

- **John H. Astington**
University of Toronto, Canada

Will Sommers' Suit: Illustration of Early Modern Performance

The early 1620s print by Francis Delaram of "Will Sommers King Henry's Jester" shows signs of being influenced by a tradition of stage representation of the figure, beginning in earnest in the early 1590s. The Admiral's Men and their successors staged at least three plays featuring Sommers, the last and most successful being Samuel Rowley's When You See Me You Know Me (c. 1604), an historical romance set in the court of King Henry VIII. The article examines the likely influence of scenes and motifs from this play, which probably held the stage for some time, on the composition and appearance of the Delaram picture, considering both within the context of the certifiable biography and the considerable legend and mythology of Sommers himself. The status of the print as an "illustration of the stage" is given critical attention. John H. Astington is Professor of English and Drama at the University of Toronto. He is the author of books and articles on the early English theatre, and has written on pictures and the stage in Shakespeare Survey, Shakespeare Quarterly, Shakespeare Studies, Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England, and The Oxford Middleton.

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The growth of popular entertainment in London over the fifty years from roughly 1560 onwards gave new prominence to the cult of the fool, already a well recognised figure in both social life and in literary and graphic culture of the medieval period.¹ The rise of the stage fool as a public entertainer, rather than purely a court or household servant, overlapped with and fed a printed literature, that catered to a spectrum of taste running from light amusement to a more searching satire.² The traditional costume of cap and bells as emblematic markers of widespread moral folly had been enshrined in Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* of 1494, anglicised by Alexander Barclay as *The Ship of Fools* (1509), with copies of the famous woodcuts showing the various manifestations of folly. A version of this edition was reissued in 1570, contributing to the growing Elizabethan fashion for fools, and for books, pamphlets, and pictures about them.

Even before the appearance of the renowned Richard Tarlton, who seems to have begun his stage career about 1576, a popular taste for jests and funny stories associated with a witty and irreverent figure showed itself in the anonymous *Jests of Skogyn*, licensed for publication in 1565-6, and appearing in print by about 1570. John Scogan, or Scoggin, as his name was popularly rendered, had been a court jester to King Edward IV; nothing much is known about him in the way of reliable fact, but he became a focus for popular jesting tales and legends. He is remembered anachronistically by Justice Shallow in *Henry IV, Part Two*: in his wild youth Falstaff is supposed to have beaten him “at the court gate” (3.2.26-28).³ That the court fool, essentially a private entertainer for an elite circle, could become the focus for popular legend and amusement, as well as for political criticism and polemics, is attested to by jests and stories attached to a number of such figures, including King James I’s court fool, Archy Armstrong, and my principal focus here, Will Somer or Sommers, fool to King Henry VIII and his children.

Richard Tarlton rose to prominence as a public professional entertainer over the course of quite a short career of a dozen years (1576-88). From the foundation of the Queen’s Men in 1583 until his death later in 1588 he was a royal servant, and his status no doubt gave rise to the later legend that he was a favourite of the Queen, able to cheer her melancholy moods with his humour, not unlike a court fool, in fact.⁴ The fool as supporter of the monarch, a therapist dispelling gloom and promoting a generous and balanced mental outlook, and hence the health of the entire realm, was a recurrent trope in literature and drama. In relation to the ruler, the fool in jestbook legend was frequently a truth-teller and friend of the common folk, an upholder of equity and fair dealing. Tarlton was also a popular subject for pictorial memorialisation, “so beloved that men use his picture for their signs.”⁵ One such popular print was shown on the stage within a year of Tarlton’s death, praised by the ballad-seller Honesty, a character in Robert Wilson’s play for the Queen’s Men, *Three Lords and Three Ladies of London*. What may have been the same woodcut, showing Tarlton performing a jig to the accompaniment of his own pipe and tabor, was used as a title-page ornament to the popular pamphlet *Tarlton’s Jests*. That it was perhaps not the first such illustration published as a cheap single sheet, for sale by such itinerant pedlars as Honesty, or Autolycus in *The Winter’s Tale*, is indicated by the early 18th-century reference to “the picture of Scoggin or Tarlton on a privy-house door.”⁶ The sign of the fool as a Bakhtinian truth-teller, a reminder of all social classes of their common dependence on the body and its functioning, that “a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (*Hamlet*, 4.3.30-31), guaranteed its widespread and common appeal. Thus popular illustrations of fools and jesters might decorate that most democratic of places, the toilet.

