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The Fool in Lear Exposes a Foolish Lear

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THE FOOL IN LEAR EXPOSES

A FOOLISH LEAR

(TITLE)

BY

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THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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The Fool in Lear is no fool. Rather, in the best tradition of true wits like Feste and Jaques in his earlier comic efforts, Shakespeare creates a vibrant vehicle to serve as his cynical spokesman in the "Lear universe."¹ He is the sweet fool, the bitter fool, the enigmatic fool, whose conundrums undermine the hypocrisy of an inane cosmos. The Fool is the imaginative force in an imbecilic universe who labors as a touchstone upon which the play's apparent truths can be applied to a test of purity. He is not " . . . a piece of court tinsel drenched and buffeted . . . "² as Harley Granville-Barker describes him, nor the comic babbler of "mirthless puns"³ as Tolstoy would sketch him, and he is certainly more profound than Coleridge's conception of him "as wonderful a creation as the Caliban--an inspired idiot."⁴ Josephine Waters Bennett's observation that the Fool, with his head full of riddles, calls to mind a "ten-year-old with a craze for 'moron' jokes"⁵ is ludicrous in the light of important roles which Shakespeare has assigned him in the play. Lear's spaniel is more nearly

¹G. Wilson Knight, "The Lear Universe," The Wheel of Fire (1949), rpt. in G. B. Harrison and Robert F. McDonnell, eds., King Lear: Text, Sources, and Criticism (New York: Harcourt, 1962), p. 129.

²Harley Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, p. 291.

³Leo Tolstoy, Tolstoy on Shakespeare (1906), rpt. in Harrison and McDonnell, p. 118.

⁴Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Literary Remains (1836), rpt. in Thomas Middleton Rayson, ed., Coleridge's Shakespeare Criticism (1930), rpt. in Harrison and McDonnell, p. 95.

⁵Josephine Waters Bennett, "The Storm Within: The Madness of Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, 13 (1962), 145.

Hudson's "soul of pathos in comic masquerade,"⁶ but no one label can categorize him, so numerous are his roles within the piece. Lear's "poor boy"⁷ functions in a variety of capacities, namely, as Cordelia's advocate,⁸ royal schoolmaster, imperial confidant, mad advisor, regal conscience, sanity's mouthpiece, choral leader, divine seer, and handy-dandy.⁹ He is as versatile and penetrating a character as any likely to be examined in Shakespearean tragedy.

Nowhere in Holinshed's The True Chronicle History of King Lear does a prototype for the Fool emerge. He appears to be solely a touch of genius in Shakespeare's limitless imagination. William Empson traces this "half-lunatic Shakespearean clown"¹⁰ to the advent of the professional jester and mocker as a fixture in the English court of Henry VIII earlier in the sixteenth century.¹¹ Borrowing his conception of this "harmless pet" from the Praise of Folly written by the fifteenth-century humanist Erasmus, Empson views the motley jester in terms of " . . . the simple man who is somehow right about life, whereas more pretentious figures are wrong; he is Everyman in the presence of God, who will forgive us because we are all fools."¹² Viewed by his spectators with contempt and awe, he is licensed

⁶ Edward Dowden, Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art (1918), rpt. in Harrison and McDonnell, p. 102.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Arnold Isenberg, "Cordelia Absent," Shakespeare Quarterly, 2 (1951), 185.

⁹ John F. Danby, "The Fool and the Handy-Dandy," Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear (1949), rpt. in Leonard F. Dean, ed., Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 378.

¹⁰ William Empson, "The Fool in Lear," Sewanee Review, 57 (1949), 177.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 178.

¹² Ibid.

to be lustful and cruel in his seeming playfulness, and profound and witty in his borrowed guise of imbecility.¹³ The court jester in his professional honesty is permitted by royal prerogative to express the truth about human nature through elliptic riddles while courtiers and sycophants are compelled to coat reality with "plaited cunning" (I.i.283)¹⁴ in order to make the truth palatable for royal consumption.

Shakespeare defines the Fool's role in an earlier comic work. Olivia in Twelfth Night reiterates the license permitted the jester when she attempts to explain to Malvolio Feste's liberal tongue by observing: "There is no slander in an allowed fool, though he do nothing but rail; nor no railing in a known discreet man, though he do nothing but reprove" (I.v.101-104). Moreover, Viola in the same play describes the discretion which the fool must observe in his wit-play as she observes:

This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,
And to do that well craves a kind of wit.
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time,
And, like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eye. This is a practice
As full of labor as a wise man's art.
For folly that he wisely shows is fit,
But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit (III.i.67-75).

Even Hamlet as he fingers the fetid skull of his favorite Danish jester, Yorick, reflects upon the gibes, gambols, and songs that set the royal table "on a roar" (Hamlet V.i.210). The role of the court clown is established in Shakespearean tradition well before the Fool in Lear joins Thersites from Troilus and Cressida as one of Elizabethan drama's most cynical and bitter spokesmen.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ G. B. Harrison, ed., Shakespeare: The Complete Works (New York: Harcourt, 1952), p. 1144. All subsequent phrases and passages borrowed from Shakespeare are taken from this text.

