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## Mentions légales

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## *“These six parts of folly”: Robert Armin’s Moralising Anatomy of Fools’ Jests*

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### *Introduction*

“Pardon my folly in writing of folly” are words printed at the end of a book published in 1600, whose author used the pseudonym “Clonnico de Curtanio Snuffe”. Eight years afterwards the same text was reprinted with additions and minor changes, but on this occasion a clear authorship was declared: the writer of what followed was Robert Armin, at the time not only a well-known actor with the King’s Men, but also a sharer in the Globe theatre. *Foole upon Foole*, the title of the first edition, was changed to *A Nest of Ninnies*, while the major additions consisted of a philosophical (or pseudo-philosophical) frame in a—generally speaking—dialogic form, the protagonists of which are Sotto and the World, and of short paragraphs interspersed here and there within the six sections of the first edition.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the epigraph on the title page (“Stultorum plena sunt omnia”) seems to connect this new version of Armin’s work to the Erasmian tradition of *The Praise of Folly*, but, on the other, the frame and some speeches

I Armin’s two works will be abbreviated in references as *FuF* and *NoN*. Quotations from both texts will be drawn from the facsimile edition (Armin, *Collected Works*). All quotations and names are modernised with respect to i/j, u/v and w/v.

exchanged in the sections which precede and follow the tales appear to look back to the allegorical world of the morality plays.

By 1600 Armin had been a member of the then-Chamberlain's Men for about one year (or two at the most), that is, since Will Kempe had left the company, thus offering a new clown the possibility of playing that role in Shakespeare's plays. How Armin's entry effected deep changes in Shakespeare's comic parts and in the creation of "new" fools is now widely acknowledged with respect to not only the turn-of-the-century festive comedies (*As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*), but also the "problem" plays (witness the characters of Lucio in *Measure for Measure*, Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida* and Lavatch in *All's Well that Ends Well*), in addition to aspects of *Hamlet*, where the prince's "antic disposition" mimics representational and performative features of a fool.<sup>2</sup> Actually, *Foole upon Foole* was reprinted (with some elisions) in 1605, but again the author used a pseudonym: this time "Clonnico del mondo Snuffe", with a not-so-hidden hint at the Globe theatre, where the King's Men performed at the time.

In 1608, Armin's fame was even greater, partly due to his own plays, as well as to his becoming, very probably, the co-creator of many comic parts in Shakespeare's. This is likely the reason why he dared to show his name overtly as the author of *A Nest of Ninnies*, and—perhaps to prevent his readers from remembering his activities in a far less prestigious venue than the Globe—cancelled everything that might remind them of his previous connections with the Curtain theatre. Above all, he transformed what can be called a "jest book" (*Foole upon Foole*) into a philosophy of folly (*A Nest of Ninnies*).

To Robert Armin as an actor, rather than as the author of *Foole upon Foole* and of *A Nest of Ninnies*, John Davies devoted thirty lines in his collection of epigrams entitled *The Scourge of Folly*—a volume printed in 1611 when Armin was still alive (Davies, pp. 228-29)—while only eight lines were written to celebrate William Shakespeare, "our English Terence" (pp. 76-77). Davies praises "Honest Robin" (p. 228, l. 15), urging him to "play thy part, be honest still with mirth" (l. 23), and ends the poem by referring once again to Armin's profession as a theatre performer, who "wisely play[s] the fool" (l. 30). In Davies's thirty lines, there are also some echoes of Armin's words in *Foole upon Foole* and of Viola's comment on Feste in *Twelfth Night*. Davies ends his verse with the couplet, "So thou, in sport, the happiest men dost schoole / To do as thou dost, wisely play the

2 See Felver, p. 31; Wiles; and Aspinall, p. 48. But cf. Somerset.

*foole*”; Viola begins her praise of Feste with “This fellow is wise enough to play the fool / And to do that well he craves a kind of wit: / He must observe the mood on whom he jests” (*TN*, III.i.59-61).<sup>3</sup> Armin writes, when telling anecdotes about Jacke Oates, his first fool:

Naturall fooles are prone to selfe conseit,  
Fooles artificiall, with their wits lay waite  
To make themselves fooles, likeing the disguises,  
To feede their owne mindes and the gazers eyes. (*FuF*, sig. B2<sup>r</sup>, ll. 1-4)

The three texts share a similar concept of the folly shown by an artificial fool, whether actor or court fool. Evidently, late Elizabethan and early Stuart discourses of folly had abandoned the religious condemnation of the *stultus* and used *fool* and *folly* with a wider social and cultural meaning.

