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Elizabethan Theatre and Clowns

When thinking about comedy, jokes and puns often come to ones mind. Nowadays, comedians are the main source of said jokes and puns, but back during the Elizabethan Period, there was a different type of comedian: the Clown. However, these weren't exactly like the clowns shown today; not like a killer clown from Stephen King's novel *It*, or performance clowns at birthday parties with the red nose and over sized shoes who make balloon animals. Through researching scripts and looking at different notes and annotations, Eugene Steele wrote, "...Elizabethan Clowns, the Commedia dell'Arte players, cared so much and no more for the sanctities of Shakespeare's set-down script" in his article *Shakespeare, Goldoni, and the Clowns*. Clowns back then were often looked down upon by playwrights, but audiences loved and praised them for their comedic effect. In the theatre during the Elizabethan Period, one of the better-known Clowns was William Kempe, who was both loathed and loved.

William Kempe was an actor who was a member of several theatre troupes including The Lord Chamberlain's Men. During his time with the Lord Chamberlain's Men, his highlighted roles in Shakespeare's shows included: Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, Costard in *Love Labour's Lost*, and most notably Falstaff in *Henry IV parts I and II*. In 1599, Kempe left the Lord Chamberlain's Men and in 1600 began his one man show, "The Nine Days' Wonder", where he danced from London to Norwich; this went from February 11th to March 11th. In Robert Hombach's book, *The English Clown Tradition from the*

Middle Ages to Shakespeare, he found that during Kempe's "Nine Days' Wonder", he had referred to himself as, "...a 'fool' not a 'clown', since the ancient, less specialized sense of the former was then dominant in everyday use." During his study of the English Renaissance, Hombach found that the use of the word "clown" referred to one that is, "...of a 'rustic', low-class, 'boorish person', but considered so-called fools as well." In the end, the term "clown" has been recognized as referring to, "...a fool, jester, or comedian in an entertainment (as a play)." This was Kempe's role in many of the Elizabethan theatres, however Shakespeare wasn't always his biggest fan.

In 1599, when Kempe left the Lord Chamberlain's Men, he never gave a clear reason as to why he was leaving. The Lord Chamberlain's Men performed at the Globe Theatre, but in order to help pay for it, many of the actors became shareholders, including Kempe. However, when he left the company he stopped paying his share and left it to the rest of the troupe to pick up his slack, which wasn't a huge hit within the members. According to Eugene Steele, Shakespeare appeared to, in his writings, defame Clowns and showed what appeared to be, "...almost a personal vendetta against bravura clownage throughout his career, though his relations with his players, especially with his principle Clowns, were complex." When it comes to written text for Clowns, improvisation was not uncommon; Steele had found that, "The texts...are full of such extraneous elements as 'the introduction of gratuitous exclamations, vocatives, and the use of *etc*'... which might well be the result of improvisation by actors, especially in passages attributed to Clowns." However, Shakespeare casually mentions Clowns

improvising in *Hamlet* when Hamlet says, “And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That’s villainous, and shown a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it” in Act Three Scene Two. With this line, it has been reported that, “Kempe boasted that he preferred to raid a play with improvised merriment rather than to learn apart”, according to Steele. Even though Shakespeare was not a fan of Clowns, the audience adored them.

Comedies were written and performed for both the common people and the higher class. Eugene Steele wrote that there was a, “...chief comic tradition holding the stage when [Shakespeare] was a young man was that of the Vice and his clownish henchmen. Whatever else he may be, and whatever his ancestry, the Vice was always the chief comic character, the foremost theatrical appeal of the allegorical drama, and a fat part for the leading Clown.” This was a character that all audiences knew as, “...a glib improviser, the irreverent source of fun in the homiletic play and the direct rapport between them and the performance, who could be relied on to acknowledge their own attendance.” Clowns brought enjoyment and laughter to audiences, but also made them think. Robert Hornback wrote, “...clowns were not simply satiric but they also played a considerable role in articulating the ideologies of their age... mingling clowns and politics offered both satiric depth and thoughtfulness...” After Kempe left, actor Robert Armin took over playing Shakespeare’s Clown roles, however Shakespeare adjusted the Clown persona from

being a pure form of entertainment, like Kempe's performances, to being more serious, like Armin's. Steele found that Armin's comedy was described as, "...a more delicate and sophisticated style of clowning, and the Clowns were no longer... 'the stiff, the heavy, and the stupid'." Shakespeare's new Clown characters for Armin included Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, and the Fool in *King Lear*. Audiences still adored these new Clowns because they began to offer a new insight into life and politics, while still adding comedic relief, according to Hornback. Clowns have always been a highlight of theatre, and have changed and adapted though time and playwrights, but all in all they are memorable characters.

William Kempe was a famous Clown actor in several troupes, most notably in The Lord Chamberlain's Men, even though he left them to do his own show. Throughout his history, Kempe has shown his talent and the right for audiences to adore his performances, as well as the right for playwrights to be salty towards him. He and Shakespeare did not have an easy relationship to the end; Shakespeare made this evident in his shows as well as his evolution of the Clown character for Armin. Today, Clowns aren't exactly the same performances wise, but one thing is still the same: they are either loved or loathed.