

**“There is more comic value in the natural fool than the licensed fool. To what extent can this be seen in Twelfth Night?”**

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The fool is often seen in Shakespeare’s plays, particularly the “licensed fool” prominent in the Shakespearian era. The job of the licensed fool was not merely to jest, but to speak outside the confines of what was considered “politically correct.” His role was to speak the truth, addressing major themes and setting disillusioned characters back onto track. Feste is Twelfth Night’s licensed fool. The “natural fool,” contrastingly lacks what the licensed fool has in perception, and is an idiot without the ability to see beyond the obvious – Andrew Aguecheek. They both have the comedic purpose of making you laugh, but do this differently: Feste through wit and intelligence; Andrew through stupidity. Their comedic value is the effect that the comedy they create has, whether it is humour or more valuable assets such as tension diffusion and plot progression.

Feste is irony personified- he’s labelled a “fool” but is debatably the most intelligent and observant of the characters. Olivia and Viola recognise this and commend him on it. Olivia remarks how “There is no slander in an allowed fool though he do nothing but rail.” By saying there is “no slander,” she insinuates that a fool speaks nothing but the truth, despite how they may damage someone’s reputation - possibly implying that harming someone’s reputation for the benefit of the truth is their purpose. It is reminiscent of stand-up comedians today: mocking the workings of society and those in power; delivering a down-to-earth viewpoint through witty remarks. Olivia continues with “nor no railing in a known discreet man though he do nothing but reprove.” She would rather confide in a fool than a wise man, as a fool is more likely to speak the truth in an enjoyable way. Viola remarks “[Feste] is wise enough to play the fool, and to do that well craves a kind of wit.” That he has to be “wise” to play the fool suggests that the nature of the licensed fool is to be perceptive. The oxymoron in comparing Feste’s work to a wise man’s highlights the irony in the title of the fool, a comedic contradiction. It shows the value of the licensed fool: important and pivotal characters listen to them (the Shakespearean licensed fool is employed by the upper class). They can influence the plot, as they affect the pivotal characters. The licensed fool’s influence on the upper class can be taken to show the topsy turviness of the Twelfth Night celebrations: the power of the upper class and lower class reversed.

In contrast, the comedy created by Andrew is from his stupidity – his blunders are amusing. Toby describes Andrew as an intellect in languages: “he speaks three or four languages...” Alternatively, “word for word without book” implies that Andrew learnt by heart without understanding and is therefore not an intellect, but a poser.

Either way, Andrew proves himself foolish by displaying his incompetence. He misunderstands the meaning of “accost,” taking it to be Maria’s name rather than its meaning of “woo her,” calling her “Mistress Accost.” When she corrects him with “My name is Mary” he misconstrues this too and goes on to call her “Mistress Mary Accost.” This misinterpretation, the audience laughing at him due to their feeling of superiority, shows that Andrew doesn’t understand his *own* language. There is additional physical comedy in his bewilderment, and the reaction of the others.

Andrew also shows he does not understand “pourquoi,” a commonly known French word meaning “why.” French, a popular language, should have featured in Andrew’s repertoire, and even if it hadn’t (like with Sir Toby), he should have nevertheless understood. Toby asks “pourquoi, dear knight?” to which Andrew answers “What is “pourquoi”? Do, or not do?” He is answering a question

with a question, and this unknowing manipulation of words creates comedy. His comedy is superficial and slapstick; obvious idiocy – once it has passed it is forgotten.

Feste is principally a witty character; through wit he creates satire. When Olivia says “take the fool [Feste] away,” he proposes a challenge: that he can instead prove Olivia the fool. He says “The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother’s soul being in heaven. Take away the fool...” Comedy is created through Feste’s clever remark, however behind this comedy there is deeper purpose: tension diffusion (Feste is in trouble as he was not around when needed) and an admonishment. Olivia has withdrawn from the world, and Feste is reminding her that her mourning is without purpose and that she should be living in the present, thus providing progression from her despair as there is now the potential for her to enter into a relationship.

