

Chapter I 1

The Characteristics and Functions of the Fool in "King Lear"

The Fool in "King Lear" is a court jester whose main function is to amuse the King. Shakespeare's idea in **presenting** this character in this tragedy is interesting since it is not common for a tragedy to have a clown. A comical mood portrayed by a fool can possibly break the tragic feeling built by the plot of the play. That is probably the reason Nahum Tate abolishes the role of the Fool in his adaptation of Shakespeare's "King Lear" in 1681. In his opinion the **presence** of the Fool is improper for the tragedy (Shakespeare, 1961:982).

However, Shakespeare is genius enough to employ his Fool so that he does not spoil the tragedy. The Fool functions more than just an ordinary court jester. His jokes are not intended only to make the King or the audience and readers laugh. They also serve to make them aware of the situation as the play develops. In this way the readers can understand the tragedy of King Lear better. So, instead of breaking or hindering the tragic mood the Fool intensifies it.

The Fool in "King Lear" is portrayed as a witty and honest character. In Renaissance period, court fools

were allowed to speak freely. Naturally some of them could not keep their wit under control (Hoeniger, 1968:15). The Fool in "King Lear" also has the freedom to speak. He can say anything he wants to Lear. He can address Lear "my boy" and even mock Lear as a fool.

Fool. Dost thou know the difference, my boy,
between a bitter fool and a sweet fool?

Lear. No, lad; teach me.

Fool

The sweet and bitter fool

Will presently appear;

The one in motley here,

the other found out there

Lear. Dost thou call me fool, boy?

(Shakespeare, 1961:985)

Likewise, the Fool cannot keep silent if he knows that something is wrong. He cannot conceal his feeling and must say what comes to his mind. Since his appearance in Act I, Scene 4, he has been doing nothing else than criticizing the King with his bitter jokes. He keeps telling Lear that the latter is a fool for he has given his kingdom to his two daughters. From this scene the readers also can see his truthfulness. He frankly criticizes Lear and he does not care whether the latter wants to hear it or not. The Fool is not going to lie to please Lear even if he has to be whipped. "Prithee, nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach thy fool to lie: I would fain learn to lie (Shakespeare, 1961:989)."

Besides being witty and straight-forward, the Fool is also faithful and wise. His faithfulness is shown

when he accompanies Lear during his banishment. He is with Lear when the latter steps out of Goneril's castle to Regan's. He consoles the King in his anger of Goneril's ingratitude. The Fool is still with him when Lear has no other place to go and they are facing the cold storm together. This Fool accompanies the King during his most difficult time. He tries to console the King with his jokes even in the latter's madness. Through his speech the Fool proves himself to be wise. Kent realizes this ever since the Fool mocks Lear as a fool. Kent says to Lear that "This is not altogether fool,... (Shakespeare, 1961:989)." The Fool is not really foolish as his name, his motley, and coxcomb are shown to the readers. Besides Kent, he is the one who judges Goneril and Regan correctly. Lear feels certain that Regan is going to treat him better than Goneril and he plans to go to Regan's castle. It is the Fool who says that Regan is just as wicked as Goneril. "Shalt see thy other daughter will use thee kindly; for though she's as like this as a crab's like an apple (Shakespeare, 1961:991)." A crab is similar to an apple, but this fruit is sour. Here the Fool illustrates Regan's character that is just as fake as her sister. This Fool surely has good counsel.

With such characteristics the Fool serves Lear more than just a jester. His wit and his truthfulness enable

him to comment against Lear's decision concerning his kingdom. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, he is free to say whatever he wants to say to Lear. The Fool is the only character who can criticize Lear's decision in the first scene of love test without arousing his anger. He has the skill to criticize the King sarcastically but humorously.

...: there, take my coxcomb: why this fellow has banished two on 's daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will;

Lear. Take heed, sirrah; the whip

(Shakespeare, 1961:989)

The Fool satirizes Lear's decision in turning his kingdom over to Goneril and Regan and also his decision to banish Cordelia. His criticism is as sharp as Kent's criticism in Act I, Scene 1. Nevertheless, he accepts Lear's threat to whip him whereas Kent is banished for opposing the King.

Through his criticism the Fool tries to make Lear realize in what condition he is now. The audience and readers alike have seen Lear's pride as a king in the first scene. He banishes Cordelia because she does not flatter him the way her sisters did in her confession of love. Lear sends Kent away since the latter dares to rebuke him. The first scene proves him proud, dictatorial, and unreasonable King (Wright, 1960:xxxvni). He is still like this in Act 1, Scene 4.

He is a king who thinks that he can rule his kingdom with his "iron fist". He expects men to come running when he calls them. In Goneril's house, Lear commands Goneril's servant and his attendants and he wants them to do his commands at once. "Where's my Fool, ho? I think the world's asleep (Doren, 1953:209)." He still considers himself as a King with power. That is why he is angry when Goneril's servant ignores him and only regards him as "My lady's father".

O, you sir, you, come you hither, sir: who am I, sir?

Osw. My lady's father.

Lear. 'my lady's father'! my lord's knave: you whoreson dog! you slave! you cur!

