



The Use of Nothing: the Abiding Disappearance of Lear's Fool

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The Use of Nothing:
The Abiding Disappearance of Lear's Fool

Edward F. Speck

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Abstract

This study investigates the disappearance of the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and how that disappearance affects our conception of the character and experience of the play. The investigation begins with the question "why does Lear's Fool disappear without explanation after Act III?" Possible answers put forth in criticism and performance are examined, and a more complete answer is sought. A comparison of the traditions of medieval fool literature with those of tragic theater reveals opposing forces forged the Fool, making him subject to contradictory demands. The unique nature of the Fool as a marriage of comic function with tragic pathos is shown to make the Fool's disappearance essential. The investigation concludes that the Fool's disappearance was necessary to the play and reveals the revolutionary value of Lear's Fool as progenitor of the clowns of modernity.

For my English teachers:

Paul

Ralph

Henry

Theo

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Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
I. The Fool's Disappearance Seen Through Character and Function.....	4
The Problematic Disappearance of Lear's Fool	4
The Demands of Character and Function.....	12
II. Lear's Fool is a Comic Christian Symbol in a Tragic Pre-Christian Play.....	29
The Medieval Fool and the Theology of Theater.....	29
No Theology Presides over <i>King Lear</i>	35
Lear's Fool is a Comic Cassandra.....	47
III. Lear's Fool can Neither Live nor Die.....	54
The Stage Clown Cannot Die.....	54
The Tragic Character Cannot Live.....	57
Lear's Fool must Disappear to Maintain both Function and Character.....	61
IV. Conclusion.....	69
Bibliography.....	77

Introduction

It is a commonplace that in *King Lear* Shakespeare wrote the Mount Everest of plays. Unique, awesome, sublime, it calls us and confounds us. R. A. Foakes tells us it “stands like a colossus at the centre of Shakespeare’s achievement as the greatest effort of his imagination” (1). To William Hazlitt it was “the best of all Shakespeare’s plays” (115), and to A. C. Bradley his “greatest achievement” and “fullest revelation” of his power (244). But *Lear* isn’t simply grand; it is *impossibly* grand. Hazlitt despairs of offering a useful critique: “To attempt to give a description of the play itself, or of its effects upon the mind, is mere impertinence” (115). In an interview last year James Shapiro took the Everest comparison to its natural conclusion: “*Lear* is extraordinary and daunting. *Lear* is the Everest of the plays...Many have tried to scale it...and *Lear* defeats you” (“*Lear*’s Shadow”). Luckily, Shakespeare provided us with a Sherpa.

Shakespeare gave his audience a spirited guide, a confidant and interpreter, known only as “Fool”. Yet in time this guide has become as remote as the terrain itself. Though using a fool as a theatrical guide was a recognized convention of Shakespeare’s day, this comic character has long struck critics and producers as out of place in the tragic context of *Lear*, so much so that Nahum Tate famously omitted the Fool entirely from his edited version of 1681. When, more than a century and a half later, the Fool finally returned to performance in William Macready’s production of 1863, he had transformed to meet contemporary tastes and was played by a young woman (Brown 164).

Academics and producers alike continue to argue over who and what the Fool is: an old man; a boy; Cordelia in disguise; a metaphor. And if his audience finds his mere presence problematic, the Fool redoubles the difficulty by disappearing from the text in act three and never speaking another line.

How are we to understand the disappearance of our guide and how navigate this difficult play without him? How is a modern reader to understand this problematic figure, and how is a modern producer to depict him? Much of the difficulty dissolves with a brief study of the fool figure in medieval and renaissance literature, but Lear's Fool is also a radical innovation whose importance we can see more clearly from our own vantage point than from that of his original audience.

Shakespeare's innovation was to place the comic figure of the disinterested and uninvolved fool in the tragic universe of *King Lear*, where he became over-interested, over-involved. His function as theatrical guide remains, and yet his pathos as a tragic character pulls him deeper into the perils of the tragic plot than any clown has business going. The Fool himself becomes a kind of centaur, comic above and tragic below. As such his disappearance becomes unavoidable; as a comic character and theatrical function he cannot die, and yet as a tragic character he cannot live. What is left but to metamorphose? The result of his ambivalence is the sudden disappearance of the Fool as a character, yet the abiding presence of the Fool as function. His traits are transferred to Edgar, Lear, and Gloucester, his wisdom pervades from heath to court, and a brand new theatrical convention is born.

By understanding the function of fools in Shakespeare's theater and the pioneering pathos of this unique fool character we will see that in Lear's Fool

Shakespeare gave us not merely a key to his most difficult of plays, but a new model of fool, calling forth the tragic clowns and existential anti-heroes of our modern theater. At stake is the soul of *Lear* itself; understanding the Fool is central to the experience of reading and presenting the play, and time has brought us both further from, and paradoxically closer to, the enigmatic character of Lear's Fool.

Chapter I

The Fool's Disappearance Seen Through Character and Function

R. A. Foakes, in his introduction to the Arden edition of *King Lear*, says "Critics agree on [the Fool's] importance, but vary enormously in their conception of the character, as do theatre directors" (Foakes 133). He goes on to list no fewer than twelve different interpretations, from half-wit to "sage rationalist," from "elderly man" to "androgynous youth" (133). Adding to these questions of the Fool's character, says Foakes, is the question of his fate: "No explanation is given for the Fool's disappearance, a matter which some have found troubling" (56). When the Fool absented himself from the court for two days, Lear cried "Where's my knave, my fool?" (1.4.42). When he disappeared from the boards for a century and a half, Charles Dickens welcomed his return by proclaiming "Shakespeare would have as soon consented to the banishment of *Lear* from the tragedy, as to the banishment of his *Fool*" (72). For a character whose absence is so conspicuous, his disappearance must be perplexing.

The Problematic Disappearance of Lear's Fool

For critics like Foakes this mysterious disappearance is often cited to support a reading of the character. Richard Abrams makes use of the disappearance to advocate for

the double casting of Cordelia and the Fool: “Aware that the Fool’s actor will eventually be needed to play a more important role, we sense that the character himself is living on borrowed time” (p. 358). For Neil McEwan the disappearance is proof of his view the Fool is meant to be a boy, like the rascal pages of Lyly, who “can disappear when no longer needed—‘go to bed at noon’—in mid play, without further mention” (p. 216). This dismissal of the problem as a question of *function* is perhaps easy for a critical reader to accept; but it is more difficult for the actor tasked with realizing the character on stage, and still more difficult for the director. McEwan acknowledges this point: “The original actors [of Lyly’s pages] would have had no say in their own disposal (Armin would have been more likely to object to his own elimination)” (216). For these actors and producers the disappearance has inspired widely divergent interpretations of the Fool and characters around him, an omission which gives them license to supply their own fate for Lear’s Fool.

Here we establish a difference in readings according to whether we consider the Fool as *function* or as a *character*. When we speak of a dramatic *character* we mean the emotional effect of a figure on the audience, the particular details and circumstances of a human individual which excite pathos or revulsion or admiration. By *function* we mean the practical use an author makes of a figure to advance the plot. However we look at the matter, functionally or characterologically, the problem of the Fool’s disappearance is essential, if not central, to understanding who he is and what he is doing in this play.

But why should the disappearance of the Fool after 3.6 bother an audience or a reader? Should the disappearance be dismissed as a critical issue and left to the actors and directors to work out, as a merely practical issue in staging? I argue that we care

about the Fool's disappearance, worry about his fate, because he is more than a Lylian page, more than his dramatic function. We care because across narrative traditions a character's end is key to an interpretation of his or her life, and Lear's Fool has earned from us the status of character. Our caring is worth investigating carefully, for by uniting function with character in his Fool Shakespeare was accomplishing something startlingly new, a Fool who is, as Enid Welsford puts it, "sufficiently life-like to be tragically convincing" (p. 255).

But can this be entirely true? Unlike tragic characters, the Fool has no defined end. The moralistic desire to see wrong punished and right rewarded; the comic enjoyment of all coming right in the end; the tragic demands of innocence sacrificed, all rely on the character's arc ending in a fixed and appropriate point. This simple rule in aesthetics is also mirrored in traditions of wisdom and folly that directly pertain to *Lear*. Herodotus, writing at the time of the greatest tragedies perhaps ever produced (at least outside Renaissance London) tells us how the prosperous Lydian king Croesus wished to know if he was, as he expected, "the happiest man" (30). The wise Athenian Solon disappointed him, listing several other happier men, all of whom had died. That is tragic thinking. Croesus could not be considered happy, despite his wealth and power, until his life had ended and could be judged in its totality. "Look to the end," says Solon, "no matter what you are considering" (32). Characteristically, Croesus ignored this advice, and considered Solon a "fool". In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, though the king has returned robed in glory to Argos, still he fears what may come: "It's only when life has ended, and ended well, that one dare say 'well done'" (64). Like these other legendary pre-Christian rulers, Lear experiences the turn of the wheel which brings a great man from

happiness to ruin. Edgar does well to learn young: "...the worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (4.1.29-30). From Dido to Cleopatra to Antigone to Hamlet, our tragic figures become themselves in the moment of their end. The Fool's disappearance thus seems an aesthetic loss, depriving us of the means of interpreting his character or understanding his function. It is a corollary truth that any attempt to guess the Fool's fate, to supply a reason for his disappearance, will necessarily project an interpretation of the character beyond what the text of the play strictly allows.

How does performance itself affect the questions we have asked about character and function with respect to the Fool's disappearance? In staging the play directors have the opportunity to supply a concrete answer to the question, and many find the chance to do so too tempting to resist. R. A. Foakes tells us that "Grigori Kozintsev keeps the Fool alive to the end in his film version (1970). The film ends with a close up of Edgar, but for Kozintsev the Fool becomes especially important as symbolizing the continuation of life in the sound of the pipe he plays" (57). Akira Kurosawa's 1985 epic film *Ran*, a relatively loose Lear adaptation, also retains its Fool parallel, Kyoami, to the end. Far from the positive abiding nature suggested by Kozintsev's flautist Fool however, Kyoami closes by questioning and cursing the gods in the wake of his master's death: "Are there no gods, no buddhas? If you exist, hear my words: you're all cruel and fickle pranksters! You ease your boredom in the heavens by crushing us like worms! Damn you! Is it such sport to see us weep and howl?" (Kurosawa). This is a far more direct pronouncement than Lear's Fool will ever make, but it is precisely the terrible conclusion that Gloucester arrives at: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.38-9). A very interesting reading of the film could be centered on the differences

between Shakespeare's Fool and Kurosawa's, the one prefiguring, the other describing, post-atomic humanity.

If some directors have solved the disappearance problem by showing the Fool alive at the end, others have showed us his death. Foakes reports that in the Royal Shakespeare Theater's 1982 production the Fool "was stabbed to death by a mad Lear" (56). Similarly, Simon Russell Beale, who played Lear in the National Theater's 2014 production, had this to say in an interview about their Fool's end:

Famously, of course, the Fool disappears, and...there are reasons that people put forward for that, partly because of course Lear has now lost his mind and therefore the Fool has no function within the play...So Sam [Mendes, Director] said 'What if Lear kills him himself?'...Almost as a sign that his mind is completely gone. So that's what I do; I beat him to death. (National Theater)

This staging offered a clear and concrete reading of the Fool's disappearance, but certainly it did not satisfy all spectators. Matt Trueman of *The Guardian* has gathered the critical responses for us:

The real opinion-splitter concerns Adrian Scarborough's Fool, specifically his demise: 'truly shocking', says Billington; 'flashy director's theatre at its worst', says Spencer; 'gratuitous nonsense Mendes has pinched from (say) Tarantino', says the Arts Desk; 'a startling innovation', according to the Times. (Trueman)

Even when the Fool's survival or death is not directly depicted, small visual cues can make worlds of difference to our understanding of the character. Richard Abrams describes Michael Elliot's directorial interpolation for his 1983 television movie, where he:

...cut Kent's final remark which cues the Fool's exit ("Come, help to bear thy master. / Thou must not stay behind"), and the audience was then

shown the shivering Fool, stranded in the hovel. Everyone grasped that the Fool's end was at hand. (359)

It is perhaps fairer to say that Elliot follows the Quarto text, in which Kent's line is not present, yet even the choice to leave the Fool shivering behind provides more information than the text alone, the imminence of a mortal death, the apparent choice of the Fool to end his loyal service. Choices such as these, by closing the Fool's character arc, giving him a finite existence, provide an editorial answer to an open question, thereby restricting, if only for one performance, the reach of the Fool. It is natural that directors and actors should, in their attempt to create a particular *Lear* for their place and time, focus on the character of the Fool, even to the detriment of his function.

While directorial decisions in performance will naturally propose answers to the question of the Fool's disappearance, scholars have not hesitated to offer their own reasons. Foakes is somewhat dismissive of their efforts: "If directors have anxieties about the disappearance of the Fool, I doubt if anyone watching a performance is troubled by it" (57). This well expresses the critical tendency to see the Fool as function more than as character. For people watching a performance are indeed troubled by the disappearance of the Fool. Foakes continues: "The Fool may be thought of as a lightning conductor, earthing the power of majesty, and humanizing Lear." This function of the Fool "is no longer necessary when Lear goes mad...after 3.6 the Fool has no function, and it is understandable that Shakespeare should let him drop from sight" (58). William Hazlitt said as much almost two centuries earlier, in his *Characters of Shakespeares' Plays*: "The character is dropped in the third act to make room for the entrance of Edgar as poor Tom" (p. 118). Foakes and Hazlitt are missing something. Although the

dropping-out of the Fool is understandable from a functional point of view, by now we have come to care about the Fool as a person, which is to say, as a character. His absence is for us another cause of worry and of pain.

