

'A CHEV'RIL GLOVE': ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN TWO 'CORRUPTED' WORDS

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The real Shakespearean puzzles are the ones we fail to notice. For if we *think we know* what a particular expression means, we don't even begin to wonder about it. Yet if we once take the unusual step of questioning the apparently obvious, the consequences can be startling. Suppose, for example, we take a common Shakespearean term, and permit ourselves to suspect that the sense we have universally accepted for it may be not at all what Shakespeare meant by it. How is the point to be settled?

(Hotson 1952:1)

Although *fool* and *clown* do not belong to the group of words which would compel the reader to put down the text and pick up the glossary, neither are they terms whose semantic content can be said to be clear cut and distinct. As Professor Quirk has already warned, when dealing with Elizabethan English, 'the problem of overtly strange words is less than the problem of words which disguise their strangeness' (1971:74). Indeed, both *fool* and *clown* might turn out to be 'strange' words for the common reader; their strangeness may very well pass unnoticed simply because —again in Professor Quirk's own words— 'We meet a large number of words more or less familiar in their graphic substance but with different meanings which we can easily ignore, to our loss...' (1971:74). It is precisely here, in the rich variety of meanings of these two apparently straightforward terms, that much of the difficulty in pinning down their true significance lies.

The first thing that the abundance of different senses borne by these words in Elizabethan English —particularly the word *fool*— tells us is, as William Empson pointed out, that their frequency of occurrence in everyday language must have been substantial: 'The main thing one learns from the existence of such a group of uses in a given period is that people were using the word [fool] a good deal; it lay near the tongue, so to speak, even on occasions where it might seem irrelevant' (1951:116). Such a high rate of appearance seems to support Hilda Hulme's suggestion that perhaps some shades of meaning of

certain words were common and usual in Elizabethan spoken language but have failed to be preserved in the Elizabethan texts which have reached our age (Hulme 1958). In addition, it may be that the frequency with which a certain sense of a word is found in dramatic texts has resulted in a distortion of the range of semantic features of such a word as it was understood by Shakespeare's contemporaries.

With regard to the meanings of *fool* and *clown* a likely cause of distortion may be sought in the hurried interpretation of the use made of these words in Shakespeare's plays, where they are applied to the same characters far too frequently to make an attempt at distinguishing between them seem, at first sight, profitable. This has led critics to argue that the words *fool* and *clown* enjoy the status of synonyms in all Elizabethan plays (Busby 1923:5). However, not even in Shakespeare's plays themselves are they used 'synonymously', that is, as merely alternative, purely whimsical options. On what grounds can *fool* and *clown* be claimed to be interchangeable terms? Firstly, the word *clown* only appears, in the whole corpus of Shakespeare's plays —if stage-directions and speech headings as well as the few *dramatis personae* provided by the First Folio of 1623 are not taken into account— on eleven occasions¹, five of which belong to the same play (*As You Like It*), whereas the word *fool* is ubiquitous throughout the Shakespearean canon with an enormous plurality of meanings. Secondly, although it is certainly true that some characters of Shakespeare's are called both *fool* and *clown*, it is worthwhile to note here that the artificial fools of Shakespeare's mature comedies (i.e., Touchstone, Feste and Lavatch) are referred to as 'clown' in the stage-directions, *dramatis personae* and speech headings *only*, never within the text of the play itself, with the single exception of *As You Like It* II, ii, 8, where Touchstone is alluded to as 'roynish clown'. In contrast, the only domestic fool ever to appear with a significant part in a Shakespearean tragedy, Lear's fool, is nowhere called or referred to as 'clown'.

Nevertheless, even if a character is referred to as 'clown' somewhere in a play and is called 'fool' somewhere else, does this necessarily imply that both words are to be considered equal and used indiscriminately? A brief glance at the semantic distance between two words which are applied frequently —almost inevitably— to the same character would tell that it is not so. No one would question that a distinct semantic content for each of the words *fool* and *knave* must have existed, since the epitaph written by John Davies of Hereford in his *Scourge of Folly* (1610) for Robert Armin would be less meaningful otherwise:

Armine, what shall I say of thee, but this,
 Thou art a foole and knave? Both? fie, I misse;
 And wrong thee much, sith thou in deede art neither,
 Although in shew, thou playest both together.

(Felver 1961:70)

The third meaning of *knave* given by the *OED*—after 'A male child, a boy' and 'A boy or lad employed as a servant; hence, a male servant or menial in general; one of low condition'—is 'An unprincipled man, given to dishonourable and deceitful practices; a base and crafty rogue. (Now the main sense. Often contrasted with *fool*). *Knave* is then one devoid of principles or honour, as opposed to *fool*, one 'deficient in judgement or sense' or 'deficient in, or destitute of, reason or intellect', as the first and fourth meanings of the word *Fool* in the *OED* read. Goneril appears to use these words in such a manner when she compels Lear's fool to follow his master in his fate:

Gon. You, sir, more knave than fool,
after your master

(I.iv.309)

It has been the Fool's 'dishonourable' behaviour² and 'deceitful practices' rather than his 'lack of judgement or intellect'—his roguishness rather than his folly—that has provided Goneril with an excuse to humiliate her father by cutting down his train.

