

# INTO THE FOOL'S MIND

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The subtle and meaningful identification “King-Fool” is one of the fundamental recurrent themes in Shakespeare’s theatre. Most of his characters put on several masks in order to display the highest level of appearance. The mask should be decoded as a hermeneutic device which hides the inner structure of a character and also reveals his “mimetic desire”. Madness is a symbolic Mask with which the kings are deliberately or unconsciously invested. It is a way of manifesting their power and the hidden forms of an unstable mind. Madness is also associated with a destructive creativity, submitting the “rationality” to various forms of degradation and “de-reason”:

MACBETH: I am afraid to think what I have done;  
Look on't again I dare not.  
(*Macbeth*, II, 2)

Through madness the king manifests his uncontrolled violence and also his ignoble devices. He paradoxically remains a totalitarian king, being also the slave of his madness. The king is a mixture of guilt which he suggestively transfers to the other characters and grotesque innocence, in the case of Macbeth, or naivety in the case of King Lear. The border between foulness and buffoonery is quite fluid. The buffoonery should not be conceived as a sign of involution, but rather as a complex way of comprehension. The transformation has a profound sense, because the “Fool-King” is able *to see*, to accurately perceive his own nature. Madness becomes a substitute for the King.

In *King Lear* there are several allusions to the King turning into a fool and admitting only the appearance, the “deceiving seeming”. Lear’s comprehension stops at a surface level. He is deceived by the untruthful words of Goneril and Regan, who perform a discourse full of lies, deprived of substance, but invested with a perfidious form of persuasion:

GONERIL: Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;  
Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;  
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,  
No less than life...  
(*King Lear*, I, 1)

On the other hand, Cordelia speaks very much like the fool; she can not assume the form of disguising which the other characters adopt:

CORDELIA: I love your majesty  
According to my bond, no more no less.  
(*King Lear*, I, 1)

From the very beginning Shakespeare mocks at the idea of true kingship: a ruler who is not able to perceive “shallow words” and distinguish them from valuable meanings is nothing but a fool. Throughout the play, Shakespeare will analyze this loss of identity in various ways. Becoming mad, Lear realizes that his previous deeds were loose and deprived of ethical value. Thus foulness implies revelation and self knowledge. Thus the king becomes wise and adopts a subtle linguistic code. The social exclusion brings about spiritual reintegration<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Istoria nebuniei în epoca clasică*, București, 1996, p. 16.

LEAR: You must bear with me:

Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish.

(*King Lear*, IV, 7)

Foolish means here capable of understanding, conscious of his previous mistake. Only in this moment Lear realizes that he trusted an artificial performance of love.

The fool, using a paradigmatically false code, associated with tricks and playful acting, detains a kind of understanding inaccessible to the others. That's why he shocks the others with his subtleties, paradoxically considered as an expression of mental instability and linguistic incoherence. It is very interesting to see that the buffoon, who is in fact the most rational and lucid character, is treated as a fool while the real fools, incapable of understanding their status, are treated as very rational beings. This is in fact the fascination that the theme provides: one never knows who the fool is and who the "coherent mind" is, because the fool's way of thinking proves to be amazingly coherent. Under the mask of a raving discourse, in the fool's mind rules the order and coherence of a secret discourse, which means more than it expresses. Foulness begins where the relation between man and truth becomes obscure. Only there, the true form of foulness reveals its complete significance; in the Shakespearian theatre madness does not receive a negative sense. It is a form of deep knowledge. In the beginning, the buffoon – considered the Fool of the court – helps the king see around him, perceive the hidden but present structure of the world. In the end, the king becomes the Fool, in a subtle identification which reveals the multifarious symbols of this theme. The real madness and the simulated one are mingled together:

LEAR: ... so we'll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues

Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,

Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;

And take upon's the mystery of things...

(*King Lear*, V, 3)

A double game in which each element manifests a dual sense forms the change between the real and the illusion, which is the dramatic sense of madness. Thus, foulness represents for King Lear an alienation of the spirit, which repeals the distinction between true and false categories. Madness becomes one of the forms of rationality, one of its secret forces. Through madness rationality can better reveal itself, because it detains a primitive force of revelation. Madness and rationality form a reversible relation that invests every kind of foulness with its unique coherence and every rationality with its ridiculous truth.

Most of the Shakespearean kings become in the end tricksters or fools, because the buffoon's discourse provides a superior kind of wisdom. The king learns from the buffoon a very complex language which expresses his subtlety.

