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## Looking at Shakespeare Theatrically with Reference to the Development of the Role of the Clown Character

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### □ ABSTRACT □

This article examines the development of the role of the clown character in Shakespearean drama with reference to the following four plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*. The article explores the historical, dramatic, material and cultural context in which the plays were written, and illustrates how it influenced Shakespeare's work and motivated him to develop the nature and dramatic function of the clown character in his plays.

The article starts with a brief survey of the origins and the early function of the clown character on the English stage, in general, and in a number of early plays by Shakespeare. In this context, the article provides an analysis of the clown character in *The Merchant of Venice*, and examines how Shakespeare presented it in its traditional form which was already familiar to the Elizabethan audience. Moving on to *As You Like It*, which marks the beginning of the radical development of the character. The article discusses the new clown character which Shakespeare developed around the year 1600 when the actor Robert Armin joined Shakespeare's company, and claims that Shakespeare designed the whole part of Touchstone to suit the style and acting abilities of the new actor. The article analyses the dramatic nature and function of the new clown character, and underlines the different factors which influenced Shakespeare's development of the role. It moves on to investigate the clown character in Shakespeare's later plays trying to illustrate other developments of this character in *Twelfth Night*. It also brings into discussion the clown character in *King Lear*, a tragedy, to serve the purpose of comparison.

The article shows, indirectly, the discrepancies of its different readings when we limit its analysis to the application of traditional literary methods which are usually applied to fiction neglecting the fact that they were written to be performed in front of a specific audience in a specific historical and cultural context.

**Key Words:** Shakespeare's clown, clown character, Shakespeare's fool, Shakespeare's theatre, Shakespeare's theatrical company, William Kemp, Robert Armin.

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## دراسة شكسبير درامياً بالإشارة إلى تطور دور شخصية المهرج

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### □ الملخص □

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة تطور شخصية المهرج ودورها الدرامي في مسرحيات شكسبير بالإشارة إلى أربع مسرحيات تم اختيارها لأنها كتبت في الفترة التاريخية 1597-1606 وتمثل كل منها مرحلة هامة في تاريخ تطور شخصية المهرج وهي: تاجر البندقية، كما تريدها، الليلة الثانية عشرة والملك لير. ويستعرض البحث السياق التاريخي والدرامي والمادي والثقافي الذي أحاط بعمل شكسبير في المسرح ويكشف كيف أثر هذا السياق على شكسبير ودفعه لتطوير صفات شخصية المهرج ودورها الدرامي في مسرحياته.

يبدأ البحث بعرض موجز لأصول شخصية المهرج المسرحية ووظيفتها الدرامية على المسرح الإنكليزي بشكل عام، وفي عدد من المسرحيات الأولى التي كتبها شكسبير. وفي هذا الإطار، يقدم البحث تحليلاً لدور شخصية المهرج في مسرحية تاجر البندقية ويظهر كيف قدمها شكسبير للجمهور الإليزابيثي في شكلها التقليدي. ثم ينتقل إلى دراسة شخصية المهرج في مسرحية كما تريدها التي تمثل بداية التطور الجذري الذي أجراه شكسبير على هذه الشخصية ووظيفتها الدرامية. في عام 1600 انضم الممثل روبرت أرمين إلى فرقة شكسبير المسرحية مما جعل شكسبير يفصل ويوظف دور المهرج Touchstone فيها ليتناسب مع نوعية وإمكانيات الممثل الكوميدي الجديد. يدرس البحث شكل هذه الشخصية الدرامية الجديدة ووظيفتها متلمساً العوامل التي دفعت شكسبير باتجاه هذا التطوير. ثم يتابع البحث تحليل شخصية المهرج في مسرحيتي الليلة الثانية عشرة في محاولة لرصد تطور هذه الشخصية في أعمال شكسبير اللاحقة. كما يدرس البحث شخصية المهرج في مسرحية الملك لير التراجيدية لمتابعة شكلها ووظيفتها مقارنة مع مثيلاتها في المسرحيات الكوميديّة السابقة.

