Oberlin
Digital Commons at Oberlin

Honors Papers Student Work

1987

The Fool As a Provisional Role in Shakespeare: Three Examples

Santha Cassell
Oberlin College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Repository Citation
Cassell, Santha, "The Fool As a Provisional Role in Shakespeare: Three Examples" (1987). *Honors Papers*. 599.
https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/599

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons at Oberlin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Oberlin. For more information, please contact megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu.

The Fool As A Provisional Role in Shakespeare: Three Examples

Santha Cassell
Senior Thesis

April 17, 1987

In his essay "Jacobean Shakespeare," Maynard Mack explains the system of "mirroring" that produces Shakespeare's depth and unity. A "mirror" is an element that creates a dialogue with other elements, and weaves the thematic fabric of the play. This process takes place between motifs, parallel scenes, and characters who echo each other or "speak each other's minds."[1] Very often, the mirroring character or catalyst is the licensed fool. With dramatic permission to say anything, and a reputation and tradition of madness, the fool both reveals the truth and obscures it with his inverted, debased, or metaphoric language. Just as an event can perpetuate the plot's development, an encounter with the fool can advance a character's development and our understanding of the play. The wise fool is provisional in the sense that his behavior is dependent on the demands the play places on him.

The fool possesses a specific discourse that contrasts with the way the major characters in the play communicate. This dichotomy produces the fool's humor and allows him to perform his dramatic purpose. Bakhtin speaks of the effect in his discussion of genre in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. In addressing the characteristics of the serio-comical genres he says:

> In all genres of the serio-comical, to be sure, there is a strong rhetorical element, but in the atmosphere of joyful relativity characteristic of a carnival sense of the world this element is fundamentally changed: there is a weakening of its one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism.[2]

If we think of "carvival sense of the world" as "fool's style"

and examine the ways in which the fool's perspective contradicts the perspective of the dominant characters in the play, it becomes clear that neither perspective is complete. The dialogue between the two views is one way in which the plays seek, but do not force, the truth.

There are fools in name and fools in function. The four traditional "wise fools" as Robert Goldsmith states in Wise Fools in Shakespeare, are Lear's fool, Lavache in All's Well, Feste in Twelfth Night, and Touchstone in As You Like It[3]. They are court jesters or professional fools, and divert or entertain their masters and mistresses through songs, riddles, and other word games. They insinuate themselves into conversation, and are allowed to be contrary and contentious, breaking rules of etiquette and decorum. Although these four characters are distinct and unique, they share these qualities and their behavior creates similar dramatic patterns.

Here let us note a distinction between the wise fool and the clown or rustic. Clowns are funny because of their simplicity, stupidity, or innocence. Audrey in As You Like It, Elbow in Measure for Measure, and Jaquenetta in Love's Labor's Lost make mistakes, misuse language, and provide a humorous contrast to the more sophisticated characters in each play. They may mirror folly in others but they do so unwittingly.

Wise fools are both silly and sage, broaching subjects that genteel characters cannot, subverting other people's language as well as their own, exposing hypocrisy and the fragility of logic. Although the four characters mentioned above

are the most formal and consistent in their behavior as wise fools and can be placed in a dramatic category, it can be argued that other characters in the canon may not be designated "fool" but serve a similar dramatic function. In other words, a fool is not only a character, but a role, and sometimes not so much a role as a purpose. Costard picks the role up (and drops it) in Love's Labor's Lost, and the clown who brings the asp in Antony and Cleopatra fills the role for a moment.

My examples, the gravedigger in Hamlet, Thersites in Troilus and Cressida, and Lavache in All's Well That Ends Well, are designed to challenge, refine, and expand the way we regard the fool. By addressing the dramatic mechanics of the fool's presence, we can discover the purpose of the fool, and learn why traditional labelling is a less important way to designate fools than by their function. The first two examples are fools in function rather than name, and should help us to define the wise fool's purpose and style. The gravedigger operates as a fool in one scene of Hamlet, and Thersites functions throughout Troilus and Cressida.The third example, Lavache, is a fool in name but has never been embraced by commentators in the way Feste, Touchstone, and Lear's fool have been. I will delineate the fool's influential qualities by examining the non-traditional fools, and use those qualities to demonstrate Lavache's illuminating role in All's Well. As a first representative of the marginal fool I propose a look at the gravedigger in Hamlet.

* * * *

The gravedigger is a protean character, presenting several different kinds of dramatic humor. He helps create a verbal and

emotional progression that has a profound effect on Hamlet's approach to death. When the scene opens, the gravedigger is a rustic; he is misusing words and proud of his status as a member of the "low folk." By the time Hamlet is on the scene, the gravedigger is a wise fool, speaking the truth but shrouding it in wit and nonsense.