However, in spite of lacking a common semantic basis, it is also certainly true that these two words are used synonymously far too often and this has not gone unnoticed. Enid Welsford observed that 'the words "fool" and "knave" were constantly coupled together, but not always in quite the same way, for sometimes they were treated as synonyms, sometimes emphasis was laid on the distinction between them' (1934:236-7). William Empson has rendered the distinction more precise: 'Not always in *quite* the same way; either as synonyms or as opposites' (1951:107). It is as opposites that Will Summers makes use of them in Rowley's *When You See Me, You Know Me*:

Will. Tis not your foole my lord, I warrant ye.

Wolsey. No Will?

Will. I thought so, I knew 'twas one of your knaves, for your fooles are
harmelesse

(11.1602-5)

Will Summer is trying to divert a likely punishment by using the words *fool* and *knave* as opposite, mutually exclusive terms. He says that, since the fools are 'harmelesse', one of the knaves did it, thus implying that the fools are not knaves. There is an abridged syllogism in Summer's answer to Cardinal Wolsey which automatically calls to mind those of which Feste is so fond and which rests upon the assumption that the words 'fooles' and 'knaves' are antonyms.

The Elizabethan taste for antithetic pairs of words and apparently insoluble paradoxes, together with that typically Renaissance idea expressed by Nicholas of Cues as *coincidentia oppositorum* and by Erasmus with the *Sileni* figures³, might be enough to explain how these two words could be used both as

antonyms and synonyms. This usage was undoubtedly facilitated by the fact that both words could be used as terms of abuse or endearment; it was because they could be endowed with the same derogatory or endearing overtones —not because they shared meanings— that they were used synonymously in many occasions. If we compare three moments of Henry VIII's royal anger in Rowley's *When You See Me*, it is clear that *fool* and *knave* could operate on an equal level as terms of abuse, emptied of their own distinct meanings:

King. You are knaves and fooles, and ye flatter me:
Gods Holy Mother, Ile not have him hurt, for all your heads
(11.2735-4)

King. Y'are a couple of drunken knaves and varlets,
Gods Holy Mother, shee is more true and just?..
(11.2735-4)

King. 'Away and leave us, you are knaves and miscreants,
Whorson Cailifes, come to attack my Queene
(11.2772-3)

But still, there are some passages where the words *fool* and *knave* function neither as antonyms nor as mere synonyms and yet are not used as terms of abuse or endearment either. That is the case, for instance, with the frequently discussed words of Lear's Fool:

Fool. The knave turns Fool that runs away;
The Fool no knave, perdy
(II.iv.81-2)

Doctor Johnson's famous emendation of these two 'puzzling' lines ('The fool turns knave that runs away; / The knave no fool perdy') has already been proved to be utterly unnecessary; the reason why they are discussed here is because, besides not being necessary, by inverting the order they destroy the effect of one of the favourite jesting exercises of witty fools. Together with enjoying themselves proving others to be fools, as Feste does with Lady Olivia, fools took advantage of every single chance they had to make clear that they were fools but not knaves, while, at the same time, they would prove knaves to be fools⁴.

The first appearance of Touchstone in *As You Like It* shows him sharpening his wit with a jest about the oath of a foolish knave⁵, immediately after which he makes Rosalind and Celia prove that he is no knave since they have no beards:

Touch. Stand you both forth now: stroke your chins, and swear by
your beards that I am a knave.
Celia. By our beards, if we had them, thou art.
Touch. By my knavery, if I had it, then I were
(I.ii.67-70)

It is clear then that the puzzling words of Lear's Fool are meaningful as they stand, and do not need either Doctor Johnson's tampering nor Enid Welsford's justification of his emendation: 'This version does, perhaps, make better common sense, but then is it common sense that the Fool is trying to convey?' (1935:255). There is certainly common sense in what the Fool says: he is simply punning on the different meanings of *fool*. The knave, i. e. the wise man⁶ who turns fool, may do so because the word *fool* carries here its biblical sense, i.e. 'vicious or impious person' according to the *OED*. The Fool is aware of the complex relation which links these words⁷ and feels obliged to explain that although the knave is a fool, the fool (i.e. he, Lear's Fool), is no knave, exactly as Touchstone did at the very beginning of *As You Like It*.

The words *fool* and *knave* can therefore function as one-way synonyms. A knave is likely to be always a fool. As E. Welsford put it: 'a knave was simply a fool regarded 'sub specie aeternitatis', for he was neglecting his true, ultimate self-interest, and what could be more ridiculous than that?' (1935:23). However, a fool was not necessarily a knave, though he might be, as Lavatch shows in *All's Well That Ends Well*, IV.v.20-9. Fools took the trouble, instead, of making it clear that the synonymous status of the two words does not operate, at least with the same intensity, in both directions.

The interest of this last use of the words *fool* and *knave* lies in the explanation it can provide, by analogy, of the relation between that other pair of troublesome words, fool and clown. There is, of course, a more complex relationship that binds these two words. Their lexical proximity cannot be simply attributed to mere connotative values nor explained with the help of the antithetic, binary nature of certain Elizabethan keywords and the *coincidentia* of opposites. A shade of meaning, albeit feeble, exists which is shared by both words, since *clown* as much as *fool* immediately evokes the image of someone bound to provide merriment and provoke laughter. Comic nature is then inherent in the fool and the clown, both regarded as either Tudor and Stuart social types or as stage-characters. The significance of this obvious shared semantic feature lies in showing that both words are used to refer to someone who, surprising his audience with his stupidity or his wit, makes them roar with laughter.