What follows aims both at analysing the idea of folly which underpins Armin’s two works on folly and at evaluating how the writer describes the fools he presents, especially from a physical point of view. It is a description which he might have kept in mind when performing not only “John of the Hospitall” in his own *Two Maids of More-clacke* (1609), but also Shakespeare’s fools.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Two Texts about Folly*

*Foole upon Foole* and *A Nest of Nimmies* present episodes from the lives of six fools. The events and their textual rendering are exactly the same in both works, but, as already mentioned, *NoN* embeds the narrations in a frame in which Sotto introduces Lady World to the tales and their protagonists. The various episodes begin with an initial header, “The description of...”, which includes the name of a specific fool. Each “description” is a poem of a variable number of lines and of stanzas, which acquaints the reader with the physical features of the fool whose biographical episodes are narrated soon afterwards. In *NoN*, though, there is no header to the introductory poems and they are shorter than in *FuF* and different in some issues, as will be discussed later. In writing his jests, Armin always appears very scrupulous about the historicity of the events, or—at least—of the

3 This and other quotations from Shakespearean plays are drawn from Shakespeare, *Collected Works*, ed. Wells and Taylor.

4 Cockett analyses how Armin’s studies of natural fools might have helped him in the performance of the major Shakespearean fools, especially Touchstone in *As You Like It*.

characters. So, for instance, the first character, Jacke Oates, is said to be Sir William Hollis's fool, probably a personage recognizable by the readers, at least in the north of England, since events are located near Lincoln. Similarly, Jemy Camber, "borne in Sterlin but twenty myles from Edinborough" (*FuF*, sig. B4<sup>r</sup>), is said to be the fool of the (unnamed) King of Scotland, and connected with such courtiers as the Earl Huntley, the Earl Norton, and Lady Carmichell (sig. B4<sup>r</sup>, C2<sup>r</sup>, C2<sup>v</sup>, respectively). The third fool, Leanard, is "now living well knowne of many" (sig. C4<sup>r</sup>); Jacke Miller, the fourth, was "borne in Wostershire, / And known in London of a number there" (sig. D3<sup>r</sup>, l. 24). Will Sommers, "the Kings naturall Iester", comes fifth, and is presented "as report tells me" (sig. Er<sup>v</sup>), while the last fool, Iohn of the Hospital, is "Knowne to all London since he liu'd so late" (sig. Fr<sup>r</sup>, l. 2). In other words, Armin seems to take special care of historical details, so as to stress the truthfulness of what he narrates in the jests.

The key words in Armin's *Foole upon Foole* and in *A Nest of Nimmies* are, obviously enough, "fool" and "folly", both of which seem to have lost their religious content. The latter word has a rather secularized meaning, roughly in the sense of "lack of understanding", while the former acquires very specific denotations pertaining to the medical and the social spheres: a fool is either a person afflicted by some mental disorder or a person living in a household as a jester.

