

Excellent Foppery - Comedy in Shakespeare's tragedies

Daniel Stanley investigates the subtle and powerful role humour plays both structurally and dramatically in Shakespeare's tragedies. He looks in particular at Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, King Lear and Othello.

Gravediggers' humour

A musician had given orders that when he died, his flute was to be buried with him. The undertaker asked the widow, 'What do you think, madam?' 'Well,' she replied, 'I thought it a blessing he didn't play the piano.'

This kind of humour, illustrative of the close relationship between comedy and tragedy, would have been appreciated by Shakespeare. The notion of a poignant moment tinged with relief but then diminished by practical, earthly considerations seems inappropriate but inescapably amusing. Indeed, Hamlet's graveyard clowns seem to understand that despair and laughter are twin responses to tragedy. Charged with the job of burying the poor drowned Ophelia, their scene quickly turns into black comedy as one clown asks another a riddle:

Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright or a carpenter?

The solution, like something from a Christmas cracker, soon follows:

a gravemaker - the houses he makes last till Doomsday.

All their discussions and mock-philosophical banter about drowning seem to provide a little light relief, albeit still concerned with the subject of death.

And yet, like other humorous moments in Shakespeare's tragedies, their placement within the play is loaded with structural and dramatic significance. Here, in the final act, Hamlet's beleaguered sweetheart has just drowned herself and it will only be a few lines before Hamlet himself lifts up the skull of the King's former jester and delivers his famous 'Alas, poor Yorick' speech.

'The readiness is all'

Structurally, a scene of dark comedy can also be seen to prepare the tragic hero, and audience, for the acceptance of truth. Hamlet passes through the graveyard scene and reaches greater insight about the idea of mortality when he later says:

The readiness is all. Since no man knows of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

In this sense, the graveyard scene anticipates events that will lead to Hamlet's end. Hamlet states that man is no more likely than a sparrow to comprehend what comes after death. And the audience, too, senses that the duel with Laertes that follows will bring bleak finality.

Verbal duelling

In Romeo and Juliet it is a duel, too, that brings about a change in mood and a realisation on the part of the hero of his own weaknesses. Romeo's fatal brawl with Tybalt is foreshadowed by comedic verbal duelling with his friend Mercutio in Act 2, Scene 4. Complaining that Romeo abandoned his friends at the Capulet ball, Mercutio says:

You gave us the counterfeit last night

and when Romeo fails to comprehend he is told:

The slip, sir, the slip. Can you not conceive?

This begins an exchange filled by Shakespeare with riddles, puns and wordplay. The idea of a counterfeit coin suggests the double meanings of language that will be explored in order to demonstrate their relationship to truth. Mercutio is complaining about Romeo's lack of honesty towards his friends, but also towards himself. Here, a swift exchange of short lines and word duelling begins:

MERCUTIO:...such a case as yours constrains a man to bow in the hams.

ROMEO

Meaning, to curtsy.

MERCUTIO

Thou hast most kindly hit it.

ROMEO

A most courteous exposition.

MERCUTIO:

Nay, I am the very pink of courtesy.

ROMEO

Pink for flower.

MERCUTIO

Right.

ROMEO

Why, then is my pump well flowered.

MERCUTIO

Sure wit, follow me this jest now till thou hast worn out thy pump, that, when the single sole of it is worn, the jest may remain, after the wearing, sole singular.

ROMEO

O single-soled jest, solely singular for the singleness.

MERCUTIO

Come between us, good Benvolio! My wits faint.

Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 4, 51-69

Romeo is accused of being 'singularly' one-track minded but Mercutio's jest is that behind the slip of words, 'courtesy' to 'curtsy', 'pink of flower' to 'flowery pumps' (shoes), 'sole' to 'soul', is a singular truth. Once worn out, Romeo will be left with nothing to stand on and the joke will be on him. For his part, Romeo evades this, simply seeing the jest as 'single-soled', like the thin sole of a shoe. 'The slip', then, refers to the slippery nature of the meanings behind language that reflect Romeo's own evasiveness. The verbal duel continues, with Romeo seeming to have the upper hand. But with the friendship reaffirmed by witty banter, Mercutio has the last word, saying:

Now art thou Romeo. Now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature.

Here, however, the double side of 'art' as in 'are' and as in 'artifice', the opposite of natural, continues to make the question of what Romeo really 'is' a slippery one to pin down. Romeo himself comes closest to answering it in Act 3, Scene 1 when, having been involved with Mercutio's death and losing himself to an impulsive revenge upon Tybalt, he moans, 'I am fortune's fool!'

Clowns, fools and jesters

So far we have seen how comedy prepares the way for truths to be revealed to both audience and hero. Clowns and jesters, then, play an important dramatic and structural role within Shakespeare's tragedies. Indeed, the audience feels the sudden change in mood brought by Mercutio's final lines. He jokes as he lies dying, 'ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man'. And yet, what stands out is not his wit, but the fear invoked by his repeated curse: 'A plague a'both your houses'. His last words, 'Your houses' toll the death knell of comedy and romance and mark the onset of tragedy. Taken off stage, his words remain, haunting the lovers and their families to the very end.

