How to Read a Renaissance Fool

Visuality, Materiality, and Symbolic Practice

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How did the people of the Renaissance look at each other and determine who they were looking at? What kinds of messages could the visual and material presence of the body give to those who were seeing it? How, in short, did people make sense of each other?

It is a well-known fact that what people looked like made many different kinds of sense in the Renaissance period. We could think of practices and conceptions emerging in areas as varied as sumptuary regulation, bodily beauty, or theatrical practice, where questions of status, identity and truth were manipulated in sometimes alarming ways by presenting something to the gaze of the spectators – all these instances relied on questions of seeming and knowing that involved the gaze and visual practice.

Habits of perception and of description were also of importance in health and medicine, in the creation of ethnographic knowledge, and of course in such a basic act as recognizing people in everyday human interaction. In material culture, possibilities were growing for both dressing and decorating oneself, and for developing symbolic differences based on these practices. In her recent study on clothes and dressing up in early modern Germany, Ulinka Rublack indeed suggests that the "growing attention to people's appearances must have had an impact on the very process of what people noticed when they looked at each other as well as on the sensation of being looked at."[1] Reading visual and material signs upon human bodies and making sense of what was seen were cultural practices that demanded considerable amounts of practical knowledge and skill. And yet those skills were seldom verbally articulated by people who nevertheless used them on a daily basis. To discuss these questions, I want to take

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1   Rublack, 2010, p. 24.

a look at the fool, a figure whose cultural significance relied heavily on visual prompts and on his spectators' ability to read his body appropriately. How would this have worked? How did one recognise a fool and make sense of who he was? My evidence comes from England, where fools were apparently often seen, but not depicted in images as often as, for example, Germany, Italy or France. What fools looked like was often referred to in texts of the period, however.

I will suggest that reading people and bodies, as well as cultural symbols such as the fool, requires symbolic vocabularies and more or less logical frameworks of meaning that come to being only by being repeatedly performed in practice. Their performativity also means that these networks of meaning are always renegotiable and repeatedly contextualised in different ways when they are called upon to mean something, that is, when one encountered a fool, for example. There is no one framework of meaning in which the fool belongs; there are several. Recognizing a fool must have been more or less straightforward to his contemporaries, but many aspects of this interpretation were enacted without conscious effort, and so it left few traces that we historians could now follow. The way in which fools' looks were referred to is in fact further testimony to the mundane nature of the visual interpretation: visual prompts were called upon as details and variations that were supposed to be part of larger implicit networks of meaning, either confirming or deviating from a common norm. People had an idea about what fools looked like. Presenting a personalised fool figure in a text relied on implicit and explicit commentary on this norm.

The most traditional markers of folly are still familiar today: the asses' ears, the cockscombs, the baubles, and parti-coloured clothing are all part of the visual repertoire that announce the presence of the fool, and we still recognise them, even though the actual fools who sported these items have not been around for the last 400 years. For early modern people, the fool's visual presence could be much more varied, though, and its meanings were both more intricate and more apparent. This visual presence partly relied on his clothes, but bodies themselves were also crucial to the meanings of folly.

In early modern opinion, there were two kinds of fools, the natural and the artificial. Contrary to modern opinion, what early modern people were thinking about when fools were mentioned were not highly intelligent and sarcastic commentators who were whispering unpleasant truths in the king's ear, but people who were lacking in both intelligence and everyday skills, people with learning difficulties and cognitive disabilities. This was the primary type, referred to by the term natural fool. Artificial fools, those performing the fool's role although

not disabled themselves, were an extension of this primary meaning.[2] This has obvious effects on how fools were to be looked at, and what people saw in them.

