

# Folly and Relations with Truth in Making a Good Society

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Due to the elusive, almost unreasonable nature of the topic, Folly has accumulated many separate meanings and associations, with branches in mere trickery or wantonness and others in Revelry of a Divine nature. The topic will be explored in some of its manifold contexts, however an extra initial definition is called for. Here we address the kinds of Folly which are oriented towards a further meaning and are not *mere* trickery, blunder or, in Shakespearian language, foppishness. We are concerned with Folly in the ways that it serves our theme of *Making a Good Society*, as a regenerative faculty that eventually re-unites and harmonizes, having blurred many boundaries and taken part in the unreasonable, irrational and unsociable.

Shakespeare shows this at work in the language and actions of professional, licenced Fools, characters who have committed roles within the society of the world of the play. He also shows this at work as a quality that temporarily inhabits certain characters or, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* every human character in the final scene. Folly begins to take part in the drama when characters use such words as: “ungoverned”, “knavery”, “folly”, “mad” or “frenzy”.

First, we make recourse to Renaissance scholarship to draw out some of Folly's associations. In his mythical piece, *In Praise of Folly*, Erasmus displays a deified Folly giving an oration about herself. It is worth noting that her status as a Goddess is a matter of controversy among the Gods. She compares herself with the “restorative spring”, adding that “at the first sight of me you all unmask and appear in more lively colours”. She also makes provocative comments about the nature of her own narrative, saying that “Folly should be the trumpet of her own praise,” and not “hire some paltry

orator or scribbling poet". Indeed, one of her companions is called Self-Love. There are plain contradictions in her speech. For example, in her showing-up of the poets Folly makes the cliché complaint that they clothe their meaning with fancy words and do not write plainly and proceeds to compare them to a peacock, "bristled up": rather like her own supposed quality of a colourful spring. Erasmus' Goddess displays an appetite for contradiction which is very much in accord with the working of Folly in Shakespearian drama. This satirical oration has a lot to be drawn out of it, such as the particular ways in which Folly acts in young children and the infirm, but here we summarise the Goddess's relations: her father is Plutus, the God of Wealth, and her mother is a nymph called Freshness. As an infant, Folly was nursed by Inebriation (Bacchus) and Ignorance (Pan). Folly's description of her birth reveals much about her sense of spontaneity and unconditional playfulness:

*"I did not, like other infants, come crying into the world, but perked up, and laughed immediately in my mother's face." In Praise of Folly*

With this mythical outline we examine the qualities of Folly in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The ability to realise the Truth is referred to by the characters in *King Lear* as "sanity", and is the end of Folly in the drama. Despite its vital role in the play, we find that the work of Folly is preparative only, and leaves the characters it inhabited when a form of anagnorisis has been reached and they can witness the Truth of things. The characters have arrived at this point in the drama when they can speak plainly to each other. This will be shown presently. The Fool in *King Lear* leaves the play, with no apparent motivation, in act three and it is suggested here that by this scene the quality of Folly which inhabits Lear is so strong that the Fool's professional jesting is no longer needed, the quality of Folly still having a role in the drama. Starting in the pretence and rashness of the opening court scene, and moving through the madness of the hovel scene, Lear's journey ends at a new, transfigured vision of the Kingdom. Shakespeare shows how Folly plays a vital and temporary role in this journey, including the ways in which it is shared by other characters such as Edgar and the Fool.

In the first act, Lear is shown to have a conventional, late Renaissance world-view which supposes that human society is bound to a higher Natural order. For Lear, however, this view has

become detached from its full meaning and is degraded to the level of mere convention and display.

