

Explore how
shakespeare's
presentation of the
fool and lear's
relationship can be...

[Art & Culture](#)



An Elizabethan fool was an inept orator of the obscene given consent to mock and entertain those residing in the King's court; a definition of the former being a member of a royal court who entertains with jokes and antics, " the Elizabethan fool represents free speech and an un-jaundiced view of a new social fabric" . Relationships between a Fool and his monarch were determined by the boldness of the Fool alongside the King's tolerance. Fools had a certain amount of comedic licence, often uttering axioms that could be deemed as impertinent.

Although Fools have to adhere to certain boundaries (not overstepping the line as far as personal jokes, insulting the monarchy and being over indulgingly crass are concerned), Lear's Fool seems to overstep these invisible restrictions. This inextricably constructs a multifaceted relationship between the two divergent characters that can be construed in various contexts. It often transpired in the Elizabethan era that many mentally handicapped men found employment exploring their own deficiencies as jesters and at times unable to distinguish between jokes and offence.

Lear's fool could have possibly been written as handicapped, therefore providing a reasonable excuse for his outspoken speeches. Lear and the Fool's relationship is an interesting and intriguing feature of the play and it is difficult to establish a distinction between Fool and Wiseman within the pair. This prompts many questions to arise about Lear and his Fool and as Enid Welsford suggests " Which is the wise man, which is the fool? " we can start to see just one of the many sides of a very convoluted bond. In a typical Elizabethan household, a servant and master would remain mutually exclusive.

<https://assignbuster.com/explore-how-shakespeares-presentation-of-the-fool-and-lears-relationship-can-be-interpreted-in-king-lear-assignment/>

King Lear explores a new type of bond where Lear and his Fool are concerned. It is suggested that the King rides alongside the Fool, in Act 1 Scene 5, exclaiming, "Come, boy", showing affection for the child-like comic and a desire to be close to him and ride alongside each other, almost as equals. This would have been quite unusual in Elizabethan times as a King and his servants were markedly segregated. This physical proximity is an indicator of how the professional relationship between a servant and his master has broken down to reveal more informal relations.

There is a definite ease at which the two converse whereas the conversations between Regan and her servant, Oswald, seem very confined to social graces and professionalism. Oswald has a more polite disposition as opposed to affectionate, often producing near mechanical responses, "Ay, madam", and remaining silent until spoken to. This differs greatly with the Fool's complete disregard for courteous behaviour in the presence of his superiors, creating a strong contrast for the audience, to see within the social boundaries of King Lear in accordance with the King's court.

The Fool and Lear address each other with more affectionate terms compared to a typical relationship in Elizabethan service. Lear refers to his Fool as "boy"; this could be a reference to the Fool being like a son to him or to the Fool's childish nature. The fool habitually refers to Lear as 'nuncle', "If thou wert my fool, nuncle, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time", an "affectionate, childish abbreviation that emphasizes the fool's simple dependence on Lear" .

This abbreviation shows how simpleminded the fool can be at times and his young disposition, although he may in fact be older than his language and mannerisms perceive as many Elizabethan fools stayed in service of the monarchy long after reaching middle age. The Fool's use of questions and generally curious nature are reminiscent of a small child, as they tend to be very inquisitive at young ages. A noticeable effect of the relationship is Lear's complete lack of iambic pentameter when addressing his "boy".

Lear, in a temporarily quizzical state of mind in Act 1 Scene 5, allows the Fool to interrupt him while he speaks, "I did her wrong,-" "Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell?" This shows how Lear permits the Fool to use impolite qualities in his court and in addressing his King. Lear completely disregards his authoritative position as King to fall back into blank verse when talking to the Fool, perhaps in shock of Goneril's surprising treatment of him and feeling his power being usurped.

