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“The mouthpiece of real sanity”: Rereading the Fool in *King Lear*

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The fool and/or clown figure occupies a very substantial role in the plays of William Shakespeare. The myth regarding the fools was already there in England since 13th century. It was during the Elizabethan era when the fools began to occupy a significant persona in the court. They were there not only to amuse their masters but also were allowed to out jest their masters during intellectual repartees. The character of the fool in *King Lear* has been a subject of great contention among the critics through ages. The fool's function in the play is serving the purpose of chorus as well as exfoliating the character of the ailing monarch.

The fool or clown figures in Shakespearean opus bears the proficient treatment of the myth of fool on the part of the playwright. Shakespearean fools may be allocated into two categories - the clown and the courtly fool. The clowns were meant to persons who came from a rustic background. The purpose of introducing them on the stage was to evoke laughter through his comments and gestures. Bottom of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Dogberry of *Much Ado About Nothing* are typically labeled by the critics as clowns who were simple in nature. The courtly jester or fool, on the other hand, was a familiar factor in the courts during the Renaissance. They maintained verbal wit and were allowed by their masters in intellectual repartee. Touchstone of *As You Like It*, Feste of *Twelfth Night* may be categorized as the courtly jesters or wise-fools. The same is observed in the case of the Fool in William Shakespeare's one of the four major tragedies *King Lear* which was composed during 1605-1606. The Fool has been introduced in the play as a clown or jester but he is not merely a flatterer in the true sense of the term. The present paper will attempt to study the treatment of the Fool in the hand of the playwright who has appropriated the Fool to a highly upgraded position in the play.

In his celebrated essay *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, (1966) Enid Welsford differentiated terms like “fool” and “buffoon”, “clown” and “jester”. For him, the fool is one “who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight, a mainspring of comedy, which has always been one of the great recitations of mankind and particularly of civilized mankind.”(Welsford xi) He also says that the fool is “the truth-teller whose real insight was thinly disguised as a form of insanity.”(Welsford 239)

Shakespeare's introduction of the Fool is a very important contribution to the story of *Lear* in *King Lear*. The Fool is basically a traditional fool - a truth-teller. His function in the play is that of chorus to comment upon the happenings of the play. He is very much vexed against the king for parceling away the kingdom to his daughters. Sidney Lamb observes, “Shakespeare's fools and clowns are the subjects of much discussion because they play such important and dynamic roles in his plays. Placed in positions where they can watch the goings-on at court, fools tend to serve as foils and sounding boards for their masters. The Fool in *King Lear* is no exception. Privy to the

innermost feelings of his king, the Fool also observes the outcomes of Lear's rash judgments and will comment upon those judgments throughout the drama." (Lamb 61)

The introduction of the Fool in *King Lear* was, however, not unexampled. England had already witnessed jesters during the medieval period (13th century) when they were found in the houses of the aristocrat people in the society. They were there not only to entertain their masters, but also to point out the flaws of their masters and even their guests. But then they were whipped for "excessive behaviour", as Lear threatens to punish his Fool. Jay L. Halio observes, "Mentally deficient and / or physically deformed, they were 'exceptional' in almost every respect, requiring the protection of powerful patrons to avoid social ostracism or abuse." (Halio 7)

The Fool, for the first time enters the stage in Act I, Sc IV. His first significant move, after meeting the king is to offer his coxcomb ('professional fool's headgear shaped like rooster comb or head tuft', Lamb 53) to the king. After that he sings, and the king tells him the song is 'nothing'. The audience is made conscious that the Fool is graveled as the king has divided his kingdom into two. Philippa Kelly says, "As an 'all-licens'd Fool' he can use his riddles to direct Lear toward truths about his mistake- truths for which Lear has banished others as Kent in I.I." (Kelly 55)

