

*XXI. Some Remarks on the ancient Ceremony of the
Feast of Fools, and on a sculptured Girdle worn
at its Celebration. By Francis Douce, Esq. F.A.S.*

Read May 10, 1804.

DURING the early ages of Christianity, when the minds of men were yet under the dominion of their prejudices for the pagan superstitions, it had become necessary on the part of those who held the reins of civil and ecclesiastical government, either to endure the practice of certain ceremonies and amusements to which the common people had been long accustomed, or to substitute others in their stead, which bore at least some resemblance to them. One of the most ancient of the latter kind, and which appears to have been the greatest favourite, was that known by the appellation of the *Feast of the Calends*. It had arisen out of the Roman Saturnalia, and resembled in a great degree the excesses of a modern carnival. Amidst various other absurdities men ran through the streets disguised as old women, and even as brute animals, whence this ceremony has been sometimes distinguished by the names of *Vetula* and *Cervula*. [a] As it was attended by the commission of many crimes, and had become in all respects an object of ecclesiastical censure, we accordingly find the pious Tertullian,

[a] Ducange Glos. med. & inf. Latin. Voce *Cervula*. Lebeuf, recueil de divers écrits, tom. I. p. 280.

with many other fathers of the church vehemently declaiming against it; and Saint Augustine in one of his sermons menaces severe punishment against all who should encourage it; but the anathemas of these holy men appear to have had no effect in checking these impious fooleries, for they were continued without interruption even to the middle ages, the religious and other manuscripts of which, particularly those of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, furnish many allusions to them depicted in their margins. The late ingenious Mr. Strutt, whose indefatigable, but ill-rewarded services will be duly appreciated by every real antiquary, has preserved a memorial of these representations, but not aware of their precise signification, he has included them in the general mass of ancient mummeries [b].

These festivities which prevailed at the opening of the new year, were, it is to be hoped, originally confined to the laity; but it is certain that they were very soon imitated by the clergy. In the ninth century the acts of the eighth general council of Constantinople indistinctly refer to some ecclesiastical mockeries that seem to have relation to the beforementioned excesses. During the twelfth century, a festival remained called *libertas Decembrica* which in some degree resembled the Roman *Saturnalia* inasmuch as the archbishops and bishops degraded themselves by playing at dice and other games, and dancing with the inferior clergy in the monasteries and episcopal houses.

In France a very singular ceremony crept into the church about this time under the name of *la fête des soudiacres*, or the feast of subdeacons. The learned M. Ducange conjectures that this expression did not indicate that the subdeacons were exclusively the actors in this farce, but that it is to be literally

[b] Strutt's Sports and Pastimes, &c. Plate XVI.

expounded *diacres saouls*, or drunken clerks, from their bacchanalian excesses; an opinion which with great reverence to so high an authority, I cannot help regarding as very apocryphal. It is more generally known under the title of *the feast of fools*, on which occasion, in the cathedrals, a mock bishop or archbishop was elected. Sometimes he was called an abbot, and in those churches that were more immediately under the papal jurisdiction, a pope [c]. There was no unity of time in this election, for it is found to have been celebrated, according to variety of place, on Christmas day, St. Stephen's, St. John's, and the Innocents days; the Circumcision, the Epiphany, and on some of the octaves of those festivals. An ancient ceremonial for the church of Viviers states that the abbot was elected on the 17th of December. It is necessary to observe that an *episcopus stylorum* had been already elected on the Innocents day of the preceding year, but he enjoyed his official rights only during the three days of St. Stephen, St. John, and the Innocents [d]. At Auxerre the ceremony took place on the 18th of July [e]. At Rome it had been removed to the 1st of November [f]. In the celebrated Bedford Missal, now in the possession of Mr. Edwards, there is a calendar, in which, under the month of February, the following inscription occurs, “Comment à Fevrier on souloit faire *la feste aux folz et aux mors.*” One might be disposed at first sight to imagine that the *feast of fools* is here alluded to as celebrated in this month; but as the fabricator of this calendar uniformly refers to scasts and ceremonies in use among the

[c] Du Tilliot Mem. de la Fête des Fouz. p. 7.

[d] Ducange Gloss. Voce Kalendæ. Mem. de l'Acad. des Inscr. tom. VII.

[e] Goujet. Biblioth. Franc. tom. X. p. 376.