Feste makes reproving remarks towards Orsino. When a song is requested of him, he sings of a sad lover who died from unrequited love (“slain by a fair cruel maid.”) Feste is mocking Orsino, who would rather be despairing, wooing Olivia fruitlessly, rather than accepting his rejection and moving on. This mockery could descend into physical comedy, Feste making faces as he recites the sombre song, highlighting the jibe at Orsino’s sanity. Feste is not just mocking but trying to make Orsino see the ridiculousness of his actions, contributing to character development.

A Marxist approach to Feste's foolery would be that he is ultimately trying to make money from his interactions, thus why he doesn't confine himself to Olivia's court and takes advantage of Orsino. However, he may not be corrupted by money, still imparting wisdom through his fooling. There is more value in what Feste says than just laughter.

Feste says a lot through songs – as part of his job, he has to “observe their mood on whom he jests.” Thus when singing and playing music (like his song to Orsino), he reveals information about the character to the audience, making him important as he provides insight that, when interpreted, can unveil hidden truths.

At the end, he sings a mournful song about how all feasting days, like the Twelfth Night celebration, must end, and give way to the mundane. In this song he mocks the higher class – “a foolish thing that was but a toy” referring to Andrew’s manipulation at Toby’s hands – and this would be humorous for an Elizabethan audience. This in turn causes Feste to become a licensed fool not just in the play but in reality too, due to how the audience can relate to what he says. However, this could be lost on a modern audience.

Feste is accomplished at twisting the meanings of words, aptly labelling himself Olivia’s “corrupter of words.” He engages in quick repartée with Viola, warping the meaning of her enquiry “dost thou live by the tabor?” (“do you live by playing music?”), deliberately misconstruing it and replying “no sir, I live by the church.” Viola misunderstands (or plays along), and asks “art thou a churchman?” to which Feste states that his house is next to the church. He enjoys playing with the different meanings associated with one word, and his punning arises from this slipperiness of language – “words are very rascals.” Humour is created from his clever creation of confusion, dancing around Viola’s speech and suiting it to his own purpose. Respect can be garnered from an Elizabethan and modern audience due to his quick wit and clever tongue.

As the plot progresses, Andrew becomes a sympathetic character rather than a comedic one. He shows self-awareness when he says “Slight! Will you make an ass o’ me?” His use of “Slight!” (“by God’s light”) punctuated by the exclamation mark shows his strength of feeling at being played the fool. This can create sympathy for Andrew: he is upset and feels he has no hope in trying to gain

Olivia's hand. Toby cruelly shows no sympathy towards Andrew and continues to play him. The extent of manipulation is revealed as Toby says "I have been dear to him, two thousand strong..." - he has been stealing Andrew's money. Though audience empathy can be felt for Andrew, apathy can too - he allows himself to be manipulated, not having the strength of character to stop Toby. In Act 3, Scene 4, dramatic irony is created as the audience watches Toby manipulate both Andrew and Viola into becoming terrified of each other. Toby viciously remarks that "I'll ride your horse as well as I ride you" - further highlighting his remorseless manipulation. (There is also physical comedy in the fencing scene as the audience watches Viola and Andrew dance around each other stupidly, too scared to make the first move). The manipulation of Andrew due to his blundering personality can be taken as too dark for comedy, causing the humour generated by his stupidity to lose its potency.

Whether or not the natural fool contributes more to enjoyment than the licensed fool is down to whether you can understand and appreciate the higher comedy presented by the licensed fool (as an upper class Elizabethan audience would), or whether you more enjoy the low comedy from the natural fool (by merit of being obvious, Andrew's humour is accessible to all classes and audiences, regardless of sophistication). In terms of the story, the licensed fool's comedy has more value as he is a successful admonisher, plot progressor and tension diffuser. The natural fool contributes more to the obvious, token humour, but the licensed fool's comedy to the plot and characters.

Word Count: 1,557