Sheldon P. Zitner regrets that scholarly judges have forced the Fool to enter the realm of literary explication " . . . through the side door of criticism."¹⁵ Attempting to extract a universal thread from the fabric of the play, some critics are myopic in their utter neglect of the Fool. They concentrate their endeavors on probing a headstrong Lear, angelic Cordelia, salacious Gloucester, or a base Edmund for the drama's answers, bypassing an important key with which to unlock the sardonic atmosphere which saturates the play's first three acts. The Fool, whose wit seasons the tone of the production, is no minor stock-type. He is the pulse at the very heart of the drama. Through his eyes the audience, as well as the King, is able to strip off the plating of appearance in order to grip the base metal of the play's reality. Fortunately, recent criticism is enlightened in its attempts to examine the Fool in his context at the core of the tragedy.

Thomas B. Stoup develops Arthur Stringer's thesis that the Fool is Cordelia herself. He seeks comfort in Professor Alois Brandl's hypothesis that the dual roles were cast by Shakespeare for the same boy actor in light of the available textual evidence. Brandl observes that at no point in the play does the pair appear on stage together. In fact, he notes that a 357 line interval occurs between Cordelia's exit and the Fool's entrance, and a corresponding 356 line lag appears between the Fool's retirement at the end of Act Three and Cordelia's reappearance at the head of the invading French force in Act Four.¹⁶ Tucker Brooke uses this coincidental evidence to surmise

¹⁵ Sheldon P. Zitner, "The Fool's Prophecy," Shakespeare Quarterly, 18 (1967), 77.

¹⁶ Thomas B. Stoup, "Cordelia and the Fool," Shakespeare Quarterly, 12 (1961), 127.

that these time lapses were meted out for change of costume and make-up which permitted Robert Armin, the boy actor who sang the troupe's whimsical parts, to undertake the dual roles.¹⁷ He contends that the Knight's reply to Lear that " . . . the fool hath much pined away" (I.iv.80) suggests a dwarfish creature whose role could properly be assumed by a boy actor of Armin's small dimensions.¹⁸ E. K. Chambers further notes that due to the lengthening of the time-interval between the two parts, which accommodated Armin's change of costume, when less capable actors later vied for the parts, the number of lines assigned to the Fool and Cordelia were cut as it was no longer a dramatic necessity that preparatory speeches for the entrance or exit of the two characters, which were by this time assumed by two actors, be maintained.¹⁹

Alois Brandl, Tucker Brooke, E. K. Chambers, Brander Matthews, Janet Spens, Arthur Stringer, and Alwin Thaler provide the critical foundation and support²⁰ for Steup's analysis that the Fool is in essence Cordelia's alter ego during her sojourn in France, and that he becomes one with the daughter in Lear's disordered mind as the King intimates when he exclaims in his last breath that his "poor fool is hanged" (V.iii.305). Charles Dickens nearly a century earlier had made a similar observation,²¹ and Josephine Waters Bennett, Harold Goddard, and Arnold Isenberg construct their analyses around this contention.²²

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 128.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

²¹ Robert F. Fleissner, "The 'Nothing' Element in King Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, 13 (1962), 69.

²² Bennett, p. 144; Harold C. Goddard, The Meaning of Shakespeare (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 548; Isenberg, p. 185.

The stage historian William J. Lawrence, however, found Dickens's hypothesis difficult to believe. He termed the postulate that the Fool and Cordelia were played by one actor "incredible," and in his studies of Elizabethan stage conventions and directions he found no concrete evidence to substantiate the assumption that a leading female character's role was doubled to include a male part. He dismisses the notion by explaining that the vast differences required in attire and make-up would have made the doubling of male and female characters "irksome" at best.²³ Lawrence assigns Brandl's contention that one boy actor played the roles of both the Fool and Cordelia to the realm of sheer speculation, that domain of literary criticism to which the hypothesis seems to gravitate.

Although the Fool may not become Cordelia's alter ego in Lear's mind, he does function as her attorney in attempting to plead her defense at court by presenting his stubborn master with a constant reminder of the injustice which he has bestowed as a dowry upon his favorite daughter. The Fool's role as Cordelia's advocate develops from the Knight's reply to the King's inquiry:

Lear: But
where's my fool? I have not seen him this two
days.

Knight: Since my young lady's going into France,
sir, the fool hath much pined away.

Lear: No more of that, I have noted it well (I.iv.76-82).

Lear is aware that the Fool is a shrub which requires Cordelia's constant warmth and attention for proper development, and that her hasty absence has caused him to wither for lack of nourishment. The Fool's link to Cordelia is a deliberate attempt by Shakespeare to establish the court clown as the advocate of the exiled princess in the mind of the audience. Moreover, the

²³William J. Lawrence, Pre-Restoration Stage Studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1927), p. 73.

King commands the Knight to be silent in the matter, for his conscience is already beginning to ache for his hasty dispatch of Cordelia, especially in light of his daughter Goneril's ill temper towards him and his retinue. Not only will the Fool pine away for want of her presence, but his entire world will be seared shortly by her marble-hearted replacements, Goneril and Regan.

