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THE IMAGE OF FOOL AS A GENRE-FORMING ELEMENT IN SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDY

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Before we set out to investigate the task formulated in the title it would be quite useful to define what we mean here under the terms „fool“, „genre-forming“ and „comedy“ in order to avoid a possible hermeneutic confusion. Although it is a well-known fact that Shakespeare wrote plays which were divided in the first published folio into tragedies, comedies and histories, a contemporary reader/viewer sometimes has problems in understanding why, let's say, *Measure for Measure* or *Tempest* would fall under the category of comedy-play: there is little space for laughter there, and, in fact, sometimes events take a thrilling turn and provoke rather sympathy and tears than laughter. Neither do the earliest Shakespearean comedies' plots fall into the category of comedy in the strict modern understanding of this genre: they seem to be more merry, romantic and festive than comic and laughter-producing. In the modern sense, comedy differs from tragedy in having a happy ending (and from farce in containing some subtlety and character-drawing) and usually the genre is suggestive in the very atmosphere of the play, from its very beginning. [7, 100] This would not, probably, suffice to draw a line of distinction between the two genres in case of Shakespeare.

Since Elizabethan theatre does not differentiate between the sublime and low genres, tragic and comic elements are tightly interwoven in each of Shakespeare's plays. Each play is 'pregnant' with both potentials: for happy and unhappy ending. *Romeo and Juliet* might have ended happily (like it did in the original melodrama which served as a basis for this tragedy) as well as *Tempest* might have ended tragically for the lightness of the first suggests a comedy and the heavy and sophisticated revengeful mood of the latter suggests a tragedy in the beginning. Thus, we may presume that comedy is present throughout each play of Shakespeare as a kind of red line, and it is the ending that becomes crucial for the genre definition because „all's well that ends well“. Thomas Heywood in his

Apology for Actors (1612) said that „comedies begin in trouble, and end in peace; tragedies begin in calm, and end in tempest“. Accordingly, tragedy is a black line accompanying the fabula of each play which becomes genre-defining in case of an unhappy ending. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare puts the following instructions into the mouth of his hero directing the players before they stage a play: „The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical pastoral, scene indivisible or poem unlimited. Seneca cannot be too heavy nor Plautus too light...“ [II, II]

The question may immediately arise on how does Shakespeare weaves so masterfully the tragic and comic together without detriment to the structure and fabula, to the characters and their natural motivation in actions. There are many ways to answer this question but whatever way we take in answering this question we will inevitably touch the fact that in every play created by Shakespeare there is a figure who merges the high and the low, the serious and the amusing, the stage and the audience, the folly and the wisdom, the tragic and the comic and who brings in the element of medieval carnival – Fool or Clown. Shakespeare himself introduces this gradation into two types of jesting characters: the characters such as Speed, Launce, Bottom and Costard have to be united under the notion of „clown“. This kind of entertaining person comes from a rustic physical man, a non-educated simpleton. They are so called „natural fools“. Feste and Touchstone fall into the second category. They are so called „wise fools“ or professional fools. In this article we will dwell upon the specifics of these two types of images in Shakespeare’s comedies and see what would be the losses of Shakespeare’s comedy be it deprived of clowns and fools?

The roots of both types of images go back to the folk tradition of the Feast of Fools, and then, in late Middle Ages, with the development of sacred drama, the folklore image is implemented in a foolish soldier, cunning fool, stupid rustic man and Vice. Usually in early comedies written by Shakespeare we are dealing with clowns, not fools, although their functions are very similar: both stand for the „voice of Nature“, i.e. a spontaneous course of events, both often become the only characters who are able to speak the truth (aware or unaware) as it is.

Clowns are more tightly connected with folk tradition: they represent the wise voice of Nature that is making its way from under the shell of rudeness, silliness, hypocrisy or simplicity. Shakespeare’s clowns always belong to a particular social group; they are simpletons and cannot be intellectuals or representatives of nobility. This fact, though, does not neces-

