

## Original Paper

# Jestersin Shakespeare's Plays

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is intended to give a brief survey on medieval European jesters and Shakespearean fools in general, and then analyzes the jesters' functions in Shakespeare's plays.*

### **Keywords**

*Shakespeare, medieval Europe, jesters, fools*

### **1. Introduction**

William Shakespeare has created a great number of living characters in his thirty-eight plays. Among all the characters presented onto the stage, the jester or clown figure remains one of the most intriguing stage characters, which frequently captures the interest of critics, audiences and readers. The jester acts like an innocent child or sometimes a sophisticated wise man with his shrewd, cynical wit to win great favors. He in motley coat and coxcomb is a bawdy entertainer, an authorized critic, an insightful observer, a thoughtful philosopher and an eloquent elocutionist, who exhibits the impudence of human vice, the gayety of the minstrel, wisdom of the trivial.

A large number of critics are jester enthusiasts. It may seem strange that the clown who has so little to do in the play attracts so many detailed studies. The jester or clown is not invented by playwrights. They come into being as a profession before the drama exists. They are always found in the role of communal ritual and festivals in primitive societies. Some famous clowns are set for permanent representatives of humor and wit at court and in great houses, and there are traces of jester image in literature, either in the form of folkloric tales, historical fictions, poems, dramas and allegorical satires and so on. They use their humor, either in form of puns, riddles, songs, or capering antics, nonsensical bauble to make him unique in the world.

## 2. Medieval European Jesters

The jester appeared as a universal phenomenon in every court of medieval and Renaissance Europe, China, India, Japan, Russia, America and Africa. It is a common belief that the jester is an exclusive character mostly associated with the middle ages and Europe which was the center of the court jester. The figure of the jester can be found in Medieval European history, folklore, literature, theatre and mythology. Jesters played various roles as entertainers, social and political critics, agents of change for cultural and religious mores. As an actor and entertainer, the Medieval European jester was authorized to express freely his ideas without causing available offense with humor, jibe and joke.

The jester is an elusive character; words to denote him are numerous, indicating the nature behind: fool, buffoon, clown, jester, etc. The four words are slightly different in meaning, and a jester can be any of these. The word “jest”, stemmed from a French word “geste”, which means a notable deed or the narrative in which that deed is related in Middle English and later develops to sing or tell stories of great deed. In modern times, the word means something comic or farcical or witty, denoting a mocking tale or mock-heroism. Thus the earliest “gester” turns from a professional or semi-professional story-teller to a professional joker or “fool” at medieval court. In his *Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1913), Webster defines jester with these senses: a buffoon; a court fool, or a person addicted to jesting or amusing talk.

Here, it is necessary to distinguish the two terms: “fool” and “jester”. Webster refers jester as “a court fool” and Shakespeare frequently adopts the word “fool” instead of jester in his plays. The fool is the expression of a man “that lacketh naturall knowledge, an ideote” (Swain, 1932), or one who is made by circumstances, or a person who imitates for non-fools the foolishness of being innately silly or made to look so. During the reign of Elizabeth I, there was a distinction between the “natural” and the “artificial” fool, the latter being the person who “professionally counterfeits folly” (Willeford, 1969), and both served as a jester or clown.

Jesters are typically thought to wear colorful clothes and eccentric hats in a motley pattern. Their hats (called the cap’ n’ bells sometimes) are distinctive with three floppy points (liliripes). Each of the point ends with a jingle bell, which represents the donkey’s ears and tail worn by jesters in earlier times. The jester is noted for his incessant laughter and mock scepter, known as a bauble or marotte. Douce depicts the bauble in his *Illustrations of Shakespeare* as a short stick “frequently annexed an inflated skin or bladder, with which the fool belabored those who offended him” (1807). The motley costumes of jesters: the asses’ ears, the coxcomb and the occasional fox tail are believed to be derived from some sort of primitive masquerade, and the principle of motley wearing is found in fool shows.

