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I AM NOT THAT I PLAY:  
SHAKESPEARE’S EMPLOYMENT OF THE FOOL

BY STEPHEN G. WEBER ‘99

Ninety-nine percent of the people in the world are fools and therest of us are in great danger of contagion.”

- Horace Vandergelder in Thornton Wilder’s “The Matchmaker”

I AM I, HOW’ER I WAS BEGOT (King John I, i, 175)

The fool of tradition was originally a creature of the European royal court—the jester, whose job it was to entertain his masters and mistresses and provide them with a sense of self-importance, be it deserved or not (Goldsmith 48). With his head tonsured and hooded, his hood adorned with “ears” and bells (Goldsmith 2), his clothes were of a motley sort—“Motley’s the only wear” (AYLI II, vii, 34). The fool was “conspicuously classless,” or at least hard to place in any semblance of social hierarchy (Black 83), most likely because the common fool was mentally deformed to a certain degree (McDonnell 14 April 1997). Despite this, he was somehow an accepted member of the royal court.

In Elizabethan drama, the fool made his start as a representative of Vice from the old Morality plays (i.e., Falstaff). In time, however, the fool developed unparalleled wisdom, an evolution credited to William Shakespeare upon his creation of Touchstone (Goldsmith 17). Though more similar to the fool of European tradition than to the Vice fool, the “Wise Fool” is an entity all its own. He was a character used by Shakespeare to be the voice of reason amidst a world of chaos; a character worthy of more than the slapstick wordplay / misinterpretation reserved for common fools (such as Dogberry) (19). The wise fool is not always his mistress and master’s flatterer; through the guise of inferiority (to keep himself from being whipped) the wise fool is very often critical of his lords and ladies (48).

The wise fool, however, is nothing more than a literary creation (Somerset 73), the cunning brain-child of William Shakespeare’s mind. For what cause did the Bard give birth to him? The pedestrian reason is that Robert Armin had joined the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (Somerset 68), bringing with him a very “foolish” acting style, which included an impeccable wit and the physical capability for slapstick comedy. Some scholars and historians say that Shakespeare saw what a boon he had in Armin and created his great fools specifically for Armin to play. Although this may be true, that Shakespeare wrote characters just for Armin, it does not explain why his wise fools came to be; they are certainly not the only kind of comical character whom Armin could have portrayed. Why, then, should some of Shakespeare’s foremost bearers of wisdom be those whose intellect was traditionally considered to be minuscule? What purpose is there of uniting folly and wisdom in a single character? The rest of this essay will be an attempt to discover the answers to these questions by examining the character and usage of three of Shakespeare’s wisest fools—Touchstone, Feste, and Lear’s Fool.

AY, NOW AM I IN ARDEN (As You Like It II, iv, 14)

Touchstone is our first to be scrutinized. Touchstone is Arden’s critic—he criticizes the Duke Senior’s reciting of his pretty sermons, Orlando’s pinning of poems to trees, Jaques’ lamentations over a deer, Corin’s simple life, William’s simplicity of mind, et cetera (Goldsmith 48). His very name—Touchstone—suggests that his “facetious wisdom was a criterion by which the actions of the other characters...were judged (ix).” Touchstone is thus the voice of reason in Arden, placing the actions of others in check with his dialogue that “consists principally of assertions that things are what they are” (Magarey 61).

Though wise fools are by nature critical, Touchstone is perhaps the most critical of all, often chiding...
To the point of being downright nasty. His if his occupation, cousin, and brother to brother. Touchstone is as critical of love, the romantic loves in particular, as he is of social class, for "as all is mortal in nature, so is all in love mortals in folly (II. iv. 50-51)." He is again representative of reason, and more specifically, of all that is unromantic in love—the anti-cupid, if you will. He is distinctive, ironic spirit to the other critical theme of "doing loves and their foibles" (Goldsmith 86). In lines 96-107 of Act Three Scene two, for example, he mimics Orlando's romantic nature, saying that love poems such as Orlando's are easy to write and do not depict any great thought as one so in love should illustrate. In Act Two, scene four, line 57, Touchstone finds Silvius' love, which Rosalind compares to her own, to be tedious and "stale."

And yet, as critical as he is of love, he is willing to use its guise for his own licentious intents with Audrey. He tells her that he would prefer her to be beautiful and experienced, claiming that "honesty coupled to beauty is to have honey a sauce to sugar" (III. iii. 26-7), in other words, too much of a good thing. He wishes to be poorly married to her so that his love poems are not coupled to beauty, and this is why he shows no affection to anyone in his lot, and yet Viola praises him very highly by saying "This is a practice! As full of labor as a wise man's art..."

