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Literature, William Shakespeare



Erik Irre April 26, 1999 " Fools and Kings" Shakespeare's dynamic use of irony in King Lear aids the microcosmic illustration of not only 16th century Britain, but of all times and places. The theme that best develops this illustration is the discussion of fools and their foolishness. This discussion allows Shakespeare not only to portray human nature, but also to elicit a sort of Socratic introspection into the nature of society's own ignorance as well. One type of fool that Shakespeare involves in King Lear is the immoral fool. Edmund, for instance, may be seen as a fool in the sense that he is morally weak. His foolishness lies in the fact that he has no sense of right or justice, which rewards him with an untimely, ironic death. He discusses this as his father, Gloucester, leaves to ponder the " plotting" of his son Edgar. Edmund soliloquizes, " This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune... .. we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion." (I. ii. 32) for the sole purpose of illustrating his wickedness. Edmund realizes that his evil is self- taught. This soliloquy shows the audience Edgar's foolishness in his belief that malevolence is the force that drives one to greatness or prosperity. It also illustrates the bastard's mistaken belief that by fooling his father, he might be able to eliminate Edgar, the competition for Gloucester's title, and possibly rid himself of his father in the same act. This is a prime example of immoral foolishness in King Lear. Another type of fool in King Lear is the ignorant fool. Whereas characters such as Goneril, Regan, and Edmund are fools because of their tendency to harm others for self- gain, the ignorant foolish are not necessarily driven to evil. However, the evil are almost always driven to foolish actions. Gloucester, arguably Lear's foil, puts

forth an interesting perspective in the play. His character is presented as one who is blind to the truth, and ironically, one who becomes physically blind in the end. In actuality, it is his blindness to the truth of Edgar's love and Edmund's greed and apathy that ultimately brings about Gloucester's demise. When he says, " I have no way and therefore want no eyes, / I stumbled when I saw" (IV. i. 173), he seems to be illustrating the realization of his own foolishness. Gloucester illustrates, through his use of verbal irony, that his foolishness lies in the fact that he never truly saw anything (e. g. the true nature of Edmund or Edgar) until he was blind. Another example of Gloucester's ignorant foolishness is the misfortune he predicts at the beginning of the play. He says, " These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide... in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father" (I, ii, 103-109). This statement ironically predicts the vast majority of the play with uncanny accuracy. Shakespeare seems to be using Gloucester as a tool to provide more insight into the nature of foolishness. Another ignorant fool, and obviously one of the most important, is King Lear himself. Shakespeare deliberately uses Lear as a representation of the darker side of human foolishness. He appears to be illustrating the folly of not listening to one's inner voice, as well as discussing the corruption of power and wealth. He first demonstrates his foolishness by saying to his daughters, " Only we shall retain the name, and all the addition of a king" (I, i, 15). His wish is to maintain the kingdom without all the accompanying responsibility of the crown. However, in a more complicated

manner, Lear's foolishness is derived from his inability to see that although he was king, he was a simple man as well. As a king, he wished to have his daughters openly display an undying affection for him. He shows that his practices are derived from that of a king, in that he can only see life through the eyes of a king, not a simple man. Unfortunately for Lear, his reason comes to him in madness. He states " When we are born, we cry that we come to this great stage of fools" (IV. vi. 178-179) as if he finally had come to realization that everyone is a human being, be they king or beggar. By far the most influential medium used by William Shakespeare in the illustration and thematic development of fools and foolishness is the Fool. This character is extremely dynamic throughout the play. He is seen by Lear and others as a simple-minded idiot, in the court to entertain the king and his daughters. However, as the play progresses, the fool proves to be the wisest character in the play. Paraphrased, he says one should never judge wisdom by office. The Fool speaks some of the most insightful words in the play. He says to his " nuncle," " Thou had'st little wit in thy bald crown when thy gavest thine golden one away." (I. iv. 155-156) The fool here shows poignant insight into the position of the king, telling him that there was no justification or intelligence in Lear's giving his properties to his eldest daughters. In King Lear, the play seems to revolve around the wisdom of the Fool. He expresses his concern to Kent, stating, " Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following it" (II. ii. 261-262) The Fool's use of metaphor expresses his cognizance of the events taking place in the play. Shakespeare's use of fools and foolishness in King Lear represents an insight into popular wisdom. The character of the fool introspects our own

intelligence. Do we, for instance, know for a fact that he who holds the highest office is the most intelligent or wisest person for the job? The thematic use of foolishness also defines much about human nature. Shakespeare brings up many interesting points about the role of evil in foolishness, tacitly stating that it is not necessarily foolish deeds that lead to evil, but evil that leads to foolish deeds. The crux of the play is one can avoid playing the fool by heeding one's own inner voice. As Edgar says in the last lines of the play, " The weight of this sad time we must obey / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (V. iii. 322-323).