Dog's Day: Natural Folly and Subversion in *Much Ado About Nothing**

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Shakespeare's natural fools, clowns, rustics, and buffoons provide far more than light comic relief. Using the example of Dogberry, from *Much Ado About Nothing*, I demonstrate that in allowing his fools to usurp their position of clownish caricature, to move outside of their normal social spheres, Shakespeare exposes the folly within societal institutions. Though an examination of language, namely the use of malapropisms, and the manipulation of traditional licence extended to natural fools, I contend that such theatrical depictions of folly opened the way for social commentary, parody and inversions of hierarchies of power on the stage.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Subversion, Folly, Malapropism, Dogberry

Paul's letter to the Corinthians contains the somewhat ambiguous admonition, '*but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty*.'[1] Shifts in perspective, such as the Pauline God's-eye view, immediately problematise definitions of folly, opening it to multiple and at times abstruse meanings, even inverting previous understandings of what is both foolish and wise. On the Shakespearean stage, the equivocality of folly serves to contrast and disrupt established ideologies and philosophies – questioning, and revealing the flaws in the protagonists' reasoning and behaviour. The paradoxical combination of wisdom and folly, alongside the traditional permissions extended to fools, opened up exciting possibilities to the early modern playwright, allowing the creation of liminal characters that could transgress the social boundaries of class and propriety, and in so doing, subvert the dominant societal structure and its belief systems.

Shakespeare's own stage fool, Robert Armin, published *Nest of Ninnies,* his personal study of fools, in 1608. Subscribing to the description of a 'fool' being an individual who displays any and all types of folly, Armin nevertheless clarified that there existed certain subgroups:

> *Naturall fooles are prone to selfe conceit:*
> *Fooles artificiall, with their wits lay wayte*[2]

Describing two types of fool, Armin points firstly to those predisposed to folly by virtue of social ignorance or want of intellect, and secondly to the pretenders, those deliberately assuming the persona of the fool as a profession. This study will look at the former category, the natural fool, and his place within society and on the stage.

Lloyd Duhaime's online legal dictionary (2017) defines the 'natural' fool as '*a human being in form but destitute of reason from birth*.'[3] As early as the fourteenth century, common law decreed 'natural' fools, or 'idiots', to be those incapable of managing their own estate, a responsibility that was transferred to the Crown until such time as any heirs were able to reassume the family inheritance. Michel Foucault claimed that, with the disappearance of leprosy throughout Europe in the late medieval period, '*the values and images attached to the figure of the leper*' that existed within the collective social consciousness were filled with fools and madmen, who were often sent to the now empty lazar houses.[4] Idiots, and fools were thus as much social constructs as mentally ill. Extending the same kind of paradoxical 'unclean-yet-holy' status of lepers, fools became a group set aside within society who, though

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1   1 Corinthians 1.27
2   Robert Armin, *Nest of Ninnies* (London: T.E. for John Deane, 1608), 12.
3   Lloyd Duhaime, 'Natural Fool', in *Duhaime's Law Dictionary*, accessed 20 January 2021, http://www.duhaime. org/LegalDictionary/N/NaturalFool.aspx
4   Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 4.

falling short of the established functional requirements and standards of that society, were nonetheless an integral part of its structure.

Robert Armin testified to a wide range of possible mental and psychological issues that characterised the fools he studied. Many of these individuals, whose condition allowed them, became fixtures in medieval and Tudor courts and households who used them as a source of mirthful ridicule and entertainment. Suzannah Lipscomb asserts that '*many – perhaps all – court fools in the early Tudor period were "natural fools", or what we today would characterise as people with learning disabilities.*'[5] To compensate for their intellectual lack, and inability to fully comprehend where and when they transgressed social protocol and etiquette, a measure of tolerance and licence was extended to natural fools.