The theme of "becoming" someone else is dominant in *King Lear*. The characters disguise themselves, they borrow different sartorial signs in order to reveal and also hide their most intimate desires: to be close to those who banished them. Kent changes his clothes to "appear" as someone else, because he cannot bear the "foulness" of the king. The dialogue between the king and the buffoon is very expressive at the level of meaningful words which are reinterpreted in order to suggest a recurrent change of roles. In a world where the kings lose their mind and become "children", the Fool, the most inventive and the wisest character lends his art to the rulers:

FOOL: Then they for sudden joy did weep,

And I for sorrow sung,

That such a king should play bo-peep

And go the fools among.

[...]

FOOL: Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.

KENT: Why, fool?

FOOL: Why, for taking one's part that's out of favour [...]

this fellow has banished two on's daughters,

and did the third a blessing against his will; if  
thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb.  
[...]

FOOL: I am better than you art now; I am a fool,  
thou are nothing...

(*King Lear*, I, 4)

Deprived of his shallow kingship, Lear begins to understand the real value of his existence. Losing his identity, King Lear becomes nothing but a shadow:

LEAR: Doth any here know me? This is not Lear.

Doth Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes? [...]

Who is it that can tell who I am?

FOOL: Lear's a shadow.

(*King Lear*, I, 4)

From now on, madness becomes his dominant characteristic, because he realizes that madness is synonymous with intelligence, in the sense that it reveals the ontological essences which he previously ignored.

Lear's supreme form of madness is attained in his monologues uttered when the tempest fills the whole earth. In the darkness of the night madness and buffoonery are close to each other and the madness of the king makes him understand that he is nothing but a poor human being.

Buffoonery is at the same time a philosophy and a profession<sup>2</sup>. The buffoon's status is ambiguous and contradictory. Because his profession consists in his ability to entertain the others, while his philosophy consists in his telling the truth and in demystification<sup>3</sup>. The buffoon in *King Lear* has no name, he is a generic figure, in a pure state. That's why the identification becomes possible. That's why the buffoon has to turn the others into buffoons:

In *King Lear* foulness represents a deliberate passing to buffoonery<sup>4</sup>:

LEAR: Pray do not mock me:

I am a very foolish fond old man.

(*King Lear*, IV, 7)

The philosophy of the buffoon relies on the fact that he mocks at the established values and finds a sense in each absurdity. Lear believed in the splendor of his majesty. Its reverse side is performed by the buffoon, who opens his eyes. The buffoon does not desert the degraded and ridiculous king: he accompanies him faithfully on the path to madness. The buffoon's language is full of biblical overturned parables<sup>5</sup>. Only the buffoon can take as a mark the subtle disguise which allows him the use of an inventive linguistic code<sup>6</sup>. This spiritual device – the irony – entitles him to create a space where his kingship is overwhelming. This stylish remarks are a sign of supreme creativity. Because his mockery is a form of revealing the hidden truth:

FOOL (singing): Fools had ne'er less grace in a year;  
For wise men are grown foppish  
And know not how their wits to wear,  
Their manners are so apish.

(*King Lear*, I, 4)

The buffoon uses the absurd joke, the dialect and the paradox through a universal "reductio ad absurdum". He appears on the scene when Lear's falling begins. He suggestively disappears at the end of Act three, after he has successively performed his art and after the King had turned into an authentic fool:

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare, contemporanul nostru*, București, 1969, p. 353.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Kott, *op.cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>6</sup> Robert Klein, *Forma și inteligibilul*, București, 1977, p. 250.

FOOL: Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman.

LEAR: A king, a king!

(*King Lear*, III, 6)

The buffoon anticipates the theatre of the absurd.

Shakespeare's kings are dominated by evil and hidden madness. Their obsessive desires bring about their final debasement. Before falling into the abyss, the King who was been deprived of his crown (Richard II) reaches the greatness of King Lear.

The buffoonery is the supreme form of the absolute despise, because through his discourse the fool looks down on a degraded world, which became "nothingness".

In *Macbeth*, one can analyze a form of madness close to that in *King Lear*. The kingship Macbeth attains is but a mockery. He is never properly a king: his royalty is mockery. He is maddened by the lack of security of his own kingship:

MACBETH: Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,  
And put a barren scepter in my gripe...

(*Macbeth*, III, 1)

Macbeth's evil is a kind of lust. An introverted, selfish lust, a centering of reality in self<sup>7</sup>. His madness is the effect of this inner evil which deprives him of peace and stability:

MACBETH: Methought I heard a voice cry: "sleep no more!"

Macbeth does murder sleep.

(*Macbeth*, II, 2)

His obsessive desire is cumulated with overwhelming fear, making him lose his senses. He becomes a mad king who sees things and hears voices, in a state of mental affliction.

Claudius is another interesting figure of madness. His double – the king in the play staged by Hamlet – makes him become mad, revealing his crime. His unstable subconscious activates his uncontrolled anger.

