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Chapter 9

Shakespeare’s “portrait of a blinking idiot”: Transnational Reflections

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The “portrait of a blinking idiot” is dismissed by its hapless recipient Arragon as “a fool’s head.” Folly, so often by Shakespeare linked to sexual or political indiscretion, is named only once in the play featuring this portrait, when, during an illicit night-time meeting with her Christian lover Lorenzo, Shylock’s cross-dressed daughter Jessica touches on several major themes of Merchant of Venice; ruefully noting: “I am much asham’d of my exchange. / But love is blind, and lovers cannot see / The pretty follies that themselves commit.” But fools and folly are powerfully evoked by the play’s setting, Venice at carnival time, and from its first scene, when friends of Portia’s eventually successful suitor, Bassanio, attempt to jolt him out of his lovesick misery by fooling around; Gratiano even declares “Let me play the fool.” Vainly concerned to restrain his daughters from joining the masked and music-making throngs of Catholic revelers, Shylock warns Jessica:

Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum,
And the vile squealing of the wry-neck’d fife,
Clamber not you up to the casements then,
Nor thrust your head into the public street
To gaze on Christian fools with varnish’d faces.

In the courtroom scene, Shylock again implicitly links folly with Christianity. Labeling his adversary Antonio “the fool that lent out money gratis,” the Jewish merchant vows: “I’ll not be made a soft and dull-ey’d fool to shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield to Christian intercessors.”

Shakespeare’s evocations of images are often said to draw on textual rather than visual sources. It has even been claimed that “whereas the place held by music was assured and central in Shakespeare’s universe, equivalent to that of the word, the visual arts, we may have to conclude, were ancillary to his creative purposes.” My analysis of the “portrait of a blinking idiot” indicates Shakespeare’s complex engagement with interrelated visual and textual sources on the very cusp of a newly emerging transnational emblematic theme. Here, some of his references to this theme are identified, and contextualized within a discussion of its medieval antecedents and selected early modern visual as well as more purely literary manifestations. The “portrait” occurs in the scene in which Prince Arragon submits to the test of choosing between three caskets, for Sigmund Freud symbolically representing, like Lear’s daughters, the three Fates, in order to determine whether he is worthy of Portia’s hand. After lengthy egocentric considerations, Arragon spurns the lead casket, rejects the gold one that he considers the obvious choice of “the fool multitude,” and picks the silver casket. Attracted by its promise that “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves,” he is devastated to find that it contains “the portrait of a blinking idiot, presenting me a schedule! I will read it. How much unlike art thou to Portia! … Did I deserve no more than a fool’s head? Is that my prize?” Arragon takes out and reads the schedule, or scroll. It concludes by admonishing: “There be fools alive, iwis / Silver’d o’er; and so was this. / Take what wife you will to bed, / I will ever be your head.” This wordplay on Arragon’s chosen metal, silver, refers pointedly to the white-haired suitor’s inappropriately advanced age for wooing the young Portia. It also significantly exemplifies Shakespeare’s extensive use of pan-European traditions of medieval folly iconography to engage his audiences with his plays. In order to allude to their own folly, but also that of observers of their depictions or performances, images in this tradition increasingly pair fools not with their simple, undecorated cudgel or slapstick, but with that mirror-like symbol of sinful pride, the bauble, marotte, or folly-stick topped with a miniature portrait of its foolish owner. More rarely, such fools hold a mirror, then a powerful symbol both of vanity and of self-knowledge, iconographically associated with the deadly sin of Pride and with Fortuna, but

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6 Merchant of Venice III.3.2.14–16.
also with the cardinal virtue Prudence. In a satirical carnivalesque world-upside-down inversion, an early seventeenth-century stone relief at Edzell Castle, based on a sixteenth-century engraving by Hans Burgkmair, depicts Prudence holding a mirror resembling a folly-stick.\footnote{W. Douglas Simpson, “Edzell Castle,” \textit{Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland} 65 (1930): 115–73 (illustrated: p. 150: Fig. 39).}

