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## Mentions légales

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## *Laughing at Natural Fools*

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The sixteenth century saw an explosion of folly discourses, many of which invoked what has now become a familiar distinction between “natural” and “artificial” fools.<sup>1</sup> The natural fool was the individual with a mental impairment of some kind who might be kept as a source of entertainment, especially in noble or royal households, up until the earlier seventeenth century. For some wealthy households, portraits of such fools survive, suggesting the value that might be invested in them. The unimpaired artificial fool, on the other hand, consciously crafted witty discourse and entertaining behaviour for professional purposes. The natural fool was an object of interest to philosophers, commentators and theologians discussing the relation of folly to rationality, the interpenetration of wit and folly, and how we can all be defined as fools.<sup>2</sup> This essay, however, does not consider these more philosophical questions but looks at something rather simpler and more immediate—though also for us probably more unsettling: how did natural fools make people laugh, and what was the function or effect of that laughter?

- 1 The history of fools has been well documented in Welsford, Billington and Southworth.
- 2 For a survey of contemporary philosophical and legal discourse and reflection on the natural fool, see Andrews (parts 1 and 2).

These are not easy questions for us to discuss in the twenty-first century. We are looking across a marked cultural divide, since we no longer think it acceptable, or even understandable, to treat those with mental impairments as a source of laughter. This makes it difficult for us to evaluate this Tudor institution. Modern unease, even with reading about the ways natural fools were used for entertainment, makes it hard for us to think through and analyse the cultural and theatrical implications of their role. But it is a project worth undertaking, if we are to understand many of the wider ramifications of folly discourses, of cultural attitudes and of performance practices in the early modern period. This issue was already raised by one of the most influential early commentators on the Fool, Enid Welsford, who pointed out in her classic study: “My concern, however, is not with the ethical but with the aesthetic significance of the subject” (p. 26). Is it possible for us, also, to look beyond our own ethical terms and try to understand the aesthetic and cultural value that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society seems to have derived from their relationship with the natural fool?

We might begin from a revealing reflection on these values by Thomas More. In the *Utopia* he articulates one Tudor attitude to natural fools, which may help to illuminate the phenomenon. The Utopians, he says,

have singular delite & pleasure in foles. And as it is a greate reproche to do to annye of them hurte or injury, so they prohibite not to take pleasure of foolyshnes. For that, they thinke, dothe muche good to the fooles. And if any man be so sadde, and sterne, that he cannot laughe neither at their wordes, nor at their dedes, none of them be committed to his tuition: for feare least he would not intreate them gentilly and favorably enough: to whom they should brynge no delectation (for other goodness in them is none) muche lesse anye profite shoulde they yelde him. (fol. 96<sup>v</sup>)

This may seem to us a conflicting view: fools are to be protected and treated kindly; but pleasure at their limitations and laughter at their words and deeds is not only legitimate and encouraged, but understood as beneficial to both parties. Men who cannot take such pleasure are seen as incomplete human beings, while laughter is apparently not recognised as humiliating or aggressive to the fools. This is, of course, a Utopian view, with all the ironies that may involve, although we should remember that More himself kept a natural fool who by all accounts was well-loved and valued within his household.<sup>3</sup> In spite of their ambivalent

3 For an account of More's fool, Henry Patenson, see Hall.

context, More's words suggest that laughing at natural fools should not be easily dismissed as simply callous or barbaric; it could be an ethically, and certainly a theatrically, more complex response than we are now likely to believe.

From this starting point, I aim to explore the contemporary discourse around the natural fool as entertainer. That discourse is sometimes explicit, as commentators reflect on the implications of natural folly; but more often it is only implicit, arising incidentally from accounts and descriptions of fools and their activities. I will not pursue the moral or allegorical paradigms by which the folly discourses sometimes interpreted fools as symbolic figures. Rather, I will focus on what was understood as the immediate pleasure or entertainment value they offered, how spectators judged and responded to that pleasurable encounter, and what they thought they (and perhaps the fools themselves) gained from it. While there is some discursive reflection around the figure of the natural to draw on, my focus will be primarily on some texts that give us raw material—texts that describe or enact these encounters, recording the natural fool in action. Central here are works by Robert Armin, well-known as a professional actor with the Lord Chamberlain's (later the King's) Men specialising in fools' parts.<sup>4</sup> In 1600, Armin first published a work called *Foole Vpon Foole*, which offered vivid brief histories of the lives and habits of six real-life fools. Armin lays stress on the fact that his subjects are all naturals: "'tis no wonder for me to set downe fooles naturall, when wise men before theyle be unprofitable, will seeme fooles artificiall" (sig. A2<sup>r</sup>). His selection of fools ranges from the iconic Will Somer, Henry VIII's fool, to fools kept by contemporary gentry or in hospitals, with some of whom Armin claims personal acquaintance. The work seems to have been popular: a second edition appeared in 1605, and in 1608, Armin published an expansion, *A Nest of Nimmies*, addressed specifically to university students.<sup>5</sup> *Foole Vpon Foole* is an invaluable source of information, not only about the fools and their behaviour, but about their relationship with those who patronised them, the ways spectators reacted to them and the responses that Armin solicits from his readers.

