Theta X

est publié par le Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,
dirigé par Philippe Vendrix,
Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 7323

Responsables scientifiques

Richard Hillman & Pauline Ruberry-Blanc

Mentions légales

Date de création

Avril 2013

The Politics of Unreason:
Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis
and the Practices of Folly

Sarah Carpenter

University of Edinburgh

The interaction of folly with politics is a familiar and well-established theme in sixteenth-century literary dis-course. It also has a vivid visual tradition. Pictures from at least the fourteenth to the late-sixteenth century show the persistence of images of direct confrontation between fools and secular authority. The principles that such images illustrate may be very different: the illumination from the fifteenth-century Ranworth Antiphoner which shows a motley-clad fool confronting a sceptred and throned King David depicts the opening words of Psalm 53: "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God".[1] In a similar meeting in Raphael I. Sadeler's 1588 engraving, *Le Bouffon et le Roi*, the court fool sets a jester's cap on the king to mark the illusory quality of his authority.[2] Either king or fool may hold the moral authority, but they testify to a familiar visual encounter. For good or for bad, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Folly has something important to say to political power.

We may well assume this is now a dead tradition, fascinating but confined to its early modern period.

1   http://www.broadsideparishes.org.uk/bspicons/antiphoner/
     david_fool.htm (accessed 9 January 2012).
2   http://www.artfinder.com/work/the-fool-and-the-king-raphael-i-
     sadeler/ (accessed 9 January 2012).

But although the visual codification of the encounter has faded, we can still recognise the demonstrative impulse to folly as an intervention in politics today. On 19 July 2011, the proceedings of the select committee of the Parliament of Westminster in London, investigating serious allegations against News Corporation, briefly dissolved into chaos as a custard pie was thrown into the face of Rupert Murdoch, chairman of the international organisation.[3] Although its cultural formula is now less clearly articulated, its images less familiar, this event clearly resonated with Renaissance practices. The pie-thrower, later identified as a part-time stand-up comic Jonny Marbles (a semi-professional fool?), presented himself as a voice of common humanity, breaking into the dignity of official proceedings with a harmless but physically humiliating comic attack. The aim seemed to be to expose Murdoch, the figure of authority, as beneath the trappings himself a mere fool like his attacker, thus dissolving the frustrating distance between the powerful and the powerless. Immediate responses to the moment extended the parallels with sixteenth-century practice. To the delight of the media and public comment, Murdoch's wife leapt to his defence, inadvertently providing a striking enactment of a "world-upside-down" attack of woman on man, a young wife defending an elderly husband.[4] Mixed public reactions at the time revealed disagreement as to where moral authority was understood to lie in this confrontation, whether with Murdoch and his wife, or with the figure of the fool. But it suggests that in the twenty-first century, folly's encounter with political power remains active and expressive, even if we have lost its formal traditions.

I

This is the context for this paper's exploration of David Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, a lively, large-scale allegorical drama performed in Scotland in 1552 and 1554.[5] It is a play which draws vividly on familiar Fool traditions, to make its own forceful intervention in the politics of mid-sixteenth century Scotland. Most overtly, it closes with a classic *sermon joyeux* from the character of Foly himself, who "hing up his [fools] hattis on the pulpet" (l. 4489) and preaches on

---

3 http://images.mirror.co.uk/upl/m4/jul2011/9/5/rupert-murdoch-pic-reuters-249911864.jpg (accessed 9 January 2012).
4 http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/01950/wendi-deng_1950463i.jpg (accessed 9 January 2012).
5 Lyndsay, *Satyre*, ed. Lyall, pp. vii-xiv. All references are to this edition.

the text "Stultorum numerus infinitus [The number of fools is infinite]".[6] Foly addresses the broad vision of universal social foolishness by offering his fool's caps to merchants, old men, clergy and kings. But he also applies the lessons of folly to the current political situation in Europe, mocking the aggression that was flaring between the Emperor, the French King and the Pope in 1552, the date of the first known production of the play (Lyndsay, *Satyre*, ed. Lyall, p. xiii). Lyndsay's chief focus throughout the play is on immediate political issues for Scotland, addressing such problems as Church abuses and corruption, the oppression of the poor through unjust taxes, and the failure to educate and support the lay community. Through Foly's sermon at the end, these contemporary local issues are set into a wider international and universal context of folly.

