

Shakespearean fools through the ages essay sample

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Shakespeare is considered to be many things—including many people— but one thing that Shakespeare is not considered is a fool. Yet this would not be as great an insult as it sounds. Shakespeare wrote many “fools” into his plays, most of whom were treated respectfully. A few even had major roles in his works. Distinctions must be made within the category of fools, however: clowns, who turn farce into a precise science (think “pie in the face”); dunces, who turn their lack of intelligence into a medium for humor; and finally the princes of fooling, the court jesters, who turn fooling into a respectable profession. The jester is the restrained clown, the educated dunce. He has earned a place near the king or queen and has earned an equally prestigious place in the literature of Shakespeare: Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, and the Fool in *King Lear*. Many contribute to the appearance of Shakespeare’s court jesters.

Touchstone, Feste, and *Lear’s Fool* are products of history, results of personal influences on Shakespeare, integral parts of their plays, and characters that deserve a closer look. Shakespeare was always apparently sensitive to history, whether in his own interpretations in his history plays or his tendency to take old, established stories and make them his own. Shakespeare then must have been aware of the jester in earlier incarnations. There was the comic chorus of ancient Greek plays, which commented on the foibles of human nature. Beatrice Otto, an authority on court jesters, found evidence of fourteenth-century Chinese plays that have conversations between jesters and their emperors (188).

Closer to Shakespeare's time, the medieval ages produced a great many morality plays, whose Vice characters—characters that represent the “vices” in human nature—speak and act as jesters. But the appearance of court jesters as court jesters on the English stage was rare until Shakespeare took up the pen himself. The court jesters portrayed in Shakespeare's work are mostly based on the model of jesters in his own time. Elizabethan England was home to many interesting characters, including the court jester. The jester was a specialized fool, the clown to the crown, placed one step below the queen—literally, since he normally sat at the queen's feet. Though some jesters were merely simple fools—singled out for their interesting physical abnormalities or bawdy humor that a king or queen found amusing—most court jesters were chosen for their wit and wiles. Those chosen jesters are an enigma in ways: valued for their jokes and silly nature, and yet they still had the ear of the queen.

In many ways, the court jester was one of the few people allowed to speak frankly to a monarch without fear of punishment. Protected behind a mask of stupidity and charisma, the intelligent jester possessed a relationship with royalty that few others could rival. One person, before Shakespeare, helped establish the court jester as a character and did so through his stage and real-life portrayal of the jester. He was Richard Tarlton, actor and favorite jester of Queen Elizabeth. Though Tarlton may not be a familiar name today, he enjoyed much fame in Elizabethan England. Richard Tarlton served as Elizabeth's favored jester from approximately 1579 to his death in 1588. Tarlton was known to speak out to the queen on occasion. In one instance,

noted by Beatrice Otto, Tarlton told the queen that he believed she was falling too much under the sway of Walter Raleigh. For this insult, Tarlton received only a royal sulk (203). Thus, Shakespeare's model of jesters speaking out to their respective monarchs has precedence.

Tarlton's jesterdom would provide Shakespeare a historically-accessible model for his jester characters. But Tarlton's influence on Shakespeare was not confined to his role as a jester alone. Tarlton was also an actor, mostly portraying (what else?) jesters on stage. Another aspect of Tarlton's popularity and influence was his fame as an actor. Otto claims that Tarlton became "a household name in taverns, theaters and the court, welcomed at the palace, recognized in the street" (203). Tarlton was often noted as a talented actor, but he specialized in the role of the fool. Most likely, his real-life experience as a court jester fed into his acting talents. Many of his lines were improvised or changed as he saw fit to make a joke.

Shakespeare is often credited with creating the literary figure of the court jester, but Tarlton's influence is well worth acknowledging. Though Tarlton died before Shakespeare wrote the roles of Feste, Touchstone, and the Fool, each character shows some of Tarlton's influence. Another person partly responsible for the creation of Shakespeare's court jesters was Robert Armin, a student of Tarlton and an actor well-suited to the motley coat. Armin was the son of a tailor and became an apprentice to a goldsmith (Gray 676), but fortunately he was saved from this career by Tarlton. He trained under the actor-jester for the last four years of Tarlton's life. Soon after Tarlton's teachings, Armin became a member of Shakespeare's company sometime

between 1599 and 1600. Tarlton may have trained Armin, but the student made a name for himself. Even before Tarlton's influence, Armin appeared to have a deep interest in the fools and madmen of the world. He felt certain empathy toward freaks and "naturals," those born with a lower intelligence or mental illness.

