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Cocking up *King Lear*

Samuel Trainor, *Shakespeare Institute*, Stratford upon Avon, June 2002

*He that has ^Fand ^F a tiny little wit,
With a heigh-ho, the wind and the rain,
Must make content with his fortunes fit,
The rain it raineth every day. (KL: 3.4.74-77)*

I'm going to argue, in this paper, that there is at least justification for experimenting with *King Lear* and going beyond the rather sombre and ultimately po-faced performances and readings we've got used to. Central to my argument will be the crucial role of the Fool in the implosive relationship of Lear, Fool and Cordelia. And of course, therefore, the doubling of the roles of the Fool and Cordelia. But I want to move away from the modern model of the two parts played by a woman (first suggested, though not carried through, by Macready's casting of a woman as the Fool in his 1838 revival of the Shakespearean text and the primary thrust of the doubling argument)¹ in favour of the rather more Jacobean perversion of casting Robert Armin as Cordelia: two parts in one; a less than pretty, dirty-minded little comedian as the beautiful and upstanding Queen of France. I want to champion this theory – and more importantly to call for similar casting in future performances – for precisely the same reasons that most critics reject it: because it ironises the drama of many of the pivotal scenes, because it creates all kinds of confusions of gender and sexuality, because it tends to allow the often childish bawdy puns to 'drown the cocks' of the tragedy, because it's wilful bad casting, and because (ultimately) it makes the tragic ending (not just 'feminine,' as Philippa Berry suggests² but) laughable... poor, infirm, weak and despicable.

The theory of the doubling of the roles of Cordelia and Fool³ in the King's Company is often rejected specifically because of the assertion that Robert Armin must have played the Fool. The notion that Armin could play Cordelia is dismissed out of hand. He was too old and too comically conspicuous.⁴ Even the most ardent supporters of the doubling tend towards the notion that The Fool should be played by Cordelia rather than Cordelia by The Fool.⁵ This means that you either propose the post-Restoration practice of casting a woman in both roles, and/or you support the theory that the Globe saw a boy actor take both parts (the persistent use of 'boy' by Lear to refer to the Fool being fuel to this

1 Before Macready, Nahum Tate's Fool-less Tragi-comedy version of *King Lear* had held the stage.

2 Philippa Berry *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings* (London, Routledge 1999)

3 This is first proposed by Alois Brandl (1894) p.179 and Wilfred Perrett (1904). More recently, Thomas Stroup (1961) and Richard Abrams (1987) have articles dedicated to the subject. All of them suggest that the doubling is 'fitting' to the tragedy, rarely noticing just how much 'fitful' comedy there is to be had.

4 See, for example, Ringler (1981) p.183-194; and Foakes (1987) p.50.

5 cf. Abrams 1985. Though (I think rightly) he dismisses H. L. Anshutz's enthusiastic argument that 'the character of Cordelia herself, not just the actor playing her, returns disguised as the Fool.' (366, n.1)

argument).⁶

All of this rests, though, upon retaining the dignity and integrity of Cordelia in performance as visibly and audibly a noble woman, rather than a midget clown (who necessarily absents himself from simple notions of dignity and integrity). Casting is seen, in this light, as a matching of like for like: a perfect ‘fit’. The idea is to mask mimesis; to create an equivalence of actor and role.

I don’t mean to assert that Shakespeare necessarily intends the opposite, merely that the evidence both for doubling and for the casting of Robert Armin as the Fool is strong enough for us to imaginatively experiment with the destabilising interpretations that this poor ‘fit’ could prompt. We don’t need to justify experimental interpretations of Shakespeare on grounds of intention. And playing with gender roles in performances of *King Lear* is nothing new. Lesley Ferris points out that there have been two recent productions which have cast a woman as Lear. In Frankfurt in 1990, Robert Wilson cast Marianne Hoppe in the role and refused to disguise her as a man; and Lee Breuer’s production in 1987 ‘update[d] the script to Georgia in the 1950s with Lear as a Southern matriarchal figure with three sons.’⁷ Compared to this kind of thing, a little male comedian playing Cordelia is small beer.