Armin thereby introduces a distinction within the world of fools, who are divided into "fools naturall" and "fools artificiall", but in his work it is not easy to separate the two categories clearly, since nearly all of his six characters, in spite of being labelled as natural because suffering from weak brains and mental disorders, show certain signs of wit. All the fools he describes are "domestic fools in gentlemen's households" (Feather, n.p.), but the author shows moral concern rather than exact medical awareness in dividing (and defining) the protagonists of his own anecdotes. In fact, the first part of the introductory paratextual paragraphs in *Foole upon Foole*, entitled "To the Printer health, to the Binder wealth, and to both both", reads:

many now a days play the fooles and want no witte, and therefore tis no wonder for me to set downe fooles naturall, when wise men before theyle be vnprofitable, will seeme fooles artificiall: Is it then a profit to bee foolish? yea so some say, for under shew of simplicity some gaine love, while the wise with all they can doe, can scarce obtaine love. (*FuF*, sig. A2<sup>r</sup>)

Armin's language seems to come straight from the mouth of Erasmus' *Stultitia*, or at least it shows the latter's long and powerful legacy, and to be connected to

the humanist issue also debated by John Heywood in his play entitled *Witty and Witless* (1525?), whether it is “[b]etter to be a foole then a wyse man”, or, rather, “be / Sage Saloman then sot Somer” (Heywood, l. 3 and ll. 659-60, respectively). By giving the name “Sotto” to the main speaker of the frame in *NoN*, Armin also seems aware of the French tradition of the *sottie*, and—even if it is impossible to ascertain—of Heywood’s use of the term as a synonym of “fool”. When introducing the six individual fools whose stories his book contains, Armin utilises adjectives that do not necessarily denote moral or mental weakness, thus avoiding any judgement on them. So Jacke Oates, the first fool in the collection, is “a flat foole naturall” (*FuF*, sig. A3<sup>r</sup>), and Jemy Camber, the second, is a “fatt Foole naturall”, but Leanard, the third, is just “a Leane Foole” (sig. C2<sup>r</sup>), and Jacke Miller, the fourth, is “a cleane foole” (sig. D3<sup>r</sup>). Will Sommers, Henry VIII’s famous court-fool, is simply a “merry fool” and “the Kings naturall Jester”, whereas John of the Hospitall (of Christ’s Church hospital), who is called “a very foole” (sig. Fr<sup>r</sup>), is overtly labelled “This innocent Idiot”, that is, with words connected to the medical lexicon, and so are Jacke Oates (mentioned as “this Idyot” [sig. A3<sup>r</sup>, l. 6]) and Jack Miller (“A simple Idiot” [sig. C3<sup>r</sup>, l. 4]). In Armin’s definitions, then, the adjective “naturall” is used explicitly for two men, and partially for Will Sommers, who was still remembered by many as the King’s “naturall Iester”, where the adjective seems to specify the role rather than the man.

In the end, though, Armin focuses on some events in these people’s lives which actually denote them as mentally disordered, even if, as I mentioned above, most of them (and Sommers more than the others) show common sense, kindness and a certain wit in their behaviour. But—as Armin always underlines—his protagonists were well known by many, so that, because to keep to historical accuracy appears to be one of his main purposes, he does not change the definitions attributed to his fools, and therefore those who were known as “natural” had to be written down as such.

What strikes one most in Armin’s two books on folly is the interest shown in the physical descriptions of his fools, a fact which emerges not only from the anecdotes themselves, but particularly from the verses preceding each fool’s stories. This is something which leaves Erasmus’ irony far behind and introduces elements of physical realism,<sup>5</sup> thus displaying Armin’s interest in observation

5 Cockett writes that Armin’s collection “is less concerned with the philosophy of folly and its ironies than with the actualities of the lives of known natural fools” (p. 141).

and—why not?—his concern to help his reader visualise his “heroes”, before making them “perform” on the stage of his book.

### *The Fools' Clothing and Appearance*

#### *A Fools' Fashion Show*

Robert Armin's presentation of his fools' clothing is not always greatly detailed, even if some items he mentions can help his reader to see what the fools literally looked like.<sup>6</sup> Jacke Oates, the first fool, is described as wearing a red and blue straw hat (*FuF*, sig. A3<sup>r</sup>, ll. 1-2), two colours which belong to the traditional costume of court fools,<sup>7</sup> but, nearly at the end of the verses devoted to this fool, Armin adds that Jacke's hat was not a fool's cap, while showing him dressed in motley:

Motley his wearing, yellow or else greene,  
A colored coate on him was seldome seene.  
No fooles cap with a bable and a bell. (sig. A3<sup>r</sup>, ll. 49-51)