The jesters are thought to originate from the tribal society and then flourished from Egyptian pharaohs’ time to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As early as 23 B.C., the 5<sup>th</sup> Pharaoh in ancient Egypt has taken Pygmy (a minority of Africa, living near by equator with 1.3-meter height for the adult, with tattoo on hands and colored faces, good at singing and dancing) as court comedians. The western tradition of the jesters could be traced back to ancient Greece in Sparta in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The jester played the roles from

soldiers, fools, witches, slaves to Greek gods. Perhaps the earliest antecedents of the European court jesters were the comic actors of ancient Rome. In Roman times, people kept monstrous imbeciles as pets, “cripples and freaks were sold in Roman markets, dwarfs ran about naked in salons of Roman ladies” (Willeford, 1969). These defectives were bought at public places, and the sillier they were, the higher price they were bought.

Jesters are mainly associated with the Middle Ages. All royal courts and a good deal of wealthy families employed professional entertainers and most of them had professional fools of various types in the Middle Ages. During the time of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, court clowns were a common feature of English society. The kings and the noblemen employed fools to entertain themselves and their friends on certain ceremonial occasions. The clowns also appeared in private houses, inns and brothel. They also wore the conventional “motley” and a conical cap with some jingling-bells in his hand to excite audiences when he spoke something foolish or funny.

Henry VIII of England, notorious for debauchery with many wives, owned much more clowns than his wives. Among them the most favorite clown was Will Sommers, who then popularized as a fictional character in an entertainment entitled “Summer’s Last Will and Testament” by Thomas Mashe and William Rowley’s play *When You See Me, You Know Me*. King James I employed Archie Armstrong as his jester who won great honor at court but was thrown out of the king’s employment for his over-reaching himself. Even after his dismissal, books of his jests were sold well in London streets. Armstrong held some influence in the reign of Charles I and then was replaced by a loyal jester called Jeffrey Hudson, addressed as “Royal Dwarf” because he was short of stature. A third jester of Charles I was called Mude John. The tradition of the jester came to an end when Charles I was overthrown in the Civil War and Lord Protector Cromwell came to reign. After the Restoration, Charles II did not restore the tradition but greatly patronized the theatre entertainments.

Peculiar in their appearance, costume and their craft of arousing laughter, the jesters find their place in various literary works: drama, fiction, poetry, opera and theatre. Since there are numerous jesters to be listed, the following will narrow the range to a period from 2<sup>nd</sup> B.C. to the Renaissance in European literature.

Featured with their wit and quirk, jesters crop up everywhere. The figure of the jester is frequently found in dramas. They were adopted in early form of plays: Greek New Comedy (the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C.), Roman Comedy (the 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.). These stories are marked by jesters’ manipulating their masters. Remarkable instance of jester characters in Greek literature is Philippus the Greek in Xenophon’s *Symposium*. The jester gets to the banquet and tries his humor to earn his supper. Another typical example is Thersites in the epic *Iliad*. Homer describes him as a grotesque figure of the most impudent of the Greeks, who tries to persuade the army back from Troy with his foul words but is punished by Odysseus harshly.

And he was ill-favoured beyond all men that came to Ilios. Bandy-legged was he, and lame of one foot, and his two shoulders rounded, arched down his chest; and over them his head was warped, and a

scanty stubble sprouted on it (Lang, 1961).

Later on, the jester appeared in French Fool plays (the 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries), German Carnival plays (the 14<sup>th</sup> century), Britain Moral plays (the 15<sup>th</sup> century) and Italian *Commedia dell' arte* (the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries). There were notable examples as “Badin” in France, a sophisticated satire critic; Marcolf in Germany, a smart jester image; Hardy Dardy in England, a vice-fool and Capitano, Pantalone, Dottore, buffoonery servant Harlequin in Italy. The tradition of court jester faded away due to French revolution in France. In Poland, the most famous court jester called Stańczyk, joked at current political events and then became an historical symbol for Poles. In Germany, Till Eulenspiegel, a folkloric jester mocked politicians and public figures of power and authority.

In historical fiction and fantasy, the figure of the jester has also been important: Wamba the jester in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*; Jack Point, the tragic jester in *The Yeomen of the Guard* by Gilbert and Sullivan; Triboulet in *The King Amuses Himself* by Victor Hugo (adapted by Verdi as *Rigoletto*); the court jester Verence in *Wyrd Sisters* by Terry Pratchett; Towser in *The Dragonbone Chair and Stone of Farewell* by Tad Williams and Hop-Frog in the story of same title by Edgar Allan Poe. Furthermore, Beatrice K. Otto presents a research of the most colorful court jester in his book *Fools Are Everywhere: the Court Jester around the World*; Rigoletto, the main character of the opera of the same name by Verdi; a jester, based on the Shakespearean jesters and informally named Elvis, is the logo of the financial website.

