Shakespeare's Clowns and Fools - Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Appearing in most of Shakespeare's dramas, the clown or fool figure remains one of the most intriguing stage characters in the Shakespearean oeuvre and has frequently captured the interest of contemporary critics and modern audiences. Taking many forms, Shakespearean fools may be generally divided into two categories: the clown, a general term that was originally intended to designate a rustic or otherwise uneducated individual whose dramatic purpose was to evoke laughter with his ignorance; and the courtly fool or jester, in whom wit and pointed satire accompany low comedy.

The dramatic sources of Shakespeare's simple-minded clowns are at least as old as classical antiquity. In the plays themselves, such figures as Bottom of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Dogberry of *Much Ado About Nothing* are typically classified as clowns, their principal function being to arouse the mirth of audiences. The history of the courtly fool or jester in England is somewhat briefer, with these fools making early appearances in the courts of medieval aristocracy during the twelfth century. By the time of Queen Elizabeth's reign, courtly fools were a common feature of English society, and were seen as one of two types: natural or artificial. The former could include misshapen or mentally-deficient individuals, or those afflicted with dwarfism. Such fools were often considered pets—though generally dearly loved by their masters—and appear infrequently in Shakespeare's writing. The artificial fool, in contrast, was possessed of a verbal wit and talent for intellectual repartee. Into this category critics place Shakespeare's intellectual or "wise-fools," notably Touchstone of *As You Like It,* Feste of *Twelfth Night,* and King Lear's unnamed Fool.

Critical analysis of Shakespearean clowns and fools has largely explored the thematic function of these peculiar individuals. Many commentators have observed the satirical potential of the fool. Considered an outcast to a degree, the fool was frequently given reign to comment on society and the actions of his social betters; thus, some Shakespearean fools demonstrate a subversive potential. They may present a radically different worldview than those held by the majority of a play's characters, as critic Roger Ellis (1968) has observed. Likewise, such figures can be construed as disrupting the traditional order of society and the meaning of conventional language, as Roberta Mullini (1985) has argued. As for so-called clowns—including the simple "mechanicals" of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Trinculo of *The Tempest,* and Launcelot Gobbo of *The Merchant of Venice*—most are thought to parody the actions of other characters in the main plots of their respective plays and to provide low humor for the entertainment of groundlings. Several critics, however, have acknowledged the deeper, thematic functions of Shakespeare's clowns, some of whom are said to possess a degree of wisdom within their apparent ignorance.

Other topics of critical inquiry concerning fools are varied. Several scholars have studied the significance of certain Elizabethan actors who were thought to have initially enacted the roles Shakespeare wrote. Preeminent among these is the comedic actor Robert Armin, for whom several critics have suggested Shakespeare created the witty, even philosophical, fool roles of Feste, Touchstone, and Lear's Fool. Still other critics have focused on Shakespeare's less easily categorized clowns. Walter Kaiser (1963) has examined Falstaff's multifaceted function in the *Henriad,* which he has argued bears similarities to those of Shakespeare's other "wise fools."

William Willeford (1969) has focused on the darker side of folly by exploring the title character of *Hamlet* as a unique form of the Shakespearean fool. Additionally, Catherine I. Cox (1992) has investigated Shakespeare's characteristic blending of comedy and tragedy through the use of clowns and other purveyors of laughter in his tragic plays.

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