

HENRY PATENSON – SIR THOMAS MORE'S FOOL

It is sometimes expedient to all the people to play the fool and make merry, lest by holding them in with too great a rigour, we put them in despair. ¹

The sixteenth century was an age of court and domestic fools and this tradition was so rich and pervasive that even the household of Sir Thomas More had its own fool, Henry Patenson. ² From a twentieth century perspective we might well ask, though, why More would need a domestic fool. Given More's character and talents, and his ordered and intellectually motivated family life, Patenson's role could suggest a paradox. As More was as much a man of the medieval period, out of which the tradition of fools came, as he was of the Renaissance, the answer to this paradox lies in the medieval pleasure derived from unsophisticated carnival-type humour, which was also a release mechanism. More could well have agreed with a fifteenth-century defender of fools who 'explained that wine barrels break if their bungholes are not occasionally opened to let in the air.' ³

The word fool in this context can be taken in general terms to mean an entertainer. Though in this sense there are a number of distinctions that need to be made within the two clear categories that can be established, the "natural" and the "artificial". The natural fool can be classed as a simpleton, slow, feeble-minded, even an idiot in the technical sense of being severely subnormal. The artificial fool was one of the following, or a combination of, buffoon or clown, whose talent lay in uninhibited slapstick, a comic who indulged in extempore slick verbal wit, or a jester who offered more contrived light-hearted entertainment. Both kinds were employed as court and domestic fools, the first category as much laughed at for their mental, and even physical, deficiencies as for their antics.

Wolsey's Patch fits into the natural group, while Henry VIII's Will Somers, depicted as having characteristics of shrewdness and intuition, belongs to the artificial. On the evidence available, Henry Patenson too can be put in the latter class.

Sources of information about the character and activities of Patenson are much more limited than those concerning other famous fools of his era. Sandra Billington's enthusiastic statement that information abounds about famous court and domestic fools does not apply.⁴ However, if, as she asserts, a fool such as Patch or Will Somers is well-documented, this indicates the popularity of this category of entertainer.

A picture of Patenson can be built up from various sources. Amongst secondary works, those based on solid research include studies by R.W. Chambers, Barbara Swain, and Enid Welsford.⁵ The work of John Doran is more dubious, whilst Anne Manning's book,⁶ the product of a fertile imagination, is basically a fictional reconstruction of the More household.

From Chambers' long-revered biography a picture emerges of a fool in the true tradition of innocent fun. He dismisses any suggestion that Patenson is in any way in the tradition of the tragic fool, but argues for a man with an unsophisticated sense of humour. An anecdote in *The Confutation* relating to More's embassy to the Emperor's court at Bruges, when his fool accompanied him, substantiates this. He 'was there some perceuyd vpon the syghte for a man of specyall wytte by hym selfe and vnylyke the comon sorte'⁷, one to be teased to anger. His rough stone-throwing treatment of his mockers suggests an artless character.

The above episode took place in 1521, so Patenson was a member of More's entourage by this date, though exactly when he joined it is not known. That he became an established part of the family circle at Chelsea is apparent from Holbein's portrait of the household, generally dated 1527. Fools in general held a lowly position within the court or domestic circle, sometimes sleeping with the animals, but this was clearly not the lot of Patenson. Available primary sources show that Patenson had a very special place in the family, that of the favoured innocent,⁸ the uncomplicated member of the household. Later biographers have accepted and repeated Thomas Stapleton's description of the family routine, that following more serious discussion during and after meals, Patenson was then allowed to introduce the lighter touch.⁹

From primary sources Henry Patenson emerges as an integral part of the More family. Standing at ease in Holbein's sketch¹⁰ next to the young John More, and behind Cecily Heron, is a broad-countenanced man, in a frontal pose resembling the one often associated with Henry

VIII. "Master Harry" seems to have been his title in the household and perhaps reflects what appears to be an imitation, in both stance and dress, of the King, himself popularly called Harry. He assumes neither the position nor the dress of a servant, nor for that matter the motley of a fool. He appears confidently secure of his place in the group. He is described, in Kratzer's hand, as being in his fortieth year. Patenson's special relationship with More and his family, as revealed by this sketch, is further reinforced by the story of him in *The Confutation*, where More recalls Patenson's (regal !) "Proclamation" issued to those who made fun of him in Bruges.¹¹

