



LARRY SILVER

FOOLS &
FOLLY

IN FLEMISH ART

HANNIBAL

CONTENTS

7	FOREWORD EXCREMENTAL MIRTH
17	INTRODUCTION VISUAL IRONY
21	PROLOGUE FOOLISH CREATURES
29	CHAPTER I FOOLS IN COURT AND DAILY LIFE
53	CHAPTER II FOOLS IN LITERATURE AND ALLEGORY
87	CHAPTER III FOOLISH LOVE... AND MARRIAGE
121	CHAPTER IV BEHAVING BADLY — PEASANTS
153	CHAPTER V BEHAVING BADLY — MERRY COMPANIES
181	CHAPTER VI BEGGARS AND OTHER BEASTS
213	CHAPTER VII PROVERBIAL FOLLY
243	CONCLUSION MIDDLE-CLASS MORALITY



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EXCREMENTAL MIRTH

or how Humour Laid the World Bare, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present

THE DEVIL'S DOMAIN

Homer's gods can roar with laughter. Zeus, Hera, Poseidon and the rest of the cabal — grinning, giggling, splitting their sides. Anything man can do, the gods can do better. The Greek pantheon is a projection of the terrestrial on to the celestial. It's only when God becomes man that he stops laughing. Jesus doesn't do stand-up. There are no gags in the Bible, no guffaws or gales of laughter. The Christian faith is an awfully serious thing.

Or so medieval theologians conclude, at any rate. In the absence of so much as a muffled biblical titter they decide that humour and virtue must be incompatible. Christianity is an ode to reason, in the best Platonic tradition. And as far as reason is concerned, anything received and perceived by the senses is a bad thing — Dionysian, bestial, impulsive, uncontrolled. Reason can't bear unrestrained laughter. Worse, laughing distorts God's creation: cheeks puff out, eyes squeeze shut, teeth are bared, bellies, buttocks and bingo wings jiggle, bladders are compressed, you may even wet your knickers. No, a modest Marian smile is just about acceptable, but splutters and smirks, grins and grimaces — they definitely belong to the devil's domain, as pernicious as other unreasoning urges like the lover's libido, the drunk's delirious hilarity, or the gambler's addiction. It's the realm of the primitive impulsive outsider, of the peasant, of the fool.

YOKELS AND BUMPKINS

In the late-medieval Netherlands, every right-minded burgher knows that 'peasant' and 'fool' are virtually one and the same thing. Urbanites look down their noses at villagers, even though their parents, grandparents or great-great-grandparents were probably peasants themselves. But now, in the Low Countries, beside the grey North Sea, the old world is shaking on its social foundations. For in strategically sited towns and cities a new species of human is making its entrée. While the divine dramatis personae included only clergy, nobles and peasants, enterprising citizens are now elbowing their way on to the social scene.

Quinten Metsys

A Fool or Folly (detail), c.1525–30

Oil on panel, 60.3 × 47.6 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

Generally speaking, entrepreneurs are critical, level-headed, realistic beings. They can do without heroism or conceit — life is truth enough. They can afford to chortle at jokes that a nobleman may find funny but can't laugh at, since social decorum requires him to keep a straight face. At the same time, peasants and fools are just yokels and bumpkins, so they're ideal objects of ridicule and jest. And thus the growing pains of a new social structure make the prosperous towns and cities of the Netherlands the perfect testing ground for a whole new kind of humour.

Peasants, apparently, are doltish and primitive; all they think about is feasting, eating and drinking to excess, and sex. They eagerly indulge in every conceivable vice and have no control over their bestial tendencies. But what else can you expect — peasants are part and parcel of nature, sons of the soil, tasked by God with tilling and growing and breeding. A mission that they carry out with far too much enthusiasm, according to the morally pedantic townfolk. In the self-satisfied eyes of merchants and entrepreneurs, God made the peasant to be the antithesis of the civilised city dweller, who, if he has urges, knows how to curb them and would never be guilty of laughing too loudly.

GREASY SAUSAGES AND BAWDY BALLADS

Except, that is, when that thin layer of civilisation is briefly scratched away. During the Church's feasts of fools, the social order is inverted, the world is turned upside down in a jaw-dropping extravaganza of excess. Clerics found foolish kingdoms ruled by child bishops or donkey popes. Venerable brothers dress up in drag, cavort in the choir and bellow bawdy ballads. Greasy sausages are served on the altar and holy water is replaced by piss. Then the monks move out of the church and into the town.

Sooner or later, a party will attract gatecrashers. What started as a parody of ecclesiastical ritual takes on a secular life of its own in the sixteenth century. Tavern-crawling, binge-quaffing citizens treat the world to a view of what they normally keep decorously covered and gleefully moon their shitty bare arses.

A couple of times a year, the townsfolk carouse in a collective crapulence that negates everyday life's less pleasant aspects and, for a little while, turns them into the exact ecstatic opposite.

While they hijack the feast from the clerics, they choose their fool from the nobility. And — genuine nutters or not — these buffoons egg on the boozing brothers and bacchanalian burghers in their folly. They caper and gibber, use obscene gestures and scatological slapstick. To make you laugh till you cry! Christ may not have been given to giggling, but late-medieval man certainly knows what nonsense is.

EXCREMENTAL MIRTH

The newfangled humanists bemusedly observe the chaos from a safe distance and wonder what on earth is going on. Striving for some kind of intellectual grasp of the proceedings, they disinter the reflections of Aristotle, Quintilian and Cicero on the workings and effects of laughter from their thick layers of medieval dust. And thus opposing yet complementary worldviews develop, comedy juxtaposed with tragedy, like yin with yang, Democritus with Heraclitus — a kind of theatrical peristalsis in which profound throat-constricting insight is relieved by the fool's fart. Which is how the uninhibited medieval joke enters the category of 'folly', as a counterbalance to the seriousness of 'wisdom'. It happens on stage, but equally in painting. And around 1500, 'painting' is synonymous with 'the Netherlands'.

In the sixteenth century, when it came to the visual arts, cities such as Bruges and Ghent and especially Antwerp were international quality brands. Where there is demand, supply will follow: in Antwerp around 1560 there were more painters than bakers. Add a middle-class buying public with middle-class norms and values, season with middle-class humour, and the result is the perfect recipe for a whole new artistic genre.