Let me take you back to the epigraph. This snatch of the wind and rain song is the most powerful suggestion in the text that Armin played the Fool. The part is in some global theatrical sense a reprise of his role of Feste in *Twelfth Night*. Richard Abrams notes the spectral effect:

[it] suggests that Lear’s Fool is not specific to this time and place but floats through the King’s Men’s repertory – an impression heightened by Shakespeare’s failure to provide a history for the Fool who mysteriously originates in Cordelia, so that her act 1 departure robs him of vital substance, causing him to pine away. (1985, 359)

Well, it all depends what you mean by ‘this time and place’. Chronology and the Fool exist in an unstable relationship; the prophecy of Merlin which ensues is proof enough of that. ‘This time and place’ is just as likely to be the Globe in 1608 (or, say, Frankfurt in 1990) as a blasted heath in pre-Roman Middle England. Hence Armin can parody George Puttenham⁸ emulating Chaucer, and the Fool can simultaneously make an anachronistic prophecy of a prophecy.

It’s the uneasy marriage of performer and role which fuels this kind of metatheatrical gag. The performer ‘fits’ the role and ‘fits’ with it. We’ll need to take a closer look at that word later.

6 Huntington Brown, in an entertainingly eccentric essay, (1963) supports the casting of a boy as the Fool. And it is this essay which leads to a similarly diverting little spat between Fleissener and Gard as to the denotation of ‘fool’ in the line ‘And my poor fool is hanged’. Empson had already picked at this ambiguity, of course, but the point to note is how a casting decision affects textual interpretation.

7 Lesley Ferris (1993) 3.

8 George Puttenham *The Art of English Poesie* (1598) ‘an argument for [Shakespeare’s] use of Puttenham is developed by Gary Taylor in ‘Date’, 382-5. The lines there run: “When faith failes in Priestes sawes, [...] Then shall the realm of Albion / Be brought to great confusion.” Foakes (1997) p.268-9 n.79-96

It's a commentator's commonplace to mention the link between Feste and the Fool in this ditty, and to go on to gloss the meaning-carrying lines as something like: 'He that is not very clever must make do with what he's given.' Foakes, in the Arden third edition, ignores line 74 (as if self-evident) and for 76 gives us 'must make his happiness conform to his fortunes'. And Hunter (1972) says that the song 'enshrines the lesson that our wits must be adapted to our fortunes', which is both po-faced and about as clear as mud.

But both of these readings ignore the fundamental importance of the word 'fit'. They assume, in fact, that the word is being used as a noun meaning 'match' (linked to the adjective denoting 'the right size' or 'apt'): as in 'a perfect fit'. If this is the case, then it's certainly unusual. According to the OED, the only usage of 'fit' as a noun in this sense which would pre-date Shakespeare's is from the anonymous early Middle English poem 'The Owl and The Nightingale', where, curiously, it is also coupled with 'wit': 'Mon doth mid strengthe & mid witte,/ That other thing nys non his fitte.' In fact the OED 2nd Edition insists on giving this denotation its own entry ('fit' n.3), only tentatively speculating a possible etymological link to the adjective 'fit', from which 'fit' n.4 ('a perfect fit') is seemingly coined, probably in the 18thC.

In his 1922 edition of the poem, J.W.H. Atkins offers this as a translation: "Man ... contrives, through his strength and sense, that nothing else is a match for him". This would certainly have ironic resonances if Shakespeare or Armin intended it as an allusion. It's not inconceivable, perhaps, that some lapsed homily is being alluded to by both texts. It's unlikely though.

In fact the collocation of 'wit'(s) and 'fit'(s) is a Jacobean cliché.⁹ It appears, in fact, in *King Lear and his Three Daughters* (1605), which is routinely cited as a source text for Shakespeare's version. In a speech of pastoral condescension, Cordella (herself disguised as one) says of the 'country folk' that they 'take on them with such antike fits, / That one would think they were beside their wits!' This is perhaps itself a self-referential comment about the performances of stage-clowns, as we shall see.

