

The Folly of Praise:
The Sapient Fool in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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A family rupture evolves into a national and consequently a cosmic confusion. Interwoven with treason, murder, and conspiracy, *King Lear* is the most tempestuous tragedy of Shakespeare's plays. Lear—the father and king who presides over all hierarchies—is banished, tormented by physical and mental anguishes, and it seems that even the indiscriminate nature collaborates to aggravate his destruction. As all the natural orders are monstrously subverted, why does Shakespeare introduce a nonsensical Fool on stage? And why does he disappear altogether after the fourth act? Unlike the flattering Goneril and Regan or the faithful Kent, the Fool is able to recognize the folly of praise, presenting himself as a conscientious scourge in front of the senile king. The speeches of this nameless buffoon, when the veil of preposterousness is lifted, shine forth with the disturbing pregnancy of seasoned wisdom, barbed sarcasm, and even prophetic providence. This essay purports to examine the demonstration of these characteristics in the Fool and his subtle interactions with the ever-transforming characters.

Shakespeare is not original in introducing a fool in literature. R. A. Zimbardo (10) notices that literary fools possess their own tradition. The King-Fool relation can be traced back to the Hebrew legend of wise King Solomon and Marcolf the Fool, and in *A Nest of Ninnies* (1608), a book relating the anecdotes of courtly fools compiled by an actor in Shakespeare's company, also documents the conversations between Henry VIII and his fool Will Somers. These accounts manifest how courtly fools function as the princes' advisers through their agile repartee. In addition, there is a more seriously pointed treatise establishing the efficiency of fool's moral position. Almost a century earlier than *King Lear* (ca. 1603-04), a Dutch humanist, Desiderius Erasmus, published a moral satire titled *The Praise of Folly* (1511). A female Fool, in this case named Folly, presents herself on stage and delivers a

jocund monologue complimenting herself. “I and I alone pour forth joy into the hearts of gods and men alike...Thus, what these eloquent orators can hardly accomplish in a long and carefully thought out speech—namely, to clear the minds of troubles and sorrows—that very goal I achieved in a flash simply by making an appearance” (Lawall 1682). The Folly preens herself on her superiority over the orators, and then she begins to demonstrate her vantage in court over the wise men: “those wise men normally offer princes nothing but melancholy—indeed relying on their learning, they sometimes do not hesitate to make harsh truth grate upon their tender ears—whereas fools provide the fun...they alone speak the plain, unvarnished truth. And what is more worthy of praise than truthfulness?” (Lawall 1692). Folly moves on to ever more ironic praise, as she innocently declares:

“Still, everyone is all the happier the more ways he is deluded, as far as Folly can judge, as long as he remains within the category of madness that belongs peculiarly to us—a category which is in fact so widespread that I hardly know whether anyone at all can be found from the whole sum of mortals who is always impeccably wise and who is not subject to some kind of madness” (Lawall 1694).

Here, the self-possessed Folly not only expands her influence but also indicates a thematic message echoed by *King Lear*: self-delusion is a self-destructive madness. This can be a departure for our discussion of Lear’s fool. In *The Praise of Folly*, the she-Folly delivers a piercing moral lesson to the general public by implying that “to be praised by Folly is to be blamed in reality.” Whereas Erasmus’s Folly mocks by praise, Shakespeare’s Fool teaches by sting.

Serving a king of egoistic blindness, the Fool recognizes that the ill-aimed praise is the very folly that precipitates Lear into improvident misfortunes, so he speaks against his favor. He unrelentingly reminds Lear of his idiocy with barely varnished sarcasms. However, though his pointed bitterness is explicitly perceived, his sarcasms mostly ring hollow in the

king's muffled ears. Instantly after he makes appearances in Act 1 Scene 4, the Fool strives to teach the king a timely lesson:

LEAR. Take heed, sirrah; the whip.

FOOL. Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out, when Lady the brach may stand by the fire and stink.

LEAR. A pestilent gall to me!

FOOL. Sirrah, I'll teach thee a speech.

LEAR. Do.

FOOL. Mark it, nuncle:

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

LEAR. This is nothing, fool. (1.4. 94-111)

Lear appears still sober-headed as he can detect the sting in the Fool's speech; his intimidating the Fool with whipping also manifests his assertion of regal power. The Fool's lesson at this moment is still rather explicit, though Lear chooses to slight it. When Lear grows more deranged, Fool's lesson becomes more subtle and metaphoric as well. Afterwards, he ridicules the king as fool (1.4. 121-28) and even reduces him to nothing:

LEAR. How, now, daughter! What makes that frontlet on? Methinks you are too much of late i' the frown.