ويكشف البحث، بشكل غير مباشر، التباين في قراءة هذه المسرحيات عندما تعالج كنصوص أدبية تدرس من خلال تطبيق نظريات النقد الأدبي التقليدية متجاهلة كونها كتبت بالأساس لتعرض على خشبة المسرح وخطبت جمهوراً محدداً ضمن إطار تاريخي وثقافي محددين.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** المهرج في مسرح شكسبير، شخصية المهرج، شخصية المجنون عند شكسبير، مسرح شكسبير، فرقة شكسبير المسرحية، ويليام كمب، روبرت أرمين.

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Despite the great importance that our English Departments assign to the teaching of Shakespearean drama, very little attention, if any, is usually given to serious studies and analyses of Shakespeare's plays from a theatrical point of view. Particularly, the question of how Shakespeare adapted his work to suit the material conditions of his profession, and the effects that this process of adaptation could have had on his plays, and consequently on their interpretations and reception by the audience, continues to pass unnoticed.

The application of literary methods of criticism completely overwhelmed the study of Shakespeare's plays, so that almost all research until the seventies of the last century concentrated on issues like story, plot, characterization, and theme. But, the introduction of the new and challenging approaches like historicism, feminism, post structuralism, and cultural materialism to the study of Shakespeare brought about exciting new readings of Shakespearean plays. These approaches strongly underline the importance of the historical material context on studying Shakespeare. Moreover, they entail a deep and thorough examination of all the historical, material, cultural and theatrical elements surrounding the Elizabethan playhouse in general, and Shakespeare's plays in particular. This article aims at examining how these conditions affected Shakespeare's work. I will try to expose this context and emphasize how it influenced the development of the role of the clown in Shakespearean drama. The analysis will also examine how Shakespeare's creation of a new function for this character within the dramatic structure of his plays came by as a direct consequence of this relationship. To achieve this purpose, I will focus on four of Shakespeare's clowns who belong to four of his mature plays which were written in the period of 1597-1606 because they mark major stages in the radical development of the character, and illustrate the new dramatic nature and function of the role.

We know from established scholarly research that the sixteenth-century English playwright regularly wrote for the same company.<sup>1</sup> In this context, Shakespeare worked with the same group of professional actors, some of whom including himself had shares in the company. Shakespeare's company benefited hugely from these working conditions surrounding their theatrical enterprise as it is evident from its successful and predominant history on the Elizabethan London stage.<sup>2</sup> The relationship/partnership worked out just as beneficial to the playwright himself. Shakespeare had a rare chance to know every single actor's ability and potential which must have inspired his work.

Peter Thomson argues that Shakespeare 'invented character by building on role'.<sup>3</sup> He must have 'observed his fellow actors/histriones at work and created characters for them through perception of the histrionic temperament in action'.<sup>4</sup> This assumption had enough solid historical evidence which had previously encouraged T. W. Baldwin to develop in his book, *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company*, a whole theory of 'type-casting' in which he argues for a practical possibility to assign certain roles (characters) of a given Shakespearean play to the existing members of Shakespeare's company at a certain time.

Looking at *As You Like It*, for example, we notice how very interesting theatrical technicalities, which played a vital role in the making of the play and its success throughout the years, pass unnoticed in our analysis. Shakespeare introduced in this romantic comedy a

<sup>1</sup> T. W. Baldwin, *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1927).

<sup>2</sup> We may also add here the royal patronage which the company enjoyed since King James I succeeded to the throne in 1603.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Professional Career* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.108.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Professional Career*, p.108.

totally new type of clown which marked an unprecedented change in the nature, role and function of the conventional clown character on the Elizabethan stage. However, the creation of the two clown roles of Jacques and Touchstone which is always referred to as an example of Shakespeare's greatness was deeply rooted in its historical and *theatrical* contexts.

