Fools and Disguise in
Shakespeare’s Middle Comedies

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Introduction

Among the characters categorized as a fool, this paper is focused on a court jester known as 'wise fool', which is particularly characteristic of Shakespearian plays. In his early comedies such as *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*, fools mainly appear as servants who seem to be rather closely related to main male characters like Antipholus or Petruchio. On the other hand, we can observe some shifts going on toward the middle comedies, in which the relationship between fools and heroines is more remarkable.

Take *As You Like It* for instance. Touchstone, a professional court jester, attends Celia and Rosalind, fleeing from the court to the forest of Arden along with them. By doing this he commits himself to a forlorn destiny with those women away from court. Likewise, Feste in *Twelfth Night* serves mistress Olivia and he also has considerable rapport with Viola, another main female character who disguises herself as a page, Cesario. That is to say, those women do not only stand close to the clowns, but also have inside them what we call the quality of Fools. In this paper we will examine their similarity in reference to some specific scenes in the comedies and consider how they function in the respective dramas.
I. As You Like It

Along with their profession, fools play a role as representing comic spirit. Not only do they portray comic relief, but also they contribute a great deal to the dramas, controlling a festive mood and leading it to the denouement. The heroines in the middle comedies seem to have much in common with the fools in terms of sustaining this kind of comedy spirit. In As You Like It, coming across Jaques who is full of melancholy in a forest, Rosalind presents a completely opposite viewpoint:

Ros. And your experience makes you sad. I had rather have a fool to make me merry than experience to make me sad, and to travel for it too!

(IV. i. 25-27)

In the forest of Arden, the gloom of Jaques and the gaiety of Rosalind make a clear contrast. At the same time, this contrast can be rendered as an analogy between the court jester, Touchstone and the heroine. Actually in Act II it is she who first notices and appreciates the wit of Touchstone. She seems to be the one who better understands the humour of a fool than any other.

Rosalind is keenly aware of multiple implications of the fool's statements, which is a trait another heroine Viola in Twelfth Night shares, too. As Touchstone parodies courtly romantic love with bawdy references, Rosalind would not flatly dismiss it. Rather, she shows a positive understanding of him.

Touch. I remember when I was in love I broke my sword upon a stone, and bid him take that for coming a-night to Jane Smile; and I remember the kissing of her batler, and the cow's dugs that her pretty chopt hands had milked; and
I remember the wooing of a peascod instead of her from whom I took two cods, and giving her them again, said with weeping tears, 'Wear these for my sake'. We that are true lovers run into strange capers; but as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly.

Ros. Thou speak'st wiser than thou art ware of.

(II.iv. 43-53)

It is obvious that her comment is meant for the last part of the philosophical remark of his: "We that are true lovers run into strange capers; but as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly." However, say that her remark covers Touchstone's state including the episode of Jane Smile and Rosalind comments with an apprehension of the sexual innuendo that Touchstone, 'as a jester, underlines the equivocal associations here,"(1) there appears to be a certain complicated image of the heroine which is far from just a conventionally simple romantic naive girl.

Furthermore, even in the middle of romance, Rosalind maintains a critical sense to be objective about the folly of love. Facing Orlando with whom she is in love, she speaks as follows:

Ros. Love is merely a madness, and I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do (III. iii. 388-389)

It sounds like a refrain of Touchstone's words we saw above. In another scene, the same refrain is repeated;

Ros. The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love-cause.

...But these are all lies: men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them but not for love.

(IV. i. 89-92, 101-103)
Both Troilus and Leander, who should have been the great patterns of love, are easily dismissed as old fictitious romance figures. Generally such a practical point of view of satire as this must be a monopoly of a fool. Shakespeare's comedies, however, represents a world in which heroines are credited with that critical perspective. Those heroines are linguistically powerful. Rosalind is just a case in point.

