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The Court Fool or Jester: a Historic Background

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The Fool as a character of the drama was the transposition of an actual being into literature. The Court-Fool was an imitation of the natural fool, a figure to which the Elizabethans were accustomed. The Middle-Ages knew the simple idiot well: he belonged to the social group and was considered an object of fun, pity and veneration. In the dark ages of superstition the first recorded instance of the custom of keeping in one's house individuals whose function foreshadowed the Court-Fool's, dates back to "the arrival of a mysterious little pigmy called the Danga at the court of Dadkiri-Assi, a Pharaoh of the Fifth Dynasty." (1) It appears that the Danga was valued by the Egyptians because of his strange physical appearance and because he had been found in mysterious lands that stretched in the south of the country. Henceforth, the dual nature that characterizes Danga discloses itself. He was simultaneously an object of laughter whose jests entertained the Pharaoh and an object of veneration mingled with religious or superstitious awe.

As a matter of fact, laughter and superstition were closely related at this stage of mental development when physical deformities and mental imbecility appealed to both mockery and respectful dread.

In addition, idiots and physically abnormal beings were considered a protection against the Evil-Eye because they were too miserable to excite divine jealousy. In that respect the "half-wit" plays an essential part which consists in abusing his rich and powerful master instead of praising him, thus diverting the divine wrath from him. The half-wit was fooled into attracting divine jealousy on himself. Mr. Welsford sets forth a definition: "a permanent scapegoat whose official duty is to give out continually at his superiors in order to bear ill-luck on his own unimportant shoulders." (2)

The half-wit's function which consisted in railing at his master was later progressively to evolve into what is known as a certain licence of speech which is characteristic of the Renaissance fool. Not only was the character's constant railing encouraged by the masters who deliberately courted vituperation in order to gain good luck but his "a priori" meaningless babbling was thought to contain a hidden meaning. There was "a widespread notion [...] that the lunatic is an awe-inspiring figure whose reason has ceased to function normally because he has become the mouthpiece of a spirit, or power external to himself, and so has access to hidden knowledge, especially to knowledge of the future." (3)

The vision of the insane was somewhat akin to that of the Delphian Pithy whose erratic speech was interpreted as a divine message. Reason and especially discursive reason, the Greeks' "logos", was considered an obstacle to the achievement of higher knowledge by those who regarded insane people as being endowed with greater and direct insight into a higher truth.

The jester's traditional vituperation against his master in order to protect him from the Evil-Eye, mingled with the belief which held him as having access to a hidden, esoteric knowledge led him to adopt the function of the satirist. His "privileged" relationship with the divine powers enabled him to criticize and judge human acts and

behaviours from the safe stand-point of his supernatural knowledge which permitted him to see the truth and to distinguish between appearances and reality.All those popular beliefs and superstitions contributed to the transposition of the Court-Fool from reality onto the stage.

There is yet one last point to be studied: the Fools' Societies of the Middle-Ages which borrowed their satirical turn of mind from the jester's ancestors.

By the beginning of the Renaissance the fool had become a fashion in society and an obsession in literature through the influence of the Feast of Fools and of the Spirit of Carnival as descended from the Kalends and the Saturnalia of pagan Rome which later on presided over the birth of the Lord of Misrule. Shakespeare's *Twelth Night* in its title directly refers to what Lucian in his Saturnalia called the "Liberties of December", a merry festival, a time of all-licenciousness when the winter darkness was illumined by the restoration of the Golden reign of Saturn: for a short while masters and slaves changed places and a mock-king, the observe version of the actual king and a sort of counter power, ruled over a topsy-turvy world.

The mental process which lies under these ritual folk festivals consists mainly of two points, namely a common belief in a cyclical time, both primitive and religious, and from a social point of view this "sacred time" was considered a sort of catharsis which cured the community of its imperfections and injustices.