Biblical passages informing the layered iconographic connotations of medieval mirror-bearing fools include: “The fool hath said in his heart, \textit{There is no God},”\footnote{Psalm 53:1.} and “For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass. For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.”\footnote{General Epistle of James, 1:23–4.} Depicted discrepancies between fools’ features and their mirrored reflections suggest that their mirrors are also intended to reflect their audience.\footnote{William Willeford, \textit{The Fool and His Sceptre} (London: Arnold, 1969), p. 39.} The most detailed allusion to a vain character in the chapter “On self-love” in \textit{Ship of Fools}, Sebastian Brant’s landmark 1494 publication of European folly literature, is reserved not for the mythical Pygmalion or Narcissus, but for the Roman senator Marcus Salvius Otho, whose three-month rule as emperor ended with his suicide in 69 AD.\footnote{Sebastian Brant, \textit{Das Narrenschiff} (Straßburg, 1494; Stuttgart: Reclam, 1964), p. 213.}

Here, I suggest proudly smooth-cheeked Otho—who was regularly depilated by his slaves, shaved twice daily, and softened his skin with asses’ milk—as an additional interpretation, supplementing rather than superseding his accepted identification as “a fool,” for the regal mirror-wielding “Nobody” depicted in the picture-within-a-picture of Bruegel’s \textit{Elck} (“Everyman,” Figure 9.1), named as Nemo by a reverse inscription in the British Museum’s original drawing.\footnote{Nadine M. Orenstein and Manfred Sellink, \textit{The New Hollstein: Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450–1700: Pieter Bruegel the Elder} (Rotterdam: Sound & Vision, 2006), pp. 80–82, n. 35.} \textit{Elck}’s complex enrichment of the transnational allegorical and theatrical figures of Everyman and Nobody with allusions to material greed and human vanity, the battlefield and churchyard, Diogenes and Otho, wise self-knowledge and foolish self-love, resonates with Shakespeare’s treatment of the gold and silver caskets. Both artist and playwright draw on classical, philosophical, religious, and political references, vernacular culture, and above all on Brant and his legacy, to comment on human folly, and specifically on two “deadly” sins: avarice and pride. The woodcut illustrating Brant’s “On self-love” inspired the teenage Hans Holbein to depict a fool holding a mirror in place of his folly-stick among his over 80 marginal illustrations of 1515 to a first-edition copy of Erasmus’s \textit{In Praise of Folly}.\footnote{Brant, \textit{Narrenschiff}, p. 212 (woodcut 60); F. Saxl, “Holbein’s Illustrations to the ‘Praise of Folly’ by Erasmus,” \textit{Burlington Magazine} 83:488 (1943): 274–9 (illustrated: Plates Iib and IId).} \textit{Ship of Fools} presents itself to readers as a book functioning as just such a
mirror. The anachronistic identification of a phrase widely attributed to Seneca’s *Naturales quaestiones* by modern authorities as a classical influence on Brant’s pithy suggestion (in the original German edition) that readers identify his book’s fools in their own mirrors, possibly derives from Robert Burton’s free rendering, erroneously referenced by him to Seneca’s *Epistle* 33. The closest equivalent to this phrase I can identify in Latin editions of Seneca occurs not in *Naturales quaestiones* but in *Epistles to Lucilius* 50: “Si quando fatuo delectari volo, non est mihi longe quaerendus; me rideo,” translated by Thomas Lodge as “If at any time I wil take pleasure in a foole I neede not seeke farre off, I finde sufficient matter of laughter in my selfe.”

Shakespeare demonstrates consummate awareness of traditional links between mirrors, folly, human vanity, and sinful pride, and also, of the dramatic possibilities for drawing audiences into his plays suggested by images depicting a lone fool whose mirror reflects not only himself, but by implication also the spectator. His use of this theme in the deposition scene of *Richard II* draws heavily on precedents in morality plays such as Thomas Chaulender’s *Liber apologeticus* of ca. 1460. Richard II rants: “must I ravel out my weav’d-up follies?” Calling for a mirror, he looks into it and exclaims “Is this the face which fac’d so many follies,” before destructively hurling it to the ground. The court jester Yorick’s skull is a concise and graphic dramatic equivalent of the medieval Dance of Death’s “Death as the Fool.” Marjorie Garber relates it to the death’s head and fool’s head of the *Merchant of Venice*’s gold and silver caskets, identifying all three as “in effect mirrors, showing those who gaze upon them the image of their own death.” She links the “blinking idiot” to the passage in *As You Like It* in which Orlando plays on the Ovidian legend of Narcissus to score points off Jaques and, without referring to the wider context of the *We three* visual tradition, notes *Twelfth Night*’s “picture of ‘we three.’” The asses’ ears of fools’ caps refer to a veritable synonym for “fool”: an animal of legendary folly in both classical and biblical tradition. The ass is iconographically connected to Stultitia, Priapus, Bacchus, devils, witches, the