As many critics have agreed, *As You Like It* is a kind of pastoral parody. It is Touchstone that brings a critical view into the pastoral world of Arden by means of developing handy-dandy-like talk on nature and art. True to his name, the wise fool plays a role of touchstone. He tries and tests every person around him, and in the end through getting himself married to a rustic shepherdess, Phebe, he plays a deformed parody of Petrarchan love. Normally a fool remains single. So Touchstone is the exception rather than the rule. It is possible that he gets married for the sake of making fun of a romantic convention. Otherwise, a fool would not usually marry.

As well as Touchstone, Rosalind plays a complicated wooing game in a no less intricate way. Disguising herself as a boy Ganymede and then playing a role of affected 'Rosalind'; an admirable subject to be wooed by Orlando, she confronts him. As a result she faces Orlando in the double disguise. (It might seem even more intricate when Rosalind is played by a boy actor, not by a woman in the theatres of the Elizabethan era.) Cloaked in the name of Ganymede, Rosalind teases and trifles with Orlando. Taking on an androgynous trait, she acquires a dual perspective and voice along with her outward attire to cross genders. In spite of being in the center of a play which is going on, she keeps some alienated stance partly due to her male costume. Unlike Orlando whose perspective is restricted because of his role in the situation, Rosalind is able to see it from various angles. In this respect, she has a stance similar to the fool. Generally in Shakespeare's middle
comedies, a heroine as well as a fool sometimes plays a part of a 'chorus' who objectively makes a comment upon the course of events on the stage. In the epilogue, Rosalind speaks to the audience beyond the boarder between the real world and that of fiction on the stage. Feste too sings a song in the epilogue in Twelfth Night as if he wraps up the carnival in Illyria. They perform as an agent or a bridge between the audience and the dramas. Therefore it might be safe to say that their viewpoint is in a sense a pivotal point of each world of the drama.

II. Twelfth Night

Next, let us shift our attention to Twelfth Night, which is also widely acknowledged as an exquisite romantic comedy and well known for its disguised characters. Feste, a professional clown shows up as what is called 'the Lord of Misrule', an incarnation of festivals, as is represented by his name. It is inevitable that he makes discordance with steward Malvolio, an affected stern Puritan who is to spoil the mirth and pleasure. Between them, it is Olivia who referees and decides in favor of the fool. Then she remonstrates against the steward's conceited behavior. Here is also demonstrated a heroine who is on the side of a fool. Not only the mistress, but also Viola, the other heroine in the same drama, shows sympathy with Feste as well. Just once they meet each other alone in the play. That is a rather short dialogue (around seventy lines) and not much of consequence in terms of developing a plot. Still, the effect of their interaction cannot go unnoticed. Through their repartees, we can tell that Feste and Viola have much in common with each other in that both of them have a kind of comedy spirit.

Feste. indeed, words are very rascals, since bonds disgraced them. Viola. Thy reason, man?
Feste. Truth, sir, I can yield you none without words, and words
are grown so false, I am loath to prove reason with them.

(III. i. 17-21)

In response to Viola, Feste plainly points to evasiveness and arbitrariness of words, when he connects with the very crucial subject of this play, that is 'a natural perspective'.(3) Besides, he anticipates a certain modern philosophy, casting doubts on the consistency of words and contents, to put it in other words, signifier and signifiant.

Left by herself, Viola speaks in soliloquy:

Viola. This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,
And to do that well craves a kind of wit;
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time

(III. i. 50-53)

To appreciate wisdom of a fool can be a proof of unquestionably sharp discernment of herself. Her reference comparing herself to a fool; 'for now I am your fool.' (III. i. 129) was made, interestingly, in the presence of Olivia who is the mistress of Feste. With those words like 'I am not what I am' (126), 'That you do think you are not what you are' (124), she puzzles others, which should be originally a fool's specialty. She assumes the aspect of evasive identity in the same way as a fool or trickster does. In this way the heroine and the fool have a common quality and mirror each other when they encounter, as if they see a natural perspective held against each other. Thus we can see between them there exists a sort of complementary relationship which incites each of them to self-introspection.

