

## Theological and Philosophical Aspects of the Fool in England

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**Abstract:** The medieval conception links the figure of the innocent fool (the one who does not have a proper mental capacity) to the man who denies God and has something devilish in him. For a number of saints and mystics, from St. Paul to St. Gregory the Great (6<sup>th</sup> century) and Francis of Assisi (13<sup>th</sup> century), the innocence of the fool is seen and presented as a model of the spiritual ideal of simplicity and humility, in contrast to the intellectual vanity and materialism of the world's sages. In the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, a stream of distinction begins between the innocent fool and his imitator, who earns their existence from this activity, and a number of authors such as Guilelmus Peraldus, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Mirc, and William Langland link the fool to the devil. Nicholas of Cusa reaffirms the capacity of Christian foolishness in helping man's salvation, and John Redford uses the ignorance of the natural fool for its comic effect. John Heywood, in *Witty and Witless*, depicts the stupidity of the world and explores the benefits of being "witty" or "witless" in relation to Christian salvation. A change in the mindset of the time, concerning the fool, occurs through Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), in which the author presents a tolerant attitude towards fools/jesters, whether natural or artificial. Erasmus, with *The Praise of Folly* (published in 1511), makes no distinction between the innocent and the artificial fool, but brings a praise to folly in general. In the chapter on Scripture, Erasmus explains what St. Paul means through his words when he considers himself to be a fool and praises himself with his weakness to the world, for he knew "that it is the privilege of fools to tell the truth without offending anyone". And with this conception, we turn back to the image of the innocent, the fool who is crazy in the eyes of the world, but who speaks the divine truth, a fool placed at the edge of society, disregarded, but protected and desired by people, for only he is able to present things as they really are, but without the gravity and sobriety of the "sages".

**Key words:** folly, natural fool, artificial fool, jester, minstrel.

### Introduction

Christian faith emphasizes St. Paul's teachings, who states that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (Corinthians, 1 C, 3, verse 19),

mentioning “the foolishness of the sermon” and foolishness of “the word of Cross”. St. Paul speaks of God’s foolishness that is wiser than men’s wisdom, so the Christian is seen as a fool in the eyes of the world. The words “fool”, “idiot”, “mindless” will define that innocent who is gentle in front of the people, telling the truth, even if he is insulted, even if he is marginalized and defamed, as were the apostles, those who became clowns (“a spectacle unto the world”, 1 C, 4, verse 9) for the sake of Jesus Christ. With the Christianization of Europe, the term fool retains the meaning given by St. Paul, namely the innocent fool who does not take into account material rewards; so, the jesters are called *joculators* or minstrels. The translation of the Bible from Greek into Latin uses the word *stultus* (stupid), which has the same connotation as that given by St. Paul, but the English Psalms introduce the term *insipiens* (fool)<sup>1</sup> that includes all the unwise people. That is why in the illustrations of the Psalms there is presented that naked or half-naked fool, with the head tonsured or covered by a hood, the insane, but also the one considered clever and who is more dangerous than the one who lost his mind. In the pictures, the fool holds a bauble, a stick, or a dagger in one hand, and a wafer in the other. These illustrations, dating back to the twelfth century, present the fool in front of David, the famous psalmist, or in front of Jesus Christ, who confronts the fool by reading the Psalms. These are the only ones who have the courage to face a fool, for “no one heeds a fool or argues with him.”<sup>2</sup> Until the sixteenth century, when the meaning of the “natural fool” changed, for a number of saints and mystics, from St. Paul to St. Gregory the Great (sixth century) and Francis of Assisi (thirteenth century), the innocence of the fool was seen and presented as a model of the spiritual ideal of simplicity and humility, in contrast to the intellectual vanity and materialism of the world’s sages. The world, perceived by St. Paul and the other mystics, was the one which turned foolish in search of material benefits and personal profit. That is why the fool was regarded as a source of wisdom. Thomas Aquinas states that folly is not contrary to wisdom, but it is only the lack of it, *unwisdom* being the one that is opposed to wisdom.

Now a man may in this respect contract dullness in judgment in two ways.