More's first biographers, William Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield, do not mention Patenson. Stapleton's biography (1588) offers positive evidence that the role Patenson played was in the tradition of the late medieval period, that of the provider of a relaxed and boisterous kind of pleasure.¹²

That Henry Patenson was half-witted cannot be substantiated. Swain asserts this but cites the unreliable Doran as her source.¹³ Richard Marius in his recent biography of Thomas More is positive that Patenson was 'feble-minded or mad. His staring eyes show an intense vacancy'.¹⁴ To base this in part on a study of Holbein's portrait, as he does, seems to be arguing it on slim, unconvincing evidence. It is not impossible that More's fool feigned half-wittedness, seeing it as a way to join a great household which would offer him security. As with the above question this too must rest on conjecture.

On the basis of More's *Utopia* it can be argued that the word fool for Sir Thomas More was synonymous with feble-minded. He says of the Utopians, 'they are very fond of fools. It is a great disgrace to treat them with insult but there is no prohibition against deriving pleasure from their foolery'.¹⁵ Paul Turner's translation of this passage is unequivocal. He says the Utopians are 'extremely fond of people who are mentally deficient'... and that 'it's quite in order to find their silly behaviour amusing'.¹⁶ This then can certainly be taken as a reference to the sub-normal, and some court and domestic fools did belong to this category.¹⁷ In the next paragraph More castigates those who laugh at physical deformity. Thus he appears to deal with two kinds of people who were traditionally the butt of the so-called normal. It is necessary to remember, if arguing along this line that Patenson was mentally retarded, that *Utopia* was written before there is any evidence More had acquired his fool. The same inference that More identified a fool as witless might be drawn from a story in the *Debellation*. He speaks of a man of his called Cliffe, describing him as 'as wel knowen as maister Henry

Patenson. This Clyff hadde bene many yeres mad,...' ¹⁸ More may just have been suggesting some similarity.

The one safe assumption we can draw (lacking any evidence to the contrary) is that if More practised what he preached then his own fool, half-witted or not, would hardly have been the butt of unkind humour. Nor would Patenson have been encouraged to hurtfully mock people, especially with respect to their physical defects. Ellis Heywood writes that when Patenson joked about the size of a guest's nose this was not well received. That the fool had transgressed the rules shows a certain dimness, but that he quickly claimed that he had really meant it was a small nose, or even no nose at all, evinces shrewdness. ¹⁹

Evidence that Patenson was not unintelligent also offers one of the most interesting insights into the relationship between the More family and their fool. This appears in a letter from Margaret Roper to her step-sister, Alice Alington, daughter of Lady Alice by her first marriage. Margaret relates how she told her father of Patenson's comments on More's refusal to accept the King's supremacy over the Church :

For sith thensauple of so many wise men can not in this matter moue you, I see not what to say more, but if I shoulde loke to perswade you with the reason that Master Harry Patenson made. For he met one day one of our men, and when he had asked where you were, and heard that you wer in the Towre still, he waxed euen angry with you and said, "Why ? What aileth hym that he wilnot swere ? Wherefore sholde he sticke to swere ? I haue sworne the oth my self." And so I can in good faith go now no ferther neither, after so many wise men whom ye take for no sauple, but if I should say lyke M. Harry, Why should you refuse to swere, Father ? for I haue sworne my self. ²⁰

Taken at its face value, this letter indicates the affectionate regard in which Patenson was held by the More family. However, the letter is generally believed to be a joint composition of father and daughter, intended to provide an explanation of More's position. ²¹ It would seem, then, that Margaret did not really believe that, after all the pleading and argument of his family and friends had failed, the beloved fool, long the source of innocent amusement, might by his commonsense laugh her father from his conscientious stand.