In the Shakespearean theatre, kingship is a theme of high human splendor and tremendous imaginative significance. The King-Buffoon and the Buffoon-King provide a fascinating change of roles, a great scenario in which every character seems to be someone else.

King Lear becomes a tragic character when he realizes and contests the nothingness of his consciousness and the supreme limit he has to face<sup>8</sup>.

The whole life is but a tale, told and played by fools, whose meanings signify nothing for the kings:

MACBETH: Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

(*Macbeth*, V, 5)

The fool is the archetype of the dramatic meanings. He generates the reverse significances of what seems to be perfectly established. The fool unfolds the explicit certainty of facts; he invests the authoritarian, royal insurance with vivid uncertainties. He always perceives the *underground* of a discourse and promotes its subversive ideas. The fool's presence is relevant for dramatic contrasts and counterpoints that are the very essence of theatre. He is the most vividly tensioned figure in the history of theatre.

The fool questions every choice of the king and is the *leader of debate*.

The evolution of the fool as a theatrical character is extremely provocative. At first he is the right hand of the king, the subtle showman who faces the truth without hiding its restless aspects. In the modern drama, he becomes more dependent on his psychological determinacy. He is no longer an *official agent of disturbance* for every one around, the one who gives birth to uncomfortable judgments, but *his own measure of mental disorder*. He becomes more focused on his inner fracture. The body of the mind has many

<sup>7</sup> Wilson Knight, *The Imperial Theme*, London, 1968, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Liiceanu, *Tragicul*, București, 1993, p. 97.

contemporary scar faces. The fool of our times is deeply torn inside. His psychotic and schizophrenic sides prevail and the trickery force he once had is turned into neurotic crisis.

The fool is *the spectrum of the mind of the theatre*<sup>9</sup>, meaning he is the sample of clashing mental identities analyzed in a psychological course and from a dramatic perspective. The fool embodies the complete *upside-downiness* of authority. He evolved from an external observer to an inside analyst. Expressing the dark insides of the mind come to be his form of performance.

The *public resonance* of the fool, his being a royal institution, diminishes in favor of private views.

The foulness has to be judged in accordance to the model of existence and behavior it imposes and also in contrast to a so called given normality. Foulness imposes double thinking and a brand of explicit ambiguity. It emphasizes the multifarious changes of a single thought and word.

One of the most important psychological movements, which greatly influenced the development of drama, was the antipsychiatry. During the Sixties, R.D.Laing's works, published in the same period with those of Foucault and Goffman, focused on the institution of psychiatry and its totalitarian impact on people suffering from mental disabilities. In *The Divided Self*, R.D.Laing has analyzed schizophrenia in relation to the social fragmentation which is an emblem of the modern society<sup>10</sup>. He deeply opposed to the treatment of the mental illness in specialized institutions and promoted a liberal way of healing. His main aim was to open the field of a permissive recovery.

Those submitted to medical reclusion had to be integrated in spaces more open to their socialization. Thus Kingsley Hall was created to emphasize the role of a new kind of medical attendance. The atmosphere in Kingsley Hall and the case of Mary Barnes, a patient going through the process of recovery, inspired David Edgar's play *Mary Barnes* (1978). Edgar's style is totally addicted to the content. The clinical aspect of the writing, the fragmented discourse, the cold notes of the symptoms are the marks of Edgar's appropriation of the subject. Mary is perceived as trapped in the realm of schizophrenia. What Edgar proposes is a casuistic theatre, a theatre of medical observation.

The clinical approach of fundamental psychiatric writings has imprinted the creation of important directors. The work of doctor Oliver Sacks influenced considerably Peter Brook. He adapted Dr. Sack's collection of case histories *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* and created a fragmented performance enacting flashes of mental disorder. The text (known as *The Man Who*) is a sequence of symptoms and manifestations of several aspects of illness: autism, visual confusions, Alzheimer, analysis of different stimuli, breakdown etc. Brook was very much interested in making the audience being *conscious* of the *unconscious sides* through the actors' gestures, words, movements. The inner hidden life is sought in every speechless details. The limits of the identity of foulness is the main topic. *The Man Who* is an accumulation of cases concerning the decadence of normality. The subversive powers of insanity are at high level. Brook's performance piece does not concentrate on the schizophrenia, but on the dysfunctions that, at a certain point, turn someone normal into a problematic ego.

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<sup>9</sup> Serge Martin, *Le Fou, roi des théâtres*, Paris, 2003, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> See also Brigitte Gauthier, *Harold Pinter et les dramaturges de la fragmentation*, Paris, 2002, p.38.