FOOL. Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning; now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing. [To Goneril] Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue; so your face bids me, though you say nothing. Mum, mum,

He that keeps nor crust nor crum,
Weary of all, shall want some.

[Pointing to LEAR] That's a shealed peascod. (1.4. 165-74)

Like the she-Folly, the Fool also praises himself, yet his self-elevation aims to awaken the muddle-headed king. Such a daring denigration is not ensued by the king's harsh scolding as before; rather, it is followed by the offensive speech of Goneril. Recurrent in the Fool's speeches is his mockery of the king's giving away his lands and preserving nothing for himself, which is, however, insufficient to enlighten the king in his dark blindness and prompts him to behave more prudently.

Lear is not the only person to whom the Fool addresses; oftentimes, he turns to Kent to urge his messages. At his debut, his intervening of Lear and Kent's conversation admonishes Kent against his loyal service:

FOOL. Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb!

KENT. Why, fool?

FOOL. Why, for taking one's part that's out of favor. Nay, an thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou'lt catch cold shortly! There, take my coxcomb! Why, this fellow has banished two daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will. If thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb. (1.4. 83-87)

This passage parallels with Folly's observation that princes are more inclined to a fool's farce than wise men's melancholy counsel, and Kent and Fool can be regarded as the embodiment of the two contrary types of counselors. Implicitly the Fool embosoms his intention when he tells Kent that for taking an unfavorable part he had better be a fool, or shortly he will catch a cold (be engulfed in misfortunes as the king's daughters). When conversing with Kent the wise man, the Fool does not employ variegated mockery or metaphors as with Lear, for Kent is capable to perceive that the Fool is "not altogether fool" (1.4. 132). Regarding Kent's

persistent loyalty in Lear's aggravating obduracy, the Fool continually warns Kent against the vainness and disadvantages of his labors:

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

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.

KENT. Where you learned this, fool?

FOOL. Not i' the stocks, fool. (2.4. 63-82)

The Fool approves of Kent's faithfulness that seeks neither for gain nor for form, and he also reveals his own determination to follow the king in whatever predicaments. The enigmatic force of fate is here represented as a great heel, powerful enough to destroy anyone crossing her path. Also remarkable in this passage are the images of winter, rain, and storm, as well as the fight-or-flight dilemma, which suggests the upcoming upheavals that will concomitantly upset the serenity in nature.

Suggesting impending dangers is another function of this nimble Fool. As the situations are increasingly festering, more and more omens are embedded in the Fool's speeches. Early in Act 1 Scene 5, the Fool endeavors to curb Lear from seeking succors from his second daughter:

FOOL. If a man's brains were in's heels, weren't not in danger of kibes?

LEAR. Ay, boy.

FOOL. Then, I prithee, be merry; thy wit shall ne'er go slip-shod.

LEAR. Ha, ha, ha!

FOOL. Shalt see thy other daughter will use thee kindly; for though she's as like this as a crab's like an apple, yet I can tell what I can tell.

LEAR. Why what canst thou tell, my boy?

FOOL. She will taste as like this as a crab does to a crab. (1.5. 6-15)

And seeing Lear is still stubborn-hearted, he reminds him again of his irreversible folly:

FOOL. Nor I neither; but I can tell why a nail has a house.

LEAR. Why?

FOOL. Why, to put his head in; not to give it away to his daughters, and leaves his horns without a case.

LEAR. I will forget my nature. So kind a father! Be my horses ready? (1.5. 23-28)

This scene of forty five lines relies heavily on the stichomythia between Lear and the Fool. Despite the Fool's escalating warning, Lear still insists on his own will, living in the cloudy world of self-delusion. The Fool's last significant effort in advising and prognosticating occur in Act 3 Scene 2, when Lear has already been exiled into the open country:

LEAR. True, boy. Come, bring us to this hovel. [Exeunt Lear and Kent]

FOOL. This is a brave night to cool a courtesan. I'll speak a prophecy ere I go:

When priests are more in word than matter;
 When brewers mar their tailors' tutors;
 No heretics burned, but wenches' suitors;
 When every case in law is right;
 No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;
 When slanders do not live in tongues,
 Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;
 When usurers tell their gold i' the open field,
 And bawds and whores do churches build;

Then shall the realm of Albion
 Come to great confusion.
 Then comes the time, who lives to see 't,
 That going shall be used with feet.
 This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time. (3.2. 77-93)

