

*'Fool on the Hill,' Janda Zdenek*

The Holy Fool

*If the fool would persist in his
folly, he would become wise.*

William Blake

THE PARADOXICAL FIGURE OF THE 'Wise' or 'Holy' Fool is almost universal across time and place, playing an important role in the ancient world up to the present day.

Socrates (469–399 BCE)—considered to be the founder of Western philosophy—based his teachings largely on exposing the folly of the presumably wise, and he himself claimed his wisdom was only derived from his awareness of his own ignorance.

Diogenes of Sinope (404–323 BCE) was even more well-known in his time than Socrates for his foolish wisdom. (Legend has it that when asked by Alexander the Great if there was anything the mighty ruler could do for him, Diogenes replied, "Yes, you could stand a little out of my sun.")

The Islamic world also had its share of 'wise fools,' most exemplary among them **Nasreddin** (1208–1285), who appears in thousands of stories, often as a fool or the butt of a joke. (One widely-copied story relates Nasreddin, having lost a ring inside his dark house, asked why he was looking for it outside in the yard. Nasreddin explains that the light was much better outside.)

Greek and Roman literature abounds with stories of the 'wise fool,' often appearing as a servant or slave who tricks his master. The theme was developed more fully during the Middle Ages, reaching its peak in the Renaissance, when the role of the jester was common in the royal courts of Europe. (The jester was permitted to mock other members of the court and even the king himself, in order to remind him of the limitations of his knowledge and power.)

The undisputed master of the ‘wise fool’ genre during the Renaissance period was **Shakespeare** (1564-1616), who seemed to have a particular fondness for fools. The archetype appears in many of the Bard’s plays, including *Hamlet* (the gravediggers) *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Puck), *Macbeth* (the drunken Porter), *King Lear* (the court jester), and *As You Like It* (Touchstone, who famously opines, “The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool”).

Historians speculate Shakespeare may have been influenced by the early 16th century Dutch philosopher, satirist, and theologian **Erasmus**—in particular, in his portrayal of Stultitia, the goddess of folly. (In *The Praise of Folly*, written in 1509, Stultitia puts forth the argument that all people are fools of one sort or another.)

First published in the same year that *King Lear* was written (1605), **Cervantes’** *Don Quixote* still captures the imagination of millions, with the hero’s ill-considered exploits and lofty rhetoric contrasted with his sidekick Sancho Panza’s earthy wit.

The figure of the ‘holy fool’ appears in virtually all religions, from the Muslim world’s **Rumi** and Judaism’s **Baal Shem Tov**, to, arguably, **Coyote**, the trickster of numerous Native American mythologies.

Even steadfastly somber Christianity has room for a bit of foolishness: St. Paul urged his followers to become “fools for Christ,” and St. Francis of Assisi called his Order of Little Brothers, “jesters of the Lord.” (Perhaps many people of his time would have considered the ragged, itinerant Jesus himself as something of a ‘divine fool.’)

But probably no religion is more devoted to the character of the ‘holy fool’ than Buddhism—in particular, Chan Buddhism.

More commonly known in the West in its Japanese form of Zen, Buddhist lineage features a long parade of illustrious monks and masters, known for their disregard for social convention and public approbation. (The monk and poet **Ikkyu** (1394-1481), could often be found running around his village carrying a human skeleton in order to remind people of the impermanence of life.)

Leaving his luxurious palace to reject worldly pursuits and become a wandering pilgrim in his own kingdom, even the Buddha himself might have been thought to be afflicted by a sort of ‘divine madness.’

Chan and Zen Buddhism were strongly influenced by Taoism, whose best known figure is the legendary **Lao-tzu**, author of the *Tao Te Ching*, who said “others are sharp and clever, but I alone am dull and stupid.”

Taoism’s other great master, Zhuang Zhou, or **Chuang-Tzu** (369-298 BCE) echoed Socrates, remarking, “Those who know they are fools are not the biggest fools.”

Like ‘holy fools,’ divine wisdom can take many forms, but a common quality among them all is an innocent, open, awake state of mind, what Lao-tzu described as an ability to “learn to ride the currents...to become friends with insecurity, making doubt your guide and each moment your god.”

Other ways to practice divine wisdom might include going against the tide, ignoring or disrupting obsolete social conventions; honoring and delighting in paradox, irony, and satire; keeping one’s expectations in check and reveling in the unexpected; and breaking taboos to mute their power.

Above all, holy fools endeavor to mock the haughty and meet intolerance and self-righteousness with scorn and contempt. As holy fool Paul Krasner once said, “Irreverence is my only sacred cow.” ■