Traditionally speaking, the role of the jester or clown is originated in the Vice characters of the morality plays. J. L. Stayn argues that "such Vices increasingly became figures of fun, and the mainstay of the popular stage".<sup>5</sup> The Vice character was comic in tone, and it was under a great demand: "Audiences also anticipated the regular appearance of the 'Vice', a character who was, like any clown, partly outside the main action".<sup>6</sup> Apart from its moralistic origins, the Vice character was essentially a 'genial rascal' who "was seen less as an embodiment of the Devil [character] than as a dramatically useful figure of fun".<sup>7</sup> However, when the role of the morality play comic Vices began to disappear from the English stage, they were substituted by a single character that provided the comedy and laughter for the entertainment of the audience. The new character, Stayn argues "always spoke frankly to his audience about what he planned to do next, and seemed to draw the house into an extra-dramatic conspiracy that allowed the spectator to make his maximum contribution to the performance".<sup>8</sup> When we examine Shakespeare's early plays (before 1597), we notice that only traces of this dramatic function of the old clown remain alive. The roles of Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, Bottom in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Dogberry in *Much ado About Nothing* and Grumio in *The Taming of the Shrew* all enjoyed a limited stage time, and served to provide this simple function. It is worth mentioning here that there exists a general critical consensus that all those roles were played by William Kemp, the main clown of Shakespeare's company at the time.<sup>9</sup> The clown roles which Shakespeare wrote for William Kemp, conformed to this type. As a jig writer and Morris dancer, Kemp's art was much suited to these roles which fitted outside the main narrative of the play. David Wiles tells us that Kemp's clown provided for the audience the release much needed after two hours of concentration.<sup>10</sup> The clown's role in these plays was limited to a self-contained sub-plot and a smaller portion of available stage time. After a scripted play was over, the clown was allowed the freedom of the stage for improvisation, rhyming and dancing. There is no better illustration of this than Lancelot Gobbo's role in *The Merchant of Venice*, which is an earlier play that is believed to have been composed around the years 1597-8. In this context, we see how in Act Two, Scene Two the clown Kemp was given a solo on the stage to talk directly to the audience providing some kind of break or interval to the performance. The whole scene about deserting the Jew, and the deceit of the father, Old Gobbo, which is the best comedy in the play, is set up purely for the audience's entertainment with no dramatic significance to the development of the main plot of the play. Lancelot Gobbo, the clown, is alone on the stage thinking aloud about deserting his master, Shylock, through a conversation between his conscience and the devil:

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<sup>5</sup> J. L. Stayn, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), PP. 47-8.

<sup>6</sup> J. L. Stayn, *The English Stage*, P. 67.

<sup>7</sup> J. L. Stayn, *The English Stage*, P. 79.

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Stayn, *The English Stage*, P. 79.

<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, edited by Brian Morris (London: Routledge, 1995), P. 49. See also William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, edited by A. R. Humphreys (London: Routledge, 1994), P. 23.

<sup>10</sup> David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), P. 46.

Certainly, my conscience will serve me to run from this Jew my master. The fiend is at mine elbow and tempts me, saying to me, "Gobbo, Lancelot Gobbo, good Lancelot," or "good Gobbo", or "good Lancelot Gobbo, use your legs, take the start, run away." My conscience says, "No; take heed, honest Lancelot; take heed, honest Gobbo," or, as aforesaid, "honest Lancelot Gobbo; do not run; scorn running with thy heels."

(II.ii.1-8)

The only other time for Lancelot on the stage waits until Act Three, Scene Five, after Portia and Nerissa decide to disguise themselves as lawyers to help save Antonio's life. The scene has only a technical significance which is to allow for the passing of the time needed for the disguise, and the journey to Venice to take place. Moreover, it provided the audience with another comic scene of unfailing foolery, and a chance to relax and ease some of the tension and concern that they must feel now about Antonio's fate.

However, since the composition of *As You like It* around the year 1600, Shakespeare radically changed the old form and function of his clown characters. Shakespeare adapted his play from Thomas Lodge's pastoral novel *Rosalynde*.<sup>11</sup> He added two main male characters to the seven characters of his source thus making the total number nine. It is not a pure coincidence that this number exactly matches the number of the actors in Shakespeare's company between the middle of 1599 and 1600 which is the assumed date of the composition of the play.<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare wrote roles for every one of these actors. However, the most important one was Touchstone's role which he wrote for Robert Armin.

