

## Jigs

Jigs were the rude, lewd B-features to the great dramas of the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Restoration stage, as **Lucie Skeaping** discovers.



# All singing, all dancing

The crowds who flocked to the London playhouses in the late-16th and early-17th centuries could expect to be amused, amazed and moved. Not only would they experience the drama of some courtly comedy or woeful tragedy but, in many cases, if they stayed on after the play had ended, they would also be treated to a sort of 'B-feature', a rude, lewd farce, commonly known as a 'jig'. Featuring songs, dancing and slapstick, jigs involved far more than the simple Irish folk dance that the word has come to denote. In the playhouses of Elizabethan London dramatic jigs were established as the standard ending or afterpiece to more serious theatrical fare. Not that everyone approved. The playwright Thomas Dekker wrote in 1613:

*I have often seen, after the finishing of some worthy tragedy or catastrophe in the open theatres that the scene after the Epilogue hath been more blacke – about a nasty bawdy jigge – than the most horrid scene in the play was.*

To the literary world they were an object of disapproval. Ben Jonson (1572-1637) loathed the 'concupiscence of jigs', believing they prevented audiences from appreciating plays. Shakespeare's Hamlet, after drawing Ophelia into a particularly vulgar exchange, apologises to her by calling himself 'Your only jig-maker'. The satirical poet Everard Guilpin (born c. 1572) dismissed the 'whores, bedles, bawds and sergeants' who 'filthily chant Kemps Jigge', noting how, on leaving the playhouse fired up with lust, 'many a cold grey-beard citizen' would sneak into 'some odde noted house of sin': easy to do, as theatres, bearbaiting pits and brothels were situated in close proximity on London's South Bank, outside the formal control of

the City authorities. Even Thomas Heywood, a dramatist and actor with the Lord Admiral's Men, felt disgust at these sub-literary dramas. While on one hand delighting in the comic farces he called 'merry accidents', he wrote in *An Apology for Actors* (1612): 'I speak not in the defence of any lascivious shrews, scurrilous jeasts, or scandalous invectives. If there be any such I banish them quite from my patronage.'

The history of the stage jig is complex but it is likely that its origins are to be found in the oral tradition, in the dancing, clowning and misrule of the carnivals, May Games and festivals held in rural communities during the Middle Ages. It was a natural development to add words to the dance tunes: the verb 'to carol' – these days the preserve of Christmas – originally meant 'to dance', probably in some kind of circle with the singers chanting the words as they moved.

Singing, dancing and play-acting were also popular pastimes in the more sophisticated environs of the royal courts. The chronicler Edward Hall gives an account of the young Henry VIII in 1510 surprising the queen in her chamber with 11 of his nobles 'all appareled in short cotes of Kentish Kendal [a type of wool from Cumbria], with hodes on their heddes, and hosen of the same, every one of them his bowe and arrowes, and a sworde and a bucklar, like out-lawes, or Robyn Hodes men'. Henry's court songbook contains several part-songs which naturally lend themselves to being acted out, while his daughter Elizabeth I was said to have danced a galliard every morning to keep herself fit.

As such courtly pastimes moved into professional realms, the term jig became used to describe anything from a solo song, dialogue ballad or dance to a full-blown mini-drama.

The same stock characters turn up again and again:

**Dancers perform in a circle around musicians in a masque at a banquet held in the home of the courtier Sir Henry Unton (detail, c.1596).**

**Inset: Richard Tarlton, a popular jig-maker and clown, portrayed in a manuscript from 1588.**



Two broadsheets of jigs featuring the stock characters of wooing rustics, Kit and Pegge and John and Joan.

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## A mery nev्व jigge.

Or, the pleasant wooing betwixt Kit and Pegge.

To the tune of Strawberry leaves make Maidens faire.



**M.** W<sup>h</sup>o met this night,  
my christen boy,  
W<sup>h</sup>o this night  
came to my door,  
M<sup>y</sup> father said he  
had a boy  
W<sup>h</sup>o came to see  
for a girl.

