

Wisdom's Folly: Analyzing Fools as Agents of Truth in Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky

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As Shakespeare's *King Lear* concludes, "the weight of this sad time we must obey; speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." Although speaking emotionally seems to be the impetus for uncivil discourse, it is the dangerous "ought to say" that prevents constructive dialogue. In *King Lear* and *The Brother's Karamazov*, those who see through the pretense of "ought" and are courageous enough to speak honestly are considered fools. Outlying characters such as the Fool and Father Zosima are liberated from societal expectations and thus have the ability to voice their criticism to those who are confined by their obsession with performing as they should like Lear and Fyodor Karamazov. Unbound by the general rules of "ought to," fools are free to speak the truth and say what they feel in order to reveal the value and necessity of connection with others. Lear's fool establishes the precedent for honesty, while the fools in *The Brothers Karamazov* offer a way to restore civility. By assuming the responsibility to be an agent of truth, the fools of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky foster civil discourse and model the way to reconstruct civil society through recovery of authentic relationships.

Society's oughts — to have wealth and security — cause disunity and destroy communication. Both Lear and Fyodor Karamazov believe they ought to pursue wealth and security, but their acquisitions comes at the cost of relationships with their families. As Lear attempts to maintain control of his three daughters and Fyodor of his three sons, the fathers use inheritances to manipulate their children as a means of mimicking relationship. Secure in the comforts wealth affords, they isolate themselves from love in favor of preserving a false conception of self-worth. Lear believes he must "unberthened crawl towards death" while still "retain[ing] the name, and all th' addition to a king" in order to maintain his pride without his responsibilities (I.i.43, 137-8). As king in name but not in occupation, he feels entitled to enjoy his old age in the comfort of reciprocal care from his daughters. Although Cordelia offers to love

Lear “according to [her] bond” as his daughter by “return[ing] those duties back as are right fit,” this answer does not embody Lear’s idealization of love that is rooted in material wealth (I.i.95, 99). Goneril and Regan succeed in winning their inheritances because they claim to love him “beyond what can be valued, rich or rare” (I.i.59). His false understanding of love and relationship isolates him from Cordelia when she fails to preform as he feels she ought to. When Cordelia answers his challenge of “which of ye doth love us most that we our largest bounty may extend,” with “nothing,” she insults him by not impersonating Lear’s false conception of relationship (I.i.53-4, 89). Cordelia’s rejection of her inheritance is interpreted as a rejection of Lear because Lear equates self-worth with material worth. Instead of preventing “future strife” as he intended, Lear’s conformity to societal “oughts” isolates him from his daughter and ironically allows disunity and miscommunication to rule his kingdom in his stead (I.i.46).

Fyodor Karamazov’s similar obsession with controlling his children by using inheritances causes disunity within the family. Miscommunication and manipulation of money destroy the relationships meant to protect aging fathers. Instead of being a father worthy of care and love in his old age, Fyodor uses monetary debt to buy protection as he grows older. Dmitri “was the only one of Fyodor Pavlovich’s three sons who grew up in the conviction that he, at any rate, had some property” (11). When Dmitri needs money, he returns to his aloof father. Fyodor “saw at once that Mitya had a false and inflated idea of his property” and he uses this misconception “to exploit” his son (12). Fyodor Pavolich, who “was simply an evil buffoon and nothing more,” cannot act as a father and so becomes a usurer to his own child in order to control him (8). Fyodor has assurance that he will be well-provisioned as Dmitri repays his debts. However, his money-lending scheme destroys his relationship with his son and is the “very circumstance” that “led to the catastrophe” of his own murder (12). Secure in the belief that wealth would protect

him, Fyodor neglects his role as a father. Rather than caring for his children and expecting that care to return to him in his old age, Fyodor buys his way out of his responsibilities to his children. Wealth destroys the reciprocal relationship between parents and children, and Fyodor becomes isolated from authentic relationships. His sense of self-worth inflated by assumed role of lender instead of father, Fyodor is unable to overcome his ego and reconcile with Dmitri.

As the fathers act in their own self-interest in accordance with how society dictates they ought to, they make themselves fools by destroying the relationships. Without real relationship, Lear and Fyodor are sustained only by the illusion of devotion from duplicitous daughters and indebted sons. Entrenched in ego, they are unable to distinguish reality from their own constructed idealizations. The actual fools in both works serve as voices of truth that are able to pierce the pride of Lear and Fyodor. Their ironic role as outsiders existing within a society liberates fools from traditional conventions of public discourse; thus, they are free to value truth and forgiveness over possessions and reputation. Lear's fool establishes a precedent for truth-telling to the arrogant, however shrouded in rhyme and riddle his truth may be, that then serves as an intertextual lens through which Dostoyevsky's holy fools can be analyzed as arbiters of truth and forgiveness.

Lear's fool is the singular character from whom Lear will accept criticism because the Fool is expected to speak truthfully, unlike Cordelia and Kent who are expected to speak flatteringly to Lear's ego. After the competition to decide how to partition his kingdom, Lear accuses Cordelia of being "so young, and so untender" to which Cordelia retorts that she is "so young, my lord, and true" (I.i.109-10). As his daughter, Lear expects Cordelia to act as her sisters had done and flatter his ego with lies. Cordelia is exiled without paternal provision because she fails to perform what she ought to say as a daughter and heiress. The Fool explains

to Lear that he “has banished two on’s daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will. If thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb” (I.iv.10406). Lear unintentionally preserved Cordelia by banishing her with a husband who saw that “she herself is a dowry” (I.i.243). France recognizes the inherent value of Cordelia as a loving daughter and wife. Defying the criteria by which he ought to select a wife, France takes for his spouse the “cast away” Cordelia who he recognizes “art most rich rich in being poor” (I.i.255, 252). Lear is a fool for banishing Cordelia, and those that follow him to his inevitable downfall are also deserving of the title of fool.

