

The Fool's Pedagogy: Jestng for Liminal Learning

Timothy McDonough

University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign

The fool emerged as a particularly thought-provoking figure within the literature of the Renaissance, especially the early Renaissance, making its appearance in the novels *Don Quixote* and *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, as well as serving as a mouthpiece for the philosophers who introduced Humanism, Erasmus and Nicholas of Cusa. These writers and philosophers relied upon the fool's role to create meanings out of the ambiguities of the liminality of the early Renaissance. Basically, the world that was flat was becoming round, the truth of theology was being challenged by science, and the dominance of the church was giving way to the nation-state. To assist the people engaged in and living through this transformation, the fool offered a form of communication that encouraged an unbinding of thought and negotiations between incompatible possibilities. Not only did the fool's rhetoric allow for such a movement in thought, but also encouraged a positioning of the subject (the reader or interlocutor) in such a way that he or she could manage the shift in world conception gracefully.

My intent in this presentation is to bring to light the "seriousness" of the rhetoric of the fool, especially its usefulness in achieving pedagogical ends. This discussion seeks to answer three questions concerning the fool's pedagogy: (1) what is the goal to be attained through the use of the fool's pedagogical practices; (2) what is the reason for resorting to a fool's style of discourse in the educational process; and (3) what are some of the features of the method by which the fool achieves his/her pedagogical ends.

For an example of the fool as teacher I will turn to two primary sources. The first exemplary fool will be Falstaff from Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*. The second will be Erasmus' characterization of the Goddess Folly in his *Praise of Folly*. These exemplars both have their origin in the Renaissance culture of Europe. The Renaissance provides us with some of the most explicit examples of this pedagogical type due to certain historical and intellectual characteristics of the age. There are other examples from this period to which we could point, most notably, the writings of Rabelais, Sir Thomas Moore, and Voltaire. But the character of the fool as teacher has appeared throughout history. In the classical period, Diogenes embodied this role and Aristophanes mastered the rhetoric employed by the fool in his comedies. In our own period, we might be able to point to representatives of deconstruction, such as Bataille, Lacan, and Derrida, as occasionally engaging in this mode of instructive foolery.

The fools that will be studied herein are not simpletons or individuals who have made themselves foolish in the eyes of their contemporaries through thoughtless action. The fools examined are exemplars of the sage-fool, that is, individuals of intelligence and wisdom who have chosen to play the role of fool in order to achieve pedagogical ends. They are, as both Shakespeare and Erasmus describe them,

"sileni," borrowing from the description of Socrates by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Therein, Alcibiades stated:

I'm going to use some imagery to help me praise Socrates, gentlemen. *He* might think I'm going for comic effect, but actually the point of the imagery will be the truth, not mockery. It's my considered opinion, you see, that he's just like those Sileni you find sitting in sculptors' shops, the ones they make holding wind-pipes or reed-pipes, which when you opened them up are found to contain effigies of gods inside.¹

(Sileni were small pottery vessels shaped like little jovial characters with chubby cheeks and ridiculous expressions. They were common in classical Greek households.) Sileni were also used to contain medicines, as well as the effigies to which Alcibiades referred. They represented comic figures that contained within them the means to spiritual and physical healing. These figures assumed outward appearances that helped them bring their extra-mundane influence into play in the common-sense, daily world.

Now, there are fools and there are fools. The fools I am describing have chosen this as a social role because this role provides them with what they regard to be the best means for achieving their ends. The *role* of fool is advantageous due the nature of the knowledge which they seek to teach and the resistances to the learning of such knowledge in those who most require it. For example, one thing they teach includes recognition of ignorance. They do this not to praise the state of ignorance, to pander to the weak, or to appease the exploited. It is an empowering recognition of the all-too-human condition which they teach. But to get someone, especially someone in a position of power, to recognize the implications of their own ignorance is a task that requires a light touch. This is but one way that the pedagogy of the fool proves effective. (From this example I do not want to give the impression that this method is only useful for teaching people to behave ethically. The virtues that the fool would teach are necessary for the promotion of any human inquiry.)

