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"Old fools are babes again": Shifting Perceptions of Folly and Childishness from Mankind *to Jonson*

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It always strikes me as a tender moment, despite all our forms of better knowledge, when Mischief comforts his three subordinate Vices for the pain inflicted on them by Mankind:

> For with his spade, that was hys wepyn,
> New-G[u]ise, Nowad[ays, and] Nought hath [he] all to-betyn—
> I have grett pité to se them wepyn.
> Will ye list? I here them crye. *Clamant.*
> . . . . . .
> Alasse, alasse, cum hether! I shall be yowr borow.
> Alac[k], alac[k]! *Ven[e], ven[e]!* Cum hethere, with sorowe!
> Pesse, fayer babys! Ye shall have a nappyll—tomorow! (*Mankind*, ll. 421-28)

Of course, I always hear that probable pause before "tomorrow" (recognised in this text by the editor's punctuation) as a sly reminder that devils make poor promise-keepers, while there is crude humour in New-Guise's injured "privité" (l. 429) and something more sinister lurking in the droll remedy that Mischief offers Nowadays: "I shall helpe the[e] of thy peyn: / I shall smitt[e] of[f] thy hede and sett it on again" (ll. 434-35). We are never allowed to forget that the venerable principle of the falling-out among thieves applies to devils, too (if it does not, indeed, originate with them). Still, the baby-talk ("fayer babe, ba me!" [l. 430], "Sely darlinge,

ven[e], ven[e]!" [l. 433]) and the physical action that goes with it foster a sympathetic counterpoint to condemnation, somewhat on the principle that even tarantulas have doting mothers. No doubt more pertinent, though in the register of folly entirely, or almost entirely, shorn of menace, is the picture of a "tender ass" (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV.i.25[1]) charming a susceptible Fairy Queen into dotage that mobilises a moment of domestic intimacy; as her minions rally to her bidding, the exotic thrill of Titania's bower fades, however precariously, into the homely harmony of a mortal household:

> *Titania*. What, wilt thou hear some music, my sweet love?
> *Bottom*. I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs and the bones. (27-29)

Bottom and Titania are by definition poised, for an instant, between reality and dream, and on the comic margins, but we find more substantial—usually sharper-edged—versions of grotesque tenderness striking a sympathetic chord throughout the representations of folly on the late-medieval and early modern stage, so the phenomenon arguably calls for formal recognition and exploration. The present essay will necessarily settle for a few highly selective, but I believe telling, examples. We are dealing essentially with two closely interrelated notions. The first is that folly draws fools (or figures of foolish evil) together—as, after all, on the *Narrenschiff*: hence the creation of quasi-familial bonds. The second is that it entails a regression from maturity, a reversion to childish behaviour and postures that, however winning in a superficial way, imply a degradation of full humanity. Obviously, such forms of denigration are highly functional morally, according to the usual double didacticism of the period's drama: while the image exposed is more-or-less crassly negative, it can also be seductively amusing, and, especially when it attracts laughter with an undertone of sympathy, even empathy, it implicates the audience in a mirroring effect. The brood of folly expands exponentially in the reflection.

An often-depicted iconographical joke embeds and abets this process: the representation of two fools (or "loggerheads" or asses) with the caption expressed or implied of "We Three", sometimes with a mirror held up to the spectator. The device was accessible enough for Feste to use it as an introduction to the fraternity, to which he lends his own acknowledged folly, comprising Toby Belch and Andrew Aguecheek: "How now, my hearts? Did you never see

1 Shakespeare's works are cited from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. Evans, Tobin *et al*.

the picture of 'we three'" (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II.iii.16-17).[2] The virtual anti-masque of their antics, which of course enfold further participants, illustrates the formation by contagion of an inverted mirror-image of a decorous household—Folly's family indeed, which will receive chastisement, even if the titular head of that family retains his liberty. He remains free, if not quite to spread his quality throughout the world, at least to catalyse its collective manifestations, to pinpoint its component households. So Feste insinuates to Cesario-Viola:

> Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines every where. I would be sorry, sir, but the fool should be as oft with your master as with my mistress. I think I saw your wisdom there. (III.i.38-41)

