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"A shrewd knave and an unhappy": The Fool in All's Well that Ends Well

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The Status of Shakespearean Fools

According to Juri Lotman's typology of culture, a great divide separates symbolic and syntagmatic models of society. The former, medieval society, is characterised by a strong sense of hierarchy, according to which individuals are worthy only so far and so long as they occupy a position in the hierarchical scale. The latter, modern society, is marked by greater consideration for the biological person whose social existence is no longer linked to any hierarchical status.[1] Starting from this division, which of course has no pretension to being chronologically precise, we can try to define the position and the stature of the court-fool.

The fool works at a king's court because the king wants to be amused, or wants to divert the "evil eye" from his sacred person. The fool is thus called from the outer world into the inner world, from the land of darkness into the light, from a chaotic reality into *the* order. A person is asked to play a role: that of the king's jester. Those who come from the mobile world outside,

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1.   See Lotman. In the first part of the present article I make use (with changes) of some paragraphs from a previous work of mine, "Playing the Fool".

from the liminal culture of the anti-model, are asked to live in an immobile world, that of the model and of the static hierarchy.[2] And to the outside they still belong, even when acting in the inside, still bringing with themselves the legacy of their origin. Part of this legacy is the continuous harping on the body, on its physicality and on sexuality. If *order* is the epitome of what is high, closed, inside, immobile, finished, ordered and spiritual, its contrary—*disorder*—is made up of what is low, open, outside, mobile, unfinished, disordered and bodily.[3] Moreover, the two polarisations are accompanied by further contraries connected to what is serious/comic, wise/foolish, officially true/extra-officially real, respectively.

However, once inside the high space of the court, the fool's chaotic significance is subjected to the influence of the power of symbolic society: his freedom is a sign of the power which calls him to life; his liberty finds expression through and is limited by the licence given by authority. If this licence is withdrawn, the court-fool is no longer himself and has to go back to the world from which he came. He neither belongs to the symbolic model, nor has any place in the hierarchy: he is accepted by this same hierarchy because the king wants a sort of speaking and tumbling toy, and a comic double of his royal person. The bauble and the coxcomb are comic copies of the king's sceptre and crown.[4]

So the court-fool is at the same time at the top and the bottom of the social scale, yet cannot be considered part of it: when his licence is revoked, the fool is sent back to the world of prostitutes and petty crime, back to the roads and the market-place. (Considering Shakespeare's plays, it is not difficult to see Pompey in *Measure for Measure* and Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* as such displaced fools.)

According to Robert Armin's division, fools can be considered either natural or artificial, but in Shakespearean drama it is hard to distinguish between the two. Armin himself writes that Will Sommers was "the Kings naturall iester",[5] but the episodes he narrates from Sommers' life reveal him as an artificial fool rather than a natural one. In practice, many people put on the mask of folly in order to earn their living at court, thus creating a first level of simulation. And it is at this point that other cultural cross-currents meet in the figure of the court-fool, the tradition of carnival buffoons and of marketplace players being grafted onto the insane children of nature (or onto those who feign a degree of lunacy).

2. See Corti.
3. Cf. Corti, pp. 14-15.
4. See Duvignaud.
5. Cf. Armin, sig. E`.

The clerical condemnation of *histriones* and their exclusion from the Christian community also combine to enrich a figure who lives outside society, far from any accepted norm, blamed and feared because of both his behaviour and his possible connection with supernatural powers. All this is summed up in the typical costume of court-fools: the "disorder" of the motley colours; the bauble as the sceptre of a nowhere bordering on an everywhere, and as a reminder of an excessive sexuality (the sin of lechery); the pig's bladder as the icon of a foolish mind, and simultaneously of the sin of gluttony; the coxcomb or the cap with ass's ears as the parodic crown of the king of the feast, and, together, as a link to two animals recorded in the Gospel as being near Christ at the time, respectively, of his death and birth.[6]