The Fool and his Motley

Let us start with the fool's clothes. In early modern texts, the fool's costume is always called motley. What might this have meant? The word motley still refers to something that is put together of parts that do not fit together comfortably. And indeed the typical court fool's garb was a multi-coloured costume, consisting of a tailored coat and hose.[3] It was put together from several pieces of cloth of different colours, arranged on the fool's body axially and symmetrically, as we can see, for example, in Pieter Paul Rubens's 1620 portrait of the Countess of Shrewsbury, where her fool companion is dressed in a symmetrical suit of yellow and green. The illustration of the psalm 52 in the *Wingfield Psalter* displays an elaborate fool in a dress of pink, red, yellow, purple and blue. The ideal motley was a jumble of colours, but it was nevertheless made with care, so that a peculiar sense of order could be detected in the placing of the colourful patches.[4] Still, the dashing colours and the disjointed patchwork, even in their more stylised versions, were supposed to mirror the fool's jumble of emotions and thoughts, and mark him apart from those wearing normal clothes, as a comic symbol.[5] When conduct books warned against following fashion too closely, they evoked the image of the fool: parti-coloured and gaudy clothes were only fit for fools and apes.[6] Even though many people delighted in wearing brilliantly coloured clothes at the time, they were usually not quite as incoherently colourful as the fool's traditional motley.[7]

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2   KORHONEN, 1999, p. 30-37.

3   HAWES, 1517, sig. L7ʳ; BILLINGTON, 1979, p. 41. Ruth Mellinkoff notes that the fool's parti-coloured costume goes back to Roman mimes and was familiar all through the Middle Ages, MELLINKOFF, 1993, p. 16f.

4   This kind of motley was so familiar that it could be used as a popular metaphor. For example, Thomas Nashe described in *The Vnfortunate Traveller* a disputation in Wittenberg which to his mind was only compiled from a patchwork of phrases from Tully and was thus "no more than a fooles coat of many colours." NASHE, 1594, p. 251.

5   MELLINKOFF, 1993, p. 30.

6   FISTON, 1595, sig. C3ᵛ.

7   RUBLACK, 2010, p. 75f.

The fool's costume, then, was supposed to represent symbolically both its wearer's mental characteristics and his office. In early modern culture an official's gown represented his position and a servant's livery associated him with his master and his family's status. Associating costume with its wearer's position was a key visual practice in early modern culture.[8] "Invest me in my motley", said Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and assumed the part of a fool, with all the liberties of speech that went with the office.[9]

However, many court fools seem to have been dressed in typical courtiers' costumes, not in elaborate outfits specific to the fool. When the fool Balurdo in Anthony Marston's play *Antonio's Revenge* prepares to go to court, he frets about how his former friends will be able to recognise him, dressed in eagerly anticipated, stylishly courtly clothing:

> If you see one in a yellow taffata dubblet, cut upon carnation velure, a greene hat, a blewe paire of velvet hose, a gilt rapier, and an orenge tawny pair of worsted silk stockings, thats I, thats I.[10]

Even though his companion seems unconcerned, the fool cannot let the topic go:

> Ho, you shall knowe me as easily; I ha bought mee a newe greene feather with a red sprig; you shall see my wrought shirt hang out at my breeches; you shall know me.[11]

The conspicuous element of Balurdo's imagined outfit is its wealth of colour, but it does not seem to be a customary jester's costume – if it were, he would not have to worry about being known. In the real court too, clothes were frequently given as presents by monarchs to their performing fools, and because gifts of this kind tended to be recorded in the royal account books, we know something about the materials of the costumes if not exactly what they looked like. King Henry VIII ordered a Christmas outfit of fine materials and showy colours, topped with furs and gilded copper chains, for his fool William Somers: the account books list a "sute of whighte and blewe bawdekyn garded with red satten a ffrocke of tauny sylke stryped with gowlde furred aboute the necke."[12]

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8   HAZARD, 2000, p. 102.

9   SHAKESPEARE, [1623] 1997, II.vii.42-61.

10   MARSTON, 1602, p. 57.

11   IBID.

12   *The Loseley Manuscripts*, 1914, p. 77.

