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Interplay of reason and unreason: Interrogating Lear's Fool as the Commentator

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Shakespeare's characters are far from being type characters. Their respective qualities mark them with all their differences from each other. Shakespearean Fools are no exceptions in this regard. They appear in different plays to perform particularly individualistic functions. In King Lear, the Fool serves a very complex role. Through his caricatures and witty remarks he perfects the role of an efficient entertainer and also the monarch's alter ego. There has been much debate about the function of the Fool as characterised by Shakespeare in many of his plays. This paper attempts to explore the apparent limitations of the role in particular and the degree to which it transcends it. Considering the interplay of reason and unreason, it further interrogates Lear's Fool as the ideal commentator much needed for a complete understanding and appreciation of the play.

It was neither Shakespeare nor Erasmus who invented the wise fool. If traced minutely one can find this paradoxically behaving character almost as old as Socrates. The fool in motley, cap and codpiece was chiefly associated with fertility rights. A strange amalgam of an entertainer as well as a critic is what we locate in a Fool and in his comments we observe a strong sense of wisdom combined with a fine sense of wit. It has been repeatedly argued by various literary scholars that Shakespeare took the wise fool of Erasmus and set him moving on the Elizabethan stage. Shakespearean fools are much more than theatrical prototypes, they are finely carved out complex individuals clearly distinguishable from each other. Shakespeare adopts the tradition but transcends it brilliantly. One can never trace prominent similarities between Touchstone, Feste, Lavache or Fool—Touchstone is a comic realist in the romantic forest of Arden; Feste is an observer and a detached participant in the world of harsh realities, while Lear's fool is a personification of the Christian doctrine of wise folly.

The very entity of "Professional fools" became much prominent in the mediaeval England, approximately during 13th century. The rigid structure of medieval society relied on these reality

maintenance constructs, to create a sense of release for and in the population. Ultimately the role was meant to re-affirm the hierarchy and strictness of the medieval system. However much later in Elizabethan times, a tradition of maintaining or rather keeping fools usually in courts, though trends to keep fools in households also survived (there was a “fool” in St. Thomas More’s household–Henry Patenson) was quite in fashion. Elizabethan stage not only saw Robert Armin, the sophisticated clown in Shakespeare’s company (1599) but before him there was William Kemp, the master of jig and table side entertainments. But even before him there was Richard Tarleton whose very appearance on stage made the audience laugh. Perhaps it was the incoming of these comic personas that afforded Shakespeare to construct such strong characters behind those merry cloaks. Without the influence of Kemp and Armin, we would have had no Touchstone, no Feste and certainly no Fool of Lear. In the mediaeval period there were certain festivals where the fool was elevated to a high level and celebrated promiscuously. Such as if we recall *Twelfth Night*, we can remember how it marked the end of a festive season in which there were other occasions alluded to by Shakespeare, notably the *Festum Stultorum* or Feast of fools, though at times it was celebrated on St. Stephen’s Day (26th December) or New Year’s Day, rather than Twelfth Night. So, one can certainly come up with a statement that fool was not only a known figure but also a well-accepted one in the society as well as on the stage.

The court jesters however fell into two groups: they could be born idiots with a natural knack for jesting; or, they could also be witty and accomplished professional entertainers. The Fool in *King Lear* belongs to the first category for he is ‘nature’s natural’. It takes a wise man to be a fool, though an ardently paradoxical statement, but it is somehow true. To modern readers or audience or readers the Fool may appear to be a bizarre kind if character, but the jester figure was not only familiar but very popular to Shakespearean audience. One reason behind this perhaps is that a large proportion of his audience hailed from the groundling sections. The fool played a stock character on the stage, linking actors and the audience, playing tricks on the characters in the play and thus amusing the spectators. But other than that, as a traditional court jester, the fool was not only dear but also a privileged person in the royal courts, who as Jacques puts in *As you like it*, could ‘blow on’ anyone he pleased. With the power of his wit, he could comment with complete freedom (certainly the fear of being whipped lurked) on some odd traits or stupid actions of men much above his rank. Interestingly, whipping is a symbolic comic punishment. The fool is licensed with the authority to comment on his subjects or patrons, we can trace back to Gonerill’s statement

citing Lear's fool as the "all licensed fool" but paradoxically whenever his comments somehow disturbs his patron, he is whipped or at least threatened to be whipped. Though apparently it is a mere punishment, but actually it is symbolic, in a comic way it keeps the balance of power alright. However, Lear's fool ignoring Gonerill's infuriation and all the threats of whipping throughout the play keeps on making comments without the least hesitation that no one else would have dared to utter in front of the mighty king.

