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FOOLS, CLOWNS, JESTERS: AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND CERTAIN LOW COMIC HEROES IN SHAKESPEARE

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RESUMEN

Shakespeare creó tantos personajes cómicos –no sólo en sus comedias sino también en sus obras más trágicas– que intentar clasificarlos parece una tarea imposible. Sin embargo, con la ayuda de parte de la reciente investigación en las comedias de Shakespeare, y limitándonos en este ensayo al estudio de los "héroes cómicos" que podríamos denominar "fools", (el "fool" oficial que suele ser más inteligente y cuerdo que el resto de los personajes, y que aparece en *King Lear* o tal vez Feste; el simplón, aquel tipo de personaje más limitado mentalmente como los "mecánicos" en *Midsummer Night's Dream*, los "tedious fools" tipo Pollonius y finalmente todos aquellos que no pertenecen a ninguna de las tres clases mencionadas).

ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare drew so many different comic heroes –not only in his comedies but also in his tragedies and histories– that to attempt a classification of them seems a daunting task. However, with the help of much of the recent research on Shakespeare's comedies and comic heroes, and limiting myself in the present essay to the study of some of his comic characters that will qualify as fools, (the so-called fools who happen to be wiser than anybody else, the type of fool we see in *King Lear* or perhaps Feste; the simpletons, the simplest of them all like the mechanicals of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and those "tedious fools," those fools that are merely in-between), this essay will clarify Shakespeare's use of low comic humour.

In speare's works we find different denominations to refer to the low comic heroes –I call them low in order to show their difference from other characters who play a more significant role in the outcome of the play, because if these so called low comic heroes play a significant role in the outcome it is only by accident–. There is no list of characters in the Quartos or in the First Folio, as they began to appear in much later editions[1]. So the only way we come to know how Shakespeare called them is by the way the other characters in the play address them or the directions in each scene that let us know which characters enter or leave. And so we find the following denominations: Fool, Clown and Jester.

After much reading and thinking I have come up with several distinctions for those characters that would qualify in a certain way as fools, clowns or jesters: The made fool because of the beating, the subservient fool, the professional fool and the feeble-minded or born fool. If we follow a chronological order we see that the first type of fools[2] Shakespeare drew was the Dromios. The Dromios seem to fit into Aristotle's definition of the character of the comedy. According to Aristotle "La comedia es... imitación de hombres inferiores, pero no en toda la extensión del vicio, sino que lo risible es parte de lo feo" (García Yebra 141.) Therefore the comic character had to be necessarily a servant or a slave. Likewise, it exists in the Latin comedy, and still in the Siglo de Oro Spanish Drama. But the Dromios are neither fool, foolish, mentally impaired, slow learner or feeble-minded. On the contrary, they are pretty smart and witty, especially Dromio of Syracuse who according to his master has a great sense of humour:

> A trusty villain, sir; that very oft,
> When I am dull with care and melancholy,
> Lightens my humour with his merry jests.
> (1.2.19-21)

And in another scene Antipholus of Syracuse even recognizes he at times uses Dromio for his fool (2.2.26-27). However, because of the continuous misunderstandings of the play –it is called *A Comedy of Errors*–, in the same scene and a few lines later he alternately strikes both Dromios due to the fact that he doesn't realize he has been talking to two different

Dromios, and he believes them to be jesting. Closer to the end of the play when Dromio of Syracuse tries to explain to his master about the persecution he is made object by Nell, and compares her voluminous appearance to the globe with all the countries in it, he sounds pretty witty. He has forgotten the previous beating[3] and seems to have recovered his witty humour. However, Dromio of Ephesus receives so much beating[4] that his brain doesn't seem to work as well as his brother's does. He puns very well also,[5] but he is never regarded as a fool in the sense of allowed fool or entertainer by his master the way his brother is. And most of the time he is no more than the scapegoat to his master's rage.

Grumio, Petrucchio's servant in *The Taming of the Shrew* is a type of fool not too different from the Dromios. He is also a servant and for that reason the Elizabethan audience expected him to be the clown. He puns very well, but he is garrulous at times[6] and at others he seems really dumb as when he misinterprets his master's "Knock me here" (I.2.7). On the other hand, he takes advantage of others whom, because of his position in the household –he happens to be Petrucchio's personal companion–, he considers his inferior as when he strikes Curtis in IV.1.59. Shakespeare uses slapstick humour only in his early comedies; in his more mature comedies, characters are morally punished but never stricken[7].