Well after the Elizabethan phase of popular fool literature and illustration there appeared in the later Jacobean period a picture in the rather more expensive medium of engraving, apparently sold as a single sheet by Thomas Jenner, a principal figure in the rising economy of the illustrated print in London, and then

doing business at the sign of the White Bear in Cornhill. It might have cost a few pence more than an equivalent woodcut print, yet still it was a reasonably accessible artifact, within the financial reach of many people at the time of its production. Dated between 1620 and 1622, it is the signed work of the engraver Francis Delaram, and shows the figure of “*Will Sommers Kinge Heneryes Jester,*” as the legend across the top announces.⁷ Sommers is shown at full length, facing the observer with his upper body turned slightly to the left, so that the level, calculating regard of the saturnine face is at a three-quarters angle. This jester is not at all invitingly merry.

In keeping with earlier representations of Sommers, what we see of his head is apparently bald or close-shaven;⁸ he wears a flat Tudor cap with a feather cockade tilted rather jauntily towards the left. His main garment is a long, skirted coat with the royal initials on the breast. It has elaborate slashed and puffed sleeves, with trailing pendants, tied with a sash at the waist into which a more traditional fool’s cap appears to be tucked.



The body of the gown is closed with decorative clasps, and around his neck Sommers wears a fairly massy three-strand chain, presumably of gold, a sign, with his master’s initials, of his status and favour. His feet, by contrast, are simply shod in slashed leather pumps: dancing shoes, perhaps. The left hand rests on the hip, elbow extended, in a gesture of confident assertion. The crooked right arm holds out a curved hunting horn. The general effect is of an affected arrogant dignity, whether in mockery or no, echoing the pose and presence of the famous King Henry himself, rather than the deliberate grotesquerie and distortion of the comedian. The curious figure is set on a raised exterior foreground; visible

to either side is a townscape background in which children play with hoops, tops, stilts, and a kite, amidst other group games. The games and the architecture in which they are set are reminiscent of Pieter Breughel the Elder's painting of children at play (c. 1560), as well as of the popular decoration of Netherlands' stove and fireplace tiles, frequently featuring a series of children's games.⁹ One part of the print, then, alludes to a widely known decorative genre of the period.

The visual signs of the print are partly elucidated in verses, engraved at the foot in two columns of four lines each. (The copy illustrated, from the British Museum, has a damaged lower right corner. The missing text is supplemented from copies of the print in the collections of the National Gallery, Washington.¹⁰) In modernised spelling and punctuation, the lines read:

What though thou think me clad in strange attire;
 Know I am suited to my own desire.
 And yet the characters described upon me
 May show that a king bestowed them on me.

This horn I have betokens Summers' game,
 Which sportive time will bid thee read my name;
 All with my nature well agreeing, too,
 As both the name and time and habit do.

Will Sommers' clothes are the subject of the first stanza, while the second concerns the other signs; the horn and the games, the verses claim, signify summer, the clue to the name of the central subject. Quite why the horn, and hence hunting, should be particularly associated with summer is not too clear. A famous set of twelve "months of the year" prints from the preceding century, made by Etienne Delaune, feature a hunting scene characterising April, for example. Nor is the "game" of hunting connected with the "sportive" pursuits of the children in the background; the logic of the analogies seems particularly weak, the more so as neither pose nor facial expression of the central subject is notably playful.

As a genre print, Sommers' picture may have been a step in the direction of the common trope of four linked prints each emblematically illustrating one of the four seasons. If so, not much forethought went into the likelihood of enlisting three other personalities with appropriate surnames and "natures." Why would an isolated illustration, as this picture appears to be, have in the first place been made of Sommers, and why was it given the particular treatment we can observe? It is the first mass-market picture made of its subject, at least that survives today, predating the cheap printed chapbook *The Pleasant History of the Life and Death of Will Summers* (1637), illustrated with crude, amusing woodcuts, by almost twenty years.

The answers to the preceding questions, I think, lie chiefly in the theatre, supplemented by the early 17th century publications of the leading comic actor

Robert Armin on fools and their history. Armin, well aware of how dramatic fictions amplified and emended historical fact, spoke in *A Nest of Ninnies* (1608) of routines and jokes attributed to Sommers that “are for mirth inserted in stage plays.”¹¹ Sommers’ career as a stage character had begun by the 1560s, shortly after his actual death in 1559. In the fragmentary manuscript play *Misogonus*, possibly performed as a college play at Cambridge, the scheming fool Cacurgus takes on the role of “Will Summer,” involving his playing the idiot and speaking in “mummerset,” characteristics which do not match other versions of the Sommers legend and seem rather to be loose generic gestures towards the characteristics of folly.