Queen Elizabeth gave the fool William Shelton three complete outfits in 1574 and 1575. The first seems to have been a rather plain outfit mostly in grey, but the second was more elaborate, with coloured trimmings, ribbons and stripes. In 1568, the queen's Italian fool Monarcho received a striped costume of velvet, silk, taffeta, fustian, grogram, sackcloth, and fur, with lace and trimmings in several colours. Jack the fool received a pair of stuffed russet trunk-hose and slops or large breeches trimmed with red, and pairs of stockings to match: "of grene cloth stiched upon with silk of sundry colors" and "of red clothe stiched alover with yellow silk."[13]

Clearly, fools paraded in a colourful get-up on festive occasions.[14] That is not necessarily enough to prove that they always did so. Whether these materials would have been sewn together into clothes that were recognisable specifically as a fool's costume, or whether they would have resembled any courtier's clothes also cannot be determined on the basis of the account books, since colours and stripes were not only used in comic clothing. Janet Arnold suggests that stuffed breeches and slops were worn first by fools but then became fashionable items of clothing for all men – and some writers of the time, Samuel Rowlands and Thomas Wright among them, did not miss the irony of this development.[15]

In visual sources, fools look more stylised. They are frequently dressed completely in yellow – and sometimes in green, blue, or even pink. Yellow and green indeed seem to have been the favourite colours in fools' clothing, and many have related these colours to the festival calendar – to the yellow and green of spring nature, of May Games and summer festivals.[16] But fools were not only associated with spring and summer festivities, and winter fools also wore yellows and greens, together with many other colours, as Ruth Mellinkoff has shown.[17] It seems to me that in fact strong yellows especially could also signal folly without any reference to carnivalesque festivities.

Court fools often seem to have appeared in these colours as well. In the miniature of Will Somers with his master Henry VIII in the king's *Psalter*, the fool is dressed in a bright green coat, certainly different from the king's more elaborate costume but not parti-coloured or particularly striking. In King Henry's family portrait, Will is seen in the background dressed in a dark costume with brightly

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13   ARNOLD, 1988, p. 105f., 206, see also STOPES, 1913, p. 160.

14   CHAMBERS, 1967, p. 386f.

15   ARNOLD, 1988, p. 206; ROWLANDS, 1600, epigram 30; WRIGHT, 1601, p. 298.

16   CANEL, 1873, p. 287-291; ZIJDERVELD, 1982, p. 76f.

17   MELLINKOFF, 1993, p. 55.

coloured stripes, representing a motley of a different kind.[18] It may well be that different colours were associated with specific celebrations as well as specific groups of people, but fool costumes were not always of many colours, and many colours were not only worn by fools. Ulinka Rublack's findings, especially, force us to think twice about randomly associating wildly coloured clothes with fools only.[19]

Sometimes we can also see fools dressed in drab browns that contrast with the ostentation or vanity of other people's clothes. The popular writer Anthony Munday, for example, opined in his *Defence of Contraries* that fools could not care less for fine clothing and were always satisfied with little comfort.[20] When dressed in simple outfits, they could also be used to criticise others for their more showy dressing habits. The fool was of course also a moral sign, and his appearance, particularly in early modern visual culture, tended to draw attention not to the fool himself but to those who seemed foolish around him. But even when he did mean to draw attention to himself, as the fool actor Richard Tarlton did, they did not necessarily dress any more ostentatiously. In fact, fools shamed young gallants and courtiers in fashionable ensembles by playing practical jokes that especially targeted their clothes, so the different hierarchies displayed by clothing were certainly among jesters' interests.[21]

Moreover, it was common to see the fool dressed in a simple long coat, designed most of all to keep him decent and warm – and to show his simplicity and lowly position.[22] Natural fools living outside court circles tended to wear loose overcoats in which they could move freely without having to be careful about clothes.[23] It has indeed been suggested that the word motley, the term for the fool's habit, actually referred to a garment made of coarse cloth that was itself also called motley. A tweed-like, relatively cheap and very sturdy material, motley was most commonly used for saddle covers, military uniforms and protective garments for artisans. For the fools and for mad-people, the material

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18   The illustration of Will can be found in *Henry VIII's Psalter. The Family of Henry VIII*, c. 1545, is now in Hampton Court Palace.

