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The Wisdom in Folly: An Examination of William Shakespeare's Fools in Twelfth Night and King Lear

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THE WISDOM IN FOLLY:
AN EXAMINATION OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
FOOLS IN *TWELFTH NIGHT* AND *KING LEAR*

by
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Introduction

“Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun. It shines everywhere”

Twelfth Night III.i.32-33¹

I. Shakespeare’s Taxonomy of Fools

The fool, in life and in literature, is an enduring character. Over the course of history he appears under different titles and in different forms. He is sometimes identified by his physical agility or by his physical deformity, by his sharp wit or by his utter stupidity. But always he is set apart from society and either ignores or is incapable of following the norms of the society in which he finds himself. Although his position sometimes affords him the freedom to say what he will, the fool has always been considered less than human- by which I mean no matter the rank or class of whom he is surrounded, the fool is always beneath- as Olivia says in *Twelfth Night*, “There is no slander in an allowed fool though he do nothing but rail” (I.v.83-84). Yet William Shakespeare’s characters, however big or small their parts, are never so easily contained. Over the course of his career, Shakespeare created a canon of fool characters as diverse in personality as they are in purpose. And though he did not invent the fool, he certainly reinvented it. Something about the fool he knew outside of his writing drove him to create an unusually massive variety of fool characters where other early modern dramatists did not. Perhaps he saw in the fool a kind of kindred spirit. After all, like so many fools before him, he was a lover and manipulator of words. Shakespeare employed more words than any other writer in his time- more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays alone- and he never feared to use a

¹ Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night Or, What You Will*. Ed. Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller. William Shakespeare: The Complete Works. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print. Pages 446-73. All further quotations of *Twelfth Night* will be taken from this text.

new word, resuscitate an old one, or simply make one up. Even the word “fool” and its cognates, as Robert Bell refers to them (words like folly or foolish) appear well over six hundred times in the body of his work.²

His fools sometimes serve purely entertainment purposes like Lance in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, but also major plot-informing parts like Lear’s Fool in *King Lear*. They can be genuine morons like Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* or incredibly insightful beings like Touchstone in *As You Like It*. They can be mischievous and magical like Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or delightfully daft like Bottom from the same play. They can be great masters and manipulators of the English language like Feste from *Twelfth Night*, or laughably incompetent speakers like Dogberry from *Much Ado About Nothing*. Each of these characters gives their play something special that no non-fool could. They confound and confuse; they encourage speculation; they serve as a mediator between play and audience; they expose the follies and faults in other characters. And though I believe each of these characters is extremely unique, Shakespearean fools are commonly divided into two categories: the natural- an uneducated individual whose dramatic purpose was to evoke laughter with his ignorance- and the wise fool, in whom wit and piercing satire supplement low comedy.

Shakespeare’s body of work developed a complex variety of interpretations for the fool, a character trope that Elizabethan audiences would have been able to sum up at a glance. Through his endless interpretations, he elevated the fool higher than had ever been done before. Shakespeare broadened the character so quickly and with such

² Bell, Robert. “This Great Stage of Fools.” *Shakespeare’s Great Stage of Fools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print. Page 11.

skill that no fool after, in life or in literature, could hope to compete with his complex perfections.

To prove this point, this thesis will conduct a thorough investigation of the wise fool in *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*. These characters rely on their wits to ridicule, outsmart, or educate those in higher social standing. In this sense, they are very similar to their historical predecessors, though their intelligence, their actions, and their madness are heightened for dramatic purposes. The wise fools both mock and criticize the flaws of other characters and of society; often, “in the laughter of fools the voice of wisdom is heard”.³ In order to properly analyze the wise fool, it is imperative to investigate the origins of the fool in history and in literature. From where did the idea of the fool come? How did he develop and change into the fool character that Shakespeare would have known? And what elements did these real world and fictional fools lend to his decisions in creating these characters? A brief historical background will provide important information that will add to the understanding and the investigation of the fools in his plays.

In this thesis, I will first investigate the history of the fool, both the real people and the characters in literature that they inspired. Having established an understanding of the historical background, I will explore the immeasurable complexities of the wise fool by examining one of Shakespeare’s funniest comedies, *Twelfth Night*, and one of his most heartbreaking tragedies, *King Lear*. In *Twelfth Night*, Feste is mysterious, musical, and extremely intelligent in relation to all the other characters in the play. Every other character, if not “sick of self-love” as Malvolio, Sir Toby, and Duke

³ Tekalp, Selen, and Emrah Isik. “The Unifying Role of Fools in William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.” *Journal of Life Sciences* 1.1 Batman University, Turkey 2012. Print. Page 1161.

Orsino, is affected by some other disease of the mind or the heart (I.v.86). The next chapter will similarly handle the wise fool in *King Lear*. Analogous to Feste, Lear's nameless Fool is exceedingly sharp, obscured by mystery, and surrounded by others of lesser wit. Over the course of the play the audience bears witness to the King himself falling into the role of the natural fool, and eventually even usurping Lear's Fool's role.

I believe that the hearts of both of these plays, one tragic and one comic, are found in the masterful manipulators of words who use their wit to influence and ridicule other characters in the play. Armed with the historical information of the real-world fool, and the complexities provided by Feste and Lear's Fool, I will argue that William Shakespeare took a well-worn comedic trope and infused it with both the history of the real world fool and his creative genius to create fool characters that add a complexity and a richness to his works that would have otherwise been profoundly missed and has since not been repeated.

Chapter One: This Great Stage of Fools

A History Lesson

I. The Problem of Definition

Laughter, according to Charles Darwin, is directly related to the development of humanity's ability to speak. As babies, we laugh before we even learn how to talk.⁴

It is the most basic form of communication, understood by all human societies regardless of other cultural barriers. Laughter is also an unconscious process; though we can consciously stifle it, we don't consciously produce it. It bubbles up from within by certain situations and serves as a social glue of sorts. Statements, actions, and gestures of a ridiculous or unexpected nature, jokes, irony, mimicry, and more all cause laughter. These elements can be categorized as elements of foolishness or "folly," which by definition means lack of sense or of wisdom.

Because laughter and the folly that causes it are universal, it makes sense that anthropologists around the world have found that professionals whose job it is to embody folly are practically ubiquitous.⁵ Fools, jesters, clowns, comedians, and buffoons all entertain and invoke laughter. They respond to and act in the world with surprise and unconventionality, pinpointing observations and perplexities that we would miss or dismiss without their presence. They encroach on conventionalism and make us laugh at them, at others, and at ourselves. But how do we go about defining the fool?

⁴ White, Todd C. "The Anthropology of Fools." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Ed. Vicki K. Janik. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print. Page 34.

⁵ White, Todd C. "The Anthropology of Fools." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Print. Page 35.

Desiderius Erasmus in his short 1509 publication, “The Praise of Folly”, creates a narrator by the name of Stultitia, who is the personification of folly herself. She wisely warns against trying to define her:

...let none of you expect from me that ...I should go about to define what I am, much less use any division; for I hold it equally unlucky to circumscribe her whose deity is universal, or make the least division in that worship about which everything is so generally agreed.⁶

As a concrete definition of folly cannot (and according to Stultitia, should not) be presented, how can we expect there to be one for its associated profession? The term “fool” itself has a range of synonyms with which we are familiar in the twenty first century: clown, comedian, jester, joker, buffoon, trickster, etc. But these words do not encompass enough consistent or concrete differences that they might aid in the division of one fool type from another. William Willeford offers a general definition of a fool as

A silly or idiotic or mad person, or one who is made so by circumstances (or the actions of others) to appear a fool in that sense, or a person who imitates for nonfools the foolishness of being innately silly or made to look so.⁷

His definition is a good place to start, but it is limited. He focuses on the mental deficiencies often attributed to the fool character: idiocy, silliness, and madness. He

⁶ Erasmus, Desiderius. *In Praise of Folly*. Project Gutenberg: October 6, 2009. Ebook. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/30201/30201-h/30201-h.htm>>.

⁷ Willeford, William. *The Fool and His Sceptre*. London, England: Edward Arnold, 1969. Print. Page 10.

also subtly addresses the distinction between those who are “innately silly”- the natural fool- and those who are “made to look so”- the artificial fool. The distinction between the two was first cemented in the twelfth century, when the fool’s position at court was partially decided by his mental capacities and limitations.⁸ Because the fool was not expected to understand social conventions- whether he actually did or did not aside-, he was permitted to breach them. He has been enabled by society to expose the idiotic qualities of those in higher social, political, and religious standing.

The fool has experienced so many metamorphoses over the course of history and is a presence in almost every society. He has been slave, prophet, entertainer, traveler, mischief-maker and more. Because of this he has become an exasperatingly slippery thing to define. I believe the only way to begin to develop a definition as it relates to Shakespeare is to explore the histories and societies in which the fool undergoes these changes in influence, position, and personality. This information will shed some light on how Shakespeare used fools and how his audience was meant to be informed and entertained by them.

II. The Fool in the Ancient World

Until the end of the Renaissance, it was common in England to find professional fools in one form or another within the courts of the highest social statuses. In a roundabout way, fools are the mementos of reality, reminding the all-powerful ruling class of the imperfection of humanity. All the way back in Ancient Egypt during the fifth dynasty court of Pharaoh Dadkeri-Assi (2414-2375 B.C.E.), the first recorded mention of a professional fool can be found. Known as the *Danga*, they

⁸ Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. London: Faber and Faber, 1935. Print. Page 124.

were agile dwarves valued for their deformity. They were said to have come from a distant land called Puanit, where talking serpents and ghosts also resided. The myth of their origin shrouded them in secrets and magic which increased the sadistic curiosity and awe of the Pharaoh and his people.⁹ From his earliest beginnings, the fool has been separated from society and cloaked by mystery.

The next written documentation of a Fool comes from Greece in the second century CE. *The Sophists at Dinner*, written by a man named Athenaeus, is a lengthy account of the most well-known jesters in the Hellenic world. Through Athenaeus, we learn that some of these fools enjoyed a permanent position in the homes of their wealthy patrons. The so-called “laughter-makers” that were not fortunate enough to have a fixed position would have been found dallying around the marketplaces, bathhouses, and other public spaces that were conducive to selling their wares. Unlike the *Danga* of Ancient Egypt, the jesters of Ancient Greece were not deformed or particularly mysterious. They were intelligent and musical, with incredible powers of memorization in order to keep their customers amused for extended periods of time with a variety of material.¹⁰

Where in Ancient Greece, the “laughter-maker” was a profession, in Ancient Rome the role of the fool was performed by slaves. In the days of the Roman Empire, a distinction between two types of fools emerged. It was considered fairly normal for the men of wealthier classes to keep mentally handicapped or physically deformed slaves in their home for entertainment. They were referred to as *stulti* or *moriones*,

⁹ Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Page 40.

¹⁰ Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 5.

literally translating into “stupid people” and “morons” respectively.¹¹ These *stulti* were so popular, says historian Plutarch, that in Roman markets purchasers would overlook the most beautiful slave girls and boys, and would instead seek out the deformed and handicapped slaves; the greater the deformity of the slave, the higher the purchase price. Desperate parents would even stunt the growth of their children in order to sell them for a bigger profit.¹² It was not unusual for wealthy Romans to also have intellectual slaves, closer in resemblance to the “laughter-makers” of Ancient Greece. Both types of slave would have accompanied their masters to assemblies or parties. If the environment were to be one of scholarly stimulation, the master would take with him only his intellectual slaves. On the other hand, if the environment was to be chiefly jovial, the master would bring his physically deformed and mentally handicapped slaves to add to the entertainment of the evening.¹³ The main role of fools in Ancient Rome, whether intelligent or not, was to stimulate the wealthy classes’ sense of humor and curiosity through their strange appearances and actions. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the fool drops into obscurity for some time. There is very little literature that can shed any light on the reasons for the fool’s historical disappearance; whether it was because the fool lost considerable popularity, or simply if the records of them did not survive remains unclear.

The fool has been in existence for millennia. In Ancient Egypt, the first appearance we have record of, the fool was as entertaining as he was mysterious and unknowable. Ancient Greece saw the rise of the first professional fools, men whose employment required them to be brilliant performers with massive memories and

¹¹ Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 59.

¹² Dr. Doran, John. *The History of Court Fools*. New York: Haskell House, 1966. Print. Page 39.