The fool's style of pedagogy is anything but didactic. He is not engaged in a direct transmission of knowledge from himself as expert to his student. There is never the question of learning to emulate. The fool does not want his interlocutor to accept the validity of his statements, but rather to recognize the *possibility* of attaining truth and the conditions attaining to this possibility of truth. The knowledge that he would impart is a type of knowledge Kierkegaard refers to as subjective, a type he opposed to the objective knowledge of the world-historically oriented individuals. Kierkegaard's subjective knowledge resists any attempt at direct communication. It demands an indirect form which encourages the interlocutor to engage in a reflexive movement that not only forces the gaze of the interlocutor back upon herself but is doubly reflexive in that it forces the interlocutor to reflect upon the consequences of her efforts to communicate her subjective knowledge in her relation to others.

One of the goals of the fool's pedagogy is to achieve a shifting of the comportment of her interlocutor. Comportment is similar to attitude, but it is not merely a presentation of oneself to others. Comportment has existential qualities that make it essential in establishing one's relationship to the condition of being in-the-world-amongst-others. How one comports oneself has to do with how one is as a

living, interacting, questioning entity. The fool is teaching not a specific knowledge but rather a way to position oneself in inquiry, in the *mutual* pursuit of goods and truths, which often must occur across difference.

The fool's discourse is effective against deeply rooted presuppositions. Above, in my definition of comportment, I used the notion of "entity" to present the picture of an individuated agent. This presupposes a relation of oneself to others that is not necessarily the only basic comportment to be taken, that is, as an individual agent confronting an individuated object. The fool's discursive style can take advantage of such reifications or top-heaviness of terms to work against unseen biases. For example, one might rhyme or pun "entity" with "enmity" to reveal the antagonism of rigid conceptions of self toward others, antagonistic relations embedded in our language. This is one reason why the fool's pedagogy is so potent. The indirection of her jests allows us to subvert the rules of a language that presupposes a certain comportment on the part of its speakers. The fool's rhymes and puns, in their ridiculous juxtapositioning of terms, can be revealing of the role of language in the support of specific belief systems.

The first example of the fool's discourse that I will examine is the example of the teaching of Prince Hal by Falstaff in Shakespeare's play *King Henry IV, part I*. Falstaff is a prodigious knight past his prime who spends much of his time at taverns and paying for his indulgences through credit, begging, borrowing or stealing. He is quick of wit and eloquent, and his reasoning is as constant and changeable as the seasons. Hal is a prodigal prince who has joined up with Falstaff and his gang. We should not write Falstaff off as a deviant and corruptor of the youthful Hal. Falstaff is a personification of life, abundant and mocking of our pretensions to overcome nature. He may not be a paragon of transcendental virtue, but he may be a good example of the worldly articulation of virtues.

The errant knight introduces the prodigal prince to a side of life which he might never have known as heir to the throne. And yet, it is a side of life that he will need to understand if he is to rule justly. The times are changing, and nobility is beset. Standards of government are being questioned, and the idea of the rights of men as individuals is emergent. Those who would rule well in these changing conditions must respond out of understanding and experience, not prejudice and doctrine. Falstaff is engaged in teaching Hal something of the nature of the virtues and the possible improprieties of judgment.

That Falstaff has taken up this role (as teacher to the prince) we can see in the first scene in which Falstaff and Hal are introduced. The first line is a question posed by Falstaff to Hal. "Now Hal, what time of day is it, lad?" This is an evaluative question which other fools in Shakespeare also use to ask, "How do you stand now in relation to the times?" Falstaff is quizzing Hal and forcing him to evaluate his own relation to his position and his evolving beliefs. To Hal's response that "thou has forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldest truly know. What the devil hast thou to do with the time of the day?" Falstaff responds,

Indeed you come near me now, Hal; for we that take purses go by the moon and the seven stars, and not by Phoebus, he, that wandring knight so fair. And I prithee, sweet wag, when thou art a king, as, God save thy grace — majesty I should say, for grace thou wilt have none

Hal. What, none?

Falstaff. No, by my troth: not so much as will serve to be prologue to an egg and butter.²

Already in these first few lines introducing these characters and their relationship we see a number of factors relevant to a description of a fool's pedagogy. For one thing, we see the use of indirect communication, metaphor and punning, playing upon words in order to get across a meaning that is denied by direct questioning.

The play upon the words "majesty" and "grace," taking advantage of the multiple meanings of grace, exemplifies the fool's discourse. It is a matter of pointing out that the words "grace" and "majesty" participate in a string of connotations facilitating confusion, for the meant meaning seems to be apparent yet on examination could be otherwise. In the case of grace, the prince assumes his right to the term's ethical significance as a matter of birth supported by a structure of power. But the knight Falstaff, through a playful manipulation of the term in relation to "majesty," turns the meaning away from the ideologically frozen appellations due the king. He effectively separates and reveals the relation between the ethical and the political meanings. Their close relation is assumed and obscured by the rigid presumptions of rank. By this play he reminds the prince that grace and majesty may also require earning through action and character, if they are to bear their potential ethical significance.

