# SHADOWS OF YORICK

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**Abstract:** The article is centred on the figures of Richard Tarlton and his understudy, Robert Armin. It focuses on the social function of the fool in the Renaissance period and the liminality of the interchangeable social role of jesters and kings, as the jester becomes a carnivalesque king. The documentation sources are centred around Armin's chronicle of the so to speak court fools of his times, *Nest of Ninnies* (1608) and *Tarlton's Jests* (1611) filtered through Bakhtin's motif of laughter as a conquering force against fear, and regeneration or rebirth through laughter. I intend to prove that Armin's personal documentation combined with Tarlton's legacy was crucial for the shaping of such deep characters as *King Lear*'s Fool, the Clowns from *Hamlet*, Touchstone from *As You Like It* and Feste from *Twelfth Night*. Also, the study will try to provide a full account of the carnival motifs of regeneration that can be find throughout Armin's chronicle and *Tarlton's Jests*, such as violence, sex, death and regeneration – as common features that link as a red thread the jests of fools depicted in these pages. The double act that follows the fool's `lively act` of inversion, the king's fool/ the fool's king and the dialectics of substance and shadow, order and chaos will try to pin-point the general traits of the fool's social function, a process made harder by the fact that the fool normally resits these characterisations, since he is the ultimate disturber of apparent designs and/ or orderly structures. It might be tempting to limit the study to the political aspect of the discussion upon the fools' social function, yet this would be a completely different article in its own right, since the fool – viewed as a social figure – served a wide range of political purposes. Rather, for now at least, I will focus my study to the artistic merits of Armin's *Nest of Ninnies* and *Tarlton's Jests* and the cultural context in which they belong and also the sources and influences that spawned them and of course, their off-springs.

**Keywords:** court jesters, fools, Renaissance, inversion, carnival, feast of fools, shadow archetype.

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"They say he goes in collours, as one strangely affected,
and I goe in motley, making my own cloakebag ready."
Robert Armin, *A nest of Ninnies, Simply of themselves without Compund*

## The jester in context

Few names of the Elizabethan stage are as much alluded as Richard Tarlton's. Queen Elizabeth's jester and a member of the most important theatre company of that era, The Queen's Men, he was so acclaimed as an actor that the Earl of Leicester, long after Tarlton's death, mistook Burbage for him. According to a variety of sources, authorities on the Elizabethan jester such as Fuller, Halliwell

and Collier, Richard Tarlton was born in Condover. The year of his birth is uncertain, but the first written account of him that was kept to this day is linked to a ballad about a flood that occurred in the year 1570 in Bedfordshire, which he authored, we have reason to believe, around that same period as the flood depicted in it. The ballad, entitled *A very lamentable and wofull discourse of the fierce fluds whiche lately flowed in Bedfordshire, in Lincolnshire, and in many other places, with the great losses of sheep and other cattel, the 5. of October, 1570* gives us some grounds to believe that by that time he was a well-known writer of ballads. The next literary account we have of him is his signature on the forefront of an *impromptu* play called *The Seven Deadly Sins* which he arranged and devised around 1583 (Halliwell, 2011, p. 5). What is interesting about this particular play is the fact that several actors which played in it – respectively, according to the original plat of the play, the actors Richard Burbage, Robert Cowley and William Sly – were later to be found in Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlaine's Men, which after the coronation of King James I, changed its name into King's Men. The canvas of the play is very similar to the Italian *Commedia all'improviso* in which the actors invented or were supposed to invent the dialogue for the occasion. It is worth mentioning that this form of devised theatre was rather the norm during that period (and I might add that this practice is as old as Theatre: from the ancient mime skits to the experiments conducted by Grotowski and Brook in the second half of the 20th Century and running throughout the theatre practice of the Renaissance). For instance, the manuscript of *Much Ado About Nothing,* printed in 1600, contains a peculiar blunder in the text of the fourth act, were the names Dogberry and Verges are replaced by the names of the actors Kempe and Cowley. As E.G. Craig believes, in his seminal article *Shakespeare's Collaborators,* the common manner in which the text was written was similar to that of a *commedia all'improviso* canvas and, if this method sounds familiar to that of the collaboratively devised theatre it is because it was exactly that.

The dramatic action would be outlined during rehearsals and then the actors would play the action in front of the public. The process enabled dramatic changes to the overall action of the canvas that could occur either during rehearsals, or, later on, after the performance was so to speak tested in front of an audience and scenes were changed, deleted or added. Another evidence of this practice is to be found in the two printed versions of the play *Hamlet.* The version of 1603 is, as far as literary value is concerned, rougher than the version of 1604, yet the dramatic situations from the 1603 version are far richer than those of the

1604 version, but the 1604 folio is more polished from a literary point of view (Craig, 1999, p. 144). In a way, the printed playbook is the edited transcript of an ambiental recording of a conversation between two gangsters taken by the District Attorney's Office. But it is just one sided, and without the proper decoding it falls as flat as the paper on which it is written. To recover the other facets, to decode the text, we must try to immerse ourselves in the room-tone, in the atmosphere of that exact space where the telephone conversation took-place and try to understand how the people that did the encoding thought.

If one were to make a *biopic* about Tarlton's life it would unfortunately have to rely on a handful of scattered, albeit very original sources. The main events concerning his life have been written in a tract entitled `*Tarltons Jests, Drawn into three parts: His Court Witty Jests; His Sound City Jests; His Country pretty Jests; full of Delight, Wit, and honest Mirth*` which was first published in 1611. Aside from this collection of anecdotes, rather than a proper biography, Tarlton is also the hero of a neitherworld travel genre booklet (rather a brochure)[13] published in 1590 with the title: `*Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie. Onleye such a jest as his Jigge, fit for Gentlemen to laugh at an houre, &c. Published by an old companion of his, Robin Goodfellow 4to.* In the book Tarlton leads the anonymous writer through Purgatory, analogous to the guiding figure of Dante's Vergil from the *Divine Comedy*. Even though most (if not all) the events depicted in the story concerning Tarlton's life are anecdotal, but they are that more interesting since, as D'israeli points out in his *A Dissertation on Anecdotes*, "anecdotes are susceptible of a thousand novel turns" (Halliwell, 2011, p. 74). Moreover, analysing Lacan's metaphoric process, and using it as a grid for our research on this matter, metaphor occurs at the precise point when sense emerges from nonsense (2010, p. 61). Therefore, we can infer that Tarlton became a metaphor for the clown of that time; he started to signify the *idea* of jester, he became a meme for the court jester and the comedian, both on and off stage.

