

THIS GREAT STAGE OF FOOLS

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: A study of the role and function of the Fool in Shakespeare's King Lear. This thesis attempts to explore the very personal nature of the relationship between the Fool and King Lear and to give reasons for the Fool's disappearance from the play at its climax. It explores the folly of the various characters in the play and points out the characteristic traits which some of them, notably Poor Tom and King Lear himself, share with the professional court-jester. It also involves discussions of the general nature of tragedy in the light of the peculiarly incongruous figure of the Fool in the tragic world. It includes an Appendix which sets down some speculations on the deep, underlying psychological motivations of the King - Fool relationship.

## PREFACE

In preparing this thesis I studied a wide variety of literature on the history of the Fool and Fool-lore from ancient times down through the Medieval period up to the appearance of the jester in Elizabethan drama. There is great variation in opinion on the origin and genesis of the Fool's character. He has been traced back to the court bards and associated with the medieval jongleurs and minstrels. In the Middle Ages an enormous variety of Fool types appeared each with different functions for different occasions. Increasingly, however, there was a fundamental dichotomy; for on the one hand there were the dwarves, the gross buffoons, the naive half-wits and simpletons, all of them employed for some grotesque abnormality of body or mind; and on the other hand there were the artificial court-jesters, perfectly sane and sound human beings simulating simple-mindedness. I shall have much to say about this later, but I must state at once that it seems to me that Lear's Fool, like Feste and Touchstone, belongs to the category of artificial court-jesters.

I have discussed much of the play in terms of the medieval concept of 'folly'. I think that every character in King Lear is at some point guilty of folly in the sense that medieval society had taken it; that is, when a person through action or speech prevents himself from fulfilling his own best interests in society. I do not wish to be mistaken in using the words 'fool' and 'folly' so frequently for I do not use them in a pejorative sense at all.



If I call Lear a fool it merely means that he is acting in a characteristic way as defined by a particular society and does not mean that I regard him as being more of a fool than the other characters in the play or myself. In the Middle Ages it was strongly felt that all men were capable of folly and all men were guilty of it. I have expressed this succinctly, in Chapter I, by using Erasmus' views, but this does not imply that either Shakespeare or his audience were familiar with Erasmus' views, but simply that these views, so widely discussed, had crept into Elizabethan drama and Shakespeare took them over lock, stock and barrel with the rest of the tradition. It was the Fool's task to prove all men guilty of folly. We have many examples of it in this play; but in this play also we have a Fool who is himself ultimately forced to be guilty of folly.

In preparing this study I felt that it was necessary, in order to present a balanced picture, to discuss the folly of other characters and the elements of the court-jester's attitude and behaviour in their personalities. In particular this led me into a study of Poor Tom and of Lear as his own Fool. It seems to me that such matters must be discussed fully if we are to appreciate the reasons for the Fool's disappearance from the play. The study has also led me, occasionally into general reflections on the nature of tragedy. Shakespeare at the height of his powers wrote in a manner which fuses all elements in his drama inextricably together

so that from almost every individual speech, save, perhaps, a monosyllabic interjection from a Second Gentleman, one is able to interpret whole sections of a play. The Fool is such an incongruous figure in this bleak world of tragedy that if we are to explain his full significance we must allow ourselves to enquire how and why Shakespeare ever dared to juxtapose King Lear and a court-jester. The fruits of such an examination of the balance of the play must inevitably tell us something about Shakespeare's general concept of tragedy.

The Fool's part as far as lines are concerned is one of the shortest in the play, yet he is one of the characters whom we most vividly recollect in the tragedy. It would be generally agreed that the play would be immeasurably less powerful without him and yet it has not often been made clear exactly what function he performs. In this study I have attempted to make clear some of the reasons for his central importance to the meaning and structure of the play and to explain why he disappears so suddenly at the height of the tragedy.

All references and quotations from King Lear are taken from The Arden Edition of the play, Edited by Kenneth Muir.

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## CHAPTER I

There are two main methods, it seems to me, which can be employed in attempting to extract the significance and meaning from a play by Shakespeare. One of them might be called 'wooding', in which one attempts to give a general picture of the whole play, the plot, structure, themes, symbols, characters. There is another method, which can be called 'treeing', in which one examines the play very closely scene by scene, documenting the complexity on all levels as the play advances, limiting the impressionistic approach by avoiding generalizations and by rubbing one's nose in the text, discovering, in fact, the exact nature of the trees which make up the wood. Strict adherence to either method is dangerous in dealing with Lear's Fool. Separating out characteristic traits and dealing with them in general terms would obscure the very definite phases of development which the Fool undergoes, whilst an attempt to follow the development chronologically by examining his role in each successive scene would lead to endless repetition. I have attempted a combination of the two methods in the hope that I have not obscured the clear nature of his development, or, to put it more accurately, the nature of his decline as a functional character in the play, whilst trying to avoid undue repetition.

There are three phases in the Fool's role, one in his first sphere of action, the crumbling world of Lear's lost kingship,

and two in the chaotic wilderness of the heath. Until Lear stamps out onto the heath the Fool's role is that of an educator, a man with an objective vision of the truth and pertinent comments on Lear's situation. The second phase begins when the Fool realizes that objectivity is impossible and that he must commit himself to the tragic fate of Lear by following his master onto the heath. It is a short and climactic phase in which the Fool finds himself completely out of his depth, his fate bound to his master whose psychological complexities are beyond his experience. The third phase brings to an end his uniquely personal relationship with Lear, his role being taken over momentarily by Poor Tom, and his comments by this time being completely irrelevant. Before examining these phases we must briefly discuss the various fools in the play and the setting of folly.

Miss Barbara Swain has summed up Erasmus' attitude towards folly admirably and because his attitude, it seems to me, has many affinities with that of Shakespeare I shall quote her summary in full so that at the outset we may have some idea of the meanings associated with the concept of folly:

Man is a fool throughout his life, in his best and in his worst manifestations, says Erasmus. Part of his folly is highly to be disapproved of, part to be applauded and encouraged. And the gods looking down upon man see him as their jester par excellence. In youth and age man is a veritable simpleton, helpless and babbling. In manhood who but the fools carry on the business of society, the men who fight, litigate, buy and sell, marry and raise families, while the sages perfect themselves in virtue?

. . . Yet the sages themselves are fools too, for they seek a kind of life which is incompatible with the existence we must lead, and the proverb states that he is a fool who seeks the impossible. But of course our life itself is the product of the superlative folly of love; these sober sages themselves spring from the incurable wantonness of man. Folly is the true goddess of man's life; she is responsible for the greatest abuses, for the kings, priests, shepherds of the people who deceive and rob their flock, and for the true leaders of mankind who follow the example of Christ in seeking to live in simplicity, innocence and humility. Man's evil and his excellence alike are due to folly.<sup>1</sup>

It can be seen, then, that most of these sentiments are shared and expressed in some form or other by Lear on the heath.

There are infinite levels of meaning in a play by Shakespeare and it is, perhaps, dangerous to emphasize one level at the expense of others, but also it is often very fruitful. At one level this is a play about fools and about folly in society and out of it. A brief glance at the characters and at various sections of the play will confirm this. Edmund tears down conventions and refuses to stand in the plague of custom. It is, perhaps, one of Shakespeare's consummate strokes of genius that he makes us feel somehow that Edmund, the gay, bouncing ruffian, has escaped from the comic world, for is he not really a Don John, a Valentine, a Iachimo, with his absurdly complicated schemes, complicated but clumsy, yet successful because he is dealing with fools? Somehow this villain has stumbled into the epic world of Lear,

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Swain, Fools and Folly During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), p.8.



into the throes of a saga family.

It is worth observing at once that the various types of folly are perpetually reflected in the contrast of plot complexity. In the main story events are simple in terms of plot but fearfully complicated in terms of motivation. In the sub-plot the reverse occurs, events are simple in terms of motivation though the carrying out of these events is perpetually attended with intrigue and complexity. One might say that Edmund has to fabricate events whereas Lear himself is events. Thus we have the agonizing simplicity of an event in Lear's family, the rupture with Goneril all because of a hundred knights, for that is the only tangible basis of the earthquake, the rest is entirely involved with a conflict of personalities. In Act II, Scene i, by contrast, we are marched at a jog-trot through a shabby escapade engineered by Edmund, whereby he makes fools of Edgar, Gloucester, Regan, and Cornwall in a matter of minutes. The folly of Lear is inexhaustibly complex because it depends so much on inner psychology and so little on outside events. The folly resultant on Edmund's trickery is simple exactly because the event which occasioned it was so complex. One immediately feels that if only events in the main plot were more complicated then the folly which they caused might be simpler.

It is important to realize that at the opening of the play we are in a world of folly and fools. One of the first times we hear of the Fool we find his name linked with that of Cordelia,

Lear. . . . But where's my Fool? I have not seen him this  
two days.

Knight. Since my young Lady's going into France,  
Sir, the Fool hath much pined away.

Lear. No more of that; I have noted it well. (I,iv, 75-79)

We learn then, of the close attachment of the Fool to Cordelia. This is important, for it is almost a principle of Shakespearian drama that at the introduction of a character, or even during the first mention of a character, we learn something fundamental about him and possibly about the entire play. In this case it is the Fool - Cordelia duality and when Lear says at the end of the play, " And my poor fool is hanged! " (V,iii, 305) the audience, and perhaps even Lear himself, is not sure whom he means, which of the two truth-tellers, the Fool or Cordelia. For we must make it clear that if the Lear of the first scene had as his two most loyal supporters Cordelia, the honest child, the one who rejects ceremonial rhetoric for realism, and Kent, the blunt speaker, both of whom he dismissed from his ambience, then in his changed circumstances at Goneril's and Regan's, his two most faithful supporters will still be there in different guise, the Fool with his apparently objective truth and Caius as the man who can deliver " a plain message bluntly " .

I am eager to make this point clear, for we are dealing in this opening section of the play with no less than three fools, fools, that is, in the medieval sense, Cordelia, Lear and Kent. They are not 'demens', 'ignarus', 'lunaticus', 'fatuus', they are not mental defectives, but they illustrate one feature essential



to the medieval conception of the fool - they all act in a way which prevents them from getting on, or getting what they want or is their due from society. The way in which they act is characteristic of 'folly', they ignore the code of reasoned self-restraint, they act stubbornly or speak out bluntly. This, I am convinced, is the real reason for Lear's anger against Cordelia. It is not merely the personal rebuff which troubles him, he knows well enough the depth of Cordelia's love for him; what is at stake is Cordelia's rejection of the established code, the Lear-ordered world. Her "Nothing" is not at all a rejection of a father but something much more fundamental, it is a rejection of the Lear world and all its values; she declines to conform to one of its ceremonies and in doing so rejects its whole validity. It is in that sense that I mean that she is a fool, a fool being one who speaks out against the conventions of the accepted social code whatever the personal cost may be. This is why we feel the power of her "Nothing" as, perhaps, few critics have sufficiently emphasized; that word is the culmination of a lifetime of experience. Goneril and Regan are not fools by virtue of the fact that whatever their personal view of that elaborate charade in the first scene, the whole grandiose inflation of the child's game of "Kiss me and I'll give you a penny", they outwardly conform. Their speeches are given and taken by the court, and by Lear himself, as exercises in the art of flattery and, indeed, they are so stylized and formal that in a production I would have the court greet them

with a polite round of applause. They, then, are not fools and their reward for not being fools is a piece of the pie.

Kent, too, is a fool, for in the service of what he believes to be truth absolute, the truth to which all fools are servants, he speaks up bluntly and his reward is banishment. Kent's role is characterized by folly throughout the play and it is one of the ironies of the play that his folly is, superficially at least, caused in the same way as that of Lear. Kent, like Lear, is too bound up with having to be himself to avoid folly. Thus there are neat contrasts throughout the play as when, having observed Lear's tempestuous anger in his conflict with Goneril, terrifying in its savagery, we proceed to observe Kent, the servant of Lear, with his equally uncontrollable, though, on his level, somewhat comical temper, berating Oswald, Goneril's servant. The parallelism of event is virtually exact, the effect is altogether different. Lear can make another event, he can stride off to Regan. Kent is put in the stocks. Just as Lear relies rather too heavily on being in the dominant position of king, Kent relies too heavily on being in the service of Lear. One wonders how many of the hundred knights had the same weakness and how justified, from her own point of view, Goneril may well have been in her petulant:

You strike my people, and your disorder'd rabble  
 Make servants of their betters. (I, iv, 264-265)

Certainly Kent disdains to make a reasonable defence of himself and behaves very churlishly, so that by any standards he might be

said to deserve stocking for his folly. Only in an age believing passionately in the Divine Right of Kings, where to attack a king's servant is to offend against the regal body, could Kent be anything other than a very dubious asset.

What about folly elsewhere in the play? If at this time Kent is in the stocks where is Edgar for his credulous simple-mindedness? In Act II, Scene iii, we find him grovelling by the wayside talking of daubing himself with mud and becoming a beggar, which one cannot but regard as a rather limp-limbed and foolish way of accepting one's fate. As a policy following the line of least resistance it contrasts vividly with Lear's later, conscious, and forthright stamping out onto the heath. Edgar graduates through one type of foolery, that of the mad bedlam, into that of a platitudinizing philosopher in the later part of the play, a position in which he is joined by Albany. Shakespeare shows their philosophy to be part of the universal folly, in terms of the play, of trusting justice and divine providence, and therefore invalid, left speechless and confused as they are at the end of the play when faced with the dead Cordelia and the broken and finally crushed King Lear. Goneril and Regan, realists at the outset, are drawn into the snare when they become 'fond' in our and the Elizabethan sense of the word, that is, foolish in love. Even Edmund must fall for it is in the nature of his folly that he allows events to catch up with him. Lear himself picks up and rejects all the various philosophical stand-

points, all these versions of the truth, or, as we come to see, versions of folly, on his path to his own harrowing vision of the world, in which, so to speak, all brands of folly are made irrelevant in Lear's ultimate vision of chaos," handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?"(IV,vi,155-56). The medieval Christian conception that all men are fools is illustrated at all levels in this play. It is that riddling statement of Lear's, which I have just quoted, which makes the play a new, dynamic and terrible exploration of the significance of that medieval conception.