19   Cf. RUBLACK, 2010.

20   MUNDAY, 1593, p. 46.

21   *A Choice Banquet of Witty Jests*, 1660, p. 139; *Tarlton's Jests*, 1611, p. 201; COPLEY, 1614, p. 137f.; *Sechs hundert, sieben vnd zwantzig Historien von Claus Narren*, 1579, p. 19.

22   DOUCE, 1807, vol. 2, p.321f.

23   See for example *The Loseley Manuscripts*, 1914, p. 119; MIDDLETON & DEKKER, 1611, sig. E1ᵛ.

was sewn into a long gown that would endure all the frenzied pranks they might engage in.[24] And so we can see, in the illustration on the title page of the fool actor Robert Armin's play *The Two Maids of More-Clacke*, a fool character called Blue John, whom Armin apparently played himself, wearing a long coat that might well be made of the motley material.[25]

Clothes were potent symbols. So were fools. Put these two together, and they start reinforcing one another: the visual (and partly tactile) imagery of the clothes defines the fool, while the fool also gives a layer of meaning to clothes and their visual aspects. Using different dress codes, clothing could emphasise different aspects of the fool's meaning. But if fools dressed in such various ways, identifying them must have relied on something more than just the clothes they wore. It was not enough to know what fools were supposed to wear – to reach their deeper meanings, even just on the visual plane, you needed more evidence, and it was in that extra knowledge where the fool's characteristics and nature were negotiated to an even greater effect.

Fool's Heads

The most conspicuous symbol of folly even in the early modern period was the fool's familiar headgear, the cockscomb. It was adorned with animal embellishments of two kinds. It was called a cockscomb because of the crest that was placed right on the crown of the fool's head and could run from his forehead down to his neck. Sometimes a whole cock's head could be portrayed as well, with the head tipping comically forward high on the fool's crown.[26] Asses' ears were sewn into the fabric of the cockscomb, hanging down on both sides of the fool's head. The word cockscomb could be used as a synonym for the word fool, so the head-dress very much characterised the entire figure. On stage, fools were constantly handing over their cockscombs to other characters, pointing out that they were more foolish than fools and deserved to wear what proved it. These cockscombs referred to in plays were separate items of clothing, then, but in late medieval and early modern images the asses' ears were often attached to a hood that could be worn either on fool's head or hanging back about his neck.

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24 Hotson, 1952, p. 10-14, 33.

25 Armin, 1609, sig. A1ʳ.

26 Elaborate cock's heads can more typically be found in images from continental Europe, but some examples were produced in England as well. See the ballad *The Daunce and Song of Death*, 1569; Rowlands, 1614, title page.

And yet, when again looking at royal account books, we can find the queen's fool Jack Greene being given a curious hat that forces us to question what cockscombs in fact meant: it was trimmed with fourteen feathers of different colours decorated with silver spangles.[27]

Underneath their hood or their cockscomb, fools wore recognisable hair styles: either a shaven head, or a one-, two- or three-tiered corona reminiscent of a monk's tonsure. When the fool's tonsure has been mentioned at all in serious studies, it has been linked directly to the monks' crown, which fools were supposed to either imitate or mock.[28] I am not certain this assumption is wholly justified. Even though the fool's curious hair could surely symbolise humility and subjugation, like the monk's did,[29] its meanings did not necessarily derive from religious hairstyles. The shaven head was first and foremost a sign of the fool's status as the lowest possible human being. The triple corona would indeed suggest that the tonsure was also a comic ploy.[30] Indeed, from the Protestant point of view, fools' typical hairstyles could be the primary image to which monks' heads were compared. According to Simon Robson, one of the practices that made people laugh at monks was that they "are shauen and notcht on the head like fooles."[31] Perhaps it is our own distance from tonsured heads that leads us to see the clerical and monastic tonsure as the iconic and primary one; in the early modern period, fools' heads were almost as iconic and thoroughly recognisable on their own. They did not necessarily need the imaginative link to the monk's tonsure to be culturally legible. But in the absence of any explicit textual discussion, it is difficult to determine what the fool's curious hair might have meant at the time.