[f] Ambroſi, Novitii. factor. fastor. lib. XII. Romæ 1547.

ancients, it is evident that in this instance he applies the above expression to the *Quirinalia*, which were also termed *feriæ stultorum*, [g] between which and the *feast of fools* in question, there is not the slightest connexion. The illumination that belongs to this line represents several men feasting in a church-yard, who have been supposed by an eminent antiquary in his account of this invaluable manuscript, to wear fools caps; but this will be found, on attentive examination of the figures, to be a mistake, probably originating from a part of the above motto. The subject of it refers to another ancient festival on the 21st of February, viz. the *feralia*, or feast of the dead, instituted by Numa in honour of the Manes, and sometimes called *parentalia* [h]. It is to be supposed that similar variations would arise in the *manner* of celebrating this indecorous violation of every thing that was sacred and solemn, yet the principal incidents were at least uniform, and these were, a ludicrous paraphrase of the service of the mass, performed by persons with blackened faces, disguised in masquerade habits of women, of fools, and of brute animals, exhibiting in this respect evident traces of the *Vetula* and *Cervula* already noticed. The bishop or abbot was arrayed in mock pontificals, partly borrowed from the dresses of jesters and buffoons, and after his election carried in procession through the streets in a triumphal car filled with ordure, with which he bespattered the spectators. His attendants threw themselves into all kinds of indecent attitudes, saluting the people in the grossest and most lascivious

[g] Ovid. *fasti* II. 1 513. Plutarch. *quæst.* 89.

[h] This Pagan custom was a long time imitated in France on the 22d of February, the feast of St. Peter's chair, when the sepulchres of the dead were covered with viands, and the churchyards profaned with scenes of riot and debauchery. Many of the councils prohibited these excesses.

language.

language. Sometimes they danced in the choirs of the churches, and chaunted dissolute songs. They even profaned the altars by converting them into tables for their provisions, carousing in the most riotous manner, and crowning their impious orgies with playing at dice and other games. Nor should it be omitted to state that the ceremony of burning incense was likewise ridiculed with the smoke of old shoes which they burned for this purpose. In short, the excesses of these fools and madmen may very well warrant the expression of a writer on the subject, who has emphatically called them “the abomination of desolation” [i].

The enormities of this idle ceremony became at length so excessive, that it might well be expected some effort would be made to curb and counteract, if not wholly to abolish it. Accordingly many of the councils issued their decrees against them, but, as it should seem, to very little purpose; so deeply rooted were they become in the minds of the lower orders of the clergy, and of the common people every where, who always joined in and supported them. Mons. Du Tilliot, a writer who has given many curious particulars relating to this ceremony, but whose treatise is on the whole very confused and immethodical, from his indiscriminate admission of extraneous matter, has cited several ecclesiastical decrees for its abolition. Ducange supposes it to have been altogether suppressed in France in the year 1444, when the Faculty of theology at Paris issued circular letters for that purpose; but it seems impossible to state with any precision when it disappeared entirely at any place, except at Sens, where it ceased

[i] Further particulars may be found in Ducange *Glos. V. Kalendæ. Durandi rationale divin. offic. in festo innocentium. Diction. Hist. des Mœurs, v. Fête. Dartigny, Mem. de Litterature, tom. IV. p. 278. and tom. VII. p. 68. Variétés historiques, tom. I, p. 457. Deslyons, paganisme du roi boit, &c. Du Tilliot, *passim.**

in 1528, [k] because it is said to be mentioned in edicts of a much later date, and particularly in one so low as 1620; but there is very good reason for supposing it to have been confounded with the *feast of the Innocents*, which, from the best consideration I have been able to give it, appears to have been a very different ceremony, and to have existed long after the abolition of the *feast of fools*.

M. Ducange has cited the ceremonial for this festival belonging to the cathedral of Viviers in 1365, and another for Sens has been described by M. Lancelot in Vol. VII. of the *Mem. de l'Acad. des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*. The latter is a long narrow folio, covered with ivory, on which some of the ceremonies of the festival itself are said to be rudely sculptured. Of this a transcript on vellum is preserved in the French national library at Paris, No. 1351, which is thus described “*Officium stultorum ad usum metropoleos et primitialis ecclesiæ Senonensis: cum notis musicis.*” At the beginning is written “*Transcriptus est liber sequens, vel potius officium, ex originali pérantiquo in thesauro metropolitanæ Senonensis ecclesiæ conservato, ex utraque parte foliis eburneis munito, nunc in arctivis capituloibus inclusò.*” Engravings from these ivory covers would be very desirable, and I shall take this opportunity of hazarding a remark, that many of the grotesque figures in the illuminated religious manuscripts generally, but erroneously, called missals, as well as some of the sculptures in ancient cathedrals, have a reference to the subject in question.