It is impossible to pin down the meaning of a play by Shakespeare, but it is true that in some of them at least part of the meaning is involved in the examination, by a Renaissance man, of medieval concepts. Hamlet, on one level, is about the evaluation of the ethics of the revenge code by an enlightened man. Macbeth examines the psychological dangers involved in the ambitions of a medieval political realist. Shakespeare's heroes, it seems to me, climb out of a world dominated by medieval concepts and in the process of self illumination have fleeting glimpses of newer concepts tragically unattainable because of the nature of their society. King Lear certainly escapes from a world dominated by folly, folly as conceived by medieval society and its conventions, and finds himself in chaos seeing the world as a savage jungle. In such a world there is no God, there is no justice and no order. Medieval man laboured under divine

malediction, incapable of avoiding folly. Lear in working his way to a pessimistic atheism finds no social folly at all; men are animals subject to the laws of the jungle. There is much more to Shakespearian tragedy than the Aristotelian tragic flaw. Many of Shakespeare's heroes are tragic because having attained a philosophy beyond the capabilities of their own societies they find it impossible to communicate their vision. This, it seems to me, is the essence of tragedies such as Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Timon of Athens, and King Lear. To whom does Lear attempt to communicate his vision of chaos? To Gloucester, most clearly inside and possessed by the medieval concept of folly, Lear gives this honour, Gloucester baffled by the gods, perpetually incapable of seeing the truths that are staring him in the face. Tragedy, in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, involves the isolation of the individual, the development of standards, ethics, or modes of action which run counter to those of the society he finds himself in. In King Lear, possibly more clearly than in any other play ever written, a man is isolated from his society, a society riddled by the folly of men and women, and that individual dares to break through the concept that man labours under divine malediction, dares to see the world as a place in which man is author and practiser of his own corruption.

At the outset all the characters in King Lear, save one, are to some extent self-absorbed, incapable of ordering their actions on a moral basis, incapable of judging their own position

objectively in relation to another's. In the opening phase of the play all the characters, save one, illustrate this feature; the exception is the Fool. The essence of what I have to say about the Fool is bound up with this exceptional position. Most of the characters in a tragedy are incapable of objective vision and are therefore drawn in to the tragic fate. The Fool is a character usually associated with the comic world where objectivity is much more commonly found. The Fool, it appears, is set apart from the generality of human kind and centuries of tradition had endowed him with a sharp insight into human affairs. Shakespeare had found a character capable of a degree of objective commentary very useful in many plays, Ross in Macbeth, Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet, Horatio in Hamlet, to mention only the obvious ones. Almost all the characters belonging to this type demonstrate a personal loyalty to the hero from the beginning so that there is no doubt that their fate is bound up with that of their masters. But the Fool is a professional, paid to jest for, with, and against his master and the court. It is possible, in theory at least, if one does not understand the psychological basis of the Fool - King relationship<sup>2</sup>, to expect that the Fool need not be involved in the tragic fate, could, in fact, pack his bags and look for a job elsewhere. After all, few Fools in the history of drama up to this point had found their fate seriously mingled with that of the major

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix.

characters and none at all with that of the tragic hero. All the characters in this play become inextricably bound up with Lear's fate; only the Fool could be expected to stand aloof. The whole point about the Fool's role in this play is that we become increasingly aware that the Fool can not stand aloof, that it is impossible in the tragic world to be uncommitted to one fate or another; even the Fool, at the extremity of detachment, must abandon his role as commentator, must be sucked into the tragic whirlpool. All the commentator roles in the earlier plays are, to some degree, prototypes for this one character; the fate of Lear's Fool is the perfect example of the all-involving power of the tragic world. If even the Fool has to decide where he stands, has to climb down from his seemingly omniscient judging of all, then, Shakespeare might asseverate, must not the audience do the same. For a time the Fool appears to be a man of insight in a world of blind self-indulgence. Each character has his version of the truth of what is happening, but only the Fool appears to be uninfluenced by entirely personal considerations. When the Fool finds that he can no longer stand aloof the last fragment of belief in objective truth is gone. The Fool's role hammers home the principle that truth in the Shakespearian tragic world is completely relative.

This, in fact, is what I have been leading up to, for nothing less than the whole structure of Shakespearian tragedy is involved in a discussion of the Fool's role. Because of the unique tradition

of the Fool's role we can see Shakespeare confirming his pattern of tragedy more clearly in King Lear than anywhere else. If he has groped towards the test-case in earlier plays, in placing a Fool at the very core of a tragedy, he has at last achieved it.

The structure of Shakespeare's tragedies seems to have much in common with that of crystal systems; there are certain basic situations through which the plot is developed, interconnected like crystals; each situation is the core of a crystal and each character involved has his own attitude to the situation, his own view of its meaning; each character is a facet of the crystal. Thus one cannot say that Lear is right and Cordelia wrong, or vice-versa, there is no moral judgement from outside, there is, or should be, no apportioning of blame. Those critics who find Lear's pride or arrogance reprehensible and see him, therefore, as something of an old fool who, unfortunately, has to suffer too much for his original mistake, his tragic flaw, miss the entire point of Shakespearian tragedy. If we cannot see that Lear, Cordelia, Goneril and Regan are all justified from their own point of view then the play is nothing more than a very crude morality play. Shakespearian tragedy, like the tragedy of many ages, assembles complex versions of the truth of a situation, each equally justifiable from its own standpoint, which, because they are incompatible, initiate a process of tragic events. In the comedies of Shakespeare the different versions are based on misinterpretation or false knowledge of a situation, and,



therefore, universal enlightenment being possible, admit a happy solution. In the tragedies the conflicting versions are based on fundamental differences of personality and, therefore, rarely admit of any solution.

As a brief illustration one need only look at the opening scene of King Lear. The entire structure of the scene is built on one word, Cordelia's "Nothing"; that is the core of the first crystal. Every character who appears in that scene has an attitude to that "Nothing". So many attitudes are presented to it that its original clarity becomes blurred. If we were ever on the side of one character or another, by the end of the scene the various versions of the truth have made its meaning so complex that it is impossible any longer to take an objective stand, we must simply submit to the tragic process.

Where does the Fool fit into what I have described as this crystal patterning? Is his judgement independent of situation, objective? Did Shakespeare intend the Fool's views to represent those of his audience? This would appear to be partially true at the beginning of the play, but it becomes less true as the play advances. Even at the outset it is not entirely true and if we make the mistake of assuming the Fool's opinions to be essentially those of Shakespeare we run the danger of seriously upsetting the balance of the play. We simply have to take the case of the Fool's attitude to Goneril and Regan to see what I mean, for we cannot understand his attitude to Lear if we do not appreciate his

attitude towards the daughters. Maybe the Fool is wise but too many critics have assumed that his attitude to Goneril and Regan was Shakespeare's own. Producers have continually presented the two daughters as being dog-hearted from the outset, have dressed them in violent crimsons and greens, to contrast with the saintly white of Cordelia, and have instructed them to simulate hissing diabolism. The subtlety of the first two acts is at one stroke thrown out of the window. Given the terms of the convention their behaviour in the first scene was eminently sensible, nor were they made to egg on Lear against Cordelia as they had done in the old play, King Leir, and it is they who, most sensibly, see an element of folly both in Lear and Cordelia. Furthermore, Lear has placed them in an awkward situation, for though he has yielded power he has retained "The name and all th'addition to a king;" (I,i, 136.) and already, by the time that we next see Lear, we have reports of his truculent behaviour and we see that Lear has relinquished none of his regality. Lear, as critics have often observed, wishes to retain all the privileges and none of the responsibilities of kingship. It appears that he has decided to indulge in a kind of perpetual, riotous equivalent of the Elizabethan Progress and the first audience of King Lear knew very well how costly, unbridled, troublesome, and wearisome those had often been, and of how, it being the Queen's will, one had had to submit and suffer. We can imagine how irritating this would be particularly to daughters of Lear, who believed in absolute measures, as which

of the Lear family did not, and found themselves not only not in power but relegated to the role of mere servants. I am not casting the blame on Lear, I am simply saying that Goneril and Regan, from their point of view, have as justifiable a case as Lear. It is clear, as in all tragedy, that the formula reached to solve a situation is less than adequate for the personalities involved. If we cannot see that the two daughters have viable viewpoints until Act III, until they mingle their fate with that of Edmund, then we are likely to misinterpret the whole balance of the play, including the process of Lear's education in the ways of the world and the Fool's version of the truth. Much of the Fool's particular standpoint depends on his rigid and uncompromising attitude towards the two daughters. The Fool sees the daughters from the outset in the roles which do not, in fact, become theirs until they surrender themselves to the laws of the jungle world in their rivalry for Edmund's love. Perhaps the seeds for their later development are already there and perhaps the Fool is far-sighted in anticipating their true nature; but there are two things to be said about this attitude of the Fool, which I hope will make clear exactly how much I regard him as an objective commentator and how limited from the outset that objectivity is. I shall deal with this more fully later, but at the moment it is important that we realize that the Fool's attitude to the two daughters is not involved in any obviously emotional way, it is not the result of personal antipathy and to that extent it is objective. On the other hand, his

attitude is a direct result of a preconceived theory, a belief in the degrees of order, a belief in hierarchy, to that extent his attitude is limited, since he takes it for granted that, regardless of personalities, disaster is the inevitable consequence of Lear's division of the kingdom. As far as the Fool is concerned the structure of society controls men and not the reverse, and so there is no more to be said. His attitude to the two daughters seems to be based more on theoretical assumptions than on personal knowledge of them. If the play, as I suggested earlier, is, to some degree, an examination of the medieval concept of folly, on another level it is an examination of the theory of hierarchy. The Fool is the orthodox representative of the theory. In many plays Shakespeare himself adhered to the theory. In this play he brings a character, no less than a king himself, to the point of rejecting or disregarding his belief in hierarchical order. Therefore, at the outset, the Fool gives the appearance of objectivity because he holds the orthodox viewpoint, but we are to discover that in this play orthodoxy is neither objective nor sufficient. The Fool's truth, we learn, is only another version, only another facet of the crystal.

## CHAPTER II

I have now set out what I consider to be the necessary background of ideas for a discussion of the Fool's role. I can now proceed to a discussion of the Fool himself. We must first establish the nature of the Fool.

In some sense we feel the Fool's role to be somewhat archaic in Jacobean drama. Indeed were it not for Shakespeare's witty court fools, Feste and Touchstone, our view of the Fool would be very much more limited and we would see him much more in terms of the gross excesses of which the medieval buffoons were guilty. Outside Shakespeare's drama there are very few sophisticated fools in literature. In general it is considered that buffoons can only flourish, jest books can only be written, in a society where the general level of sympathy and sensitiveness is not very high. The Lear world is usually considered to be a picture of a primitive society full of savage barbarity, though in my opinion it has many elements of a highly cultured court of "space, validity, and pleasure," (I,i, 81.), and because it is supposedly a savage world it is more natural that the Fool should not be a sophisticated court-jester but an inspired half-wit boy. This view seems to me to be mistaken, for the vast majority of the evidence on the medieval

fool points to a coarse, gross, grotesque, even outrageous figure. Many of the coarse jests still survive in the speech of Lear's Fool, particularly in his sexual allusions, but his speech is far from being predominantly coarse and there is plenty of evidence to show that he was not merely the conventional buffoon. How far he was from this position, and consequently how much nearer he was to the tradition of the sophisticated court jester, we can see if we turn to Lodge's standard description of a buffoon in

Wit's Miserie, in 1599:

Immoderate and disordinate joy become incorporate in the body of the jester, this fellow in person is comely, in apparell courtly, but in behaviour a very ape, and no man; his studie is to coine bitter jeasts or to show antique motions, or to sing baudie sonnets and ballads: give him a little wine in his head, he is continually flearing and making of mouthes: he laughs intemperately at every little occasion, and dances about the house, leaps over tables, out-skips mens' heads, trips up his companions heels, burns sack with a candle, and hath all the feats of the lord of misrule in the countrie: feed him in his humour, you shall have his heart, in meere kindness he will hug you in his arms, kisse you on the cheeke and rapping out an horrible oath, crie God's soule Tum, I love you, you know my poore heart, come to my chamber for a pipe of tobacco, there lives not a man in this world that I more honour. In these ceremonies shall you know his courting, and it is a speciall mark of him at the table, he sits and makes faces: keep not this fellow company, for in jugling with him, your wardropes shall be wasted, your credits crackt, your crownes consumed, and time ( the most precious riches of the world )



utterly lost.<sup>1</sup>

This description might be said to fit Falstaff to some extent, or Sir Toby Belch, but with Touchstone, Feste and Lear's Fool it has little in common.

We should note, too, the testimony of Robert Armin, who seems to have been something of a self-made expert as far as fool-lore goes. It is quite possible that he acted the parts of Touchstone and Feste and, maybe, even of Lear's Fool. His book Nest of Ninnies<sup>2</sup> makes repeated distinctions between artificial Fools and naturals, so that if Shakespeare was closely acquainted with Armin's views it is unlikely that he would leave to chance the question of the sanity of one of his Fools. In no story that I have come across of naturals and half-wit fools is there any resemblance to Lear's jester. The natural usually gives rise to mirth by his ridiculous actions, the scrapes he gets his body into or the practical jokes, which in his simplicity, he performs. The natural's gift, if one can so designate something involuntary, is scarcely ever verbal, and when it is so it is not consistently illuminating. One could hardly be a simpleton and hit home accidentally and so pertinently and consistently as does Lear's

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Francis Douce, Illustrations of Shakespeare and of ancient manners with Dissertations on the Clowns and Fools of Shakespeare, (London: Printed for Thomas Eggs, 1839), p. 504.

<sup>2</sup> Fools and Jesters: with a Reprint of Robert Armin's "Nest of Ninnies", ed. J.P. Collier (London: Shakespeare Society, 1842).

Fool, who hardly ever misses his target. Even for the purposes of dramatic convention one could not reasonably expect an audience to find a character an idiot who seems, for at least part of the play, to be the only character on stage who realizes exactly what is happening.

We are so used to seeing Lear's Fool presented as a neurotic, whimpering boy in productions, always clinging and whining round Lear's feet on the heath, that we have taken it for granted that he is a simpleton, a naive half-wit, who speaks the truth persistently because, by an inexplicable dispensation of Providence it is in his character to see those things obscured from the wiser<sup>3</sup>. Most critics on no evidence whatsoever, as far as I can see, blithely take it for granted that he is an inspired half-wit<sup>4</sup>. This, I am certain, is a mistake and is, I suspect, linked with the interpret-

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<sup>3</sup> A.C.Bradley says: " To suppose that the Fool is, like many a domestic fool at that time, a perfectly sane man pretending to be half-witted, is surely a most prosaic blunder ". A.C.Bradley, Shakespearian Tragedy, (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1904), p.260.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. R.H.Goldsmith, who has noticed the same propensity amongst critics, has this to say: " . . . is this fool mentally defective? If the Fool and his 'folly' are so important to our full understanding of King Lear, then the question is not academic. Except for the bizarre diagnoses of a few scattered writers, the consensus of the critics is that Touchstone, Feste, and Lavache are clever artificial fools, not naturals; that they are conscious humorists, not unwitting instruments. However, when they come to examine Lear's Fool, the critics are far from agreed on the state of his



ation of Cordelia as a lily-white, meek, primrose-mouthed, Christ-like child. This is not the place to examine Cordelia's character but, because it has a bearing on the interpretation of the Fool, I think that it must be said that any serious examination of the text will show her to be bold, outspoken, with her due proportion of the Lear family temper. She is able to hold her own against the mighty wrath of Lear in a family crisis, and also able to hold her own, and more, against her two sharp tongued sisters in that brief interchange, slightly reminiscent of a Billingsgate fishwives' brawl, at the end of the first scene. Cordelia is one of the strongest, most self-willed and most independent characters in the play. The Fool, as I have already indicated, seems, in some sense, to take over Cordelia's role. He, likewise, has suffered from interpretations which have presented him as a boy, with sweet naivety making devastatingly bitter points. As I shall hope to

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mind. The preponderant opinion since the beginning of the nineteenth century seems to have been that this fool is a naive natural or even a half-wit boy. Coleridge speaks of his 'grotesque prattling' and inspired idiocy. An earlier commentator, Francis Douce (II, 169) calls him 'a mere natural with a considerable share of cunning.' And Boas sees in the working of the Fool's mind 'that strange mixture of simplicity and acuteness which is so often the birthright of "a natural".' "Dr. R.H. Goldsmith, Wise Fools in Shakespeare, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1958), p. 60.

show, he is fearless, a bitter and mature man of a sharp and limited intelligence, limited, that is, in relation to the Lear standard of intellect. Only with a strong Cordelia and a mature Fool does the threat to the Lear dominated world, and consequently to Lear's sanity become a potent and necessarily credible force. There is a very real sense in which one can say that Lear begins to go mad at the moment when he understands Cordelia's rejection.

