

**A BANQUET OF  
JESTS AND MERRY  
TALES. PP.1-235**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649000654

A Banquet of Jestes and Merry Tales. pp.1-235 by Archibald Armstrong

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Cover @ 2017

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JESTS AND MERRY TALES

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*Banquet of jests.*

A BANQUET OF

# JESTS and MERRY TALES

By

ARCHIE ARMSTRONG

*Court Jester*

*to King James I. and King Charles I*

1611—1637



*IN THE ORIGINAL QUAIN'T SPELLING*

LONDON: HAMILTON, ADAMS & CO  
GLASGOW: THOMAS D. MORISON

1889

Reference - Stacks  
Low  
3-1-43  
46891

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

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FIRST published in 1630, Archie Armstrong's *Banquet of Jest* was so highly appreciated by our forefathers, that, in the course of thirty years, some nine or ten successive editions were printed. Notwithstanding the issue of so many impressions, extremely few copies of these early editions appear to have survived the diligent use made of them by our primogenitors of two hundred and fifty years back. It would appear as if the copies had, so to speak, been actually devoured. And no wonder,—a more amusing collection of quaint stories, and laughter-moving tales, is not to be found among either the early or recent collections of a like nature. Its great rival of one hundred years later,—namely, the work published as Joe Miller's *Jest Book*,—as issued in the original form, for genuine wit and fun is not to be compared with Archie's work. Afterwards however, in the course of successive editions, Joe Miller's was vastly improved in these respects.

In addition to the immense fund of amusement to be found in its pages, this work is highly valuable as

throwing much light on the social customs and ideas of the period, and that, too, in connection with all ranks and sections of society—it will be observed that the author classes the collection into Court, Camp, College, City and Country Jest. The author saw and experienced life under these many aspects himself; varying from his own peasant-home in the North to that of the Court of his Sovereign. With the faculty of observation highly developed, and endowed naturally with a keen sense of the ludicrous, the author was peculiarly endowed for the congenial taste of compiling a “banquet of jests.”

On account of several of the earliest editions not bearing the name of Archie Armstrong, and so published anonymously, some doubt has been thrown on the matter of authorship. But we think such doubts unjustifiable. That some of the early editions were published anonymously is not surprising—such a thing has not been at any period at all uncommon; and it may be, that, without first knowing what sort of reception the book would get, the Court Jester might not wish to risk associating himself with the work. But, in any case, as several editions bearing his name as author were published during his lifetime, that should be quite sufficient and satisfactory reason for holding him to be the actual writer of the book.



Although there are numerous references to Archie Armstrong in the State documents and literature of the period, after he became connected with the Court, little is known regarding his early history. But the story goes, that, in a case of sheep-stealing on the Border, the thief was tracked to a moorland cottage, where was found no one but a seemingly half-witted lad vacantly rocking the cradle of some apparently younger member of the family. The baffled officers were just about to retire and give up the quest, when a sudden thought instigated them to upset the cradle, and, to their amazement, the sleeping infant turned out to be the dead missing sheep. The discomfited thief was at once seized upon, and taken to Jedburgh, where King James was holding a Court of Justice.

Condemned to die for his crime, the knowing sheep-stealer made his first, but by no means last success in out-mastering his Sovereign. Knowing King James' weakness for theological matters, Archie Armstrong—for it was he—pleaded that he was a poor ignorant man, who had only recently heard of the Bible, but was desirous for his soul's sake to read through the precious volume, begged his Majesty to respite him until he had done this. The Monarch, pleased to find the thief in such a sensible and repentant state of mind, at once acceded to the request. On which

Archie immediately rejoined to his friends near him in a low voice and with a sly look :—

“Then, de’il tak’ me an’ I ever read a word o’t as lang as my een are open !”

The remark being overheard, and the King being afterwards informed of it, was so taken with the fellow’s ready wit, that he forthwith employed him in his service, beginning about the year 1611.

The service seems to have been at first, that of a gentleman’s groom of the King’s Chamber, arranging matters for his royal master when travelling about. The post must have been one of some honour, as, when occupying it, he was made a free burgess of the city of Aberdeen. Later on, however, and for a considerable term of years, Archie is spoken of as the Court Fool, under which designation many references are made to him in the State Papers and literature of the day.

The position and character of Court Fool of former days may, on the part of many be somewhat undervalued or misunderstood. As a rule, he was a compound of humour, tact, impudence, and genius, and his position involved less that of being a fool than that of playing or acting the fool. In many instances, he who wore the cap and bells had more sense than the man who was decorated with a coronet. And Archie

Armstrong was as shrewd, sensible, witty, and good-humoured an individual as ever filled the time-honoured station to which he had been promoted. Through these excellent features of character he ere long got well established at Court, and became a personage of no little importance.

As a specimen of Archie's admirable wit, his conversation with the King in reference to the secret expedition of the Royal Prince into Spain has been frequently given :

"I must change caps with your Majesty," said Archie.

"Why?" asked the King.

"Why! Who intends sending the Prince into Spain?" replied Archie.

"Ah! but supposing that the Prince should come safely back again?" remarked the King.

"In that case I will take the cap from my head, and send it to the King of Spain," replied the Jester.

Probably the foregoing was a mere passing jest on Archie's part, as he himself accompanied the Prince in this romantic expedition. At the Spanish Court the royal fool seemed to be highly popular, and appears to have exercised all the privileges there that appertained to the post at home. Howell, in one of his letters from the Spanish Court makes an interesting