The graveyard scene is really three smaller ones: the two clowns' exchange with each other, the first clown's exchange with Hamlet, and the arrival of Ophelia's coffin and the ensuing fight between Hamlet and Laertes. The scene opens as the two clowns (as they are called in the text) are discussing the feasibility of a Christian burial for Ophelia while standing in the grave that they dig for her. This first section, in which the clowns discuss death in a businesslike way, forms a preface to Hamlet's involvement.

In her book The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies, Susan Snyder makes a comparison between this scene and the "To be or not to be" speech. "In the [soliloquy, death] was at least a significant reality, at once fearsome and desirable. Now the comic perspective calls even that significance into question...the end of life makes every life equally absurd."[4] Like so many other Shakespeare scenes belittlingly labeled "comic relief," this episode is dense with allusion that both complicates and clarifies the rest of the play. By balancing Hamlet's intellectual and abstract view of death with the pragmatism of the gravedigger, the scene makes the play a richer and ultimately more moving experience.

Upon entering, Hamlet sees the gravedigger singing to himself as he works. He is provoked: "Has this fellow no feeling of his business? A sings in the gravemaking." (Act. V, scene 1, ll. 55-6) With "'Tis e'en so, the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense" (ll. 58-9) Hamlet even seems to be taking the gravedigger's part, as if acknowledging his shift to a more potent role, from rustic to wise fool.

The grave is being dug in an overcrowded cemetery and at least two bodies have rested in the earth that is being prepared for Ophelia. Death is a pervasive, and, at the moment, tangible part of life, represented both in time and space. The clown's casualness in tossing bones up is contrasted to Hamlet's previous stifled urgency in his consideration of death.

Using a fool to confront the subject of death is hardly novel. The fool, simply by virtue of the tradition of madness, deformity, and perversity, has always existed as a symbol for the mystery of life. The fool's use of nonsense is a metaphor for recognizing and embracing this mystery. Welsford reminds us that Shakespeare was writing during a time in which people did stand as symbols for each other.[5] Just as a king could exist as a representative of divinity, the fool could exist as a representative of humanity, but also of the unknown, dark, and mysterious. Madness is one degree of this mystery, and death is the ultimate extension of the metaphor.

Here let us clarify that the fool was not necessarily an agent of death or evil; he is a mouthpiece for the human preoccupation with death. We will see this again in another form with Lavache, who is able to verbalize part of the dark side of

All's Well That Ends Well. The gravedigger is able to talk about death, it being his business, but he does so in fresh, surprising ways, being a fool. He keeps a balance between the literal and abstract. Like any other Shakespeare fool, the gravedigger creates a verbal forum in which Hamlet must function in an imaginative, creative way, questioning the known and accepting the unknown.

Hamlet does conform to the gravedigger's way, and joins in the game that this scene has become. By the time the skull has been thrown on the stage, Hamlet is using the scene as a springboard for his imagination. At the sight of the skull he says, "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once," and with this statement seems to cross a line, entering the world of meaningful nonsense.

Act II, scene 2, makes it clear that Hamlet has the ability to play on Polonius' expectations. Hamlet has played the wise fool before as his 'antic disposition' demanded; he knows the power of the role. Horatio is somewhat cowed by his raving friend. His lines, "It might my lord," "Ay my lord," and "Not a jot more my lord," and finally "Twere to consider too curiously to consider so," contrast starkly with Hamlet's increasingly fanciful and witty speech: "Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt?" matches and even exceeds the gravedigger's stretching the bounds of language.

By asking whose grave he digs, Hamlet is setting up a perfect opportunity for the gravedigger to be a wise fool; by

answering that it is his, the gravedigger begins an exchange that can work as a metaphor, condensing the major themes of the play into a very pregnant kind of nonsense:

> Hamlet: Whose grave's this sirrah?
> Clown: Mine sir.
>
> (sings)
> Oh a pit of clay for to be made
> For such a guest is meet.
>
> Hamlet: I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.
> Clown: You lie out on't sir, and therefore 'tis not yours. For my part, I do not lie in't, yet it is mine. (11.99-105)

By responding in kind Hamlet is able to adopt some of the fool's attitude and begins to develop an ecumenical approach to mortality.

After a frank discussion concerning Hamlet's whereabouts and mental health and then one concerning the speed with which corpses decay, Hamlet asks the gravedigger whose skull it is that has been exhumed. "A whoreson mad fellow's it was. Whose do you think it was?" Hamlet is faced with another riddle from the gravedigger and a thematic echo in his response. "A pestilence on him for a mad rogue, a poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester." The first recollection we have of Yorick is an echo of the king's murder transposed into foolish terms.

In each phase of this scene there is a presiding spirit of foolery; first it is the gravedigger, then it is Yorick in the form of his skull, and finally it is Hamlet himself, who, like Lear, gains from his relationship with his fool. Although he is repulsed by Yorick's skull, he holds it in his hands and up to

his nose. The distancing necessitated by ordinary discourse has been replaced with the immersion allowed by fool discourse.