There is a contrast between Kent and Cordelia as there is between Caius and the Fool. It is one of Shakespeare's subtlest points in that first scene to show that Cordelia knew very well what she was doing and knew its significance, as did Lear, whereas Kent's defence of Cordelia was irrelevant just because he lacked insight, because he was dabbling in the deep complexities of a family matter which he could not possibly understand. Throughout the play it proves that Kent's loyalty acts as a limit to his insight. Shakespeare having hit on an admirable formula is unwilling to relinquish it and Caius serves as a useful foil to the Fool as Kent did to Cordelia. The Fool is the one blessed with insight, the one who understands what is going on and who knows exactly what he means when he says something. This is linked with Lear's peculiarly personal relationship with his far-sighted Fool.

The nature of the relationship is emphasized from the very outset. The first mention of him is in Act I, Scene iii, line 1, with Generil's petulant question: " Did my father strike my gentleman for chiding of his Fool?" This is one of Shakespeare's deft strokes which immediately apprizes us of the

situation between Goneril and Lear, his determination to retain the name of king and her anger at his excesses. A Fool must often have been chid if his jokes did not take, often, indeed, whipped and in danger of losing his master's patronage. But here we have an unusual situation; we learn of a king taking the side of his Fool and striking a 'gentleman'. There is more behind this than appears at first. A fool is employed by a king and protected by him. It was the king who did the chiding and if the Fool pleased the king a courtier was obliged to conceal his displeasure. Thus an argument over the excesses of a Fool is an argument over kingship. It tells us of disputed authority. He who licences the Fool is king. Already Lear is finding it necessary to assert his right.

We are aware, therefore, before the Fool appears that we are observing a world where folly is rife. The situation before he enters is steadily deteriorating; Oswald has behaved insolently, though Lear does not know that he has done so on Goneril's instructions. Lear has also taken into his train the disguised Kent, that is to say, a man who mars his fortune by the bluntness of his tongue, and in Act I Scene iv he is in the process of displaying his limitation once again, his loyal impulsiveness, when the Fool makes his first appearance. Kent this time wins Lear's approval because his action is confined to its proper sphere, the putting in his place of an insolent attendant. The Fool at this first entrance displays an insight

altogether different. He immediately offers his coxcomb to Caius for he sees that he is a fool.

According to the medieval theories all men are fools. One of the chief functions of the Fool in literature and in life was to prove, by his wit, that his auditors were as much fools as he himself. The Fool was the lynch-pin, so to speak, of the whole theory and it was traditionally his role to uphold the theory of the inherent foolishness of man on the most professional level. It had become one of the chief devices of Shakespeare's witty fools.

In his first phase the role of Lear's Fool is essentially that of an educator. All the various aspects of this phase are almost inextricably interwoven but I would like to extract the Fool's most traditional and most professional device of educating, that of proving foolishness on others and offering them his coxcomb, before proceeding to show how, out of this, the Fool develops a unique role and establishes for himself an entirely new position in drama.

Immediately following his first entrance(I,iv, 100.) the Fool offers his coxcomb to Caius. We understand at once that the Fool has learnt the bitter lesson of Cordelia's banishment. It is one of those multiple ironies that Caius-Kent has not learnt the lesson, for what is it that the Fool says to him? Caius is a fool for taking the part of one that is out of favour, that is to say Lear, by tripping up Oswald. Kent took the part of Cordelia when

she was out of favour and he was banished, and here he is doing the same thing again so that, the Fool might anticipate, he will find himself banished again onto the heath on a stormy night if he persists in his folly. It is one of those delightfully subdued ironies, picked up only by the audience, which is the constant fruit of the Fool's inversions. The Fool too, of course, finds himself on the heath, but he knows that his determination to follow Lear was a result of a complete awareness of the situation. He chooses folly rather than disloyal knavery; such a careful distinction never occurs to Kent. This introduction exactly fixes the difference between Kent and the Fool. How can we say, then, that the Fool is a simple ingenue, who cannot help but speak the truth, when we see at once that he is fully aware of the nature of folly, sets up at once the lines of demarcation of the convention outside which he speaks? Kent is blinded by his loyalty, he does not know which way the wind sits and the Fool knows, above all, that to avoid folly one must be a good weather-vane. We must notice at once that the offering of the coxcomb in the comedies is invariably the result of mental agility and verbal gymnastics, the Fool has his formulas with which he can prove anybody a fool and the proof is abstract, not essentially connected with personality or reality. But in King Lear there is a very distinct difference for here the proof depends on real events, events which we feel have tragic significance. The Lear Fool is attempting to teach, not to amuse,

he proves his auditors not fools temporary but fools positive.

Immediately after offering Kent his coxcomb he offers it to Lear, he is conscious of being in a world of fools :

Fool. . . . Would I had two coxcombs and two daughters!

Lear. Why, my boy?

Fool. If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my cox-combs myself. There's mine; beg another of thy daughters.

Lear. Take heed, sirrah the whip. (I,iv, 110-116)

We see that the Fool's jibe hits home at the threat of the whip, but the Fool's answer is not cowed, it is that of a man well versed in the ways of the world, not of a happy prattler :

Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be  
whipp'd out when the Lady Brach may stand  
by th'fire and stink. (I,iv, 117-119)

The Fool understands Lear's predicament and knows that the king must understand it, therefore he fears not the whip. Again he draws blood : " A pestilent gall to me! "(I,iv, 120). This Fool we are beginning to see wields a very sharp knife, he jests with a purpose and, most remarkably, he has no fear of the king; wasting no words in idle banter he at once lays the foundations of a serious attack. It is an attack which will very soon help to bring King Lear to say :

O Lear, Lear, Lear!

Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in,  
And thy dear judgment out! (I,iv, 279-281)

This traditional role of giving away the coxcomb soon

develops in a new and vital way in this play. The Fool can manage the role with Kent all right, but by the fifth scene of the play we are aware that, with Lear, the Fool is beginning to get out of his depth. We are already beginning to get the sensation of watching somebody play with dynamite. After Lear has stormed away from Goneril's home the jester, in his dedicated fashion, attempts to prepare the King for the same treatment from Regan. Lear, however, is already, in Act I, Scene v, beginning to lose concentration and is now incapable of giving full attention to his truth-teller, partly, of course, as we have seen at Goneril's, because he cannot take advantage of his Fool's version of the truth; he can only illustrate it, act it out, The Fool employs the traditional stale jokes here, "why a snail has a house."(I,v, 27ff.) etc., to very real purpose. In other plays they are riddles, in this play they are a direct commentary on the action. He attempts to show Lear what is staring him in the face. But Lear's eye, rather like that of Dickens' Captain Bunsby, always seems to be focussed on the horizon of mighty events, and it is the weakness of giants with far-seeing vision that they perpetually stumble over matchsticks. But also we are already beginning to see that the limitation of the Fool is that he has only one method of action, that he starts out in one key and is incapable of changing it. The Fool's mistake as I have suggested before, is that, being a character from the comic world, he believes that it is possible to see an objective truth. It is the lesson of tragedy that it

does not deal in objective truth, indeed, it questions the existence of such a truth. Oh yes, the hedge-sparrow and the cuckoo, certainly, but if one is Lear, what then? "Be my horses ready?" "The reason why the stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason." Most certainly it is pretty and Lear tells us why, "Because they are not eight?" and it is true that Lear would make a good Fool; it becomes ironically true that he does, in fact, make a better Fool than his own Fool towards the end of the play. Is the Fool's message, then, that Lear must stay close to the truths that any fool can tell because they are the only real ones? As we have just seen, Lear knows his Fool-catechism, and yet there is more - "Monster ingratitude!" - he still has to be Lear on top of all that. The Fool has not enough insight to realize that a man with the enormous preoccupation of being Lear cannot be taught a simple truth; he must go mad in order to teach it to himself, and having found that seeming-simple truth he will then be able to display its hollowness; he will know that, "Because they are not eight?" is not sufficient and he will dare to ask the impossible question, "What is the cause of thunder?"

I have used this brief introduction on the traditional method of the Fool as a sketch for a broader and more general discussion of the Fool's role as an educator in his first phase, for it thus becomes obvious at once that Shakespeare was not willing to take over any of the stock devices associated with a court jester without exploiting them in order, in my own view,



to display in its most extreme and clearest pattern his conception of tragedy. Having given a brief sketch of the complexity of the Fool's role, I think it is important that I should establish Lear's attitude to his Fool and the nature of the Fool's insight in the Lear situation.

Lear admires his Fool, respects him, considers him, in short, a good counsellor. It is important to note that the King's relationship with his Fool is the most natural one he has in the whole first half of the play, natural, that is, as person to person. It is more complex than his relationship to Caius, also successful, save that Caius also happens to be Kent in disguise. We should note, too, that the Fool's brains, social position and unusual court function make this a reasonable situation. Knowing Lear's personality I find it very difficult to think of anybody other than an all-licensed court-jester in his peculiar role as professional critic who could have stayed long with Lear. It is, I always feel, partly because the role, on the surface at least, is so impersonal, that Lear was able to make of it such a personal relationship.

The most precious part of that relationship, at least for a short time, is the nature of the Fool's insight. The Fool does not base his censure of Lear simply on the Lear situation, but on a fundamental principle of Nature. He virtually bases his wisdom on the belief that untuning the strings of order will inevitably bring discord. His function is an opposite one to that of Kent. Kent attempts to bolster up Lear's belief that he is still king,

and he is stocked for his attempts because he is wrong. As I shall show in the next section, the Fool's role is essentially that of an educator; he has to bring Lear down from the clouds of his own conception of kingship and to press upon him the reality of the situation. His 'truth' is of the nature of Cordelia's, that is, it is designed to break down the impracticability of a Lear-dominated world. The Fool knows that Lear is no longer dominant. He has given his daughters the rod and put down his own breeches. But it will be objected that Lear himself believes passionately in hierarchy and becomes angry with his daughters exactly because they ignore the natural degrees of order. What, then, is the nature of the Fool's insight? He perceives two things. Firstly he sees that Lear is attempting an impossible feat which natural order will not permit, for he wishes both to be king and not to be king at the same time. The Fool also realizes that the King is making a mistake consequent upon this one. Lear expects his daughters to be obedient because he is king, or because he still regards himself as king; that is to say, he is exhibiting that fatal mistake which cost him the love of Cordelia, an inability to distinguish between his role as a father and his role as a king. The initial impulse towards tragedy here is nothing as unsubtle as arrogance or pride, it is the intense complication of a man who cannot distinguish between fatherhood and kingship. What Lear demands, when he calls for a declaration of love, is

not only love to a father but to his own divine conception of himself as a king who has impressed his will on a country.

The first phase of the Fool's role, then, is concerned with educating and enlightening the King as to the exact nature of the situation which he now finds himself in. This, of course, is a traditional role, for the court jester's riddles baffled his master and proved him as much of a fool as the rest of mankind. But that proof was only temporary and conventional because the king still remained king. Here, in this play, there is real point to the process of education since the King is no longer all-powerful and the Fool's tutoring is based not on logic chopping or verbal trickery but on an existing situation. Lear's threat of the whip may be that of a king threatening a Fool, but it is also that of a man who has felt the truth of another man's jibe and who attempts to fall back on his non-existent prerogative as a means of evading the truth. Yet even at the moments when Lear is feeling the sting of the barbs he comes back for more. Why does Lear do so? If the jibes are felt by Lear to be impudent and irrelevant then he would not react as he does nor would he permit the Fool to continue. I think that Lear hangs onto the Fool's words because we know that he has already "perceived a most faint neglect of late" (I, iv, 71-72). Lear's feeling that he made a tragic error in dismissing Cordelia has not yet surfaced, but there is already expiation of that guilt on a psychological level in his cleaving to the disguised Kent, who is, indeed,

little changed from the old Kent, and the Fool, a substitute for Cordelia. Lear must learn from his new companions to listen to a version of the truth other than his own, which is something he had decidedly been incapable of doing at the beginning of the play. A Fool can teach his master nothing that he does not already know, but this Fool can teach his master something that he refuses to see. In Act I Scene iv the process begins:

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

Lear. Do. (I,iv, 121-122).

The Fool deals in common sayings, the sayings which the common people cherished, embodying the conservatism of the ordinary man. Yet he does not do so because his wit will stretch no further, but for a set purpose, for to a certain extent he does represent common sense, the common man, someone detached from court politics and therefore free of its sycophancy and its ceremony. Lear clings to the Fool as later on he clings to Poor Tom, another outcast or man apart from the court world. The Fool knows that Lear is also a man as well as a king and that the consequences of his earlier actions are going to be that Lear will have to act as a man and not as a king. Goneril and Regan bound by personal interests also realize this. Kent hardly understands it fully and Gloucester not at all, for that is Gloucester's terrible mistake at the climax of the play, in Act IV Scene vi, where he still insists on treating Lear as a king instead of as a man. Lear has by this time learnt the Fool's

lesson for himself, and in his own way, on the heath. In order to learn that lesson he has suffered, probably, more profoundly than any other hero in literature. He learns it to a depth of which the Fool himself is completely unaware. Yet it remains true that in the Fool's attitude there are at least the germinating seeds of Lear's eventual recognition and acknowledgement of unaccommodated man.

The Fool can only teach a catechism of ordinariness; he cannot see beneath its surface to see how it might become a direct attack on the concept of hierarchy. For what is this speech which the Fool would teach Lear other than a plea to be an ordinary human being?

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 thou shalt have more  
 Than two tens to a score. (I, iv, 124 - 133)

It is a piece of common wisdom paralleled by many well known jingles such as that of the Yorkshireman's:

Hear all, see all, and say nowt,  
 Eat all, sup all, and pay nowt,  
 And if thee ever does out for nowt,  
 Do it for thysen.