The humanistic view of the fool—that of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* rather than Brant's *Narrenschiff*—evaluates the figure as the mouthpiece of truth. Fools, says Erasmus, can provide

> the very thing a Prince is looking for, jokes, laughter, merriment and fun. And, let me tell you, fools have a gift which is not to be despised. They're the only ones who speak frankly and tell the truth, and what is more, passionately the truth . . .. The fact is kings do dislike the truth, but the outcome of this is extraordinary for any fools. They can speak truth and even open insults and be heard with positive pleasure: indeed, the words which would cost a wise man his life are surprisingly enjoyable when uttered by a clown. (Chap. 36)

But it must be emphasised that hierarchical society permits the fool's truth precisely because it is told by someone who this same "wise" society considers to be a fool. The truth of the fool's discourse cannot be utilised to change the situation because, as Michel Foucault (pp. 10-12) reminds us, it has no value: it belongs to the time-off period of games, and the sender of the message is licensed only so long as his satirical comments do not intrude into the sphere of action. "Truth's a dog must to kennel", as Lear's Fool laments (I.iv.109). As Richard Hillman writes, "his [the Fool's] marginality simultaneously signifies the limits of his power" (p. 15).

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6. Zucker observes that "The clown. . . plays the role of the outsider, the one who is outlandish in costume, mores, and manners" (p. 315). For a more detailed study of both court- and stage-fools, see Welsford, Willeford, and Billington. Among the many articles on the subject, see particularly that of Evans for its stress on the actor/character and stage/audience relationships.

Games have their own rules, which do not affect the level of reality. When the game is over, the players resume their daily activities: the fool, however, who constantly signifies play, is not allowed a proper time for serious activity. He is allowed no activity at all outside the game, unless he steps out of it. But in this event the fool turns into a man, and is therefore useless to the court games. While playing the game, the fool enjoys his particular licence to address anybody, anywhere. His word is tolerated as a warped comment on reality. And it is exactly within the boundaries of his own licence—nearly always on the borderline of being whipped—that the fool has to make a profit from his discourse.

Shakespeare, once again, is ready to exploit this global and multi-faceted tradition when building his fools, drawing from both his own cultural history and the previous (and also contemporary) dramatic tradition in which the Vice was the leading role of many plays.[7] In the plays Shakespearean fools live as striking dramatic outsiders, for at least three main reasons: first, because they are the heirs of a culture of exclusion; secondly, because they are given no power to act on the events of the plot; thirdly, because they are meta-characters mediating between the play and the audience through what is their specific power: their discourse.

Lavatch in All's Well That Ends Well

By the time he wrote *All's Well That Ends Well* (1603-4[8]), Shakespeare had already given life to several fool characters—from Launce to Launcelot Gobbo, from Touchstone[9] to Feste—and, starting around 1599-1600, he had a new clown in the Chamberlain's/King's Men. Robert Armin had replaced Will Kempe, and the playwright had to tailor his personage to both the physical aspect and the performance qualities of the new actor. Besides all that, this is the period in which, after *Hamlet*, Shakespeare wrote the so-called "problem plays", in which he inserts fool figures reluctantly. In the unsettled and disordered societies of both *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, there is no room for a court fool, and only a Pompey and a Thersites find a place for their decayed humour and

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7. For the main differences between Vice and fool, see Bourgy; also Mullini, *Corruttore di parole*, pp. 75-80.
8. According to Hunter, ed., p. xxv.
9. Wiles, p. 145, is convinced that this role was played by Armin and not by Kempe. I agree with him, not accepting the arguments of Nielsen in favour of Kempe's longer staying with the Chamberlain's Men. Cf. Mullini, *Il fool in Shakespeare*, pp. 27-29. See also Sutcliffe.