But the common idiomatic collocation of 'wits' and 'fits' is first suggested to late Elizabethan London dialect by the title of Copley's *Wits, Fits, and Fancies* (1595). Here, 'wit' and 'fit' are metonymically linked terms for funny stories, rhymes or jokes. This rather collapses the distinction of the words into a rough self-referential synonymy when end-rhymed together. This gives us our first alternative gloss on the epigraph:

1. *'He that has only a funny little ditty, must make content with the rhyme he's given'*

This reading is implosively reflexive. The line endings virtually negate one another and the two lines seem to say almost the same thing. (I'm reminded of the war song 'We're here because we're here

9 A particularly fitting example, given the subject, is to be found in *The Scourge of Folly* by John Davies of Hereford: 'To our English Terence, Mr Will Shakespeare / Thou hadst been a companion for a king, / And, been a king among the meaner sort. / Some others rail; but, rail as they think fit, / Thou hast no railing, but a reigning wit' cit. *Eyewitnesses of Shakespeare* Gamini Salgado (Sussex, 1975) p.30

because...’ and ‘My name is Jon Jonson’). The Fool, like Cordelia, is saying nothing in this reading. And we all know what becomes of nothing.

But the self-referentiality is not limited to the text. In more theatrical terms, we could gloss this as:

2. *‘He who is stupid must make content with the costume and the role of the Fool.’*

If, however, we take ‘wit’ to mean ‘a witty person’, then we could also see Robert Armin, the professional wee comedian, as ‘the tiny little wit’. This gives us another alternative gloss:

2b. *‘He who has a midget fool (i.e. both Lear and Shakespeare), must make content with what he gets.’*

The Fool and Armin are perhaps self-mockingly casting themselves as the physical embodiment of stupidity. But if they are, it’s not without ironic complexity. It’s not Armin or the Fool who have a tiny little wit now, but their owners: Shakespeare and Lear. The Fool actually turns out to be ‘a wit’, whereas his King is stupid. And this brings us to the problematic nature of the performer/role distinction, and the difficulty in attributing authorship. Perhaps a contemporary audience could have heard the jingle as:

2c. *‘He who is stupid but has a witty little clown in his company, must make content with the rhyme(s) he gets.’*

It’s almost as if the Fool is making joking reference to the collaborative authorship of his words. Mary Bly says this on the subject:

Fools did their fooling with an eye to the dramatists’ script, but also with a sense of personal license. Jonson’s *Gossip Tattle* describes the Fool as a character independent of the script: “I would faine see the *foole*, gossip, the *foole* is the finest man in the company, and has all the wit: Hee is the very Justice o’Peace o’ the play, and can commit whom hee will, and what hee will, error, absurdity, as the toy takes him...’¹⁰

Performer and role, author and clown, and the words used to represent them: ‘fool’ and ‘wit’, are brought into an energetic relationship wherever the fool appears. These notions ‘fit’ together like hand and glove, and like combatants. Because there is, of course, another denotation for the word ‘fit’. It can also mean a ‘paroxysm’ or an ‘outburst’, an ‘attack’ or a ‘collapse’. This uncovers the antithetical nature of the word in Modern English. A ‘fit’ is both an act of perfect matching or combining, and an act of violent disjuncture or explosion: it is fusion and fission at once. It’s like one of Freud’s ‘primal words.’¹¹ In fact, like the traditional example of the verb ‘to cleave’, it seems almost to define them.

¹⁰ Bly (2000) p.122 (and p.181 note cit.) Notice the use of the word ‘toy’ punning on the ideas of whim and the Fool’s ‘bauble’ here. The two notions are conflated as if the bauble were an embodiment of his mercurial character (see below). ‘Toy’ also carried, in contemporary usage, the meaning ‘throwaway witticism’ – like ‘wit’.