The existence of this common ground where the meanings of *fool* and *clown* overlap brings us a step nearer to the tangled core of this semantic knot: since, around 1600, the words *fool* and *clown* seem to have been neither synonyms nor semantically distinct, it might be worthwhile to examine the attempts made at clarifying the tightly interwoven meanings of these two words, even though neat lexical boundaries are not likely to emerge, and therefore no more than a slurred distinction should be expected.

One of the first Shakespearean commentators to state his awareness of the hidden complexities underlying these two words was A. W. Fox, who made an attempt at defining one of them. He discusses the meaning of the word *clown* which he connects, beyond its original meaning as 'clod, clot, lump'⁸, with the words 'clump' and 'clumsily'. Thus, he says, a clown is one who 'clumps clumsily

over the ground' (1895:217). Although Fox made thereby an important contribution towards clarification by laying emphasis on the roughness and ungainliness which lie at the origin of the dramatic type, he also helped, however, to perpetuate the confusion that affects these two words by erroneously pointing out that Shakespeare made use of the words *fool* and *clown* indiscriminately when referring to two distinct sets of characters, the 'boorish countryman' and the 'jester'⁹. It has been precisely the conviction that Shakespeare's fools and clowns comprise no homogeneous body that has misled those who have attempted to draw a clear distinction between the meanings of *fool* and *clown* analogous to that other distinct boundary which, they believe, exists between the earlier, dull clowns of the Launce type and the witty, wise fools like Feste and Touchstone. This distinction, which contrasts 'the court jester with his brilliant and charming raillery' and 'the country clown who stumbles into every conceivable blunder and mistake' (Cottrell 1886:423), has been supported with evidence as varied as the development experienced by Shakespeare's dramatic conceptions and artistry (Hetherington 1879:722) and the influence exerted upon Shakespeare by Robert Armin's new style of clowning when he became a player of clownish parts with the Chamberlain's Men¹⁰. The need for words with which to name this distinction has led to the distortion of the meanings of *fool* and *clown* to fit the purposes and interests of criticism, without any further analysis of the historical meaning and usage of these two words in Elizabethan and Jacobean texts.

It seems unnecessary, besides, to establish such a strict distinction between *stupid clowns* and *witty fools* when one realises that such inflexible categories cannot be applied even to Shakespeare's characters. On the one hand, some of the clowns in the earlier comedies show sparks of wit of the kind used later by Feste and Touchstone, and on the other, there is no such thing as a lineal evolution regarding Shakespeare's comic figures. Thus, in the last plays we find once again characters which bear a resemblance to those which appeared in the early comedies (Trinculo and Stephano in *The Tempest*, the clown in *The Winter's Tale*), and in one of the mature tragedies, *Macbeth*, we find what can be considered as one of the best clownish specimens, the Porter. Moreover, the arrival of Robert Armin in Shakespeare's company, though enormously influential, cannot account in itself for Shakespeare's 'new clowns'¹¹. No matter how disputed the date of Armin's arrival¹², it is certain that he had not yet joined the Chamberlain's Men in 1598, when *The Merchant of Venice* (entered in the Stationers' Register on 22 July 1598) had already been written. The clown in this comedy, Launcelot Gobbo, shows that Shakespeare already had in mind the creation of a different line of clowning¹³. Gobbo is also a good instance of the impracticability of setting fixed boundaries; he moves backwards and forwards, sometimes behaving like a country rustic and stuffing his speech with malapropisms or ridiculously heightening his language when addressing his betters, whereas at other times he can be seen fooling his

master's guests with his witty verbal jests in a fashion very much like that of Feste and Touchstone.

If an overclose look at the fools and clowns of Shakespeare has led Shakespearean criticism to accommodate the meanings of the words *fool* and *clown* so as to render them useful in explaining the peculiarities of Shakespeare's characters, the same can be said of critical works which have a wider scope and attempt a comprehensive view of both historical and literary fools of all times and ages. These have not always taken into consideration that their distinctions and categories would not apply to the English drama of the last decade of the 16th century and the earlier 1600s. Thus, in her seminal study, E. Welsford considered the 'stage-clown' as 'a type of Fool' (1935:xiii) —when for the better comprehension of the dramatic conventions of Renaissance English drama it would be rather more profitable to consider 'the Fool' (i.e., the domestic jester or 'court-fool') as a peculiar kind of 'clown'— and also one 'whose folly is admittedly a matter of make-believe, a role deliberately assumed at special times in a special environment framed off from the ordinary flux of events' (1935:xiii). This definition of the 'stage-clown' only applies to four of Shakespeare's characters, the wise domestic jesters, but leaves out a long list of Shakespearean clowns who are also 'stage-clowns' in spite of not being 'courtfools'. Even so, Welsford's definition also disregards the fact that in Renaissance plays other than Shakespeare's, instances of stage-clowns depicting natural fools¹⁴ can be found and their folly is not meant to be at all a matter of 'make-believe'.