One is here reminded of the famous illumination in the *Psalter of King Henry VIII*, where Will Sommers is portrayed in green motley, seemingly with a hood of the same laid on his shoulders, but no cap and bells, or a bauble.<sup>8</sup>

No detail is given concerning Jemy Camber's clothes, save that “a pearle spoone he still wore in his cap” and that “he ever wore rings rich and good” in the fingers of his “big hand” (sig. B3<sup>v</sup>, ll. 23 and 25-26): from the precious material of which both spoon and rings are made one can deduce the latter were gifts from the King of Scotland, whose jester Jemy was.

Leanard, “leane as plagu'd with want”, is always dressed “In his long coate of Frieze both hot and colde” (sig. C4<sup>r</sup>, l. 7), therefore in a coarse woolen fabric never changed during the year but worn both in summer and in winter. No other detail is mentioned. Little information is also given about Jack Miller's clothing, who goes “unhatted ... / Neate in his cloathes being course or never so gay” (sig. D3<sup>r</sup>, ll. 2-3). About Will Sommers' clothing nothing is said, since—as Armin states—“how ere I do descry him, / So many knew him that I may belye

6 The 1605 edition of *Foole upon Foole* presents only two “descriptions” of fools, introducing Jemy Camber and Will Sommers only, instead of the six of the first printing.

7 This can be seen in the *Psalter*, Autun, ca. 1470, held by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (National Library of the Netherlands), The Hague.

8 *Psalter of King Henry VIII*, illumination for Psalm 52, fol. 63<sup>v</sup> (British Library). For a discussion of British fools' costume, see Hotson, and Wiles's answer to the former's hypotheses.



him” (sig. D2<sup>r</sup>, ll. 15–16). Nevertheless, we are able to visualise him, since of Sommers, the best known of all Armin’s fools, some portraits are still extant.<sup>9</sup>

For a different reason, John of the Hospital is also well known, because Armin included him among the characters of his *Two Maids of More-Clacke*, a play the title-page of which has a picture generally considered to be that of Armin himself when playing John. The description of this fool indeed resembles the appearance of the personage on the title-page: “Flat cap, blew coate, and iekorne [inkhorn] by his side” (*FuF*, sig. Fr<sup>r</sup>, l. 6).

### The Fools’ Physiognomy and Their Bodies

To the physical appearance of his fools Armin devoted more space than to their clothing, and he also enriched his lines with considerations about their attitudes and behaviour. But before presenting Armin’s portraits, a glance must be given to at least one sixteenth-century treatise dealing with physiognomy, the *Epytomie . . . of Physiognomie* by Bartholomeus Cocles, published in 1556 (first edition 1504, in Bologna), and translated by Thomas Hill from Latin into English.<sup>10</sup> This volume is just one of many such, but the reason for choosing it here is the fame it enjoyed all over Europe, as is witnessed by the many translations also made into Italian, French and German.

In *Epytomie of Physiognomie*, the author, grounding his statements on Aristotle’s *Physiognomica*, analyses the shape of the body and of the head in particular, evaluating physical details in moral, psychological and medical terms. Just a few quotations—all bearing on the definition of foolish people—will be sufficient:

That head which is long, having the face long and bigge, and deformable: declareth that man to be a foole maliciouse, or very simple, vayne or a lyer, sone beleving the thyng heard or tolde him, a caryer or teller of newes, and also envious or hatefull. (sig. A5<sup>v</sup> [chap. 11])

That head which is very great, and the necke with the sinowes and bones small: declareth an evill condicion or qualitie of the brayne, and that man to be a dullarde and foole, compared to the asse. (sig. A6<sup>r</sup> [chap. 11])

9 Apart from the illumination in Henry’s Psalter, Sommers also features in a portrait of the royal family at Hampton Court, and in another painting discovered in 2008 at Boughton House (Northamptonshire), where he carries a monkey on his shoulders.