The fool is uprooting himself from the margins — literally. In medieval manuscripts and church sculpture, drolleries and jests were usually to be found around the edges. Now the marginalia become subjects in their own right. Fool-filled pictures present us with a mirror, for aren't we all a tad foolish, a bit preposterous? Images of unequal love show

lustful old men embracing artful damsels who make off with their purse, hahaha! In illustrations of gender-reversal, viragoes wear the trousers while their henpecked husbands are turned into jessies, heeheehee! Monkeys ape people, and so monkey paintings — *singeries* — act as a witty spoonful of honey to help inconvenient truths go down. Often, cackling characters will turn to the viewers and encourage them to chortle along with them, like the canned laughter in a TV sit-com.

A lot of the humour is on a level that would make Benny Hill seem intellectual. But even the biggest brainiac secretly slumps on the sofa and laughs at *Dumb & Dumber's* flatulent farts and puerile pranks. In 1604 that renowned biographer of artists, Karel van Mander, cheerfully describes turds in paintings as *aardige bootsen* or 'pleasant jests'. The French, of course, are above that kind of thing. Piss and poo are not *de rigueur*: in the seventeenth century, a French dealer in Flemish paintings specifically asks for pieces in which no one is urinating. Evidently the Parisian *beau monde* is too po-faced for jokes involving excrement.

SALVE FOR THE WOUND

Fortunately for the more sensitive souls there is also nonsense of a different calibre. Set a humanist to piss-taking and the result is more Monty Python than Mr Bean. The medieval gags acquire Erasmian irony and evolve into an intellectual game that you can play with your like-minded mates. In that context, painters such as Quinten Metsys (c.1466–1530) and Marinus van Reymerswaele (c.1490–c.1546) are quick to recycle the caricatures of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), poignant portraits demonstrating that nature herself is not averse to a little irony, as she lets beauty wither and smooth skins shrivel into crow's feet and crumpled craters with sunken eyes and hooked noses. We may smile at the vanity of youth, but the decay of the elderly is painfully funny, for humour is also a salve for the wound of reality.

No one in the visual arts understands that better than Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1526/30–1569). His paintings give us a glimpse into the convex mirror of life. Laugh at the blind leading the blind and you're likely to fall into a pit yourself. This is next-level humour,

Quinten Metsys

Fool with a Spoon (detail), c.1525–30

Oil on paper, mounted on panel, 25.3 × 19.4 cm

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witty, playful — and deadly serious. There are good reasons why Van Mander describes Bruegel as ‘ingenious and farcical’ and ‘sharp and droll’ in one and the same breath. Though subsequently he also dubs him ‘*Pier den Drol*’ — Pieter the Joker — in reference to the faecal farce that was so characteristic of the elder Bruegel.

WISE FOOL

Meanwhile, the fool is conquering the world. Or not — it turns out that the world is the fool’s. New people are discovered in the New World. Their laughter is rude and raucous by western standards but they are also marvellously innocent. These are the lost children of paradise, distant cousins of the *fol saige*: the fools who had a lucky escape from the Fall, vague reflections of the purity of the first twosome, uncontaminated by fiend-authored wisdom. The world went to hell in a handbasket when Adam’s teeth met in the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: before that, creation was in perfect balance — God doesn’t do things by halves — but with that fatal bite, harmony was at an end. Henceforth the world would take root in evil — witness Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*. At a stroke, creation lost its preternatural primal purity. But that was to reckon without the fools. Because they are innocent of knowledge, they embody another piece of pristine paradise.

Original sin is all Eve’s fault, of course. It would never have crossed Adam’s mind to eat forbidden fruit if Eve hadn’t enticed him into it. If only the wretched woman had stuck to the divine rules! Today we’d still be living the life of Riley. No worries about energy bills or how to make ends meet — just the endless leisure of a sempiternal spring, and perfect weather forever — thanks a bunch, Eve! Ever since she seduced Adam, the female of the species has embodied everything connected with lust and passion. In other words, woman must be kept in check, as if she were a roar of laughter. Men who let themselves be dominated by a woman are the butt of hilarious jokes in literature and painting. Though it can happen to the best: even Aristotle indulged in horseplay and allowed Phyllis to ride him. Sometimes the greatest scholar turns out to be the biggest fool.

COMEDY CUP

Ironically enough, it’s the fool who actually escapes this kind of social pigeonholing. Whether he’s genuinely developmentally challenged or merely acting, he inhabits a social vacuum. And that has its advantages. The fool is not bound by social norms. Man, woman, emperor, king, admiral — it’s all the same to him. He lives in a crazy space in which the extenuating cloak of humour that is often pretty near the knuckle allows him to criticise social problems without a qualm. His licence lies in his physical deformity. Hunchback, dwarfism and hydrocephaly: this fool is no clown. He — or she — can afford to laugh while truth-telling, even if that truth is buried among piss and shit, sex and snot.

This is the reason why Erasmus eschews the first-person singular in his *In Praise of Folly* and leaves the talking to his mouthpiece, *Stultitia*, not coincidentally a woman. Thus Folly lends him a broad back to hide behind when he vents his various social criticisms. Offended readers can always be reminded that it’s not the author himself, but a character in the book who voiced this or that opinion. It’s a neat trick, and not surprisingly, given the religious upheavals of the time, it’s replicated by everyone who wants to put the Catholic Church — with its indulgences, relic trade and not-so-unattached lifestyle of the clergy — through the wringer. But what’s sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander: if Protestants can condemn Catholicism through mockery and satire, the Catholics are happy to return the compliment. Although there’s not much subtlety involved on either side, since the cruder the language the louder the laugh; statues of saints are compared to fools, Catholics are cats or popish parrots. Conversely, the Protestants are geese, the Calvinists calves. It won’t win you the Comedy Cup, but that doesn’t lessen the effect.

FROM BURLESQUE TO PICTURESQUE

This immediately suggests that humour is bound not only to place, but also to time. In the sixteenth century, comedy comes in the form of animals dressed up as humans, proverbs, peasant burlesques, clichés and

Circle of Jan Massijs

Rebus: The World Feeds Many Fools (detail), c.1530-40

Oil on panel, 37.5 × 48.2 cm

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caricatures such as ill-matched couples, quacks, jesters, misers, viragoes and henpecked husbands. In the seventeenth century, the artistic focus shifts to situations inspired by everyday life. Amorous adventures are still firm favourites, but are less of a parody and therefore more recognisable. Soldiers start to make an appearance, for even in times of war a person needs to laugh to make the bitter pill of reality a bit easier to swallow. Merry drinkers have always been around, doctors are still charlatans, smokers are abreast of the latest trends, but they are all fools. Hitting the artistic nail on the head now means employing a little deceit and gently pulling the viewer's leg. Because witticisms are now replacing the elbow-in-the-ribs side-splitters.

