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Shakespearean Fool: The Double Edged Carnavalesque¹ Sword

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to study the Shakespearean fool with reference to the Fool in King Lear. My basic premise would be to show how far Shakespeare has been successful in subverting the fool's role from a mere entertainer to a philosopher who had deep insights into the workings of human mind. The paper would deal with an analysis of these fools as subalterns who were bestowed with a carnivalesque double edged sword by Shakespeare.

Protected behind a masque of stupidity and charisma, the intelligent jester possessed a relationship with royalty that few others could rival. They feature as privileged critics in the plays who speak the truth of people around them; unmasking the social realities. The groundlings during Shakespearean time reveled in the privileged licensed speech of the fool. They sort of identified in the freedom of his speech in spite of his lower status in the social hierarchy. Harold Bloom calls the Fool a "surrogate" who voices the audience's true feelings. The fool was a subtle teacher, reality instructor and a mentor. Thus, Shakespeare gave the commoners a dream of freedom of expression through the fool.

Michael Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory would be a valuable tool to show how Shakespeare had been instrumental in many ways for the discontinuation of the colonial mindset that was prevalent during his time. Shakespeare's deep-rooted humanism allowed him to give voice to the silenced subaltern through his creation of the licensed fool. Shakespeare has not only exposed their subalternity but also fused these characters with energy so that they can speak. The fool becomes a double edged sword to ruthlessly critique colonial underpinnings. Hence, Shakespeare has most constructively used the license to speak one's mind and this freedom and power of expression has been given rightly to a subaltern – The Fool.

Keywords: Subaltern, postcolonial, carnivalesque, subversion

Shakespeare has been an industry for critics from all camps and ages. His works have been like a flag post for critics and theorist who have tried to hoist their theories and ideologies taking his support. And his genius has been so remarkable that he has failed none; be it postcolonial, feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist, psychoanalysts to name a few. The relevance of the bard increases with the advancement of theory. The generative capabilities of Shakespeare make him the fountain head repository of research.

In any post-colonial scrutiny attempts are made to study history and culture from below. Yet the dramatic texts of Shakespeare are still being read from above, i.e. critical scrutiny persistently favors to articulate principal characters of a play over the minor figures. The object of this study is to compensate for the neglect to such minor characters by decentering the dominant character and concentrating instead on the minor character like the fool in the margins of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. And yes, this paper is a conscious commitment to study Shakespeare's work in the light of the theoretical insights as a tribute to the bard and certainly not a reductive reading, but another perspective.

This paper attempts to study the Shakespearean fool with reference to the Fool in *King Lear*. My basic premise would be to show how far Shakespeare has been successful in subverting the fool's role from a mere entertainer to a philosopher who had deep insights into the workings of human mind. The paper traces down the history of fools in drama from Greek plays where chorus could be treated as a prototype of the Shakespearean fool; to medieval plays, renaissance drama and Shakespearean drama. An analysis of the fool in *King Lear* as subaltern with a carnivalesque double edged sword will be made.

Shakespeare by following a carnivalesque tradition was able to subvert the hierarchical order of monarchy by putting pearls of wisdom in the speech of subaltern characters like Feste, Touchstone, Jacques and other fools that feature in his plays. Shakespeare has made these characters most unforgettable and endearing literary figures. They feature as privileged critics in the plays who speak the truth of people around them unmasking the social realities. The groundlings during Shakespearean time reveled in the privileged licensed speech of the fool. They gloated and sort of identified in the freedom of his speech in spite of his lower status in the social hierarchy. Harold Bloom calls the Fool a "surrogate" who voices the audience's true feelings (494). The fool perpetuates the essence of populist will or represents the ground swell in Shakespeare's plays. The fool was a subtle teacher, reality instructor and a mentor even to the kings, prince and princesses. Thus, Shakespeare gave the commoners a dream of freedom of expression through the fool. They were marginalized in terms of position in the social hierarchy yet they observe and participate, with the license to rectify the folly of their masters.

Michael Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory would be a valuable tool to show how Shakespeare had been instrumental in many ways for the discontinuation of the colonial mindset that was prevalent during his time. Shakespeare's deep-rooted humanism allowed him to give voice to the silenced subaltern through his creation of the licensed fool. Shakespeare has not only exposed their subalternity but also fused these characters with energy so that they can speak their mind. Shakespeare attempts to provide them their due space and defy the traditional hierarchies prevalent in the Elizabethan society. The fool becomes a double edged sword to ruthlessly critique and reveal the colonial underpinnings along with entertaining the masses, even if the plays appear to celebrate those ideals of colonialism. And thus, the fool becomes may be a veiled propaganda devised by Shakespeare to dismantle structures of oppression. Shakespeare has most constructively used the license to

speak one's mind and this freedom and power of expression has been given rightly to a subaltern – The Fool.

