



Dissertation summary

William Kemp: a comic star in Shakespeare's England

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Advisor: Klaniczay Gábor Professor

ELTE Doctoral School of History
Medieval and Early Modern World History Doctoral
Programme

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Cover illustrations show Kemp from the title page of his *Nine Daies Wonder* and the original Tollet window.

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Aims and Structure of the Dissertation

In my present study I wish to narrow down the notion of foolery to a period of time and to a particular person. I have chosen William Kemp as the focus of my dissertation and propose to discuss the scope of his professional achievements in his active years from the 1580s to 1616. I have opted to concentrate on him because for me he is the most exciting of the three famous Elizabethan fool actors (i.e., Tarlton, Kemp, Armin) due to his autonomous and uncontrollable personality. He is a representative both of the medieval roots of Renaissance popular culture and of the new era of commercial theatrical life. Through careful study of his life and career the great cultural and political changes of the turn of the century are made evident.

My study is an original contribution to scholarship in that I attempt to meet the demand for a complete panorama of Kemp's profession, personality and of the cultural and historical context in which he lived.

Each chapter of my dissertation delineates a different sphere of Kemp's activities and cultural background. The First Chapter reveals his cultural roots in the tradition of foolery, and seeks to identify his place in the theatrical cross-fires of London, while the second defines Kemp's relationship with various elements of contemporary and medieval popular culture and his forms of communication. In this context I scrutinize his most important theatrical role as Falstaff, as well as his jigs, in which genre he reached outstanding results. The Third Chapter examines his most stable and successful theatrical company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, while collating the differences between the guiding principles of Shakespeare's and Kemp's artistic aspirations and considering his motivations for leaving the Company. I illuminate the reasons for the popularity of morris dancing and of Robin Hood

1. CHANGES IN THE CULTURAL LIFE AND MENTALITY AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY
2. KEMP AND ARMIN
3. AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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List of publications

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Colours

Green, Wild Man

Will Somer

Green Kendal and Motley

Accessories

3. KEMP AS FALSTAFF, THE COMIC AND THE GROTESQUE BODY

4. KEMP, THE MASTER OF THE STAGE JIG

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IV. NINE DAIES WONDER - THE GREAT CHALLENGE

1. KEMP IN THE SHAKESPEAREAN COMPANY

Structure

Place of Residence

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2. KEMP, A LIFELONG WANDERER

Morris Dancing

Morris at the Royal Court

Morris on the Stage

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The Transformation of the Figure of Robin Hood

Ballads

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May Games - Robin Hood Games

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3. NINE DAIES WONDER - KEMP'S JOURNEY

Improvisation, Fool Tradition

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People and Places

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Kemp in Norwich

V. CONCLUSION

in the sixteenth century through the analysis of Kemp's diary, *Nine Daies Wonder*. In the conclusion, I take a closer look at the changes in mentality and theatre and the role of the fool at the turn of the century through the new comedian of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Robert Armin. It was my aim to provide a focused treatment and to arrange the information about Kemp into a tightly specific scheme instead of presenting it in a generalized manner.

Although Kemp was a great actor, his art unfortunately spoke to the here and now and has not remained for posterity in written or other permanent form. His name has, more or less, sunk into oblivion. With this study I hope to revive Kemp's greatness and importance in the well-known Shakespearean theatrical world. I depict him, the comic star of Elizabethan England, in a new light, as the great rival and equal in the theatrical life to Shakespeare and to other leading playwrights such as Ben Jonson and Thomas Heywood.

I emphasize that Will Kemp was a versatile, autonomous, flexible, talented and successful personality. Given the stormy political, economic and cultural conditions of the 1590s and the turn of the century, only exceptional personalities could achieve what he did. He was a multi-faceted person. In the beginning of his career he was the general entertainer to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. He also performed diplomatic services and was solo artist, professional dancer, the leading comic actor of the Globe, share-holder and actor-manager in one person. Kemp was flexible in finding the niche he could fill in Elizabethan entertainment and possessed the full knowledge of fool tradition as well. He combined various elements of contemporary popular culture and at the same time was an outstanding representative of the new commercial theatrical life.