Humour becomes part of the ideal of the educated courtier and commoner. As Anna Roemer Visscher (1583–1651) puts it, 'He is not wise, who cannot sometimes be foolish.' In courtly companies, joke-cracking becomes an art: quips and badinage, seemingly effortlessly woven into the conversation, prompting smiles, not greasy grimaces. From now on, beauty and decorum go hand in hand. It leaves little artistic room for the excesses that a good thigh-slapper requires. Even the peasants leave off their sixteenth-century roistering and morph into bucolic seventeenth-century shepherds and shepherdesses, and ultimately idyllic wallpaper. Thus they sidle from burlesque to picturesque, and in the eighteenth century the English can introduce them as welcome morsels between the entrées of heroic and idyllic. And here we can already see a glimmer of the Victorian mindset in which all things platonic are once again good and anything too corporeal and earthy is once again bad. No wonder the Anglo-Saxon world often winces with embarrassment at the off-colour antics of the various Verbeecks or the lumpen pawkiness of Jacob Jordaens's slices of life.

THE LAUGH UNMASKS THE WORLD

Before that point is reached, however, the path of humour winds past Voltaire's enlightened satire and Frederick the Great's witty philological games in Sanssouci. With the French Revolution, the nobility and clergy stop laughing. The social (r)evolution that began so long ago in the medieval Lowlands

now brings down the whole system, resulting in civil society. It brings the freedom to make jokes — until recently, at any rate, since political correctness and cancel culture seem to have put the kibosh on comedy. For where does humour end and offence begin? Can the one exist without the other, or is humour almost by definition at the expense of someone or something? Could it be that we simply daren't look in the mirror any more?

Joke and joke-teller question themselves, and the paradigm shifts — again. Old jokes seem out of place, inappropriate jokes are banned or at least frowned upon, or nobody gets it anyway. But if one thing is evident from this book, it's that historical things should be seen in a historical context, especially when they seem brash or tasteless or presumptuous. For nothing shows how the world works so clearly as a joke. Jokes show what's taboo and what isn't, they show the differences between the ruling classes and the underdogs; they show what preoccupies people. The laugh unmasks the world.

In this book, Larry Silver takes a refreshingly unvarnished look at the jokes and pranks of late medieval and early modern joke-tellers. The laughing fools, deceived men, domineering women, dancing peasants and crapping clodhoppers — they offer a gateway to a vanished world full of bawdy buffoonery and ribald raillery, of dreams and dread, anxieties and ambitions, customs and conventions — in short, to a world full of people. Seen through that lens, the images in this book suddenly become startlingly easy to identify with. For at the end of the day, they testify to a profoundly human story. The jokes may have evolved, but five centuries on the people behind them are still surprisingly recognisable.

Humour is *Ulleden Spiegel*, a mirror of ourselves, always has been, always will be. Humour lays bare our concerns, our frame of mind, our true nature. Humour, no matter how crude or how 'incorrect', shows what makes us human.

Dr Katharina Van Cauteren

Academic Editor and Chief of Staff,
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pp. 14-15

Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder

The 'Witch of Mallegem', or The Stone Operation (detail), 1559

Engraving, 370 × 480 mm

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Unknown Master

Portrait of Claus Narr von Ranstedt, c.1530

Oil on panel, 15.9 × 13.7 cm

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Combi exploratus hoc omni iugiter
lavit quado usago dicitur der
una stude quado Jan hernakel

P. Brueghel
inventor



Did people laugh? They laughed above all at the bizarre, the deformed, and the weak. [...] The harder someone laughed the closer he was to the object of that laughter: the aggressive scoffer and the doltish peasant.

— Hessel Miedema¹

Quinten Metsys

The Ill-Matched Pair, c.1520–25

Oil on panel, 61.6 × 81.3 cm

WASHINGTON, NATIONAL GALLERY

VISUAL IRONY

In order to remain serious about the process of human salvation, Christian art of the Middle Ages relegated humour and depictions of the lower orders of society to its margins. Ordinary humans and even animals offered images of playfulness and daily life, including vulgarity, in illuminated prayer books and in the carved misericords of choir stalls — but only in obscure sites at the bottom of pages or on the undersides and corners of functional structures.² This book will trace a dramatic cultural reversal, beginning with late fifteenth-century art, in which public art — chiefly panel paintings, but also the new medium of prints — brought those margins to the centre around the misdeeds of those fallible humans. The guiding concept of this new art about human (mis)behaviour is folly, personified in the figure of the fool himself: court wit, clown or buffoon, even madman.³ Driven by instinct and subject to temptations of all kinds, he destabilises order in society, introducing chaos or confusion, while still provoking laughter.⁴ This study will begin with the image of the fool in both court and city, and how his folly could be viewed variously as humorous but also as an instructive negative example, an *exemplum contraria* of a normal world turned upside down.⁵ In *King Lear* (V. 3. 83), Shakespeare declares that ‘Jesters do oft prove prophets.’ Just as many a truth is spoken in jest, many jokes also have a sting in them and can encourage instruction, even painful self-reflection, in their recipients.

In addition to the fool, popular culture can also introduce social inversion. In particular, the once-a-year inversion and excesses of Carnival reveal the structures of normal order. At the bottom of the social pyramid, the labouring peasant, far from the urban life of art and its audiences, offers an unsophisticated baseline test case (Chapter Four), connected through his labour to nature and the seasons. Peasant leisure, however, opened possibilities of unrestrained pleasure-seeking through drink, gluttony, lust and anger.

Although he was not the first artist to give principal attention to the unrestrained revelry of peasants, Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525–1569) has enjoyed not only intense popularity but also a wide spectrum of conflicting interpretations. In many ways, this study arose out of a Bruegel debate: in depicting the boisterous celebrations of peasant festivities, is the artist laughing *with* his plump and comical

subjects, or is he laughing *at* them?

In the 1970s, the terms of this debate hardened into a heated exchange between scholars.⁶ In terms of dates, Bruegel stands in the chronological centre of this study, and his simple rustics exemplify the foundations of human nature. Thus the challenge of interpreting his peasant subjects also presents a case study of how to assess the significance of these new developments in representing ordinary human behaviour in Flemish art. But we shall also see (Chapter Five) how the very top of the social pyramid, the aristocracy, could also indulge in excesses and follies if they abused their wealth and privilege.

If, as the Bible has it, ‘the number of fools is infinite’ (Ecclesiastes 1:15), or ‘all places are filled with fools’ (Cicero, *Epistulae ad familiares* IX, xxii), then all humans also inevitably will be crooked rather than straight, and, incorrigibly, they will display their folly for all to see. Folly, it seems, is embedded in human nature, and we are all potentially fools or have some folly within us. That is the message of the humorous *jeu d’esprit* by theologian Desiderius Erasmus in his *In Praise of Folly* (1511 — see Chapter Two).