Similarly, Kent is exiled for attempting to speak truthfully because he attempts to be “unmannerly when Lear is mad” (I.i.147-8). The conventions of behavior that characteristically flatter the self-worth of those in power eradicates the ability of loyal couriers to speak honestly in times of need. The fool, however, is responsible for being honest because he is exempt from conventional discourse of court. Using humor to skillfully present the truth to Lear in a satirical way, Lear listens to the Fool because the fool’s statements do not insult his ego. Through the voice of the fool, Lear is able to distinguish truth from lies. He finally believes “they told me I was everything; ’tis a lie,” and this revelation allows him to see the importance of his relationship with his daughter (IV.vi.105-6). Lear is able to reconcile with Cordelia because the fool taught him to “see better,” to see the true value of relationships over himself and his wealth (I.i.160). However, Lear must face the consequences for his actions, and his egoism and isolation cause his demise and Cordelia’s.

Fyodor Karamazov similarly cannot distinguish between truth and lies, and his ignorance prevents him from true love and security. Father Zosima warns Fyodor that “a man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point where he does not discern any truth either in

himself or anywhere around him, and thus falls into disrespect towards himself and others. Not respecting anyone, he ceases to love” (44). Fyodor disrespects himself by becoming the embarrassment of the town, and he frequently disrespects others, including the dying Father Zosima. Unable to discern the truth of his embarrassment, Fyodor continues to isolate himself from the sanctuary of reconciliation with his family and community. Dmitri understands that “morally [Fyodor] owes [him] something,” and so he decides “for the last time I give him a chance to be my father” (120). However, Fyodor is so established in his egoism that he trades his second chance at love for wealth and sensualistic depravity. Zosima sees reflected in Fyodor how “the whole world has long since gone off on a different path,” one that considers “a veritable lie to be the truth” and “demand[s] the same lie from others” (301). As a holy fool, Father Zosima recognizes the path of destruction that the Karamazovs follow because he once was on the same road, believing in the same lies. Because of his similar egotistical background, Father Zosima is able to speak the truth of Fyodor’s heart. He, however, learned to reject societal expectations and embrace community and in doing so became a holy fool.

Relationship heals mankind from self-inflected solitude, but in order to realize the importance of others, one must first realize the comparative un-importance of one’s self. Zosima first had to recognize his shortcoming and humble himself to become “the servant of [his] servant” before he could fully understand the importance of community (317). In his life before the monastery, Zosima acted similarly to Fyodor because he was “blinded by [his] own merits” as a successful rising officer (297). He isolated himself by abusing his subordinates, abandoning his lover, and challenging his peers in the name of ego. He was the person who “accumulates wealth in solitude, thinking: how strong, how secure I am now,” but did not realize “madman as he is, that the more he accumulates, the more he sinks into suicidal impotence” (303). About to

risk his life and the life of another in a duel because of his suicidal need to preserve his image, Zosima suddenly realizes his pride is not worth a life. He remembers his brother Markle's dying conviction, that "each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and everything" after reflecting on his abuse of his servant (289). Zosima comes to understand the equality of mankind after realizing he had no right to abuse his subordinate the way he did. He makes himself a fool in his attempt to make others understand the truth of being created equally, all in "the image and likeness of God" (298). The conviction of equality Zosima dedicates his life to upholding contradicts society's valued obligations predicated on unequal social dynamics. He who believes that he ought "to separate his person, wishing to experience the fullness of life within himself" is in reality doomed only to find "not the fullness of life but full suicide, for instead of the fullness of self-definition, they fall into complete isolation" (303). One cannot find fullness through separation, wealth, or security, but must engage with others to truly experience all life has to offer. This realization, however, does not come easily to the egotistical, and the only wise words of fools construct discourse to which the ego will listen.

In order to escape isolation, Zosima "suddenly set[s] an example, and draw[s] the soul out from its isolation for an act of brotherly communion, though it be with the rank of a holy fool" (304). Society is rebuilt with brotherly communion among individuals coming together, but those that seek restoration of relationship are considered fools; in reality, those that believe "the current teaching of the world," that "you have needs, therefore satisfy them," are the true fools (313). Zosima rejects the world and joins the monastery as sincere act of repentance and desire for reconciliation with all people. "For once in [his] life" Zosima "[has] acted sincerely," but his sincerity transforms him into "a sort of holy fool" (301). In a society that values egoism and unauthentic communication, those who are sincere in their words and relationships are

considered fools, but their authenticity earns them the trust and respect necessary to present the truth in a comprehensible way. Holy fools are set apart by their recovery of authentic human relationships in a world that believes people ought to speak and behave selfishly. Fools understand “a man’s true security lies not in his own solitary effort, but in the general wholeness of humanity” (303). Alexei Karamazov, Father Zosima’s successor, dedicates his life to the development of authentic community and sincere dialogue starting with the next generation in the hopes reconstructing a civil society. Although Lear learns the value of others too late, the holy fools in *The Brothers Karamazov* exist to teach the imperative lesson of community. “Alexei must be one of those youths like holy fools” who “want[s] to influence the young generation, develop them” in order to teach them not to abide by lies and ought to’s, but to seek community and truth (21, 534). As Alexei Karamazov learns from the example of Father Zosima, he realizes the way to civil society is through authentic relationships, even if the pursuit of authenticity means the world sees you as a fool.