William Willeford seems to follow E. Welsford when he considers, in *The Fool and His Sceptre*, Elizabethan stage-clowns as merely one of 'the earlier differentiations of the fool type' (1969:12) and he attributes to the fool a lack of perception of how social rules work, together with stupidity and clumsiness. These two features would render the word totally inappropriate for Touchstone, well read in courtly matters and nostalgic for courtly manners, as well as for Feste, well-known for his skilful dancing and valued for his singing¹⁵.

Although hardly concerned with Shakespeare's fools and clowns, and focusing on historical fools and their social status rather than on fools as dramatic characters, Sandra Billington's *A Social History of the Fool* (1984) makes use of the words *fool* and *clown* as synonyms, though acknowledging that *clown* originally meant a country bumpkin. The interest of her work with regard to the distinction between these two words lies in showing that it is only during the Tudor-Stuart period, not before or after, that the word *fool* appears linked to *clown*, their semantic relationship vanishing with the closure of the playhouses.

If the extreme brevity of the period during which the two words were semantically interrelated is borne in mind, it is not difficult to understand why the assumption that the Elizabethan usage of *fool* and *clown* as synonyms was utterly improper and inaccurate, has been favoured as an explanation in the attempt at sorting out the 'confused' meanings of these two terms. With the

support of Francis Douce, the 19th century authority on clowns and fools, this apparently illuminating solution has been widely accepted¹⁶. In his *Illustrations of Shakespeare* Douce wrote: 'It is so exceedingly clear that the terms *clown* and *fool* were used, *however improperly*, as synonymous by our old writers, that it would be an unnecessary occupation of the reader's time to aduce examples' (1807:300. My italics). However a quick glance at a few texts containing both words seems to suggest that the question has been oversimplified; as a matter of fact, the words *fool* and *clown* were *not always* used as interchangeable terms¹⁷, but were used as such in precise specific contexts. It is plausible to suspect then that a reason for such a usage must exist and that far from being improper, this ambivalent way in which the words were used was the 'proper' and 'accurate' one in Elizabethan English. Casting a look at some of those examples should therefore prove to be not 'an unnecessary occupation'.

Francis Douce based his conviction concerning the inappropriate use of these two words by the Elizabethans on a passage taken from *Mirroure of Monsters*, a satire against theatre and players by the puritan William Rankin which appeared in 1587: 'Some transformed themselves to roges, other to ruffians, some other to *clownes*, a fourth to *fooles* [...] the roges were ready, the ruffians were rude, *theyr clownes cladde* as well with country condition, as in ruffe russet, *theyr fooles as fonde as might be*' (Douce 1807:303). The interest of such a fragment, Douce comments, lies in showing that 'the clown is properly distinguished from the fool, as he always should have been' (Douce 1807:303). But Rankin's distinction between clowns and fools is simply a matter of costume: what can be deduced from his words is that the way in which clowns were dressed differed from that of rogues, ruffians *and* fools. He does not, however, let us know what kind of garments fools wore. In his *Wise Fools in Shakespeare* (1955), Robert H. Goldsmith seems to have noticed this because, although he brings forward the same passage when discussing the distinction between fools and clowns, he only makes use of it to support the difference in outfit. He nevertheless —and without any sort of evidence— assumes too that 'The stage practice of *loosely labelling all low comedy figures* "clowns" has tended to obscure for us the very real difference between the fool and the clown —a distinction which was *clearly understood* by the people of Shakespeare's day' (1955:40. My italics). Not only were not all low comedy figures called 'clowns' —only very particular ones among them were— but neither was the labelling of fools in plays as 'clowns' a 'loose practice' at all, since the actor in the company who was to perform the stage-fool was known as the *clown* in the company¹⁸. And, besides, there is strong evidence to make us ponder whether the people of Shakespeare's day did actually understand *clearly* the difference between a clown and a fool.

By reducing the problem to the capacity of the word *clown* to serve as a stage term for both country-like clowns and domestic fools, Goldsmith himself has done much to obscure the 'very real' problem about these two words. He

has not, in this respect, added anything new to what A.C. Bradley had already proposed as far back as 1929. In a footnote to the word *Fools* in his article 'Feste the Jester', Bradley makes clear that by this word

I mean the Fools proper, i.e. professional jesters attached to a court or house. [...] The distinction is quite clear, but it tends to be obscured for readers because the wider designation "clown" is applied to persons of either class in the few lists of *Dramatis Personae* printed in the Folio, in the complete lists of our modern editions, and also, alike in These editions and in the Folio, in stage-directions and in the headings of speeches. Such directions and headings were meant for the actors, and the principal comic man of the company doubtless played both Launce and Feste.

(1929:207)

Both Bradley and Goldsmith failed to see the deep complexity of meanings which binds the words *clown* and *fool* because both of them ignored that not only 'fools' (i.e. domestic or court jesters) were called 'clowns' (i.e. stagecharacters of a certain kind and a role in the theatre company) but that 'clowns' (i.e. rustic, half-witted merrymakers of the Launce type) were also called 'fools'.