While he does seem to be at odds with his title of Fool. Although at line 29 in Act One scene five, he says, "Wit, ast be thy will, put me into good words", there are many instances when he denies Olivia's "a relic of the past"—no one loves him, which is why he shows no affection to anyone (Bradley 20). Whether this is true or not is debatable—while he does not show his love for anyone, he does not appear to hate anyone either. What does he do? He is a singer. What he would rather be is a singer. He is deceptive at times, making others fools when he plays the fool (and gets it), and certainly when he plays Sir Topas; yet he is the only character not fool enough to be deceived himself (Grief 61)—he seems to realize that Cesario is a woman, even calling Viola "sir" many times and mentioning that she could use a beard (III. i. 43-4). No, Feste is not a fool.

What he would rather be is a singer. "I take pleasure in singing," he says to Orsino (II. iv. 67), and he sings throughout the play, even at times when he is alone on stage (V. i. 378). In a play where the very first line is "If music be the food of love, play on...", it is interesting that the musician, Love's chef, should be the character. When you add to this the fact that the majority of Feste's songs have a ring of melancholy and choral, and that he is really the only character who ends happily without being coupled (the others who are not coupled—Malvolio, Andrew, Fabian, and Antonio—do not end in ways they might have liked) (Bradley 21), what does that say about love? Though he does not challenge love as an institution the way Touchstone does, Shakespeare seems to have used Feste as an instrument (musical pun intended) to depict a similar theme. Love thrives on music, Feste's melancholic and reflective singing feeds the loves in the play, thus the love in the play, and perhaps in general, are fed on melancholy. Make of this what you will, but it is interesting to note that the musician, Love's chef, for Cesario grew from mourning her brother's death so long, Orsino's love for Olivia brought him sadness and slight depression, Antonio's love for Sebastian brought him heartache when he mistook Viola for Sebastian and not Cesario and that Olivia's love for himself did him more psychological damage than all of the above put together. Melancholy played a very important part in all the relationships, save perhaps Toby and Marzio, and Feste knew it all along. To possess such knowledge and have it turned to good use is, perhaps, why Feste dislikes playing the fool.
Ariel and Caliban (198) rather than with his come-
whatever else he is, is not a
dic counterparts because the other fools are charac-
this,

Like Feste, the Fool was a much edited character for
we have a completely original creation of
"Lear's
important similarities with Touchstone and Feste.

The Fool, aside from what the aforementioned

Why is the Fool Lear's truest companion? There
are a few valid readings of this question, and they
all may work together. The first and simplest is that the
two of them together are a mixture of comedy and

The Fool-as-teacher motif used in this play is
very interesting to consider. How should we react
when a king is pupil to a fool? If the Fool is fool
enough and Lear is more so, and the Fool is Lear's
alter-ego, what was Lear when his ego and alter-ego
were together as one. Or were they ever? If the Fool
is perceived as a separate, paranormal personality of
Lear's, perhaps it can be read that the two of them
have never been united until Act Three scene four.

What fools these mortals be (Midsum-
mer Night's Dream, I. ii. 15)

From this evidence it is obvious that the Wise
Fool is much more than a tip-of-the-hat to Robert
Armin. Although it is evident that the "comic spirit
breathes most freely in the person of a somewhat
detached observer" (Goldsmith 31), the wise fool is
responsible for more than that. Though Touchstone,
Feste, and the Fool are all "somewhat detached" from
the rest of the characters in their respective plays, they
give life to more than just the comic spirit.

These fools are characters of a most complex
nature. Not one of them is truly happy with his life

Shakespeare's employment of the Fool
or the situations he faces. None of them is a fool in
any of his actions, only in name. And yet, we laugh
at them—or rather, we laugh with them, for therein
lies their wisdom. When Touchstone whines about
Arden and its uncivilized inhabitants, we laugh. When
Lear's Fool dares to snarl at the loathsome Goneril,
we laugh again. And as Feste deems others fools, we
laugh once more. The fools laugh at others as we
laugh at them, and as they would surely laugh at us.
Horse Vandergelder has it wrong—100% of
the people in the world are fools, be we wise or not,
and we consogin ourselves by not laughing at the follies
of the world, and indeed our own folly. If everyone
could learn this, the fool's wisdom, think of how life
could have been happier for Lear. Malvolio. Jaques.

You. Me. . . . .