He claimed one such "natural," John O' the Hospital, as an "old acquaintance" (Gray 682) and supposedly pulled much of his acting from this friend. The majority of his works, *Nest of Ninnies* and especially *Fooles Upon Fooles*, deal with his observance of these "naturals." Just like his teacher, Armin seemed to have gained his ability to act as a fool through study of real-life fools. Armin's acting, though, was a little more reserved than Tarlton's style. As a result, Armin stuck to his lines much more than Tarlton ever did. This fact more than anything might have pushed Shakespeare to create better roles for his fools, as he knew that Armin would adhere more closely to the role. Austin Gray claims that Armin actually played the roles of *Touchstone*, *Feste*, and *the Fool* (676). What is not known for certain is the amount of influence Armin had on the creation of these roles. There is a clear shift in the character of Shakespeare's "fools" at the same time as Armin's arrival in Shakespeare's company.

Otto believes that Armin at least influenced the creation of *Touchstone*, which can almost be proven by dates (205). No court jester appeared in Shakespeare's works before *As You Like It*, which was written in the same year that Armin joined *The Chamberlain's Men*. Gray goes much further in his assessment of Armin's influence. Gray states, "[Shakespeare] allowed

[Armin] the fullest self-expression in his plays," suggesting that Armin is more responsible for the roles than Shakespeare, a possibility made easier to believe by Shakespeare's nature. As stated above, "The Bard" was sensitive to the world around him and would make full use of a talent like Armin. Shakespeare must have seen a "fresher, more sympathetic" jester in Armin, due in part to Armin's sympathy for naturals, which helped affect the change in his characterization of the court jesters (Gray 683). Another clue to Armin's influence is the amount of singing attributed to the characters of Feste, Touchstone, and the Fool. The most obvious example of this is in the songs of Twelfth Night.

Armin was known to have a beautiful singing voice and to be a writer of ballads; it is very likely that Feste, who sings multiple times in the play and is also complimented upon his voice, was created with Armin in mind for the role. Gray assumes that the role was created for Armin, and his only doubt is as to whether or not Armin wrote the songs (684). Likewise, King Lear points to an Armin influence, in that not only the Fool but also Lear and "Tom O' Bedlam" are touched by a bit of madness and yet treated sympathetically. Once again Gray points out that this obviously shows Armin's persuasion: "Here is Armin's own humor of madness run riot" (684). Armin's fascination with naturals and his talent at singing are commonalities that point to his influence in these works, but he was not Shakespeare's only motive for creating the roles of the Fool, Feste, and Touchstone.

Shakespeare was no doubt influenced in many different ways to create his court jesters, including historic models and new acting talents, but most

likely the greatest factor behind the creation of the characters lies within the works. Shakespeare could not create cookie-cutter models of court jesters and just paste them into his shows. He had to create fully-fleshed characters, and they must be understood as characters. Each serves a distinct purpose in their respective works, which can be derived from their character traits, interactions, and how they compliment the purpose of the work. As You Like It's Touchstone, chronologically Shakespeare's first jester, serves his role as less of a court jester and more of a commentator on all human existence. Indeed, he is the only jester to abandon his master, Duke Ferdinand, escaping to the woods of Arden. It can be argued, though, that he is merely following the orders of his mistress, Celia. In many ways, it appears that Shakespeare is feeling out a use for the court jester in As You Like It.

At first glance, Touchstone may appear to be a poorly written, or at the least, unlikable character, mostly because of his vulgarity and the treatment he receives from his superiors. Evidence supporting this view can be found early in the play. His first appearance is not very impressive. He is easily overrun by Celia after a brief exchange of wit. Gray, who believes that Touchstone was Armin's greatest role, asserts that it could be the attempt to hide his wits in Frederick's court that keeps the jester from showing as much of his intelligence as he could (885). Another explanation for the absence of Touchstone's biting wit in the beginning of the play is that Armin joined the play after Shakespeare had started writing it.

It is entirely possible that the beginning is a setup for the more physical fools of Shakespeare's earlier works before he had Armin in mind (Gray 884).

Touchstone's complaints upon his arrival in Arden seem to prove his "physical" weakness: Rosalind. O Jupiter, how weary are my spirits! Touchstone. I care not for my spirits, if my legs were not weary. (II. iv. 1-3) And a little later Touchstone again complains: " Ay, now am I in Ardenne; the more fool I. / When I was at home I was in a better place; but / travelers must be content" (II. iv. 14-16). This sense of weakness further supports the possibility that Shakespeare was experimenting and had not yet perfected his court jester characters and the level of wit that appears in the later characters of Feste and the Fool. Harold Bloom argues that Touchstone is a character full of mostly " indeliberate travesties" and calls him " truly rancid" (218). Bloom also makes many references to Rosalind's besting of Touchstone, declaring that she is superior in wit and the ways of the world.