The second kind of fool I am going to talk about is the subservient Fool. Polonius is a fool of that kind. After having pulled his leg, called him a fishmonger and insinuated all kinds of corruption, Hamlet exclaims "These tedious old fools!" (II.2.219). The audience may laugh with Polonius's garrulousness, but not so the other characters in the play. For example, when the Queen tells Polonius "More matter, with less art" (II.2.95), she, like her son, seems to be growing impatient with his excessive verbosity. Once Polonius is dead Osric seems to take his role, for the play needs a new character for Hamlet to bounce his wit on (V.2.90-180). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also subservient fools and Hamlet uses his wit on them. In the 1996 summer presentation of *Hamlet* by a local Chicago company, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were just two fools, fools of the clown or dummy type; their role[8] wasn't tragic in the least. That interpretation was exaggerated in my opinion, because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are just that kind of subservient persons

to the ones in power, who don't regard camaraderie or friendship as more important[9]. Between the two of them there doesn't seem to be much difference, they are not individuals, because they happen to act always of the same accord. The King doesn't seem to be able to tell them apart, but the Queen, more observant because she is a woman, is apparently correcting him (II.2.33-34). When Hamlet lets them know he is aware they have been called by the King, one of them, Guildenstern, dares to answer, but only after they have conferred among themselves (II.2.292).

The third kind of fool I am discussing is the smart one, King Lear's or countess Olivia's jester, usually a serious and philosophical character, witty, his humour is black and intelligent, not a universal kind of humour. Shakespeare's humour is usually a very elevated humour directed to the brain. In general, we don't laugh with this type of fool and what is more we don't quite understand their masters' interest in them, because you don't get to laugh with them; they are not funny. Theirs is a kind of Doom's Day humour, very philosophical and profound. If that wasn't bad enough they also like to make their masters feel stupid. But this is probably what made them so valuable because as the critics claim the fool was the one to save the hero from hubris (Sypher 39). Shakespeare usually calls him fool. "But where's my fool?" (I.4.70-71) Lear says and Olivia talks of "an allowed fool" (**TN** I.5.94), though in this last play, he is known as the clown. The term clown, according to Graham Holderness in William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*, is "usually given to a basically minor role: he is not actually a professional 'jester'" (9). But in Shakespeare's works this is not always the case. Clowns is the name given to the gravediggers in *Hamlet*, and one of them, though he is not a professional, jests like a pro. However, the term jester that seems a more proper term for this kind of character, is the one that is given to a really foolish one like Trinculo. Trinculo is the King's jester but he cannot tell if Caliban is a fish or what[10]. Yorick was the king's jester also and he was "a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy" (*Hamlet* V.1.182) as Hamlet says in the cemetery scene while holding his skull. Yorick was so great that was even admired by the gravedigger[11], somebody with whom Hamlet does not mind to measure his wits and let him have the punch line or the last word.

This type of fool is the only one with license to tell the truth to his master or mistress. They were like present day actors for whom almost anything seems to be allowed. Videbaek has observed that in *Twelfth Night* Olivia is mad at the clown; however he succeeds in making her realize she is a fool for crying for a brother whom she believes to be in heaven. She recovers her good spirits with his witty reasoning and she even defends her fool from the verbal attack of her favourite servant, the one without whom she believes she wouldn't be able to properly handle her duties as an heiress. We can appreciate that Olivia seems to consider Malvolio indispensable in her household because when Malvolio, who is following the instructions of the letter, starts acting like crazy in her presence, Olivia says, "Let some of my people have a special care / of him. I would not have him miscarry for the / half of my dowry" (III.4.64-66). She considers Malvolio more precious than half of her riches. But in a previous scene when Malvolio tells Olivia he doesn't understand how she takes delight on such a barren rascal –meaning Feste– and how he can be put down by any ordinary fool, Olivia defends Feste from Malovio's attack and gives her definition of an allowed fool: "There is no slander in an allowed fool, though he do nothing but rail" (I.5.94-95).

Though they both use a similar kind of intelligent and dark humour, Feste and Lear's Fool are two completely different characters. Lear's Fool loves his master and his good mistress, "Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the Fool has much pined away" (I.4.72-73), as the third knight says to Lear, however, he hates Gonerill. But Feste as Videbaek has observed remains detached from everybody. The only time he gets involved in something is when he plays Sir Topas, to better fool Malvolio, taking revenge from the time that Malvolio tried to present him as useless before his mistress. At times he seems to have left Olivia's household for a while (I.5), the reason why she doesn't want to be entertained by him, and at the end he appears to have left Olivia's household, but we cannot tell if voluntarily or by force[12]. After finding out that Malvolio has been wronged, Olivia promises him he can "be the plaintiff and the judge / of [his] own cause" (V.1.356-357). But getting involved didn't seem to work out for Feste, because if Malvolio is going to be both judge and defendant of his own cause, he will probably take all his revenge on the weakest one

of them. As Maria is already married to Sir Toby, Feste will be the only one to pay for the gulling of Malvolio. But this is not so unusual in Shakespeare's plays. We find it also in *Measure for Measure* in Lucio's punishment and Angelo's pardon.