In light of the chronology of Shakespeare's canon, Twelfth Night is generally believed to have been written later than As You Like It. That means Twelfth Night is set relatively close to the period in which the great tragedies and problem plays were
produced. Because of that, a touch of pathos is more prominent in *Twelfth Night* than *As You Like It*. That tone is reflected in the characterization of both the heroine and the fool. The same tendency can be true of transvestite. Compared to Rosalind taking advantage of her disguise and being able to control the situation, Viola is rather under the restrictions of her persona. Actually she is in a very awkward position and forced into a predicament near the climax. She even has a narrow escape from being killed by the man she adores. Viola laments over her dilemma, calling herself poor monster.

Viola. Disguise, I see thou art a wickedness,
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
How easy is it for the proper-false
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms! (II. i. 24-27)

However, it is also at that moment that Viola completely grasps the fallibility of both sexes due to her delicate situation.

M.T.Crane points out that "Traditional criticism of the play has often commented on Viola's role as 'a catalyst...who becomes the agent required to free Orsino and Olivia from the bondage of their self-delusions.""(4) Crane further argues that "Viola does seem uniquely able to see the problematic aspects of the spatial orientations of Orsino and Olivia or of suits of various kinds. She can see the containing function of the body as potentially dangerous and deceptive in various ways."(5) Paradoxically, the transvestite which is binding Viola can, on the other hand, set her free to talk:

Orsino. There is no woman's sides can bide the beating of so strong a passion as love doth give my heart; no woman's heart so big, to hold so much. They lack retention.

(II.iv. 89-92)
Viola. Ay, but I know---Too well what love women to men may owe. In faith, they are as true of heart as we. ...We men may say more, swear more, but indeed our shows are more than will

(99-102, 112-113)

Owing to her persona as a page, Viola can bring forth a counterargument in the face of Duke Orsino. Her claim that men have faults has all the more significance for her altered gender. It might as well to remember here that a fool is, by convention, granted a liberty of mocking or criticizing his master, even a king. This type of privilege seems to be conferred on Viola playing Cesario. Of course it is desired that both of them be careful not to overstep the social mark. In that sense, they are in a delicate position. And the fragile standpoint enables them to gain keener insight.

III. Festivity and Disguise

As we have examined, disguised heroines reveals quite a few characteristics similar to wise fools. Why is this? Take a look at their background. Both of them are endowed with power to upset establishment. Disguised heroines as well as fools can be traced back for their roots to seasonal festivity. C.L.Barber takes up social context of women's disguise and connects it with a 'holiday mirth' or 'festive liberty' of disguise which is peculiar to seasonal festivity. It's like a release, though temporarily, from everyday tension or strain. If masculinity symbolizes solid power or morality, then femininity is defined to symbolize flexibility to alleviate the stiffness symbolized by the former. This feature is attributed to disguised heroines and fools. In addition, they have much in common as characters capable of activating plots from the marginal point by means of their sharp insight. To endow the heroines with those fool-like characteristics does not only make the world of plays resilient but also contributes to developing the
characters. Therefore it eventually comes to enliven the middle comedies. The fools and disguised heroines can be regarded as a source of energy for those mature comedies.

IV. Paradigm shift

Meanwhile, transvestites seem to be an antithesis to social order, for it is to some extent an infringement on boundaries, allowing women to gain men's privileges. On the other hand it was also true that so as to secure social order, such a liminal figure as fools or disguised ones were needed. As is often pointed out, theatre was rather beneficial than threatening to the authority while it seems outrageous at first glance.(7) Theatres were a sort of place where people were relieved from daily pressures, which gave people a momentary sense of freedom. Therefore, though it might sound paradoxical, it was essential to have some doubts, shake and reinterpret some established codes in order to keep social stability. Given that, professional fools and disguised heroines have an important role to play.