Bloom states that Touchstone's main purpose is to serve as his namesake—a touchstone is one who can determine pure gold from mixed alloys—proving the " true gold of Rosalind's spirit" (218). Did Shakespeare create the character of Touchstone, his first court jester, only to make others look better by comparison? It is unlikely, considering that there are many defenses to Touchstone's seeming inferiority. Many of Touchstone's qualities, such as his vulgarity and tendency to complain, may hide a greater purpose. Shakespeare most likely created Touchstone to serve as a parodist. Robert Hillis Goldsmith supports Touchstone's early complaints and vulgar nature as an attack on the pastoral tradition. Many of the characters make reference to the beauty of the pastoral, a common theme in Elizabethan England. Duke Senior speaks of his exile like a vacation to enjoy the beauty

of nature: Hath not old custom made this life more sweet Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods More free from peril than the envious court?

And this our life, exempt from public haunt, Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (II. i. 2-5, 15-20) Touchstone destroys this romantic ideal by complaining of walking through the forest and wishing he were back in the court. Touchstone further displays his wit and contempt for Arden—sometimes suggested to represent Eden—when Corin asks what he thinks of the forest: Corin. And how like you this shepherd's life, Master Touchstone? Touch. Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd's life, it is naught. In respect that it is a solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. As it is a spare life, look you, It fits my humour well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach. (III. ii. 11-21) The jester's complaints are transformed to parody, laughing off the romantic ideals of Arden. Touchstone's true ability is to sort through the inferior "alloy" of pastoral life to find the "gold" of reality. But the pastoral tradition is not the only Elizabethan ideal that withers from Touchstone's genius.

Another subject that dances upon Touchstone's biting tongue is romanticism. Touchstone reveals his contempt for romance almost as soon as he enters Arden. Touchstone and Rosalind come upon the shepherd Silvius and hear him complain of the pangs of love in melodramatic manner. Rosalind

responds as the Renaissance romantic: “ Alas, poor shepherd, searching of thy wound, / I have by hard adventure found mine own” (II. iv. 41-42), to which Touchstone counters in a much less romantic bent: “ We that are true lovers / run into strange capers. But as all is mortal in nature, / so is all nature in love mortal in folly” (II. iv. 50-52). And when Rosalind declares that she is in love with this pastoral romance— “ Jove, Jove, this shepherd’s passion / is much upon my fashion” (II. iv. 56-57)— Touchstone complains of boredom—“ it grows something stale with / me” (II. iv. 58).

Touchstone’s social satire touches upon the more general aspect of marriage toward the end. Shakespeare is using Touchstone’s vulgarity and sarcastic nature to reflect upon society. Gray believes that in the “ sardonic philosopher” of Touchstone, Shakespeare created the “ household jester in excelsis” (683). The vulgar clown of Bloom’s description is instead a fool who is too aware of the folly around him to speak so lightly of it. Another aspect of Touchstone’s character is revealed through the treatment he receives from the other characters. He is degraded by Rosalind and Celia, while also being extolled by Jacques. Touchstone’s jokes and manner constantly earn him dismissals and censoring from Rosalind and Celia. This can be explained easily as the court jester’s acquiescence to his superiors, a question of hierarchy, not intelligence.

Goldsmith declares this behavior to be the duty of the jester: “ Fools served a double function; to entertain their masters or mistresses and at the same time to minister to their sense of self importance” (885). Just as with Tarlton, Touchstone often goes against his mistress’s wishes, but Touchstone is

quickly silenced, especially at the beginning of the play. This is not to say that Touchstone is a weak character; rather, it is proof of his wisdom to know when to be silent. Touchstone makes reference to this when he describes the “degrees of the lie.

” Touchstone tells Jacques that he was willing to argue with a courtier about the cut of his beard through the first six stages of the argument—“ the Retort Courteous,” “ the Quip Modest,” “ the Reply Churlish,” “ The Reproof Valiant,” “ the Countercheck Quarrelsome,” and “ the Lie Circumstantial”—but he stopped before “ the Lie Direct,” and they were able to part in peace (V. iv. 71-80). Shakespeare shows that the court jester’s freedom to speak is not complete in the presence of royalty. Yet Touchstone has more freedom to speak of others’ follies than anyone else in the play. His power is amplified through the motley-worshipping Jacques. If Rosalind and Celia work against Touchstone’s influence, it is Jacques who constantly restores the clown’s clout. The melancholic Jacques has few moments of elation in the play, most of which come from his conversations with Touchstone.

