly on its social background seen through food.

Husks

The word is in the lines spoken by Orlando, the youngest son of Sir Rowland de Boys, in the opening scene. He is discussing the inheritance from his father with Adam, an old servant of the de Boys family. His eldest

brother, Oliver, comes in.

Oliver: Now sir, what make you here?

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

Oliver: What mar you then sir?

Orlando: Marry sir, I am helping you to mar that which God
made, a poor unworthy brother of yours, with
idleness.

Oliver: Marry sir, be better employed, and be nought
awhile.

Orlando: Shall I keep your hogs and eat husks with them?
What prodigal portion have I spent that I should
come to such penury?

(Act one, Scene one, 29-39)³

Besides the violent rivalry between the brothers shown in the frequent use of 'sir' on both sides, Orlando's cynicism toward his treatment by his eldest brother is indicated here with a touch of self-mockery. It is culminated in the words 'Shall I keep your hogs and eat husks with them?' His cynicism is generated by the system of inheritance that was sturdily set up in the society of the period; primogeniture.⁴ Lawrence Stone explains how the power within a household came to assemble in the current owner of the estates in the developing process of the primogeniture system.

This greatly strengthened the ability of the current head of the family to dispose the property as he chose ... He could now quite easily either sell land to meet current needs or split it up amongst his children as he

thought fit. The increase in this freedom of action of the current owner meant an increase in his capacity to punish or reward his children or siblings. Thus it meant the further subordination of the children, including the heir, to the father, and of younger sons and daughters to their elder brother if he inherited the estate before they married. ... He possessed the power to manipulate the distribution of his property, ... to control and direct his children in making the two most critical decisions of their lives: choice of a spouse and choice of a career.⁵

In the primogeniture system, younger sons and daughters of the upper classes would be thrown out of the house, as for sons in the prospect of getting professions through study at university or getting a position in the mercantile field after apprenticeship, and as for daughters getting into another family by marriage. And as Stone pointed out about the power-possessing lord of the house of the period, we see Oliver in the play reject treating his youngest brother Orlando as their father had ordained him to do because of the envy he bears toward him. ('I hope I shall see the end of him; for my soul --- yet I know not why --- hates nothing more than he.', Act one, Scene one, 162-64)

Orlando's use of 'husks' doesn't necessarily mean that he thinks his eldest brother demands his eating husks actually. Husks, which the prodigal son wanted to eat in his perishing hunger, has a connotation of its own in the bible. In *As You like It*, husks symbolize the social self-ambiguity of Orlando in the image of him who is gentle-born and eat the lowest food. Husks are a common food for swine.

Orlando's indignation here is that the amount of money his father bequeathed to him is very small, and that the promise made between his father

and Oliver that Oliver would give Orlando a good breeding has been ignored.

Orlando: As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion
bequeathed me by will but poor a thousand crowns,
and, as thou sayst, charged my brother on his blessing
to breed me well; and there begins my sadness.
My brother Jaques he keeps at school, and report
speaks goldenly of his profit.

(Act one, Scene one, 1-6)

Considering that the two things—enough money to support himself and education—were vital for younger sons of gentility in the Elizabethan period, Orlando is in a critical condition to make a career outside of his native household because he doesn't have and is not likely to obtain these. For Orlando, 'a thousand crowns' is a smaller portion than what he regards proper for him to receive ('poor a thousand crowns').

We don't know if he would like to develop his career by education at university, but he sounds sort of envious of his second brother studying at school and getting a good report. 'School' here means one of the two universities and the Inns of Court. The second son is in the trend of the time, in terms that, as sociologists point out, the number of students learning at university had been increasing during the Elizabethan period. Supposing that Orlando intends to establish his life by getting himself educated, the problem for Orlando is that the cost for those institutions was rather high, that for the Inns of Court being higher because it didn't have a scholarship system.⁶ So it is not possible for him to follow the course of his second brother.

The other way Orlando might take is to enter apprenticeship. Yet sociologically thinking, he has an obstacle here again. Early modern apprentices consisted of two groups, migrants from local smaller towns who aspired for big cities such as London or Bristle that had more chances for social advancement and 'subsistence migrants that included the poorest sections in society at large, victims of overpopulation who were seeking employent or charity rather than a respectable apprenticeship'.⁷ Among those who would go into respectable and lucrative distributive trades were 'the predominances of the better-offs'. Gentle-born younger sons like Orlando would get a position in such trades as one dealing cloth. According to Ben-Amos 'in the seventeenth century between a fifth and a third of those entering the grocery, drapery and haberdashery trades were sons of knights, esquires and gentlemen.'⁸ And 'these mercantile trades and businesses, especially those connected with London's export of cloth, required formidable resources for the launching of successful careers, as well as for the initial fees (premiums) demanded from those being apprenticed in them.'⁹ Those kinds of financial support Orlando is rejected access to.