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22 *Richard II* IV.1.228–9, 285.
“World Upside Down,” and at least four seven deadly sins: sloth, pride, avarice, and lust. References to the ass inform fool-mirror links in several “foolish” Shakespearean exchanges, including that prompted by Bottom’s transformation:

**SNOUT.** Oh Bottom, thou art chang’d! What do I see on thee?

**BOTTOM.** What do you see? You see an ass-head of your own, do you?

**QUINCE.** Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated.

**BOTTOM.** I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me.26

Allan Shickman suggests that King Lear’s fool wielded a much-used mirror. He identifies it with the mirror with which Lear pathetically tries to disprove the death of his daughter Cordelia, briefly touches on the didactic intention of this versatile stage prop, and uses it to propose a new reading of the challenging “sweet and bitter fool” exchange. His reading of Lear’s: “Dost thou call me fool, boy?,” as an outraged response to the Fool’s gestures that his king find the bitter fool in his mirror, is convincing in itself and, although Shickman does not make the connection, supports mirror-based readings of “the portrait of a blinking idiot.”27 I would go further. For me, the whole of *King Lear* may be read as a complex gloss on a flourishing literary and visual tradition which made its mark on seventeenth-century culture by informing texts and text-image combinations in many European countries. This transnational tradition, here identified as a popular emblematic theme fundamentally rooted in late medieval Germanic folly literature and its associated images, especially those of the fool and his mirror, may be typified by the phrase *We three*. The number “three” is not fixed. Two and three were popular variants from the 1590s, commonly joined, as the seventeenth century progressed, by anything up to *We ten* for images and *We 100* for literature. However many, it is always one more than those actually present in the image or text in question, and the principle is always the same: in depicting or describing one fool less than the given number, the reader, onlooker, or spectator is by implication drawn into the narrative, and branded a fool himself, by being identified as the final—missing—fool.


Viewing Lear from the perspective of the We three tradition, the King and his court fool form two of this classic triad, whose missing third fool is, in this case, individually represented by every spectator or reader of Shakespeare’s play reflected—genuinely or metaphorically—in the fool’s mirror. Not unlike modern stand-up comedians, early modern stage fools played directly to their audiences, in ways inaccessible to non-comic actors. Lear’s fool holds up his mirror not just, or even primarily, to his fictional monarch, but to his real audience, from whose necessarily human failings Shakespeare never allowed his gaze to falter while creating his dramatic characters. An avenue explored by many critics and directors is that the “portrait” Arragon found within his chosen casket was a “blinking,” light-catch­ing mirror image, and the fool in the casket thus none other than Arragon’s own reflection. This richly expands its traditional reading as an artistic creation. In 1970, Jonathan Miller had Charles Kay play Arragon as a “senile dodderer,” an elderly man too short-sighted to recognize himself in the silver casket’s mirror “portrait.” Its connections to the We three tradition surface most fully when the foolish Arragon sums up his bitter disappointment at his chosen casket’s image and text by artlessly endorsing his self-identification as an idiot and old fool: “Still more fool I shall appear / by the time I linger here. / With one fool’s head I came / But I go away with two.”

I detect many further Shakespearean We three allusions. Near the start of The Merry Wives of Windsor, Mistress Quickly, the maid of Anne Page’s comical admirer Doctor Caius, brands her linguistically challenged master a fool. Subjected to one of the love-struck French physician’s garbled outbursts, when he has left, she punningly vows: “You shall have Anne—fool’s-head of your own.” Later, when Dr Caius follows Mr Ford and the Welsh parson Sir Hugh Evans in accepting an invitation from Anne’s father, he employs an unfortunate malapropism that works on several levels to appeal to educated and uneducated spectators. Those unaware of the We three tradition can enjoy Caius’s “foolish” scatological pun; to those in the know, it heightens the French quack’s suitability as the trio’s inadvertently self-volunteered missing third fool:


29 The Merchant of Venice II.9.73–6.
30 The Merry Wives of Windsor I.4.126.
PAGE. I do invite you tomorrow morning to my house …

FORD. Any thing.