More dispensed with Patenson's services when he relinquished the chancellorship, since his financial position was such that his staff had

to be severely cut back. According to Stapleton, 'Some four years before his passion More removed the fool from his table and gave him to his father'. ²² On the basis of Cresacre More's biography of his great-grandfather, it has generally been accepted that Patenson was placed eventually with the Lord Mayor of London. However, E.E. Reynolds has queried this, suggesting a possible case of mistaken identity. ²³ Sir Thomas felt a responsibility for all who served him and made efforts to place them elsewhere.

After his resignation More was free at least from the tensions of official life, and from then on he gradually withdrew into himself in preparation for his end. He needed less and less exterior support, except for the love and prayers of family and friends. His own ironic humour was sufficient to sustain him. It could be asked, might not his family have needed, even more now, some good hearty fun and laughter. However, time being out of joint, they too needed to call on inner reserves for this, the greatest trial of their lives, the loss of their guide and mentor.

The last piece of information about Henry Patenson is the record of his burial at St. Lawrence Jewry, on 31 March 1543. ²⁴

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Stern virtues and learned studies were emphasized in the More family circle and were clearly spelt out by Sir Thomas in a letter written to William Gonell, a tutor to his children, advising him to emphasize the works of St. Augustine and St. Jerome :

From them they will learn in particular what end they should propose to themselves in their studies and what is the fruit of their endeavours, namely the testimony of God and a good conscience. ²⁵

In letters to Ulrich von Hutten and Guillaume Budé, Erasmus stresses the sobriety of the family circle but also provides an insight into More's means of providing simple pleasures, among other things, his menagerie, which was meant to amuse as well as to instruct. ²⁶ More recognized that the provision of light-hearted relaxation must accompany the intellectual methods he prescribed if his goal was to be achieved. The introduction of a merry-andrew supplied simple foolery which was part of the fabric of life at Chelsea. Employing Patenson indicates an appreciation that, at given times, pure escapism was a necessity.

How More was perceived on a personal plane provides an insight

into Patenson's role in the family circle. Correspondence and biographies paint a picture of a modest, merry and warmly friendly man, whose company was eagerly sought. Sir Thomas had a reputation for boisterous humour going back to his activities as a boy in Cardinal Morton's household, where his improvisations outshone those of 'all the plaiers beside'.²⁷ This boisterous aspect of his character, later catered for by Patenson, is different from his usual image as a renaissance scholar skilled in irony and satire. More's humour was as many-faceted as the character of the man.

It is a generally accepted thesis of social historians²⁸ that either participation in or observing merrymaking is a liberation and renewal. But they contend that foolery achieved something more: as Keith Thomas writes, a carnival atmosphere can be viewed as reinforcing the values of a hierarchically structured society.²⁹ Indeed an appreciation of the age is essential to our full understanding of Patenson's relationship with the More family. More may well have seen his fool in the light of a tension-releasing mechanism serving to underpin the disciplined structure of his household. When authority allowed a relaxation of its strictures, even encouraged fun to be made of them, its values, in this case More's, could well be strengthened. This was a tightly ordered circle, each day carefully planned by its ruling force, More reading human nature with perception. There is no hint of discontent with this regime.

By the sixteenth century, court and domestic fools comprised a "professional" class. The fool, especially within the "artificial" category, is, on the whole, 'no longer a mere butt or foil to the normal members of the community, but his detachment enables him to be their critic'.³⁰ While fools' humour was conventional, 'It reinforced accepted morality by mocking superiors by standards which they themselves upheld. Many regarded the court jester as a necessary prop to a personal monarch'.³¹

Within the family More could be equated with the absolute ruler, and Patenson, the fool who mocked, the subtle but pleasurable means by which accepted values were reinforced. The records however suggest the family accepted Patenson's contribution to their leisure time as basically one of light relief. There is no indication that the More circle were aware that they laughed at Patenson in terms of sublimation of their natural instincts. Whether their laughter was a reflection of suppressed instincts can only yet again be a matter for conjecture. It could well, though, have been a situation where 'We laugh to find that we are as natural as the fool, but we laugh also because we are normal enough to know how very unnatural it is to be as natural as that'.³²