What possibly distinguishes the Fool of *Lear* is that although he speaks quite like the other fools of Shakespeare, but most of his statements are somehow pointed towards Lear, trying too hard to 'rub in' the mistakes of his 'nuncle.' His apparently happy comments somehow project the darkest realities and it has been suggested by William Empson that the fool represents in an embodied form, the conscience of Lear. Shakespeare perhaps had an intention to lay threadbare the strange puzzles of human life and fool was perhaps the best instrument that he could use.

More than the witty comments of the Fool in *Lear*, what appeals to us ardently is the wisdom behind those statements. Nature has not only blessed him with wit, but also with a strong sense of wisdom. He apprehends much earlier the consequences which may befall on Lear while the wise king fails to behold even a bit of it. The Fool always advises others, to disdain the company of Lear for he has fallen from grace, but ironically enough the fool never deserts the king. He constantly reminds Lear of the wrongs that Lear had done to Cordelia and at times it becomes too harsh to bear and in rage the king calls him "a bitter fool". Well aware of his status, the fool still crosses his limit ignoring the threats of whipping and boldly states – "Truth's a dog must to kennel" implying that though men desire to have truth, they can hardly stand it, so truth like a dog is whipped back to the kennel. Again, it is this "bitter" fool who rushes out with Lear in the storm ignoring every tinge of self-interest and comfort, shouting "Tarry, take the fool with thee" and he sings, "But I will tarry but the Fool will stay". The fool at the same time plays a dual role. Firstly, as an objective commentator constantly commenting on the follies, mistakes and the blatantly incorrect decisions of Lear and secondly as a subjective sympathizer, who perhaps criticizes Lear on the surface but also loves him dearly.

Evaluating the comments or the remarks of Lear's fool, one can certainly observe that other than wisdom, the jester also has his own share of common sense – certainly his deflating common sense projects more vividly Edgar's feigned madness and also Lear's ravings:

LEAR: Could'st thou save nothing? Would'st thou give'em all?

FOOL: Nay, he reserved a blanket; else we had all been shamed.

Again when Lear attempts to tear off his clothes to become like Tom O'Bedlam (Edgar in disguise) - "poor, bare, forked animal", Fool terminates his desire by saying - "Prithee, Nuncle, be contented 'tis a naughty night to swim in". Often that has been marked as fool's mad babblings and tasteless jokes are in reality shrewd comments on the dramatic action. Shakespeare through the comments of the fool sums up the exact position of the king "thou should'st not have been old till thou had'st been wise" and when Kent says, "this is not altogether fool, my lord," he is evidently correct.

Classical drama had the tradition of using chorus, a group of singers who commented on the dramatic actions of the play with a collective voice. However, Elizabethan stage did not witness the chorus. Rather they turned towards comic characters, a striking combination of intelligence and buffoonery. But somehow the functions remained the same - while the chorus commented on the dramatic action with a collective voice, the fool performs the same but only with his own voice. Other than that, as the tragedy advances towards a graver tragic ambiance, with the increasing pity and fear, it becomes necessary to provide moments to release the tension, not wholly for that might spoil the mood altogether, but of course partially. These are known as moments of comic relief and Lear's fool certainly attempts to provide comic relief. But again, even if the purpose of the fool is to provide comic relief, he is not a master of that art, for his long and winding speeches defies and neglect the very essence of comic relief, which is at its best when kept short, brief and humorous. His speeches are certainly humorous but one can hardly find them short and brief.

The character of the fool is so well devised that it often compels us to wonder if he is the second important character after Lear (at least in the early sections of the play). Such is the insight of the clown that he easily reduces the king to the level of a fool.

FOOL: The one in motley here

The other found out there!

LEAR: Dost thou call me fool boy?

FOOL: All thy other titles thou hast given away that thou wast born with.

However, in the comments of the fool, apart from the wit, dark humour, grotesque jocularity another thing which strikes us is a sheer presence of irony which successfully provides the clearest insight into the play. Paying no heed to the fool's sayings, Lear cries: "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" to which the fool answers "Lear's shadow". The fool as a commentator not only remarks or criticizes the dramatic action, may be on the surface he does, but more than that for what he stands remarkably distinct is that he develops the moral tone of the play.

King Lear has been described as a play about Christian justice and a play about Christian patience; it is also a play about Christian folly, which is paradoxically to be interpreted as a kind of wisdom. By popular tradition, if not classical precedent there had always been in English drama prior to Shakespeare a tendency to mix low comedy with serious action. One need only to check the morality plays with their comic "vices" and the popular tragedies such as Horestes or Cambises, to apprehend this peculiar Elizabethan taste for unorthodox combination. But in *Lear* the presence of the comic element is quite different, for it is more intensely linked with the tragedy. In fact it is through the foolery that an important aspect of the Christian theme is conveyed to the spectators.