Falstaff stages other lessons on virtue, including courage and friendship, which do not take on the polite and pedigreed style of a royal tutor. For instance, he stages a bit of banditry with Hal and engages Hal in a mocking bout of role-playing, in which Falstaff takes the role of the King and Hal plays himself, and then they switch roles. All this results in some comedy and a chance for Hal to view this potentially antagonistic confrontation from multiple perspectives — to play experimentally within these opposing positions. Falstaff's lessons partake of alterior and deviant modes of teaching. But his lessons cannot be had at court. Instead, if he is to teach the prince about virtues as they are required of us by the world and our relations among men and women, then he must move contrariwise to the court, cutting across its strictures and rules, in order to reveal that the virtues are of the world and as mutable as the laws.

These are useful lessons for the man whose body is to be equated with the lifeblood of the land, the body politic. Falstaff is teaching a worldly socio-politics to a monarch-to-be. A fool, someone able to speak indirectly about sensitive issues without boring or offending too much the young prince, is the only person able to introduce to such feudal-power-in-waiting the radical and nascent concept of humanistic justice. (Also to be taken into consideration here is the issue of power and the usefulness of the fool's role when a teacher needs to avoid the retribitional stroke which his interlocutor is capable of wielding.)

Falstaff is not delivering a grand eloquent statement of doctrine. He never utters statements on law, rights, or maxims of ethical conduct. What he does is point out a stance in judgment, a positioning required for inquiry into the foundations of lawmaking, a position one must take in order to acknowledge the possibility of

alterior constructions of a meaningful politics. Falstaff the ex-revolutionary uses the role of the fool to teach the heir-apparent the virtues needed for inquiry into questions of power and ethics.

The fool's discourse plays self-consciously with patterns of signification and thus is particularly well suited for disrupting the symbolic logic that undergirds an existing worldview. The pedagogical strength of this discourse lies in revealing the structure underneath beliefs, the symbolic nature of the structure, and the constructed nature of the symbolic ordering. The capacity to reveal this malleability of meaning structures undermines the hegemonic pretensions of worldviews. The fool is not teaching an ideological critique that assumes a right or a wrong, but a position which dances between possibilities revealing the fluidity of the structures and the multiplicity of possible positions one can assume within the arena of ideological contest, inquiry and debate.

We see this fool's play, or work, in the example of Falstaff trying to educate the young prince during a time of revolution. Falstaff takes up a position not in favor of one side or the other, nor superior to either, but rather a position of *indifference*. This indifference to the superstructural ideological debates is a means of establishing a firm foothold, a touchstone as it were, from which to observe the debates and their impositions upon society. What the fool teaches is social knowledge, a social epistemology that points not to transcendental truths, but to the embeddedness of truths and their emergence only in the actions and interactions between meaning-making, symbolically capable actors.

The fool's humor makes the instruction fun. It is a game, a momentary engagement sharply distinguished from the mundane course of the world. The fool provides the frame within which something alterior is given the space to happen. His interlocutor knows that one will only be temporarily engaged with the fool; then it is back to the norm. But if the fool has done a good job of teaching a graceful comportment toward socially held truths, then there is the possibility that this will give the interlocutor some additional freedom of movement in her everyday social interactions and, moreover, give her the tools which will allow her to become an active participant in the creation of her community's developing norms and truths.

I will now turn to a discussion of Erasmus' use of the fool's discourse. Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* was written in 1509.³ During this time, Ecclesiastic control over the institutions of higher learning seriously curtailed the course of inquiry, although humanist scholars such as Erasmus were working to prepare the way for future challenges. The men of science were beginning to assert themselves. Copernicus would publish *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* in 1543. Galileo would seek to prove his theories through experimentation in 1623. The challenges to church authority which would erupt in the wars of religion and effectively split Europe in half were beginning to take form. Erasmus was very aware of the clouds on the horizon. To a large extent his efforts were in favor of neither side in the coming dispute; rather he turned to the job of ensuring that the coming storm would do as little irrevocable harm as possible. Erasmus recognized the need for and was himself a force for change, but he represented a middle position which propounded above

all else the virtue of *sophrosyne*, that is, temperance and wisdom, in matters of human knowledge and action.

