

Shakespeare and His Actors: An Essay on Clowns, Fools, Tragedians, and Women, and the Men and Boys Who Played Them

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Much has been written about the possible roles each actor played in specific productions for the Lord Chamberlain's/King's Men between 1594 and 1616—Shakespeare's time with the company—since T. W. Baldwin's 1927 book *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company*.¹ Since that time, Nungezer's *Dictionary of Actors* and Bentley's *Jacobean and Caroline Stage* were published, along with other more recent studies.² While most studies tend to be conservative in their speculations, the latest book on the subject, David Grote's *The Best Actors in the World: Shakespeare and His Acting Company*, while an attempt to recreate the history of the Lord Chamberlain's/King's Men in Shakespeare's time, is wildly speculative entertainment, but not a serious work of reference.³ His approach presents sheer guesswork about the roles specific actors played, as if such guesswork were obvious fact. Rather than speculate excessively about the actors and parts they played, the focus of this essay is to speculate on Shakespeare the artist, on the plays he wrote, and on the overall effect of the numerous actors, boys and men, in his company and the parts they were capable of playing. For the purposes of this essay, I identified seven distinct roles and the actors likely to play them.

Role 1: Boys Playing Young Women. Despite the performance of Gwyneth Paltrow as Juliet in *Shakespeare in Love*, The Lord Chamberlain's Men were all males. There were some sixteen actors, five or six of whom were boys who played the female parts.⁴ Certainly, each adult actor and boy actor had certain talents along with physical features unique to that actor. We know that there was a tall fair boy and a short dark-haired boy from references in various texts describing the pair.⁵ It seems likely that this gifted pair played the roles of Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream, the roles of Portia and Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice*, Beatrice and Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Rosaline and Celia in *As You Like It*, and possibly Ophelia and Gertrude in *Hamlet*.⁶ Certainly, young apprentice boys played the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The presumption is that having this talented pair of physically distinct boy actors available allowed Shakespeare to create the great female romantic comedy roles noted above. Would Shakespeare have been able to write the great romantic comedies if he did not have these talents available? But he did, and having this pair of actors empowered Shakespeare the artist to write increasingly complex roles for them.

Role 2: The Clown. The worlds of comedy and history had more than female roles played by boys, of course—and perhaps also by men, as I will discuss later in this paper. In the early days of Elizabethan theatre, the comic functions were mainly given to rustics, clowns, country bumpkins, and servants, and these actors relied mainly on acrobatics, bawdy, slapstick and jigs. The great early master of this kind of comedy was Richard Tarlton. Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* (1662) gives an account of the recruiting of Tarlton, informal jester to Elizabeth I, that illustrates the informality of the fool or jester discovery process and its connection to the theatre. Fuller writes, "Here he was in the field, keeping his Father's Swine, when a Servant of Robert Earl of Leicester . . . was so highly pleased with his *happy unhappy* answers, that he brought him to Court, where he became the most famous *Jester* to Queen Elizabeth."⁷ But from jesting he moved on to his real forte, the stage, becoming the first English "Star." As a famous comic actor, he became the model or inspiration for the antics of Will Kempe of Shakespeare's acting company, the next great comic star of early modern England.

Will Kempe brought to the highest—or perhaps lowest—level the kind of antics developed on stage by Tarlton. Will Kempe was the great clown, singer of obscene songs, and jig master. Kempe was expert at physical comedy, able to make audiences laugh with his grotesque faces, and a great improviser who would engage the audience in conversation, an activity called "gagging" in the theatre. For him Shakespeare wrote the role of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and in the histories the major role of Falstaff in the first two Henry plays.⁸

But tensions were rising between a performer's theatre and a playwright's theatre. When Shakespeare, as promised, continued the Henry plays, Kempe was written out without a part when