Hamlet asks Yorick, in the guise of the skull, "Where be your gibes now? your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning?" In an earlier speech, Hamlet had asked a question in the form of a statement, "To be, or not to be, that is the question." There are endless theories on Hamlet's problem; surely part of it, which he expresses himself, is that he is "unpregnant of his cause." (Act.2, sc.2, l. 520) He is so disassociated from things that he is paralyzed. After the discovery of both skulls, Hamlet's reaction is to ask questions of a different kind than he asked earlier in the play. He is beginning to approach death in a more concrete, less intellectual way, one more conducive to action, and with increasing affinity with the wise fool's perspective.

* * * *

<u>Troilus and Cressida</u> is substantially given to satire, which demands another kind of commentary. Some of Maynard Mack's mirrors are true to their subject, and some, like Thersites, distort. But Thersites reflects, and therefore serves, his play. He embodies the anger, envy, and irrationality that fill <u>Troilus</u>, and by the magnification of these attributes in himself, serves to demonstrate their folly. Other fools may do the same by more attractive attributes: their ability to see the essence of things, take pain out of the truth through humor, and balance

between sense and nonsense to communicate the futility of reason. Thersites does not bring meaning to his play through equivocation, but rather through the perversity of his singlemindedness. He is made up of the manifestations of weakness in others, embodied in a distorted version of the court fool.

Troilus and Cressida is about a love that exceeds its merit and a war that exceeds its cause. Thersites is a fool who exceeds his license; although he possesses the attributes of the traditional fool we do not empathize with him. Like any other fool he asks riddles, calls names, and offers commentary but with unmatched vituperation. His language, which makes constant reference to bodily functions, uses rustic proverbs and crude sexual images, poses a large contrast to the discourse of the soldiers around him, who are usually engaged in elevated debate.

In Act II, sc.1, Thersites displays a number of the wise fool functions. He is scapegoat, truth teller, equalizer (by calling everyone "fool', and by showing favor to no one), and iconoclastic free agent. This scene is sandwiched between the two council scenes, so that Thersites comments on what has come before and what is to follow. He opens the second act with a vulgar riddle/pun that describes the Greek general as a pussy sore who therefore "runs'. By this verbal gesture, several fool functions are brought into play. He destroys the hierarchy of characters by reducing everyone to a variety of obscene images. His traitorous or destructive statements make it dramatically and psychologically unnecessary for others to voice theirs. He

is vessel and valve for what is unspeakable to others.

Thersites is both a lisenced fool and a scapegoat for the camp. Troilus and Cressida's origin is Homer's Iliad, but the play is far more Jacobean than neo-classical. In the Iliad, Ulysses' response to Thersites' railing is designed to put him to shame. There is no assumed license for the fool in this speech:

> Then do not take into that mouth of thine
> The names of kings, much lesse revile the dignities that shine
> In their supreme states, wresting thus this motion for our home
> To sooth thy cowardise, since our selves yet know not what
> will come (Iliad, Book 2, ll. 213-222)

Thersites' role in Homer's Troilus and Cressida is not to entertain, but to bear some of the shame produced by the war.

Shakespeare's Thersites is based on a court jester, whose roots lie in medieval Christian ritual. Folk festivals often had a character who was called 'fool' and was subject to the abuses of the people around him. "The persons concerned have striking features in common; they are all grotesque in appearance and behavior, they all bear marks of an ancient association with sacrificial ritual."[7] Thersites seems accustomed to his beatings and both provokes his punishment and defends himself from it with language:

> Ajax: You whoreson cur! [Beats him.]
> Thers.: Do! Do!
> Ajax: Thou stool for a witch!
> Thers.: Ay, do! do! thou sodden-witted lord,
> thou hast no more brain than I have in mine elbows:
> an asinico may tutor thee.
> (Act II, sc.1, ll. 42-7)

Thersites' defense is more crucial and more brilliant when Margarelon challenges him to fight in Act 5, scene 8. He plays on the word bastard for all it's worth and expresses apt reason for not fighting. "Take heed: the quarrel's most ominous to us - if

the son of a whore fight for a whore, he tempts judgment. Farewell, bastard." His would-be attacker replies: The devil take thee, coward," which shouldn't bother Thersites. His strongest suit is that he knows what he is. He rails at others' lack of self knowledge. He avoideds the essential weakness of all the characters that he insults by admitting to his own vulgarity. Ulysses echoes this idea: "pride hath no other glass/ To show itself but pride." (Act III, sc. 3, ll. 48-9)

His self knowlege does not make him any more appealing to the other characters, however. Ajax has a physically violent response to Thersites. Whipping and beating were clearly risks that wise fools ran. Lavache is warned that he will be whipped by the Countess, Lear's fool is threatened with the same. Only Thersites is actually struck. He is part of a play that is pulled away from sense and based on extremities of emotion and action. Ajax hits Thersites for his insults, which does nothing to dampen his spirit or verbal abuse. In Act II, scene 3, Thersites says "He beats me and I rail at him." As always, the word is the fool's protection, but here the fool's threat and counterpoint are desperately abusive. Ajax strikes him in the above passage because Thersites accuses him of being envious of Achilles. Proof of the truth is Ajax's inordinate reaction. Thersites never sounds reasonable, but he generally speaks the truth; his license allows him to.