4 For a biography of Armin, see Wiles, pp. 136–63.

5 This version introduces an allegorical, moralised frame for Armin's fool stories, a dialogue between a personification of The World and a supposed philosopher, Sotto. Between them these debaters offer satirically learned allegorised interpretations of the behaviour and significance of the fools in the inset stories. I am avoiding this version, in order to concentrate on Armin's direct presentation of the natural fools themselves.

Much of the pleasure of Armin's histories lies in the distinctive personalities and behaviour of the six fools he describes. Whether these arise, as he frequently suggests, from personal acquaintance with the fools or with those who report their stories, or whether they are simply creations of his lively and unaffected style, this conveys an illusion of authenticity that is an important feature of the work's appeal. But is it possible to draw from the particular portraits any broader principles about natural fools? A place to start may be the "contents list" he provides on his title page:

Six sortes of Sottes

A flat foole		A fatt foole
A leane foole	and	A cleane foole
A merry foole		A verry foole.

He identifies his six fools not, initially, by name, but by largely physical characteristics. He then opens each history with a verse description that focuses first and foremost on the generally misshapen physical appearance of the fool. Of Jack Oates, the flat fool, he explains: "His upper lip turned in, but that was stranger, / His underlip so big t'might sweepe a manger" (sig. A3<sup>r</sup>); of Jemy Camber, the fat fool: "A yarde hye and a nayle no more his stature . . . / One eare was bigger than the other farre: / His fore-head full, his eyes shind like g [*sic*] flame, / His noze flat and his beard small yet grew square" (sig. B3<sup>v</sup>); of Lean Leanard: "A little head, high forehead, one squint eye, / And as he goes he holdes his necke awry: / One hand stands crooked and the other right" (sig. C4<sup>r</sup>). These descriptions draw us into immediate and intimate physical proximity to the fools; they offer their bodily idiosyncrasies both as a marker of identity and as an accepted source of fascination and humour. As Armin remarks of Jemy Camber, his "very presence made the King much sport" (sig. B3<sup>r</sup>). Pictures of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century fools show similar interest and pleasure taken in representation of the detail of their physical appearance.

This focus on the body informs one important strand of the humour and entertainment generated by the natural fools in Armin's tales. Apart from fascination with their features, undignified physical mishaps are a commonly repeated source of laughter, from Jack Miller, the clean fool, who burned off his beard and eyebrows by thrusting his head into a hot oven in search of pies, to Lean Leanard, who almost choked himself on the feathers of his master's favourite hawk, which he killed and tried to eat raw. The gross physicality of the body

is a key feature in generating laughter at the natural. Humour like this offers a Bakhtinian delight in the body as distorted, leaky, reductive. This is intensified in the case of the natural fool, who has less control over his physical faculties and impulses. Armin emphasises, for example, how several of his fools are “dribling ever”, with the natural’s “muckinder”, or handkerchief, always prominent.<sup>6</sup>

The cheerful acceptance of the natural fool as a physical spectacle presumably underlies the common impulse to play practical jokes on him. Unlike the professional fool, the natural is significantly more likely to be the target than the initiator of jests. Many of the tales report laughter provoked by deliberately setting the fool up as the victim of a trick which results in physical indignity or pain. So, for example, in one jest someone spreads butter mixed with itching powder under the saddle of Jemy Camber, the fat Scots fool. Armin explains:

The trotting of his Mule made the mingled confection lather so, that it got into his breeches, and workt up to the crowne of his head, I to the sole of his foote, and so he sweate profoundlye: still he wipt and he wipt, sweating more and more, they laught a good to see him in that taking. (*Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. Cr<sup>r</sup>)