Gary Waller argues women are of marginal groups, "economically disenfranchised, on conflict among class factions—in short on the marginal but insistent forces that challenge and may eventually break down a monolithic construction of power."(8) Both fools and disguised heroines have various contradictory factors themselves. And by bringing those odd characters into dramas, the dramatist may succeed in integrating the world of a play, giving it a wholeness.

The Elizabethan era can be described as a period of transition from the medieval to the modern. It provided rich fields for growing multifarious mingled popular culture including original characters like disguised heroines or wise fools of Shakespeare. There one could find a generous atmosphere in which folly and misrule were largely accepted. In the following Jacobean era, however, this wasn't the case any longer. Then under the reign of
James I, cynicism was holding sway\(^9\) Subsequently the hybrid view of fools' handy-dandy was underplayed. Instead, a monolithic mentality came to prevail. At the same time ambivalence symbolized by disguised heroines gradually declined. An ideal vision emphasizing a combination of contradictory viewpoints such as integrity of masculinity and femininity became secondary.

**Conclusion**

It is often the case with Shakespeare's romantic comedies that main male characters propose problems, playing a role of a distressed one while fools and heroines comment on and takes an initiative to settle the situation, observing from a detached point of view. The latter group is a key to revitalization of the world in a play. Terence Hawkes describes the body of Shakespearean comedy as follows, which is a typical explanation that has been largely accepted;

“It has three stages: first, that of an anticomical 'old' society that imposes restrictive laws from the 'outside': a world of uninvolved 'spectators'. Second, there is a stage of confusion and loss of identity, socially and sexually (boy-actors playing girls 'disguise' themselves as boys and so on). The third stage occurs when the confusion is resolved, socially and sexually, through the institution of marriage. The result is a 'new' society whose laws are permissive because concrete: felt, lived, and internalized by people who function, not as spectators of, but as participants in the society.”\(^{10}\)

Fools are in charge of restoring the original order to a chaotic world in the end in spite of their representing disorder. It is a heroine who newly inspires the protagonist who is otherwise in danger of an identity crisis and meanwhile a fool acts as an agent or mediator. Both show their talent to take advantage of their
extraordinary insight and verbal skill. Their states allow them to act toward center from their marginal place. Contrary to the protagonist whose perspective is restricted due to his position in the center of the issue or event, a heroine appears to be able to stand flexibly both in the center and its periphery.

Surely fools and disguised heroines cause misunderstanding or disorder. Yet it is chaos of the revitalizing kind, as Edward Berry explains, that from which order marvelously emerges. They possess considerable power to generate fortunate transformation which turns stagnation into chaos, and then into recovery. This power rises from their capacity to accept an ambiguous, contradictory situation or word. With an upside-down view professional fools who are good at playing with words are always aware of any potential for conversion. They come out of a topsy-turvy world. No wonder they are so subtle, given their delicate liminal stance in the social hierarchy. And that feature is conferred on a disguised heroine who is put into an ambivalent position in the play. It is initially a strategy to protect themselves from a social threat and to survive, but eventually it also serves to protect and revitalize the entire world of a play and give it a new life.

We can regard it as a dynamism of Shakespeare's comedy which is to attain reunion or restoration. And it is the product of the combination of the dramatist's mature creative skills and all-inclusive liberal atmosphere of the Elizabethan society. There, fools and disguised heroines played an indispensable role to realize the depth of comic vision in Shakespearean theatre.

Notes

(2) C.T.Onions, A Shakespeare Glossary, enlarged and revised throughout


(9) Hosokawa Makoto, Shakespeare no Disguise no Keifu (Gakushobo, 1995), p.11.


(11) Edward Berry, Shakespeare's Comic Rites (Cambridge U.P., 1984) notes that "Both the ritual and comic Structures are dynamic and progressive, precipitating a breakdown of order that creates, paradoxically, the conditions for a more perfect kind of integration," p.13 "Yet the chaos of the liminal world is ultimately regenerative." p.162.