Foly's sermon is a very explicit example of foolery which shows clear influence from established European traditions, such as Brant's *Ship of Fools*. But all through the play, Lyndsay draws on a variety of traditions of folly to expose and challenge the political processes of his own time and country. He even includes an interruption of Parliament by a fool-figure, although unlike Jonny Marbles, the Westminster pie-thrower, Lyndsay's fools are safely contained within a dramatic performance. That framework of performance allows the spectators to enjoy and at times support the antics of his disruptive fools; it encourages the audience to reflect on the resonances of their *lèse majesté*, rather than being caught up into the immediate social disruption. It is worth exploring these resonances, as well as the mechanics of Lyndsay's fools' political challenges, in relation to the literary and dramatic folly traditions of the time. The *Thrie Estaitis* is naturally and rightly thought of in comparison to Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, Brant's *Ship of Fools*, *sotties* and other kinds of European folly literature.[7]

In his sermon at the end of the *Thrie Estaitis,* Foly projects onto the audience the biblical text so often associated with foolery ("Stultorum numerus infinitus"), as he tries to sell his hats to them. But the text also reflects back over the

---

6   Vulgate, *Ecclesiastes* 1:15. Later translations rendered the Hebrew text differently. For a preaching fool from Durer's woodcuts for Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (1497), see http://www.spaightwood-galleries.com/Media/Old_Masters/Durer/Durer_Fools/Durer_Fools_Preaching_Fool_97.jpg (accessed 9 January 2012).

7   These key works were available in Scotland in the mid-sixteenth century. The 1523 edition of Erasmus's *Stultitia Laus* was owned by a man who may well have been the schoolmaster of Cupar, Lyndsay's home town, at the time of the production of the *Thrie Estaitis* there in 1552. Alexander Barclay's English translation of Brant's *Ship of Fools* was owned by one John Chepman early in the sixteenth century. See Durkan and Ross, pp. 98, 176.

play itself, which is thick with fools of different kinds. In this, the *Thrie Estaitis* is closely linked to and quite probably influenced by French *sotties*. Scholars have often pointed out the analogies of Lyndsay's play in plot and characters, as well as in topic, both with the genre of the *sottie* and even with specific examples.[8] But more important than any particular parallel is the overall conception of folly itself and how that might be realised in dramatic mode. Heather Arden has a helpful analysis of the *sotties* with their focus on infinite folly; she points out that these dramas used fools to play a richly contradictory set of roles:

> [the] complex nature of the fool enabled the authors of the *sotties* to develop the three roles of evildoer, accuser, and victim. … The fool had the remarkable ability to represent any and all of the roles. (Arden, p. 163)

Arden's evil-doer fool dramatises "all the misguided, wrong-headed, silly, self-destructive behavior that mankind could devise". As victim, the fool represents "the simple-minded … the meek of the earth, and for this reason he came to stand for the downtrodden—the victims—of society" (p. 164). Finally, as accuser, the fool acts as the truth-teller, the revealer of wrong, because "he alone was given the right to speak his mind openly" (p. 163).

These conflicting roles map persuasively onto the characters and action of the *Thrie Estaitis*. Lyndsay's play presents the audience with a fertile, if at times confusingly varied and even contradictory cast of different kinds of fool. Some are wrongdoers—either mischievous or vicious. So Flattery, one of the three Vices who abuse King Humanitie, is explicitly presented as a fool, introducing himself to the audience:

> Se ye not Flatterie, your awin [own] fuill,
> That yeid [went] to mak this new array?
> Was I not heir with yow at Yuill? (ll. 629-31)

He is not only a classic fool, but speaks as a figure the audience might have expected to encounter during Christmas festivities. The chief villains of the play, the corrupt members of the Spirituality, are also, as in many *sotties*, eventually revealed as wearing fools' costumes underneath their clerical robes: as Henrie Charteris reported of the 1554 production, "thay denudit of thair upmaist garmentis, thay war fund bot verray fulis" (Preface to Lyndsay, *Warkis,* fol. +ii[r]).