He has included many fools as characters in his plays. Shakespeare's comic element is affectionately valued and vigorously enabled by the fool in his various plays. Fools have been used by other dramatists and writers before Shakespeare yet, Shakespeare's comic epistemology is more complex and inventive. In an absolute monarchy, the jester alone could cause rulers to doubt their actions, make them reconsider; relieve them of their lonely eminence. This paper cites a vivid relationship of this sort, where the fool is full of tenderness, has a license and an intimacy that is otherwise unobtainable by King Lear. The trust bestowed by Lear on his Fool, is perhaps because of a shared sense of isolation. The Fool also worked within the status quo. He might have also risked his life to tell Lear a thing or two, but he was not revolutionary in the sense of trying to destroy the existing power structure. The Fool also got away with it because of the trust that existed between king and him; part of the fool's role included that of confidant. And of course candor itself can be disarming. He seems to prefer to change behavior as an outsider operating within the system. The Fool is mischievous and irreverent, but he is nowhere shown to be scheming or conspiratorial to plot his overthrow. 'Shakespeare popularized the fool tradition by turning it into an institution in Elizabethan drama unlike any other writers or men of theatre of that period.' (Videbaek, Bente 189.)Lear's Fool has moments of humour, but he directs most of his energy towards condemnations of corruption and political misjudgment. Lear's Fool offers a clear-sighted diagnosis of Lear's diseased court, even as he demonstrates his touching loyalty to his king. For this, it seems, his punishment is death: 'And my poor fool is hanged' (5.3.306), Lear laments. King Lear's Fool is the only clown to die during his play's action. Clearly, these late clowns – Feste, Touchstone, Lear's Fool – were not written to prompt jeering mockery (as were the bumblers) or giddy laughter. Rather, they prompt a meditative and even chastened response. Jesters thus had remarkable freedom to speak truth to power. In part, because they were often considered to be touched by supernatural forces, jesters were given far more rein to mock their masters than other more 'normal' but less privileged courtiers. King Lear's Fool is perhaps the purest court jester in Shakespeare's plays: glib, madcap, clever and insightful, he speaks bitter truth to his master the King, especially in those moments when Lear does not wish to hear that truth.

Mark it, nuncle.

Have more than thou showest,

Speak less than thou knowest,

Lend less than thou owest,

Ride more than thou goest,

Learn more than thou trowest,

Set less than thou throwest;

Leave thy drink and thy whore,

And keep in-a-door,

And thou shalt have more

Than two tens to a score.(Act I, Scene iv 645-655)

Shakespeare was always apparently sensitive to history; he profusely borrowed his plots from old, established stories and made them his own using his inventive imagination. Shakespeare then must have been aware of the jester in earlier incarnations. There was the chorus of ancient Greek plays, which commented on the foibles of human nature. Vidabaek (195) confirms that the Elizabethan stage clown has ancestors as far back in time as Greek and Roman theatre. His indebtedness of taking the fool from traditional festivals – such as the Greek Dionysian or the Roman Saturnalian does not lessen his creative ingenuity and invention.

Otto Beatrice, an authority on court jesters, found evidence of fourteenth-century Chinese plays that have conversations between jesters and their emperors (188). Otto Beatrice's book *Fools are Everywhere* succeeds in presenting the general characteristics of jesters, especially the classic jesters of England and China. Above all, it takes away the illusion that only Shakespeare's England enjoyed such characters and introduces readers to the rich traditional court fool lore in China. Fools emerged in medieval England in the 13th C. Closer to Shakespeare's time the proto type of fool appeared in the morality plays, the Vice character, that represented the "vices" in human nature—spoke and acted as jesters. But the appearance of 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. In Elizabethan England the court 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. This is indicative of his subaltern status. The fool in Shakespearean drama represents free speech and an un-jaundiced view of the social fabric. The clown projects two levels of character simultaneously--the pretentious idiot on the surface harboring the common man beneath, who rejects all pretensions.

The rigid social hierarchies relied on these reality maintenance constructs to create a sense of release or catharsis for and in the population. The important question is how these transgressions of a fool function and whether they matter in the real sense of contributing to genuine social change through their inclusion in literature?