What is immediately apparent from an examination of Shakespeare's plays is that these 'naturals' are not standard stock characters stock for the writer – mental disability, and childish ignorance alone would have limited the impact of the fool on stage to simple levity, crass comic relief, or pitiful interlude.[6] Yet there was also an attractive element to natural folly - that of the licence extended to such persons that effectively allowed them to move freely across social hierarchies and, in the process, broach controversial or sensitive issues. This presents an important counter-balance to conventional power structures. Foucault speaks of the presence of resistance wherever there is power. The natural fool is one such example of resistance, though unwitting or innocent, as in the allowance of transgressive action, albeit within certain social constraints, such licenced actions generate new power dynamics and test the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

The solution of how to utilise the unique licence extended to natural fools on the stage came with the role of the clown. David Wiles takes pains to establish the identity of the Elizabethan stage clown, a term that is used interchangeably with 'fool' in stage directions throughout Shakespeare's texts.[7] As with the natural fool, the clown is a social construct that absorbed some of the traits of the natural fool – they were rustics, mechanicals, persons of low class and meagre education whose folly became apparent when contrasted with the intellect and wisdom

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5   Suzannah Lipscomb, 'All the King's Fools', in *History Today* 61/8 (August 2011), accessed 20 January 2021, http://www.historytoday.com/suzannah-lipscomb/all-king's-fools

6   It is worthwhile to note that 'madness' is a different condition to folly, though there is a fine line between the two. Ferdinand's *lycanthropia* in The Duchess of Malfi, Lady Macbeth's compulsion neurosis and somnambulism, and Ophelia's mental and emotional breakdown are conditions that reveal themselves as the psychological ramifications of trauma, guilt, or sustained inhuman behaviour. Shakespeare himself acknowledges the difference when Feste describes the stages of drunkenness: 'one draught above heat makes him a fool, the second mads him, and a third drowns him' (*Twelfth Night*, 1.5.126-8) N.B all references to Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, eds., Stanley Wells and Garry Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

7   David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 61.

of their social betters. Deficiency does not constitute simply mental or physical abnormality; rather it can be extended to include incomprehension or inadequacy successfully to engage in proper social function according to the higher learning of the day. Thus Bottom (the weaver) and Dogberry (constable of the night's watchmen) successfully hold positions within their communities yet are shown to be naturally foolish both in their office and in interacting with those in higher social stations.

Until Tudor times comic contrasts and subversive themes had been represented by the Vice. Much has already been written about the Vice, the classical and medieval theatrical role that served as a diabolical messenger, the means by which the chief character could be swayed to take darker, fleshlier actions. Authorised to '*break the rules for morally edifying purposes*'; the Vice became the sanctioned means to represent transgressive behaviour on the stage.[8] The Vice often portrayed a darkly amusing role that, by Tudor times, was translated in theatre as the clown or fool. Wiles notes that while '*the Vice exists in a moral/philosophical dimension, the clown exists in a social dimension*.'[9] Shakespeare's fools are indeed more villein than villain, more rustic than ruffian. Though Wiles' observation is apt in situating stage clowns firmly within a social setting, this should not be seen as precluding the fool from impacting on moral or philosophical dramatic content. As shall be demonstrated, the ignorance and intellectual lack displayed by Dogberry underscores important social issues and moral flaws in his immediate community that can be extended to the world beyond the theatre.

Dogberry first appears at the culmination of Don John's plot to spoil the marriage of Claudio and Hero. The employment of folly to counterbalance tragedy would seem to be part of Shakespeare's structural formulae in developing the plot. In *Hamlet* the clownish gravediggers appear after Ophelia's death; the porter's bawdy jests follow the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth*; in *Othello* the clown shadows Iago's revelation of his sinister plots; the court clown who delivers the basket containing Cleopatra's demise makes sport with the sexual innuendo in death-by-worm; and Lear's Fool constantly juxtaposes humour with the endless tragedy unfolding around him. This use of folly has led certain critics such as Richard Levin to describe humour as '*an emotional vacation from the more serious business of the main action*'.[10] However, it would be a mistake to dismiss the appearance of Dogberry as mere comic relief at a time the plot has turned darkest. To do so would devalue the position of the clownish constable to simple caricature rather than as a means to expose the egoism and folly of the nobles into whose company he is thrust and as a crude *deus ex machina* who uncovers the truth of the schemes against Hero.

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8   Robert Hornback, *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 18.

9   Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse*, 23.

10   Richard Levin, *The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 142.

Shakespeare's foregrounding of the comical Night-Watchman begins with the nuanced meaning in his very name. Dogberry's name does not bear the Italianesque inflection of the play's upper-class cast. 'Dog', a lowly domestic animal often used in the pejorative sense[11], and 'berry', a colloquial term for a fart[12], compound to create a comical English name that befits the rustic clown in his subservient role trudging the streets as a humble plod.[13] Yet his name is not the only one within the *dramatis personae* that references the animal kingdom. Shakespeare lifts the character of Lionato de'Lionati, a poor gentleman of Messina, from Matteo Bandello's *Novella* (1554) and elevates him to Leonato, Governor of Messina.[14] Both dog and lion hold public office – Leonato bearing the highest office the city has to offer and Dogberry bearing one of the lowliest. The parallels between the fool and the nobleman, servile cur and apex predator, are too striking to have such chance nomenclature and set the stage for a series of telling parallels that potentially invert their positions both officially and as fool and wise man.