It is widely argued that the arrival of Robert Armin into Shakespeare's company to substitute William Kemp, who dropped out of the company in the middle of the year 1599, had been an inspiration of Shakespeare's creation of the character of Touchstone in *As You Like It*.<sup>13</sup> Robert Armin published his works *Foole Upon Foole*, and *Quips Upon Questions*, under the pseudonym 'Clunnico de Curtanio Snuffe-Snuffe the Clown of the Curtain Theatre' in 1600.<sup>14</sup> Armin's work distinguished between a fool 'natural' and a fool 'artificial'.<sup>15</sup> A fool 'natural' refers to a common man's character who is socially and hierarchally inferior and ridiculous. This fool spoke disorderly which distinguished him from other characters in the play. On the other hand, a fool 'artificial' had only the name of the fool, but he was a witty character who always spoke wisely. Shakespeare adapted Armin's theory about the clown character, and used this distinction to develop a new type and function for the clown on the stage. The new clown character had some of its predecessor's functions, but most importantly, was given new dimensions.

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare does not delay introducing and defining his new clown character to his audience. At his first appearance in Act one, Scene two, Touchstone is called 'Nature's natural' by Rosalind (I.ii.46), and 'natural' by Celia (I.ii.50). And he is also called 'fool' twice (I.ii.44, 51). The term is an accurate description of the older type of the clown, and a definition of the new concept is soon beautifully dramatized. Celia remarks that the 'dulness of the fool is the whetstone of the wits' (I.ii.52-3); and mocks his 'great heap of knowledge'. The new characteristics of the clown are instantly reflected

<sup>11</sup> Lodge's "*Rosalynde*" Being the Original of Shakespeare's "*As You Like It*", edited by W.W. Greg (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907), P.xx.

<sup>12</sup> T. W. Baldwin, *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company*, p.83.

<sup>13</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, edited by Agnes Latham (London: Routledge, 1996), P.liii.

<sup>14</sup> David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse*, P.135. See also William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, edited by Agnes Latham (London: Routledge, 1996), P.liii.

<sup>15</sup> David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse*, P. 136.

through Touchstone's mastery of debate techniques, and his ability to defeat Rosalind and Celia in their own game:

**Rosalind:** Where learned you that oath, fool?

**Touchstone:** Of a certain knight, that swore by his honour they were good pancakes, and swore by his honour the mustard was naught. Now I'll stand to it, the pancakes were naught and the mustard was good, and yet was not the knight forsworn.

**Celia:** How prove you that in the great heap of your knowledge?

**Rosalind:** Ay marry, now unmuzzle your wisdom.

(I.ii.58-66)

Immediately, through Touchstone's character, Shakespeare defines the dramatic function of the new role as that of the artificial fool, as a truth-sayer and a commentator: 'The more pity that fools may not speak wisely/ what wise men do foolishly' (I.ii.80-1).

Shakespeare's determination to bring the new form and function of his new clown role comes clearly into the open through the comments of the melancholic Monsieur Jacques in his first meeting with Touchstone in the Forest of Arden which helps to bring into focus the contrast between the function of two roles :old and new. Jacques refers to Touchstone's 'motley', which is the traditional costume of the traditional clown character, and enforces the audience's awareness of the ancestry of the role. His reference to Touchstone's 'wisdom' and use of 'good set terms' sharpens the contrast between the two clown roles, and indirectly brings it to the attention of his audience.

**Jacques:** A fool, a fool! I met a fool i'th'forest,  
A motley fool: A miserable world!  
As I do live by food, I met a fool,  
Who laid him down and bask'd him in the sun,  
And rail'd on Lady Fortune in good terms,  
In good set terms, and yet a motley fool.  
"Good morrow, fool", quoth I. "No sir", quoth he,  
"Call me not fool, till heaven hath sent me fortune".  
And then he drew a dial from his poke,  
And looking on it, with lack-luster eye,  
Says, very wisely, "It is ten o'clock.  
Thus we may see", quoth he, "how the world wags:  
'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,  
And after one hour more ,twill be eleven;  
And so from hour to hour, we ripe, and ripe,  
And then from hour to hour, we rot, and rot,  
And thereby hangs a tale".