sarily mean that all servants can be included into this group. Unlike clowns, servants in Shakespearean comedies are usually deprived of individuality and merge with the general background of comedies. The only exception, perhaps, may be Grumio (*The Taming of the Shrew*) who is actively participating in intrigue but he is more connected with the tradition of Italian *commedia de l'arte* than with the folk fool tradition. On the other hand, this peculiarity does not mean that clown cannot be a servant. He is allotted this role sometimes, like Speed and Launce (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*) or Launcelot Gobbo (*The Merchant of Venice*). Into the images of clowns Shakespeare is investing more individuality, more uniqueness. If servants can be moved from one comedy to another, exchanged, etc. without detriment to the harmony of a comedy, clowns, although they are not fabula characters proper, are interwoven with the fabula and atmosphere of the comedy on a much deeper level. It is unthinkable, let's say, to imagine Bottom beyond Athens or „athenian comedy“ (*Midsummer Night's Dream*) and move him to Milan or Venice. Bottom is essentially a product of that world where Puck's or Oberon's tricks are as real as the law of Athens strictly punishing children for their disobedience towards parents.

It seems like the main function of a clown in Shakespearean comedies is the role of outside-spectator, commentator of everything that is happening on the stage. Without this function the 'natural' background of Shakespearean comedies would lose a lot and would look impoverished. Clowns become one of the forms of expressing author's position towards the collisions of the fabula. Moreover, they become interpreters of the events who are able to raise very sophisticated issues in a very funny manner. These issues had to be directly relevant to the current social, cultural, political and religious contexts familiar to Shakespeare's audience for it is a very well-known fact that spectators of Elizabethan England did not come to London theatres to find out the plot of a play but to be entertained with the way it would be performed and, above all, to take an active part in the performance through the stage-audience mediator, i.e. the clowning figure who has no space and time of his own and therefore is able to make chronotopic trips from and into the reality of a play. [5, 4-6] This significant role of a clown is studied in detail in the article by Lori M. Culwell [2, V-VII] where she is trying to show the genesis of the interpretational nature of Elizabethan stage fools from the sheer physical comism of their medieval predecessors. She explains the necessity of this new role by the complicated and diverse changes that were taking place in various spheres of life at the times of Shakespeare which all together turned a former

homogeneous audience of morality-plays into a large number of mutable individuals, diversified by social status, professional skills, level of literacy and education, and even religious views. To satisfy such a motley-group of spectators, a comedy (or a comic scene in a tragedy) had to be open to numerous interpretations, so that each spectator would be able to make reference to himself. Clowns, thus, become, almost „everything for everyone“, suggesting the appropriate set of connotations and denotations for whatever topic they address. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, for example, the character of Launce appears in a variety of scenes, almost always as the comic relief. But it is in his several monologues where we begin to see him as a cultural object, a sponge of contexts, using the familiar symbols and placed in the proper area, thus meeting the criterion of the clown. In one especially effective moment, Launce appears after a touching „parting of the lovers“ scene (which is soon to be forgotten by Proteus), performing a parody of the scene with a cast of characters which includes his dog, his shoe, his hat, and a broom, all of whom he speaks with and for, ending the speech with a comparison of his mother's breath to the scent of his shoe.

Another example of referential comism and of stepping from-and-in can be taken from a red-line comic episode in *Hamlet* known as the Grave-digger's scene where Shakespeare identifies the two men who dig the grave of Ophelia as Clown One and Clown Two. The topical, cultural themes are introduced immediately by the gravediggers: these men are by no means royalty. They speak in the informal and make references that clearly have nothing to do with Elsinore, or even Denmark. The First Clown is digging the grave of Ophelia, who is to be buried in Denmark (if one is „playing along with the representationality of the drama“). And yet this clown calls out to his counterpart to: „go, get thee to *Yaughan*, fetch me a *stoup of liquor*“ [V, I], simultaneously breaking the represented reality of the drama and creating an audience rapport through the humor implicit in his statement. As the playgoing audience would certainly have recognized, *Yaughan* was a pub around the corner from the London Playhouse where *Hamlet* was playing. This likely warranted as much raucous laughter as did: „...[insanity] will not be seen in [*Hamlet*] there [in England]; there the men are as mad as he“ [V, I]. The importance of these references is twofold: they give the audience a much-needed laugh, and provide the proper distance from Elsinore to view what the clowns say as discreet parallels, not direct commentaries: the clowns, though they speak with *Hamlet*, are assuredly not his contemporaries.