¹³ Dr. Doran, John. *The History of Court Fools*. Print. Page 16.

imagination. Ancient Rome presented history with the first division between artificial and natural fools, though they were not so labeled until much later. All three societies saw aspects of the fool develop that would, to some extent, be present for the remainder of the fool's history.

III. The Appearance of the Buffoon

In early medieval western Europe, the fool reappeared as the Buffoon. He was particularly popular in Italy and Germany; the popularity of the fool in France and England did not occur until well into medieval times. The Buffoon was a comic character who used his immediate surroundings as his stage. Often a poet and a storyteller, the Buffoon was conscious of his role as jester and mocked himself for financial gain.¹⁴

The Italian Buffoon occupied a higher and less degraded position than the Roman *stulti*, though it was extremely rare for him to enjoy permanent residence. With the world as his stage, the Italian Buffoon would play comic- and often dishonest-tricks on the people he met while travelling. These tricks he would then spin into stories for his noble customers, adding them to his repertoire in the hopes of gaining a higher profit from his latest mischiefs.¹⁵ It was a highly skilled profession and more often than not, the Italian Buffoon was a storyteller, a musician, an improviser of poetry, as well as an acrobat or a contortionist.¹⁶

Around the same time in Germany, another version of the Buffoon, known as the "gleeman" was gaining popularity.¹⁷ The gleeman, like his Italian counterpart, was

¹⁴ Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 6.

¹⁵ Dr. Doran, John. *The History of Court Fools*. Print. Page 86.

¹⁶ Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 8.

¹⁷ Dr. Doran, John. *The History of Court Fools*. Print. Page 85.

a traveler and just as aware of his role as fool. Known throughout Germany as a stupid man, but paradoxically at the same time a learned Latinist and poet, the gleeman capitalized on all the aspects of folly he could. The German court at this time was small and refined; while there were sharp distinctions, all ranks of society remained closely connected.¹⁸ The same jokes that were popular in low-class taverns were often just as accepted in the houses of nobility, so there was less of a need for the gleeman to wreak havoc on the people he encountered on his travels.

It is not impossible that William Shakespeare took a leaf from these Buffoons while writing Feste. *Twelfth Night* takes place in a fictional town in Italy and Feste himself indisputably shares some traits with the Buffoon. He travels from household to household and beyond (even going missing for a period of time for reasons he never explains). Throughout the play, he exchanges jests and songs for money, catering his humor and subject matter to his present audience. Finally, he is also occasionally a mischievous trickster, putting on the guise of Sir Topas in the infamous prank on Malvolio.

IV. The Fool in Medieval Europe

The earliest version of the court jester can be found in the Medieval Period in Europe. This new fool was much more abnormal than the Buffoon before him and he was much more sharply separated from the rest of society. The early court jester more closely resembles the *Danga* of Ancient Egypt or the *stulti* of Ancient Rome than the more contemporaneous Buffoon. A fascination with the mysterious “other” was back on the rise. While the Buffoon was extremely intelligent and somewhat morally

¹⁸ Welsford, Enid. “Chapter One: The Professional Buffoon.” *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 20.

questionable, the early court jester was often mentally deficient and/or physically deformed. He was deprived of rights, spared responsibilities and was utterly dependent on the support of the person or persons to which he belonged.¹⁹ These court jesters, though practically enslaved, were generally treated kindly. There are multiple accounts of kings and nobles in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries taking special care to make sure that their jesters were well provided for in their old age and they were often honorably buried. In return, these court jesters had a reputation for being extremely loyal to their masters. Tellingly, the first known mention of the medieval court jester was in a story written sometime in the twelfth century about a fool named Golet who saved his master, William Duke of Normandy, from a conspiracy on his life by waking him up the night of the attack and alerting him of the plot.²⁰ As time went on, however, the court jester position began to change. Eventually, talented and intelligent men began to put on the guise of madness, making use of the mentally handicapped fool's freedoms for their own gain. Regardless of the level of intellect, though, the medieval court jester was valued for his madness whether it was feigned or authentic.

The position of the court jester in Medieval England was a fairly unofficial status, though it came with uniforms and monthly wages. Often, kings and lords in possession of fools would swap them among themselves for a variety of entertainment. The court fool in England as elsewhere enjoyed a close companionship with his master. He was the only person allowed free access to the King at any time, day or

¹⁹ Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Three: The Fool as Mascot and Scapegoat." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 55.

²⁰ Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Five: The Medieval Court Fool." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 114.

night, without express permission. No other official could enter the King's chambers uninvited.²¹

In Medieval France, the royal fool was given an official status not frequently awarded in other countries at the time. They were sometimes given keepers or trainers in order to enhance particular skills. A tale from the twelfth century entitled *Robert le Diable* written by Giacomo Meyerbeer gives an account of what was realistically expected from a Medieval French court jester.²² Out of desperation, Robert's mother turns to the Devil for help in bearing a son. After discovering this, Robert travels to Rome in order to learn how he might be forgiven his unholy origins. On his journey, Robert encounters a saintly hermit who tells him that in order to achieve absolution, he must play dumb; he must never eat food unless dogs have tried it first; and appear insane in all other accounts. Robert obeys and is treated miserably on the streets of Rome for a time. The Emperor eventually notices the "mad" Robert and takes pity on him. Robert becomes the royal court jester and is treated kindly thereafter. What makes Robert so successful a fool in this tale is what was expected of the medieval court jester; madness, demonstrated through grotesque actions and statements were expected and rewarded by French nobility.

Just as Shakespeare probably took inspiration from the Italian Buffoon for Feste, these early court jesters may have offered inspiration for Lear's Fool in *King Lear*. Lear's Fool is a dizzying mix of brilliance and madness and it is unclear whether his madness is feigned. Like the court jesters of the early medieval period, the importance lies in the portrayal of madness, not in the truth of it. King Lear and his

²¹ Dr. Doran, John. *The History of Court Fools*. Print. Page 88.

²² Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Five: The Medieval Court Fool." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 124.

fool also share a uniquely close bond like many medieval court jesters. The Fool is constantly by his side, and the two look after one another in multiple instances.

V. The Festival of Fools in Medieval Europe

The Festival of Fools, celebrated around New Year's Day, was the most renowned incidence of topsy-turvy throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance period. Sacred songs were replaced with nonsense or obscenities, men wore women's garments, fool-plays were put on throughout the towns, and clergymen engaged in drunken singing matches. The Bishop of Fools was the principle character of the festival, elected on the previous twelfth night (a seemingly small detail that may have played a large role in Shakespeare's decision to title his 1601 play *Twelfth Night* as opposed to the alternative *What You Will*). He was the leader of the role reversals and tomfoolery that was the main attraction of the event. Wearing the traditional episcopal dress, gloves, crozier, and cross necklace, he would award prizes to the best dramatic performances.²³ At first, it was a celebration for members of the Church only, but the inverting of the hierarchy and ruin of order for a single day was unavoidably infectious and the foolish revelries eventually spread out from the Churches to include the surrounding towns.²⁴ The festival would get so unruly that the Church officially banned it on multiple occasions; even then it continued to reappear for over four hundred years.

This festival and others like it were happening around the same time that the court jester was becoming a common phenomenon, but the fool characters so popular

²³ Cochis, Simonette. "The Bishop of Fools." *Fools and jesters in literature, art, and history*. Ed. Vicki K. Janik. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print. Page 99.

²⁴ Cochis, Simonette. "The Bishop of Fools." *Fools and jesters in literature, art, and history*. Print. Pages 99-100.

in the celebrations had no relation to the fools of the court. While the court jesters were dependent on the kings and nobles whom they served, they were not ritualized at all. The fool character in the festivals, though they dressed and acted similar to their court counterparts, was a ritual, even sacrificial, and fictional character.²⁵

These events provided occasions for both formal worship and wild antics. The folly often culminated in fool-plays; Les Bouffons in France, Il Mattacino in Italy, and similar examples in Germany and England. The fools in these plays are frequently killed as the scapegoat character. They all behaved in outrageous and bizarre manners. Often these fools would dress up in two-person horse and cow costumes, loosely invoking sacrificial rituals of the past. It is in these plays that the popular character Tommy the Fool appears, an especially delirious and insane individual. Due to the character's lasting popularity, it is plausible that he is Edgar's inspiration for his disguise as Poor Tom in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

VI. Fools of the Renaissance

In Italy during the Renaissance period, the trend of having both artificial and natural fools increased dramatically among the nobility. Lords and ladies took great pride, like the wealthy classes of Ancient Rome, in acquiring the wittiest of fools and the most deformed or mentally handicapped fools. A compliment paid to a fool was a compliment taken by his employer.²⁶ The English king was able to grant any of his subjects custody of another man who had been proved legally insane; when a man was

²⁵ Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Five: The Medieval Court Fool." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 117.

²⁶ Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Six: The Court-Fool of the Renaissance." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 135.

too handicapped to have any real say in the matter, their relatives would have been delighted to have him so well-provided for as to be a court jester.

The Tudor monarchy is largely responsible for the popularity of fools in England- at least two were well-accounted for in Henry VII's funeral expenditures.²⁷ William Sommers (date of birth unknown, died in 1560) was one of these two fools, but he gained a majority of his renown under the reign of Henry VIII. Sommers was an artificial fool and like the medieval Buffoons before him was excellent at improvising verse and rhyme. He was famous for his clever play with language, and is considered the first notable comedian of the English Renaissance.²⁸ He had such a close relationship with Henry VII that when he chose to defame other English nobles, they lost substantial influence. The general population of England loved him because he was a kind man. His main goal was not to gain power for himself, but to steer the King into performing good deeds. Shakespeare would have known of him, if not from Sommers's fame alone, then from his principle comic actor Robert Armin, who dedicated a significant portion of his book *A Nest of Ninnies* to describing the beloved court fool.²⁹ Perhaps in this shrewd, intelligent, and kind fool Shakespeare found inspiration for the wise fools so often found in his plays.

VII. Fools in the Renaissance Theatre

As a dramatic figure, the fool usually stood apart from the main storyline of the play. His chief dramatic function was to act as an intermediary between the stage and

²⁷ Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Seven: The Court Fool of England." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 158.

²⁸ Ettin, Andrew Vogel. "Will Sommers." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Ed. Vicki K. Janik. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print. Page 407.

²⁹ Ettin, Andrew Vogel. "Will Sommers." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Print. Page 408.

the audience. Though a main fixture in reality, the fool did not serve a huge purpose in English drama outside of Shakespeare. Mostly, they were there to perform an occasional jig and to help emphasize important qualities of the main characters. The fool sometimes served as a narrator, delivering the prologue and making a mockery of the other characters. In these shows, the role of the fool served a similar purpose as that of the Greek Chorus.

In France, short plays called Sotties became radically popular during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The characters involved were all allegorical fools (i.e. the Everyman, the World, or Abuse, etc.) who would make observations and exchange opinions on relevant, real-world individuals while dealing with stock situations like the cheating wife, the stupid student, and dishonest merchants, which were popular at the time and had been popular since Chaucer was writing his *Canterbury Tales*. These plays were sprung from the freedom afforded to court jesters who could safely criticize the powerful figures surrounding him.³⁰ The actors would wear the same motley uniform associated with the professional fool; red, green, and yellow checkered suits, eared or coxcomb hoods, baubles and bells, etc.³¹ The extensive popularity of these short play informs us how important folly and the professional fool were to the people of the Renaissance period.

X. The Jester's Uniform

While the positions and capabilities of the fool transform through history, surprisingly the purpose of his uniform does not. Long before Shakespeare's

³⁰ Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Ten: The Court Fool in Literature." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 231.

³¹ Perret, Donald. "The Sottie, the Sots, and the Fols". *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Ed. Vicki K. Janik. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print. Page 415.

adaptation, the fool was obliged to maintain a certain appearance that set him apart from the rest of society. In Ancient Greece, fools were bald except for a few tufts of hair on the top of his head, and his clothing was padded to make him appear larger than he was. In Ancient Rome, the fool's costume consisted of an eared hood and a colorfully checkered cloak.³² Medieval fools in Europe were dressed specifically to identify them with their profession, and their uniform did not change much in the Renaissance. There was a surprising universality to the fool's dress in England, Italy, and France. Red and green were most often the colors of their garb, and like the fool of ancient Rome, these colors were arranged in a checkered pattern. Instead of just a cloak, however, they were recognized by a particolored coat with a loose-fitting hood. The costume's hood usually had long ears attached to resemble the ears of an ass, but it might also have been a coxcomb on the top. Bells were regularly added to the hood, arms, and legs of their costumes. Often, the fool is depicted holding some kind of prop as well; usually a small sword, a marotte (a small stick with a face carved into it, sometimes made to look like the fool himself), or a staff.³³ This uniform became so closely connected with the fool profession, that it was sometimes imposed on criminals as a particularly degrading form of punishment.³⁴ The fool's costume carried with it the characteristics of the fool himself- madness and servitude.

³² Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Five: The Medieval Court Fool." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 124.

³³ Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Five: The Medieval Court Fool." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 124.

³⁴ Welsford, Enid. Enid. "Chapter Five: The Medieval Court Fool." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 124.

VIII. Richard Tarlton, William Kemp, and Robert Armin

The fool was not just a literary device in Shakespeare's time. Queen Elizabeth employed Richard Tarlton as court jester, whom many consider to be one of England's first successful comedians. Tarlton, while he may not have invented it, became known as the originator of slapstick and physical comedy. William Kemp most likely took inspiration from him.³⁵

Shakespeare met William Kemp when he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1598. Kemp was a talented comedian; he could sing and dance but mostly he was known for slapstick comedy. Kemp was renowned for his flamboyant dress and his "calculated buffoonery."³⁶ It very well could be that Kemp's fame was what initially fueled Shakespeare's curiosity about the fool. Shakespeare seized any and all opportunities to create roles like the blabbering Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* or the self-deluded Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These early experiments in folly were solely "responsible for irresponsibility."³⁷ They did not challenge the knowledge of other characters, influence the plot, or make profound or inspired comments.

Robert Armin, who was both a literary critic and a professional fool, joined the Lord Chamberlains Men around 1599 after William Kemp left.³⁸ He had gained recognition by taking the slapstick bumpkin made famous by Kemp and Tarlton and turning it into a more sophisticated character. Shakespeare probably derived some of

³⁵ Lyons, Matthew. "Richard Tarlton Biography." The Tarlton Project. Wordpress, May 2014. Web. 12 Dec. 2014.

³⁶ Bell, Robert. "This Great Stage of Fools." *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print. Page 10.

³⁷ Bell, Robert. "This Great Stage of Fools." *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. Print. Page 11.

³⁸ Bell, Robert. "This Great Stage of Fools." *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. Print. Page 21.

his knowledge of the fool's profession from the authentic information Armin brought to him. Dana Aspinall argues in her article "Robert Armin" that "before Armin, clowns and fools usually remained separate from the main plot [of Shakespeare's plays], only peripherally undermining serious, ritualized aristocratic manifestations."³⁹ Armin was not simply a funny man; he was also a scholar. His first publication, *Quips upon Questions*, put much care into defining the fool's role in society. In it, he expands the boundaries of foolery to include aspects of advice and wisdom along with the wider-known aspect of nonsense.⁴⁰ Another work of his, a joke-book entitled *A Nest of Ninnies* (first published in 1608) comments on the difference between a natural fool and an artificial fool: "Fools natural, are prone to self-conceit/ Fools artificial with their wits lay wait."⁴¹ He was so interested in fools, of course, because he was one himself. Richard Tarlton, after meeting Armin, even remarked that he would "enjoy my clownes sute after me", marking Armin as his predecessor.⁴² His 1605 publication, *Foole Upon Foole*, is based on his own professional experience, and the experience of others he knew. Armin therefore took great care in depicting the different types of fools in a positive light, many of which had traits of mental instability or physical deformity.⁴³ While Armin may not have played them all himself, it is through him that Shakespeare was able to expand the importance and complexity of the fool in the plots of his plays. Armin most likely played Touchstone

³⁹ Aspinall, Dana E. "Robert Armin." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Ed. Vicki K. Janik. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print. Page 45.

⁴⁰ Aspinall, Dana E. "Robert Armin." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Print. Page 43.

⁴¹ Bradbrook, M. C. *Shakespeare, the Craftsman*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969. Page 58. Print.

⁴² Aspinall, Dana E. "Robert Armin." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Print. Page 42.

⁴³ Aspinall, Dana E. "Robert Armin." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Print. Page 46.

from *As You Like It*, Feste from *Twelfth Night*, and Lear's Fool from *King Lear*. These characters are the wise fools. They mark the pivoting moment for foolery in Shakespeare's works; through them, folly moves from the margins to center stage.

XI. Conclusions

It is clear that what Shakespeare's audience came to know and recognize as the Fool had already a long period of development in reaching that point. Shakespeare made the fullest use of the known convention that it is the Fool who speaks the truth. The mere appearance of the familiar figure in cap and bells or in a motley coat would at once indicate to the audience where the *punctum indifferens*, the impartial critic, was to be found.⁴⁴ I believe that Shakespeare took the widely known and loved trope and with his genius, gradually turned the fool character into a character of vast importance and impact. Shakespeare's wise fools show their intelligence by twisting the meaning of words and engaging in language puns, riddles, and games. Conscious or not, in the body of his works, William Shakespeare created as vast a taxonomy of fools as there exists in history. Not only do they contort the confining role of a Renaissance Fool, but they also borrow elements from fools of the recent and distance past. Elements of mystery, madness, loyalty, wit, hilarity, and more appear in his fools as only one or two elements appeared in the fools before him.

⁴⁴ Welsford, Enid. "Chapter Ten: The Court Fool in Literature." *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 269.

Chapter Two: Feste

“This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,
And to do that well craves a kind of wit”

Twelfth Night III.i.53-54

I. Introduction

Richard Henze argues that the central theme of *Twelfth Night* is contradiction: it is a play about dichotomies on all fronts. Inconsistency appears even in the full title of the play- *Twelfth Night or What You Will*- putting religion and desire in opposition with one another.⁴⁵ There are oppositions between characters, actions, between emotions, even between settings. *Twelfth Night* is a play about characters trying to find a balance among all of these conflicting ideas. Feste, whose insider-outsider status as a professional fool allows him to find stability among all the contradictions, walks the fine lines between them all and encourages others to follow his lead. Who better to help than a wise fool, who has always functioned best in a world of contradiction, and whose function according to Walter Kaiser is to “create laughter...to teach us the truth...[and to embody]...paradoxes?”⁴⁶

Shakespearean critic Harold Bloom calls *Twelfth Night* “the greatest of all Shakespeare’s pure comedies.”⁴⁷ And indeed, the play covers all bases with healthy portions of romance, witty repartee, and physical comedy. The play’s success, however, does not lie in these traits alone or in the incredible leading roles. Bloom goes on to say “an abyss hovers just beyond *Twelfth Night*, and one cost of not leaping

⁴⁵ Henze, Richard. “*Twelfth Night*”: *Free Disposition on the Sea of Love*. The Sewanee Review. Vol. 83 No.2. Spring, 1975. Pages 267-283

⁴⁶ Kaiser, Walter Jacob. *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963. Page 12. Print.

⁴⁷ Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York, New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. Page 226. Print.

into it is that everyone, except the reluctant jester Feste, is essentially mad without knowing it.”⁴⁸ I believe Feste alone keeps Illyria from Bloom’s abyss. In a multitude of ways, he is the central figure of the play. This is not to say that he is the protagonist or the antagonist, but rather the undercover lynchpin that holds the play together from the beginning to the end.

When we are first introduced to Feste, he has been away from Olivia’s household without her permission. The questions of where he went and why remain unanswered, marking his character immediately with an air of mystery and separation from the others. Feste, here and in other circumstances, keeps his own counsel. Well aware of his role, he purposely holds himself somewhat apart from the other characters and tailors his personality to fit those around him; he sings songs, tells jokes and riddles, puts on voices- sometimes for a price. In so doing, he subtly points out their flaws and delicately nudges them away from the abyss. He is the truth-teller and in remaining aloof he remains objective.

Like the jester of the Medieval English Court, who was allowed access to the King whenever he pleased, Feste has access to all realms of Illyria. He bridges the gaps between the two households, the two plots, and between the many moral contradictions within the play, stabilizing the upset land of Illyria as best he can. In this world of exaggeration and excess, he handles the crucial role of telling and reminding the audience of the truth. Within the play, he unifies the two main plots- that of Olivia, Orsino, and Viola and that of Malvolio, Sir Toby, and Maria. Critic Selen Tekalp rightly states, “His accessibility to nearly each stage of the story helps

⁴⁸ Bloom, Harold. Page 226. Print.

him combine different thematic threads into one.”⁴⁹ And throughout the many incidents of clashing values, Feste performs and maintains a balancing act that keeps the play steady from beginning to end.

II. Illyria: City of Deliria

According to the text, a majority of the action takes place in a city that John W. Draper argues Elizabethan audiences would have known about. It was a “contemporary geographical term... within, or border[ing] on, the Holy Roman Empire”⁵⁰ Sebastian’s remarks in Act III, scene iii, having just arrived with Antonio, are a testament to the reality of Illyria. He has prior knowledge of (and is excited to visit) the “reliques” and the “memorials and things of fame” suggesting that Illyria is in possession of a long and rich past (III.iii.19; III.iii.23). But while Illyria may have had a real world basis in Italy for the Elizabethan audience, *Twelfth Night* is by no means a play set in reality.

Although the name may have brought to the Elizabethan mind a real Italian city, *Twelfth Night*’s Illyria shares no other traits with one. L.G. Salingar argues that there is “no strong local color, as there is for...Shakespeare’s other plays”⁵¹ and Illyria has no definitive traits of a specific Italian city. Draper agrees, adding “the local colour is not Illyrian, nor ‘thoroughly English’...nor anything else in particular”⁵². Illyria is a stylized and self-contained place. The concrete implications Illyria may

⁴⁹ Tekalp, Selen, and Emrah Isik. “The Unifying Role of Fools in William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*.” *Journal of Life Sciences* 1.1 Batman University, Turkey 2012. Print. Page 1170.

⁵⁰ Draper, John W. “Shakespeare’s Illyria.” *The Review of English Studies*. 17.68 (1941): Oxford University Press. Web. 03 Nov. 2014. Page 459.

⁵¹ Salingar, L. G. “*The Design of Twelfth Night*.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 9. 1958. Page 138.

⁵² Draper, John W. “Shakespeare’s Illyria.” Page 460.

have had on original audiences are countered by the fantastical aspects that become clear as the play progresses. The land from which Viola and her twin Sebastian hail, for example, is based purely in fiction. Their hometown of Messaline blurs the line between reality and fantasy in Illyria; the thrusting arrival of these two characters disrupts the feeble stability allowed Illyria by its possible real world basis. "One thing that Feste gets right:" remarks Robert Hall, "in Illyria, 'nothing that is so is so' (4.1.8-9)."⁵³ Though his profession is folly he remains the most grounded character in the plot, striving to lead the audience and the characters to a balance between the imaginary and the real.

The opposition between the real and imaginary introduced through the setting, is furthered by Northrop Frye's classification of *Twelfth Night* as a Shakespearean "sea comedy" (under this term also falls *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *A Comedy of Errors*, and *As You Like It*).⁵⁴ Within each of the so-labeled sea comedies, there is always a dichotomous structure: that of the "normal" world and that of the "dream" world:

And as the forest in Shakespeare is the usual symbol
for the dream world in conflict with and imposing its
form on experience, so the usual symbol for the lower
or chaotic world is the sea, from which the cast, or an
important part of it, is saved⁵⁵

⁵³ Bell, Robert. "This Great Stage of Fools." *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print. Page 26.

⁵⁴ Frye, Northrop. "Third Essay: Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths." *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957. Pages 131-239.

⁵⁵ Frye, Northrop. "Third Essay: Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths." 1957. Print. Page 184.

In *Twelfth Night*, the “normal” world takes shape in the constant bombarding of sea-based imagery. It is through this imagery that the audience is constantly reminded of the unbalance in Illyria between the real and the imaginary. W.H. Auden, on the opposite end, argues, “the shipwreck has merely a technical use, to get the characters in place.”⁵⁶ I completely disagree. Yes, the entire action of *Twelfth Night* takes place *because* of this shipwreck; we have followed Viola through her unwilling retreat from the first world, and watch as madness unfolds in the second world as a result.

However, the shipwreck is just the first installment of a never-ending reminder of instability in Illyria; the sea is constantly disrupting and upsetting the dream-like microcosm of Illyria by consistently reminding the audience of the first “normal” world.