As for the theatre, as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the English comedians transplanted their jesters into the German stage, which was adopted soon by Jacob Ayrer and Duke Heinrich Julius of Brunswick in their plays. The jester, from then on, became an indispensable character and combined all comic characters in one: a fool or a poor devil; a servant, messenger, spy or conjuror; a great eater or drinker; a braggart or a coward; a hero of farce or a jester of tragedy. He took different names in different periods, Pickelhering, Harlequin and Hanswurt, etc.

The jester also existed in Chinese and Indian literature for a long time. China is said to have the longest, richest and “most thoroughly documented history of court jests” (Otto, 2001). The jester in Chinese literature was addressed as “paiyou (俳优)”, “youren (优人)”, “youling (优伶)”, “lingren (伶人)”, “changyou (倡优)”, “you (优)” and “ling (伶)”, which were traced back to Xia Dynasty and flourished in Yuan Dynasty in a form of Yuan dramas. Apart from China's Herodotus, Sima Qian providing the records of jesters in his *Historical Records* (Shiji), Ban Gu's *History of the Former Han* (Hanshu) depicts the principal jester of Emperor Wudi of Han dynasty and Wang Guowei's *Record of Jesters' Words* (Youyu Lu) provides the tradition of China's jesters. In Indian drama, the jester tended to be less physically impressive, older than the European jester stereotype, being rather wise, sarcastic and witty adviser to the king. One notable example is Madhavya in Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. In the play, the jester is a loyal friend and adviser to the king who pursues a beautiful maiden called Shakuntala while out hunting.

The above gives a brief survey of the jester's history and its reflection on various literary works in Europe. As a great playwright of Britain, William Shakespeare adopted the tradition of the jester in his

most plays.

### 3. Shakespearean Jesters

It is no doubt that Shakespeare was not the first to adopt the jester figure into his works. As Goldsmith wrote in his book *Wise Fools in Shakespeare*, “without this tradition reaching back into classical and medieval times the wise fools of Erasmus, Shakespeare might never have been” (Goldsmith, 1955). In 1509 Desiderius Erasmus pioneers fool’s writing’s in his book *Praise of Folly*. He presents the superstitious abuse of Catholic doctrine and corrupt practices of Roman Catholic Church through the mouth of a fool. He notes fool’s simple characteristics such as self-deception, self-will, and self-love, and praises their cheerful qualities, being indulged in laziness, wantonness, intemperance, flattery and no traces of pretending modesty, jealousy, ambition and fearlessness. In Erasmus’s eyes, a fool is always happy and popular everywhere. His ideas may inspire Shakespeare a lot in fool’s depiction. However, none of the jesters of pre-Shakespearean writers or of his contemporaries could compare with those of Shakespeare. He highlightens the role of the jester and stresses the pungency of their wit and the warmth of their feelings. They are all capable of word-play (word-play is a literary technique in which puns, paradoxes, obscure words and meanings, oddly formed sentences, rhetorical excursions are often used to make the meanings ambiguous, and it has to be used cleverly to create fun or to reinforce meanings), speaking in nonsense, misunderstanding and puns to tell the truth which those who speak in a straightforward way cannot arrive at.

Shakespeare has created a good number of vivid jester images: Trinculo in *The Tempest*, Costard in *Love’s Labour Lost*, Yorick and two unnamed clowns in *Hamlet*, Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*, Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*, Lear’s Fool in *King Lear*, Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Lavatch in *All’s Well That Ends Well* and many others. The latter four are widely acknowledged as the four most typical and successful Shakespearean jesters. They are regarded as witty, intelligent artificial fools with conscious humor rather than natural fools by many critics.

Despite Elizabethans’ familiarity with fools, Shakespeare repeatedly indicates that a fool has privileged position. Jaques supposes himself as being a fool, who may be to blow on whom he pleases:

He that a fool doth very wisely hit,  
Doth vey foolishly, although he smart,  
Within, seem senseless of the rob. If not,  
the wise man’s folly is anatomiaed,  
even by the squand’ring glances of the fool (Shakespeare, 1969).