Absence of hair would also have pointed towards the fool's questionable status as a man: prominent body hair signalled powerful masculinity, but bald-

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27   Arnold, 1988, p. 201.

28   See for example Douce, 1807, p. 323; Flögel, 1789, p. 51. Sometimes the practice is mentioned without any attempt at explanation, as in Nicoll, 1931, p. 161f. Another point sometimes made is that there may have existed a very long tradition which linked fools to classical mimes, and especially to a type called *mimus calvus*, a bald-headed fool-like entertainer in classical theatre. It is possible that this type survived in folk festivals and was transferred to actual natural fools, but it is difficult to find solid evidence to support this theory. See for example Flögel, 1789, p. 52; Wyss, 1959, p. 8.

29   Mezger, 1991, p. 229.

30   Ibid.

31   Robson, 1598, sig. K1ᵛ.

ness was associated with advanced age and lack of a beard with childhood, and both were conditions of less than perfect masculinity.[32] Reading the English texts about fools, what often is mentioned is that their hair was shaved off to mark their humiliation, and at the same time their professional or social status. John Bulwer even saw the fools' deliberate baldness as a conscious attempt, presumably on the part of their shavers rather than the fools themselves, to reach a comic look:

> Shaving (generally speaking) being servile, ridiculous, and proper to Fooles and Knaves, […] being in sooth a voluntary, spontaneous, and wilful baldness, shaving of the head unto the quick, being from all antiquity appropriated unto Fools, being proper in them to signifie the utter deprivation of wit and understanding, and at first began in mockery and to move laughter.[33]

Fools may have been shaved in order to make them look ridiculous, but this comic effect was always linked to the idea of their lacking mental capacities.

There is also some visual evidence to support the image of fools' being shaven. In a later woodcut representing Will Somers, his bristly bald head hardly looks like a fashionable hairdo but effectively refers to his status as a fool. It is in fact quite rare to see bald heads uncovered by caps in images of the early modern period. Of the few baldies who appear in visual sources, with their hoods slipped back and their heads bare, many are in fact fools, and sporting an uncovered bald head could itself signal folly. But I would like to think that there was also a medical reason for why idiots and lunatics were shaven: the fool's body and its functions, as indeed the functioning of all human bodies, were envisioned within the framework of humoral theory, where the balance of bodily fluids and vapours was crucial to engendering both health and illness. Hair growth itself represented evacuation of excess matter, but hair had other health effects as well.[34] If hair hindered harmful vapours from evaporating from the body, memory was in danger of deteriorating, and that was the faculty already most adversely affected in fools – that is what their dysfunctional habits and problems with understanding seemed to suggest. Shaving off one's hair could be a treatment, if not cure, for simplicity and stupidity. And so people looking at fools

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32 CADDEN, 1993, p. 181; FISHER, 2006, p. 108-111; KORHONEN, 2010, p. 378f. Fools usually did not grow a beard either – and if it was needed, they could run into trouble trying to glue a false beard on. See MARSTON, 1602, p. 90f.

33 BULWER, 1650, p. 48f.

34 KORHONEN, 2010, p. 381.

would have expected them to have a shaven head, although often hiding under a hood. Whether shaven heads were comic because of fools, or suited fools because they were comic, is a question we cannot answer. But when making sense of fools, baldness was certainly interpreted as one facet of their comic nature.

