P.G. SEM. I

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King Lear

Discuss the role of the Fool in King Lear.

Intro

Just as Hamlet is Shakespeare's best play, so King Lear is his greatest tragedy. It is tragic vision of humanity, a work of deep philosophic vision, a profound commentary on life and its values - an exalted morality play set against a back drop of eternity.

(1) In the tragic, serious setting in King Lear, a fool seems to be out of place, as in Shakespeare's other great tragedies. And in introducing him in this play, Shakespeare seems to have made a mistake. This view is further strengthened by the fact that the fool makes only an occasional appearance on the stage. We see him first in Act I, Scene IV, and by Act III, Scene VI his role is over. The fool's utility is only for him and only during certain periods of his history. Hence his role seems to be accidental and unimportant. Further more, his presence and action can hardly seem other than a blemish on the work and hindrance to its proper interests.

(2) However, a closer reading of the play will bring to light the importance of the fool in the tragic scheme of King Lear. In fact, his role is so important that Professor Hudson remarks that "Your estimate of this drama, as a whole, depends very much on the view we take of the fool." As Bradley points out, "he is " one of Shakespeare's triumph" and without him "we will

hardly know the tragedy."

FUNCTION

What, we may ask, is exactly the function of the fool in King Lear? Like all the (1) traditional fools, in Shakespearian play we find him performing the task of providing (2) dramatic relief. He does by means of his antics and songs, his proverbs and epigrams, his witty pieces from old ballads and folklore. Even in the abiding gloom and stark tragedy of King Lear, the fool discovers comic potentialities. Even in the most heart-wrenching (3) incidents, he can see elements of humour. For instance, when Lear pathetically exclaims, "O me, my heart, my rising heart, but down," the fool tells him the comic story of the women who tried to cook eels without first realizing that they must be killed before being cooked. When they tried to escape from the dish, she hit them on their heads, crying "Down, wantons, down!" And it must have been her brother who thought that putting butter on hay would be a kindness to his horse. In another scene, when the sight of Edgar as a poor, naked bedlam (5) leads Lear into philosophic contemplation on the helplessness of man, and in despair, tears his clothes, the fool converts the situation into a philosophic comedy saying "Prithee, nuncle, be contented; 'Tis naughty night to

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(3) But unlike traditional fools, the fool in King Lear, besides providing comic relief also performs functions which are more important and integral to the play King Lear; as Wilson Knight observes, "the fool's function is of the chorus, that of commenting on the action". And in King Lear, comments are necessary for it is the most complex tragedy that Shakespeare ever wrote. The fool is not directly involved in the dramatic conflict he is there to offer comments and he does so in his own humorous jocular witty ways, ways. His comments serve as a means of elucidation and interpretation of the dramatic action.

(4) The fool also performs the function of a traditional Philosopher, whose task is to advise the king in matters in general as well as to help him answer the tricky questions at the court. many of the fools questions and comments and observation show deep perception, have insight and profound wisdom. One critic describes him as "the wise fool among the foolish wise". There is a stock of sly cynical wisdom in his songs such as

"Have more than thou showest-
Speak less than thou knowest-
Lend less than thou owest.....
Leave thy drink and thy whore
And keep in a door.
And thou shalt have more
Than two tens to a score."

And the rest of his wield falls on this
heave is so sharp that won't remarks:
"This is not altogether fool, my lord."
(6) His wisdom stands in
total relief when contrasted with Lears
folly. "The fool", as Coleridge observes,
"seems as a foil to the main figure, and
by his antitheses tends to intensify the
tragic element of play."
He has the questioning,
inquiring mind of a philosopher. Again
and again, we hear him hurling a torrent
of question at Lear, "Canst thou tell how
an oyster makes his shell?" or again,
"Thou canst tell why one's nose stands
at the middle of one's face?"
Somepara + All these questions have
but one purpose: to bring home to Lear
his folly in divesting himself of all power
authority, and in thus making his
daughters his mother. He is as one critic
put it, "the voice of Lear's conscience."
He chastizes the king by reminding him
again and again of the better truth that
he ought not to have made them his
daughters his mothers that he ought not
to have been old before he was wise.
He strikes at the heart of the matter when
he remarks that little wit in his
bald crown when he gave his golden
one away: he has made his daughters
his mothers and put the rod into their
hands."

A strange thing about the Fool is that while his heart-strings belong to the Lear party, and while his loyalty to Lear himself is unshakeable, his head can only represent to him that meaning for Reason which belongs to the party of Edmund and the sisters. He advises Kent of a puncture: "let go thy hold, when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it breaks thy neck with following".

7 A modern Psychologist trying to analyse the fool in King Lear might find him a complex character. He seems to possess a paradoxical nature. The workings of his mind shows a strange mixture of complexity and simplicity. On the one hand the flickering light of his intellect has a 'curiosity penetrating power'. And yet, on the other hand, the sphere in which he is most at home is that which contains the lowest forms of animal life. The eel, the snail, the oyster, the Ledge sparrow are furnish him with illustration of Lears helpless position. He is again, a mixture of Sense and nonsense, of Sanity and insanity swinging in and out of one another and this adds to the mystery of his nature. He is as Hazlitt points out "always half-comic, half serious". At critical moments we find him a strong courageous figure who is inspiring confidence into the drooping spirit of the King, by his witty remarks and words of wisdom. At other times, however, he is all too easily frightened. He trembles at the dark frowns of Goneril. When he finds Edgar in the hearth, he cries out in terror, "Help me, help me! And the cold night and bitter wind are more than he can bear." *

In the strange assemblage of qualities in him, nothing stands out more contrasted than his Sense of Pathos

in a sort of comic masquerade. In him wit and folie are sublimed and idealized into a tragic beauty. His garments of mourning often show through the apart of his playfulness. His labouring to out-jest Lear's heart-struck injuries, tells us that his wits are set-a-tuning by grief. He brings no diversion to the thought only to steal a sense of woe into the heart.

8 In assessing the character of the fool, one can not overlook two of his most complicated qualities. His deep love and devotion to the king and Cordelia and his utter unselfishness which drags him into a world to share with Lear pains curses from her father, "the fool hath much pined away." His attachment and loyalty to the king enables him to follow his agony and adversity. In fact, in this play, he paints the picture of a 'crises' figure, accompanying the king in times of his crises. Though he has no suffering of his own, yet rightly seen, he does move us, and deeply too. The most noteworthy point in him is the fact that his heart is slowly breaking under the burden of his masters sorrows. His anguish is the anguish of pure sympathy, a sympathy, so deep and intense as to include absolute self forgetfulness. As his old masters wits are shattered in pieces he is overcome with deep grief. To prevent this calamity, he

has all along been toiling his forces to the utmost. Now that it has come he has no longer has anything to live for, And so, he withdraws from the scene with the prophetic, poignant words: "And I will go to bed at noon."

The corrupt world is the final clue to the meaning of the Fool. He is not of tragic scope. He affirms the dignity of man neither as animal nor angelic reason. Nor has he the ennobling weakness of compassion. He remains a figure of pathos because he is so helpless — helplessly immobilised by a handy-dandy horde of opposites neither of which he can choose. He does not survive his own grim laughter, and disappears for that reason. He could not survive, without metamorphosis, in the same context as Cordelia.

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