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THE UNIVERSITY AS FOOL

Donncha Kavanagh

The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), *As You Like It*

Introduction

If identity is an emergent property in a network of relationships, then the idea of the University is perhaps best understood through analysing its relationship with other *institutions* over time. The central argument in this chapter is that, akin to the fool's role in the medieval royal court, the University is a “foolish institution” embedded in a close relationship with various “sovereign” institutions. The first part of the chapter describes the evolution of the relationships, before proceeding to explore other “foolish” aspects of the contemporary university. The chapter concludes by reflecting on how the metaphor of the Fool provides a frame for re-thinking the educational practices of the University and its own future.

The University: a Foolish Institution?

The Fool is usually associated with the Middle Ages but is also a feature—in some form or another—of many societies over history (Otto, 2001; Phan, 2001). The Fool has many faces; he is a shape shifter, a chameleon and a trickster, always open to the possibility of transformation. This ambiguity extends to the Fool's own sexuality—the Fool is usually male but female Fools were not uncommon—as demonstrated by the Fool's enduring penchant for cross-dressing. Perhaps the best-known representation is in Shakespeare's plays which often featured the Fool as a recurring character type, usually based on the jesters employed by the royal

courts of his time. The Fool is symbolically linked to the king, and this relationship holds on stage, in the reality of the royal court, and in its metaphorical use in my historical interpretation of the evolution of the University. Saying that the University is a “foolish institution” means that it is always defined by its unique relationship with another institution, termed the “sovereign institution”. This study of the University’s evolution identifies at least five different institutions that realize this sovereign role—the Church, the State, the Nation, the Professions, and the Corporation—as well as others that partly attain the position.

The first Fool-Sovereign relationship of note emerged in the medieval universities in Italy, France and England around 1100 AD. The medieval universities provided many of the defining features of the contemporary university, including the term university, a system of lectures, examinations, administrative structure (faculties), the residential college, and a central location (i.e. the notion of the University as a place). Typically, these institutions grew out of monasteries or cathedral schools and were tied to a universal, “natural” order—the universal ideology of Christianity—rather than to the State or civic society. While law, arts, medicine and theology were all part of the curriculum, theonomy—government by God—provided the medieval university with a dominant and unifying philosophical principle. Thus, the medieval university might be described as the *University of God*, with the Church taking the role of the Sovereign Institution, with its focus on indoctrination, rather than on teaching, living or research.

As a deviant, the Fool is a liminal character, and yet he holds a position at the centre of the royal court. His relationship with the King is equally complex: he is the King’s friend and confidant, but he is also a servant and subject to punishment at a whim (“Take heed, sirrah—the whip!” *King Lear*, 1:4:109). In *King Lear*, the Fool seeks to demonstrate to Lear the truth about the people around him, but when Lear goes insane and is unable to heed the Fool’s advice and knowledge, the Fool vanishes. Interestingly, the tradition of court jesters ended in Britain less than fifty years after *King Lear* was first performed, as Oliver Cromwell’s Puritan republic had no place for such frivolities as professional jesters.

Our foolish institution, the University, is not dissimilar. By the end of the eighteenth century, the medieval university had become quite isolated from society, oligarchical, rigid, introverted, and reactionary, being largely opposed to the Reformation, unsympathetic to the Renaissance, and antagonistic to the new science of the Enlightenment. In addition, the universities saw their scientific leadership usurped by the scientific academies, such as the Royal Society, that were established all over Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. An early lesson that the University learned was that while it should be loyal to the sovereign institution, this loyalty is not unconditional, and it may align itself to other, more powerful, sovereigns as these emerge.