In his hand, the fool carried a bauble, the sceptre of folly. These ranged from simple sticks into intricate doll-like doubles of the fool himself. In France and Germany, baubles carved of wood, ivory or precious metals that once belonged to court fools have survived, but I have not come across any English examples.[35] There is some reason to suspect that in England, baubles were not as common in real life as they were on stage: Stephen Gosson, for example, suggested that the new-fangled but ubiquitous female accessory, the fan, was growing as popular as "bables are in playes for fools".[36] In fiction, however, they seem very familiar and can be seen in several illustrations in English psalters which display fools either with primitive sticks or elegant baubles; the fool in the *Wingfield Psalter* even has two.[37]

Sometimes the bauble's fool head top could be a portrait of its carrier with all his features, even physical abnormalities faithfully reproduced – or so we think.[38] Often, however, it was given a name of its own, and its carrier could invent a specific personality for it, as if for a ventriloquist's dummy. Performing fools made much of their imaginary brothers, bickering and babbling with them while commenting on other people and their follies. Baubles could also work as dramatic weapons and the fool's means of defending himself. But the sceptre was also clearly a phallic symbol that related both to the fool's own sexuality and his habit of teasing others with less than subtle sexual innuendo. On the stage, the fool often used it for obscene gestures, placing it between his legs and poking it at the female characters.

Foolish Faces

But what about the fool's own looks, and his own body, then? Whether natural or artificial, fools tended to be seen as grotesque, ugly and deformed – indeed, their funniness seemed to demand that something must be wrong with their

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35   MEZGER, 1991, p. 198.

36   GOSSON, 1596, p. 7.

37   BILLINGTON, 1979, p. 41; ID., 1984, p. 4f.; see also GIFFORD, 1979, p. 18.

38   MEZGER, 1991, p. 183-185.

looks as well as their minds.[39] Interestingly, the legal practice of determining whether someone was a natural fool – an idiot from birth – depended partly on visual signs. Although the most important tests in investigating someone's mental capacities were questions about who his parents were, where he lived, and whether he could handle coins, the examiners also paid attention to the suspected natural fool's facial expressions and his looks. It was especially noted if the fool had a very large head or any other disproportionately large features, or if he showed any singular deformities. Foolish or vacuous expressions were also recorded as proving a person foolish.[40]

This ties in seamlessly with readings of human looks in other discourses, such as physiognomy, where large faces and facial features were seen as signs of stupidity.[41] Thomas Hill, in his translation of Bartholomaeus Cocles's treatise on physiognomy, gives us an example of the physique of an actual fool, whose main characteristics were due to too much of a hot temperament, but he also displayed the physiognomical attributes of folly:

> He had the heade pinaple like, the voice lowed and sownding, quick of speech, and in stature small, musculous, Sanguine, yet tending vnto choler. The eares were great, the forehead bearing or bossing out, after a round maner, the ouerbrowes ioyned together, and much hearie, the eies small, hollow standing, glistering, and fierie: the nose flatte and holowe in the middle: the cheeks bonie, and somewhat flat: the mouth great, the lips thicke, and folded or turned outward: the teethe bigge: the chinne sharpe, and longe: the face long: the neck grosse, and shorte.[42]

A head shaped like a pineapple hardly signalled a sharp intellect even on its own, but physiognomical recognition required an overall interpretation, sewn together from its various separate components. All of the features listed here

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39 KLAPP, 1949, p. 157f. While discussing the incongruity theory, one of the main historical explanatory frameworks for laughter, John Morreall suggests that physical deformity in a person is one of the simplest, oldest, and most common things to be found humorous. MORREALL, 1983, p. 64f.

40 ANDREWS, 1996, p. 70; see also NEUGEBAUER, 1996, p. 29.

41 GROSS, 1990, p. 84-88. Martin Porter and Ian McLean, among others, have differentiated between everyday discourse of appearances, physiognomy, and its scientific variant, physiognomony. Hill would fall under the latter category. See PORTER, 2005, p. ix-x; McLEAN 2010.

42 HILL, 1571, p. 55f.

worked both as a description of the individual fool and more generally as elements of a face that could be read as a sign of foolishness.

