

These Foolish Things

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There are three kinds of fools: Real Fools, Professional Fools, and Unsuspecting Fools. The professional, a staple of Shakespeare's plays, is, in reality, nobody's fool.

By Michael Dirda

Aristotle is sometimes called the Master of Those Who Know, which may explain why most people find him easier to admire than to like. By contrast, his own teacher's famous teacher might be dubbed the Master of Those Who Haven't a Clue. Informed by an oracle that he was the wisest of men, Socrates immediately recognized that this must be some kind of Delphic joke. Wise, pshaw! At best he was just a lover of wisdom — etymologically a philo-sopher — rather than a possessor of it. Really, Glaucus — he might have said — if I'm so smart, why do I have to go around asking all these questions?

Still, Socrates does at least look the part of antiquity's Yoda. Everyone knows that to be wise means to be old, with lots of wrinkles around kindly eyes that have seen much and forgiven much and are full of pity for the fools that mortals be. But that, in short, is the trouble with wisdom. It implies a superiority to or withdrawal from the hurly-burly of life. While most of us are surrendering to what Joseph Conrad called "the destructive element," and probably drowning in it, the wise guy is there on the shore warm and dry in his old flannel dressing gown and his new fluffy bunny slippers, and he's probably murmuring something like, "Grasshopper, only a fool would go into the water on a day like this." Shaking his head, he will soon pad on back to his snug little burrow and a nice cup of chamomile tea.

This is living? Wisdom plays it safe, avoids occasions of sin, sits home on Saturday night with an improving book. Elvis used to croon that "Wise men say, 'Only fools rush in.'" But like the king he was, he knew that a brokenhearted clown understood more about the heart than any cautious Polonius. What would love be without impetuosity? Who can love and then be wise? "The heart has reasons that the reason doesn't know." No proverb says that love should be the end product of careful calculation, that it's the smart move. This is why computerized dating seems repulsive to so many people: you just know the machine would be happier working on a spreadsheet. Besides, who would trust his emotional life to a program written by some Caltech brainiac who's spent his entire geeky existence playing Halo and Warcraft? To quote Mr. T, "I pity the fool."

As every truly wise man or woman knows, love is just one of those crazy things, and there's no logic to what attracts us to one person and not another. You can tot up the pluses and minuses of a relationship all you want, meditate on the possible outcomes of commitment, consult past experience, but you'd do just as well, or better, to listen to a lot of country and western music. You want an explanation for falling in love? "Maybe it was Memphis." Montaigne, whose Socratic motto was "What do I know?" accounted for his love for his friend Etienne de la Boetie perfectly: "Because he was he and I was I."

In other words, when it comes to falling in love, who can explain it? Who can tell me why? Well, the goddess Folly can. In Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* she proclaims that she oversees love, that folly embodies the intuitive and passionate side of life and is far more fundamental to our human well-being than propriety or reason.

And that's just for starters. Folly points out that Christ endured the "folly" of the cross and reminded His followers to imitate "children, lilies, mustard-seed, and humble sparrows, all foolish, senseless things, which live their lives by natural instinct alone, free from care or purpose." Folly represents the "natural" in all its senses, standing in opposition to the mind-forged manacles of societal norms and expectations. Eventually, notes Erasmus, this sort of folly can even modulate into mystical distraction and ecstasy. Plato asserted that the madness of physical love, during which we forget all about thinking and our spirit seems to leave the body, is the highest form of ordinary happiness, while Christianity offers a similar joyful and irrational dream state when the soul temporarily unites itself with God.

Humanity, that dialectical animal, likes to look at things as binary opposites: raw and cooked, gay and straight, Laurel and Hardy. Just so, foolishness is the usual antithesis of wisdom. But foolishness, as Erasmus reminds us, is one of those qualities with a bit of range to it, so that another possible opposite is prudence. In fact, prudence and wisdom are practically roommates, and while sometimes being wise can look attractive — Gandalf, anyone? — almost nobody, except perhaps investment counselors, really wants to be thought of as prudent. Might just as well be an old maid in sensible black shoes or a Mr. Peepers with a coin purse. No, no, no; give me stiletto heels or give me death! If you can't say "keep the change," why bother to go to the bar?

In truth, there are essentially three kinds of fools: Real Fools, Professional Fools, and Unsuspecting Fools. Real Fools are the innocents, the simpletons, the idiot savants and "naturals" who react to situations and people with an Aspergian lack of restraint or decorum. They speak their unmediated minds, and great truths sometimes emerge, as "out of the mouths of babes." Any of them might have blurted, "The emperor has no clothes." Forrest Gump is our great modern exemplar of this kind of fool. Heaven looks out for such as these.

