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Hamlet, Fool of the Danish Court: A New Reading of the Prince’s Role at Elsinore

Steven Storheim

The reader of Shakespeare’s Hamlet Prince of Denmark is not introduced to Yorick, fool of the Danish court, until the first scene of the last act. “Alas poor Yorick,” his skull “has lain in the earth three and twenty years” (V.i.190, 178). Although the play does not reveal who assumed the fool’s station after Yorick’s death, through the study of history and mystic tradition—the stories and perspective that supply the foundation for many of Shakespeare’s plays—we are swift to discover that the character Hamlet should be the “rightful heir” to Yorick’s position. With new understanding provided by this study, Hamlet’s cryptic and sometimes paradoxical behavior reveals itself to be symptomatic of his internal struggle toward self-discovery as destined fool of Denmark’s court, and his external struggle against the would-be fool Polonius, who repeatedly seeks to assume the position rightfully held by the Prince.

Shortly after the close of the twelfth century, Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish monk, wrote a compilation of Danish oral tales entitled Historia Danica. His intent was to preserve the history of Denmark. Among the tales recorded was The History of Amleth Prince of Denmark, widely accepted as the origin of both the name and tale of Shakespeare’s Hamlet Prince of Denmark. However, the title and story are not the only similarities found between the history and the play. The phonetic and written relations between character names are also of particular interest and uncover new ways of reading and understanding the drama. Saxo’s historical account tells of Amleth, his mother Gerutha, and Gerutha’s father, Rorik. In Shakespeare’s drama, we read of the parallel figures of Hamlet, his mother Gertrude, and the twenty-three year dead Yorick. The three characters mentioned in Historia Danica represent three generations of the royal Danish
family. Although only two generations are represented in the drama, the phonetic and written correlation suggests Yorick to be representative of the third, or to be the father of Gertrude. If we accept Yorick as Hamlet's grandfather, the intimate relationship the prince and the fool shared takes on new meaning. We also become aware of Hamlet's fate as hereditary fool of the Danish court since, from this perspective, he is the only known male descendant of the late Yorick. (Besides the king and prince, the station of court fool was the only other position within medieval and renaissance court life that was hereditary.)

In Oliver Elton's translation of *Historia Danica*, we learn that when Amleth was in England, he refused to eat the food served at the King of England's table. The King sends a servant to eavesdrop on the conversation between Amleth and his friends that night. The discovery is that Amleth noticed certain peculiarities in the food, and in the King and Queen's, as well as in the behavior of the King's mother. Upon hearing the report, the King states, "He who could say such things had either more than mortal wisdom or more than mortal folly" (63). The King's words illustrate what history and mythic tradition teach concerning the nature of the fool: either he is wise or he is a knave. In Shakespeare's play, we find that Hamlet takes on the role of the wise-fool, while Polonius assumes the role of the knave.

The sort of wisdom in folly found in the character of Hamlet, and probably in his grandfather Yorick, originates in Judaism and the Arab world and later from Christianity. According to Jewish history found in the TaNaKh (the parallel to the Christian Old Testament), Jewish prophets were often ostracized, cast out, and even killed for their unsightly appearance and insightful, expository teachings. Similarly, "at the base of Christian belief is St. Paul's teaching, and fundamental to this is that the Christian is a Fool in the eyes of the world, 'because that which is foolishness to God is wisdom to men, and what is weakness to God is strength to men'" (Billington 16). The Christian prophet John the Baptist best illustrates this holy folly shared by the Jewish prophets: "And John was clothed with camel's hair and with a girdle of skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey: And preached, saying there cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose." (Mark 1:6-7).

The Norse of Iceland and the Celts of the British Isles shared similar views of these peculiar prophets. Commonly viewed as madmen, similar to the perceived condition of our fool Hamlet, prophets were further considered "wise" because of their peculiar abilities, commonly attributed to their associations with spirits from other "worlds"—another similarity shared by the character Hamlet. Both the Norse and the Celts used similar terms for prophets. These terms seem to be the origin of the present term, *fool*. From the Old English *fyle* and the Icelandic *fulr*, "taking all the evidence together the word *fulr-fyle* would seem to have the following meanings: (1) a poet, perhaps a specially learned poet; (2) an (old) sage, especially one who is versed in antiquarian lore; (3) a prophet; (4) a spokesman, or 'man of information'" (Welsford 84).
The origin of the knavish-fool appears later in history than the origin of the wise-fool, from within ancient Greece and Rome. This type of individual was more like a buffoon, one who does not behave or function within society like the general public. The individual would often have some type of physical defect or strange behavioral pattern, which amused people of leisure. "Plutarch describes how in the market in Rome many purchasers would pay no attention to the most beautiful slave girls and boys who were exposed for sale and would seek out the horrible freaks and monstrosities" (Welsford 59). Thus, some fools were revered for their exceptional insight or understanding, while others were mocked and sported for their baseness and/or deformity.

