

Clegg, Roger, and Lucie Skeaping. *Singing Simpkin and other Bawdy Jigs: Musical Comedy on the Shakespearean Stage, Scripts, Music and Context*. Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2014. 340 pp.

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Singing Simpkin is long overdue. Not only as an invaluable addition to the Renaissance drama library, but as a statement about what a typical Elizabethan/Jacobean theatre entertainment comprised. Where a decade ago Duffin's book (with enclosed CD), *Shakespeare's Songs*, finally put the musical elements of Shakespeare's plays into their rightful, more central context, here Roger Clegg (senior lecturer in Drama Studies at De Montfort University) and Lucie Skeaping (presenter of the BBC's *The Early Music Show* and performer—the City Waites), both of whom regularly work with the Globe Theatre, now provide us with an image of the entire raucous entertainment package, only a part of which was the Shakespeare play itself.

The problem before now has lain with the word “jig,” which in modern-day parlance automatically leads one's thoughts in the direction of a jolly folk dance. In historical terms it means much more, and once this has been clarified we see entire plays emerging. Shakespeare topped the bill, but was by no means the entire bill. So while the Globe Theatre regularly concludes its performances with a danced jig, it does not produce a full theatrical jig—“a short, comic, bawdy musical-drama that included elements of dance, stage combat and disguise [w]ith a cast of aging cuckolds, faithless wives, knavish clowns, roaring soldiers, coy maidens and country bumpkins” (front flyleaf). Jigs were not confined to the playhouse, where they fulfilled the role of afterpiece, but were popular features of fairs, as village entertainments, and even home amusements where, like the late medieval Robin Hood plays before them, family and sometimes servants would join to provide sufficient cast numbers—the plays have between 3-8 named parts.

In *Singing Simpkin*, to which the City Waites have added a vibrant CD of jigs, the authors provide both scholarly insight and the scripts of nine performance-friendly jigs (Jeremy Barlow, back cover). Following the preface, there is a brief list of reference abbreviations. This is followed by sixty-five pages presenting the history of the genre. The theatrical jig—for outside the theatre the word could mean ballad, dance, or piece of instrumental music—was born in the 1570s, when Shakespeare was growing up, although bawdy secular entertainments were by no means new, as I have hinted. One well-executed purpose of the book is to produce a convincing argument for the existence and context of the jig. The authors' premises are lucidly put forward. To provide but one: the renowned (and efficiently self-managed) star of the day, Will Kemp, was not one to take on minor

parts such as *Romeo and Juliet's* Peter. He would have wanted and demanded to go centre stage, but he was no deliverer of soliloquy: his skill lay in the physical, not the verbal. "He was a supreme jig-man and consciously a star attraction" (23). The jig was immensely but not universally popular. On the one hand, they were jealously guarded and few were published—at that time one way of protecting copyright was *not* to publish—while even in its earliest the theatre was developing a variety of clientele:

[A]fter a comedy ... the clown(s) erupted on to the finally emptied stage as soon as it was feasible to do so. There may well have been a necessary pause to allow fastidious theatregoers to signal their disdain for jigs be leaving and new arrivals – those who preferred jigs to plays – to take their places. In ruling on the suppression of jigs in October 1612, the Middlesex General Session focussed on the crowd of 'lewd and ill-disposed persons' at the Fortune who 'do resort thither at the end of every play.' (27)

As can be imagined, the dramatists were not entirely happy about the jig sharing their venue, either. As a shareholder, presumably Shakespeare's attitude would have been similar to that of Alexander Pope when he begrudgingly confessed that Thomas D'Urfey's "Pills" certainly sold in large numbers.

As we can see in the following section, which provides us with nine jigs, the texts themselves are not long, but it would be misleading to equate length of text with length of performance. Songs, dances and onstage fights would all extend the show. (As Duffin pointed out a decade earlier, this is just as true of the Shakespeare plays themselves). In written form as they appear here the nine plays stretch over some 150 pages, but this includes the songs, complete with scores as well as up to the same amount of space gain as the play itself devoted to synopses, provenances, sources, notes and commentaries on the tunes, providing text and music for the would-be performer (or whistling or humming reader!) and much meat to chew on for the scholar.

The topics are echoed in the titles of some of the plays. Apart from the jig that gives the book its main title, we find *The Wooing of Nan*, *The Black Man*, *St. Denys' Ghost*, *The Libel of Michael Steed*, *Fools Fortune*, and *The Cheaters Cheated*.

The final part of the book, a kind of intellectual yet practical handbook, discusses the staging of the jig. Here the three elements of text, music and dance are treated separately, though the tips stretch further than that. Subheadings include disguises, men-playing-women, stage fighting, the reuniting of script with tune, and the developing of tunes for instrumentalist. With the dances, the plays are treated separately. The appendix includes dance steps.

Singing Simpkin, then, is a book relevant toward a wide readership: for some, a valuable addition to our understanding of the complex jigsaw that is the Renaissance and post-Renaissance theatre, while others—hopefully, a good healthy percentage—will remove its contents from page to stage.