This play, like <u>All's Well</u>, has been an object of critical attack. It may be that the problem plays are not more flawed than other Shakespeare plays, but simply more dependent on stage presentation, which is another kind of close reading. In order

to get anomalies like Thersites to make sense, it may be necessary to impose an interpretation on a play that feels disconnected and inconsistent. The key issue to understanding the dramatic value of the fool is to understand his purpose in his play. In other words, how does the character both enhance and challenge the premises upon which the play is built?

In the course of their plays, Feste, Lavache, Touchstone, and Lear's fool each have a verbal game that proves that their masters and mistresses are bigger fools than themselves. This traditional wise fool gesture can be a formative one in the character's development, the most complex and complete example being Lear and his fool. It can also be an "equalizer" which humanizes characters, convincing the audience of their accessibility or even fallibility despite their high language or heroic deeds. Troilus and Cressida explores heroism and love, and creates an unstable world in which these ideals are put into question. Thersites' ability to break down the hierarchy of the characters, through various methods, helps make this reconsideration possible.

Critical interpretations of the play provide varied explanations of Thersites' purpose. William Bowden argues that all Shakespeare plays have the audience's emotional involvement as their objective.[8] Bowden feels that Shakespeare, with his usual generosity towards human weakness and folly, would want us to side with Troilus and forgive him for loving ignorantly. According to this interpretation, Thersites' function would be to make lack of sympathy look unattractive. Since he is so

extreme and unreasonable, Theresites is both an agent and an antidote for the vicious satire in the play.

The issue that Bowden speaks of is complicated by the fact that Thersites is fascinating in his grotesqueness, and is therefore able to involve the audience. Though Bowden maintains that audience psychology is an essential consideration to understanding the motives of the play, he doesn't give Thersites enough credit as a startling and engaging character. In the scene before Thersites's entrance, the Greeks use a high style and rhetoric to speak about the war, making a dirty matter grand. The rhetoric is counteracted by the fool, whose job, in the plainest sense, is to entertain. He is sharply reductive, which can be appealing, considering the rhetorical tendencies of the rest of the play. His view is fresh; he entertains the camp and he entertains the audience, which produces our allegiance or his credence.

Perhaps, as Kenneth Palmer implies in his introduction to the Arden edition of Troilus and Cressida, the thing we are meant to question most in the play is judgment.[9] The play's structure and plots are meant to frustrate judgment; our understanding and evaluation of a situation shift as different characters have their say. Even this play's genre is elusive; it variously resembles a romance, history, tragedy, or a comedy. Thersites does not shift his perspective. He exaggerates, is unattractive, and embodies what he hates in others, but he is consistent. He stands as a symbol for the folly of judgment even when he is speaking the truth. If this is a play both of human inconstancy and our desire to evaluate each others' behavior and morality,

Thersites is important both as a constant perspective and as a grotesquery of judgement.

We have been speaking about Thersites in more general terms than the gravedigger. Thersites is present throughout his play and doesn't seem to enlighten or deeply affect any of the other characters. Some fools challenge individual characters, making them change or grow. Some fools, like Thersites, challenge the structure and content of the play and force us to more complicated dramatic awareness. We are not allowed to assume much about the structure and premises of a play if a character is there to disrupt the patterns that it tries to establish.

* * * *

In only one scene the gravedigger gives Hamlet a chance to explore a new way of thinking about death, and hastens the action of the play. Thersites contradicts and complicates the evaluation of ideals and human nature throughout Troilus and Cressida. These characters are not court fools in name, yet we have seen that they function in that way, although their roles and styles differ. Lavache, who is the Countess' fool in All's Well That Ends Well, is my example of the traditional court fool. He disrupts moral assumptions that we might make about the play and introduces bawdy country wit, cynical theology, and country simplicity as possible antidotes for the pain and confusion in Alls Well.

Lavache brings many issues together; in him we can see both

the choric quality of the fool's commentary and the isolated, unique, and sometimes contradictory perspective that the fool offers. Here we have our critic, mirror, and truth sayer. Like Thersites, it is important that Lavache maintains consistency in his view. Part of the fool's meaning stems from the fact that his perspective is stable. He is not caught up in the events of the play, and is not rocked by the emotional challenges that other characters face. A fool is not meant to grow and develop as a character. He is an agent rather than a subject of change. His influence on the tone of the play or the mental life of other characters is important, not his development.