It is an explicit plea for the safe life, the way which Lear has abandoned. It is its commonplace nature, its mundaneness, which draws from Kent his retort, "This is nothing, Fool." (I, iv, 134) for Kent believes that Lear is still king and very soon he will suffer for that belief. To make the point clearer the Fool is forced to venture onto sacred ground emphasizing the Cordelia-Fool link, though Lear seems to miss the reference:

Fool. . . . Can you make no  
use of nothing, Nuncle?

Lear. Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of  
nothing.

Fool. (To Kent) Prithee, tell him, so much the rent  
of his land comes to: he will not believe a Fool.

Lear. A bitter Fool! (I, iv, 136 - 142)

It is the sublimely unconscious irony of Lear's reply which makes us aware that the first scene with Cordelia is here being played out in little. The continued jibes even draw a partial assent from Kent: "This is not altogether Fool, my Lord" (I, iv, 157), so that we know that the Fool is beginning to establish his attitude. This Fool does not even have to practise his trade, does not have to set out to prove others fools, they do it of their own accord. The Fool admits that his role is almost superfluous, as how should it not be since he is a court jester with no court to be jester in. That is proof in itself. Already the Fool is learning that he is in a world where every man is his own Fool. He will soon have to learn the consequences of this when he has to choose his own course and to choose not as a professional

court jester but as a man. At this point, however, Lear is far from understanding the situation so that the Fool still has a function. And so he returns to his task with his illustration of the two crowns of the egg. (I, iv, 165 - 172)

It becomes increasingly clear that every single illustration which the Fool uses is of the nature which one would use to a simple child. Lear is being taken back to nursery school, he is being taught the elementary rules of life. It is pungent and grotesque because through those tinkling rhymes and simple parables there is, momentarily, vital significance to the mighty events of the tragic world. It is an essential preparation at this stage of the play for the stark reality of the heath, which contrasts so strongly with the regality of the Lear world. Lear starts out with god-like authority; he must be reborn and taken through the introductory stages of childhood before he can become a man on the heath. It is often asked what the play would lose if the Fool's role had been omitted. It is clear that the transition from kingship to beggary could not be effected at all without some kind of commentator detached from the Lear family and the court intrigue. The only single role which could adequately fill this and, indeed, add a new dimension to the tragedy, is that of the Fool. How can one successfully reduce the awe-inspiring ceremony and majesty of Lear's conception of kingship? Only Shakespeare could have hit upon this extreme device of incorporating a figure traditionally associated with comedy, of juxtaposing the startling vividness



of childhood with that of a man possessed by the concept of the Divine Right of Kings. We almost see Lear pulling down his breeches like a naughty boy and playing bo-peep so successfully has the Fool transferred his version of the events of the first scene into our memory. It is grotesque because on one level it is a travesty and reduction of the psychological complexities of the situation, whilst on another level it is only a slight exaggeration of what is actually happening.

The Fool continues from one illustration to another and at length, revelling in his success, pretends that he too would be educated, he would "fain learn to lie." (I,iv, 187). Lear's reply is very revealing: "And you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipp'd." (I,iv, 188). It indicates at once Lear's faith in the Fool, his steeling himself to the truths which are to come, and serves as a partial admission that he recognizes the truth of what the Fool has already said. It is almost a retrospective triumph for Cordelia, in the person of the Fool, for her truth had to serve as her dower. The Fool, however, unconsciously acknowledges his anomalous position in tragedy:

I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are:  
 they'll have me whipp'd for speaking true, thou'lt  
 have me whipp'd for lying; and sometimes I am  
 whipp'd for holding my peace.

That is an exact statement of the position of a Fool in tragedy. The Fool's truth is relevant now but Lear will outgrow it. Each man's conception of the truth is his limitation. The Fool,

traditionally in a protected situation, and never called upon to be embroiled in action and decision, has yet to learn that the consequences of Lear's rupture with Cordelia will affect himself and will demand action which will make his detached conception of the situation invalid.

The whole pattern of the scene under discussion follows that of a school lesson. The Fool teaches Lear the grammar of the situation, Goneril and Lear then provide the illustration by performing the exercise and putting the grammar together between them, until Lear in his lament for Cordelia(I,iv, 275 - 281) seems to have learnt the lesson, but at once proceeds to ignore it by casting Goneril aside in roughly the same manner and terms as he had Cordelia. The Fool's function at the beginning of the exchange between Goneril and Lear is almost that of translator, certainly that of reducing agent. He is the pin which pricks the balloon of rhetoric of the father and daughter, for we see at once that Goneril has her due proportion of the family gift for high-flown, dizzying rhetoric. After Goneril's first speech the Fool comes chiming in with:

For you know, Nuncle,

The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,

That it's had it head bit off by it young.(I,iv,223-225)

Nursery rhyme and the concept of Lear's kingship become inextricably bound together. This metaphor illustrates exactly what I mean when I say that the Fool is the only other person in the play who realizes what it means to be stripped of kingship and is the only one to point

the way to Lear's later harrowing vision of unaccommodated man. The Fool's conception of Lear's condition is limited by his belief in hierarchy, but he is the character closest to Lear's views in the play because he realizes that a king must have his 'lendings' to retain authority. He realizes long before Lear that no man is a divinely inspired king, that kingship rests on authority not on any inherent quality in man.

The effect of the Fool's goading immediately is to drive Lear back onto his belief that it is his innate right to be obeyed. Despite the accuracy and perceptiveness of the Fool's jibes Lear is still dependent on that thundering language of "the barbarous Scythian", and "the mysteries of Hecate", that highly stylized rhetoric, in dismissing Goneril as he was in that catastrophic first scene. By a supreme irony his temper seems to remind him momentarily of Cordelia so that he seems on the verge of learning the Fool's lesson:

O Lear, Lear, Lear!  
 Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in,  
 And thy dear judgment out. (I, iv, 279 - 281)

The King's application of the word 'folly' to himself is important, but the effect is only momentary. Lear continues, "Go, go, my people." the simplicity and majesty of which reminds us of that Old Testament monotheist, Jacob, gathering his flocks about him after the fight at Jabbok ford. It is the overwhelming, epic simplicity of the man possessed. Lear, sooner than submit, summons

his gods, his curses, and hurls them at Goneril. The curse of Isaac could not be more terrible.

The Fool's role as acting-Chorus is coming to an end.

The King has not learnt his lesson, and so he sets off for Regan's where we know, through the colloquy at the end of the scene, that the lesson will be presented again.

### CHAPTER III

The second phase of the Fool's role is very brief, if it can be called a phase at all. It concerns his personal decision, in Act II Scene iv, to cleave to the King and it constitutes the climax of his role. In his exchange with the stock Kent in this scene he fulfills his dual function as traditional jester and unique commentator.

Kent has committed a folly for the second time; he has marred his fortunes with his bold outspokenness. Now it is a characteristic of those who have committed a folly in the eyes of society that they are incapable of realizing, or at least admitting, what they have done. Polonius illustrates it after his theory of Hamlet's love for Ophelia has been exploded; he cannot quite relinquish his folly even when he sees that the results are catastrophic. Kent here gives Lear a garbled version of what happened. He entirely omits the very real cause of his stocking, his direct insolence to Cornwall and Regan. When the Gentleman says, "Made you no more offence but what you speak on?" (II, iv, 61) Kent absurdly replies "None", for he still labours under the delusion that it simply is impossible to be insolent if you are in the service of Lear. The position Kent had taken in the scene where he was stocked (II, ii) was exactly that of an all-licensed Fool, not realizing that there is no longer a

court to be Fool in, that Lear is no longer in a position to protect anyone who attacks his courtiers. The Fool himself has realized this and it was significant in Act I, Scene iv, in the altercation between Lear and Goneril, that not once did he directly attack or mock anyone connected with the new regime, but confined his jibes solely to Lear. There is no court to entertain, and for the Fool deprived of his social function there is, therefore, no certainty of security. In Act II, Scene iv, it is made abundantly clear that it is the Fool's loyalty, first and foremost, which makes him stay with the King. It is a personal choice and the Fool is fully aware that it is not a wise one. He is, after all, a professional. There is no indication that he could get a job elsewhere, but there is no reason to believe that he cleaves to Lear because he could not. The essential fact about this Fool is that he chooses to stay in a position that has no recognizable contacts with the normal position of a court jester and to use his jesting techniques in an entirely personal relationship.

In this scene we see that the Fool is conscious of Kent's inability to grasp the situation and also conscious of his own situation. He points out the obvious course of salvation; "Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following; "(II, iv, 71-73). Yet the Fool shows himself incapable of taking his own wise advice. He makes at this point his decision, or rather he makes us aware that he is

in his present situation through choice not because he has drifted into 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 a 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. (II,iv, 78-85)

The Fool, therefore, regards his wisdom as higher than the wisdom of those contemptible ones who run away. He has found a higher service, not a safe one, that of fidelity. This is the turning point of the Fool's role. It is the point at which, despite his continuous objective commentary, he admits that he is deeply committed to the tragic outcome of the play. Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus<sup>1</sup> sees the fate of man as being a tragic one, but sees Sisyphus' suffering as noble because at the top of the hill there is a moment when he turns, looks round and chooses to go down the incline and push the stone up again; he wills his own action. However trivial the jingles and banter of the Fool in other plays may be, at this point they gain an intensity that only Shakespeare could achieve, for here we have such a moment with Lear's Fool. He does not, of course, make the complete decision at this moment but he does make the statement of it. He sees his

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1959).



own destruction ahead and his loyalty is not, as it has often been played and interpreted, merely pathetic, it is noble because he chooses his own fate; it is the choice of an adult in full possession of his powers. We are already at the limit of the Fool's intelligence and insight but whatever happens after this nothing will obliterate the tragic impact of this choice. The Fool has had a consistent attitude, apparently an objective one traditionally associated with his role, but we see in the Fool's declaration of loyalty that it is impossible to separate oneself from the tragic world. The Fool makes clear his own dilemma for he realizes that tragedy is a whirlpool; one must either be a knave and flee the dangerous area or one must allow oneself to be sucked into it; there is no hovering on the periphery.

The point is rammed home when Kent asks the Fool immediately following his declaration of loyalty: "Where learn'd you this, Fool?" (II, iv, 86) and receives the reply: "Not i' th' stocks, Fool." This could be taken as the usual sharp reply, the characteristic transference of the coxcomb, but it may have greater significance because the Fool means that his philosophy is that of a free man in charge of his own will to act, not a man trapped in the stocks.

The Fool will, of course, go on attempting to aid Lear in his old manner, for he knows no other way and, as I say, he has reached the height of nobility of which he is capable. But it is interesting to note that he jibes at Lear only once in the

ensuing colloquy with Regan, a far different role from that of perpetual commentator in the earlier interview with Goneril. The die is already cast. The great wheel is already running down hill and, as the Fool knows, he is likely to break his own neck. He has already foreseen what will happen at Regan's and he has committed himself to the fate that it entails.

In dealing with the third phase of the Fool's role, his increasing irrelevance as a functional character on the heath, I must again stress my belief in his sanity and maturity. For many years, simply through seeing it acted thus on the stage, I had taken it for granted that the Fool undergoes some kind of neurotic collapse in the storm, crying and whining pathetically as he clings to the feet of his master. I have given my reasons for demanding a mature and bitter Fool in the first two acts of the play. I see no evidence in the play that the Fool is a boy or a half-wit, nor do I see any evidence that he whimpers and whines on the heath. It is true that Lear often calls him 'boy' but this may be taken as one of the traditional terms of reference between a king and his jester. It should also be noted that Lear is of such a venerable age that he could be allowed even to call a fully mature man, 'boy', as old ladies today call their fifty-year old nieces, 'girl' .

The Fool is an intelligent man who realizes that he is getting out of his depth, trapped in a situation which he cannot

alleviate, urgent and desperate in his demands and suggestions for temporary security, but, withal, profoundly disillusioned, bitterly conscious of his own irrelevance. Traditionally the Fool liked comfort and security, preferred the court life and rejected the uncertainty of the outside world. This Fool is no exception, but we should not over-emphasize his fear of the storm, for Gloucester and Kent are equally appalled by it. The Fool is in a world totally alien to him, and so are all the other characters, save Lear only who has need of the storm. It is not the Fool himself who collapses on the heath but rather his uniquely personal relationship with Lear which disintegrates.

It is true that we remember the first and last sections of the play for the complex series of events and the characters whirling perpetually around Lear. The Lear world is a cluttered one with complex interweaving of motives and events. Yet that clutter is relegated to the sub-plot throughout the central section of the play; all the events happen in that sub-plot. Strictly speaking in the main plot there is only one attempt at or motive for action, the agonizing business of getting Lear out of the storm and under some kind of shelter. Four characters for the best part of Act III are totally absorbed in the carrying out of this seemingly simple requirement. However cluttered the Lear world may be, our memory of it is always of a man apart, a lone man standing like a gaunt tree on a moor, outlined against lightning flashes, battered

by rain. Lear's madness is a tornado, the course and deviations of which can be plotted in the patterned nature of his speeches. His followers are whirled around in this tornado until they are flung off at a tangent, broken and defeated, bewildered or confirmed in their limited philosophies.

In the first mention of Lear's turning wits and of his behaviour on the heath we hear that he is accompanied solely by the Fool: " who labours to out-jest/ His heart-strook injuries."(III,1, 16-17). At their last exit from the world of home and hearth Lear had spoken of his stricken heart and addressed his remarks to the Fool:

. . . but this heart

Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws

Or ere I'll weep. O Fool! I shall go mad. (II,iv,286-288)

Although Lear has increasingly become incapable of listening to his Fool he is still closest to him amongst his followers and the development of the action has tended towards the isolation of the King and his jester. It may be unimportant and even accidental but there is no point in this play in which Lear holds the stage alone. There is only one scene in the play in which he is alone with one other person on stage. That scene is Act III Scene ii, and the lone companion for an apocalyptic thirty-five lines, is the Fool.

We have our first sight of Lear on the heath in this scene and it is, perhaps, the most memorable. It is an extraordinary scene because of the juxtaposition of Lear and his Fool and shows

us that though few people know exactly what the jester contributes to the play, the scenes in which he occurs would be immeasurably less powerful in his absence. We can observe the tornado of Lear's passion but we can only realise its full impact by watching a loyal jester, totally inadequate to the situation, attempting to counteract an increasing lunacy by the only method at his disposal, the reiteration of his concern with actuality. To understand Lear the audience must see him being misunderstood by his followers, for only in that way can the personal nature of his tragedy be emphasized. You have to be King Lear himself in order to feel the monumental insult of the daughters; there have to be others around who do not feel it in order to throw it into perspective. At this point in the play, at the introduction of Lear's wild passion, there is only one person who can perform this function adequately, who can, so to speak, sit in the dead centre, the eye, of the tornado. That person is the Fool. Imagine these thirty-five lines with Kent, Gloucester or even a Gentleman as auditory, and our first introduction to Lear whose wits are beginning to turn would not be nearly so terrifying.