The role of More's fool was clearly similar to that of famous contemporary fools, and a knowledge of them helps to categorize Patenson. He was one of a group of fools who laughed loud and hoped to produce a belly laugh in response, relying for the most part on straight comedy and clownage. Sources establishing the type to which he belonged are so variable that stories about fools such as Will Somers and Patch increasingly become, with the passage of time, a mixture of fact and fantasy. Samuel Rowley's chronicle play of Henry VIII's reign, *When You See Me, You Know Me*, and the anonymous *A Pleasant History of the Life and Death of Will Summers* (1676) are doubtful authorities, stemming from some genuine tradition but based also on fiction. George Cavendish, who knew Patch and his relationship with Wolsey, presumably gives a more trustworthy account.³³ Robert Armin's *Nest of Ninnies* (1609)³⁴ does derive from a knowledge of contemporary entertainment in the tradition of Patch and Somers, and from his own experience as a court and domestic performer.

Patenson conformed to a pattern of behaviour which expressed itself in the tradition of bawdy and slapstick. One of its characteristics was the often uninhibited behaviour associated with that of the child. The fool ignored the social code, was unrestrained in his gaiety and operated not via logic but through instinct fed by shrewd observation. He was held to account if he transgressed the rules, though this boldness often amused even if it went too far.

The More family's attitude towards Patenson was evidently one of indulgence, as to a pert child allowed after dinner to entertain. This fool seems to have been loved for what he was. We tend to love those who make us laugh, for whatever reason, excusing injudicious conduct, as More did on the occasion of Patenson's indiscretion over a guest's nose.

Like modern comedians, sixteenth century fools made cynical political comments, as well as uncomplicated witticisms. As their masters allowed this, the comments were associated with the fool and not with themselves. According to *A Pleasant History of the Life and Death of Will Summers*, Will had little love for Cardinal Wolsey, and the author quotes the fool's rhyming reference to Wolsey's aspirations:

A halter and a rope
For him that would be Pope
Against all right and reason.³⁵

Suspect as this authority is, it provides an insight into a role some court and domestic fools played.

While Will Somers might bait Wolsey, albeit more for personal reasons, it is most unlikely that Patenson was encouraged to provoke influential figures, especially if connected with the Church. More was instinctively cautious on sensitive public issues. After the Reformation he believed even constructive criticism, which Erasmus continued to advocate, could lead to heresy and undermine the very fabric of the true Church on which the political and social order rested.

Patenson is not in the renaissance tradition of using sophisticated wit to illuminate the defects of contemporary society. On the evidence available, More's fool did not possess the intellectual skills to use humour ironically to stimulate self-examination, nor did More require this of Patenson. Thus he emerges as a fool in the medieval tradition, employed to provide pure fun; a source of momentary relaxation for those from whom More demanded so much. However, the argument that making fun of things dear, for the conscious purpose of underpinning them, cannot be discounted.

Thomas argues cogently that laughter has a 'social dimension', and 'jokes are a revealing guide to tensions and anxieties'.³⁶ More uses subtle jokes in his *Utopia* to highlight contemporary problems. We do not know whether Patenson, within the limits of the fool's licence, ever touched on the sensitive issues of the day in a shrewd and intuitive way. However we can assume that the laughter Patenson raised reflected the tensions and anxieties in More's personal world, in so far as he was used as a safety valve, thus serving to protect what More held precious.

More was caught, probably more than most, in the contradictions of his age. One of the conventions of that age was the employment of a domestic fool to relieve tension without challenging the system. The witty, scholarly and legalistic More followed this convention by employing Henry Patenson, who consequently stands foursquare in Holbein's portrait, the embodiment of More's apparent dualism.

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NOTES

1. Claude de Rubys, sixteenth century lawyer, quoted in Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-century France', *Past and Present*, no. 50 (Feb. 1971), p. 41.

2. There are various spellings of this name, Patenson, Pattenson, Paterson, Pattison, Pateson. For the sake of uniformity the first will be used, except where an alternative appears in a quotation.