EVANS. If there is one, I shall make two in the company.

DR. CAIUS. If there be one or two, I shall make-a the turd. 31

Love’s Labor’s Lost features a We four variant. Having roundly mocked his love-struck colleagues Longaville and Dumaine and their master King Ferdinand as fools, Berowne finally confesses that he too is in love:

BEROWNE. Ah, you whoreson loggerhead, you were born to do me shame.
Guilty, my lord, guilty! I confess, I confess.

KING. What?

BEROWNE. That you three fools lack’d me fool to make up the mess.
He, he, and you—and you, my liege!—and I,
Are pick-purses in love …

DUMAINE. Now the number is even.

BEROWNE. True, true, we are four.
Will these turtles be gone? 32

The only universally recognized Shakespearean example of We three occurs in Twelfth Night. Near the beginning of the scene in question, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek are joined by the play’s clown or fool, Feste:

SIR ANDREW. Here comes the fool, i’ faith.

CLOWN. How now, my hearts? Did you never see the picture of “we three”?

SIR TOBY. Welcome, ass. 33

Having skillfully engineered this exchange, refreshing the audience’s recollection of the We three trope’s exact details, Shakespeare more casually refers to it in another context later in that same scene, when the maid Maria reveals her plot to make Malvolio look foolish to Sir Toby and Sir Andrew:

MARIA. My purpose is indeed a horse of that color.

SIR ANDREW. And your horse now would make him an ass.

32 Love’s Labor’s Lost IV.3.200–208.
33 Twelfth Night II.3.15–18.
Maria. Ass, I doubt not.

Sir Andrew. O, ’twill be admirable!

Maria. Sport royal, I warrant you. I know my physic will work with him. I will plant you two, and let the fool make a third.34

Clearly, the punch line of the earlier encounter is that the play’s own professional fool—wittingly or unwittingly—volunteers himself as the missing third fool. However, the third “fool” of Maria’s speech is neither Feste nor an “abrupt, unexplained” mis-reference to Fabian, whose “crudeness … contrasts strikingly with the theatrical expertise of the play so far.”35 Maria’s missing third fool can only be identified with the man she plots to publicly expose as a fool, namely the foolish lover Malvolio.

Some modern editors accept the Shakespeare collector and scholar Edmund Malone’s interpretation of Twelfth Night’s “picture of ‘we three’” as a popular painted tavern sign: “in which two wooden heads are exhibited, with this inscription under it: ‘We three loggerheads be.’ The spectator or reader is supposed to make the third.”36 Shakespeare scholarship makes no references to specific images in the We three tradition pre-dating Shakespeare’s death in 1616 or the 1623 first folio. The earliest substantial study of the impact of the visual arts on Shakespeare’s writings excludes Twelfth Night’s “picture of ‘we three’” altogether, and lists “the portrait of a blinking idiot” without further comment in its discussion of portraits.37 Margaret Thorp documents both, without however referring to any specific We three images. Vaguely suggesting that the paintings which most often inspired Shakespeare were “those of ‘monsters,’ of tavern signs, broadsides, painted walls and painted cloths,” she proposes a modified version of Malone’s identification of Twelfth Night’s “picture of ‘we three’”: “Sometimes this sign had two loggerheads, sometimes two fools, sometimes two asses.” Unlike “the portrait of a blinking idiot,” it is by definition excluded from her list of visual images required as actual props in Shakespeare plays.38 Malcolm Jones’s discussion of Shakespeare’s “picture of ‘we three’” refers to the survival of continental prints in this tradition contemporary to Twelfth Night (1601), but documents only post-

34 Twelfth Night II.3.167–74.
Shakespearean images. Jones rejects the traditional identification of a painted panel at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, inscribed “Wee three Loggerheads” below the portrait of two court fools, one holding a folly-stick, as a double portrait of Tom Derry and Archy Armstrong, court fools in the reign of James I. More plausibly, he suggests the later date of ca. 1650, supported by John Southworth’s identification of the right-hand figure not as Armstrong, but as Charles I’s natural fool, Muckle John.