In *Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, the first of the three *Parnassus Plays*, which were performed between 1598 and 1601, a 'clown' is brought onto the stage by force with the help of a cart rope. The scene is a satire on the abuse of meaningless non-ending clown-scenes, irrelevant to plot and dramatic action, which were frequent in contemporary plays. When this clown (who in all he does or says resembles the school of clowning initiated by William Kempe) demands what it is that he is expected to do whilst remaining on stage, he is told:

Why if you canst but drawe thy mouth awrye, laye thy legg over thy staffe, sawe a peece of cheese asunder with thy dagger, lape up drinke on the earth, I warrant thee theile laughe mightilie.

(Leishman 1949:129)

He fits, therefore, within the category of 'clowns' which Goldsmith opposes to 'fools': those whose humour differs from that of the court-jesters by being 'alternatively clever and stupid' (1955:40-1) and whose role in the play 'had come to be regarded as an impertinent excrescence on the dramatic action' (1955:41). This clown who is, moreover, called *clowne* both in the speech-headings and stage-directions is also called *foole* in the text by another character in the play. After unfolding to the audience his mockingly clownish soliloquy, another character, Dromo, re-enters on stage and says:

Give us a voyder for the foole. Sirra you must begone, here are other men that will supplie the roome.

(Leishman 1949:130-1)

The word 'foole' must be understood here, in spite of its multiple range of meanings, according to the definition no. 2 in the *OED*: 'One who professionally counterfeits folly for the entertainment of others, a jester, clown'. Dromo asks for a voyder because there were a couple of well-known phrases, like 'take away in a voyder' or 'take away in a cloak-bag' that were used 'when a jesting fool grew tedious or offensive' and 'he was banished, hustled away, or carried off like a tiresome piece of luggage' (1952:44), as Leslie Hotson has explained. The request for fools to be carried away from the presence of their masters was, like the threat of being whipped, one of the ways in which masters could let their fools know that they were becoming wearisome. In that beautifully stereotyped relationship between masters or mistresses and their fools, the implicit, unstated code accepted by both parties required this warning, so the fool could try his best and 'mend'¹⁹. But not all masters were as patient as Lady Olivia and not all fools as skilled as Feste: most of the times this was a clear signal for the fools to vanish. The fact that this 'clowne' in *Pilgrimage to Parnassus* is called 'foole' and treated as a domestic jester proves how closely related to each other both activities—that of the stage-character, whether *clown* or *fool* and that of the 'hired jester', whether natural or artificial—must have been in the minds of Elizabethan theatre-goers.

The collision of semantic fields experienced by the words *fool* and *clown* might partly have arisen then from the extreme resemblance which existed between the profession of the stage-clown and the activities of domestic fools. A great deal in the behaviour of the fool was, in a sense dramatic: the bauble enabled him to perform a dialogue with himself in which, generally, the part of the mocking sceptre was to openly insult and abuse power and authority, whilst the part of the fool himself, being a fool, was to counter-attack unsuccessfully. By doing so, the criticism the fool wanted to make remained unanswered and the fool would manage thus to escape punishment, since it was the bauble, not himself, that was being disrespectful and 'growing dishonest'²⁰. In addition, the latent dramatic nature of the fool's show becomes more obvious when it is realised that in order to be what he is, the fool must have an audience: his master and his master's guests, without whom he would not have someone to laugh at—if a professional fool—or someone to make fun of him—if he were a natural. And most important of all, the fool would usually perform his show in the Elizabethan hall, a place brimming with theatrical atmosphere and frequently turned into a stage. And one of the privileges of allowed fools was to interrupt the play performed in the hall and become part of it with their jests.

The relation between the activities of the fool and the stage-clown becomes more obvious when the latter is given the part of counterfeiting a domestic jester. It is also known—and this was one of the causes of their decline—that players performing stage-clowns, especially those of the Kempe's school, would tend to say more than was set down for them and they would also hold

what Richard Brome called 'interlocutions with the audience' (Bradbrook 1969:32), just as court-fools probably did at their master's hall. At the end of the play the clown would deliver the jig, which required a certain disposition for singing and dancing that was also a part of the office of the domestic jester. And the custom of recruiting domestic fools among countrymen must have also contributed to the overlapping of meanings of the words *fool* and *clown*. Sandra Billington has shown that 'talent-spotting for Fools was part of a nobleman's employment while travelling through the countryside' (1984:32), and we also know that both Will Summer and Tarlton were brought up to London from a rural environment to entertain a royal audience²¹. The excessive regard for Shakespeare's fools—who are witty and artificial and skilled in courtly matters and gentleman-like manners—as representative of court-fools has obliterated the proximity that existed between the stupid rustic and the natural fool taken from his village to court.