8   See Mill, "Continental Drama"; Graf; Lyndsay, *Satyre*, ed. Lyall, pp. xxiii-iv; and Happé, pp. 101-2.

So vice—and in this play that means largely political vice—is folly. But this is also a play where vice is exposed and truth revealed by fools: Foly himself in his final sermon challenges and uncovers the foolish vices of all classes. More significantly, within the body of the play the character of John the Common-weill acts as the righteous accuser of the Spirituality. John the Common-weill does not wear the distinctive costume of the professional fool, but he embodies much of the manner and behaviour of folly. He bursts into the ceremonial dignity of the Parliament of the Three Estates to present his complaint, with a comic slapstick somewhat reminiscent of Jonny Marbles's pie-throwing. In rough, tattered clothes he emerges from the spectators, leaps over (or falls into) the stream, and greets the king with a cheerfully colloquial challenge to the formal etiquette of the assembly, and with a wise and fearless speaking of his mind against the powerful (ll. 2424-73). Theatrically, he carries some of the force of Marcolf, the comically wise and outspoken peasant-fool who challenges the intellectual wisdom of Solomon in the well-known medieval dialogue between Solomon and Marcolf.[9] So in the *Thrie Estaitis* folly is not just the wrong-doer, but also the challenger of wrong, the political truth-teller.

Finally, the Poor Man of Lyndsay's play, with his rags and comically forthright but helpless complaints against oppression, acts as the simple fool, the powerless victim of the Spirituality who is defended by John the Common-weill. There are even more types and examples of fools in the play, especially in the two farcical interludes in the Banns and in the interval. In the Banns, a sexually successful "Fuill" wins the young wife of a jealous old man from her many suitors, while in the interval a foolish Sowtar (shoemaker) and his wife are divorced by a fraudulent Pardoner in a farcical arse-kissing ceremony. Altogether this range of conflicting but interacting characters reinforce Foly's claim in his concluding sermon about the inescapable universality of folly. More particularly, they cast the whole dynamic field of politics as an arena of folly. Wise fools challenge the self-satisfied and corrupt fools who are in authority, and expose them to the innocent fools who are ruled by them, both on-stage and in the audience.

This powerful image of multivalent and all-embracing folly clearly relates to the wittily ambivalent traditions of classic fool literature. But it is not a purely literary conceit: in mid-sixteenth century Scotland, folly traditions were not

---

9   [T]*he Dyalogus … Salomon and Marcolphus.* Some of the sense of John the Common-weill confronting King Humanitie is captured in the image at http://marolf.org/photogallery/Fictional%20Characters/salomon%20with%20marcolfus%20and%20wife%20polycana.jpg (accessed 9 January 2012).

confined to literary or dramatic representation. Lyndsay and his audience were familiar with a wide range of festive fool activity and behaviour that itself often carried a political dimension. Folly practices seem to have embodied a recognised visual and metaphorical language that had a place in the real world of politics. These local practices also feed into the play, inflecting not only the action of the *Thrie Estaitis*, but also the likely audience response. They create a semantic ambience by which folly's intervention in politics on-stage can be recognised and interpreted in relation to the audience's experience of such activity in their own social and political lives. To explore how Lyndsay tapped into these cultural practices, I will highlight three areas of fool activity in sixteenth-century Scotland: the keeping of fools at court and in noble households; the practices of outspoken comic truth-telling in flytings and advice literature; and the traditions of the "Abbot of Unreason", the temporary mock-rulers who organised and governed festive civic entertainment.