Although common opinion about him is that after leaving the Globe he was not at the pinnacle of the world of entertainment as were Shakespeare and

his company, I regard him successful especially as a professional entertainer, and my aim is to demonstrate his success, which lasted until the end of his life.

I also highlight Kemp's close relationship to the mythical figure of Robin Hood and illuminate it from the angle of morris dancing. Scholars of Elizabethan culture have ignored the significance of the green Kendal, its association with the costume of Robin Hood and of the fool. Amidst the political, religious and intellectual skirmishes and professional competition around the theatre, I focus on the central role which was played by Kemp the comic actor, the fool.

Problems and Questions

The lack of primary sources and their reliability generated most of the difficulties which surfaced as I wrote my dissertation. In response I have formulated questions in every chapter which reflect the emerging problems concerning Kemp's life and career. Although my questions sometimes remain unanswered, they may inspire other scholars of Elizabethan popular culture to search for the answers. My research touching these problems has taken me in directions I had not anticipated.

In the Introduction some questions arise in connection with Kemp's biography, namely that his exact date and place of birth, the details of his private life, references to his religious denomination are missing.

The First Chapter treats the different kinds of concepts, traditions and predecessors informing Kemp's art. I take a closer look at the roots of Kemp's profession, the abundant concepts of the tradition of foolery and its representatives. It turns out that Kemp had numerous enemies who attacked the institution of the theater, the comic actors and Kemp himself. But in the primary

“resilient” nature of popular culture. Although as a dancer and jig-maker he was faithful to his roots and always returned to the community to which he belonged, he was also an autonomous personality, an expert in his profession and a true representative of the Elizabethan commercial theatre.

The outline of the dissertation

PREFACE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. MA THESIS
2. AIMS, SOURCES AND PROBLEMS
Sources
Problems
3. A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM KEMP

II. FOOLERY AND THEATRICAL WARS

1. WILLIAM KEMP AND FOOLERY
The Christian Concept of Folly
Erasmus and Brant
2. THE VARIETY AND SITUATION OF FOOLS
Court Jesters
Festival Fools
The Actor Fools
The Legal and Social Control of the Actors
3. ATTACKS AGAINST THE THEATRE
The Reasons for the Attacks
The Enemies of the Stage
The Central Role of the Fool in the Theatrical Debates
Defenders

III. KEMP AND ELIZABETHAN POPULAR CULTURE

1. THEORIES OF POPULAR CULTURE
2. CLOTHING - BODY - DANCE
Nine Daies Wonder
The Tollet Window

Finally it has to be pointed out that there are strong characteristic features that differentiate Armin from Kemp. Armin's physique was very different from that of Kemp. He had diminutive nicknames (e.g. 'Snuff' and 'Pink') because of his looks; he was dark, small, fat and physically grotesque. As an actor, Armin's skills lay in mime and mimicry; he was a singer, but not a dancer. Because he set himself up as a writer, Armin, unlike Kemp, presumably did not perceive that there was any necessary tension between the purposes of the dramatist (Shakespeare) and the purposes of the actor/comedian.

Avenues for further research

The main and most exciting points I have opted to focus on and their abundant cultural historical background have proved to be rich research fields open to further investigations for other researchers as well. The question of the Robin Hood figure is full of possibilities including his relationship with the comedians and literary underworld characters, his links to Falstaff and, through him, to Shakespeare. The appearance of the outlaw, the green man from the countryside in the morris dance and the jig may serve as additional avenues for exploration. The examination of the pamphlets of Thomas Nashe and Thomas Deloney and their role in Elizabethan popular culture, especially concerning their relationship to jigs, is another exciting area that could benefit from further research. Theatrical patronage, court theatre, Kemp's, Armin's and Shakespeare's relationship to Jonson, the links between Kemp and commedia dell'arte, and university stages are all topics which offer further scope for elaboration.

