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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

THE HISTORY of the English court in the age of the Tudors is rife with intrigue, sectarianism, war, and paranoia. From the tumultuous era of Henry VIII to the successful reign of Elizabeth I, via the boy king Edward VI and Mary Tudor's brief Catholic rule, the political turmoil of the sixteenth century remains a continuous obsession and point of reference in British history. But amid religious and political power struggles, there was one man, completely detached from all this, with whom King Henry spent perhaps more time than any other. A man whose presence at the absolute centre of the corridors of power during the Tudor era today seems like a flagrant anomaly. A man who had constant access to the king's most private quarters and who must have been alone with him daily, but whose importance has been overlooked in favour of politicians, bishops, philosophers, councillors, courtiers, lords, ladies, and other royalty.

His name was William Somer, and he was Henry VIII's fool. The name first appears in court records in 1535, when the king was in his mid-forties, and continues to crop up in documents

during the rest of Henry's reign and in those of Edward VI and Mary Tudor. William Somer is even listed as an attendant at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1559. He appears next to Henry in no less than four portraits of him, and the royal accounts list several expensive gifts of clothing to him, from 1535 until as late as November 1558. After his death in June 1559 he began to gain a posthumous reputation as one of the greatest comic figures of the age, often with a tinge of nostalgia for the days before Queen Bess. Thomas Nashe made him a lead character in his only preserved play, *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (1592), and he figures prominently in history plays such as Samuel Rowley's *When You See Me, You Know Me* (1605). When Shakespeare's clown Robert Armin compiled his great chronicle of famous English fools, *Foole upon Foole* (1600), the inclusion of Will Somer was a given, and as late as 1637 a book purporting to tell his life story—usually dismissed as unreliable—was published.

The man who stares back at us from the group portraits with Henry and his children, looming behind the royal figures, is perhaps one of the most mysterious individuals of Tudor history. By all accounts an entertainer and comic, he appears in every depiction gaunt and morose, a curious combination of sage and crofter. According to Robert Armin, Somer had the ability to raise the king's spirits and spent many hours in his private quarters improvising doggerel verse. Could this be the same person whose enigmatic presence in the background of the royal portraits casts such an eerie shadow over the entire painting? When modern historians attempt to describe him, they are never able to resolve the question of whether Somer was a simpleton retained as

an amusing "idiot" or a shrewd comedian who could speak freely in front of the king, and often did. The posthumous image of him has been entangled with the real individual, and no one has really fully tried to disentangle them. But achieving that would provide us with a unique window into both the life of the court and fundamental conceptions of humour, humanity, and deviance in the Renaissance.

Judging from the frequency of references to him in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, Will Somer was one of the most famous men of his age. And yet, to this day, no one has attempted to write his biography. Only in recent years have biographies of Henry VIII seen fit to mention Somer at all, reflecting a transition in interest away from the purely political to accounts that also consider things like court culture, mentalities, and the royal household. In the more traditional books on Henry VIII and his times by the likes of John Guy, David Starkey, and J. J. Scarisbrick, a man like Somer never gets a mention. The works that have shaped the public image of the Tudor age in the early twenty-first century—the TV drama series *The Tudors* (2007–2010) and Hilary Mantel's trilogy of novels about Thomas Cromwell (2009–2020)—paint a broad enough picture to include Somer briefly, but the attention is still focused on the monumental men of the age.

We are better served by popular biographers such as Tracy Borman and Alison Weir, who pay due attention to a man who seems to have been an important presence in the king's life, even though the lack of sources and Somer's distance from the rest of court life mean he is present on only a few scattered pages. Weir presents us with a colourful description of the

fool's performance: "He had monarch and courtiers in fits of laughter as he thrust his comical face through a gap in the arras; then, with a monkey on his shoulder, he would mince around the room, rolling his eyes. The monkey might perform tricks, and Somers would tell jokes, himself laughing uncontrollably at the punchlines, or mercilessly impersonating those who were the butts of his jests."[1] The scene is truly striking, but Weir cites no sources for this passage, and closer scrutiny of the available evidence reveals that her account is a fictionalised vignette. It is in fact doubtful whether Somer's personality and fooling were of this manner at all, and Weir's characterisation of Somer as a "comedian," although thought-provoking, is not entirely accurate.[2]