As far as anecdotal biography goes, Tarlton's destiny took a crucial turn due to a servant of the Earl of Leicester who, passing by with some business somewhere near Condover bumped into Tarlton who was conveniently grazing his father's swines right in the way of the high official. Apparently, the Earl's

[13] Written in the style of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and many other, lesser known, publications of that time (*Visio Pauli*, *Tungdal's Vision, etc.)* which, in turn all spawned from *Peter's Apocalypse* (~200), a book which for the first time adapts the ancient, pre-christian representations of hell to the christian framework.

servant was so pleased with his "happy unhappy answers" that he brought him to the Queen's court, where he became the jester of Queen Elizabeth. His level of education, as it is stated in the introductory note to *Tarlton News out of Purgatory* was very low. He was "only superficial seen in learning, having no more but a bare insight into the Latin tung". By 1583, he is listed among the Queen's players and a groom of the chamber. In addition to these accomplishments, Tarlton was a very well skilled fencer. He was appointed Master Fencer (the highest fencing degree of the time) in 1587. He died of plague on the 3rd of September 1588 and he was also buried the same day at St. Leonard's Cemetery in Shoreditch (Halliwell, 2011, p. X).

About his talent as an actor, he was well esteemed for his skills as a comedian, as well as for his improvisational talents. He generally performed at The Curtain theatre, in Shoreditch from 1575 onwards, but certainly he was an applauded actor before that date. Apparently, his ability to improvise reached such high levels of popularity that his name spawned a verb for improvising: *to tarltonize* (Halliwell, 2011, p. 28)*;* through the process of metonymy Tarlton's name was transferred to the term used for *impromptu*; it's as if at that point Tarlton was to acting *extempore* what the couch is now for psychoanalysis; as various scholars point out, the clown of that time not only entered the stage at given intervals, but continually mixed with the crowd and attempted a punch at merriment through any means that would occur to him, and, more often than not, they were known to enter into a renaissance equivalent of a `hip hop rhyme battle` involving themselves versus the boldest members of the audience. As one of his jests states, it was accustomed for the players to improvise on themes given out by members of the audience. So, a young and conceitful gentleman thought that he came up with a theme that will put Tarlton to a non-plus. Here are the lines he came up with: `Methinkes it is a thing unfit,/ To see a gridiron turn the spit.` To which Tarlton replied as follows: `Methinks it is a thing unfit,/ To see an asse have any wit.` The vexed gentlemen, unexpecting such a quick and fatal comeback left the roaring crowd completely and utterly humiliated (Halliwell, 2011, p. 28). As some of the biographical facts mentioned in the jests are supported by other accounts from diversified sources, we may have strong grounds to believe that their author was very well acquainted at least with the major events that took place in Tarlton's life.

We can trace the most important facts of his life according to the *Jests* and other testimonies as follows: first of all, he was the jester to Her Majesty the Queen

Elizabeth I – this is corroborated from every source available (Fuller, Heywood, etc.) and there are to accounts in *Tarlton's Jests* on the topic, one in which Tarlton it is said, played an inebriated man in front of the queen to cheer her up, and called for some more beer. Her Majesty commended him not to drink anymore, because it will only make an already beastly man act even more shameful. To which he responded: "Don't worry Your Highness, for your beer is a small one." (Halliwell, 2011, p. 5).

Secondly, he was one of the Queen's players. Anecdotes scattered throughout the *Jests* provide useful information about this. To this respect, there is one curious jest, one entitled *How Tarlton deceived a country wench,* that reminds us of Touchstone and Audrey's wedding episode in *As You Like It.* While travelling with the queen's players and lodging in a village, he laid his eyes on a simple girl there. So, he no more, no less professed that he came from London specially to marry her. The girl, being as I stated, fairly simple, and proud to have one of the queen's players so madly in love with her gave in to his advances and they spent the night together. The next day, as he promised her, they both went to church to get married. But little did she knew that the priest was another actor from the queen's players, proficiently disguised, Mr. Parson, a sort of real-life prototype for Oliver Martext in *As You Like It.* As he got to the words `I, Richard, take thee...`, Tarlton stopped the ceremony because he remembered that he forgot to invite his fellow actors. So, he went to fetch them, as they were already on their way to Bristow and he already had a saddled horse waiting for him outside the church, and he did catch them on the way but never did he return. The anecdote doesn't provide us with any information about the way in which Parson extracted him from the delicate situation. This story provides extremely useful evidence on the parentage line between Tarlton and the Armin era[14] fools in Shakespeare's plays. We can see here the cynical Touchstone who will acquiesce to the demands of the flesh by exploiting Audrey's naivety (Halliwell, 2011, p. 33).

Thirdly, directly connected to the afore-mentioned story, as we could see he had a great talent for improvising off-stage, he also had a great talent for improvising on-stage, as another one of his jests suggests (Halliwell, 2011, p. 24). While playing Derick the clown in `*The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*` (circa

[14] I am referring through the usage of the umbrella term "Armin-era" to the period of time when Robert Armin, who was replacing William Kempe was an active member of the Chamberlain's Men (in later years, following the coronation of James I as King known as King's Men). The period of time stems roughly from 1595 to around 1609-10.

1580), Tarlton, always willing to please audiences, more than willingly agreed to replace another actor, who wasn't able to fulfil his duty on stage that night and who was supposed to play the judge. Prior to Tarlton's entrance as clown, the actor that played Henry the King was supposed to punch the judge in the ear. When the scene took place, Knel, who was playing Henry, as the anecdote informs us, hammed his performance and punched Tarlton as hard as he could in the jaw. Out goes the judge, in comes the clown who asks what happened. Another actor tells him that it was a pity he didn't saw how prince Henry had terribly jabbed the judge right in the face. To which Tarlton responds, aside from the dramatic situation that the report of the prince striking a judge is so terrible that he can feel the burn on his own cheek.

On this episode I will want to make some comments. Proceeding thus, Tarlton offers the audience a double perspective, one that is more common to the carnivalesque performances, rather than with the so to speak *straight* theatrical performances. The technique, commonly known as the *verfremdung*, as Brecht coined the term, makes possible an ironical *double entendre* between the stage action and the audience, reminiscent of the carnival dramatical performances, in which the audiences were at once in the presence of the devil (or the clown) and the guild that was usually representing those characters (Prentki, 2012, p. 40). In this case we have the clown impersonating the judge, so we have an impostor, belonging to a different "guild". The anecdote also gives us some precious information about how the audience reacted when Knel/ Henry hit The Judge/ Tarlton: "the audience laughed more because it was he". As Tarlton returns as the clown, or rather, as the public expects to see him, he reveals himself not only as a tragedian, involved into a *straight* performance of a serious role but, at the same time, as the clown (his on-stage persona) and an *extempore* master of ceremonies. Tarlton gives us three simultaneous performances, and in the process of doing so, turns a death-punishable offence into a laughing matter.

Another favourite theme of the anecdotical account of his life deals with the masculinity (or lack thereof it) of the main character. Obviously, by Renaissance standards, being a comedian had nothing to do with manly activities. Few things have changed even to this day. If we look, for example at the conflict in Ukraine, we see that one of the main talking points of the Kremlin controlled narrative against Volodymyr Zelenskyy is the fact that he is an actor.

