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You're Never Too Old to Laugh: An Adaption of Shakespeare's Fool in the Modern Era

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The Shakespearean fool has been utilized in various forms of adaptations in the modern era. However, there is marked development over the course of Shakespeare's plays even in his own time. Earlier works catered to "slapstick" style humor while later plays, including *King Lear*, feature fools that introduce wisdom through humorous episodes. Christopher Moore's *Fool*, a novel published in 2009, adapts the figure of the Shakespearean fool to fit the novel-style tale of Pocket, fool to King Lear. Little attention has been paid to this written work, which contains academic merit beyond the play that it replicates. Moore capitalizes on the use of the fool by casting Pocket as the main source of driving action. This modern adaptation merges Shakespeare's two primary uses of fools, creating a bawdy and wise fool. These changes allow the original story and functions of fools to be easily relatable to modern audiences. The novel manages to combine original elements of the play with new additions that surprises and delights readers. *Fool* is an example of a modern adaptation that entertains, enlightens, and interprets Shakespeare to relate to an audience of non-specialists. Moore utilizes the fool character through the medium of the novel, focusing on Pocket's action and importance as a dualistic comic character of wisdom and humor.

The term fool entered the English lexicon in the late medieval period. Originally, the term meant both behaving silly and bawdy. The current *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* definition of fool reads: "one deficient in judgement or sense, one who acts or behaves stupidly, a silly person, a simpleton." This is not very different from what the term previously meant in the earlier English period, though it is currently used most commonly as an insult ("fool"). Many of Shakespeare's plays utilize the "fool" character in a different way, coinciding with the *OED* definition of "one who professionally counterfeits folly for the entertainment of others, a jester, clown." This type of fool may be more closely aligned with modern comedians, some forms of actors, or similar entertainers. In a way Pocket achieves this modern level of entertainer, going beyond the idea of

an idiot or simpleton which the first definition suggests. Though the term consistently is used in the form defined here, there is also an innuendo associated with fool, being “fooling around” in a sexual nature, which Pocket partakes in throughout the novel. Perhaps this combination of Pocket’s character, being an entertainer of others, a professional in his own right, and a rambunctious man of intimate physical contact that has made the novel so successful. *Fool* has been received remarkably well, becoming a *New York Times* bestseller and earning a 3.97 out of 5 stars on the website Goodreads. This Shakespearean tale has been redesigned to fit the modern comedic style, making it a success in the modern media.

Even though Moore’s treatment of the play is not precise, it still manages to teach readers about Shakespeare. Moore himself admits that in many ways, he’s “made a dog’s breakfast of English history, geography, *King Lear*, and the English language in general” (305). It is true that many of the original elements of *King Lear* have been altered minutely, if not drastically. The main characters remain, some with personality alterations or further character development not present in the original drama. The original time of *King Lear* as defined by Shakespeare was intentionally changed by Moore to better serve his purpose; the original Lear is estimated to have lived around A.D. 500 to 800, Shakespeare’s Lear exists at a later undefined date (a time in which earls, dukes, and kingdoms are present), and Moore’s Lear exists in the mythical Middle Ages (Moore 308). This change mostly influences the language of the characters present in Moore’s novel. Moore’s rendition of *King Lear* has altered many components of the original play, though his tale still manages to show audiences a rendition of a Shakespearean classic.

The idea of the fool in Shakespeare’s time was largely to accomplish one primary goal: relating to the audience. Many Shakespeare scholars agree that fools are designed to connect with the audience. Robert H. Bell, author of *Shakespeare’s Great Stage of Fools*, states that the fool is to act as one of the audience, “as if the fool is on our side and at one with us” (7). Further, Victor L. Cahn explains that Shakespeare’s fools “mirror our own uncertainty, wonder, or frustration” (89). This relatability makes fool characters that are fondly remembered beyond their low-level or high-level humor imparted during their time on stage. Fools end up taking a role of audience involvement, which Moore magnifies by creating a novel from the fool’s perspective.

The historical context of the Shakespearean plays relates to the portrayal of the characters and must be examined to understand the fool in his entirety. In Shakespeare's time, the actors and patrons largely influenced the writing of playwrights. The fool character used in earlier plays by Shakespeare was Will Kemp, a comedian known for his low-level humor, singing, and physical performances. Shakespeare wrote parts into his plays that catered to his personality and skill, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (Babula 2). Kemp was prone to adding to his lines and taking the limelight from other actors (Cahn 91). However, when Shakespeare continued the Henry plays after Kemp's character Falstaff was killed, Kemp lost his time onstage. This caused him to angrily leave the company of Shakespeare's actors. It was not until later that Robert Armin joins Shakespeare's company, a truth-teller and wise form of fool (Babula 3).