Yet it must be remarked that the notion of misrule did not contain any seed of social disorder. It merely represented the reversed and symbolic image of the natural order, the obverse version of social and spiritual powers. Far from being clamours and claims to change the actual order of things, to shake the framework of social hierarchy, the Feasts of Fools and Carnivals were a means to secure the social order in the sense that they were a conventionalized form of festivity which took place within the social community itself and which permitted an "illusory" and transitory exchange of roles and status. The Lord of Misrule was not a Lord of Unruliness and the transitory reign of folly represented tse totality of the concepts of power and reason, the re-unification of the obverve and reverse faces of these concepts.

Nevertheless the "philosophical" aspect of these ritual and traditional folk festivals must not prevent us from noticing that such "serious" matters were expressed through laughter and irony, a method initiated by Erasmus who powerfully stressed the importance of the dialectic between reason and folly/madness and who insisted on the appropriateness of laughter and irony when dealing with man's Reason.

Therefore the Court-Fool/Jester was to become a sign in the Elizabethans' minds, the symbol of an all-licenced critic, whose speech, considering the enduring superstitious belief which related him to supernatural powers, connected human beings with the spiritual world of Ideas, as well as with higher Truth.

Lastly, a study of the Court-Fool in general has no right to ignore Shakespeare's contribution to the character's development along the guidelines provided by Erasmus in his *Praise of Folly* - "soli simplices ac veridici": in a misguided world the fool is the only wise being - and by Sebastian Brant in Das Narrenschiff - "stultorum numerus est infinitus", referring to a fallen humanity. As a result the dramatic function of the Court-Fool is no longer justified merely as a comic function but sets forth the character as one whose speech can attain deep regions of truth, be he aware of it or not.

Superficially the main characteristic of the Fool's speech seems to be its total lack of organization and its irrelevance. Yet, this seeming wildness and lack of formality conceal a higher degree of lucidity and a very acute insight. In keeping with the tradition

according to which the Fool was descended from seers and prophets, the Fool uses metaphors whose meaning is not apparent at first and which sound like an irrelevant rigmarole. The fact that the Fool never expresses his thought directly in plain words can be accounted for in two ways: tradition insists that the Fool could be whipped for his insolence, his metaphoric language is thus a sort of protection. By giving his speech an ambiguous turn, by not making his criticism violent, the Fool could speak his mind and avoid the whipping. Besides the use of metaphors is in keeping with the opinion which considers the Fool a prophet, a seer. Like the Pithy of Delphi's, the Fool's insight, a divine gift, is expressed in obscure speech. His meaningful lack of formality opposes the other characters' meaningless formality.

As far as language can also be considered an attitude to life, two conclusions can be drawn concerning the Fool's outlook on life. It is first evident that our jesters are very fastidious as far as precision of language is concerned; they are very careful to use the words according to their first direct meaning. This reveals a determination on their part to remain close to reality. The Fool does no trust the words when they become independent of reality. This is a condemnation of hypocrisy in so far as the hypocrites use language not as a direct reference to reality but as an independent entity which signifies itself instead of signifying reality. Feste, in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* proves our point further:

> [...] and words have grown so false I am loathe to prove reason with them. (III, i, 28-29)

Language is a poisoned gift which can be corrupted as it is by the wicked daughters in *King Lear* and by Osric in *Hamlet* for instance. When language has become nothing but formal, it has also become a mask, it has been corrupted from its original function which consists in revelation and communication.

We can now consider as logical the fact that the Fool's speech lacks formality. Not only is the wildness of his speech in keeping with his "folly", but it is also, under the circumstances of the plays, the sign of his truthfulness. In the topsy-turvy world of our plays formality can be equated with hypocrisy, whereas lack of formality which privileges substance over form can be equated with truth and shows a determination to found communication on a firm basis.