Tarlton is therefore more of a Saukrates than an Alexander, despite the fact that he was appointed master of fencing by Queen Elizabeth herself. He was,

as the story goes, "a lustful character" and therefore, had to be set as an example. More so, in perfect analogy with Saukrates, his wife would inflict the punishment, as she was "every now and then making him a cuckold". A curious and merry evidence is given out in this respect. A "crack-rope, a one that groans for the gallows, a hangdog, a rascal, a scoundrel" who meeting Tarlton on the streets of London addressed him in rhymes, saying "woe betide thee, Tarlton/ that ever wast thou borne;/ thy wife hath made the cuckold/ and thou must wear the horn". Tarlton, quick on his wit answered him also in verses "What if I be, boy,/ I'm ne're the worse;/ She keeps me like a gentlemen,/ with money in my purse".

The whole scene contains the core of merry paradox that is usually reminded of Heraclit's unity of opposites, and also with the quick switch to a different point of view that only the fool's detachment from the situation can provide. The boy, "the rascal, the scoundrel that groans for the gallows" can also be seen as Heraclitus' boy that leads along the stumbling drunkard, that is to say, the *psyche.* We have here a fine example of the abusive language of the Renaissance period, what Bakhtin calls *the language of the public market*. The little boy represents a collective character, and, to use Renaissance metaphors, a *mirror image* of the fool's hubris. One that degrades the fool, publicly, yet (as the fool does whenever he's questioning social norms) merrily. The *mirroring* is the crueller, since we know that Tarlton found out his wife was cheating on him after "he paid her a golden crown" to answer truthfully whether or not he is "a cuckolde". His wife said nothing, so he asked for his golden crown back. To which she responded that she doesn't have to return it, since she didn't lie to him. Therefore, the young boy's

Richard Tarlton, source: National Portrait Gallery Richard Tarlton, by Silvester (Sylvester) Harding, after Unknown artist stipple engraving, published 1792 https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw40913/Richard-Tarlton

interpellation of Tarlton is as unsubtle as the excrements that were thrown from the allegorical chariots during the Feast of Fools at the bystanders. As a weird coincidence that adds metaphorical enforcement to this point of view, in 1702, a portrait of Tarlton's ended up adorning the entrance to a public toilet in London "which by long standing there, has contracted the colours of the neighbouring excrements."

**Interlude – Feast of Fools**

The Feast of Fools was celebrated in various European cathedrals shortly after Christmas. The inferior clergymen posed as their hierarchical superiors. The incensing of the church was done with the use of excrements, the clownly-bishops talked in Latin *gibberish*, eating blood-pudding instead of the sacraments and while performing the sacred litanies a donkey was brought into the church and responded with an *insert donkey onomatopoeia* instead of the usual *amen*. After the divine service was over, the mock-up bishops were loaded into a cart filled with excrements that was pulled on the city streets by the same donkey and excrements were thrown at people (Couliano, 1984, p. 162).

At a certain level, what the boy is doing is similar. He is degrading Tarlton, is serving the fool a taste of his own medicine. Of course, the language used is not so hard and things are made to seem more delicate than they probably were, but nevertheless, we are obviously faced with a case of moral degradation. It is worthy to note that the editor of the book censored two anecdotes for the sake of *pudoris causa.* The fools and little children don't censor themselves for the sake of *pudoris causa,* but rather, they state things as they are. To take a step further into the metaphorical realm, if the little boy represents the *psyche,* and considering the fact that Tarlton's answer provides ground for regeneration, the cuckold is not only not taking offence, but more so, by shifting the focal point, he is able to see what is there to gain from this state of affairs; we can therefore infer, following the process of Lacan's **theory of transfer**, according to which the world is nothing else but a huge intersubjective exchange apparatus where everybody is playing simultaneously the part of the patient and the part of the analyst, that the fool shares this exact perspective of the world as a transfer apparatus – Tarlton knows, in other words, that he is both mock*er* and mock*ed* – and seizes every opportunity to get the best out of it.

His attempts at gaining the upper hand switch from victimization to aggression. There are various examples of him being "angrily inward" or "angered

at this so much" or of him "loath to rest thus put off`" and in this study I have already cited at least three situations so far in which he makes use of this skill in the manner of an urban terrorist. On the other hand, in `*Brief Discourse of Warre*`, published in London around the year 1590, Roger Williams retells that outside the stage, like many comedians, Tarlton was not always in his cheerful mood. His behaviour is that of a malevolent child. This antisocial behaviour is at its most obvious when, for example, he plays a very elaborate practical joke on a fellow actor that was so drunk that he couldn't play in the performance. Tarlton "as mad angry" as the actor was "mad drunk" claps on his legs a huge pair of bolts, then carries the sound-asleep actor to the jail and asks the jailer to let the man sleep there. As the fellow actor woke up and found himself in shackles, imprisoned, without any recollection of the events from the previous night, he assumed that he committed a dreadful crime and started to cry out for the jailer to ask him what happened. The jest was so elaborate that not only the jailer came, but two other individuals that were very mysterious about the events that brought him there. The mysteriously looking individuals only reported to him that a young man like him should be ashamed for what he did and that he will surely hang. Tarlton finally arrives, behaving as a saviour and lets the man in on the fact that while drunk, he murdered someone. The ruse didn't stop there, though. In order to get the poor actor out of jail, Tarlton, the jailer and the two mysterious friends even organized a prison break for the victim of the practical joke.

The anecdote doesn't recount how they helped him escape from prison, it just tells us that "they got him out of prison by an escape". And, most importantly: *they never told him what truly happened*. We can guess as much as we want the motives for which the Queen's jester was up to this, but I think a specific answer would be out of our reach and useless, now. Nevertheless, we can suspect a sort of antisocial super-ego *(sic!)* that was being fed through this behaviour. Again, the two characters, the boy and the fool, the *psyche* and the stumbling drunkard can provide us with a deeper ground for excavating the truth. The ego is represented as a little kid that needs an urgent confirmation of his magnificence. Providing an unexpected answer to a child puts the fool on a superior position, but in doing so, he is proven to be more childish than the child. But if we change perspective, we can safely assume that by conquering the *psyche,* the fool is conquering the ego. And by doing this, he is regenerated, he comes to a new life, to a new perspective. Even though he is "a cuckold", there is nothing that prevails him to enjoy the world. Through these sorts of exploits, the fool is seen as the figure who provides

constant reminder of our animal nature and our imperfection. Whether we can achieve regeneration, or being reborn from our ashes, by simply becoming aware of our shortcomings is yet to be proved. So far, history, to quote Marx quoting Hegel, has a way of unwinding ”first as a tragedy and then as farse”.