Bente A. Videbæk puts it most succinctly in *The Stage Clown in Shakespeare's Theater*: "The Fool as symbol disappears when his purpose is served" (134). Critics holding this view may have slightly different views on this "symbol" and its "purpose," but excuse its disappearance using identical logic: when the Fool's aesthetic reason to exist disappears, so does the Fool itself:

The Fool will disappear from the play when the question of Lear's kingship is no longer as important as that of Lear's fundamental humanity, that is at the true turning point, the lowest point of Lear's fortunes, where he takes over from the Fool and begins to make fundamental discoveries about himself and his relationship to the world. Therefor the Fool may describe a downward curve like his master's, may dwindle before us like Lear's reason, and finally fade from the play when Lear's madness takes him over. (Videbæk 127)

Seen from a removed, utilitarian perspective, this makes immediate sense: the playwright no longer needs him, so the playwright leaves him entirely behind. But if the Fool has managed to endear himself to us, managed to associate himself with Cordelia and Kent as a caring and self-sacrificing truth-teller, then this logic becomes cold, more worthy of Edmund than Edgar: "...the Fool would have made an awkward third at Dover Cliff, where none of the connotations he must carry with him *qua* his stage clown status would be appropriate. Moreover, his counterpart Cordelia will shortly reappear at Lear's side and take the Fool's place as truth-teller and healer of her father" (Vidabæk 134). Becoming "awkward," with a replacement literally in the wings, the character is discarded. We hear Edmund: "The younger rises when the old doth fall" (3.3.24). We

hear Cornwall discarding the blinded Gloucester and the slain servant who stood up for him as if they were mere waste: “Turn out that eyeless villain. Throw this slave / Upon the dunghill” (3.7.95-6). As in the text itself, there is no satisfactory argument against this utilitarian view, only our feelings tell us to look deeper. In his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant tells us to “act in such a way that you treat humanity...never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end” (36). Shakespeare made stark distinctions between the characters of *Lear*, each one definitively on one side or the other of Kant’s imperative. The play asks us about the value of a king beyond his king-ness, a child beyond its child-ness, a servant beyond its service. The poetry and pathos are unequivocally on Kant’s side, even if the tragic results of the action are not. We should be wary of accepting the Fool as mere function in such a play. Thus to interpret the Fool’s disappearance as a simple matter of his waning utility within the plot makes the opposite error of the sentimentalizing theater directors. It is to treat him merely as an implement, and to forget his existence as the representation of a human being about whom we care, a character.

But are these interpretations necessarily opposed and mutually exclusive, or can they, paradoxically, fool-like, hang together, Fool as function, and Fool as character, at once? By setting performance theory and critical theory, character and function, against each other we have drawn, perhaps unfairly, battle lines. In doing so, however, I hope we have succeeded in creating space between the parties, a middle ground which I now propose to claim. Here then, between the two camps, lies the position I will occupy: in the figure of *Lear*’s Fool character and function are inextricably entwined, and this paradox sets a new mold for future fools.

The Demands of Character and Function

It is perhaps not immediately apparent to the modern reader or playgoer that the function and character of Lear's Fool should ever admit of division. We expect every artificial figure to contain both; when a figure is more function than character we are likely to accuse it of being poorly drawn or underdeveloped, when more character than function, superfluous. We expect every figure to both be "believable" and to advance the plot. While the validity of this expectation is beyond the scope of our investigation, in this chapter I hope to show how strongly a case may be made for either view of Lear's Fool. From one angle, in a certain light, the Fool may appear to us almost exclusively as function, while when the light shifts we might see pure character, all function obscured.

To begin with, it is fair to say that Lear's original audience would have seen more function than character when Lear's Fool first enters. The playgoers at The Globe in 1606 were well used to the man in motley. They had seen him hop from comedy to comedy unaltered, untouched by the rewards and punishments meted out in each, and they expected "believability" from him as we might from Bugs Bunny. Just as a protagonist must develop, suffering and over-coming obstacles, his fortunes rising and falling, so the fool must leave the stage as he entered, unaffected by the great events which shape the rest of the characters. The character arc for a clown is a flat line.

Enid Welsford wrote the definitive word on the figure of the fool, all three-hundred and ninety-six pages of it, in 1935, titled *The Fool: His Social and Literary*

History. One is hard pressed to find a publication on fools that does not cite her heavily, and for good reason. Her history is as exhaustive as it is engaging and we do well to ground our understanding of fools in her scholarship. At the start, acknowledging that the term runs a long road of fools from country clod to parasite to court jester, Welsford offers a broad definition: “He is a man who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight, a mainspring of comedy” (xi). Disqualified from most offices and social relationships by his deficiencies, he instead cultivated an outsider status, so that in the middle-ages he attained “a fixed social type with a recognized vocation to bear perpetual witness to the vanity of all human pretensions” (Welsford 251). Who better to mock the pretensions of young lovers, ambitious politicians and vainglorious kings than the fool, who by definition could not woo the maiden, aspire to office, or sit a throne? In the medieval Christian world described by Welsford, “when each man was, theoretically at least, a member of a sharply defined class; and when all worldly distinctions, theoretically at least, were regarded as unreal and transitory” (250), the fool’s position was paradoxically wiser than that of his worldly rivals: “In view of Heaven and Hell, the worldly man is penny wise and pound foolish as the saying goes” (Welsford 239). Standing outside the social order, the medieval fool was uniquely well positioned to see our faults, to mock them without mercy, and to point firmly toward what truly mattered: the next life, when “we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Romans, 14:10). While this religious fool function may be foreign to us today, Foakes reminds us that it would not have been so to a renaissance Christian:

Shakespeare was familiar with the Bible, and he knew the Epistles of St. Paul, which return to the idea that true wisdom appears foolishness in the

eyes of the world, as in the verses, 'hathe not God made the wisdome of this worlde foolish?' (1 Corinthian', 1.20 [Geneva Bible]), and 'If anie man among you seme to be wise in this worlde, let him be a foole, that he may be wise' (1 Corinthians, 3.18). (105)

In medieval culture this wise fool paradox was represented in icons, celebrated in festival, dissected in philosophy¹, and, notably, dramatized in theatrical entertainments.

Particularly influential as the medieval order gave way to the renaissance, the French

Sottie was:

A type of comedy in which the fool provided both the dramatis personae and the theme. For the theme of the *sottie* is the universal sway of Mother Folly, the form of the *sottie* is the roll-call of all the different types of fool, the dénouement of the *sottie* is the reduction of all the apparently divergent classes of humanity into one single type: the man in cap and bells. This idea spread beyond the limits of drama, and became the inspiration of that fool-literature which flourished roughly speaking from the end of the fifteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth century. (Welsford 220)

This was a theater in which popes, kings, tradesmen, knights, all humanity argued and grasped and fought, and thereby revealed their worldly folly. At the end their costumes, the mark of their worldly positions, would be pulled up to reveal the motley beneath, uniting all the world in foolery. Thus though the worldly-wise are exposed as fools, they are in that moment elevated to fool-wisdom; closer to the divine. Though the fool by definition was excluded from the categories of class and power represented, his outsider perspective heralded the dissolution of those very categories.

Returning to our character/function dichotomy, we see that in the context of the *sottie* and the conception of folly that it represents, the fool is not so much a character as

¹ See Desiderius Erasmus' 1509 essay, *In Praise of Folly*, which revels in wise fool paradoxes and was available to Elizabethans in both Latin and English.

a principle, the embodiment of divine laughter that dissolves and reconciles the different characters on the stage. Shakespeare and his contemporaries then were inheriting a theatrical fool who was indeed far more function than character. Transferred from medieval forms like the *sottie* and morality play into the more realistic and plot-based theater of Elizabethan London, the fool nevertheless retained those characteristics celebrated by the *sottie*. As an outsider, a social critic with privileged information, he could be a most effective theatrical device. Disqualified from playing the young lover, the aspiring politician or the vainglorious king, he could serve the audience as a theatrical presenter, intermediary, confidant, rather than a citizen of the drama with a stake in the game. In Welsford's words, "as a dramatic character [the fool] usually stands apart from the main action of the play, having a tendency not to focus but to dissolve events, and also to act as intermediary between the stage and the auditorium" (xii). Despite this utility and rich tradition, Welsford tells us that apart from Shakespeare "Elizabethan dramatists made little of the fool" (251).

In her engaging study *The Stage Clown in Shakespeare's Theater* Bente A. Videbæk argues that "Shakespeare is the only playwright of his time who explores the possibilities of the clown's part, and uses it to the fullest...as a major contribution to the understanding of the play" (1). Every Elizabethan company had resident clowns, whose quips and jigs in the costumes of jesters or servants or dwarves, were a very real box office draw (for our purposes the terms clown and fool are more or less synonymous, clown being the Elizabethan character or actor that represents the fool type). Shakespeare made more of this character precisely by emphasizing the ways in which it was unlike other characters; just as the medieval fool would stand outside of worldly

affairs and point the audience toward what truly matters in Christian life, so Shakespeare's fools would stand outside of the play's action and point his audience toward what truly mattered in the play. In both cases, the fool's function is to *point*, not to love, fight, strive, overcome or die as other characters will in serving their own ends and expressing their own desires.

Do we yet recognize Lear's Fool in this description? We of course recognize his vocation, from his coxcomb to Goneril's resentfully terming him "all-licensed fool" (1.4.191). He clearly makes the most of his license, derived from his outsider status, to speak the truth, a truth which is clear to him because of his outsider perspective; his removed position allows him to both see the folly of trusting Goneril, and to articulate it with impunity. Indeed, his very first exchange encapsulates the wise fool paradox:

FOOL [*to Kent*] Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.

KENT Why, fool?

FOOL Why, for taking one's part that's out of favor. (1.4.96-8)

Kent's over-involvement, his care for the now powerless king, mark him for a fool. Simultaneously the distanced position from which the Fool speaks marks him for a fool. Standing side by side, exchanging a coxcomb, Kent and the Fool form the two aspects of the fool as described by the sottie, just as Lear and the Fool will in their exchange:

LEAR Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.

KENT This is not altogether fool, my lord. (1.4.141-4)

Blinded by his trust in his daughters and his habituated role as king, Lear exposed himself as a fool when he “banished two on’s daughter’s and did the third a blessing against his will” (1.4.101-2). The Fool, in addressing the King as “thou” and “my boy,” further emphasizes the superior status of the distanced fool over the involved king, and the irony of Kent’s line relies on the traditional paradox: he means that the Fool’s statement is not exclusively foolish rhetoric, but also wisdom. But of course it is wisdom which only the Fool has license to speak, so he could as well say “this is altogether fool.”

Again and again we see how the Fool’s speech, rather than the expression of realistic human drives that define other characters, are recapitulations of the paradox he represents; motley in verse.

FOOL Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

LEAR Why no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing.

FOOL [*to Kent*] Prithee tell him, so much the rent of his land comes to; he will not believe a fool. (1.4.128-32)

This passage has perplexed and delighted us for centuries, but anyone familiar with the sottie would have recognized its fool logic immediately. In a pack of playing cards the joker represents zero, yet also the value of every other card in the deck. The fool is nothing because he is outside of our system of valuation, but as an outsider he is able to see what we cannot, the flaw in our system, and can speak it too. To make use of nothing is to listen to the fool. But Lear can, as yet, make no use of nothing, “he will not believe a fool.” Deepening the irony is that Kent, as the fool now bids him, has already told this truth to Lear, and payed the price, reduced, or exalted, to the status of fool.

The same circular movement is figured when the Fool offers Lear his coxcomb at line 107; anyone will recognize that in giving his daughters all his living he has traded a crown for a coxcomb, but we know that this is the prescribed end of every sottie; the exchange of the crown for the cap and bells, the king's robes removed to reveal the motley beneath. This conflation of crown and coxcomb foreshadows that "side-piercing sight" (4.6.85) on the heath when Lear is seen "Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,/ With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,/ Darnel and all the idle weeds that grow/ in our sustaining corn" (4.4.3-6). This crown of weeds makes Lear, as William Willeford observes in *The Fool and his Scepter*, "The mock king of the Whitsun mummings" (220), as far from rule as it is possible to be, yet still "every inch a king" (4.6.106). We see then that the content of the Fool's speech expresses the traditional function of the fool, but we will see that it is also mirrored in its form.

In *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* Anne Righter traces the history of theatrical performance through the evolving relationship of actor and audience, the world of the play and the world of every day. Writing of the morality plays which were performed in England at roughly the same time as the French sotties, and like them contrasted worldly folly with divine wisdom, she observes that "as a group of enlightened Christians, the audience itself assumed possession of Reality, while illusion and imperfection became the property of the stage" (28-9). In other words, though the world being mocked and burlesqued was that of the spectator, the mode of performance "temporarily elevated" the spectator above it (29). Their position in the gallery aligned them with the angels rather than the sinners for as long as the play lasted, and reminded them that the greater reality, the Kingdom of God, lay beyond this world. This was also

the case with the sottie; the audience member did not identify with the corrupt knight, the vain prince, the jealous ruler, but with the motley sot who revealed their pretensions and reduced them to the audience's level.