In the orchard of the de Boys estate he insisted to Oliver that he is a proper son of Sir Rowland in terms of pedigree.

The courtesy of nations allows you my better, in that you
are the first-born, but the same tradition takes not
away my blood, were there twenty brothers betwixt us.

(Act one, Scene one 45-49)

His self-confidence, grown within him by his being gentle-born, has no

financial fundamental as we have seen, and the problem is that the father whom the youngest son so depends on psychologically in his trying to establish his social self doesn't seem to have given him fatherly care emotionally not to say financially. And it seems to be the cause of the crisis of self-ambiguity of his son.

The Oxford English Dictionary says that 'to breed' is to train up young persons in the arts of life, to educate, tutor, bring up'.¹⁰ Then 'breed Orlando well' seems to show Sir Rowland's fatherly intention not to ruin the younger son's life, but actually it could be an irresponsible remark at the dying moment of a father because it has no financial base at all. As a later line of Orlando tells us, what was included in the testament is one thousand crowns only. The remark of the father, who undoubtedly believed in filial duty, is outdated in the world of *As You Like It* where self-centeredness is the 'fashion' of the time.¹¹ And thinking that the word 'breed' was originally meant 'to bring offspring forward from the germ to the birth' or 'to hatch young birds from the egg' because 'the young creature was viewed as a rude germ to be developed by nurture',¹² there could be a slight sense of disregard in Sir Rowland, when he used the word, of the youngest son as a human being who could be a proper person in society if encouraged carefully and supported financially. This is much different from the father of the Prodigal Son who welcomed his down-and-out son with rich food.

'Husks' is a symbolical word for poverty, hunger, and accordingly social marginalization, though it means repentance in the case of the prodigal son. Though husks are common food for swine, there was a differentiation of feeding materials even among swine. According to Thirsk, 'people of Shakespeare's day had strong opinions about the flavour and quality of meat: ...Pork from pigs that ate grass and nuts in the woods was infinitely

better than pork from pigs fed kitchen waste or, even worse, the industrial waste of town industries such as starchhouses.¹³ Husks seem to be one of a worse kind of food like kitchen waste, being dry discarded outer covering of some fruits or seeds. Orlando's remark of eating husks with hogs is chosen to attack Oliver's unnatural attitude, but it is also the metaphor of his being driven into the lowest position in the household, and that he feels it deeply.

Also the food circumstances Orlando is under is shown in 'He lets me feed with his hinds ...'(Act one, Scene one, 18). It was an eating custom of the well-off families that servants had food allotted for them apart from that of the lord or the lady of the house. Overiewing Elizabethan England Harrison pointed out that in some shires the gentility 'commonly provided themselves sufficiently of wheat for their own tables' while their household and poor neighbours had to content themselves with worse materials such as rye, barley, beans, peas or oats, and sometimes when in dearth for instance, even acorns.¹⁴ The division of what people were allowed to eat was clear in the period when class division was powerfully set up, and the problem is that food is vital in sustaining one's existance and it can be a device of ruling and exploiting people.

Venison

As the scene where the brothers conflict, the de Boys estate doesn't show anything given or taken with generous feelings. Adam, having served the de Boys' since seventeen (perhaps the age he started his career as an apprentice servant) for over sixty years, got only a curse from his master Oliver.

Oliver: Get you with him, you old dog.

Adam: Is old dog my reward? Most true, I have lost
my teeth in your service.

(Act one, Scene one, 81-83)

He is one of the lowest group in the household and would most likely be cast out by his master even if he didn't run away with Orlando, and he is conscious of such a plight that a servant should be in.

Adam: ... I have five hundred crowns,
The thrifty hire I sav'd under your father,
Which I did store to be my foster-nurse,
When service should in my old limbs lie lame,
And unregarded age in corners thrown.

(Act two, Scene three, 38-42)

He represents a labourer undergoing a changing labour market of the period in terms that he is likely to be thrown out quite easily by his master. Though apprenticeship was a proper way for the younger generation to earn one's living, A. L. Beier's detailed study in the vagrancy problem points out that 'apprenticeship ceased to be the main avenue for entry into trades and crafts' during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries because 'interlopers now set up in suburbs and in the countryside outside guild controls.'¹⁵ And living-in, dependent workers (labourers in farming, for instance) were reduced in number being replaced by 'short-time hirings on a cash basis'. It seems a natural consequence in such a condition that the labourers' mobility increased. The figure Beier gives us is extraordinary:

'between a half and two-thirds of farm servants switched masters yearly.' And 'there is considerable evidence that breakdowns occurred' in 'master/dependent relations' because of the severe attitudes on the masters' sides toward their servants.¹⁶ Adam's service for over sixty years represents a feudalistic service in which the master/servant relationship is consisted on a sort of love relationship, but it surely becomes one example of the discordant relationships of the period when he is fired by Oliver.