Mystic teachings concerning this duel nature of the fool's character are most clearly found within the ancient art and tradition of the Tarot. The Tarot is said to have originated in Egypt among the Pharaohs. The practice of Tarot, however, is far more diverse and varies from land to land. The most popular versions in the Western world are derived from the Kabbalistic traditions of Hebrew rabbis. This tradition divides the Hebrew Tarot into two major groups of cards, the major arcane and the minor arcane. The minor arcane is of no use to us here, and although the major arcane is composed of twenty-three cards, this argument focuses only on the card given the title of fool. The fool's number can be either 0 or 21. Although some Tarots consider the fool as the 21 key of the arcane, they "also use the sign of '0' (zero), and this is done in order to emphasize the fact that this Arcanum (key) does not arise from any other. Its position is unique in the whole system of the Tarot" (Sadhu 453). If one considers the whole arcane as representative of our world, and the things, people, thoughts, and ideals within it, the number 0 suggests something, someone, some thought or ideal as being set apart from the rest of the whole; something of, for, and by itself. This characteristic is what we find in the fool's character of Hamlet, who is represented by the 0 key of the major arcane.

The 0 key identifies itself in Kabbalistic theory "with the No-Thing whence all things proceed" (Case 31) while Aleph, the key's corresponding number, identifies directly with 'Ruach,' the Hebrew word for "breath" or "breath of life." Thus we are told that the fool represents "radiant, fiery energy" (30), which is the source of all things. The correlative fool's image upon the card is that of a young traveler who is neither male nor female; however, we will give it female gender for the sake of description. The traveler is dressed in a robe of white, heading intently north-west. She gazes above and ahead of herself, not able to see what is in front of her. When the number, letter, and imagery collide, the meaning and power of the fool is revealed. "Always it faces unknown possibilities of self-expression, transcending any height it may have reached at a given time. She is That which was, and is, and shall be—the deathless, fadeless, life-principle, subsisting eternally behind all modes of existence [. . . ] representing the light of perfect wisdom" (32). The fool does not operate through the consciousness of mind, but through the super-consciousness of mind, a behavior interpreted historically as mere madness.
With this historic and mystic insight, Hamlet's decision to assume the guise of madness becomes more significant than a simple means to buy him time before taking action against his Uncle. He is literally assuming his rightful title as descendant of Yorick and fool of the Danish court. Furthermore, he begins to physically take on some of the symbolic imagery from the 0 key image of the Tarot. In act one, Ophelia reports that he strangely approached her and left “with his head over his shoulder turn'd, he seemed to find his way without his eyes; for out o’ doors he went without their helps” (II.i.98–100). Hamlet carries himself in the same manner as the fool in the image of the Tarot, with direction, yet without directing his gaze in that course. Hamlet's ability to go, without seeing where he is going, is witness to his seemingly increased capacity to commune outside of the primary senses, a witness that he is beginning to operate, as suggested by the image, through the super-consciousness of mind. In the same act, Hamlet divulges to his friends, “I am but mad north-north west; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw” (II.ii.373). This alludes to the direction in which the fool's image travels, northwest, “toward a direction which, for Masonic and other occult reasons, has for millenniums been symbolic of the unknown, and of the state just prior to the initiation of a creative process” (Case 32), a creative process that Hamlet undertakes to discover the truth concerning his father's spirit's charge. Finally, Hamlet engages in a peculiar conversation with Ophelia, in which, he states, “That's a fair thought to lie between maid's legs.” Ophelia does not follow so she asks, “What is, my lord?” to which Hamlet replies, “No-thing” (III.ii.10–12). The meaning of this statement is difficult and many interpretations have been given, but the mere fact that he uses the term “No-thing,” which we have already established to be the direct meaning of the 0 key or fool card of the Tarot, is highly significant. It is Hamlet's declaration that he is the no-thing from whence all things proceed, otherwise known as the fool of the Tarot. Furthermore, it is far from coincidental that this declaration comes immediately prior to a second declaration of his station as the wise-fool in line 116.