Stoup uses Brandl's speculative theory based upon a brave interpolation of textual evidence and stage convention to formulate his bold hypothesis that the Fool is Cordelia in disguise. He is "her vicar,"²⁴ "her deputy,"²⁵ who suffers unjustly for his master's implementation of a rigid self-will. According to Stoup, the Fool is a constant reminder of Cordelia's absence; he is the whip that goads the King for his hasty treason. He " . . . gives verbal utterance to Lear's conscience . . . ,"²⁶ for he reminds him of a daughter's love which refused to play "bopeep" (I.iv.193). His presence is a constant reminder to Lear of his favorite's absence. The Fool's sharp replies to Lear's blind questions resemble the bitter remarks that Cordelia would have used to lead her father to a re-evaluation of her sisters' public professions of love. As Stoup contends, " . . . he says what Cordelia would have . . . "²⁷ if she were still residing in the realm.

Lear's final sigh as the iron strings of his heart crack at the end of the play that his "poor fool is hanged" (V.iii.305) is a key passage for deciphering the true relationship of Cordelia and the Fool in Lear's mind. Harold Goddard does not insist that the label "fool" is an Elizabethan term

²⁴ Stoup, p. 129.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 130.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 129.

²⁷ Ibid.

of endearment meaning "dove," thereby restricting Lear's lament to his hanged daughter.²⁸ Although the context of the remark would dictate that the line be applied to Cordelia, both Goddard and Stoup theorize that Lear could be referring to the physical execution of his own jester for his devotion to the King's cause,²⁹ thus attributing to Shakespeare a compounding of injustice which hurls the play into a more abysmal nihilism and fatalism. However, the controversial line's juxtaposition to Lear's last expression of despair in his divine inquiry, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life/ And thou no breath at all?" (V.iii.306-307), seems to establish Cordelia as the "poor fool," and thus substantiate "fool" as an affectionate term used by a father for his daughter.

Consequently, Stoup's contention that "fool" refers to both court clown and royal princess offers one answer to the dilemma, but it serves the cause of explication only if Brandl's hypothesis is dramatically sound. If one actor played both parts, and the contention that Shakespeare consciously created the Fool to serve as Cordelia's advocate during her absence can be accepted, then it is reasonable to assume that both are united in Lear's mind upon her death.³⁰ Following Stoup's logic, since Lear associated his Fool with his daughter in his conscious utterances while Cordelia lived, there would be no reason why that bond would be severed in his mind upon her death. However, this play, little concerned with offering detailed explanations for dramatic incidents, since its main appeal is to the imagination rather than the reason, cannot be expected to substantiate whether or not the Fool is hanged to appease a pragmatic audience. Rather, it functions

²⁸ Goddard, p. 548.

²⁹ Ibid.; Stoup, p. 130.

³⁰ Stoup, p. 130.

to structurally and dramatically justify Cordelia and the Fool's displacement of one another during the production, for the two become one in their efforts to force father and master to " . . . see truth as the nadir of affection."³¹

The first reference to the Fool in the play occurs in the first lines of Act One, Scene Three, in which Goneril first displays that "marble ingratitude" (I.iv.281) toward her parent which Cordelia prophesied Time would uncover in her sister's "plaited cunning" (I.i.283). "Did my father strike my gentleman for chiding of his fool?" (I.iii.1), she demands of her steward Oswald, before she begins to catalogue for him the senile whims and quirks of her hoary father. By beating his Fool, Goneril's representative has bruised the royal conscience which lies drugged in self-interest, and each subsequent attack in a protracted siege will serve to revive it from its prolonged repose in a misplaced trust.

The Fool's major task in the play is to don the robe of imperial schoolmaster in order to instruct a senile king to differentiate between appearance and reality--truth and facade. He must remove the masks that are used by Goneril and Regan to hide "Ingratitude, [that] marble-hearted fiend" (I.iv.281) with caustic remarks and bitter jokes which brand the truth upon Lear's mind. Since the King like Gloucester " . . . stumbled when [he] saw" (IV.1.21) with his eyes, the Fool must supply his master with a new pair of "orbs" with which to view the hypocrisy of the world. In order to help Lear to discover the "[r]obes and furred gowns [that] hide all" (IV.vi.169) and the gold-plating that is used as a tinsel for sin (IV.vi.169), the Fool is challenged to reveal to his "Mumble" his hand which " . . . smells of mortality" (IV.vi.136) and condition him to accept the truth that he is

³¹Goddard, p. 549.

" . . . a man/ More sinned against than sinning" (III.ii.59). The jester must continually reiterate Regan's astute observation that " . . . to willful men/ The injuries that they themselves procure/ Must be their schoolmasters" (II.iv.305-307), although the injuries which he will concentrate his cannon on are those of "filial ingratitude" (III.iv.14).

While the Fool is Lear's primary pedagogue, the King has a succession of instructors in the play who teach him a lifetime's knowledge of humanity in a few short weeks. Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Oswald teach him the lesson of ingratitude and disobedience whereas Cordelia, Kent, France, and Edgar educate him in the converse virtues of obligation, loyalty, and love. (Part of the dramatic irony rests upon the fact that Lear seeks hospitality from those who would undermine his will while he banishes his "truepenny" allies whose affection will not permit them to enslave themselves to it.) As Tom O'Bedlam is accepted as Lear's acknowledged philosopher, so the Fool is the licensed tutor, his certificate being founded upon his ability to motivate his pupil through a burning wit. That the play recognizes the Fool to be the King's royal schoolmaster is established by the gentleman's response to Kent's inquiry concerning Lear's whereabouts:

Kent: But who is with him?
Gentleman: None but the fool, who labors to outjest
His heart-struck injuries (III.i.15-17).