Theories of laughter took this into account when they classified things that people found funny; laughter in general was seen as arising from perceiving ugliness or grotesqueness in any of its forms, whether mental or physical, and fools displayed both. Early modern writers rarely talked about 'ugliness'; the expression they used was 'deformity' – and so laughter theorists asserted that distorted faces and hunchbacks, extreme expressions, clumsy handling of everyday objects, falling and tumbling, or unruly behaviour in general were forms of deformity, of laughable ugliness. These depictions could just as well be descriptions of fools. In some images of fools, particularly those portraying individual known fools, mental derangement and idiocy still seems to be detectable, as Erik Midelfort has noticed.[43] Foolish faces and bodies were meant to be laughed at.

Even though all the theorists of the comic in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries found that laughter was produced by sensing something ugly or deformed, the moral content of this statement came to be more and more questionable, and at the same time doubts were raised about whether laughing at what we would now call disability could ever be justified. The shadow of the fool can often be found at the centre of these debates. One of the doubters was Sir Thomas More, who wrote that in *Utopia*

> to despise a man for a disfigurement or the loss of a limb is counted as base and disfiguring, not to the man who is laughed at but to him who laughs, for foolishly upbraiding a man with something as if it were a fault which he was powerless to avoid.[44]

Laughing at deformity was cruel, and mere deformity should perhaps not brand anyone a fool. But without deformity, no one could be counted a true fool.

In *The Covrt of Ciuill Courtesie*, a conduct book translated from Italian, Simon Robson also believed that laughter was indeed cruelty, and proceeded further towards fools in his reasoning. He suggested that three groups of people were not to be scoffed at: women, those in misery, and those who were in any way deformed. People who were deformed or ugly were not responsible for their bodies' peculiarities themselves and could not remedy their situation.[45] It was, however, admissible and even advisable to jest and exchange witticisms

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43   Midelfort, 1999, p. 239.

44   More, [1516-1518] 1965, p. 193.

45   Robson, 1577, p. 12f.

with women and deformed persons, if their wit was sharp enough to enjoy this. Laughing *with* the fool was honest mirth, but laughing *at* the fool signified a cruel nature. And yet, the fact that the discussion existed in the first place points towards the reality that the gaze directed at deformed features was normally conceptualised within the comic framework.

Every facial expression and every small defect could be significant in inferring the inner being from outward signs. Almost any feature could be seen as a symptom of folly if it deviated enough from ideals of beauty. The determining factor was incongruity: when facial features did not seem to belong together, or the fool was excessively fat or thin, the whole appearance turned laughable. An important factor in these foolish bodies was their inconstancy: they were always moving and changing. If a normal person's face was supposed to be calm and orderly, the fool's was disordered and uncontrolled. In all conduct books readers were warned to keep their eyes from wavering or only looking down, or being too open and staring, since all these would betoken want of wit and show them to be "blockheads" and "shameless fools".[46] According to Erasmus, "to wrie the nose is the propertie of scoffers and naturall fooles", and he also warned against puffing up one's cheeks or gaping with one's mouth open, for "that is a token of ydiot fooles".[47] Where normal people kept their clothes on and farted in private, fools displayed their nakedness in public and made their bodily movements a matter for coarse comedy. It is noteworthy that so many conduct writers not only condemned excessive facial expressions and bad behaviour, but did so by referring to fools and idiots. Uncontrolled faces and shameful actions signified childishness, foolishness and bad manners in anyone, but they were also, more specifically, among the best distinguishing marks of the fool, whether natural or artificial.

But in the end, all fools looked different, and had many other qualities besides their foolishness. It would have been difficult to apply a standard table of meanings to reading their mental capabilities, or indeed their laughableness. Despite the wealth of detail, literary descriptions of fools often do not sound all that authentic – they tend to conform to a type and exaggerate all in the same way. Perhaps, then, it would be more helpful to turn the question around: what we can read in these descriptions is not so much individual characteristics of specific fools, but a practical aesthetics of the early modern gaze. Descriptions

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46 Pouting one's lips as if willing to kiss a horse, shaking one's legs, stomping and toying with one's feet, and playing apish tricks with one's hands and fingers were also clear signs of folly. ERASMUS, 1532, sig. A3ʳ; RHODES, 1577, p. 74, 80; FISTON, 1595, sig. C3ʳ, B5ᵛ; WESTE, 1619, p. 293.