cynicism, respectively. A fool proper—*the* Fool—will arrive only with *King Lear* some time later, but he will leave the play "at noon" (III.vi.83), nearly recognising his inefficacy in solving his king's tragic troubles. In the court of Rossillion, where *All's Well That Ends Well* is largely set, an intermediate figure is to be found: Lavatch is a "leftover", so to say, of a previous political and social order, an antiquarian relic hardly tolerated in the new unstable situation. Power has passed from the deceased count to a woman—the Countess; Bertram, the heir, does not want to get married according to his king's and his mother's wishes and thereby threatens to disrupt the socio-political system. When forced to marry Helena, he leaves her "unbedded", a means of stressing that Rossillion will have no legitimate lord in a future child of his. Actually, there will be no child begotten of Bertram and Helena—until, of course, the comedic ending of the play, after the bed-trick, which reverses non-comic expectations about the plot.

Lavatch has survived his own lord and seems out of joint in the new *milieu*. He still lives inside the main action but is ready to step out of its borders, as little involved as possible, since his function as stage fool makes him a stranger in the court, an external element to which the court gives a limited licence but, paradoxically, a powerful voice with which to comment on events.

Bitterer than his "brethren", Lavatch often works as a servant and a messenger for his lady, but it is to his comments that Shakespeare gives the power to create the character, so that, as he is part of a "bitter" story, his word mirrors the most disquieting aspects of a decaying world. His ubiquitous word is condemned by the Countess in the last scene of Act IV, when, after the fool's exit, she comments on Lafew's judgement of Lavatch:

> *Lafew.* A shrewd knave and an unhappy.
> *Countess.* So 'a is. My lord that's gone made himself much sport out of him; by his authority he remains here, which he thinks is a patent for his sauciness; and indeed he has no pace, but runs where he will. (IV.v.60-4)

But already, at the beginning of the play during their first on-stage encounter, the Countess deplores her fool's behaviour, calling him "knave" rather than "fool", his actions "knaveries", and stressing his intrusions into the life of the court:

> What does this knave here? get you gone, sirrah. The complaints I have heard of you I do not still believe; 'tis my slowness that I do not; for I know you lack not folly to commit them and have ability enough to make such knaveries yours.(I.iii.7-11)

Later in the play, the Countess admits to her own role as a lady "playing" with a fool during her time-off activities,[10] thus recognising Lavatch as part of the court's games, unable to act on the serious events taking place there: "I play the noble housewife with the time,/To entertain it so merrily with a fool" (II.ii.54-55). She is nonetheless ready to dismiss him soon afterwards, tired of the game itself: "An end, sir! To your business" (57).

Lavatch's "sauciness" mainly concerns bawdy, but this is not by chance, since the play's whole action focuses on sex: lawful sex denied to Helena after the marriage but got by her through the bed-trick, and sex sought by Bertrand from Diana in Florence. The fool's word cannot but reproduce, at his highly sophisticated or debased level, what he sees and perceives around him—that is, decadence—and echo the main themes of the plot.[11] Actually, the fool's commenting power transfers the atmosphere of the play to his own level: Bertram's unwillingness to marry Helena is contrasted with Lavatch's desire to marry Isbel (I.iii); Bertram's contract with Diana—that is sex outside marriage, adumbrating cuckoldry—is already ambiguously foreshadowed in the fool's speech to the Countess in I.iii, especially when Lavatch declares that he hopes "to have friends for my wife's sake… for the knaves come to do that for me which I am aweary of" (I.iii.38-41). In his words, the fool anticipates both Bertram's "weariness" and his search for illicit sex, and Shakespeare gets his fool to say that he is "A prophet I, madam" (I.iii.56) as an answer to the Countess's reproach: "Wilt thou ever be a foul-mouth'd and calumnious knave?" (55). When, later in III.ii, he brings Bertram's letter to the Countess, Lavatch anticipates its content by his own arguments about his allegedly decaying love for Isbel, so that when his mistress asks him, "What have we here?", he answers only, "E'en that you have there" (III.ii.17-18), signalling a striking parallel between the two "love stories".[12]

These aspects of the play, and of the fool's role in particular, have been seen as simply parodic of the main action.[13] G. K. Hunter, the Arden Shakespeare

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10.   Here I make use of the concepts of "time-on" and "time-off" activities as introduced by Goffman.