According to St. Paul, whom Tillyard regards as the principal biblical source of Elizabethan and Jacobean theological doctrine, true wisdom comes only from God, and is virtually opposed to the worldly wisdom which man uses to justify his own fallen nature:

"Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise."

And again, more apt to the situation in *Lear*, St. Paul states:

"But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty."

"Confounding" is exactly what the fool does to *Lear* and *Lear's* pitiful plea to Cordelia that he is "old and foolish" echoes the words of Ecclesiastes – "Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king who will no more be admonished."

We cannot assume exactly what instigated the construction of the character of the fool; rather we can glance at the Elizabethan theology advocating the curious fact that man must be "convicted of folly" in order to become aware of spiritual truth. The theological doctrine which admitted man's

reason to be “foolish” without divine aid is found comprehensively projected in Torneur’s The Atheist’s tragedy, written almost at the same time when Shakespeare was framing King Lear. In the Act V, Scene I of Torneur’s play, D’Amville, the murdering atheist is confronted by Montferrers’ (the victim) ghost, who warns him:

D’Amville! With all thy wisdom th’art a fool
Not like those fool that we term innocents,
But a most wretched miserable fool
Which instantly, to the confusion of
Thy projects, with despair thou shalt behold.

The ghost in his speech perfectly marks two different kinds of foolishness, both of which are found in Lear. We almost see the accurate prophecy of the ghost echoed by D’Amville in his dying speech:

There was the strength of natural understanding. But nature is a fool. There is a power
Above her that hath overthrown the pride
Of all my projects and posterity.

The statements or dialogues in Torneur do highlight the thoughts underlying the action of Lear. It functions as a key to apprehend the symbolic function of the fool in Lear. Like the fool in Twelfth Night and Timon of Athens, he highlights the mortification, not of flesh but of mind. Ambiguously enough, the fool utters, “Marry, here’s Grace and a cod-piece; that’s a wise man and a fool. “These wise fools had another dramatic function, which was to deflate their master’s pride by speaking out bitter truths about their deeds and hence bringing them to the light of spiritual wisdom. Lear refuses to hear the truth from his own daughter, but accepts it when chided by the fool. Unlike Feste, Lear’s fool is never intentionally unkind, but is a true innocent – a “natural” fool, whose wisdom is not self-fashioned. His bitter comments are born out of a deep sense of affection and loyalty that instead of curbing the tragic effect, it enhances the gravity of the pathos.

The fool's natural power to unveil obscured mysteries of the soul is important as it foreshadows Lear's flashes of "reason in madness" during the Dover scene, when he is transformed into – "the natural fool of fortune", a performer on "this great stage of fools". Often it has been said that the fool disappears at the end of Act III, for it is Cordelia who takes his place as Lear's spiritual guide. However this is perhaps not exactly accurate for during the Dover scene, Lear himself becomes his own fool, uttering all the moral truths that he himself failed to accept when he was sane. When Lear was in his proper senses, the fool was his entertainer, but as he loses his sanity, we see him drawing imaginary bed curtains around him "So, so, we'll go to supper in the morning". The fool echoes his master's paradox and slowly vaporizes from the play – "I'll go to bed at noon." The Fool's function is exhausted. [2052] But this can be viewed from another angle as well. From the theatrical production point of view, the Fool and Cordelia can never stay together for both of the roles were played by a single actor – Robert Armin. Thus, following Armin's (Fool) departure from the stage, Armin (Cordelia) makes her stage appearance again. So, the character of the fool had no other choice than to leave the stage.

If we judge the fool by his comments, then we can see how he provides different shades of comments. It is not merely political commentary; rather it is more of an ethical and philosophical commentary. The fool is besotted with barbed, double-edged and ambivalent dialogues which are apparently humorous and amusing but more than that he is invested with an insight deeper and farther- reaching than that superficial wittiness that makes a popular court jester. In fact he is the sage fool who beholds the naked truth and his role more than its emotional significance is remarkable for its intellectual quality.

However, *King Lear's* Fool is not Feste the jester—he is a Fool trapped in a tragedy rather than a comedy. Feste has some responsibility towards the end of the comedy making it clear for the audience: he changes the phrase, "For the rain it raineth every day," with which ends each stanza of his song to "We'll strive to please you every day" in the last stanza. Feste's comment on the actions of *Twelfth Night* is needed until the 'show' ends. But *Lear's* Fool cannot be there till the end; his commentary on the actions of Lear or the other characters could not save them from their inevitable ending. Rather than becoming cheesy or campy, *Lear's* Fool is therefore gloomy, sad, and a man whose comments had the value of a chorus but lacked proper ears except the audience of this harrowing tragedy.

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