Licensed fools

Another joker whose disappearance marks a shift towards tragedy is King Lear's Fool. Shakespeare's comedies, such as *Twelfth Night*, contain instances of clowns and fools who play an important role in the confusion and errors of identity that make up the core humour of the drama. Sometimes simple minded, the conventional fool is the object of much mirth but he often also states truths and has the licence to say things that others can't. Fools in Shakespeare often use wit and clever wordplay for satirical ends, drawing attention to the flaws in their rulers or society, or the darker side of their world. This kind of satirical wit can act as a comic mirroring of the events of the plays. In Lear's tragedy,

however, we meet a fool whose ability to speak wisdom and truths is demonstrated in a play where questions about nature and reality versus illusion or artifice reign. In a dramatic sphere where truth is contested, rendered murky by disguise, intrigue and insincerity, it is the hero's metaphorical blindness that arguably leads to his downfall. The Fool's privileged position and the lowness of his social origins give him license to speak with honesty and truth. In *King Lear*, however, part of the tragedy lies in the fact that Lear consults his Fool too late; by Act 1, Scene 4 the seeds of tragedy have already been sown. The timing of the arrival of the Fool seems inopportune and his advice to Lear flippant in the light of the king already having given his kingdom away to his two scheming daughters, Goneril and Regan. Furthermore, he has disowned his most loving and faithful daughter Cordelia and banished the loyal Earl of Kent. And yet, Lear's relationship with his Fool is warm and full of trust. Unlike in the case of Kent, Lear listens to the Fool's criticisms, which Shakespeare fills with more riddles and wordplay. But behind the Fool's words lies the truth, and part of his function is to open Lear's eyes to it:

FOOL: ... Nuncle, give me an egg and I'll give thee two crowns. KING LEAR : What two crowns shall they be?

FOOL: Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle, and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou lovest thy crown i' the middle, and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thy ass on thy back o'er the dirt thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away... [Sings.]

*Fools had ne'er less grace in a year,
For wise men are grown foppish,
They know not how their wits to wear,
Their manners are so apish.*

To begin with, the Fool puns on crowns as in money as well as the halves of Lear's kingdom he has given up. He takes this further with the metaphor of the egg, out of which he creates two crowns and an image of a golden yoke representing his daughter, whose true value and love Lear had failed to recognise. In a third meaning of 'crown', Lear's head is held up for examination, dramatically significant given the madness that will shortly take hold of him. Lear is further ridiculed by the image of him carrying his own donkey, an inversion of natural order that the Fool compounds with the statement that wise men have become fools, so that the jester's own job seems seriously redundant.

Lear's folly

The essence of the Fool's joke is that Lear must have emptied his head of wits and good sense, strongly suggesting that the real fool here is Lear himself. His 'apish' decisions suddenly seem absurd to the audience, who are put in the position of deciding whether, as a tragic hero, he deserves our sympathy at all. This may be why Shakespeare has Lear continue to be blind to the truth and our pity for him is suspended until he undergoes great suffering and madness. Nonetheless, the Fool scenes are worthy of further study not only in the way their humour defuses the tension of the play, but in the part the character plays in helping Lear realise his mistakes. By that time, however, it is too late; the Fool is gone and Lear can only lament while holding the body of Cordelia in his arms: 'and my poor fool is hanged.'

Iago: a malevolent wit

The Fool's perceptive jests are enjoyable but his removal from action, like that of Mercutio's, signifies a dramatic step towards tragedy. The skull representing a king's dead jester, Yorick, also represents the death of laughter. As Hamlet himself asks:

Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?

In Othello, laughter also quickly dies. Iago is another trusted companion of the leader, who in a comedy might use his cleverness to quip and joke satirically about his world but in Iago that humour has gone sour and his clever wordplay performs an entirely different function. Iago has the Fool's position of trusted servant and confidant; however, his sharp wit is used for deceit and discord rather than the service of truth. 'I am not what I am', we are warned by 'Honest' Iago in the first scene of Othello. His openness is disarming, as are his light-hearted riddles and drinking songs, so that when Othello requires guidance, Iago's words are valued. In fact, Othello requires Iago to be true to himself when seeking to validate his insecurities about his wife, Desdemona: 'Give thy worst of thoughts the worst of words' he requests. Skilfully holding back, Iago eventually counsels Othello, 'it is in my nature's plague to spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy shapes faults that are not'. Iago's genius cunning is in using his honesty veiled by modesty to manipulate his master so that he may be trained to see for himself the proofs of infidelity between Desdemona and Cassio he looks for:

*if you please to hold him off a while
You shall by that perceive him [...]
Note if your lady strain his entertainment
... much will be seen in that.*

Having set him up, all Iago needs to do is to plant the proof, Desdemona's handkerchief, in Cassio's chamber and the trap is set. 'Thus credulous fools are caught' boasts Iago, with Othello having suffered a total breakdown:

and many worthy and chaste dames even thus/all guiltless, meet reproach.

A complex conclusion

There is little mirth to be found in Othello. In the other tragedies what comedy there is serves briefly, but only briefly, to make us laugh. It is a dark kind of comedy which uses language to point up harsh realities about characters, the world or the truth of human experience. In the end it reinforces the impact of the tragedy, and the pity we feel, as the protagonists tumble into insanity, indignity or death.

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