Jests of this kind are rarely simply private or personal interactions between trickster and fool. They are generally set up or exploited as deliberate performances: the discomfiture of the fool is staged to an audience, either contrived as, or turned into, a spectacle. Jack Miller’s burned face is a particularly rich example of such performance. Armin reports that the fool was persuaded to “thrust in his head into the hot Oven” by the boy actress of a visiting company of players, who “dressed them in the Gentlemans kitchin, & so entred through the Entry into the Hall”. After his painful accident, “Jacke was in a bad taking with his face, poore soule, and lookt so ugly, and so strangely” that the boy, making his own first entrance as the lady in the play, was overcome with laughter at the memory “and could goe no further”. When he explained to the audience what had put him off his stride, Jack was called out on stage so that all the spectators could share the joke: “but he so strangely lookt, as his countenance was better then the Play” (sig. D3<sup>v</sup>). This accident, painful and disfiguring to Jack, is not only a source of uncontrollable laughter to the boy actor who initiated it; it is then staged to the audience in the hall in order to extend the pleasure of the jest. A network of performance events surrounds the incident, culminating in the spectacle of

6 See *Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. D3<sup>r</sup>, and *A Nest of Nimnies*, sig. Gr<sup>r</sup>.

the battered body of the fool itself both becoming and outdoing the play. Many of the incidents Armin describes, whether involving spontaneous actions by the fools or tricks played upon them, are similarly “staged” to public view, perceived as or transformed into performance and spectacle.

There is a good deal in this that we are likely to find troubling today: laughter at physical appearance and deformity, painful jokes practised against those who are unable to defend themselves, and the readiness to turn both physical and mental impairment into spectacle. It may be worth looking at the contemporary discourses of folly to see if they can help us to understand more clearly what such jests might have meant and how they might have been received in their own time. One place to start is with discussions not of folly itself, but of laughter. Aristotle’s influential explanation of laughter was much repeated throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period, and it has an obvious connection here: in the *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that we laugh at “some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive” (Section 5). The body of the natural fool could be understood as fitting this category: the fool is physically deformed, and though he himself may suffer bodily pain, it is of a relatively minor kind which does not affect others. However, Aristotle’s definition implies a certain distance and superiority in the spectator which does not seem fully to account for the cheerful laughter Armin describes. More’s report of the Utopians laughing at fools also suggests that laughing *at* the defective or ugly is not, or at least should not be, quite what is happening in these encounters. He explains: “To mocke a man for his deformitie, or for that he lacketh anye parte or lymme of his bodye, is counted greate dishonestye and reproche, not to him that is mocked, but to him that mocketh” (fol. 96<sup>v</sup>). While More fully accepts that the fool’s body may generate permissible laughter, he appears to distinguish this from the cruel “mockery” at deformity.

There may, then, be other factors at play, beyond Aristotle’s definition. Early modern analysts tend to emphasise laughter as itself a radically physical phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Erica Fudge quotes Laurent Joubert’s *Traite du Ris* (1579), which tells us that when laughter

goes on for a long time the veins in the throat become enlarged, the arms shake, and the legs dance about, the belly pulls in and feels considerable pain; we cough, perspire, piss, and

7 See Fudge for a full discussion.



besmirch ourselves by dint of laughing, and sometimes we even faint away because of it.  
(trans. Gregory David De Rocher; cited by Fudge, p. 280)

Laughter is profoundly and even grotesquely rooted in the body. Joubert's description, in fact, echoes the very kinds of physical features and actions Armin describes in his fools. It might almost seem as though the naturals not only provoke laughter in others, but embody laughter itself. Certainly, hilarity seems to have been commonly accepted not just as a reaction *to* fools, but as a symptom or behaviour *of* fools. William Phiston, in his conduct book, *The Schoole of Good Manners*, translated from French in 1595, points out that "To laugh at every thing, betokeneth a foole"; he advises young men not to "stirre and shake thy body in laughing". Fools themselves, he explains, link laughter grossly to the body: "These are wordes of fooles to say: I was like to be pisse my selfe with laughing: I had almost burst with laughing: I was like to haue died with laughing: or I had almost sounded [swooned] with laughing" (sig. B7<sup>v</sup>-B8<sup>v</sup>). Through laughter, the gross physicality of the fool himself is actually reflected into those who laugh at him.