What is immediately apparent in comparing the language and manner of speech employed by the Governor and the Constable is their tendency toward using aphorisms. When the play opens with news of Don Pedro's imminent arrival, Leonato punctuates his conversation with adages such as '*a victory is twice itself when the achiever brings home full numbers*,' (*Much Ado About Nothing* 1.1.8-9) and '*how much better is it to weep at joy than to joy at weeping!*' (1.1.27-8).[15] When we first meet Dogberry he attempts to mimic the axioms of his betters: '*To be a well-favor'd man is the gift of fortune, but to write and read comes by nature*' (3.3.13-5), and to Leonato: '*When the age is in, the wit is out*' (3.5.33) That Leonato finds his comic shadow 'tedious' (3.5.17) effectively solicits a condemnatory self-commentary, drawing attention not only to his impatience and ignorance, but that of others in high office. As William Hazlitt observes:

> Dogberry and Verges in this play are inimitable specimens of quaint blundering and misprisions of meaning; and are a standing record of that formal gravity of pretension and total want of common understanding, which Shakespeare no doubt copied from real life.[16]

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11   Shakespeare makes frequent references to dogs; not always derogatory. However, Shylock resents being called 'dog' (*The Merchant of Venice,* 3.3.6), and Othello describes a 'malignant Turk' as a 'circumcised dog' (*Othello,* 5.2.364).

12   Peter J. Smith, *Between Two Stools: Scatology and its Representations in English Literature, Chaucer to Swift* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 67.

13   *OED*, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/17975?rskey=rXtwxE&result=4#eid accessed 20 January 2021. Kenneth Branagh's production of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) makes inadvertent reference to the bawdier translation of Dogberry's name, punctuating his homily to the nights watch with flatulence and having Verges and Dogberry repeatedly pursued by barking dogs. *Much Ado About Nothing,* dir. Kenneth Branagh (BBC Films, 1993), [on DVD].

14   Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 64-5.

15   William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, Ed. Stanley Wells and Garry Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

16   William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 239.

Dogberry's whining obsequiousness and attempts at grandiose speech smack of the jester's role at the feet of the master he parodies. Yet Hazlitt fails to note that fools in high office are not a recent phenomenon. In fact, Dogberry serves as the yardstick by which Leonato reveals his own folly, a self-importance that overlooks the very issues that will bring about great personal tragedy. Erasmus identified this particular type of fool in his seminal work, *The Praise of Folly* (1509):

> The lot of princes brings with it a host of things which tend to lead them from righteousness, such as…adulation, and excess; so that he must endeavour more earnestly and watch more vigilantly lest, beguiled by these, he fail of his duty.[17]

His wisdom blunted by his self-importance, extending a measure of courteous condescension to those incapable of furthering his position, Leonato is turned fool by nature of his office. Though perhaps not worthy of the heavy censure Erasmus heaps on those who have '*played the part of the sovereign*', and yet are '*ignorant of the laws, almost an enemy of the public welfare, intent upon private gain,*' and '*measuring all things by his own desire and profit*', he is still negligent in his office.[18] Dogberry parodies Leonato's dereliction of duty in his ridiculous commands to his fellow constabulary. Reasoning that a '*most quiet watchmen*' (3.3.38) is one who '*makes no noise in the streets'* (3.3.33), he justifies sleeping on the job whilst simultaneously failing to apprehend treason, drunkenness, and thievery. It is sheer blind fortune that delivers Borachio and Conrad into Dogberry's fumbling hands, and Leonato's blindness to his inferiors that prevents him comprehending the significance of the arrests, enabling the hapless constable to conduct the trial. In so doing Shakespeare subverts the natural order, allowing the fool to slip between roles and accomplish what his betters could not.