The convoking of fools is neatly epitomised in the stage-action probably cued by Jaques' song in *As You Like It*, with the difference that the would-be conjurer who occupies the very centre of the circle, like the spectator in "We Three", does not appear to count himself within it (being woefully ignorant of Derrida's post-structuralist critique of such foolish illusion):

> If it do come to pass
> That any man turn ass,
> Leaving his wealth and ease
> A stubborn will to please,
> Ducdame, ducdame, ducdame!
> Here shall he see
> Gross fools as he,
> And if he will come to me.
> *Amiens.* What's that "ducdame"?
> *Jaques.* 'Tis a Greek invocation to call fools into a circle. (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II.v.50-60)

(By the way, has it been proposed—almost certainly, but I have not seen the suggestion—that the elusive "ducdame", however extravagantly Hellenistic, or Welshified, its pronunciation, would in any case have echoed with "dukedom"? Jaques will desert the Duke, after all, when the latter recovers his.)

Mirrors make their way on stage in connection with foolish ways beginning at least as early as John Redford's *Wit and Science* (1530-48), a play which also identifies the protagonist's eventual attainment of maturity with his incorpora-

2 Still useful is the gloss on II.iii.20 by Furness in the New Variorum ed. (p. 17). The famous image entitled "We Three Loggerheads" (held by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust) is available online at <http://artuk.org/discover/artworks/we-three-loggerheads-54233#> (accessed 25 May 2016).

tion into a proper well-regulated family. Before this, his alienation is marked by his acquisition of a most improper one, as he becomes the likeness and virtual brother of Ignorance, foster-child of Idleness. Such are the relations implicitly put in place as Idleness drives off Honest Recreation from the sleeping (and snoring) Wit, puts her "marke" (l. 432) on him by blackening his face, and whistles the fool Ingnorance onstage (against his mother's will) for his naming lesson. The latter episode, beneath its surface of mere farce, focuses the key question of identity. Idleness marks both characters linguistically as her symbolic offspring, asking one, "How, Wit, awake! How doth my babey?" (l. 427), and introducing the other as "my boye" (l. 440). Having won Ingnorance's assent to the question, "Is he not a foole as well as thow?" (l. 581), Idleness proceeds to the exchanging of their coats—"won[e] foole keepe another! / Geve me this, and take thow that brother" (ll. 582-83)—then to the thorough conjuring of her "deere … unto a starke foole" (ll. 586, 591), so that he appears to Experience as "Ingnorance, or his likeness" (l. 719). Wit's degradation thus entails forms of familiarisation by association, and by the point where the glass of Reason reflects that likeness to him, rather than the image of his true portrait, the stage business evokes the established pattern of two fools in search of a third. This is what gives an ironic edge to his dissociation of his degraded features from those of the spectators, as they are invited to contemplate at once their own no-doubt laughing faces and their presumably superior moral position:

> How looke ther facis heere rownd abowte?
> [*He holds the mirror up to the audience.*]
> All faire and cleere, they, ev'rychone;
> And I, by the mas, a foole alone—
> Deck't, by Goges bones, like a very asse!
> Ingnorance' cote, hoode, eares—ye[a], by the masse! (ll. 808-12)

Redford's use of the mirror-device here suggests that the presence of spectators to supply a missing third term to the staging of "We Two" may be a standard part of the joke when fools are drawn together in the early modern theatre, as they often are. In *Clyomon and Clamydes* (*c.* 1570), two cowards, the Vice Subtle Shift (disguised as Knowledge) and Bryan sans foy (an enchanter), make common cause; Shift takes the audience into his confidence, speaking of Bryan:

> Gogs bloud was euer seene such a iolt-headed villaine as he,
> To be so afraid of such a faint-hart knaue as I am to see?
> Of the fraternitie, quoth you? birlady its a notable brood. (627-29)

But such confidence hardly carries very far, given its source: the complicity of Vice-figures with the audience is always double-edged, and the dangerous outward edge tends to prevail when the proliferation of vices is evoked. For where does it stop? The assurance that the degraded and the ridiculous are isolated on stage is contradicted by the evidence that they spawn a "notable brood".

