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**“The Fool of Conscience”:**

**Comedy and the Moral Order in the Medieval Theatre**

by Peter Garvie

These thoughts on the Fool come from three sources. The first is from thinking about *Macbeth* and the ways in which it is a medieval as well as a renaissance play. Second, in brooding about a play I want to write, I found myself contemplating dynasties; not historically, let alone heroically, but as a somewhat absurd, repetitious pattern, a sombre game, as it might seem to a court jester if he lived long enough. And third, I went back to a childhood experience. On my first visit to the circus at the age of five I was frightened by the clowns. I do not now remember if it was their antics, their make-up or their proximity that caused my reaction. My parents, no doubt deviously, persuaded me to try the circus again. So I asked the man at the door if there would be any clowns. He cheerfully assured me that there would be dozens of clowns! My howls drowned out the circus band.

My title, “The Fool of Conscience,” comes from a satirical poem by Sir Thomas Wyatt which looks back from retirement at the early Tudor court.<sup>1</sup> The word “of” is important for its ambiguity: the fool with a conscience and the mockery by conscience. The jester, the Joker, is the wild card on which any value may be placed, depending on the game. The Fool is also a card in the Tarot pack. His sign is Gemini. He is the symbolic inversion of the king and he can be a scapegoat. As J. E. Cirlot sums him up, “The jester or clown says pleasant things harshly and terrible things jokingly.”<sup>2</sup>

His first duty was to entertain, to “set the table on a roar,” in Hamlet’s phrase. His status was humble and he had at least to seem to be simple, even simple-minded. This served as a mask and a privilege. You cannot be wholly responsible if, in the colloquial phrase, you are “not quite all there.”

Context is very important to comedy. The comedian must have a rapport with his audience, but time and place must be appropriate, too. The off-color joke will be a howling success with a group of associates over drinks. The same joke on a formal occasion will be rejected with embarrassment by those same people. As Hugh Dalziel Duncan puts it,

We must uphold the dignity of our superiors, and respect the devotion of our inferiors....  
The kinds of play and irony, and indeed the whole range of comedy permitted in manners,  
tell us much about the strains of hierarchy....we must be careful to jest and play only with

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas Wyatt, “Satire 111,” *Silver Poets of the 16th Century* (London: Dent, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962) 155.

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peers. Joking with superiors (and inferiors) is always risky.<sup>3</sup>

The fool was licensed, and it is interesting that the word means both what is lawful and, when pushed too far, what is licentious or unapproved behavior. The jester could make fun of his superiors up to a point. He might also be an unacknowledged spokesman for the king, saying what the king might like to have said, but could not say in his own person.

This candor would be absurdly expressed and in a context in which criticism had to be accepted with good humor. If the butt of a joke does not take it in good part, he sets himself off from the community of laughter around him. If he persists in an angry or sulky reaction, then others may take it as an admission of guilt. If, on the other hand, the jester misjudges the context, then sympathy switches to the victim.

The jester has an ambiguous and risky role. The corrective of wit maintains a balance, exposes the pretentious, and may enable people to change without conflict or punishment. To laugh at your own shortcomings can be a relatively painless form of confession if both the context and the motives of the humor are not in doubt. If the tone of ridicule is unacceptable, the joke is not just seeking acknowledgement, but threatening disorder. It is saying more than we care to be told. The soothsayer or prophet is never as welcome as the jester. Cassandra did not get many laughs in Troy.

The rules were stretched furthest at those times—around Epiphany or before Lent—when the medieval world became a carnival. We may still be amazed at the degree of insult and inversion allowed the Lord of Misrule or at the Feast of Fools. There were no protected places. At the cathedrals of Autun and Beauvais an ass was led in to be the star of the show.

At Autun the ass was led with great ceremony to the church under a cloth of gold, the corners of which were held by four canons; and on entering the sacred edifice the animal was wrapped in a rich cope, while a parody of the Mass was performed...the celebrant priest imitated the braying of an ass.<sup>4</sup>

Authority could allow this discharge of subversive merriment because it was secure. Firstly, it was good psychology. Tell a child that he or she is free, except for these restrictions, and the chances are that the child will nag to get them removed. But the energies of carnival time were a positive release of impropriety and enjoyment. Secondly, the uninhibited expense of energy can last only so long; and the morning after the night before, when sobriety is penitential, what seemed hilarious then is now plain silly. Thirdly, the carnival rout was strictly limited in time. After it was over, you had better not call your superior “the Abbot of Ninnies.” Finally, the parody was directed, not against belief itself, but against human inability to personify all that belief should mean. The Fool, in trying to rectify his exemplars, certainly did not confuse God’s

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<sup>3</sup> Hugh Daiziel Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968) 180.

<sup>4</sup> Sir James George Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, ed. Theodor Gaster (New York: Criterion, 1959) 567.

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forgiveness with the sale of pardons at a discount.