Folly, the philosophy of the fool, is a ritualized outlet for repressed sentiments. The fool displays a folly which is just as important as rationalized wisdom, a construct of magical quality and ambiguity which accurately counter-balances the rationalism of both medieval and renaissance systems of hierarchy. The fool constantly questions the perceptions of wisdom and truth projected as rationale and their relationship to everyday experience. He readily applies metaphysical abstractions to attack the routine, taken-for-granted whims of the despotic rulers. The fool lifts the veil of authority, devoid of decorum, constantly making silly remarks, acting irreverently and unmasking the unpleasant aspects of power.

Instead of applauding and bolstering the totalitarian spectacle the fool is a construct to topple, depose and question it. The social significance of the fool cannot be underestimated, it is perhaps the surest sign that a society has attained cultural maturity because the construct allows the society to reflect on and laugh at its own complex power

relations. Yet, the role must maintain its marginality, losing its own rebellious power by coming too near to the center of power; his role becomes a symbolic reminder of the hollowness of human pretensions in relation to existing power structures. The evolution of the fool as a theatrical character is extremely provocative. The fool embodies the complete subversion of authority. He evolved from an external observer to an inside analyst of the workings of the human mind. Goldsmith declares: "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). An example of forthrightness of a jester would substantiate this: A Middle Eastern king who was meting out a pretty harsh punishment—800 lashes for a man, 1200 for that, 1500 for the other. His jester, the folk-fool mullah Nasrudin, interrupted him with an apparently irrelevant question: 'Oh King, do you know everything?' 'Of course I do,' snapped the king. 'Then how could you inflict such punishment? Either you don't know the meaning of the number 1500, or you don't know the sting of a whip.'

Fool exists as an outsider from the focal domain of the play. They participate in events, yet they remain isolated observers, evaluating the world as if they care for nothing. With their pranks and parodies, fools question prevailing order, and their objectivity makes them at once comic individuals who are too removed to suffer and ironists who see existence as absurdity. Fools mock social structures, individual righteousness, passionate personal relationships, and mutating the fragile underpinnings of human thought and language itself. Fools, then, operate as anti-rulers, offering society sceptical, unencumbered viewpoints that scorn pride and challenge such concepts as logic, cause, reward, and solution. It is significant that nearly all cultures instinctively seek such disordering perspectives. They point out the inevitable imprecision and the consequent fallibility of human reason.

Fools are cast in drama to explode, invert, blur, or establish a new order, balance, and harmony. According to A C Bradley 'the theatrical fool or clown was a sore trial to the cultured poet and spectator in Shakespeare's day. He came down from the Morality plays, and was beloved of the groundlings. His antics, his songs, his dances, his jests, too often unclean, delighted them, and did something to make the drama, what the vulgar, poor or rich, like it to be, a variety entertainment.'

They intrude into conventional order, making us laugh at them, at others, at ourselves, and even at the order itself, artfully distracting us for the moment from the questions raised by their presence in the system. Fool is an artful inversion of the existing social order. He temporarily arrest, contrasts or questions the on-going earnest reverence for the divine order.

"*King Lear* has again and again been described as Shakespeare's greatest work, the best of his plays, the tragedy in which he exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers."(Bradley, *AC Shakespearean Tragedy*198.) The play deals with the tragic effects of ingratitude. The victim is exceptionally unsuspecting, well-meaning, goodly and vehement. He is completely overwhelmed, passing through fury to madness. First Lear's dependence of the division on the speeches of the daughters was in his intention a mere form, devised as a childish scheme to gratify his love of absolute power and his hunger for assurances of

devotion. And this scheme is perfectly in character. We may even say that the main cause of its failure was not that Goneril and Regan were exceptionally hypocritical, but that Cordelia was exceptionally sincere and unbending. And it is essential to observe that its failure, and the consequent necessity of publicly reversing his whole well known intention, is one source of Lear's extreme anger which hearteningly shatters him. He loved Cordelia most and knew that she loved him best, and the supreme moment to which he looked forward was that in which she should outdo her sisters in expressions of affection, and should be rewarded by that 'third' of the kingdom which was the most 'opulent.' And then so it naturally seemed to him that she put him to open shame by saying 'nothing'.

The Fool in *King Lear* leads the protagonist toward ever harsher simplifications. He goads Lear on to creating what are progressively fiercer and more compressed versions of his sorry state and compounds his sorrows. The Fool intensifies Lear's misery, leading him to the severest truths.

Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped
Out when the Lady Brach may stand by th'fire and stink.
(act I Scene iv,110)

Leavened and larded with word play and jokes that fleshed out the didactic skeleton of the fool's argument, the Fool attempts to smother the smug King's ego and breaks up the high seriousness of the tragedy. Though, wordplay has often been considered inconsequential, frequently reduced to a "decorative quibble" but in *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context*, Patricia Parker, one of the most original interpreters of Shakespeare, argues that attention to Shakespearean wordplay reveals unexpected linkages, not only within and between plays but also between the plays and their contemporary culture. Through pithy language endowed with a political power, by the use of puns and irony that unmasked the social order, the Fool in the play attempts to deflate the colonial ego of self-righteousness in *King Lear*.

No, faith, lord and great men will not let me;

if I had a monopoly out , they would have part on't:

and ladies too , they will not let me have all the fool

to myself; they'll be snatching. Nuncle , give me an

egg, and I'll give thee two crowns.(Act I, Scene iv 150)

Lear, it's said, has ever but little known himself; now, in order to die at peace, he needs to face what he is. The Fool like a mirror reflects the true personalities of the people around him, "who is it that can tell me who I am" asks Lear. And the Fool answers: "Lear's shadow" (I.iv.212-213)

As a king, Lear is given to display, to making large, grandiloquent pronouncements and soliciting them. He falls out with Cordelia in part because he demands that she traffic in his own inflated and self-conceited terms. The Fool, acts like ‘a displaced Zen master’, who wants to cut through all that. He outpours his grievances in sugar coated pills. He offers bitter haikus to deflate Lear's endless self-promoting epic.

The hedge- sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,

That it's had it head bit off by it young.

So out went the candle, and we were left darkling. (I.iv.213-5)

Though some of the Fool's utterances in the play lie on the border of nonsense but on the other side King Lear had made too much sense, and that too of a consistently self-blinded sort. The Fool's common sense, his worldly wisdom and his insights into men's motives, by contrast, highlight Lear's lack of common wisdom and his total ignorance of men's true character. The image of the king's weakness is revealed against the ground of the Fool, and society's hierarchy is exploded.

Fathers that wear rags

Do make their children blind.

But fathers that bear bags

Shall see their children kind. (II. iv 1326-1329)

"Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?" the Fool asks Lear, meaning, among other things, can you make no use of your now-impooverished state to see what the world can be, at bottom? To which Lear -- it is still early in the play -- replies, "Nothing can be made out of nothing."

But it turns out that the Fool's question is pregnant. A great deal can be made of nothing. And before the play is over, Lear, tutored by the Fool, shows us how humane a vision can arise from losing all outward trappings, and seeing the essential fragility and preciousness of everything that lives. The “nothing” of the Fool becomes an echo of the ‘nothing’ that Cordelia says at the beginning of the play. It haunts King Lear throughout the play, goading him to realize his misperceptions and shortsightedness.

I have us'd it, nuncle, ever since thou mad'st thy daughters
thy mother; for when thou gav'st them the rod, and put'st down
thine own breeches,
[Sings] Then they for sudden joy did weep,
And I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play bo-peep
And go the fools among.

Prithee, nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach thy fool to lie. I would fain learn to lie. (Act I, Scene iv 965-703)

The carnival is the temporary suspension of set hierarchies, a 'licensed misrule', paradoxical as it may sound. Transgression and creativity have been inextricably linked throughout the history of Western culture. The critics, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, have argued that the Formalist treatment of literature as a "closed, purely literary series" (Bakhtin and Medvedev 159), prevents the exploration of the truly important interventionist energies of literature, which are directed not at other literature but at dominant institutions and ideologies in the real world of politics and history. There is exciting potential in this suggestion that literature can in fact have a genuine political impact. And there is a need to recognize their radical potential.

The Bakhtinian concepts of carnival and of dialogism do, in fact, provide an extremely useful starting point for my readings of the fool in *King Lear*. According to Bakhtin carnivalisation is a means for displaying otherness. It is a process whereby anything authoritative, serious or sacred is subverted and mocked. It is not denied that the voice of dominant culture sounds in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but that voice is continually placed in dialogue with more subversive and transgressed voice of the fool.

Shakespeare does represent the society and its hierarchical structures during his times which were predominantly colonial, yet in this play the subaltern fool has been individualized and empowered. The fool in the play does not appear to be severely constrained or marginalized but often creative and determined. The fool reclaims the freedom of expression for the masses. The fool could be treated as a kind of subaltern consciousness that articulates the hidden and suppressed voice thereby generating power in the victims out of their own victimisation. As Gayatri Spivak puts it "The agency of change is located in the insurgent or the subaltern".(83)

The most transgressive and interventionist works of literature do not in general immediately send their readers into the streets carrying banners and shouting slogans. Transgressive literature works more subtly, by gradually chipping away at certain modes of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive political structures. There seems to be a growing conviction among literary scholars that literature can serve legitimate and useful purposes that go far beyond mere entertainment. Shakespearean fool is a subtle transgressive device used in his works that breaks rules, transgress boundaries, destabilize hierarchies, and questions authority He is a political and nonviolent technique of playful rebellion. He is like a friend who gives you an honest critical reading about you without the sting, which one cannot take otherwise.