How, then, should one view the imagery of transgression that follows? Adopting or abandoning adult responsibility and maintaining or disrupting social order lie at the heart of how to understand such folly. An occasional, silly, humorous departure from norms actually reinforces those norms, while infantile self-indulgence can be viewed either as a bad moral choice or merely as an amusing, momentary peccadillo. Such are the lessons of humour in the pictures that follow.

The humour of these fascinating images — and the very character of genre art itself — depends on our recognition that these are not quite ordinary characters in action, even though they purportedly stem from ‘everyday life’.⁷ In fact, these genre actors are defined precisely by who they are *not* — neither mythic heroes nor gods nor religious saints, or even recognisable portraits of individuals. In fact, they are anonymous. Often they are represented with the visual trappings of overt satire, estranged from us, whether in body type, facial feature or outlandish costume. So they cannot be confused with their viewers, and their follies can more easily be the targets of either our scorn or our laughter. These figures need not act out the medieval Christian Seven Deadly Sins, though initially Hieronymus

Bosch painted their activities as seen through that traditional lens. They usually bring laughter, often at first glance. Sometimes, as with the seventeenth-century painters Jacob Jordaens and Jan Steen, the appeal to humour through caricature or gross behaviour is obvious.⁸ For those artists and others like them, the image role of satire remains clear.

However, in other folly images, such as Bruegel's festive peasants, the charge of positive or negative valence remains ambiguous, subject to those conflicting interpretations. Many modern scholars of Bruegel's mute and deadpan representations have instead seen the same kind of pictorial irony that one finds in Erasmus's verbal irony, performed as a mock eulogy by Dame Folly herself.⁹ Thus laughter informs his genre pictures as well, but the enduring question of how to understand such imagery remains: whether, in viewing these colourful, if anonymous individuals, we are laughing *at* them (with Hessel Miedema) or vicariously enjoying their festivities and pleasures (with Svetlana Alpers) and laughing *with* them.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Hessel Miedema, 'Realism and the Comic Mode: The Peasant', *Simiolus* 9 (1977), p. 211.
- 2 Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1992). More specialised studies: Lilian Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley, 1966); Betsy Chunko-Dominguez, *English Gothic Misericord Carvings: History from the Bottom Up* (Leiden, 2017).
- 3 William Willeford, *The Fool and his Scepter* (Evanston, 1969).
- 4 The subversive, even grotesque aspects of instinctual behaviour are vividly analysed by Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Cambridge, MA, 1968); and in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), esp. pp. 1-66.
- 5 Korine Hazelzet, *Verkeerde werelden. Exempla contraria in de Nederlandse beeldende kunst* (Leiden, 2007).
- 6 Summarised by Walter Gibson, 'Bruegel and the Peasants: A Problem of Interpretation', *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Two Studies* (Lawrence, KS, 1991), pp. 11-79. Also notable: Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Bruegel Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge, 1999), esp. pp. 184-211. Hessel Miedema, cited in the epigraph, drew a sharp contrast in print with his antagonist, Svetlana Alpers, who replied to him, 'Taking Pictures Seriously: A Reply to Hessel Miedema', *Simiolus* 10 (1978-79), pp. 46-50.
- 7 Peter van der Coelen and Friso Lammertse, eds., *De ontdekking van het dagelijks leven van Bosch tot Bruegel*, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen,), esp. pp. 9-29. Their very title includes the phrase 'daily life'. As they note, the term 'genre' was devised retrospectively in the nineteenth century; see also Wolfgang Stechow and Christopher Comer, 'The History of the Term Genre', *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 33 (1975-76), pp. 89-94.
- 8 Jordaens as well as Steen works are objects of analysis in Mariët Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen* (Zwolle, 1997), esp. pp. 89-135, 'The Pictorial Poetics of Comedy': 'Remarkably often, Steen took mockery, wit, and laughter themselves for his themes [...] Steen's themes sometimes mirror those of comic literature so closely that his paintings may seem to enact texts or texts to evoke paintings [...] But the less official, comic treatment of doctors and patients suggest that these painted jokes would have been obvious to viewers without such information.' (pp. 100-101).
- 9 Particularly the work of Jürgen Müller, summarised in his massive *Bruegel* (Cologne, 2018), e.g. on p. 35: 'Bruegel manages, like Erasmus before him in *Praise of Folly*, to conceal the serious in the frivolous. He makes use of the rhetoric — beloved of humanists — of *serio ludere* — serious play.' Also emphasising a hidden meaning in Bruegel's art, Reindert Falkenburg and Michel Weemans, *Bruegel* (Paris, 2018), where Falkenburg indicates that Bruegel paintings require *spéculation*, and Weemans finds them to be *images pièges* ('pictorial traps'). For the dilemmas of reading irony in literature, Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1974).

