

The Fool



King Lear

The Fool's Timeline

- ❖ Act 1 Scene 4: Makes fun of Lear for giving away the kingdom to his daughters
- ❖ Act 1 Scene 5: Distracts Lear with jokes when the former king is distressed by his meeting with Goneril and warns him that Regan will not treat him any better
- ❖ Act 2 Scene 2: Follows Lear out into the storm
- ❖ Act 3 Scene 2: Tries to persuade Lear to seek shelter from the storm
- ❖ Act 3 Scene 6: Takes part in the mock trial

Key Points

- ❖ Insightful
- ❖ Highlights Lear's poor judgment
- ❖ Contributes to themes of appearance versus reality, loyalty etc.
- ❖ Symbol of truth: catalyst in Lear's developing self-awareness
- ❖ Abates dramatic tension with jokes
- ❖ Loyal
- ❖ Protects Lear in Cordelia's absence

“The Fool does not follow any ideology. He rejects all appearances of law, justice moral order... Lear, insisting on his fictitious majesty, seems ridiculous to him... The Fool knows that the only true madness is to recognise this world as rational.”

—Jon Kott - ‘Shakespeare Our Contemporary’

Role of the 'all-licensed fool' in Shakespearean plays

- ❖ Convention in Shakespearean time: Gifted individual who has intuitive response to difficult situations and is far from foolish.
- ❖ Succeeds where intellect fails: good and evil are not battles of the mind but of the soul



Sees straight to the heart of the matter

- ❖ Lear's love test and division of the kingdom is based on vanity and lack of foresight.
- ❖ The Fool sees this and comments on it immediately, saying Lear is the one who should be fool: 'All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with'.
- ❖ Is aware of Goneril and Regan's true nature and the danger they pose: 'The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it had its head bit off by its young'.
- ❖ He offers Kent his coxcomb 'For taking one's part that's out of favour ... If thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb'.

Acts as a chorus of sorts

- ❖ Shows the audience that Lear is unwise: 'If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself'
- ❖ Is a symbol of truth in a world of lies and deceit: 'Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out, when Lady Brach may stand by the fire and stink'.

The only character who is permitted to tell Lear the truth

- ❖ The Fool does not occupy an important position in court
- ❖ Unlike Kent, the Fool is allowed to criticise Lear and avoid punishment
- ❖ Protected by his lowly status

Unstinting love and loyalty

- ❖ Criticisms are meant as help: endeavours to show Lear the foolishness of his actions: 'Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise'.
- ❖ Stays with Lear through his time on the heath in the storm
- ❖ Tries to persuade Lear to take shelter, even if it means returning to Gloucester's castle: 'Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters' blessing'.
- ❖ Although the Fool advises Kent to 'Let go thy hold when a great wheel / runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following it', he does not take his own advice.

Provides light relief

- ❖ When Lear marvels at 'Tom O'Bedlam's' lack of clothing (he is clad only in a blanket) and wonders if the beggar's ungrateful daughters could have brought him to this pass, the Fool wryly observes, 'Nay, he reserved a blanket, else we had been all shamed'.
- ❖ Ridicules Lear's actions in such a way that his jests remain relevant.

Fades from the action: why?

- ❖ When Lear loses his sanity, the Fool can do nothing for him.
- ❖ His final words are 'I'll go to bed at noon'. This cryptic comment may simply be a nonsensical response to Lear's 'We'll go to supper i' the morning', or it may mean he will lie down and die
- ❖ His role is taken over by Tom O' Bedlam and even Lear himself.