If we work our way carefully through the scene we can see certain changes in the Fool's attitude which makes the contrast between himself and the King even more complete. I said earlier that Lear moves from dependence on his Fool to pity of him whilst the Fool moves from independent criticism to completely irrelevant commentating. It is at this point in the play that the two characters

can be seen to be drifting irrevocably apart. In this scene the distance between their individual attitudes to the storm is measured and set down.

Lear has by this time taken up his rhetoric a peg nearer to lunacy. His attack here is on Nature and on the gods. He summons his poetical rhetoric and like the powerful Zeus he flashes his thunderbolts. Like Macbeth, and with a similarly ironical result, he calls for chaos, the vision of which is ultimately to crack his sanity. There is always something gross and appalling in:

. . . And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!  
Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once  
That makes ingrateful man!      (III,ii, 6 - 9)

It is appalling because it is justifiably tragic, because a human being has been brought to the point at which he finds it necessary to say such things or go mad, and yet in saying them contributes to the causes of his madness.

When Lear accuses the gods:

But yet I call you servile ministers,  
That will with two pernicious daughters join  
Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head  
So old and white as this.      (III,ii, 21-24)

he is involving himself in a kind of primitive animism, viewing the elements as actively linking themselves with evil earthly agents to make man miserable. We are here touching on a mytho-

logical situation of archetypal power, man challenging the elements, reminding us of folk-heroes such as Cuchulain lashing the waves with his sword. It is the kind of mad situation which frightens the ordinary man out of his wits. Shakespeare realized that he could increase the impact of Lear's struggle by violent contrast. We can more completely feel the terror of the Lear attitude to Nature, of a man who imagines the gods to be in league with his daughters, and who summons the elements to blast the world in an excess of despair, if we also have a man on the stage who sees the elements as plain weather in which they are getting unnecessarily wet. If only Lear could see the storm objectively as wind and water, the Fool implies, there would be hope for his sanity. But the Fool is now wide of the mark, for we see, as Lear later explains, that the King must stay out in the storm; he cannot afford to allow the counterpoint between the inner and the outer storm to cease. Only thus can the balance be maintained. Take away the storm and his mental torment, having no external reference, will overwhelm him. It is at this point, therefore, that the Fool's remarks begin to be essentially off the point, his master now having gone beyond the sphere of his understanding. It is the concern of the Fool with actuality, from this point onwards, which before had made his jibes so pertinent, which now makes them so irrelevant. He is still attempting to fulfill his role as the reducing agent, the puncturer of rhetoric but we now begin to feel that he fails, fails, that is, not with Lear



with whom he had hardly ever succeeded, but with the audience. For a time in the first section of the play the audience feels that if only Lear were capable of learning the Fool's lesson then all might not be lost. Increasingly that lesson, that version of the truth, has come less and less to represent a common sense which the audience might be expected to share and more and more represents a kind of idiot common sense which is increasingly detached from reality. It is largely because the Fool emphasizes and seems aware only of the climactic storm that the audience becomes aware of the mental storm in Lear, of the importance of this mental storm, and of the impossibility of Lear's separating weather and madness. Kent, Gloucester and Poor Tom later join in this attempt to separate their King from the elements in the hope of escaping both storms, but it is the Fool who introduces the theme and he who must be its chief representative, since he is the symbol of common sense and its ultimate irrelevance in the play.

This experience of being alone with Lear transforms the Fool. In this scene the Fool's impartiality and apparent selflessness disappear. His comments, for the first time, are no longer designed solely to help Lear, they are designed also to save his own skin: "here's a night pities neither wise men nor Fools."(III,ii, 12-13). Danby<sup>2</sup> has pointed out that the

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<sup>2</sup> John Danby, Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of "King Lear", (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), p. 103.

Fool is one of the arch exponents of the 'handy-dandy' theme. From the beginning he has recognized the distinction between knaves and fools and knows that both knavery and folly are not adequate to the situation; what he requires is a middle path, but unfortunately none exists so he has to follow the dictates of his heart and link his fate to that of Lear. In this scene he is still talking consistently, that is, recognizing necessity, but now for the first time his appeal is not an attack on Lear for having upset natural order, rather it is an encouragement of Lear to accept a new order as the lesser of two evils: "O Nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o' door. Good Nuncle, in, ask thy daughters blessing;" (III, ii, 10-12). Now it is clear that the Fool's attack on Lear in the first part of the play had been an attempt to make him see that he must not act like a king when he is no longer king. And yet the Fool himself had not been able to visualize any modus vivendi because he, more clearly than anyone else, saw the division between fools and knaves and he chose the heath because there was no middle way. Now, at last, we see that the old certainty is gone under duress of weather and Lear's brainstorm, for here he is asking the impossible, he is asking for the middle way that he knows does not exist. He is asking for the fools to go and live with the knaves and yet he had always known that fools cannot live with knaves for the very simple reason that fools are fools and knaves are knaves. Thus

in this scene there are, in a certain sense, two kinds of madness terrifyingly wide apart, one involved with the dizzying nature of the gods, another involved with the bare minimum comforts of man. In a way the Fool is as mad as Lear in that they both ask for the impossible. It is as impossible to expect Lear to ask forgiveness of his daughters as it is to organize the gods and the elements. If Lear could ask forgiveness there would be no necessity for struggling with the elements. That the Fool can still suggest this as a solution for Lear after listening to his titanic struggle is evidence that he has been left far behind.

Until this point in the play the traditional jingles and rhymes of the Fool have had a new relevance, their apparent triteness has emphasized the surface simplicity which covers the bewildering complexity underneath. This complexity is now beginning to be exposed in Lear's madness; those banal little rhymes and jokes can no longer be used as tent-pegs to keep the canvas cover over the arena of Lear's mind. Once the tornado begins to move, begins to free itself of its sole preoccupation with the ingratitude of Goneril and Regan, and generalizes itself into an attack on the human condition, that frail little canvas, which the Fool had laboured to keep in place, is tossed into the air and blown hither and yon in the tempest. The Fool's jingles now completely lose their relevance to the King, they are turned in on the Fool, they define the limitations of his intelligence. At no point in the play is he simply a conventional jester, he is

never in a social position in which he can be such, he is always either more or less than a Fool. So we feel that the jingle : "The cod-piece that will house"(III,ii, 27ff.) is launched into a void. The rhymes had power only as long as Lear listened to them; they now sail out into the air and dissolve in their own foolishness. For the first time, I think, we feel the grossness of the bawdy talk, the sexual references are deliberately numerous to make us aware that this is really Fool-talk. When the Fool ends his speech with:"For there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass."(III,ii,35-36), I assume the reference to Goneril and Regan is not merely oblique and that possible meanings must include the idea that their deceit and flattery must be accepted because it is universal. In reply to this we have Lear's colossal irony: " No, I will be the pattern of all patience; I will say nothing."(III,ii,37-38) almost as though he had accepted the Fool's point without hearing it. After he has summoned the elements and poured forth some of the most terrible curses in literature, for a moment, in the midst of the struggle, Lear can actually affect docility, the bottom of the pendulum swing before the anger rises again. It is the kind of psychology that the Fool cannot understand. He cannot realize that Lear is the kind of man who must ask for Nature's mould to be cracked, invoke all the gods and blast his daughters before he can be capable of saying, and perhaps even meaning for one brief second, something as simple as : " No, I will be the pattern of all patience;".

There is a further change in the Fool's attitude in this scene

which is worth noting. When Kent comes in we have the following exchange:

Kent. Who's there ?

Fool. Marry, here's grace and a cod-piece; that's  
a wise man and a Fool. (III,ii,39-41)

The riddling ambiguity of the Fool's statement makes his meaning uncertain, but I take it that since 'grace' and 'cod-piece' both seem to refer to Lear, that 'wise man and Fool' also refer to him. For the second time in this scene the jester calls his master a 'wise man' and he is not, I think, being sarcastic. It is a recognition of a wisdom beyond his own, a wisdom which he cannot accept, perhaps, because it is dangerous. The jester has constantly been calling Lear a fool and maybe he is still doing so here, but why at this point does he also call him a wise man if he has not begun to recognize the limitations of his own criticisms? That is why his attitude to the storm is so contrasted with Lear's, because granted, at last, that he has recognized that Lear has somehow become independent of his criticism he still says, in effect, "even if you are wise and I a mere Fool we are still getting wet". The Fool's partial recognition of Lear's wisdom is important; Lear is making the jump from folly to madness, a jump which the jester himself cannot make. Lear is, in fact, becoming a sacred madman, awe-inspiring and revered as the lunatic often is in primitive cultures. The Fool is a court jester, an intelligent man assuming simplicity; later on we will have Poor Tom, Edgar's pretence of insanity. Only Lear is not assuming madness but embodying it;

only the true madman is sacred. As I shall hope to show, the central section of the play is involved with Lear's establishing himself as the dominant and only authentic madman in this play. The method by which Lear, so to speak, liberates himself from his preoccupation with his folly and thereby embraces madness is very carefully handled.

Kent's approach to Lear is substantially the same as the Fool's and he goes on to repeat the same entreaty to return to the daughters, but one should notice the subtle distinction. The Fool had said : " ask thy daughters blessing," which is what Lear will eventually do, but of Cordelia. Kent says: " return and force/ Their scanted courtesy."(III,ii,66-67). At once a reply comes from Lear, which is I think dependent on Kent's attitude: " My wits begin to turn." The very suggestion brings thoughts of madness for has not Lear discovered that he cannot force anything? To that extent the Fool was nearer to sense than Kent will ever be and Lear turns to him now. Lear is, at this point, involved not in forcing scanted courtesy but in obtaining divine retribution; the gods must repay his daughters' monstrous conduct. Lear having left retribution to the gods can momentarily disengage himself from the struggle.

It is one of the most impressively moving moments of the play when Lear descends from the emotional vision of minute justice visited upon mankind in order to pity someone who is not

King Lear, becomes aware of someone external to himself. He takes the attitude of one who, though suffering himself, is considerate of the sufferings of another, inferior to himself, one who cannot understand or share these greater troubles. At that moment he comes right down to the Fool's level and recognizes the storm as sheer bad weather, an admission he had made at no point up until now: "Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold/ I am cold myself." (III,ii,68-69). It is significant to the close relationship of the two, even when the Fool is hopelessly out of his depth and when Lear tacitly recognizes the distance between himself and his followers, that the first person in the play whom Lear recognizes as separate from his own will and whom he genuinely pities, is his jester. Here begins the process in which we see Lear breaking down all the barriers inside himself until he recognizes his kinship with unaccommodated man, the thing itself. I always feel, therefore, that his line to Kent: "Come, your hovel." (III,ii,71) means exactly what it says - your hovel. It is not Lear's hovel, he has no real need of it, but his followers have and, in a brief, vivid flash, he submits his will to their necessity. And it is at this point that Lear says: "Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart/ That's sorry yet for thee." (III,ii 72-73). Now it may be accidental or it may be just a formula, but it is curious that the King should say to his jester: "Poor Fool and knave," since this is a play in which a very definite distinction is constantly being made between the two. It is, perhaps, too nice



a point to make, but it is just possible that Lear fully realizes the situation, recognizes that the jester is a fool because he followed his heart and his king onto the heath, and then, overwhelmed by the new situation, wished to go back to join the knaves whom Lear had fled. Throughout the heath scenes, and particularly at the height of his insanity Lear displays such startling intuition that one should never underestimate the meaning packed into a phrase. The Fool replies with a version of Feste's song immediately emphasizing the point that everything in this play has a meaning. The song in this context is not woolly sentiment but is directly applicable to the situation:

He that has and a little tiny wit,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
Must make content with his fortunes fit,  
Though the rain it raineth every day. (III,ii,74-77)

The song could have reference to Lear or his Fool. I think it is confined in its relevance to the Fool and I think the Fool means it to be so. I have no proof whatsoever of this save that: "Must make content with his fortunes fit," is of a piece with the Fool's version of the truth, a version which he has already begun to find inadequate in its applicability to Lear whom he has recognized as a wise man rather than one of "a little tiny wit". The line is an adequate description of the Fool himself and later on of Edgar and Gloucester, but at no point in the play is it an adequate philosophy for Lear. Lear may say: "True, boy." but he

is soon to find that there are no fortunes fit, they are gildings, lendings, and with such knowledge it is impossible ever to make content with them.

Traditionally the Fool was gifted with foresight and constantly dealt in prophecies. At the end of this scene the Fool delivers a prophecy which follows the conventional riddling pattern of Fool nonsense. The speech has, however, often been regarded as an interpolation and it is difficult to make up one's mind on the matter. Since it has some importance, from my point of view, its meaning is worth examining. It seems to me to be unlikely that, after such a close interchange in which Lear pities his Fool, the King would then leave the stage without him, the first person of whom he has become objectively aware for many scenes. It is the confusing nature of the speech which makes its authenticity dubious. This confusion, however, can be used to make a dramatic point if we allow Danby's interpretation <sup>3</sup>.

I have pointed out that there may be some significance in the fact that Lear calls his jester both fool and knave, sees him trapped in the handy-dandy of which he himself later makes so much, using his madness to release its real truth. The Fool believes that you have to accept handy or dandy. Lear eventually comes to say that it does not matter which you accept because beneath the superficial social distinction we are all the same.

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<sup>3</sup> Danby, Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature, p.107.

The Fool has been constantly preoccupied with defining " the situation we are now in", so to speak, but increasingly finds himself in topsy-turvy land with a man who refuses to be controlled by the elements or even the gods but struggles to control them.

If we extend and exploit Danby's interpretation this is what I take the speech to mean. The first four lines describe the actual state of present corruption, an acceptance of the world for what it is, a view which the Fool had attempted to press on the King throughout the first section of the play:

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; (III,ii,81-84)

The next four lines switch without warning to Utopia, that is, to the world in which Lear believed, the world of order, where everything is just, a world which Lear could not believe his daughters had overturned:

When every case in law is right;  
 No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;  
 When slanders do not live in tongues;  
 Nor cut-purses come not to throngs; (III,ii,85-88)

These two quatrains reflect the two attitudes on which the Fool and Lear had been working a perpetual counterpoint in their earlier relationship. Lear is soon to find out, however, that every case in law is not right, when he has to hold his own trial of his daughters which leads to his rejection of justice.

Danby makes the important point that the next two lines do not continue the Utopian vision but rather mix present corruption and Utopia together:

When usurers tell their gold i' th' field;  
And bawds and whores do churches build; (III,ii,89-90)

and we might add, when kings accept the council of bedlam beggars, for that is the world to which we are now moving and the Fool knows it. This is an expression of his recognition of topsy-turvy land, the mad world.