**M.** The beauty of this  
boy is my bliss,  
W<sup>h</sup>o for these last  
of the winter  
M<sup>y</sup> father I mean  
meant to part,  
W<sup>h</sup>o no later than  
could get a girl.

**M.** The Pupper  
has gone  
W<sup>h</sup>o has taken  
the girl to bed  
M<sup>y</sup> father  
will not  
W<sup>h</sup>o has taken  
the girl to bed  
M<sup>y</sup> father  
will not

**M.** The life I will spend  
to see thee  
W<sup>h</sup>o has  
that the  
M<sup>y</sup> father  
will not  
W<sup>h</sup>o has  
that the

**M.** The life I will spend  
to see thee  
W<sup>h</sup>o has  
that the  
M<sup>y</sup> father  
will not  
W<sup>h</sup>o has  
that the

Printed at London for H. Goffon.

## The North Country lovers:

Or: The plain Downright wooing between John and Joan.

A Pleasant new Song as it was sung before the Court at Windsor.

*John* Addresses to his Joan most dear  
And on her piggisneys casteth many a leare,  
Telling her how he wealth and love had got

*The which so far transports the subtle slut,  
That unto Venus sport she drew him in  
And in her mortice fastened straight his pin*

To a New Tune, Quoted by John and Joan.



**John.** Which tells to thee what till thou have me,  
I will be as good as dead to thee,  
The which I will be as good as dead to thee,  
The which I will be as good as dead to thee,  
The which I will be as good as dead to thee,  
The which I will be as good as dead to thee,

**Joan.** In the end of a Chantry instead of a dog,  
Say my Joan, say my Joan will not do,  
I cannot I cannot come every every day to bed,  
I cannot I cannot come every every day to bed,  
I cannot I cannot come every every day to bed,  
I cannot I cannot come every every day to bed,

cuckolded husbands, adulterous wives, milkmaids, whores, wide-boys, muggers and thieves, along with lecherous soldiers, fishwives and a variety of street traders who get drawn into the plot. But perhaps the most commonly found character and often the inadvertent hero of the piece was the gullible bumpkin. With his country dialect, he was a favourite butt of ridicule for urban audiences and never more laughably 'soft' and 'fond' than when shown in love. In *The North Country Lovers: Or The Plain Downright Wooeing between John and Joan*, [date?] a simple farmer and a milkmaid discuss how they are going to find time to woo each other in between all their rural chores. John boasts of his 'rustic wealth' until Joan, having first given him the brush-off, finally offers to lie down 'upon mine back' there and then – provided he promises to turn up the next day for their wedding. On the broadsheet, below the title, the printer (no doubt with an eye to healthy sales) informs potential purchasers that it is 'A Pleasant new Song as it was sung before the court at Windsor'. But if that wasn't enough to tempt a Mopsa or a Dorcas to hand over her penny, perhaps the verses printed at the top of the jig which neatly summarise the story would have enticed them:

*Johny Addresses to his Joan most dear  
And on her piggisneys\* casteth many a leare,  
Telling her how he wealth and love had got  
The which so far transports the subtle slut,  
That unto Venus sport she drew him in  
And in her mortice fastened straight his pin.*  
(\*a term of endearment meaning 'eyes')

We find similar characters in *The Merry Wooing of Robin and Joan* although this time our rustic bachelor is less confident, requiring his mother's advice on courtship technique:

**ROBIN:** *And first chill ('I'll) put on my Sunday parell  
That's lac't about the quarters;  
And a peacock's vearth in my cap –  
Then, oh how I'ch shall swagger!*

**MOTHER:** *Nay, take thee a lockrum\* napkin, son,  
(\*coarse linen)  
To wipe thy snotty nose,*

**ROBIN:** *T's noe matter vor that – chill snort it out,  
And vlurt it athwart my clothes'*

Other jigs offer more bourgeois settings. *Attowell's Jig Or Frauncis new Jig*, licensed in 1595, is a surprisingly sober domestic tale of wife-swapping and disguise which ends happily (based on a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron* which later provided the basis for *All's Well that End's Well*). George Attowell whose name appears on the text, may have been either the author or chief performer, or both. He was an actor of some note and performed with a company known for their expert tumbling feats.

