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“And Those That Are Fools, Let Them Use Their Talents”: Looking at the Power of Music in the
Hands of Shakespeare’s Wise Fools

The fool has been a long-standing staple in society for centuries. As art imitates life, this same fool has also noticeably permeated literature throughout history. Though we may call them by different names, we’ve all known at least one of these fool or clown characters in our lives; whether it’s the class clown we knew in high school, the stand-up comedian we go to see for entertainment, or that crazy uncle who just seems a little more off his rocker than the rest of the family. Fools surround us, and for whatever reason, their “madness” seems to be the key to unlocking the truths that no one else can (or is willing to) see. This is the aspect of the fool that so intrigued William Shakespeare. You can scarcely read any of Shakespeare’s plays, including the tragedies, without some sort of clown character serving comic relief while also revealing to their audience the hidden truths of a given situation or character.

Why was the fool so important to Shakespeare? The reason was simple: times were dark with oppressive rules coming from both the government and the church which led to a widespread depression especially among the common people. To quell this emotion and thereby make the working class more productive, the church put their faith in the expression, “laughter is the best medicine,” and began supporting festivals such as Carnival from which the profession of

the fool (or clown) sprung. As Robert J. Alexander describes it in his essay on the origins of English and German clowns, “Laughter . . . was often prescribed by doctors in the seventeenth century as a remedy for the catch-all illness of ‘melancholia.’” (Alexander, 737). While effective, laughter alone wasn’t always enough. David Lindley writes in his book *Shakespeare and Music*, “‘Melancholy’ is a general term covering a number of different mental ailments. . . for which music was thought to be a particularly suitable remedy.” (Lindley, 31). So when jokes failed, the fools became musicians as well. Combining these two traits and their overall jovial characters, the fools became the “mock kings” (Alexander, 736) of the lower class using every opportunity they could to mock and outwit their betters. It is this sort of fool that Shakespeare loved to employ in his play writing. However, in contrast to real life fools who might get punished for saying something wrong, Shakespeare’s clowns always manage to get by unscathed. This is because Shakespeare’s fools didn’t view music as something they merely performed--it was a tool they wielded to their advantage. Music in the correct hands can be a powerful force. In the hands of a proper fool, music serves as both a shield and a sword: a shield, as the fool plays the silly songs to link him to madness; a sword, as the same wise fool, failing to teach his masters by his words alone, puts the messages to music so the lesson can pierce the heart where the mind is unwilling.

The Wise Fool Beginnings

Before we can fully explore music’s purpose through Shakespeare’s fools, we must first examine the fools themselves. In studying Shakespeare’s plays chronologically, there is a clear separation of two types of fools known to many scholars as the “natural fool” and the “artificial fool.” “‘Natural,’ at the time and in this context, was a word referring to someone who was genuinely mentally unbalanced or handicapped,” in contrast to the “artificial fool” who was a

generally intelligent person who just “played” the fool. (dukeofbookingham, 2016). This shift in fool styles indicates that while Shakespeare was a talented writer himself, many of the characters he wrote were based on the physical actors he had available in his acting company. In his earlier days working with the acting company known as the Chamberlain’s Men, his go-to clown actors were Richard Tarlton and later Will Kemp who were both of the “natural fool” temperament physically and mentally. Hence, in those earlier productions we had simpler characters like Dogberry from *Much Ado About Nothing* who, though still fulfilling the clown’s part as truth-teller, almost literally stumbles upon the truth of Don Jon’s plot without using much cunning of his own. Around 1599, starting with the character of Touchstone, Kemp was replaced by Robert Armin as the new resident clown who brought with him a slew of new possibilities for the character. As history grad student and Tumblr user dukeofbookingham sums up:

with Touchstone we get a new class of clown. Gone are the bumbling bumpkins like Dogberry that Kemp was so famous for. Instead we have this quick-witted, sharp-tongued fool who plays the part of jester and truth-teller simultaneously. . . . And this role gets refined through characters like Feste until we finally get the magnificently complex character of the unnamed Fool of King Lear in 1606. (2016).

Not only did Armin bring a new air of wisdom to this character, but he also brought more music to the fool and to Shakespeare’s plays in general. Catherine A Henze, broke down the exact musical increase in a study she did for her article, “‘Wise enough to Play the Fool’: Robert Armin and Shakespeare’s Sung Songs of Scripted Improvisation.” In her study, she calculated that after Armin’s arrival, singing in Shakespeare’s plays increased by roughly 204 percent, while number of singing lines per play increased by roughly 226 percent (Henze, 420). This is an important increase, because as I noted before, it’s the fools’ use of music that enables him to speak his truth while also saving him from being punished for doing just that.