It is only natural that the audience should feel an affinity to the stage fool since insofar as he speaks truth, he speaks our truth. While the characters on stage plot and strive and rise and fall, we, like the fool, sit at a remove, observing and judging their conduct, our lives seeming to stand still while theirs rush to a conclusion. This is the fool's function, his vocation, the way that the playwright makes "use of nothing"; the fool points us toward the eternal beyond the temporal, the divine beyond the worldly. He facilitates that birds-eye-view of the action which separates us from the actors, as angels above mortals, for as long as the play lasts. Welsford describes this fool vantage point as a *punctum indifferens*:

In his capacity as detached commentator upon the action the fool...makes each one of us realize only too well that he is a mere bubble of temporary existence threatened every moment with extinction, and yet to be quite unable to shake off the sensation of being a stable entity existing eternal and invulnerable at the very centre of the flux of history, a kind of living *punctum indifferens*, or point of rest. (324-5)

He accomplishes this by bridging the divide between the world of the audience and that of the play. He is after all, as Videbæk puts it, "an artificial creation who will never be seen outside of some form of roleplaying" (2), and this allows him to violate those theatrical rules which might restrict more realistic characters. As the fool is all-licensed in court, so the clown is all-licensed on the boards. More concretely this means that: "Shakespeare's stage clowns...are in direct contact with the audience, address the spectators, and often comment on the proceedings they take part in even as they occur"

(Videbæk 3). Because he is “poised...between actual involvement in the proceedings and calculated distance” (Videbæk 2), he serves two masters; mocking and advising those in the audience no less than the characters on stage. Should we make the mistake of laughing too loudly when a clown mocks a character, we risk becoming the target ourselves.

To a modern audience this commerce between the worlds, the “breaking of the fourth wall” can be quite jarring, though recent trends toward immersive and documentary theater are accustoming modern playgoers to something closer to the Elizabethan relationship of actor and audience. It is clear from the text that at the very least Edmund and Edgar would also have directly addressed the audience of *Lear*, but actors can choose to perform their soliloquies to the empty darkness of the theater. Edgar’s “I heard myself proclaimed” (2.2.172) speech explaining his escape, or Edmund’s running villainous commentary, “...my state / Stands on me to defend, not to debate” (5.1.69-70), may be passed off as “speaking to themselves,” thereby losing the force of direct address, but preserving a modern sense of verisimilitude. The Fool’s function is more difficult to restrict.

Left alone on stage, the Fool will of course take the opportunity of a comic exit line, such as at the close of act one, to crack a joke directly to the audience. But the Fool will also find plenty of moments to joke with the audience when other characters are present, who are “playing it straight.” His first exit, in act one, scene four, finds him the last of Lear’s party in Goneril’s castle. Surrounded by enemies, there is no apt ear left to whom he may deliver his comic condemnation of Goneril, save ours. Later Edgar appears nearly naked as Poor Tom and Lear very nicely sets up the Fool with “Have his

daughters brought him to this pass? Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give ‘em all” (3.4.62-3)? What professional clown could resist a mock bashful glance at the ladies in the audience when he responds “Nay, he reserved a blanket, else we had been all shamed” (3.4.64-5)? In a recent production by Theater in the Open, our fool directed her line “Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool” (3.6.51) to a lawn chair then occupied by an audience member, suddenly initiating the audience into Lear’s madness. She served the audience as she served Lear. As she exposed Lear’s folly in imagining a joint-stool to be his daughter, so she exposed the folly of the audience in imagining that *this* lawn chair is *that* joint-stool, while simultaneously reinforcing the madness/artifice by begging its pardon. Reality is mutable when a fool is present.

The central example, however, of direct address and of our Fool’s power to dissolve the reality of the play world, is Merlin’s prophecy. At the close of act three, scene two, the Fool steps out of the raging storm and into the playhouse, or as Willeford puts it, “falls out of time” (55). The prophecy itself is traditional doggerel, in the form of what Foakes calls “a deliberately confusing parody of a tradition of merlinesque prophesies” (268N), but what interests us is the mode of its delivery. Having been invited by Lear and Kent to shelter in the hovel, he instead stays behind to speak with the audience: “This is a brave night to cool a courtesan. I’ll speak a prophecy ere I go” (3.2.79-80). Before the prophecy has even begun he has expressed a paradox. In turning away from his oppressed friends and addressing the Elizabethan audience he would have reminded them of his reality as an actor (likely the popular comic actor Robert Armin whom they had seen in several other clown roles), experiencing the same temperate London afternoon as they, while the little joke he tells insists that he is on an ancient

heath, shivering through the cold of a tempestuous night. To tell the audience that the warm day is a cold night is to address the joint-stool as Goneril, or to “go to bed at noon” (3.6.82). He closes his prophesy in the same spirit of internal contradiction: “This prophesy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time” (3.2.95-6). He is not Lear’s Fool then, but an actor in seventeenth century London, referring to a legendary fifth century wizard, who will speak the prophesy of an eighth century BCE fool.

Videbæk speaks to this anachronism when she observes that the clown of Shakespeare’s drama “constantly reminds the audience that they are watching a play, and constantly sees to it that potential identification and involvement with the characters is turned to laughter” (192). In this way he is an *un*-character, not merely outside the drama himself, but actually pulling us away from the characters who are doing their best to pull us in. If Lear’s despair and Kent’s loyalty brought us out on to the heath, the Fool has sent us back to our chairs. This being the case, isn’t it time for him to disappear? Must he belabor the point, or can we say that his function is served?

Are we not now ready to agree with Videbæk when she says “Because of their lack of realistic personality traits, [Shakespeare’s] clowns may appear and disappear without any introduction or excuse, and the audience will not miss them when they are not seen, for they are indeed more function than character” (3)? Though we may not be accustomed to this function of the clown in modern culture, we certainly know how a narrator, whether in film, novel or play, can be “in direct contact with the audience,” “more function than character,” and bridge the worlds of audience and stage. A disembodied voice with knowledge of the entire story, we accept a narrator’s help in understanding the movement of the plot. But do not require a narrator’s explanation of

his or her own connection with the events, nor do we notice a narrator's absence when the film's movement no longer requires such explanation. The Fool having helped Lear to see his Folly, will we mark his disappearance? Will we miss him when he is gone? Certainly, if we shift the light.

For an actor tasked with realizing this chameleon part the above will sound coldly academic. For every example of prevailing function the actor may point to aspects of a deeply sympathetic character. By the time he has "gone to bed at noon" he has suffered much. He has "pined away," apparently out of sympathy for banished Cordelia, even before his first entrance. Nor does he spring unbidden onto the scene like a jack-in-the-box, but must be drawn into the play by Lear, who calls for him no less than four times. Lear has missed him: "But where's my fool? I have not seen him this two days", and as for his pining, Lear has "noted it well" (1.4.69-73). The king's attention suggests a more affectionate, even dependent relationship than one might expect between a monarch and a mere diverting comedian or object of humility. He is even protective! Dickens, that great admirer of Grimaldi and his clan, observed that "The rage of the wolf Goneril is first stirred by a report that her favourite gentleman had been struck by her father for 'chiding of his fool'" (72). When the Fool does at last appear, Lear's joy and concern are evident: "How now, my pretty knave, how dost thou" (1.4.95)? It will be ninety-five more lines before Goneril finally speaks, as if impatient for the action of the play to continue, and in all that time Lear indulges the Fool as a besotted father to a favorite child. Though he refers to him by his profession, "fool," and recognizes his function as "a pestilent gall" (1.4.112) and "bitter fool" (1.4.133), Lear is not merely taking his medicine; the Fool is "my pretty knave," "my boy" and "lad." Nor does the affection

seem one sided, for though the Fool's speech is biting, galling, bitter, there is a current of regretful sympathy throughout, as though it is as painful for the Fool to administer this medicine as it is for "nuncle" Lear to receive it: "Prithee, nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach thy fool to lie; I would fain learn to lie" (1.4.170-1). Mixed with the satirical wit and genuine humor of these ninety-five lines is a truly remarkable development of the traditional fool. The Fool has seen the end of Lear's folly, knows the pain to come, knows too that his truth-telling can do no good now, yet his function is to speak the truth. As Lear "will not believe a fool," neither can the Fool lie. He is caught. Little wonder then that he was so slow to enter the play; as Edgar will put it when he finds himself in the same unenviable position, "Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow, angering itself and others" (4.1.40-1). An Elizabethan clown, receiving this part written for the first time, may well have been shocked to find the depth of character suggested in these lines. He must play his usual part, the bright, nimble, biting truth-teller, yet must do so regretfully, and represent the weakness of one who has been "pining."

As his scenes continue the Fool will become more and more associated with Kent and Gloucester and Cordelia through his care and loyalty, without ever losing, as we have seen, his fool qualities and function. A defining moment comes outside of Gloucester's castle, where Kent and the Fool are once again paired as the two aspects of the sottie, but now they seem to be bleeding into each other, wisdom and folly becoming indistinguishable. The Fool tells us explicitly that he will not desert the king:

FOOL That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
 And follows but for form,
 Will pack when it begins to rain,

And leave thee in the storm;
But I will tarry, the fool will stay,
And let the wise man fly;
The knave turns fool that runs away,
The fool no knave perdy.

KENT Where learned you this, fool?

FOOL Not i' the stocks, fool. (2.2.267-76)

In the humor of the closing lines we recognize the traditional image of the sottie, the wise-fool mocking the worldly-wise. The Fool is a fool by trade, the cap and bells his badge of office. Kent is a fool for acting against his own self-interest, and the stocks are his reward. But for all his humorous railing against Kent's foolish conduct, he upholds that conduct in word and deed, stocking himself. His song uses the differences between the terms knave and fool, often synonymous, to great effect, which requires some study to pull apart.

The term knave is used five times by Lear, and nearly always affectionately; three times he refers to the Fool and once to Kent, in disguise as Caius. Lear's tender use of the term on the heath, "Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart / That's sorry yet for thee" (3.2.72-3) emphasizes the use of both terms as meaning youth, darling, while Goneril's only use of knave sets the words apart: casting out the Fool, she says "You, sir, more knave than fool, after your master" (1.4.307). This obviously pejorative use points us toward the deceptive, villainous use in which Lear used the term for Oswald in act one scene four, pairing it with "you whoreson dog, you slave, you cur" (1.4.78-9). The same usage dominates the first half of act two, scene two where Kent, "having more man than wit about [him]" (2.2.232), attacks Oswald. Over the course of only one hundred and twenty two lines the term knave is used eleven times, taking the form of a

trial to see who, Oswald or Caius/Kent, deserves the name. Kent calls Oswald a knave six times, with a delightful train of additions such as “base, proud, shallow, beggarly...lily-livered, action-taking...coward, pander and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch” (2.2.14-22), while Cornwall and Regan call Kent a knave four times between them. Kent disclaims Oswald as one of those “smiling rogues” who “Renege, affirm and turn their halcyon beaks / With every gale and vary of their masters, / Knowing naught, like dogs, but following” (2.2.71-8). Cornwall’s counter charge is that Kent’s plainness is more dangerous than flattery:

CORN. These kind of knaves I know, which in this plainness
Harbour more craft and more corrupter ends
Than twenty silly-ducking observants
That stretch their duties nicely. (2.2.99-102)

Clearly in no case is their use of knave positive, but at stake is whether Oswald’s changeable flattery or Kent’s resolute (if violent) honesty is preferable. Or, to skip to the end, is it better to “speak what we feel,” or “what we ought to say” (5.3.323)?

Cornwall’s answer is unequivocal.

Finding Kent in the stocks for his plainness, the Fool cannot help but taunt him, yet the first half of his song clearly describes an Oswald, “That sir which serves and seeks for gain,” and the second clearly aligns the Fool with Kent, two fools who “will stay.” If we apply Kent’s definition of knavery here, the final lines of the song are clear. As Welsford puts it, “The knave who runs away, comes out into the open, and is at once seen as the abject contemptible ludicrous creature that he has always really been. The fool is at least true to himself” (258). Those knights who abandoned Lear when his fortunes changed, who, like Goneril and Regan were “more in word than matter”

(3.2.81), were always knaves, but were not known as knaves until they deserted Lear.

Though from the standpoint of self-preservation their flight makes them “wise,” yet it is a detestable wisdom; the revelation of their blatant hypocrisy turn them suddenly to abject fools in the sight of any fit to judge, as the worldly figures of the sottie were always wearing motley beneath their robes of office. The Fool, in declaring that he will stay, actually uses the logic of the under-involved fool to uphold the over-involvement that he mocks in Kent. In this exchange, if not before, he becomes a loyal follower and selfless truth-teller in the mode of Cordelia and Kent.

