



# Mirror of Lear: A Comparative Study of The Fool in *King Lear* and The Gravedigger's Boy in *Lear*

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### ABSTRACT

Adaptations of Shakespeare's *King Lear* have always been extensively explored, especially Edward Bond's *Lear*. Many researchers about *Lear* focus on its rewriting of the political and social themes, however, they seldom of them paid attention to the small roles in the two works. Although scholars such as Michael Patterson once mentioned Bond's rewriting of Shakespeare's original characters, they focused on the lack of perfect characters such as Cordelia and did not make a detailed comparative study of small roles such as the Fool in *King Lear* and gravedigger's boy in *Lear*. This paper aims to analyze small roles in the two dramas, especially the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Gravedigger's Boy in Bond's *Lear*, and explore Bond's rewriting of Shakespeare's image of these two small roles.

**Keywords:** adaptation of *King Lear*, small role, the mirror of Lear, fool

### Introduction

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is one of the most important classic tragedies that has been rewritten many times on the contemporary English drama stage. For instance, there are *Lear* by Edward Bond in the 1970s, *Lear's daughters*, which was collectively created by Elaine Feinstein and Women's Theatre Group in the 1980s, and Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* in the 1990s. Among those rewritten plays about Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Edward bond's *Lear* has received much attention and is considered to be the representative of Shakespeare's "reactionary rewriting"(Chen, 2012). However, most researches about *Lear* focus on its rewriting of the political and social theme. Vera Gottlieb (2004) and Simon Johns hold the view that the play is a representative of Edward Bond's political fables; Sonia Massai (1999) believes that Bond rewrites Shakespeare's view on the mechanism of power in the play; Scholars such as Chen Hongwei and Wang Lan (2007) emphasize the social and political roots of the violent description of the play. Few scholars pay attention to the comparative study of characters between Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Bond's *Lear*, especially small characters. Although scholars such as Michael Patterson (2008) once mentioned Bond's rewriting of Shakespeare's original characters, they focused on the lack of perfect characters such as Cordelia and did not make a detailed comparative study of small roles such as the Fool and Gravedigger's Boy. In view of this, this paper will focus on the comparative study of small roles in the two plays, especially the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the gravedigger's boy in Bond's *Lear*, and explore Bond's rewriting of Shakespeare's image of these two small roles.

### Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Compared with other characters, especially the protagonists, the fool is only a small role in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but he is a prominent and distinctive image who is indispensable in the play. Fools are jesters kept by the court and nobles. They wear colored clothes, clown hats, small bells, and colorful faces, entertaining their masters with humorous actions, quick responses, and witty and humorous language. In *King Lear*, the fool breaks his traditional identity of entertaining the host and acting as a joke after the meal. He dares to speak frankly and is also good at beating around the bush to awaken the dazed Lear. The Fool sees through the king's serious mistake in dividing the land, and he reminds Lear:

Why, after I have cut the egg i'the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i'the middle and gav'st away both parts, thou borest thine ass on thy back o'er

the dirt: thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden one away. If I speak like myself in this, let him be whipped that first finds it so. (Shakespeare, 1904, p.27)

He compares the crown to an egg to remind Lear not to give up the throne and divides his land. But Lear doesn't realize it. After Lear stubbornly divides the land to his two elder daughters, the fool satirizes Lear:

Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. Now thou art an O without a figure: I am better than thou art; I am a fool, thou art nothing.--Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue. So your face.....(Shakespeare, 1904, p27)

Besides that, he always accompanies Lear. When Lear is driven away by his two elder daughters, wandering in the wilderness and fighting against the storms, only the fool is by his side, "None but the fool, who labors to out-jest his heart-struck injuries." (Shakespeare 55) The process of accompanying is also the process of saving Lear's soul. Lear, who lost his land and kingship, owns nothing in the material sense, but the fool guides him to pursue the "existence" of the spiritual world. "Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle" (Shakespeare, 1904)? After experiencing the hardships of the masses, Lear begins to find spiritual "existence". He recognizes the suffering of the lower-class people and shows his sympathy:

"Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this!"(Shakespeare, 1904, p60)

As Nigellus Wireker said in his *Speculum Stultorum* that ".....foolish men may observe as in a mirror the foolishness of others and may then correct their own folly, and that they may learn to censure in themselves those things which they find reprehensible in others" (Mann, 1975), the fool in *King Lear* acts as a mirror in Lear's life, allowing Lear to see himself all the time. He accompanies Lear, educates Lear, and helps Lear to find the humanity of Christ Jesus.

### **Gravedigger's Boy in Bond's *Lear***

The gravedigger's boy in Edward Bond's *Lear* is another "fool" who accompanies Lear. Joseph E. Duncan pointed out that "Lear and the boy's ghost, like the king and the fool in *King Lear*, become faithful companions, pathetic in their concern for one another." (Duncan, 1976)

The gravedigger's boy is the other side of Lear. At first, Lear tries to build a wall on the swamp and turns the water of life into a source of pain and death; On the contrary, when the boy realizes that the grave he is digging is actually a well, he gives up to dig it: "And when I got down I struck a well. I thought, there's water here and some land, why do I want to dig graves all my life? So I live here and built this farm" (Bond, 2013, p34). He doesn't approve of Lear's building of the Wall: "Up and down, up and down. The king was mad. He took all the men from this village. But I hid. They'd worked with their hands all their lives but when they started on the wall their hands bled for a week" (Bond, 2013, p40). Although the boy doesn't know that Lear is the king, he expresses his disagreements with the building of the wall from a perspective of a farmer or a lower class.

