



Playing the fool

Anna Whitelock is researching the history of jesters, and has found that these courtly fools often had the ear of Tudor kings and queens

They can speak truth and even open insults and be heard with positive pleasure... For truth has a genuine power to please if it manages not to give offence, but this is something the gods have granted only to fools.

Erasmus

HERALDED BY Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (1509), and made famous in Shakespearean comedy, the 16th and early 17th centuries were an age of court folly. From the reign of Henry VIII to the English Civil War, privy purse accounts, state papers, ambassadorial despatches, plays and portraits record the presence of fools – “natural” innocents and “wise” jesters – in the Privy Chamber, the monarch’s most private apartment. At once entertainers and trusted intimates, licensed truth-tellers and candid counsellors, they punctured the hypocrisy of court with their brazen, mocking honesty.

While court fools had been a feature of the Middle Ages – Edward II (1307–27) was the first English king to retain innocents on a regular basis – it was not until after the Wars of the Roses and the consolidation of the court as a political and cultural centre that fools were retained permanently as part of the king’s immediate entourage. Sexton, or “Patch” as he was commonly known, was the first fool to be recorded as being “of the Privy Chamber”. He was taken into Henry VIII’s service as a gift from Thomas Wolsey in a last ditch attempt by the cardinal to curry favour with the king. Patch received a royal

livery coat with the king’s monogram embroidered on it and in October 1532 accompanied Henry to France for a meeting with the French king. But in July 1535 he dramatically lost favour. As Eustace Chapuys, the imperial ambassador reported, “He [Henry] the other day nearly murdered his own fool, a simple and innocent man, because he happened to speak well in his presence of the Queen [Catherine of Aragon] and called the Concubine [Anne Boleyn] ribaude and her daughter [Elizabeth] bastard. He has now been banished from Court.”

Sexton’s replacement was William Somers who thereafter established himself as Henry’s foolish favourite. He was said to have enjoyed such favour with the king that “he could have admittance unto his majesty’s chamber and have his ear, when a great noble man, nay, a privy counsellor could not be suffered

William Somers (d.1559)

Of unknown parentage and origin, he was a maintained innocent who had a keeper to look after him. He was in Henry VIII’s service by 28 June 1535 and went on to serve Edward VI and Mary Tudor. He was also in attendance at the coronation of Elizabeth I on 15 January 1559, but is not known to have served her as court fool. He had a long after-life in drama and literature – in Thomas Nashe’s 1592 play *Summer’s Last Will and Testament* and Samuel Rowley’s 1605 chronicle play *When you see me you know me*.

William Somers kept the Tudor monarchs chuckling, from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I





The inclusion of jesters “Jane the Fool” and William Somers in this painting shows their closeness to the Tudor family

to speak with him”. Somers remained at court through the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I. His witty sayings were increasingly invoked in ambassadorial correspondence and in letters between courtiers. Mary also maintained “Jane the fool” – a female innocent who had been in her household since 1537. Jane, together with Somers, appears in *The Family of Henry VIII* portrait of 1543. Their appearance amid the royal family is testament to their favoured status at the heart of the court.

Of Queen Elizabeth’s numerous “artificial” fools, Richard Tarleton, son of a pig farmer, was the most significant. He was the first of the jesters not to be permanently resident at court but also to have a career on stage as one of the Queen’s players. Yet Tarleton remained high in royal favour and with regular access to Elizabeth. When the queen was “serious... and out of good humour, he could go undumpish to her at his pleasure. Her highest favourites would in some cases go to Tarleton before going to the queen and he was their usher to prepare their advantageous access to her.” (Source: Thomas Fuller’s *History of the Worthies of England*.) He told the queen “more of her faults, than most of her chaplains and cured her melancholy better than all her physicians.”

The most documented court jester of the period, and the last to have a position of prominence at the Court, was Archibald (Archy) Armstrong, James I’s fool. The extent of his favour is attested to by his inclusion in the small party that accompanied Prince Charles on his secret mission to

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Archibald Armstrong served James I and Charles I as court jester



Archy Armstrong (d.1672)

A Scotsman and allegedly a “sheep-stealer”, Armstrong was said to have been pardoned by James VI and I for his crime and taken into the king’s service on account of his ready wit. He was certainly in the king’s household when he journeyed to London in 1603 to assume the English throne. After a period in high favour with King James, he was finally dismissed from court in 1637. A popular jest-book of the period, *Banquet of Jest*, was attributed to his name and first published in 1630.

JESTER WANTED

Must be mirthful and prepared to work summer weekends...” Must have own outfit including bells, although a “bladder on a stick” can be provided “if necessary”.

(English Heritage advertisement, *The Times*, 2005)

England is looking for a state jester for the first time in more than 350 years.

Such were the headlines in newspapers across the world when English Heritage advertised in a national newspaper for the post, last held in the court of King Charles I in 1649. Kester the Jester was duly appointed, but the matter did not end there. The Guild of Jestors was perturbed by the lack of notice for auditions and claimed that the post lacked legitimacy as it had not had royal assent. Such was the outcry, English Heritage was duly forced to drop the title state jester.

Spain to negotiate a marriage with the Infanta Maria in 1623. *Memoirs* record the exclusive access won by Armstrong. He gained entry to the private world of the Infanta far more readily than the infatuated royal suitor, greatly pleasing the Spanish king with his saucy and subversive wit. As one report described, “Our cousin Archy hath more privilege than any, for he often goes with his fool’s coat where the Infanta is with her meninas

and ladies of honour, and keeps a-blowing and blustering among them, and blurts out what he list”. On 28 April 1623 he dictated a letter to James where he described his favour with the Spanish King: “To let your Majesty know, I an sent for by this King when none of your own

nor your son’s men can come near him.”

Ultimately Armstrong was dismissed from court for his increasingly outspoken hostility to Archbishop Laud. On one occasion when saying grace at dinner at Whitehall, he is said to have blurted out, “Great praise be given to God and little Laud to the devil.” As he continued to lambast Laud for his attempts to impose the English liturgy on Scotland, the archbishop ordered that Archy “should be carried to the porter’s lodge, his coat pulled over this ears and kicked out of the court”. His replacement Muckle John never achieved such notoriety.

The ordered decorum and distance of Charles I’s court gave the figure of the fool little political access. After the Civil War the position of court jester was never reinstated. The figure of the fool moved on to the stage and at court. The licence of folly and the figure of the “jester” was appropriated by playwrights and scholars to veil their political critiques. ■

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JOURNEYS

BOOKS

Fools and Jestors at the English Court by John Southworth (Sutton, 1998); **The History of Court Fools** by John Doran (Richard Bentley, 1858); **Fools are everywhere: the Court Jestors across the World** by Beatrice Otto (Chicago, 2001)