

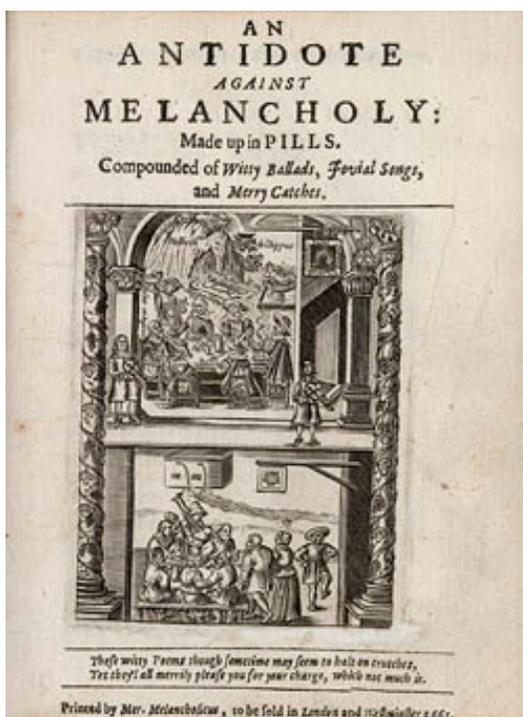
“A FOOL, A FOOL! I MET A FOOL I’ THE FOREST, A MOTLEY FOOL.” (AS YOU LIKE IT, 2.7.1 2)

Fools often feature in the plays of William Shakespeare. Professional fools had long been members of royal or noble households and many wore motley or a Harlequin design tunic as a recognizable badge or costume. Licensed fools were permitted to say dangerous things without fear of punishment. Shakespeare often used the role of the fool to act as a mirror, reflecting and commenting on the life and times of the characters in the play.



T.H. Nicholson after C.W. Sheeres. “Touchstone, Audrey, and Clown”.
Engraving, 19th century

Touchstone is one of Shakespeare’s more engaging fools, and he is a source of much of the humor in the play due to his love of puns, double-entendres, and false logic. His name signifies his dramatic function: a touchstone was used by alchemists to detect true gold. Touchstone is an index of human behavior in that he tests the genuineness of characters with his skeptical comments. He also articulates the arguments for and against country life and life at court: arguments that affect and afflict most of the characters in the play. Touchstone also shows up the sham honor and courtesy of the court, ridicules love, and melancholy.



Melancholy was a fashionable Elizabethan complaint, a mark of aesthetic and intellectual refinement. It was believed that the essence of the human body was contained in four humors, or fluids: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. In a healthy person these four humors were balanced; any illness was the result of the domination of one humor over the others. A domination of black bile disposed a person to melancholy. Jaques appears to be afflicted with melancholy, although this may be more of a personal affectation than an emotional affliction. He is a sardonic observer who is pessimistic, cynical and only sees foolishness, absurdities, and ingratitude. Jaques is delighted when he meets Touchstone whom he sees as a cynic like himself. Jaques wants to cleanse the world with his satire, but the Duke accuses him of hypocrisy.

N. D. “An antidote against melancholy”. London, 1661.