Textual evidence suggests that tavern signs in the We three tradition predate the use of the term “loggerheads” in this connection. The title page of Thomas Robins’s pamphlet of 1675 invokes the “sign of the three Loggerheads in Bacchus Court,” and notes another variant in this tradition, “the sign of the three merry companions in Bedlam.” As early as 1608, in a play by John Day, two young stage lovers prompt a garbled version of the usual joke in choosing to meet at “The three fooles” tavern: “Julio: Appoint the place sweete, ile not misse mine housre. / Emilia: At the three fooles. / Julio: Ile meete. / Emilia: And make vp foure.” Both the We three tradition and the use of the word “loggerhead” in the sense of blockhead, thickhead, or foolish and quarrelsome fellow first came to the fore in British texts of the 1590s. Although Shakespeare led the trend, once even punning on its alternative definition as a type of turtle, there are no published instances of the term “loggerhead” in the We three tradition within Shakespeare’s lifetime. Wee three Loggerheads, which draws on early sixteenth-century Flemish iconographic traditions, is possibly a pre-Shakespearean image amended by later over-painting and a post-Shakespearean inscription. Post-Shakespearean images associated with Twelfth Night’s “picture of ‘we three’” include Stulti quatuor, an “old Dutch painting” of three fools referred to by Lees Knowles and his respondents. The “curious emblems” Knowles describes on their costumes enable me to identify this as a variant of Peter Schenck’s engraving of three fools of ca. 1700, sometimes inscribed “Gaudeamus, quia te praesente, stulti quatuor.”

I remain unconvinced by Malone’s suggestion regarding inn signs. My search for reliable evidence concerning the possible appearance of Shakespeare’s “picture

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42 John Day, Law-Trickes or, Who would have thought it (London: Richard More, 1608), Sig. C’.
43 Love’s Labor’s Lost IV.3.200–208 (quoted above).
44 Southworth, Fools and Jesters, p. 150.
45 Lees Knowles, “We Four Fools,” Notes and Queries (December 1919): 316; (March 1920): 68–9; Günther Hansen, Formen der Commedia dell’arte in Deutschland (Emsdetten: Lechte, 1984), figs 20–21.
of ‘we three’” has led me to identify the early modern German friendship album as an under-recognized source for such images. *Hoggig und Bogigg*, one of the earliest indisputable images in the tradition, is a late sixteenth-century colored friendship album drawing (see Figure 9.3b). Its depiction of two fighting fools closely fits the succinct gloss for Shakespeare’s use of the term *We three*, provided in 1623 by the London-based Netherlandish merchant, political informant, and financial economist Gerard de Malynes, when he recalls an image as “the picture of two foole, deriding one another, made by our moderne Paynters, with an inscription: *Wee are three*, meaning the looker on for one.” It could be the sort of *We three* image Malynes, and perhaps also Shakespeare, had in mind. Far more important for transnational visual exchanges than unique manuscript friendship album drawings were widely circulated popular prints. Figure 9.3a, an anamorphic print by Jacob van der Heyden, is dated 1629. In *Richard II*, Shakespeare notes that such “perspectives … rightly gaz’d upon / Show nothing but confusion, ey’d awry / Distinguish form.” By virtue of an updated inscription, *We are both laughing*, Paulus Fürst’s engraving of a laughing fool of ca. 1640 draws into the *We three* tradition the single laughing fool of Johann Bussemacher’s print of ca. 1600, *Si credere fas est*. Another print drawn into the tradition by later textual additions is *Head of a reveler*, an engraving signed in the plate by the Netherlandish artist Philipp Galle. An undated, unsigned variant bearing four rhyming couplets (not on the original print) in the *We three* tradition was published by Gregory Davies and Alison Stewart, as “an anonymous German engraving of c.1600,” soon after it first reached Toronto. Reading the number of fools indicated in the print’s caption as seven, while noting that the print depicts not one less than seven foolish characters (i.e., six), but only a single fool, they suggest that this print may be “either a variant on the visual tradition with six figures or an early example before the number of figures shown became standard.” My reading, identifying the intended number not

46 See also Katritzky, “Unser sind drey,” fig. 1, and “The Picture of *We Three,*” fig. 3b.
49 *Richard II* II.2.18–20.

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as seven ("ziven"), but as two ("zwen": a standard renaissance variant of "zwei"), views this updated copy of Galle’s sixteenth-century print as a standard We two variant of the familiar We three formula, recording not two fools, but one, with the spectator supplying the missing second fool.53