The play turns to the Forest of Arden around the feudalistic action of Adam who gives the long-earned five hundred crowns to Orlando in the hope of helping this new master. It leaves the harsh reality of the Elizabethan for a dramatic relief for the Elizabethan audience.

The Forest of Arden is regarded as topos of pastoral tradition. It is the place where people live without care. Charles the wrestler describes it as a 'golden world' where they 'fleet the time carelessly.' (Act one, Scene one, 118-19) Golden world, the equivalent to golden age in pastoral literature, the state of ideal prosperity and happiness free from all trouble and crime, means an easy careless life here in this play. It shows the dramatic framework of this play intended by the author. Picking up several literary works, Raymond Williams pointed out that if a person in one age regarded another age back in history as a golden age, another person in that age would look back in time as well searching for his own golden age. The golden age perpetually goes back in history. It is nowhere to be found in time because it is characteristically retrospective.¹⁷ This sense of a golden age that one aspires for but cannot find anywhere seems vital in this pastoral work of *As You Like It*. As an entertainment for the London audience, many of whom being apprentices and students from the same kind of household as Orlando, the play's plot goes from the harsh reality of

the younger son to the fulfillment of his aspiration for a better life. Adam's aspiration for the golden age is in his retrospect of young labouring days under old Sir Rowland, who treated him honourably as a servant. This aspiration is to be fulfilled finally in the Forest of Arden where he is given food at Duke Senior's table after a terrible journey at the end of which he becomes tired and desperate enough to give up his life. Orlando's aspiration is to be fulfilled there, too, making him heir of the dukedom through his marriage to Rosalind. This naturally makes him the son-in-law of Duke Senior. As Montrose says,¹⁸ he retrieves a father/son relationship in the Forest of Arden. And the relation with his social father seems a better one than the one he had with his natural father. Orlando's agony disappears in the Forest of Arden, and the plot of the play turns into a pastoral where the fulfilment of their aspirations is represented in 'venison', though the question is left unanswered whether the things that happen there can be a realistic relief for the Elizabethan audience if the Forest of Arden is 'a golden world.'

Venison is the food on the table of Duke Senior. The two activities he employs himself in are to bother Jaques requiring him to tell about his philosophical thoughts on worldly things and to hunt deer.

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.

(Act one, Scene one, 21-25)

Hunting was a recommended sport for gentlemen in the period. It is on the long list of proper education appointed by Roger Ascham in 1530 for the privileged class. Gervase Markham recommended it as 'most royal for the stateliness', 'most artificial for the wisdom and cunning thereof, and most manly and warlike for the use and endurance thereof.'¹⁹ As seen from this explanation, hunting was favoured by Elizabethan aristocracy as an exercise to make a man useful in the time of war. George Turberville's illustration of royal hunting²⁰ in his book of *The Noble Art of Venerie of Hunting* printed in 1575 has Queen Elizabeth taking breakfast before hunting. The queen is set in the farther part of the drawing and rich breakfast is illustrated in the front part. It contained a large amount of meat and barrels of wine, and shows the jocund atmosphere before the hunting and also the power of the sovereign by the display of the gorgeousness of the food. The book was printed again in 1611, this time with the figure of King James I thrust onto the place where the queen had been illustrated. This shortcut way of publication only with a minor replacement means that hunting had a constant position as a state sport through the Elizabethan and the Jacobean periods. It gave an occasion to courtiers on which they could show themselves off as good warriors, and on which the king and the queen could show his/her power and majesty.

The game of hunt were 'deer, fox, and marten.' And especially 'venison originally was eaten only by the king.'²¹

As for the Forest of Arden, it is naturally associated with royal governance. Historically 'forest' was the area where the king had the right to hunt which is known as 'the vert and venison' and it was preserved by forest law. Hunting right was 'exclusive privilege of the sovereigns and of those whom they allowed to share with them the pleasures of the chase.'²²

Duke Senior and his followers in the Forest of Arden are the figures that this is projected into.

