

“The Shakespearian Fool as the Orchestrator of the Play’s Conscience” – A Reinterpretation of the Role of the Clown in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

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ABSTRACT

The Fool has been part of the medieval cosmos even before the advent of the English Theatre. Originating as jesters and clowns in medieval courts, Shakespeare brought the fool into his plays to bring both realism and comic relief to the often melodramatic and sombre tragedies which in turn reveal the psyche of the human mind. The fool is not found only in Shakespeare’s Romances but has a very crucial part even in his tragedies. This paper attempts to highlight the role of the fool as the inner voice of the titular hero in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The clown often ridicules and jokes around the king and his state but he is not killed or imprisoned, as he is just a meagre jester. However, Shakespeare portrays the clown as the character who breathes sense through his wit to his fellow characters and he is often the sole guard of the play’s conscience.

KEYWORDS

Jester; Shakespeare; Conscience; King Lear; Psyche.

Introduction

During the Elizabethan era, the comedian emerged as a highly coveted character on the theatrical stage, garnering significant attention from diverse audiences, including the aristocracy and the public. This widespread appeal can be attributed, in part, to the comedian's ability to resonate with the vast assembly of the 'groundlings,' the common folk who occupied the standing area in the theatre. However, beyond this broad popularity, there existed an exceptional quality in the delineation of a clown’s character, setting it apart as unique amidst the dramatis personae. In the grandeur of the court, the presence of a clown was not merely

incidental but rather essential and specialized. Tasked with bringing mirth to the opulent halls of the palace, the clown assumed a vital role in the royal setting. Shakespeare, a keen observer of the dynamics of his time, seamlessly incorporated this character into his plays, recognizing the intrinsic value the clown added to the dramatic narrative. Among Shakespeare's works, the creation of fools holds particular significance, highlighting his deliberate emphasis on this character archetype. Feste, the wise fool in *Twelfth Night*, encapsulates the universality of foolishness with his assertion, "Foolery, sir, doth walk about the orb like the sun; it shineth everywhere." Here, Shakespeare

metaphorically likens foolishness to the sun, implying its omnipresence in human affairs. Paradoxically, it is this very foolishness that Shakespeare employs to amplify the inner voices of his protagonists. Despite the seemingly feeble and whimsical nature of the fools, their voices resonate with profound and complete truth, serving as a unique vehicle to the realities that others may overlook. Isaac Asimov, in his *Guide to Shakespeare*, delves into the paradox of the successful fool, asserting that their success lies in the fact that they are, in essence, not fools at all. The fool emerges as the only character capable of echoing the unadulterated truth of reality. However, this truth is often dismissed and overshadowed by the prevailing perception that the fool's sole purpose is to entertain and provide pleasure. It is within this paradox that the Shakespearean fool transcends the conventional role of a mere jester, transforming into a prophet whose words contain explicit truths.

Unlocking the Play's Conscience

Shakespeare masterfully explores the consequences of disregarding the wisdom embedded in the fool's seemingly jesting words. The fall of the characters in the plays unfolds with beauty when they reject the truths articulated by the fool. In these instances, Shakespeare underscores the tragic outcome of denying the validity of the fool's insights, highlighting the profound impact the fool can have on the direction of the play. In essence, the Shakespearean fool transcends the confines of traditional comedic roles, evolving into a prophetic figure whose truths are both explicit and consequential. The interplay between the fool's wisdom and the characters' reluctance to accept it becomes a thematic thread woven intricately into the fabric of Shakespeare's dramatic tapestry. The dynamics of the play's conscience, as elucidated in the context of Shakespearean drama, unravel a

rich tapestry of psychological intricacies that contribute significantly to the thematic depth and narrative complexity. At the heart of this exploration is the notion that the play's conscience, synonymous with the truth embedded in the protagonist's mind, acts as a guiding force, shaping the trajectory of the narrative. In essence, the conscience of the play mirrors the internal moral compass of the hero, dictating the ethos of the unfolding drama. As the narrative unfolds, the actions of the protagonist become the focal point around which the entire play revolves. This centrality emphasizes the hero's agency in defining the growth and progress of the narrative. The hero's actions, laden with moral implications and consequences, become the driving force propelling the play forward. Amidst this narrative progression, the comedian emerges as a distinctive voice, offering a contrasting perspective to the hero's internal deliberations. The comedian, often portrayed as a clown, assumes the role of the personified soliloquy, embodying an externalized inner voice on the stage. This unique characteristic provides comedy with a distinctive advantage, enabling the audience to discern the truth embedded in the hero's actions. Despite the audience's initial perception of the clown as a mere fool, the clown's insights and wisdom serve as a counterpoint to the hero's internal struggles. The comedian becomes the arbiter of truth, employing mockery and buffoonery as tools to elucidate the hero's moral dilemmas, distinguishing between right and wrong. In the realm of tragedy, a genre marked by the introspective lamentations of the fallen hero, the delineation between the hero's mind and external actions is blurred. The tragic hero grapples with internal conflicts, and the audience becomes entangled in the intricate web of the hero's psyche. This complexity, while intellectually stimulating, can pose challenges for the audience in grasping the delineation