3. In Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (New York, 1961), p. 204.

4. Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (Brighton, 1984), Chapter 3, *passim*.

5. R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982); B. Swain, *Fools and Folly During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (New York, 1932); Welsford, *The Fool*.

6. John Doran, *The History of Court Fools* (London, Richard Bentley, 1858); Anne Manning, *The Household of Sir Thomas More*, 4th ed. (London, 1904).

7. T. More, 'The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer', Louis Schuster et al. (eds.), *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, v. 8, pt. II (New Haven, 1973), p. 900.

8. In addition to Holbein's sketch for the portrait of the More household, several biographies of More: T. Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, E.E. Reynolds (ed.) (London, Burns and Oates, 1966), pp. 89-90, Ro: Ba.; *The Lyfe of Syr Thomas More, Sometyms Lord Chancellor of England*, E.V. Hitchcock & P.E. Hallett (eds.) (London, Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 208, and Cresacre More, *Life of Sir Thomas More*, M.A. Anderegg (ed.) (Yale Ph.D dissertation, 1972), p. 165.

9. Stapleton, *Sir Thomas More*, p. 90.

10. The original pen and ink drawing is now in the Kunstmuseum, Basel.

11. More, 'The Confutation', pp. 900-901. For the Bruges context of Patenson's 'Proclamation' see also G. Marc'hadour, 'Thomas More dans l'histoire de Bruges', *Moreana*, XXV, 97 (March 1988), p. 110.

12. 'Afterwards More in his inimitable way would suggest some lighter topic, and all would be highly amused. Henry Patenson, More's fool, would now join in the conversation'. Stapleton, *Sir Thomas More*, pp. 89-90.

13. Swain, *Fools and Folly*, p. 55.

14. R. Marius, *Thomas More* (London, 1984), p. 230. In a letter to me (dated 17/2/1986), Marius admitted that there is no firm evidence to support the belief that Patenson was retarded. He believes More's fool manifests physical indications of Down's Syndrome. This and the attitude of the family towards their fool led to this judgement. If Henry Patenson was forty in 1527, and died in 1543, he would be an exception to the

rule as far as life expectancy went. Until the advent of modern surgical techniques and antibiotics Down's Syndrome people were prone to cardiac anomalies and respiratory diseases which resulted in early death. M. Craft, 'Chromosomal Anomalies' in *Tredgold's Mental Retardation*, M. Craft (ed.) (London, 1979), p. 53.

15. T. More, 'Utopia', E. Surtz and J.H. Hexter (eds.), *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, v.4 (New Haven, 1965), p. 193.

16. T. More, *Utopia*, P. Turner (ed. trans.) (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 105.

17. 'The court-fool...causes amusement not merely by absurd gluttony, merry gossip, or knavish tricks, but by mental deficiencies or physical deformities which deprive him both of rights and responsibilities and put him in the paradoxical position of virtual outlawry combined with utter dependence on the support of the social group to which he belongs'. Welsford, *The Fool*, p. 55.

18. T. More, 'The Debellation of Salem and Bizance', John Guy et al. (eds.), *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, v.10 (New Haven & London, 1987), p. 16.

19. Ellis Heywood, *Il Moro*, R.L. Deakins (ed. trans.) (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 20. This story is supposed to have been recounted by More himself. Heywood's dialogue in memory of Thomas More is the record of an imagined debate between More and six friends about true happiness. Heywood (1530-1578), a Jesuit, was the son of More's niece, Joan Rastell.

20. Margaret Roper to Alice Alington, in E.F. Rogers (ed.), *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton, 1947), no. 206, p. 529. This was first published by Rastell in his edition of More's *English Works*, 1557.

21. Rogers, 'Introduction', *ibid.*, p. 514. Marius, *Thomas More*, uses this incident to emphasize that Patenson was an imbecile, pp. 469-470.

22. Stapleton, *Thomas More*, p. 90. Reynolds, editor, points out that there has been debate about this and it is possible to argue that, 'to his father', could have been to More's father, though it could be taken to mean Patenson's, if 'passion' is dated from February 1534, the date of the Nun of Kent's attainder. Sir John More died in 1530.