But the crucial feature which stage-clowns and domestic fools shared was undoubtedly that both of them had to fulfil the same task: to entertain an audience by succeeding in making them laugh. This shade of meaning which the words *fool* and *clown* had in common must have been a strong factor for these two terms to become interchangeable—although in very precise contexts only. Tarlton, Queen Elizabeth's jester and Robert Armin, the clown of the Lord Chamberlain's Men would be called clown or fool *indiscriminately*: Tarlton was a court-fool who became a comic actor and Armin was a player whose comic role was often that of a domestic jester kept in a court or large household. It was not the case, as Enid Welsford thought, that 'it would seem that at this period the household-fools tended to be eclipsed by the theatrical clowns' (1935:170); it was rather that fools turned into stage-clowns when necessary and theatrical clowns would be fools if the play had a fool in it. Armin himself would perform Dogberry or Feste according to the play; and in his *Foole Upon Foole* he tells how a village-fool, Jack Miller, was likely to perform, among other things, the 'clown':

...in Gentlemens houses, where hee would imitate playes, dooing all
himselfe, King, Gentleman, Clowne, and all: having spoke for one, he
would sodainely goe in and againe return for the other; and stamering,
so beastly as he did, made mighty mirth

(1600:112)

Domestic jesters then would mock plays in their masters' halls and stageclowns would be asked to play for private audiences, becoming momentarily, domestic fools. This lack of clear, set boundaries between the activities of domestic fools and stage-clowns permitted the semantic contents of both *fool* and *clown* to fluctuate whenever 'dramatic' performance was involved.

It is precisely on the importance of the stage in determining the meanings and usage of the words *fool* and *clown* during the last decade of the 16th century and the first years of the 17th century that the *OED* fails to put proper

emphasis. Under the entry *Fool* no mention of the stage can be found whereas, at the same time, it is said that a fool is 'One who professionally counterfeits folly for the entertainment of others, a jester, clown'. However, a professional jester or artificial fool kept at large households or courts to wait upon lords or ladies was not likely to be called 'clown', unless —as it was the case with Tarlton— he had something to do with theatre practice. Shakespeare himself, —who seems to have had the word *clown* in mind constantly while he was writing *As You Like It*—, only allows Touchstone, of all his fools, to be called 'clown' once in the text of the play. Towards the turn of the century two plays at least —Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* (1599) and Marston's *The Malcontent* (1600)— having a fool among their characters, do not refer to him as *clown* at all, not even in stage directions or speech headings.

The *OED* then, under the entry *Fool*, does not distinguish between the professional fool who is not a 'clown' and the one who is so. Neither does it suggest that *fool* must have meant 'clown' (i.e. a stage-character, a role in the company) at some stage; the use of the term clown to refer to the stage role of the professional fools seems to have started to wear off by the first half of the first decade of the 17th century and by the second half only one play has been found, Wilkin's *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1605-7) that, when referring to a domestic jester, still keeps the word 'clowne' in stage directions and speech headings.

Under the entry *Clown* we do find acknowledgement of the influence of the stage on the meaning of the word. A clown is 'A fool or jester, as a stagecharacter (? orig[inally] representing a rustic buffon) or (in Shakespeare) a retainer of a court or great house'. This, however, brings more confusion than clarification: it is now clear that fools as stage-characters were, or could be, called 'clowns', but not all clowns were fools (i.e. domestic jesters), not even where the stage was concerned. It was not only 'originally' that the clown represented a somewhat stupid and rustic butt: it would be more accurate to say instead that he coexisted with the court-fools and jesters in the plays of Renaissance England. With regard to a possible particular meaning of the word *clown*, peculiar to Shakespeare only —if such a thing does exist— it is certainly not 'a retainer of a court or great-house'. It is eloquent in this respect that the only occasion on which this could be said to be true is in *As You Like It*, the first of Shakespeare's plays with a proper court or household fool in it, and almost at the beginning of the play, when Touchstone has only appeared once on stage (*AYL*, II.ii.8). Besides, it occurs in a context in which the word acquires a slightly derogatory innuendo, and, also, in the play in which the word *clown* appears with an unwonted, uncommon, un-Shakespearean frequency —five times out of a total amount of eleven times in the whole Shakespearean corpus. The very date of the play (c. 1600) provides an answer for the unusual recurrence of the word *clown* in *As You Like It*; it was around the turn of the seventeenth-century that the conflict between the meanings of these two words seems to have reached its peak. The debate on the antagonistic

virtues of *court* and *country* contributed to make some of the meanings of these two terms more relevant than others, and thus their use as opposites becomes crystal clear. When Rosalind and Touchstone strike up their battle of wits in meeting Corin in the forest, court and country face each other as irreconcilable states:

Touch. Holla, you clown!

Ros. Peace, fool, he's not thy kinsman

Corin. Who calls?

Touch. Your betters sir

(II.iv.62-5)

Clown and fool are used here to define separate, distinct worlds which should stand apart. '...the court cannot possibly be without me', says Passarello, the fool in Marston's *The Malcontent* (I.viii.60) whereas Babulo, the clown in Chette, Haughton, and Dekker's *The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill*, says: 'Clowns are not for the court'. It is in the other two senses of the word given by the *OED* — 'A countryman, rustic or peasant' and 'A man without refinement or culture; an ignorant, rude, uncouth, ill-bred man' — that Babulo uses the word in this passage. It is highly significant that it is Touchstone, the great advocate of courtly ways in the forest of Arden, who uses the word *clown* in four of the five times that it is used in the play and, furthermore, he makes use of it precisely in the same two senses that Babulo did. By addressing Corin and William with the word *clown*, Touchstone clearly states his detachment from what he considers a world of unrefined country manners, full of despicable fellows who are not 'in', who ignore the courtly behaviour that befits a gentleman²². The word *clown*, then, evokes a whole range of ideas related to 'countryness' and lack of up-bringing and good manners which is utterly alien to the word *fool*. And this is what W. Empson's study of the word *fool* in *The Structure of Complex Words*²³ fails to notice: he identifies the word *clown* with *jester* when he says that one of the meanings of *fool* is 'clown, professional jester and mocker' (1951:111). In spite of the tight link that the dramatic nature common to the activities of clowns and jesters provides, this total identification of *clown* with *jester* is, in the long run, misleading. By not taking into consideration the semantic features peculiar to the word *clown* — countryness, ill-breeding, ignorance, rude manners — not only does it leave out of the scope of the word *clown* characters such as Launce or Dogberry but it also obstructs the clarification of the usage of the words *fool* and *clown*. It is not until we realise that the biblical and Erasmian senses of the word *fool* counterpoint the capacity of the word *clown* to evoke rudeness and rural upbringing that we understand how these two words could function as synonyms at certain contexts while keeping a distinct meaning of their own at others.