However, this is by no means the only manner in which Dogberry's natural folly transgresses societal structure. Language is itself thrall to the hapless constable as his peculiar idiolect constantly twists and corrupts meaning. Malapropism becomes a linguistic weapon that severs intent from interpretation, effectively confounding communication. In her essay on the meaning of the malaprop, Marga Reimer provides three options of meaning: the intent of the speaker or '*first meaning'*; the actual meaning of the words '*relativised to the context of utterance'*; and lastly, that there is no semantic content at all.[19] I would propose a fourth option, one that takes into consideration Shakespeare's careful crafting of dogberryisms that betrays a deliberate doubling of meaning. Consider Dogberry's attempts to inform Leonato of the apprehension of Borachio and Conrad. '*Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two auspicious persons*' (3.5.43-4). Clearly, '*comprehended*' and '*auspicious*' should rather have been '*apprehended*', and '*suspicious*', no doubt the intended '*first meaning*'. Leonato quickly

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17   Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. Hoyt Hopewell Hudson (New York: Random House, 1941), 94.
18   Ibid., 95.
19   Marga Reimer, 'What Malapropisms Mean: A Reply to Donald Davidson', *Erkenntnis* 60 (2004), 319.

discerns the import of the clownish night watchman's speech. However, a *literal* interpretation of the line would have given a secondary, and more truthful meaning: that of comprehension of the propitious nature of the arrests – something Leonato fails to do at great personal cost. Hence, to ignore all possibilities of meaning in favour of a perceived first meaning detracts from the artifice of dissident semantics. The pun and the double-entendre are linguistic devices used extensively by Shakespeare's more intelligent characters as a conscious method of subverting and destabilising meaning. Yet the malapropism is here used to the same end, unconsciously and dexterously wielded by a natural fool, as the weapon to destroy intended implication and provide alternate, even conflicting, meanings. Ironically, Dogberry lists the faults of Borachio and Conrad as offences of speech - telling '*untruths*' and giving '*false report*' (5.1.208-9). Yet it is Dogberry who unwittingly commits arguably the greatest corruption of speech in the entire Shakespearean cannon, consistently misusing and misapplying aphorisms.

However, it is not just Leonato that Dogberry undermines. Dogberry's malapropisms also serve as a means to critique the Church as the fool apes the manner in which Puritan preachers addressed their congregations. By the 1590s a popular form of clown emerged that satirised the ignorant Puritan zealot. Robert Hornback notes that discrediting opposing religious views was often achieved by associating one's opponents with laughable ignorance, and that one of the ways this was achieved on the stage was through '*rusticity, misspeaking, and inane logic.*'[20] Yet Hornback neglects to link Dogberry with the Puritan clown tradition, despite the clown's open display of the signs. Commending their fellow watchmen to acts as befit their office, both Dogberry and Verges admonish their colleagues to '*give God thanks*', a moral caveat that repeatedly punctuates their speech. The Puritan ideals of favouring faith over earthly wisdom and learning is echoed in Dogberry's admonition to the watchman possessed of a measure of education. Abruptly cutting off what, in his opinion, amounts to a boast by George Seacoal, the pious constable pontificates:

> *Well, for your favour give God thanks, and make no boast of it. And for your writing and reading, let that appear when there is no need of such vanity.* (3.3.17-20)

The clown's warning against the '*vanity*' of letters and language, the basic building blocks of learning, makes sport of pious Puritan preachers for whom such skills should only be employed to read the Bible and glorify God. Yet for all Dogberry's divine reverence, his lack of letters serves to make him a laughing stock as he repeatedly twists meaning. Once again, it is with heavy irony that Shakespeare endows the simple fool with the ideals of Protestant reformers, whose language shunned '*ambiguity, deceptiveness, or absence of meanings*', whilst bestowing him with the most '*playful*' language in the entire play.[21] The trial scene sees

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20   Hornback, *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare*, 102.
21   Alan Somerset, 'Damnable Deconstructions: Vice Language in the Interlude', *Comparative Drama* 31/ 4 (1997), 575.

Dogberry assail Borachio with a cryptic pseudo-religious aphorism, declaring: '*O villain! Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this'* (4.2.54-5). This damnation bears all the hallmarks of Puritan homiletics, a strain of grandiose sermonising with which Shakespeare's audience would no doubt be familiar, and that Dogberry assumes fits with his newly acquired privileges of office. Yet, as John Allen notes, '*being condemned into redemption is not actually nonsense at all, but is a familiar Christian paradox.'*[22] Don John's condemned lackey gives us every indication he is truly contrite, going on to offer the only heartfelt apology in the entire play. If we are to understand the Christian concepts of forgiveness and absolution then everlasting redemption is indeed what awaits Borachio.