The Enlightenment and the Reformation reduced the power of the Church and it was these changes that lay at the heart of the University’s strategic realignment in the nineteenth century. An important contribution to this process

was Kant's argument, in 1798, that the authority of the three "higher" faculties of theology, law and medicine—around which the medieval universities were centred—was *heteronomous* (i.e. imposed by others), while the authority of the "lower" faculty (philosophy) was *autonomous*, legitimated by reason alone, by its own practice. Kant's argument was tremendously important in providing a conceptual basis for academic freedom, not unlike the freedom afforded the Fool in the Royal Court. But perhaps the more important part of his thesis was that the State had a *duty* to protect this freedom, which formed the basis for a more complex relationship between the State and the University, with the former protecting the latter in order to ensure the rule of reason in public life, and the latter, via philosophy, providing a counter to the excesses of the State and its desires. Power also shifted to the State as, for instance, during the eighteenth century the German state began to regulate academic behaviour through new bureaucratic and accounting practices which ultimately evolved into the "publish or perish" syndrome (Clark, 2006). Through these conceptual and practical reorientations, the State came to take the Sovereign's role in the evolving story of the Foolish Institution.

During the nineteenth century, another realignment emerged as part of modernity's cultural project and its engagement with cultural nationalism. Now, the dominant institution in the University's field was not so much the State, as the *Nation*. While Kant had argued that the State should support and protect the University because this was needed to foster *reason*, the new dispensation positioned *culture* as the University's unifying function. Hence the humanities and literature became central, in contrast to philosophy's pole position in Kant's "university of reason". This concern with culture followed the romantic fascination with subjective *Bildung* (the self-development of man) and is well articulated by Cardinal Newman in his influential book, *The Idea of a University*.

At much the same time a quite different development was taking place in the US where the University was moving away from the Nation and towards the *Professions*. The medical and legal professions had been important stakeholders of the University since medieval times, but developments during the nineteenth century brought the professions, more generally, into a sovereign alignment with the University. In particular, there was a shift from contemplative, idealist philosophies and theories of learning propagated by the Platonic tradition towards real-world, action-orientated, purposeful production of knowledge via a modern experimental science of inquiry. By the mid-nineteenth century the idea was in place in the US that universities were not just to produce "gentlemen", teachers, preachers, lawyers and doctors—as per the Newman model—but were to be actively involved in industrial and agricultural development. The unifying goal of the new form of university was the betterment of *humanity*, in contrast to the "University of Culture" which was centred on nationalism. This idea became institutionalized in the US through the land grant movement (from 1862), in the demands of the time that research be related to the technical advance of

farming and manufacturing in service to the political and economic segments of society, and in response to the needs of a new American middle class (Bledstein, 1978: x).

In 1876, Johns Hopkins University was founded and many Americans wanted this to follow the “German” or “Humboldtian” model focusing on graduate work and research. However it soon became clear that a large undergraduate student body was required to support graduate study and scholarship. Hence it effected a superimposition of a Platonic German University (or French *grandes écoles*) on top of a classical English/American liberal arts college. This somewhat contradictory institution became hugely influential and the model for all subsequent American universities and indeed many universities outside the US. The research, graduate component concentrated on increasingly specialized, fragmented scholarship while the college component dedicated itself (at least in theory) to general education, character building, and civic education for a democratic society. Serving the civic community, rather than the State, meant providing “human resources” to the professions and industry—such as engineers, doctors and lawyers. This led to increasing disciplinary specialization and fragmentation with departments reflecting professional associations externally.

This new idea of a university also brought a new pragmatic approach to pedagogy, which stressed developing applicable thought *processes*, rather than just the learning of great books and cultural legacies. Hence, the focus shifted to immediate experience, practical education and useful and instrumental knowledge (i.e. the sciences and professional studies) over the traditional humanities curriculum (philosophy, literature, history, and theology).

