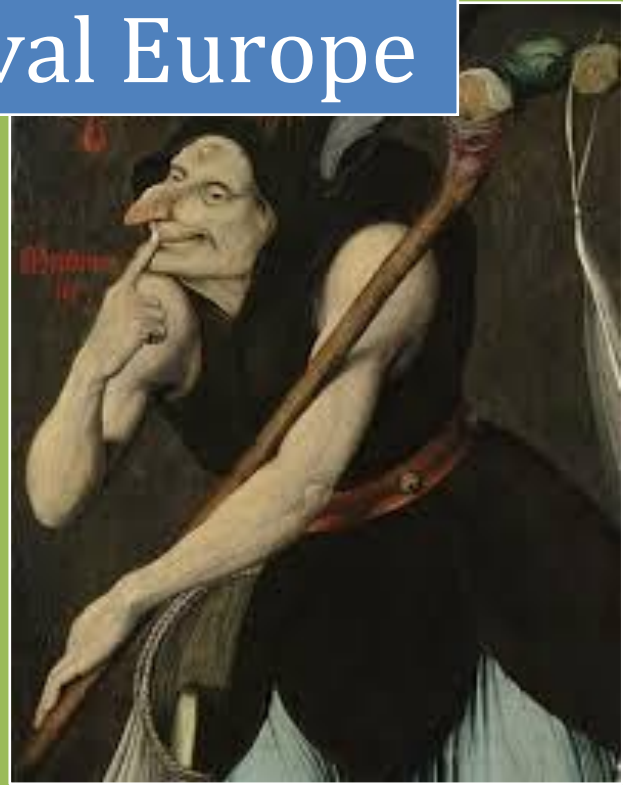


A Fool's Life: Jesters in Medieval Europe



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*“They can speak truth and even open insults,
and be heard with positive pleasure;
indeed, the words that would cost a wise man his life
are surprisingly enjoyable
when uttered by a clown.
For truth has the genuine power to please
if it manages not to give offense,
but this is something the gods have granted only to fools.”*
~Erasmus, in Praise of Folly¹

Author's statement

What I see in my mind's eye when I think of jesters is more than just a costume and a smirk. I see all of humanity reflected there, in every joke between friends, in every silly face and gesture and in every pratfall. Each of us has the capacity to play the fool and many of us do either by choice or by nature. The purpose of this paper is to inform the reader about the lives of real jesters. I have attempted to compile as many interesting examples of real-life jesters as recorded by clerks and record keepers. These are merely brief glimpses that give us a peek into what their lives might have been like. The challenge in writing a factual paper is that much of what is considered to be truth of jesters and fools is actually literary and allegorical evidence, which may be accurate, but may also be a more symbolic representation of who they were and what they did.

Introduction

There are many images that come to mind when we hear the words *fool* or *jester*. One might imagine colorful garb, jingling bells and the laughter of the masses. Who were these jesters? How did they become jesters? What were their lives like?

Like many professions, the call of the hood and bells went out to all types of people, but only a lucky few were recorded and most of what we know of them is by accountants' records and clerical bookkeeping. When combined with personal accounts and historical records, much can be extrapolated about their lives.

There are many things about jesters that are true. They could (and would) say and do anything for a laugh and they were often allowed to do so, at a time when anyone else would be in a great deal of trouble or even killed for the same act.

There are many names and ideas associated with jesters, not all of which mean the same thing or have the same connotation. Some words are more negative and some are more positive. Many different countries and eras had their own jesters, and culturally they fill a similar, but not identical role. The Chinese seem to have the most evidence of the wise fool, who can say just the right thing, at the right time, in the right way to change the mind of even the most formidable emperor. The Romans have the trickster fool whose mischief and trickery entertain and amuse. This is evidence for another paper. The focus of this paper is on Europe in the Middle Ages and the court jester or fool.

¹ *Moreiae Enconium*, translated by Betty Radice (Harmondsworth, 1971) p. 119

Vocabulary

Fools were also known as: *nebulo* (Southworth 1), buffoon, clown, jongleur, jogleor, joculator, sot, stultor, scurra, fou, fol, truhan, mimus, histrio, morio (Otto 1), and filled the role of merrymaker, trickster, scourge and scapegoat (Willeford xv).