Hamlet's role as the wise-fool is in continual and direct conflict with the fool's character of Polonius, who is illustrated in another image used for the fool card. In this second image, we see a boy dressed in motley clothes, ripped at the leg. He also looks up, but to the rear, and his direction of travel is of no concern to him. What this traveler doesn’t see in his carelessness is the abyss ahead where a crocodile awaits the boy for its next meal. A dog can also be seen viciously biting the boy's leg, to which the boy pays no heed. This image and its meaning seem to take on less esoteric meaning and more literal symbolism. The fool is this picture represents a careless, foolish life heading directly toward its own destruction, much like the character of Polonius. The dog represents the base things of the world, which plague him, but to which he has no regard. In the case of Polonius, we find his ambition to find favor in the eyes of the King and Queen to be the worldly things with which he is plagued. He is a miserable life, heading for a miserable death. “In
him is depicted the tragedy of the family of beings called ‘human,’ which inhabit this planet” (Sadhu 454).

Polarity between two fools, as we see here, is not uncommon in Shakespeare. For example, we also find it in As You Like It between Touchstone and Jacques. Jacques, who often voices his envy of Touchstone’s privileges as court fool, tries hard to crack wit but always comes out lacking. His foolish melancholy becomes a source of entertainment to others, particularly Touchstone, who delights in pointing out Jacques’s folly. Jacques takes no notice however. “His imperturbable self-esteem makes Jacques ludicrous to other but never to himself” (Goldsmith 92). In contrast, Touchstone is full of wit and constantly depreciating himself, a true sign of a wise-fool. Similar interplay is found in the ever-constant duel between the foreseeing Hamlet and the oblivious Polonius. With them, “the two methods of satirically attacking a subject or a person are sharply contrasted. The railing buffoon and the malcontent satirist hack away at their victims with a cleaver; the wise, ironical fool parries and thrusts with his rapierlike wit” (89).

Dueling between the two fools begins with their first encounter in act two, scene two. By this time, both characters have proven worthy of positions as court fools, Hamlet as the wise and Polonius as the knave. Hamlet’s parleys of wit begin with different members of the court, especially with his uncle Claudius in the second scene of the first act. In response to Claudius’s question, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” Hamlet replies, “Not so, my lord, I am too much i’th’ sun” (76, 77). Thus, the wit of Hamlet is well established upon his first appearance. Soon after, Hamlet proves his prophetic sight when he proclaims to Horatio, “My father—methinks I see my father—” (I.ii.84). This prophecy is followed by five others, the more impressive of which is given upon the arrival of the players when he says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,

He that plays the King shall be welcome—his majesty shall have tribute of me; the Adventurous Knight shall use his foil and target; the Lover shall not sigh gratis; the Humorous Man shall end his part in peace; the Clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickled o’th’ ear; and the Lady shall say her mind freely, or the blank verse shall halt for’t. What players are they? (II.ii.315–23)

The question “What players are they?” rings like a challenge when considering what Hamlet just did. The players, or rather the characters he just named, are all those, excepting of course his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who will be dead by the end of the play: King Claudius will receive Hamlet’s tribute of death; Leartes will have the chance to use his weapon of choice; Queen Gertrude will not go unpunished for her offenses; Hamlet will die, having fulfilled his pledge with certainty and clarity of mind; everyone will laugh at Polonius for his foolish remarks and behavior; and Ophelia will go mad, allowing her to rant her mind as she pleases. By this, Shakespeare has proven Hamlet the prophetic fool just like the fools of old Hebrew, Christian, Celtic, and Norse origin.
On the other hand, as Hamlet's polar opposite, Polonius attempts to prophesy the cause of Hamlet's lunacy is absolutely wrong. His folly is proved by his rash and impulsive conclusion that because Ophelia obeyed her father and set back Hamlet's letters, Hamlet has gone mad out of love. His folly is further confirmed when he proudly proclaims to the King and Queen, "Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit, and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief. Your noble son is mad. Mad call I it, for, to define true madness, what else is't but to be nothing else but mad?" (II.i.91–93). To his lack of wit, the Queen confirms, "More matter with less art" (95), a gentler way of encouraging him to get to the point, while the audience chuckles or roars over the buffoonery of Polonius' behavior.