Jacques relates his first meeting to the Duke with barely checked emotion, evident in his repetition of “ A fool, a fool, I met a fool i’th’ forest, / A motley fool” (II. vii. 12-13). Jacques dotes upon the life of a fool, becoming “ ambitious for a motley coat” (II. vii. 43). He even suggests that a jester could save the world from itself: “ Invest me in my motley. Give me leave / To speak my mind, and I will through and through / Cleanse the foul body of th’infected world” (II. vii. 58-60). Jacques is reflecting upon the power and license of the court jester. Under the guise of feigned madness or simply in

the name of humor, the jester can bring the faults of any man, high or low, into question and thus one step closer to mending. The jester enjoys another added protection from retribution because anyone who speaks against the fool is acknowledging his jokes for truth. As Jacques states: And they that are most galled with my folly, They most must laugh He that a fool doth very wisely hit Doth very foolishly, although he smart, Seem aught but senseless of the bob. If not, The wise man's folly is anatomized Even by the squandering glances of the fool. (II. vii. 50-51, 53-57) Jacques is not the only one to praise Touchstone's wit.

It seems that apart from Rosalind and Celia, Touchstone enjoys a unanimous consent to his superior wit. Corin, another shepherd, declares Touchstone to have "too courtly a wit for me" (III. ii. 68). William, Touchstone's brief rival to his wife, Audrey, is quickly and completely defeated by Touchstone's sharp tongue. Even the good Duke Senior compliments the fool, calling him "swift and sententious" (V. iv. 62). The majority of characters—discounting the weight of a main character like Rosalind—accept the view of Touchstone's possessing an intelligent, though crude, wit. In Touchstone, there is a clear shift from the bawdy, physical comedy of Shakespeare's early fools to the clever, weighty witticisms of the newer court jesters. Shakespeare only expanded upon the uses of the jester as he continued writing. Twelfth Night's Feste, the second of Shakespeare's jesters, seems to be an improvement upon the wit of Touchstone and the characterization of the court jester as well.

Feste possesses many of the same qualities as his literary father, Touchstone, and yet has his own unique traits and purposes.

Whereas Touchstone's function seems to be primarily that of a parodist and universal commentator on the human condition, Feste is a character more concerned with exposing individual folly for the betterment of his loved ones. One of the first differences presented in the character of Feste is his loyalty. Touchstone was more akin to the wandering fool, while Feste remains with the daughter of his master. Feste also appears to be looking after the wellbeing of Olivia. He is a fool that makes full use of his license to speak his mind, speaking out for Olivia. Yet his witticisms have a purpose in the play, unlike Touchstone's, whose serve mostly as passing comments. Feste appears to be the most mature and sensible character in the play, an intentional irony on Shakespeare's part in that he is the "fool" of the play. At the opening of the play, Feste has fallen out of his mistress's favor.

Feste quickly and calmly brings himself back into Olivia's good graces while also revealing her foolishness. Almost childishly Feste responds to the instructions "Take the fool away" with the simplistic "Do you not hear, fellows? Take away the lady" (I. v. 3536). Yet this proves to be part of a more elaborate witticism. Feste asks for a chance to earn his right to remain by proving Olivia to be the fool: Feste. Good Madonna, why mournest thou? Olivia. Good fool, for my brother's death. Feste. I think his soul is in hell, Madonna. Olivia. I know his soul is in heaven, fool. Feste. The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen. (I. v. 62-68) In this way, Feste displays his wit, reclaims his

mistress's favor, and shows her melancholy to be unnecessary. Olivia even defends Feste's right to speak in such a manner—" There is no / slander in an allowed fool, though he do nothing but / rail" (I. v. 89-91).

Though this freedom is a common theme with Shakespeare's jesters, Feste seems to make most constructive use of the license, which is another difference between Feste and Touchstone. Feste's humor is bright compared to Touchstone's sardonic wit; he relieves melancholy as surely as Touchstone produces it. There is none of the vulgarity or aggressive nature of Touchstone. Bloom describes Feste as " the most charming of all Shakespeare's fools" (244). Even in the one scene of the play where Feste uses his wit deceptively—tricking Malvolio into thinking he is Sir Topaz—Feste shows his geniality by granting the imprisoned Malvolio his wish for pen and paper. The songs of Feste also prove his merry nature. Touchstone sings briefly, while Feste has many opportunities to sing and even closes the play in song. Feste is even able to delicately admonish Duke Orsino's love-sickness in song.