By act three he will be playing loyal child as much as fool, as the suffering that he prophesied, “So out went the candle and we were left darkling” (1.4.208), arrives on the heath. So far from being a dispassionate observer mocking Lear’s lost status, his concern is for Lear’s physical well-being, his corporeal self. His lines “Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters blessing. Here’s a night pities neither wise men nor fools” (3.2.11-3), and “Prithee nuncle be contented; tis a naughty night to swim in” (3.4.108-9) are substantially identical to the deeply involved Kent’s: “Alas sir, are you here? Things that love night / Love not such nights as these” (3.2.42-3), and “...good my lord, enter; / The tyranny of the night’s too rough / For nature to endure” (3.4.1-3). And isn’t Lear himself insisting on the importance of the Fool as character, as an end in himself, when from out of his raging self-obsession and suffering he turns to his “poor boy”:

LEAR: Come on, my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold?
 ...Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
 That’s sorry yet for thee. (3.2.68-73)

Even as he winks his final quip to the audience, the Fool's enduring presence on the heath marks him for one of the most intriguing, nuanced and difficult characters in Shakespeare.

I am then, fool-like, arguing a paradox. As a plot function, Lear's Fool is comic, uninvolved. As a character, Lear's Fool is tragic, over-involved. As a stage fool, an established, conventional, theatrical device, the Fool stands outside of the action of the play, providing an unchanging, fixed point of access to the actions we watch performed by the more involved characters. As a tragic character his kinship with Cordelia, Kent and Gloucester and his touching loyalty to Lear deeply involve him in the chaotic, steep declining plot of *King Lear*. His use of anachronisms and direct address pull us out of the action. His pathos draws us ever further into the heath. How then are we to understand, and how are we to portray, his disappearance? How did such an internally divided character come to be?

Chapter II

Lear's Fool is a Comic Christian Symbol in a Tragic Pre-Christian Play

The paradox described above, the marriage of comic function and tragic character in Lear's Fool, was the natural, if revolutionary, result of Shakespeare's decision to transplant a medieval Christian symbol into a pre-Christian, pagan kingdom. In the world of *Lear*, where "All's cheerless, dark and deadly" (5.3.288), the Fool was out of his Christian element. Rather than elevated above the worldly by the promise of a next world, he finds himself one of many fools clinging to the surface of a hostile lonely earth: "This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen" (3.4.77).

The Medieval Fool and the Theology of Theater

The medieval fool mocks the worldly in secure possession of the truth, that "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34). The monumental import of Peter's words to the centurion Cornelius here is that, gentile or Jew, neighbor or foreigner, "whosoever believeth in [Jesus of Nazareth] shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). James makes this more concrete:

¹ My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons.

² For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment;

³ And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool:

⁴ Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

⁵ Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? (James 1-5)

This articulates and secures the privileged place of the fool. Whatever distinctions we make here on earth, all will be wiped clean in the kingdom of God, and those who mistreated the poor (or the dwarf, or hunchback, or idiot), will be called to account. Being by nature excluded and disqualified on earth, the fool stands somehow above the earth, closer to the divine, as one on Dover Cliff, watching the miniature commerce below. His jokes rely on this secure distance. What a long way to fall then, when suddenly the cliff is no more. The joke falls flat. Christ has no place in Lear's kingdom. Take away the Christian God, remove his mandate, and what is left of the symbol that pointed always to it? A signpost to a city that never was. A cross before the crucifixion.

To a playgoer in fifth century B. C. Athens, the closing lines of Sophocles' *Antigone* had very real moral force:

CHORAGOS: There is no happiness where there is no wisdom;
No wisdom but in submission to the gods.
Big words are always punished,
And proud men in old age learn to be wise. (245)

The drama recapitulates the audience's own understanding of the world and provides a moral to be applied immediately to present conduct, secured by the authority of the gods; it confirms and depends upon a shared national and religious identity. The mystery cycles of medieval England carried the same authority to its Christian audience:

In the fourteenth-century streets of Wakefield and Coventry, Chester and York, medieval audiences could achieve an actual communion with the events of the Old and New Testaments. Year after year they saw the Magi bring their gifts to the Christ Child for the first time, and heard Herod himself, not an actor in splendid robes, command the slaughter of the Innocents. They both witnessed and bore the guilt of the Crucifixion. (Righter 16)

And when the pageant cars gave way to the morality plays, shifting the *dramatis personae* from biblical characters to worldly types, still the audience was secure in the moral authority underpinning the drama, as when the queen chastises the hubristic king in *The Pride of Life*:

REGINA: Love God and Holy Chirche,
 And have of him som eye;
 Fonde his werkis for to wirch
 And thinke that thou schal deye. (ll. 187-90)

The acknowledged wisdom of the audience's culture is voiced by the queen, and the audience will watch as the consequences of ignoring her overtake the king.

Even in Shakespeare's day, when the drama had turned almost exclusively secular, concerning itself primarily with those worldly comings and goings, the trysts and intrigues that the fool was born to mock, one could expect some moral security at the close of the play. *The Spanish Tragedy*, circa 1589, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, 1607, were perhaps the least edifying entertainments an apprentice could attend for a penny,

taking as their themes the rape and murder of innocent virgins and the long bloody revenges of those that cared for them, bodies stacked upon bodies in near comic succession. These are not tragedies of hubristic rulers who offend the divine and too late find wisdom, but rapacious kings whose offences to men are revenged in a secular political sphere. But when, in *The Revenger's Tragedy* the eponymous Vindice calls the heavens to witness, the heavens respond:

VINDICE: Oh, thou almighty patience! 'Tis my wonder
That such a fellow, impudent and wicked,
Should not be cloven as he stood,
Or with a secret wind burst open!
Is there no thunder left, or is' kept up
In stock for heavier vengeance? [*Thunder*] There it goes!
(4.2.188-93)

As the editors note in their 1969 edition, “The thunder is a dramatic testimony that there is an ordering force behind the apparent chaos of the violent world presented in this play” (427N). And while much of the unjust and violent action of *The Spanish Tragedy* might refute the idea of a divine justice, its structure depends upon it. The entire performance takes the form of a vision granted to a dead soldier by Proserpine, queen of the underworld. Revenge, personified, bears the soldier, Don Andrea, away to watch as the love he left behind, Bel-imperia, revenges his death. Revenge has brought him to join with the audience as spectators, saying: “Here sit we down to see the mystery, / And serve for chorus to this tragedy” (1.Introduction.90-1). Thus even here, in a secular tragedy ruled over by pagan deities, an audience may leave the play house with faith in divine justice; if the gods are ambiguous because borrowed from classical antiquity for a Christian audience, the wages of sin are not. Of the dead villains, Revenge assures Don Andrea, “This hand shall hale them down to deepest hell, / Where none but Furies, bugs,

and tortures dwell” (4.Chorus.27-8), while Don Andrea looks forward to rewarding the faithful revengers:

GHOST: I'll lead my Bel-imperia to those joys
That vestal virgins and fair queens possess:
I'll lead Hieronimo where Orpheus plays,
Adding sweet pleasure to eternal days. (4.Chorus.21-4)

The Elizabethan audience is not likely to believe in the gods of this play world, but nor are they threatened; this pagan structure can exist parallel to their own Christian perspective, upholding Christian values by another name, a modern Senecan tragedy. Within the structure of the play morality is upheld and self-sufficient, and the result is much the same as if Christ were presiding (that its author, Thomas Kyd, was jailed for atheism, shows just how dangerous questions of religion were at the time). If Kyd diluted the moral force of *The Spanish Tragedy* by giving rule of modern Spain to pagan deities, he was certainly not the first Elizabethan to revive and appropriate Seneca.

The anonymous author of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (perhaps Kyd himself) went in the other direction, giving the rule of pre-Christian England to an anointed Christian king. In fairness, he could hardly have avoided presenting a muddled understanding of the divine when dramatizing the life of an eighth century BCE king for a sixteenth century CE audience. Although its sources, Holinshed and Geoffrey of Monmouth, recognize the pagan setting of Leir's rule, the play reflects the theological worldview of its audience, not its legendary subject. A messenger, hired by Ragan to kill Leir and Perillus, Kent's precursor, glories in his commission, "Oh, had I every day such customers, / This were the gainfulest trade in Christendom! A purse of gold giv'n for a paltry stab" (4.3.65-7)! Though Christendom will not exist for nearly a millennia after

this action, its God rules here, and when the messenger discovers Leir and Perillus in a remote thicket (the closest we get to a heath), it is to the Christian God that Leir appeals:

LEIR: Oh, but assure me by some certain token,
That my two daughters hired thee to this deed:
If I were once resolved of that, then I
Would wish no longer life, but crave to die.

MESS: That to be true, in sight of heaven I swear.

LEIR: Swear not by heaven, for fear of punishment:
The heavens are guiltless of such heinous acts.

MESS: I swear by earth, the mother of us all.

LEIR: Swear not by earth; for she abhors to bear
Such bastards, as are murderers of her sons.

MESS: Why then, by hell, and all the devils I swear.

LEIR: Swear not by hell; for that stands gaping wide,
To swallow thee, and if thou do this deed.
[*Thunder and lightning.*] (4.7.179-91)

Twice the old men call on the messenger to think on the torments of hell reserved for murderers, and twice thunder and lightning confirm the doom; God is present above the thicket. Whereas the maddened Lear, similarly apprised of his daughters' worth, calls on the unhearing, deafening thunder to "strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world" (3.2.7), Leir manages to talk his assailant out of the deed, and soon is off to see his daughter in France. His is a warm, dry, purposeful thunder, not the pelting chaos of the heath, and the two travelers are rewarded for their faith in "just Jehova, whose almighty power / Doth govern all things in this spacious world" (4.7.204-5).

Though *Leir*'s audience may have paused momentarily to mark the anachronism of Christendom projected back eight centuries before Christ's birth, the ultimate effect is not to undermine the religious authority of a Christian God, but to dramatically support

His claim on the audience through the consequences of right and wrong action in the play. Leir and Cordella are safely reunited. A French army is levied and quickly routs the combined forces of Cornwall and Cambria. Cordella, happily married, ends as queen of France and England. Cambria speaks the keynote:

CAMBRIA: The heavens are just, and hate impiety,
And will (no doubt) reveal such heinous crimes:
Censure not any, till you know the right:
Let him be Judge, that bringeth truth to light. (5.2.30-3)

Like *Antigone*, the mysteries, and the moralities for their original audiences, *Leir* confirmed a shared national and religious identity, prescribing local action with divine authority. But *Leir*, after all, was a history play, and though both *Lear* quartos retain the word, by the First Folio's publication in 1623 who could doubt that Shakespeare had turned the legendary tale into *The Tragedie of King Lear*?

No Theology Presides over *King Lear*

In *Lear* Shakespeare undermines all authority. Audiences of *Antigone* had the Chorus, and those of *The Spanish Tragedy* had Revenge and Don Andrea, reliable guides to mediate their own world with that of the play. These guides were last to leave the stage, recapitulating the play's moral with divine and theatrical authority. *Lear*'s guide, however, the Fool, because he is divorced from the Christian epoch which deputized him, has no authority, and disappears without trace, without a closing statement. Audiences of the mystery and morality plays were called to bear witness, to confirm their theology by participating in the crucifixion or watching devils carry away the wicked. The audience

of *Lear* must bear painful witness to the absence of their own, or any other, theology on the heath. Until the nineteenth century, it was felt that Shakespeare's tragedy goes too far in undermining the moral edification of its sources, from Tate's restoration of a happy ending to Johnson's observation in his introduction to *Lear* that "Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles" (Johnson). I will try not to lead us too far over such well trodden ground, except to make two points central to my claim that the Fool has entered a stage where his Christian authority is curtailed. First that *Lear*'s characters' own speech presents too muddled an idea of the divine for the audience to have faith in it, and second that the results of the play's action undermine the piety expressed by its characters.

Lear's world is not simply prior to Christ's redemption, as are Croesus' and Agamemnon's. The play, like the Fool, carries anachronistic reminders to the audience that a Christian society gave it birth, from simple oaths like "perdy" to contemporary references to "Beldlam beggars," former inmates of London's Bethlem Royal Hospital. It does not, however, as *Leir* did, make a wholesale projection of Christian authority onto the ancient scene. *Lear* evokes the pagan gods that ruled *Antigone*, Jove, Apollo, Hecate, but on the boards of Christian London the audience could not but feel the internal contradiction articulated by Kent: "Now by Apollo, King, thou swear'st thy gods in vain" (1.1.161-2). In the same breath that *Lear* calls on the "thunder-bearer" Jove to "strike flat the thick rotundity of the world," he also cries "You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks" (3.2.2-3). He is calling on ancient pagan forces to destroy modern Christian churches, their steeples adorned with

the rooster symbolizing Saint Peter. Similarly, when Edgar plays the bedlam, he claims the Christian vices of pride and lust, for which he is tormented by “the foul fiend,” “the prince of darkness,” and a “black angel” named Hoppedance. James Shapiro, in *The Year of Lear*, suggests that “the demon’s odd name, like many others Edgar invokes, is...lifted from Harsnett’s book” (76-7), referring to Samuel Harsnett’s 1604 publication *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*. Not only were these tormentors Christian, but they were part of contemporary popular culture, as attested by the printer advertising the Quarto as containing the “sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam”. Edgar is counterfeiting the Fool well; where the fool casts Merlin forward and backward in time, Edgar converses with a Christian devil about a first century Roman: “Frateretto calls me, and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness” (3.6.6-7). The Fool, Edgar, and Lear articulate, through foolish anachronism, a world in which theology is so muddled and contradictory as to lose all authority.

