

An Imposter Among Shakespeare's Fools: *The Tempest's* Trinculo

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ABSTRACT: The plays of William Shakespeare often feature a fool who resembles the historic jester of the Elizabethan era. Overtime, the Shakespearean fool developed into a powerful character who challenges and questions both the other characters in the play as well as the audience. This article analyzes the fool known as Trinculo from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* who I argue does not amount to the great Shakespearean fool archetype. The criteria for a true Shakespearean fool is drawn from the work of Robert Bell, who studies the progression of Shakespeare's clown character, and the work of Roberta Mullini, who analyzes the traits of Shakespeare's fools. When Trinculo is compared to these outlined standards, such as prophetic ability and powerful speech, he falls short. Trinculo's lacklustre character is especially apparent when compared to King Lear's Fool in *King Lear*. King Lear's Fool excels in the necessary qualities that Trinculo does not. Rather than serving as mere comedic relief, King Lear's Fool drives the plot forward with his capacity for knowledge and awareness of the audience. Trinculo, on the other hand, embodies Shakespeare's early, underdeveloped clown characters who exist purely to amuse the crowd and nothing more.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, English, Humanities

The many characters of William Shakespeare share similarities across his plays but, among them, there is one archetypal character who stands out: The fool. Built on the historic jester of the Elizabethan era, fools in Shakespeare's plays have evolved to be more complicated characters, who leave behind the persona of a simpler jokester. However, in Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, he reverts to creating a simple comedic character. Although Trinculo is a jester, he is not the embodiment of the true Shakespearean fool since he does not meet the necessary criteria laid out by some scholars. According to two such scholars, Robert Bell and Roberta Mullini, Shakespearean fools are given unique traits that set them apart from the simple jesters, whose only purpose is to provide comic relief. The difference in character depth is evident when comparing Trinculo to the Fool in *King Lear*—a fool who is arguably the epitome of what it means to be a Shakespearean fool.

More than just to serve as comedic relief, the Shakespearean fool has key attributes that set him apart from other characters. These attributes, however, have evolved over time. In his article "Motley to the View: The Shakespearean Performance of Folly," Bell writes that, over time, Shakespeare "expanded the clown's role to develop dramatic possibilities and explore the mysteries of folly" (Bell, 48). Bell says the Shakespearean fool makes the audience doubt what they know and makes us question reality "by introducing radically different, even diametrically opposed perspectives" (47). This introduction of differing perspectives is only achievable through powerful speech and rhetoric. As Mullini writes in her article, "Playing the Fool: the Pragmatic Status of Shakespeare's Clowns", Shakespeare gives his fools "extraordinary powers of speech" (Mullini, 102). Mullini continues that Shakespearean fools are not only talented speakers with great wit, they are "endowed with special prophetic values which link the play's society to the Elizabethan audience, to our own world, and backwards to myth" (104). Shakespearean fools tie the audience and reality back to the play with wisdom that applies to our own lives and politics.

Trinculo does not have the aforementioned characteristics of a Shakespearean fool. When Shakespeare first introduces Trinculo in *The Tempest* in Act 2.2, he immediately serves a comedic soliloquy, part of which makes fun of Caliban's appearance (2.2.25-26). The rest of the scene involves a hilarious

misunderstanding between Trinculo and Stephano, the latter thinking that together Trinculo and Caliban are a four-legged monster. This interaction leads Stephano and Trinculo to take advantage of a drunk Caliban, which parodies Caliban and Prospero's first meeting. However, in all of his scenes, Trinculo's lines exist mainly as jokes, arguments, and defenses. He has one soliloquy in the play, during which he speaks of the storm and decides to hide with Caliban, a monster who people in England "would give a piece of silver" to look at (2.2.18-42). Trinculo does not exemplify powerful speech like a Shakespearean fool—he only jokes and ridicules. He does not prophesy or impress the audience with ruminations on the mysteries surrounding him. There is only one plausible example of Trinculo giving critique, during which he calls out the Naples' government (3.2.5-18).

Trinculo does not affect the audience in any way that is not comedic. He does not question the plot or the mysteries of the world. He does not introduce exhilarating ideas or thoughts that oppose the main characters. In fact, he has little opportunity to do so, having fewer lines than Alonso. Trinculo makes for a meek comparison when held up to the Fool in *King Lear*, who "illuminates this dark world with mysterious flashes, cryptic yet resonant, including paradoxes and riddles, Biblica travesties, inverted parables, and surrealistic images" (Bell, 59). Trinculo's lines do not resemble Bell's description of Lear's Fool. Unlike Trinculo, Lear's Fool uses unique rhetoric to share wisdom. An example of this is in Act 1.4 when Lear's Fool uses an egg analogy to call Lear foolish for giving his power to Goneril and Regan (1.4.162-169). This language is only one example of how the Shakespearean fool is characteristically "rhetorically rich, semantically ambiguous, ontologically disruptive of the order of the fictional world" (Mullin, 104). While Lear's Fool moves the plot forward, Trinculo is just a bystander. Lear's Fool further demonstrates through the split egg analogy his prophetic foresight: He knows that Lear's actions will contribute to his downfall. An endowment of wit, humour, and wisdom is what Trinculo lacks, and this acts as the dividing line between a regular clown and a Shakespearean fool. Although Trinculo and Lear's Fool are both jesters, the speech of Lear's Fool is astoundingly different from that of Trinculo, and the former's impact within the play is incomparable.

Another main trait of a Shakespearean fool is their ability to break the fourth wall and interact with

the audience—while simultaneously interacting within the fictional setting on the stage. During a performance, Shakespearean fools cross the line between illusion and reality as they please because they are aware of their character. As Mullin describes, the fool is ready to step off the stage and “the awareness they possess of their condition, of their playing the fool, contrasts with the other characters’ blindness” (102-104). At no point in *The Tempest* does Trinculo cross the dividing line into our reality. He does not speak to the audience, nor does he imply an awareness of being a fool. Trinculo also does not refer to himself as a jester. In Act 2.2 he reassures Stephano that he is Trinculo and nothing more. However, through Lear’s transformation into a fool in *King Lear*, Shakespeare depicts his Fool’s self-awareness. The Fool confirms that Lear himself has become a fool, and although the Fool would rather be anyone else, he still would rather not be Lear (1.4.191-192). Lear’s Fool knows the character that he embodies, and it influences his words and actions. His awareness allows him to do something Trinculo cannot: Acknowledge reality and intertwine it with his words. In contrast to Trinculo, Lear’s Fool directly addresses the audience through monologues and asides (Mullin, 104). Additionally, Trinculo’s impact on the play and the audience is weak because he does not contrast with the other characters in *The Tempest*. The main characters are blind to Prospero’s plans, including Trinculo. His lines and actions are based on what he knows himself to be: A simple person who lives to serve Alonso, unaware of the real-world crowd watching him.

Although not the least important character in *The Tempest*, Trinculo does not convey important attributes that would make him a true Shakespearean fool. Perhaps intending to capture the essence of his early, underdeveloped fools, Shakespeare brought to life a simple jester. Although entertaining, Trinculo lacks the powerful speech a Shakespearean fool traditionally has, speech such as that of Lear’s Fool. Furthermore, Trinculo does not have prophetic power, and his wisdom is ironically folly. Most importantly, Trinculo lacks awareness of who he really is, which hinders him from accessing reality the way that Lear’s Fool does. Lear’s Fool exemplifies the traits that Trinculo lacks. For reasons unknown, Trinculo is written to be a common jester, one who cannot be included as a true Shakespearean fool.

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