First, from a natural indisposition, as in the case of idiots, and such like folly

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<sup>1</sup>“Dixit insipiens in corde suo: non est Deus.” (The fool says in his heart: there is no God), *Windmill Psalter*, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York: MS M.102, f. 53, apud John Southworth, 1998, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*, London, Sutton Publishing, Plate 3.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Tristan’s Madness’ in Beroul, *The Romance of Tristan*, 1970, tr. A.S. Federick, Penguin Books, pp. 153-155, apud John Southworth, 1998, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*, London, Sutton Publishing, p. 51.

is no sin. Secondly, by plunging his sense into earthly things, whereby his sense is rendered incapable of perceiving Divine things and such like folly is a sin. (Thomas Aquinas, 1947, *Treatise on The Theological Virtues*, Question 46)

But the medieval conception links the figure of the innocent, the one who does not have an adequate mental capacity, to that of the man who denies God, being considered the agent of evil. The image and idea of folly fascinated the Late Middle Ages, people having the belief that the number of fools was virtually infinite. In this sense, medieval literature abounds in descriptions of fools of different kinds. Not only were the people, more or less cultivated, attracted by the fool and the theme of folly, but also a number of painters and writers. In 1494, Sebastian Brant writes *Das Narrenschiff*, a moralistic poem describing 110 types of fools and their vices. In the form of an allegory, a ship loaded and driven by fools sails to the promised land of *Narragone* – the German term *Narr* having the meaning of insane. Every sin or vice in the book is accompanied by a wood engraving that provides its allegorical interpretation. In 1509, Alexander Barclay translates and adapts Brant's work into English under the title *The Ship of Fools*, maintaining the illustrations attributed to Albrecht Dürer (Trans. A. Barclay, 1874). The Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch was inspired by the same image of a drifting ship with fools in his allegorical painting with the same title, *The Ship of Fools*, which was painted around 1490-1500 and was part of the "Wayfarer Triptych". Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted, in 1563, a painting titled *Dulle Griet (Mad Meg)*, presenting a woman, not at all attractive, armed to the teeth, leading an army of women to rob Hell. The monsters, as if descending from Bosch's paintings, are, in fact, the sins that are punished there. Bruegel criticizes the sin of greed and laughs at the noisy and aggressive women; Griet (Margot in French and Meg in English) is a name with a pejorative flavour, given to all aggressive, angry women, true shrews (Pieter Bruegel, 1900). In the painting *Le Combat de Carnaval et de Carême (The Battle between Carnival and Lent)*, 1559, Bruegel presents some of the traditions that underlie the Carnival before the Lent and the celebrations organized on the Twelfth Night after Christmas, on the Epiphany day, where social hierarchies were temporarily overthrown. The painting depicts the specific characters of the Carnival, in the middle there is a fat man, riding a barrel, with a meat chop in his hand, and a bucket in one foot, men and revellers, strangely dressed, wandering around him, flanked by ordinary citizens, believers, nuns, and nobles. The inn is placed on the left side, and the church on the right side, representing, allegorically, the two forces underlying the traditions of the Christian church, the Carnival and the Lent,

essentially opposite, but bringing equilibrium by their very nature in men's lives.

### **The theological conception – the fool is the agent of evil**

Whether natural or artificial, fools were present everywhere in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, at fairs or festivals, in taverns and brothels, as well as in the dramatic creations of the time, in mystery plays, farces and sotties (Heather Arden, 2011, pp. 1-4). Although they had no rationality, and sometimes their behaviour was difficult and recalcitrant, the innocents could not be held morally accountable for their actions, and therefore, like children, they were not capable of sin. From the theological point of view, they were those innocents by whose folly we could fight against evil. The belief in the essential goodness of the fool and the conception that worldly and even church hierarchies are of a purely temporal order, as well as the expectation of that divine reorganization through which “the last will be first” constituted the initial inspiration for the Feast of Fools. Beginning in the eleventh century, as part of the Christmas Feast, this celebration of folly will reach the climax in the Late Middle Ages. On December 6, the celebration of St. Nicholas, a Boy Bishop was chosen from among the boys in the chorus, and on the feast of the Holy Innocents, on December 28, he was allowed to preside the liturgy and to preach a sermon. On New Year's Eve, in cathedrals and churches of the monasteries, the office of Vespers began normally, but when it came to the words of *Magnificat*, which spoke about exalting the humble by God, the subdeacons and the junior clergy rose together, and saying “Put down, put down”, they ejected the senior priests from their stalls. At the same time, the Precentor, the canon in charge of the ordering of religious services, was replaced by a “Fool Precentor” – who belonged either to the junior clergy – or even a fool was called in. The one who presided the liturgy was also called Fool Bishop or Fool Abbot (John Southworth, 1998, pp. 52-53). What happened in the days following this event was an “upside down” utterance of the ordinary liturgy, a burlesque manifestation, in which those “counterfeits” of the junior clergy were raised to the rank of the senior clergy, as a prophetic anticipation of the Last Judgment. The excesses and abuses that related to this feast – for example, the burning of old shoes on the altar instead of incense and the turbulent gatherings on the streets during the night, led to its prohibition at the end of the fourteenth century, in England, and in the fifteenth century, in France. The potential of this anarchic joyful celebration and satirical commentary on the abuses of the authorities, both ecclesiastical and secular, was exploited by the *Sociétés Joyeuses* from France – societies of