II

The records of the Scottish royal court show how fools were maintained by the monarch right through the sixteenth century, as well as documenting the occasional patronage of fools belonging to other noble households.[10] Unfortunately, little information is recorded about what these fools actually did at court, or how they were considered.[11] Some were clearly "natural fools"—those with intellectual handicaps tended by carers, like Curry, a fool of James IV.[12] We find regular payments to "the lad that kepit Currye" (*Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*,[13] I: 275), and to "Curryis modir" (II: 104), as well as for food, drink, clothing and accommodation. Curry was later married to another natural fool, "Daft Anne" (III: 369). Yet we know very little about what he did to entertain the court. There is a payment "to the lityll fithelar callit Curryis fithelar" (*LHTA*, II: 103) which suggests performance of some kind. But Curry is held up to laughter in a poem of Dunbar's for twice shitting in his saddle, which suggests

---

10 For a selection of these records, see Mill, *Mediaeval Plays*, pp. 313-33.

11 For the difficulty in discovering evidence of fools' activities, see Southworth.

12 For discussion of the blurred distinction between "natural" and "artifical" fools, see Welsford, p. 119, and Cockett. For Curry, see Bawcutt, p. 59.

13 Henceforth abbreviated *LHTA*.

rather the comedy of unintended and undignified physical mishaps.[14] We are now, of course, uncomfortable with this kind of humour directed at this kind of person, which makes it difficult for us to assess its cultural function in its own time. Thomas More in *Utopia* articulates one contemporary attitude to such fools, which helps illuminate the issue:

> They sette great store by fooles. And as it is great reproche to do to annye of them hurte or iniury, so they prohibite not to take pleasure of foolyshnes. For that they thynke doth muche good to the fooles. And if any man be so sadde and sterne, that he cannot laughe nother at their wordes nor at their dedes, none of them be commytted to his tuition: for feare lest he would not ordre them gentilly and fauorably enough. (More, sig. N8[r-v])

This Utopian view of mutual benefit suggests that such fools were probably regarded as innocents whose incomprehension was a legitimate source of laughter because it revealed the innate folly of all human beings.

Later, stories were recorded of a Scottish natural fool and dwarf who is said to have served the court in the reign of Mary Queen of Scots—Jemy Camber, who is described as a "fatt Foole naturall".[15] In his collection *Foole vpon foole*, Robert Armin, himself a professional actor-fool in Elizabethan London, recounts Camber's story claiming that as a natural fool "his wit, indeed . . . is just none at all, but merry and pleasing" (sig. B4[r]), and that with his fat belly and diminutive stature "his very presence made the king much sport" (sig. B3[v]). Armin's tales suggest that this sport again consisted largely of physical practical jokes played against the uncomprehending fool: "How *Jemy* this Fat foole swet almost to death, and never knew the reason" (sig. C1[r]), or, more alarmingly, "How this Fat foole *jemy* was stung with nettles, and how after unknowen to himself, helped to make his owne grave" (sig. C3[r]).

Fools like these are certainly, in Arden's phrase, "innocent victims"; but the roughness of the jokes played on them suggests that they do not really function as individual objects of pity or sympathy, but rather as emblems of wider human uncomprehending foolishness. There is perhaps an interesting comparison to be made with, for example, Lyndsay's character of Pauper, a ragged and simple poor man who angrily but helplessly seeks redress from the courts. In the interval of

---

14   Dunbar gives another court fool, Sir Thomas Norny, a backhanded compliment, explaining that "He fyld [fouled] neuer sadell in his dais, / And Curry befyld tua [two]" (Dunbar, "Of Sir Thomas Norny" ["Now lythis off ane gentill knycht"], ll. 47-48 [I: 143]).

15   Armin, sig. B3[v]; see Billington, pp. 35-36.

the *Thrie Estaitis,* Pauper rudely climbs up into the King's empty throne, where he is trapped by the steward Diligence—who takes away his ladder, laughs at his unsophisticated lack of understanding, and castigates him as "the daftest fuill that ever I saw!" (l. 2015). The play clearly acknowledges Pauper as a victim who is both innocent and oppressed; yet this apparently does not demand reverential treatment either from the virtuous characters of the play or from the audience. Like Jemy Camber or Curry, the innocent fool may be acknowledged as blameless and even as oppressed, but is nonetheless a legitimate target of rough mockery and ridicule.