10 Thomas Hill reworked Cocles’ volume when he published his own physiognomic treatise, *The Contemplation of Mankinde*, in 1571. The full title of Cocles’ text is *A brief and most pleasaunt Epitomye of the whole art of Physiognomie, gathered out of Aristotle, Rasis, Formica, Loxius, Phylemon, Palemon, Consiliator, Morbeth the Cardinal and others many moe, by that learned chyrurgian Cocles: and englished by Thomas Hyll Londoner.*

The eyes verye small: declare that manne to bee a foole, weake in strength, applying in maners to the ape: that is, to be fearful, and a deceaver. (sig. B3<sup>r</sup> [chap. 16])

The mouthe standinge farre oute, and rounde, by meane of the thicknes of the lypes, and the mouthe somewhat wrythinge withall: declareth that manne to be unclenlye or nastie, a foole, ferie or churlysh, compared to the hogge. (sig. B8<sup>r</sup> [chap. 18])

The lippes not sufficiente equall thoroughe oute, To that the one is greater then the other, declareth that man to be more simple, then sapiente, of a grosse wit, and dull understanding, having a diverse or variable fortune, as the autentikes affirme. (sig. Cr [chap. 19])

As is evident, Cocles draws his outlines connecting behaviour to physical traits, all of which, in the quotations transcribed, result in attributing the label of “fool” to the person with the characteristics he specifies.

Is such a physiognomic interest present in Armin’s descriptions? It is nearly impossible to give any answer to this question, even if physiognomic thought was known and widespread in Elizabethan society;<sup>11</sup> it is interesting, however, to see how rich in facial and bodily features Armin’s portraits are, and this invites us to build a parallel between Cocles’ and Armin’s fools.

The “flat foole” Jacke Oates ranks highest in Armin’s collection as to physical details: seven stanzas out of the ten devoted to his presentation deal with Jacke’s features, described from l. 7 to l. 48 from head to foot (*FuF*, sig. A3<sup>r-v</sup>). His brow is “wrinkled” (l. 7), his nose is “short” and “hooked” (l. 11), his eyes and cheeks are “hollow” (ll. 10 and 12, respectively), his mouth is irregular, the upper lip being “turned in” (l. 13) and the under lip “so big t’might sweep a manger” (l. 14). On an upward slanted chin Jacke has a little beard “like to a swallowes taylor” (l. 15); he has a lot of hair on his dark neck, a big belly, long and lean but small-fingered hands, powerful wrists and arms but short legs, swollen knees painful with gout, two “broad and big” feet (l. 37), huge hips, a stooping back, and long hair shorn at the back of his head. If seen through Cocles’ lenses, Oates would certainly qualify as a fool, at least according to the shape of his mouth, as in the fourth passage quoted above.

If Oates does not seem to be particularly disabled, what Armin writes about the “fat foole” Jemy Camber makes the latter a more than plump dwarf (*FuF*, sig. B3<sup>v</sup>, l. 5): “A yarde hye and a nayle [1/16 of a yard] no more his stature” and “Two yards in compass and a nayle” (l. 7), with short legs just one foot in length and big hands. He has a small head, long hair, one ear bigger than the other,

11 On this point, see Baumbach.

shining eyes, a flat nose and a square beard, little lips but a wide mouth with few teeth. About a person with a flat nose, Cocles observes:

The nose flatte, declareth that manne to be violente or hastye in hys wrathe, vayne or envyouse, a lyar, leacherouse, weake, unstable, soone credityng one, and convertible to good or evyll. (sig. B5<sup>r</sup> [chap. 17])

The author does not include such a flat-nosed person in the fool category, but nevertheless he defines him in a very negative way.