23. Reynolds also puts forward the suggestion that there may have been confusion here with Walter Smythe, "author of *Twelve Merry Jestis of One Called Edyth* (1525), who was in More's service, and at his master's request was appointed sword-bearer to the Lord Mayor in 1529...", *ibid.*

24. *The Register of St. Lawrence Jewry, London 1538-1676*. 'Burials', A.N. Hughes Clarke (trans. and ed.), Harleian Society Publications, v.70 (London, 1940), p. 107.

25. Thomas More to Gonell, 22 May [1518?], cited in Stapleton, *Thomas*

More, p. 96. See also Rogers (ed.), *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, no. 63, pp. 122-23.

26. Erasmus to von Hutten, 23 July 1519, in R.A.B. Mynors (trans.) & P.G. Bietenholz (annot.), 'The Correspondence of Erasmus', *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto, 1987), v.7, no.999, pp. 16-25. Erasmus to Budé, [c September] 1521, *ibid.* (1988), v.8, no. 1233, pp. 294-299.

27. W. Roper, *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, Knighte*, E.V. Hitchcock (ed.) (London, E.E.T.S., 1935), p. 5.

28. Welsford, *The Fool*, chapter IX; Zemon Davis, 'The Reasons of Misrule', pp. 41-75; Keith Thomas, 'The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 3906, 21 January 1977, pp. 77-81.

29. K. Thomas, 'Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society', *Past and Present*, no. 29 (Dec., 1964), pp. 53-54.

30. E. Welsford, *The Court Masque. A Study in the Relationship Between Poetry and the Revels* (New York, 1962), p. 381.

31. Thomas, 'The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', p. 78. Earlier Thomas had been more positive about this aspect of the fool. He says in 'Work and Leisure in Pre-industrial society' (p. 54), the court fool was an "inseparable accompaniment of absolute monarchy...". In 'The Place of Laughter' (p. 78), he wonders whether Elizabeth's jester Tarleton was more able to point out her faults than were her chaplains, privileged though Tarleton was, and to a greater extent Scogan, another of her court jesters.

32. Welsford, *The Fool*, p. 322. She goes on to say, "the fool knows the truth because he is a social outcast and spectators see most of the game...", p. 323.

33. George Cavendish, 'Cardinal Wolsey', R.S. Sylvester & D.P. Harding (eds.), *Two Early Tudor Lives* (New Haven, 1962), p. 107.

34. Robert Armin published *Foole Upon Foole* anonymously in 1605, and an enlarged edition, published in 1609, was entitled *The Nest of Ninnies*. Armin was in a different class from fools such as Patenson. He bridged the gap between the buffoonery of the earlier sixteenth century fools and the more intellectual ones of the later period. He acted in Shakespeare's company and there is evidence that his experience and knowledge were used in the characterization of some of Shakespeare's fools.

35. Cited in Welsford, *The Fool*, p. 169.

36. Thomas, 'The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', p. 78.

Précis

Sir Thomas More was as much a man of the medieval period as of the Renaissance. The former is reflected in his acquisition of a domestic fool, Henry Patenson. The seeming paradox of this sophisticated, witty and intellectual man employing Patenson needs to be seen against the context of a still highly structured society, and in the case of More's family a strictly ordered one, medieval in character. The boisterous-type fun of the fool operated in terms of liberation and renewal, a release mechanism. Fools were a convention that flowed over into the sixteenth century.

Résumé

Sir Thomas More appartient à l'époque médiévale autant qu'à la Renaissance. Son acquisition d'un bouffon domestique, Henry Patenson, reflète le Moyen Age. Le paradoxe apparent de cet intellectuel plein d'esprit qui entretient un fou sous son toit est à voir dans le contexte d'une société encore très structurée, et dans le cas de la famille de More, d'une société strictement ordonnée, de caractère médiéval. La bouffonnerie de Patenson servait pour libérer et renouveler -- une soupape de sûreté. Le bouffon était une convention qui s'est maintenue jusqu'au seizième siècle.

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