The lack of iambic pentameter makes Lear and the Fool's conversations appear on a much more personal level, contrasting to Lear's imposing sense of speaking and use the royal 'we' in Act 1 Scene 1, even when addressing his own kin. The absence of a mother or wife figure for Lear leaves a space to be filled. Maggi Ros believes: "In some ways the Fool picks up part of this role for Lear, in terms of offering advice based on a very close relationship, and trying to temper his passions" The Fool does attempt to control Lear's rages by offering his own unique brand of advice, riddled with irony and punctuated with lunacy, "Prithee, nuncle, be contented; 'tis a naughty night to swim in." The Fool tries to prevent Lear's rash and unexplainable actions,

when Lear begins ripping his own clothes off on the heath in Act 3 Scene 4. The Fool's statement is an attempt at preventing Lear's ridiculous display, said with a reverence of womanly chiding. The Fool tells Lear to "stop being so ridiculous", firmly reprimanding him as a wife would, showing he cares about Lear's wellbeing and reputation. The play could be staged with the Fool being played as a more androgynous character, accentuating his possession of feminine traits.

In Act 3 Scene 4, after entering and quickly retreating from a hovel on the heath, the Fool shouts: "Nuncle; here's a spirit. Help me! Help me!" His cries for help are reminiscent of a damsel in distress called for assistance, showing the fool's effeminate reactions when scared. This gives him a more feminine quality, which accounts for the female position in Lear's life with the absence of fully feminine figures (Goneril and Regan are regarded as less feminine from their warlike attitudes and violent manners of speaking).

As Lear's daughters abandon him one after another, he is left alone with no family. The Fool possesses certain child-like qualities and mannerisms, which would draw Lear to him, making the Fool a surrogate child in the absence of Lear's daughters. Elizabethan children were cherished in families, as the mortality rate was high during the era so Lear may have felt the longing to cherish own family, unfortunately failing to grasp the concept of unconditional love, and the Fool takes the place of the children he feels he no longer has.

The word 'fool' in Elizabethan was a term meant to mean 'child' and is similar to the word 'foal', the young offspring of a horse; acknowledging this, <https://assignbuster.com/explore-how-shakespeares-presentation-of-the-fool-and-lears-relationship-can-be-interpreted-in-king-lear-assignment/>

when on the heath, Lear puts the Fool before himself, “[To the Fool] In, boy; go first”. Like a father would in dangerous times, Lear looks after the Fool as a father looks after his children in the face of the storm, showing how Lear is learning to love those close to him as a father and a person rather than the King.

This introduces the prospect of the Fool being looked upon as a teacher for Lear's naive experience with close relationships. Elizabethan women were seen as inferior to men and expected to obey men in all aspects of their lives, disobedience was seen as a crime against their religion. Male heirs were preferred as their position was one of power. Lear often seems in awe of or proud of Albany and France's accomplishments, hinting at a possible longing for a son instead of so many daughters, as his daughters are not held in such high esteem, “[To France] for you, great king”.

The adoption of the Fool as a male surrogate child (which is rather fitting considering the Fool's childish nature) would make him feel more as though he has accomplished a male dominancy in his family status. Within King Lear, there is a close link between Cordelia and the Fool, leading to its reference as a double role and the Fool and Cordelia being regarded as one person (although this theory cannot be proved so it is only widely speculated). The audience never sees Cordelia and the Fool onstage at the same time, conceiving an idea that Cordelia never left for France, but instead stayed by her father's side disguised as the Fool.

In Act 1 Scene 4 Lear is informed by one of his Knights that “ Since my young lady's going into France, sir, / the fool hath much pined away. ” This

<https://assignbuster.com/explore-how-shakespeares-presentation-of-the-fool-and-lears-relationship-can-be-interpreted-in-king-lear-assignment/>

introduces a physical link between the Fool and Cordelia as we notice how one appears as the other leaves. In his final words, the Fool says, " And I'll go to bed at noon", suggesting he is preparing to hang himself: noon being the highest point in the sky for the sun in the sky, and the time at which Elizabethan hangings took place, and this being at the highest point in the Fool's life, with his friends at peace.