Strenuously the Fool depicts a menacing picture of overall confusion—every class of the society is violating social decorum and no belief or veracity can be firmly held. It is notable that the class members mentioned in this passage are absent in this play, while the absent ones in this passage, the royal members on the top of social hierarchy, are the very cause of the disorder, which spirals down the hierarchy to infect other classes. The ruling class that is supposed to be the stable force of the society turns out to be the fountain of pollution, threatening to devastate the entire kingdom. Regretfully, however terrifying the picture is, the prophecy only rings hollow on the empty stage. From this moment onward, the Fool seems weary of all the fruitless efforts, as his later advices grow less meaningful and insignificant and ultimately his entire figure fades out in Act 3 Scene 6.

The disappearance of the Fool after Act 3 Scene 6 is precipitate and unfathomable. Does he despair of Lear's incurable imperceptions? Or is he simply at his wits' end? In "Cordelia and the Fool," Thomas Stroup examines the theory broached by Alois Brandl (1894) that the parts of Cordelia and the Fool were written for the same boy actor (127). This suggestion of the two characters' doubling allows us to explain the puzzles revolving around the Fool: his evaporation and Lear's referring Cordelia to fool in the finale. Janet Spens indicates that the two characters never exist on stage at the same time (qtd. Stroup 127), and they share many features in Lear's references (Stroup 128). Lear often calls the Fool knave, fool, or boy, which indicates his small stature in resemblance of a female, and there are times when Lear seems to regard the fool as his own child. As in Act 3 Scene 2 when they find a hovel in the open country, Lear feels sorry for the fool who suffers with him: "How dost, my boy? Art

cold?...Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart that's sorry yet for thee" (3.2.66, 70-71). Stroup (128) also notices that before the Fool's appearance, Lear has asked for him two times in Act 1 Scene 4 Line 42 and Act 1 Scene 4 Line 62, and he is answered by a knight: "Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the fool hath much pined away." The Fool's strong attachment with Cordelia brings him to constantly remind Lear of his cruelty toward his youngest daughter and to speak in her defense. In Stroup's conception, when the Fool is identified with Cordelia, the forces of good and evil are balanced—Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall as opposed to Kent, Edgar, Cordelia and the Fool (129). In this sense, the Fool is the implicit disguise of Cordelia, and thus we can observe that all the members of the good party undergo physical transformation in fighting against the antagonists. As the deputy of Cordelia, the Fool's departure is the preparation for Cordelia's appearance.

Lear's remark in Act 5 Scene 3 Line 304 is no less troubling when he cried out "And my poor fool is hanged!" Whether the poor fool points to Cordelia or the fool is fervently debated. Robert Fleissner (426) objects to identify the fool as Cordelia for the phrase "poor fool" is always given to the knave; the sudden change of naming Cordelia as fool is unaccountable, while Stroup consider that the ambiguity of this line to be intentional (131), since "it indicates 'an association in Lear's mind between his child and the Fool who so loved her'" and Lear were felt to be taking leave of both of them. Harold Goddard (Bloom 34) also supports such an interpretation, as he maintains that "poor fool" is a colloquial term of endearment applied to Cordelia, as well as a well-aimed manifestation of Lear's confusion of his beloved two.

From acrimonious derision to metaphoric foreshadowing, the bitter Fool has exerted his best to prevent the miserable king from further deviation. He is at once an insider and an outsider—a fool in the court but a man outside the royal family. He is conversant with the respective temperament of the noblemen, and he can also penetrate into their weaknesses from the perspective of an outsider. Nevertheless, little did the king benefit from his sapient

and devoted Fool. Moreover, the complementary substitution of Cordelia and the Fool exposes different frailties of Lear—his rashness and his obstinacy—which renders Lear’s destruction ineluctable at last. Undergoing symbolic regeneration, the decrepit king resumes his sovereignty at length, yet he is so emaciated by the loss of his beloved ones that he can no longer wield his authority in the previous state of omnipotent felicity. Eventually, “All three now marry in an instant” refers not only to the union of Edmund and the two wicked sisters, but also to the posthumous union of Lear, and his beloved child/ children—Cordelia/ the Fool (Goddard 34). Though a minor character, Shakespeare’s Fool is remarkably idiosyncratic. We laugh at his absurdity but also marvel at his intellectual depth. In creating such a brilliant Fool, Shakespeare multiplies the intricacies of *King Lear* and jointly fashions the entrancing tradition of “foolosophy.”

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