(*As You Like It*, II. vii. 53-57).

When Malvolio attempts to restrain Feste’s tongue before lady Olivia, she reminds her steward that “there is no slander/in an allo’d fool, though he do nothing but rail” (Shakespeare, 1969) (*Twelfth Night*, I.v. 88-89). When Patrolus protests against Thersites’ slanders and threatens to strike him, Achilles similarly says, “He is a privileg’d man” (Shakespeare, 1966) (*Troilus & Cressida*, II.iii. 61).

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare derives the image of Thersites from Homer's *Iliad* and portrays him as a foul-mouthed but keen jester. He rebukes all the way from Agamemnon to Ulysses, from Nestor to Ajax, degrades the Trojan War as a war for "a cuckold and a whore" (Shakespeare, 1966) (*Troilus & Cressida*, II.iii. 79), and comments upon the weakness and evil lying in human mind to reveal the nature of the war.

Shakespeare adopts clowns only in minor parts in tragedies and mainly uses them to illuminate a turning point in the action. As the most tragic of Shakespeare's tragedies, *King Lear* portrays the story of a father and a ruler who loses his family and kingdom, in which Lear's Fool plays a major character. The Fool is no name other than "fool" or "boy" in the play. He veils his consciousness and sense of the world and pretends to be a natural fool. He disguises his thoughts in imaginary and old songs, urging the king to make terms with his daughter and giving cynical advices to Kent. He is caring, compassionate and loyal to the King, accompanying him to wander around as his only courtier when Lear is driven out of the court by his two elder daughters. He adopts foolish words to lead Lear to see what the real world is. When Lear sinks into madness he exchanges his position with Lear. Lear is now a fool, and he himself is a man with sound sense:

Fool: Have more than thou showest,  
Speak less than thou knowest,  
Lend less than you owest,  
Ride more than thou goest,  
Learn more than thou trowest,  
Set less than thou throwest (Shakespeare, 1966).

(*King Lear*, I.iv. 121-126).

In *As You Like It*, Touchstone plays the role of a classic jester, who is "the first truly wise fool to caper and tumble across the Elizabethan stage" (Goldsmith, 1955). Opposed to loutish comic figures as Launce and Bottom in earlier plays, Touchstone represents the first of Shakespeare's witty professional court jesters. Since a touchstone is a stone used to test the purity of gold and silver, Touchstone exercises his "folly" to test the "wit" of those who do think themselves wise.

In *Twelfth Night*, Feste charms the reader with his lovely songs and cynical acumen. He helps to move the plot in the part of Malvolio's imprisonment and concludes the play. In the chaotic kingdom of love, he is the only sane observer.

In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Lavatch is noted for his obscene speech. More frequently than other Shakespearean jesters, Lavatch jokes about sex and chastity through sly innuendoes like a prophet.

In general, Thersite is caprylic, Lear's Fool sentimental, Touchstone thoughtful, Feste a poetic singer and Lavatch a vulgar prophet.

#### 4. Cause of Shakespeare's Application of Jesters

As a great playwright of the Renaissance, it is no doubt that Shakespeare introduces so many clown characters into his plays, even some irrelevant with the whole plot, to follow the tradition of feeding clowns around in British society. It is also universally believed that Shakespeare's personal experience shares similarity with the clown.

In Elizabethan age, performing and creative artists were held in rather low esteem. In order to gain recognition, they relied heavily on support from noble patrons or from the court. Shakespeare was no exception. In 1595 he was one member of the Lord Chamberlain's men who received a fee for two performances at court. In 1593 or 1594, a plague attacked London, which forced the closure of theatres. During this period, Shakespeare found a new patron, youthful Earl Southampton for whom Shakespeare wrote and published two poems, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). Then in 1603, the Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men with the status of minor court officials. Shakespeare has created many works and began a considerable investment in Stratford and London. In his late life, he seemingly enjoyed a wealthy and happy life. In August 11, 1596, his only son Hamnet was buried. In 1613, the Globe Theater was burned out, in that year, Shakespeare left London to Stratford.