It is thus in his attempt to mediate between these forces — the one an old hegemonic force, the others nascent but potentially revolutionary forces — that Erasmus elects to assume the role of fool. More specifically, he chooses to address both sides in this coming conflagration through the medium of Folly, the goddess herself. Erasmus has Folly praise the many ideologically bound combatants for their glorification of her through their actions. Folly's praise, though couched in a language of thanksgiving from a god, implicates those named in the establishment of her kingdom on earth.

In addressing the Scholastic Theologians, Erasmus was speaking to a group that had for many centuries been secure from any outside threat to their doctrinal positions and hegemonic authority. This security had produced a certain propensity for indulgence and conceit that left them ill prepared for the transition and transformation of thought which was occurring during the Renaissance. Erasmus' goal was to point out to the Schoolmen, through an immanent critique of their practices, how they had produced in themselves blindnesses which contradicted the substance of their own teaching and made them unfit for dealing with the new world that was emerging around them. Erasmus in the guise of Folly addressed them thus:

No other people are less ready to acknowledge my services to them; yet they're obliged to me on several important scores, for they cocker up their own self-esteem, as if raising themselves to a seventh heaven, and from that vantage look down on the rest of the human race as so many dumb beasts crawling the ground — so lowly as to be almost pitiful. Meanwhile, they protect themselves with a hedge full of academic definitions, logical argumentations, inferential corollaries, explicit and implicit propositions; they blossom out with so many "subterfuges" that the net of Vulcan couldn't hold them down.⁴

And then a little later in a less directly critical, more humorous style, Folly states,

But I think Christians would be well advised if, instead of building up all those cumbersome armies with which they've been fighting indecisive wars for some time now, they sent against the Turks and Saracens some of our most invincible Albertists. Then I think the world would behold a most hilarious battle and a victory such as was never seen before. Who is so cold-blooded that the clash of these mighty intellects would not excite him? Who so stupid as not to be stirred by these keen sarcasms? Who so piercing of visage as not to be overwhelmed by the smoke-screen of verbiage?⁵

According to the judgment of Folly, such behavior marked them as part of her congregation. Erasmus hoped they might recognize this through a moment of self-examination in the brief space of relaxation offered to them in their listening to Folly. In their reading of this comic text, perhaps they could recognize their shortcomings in regards to those virtues which they preached and start to practice them.

Throughout the text, Folly's "praise" of the men of science occurs in close conjunction with her treatment of the theologians. The conflict in perspectives, ideologies, and worldviews between these two groups is clearly established, as well as their shared participation in the attributes of Folly. Bringing them together for such mocking treatment was a way of trying to whittle down the arrogance and mutual antipathy of both groups. To laugh at her treatment of one group and then to read another and take offense would surely give pause to consider one's own hypocrisy.

In his critique of the Scientific Rationalists, Erasmus uses Folly's praise to draw attention to their failure to recognize the role of emotions and imagination as constitutive factors in their pursuits. So certain are they of Reason and its ability to penetrate the veils of appearance that they fail to understand even their own mediatory role in the creation of knowledge. It is this capacity for passing over what is human in their efforts to uncover the eternal verities of nature with which Erasmus is most concerned in regards to encouraging self-reflexive critique on the part of these men of science. Folly ventures the following praise,

Come next the natural philosophers, long of beard and furry of gown, who declare that they alone possess wisdom, the rest of mankind being capable of nothing more than fleeting impressions. How agreeably they hallucinate when they construct innumerable worlds, measuring sun, moon, stars, and heavenly orbits as if with thumb and tape-rule... [T]hey act as if they were in on all the secrets of nature who created the universe, as if they came down to us bearing the word direct from on high.⁶

And then in another place, Folly adds,

So it is among all men, those are farthest from felicity who strive most earnestly for knowledge, showing themselves double fools, first as they are born men, and then because they have forgotten that basic condition, and like the giants make war on nature with the machinery of their learning.⁷

In the same way that Erasmus criticized the Theologians for lacking the virtues necessary to pursue and realize the larger goals which they set for themselves, he engages the scientific rationalists urging them to engage in self-reflexive criticism that might reveal problematic features internal to their practice which contradict their goals. The shared blindness of the two warring campaigners for truth stems largely from an intemperate pride that, if addressed, may allow for a bit of opening up on both sides and the creation of a ground for common inquiry.

