The Carnivalesque and Class Hybridization in As You Like It

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When in As You Like It Touchstone voices ruling class values, he is often unable to do so without simultaneously demystifying that dominant value system. Demonstrating the elitist logic of an aristocratic worldview, Touchstone mocks Corin’s lower class position: “if thou never wast at court thou never sawst good manners; if thou never sawst good manners then thy manners must be wicked, and wickedness is sin and sin is damnation” (3.2.38-41). If Touchstone’s indictment suggests a strategy to employ a country/court division to naturalize the hierarchical organization of class relations, Corin’s retort suggests the relativity and fluidity of social values: “Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behavior of the country is most mockable at the court” (3.2.43-46). In the inverted green world of Arden, the lower classes are not simple objects of derision that serve to reinforce the ruling class’s position of domination but instead give voice to the contextual nature of social subjectivities. Corin’s perspective is not subordinated to the ideologically dominant one expressed by Touchstone; instead, their conversation comprises a dialogue in which oppositional worldviews intersect in complex ways, weaving in and out of one another rather than reinforcing positions of mutual exclusion and incompatibility. Corin’s discourse disrupts and modifies Touchstone’s initial intent to emphasize the former’s abject social status.

Recent early modern literary scholarship grounded in the theories of the carnivalesque proposed by M. M. Bakhtin offers a useful way of approaching the transgression and reformulation of class boundaries exemplified by the above interaction. This scholarship builds on Bakhtin’s central claim that “All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with [the] pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” (Rabelais 11). The playfulness of the carnivalesque as a mode of representation both deconstructs and reconstructs the social order. Central to carnival is its ambivalence and indeterminacy relative to the normative, a feature which enables it to act as a “place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life” (Bakhtin, EIRC 36.2 (Winter 2010): 229-44
Carnival's open-endedness, its radical unfinishability as a social semiotic, makes it a sensitive register of change, allowing the playfully subversive interaction between literary characters to stand in for broader social and cultural dynamics. If, according to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque interaction of worldviews and social categories tends to yield "a hybrid construction" of meaning, then the carnivalesque elements in As You Like It facilitate the articulation of a hybrid class identity that combines feudal and bourgeois characteristics. As a result, the play participates simultaneously within both of these value systems (Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination 304). Although the merging of aristocratic and commercial classes in the early modern period has long been recognized, the aesthetic dimensions of this intersection have been overlooked. While early modern drama abounds with class tensions which reflect the period's transitional socioeconomic conditions, these class perspectives enter into relations of articulation rather than mere conflict within the fantastic, carnivalesque green world.

The fluid interaction of worldviews that occurs in the Forest of Arden's green world is not an arbitrary thematic or stylistic device but a reflection of Shakespeare's transitional socioeconomic context. This intersection of multiple worldviews allows As You Like It to negotiate the destabilization of the feudal order and the corresponding emergence of a capitalist class identity. Such a reading of the play, however, does not assume that this bourgeois or capitalist perspective is a finished historical category. Instead, the emerging capitalist worldview appears as fractured and unstable in the process of its active formation. This unstable emergence is mediated by the marriage plot at the center of the play, which uses the highly classed romantic tensions between Rosalind and Orlando to explore changing social and economic identities. Indeed, class relations in the play are closely connected to gender dynamics. Accordingly, the first section of this study looks at the class ideologies that inform the green world before moving to an analysis of the way Rosalind's and Orlando's romance plot negotiates these ideologies and values. The article concludes with a close reading of the marriage ceremony at the end of the play, looking in particular at how the marriage fashions a balance of feudal and capitalist social elements. More broadly, the play's carnivalesque negotiation of gender and class relations articulates a hybrid social vision, neither purely capitalist in nature nor nostalgically yearning for a feudal past, but drawing in equal measure from both of these socioeconomic systems.

The crisis that sets the play in motion appears precisely as a struggle to assimilate conflicting class values. When Orlando confronts Oliver to demand justice for his perceived mistreatment, he expresses succinctly the