The “leane foole” Leonard is described as slender and “reasonable tall” (*FuF*, sig. C4<sup>r</sup>, l. 5); his head is little and his forehead high. His body is also a little misshapen (even if not with the same disabilities as Camber’s), since one of his hands is crooked, his neck is held askew and one eye is squint. His “great” legs have swollen knees (l. 13). Nothing else is described about Leonard but his bad character, so that “Few takes delight in him or joyes, / He is so fraught with envy not with toyes” (ll. 25-26). As for lean people, Cocles once again underlines negative aspects which border on a moral condemnation:

in fleshe leane, as it were sharpe, declareth that man to be most wycked or ungracious, symple, bolde proude or hautie, a threatner, envyous, warie in expenses, deceatefull, soone angrye, Iracundious, a betrayer or traytoure, a thefe, and a surmyser. (sig. C8<sup>r</sup> [chap. 25])

One is certainly struck by the coincidence between Armin’s and Cocles’ judgments about the “sin” of envy in lean people: the abstract principle presented by the latter is embodied in the real fool—Jemy Camber—introduced by the former.<sup>12</sup>

When describing Jack Miller, “A Cleane Foole”, Armin presents him as a clumsy person “plodding on his way” (*FuF*, sig. D3<sup>r</sup>, l. 1), with no education at all (education is not mentioned with regard to the other fools). His body has nothing particularly relevant: he has white skin, a round face and a body to match; but his lips are dirty with the continuous rheum dropping from his nose. To this the author adds a very peculiar feature concerning this fool’s way of speaking: Jemy, who is also able to sing and to “speake a Players part” (l. 19), stutters. Armin’s comment is also interesting, since the author laments that Jemy’s stammer causes sorrow in the onlookers (“made the saddest heart” [l. 21])—a sign of

12 One is reminded here of Julius Caesar’s remarks about Cassius: “Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look; / He thinks too much; such men are dangerous” (Shakespeare, *JC*, l.iii.195-96).

Armin's compassionate attitude towards mental and/or physical disabilities. This can at least partially clear the author of the accusation of cruelty in exhibiting his fools. Actually, as Peter Cockett writes, "The fact that the book treats the mentally handicapped as figures of fun is the most likely cause for the scant attention it has received from scholars" (p. 144). I believe, however, that before judging, one ought to take into account cultural and epistemic differences, in order to avoid applying modern attitudes to a text of the past. Therefore, especially considering that Armin does not introduce moral comments when writing of his fools but simply tells stories about them in a documentary way, the words he uses to present Miller's speech disorder seem to reveal humane concern, exactly at a time when Bedlam Hospital was progressively becoming the resort for horrible displays of the inmates locked up there.<sup>13</sup>

That *Foole upon Foole* presents only scant details about Will Sommers' clothing has already been underlined, and the same applies to his physical appearance: of this fool Armin writes only that "Leane he was, hollow eyed as all report, / And stoop he did too" (*FuF*, sig. Er<sup>v</sup>, ll. 7-8), so that it is easy to match these few words with the extant pictures of Henry VIII's court jester. According to Cocles' physiognomy, Sommers should have been a very wicked man:

The eyes depe in the head, as they were hydde that is, hollowe in and the syghte farre in, declare that man to be suspiciouse, maliciouse, long angry or muche Ireful, of a perverse maner, perfynt of memorye, bolde, cruell, lyghtlye lying, a threatner, a vycyouse leacherer, proude, enviouse, and a deceaver. (sigs. B2<sup>v</sup>-B3<sup>r</sup> [chap. 16])

On the contrary, though, Sommers is praised in *Foole upon Foole* because of his generosity and his compassionate spirit, even if Armin narrates the witty (but certainly not vicious) jests and riddles of Henry's fool when facing Cardinal Wolsey.<sup>14</sup>

Neither does Armin devote many words to John of the Hospital's outward features: of this last fool in the series we learn only that he has "Two flaring eyes, a black beard, and his head / Lay on his shoulder still, as sicke and sad" (*FuF*, sig. Fr<sup>r</sup>, ll. 9-10). From these expressions, as well, Armin's sympathy towards his subject seems to surface, rather than the attitude of someone ready to guffaw at a mentally disordered creature, or of a physiognomist who judges people only

<sup>13</sup> See Mullini, "Pardon", pp. 250-52.