¹¹ See S. Freud *The Interpretation of Dreams* (trans. Brill 1913)

Meanings ‘fit’ *with* and *against* one another.

Feste, the most infernal quibbler on ‘fool’ and ‘wit’, says this:

[*aside*] Wit, an’t be thy will, put me into good fooling! Those wits that think they have thee do very oft prove fools, and I that am sure that I lack thee may pass for a wise man. For what says Quinapalus? – ‘Better a witty fool than a foolish wit.’ [I.v.29]

Wit and folly are collapsed into a ‘fit’, here. But the interesting thing is Feste’s apostrophisation of the wit he is so sure he hasn’t got, in a ventriloquising performance with his Jester’s *marotte*. This is either wittily ironic, or foolishly deluded. But the point of the quoted dualism is that it means nothing if its parts are integrally obversive: only because ‘fool’ is more polysemously expandable is it superior to ‘wit’ (a fool – artificial – can be witty, but a wit cannot be foolish and still a wit). So Shakespeare and Armin’s apostrophic irony – an irony that dances on their own internal dialectic – can be the natural and the artificial fool’s at once.

Here we stumble upon the central dichotomy of the Elizabethan fool. As William Empson points out, the distinction between *artificial* and *natural* fools stems, linguistically, from the “‘de idio querenda’ new legal procedure under Henry VIII by which one could petition the court of wards for custody of an idiot.” (1951, 117) Basically this refers to the ‘right of attorney’, in cases of mental handicap. But the point is immediately worried by the fact that many professional Tudor jesters – *artificials*, supposedly – were actually legal *naturals*, and it is precisely this which gives the role of fool the licence that characterises it. Paradox upon paradox. What is the difference between the mysteriously wise imbecile and the dissembling wit ‘playing the fool’? Essentially, Armin’s fool is always – even Feste – balanced between the two. Or is he?

This might be a sticking point for a portrayal of Armin. He seems to have been the perfect *artificial*: a scholar of the trade, a paid professional, an intellectual, and so on. For him to be the perfect fool, we need to be uncertain about this. David Wiles comes to the rescue. He suggests that Armin was a midget, and that he was therefore genuinely a *natural* fool.¹²

Armin also had a counter-tenor singing voice. Wiles says: ‘The high singing voice adds... to the sense of Armin’s multiple *personae*, at once elegant and ugly, at once boy and man. [1987: 159] (We should remember that Armin’s mature appearance in the boys’ company production of his own play,

12 Intriguingly, Wiles suggests that references to characters being ‘dogs’ can be understood as indications that the diminutive Armin played the part. A fact which I think might be seen to reach its symbolic peak when Thersites nips at Ajax’s *heels* after being beaten by him like a dog, revealing his own master’s vulnerability. As Robert Weimann shows though, [1991, 108] the doggiest of fool’s parts was probably Kemp’s: Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: ‘I am the dog. No, the dog is himself, and I am the dog. O, the dog is me, and I am myself. Ay, so, so.’ [II.iii.19] This follows the typical iterative pattern of Kemp’s parts: *No, A, apposition / opposition. O, A*, opposition / apposition. Ay, so, so.* (‘So, so’ turns up a lot in foolspcak). The difference here though, is that Kemp may well have been performing *with* a dog and claiming interidentification (Tom Stoppard wittily has Kemp tangled up by his own dog with the leash, ruining his performance, but getting laughs from Queen Elizabeth, in *Shakespeare in Love*), whereas Armin *was* the dog.

The History of the two maids of More-clack was unprecedented.)¹³ This *natural* grotesqueness – as well as contextualising his parodistic bravado, suggesting a genuine seam of humour – was just enough perhaps to put the seed of doubt into the minds of contemporary spectators as to whether a fool like Touchstone in *As You Like It* was ‘a very natural’ or whether he ‘uses his folly like a stalking horse.’