One of Armin's stories demonstrates the interdependence of this process of mutual laughter especially effectively. Jack Miller was a natural with a speech impediment, who was often asked to perform at feasts. At one, he "began in such manner to speake with driveleing and stuttering, that they began mightily to laugh". One demure and straitlaced gentlewoman, in attempting to suppress her own laughter at Jack ("because shee would not seeme too immodest with laughing"), found herself erupting in a fart. To her blushing embarrassment, this was quickly detected by the company, and "this jest made them laugh more". The company then "so hartily laught" that one old gentlewoman fell into a fit, and "shee was nine or tenne daies ere she recovered". Physical mishap and laughter spread through the company in escalating delight, gradually drawing everyone into the whirlpool. As Armin concludes: "Thus simple Jack made mirth to all, made the wisest laugh, but to this day gathered little wit himselfe" (*Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. Er<sup>v</sup>). It is clear that the fool is understood as not only laughable himself, but the cause of both laughter and laughableness in others. Laughing at the reductive physicality of the natural can draw the spectator into the fool's own sphere, partly dissolving the sense of separation and hierarchical superiority between the two that initiated the jest.

However, it was not only the physical that provoked laughter. As More pointed out, the "sad and stern" man "cannot laughe neither at their words, nor

at their dedes”. The naturals were rarely capable of the conscious or sophisticated verbal wit of the artificial fool, although some of the high-functioning natural fools like Will Somer were reported to be valued for their repartee. Yet many of them did offer verbal comedy or even wisdom. Such verbal entertainment tends to be of one of two kinds: either the fools’ words reveal their laughable lack of comprehension of social and intellectual skills; or they may be valued for their truth-telling, their inability to use words to deceive, to flatter or to lie. Lack of understanding is central to many stories of naturals. Jemy Camber was apparently renowned for misunderstanding and misuse of words: one “marvelous hot day: O says *Jemy* how colde the weather is (so wise hee was that hee scrace [*sic*] knew hot from colde)” (Armin, *Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. Cr’). John i’the Hospital, a natural fool who lived at Christ’s Hospital and was personally known to Armin, “was of this humour: aske him what his coate cost him, he would say a groate: what his cap, band or shirt cost, all was a groate, aske what his beard cost, and still a groate” (sig. F2’). Laughter seems to be prompted by the obvious naivety and lack of understanding such words betray.

Armin gives us a vivid example of how such incomprehension might be deliberately staged as entertainment in a scene from his play, *The History of the Two Maids of More-Clacke* (1609). The play has a significant part for John i’the Hospital, a part which Armin appears to have composed for himself to play. Sir William Vergir, an affectionate patron of the natural fool, sets him up in a performance for sport, to demonstrate how he “Utters much hope of matter, but small gaine” (vii.140 [p. 129]). Summoning John, he tells his dinner guests that they will hear a schoolboy “Aske him [John] such questions as his simplenes / Answeres to any: sirra let me heare ye” (vii.146-47 [p. 130]). The boy then “apposes” John with a mock schoolroom catechism:

*Boy.* *John*, how many parts of speech be there?  
*John.* Eight, the vocative, and ablative, caret nominativo O.  
*Boy.* What say you to reddish [*radish*] *Jacke*?  
*John.* That it does bite. Ha, ha, ha.  
 .....  
*Boy.* I’le give thee a point *Jack*, what wil’t do with it?  
*John.* Carri’t home to my nurse.  
*Boy.* I’le give thee a fooles head *Jack*, what wilt to do with it?  
*John.* Carri’t home to my nurse. (vii.146-64 [p. 130])

Similar delight is generated at the uncomprehending answers of the natural fool to simple classroom propositions in John Redford's *Wit and Science*, where Idleness attempts to teach the natural fool Ignorance to read.<sup>8</sup> Both plays stage performances of the apposition which invite laughter, both at the natural's incomprehension and at his patent inability to learn any better.