Keeping up with the protestant propaganda efforts of the late 16th century, that was fighting back hard the popular common beliefs of pre-Christian paganism and Catholicism, the anecdotical Tarlton had a huge aversion for the Pope and black cats (as medium for evil spirits akin to the poltergeist). During his peregrinations through England, he was resting at an inn where the hostess asked him to help her find out who stole some pewter pots from the inn’s tavern. As a jest, Tarlton promised her that he will conjure the devil and the devil will tell her who stole the pot. In the morning he and the hostess met alone in a room. Tarlton started a weird number of magic where he would be enacting a mocking conjuration ritual where he would draw pentagrams on the floor and babbling Latin gibberish. Suddenly a cat leaped on the windowsill, scaring Tarlton out of his wits. He was so scared in fact that on his rushed exit he pushed the hostess so hard that she fell and broke her hip. The witchcraft number that he stages in the inn was not at the time so rare. Black liturgies were performed for fun, and it was viewed as a casual amusement amongst the members of the ruling elites of that age, and not only. Contrary to pop culture belief, the ”black liturgies” were not an invention of the French occultists of the 19th century. The first *per se* black liturgy was performed in Brescia around 1480, as a parody to the Christian liturgy (Couliano, 1984, p. 358).

As a matter of fact, Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* played along the lines of *make belief conjuring* that becomes real. At a particular performance in Exeter, an extra devil showed up on the stage in order to scare the actors, and at yet another performance, this time in London, the whole playhouse cracked loudly (Bartels and Smith, 2013, p. 16). This obviously follows the tradition of the old morality plays, when the *diableries* took place both inside and outside the *per se* play. For instance, as late as the year 1500, gangs of ”devils” ransacked the farmers in between morality performances and a few days after the festivities were over. Not to mention that while performing they were truly devoted to the character, protected by the mask and anonymity. Usually, the devils were played by poor people that came from distant regions specially to be hired as devils. The tradition is kept in Greece, in the island of Pathmos, where an orthodox morality play takes place during Easter Week.

As we saw earlier, during the Feast of Fools something similar was being staged in the cathedrals around Europe. The episode is extremely interesting from a wider perspective. Before the Feast of Fools was completely eradicated, and while the church was trying hard to ban it, the clergy members who were defending it stated that foolishness seems to be inherent in man and must be allowed to express itself freely at least once a year. During the Counter-Reformation, the feast was completely eradicated. And one reason for it being banned was because the catholic church could not allow their clergy to behave in the lines of the defamation pattern that they were using to attack their ideological enemies. The defamation pattern was used as a powerful weapon, and it traces back to immemorial times. I.P. Culianu provides a fair share of examples, some dating back to 1022, when the official Catholic Church purported rumours that the heretics from Orleans were using in their litanies names of devils, and they took part in cannibalistic feasts. The congregations of witches were called *synagogues,* an obvious allusion to another group to whom the church was attributing, *par excellence* sacrilegious activities, namely the Jews. In the 15th century, a Jewish ”magician” was burned to the stake because he purportedly burned statuettes of the Virgin Mary and Christ and that he desecrated the one called Agnus Dei by crucifying a lamb that he afterwards fed to the dogs. King Philip the Beautiful and his secretary, Guillaume de Nogaret used at the trial against the Knights Templars a whole array of the finest and most popular elements of the defamation pattern of their time (Couliano, 1984, p. 359).

But Tarlton’s jest is interesting if we take into consideration the fact that he was a Protestant. Asked once at what time would the devil be most busy his answer was ”When the pope dies”, because all the devils will be troubled to plague him, as he was in his lifetime plaguing those who raised against him. This subversive, revengeful spirit of his was still remembered 20 years after his death, when George Wilson notes in a treatise about cocks and cock fights entitled *The Commendation of Cockes and Cock-fighting* that at a cock-fight in Norwich there was a cock named Tarlton, because of the thundering noise that he made with his wings, which reminded people of Tarlton’s drum. As Tarlton, the cock fought many battles with ”mighty and fierce adversaries” (Halliwell, 2011, p. 34). His combative spirit lives on, and as the cock, he takes every fight with the risk of losing everything. When fools ceased to be funny, they were no longer protected. As in the anecdote with the boy that tries to disgrace him publicly and he stands his ground, as in the one with the gentlemen that tried to put him to a *non-plus*, he

stands his ground and is obliged to win. They don't have anything to lose, he has everything to lose, as far as status quo is concerned. And while their win over him will be short-lived, his defeat will follow him wherever he will go. In a way, by succeeding to keep his always challenged status quo Tarlton worked magic. And by converting every time the disadvantage to advantage, he lived up to the standard of comedy imposed by Rabelais, which Bakhtin conceptualized as *laughter as a regenerative force*.

The huge popularity which Tarlton most have surely enjoyed can also be extracted from the huge amount of allusions at his person, found in almost all the important writers of the time. For instance, Joseph Hall in the last book of his *Satires* (which consists of just a long satire in the form of an epilogue and summons up in a humorous way the effects of his satires) has the following verse, oozing with self-aware bitter irony: "O honour far beyond a brazen shrine,/ To sit with Tarlton on an ale post's sign!" Quoting Nash "the people began exceedingly to laugh when Tarlton first pepped out his head." Sir Richard Baker mentions him in *Chronicle (1653)* "to make their comedies complete, Richard Tarleton, who for that part called the Clowns part, never had his match, never will have."

**Dismembering the performer**

Tarlton is mentioned also in one of Poe's favourite books, Isac D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature* (1841). His behaviour and quick temper almost got him in a lot of trouble with the Queen, as D'Israeli recounts. Tarlton was playing in front of Her Majesty a play that he devised alongside the actors in his troupe, when, all of a sudden, he pointed his finger to Sir Walter Raleigh and said, "see how the knave commands the Queen" to which jest the Queen just frowned. Carried away, "he reflected on the over-power and riches of the Earl of Leicester`, a jest which was universally applauded by everybody present. The Queen seemed unconcerned about this, but after the performance she forbade Tarlton to come near her (Disraeli, 2018, p. 352). There is an interesting absurdist anecdote that links Sir William Raleigh and Tarlton. The quite cruel story, Halliwell informs us, circulated on the expense of Raleigh, who brought tobacco to England. How it got to be fixed down as one of Tarlton's jests can only be guessed. The story has the structure of a nowadays bar-joke (X walks into a bar). It depicts Tarlton sitting in a tavern just as two inebriated gentlemen walk in. As they walk in, they find Tarlton who was serenely puffing his pipe "for the sake of fashion", as the author assures us. As they saw the vapours coming out from Tarlton's nose they started shouting

”fire” and threw the content of the cup of wine that Tarlton was peacefully enjoying in his face, in order to put the fire out.

His nose was a sensible subject. We know from the surviving engravings of him that he had a flat nose. In the only anecdote that comes from the direct recollection of the unknown author of Tarlton’s jest, if we are to believe him when he says: ”I remember I was once at a play in the country, where Tarlton’s use was, the play being done, everyone so pleased to throw up his theme.” Here a short parenthesis must be made. According to Robert Preiss’s study *Clowning and Autorship in Early modern Theater* the structure of the four-to-five-hour usual performance was as follows: ”peeping and faces at the beginning, assorted merriments in the middle and themes in the end” (2014, p. 93) and after all these were concluded, the audience was entertained with the pipe and tabor jig. The *themes* were something akin to our modern days hip-hop *battles* or trap artists *beef* tracks. A member of the audience gave out the following verses, word by word, if we can trust the writer’s infallible memory:

> Tarlton, I am one of thy friends, and none of thy foes./ Then I prethee thee tell how cam’st by that flat nose;/ Had I been present at that time on those banks,/I would have laid my short sword over his long shankes.