When asked for a love song, he sings a song about dying from unrequited love. Alan S. Downer believes the song to be " mocking, indirectly, the Duke's passion" (263). Feste again appears to try to rescue a character from " the melancholy god" with common sense. Feste's wit is gentler than Touchstone's, but it is no less sharp. Feste's upbeat witticism possesses all the power of Touchstone's sarcastic humor, despite the lack of aggression. The proof of Feste's genius—as with most things—is in the pudding or, rather, the punning. Olivia breaks out of her melancholy and manages to

affect the swooning Orsino. Perhaps his greatest genius is in his playful banter with Viola: Viola. Dost thou live by thy tabor? Feste. No, sir, I live by the church. Viola. Art thou a churchman? Feste. No such matter, sir. I do live by the church, for I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church. (III. i. 2-7) Feste then examines his own wit, making the observation that “ A sentence is / but a cheveril glove to a good wit. How quickly the / wrong side may be turned outward!” (III. i. 11-13).

This intelligent, light-hearted wit is appreciated by all of the characters in the play and yet still allows Feste to complete his function in the play, which, according to Downer, is to expose the “ artificial, foolish attitudes of the principal figures” (264). Unlike Goldsmith’s description of Touchstone, who panders to his superiors, Feste uses his less aggressive jesting to bring out their faults. Feste, in jest, is just as effective as Touchstone. But the faults of the nobles in Twelfth Night and the follies of man in AsYou Like It cannot compare to the failings of the characters in King Lear; Lear’s jester, in turn, must have a much stronger presence and greater wit to deal with the inadequacies of that world. The Fool of King Lear can surely be seen as a culmination of Shakespeare’s fools.

Lear’s Fool expands upon the already-explored avenues of position, humor, and purpose. In comparison with the previous jesters, the Fool seems to be a more grave character, which could be due to the severe difference between the genres of Shakespeare’s comedies and tragedies. Yet the characters of the jesters still have similarities that traverse that gap. As with Feste, Lear’s Fool is loyal to his master, but the Fool’s loyalty seems stronger than Feste’s.

The Fool shares a strong bond with Lear. Whereas both Feste and Touchstone seem unwelcome in their first appearance, the Fool is emphatically sought after at the start of King Lear. The Fool and King Lear share a relationship not seen before in the other jesters and their masters. Lear is aware enough of his fool's emotions that he knows that the Fool misses Cordelia (I. iv. 71-74). Often Lear uses the phrase "boy" and even "my pretty knave" to refer to his fool, and Fool replies with "nuncle," creating a sense of a surrogate father-child relationship. Yet the relationship is almost backwards at most points of the play.

The relationship is more like that of an impatient student and a witty teacher, with Lear playing the part of the student. When Lear dispassionately responds to his fool, "Teach me," he assumes the role of student but not the duties, for he never truly listens (I. iv. 136). The teacher then begins to mock the student, provoking some of Lear's anger and perhaps insanity. In this, the Fool exercises the most thorough license to speak out of any of Shakespeare's jesters. Though Lear may become angered by his fool, he never stops caring for him. This is evident at the end of the play, where Lear evokes the presence of the absent fool as he comments on Cordelia's dead body: "And my poor fool is hanged" (V. iii. 281). The Fool proves to be just as loyal, staying with Lear throughout his exile and being the first one to ask him to come out of the storm.

The only exception is the Fool's strange disappearance after Act III. This relationship also makes the Fool the court jester who speaks out the most to his master. The Fool does not approve of Lear's decision to give his kingdom

to Regan and Goneril and repeats his admonitions, despite the anger it causes Lear: Fool. How now, nuncle? Would I had two coxcombs and two daughters. Lear. Why, my boy? Fool. If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself. There's mine; beg another of thy daughters. Lear. Take heed, sirrah—the whip. Fool. Truth's a dog must to kennel. He must be whipped out when the Lady Brach may stand by th' fire and stink.

Lear. A pestilent gall to me! (I. iv. 106-115) The Fool does not fear the whip and speaks (as Goneril titles him) as the “alllicensed fool” (I. iv. 183). Yet he does this out of love for his king, and it may only be the king's returned love that holds back the whip. As much as Lear cares for his knave, the other characters show little love for the king's fool. The Fool suffers everything from outright abuse to complete disregard at from the other characters in King Lear. Regan and Goneril turn out the Fool as an extension of their father. Goneril uses her father's jester as part of an excuse to convince Lear to abandon most of his attendants: “Not only, sir, this your alllicensed fool, / But other of your insolent retinue / Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth / In rank and not-to-be endured riots” (I. iv. 198-201). Goneril uses the title “all-licensed” to condemn Lear for allowing his fool too much privilege. Regan does not even acknowledge the Fool when she turns Lear away. Kent seems to merely endure the Fool. And Edgar, as Tom O' Bedlam, competes with the fool in both wit and lunacy. That touch of lunacy separates the Fool from the other two jesters.

