Feste and Lear's Fool: Different Genres, Same Function
Author(s): Nettie Jensen
Reviewed Work(s):
Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org
Stable URL: http://www.thisroughmagic.org/jensen%20article.html
"Feste and Lear's Fool: Different Genres, Same Function"

by Nettie Jensen

All Shakespeare’s clowns, the court jesters foremost among them, serve as the audience’s guides and teachers. At a time period when Puritan influence made it incumbent upon the playwrights to send a moral message with their work,[1] it would not do to have the audience identify too closely with the characters on stage. One of the “distancing devices” Shakespeare uses most often is the stage clown or jester. Where we find Shakespeare’s other court jesters involved in love intrigues, Feste from Twelfth Night and the Fool from King Lear have other interests.[2] While Feste serves to bring out the qualities in his fellow characters which the audience needs to know about and serves “the dark side” of the plot, the Fool centers our focus on the problems of kingship. Both teach us.[3]

Both clowns are on stage often and for long periods of time, but neither spends much of this time bonding with the audience through addressing us directly, which sets them apart from most of their brethren. Both are extremely verbally adroit, but they do not draw us in through their verbal acrobatics. We do not laugh with Feste—we laugh at what he magnifies for our scrutiny; and Lear’s Fool’s painful jesting gets no truly
liberating laughter from the audience. In both plays other characters take on part of the clown’s “job,” as it were, freeing him for more serious matters. In *Twelfth Night*, the rowdy group gathered around Sir Toby Belch provides the material for our easy laughter, while *Lear*’s Edgar-as-Poor-Tom would have been comical to a society that often was amused by madness. The moral message Shakespeare’s comedies usually transmits is that infatuation is a negative thing, while a sober mutual-aid-and-comfort approach to marriage, the necessary building block of society, is what one should strive for. Marriage should be based on a rational, reasonable relationship, not a giddy, short-term obsession like Orsino’s and Olivia’s. That kind of passion is disruptive, undesirable, and disturbing. Lovers in comedies usually go through a pattern of transformation from self-absorbed infatuation to balanced, rational marriage; lasting love has to be learned. However, this pattern is broken in *Twelfth Night*. In the completely non-realistic realm of Illyria, Feste helps show us how ridiculous Orsino and Olivia are. Despite responsibilities as heads of the state and a major household respectively, both are self-absorbed, self-indulging creatures. Orsino’s “love” for Olivia is all about what he feels; he reminds one of the, by this point no longer fashionable, Petrarchan love melancholy as he wallows in his pain and rejection. Olivia’s seclusion from society can easily be seen as a kind of teasing. She enjoys being the target of four different wooers—and, ironically, she is not the true target at all. Orsino loves the way infatuation makes him feel; Malvolio is after social position; Sir Andrew merely obeys
Sir Toby’s wishes; and Sebastian just has a very good thing land on his plate. Olivia herself loves a boy, who is playing a cross-dressing woman. What can be more ironic than that? Feste exposes Orsino as love’s fool in II.iv, both through the song he sings about dying from unrequited love (51–66) and through his “changeable taffeta” speech (73–79). Olivia’s unrealistic mourning is exposed in I.v, as Feste “proves the lady a fool” (55–70); here we see her as a delightful young woman with a good sense of humor, contrasting Malvolio’s sour outlook.

More interesting is the way both twins’ wit manages to best Feste, not an easy feat to accomplish when up against a Shakespearean court jester. Viola meets him alone in III.i and thoroughly enjoys him and his acrobatic punning. Of course Feste obeys stage convention of the time: dress dictates gender, and he has no idea Viola is a woman. They exchange banter and seem on equal footing. Interestingly, Viola is the one philosophizing and pointing out the parallel between herself and Feste, something that usually would be the fool’s task:

This fellow’s wise enough to play the fool,  
And to do that well, craves a kind of wit;  
He must 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. This is a practice  
As full of labour as a wise man’s art:  
For folly that he wisely shows is fit;  
But wise men, folly-fall’n, quite taint their wit.  
(III.i.61–69)
Feste here shows us and underscores for us Viola’s intelligence and resourcefulness. When Feste meets Sebastian at the beginning of IV.i, he naturally thinks he has met the very same sweet boy he came across before, but he is soon corrected. Sebastian here shows the audience what a topsy-turvy, bizarre world Illyria is, how full of “mad” people—just before he himself falls prey to love’s madness. Sebastian dominates Feste here to such a degree that the clown repeats Sebastian’s phrase.