Like most of the laughter at fools, this kind of joke may seem both obvious and deliberately non-intellectual. But it is worth exploring how it was theorised at the time, how laughter at failures of understanding was thought to work.<sup>9</sup> There is presumably a significant element of self-congratulation involved, as the spectators recognise the gap between the natural's skills and their own. Hobbes's famous characterisation of laughter is apposite: "The passion of Laughter is nothyng else but a suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others" (cited by Skinner, p. 155). We can congratulate our own cleverness in contrast to the natural's incomprehension. Armin himself at times acknowledges and encourages just this sense of superiority, celebrating our difference from the fools we laugh at. When he introduces us to Leane Leanard, for example, he explains that his purpose in describing him is "that people seeing the strange workes of God, in his differing creatures, we that have perfect resemblance of God, both in sence and similytude, may the better praise his name, that we differ from them whose humors we read, see and heare" (*Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. C4<sup>v</sup>).

Yet this pious explanation does not seem entirely to account for the apparent mixture of emotions Armin describes in these interactions. The natural's comical ignorance involves the less "glory to ourselves" in contemptuous comparison to him, because he is not responsible for it and can do nothing to change it. More, yet again, in his discussion of fools remarks how unwise it is to "imbrayde anye man of that as a vice, that was not in his power to eschewe" (*Vtopia*, fol. 96<sup>v</sup>). It is no glory to us to be cleverer than the natural, because he cannot learn to be other than he is. An early seventeenth-century sermon preached on the death of a famous Pomeranian fool, Hans Miesko, explains almost admiringly how fools cannot "be influenced or corrected, neither with words nor with deed, neither

8 See Twycross.

9 For discussion of varying early modern theories of laughter see Skinner, as well as Steggle, pp. 11-24 (chap. 1).

with threats nor with punishment. They stay as they are.”<sup>10</sup> Laughter at the natural’s ignorance is therefore not simply in scorn of his willfulness or laziness; it is not critical or satirical. It is perhaps revealing that Armin’s descriptions of the naturals’ patrons and guardians suggest that they frequently treated their charges like small children, acknowledging the fools’ lack of responsibility for their actions with a combination of discipline and affection. John i’the Hospital’s nurse in *The Two Maids of More-Clacke* speaks to him in just this way: “Wipe your nose, fie a sloven still, looke ye be mannerly, hold up your chinne, let me see ye make your holiday legge, so my chucking, that’s a good lambe, do not cry” (vii.197-200). John’s ignorance is presented as charming rather than culpable, his performances laughed at but also congratulated. This is not quite the same as glorying in the fool’s inferiority. Quentin Skinner alerts us to alternative Renaissance positions on laughter, one of which locates it not in scornful superiority but in joy and pleasure. In particular, he cites a number of writers who link laughter to affectionate observation of the behaviour of children: Italian commentators observe that “we often laugh and show our joy when we meet . . . our children”; or “a father and mother receive their little children with laughter and festivity” (Skinner, p. 435). Laughter at the natural fool seems sometimes motivated at least in part by this kind of affectionate pleasure.

These reactions may even be engineered, using the fool’s lack of comprehension or discrimination, to create a spectacle of childlike delight. Jemy Camber, for example, is several times described as being tricked by his masters into believing that he has successfully run at the ring, or won a race up the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, when of course he was capable of no such thing. The king and lords who set up the deceptions are said to derive great enjoyment not so much from the tricks played upon Jemy as from his pride in his own supposed achievements: “It was sport enough for the King a month after to heare him tell it” (Armin, *Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. C3<sup>r</sup>). The jest depends on the gap between the king’s understanding and the fool’s; but the point seems to have been not simply to expose and laugh at the natural’s limitations or ignorance, but to enjoy his celebration of himself.

10 Cited by Bernuth, p. 250: “nicht einreden und corrigiren, weder mit Worten noch der that / weder mit drawn noch straffen / bleiben wie sie sein.” I am grateful to Dr Sabine Rolle for translations of quotations from this sermon.

These mixed responses may underlie a general readiness to enjoy transgressive behaviours and displays of ignorance on the part of the fools, because they are recognised as blameless. This notion of blamelessness, of the harmlessness both of the naturals and of the laughter they provoke, is especially strong in recorded reactions to the fool: “this innocent Idiot that never harmed any” (Armin, *Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. Fr<sup>v</sup>). Accounts often emphasise the specific value of the fools’ function to lighten care with harmless fun, especially for those who themselves carried heavy responsibilities. Hans Miesko was praised because, the preacher Cradelius remembers, “with his presence [and his] entertaining talk of adventures he drove out many and varied melancholy and sad thoughts from those who bore a heavy burden”.<sup>11</sup> Will Somer is similarly frequently presented as having an important role in managing the moods of Henry VIII. Armin repeats one incident in which “the King upon a time being extreame melancholy & full of passion, all that Will Somers could do, wold not make him merry” (*Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. E3<sup>v</sup>). Somer is then remembered as having staged a series of what are plainly, and probably deliberately, rather meaningless jests to gradually lure the king back into a good humour. The fool can thus offer a legitimate escape from responsibility, from intellectual and emotional demands. His harmless humour might therefore have a valuable moral and social function.