By contrast, *Singing Simpkin* ridicules marriage as a young wife receives a stream of lovers while her impotent old husband is out hunting. Each one announces himself with a loud knock on the door –



*Fair with a Theatrical Performance by Pieter Bruegel the Younger, 1562. Though the setting is the Low Countries, this painting gives some idea of the ribald entertainments found in London at the time.*

giving the previous fellow just enough time to hide himself in a large chest. When Simpkin raises the lid and pops his head out for a series of terse comments ('I laugh now till I piss') the effect is pure Whitehall farce. Featuring character types found in the *commedia dell'arte*, the jig is packed with sexual innuendo:

**WIFE** (searching for somewhere to hide the clown Simpkin):  
*I have a place behind here  
Which yet is known to no man.*

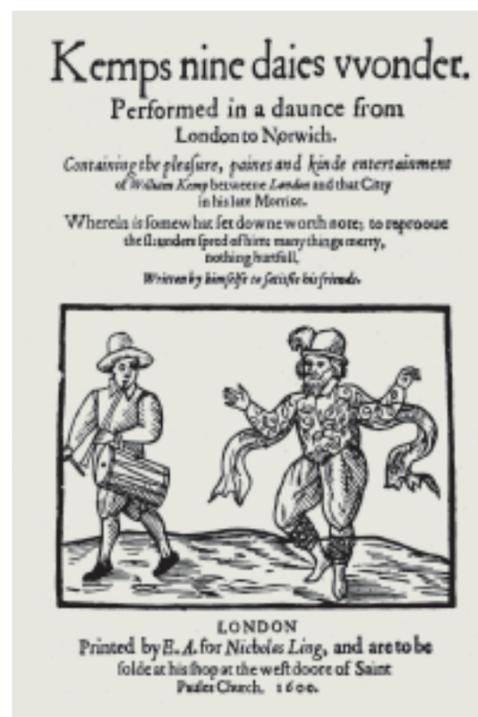
**SIMPKIN** (aside):  
*She has a place before too  
But that is all too common.*

*Singing Simpkin* is one of several jigs whose dates are indeterminable. The earliest printed text appears in Robert Cox's *Actaeon and Diana* (1656), but this is related to *A New Jygge betwixt a Soldier and a Miser and Sym the Clown*, listed in the *Stationers Register* in 1595 and popularly attributed to Will Kemp, who took the starring role of Simpkin and specialised in playing clown parts. As co-founder (with Shakespeare) of the Chamberlain's Men at the newly built Globe, he may also have been the author of *Singing Simpkin*. Kemp described himself as one 'that hath spent his life in mad jigs and merry jests' and is documented as having danced a jig all the way from London to Norwich.

In the 1590s Kemp and his company toured Germany where their repertoire of plays, jigs and farces had a powerful influence on *Singspiel*, a form

of early opera. Much of their material was imitated or translated and there is a German version of *Singing Simpkin*, entitled *Pickelhering in der Kiste* ('Pickle-herring in the Chest'). Cox seems, however, to have made some alterations, presumably to take into account Puritan sensibilities. For instance, when Simpkin clambers into the chest to hide, he tells the Wife: 'Shut the chest, I pray, with speed, for something has some savour.' The equivalent lines in the earlier German version are: *Ich hab mich bald beschissen* ('Shut the chest, I pray, with speed, for I have just shit myself'). Cox also appears to have tampered with the ending: the German version finishes with Simpkin and the Wife happily canoodling, leaving the husband well and truly cuckolded, but Cox evidently preferred to leave his audience with a moral message: the old husband returns unexpectedly, discovers the illicit couple *in flagrante* and beats Simpkin out of the house.