There was, however, another complex, questioning note, and this represented the surviving traditions of pre-Christian Europe. Insofar as these traditions could be co-opted by the Christian world, they strengthened it. Churches were often built on pagan sites to suggest continuity with, rather than violation of, earlier belief. Christian ritual often coincided with those earlier cultures in recognizing seasons and sustenance, though the fit may not be exact and the meanings may be contradictory.

In their fascinating study, *Gargoyles and Grotesques*, Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross recover from medieval churches series of bizarre images which they trace back to the survival of old beliefs in giants and in animal and vegetable gods. These can be amusing and terrifying at the same time.

It is certain that many of them had a very real meaning for those who created them and for those who worshipped in the structures which housed them or were externally adorned by them....The Church in medieval times had come to be the storehouse of the sub-conscious of the people—the lumber room, as it were, in which were bygone, ancient, half-forgotten, half-formulated beliefs and superstitions, customs and folklore.<sup>5</sup>

Magic has a double identity. It is awesome because it shows the exercise of power where power was not thought to be. It is also, in a strict sense, absurd because impossible or unreasonable. This is on the jester's lowest level of tricks and juggling and riddles; and more significantly, it is so when the magic act is a miracle, gratuitous mischief or a dark curse fulfilled.

Giraldus Cambrensis, writing in the latter part of the twelfth century, related a marvelous legend about a boy who ran away from home and was led by "two little men of pigmy stature" to a subterranean kingdom. He moved freely between this Utopia and our world until his mother asked him to bring back some gold. So the boy stole the golden ball belonging to the king's son. The little men pursued him. On his mother's threshold he stumbled and dropped the golden ball. The little men retrieved it and departed. But never again could the boy find the entrance to their world.

Giraldus said he had the tale from the boy himself, now grown up and a priest. What did he believe? He is carefully ambiguous.

These things, therefore, and similar contingencies, I should place...among those particulars which are neither to be affirmed, nor too positively denied.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross, *Gargoyles and Grotesques*, (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975) 19.

<sup>6</sup> Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Itinerary Through Wales*, ed. W. Llewelyn Williams (London: Dent, 1935) 68-71.

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The Wife of Bath, no great sentimentalist, reported the abolition of the magic world:

But now can no man see none elves mo.

We note the double negative and the sad, spaced monosyllables. She continued,

For there as wont to walken was an elf,  
Ther walketh now the limitour himself.<sup>7</sup>

She was scoring points off those friars called limitours because they had only restricted rights to beg alms. But the couplet also suggests limits set by the Church to the old magic. The ambiguity remains. We can read Giraldus' fairy story as a version of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, while from the cornices of the church the gargoyles grin down on the Christian congregation.

When we look at some of the medieval plays, we find that their comedy has a sequence of functions very like the jester's. The first function is to make people laugh and to identify with that character or that scene. Noah's shrewish wife or Mak, the con man, in *The Second Shepherds Play* is an intermediary between the Bible story and the audience. "Just like so-and-so up the street," the audience would have said. Sometimes the identification enforced is a grim one. In *The Crucifixion* from the York cycle, Christ is contrasted with the soldiers going about their usual drill of getting somebody—some body—crucified properly, by the book.

Sometimes the comedy is in witnessing a high figure being reduced to our level, or even lower. In *The Fall of Lucifer*, also from York, Lucifer preens himself on his own vocabulary:

in a glorious glee my glittering it gleams.

In fact, it is the vocabulary he has stolen from God:

I shall be like unto him that is highest on height.  
Oh, what I am dearworth and deft!—  
He is really not deft at all because,  
Oh, deuce! all goes down.<sup>8</sup>

The deuce is the lowest value at dice, the Devil, a word close to *Dear*; and the great prince is in Hell, smothered with smoke.

In *The Woman Taken in Adultery* (N Town cycle) the hurried exit of her partner is in true farce style. The stage direction reads,

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<sup>7</sup> Chaucer, "The Tale of the *Wyf of Bath*", *The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1946).

<sup>8</sup> "The Fall of Lucifer," *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, ed. A.C.Cawley (New York: Dutton, 1957) 6.

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Here a young man runs out in his doublet, with shoes untied, and holding up his breeches in his hand.

There is another level of absurdity, though, in the complicated plotting about how to trap Christ in argument. On and on they go, the Pharisee and the Scribe, until the Accuser has to get practical with them.

Ye tarry over-long, sirs, I say you;  
They will soon part, as that I guess;  
Therefore if ye will have your prey now,  
Let us go take them in their wantonness.<sup>9</sup>

These are not simply comic turns. They represent plausible attitudes which only the whole context of the play is to show as absurd. Presumption is the common denominator. Noah's wife just knows better; all this nonsense of building an ark! Lucifer misreads his privilege in the mirror of his own magnificence. Pharisee, Scribe, and Accuser think they can win against God in petty court. The presumption is of this world, so money may be a part of it. Simon Magus thought he could buy the power of the Holy Ghost, a new trick for his repertoire as a sorcerer. The woman taken in adultery tries to bribe her accusers. One of Everyman's reasons for resisting the call of Death is pressure of business.