Sommers’ dramatic afterlife began in earnest in the 1590s, and lasted for at least two decades. The character on the stage evidently was known partly by a special costume. The Admiral’s Men had clearly performed a play featuring a Will Sommers role by 1598, when Philip Henslowe made an inventory of the theatrical wardrobe stored at the Rose playhouse; among other “*Clownes Sewttes*” was “Will. Sommers sewttte.”¹² The Rose play was probably preceded by Thomas Nashe’s entertainment *Summer’s Last Will and Testament*, which, like Delaram’s print, puns on the name and the season: the personified character Summer is a central allegorical character, while Will Summers, so spelt, acts as prologue, chorus, and sardonic commentator on the show itself, which was not, as far as we can tell, widely seen. It was probably performed in 1592 at the Croydon household of John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury, and any popularity it may have had followed its publication in 1600. In the show Sommers is reinserted into a household, so to speak; the metatheatrical opening of the text is a stage direction: “*Enter Will Summers in his fool’s coat but half on, coming out.*” He complains about the “turmoil of getting my fool’s apparel, and care of being [line] perfect,” “when I had my things but new brought me out of the Laundry.”¹³ The costume, in this case no doubt a fool’s parti-coloured or motley coat, is thus foregrounded, and Will’s ambiguous status—both himself and a performer taking on a role—played upon.

The Rose costume was also a “fool’s suit,” and therefore likely to have resembled what Nashe envisaged for his version of Will Sommers. The Admiral’s company costume either went missing in the next year or so or was unsuited to a later play, since in May 1602 Henslowe advanced three pounds to the actors “to bye W^m Someres cotte [coat] & other thinges for the 2 pt of Wollsey.”¹⁴ This was a sequel play in a two-part dramatisation of the rise and fall of Cardinal Wolsey, possibly with Edward Alleyn in the title part, performed at the relatively new Fortune playhouse between later 1601 and mid-1602, and written by Chettle, Munday, and Drayton (but now lost). The second play evidently featured scenes set in the court of Henry VIII, and probably also introduced the figure of Wolsey’s own fool, Patch, who figures with Sommers in later treatments of similar material. That Sommers wore a “coat,” a longer garment like the costume in the engraving, may explain why the stock suit was not appropriate; there was perhaps some specific dialogue or business referring to a “coat” in the Wolsey play.

The final play in the fashion for the history of the earlier Tudors was Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII* of 1613, which chose to ignore Will Sommers. Before it, however, came a play that appears to have been considerably popular, and continued the tradition of staging such material at the Fortune. This was the actor-playwright Samuel Rowley's *When You See Me You Know Me*, performed within a few years of the Wolsey plays, evidently with many of the same actors, by later 1603 under the patronage of Prince Henry, and first published in 1605. A second edition of the play in 1613 featured a woodcut portrait of the leading character, King Henry VIII, decorating the title page, perhaps with an eye to the competition at the Globe, where John Lowin was probably playing Henry to Burbage as Wolsey in the King's company's new play.¹⁵ *When You See Me You Know Me* came out in further editions of 1621 and 1632, indicating steady sales for thirty years, sustained perhaps by a continuing career on the Fortune stage in the repertory of the company successively under the patronage of Prince Henry and the Palsgrave, or Elector Palatine. The popularity of the play in print, at the least, certainly overlapped with the publication of Delaram's print of Will Sommers. *When You See Me You Know Me* is an anachronistic farrago of history and legend. Prince Edward is born to Queen Jane (Seymour) early in the play, and the king appears remarried to Queen Katherine (Parr's inconveniently unpleasant intervening history having been airbrushed) in a later scene. Wolsey remains alive and active throughout, his fall briefly dealt with towards the end, as the Holy Roman Emperor arrives for his visit to London. Wolsey and his Catholic allies are opposed by Will Sommers as a critic and commentator aligned with reformed English patriotism. Wolsey's fool Patch features as Sommers' companion in a farcical episode, and their discovery of the wealth hidden in Wolsey's wine cellar is picked up in the later *Pleasant History*. There is also an apocryphal "monarch in disguise" episode, in the tradition of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* plays, during which the disguised Henry penetrates London by night, is arrested and imprisoned by the watch, and befriends a criminal with a heart of gold. The play, in short, is historical-romantical-comical.