The speech, then, is about the impossibility of Utopia. Either you accept the wickedness of this world, a world which has some stability, or you nurse impossible visions of Utopia, or like Lear you go mad and attempt to bring the gods down to earth to exact retribution, which brings the inevitable result that the King is turned into a beggar, as indeed the Fool says in summing up his prophecy:

Then shall the realm of Albion  
Come to great confusion; (III,ii,91-92)

This speech reflects the argument of the play so effectively that one is inclined to believe that it is authentic. The Fool, at this point, is all at sea, his mind confused by the conflicting ideas which the storm has thrown into hiatus. The Fool is no longer certain what he believes; there is the corrupt world, there is the Utopian vision and there is this present mixture of the two; all that he can now say is that all of them lead to confusion.

It is as near as the Fool ever comes to Lear's frightening vision of chaos. The last line of the speech certainly emphasizes the impression: "This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time." (III,ii, 95-96). It is the kind of device, which Brecht later called the Verfremdungseffect, whereby Shakespeare constantly generalized the relevance of his philosophical insights. As Danby says: "Handy-dandy is even applied to Time. . . . Direction and purpose in history itself are lost. The motion from past to future becomes a wheel again."

Whether one includes the speech in a production depends on how much one wishes to emphasize and isolate Lear's sorrow for his Fool. The speech would lessen the effect of that tenderness unless it were possible to bring out all the meanings I have suggested on the stage. Clearly the prophecy is very much akin to those of Enobarbus in that it turns out to be true but for far other reasons and in much profounder ways than the speaker ever surmised <sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that the structure of the next brief scene between Gloucester and Edmund in a certain way reflects this prophecy of the Fool. It begins by talking of the present corruption of the world, the unnatural dealing of the daughters. It then moves into a just world, a world based on order in which there is a party forming to help the King, and Gloucester states his determination to stay loyal - a brief flash, if not of Utopia, at least of a restored world of sanity. This vision of stability is undermined at once by a return to the present corruption in the revel-

to make clear, stage by stage, the breakdown of any kind of significant contact between King Lear and the Fool and because at the outset the patterns and themes of the heath scenes are so clearly set down. All that happens hereafter on the heath will be to some extent a development of the pattern and attitudes set down in this scene. In this scene also we see the last disappearing remnant of the Fool's unique position. His role becomes less and less pertinent, increasingly we find that he has less to contribute save for a brief revival at the trial of the joint-stool. We have seen, then, that the Fool is ceasing to have a functional role. His complete eclipse is accomplished by the introduction of a new Fool, Poor Tom, and finally by the King's growing consciousness that he is his own Fool. It seems important to me to examine in detail these new developments in order that we can eventually accept the necessity for the Fool's incipient demise. In the middle of the play and at the height of the tragedy the Fool completely disappears from the action and yet no audience can ever have felt this to be dramatically inappropriate. The heath scenes, in which the Fool occurs, are accomplishing many more important objectives, yet all the time Shakes-

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ation of Edmund's intended betrayal. The scene starts out on the note of the savagery of unnatural children and ends on it. Shakespeare delighted in such illustrations and repetitions from scene to scene. That the prophecy is immediately illustrated may be held to be accidental but it may also be adduced as evidence of the authenticity of the Fool's speech.

peare is preparing for the exit of the jester, devaluing, so to speak, the Fool's claim to have a continuing functional role in the action and meaning of the play. In order to illustrate how this is achieved we must direct our attention away from the Fool onto other characters, just as Lear's attention is directed elsewhere. That, indeed, is why the Fool must disappear from the play. It had always been true that when a Fool began to be ignored then he was out of a job. This is more clearly demonstrated here than anywhere, for though the Fool, properly speaking, has never in the play been in a job, the consequence of his being ignored is even more radical - he is, of necessity, not merely out of a job, but out of the play.

## CHAPTER IV

It is at this point that we must begin to concern ourselves with Poor Tom, for it is he who takes over the role of the Fool. I have said that Lear's Fool believed in the hierarchical order and that his function was to apprise Lear of the reality of the situation in which he now finds himself. At no point does he suggest that the whole world has come to chaos now that Lear is no longer king. The Fool, out of the world of established order, has lost his bearings and is not likely to find them again. Lear himself is exploring new ideas and now, since they are no longer in the world of order, the Fool's comments have become increasingly irrelevant. If a new philosophy is to be built out of chaos then the Fool is certainly not the one to help Lear. We must, therefore, have a new Fool who sees not merely that Lear has brought chaos upon himself but that the whole world he has left is no more than a covering for chaos. Lear's Fool saw how this world goes if you do not obey the rules, and he was right, but he was right only in a limited way, for if it is possible for the hierarchical order to break down, does that order have any validity at all or is it only a shroud for universal chaos? Shakespeare prepares the entrance of Poor Tom to call this doubt into question.

In Act III Scene iv, Lear lucidly explains his reasons for



remaining in the storm and at once makes clear the distance which separates him from his followers:

Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm  
 Invades us to the skin; so 'tis to thee;  
 But where the greater malady is fix'd,  
 The lesser is scarce felt. Thou 'ldst shun a bear;  
 But if thy flight lay toward the roaring sea,  
 Thou 'ldst meet the bear i' th' mouth. When the  
     mind's free  
 The body's delicate; this tempest in my mind  
 Doth from my senses take all feeling else  
 Save what beats there - filial ingratitude! (III,iv,6-14)

Here again Lear illustrates his new found ability to be conscious of the limitations of others. When was Lear wont to be so full of explanations? We have the sense of balancing on a razor's edge in this speech. This arises from the King's dilemma; his need to be rid of the Fool and Kent, to be alone with the storm he knew, which had brought a heightened understanding and a truer majesty; and need of consideration, born of that very experience, for the Fool and his loyalty. For a moment Lear manages to attain isolation again in the storm and to define his attitude to it in forgetting his own torment and pitying suffering mankind in his prayer:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
 That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
 Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
 From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en  
 Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
 That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
 And show the Heavens more just. (III,iv,28-36)

This, at last, is not a prayer to the storm as many of Lear's previous speeches on the heath have been; it is a prayer to the poor. We must note the enormous struggle that Lear is making to free himself from his probing of his own personal suffering. We can see the advance that Lear has already made if we point a brief contrast. If this speech is a prayer, in any sense of that word, it is in a form similar to a previous storm speech:

Tremble, thou wretch,  
 That hast within thee undivulged crimes,  
 Unwhipp'd of Justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand,  
 Thou perjur'd, and thou simular of virtue  
 That art incestuous; caitiff, to pieces shake,  
 That under covert and convenient seeming  
 Has practis'd on man's life; close pent-up guilts,  
 Rive your concealing continents, and cry  
 These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man  
 More sinn'd against than sinning. (III,ii,51-59)

The speech here invoking the punishment of the storm ends on a personal note. In his later prayer he ends his pity for all suffering humanity on a personal but entirely different note: "O! I have ta'en/ Too little care of this." The contrast, far too violent for good drama when thus printed side by side, is a measure of the change brought about in the King. The process was three-fold; first he pitied the Fool, then he offered explanations to Kent for keeping him out in the rain, now he pities all wretches.

He has attained the highest virtue - magnanimity. The point I wish to make is that not only has Lear momentarily detached his brainstorm from the weather as the Fool had asked, he has gone a stage beyond the Fool's conception of the kingly role. Magnanimity had at no point entered into the Fool's idea of hierarchy. Lear at last makes a statement which completely eclipses the Fool's supposedly objective view of what the King should be. His version of the truth is finally shown to be completely invalid. He can no longer stand outside as a commentator on Lear's action; he is included as one of the poor wretches. He was the first representative of mankind to be pitied by King Lear; he is now included amongst them. The King has seen his true duties to his subjects, has paid the price of folly and has reached a position where he can act with wisdom. All we want now is the sound of Cordelia's trumpets coming to the rescue and Lear could indeed have been restored to the throne and would have made a better king ever after. Had Tate done that, he would have been reasonable, and the play would have been a fairly good prehistoric Cowboys and Indians drama. Lear, in this prayer, speaks as a king pitying the poor, allowing them his superflux, following the central section of that confusing speech by the Fool which evoked Utopia. It is a speech of the Ideal king.

Lear, however, already has a feeling that there must be more: "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel," which is something more than magnanimity. He has yet to realize how far

he has to fight before all his genius, that is to say, all his powers as a man, heart, brains and belly, can see what they are capable of seeing. Such a vision will seem like madness to other mortals such as Kent, Gloucester and the Fool. Perhaps attaining it must involve actually going mad; perhaps, too, to have it seems to estrange one so much from one's fellows that one feels mad. The magnanimous man feels that there may be yet more. Shall he find out? He has no choice, for at that moment an event, which draws its power from mythology, occurs. Lear is blasted by a thunderbolt in the person of Poor Tom:

Fathom and half, fathom and half!

Poor Tom!

(III, iv, 37-38)

I have always felt that this is one of the most powerfully dramatic moments in the Shakespearian canon, and always the effect on stage has been muffled for me by a half-wit Fool whimpering in pathetic cowardice. Yet with the Fool as a mature man, an intelligent jester, desperately aware of the danger, frightened himself, and warning Lear not to go into the hovel to meet his new Fool, so to speak, the dramatic impact is immeasurably increased. If, as I suggest, the Fool is no naive half-wit, by a consummate stroke of irony he meets in the hovel another faker of simple wisdom, Poor Tom - Edgar, or even more than that, since Bedlam beggars were notorious fakers, a fake-faker of madness. Lear's prayer has just mingled the Fool with the generality of mankind, has finally denied to him his unique position. When he comes out of

the hovel his claim to sit in the eye of the tornado is gone, and he is whirled up the funnel with hardly anything more to say in the scene.

By a nice irony one of the first things that Poor Tom says is "go to thy bed and warm thee"(III,iv, 47). The Fool and Kent have been put to great pains to persuade Lear to take shelter, have finally got him into a hovel, and the whole plot, for this is the only matter which passes for a plot at this stage of the play, is scotched with the appearance of the Bedlam. The Fool says at once: "Come not in here, Nuncle;"(III,iv, 39). For a bedlam beggar to bid Lear go to bed, Lear the king who has no bed, is either accidentally or deliberately a characteristic remark, in such circumstances, of a bitter Fool.

Before proceeding any further with Poor Tom I must first explore a question which seems to me to be of great importance, though commentaries on the play usually ignore it, and which is of the order of "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" The question of whether the audience knows Poor Tom to be Edgar from his emergence from the hovel onwards might appear to be an entirely Bradleian question. But we must remember that from his entrance in Act III, Scene iv, to his aside, which in any case may not be an aside, in Act III, Scene vi, during the 'trial' scene, Poor Tom gives no indication whatsoever that he is, in fact, Edgar in disguise. This can only mean one of two things; firstly, that Shakespeare took it completely for granted that his audience would recognize Edgar in

his disguise and did not think it necessary for Edgar to point out the obviousness of the disguise to the audience, or, secondly, that he preferred the dominant identity in our minds to be that of a bedlam beggar rather than Edgar. In other words it is more important that the audience should observe Lear sharing a relationship with a beggar than with Edgar in disguise. There is a third possibility, which is hardly plausible, that Shakespeare did not wish us to know that Poor Tom was Edgar at all until much later, after having secured the impact of the bedlam beggar on Lear. I believe the whole situation to be based on an irony which is rarely commented on. It seems to me that we start out concerned almost completely with the Poor Tom side of the duality, whilst being perpetually aware at the back of our minds of the irony of the beggar being Edgar in disguise. As Lear's mind begins to explore new territories he outstrips all his companions so that increasingly we see Poor Tom having to drop his disguise, being forced, so to speak, out of the role of the beggar into his role of being obviously Edgar disguised, a part which he can manage comfortably when he accompanies Gloucester allowing the obvious ironies to multiply. This fine distinction is important because Poor Tom has a functional role as a commentator for a brief while, but finds that his comments become irrelevant as Lear's mind advances beyond his range; that is to say, his pattern of development follows exactly that of Lear's Fool.

Let us then consider this matter carefully to decide how conscious of Edgar's disguise an audience must be in this crucial phase of Lear's development. In the early part of the play Edgar's character has been barely established, and then he was dressed as a Duke's son, wearing more than a "blanket". Admittedly the 'night' scenes, which today would cause a difficulty of identifying Edgar on the heath, would not then exist - they would be in daylight. There is, too, the fact that the actor in Shakespeare's company, playing both parts, would be at once known, but there is a serious chance that the audience could assume doubling of parts. Edgar, of course, has informed us at considerable length that he is going to play the part of Poor Tom and gives us an example of Tom's characteristic speech in Act II, Scene iii. It might be argued that it is not Edgar's description of himself that matters in this earlier speech; the speech is more a preparation by way of description of bedlam beggars, for the coming of Poor Tom as Tom, not Edgar disguised. We are made aware that there are such beings in existence, a fact which Shakespeare might have found it necessary to underline, this being the only version of the story in which a Poor Tom makes an appearance. Poor Tom himself is more immediately identified and his entrance prepared by Lear's:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
 That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
 Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
 From seasons such as these? (III,iv, 28-32)

Tom, then, is the incarnation of the 'naked wretches'. Lear might

almost have conjured him up. Lear's speech seems to be the conclusion, almost triumphant, of an heroic struggle. The kind of poverty he envisages, too, is significant. It bides the pelting of the storm, it patiently endures, it will be content with a superflux, it is altogether the kind of poverty which exists in a Christian community, where the rich may gain virtue in the sight of heaven by doling out superfluxes. At the words: "show the Heavens more just." comes "Fathom and half, fathom and half! / Poor Tom!" (III, iv, 37-38). This may refer to the amount of straw surrounding Tom or be suggested by the floods of rain. Whatever the words may mean literally their effect is that of trumpets.

Consider the story as Hollywood would have treated it at this point. Trumpets could have sounded after the King's prayer and saved him, so to speak, from the Injuns. Hollywood might have Tom appear and allow Lear to comfort him - he would be the answer to a prayer. They would take Tom and Lear to the daughters and the sight of them would melt their hearts, and then it would turn out that Tom is really Edgar after all. Edmund would confess and - you see what I mean? This prayer speech of Lear's and Edgar's entrance would make a possible ending to a play, save that we are dealing with Shakespeare and he makes it start something new and uncompromising.