The fool that Southworth describes in his book *Fools and Jesters in the English Court* is a person of no social standing of his own regard. He is outside of the social hierarchy completely; Southworth calls it a “social limbo” (Southworth 1). Southworth continues to say that without his master the fool is nothing and is dependent on the whim of his patron. This is not to say that the fool had no power. Because he had no social structure to hold him back he could fill the role of “confidential informant or spy-as the fool Golet is said to have done for William of Normandy, warning him of the approach of intending assassins and thus saving [his] life.” (Southworth 2)

Another desired outcome of the king and fool relationship is that the king could have a companion who would relate to him on a level that people within the social structure could not. Power is isolation and powerful men lose touch with the real world and lose sight of the consequences of their actions. It is the fool who is able to comment honestly to the king and remind him of reality. A fool could deliver an uncomfortable or unpalatable truth, often with a bit of humor. A clever fool delivers news in a subtle way and the “the innocent speaks the truth because he can do no other” (Southworth 8).

Definitions and Classifications.

*“None but he that hath wit can perform, and none but he that wants wit will perform.”*²

There are two main categories that are used to classify fools in the Middle Ages: *natural* and *artificial*. **Naturals** or *innocents* were people who had a physical abnormality or a mental disability. **Innocents** were specifically the simple-minded fools. They might have also been known as madman or were possibly insane (Southworth 5). The kings and queens often cared for fools such as these, and they were very well cared and provided for. **Artificial fools** were fools by choice or necessity but possessed either a talent for performance or merely just entertaining and providing good company to their benefactors. They were professionals playing a comedic role (Southworth 5).

Other classifications of fools were *dwarfs* (who may have been innocents or clever, but were considered to be natural fools because of their stature) *warrior fools*, *minstrel fools*, and *player fools*. **Dwarfs** are seen in portraits with their benefactors and have been in the service of royalty since the time of the Pharaohs. A dancing dwarf was known to have delighted Egyptian courts (Southworth 10). The dancing dwarf was important in Egyptian culture and some of the oldest puppets recorded are a set of dancing puppets.



Dancing dwarfs in ivory. The figures move through the use of strings and a pulley. Found at Lisht during excavations in 1934 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which has a fourth dwarf from the set. Height - 7.8 cm. Egypt- Middle Kingdom - 12th Dynasty

² *The Holy State and the Profane State* (Cambridge, 1642), pp 182-3

Warrior fools could work as body guards, as well as entertainers, and were often underestimated as fighters, which gave them an advantage in battle. A fool would parade in front of his own army and give them inspiration by shouting insults and juggling his sword thus confounding the enemy forces (Southworth 25).

The **minstrel fool** was a person who was already in the service of the court who also happened to be a performer, or an amateur. In the twelfth century the word *minstrel* meant servant, and had not yet earned the connotation for being applied to any kind of entertainer. This is explained by a clerk's letter to some new chaplains about the court of Henry II. He names all manner of laborers, such as barbers, waferers, and laundresses in the same line as actors, entertainers and players. Waferers would make thin round wafers to be eaten with wine and then "doubled as after-dinner cabaret artistes." (Southworth 36) It then became commonplace for domestic servants to also be occasional entertainers. The clerk called these performers "gluttons" because they were often given extravagant payment for these extra duties. These minstrels were already being paid "regular wages and grants of property upon retirement" (Southworth 36). The clerk felt that the bonus being paid to the minstrel for a trick or performance was money that should have gone to the church or to the poor. This is the reason a fool is often seen in illuminations with a large wafer in his hand. He is shown "eating the bread of the poor" (Southworth 36). See Figure 1.



Figure 1 Detail of a miniature of the Fool, with a bauble, loaf and a dog, from Guyart de Moulins' Bible historiale, France (Paris), 1356-1357, Royal MS 17 E VII, vol. 1, f. 241r

What did they do?

Some historical accounts exist of what jesters are credited with doing and performances are mentioned, but for as common as jesters were, few detailed accounts of what they actually did exist. Beatrice K. Otto's book, *Fools are Everywhere*, gives extensive accounts of what reliable information exists of jesters in recorded history around the world. It is a very thorough account, but when you consider what is written of the kings and rulers who were their companions it is a comparatively small amount.

Some minstrel fools earned their keep. John the Fool, first mentioned first in 1210, worked as a huntsman and fool for 37 years. He was primarily in charge of providing game for the King's feasts and only when that job was done did he have time to play the fool (Southworth 40). Southworth goes on to explain that describing what these minstrels, like John, did as amateur performers is a mistake for "as minstrels they were nothing less than professionals" (Southworth 41).

We know exactly what minstrel fools got paid for some amateur performances because, on occasion, they were written in various accountants' records. A wardrobe account of Edward II explains that the king rewarded a kitchen-man for riding his horse in front of him and falling off repeatedly. There is another account of a court painter being paid for dancing on a table (Southworth 42). These clumsy slapstick episodes or bouts of silliness were worth extra shillings and pounds.