Shakespeare's personal experience has much in common with clowns. Though making great success in London, he was ridiculed by "university wits" (Wells, 2000) for he did not receive good education. Shakespeare became a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the King's Men, who wore special clothes with special salaries and were in turn to provide entertainment for kings and the noble. They had no difference with fools as a special entertainer. Though Shakespeare enjoyed a wealthy and happy life in his late life, he suffered a lot from his only son's death and his daughter's unhappy marriage. Like clowns, though deeply depressed in heart, he had to pretend to be joyous and entertain his masters. Shakespeare's purpose of introducing the clown into his plays is manifold. The general one is to make the audience laugh, and to keep the dialogue going on in the intervals of action, or to provide songs and dances whenever it is necessary. They act as wise men in his plays, adopting puns, paradoxes, some ambiguous words and malapropism (malapropism is a term referring to incorrect use of words, such as by using a different word with similar sound but opposite meaning or the word that is used means something different from the word the speaker or writer intended to use) to make audience laugh, increase stage effect of the comedies and predict the plot. Simply take Feste in *Twelfth Night* for example here.

Suffering the love-sick for Lady Olivia, Duke Orsino becomes upset and sends the clown away, "Give me now leave to leave thee" (Shakespeare, 1969) (*Twelfth Night*, II.iv. 71) after Feste finishes the love songs. Feste whispers to himself,

I would have men of such constancy,  
put to sea, that their business might be everything, and  
their intent everywhere for that's it that always makes a good voyage of nothing (Shakespeare, 1969)

(*Twelfth Night*, II.iv. 74-77).

“Make a good voyage of nothing” can be interpreted as two meanings: make a good voyage into nothing, or makes a good voyage out of nothing (Edward, 1984). The pun indicates the development of the plot. Sebastian and Viola flee to Illyria Island due to the storm, and reunite in the same island and they find their true love there. Duke Orsino, proposing eagerly to the countess Olivia, gains nothing but depressiveness and accidentally takes Viola as his lover. Olivia, who swears to veil her face and mourn her brother’s death with “eye-offending brine” (tears) (Shakespeare, 1969) (*Twelfth Night*, I.i. 31) for seven years, begins fierce pursuit of Cesario disguised by Viola without being acknowledged that she is a woman but falls in love with Sebastian in the end. The clown’s words apparently seem irrelevant with the drama but indicate many clues of the development of the play.

Another function of the clown is to philosophize over certain situations of the play or even the actions of certain characters. Or sometimes, he helps to explain certain things, such as the behavior of the hero or the heroine, or “the trend of the action of the play which would otherwise remain unintelligible to the audience” (Asnani, 1969). The fool always plays the role of a philosopher, a “Greek Chorus, an interpreter or a critic” (Asnani, 1969). In Europe, it has some proverbs like “jesters do oft prove Prophets”, “a whole fool is half a prophet” (Ottoo, 2001). Mentioned as above, clowns are the most privileged person to speak some sense or nonsense. They serve as neither masters nor servants but merry-makers to their masters, aiming to make the life colorful, and the mover of the plot and the conflict of those main characters. They seldom take part in any decisions of important events. Absolutely, they are drifted away from other characters in the play. Though Touchstone follows his two mistresses to the Forest of Arden, Feste is asked to disguise himself as Sir Topas to visit “Malvolio the lunatic” (Shakespeare, 1969) (*Twelfth Night*, IV.ii. 22) and sends a letter to Lady Olivia and Lavatch is sent to the court by Countess of Rossillion. However, what is required from them is merely entertainment. Touchstone is stolen to kill the boresome trip to Arden Forest, Feste summoned to add jocund episode and Lavatch called to test his foolish courtesy. They live between the under-layer and super-stratum, which helps them become sober insighters with a mask of folly to penetrate the truthfulness beneath. They are exposed to the goodness, cheating, wiles, extortion, and wanton. It is no exaggeration that Shakespeare expresses his own opinion through the lips of the clown and sometimes portrays them as a prophet or wise man. They win great favor of the audiences and critics by their sober mind, quick wit, great humor and eloquence. As Avigdor Dagan describes in his *The Court Jesters*, “everyone was dazed by him even though—and maybe because—no one was sure how seriously to take his words. Sometimes he sounded like a prophet and sometimes like a mocking chatterbox” (1991).



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