“fools” from the bourgeois class, who spent their time in cities and gathered during the Christmas and Carnival celebrations, wearing that uniform called *habit de fou*, and playing in elaborate plays and processions (Max Harris, 2011, pp. 244-245). In England, this feast survived in the form of celebrating the Twelve Days of Christmas, in this period Lords of Misrule were appointed to run the festivities at court or in the noblemen’s houses, in schools or universities (especially those of law, Inns of Court, and many of the colleges at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford), a practice that ceased after the death of King Edward VI, in 1553 (<https://www.britannica.com>).

Innocent fools also appeared in the mystery plays describing the judgment and torture of Christ – *Coliphizacio* or *Buffeting of Christ*, from the Wakefield cycle, or *Lytsteres* and *Tyllemahus*, from the York cycle, and the basis of trial and torture lies in the Fool-game. In the Wakefield cycle, the torturers compare Jesus Christ with the Christmas Fool – pagan games being allowed during the birth of the Saviour, in which the fool played the clown or magician and entertained the crowd. This fool was either “artificial” or professional, earning his living from this activity. In the *Lytsteres* mystery play from the York cycle, Herod thinks that Jesus Christ is such a fool and enters the game, playing the clown to encourage Jesus Christ to say something. But, not saying anything, he is considered a “natural” fool, an idiot, and he is sent to execution (Sandra Billington, 2015, pp. 17-20).

In the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, there was a stream that began to separate the innocent fool from his imitator, the one who earns his living from the “staging” of “foolishness”, most of the time being exempt from work in the noblemen’s houses and, thus, taking advantage of the idiots’ immunity. The church excommunicated all those who lived from such “staging”. The connection between these imitators, who played the role of the fool, and the “essence of evil” began with the French theologian Guilelmus Peraldus, in the middle of the thirteenth century. Peraldus published a treaty on virtues and sins, the latter being called *stultitiae*. Thus, the correlation between the *stultus*, the social idiot, and the evil appeared. Peraldus emphasizes the sin of Pride – which has two manifestations: an inner and an outer one, and the latter manifests itself in two ways: the naked man (referring to the cleric of the Feast of Fools who adorned his horse in red and clothed in straws) or the decorated one (the fool who begged for ornaments to decorate his body), making no difference between the artificial fool and the comedian. The author regards as absurd the tendency of body adornment with unnecessary ornaments, for without food and water it loses its force in five days, it’s just like you put on

wooden shoes on deformed legs.<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer follows the same direction started by Peraldus, and in the *House of Fame* he speaks of minstrels and fools who seek only fame, and in “The Parson’s Tale”, from *The Canterbury Tales*, he makes a classification of the capital sins, Pride being considered the basis of all other sins. Pride, he says, lies both in the heart of man and outside of it, by the ostentatious display of costly clothing, or short clothes, which leave the body bare and stockings of different colours that should fill men with shame. Salvation comes through repentance, for it “is the weeping of the man who suffers for his sin” (Geoffrey Chaucer, 1993, p. 503). Another popular clergyman from the fifteenth century, having the same theological conception with Peraldus, is John Mirc, who, through *Instructions for Parish Priests*, emphasized the priest’s obligation to resist the temptation to fall into the sin of body adornment, the wearing of cut clothes and sharp shoes, the decent clothes, without ornaments, being the right ones, thus making an allusion to the fool’s clothes which were either spruced or torn and dirty, and the body is almost exposed as it appears in the illustrations of the Psalms (John Mirc, 1403, p. 2, lines 43-48).

The writer, who explicitly links the fool to the devil, is William Langland in *Piers Plowman*, from 1380. The author divides the fools in those who do not have wisdom and those who pretend to be idiots to gain access into the great noblemen’s houses. His criticism is harsh, to the extent that “those that fain them foolish and with faining liveth deceiving [...] They ken no more minstrelsy nor music men to gladden/ than Munde the Miller” (William Langland, 2006, p. 93, Passus 10, lines 38-44). Langland calls them the children of Judah and states that the ploughmen, those who work the fields, are denigrated by these fools. Through Haukyn’s words, the character that actually appears in Piers’ dream, the author illustrates the activities that these clowns-minstrels fulfilled and the fact that they were rewarded with money and furred gowns. They used tabors, trumps, harps, fiddles, and chitarrones, told jests and japed, juggled, rolled and danced. Haukyn admits openly that he does not have any of the skills needed by a minstrel, but works for many masters, as a *waferer*, and if he knew how to lie and make people laugh, he would be among the minstrels from the houses of the rich (William Langland, 2006, p. 140, Passus 13, lines 225-236). Haukyn has dirty clothes and laments