Of all the four lovers united on stage at the end of the play, only Viola knows what she is getting into; male attire gives a woman a marvelous opportunity to be on equal footing with the object of her desire and become educated about his character.[5] Orsino is still struggling with the fact that his good friend[6] is a woman, who never even gets to change into female garb like Rosalind does in As You Like It. And Sebastian and Olivia are married, he under the influence of “love’s madness,” she believing her partner is the one she has so passionately—and unwomanly—wooed throughout the play.

Feste’s other charge is to serve the dark aspects of this comedy. Malvolio’s first remark about him is that he is an execrable jester: “[U]nless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagged” (I.v.85–86). This festers with Feste to such a degree that his main mission in the play becomes getting back at Malvolio. He has no part in the cross-gartering plot,[7] but once Olivia pronounces Malvolio “midsummer-mad”
(III.iv.55), Feste pounces. When Malvolio has been placed in his dark cell (IV. ii), unable to see Feste, the clown still adopts the Sir Topaz costume for the delight of the audience. Maria points out to him that there is no need for a costume as Malvolio cannot see him; Feste persists. We have no problem laughing at Malvolio as he makes a cross-gartered fool of himself before Olivia. When he is just a voice, however, Feste’s rapid voice and costume changes become cruel. Also, the way Feste hoards and later reads Malvolio’s letter assists in darkening the comedy, as does his revenge speech in V.i:

```
How with a sportful malice it was follow’d
May rather pluck on laughter than revenge,
If that the injuries be justly weigh’d
That have on both sides pass’d.
...
‘Madam, why laugh you at such a barren rascal, and you smile not, he’s gagged’?
And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.
```

(V.i.364–376)

Certainly, there is something wrong with a world with no space for clowning, but the revenge is out of proportion to the offence. Sir Andrew, Antonio, and Malvolio all can speak to the dark side of Illyria.

Even as Feste sings the epilogue, he is a dark jester. However, the song normalizes our experience. The audience does not live in the dream-world of Illyria, where only the occasional Malvolio is a discordant note. We live in the world of the wind and the rain where marriages are not a daze of giddy happiness, and where there are more Malvolios than Orsinos and Violas. We have not had enough one-on-one time
with Feste to feel as cozy with him as we do with, say, Lavatch of All’s Well That Ends
Well and As You Like It’s Touchstone. Feste is illusive and serves the darkness more than
the light. Twelfth Night is not a comfortable comedy, as King Lear is, at least to this
writer, the least comfortable of all of Shakespeare’s tragedies; much of this is owed to
Feste’s counterpart, the Fool.

When we meet the Fool, Lear’s die has already been cast. The kingdom has been
split into two parts, and, like in Gorboduc and Henry IV, Part I, division of a kingdom
bodes ill and presages war and destruction. Cordelia and Kent, our speakers of truth,
have already been banished; Lear has preferred show over duty and substance and has
sealed his fate. The Fool, whom we never see comfortably performing his appointed,
jestery tasks at court, has reportedly “much pined away” (I.iv.72); he comes to stand for
the normalcy of the court that was as well as for Lear’s reason. He knows that there is
no being king in show and trappings only, because it is the bond between the king and
his people that is the substance of kingship. A king is the father of his country, much
like the husband is the father of his family; there is no abdicating from this
responsibility, and the Fool wastes no time communicating this to Lear. The Fool has
retained his bauble and coxcomb, emblems of the king’s scepter and crown; and the two
crowns of the egg with nothing in the middle, with no meat or reason left, is like the
rent crown of the kingdom (I.iv.148–157). Once Goneril unleashes her wrath and lashes
out at Lear and his Fool, we could have an emblematic moment, depending on staging,
where the Fool cowers under the mantle of the defiant king, making them one. If staged like this, uniting Lear and his Fool, the moment gives support to the idea that the Fool represents Lear’s reason, a faculty he loses completely along with his Fool, whom we hear for the last time at III.vi.82. What reason Lear regains, he has to painfully discover as he learns that without humanity, he is nothing.

True to his jesterly vocation, the Fool speaks to us in jokes, riddles, jingles, and rhyme, but he labors largely in vain, and there is an indication that this jesting is painful to the Fool, who loves Lear devotedly. Much of the time Lear, preoccupied with himself and his journey inwards, hardly listens, and we never have a clear indication that he laughs at all. Where Feste holds human folly up to ridicule, the Fool is glued to Lear in order to show the audience his kingly folly. This helps focus the audience. King Lear shows us a man growing old and questioning his faculties, something we all fear and can readily identify with, but the Fool centers our attention on the topic of good kingship, something Lear never demonstrates while on stage before us—and he has, in the words of his “bad daughters” “ever but slenderly known himself” (I.i.294–295), or others, for that matter.