The crowning example is Lear’s vivid and disturbed description of hypocritical women, who affect chastity but covertly indulge in every lust:

LEAR: Down from the waist they are centaurs, though women all above.
 But to the girdle do the gods inherit, beneath is all the fiend’s:
 there’s hell, there’s darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning,
 scalding, stench, consumption! (4.6.121-5)

The connection of genitalia with hell and “the fiend” belongs to a very different tradition from that in which “the gods” reside. In Greek tradition centaurs, men to the waist but joined at the withers to horses’ frames, were best known for their attempted abduction of Hippodamia and other women during her marriage to the Lapith king. Their defeat at the hands of the Lapith men and Theseus, notorious monster-killer, is taken to symbolize the

victory of civilized behavior over barbarity and the lower appetites. Similarly, the Christian devil was often depicted with the loins and legs of a goat, again tying the reproductive functions to ungoverned animal appetites. In the Christian tradition, born of an immaculate conception and dominated by original sin, the lower half of the human body was problematic.

But monotheism by its nature has raised the stakes in this man/beast metaphor. Though most Greek gods dwelled in Olympus, Hades was no less a god than Zeus; the gods ruled above and below. Christianity locates all good in heaven, in its one God, and so below there is only the “sulphurous pit.” This God does not participate in the lower appetites, whereas Zeus ravaged Leda in the form of a swan. While the centaurs must be defeated and civilization upheld, the moral obsession with self-denial is not present in the Greek, and philanderers are not punished for all eternity in a lake of fire. For that matter, neither are they, like Gloucester, blinded while still on earth:

EDGAR: The gods are just and of our pleasant vices
 Make instruments to plague us:
 The dark and vicious place where thee he got
 Cost him his eyes. (5.3.168-71)

The play has created its own mythic beast, polytheist above, monotheist below: “But to the girdle do the gods inherit, below is all the fiend’s.” The audience is left with a Christian Satan, yet without Christ, a prospect nearly as disturbing as the reduction of the feminine reproductive force to “the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption!” We are left unsettled, without secure moral authority. A Greek drama might end with a *deus ex machina*, a morality play with the dramatic descent of Mother Mary, authorities capable of blessing the audience with the exact moral of the play. What

were these actors if not the “visible spirits” (4.2.47) which Albany demanded of the heavens? Shakespeare will not send them. *King Lear*, by conflating the theology of the audience with that of its legendary characters, makes divinity itself amorphous, indistinct and impotent.

Yet even if the audience could get past this basic incongruity and believe in pagan gods for as long as the play lasts, as I have argued it would for Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, the action of *Lear* must undermine even that. No one can doubt the potency of Revenge, Proserpine and Pluto within the play world of Hieronimo, where actions on the earthly stage are rewarded or punished forever in the afterlife. But who can believe in the potency of *Lear*’s gods, when every appeal to them goes unanswered? Kent says to Cordelia “The gods to their dear shelter take thee” (1.1.183), and to Gloucester “The gods reward your kindness” (3.5.5). Neither plea is answered. A servant cries “Now heaven help him!” (3.7.106), but Gloucester’s eyes have just been gouged out and their fellow servant killed for interceding. Edgar expresses his faith in fortune, but his optimistic phrase “the worst returns to laughter” (4.1.6), only calls forth the terrible sight of his father, poorly led. Albany’s “The gods defend her” (5.3.254), serves as a cue line for: “*Enter LEAR with CORDELIA in his arms.*” In the world of *Lear* appeals to the divine offer the audience no comfort, but foreshadow a worse to come. Perhaps we laughed with Edmund when he mocked Gloucester’s astrology, yet he seems to have had it right when he said “we have seen the best of our time” (1.2.112). At best, the gods are absent. At worst, they are actually malicious: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport” (4.1.38-9).

What a remarkable stroke then, that in turning a Christian history play into an atheistic tragedy Shakespeare chose to insert that Christian symbol of divine order, the Fool. Like a church steeple, the Fool points to God, and like it, he wears a cock on his head. Like a steeple, he is entirely out of his element in *Lear*, and likely to drown. The medieval fool's superior wisdom was situated in his knowledge that kings and peasants would all be leveled before God's throne, that worldly man was a fool to strive for gain and pleasure in this life rather than prepare for the next. *Lear's* cosmos holds no such promise. Why, then, does Shakespeare give us a comic Christian symbol to navigate the heath? If audiences since fifth-century Athens have experienced theater as a dramatic recapitulation of their own national and religious identity, then what terrifying aporia has Shakespeare plunged his audience into? In the absence of Christ's judgement, what does the play hold up as valuable? Bente Videbæk assures us that "Shakespeare always times his clown's appearance perfectly to fit the audience's need, sometimes for relief from tension, but most often to serve as a guide through the maze of the play" (2). He cannot point us toward the security of a Christian afterlife, but he points nonetheless.

Of the major characters in *Lear* only Goneril, Cornwall, and the Fool never invoke the gods. In a world where gods do not answer pleas, these characters would appear to be the wisest. Hobbes compared the body politic to the leviathan, a mirror of Albany's dark prophecy "It will come: / Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep" (4.2.49-51). Certainly a Hobbesian understanding of the world is articulated by Edmund and Goneril. It may be easy to dismiss their cold reasoning as cruel, but it is more difficult to argue that they are incorrect. As usual, Welsford has offered a clear summary:

For Goneril, Regan and Edmund the world is the world of Hobbes, a world where every man's hand is against every man's, and the only human ties are contracts which reason and self-interest prompt people to make as the only alternative to mutual annihilation and which no moral scruple need hinder them from breaking when by doing so they defend their own interests (260-1).

And why not? In the world of *Lear* is Edmund wrong to observe that “The younger rises when the old doth fall” (3.3.24)? Is Goneril wrong to say “Let me still take away the harms I fear, / Not fear still to be taken” (1.4.323-4)? Doesn't Regan perfectly articulate the folly in Lear's parting of his coronet when she says “How in one house / Should many people, under two commands, / Hold amity? 'Tis hard, almost impossible” (2.2.429-31). Isn't First Servant just as dead as Cornwall? "Are not Edmund and Goneril...justified in seeing the world as they do see it and acting in accordance with their insight" (Welsford 263)? In the absence of divine authority, moral relativity enters, and from a purely rational standpoint it is difficult to discredit Edmund, Goneril, Cornwall, Regan. Where does the Fool point us?

Having lost his Christian perch above the earth, the wisdom of the Fool turns worldly and natural; he does not appeal to the gods, but refers to examples in nature. His wisdom now derives from patterns; the seasons and weather that form our environment and the animals that inhabit it. I have attempted a catalogue: he mentions fire three times, along with its sources and effects: stars, spark, shadow, noon. Mostly however, he points to bad weather: storm, wind twice, cold twice, winter twice, night four times and rain five. Then comes the menagerie: ape; monkey; bear; fox; wolf; three dogs; three asses; four horses; hedge-sparrow; cuckoo; geese; egg. Add to these crab, oyster, eel, snail, an ant, many lice, and apples, a shelled peascod and a wild field. The Fool employs these

items from the natural world to illustrate the ways in which his companions are less wise than animals, less able to adapt to and survive winter, rain, cold, wind, night.

For the medieval fool the great joke was that the worldly acted against their ultimate self-interest by seeking pleasure and safety in this momentary, illusory world. For Lear's Fool the joke is that people should be so inept in serving their worldly self-interest. With the moral imperative to eschew the world lifted, and a clear path to all the pleasures it offers, he laughs to see the bumbling fools incapable of securing them. Unlike the oyster and the snail, Lear has given away his shelter. Unlike the ant and the goose, Kent is exposing himself to the winter and all it represents. The Fool sees clearly "how the world goes" (4.6.146), and mocks those that cannot, or will not. In this he is aligned with Goneril and Edmund, or at least he understands their point of view, perhaps better than they do themselves; if the Fool had a god, it would be Nature. His connection with nature is natural: if the centaur joins the rational man with the irrational beast then so does the Fool, whose marks of wisdom are an ass's ears and the crest of the rooster; stupid, strutting, sexual. But he does not have a god, and will not invoke Nature as Edmund does, with "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound" (1.2.1-2). He does not serve or deify the patterns he observes. He, like Goneril, will never actually say the word nature or any of its variants (in a play where they appear fifty times). While others debate what is natural and unnatural in human relationships, the Fool and Goneril simply acknowledge how things are. The seven stars cannot be reasoned into becoming eight, eels will not consent to being baked alive, and to expect more out of humans than animal behavior is foolish: "He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath" (3.6.18-9). These

patterns are obvious. Only a fool could miss them. Only a fool butters his horse's hay, or carries his ass o'er the dirt, or doesn't notice when the cart draws the horse; and such a fool, says the Fool, is Lear.

There is no moral judgment in this mockery. Nature does not offer morality, only life and death. Goneril is a fox. So it goes. She is a cuckoo in a sparrow's nest. Morality doesn't enter into it, except to blind fools to the natural behavior of foxes, wolves, pelicans, cuckoos. Goneril calls Albany a "moral fool" (4.2.48) for considering the justice of France and Cordelia's expedition, one "that bear'st a cheek for blows" (4.2.52). In a world where humans are morally no better or worse than animals or natural forces, Christ's injunction to turn the other cheek becomes absurd. Only a fool turns the other cheek to a charging bear or falling stone, and such a Fool is Albany. Edmund tells us that Edgar is a "brother noble, / Whose nature is so far from doing harms / That he suspects none – on whose foolish honesty / My practices ride easy" (1.2.177-80). His flaw is a "foolish honesty." Only a fool trusts too far, and such a fool is Edgar. But is the Fool truly so aligned with Edmund and Goneril? Of course not. We have already observed how his loyalty and involvement in Lear's suffering set him apart from the Oswalds of this world, but it is worth returning to that all-important moment in the stocks.

Despite the moral relativity symbolized by the animal kingdom in *Lear*, many characters also employ animals to make value judgements. Regan kills First Servant after calling him a dog. Albany calls Goneril and Regan "Tigers, not daughters" yet in the same breath suggests that "even the head-lugged bear" (4.2.41-3) would show more sympathy than they have to Lear. The assumption here is the opposite of what we observed above; humans should act differently from, better than, animals. Kent,

Gloucester and Cordelia all take this further, describing the worst human cruelty as not fit for the animal kingdom:

KENT: Why, madam, if I were your father's dog
 You should not use me so. (2.2.133-4)

GLOUCESTER:
 If wolves had at thy gate howled that stern time
 Thou shouldst have said, 'Good porter, turn the
 key...' (3.7.62-3)

CORDELIA: Mine enemy's dog,
 Though he had bit me should have stood that night
 Against my fire... (4.7.36-8)

The fact that immoral behavior is so quickly compared to animal behavior across traditions and cultures makes the Fool's choice of analogies with Kent in the stocks particularly strong. Though the fox and cuckoo are only following their natures, it is hard not to read a moral judgement in their application to Goneril. For Kent's lesson he chooses winter and gravity.

FOOL: We'll set thee to school to an ant, to teach thee there's no
 labouring i'the winter.... Let go thy hold when a great
 wheel runs down a hill lest it break thy neck with following
 it; but the great one that goes upward, let him draw thee
 after. (2.2.257-63)

There is no possible moral objection to the winter, and no possible moral objection to the ant who remains in the colony rather than venturing out in it. So with the wheel, we are dealing with physics, not morality. The Fool doesn't compare "that sir which serves and seeks for gain" to a tiger or pelican or wolf, but to those who know better than to fight the inevitable. His true tragic sight, transferred and transformed from the comic Christian

sight of his past, is clearest in this moment. He is not fighting the inevitable, as we grow to feel that Kent, Lear, Cordelia are, as their hopes dwindle. He is staying loyal in the fixed knowledge that fighting is useless and there's nothing to be done. He sees how this world goes distinctly, yet still chooses folly:

FOOL But I will tarry, the fool will stay,
 And let the wise man fly;
 The knave turns fool that runs away,
 The fool no knave perdy.

I have said that the Fool does not invoke the gods. This pretty Christian oath is the closest he comes, now at his keynote, with a sly wink. Against all logic, the smallest glimmer of value is returned to the world. But it is not a refutation, only a paradox, and difficult though it may be to suffer foolish loyalty in the stocks, it will get immeasurably worse. The sight of the tragic fool is terrible.