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<sup>3</sup> G. Peraldus, 1614, *Summa virtutem ac vitiorum, Tomus II*, Boetzerus, p. 208: “Domus talis est corpus hominis, Vix enim staret per quinque dies, nisi cibus & potibus fulciretur. Vnde irridendi sunt qui vanis ornatibus illud depingunt. [...] Et sicut ridiculum esset si loripes pedem ligneum depingeret, vel deaueret: sic ridiculum est cum homines se ornant.”

that he has no other clothing and no time to clean it because of the many duties he is given.

The ignorance of the natural fool is also used for its comic effect, as it appears in *Wit and Science*, written by John Redford, in the form of a morality that combines in its structure a romantic-chivalrous fable and the prodigal son story. The comic effect comes out from the incapacity of Ignorance to pronounce her name, and the technique that Idleness uses – learning through memory-based associations, the play is a critique of the learning of that time. There is also Idleness who is ironic in a subtle way on Wit's account. By exchanging clothes, suddenly Wit's coat is on Ignorance's back, Idleness affirming that "So well this Wit's becometh a fool's coat", to conclude – "Well then, one fool keep another", alluding to that deliberated foolishness of a man who has lost his mind (John Redford, 2004, pp. 26-27). At the end of the play, Wit rediscovers herself by mirroring her double – Ignorance. What Wit learns in her process of transformation is that she must abandon pride and stubbornness, so learning also involves a certain mental state and the practice of specific virtues: humility, discipline, perseverance, gentleness (John Redford, 2004, p. 73).

John Heywood, a writer and minstrel appreciated at the court of King Henry VIII, but also by Mary I of England, although he was a sympathizer of French comedy (he uses the word *sot* instead of fool, so it is supposed he had contact with French sottes), in his dramaturgy he expresses the opinion of the time about fools who sin by what they do. Written in the form of interludes, his plays, though few in number, are humorous and each includes a philosophical part. The central theme of *Witty and Witless* depicts the stupidity of the world and explores the benefits of being "witty" or "witless" in relation to Christian salvation. Performed in the form of a dispute – an intellectual exercise, the play presents the discussion between John and James, who are later joined by Jerome, the author excelling in contradictions and paradoxes. The provisional acceptance of the foolishness of human life, which emerges from the first part of the protagonists' dialogue, is then subjected to a more careful examination, which confirms the need for deeper wisdom.<sup>4</sup> The theme of folly is exemplified by the references he makes to Will Somers, King Henry

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<sup>4</sup> John Heywood, 1846, *A Dialogue on Wit and Folly*, prefixed by Frederick William Fairholt, Percy Society, p. 1: "JOHN. A mervelus mater, merciful lord, Yf reason whyth this conclewcyon a cord, Better to be a foole, than a wyse man / JAMES. Better or wurs I seay as I began, Better ys for man that may be wyttles, Then witty."

VIII's fool and, perhaps, Heywood's theatrical rival, for his words are not of praise.<sup>5</sup>

### **Fools are the ones who can do and say whatever they want**

An author, who, through his work, reaffirms the capacity of Christian foolishness in helping the man's salvation, is Nicholas of Cusa. In *De Doctrina Ignorantia* (1440), Cusa speaks of a "learned ignorance", man realizes that he cannot "know" the meaning of God's works, but he can only marvel at them (Nicholas of Cusa, 1990). In the work *Idiotae Libri* (1450), four philosophical dialogues (*De sapientia I et II, De mente, De staticis experimetis*), the author investigates the human mind with regard to the truth from different perspectives. The main characters of the four dialogues are the Orator and the Cleric (Ydiota), and later the Philosopher, in the fourth volume. The first is a professional scholar who depends on books and boasts about his academic knowledge, the second one is the ordinary man who does not have an education but who gives us the path of personal experience and thoughtful thinking, as only they can lead us to true wisdom. Ydiota speaks of the true knowledge that makes people humble, for the knowledge of the world is foolishness for God (*stultitia quaedam*), a conception which can be found in St. Paul's teachings. He admits that he is an idiot and knows that he does not have the knowledge, so he does not hesitate to answer any questions. The boldness with which he defends his point of view, both in front of the Orator and the Philosopher, resembles the voice of the Carnival fool, who was an exponent of the crowd in the criticism towards the authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical (K. Meredith Ziebart, 2014, pp. 106-118).