Even in the first few lines of the play Duke Orsino compares the overwhelming force of love with that of the sea:

O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou
That, notwithstanding thy capacity
Receiveth as the sea, naught enters there,
Of what validity and pitch so e'er,
But falls into abatement and low price
Even in a minute.

I.i.9-14

Orsino furthers this allusion in Act 2, arguing that his love “is all as hungry as the sea,/And can digest as much” (II.iv.100-101). The Duke uses the ocean to describe his

⁵⁶ Auden, W.H. “Twelfth Night.” *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. Print. Page 153.

insatiable appetite for love. Love in the madcap land of Illyria is a dangerous and destructive thing, just as the sea is in the real world. Even the give and take aspects of the play (Feste bartering jokes for coin, Viola bartering words for affection, etc.) argued by Henze brings to mind the ebb and flow of the ocean tide.

In order to further bring this duality of fiction and reality to the attention of his audience, Shakespeare also divides the plot into two localities. Orsino is “far more in love with language, music, love, and himself”⁵⁷ than anything else and his court, a place of melancholy narcissism, follows suit. Olivia’s court, on the other hand, is home to all manners of people- drunkards, puritans, fools- and as a result becomes a kind of mad house. “The subplot action reproduces the main action like a comic mirror-image, and the two of them are joined to form a single symmetrical pattern of errors in criss-cross”⁵⁸ Life in Illyria, though full of music, is lived completely out of tune in both households. One would think that a professional fool would thrive in this world; in a way he does, but not in the fashion one might expect. Feste’s participation in the jovial antics is half-hearted and distant. He recognizes that his responsibility is not to participate, but to stabilize the topsy-turvy world around him.

Disguise is a major element throughout the play, significantly adding to the delirium in Illyria. There are intentional costumes; Viola masquerades as a man, Olivia as her lady-in-waiting, Feste as Sir Topas. Yet there are also forced disguises; Malvolio is tricked into unseemly attire, Olivia and Orsino dress themselves up (figuratively) in untrue love, and Feste is forced to wear the mask of the witless fool, even though he is the most clever of them all. All of the disguise and role-playing

⁵⁷ Bloom, Harold. Print. Page 226.

⁵⁸ Salinger, L.G.. Print. Page 132

leads these characters into a mass confusion about their true identities and their true emotions.

Look back at Willeford's definition of a fool: "a silly or idiotic or mad person, or one who is made so by circumstances (or the actions of others)..."⁵⁹ Feste's putting-on of other attitudes and identities is not unusual for the artificial fool. He says to Olivia, "I wear not motely in my brain" (I.v.52-53). In these few words, the fool alerts the reader that he *is* wearing motley garb- probably a patchwork cloak or jacket as was custom for the professional fool- and that despite his appearance, he is extremely intelligent. As a professional, he knows that he is in fact *role-playing*, the recognition of which gives him a leg up in power over the other characters.

III. Feste's Feast of Fools

At the very heart of *Twelfth Night* is the inescapable similarity to the Medieval and Renaissance Festival of Fools. Disguise, deception, and drunkenness are as important in one as they are in the other. The full title of the play brings to mind two important aspects of the Festival of Fools. The main title, *Twelfth Night*, reminds one of the ceremony during which the Bishop of Fools (the master of revels, if you will) was chosen- for he was selected traditionally on the twelfth night of Christmas. The secondary title, *What You Will*, brings to mind the topsy-turvy aspects of the Festival, during which the beggar was on the same playing field as the Duke and anything goes.

Indeed, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew Aguecheek are both members of the high class in Illyria who act in exact opposite manners as would have been expected of

⁵⁹ Willeford, William. *The Fool and His Sceptre*. London, England: Edward Arnold, 1969. Print. Page 10.

them; they are aristocrats who behave in the manner expected of fools. Multiple times, Sir Andrew is labeled as such- by Maria as “a foolish knight” and “a very fool, by Sir Toby as “an ass-head and a coxcomb and a knave,” he even acknowledges himself that “many do call me fool” (I.iii.14-15; I.iii.23; V.i.201-202; II.v.78). They are characters that emphasize the traditions of the topsy-turvy of the Festival of Fools and appropriate them for *Twelfth Night*. Feste distances himself from their antics for the most part. He addresses their poor life choices and decisions in a song (to be discussed later).

In a world that so closely resembles the Festival of Fools where ambivalence is the ruling element, a Master of Revels is required. Feste’s name alone conjures up thoughts of festivals, and roughly translates in Latin to “festival”. Feste manages to artfully blend the humorous and serious aspects of the play. In the spirit of the Festival of Fools, he mocks Orsino as harshly as he does Olivia or Cesario, putting them all on a level playing field- with the exception of Malvolio, who receives special treatment from the master of revels.

IV. The Aloof Jester

One of the central elements of Feste’s character is his detachment from the other roles in the play. He observes what is going on and then announces to the audience the hidden meanings behind the appearance. He is simultaneously the observer and the observed, straddling reality and imagination. This is most apparent in the final act when Feste ends *Twelfth Night*, “that’s all one, our *play* is done” (V.i.400; my italics). In this line, Feste highlights the imaginary nature of the show, cementing the wall between fiction and reality with a finality that cannot be disputed.

During his first appearance on stage, Maria chastises, “tell me where thou hast been” (I.v.1). C.L. Barber argues that Feste “has been over the garden wall into some [other] world...He never tells where he has been, gives no details. But he has an air of knowing more of life than anyone else”⁶⁰. Perhaps the “world” he visited was that of the audience, the *real* world. I believe that by positioning himself outside the realm of the other characters, between the fictional world of the play and the real world of the audience, Feste is able to see ridiculousness for exactly what it is. In a world so upside down, it is necessary to always stand at a certain distance in order to remain objective. His distance, however, sometimes reads as depression against the backdrop of constant folly. Robert Hall remarks that though “he wears not motley in his brain, this fool appears more comfortable in mourning... fun always seems to leave him at a loss.”⁶¹

His impartiality is crucial because he is responsible for relaying the truth to two audiences, continuously addressing both his patrons within the play, and the actual audience outside of it. Indeed, the only time Feste gets directly involved, our trustworthy jester gets carried away. Feste disguises himself as Sir Topas to harass Malvolio while he is jailed in darkness. In the final scene of the play, as the steward begins to realize the extent to which he was duped, Feste triumphantly exclaims, “I was one, sir, in this interlude” and he gives the reason why he participated in the jest (V.i.365-366).

“But do you remember? ’Madam, why laugh you
at such a barren rascal; an you smile not, he is

⁶⁰ Barber, C.L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959. Print. Page 248.

⁶¹ Bell, Robert. “This Great Stage of Fools.” *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. Page 26.

gagged' And thus the whirligig of time brings in
his revenges"

V.i.367-370

Malvolio's crime (a vaguely insulting remark that occurred towards the beginning of the play) does not fit Feste's punishment. The usually impartial jester tries to justify the steward's ill fortune on "time". While "time" may eventually reveal all, it is a passive thing and does not take "revenge;" Feste brought in his own revenges. It is no coincidence, I think, that the one character with whom Feste involves himself, is the one unhappy character at the conclusion of the play. Instead of subtly aiding Malvolio to find balance, Feste actively, even aggressively, works towards the steward's instability.

V. Feste the Word Wobbler

An important characteristic of fools throughout most of their history is their quick creativity with language. Shakespeare wrote Feste to be a masterful "corrupter of words" (III.i.36). Through his words Feste fuses the humorous aspects of the play with the serious in a masterful manner. He uses this tactic the first time he appears on stage, mocking his mistress for the foolish way she has chosen to mourn the death of her brother.

Clown: Wit, an't be thy will, put me into good fooling.

Those wits that think they have thee do very oft prove
fools, and I that am sure I lack thee may pass for a
wise man. For what says Quinapalus? "Better a witty
fool than a foolish wit." God bless thee, lady.

Olivia: Take the fool away.

Clown: Do you not hear, fellows? Take away the lady.

Olivia: Go to, you're a dry fool! I'll no more of you.

Besides, you grow dishonest.

Clown: Two faults, madonna, that drink and good counsel will amend. For give the dry fool drink, then is the fool not dry. Bid the dishonest man mend himself: if he mend, he is no longer dishonest; if he cannot, let the botcher mend him. Anything that's mended is but patched; virtue that transgresses is but patched with virtue. If that this simple syllogism will serve, so; if it will not, what remedy? As there is no true cuckold but calamity, so beauty's a flower. The lady bade take away the fool; therefore, I say again, take her away.

I.v.30-49

This early appearance of Feste is extremely important and requires our attention. In this interaction, Feste demonstrates his intelligence as well as his farce while providing Olivia with a much needed reality check. The first quote above is Feste speaking mainly with himself, preparing for the conversation to come. In it, he delivers a clever play on the word "wit," using it as both a personification and as a descriptive label for a certain type of person. Feste beseeches "Wit" to sharpen his tongue as another non-fool character would beseech the gods to guide their swords. In

this same quote, he invents a scholar, “Quinapalus”, in order to condense and reinforce (falsely) his previous statement.

In this scene, Olivia is mad at her fool for “being so long absent” from her household (I.v.15). Even though she is displeased, as her fool, Feste still has a license to say what he wants. So when Olivia orders him to be taken away, he counters, “Do you not hear fellows? Take away the lady”- implying that she is the fool- with little repercussion. This is not simply a base insult to his mistress, however. Rather, it is a calculated first move to engage Olivia in a game of wits. The countess accuses her fool of being “dry” (meaning dull) and “dishonest.” Feste immediately launches into a syllogism which, according to *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, is “a three-step logical argument in set form.”⁶²

The first step is a play on Olivia’s choice of words: “give the dry fool drink, then is the fool not dry.” The second step answers to her latter accusation, “Bid the dishonest man mend himself: if he mend, he is no longer dishonest; if he cannot, let the botcher mend him.” A “botcher” is a tailor, and by introducing him, Feste creates another play on words that will be furthered in the third and final step of his syllogism. “Anything that’s mended is but patched; virtue that transgresses is but patched with sin, and sin that amends is but patched with virtue.” Continuing his jest, by using words like “botcher,” “mend,” and “patched,” he calls to mind the imperfect patchwork of the motely costume that was the standard attire of fools. Feste goes on to argue, “As there is no true cuckold but calamity, so beauty’s a flower.” The Pelican’s accompanying note for this line is: “obscure, but apparently proverbial

⁶² The Complete Pelican Shakspeare. Page 450.

reassurance that the young and beautiful Olivia will not remain solitary.”⁶³ While I partially agree, the note is an oversimplification. He is not just telling Olivia that she will soon be fine.

A cuckold by *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition is “a derisive name for the husband of an unfaithful wife”.⁶⁴ Nobody who has experienced calamity has lived his or her entire lives in it- in other words; no one can be a faithful wife to disaster. Good fortune eventually comes along to replace misfortune. As this is a comedy, the audience is safe in taking Feste at his word. In much the same way, the jester argues that beauty doesn't last forever either. Flowers, as Viola will later reinforce, as soon as they reach their most beautiful, “doth fall that very hour” (II.iv.39). Therefore Olivia is a fool for wasting her beauty on seven years of mourning. So quickly stated, however, his logic escapes Olivia. So, Feste tries again to prove the same point in a simplified step-by-step manner. The back and forth they have is hilarious, but the fact that in his first appearance on stage, Feste has eloquently proved his point in one short line is evidence of his intelligence and his mastery of the English language.

Feste's jests are not always for the benefit of the character with whom he is interacting. Occasionally, the fool takes out his wit for the sake of entertaining himself and flaunting his intelligence to the audience. These instances involve the corruption of words by exploiting ambiguities that can be found in the English language. In Act 3 scene 1, he recognizes and acknowledges the possibility of misinterpretation in communication: “A sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit. / How quickly the wrong side may be turned outward” (III.i.11-12). These brief interactions and verbal

⁶³ The Complete Pelican Shakespeare. Page 450.

⁶⁴ “Cuckold.” Def. 1. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

antics are “performative rather than substantive, favoring surface over essence”⁶⁵, but they prove his point. They are demonstrative of his role within the play as a professional jester. A brief exchange between Viola and Feste is a perfect example.

Viola: Save thee, friend, and thy music. Dost thou live
by thy tabor?

Feste: No, sir, I live by the church.

Viola: Art thou a churchman?