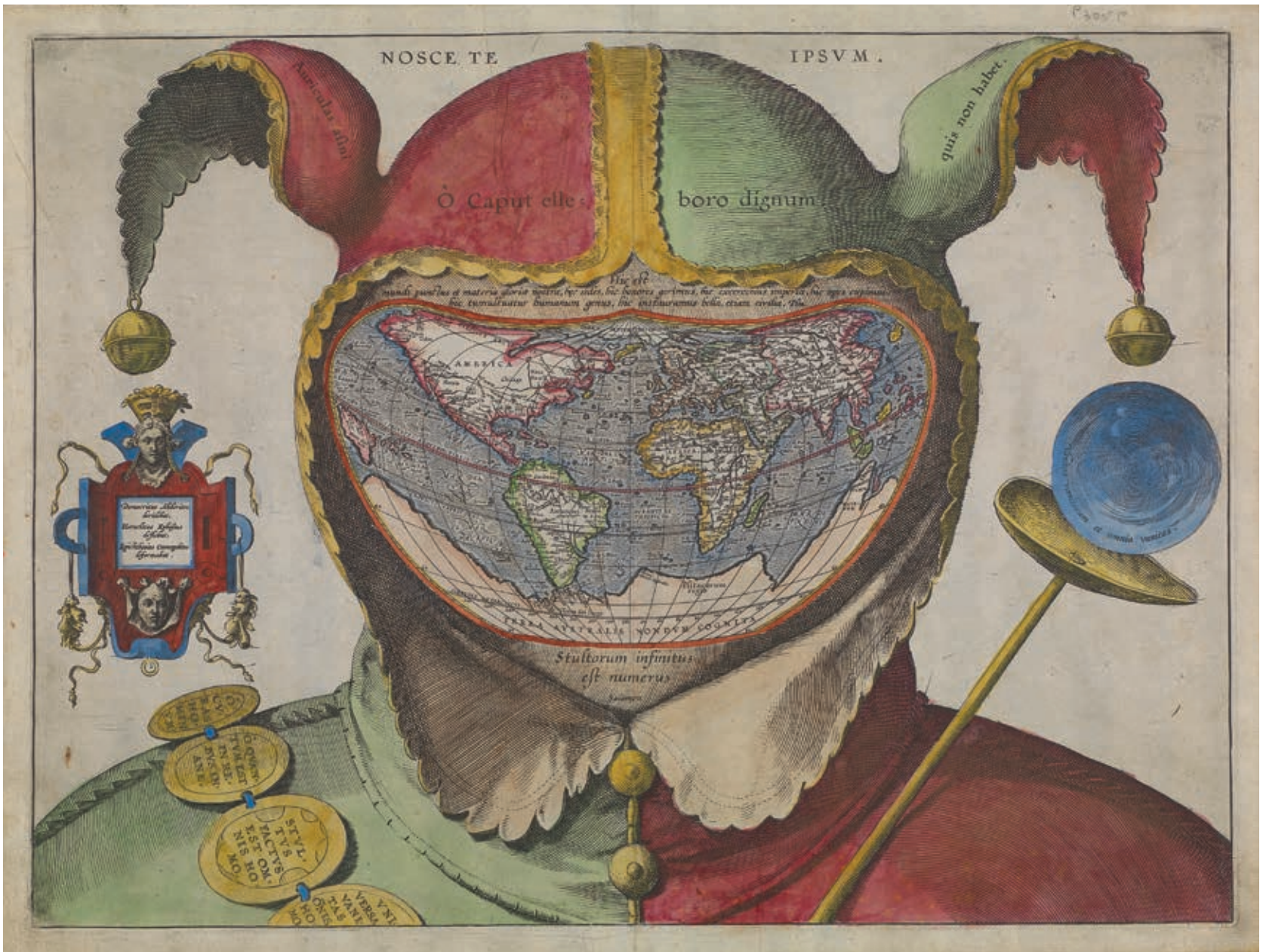


Jacob Jordaens

Trompe-l'oeil Door Panel: Unequal Love, c.1640-45

Oil on canvas, 190.5 × 88.5 cm

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Lord, what fools these mortals be!

— Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Unknown French Artist, published by Jean de Gourmont the Younger

The World's Folly/Know Yourself, c.1580-90

Woodcut, 360 × 480 mm

PARIS, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, CABINET DES ESTAMPES

FOOLISH CREATURES

Foolishness and Sin in Flemish Art

Sometime in the late sixteenth century, probably well after 1570, an anonymous woodcut (p. 18) produced in Paris by Jean de Gourmont the Younger (active 1559–1598), confronts the spectator with a curious image. What should be a frontal, staring face has been replaced with a world map derived from the latest atlas projections, produced in Antwerp after 1570 by Abraham Ortelius. The head itself is adorned — with a cowl and several decorative items: drooping cloth ears with bells at their ends; and a ruffled ridge across the top of the head. These several elements comprise the costume attributes of a fool. The drooping ears are meant to represent an ass, and the ruffles the comb of a crowing cock, just as the fool as entertainer brays and crows. Moreover, a fool conventionally holds his own sceptre, as if mocking a royal patron, but that too had a purpose. It could be used as a talking stick, called a *marot*, which the fool could manipulate like a ventriloquist, to pretend that his insults, jokes or truth-telling actually came from the dummy instead of from his own mouth. Thus the missing face that stares at the viewer in the French woodcut represents the entire world, dressed as a fool — meaning that everyone is a fool. Redoubling the message, a Latin inscription at the top of the print, *nosce te ipsum* ('know yourself') adopts the original ideal of the examined life for Socrates and the ancient world, which was inscribed over the doors of the temple at Delphi.

In fact, across Western Europe this same sixteenth century was noteworthy for its close attention to human folly — a kind of transgression, whose seriousness could range from self-indulgence and stupidity to outright sinfulness. Both art and literature of the period contributed to this acute new consciousness of human frailty and misbehaviour. It marked a sea change from the previous, late medieval emphasis on pious emotions of monastic self-discipline and prayer, whose norm started with a pious individual before a holy figure. The phrase 'know yourself' was one of the principal early Latin adages, collected with classical references as early as 1500 by Erasmus of Rotterdam, who also went on to criticise the foibles of humankind directly through the voice of a personified Dame Folly, in his *In Praise of Folly* (1511).

If we return to the print, its Latin inscriptions continue. Specifically, on the neck of the fool's costume appears the epigram from Ecclesiastes:

'The number of fools is infinite.' Related to it is the quote around the top of the *marot*: 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.' The ass's ears have their own inscription: 'The ears of an ass, who is exempt from them?' Across the forehead: 'O head, worthy of purgation.' (We shall see the mythic 'stone of folly' in the fool's forehead as the cause of his foolish behaviour, capable of being cut out as a cure — see Chapter Two.) On a chain of four medallions a series of further observations form a sequence, beginning in the first two with a satire by Persius, 'O, the worries of mankind! O, how much worthlessness is in the world!' Then follows the Vulgate Latin of Jeremiah 10:14, 'Every man is stupid and without knowledge,' and finally the Vulgate of Psalm 38/39:6, 'All is vanity for every man.' Finally, in a small frame at the left edge, the print invokes two ancient philosophers, already found in Erasmus, who either weep at the follies of the world (Heraclitus) or laugh at how ridiculous and universal they are (Democritus).

Later, in the mid-seventeenth century, Jacob Jordaens turned this very same contrast into a generalised image, *The Wise Man and the Fool* (c.1650; p. 23). Here, the grinning fool still wears the ass's ears and bells on his colourful cowl, capped with a cockscomb, and he leans out of a window into the viewer's space. Meanwhile, his dour counterpart wears spectacles (often seen as a symbol of self-deception) to read his open book, held in both hands; he wears a doctor's cap to show his accumulated learning. But in retreat from the world, he shows only his profile, and he grimaces sourly in self-absorbed, intense concentration.