This is of course part of the natural’s recognised status as the “innocent”, the other term which is often used to identify him. The natural fool is morally innocent because he does not have the wit to make ethical judgements, or thus to sin. This is another feature which links him to the child. In John Heywood’s *Witty and Witles*, a dramatised debate about fools, the advocate for the natural fool explains:

Wher God gyvythe no dys[c]ernyng God takethe none acownte;  
 In whyche case of acownt the sot dothe amownt,  
 For no more dysernythe the sott at yeres thre score  
 Then thynosent borne wythe in yeres thre before. (ll. 345-48)

The fool, like the infant, is incapable of “discerning”. As the play explains, this innocence lies at the root of the natural’s spiritual advantage over others, an advantage that counteracts his impairment in this life, which is his certainty of

11 Cited by Bernuth, p. 248: “mit seiner gegenwart / kurtzweiligen Ebentheirlichen geschwetz und vornehmen unter den schweren Regiments unnd Haussorgen viele unnd mancherley Melancholische und trawrige gedanken vertrieben.”

salvation. Incapable of sin, the natural is thus incapable of damnation: “the wytyles ys sewer of salvashyon” (l. 357). His innocent lack of discernment equally accompanies the general perception that the natural fool cannot deceive and cannot lie. The sermon on Hans Miesko praises him for embodying “the common saying: fools and children usually tell the truth”.<sup>12</sup> This kind of innocence is presumably one foundation for the “wise fool” so fascinating to the Tudor stage. The natural, it is assumed, can see truth undistorted by the complexities of deception, imagination or intellect, even if he cannot fully understand its implications.

Armin’s real-life fools, in fact, rarely if ever display this sort of unconscious wisdom, although the traditional tales of Will Somer suggest that he, like Hans Miesko, was certainly remembered as having had this capacity. But Armin’s stories suggest that the natural’s fundamental innocence was recognised by spectators, and might at times contribute to the pleasure taken in their performances. Innocence makes it possible for onlookers to laugh at behaviour that in a non-fool would be culpable or annoying rather than funny. Spectators are often credited with recognising and accepting the natural’s lack of malicious intent, thus allowing them to enjoy what would otherwise be unacceptably unsociable or challenging behaviour. An anecdote of Jack Oates shows how this might operate. Jack one day stole a quince pie that was being made with great effort and expense for a special feast for his master, Sir William. The pie was hot, and Jack ran away and “leapes into the Moate up to the arme-pittes, and there stood eating the Pye” (Armin, *Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. B2<sup>v</sup>). When this was reported to Sir William and his guests, “they laught and ran to the windows to see the jest”. After a furious exchange between Jack and the Cook, the pie was eaten and the fool came out of the moat. Yet in spite of the loss of the pie, Jack was not held accountable or punished, and laughter remained the dominant response to the spectacle: “the Knight and the rest all laught a good at the jest, not knowing how to mend it . . . to chide him was to make worse of things then twas, and to no purpose neyther” (sig. B3<sup>r</sup>). The innocence of the fool excuses the theft, and in fact encourages Sir William to accept it as a jest against himself.

While the innocence of the fool could provoke this kind of tolerant laughter, that response was closely tied to an evaluation of his mental incapac-

12 Cited by Bernuth, p. 248: “das gemeine Sprichwort: Narren und Kinder reden gemeinlich die Wahrheit.” Modern explanations of mental impairment recognise similar traits as characteristic of various conditions: for example, we are encouraged to understand the social difficulties experienced by those with autism as arising from an inability to lie, or to understand anything but literal truth.