Not surprisingly, this new university model was criticized by many. In the early nineteenth century, Veblen was a vocal critic of the attempt to link the College (undergraduate) and the University (graduate), and the training of novice professionals which he dismissed as “vocationalism”. Writing in the 1930s, the influential American educationalist, Abraham Flexner, made much the same point, arguing that “Practical importance, is not a sufficient title to academic recognition: if that is the best that can be said, it is an excellent reason for exclusion” (Flexner, 1930: 27). Flexner and Veblen represent one position in a much wider debate about which Sovereign the University should serve—the State, Nation or the Professions—and whether or not research (and/or professional training) should form part of the University’s function, or whether this is best left to other institutions. Of course the practical workings through of these issues varied from country to country, but suffice to say that the “pure” liberal University, unsullied by professional schools, did not flourish during the twentieth century.

By the late nineteenth century, a further shift occurred as the University commenced a more explicit engagement with business and commerce. A first sign that the *Corporation* was becoming the new power was the widespread substitution of “laymen” (i.e. businessmen) in place of clergy in the governing boards of US undergraduate colleges. As the University shifted its gaze to the Corporation,

it increasingly came to adopt organizing principles from the business world, which again affected the nature of the institution. We can, indeed, speak of the emergence of the “Entrepreneurial University”. As mass education developed, universities grew and became more powerful, bringing increasing demands for accountability. This justified the diffusion of management discourse and technologies into the university where, increasingly, the administrator took the central position, a role previously occupied by the professor. The pace and nature of this diffusion differed from country to country, but the trend followed a general pattern. As night follows day, faculty resisted and criticized the advent of managerialism, the perceived corporatisation of the University, the de-professionalization of academic work, the rise of consumerism, the discourse of “excellence”, and the commodity (versus community) model of the University.

The Fool's Many Faces

During the nineteenth century, the University demonstrated a remarkable ability to align itself with different sovereigns and to institutionalize organizing practices that at once enabled transformation and yet sustained a meaningful link with tradition. The institution, in the guise of the new American university model, flourished during the twentieth century, although a confused identity emerged as different actors fought for the already contested position of Sovereign.

After the Second World War, it became clear, at least in the United States, that university research had played a vital role in the war effort and that universities were more than simply teaching institutions. Thus the *Military* wrested the sovereign's role, at least in some parts of the University, as US universities came to be seen as the primary locus for the research that would underpin that country's military and industrial dominance. At the same time, there was a long-standing view—going back at least to pivotal thinkers like John Dewey and William James—that education was a tool for progressive social change. Thus, the University wasn't just there to serve a Sovereign (be it the Church, State, Nation, the Corporation, Professions, or Military), but its primary role should be a promoter-cum-architect of emancipation and social justice. In other words, the new Sovereigns should be the ideals of Justice and Emancipation.

But all of these competing Sovereigns led to confusion, tension and finally violence. As early as 1930, Flexner was complaining that universities were too many things: they were “secondary schools, vocational schools, teacher-training schools, research centers, ‘uplift’ agencies, businesses—these and other things simultaneously” (Flexner, 1930: 179). But by the early 1960s, Clark Kerr's idea of a “multiversity” reflected the reality if not the aspiration of higher education in the US and beyond. For Kerr (1963/2001), the multiversity is a large, inconsistent, bureaucratic institution with fuzzy boundaries, made up of and serving many communities, functions and interest groups and articulating quite different traditions. The multiversity is paradoxical in that it presents itself as a radical

institution, when often its conduct is quite conservative. Likewise, it happily depicts itself as a cloister, an ivory tower aloof from the world and yet it readily embraces the desires and wishes of external groups, such as the Church, State, Professions, and Military.

One way of capturing the confused nature of the University is to leverage tropes favoured by the “postmoderns” that seem especially applicable to the contemporary institution. It is at once virtual, reflexive, fragmented, ambiguous, de-centred, contradictory, devoid of fundamentals, inconsistent, and multifaceted (see, for instance, Smith & Webster, 1997). It is also a corporate conglomerate that is embedded in, dependent on, and constituted by information and communication technologies. And the postmoderns have burrowed away at the institution’s foundations and traditions, raising profound questions about ideas such as the canon as “self-evident repositories of enlightenment” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991: 15), and the notion that intellectual knowledge, as interpreted by the academy, should be privileged over other types of knowledge (such as practical knowledge, gossip and folk wisdom).

