

# Four 'drollities' from the painted ceiling formerly at Prestongrange, East Lothian

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## SUMMARY

The decoration painted on the ceiling dated 1581 which was discovered at Prestongrange in 1962 and subsequently moved to Merchiston Castle included four grotesque figures without known parallel in Scottish painted decoration elsewhere. The characteristics of these figures were sufficiently similar to suggest at the time of discovery that they were all derived from a common source, presumably a collection of engravings, which could not then be identified. It now seems likely that this source was the *Songes drolatiques de Pantagruel*, a book of engravings published in Paris in 1565, since this small volume contains versions of all four figures. One of the four also appears in an engraving of much the same period preserved in the library of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and two were used by Inigo Jones to provide costume designs for a masque staged in London in 1640. In all these cases the figures were regarded as amusing rather than sinister, so that their appearance at Prestongrange does not necessarily imply, as has been suggested, that the ceiling decoration there was connected with black magic.

## THE 'DROLLITIES' FROM PRESTONGRANGE

The discovery of a painted ceiling at Prestongrange during the repairs of 1962, although unexpected, was not in itself surprising since the part of the house concerned was built at a time when it was normal for the home of a gentleman of substance to be so painted. Mark Ker, owner of Prestongrange, was just such a man – Commendator of Newbattle, a member of the Privy Council and an Extraordinary Lord of Session. Nor was the decoration in itself unusual, consisting as it did of a miscellaneous collection of emblems and other devices of varying origin, divided into strips by decorated beams supporting the ceiling above, and loosely linked together, where appropriate, by continuous bands of arabesque pattern. The colouring (monochrome on an orange background) was, however, unusual, as was the inclusion of a group of four grotesque figures of a type not hitherto recorded elsewhere in Scotland, which appeared to fit uncomfortably into the scheme of decoration as a whole. It seemed reasonable to assume on the basis of experience gained at Rossend Castle and elsewhere (Apted and Robertson 1972) that these figures had been copied in some detail from a common source-book, although at the time this could not be identified. It is now known that the figures were in fact copies, probably from a book called the *Songes drolatiques de Pantagruel* published in Paris in 1565 (Breton 1565). It is not absolutely certain that the engravings in this book were the actual source since they are attributed to Rabelais who had died twelve years earlier (1553) and could therefore have been reproduced previously in some other form elsewhere, while other secondary sources certainly existed, such as the series of engravings now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, which also includes one of the Prestongrange figures. The fact, however, that all four figures appear in the *Songes drolatiques* suggest that this was indeed the source-book used by the painters of Prestongrange. Three of the figures from the *Songes drolatiques*, including two of those employed at Prestongrange, were

subsequently used by Inigo Jones as costume designs for a masque produced for their Majesties at Whitehall in 1640 (Walpole Society 1924, 124, pl 44a).

The fact that the figures at Prestongrange were copied from a book of engravings is not in itself of special significance since the practice has been amply demonstrated elsewhere (see above, and Apted 1964, 2, 273 and 3, pl 28b; 1966, pls 41–2). What is important in the present context is the significance attached to the figures in the 16th century in view of the fact that their inclusion in the ceiling paintings has been used to suggest a link between this decoration and the practice of black magic at Prestongrange. In the detailed account of the ceiling written soon after its discovery (Murray *et al* 1966), it is stated that the abandonment of the house in 1609 marked the end of a period when it was 'steeped in the mysteries of witchcraft and necromancy' and that the ceiling was a 'unique and tangible monument to that faith'. Part of the argument for this conclusion was based on the presence of the four grotesques with their 'diabolical, evil-eye expressions' and for this reason it is worth looking at these figures again in the light of what is now known of their origins.