King Lear presents a world gone mad; it is fitting that the jester should be touched by that madness, if not so much as other characters. His random

outbursts into song support the sense that the Fool is not thinking in a linear, rational fashion. Another instance of his madness is in the strange prophecy in Act III, where the Fool makes reference to Albion and Merlin. It is a rant that appears out of place in the rest of the play. Yet for all his seeming madness, the Fool seems more rational than Lear toward the middle of the play. Shakespeare again captures the irony of a “fool” being saner than the leading characters. But irony is not the only purpose behind the Fool’s comparative sanity. Another purpose for the Fool’s “voice of reason” in a mad world is translating Lear and the play to the audience. Bloom calls the Fool a “surrogate” who voices the audience’s true feelings (494). The Fool constantly reinforces Lear’s self-condemnation with various images and catechisms, baring his folly to the audience: “Thou hast pared thy wit o’ both sides and left / nothing i’t’h’ middle” (I. iv. 168-169); “Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst / been wise” (I. v. 43-44); and “May not an ass know when the cart draws the / horse?” (I. iv. 206-207).

When Lear rails against the storm, it is the Fool who begs the king to come inside: “He that has a house to put ‘s head in has a good / headplace” (III. ii. 25-26). The Fool also has moments that seem beyond the grasp of a simple fool: deep reflections upon Lear. Before his mysterious departure, the Fool predicts his king’s descent to madness: “This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen” (III. iv. 73). The Fool does indeed tell the king the blunt truth as often as he covers it with riddles. In one of the most poignant exchanges of the play, the Fool delivers to his king an answer that is both truth and riddle. Lear begs of anyone, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?”

to which the Fool answers succinctly, "Lear's shadow" (I. iv. 212-213). This seems to be part of a strange bond shared by the Fool and Lear. Whether it is simply a long friendship that allows them to understand each other or Lear's touching upon the madness usually associated with a fool, the Fool and Lear comprehend one another so well that they nearly speak as one person.

Almost all of Lear's inner workings of his mind are addressed to the Fool. Indeed, Lear's first knowledge of his daughter's betrayal is conveyed through the Fool. After Goneril reveals her intentions to turn away Lear's attendants, there is a brief pause, into which the Fool sings: "'The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it had its head bit off by its young.' / So, out went the candle, and we were left darkling" (I. iv. 213-5). The Fool is telling Lear that it is the king's own fault for being turned away: "Thou mad'st thy / daughters thy mothers" (I. iv. 169-70). Though the Fool is hiding the truth in the guise of metaphor, Lear seems to understand the words of his Fool better than the plain ones of his daughter. The jester's words are not always so weighty, though. Unlike the other two court jesters, the Fool resides in the world of tragedy, and his humor serves a different purpose than that of the jester in a comedy. Humor is often employed in a tragedy to relieve the seriousness created by the nature of a dramatic situation, but in King Lear, the Fool's humor has a different effect. Otto believes that the Fool's humor actually leads into greater suffering (207).

Is a tragedy not heightened by moments of levity? The Fool surely plays a double role in that instance. He creates not only the humor but often the

tragic element as well. Most of his jokes are insults to Lear, making his humor sound bitter. If he alleviates the king of his worries for a moment, it is “only to then bring him back down to earth with a thud of truth” (Otto 208). Lear’s Fool serves both Gray’s and Downer’s definition of the fool; he both entertains his master and makes his faults glaringly obvious. Of the three fools, it is impossible to hold one as the standard or to determine which source—Tarlton, Armin, or Shakespeare—was more accountable. Does one jester come closer to the historic model presented by Tarlton?

Touchstone seems the more restrained (in the sense of not speaking out against the royalty) and believable of the jesters in this respect, yet Feste shows more of the livelihood and actual dealings within the politics of court expected of a higher jester. The Fool appears to be too strong a character to have truly existed and survived the temperament of a true king. Besides, Otto claims it is not possible to draw the line between the historical and literary fool: It is inconceivable that the literary and stage fool would not be influenced by the historical jester, or exert influence on him, like two circles, one historical and one literary, that would never overlap...history and literature are not enclosed in impermeable membranes. (203-204)

Shakespeare’s jesters could be representations of true court jesters or merely literary reflections used to further the dramatic situations of his plays; it is impossible to determine which is more accurate, and it is unnecessary. While it is interesting to pursue the historicity of Shakespeare’s fools, it is unlikely that Shakespeare’s main reason for writing the characters stemmed from their actual existence.

