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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 Match
maker"*

I AM I, HOWE'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

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others to the point of being downright nasty. His motley costume, however, removes the venom from his words (Goldsmith x). It is his appearance, then, that gives this fool his license and his social rank, two elements of his character that he hopes to keep secure "since the little wit that fools have was silenced" in *Arcadia* (I. ii. 82-4), and the very occupation of the fool was not a stable one (McDonnell, 14 April 1997).

Social rank seems to be the more prominent of his two concerns, however. At court Touchstone is merely a fool; in *Arden*, "a region defined by an attitude of liberty from ordinary limitations" (Barber 223), Touchstone transforms himself into a gentleman. In court, his own ambiguous rank is not that much greater than the ranks of the rustic bumpkins in the countryside, yet he treats them as his natural inferiors. In his initial meeting with Corin, Touchstone introduces himself and his party as Corin's "betters" (II. iv. 61-64). He later argues with humble Corin the glories of the court versus the monstrosities of the country (III. ii. 13-21), going so far as to tell him:

Why, if thou never wast at court, thou never saw'st good manners; if thou never saw'st good manners, then thy manners must be wicked; and wickedness is sin, and sin is damnation. Thou art in a parlous state shepherd. (III. ii. 37-41)

Touchstone's pseudo-rank is also brandished upon William in Act Five scene one and to the page boys that sing for him in Act Five scene three.

The caustic wit of Touchstone sharpens upon his arrival in *Arden*; in Duke Frederick's court, Touchstone is considered to be no more than a "whetstone of the wits," the object which others sharpen *their* tongues upon (I. ii. 51). In court, his wit is suppressed; in *Arden* it is unleashed, and its victims undergo the same kind of patronizing that Touchstone himself goes through in his daily, courtly life (Goldsmith 49). It could be read that Touchstone is acting out fantasies of power with his upwardly-mobile status in *Arden*, verbally abusing others as he does; perhaps he enjoys being on the giving end of repression. However, given his critical nature, it is more likely that Shakespeare utilized this fool's social rank to imply that nobility is not based on birthright so much as it is on superior attitudes and words of condescension (Kronenfeld 345); a fool can be a lord

if his "subjects" know not otherwise.

As You Like It is a comedy of manners in many respects (Black 89), but it is more properly defined as a romantic comedy that deals with many types of love relationships; woman to man, man to man, woman to woman, father to daughter, cousin to 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 nature in love mortal 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 brings an ironic spirit to the satirical and cliché theme of "doting lovers 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 after the consummation of their union he may more easily leave the marriage (III. iii. 81). His most shocking speech comes at Act Three, scene three, lines 43-55, where he glorifies the cuckold. It is Touchstone's contention that since the mighty stag has great horns and is admired for them, so should the cuckolded man be for it strengthens his defenses. He asks is it better to be inexperienced and have no horns, or to be a cuckold?—at least then a man has some experience to look back on and enjoy.

On the subject of love, this existential fool transcends emotion and makes much sense—too much sense; for indeed, any lover will tell you that sensibility and love are rarely compatible. Why, then, should the fool make the most sense? Touchstone exists for a definite reason; it is known that he was not a character in Shakespeare's source play, nor were Audrey or Jaques (Sargent 244). He is therefore a bona fide Shakespeare original. In the chaotic court of *Arden* where dukes live like peasants and women like men,

it makes sense that fools should be wise. Given that Audrey, too, is a genuine Shakespearean creation—her only purpose to the tale being that she is the fool's lust-interest—a further, more meaningful reading of the fool is this: Shakespeare is telling us that in the world of love it is foolish to be sensible. That makes sense.

NAY, I AM FOR ALL WATERS (*Twelfth Night* IV. ii. 62)

Feste is another of Shakespeare's originals not found in the source play, indicating that his existence must be very important to the playwright. However, to his fellow characters and to many directors and audiences up until the 20th century, Feste was sorely overlooked. In fact, Feste was the most edited character of the play, often edited completely away (Greif 62), until a production in 1901 when he was given his due. Feste, it seems, is a character created long before his time, his time being now.

The reason Feste has gained appreciation in our society has much to do with his ambiguous nature. Some scholars contend that Feste, in relation to the other characters in the play, is "tolerated rather than appreciated" (Draper 192). Evidence of this is that, unlike Touchstone or Lear's Fool, Feste has no Celia or Lear; he was Olivia's late father's fool and is, at the time of the play, "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 he does seem to be at odds with is his title of *Fool*. Although at line 29 in Act One scene five, he says, "Wit, an't be thy will, put me into good fooling," there are many instances when he denies being a fool and/or gives the title to someone else. Later in the same scene he says, "I wear not motley in my brain" (51-2) and proceeds to prove that Olivia is indeed more fool than he. He tells Cesario that he is not Olivia's fool, "but her corrupter of words" (III. i. 35), and on a number of occasions (I. v. 31-2; II. iii. 74; IV. ii. 87-8; V. i. 282-3) he deems others to be more fool than he. Feste is a fool unhappy with his lot, and yet Viola praises him very highly by saying "This fellow is wise enough to play the fool, / And to do that well craves a kind of wit (III. i. 58-9)," and of his occupation, "This is a practice / As full of labor as a wise man's art..."