Erasmus' intention was not to undermine the position of either camp, but rather to seek to bring each to a position in which a middle way could be peacefully and harmoniously established, so that the benefits of both worldviews could be realized and some of the narrow-mindedness of their most vehement supporters could be countered. Moreover, he was trying to teach the general readers of the *Praise of Folly* to recognize the play of forces which was occurring in the rarified air between these visions of truth, which had serious implications for the immediate and not so immediate future of Europe. The clash between these worldviews, if not mediated wisely, would surely limit and negatively condition the realization of either of their worthy projects aimed at the advancement of humanity's spiritual and intellectual, as well as material and collective, existence. Thus he *praises* and *critiques* both in the same breath.

Erasmus is mediating between powerful ideological stances not to create a compromise or assert a better position, but to allow for a wise transition. Erasmus' pedagogy is above all meant to make possible a historical transformation exhibiting a modicum of grace and wisdom. The clash of ideologies, if not mediated by a concern for general humanity and attention to virtuous mutual engagement, would almost certainly result in a violent exchange between powerful parties. In such a one-sided, unreflexive resolution the possible goods of one side are likely to be neglected

while the succeeding worldview would almost certainly be warped by its own exaggerated self-love.

What Erasmus is trying to get all parties to reflect upon is their mutual folly and humanity. He is urging a recognition on the part of the dominant hegemonic and decaying ideology that it is a participant in the cyclical historical movement in which birth and decay are continuous and the old must prepare the grounds for the new — that there is a way to pass with grace and to assure the wisdom which the old worldview has to offer is not lost with its going-under but is continued into the next generation. Likewise, he is urging the emergent worldviews to temper their youthful exuberance and learn to respect the complexity of the human world in which they are necessarily embedded. Erasmus takes on the opposing worldviews and reveals their essential ground in a common human folly, not to condemn both, but to praise them, and to allow the new spirit, mind, and body politic a chance to develop a position that mutually recognizes the humanity, and the benefits to humanity, of both disputants.

It seems strange that Folly is the best teacher of Grace, but in the situation of transition in which strong ideologies are at war, the pedagogical style of folly is the only one that can engage both parties, offend both to the extent needed to get their attention without enraging either, and encourage self-reflection by all. We see this same pedagogy at work in the example of Falstaff and Hal, but at an individual level in which the embodiment of Monarchy must learn grace in a period of political transformation. Any liminal moment, any moment of passage, requires this form of dialectical development in which the individual or society retains their identity though at a new stage of maturity or history. The fool reoccurs archetypically as a companion during such crossings.

The jests of the fool should not be taken lightly for they anatomize our faults; to continue in unreflexive ignorance after being so engaged in a pedagogical exchange is to point out that we just don't get it, that we lack the reflexivity to grow. The fool does serious work in contexts where that work cannot be otherwise achieved. Respect for the fool is due. Many educators who remain in great esteem have taken on the motley in one form or other. And some who we do not usually regard as educators have under this disguise guided many through times of apparent irresolvable contradiction. Socrates and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, all mastered aspects of the fool's discourse, as well as such figures as the Dadaists during World War I and Lenny Bruce during the Civil Rights Movement.

To establish a positive determination of the knowledge and beliefs that will emerge as dominant out of the period of transition is not a goal or a possible outcome of the fool's pedagogy. The fool can only position his interlocutors in such a way that they can see their worldviews as symbolic constructs manipulable and manipulating. The sage uses the role of fool to get his students into a position, to coach them into a comportment, from which they can analyze the ideologies at play in the current field of social action. From there, with an understanding of their potential creative role, they are prepared to act in a way that generates the symbolic relations which may grow to constitute a virtuous harmonizing of the contending ideological positions.

When we laugh at the jests of the fool, we are not laughing at the absurdity of his statements, but at our recognition that within his discourse he is doing something we thought undoable, questioning something unquestionable. We laugh because we catch on to how he is manipulating the symbolic logic of our discourse in order to communicate that which is nonsensical according to conventional grammars. We laugh due to an emergent sense of power that comes with the recognition of our capacity to transgress boundaries of meaning-making we did not know were delimiting alterior possibilities. The fool's pedagogy *reminds* us of our capacity to play formidably with the symbolic structures of meaning.

For response see essay by Blacker

1. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 215b.
2. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part One* (New York: Signet Classic, 1998), 7-8.
3. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings*, ed. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).
4. *Ibid.*, 57.
5. *Ibid.*, 60.
6. *Ibid.*, 55.
7. *Ibid.*, 35.