It is the Fool's ability to function as the true wit in probing Lear's conscience which permits him to lead his master to a self-realization of his blindness through jests and mocks disguised in the cloak of genial banter.

As Manfred Weidhorn views the play, one central theme is " . . . the education of Lear who learns."³² Since before Homeric times age has been

³² Manfred Weidhorn, "Lear's Schoolmasters," Shakespeare Quarterly, 13 (1962), 305.

equated with a wisdom which experience brings, and a hoary head has been a physical symbol of its presence in a man, Lear at fourscore and odd years would be taken by the casual observer as one more fit to educate than to be educated. But he is not "ague-proof" (IV.vi.106-107). Lear's pre-eminence, according to Weidhorn, was implicit in a power which he has dispensed to "more capable hands" upon his abdication.³³ Divorced from reality, the King must undergo an Aeschylean suffering to move him to an understanding of his personal fiasco which resulted from a misinterpretation of an initial family alignment. Weidhorn holds that Lear's preoccupation with striving to communicate through "exclamatory questions" (that is, questions that assume rather than seek an answer)³⁴ indicates that a few barbs unleashed by the Fool will be sufficient catalysts within him to stimulate self-recognition of the truth. Lear must be shocked into perceptiveness, for it is difficult to induce a time-weary traveler to embark on a new route.³⁵

Lear's growth to self-knowledge is a gradual process. He will be ripe for graduation only when he can say, "I am old and foolish" (IV.vii.85).³⁶ However, during his maturation the Fool must vigorously apply the whip if imperial pride and imprudence are to be lashed from his character. (While the King in his tattered robe of authority would willingly apply the lash to the Fool's back on several occasions for the caustic mirth which he uses to scorch his royal composure, it is the King who can most benefit from a judicious mental beating.) Only a physical as well as intellectual scourging can endow Lear with the insight he lacks so desperately. "Oh, reason not

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p. 308.

³⁵Ibid., p. 305.

³⁶Ibid., p. 313.

the need" (II.iv.267) is a piece of kingly advice which this one-time monarch should embrace as the Fool lashes his sides in a bitter and cryptic repartee.

At the play's outset Lear is a stranger to himself. He mistakes his flaws for rights, even virtues. Regan reveals to Goneril that his rash banishment of Cordelia results from " . . . the infirmity of his age," for " . . . he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (I.i.296-297). After Lear's pronouncement of the royal prerogative, Kent indicates that " . . . [when] power to flattery bows . . . majesty stoops to folly" (I.i.151), and only when Lear can recognize his error and make restitution to the injured parties involved will that "folly" be rectified. It is only much later in the play that Lear, purged of his gross faults through a violent insanity, can reproach his two toady daughters with words that needed to be articulated earlier in the protestation scene. Mistaking Gloucester's voice for that of Goneril at a critical point in the drama, Lear in his madness raves:

Ha! Goneril, with a white beard! They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say "aye" and "no" to everything that I said! "Aye" and "no" too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie. I am not agree-proof (IV.vi.97-107).

This enlightened vision is only possible because the Fool earlier had removed his master's rose-tinted glasses in order to replace them with his powerful spectacles which enable Lear to see through facades so that he can read humanity at face value.

Earlier in the play the Fool is summoned by the King to engage his mind in mirthful activity which will divert his thoughts from Goneril's

rejection and harsh treatment of him. Lear is outraged and furious at Oswald's lack of respect for his retired sovereign:

Lear: Oh, you
sir, you, come you hither, sir. Who am I, sir?
Oswald: My lady's father.
Lear: My lady's father! My lord's knave. You
whoreson dog! You slave! You cur! (I.iv.85-89).

This proud monarch is quickly forced to face the stark reality of his insecure and feeble circumstance by this servant's failure to recognize a king stripped of his powers of office. Lear gave away to his daughters and their husbands all except "[the] name and all the additions to a king" (I.i.138). He was too myopic to realize that deprived of "sway, revenue, and execution" (I.i.139), a king is a " . . . poor, bare, forked animal . . . " (III.iv.111) devoid of a proper base of power from which to command respect. A ruler stripped of power and purse is nothing, and Lear himself proclaimed to Cordelia that "[n]othing will come of nothing" (I.i.92).

Within a very short period after the abdication scene, Oswald strips Lear of his royal title, and eventually his daughters will take concerted action to deprive him of his entire retinue, finally compelling him to search for suitable shelter on the barren heath in the fury of a turbulent storm. As the Fool arrives, he has an important two-fold task confronting him; namely, he must cure Lear's blindness so that the mistakes of the past be not protracted, and he must prepare his master to endure the disappointments that his foolish behavior has precipitated. As Gloucester sums up the King's predicament, he has "[s]ubscribed his power" and is "[c]onfined to exhibition" (I.ii.24-25).