between the hero's mental state and the external manifestation of their actions. Conversely, in Shakespearean comedy, the comedian provides clarity amid the intricate interplay of the hero's mind and actions. The audience, through the fool's discerning perspective, gains access to the truth of the hero's motivations. The juxtaposition of the hero's internal struggles and the fool's external commentary creates a nuanced psychological dynamic, making comedy more accessible and relatable to the Elizabethan audience. The Elizabethan Age witnessed the burgeoning popularity of Shakespearean comedy, in part due to the clarity afforded by the comedian in navigating the complexities of the human psyche. While tragedies may have held sway with their supernatural elements satisfying sensual needs, it is the genre of comedy that has brought a tangible, authentic finesse to the lives of the audience. The comedian, with astute insights masked in humour, bridged the gap between the audience and the hero's internal world, fostering a profound connection with the play. Within the realm of *King Lear*, one of Shakespeare's iconic tragedies, the role of the fool takes on heightened significance. The fool, acting as the orchestrator of the play's conscience, assumes a pivotal role in guiding the emotional trajectory of the hero's mind. This orchestration is likened to a maestro guiding an orchestra, where the fool manipulates the emotional tones in the hero's psyche. The fool's license to mock becomes a powerful instrument for guiding and directing the minds of the audience. Through seemingly humorous and whimsical utterances, the fool reveals profound truths that resonate with the thematic essence of the play. Shakespeare constructs this character to be the custodian of deeper truths, unveiling the consequences of the hero's actions with poignant clarity.

Previous Examiners of the Conscience

In *King Lear*, there are many instances where the role of the fool transitions into that of the play's conscience. Most of it revolves around the fool's direct utterances to the audience and primarily as a secondary interlude between King Lear and Cordelia. The Royal Shakespeare Company explores the distinctive portrayal of the fool in Shakespearean works, specifically emphasizing the absence of a contemporary equivalent to this character within the royal court. According to Shakespeare's perspective, the fool takes on the role of a servant vulnerable to punishment, exemplified by the line, "Take heed, sirrah – the whip" (1:4:104). Nevertheless, King Lear's interaction with his fool surpasses the traditional master-servant relationship, developing into a nuanced connection marked by friendship and dependency. In the storyline of *King Lear*, the fool emerges as a fearless commentator on unfolding events, aligning with characters unafraid to speak unfiltered truths, including figures like Kent. Amidst the play's desolation, the fool introduces a crucial element of wit. Unlike some of Shakespeare's jesters whose humour might elude modern audiences due to outdated references, the fool in *King Lear* utilizes ridicule to underscore the gravity of Lear's actions and predicament, ensuring the audience comprehends the essence of his jests. Notably, the fool's acute observational skills come to the forefront at the play's outset, where he discerns the true nature of Lear's daughters and anticipates the disastrous consequences of the king's decisions. Jan Knott, within the context of Shakespeare's enduring relevance, elaborates on the fool's ideological autonomy. Dismissing the semblance of law, justice, and moral order, the fool peels back the layers to reveal the harsh realities of brute force, cruelty, and lust. Free from illusions, he eschews finding solace in the comforting notions of

a natural or supernatural order that metes out punishment for evil and rewards for good. Lear, staunch in his insistence on fictitious majesty, becomes an object of ridicule for the fool, who perceives the king's absurdity even when Lear himself remains oblivious. Despite the ludicrous nature of Lear's actions, the fool unwaveringly accompanies his degraded king on the descent into madness, recognizing that true madness lies in acknowledging the irrationality of the world. In this nuanced interpretation, the fool not only serves as a purveyor of wit but also as a companion to Lear, guiding him through the tumultuous journey into insanity.

Conclusion

Therefore, Shakespeare has proven to be a true master in his creation of characters. The fool who seems to be a mere sidekick in the play turns out to

streamline the entire mental progression of the play. The unnamed fool in *King Lear* is indeed an orchestrator of the play's conscience as he acts as a prophet and foretells the upcoming passion and pain that are caused by his tragic hero's actions. In conclusion, the exploration of the play's conscience within the framework of Shakespearean drama unveils a complex interplay between the hero's internal struggles and the external manifestation of their actions. The comedian, particularly the fool, serves as an indispensable mediator, offering a discerning perspective that enhances the audience's understanding of the hero's moral dilemmas. This dynamic engagement with the play's conscience not only distinguishes Shakespearean comedy but also underscores its resonance with the Elizabethan audience, providing them with a more palpable and genuine connection to the human experience.

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