



IV. THE DROLLS

We cannot recognize the droll as a single dramatic type like the morality, the masque, or the jig. The *New English Dictionary's* definition of the word in its dramatic senses gives some notion of the breadth and looseness of the term: "A comic or farcical composition or representation; a farce; an enacted piece of buffoonery; a puppet-show." The word "drollery" likewise may mean "a comic play or entertainment; a puppet-show; a puppet."¹ The name is thus impartially applied to short farces performed by human actors and to puppet-plays, and it is sometimes difficult to

¹ Johnson's *Dictionary* defines "droll" in the sense first of "a jester; a buffoon; a jackpudding" and secondly of "a farce; something exhibited to raise mirth." Nares' *Glossary* thus explains "droll": "A puppet; at a later period it appears to have been used for a tom-fool," and "drollery": "A puppet-show . . . also a lively sketch in drawing, or something of that kind."

tell, in seventeenth-century writers, whether one or the other form of entertainment is meant. Nor can we be sure that some playlets included in *The Wits* were not originally puppet-plays.¹

Furthermore, in our collection a great variety of dramatic miniatures is assembled under the general title of "Select Pieces of Drollery" in *I Wits*, and of "Drols and Farces" in *II Wits*. Brevity is the only really consistent characteristic; yet several drolls, as *The Bouncing Knight*, *Bottom the Weaver*, and *The Cheater Cheated*, are lengthy. And five pieces entirely lack the comic quality.

According to their dramatic nature and their known or apparent origin we may divide the 38 drolls of *The Wits* and *Actæon and Diana* (counting *Actæon* and *Oenone* as drolls distinct from their abridgments, *Bumpkin* and *Hobbinal*) into seven classes, thus:

1. Abridgments, consisting almost entirely of comic scenes, from known five-act pre-Commonwealth plays (24 drolls).
2. Non-comic playlets in verse, on pastoral, mythological, or Biblical themes (5). These are of unknown origin, save for *Philetis and Constantia*, a composite play taken chiefly from a poem by Abraham Cowley.
3. Masque-like "pastorals" in verse and prose (2).
4. Abridgments from (the above) masque-like pastorals (2).
5. Abridgment from a known Court masque (1).
6. Jigs—farcical playlets almost wholly in verse, intended to be sung (2).
7. Prose farces, possibly abridged from lost plays (2).

I Wits contains all but two of the drolls in Class 1, and consists chiefly of these; but inserted in the midst of them are the drolls of Classes 4 and 7, and one of the jigs of Class 6. *II Wits* is largely composed of Class 2, which presents some of the most interesting problems; but it contains five other pieces, beginning with a jig and concluding, after the non-comic playlets, with a pastoral, the masque-abridgment, and two play-abridgments. There may be significance in the arrangement of both parts; per-

¹ See my notes on *King Abasuerus* and *King Solomon's Wisdom*.

haps the compiler or compilers intentionally buried in the middle of each book the pieces about which they knew the least, and made each volume begin and end with matter of more certain appeal. But if so, why was not the popular *Bottom the Weaver* placed at the beginning of *II Wits*? The jig, *The Black Man*, is a lively opening piece, but no better than the jig of *Simpkin*, which is buried in the center of *I Wits*.

In the pieces of unknown origin it is risky to attempt to decide which are abridgments and which are not. I think it likely that the anonymous plays of Class 2 were originally written in approximately the very brief form in which we have them. I am quite certain of the completeness of the jigs, and almost equally so of the pastorals in their more lengthy form. Of the prose farces, *Simpleton* is probably complete as it stands, but *John Swabber* may have been taken from a comedy that has perished. These judgments, however, are not capable of formal proof.