The Fool, offering Lear his cockcomb as he approaches his master, attempts to replace his diadem with the headdress of the professional jester in a mock coronation scene. The King deserves the "cock's comb," for his sense-

less abdication has rendered him a fool. (All the characters, even the dim-eyed Gloucester, seem to be aware of Lear's precarious situation.)

Lear is flayed as his bare sense is lashed by the Fool's keen wit:

Lear: Take heed, sirrah, the whip.

Fool: Truth's a dog must to kennel. He must be whipped out, when Lady the brach may stand by the fire and stink (I.iv.123-126).

Lear, most reluctant to abide the Fool's caustic banter, which pricks his conscience in its truthful application, allows his sore spot to be rubbed raw by the jester, for the pain of such remarks brings vision as well as agony. This Fool proves an able counselor when he advises Lear through a sing-song tune to:

Have more than thou showest,
Speak less than thou knowest,
Lend less than thou owest,
Ride more than thou goest,
Learn more than thou trowest,
Set less than thou throwest.
Leave thy drink and thy whore
And keep in-a-door,
And thou shalt have more
Than two tens to a score (I.iv.131-140).

The pupil Lear rejects his lesson with his characteristic reply: "This is nothing, fool" (I.iv.141), but the self-deceived ruler will learn eventually that the maxims implicit in the melody's lyrics are everything.

After crowning Lear a dunce a second time with the empty eggshells deprived of their meat by his two wanton daughters, the Fool, full of songs, presents the lesson in the terms of the conventional schoolroom:

Lear: When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?

Fool: I have used it, Nuncle, ever since thou madest thy daughters thy mother. For when thou gavest them the rod and puttest down thine own breeches, [Singing]

"Then they for sudden joy did weep,
And I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play bopeep,
And go the fools among" (I.iv.185-194).

This is the ditty that Peter Seng thinks so very appropriate as the feeble Lear is compared to a "powerless babe" playing bopeep with his mother.³⁷ Darlene Eddy insists that these "bitter and cryptic" songs of the Fool foreshadow the daughters' harshness to the old man in future scenes.³⁸

Presenting Lear with a lesson on filial ingratitude, the Fool seems to reiterate the advice which the royal counselor Philander gave his King in the pre-Shakespearean tragedy Gorboduc; or, Ferrex and Porrex by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton. Warning his monarch against prematurely dividing his kingdom between two greedy offspring, Philander observed:

And oft it hath been seen, where nature's course
Hath been perverted in disordered wise,
When fathers cease to know that they should rule,
The children cease to know they should obey;
And often overkindly tenderness
Is mother of unkindly stubbornness (Gorboduc I.i.205-210).³⁹

Gorboduc, like Lear, in failing to exert his authority and paternal prerogatives over his children, renders himself helpless, for their greed for power tumbles his ordered state into a destructive civil war. The Fool in an attempt to demonstrate his pupil's paternal blindness tells Lear: "If thou wert my fool, Nuncle, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time" (I.v.45-46).

The Fool then reduces Lear through a bitter mockery to [t]he hedge sparrow [that] fed the cuckoo so long/ That it had it head bit off by it young" (I.iv.235-236), the cart that draws the horse before it (I.iv.244-245), and the eel which the cockney put in the paste alive (II.iv.123-124) in his

³⁷Peter J. Seng, "An Early Tune for the Fool's Song in King Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, 9 (1958), 583.

³⁸Darlene Mathis Eddy, The Worlds of King Lear, Ball State Univ. Monograph No. 20, Publications in English, No. 14 (Muncie, Ind.: Ball State Univ., 1970), p. 9.

³⁹H. C. Schweikert, ed., Early English Plays (New York: Harcourt, 1928), p. 257.

attempts to enlighten and humble His Majesty by analogy. Numerous barbs of wit in a rapid repartee are slung by the Fool at the recalcitrant pupil, with the result that his eyes slowly begin to open to the ignominy of his plight. Ever deprived of clear sight by a stubborn pride, the King has allowed his other senses, which are as capable of uncovering deceit, to decay through disuse. As the Fool advises Lear in a riddle: "[O]ne's nose stands i' the middle on's face . . . to keep one's eyes of either side's nose, that what a man cannot smell out he may spy into" (I.v.19-20;22-24), the Fool instructs his pupil that a man has numerous antennae capable of detecting fraud if his pride and conceit are removed as impediments to their full operation.

Through a series of riddles in which Lear is equated to an oyster without a shell (I.v.26) and a snail without a case for its horns (I.v.29), the Fool stimulates the "hysterica passio" in the King's breast until the confession "I did her wrong--" (I.v.25), is painfully dislodged. The master Fool has led the student Lear to reality along a route of painful exercises, but it is ironic that insanity is a by-product of the cure. The Fool's saucy conundrums present Lear with a dim personal sight based on a familial encroachment; only madness provides him with a universal vision of suffering humanity derived from cosmic insanity.