Robert Armin's comedic genius was extremely different from that of Kemp. Armin is said to be the only one in Shakespeare's company to be "a literary figure in his own right," as he wrote the book *Foole upon Foole* (Lippincott 244). His characteristics were more thoughtful, reflective, and witty. The form of fool Armin portrayed became able to criticize those holding high-power positions in the Shakespeare plays (Babula 5). These fools hold insight and tend to direct their truth-revealing comments to specific people of power (Cahn 91). The original fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* was specifically "thoughtful and introspective," which was modelled after the actual actor of the fool in the play, known as Robert Armin ("Fools" 186). *King Lear* falls within this realm of "wise fool." Similarly, earlier plays had fools that had outgoing personalities and talents, corresponding with the actor Will Kemp ("Fools" 186). Shakespeare was limited based on the actors that he had available. The personalities of the actors were intermingled with the fool characters Shakespeare created.

Christopher Moore had the luxury of creating his own perfect character, a melding of these two forces into a thoughtful and extroverted performer. Moore, creator of the 2009 *King Lear* adaptation novel *Fool*, goes beyond these two types of fools developed by Shakespeare and creates a new kind of fool, one that is both a performer and a teller of truth. This opens the fool character's appeal to a wider range of audiences as the combination of bawdy and clever jokes covers a wide range of comedic

styles. Pocket, the fool of Moore's novel, emerges as a relatable character to those who appreciate various types of humor.

Pocket's dualistic style of humor is developed throughout the novel in his dress, action, and insight. Pocket is not dressed in bright colored clothing, but instead wears black and is referred to as the Black Fool (Moore 21). This already distinguishes him as some form of intelligent fool, as he does not rely heavily on his garments to contribute to his routine of comedy. However, he does keep a small puppet named Jones that was designed in his likeness (Moore 6). Jones is used in low-level humor skits that occur throughout the novel as Pocket performs. Pocket juggles apples, sings, and performs other low-level fool techniques for the court (Moore 54). Pocket also tells jokes with high level puns and points out the poor judgement of those in power, as he acknowledges. He is removed from the court when he comments on Cordelia's banishment and describes the event: "Two yeomen stepped up behind me and seized me under the armpits... This had never happened before—nothing like it. I was the all-licensed fool! I of all people could speak truth to power—I am chief cheeky monkey to the King of Bloody Britain!" (Moore 56). Pocket is an established well-rounded fool through his wardrobe, props, abilities, and commentary.

The format of the novel versus the dramatic structure allows the Fool to take on slightly different roles, though retaining similar function. The function of relating to the audience is magnified by the first-person narration of the novel. The perspective in Moore's format of the tale allows readers to be aware of the character's internal thoughts, motives, and actions. In the original play, the Fool's thoughts could be expressed in dialogue, the occasional song or prophesy, and actions that are unknown to readers of the play. The novel allows Pocket to express inner thoughts, discuss his motives, and reveal his exact movements and actions to the audience. This contrast can be seen in both tales when the Fool attempts to get King Lear to return to the indoors after renouncing his daughters. In the original Shakespeare, the dialogue consists of the Fool making witty remarks and trying to convince the king to return to his daughters:

FOOL. O nuncle, court holy water in a dry house is better than this rainwater out o' door. Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters blessing. Here's a night pities neither wise man nor fool.

LEAR. Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters.
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness.
I never gave you kingdom, called you children.
You owe me no subscription. Why then, let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand, your slave—
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters joined
Your high engendered battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. Oh, ho! 'Tis foul.

FOOL. He that has a house to put 's head in has a good headpiece.
The codpiece that will house
Before the head has any—
The head and he shall louse.
So beggars marry many.
The man that makes his toe
What he his heart should make
Shall of a corn cry woe,
And turn his sleep to wake.
For there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths
in a glass.

Enter KENT disguised

LEAR. No, I will be the pattern of all patience.

I will say nothing.

KENT. Who's there?

FOOL. Marry, here's grace and a codpiece—that's a wise man and a fool.

(3.2.10-39)

Pocket, on the other hand, makes witty remarks while also taking the coat from Lear's back to show him the coldness of the outdoors in the rain:

“Come in, nuncle. Take some shelter under a shrub, if only to take the sting out of the rain.”

“I need no shelter. Let nature take her naked revenge.”