Feste: No such matter, sir: I do live by the church; for
I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the
church.

III.i.1-11

In this dialogue Viola, disguised as Cesario, listens to Feste playing music with his tabor. When she asks him if he is a musician, (“Dost thou live by thy tabor?”) he twists the implied meaning of her question and responds with a literal answer; thus showcasing his wit while entertaining the audience without hindering or affecting the plot.

VI. The Musical Fool

Containing six songs and four song fragments, *Twelfth Night* has more music than any other of Shakespeare’s works. Music also uniquely begins and ends the play. Feste is by far the most musical of the show’s characters and the chief deliverer of the music; over twenty percent of the fool’s lines are in song.⁶⁶ He has “so sweet a breath to sing,” a “mellifluous voice,” and he takes “pleasure in singing” (II.iii.20-21;

⁶⁵ Bell, Robert. “This Great Stage of Fools.” *Shakespeare’s Great Stage of Fools*. Page 26.

⁶⁶ Henze, Catherine A. ““Wise Enough to Play the Fool”: Robert Armin and Shakespeare’s Sung Songs of Scripted Improvisation.” *Comparative Drama* Winter 47.4 (2103): Print. Page 429.

II.iii.51; II.iv.68). Feste's songs provide relevant and informative comments regarding the behavior of the characters to whom or about whom he sings. All of his songs have a melancholy melody, but their content is humorous; they serve as another example of Feste's ability to connect the comical and the solemn aspects of the play.

For the entertainment of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, he sings an ironical song about ephemeral love and youth. The second stanza is quoted here:

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter,
What's to come is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty-
Then come kiss me sweet and twenty,
Youth's a stuff will not endure.

II.iii.45-50

Feste recites what his listeners want to hear- after he concludes, Sir Toby and Sir Andrew praise his talents. The audience, meanwhile, is treated to an extra layer of meaning; the song also connotes a healthy measure of sarcasm. Sir Toby is well passed his prime, and Sir Andrew cannot be too far behind him. These men are quickly getting old, and though "present mirth hath present laughter," the futures of these two are far from certain. If, as the first stanza says, "Journey's end in lover's meeting", and Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are far beyond the age for love ("youth's a stuff will not endure"), perhaps this is a lesson on delayed gratification or the value in planning ahead (II.iii.41). Feste is at the same time mocking the poor decisions of the enthusiastic drunkards, while posing a warning to the audience.

The song that Feste sings for the overdramatic Orsino in Act III scene iv matches his melodrama. At its heart, the song is about unrequited love. The song's narrator is a young man who has been figuratively "slain" by a "fair cruel maid" (II.iv.54). Because the lover is so hurt, he wants to literally die ("Come away, come away, death" II.iv.51). Not only does he want to be buried without a flower strewn "On my black coffin," he wants to be buried in secret, so that "not a friend" can find his grave (II.iv.60; II.iv.61). Here as before, the listeners within the play perceive only what they want to. Both Viola and Orsino are moved by a tune that is so dripping with exaggerated melodrama because both of them suffer (or *thinks* they suffer- as is Orsino's case) from unrequited love. While the audience, on the other hand, snickers along with the jester at the laughably overdramatic mixture of such a song with such a pair.

While Malvolio is imprisoned, Feste sings a song meant to further taunt the steward. After his alter ego, Sir Topas, has railed at Malvolio for being mad, Feste re-enters as himself while singing a tune. According to Catherine Henze, "Hey Robin" is a "beautiful Renaissance song with haunting, melancholic harmony and melody [that has been turned] into a saucy taunt for Malvolio."⁶⁷ She states that in the original version, the song opens with "Ah, Robin." By changing the opening line to "Hey, Robin," Feste has made the song much more confrontational (IV.ii.72). This is another song about unrequited love;

Clown: "Tell me how thy lady does."

Malvolio: Fool.

⁶⁷ Henze, Catherine A. "'Wise Enough to Play the Fool': Robert Armin and Shakespeare's Sung Songs of Scripted Improvisation." Page 434.

Clown: "My lady is unkind, perdy!"

Malvolio: Fool.

Clown: "Alas why is she so?"

Malvolio: Fool, I say.

Clown: "She loves another."

IV.ii.73-79

Instead of the playful and subtle teasing Feste shares with the audience during his song to Orsino, this song is a direct mocking of the confined Malvolio. Henze argues, "Shakespeare's choice to bait Malvolio with a phlegmatic tune simultaneously infuriates the steward and intensifies the humor for the contemporary audience."⁶⁸ The comic element is increased by the punctuation of the steward calling desperately to Feste three times before any acknowledgement.

Feste's epilogue song is an oddly discombobulating finale. Most of the couples have paired off, the confusions and misunderstandings have been resolved, but Feste's last song is unexpectedly gloomy. The fool steps even further outside of the community within the play as it moves toward a degree of resolution. His role as stabilizer and connector has been fulfilled to the best of his abilities.

He sings then about the progression of life with poignant melancholy, punctuating each stage with the depressing line, "For the rain it raineth everyday." The last stanza of this valedictory song is especially meaningful; the audience witnesses the character morph into the actor. Robert Hall argues, "Instead of concluding with the satisfying click of closure, Feste evokes the strain of resolution, the artifice of

⁶⁸ Henze, Catherine A. "'Wise Enough to Play the Fool': Robert Armin and Shakespeare's Sung Songs of Scripted Improvisation." Page 435.

production, and the onerous effort to please.”⁶⁹

A great while ago the world began
With hey ho, the wind and the rain,
But that’s all one, our play is done,
And we’ll strive to please you every day.

V.i.398-401

This final song is the perfect closing argument for Feste’s power to link worlds. No sooner does he finish with “our play is done” than he acknowledges that the show goes on tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. This time he goes beyond connecting plot with subplot, or household with household, or even humor with seriousness. Here, in this final stanza of this closing song, he links actor to character, and the world of Illyria to the world of the audience.

VII. Conclusion

Richard Henze argues that *Twelfth Night* is a play about contradiction. It is a play that is in all aspects unbalanced and there are clashing dichotomies throughout that help to disrupt the stability of Illyria. Appearing in every Act, Feste cleverly blends these contrasts in a variety of ways. He connects the two households (Duke Orsino’s and Olivia’s), and the two plots (the love triangle between Olivia, Orsino, and Viola and the comedy plot involving Malvolio, Maria, and Sir Toby) with his physical presence. Also, just like his historical counterparts, Feste brings others “to face truth in the mirror of comedy... sometimes via wit and wordplay, and sometimes

⁶⁹ Bell, Robert. “This Great Stage of Fools.” *Shakespeare’s Great Stage of Fools*. Page 28.

under the guise of nonsense.”⁷⁰ He is continuously nudging the characters out of their insanity and unbalance through jests and songs. Through his melancholy songs, the professional jester of *Twelfth Night* manages to artfully blend the humorous and serious aspects of the play. He plays songs that his patrons want to hear, while embedding a layer of irony to be enjoyed by himself and the audience. By remaining mostly objective, Feste is able to reveal to the characters their faults and follies. He teases the other characters while showing off his intelligence, sometimes for no purpose other than his and the audience’s enjoyment. With his subtle guidance, most of the characters end the play in bliss. The exception is Malvolio, who, it is no coincidence, is the only character that Feste intimately involves himself with and the only character that falls into Bloom’s dreaded abyss.

⁷⁰ Novelli, Neil. “Feste.” *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History*. Print. Page 189.

Chapter Three: Lear's Fool

"I will tarry; the fool will stay"

King Lear II.iv.88⁷¹

I. Introduction to the Play

William Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* around 1605. In many ways it is his most painful tragedy. Unlike the end of his other great tragedies like *Hamlet* or *Othello*, the audience is given hardly any catharsis at the play's conclusion. The absence of release is preceded by very clear divisions between the good guys- King Lear himself, Edgar, Gloucester, Kent, Cordelia, and the Fool- and the bad guys- Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Cornwall, and Oswald. Over the course of the play, the good characters are dealt only more blows, while the bad characters win triumph after triumph. The knowledge that other versions of the mythical story of King Lear end happily (namely Monmouth's version in *History of the Kings of Britain*) makes the play even more tragic.⁷² Shakespeare's original audiences would have been familiar with such versions and would have been expecting Lear to be victoriously reinstated in the end as the rightful king, regardless of the occurrences in the middle. Some seventy-five years after Shakespeare's original was published, a man named Nahum Tate was so appalled by the ending that he took it upon himself to rewrite it. In his version, Lear lives, Cordelia marries the heroic Edgar, and the Fool is completely omitted; this version usurped the original from the theatre for over a century and a half.⁷³ No other

⁷¹ Shakespeare, William, *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat, and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square, 1993. Print. All further quotations of *King Lear* will be taken from this text.

⁷² For more on the origin of the King Lear myth, see Book 2 in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*.

⁷³ Wells, Stanley. "Introduction to *King Lear*." *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press, 2000. Print. Page 63.

Shakespearean tragedy underwent such extreme censorship at the hands of adaptation. So why did Shakespeare so alter the ending of the mythical tale and what makes Shakespeare's intended ending so unbearable?

A major factor, I believe, is that every character in the play is so exaggerated that they all morph into stock characters. It seems counterintuitive that this would make the play more impactful, but it is in so doing that Shakespeare creates a world full, not of characters, but of states of being. As W. H. Auden puts it while talking about the outrageous King, "I don't think this is a person I might meet, but this is a state which in the life of man everybody at one time or another experiences."⁷⁴ This statement can be applied to most if not all of the characters that appear in the play. In creating these exaggerated beings, Shakespeare is asking the audience to address multiple states of existence that are common, even universal, to the human condition. The good characters are almost *too* good; the bad characters are evil beyond belief. "On both sides...the common quality takes an extreme form; the love is incapable of being chilled by injury, the selfishness of being softened by pity."⁷⁵ The play becomes less of a matter of person against person, but of the actual forces of good and love battling- and *losing*- against the forces of evil and of hate. Thus, the play demands the audience to think critically not necessarily about the aspects of the individual characters, but to meditate on the aspects of good and evil in the world in which we live.

⁷⁴ Auden, W. H., and Arthur C. Kirsch. *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000. Page 220.

⁷⁵ Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy; Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. 2d Ed. London: Macmillan, 1971. Page 242.

A.C. Bradley poses a few examples of these questions in his lecture on King Lear in *Shakespearean Tragedy*:

“How can there be such men and women?...How comes it that humanity can take such absolutely opposite forms?... To what omission of elements which should be present in human nature, or, if there is no omission, to what distortion of these elements is it due that such beings as some of these come to exist?”⁷⁶

What one must address before these can be answered is at once the most basic and the most difficult question to ask: what is human nature? By rewriting the people in the myth, creating these outlandish characters, Shakespeare requires us to face uncomfortable questions that we might not want to ask ourselves. An easy way out, as Tate found, is to rewrite the ending; the argument being that since these characters are unrealistic, the Shakespearean ending is alienating and unrelatable. But Shakespeare’s ending is so frustrating and so moving because it gives no answer to the questions that the rest of the play has been devoted to posing. The viewer is forced to seek out answers beyond the play, perhaps within themselves. This is a world in which the professional fool can be most impactful.

In addition to focusing attention on the uncomfortable reality of the human condition, Shakespeare exaggerates the characters so much that they become representations and symbols. In this play Lear’s Fool is given an exaggerated importance that he is only allowed *because* he would have been recognized as a

⁷⁶ Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy; Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Page 242.

symbol and an exaggeration himself. Fools were generally used as stock characters, with Shakespeare's work being the exception. A man or a boy dressed in motley on the stage would have been immediately recognizable as a go-between for the audience and the play or as a simple method for comic relief. Generally, the stage fool of Shakespeare's time was a nod to the medieval court jester, who was often presumed to lack the mental capacity of an average person. The easily recognized pattern of the fool's role is particularly appropriate to exercise control over the perception and response of the audience to the play. The character that was most often and most easily recognized as a stock character elsewhere, in *King Lear* is given multiple layers of complexity that force the audience to look deeper at every role in the play and perhaps, in extension, at themselves.⁷⁷

Where in *Twelfth Night* Feste is a connector between households, trying to patch up the discombobulated world of Illyria, Lear's Fool is a healing balm. In order for him to heal metaphorical wounds properly, he must remove the rotten flesh; so, the Fool reopens the scabs of his king and fellow characters' past decisions. Like any decent healer, he is very much in tune with his patients, changing his methods of treatment as the play progresses. The Fool begins treatment with his harshest method; he morphs into a righteous man on a rampage, berating the King and Kent while unforgivingly revealing their mistakes and idiocy. The Fool is quick to realize when a method is not working, and he tweaks his approach accordingly. He then puts on the mask of a teacher, hoping to reach his students through lessons, riddles, and songs (his students, keep in mind, are not solely within the play. The audience, if it so chooses

⁷⁷ Even though my paper is not focused on these questions, in discussing *King Lear* I find it important to address at least in passing why the play has the impact it has.

can learn from his words as well). Producing little result again, however, the Fool moves from methods to madness, following his beloved master down the rabbit hole. It is here, on the brink of insanity, that the Fool finally starts to percolate through his master's thick skin. Gradually, the mad King fills the shoes of the Fool, leaching wisdom, foolery, and even life from him. Having given all he can in service to his King, the Fool disappears. Even though towards the end of the play Lear is at last struggling to climb out from the pit in which he has found himself, the gifts of the Fool have been received too late; the play ends in a similar way to the Fool, not with a bang but a whimper.