I wish to close my dissertation by highlighting Kemp's uniqueness. He was both an open-minded and adventurous traveller and an exceptionally vigorous performer of every form of national entertainment. Kemp embodied the

sources only Shakespeare, his company, the "Shakerags," Richard Johnson and Ben Jonson appear. Who might the others have been?

In the Second Chapter the questions posed concern Kemp's role in Elizabethan popular culture and his connection to the margins of society. What form of communication did he choose? His appearance as the fool and as Robin Hood, as well as his dancing the different figures of the morris dance, were certainly a mode of communication. Were jigs and morris dancing as important to him as was playing in the theater? Can we consider jigs and morris dancing a worthy rival of the legitimate arts? Did Kemp really play the great role of Falstaff? The uncertainty extends to his theatrical roles as well.

In the Third Chapter I have formulated questions concerning Kemp's role in the Lord Chamberlain's Men and successive career choices. What kinds of relationships and conflicts did he have? What were the reasons he left the company? Was it a victory or a failure for Kemp to face the challenge of morris dancing from London to Norwich? What was his relationship to Robin Hood the hero of May Games and processions?

The examination of the contemporary documents, the research and theories concerning Elizabethan culture and theater offers further scope for elaborating my opinion and for answering the questions posed in each chapter.

Methods

The concepts of early modern popular culture mentioned in the Introduction and in the first subsection of the Second Chapter helped me in my research concerning the role and importance of William Kemp in Elizabethan popular culture. They justified my choice of Kemp, the most exciting figure of the Shakespearean fool actors, who left behind the fewest documents and sources and whose life story is obscured by questions and incomplete

information. The oral and gestural nature of his art: his dancing, theatrical roles and jigs—all of which were full of satire—would have also become problematic if I wanted to work only on the grounds of ‘traditional history.’ The special concern of scholars of popular culture with the whole range of human activity and their interdisciplinary approach encouraged me to collaborate with cultural historians, historical anthropologists, literary critics and scholars of stage history of early modern Europe especially England and to work with their scholarship. With the above-mentioned methods I try to reconstruct the mosaic of Kemp’s biography from various contexts of English Renaissance cultural life. My aim is to illuminate and grasp the great complexity and richness of the concepts, symbols and changes of mentality through the prism of the Renaissance fool figure.

Kemp and Armin

There are several false assumptions concerning Kemp, especially with regard to his position in Elizabethan theatrical life and to his relationship to the other famous Shakespearean comedian, Robert Armin. I wish to refute the incorrect prejudices, illuminate the differences from another angle and highlight the possible similarities of the two figures. Critics have distinguished between Shakespeare’s clown, personified by the Peter scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the fool, personified by Lear’s fool. It has become a commonplace to assume that Armin played all the fools who were intelligent, sophisticated, and satirical, whereas Kemp played only vulgar, crude, common buffoons. There are many problems with such an assumption. Shakespeare wrote the roles for different characters with different abilities, conditions and personalities, and the above simplification can be easily refuted with compelling evidence of Kemp’s having played Falstaff who embodied the witty, clever and ironical comic figure. In spite of the exaggerated differences which are true considering their style and

the beginning of the seventeenth century as participants were fined or even excommunicated if caught. There were attempts to stop the games altogether. At the same time the rustic clown as a lord of misrule was a subject of nostalgic reminiscences typical to the late Tudor and early Stuart era. In the Elizabethan period, the conventional setting of stage comedy remained in the countryside, but by the Jacobean period the setting of comedy had mostly become the city, and Robin Hood was often relegated to pastoral literature.

Kemp sustained popular genres and was a talented and professional comedian as well. It is also common opinion that only Armin was able to switch from one character to the other. The projection of multiple identities is considered the staple of Armin’s clowning, while men like Tarlton and Kemp are supposed to have sustained their comic personae in every stage role and outside the playhouse walls. Contrary to the above stated misconception, Kemp also changed his comic personae, although he did not do so nearly as often as did Armin; neither did he play as many different characters, but he was not a lesser professional actor. Evidence for this is his successful performance of the role of Falstaff. It is certain that there are difference between his style and the requirements directed towards a stage comedian of the Globe of the 1590s and in the new era after 1600.