(Shakespeare, 1961:989)

The Fool is the one who reminds the King that he has given his kingdom and he is not a king anymore. Positionally speaking he is no better than the Fool now. The Fool has his coxcomb whereas Lear has lost his crown. The Fool still works as a court jester whereas Lear is stripped of his power (Shakespeare, 1961:990). Thus through his comment, the readers are aware of Lear's folly and pride.

The Fool also provides the readers with some imageries to illustrate the theme of the two daughters' ingratitude to their father. The first imagery is about the cuckoo.

For , you know, nuncle,
The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,

That it had it head bit off by it young.

(Shakespeare, 1961:990)

This imagery is aptly spoken after Goneril's sharp disapproval against Lear's fool and attendants that make riots at her castle. This imagery illustrates Goneril's effort to hurt Lear's feeling, the father who has provided for her with all the luxuries of life. The second imagery is about the cart which draws the horse. This imagery is a critical comment on Goneril's flattering Lear that the latter is wise so that she can make Lear obey her.

Gon. Come, sir
 I would you would make use of that good wisdom,
 Whereof I know you Are fraught;
 Fool. May not an ass know when the cart draws
 the horse? Whoop, Jug¹. I love thee.

(Shakespeare, 1961:990)

As the Fool says, Goneril tries to drive and govern his father. The father is in the position to govern his children as a horse draws a cart. However, what happens in this scene is just the reverse. It is the two daughters who govern their father, not the other way around. Through these imageries the Fool tries to make Lear see the destruction he has done to himself for trusting Goneril's expression of love in the first scene. A snail has a house to put his head in while Lear does not since he has given it to his daughters (Shakespeare, 1961:991). Lear begins to gain self awareness when he is about to leave Goneril's castle.

These imageries motivates him to say : "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/ To have a thankless child (Shakespeare, 1961:990)."

Moreover the Fool serves as a dramatic contrast against Lear. There is a contradictory relation between him and the Fool. Their relationship should be that of a master and servant. The master should be more intelligent and wise than his servant (Traversi, 1969:151). Ironically it is the Fool who shows more intelligence about the situation than Lear. He knows that Lear is wrong in turning his kingdom over to Boneril and Regan. Lear himself is completely unconscious that he has made his daughters his mother (Shakespeare, 1961:989). With his criticism the Fool proves himself to be wiser while Lear becomes the fool as shown by his conduct. The scene becomes ironical when the Fool advises Lear not to be old before he has been wise. "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise (Shakespeare, 1961:992)." As a father, Lear should know his daughters' characters far better than other people. On the contrary it is the Fool who sees clearly that Lear's two daughters do not love Lear heartily and truly as they expressed. Their expression of love to their father is but "sugar coated". They Bre just after Lear's money and power. "Fathers that wear rags/ Do make their children blind;/ But fathers that

bear bags/ Shall see their children kind (Shakespeare, 1961:996). Lear seems to be blind about this. After he is humiliated by Goneril he still proudly says that he has another daughter who is going to restore him to his dignity as a King (Shakespeare, 1961:991). Thus, Shakespeare uses the Fool as a contrast to emphasize Lear's tragedy. The readers can see however sharp and direct is the Fool's message to Lear, the latter still cannot recognise his error. The readers' pity on him is heightened when he argues desperately against Kent's reply that it is Regan and Cornwall who put him in the stocks (Shakespeare, 1961:995). This scene is the beginning of Regan's refusal to receive Lear with his fifty attendants. The Fool's prediction comes true, "...thou shalt have as many dolours for thy daughters as thou canst tell in a year (Shakespeare, 1961:996). Lear suffers and is humiliated by his two daughters instead of honored and respected.

The Fool in "King Lear" does not appear again on stage after the trial scene in Act III, Scene 6. During this scene he joins Lear's fancy in judging his daughters' cruelties to him. This scene shows how deep Lear is hurt by his daughters' ingratitude. He longs to see them put into trial and the Fool is trying to ease Lear's feeling by joining his fancy. He portrays Goneril as if she is scared to come to Lear and he also

tells the unreal Goneril to cry for mercy (Shakespeare, 1961:1002).

In the fourth act when the Fool is no longer with him and he is brought to Dover, Lear comes to the realization that he has been flattered. When he sees Gloucester, he mistakes him for Goneril and he says :

They flattered me like a dog; and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say ay' and 'no' to every thing that I said!
When the rain came to wet me at once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found' em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words: they told me I was every thing ; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof. (Shakespeare, 1961: 1009)

The hard experience Lear undergoes during the storm teaches him that he is a fool to believe in flattery. The rain can wet him, the wind can make him chatter but he cannot command the thunder. He learns that he is not like everything they say about him. The meeting with Cordelia shows Lear as a humble King who is willing to admit his faults. He confesses that he is old and foolish and he asks Cordelia's forgiveness (Shakespeare, 1961:1012). The hard experience and the meeting with Cordelia cure Lear of his folly and pride. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the Fool has no contribution to Lear's change. Lear must have remembered the Fools criticism since no other man dares to mock him as the Fool.

The Fool is a good character. He is cynical in words but not in deed. He knows that he is going to receive nothing from Lear but suffering, yet it does not stop him *in* serving his master (Mitchell, 1966 :74).