Not all court fools were "natural", but we know even less about the activities of the so-called "artificial fools". They are identified in the accounts largely in terms of their duties as messengers or other court workers, and it is often from other sources that we find they also functioned as fools.[16] On occasion they are dressed in more elaborate and expensive clothing than the known natural fools, a fact possibly suggesting more deliberate performance roles. John Bute, for example, in 1511 was provided with relatively costly red and yellow cloth to make "ane Coit of ye fassoun of ye sey wawis [sea waves]".[17] Clothing of this kind seems to have become satirically associated with performances involving foolishly extravagant court employees. In a 1540 interlude, which is generally thought of as a precursor to the *Thrie Estaitis*, we find that the three foolish, boasting courtiers are also dressed in elaborate parti-coloured red and yellow, colours which had by then become a visual reference to the livery colours of the Scottish royal court.[18] Such flamboyant clothing may also suggest the costume of Flattery in the *Thrie Estaitis*: he is a fool, dressed in "gay … new aray", who is also one of a group of three corrupt courtiers.[19] So it is possible that the court fools of this kind had already come to occupy a role of providing satiric commentary on the behaviour and excesses of the court, and that this is picked up in the two trios of courtly vices we find in the *Thrie Estaitis*. Both natural and artificial fools, then, appear to hold roles which in different ways expose the

16 John McCrery, for example, receives a number of payments for clothing, horses and unspecified duties in the Treasurer's Accounts 1525-32. He is identified as "fatuus" in the Household Books, and as a fool by Lyndsay in "The Complaint" (*Selected Poems*, p. 50, ll. 283-84).

17 *LHTA*, IV: 263. Sir Thomas Norny was given satin gowns in 1505 and 1506 (*LHTA*, II: 109, 307).

18 *LHTA*, VII: 276-77. For an account of the interlude, see Walker, pp. 125-38.

19 According to Arden, this "three-of-a-kind" trio is a motif commonly linked to the *sottie*: "Because of the prevalence of three-of-a-kind characters, I would argue that a short satiric play with a trio of similar characters is almost certainly a *sottie*" (p. 37).

failures of understanding and behaviour of the courtly household; both provide models which Lyndsay develops.

Apart from those designated and kept as fools, we find that other members of the Scottish court deliberately drew on traditions of folly, both in creating entertainment and for more serious purposes. There is a general sense that the sixteenth-century royal court of Scotland was less formal in manner, and more irreverently outspoken, than that of England. English commentators noted with surprise the freedom with which James VI was addressed by his subjects, and both James IV and James V were the subject of raucously outspoken poems about their sexual exploits.[20] The court apparently enjoyed flamboyantly farcical comedy, both physical and verbal, as we see in the virtuoso insults of the tradition of flyting, or the undignified slapstick of a poem like Dunbar's "Ane Dance in the Quenis Chalmer". Perhaps it is not surprising that in the enclosed world of the court this sort of disruptive foolery was sometimes used to proffer more serious political advice. Lyndsay himself gives us an excellent example of this. His "Answer to the Kingis Flyting" not only accuses the young James V of "fukkand lyke ane furious fornicatour" (l. 49), but offers a ludicrous picture of the king ruffling a kitchen maid, throwing her across a "stinking trough" and then weltering with her in the dregs of the overturned brewing vat. This sort of ridiculous sexual and (literally) filthy comedy is a characteristic of fool behaviour.[21] It is echoed in a story Foly tells on his entrance in the *Thrie Estaitis* about his encounter with an angry sow in a midden (ll. 4315-41); and it is more explicitly enacted by the Fool in the Banns farce who steals the key to the young wife's chastity belt (ll. 170-75). But Lyndsay's outrageous attack on his monarch is not only a joke. The poem also carries a serious criticism of James's irresponsible behaviour, even though it is couched in words and images that invite rudely bantering laughter. As king, not yet married and without heirs, James V is not only losing respect but risking the future stability of his country by such behaviour, says Lyndsay:

> Quharefor, tak tent, and your fyne powder spair,
> And waist it nocht, bot gyf ye wit weill quhair.
> …

---

20   See *Calendar of the State Papers*, IX: 707; Dunbar, "This hinder nycht", I: 245-47; and Lyndsay, "The Answer to the Kingis Flyting", *Selected Poems*, pp. 98-100.