II. Lear's Fool: An Introduction

Before I begin delayering the onion that is Lear's Fool, I will discuss some basic information about the character. Lear's Fool would have appeared on stage dressed in tightly fitted motley garb wearing a soft-notched floppy hat with bells attached, known as a coxcomb. "The outfit of patchwork" argues Alan Hager, "(symbolizing absolute poverty) parodies the ruler's opulent dress."⁷⁸ He would also be carrying a bauble with some sort of miniature head attached at the top.⁷⁹ The age of the Fool is a point of contradiction in literary criticism. Lear's Fool is referred to throughout the play as "boy"; some critics take this label literally while others view it as a derogatory label given to him by other characters for his apparent lack of wit and low social standing. His witty remarks indicate a mental capability that far surpasses

⁷⁸ Hager, Alan. "Lear's Fool." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bibliographical Sourcebook*. Ed. Vicki K. Janik. Westport: Greenwood, 1998. Print. Page 290.

⁷⁹ Hager, Alan. "Lear's Fool." *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bibliographical Sourcebook*. Page 289.

that of a young boy. However, he has moments of genuine innocence that would not occur if he were an adult; for example, his frightened remarks when he encounters Poor Tom in the cave, referring to him as a “spirit” while he cries for help. It is my impression that the Fool is an adolescent; he is capable of complex thought but is not yet an entirely formed and mature adult.⁸⁰ His relative youth makes his premature departure that much more heart-wrenching.

Just like Feste, Lear’s Fool is an “allowed fool”- his controversial statements and seemingly incoherent babble are legitimized by his station. The Lord of Misrule probably influenced Shakespeare for this character just as it did for the wise fool of *Twelfth Night*. The Fool’s primary goal is to combat and oppose the thoughtless vanity and pride of the people at his court by reflecting back a flipped or distorted image, a goal which summons to mind the Festival of Fools, where the hierarchy of life was turned on its head. And like Feste, Lear’s Fool is intentionally nonexistent at the beginning of the play. His absence, however, is felt much more keenly than Feste’s. The only person who directly stands against Lear’s mad actions is immediately banished. Kent is not an allowed fool; he has no place questioning the King’s decrees. With a few well-placed remarks on his huge ego and wounded pride, the presence of Lear’s Fool in the first scene could have potentially stopped the King’s madness before it started. And unlike Feste, who is allowed the final word in *Twelfth Night*, Lear’s fool is noticeably absent at the end as well- a final confirmation that *King Lear* is a tragedy, mirth itself is dead in that world, killed off with the Fool, and good did not come out unscathed.

⁸⁰ For more on the debate, see A.C. Bradley’s lecture on *King Lear* in *Shakespearean Tragedy* and Robert B. Hornback’s Article “The Fool in Quarto and Folio *King Lear*”

III. The Righteous Fool

We learn two important things about the Fool before he ever actually emerges. First, in Act I, scene iii Goneril is angered when she discovers that King Lear struck one of her gentlemen for “the chiding of his fool” (I.iii.1-2). This alerts us to the fact that the King cares enough about his Fool to come to his defense. Then in Act I, scene iv, we discover that “the Fool hath much pined away” since Cordelia’s banishment (I.iv.74). The audience now knows before ever seeing him that the Fool, whether he is artificial or natural, recognizes the wrong daughter was sent away. Because this is a world that is made up of extremes from the beginning, and it is clear that Cordelia is good, therefore it is safe for the audience to assume that the Fool will be good. He likes the good daughter a great deal and Lear finds him worthy of protecting.

Having these impressions prior to the first appearance makes the first appearance of the Fool in *King Lear* extremely important. The audience has expectations and the Fool does not disappoint. As soon as he enters he wastes no time getting to the point, using his bitter tongue to tell truths that King Lear has chosen to ignore. And while Lear has not been completely deserted- the disguised Kent has been at his side- he desperately needs the tough love only a professional fool can provide.

When Lear inhabits Goneril’s house, though he has given away his crown, he somehow believes that he retains all of his power. Despite opposition from his daughter, he assumes the world to be at his beck and call. In Act I scene iv, he sends a knight away with the command, “Go you and call my Fool hither” (I.iv.4). The knight had barely time to exit the stage before the King impatiently asks again, “Where’s my Fool? Ho! I think the world’s asleep” (I.iv.48-49). Lear inquires about the location of

his Fool two more times before he shows up, fewer than 100 lines after the first inquiry.

The Fool enters with his wit drawn, launching it first at Kent. He offers Kent his coxcomb four times; “Here’s my coxcomb,” “Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb,” “There, take my coxcomb,” “If thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb” (I.iv.96-97; 99-100; 104-105; 107-108). His repeated offer implies that the old man is as much a fool as he for following a King in a downward spiral while also expecting nothing in return. Before anyone can speak in Kent’s defense, the Fool turns his (and our) focus abruptly to the King himself. After a quick ditty that Lear claims means nothing, the Fool twists the King’s words against him.

Fool: Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

Lear: Why no, boy. Nothing can be made out of nothing.

Fool [*to Kent*]: Prithee tell him, so much the rent of his land
comes to. He will not believe a Fool.

Lear: A bitter fool!

Fool: Dost know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and
a sweet one?

Lear: No, lad, teach me.

Fool: That lord that counseled thee

To give away thy land,

Come place him here by me;

Do thou for him stand.

The sweet and bitter fool

Will presently appear:

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.

Kent: This is not altogether fool, my lord.

I.iv.134-155

In order to prove Lear a fool, he uses a tactic that Feste is also fond of, laying a trap for the addressee in the guise of a seemingly simple question. Having engaged Lear in conversation, the Fool then leaps into action. Of course, the Fool and the audience know that "That lord that counseled" the king to give away his lands is none other than the king himself. As noted by Robert B. Hornback in his article "The Fool in Quarto and Folio King Lear", not only does the Fool call Lear a fool in his brief rhyme, he also distinguishes himself as the professional "bitter" fool, while degrading the King further by implying he is a natural "sweet" fool: "that [ie, the title of fool] thou wast born with"- he is not a fool by profession, but by birth.⁸¹ Kent interjects at the end of the exchange in an attempt to soften the Fool's bitter words, but he also recognizes (and therefore legitimizes) the truth in them.

The Fool does not let up for the remainder of the scene. Until Goneril enters, every time he speaks his words are viscous verbal lashings of the King's folly: "Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away", "I had

⁸¹ Hornback, Robert B. "The Fool in Quarto and Folio King Lear." *English Literary Renaissance* 34.3. September, 2004. Page 319.

rather be any kind o' thing than a Fool. And yet I would not be thee, nuncle." He continues to cling to Lear's philosophies of "nothing," later venomously remarking "I am better than thou art now. I am a Fool. Thou art *nothing*" (I.iv.198-199; my italics). The Fool is especially unforgiving in this scene for two reasons. The first is because Lear repeats almost verbatim what he said to Cordelia before abruptly and unjustly banishing her: "Nothing can be made out of nothing."⁸² Since we are already aware that the Fool cares greatly for Cordelia, it is understandable why this remark would not go unchallenged. The second reason is that this is the Fool's first opportunity to address all the mistakes that Lear has made in his absence: banishing Kent, dividing up and giving away all of his land and all of his power, and banishing Cordelia. Lear's foolish decisions have turned the world upside down by reversing power and status, turning his daughters into his mothers (paraphrase of I.iv.174-175). The Fool takes the king and the audience on a comprehensive tour of Lear's journey; from the deluded belief that he is everything (an assumption made especially clear in Goneril's house), to the incontrovertible truth that he is nothing (having given away everything), to the discovery that nothing might be something after all (a concept not fully realized by Lear until much later in the play). As Hornback suggests, "The fool harps on topsyturvydom, even though he can do little to set things right, because he wants so badly for Lear to regain his equilibrium."⁸³ All of his remarks, however venomous they seem, are born out of care for the King, not malice. He stays with the King even at his lowest point, and gradually softens his remarks as Lear gradually loses his mind.

⁸² King Lear's line to Cordelia: "Nothing can come of nothing" 1.1.92.

⁸³ Hornback, Robert B. "The Fool in Quarto and Folio King Lear." Page 321.

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola remarks on the expertise of Feste because of his ability to

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.⁸⁴

In this way Lear's Fool is much bolder than Feste. He braves the tempest in the middle of the play to keep an eye on his beloved monarch, where Feste would most likely move on to more profitable- or at least more comfortable- situations. Feste's advice paired with the convenient plot developments of a comedy prevent chaos from ever taking hold as it does in *King Lear*, where there are no stops in the title character's downward spiral save the feeble attempts of the Fool to save him. Over the course of the entire play Lear's Fool changes his stance for no one, though his method of delivery evolves alongside the king. In his words, "Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out, when the Lady Brach may stand by th' fire and stink" (I.iv.115-117).⁸⁵ He braves the threat of being whipped many times to ensure that the truth, though his roundabout language may muddle it, is at least spoken if not heard.

IV. The Fool Teacher

As a professional fool who is closely related to the Elizabethan court jester, a main priority of Lear's Fool is to illuminate follies in his master and his master's colleagues. He is, as Goneril refers to him, an "all-licensed" fool, whose purpose is to

⁸⁴ *Twelfth Night*. III.i.55-58

⁸⁵ "Lady Brach" here is a substitute for flattery.

mend his master's follies. As Lear disintegrates, the Fool takes notice and changes his demeanor. Instead of the wildly accusatory drill sergeant, the Fool morphs into a patient teacher. Through the process of illumination, the professional fool hopes his listeners learn from their mistakes (or the mistakes of others, as is the case for the audience), and recognize their folly.

The ditty mentioned in the previous section is the first example of a lesson from Lear's Fool. He constructs a small rhyme, perhaps a cushioning method to lessen his chance of being whipped by his master, as he instructs Lear on the ways in which he has been made a fool. When Lear first encounters his faithful servant Kent in the stocks at Regan's house, he bursts into a rage, claiming unreasonably that the offence "tis worse than murder" (II.iv.26-27).

"Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind.
But fathers that bear bags
Shall see their children kind.
Fortune, that arrant whore,
Ne'er turns the key to th' poor.
But for all this thou shalt have as many dolours for thy
Daughters as thou canst tell in a year."

II.iv.54-61

Here, the Fool articulates Lear's mistakes in the clearest terms. If a father is poor (as Lear *is*), his children will not care about his needs. If, on the other hand, a father is wealthy (as Lear *was*), carrying "bags" of gold, his children will treat him kindly. The

poorer that one is, the harder one has it in life. When the King was powerful and wished to divide his land, his ambitious and greedy daughters Regan and Goneril were more than willing to make outlandish claims about their love. Lear at the beginning of the play would much rather have had flattery than truth, and was happy to believe them.

When the stocky Kent inquires as to why King Lear has arrived at Regan's house with a dwindling crowd, the Fool takes him "to school" in Act 2; "there's no laboring i' th' winter," he explains (II.iv.74;75). He begins the lesson with a variety of analogies, the most notable being that of a wheel rolling down a hill: "Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill lest it break thy neck with following; but the great on that goes upward, let him draw thee after" (II.iv.78-81). The general lesson is not to hitch one's wagon (so to speak) to someone that is very clearly headed in a negative direction. More specifically to the play, Lear is obviously spiraling downward at break-neck speeds, so the knights have decided it is in their best interests to leave. The lesson does not end here, however. Adding a ditty to his speech, the Fool complicates his seemingly straightforward advice.