Other metaphors also describe the nature of the “postmodern” university and how it differs from earlier visions. If the liberal university espoused by Newman was akin to a village with its priests, and Flexner’s vision of a modern university was analogous to a one-industry town with an intellectual oligarchy, the multiversity is a city of infinite variety, in which there is a lower sense of community but also less sense of confinement. And if there is a diminished sense of purpose, there are also more ways to excel. Another way of understanding the postmodern university is to see it as a maze of major fault lines: student v. faculty, professors v. non-professorial teaching staff, academics v. administration, full-time v. part-time, humanists v. scientists, research v. teaching, production v. consumption of knowledge, liberal education v. vocational training, radical thought v. conservative practice.

The university as a “Foolish” institution neatly captures this heterogeneity and confusion. Throughout history and across cultures the Fool has used masks and masquerade, costumes and Carnival to play with (mis)representation and dissimilitude. With the Fool, you may not get what you see. The Fool as trickster is “the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (Hyde, 1998: 7), providing a dynamic in a sea of apparent order, a mischievous willingness to contemplate and provoke an alternative state of affairs even at some risk to its own status. Thus, while some might pine for Kant’s university of reason, or the University of Culture, the contemporary university is perhaps better understood as the institutional manifestation of modernity’s ontological uncertainty, insecurity and ambiguity.

Making Meaning: The Fool as Normative Narrator

Thinking of the University as a Foolish institution helps clarify the essence of what it has been doing in the past and its challenges into the future. For instance,

the Fool is a story-teller, telling stories that are always embedded in a framework of norms and values that connect the moment into longer conversations over time and space. In considering this story-telling role, the metaphor of Shakespeare's Fool suggests parallels to how we see the University: the Fool has *audiences* (plural) rather than a single audience. First and primarily, the Fool speaks to his king, his Sovereign. Second, he also addresses other characters in the play. Third, he has conversations essentially with himself, about his own position, and the Fool's role in the world. Fourth, he routinely makes witty remarks about topical issues engaging the viewing audience of the time but which have nothing whatsoever to do with the play.

Likewise, the Foolish Institution (the University)—which shares the Fool's fetish for garish costumes—addresses four different audiences. First, the University directs much of what it says to its sovereign institution, whether this is the Church, the State, the Nation, the professions, the corporation, the military, or the ideals of emancipation and justice. For instance, as the Nation became the University's Sovereign, professors became indispensable “interpreters” of the Nation giving them a powerful and privileged position in society. This is why, in the nineteenth century, universities garnered a crucial role in promoting national languages, codifying national literatures and geography, and providing repositories of national culture. Likewise, business schools provide a mechanism whereby the University can speak to its new sovereign, the corporation, as an institution. In this regard, university research tries to be purposeful, working to deepen and consolidate the Sovereign's power and position.

Second, it also addresses other institutions within its compass, such as “marriage” and the “family”. This constituency includes aspiring and declining sovereigns. Third, the University has conversations with itself about the nature of the University and its role in the world. Finally, the University engages in “idle” speculation and basic research that have no immediate practical relevance.

Akin to the medieval fool, who is not there to merely tell stories, the University is expected to provide a *normative* narrative, or a critical interpretation of the world. From the seventeenth century, this was enacted through the theatrics of the public academic lecture and performed disputation—though these modes declined as Enlightenment rationality marginalized dissimulation and role-playing (Clark, 2006)—and through the University's long tradition of academic freedom. The university does not just (re-)tell stories, parables, and proverbs. Its power also comes about from its material ability to *sort things out* (Bowker & Star, 1999); it is a *sorter par excellence*. While the medieval fool does this discriminating through an observant eye, quick wit and an agile ability to voice distinctions, the University relies on a set of material and writing practices embedded in lecture and library catalogues, grading schemes, charts, tables, classification systems and such like. These “little tools of knowledge” (Becker & Clark, 2001) provide a formidable sorting ability that underpins the university's epistemic power and also its administrative competence in making decisions about who to appoint, which course

to run, who to promote, and so forth. And this ability to “sort things out” will become even more important in a world overwhelmed by information, chatter and trivia.