As both a stock character, from whom we can expect certain qualities, and a dramatic and thematic device, the fool is uniquely suited to serve his play. In _All's Well That Ends Well_, Lavache functions as an emotional buffer for the Countess and Helena, outwits hypocrisy in Parolles and Lafew, and parodies Bertram's rejection of Helena and courtship of Diana. His theological views offer a contrast to the optimistic and perhaps naive piety in others; he is a moral and philosophical counterpoint to the world of the play. By presenting parodic parallels and contrasts to the plot, he serves to challenge both the play's superficial premises and the personal objectives of the characters.

All fools possess an ideology that differs from that of the other characters. Lavache is not the only fool who is obsessed with morality, Christian ethics, and court hypocrisy. Lear's fool also puts some of his criticism in Christian terms (_Lear_ III, 2, ll. 78-96). Religion is referred to in an abstract

way by most of the characters except Lavache, who puts his beliefs into verbal practice; his stories, analogies, and fool's tricks are all products of his theological and social perspective. Lavache is enigmatic because he is a critic of morality and one of Shakespeare's most bawdy fools. This apparent contradiction, and Lavache's general demeanor, have led at least one critic to comment that he is Shakespeare's least pleasant court fool.[10] However, the play itself is dark and problematic, and it needs a fool who reflects and justifies this. Lavache is the appropriate fool for the play.

In the introduction to the Arden edition, G.K. Hunter says, "Few ideas pass without derogatory comment by Lavache...If his speeches are full of bawdry, they are equally full of theology; there seems to be an intimate connection between man as fallen creature, and an uninhibited revelling in the sordidness of his fallen state."[11] Lavache sees people around him making social, moral, and emotional blunders. Helena, Bertram, and Parolles are all looking for love and approval and they want the world to change for them. Lavache's expectations are firmly grounded in his understanding of his position in the world and a strong opinion about how the world works. He is not searching for answers; he seems already to have them. Not only does he have a theological view of the world, but like other fools or "naturals," he possesses an understanding of the connections between the heart, mind, and body, and can be forthright in his approach to love, power, and status. His bawdiness is partly comedy and shock, but it also demonstrates the difference between the court

and country views of these issues. All fools, with their obscenity and simplicity, display a comfortable and intimate relationship to sex and death, while other characters continually manifest their discomfort.

We first meet Lavache in Act 1, scene 3 when he interrupts the Countess' steward to have a conference with his mistress. From the Countess' admonishments, we understand immediately that Lavache is a rogue, but one who is embraced by the court. He cuts into an obtuse speech that the steward is trying to give the countess, demonstrating both his license, and dramatically, his fresh viewpoint and ability to cut through other people's dry, excess verbiage. Here, as in the gravedigger scene, the fool creates a situation that parodies a scene in the main plot. The steward is trying to tell the countess that Helena has been sick at heart and that she will eventually ask the countess for permission to seek her son's hand. Lavache interrupts the steward to ask permission to seek love in his own way, which in its bluntness, contrasts directly with the scheming and pain that Helena undergoes in her search for love.

Lavache's reasons for marriage are based on natural urges, the need to procreate, and a desire to appease God. Each of the speeches he uses to explain his needs contains two ideas: God and lust. Where others complicate, Lavache simplifies, not with his language, which is rich and suggestive, but with his world view. Part of his humor, much like Thersites', is that he is reductive in his language and in his philosophy:

> Countess: Tell me thy reason why thou wilt marry.
> Clown: My poor body, madam, requires it; I am

> driven on by the flesh, and he must needs go that
> devil drives. (Act 1, sc. 3, ll. 25-8)

His bluntness enables him to avoid the hypocrisy that he finds in others.

Hypocrisy is the victim of Lavache's wit in his next scene with the Countess, which follows Helena's first visit with the king and precedes the husband-choosing scene. Very little of Act II, scene 2 is expository; like many fool scenes it is ironic ornament. In answer to the Countess's objections to Lavache's contempt for court life, he says that anyone can succeed at court if they possess the right manners. If this is the case, then Lavache knows the one thing that anyone can say to get along at court. It is "the answer that will serve all men." In his qualification for how fitting the answer is, Lavache lists a group of bawdy pairings. "Tib's rush for Tom's forefinger" is a reference to rustic mock-marriages, has a sexual implication, and foreshadows the importance of the ring in Helena's following plotline. "The nun's lip to the friar's mouth" is another reminder of Lavache's preoccupation with religion, sex, and corruption in both. Even in apparent nonsense Lavache is consistent in his perspective, and with it he colors and interprets the rest of the play.

The answer that he is speaking of is "O Lord, sir!" According to a note in the Arden edition, this was a "fashionable stopgap when conversation flagged or when an awkward question called for a reply." Helena, Bertram, and Parolles all engage in social climbing, and this makes them the indirect objects of Lavache's parody. Their expectations of

court life are disproved or disrupted and the folly of court life is proven by circumstance and exposed by Lavache.

Court hypocrisy, superficial manners, and self delusion embodied by Parolles, making him a natural object of Lavache's jest. We laugh with Lavache, and through him we laugh <u>at</u> Parolles. In Lavache's next scene, Act II, scene 4, he demonstrates his strong position against Parolles's weaker one. The confrontation between the two characters is important, not only as part of the discovery of Parolles's true and pathetic identity, but also to insure that the audience is aligned correctly: in support of Helena.