This is shown in his use of elegant, rhetorical speech:

*“Which of you shall we say doth love us most / That we our largest bounty may  
extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge...” 1.1.51*

He uses the royal plural and is concerned with which daughter will “say” she loves him most: his interest is towards the display of words. Shakespeare makes it ambiguous as to whether Lear’s words are a statement or a question, with no question mark and an extensive sentence of multiple clauses. The strict metric lines of iambic pentameter demonstrate his appearance of sureness in light of such corrupt propositions as the sentiment better expressed in the Quarto version of the text:

*“That we our largest bounty may extend / Where merit doth most challenge it...”  
(Quarto, 1.1.52)*

Meaning: where natural affection and merit both lay claim to Lear’s generosity. This is the first of several times when Lear puts himself above Nature, expressing a sense of god-like superiority. This flawed vision of himself and the world (when uncovered from the rhetoric) brings about Lear’s downfall, and with it, the disintegration of British society in the play.

Folly is first brought into the drama in the prosaic language of the Fool:

*“Why, this fellow has banished two on’s daughters and did the third a blessing  
against his will – if thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb.” 1.4.100*

The “blessing against his will” refers to Cordelia having been made Queen of France, while Lear has put his Kingship into question, inverting the original hierarchy. It also shows that the King’s choice is at odds with real blessings. The Fool parodies his actions by playing on the coxcomb’s semblance to a crown and offering it to Lear’s prospective follower: Kent in disguise. His first line in the play, as soon as he enters the stage, is:

*“Let me hire him too; [to Kent, holding out his cap] here’s my coxcomb.” 1.4.94*

The Fool labours his point about Lear’s choice in this part of the scene, using different symbols of the crown and hierarchy such as the coxcomb, a crab and an egg, chosen to provoke thought into the

matter. His implied statement, when uncovered from its appearance of madness is sane, but Lear will have none of it:

*"Take heed, sirrah, the whip." 1.4.108*

The Fool's work is unsuccessful until much later in the play. More context about the language of the drama must be given to understand the Fool's motives here. The reasonable, non-symbolic and plain way of speaking has become redundant to those wishing to communicate with Lear about matters of the Kingdom, it was banished with Cordelia. Those able to advise him sanely, with an appearance of sanity, were ignored or moved to rage in the first two scenes, while the play's antagonists start to take power using their persuasive, rhetorical speaking to manipulate Lear. The Fool's cryptic symbols and playful seriousness are an attempt to communicate with the King in a meaningful way, since common-sense, plain language no longer can. There is a contradiction between appearance and the meaning behind it in the Fool's work, or indeed in the nature of Folly at large: a contradiction which mirrors Lear's divorce between the display of words and their meaning. However, the two are brought about through entirely different intentions: The Fool's is willing and serendipitous, while Lear's is contentious, and a crisis over the sense of selfhood.

Returning to the Fool's statements of I.iv, a theme which has a strong association with Folly - peripeteia, the inversion of hierarchy - is displayed. The circumstances of *King Lear* show a deliberate but un-called-for inversion of the social hierarchy which brings professional and emanating Folly into the drama. However, a contrasting version of this is embedded into Ancient Traditions which are waning in *Lear*. This is the Tradition of Fools which has the form of a ritual such as the European Carnavalesque, and involves an overturning of the social hierarchy, both deliberate and appropriate because it is part of the culture, whereby the King's Fool leads a public dance and has the practical role of crowd control, but also makes sure that the dance does not become too serious. Social hierarchies of everyday life – their solemnities, pieties and etiquettes and all 'ready-made', commonsense truths – are profaned and inverted by normally suppressed voices and energies. Fools

become wise and Kings become beggars. Opposites such as fact and fantasy, old age and youth, knowledge and ignorance, merge. This can be seen at work in the Imaginative Folly of V.i in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Renaissance society incorporated Fools for purposes of self – reflection in its ranks to exercise a professional mode of Folly which subverts and liberates assumptions made by the figure of authority they are partnered with. This is oriented towards the maintenance of social order. The Fool who is partnered with King Lear has this role, a role which extends beyond the play's society to that of Shakespeare's stage. The Fool of *Lear* has a similar role to the Vice in Medieval Morality plays, which is to remind the audience that drama exists outside of the theatre, that the world of the play and the world of reality are linked and invites the audience to a closer involvement with the play using aimed phrases such as "this fellow" and "if thou follow him". One of the many ways in which Folly cleanses through the breaking of boundaries can be witnessed here. It also becomes apparent that the faculty of Folly works in the same way whoever possesses it – be it the Fool or Edgar or King Lear himself. It works by the softening of social norms and common-sense to find a more essential kind of Truth or Reason. This is touched upon in more detail by Charles Lamb in his essay *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare* from 1811:

*"In the aberrations of his [Lear's] reason, we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning, [ie, Folly] immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life, but exerting its powers, as the wind blows where it listeth, at will upon the corruptions and abuses of mankind".*

Lamb suggests that the kind of Reason found in Folly (or, "aberrations [of reason]") is one that goes beyond the merely human "purposes of life" (which for Lear is the routine maintenance of a kingdom) and illuminates the more existential: "corruptions and abuses of mankind". From the point of view of these darker aspects of human nature, the qualities of Folly and madness are good, transcendent forces which allow a Truth to be witnessed once the limitations of critical discourse have been reached. By the time that Gloucester's eyes have been plucked and he walks on the heath with Poor Tom, his own son in disguise (a truth yet unrevealed to Gloucester), a sense of the "corruptions and

abuses” of society seems close to both the audience and the play’s characters. Gloucester has reached the height of his personal blindness to the Truth, having been prone to manipulation by Edward (with his counterfeit letter), and Regan and Cornwall (with their treachery). He is placed on top of a small hill, believing that he faces a cliff-edge that will take his life and put him out of his suffering. Edgar, who has orchestrated this in his own madness, advises him:

*“For all beneath the moon / Would I not leap upright” 4.6.26*

All of humanity are displayed as Fools under the influence of the Moon. The over-exaggeration of “not leap upright” (let alone leap forward), combined with the imagery of “all beneath the moon” gives his speech a hysterical tone, building on the sense of a play within a play but also mirroring the Foolery of both characters. His words are therefore absolutely truthful. His language is metaphorical and he looks mad on stage (this contradiction of appearance and the meaning behind it being close to the nature of Folly) but he speaks in verse and is not *really* insane. In the character of Edgar we are shown the antithesis of Lear’s original, redundant form of reasoning which is shared by Gloucester. Unlike Lear, however, Gloucester fails to move on from this as he never drops the pursuit of levelheadedness, even having experienced the pity of the events. He calls upon the qualities of Folly after he realises their necessity in coping with his grief.

*“The King is mad ... / Better I were distract; / So should my thoughts be severed  
from my griefs / And woes by wrong imaginations lose / The knowledge of  
themselves.” 5.6.274*

He dies of shock when Poor Tom reveals himself as his son; the world of appearances had tragically become his personal truth.

In the Elizabethan world-view, Folly cleanses through either transcending the intellect above the import of words<sup>1</sup> to a higher level of Nature (as in cases of Divine Frenzy or professional Folly), or through a fall to the demonic level of nature (as in Lear's case). Northrop Frye writes:

*"The demonic world, whatever or wherever it is, [is] often associated with the destructive aspects of nature, such as the storm on the heath ... [it is] a "hell – world" glimpsed in moments of madness or horror."*<sup>2</sup>

The hovel which is visited by Lear and his group is the symbolic presence of the Classical Underworld, though his experience of it extends to the storm on the heath. This demonic world is indifferent to human affairs but, in his Folly Lear reaches a realisation about his own frailty:

*"They told me I was everything: / 'tis a lie; I am not ague – proof."* 4.6.104

In his essay on *King Lear*, Northrop Frye describes precisely how these levels of nature look to an Elizabethan audience:

1. *Heaven (the place of the presence of God), symbolized by the sun and the moon, which are all that's left of the original creation.*
2. *Higher or human order of nature, originally the "unfallen" world or garden of Eden, now the level of nature on which man is intended to live as continuously as possible with the aid of religion, morality and the civilized arts.*
3. *Lower or "fallen" order of physical nature, our present environment, a world seemingly indifferent to man and his concerns, though the wise can see many traces of its original splendour.*
4. *The demonic world, whatever or wherever it is, often associated with the destructive aspects of human nature, such as the storm on the heath.*