Falstaff is announced as dead in *Henry V*. Kemp angrily left the company to jig across England, firing back insults at Shakespeare or “Shakerags” as Kempe called him.⁹ As for Kempe’s “gagging,” Hamlet, speaking for the playwright, advises the players, “Let those that play the clowns speak no more than is set down for them”(3.2.38-39).¹⁰ So much for Will Kempe and “gagging.” Shakespeare had won the battle of the Wills. In a later 1638 play by Richard Brome, *The Antipodes*, a clown is taken to task for gagging with the audience. When he defended his bantering with the audience by appealing to the great comedians of the past, Tarlton and Kempe, he was told those days are long gone: it’s a playwright’s theatre now and the stage is “purged from barbarism / And brought to the perfection it now shines.”¹¹

Role 3: The Wise Fool of Comedy. With Kempe gone, a new major actor joined Shakespeare’s company, Robert Armin. He was fascinated by fools and jesters and wrote a book entitled *Foole upon Foole*. Armin was a pioneering realist in his study of how fools actually behaved. His stage fools were based on observation of court jesters, or “Wise Fools,” at work.

The court jester or “Wise Fool” is a universal phenomenon. He is a fixture in every major court in medieval and Renaissance Europe, in China, India, Japan, Russia, and in native tribes in America and Africa. All of these share a consistency of characteristics: attachment to a particular ruler; physical or mental deformity (real or pretended); concern for the general welfare of the people; and the freedom to alert isolated kings, emperors, sultans—even popes—of their moral failings. This is the kind of reality that shaped Armin’s view of fools.¹²

Apparently Armin’s views and realistic acting ability did influence Shakespeare’s writing. From the time that Armin joined the company, Shakespeare very noticeably began to give his clowns the catechism, or lesson, as a form of jesting. So in *As You Like It*, we don’t get the slapstick of Kempe, but instead, Touchstone, the first “Wise Fool” in Shakespeare. He is a court jester who flees the corrupt court—where a truth-teller would not be welcome—with the banished Rosalind and Celia. Two characters, Jaques and the Duke, define exactly the “Wise Fool” in this exchange following Touchstone’s catechism on the “Lie Direct”:

Touchstone: O, sir, we quarrel in print by the book, as you have books for good manners. I will name you the degrees. The first, the Retort Courteous; the second, the Quip Modest; the third, the Reply Churlish; the fourth, the Reproof Valiant; the

fifth, the Countercheck Quarrelsome; the sixth, the Lie with Circumstance; the seventh, the Lie Direct. All these you may avoid but the Lie Direct; and you may avoid that too with an If. I knew when seven justices could not take up a quarrel; but when the parties were met themselves, one of them thought but of an If, as: 'If you said so, then I said so.' And they shook hands, and swore brothers. Your If is the only peace-maker; much virtue in If.

Jaques: Is not this a rare fellow, my lord?
He's as good at any thing, and yet a fool.

Duke: He uses his folly like a stalking-horse, and under the presentation of that he shoots his wit.
(5.4.89-106)

Touchstone the jester is wise, yet plays a fool, and his foolishness protects him from blame as he fires off his wit, especially at the folly of those who take too seriously human failings—someone like Jaques, who gives us the “seven ages” of man, ending with the final act:

Jaques: Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing.
(2.7.262-65)

This is not the vision of humanity that Touchstone shares. The human condition is a source of laughter, not despair.

In *Twelfth Night*, Robert Armin, who also originated the role of Feste, the next “Wise Fool” created by Shakespeare after Touchstone, catechizes or teaches Olivia, the mistress of a great house, on why she grieves and proves her a fool for doing so:

Feste: Good madonna, why mourn'st thou?
Olivia: Good Fool, for my brother's death.
Feste: I think his soul is in hell, madonna.
Olivia: I know his soul is in heaven, fool.
Feste: The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven. Take away the fool gentlemen. (1.5.63-69)

Feste's Christian theology is correct so who is the real fool?