Will Sommers' clothing is a focus of attention at a number of points in the play. His initial entry, in the first scene, is a farcical intrusion into the royal presence dressed as a post, or mounted messenger: "*Enter Will Sommers booted and spurred, blowing a horn.*"¹⁶ He is the facetious purveyor of "strange news" from the city to the court, retailing the matters of high politics as they are supposedly seen by the common people. This jest, or "game," to use the language of the verse in the print, the first comic episode of the play, was undoubtedly a striking moment on stage. The horn carried by the figure in the picture, then, might be a loose allusion to the "game" of hunting, but by the time the print was made, playgoers and playreaders would have known that one of Will Sommers' famous games was the jest of entering the stage to the accompaniment of strident blasts on a horn, interrupting state business with ludicrous self-importance and irreverence: "Out of my way, old Harry. I am all on the spur, I can tell ye; I have tidings worth telling."¹⁷ In the picture the figure is certainly not dressed in the riding boots and spurs specified in the stage direction, yet the horn, a reminder of a memorable jest, seems likely to have recalled

to the minds of many of its first viewers a staged episode of Will Sommers' accumulating legend.

Clothing as a reward is promised Will in the second scene of the play, when the courtiers seek to deflect the king, "sad and passionate," from his ill-tempered grief following the death of the queen. Charles Brandon, the leading courtier and companion of King Henry, promises the fool "I'll give thee a velvet coat, and thou canst make him merry."¹⁸ Will manipulates Patch into acting as the lightning rod for the king's wrath, and consequently dissipating it. "Ye shall have a new coat and cap for this," the king promises Will, and he replies "Nay then, I shall have two new coats and caps, for Charles Brandon promised me one before, to perform this enterprise."¹⁹ A velvet coat might well have been as grand a garment as that worn by the figure in the print, although whether in the play Summers subsequently appears in the new finery he has won is not specified by any reference to it. Yet that the king's servants wear his clothes and livery badge—the "H R" shown on the breast of the figure in the print—and therefore have a duty to represent him and to uphold his honour *is* a matter raised later in the play.

In the sixth scene the assembled court hears the king adjudicate petitions, and the thematic focus bears on emblematic abuses of power by untrustworthy servants: false and true service and duty are central issues in the play as a whole. The first case concerns a member of Wolsey's household:

King. Cardinal, what find ye written there?

Wol. Mine own discredit, and the undoing of an honest citizen by a false servant.

Will. 'Tis not your fool, my lord, I warrant ye.

Wol. No, Will.

Will. I thought so; I knew 'twas one of your knaves, for your fools are harmless.

Queen. Well said, Will; thou lovest thy master's credit, I know.

Will. Ay, Kate, as well as any courtier he keeps.²⁰

Will's loyalty to his master having been established, Henry proceeds to the examination of one of his household staff called Rooksby, who wears livery as a Groom of the Wardrobe: "Our servant we guess thee by the cloth ye wear."²¹ In the face of insistent denial of wrongdoing (the case concerns unpaid debts), the king's temper rises:

Thinkest thou, false thief, thou shalt be privileged

Because th'art my man, to hurt my people?

Villain, those that guard me shall regard my honour.

Put off that coat of proof, that strong security,

Under which you march like a halberdier

Passing through purgatory, and none dare strike.

A sergeant's mace may not presume to touch
 Your sacred shoulders with the king's own writ.
 God's dear lady, does the cloth ye wear
 Such privilege and strong persuasion bear?
 Ha? is't, Rooksby?²²

Dismissing pleas for mercy, the king orders "Discharge him from my cloth and countenance"; "I'll keep no man to blur my credit so/ My cloth shall not pay for what my servants owe."²³

Thus the king's cloth and the king's credit are closely associated: Will Sommers, whatever the particular clothes he wears on the stage, cares for his master's reputation, and hence it would have been appropriate for him to have appeared in this scene, after winning his new coat, in something like the royal livery shown in the picture, bestowed on him by a king. True and false service continue to resonate through the remainder of the play; Prince Edward and Cranmer resist the false accusations against the queen of Bonner and Gardiner, the leading Catholic bishops and arch-villains of Protestant polemic, and Wolsey's duplicity is finally uncovered, partly with Will Summers' agency.