Armin himself was wonderfully equivocal on the subject. As Wiles says:

[*Fool upon Fool*] has as its running theme the distinction between a fool ‘artificial’ and a fool ‘natural’. Armin declares that his book is ‘written by one, seeming to have his mother wit, when some say he is filled with his father’s foppery’, and the phrasing suggests the delicate line that Armin followed in his own fooling. He always leaves the ambiguity open, whether he is a congenital moron, like the subjects of his six sketches, or whether he is merely the artful jester. His skill lay in suggesting that his lunatic foppery might be innate. (1987, 140)

In fact, if there is a *line* – an Aristotelian *golden mean* – then Armin stood with one foot either side of it. His use of the mother / father distinction here is revealing. He is, I think, making a play with Aristotle’s generative matter / form dichotomy: matter (of the child) being *mother’s* and form being *father’s*, hence he could be both at once. But, subversively, ‘mother wit’ recalls Erasmus’s ‘mother folly’. Armin was ever the fool.

Or was he a ‘clown’? ‘Fool’ and ‘clown’ fit together like ‘fool’ and ‘wit’. Consider Touchstone’s encounter with William; he says:

... you clown, abandon – which is in the vulgar, leave – the society of this female – which in the common is woman; which together is, abandon the society of this female, or, clown, thou perishest; or, to thy better understanding, diest; or, to wit, I kill thee, make thee away, translate thy life into death, thy liberty into bondage. I will deal in poison with thee, or in bastinado... [AYLI IV.iii.46-]

This use of the word ‘clown’, as a clear differentiation of the courtly speaker from his rustic foe, is iterated in the persistent dichotomies of the frenchified courtly language and the colloquial anglo-saxon. (One is reminded of the verbal ear-boxing that Terry Eagleton gives to Empson’s condescending theories of the pastoral in ‘The Critic as Clown’). But this is undermined by the fact that – as a performer – the speaker is designated *clown* himself. This is an irony which focuses upon the performer / role distinction as its source, and it keys into the differences between the dialects of the audience in the

13 These kind of details lead Doris Adler (see *The Shakespeare Newsletter* vol.27 no.4, p.30) to make the most direct (if a little humourless) argument for *The King’s Men* casting Armin as Cordelia. She pays particular attention to Armin’s feminising diminutive nicknames: *Snuff*, *Pink* and *Robin*.

balcony and the pit. In the figure of the fool – the irony comes naturally: *clown* is a non-colloquial pejorative (suggesting low rank) but it also has (as Wiles says) ‘a technical value-neutral usage’ which its owner would know better than anyone. The fool is showing himself up as a fool, here; but, as such, he has the last satirical laugh: *clown* he says, is mine to say after all.

The point is, of course, that the *clown* / *fool* dichotomy, dramatised here, is itself ironised. It wittily ‘fits’. Touchstone is talking to himself, and the audience, as much as to William. This fact is highlighted by the use of the word ‘bastinado’, I think. Wiles writes:

Armin prefaces his work (*Quips upon Questions*) with an address to ‘Sir Timothy Truncheon alias Bastinado, ever my part-taking friend’. Armin personalises his slapstick, and we must imagine that in performance he used it like a jester’s *marotte*, endowing it with the voice of his *alter ego*. *Quips upon Questions* makes it clear that the projection of multiple identities is the staple of Armin’s clowning. (1987, 139)

So, it’s the Arminian fool who posits the dichotomy himself: but it’s an easily collapsible one. His foil is a mirror, of a sort.¹⁴

The fact that this is a speech which makes one of the clearest statements in the play of the distinctions between high and low class, court and forest, suggests that its self-deconstruction under the pressure of the tenuous *fool* / *clown* divide is being used by Shakespeare to pre-empt the final atonement. This is characteristic of Touchstone’s totemic centrality in the play, like the Fool’s and Cordelia’s in *King Lear*. The bastinado is a phallus, obviously, and its salience as a copulative instrument in Armin’s arsenal resonates in the context of a sexual struggle for Audrey. The fact that it is therefore both a conjugal and an antagonistic instrument (a *cleaver*, if you like) which finds its way into Touchstone’s mouth, is only fitting if we consider his comment: ‘I press in here, sir, amongst the rest of the country copulatives, to swear, and to forswear, according as marriage binds and blood breaks’ which is, as Empson says, ‘(dropped coolly into the middle of his account of his duelling experience.)’