Peter Milward, in “Wise Fools in Shakespeare,” makes the connection between Christianity and Wise Fools like Touchstone and Feste. Milward demonstrates the Fools' significance by paralleling their speeches to St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians and to the Ephesians. Certainly we can recognize the voice of a

Shakespearean Wise Fool in Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians: "If anyone fancies himself wise, according to the standards of this passing age, he must become a *fool* to gain true wisdom."¹³

In *Reality in a Looking Glass*, a comprehensive historical study of fools and their roles in medieval and modern society, Anton C. Zijderveld describes and classifies the types of traditional medieval fools. Feste, the "Wise Fool" of *Twelfth Night*, belongs to a class of jesters which, according to Zijderveld, "were . . . in full command of their wits. . . . They played at being foolish, often with much wit and ingenuity," as Feste himself proclaims: "I wear not motley in my brain" (1.5.53-54). He is the "allowed fool" who can criticize the folly of the two absolute rulers of the play—Olivia and Orsino, the two unwise fools.¹⁴ Zijderveld comments that the fool "is irreverent in the face of authority and tries his best to undermine the impression management (or spin) that is staged by the powerful."¹⁵ He says of rulers, "The more dictatorial they are, the more they need fools and folly."¹⁶

But Feste has another role: A corrupter of words who still tells the hard truths, in this case concerning marriage, as in the second of the following exchanges.

Viola: Save thee, friend, and thy music: dost thou live by thy labour?

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

Viola: Art thou a churchman?

Feste: 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. (3.1.1-7)

And a few lines later:

Viola: Art not thou the Lady Olivia's fool?

Feste: No, indeed, sir; the Lady Olivia has no folly: she will keep no fool, sir, till she be married; . . . I am indeed not her fool, but her corrupter of words. (3.1.31-33)

Shakespeare, a writer who loved playing with language and the pun, can't resist giving this corrupting quality to a "Wise Fool." Note also the standard joke of the husband as the real fool in the household—with a hint of cuckoldry embedded in the foolishness.

Role 4: The Tragedian. By the end of the sixteenth century, tragedy was becoming the dominant dramatic form, and Shakespeare had one of the greatest tragic actors in his company, Richard Burbage.¹⁷ For Burbage Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* and *Hamlet*. Apparently known for his size and weight, Burbage's Hamlet is described as "fat and scant of breath" by Gertude during

the final duel with Laertes (5.2.289). As both Burbage and Shakespeare age, Burbage's roles grow older—from Othello:

“the young affects in me defunct.” (1.3.265-266)

to Macbeth:

I have lived long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have. (5.3.22-26)

to the aged, foolish King Lear. Again, Shakespeare is able to write these plays in part because he has a great tragic actor who can effectively deliver these evolving roles.

Role 5: Old Men. Burbage, of course, played the major old men roles noted previously. As for Shakespeare as actor, the critical consensus is that he played old men, probably Adam in *As You Like It* and the ghost in *Hamlet*. Other than that, we have just more speculation and guesswork, including a wild suggestion that Shakespeare played the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* and that he gave the Nurse a limp because he himself walked with a limp. But what seems clear is that he was successful as an actor, since he was an owner-sharer who was mentioned along with Burbage and Kemp as members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, receiving payments from the royal household in 1595. Besides, playwrights, rather than actors, tended to be paid little and to die young and broke, as did Robert Greene, among others.

Role 6: The Wise Fool of Tragedy. Up to this point in his career, Shakespeare's fools have been in his comedies; but as Shakespeare moves into his tragic period, his “Wise Fools,” or jesters, move with him. The first appearance of a “Wise Fool” in a tragedy is Yorick in *Hamlet*. While he had both the excellent wit of a “Wise Fool” and the pranks of a jester, Yorick is long dead and now serves as a *memento mori* in the graveyard scene in act 5 of *Hamlet*. There is speculation that the speech is a description of and tribute to the great jester Richard Tarlton by his successor Robert Armin.¹⁸

Gravedigger: Here's a skull now. This skull hath lien you i'
th' earth three-and-twenty years.