It is possible then to say that banished Duke Senior is leading the life of a sovereign in the forest as he must have led in the court. Charles mentioned Duke Senior as Robin Hood ('and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England.', Act one, Scene one, 115-16). In the legend, Robin Hood poached deer against the forest law. And when he met the king later on, he apologized to him. Through the tradition of Robin Hood, the character had been transformed to the person somewhat mischievous but obedient and loyal at the same time, which must have been more acceptable as a hero than a sheer rebel in the society under the queen's sway. The character of Robin Hood and the king in the tradition are put into the person of Duke Senior, making him into the lord who is dominant and is loved as a hero by the dominated.

Hegemony dominating lower classed people concerning food as seen above is not seen in the Forest of Arden. It was a usual practice in eating scenes of upper class houses that the food left uneaten at the table would 'be passed to the lower ranks of servants in the household and would finally reach the poor waiting at the gate.'²³ It might be a help for the poor people to have chances to get a supply of food. However, it seems to be a habit of getting advantage over the poorer people by letting them have essential materials to sustain life. That Duke Senior doesn't represent this governance over lesser ones becomes apparent in the scene where he welcomed Adam to his table. Here the hierarchy produced by means of food is discarded. The ruler, aristocrats and the poorest are at the same table, the upper-ranked ones taking care of the lowest one. The plot that the person at the highest position in society is generous enough to serve

the one at the lowest must have been a fanciful pleasure for the audience in Shakespeare's theatre. This play was performed in both public theatres of the Curtain and the Globe. As we have seen above a number of gentle-born younger sons worked in London, and a large part of the Shakespeare audience must have been those apprentices or students. And for those younger sons, as Montrose says,²⁴ 'it is likely that Orlando's desperate situation was the focus of personal projections and a catalyst of powerful feelings.' Watching this play were they looking for the humane concern from their father as Orlando does, to make their way through the future in the tense society of Elizabethan London? If so, the pastoral ending of the play may have given them a joy even if it was temporarily got in the theatre. The profundity of *As You Like It* seems to lie in the fact that the play implies reality through the comic ending of the romantic pastoral.

NOTES

¹ William Harrison, *Elizabethan England ; From A Description of England by William Harrison (1889)*, (Kessinger Publishing, 2009), p.88

² Joan Thirsk, 'Food in Shakespeare's England' in *Fooles and Fricassees: Food in Shakespeare's England*, (Washington, The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1999), p.13 and p.16.

³ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Agnes Latham (The Arden Shakespeare, London, Thomson, 2004)

⁴ Younger brother's protest against elder brothers is seen elsewhere in Shakespeare's work with topics of its own: *Titus Andronicus*, for instance, in which the younger brother Bassianus competes with his elder brother Saturninus who insists his own right to succeed the crown can be understood as a variant of the primogeniture-struggle.

⁵ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 112-13

⁶ Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England*, (London, Penguin Books, 1991), p.129

⁷ Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England*, (New Haven and London, Yale U. P., 1994), pp. 86-87

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 86-87

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 86-87

¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary* vol. I, eds. James A. H. Murray, Henry Bradley, W. A. Craigie, C. T. Onions (Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1978)

¹¹ 'Fashion' is the word frequently said in the play. The next is one of the instances. Then being there alone, / Left and abandon'd of his velvet friend, / "'Tis right', quoth he, 'thus misery doth part / The flux of company.' Anon a careless herd, / Full of the pasture, jumps along by him / And never stays to greet him. 'Ay', quoth Jaques, / 'Sweep on you fat and greasy citizens, / 'Tis just the fashion. ... (Act two, Scene one, 49-56)

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, *op. cit.*

¹³ *Fooles and Fricassees*, *op. cit.*, p.14

¹⁴ *Elizabethan England*, *op. cit.*, p.96

¹⁵ A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640*, (London and New York, Methuen, 1985), p.23

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.24

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (London, the Hogarth Press, 1985), pp. 9-12

¹⁸ Louis Adrian Montrose, 'The Place of a Brother' in *As You Like It: Social Process and Comic Form* in *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. Ivo Kamps (London, New York, Verso, 1995)

¹⁹ Gervase Markham, 'Country Contentments', 1611 in *Life in Shakespeare's England*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Penguin Books, 1954), p.35

²⁰ Peter Brears, *Food and Cooking in 16th-Century Britain, History and Recipes*, (London, English Heritage, 1985), p.20

²¹ *Fooles and Fricassees*, *op. cit.*, p. 89

²² William Richard Fisher, *The Forest of Essex: Its History, Laws, Administration and Ancient Customs, and the Wild Deer Which Lived in It*, (London, Butterworths, 1887), p. 2

²³ *Fooles and Fricassees*, *op. cit.*, p.15

²⁴ *Materialist Shakespeare*, *op. cit.*, p.45

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