



Peter K. Andersson. *Fool: In Search of Henry VIII's Closest Man.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023. 224 pp. ISBN 9780691250168. \$27.95 hardcover.

Andersson's book *Fool* refers in its subtitle to a "search" for a truer understanding of William Somer, the man who is occasionally depicted hovering behind Henry VIII in Tudor portraiture and can be glimpsed in early modern court papers and correspondence. The author's unconventional framework has produced a lively and inspiring encounter with the narratives and fables amassed about Somer over time, culminating in an enticing read both for those of us who study folly and for more widespread readerships interested in the early modern age. By examining what Andersson calls the "layers of myth" that have accrued around this figure, the quasi-biographical work explores the mysteries engulfing Somer in order to "gradually move closer to the man" himself (8). The tantalizing work explains—in ways that simply ignoring his myths often fail sufficiently to elucidate—why Somer's identity is so muddled within academic circles. As Andersson acknowledges, it is because historians

The Spenser Review

must work with “very scant source material” (6), so that “the history of the fool is many times contradictory and inconclusive” (4), while popular fiction, “although provoking, is not entirely accurate” (4). Though Andersson’s *Fool* is “not a conventional biography,” (8) it nevertheless offers an intensive hunt for the man who has been lost amongst the tellings and retellings of him over the prevailing centuries.

Andersson commences his search by laying out the generalized images of the stock types of early modern fool and some guidance concerning the nature of early modern comedy before focusing more prominently upon William Somer as he appears in art and literature. Somer is, Andersson argues, represented using an amalgamation of tropes and stereotypes, which draw on the previous fool personas present at court and in popular stories and from folkloric myths, including even those relating to the famous court fools who came *after* him. In so doing, Andersson lays out how our understanding and knowledge of Somer has been problematically enmeshed with that of other foolish figures due to a reliance on the foregrounding of stereotypical traits like a lack of literacy, a lack of intelligence, or a deficiency of reasoning or physical self-possession. Andersson demonstrates that the cacophony of fool images over time all help to confuse our own posthumous understanding of Somer’s intellect, his role and his place at court, and even his personal temperaments. Andersson argues that literary works and presentations readjust our conception of Somer, as his character, how he appears, and how he was treated have been molded and remolded to suit any given writer’s whim. Referring us, for example, to the manipulative Carurgus character in a 1577 manuscript play *Misogonous*—the “earliest known play that makes explicit reference to Will” (38)—Andersson interrogates Somer’s susceptibility to malleable depiction. In *Misogonous*, the character labeled—or mislabeled—as Somer during the play is named Carurgus, who dissembles as a natural fool. Somer is thus linked with an artificial fool (Carurgus) who plays at being innocently foolish to manipulate social superiors, but who is in fact far more akin to the Vice figures of the early morality tradition. This fascinating early representation of Somer proves at odds with the harmless “natural” fool type we are presented with in the decades to follow. Andersson considers Carurgus “a faint trace [...] of court or nobility gossip that Will Somer was not so stupid as his master thought he was” (41). He then outlines a “number of traits” correlational within the sources that might be reasonably ascribed to the man Somer himself (45). These include his bad temper, that he was a sufferer of narcolepsy, that he was known for sleeping amongst the spaniels, that he experienced physical

The Spenser Review

punishment at court, that he was not a physical comedian and, that he was—or at least *pretended* to be—what early moderns would call a natural fool.

Providing a helpful reminder that our current conceptions of care and violence often come into conflict with early modern interpretations of disability, Andersson reflects that “natural folly was not considered treatable” (49) in medicinal works of the time and that the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century “toleration for violence” (51) and “rough treatment of fools” (50) proves disconcerting—even troubling—for many readers interested in fooling and folly today. By charting the schools of thinking that wrestled with folly (in Renaissance texts, classical philosophical thought, and in works of early modern fiction), Andersson explores just how contradictory early modern perceptions of fools could be. Whilst this picture remains challenging for modern academics to interpret, Andersson reveals how seriously the debates concerning the nature of folly and reason were handled. He also asks us to reconsider our own perspective on the roles of fools in early modern works of imaginative literature, for any critical fixation that privileges the influence that fools supposedly had over their social superiors skews our focus away from what was often more likely to be their lot in real-life. Rather than attempting to prove how a fool’s presence may or may not have changed the course of history from within a court landscape, or changed famous minds, or spurred noble decision-making, Andersson encourages his readers to focus more on the issues that they evidently do shed light upon: those of “inequality, norms, identity, the fundamental discrepancy between how one conceives oneself and how others conceive you” (62).

Andersson interrogates the two main claims about Somer’s origins, surmising that he likely “came from a humble background” (68). The earliest claim derives from Robert Armin’s account of Somer in his 1600 pamphlet *Foole upon Foole*, where Somer is supposed to have originated from Shropshire. Andersson appears less convinced by this claim than the later one made by a seventeenth-century biographer James Granger who labeled him “a servant in the family of Richard Farmor,” a Catholic gentleman in Northamptonshire (64). Yet, despite the lack of evidence corroborating Armin’s claim, Andersson remains open to the prospect that both claims have merit, given that Somer’s “service in the Fermor family does not contradict a possible background in Shropshire” (67). William Somer, he suggests, was likely talent scouted for the Henrican court—a practice which appears to have been common—and may have been “proved” as a fool at another nobleman’s household before being transferred

The Spenser Review

to court as a royal fool, as was the case for Cardinal Wolsey's fool Sexton, alias Patch, in 1535.