A man like Somer is not as important as a Cardinal Wolsey or a Thomas Cromwell if the political life of the era is in focus, which it usually is when historians take an interest in the reign of Henry VIII. And when they don't, it is often Henry's six wives and his role as a husband that attract people's attention. The story of Will Somer sheds light on other things—like how people with a disability or an eccentric turn of mind have been treated in history, the relation between royalty and commoners in the Renaissance, and notions of what constituted comedy in the early modern period. Historians have written interesting books on the history of fools and jesters, revealing their diversity, the philosophy behind employing them, and how folly was perceived and comprehended. But the scattered pieces of evidence on which historians are often forced to rely have meant that the history of the fool is many times contradictory and inconclusive, haunted by combinations of material from different origins and a reproduction of

myths or unfounded claims that have been taken as truths. Furthermore, the perspectives and experiences of the fools themselves are almost never considered, and there has been no modern biography of an individual fool.[3]

Why is this? The main reason is simple enough, although also intriguing. Very few court jesters left behind any substantial source material. The comic entertainers who authored pamphlets, jestbooks, or plays were generally clowns of the stage or educated writers. Fools appear to have been antithetical to writing, and those who did write—like Francesillo de Zúñiga, jester to Charles V of Spain, or Zuan Polo, the Italian commedia dell'arte clown—had a discrepant identity.[4] The ideal fool was a man who detested and mocked learning.[5] Many of the clowns in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama at some point in the play either explicitly comment on their distance to learning or in other ways employ comical misinterpretations or mispronunciations of fancy words. The fictional version of Will Somer in Thomas Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* even exclaims, "I profess myself an open enemy to ink and paper."[6] I am not really interested in the "interior life" of Somer but rather his personality, his behaviour, and how he was viewed and used by the people around him. That, I think, was where he expressed himself, and it was what people noted and remembered of him. The fool lived and worked in the oral and corporeal realm rather than the literate. The jest was an artform that existed when it was performed, and then disappeared—unless it entered into court gossip, then folklore, and subsequently perhaps inspired a writer.

The most foundational aspect of the early modern concept of folly is usually said to be the distinction made between

artificial and natural fools. But when studied up close, it seems that all court jesters were natural fools in some way or another—hired because of a physical or intellectual disability, or thanks to their plebeian or rustic character, deemed amusing in its contrasting relation to the conduct of the court. Even the artificial fools, who are sometimes viewed as the equivalent of modern comedians, often came from humble origins and based their humour on simulating stupidity. To have a fool who was a skilled poet or writer, then, would have been a contradiction. Thus, when reading works on fools by John Southworth or Beatrice Otto, you will find that the closest we get to the fools is in household accounts detailing what clothes they wore and in portrait paintings documenting their physical appearance.

There is, then, very scant source material on most court fools, and this is also true of William Somer. He shares with other fools the fate of becoming the subject of mythology and jestbooks after his death, and the tales and portrayals of this posthumous reputation are often used to characterise and describe the fools, even in modern times. A paucity of reliable sources has not deterred historians from writing biographies of men like Charlemagne or even Jesus. The material available to those who undertake such a task mainly consists of chronicles written centuries after the subject's death or accounts written with a hidden agenda. As medieval historian Janet Nelson has pointed out, the "unknowability of another human being" is there "for the biographer of a twentieth-century public figure" just as much as for the biographer of an early medieval king or a Renaissance fool.[7] Historical figures of which merely the myth remains are given biographies

frequently, primarily because they are kings and queens, politicians, and military leaders. I sometimes wonder if there would have been biographies of the clown Richard Tarlton, the fool Archie Armstrong, and the actor Richard Burbage—all important men in the history of British entertainment—if they had been kings or serious poets.