The bastinado is: a *marotte* is: a miniature version of the Fool is: a phallus. This all seems to ‘fit’. And the phallus is itself the organ which ‘fits’.

Lear’s Fool probably uses his *marotte* or his *bastinado* in between his legs when he delivers his ‘witty’ lines about heads and codpieces (3.2.25-35). This ‘fit’ of the Fool’s throws into a bawdy light all of the references to heads and shelter in the heath and hovel scenes, and therefore, by extension, offers these ironically phallogocentric deconstructions of the play to global interpretation.

Let’s apply this to the epigraph again. Suddenly, a ‘tiny little wit’ could refer to the fool’s *marotte* (a

¹⁴ Allan R Shickman actually suggests that Shakespeare intends the Fool to carry a mirror rather than a *marotte*. ‘The Fool’s Mirror in King Lear’ (*English Literary Renaissance*, 21. 1991) It’s doubtful how convincing this is as an assertion, but – regardless of intention – it’s at least worth trying in performance.

tiny little version of the ‘wit’, a figure which stands in the same relationship with the midget fool as the midget fool does with King and playwright). By extension, of course, this could mean *penis*. (Let’s call this conflation of *marotte* and *penis*, Dick.) This gives us another alternative gloss:

3. *‘He that has a tiny little Dick, must make content with his small endowment.’*

The overtones of ‘property’ in my choice of ‘endowment’ are important, as we will see. Otherwise this is the simplest of the penile glosses. A much more bawdy reading, given the proximity of the hovel and the puns on ‘housing’, might be the following:

4. *‘He that has a tiny little Dick, must make content with an orifice which it fits* (i.e. the anus)

Obviously, the fact that I’m suggesting the casting of Armin as Cordelia has a lot to do with the undertones of anal sex which I’m finding here. The casting of boys as women on the Jacobean stage has always suggested homoeroticism,¹⁵ and in this case it is a mature man in the particularly sexualised role and profession of the Fool.

But Philippa Berry (1999) manages, mercurially, to sniff out the scatological implications of the ‘missing middle’ of Lear’s Britain without the help of this doubling. Her virtuoso argument likens this ‘nothing’, between the two disjointed thirds of Britain, to the anus, and to the female. England is Cordelia is the muddy arse which unmans the failing King of Britain. She doesn’t examine the wind and rain song (strange when you consider the scatological possibilities), but she does suggest the same pun on ‘wit’ in her discussion of the Fool’s egg riddle (1.4.148-52 and 177-9):

The kingdom-as-egg subsequently mutates into a lost ‘wit’ that is now ‘nothing’ (or mad?), with a possible quibble on the white of the egg as well as on ‘wit’ as bawdy slang for the genitals – hinting thereby at the eclipse of both Lear’s manhood and intelligence in relation to a feminine ‘nothing’.
(1999, 153)

But Armin as Cordelia suggests to me that, just as useful as opening up the anal readings of Cordelia, is to read her as standing, rather more simply, for the King’s lost phallus. A penis, as the Fool has already said, is also capable of ‘fitting’ into a (phallic) codpiece.