By act four, scene six, Lear has found a sense of the human level of nature in relation to the one above:

*"When we are born we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools"*  
4.6.116

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<sup>1</sup> *De Docta Ignorantia*, Chapter 2

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye on Shakespeare, Essay on *King Lear*

(Notice the contrast with Erasmian *Folly*, who did not “come crying into the world” as she was already equipped with all the qualities she embodies in the myth.)

After the hovel scene, when Cordelia has heard the news of Lear but has not yet spoken to him, she says:

*“Seek, seek for him, / Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life / That wants the means to lead it.” 5.5.18*

Cordelia declares that Lear still lacks the sanity to continue his life, expressed in the words: “the means to lead it”. It is implied that Lear has more truths to re-acknowledge, such as the fact that he is the King, having been fully possessed by Folly in the hovel scene. At this point Folly no longer has a role in the narrative of the play. Cordelia speaks the truth plainly (the way she always has) but can be heard by Lear. When he wakes from his fainted condition and meets Cordelia for the first time since her banishment, their verse is simple and spontaneous:

*“Lear: I know not what to say. / I will not swear these are my hands: let’s see - / I feel this pinprick. Would I were assured / Of my condition.” 4.7.55*

These three-and-a-half lines contain three sentences. Cordelia replies, kneeling, and completes the syllables in Lear’s line:

*“O look upon me, sir, / And hold your hands in benediction over me! / [Lear tries to kneel] No, sir, you must not kneel.” 4.7.57*

Their newfound allegiance leads to the suggestion that the Fool embodies Lear’s sanity in the first three acts, and Cordelia does in the final two. When she dies, he refers to her endearingly as his “poor Fool”. In early productions of the play, these characters were played by the same actor, Robert Armin, who had all the skills of a professional Fool, resulting in a form of ‘conceptual doubling’ which strengthens this association. At this point in the drama, Folly’s work is done and Good society has been hardly attained, however it has on the level of speech. The language of plainness is its dominant form,



and the characters who survive at the end of the play can “speak what [they] feel, not what [they] ought to say” 5.3.323. In the same conversation between Lear and Cordelia, Lear speaks of his prevailing forgetfulness, however a deeper meaning which relates to his condition as a human being can be found:

*“Methinks I should know you and know this man, / Yet I am doubtful: for I am  
mainly ignorant / What place this is and all the skill [knowledge] I have /  
Remembers not these garments ...” 4.7.63*

Although he speaks of his lack of knowledge, the very saying of it is an act of knowing, which in turn shows that Folly has brought him to knowledge of his ignorance; to learned ignorance. Lear describes his particular condition of being unable to remember the clothes he is wearing, but this is preceded by the universal statement: “for I am mainly ignorant”.

Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*:

*“For the intellect is to truth as a polygon is to a circle. The more angles the inscribed polygon has the more similar it is to the circle. However, even if the number of its angles is increased ad infinitum, the polygon never becomes equal [to the circle] unless it is resolved into an identity with the circle. Hence, regarding truth, it is evident that we do not know anything other than the following: viz., that we know truth not to be precisely comprehensible as it is. ... And the more deeply we are instructed in this ignorance, the closer we approach to truth.” De Docta, C3,10*

Shakespeare’s tragedy ends with a realisation of the Truth by most of its main characters. Those who have, in doing so have been involved in its themes of transfiguration of vision to that beyond the world of appearances by a journey through the qualities of professional and emanating Folly. These conditions are withdrawn from the drama by the time Folly has opened the door for higher Shakespearian qualities such as Forgiveness, Justice and Love which complete the making of a Good society. However, as a Jester may remind us, there is no boundary between the world of the drama and our world, and that feeble-mindedness and lack of good sense can help in perceiving the circle.