Obviously, we cannot seek a single origin for such a motley assortment as our drolls prove to be. We might trace their ultimate ancestry to the sixteenth-century moralities and interludes, and possibly even to the medieval mysteries. The playlets embodied in major Elizabethan dramas, such as *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, bear a strong resemblance to the drolls. Baskervill, one of the very few scholars who have carefully investigated such by-paths of the drama, considers the masque-like pastorals survivals of folk-plays of the sixteenth century;¹ but definite evidence of this is scanty. Without question the jig, *The Black Man*, which probably dates back to Elizabeth's reign, owes something to the morality, *The Marriage of Witt and Wisdome*, 1579.²

Puppet-plays may have been called drolls before the term was applied to short skits for actors. The *New English Dictionary* records the use of "drollery" in its dramatic sense thirty-nine years before that of "droll," and the earliest instances of the

¹ "Early Romantic Plays in England," *Mod. Phil.*, vol. XIV, p. 486. Baskervill points out features of popular drama in *Oenone, Actæon and Diana*, and *Venus and Adonis*. "Cox, indeed, seems merely to have revived old plays and farces for the populace," he concludes.

² The close parallels between the two are pointed out in my notes on the jig.

former word imply a puppet-performance.¹ Puppet-shows at Bartholomew Fair continued, apparently without interruption, throughout the Puritan period.²

The most plausible supposition, pending further research into these numerous branches of our minor drama, is that the Commonwealth drolls had their immediate evolution from the jigs of the Elizabethan theatre, with some influence from the earlier moralities, interludes, and folk-pastorals, and from the contemporary puppet-plays. Professor Baskervill's thorough and specialized treatise, *The Elizabethan Jig*, issued in 1929 after fifteen years of investigation, illustrates the sort of work which must be done in allied fields before we shall have an adequate basis for theories.

During the troublous times of the Rebellion and the Protectorate, a new species of minor dramatic composition arose, which bore a slight external resemblance to the drolls, but differed entirely in its purpose. This was the political playlet, or satirical pamphlet in dramatic form. Two such pieces appeared as early as 1641: *Canterburie His Change of Diot*,³ a satire on Archbishop Laud, in four short acts, followed by a "Gig betweene a Paritor and the Foole," and *Mercurius Britannicus, or The English Intelligencer*. The title-page calls the latter "A Tragic-Comedy, at Paris. Acted with great Applause"; but Frank H. Ristine,⁴ who ascribes the piece to Richard Braithwait, considers it a mere royalist polemic, never intended for presentation. Ristine describes half a dozen similar pamphlet-dramas which appropriated the name "tragic-comedy" with a satirical implication. One of these, *The Presbyterian Lash: or, Noctroff's Maid whipt*, 1661, is commonly ascribed to Kirkman, on the strength of the initials "K. F.," signed to

¹ Dekker, *The Belman of London*, 1608 (Temple Classics edition, 1904, p. 86), says of a beggars' tavern: "The whole Roome shewed a farre off . . . like a Dutch peece of Drollery: for they sate at table as if they had beene so many Anticks." This reference is not in *NED.*, whose first instance is from Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, c. 1610, III. iii. 21, in which Ariel's spirits preparing the banquet are termed "a living Drolerie."

² Henry Morley, *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair*, pp. 222, 229, 230.

³ Published in Ashbee's *Fac-simile Reprints*, No. XV. Baskervill discusses the appended jig in *The Elizabethan Jig*, p. 59.

⁴ *English Tragicomedy: Its Origin and History*, 1910, pp. 151-153.

the preface. Rollins¹ also discusses these curious manifestations of the dramatizing impulse, and concludes, "Perhaps some of these brief plays were performed—what better could the noblemen who hired actors at their private homes want?" In *The Wits*, however, we look in vain for any influence of these playlets. No contemporary political allusions occur in the drolls; no interpolations are made to satirize contemporary happenings, and very few excisions can be detected of passages which might be thought to touch on dangerous current issues.² The drolls were designed to entertain, not to propagandize. Their aloofness from the turmoil of the times is, in fact, one of the puzzling things about them.