One other sixteenth-century painting from the circle of Jan Massijs addresses the omnipresent figure of the fool (c.1530/50; pp. 24–25). Once more we see a costumed fool on the left, who wears motley, or multicoloured dress, with the characteristic ass's ears as well as a pointed head, likely derived from a cockscomb. To his right, another fool, long-nosed but bare-headed and dressed in another cowled garment, faces his counterpart. Although they are entwined together, both are laughing and facing the viewer, while the fool on the left spoons out porridge. Above them, however, a rebus of letters and objects appears: letter D, plus globe, plus foot, plus viol. To decipher its meaning, a viewer must become involved and read the message: 'The world feeds many fools.' This is based on the Dutch phrase *de wereld voedt*

veel zotten, or D (the) world (globe) *voedt* (pun on the Dutch *voet*, or 'foot'), and the *viol/veel* a pun on the Dutch *veel*, meaning 'many'. The phrase is completed below by the two fools themselves, who are in fact finding nourishment and also implicating the viewer by their own paired glances out of the picture.

Several other printmakers from the last third of the sixteenth century picked up the pictorial influence of Pieter Bruegel, for example in his *Feast of Fools* (pp. 62-63). One of them, Frans Hogenberg (c.1539–1590), an etcher from Mechelen, produced prints for an Antwerp publisher, Bartholomeus de Mompere. His folly etching shows a circle of fools, inscribed in both Latin and Dutch as *Stultorum Chorea* (*The Dance of Fools*), with running captions along the wall of the interior (c.1570/90; pp. 26-27). All the figures appear in fools' costumes, wearing bells, ass's ears and cockscombs as they prance around a central trumpeter in a similar costume. Outside their circle and the space of the room their entire dance is overseen from windows by a pair of bearded philosophers or patriarchs. The one on the left pronounces the same message as the epigram — that the number of fools is infinite. The wise man on the right advises moderation and self-rule in all things as the way to evade this dance of folly: *Wie mate en regel can houwen in allen dinghen. Die mach desen dans der sotten ontspringen* ('Measure and rule can cut into all things. They make this dance of fools arise.')

Each fool in the circle represents a different vice and is labelled explicitly, across a range that includes the Seven Deadly Sins, but also more modest follies, among them: scandal, flattery, curiosity and wastefulness. Each fool also makes a short written speech, commending his folly and expressing his lack of regret. But one gap in the foreground breaks the circle dance, right before the trumpeter. Thus, just as the contemporary French woodcut faces outward, at the bottom of this print too, the viewer finds an invitation to join in and enter the dance: 'You who do not see what is right nor hear righteous warning, take my hand and cut in here.' The next dancer to the left, who brings up the rear of the open circle, also bears an inscription that points to the result of such an inclusion for whoever does join the dance: 'He will have to sew these [ass's] ears to his own head.' With the French woodcut from the end of the sixteenth century and with the writings of Erasmus at its outset, we observe a new consciousness about folly, which will shape so much of the art (and literature) that result. This small volume will survey that material thematically, focusing primarily on prints as well as paintings, because prints frequently come with additional text inscriptions that help to shed light on the non-verbal content. Often those texts

are proverbial in origin, and meant to be universal in application about the weakness and misbehaviour across the human condition. Prints also take us beyond the familiar artists, other than the most famous masters of Netherlandish art, from Bosch to Bruegel (though those artists and their close imitators will also figure throughout).

This book will venture into the work of early-seventeenth-century painters (such as Adriaen Brouwer, Adriaen van de Venne and Jacob Jordaens). Selected works will explore all of society — from beggars and cripples to rural peasants and aristocratic elites, all of whom can fall prey to indulgences and desires. For some foolish misbehaviours, overlaps between social groups may be inevitable, especially for 'merry companies', peasant as well as patrician; those foolish groups who gather together, either in taverns or in more sophisticated garden settings, to indulge their gluttony, lust and sloth, often fuelled by drinking. Festival celebrations often get out of hand for the celebrants. Greed and the search for dominance, even within the household as a 'battle for the trousers' (Chapter Three), also figure among the failings of ordinary people. In depicting such follies, Netherlandish artists invented a new kind of picture, what has come to be called 'genre' imagery, or representation of everyday figures and activities.

Thus the sixteenth century's fascination with folly productively shifted cultural consciousness toward a new, early modern mentality for urban consumers. These works seek to teach valuable lessons through irony, offering negative examples of behaviour by unattractive role models. But along with that instruction also comes visual (or verbal) delight, which can be savoured in the images that follow. Always, however, the possibility remains — as in that initial French woodcut — that in this universal folly, everyone might well find self-recognition.

The number of fools is infinite.

— Ecclesiastes 1:15



Jacob Jordaens

The Wise Man and the Fool, c.1650

Oil on canvas, 95 × 74,5 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

PROLOGUE

pp. 26-27

Frans Hogenberg

The Dance of Fools, c.1570

Etching with engraving, 321 × 523 mm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

Circle of Jan Massijs

Rebus: The World Feeds Many Fools, c.1530-40

Oil on panel, 37.5 × 48.2 cm

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STULTORVM
Der sotten

Stultorum non est numerus sua nam voluptas
Quae trahit sese nemoq; nosse s'rudet
Den hoop der sotte es sonder ghetal
Want elck volghet sijn Wellustichz oueral



Adulator pluystrykedesot
Omnia dissimulo, simulog, & blandus adulator.
Omnibus ore, manu, vultu animog; duplex.
Alle dinck veysick die elck can soetelich vleyen
Mette monde en therte Vol dobbelheijen

Loguax Clapachtichsot
Prodit lingua loquax stultu, facit regat, ipse
Stulticia fatuus si tacuisse queat
De clappende tonghe can den sot betinghen
Wat sulx sotchz bedeckt bleef cost hy gezinghe

Me dirie Eumenides agitant, pacisq; quietem.
Exosus, rixas undiq; spargo truces
De hellsehe raserije doe mij peijs en Srede haten
Dus stroje ick gheleij en t'wylt in alle staten.

Curiosus
Omnia tu sceler, nil absqueor, omnia nosse
Omnia habere parans, noui habere, nihil

Contetiosus
Kijffachtichsot



Nidusichsot
Niet al ochtichachtich
Nij mijn vobich sijt
Niet vobich alke dinghe
Nij hebbe
Nij vobich sijt

Luxuriolus. Luxuriansot
M'ami serabitor nemi est, ipse spurca libido
Eman exit nemi viribus, atq; animo.
Ghec ongheluckiger da ick / Wiens Wel
Mij heeft Van ghelcke machte, en sin be

Preco
Deherault / achterdanser

Prodigus Verquisten sot

Dissipo res, nulla dando seruans rationem
Nec mihi prospiciens / pauperibus timens.
Het mine vobich sijt / Ghande vobich sijt
Niet vobich sijt / mocht vobich sijt

Qui sequitur, quorum animi peruersa libido,
Impulerit, agit haec sicut auriculae

Wiec al volghet / Waar tot he stiert sijn sinlichheit bloot
Die narje dese ooren vest aen sijn hoot

Antemisi pulmo
Quam numero cla

Mij s'vobich sijt
Niet vobich sijt

CHOREA

ans

Omnib⁹ in rebus mediū modumq; tenere
Qui sapit Impure hunc transeat ille chorū.

