

Folly of the fool

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In Elizabethan times, the role of a fool, or court jester, was to professionally entertain others, specifically the king. In essence, fools were paid to make mistakes. Many of the fool's quips and riddles were made at the expense of the king. The "all-licensed" fool was able to get away with this due to his position (1. 4. 191). By using the character of the Fool in King Lear, Shakespeare intends to illustrate the imperfections in human nature by showing that all humans can be guilty of folly. He portrays this in a number of characters, but namely through his protagonist, Lear, in several important scenes of the play. As the tragedy opens, Lear presents his three daughters with a feigned hearing that allows them to make a public pronouncement of their love for him. He is delighted when Goneril says hers is "Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty" (1. 1. 56). He is similarly pleased with Regan's praises. Lear foolishly believes that Goneril and Regan love and respect him the way they say they do; he is oblivious to the fact that his daughters, or anyone for that matter, may lie for their own benefit. Because he believes his eldest daughters' insincere adulation, Lear's trial proves him a fool. In addition, Lear senselessly concludes that Cordelia is a disrespectful daughter and not worthy of her share of the kingdom. He is irked when she states simply that she loves her father as a daughter should, no more and no less: "I love your majesty/According to my bond, no more nor less" (1. 1. 92-93). Angry and humiliated at her lack of honor, Lear immediately exiles Cordelia from the country. Through banishment, Lear intends "to reduce her to "nothing," this being the recompense that she had earned by answering "Nothing" to his demand that she demonstrate her love for him" (Willeford 210). He then orders her to marry the King of France and finally divides the

kingdom between his two eldest daughters and their husbands. Furthermore, Lear's folly is again evident when both Goneril and Regan later shun him. As he ventures into the night's storm, he tells the Fool, "O fool, I shall go mad" (2. 2. 475). He later remarks, "My wits begin to turn" (3. 2. 68). Here, Lear begins his downward spiral toward madness. But in his madness, he discovers the essence of humanity; he descends from his majestic position to a ranking of lower class. He declares, "When we are born we cry that we are come/To this great stage of fools" (4. 6. 183-84). The Fool accurately comments, "this cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen" (3. 4. 77). Later, he quips, "Marry, he's grace and a codpiece ñ that's a wise man and a fool" (3. 2. 40-41). Ironically, the Fool and the king begin to swap positions. Up until this point, the Fool has granted Lear helpful understanding of his decisions; this establishes the question of which of the two is now the real fool. Lear asks, "Dost thou call me a fool, boy?" The Fool replies, "All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with" (1. 4. 142). The "king has been openly debased to the level of the Fool" (Willeford 218). Consequently, the Fool disappears after the storm; he has taught Lear all he knows. Through Lear's metamorphosis, Shakespeare demonstrates that being a fool enables one to see things clearly. Moreover, when Lear is reunited with Cordelia at the end of the play, "it is not as the petty tyrannical king who has banished her but as a fool who has himself been banished by such a king and who yet preserves the future of the kingdom in his enigmatic relationship with her" (Willeford 223). Lear is fooled a final time by Cordelia's death. After she is hanged, Lear appears on stage holding her dead body in his arms. He cries, Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha?

What is't thou sayst? Her voice was ever soft, Gentle and low, an excellent thing in a woman. I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.(5. 3. 269-73)Lear asks for a “ looking-glass” and “ feather” to see if she has “ no breath at all.” As Lear falls to his death, he has a glimmer of hope. He asks, “ Do you see this? Look on her: look, her lips,/Look there, look there!” (5. 3. 308-309). Rather than part in misery, Lear journeys to his final rest in contentment for he is fooled into thinking Cordelia still lives. The “ imagined breath” is brought to the audience by “ a king who is also a tragic clown to a point of folly” (Willeford 225). Although the Fool serves many functions in King Lear, his main role is that of a moral instructor to his king. He teaches him that humans are unable to know themselves completely. Through his character, Shakespeare reveals the magnitude of humanity. Works CitedShakespeare, William. King Lear. Ed. R. A. Foakes. Surrey: International Thomson Publishing Company, 1997. Willeford, William. The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969.