More problematic is the sole image of multiple foolish characters associated with the We three tradition habitually dated by specialists to well before 1600.54 This extremely worm-damaged and fragile wood carving was found in a Picardian monastery. Its flat, untreated back is strengthened with a crudely attached untreated modern wooden support and fitted with a metal hanging hook, while its front carries one badly discolored application of paint on a thick white preparatory layer, and variously-aged partial applications of varnish. It depicts six figures on a wooden plinth: three humans, an owl, and a cat, all singing to notes in an open music book supported by a monkey. Variously dating this carving, now in Douai, to the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, specialists cite the painted inscription on its plinth—"Nous sommes sept"—as proof that it was created in the We three tradition before 1600.55 The comic choir was a popular late medieval composition, and examples outside the We three tradition include certain works by and after Hieronymus Bosch,56 and an unpainted late medieval English carved wood misericord depicting two fools playing two cats as bagpipes.57 My close examination of the Douai carving confirms that, excluding its modern support, the wood of its figural group and plinth is all of comparable venerable age, and that all its paintwork (plinth inscription included), although possibly significantly more recent, was applied at around one date. I also detected previously unnoticed

54 My thanks for access to the original to Anne Labourdette and Colin Colson (Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai), and, for access to relevant publications, to Stewart Tiley and Ruth Ogden (St John’s College Library, Oxford).
56 Bax, Hieronymus Bosch, pp. 263–4.
discrepancies between the cut of the costume, which is compatible with that of the medieval fool, and its style of coloration, some of which is not. The central figure’s original colors, discernible through severely darkened and discolored varnish, indicate a white, vertically decorated jacket with blue dabs in between the solid red stripes on its body, and horizontally on its sleeves. Decoratively, though not in cut, this resembles the distinctive jacket worn by the *commedia dell’arte*-inspired stage clown in “Polichinelle,” an engraving from Nicolas Bonnart’s series *Recueil des modes de la cour de France* (ca. 1678–93), none of whose hand-colored examples, however, feature the distinctive Douai color scheme.58 Regardless of the date at which it was carved, if this widely circulated print or a variant influenced the carving’s painter, it provides an *ante quem* of ca. 1680 for all its paintwork, including the inscription. By then, the popular *We seven* variant was widespread (Figure 9.3c, d).

My reading of Galle’s *Head of a reveler* is supported by the image and text carved on a stone slab of 1618 (Figure 9.2). Set into the wall of a Bavarian town hall, this relief, depicting a single fool’s head above an inscription that translates as “Now we are two,” tellingly positioned next to the municipal prison cell entrance, mockingly brands as a fool any early modern drunk or vagrant detained under arrest. Of similar date is a carved wooden circular biscuit mould in Basel’s Historical Museum inscribed “Vnsr sind drei” [We are three], depicting a court fool with his folly-stick.59 Shakespeare’s “portrait of a blinking idiot” is very much in the spirit of early *We two* and *We three* images such as Galle’s *Head of a reveler* or Figure 9.3b. They represent a transitional phase connecting the late medieval transnational trope of the single fool and his folly-stick or mirror with the increasingly elaborate seventeenth-century *We three* iconography, depicting as many as nine “foolish” animals and humans. Unless, as I here suggest, the Douai carving’s paintwork considerably postdates its late medieval woodwork, it challenges specialists with the enigma of an image conceived and created by its original sculptor in the *We three* tradition decades, perhaps centuries, before any of this tradition’s other known images of multiple fools.

Once *We three* iconography multiplied the early images’ predictable single fool, with or without folly-stick, its message could no longer be conveyed purely visually. Explanatory text became obligatory, turning these images into emblems. Most images of multiple fools in the *We three* tradition belong to compositionally related groups. One such is Jacob Jordaens’s mid-seventeenth-century ink and wash drawing *Nous sommes quatre*, and prints based on it,60 another, the popular variant *We seven*, typically depicting three stage fools riding asses (Figure 9.3c, d).