21   http://www.britishmuseum.org/collectionimages/AN00062/AN00062616_001_l.jpg (accessed 9 January 2012).

And, speciallie, quhen that the well gois dry,
Syne can nocht get agane sic stufe to by. ("Answer to the Kingis Flyting", ll. 34-42)

This disruptive, ridiculing folly is certainly primarily to be enjoyed; but its humour also becomes the vehicle for political criticism.

In the *Thrie Estaitis*, the truth-telling John the Common-weill shares in this tradition of provoking disrespectful, foolish but critical laughter. Like Lyndsay himself with the young James V, John uses the tools of comic sexual humiliation to undermine and expose the powerful. Challenged to confess his faith in Holy Church before the Spirituality, he responds:

I trow *Sanctam Ecclesiam*—
But nocht in thir bischops nor thir freirs,
Quhilk will for purging of thir neirs [kidneys]
Sard [fuck] up the ta raw [one row] and doun the uther.
The mekill Devill resave the fidder [cartload]. (ll. 3037-41)

John's tone is less bantering, more fiercely critical, than Lyndsay's. But he uses the same mechanism of publicly inviting bawdy laughter against the politically irresponsible. The irreverent truth-teller foolishly and comically threatens the dignity of the powerful, exposing them as the real fools. John the Common-weill, in fact, uses the same techniques as had apparently been vividly demonstrated in real life in the late 1520s by one Alexander Furrour. Brought to examination for heresy, Furrour twisted his trial into a comical challenge to the adulterous cleric who had seduced his wife. His explicit sexual jokes not only exposed the corrupt hypocrisy of the clergy but re-defined his clerical judges as helplessly foolish butts of his performance.[22] Lyndsay co-opts this mode of political-theatrical intervention in John's attack on the Spirituality. As audience we are permitted to enjoy and participate in the bawdy language of folly, which is sanctioned by its use in exposing vice and challenging corruption.

Folly practices with a potentially political edge, therefore, seem to be familiar both in and beyond the royal court. But there is another more official institution established throughout Scotland at the time that demonstrates how widely embedded the language of folly also was in civic organisation. From well

22   See Knox, I: 18-19. For a penetrating and subtle exposition of the theatrical power of Furrour's challenge, see McGavin, pp. 20-25.

before the sixteenth century, it was the practice of many burghs to elect seasonal kings, who oversaw festivity, entertainment and civic ceremony for the year. These kings had many different names, but the commonest are terms that link directly to the practices of misrule and folly: the "Lord of Inobedience", the "Abbot of Na Rent", the "Abbot of Unrest" and—most commonly of all—the "Abbot of Unreason".[23] Abbots of Unreason were regularly chosen in burghs all across Scotland from at least the mid-fifteenth century: they are figures who sum up the rich tensions and ambivalence around the public practice of folly. They hold a significant municipal office, and were selected, paid and authorised by the burgh council; yet their titles openly associate them with foolery and a chal-lenge to authority and reason. These mock rulers were put in charge of a kind of licensed folly: a 1553 statute in Aberdeen reminded its abbots that their role was "halding of the guid toun in glaidnes and blythnes wyth dansis, farsis, playis and gamis in tymes convenyent" (Mill, *Mediaeval Plays*, p. 150). In this role the Abbots of Unreason were, paradoxically, supported by a tight legal bureaucracy: they were formally appointed, rewarded from council revenues, and given authority to enforce appropriate participation from their fellow-citizens. Men could be fined for failing to ride out in procession with the Abbot of Unreason on feast days. The office was in fact not always welcomed, largely because the respon-sibility, time and expense weighed heavily; various records survive of citizens trying to escape their appointment as Abbot of Unreason, apparently because of its burdensome duties.[24] This does not sound as though unreason or folly was a dominant element of the role.