The Fool's speech is also a comment on reality and this is the second function of the equivocations, quibbles and metaphoric use of language of which Feste is the master. We can sense the influence of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* in the technique of transvaluation of values, artfully illustrated by Feste through the image of the "cheveril glove" (III, i, 13-15) and which was prompted by sixteenth century scepticism. According to the transvaluation technique and to the fact that Erasmus allows Folly to speak for itself, what was wise turns out to be folly and what had seemed evil turns out to be good, and vice-versa. The Fool's speech with its constant hinting at the double nature of words and reality illustrates the Erasmian advice to qualify one's speech in order not to commit oneself to any given side of reality. This is a warning against man's tendency to believe that he alone possesses the truth and an urgent command to qualify and reserve our judgment since we are never totally sure that we have broached every aspect of a question. At the same time the attitude which consists in always searching for the opposite of a value is a claim for moderation. As Erasmus pretends to espouse the most outrageous Epicurean licences in order to show the fallacies of their Stoic restraint and to qualify the Stoic virtue, the Fool's use of equivocations and quibbles, issued from the same trend of thought, marks that the frontier between wisdow and folly, good and evil is far from being clear-cut.

Erasmus and the Fool call for moderation, understanding and reflection. The form of the Fool's speech itself in so far as it prevents the meaning from being understood at once, calls for reflection and reserve. In displaying to our eyes the complexity of reality - we agree with Feste that "Nothing that is so, is so". (IV, i, 9) - the Fool warns us against our own judgment.

After outlining the function of this lack of formality and apparent meaninglessness, the last point in our study of the Fool's speech will focus on the semantic field used by the Fool and his frequent use of songs and proverbial wisdom. Indeed, it must be noticed that the Fool's semantic field is that of Nature; The use of animal imagery for instance, as examplified in *King Lear,* (I, v, 25-30), in *Hamlet* (II,ii, 202-204) can be accounted for in two ways: in Hamlet's case, most specifically, the animal imagery hints at the folly of his interlocutor and at his debased nature. Since reason is a divine gift and the capacity that differentiates man from the beasts, Polonius and the evil characters of the play are associated with beasts. Feste and Lear's Fool also hint at the lack of wit of their interlocutors but another very important theme must be pointed out as far as animal imagery is concerned. It seems that hypocrisy is located geographically: the Fool postulates an equation between hypocrisy and the Court, truth and Nature. The Fool, a natural being in so far as he was originally simple, opposes through his choice of words, the world of hypocrites, courtiers and flatterers and the world of Nature. This is to be related to the proverbial wisdom displayed by the Fool, the wisdom of common people who have nothing to do with the corrupted and debased world of the Court. The simplicity of his vocabulary contrasts with the sophistication of the courtier. In *Twelfth Night,* Feste mocks Orsino's refined and bombastic speech, in *King Lear,* Kent who takes over the role of the Fool or wise-fool for the occasion imitates Oswald's preciosity and pomposity (II,ii, 102-107), in a fashion that echoes Hamlet's playful imitation of Osric (V,ii, 112-120). And it is still possible to derive another equation from the previous one since the Jester embodies paradoxical wisdom, homeliness, moderation in judgment, conformity to the laws of Nature, once we take into account the Fool's leaning towards music and songs, irrational modes of expression since they only appeal to the senses and feelings in contrast with the rational, discursive reasoning of the wicked characters.

Eventually the Fool's speech offers a very valuable piece of information in our attempt at defining and placing the character and the nature and meaning of his folly.In a world where all values have been turned upside-down the Fool-Jester stands as the representative of wisdom; this wisdom he affirms against flattery, against rashness of judgment, against ambition, prejudice and hypocrisy. His wisdom is the Erasmian wisdom of the XVIIth century which praises moderation, homeliness, laughter and awareness of one's limits. The Erasmian principles are synthetized in the Shakespearian Jester-both fool and wise man, an entertaining commentator, critic and moral touchstone. Thus is the Fool the spirit of the play, the living symbol of the school of thought which insisted that man is not merely a reasonable being.

NOTES

(1) Enid Welsford, *The Fool, His Social and Literary History,* London, Faber and Faber, first edition 1935, present edition 1968, p. 56.
(2) *Ibid.,* p. 74.
(3) *Ibid.,* p. 76.