

LEAR'S FOOL

Feste, the Fool (or Clown) in *Twelfth Night*, turns up in Act I after an unexplained absence. 'Nay,' Maria says to him, 'either tell me where thou hast been, or I will not open my lips so wide as a bristle may enter in way of thy excuse: my lady will hang thee for thy absence.'

The Fool in *King Lear*, who does not have a name, goes missing in Act III and is not seen again, though he is heard of. 'And my poor fool is hang'd!' says Lear in the final scene while cradling the dead Cordelia. 'No, no, no life!'

Hanging perhaps was an occupational hazard for Elizabethan fools. The coincidence otherwise is a strange one. Or was it deliberate? With Shakespeare as with any playwright, each play was a new beginning but one which built on the last. The Fool in his greatest comedy, brought back by popular demand in *All's Well That Ends Well* and given the *coup de grâce* in his greatest tragedy. The life of a Fool brought full circle. Another absence, another hanging - this time a real one.

Shakespeare's Fools (or Clowns) stand outside looking in. Feste plays a small part in Sir Toby's plot, but the principal actors are Sir Toby and Maria. All Feste does is what Fools are paid to do: speak truth to power, using words, not deeds, to show people the error of their ways.

CLOWN: Good madonna, why mourn'st thou?

OLIVIA: Good fool, for my brother's death.

CLOWN: I think his soul is in hell, madonna.

OLIVIA: I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

CLOWN: The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul being in heaven.—Take away the fool, gentlemen.

But this is just light-hearted banter in comparison with the first exchange between Lear and his Fool in Act I, scene iv.

FOOL: How now, nuncle! Would I had two coxcombs and two daughters!

KING LEAR: Why, my boy?

FOOL: If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself. There's mine; beg another of thy daughters.

KING LEAR: Take heed, sirrah,—the whip.

FOOL: Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipt out, when Lady the brach may stand by the fire and stink.

KING LEAR: A pestilent gall to me!

It sometimes feels as if the fool in *King Lear* has wandered by accident into the wrong play. He was never more needed and never more out of his depth. As the play goes on, he seems to stop trying to be funny and just tell the truth.

KING LEAR: Doth any here know me?—Why, this is not Lear:

Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?

Either his notion weakens, or his discernings

Are lethargied—Ha! waking? 'tis not so.—

Who is it that can tell me who I am?—

FOOL: Lear's shadow.

Macbeth, we know, murdered sleep. He said so himself. Lear has murdered laughter, a much greater crime. His Fool's attempts at humour grow more half-hearted with every scene. His double-act with Lear is notable for the way the Fool's barbed comments fail to hit their mark because Lear isn't listening.

FOOL: Thou canst tell why one's nose stands i' th'middle on's face?

KING LEAR: No.

FOOL: Why, to keep one's eyes of either side's nose; that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into.

KING LEAR: I did her wrong—

FOOL: Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell?

KING LEAR: No.

FOOL: Nor I neither; but I can tell why a snail has a house.

KING LEAR: Why?

FOOL: Why, to put's head in; not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case.

KING LEAR: I will forget my nature.—So kind a father!—Be my horses ready?

And so it goes on, half a double act at best. The Fool has lost his straight man. The desperation of a comic struggling to go on with his routine is in a way a reflection of Lear's own despair.

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

LEAR: How's that?

FOOL: Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise.

KING LEAR: O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!

Keep me in temper: I would not be mad.

Critics and directors have come up with various explanations for the disappearance of the Fool halfway through the play. Some have suggested that the actor was doubling the part of Cordelia, some that the actor was getting old and couldn't keep it up for a whole play. One, in a recent production at the National Theatre, had him stabbed to death by Lear. This was the production in which Lear himself was presented as suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Such explanations deserve the kind of ridicule which Shakespeare would have been better able to put into the mouth of his Fools than I am to write in an essay. The Fool's disappearance needs no explanation beyond that provided by the play itself. Lear had murdered laughter and there was only so much the Fool could take. If Oliver Hardy or Ernie Wise or King Lear lose interest, there's not much point in Stan Laurel or Eric Morecambe or Lear's Fool going on.

Lear makes a kind of apology to his Fool in Act III. 'Poor fool and knave,' he says, 'I have one part in my heart that's sorry yet for thee.' In response to which, perhaps to Shakespeare as much as to Lear, the Fool sings a song from *Twelfth Night*.

He that has and a little tiny wit,—

With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,—

Must make content with his fortunes fit,

Though the rain it raineth every day.

And Lear, less distracted for the moment, says, 'True, my good boy.' But his distraction soon returns, encouraged by Edgar disguised as a madman and, though the Fool stays with him for two more scenes, he has little to say. The wind and the rain are too much for him.

This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

Act III, scene vi, his last, gets off to a bad start when Lear kills one of his jokes with his own punch-line, so that his falls flat.

FOOL: Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman.

KING LEAR: A king, a king!

FOOL: No, he's a yeoman that has a gentleman to his son; for he's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before him.

It wasn't very funny anyway. But he keeps trying, throwing in funny lines at random, though nobody is taking any notice of him.

He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath.

He plays his part in the pretend trial of Lear's daughters, but it is a very small part and not the kind of part a Fool is used to playing. The scene ends when Gloster and Kent take Lear to safety. As they are going out, Kent turns to the Fool and says, 'Come, help to bear thy master; thou must not stay behind.' The implication of which is that the Fool intends to stay behind - or why would Kent tell him not to?

And that is the last we see of him or hear of him until Lear tells us that he is dead. Does his absence need any further explanation? I don't think so.

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