

The role of the fool in 'king lear'

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Originally a fool was simply a madman that was brought into court for people to laugh at their unusual antics. People would also pay to take a tour of Bedlam to view the senile patients for their entertainment. Gradually people began to take upon the role of the fool as a job.

Often living for many years in court they could become an intimate friend of the employer, yet the strict rules of society meant that he could never be called a friend, as an aristocrat could never be seen to have a servant for a close companion.

Most of what a fool would jest about would have been based on what he could see of life, which would be portrayed in a satirical manner and could possibly be offensive to the employer or onlookers. For this reason there would always be limits to the fools behavior, keeping a clear sense of authority in the relationship. This would also allow the employers to keep themselves satisfactorily distanced from the fool, making it easier to punish or replace him.

The fool could also be used to channel embarrassment away from the employer by making the fool seem foolish.

The Fool in King Lear is such a character. Named Fool and the epitome of foolishness he could be heard and yet not listened to. The court jester who ironically has good sense and offers a clear sighted commentary of Lear's actions for the benefit of both Lear and the audience.

It can be said that coming from a lower class the politics do not concern him so personally so he is able to stand back from the situations and see the

reasonable decision. He has also been serving Lear for a long time and is able to see how the relationships and politics work inside the court; therefore his advice is valuable.

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The Fool may not seem significant to the course of the play but this is purely due to the way that his wise words are discarded by Lear. Even though his advice is not acted upon it still gives the Fool a role as a measure of true loyalty and integrity, contrasting evil characters such as Goneril and Regan. The values that the Fool displays also help to highlight Lear's stubbornness as he offers useful information disregarded by Lear and his ego.

' I can tell why a snail has a house...to put's head in; not to give away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case.'

There is also a role towards the audience that the Fool must play. As a measure of heroic qualities he reassures the audience that there is some goodness in the world. On occasions he speaks to the audience directly to give warnings of the impending disasters. By addressing the audience the Fool is able to establish a relationship that no other character manages to do. He also voices the concerns of the audience on stage.

' May not an ass know when a cart draws the horse?'

The Fool tells Lear that any ' ass' could see something is wrong when a daughter gives orders to her father, but the problem is still not clear enough for Lear to act upon the Fool's words of advice.

Like Kent the Fool speaks truthfully offering wisdom, however Kent speaks as an equal. The Fool is simply a servant to the King, although in reality he is the friend that Lear has failed to recognise. So when the Fool wishes to provide Lear with a touch of wisdom he usually does it through riddles and jokes, disguising the harshness of his comments. Using these techniques stops the Fool from being banished for saying something that Lear does not want to hear, although he does get threatened with the whip if he dares go too far.

It could be said that the Fool is able to talk to Lear with his words bearing no weight on anything. If Kent was in the same position, Lear could construe that influential people in the Kingdom would listen to Kent and Lear would lose respect.

The Fool acts as a conscience full of common sense and advice always by Lear's side. This devotion shown by the Fool staying with his King also shows the audience that Lear must have a kinder side that has not yet been shown.

' So the fool follows after.'

The Fool has many qualities as a true friend to Lear. Although he is cynical about human nature he is totally loyal and utterly giving with no expectation of gratitude in return. Due to these genuine qualities, although Lear is not seen to consciously recognise them, he has managed to form a unique bond with the King. This is shown by the way that they frequently use pet names for each other. The Fool often calling Lear ' nuncle' which is an affectionate

and childish abbreviation of ' mine uncle' and Lear refers to the Fool as ' pretty knave' and ' my boy'.

This bond developed between them helps the Fool to speak his mind to Lear.

Fool: ' If thou wert my fool, nuncle, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time.'

Lear: ' How's that?'

Fool: ' Thou should'st not have been old till thou hadst been wise."

Although his role towards Lear is meant to be as an entertainer and servant he becomes more of a loyal companion and teacher. This is his main significance in the play, to be a part of Lear's growing awareness and help in the development of Lear's character. He does this by not letting Lear forget what he has done to himself, reminding Lear constantly of his tragedy. Even though being a Fool he is supposed to distract Lear from ' His heart-struck injuries', the Fool understands that mistakes must be endured and learned from, and he stays and endures with Lear.

Fool: ' But I will tarry; the fool will stay'

Although Lear learns from his mistakes, unfortunately he is too old to be able to move on from this situation. It is not the same for all the characters as Lear and the Fool are able to help Edgar endure and learn from his own mistakes. Edgar is young and has time to move on with his life, having been taught a valuable lesson by these troublesome times.

The Fool does not only help Lear face the moral dilemmas of his grief but also his practical problems. He helps him endure the physical torment of the extreme stormy weather.

We can see that Lear understands how much of a friend the Fool has been because at the beginning of the play Lear treats the Fool with a certain amount of respect, but when Lear finally begins to show any actually compassionate human kindness it is towards his Fool. It can be seen clearly in Act 3 Scene 2 as Kent tries to make Lear take shelter, and he refuses until he sees his fool shivering.

' How dost, my boy? Art cold?'

' In, boy; go first... Nay, get thee in.'

This is shown to be a major turning point in Lear growing awareness as he begins to think of others before himself.

Three characters in the play are seen to become progressively more clear-sighted through madness. In genuine madness Lear has begun to see his situation with a clear perspective, whereas Edgar, through fake madness, is able to have an insight of how his trust in Edmund, his brother, was abused and brought him to his current situation. The Fool has a professional madness which is mainly for the entertainment of others. But at times it can be seen that the Fool is so used to acting this way that he can often ramble as if he were truly mad, especially at the end of Act 3 Scene 2.

This 'prophecy' spoken by the Fool may seem to make no sense due to the fact that it is a version of the song sung by Feste in Twelfth Night, although altered to suit the present situation. Robert Armin, who played both Feste and the Fool for Shakespeare, sings the same line 'the rain it raineth every day' in both versions. He seems to step out of the play and talk directly to the audience, with an air of timelessness, about how some things never change, that Lear's situation would be the same whatever the century.

The Fool is also utilized by Shakespeare to effect the intensity of scenes. It is not possible to keep an audience in the high emotions of terror and pity throughout the play so the Fool is used to section the emotions, using his jibes as dividers, without upstaging the tragic events in the play. He provides comic relief which breaks up the tension in the scene so that each time it can be increased even more. He punctures the tension with jokes often aimed at characters such as Goneril and Regan, and sometimes they are aimed at honorable characters such as Kent.

'Where learn'd you this, fool?'

'Not I'th'stocks, fool.'

Lear's senile antics may provoke laughter in the audience, but the Fool's jokes can also be used to divert it. For example, when Lear is arguing with the storm and stripping away his clothing he could be laughed at. A simple comment by the Fool, 'tis a naughty night to swim in', channels the laughter towards the Fool and away from Lear, so that Lear still remains the centre of the tragedy.

His role remains constant throughout the play before the Fool makes an untimely departure from the stage. It is thought, by some, that this may be because the actor Robert Armin, for whom the role of the Fool was created, also played the part of Cordelia. This would be a good practical explanation as Cordelia soon returns into the play. It is also thought that when Lear has learned all of the Fool's wisdom and good judgement, the Fool's job is done and he is no longer needed, so he disappears.

Another view is that Lear has only managed to learn a little about how to truly appreciate the Fool's wisdom and companionship, and when the Fool realises that no amount of lyrical advice will help to bring Lear back to his senses, he leaves.

Whatever the real reason for the Fool's unexpected exit it is clear that his departure marks the beginning of the end for Lear. The beacon of goodness and loyalty in the play has left Lear to discover what wisdom he can find in his own madness.