<sup>14</sup> For parallels between, on the one hand, Sommers' technique when teasing Cardinal Wolsey and King Henry VIII with his riddles and, on the other, the Fool's riddling in *King Lear*, see Mullini, *Corrutore*, pp. 136-37, 142-79.

from their facial features. In sum, even if Armin sometimes seems to comply with his time's physiognomic discourse, he is not totally subservient to it, ready as he is to see beneath appearances.

### *The Moralising Frame*

As already mentioned, in 1608 Armin had his *Fool upon Fool* reprinted, changed the title to *A Nest of Nimmies*, declared his name as its author, and added some parts to the old text. There is also a new paratextual item: instead of addressing his printer, binder and reader, he writes an introductory letter “To the most true and rightly compleat in all good gifts and graces, the generous gentlemen of Oxenford, Cambridge, and the Innes of Court.” In it he claims to

have seene the stars at midnight in your societies, and might have Commenst like an asse as I was; but I lackt liberty in that, yet I was admitted in Oxford to be of Christs Church, while they of Al-soules gave ayme: such as knew me remember my meaning. I promised them to prove mad, and I thinke I am so, else I would not meddle with Folly so deeply. (*NoN*, sig. A2<sup>r</sup>)

Nothing in the few biographical details we know about Armin sheds light on a possible visit of his to these institutions, but—as David Wiles observes—this dedication “establishes the work as a bid for intellectual recognition” (p. 140).

The anecdotes narrated in *A Nest of Nimmies* are exactly the same as those in *Foole upon Foole*, but there is an internal narrator, Sotto, who tells the stories to the World, a female character presented as

wantom sick, as one surfetting on sinne (in morning pleasures, noone banquets, after riots, night moriscoes, midnights modicoms, and abundance of trash trickt up to all turbulent revellings) . . . riches her chamberlaine could not keep her in, beauty her bed-fellow was bold to persuade her, and sleepy securitie mother of all mischiefe, tut her prayers was but mere prattle. (*NoN*, sig. A3<sup>r</sup>)

The names chosen for the two main characters and for the lady's servants immediately show a certain abstract concern on the writer's part: Armin, by embedding his old stories in a new frame, seems to add allegorical connotations to them. Actually, at the end of each fool's jests, Armin introduces comments which often include the adjective or noun (or even verb) “morrall” or the adverb “morrally” (altogether they occur seven times). These words are present in Sotto's decoding of the meaning of the stories, for example: “By Jack Oates is Morrally meant

many described like him; though not fooles naturall, yet most artificiall. . . . By the knight is meant maintainers of foolery: By the Hall, the Inne where the cards of vanity causeth many to be bewitched” (*NoN*, sig. B4<sup>r</sup>). Another example occurs after Jemy Camber’s stories: “The Mule, morrally signifies the Divell, upon whose trot their fatnesse takes ease, and rides a gallop to destruction” (*NoN*, sig. Dr<sup>v</sup>). Similarly, at the end of Jack Miller’s jests, Sotto says: “I would faine Morrall of it, if you please. Leave was granted, for the World knew it would else bee commanded, and Sotto thus poynts at the Parable” (*NoN*, sig. E4<sup>v</sup>).

The language of moral plays resounds here, as if Armin, after asking the educated members of the academy for recognition in the initial letter to the universities, were also looking for the public’s praise of his philosophical depth. His discourse of folly had begun on the title page of *Foole upon Foole* with the Ciceronian motto “Stultorum plena sunt omnia”<sup>15</sup>—a saying not far removed from the “Stultorum infinitus est numerus” from the Book of Ecclesiastes (1:15) or, indeed, from Feste’s remark in *Twelfth Night* that “foolery . . . does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere” (III.i.39-40). Now it appears transformed by the new frame surrounding the jests. This “philosophy of folly”, though, apart from some satirical barbs, does not add much to its previous version. And when Sotto asks World to look into his “glass perspective” to see “into some (and in them thy selfe)”, the fool’s mirror—as in Hans Holbein’s drawing illustrating a passage of *The Praise of Folly*—is once more introduced as an instrument of self-analysis.