He was a man given to imagination and is unlikely to have been content with merely repeating exactly what he saw. The historical jester was not the only inspiration for incorporating court jesters into the plays of Shakespeare.

Tarlton thrived for many years before Shakespeare wrote the plays *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *King Lear*. He had plenty of opportunity to shape an earlier jester character from the historical mold. It must have been another influence outside history that prompted the creation of Shakespeare's "roynish" clowns. Perhaps it was Armin who created the roles of Feste, Touchstone, and Lear's Fool; surely his presence is felt in each. Feste displays many qualities associated with Armin's interpretation of the court jester: intelligence, clean wit, and a love of puns. Feste has an intelligent wit that does not rely on making any vulgar jokes.

Feste's greatest jokes come from his ability to twist words, which Armin was just as wont as Shakespeare to do. The fool of *Twelfth Night* is also the most musical of the fools. Feste sings for the company of Toby, and he is asked to sing for Orsino because of his "mellifluous" voice. The other jesters of Shakespeare engage in song—Lear's Fool burst into song spontaneously and repeatedly—but only Feste is praised for his singing. The only trait that Feste does not have in common with what is known about Armin is his concern with "naturals" and madmen. It is Lear's Fool that most displays the characteristics of the madmen that Armin studied. The king's fool tortures his master without seeming to realize the effect it has, driving Lear more insane instead of helping preserve his sanity. The Fool's random songs and sometimes spontaneous outbursts also seem to be indicators that he is not

in his right mind. The Fool's madness must have come from Armin's obsession with his study of naturals.

And as Gray states: Shakespeare could have easily studied such characters for himself, but was most likely drawn to them by Armin (685). Whether Armin or Tarlton had a bigger influence in the roles is almost a moot point because Shakespeare had his own purposes within the plays for his court jesters. The roles of the jesters have individual purposes to their respective plays, though it may not be readily apparent. In *As You Like It*, Touchstone's role seems easily dismissed because he has little to do with the story line, unless his story and character are considered as foils for the others.

Touchstone finds love more easily than do any other characters in the play. Audrey suddenly appears and immediately accepts his proposal to marriage. Even though a rival suitor, William, appears at the end, he is no competition for Touchstone, especially in the brief battle of wits that ensues, from which William retires quickly and without rebuke: "God rest you merry, sir" (V. i. 57). In fact, Audrey does not even return poor William's feelings, making the competition moot.

This is an interesting foil to Silvius's nearly hopeless pursuit of Phoebe and Rosalind's careful maneuvering (which includes concealment) if not to capture, then to train her love. Touchstone also figures little into the banishment and reinstatement of the Duke. He is merely following the wishes of Celia in escaping to Arden, and from his complaints he doesn't even want to be there. Soon after reaching the forest, he leaves the company of his mistress; it appears unlikely that he will rejoin their services.

The court life that is a secondary focus to the play—ironically enough—has nothing to do with the court jester. In *Twelfth Night*, Feste seems even more disconnected from the plot than Touchstone was in his play. Feste does not even have a love interest to serve as foil to any of the characters. At first glance, he appears to be a messenger and entertainment for the court, with little else commending him. Yet as Downer suggests, the plot would not have missed him but that there would still have been a certain element missing from the play (261).

Without Feste, it is possible that Orsino and Olivia would have been stuck in a bitter melancholy with no one to reveal the absurdity of their pining. Feste uses humor to provoke the two out of their melancholy. Downer states that his purpose is to “perceive and declare the true state of affairs in the face of scorn, threats, and discouragement from the self-deluded” (262). Feste does appear to be the one character in the play not given to delusions. He reflects upon self-delusion even before he encounters it in the other characters: “Those wits that think they have [wit] do very / oft prove fools” (I. v. 30-31). Feste is also the last speaker of the entire play, finishing the story with a song: “With hey, ho, the wind and the rain...for the rain it raineth every day.” Feste is commenting on the play and the real world (V. i. 385-404). The chorus of his song—“the rain it raineth every day”—echoes after the close of the play to say that no matter what foolish lives mortals live, nature and life continue unaffected.

The Fool in *King Lear* plays a role similar to that of Feste in that the Fool affects little in way of the storyline but has an effect upon the characters.

