

Topic: Fools in Shakespeare

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Shakespeare's Fools

The word **fool**, used as a noun, is defined as **a person who acts imprudently or unwisely**. In other words a fool is a silly or stupid person. But there is also a historical definition of the term **fool- a Jester or a clown**.

During Shakespeare's time, Fools in the Elizabethan society were paid entertainers, employed by royalty and rich people (usually rich men, because men were entitled to have property, in general). So **fool** was a technical term which referred to professional jesters in courts and castles. It is this sense in which we should consider the **Fools** on stage as well.

In Shakespeare's plays **fools** are usually the most insightful and intelligent men. Although they are often introduced by editors as **Clowns**, we need to understand that the fools are different from clowns. **Clowns in Shakespeare**

are usually rustics, villagers like **Bottom** in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for instance, who evoke laughter due to their ignorance and folly. There is also a lot of physical comedy involved where Shakespeare's clowns are concerned. A **Fool** like **Feste**, however is more intellectual and wisest among all in *Twelfth Night*.

Shakespeare's life as a playwright has often been studied in phases such as the early, middle and last. The Fools in the early comedies are witty and often crafty like **Gobbo** in *The Merchant of Venice*. They evoke laughter and spread happiness. By the time Shakespeare wrote the middle comedies, the fools had evolved, and in the last two comedies (*As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*) before turning to problem plays, Shakespeare's fools had transformed considerably.

Before looking at the comic transformations, we should consider the general characteristics of **Shakespearean Fools**.

- A Fool in Shakespeare always **has** the **license to speak** and **do** as he wishes.
- Shakespeare's fools usually **speak truth**. Since they have the license and authority they **can dare to articulate** the **most unpleasant, harsh and outrageous thoughts**. But all this is never spoken with the intention to seriously harm people, especially in comedies.
- They are often **compared** to the **Greek Chorus** as they function as **commentators**, commenting on characters or their actions for the benefit of the characters and audience. Shakespeare's fools are **entertainers and commentators**.
- **Not all fools are mere commentators**. Some, like Feste, have active roles in the action proper. However, Feste remains detached because he is wise and it is he who functions as the epilogue, **outside** the action proper.