These functions and levels of comedy belong to the audience and the natural world, just as the jester in his clown role draws upon himself; yet in his role as commentator, he draws on hierarchy up to the supernatural. The trickster is a common figure of mythology; he can switch things around and change from human to animal and back again by his superiority of magic. The arch trickster is the Devil. He has become God's shadow, or under-side. His glance is as sharp as it is disillusioned. The irony is that while he can no longer compare himself to God, he cannot disconnect himself, either. In Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, the contract that Mephistopheles (and Lucifer) make with Faust seems to them a cross between a game and an inversion of the law. But Mephistopheles, like Faust, is contracted into the moral order, and God cannot be dealt out of the game.

The figure of Death in *Everyman* has something of the oblique, sardonic candor of Mephistopheles. In the dark comedy of his dialectic with Everyman, the reversal is from the arbitrary selection of this man to the absurdity of human argument against what must happen.

"Everyman, stand still" are Death's first words to him—the paradox of spiritual activity in contrast to worldly busyness. When Everyman is told he must render his account, he thinks of his ledgers. He tries to bribe Death. He asks for a deferment. He tries to make an interlude of it, after which things can return to normal. At least he has his identity, his life. And Death replies,

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<sup>9</sup> "The Woman Taken in Adultery," *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* 136.

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“Nay, nay, it was but lent thee.” Can the human be more diminished?

Deftly and wittily the figure in the black cloak draws Everyman down to the point from which he can begin “the pilgrimage to my pain.” Comedy flickers through the early part of his journey as he hears all the excuses offered for not going with him. Now it is different—wry rather than disillusioning—because Everyman realizes how unstable must be the relationships in a borrowed life.<sup>10</sup>

The kind of partnerships represented by Death and Everyman, Mephistopheles and Faust, is to persist through our dark comedies to the present day. In the Don Juan dramas of Moliere and Mozart, the servant, though not a supernatural being, ends up with more power than his master. Sganarelle and Leporello survive. In the Auden/Stravinsky opera, *The Rake’s Progress*, Nick Shadow (as the Devil is named) enforces the contract over a game of cards at midnight in the graveyard. Tom Rakewell ends mad in Bedlam.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the more equal clowns engage in an almost medieval debate about the two thieves crucified with Christ. What is more significant: that one was saved or that the other was not? Is each of them wondering which role is his? Casuistry has become a comic turn. As Vladimir says to Estragon, “Nothing is certain when you’re about.”

The absurd allied with the supernatural is the context of the clowns in Shakespearean tragedy. It has been plausibly suggested that the clowns of Shakespeare’s company would have played the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*. The porter in the same play is guardian of a medieval Hell Mouth. In the storm scenes of *King Lear*, Fool and Tom o’ Bedlam are a double act against the universe. In *Hamlet*, we meet Yorick, the jester, only as a skull held up by the Gravedigger, another clown. And Yorick represents the only happy memories that Hamlet admits to in the whole play. The skull is the ultimate gargoyle.

Fortune is the furthest reach of the Fool—unpredictable Fortune, wheel and wild card, which can make of everything a pointless joke or riddle without an answer. In Francois Villon’s poem, Fortune tells him to ask no favors.

Poor Francois, please listen to what you’re told.  
Without God’s help, nothing you do can hold;  
Without Him, you are just a sprinkling of crumbs.  
As for disaster, I’ll give you that tenfold.  
Take my advice, just take it as it comes.<sup>11</sup>

In Chaucer’s poem, the response of Fortune against the Plaintiff is bleak indeed:

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<sup>10</sup> “Everyman,” *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* 205-234.

<sup>11</sup> Francois Villon, “Problem or Ballade in the Name of Fortune,” *Villon: Ballades* (London: Allan Wingate, 1946). This (rather free) translation of the envoi is my own.

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Thy laste day is ende of my intresse.<sup>12</sup>

The Fool too must exchange his motley for a winding-sheet. Chance may jar the moral order—it is part of our legacy from the Fall—but it is never permitted to disintegrate the rule of a provident God. In the play of *Abraham and Isaac*, God sets a test of allegiance, and his promise at the end is only to desist. Elsewhere, he is seen as the Giver, as in the covenant he makes with Noah in the reborn world.

The string is turned toward you,  
And toward me is bent the bow.<sup>13</sup>

And as we know, humanity will indeed bend the bow and loose the arrow and kill the god-made man.

If context is important to comedy, so may it be to affirmation. Both are unreasonable and unlikely, in some sense absurd; both require a truthful vision. Can we detect an ironic inflection in another saying by Giraldus Cambrensis?

Things pertaining to the sacraments, as well as the sacraments themselves, defend us from hurtful, but not from harmless things; from annoyances, but not from illusions.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Chaucer, "Fortune".

<sup>13</sup> "Noah's Flood," *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, 49. Benjamin Britten's "Noyes Fludde" is a wonderful realization of this play from the Chester cycle. It extends the comedy to the animals who sing "Kyrie eleison" as they go in procession into the ark, and "Alleluia" as they come out.

<sup>14</sup> Giraldus Cambrensis 86.

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