Renowned microhistorian Natalie Zemon Davis asserts in her book on the sixteenth-century African diplomat Leo Africanus that she is presenting to the reader a "history of silences," in which she allowed herself greater freedom than most historians for filling the gaps where the sources were silent.[8] In her book, she includes a lot of conjecture and speculation about what her protagonist might have thought or what his motivations could have been. This is a venture which requires, as her reviewer Maxine Berg notes, "extensive contextual research," which permits her to reconstruct the man "out of the persons, places and texts that he could plausibly have encountered; what she writes is a speculative history, a plausible life story."[9] This approach in Davis's work can be traced back to her breakthrough book, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), where she attests in a foreword how in the absence of sufficient source material she endeavoured to uncover "not proofs, but historical possibilities."[10]

This concept has subsequently been elaborated by Finnish historian Hannu Salmi, emphasising the historian's need to consider what possibilities were open to people of the past at a given moment. This applies especially to those people about whom we can learn only very little from the source material. "Just as astrophysicists can determine features about black holes on the basis of inferences based on evidence about that

which surrounds them, so also historians can draw inferences about the past even when it no longer offers any direct evidence about its nature."[11] And as a final addition to this conglomerate of methodological approaches, we might append Swedish historian Eva Österberg's words about the possibility of writing "biographies of the silent." Her contention stipulates that although it is not possible to write a full biography of all the twists and turns in a person's life when our knowledge of it is fragmented, we might write "an existential microhistory," which focuses on "a certain chosen path of the individual's life which has proved fateful for their subsequent way of living" or a "condition that has afflicted the individual without their own influence but has nonetheless shaped their life in some way. In order to understand this, the historian constructs a wider context of mentalities, culture or politics."[12]

So how close can we get to a court fool who hasn't left behind any written records? Can we write his biography? *Fool: In Search of Henry VIII's Closest Man* is not a conventional biography, hence its somewhat elusive subtitle. When faced with a type of source material that has been produced after a person's death, the historian often adopts a strategy of studying representations of the person rather than the person themself, and for such an investigation there would be more than adequate material in this case. But I will here attempt a sort of middle way. Starting in the posthumous legend of the great comic Will Summers (that is how his name was spelled after his death), I will peel away the layers of myth in order to gradually move closer to the man himself. His life's trajectory and mind can be only partly pieced together, so a common biography is out of the question. But what we can attempt is

a study of his role and function in the social world of the royal court, which brings us closer to both the individual and perceptions of him. What type of fool was he, and what does this say about fools and early modern views of disability or deviance? What place and role did he have in the court? How did his surroundings treat and view him? How were his actions and utterances spread and quoted, and what attitude towards him does this reveal?

One might object that any fool would do in order to answer these questions—why not choose one who is better documented? Because in Somer we find a combination of the celebrity that Renaissance fools enjoyed as opposed to their medieval counterparts, the proximity of popular humour to the nucleus of power, and an intriguing example of the ambivalent personality of the court fool that transcended the border between natural and artificial. To following generations, Will Somer constituted *the* fool, and his occupation differed from that of Elizabethan clowns such as Richard Tarlton and Will Kemp, who, though hailed as great comics and favoured by royalty, were stage actors and performers of a wholly different slant. And, ironically, although a list of contemporary references to him will fit on the back of a postcard, Somer is an unusually well-documented fool.

But the primary reason for focusing on an individual fool is to finally release the many men and women who were labelled fools during the early modern period from the oppression of terminology. In fact, to the early moderns, terms such as "fool" were not as categorical and clear-cut as they have become in modern historiography, and this can be applied to many epistemological terms. I would like to give just one of

all these fools the opportunity to be considered as an individual and thus to see whether after that he remains just a fool or is something more complex and, perhaps also in turn, makes the word "fool" more complex. We live in an age where social categories are perhaps more labelling and constricting than they have ever been. Repeatedly we see how people with an intellectual disability, for instance, are in public only allowed to be representatives of their diagnosis. I therefore consider it relevant to look at an individual beyond categories such as natural and artificial fool without ruminating on which category is the more suitable. The impossibility of the answer, the unreachability of the man himself, is exactly the point.