Wie mate en regel can houwe in alle dinghen
Die mach desen dans der sotten onspringhen



Superbus Hooghveerdichsot
no bon? S sapiens nec dignor honore,
aliquo pre me, nā mihi nemo placet.

Ambitios⁹ Eerghierichsot

Omnia presumo temerarius omnia de me,
Pollicor proprie laudis amore furens
Alle dinghe vermetick mij en beroeme mij seere
Want ick ben rasende om my eyge eere.

Detractator Achterclappia

Sollicitu quidagant ali nouiste labore,
Et mea no spectans facta aliena noto.
Wat anderhe make wil ick alstje acmerken
Niet siende mijns sels herghick ces anders Werke
Alle vrucht en blifschap es mij sewaer pijn
Om ces anders Weluac ick geheel verdwijn

Inuidus, Haerijchichsot

Gaudia tristitia, luctu pariunt mihi risus,
Tabco cunctoru prosperitate miser

Ignauus

Frigora probra sunt, vana, incanada nulli
Qua de seculis istis laetitia feru.



Auarus

Dū socuples moriar viuo miser Inter uer
Auri semper egem, S mihi deest? putat

Luyesot

Ick sijde hogher dorst en kan doe maer karcuen
Ten miste dat ick luyje en ledich mach bliuen.

Gherichsot

Om dat ick rijck sou sterue leuick armelijck loos
Al heb ick goets genoegh nochtas claghick altoos

Preco

Rosy de herault
Voerdanser

Gulosus

Gullichsot

Indulgere epulis prestat. Viuoq; futuri.
Sollcito memet, quā macerare metu.
Te beter op een smeyssen en diercke te stellen
Dan mij seluen met sorchvulicheyde te quellen.

buery, crepent Vocitando
audi nostra chorea queat

Blasch der souterij de ha
dazou couch (volmalch)

ui no ipse videt rectu, nec recta macem.
Sollcito memet, quā macerare metu.
niet en siet dat rechte es, nochtas en hoort na rechte Vermaent
heut mij de hant, en houue hier op.

ns Hogenberg
a Dance of Fools, p.1570
holog with engraving, 21 x 523 mm
TWERP, THE PHOENIX FOUNDATION



Hans Burgkmair
Court Jesters, c.1517
 Woodcut, 410 × 370 mm
 VIENNA, ALBERTINA

Hans Burgkmair
Natural Fools, c.1517
 Woodcut, 410 × 370 mm
 VIENNA, ALBERTINA

Nikolaus Türing and Gregor Türing
Court Fools Performing Morris Dance, c.1496–1500
 Sandstone relief with polychrome, 82 × 76 cm
 INNSBRUCK, FERDINANDEUM

FOOLS IN COURT AND DAILY LIFE

FOOLS IN COURT

A pair of woodcut images depict actual, named court jesters and fools from the early sixteenth-century court of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (r. 1493–1519), to demonstrate just how such costumed fools formed an integral part of imperial entertainment (p. 30).¹ Depicting two separate carts with figures, this *Triumphal Procession* distinguishes between jesters (*Schalksnarren*) — defined by their mental cleverness as well as by their physical antics, such as juggling or acrobatics — and ‘natural fools’, mentally handicapped persons, exploited objects of ridicule. For the first group, verses spoken by the principal court fool, Conrat (‘Kunz’) von der Rosen, who is mounted in front of the cart, indicate their behaviour at court:

‘Assiduously always I did try
To keep buffoons in good supply,
Always to furnish the merriest jest —
To this one end I did my best.
And from my diligent employment
The Emperor derives enjoyment.’

Significantly, the first group — the jesters — gesture wildly and wear elaborate costumes featuring chains and insignia, markers of court status. The canopy of their cart is topped by a small ape and adorned with bells; monkeys also adorn the side decoration of the cart itself. (For the enduring connections between bells and fools, see the Prologue; for their associations with the untamed wildness of apes and monkeys, see Chapter Six.) The second cart in the *Procession* is drawn not by stately horses, but by donkeys, indicating their lower status. These natural fool figures play idly with instruments, including a humble mouth organ (also called a Jew’s harp, often associated with deceit, see p. 59). Both their cart and their headwear are ornamented with leaves rather than feathers, as if to suggest that their condition as fools is determined by nature rather than artifice. Their associated verses further reveal that the court was laughing at them, not with them:

‘Another group is drawing near
Within this Triumph to appear:
These are fools of the natural sort,
Very well known in the Emperor’s court.’

Their sayings and deeds without reason or rhyme
Have occasioned great laughter many a time.’

Not only were Maximilian’s *Triumphal Procession* woodcuts distributable, but some of the woodblocks were actually cut by Netherlandish graphic masters, including Jost de Negker and Willem and Cornelis Liefrinck of Antwerp.²

Using specific names for both the jesters and the natural fools in the *Triumphal Procession* certainly attests to their presence as familiar individuals in the settings around the Emperor, as fools whom he knew well. Furthermore, fools actually formed a real part of Maximilian’s court festivities. Their antics can be seen in spry physical motions on the carved relief decoration of his Innsbruck palace (p. 28 right), the so-called ‘Little Golden Roof’ (*Goldenes Dachl*) in Innsbruck.³ There they perform an acrobatic dance, the *moresca* or ‘morris dance’, associated at court with the exotic culture of the Moors in North Africa and understood as a masculine demonstration of courtship ardour in competition for the affection of a lady.⁴ Such foreign costumes and dances enriched court festivities for Maximilian, and they held such an attraction for him that he had these masquerades recorded visually, to form a lightly fictionalised record book, the *Freydal*, in celebration of his frequent knightly tournament events.⁵ As we shall also see below (Chapter Three), either love or lust can drive men to folly in their unconstrained pursuit of women, so the morris dance is a courtly ritual version of a universal folly.