It might appear that I have been arguing that the audience does not recognize Edgar at all in his disguise, but this would be to throw away too many of the subtle ironies which Shakespeare dovetails into Poor Tom's part. It is clear, and it supports my



point, that most people in discussing the play talk of Poor Tom as a separate character, they name him and they discuss his role even though they know him to be Edgar. It is true also that we only talk of Poor Tom as Poor Tom in his relationship with Lear; in his various disguises with Gloucester we always think and speak of him as Edgar, for by that time Poor Tom has, so to speak, become Edgar again. Shakespeare could, therefore, had he been more of a clumsy dramatist than he was, have introduced an actual and separate Poor Tom and have Edgar appear only in his relationship with Gloucester, where the chances of a blind and isolated father recognizing him would be nil. But Edgar's patience and newly found morality which enable him to deal with Gloucester are the fruit of his relationship as Poor Tom with Lear. He makes a statement of it as soon as Poor Tom's relationship with Lear is completed. The Edgar identity is placed squarely in the foreground:

When we our betters see bearing our woes,  
 We scarcely think our miseries our foes.  
 Who alone suffers, suffers most i'th' mind,  
 Leaving free things and happy shows behind;  
 But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip,  
 When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.  
 How light and portable my pain seems now,  
 When that which makes me bend makes the King bow;  
 He childed as I father'd! Tom, away!  
 Mark the high noises, and thyself bewray  
 When false opinion, whose wrong thoughts defile thee. (III,vi, 105-116)

Shakespeare, as I hope I have made clear, took a great many precautions to keep the Edgar identity in the back of our minds

when the Bedlam first appears. Yet there is one reason above all others why we must recognize Edgar in Poor Tom. Lear has prayed for 'naked wretches', and had any low-born beggar appeared the situation might still have been saved, for Lear still determined to be king, still clinging to order, might have safely allowed him some of his superflux. But Edgar is not merely any poor wretch, he has been at court, has practised all its tricks and followed all its fashions and has now come to nothing. Poor Tom presses home the reality of Lear's own situation as the Fool had never been able to do. This is why, as an audience, we accept Poor Tom for what he is, because he speaks a degree of truth. Edgar is, in fact, a kind of Poor Tom, a courtier degraded without any of the 'lendings'. He is not, of course, mad, but then bedlam beggars were notorious fakers of madness. Edgar is not merely in disguise, he is, in reality, a fake bedlam beggar by his own choice. The fact that Poor Tom was at one time Edgar enables us to grasp more easily Lear's uncompromising denunciation of sophistication. The importance of Poor Tom both for Lear and for the audience is not that he is a madman or fake madman, but that he is a fallen courtier. Much of his mad speech, even though the audience knows it to be feigned, still has vital and valid significance to the situation. In short, because Edgar is speaking substantially the truth, the content of his speeches has equal significance for Lear and the audience - it is the testimony of a bedlam beggar.

I have now arrived at the position in which I can say that Shakespeare seems to have managed the situation so that, initially,

at least, there should be no conflict in our minds which causes us to disregard Poor Tom's significance because he is really Edgar in disguise. At this point we make no conscious distinction. That irony will come later when Shakespeare is ready to exploit it.

The naked wretch, then, turns out to be different from what the King thought it ought to be. For what is Tom? He is mad, since the foul fiend haunts him. What has the fiend done to him? He has led Tom into meteorological hazards; tempted him with false suspicions; made him proud so that he undertakes useless feats of daring; and so sensitive that he will 'course his own shadow for a traitor'. Tom even blesses Lear; Lear was going to allow wretches some of his superflux, save that he had forgotten that he no longer had any superflux to allow them. Tom has gone a stage beyond the Fool, he recognizes kinship in wretchedness, the beggar blesses a fellow wretch and wants to protect from "whirlwinds, starblasting and taking!" (III,iv, 59-60). Lear has attempted to marshal the elements on the heath to blast his daughters, has invited the 'taking airs' to infect them. We are reminded of his earlier curses: "Strike her young bones, / You taking airs, with lameness!" (II,iv,-164-165) Lear at once upon receiving Tom's blessing, as if to indicate its futility and as though to show, as it were, that he has not yet learnt wisdom, beseeches all the plagues to torment Tom's daughters. We are immediately back in the King - Fool situation. The Fool in attempting to make Lear face reality unconsciously drove Lear towards madness. Poor Tom also attempts to divert Lear's attention from the wickedness of daughters and also inadvertently goads Lear

on in his path of insanity. Tom's documentation of his own decline comes too near a summary of Lear's own history to be comfortable. That is the reason why Tom's account of himself is at once acceptable. The audience will not be aware that Tom is paraphrasing, even parodying, Lear's experience, but it is sufficiently close to his to be convincing. But Lear, he who can, too well, 'course his own shadow for a traitor,' he, surely, can see the parallel.

I feel strongly that Lear's self defence against accepting Tom and the implications of Tom make him explain Tom away by the excuse of the false daughter. It is ironical that Lear's last hold on sanity depends on the actuality of filial ingratitude, a path about which he once said 'that way madness lies.' Yet his very choice of defence furthers his identification with Tom. Not only do Tom's sufferings reflect Lear's but Lear's explanation of their origin further reinforces the similarity.

The strongest evidence for identifying Tom with a Fool's role is the delivering of his sermon on the heath. There were many examples of the Fool in society taking advantage of his position to deliver a mock serious or parody sermon. In productions it is not always given this force but I believe it must be so interpreted to underline the fact that Tom's speeches, however much of a Bedlam he may be, have form. Like the Fool he may often be thought to be dealing with trivialities when a closer study will show him to be essentially on the point. Here we have the grotesque situation of an exiled bedlam preaching in a storm to the exiled court party

about the wickedness of the court. Poor Tom clearly is the new truth-bearer and sees something which the Fool had only glimpsed in his assertion of the necessity of order.

Poor Tom enters his pulpit to the liturgical and obscene:

Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill: (III,iv, 76ff)

and gives the usual blessing to his congregation,

Alow, alow, loo, loo!

His text is,

Take heed o'th' foul fiend.

and he then moves through a catechism, a minatory confession of faults, a catalogue of sins to avoid, and reaches his conclusion at line 99 with,

defy the foul fiend.

He blesses his congregation,

Suum, mun, hey no nonny,

in mock Latin, and then tries to get away from them, only to be stopped by Lear. This is an account of how I would produce the scene in order to make its sense and applicability to the situation obvious. The form of the sermon I have described. The content is significant. The five opening dogmas in the catechism have all played a part so far in the action: 'obey thy parents' - a general theme in the play; 'keep thy word's justice' (word justly - Pope) - be as just in deeds as in words - a good commentary on the varying responses of Cordelia, Goneril and Regan in the first scene; 'swear not' - as Lear had sworn and cursed in dismissing Cordelia, Kent and later Goneril and Regan; 'commit not with man's sworn spouse' -

a reference perhaps to Edmund's bastardy; and 'set not thy sweet heart on proud array,' had been the undoing of Lear with his demand for his hundred knights and all the appurtenances and ceremony of kingship without any of the responsibility.

This catechism would have little effect were there no exemplum. The Fool had been an educator and had attempted to enlighten Lear with his nursery rhymes. Poor Tom goes a step further, though still remaining within the Fool's role - he preaches. The Fool himself had no illustration of what may happen to a fallen man, for he himself has that peculiar position which is neither of the court nor out of it. There is, of course, the perfect example of the fallen courtier in the disguised Kent, but neither the Fool nor Lear know of the disguise. Lear himself is reduced to beggary but cannot yet understand his new position. If Poor Tom were merely a beggar the world of kingship might remain intact and Lear's concern with filial ingratitude might still be dominant. But Poor Tom, so to speak, throws down the disguise which has of necessity concealed Kent's state from his master and Lear's from himself.

The one pitied has materialized but turns out to have been led by the foul fiend over much of the journey Lear has covered. Identified by Lear with himself, Tom builds himself into the fabric of the play with his precepts and his own life as examples of them, but goes further: the savage law of the jungle, kill or be killed, is not only on the heath in the storm, but in the court, Lear's home,

where Lear's charity might well have begun. His testimony is the speech of a man fallen from the court down headlong into the ditch. Whether Tom has been a fashionable lover or a favourite, petted servant, his calling himself, "hog..... fox..... wolf..... dog..... lion," when he was a courtier is a bitter irony since Lear finds him now, in the ditch, essential man. It makes little difference whether Edgar had been exactly such a courtier as he describes himself or whether he had been a courtier, had 'fallen', and had made the rest up as part of his disguise, for we are only interested in Lear's reaction to the situation. Lear's answer to Poor Tom's sermon vividly reminds us of that moment earlier when his concern for his Fool had momentarily halted his titanic struggle with the elements: "Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncover'd body this extremity of the skies."(III,iv, 103-105). This is the true pity of the play and had it come earlier it would have led to Lear's shaking his 'superflux' onto him. When it actually comes to Lear's taking off his clothes it is for a far different purpose; not to keep Poor Tom warm but to display himself as Man. The Fool had attempted to communicate his version of the truth and had failed, now Poor Tom not only communicates a truth but is himself an illustration of it in a way that the Fool could never be. Lear himself cannot judge events because he is the one who makes them. It is fitting, therefore, that he cannot understand his Fool, who is a detached commentator, but can glean a message from Poor Tom, who, so to speak, acts out his version of the truth. It is not so much

that Poor Tom communicates a truth but that he is himself the embodiment of a truth; that is why I have likened him to the thunderbolts of Greek myth. Poor Tom picks up where the Fool left off. The Fool had used animal similes to show Lear what the world was like when one no longer held supreme power and Poor Tom now goes on to name himself one of the animals, lives off carrion like them, 'eats the swimming frog, the toad,' 'swallows the old rat and the ditch dog.' The Fool had shown how one must retain the 'lendings' if one were to escape the animal world, but Tom shows that the lendings are a sophisticated covering for a world ruled by the jungle law, and is himself - 'the thing itself'.

Lear's new discovery is far beyond the Fool's belief in maintaining hierarchical order. The King finds in the beggar an identity far beyond having experience in common with him, far beyond unkind daughters. In Poor Tom he finds Man. Lear is no longer attempting to pity the poor, he is no longer blinded by his concept of kingship, in Tom he sees himself. Here, if anywhere, truth will be, and Lear will grasp it, even if he has to run naked to do so. It is this new truth which completes Lear's conversion into, what I have called, the sacred madman, the man endowed with a dizzying superior sanity, seeing men for what they are. The Fool sees courtiers for what they are, but we are already beyond that stage, we are concerned with the essential nature of man, and one has, perhaps, to be mad in order to comment on that nature. Lear, from this point is, so to speak, able to become his own Fool, easily the most far-seeing Fool in the play.



The Fool still attempts to press home the reality of the situation. Ludicrously and with grotesque humour he suggests that Lear in unbuttoning is not involved in a blasting vision of a new truth, but is absurdly attempting to go swimming - of all things! - on such a very wet night (III,iv, 113). One begins to feel that the Fool's statements are not only entirely off the point, but almost sacrilegious.

It is with his new knowledge that Lear now begins to be his own Fool for he soon asks: "What is the cause of thunder?" (III,iv, - 159), and the commentators explain at length that this is one of those questions included in popular instructive catechisms with which kings often used to test the wit of their Fools. The Fool had earlier reversed the procedure by asking his master why there were no more than seven stars, and had commented on the reply that Lear would make a good Fool. Here Lear takes on his role and questions Poor Tom.

I have never been aware during a performance of this particular aspect of the scene. Yet the actor who is aware that Lear is serious and not merely discussing schoolboy conundrums with a bedlamite will not make nonsense of it. The question itself is, surely, linked with all that has gone before - the commanding of the thunder, the role of thunder as 'justicer', as the vengeance of the gods, that concern which passed from Lear with his prayer before the hovel. Now his concern with thunder has a new aspect - what is the cause of it? As he says later, it would not still at his bidding. In Tom he has seen essential, natural man. What more pertinent question could be put to this quint-

essence of man than this about the quintessence of his experience? It is not a matter of popular education, nor even of a Fool's anti-fooling. It is a matter of fundamental importance; Kent and Gloucester cannot see the importance of the question, to them it is a sign of madness and they muddle along attempting to get Lear to shelter and comfort. Poor Tom has been forced into a desperate muttering about his devils and it is clear that in his relationship with the King he is already beginning to get out of his depth. It is becoming increasingly obvious that Lear's mind is exploring questions far beyond the sanity of his followers. The contact with them is already becoming strained and in the next scene when we see them together we observe the complete breakdown of communication.

It is that extraordinary scene, Act III, Scene vi, in which he brings his daughters to 'trial', that Lear at last rids himself of the necessity of his fake simpleton, the professional jester, and his fake madman, Poor Tom. In keeping with the King having become the best Fool, his jester returns to his old jokes, and here they have no immediate relevance to the situation; they are, so to speak, taken at random out of the jest-book. We are aware at once that Lear outwits him,

Fool. Prithee, Nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman  
or a yeoman?

Lear. A King, a King!

(III, vi, 9-11)

We see at once that Lear's reply would earlier in the play have been put into the Fool's mouth. It is the answer of a bitter Fool. Lear is the one now to press home reality, to make the jest relevant to the

situation, Lear knows all the answers, his Fool can teach him nothing and he leaves the Fool to complete his joke with desperate irrelevance.

We are soon drowning in a welter of disorder, "The foul fiend bites my back" (III, vi, 17). It is a world where no-one is making any contact, each character whirls in his own vortex. Each sentence is thrown out into the darkness and, finding no target, disappears in the void. It is an extraordinary anticipation of many of the techniques of the modern Theatre of the Absurd. Then Lear makes his first attempt to give the scene direction: "It shall be done; I will arraign them straight." (III,vi, 20) and he starts to put the others in their places. But this comes against an impasse; the Fool and Tom take over with song and mad irrelevance. This is important for since his appearance Tom has replaced the Fool. Now we see that Lear is outgrowing his need for Tom also. The Bedlam and the Fool are finding themselves equally irrelevant. Instinctively they play into each other's hands in an attempt to arrest the progress of Lear's madness which is now carrying them both out of their depth.

The trial scene is based on a comic situation, that of the fools trying knaves, a reversal, so to speak, of normality. It is the grotesque and bizarre incidence of madness which makes laughter impossible. The essence of the scene is a struggle between Lear and his followers. For the space of an Act in the play they have attempted to lead him somewhere; now they have arrived and he can bring them to heel. After his initial failure to organize a trial, he again puts them all in due order, and this time he includes Kent. The resistance of Tom he overbears;

he forces the article of arraignment before them only to be met by the Fool's joint-stool joke. There is some reason for believing that the three followers of Lear in this scene are all desperately at their wits' end. Kent, the balanced and shrewd one, can only beg the King repeatedly to be patient; the strain on him too is beginning to tell, so that his insistence on Lear's being calm is almost madness itself. Lear is surrounded by three men all seeming to be what they are not; Kent is disguised, Edgar is playing the role of a bedlam beggar, and the Fool's profession is that of artificially simulating simpleness. Lear, I would suggest, turns on his followers now that he has, so to speak, routed them with their counterfeiting attempts to play his game, his trial. It seems possible that when he says: "The little dogs and all, / Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me." (III, vi, 62-63) he is not merely indulging in wild and meaningless words, but may be addressing his three followers as dogs who are barking at him, as dogs annoy their master. Edgar's reply: "Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, you curs!" (III, vi, 64-65) is now the crudest sham madness. He has been shamming madness all the time, but not so crudely with such lack of meaning, for now in misunderstanding Lear he is talking gibberish. The doggerel verse which he falls into as a refuge, something that the Fool had never done, is unlike any other speech he has had so far, though of the same order as those which he uses with Gloucester later. At the end Tom's 'horn is dry' and like

the Fool he is bankrupt with nothing more to offer. When Lear says to Poor Tom: "only I do not like the fashion of your garments: you will say they are Persian; but let them be chang'd." (III,vi, 80-83) we automatically assume that Lear is insanely implying that the beggar's rags are gorgeous robes. I suggest that it is at least possible that Lear may mean that Edgar will say his garments are Persian, that is, unalterable like the laws of the Medes and Persians, that a beggar cannot change, but Lear knows better, he has won the battle, he has exhausted Edgar and his mad counterfeiting. I would not suggest that Lear is fully conscious of the accuracy of his insight but the important thing is that there is a rich irony for the audience who had seen Edgar voluntarily daubing himself and choosing his pose. It is part of the evidence littered about that the insane often understand situations more clearly than the sane, and this understanding is essential if the heath scenes are to have any meaning above that of simple pathos.