11.   I disagree, therefore, with what Goldsmith writes about him: "He is unlike Shakespeare's other fools in that his role bears no significant relationship to the play's meaning" (p. 60).

12.   I had already jotted down these observations (in *Corruttore di parole*) when Roark's article was published. Roark, besides analysing insightfully many points of the play, also stresses the relevant role of Lavatch's words, especially their anticipation of complex moments of the plot. Some of his conclusions are very similar to mine.

13.   Bennett maintains that many of the fool's comments are due to "parody", as "preparation" of the action to come. This view of Lavatch is strongly biased by the critic's opinion that he is "a shallow

editor, though insisting on parody, speaks of its function as "the addition of [a] parallel [perspective]" to the main plot, with "disintegrating effect" (p. xxxv, n. 1). In my opinion, however, even if the purpose of the fool's words in the previously quoted instances is parodic, this stems from his ability in observation and his capacity for foreseeing events. In the case of Lavatch, I would accept the words "parody" and "parodic" only if they are taken to point to Shakespeare's use of this character as a real "genius" of "analogical probability", not only to control the audience's responses, but also, on the contrary, to highlight the prophetic power of the fool's discourse.[14]

Even in his interaction with Parolles (II.iv) Lavatch's word is "prophetic". Once more called "knave", the fool very promptly answers:

> *Clown.* You should have said, sir, "before a knave th'art a knave"; that's "Before
>   me, th'art a knave". This had been truth, sir.
> *Parolles.* Go to, thou art a witty fool; I have found thee.
> *Clown.* Did you find me in yourself, sir, or were you taught to find me?… The
>   search, sir, was profitable; and much fool may you find in you, even to
>   the world's pleasure and the increase of laughter. (II.iv.28-35)

Here Lavatch seems to foresee Parolles' destiny in the future of the play, with the ambush in Italy and the laughable episode of which he is victim. But at the same time, the fool's comment on Bertram's disreputable friend is totally negative, since Lavatch unmasks Parolles' knavery. Being a mirror of society, the fool imitates the world he lives in; therefore, he is a knave in front of a knave only because he reflects what stands before him. The fool, from his privileged standpoint of "le spectateur non-concerné qui énonce la moralité du jeu" (Klein, p. 18), is able to observe and interpret the society he lives in, even if his word is still powerless to change events.

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malcontent, seeing only the surface and understanding nothing, an utterly superficial observer" (pp. 345-46). By contrast, I consider Lavatch's verbal behaviour as deriving from his deep, though detached, foreknowledge of events, from his power of commentator as "fou glossateur" and "fou démystificateur" (Klein, pp. 18-19). In his volume devoted to the clown figure, Starobinski entitles the first chapter, "Le double grimaçant" (p. 7), thus interpreting the character as a powerful instrument of self-knowledge. Snyder also stresses the fool's power of mirroring his surroundings ("'The King's not here'", p. 22).

14.   Cf. Pearce.

Lavatch as "corrupter of words"

Lavatch has been defined in a variety of ways. Hunter talks of his "boorishness" and understands his discourse as bawdy yet theological (p. xxii)[15]; Lawrence calls him "a thoroughly unsavoury fellow", whose comedy is limited to "poor comic relief" and to "vulgar cynicism" (pp. 69, 70). As already noted, Bennett sees him as "an utterly superficial observer", while Evans underlines that he is "more cynic than jester" (p. 148). Brooke also points to the fool's "cynical bluntness" (p. 81).