Lear seems to be driven closer and closer to insanity; the Fool quickens Lear's decaying mind by constantly reminding him of his foolish decision to hand his kingdom over to Regan and Goneril. The Fool is not malicious. He is only trying to make Lear realize his mistake, and he is the only one to whom Lear will listen. The Fool serves as Lear's one constant companion, and despite the fact that he seems to add to Lear's descent into madness, the Fool's presence provides the king with some comfort. It is only after the Fool's disappearance that Lear goes mad. Each of these characters has a specialized purpose, but they also serve general purposes as court jesters under the fictional employ of Shakespeare. Just as they share common factors from their origin, Shakespeare's jesters have common functions as characters. Otto points out one such universal quality: "They amuse and entertain, stand on the sidelines and observe, and act as a control against which to measure the folly of others" (187).

The entertainment aspect is readily apparent. William Shakespeare loved wordplay, evident in all of his works. It makes sense that he would be attracted to characters that turn puns into a profession. Court jesters also provided Shakespeare with an instant source of irony. The court jester is a character who is defined as a fool and yet can speak with intelligence. Shakespeare often plays on the word "fool," because with the presence of jesters it becomes both a title and insult. In *King Lear*, the Fool sagely warns Lear that people who are thought loyal often run away at the first sign of danger. Kent seems a bit taken aback by the Fool's wisdom, calling it into question: "Where learned you this, Fool?" The Fool responds, mocking

Kent's current situation, "Not i' th' stocks, fool" (II. ii. 259-260). Feste likewise offers his title as insult to the Lady Olivia: "I wear / not motley in my brain. Good Madonna, give me leave / to prove you a fool" (I. v. 53-55). He is telling his mistress that though he is a fool by profession, she is the fool in fact.

In all their plays, Feste, Touchstone, and especially Lear's Fool often voice philosophical (if not common) sense, though they are "fools." The Fool tries to lead Lear aright, Touchstone rises above senseless romance, and Feste deludes the self-deluded. There is rich irony in a play where the nobility are fools and the fool is noble. Another function of the fool is as a social commentator. Bloom says that at least one of the jesters, Feste, made comments about society as "one of [Shakespeare's] rare surrogates" (245). He is speaking not only about society but for Shakespeare as well. One of the benefits of using a court jester as a social critic is that only a fool is allowed to make critical comments about royalty. Queen Elizabeth was known to keep plays from the stage if they bespoke ill of her, though she allowed it of Tarlton. Thus, Feste, Touchstone, and Lear's Fool are not censored from talking about royalty in the same way as everyone else.

The jesters' common commentary touches on certain subjects more than others. One such subject is love and its frequent eventuality, marriage. Feste muses in song that love is something to be enjoyed and not delayed: "What is love? 'Tis not hereafter, / Present mirth hath present laughter" (II. iii. 46-47). Feste is an older man speaking from experience not to waste time, as Olivia does by mourning and Orsino does by pining. He warns them, as he

does the audience, “ Youth’s a stuff will not endure” (II. iii. 51). In *As You Like It*, Touchstone makes more bitter remarks about love. He describes marriage as a confining duty; man must be married as “ the ox hath his bow, sir, the horse his / curb, and the falcon her balls” (III. iii. 72-73). Lear’s Fool is even more embittered by the thought of love. He appears to be the oldest of the jesters and must speak from the most experience, yet one of his only comments is upon women in general: “ There was never yet fair woman but she made / mouths in the glass” (III. ii. 3536). It is an old saying referring to a woman practicing a face in the mirror.

The Fool uses it to show all women as con-artists. One other subject that all the jesters speak to is the folly of man, especially the man who believes himself to be intelligent. It is one of Shakespeare’s favorite ironies: the wise fool and the foolish wiseman. Touchstone regrets that the way of the world is backwards: “ The more pity that fools may not speak wisely / what wise men do foolishly” (I. i. 82-83). Feste believes it better to think one foolish than wise. He even is so modest as to credit his thoughts to another: “ For what says Quinapalus?—‘ Better a witty fool than a foolish wit’” (I. v. 32-33).

The fools know themselves to be what they are and seem to be just waiting for the other characters to show their own foolish natures. Perhaps they know themselves better than anyone can. Shakespeare may have been inspired by outside influences to create the characters of Feste, Touchstone, and the Fool, but he fleshed out the historic model of the court jesters and transformed them into enduring literary figures. The merry Feste may be drawn primarily from Armin’s acting; the mad Fool may be a result of

studying “naturals”; and the crude Touchstone may be Tarlton’s ghost dressed in motley. Most likely they are a combination of all those elements, filtered through the imagination of a man with a talent for writing.

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