Music as a Shield

In the case of music being a shielding device, Shakespeare's fools or other mad characters (such as Ophelia and Edgar) are often shown using music as way of making themselves appear very obviously mad. By appearing mad, the fools appear more sympathetic. They're supposedly not in their right mind; if any of the harsh realities they try to disclose are met with anger, they can feign that they had no idea what they were talking about and brush off the encounter with a silly song. In the book *Shakespeare, Music, and Madness* by Kendra Preston Leonard, Leonard discusses that throughout Shakespeare's plays music is often associated with a sort of insane behavior. She says, "Music has long been associated with madness. . . It was often used as a visible and audible symptom of a victim's disassociation from her--most cases of madness on the early modern stage involve women--surroundings and societal rules and her loss of self-control." (3). As such, Shakespeare uses music heavily when introducing mad characters. With Ophelia in *Hamlet*, her descent into madness is very audible as the audience hears her singing a new song every time she enters the stage once in this state. As Leonard proposes in her book, because Shakespeare knew of the link between music and madness, he also specifically gave music to his artificial fools and his main characters who choose to consciously play the madman for some greater purpose such as Hamlet and Edgar (of *King Lear*).

In the cases of Hamlet and Edgar, the two characters are feigning madness for different purposes, but both of them use music and heavily rhythmic speeches to more fully sell their characters to their peers. Though Hamlet has fewer explicitly stated songs to sing, he has many rhythmic phrases during the times he is playing mad. One such phrase that hints strongly at a

musical undertone is in Act 3, Scene 2; right after the players' play has been stopped and the audience dismissed, Hamlet says (or in some instances sings):

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
 The hart ungallèd play,
 For some must watch while some must sleep,
 Thus runs the world away. (*Hamlet*, 3.2.242-245).

In response to a more musical interpretation of this rhyme, Leonard states that “Hamlet’s feigned madness takes on a sign of actual madness that would be recognizable to early modern audiences. . . in particular a sign of feminine madness: he sings.” (22). Edgar on the other hand has almost no spoken lines when he becomes Poor Tom compared to how many songs he sings to “project his madness” (119) to the other characters as well as the audience. In these characters, we can see how effective music is in portraying madness even in a temporary situation. Accordingly, it makes sense that the fools have figured out this music and madness usefulness as well.

The best instance of a clown using this music and madness connection as a shield is the unnamed Fool from *King Lear*. As we’ve seen with Edgar, *King Lear* is rife with mad characters, so Shakespeare had to differentiate them in some way. For Edgar, he uses a combination of many songs and wardrobe directions to show his madness. For the Fool, Shakespeare combines wit with madness and song to create the embodiment of an artificial fool. In the play, after Lear has divided his kingdom between his elder two daughters and banished his youngest daughter, Cordelia, and his trusted advisor, Kent, for speaking harsh truths to him, Lear becomes convinced that the Fool is his last true friend in the world. He is still in such disbelief that the

people he most loved--Cordelia and Kent--could go against him as they just had, that he doesn't immediately register when the Fool begins to lightly criticize him, saying the same things that Cordelia and Kent had. In Act 1 Scene 4, the Fool starts off a joke saying, "Dost know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet fool?" (1.4.113) and answering the king, in *song*, that the lord who gave away his land (implying Lear) is the bitter fool while himself in "motley here" was the sweet fool (1.4.123). Lear does get angry here asking, "Dost thou call me a fool, boy?" but he doesn't punish the Fool immediately as he did with the others. Most likely, this is because the music disguises the truth as the ramblings of a mad man and thus makes the Fool more sympathetic. The Fool actually goes in and out of song so much in this scene to defend himself that Lear asks, "When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?" (1.4.141). The Fool uses this opportunity to explain that he always used music to shield his truths from Lear's daughters so they wouldn't be so angry because he's too good at telling the truth that he can't lie. He says that he'd even like to learn to lie, but "They'll [the daughters] have me whipped for speaking true, thou [Lear] wilt have me whipped for lying, and sometime I am whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind of thing than a fool." (1.4.153-157). With this line, the Fool embodies what it is to be an artificial fool. While he might be one of the wiser characters, he must lie about his true nature and play the fool while also telling the straight truth about everyone else, while also trying to avoid punishment from both lying and telling the truth. He risks so much trying to accomplish his job as artificial fool, but luckily, they have a solution to all these problems: music.