Between 1582 and 1588 Armin was most likely an unofficial apprentice player with Tarlton. As we know, Kemp’s master was also Tarlton, so they had the same roots and techniques and shared an influential teacher. They performed at the same typically English venues: stages, taverns, courts and private houses. Armin shared with Kemp the talent of improvisation and through it a close rapport with the audience. Fools written and played by Armin were also rooted in low comedy. *Quips upon Questions* was written in the crucial year of 1600, so it is probable that they shared the same experience concerning improvisation and also played together with Tarlton and later at the Curtain.

practical men. A good example for this way of thinking is that two of Armin's works are dedicated to 'The Reader' rather to a patron, whereas Kemp dedicated his diary to a Maid of Honour which probably implied an appeal to the Queen herself. It is equally true for both of them that their object in publishing was profit.

It is also common opinion that Kempian comedy was regarded stale and jaded by the beginning of the new century and there was a tension between the traditional playgoers and those who wanted something different. Armin seemed able to satisfy the new requirements, but this was true only for the more select, educated social classes.

Kemp's athleticism and dancing abilities "of an overtly sexual" nature had made him famous. Kemp liked jigs and was good at them, but the Globe was not famous for this popular dance. Kemp remained popular at the Curtain where Armin also performed with Lord Chandos's Men. Kemp's status as a despised comedian of the early seventeenth century is easily rebutted. Long after Kemp's era, the crude vulgar clown continued to appear regularly in the shape of Pompey Bum, the clowns in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Autolycus, or Mouse in the company's *Mucedorus*. The clown's vulgarity was obviously not forced on Shakespeare by Kemp. Neither was Kemp confined to brief roles of gross vulgarity, as it has been already noted in his résumé thus far.

Kemp very often used satire, parodies and burlesques in his jigs; political satire especially had become popular again, and it reached unprecedented fame by the end of the seventeenth century as a result of the religious and political conflicts. (Baskervill has even proposed that comic opera flourished at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, because it was conceived during the development of the farce jig.) May Games and especially morris dancing remained popular, particularly during festivals among common people, although May Games mostly petered out by

physique, Kemp and Armin had many common features as well, and I approached their relationship with an eye to their similarities.

It is widely accepted that Armin belonged to a rising social group and represented upward mobility. He was an intellectual, a Londoner, and well attuned to Renaissance notions of folly. It is also a false belief in this respect that there is a striking contrast with Kemp for "Kemp always made it his priority to be popular with the commoners rather than to woo the London gentry." This is David Wiles's accepted view about Kemp, but in light of Katherine Duncan-Jones's article entitled "Did William Kemp live on as 'Lady Hunsdon's Man'?" Wiles's deduction should be modified. Duncan-Jones in her article provides printed contemporary allusions and substantial other evidence that Kemp was patronized by Lady Hunsdon, was still active in the first years of James I's reign and certainly did not die in 1603. The suggestion that after 1603 Kemp "retired from the scene" seems distinctly plausible. After 1600 Kemp tried to seize every opportunity to stabilize his financial situation. He was certainly fortunate to get hold of the forthcoming patronage of Lady Hunsdon and had a safe retirement. As Duncan-Jones says, "[t]his opens up the theoretical possibility that he was still sometimes to be seen and heard in the exclusive environment of the court" and in private households as most of his Jacobean performances may have taken place rather in private sphere than on public stages.

The question of noble patronage concerning Kemp versus Armin should also be radically altered. The oversimplified opinion that Kemp was the representative of the common English people, did not aspire to noble patronage and had no court ambitions, as well as the double notion that he was an "exception of an upwardly mobile profession" and that only Armin belonged to this group in this respect are untenable. Both Kemp and Armin attempted to become financially successful and, as occasions arose, they accepted every possible source of support without ideological considerations. They were very