“Fine, then,” said I. “Then you won’t be needing this.” I took the old man’s heavy fur cape, tossed him my sodden woolen cloak, and retreated to my shrubbery and the relative shelter of the heavy animal skin. (210)

Though this difference is subtle, it does allow the Fool to take on a different path as truth-teller. Pocket physically manipulates the world of King Lear, while the Fool in Shakespeare’s version can only discuss it verbally. No stage directions exist in this portion of the act, causing readers to only speculate as to the actions of the actor. The novel format gives definite explanations for physical movements and manipulations. The dramatic reading of the original *King Lear* gave actors the liberty to have limited or expansive manipulation of stage props and movement. The format of Moore’s novel contrasts this; the vaguely possible is clarified and specifically stated. Though both fool characters tell the truth, only Pocket is specifically characterized as a man of power through physical manipulations. This gives Pocket power that the Fool is not required to embody. Though in both instances the Fool and Pocket are revealers of truth, Pocket is more forceful in King Lear’s tale.

Moore’s adaption of *King Lear* presents distinct language and written form. Moore changes the language of the original characters into more easily understood phases and statements within the novel format. Words and phrases that are unfamiliar to the audience are typically defined or explained in context or via footnotes. Further, the novel format changes the entire atmosphere of the tale. Moore drives the action with specific techniques, including first-person narration and descriptions. This differs from Shakespeare’s method of drama, which consists primarily of dialogue and stage directions. These differences allow certain aspects of the story to be more easily acceptable to modern readers.

The original Shakespeare text introduces Edgar disguised as Poor Tom when Kent, the Fool, and King Lear enter the cave (3.4.35-40). His appearance is related entirely through dialogue and gives a vague understanding of Edgar’s physical appearance. Therefore, the actual way in which Edgar appears is at the mercy of the actor or director to interpret, or of the reader to imagine. The Fool comments that “he [Edgar] reserved a blanket, else we had been all ashamed” (3.4.65). However, the novel takes a much more descriptive and direct role. Moore describes Edgar over the course of pages, the initial description of Edgar as a thing “covered in slime, walking as if it had been constructed from the very earth over which it

slogged” (210). Later, other characters comment on his nakedness by directly stating it and discussing it amongst themselves (212). The nakedness of Edgar in *King Lear* is described discreetly through the term “ashamed,” which modern readers would assume to mean that Edgar was indecent, or naked. Shakespeare’s original audience may have experienced this nudity directly during the play, as opposed to modern readers’ imaginings. However, Moore is much more direct and uses words that are common in the modern vernacular without relying on visual representation. It is unlikely that a modern reader would miss the direct statement of nudity in Moore’s version.

The language present in both works also distinguishes the Fool’s function. In the original *King Lear*, the Fool’s main identity is that of a revealer of truth (Lippincott 250). This is evident in virtually every line spoken by the character. The Fool repeated comments on the choices King Lear has made: “Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise” (1.5.45). He only occasionally resorts to bawdy humor, focusing on outwitting King Lear and the other characters of the play. Pocket in Moore’s rendition continually uses both forms to convey his purpose throughout the novel. Sexual references and encounters are a crucial element of Moore’s creative style (Bainschab 87). Therefore, the Fool is prone to innuendo and outright crude humor. When he meets a group of thespians on his journey with Lear, he makes the comment “Well, I enjoy a lick of the lily from time to time myself...but it’s hardly something you want to paint on the side of a wagon” (143). This is a pun of the words “thespians” and “lesbians,” to which Pocket comments on the sexual practices associated with the latter group to jest the prior group’s name and occupation. He uses this comment to incorporate vulgar commentary while maintaining his wit above those in the acting group. Readers that appreciate either or both types of humor may be better satisfied by Moore’s adaptation than the original Shakespearean play.

Pocket is distinguished as a wise and raunchy fool through his backstory as well. The original Fool in *King Lear* does not get much attention paid to his existence prior to the instances depicted in the play. When the king calls for him, the Knight replies that he has been sad since Cordelia left the castle (1.4.75). Other than the Fool’s clear attachment to Cordelia and the king, his past is left unnoted. The format used by Moore allows a shifting of focus, as Pocket explains his origin and why he is fool

to King Lear. His history shows an educational background, as he grew up in an abbey. Pocket claims “By the time I was nine I could read and write three languages and recite *The Lives of the Saints* from memory” (31). Established as a wise fool, he later comments on his abilities as a performer and entertainer. He was taught by an anchoress (a women that devotes herself to the church by isolation in a cell) how to “dance, juggle, and perform acrobatics” as well as perform sexual acts (68-70). His wisdom was earned in working with the nuns, yet his stage talents and sexual nature was developed by the anchoress. Pocket’s backstory establishes him as a dualistic fool, being able to have both surface-level humor and deeper, more developed wit and observation.