Music as a Sword

Besides shielding oneself, the other side of the music metaphor, and the one most prevalent in today's society, is that music can be used as a persuasive tool. One of the best

examples of a fool using music this way is Feste in *Twelfth Night*. As John Stevens nicely introduces in his essay on Elizabethan stage music, “The most striking uses of music in the comedies of Shakespeare's maturity are to govern the romantic mood and to express the inner psychology of the characters. *Twelfth*



Figure 1 Shaina Taub, the composer, as Feste in Public Works' *Twelfth Night* musical.

Night does both these things,” (32). I would add to Stevens’ words that *Twelfth Night* only successfully does these things *because of* the clever and most musical of fools, Feste.

Throughout the chaos of the story, Feste serves somewhat as the all-seeing eye over the whole plot and uses his music to get everyone in the right place, or at least the place where *he* thinks their right place is. In one line, Feste even proves that he is the caretaker over everyone else’s fate as he says, “He is but mad yet, Madonna, and the fool shall look to the madman.” (1.5.111). While this play is one of the more popular of Shakespeare’s works spanning movies, musicals, and a plethora of stage adaptations, one recent production captured the heart of the fool the best: Shaina Taub’s musical adaptation written for Public Theater’s Shakespeare in the Park (NYC) in the summer of 2016. It is set in a modern jazz age, yet it still retains much of the spoken lines of Shakespeare’s original work. Shaina Taub doubling as both composer and actor of Feste the Clown, uses her unique opportunity to interpret Shakespeare’s songs and soliloquies into messages for a modern audience taking the musical aspect of the fool to a whole new level. Not only is she planting messages into the other characters hearts through her songs as Feste, but

through her political interpretation of the musical soliloquies and a reimagined moral epilogue/closing song, she is planting her messages in the live audience as well.

This musical persuasion can be seen especially well in Taub's rendition of *Twelfth Night* Act 2 Scene 4. As Lindley says, "This scene is absolutely crucial to the emotional direction of the play, and music is essential to its conduct and to its effect." (209). I couldn't agree with him more here, and luckily we have Taub's beautiful musical arrangement to accompany this entire scene. At the beginning of this scene, in the original text, Duke Orsino calls for Feste to play a melancholy mourning song to match his love-sick mood; as Shakespeare wrote it, Feste sings his sad song then leaves while Viola and Duke Orsino argue about the strength of women's love compared to a man's. "I know--" Viola, disguised as Cesario argues, "Too well what love women to men may owe:/ In faith, they are as true of heart as we." (2.4.100-103) While the ensuing argument already makes this scene plenty powerful in the original version, Taub elevates the feelings in this scene a step further in changing the role and placement of the fool's song from merely introducing to the tone, to fully bolstering and affirming the emotion behind Viola's speech. In Taub's musical, rather than singing and leaving, Feste only begins her song when Orsino asks her, but she keeps singing and playing in the background while this speech goes on in front. Taub takes Feste's original song of an anonymous, lonely, broken-hearted lover and turns it into "Is This Not Love?" -- a jazz club style lament with the title taken from the end of Viola's own speech to show how it mirrors her tale even as she's telling it.

"I can tell you anything, my friend / except how I feel about you / 'cause I know you don't return it," (Taub, 2016) Taub's Feste sings, clearly alluding to the close friendship between Cesario and Orsino at this point while Orsino in the foreground asks Cesario (Viola) for yet another favor. In the song, Feste continues the image of a pining hidden love in her song, using

the clever word-play fools are known for to convey the hidden truths that only she seems to know: “I’m despondence dressed like confidence; a lamb in lion’s clothes” (Taub, 2016) hinting at Viola being a woman dressed as a man. While Viola starts pleading with Orsino to not have to go tell some other woman of his love, the music in the background goes quiet as she finally gets to the sad tale depicting her own unrequited love that the duke innocently assumes is about “Cesario’s” sister. When Viola gets to the painful crux of her story about what happened to this woman who loved so much, the band fades out completely and a solo piano plays the sad chorus while Viola mourns:

She never told her love. . . .
 She pined in thought,
 And with a green and yellow melancholy
 She sat like patience on a monument,
 Smiling at grief.
 Was not this love indeed? (2.4.109-112).