47 ERASMUS, 1532, sig. A4ᵛ-A5ʳ.

of fools' physical features represent a kind of applied physiognomy, a "body skill" (a term snatched from Thomas Hill) that was appropriated when looking at and assessing fools. This was a gaze that, when directed at other people's bodies, was expressly looking for features that would help to interpret the object as foolish. Having confirmed that interpretation, the repertoire of body skills would also help determine an appropriate reaction in the face of those features, and that would quite possibly be laughter. One looked at fools in a special way. The gaze that was looking for folly operated conceptually within a flexible, loosely physiognomical system, but it was also dependent on the epistemic underpinnings of laughter and folly, with its emphasis on incongruity and paradox.

From a writer's point of view, then, in order to describe a fool you needed to list several foolish features, to make clear that folly was indeed embodied through this entirety of signs. In descriptions of fools' bodies, early modern writers tried to evoke the progress of the gaze as it glided over – or indeed halted at – the features of the gazed-at object. Where early modern descriptions of beauty, particularly the poetic blazon, glide effortlessly along the female body from top to bottom, fool descriptions try to follow the same progression but seem to get stuck at almost every feature, noting a large nose and laughing, stopping at squinting eyes and giggling, chuckling at hanging lips. The gaze needed to be aware of the laughable ugly whole, but it paid separate attention to every protruding part – and it is interesting that laughable parts were indeed often protruding. And where beauty excited love in the viewer by the sheer force of aesthetic perception, ugliness brought about aversion but also invited a comic interpretation. Folly entailed a visual technique, a technique of the grotesque. Looking at an object by tearing it apart into small elements, each as grotesque as the whole, made the object lose some of its humanity, but also gain an essentially visual comic quality.

To summarise, then, one needed at least three kinds of "visual literacy" in order to recognise someone as a fool. First, one needed physiognomically inflected knowledge about the facial and bodily features that signified stupidity, simplicity, unreason and folly, and one needed to be able to link 'deformed' outward features with deformity of mind and reason. Secondly, one needed to know that this deformity could just as well be interpreted in the discursive field of ugliness. In Renaissance aesthetic thinking, beauty was a product of proportion and harmony of all features; ugliness, in turn, was about deviation and deformity, disharmony and lack of proportion.[48] The belief that only proportionate parts

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48   Early modern beauty theory, however, generally tends to describe female bodies, whereas physiognomy concentrates, without actually saying so, on the male

could form an ideal beautiful whole was very common in Renaissance discourses, and it is this belief that links together physiognomical and aesthetic value judgements. Deformity, on the other hand, was linked with vice and lack of ability on some field of human activity. Thirdly, one needed to know the basics of laughter and humour – not necessarily in theory, although the theory helps us historians to link these phenomena. Laughter was produced by the perception of something deformed, ugly and surprising. Fools' laughable features were mostly harmless: they did not signify serious vices, because fools were without full understanding. Instead, they encouraged a comic interpretation. In order to really get the joke, then, a fool's observer needed to have the visual literacy, the mastery of body skills that allowed him or her to link the epistemological fields of aesthetics, comedy, and practical physiognomy to the more material fields of foolish clothing and foolish artefacts.

Applying these skills in practice meant engaging in a process of interpretation, in cultural meaning-making that despite its complexity functioned very much on the level of ordinary people and everyday life, even though the best minds of the age also found it useful. Making sense of fools was indeed a cultural practice, and the visual elements described above were only one segment of how and what the fool signified. That so much of it is now difficult to fathom only testifies to how intricate these webs of meaning were when they were in more active use.

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physique. Martin Porter has noted that early modern physiognomical treatises do not give a very flattering picture of human psychological and intellectual features: most character traits discerned through physiognomy could be classified as vices, not virtues. Porter 2005, 183, 189f.

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