Footnotes are a vital added component of Moore’s version of Lear. These footnotes add to the humor of the text while also making certain terms easily accessible to those enjoying the novel. This enjoyment builds a relationship between the perceived character of Pocket and the modern reader. For example, the term “tossler” is used throughout Moore’s novel repeatedly. Pocket defines this term in the footnotes as “one who tosses, a wanker” (Moore 3). Though this definition is vague, it promotes a sharing of knowledge between the reader and the speaker of the novel. Pocket even defines and demonstrates the use of iambs on the bottom of the page in which he mentions the term (Moore 83). The only way the original Shakespeare text has these footnotes is if the editor of the text inserts them. Therefore, the footnotes present in the novel allow the novice reader to follow the story of Pocket without becoming confused, lost, or overwhelmed. Beyond this purpose, it builds a relationship between the character and the writer that cannot be achieved by adding definitions to the original text of Shakespeare.

The footnotes further clarify how Pocket is both wise and bawdy in his foolishness. Similar to the dramatic device of an aside, Pocket is able to form witty comments and deliver them to the audience without enlightening other characters of his speech. Pocket makes allusions to historical events and customs in the footnotes. The character provides definitions of pagan holidays, such as the celebration of “Saturnalia” (Moore 190). This shows a level of knowledge, calculation, and reflection, proving the image of the wise fool. Though there are an exceedingly high amount of bawdy terms in the novel as well, such as the term “balls up” which, according to Pocket, is “slang, to ruin, to fuck up” (Moore 227).

Pocket is just as likely to charm modern audiences for his thoughtful nature as for his low-level, outrageous type of humor. Footnotes help Pocket properly reveal his humor and create a more accessible form to layman readers.

The interactions of Pocket and Cordelia is greatly expanded upon in Moore's tale from that of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, primarily because the two never appear on stage together in the play. All that is known about the relationship between the Fool and Cordelia is likely some affection, as the Fool shows sadness at her departure (1.4.75). Moore revamps this relationship to reach romantic proportions by the end of his novel. Not only does Cordelia live, but she also marries Pocket. This keeps the novel from becoming a tragedy, completely changing the purpose of the written work from the original play. Further, he plays to modern audience's appreciation of romance and a happy ending. Moore reverses the original tragic play by keeping both Pocket and Cordelia alive at the close of the novel. Readers are upset by the death of the king, but happy to accept that Cordelia and Pocket get to rise to power, as they have been depicted as favorable and relatable characters throughout. This blend of tragic and comedic elements makes Pocket and his tale more complex than a simple retelling of a classical Shakespearean play. This further centers the action on Pocket and Cordelia as strong characters. Their romance is appealing to modern audiences and complements the backstories and character development Moore set up throughout the novel.

The death of Cordelia in the original play causes Lear himself to die shortly after his response, including the phrase "And my poor fool is hanged" (5.3.807). This line can be taken to mean several things, including that the Fool has been literally hanged, as well as Cordelia (Fraser 180). However, Cordelia may also be seen as a fool-type character for her involvement and trust of King Lear (Clayton 143). The first interpretation coincides with tragedy and the large amounts of deaths happening within the play. The latter interpretation strengthens this connection between the Fool and Cordelia as characters themselves and also in relation to King Lear. Cordelia does not hold excessive trust in Lear in Moore's rendition, as she does not cry at the sight of her father's dead body (293). It is possible that her rejection of Lear brings her closer to Pocket, allowing herself to live at the end of the tale. Pocket proves himself to be a relatable character by falling in love. Further, this addition of love interest between Cordelia

and Pocket make it impossible for them to be played by the same person, or to be viewed as interchangeable in any sense.

Moore's novel creates a fool that is capable of both raunchy jests and intelligent commentary. This form of adaptation entertains and enlightens readers by making Shakespeare accessible to non-Shakespeare enthusiasts and others who enjoy Moore's style of humor. Several of the original elements of the play are still present, though many additions have been made to surprise and delight readers. These changes allow the original story and functions of fools to be easily relatable to modern audiences. The original Fool in *King Lear* was primarily in existence as a wise fool. Moore has managed to merge the components of slapstick style humor and intellectual comments to create a blended, dualistic fool. With Pocket in control of the action, this difference is strengthened, allowing audiences to like the character and relate to him on a deeper level. Moore has managed to adapt a Shakespeare original to fit the modern times by adjusting the form of comedic relief present in the tale. Though many try to accomplish this feat, few complete it as well as Moore.

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