The Fool not only conducts class for Lear to enable him to uncover the wiles of his "foxy" daughter, Goneril, but he extends the classroom to the heath where the King's loyal servant Caius is stocked for disobedience. He chides Kent for his lack of insight into his master's precarious footing and admits he deserves much punishment for such manifestations of ignorance. To indicate that the classroom has been temporarily moved to the heath, the Fool begins his long lecture on discretion to Kent in terms of academic

imagery. Although cryptic, the sense conveyed is sound advice:

We'll set thee to school to an ant, to teach
thee there's no laboring i' the winter. All that follow
their noses are led by their eyes but blind men,
and there's not a nose among twenty but can smell
him that's stinking. Let go thy hold when a great
wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with
following it, but the great one that goes up the hill,
let him draw thee after. When a wise man gives
thee better counsel, give me mine again, I would
have none but knaves follow it, since a fool gives it (II.iv.68-78).

The Fool berates Kent for his poor vision. An ant could teach him that his dedication to his master is fruitless, for any nose can smell the stench that accompanies the King's demise. Kent is a fool if he leaps with Lear onto the wheel of fortune as it dips into the well of misery and misfortune. He would be wise to clutch the tail of a rising comet like Cornwall or Albany in an attempt to enhance his prospects. But Kent is no knave, and his love for his shredded master is too deep to allow for conversion based on material temptations. Kent would have remained in exile rather than risk the hangman if his devotion were not anchored to affection. This is shrewd advice for expedient sycophants like Goneril, Regan, Oswald, and Edmund, not loyal slaves like Kent and the Fool. Although the inhabitants of the microcosm judge men who reject such practical counsel as fools, the justiciars of the macrocosm view such as adhere to it as knaves.

The Fool further functions as an imperial confidant and regal conscience within his larger role as schoolmaster. He is Lear's alter ego who can convert the King's disgrace and agony into concrete symbols to enhance audience understanding. The two are close comrades who, despite Lear's social superiority, engage in therapeutic wit combat to grant release for repressed observations which would shock conventional ears if they were not incorporated

in cryptic and ambiguous riddles and proverbs. Although the Fool has the sharper wit at the outset, once Lear's eyes are opened to the reality which he mistook for appearance, his sallies are as keen as those of his instructor.

Madness heightens the King's perception. In fact, the Fool's sharp barbs help plunge Lear into an outrage whose outlet is achieved through insanity, whereby his cynical remarks are directed to a universal brotherhood of tormentors and tormented instead of being solely inwardly directed for a personal application. As W. R. Keast contends, Lear can only come to terms with the outside world if he is led to understanding by a capable guide.⁴⁰

The Fool is determined to stand by Lear despite the consequences of his action. He proclaims himself a martyr to Kent in the following prophetic confession:

That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
And follows but for form,
Will pack when it begins to rain,
And leave thee in the storm.

But I will tarry, the fool will stay,
And let the wise man fly.
The knave turns fool that runs away,
The fool no knave, perdy (II.iv.79-86).

The Fool has decided to clutch the wheel of fortune with Lear on its downward arc in an attempt to retard its motion, action which the flatterer, the wise man, will avoid for the sake of expediency. He proclaims himself no sycophant, for he mistakes Caius to be no follower of form. He foresees the storm as imminent in which Lear's band will be routed by the fiends, but he is the loyal shepherd who will guide his charge on the moor while at the mercy of the elements. He risks both his physical and mental

⁴⁰W. R. Keast, "Imagery and Meaning in the Interpretation of King Lear," Modern Philology, 42 (1949), 46.

health in doing so. Eventually, he will be forced by the seeds of insanity to quit such an insane and fruitless field.

From the outset of the tragedy, Lear stands in need of a conscience to acquaint him with his pride, selfishness, obstinacy, and rashness, and to check effectively their manifestation in his will. In his blindness he has banished both Cordelia and Kent who have attempted to break down the headstrong resistance of his will. The pair prick him, but their effort collapses in opposition to his blind rage. Their revolt from flattery is viewed as treason.

The Fool, on the other hand, functions as court jester in a role which permits him a verbal license that is denied to the King's royal counselors and family.⁴¹ Ordinarily, the jester's prattle is not to be taken seriously, for it is the raving of a court clown commissioned to amuse and entertain by whatever means. As Lear's "all licensed fool" (I.iv.220), however, he is the only character in the court who is in an opportune position through which to attempt the remedy. As regal physician, he recognizes that the cure will not be instantaneous, for only by the gradual applications of riddles and puns can Lear be bled effectively. Once the medication is begun, the Fool can share his patient with Poor Tom the philosopher and the matronly Cordelia. The Fool departs the stage with his portion of the operation successfully completed.

In order for the Fool to combat successfully Lear's will, he must be prepared to suffer the imperial whip which drove Kent and Cordelia from Albion, without, however, winning their submission. The Fool as martyr bares his back for Lear's lash while his tongue flogs the King unmercifully. His verbal thongs are sharper; they bite deeper into Lear's soul

⁴¹ Dapson, p. 182.

than leather straps into human flesh. The Fool withstands his ordeal, and once master of the whip, applies it forcefully against the King's will until his soul cries out in agony. Once the soul can articulate its anguish, the monster will capitulate. The Fool continues as Lear's conscious agent in a hostile and idiotic milieu until his own sanity is threatened and his companion's insanity is complete. As J. Stampfer concludes in "The Catharsis of King Lear," Lear pays with his sanity for his arrogant folly. He is purged only to the extent that penance is possible within the malignant machinery of an imbecilic universe.⁴²

The Fool is one of Shakespeare's normative characters in the drama along with Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and the converted Albany. In his myriad roles he is the voice of truth in an age of deceit, a sane spokesman in an insane environment. The audience can test the true brilliance of a Cordelia or the counterfeit glitter of a Goneril or Regan against the proverbs and prophecies that comprise the touchstone of his wit. Kent's insight that "[t]his is not altogether fool . . ." (I.iv.165) is an appropriate evaluation of the character who serves as one of the author's principal mouthpieces in the play.