Tarlton, ”mad at this question, as it was his property sooner to take such a matter ill then well” replies, word by word, and, again, we rely solely on the same infallible memory:

> Friend or foe, if thow wilt needs know,/ Mark me well:/ With parting dogs and bears, then, by the ears,/ This chance fell:/ But what of that? Though my nose be flat,/ My credit to save,/ Yet very well,/ I can by the smell,/ Scent an honest man from a knave (Halliwell, 2011, p. 29).

His deformity is a sensitive subject, the more that, by trying to humanize it, it makes a cleavage between the on-stage persona and the off-stage persona, subverting the performers authority and trying to substitute it to the man. To paraphrase Lacan’s statement in his seminal The Mirror Stage, the **disfigured body**

> usually manifests itself [...] when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual [...] this form is [...] tangibly revealed at the organic level, in the lines of 'fragilization' that define the anatomy of phantasy, as exhibited in the schizoid and spasmodic symptoms of hysteria (2004, p. 5).

Tarlton, which, as I stated earlier, quoting Roger Williams's *A briefe discourse of Warre*, "was nobody outside his mirths". To be precise, in this cleavage, wherein the vulnerability of the performer's everyday persona transfers its narrative to the performer's onstage persona a *schizopoesis* takes place and the nobody-outsider feeds his narrative into the somebody-insider. It is this *schizopoesis* that indicates that the "me-not-me" condition of acting, in Schechner's terminology, occurs.

Another interesting and striking aspect of this particular scene is the familiarity with the (in)famous Nose Monologue from *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The difference is that while Rostand's Cyrano keeps his cool and gives 18 examples of how that could have been said and elegantly dismisses the young man that so unfortunately provoked him, Tarlton loses his temper but not his ability to give a spontaneous answer, which probably is another way of getting there, as opposed to the controlled inner turmoil that Cyrano displays. He answers that the shape of his nose is a result of parting dogs and bears, an almost superhuman feat, worthy of Hercules. The demigod Heracles was no stranger to the clown profession himself, if we take into consideration the antique vase scenes depicting him sleeping drunk at the door of a hetaireia while an old procuress dumps over him the content of a chamber pot, or himself, armed with a chamber pot in the pursuit of some enemy. As for the parting bears and dogs, in *Kemps Nine Daies Wonder,* in that absurd dance marathon that he put himself up to, Kempe tells that the people of Norwich organised a bear fight for him, but he entered through the city to another gate, so they did it in vain. Therefore, bear and dog fights set up in the honour of the clowns at that time were not such an unseen sight, which gave Tarlton affirmation some weight, especially since we do not know much about his life prior to 1570.

The *nose motif* must be one of the most common grotesque motifs in the universal literature, and Tarlton explanation of his deformity, "by parting bears and dogs" immerses us in the ancient grotesque deformity of human features *via* animals. Tarlton description, real or not, is done in a theatrical manner, more so since it is done from the stage. The classical transgression between human and animal features as a means to explain his ill-shaped nose is a characteristic feature of the popular grotesque-realism. Bakhtin gives us an account about a treatise published in 1579 and written by the French medic Laurent Joubert, *Erreurs populaires et propos vulgaires touchant la médecine et le régime de santé*. In the 5th volume, Chapter IV he reviews the common popular belief that the size and the

potency of the genital organs can be assessed by the size of the nose. In the grotesque popular interpretation of the Renaissance, the nose was substituted to the penis. Even carnival feasts were held to honour the biggest nose in the community, as Seebald Beham's 1534 woodcut of a kermis where a contest for the biggest nose was held depicts. As an obvious connection between the nose and the penis, in the foreground we see a group of large nosed men and a woman dancing, while in the right corner, a fool exposes its genitalia. So obviously, this attack at Tarlton's nose had a deeper meaning then we would be inclined to think, since it was a direct hit at his manliness. Which justifies Tarlton's loss of temper and also his answer: "but it can smell a knave". It was a hit under the belt, therefore, the epithet (knave) was rightly chosen.

Seebald Beham, Kermis, 1580-1600; source:
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1883-1110-489

Tarlton represented the charm of a spontaneous person, completely centred within itself and completely free as much as any answers regarding his behaviour are concerned, ungoverned by the same social and hierarchical restraints that everyone else had to respect, which could in a large way explain the universal applause to his joke. He brings about a new sort of pleasure. While playing at the Bull, in Bishop's Gate Street, one night, as he was kneeling to ask his father blessing for the long journey that awaited him, a gentleman from the audience threw an apple at him which hit him in the cheek. He responded in the usual *extempore* rhyming style: "Gentlemen, this fellow, with this face of mapple/ Instead of a pipin, hath thrown me an apple/ But as for an apple, he hath cast a crab;/ So, instead of an honest woman, God hath sent him a drab." The people laughed heartily because in the play Tarlton's wife was the queen. Again, we have here a multi-folded simultaneous performance. We have firstly the character that Tarlton is playing, we then have the clown at which the person in the audience threw the apple at, who is both at times the jester to Her Majesty the Queen and a

subject of the Queen and finally, we have a man who is married to an unfaithful woman and, pardon my French, the "darb", who is allegedly the wife of the person who threw the apple. So, we have in this particular scene six folds of reality that are alluded at, simultaneously. The character who in the play is married with a queen and gets hit in the face with an apple, the *extempore* clown who adlibs the poem about the man married with a darb (which clearly was aimed at the person that threw the apple), the jester and the subject of the Queen who, at the same time, is married to a notoriously unfaithful woman. It is here to be added that also the Queen's virginity was very controversial at the time when this joke was made. So, unpeeling all these layers, starting from the most obvious ones and getting to the more obscure ones, Tarlton utters, accidentally or not, a very deep and harsh critique aimed at the moral high standards set up by the ruling elite which were quietly agreed upon (albeit not really accepted) by the lower classes.

What was questioned was not just the alleged virginity of Queen Elizabeth, but also the rigidity of the social norms that were drawn up solely for the purpose of empowering the ruling class and maintaining a pre-established status quo (gained usually through the right of birth) for people that, when their livelihood was being threatened were very quick to judge those that threatened their position and also threw in their face their whole contempt, usually by demonizing the contender by means of stirring up moral panic. The Queen's virginity was just another case of the Emperor's new clothes, a ridiculous pretension of public dignity maintained not only by her but by everyone up the social ladder, from all privileged social castes, and this includes members of the emergent *petite bourgeoisie* going up the hierarchical ladder towards the religious and political leaders of the moment, in essence, those that are responsible for the organisation of the society's legal and moral norms, who in this particular case were embodied by one and the same person.