Hamlet: Whose was it?

Gravedigger: A whoreson, mad fellow's it was. Whose do
you think it was?

Hamlet: Nay, I know not.

Gravedigger: A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! 'A pour'd
a flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This

same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester.

Hamlet: This?

Gravedigger: E'en that.

Hamlet: Let me see. [*Takes the skull.*] Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kiss'd I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chap-fall'n? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that. (5.1.172-94)

Yorick in death, through Hamlet, still delivers a harsh rebuff to female vanity, the kind he expresses toward both Gertrude, his mother, and Ophelia.

Shakespeare's perhaps most famous fool is in *King Lear*, a new role for Robert Armin. The unnamed Fool is the harshest critic of Lear and yet his most loyal follower. He can be cruel with the bitter truth, as for example in this exchange:

Fool: Dost thou know the difference, my boy,
between a bitter fool and a sweet fool?

Lear: No, lad; teach me.

Fool: That lord that counsel'd thee
To give away thy land,
Come place him here by me—
Do thou for him stand.
The sweet and bitter fool
Will presently appear;
The one in motley here,
The other found out there.

Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

Fool: All thy other titles thou hast given away; that
thou wast born with.

Earl of Kent: This is not altogether fool, my lord.

Fool: No, faith; lords and great men will not let me.
If I had a monopoly out, they would have part
on't. And ladies too, they will not let me have
all the fool to myself; they'll be snatching.
(1.4.135-48)

According to Lear's "Wise Fool," the world is full of real fools snatching the monopoly of foolishness from the professional fool.

And Lear, according to the Fool, is among the worst. But when the storm rages and Lear goes mad, it is the Fool out on the heath with him urging him to go indoors:

Fool: Nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o' door. Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters blessing! Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools. (3.2.10-13)

Finally, when Lear tears at his clothes, the Fool urges a reasonable, non-naked response to the storm:

Lear: Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncover'd body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.

Fool: Prithee, nuncle, be contented! 'Tis a naughty night to swim in. Now a little fire in a wild field were like an old lecher's heart—a small spark, all the rest on's body cold. Look, here comes a walking fire. (3.4.100-12)

After this scene, and with a bit of stage business like coughing and shivering with fever to suggest that the Fool gets sick, the audience may come to assume that exposure on the heath out of affection for Lear leads to the Fool's presumed death.

It should be noted, however, that there are two versions of the Fool in *King Lear*, the Fool of the earlier quarto version and the Fool of the Folio version of 1623. In "The Fool in Quarto and Folio in *King Lear*," Robert B. Hornback argues that it is necessary to consider the particular theatrical context for the two fools: the early modern English theatre "distinguished between so-called 'natural' and 'artificial' fool types." He goes on to argue that the quarto presents a fool that is bitter, wise, and funny, fitting with the actor Armin, the fad of the years following 1599, while the Folio undercuts these elements to emphasize and evoke pathos, keeping with the change in taste evidenced in the last plays of Shakespeare and the work of his successor John Fletcher.¹⁹ Hornback's assessment leads to unanswered questions about the actor: if not a transformed Armin, who may have played the pathetic Fool of the Folio.

Role 7: Men Playing Adult Women. As Shakespeare moves into the latter phase of his career, perhaps beginning with *Coriolanus*

and *Antony and Cleopatra*, he possibly has one more major actor influencing his art. In his article, "Why Boys for (Wo)Men's Roles? Or Pardon the Delay, 'the Queen was shaving,'" James H. Forse, taking the second half of the article's title from the excuse a Restoration actor gave to Charles II when the king complained that the play had not started when he arrived, disputes the "common scholarly presupposition that major female roles in the age of Shakespeare always were taken by boy actors." He argues instead that these roles were more likely designed for actor-sharers. He also isolates one particular character type—"a woman who, in comic or serious vein, displays some sort of assertiveness or aggressiveness" within the traditional male-oriented Elizabethan society—that extends throughout Shakespeare's career and which Forse sees as an appropriate role for an adult male to play.²⁰