The connection of the words has significant meaning, for at the end of the play Cordelia is hanged, linking her to the Fool's parting words and reinforcing the double role of the two characters. The Fool is noticeably absent for the remainder of the play after his proclamation while Cordelia is reinstated as a character. Cordelia, in disguise as the Fool, may have predicted or spoken a foreshadowing of her own demise before returning to her former physical self and dying as she envisioned.

Cordelia as the Fool would also have meant that she was the one giving him advice all throughout the play, chiding his foolishness and plaguing him with the irony of his selfish actions, committed against her, to make him realise his wrongdoing. Her disguise would make more sense in the way that the Fool spoke and reacted, the androgynous effects of his words would have more meaning and the feminine figure would be reinstalled into Lear's life. In both Elizabethan and Jacobean productions of King Lear,

Cordelia and the Fool were together a dual role although William Dyce argues " The Fool would have been performed by Robert Armin , the regular clown actor of Shakespeare's company, who is unlikely to have been cast as a tragic heroine" . It seems improbable that a 40 year old man would play a

<https://assignbuster.com/explore-how-shakespeares-presentation-of-the-fool-and-lears-relationship-can-be-interpreted-in-king-lear-assignment/>

young woman onstage (as women were played by young boys), however, the dual role would allow audiences to see a physical link between the two characters to support the emotional connection.

A skilled Actor would not be employed just to play the part of Cordelia, significantly minor without the input of the Fool's scenic appearances; Larry Weiss believes that it's "wasteful for an actor with the skill to play Cordelia to be unemployed for most of the Play?" This would only be such a waste if the dual role was not employed. The Fool remarks in Act 1 Scene 4: "Do'st know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet one? This can be interpreted as Cordelia, in the guise of the Fool, telling her father she is bitter about being banished, but also asking her father if he knows the difference between love and refusal to flatter. The quote also retains Cordelia's sharp wit and rebellion against her position as a woman and an inferior to her father. On the heath in Act 3 Scene 4, Edgar is disguised as Tom 'O' Bedlam and Kent as Caius in front of Lear. Cordelia dressed as the Fool would complete the fact that those loyal and closest to him have to remain in hiding and make the scene feel more visually absolute.

A dual-role would connect the two characters as both being "truth-tellers" to Lear, his personal soothsayers trying to protect him from his hubris and imminent downfall. They both act as consciences to Lear, again linking them to be the same person to look after him. The Fool gives Lear constant affection, attention and completely and utterly unconditional love, a trait most associated with family members. Cordelia's refusal to participate in Lear's 'love contest', claiming she does not possess the "glib and oily art"

as her sister do to flatter him, demonstrates how she feels she doesn't need to voice her love.

By being the Fool and taking constant care of her father, she shows a love for him greater than the supposed love of her sisters: looking after him in the storm, advising him and making him laugh in times of need. Initially, we see the Fool and Lear as a motley duo, bouncing off each other's foolishness but to Lear, his Fool shows unconditional love, greater than any other love shown in the play, and represents significant figures in his life: his son, his daughter, a friend.

When exploring the relationship between the two, it is hard to see who is the wise man and who is the fool, but supporting their own follies and flaws they help each other to a wholesome end and to a feeling of completion. Lear is lead through his cathartic experience by his fool and at the very end we are left with these raw specimens; stripped of all their pretence. It is then possible in the end to truly see the reality: neither is the wise man or the fool, they are just human beings in their purest form.

Bob, www.foolsforhire.com Enid Welsford, *The Fool in King Lear* (1935)

Roma Gill, *King Lear*, Oxford School Shakespeare Mark Morris, www.arts.ualberta.ca/morris/239/king_lear.htm

A member of The Lord

Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's theatre company, who often played the role of the fool: showing a range from natural idiots to philosophical jesters.

William Dyce, *In The Storm* Larry Weiss Richard Abrams' phrase for the two characters, *The double casting of Cordelia and Lear's Fool: a theatrical review* (1985)

<https://assignbuster.com/explore-how-shakespeares-presentation-of-the-fool-and-lears-relationship-can-be-interpreted-in-king-lear-assignment/>