However, the Fool is not altogether sane. As Lear approaches the Fool's caustic levity during the storm scene, the jester conversely gravitates toward the King's acquired madness. As Lear's utterances become more lucid, the Fool's responses deteriorate into incoherence. His nonsensical ditties are not lucid enough for the reader to determine their applicability to dramatic situation:

Her boat hath a leak,
And she must not speak
Why she dares not come over to thee (III.vi.28-30).

⁴² J. Stampfer, "The Catharsis of King Lear" (1960), rpt. in Dean, p. 375.

After leading Lear through his rage in the storm to a placid state, the Fool himself is unable to relax, for he shivers not only in the cold outside the hovel, but even in the farmhouse beside the fire. By trying to treat Lear's malady too closely, the foolish physician contracts several of the symptoms of a disease which he sought to cure. He loses his rapport with a patient who is beyond medical salvation. The hopelessness of the case is apparent when the Fool's effectiveness in ministering to the royal charge diminishes as this comic is supplanted by more able surgeons in the guise of Cordelia, the Bedlam beggar, and Kent.

In the tradition of Greek tragedy, the Fool leads a chorus of Lear's advocates which periodically comments indirectly to the audience upon the moral implications of a character's actions or the ethics of a particular situation. W. H. Clemen contends that the Fool's images are directed to the audience rather than the King. He notes that the Fool never speaks in dignified blank verse which is reserved for the play's major characters, but rather communicates through a complex web of images and proverbs which are converted into a labyrinth of truth. Clemen observes that the Fool's utterances expect no answers, but are more specifically " . . . general truths directed at no one person in the play."⁴³ He reasons that a number of the remarks are either unheard or unheeded as they are spoken more for the audience.⁴⁴ The Fool's role as choral leader is an extension of his function as one of the author's sane spokesmen for the tragedy. His

⁴³W. H. Clemen, The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery (1951), rpt. in Harrison and McDonnell, p. 162.

⁴⁴Ibid.; John F. Danby, Shakespeare's Doctrines of Nature: A Study of King Lear (London: Faber, 1949), p. 181.

"choral odes" and his prophetic incantations alike serve to establish dramatic irony as well as foreshadow events in the later two acts of the play.

The Fool is also the divine seer in the play whose prophecies are worded in the ambiguous verse of Delphic oracular prognostications. Like Tiresias in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex who uses truth as a beacon with which to lead the blind Oedipus to clear sight, Shakespeare's soothsayer uses prophetic incantations to foreshadow impending cruelty on the part of Lear's foes as well as enhance his vision so that it might incorporate a view of suffering humanity. The Fool's image which compares Lear's myopic sight to that of "[t]he hedge sparrow [that] fed the cuckoo so long/ That it has it head bit off by it young" (I.iv.235-236) is not only a cruel metaphor of ingratitude but of latent bestiality as well.⁴⁵ This portrait supplies the King with an inkling of what can be expected of fiendish daughters who will tear his flesh with their fangs as they send their father scurrying "hatless" across the blasted heath. This is merely one example of numerous images which the Fool uses to reconcile Lear to Goneril's heartlessness and prepare him for a second dose of the same cruelty imminent in a visit to Cornwall's fortress. He also prophesies the defection of the flatterer and loyalty of the Fool in the storm long before the winds blow and the "cataracts and hurricanes spout . . ." (III.ii.1-2). Even Regan can attest to the expertise of the Fool in his role as divine seer in her observation that "[j]esters do oft prove prophets" (V.iii.71).

The Fool's major prophecy in the play is articulated when he anticipates Merlin's work of spinning a legacy for Albion. Although some might mistake

⁴⁵ John C. McCloskey, "Motiv Use of Animal Imagery in King Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, 13 (1962), 321.

the lines to indicate the Fool's allegiance to a social Utopia, he is clearly seen to be no social reformer.⁴⁶ His oracle is projected into the future in a harmonic ditty characteristic of the jester's numerous responses. He must spin a prophecy before he goes:

When priests are more in word than matter,
When brewers mar their malt with water,
When nobles are their tailors' tutors,
No heretics burned, but wenches' suitors,
When every case in law is right,
No squire in debt, nor no poor knight,
When slanders do not live in tongues,
Nor cutpurses come not to throngs,
When usurers tell their gold i' the field,
And bawds and whores do churches build--
Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion.
Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
That going shall be used with feet.
This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before
his time (III.ii.81-95).