Despite the significance of the carnival as an arena for the staging of subversive energies, one must not forget that the carnival itself is in fact a sanctioned form of "subversion" whose very purpose is to sublimate and defuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion--a sort of opiate of the masses. The Fool in *King Lear* is also a

licensed fool, an allowed critic as against the noble Kent who too tries to voice his criticism but is out rightly rejected by the King.

Terry Eagleton is only one of many critics who have pointed out that: "Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art" (Barker, Stephen 273). Eagleton's critique is particularly relevant here because it calls into question both the validity of the carnivalesque fool as a symbol of subversion and the political force of the fool in general.

According to Bakhtin much of the subversive force of carnivalesque literature derives from the intermingling of elements of official "high" culture with the "low" culture arising from folk sources; folk culture is associated with liberation and emancipation while official culture is associated with repression and tyranny. In *King Lear* the fool is the voice for the masses. He represents the desire of the public for a satirical commentary on the life and events of the times but then impossible except under the protection of the cap and bells. The fool in *King Lear* is a carnivalesque device used by Shakespeare to make sympathetic contact with rebellious spirits among the groundlings. His remarks though cruel in their impact on Lear's mind, are just an expression of his and the public's annoyance with Lear for the latter's unwise and hasty action in disowning and disinheriting Cordelia. He is chosen to utter the uncomfortable truth about injustice and discrimination to his superior. He carries a traditional metaphor of social inversion into rampant reality. He is able to create a wondrous reversal of the privileged metaphysics of presence of the Western thought thus, deconstructing and reversing the established binaries. According to Welsford, "Lear's tragedy is the investing of the King with motley: it is also the crowning and apotheosis of the Fool." The figure of the fool in *King Lear* is per definition carnivalesque: it exemplifies social inversion. The Fool provides humour in the play by parodying its serious themes. He provides a common sense vision of events in the play. Acting like a chorus, he points what is happening, and increasing the pain and pathos by his humor.

I am better than thou art now;

I am a fool, thou art nothing. (I, iv.201-202)

A.W. Verity says, "The Fool represents two characters familiar to the Elizabethan's, the court jester and the Fool or comic buffoon." With doggerel snatches, conundrums and epigrams he over and over again returns to the attack. He makes his folly a weapon and a vehicle of truths which the king will bear in no other shape, while his affectionate tenderness sanctifies all his non sense.

Fools had ne'er less grace in a year;

For wise men are grown foppish,

And know not how their wits to wear,

Their manners are so apish. (Act I Scene IV 165)

It is true that the audiences in early modern playhouses paid to be entertained but it is also true that theatre professionals sometimes worked to change those tastes. Shakespeare was never contented with status quo so he devised the fool to put a spoke in the hegemonic wheel of power structures. The fool who was considered an outcast to a certain extent, he was frequently given reign to comment on society and the actions of the people who were up in the hierarchical order. Thus, we can conclude that the Fool in King Lear demonstrates a subversive potential. His world view presents a radically different world view than those held by the King. Fool's utterances in the play are not only an outlet for social tensions, or comic relief, as it were, but also a source and arena for important political and ideological discourse analysis.

As a way forward, this study becomes extremely relevant in the present context too where the civil society speaks back to the structures of power, questioning its ways and seeking transformative change. For society at large, and politics, the jester's role continues to be fulfilled by political cartoonists and stand-up comedians who have the same knack of assessing the general mood and communicating its essence in a funny way. The importance of fools is always going to be there till the world miraculously becomes devoid of corruption and hegemony. They have a very strong role to play even in democratic societies, since those are far from perfect. Especially in totalitarian states jester like humor is quite hard to suppress because it's part of the survival mechanism and it is a joyous dynamic element of human society.

Notes:

¹A carnival is a popular festival/ a jamboree/ *a mela* where 'jolly relativity' makes it possible for anything to happen –hierarchies turn upside down, opposites like fact and fantasy mingle and mix, seriousness is subverted, popular/folk libertarian power is proclaimed and points and counter points collide; it is multiverse and not universe.

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