Delaram's print of c. 1620 deliberately recalls the stage life of a popular character, perhaps still appearing at the Fortune at the time the picture was made. It is evidently not an illustration of an actor in the theatre, but it invokes various aspects of a figure that by the Jacobean years had accumulated layers of apocryphal legend. The striking initial appearance of Rowley's version of Will Sommers is alluded to in "this horn I have," and the stage Sommers' loyalty to the king in the "strange attire," which perhaps throws back some light on what "Will Sommers' coat" may have looked like in the theatre: not, as we might otherwise expect, a parti-coloured fool's robe, but a version of the livery coat worn by royal servants, surviving still in the scarlet uniforms of the Yeomen of the Guard. If the woodcut of King Henry on the title page of the later editions of *When You See Me You Know Me* is the familiar Holbein icon of the older king standing massive and foursquare, legs apart, an image probably followed by Jacobean actors in dressing for the role, Delaram's print of Will Sommers, quite distinct in dress from the surviving sixteenth-century representations of the man, points to the stage, and to Sommers' recent embodiment in pose and stage costume. The picture might therefore be included among other putative pictures of stage costume of the period, usually shown in woodcuts and engravings prefacing and illustrating published plays.²⁴ It has as much claim as such pictures, I believe, to be read as an "illustration of the stage."

The little verses below the picture might also be thought of as a further allusion to the Sommers legend as created in drama. Simple rhyming couplets, couched in the first person like dramatic speech, give voice to a visually intriguing figure, and are not far removed from the final "merriment" concluding Rowley's

play, in which Will caps with rhythmically matching responses rhyming lines fed to him successively by the king, the emperor, and the queen, giving each a witty or bawdy turn or “clench.” Singing, chanting, and improvising rhymes were all routines of stage fools from Tarlton onwards. The text below the Will Sommers print alludes to a performative tradition, and makes a further gesture to the theatre.

Yet, in conclusion, the theatrical life of Will Sommers was only one influence on the composition of the picture: its background, for example, has nothing to do with any aspect of the Sommers legend, and certainly not with the stage. The drawing of the figure’s face and head is also particular and rather unsettling, and demonstrates that the artist had looked carefully at one, at least, of the two images of Sommers made in his lifetime; since one is contained in a valuable manuscript prayerbook, then more likely at the court painting of *Henry VIII and his Children* of c. 1545, showing Sommers in the background at the right side of the panel.²⁵ In both pictures he has a rather exhausted, preoccupied expression possessing his gaunt and bony face. In the print he looks considerably more calculating and conniving, more potential rogue than fool, yet still a long way from what any stage actor is likely to have made, facially, of the part written by Samuel Rowley. By 1620 Will Sommers was at least as much a legendary as a historical subject, and the picture brings together elements from this joint life of over a hundred years, to which the theatre contributed significantly.

¹ See Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber, 1935), and Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984).

² See Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (London: Methuen, 1981); Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³ Quotations from Shakespeare refer to the text of *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁴ See Ernest Nungezer, *A Dictionary of Actors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), 350.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁷ British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, O,7.182. Copyright Trustees of the British Museum.

⁸ See J. R. Mulryne, “Somer [Sommers], William,” *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. G. C. Matthew and Brian Harrison, 60 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51, 560-61.

⁹ The painting is in the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; it is widely reproduced, in books and on websites: see, e.g., www.artarchive.com. For illustrations of decorated tiles see, e.g., Hans van Lemmen, *Delftware Tiles* (London: King, 1997).

¹⁰ Copy in the Rosewald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, ref. 1950.14.1125.

¹¹ Robert Armin, *A Nest of Ninnies* (London, 1608), sig. F3^r (modernised).

¹² R. A. Foakes, ed., *Henslowe’s Diary*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 318.

¹³ Thomas Nashe, *Summers Last Will and Testament* (London, 1600), sig. B1^r (modernised).

¹⁴ Foakes, *Diary*, 201.

¹⁵ See John H. Astington, *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare’s Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 130.

¹⁶ Samuel Rowley, *When You See Me You Know Me* (London, 1605), sig. A4^r (all quotations from this text modernised).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, sig. C1^v.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, sig. C3^v.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, sig. F2^r.

²¹ *Ibid.*, sig. F2^v.

²² *Ibid.*, sig. F3^r.

²³ *Ibid.* sig. F3^v.

²⁴ See R. A. Foakes, *Illustrations of the English Stage, 1580-1642* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).

²⁵ The prayerbook image is reproduced in Clifford Davidson, *Illustrations of the Stage and Acting in England to 1580* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), and the painting (from the Royal Collection), e.g., in Simon Thurley, *The Royal Palaces of Tudor England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).