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CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FOOL IN SHAKESPEARE'S KING LEAR

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare is one of the most well-known and cherished playwright of English Literature. *King Lear* is one of his popular tragedies. The character of Fool was common in Elizabethan drama. The role of fool is to amuse and entertain his master. The Fool is also privileged to speak the bitter truths to his master. This paper will attempt to analyse the role played by Fool in *King Lear*.

William Shakespeare is one of the most celebrated playwrights and poet in English Literature. He was popular not only during his age but even after so many centuries his popularity continues. Ben Jonson one of well-known playwright and contemporary of Shakespeare praise him in the following words, "Soul of the age! The applause !delight! The wonder of our stage." Shakespeare has written more than one hundred and fifty sonnets. He has penned some well-known comedies like, *Comedy of Errors* (1589), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), *As You Like It* (1599) and tragedies like *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Hamlet* (1600), *Othello*(1604), *Macbeth* (1605) and *King Lear* (1606). *Richard III* (1592), *Richard II* (1595), *King John*(1596) and *Henry V* (1598) are some of his plays based on history. His plays like *Comedy of Errors* (1589), *Romeo and Juliet* (1594), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), *Twelfth Night* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), and *The Tempest* (1611) have been adopted on screen.

Shakespeare was a craftsman who created characters that were close to reality. His plays has many characters like kings, barons, queens, barons, fools, tradesmen, witches, magicians, ghosts and fairies. He has created some memorable characters like Rosalind in *As You Like It*, King Richard in *Richard II*, Falstaff in *Henry IV*, Iago in *Othello*, Prospero in

The Tempest, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Hamlet in *Hamlet* and Viola in *Twelfth Night*. Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Clown in *Titus Andronicus* Falstaff in *Henry IV Part I* and *Henry IV Part II*, Nick Bottom and Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Clown in *Othello* proves Shakespeare's art of characterization. The paper will attempt a critical analysis of Fool in Shakespeare's play *King Lear*.

King Lear is a tragedy by Shakespeare. The play was first performed probably in 1605 and was published in 1608. The main plot about Lear is borrowed from Holinshed's *Chronicles* and the subplot of Gloucester is borrowed from Book II of Sidney's *Arcadia*. Probably, Shakespeare also borrowed from an earlier drama titled *The True Chronicle History of King Lear and his Three Daughters*. L. C. Knights regards the play as "great exploratory allegory" of Shakespeare.

The play narrates the tragedy of King Lear, the king of Britain who decides to divide his kingdom amongst his three daughters Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. His eldest, daughter Goneril is married to the Duke of Albany and Regan is married to the Duke of Cornwall. The Duke of Burgundy and the King of France both wish to marry Lear's youngest and favourite daughter Cordelia. Lear asks his daughters to profess their love for him. He plans to give the largest share to the daughter who loves him

the most and professes it in the court. Goneril and Regan are hypocritical who express their love for Lear in passionate speeches. However, Cordelia refuses to speak anything. Lear feels insulted and upset therefore, he banishes Cordelia. He also banishes his servant Kent. A similar sub plot in the play is that of Earl of Gloucester. The illegitimate son of Gloucester named Edmund convinces him that his legitimate son Edgar is plotting to kill him. Edgar escapes to save himself from his father's wrath and disguises himself as 'Poor Tom'. Lear accompanied by his Fool and Kent goes to stay with Goneril but finds that she has no respect for his father. At Regan's place too Lear is treated badly. The Fool many times through his witty remarks, songs and jokes speaks makes Lear identify his mistakes. Lear then wishes to be united with Cordelia. Goneril and Regan plan to kill Lear. However, Gloucester warns Lear, Fool and Kent who is disguised as a servant. Cordelia who marries Duke of France after she is banished by her father; prepares her army to attack Goneril and Regan. In the battle against Goneril and Regan, Cordelia is defeated. Cordelia is taken as prisoner and meets Lear. Goneril and Regan both are in love with Edmund and in mutual jealous all three are killed. Cordelia is thus victorious but before that she is hanged. In the final scene, Lear appears carrying the dead body of Cordelia.

Looking at the history of the character, Jay L. Halio in his book *The Tragedy of King Lear* refers to Enid Welsford's essay "The Fool: His Social and Literary History" (1935). Welsford observes that the character of fool can be traced back to the ancient times. In the Middle Ages, jester was a familiar figure. In the Renaissance the fool became a domestic servant in the homes of aristocratic people. The figure of fool served to entertain their master. They also had liberty to criticize their master and mistress. The fool was presented as lacking intelligence and therefore required their powerful patrons to avoid social mockery. The fool was given a privileged status in the court. The character of fool became popular in the Elizabethan drama between 1598 and 1605. Some of Shakespeare's contemporaries also used the character of fool. Ralph Simnell in Robert Greene's in his popular play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* described the

According to L.C. Knights essay "King Lear" (1906), the function of fool is speak truth in disguised and sometimes grotesque manner. Enid Welsford refers to the fool as "the sage-fool who sees the truth" (qtd. in Knights 280). The Fool speaks the truth about Goneril and Regan. Through his witty remarks the Fool points out to Lear's mistake "to make his daughters his mothers". The Fool comments that by giving up his power and kingdom to his daughters who are hypocritical he has lost all his authority and freedom. He now depends upon his daughters for fulfilling all his requirements.

The unique feature of Fool lies in how he speaks the truth. He is an agent who prompts Lear to recognize the bitter truth. His words which are sometimes in the form of riddles to some extent reflect the moral confusion of the world. He can formulate the tenets of worldly wisdom. In the first act, Fool observes, "Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out, when Lady the brach may stand by the fire and stink." This quote describes the nature of truth. He also suggests:

"Have more than thou showest
Speak less than thou knowest"

Such observations were not only true in the Elizabethan era but are still true in the twenty first century. His witty remarks prove that he is not a fool in the literal sense. The Fool has the liberty to say bitter things to his master. He comments on Lear that, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise." Goneril is annoyed to see the special privilege given to the Fool of Lear.

The character of Fool introduces us to the theme of contrast between appearance and reality in Shakespeare's plays. Wolfgang Clemens in his essay "Appearance and Reality in Shakespeare's Plays" observes that the theme of appearance and reality has always been one of the major themes of literature. The contrast between what a man pretends to be and what he really is pervades most of the plays of Shakespeare. The Fool appears to be mad but in reality he could see the truth that Lear is unable to see in the fit of rage.

Clemens in his essay "Characteristic Features of Shakespearean Drama" observes that one of the striking features of Shakespeare's artistry is the uniting of opposites. Shakespeare's play shows

the linking of the serious and the comic. The Fool in King Lear is not only a jester but a tragic figure who shares the suffering of Lear. He accompanies his master when he goes to stay with Goneril and Regan. The Fool shares the suffering of Lear when the king realizes his mistake of misinterpreting the honesty and simplicity of Cordelia and falling in the trap of Goneril and Regan's sugar-coated speeches expressing their love for him. He accompanies Lear in the storm where at the heath he does a mock-trial of his daughters.

Clemens remarks that Lear is accompanied by Fool in many scenes whose profession is to appear other than what he really is. The fool opens the eyes of Lear to his own mistakes. Fool through his jokes, songs and proverbs speak the truth which the king would have otherwise refused to listen.

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