ity. This could subtly but significantly affect the perception of his behaviour as either entertaining or insulting. Another anecdote of Jack Oates illustrates this very precisely. A very eminent nobleman came to visit Sir William, whose wife “as is the Courtly custome, was kist of this Noble man” (Armin, *Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. A4<sup>v</sup>). Jack Oates immediately started up and boxed the nobleman’s ear: “knaue quoth hee kisse Sir Willies wife?” Sir William was mortified and ordered Jack to be whipped, “but the kinde Noble man knowing simplicity the ground of his error, would not suffer it”. At this point, then, the fool’s lack of understanding excuses his behaviour, allowing it to be forgiven and even laughed at as innocent. But the story then has a revealing sequel. Armin reports that “Jacke seeing they were sad, and hee had done amisse, had this wit in simplicity to shaddow it”. He approached the Earl with an attempt at deliberately witty wordplay. Shaking the nobleman’s hand, he apologised for his mistake, “knowing not [y]our eare from your hand being so like one another: Jacke thought he had mended the matter, but now he waa [*sic*] whipt indeede and had his payment altogether” (sig. A4<sup>v</sup>). This anecdote highlights very exactly the boundaries of the licence allowed to the natural fool. When his invasive truth-telling behaviour is spontaneous, and understood as springing from natural innocence or simplicity, it can be tolerated and even enjoyed. But if it is seen as conscious—when Jack attempts to perform the artificial fool’s crafted mockery to manipulate others and their opinion of him—it becomes culpable. Once he strays beyond his natural limitations, he loses his licence; there is no laughter, and he is held responsible and punished for insolence.<sup>13</sup>

From the various ways in which the natural fools are recorded as generating laughter, it is plain that they provoked mixed and sometimes conflicting responses of scorn and affection, superiority and identification. The same conflicts can be seen in the broader social attitudes that form the context for the entertainment role of the fools. It is undeniable that there appears to be a general social acceptance of aggressive behaviour towards natural fools. Heywood’s *Witty and Witles* is particularly graphic about this. One character asks,

Who cumth by the sott, who cumth he by,  
That vexyth hym not somewey usewally?

13 Armin emphasises this difference in another tale which sets Jack Oates against a deliberate jester: “Here you have heard the difference twext a Flat foole natural, and a Flat foole artificiall, one that had his kinde, and the other who foolishly followed his owne minde” (*Foole Vpon Foole*, B2<sup>r</sup>).

Some beate hym, some bob hym,  
Some joll hym, some job hym,  
Some tugg hym by the heres,  
Some lugg hym by the eares  
.....  
Not evyn mayster Somer the Kyngs gracys foole  
But tastythe some tyme some nyys of new schoole. (ll. 29-34, 41-44)

Heywood implies that it is normal for people to torment natural fools. He suggests that even the most valued and highly patronised of household fools can expect a degree of casual violence.

More, in spite of his own affection and tolerance for naturals, confirms this social response. In *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, he tells a story of his own fool, Henry Patenson, who had accompanied him on a visit to Brussels. The anecdote is perhaps the more revealing because it is not told in order to illustrate any point about attitudes to naturals; it is rather introduced as a playful allegorical example to help explain an issue of theological controversy. The treatment of the fool is incidental rather than central to the story. More records that, out in the streets, Patenson was observed by the passers-by in Brussels, some of whom “caught a sporte in angryng of hym / and out of dyvers corners hurled at hym suche thynges as angred hym, and hurte hym not” (II: 900). In response, he tells us, Patenson collected stones, “not gunstonys, but as harde as they”, proclaimed that those who had not tormented him should leave, and then threw back his stones against the crowd, inflicting some bloody injuries. Patenson’s stone-throwing is then interpreted as an allegory of the unjust exertion of power, based on the jest that although the fool had excused himself for his indiscriminate retaliation by warning the innocent in the crowd to leave before he hurled his missiles, he could not realise that they did not understand English. More raises no questions about the tormenting of the natural and his angry response, which form the context and background for this parable; he passes no judgement on either the crowd’s or Patenson’s behaviour. Mutual aggression seems to be expected and tolerated, reported as familiar and attracting no particular reproach.

Apart from such everyday random violence, the household fool might also expect physical punishment, even for faults he might not understand. As Wolsey is reported to have reminded Will Somer, “A rod in the schoole, / And a whip for the foole / Is alwayes in season” (*Pleasant Historie*, sig. C1<sup>v</sup>). Armin’s stories of fools certainly confirm that rough treatment is both normal, and accept-



ably productive of laughter, even from kindly and protective patrons. He tells a sad tale of Jack Miller, who, entranced by the clown in a company of visiting players, ran after them across a frozen river. Although he got safely across, he was scolded for doing something so dangerous. At this, “he considered his fault, and knowing faults should be punished, he entreated Grumball the clowne whom he so deerey loved to whip him but with rosemary, for that he thought wold not smart: but the Players in jest breecht him till the bloud came which he tooke laughing: for it was his manner ever to weepe in kindness, and laugh in extreames” (*Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. D4<sup>v</sup>). Violence, along with laughter, seems to be accepted by both sides as part of the contract between the fool and his protectors.