Our knowledge of the historical figure of the fool owes much to Enid Welsford's pivotal 1935 book on the subject, which in its comprehensiveness and observations has yet to be surpassed. At the same time, it fails to place the fools in their proper historical contexts, and its conclusions are often based on anecdotal or uncorroborated evidence which has contributed to distorting the image of the fool. This partly mythical image has lived on in later works which, although many times insightful, have mingled the fool as a literary archetype with the fools of real life.[13] The first real attempt at writing a history of fools by consulting archival records was made by John Southworth in 1998, resulting in the unearthing of many hitherto unknown facts. His project was marred, however, by misinterpretations and, as has been observed by reviewers, a tendency to reproduce the myths he set out to eschew.[14] Recent works in disability history have shed light on the blurred line between natural and artificial fools in the early modern period.[15] Alice Equestri has shown how all types of fools,

whether intellectually disabled or "counterfeit," were viewed according to some notion of disability.[16] A large portion of this school of research relies on Shakespeare's portrayal of fools, and Wes Folkerth has argued, based on the immense diversity of fool types in Shakespeare, that sixteenth-century conceptions of fools and, indirectly, intelligence were flexible and inclusive. Folkerth even speculates how communities responded to local fools according to their individual differences rather than any consistent definition of disability.[17]

The hazy identity of William Somer is his chief characteristic. Southworth is one of only two writers who have attempted to compose a biographical account of him. The other is his biographer in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, J. R. Mulryne, who compiled a very brief but informative entry.[18] The main theme of both articles is the question of whether Somer was a natural or artificial fool. It is Southworth who is most adamant in claiming that he was an "innocent," referencing the posthumous nature of the witty sayings attributed to him, the fact that he does not appear to have received any wages, and a record of Edward VI appointing a "keeper" for him. This last point is the most decisive for Southworth's conclusion, but it has also been noted that a fool's "keeper" could simply refer to a servant of some sort.[19] Closer inspection indicates that the case is not quite as clear-cut as Southworth has it, even though Somer's status as a great wit and comedian is certainly a later fiction. Mulryne has little choice but to agree with Southworth, who is the only writer to pay Somer any extensive attention. It is curious, however, that a man who was of low intelligence or had learning difficulties should be seen by posterity as a

genius comic and one of the greatest wits in history. How did this change come about, if that is the case? Or does the truth lie somewhere in between? Folkerth, Equestri, and other scholars' suggestion that the relationship between natural and artificial folly was more complex invites further study. Perhaps Thomas Nashe knew more than he let on when he had his fictional version of Somer maintain that he was a "fool by nature *and* by art"?[20]

The chapters of this book take the form of concentric circles, slowly closing in on the elusive centre of attention as we proceed. The question is, Will he even be there when we arrive?

The second chapter, "Legend," unravels the posthumous mythology around Somer, allowing us to work our way backwards to arrive at the first mythologisations of him in the years after his death. The third chapter, "Idea," briefly reviews the theoretical perspectives on court life and Renaissance folly that might or might not become useful to us. In the following chapters, we start our journey towards the man himself, first by briefly considering in the fourth chapter what might be concluded about his origins. The fifth chapter, "Place," traces the occurrence of Somer's name in the administrative records of the Tudor court in order to paint a picture both of the court where he worked and of his place in it. The sixth chapter, "Features," examines the contemporary depictions of Somer's appearance in portraits and the possible symbolism of his external characteristics. The next two chapters are concerned with his personality: the seventh chapter is a study of his external traits, as described by those who knew him, and how these traits might have

contributed to his role as a fool; the eighth chapter, "Words," surveys contemporary allusions to Somer's sayings and humour in order both to come as close as possible to his comedic talent and mind, and to perceive how the spread of his sayings reveals other courtiers' attitudes toward him. The ninth chapter, "Role," summarises the observations of the two previous chapters by composing a picture of his role at court and how it related to the roles of others. The final chapter, "Legacy," considers Somer's importance, in terms of both his role while alive and his posthumous identity, for the following development of comedy and fools.

Can it even be that it is with him that a process towards modern comedy is begun?

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