In spite of being the fool of the King, he does not spare the king from criticizing and in spite of criticizing him; he is the true friend of him. Kenneth Muir observes, "We are usually told that by his jests the Fool tries to take Lear's mind off his obsession with his daughter's ingratitude." (Muir lvi-lvii) He can never forgive Lear's treatment of Cordelia. He pines away at the banishment of Cordelia and his bitter jokes continually remind the king of his injustice. When in Act I Scene IV Lear, the banished Kent (returned in disguise to serve his ungrateful master) and the Fool are engaged in a conversation and Lear begins to realize faintly the consequences of his folly, the Fool enjoins the bitter truths at his master. According to Enid Welsford, he is "not merely a touching figure who might easily have been drawn from life" but also "the sage-fool who sees the truth." (Welsford 253) G.K.Hunter observes, "...He is a living manifestation of that world of irony and metaphor in which every experience can throw light on every other one, in which Lear too would 'make a good fool', and which the daughters seek to reduce to the literalism of appetite. In such a world, where bitterness and innocence, correction and irresponsibility effortlessly co-exist, it is pointless to ask if he is mad or sane. He knows as much as the next man; but he is exempted from the need to put his knowledge in logical order." (Hunter p.11)

The Fool provides help for the king with advice and suggestions to take decisions. The noblest characteristic of the Fool is his transparent and impartial attitude towards the characters and in this case, he has, as if, gained the entity of the playwright. It can be said regarding a play and a playwright that a play and its protagonists would be revealed minutely when the playwright would be able to see the society as well as the world with impartial and intuitive vision. Philippa Kelly opines, "Not only does the Fool turn Lear's private experience outward into public, comprehensible form; he also turns the public sphere inward, implicating us within Lear's inchoate experience." (Kelly 57)

Most critics have tended to sentimentalize the Fool. He labors to out jest Lear's 'heart-strook injuries' and his resentment at Lear's treatment of Cordelia expresses

itself in savage attacks- in songs, in doggerel rhymes and in sarcasm- on the foolishness of his master. The Fool, either because of his love for Cordelia, or less probably, because he is afraid that repression may lead to madness, continually harps on the wrong that Lear has committed.

The Fool's shafts against the ineradicable selfishness of humanity have found expression in Act II, Scene IV. He suggests that children are kind to their parents, only in hope of gain and the poor are always badly treated by fortune. According to him, a wise man is the one who 'serves and seeks for gain', one who will desert his or master as soon as he declines in wealth or power. But he himself will not follow his own advice: he 'will tarry' and sees that only knaves will follow his advice. Here he is a fool who is ultimately wise just as the worldly-wise are spiritually foolish as we find in Erasmus's *Praise of folly*.

It is a much discussed subject that both Cordelia and the Fool are never present on the stage altogether. It has been suggested that when 'King Lear' was performed, Cordelia and the Fool was played by the same actor (Robert Armin). Cordelia's relation to the Fool is established earlier in the play, when her initial 'Nothing, my lord' (line 86) is echoed in Act I, Sc IV in the words of the Fool: 'can you make no use of nothing?' (line 128) - the love which, while it has no material measurement, has true substance. Again in the last scene of the play, Lear carries Cordelia in his arms and says, 'My poor fool is hang'd!' (Act V, Scene III, line 305). And we are left contemplating who the fool here is.

In the storm scene [Act II, Scene IV] the cold and rain are almost more than the Fool can bear. His childishness is revealed when he runs out of the hovel, terrified by the mad man [Edgar] and crying out to the King "Help me, help me" [Act III, Scene IV, line 40] his side. "In the storm scenes", as Kenneth Muir points out, "there is a wild quarter of madness- Lear, Poor Tom, the Fool, and , the elements themselves- in which the Fool seems almost to stand for sanity. He fades from the picture when he is no longer needed, since Lear can act as his own Fool". (Muir lvii) And the last words of the Fool- 'And I'll go to bed at noon' in Act III, Scene VI (line 83) are primarily a reply to Lear's 'We'll go to supper i' the morning', another example of the topsy-turvy state of affairs. He fades out of the play when he helps to carry Lear out to the waiting litter. Now that Lear is mad, the Fool's functions- to cheer him, to criticize him, to keep him sane- no longer operate. He, therefore, disappears.

The Fool's compassion for the maddened Lear helps the indisposed sovereign to realize the error of his ways. He also serves to gain a saner view of his life and allow him to make some sort of amends, at least in his heart, to his daughter before execution. To conclude, within this character Shakespeare shows us the true soul of Lear. Enid Welsford observes, "Shakespeare makes the fullest possible use of the accepted convention that it is the Fool who speaks the truth, which he knows not by ratiocination, but by inspired intuition. The mere appearance of the familiar figure in cap and bells would at once indicate to the audience where the 'punctum indifferens', the impartial critic, the mouthpiece of real sanity, was to be found." (Welsford 133)

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