(II.vii.12-29)

Agnes Latham argues that "until he came to write *As You Like It* Shakespeare had created fools only dimly aware of their folly, if at all. Dogberry has no idea that he is comical. Touchstone intends to be".<sup>16</sup> Clearly, this new type of clown has one main business which is that of mockery. He is an 'allowed fool', and in fact, a wise man only

<sup>16</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, edited by Agnes Latham (London: Routledge, 1996), P. lii.

pretending to be a fool. The 'wise' Jacques wishes to be a fool like Touchstone, thus indirectly describes the new dramatic function of the clown.

**Jacques:** O worthy fool! One that hath been a courtier  
And says, if ladies be but young and fair,  
They have the gift to know it. And in his brain,  
Which is as dry as the remainder biscuit  
After a voyage, he hath strange places cramm'd  
With observation, the which he vents  
In mangled forms. O that I were a fool!  
I am ambitious for a motley coat.

(II.vii.36-43)

The role of the new clown remained outside the main plot, yet, through Touchstone's relation with Audrey, it offered a comic contrast to the pretty ladies and gentlemen in the play, and made a very strong mockery of the pastoral and the life of the foresters. Alan Brissenden summarizes how Touchstone was made to function in this way:

Orlando's verses, for example, are shown up as ridiculously extravagant when Touchstone extemporizes a bawdy parody; Jacques's pessimistic wit and his place as entertaining gall to the exiles court diminished in the face of Touchstone's fresher humour; and the idealistic romanticism of the three other pairs of lovers is reduced to a more realistic level by Touchstone's reminder that freshly desires are significant in the satisfaction of love.<sup>17</sup>

The character was moved from its marginal place in the narrative of the play to a more integrated place within it. Touchstone's role in the play as a commentator on worldly morals and court values links him strongly to the category of the licensed fool. Simultaneously, the new clown maintains his old function as an entertainer playing on sexual themes and imagery. He enjoys the debate and relishes words which in their very bawdiness and sexual allusions are reminiscent of the roles which William Kemp used to furnish.

It is very interesting to search for the effects that the creation of the new type and function of the clown could have on reading and analysing Shakespeare's play. After all, the distinction between a fool 'natural' and a fool 'artificial' was put forward so strongly, and it could not have passed unnoticed by Shakespeare's contemporary audience, especially, when Robert Armin himself played Touchstone.

The audience factor and its relation with the theatrical enterprise come here into play. Alfred Harbage tells us that 'Elizabethan playgoers were not the refined, sedentary, intellectual and middle class persons who patronize "legitimate" drama today'.<sup>18</sup> Shakespeare must have had his eye on the nature and composition of his audience and attempted to give them what they wanted. The jigs which were usually played by William Kemp were very popular with Shakespeare's contemporary audience. Those were hard times of disease and plague, and as Wiles tells us the jigs being based on a sexual theme must have provided satisfaction to the 'sexual needs of innumerable men severed from family and parish life'.<sup>19</sup> In this context, the bad jokes and obscenities which were taken

<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Edited by Alan Brissenden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). P.35.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* (New York. 1941). p.18.

<sup>19</sup> David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse*, P.45.



against Shakespeare show the mastery and professionalism with which he dealt with his historical and theatrical conditions. Shakespeare successfully incorporated these elements into his art in order to meet a certain demand on the part of his audience. However, Shakespeare went on to invent in *Touchstone's* clown character a most successful mixture of Kemp's jigs and Robert Armin's artificial fool, and used it to serve his own artistic intention.

We do not have any evidence of a recorded performance of *As You Like It* during Shakespeare's life. However, it is practically valid to conclude that the two characters of Touchstone and Jacques were central to any possible reading of the play at the time. The importance that Shakespeare gave to his new clown role within the main structure of his play, and the occasional reference to the nature of the new clown role played by Armin, validates the assumption that a lot of the play's entertainment and meaning is derived from this creation. We can clearly notice how Touchstone, the sensualist character and master of bawdy who is driven by his earthy feelings and desires, is used dramatically to sharpen the contrast between his world and the imaginative world of the pastoral.