Finally, there is another kind of fool, the extremely dumb, the dummy, the simpleton, a kind of unbelievable character, probably created as a concession to the gallery, to the less cultivated or educated part of the audience. The type of humour mostly used by Shakespeare is so intelligent and witty, that unless you are a Shakespearean scholar you cannot understand much of the punning or exchanges of witticisms between the characters. Shakespeare needed sometimes to lower this elevated humour and make it more available to the whole audience. The humour of this last type of character we are considering now relies on the use of malapropisms. Among those characters we could mention the mechanicals in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Dougberry in *Much Ado* and Elbow in *Measure for Measure.* The richest of these characters and the ones we are going to analyse now are the mechanicals. Bottom's request that Snug the joiner tell the audience he is a man and not a real lion (MSND 3.1.38-43) so that the ladies in the audience won't be afraid is an unbelievable stupid idea; however Bottom is not always that limited, he sounds pretty smart in the next exchange with Titania. Titania under the effect of the magic flower falls in love with Bottom, one of the mechanicals, who has been chosen by Puck for one of his practical jokes and has been transformed into an ass. Titania declares her love to Bottom with the following flattering expressions:

TITANIA
I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again:
Mine ear is much enamour'd of thy note;
So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
And thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me,
On the first view, to say, to swear, I love thee.

Bottom, the same Bottom who believes himself suitable to play all the roles of the interlude, finds Titania's compliments too exaggerated and so he lets her know, but he comes up with a very clever explanation of her sudden infatuation, "reason and love keep little company". But Bottom,

needs to be always talking and so he lets her know that when occasion calls it he can also talk in jest:

> BOTTOM
> Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that:
> and yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little
> company together now-a-days;- the more the pity that some
> honest neighbours will not make them friends. Nay, I can
> gleek upon occasion[13]. (III.1.129-138)

There is another scene in which Bottom sounds quite smart while incurring at the same time in lapses of malapropisms. I am recalling the moment in which he awakes in the forest and believes his transformed appearance and his "affair" with Titania was only a dream, but such an unbelievable dream that no man in his right mind would talk about it[14], because his dream, his happiness, was only comparable to St. John's explanation of Paradise. For this reason he will ask Quince to write a ballad about it so that he could sing it in front of the Duke.

The best description of the mechanicals is the one given by Philostrate to Theseus when he explains that the players of the interlude *Pyramus and Thisbe* are "Hard-handed men... / which never laboured in their minds till now / And now have toiled their unbreathed memories / with this same play against your nuptial" (V.1.72-75). In spite of the way they express themselves, there is no suggestion in the play that the mechanicals are no good in their profession; their problem seems to be that until this moment in which they decide to feast their Duke with a task beyond their limitations, they haven't had to use their brain at all. Shakespeare seems to point out that you can be a fairly good or average mechanical with almost no brains, but a very different thing is when you try to put your hand in something above your own capabilities. Shakespeare seems to be satirizing some of the productions of the trade guilders, as well as the too many amateurs that every writer has to live with. Quince stands as the smartest of the whole pack, at least he corrects Bottom's use of "odious" for "odors" (III.1.76 y77). He is a creator who can use different meters in his works, but Bottom is considered the best actor.

In *The Taming of the Shrew* we also encounter a group of Clowns in Petrucchio's household, but unlike the Mechanicals they are not individuals. In the Mechanicals we find a troupe of amateur actors. Bottom is considered the best performer and for that reason the main role, that of a "lover, that kills himself most gallant for love" (I.2.23-24), has been written with him in mind. Bottom agrees he can give a superb performance as he will be able to move storms to arouse pity from the audience, but he feels his temperament is more suitable for a tyrant as he finds a lover too pathetic and so he tells Quince.

Most of the mechanicals seem to dislike the role conceived for each by Quince. Bottom would rather be a tyrant, Thisby or the Lion. But Quince who has created the play with Bottom in mind for the leading role, insists that Bottom will play no other role but Pyramus. Flute, the Bellows-mender, as he already has a beard would like to play a wandering knight, but he will have to be the heroine instead and wear a mask to hide his incipient beard. Snug, the joiner, fears he won't be able to memorize his part. But he is put at ease by Quince: his part is that of a lion, and he just has to roar from time to time. Bottom believes he can play all the roles and memorize all the parts while Snug recognizes he has no good memory. And we are left with Starveling the tailor, who can play a slim Thisby's mother and Snout the tinker, a probably fat Pyramus's father and Quince himself Thisby's father[15].