Yet Lear attracts affection. Cordelia loves him in true, daughterly fashion; Kent loves him enough to overlook his unfair banishment and return to support him; Gloucester loves him enough to help him and suffer dreadfully himself; Edgar suffers
when he sees the ruin of Lear, his king; and the Fool refuses to leave him, come what may, and labors to restore his reason in the process. There must be a “Lear the Man” in the king that the audience never sees till the bitter end, but all these people, especially the Fool, tell us Lear is worth saving. It seems the trappings of kingship and power have gone to Lear’s head to such a degree that human beings and subjects, even daughters, become puppets to be made to stroke his monster ego. And threats of whipping hang over the Fool when he does not oblige.

The Fool deeply understands the human condition and pities those who suffer. He has the compassion necessary in a king, and Lear reaches towards this point on the path to recovering his humanity during the storm scenes:

LEAR
Come on, my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold?
I am cold myself. [To Kent] where is this straw, my fellow?
The art of our necessities is strange,
And can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.
[To the Fool] Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
That’s sorry yet for thee. (III.ii.68–73)

KENT
Prithee, my lord, enter here.

LEAR
Prithee, go in thyself, seek thine own ease.
This tempest will not give me leave to ponder
On things would hurt me more. But I’ll go in.
[To the Fool] In boy, go first. You houseless poverty —
(III.iv.22–26)
Lear, for the first time, considers somebody else before himself and pities Kent and the Fool. This prompts “Merlin’s Prophesy” (III.ii.81–94), a rare moment spent by the Fool alone with the audience. Here, as always, there is no angling for our laughter; he wants that reaction only from Lear. In the Prophesy, he lists the abuses of the age, something a king should have addressed, and predicts the downfall of the state. All his predictions, were they phrased as questions, would be answered with “now” or “never”:

When priests are more in word than matter,
When brewers mar their malt with water,
When nobles are their tailors’ tutors,
No heretics burned but wenches suitors;
When every case in law is right
No squire is debt, nor no poor knight;
When slanders do not live in tongues,
Nor cut-purses come not to throngs,
When usurers tell their gold i’the field,
And bawds and whores do churches build,
Then shall the real of Albion
Come to great confusion…

We do not have time to ask ourselves, “What has the Arthur legend got to do with Lear’s Albion?” The Fool freezes the play’s action and acts as an eye-of-the-storm center, so we are forced to pay attention to the prophecy and remember it after the Fool leaves us. When Lear’s newly awakened compassion sends the Fool into the hovel before himself, he meets his “replacement” in the form of Edgar-as-Poor-Tom. After Lear becomes strongly attracted to Tom’s basic, fundamental, “bare, forked animal”
(III.iv.105–106) brand of humanity, the Fool seems to give up on his vocation. During the trial-scene, the Fool is the reasonable one, whilst Poor Tom goes along with Lear’s every whim. The Fool dwindles in tandem with Lear’s reason, and when we last hear from him, we have a final comment on the upside-down world he is leaving: “And I’ll go to bed at noon” (III.vi.82). Mealtime and time for sleep, most fundamental for our existence, have been disrupted. Lear’s reason is gone, and now so is the Fool.[9]

Both Feste and Lear’s Fool are attached to courts as professional jesters. Both are stern critics of their society and the people in it. Lear’s Fool, attached as he is to Lear, becomes a spokesperson for the humanity lacking in Lear’s outrageously self-centered court. Feste, in some ways darker than the Fool, both upholds the fairy-tale nature of Illyria and criticizes it. Yet, these two step outside the stage clown mold. They are more centered on characters on the stage than on the audience, and they both serve dark aspects of their plays. It is remarkable that a comedy and a tragedy as black as Lear’s both manage to incorporate a stage clown with close to identical functions. Still, both clowns are our teachers, guides, and interpreters. The plays are made richer and deeper by their presence.

Endnotes:

[1] See, e.g., Thomas Heywood’s An Apology for Actors, 1612. The text can be found in Tanya Pollard’s Shakespeare’s Theater, a Sourcebook, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004.

[3] Both these characters have usually been played by old men, maybe to indicate wisdom, but the Fool has also been played by female actors until recently, possibly to forge a link to Cordelia.

[4] The four lovers of *Much Ado About Nothing* are a prime example of this pattern.

[5] Rosalind of *As You Like It* is another wonderful example of this experience.

[6] At the time, the optimal relationship between two people was male-to-male friendship. This provided an opportunity to bond in a true friendship based on reason, intellect and spirituality, uncomplicated by the tensions of passion and sexuality associated with relationships to women.

[7] Something Touchstone would have gleefully orchestrated.

[8] Kent’s and the Fool’s deep devotion to Lear demonstrates that once, before pride took him over, Lear was an admirable king.

[9] Interestingly, the Fool is Shakespeare’s addition to his source play, *King Leir*. 