Act II, scene 4, is structured to compare Lavache's attitude toward Helena and Parolles. In the exchange that begins the scene, we get another taste of Lavache's cynical theology. Lavache makes no attempt to expose or attack Helena; he engages her in a riddle about the Countess. The outcome of this riddle is that the Countess cannot be well until she is delivered from the earth. Parolles asks after the countess's health also, but he does it in a pretentious, presumptuous way: "O, my knave! How does my old lady?" This is the beginning of a verbal entanglement which the fool uses to expose Parolles. By reminding Parolles that he is a servant, "Marry, you are the wiser man; for many a man's tongue shakes out his master's undoing," Lavache echoes Lafew's previous ridicule of Parolles.

Indirectly, Lavache says in the exchange that irresponsible talk gets people into trouble. In fact, Parolles does influence Bertram in a negative way. As the Countess describes him a few

scenes later:

> A very tainted fellow, and full of wickedness;
> My son corrupts a well- derived nature
> With his inducement.
>
> (III, 2, 87-9)

Once again we have foolish prescience; there are words of truth within the jest. The fool is clearly a dramatic conduit for information. He has been invested with the power to communicate the truth, though it may be veiled in a game, insult or piece of nonsense.

The issue of exposure is focused in the phrase "I have found you," which is used throughout the play by Parolles, Lavache, and Lafew to denigrate each other. We see it for the first time in II, 3 when Lafew says to Parolles, "I have now found thee; when I lose thee again I care not." The meaning of this expression is reiterated when Lafew calls Parolles a "window of lattice." Parolles's posturing does not sufficiently obscure his bad intentions or his personal weaknesses. He is "found" despite the manners and mannerisms that he hides behind. When Parolles tries to quiet Lavache with the humiliating "I have found thee" that was just used on him, he is caught in the web of the fool.

> Did you find me in your self, sir, or were you taught to find me? The search, sir, was profitable; and much fool may you find in you, even to the world's pleasure and the increase of laughter.

The passage demonstrates the way in which the fool acts as a mirror; "Do you find me in yourself sir" is indicative of the fool's own knowledge of himself as a dramatic mechanism. When characters come into contact with Lavache he reveals the truth about them to the audience or themselves.

A fool is a mirror in that he reflects what is around him but also in the sense that other people see in him what they want to see. Parolles can't afford to take the fool's insults seriously and he passes off Lavache with "A good knave i'faith, and well fed." His retort is lame after the verbal circles Lavache has run around Parolles, and causes the audience to scrutinize his announcement of Bertram's postponement of consummation for its sleazy euphemism.

The conflict between innate virtue and social position that creates so much of the action and tension in the play is found in Lavache's insults. True virtue and polished manners (an ineffective disguise for moral weakness) are compared throughout the play. At the root of Lavache's commentary is the distinction between the two. Although neither Helena nor Parolles are noble in birth, Lavache treats them in entirely different ways. Helena's actions are powered by her overwhelming desire for Bertram, despite her piety, making her a mark for Lavache's parody. However, he also sees her goodness and lack of pretense and treats her with the same 'mischief without malice' that he employs in his discussions with the Countess. Lavache challenges Parolles directly, and exposes his pretentions. Although he can dismiss Lavache as a fool not worth his time, Parolles' dramatic integrity is weakened by Lavache while Helena's position is strengthened. Lavache's level of antagonism changes according to his companion, as does the topic of conversation. In exchanges with Parolles he speaks about personal hypocrisy and manners. With Helena, the Countess, and Lafew, he creates religious and moral banter, as if to remind

them that although they are good, they are still besmirched with the mud of human existence.

By Act III, scene 2, Lavache's warnings about Parolles and human nature have proved themselves valid. Lavache begins the scene with an inversion of meaning, "By my troth, I take my young lord to be a very melancholy man," the proof of which, that he spends his day singing, makes no sense. Lavache masks the meaning of his sentence, which creates a metaphor for the fact that Bertram is not what he seems, or not what the Countess thinks he is.

While the Countess reads Bertram's letter, which is a denunciation of his marriage to Helena, Lavache comments on the state of <u>his</u> love life, which produces another parodic parallel. "The brains of my Cupid's knock'd out, and I begin to love as an old man loves money, with no stomach." Bertram's letter has the same theme, although it is a good deal more self important:

> I have sent you a daughter-in-law; she hath recovered the king and undone me. I have wedded her, not bedded her, and sworn to make the "not" eternal.
> (Act III, sc. 2, ll. 19-21)

The fool transposes the activities of the gentry into the language of the common folk, which lends the developments of the play a sense of absurdity. The issue that separates court and country is contrivance and custom. The king imposes Helena on Bertram by decree of his royal power. Bertram attempts to refuse Helena because it is not customary to marry so below himself. Custom gets in the way so that Helena cannot simply express her love by pursuing Bertram. The social complication demonstrated

by these conflicts is unmasked by Lavache, who sees things in their most intrinsic sense.