We are left with no other choice then taking for granted Azdak's words from Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1947) "the fool gives no man the pleasure of seeing human greatness". Various levels of irony ply throughout this scene, and with Tarlton's failure at keeping his cool he orchestrates an intricate design to reveal the contradiction and hypocrisies of his time, and, to some extent, our own. As D'Israeli recounts about the universal applauses that he was rewarded with when playing at the Queen's Court, so the laughter here is universal. The carnival laughter, according to Bakhtin is the laughter of all the people and it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, moreover, the

entire world is seen in its drole relativity and the universal laughter is ambivalent, both triumphant and mocking, lively and deadly (1984, p. 12). The clown becomes in this case a proxy for the audience, but one that is disconnected from it, at that very moment. He reclaims self-ownership over himself as he is acting out of the play. He no longer belongs to the audience, to the play, to his civil life, he is no longer a subject. He is his own master, his own ruler, he now speaks for himself, but by doing this, by speaking for himself he is speaking for the self of everyone present. While this is going on, he plunges, if you will in the collective self, through this sacrificial act of self-exposure. The fool, or clown, is often the performer most aware of the play's dramatic structure, since he is so often on and off the dramatic fiction he plays in. He plays with the conventions that simultaneously enable and limit the performance (Bartels and Smith, 2013, p. 116). This knowledge gives him the possibility to juggle with the intricate layers that make up the self and by doing this he manages, as a by-product of his action to awaken the awareness of the auditorium.

**Shadows of Tarlton**

Since sacrificing yourself is in every religious tradition a "spiritual death of the ego", we might say that Tarlton also played with death. In *Tarlton Jests* we find at least one anecdote that accounts for this. While at a dinner table where he dined with a gentleman that had the habit of concealing in his sleeve a *modicum* of whatever he had in the plate before him, Tarlton solemnly claimed that he is writing his last will and testament. First of all, he entrusts his soul to his Creator. As for his body, he would have it buried in the sleeve of the aforementioned gentlemen. As he said that he rolled the gentlemen's sleeve backwards and chunks of food started dropping everywhere. Here a bit, there a bit, while Tarlton was still shaking the gentlemen's arm and adding, in a crescendo: "this sleeve I mean, this sleeve" (Halliwell, 2011, p. 36). The second time he played with death was coincidentally also the last. It was on the 3rd of September 1588, the day of his death. According to his testament he left his son, Philip one penny and all his debts.

> I, the said Richard Tarlton… have given, graunte, confirme, assigne and sett over unto my said sonne… all such debts and somes of money as now be… and hereof delivered one penny of lawfull money of England… to the use of Philipp Tarlton… (in Halliwell, 2011, p. IV).

No evidence of what became of his son Philip is to be found. This was Tarlton's final jest. Tarlton's death was deeply regretted by his contemporaries and we have a lot of elegies that were written for him in that period. One of those epitaphs links him to Armin and establishes the fact that Tarlton's style was established as a tradition among clowns:

> Who taught me pleasant follies, can you tell? I was not taught and yet I did excel; /Tis hard to learne whitout a president, /Tis harder to make folly excellent; /Isawe, yet had no light to guide mine eyes, / I was extold for that which all despise. (Chrestoleros, Seven books of Epigrames written by T.B., 12mo, London, 1598, pg. 155. The initials T.B. stand for Thomas Bastard).


THE
History of the two Maids of More-clacke,
With the life and simple manner of IOHN
in the Hospitall.
Played by the Children of the Kings
Maiesties Reuels.
Written by ROBERT ARMIN, seruant to the Kings
most excellent Maiesty.
LONDON,
Printed by N.O. for Thomas Archer, and is to be sold at his
shop in Popes head Pallace, 1609.
ROBERT ARMIN,
was an Actor in Shakespeare Plays.
See the List of Actors in the First Folio Edition.

*Robert Armin's portrait on the cover front of his first folio play: History of the two maids of Moreclacke; by Unknown artist, woodcut, source National Portrait Gallery, https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw40025/Robert-Armin*

Tarlton was far more generous to his stage understudy, to whom he would be a mentor, Robert Armin, the comedian that embodied on stage for the first time now iconic characters such as Flute, from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Feste, from the *Twelfth Night*, or the Jester from *King Lear*. Armin was, so to speak, raised under the tutelage of Tarlton. Actually, the anecdote that gives this account is called "How Tarlton made Armin his adopted sonne, to succeed him". Armin, a goldsmith's apprentice, went to collect some money that was owed to his master from a tavern owned by Tarlton but administered by another person. Armin came and demanded for his master's money, but the administrator of the tavern, growing poorer and poorer couldn't pay up. Being a bit of a joker, according to the anecdotical account, Armin wrote a short poem, with a chalk on a wainscot of the tavern

that went something like this: "O, world, why wilt thou lye? /Is this Charles the Great! That I deny. /Indeed, Charles the Great before, / But now Charles the less, being poore." (in Halliwell, 2011, p. 22). Tarlton saw Armin's poem and replied next to Armin's:

> A wag thou art, none can prevent thee; / And thy desert shall content thee. /Let me divine. As I am, / So in time thou'lt be the same, / My adopted sonne therefore be, / To enjoy my clownes sute after me. (in Halliwell, 2011, p. 23).

Soon after that Tarlton took Armin under his tuition, as it was accustomed in that period, when all the prestigious comedians (and tragedians) had a disciple whom they taught to play, called an understudy. The understudies usually sustained female parts until their beard grew and then went on to play the roles that they trained for. It was also accustomed that the understudy would take over the master's roles after his death or parting from the group, so it is very likely that Armin probably took some of Tarlton's parts after his passing. Nash mentions him the same year as Shakespeare made his debut, 1592, as one of the "progeny of their father Elderton, (*sic!*) a famous time ballad writer of that period". Until May 17th 1603 we have no information about him, when his name figures on the list of the King's Men, amongst others such as Richard Burbage, Shakespeare and William Fletcher. William Kempe by the time must have surely left the company, since it would be extremely weird that an actor of such immense popularity would have been missed out from the list, by some accident. The retirement of Kempe from the company opened the opportunity for Armin to undertake some of the parts that Kempe used to play. Most certainly he took over from Kempe the part of Doggbery, since in the preliminary word to his play, *The Italian Tailor and his boy* (1609), he quotes one of Doggbery's lines, from act IV, scene 2: "I have been writ down an ass in my time", as if self-referential. As I have stated in the beginning of this article, due to printing blunder of *Much Ado About Nothing* that occurs in the 3rd act, instead of the names Doggbery and Verges the names Kempe and Cowley appear. It is not hard to imagine that after Kempe left The Lord Chamberlain's Men, somewhere around 1599-1600, Armin replaced him in the plays that were still in the company's repertoire.