A number of jigs appear to have been based on real-life characters or events. 'The Yorkshire Jig of Michael and Frances' (1602) was a short farce commissioned by a Yorkshire squire, Edward Meynell, as a result of a long-running feud with his neighbour Michael Steel. Not content with distributing libellous tracts about Steel around the local market towns, Meynell's revenge went as far as giving copies 'to stage players who, by practice and procurement, have at the ending of their plays, sunge the same as a jygge the great scandall'. The actors dramatised Meynell's



**A broadsheet from 1600 celebrating the dance from London to Norwich performed by William Kemp. A colleague of Shakespeare, Kemp was considered the greatest clown of his day and was a regular performer of jigs.**

complaint and toured the jig around the locality, an effective way of spreading gossip before the age of the tabloid press.

Also based on 'real life' was the 'Jig of Garlic' (before 1612), the Fortune Theatre's most infamous jig, in which a well-known garlic seller was invited to appear on the stage while the players acted out scenes from his exploits with a prostitute. All this apparently resulted in the garlic seller becoming something of a celebrity.

By October 1612, the year of Heywood's 'Apology for Actors', jig performances were attracting so many criminals and disorderly crowds – who often visited the theatre for the jig alone with no intention of seeing the main play – that the Middlesex Magistrates, north of the Thames, saw fit to issue 'An Order for supressing of jiggs att the ende of playes ... by reason of certayne lewed Jiggs songs and daunces used and accustomed at the playhouse called the Fortune in Goulding-lane, divers cutt-purses and other lewde and ill disposed persons in great multitudes doe resort thither at th'end of everye playe, many tymes causinge tumults and outrages [...] it is hereupon expresselye commaunded that all Actors of every playhouse [...] utterlye abolishe all Jiggs Rymes and Daunces after their playes.'

In the phrasing of the Middlesex order – which treats jigs as associated, or even as synonymous, with dances, songs, and rhymes – is some scope for speculation. Were jigs recited over the tunes, did they contain song interludes, were they through-sung like mini-operas, or did all three of these at various times apply? Of the 12 surviving English jig texts, roughly half contain specific tune titles printed at various points alongside the text, that is, the names

of popular ballads or dance tunes of the day. We can't be sure, of course, just how closely the actors stuck to these melodies; one imagines there was plenty of scope for 'speak-singing' of the Rex Harrison variety. But lines ending in 'fa la la' naturally indicate singing and invariably where a new tune title is prescribed it corresponds with a new metre or rhyme-pattern in the text.

Even in the usual absence of any actual musical notation, some tunes are relatively easy to trace, preserved in collections of country dances, in artful arrangements made for keyboard or viol consort, or in song anthologies like Thomas Dufey's three volume 'Pills To Purge Melancholy' (1719-20). However, as ballad writers were in the habit of renaming favourite tunes after the most popular, or most recent, ballad to which they had been sung, detective work is often needed to identify the tunes.

Sometimes, instead of giving a tune name, a jig text simply prints instructions such as 'The Tune Alters' or 'The Tune Changeth'. Fortunately, clues can sometimes be found in the text itself. For instance, in 'The Black Man' (about a street-seller of ink) the 'hero' Thumpkin disguises himself as an old man in order to rescue his sweetheart Susan from the clutches of two 'Gentlemen' coney-catchers (thieves). No tune titles are given anywhere in the piece, but Thumpkin's words at this point, beginning 'As ye came from Walsingham', are clearly a reference to the older and well known 'Walsingham' ballad which begins with almost identical words. That tune, preserved in 'My Ladye Nevells Virginal Book' (1591) in a setting by the great Elizabethan composer William Byrd, fits the text exactly; and we know from its appearance four years later in 'Attowell's Jig' (where it provides the only known example of musical notation in a jig text) that it was a tune of which the jigmakers of the period made shrewd use.