"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.84-93

“Knave” in this context can be defined as a dishonest or unscrupulous man. I interpret the last two lines of this short poem to mean that the knights who have run away are knaves, having followed the previously given advice of a fool (“I would have none but knaves follow it since a fool gives it” II.iv. 82-83). However, he, the Fool, shall not follow his own advice, refusing to turn into a knave. Though logic and intellect indicate that the “wise” decision is to flee, it is a heartless and unsympathetic choice. It is not outlandish to postulate that this bit of speech also demonstrates that the Fool knows there is something inherently wrong in a world where loyalty is demanded only if the person is on the rise or is in possession of substantial power. The beautifully simple line, “But I will tarry; the fool will stay” showcases how steadfast and heartfelt his loyalty to the King is; there is no need to dress up or accessorize his loyalty with fancy words. He is criticizing the gutlessness of those who have left the King with a mastery of the English language that can only belong to a wise fool- all this in the hopes of guiding Kent into the right, though perhaps foolish, decision. The lesson is not just for Kent, however. The audience, if they so choose, can learn from this lesson too; the logical choice may not always be the right choice.

The Fool's criticism is always tinged with heartache because he is sorry for his master's current state; “his tactless jokes and snatches of song spring so evidently from genuine grief”, highlighting that there is sorrow underneath his sometimes harsh

comments.⁸⁶ The Fool knows Lear acted wrongly and wishes he had not. But even more frustrating is that no matter what form the Fool's advice takes- ditties, insults, songs, lessons, etc.- Lear fails to recognize his offenses, allowing himself to sink deeper into misfortune and madness.

V. The Fool as Pain Reliever

In the third act, the infamous storm occurs. As the act progresses, the weather worsens and the Fool begins to realize that his efforts, whether harsh or kind, to steer the King away from madness have little effect. He focuses more on catering to Lear as best as he is able. In the first scene, a knight relays the information that the King is alone except for "the Fool, who labors to outjest his heart-struck injuries" (III.i.19-20). At this point, the Fool shifts gears again, turning from teacher into pain reliever. This is a turning point in character that we don't see in *Twelfth Night* because it is a comedy; Feste's advice paired with convenient plot development typical of a Shakespearean comedy prevents Chaos from ever taking so strong a hold as it does in *King Lear*, where there are no stops in the title character's descent into madness.

The Fool's main priority is no longer to point the king in the right direction metaphorically, but literally. The storm that surrounds them unceasingly worsens in the second scene. As Lear is shouting uselessly at the weather to "Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world," the Fool is shouting (just as uselessly) at the king to get in doors, "Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools" (III.ii.9; 14-15). The Fool's sincerity is a testament to his age as an adolescent, clinging to Lear as a youth would to a parent even after realizing the hopelessness of their situation. Lear is deaf to his

⁸⁶ Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. Print. Page 256.

warnings and rages on until he notices the shivering Fool. “Poor Fool,” he says, “I have one part in my heart that’s sorry yet for thee” (III.ii.79-80). In the fourth scene the audience bears witness to Lear’s tenderness again, when he insists that the Fool goes into the hovel before he does, affectionately calling him “boy.”⁸⁷ Sadly, it is only when his “wits begin to turn” that he recognizes the unwavering loyalty of his professional fool.

Edgar disguised as Poor Tom is also introduced to Lear in the fourth scene. Lear immediately projects his situation onto Poor Tom. He argues “Nothing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his unkind daughters” (III.iv.76-77). After Edgar weaves Tom’s tale of woe, Lear’s speech shifts from verse to prose, and the floodgates of madness open within him. “Is man no more than this?” he asks and proceeds “tearing off his clothes” (III.iv.109-110; stage directions). After witnessing this, the Fool understands that Lear has passed the point of no return. He issues one last plea to his master- “Prithee, nuncle, be contented. ‘Tis a naughty night to swim in” - then grows noticeably quieter (III.iv.117-118). For the remainder of his time on stage, he does not offer advice in any form, but contents himself with being at his king’s side.

The last time we see the Fool is in Act 3 scene 6, in which he only speaks a handful of times. At this point, he knows he has lost the ability to communicate with Lear. His earlier statement predicted correctly that the wild tempest would “turn us all to fools and madmen” (III.iv.84-85). In his final scene, the Fool provides what little companionship and love he can, participating as the jury in Lear’s mad enactment of a

⁸⁷ The full line is “In, boy; go first.- You houseless poverty- Nay, get thee in. I’ll pray, and then I’ll sleep.” III.iv.30-31

trial, cementing the abandonment of his quest to heal Lear. “And I’ll go to bed at noon” are the last lines ever spoken by the Fool. These words are spoken in defeat, with the assumption that he has lost the king to madness, and therefore failed in his duty to him. After that, he noticeably and inexplicitly vanishes.

VI. The Death of the Fool

The Fool can only take Lear so far with riddles and rhymes when the King refuses to internalize them. Very early in the play, Lear beseeches desperately, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” To which the Fool replies, “Lear’s shadow” (I.iv.237). This is a massively loaded reply to Lear’s question. I believe the Fool’s statement has two meanings; that this current Lear is but a shadow of the once all-powerful monarch, and that the Fool himself is Lear’s shadow. This lends to the exchange a deep, maybe even prophetic, understanding on the Fool’s part of his role. From the very beginning he recognizes that he is attached to the King, though Lear may not see it himself. Just as a shadow gradually dwindles as the day progresses, the Fool begins to dwindle as Lear descends further into the state of a natural fool.

Though he is disappeared, the Fool has successfully left his mark; he has been metaphorically absorbed by his master. As Lear’s sanity becomes more and more unstable, he becomes gradually more aware not only of the truths about himself that he had earlier refused to see, but also of the suffering of others. Lear’s meeting with the blinded Gloucester serves as a perfect example. The King’s lines eerily resemble the idioms of the Fool, mixing together babble and wisdom, but also care. The mad King even comes onstage in motley attire, “crowned with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds/
With hardocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,/ Darnel, and all the idle weeds that

grow” (IV.iv. 3-5). Robert Hall remarks, “Having attended the school of fools, Lear [has internalized] Foolosophy 101”⁸⁸ In true fool-form, Lear remarks on the state of the world with the piercing clarity generally reserved for the wise fool:

“Through tattered clothes great vices do appear;
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with
gold, And the strong lance of justice hurtless
breaks. Arm it in rags, a pigmy’s straw does pierce
it.”

IV.vi.180-184

Lear has taken over the Fool’s part, and he is playing it well. The Fool’s words at the beginning of the play have turned into another prophecy; “Thou wouldst make a good fool” (I.v.38). Having been tossed out of society, the mad king can now see and speak the truth as his loyal fool once did on his behalf. In this fool state, he acknowledges and renounces his previous delusion that a king is Godlike: “They told me I was everything. ‘Tis a lie, I am not ague-proof” (IV.vi.123-124). Lear finally begins to understand that he, like everyone else, “smells of mortality” (IV.vi.148).

The Fool had lived his life in loyal, though arguably illogical, service to a mad king in a rapid downward spiral. He helped Lear more than any other character in his journey to this state of clarity. And now, finally, Lear recognizes that to see the world truthfully is to “see it feelingly” (IV.vi.164). The king has become capable of realizing: “I am even/ the natural fool of Fortune” (IV.vi.209-210). Once he is reunited with Cordelia, he begins to climb out of his insanity, while still holding onto the

⁸⁸ Bell, Robert H. "There the Antic Sits." *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print. Page 121.

knowledge of his follies: “I am a very foolish fond old man”; “I fear I am not in my perfect mind”; “I am mainly ignorant”; “I am old and foolish”; over and over recognizing and proclaiming his faults- a feat that the earlier Lear would have never been able to do (IV.vii.69; 72; 74; 98-99). The Fool is not fated to see the impact of his hard work, however, making his sudden and early exit all the more heartbreaking.

VI. The Mystical Fool

Over the course of the play, the Fool has had moments of foresight. Yet it remains unclear whether he has prophetic qualities or is just accurately insightful. Shakespeare writes the Fool a single soliloquy. It is the only moment where the Fool is on stage alone, and the only moment he is given to break to fourth wall and address the audience directly.⁸⁹ He recites it just after Lear madly shouts at the storm, but just before Poor Tom is introduced. The soliloquy is known as Merlin’s Prophecy, eerie and forewarning in tone.

Robert Bell says, “Nothing typifies the fool more than to juxtapose ridiculous and sublime or to oscillate between high and low matter.”⁹⁰ The Fool performs all of these feats in Merlin’s Prophecy.

When priests are more in word than matter,

When brewers mar their malt with water,

When nobles are their tailor’s tutors,

No heretics burned but wenches’ suitors

⁸⁹ Directors and actors may have the Fool interact with the audience at other points, but this is the only moment where the Fool, without doubt, is speaking directly to the audience as no other actors are on stage.

⁹⁰ Bell, Robert H. “There the Antic Sits.” *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print. Page 118.

III.iii.88-91

These first four lines move us away from the mystical and into the profane. He claims that currently, priests practice what they preach, brewers do not dilute their wares, nobles do not teach their tailors, and heretics are not burned (presumably at the stake). From what the audience has witnessed, however, these statements seem highly unlikely. The fourth line also brings in a bawdy joke about sexually transmitted diseases- “No heretics burned but wenches’ suitors.” This set of four circumstances is followed by another set of circumstance that paint a completely opposite picture. Instead of bawdy humor and potentially false information, we are given a vision of a Utopia:

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’ th’ field,
And bawds and whores do churches build

III.iii.92-97

The Fool here gives examples of all the ways in which the current world is imperfect; every case in law is not right, squires are in debt, and some knights are poor, people insult each other, and thieves haunt crowds, moneylenders count their gold in private (the implication being that perhaps they are not entirely honest in so doing) and finally, “bawds and whores” definitely are not building churches. These situations seem much more likely in the world of *King Lear*. In this second section, the Fool is

“representing the handy-dandy motion of time itself from satiric to idyllic.”⁹¹ At this point it seems that the Fool is discussing a decent future, but there are still six lines to come. The latter half of this long sentence does not predict eternal happiness.

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.iii.98-103

As soon as this land of Utopia is achieved, it will be destroyed. In other words, what goes up must come down. After it has been destroyed, “Then comes the time, who lives to see't,/ That going shall be used with feet.” The Fool finishes this mystifying and confusing prophecy with a banal truism; that people will walk using their feet, which they have always done, and will always do. In the first section of the prophecy, he addresses “priests” and “heratics” planting himself and the audience firmly in a realistic Christian realm. Yet this last section confuses that certainty. The Fool has moved us into “the realm of Albion,” and of “Merlin” which is an entirely fictitious place. He manages to confuse even further in the last line, claiming that he lives “*before*” Merlin’s time.

By the end, I find myself asking “*When* are we?” as opposed to the usual, “*Where* are we?” - the question that haunts a majority of the play. In the Fool’s one

⁹¹ Bell, Robert H. “There the Antic Sits.” *Shakespeare's Great Stage of Fools*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print. Page 119.

soliloquy, he breaks the fourth wall, confuses chronology, and unseats reality. In a few lines, the Fool has transcended both time and reality, confusing the present and the past with the future and the true with the fictional. Merlin's Prophecy leaves the audience in such a state of confusion that it becomes unclear how grounded the Fool really is. We are left with another question to which Shakespeare allows us no answer: Is the Fool prophetic or is he really mad? This is the last time the Fool speaks with any real conviction and it leaves us questioning his sanity. But I believe that is the point; the Fool's goal here is not necessarily an accurate prophecy, but to get the audience asking questions.

