

**FOOLS AND JESTERS: WITH A
REPRINT OF ROBERT ARMIN'S
PUBLICATIONS, NEST OF
NINNIES, 1608. WITH AN
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES**

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES.



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INTRODUCTION.

It would be singular that a man of so much, and of such peculiar, learning as the late Mr. Douce, in his "Dissertation upon Clowns and Fools," should not even refer to the ensuing tract, did we not know that only a single copy of it (as far as has been ascertained by the most diligent inquiries during the last thirty or forty years) exists in any public or private collection. Were it, therefore, of less value than it really possesses, as a curious picture of manners, towards the end of the reign of Elizabeth, and in the beginning of that of James I., we should be disposed to reprint it, in order to place it beyond the possibility of destruction. The original is preserved in the Bodleian Library, the statutes of which, we believe, forbid fire within the precincts of the edifice; and the unceasing and almost affectionate care of the Rev. Dr. Bandinel and his curators inspires every confidence as to the security of the matchless stores in their custody: still we are unwilling that any volume of this description, of which no other exemplar is known, should be exposed to the slightest risk of loss, however remote or improbable. We mention this as an addi-

tional inducement with us for the republication of a relic of much interest and merit, not only *unique* in itself, but unprecedented in its kind. The tract is the only one in our language that treats distinctly of such a subject, and of such persons, as the domestic fools and jesters of a period when they began to receive less encouragement than they had experienced in times of greater ignorance and barbarism.

The entertainment of this class of persons in private families seems to have originated mainly in two causes: one of these was, that the care and custody of idiots was of old assigned to individuals as a source of emolument, the latter having the control and management of the estates of the former: another cause was, perhaps, the natural weakness of our nature, which, when any species of learning was a rare acquisition, and when intellectual abilities were less prized and cultivated, sought to place itself in contrast with those who would show off to advantage even the smallest acquirements, and the most moderate talents. This consideration will account for the ancient familiarity of great men, even of kings and princes, with their fools or jesters, and for the introduction of them at their tables, on the most solemn, as well as on the most festive occasions. It has been ascertained, and requires no proof here, that such was the case of old, not merely in England, but in most other countries of Europe.

It is not our intention at present to pursue this inquiry farther, but merely to observe that the fools, to whose propensities and adventures the following pages chiefly relate, belonged to the class usually entertained

in the houses of the nobility and gentry. There can be no doubt that the dramatic clowns and fools, such as they are represented in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, originated in this practice; although they came down to the poets of the end of the sixteenth and of the beginning of the seventeenth century, through the medium of the personage who is known as the Vice of the old Moralities: he was employed in them, sometimes by his affected stolidity, and at others by his low cunning, to amuse the spectators, and to relieve their minds from the weight of the more serious portions of the performance. In this point of view, all that relates to the history of the domestic fool cannot fail to be interesting to the student of our early dramatic literature. "It may be objected (says Heywood, in his 'General History of Women,' 1624) why, amongst sad and grave histories, I have here and there inserted fabulous tales and jests, savouring of lightness.—I answer, I have therein imitated our historical and comical poets that write to the stage; who, lest the auditory should be dulled with serious courses, which are merely weighty and material, in every act present some zany, with his mimic action, to breed in the less capable mirth and laughter: for they that write to all must strive to please all."

Many of the anecdotes or incidents in the following pages will strike all readers as merely puerile and absurd; and they will be disposed to wonder how our ancestors could find entertainment in displays of folly and weakness, by which they themselves were not unfrequently sufferers. We must throw our imaginations