The paucity of allusions to the performance of drolls during the Commonwealth period need not surprise us when we consider that they were not only unlawful, but also humble in origin and inferior in literary quality, and were perhaps acted by no other troupe save Cox's. We hear a good deal of pre-Cromwellian actors striving to revive the regular drama, of Davenant disguising opera as musical entertainment, of rope-dancers, jugglers, and bear-baiters;³ but no player of drolls is named except Cox. Obsessed as they were with political and religious issues, most writers of the day, even if they had heard of him, would have deemed his little entertainments too contemptible to mention. The low esteem in which drolls were held is plain from the apologetic tone of Cox's preface, and is frankly conceded by Kirkman. And in the plays of Shadwell⁴ and other Restoration dramatists we find expressions of scorn for the drolls still beloved of the proletariat.

It is probable that the acting of drolls went on in the provinces at least as extensively as in the city. Country fairs are coupled with Bartholomew Fair in London in the list of places of performance on the title-page of *II Wits*; and "halls, taverns, and

¹ "Contribution," pp. 270, 294-299.

² See my notes on *The Bouncing Knight* and *Invisible Smirk*.

³ See the extensive evidence of the persistence of bear-baiting given in Hotson, *Commonwealth and Restoration Stage*, pp. 59-70.

⁴ E.g., *Pryche*, Epilogue (Summers' edition, vol. II, p. 340); *A True Widow*, dedication to Sir Charles Sedley (vol. III, p. 284). Shadwell's numerous sneers at "jack-puddings" may also glance at droll-performances.

mountebanks' stages," which may have been anywhere in the kingdom, are mentioned along with Charing Cross and Lincoln's Inn-Fields. Even if Cox, a resident of Clerkenwell, confined himself mainly to London, he may have had provincial imitators. I believe that much more light will be thrown on the dramatic history of this period by careful investigation of the records of towns in all parts of England.¹ Kirkman's statement that Cox acted "at the Universities," which can only mean in the college towns, is supported by the testimony of Anthony à Wood to the persistence of drama there. Wood writes in December, 1659, summing up certain characteristics of the Presbyterians and Independents who had controlled Oxford: "They would not suffer any common players to come into the Universitie, nor scholars to act in privat but what they did by stelth; yet at Act times [the period of conferring degrees] they would permit dancing the rope, drolles, or monstrous sights to be seen."² He relates that one John Glendall, fellow of Brasenose, who died in 1660, "was a great mimick, and acted well in severall playes which the scholars before acted by stealth,"³ naming the places of their surreptitious performances. Wood's accounts mention payments to rope-dancers, and for plays at inns in the town, in the Act periods from 1657 to 1660.⁴ These definite records are all subsequent to the death of Cox, but it is very probable that kindred spirits were carrying on his work, and that the entertainments for which Wood paid fourpence or sixpence were drolls rather than full-sized plays.

Certainly, with the reaction under Charles II from Puritanism to general indulgence in amusement, drolls flourished in every part of England. Literary men like Shadwell might sneer, but the populace enjoyed them. Kirkman brought out his two edi-

¹ Cf. Rollins, "Contribution," p. 304: "No satisfactory history of the Commonwealth drama can be written until some one has made a thorough study of the enforcement of the laws against actors in the provinces." He cites a few instances which he found of the punishment of actors of "interludes" in Yorkshire in 1652, 1654, 1656, and 1657, and of men who acted a "comedy" at Newcastle in 1655.

² Clark, *Wood's Life and Times*, vol. I, p. 299.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 220, 255, 279, and 321; also vol. V, index, p. 150.

tions of *II Wits* in one year, largely, as his preface declares, to provide a repertoire for strolling players. Fiddlers interspersed jigs and drolls among their musical numbers.¹ The "jack-puddings," or acrobatic, slapstick-wielding buffoons of the day, may well have amused their vulgar audiences with excerpts from Kirkman's miscellany. Mountebanks— itinerant drug-vendors—made liberal use of drolls, which their confederate clowns, or "zanies," performed, to draw the gullible crowds of prospective buyers. Far from being suppressed, droll-performances now were licensed by law.²

Thus the despised and persecuted droll in some measure came into its own, winning popularity which was to endure for more than a century.³ As its vogue increased, many more specimens than those which Marsh and Kirkman had published were produced. At Bartholomew Fair time, actors deserted the public theatres for the droll-booths, if Cunningham's *Handbook for London*⁴ is to be believed; and the luckless Elkanah Settle, once a rival of Dryden, ended his days contriving drolls for the fair. By 1688 and 1691 we hear of new idols of droll-audiences, such comedians as Joe Haynes and Tom Dogget, some of whose skits were apparently derived, like the *Wits* abridgments, from old plays.⁵ Three drolls or farces, "all stolen from other Plays," as Gildon⁶ bluntly declares, and published in 1680 or 1681 under the

¹ Kirkman recommends his drolls to these popular entertainers, and in 1672 Shadwell definitely alludes to a performance of *Simpkin* by fiddlers. See my note on that jig.