Will Somer was not Henry VIII's first fool, then, but his place at court was not clearly defined in spite of others having played a similar role in the royal household before him. Henry's fool was set apart from the minstrels and entertainers in records for celebrations at court, in a role distinct from the paid employment of skilled dissembling performers. He did not provide a professional service. At court, it seems, Somer's "presence was enough" (107). He was not paid for displaying skillful tricks or verbal quips. Instead, Andersson's research determines that the man's place at court was instead highly "decorative" (76), given the consistent purchases found in the records of comfortable, green clothing—symbolic for its associations with nature and inexperience or innocence—as well as of an intriguingly large array of colorful buttons. As Andersson comments, there appears no set place for fools at court and they appear to have been appointed "little or no boarding ... during the Tudor age" (84). Somer does not appear to have been allocated a designated space at court in any defined capacity: he is mentioned in accounts from the chamber and household sectors of court; he is recorded as a topic of gossip in correspondence between nobles and ambassadors; and, perhaps surprisingly, he is mentioned only once in a performative capacity, in relation to Edward VII's 1552-53 festive Christmas celebrations. Indeed, Andersson suspects that "perhaps the most difficult person to place within the various departments in sections of the court is the fool" (81); yet, he asserts that the "infrequent nature" (80) of Somer's visibility in records—and that of other early modern court fools—while not particularly concerning, poses a series of fascinating questions concerning how their lived experiences might be recovered. The clear indication, he suggests, is that Somer's role was transitory. He belonged nowhere, occupying a role adjacent to, rather than of, the court. Not in the court, but near it.

Somer's side-on involvement at the early modern court thus offers insights into the values that he signified. References made to his "horse," Andersson comments, "is a sign that he not only moved along with the court but also moved between the king and his children" (105), and indicates some degree of royal affection or attachment, while his inclusion in dynastic portraiture indicates how, over time, he became "a symbol of continuity, a fixture of the court" (104). Perhaps, his physical presence at court had developed into that of an heirloom or "a good luck charm for the Tudor dynasty" (105). In the portraiture, Andersson notes that though his "facial features are

The Spenser Review

distinctive [...] they hardly show signs of anything that would have been grounds for his employment” (110), and that “a faint smirk is the extent of his performance” (114).

His personal traits are likewise challenging to pin down, but Andersson lays out four potential “limited conclusions” about his personage: firstly, that Somer was not a performer, but instead functioned as an “open target” for anyone at court; secondly, that he was known for sleeping, either by being lazy or because of a narcoleptic condition; thirdly, that he experienced emotional “outbursts,” indicating either an uncontrolled or volatile temperament; and fourthly, that he might have suffered from an unknown disability which included physical tics of a “spasmodic’ nature” (131-132, 121, 128, 131). He was likely a “bungler” (148) of oratory, incapable of spontaneous wit or deep semantic intuition. His speech exhibited less insight or flair than that of other fools, such as Archie Armstrong and Thomas More’s Pattinson, or than that of court wits like John Heywood, Andersson supposes. Yet, he was not inept in making conversation. Instead, Andersson points out, his “unintentional solecisms” (152) appear to have been appropriated and recalled as a running “private joke” (147) in the uppermost courtly circles. Of this fact Somer may have been fully aware, because, although he “perpetually lived” in what Andersson calls “a sort of parallel dimension” (161) at court, his existence appears to have been spent “so that he might prove fodder for amusement to others and stir humor and contemplation in those around him” (162). Andersson implies, tantalizingly, that there may have even been a running gag about one never being able to “abide” Will’s words (144-147). Yet, in spite of this, the mention of Somer in correspondence in fact serves as proof of the fool’s longstanding favor in the innermost circles of court. Recital of his verbal blunders or personal mantras in letter-writing, appears to have functioned as a way of claiming an intimate access to, and connection with, the heart of Henry’s chamber discourses: to have conversed with Somer—or to have experienced his wittering—was to be “close to the throne” (149).

The currency carried by the use of Somer’s name in private correspondence anticipates the afterlives his character is granted in later literary works including *Misogonous* (1577), Thomas Nashe’s *Summer’s Last Will And Testament* (1592), and Samuel Rowley’s *When You See Me You Know Me* (1605). We also find his presence among the documented natural fool personas in Armin’s *Foole Upon Foole* (1600) and *Nest of Ninnies* (1608). Andersson observes that Somer offered writers the “potential to imbue his words with whatever meaning the writers saw fit” (140) and so just as we

The Spenser Review

might question why Henry VIII adopted Somer as a “mascot” (152) at his court or in the portraiture of his day, he invites us to consider how Somer offered early moderns a model of malleable subjectivity, open to interpretation and rewriting. As *Fool* goes to show, notions of wisdom, humor, courtly practice, propriety, and personal identity could all be molded and manipulated by writers who appropriated the name of Will Somer in their performative enterprises.

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