Then, after the boy's death, he accompanies Lear in the form of a ghost. Ghost is the representation of a character's inner world (Chen&Zheng, 2011). The boy's ghost is another side hide

in Lear's inner world. When the boy's ghost first appears, he looks like Lear, who has suffered a lot, in a mirror. "The ghost of the gravedigger's boy appears. His skin and clothes are faded. There's old, dry blood on them" (Bond, 2013, p52). After those inhuman tortures, Lear gradually realizes the mistakes he has made: "I shouldn't have looked. I killed so many people and never looked at one of their faces. But I looked at that animal. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. It's made me a stupid old man" (p66). Lear gains his humanity from those miserable sufferings, so he shows his sympathy to the boy: ".....poor boy. Lie down by me. Here. I'll hold you. We'll help each other. Cry while I sleep, and I'll cry and watch you while you sleep. We'll take turns. The sound of the human voice will comfort us" (p57). At this moment, Lear is like the Lear in Shakespeare's play who just experienced the thunderstorm and says to the fool: "In, boy; go first.--You houseless poverty,--Nay, get thee in. I'll pray, and then I'll sleep"(Shakespeare,1904, 60).

### **The Comparison Between the Fool and Gravedigger's Boy**

Although the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Gravedigger's Boy in Bond's *Lear* are so similar, they are different in some aspects. The gravedigger's boy goes further than the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. He sacrifices himself for Lear's awakening. With Lear's awakening, the boy's ghost becomes paler and paler: "The ghost comes in. It is thinner, shrunk, a livid white" (Bond, 2013, p96).

It seems that he and the boy exchange their roles. The ghost boy displays his white hair and withered hands and progressively shrivels up, while Lear sleeps as a child, stumbles as a child, and learns to see as a child (Duncan 1976). The boy tries to take Lear away: "Quickly, Lear! I'll take you away! We'll go to the place where I was lost" (Bond, 2013, p73). But Lear refuses: "No. I ran away so often, but my life was ruined just the same. Now I'll stay" (Bond, 2013, p73). In addition, Lear tries to persuade Cordelia to give up building the wall:

"Men destroy themselves and say it's their duty? It's not possible! How can they be so abused? Cordelia doesn't know what she's doing! I must tell her – write to her!.....I can't be silent!.....I must stop her before I die!" (Bond, 2013, p82)

The boy tries to fence out others, he says, "Let me poison the well..... Then no one can live here, they'll have to leave you alone. There's a spring hidden in the wood. I'll take you there every day to drink" (Bond, 2013, p96). On the contrary, Lear adamantly insists on offering refuge to others and is ready to destroy the wall by his death. However, gravedigger's Boy goes further than the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

The gravedigger's boy is a mirror of Lear's heart, which reflects his willingness to escape the past and his afraid of death. But Lear defeats him: "You must die! I love you. I'll always remember you, but I can't help you. Die, for your own sake die" (Bond, 2013, p100). Because of the ghost boy's sacrifice, Lear wakes up and becomes a new Lear totally.

### **Conclusion**

The fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Gravedigger's Boy in Bond's *Lear* are similar. Both of them point out mistakes of Lear. The fool sees through the king's serious mistake in dividing the land and reminds him with humorous words, while the boy expresses his disagreements with the building of the wall from a perspective of a farmer or a lower class. Both of them accompany Lear when he is suffering. The fool stays with Lear and fights the thunderstorm with him together, while

the ghost boy accompanies Lear when Lear's eyes are dug out. Both of them waken Lear's humanity. The fool encourages Lear to pursue the "existence" of the spiritual world and at last Lear gains sympathy for his companion, while the ghost-boy helps Lear to gain pity for lower-class people. Both of them are mirrors of Lear, reflecting the inner side of Lear.

However, the gravedigger's boy does more to Lear than the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. He sacrifices himself for the sake of Lear's spiritual awakening. The ghost boy becomes paler and paler while Lear becomes soberer and soberer. He is white and thin (Bond, 2013, p70). It is thinner, shrunk, a livid white (76). Its flesh has dried up, its hair is matted, its face is like a seashell, the eyes are full of terror (96). He even changes roles with Lear and acts like a coward side of Lear, persuading Lear to accept and bear all the sufferings. When Lear's eyes are dug out, he is suffering and hopes the pain will stop. The boy says: "It will stop. Sometimes it might come back, but you'll learn to bear it" (78). At last, he sacrifices himself under the attack of pigs. As Professor Chen Hongwei said in class, "It's very important for Lear that he should get rid of this other figure: he has to discrown something of himself, this instinctive thing he calls the gravedigger's boy" (Chen, 2021).

Owing to the gravedigger's boy, Lear in Edward Bond's *Lear* is neither the Lear who wants to build the wall and "defend" enemies, nor the Lear who accepts what comes and discovers that a human being can accept an enormous lot and survive it. He is the Lear who sees through the essence of violent politics and tries his best to destroy the wall.

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