A change in the mindset of the time, concerning the fool, occurs through Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), in which the author presents a tolerant attitude towards fools/jesters, whether natural or artificial. More tells the story of an imitator, a "nothing" (*parasites* – in original), "who wanted to imitate a clown, and imitated it so well that you would have taken it as such" (Thomas More, p. 38). The repugnance of the church representatives to such a character is felt in the text, for a monk (a tag that has often been the target of these clowns) calls him "a man of nothingness, blasphemous, slanderous and son of perdition [...] this jesting and meretricious clown" (Thomas More, pp. 40-41). Only the Cardinal clearly tolerates this "parasite" telling the monk: "You take

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<sup>5</sup>Idem, pp. 21-22: "Nay! Somer ys a sot, foole for a kyng, But sots in many other mens howsyng, Bear water bear woodd and do yndrugery [...] Except mayster Somer, of sotts not the best."

a fool seriously and embarrass yourself” (Thomas More, pp. 40-41), which confirms the idea, already established in the eleventh-twelfth centuries, that it’s good to keep away from debating with a fool.

Erasmus, with *The Praise of Folly* (written in 1509 and published in 1511), makes no distinction between the innocent and the artificial fool, but brings a praise to folly in general. The author speaks of folly as being present at all social levels, it is considered the source of good mood and cheerfulness, the condition of a happy marriage and a life without worries. Clowns or parasites are the ones that bring joy at feasts through the jokes, games, and stupidities they say, for “human life is nothing more than a folly’s game” (Erasmus of Rotterdam, 2000, p. 44). Although he does not explicitly speak of natural and artificial fools, in a description, under the title *Fools are the happiest from all people*, clowns seem rather those innocents who, through their lack of judgment, fear nothing, they do not experience shame, ambition, envy, or love, for as approaching the “insensibility of beasts without judgement, they can no longer sin, as the theologians guarantee us” (Erasmus of Rotterdam, 2000, p. 59), a conception similar to that maintained by Thomas Aquinas. And precisely because of this lack of reason, these fools are wanted and protected and they can do and say whatever they want (Erasmus of Rotterdam, 2000, p. 60). In describing the relationship between kings and fools, Erasmus, in our opinion, does not distinguish between those innocents who were kept at the royal courts and in noblemen’s houses, and minstrels, jesters, who are beginning to appear among the permanent servants of the sovereigns. The author talks about “the clowns (who) always serve them only what they like: jokes, games, laughter, revels”, but as well as about the privilege of “being idiots and telling the pure truth” (Erasmus of Rotterdam, 2000, p. 61). The confusion that Erasmus emphasizes is a deliberate one, for the author does not pursue any theological conception, on the contrary, church representatives are the leading exponents of folly. Erasmus also makes a classification of foolishness: the one caused by the anger in men’s souls is a devastating tendency, while the foolishness caused by the error of senses and judgment is that foolishness that induces lack of care, joy and lust for life, and in this latter category we have all sorts of fools, smaller or bigger. In the chapter on Scripture, Erasmus explains what St. Paul means through his words when he considers himself to be a fool and praises himself with his weakness to the world: in the Christian conception, God’s weakness is stronger than men<sup>6</sup>, being, in fact, a false praise, for he knew “that it is the privilege of fools

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<sup>6</sup>“I say again, Let no man think me a fool; if otherwise, yet as a fool receive me, that I may boast myself a little” 2 C,11, verse 16, *Noul Testament (The New Testament)*, 1992, translated

to tell the truth without offending anyone” (Erasmus of Rotterdam, 2000, p. 140). And with this conception, we turn back to the image of the innocent, the fool who is crazy in the eyes of the world but who speaks the divine truth, a fool placed at the edge of society, disregarded, but protected and desired by people, for only he is able to present things as they really are, but without the gravity and sobriety of the “sages”.

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Theological and Philosophical Aspects of the Fool in England: International Conference of Doctoral School for Theater and Performing Arts and the Research Center of The Faculty of Theater at the George Enescu National University of Arts. Chapter (PDF Available) Â· December 2018 with 10 Reads. DOI: 10.2478/9783110653823-021.Â lives. The theological conception â€œ the fool is the agent of evil. Whether natural or artificial, fools were present everywhere in the. fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, at fairs or festivals, in taverns and brothels Source for information on Human Nature, Religious and Philosophical Aspects: Encyclopedia of Science and Religion dictionary.Â Consequently, one of the issues that theological anthropology must address when integrating elements from scientific understandings of human nature is the possibility for understanding human beings as more than a product of natural evolution.