On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence of apparently real and deep affection of masters for fools. This is attested from many quarters, and Armin is explicit about the intimacy often involved. His narratives are full of phrases asserting, for example, “he loved the foole above all, and that the household knew” (*Foole Vpon Foole*, sig. Br<sup>r</sup>); “the Knight . . . made no small account of his wel-faire” (sig. B2<sup>v</sup>); “though the Gentleman loved his hauke, yet he loved the foole above” (sig. D2<sup>r</sup>); “many . . . so much loved him, that they were loath to disease him” (sig. E2<sup>r</sup>). Such love is apparently not only a personal idiosyncrasy of warm-hearted individuals; it is asserted in some discussions of folly as the appropriate response to the innocent. Hans Miesko’s sermon urges: “one should show [fools] goodness and love, take them in, host, clothe, feed them . . . protect, shield and defend them, and not abandon them even at the time of death.”<sup>14</sup> This affection, as Armin’s anecdotes reveal, often plays significantly into the ways in which the fool’s behaviour was understood, valued and laughed at.

This mixture of aggression and affection, contempt and delight that informs social attitudes to these fools helps us to estimate the value that was placed on the laughing encounters with them. On the one hand, scornful laughter at the deficiencies of the fool justifies violence against him and should sharpen the spectator’s gratitude for his own capacities. Hans Miesko’s sermon tells us that by fools “we are reminded of sin, of the wrath of God and his punishment as well as of the gifts of soul and body, which we received from God, so

14 Cited by Bernuth, p. 251: “sondern ihnen viel mehr alles gutes und liebes bezeigen / sie aufnehmen / Herbergen / Kleiden / Speisen . . . sie schutzen / beschirmen und verteidigen / auch im Tod nicht verlassen.”

that we use them properly”.<sup>15</sup> On the other, affectionate laughter at the harmless simplicity of the fool may acknowledge his superior innocence and spiritual grace. The sermon also claims that the fool’s “natural lack of reason, and spiritual wisdom” teaches us as much as “the life of one of the wisest, most talented and respected of men”.<sup>16</sup> The sermon thus suggests opposing interpretations of the fool, yet in both laughter depends on, and reinforces, the sense of difference, of our separation from the natural who is either less, or more, than ourselves. Yet Armin’s accounts suggest that at times laughter could work to draw the spectators into a shared identity with the natural. We may be invited or even compelled to recognise the fool’s deficiencies, mental and physical, as our own; laughter can establish a bond rather than a division. So the natural may not be different from us, but intensely and comically the same. A famous sixteenth-century epitaph for a fool laments:

Lobe, God have mercye on thy innocent sowle,  
 Whyche amonges innocentes I am sure hath a place,  
 Or ellys my sowle ys yn a hevy case;  
 Ye, ye, and moo foolys mony one,  
 For folys be alyve, Lobe, though thou be gone.  
 .....  
 Nowe God have mercye on us alle,  
 For wyse and folyshe alle dyethe;  
 .....  
 God amend alle folys that thynke themselfe none.<sup>17</sup>

This may, of course, record a romanticised view, tinged with nostalgia and a reverent attitude towards mortality. But it does confirm that laughing at natural fools can be understood to have included responses significantly more complicated than simple mockery. In the fool, the spectacle of difference and deficiency combines with and plays against a recognition of the innate and shared folly of all human beings.

15 Cited by Bernuth, p. 251: “dz wir dadurch nicht alleine erinnert werden der sunde / Gottes Zorn und strafe / sondern der gaben des gemuthes und Leibes / die wir von Gott empfangen haben / das wir sie recht gebrauchen.”  
 16 Cited by Bernuth, p. 249: “seinen naturlichen unverstandt und Geistliche Weissheit”; “als an einem der weisesten hochbegabtesten unnd wolverdienensten Mannern.”  
 17 “Elegy on Lobe, Henry VIII’s fool”, pp. 44-46.

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