Shakespeare’s “portrait of a blinking idiot” includes examples specifically aimed at readers who need to have it spelled out to them that they themselves are the missing fool. Probably targeting those for whom reading was a laborious task rarely undertaken unaided, some bear texts labeling their readers as fools by identifying them as asses (Figure 9.3c); others mock them even further by pointing out that by not going to the trouble of reading out their text, they could have spared themselves the embarrassment of being branded asses. We seven paintings include a seventeenth-century ceiling caisson at the Château d’Oiron and Wij zijn seeven—nous sommes sept, by or after Adriaen van de Venne, featuring three asses in a wide landscape, one ridden by a lute-playing and one by a goblet-holding man, while an empty-handed man gesticulates beside the right-hand ass and We ten variants also became popular. Images testifying to the We three tradition’s tenacity include an execrable circular oil painting of two hay-munching asses by Maude Earle (1864–1934), When shall we three meet again?

While no other plays enrich fool-mirror connotations as rewardingly as Shakespeare’s Lear or Merchant, the We three theme informed many writers. In early modern drama, it represents a minor, previously under-recognized transnational lazzo or “theatergram,” a portable piece of comic stage business designed to appeal to audiences on many levels. It relates to performative traditions manifested in the “ironic privilege of [audience] inclusion” of sixteenth-century Dutch vernacular fools’ tracts, or certain quack monologues. We three appears as early as in 1596 in “The triumphes of Saffron-walden, with the merrie conceipts of VVee three; or The three brothers,” the third of a list of five play titles with which Thomas Nashe taunts his rival Gabriel Harvey. The theme subsequently features in Middleton and Rowley’s The Changeling, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s “The Queene of Corinth,” Thomas Dekker’s The Gyls Horne-booke, Edmund Gayton’s

62 Katritzky, “The Picture of We Three,” fig. 4a.
65 Kavaler, Bruegel, p. 207.
66 Thomas Nash, Haue with you to Saffron-walden. Or; Gabriell Harveys hunt is vp (London: John Danter, 1596), Sig. R4v.
Pleasant notes upon Don Quixot, several plays of James Shirley, and a genre with a long tradition in English festival culture, the emblematic impresa.67 Shakespeare himself provides imprese for five knights in Pericles (II.2) and was remunerated in 1613 by Francis Manners, sixth Earl of Rutland, for providing an unknown text (“my Lordes impresa”) for an emblematic tournament shield painted by his theatrical colleague Richard Burbage.68 An English pastoral poem of 1633 features a procession including a shield in the We three tradition:

Geloios next ensu’d, a merrie Greek …
His speeches broad, to shame the modest cheek …
Upon his shield two laughing fools you see,
(In number he the third, first in degree)
At which himself would laugh, and fleer: his word, We three.69

Arguably, the northern European We three tradition first reached London via medieval folly literature’s favored trope of the fool and his mirror-like folly-stick. Yet this theatergram’s cross-channel traffic continued beyond 1600. John Taylor’s cordial relations with many players and writers who habitually crossed the Thames to frequent London’s South Bank theaters are a well-known feature of his carefully cultivated image as Thames waterman turned celebrity “water-poet.”70 Less widely recognized is a family connection which adds a significant dimension to these friendships and his ability to facilitate transnational cultural exchanges. In 1616 and again in 1620, he visited his brother William Taylor, an accomplished lutenist. William was based at the Saxony court of Count Ernst III zu Holstein-Schaumburg in Bückeburg from around 1607 to 1630, with a small group of professional English actor-musicians whose other long-term members included William Benton, George and Maurice Webster, and Thomas Simpson.71 In August 1620, the Taylor brothers traveled together to a festival at the short-lived Prague court of the “Winter-King” Frederick of Bohemia, and his wife Elizabeth, daughter of James I. During this journey, William introduced John to

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67 On which, see: Katritzky, “The Picture of We Three,” pp. 231–5.
69 Phineas Fletcher, The Purple Island, or The Isle of Man (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1633); Canto VIII, 120.
other expatriate English performers, including the merchant and former troupe-leader, actor, and creator of the comic role “Jean Potage” Thomas Sackville, with whom they stayed in Wolfenbüttel in September 1620.72

*Shrovetyde* and *Lent*, two prints based closely on Flemish prints published with verses by John Taylor in a pamphlet of 1636, have been identified as early British images of the battle between Carnival and Lent.73 A marginal note glossing his mention of “the Picture of wee Three” confirms that the *We three* formula underpins Taylor’s lengthy poem of 1622 on the two leather wine bottles he formerly collected as toll from visiting ships:

> Plaine home-spun stuffe shall now proceed from me,  
> Much like vnto the Picture of wee Three …  
> My Bottles and my selfe did oft agree, 
> Full to the Top, all merry came *Wee three* …  
> And to close vp this point, I say in brieue, 
> Who buyes it is a Begger, or a Thiefe, 
> Or else a Foole, or to make all agree, 
> He may be Foole, Thiefe, Begger, all the Three.  
> So you false Bottles, to you both adieu, 
> The *Thames* for mee, not a *Denier* for you.74

It notes that “b: The picture of 2. fooles, & the third looking on, I doe fitly compare with the two black Bottles and my selfe.” Evidence suggesting that Taylor brought European popular prints relating to this iconographic tradition back to London comes from a later publication, *Wee bee seaven*. First noted in a Stationer’s Register entry of March 8, 1637 identifying John Taylor as its author,75 it was reissued as the anonymous, undated illustrated pamphlet *Tvynr over behold and wonder*, a copy of which, dated “March 3 1654” in manuscript, entered the British Library holdings via the Thomason collection.76 The compositional closeness of the frontispiece woodcut of this extended elaboration on the *We seven* theme to a French forerunner of the popular prints here reproduced as Figures 9.3c and 9.3d suggests that Taylor encountered *We three* images during his European travels. Identifying Taylor’s frontispiece as the earliest extant English *We seven* depiction,


74  John Taylor, *Taylors farewvell, to the Tovver-bottles* (Dort [=London: Augustine Matthewes], 1622), Sig. A2v–


Malcolm Jones relates it to the broadsheets *Sumus septem* of 1654 and a possible variant in the Library of Congress (*We are seven*), advertised by Peter Stent and his successor John Overton.\(^{77}\)

John Taylor’s pamphlet represents as exhaustive a combination of image and text as any relating to this transnational tradition. From the 1590s onwards, *We three* informed numerous British and European text-image interdependencies, providing early modern broadsheet illustrators and dramatists with a cross-referential “theatergram” capable of actively engaging audiences at many levels. The theme is rooted in a profoundly moral multi-layered admonition, drawing on the medieval sources and classical roots of folly literature, and enriching the works of great seventeenth-century artists, writers, and dramatists who engaged with the implications of human self-knowledge and mortality, and strove to make sense of folly as the human condition’s definitive mind-set. From this, it degenerated via satirical and popular manifestations, withering into the crude, derivative images of the trivial secular “joke” familiar to Shakespeare’s modern critics. Although considerations of the persistent *We three* theme flourish at the margins of various modern cultural, literary, and art-historical enquiries, and specialists in diverse fields cite relevant images and text-image links, few venture beyond *Twelfth Night* to draw on this broad transnational emblematic tradition and its implication for readings of Shakespeare’s plays. Early developments in the *We three* tradition support interpretation of the image Arragon variously describes as a “silver’d o’er’ fool” or “the portrait of a blinking idiot” not as an artistic portrait, but as a mirror image of his own face, viewed either in the silver casket’s polished interior, or in a mirror within.\(^{78}\) Here, this “portrait” is contextualized within an overview of the related fool-mirror and *We three* themes, and Shakespearean manifestations augmenting their widely recognized occurrence in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* with significant newly-identified traces in plays such as *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. All bear tangible witness to the extent to which the transnational intellectual heritage of medieval folly literature engaged the mind, and shaped the work, of Shakespeare.

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\(^{77}\) Jones, “Broadside Print,” p. 503. On *We three*’s seventeenth-century German literary impact, see Katritzky, “Unser sind drey” and “The Picture of *We Three*.”

\(^{78}\) *The Merchant of Venice* II.9.54, 69.
Fig. 9.1  Pieter van der Heyden after Bruegel the Elder, Everyman, print, ca. 1558, detail: “Niema[n]t en kent he[m] selve[n]” [Nobody knows himself]. (Nemo is here tentatively identified as the Roman Emperor Otho.) London, British Museum 1866-0407-16. Reproduced by permission.

Fig. 9.2  Wolfgang Walberger, *Nun sind unser zwey*, 1618, stone relief set into outside wall of former prison cell, Town Hall, Nördlingen.