I have said that Lear's remarkable Fool is the natural result of transplanting the comic Christian figure into the tragic pagan world, but it is important to acknowledge that several other of Shakespeare's clowns escape from their tragedies unscathed. Bente Videbæk tells us that "comedy is the clown's natural element" (191)," but also admirably elucidates the ways in which clowns in *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Titus Andronicus* both disrupt and illuminate the tragic action. All step into worlds similar to *Lear's*, yet none are affected by their detour. They enter as a somewhat jarring relief during particularly tense moments of the drama, underline important themes in the play, often those which the tragic characters are importantly missing, anger and distract more "important" characters, and then go on their way. Unlike Lear's Fool, these are truly clowns of function, and their complete detachment from the characters and stakes of the

drama enable them to suddenly appear, and as suddenly disappear. At the same time, comedies were beginning to experiment with pathetic clowns, who were more than traditionally involved in the characters and stakes of the drama, and thus more affected by their endings. Enid Welsford points us toward Babulo, a fatherly and quite touching fool in what is otherwise a dull and formulaic read, *The Pleasant Comedy of Patient Grissell*, written at about the same time that Shakespeare was shaping his two other famous court fools, Touchstone and Feste. All three of these over-involved fools display loyalty and care for others, all are present at the end of the drama, and are, in at least a very little way, affected by it. Welsford marks their similarities with our Fool:

In treating the Fool as the disinterested truth-teller, the '*punctum indifferens*' of the play, Shakespeare was not making any new departure from his earlier comic method as shown in the handling of Touchstone; and, as a piece of realistic character-drawing, Lear's 'Good boy' with his lovable, sympathetic qualities is only a profounder study of a type already exemplified in the jester of *Twelfth Night*. (258)

It is in uniting the touchstone function with sympathetic character, and dropping the result into the tragedy, that the new and revolutionary turn occurred. Videbæk agrees that “where the stage clown usually remains personally aloof and unaffected by the other characters in the play, Lear's Fool is deeply touched by Lear's tragedy and shares in it himself” (134). It is this compassion, suffering-with, that makes the Fool convincingly tragic while remaining comic; Videbæk sees that Lear's is a “miserable” fool, but “his handling of his misery does him credit” (131). Although the laughter dies, his comic function survives:

There is little room for laughter in King Lear, and what there is, is different from our unrestrained response to the comedies. The nature of the tragic mode prevents us. In a comedy we are interested in the outcome, but we remain in a position from where we may regard the

proceedings with some superiority. In tragedy, however, we easily lose such a perspective because of our great personal involvement in the target of the jokes, here Lear himself. (129)

We have seen how the Fool's comic anachronisms pull us out of the drama. Now we can see that by comically bridging the world of *King Lear* and the audience, then turning back to Lear and treating him seriously, even lovingly, he is pulling us back into the drama in a way no other character could.

There is much in the latter half of *Lear* of that is Greek. In Gloucester we see Oedipus, who wanted nothing more after his ignorant sins and blinding than a guide to help him walk toward death: "For the love of God, conceal me / Somewhere far from Thebes; or kill me; or hurl me / Into the sea, away from men's eyes for ever" (Sophocles 75), and who said of his daughters "Could I but touch them / They would be mine again, as when I had my eyes" (77). Compare with Poor Tom and Gloucester's journey to Dover, and Gloucester's "O dear son Edgar, / ... Might I but live to see thee in my touch, / I'd say I had eyes again" (4.1.23-6). But to understand the Fool's new position we must look to Cassandra, another blend of theatrical function and tragic character, who sees more than a mortal ought.

Lear's Fool is a Comic Cassandra

Seth Schein, in his article *The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus' 'Agamemnon'*, tells us that:

Scholars and critics...have tended to give [the Cassandra scene] relatively little attention. In a sense this is understandable: the scene in no way advances the action of the drama, and critics who have learned from Aristotle that the 'plot' is the 'soul' of a tragedy might well feel that it is unnecessary to bother about a scene which could be omitted with no effect on the movement of the story. (11)

He argues however that Cassandra, and her scene in which “Aeschylus suspends dramatic time,” serves an important function: “She helps to bring the audience - and the reader of the play - out of the bewilderment and confusion” of the tragic action, to “make sense of what we previously have seen and heard and of what we shall encounter later in the trilogy” (13). This is very near to Videbæk’s project regarding Shakespeare’s clown, a part which “has often seemed irrelevant to both critics and directors” (1), but who serves as “the audience’s guide and teacher, someone who breaks down barriers of the various kinds, notably between stage and audience, and someone who opens eyes and minds to the deeper reaches of the play” (4). Schein and Videbæk are both interested in the function of their subjects upon the audience’s understanding of the dramatic action, from which the prophet and the clown are broadly excluded. In each case, the function is a product of the character’s superior sight, a privileged perspective, but they belong to different traditions, different times, and different theologies.

Cassandra’s wisdom is the wisdom of Silenus. This is Greek folk wisdom, recorded by Aristotle, quoted in Plutarch, and appropriated by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

An ancient legend recounts how King Midas hunted long in the forest for the wise *Silenus*, companion of Dionysus, but failed to catch him. When Silenus has finally fallen into his hands, the king asks what is the best and most excellent thing for human beings. Stiff and unmoving, the daemon remains silent until, forced by the King to speak, he finally breaks out in shrill laughter and says: 'Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and

tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon.' (22-3)

This wisdom may be easy for Silenus to bear, an immortal untouched by the plagues of man, but it is, as he observes, not profitable knowledge for a mortal to possess. Cassandra gained this wisdom from Apollo. In Aeschylus she relates: "I promised the god and cheated him. / ...Since my offense against him, / No one believed a word of mine" (75). Having promised to bear Apollo children in exchange for prophetic sight, she was blessed with prophecy, but after refusing him, cursed to go unbelieved. Her sight elevates her, and thus painfully separates her from her loved ones, who cannot see what she sees and think her mad. She cannot tell them Troy will fall, that they will be butchered, that she will travel a slave to Argos only to be slaughtered upon arrival along with Agamemnon. Schein points to another myth, retold in another Aeschylus play, to underline her tragic position:

In *Prometheus Bound*, when the chorus question Prometheus about what he did for mortals that so offended Zeus, Prometheus says, 'I stopped mortals from foreseeing death' (248). When the chorus ask what sort of 'cure' he found for this 'illness', Prometheus replies, 'I settled in them blind hopes' (250), and the chorus comment, 'This is a great benefit you gave to mortals' (251). What is so affecting about Cassandra is that she is a mortal for whom this 'illness' has no 'cure'; she has no hopes, blind or otherwise, and the prophetic knowledge that for some might be a blessing only serves to enhance the pain of her existence. (12)

Prometheus brought light to mortals, but thought it wise to shade them from its full brilliance. Cassandra sees the blinding truth behind the shade. Agamemnon, for all his failings, could at least possess the wisdom of Solon: "It's only when life has ended, and ended well, that one dare say 'well done'" (64). Wise mortals, with their limited

sight, must rest in this knowledge, as the Choragos tells us in the final lines of *Oedipus*

Rex:

CHORAGOS: Let every man in mankind's frailty
Consider his last day; and let none
Presume on his good fortune until he find
Life, at his death, a memory without pain. (81)

Kent is wise enough to understand this as well: "My point and period will be thoroughly wrought, / Or well or ill as this day's battle's fought" (4.7.95-6). Cassandra's curse is that she is over-wise. She knows that our lives are defined at their ends, *and* she knows what a horror hers will be. She therefore experiences this horror proleptically, again and again:

CASSANDRA: Oh, oh, my agony! There it is again!
The fearful pain of true prophecy
That twists me, that drives me wild;
And it is still only prelude. (75)

It is only "prelude," because she has still to experience it in reality: the metal biting at her throat; Clytemnestra reveling in her blood. She can foresee, but because she will not be believed, she cannot prevent the death of Agamemnon. All that is left is to await and suffer their twin deaths: "Oh, the ill boding of my own sad fate! / For it is my own suffering, on top of his, / That my tongue spills out" (72). Cassandra projects the moment of tragic recognition forward and backward in time, seeing always what Oedipus, Creon, Agamemnon, Croesus will only know at the end, and thus suffering it always. When the moment at last arrives, she walks resolutely toward her death, cursing her prophetic sight as a "blinded madness" (78) and welcoming an end to the terrible pain

Apollo has brought her. Her fate is like Gloucester's, and she might well say with him, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport."

To possess the wisdom of the Fool in the tragic world of *Lear* is to become a comic Cassandra. In removing the teleological certainty of Christianity, dropping his clown into the tragic Hellenic mode, Shakespeare substitutes the wisdom of Saint Peter for the wisdom of Silenus. In doing so he combines the wise fool with the tragic prophet. Regan remarks that "Jesters do oft prove prophets" (5.3.72), and thereby reminds us of our missing Fool. He is wise in the sense that he sees better than anyone else how this world goes, he can anticipate and intuit outcomes. But he is also a prophet in the sense that he is able to read the script and literally see the end. Straddling both worlds, he belongs neither to the world of Cordelia nor to that of the audience, who are all equally, at least theoretically, ignorant of what will happen at the end. The Fool belongs to the theater, and the playwright bestows privileged knowledge on him as Apollo does on Cassandra. Perhaps the tragic character does not know that Cordelia will be hung, but the comic actor does, and we have seen that it is impossible to keep these two sides from communicating, bleeding into each other. He foresees the coming of Merlin in a different mode than he foresees the cruelty of Regan, who will taste as much like Goneril "as a crab does to a crab" (1.5.18), but the paradox and miracle of the Fool is that he foresees both. Only in a comedy can an actor pull out his script to gain knowledge of the end. Only in a tragedy can that knowledge be torturous. Thus his comic function paradoxically forces him to suffer *more* than other tragic characters, as Cassandra suffers for a lifetime what Agamemnon will suffer in a moment. And still, he must suffer in motley! He cannot abandon his quips and doggerel, so that where Cassandra in a mad

prophetic ecstasy cries “keep away the bull from the cow!” (71), the Fool will joke (and perhaps sing):

FOOL: For you know, nuncle,
The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long
That it's had its head bit off by its young.
So out went the candle and we were left darkling. (1.4.205-8)

Their meanings are equally clear to the audience and equally ineffectual within the drama. Though they are spoken in different prophetic modes, the pain of the prophet is evident in each. And again, Cassandra, though not believed, can at least speak directly:

CASSANDRA: I tell you, you will live to see Agamemnon's death.
CHORUS: Wretched girl, hold your tongue in piety.
CASSANDRA: No, no holy god of healing presides over this story. (77)

The Fool can only painfully jest with Kent about ants, geese and winter, though he sees as clearly as she that no healing god is presiding, and that neither he nor Kent can save Lear.

Aeschylus's Cassandra and Shakespeare's Fool are twins. Both are mortals with immortal sight, both see more than their fellow characters but will not be believed, and thus both blend prophetic function with dramatic pathos. Furthermore, both are very effectively employed by their playwrights to interrupt the swirling chaos of tragic events and provide a still point from which the audience may evaluate the action:

By the time [Cassandra] bravely but despairingly enters the palace to be killed, her imagination has clarified many of the enigmas and obscurities of what had happened earlier in the play, told us where the drama is going...and helped reveal a meaning, albeit a painful one, in the sequence of events. ... She compresses and condenses the imagery and ideas of the play...and evokes in us feelings of sympathy, in the literal sense of 'shared

suffering', as well as enlightenment. That is to say: we learn through Cassandra's suffering. (Schein 15)

Cannot precisely the same be said of Lear's Fool? Videbæk concludes her study: "The lesson we learn through laughter is always remembered" (193). Cassandra and the Fool are twins, but they are not identical. He is no son of Priam: he was not born in Troy and he didn't grow up playing on the banks of the Scamander. He was never born at all. He is a comic type, to whom growth, suffering and death are foreign. Cassandra is mortal:

CHORUS: But if you truly know your fate,
 Why do you walk up to the altar steadfastly,
 Like an ox?

CASSANDRA: There is no escape, my friends; the time is full.

Cassandra can stride proudly to her physical death, completing her painful arc. The Fool can only disappear. The character arc of a clown is a flat line.

Chapter III

Lear's Fool can Neither Live nor Die

Cassandra's death is the completion of all that she has been; it is the consummation of her marriage to Apollo. Her tragic position hinged on the inevitable coming of this terrible moment, and to see her limp body on the steps of the house of Atreus, Clytemnestra glorying in her blood, is for the audience to see at last the vision that tortured her, and to see that torture ended. For all her unique power and function, she ends like other characters, becoming herself in death. She has reached her destination. The clown, by definition, lives on, regardless of the conventional ends of plots and characters: "And I'll go to bed at noon" (3.6.82).

The Stage Clown Cannot Die

Any child that has been to the circus or seen a cartoon knows that clowns do not die. He will dodge a bullet, or spring back, none-the-worse, from an anvil-to-the-head, as quickly as we can wish it. He is with us, on our side and representing our interests, and the weapons of the stage can no more harm him than they can harm us. The power of dramatic characters in theater comes from our ability to suspend disbelief and see Cassandra dead, rather than an actress, trying to remain as still as possible in a pool of red

corn syrup. The clown springs forth, fully grown, from this moment. He is the imp who delights in tasting the corn syrup. He whispers dirty words in Cassandra's ear and pinches her until she at last laughs or kicks him, submitting to the truth, that she is, after all, an actor, and this is, after all, only a play. To lay the Fool's body next to those of Cordelia and Lear at the end is to remind the audience, in this most moving of all theatrical moments, that none of it is real. Just when the cruel, unyielding, solidity of the tragic world has been most clearly realized, the sight of a dead fool must evoke "one of the perennial functions of the fool, the power of melting the solidity of the world" (Welsford 223). The Fool actor may lay still, but the spirit of foolery snatches the feather from Lear's hand and employs it to tickle Cordelia. Lear's final scene hinges on the feather remaining still, on her breath not appearing on the looking-glass. It confronts us with the undeniable truth that Prometheus wished to shield us from, that we and everyone we love will one day cease to breathe. That we will end and be survived by "a dog, a horse, a rat." The clown is our counter-attack on unyielding reality, a version of ourselves that cannot be killed; his imaginative immortality is contagious. Keep him far from the feather and the looking-glass.