Like John the Baptist and true to the form of a wise-fool, Hamlet becomes increasingly aware of his own personal folly and does not hesitate to voice it, at first in private and later in public. After the first player's speech, we find Hamlet wrestling with his will and faith, amidst which he says

> O What a rogue and peasant slave am I! Is it not monstrous that this player here, but in a fiction [. . .] could force his soul so to his whole conceit [. . .] what's Hecuba to him [. . .] that he should weep for her? What would he do had he the motive [. . .] that I have? [. . .] Am I a coward? [. . .] For it cannot be that I am pigeon-livered and lack gall to make oppression, or ere this I should have fatted all the region kites with this slave's offal [. . .]. Why, what an ass am I! (II.i.537–71)

In his quarrel with Ophelia, he outright proclaims, "We are arrant knaves all. Believe none of us" (III.i.129–30). Fortunately, this self-mutilation does not last forever—sometimes Hamlet even speaks of his folly with solemnity and wit like a true wise-fool. The first of this change is seen in act two, scene two as Hamlet speaks with his newly arrived friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. "Beggar that I am," he says, "I am even poor in thanks" (270). Later, at the grave of Ophelia, Hamlet reflects on death and the nothingness of life to Horatio.

> To what base uses we may return, Horatio. Why, may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-hole? [. . .] As thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust. The dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel? (V.i.193–206)

Again, in contrast to Hamlet's base attitude towards self, Polonius thinks himself nothing less than the very harbinger of wit and wisdom, particularly when talking to the King and Queen. To the King, he pompously declares, "And I do think—or else this brain of mine hunts not the trail of policy so sure as it hath used to do—that I have found the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (II.i.46–49). Later in telling his Majesty how Ophelia received Hamlet's tokens of love, he proceeds to brag.

> But what might you think, when I had seen this hot love on the wing, as I perceived it—I must tell you that—before my daughter told me, what might you,
or my dear majesty your queen here, think, if I had played the desk or table-book, or given my heart a winking mute and dumb, or looked upon this love with idle sight—what might you think? No, I went round to work, and my young mistress thus I did bespeak—And then I precepts gave her [. . .]. (II.ii.127–41)

Thus we have the wise-ass and the foolish-ass, which Hamlet titles both himself and Polonius. We have seen where he gives himself the title (II.iii.537–71), but it is in one of the best victories of Hamlet over Polonius when the foolish-ass receives his title. In fulfillment of Hamlet’s fourth prophecy, Polonius reports the arrival of the actors to Elsinore.

Polonius: The actors are come hither, my Lord.
Hamlet: Buzz, buzz.
Polonius: Upon my honor—
Hamlet: Then came each actor on his ass— (II.ii.390)

That the actors arrived, ironically riding upon Polonius’s honor is to Hamlet and the observer, to have come riding in upon an ass. The duel continues in victory after victory for Hamlet over the knave Polonius. Before he approaches Hamlet in scene two of act two, Polonius assures the King and Queen, “If he love her not, and be not from his reason fallen thereon, let me be no assistant for a state, but keep a farm and carters” (II.ii.164–67). Just as he did with his first words to Claudius, Hamlet not only puts Polonius to shame, but he also displays his second-sight or “super-conscious” again by calling Polonius a fishmonger. Thus, instead of a carter of wheat or some other grain, Polonius must settle for carting fish. After the players arrive, and the first player gives his speech, they are heartily welcomed and told, regarding Polonius, “Very well. Follow that lord, and look you mock him not” (II.ii.532). In this counsel not to mock good Polonius, Hamlet encourages the players to do just that. And so Polonius exits again with a few stripes. In the next act, scene two, we find the entire court gathered together to see the players’ performance of Hamlet’s mousetrap. Here Polonius is asked of Hamlet,

Hamlet: My lord, you played once i’th’ university, you say?
Polonius: That I did, my lord, and was accounted a good actor.
Hamlet: And what did you enact?
Polonius: I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i’th’ capitol. Brutus killed me.
Hamlet: It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there. (91–99)

Not that it was bad of Brutus to kill Polonius. On the contrary, it was good to kill him, but not in front of the capitol. The final of victory of wit comes in the same act, scene four. When bid by Polonius to come to his mother, Hamlet begins to parlay with him more directly, but it is apparent that Polonius has given up.

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius: By th’ mass, and it’s like a camel indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale?
Polonius: Very like a whale.
Hamlet: . . . They fool me to the top of my bent. (359–66)

The challenge of wit all gone from Polonius leaves him with no more service to render the court as knavish-fool and upon his next encounter with Hamlet, Polonius is discharged. Hamlet kills Polonius behind the arras and bids him in sorrow, “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell” (III.iv.39).

Thus it is established. Hamlet has chosen to assume his hereditary title of wise-fool to the Danish court. Not for penance, not for holiness, not for money, but for revenge. In so doing, he must defend his position from other would-be fools, just as he must defend the honor of the Danish throne as the Prince. This is a fool’s play. When we are not absorbed in the process of self-realization and transcendence that Hamlet must undergo in developing into the wise-fool, we are happily engaged in his duel of wit against the foolish arrogance of Polonius.

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