When Orsino then asks, “But died thy sister of her love, my boy?” (2.4.116) Feste comes back in singing, “Will I *die* without saying a thing? / Will I wait here for years silently? Or will I risk it all / lay bare my heart and say it . . . Is this not love?” (Taub, 2016) [emphasis added]. Taub’s lyrics here merely showcase one example of what music in the right hands can do for the emotions of their listeners. As Viola reluctantly leaves the stage to deliver Orsino’s love message again, Feste’s song urges her to stop waiting and move toward action.

A political activist in her everyday life, Shaina Taub often uses her music to prompt people to action. Elsewhere in the musical, Shaina Taub also discusses gender politics and seeing

people with equality. As Michael Paulson states in a New York Times review of the musical, “[Taub] finds in the cross-dressing comedy an opportunity to explore how gender shapes the way we perceive one another, and ourselves.” In this way, she shows that, as the fool on stage she can use her music to make the other players around her see the right perspective on their lives; even more, as a musician/composer in the real world, she can use that music to teach messages of value that resonate better in the heart than a spoken argument would in the mind. In a personal interview on this subject with local arts professional (actor, musician, and teacher) Marshall Madsen, he told me “I think music is the MOST persuasive tool in uniting minds, cultures, thoughts, and emotions. I feel like music can’t [be] misinterpreted - people hear it and either go, ‘I relate to that,’ or, ‘I don’t understand,’ but for those that do, the realm of emotional discussion often isn’t diverse in interpretation amongst them - and I feel like music inside of theater, Shakespeare, musicals, etc. is used most effectively to this purpose.”(Madsen, 2019). Clearly, the arts and music specifically are proven effective tools for persuasive means, and Shakespeare clearly noted that in the way he has his fools use music throughout his stories. Furthermore, in accordance with Madsen’s thoughts, we can see music’s persuading effect happening not only on the stage but also in widespread music cultures such as the current political hip-hop phenomenon that is dominating the modern world music market.

Just as Shakespeare’s fools used music as a sword to pierce the heart in spite of unwilling minds in his plays, today we are seeing something similar happen with hip-hop and rap music being increasingly political. In America, we have our very own artificial fool Donald Glover, known for his comedy acting, who is now using his musical persona Childish Gambino and songs like “This is America” to address those blunt truths that too many are willing to overlook. American songs like this have inspired groups around the globe to start firing back at their own

governments. One group known as Rap Against Dictatorship was so inspired by “This is America” that they made their own heavy-hitting song and accompanying music video condemning the government of Thailand: a government which has been so tightly controlled by a military junta for the past four years that they ban any sort of protests, including peaceful picnic protests. Thanks to the power of music outreach and online streaming however, Rap Against Dictatorship’s video got too big for the government to completely censor, and they instead decided to respond by making their own rap music to try to combat the musical effect on their people. (“Hip-hop & Streaming”). Even on a political scale, people are realizing the persuasive power of music that Shakespeare felt in his day. Yes, Shakespeare may not have explicitly added rap in any of his plays, but as discussed earlier, Robert Armin, the originating “artificial fool”, was loved for more than just his comic acting genius. According to an article on Armin by John Astington, one of Armin’s predecessors for residing-clown actor, Richard Tarlton, once said that what he loved most about Armin was his “ability to improvise in verse. . . as he himself was able to do.” (Astington, 231). Indeed, Astington even compares Armin’s improvisation talent directly to the technique and skill needed in rap music and says about it that this “aptitude for verbal wit and inventiveness can hardly be taught.” (232). So while Robert Armin and Donald Glover might be centuries apart, it’s a beautiful parallel to see Donald Glover acting as that same type of artificial fool for the modern age who is helping spur great changes now.

Using music as a medium widely increases not only your audience size but also the audience’s willingness to hear the message and respond. Shakespeare clearly realized this when he started incorporating music more heavily into his plays and started using the wise fools as the driving force behind getting those messages out. In his plays, the fools are always spouting ideas that are shrugged off as nonsense no matter how true they are; by using music to reinforce these

thoughts, though, it gets into the hearts of the people in a way that influences them on a deeper level than spoken words ever could. Shakespeare started a trend of giving music to the lower class to use as a tool to make a situation better, and that music trend has continued on today through all forms of art. He wrote himself, “If music be the food of love, play on” (*Twelfth Night*, 1.1.1). Today we have professional artists all around the world agreeing that music is the food of love that gets the most positive change happening, so we must play on.

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