There is little, if any, tenderness in all this, given the minimal emotional stakes attached to clowns and allegorical types, although Redford's have their deeper moments. In any case, similar mechanisms produce very different effects in, say, *King Lear*, where they tend to be under-recognised by criticism, despite the play's insistent reshuffling of the players along familial lines. To begin with the formal embodiment of folly, the Fool's initial position in the royal household presumes the sort of oblique and precarious integration, but integration nonetheless, that is suggested by the well-known portrait of Henry VIII's family including Will Somers. The oblique position of the Fool in *King Lear* is figured onstage by his introduction after that household has begun the first of several successive and futile attempts to forestall its disintegration, and by his particular link with the key member of the family as it was:

> *Lear*. … But where's my Fool? I have not seen him this two days.
> *Knight*. Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the Fool hath much pin'd away.
> *Lear*. No more of that, I have noted it well. (I.iv.71-75)

From my point of view here, which I hope may enable us to hear some very well-known speeches with new ears, the subsequent functioning of the Fool gains force from both the tradition of folly's familiarisation—insistently recalled by the epithets of "boy" and "nuncle"—and from a succession of mirror-games. Fundamental to the dynamic are the Fool's notorious demonstrations of Lear's (self)-degradation to his own childish level, following his inversion of the family hierarchy; the inevitable starting point is the proliferation of the "brood", already signalled by the Fool's complaint that "great men" and "ladies" (I.iv.152, 154) are giving him competition:

"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."
Lear. When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?
Fool. I have used it, nuncle, e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers. For when thou gav'st them the rod and put'st down thine own breeches,
[*Sings*.] "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." (166-78)

This makes a resounding follow-up to Goneril's self-interested affirmation that "Old fools are babes again, and must be us'd / With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abus'd" (I.iii.19-20).

As for the "We Three" effect, it is all but explicitly put in place by the stage business by which the Fool—talking down to Lear as "my boy" (I.iv.137)—shows him the "difference between a bitter fool and a sweet one" (137-38):

That lord that counsell'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. (140-47)

The next scene serves to complete the tableau by making it dynamic. After a reminder of the essential structure of the spectacle ("thou wouldst make a good Fool" [I.v.38]), the Fool draws in the audience through direct address: "She that's a maid now, and laughs at my departure, / Shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter" (51-52). The obvious obscenity targeting the silly young girls who are amused by his antics arguably carries universal admonitory weight, for spectators are likely, I suspect, to have registered a resonance with the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matt. 25: 1-13)—another case of associative extension. Shortly afterwards, the Fool gives the striking image of Kent in the stocks, which makes of Lear an outraged spectator, concluding his lesson on the fidelity of fools, as opposed to knaves, with a backhanded compliment associating the king's two loyal followers:

Kent. Where learnt you this, Fool?
Fool. Not i' th' stocks, fool. (II.iv.86-87)

Thereafter, the tableaux representing fools multiply and compound—with the addition of Poor Tom, with Lear's arraignment of Goneril and Regan before the Fool as judge, and with the pathetic spectacle, interpellating Edgar as witness, of the key figures of blind and mad folly reunited. The cumulative effect is to tip the balance of sympathy decisively in favour of associative folly, not just inverting the moral paradigm inherited from the earlier drama, but actually causing the most profound, because ambivalent, tragedy to emerge from it. For it is arguably the perception of this inversion that guarantees the impact of the widely perceived paradigm of Christian folly, redemptive suffering, but that also keeps the latter from being the whole story.

The inversion is the more apparent because it is counterpointed by the degrading association formed among the play's worldly wise characters—Goneril and Regan, plus, of course, Edmund. They may finally fulfil the Fool's prediction about "knaves" in a way that illustrates a "falling out among thieves". But before arriving at that self-destructive destination, they are drawn together through forms of behaviour associated with vice and folly, though in subtly psychologised ways that at least sporadically attract the spectator's comprehension verging on sympathy. Edmund's pitiless plotting in itself is redolent of Vice-figures, as has been much discussed, but less often noted is the pitiful folly of his enterprise, especially as it entails a childish and futile plea, beyond what he is willing to acknowledge, for the affectionate recognition of his father; his self-wounding becomes emblematic in this regard: "Look, sir, I bleed" (II.i.40). A similar dimension lurks in the ambivalent and unstable alliance of Goneril and Regan, conditioned and catalysed as it is by their father's preference for Cordelia: "He always lov'd our sister most" (I.ii.290). It is the latter who, having been the onstage spectator of the childish jealousy enacted in their love-speaking—a spectacle then sealed by their rebukes of her disobedience—refuses to be drawn into the foolish tableau of "We Three":