There is a certain set of characteristics shared by all clowns created by Shakespeare, and this set of common features helps them to play their major roles in the plays. Cunning Speed, somewhat melancholic Launce, Bottom who is naively in love with art, 'a merry devil' Launcelot, pun-producing Costard – all of them are full of inexhaustable vitality, good humour, naturally healthy perception of life. Good humour makes it possible for them to be merciful with human vices and weaknesses. Vital wit is helping them to make necessary corrections at those moments when the feelings of love are becoming too sublime in the minds of clowns' masters and the sincerity of expressing their feelings is slowly growing into affectation. A good representation of such cases may be the comment Speed makes on the love of Valentine and Silvia's behaviour or the list of female virtues compiled and commented by Launce, etc. An innate intuition and capability to discern what is good and what is bad gives all of them an opportunity to reveal the genuine motives of their masters, however subtle they may be. Thus, when Valentine (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*) is still sure of Proteus's honesty and sincerity and when Proteus himself is still building a sophisticated construction to justify his own treachery and says that he is just following the call of Nature and trying to be true to himself, Launce says in his monologue:

I am but a fool, look you; and yet I have the wit to think my master is a kind of a knave; but that's all one, if he be but one knave. [III, I]

The same innate feeling of Nature's voice makes Costard violate the decree issued by the King (*Love's Labour's Lost*) long before His Majesty and courtmen come to the conclusion about the nonsense of the decree. All clowns like to deliver long philosophical speeches but at the bottom of their philosophising there always lies sound common sense. As a bright example here may serve a passage from Gobbo's monologue (*The Merchant of Venice*) when he is hesitating whom to listen to: „*to be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master, who – God bless the mark! – is a kind of devil; and, to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the fiend, who, saving your reverence, is the devil himself. Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnal; and, in my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience, to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives the more friendly counsel: I will run, fiend; my heels are at your command; I will run.*“ [II, II]

Everything the clowns articulate is perceived as delightful nonsense, futility. These futile jests are entertaining both characters and audience but they are not taken seriously. Rather as a warning, a hint on the hidden sense. The weapons of comism used by clowns seems to be not extremely rich

and mostly they follow the tradition of jesting characters of the medieval drama, for example the episode of Launcelot with his father (*The Merchant of Venice*) or of Launce with his dog (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*). The most often used comic method is, of course, a play of words. Here are just some of the examples:

*COSTARD: I, Costard, running out, that was safely within,
Fell over the threshold, and broke my shin.*

ARMADO: We will talk no more of this matter.

*COSTARD: Till there be more matter in the shin. [Love's Labour's
Lost, III, II]*

CLOWN: No, sir, I live by the church.

VILOA: Are you a churchman?

*CLOWN: No such matter, sir: I do live by the church; for I do live
at my house, and my house doth stand by the church. [The Twelfth Night,
III, I]*

Although in general in Shakespeare's comedies the image of clown has undergone certain stages of evolution in comparison with its late medieval predecessor and has gained more individuality, still, to a great extent it is „locked up in its earlier tradition“. [11,11]

More complicated and composite is the nature of professional fools. In the comedies of the first period there are, in fact, only two wise fools – Touchstone (*As You Like It*) and Feste (*The Twelfth Night*). Touchstone is a court fool of duke Frederick, while Feste (Clown) is Olivia's domestic fool. Both are originally from French *sotie* and British morality-plays where, apart from clowns, there was a set of fools, usually boastful and cynical, bearing little resemblance to those wise fools of the Ardennian forest or Illyria. These players in Shakespeare remind us of the tradition existing in medieval theatre to which many scholars refer, i.e. the tradition of Vice in morality-plays and of villains in mystery plays.¹ Even the fools and clowns in Shakespearean plays feel that they owe their existence to this tradition. Thus, the Clown in *The Twelfth Night* sings in one of his songs:

I am gone, sir;

And anon, sir,

¹ The references to these phenomena are numerous. There is a whole chapter dedicated to the tradition of mischievous character of Vice in the late Tudor morality-play in the multi-volume classical edition of *The Oxford History of English Literature* [8, 59-66]. Other histories, even brief and student-oriented, write extensively on the connection between Vice and “bad characters” from the Bible stories with those of clowns and fools, jesters and buffoons. [3, 53],[9, 319]

I'll be with you again,

In a trice,

Like to the old Vice... [IV. II]