In addition to domestic staff fooling around on their free time, a full time fool could take on domestic duties. As messengers they could be paid extra by their patron king and then tipped on delivery

to the recipient of the message (Southworth 42). The minstrel fool, by nature of having a domestic purpose first and fooling second, did have a place in the social hierarchy that other fools did not. What they lacked was the freedom to give up the duties that held them in that place. “Of one thing we can be sure: that their fooling was as idiosyncratically varied, unpredictable and largely incommunicable as the few odd examples I have been able to give; for the essential characteristic of comedy in all ages is its capacity to surprise”(Southworth 46-47).

You will know them by their colors

Fools were known to wear lots of brightly colored clothing. This served the purpose of making them known as a fool, which could have offered protection if the fool was telling jokes or making fun of people, especially important people. It also showed that someone was taking care of said fool in the case of natural fools and innocents.

The often bizarre and colorful clothing worn by many innocents was multifunctional. One purpose of the mixed threads and colors was to provide a durable and warm garment suitable for someone who is clumsy and falls a lot. Another purpose of the multicolored garment was to help hide stains from either food or mud and grass stains or even bodily fluids. (Southworth 164-167) Even innocents who did not have royal patronage such as Jane or Will Somers were still given charity. In addition to sturdy clothing, hats and boots were provided for them and their garments were marked at the hem by a band of brightly colored fabric to signify that they were being cared for (Southworth). The colors used were primarily yellow, green and russet. Sometimes the coats were long and loose to help hide a physical deformity, like bowed legs (Southworth). They were often given a special haircut seen in Figure 1. This showed that people didn't need to be afraid of the fools, and they were being fed and housed, sometimes in a monastery.

Artificial fools wore the contemporary dress of their peers but often in combinations of contrasting colors characteristic of jesters. Sometimes they wore the identical clothes, as indicated by records that show that a king's fool and knights were allotted the same amount and type of material for clothing allowance (Southworth 168).

I can see from portrait evidence and illuminations that show ass-eared caps being worn, I am unsure if this was done as often as it appears or if it was only for performances or to show symbolically that the person was a fool. Many illuminations show a fool king giving an audience to a fool and this is sometimes referred to as King David. I think if I were to make the assertion that David



Figure 2 Portrait of Tom Derry and Muckle John, fools of the late 1500s.

wore a fool's cap based on illuminations in manuscripts. I would be wrong. The fools from Figure 2 may or may not have worn these hoods on a daily basis, or perhaps just for entertaining and for the portrait. One cannot assume portraiture depicted everyday life any more than we would assume that woman wear wedding gowns for anything other than their wedding day.

Bibliography

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Appendices

Appendix A. Experimental Archaeology: How I became a fool

In my role as Bardic Champion I first donned the jester's cap and handled a scepter as fool for Ieuan and Gwyneth Gower. I would sit at their feet during court and try to get in as much mischief as I could think of. I once bit the queen in a cookie stealing incident. I would pour wine during largess exchanges, I made puppets of the royalty to create mock scenes of them to entertain myself. Court can be long. I was occasionally well behaved and played a lap harp, or a ukulele. After I was no longer Champion, I took on the role of A&S Minister and traded in my cloak for a scepter of office. My scepter and I both wore a cap and bells and I tried to make as much noise as possible when moving around. Just like jesters of old I could maintain a "day job" and still be an entertainer in my down time.

If you know me at all you might know that I tend to over-do things. Colors on an outfit, bells from head to toe, a wearable horse that dispenses wine: these are just a few of the things I do to add merriment and light to the culture of our Kingdom. Once I started dressing like a jester people would smile whenever they saw me. The jester costume brings joy just by being seen. I never had to do anything extra to get a smile. A smile alone is worth wearing it at every event and always being a fool.

Appendix B. Real fools in the SCA: Jaegar Stumpface (Sir Dublin Oguinn)

When I was first being a jester in the SCA, I had the opportunity to spend some time with Sir Dublin Oguinn. He shared with me his method for playing the innocent, who was called Jaegar Stumpface. He said that he would dig in the ground and pretend to eat dirt or worms and do anything he thought a 4th grader would find funny. At being an innocent he was clearly only playing, for he told me another story of Jaegar being a true, clever fool. This is an account I heard from Sir Fiach:

The best line that I had ever heard from Jaegar was during Master Grendel's laureling ceremony. Laurels are speaking on Grendel's behalf, and one says "...and the greatest reason why Grendel is a peer is"----Dublin cuts in ---"Because he's big enough to tie boats to!"