Through these twin processes of normative narrating and sorting, the university constructs and maintains what I term the *semiotic nexus*. The semiotic nexus gives meaning to an institution—be it the University, its sovereign or one of the other institutions in the realm—through telling a multi-part, compelling, value-laden tale about the institution and its place in the world. The university is not the only institution engaged in this process of “making meaning”—narrating is a form of theorizing that everyone engages in—but it plays a central role in determining what counts as knowledge, as well as defining what is valuable, peripheral, obscure, sacred, profane, reputable, opinion, or fact. The university, like the Fool, personifies truth and reason, in that it is *required* to tell the truth, to abolish myth, and to distinguish fact from mere opinion. In other words, the University’s normative story-telling ability allied to its sorting practices and technologies are basic to how the University realizes its imagined community of academics, how it at once becomes an institution itself, and also how it maintains and sustains the semiotic nexus underpinning other institutions. In other words, these practices play a significant role in the *process* of institutionalization.

These processes work largely at the level of the *institutional complex*, which I define as a network of identifiable institutions that interact with one another and with, in particular, a focal institution, which in our case is the University.

Play in the Fool

The Fool is a ludic spirit within the institutional complex, and play—a free activity standing outside of and opposed to the seriousness of ordinary life (Huizinga, 1955)—is its *modus operandi*. As with the child, the Fool is allowed, expected and given time and space to play. Through playing with language, the Fool sparks a new (yet old) understanding of the here and now. This incandescent quality at once makes events alive—giving them immediate meaning—while simultaneously framing them within a longer temporal structure or *longue durée* that articulates the empirical with a transcendent truth. Each “play” then endures as a new mental creation, to be repeated and retained in memory, echoing older refrains of truth and tradition. Following Huizinga, play is primordial and because of its close links with the sacred, it works to keep old norms and beliefs alive. The Fool as playmaker *extraordinaire* is central to this continual process of institutional re-creation through which an institution breathes, lives and renews itself.

Yet, because it takes work to create order within play, play always (subliminally) reminds us that the world is fundamentally chaotic and that any meaning within this chaos is always provisional and artificial. The Fool’s work of play then is to institutionalize order and at once to open up order to de-institutionalisation. Through its role as playmaker, the Fool puts an institution “into play”, which

means that work must be done either to re-create or to de-stabilize the institution. In this way, the Fool's ability and license to play is paradoxically central to both institutionalization *and* de-institutionalization.

While the Fool is a liminal entity that is encouraged to play, its role is not without boundaries. Indeed, delimiting social positions is central to its own (liminal) role. And the Fool must also be careful not to transgress this role, as may happen, for instance, if it appropriates the position of Sovereign or becomes an agent of the Sovereign. In both cases, it forgets to "play the fool". This perhaps has happened to the University as it grew into a "multiversity" wherein (a) "foolish" intellectuals ceded power and status to earnest "academic workers", and (b) the multiplicity of Sovereigns in the institutional complex led to profound confusion about the University's own identity. Another transgression occurs when the Fool cannot see beyond the play-making; that is when the Fool becomes a trickster, a Lucifer figure working solely to undermine and destroy order. This happens when the Fool forgets that part of the Fool's role is sustaining order in the institutional complex. Within the university setting, the decline of the academic lecture into public farce during the eighteenth century, the excesses of postmodern self-indulgence, and the careerism underpinning much statistical and interpretative sophistry are perhaps good examples of this kind of transgression.