The original meaning of *clown* as 'countryman, rustic or peasant' helps to

explain how the word achieved its use as a term for a stage-character. Since at an early period in English drama the comic prototype of a country bumpkin became a dramatic convention, the word *clown* began to be used to refer to the actor in the theatre company who would play this kind of comic part. Being the clown of a company was a trade or profession as much as goldsmith or schoolmaster²⁴. When the dramatic convention grew stale —the clowns had begun to abuse their stock of jokes and say more than was set down for them— and tilted towards a more refined, witty, well-bred entertainer, modelled on the domestic fool kept at courts and large households, the word *clown* was maintained to name the new comic prototype. There was no reason for a new word to emerge in its place since the actor who would play the new comic figure, the witty fool, was the same one who played the old one, the rustic, ignorant countryman. There were, besides, other advantages in preserving the word *clown* and not substituting it for *fool*. The first one had been recently incorporated to the English language, probably during the second half of the 16th century —the earliest example given by the *OED* is ‘1563 Baldwin Mirr[oir] [for] Mag[istrates], Rivers, xlv, The cloyne contented cannot be with any state’, although we cannot be completely sure that it had not been in the language earlier. The word *fool*, however, had been an English word since, at least, the 13th century —the earliest recorded example by the *OED* is c. 1275. Because of this, the word *fool* enjoyed an enormous polysemic and punning potential. The word *clown* instead was freshly coined, handy and unburdened with a pile of meanings.

If the word *clown* was kept to name a role in a theatrical company, being a name as much for the stagecharacter as for the person, the actor, it is less difficult to understand then why Touchstone, Lavatch and Feste are called *fool* throughout the text of their plays but *clown* in stage-directions and speech headings. Rather, the unexplained, puzzling riddle lies now with Lear’s Fool. Why was he not called *clown* if, as it has been argued (Bradley 1929:201), stage-directions and speech headings were meant for actors and the actor who played Touchstone and Feste was the same man who played the fool in *King Lear*? The fact that he is a fool in a tragedy and not in a comedy cannot solve the problem since there are characters called *clowns*, though of a very different kind, in other tragedies, namely *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Once more *fool* and *clown* prove to be a pair of ‘corrupted’, ‘wanton’ words whose meaning, as Feste would put it, can be played upon, confused and reversed as swiftly and easily as a chevril glove is turned inside out. Perhaps a way to restore the glove its primitive aspect could be attained through the study of Shakespeare’s clowns and fools not just as isolated and individual manifestations of Shakespeare’s artistry but as part of a complex dramatic convention which can be traced in several late Elizabethan and early Jacobean plays. It is our belief that a careful look at both Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean fools and clowns, bearing in mind the peculiar status of the actor in the company that took their part on the one hand, and the contemporary debate

on the advantages and disadvantages of court and country on the other, would lead towards a better understanding of the dramatic convention to which both stupid rustics and witty jesters belong, and would prove illuminating in the task of establishing the value of the words *clown* and *fool* for the study of dramatic conventions in Renaissance drama.

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Notes.