Still, he is not content. Perhaps it is because no one heeds his words; everyone in the play is a kind of fool, but no one will believe him (Bradley 19). He is deceptive at times, making others fools when he begs for money (and gets it), and certainly when he plays Sir Topas; yet he is the only character not fool enough to be deceived himself (Greif 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 fool. When you add in the fact that the majority of Feste's songs have a ring of melancholy to them 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 loves in the play, and perhaps in general, are fed on melancholy. Make of this what you will, but it is interesting to note that Olivia's love 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 she denied knowing him and Malvolio'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 Maria's, and Feste knew it all along. To possess such knowledge and have it go unlistened to is, perhaps, why Feste dislikes playing the fool.

THE FOOL WILL STAY (*King Lear* II. iv. 78)

Lear's Fool is our final fool, and he is a completely different entity from those mentioned before him. Some have argued this point heavily, saying that the Fool is almost as complex as Hamlet due to his unintelligible emotions. Going even further with

this, it has been said that the Fool "has a personality; yet he is not—or cannot be perceived as being—a person" (Seiden 197). He has been compared with Ariel and Caliban (198) rather than with his comedic counterparts because the other fools are characters like any other—Macbeth, Desdemona, Angelo—in short, they have pasts. Feste and Touchstone are obviously real people with real feelings: "The Fool, whatever else he is, is not a man" (199). Others, of course, disagree, saying that the Fool is very much human and is not at all supernatural or even a "natural" (Goldsmith 60): "It is the world and not the Fool that is irrational; the Fool's wisdom is the wisdom of a cruel world" (Jorgensen 111). In other words, "Lear's Fool is nobody's fool" (Goldsmith 62).

The Fool, aside from what the aforementioned scholarship suggests, does in fact share some very important similarities with Touchstone and Feste. Like Feste, the Fool was a much edited character for a long time—he was cut entirely from a Restoration production of *King Lear* (Green). More importantly, the Fool, like Feste and Touchstone both, is not native to his play source, the legend of Llyr; he is very much an anachronism (Goldsmith 96). Once again we have a completely original creation of Shakespeare's; once again we must wonder why.

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 tragedy—a dramatic marriage of sorts (Goldsmith 95). Another reading is that the Fool is Lear's alter ego (67), "the voice of nothing" (Seiden 209) that heckles the King into madness (Goldsmith 64). He does this by focusing two-thirds of his comments on Lear's folly: dividing his land between his two evil daughters and banishing Cordelia (Jorgensen 112). Other textual evidence of the Fool-as-alter-ego theory is that the Fool is completely loyal to Lear, and his loyalty overrides his common sense (Goldsmith 64)—why should he have followed the King to possible death in the storm? Why such faith to Lear whom he is so angry at for banishing Cordelia? If he is Lear's alter-ego and therefore a part of Lear, there would be no other choice for him but to follow. Another valid point is that Lear banishes Cordelia and Kent for saying less than the Fool does—he does not banish the Fool because it is not possible; they are the same.

The Fool's most important role in the play,

however, is as Lear's teacher, "a severe tutor" (112) for one who has never learned much of anything as a King. Not only does the Fool school Lear in the humblest needs of money, warmth, shelter, and labor (120), but he also teaches the King wisdom (Black 94)—foolish wisdom, "the wisdom of a cruel world." The Fool's goal is to make the King discover himself:

Lear: Who is it that can tell me who I am?

Fool: Lear's Shadow. (I. iv. 220-1)

He teaches Lear more than this, however: he teaches Lear that he is himself a fool. When the Fool asks the King whether or not he knows the difference between a bitter fool and a sweet one, the King begs, "No, lad; teach me" (I. iv. 130-132). The answer is that Lear is the bitter fool, the Fool is the sweet one. Though Lear does not realize this right away, it is evident later that he is indeed a fool, and even a wise one, when he exclaims in the Fool's "Inversion-Utterance" style of speech (Williams 63), "We'll go to supper i'th'morning" (III. iv. 83). The Fool, realizing that Lear passed his course in Foolish Wisdom, replies "And I'll go to bed at noon" (III. iv. 84). Those the last words we hear from the one who taught Lear to make use of nothing.

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. Lear, therefore, was never a complete person until he joined himself with a fool.

WHAT FOOLS THESE MORTALS BE (*Midsummer Night's Dream* III. ii. 115)

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

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. Horace Vandergelder has it wrong—100% of the people in the world are fools, be we wise or not, and we contagion 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.

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