But there’s a part of the epigraph that we’re yet to unpack. In general terms, the phrasal verb ‘to make content’ would seem in Early Modern English to denote three different things: a. ‘To make do’, b. ‘To satisfy’, and c. ‘To fill’. The three denotations are etymologically cognate, of course. But the conflation of the two transitive meanings, with the further conflation of transitive and intransitive into a

15 In *Shakespeare from the margins* (Chicago 1996: p144), Patricia Parker provides a fascinating, if slightly tenuous, reading of the words ‘ingle’ (meaning ‘catamite’) ‘angle’ and ‘English’ in and around Shakespeare which focuses on the notion of a National homosexual guilt linked to the suspicion of sex between adult actors and the boys hired to play women.

single signifier, would seem to offer to our fourth version of the epigraph a near definitive expression of misogynistic sexual gratification:

4b. *'He who has a tiny little Dick, must 'make content' (both himself and the sexual object) by penetrating the anus'*

But we get the impression that Lear is penetrating nothing, not even the arse of England. If we recall the 'paroxysm' or 'collapse' version of 'fit', then we can perhaps offer this reading:

5. *'He that has an impotent Dick, must put up with its vagaries'*

Crucial to this reading is the fact that it couples the words 'wit' and 'fortune' as signifiers of the penis. (If we assume the elision of a genitive apostrophe in fortune(?)s.) Paradoxically this seems to ally the impotent Dick with the capricious goddess Fortune, hence suggesting a feminisation of the flaccid penis. Which perhaps, in part, might provide back-up to Stephen Greenblatt's denial of the binary sexual model in a Renaissance which saw the female as an incomplete or debased version of the male. (1988 p.88)

But it's not as simple as that. Armin's and Shakespeare's fools seem at once to assert and to undermine the binary distinction. Both versions of gender seem possible:

LAFEU: Whether dost thou profess thyself, a knave or a fool?

LAVATCH: A fool, sir, at a woman's service, and a knave at a man's... I would cozen the man of his wife and do his service... And I would give his wife my bauble, sir, to do her service. [AWEW: IV.v.22-31]

This bawdiness is sticky. Apart from the obvious duplicity of 'service' (sex or employment), there is also the added transitivity ambiguity. Does he mean 'serve for' or 'serve as' a woman or a man? Precisely what kind of sexual roles are being played by the fool (or the knave)? Is he actor or goal? By giving 'his wife my bauble' is he masculating or emasculating her, or himself? And considering that the bauble is also his *alter ego*, which one of them is *he* and which one *she*? Is it this simple?

Only the last question here can be answered easily: no, this simpleton's duplicities are not that simple. Lavatch is being deliberately duplicitous, but in a way that blurs the most fundamental of duplicities: gender. Lavatch, like the FoolCordelia is at once asexual and bisexual.

These foolish 'wits' often have a 'fitting' effect on the sexual dichotomy. Mary Bly (2000) refers to:

the uneasy feeling that any bawdy pun can mutate between female and male bodies. In essence, bawdy puns are curiously simple substantiations of what Jonathan Culler calls 'the inherent

instability of language.’ Whichever binary gender identity one might want to impose, one cannot do it through these puns, as they produce meaning precisely by transgression. (2000, 79)

The yoking of this notion to the difficulties of the transitivity relationship (in Lavatch’s ‘serve’ and the Fool’s ‘make content’) casts another linguistic dimension to the double-trouble of the fool. Transitivity itself has sexual connotations in a simplistic gender schema (male=active, female=passive; male=subject, female=object etc.), and it is precisely this which, again, is being simultaneously invoked and dissembled by the actor / role of fool.

There are two more things to clear up. Firstly, we must insist again on ‘fortunes’ as a plural. The OED has as its seventh denotation of the noun ‘fortune’: ‘a woman in receipt of a fortune’, ‘an heiress’. So, reverting the first line to the original, we can gloss the epigraph as this:

6. *‘He that has and a tiny little wit, must suffer the slings and arrows of his outrageous heiresses’*

Lear has, remember, just claimed that the rain and wind are working in allegiance with his daughters.