Four out of six of the detailed physical descriptions of naturals present in *Foole upon Foole* have disappeared and been replaced by shorter and less rich verses. For example, the sixty pentameters devoted to Jacke Oates in *Foole upon Foole* give way to the twenty-four shorter lines of his presentation in *A Nest of Nimmies*, and—what is more significant—Armin adds moral comments to bodily features, such as the following: “Of nature curst, yet not the worst, / Was nastie, given to sweare, / Toylesome ever” (*NoN*, sig. A4<sup>r</sup>, ll. 5-7), apparently unaware of the inconsistency deriving from the fact that in *Foole upon Foole* he had written of the same fool, “Sweare he would not, for which all lov’d him well” (*FuF*, sig. A3<sup>v</sup>, l. 52). In the same way, the twenty-eight lines introducing “leane Leanard” are completely replaced by eighteen shorter lines, which, on the one hand, do not

15 This motto also appears in Thomas Dekker’s *The Guls Horne-booke*, which was published in 1609, the year after the release of *NoN*.

mention the fool's envy, but, on the other, inform the reader that he is "subtill in his follie, / Showing right but apt to wrong, / When a'peared most holy" (*NoN*, sig. D2<sup>r</sup>, ll. 14-16). In *A Nest of Ninnies*, the various fools remain real people, but their actions are explained as if they were *exempla*, meaning something on an allegorical level, in contrast to the historical basis on which *Foole upon Foole* pretended to be built. The allegorising turn is also signalled by the use of such terms as "embleme" and "parable" (*NoN*, sig. E4<sup>v</sup>), and of the phrase "by the" as the introduction of a moral explanation (out of forty-two such occurrences, a good seventeen serve to let moral glosses be joined to the previous co-text).

Everything in this way becomes moralised, read through special lenses, and what in *Foole upon Foole* was a collection of realistic anecdotes having actual fools as protagonists has become in *A Nest of Ninnies* a nearly sermonising reinterpretation. The Erasmian idea of the first suit of fools is turned into something similar to moral instruction, and folly into an allegory, or at least a metaphor.<sup>16</sup> In this way Sotto's "glasse prospective" (*NoN*, sigs. A3<sup>r</sup>, A3<sup>v</sup>), through which he shows Lady World the sequence of his six fools and which is often in the text simply named a "glasse", reveals itself to be both a conjurer's instrument and an early modern "translation" of the medieval *speculum*, in this case a *speculum stultorum*<sup>17</sup>—a tool for mild satire and, particularly, an instrument for knowing oneself. Armin's discourse of folly, through "these sixe parts of folly" (*NoN*, sig. A3<sup>v</sup>), seems to look back at that sort of literature, when the author mixes the "mirror held up to nature" in *Foole upon Foole* with a "glass prospective" of moral significance.

Modern readers may wonder why Armin revised *FoF* in the way I have tried to exemplify. Unfortunately, there is no documentable explanation. However, one might surmise that Robert Armin, the son of a tailor, who in the 1580s had served as an apprentice in the London Company of Goldsmiths, and in 1614 would sign his will as a "Cittizen and Goldsmithe of London", desired to remain in readers' memory as a respectable and reputable writer, rather than as the mul-

16 See Gardette for an approach to *A Nest of Ninnies* in the line of Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff*.

17 See the volume with this title by Nigel de Longchamps. On the development of the mirror image in medieval and early modern literature, see Grabes. Sotto's glass might also have reminded Armin's contemporaries of the magic glass held, during the apparitions in Act Four of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, by the eighth king, a glass in which Macbeth—to his total dismay and fury—sees "many more" (IV.i.136) future kings derived from Banquo's offspring.

tifaceted interpreter of Shakespeare's fools.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the few parish documents witnessing his children's christening and his own death (the latter in 1615) attest that, in the minds of his neighbours, he remained a "player of Enterludes" (Felver, p. 77).

18 The information about Armin's last will and testament derives from Hotson, pp. 107-11. In the will there is no hint of Armin's theatrical profession or association with Shakespeare (see Felver, pp. 77-78).



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