Professional Fools include court jesters, clowns, toadies, con artists, and a whole range of yes-men. By pretending to be stupid or servile, the Professional Fool coolly aims to reinforce his client's conviction of his own obvious superiority. In fact, these performance artistes always quip and caper with a purpose: a salary, behind-the-throne power, a scam. In literature one of the most memorable of these professional fools is Rameau's Nephew, who in Diderot's famous dialogue of that name toadies to the rich and powerful in return for a snug berth and regular meals. In the film *The Usual Suspects*, Kevin Spacey is a more complex example: Hunched and crippled (as were many professional court jesters), he's slightly pitied by the tough and obviously much smarter people all around him. But Verbal Kint is far more than the "talkative child" that his name suggests.

As for Unsuspecting Fools, they are essentially everyone else in the world, starting with you and me. Everybody plays the fool sometimes; there's no exception to the rule. More particularly, the Unsuspecting Fool is the supposedly wise figure — a sovereign, a pedantic scholar, a pillar of the establishment — who is blind to his own vanity and self-importance, ignorant of what's really going on, puffed up with hubris. Pride goeth before a fall. In tragic vein, Oedipus and Lear are Unsuspecting Fools.

If you want to understand the power of Real Foolishness, read fairy tales. If there's one thing that such stories teach us, it's to trust animals. The simpleton who befriends the local forest creatures will find the treasure and win the princess. Every time. Not the clever older brothers with some *Mission: Impossible* plan. The guy who takes the thorn out of the lion's paw, who doesn't trample on the ants, who is careful not to crush the wildflowers will be rewarded.

Why is this? Because such saintly or holy fools possess a primitive, almost prelapsarian goodness. They are close to Nature, and they are empathetic and kind and humble and unsure of themselves and maybe not very good-looking either. They're picked on by society and were probably in the lowest reading group, and their good souls shine forth like shook foil. Think Shrek. It's no accident that the Feast of the Holy Innocents is also the date for the Feast of Fools. Over and over again, the Bible reminds us that the humble will be exalted.

In Shakespearean comedies (and tragedies) you're certainly smart to play the Professional Fool or clown. When Bottom the Weaver is "translated" into an ass, the very symbol of the fool, what happens? The gorgeous Titania leads him away for some quality time in her bower. Hamlet knows that with his "antic disposition" on, he can do or say whatever he'd like. There's no need to act the conventional young intellectual like his earnest schoolmate Horatio, who probably wears a bow tie and always makes the dean's list at Wittenberg. As for the late Yorick, that fellow of infinite jest was obviously the only person at the gloomy court of Denmark who ever brought a spark of joy into the life of the melancholy Dane: "He hath borne me on his back a thousand times!" Even the greatest of all Shakespearean characters, Falstaff, is essentially a fool writ very, very large. Wherever Sir John goes, it's party time, Carnival, and he is the Lord of Misrule. Certainly this jolly fat man is a lot better company than, say, the rather cold-hearted and manipulative Prospero. But even that magician finally decides to drown his book and give up his power. Being superhuman isn't half as much fun as being human.

As for those Unsuspecting Fools, take a look at King Lear. Here the best and the brightest — the king himself: the clever, upwardly mobile Regan and Goneril: that shrewd bastard Edmund — wreak nothing but havoc and sorrow. Everything goes wrong. But why, how, could this happen *to them*? They took every precaution, they carefully plotted and schemed, they made Venn diagrams and flow charts, and they were careful not to let people or human feelings interfere with their big plans. By contrast, the most admirable characters in the play are terribly naive (Cordelia), insane (Edgar as Tom O'Bedlam), or simpleminded (the Fool).

One might argue that Shakespeare's wicked characters aren't wise but merely worldly wise and usually too smart for their own good. They're the sort of people to whom Paul offers his famous advice in his first letter to the Corinthians: "If any man among you seem to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise." They are, in fact, self-centered egotists who have suppressed the springs of natural affection. In this respect, if not in any other, they aren't really so different from the great sages and Buddhas, who remove themselves from this world, who keep a safe distance from the bonfires of desire. The austerity of spiritual life, the quest for perfect understanding or oneness or transcendence, asks that we give up being human. Is any abstraction really worth so much?

The English author Walter Pater suggested that we should seek experience itself, rather than the fruit of experience, i.e., wisdom. Of course, he was an aesthete with an ornate style, so it's easy to dismiss what he said. It's important for human beings to make mistakes, to do stupid things, to go overboard, to be foolish — even if it's painful — and not to judge themselves too harshly when they've been burnt. As Zorba the Greek used to proclaim, "Life is trouble!"

Let me bring this foolishness to an end by repeating the advice from the closing lines of *The Praise of Folly*: "Clap your hands, live well, and drink!" In other words, *meine Damen und Herren*, life is a cabaret. What is the use of sitting alone in your room? Come hear the music play! And, then, if you're really wise — or do I mean foolish? — you might as well dance.

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