But the official sanction and authority of the Abbots of Unreason was at times in tension with the disruptive, festive foolery they were appointed to promote. Their foolish excess might get out of hand: in outlining the duties of the role, Aberdeen had actually been attempting to rein in its Abbots, who had been sponsoring "our mony [too many] grit … ryetous [riotous] & sumptuous banketing … nother profitabill nor godlie" (Mill, *Mediaeval Plays*, p. 150). Even in their official activities, there were regular payments to citizens whose prop-erty had been damaged during the Abbots' events. Sir Walter Scott records a story from 1547 in which an official delivering letters of excommunication from St Andrews to Borthwick Castle was first ducked in the millpond by the Abbot

23   See Mill, *Mediaeval Plays*, pp. 21-33.
24   See Mill, *Mediaeval Plays*, pp. 220, 250-51.

of Unreason and then forced to eat the letters in a glass of wine.[25] The little we know of the official games the Abbots sponsored suggests that these too drew openly on folly traditions. One of their chief responsibilities was the May play or game, involving the participation of the citizens in celebrating the bringing home of summer. It is not clear how far these games involved scripted performance, but one speech survives from the presenter of such a May play—a dwarf called "Welth".[26] His performance routines are very much like those of the comic Vices of the *Thrie Estaitis* or even of Foly himself: in his monologue he tells a story of the adventurous journey he has taken to Edinburgh, gives a playfully fantastic introduction of himself and his ancestors, and all through enters into direct and intimate teasing interaction with the spectators.

The Abbot of Unreason, then, is a figure poised between authority and folly, between political power and a challenge to that power. The putting on of plays was part of the duty of the Abbot of Unreason, and these plays were supported by the authorities—just as the 1554 Edinburgh production of the *Thrie Estaitis* was financed by the burgh and patronised by the Queen Regent. But it seems that, as often as not, these plays and games presented themselves as festive, foolish and disruptive of the very authority that licensed and supported them—just as the *Thrie Estaitis* publicly but comically challenged both political and ecclesiastical authorities. This potential for fertile ambivalence was recognised at the time. The title of the Abbot of Unreason entered into the political discourse of the day, with the image of the role available as a means of conceptualising political relationships. So John Knox records a resonant sermon directed against the church establishment in the 1530s: he reports on a Friar who delivered a "sermon of the Abbot [of] Unreason, unto whom and whose laws; he compared the prelats of that age; for they were subdued to no laws, no more than was the Abbot [of] Unreason" (Knox, I: 17). Unreason, or folly, is subject to no laws; as such, it can offer a powerful image of corrupt authority. Knox, like Lyndsay, caricatures the "Prelats of that age" as fools who deny both social and spiritual laws. But by virtue of standing outside the law, Unreason is also the very instrument by which such corruption is exposed. Corrupt clergy are not only themselves images of the Abbots of Unreason, but may be challenged and exposed by others adopting the same role, as was shown in Knox's story of Alexander Furrour.

25   See Mill, *Mediaeval Plays*, pp. 28-29, n. 2.
26   "The Maner of the Crying of ane Playe", *The Asloan Manuscript*, II: 149-54.

III

This leads us yet again to the motif of universal folly: as Brueghel's image of the Feast of Fools proclaims, all are fools, so the best fools are those who accept their own folly.[27] Lyndsay exploits this image tellingly in the *Thrie Estaitis*: universal folly asserts the fundamental likeness between the ruler and the ruled, the corrupt and the innocent. All are fools, and "the number of fuillis ar infinite" (l. 4506). Lyndsay demonstrates how the use of this motif of universal folly is a means by which political antagonism can be played out, while still asserting the strength of the community as a whole. Kings and commoners, abusers and victims, the players and the audience, are all fools. In the final note of the play, Diligence leaves the audience with an invitation to share with him in folly behaviour:

> Now let ilk man his way avance:
> Let sum ga drink and sum ga dance.
> Menstrell, blaw up ane brawl of France:
> Let se quha hobbils best! (ll. 4663-71)

Laughter is not only a means to attack abuses but a unifying political force.