Even though one can arguably defend the fact that previous to Armin's arrival in the company the Shakespearean fools played by Kempe were aware of their folly, with somewhat ambiguous characters such as Falstaff or, more clearly, Bottom, his appearance breaths a new life into the Shakespearean fool. Kempe is Bottom or Falstaff in the same way that Feste or Touchstone, or Lear's Fool, or

Hamlet's gravedigger is/are Armin. For Kempe's fools serve as a carnivalesque sub-plot in the stagings, as is the case with Cade's rebellion in *Henry IV*, when Cade appears with the Harlequin's lath sword (the slapstick) or the mechanicals staging from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In these cases, the attempts of the clowns to insert themselves in the play's plot are either painful (Cade is killed) or awkward. Kempe still pays tribute to the old tradition of merry, the carnival, where the clown knows that he embodies a utopian state of affairs that will usually end very bad for the Carnival's King. Shakespeare performs a dramatical *euthanasia* on them, but in real life they were severely beaten at the end of the Carnival. There are numerous examples of these bleak occurrences, starting with the Passions of Christ that followed his festive entrance to Jerusalem which ends in a gruesome crucifixion, to merrier examples furnished by the Medieval and Renaissance literature to that point.

The motif of the foolish Jesus is revived by Dario Fo in his sketch *The Fool Beneath the Cross*, where the Fool addresses Jesus on the cross telling him "they call me Fool, but you beat me by a long chalk, Jesus."(Fo, 2006, p. 109). Kempe's clowns in a way share the same madness and the same destiny. They try to keep a distance from the main purposes that drive the *straight* characters of the play and instead they provide a utopian reality to that of the play. They have to pay for this dramatic betrayal. And if Kempe's fools provide an escape from the real but get devoured by the fiction, Armin's fools are followers of the real in order to avoid being devoured by the fiction. This is how the fool survives, and this is Armin's contribution: his fools contain a degree of self-consciousness in order not to give themselves away. Their Carnival is discreet, their antics subtle. They no longer have to make grimaces, it is enough to wink. Armin's fools lose their personality, they are just function. In the dramatical structure, the actor that plays the fool and the fool itself are juxtaposed, as if the actor has only the character's function to wear as a mask. And that function is the specific way in which the fool perceives reality. Armin's carnival is the discreet shadow of the carnival, and its fools function is made specific in the III$^{rd}$ act of *Twelfth Night*, when Viola describes Feste as "a fellow wise enough to play the fool" and in order to do that well "he must observe their mood on whom he jests, the quality of person and the time. […] This is a practice as full of art as a wise man's art: for folly that he wisely shows is fit"**.**

What Tarlton and Kempe lacked Armin supplied. They had mastered the technique, but they were to be taken aback by their personalities. There can be no

compromise there, just absurd stubbornness. And we can see this in the scenes with Bottom and the mechanicals from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and more clearly in Kempe's *Nine Daies Wonder.* One can get the impression in Kempe's sole attempt at writing that he is taking Bottom to a field trip. The writing is so close to the way Bottom is, a nice guy deep down, that tries to make things work but fails painfully at it. For instance, in the dreary but honest account of him dancing the Moriss dance from London to Norwich, he bumps into all sorts of mishaps. He disjoints his hip, but he carries on dancing; in another episode, some pickpockets that hang around him are caught doing their job amidst the crowd gathered to see him; he has to give a statement to the sheriff that he doesn't know them; in another episode he misses the entrance to Norwich where people were gathered to great him and while dancing in the city market, he loses his tabor, but keeps on dancing without the music, afraid that the people will see that he stopped dancing and his whole effort would be in vain. This isn't Bottom, this is Kempe in a normal day. Yet, Kempe isn't able to step outside of himself and take notice that his mishaps are comic. He is like a candid yet naive child that retells his side of events in full honesty. Unlike Armin and closer in this respect to Tarlton – whose humour is cruel and sometimes bordering violence, thus becoming the agent of natural folly – Kempe's humour is mediated. His antics need their own time within the time of the play to be presented, for he is unable to adapt his style to the needs of the dramatical plot.

Even though Armin crafted his own style and developed the poetics of folly away from the improvisation realm towards his musical skills and a verbal wit integrated firmly within the thematical structure of the drama, he is still tributary to Tarlton as any disciple is to his master. Armin's betrayal of the system paradoxically ensured its survival. But one must not forget that etymologically, tradition stems from betrayal (παραδίδωμι)[15] (Parker, 2007, p. 111). As far as any

[15] Παραδίδωμι – *paradidomi* in the lexicon on the New Testament literally means "to entrust**,** (to put) ahead of, to hand over (for use)" and it is used 119 times in the New Testament. For instance, In Luke 10:22, Jesus says: "All things have been handed over to me (*paredothē* | παρεδόθη) by my Father; also in Acts, 6:14, "for we have heard him say that this Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed down (*paredōken* | παρέδωκεν ) to us." Also in John, 13:11, "For he knew who was about to betray (*paradidonta* | παραδιδόντα) him"; The dialectics of entrust (tradition) and betrayal are very important to the judeo-christian tradition, and they are made very clear by putting them together in the same sentence as opposite terms in Luke 22:22 "For the Son of Man goes according to what has been determined (*paredothē*| παρεδόθη), but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed (*paradidotai* | παραδίδοται)". From this sentence stemmed what is now

method is concerned, the hypothesis of regeneration through laughter is applied to the system itself. From a positivist perspective this should be the equivalent of the testing that the system undergoes, in order to prove itself as a valid one. Thus, the hypothesis works its way up to becoming a functional paradigm and Armin acts like an *epistemic* agent. Obviously, he is cut from a finer fabric then Kempe and Tarlton. His *Nest of Ninnies,* a tract about fools is of primary importance, first of all, because it is the only known tract of the time on the topic of Court jesters that survived to the present day, and second of all because it gives the contemporary reader the chance of experiencing a first-hand "tunnelling" with the actor that played and helped to bring into presence arguably the most important fools in dramatic literature, an unmediated access to a professional fool's point of view on fools. As he states in the *preliminary* to his *Nest of Ninnies*:

> I was admitted at Oxford to be of Christ Church while they of Al-soules gave ayme such as knew me remember my measures. I promised them to prove mad, and I think I am so, else I would not meddle with folly so deeply, but similis simile &c[ompany] (2010, p. 2).