However, the play went a long way from this possible reading. For centuries now, readers, critics and audiences have developed a love relationship with the romantic heroine Rosalind which resulted in a dramatic transformation of the reading of the play. Numerous citations and critical commentary survive to tell of this adoration for the character. Lesley Anne Soule identifies this problem and points out how 'our own two-centuries-old affair with an idealized heroine has distorted our reading of the play obscuring the fact that the text describes a performance in which the controlling presence is not a female performer but a male adolescent'.<sup>20</sup> What is interesting here is what Soule refers to as a process of continual interruptions to the main story of the romantic love through which Shakespeare's text expresses more interest in these theatrical digressions and the actual business of popular theatre than empathetic concern with dramatic characters: 'Loosening logical causality and time sequence weakens the operation of character motivation in the play and thus reduces suspense, the driving force of an audience's emotional involvement in the fictional plot'.<sup>21</sup>

Shakespeare created similar clown characters in his later comedies. In this context, we may also look at two more clown roles in *Twelfth Night*, and *King Lear* which Shakespeare wrote after *AS you Like It*. Studying the two roles of Feste and the Fool will help to illustrate clearly our argument.

Of all Shakespeare's clowns Feste has the largest role of 318 lines. Like Touchstone, on his first appearance on the stage, Feste is engaged in a serious debate with Maria, and introduces a very beautiful display of play on words stressing the relation between fool, wit and fooling: 'Wit, an't be thy will, put me into good fooling! Those wits that think they have thee do very often prove fools; and I, that am sure I lack thee, may pass for a wise man. For what says Quinapalus? Better a witty fool than a foolish wit' (I.v.26-30). The distinction between the two types of fools comes alive again, and, indirectly, allows Feste to take up his position in the play as the licensed fool or, as Olivia calls him the 'allowed fool' (I.v.76).

Clearly Feste's role was so important to Shakespeare, but the play's history on the stage suggests that it suffered a problem similar to the one which *As You Like It* had. For years readings of the play, as well as huge numbers of productions were victims to different

<sup>20</sup> Lesley Anne Soule, 'Subverting Rosalind: Cocky Ros in the Forest of Arden', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. VII, 26, 1991, p.126.

<sup>21</sup> Lesley Anne Soule, 'Subverting Rosalind: Cocky Ros in the Forest of Arden', p.128.

literary interpretations which assign the main focus of the play to the characters of Malvolio and Viola. Shakespeare designed his play around the spirit of holiday surrounding the Christmas period and incorporated and preserved the very rich atmosphere of festivals of his day.<sup>22</sup> The play is partly a representation of one of these celebrations, namely, the Lord of Misrule. This festival celebrates liberty and defiance to customs. In it a man is usually elected as the 'King of the bean' having found a dried bean in his portions of a cake that they serve in that celebration. Once chosen, the man would have a hundred people to wait on him and guard him. In his very narrative, and choice of words, Shakespeare represents this celebration in which Feste plays the Lord of Misrule. It is in that fictional capacity that Feste mocks Malvolio who was representing the Puritan figure.

In this context, Feste's role was another one of Shakespeare's artificial fools overseeing the holiday fun and commenting on the action of the play. He was chosen to be the last character to leave the stage, and, with a very sweet song, announces that the 'present Mirth' may vanish tomorrow:

A great while ago the world begun,  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,  
But that's all one, our play is done,  
And we'll strive to please you every day.  
(V.iii.407-410)

However, too many years had to pass by before any credible reading or production gave Feste any prominent position. The same love story to the fictional character of Viola, and the same story of empathy are repeated. Most literary analyses of the play focus on the romantic theme, and assign the gulling plot of Malvolio a second place.<sup>23</sup> However, theatrically speaking, Shakespeare did not give any prominence to his romantic plot. On the contrary, it is obvious that because he did not include any direct wooing in the play between the lovers Shakespeare underestimated the love theme in the play. Furthermore, this is particularly important when we remember that the Elizabethan audience watched the plays in broad day light, and they were aware of the reality of the boy actors who played Shakespeare's female role. In other words, Shakespeare's audience was certainly able to see under the disguise of the female character of Viola. The only scenes which refer to the love theme are subverted by the audience's awareness of the boy actors. There is matter for comedy, more than romance, in the message which Duke Orsino asks Viola to deliver to Olivia:

**Duke:** O! then unfold the passion of my love;  
Surprise her with discourse of my dear faith:  
It shall become thee well to act my woes;  
She will attend it better in thy youth  
Than in a nuncio's of more grave aspect.