I know you what you are,
And like a sister am most loath to call
Your faults as they are named. (269-71)

But it is above all the enactment of their emotional frustrations and jealousies through sexual entanglement that divorces Edmund, Goneril and

Regan from their respective families and forms them into a parodic one, which implodes. The sisters' epitaph, as delivered by Edmond, pushes as far towards pathos as possible folly's capacity for self-delusion:

> Yet Edmund was belov'd!
> The one the other poison'd for my sake,
> And after slew herself. (V.iii.240-42)

The effect is the more striking because he now associates his being, and non-being, with them—"all three now marry in an instant" (229)—whereas he had prided himself on remaining aloof as a mere spectator, gazing down at two fools for love:

> To both these sisters I have sworn my love;
> Each jealous of the other, as the stung
> Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
> Both? one? or neither? (IV.vii.55-58)

In fact, it is apparent that Goneril and Regan have become the key to his legitimacy, willy-nilly, and as more than the new-made Earl of Gloucester ("Yet Edmund was belov'd !"). As for the sisters themselves, the wilful degradation of their lofty rank and precious dignity that they incur in quarrelling like schoolgirls over a flashy young man virtually turns Goneril's words back on both of them: it now appears that "old babes are fools again".

It would be possible to extend this survey of associative folly to numerous later texts that flaunt their roots in medieval dramatic tradition. On the tragic side, *The Changeling*, by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, comes most immediately, and insistently, to mind, with its concluding (de)formation of an infernal family, Beatrice and DeFlores, to which Vermandero admits belonging—"We are all [in hell], it circumscribes here" (V.iii.164)—but from which Alsemero distances himself in terms that purport, more or less convincingly, to recreate a proper one: "Sir, you have yet a son's duty living, / Please you, accept it" (216-17). In the Jacobean and Caroline drama, in fact, it seems to be tragedy and tragicomedy that take most readily to exploiting the potential of this set of devices to combine, as in the early drama, ironic humour with deadly spiritual menace.

By contrast, I would like to close this cursory survey with an afterword underscoring the primordial importance in Ben Jonson's comedies of folly as a

quasi-familial and childish affair. Without such precedents in precursor dramaturgy, which his active moral professions regularly throw into meta-dramatic relief, Jonson would not have been able to count on audiences to read the theatrical shorthand behind his complex and shifting patterns of gulls, gullers and gullers gulled. From the opening fart (threatened or delivered) with which *The Alchemist* introduces the "venture tripartite" (I.1.135)—for Doll makes an apt *common* denominator even as she appeals for peace in their "republic" (110)—to the serious funny business of Volpone's multiply deformed household (which purports to have its complement of three without him), to the noisiness plaguing Morose in *Epicoene* and the piggishness pervading *Bartholomew Fair*, both denizens and outsiders—all these gambits (and more) evoke the infantile. In turn, they form part, if not the core, of the raw material that fuels the quasi-familial formation, deformation and reformation constituting the essential mechanisms of the comic action.

That action, in several Jonsonian cases, may be visualised as a ripple effect, spreading folly outward through a series of concentric circles (or, as the French perhaps better expresses it, *con-centriques*). Its ultimate destination, is, of course, the audience, implicitly or explicitly— the latter notably in *The Alchemist*, where the ill-gotten gains are to be shared out (if the audience is gullible enough to be drawn into the illusion). By such means, the foolish community expands exponentially, indeed infinitely, as Ecclesiastes (I: 15) would have it, not to mention Erasmus's *stultitia*. So much is hardly news. But the effect gains impact from what is arguably a technical innovation on Jonson's part: his creation, through dynamic character groupings, degroupings and regroupings, of a meta-allegorical mise-en-abyme, a triangular structure comprising the very principles of gulling, of being gulled and of observing both with censorious, amused and self-deluding detachment. Characters define that structure by coming and going, changing places, gaining and losing within it. The result amounts to the tableau of "We Three" writ large, and with the spectator "always already" inscribed within its changefulness, complicit despite himself. For Jonson, unlike Jaques, and probably through more truly melancholic spectacles, had obviously read his Derrida.

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