Conclusion

King Lear is a tragedy that very clearly draws the line between good and bad. Certain traits of the characters are so exaggerated that they verge on becoming stock characters. Because of the extremes in the world of *King Lear*, Lear's Fool commands a certain attention that he is only allowed because he himself would be recognized as a symbol and an exaggeration. As a professional fool dressed in easily identifiable motley garb, the Jacobean audience would have been looking to Lear's Fool for not much more than comic relief. However, the Fool speaks the unspeakable, confronts contradictions, and teaches valuable lessons in unconventional ways to both the characters and the audience. Shakespeare so elevates the Fool in this play that he made "the very word 'fool' a blessing and a sanctification.... All [the characters] who sooner or later stand up for Lear... are called 'fool'." Kent and King Lear are called

fool by the Fool himself, Edgar transforms himself into a fool, Gloucester becomes a natural fool when he is blinded, the list goes on.⁹²

The Fool appears just after Lear has behaved like a fool, and disappears just before Lear's madness subsides. Lear's Fool is caring, ruthless, amusing, and prophetic all at once. He tries valiantly to make Lear see the error of his ways, acting as a healing balm for the wounded king. In order to save his master, he tries a variety of methods- from a righteous taskmaster to an understanding teacher- always speaking with the verbal mastery of a wise fool. He is tremendously important to King Lear's character development. Occasionally, the mysterious and nameless Fool turns prophet, but his apparent foresight is muddled by his one self-proclaimed prophecy. Whether or not Shakespeare granted him the power of prophecy, Lear's Fool tragically remains unable to predict the fruits of his labors and is deprived of the opportunity to see them, exiting on a note of defeat. Having entered the stage with an energetic determination to set his master on the right path, the Fool ultimately leaves the stage in exhausted defeat. The famed poet John Keats summarizes clearly the importance of Lear's Fool: "Does not the fool by his very levity—nay, it is not levity—give a finishing touch to the pathos, making what without him would be within our heart-reach, nearly unfathomable."⁹³ Through the Fool's unexpected depth of understanding the human condition, the audience is beseeched to look closer, if not at the exaggerated characters in the play, then at themselves.

⁹² Markels, Julian. "Shakespeare's Confluence of Tragedy and Comedy: Twelfth Night and King Lear." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15.2 (1964). Folger Shakespeare Library. Web. 19 Nov. 2014. Page 76.

⁹³ Keats, John, and Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Bulletin and Review of the Keats-Shelley Memorial, Rome*. Ed. Harry Nelson Gay and Rennell Rodd. London: Macmillan &, 1913. Print. Page 25.

**A Brief Coda:
The Striking Similarities between
King Lear and *Twelfth Night***

In general, it can be said there are elements that closely resemble one another in Shakespearean tragedy and Comedy; within all of Shakespeare's tragedies moments of comic relief can be found, and in of his comedies, there is often a moment of solemn reflection. It can be difficult, for example, to sit through the entirety of *Othello* and not find some of his hysteric rants comical. On the other hand, there is very little that, for modern audiences, is humorous in *The Merchant of Venice*, which is technically a Shakespearean comedy. As Julian Markels remarks, "The comic and serious elements so often overlap [in Shakespeare's works] that on this subject it would be easy to say... simply that Shakespeare is Shakespeare and the rest is silence."⁹⁴ *Twelfth Night* is most certainly a comedy, but with just a few tweaks to the plot it could easily become a tragedy; the same could potentially be argued for *King Lear*, going in the opposite direction. The parallels that can be drawn between *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*, however, run deeper than moments of comedy or seriousness in one or the other.

The two plays pull from surprisingly similar thematic materials, substantial enough to warrant further investigation. The wise fools extensively discussed in my thesis are by no means the only similarities that occur between Shakespeare's most heart-wrenching tragedy and his most sidesplitting comedy. There are parallels to be found among the characters, the settings, and even the plots themselves.

⁹⁴ Markels, Julian. "Shakespeare's Confluence of Tragedy and Comedy: *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15.2 (1964). Folger Shakespeare Library. Web. 19 Nov. 2014. Page 76.

A major theme that appears in both plays is the theme of love. In *Twelfth Night* the love is romantic. In *King Lear* the love is familial. As the former is a comedy, four characters are put through a period of comical confusion before pairing off to live the remainder of their lives in blissful marriage. Duke Orsino falls in love with Viola, and Countess Olivia falls in love with Sebastian. As *King Lear* is a tragedy, the audience receives a different picture of love. Again, there are four characters thrown into confusion; King Lear and Cordelia, Edgar and Gloucester. These characters feel genuine love towards their respective family members but they are met constantly with tragedy. From the outset of the play, love seems to beget only misfortune. Both pairs are separated before the end of the first act; the end of the play sees neither pair of parent and child happily reunited. In *Twelfth Night* love is a blessing, but in *King Lear* it seems to be a curse.

The subplot in *Twelfth Night* that involves Malvolio is arguably the most comical element of the entire play; has there *ever* been a performance of the play where the cross-gartered scene did not rouse substantial laughter from the audience? Quite interestingly, however, there are significant components of Malvolio's character that can be found in the title character of *King Lear*. At the beginning of the tragedy Lear, like Malvolio, is "sick of self-love" (I.v.86; *Twelfth Night*). In front of his court, the king arrogantly demands exaggerated professions of love from his daughters before he grants them land. When Cordelia refuses to flatter his ego, Lear reacts as if she were a "cannon-bullet," hotly and irrationally banishing her (I.v.83; *Twelfth Night*). Maria's description of Malvolio in the third scene of the second act when taken out of context is an eerily accurate description of Lear: "the best persuaded of himself, so

crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him” (II.iii.132-135; *Twelfth Night*). It is this vice that Lear shares with Malvolio, and like Malvolio, it is what leads to his downfall.

King Lear is not the only character that shares traits with the unhappy Malvolio. Goneril’s haughty serving-man Oswald is the tragedy’s most obvious equivalent to the comedy’s puritan. Both characters are gravely concerned with advancing their positions in their respective households. Malvolio hopes to achieve success by “con[ning] state without book and utter[ing] it by great swarths” (ie, faking it until he makes it) and a wishful marriage to Countess Olivia (II.iii.131; *Twelfth Night*). Oswald, as his mirror image, also hopes to achieve advancement by acting above his current station- he addresses Lear and Kent as if they were beneath him- and by being “as duteous to the vices of [his] mistress/ As badness would desire”(IV.vi.281-282; *King Lear*). Both of these servants can be adequately described as affectionate asses (II.iii.130; *Twelfth Night*).

Illyria as a location half in reality and half in imagination was discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Sebastian speaks in passing about the relics that are within the city, identifying it as a place with a past. In fact, Illyria has foundations in the real world. John Draper argues that it was an actual place on the border of the Holy Roman Empire. Yet while it may have foundations in reality, it is by no means firmly set there. In a similar fashion, the setting of *King Lear* is also on the knife’s edge of reality and fiction. As A.C. Bradley points out in *Shakspeare’s dramas* “as a rule, we know, broadly speaking, where the persons live” and where they go on their

journeys.⁹⁵ But this is not the case in *King Lear*. A fair number of the characters spend a fair portion of the play travelling. Shakespeare has situated the play in a real country that would have been intimately familiar to the original audiences (Britain) while making it frustratingly impossible to plot the character's movement with any more detail. Says A.C. Bradley, "The localities and movements are unusually indefinite."⁹⁶ In placing the audience in a world that is just out of reach, Shakespeare has left the audience disoriented and confused. This confusion in space is complicated by the Fool's confusion of time in Merlin's Prophecy. *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear* both keep the viewers and the readers from ever putting a solid metaphorical foot on the ground of the setting. *Twelfth Night* takes place in a city halfway in reality and halfway in fiction. *King Lear* takes place in a world that should be somewhat recognizable, but is always kept halfway behind a curtain.

Yet another similarity lies in the development of the subplots. The subplot of each play mirrors the main storyline, but this is by no means exclusive to these plays. What is unique to the progression of the subplots in *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear* is their utter dependence on the discovery and belief of forged letters. In the former, Malvolio discovers a letter that he believes to have been written by Countess Olivia, when Maria was the actual author. In the latter, Gloucester discovers a letter apparently from Edgar that relates a plot on his father's life, when the letter has actually been forged by Edmund.

⁹⁵ Bradley, A. C. "Lecture VII: King Lear." *Shakespearean Tragedy; Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. 2d Ed. London: Macmillan, 1971. Page 238.

⁹⁶ Bradley, A. C. "Lecture VII: King Lear." *Shakespearean Tragedy; Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Page 239.

In both cases, the subplot is completely dependent upon these forged letters. Without them, Gloucester would have had no reason to banish his loving son Edgar and Malvolio would never have willingly brought about his own downfall by dressing in cross-gartered yellow stockings. The respective readers' eagerness to believe the content of these letters is vital. Gloucester is bizarrely willing to accept that his first son, who in all other instances has been loving and faithful, would be the instigator of an assassination plot simply because the handwriting looks like Edgar's ("You know the character to be your brothers?... It is his." I.ii.65-70; *King Lear*). Similarly, Malvolio convinces himself that the handwriting is that of his mistress Olivia ("By my life, this is my lady's hand" II.v.76-77; *Twelfth Night*). If the respective readers did not trust in the content of these letters with utter conviction, the respective subplots would crumble.

Arguably the most direct similarity between the two plays is the echoing of a specific song; "For the Rain it Raineth Everyday." In *Twelfth Night*, the song is the last moment of the play. In *King Lear*, a single verse is sung during the infamous tempest. For the comedy, it serves as a way to transition from the make-believe world of the play to the reality of the audience. The professional jester sits alone as he sings about the progression of life before transitioning into thanking the audience, "But that's all one our play is done" (V.i.400; *Twelfth Night*). While a strangely melancholy finishing note for a comedy, it is that very element of sadness that allows the song to bridge the gap smoothly into tragedy. In *King Lear*, the Fool sings a verse that is absent from the version in *Twelfth Night*. Appropriately, it is raining in the play when the Fool sings and figuratively it seems to "raineth everyday" on the characters of

King Lear (III.ii.84; *King Lear*). As opposed to narrating the melancholy progression of life, he proclaims, “He that has and a little tiny wit.../ Must make content with his fortune’s fit” (III.ii.81-83; *King Lear*). This should be interpreted as a combination of two meanings; as the Fool taking yet another verbal stab at Lear’s previous mistakes and the Fool commenting on his own decision to remain in the company of the mad king. In both plays, the song serves as a means of commentary by the singer on the specific situations; Feste on endings, and the Fool on mistakes.

In general, it is not uncommon for Shakespearean tragedy to have moments of comedy, nor is it so for Shakespearean comedies to have moments of tragedy. The similarities that occur between the comedy of *Twelfth Night* and the tragedy of *King Lear*, however, are much more interwoven than that. In multiple ways, the two plays mirror each other. Both settings seem to occupy a dizzying space somewhere between reality and fiction. Both center around the theme of love, the former on romantic love and the latter on familial love. Between them, certain characters are reflected in others, as is the case with Malvolio and King Lear. And finally, the wise fools share the same song, linking one play irrefutably with the other.

Before William Shakespeare was even born, the fool was thousands of years old. Over the course of his long history, the fool has undergone many metamorphoses. It is precisely because he was always shedding one skin to fill another that he never became an overly complicated character; they were *either* storytellers *or* wandering jokesters, *either* intelligent entertainers *or* amusing house-pets. The fool Shakespeare would have known intimately was the physically comical buffoon popularized by the likes of Richard Tarlton and William Kemp. In his early works, especially in the

comedies, the fools' main purpose was similarly to generate laughter.

Gradually, though, and with the help from real world professional fool Robert Armin, Shakespeare began folding layer upon layer into his fools, allowing them to conduct pivotal investigations regarding human nature and self-perception. These wise fools bring the audience closer to the heights and depths of experience and keep both poles present during the plays. They are equally important in tragedy as they are in comedy, as demonstrated through the momentous parts of Feste in *Twelfth Night* and Lear's Fool in *King Lear*. Their discourse might appear to be nonsense, babble, blither but hidden beneath their unusual syntax lies insightful, relevant, even inspired commentary on the characters and themes within the play and human nature outside the play.

Twelfth Night and *King Lear* are often considered William Shakespeare's greatest works in their two respective genres of comedy and tragedy. It is no coincidence, then, that these plays are heavily impacted by the infinitely complex, almost ungraspable fools, Feste and Lear's Fool. Feste points out that we are all actors and spectators, that to observe folly is to participate in it. Lear's Fool confronts us with the thought that perhaps to be human is to be a bit mad. They both create verbal illusions and perform oral aerobics, making it harder to distinguish between counterfeit and real. The conventional fools of Shakespeare's time had temporary positive impacts but ultimately they are not remembered. Feste and Lear's Fool defy oblivion and persevere with wit, mysticism, tricks and bravado that has since not been matched.

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