1. According to J. Bartlett (1894), these eleven occasions are: *LLL*,IV.i.142; *LLL*,IV.iii.17; *AYL*,II.ii.8; *AYL*,II.iv.66; *AYL*,V.i.10; *AYL*,V.i.52; *AYL*,V.i.5; *WT*,IV.iv.616; 2 *Hen VI*,iv.x.60; *Ham*, II.ii.336, *Ham*,III.ii.43.
2. Cf. *King Lear*, I.iv. 198-201.
3. In his *Moriae Encomium*, Erasmus regarded the *Sileni* figures as a symbol of the union of contraries: 'In the first place, it's well known that all human affairs are like the figures of Silenus described by Alcibiades and have two completely opposite faces, so that what is death at first sight, as they say, is life if you look within, and vice versa, life is death. The same applies to beauty and ugliness, riches and poverty, obscurity and fame, learning and ignorance, strength and weakness, the noble and the base-born, happy and sad, good and bad fortune, friend and foe, healthy and harmful —in fact you'll find everything suddenly reversed if you open the Silenus' (1971:103).
4. When M. C. Bradbrook enumerates the characteristics of the fools played by Armin she notices: 'He is often contrasted with a knave, and he likes to prove that others are either fools, knaves or both, by means of catechism and other marks of the wise Fool' (1969:57).
5. The knave can be said to be foolish because he is swearing 'by his honour', when knaves, contrary to knights, have no honour.
6. Cf. J. F. Danby 1945:17-24.
7. So is Shakespeare. It is not the first time that Shakespeare makes one of his fools explain the meaning of these two words. See *All's Well that Ends Well*, IV.v.
8. In the *OED* entry for *Clown* we read: 'So far as concerns the sense development, then, it is clear that we have here a word meaning originally 'clod, clot, lump', which like these words themselves (see Clod 5, Clod 4), has been applied in various langs. to a clumsy boor, a lout'.
9. This is not, as we have already shown, the case. Only Touchstone, among all of Shakespeare's 'jesters' and on one single occasion (*AYL*,II.ii.8) is called *clown* within the text of a play. Stage-directions and speech headings are, of course, a different matter altogether.
10. For the date of Armin's arrival in Shakespeare's company see T.W. Baldwin 1924 and C.S. Felver 1961.
11. See M.C. Bradbrook's chapter on the 'new clown' in 1969.
12. See C.S. Felver 1961:22-4, for emendation and discussion of Professor Baldwin's date for Armin's arrival.
13. The resemblance between Touchstone's interview with William in *As You Like It* and Launcelot Gobbo's conversation with his father in *The Merchant of Venice* shows that Gobbo is the germ of the witty fools: Cf. *MV*,II.ii.36-64 with *AYL*,V.i.15-59 and specifically *MV*,II.ii.56-62 with *AYL*,V.i.45-8.
14. A good example can be found in Patch, Cardinal Wolsey's Fool in Rowley's *When You See Me, You Know Me*.
15. With regard to the 'abilities' of real fools and clowns see C.S. Felver 1961:9, where he refers to those of Tarlton and Kempe.
16. For Frederick Warde —who follows Douce closely in his distinction between *fool* as a natural or artificial jester and *clown* as a mere rustic, a witty servant or any low buffoonish character in a comedy—, 'To term Touchstone a clown, as he is called in the cast of characters of 'As You Like It' (sic) seems to me both a misnomer and an injustice. His knowledge, his wisdom, his wit and faculty of observation, raise him far above the condition that such a term would imply' (1915:31). Such a mawkish view of the question rests on the false assumption that the word clown necessarily carries an inherent derogatory value. It is true that it may imply 'ignorance, crassness, or rude manners' (*OED*¹), a sense derived from the earlier one of 'a countryman, rustic or peasant' (*ibid.*). However, not only is it not an injustice

- to call Touchstone *clown*, but its not a misnomer either, since in the cast of characters, as well as in the speech tags or stage-directions, Touchstone is 'the clown' because that was the current word, the fashionable term at the turn of the seventeenth-century for a distinct comic part in a play. *Clown*, then, could also mean a 'fool or jester, as a stage-character' (*OED*³).
17. Just to quote two of the better known examples: 'The clown bore it, the fool sent it, and the lady hath it: / sweet clown, sweeter fool; sweetest lady!' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.iii.17-8); '...the beast-eating Clown, and next the Fool, / The Bavian.../ *Cum multis aliis* that make a dance' (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, III.v). See also H. Kokeritz's commentary on this last passage in 1946a.
 18. In his New Arden edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, J.R. Brown comments on the accuracy of calling Launcelot Gobbo 'clown' in a footnote to the stage-direction at the beginning of II.v., where he also reminds us that 'Feste is so called in *Tw[elfth] N[ight]*— he was a fool in the play, but the clown of the theatre company' (1955:49).
 19. See *Twelfth Night*, I.v.; Feste brings the convention to an extreme when he asks for her mistress to be taken away since she has just been proved to be a 'fool' (i.e. 'one who acts or behaves stupidly', *OED*¹). And her immediate reply is: 'What think you of this fool, Malvolio, doth he not mend?' (*TN*.I.v.71-2).
 20. For a better account of the fool's skiful play with his bauble see W. Willeford 1969:33-4.
 21. E. Welsford quotes John Fuller's account on how Tarlton was found keeping his father's swine and brought to court. See 1935:282.
 22. It was probably through the polarity *fool* and *court* versus *clown* and *country* that the word clown acquired a derogatory value which together with the contemporary satire on clowns and the criticism of their dramatic irrelevance must have contributed to the decline of its use. It would be worthwhile —had we but the time and room that the brevity of this work denies— to collate the use of the word clown in plays performed between 1590 and 1610 to see if a comprehensible pattern of the emergence of the term in its stage sense and its growing into disuse can be obtained. Because it may turn out to be the case that it is not, as W. Empson thought, that 'Shakespeare tends increasingly to say *fool* rather than *clown*' because he 'wanted to insist that he was representing a court fool not letting a loose clown on his stage', (1951:114-5), but rather that it was the word clown which replaced the word fool for a few decades.
 23. See Chapter 5, 'The Praise of Folly' which is otherwise a very illuminating compendium of the ways and manners in which the word fool operated in Early Modern English.
 24. When the author of *Quips Upon Questions*, Robert Armin, presents his book in the edition of 1600 he writes: 'Clapt up by a Clowne of the towne... By *Clunnyco de Curtanio Snuffe*', or what is the same, by the clown of the Curtain theatre who calls himself Snuffe. See Baldwin 1929:447.