There are, of course, other sources of this image in Shakespeare. In the 16th century a new figure of wise jester appears on the stage, the one who, „according to the public opinion, knows about virtue and generosity more than a fool can learn during all his lifetime“. [4, 5] It is a buffoon, one of the predecessors of the Shakespearean fool. An influence from the side of literary tradition should be mentioned here too. Shakespeare's fool has a classical predecessor and counterpart in Plato's „Dialogues“ – a mocking philosopher, and the linking line between the ancient tradition and Renaissance fool, according to I. Taits, „became 'Encomium Mortae' by Erasmus“. [18, 46]²

Tradition is felt also in the fools' special, usually motley, appearance with coxcombs, bauble or sceptre which is one more comic contribution into the genre of comedy. Shakespeare never indicates directly the coiffure of his fools but there are slight hints, and his contemporary playwright Marston's fool Dondollo in the comedy „Faun“ (1604-1606) is called a „bald fool“. This epithet is not accidental. Indeed, at that time a court fool was usually either bald or with a haircut bearing resemblance to that of a monk. One mentioning about this is in an old French mystery of the 15th century where one of the characters is jesting at the image of St Peter saying something like: Look at this apostle – he's cut in the manner of fool. A slight hint on the parallel between clergy and fools is in the scene of changing clothes, when Feste (Clown) is putting on priest's vestments to play a trick on Malvolio and says that he must be the first fool in a frock. Such outfit, though, turned out to be uncomfortable for a court fool who also played a role of acrobat and dancer. There are facts proving that Shakespeare's fools were wearing motley clothes and one of them is that the playwright is using the epithet 'motley' almost as a synonym to foolish, incomplete, not whole, not sane. Jaques in *As You Like It* immediately recognizes a clown in Touchstone when the latter appears on the stage: „motley fool“. And Feste is speaking about himself to Olivia: „...I wear not motley in my brain“. [V, I] meaning that he is wise in his essence, though a fool by appearance.

² Another relevant link is important to mention here, i.e. the link between the folk image of jester/clown and the Biblical notion of fool. A detailed research on this issue see in my article „Transposition of Biblical Fool and Folklore Jester In English Literature of Late Middle Ages“[15, 198-208]

Summarizing, thus, the above said, we may say that the clowning figure in Shakespeare's comedies is charged with a number of significant genre attributes: connection with the medieval tradition of comism (which made a common root known to every playgoer); indirect introduction of author's words and attitudes; comments and textual reference to „now and here“; extensive play with words showing the treacherous nature of human language. Fools and clowns happen to be the 'experts' of the essence of human nature which usually differs from its appearance and whose revelation is, probably, the most favourite theme for Shakespeare's dynamics in the plays, especially in comedies. Fools are always warning against the false appearance, undermine it and anticipate the forthcoming revelation, ballancing on the edge between reality and various constructions of reality. They become a necessary liminal figure between lie and truth, imagination, dream, fantasy and reality, actors and audience, the worlds of theatrical ritual and 'now-represented' performance. Fools make an inalienable part of the comic element not only in Shakespeare's comedies but also in his tragedies teeming with comic scenes.

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Summary

The title of this article should be regarded rather as a question than a statement for the role of the image of fool both before and during the development of Elizabethan drama can hardly be reduced to an inalienable element of the comedy genre. In many cases of highly moralistic medieval plays a fool (that was only emerging and therefore should be rather referred to as a clown) was not a fabula character but functioned as an institution of corporeality based on a long-standing popular tradition deeply rooted in culture. Very often it was Vice or Devil who fooled on the stage.

The pre-modern clown made no attempt to interpret or to motivate the action by which he was defined. In Elizabethan drama fools gain apart from universal, some personal characteristics and become stage characters. Through the analysis of fools and clowns in major (mostly early) Shakespearean comedies which differ in the time of writing and variation of comedy genre, the author of this article is trying to see how much fools and clowns contribute to the comedy as a genre and to what extent their presence is genre-defining.

The summarising conclusion of the article is that the clowning figure in Shakespeare's comedies is charged with a number of significant genre attributes: the connection with the medieval tradition of comism (which made a common root known to every playgoer); laughing (not mocking) and didactic nature of Elizabethan comedy; indirect introduction of author's words and attitudes; comments and textual reference to „now and here“; universality of a play due to a chronotopical relativity of clowning figures; extensive play with words showing the treacherous nature of human language.