**Viola:** I think not so, my lord.

**Duke:** Dear lad, believe it;  
For they shall yet belie thy happy years  
That say thou art a man: Diana's lip  
Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe  
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,

<sup>22</sup> L. G. Salinger, 'The Design of *Twelfth Night*' in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, IX (New York: AMS Reprint Company, 1958), p.117.

<sup>23</sup> William Winter, *Shakespeare on the Stage*, 3 Vols., II (London: Benjamin Blom Inc., 1969), pp.37-40.

And all is semblative a woman's part.  
(I.iv.24-34).

Now if we move on to examine the role of the character of the Fool in *King Lear*, we will come across a similar case which signifies the influence of Shakespeare's historical, material and theatrical context on the creation and function of the character.

The play is believed to have been written in the winter of 1605-6 while Robert Armin was still playing for the King's Men.<sup>24</sup> By then, the clown role, so popular and indispensable within Elizabethan plays, has become a necessity even for Shakespeare's tragedies. In addition to some changes in the main plot of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, the main source of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Fool character is the only addition which Shakespeare made on the 'dramatis personae' of his source.<sup>25</sup> The role did not only retain its function as the main provider of the comedy, but also developed a new dimension. It is almost impossible not to notice how the Fool is playing the role of a narrator, and a teacher of wisdom and common sense. He is referred to by Goneril as 'all-licens'd fool' (I.iv.204), and he has grown very courageous and more direct now:

**Lear:** Take heed Sirrah- the whip.

**Fool:** Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out, when the lady brach may stand by the fire and stink.

**Lear:** A pestilent gall to me!

**Fool:** Sirrah, I'll teach thee a speech.

**Lear:** Do.

**Fool:** Mark it, nuncle:-

Have more than thou showest,

Speak less than thou knowest,

Lend less than thou owest,

Ride more than thou goest,

Learn more than thou trowest,

Set less than thou throwest;

Leave thy drink and thy whore,

And keep in a-door,

And thou shalt have more

Than two tens to a score.

(I.iv.112-129).

The jests and bitter jokes of the Fool function as a reminder to the king of his own injustice. In this context, the dramatic function of the Fool's role becomes essential for preserving the King's sublimity as he himself falls into madness:

'He provides not so much comic relief as a safty-valve for the emotions of the audience. Lear's conduct is absurd, if judged critically; and the representation of madness is apt to arouse more laughter of the audience than sympathy. The Fool was therefore inserted to draw the laughs of the audience, and so preserve Lear's sublimity'.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, edited by Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1980), p.xix.

<sup>25</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, p.xxiv.

<sup>26</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, p.lvii.

Looking at Shakespeare's plays theatrically through the re-examination of the texts as dramatic scripts or scenarios written for performance in a specific time, and for a specific audience provides a great asset to the researcher to identify the influence of certain factors, like actors, stage, and audience on the creation of the theatrical text, and its possible readings or interpretations. In this context, I have looked at the character of the clown in four Shakespearean plays, and have tried to trace back its creation and the development of its nature and theatrical function. From a purely marginal figure whose main function is to provide laughter and comic release to the audience, Shakespeare developed his clown characters to occupy a much more prominent position within the main dramatic structure of the play. In doing so, Shakespeare was influenced by the material and theatrical conditions of his time. In addition to his role as the main source of laughter, Shakespeare's clown character was developed and used as a foil to other main characters in the plays, and to help expose their fallacies and weaknesses. Moreover, Shakespeare gave his clown character enough stage time to comment on the action of the play and provide pieces of wisdom which, ironically, helped in bringing out the serious content of his plays reaching the position which Jacques once aspired to:

**Jacques:** Give me leave  
To speak my mind, and I will through and through  
Cleanse the foul body of th' infected world,  
If they will patiently receive my medicine.  
(II.vii.58-61)

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