Armin also wrote the preliminary for a book bearing the title `*A brief Resolution of the right Religion touching the controversies that are now in England*` (1590). It is singularly to have the name of an actor, as Collier points out, related to such a topic, but nevertheless, the fact that he attended Oxford's Christ's College explains in a way his connection to these topics. Also, the *Nest of Ninnies* is filled with moralizing conclusions that amend each story. The stories themselves are recounted to the World by a philosopher named Sotto (from the Latin *sotia,* foolishness), as one besotted, who "would wisely see into all men but himself, a fault general in most" (2010, p. 5). He is distinguishing between the artificial fool and the natural fool, and he also attempts to "rustle the chains" of those in power with a jab at social critique by holding responsible those that are `mantaining the foolery`, or the ones that are nursing the fools' ridiculous pretensions. His analysis is multi-layered and his analytical process offers a detailed description of the soul's "vanity fair". The carnival is internalized, and its external images are projected inwardly, as metaphors of the self. One story concerning Jamy Cumbers, the jester of James I, and a "country wench" with whom Jamy had been infatuated for a long time and when he finally builds up the courage to solicit from her sexual

known as Judas' paradox, since, if everything has been put forth ahead of his betrayal, how could he possibly be held accountable for his betrayal.

favours, she gaslighted him so that he ended up spending the night under a bed which she "strawed with nettles". In the morning the girl went to the King and told him everything. As the Chamberlain came to fetch the fool, he found him sleeping sound under the bed, on his own bed made of the nettles that the girl scattered under the bed. He woke Jamy up, commending him to get his horse and come back to the king's court but the jester answered that he will not come because he is going to dig his grave. Which he did and a few hours later he indeed died, because, as Armin mercilessly infers, "even fools have a guess at wit sometimes, and the wisest could have done no more".

Jamy Cumber's story is made drawn pout to be, by the author, analogous with men's desire that surpasses men's ability to perform. He concludes that "such deeds" that meet with "backward lurches" often get stung in their own folly, "nettling the same lust with shame and disgrace". This moreover signifies "adultery" in those people who go above their powers and are "whoring after strange Gods make their Religion drive them hackney to hell, and when shame takes them from the horse, they make their own graves and are buried in their own shame" (2010, p. 25-6).

What is remarkable here is that in the grotesque topography, the grave corresponds to the uterus and also to the entrance to hell. This failure of the fool to satisfy his lust and sexual desire paradoxically, through the fool's death and burial obliges the Earth to give birth to a new life. As Armin continues his moral conclusions, the World, even though seriously shaken by Sotto's blow, saw no remedy for this, but that "the flat fools should draw in her coach together" while "she sits in the boote and rides on". The circle of life goes on. The irony is that even though he didn't succeed in impregnating the maid, the fool succeeded in impregnating the Earth. And this sort of black humour characterizes all of Armin's stage fools.

**Shadows of Yorick**

Hamlet, in the graveyard scene comes face to face with the past tradition in the form of Yorick's skull. In a way, it is ironic that in his speech to the actors he is forbidding those who play the clown to do what he himself is doing.

> Speak no more than is set down for them – for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play to be then considered. (III.2.38-43)

Scholars have linked this, until recent times, to his quarrel with Kempe and his departure from the company. We should be more moderate in this, as Hamlet himself is doing just what he advices the actors not to. We have some indicators of regret from Shakespeare's behalf upon this parting. Hamlet alludes to the old style of comedy tradition that Kempe and especially Tarlton, for, according to Prentki, his bones are disinterred by the gravedigger. (2012, p. 103).

During the graveyard scene Hamlet also faces the professional fool, in the person of Armin. The wit of Armin ensures that the foolery on display relates directly to the "to be or not to be" motif. Hamlet's folly confronts his predecessors, the bones of his jester, the "not to be", the Yorick/Tarlton binomial, and also the present, the "to be", in the person of the clown – apprentice and renewer – Armin. Hamlet marks Shakespeare older trials of trying to make the protagonist a fool, as in *Richard III,* where Richard reclaims the forgotten character of the Morality plays, The Vice. In Hamlet's case, the fool isn't a substituting instance, but a pillar, *helping the action out.* As in *King Lear,* the play starts with the breaking of the bonds, the inversion of the social hierarchy. By this time, we can infer that Shakespeare most have developed a taste for folly in high places. Carnival had made the notion of Fool as King a common meme during the Renaissance, but Shakespeare inverts the Carnival concept and investigates the concept in which a King could become a fool. Actually, he was not so far off, because one etymology for Carnival comes from the old German word `*karne*`, which meant `God`, or `saint`, and the word `*wal*`, which meant place. In other words, a place where gods roam, or the time when the gods descend on Earth. The lineage God – King – Fool is of no little interest, if we take into consideration the identification of Jesus with the Carnival's King, who at the end of the carnival was severely beaten, dispossessed, sort of speak, of his authority in a violent manner, by the participants. Also, during the reigns of Elizabeth I, and then King James I, in a tradition set up by Henry VIII, when the protestant reform brought with it a secularization of religion, which permeated every social strata. The coronation of Lear as King of fools is done by the fool itself: "thou hadst' little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away" (I.4. 159-60).

The Fool in relation to the king in *King Lear* sits on much firmer ground. For if the Fool was dressed in motley and his behaviour announces him of what he is, more so, Armin's cast in the role gave the audience a clue about the character in front of them. As for Lear, played by Burbage, the opposite would be the case, since his character renounces its status very early in the development of the

action. Lear is not king Lear, Kent becomes Caius, Edgar is Poor Tom, Edmund becomes the favourite son while Goneril and Reagen become Lear's mothers. In this *maelstrom* of inversions, the only fixed identity is that of the fool. "I am a fool, thy art nothing". Lear's questioning of his identity – "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" – has a prompt reply from the fool, in the multi-layered manner that I have been referring to earlier: "Lear's shadow". At a first level, the dramatical logic of the play, Lear is his own shadow, since he has stripped himself of his own substance. Analogous to this situation is Marlowe's *Edward II* line that openly suggests the status of kings without their court as "perfect shadows in a sunshine day" (Marlowe, 1969, p. 508). Therefore, it makes perfect sense that only Lear's shadow can tell him who he is, since he has become his own shadow, bereft of substance. But, if we go even deeper, we find out that in Elizabethan stage-slang "shadow" was a term regularly applied to actors (Prentki, 2012, p. 116). Thus, the fool is both addressing actor and character, each pulling a different way. Lear, on one side is a man whose unsuccessful efforts to coexist both as king and shadow of a king, and the actor on the other side who cannot bring the role of the king at bay, not knowing how the shadow of a king would cope with the reality of the play. And at a third layer, we have the person of the King, as a permanent role and the shadow as the actor that tries to breathe life into this permanent role. Actors are nothing but a long succession of shadows, as spirits of the departed, in Dante's vision of the Inferno and the Purgatory who try to feel this substance, the character.

And this is the final inversion. As the shadow becomes the flesh and blood and bones while the substance becomes the idea, the concept, the part, the character. As Hamlet finds Yorick's skull, we are thrown from the reality of the play into our reality, where, mirrored, we see the faith that awaits all of us. Death, dressed in motely brings forth a certain sense of sinister. As Yorick's memory was kept by Hamlet, so Tarlton's was kept by Armin. But the paradox of the inversion between substance and shadow reveals itself as a dialectical relation between life and art. For if the shadow is the human and the substance is the art, we now immerse ourselves into this dramaturgical archaeology exercise for the sake of the shadows that breathe life into substance.

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Franciscus Bysbrecht, *Vanitas*;
source: https://meoloe.blogspot.com/2021/06/memento-mori-renaissance-art.html