The rescue accomplished, Thumpkin and Susan make a speedy escape on foot from the Gentlemen, Thumpkin urging her to 'Jog on, jog on my pretty Susan!' Those familiar with Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* will recall the ballad seller Autolytus

**Musicians and performers interact in Pieter Jansz Quast's *Farce Actors Dancing*, early 17th century.**



singing similar words as he exits: 'Jog on, Jog on, the footpath way.' A tune entitled 'Jog On' appears in Playford's dance anthology 'The English Dancing Master' (1651) and there can be little doubt that Thumpkin's words were tailor-made to fit it. Likewise, the refrain 'Which nobody can deny' (sung by the bumpkin Wat in 'The Cheaters Cheated') is in fact the title of a much-used ballad tune of the time, a version of *Greensleeves* and again this tune fits the jig text perfectly.

There are few specific references to dancing in jigs but, along with various movements, acrobatics and rhythmic gestures, dance was undoubtedly a major feature. 'The players mean to put their legs to it as well as their tongues,' wrote the satirist and clergyman Donald Lupton in 1632 and, as jigs expanded into more sophisticated song dramas, we find instructions like 'Both dance to their own singing' and 'She singeth and danceth'. Will Kemp's predecessor, the celebrated jig-maker and clown Richard Tarlton (1530?-1588), was said to 'love the maypole with his heart' and often made his stage entrance playing the pipe and tabor (a small drum), instruments characteristic of a folk dancer. Sadly none of his jigs survive although music parts for a cittern (a small wire-strung banjo-like instrument), recorder and bass viol for a 'Tarltons Jigge' are preserved in manuscript in Cambridge University Library, which suggests that accompaniments could be rich and varied. An English troupe performing in Germany in 1599 is noted as having lutes, citterns, fiddles and pipes, all instruments typical of a tavern or theatre band and commonly found in country festivities throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. Moreover, if we take into account a rowdy audience, coarse singing and an open-air environment (and, in the case of the Globe, the actors competing with growls from the nearby bear-baiting pit), then any accompaniment would have needed to be pretty loud and lusty and would surely have featured some home-grown percussion. As Shakespeare's Bottom the Weaver points out: 'I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs and the bones.'

The rattling of the bones had, by 1612, built to such a crescendo that putting the lid upon the performing Bottoms of the public playhouses proved quite beyond the powers of the Middlesex Magistrates. The effects of their ban were only temporary. Audiences, educated and ignorant alike, still demanded their jigs and as the 17th century progressed these ribald playlets grew in popularity. Indeed, during the Interregnum (1649-60) when the performance of plays was illegal, the dramatic jig came into its own. Music and dance acts were not covered by this law of suppression and jigs continued to draw riotous holiday crowds to the makeshift stages at fairs and the temporary booths at Bankside.

Immediately after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 London's theatrical life exploded into action again and one might have expected jigs to enjoy a further lease of life. However, within two months Charles II passed a law allowing only two theatre companies to operate, which resulted in jigs



**A typical jig cast of grotesques, including Falstaff, from a London broadsheet of 1662.**

being dropped from the playhouses, although they seem to have found a niche as entertainments at civic functions and feasts.

'The Cheaters Cheated' was penned by London's leading pageant poet Thomas Jordan and printed in his 'Royal Arbor of Loyal Poesie' (1664). Slightly more complex and certainly lengthier than some of the earlier jigs, it was given at the Mansion House to 'the Sheriffs of London'. The exact date of performance is unknown but it could not have been more than a few years prior to publication since Jordan's activities for the corporation of London (which later led to him becoming London's City Laureate) began with the fall of the Commonwealth in 1660. Again we meet a country bumpkin, 'Wat' (or 'Water-Gruel' as he calls himself). Some low-life city characters take advantage of Wat and try to rob him of his money. One can