Lavache returns after the Countess reads Bertram's letter and warns her of Helena's distraught arrival. Even in this dire moment, Lavache speaks in riddles. In this case it is to buffer the pain of the news of Bertram's flight for the Countess. His delivery includes a confusion over the word "kill," having both sexual and literal meanings here. It seems that the fool cannot help but play on any ambiguity he finds in the language. His corruption of language allows him to magnify and fracture the meaning of what he says, enabling the audience to associate their own dramatic interpretations. By giving things multiple meanings, he says more than what is on the surface of his words. The inherent ambiguity in human interaction, our difficulty in actually getting at or understanding the truth, is present in his punning language. Nonsense, such as we find in this scene, is a metaphor for our difficulty in getting at sense in the first place.

In his next scene, nearly two acts later, Lavache demonstrates his compassion for Helena and his cynical theology. Helena is supposedly dead and there is a sad spirit throughout the Countess' court. This scene is not allowed to carry on in its mourning vein for long. Lavache changes the tenor of the scene. He brings the focus on himself for a time as he attempts to insult and expose Lafew. We have known all along that Lavache distrusts the rich. He makes a disparaging comment regarding them in his first scene: "tis not so well that I am poor, though many of the rich are damn'd."

Before he makes his definitive theological statement, he irritates Lafew by mocking and masking his intended meaning. Lafew says "Twas a good lady; 'twas a good lady. We may pick a thousand sallets ere we light on such another herb." When Lavache, in response, calls her the "herb of grace," Lafew objects to mixing the metaphors of "sallet herbs" and "nose herbs." And yet, "the herb of grace" was another name for rue, an evergreen with medicinal uses. This epithet for Helena is touchingly appropriate. Lavache's nonsense is meaningful once again, but represents a completely different way of thinking, and uses a more concrete kind of language. This is also the first time Lavache has said anything complimentary; his criticism is obviously reserved for more pretentious characters.

The exchange concerning Helena provokes Lafew to ask Lavache, "Whether dost thou profess thyself- a knave or a fool?" If the fool is concerned with defining others, as demonstrated soundly by Thersites, certainly surrounding characters are equally concerned with defining <u>him</u>. Lavache's answer, that he is "A fool, sir, at a woman's service, and a knave at a man's," highlights the fact that he is different things at different times. In fact, much of what Lavache says demonstrates his knowledge of his ambiguous role as fool. The fool is a barometer that helps us judge the characters that surround him; his function and personality must be flexible.

The exchange also brings up the issue of service, which is germane to the concept of the fool (serving both his master and the play) and also has sexual connotations. In this scene we

are reminded of a previous statement by Lavache: "He that ears my land spares my team, and gives me leave to in the crop; if I be his cuckold, he's my drudge." (Act I, sc. 3, ll. 42-4) In this scene we have the flip side of the statement. Lavache is the cuckolder rather than the cuckold but he still suggests that sex is a necessary but unpleasant job. This is antithetical to the lust that Bertram, Diana, Parolles, and Helena display and poses an ironic counterpart to Helena's mission, which includes a bedtrick: an instance of sex with a motive other than pleasure. Lavache's suggestion is also a vision of debauchery and a reference to the chaos that the desire for sexual love will produce.

From service Lavache moves on to the topic of morality. He offers to be at Lafew's service, meaning to be his cuckold. When Lafew declines he says "Why, sir, if I cannot serve you I can serve as great a prince as you are," meaning the devil. The emphasis is on "as," making it not a statement of fact, but a suggestion of the ease and possibility of serving the devil. Lafew's response to this plays into Lavache's hands; he has an opportunity to implicate Lafew, as a court man and as a rich man, in his exposure of hypocrisy in the play.

Lavache begins his tirade by stating that he is a "woodland fellow," a country person, and is therefore attracted to the "great fire," referring to the heat of Hell. The bulk of his statement is devoted to explaining the distinction between those who go to hell and heaven. Humility is key here: "I am for the house with the narrow gate, which I take to be too little for pomp to enter...." Lavache also uses the metaphor of a prince and

his court to speak about the devil and his domain. He poses a contrast to the other characters, like Lafew, for whom the court is home, or to Parolles, who aspires to the court. Lafew is able to take advantage of his position in the upper social strata, exemplified by the charm with which he proposes the opportunistic match between Bertram and his daughter Maudlin. Lavache's presence reminds us that the people in the play are motivated by a variety of desires and objectives. He discourages the audience from accepting any behavior at face value.