Continuing this argument, Marvin Rosenberg in "The Myth of Shakespeare's Squeaking Boy Actor—Or Who Played Cleopatra?" argues that there was at least one adult actor that Shakespeare used for his major female roles, specifically Volumnia in *Coriolanus* and Cleopatra. According to Rosenberg, "By the time the playwright was ready for Cleopatra, the genius of this impersonator promised a match worthy of the character's mystery . . ." He goes on to speculate, "The actor may even have helped suggest it."²¹ Thus, at this stage of his career, Shakespeare may have had one more actor influencing his art.

However, there is hardly universal agreement on this point. In response to such speculation, Stanley Wells, in his article "Boys Should Be Girls," reinforces the view that female roles were played by boys, arguing that the company would be wasting resources if adult males were playing the less demanding female parts,²²—although it is hard to imagine how the roles of Volumnia and Cleopatra could be less demanding.

So from two talented boys, to Will Kempe, to Robert Armin and Richard Burbage, and possibly, if you agree with Forse and Rosenberg, an adult female impersonator able to handle the role of Cleopatra, and other numerous named and unnamed players, Shakespeare shaped and had shaped for him his dramatic art.

A final comment: while Shakespeare's public stage did not have women players, women of various classes were in fact performing in England from the late medieval period to the Restoration. Of course, aristocratic women appeared in court masques and were severely criticized for this activity by the puritans—to the extent of calling them whores, even the Queen—a comment that cost at least one puritan his ears. But aristocratic women were not the

only female actors. Women from all walks of life participated as “players” in entertainments ranging from Corpus Christi cycle plays and Virgin Mary devotions to various pageants and traditional celebrations like May Day.²³ While *Shakespeare in Love* is a biographical fantasy that has a woman performing Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* on the Elizabethan public stage, actual English women were on their own real stages all over England, just not on the public stage in London.

Notes

1. T. W. Baldwin, *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1927).

2. Edwin Nungezer, *A Dictionary of Actors and Other Persons Associated with the Public Presentation of Plays in England before 1642* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1929); and Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941).

3. David Grote, *The Best Actors in the World: Shakespeare and His Acting Company* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).

4. Peter Acroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (New York: Random House, 2005), 224.

5. Acroyd, *Shakespeare*, 225.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Cited in Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3.

8. Acroyd, *Shakespeare*, 222.

9. Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 292-93.

10. All references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Complete Works*, ed. David Bevington, 4th ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992).

11. James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 42.

12. Otto, *Fools are Everywhere*, 233.

13. Peter Milward, “Wise Fools in Shakespeare,” *Christianity and Literature* 33, no. 2 (1984): 21-27.

14. Anton C. Zijderveld, *Reality in a Looking Glass* (London: Routledge Kegan and Paul, 1983), 92.

15. *Ibid.*, 28.

16. *Ibid.*, 30.

17. Acroyd, *Shakespeare*, 150.

18. Shapiro, *A Year in the Life*, 289.

19. Robert B. Hornback, “The Fool in Quarto and Folio in *King Lear*” *English Literary Renaissance* 34, no. 3 (November 2004): 306.

20. James H. Forse, “Why Boys for (Wo)Men's Roles? Or Pardon the Delay, ‘The Queen Was Shaving,’” in *Art Imitates Business: Commercial and Political Influences in Elizabethan Theatre* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 71, 73.

21. Marvin Rosenberg, “The Myth of Shakespeare's Squeaking Boy Actor—Or Who Played Cleopatra?” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 5.

22. Stanley Wells, “Boys Should Be Girls,” in *Foreign Literature Studies* 1 (2006): 10-15.

23. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin, eds., *Women Players in England, 1500-1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).