## Jigs



**The Globe Theatre, London, home to both the dramas of Shakespeare and the jig, in a contemporary watercolour.**

imagine the titillating movements of the whore ‘Moll Medlar’ (named after a suggestively-shaped pear, best eaten when rotten) as she flirts with Wat, enticing him to come with her to ‘Tickle Yard’ where he ‘will do his work well’:

MOLL: *I can nimbly come above,  
I can tumble under,  
And I can do the tother thing  
When we get together*

But this bumpkin is more than a match for them all and, indeed, his good-natured simplicity finally persuades them to renounce their wicked ways:

MOLL: *For all the world’s wealth I will ne’er be a whore*  
FILCHER: *I’le purchase new credit upon an old score*  
NIM: *I’le deal in these damnable courses no more*  
ALL: *We every one will mend!*

Finally, with a smile on his face, Wat returns home to Somerset with his savings intact:

*Did ever fellow find  
Such simple sots as these –  
To leave my fifty pound behind  
And steal my bread and cheese!  
These city thieves are fool’d  
That meant to do me hurt  
The meazels\* could not find my gold,  
(\* ‘wretches’ – originally ‘lepers’)  
I’ve knitten in my shirt!*

Jordan also manages a good-natured dig or two at his illustrious audience. The two thieves constantly complain that their ‘business’ is bad due to the vigilant eyes of the authorities: ‘Faith, every Red-coat now can make a puppy of a Hector.’ And, when Wat discovers a baby in his trunk (secretly dumped on him by Moll), he cheekily appeals directly to the audience of respectable City dignitaries in front of him, suggesting that one of them may be the father:

WAT: *Goodman zhreev\*, look on the face  
(\*sheriff)  
For I believe it may be your own case.  
It looks Tory rory\* and smells zo of mace  
(\* in the rudest good health)  
That I’m zure it was got by zome zarzhant  
(sargeant)*

In the Restoration theatre, music and song were more integrated within the plays. The jig tradition, however, continued to reverberate, for example in Henry Purcell’s ‘semi operas’. In *The Fairy Queen* (1692), a drunken poet and a pair of rustic lovers feature in several sequences reminiscent of the earlier dramatic jigs. John Rich’s pantomimes and ballad operas at Lincoln’s Inn Fields in the first half of the 18th century had much in common with the Elizabethan jig, while a shrewd theatre manager such as David Garrick would often try to prop up a faltering play with a popular Afterpiece. Indeed, the spirit of the jig can still (just) be perceived in today’s Christmas pantomimes with their stock characters, dancing and slapstick.

Only a few jigs found their way into print, some damaged or incomplete. They are laden with period references, and contemporary underworld cant. What went on between the lines, though – the bawdy gestures, dance steps, instrumental interludes and improvised spoken ‘asides’ – belonged to each individual performer and probably changed with each performance; with so little surviving information, we can only guess. What is clear, though, is that our thespian ancestors and their audiences enjoyed a laugh. Their sense of humour was just as indecent, daring and off-the-wall as anything we might catch ourselves sniggering at today.

Lucie Skeaping’s CD *The English Stage Jig* is available on the Hyperion label ([www.hyperion-records.co.uk](http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk)). Her award-winning book *Broadside Ballads: songs from the streets and theatres of 17th century England* is published by Faber Music ([www.fabermusic.co.uk](http://www.fabermusic.co.uk)). Thanks to Dr Roger Clegg of De Montfort University for additional information about the jigs’ history and context. Skeaping and Clegg are currently working together on a book-length edition on the subject.

**Further reading** Charles Read Baskervill, *The Elizabethan Jig and Related Song Drama* (Dover, 1965); François Laroque, *Shakespeare’s Festive World* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge University Press, 1980); Johannes Bolte, *Die Singspiele der Englischen Komödianten* (Elibron Classics, 2006); Ross W. Duffin, *Shakespeare’s Songbook* (Norton, 2004).

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