² Rollins, "Contribution," p. 309, records the licensing at Norwich of "pieces of plays and drolls" in 1676, and of "plays, drolls, farces, interludes" in 1687. Thorough search of town records would doubtless reveal other instances.

³ Allardyce Nicoll, *British Drama*, 1925, p. 216, points out that a droll tradition "ran its course by the side of the regular theatre tradition right on to the close of the eighteenth century." That it survived into the nineteenth is indicated by the last instance of the dramatic sense of "drollery" given in the *NED*: an explanation of the word, dated 1818, as "a show; the old word for *the present drolls exhibited at fairs*." In many instances, however, the word may refer to puppet-shows.

⁴ Vol. I, p. 58.

⁵ Edward F. Rimbault in *Notes & Queries*, 2nd series, vol. VII, p. 409.

⁶ *Lives and Characters of the English Dramatic Poets*, p. 164. Gildon dates the quarto 1681; Nicoll, 1680 (*Restoration Drama*, p. 350). Nicoll speaks of only two of the drolls as derived from known plays.

title of *The Muse of New-Market*, attained the loftiest honor ever vouchsafed to drolls in being, so the title-page declares, "Acted before the King and Court at New-Market"; though Nicoll¹ censures their "banalities." For the first half of the eighteenth century, Nicoll² records the titles of no fewer than 66 drolls, all by unknown authors. Several of these pieces recall those in *The Wits*, having Falstaff, Actæon and Diana, and Queen Esther as their themes; one, *The Mad Lovers*, 1738, has *The Wits*' own sub-title, *Sport upon Sport*. An extant collection of seven pieces, *The Strollers Pacquet Open'd*, is the most extensive book of drolls that has survived, after *The Wits*. The sub-title shows that its contents were presented at Bartholomew and Southwark Fairs. The first droll has the familiar-sounding title *The Bilker Bilk'd* (cf. *The Robbers Robd*, sub-title of our *Bouncing Knight*), and the second has the sub-title *Stratagem on Stratagem*, perhaps an echo of *Sport upon Sport*. *The Wits* did not lack the sincerest form of flattery, as these and other imitations of its phraseology reveal.

This multiplicity of drolls after the Restoration probably explains the allusions by several modern scholars to some Shakespearean drolls not found in *The Wits*. Thus J. W. Ebsworth³ names, citing no authority, "the Shylock scenes in *The Merchant of Venice*, or the Choice of the Three Caskets, from the same play; the Sheep-shearing episode of Perdita, with the merriment of Autolycus. . . the Buck-Basket mishap of Falstaff, from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*." He enumerates these drolls together with several from *The Wits*, but the former must belong to some other and probably later collection.

It is plain that the field of the droll-drama is extensive. Many problems await solution by scholars who have the time and

¹ *Restoration Drama*, p. 139.

² "Hand-List of Plays, 1700-1750," in his *History of Early Eighteenth Century Drama*, pp. 365-386. Nicoll had seen copies of none of the pieces except those in *The Strollers Pacquet Open'd* and one other, *Wat Tyler and Jack Straw*, 1730.

³ Introduction to *Westminster Drolleries*, 1875 (a reprint of the original editions of 1671-72), p. xviii. The book is a collection of ballads and comic verse, and Ebsworth does not print any drolls with it. Schelling, *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. VIII, p. 132, also mentions the droll from the *Merry Wives*.

patience to thread the labyrinthine records of humble folk-ways in which most of the secrets of this exuberant form of popular entertainment are still concealed.