If a director is dead set on a dead Fool, then of course she can present it, but then his unique function must be denied for fear that he might spring up and begin a new bit of doggerel with the audience. If the audience has come to expect this from the Fool, to accept his anachronisms and superior sight as a function of his traditional status as clown, then still as the actor may lay, the audience cannot help but project him back onto his feet. If, on the other hand, the audience has not come to appreciate this unique position of fools, and has only seen the Fool as a very sad, somewhat caustic, tragic young figure

for the past two or three hours, then he may make for a very sympathetic corpse. But what has been lost in our experience and understanding of the play if the Fool is reduced to a character like any other? We lose a guide and gain only Cordelia's shadow. To kill the Fool is to refute his nature as stage clown, to destroy his function.

Trevor Nunn, directing a film adaptation of his 2007 RSC production, has soldiers belonging to Cornwall hang the Fool at the close of act three, scene six. This completes the Fool's slide toward the purely pathetic; his special role as bridge to the audience, outside the action, was never developed. Not written to be pure character, and now robbed of his function, he is only a line pointing downward, toward a fixed terminus. Not merely the fact of his death, but also its manner, destroy his fool function. Nunn transplants the Fool's prophecy of act three, scene two here, changing it from a sly paradoxical wink with the audience to an indictment of the men hanging him. Rather than direct address from the empty boards, the speech now fits neatly into a modern stage, safely behind the fourth wall. Despite Edgar's having philosophized directly to the camera only moments earlier, the Fool seems unable to look outside of the theatrical moment and speaks only to the soldiers. His jibe "this is a cold night to cool a courtesan," once a clever confirmation of his place within and without the tragic heath, is now an unseemly attempt to placate the soldiers and save his hide. His final line, with its anachronistic reference to Merlin, is simply cut. Fool time and fool logic do not apply. This may be an effective way to reduce a modern audience's confusion regarding a theatrical convention that it finds unfamiliar, but it also flattens the paradoxical nature so important to the character, and to the play as a whole: if you take away "nothing," all you're left with is "something." If the character is troubling because suspended between

That ever ear received, which in recounting
His grief grew puissant and the strings of life
Began to crack. Twice then the trumpets sounded,
And there I left him tranced. (5.3.210-7)

“Tranced,” with his “strings of life” breaking under his grief, Kent at last arrives on the closing scene of his drama, “To bid my King and master aye good night” (5.3.234). Like Odysseus’s dog Argos, he is only waiting for one last view of his master, to be recognized by the master for his loyalty, before he lets go of life. Could he but arrive to find Cordelia and Lear alive, to receive Lear’s acknowledgment that he and Caius were one, he would readily die. But even that small acknowledgement, which “pays all” (4.7.4), is denied him. Instead he must witness the deaths of the two he had sacrificed everything to save, and beg for an end: “Break, heart, I prithee break” (5.3.311). Kent cannot survive the play, cannot, like Albany and Edgar, look to what may be done now to heal the realm. He is inseparably conjoined to Lear: “I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; / My master calls me, I must not say no” (5.3.320). His pronouncement over Lear is equally true of himself: “The wonder is he hath endured so long; / He but usurped his life” (5.3.15-6). The tragedy demands his death, as it demanded First Servant’s, as it demanded Cordelia’s, as it would demand the Fool’s if it could discover him, for he belongs to their party. His sly “and I’ll go to bed at noon” is only the comic mirror of Kent’s own “I am come / To bid my master aye good night.” To include a live Fool among the few standing at the play’s close would be to deny the titanic tragic demands of Lear’s world. To let the Fool live is to refute his tragic loyalty, to destroy his character.

If, as Kurosawa does with Kyoami, a director places a mourning clown, cursing the heavens, next to the dead king, then his superior sight is as undermined as it would be by performing his pathetic death. If he is indeed our guide, then he knows, has always known, what we all come to understand; words at such moments are “bootless.” Our Fool would never be fool enough to curse the gods; he knows they are not there. Kurosawa chose to make his fool a tragic character only. He gave him a backstory, and thus a real existence in time: “Ever since I was a child, I’ve been tending to him.” He uses the innocence and suffering of the pathetic youth to underline Lord Hidetora’s former cruelty as a war lord, and thus his moral, spoken by Tango, Kent’s equivalent:

Do not curse the gods! It is they who weep. In every age they’ve watched us tread the path of evil, unable to live without killing each other. They can’t save us from ourselves. Stop your crying! Such is the way of the world. Men live not for joy but for sorrow, not for peace but for suffering.
(Kurosawa)

The heath in *Ran* is the ruins of a castle Lord Hidetora had himself sacked and burned years before. Like Shakespeare and Tate before him, Kurosawa has shifted the plot to describe a different cosmology: here the gods are good, and they hear our cries, but are powerless to prevent the evil we forever inflict on ourselves. The result is an anti-war epic masterpiece, but the personal tragedy of the ruined king is swallowed by the horror of unending war, and no fool wisdom can redeem it. The movie, and the slaughter, continue even past the death of the king.

Foakes has told us how Kozintsev maintained the Fool to the very end, “symbolizing the continuation of life in the sound of the pipe he plays” (57). But in this film adaptation the Fool has been reduced to a slave, who travels with the dogs to Goneril’s castle, and like them, is led by a rope around his neck. He is more akin to the

Bedlam beggar than the court fool, and, with most of his lines cut, he does not strike us as either particularly wise or particularly loyal. He is one of countless poor souls trampled under the heels of warring nobles. Having never displayed the theatrical fool function, his death would not have been discordant. Having never become convincingly tragic, his survival is not discordant. In the prologue to *Henry V* the Chorus observes the limitations of the theater: "O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend / The brightest heaven of invention" (Prologue, 1-2). Shakespeare might have recognized in cinema this muse of fire. While the Elizabethan playhouse could not contain "the vasty fields of France"(13), the camera gave Kozintsev the ability to put Lear out in the wind and rain of the heath, display armies at war, and, what is more, literally point our view toward what is important, usurping the clown's role. The result is spare, beautiful, shocking, but makes almost no use of the guide Shakespeare provided us. Kozintsev and Kurosawa do not need the Fool as function; much is gained and much is lost. I am unaware of a stage production that has kept the Fool alive to the end.

Of all the options for providing an end for the Fool in performance, instead of simply allowing him, as Shakespeare does, to disappear, perhaps the least objectionable is allowing him a mute, mourning presence at the end, but then only if he is physically in the audience, mourning with us rather than with Kent, Albany, and Edgar. In this position he could acknowledge both his investment in the story and his unaffected distance from it. But he would still be a distraction, and would flatten our experience of "And my poor fool is hanged" (5.3.304) by definitively removing him from the scaffold. More to the point, he abides to the end in much more important and moving ways through his disappearance.

Lear's Fool Must Disappear to Maintain both Function and Character

I began this study by asking why the Fool disappears suddenly from *King Lear*. I end by answering that he had no other choice. Caught between the defining immortality of his function and the defining mortality of his character, Shakespeare could neither maintain the Fool nor kill him off. He could not choose but quietly remove Lear's Fool from the action. Or to phrase it positively, there was far more to be gained by adhering to the demands of both function and character than by offending against them. The one demands unaffected life, and the other demands tragic death. An ambiguous disappearance is the compromise, satisfying neither but maintaining the power of both, which birthed a character greater than the sum of its parts. A nothing of extraordinary value. Lear's Fool is a symbol that can feel pain, something inhuman which we must respect as human, a means to an end, and an end in himself.

I have already described what would be lost in performance by giving a fixed answer to this question. But I am equally leery of the critical tendency to dismiss the question as a simple matter of expedience. There is nothing accidental about the Fool; he is our teacher, and even his absence is instructive. Shakespeare made a history into a tragedy, in part, by adding a fool. Tate, in creating a comic Lear, had to cut him back out. To Tate the Fool could only be a pestilent gall; imagine the derisive laughter his part, saccharine, happy ending would come in for if the Fool were allowed admission!

But Tate has been thoroughly shamed, and no critic would allow for the Fool's omission from *Lear*. For all of the reasons enumerated above and many more criticism is fascinated by the comic "poor boy", and it is difficult to find a critic that does not observe the ways in which the Fool's characteristics are taken up by Lear, Edgar, Gloucester, Kent, Cordelia, once he is gone. While it is easy to see the difference between Mendes depicting a graphic death for the Fool and allowing him to disappear, it is harder to articulate the demand for disappearance. When I make a distinction between "allowing" the Fool to disappear and "demanding" it I don't mean to quibble. I mean to argue that the fact of his disappearance is as essential to his character, his fate, as Cordelia's hanging is to hers. She must die. He must disappear.

Both "allowing" the disappearance and offering a staged death arise from the same belief, that the Fool has no function after the storm. Remember, Beale told us that the idea for Lear killing the Fool occurred to Mendes because "Lear has now lost his mind and therefore the Fool has no function within the play," while Foakes articulated the popular critical view that the Fool's function, "is no longer necessary when Lear goes mad...after 3.6 the Fool has no function, and it is understandable that Shakespeare should let him drop from sight" (58). Jan Kott, in *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, agrees: "A clown is not needed anymore. King Lear has gone through the school of clown's philosophy" (168). Even Welsford, while using the word necessity, seems to agree that he is discarded to make room for a replacement:

From the realistic point of view it is no doubt a dramatic flaw that Shakespeare does not account more clearly for the fate of the real man in motley; but his disappearance was a poetic necessity, for the king having lost everything, including his wits, has now himself become the Fool.

We have seen that this “dramatic flaw” was itself a necessity. Kent or Edgar might have related an offstage death for the Fool, but the ambiguity of his disappearance signifies more than the death of his character or the replacement of his function. Fools do not die, but exit, and always on their own terms. The Fool is not discarded, but repurposed, not lost but transformed. His new function is found in his absence; Shakespeare is making “use of nothing.”

Foakes writes, “If directors have anxieties about the disappearance of the Fool, I doubt if anyone watching a performance is troubled by it” (57). I take him to mean that the headlong rush of the tragedy through the madness, violence and sorrow of the final acts won’t allow the audience time to consider his absence. But what a terrible review for the actor! If the character has been fully realized, if he is convincingly tragic, so closely aligned with Cordelia and Kent, so beloved by Lear, can he disappear without our notice? And if his function has been to guide us through this overwhelmingly chaotic landscape, how can we fail to notice our abandonment? If the production has made the best use of his unique blend of tragic pathos and comic function we will fear for him as our “poor boy” and miss him as our guide. Both are desirable effects for the close of a tragedy, and our experience of the mad, blind, headlong rush to the close will be shaped by his absence: “So out went the candle and we were left darkling” (1.4.208).

The audience will most keenly feel the Fool character’s ambiguous absence in the final grief of “And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!” (5.3.304), where we cannot help but hold Lear’s two faithful children in one terrible image. But the Fool’s abiding function is no less important in creating this moment. I have described already how

destructive his presence would be at the end of the tragedy, but by so much is this moment strengthened by the *fact* of his disappearance, far more than if he had never been listed among the dramatis personae at all. We miss his power to distance us from the pain of the tragic world *because* he served that function until 3.6.

The sottie has a descendent in modern British pantomime, where fool time and fool logic run wild. Every principal character is made a fool by association and the spirit of carnival presides, on stage and in the audience. Anachronisms abound, references to the curtain, footlights and stage manager are standard, and not only do actors enter the audience, but the audience gets dragged into the action. It represents a poke in the eye and seltzer down the pants to dramatic verisimilitude. Millie Taylor, in her excellent study *British Pantomime Performance*, points to what can be gained when realism is lost:

It may be true that the audience feels closer to the story in moments of 'realism' and further removed in reflexive moments. But at those moments when identification with the story is distanced, a new relationship is established with the performer who appears to be revealing her/him self as a co-conspirator with the audience through direct speech or interaction. The distance increases between audience and story, but decreases between audience and comedy performer. (102)

Identification is necessary if we are going to care about Cinderella attending the ball or Cordelia's survival, but distance, far from destroying theater, allows us to adjust, fine tune, our experience of it. If the action on stage is too sappy a clown can speak our criticism, as when Touchstone derides Orlando's odes to Rosalind: "This is the very false gallop of verses. Why do you infect yourself with them?" (AYLI, 3.2.11-2). His mockery of young lovers and his travesty of love with Audrey allow the audience a momentary distance, an acknowledgement from the playwright that what we are being asked to identify with is a bit absurd. But that absurdity, acknowledged, is all the easier

to accept, so that we believe in Orlando and Rosalind's love more than we might without the clown's commiseration. Touchstone brings us closer to himself by separating us from the plot, but only deeper into the world of theater; he provides distance to facilitate identification. After all, Hymen herself presides over the triple wedding that ends the comedy; that Audrey and Touchstone make one of the pairs allows even the deity herself a little jest: "You and you are sure together, / As the winter to foul weather" (5.4.134-5). Here we see the utility in comedy of the Shakespearian clown who "constantly reminds the audience that they are watching a play, and constantly sees to it that potential identification and involvement with the characters is turned to laughter" (Videbæk 192). He guides us to the best vantage point from which to see the play, pulling us out in order to direct us back in. But this is Arden, worlds away from the heath, and everything absurdly idyllic in *As You Like It* turns terrifyingly adversarial in *King Lear*, it's dark reflection. Maynard Mack plots out the differences and similarities in '*King Lear*' in our *Time*," and concludes that *Lear* is "the greatest anti-pastoral ever penned" (65). Touchstone and Lear's Fool were cut from the same motley cloth, but the involved clown, transferred to the tragic stage, became something radically new in Lear's Fool.