The *Thrie Estaitis* is an exceptionally powerful example of the uses of folly as a means of intervening in politics. Lyndsay clearly had an easy familiarity with the European literary and dramatic traditions of folly to which his own play contributes. Yet he is also working in a country in which folly practices were active in social and civic life. Both at court and in the burghs, these practices created a climate in which Folly might enter political discourse; these are deftly exploited both in the characters and situations of the *Thrie Estaitis* and in the relationship it establishes with its audience. Lyndsay thus draws on traditions which are European and local, humanist and popular, literary and social, creating a play whose sources and effects both vividly assert the universality of folly.

---

27   http://www.art-wallpaper.com/2684/Bruegel+Pieter/The+Feast+of+Fools-1024x768-2684.jpg (accessed 1 June 2012). The final verse of the picture's caption may be translated: "Yet there are numbskulls who behave themselves wisely / And grasp the true sense of numbskulling / Because they accept their own folly. / Their numbskulls will hit the pin best." See Moxey.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland. 12 vols. Edinburgh: H. M. General Register House, 1877.

Armin, Robert. *Foole vpon Foole, or Six sortes of sottes, etc.* London: [E. Allde] for William Ferbrand, 1600. STC 772.3.

The Asloan Manuscript. Ed. William Craigie. Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1923.

Calendar of the State Papers Relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, 1547-1603. 12 vols. Edinburgh: H. M. General Register House, 1898.

Dunbar, William. *The Poems of William Dunbar.* Ed. Priscilla Bawcutt. 2 vols. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1998.

[T]he dyalogus or co[m]munyng betwxt [sic] the wyse king Salomon and Marcolphus*. Antwerp: M. Gerard leeu, [1492]. STC 22905.

Knox, John. *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland.* Ed. William Croft Dickinson. 2 vols. London: Nelson, 1949.

Lindsay, David. *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis.* Ed. R. J. Lyall. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1989.

____. *Selected Poems.* Ed. Janet Hadley Williams. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2000.

____. *The Warkis of the Famous and Vorthie Knicht Schir Dauid Lyndesay of the Mont.* Edinburgh: Henrie Charteris, 1568.

More, Thomas. *A fruteful, and pleasant worke of the beste state of a publyque weale, and of the newe yle called Vtopia.* Trans. Ralph Robinson. London: Abraham Veale, 1551.

Secondary Sources

Arden, Heather. *Fools' Plays: a Study of Satire in the "Sottie".* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Bawcutt, Priscilla. *Dunbar the Makar.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.

Billington, Sandra. *A Social History of the Fool.* Brighton: Harvester, 1984.

Cockett, Peter. "Performing Natural Folly: The Jests of Lean Leanard and the Touchstones of Robert Armin and David Tennant". *New Theatre Quarterly* 22.86 (2006): 141-54.

Durkan, John, and Anthony Ross. *Early Scottish Libraries*. Glasgow: John S. Burns, 1961.

Graf, Claude. "Sottise et Folie dans *La Satire des Trois États*". *Recherches anglaises et américaines* 3 (1970): 5-21.

Happé, Peter. "Staging Folly in the Early Sixteenth Century: Heywood, Lindsay, and Others". *Fools and Folly*. Ed. Clifford Davidson. Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series, 22. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996. 73-111.

McGavin, John J. *Theatricality and Narrative in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

Mill, Anna J. "The Influence of the Continental Drama on Lyndsay's *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*". *Modern Language Review* 25 (1930): 425-42.

____. *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927.

Moxey, Keith P. F. "Pieter Bruegel and the Feast of Fools". *The Art Bulletin* 64.4 (1982): 640-46.

Southworth, John. *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*. Stroud: Sutton, 1998.

Walker, Greg. *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. London: Faber and Faber, 1935.