So Lear can submit to the insistence that he go to bed. He has attained a solitude in madness. He has fought hard in this scene to attain it. Alone, now, he goes to bed, promising to go to supper in the morning, a promise coupling sweet reasonableness with the topsy-turvy nature of all things in Lear's brain. Whether there are seven meanings or not in the Fool's last line: "And I'll go to bed at noon." (III,vi, 88) the leading sense is characteristically the actual one, since he hasn't had a wink of sleep all night and will thus be able to catch up on it.

A few moments later he leaves the stage for good helping to carry Lear.

This scene is the end of many things. It is the end of Lear's followers. Kent has no direct dealings with the King henceforward, he is either a bystander or finally dismissed by Lear as a nobody. Edgar with Gloucester meets Lear again but has no dealings with him - the exchange is entirely between Gloucester and Lear - since having once been outplayed by Lear he can never dare to venture another contest in madness with Lear. The solution of the Fool's role is the most radical, he is out of the play and possibly mentioned only once, and even then not certainly, in the rest of the play. No audience can ever have felt this to be unjust. As I have tried to show the Fool's comments become more and more irrelevant, until he has no function at all. He had established only one relationship in the play and that was with Lear, and, when Lear insists on being alone, with whom could the Fool go, with Kent, with Edgar, the blind Gloucester? To what purpose? Or might he have found his way to Cordelia? But Cordelia has all the virtues and none of the limitations of the Fool. It is impossible to visualize a change in the Fool, and one cannot imagine him in any scene or in any role in the rest of the play without adding unnecessary discordance or being in the way. The Fool's fate is that of the topsy-turvy world, of the unique circumstances of the play, for when a king becomes his own Fool the court-Fool can have no function at all.

It might appear that I am trying to turn the whole play into an illustration of the practices of court fools, or that I am trying to show that the play is really about a large number of jesters in disguise. Having taken one line of research I have found elements of the Fool in various characters. I do not believe the play to be about Fools and folly any more than I believe it to be about arrogant old men and disobedient children. That many of the elements I have discussed are in the play I do not think can be denied. If I conclude this study with a few brief comments on Lear as his own Fool I am not trying to prove that the whole play has been organized in order to show that Lear is fundamentally a better court jester than the one in his employ, I am merely indicating that this level of interpretation is one of many, and, insofar as it is consistent, is worthy of examination.

The Fool's role has always been fundamentally that of a licensed critic of society. This play has isolated its protagonist and taken him outside societal bounds, revealing to him a new and searing vision of the nature of man. If the Fool's role has always been confined to a particular, individual society, then King Lear becomes the licensed critic of the whole of humanity, and it is we, the audience, who give him that license. In whatever age and whatever society, the

audience of this tragedy becomes the court in which Lear is jester, for his attack is not on the fashions and institutions of any particular time, it is on the essence of man himself. Shakespeare does not loose Lear on his audience for that would be like the mad Cuchulain lashing at the endless waves with his sword, but he does loose him on Gloucester in Act IV, Scene vi, and Gloucester is a man who might be held to represent average humanity, perpetually relying on facile moralizing, incapable of learning from its mistakes, blind humanity groping hopelessly in the darkness.

The Fool had believed that order could be imposed upon the world; Poor Tom had been the illustration of the results of that order; and Lear has come to realise that all order is superficial. The Fool's task was to see things as they really are, but bounded by his society his vision was limited. Lear no longer bound by society, having moved from the highest to lowest, from King to beggar, sees no essential difference in men: "Go to, they are not men o'their words: they told me I was every thing; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof." (IV,vi, 105-108). If a king is a king he must be everything, if he is not ague-proof he is a man like everyone else, and kingship is one of the lendings which we must strip off to see things as they are. The Fool himself had seen one level beneath the surface and had helped to drive Lear to madness. Lear now pierces to the very core of reality and, so to speak, challenges the audience to go mad.



The Fool had attempted to face Lear with reality by pointing to the hedge-sparrow and the cuckoo. Lear now follows the same trick of simile but for inverted effect, for the Fool had been speaking of the laws of natural order whilst Lear makes no distinction any longer between man and beast. He pardons Gloucester's adultery for: "The wren goes to 't, and the small gilded fly/ Does lecher in my sight." (IV,vi, 115-116). Lear also indulges in that kind of grotesque irony which is characteristic of the bitter Fool. When Gloucester asks to kiss the King's hand Lear now faces reality with a vengeance, replying with the pungent insight of one from whose eyes the scales have fallen: "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality." (IV,vi, 135). Nothing that the Fool ever said could have sounded as bitter as this for it bears with it the weight of Lear's suffering and experience. The Fool had sat outside his own society and attempted to make an objective commentary on its corruption. Lear in total nihilism attempts to sit, so to speak, outside mankind and make an objective commentary. Lemuel Gulliver, Raskolnikov and many other characters in literature have been described in this condition of nihilistic pessimism, which we recognize as madness. But if we recognize the insanity we cannot lightly dismiss it. Lear ultimately challenges Gloucester and indirectly the audience:

What! art mad? A man may see how this  
 world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears:  
 see how yond justice rails upon yond simple  
 thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places, and,  
 handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the  
 thief?  
 (IV,vi, 151-156)

This is the ultimate vision of chaos, the core of the philosophy born of Lear's experience. We have been through the experience with Lear and the question is, therefore, a challenge to us. Is Lear our jester, the man detached from society and therefore licensed to educate us? The court Fool's position is isolated, so is Lear's; he attempts to comment on the reality obscured by manners and institutions, so does Lear; he is whipped if he comes so near to the truth that he offends, as Lear or Shakespeare has been attacked by innumerable critics unable to bear the pessimism of this play. Handy-dandy, who is the foolish one Lear or the critic? Lear, early in the play, was caught between two attitudes to his Fool; on the one hand was: "Take heed, sirrah; the whip." (I,iv,116), on the other was: "teach me" (I,iv,145). It depends on which of these two attitudes that we, as an audience, take to Lear as to how much we profit by the experience of the play. The word 'fool' is a slippery one and each one of us must decide exactly which meaning or meanings he intends when he says at Act IV, Scene vi, lines 192-193:

No rescue? What! a prisoner? I am even  
The natural fool of Fortune.

It is, perhaps, Lear's epigrammatic statement of the human condition.

## APPENDIX

It is worth making some further comments on the intimacy between Lear and his Fool in order to uncover some of the deeper psychological implications of the relationship. The Fool's position gives rise to a series of paradoxes. The chief difference between the court-fool and the parasitical buffoon is that the former is more strikingly abnormal than the latter, and more completely separated from the rest of his fellow men. They are permitted intimate friendship with the king but are also expected most boldly to mock the king. The very basis of the relationship, whether of artificial court-fool or simpleton buffoon with the king, is an abnormal one. If the Fool's boldness is protected from punishment by the king's patronage so also is he the most immediately vulnerable to the king's own displeasure. At the most superficial level of observation we come across elements of a love - hate relationship. In psychological terms the king is, of course, a father figure, and it is with increasing clarity and surprise that one notices the elements of a father - son relationship in so many King - Fool situations. It should be mentioned at once that nowhere is this more obvious than in King Lear, a play which starts out by presenting the problem of a king with no son for an heir dividing up his kingdom between his three daughters. Edgar succours and accompanies his father in distress; the Fool has the corresponding position in the main plot. The role of the Fool,

then, is characterized by complete dependency on the King for shelter and protection and of complete freedom of speech as of the rebellious adolescent.

A king, however, is a father figure for a whole nation. One of the safeguards against public jealousy is to depreciate oneself or be mocked by other people <sup>1</sup>. This question has been fully discussed by Miss Welsford <sup>2</sup>. She points out that there is a universal human instinct to avoid the sin of presumption for to praise oneself or receive praise is to attract a dangerous cosmic jealousy. The

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<sup>1</sup> Homberger Ericson, Childhood and Society, (New York: W.W. Norton Inc., 1950) pp.134-6 mentions a mechanism for solving the terrifying implications of a manifest dream among the Sioux Indians: "A person who was convinced he saw the Thunderbird reported this to his advisers, and from then on at all public occasions he was 'heyoka'. He was obliged to behave as absurdly and clownishly as possible until his advisers thought he had cured himself of the curse. . . . One conversant with the ego's tricky methods of overcoming feelings of anxiety and guilt will not fail to recognize in the heyoka's antics the activities of children playing the clown or debasing and otherwise harming themselves when they are frightened or pursued by a bad conscience. One method of avoiding offense to the gods is to humiliate oneself or put oneself in the wrong light before the public. As everybody is induced to permit himself to be fooled and to laugh, the spirits forget and forgive and may even applaud. The clown with his proverbial secret melancholy and the radio comedian who makes capital out of his own inferiorities seem to be professional elaborations in our culture of this defence mechanism."

<sup>2</sup> Miss E. Welsford, The Fool: His Social and Literary Position, (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1961) pp. 67-74.

medieval flagellants understood this psychological approach very clearly. Similarly, a good host, in earlier times, may, therefore have been doing his guests a good service if he sees to it that they are mocked as well as fed. Perhaps Shakespeare's Yorick undertook this as part of his duties. This element of the jester's role can be found in our earliest literature. This deeper psychological motivation, we may suspect, is the explanation of the curious relationship between Unferth and Beowulf in the Anglo-Saxon epic, though it may have been a remnant of an earlier story and its original meaning not completely clear to the author himself. Unferth, spokesman for Hrothgar, may not originally have been serious in his criticism of Beowulf, but may, in his ceremonial speech have been fulfilling an accepted role of mocking the guest. The efficacy of mockery as protection against misfortune has a long history from primitive societies to our own more sophisticated defence mechanisms.

Miss Welsford also points out that the dwarf or half-wit seems to have been held to be excluded from this cosmic jealousy in many primitive societies and being incapacitated for normal human relationship may have become a scapegoat for society. In superstitious societies we have many examples of the custom of provoking one's neighbours to abuse if misfortune threatens, thereby transferring one's bad luck<sup>3</sup>. The obvious solution is to employ a permanent scape-

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The Dobuan Society observed by Ruth Benedict seems to have been constructed almost entirely on this principle. Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1934).

goat whose official duty is to jeer continually at his superiors and thereby bear their ill-luck. Miss Welsford very cautiously suggests that there may be some connection between this primitive scapegoat and the later court jester; the Fool may be employed as a spiritual whipping boy. If we go back to the earliest Fools this transference technique was clearly part of their function, particularly in ceremonies which involved warding off the ill-luck which a spirit of one newly deceased might bring. In Egypt in the funeral train followed the arch-mime lately retained by the deceased patrician, and it was his business to keep the mourners merry, by imitations of the speech, gesture and manners of the deceased himself<sup>4</sup>.

The Fool's mocking of the king also serves another purpose; as authorized critic he serves as a representative of all those who are dissatisfied with the king but whose dissatisfaction might take a more dangerous form. Any ill feeling against the king can be soothed by observation of the jester mocking his master. This has the added advantage, of course, of the authorized critic being in the power of the king and punishable should his raillery go too far. Some such deep psychological motivation must be involved here, for it is impossible to explain in any immediately obvious way the paradoxes of the Fool's role.

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John Doran, The History of Court Fools, (London: R. Bentley, 1858), p. 16.

It is these ideas which lead me to a tentative suggestion of the even deeper and more basic psychological implications of the Fool's role. It is tentative because to make any dogmatic assertions is to place oneself in the jester's role and risk becoming the abusive scapegoat for psychological interpretations of literature. I have implied that the relationship between a king and his Fool has affinities with that between father and son, and that a king is in some degree a father figure for whatever society he rules. I would like to suggest that somewhere, a long way beneath the level of our conscious appreciation of such relationships, there is a vague and perpetually undefined feeling that the Fool has some force of Oedipal antagonism, that perhaps one of the reasons for creating a Fool role was to allow a society to project its innate Oedipal antagonism, carried out on a symbolic level between king and people, onto a scapegoat figure, and that that figure in his perpetual attack on authority, his mocking of his master, was the Fool.

*this is  
a  
numbug*

This idea was first suggested to me by a remark made, characteristically enough, by Freud in his paper "Dostoevsky and Parricide"<sup>5</sup>. Dostoevsky's character certainly retained sadistic traits in plenty, which show themselves in his irritability, his love of tormenting

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<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, Collected Papers, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), V, 222 - 243.

and the manner in which, as an author, he treats his readers. It is known that Dostoevsky himself suffered from hysteria. Freud's explanation of the parricide in The Brothers Karamazov is, therefore, ingenious. Zossima, we must remember bows down to the one possessed with parricidal feelings, Dmitri, and Freud says: "Dostoevsky's sympathy for the criminal is, in fact, boundless; it goes far beyond the pity which the unhappy wretch might claim, and reminds us of the 'holy awe' with which lunatics and epileptics were regarded in the past." Freud suggests that the author uses Dmitri as a scapegoat for his own parricidal feelings. The author - character - victim relationship is, of course, much different from the public - king - Fool relationship, but it is significant that the form which this takes in Dostoevsky should be a reverence before a type of person that was the earliest Fool-figure, the lunatic, the sacred madman, for Dmitri is possessed throughout the novel. There may be something, then, in the idea that the Fool's insistent barbed thrusts against the king are a public avowal of antagonism which originally involved vicarious suffering in a scapegoat sacrifice and which was later replaced by the traditional punishment of the Fool, a whipping.

It is not, perhaps vitally important whether such a surmise is correct or not, but we need some such clue to explain the extraordinary intimacy developed in the unique relationship between King Lear and his Fool. The Fool's comments are always a warning to Lear



to retain his autocratic fatherhood, for he seems to believe that filial ingratitude will flourish if it is given a chance. It might be said to be a trait central to the role of a Fool that he injects the data of the unconscious, of psychological reality, into a world busily involved in covering up and attempting to obscure such unpleasant factors. The Fool certainly understands much more clearly than Lear the nature of the rivalry and antagonism in family life. It may be that with a king surrounded by three daughters the man who acts as his closest intimate is bound to become an accidental son substitute. Whatever the truth of the matter I feel that in King Lear we are involved in deep psychological implications in the Fool figure.

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