The *feast of fools* soon made its way into England, but its vestiges here are by no means so numerous as among our neighbours. The earliest mention of it that I have traced is under the reign of Henry the IIId. when Grosthead, bishop of Lincoln, in a

[k] *Du Tilliot*, p. 61.

letter addressed to the Dean and Chapter of that diocese about the year 1240, thus speaks of it, “ Execrabilem etiam consuetudinem quæ consuevit in quibusdam ecclesiis observari *de faciendo festo stultorum*, speciali auctoritate rescripta apostolici penitus inhibemus, ne de domo orationis fiat domus ludibrii, et acerbitas circumcisionis Domini Jesu jocis et voluptatibus subsannetur. Quapropter vobis mandamus in virtute obedientiæ firmiter injungentes, quatenus *festum stultorum* cum sit vanitate plenum et voluptatibus spurcum, Deo odibile et dæmonibus amabile, de cetero in *ecclesia Lincoln* die venerande solemnitatis circumcisionis Domini nullatenus permittatis fieri.” [l] Whatever effect this inhibition might have had in the place to which it immediately related, it is certain that the feast of fools continued to be observed in various parts of the kingdom for more than a century afterwards. It was probably abolished about the end of the fourteenth century; for in some statutes and ordinations made by Thomas Arundell, Archbishop of York, for the better government of the collegiate church of St. John at Beverley in 1391, there is the following regulation, “ In festis insuper sanctorum Stephani, Diaconis, et Johannis, Vicariis; ac sanctorum innocentium, Thuribulariis et Choristis; in die etiam circumcisionis domini, subdiaconis et clericis de secunda forma de viciualibus annis singulis, secundum morem et consuetudinem ecclesiæ ab antiquo usitatos, debite ministrabit (i. e. præpositus) antiquâ consuetudine *immo verius corruptelâ* regis stultorum infra ecclesiam et extra hactenus usitatâ sublatâ *penitus* et extirpata.” [m].

This festival has by many writers been strangely confounded with the ceremony of electing a boy-bishop in cathedrals and

[l] Brown fasciculus rer. expetend. II. 331.

[m] Dugdale Monast. Angl. tom. III. par. 2, p. 7.

other places. Ducange, followed by Du Tilliot, quotes from Dugdale's *Monasticon*, an inventory of ornaments, &c. belonging to the cathedral of York in 1510, wherein are mentioned a small mitre and a ring for the “*episcopus puerorum*,” from which he has inferred that the *feast of fools* continued till that period in England: but it is evident that this refers to the election of a boy-bishop, a ceremony not only of a serious nature, and instituted in honour of Saint Nicholas, or as some have, I think erroneously conceived, in remembrance of the massacre of the Innocents, but which uniformly took place on the 6th of December, Saint Nicholas's day, from which time to the feast of the Innocents, this boy-bishop remained in office. But I purposely wave any further discussion of this subject, because I feel much pleasure in reflecting that it will most probably find a place amidst a general exhibition of our popular customs and antiquities by the masterly hand of my valuable and learned friend the Secretary of this Society; and shall conclude my remarks on the *feast of fools* with stating that numerous imitations of it arose in various places and on different occasions. These were, the feast of the *afs*; the elections of an *abbé des conards* or *cornards*, of an *abbé des esclaf-fards*; of an *abbé de malgouverne*, whence our abbot or lord of misrule; of a *prince des fots*, sometimes called *mere folle*, or *folie*; of a *prince de plaisance*; a *prince de l'estrille*; a *prevôt des etourdis*; a *roi des ribauds*, and some others of a similar nature. It is now time to advert to the more immediate subject of the exhibition which has given rise to this imperfect communication. It is a girdle which tradition reports to have been worn by the abbot of fools in the cathedral of Dijon on his election into office. From the style of its sculpture I conceive it to belong to the fourteenth century. It consists of thirty-five square pieces of wood

so contrived as to let into each other, by which means it easily assumes a circular form. On these are carved a variety of ludicrous and grotesque figures, consisting of fools, tumblers, huntsmen, and animals, with others that, from their licentiousness, do not admit of a particular description. They bear, on the whole, a very striking similitude to the sculptures on the seats of the stalls in our cathedrals and monastic buildings, which were, no doubt, conceived in ridicule of the clergy in general, but more particularly of the friars; or, as I have already observed, they may, in some instances at least, refer to the mockeries that were practised in celebrating the *feast of fools*. It only remains to add, that for the possession of this, perhaps unique, curiosity, I am indebted to the liberality of Monsieur l'abbé de Tersan of Paris.