Though Dogberry is a native of Sicily, his function, including his peculiar syntax and language, was a reminder of the very real presence of the London night watchmen. With English names like Seacole, Verges, and Oatcake, a contemporary audience could not fail but draw comparisons to the constabulary at large on the streets outside the Globe. Duncan Salkeld notes that the Watch had a reputation for '*low-level ineptitude'*, evidenced by the Mayor and aldermen issuing an order in 1602 for a thorough revision of practice and procedure.[23] Salkeld even finds substantiation in documents that reveal a comical substitution of similar sounding words not unlike the malapropisms with which Dogberry peppers his speech. Substituting '*desertless*' for 'd*eserving*' (3.3.8), and '*senseless*' for '*sensible*' (3.3.21), Dogberry not only echoes public sentiment towards the Watch but also uses the very same language misappropriated and misapplied by London's contemporary night watchmen.[24] *Much Ado About Nothing* is not the only play of the period to pick up on the verbal follies of those in low public office. The anonymous author of *Thomas of Woodstock* (1591) makes sport by means of Nimble, servant to the Chief Justice who confuses '*whispering*' traitors with '*whistling*' traitors (3.3.228-30) and arrests several men on the wrong charge; and Master Ignorance the Bailey (Bailiff) uses the word '*pestiferous*' ten times in one act to describe everything from demanding colleagues, obliging relatives, heinous wrongdoers, confused clergymen, tax evaders, cooperative do-gooders, and worthy constables.[25]

The detail with which *Much Ado*'s clownish constable is painted speaks of the writer's familiarity with the local constabulary, a detail that is more than caricature but reveals a keen observation of actual persons and events. Such speech betrays an inherent vanity in those raised from a low position into one of public office. The impression Shakespeare gives is that

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22   John A. Allen, 'Dogberry', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24/1 (1973), 37.

23   Duncan Salkeld, 'Letting wonder seem familiar: Italy and London in *Much Ado About Nothing'*, in *Much Ado About Nothing: A Critical Reader*, Eds. Deborah Cartmell and Peter J. Smith (London: Bloomsbury Arden, 2018), 100-101.

24   Salkeld notes an instance of comical malapropism in the records of the London aldermen that stipulates suspect persons must 'remain until the Lord Mayor be certified of their names and several offences'. London Metropolitan Archives, *Repertories of the Court of Aldermen*, Rep 21, 31ᵛ (19 February 1584).

25   *Thomas of Woodstock The Complete Readings of William Shakespeare*, Ed. Justin Alexander, accessed 20 January 2021, http://www.thealexandrian.net/creations/shakespeare/Richard2-Woodstock-ASR-Script.pdf.

rubbing shoulders with more educated men, combined with a modicum of power, seems to instigate the use of language ill-fitted to their humble origins and station, like a child wearing grown-up clothes. Dogberry thus represents a satire of the London Watch, replete with ludicrous oral bungling.

However, it is not just the contemporary London Watch that is being undermined in Shakespeare's play. Subversion runs deeper, extending its gaze to those responsible for the appointment of incompetent minor officials. Just as Leonato stood at the apex of the pyramid of power the lowly dogs at the base reflect on his authority and ability. Thus, the foolish clown unwittingly appointed to officiate in the apprehension of a Prince's plot suggests that the upper classes and those in high office were either unaware of, or deliberately overlooked, the full extent of the misconduct. Systems of governance and their efficacy come into question as fools do the bidding of the blind.

Yet every dog has his day, and the clownish constable is more than simply a burlesque bobby. Aside from bringing the plot against Hero to light he is responsible for parodying the civic powers, mocking the church, and destabilising language. Shakespeare privileges the most inept and lowly of officials with the power of folly – a licence to bungle, to blunder, unwittingly to uncover the plots of his betters and comically expose the flaws in their natures and in the hierarchies of power. The responsibility resting on the shoulders of this simple fool is immense – he stands at the pinnacle of Pauline and Erasmian fools, laying bare the foolish things in the world he missteps his way through.

Shakespeare's natural fools, clowns, rustics, and buffoons provide far more than light comic relief. In allowing his fools to usurp their position of clownish caricature, to move outside of their normal social spheres, Shakespeare exposes the folly within societal institutions. The traditional licence extended to natural fools opened avenues of social commentary, parody, and inversions of hierarchies of power on the stage. Religious ideologies, languages and meaning, patriarchal norms, social conventions; nothing is beyond the reach of the natural fool who unconsciously inverts and subverts such structures.

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