Yet another transgression occurs when the Sovereign itself becomes a fool or trickster, which can happen when the Sovereign forgets that its power is ultimately derived from a primordial sovereign, namely the People.

Using Meaning: The Fool as Educator

Pursuing the metaphor of the Fool presents an interesting perspective on the University as an educational institution. While the Fool is an educator of sorts, she does not really "own" knowledge that she "passes on" as per our conventional understanding of pedagogy. Unlike the teacher who is usually cast as the learner's caring coach, the Fool is an irritant, a provocateur, whose *modus operandi* is to provoke new wisdom in others. The Fool's approach is, quite literally, to play the fool, acting as a lucid and ludic lens through which others perceive and recognize profound truths, truths that indeed may be lost in the conventions of learning and scholarship. The fool (like the child) is not expected to "know" anything and is therefore free to act the fool, because she cannot, by definition, "know any better". Paradoxically, this epistemic vacuum is also a potential source of great wisdom, which is why the idea of the "wise fool" has such a long tradition. Moreover, the oxymoron "wise fool" is also reversible: he that believes himself to be wise is necessarily foolish. For the Fool also reminds us that knowledge of the mystery of life is always beyond even the wise; at best we can only know that there is much of which we are and can only be ignorant. And in recognising this, the highest wisdom is perhaps to do nothing other than to play the Fool, as

Erasmus wickedly pointed out in his seminal satire, *The Praise of Folly* (Erasmus, 1511/2005).

The Praise of Folly was hugely influential in the sixteenth century and perhaps its central message can continue to map out a positive path for the University, an institution that is bedevilled by angst about its role in the world. The central character in Erasmus's masterpiece is Stultitia, the goddess of Folly, who advocates that *nature* is the primordial life-force of the universe and that all manifestations of institutionalization, all civilizing enterprises, laws, customs and traditions, are but foolish attempts to contain nature. The University, from this perspective, must continue to live with its role as an institutionalizer *and* de-institutionalizer. It must be a dependent, loyal subject to its Sovereign(s) and yet it must also be a promiscuous charlatan. It must be caring and yet it must be fearlessly critical. It must be central yet at the same time liminal. It must advocate reason and yet always celebrate and recognize that folly is foundational. In short, it must be the institutional manifestation of an *oxymoron*, remembering that this word comes from the Greek, *oxumōrone*, meaning "pointedly foolish".

Conclusions

The University as Fool, dancing with and between a constellation of powerful Sovereigns, also provides a useful perspective on local practices and disputes in universities, on the contemporary role of academics, and on the nature of theorizing and learning. And while the Fool's role is traditionally understood in terms of its relationship with the State, it is clear that the University has partly escaped its subservience to the State through engaging with and being funded by other Sovereigns, such as the Professions. This has implications in terms of how the University engages with its Sovereigns, and again the metaphor provides an enduring trope to guide the nature of this engagement. Here, we are at one with Dahrendorf (1969) for whom the fools of modern society are the intellectuals who "have the duty to doubt everything that is obvious, to make relative all authority, to ask all those questions that no one else dares to ask" (Dahrendorf, 1969: 51). While this role was traditionally conferred on and appropriated by the academic, this is less so today. For instance, the sociologist of science, Steve Fuller, has observed that academia "increasingly looks like a state of exile from the intellectual world" (Fuller, 2005: 2), probably because academic freedom diminished in significance once a general right to free speech became institutionalized. However, there is an historical and social onus on the university to not only house but to actively *foster* intellectuals that question and play with society's institutions. In this context, it is important to reassert and re-invigorate the academic's role as Fool (*qua* Intellectual), which can only be secured through engaging distinctively, closely, and *critically* with the various Sovereigns in the University's institutional complex. Finally, the perspective enunciated in this chapter requires that distinctive virtues and practices be celebrated within the

University, with consequential implications for how the institution should be funded, assessed and organized.

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