Videbæk observed that Shakespeare employed clowns "for relief from tension" (2), a function admired in Lear's Fool. For Hazlitt the contrast between the pitiable king and his pitiless daughters "would be too painful, the shock too great, but for the intervention of the Fool, whose well-timed levity comes in to break the continuity of feeling when it can no longer be borne" (117). Here is (one) utility of the clown in tragedy. The Fool protected us, as he protected Lear, from the cruelty figured in Regan and Goneril. Though they were only temporary, his interruptions of the tragic action

provided shelter in the storm, and even in his cruelest mocking of Lear, he is reinforcing the truth which we see. He uses his license to confirm our view: Lear was an ass to divide his kingdom, Goneril is a cuckoo in the sparrow's nest. Lear had little enough merriment between banishing and recovering Cordelia, but what joy he had came in repartee with the Fool. While these comedy breaks didn't prevent us from identifying with the characters, they did keep us from getting swept away and overwhelmed in the action, over-identifying with the tragic world. He is a rock above the flood, a fire in the field.

But of course the real disruptions came in the moments of direct address. When the Fool abandoned tragic/historic time for comic time, dissolving the storm by recalling his audience to the warm London day, he reminded them that whatever happened to Lear on stage, they would all be on their way home to dinner in an hour or two. He was the *punctum indifferens*, their point of rest, facilitating a birds-eye-view. And as Taylor observed, these comic dislocations pull us out of the world of the play, but into the world of the clown. In our own lives death is inevitable. In the tragic world death is inevitable. But in the space between the two, mediated by the clown, anything is possible and death cannot be taken seriously. What we will find, to our horror, is that the release he provided at the beginning of the tragedy was in truth only a ratcheting up of the tension under which the tragedy bent. We thought he was pulling us away from danger; he was drawing back the bow string. When he disappears we are propelled into the tragedy. To avoid this distance is to avoid drawing the bow. To dismiss the disappearance as accidental is to miss the archer's hand, and perhaps his aim. Deftly managed, the fool can have a far greater effect on the tragic development of the play through the

anachronisms and direct address that so scare modern performers, than through their modern verisimilitude.

The above demonstrates how the Fool's function deepens our experience of Lear as a tragic figure, but the tragedy has touched the clown as well. This is the natural, if unforeseen consequence of Shakespeare's experiment. The Fool has become tragic, yet he cannot be tragic in the same mode as Cordelia and Lear, because he cannot die. He can only suffer. He did not simply jump into the world of Lear and back out of it unaffected, as he had in *Titus Andronicus*², rather he abided and suffered. This is his tragedy too. In becoming more than mere function, the Fool loaded mortal suffering onto his lithe immortal frame. His tragedy is articulated by Gloucester:

GLOUCESTER: Is wretchedness deprived that benefit
To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort
When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage
And frustrate his proud will. (4.6.61-4)

If the Fool is protecting us, it is from the truth of Lear's world and the wisdom of Silenus as Nietzsche describes it at the beginning of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Shakespeare's version is this: "When we are born we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (4.6.178-9).

The problem of the Fool's disappearance demonstrates his nature and tells us how he is to be understood. His disappearance is a paradox to be upheld, not resolved. To privilege character in performance by providing a fixed fate for the Fool is to lose the distance, authority, comedy and prophecy symbolized by the medieval fool. To dismiss

² See Bente A. Videbæk's *The Stage Clown in Shakespeare's Theater*, Chapter One. The clown in *Titus* is sentenced to death, but there is no indication that the sentence is carried out, and he exits the scene perfectly at ease.

the problem in criticism as a simple case of expired utility, waning function, is to deny the Fool's suffering. It is to miss the revolutionary step which Shakespeare took in maintaining both sides of the Fool in the face of competing aesthetic demands, and its remarkable results. What Shakespeare discovered in the Fool, and countless since have confirmed, is that the paradoxical combination of comic alienation and tragic involvement can articulate the eternal human condition in a particularly modern way. As one that sympathizes with mortals, suffers for them, yet cannot die, his tragedy is that of Prometheus, bound to his rock and vulture, or Christ to his cross. But Prometheus and Christ belong to theologies, where human conduct is imbued with cosmic meaning through the promise of an afterlife. Their sufferings become absurd when removed from that promise. In a tragic, hostile, god-deprived world, clown logic best reveals the absurdity of existence, and our irrational will to redeem it.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

The Fool abides in many ways. It is his nature to leave unchanged, but the stage and audience have been altered by his time on the boards. As we see Kurosawa and Kosintsev's interpretations through the eye of the camera, we should, if his theatrical function has been maintained, see the live performance through the Fool's eyes, even when he is gone. This in itself, as Welsford observes, is an answer to the moral relativism of the play:

Shakespeare makes the fullest possible use of the accepted convention that it is the fool who speaks the truth, which he knows not by ratiocination but by inspired intuition. The mere appearance of the familiar figure in cap and bells would at once indicate to the audience where the 'punctum indifferens', the impartial critic, the mouthpiece of real sanity, was to be found. (269)

Even if this "accepted convention" is far less familiar today than in 1606, everything a modern producer or reader requires to reestablish the clown/audience relationship is present in the text of *Lear*, if only they know how to value it. Not surprisingly, those critics like Welsford and Videbæk who are most keenly aware of the fool's function, and this Fool's unique pathos, have best teased out the echoes he leaves behind in the final two acts. We all do well to listen for them.

What is at stake for criticism is the recognition that *Lear*'s Fool gathered together for the first time those tragic fool attributes which would eventually give us the

protagonist clowns of modernism, from Chaplin to Beckett to Benigni. The clown has always represented our interests and perspective, straddling the worlds of audience and play, but the pathos of Lear's Fool, his over-involvement, was the first step toward taking the fool "seriously" enough that he could become a protagonist. In *The Circus*, Chaplin strives to be the leading man of his own movie, but at last facilitates the happiness of his rival with the ingénue. The circus leaves him behind, but after a moment's sorrow he shrugs off the pain and regains his trademark walk, receding from this film, preparing to enter the next. In *Act without Words I* Beckett presents a clown who can neither exit the stage nor escape by any other means. When he tries to hang himself from a tree, to free himself from Gloucester's gods, "The bough folds down against the trunk" (39). In *Life is Beautiful* Roberto Benigni attempts to apply clown logic to a Nazi concentration camp. When it at last fails, he winks to his son, the only audience of importance, before comically goose-stepping to his violent death. All of these characters are suffering clowns. They all descend from Lear's Fool, continuing to answer his question: "Can you make no use of nothing" (1.4.128-9)? That a successful film about the holocaust can be titled *Life is Beautiful* testifies to the enduring power of the clown to help us investigate our suffering and organize our values.³

What is at stake for an individual production is all of the powerful functions of the Fool described above, available only if the audience sees the Fool as more than the sum of his parts. The resonances of all that he spoke while present will be lost when he is

³ For discussions of clowns in modernity see Jan Kott's *Shakespeare our Contemporary* and Donald McManus' *No Kidding!*

gone if the audience has not been trained to hear them. A stunningly beautiful example can be traced through the uses of gold in *Lear*.

Gold is a traditional symbol of the differences between the worldly-wise and the truth which the medieval fool possesses, recalling the Christian injunction to be “no respecter of persons.” A king lusts for gold when he ought to be preparing his soul for the next world, ignorant that “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). With no gods present in *Lear*, the Fool is only speaking the worldly logic of Goneril when he says “Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav’st thy golden one away” (1.4.155-6). When we next hear the word it is in the Fool’s riddling prophecy, “When usurers tell their gold i’ the field” (3.3.89), expressing the absurdity of acting against self-interest as well as the utopian vision which that absurdity constitutes. When the Fool is gone it is left for others to tell us the value of gold. When Lear at last comes to “see how this world goes” he pronounces “Plate sin with gold, / And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;” (4.6.161-2). Albany reinforces this view when he calls his wife a “gilded serpent” (5.3.84), but a subtle shift is taking place when Lear famously speaks of “gilded butterflies.” We have acknowledged its uses, but finally we get an image suggestive of gold’s absurd uselessness; the medieval fool’s view. A butterfly cannot take to the air, its natural element, if weighed down with gold, any more than the soul weighed down with sin may ascend. Gold will protect you, gold will disguise you, but gold will weigh you down. This image recalls those of the Fool, eels in pies and buttered hay. They at once evoke the absurdity of man’s attempts to better what is already perfect in nature, as well as the folly of resisting the inevitable. Lear will no longer resist the inevitable, as he did

entering the heath. The Gentleman tells Kent that he found him there striving to “outscorn / The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain,” while the Fool labored to “outjest / His heart-struck injuries” (3.1.10-7). Lear would rail against the cause of his suffering; the Fool would stand back to treat the suffering itself with laughter. Attuned to the traditional uses of fools and the unique pathos of this particular Fool, we are prepared to fully appreciate the construct of value Lear builds for himself and Cordelia after their suffering. When Cordelia speaks of out-frowning the causes of their suffering, he returns to laughter:

CORDELIA:	We are not the first Who, with best meaning, have incurred the worst. For thee, oppressèd king am I cast down; Myself could else out-frown false fortune's frown. Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?
LEAR:	No, no. Come, let's away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds i'th'cage. When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live, And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too-- Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out, And take upon's the mystery of things As if we were gods' spies; and we'll wear out, In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones That ebb and flow by th'moon. (5.3.3-19)

He is describing the traditional outcast position of the medieval fool, the enforced remove from public life, as itself constituting a heaven on earth. This, at last, is the “use of nothing,” to lose everything and thereby gain infinitely more. This is the happiness that he imagined in parting his coronet, yet couldn’t attain because he insisted on remaining a king. Now he is more. He is a fool.

For modern theater in general, what is at stake is the reclamation of the tools which Shakespeare so brilliantly adopted and sharpened. His was a theater of language, not spectacle; he used the word to evoke the image. Edgar brings his father, and the audience, to the edge of a flat stage, and there, with words alone, minutely paints a staggering abyss, a terrible fall, and a miraculous salvation. Many have found this episode cruel, found it difficult to take Edgar at his word when he claims, "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (4.6.33-4). But shouldn't we be perfectly attuned now to this fool logic? Edgar was there on the heath, and he learned from the Fool no less than Lear did. If modern theater has continued to investigate the uses of nothing since *Lear*, to ask what human agency is worth in a tragic world, Shakespeare offered an answer in the very posing of the question: Edgar.

Edgar is forced into disguise, "Edgar I nothing am" (2.2.192), and by becoming nothing he gains the fool wisdom appropriate to the outcast. Edgar, as poor Tom, swallows legion devils and speaks hell on the Heath, but there he finds suffering deeper than his own in Lear, and the costume more powerful than his own: motley. His brother, a bastard, was an outcast too, but far from elevating him from the foolish vanities of wealth and rank, it taught him to pursue them even to the mouth of hell. His mock betrothal to Goneril, "Yours in the ranks of death" (4.2.25), though hollow, is prophetic, and evokes all the ranks of devils Edgar has enumerated. Lucifer was an outcast too. Edmund is a fool with agency, but no love. He has a strong hand but no heart. He plays the bedlam beggar before Edgar. Beginning "with a sigh like Tom o'Bedlam" (1.2.135-6), he uses the power of theater to gull "A credulous father and a brother noble" (1.2.177). Because he wears no motley, his artful lies are believed.

But here the brothers diverge. Edgar uses his suffering to redeem others, and employs his new-found fool function to effect it:

GLOUCESTER: Now, good sir, what are you?

EDGAR: A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows,
Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,
Am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand;
I'll lead you to some bidding. (4.6.216-20)

Where the Fool disappears on the heath, Edgar takes on his theatrical mantle, adding the function of a fool to the agency of a character (in Theater in the Open's recent production the Fool gave her coat to cover Poor Tom before her final exit). The Fool is Lear's "poor boy," but he is not a fighter. That is beyond his role. The Fool cheered the king, and taught him his follies, but without the agency of a character he could only remain loyal. The world will not take a clown seriously, it "won't believe a fool." He is a heart with no hands. But Edgar will believe a fool, and take clowning seriously. Lear named Edgar. Edgar is his *godson*. Albany is his son-in-law. If his kingdom is to be restored it must be through the actions of these two sons. Both are fools, the honest fool and the moral fool, but they also have agency. Albany and Edgar are heart and hand. But Edgar has learned more than Albany. He has been made tame through feeling sorrows. Edgar can do what Edmund cannot: he can love. Edgar can do what the Fool cannot: he can kill. He passes judgement on Oswald and Edmund, and kills them both. In so doing he provides what little solace there is at the end of our tragedy, saving Albany and defeating the true Hobbesian characters. Perhaps more than this, he employs clown theater to construct a happy ending for his despairing father.

address, modern theater does well to remember that Shakespeare's theater was one of the word, not the image, and what the chorus lamented in Henry V is the theater practitioner's great advantage over the screen. The live moment. The audience and the empty stage. The mediation of the fool.

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