As John F. Danby viewed the confused verse, the first four lines describe England's present state of corruption while the next four switch to the projected Utopia, with the ninth and tenth lines combining present circumstances with future prediction. He views the Fool as no social reformer because of the deep-seated cynicism which he draws into the legacy.⁴⁷ When these marvelous transformations occur in the fabric of society, Albion will be hurled into confusion, but the isle is in a state of moral and social decadence during the time he mouths the lines. In the early stages of this social metamorphosis, those who live to view it will walk with their feet, but in a distorted universe where the Fool has observed that men are unable to see with their eyes and smell with their noses, there is no hope that humanity will ever tread a straight path when the senses themselves are useless as antennae to perceive physical reality.

⁴⁶ Danby, "The Fool and the Handy-Dandy," p. 382.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Zitner observes that the Fool's prophecy dashes the audience's longing that Albion will be capable of reform in such a universe.⁴⁸ Danby views the " . . . shivered mirror of the Fool's [prophetic] verse . . . "⁴⁹ as truth masked in a cryptic mantle, for the professional jester was under a professional compulsion to sketch reality.⁵⁰ He envisions the Fool as a counterweight atop a fulcrum or see-saw where he can function as the devil's advocate in presenting the opposite viewpoint to that presented by a character. The Fool is the handy-dandy whose domain is antithesis.⁵¹

As counterweight, the jester can lead Lear to feel " . . . [H]ow sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/ To have a thankless child" (I.iv.310-311) while convincing the audience that the play is set in a cosmos where "[t]he worst is not/ So long as [one] can say 'This is the worst' " (IV.i.29-30), and men are to the gods "[a]s flies to wanton boys . . . [who] kill [them] for their sport" (IV.i.37-38). Lear redefines the role of the handy-dandy to Gloucester after the Fool's departure in his observation: "Hark, in thine ear. Change places and, handy-dandy, which is the Justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?" (IV.vi.156-159).

The Fool as reason in the play begs Lear to relegate himself to the role of "obedient father" (I.iv.256) to his "pelican daughters" (III.iv.77) in order that they might escape the physical storm and its co-ordinate

⁴⁸Zitner, p. 80.

⁴⁹Danby, "The Fool and the Handy-Dandy," p. 377.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 378.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 379.

turbulence of the mind. He cautions Lear that to:

. . . Court holy water in a dry
house is better than this rain water out o' door. Good
Nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters' blessing. Here's
a night pities neither wise man nor fool (III.ii.10-13).

It is after the Fool's suffering on the heath and following his prophecy concerning the improbability of a conversion of society's hypocrites that Lear recognizes the futility of his rage upon the moor and seeks to enter the hovel as his companion has suggested. Seeking to comfort the boy who has been his partner in anguish, Lear equates their "houseless poverty" with the lot of suffering humanity which is bootless as well as hatless amidst nature's cruel elements. Insanity leads Lear to an awareness of the majority of human beings whose entire lives have been spent in endless misery. He articulates his insight and empathy in these moving terms:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? Oh, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp.
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the Heavens more just (III.iv.28-36).

Lear's newly acquired magnanimity is manifested in his concern for the Fool's health.⁵² The Fool finally sees his mad master become one with humanity through a suffering which paved the way for a deeper understanding of and commitment to "houseless heads and unfed sides."

Nevertheless, the Fool's physical and intellectual health is severely tested in the experience. Lear applies the milk of human kindness as a balm to the jester's flayed spirit after his disorientation is initiated. Shakespeare removes his spokesman late in Act Three in order to relieve him

⁵² Eapson, p. 191.

of the burden which he has shouldered throughout the play, and he never reappears for the duration of the play except in the conversation of other characters.

The Fool's last utterance as Lear consents to apply the ointment of sleep to his wounded mind is a preparation for his dramatic disappearance in the play. "And I'll go to bed at noon" (III.vi.92) is his farewell address to the audience. He can mean by the ambiguous reference that he will retire from the drama in its middle at the request of the playwright, or that his task is unequal to his suffering, and he will be forced to abandon it at its noontide. The Fool exits as he has fulfilled his responsibility to the drama in his various roles, and he is no longer needed to bring the play to its resolution.

Critics differ as to the meaning of the Fool's sudden disappearance. According to Stoup, the Fool departs to pave the way for the reappearance of Cordelia whose presence will terminate his need to serve as her advocate to Lear.⁵³ With Lear mad, his roles can be assumed by Poor Tom the philosopher, who as a Bedlam beggar is better able to minister to the King's spirit with his feigned insanity than the Fool is with his cracked sanity. The Fool must leave or be plunged into Lear's madness. He has completed the various tasks to which he has been assigned in the drama, and his efficiency in executing them has dispensed with Lear's need for him.

However, the Fool never truly does depart the fabric of the play. As the imaginative and intellectual force in the drama,⁵⁴ his conundrums and prophecies will reverberate throughout the last two acts. As the play's Fool, he exposed a foolish King who was blind to his own folly before the

⁵³ Stoup, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Danby, "The Fool and the Handy-Dandy," p. 388.

jester undertook his correction. Having " . . . labor[ed] to outjest/ His heart-struck injuries" (III.i.16-17), the Fool can depart with the assurance that his master has succeeded in becoming his own bitter critic. With his master " . . . cut to the brains" (IV.vi.196), the Fool, to salvage what remains of his rational faculties, must quit "this great stage of fools" (IV.vi.187) where:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing (Macbeth V.v.24-28).

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