I find it strange that, among the many pages I have re-read on this occasion, very few critics accept Shakespeare's judgement on Lavatch as "A shrewd knave and an unhappy". Robert H. Goldsmith simply defines these words as "apt" (p. 59), while David Scott Kastan stresses the "unhappiness" (p. 587), the melancholy of the figure, thus refraining from any disparaging attribute and aligning himself with Shakespeare's own words. But it is Geoffrey Hutchins, an actor and not an academic, who performed this fool for the first time in 1981 with the RSC under the direction of Trevor Nunn, who fully subscribes to the playwright's words, which are—in his opinion—"the most accurate description of the character" (p. 89).

However, I think that what is relevant in the character of Lavatch (as it is for all fools, actually, in various degrees), beyond any description of the modes of his wit, is the use he makes of language, for, as stated above, his influence *qua* fool on the plot is limited by his licence. In a previous study devoted to Shakespearean fools, I labelled Lavatch's discourse as "reticent" because of the rhetorical strategies he employs in his comments and transactions with the other *dramatis personae*.[16] This fool defines himself as "a poor fellow" (I.iii.12), a phrase which allows a comparison with Pompey in *Measure for Measure* (who declares that he is "a poor fellow that would live" [II.1.220]). Pompey does not belong to a noble family, is no fool proper, is degraded to the despicable role of bawd and pimp in the world outside order. Lavatch, as already noted, lives in a court whose head—the count—has been dead for some time: he is just tolerated there as a reminder of

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15.   Lavatch's theological aspects are also stressed by Simonds, pp. 47-49.

16.   Brooke, pp. 75-76, uses this same word, "reticence", to define *All's Well That Ends Well* as a whole. After commenting on the "uniquely bare language which excludes decoration" in the play, he shows how the play displays a special kind of "naturalism" that "is not simply bluntness. It has the quality too of the reticence of natural speech"; he adds, "It follows that reticence is as characteristic of the play as bareness is of language".

the past. As I said, he is a "relic", reluctantly kept by the Countess. Things are changing in the society of Rossillion and seemingly running towards disaster: in this situation Lavatch survives, is "a poor fellow", observes the changes and comments bitterly upon them. In such a society it would be difficult to provoke pure laughter and sweet mirth, because the times of "much sport" have gone; the fool's discourse reflects these changes, the decay of old values, and, accordingly, he is often named "knave" rather than "fool".

Despite being reproached by the Countess at the very beginning of the play for his "knaveries", Lavatch does not hesitate to externalise what he thinks, but he proceeds by riddles and paradoxes—rhetorical screens able to protect him from whipping and, simultaneously, to allow him to vent his sour and prophetic perception of reality. He claims to have "an answer will serve all men" (II.ii.13), but soon after he paraphrases his own words by making reference to the body (and, we can imagine, also by using bodily language): "It is like a barber's chair that fits all buttocks" (16). When the Countess continues by asking him, "Will your answer serve fit to all questions?" (19), Lavatch replies with the first of his long and elaborate sentences, whose main characteristic is accumulation:

> *Clown.* As fit as ten groats is for the hand of an attorney, as your French crown for your taffety punk, as Tib's rush for Tom's forefinger, as a pancake for Shrove Tuesday, a morris for May-day, as the nail to his hole, the cuckold to his horn, as a scolding quean to a wrangling knave, as the nun's lip to the friar's mouth; nay, as the pudding to his skin. (20-26)

The fool's list of comparisons draws, significantly, from a vast semantic area including satire against lawyers and religion, venereal disease, popular folklore, carnival, sexuality, prostitution, and food. Once more he touches on themes which pertain either to his origin as a dramatic character (such as carnival, mock marriages, and morris dancing), or to topics dealt with in the play (such as sexuality, cuckoldry, and prostitution). The theme of mock marriages also hints at the unsuccessful wedding between Helena and Bertram, while food is often associated with both sex and feasting,

Another famous speech, besides that in Act I, Scene iii, mentioned above, where, via a stringent syllogistic logic, Lavatch explains to the Countess why he hopes to have "friends for my wife's sake", soon follows in Act II, Scene iv, when the fool speaks with Helena:

Helena.	My mother greets me kindly; is she well?
Clown.	She is not well, but yet she has her health; she's very merry, but yet she is not well. But thanks be given she's very well and wants nothing i' th' world; but yet she is not well.
Helena.	If she be very well what does she ail that she's not very well?
Clown.	Truly, she's very well indeed, but for two things.
Helena.	What two things?
Clown.	One, that she's not in heaven, whither God send her quickly! The other, that she's in earth, from whence God send her quickly! (II.iv.1-12)

In this case, the fool's reticence is particularly strong: it is not that Lavatch refuses to co-operate on the most superficial level of conversation. Actually, he is "pragmatically correct"; only, his obliqueness is such as to oblige Helena to a progression of questions, and when he finally answers, his words are just a semantic complication, a vicious circle, and not a double answer, as he has promised. His first speech follows the scheme, "yes, but . . . ", repeating it three times and also muddling its rhetorical construction with a chiasmus where positive and negative meanings get entangled. His two last sentences appear verbally different exclusively because of the reverse semantics of their terms: "not in heaven" is different from "in earth"; "whither" is not "from whence", but their use makes them similar, thus reducing the meaning to univocity in spite of the great expense of (colloquial) spirit. In other words, Lavatch transfers meaning from the worldly to the heavenly, deferring his answer through rhetorical difficulties.

That he is a master of speech and a "corrupter of words" similar to his "brethren" is clear from the beginning, when he changes the words of a popular ballad. In fact, the Countess reproaches him, "You corrupt the song, sirrah" (I.iii.77-78), but—as happens with other fools—Lavatch is only adapting somebody else's discourse (proverbs, sayings or, as now, a song) in order to advance his own meaning (here that, in spite of his misogyny, one woman, i.e., Helena, is good).

"A shrewd knave and an unhappy" is, as it is well known, the definition Lafew gives of the fool. Certainly Lavatch is shrewd, able to comment and observe reality, capable of recognising real knaves such as Parolles, ubiquitous for his licence ("he has no pace, but runs where he will", says the Countess), ready to turn his speech to religion and make himself pass for a "woodland fellow" (IV.v.44). But he is "unhappy", feeling that it is not true that "all's well that ends well", perceiving—like the playwright, perhaps—that the "happy ending" is strained, i.e., not

just happening but made to happen, artificially built and not deriving "naturally" from the sequence of events.[17] Yet, as the "fou glossateur" of the piece, he adapts himself to his surroundings, showing and concealing, grimacing and stressing corruption, touching on all the topics that underpin the play. Shakespeare keeps him far from the comedic solution, that happy ending so difficult to achieve, and this, too, is not by chance: after Parolles' exposure in Act V, Scene ii, he leaves the stage never to appear again. His task *qua* fool is done: he has triumphed in the public recognition of Parolles's knavery (which he had already foreseen), has been called by his name (the only instance in the play),[18] but cannot accept what is ahead, that is, simply, that "all's well that end's well".

Lavatch remains a dramatic outsider within the performed story, ready to step out of it, detached, pointing like a chorus to what is worthwhile considering and thinking about. Like a "voice-over" throughout the affairs of the play, he has constantly reminded us of the equivocal issues of gender, sexuality, war, honour and nobility, and, given his previously mentioned dialogue with Helena about the Countess's "being well", he has already demonstrated that "well" and "not well" are ambiguous contraries, leaving us to think about the disturbing results of the plot. On the latter's outcome he cannot work, and so he does not take part in it but remains once more liminal, as a now silent and sadly blurred mirror on the wall of the court of Rossillion.

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17.   Only the intervention of the bed-trick and ring-exchange conventions, specifically linked to comedy, allows the happy ending. See Mullini, *Corruttore*, p. 105. Kastan writes that "the fragility of this comic plot is obvious" (p. 582).

18.   Cf. Snyder, "Naming Names", pp. 268-69.

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