Finally, if we add the contemporary denotation of ‘make content’ as ‘settle an account’ or ‘pay off a debt’, we can add a seventh gloss:

7. *‘He that has and a tiny little wit, must settle his account with the division (fit) of his estate (fortunes)’*¹⁶

So, to recap. The Fool’s little ditty can be glossed as:

1. *‘He that has only a funny little ditty, must make content with the rhyme he’s given’*

2. *‘He who is stupid must make content with the costume and the role of the Fool.’*

2b. *‘He who has a midget fool (i.e. both Lear and Shakespeare), must make content with what he gets.’*

2c. *‘He who is stupid but has a witty little clown in his company, must make content with the rhyme(s) he’s given.’*

3. *‘He that has a tiny little Dick, must make content with his small endowment.’*

4. *‘He that has a tiny little Dick, must make content with an orifice which it fits (i.e. the anus)*

16 Here’s a similar foolish yoking of the languages of accountancy and sex: ‘I will content you, if what pleases you contents you.’ *As You Like It* (5.2.126)

4b. *'He who has a tiny little Dick, must 'make content' (both himself and the sexual object) by penetrating the anus'*

5. *'He that has an impotent Dick, must put up with its vagaries'*

6. *'He that has and a tiny little wit, must suffer the slings and arrows of his outrageous heiresses'*

7. *'He that has and a tiny little wit, must settle his account with the division (fit) of his estate (fortunes)*

What this little jingle manages to achieve then, in its 'fitting' little way, is a super-condensed commentary on Lear's absurd tragic predicament. Lear is a King for whom the loss of power, the loss of his favourite daughter, the disjuncture of his kingdom, the loss of his mind, his fool and his nobility are all equivalent to the loss of his erection.

Where Berry reads the threatening presence of the anus in Lear, I read the paradoxically absurd and tragic absence of the phallus. Our readings fit together. Cordelia, with Armin in her costume, is not the anus between the buttocks of Goneril and Regan, but the (standing) Dick between their (kneeling) balls. The fact that Lear cannot get her to respond is the source of his collapse.

But, as A C Bradley would never have put it, can there be any redemption for the old sod? Not, I'd suggest, without his suffering at the hands of a hostile audience. If and when Richard Burbage staggered onto stage carrying the not-so-pretty little Robert Armin in his arms as the body of the (drag) Queen of France, could we blame the youngbloods in the pit for howling not with sympathy but with derision?

But I read this 'Howl' as the moment of Lear's anagnorisis. If Lear is redeemed it is in his metatheatrical revelation. This is always the redemption with which a Tragic hero likes to congratulate himself: he recognises the generic pattern of the Tragedy and therefore transcends to the deified level of the audience. But there's no comfort in it if the Tragedy is so absurd. Lear recognises, perhaps, the implosive hermeneutics of his own play as it implodes. Lear's tragically posthumous copulation, in the word 'fool', of the daughter and the Fool (the inherently copular figure, the one who can bridge the gap 'between cosmos and chaos') might therefore be understood as the moment of reincorporation... too late. The daughter and the Fool are dead, and Lear's cosmic impotence remains.

King Lear is a tragedy of the absurd. It is a play which seeks both the mockery and the empathy of the audience for a spectacle of universal decrepitude and impotence; it is absolutely a play about sex, sexuality and power which seeks to assert the shame of Lear's loss of tenuous phallic potency (embodied in Robert Armin's FoolCordelia) in order to broaden the scope of his shame to encompass those who pillory him.¹⁷

17 For a worthwhile discussion of this subject especially in *King Lear* see Ewan Fernie *Shame in Shakespeare* (2002)

What we're left with is the tableau of a foolish King mourning over his dead daughter's body like the broken *marotte* of the professional clown. A dummy that cannot be ventriloquised. A Dick that won't stand up. Or will it?

'Look, her lips'...

Robert Armin had a beard, of course, and doubtless found it difficult to play dead with Richard Burbage fondling him and trying to take his clothes off. The tragic climax could easily descend into a farce. The point of this essay is to suggest that perhaps it should. Lear's death, whilst tickling his dead, transvestite, fool phallus is capable of being the most movingly absurd and absurdly moving of theatrical events.

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