In his last scene, Act V, scene 2, Lavache has his conclusive exchange with Parolles, which defines Parolles' new role in the play. Lavache does not instigate his exposure, which is carried out by the soldiers, Parolles' peers. As in his previous scene with Lafew, Lavache deconstructs Parolles's attempt to communicate by perpetuating his figures of speech to an absurd degree. Lavache again comments on his own job as fool: "Indeed, sir, if your metaphor stink I will stop my nose, or against any man's metaphor." He is aware of his job as critic and his privilege of criticizing anyone. This line, although integral to a discrete joke on Parolles, depersonalizes the fool's critique. Dramatically, it is time for the conflicts of the play to be resolved, for wounds to heal. Although Parolles is still the object of the fool's derision, he is now an accomplice in the foolery because of his new understanding of the truth about himself.

Parolles has been soundly chastised, and therefore he must see himself not in his previous deluded way, but as the fool has

seen him all along. Like the fool, Parolles is forced to embrace his own folly: "... and Parolles live/ safest in shame; being fool'd, by fool'ry thrive./ There's place and means for every man alive." There is an echo here of the gravedigger scene, in which Hamlet supplants the gravedigger as fool, and <u>Lear</u>, in which Lear takes on the role. Previously, Parolles has been ridiculous and has not known it. He must adopt some of what Lavache has represented throughout the play. Now that he knows what he is, he also realizes that being foolish is his only hope for survival and community.

* * * *

Hamlet embraces a concrete way to look at death during his exchange with the gravedigger. Thersites forces the audience to look past rhetoric, and question the direction that the play appears to take. Lavache clarifies our sympathies, and the hidden values that <u>All's Well</u> espouses. In each case, the fool provides meaning partly by destroying it. To accomplish these ends, the wise fool must oppose the conventional method of discourse with his deviant communication and ideology. Proverbial wisdom challenges conventional wisdom, the rustic view redefines the court view, and reference to the physical aspects of life molds and shapes our understanding of the abstract and philosophical.

We are attracted to the fool for the pleasure he provides and the way he provokes our imagination, but also because the dialogue that he creates becomes a search for better understanding of human nature and the way of the world. To quote Bakhtin:

> Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of dialogic interaction.[13]

The wise fool is not only a conversational character, but a challenge to the ideology of those around him. His license gives him the freedom to perform this function. We can assume that the way in which the fool defies monologism is a desirable and productive function.

Some of the fool's qualities contradict our rational or customary way of thinking, and some represent the human condition. In his isolation and grotesqueness he stands for the pain and impotence of human experience, while his wit is a celebration of the flexibility and power of the word. In both cases the fool is a dramatic device and a metaphor.

By viewing the conversation between the fool and surrounding characters as a dialogue of ideologies, we embrace the metaphoric quality of the theater, and of the fool himself. He represents or embodies human failings and triumphs, but also uses metaphor as a tool in his communication. Enriching issues are woven into play through the use of eccentric or unexpected associations: the rustic view of a dilemma, a sexual implication. a biblical or mythic reference, or the intrinsic value of an idea. This both obscures his message, creating humor and a search for the truth and broadens the frame of reference to accomodate association and an amplification of meaning.

Footnotes

[1]Maynard Mack, "Jacobean Shakespeare: some observations on the construction of the Tragedies," Jacobean Theater (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1960), p. 16.

[2]Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.107.

[3]Robert Goldsmith, Wise Fools in Shakespeare, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1955), chapt. 4.

[4]Susan Snyder, The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 127.

[5]Enid Welsford, The Fool, (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1938), p. 270.

[6]Ibid., p. 308.

[7]William Bowden, "The Human Shakespeare and Troilus and Cressida," Shakespeare Quarterly, Spring 1957, pp. 167-77.

[8]Troilus and Cressida, ed. Kenneth Palmer. (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 40.

[9]E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's Problem Plays, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1949), p. 37.

[10]All's Well That Ends Well, ed. G.K. Hunter. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. xxxv.

[11]Ibid., p. 48.

[12]Goldsmith, Wise Fools, p. 58.

[13]Bakhtin, Problems, p. 110.

Selected Bibliography

Bakhtin, Mikhail. _Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics_. Translated and edited by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1984.

________. _Rabelais and His World_. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1984.

Bowden, William. "The Human Shakespeare and _Troilus and Cressida_." _Shakespeare Quarterly_ VIII (Spring 1957) :167-77.

Dodsworth, Martin. _Hamlet Closely Observed_. London: Athlone Press, Ltd. 1985.

Goldsmith, Robert Hillis. _Wise Fools in Shakespeare_. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press. 1955.

Snyder, Susan. _The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies_. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1979.

Stewart, Susan. _Nonsense_. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1979.

Tillyard, E.M.W. _Shakespeare's Problem Plays_. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1949.

Welsford, Enid. _The Fool_. New York: Farrar and Rinehart. 1938.

Wheeler, Richard P. _Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies_. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1981.

John Marston, *The Malcontent*

Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass*

Francois Rabelais, *Treating of the Inestimable Life of the Great Gargantua*

Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*

William Butler Yeats, "Crazy Jane On the Mountain," 1939

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*