Shakespeare’s Viola declares, about the wit of the court fool and professional clown, Feste: ‘This fellow’s wise enough to play the fool/ And to do that well requires a kind of wit. [...] This is a practice/ As full of labour as a wise man’s art;/ For folly that he wisely shows is fit [...]’ (*Twelfth Night*, III. 1. 60–68). Such a figure is the epitome of the professional wit of a court jester.⁶ Certainly, court fools, buffoons and jesters had already become standard members of European courts by the end of the Middle Ages. Such fools are documented in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century documents for both the royal courts of England and France. For example, a ‘Maistre Jehan’, who accompanied his patron, King John the Good of France, into exile as a captive after 1358, was recorded in court documents as a serious master, who received costly clothing and furnishings.⁷



Unknown Artist

Portrait of a Jester at the Court of the Emperor Maximilian I,
probably Narr Pock or Hanns Wynter, c.1515

Oil on panel, 30.6 × 21.9 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

Master of the Angerer Portrait

Fool with Dog, c.1520

Oil on panel, 44.5 × 33.7 cm

NEW HAVEN, YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY,

BEQUEST OF DR HERBERT AND MONIKA SCHAEFER



Subsequent French monarchs also budgeted for their favourite fools. We still find such figures attached to the seventeenth-century Spanish court of Philip IV. There, the royal court painter Diego Velázquez dignified them with an entire series of isolated, individual character portraits.⁸ Those court figures, each identifiable with a name, include both natural fools and witty jesters, whether dwarves with wit or imbeciles.

Dwarves often appear within group portraits of monarchs and their families. One notable example, also painted for display in the ruler's palace, are Andrea Mantegna's *Camera Picta* frescoes (1465–1474) in Mantua; Barbara, the Duchess of Mantua, seated, is accompanied by her standing unnamed female court dwarf, who is also dressed in rich court garments.⁹ Seventeenth-century examples abound. Velázquez again forms the *locus classicus*, with his renowned *Las Meninas* (1656; Madrid, Prado), also located in the royal palace. Here, all the depicted figures are known by name, including two dwarves, Mari Bárbola and Nicolas Pertusato, identified by Antonio Palomino in his posthumous biography of the artist (1724).¹⁰ Rubens made a portrait of Robin, the dwarf of the Earl of Arundel (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum), which was later used in the group portrait of the Arundel family, headed by Countess Aletheia Talbot (1620; Munich, Alte Pinakothek).¹¹ More seventeenth-century portraits, such as Anthony Van Dyck's image of Queen Henrietta Maria and her dwarf, Sir Jeffrey Hudson (1633; Washington, National Gallery), feature isolated royalty or nobility with a single, favourite companion dwarf.¹² In Hudson's case, both his diminutive size and ready wit combined to make him a celebrated English court presence.

Along with the print of Kunz von der Rosen and the other court fools portrayed in the woodcuts by Hans Burgkmair, a few other celebrated jesters sat for individual portraits. In addition, The Phoebus Foundation owns an isolated, bust-length painting that has been identified as one of Maximilian's court jesters (p. 30). The figure's striped costume of rich materials and his golden chain suggest a role at court, and his red feathered hat with prominent bows also includes an X-shaped brooch (possibly alluding to the cross of St Andrew, a symbol of Emperor Maximilian, stemming from his Burgundian lands and used on his battle flags). A further association with Maximilian derives from a gold pin with the crowned initial 'M' on his hat next to a gold St Christopher badge. This fool figure, wearing as many as four rings on his right hand, holds a drinking glass and stares dully with open mouth and glazed eyes. His lack of decorum in a portrait format points to informality between this figure and his defined social circles, appropriate to a court jester.¹³

Another court buffoon, presented at half-length behind a barrier, looks like a portrait but might well be a generic fool. Attributed to the Master of the Angerer Portrait, usually identified as Marx Reichlich, this unidentified individual (New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery; p. 31) wears the traditional fool's cowl with a decorative central cockscomb and dangling ass's ears, tipped with bells.¹⁴ Like a courtier, he also wears rings and gold chains of court as well as a profile medal or coin of a ruler, seemingly the ancient Roman Emperor Commodus, known for his love of wearing a Herculean lion's pelt. He holds the most obvious attribute of a fool, the *marot*, or talking stick (see Prologue), his mock sceptre — in this case, with an identical cockscomb and ass's ears. Before him on the ledge is a drinking glass with a piece of bread and a cracked egg with a runny yolk, which the figure seems to be about to eat (as a brown puppy snuggles up to him). The crack in the egg might refer to him — since his own stupid look with crossed eyes and broad grin suggest the simple mind of a natural fool.

An even earlier, mid-fifteenth-century informal painted portrait, attributed to the eminent French court painter and illuminator Jean Fouquet, allegedly represents a famous Italian fool, Gonella (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum; p. 33), although evidence for the sitter's identity is slight.¹⁵ Gonella was the second of three pioneering Italian court jesters with the same name; famously witty and even the subject of a celebratory biography, he lived in Ferrara and served Marquis Niccolo d'Este III (d. 1441).¹⁶ The portrait could have been painted for his successor, Lionello d'Este (r. 1441–1451), when the painter was travelling en route to Rome, probably around 1445. Fouquet, working very much in the meticulous oil paint technique of Jan Van Eyck and other Flemish artists, presents this half-length figure with beard stubble on his face and laugh lines around his eyes. Dressed in a multicoloured costume with a fur-trimmed red hat, he tilts his head as he gazes outwards towards the viewer with the calm trace of a knowing smile on his lips. While his costume does not (yet) conform to the standard imagery of a fool's outfit, it does have abnormally large buttons on fabric with brightly coloured vertical stripes. This presumed jester also tilts his head and crosses his arms unceremoniously.

Roughly a century later, another identified court fool received a meticulous, half-length portrait by Hans Mielich (1516–1573). This is Mertl, who served the Bavarian court of Duke Albrecht V (1545; Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum; p. 34 left).¹⁷ This painting is presented with the same seriousness of pose and outward gaze as the artist bestowed on his noble and patrician sitters (though he portrayed the ruling dukes at full length).



Jean Fouquet

Portrait of Gonella of Ferrara, c.1445

Oil on panel, 36.5 × 26 cm

VIENNA, KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM



Hans Mielich
Court Fool Mertl, 1545
Oil on panel, 49 × 45 cm
MUNICH, BAYERISCHES NATIONALMUSEUM



Anthonis Mor
Granvelle's Dwarf with Dog, c.1558-59
Oil on panel, 127 × 93 cm
PARIS, MUSÉE DU LOUVRE



Jan van Hemessen

Portrait of Elizabeth, Court Fool of Anne of Hungary, c.1525-30

Oil on panel, 49.7 × 40.3 cm

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Cover image

Unknown Artist

Fool Looking through his Fingers, c.1520

Oil on panel, 45 × 30,5 cm

Antwerp, The Phoebus Foundation

Backcover image

Jan Massijs and workshop

Peasant Merry Company (detail), c.1560–65

Oil on panel, 51,5 × 67 cm

Antwerp, The Phoebus Foundation

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