Elbow from *Measure for Measure* and Dougberry in *Much Ado about Nothing* are not too different from the mechanicals in the sense that all these characters don't know the proper meaning of the words they are using; that is, their conversation is full of malapropisms. Nevertheless, at times they are capable of doing something right. Elbow cannot make himself understood by Angelo or Escalus, the reason why Escalus has to let Master Froth and Pompey free as Elbow's accusation is totally incomprehensible. In spite of all Escalus' questioning Elbow, who talks by contraries, has been incapable to emit a meaningful thought, up to the point that Escalus cannot understand how Pompey or Master Froth have offended Mrs. Elbow. However, in his other appearances in the play, Elbow seems capable to perform some duties proper to his profession as when he is taking Pompey to prison (III.1.271-350). With respect to

Dougberry we can say that he seems to be the character that David Grote had in mind when he describes his concept of the Fool[16] as he is capable to unmask Don John's treachery and so give a good resolution to the plot.

Clowns are also found in tragedies, and though their mission continues to be to entertain, they are used as a break from all that horror. Shakespeare is very fond of introducing these simpletons, who are usually called clowns, in tragedy. They look and sound rather incongruous with their quibbles and their simple innocence among the complicated moral issues discussed. But Shakespeare loves them and the audience welcomes their appearance. And there have been times in which the scene with the drunken Porter in *Macbeth* can steal the play.

If we return now to our original question of Shakespeare's denominations of those low comic characters, we find that Shakespeare is not constant in the use of the names assigned to each. The name Fool or jester is indiscriminately assigned to a very similar type of character; while clown with the single exception of Feste is usually given to the simpleton, to that character created in my opinion as a concession to the gallery or created in order to serve as a relief from the horrors of tragedy. As examples of this, we have the appearance of the drunken porter after Duncan's murder in *Macbeth*, or the gravediggers before Ophelia's burial in *Hamlet* or the clown with the basket of figs in *Antony and Cleopatra.* Characters created perhaps with the intention to distract us from the impending doom in order to plunge us emotionally deeper after. At times the clown may be the butt of the either practical or verbal joke and provide healthy merriment to the audience. This kind of character usually needs a practical joker like Autolycus or Puck to take advantage of him.

We also observe that the Fool is usually the scapegoat, the one to receive the punishment, though he is never the most guilty and can even be without fault and we have as examples Feste and king Lear's Fool. The jester, on the other hand, is never chastised, or very lightly. He is just entertainer, and like the clown he may also appear in a single scene delighting us with his merry humour and leave without returning again[17].

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NOTAS

1 As we read in the prologue to *The Taming of A Shrew: The 1594 Quarto*, none of the "quartos" had a list of characters.

2 For the time being we are going to limit ourselves to the denomination of "Fool" though we mean any of the three types mentioned above.

3 Albert Bermel says the following about farce: "In farce, characters seldom get badly injured, almost never die. ... Blood flows like wine in a heavy drama or melodrama. ... Farce shows us human bodies that are indestructible, sponges for punishment (Farce 23).

4 On stage he is beaten once by Antipholus of Syracuse who believes him to be his Dromio and lost his money (II.2.93), twice by Antipholus of Ephesus, but he claims to be frequently beaten by both Adriana and Antipholus, and that seems very probable as both spouses have a short temper.

5 I.2.43-97; II.1.45-90; etc.

6 As Charlton says: Grumio and Biondello bear their Roman origin unmistakably stamped on their features. Theirs is the traditional stupidity of "fond reasoning" and of clumsy and occasionally unclean quibbling (Charlton 95).

7 Malvolio is taken for mad and locked in a dark place (TN IV.2), Falstaff is put in a basket with dirty clothes, covered with dirty clothes and thrown into the Thames (MWW III.4) , and Lucio is married to a whore (MFM V.1.507-520).

8 There doesn't seem to be much individuality in these two characters. Even the other characters in the play seem to confuse one with the other; not to be sure which one is which.

9 Hamlet seems happy when they arrive but he soon begins to mistrust them.

10 But perhaps this is not a sign of stupidity, because Antonio on seeing Caliban comments that one "of them is a plan fish" (V.1.266).

11 According to Videbaek the gravedigger, who jests very well, recognizes in Yorick somebody greater than himself.

12 Lear's Fool also disappears from the main action of the play, but his disappearance is probably due to the fact that the actor had to play two different roles.

13 "I can gleek upon occasion", this is a rather ambiguous expression. Bottom seems to let her know he can also talk in jest, just in case Titania is trying to fool him, but on the other hand, Bottom seems to have recovered his usual self-confidence because he is convinced that he can be a good jester when the occasion requires it.

14 According to Grote "[The Fool] is as far removed from the Shakespearean Fool as he can be, for if he speaks wisdom, he does so without his own awareness", (41) and this we find in Bottom who can be unbelievable stupid and unbelievably right.

15 These are the roles assigned at the rehearsal, however in the actual performance we see Snout and Starveling as Wall and Moonshine respectively.

16 Cf. Grote 41.

17 The merit of the actor clown rests in the fact that reading the text is not always that funny and it is up to the actor to make the character and the whole scene as funny as intended.