

Character of Touchstone

In the stage directions of the First Folio, Touchstone is designated as being a "clowne"; later, he is referred to as a "fool." Basically, the term "clowne" was more applicable to a country bumpkin, whereas the term "fool" was applied to the professional jester — that is, the fool, the king's jester, dressed in motley. In reading Elizabethan plays, it is important to keep this important distinction in mind. Touchstone is brilliant—he's insightful about human nature and has a quick wit. He's most notable for his incredible ability with words; he loves to twist any argument and nitpick over any little thing. Perhaps the strangest thing about Touchstone is that with all his cynicism and insight into human action, he's actually a rather jolly character. Mostly, Touchstone is a wise guy who he doesn't think he is above anybody or beyond the folly that just comes with being human. Touchstone laughs at himself as easily as he laughs at others. He's raunchy, funny, and observant, and never fails to provide a witty perspective on the serendipity and capricious madness that characterize the entire play.

In Act I, Scene 2, Celia and Rosalind refer to Touchstone as a "natural." Here, Touchstone's character changes yet a bit more; Rosalind is saying that he is a born fool or idiot, but this is wholly out of keeping with what we know of Rosalind's character. Obviously, this is most likely a pun on the words "natural" and "nature," words that occur frequently in the scene. The comic banter of the two girls here is used as a contrast to the sombre opening scene, and it is also used to establish the comic device of the pun, a word play that Elizabethan audiences never tired of. The extended pun on "natural" and "nature" in this scene where Touchstone's "wisdom" is questioned culminates in Celia's remark, "the dullness of the fool is the whetstone of the wits" (I.ii.58-59).

Touchstone, more appropriately, is described by Jaques as being "a motley fool" (II.vii.13). Here, Jaques is describing the professional jester, easily recognized by his costume, which was usually a child's long coat, gathered at the waist and falling in folds below the knees. A bauble was sometimes worn on the sleeve, and a cockscomb or feather decorated the hat.

Whatever the case in this particular scene, Touchstone's motley is sober enough to entitle him to treatment as a gentleman in the Forest of Arden. As a matter of fact, Touchstone fancies himself a courtier, and Jaques reports on Touchstone's pretensions of being a courtier in Act II, Scene 7, lines 36-38, and again when he introduces the fool to Duke Senior:

Jaq. He hath been a courtier, he swears.

Touch. If any man doubt that, let him put me to my purgation. I have trod a measure; I have flatt' red a lady . . . I have undone three tailors; I have had four quarrels, and like to have fought one. (V.iv.42-49)

Touchstone has also assumed the role of a courtier in his meeting with Corin. Personally, he feels far superior to the pastoral shepherd; his criticism of pastoral life proceeds from his assumption of the superiority of sophisticated court life over country living. Later, Touchstone burlesques the artificiality of the gentlemanly code of honor (V.iv.48-108), which is in keeping, of course, with his multifaceted personality.

Another interesting aspect of Touchstone's character is the fact that he is restricted in his singing. Shakespeare usually gives some songs to his fools. Yet here, Touchstone sings only snatches of song. Several explanations have been advanced as to why Touchstone is not given more songs to sing, but all arguments remain only conjectures.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that in a fantasy such as *As You Like It*, it is not necessary that every character be fully developed. The strength of this play lies in its dialogue and in its masque-like elements. That Touchstone is not truly and fully developed as a character does not detract from the play. That he is a superb example of theatrical convention is enough, and in no way does it detract from his effectiveness as an integral part of the play. His wit is the wit of a master dramatist, even if he remains, ultimately, incomplete, an enigma of contradictions.