The *Songes drolatiques* was published by one Richard Breton and consists of 120 engravings with an introduction. The writer of the latter, presumably Monsieur Breton, explains that he has been encouraged to publish what is the last work of the late François Rabelais because of his close association with that author and declares that his objects in publishing are to provide something to pass the time for young people as well as a source for making grotesques or devising masquerades or for any other purpose justified by the occasion. It could be argued that these objects were precisely fulfilled by the painters at Prestongrange or by Inigo Jones at Whitehall. The illustrations were originally published without captions, but a number of subsequent facsimile editions were printed with the addition of commentaries added by the editors to explain the meaning of the illustrations and relating them to the previously published works of Rabelais. Of one figure (pl 18b) an edition of 1869 says 'N'est-il pas plus naturel de voir, dans cet aimable railleur, Panurge allant en campagne amoureuse', while the grotesque dwarf (pl 18a) is dismissed as 'sans doute un des cinquante-trois mille fils que Pantagruel engendra dans un moment d'oubli'. The dwarf demonstrates, incidentally, that the Prestongrange painters did not copy the originals slavishly but modified them to suit their purpose – the source figure in this instance is a curious monster with a hump on its chest, no arms, one human leg and one bird's claw, while the Prestongrange copy shows basically the same figure, but with two human legs, one complete, the other with the foot amputated and supported on a crutch. A comparison of the two versions also demonstrates the skill of the Prestongrange painter who has filled in the facial details of what is in origin no more than a cartoon – a reminder of the close links between the portrait and decorative painters of the day (Thomson 1974).

One of the four figures at Prestongrange (the 'Panurge' referred to above) also appears on a series of engravings preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. These engravings, which cover four sheets, are headed *Histoire d'une drollerie Facetieuse, du Mariage de Lucesse aux yeux de beuf, & Michault Crouppiere son mary, avec ceux qui furent semonz au banquet*. The bizarre rustic figures taking part in the wedding celebrations include the Prestongrange 'Panurge', although he is not the bridegroom but according to a note on the engraving *Guillemin Grossepeuce, Seigneur de place nette*. The four sheets concerned are contained within a folio volume, one of two listed as *Receuil de pieces facetieuse et bouffones de 1500 a 1630* which form part of a collection deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale by the Abbe de Marolles in the 17th century (Bouchot 1895). The engravings are undated, but are believed to have been copied in part from the *Songes drolatiques* rather than the other way about. Since they contain only one of the figures from the Prestongrange ceiling this seems likely to have been the case. The engravings form part of a group

attributed by the Cabinet des Estampes of the Bibliothèque Nationale to François Desprez, or Deserpres, which include other comic scenes, a *history of the siege of Troy* and a *Jonas* and are said to have been widely circulated on the Continent in the second half of the 16th century.

The so-called 'Panurge' figure was also used by Inigo Jones as one of three taken from the *Songes drolatiques*, of which two appear on the Prestongrange ceiling. The masque concerned was called *Salmacida Spolia* and was presented by the King and Queen at Whitehall on Tuesday, 21 January 1640. Entry Number 9 was for 'Fowre Grotesques or drollities, in the most fantastical shapes that could be devised' and the costumes for three of these four were inspired by the engravings in the *Songes drolatiques* (Orgel and Strong 1974, 732, 770-1).

The significance of the evidence set out above is plain – on the occasions in the 16th and 17th centuries of which we have any knowledge these figures were not regarded as sinister beings but rather as drolls in the long succession of comic and often cruel figures dating far back into the past and surviving today in the persons of Punch and Judy. The Prestongrange 'drollities', in fact, are not in the tradition of the witches of Macbeth but of Bottom the Weaver. This does not prove, of course, that the figures at Prestongrange were indeed so regarded – we have no evidence as to what was in the minds either of those who commissioned the ceiling or of those who painted it – but the fact that they were used clearly does not in itself prove that the ceiling is evidence of black magic or inhibit the paintings from being as perhaps one might expect no more than an example of 'Antique Work' as defined by Henry Peacham, i.e. 'an unnaturall or unorderly composition for delight sake of men, beasts, birds, fishes, flowers etc without (as wee say) Rime or reason' (Peacham 1606, 35-7).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This account of the Prestongrange 'drollities' stems from information provided by Dr F J Stopp, who first drew our attention to the *Songes drolatiques* and to the *Mariage de Lucretse aux yeux de beuf*. The photographs of the Prestongrange ceiling were taken by Mr J Pugh and the survey drawing traced from a photographic montage by Miss Thea McDonald. The plates are reproduced by courtesy of the Department of the Environment, the London Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth, respectively.

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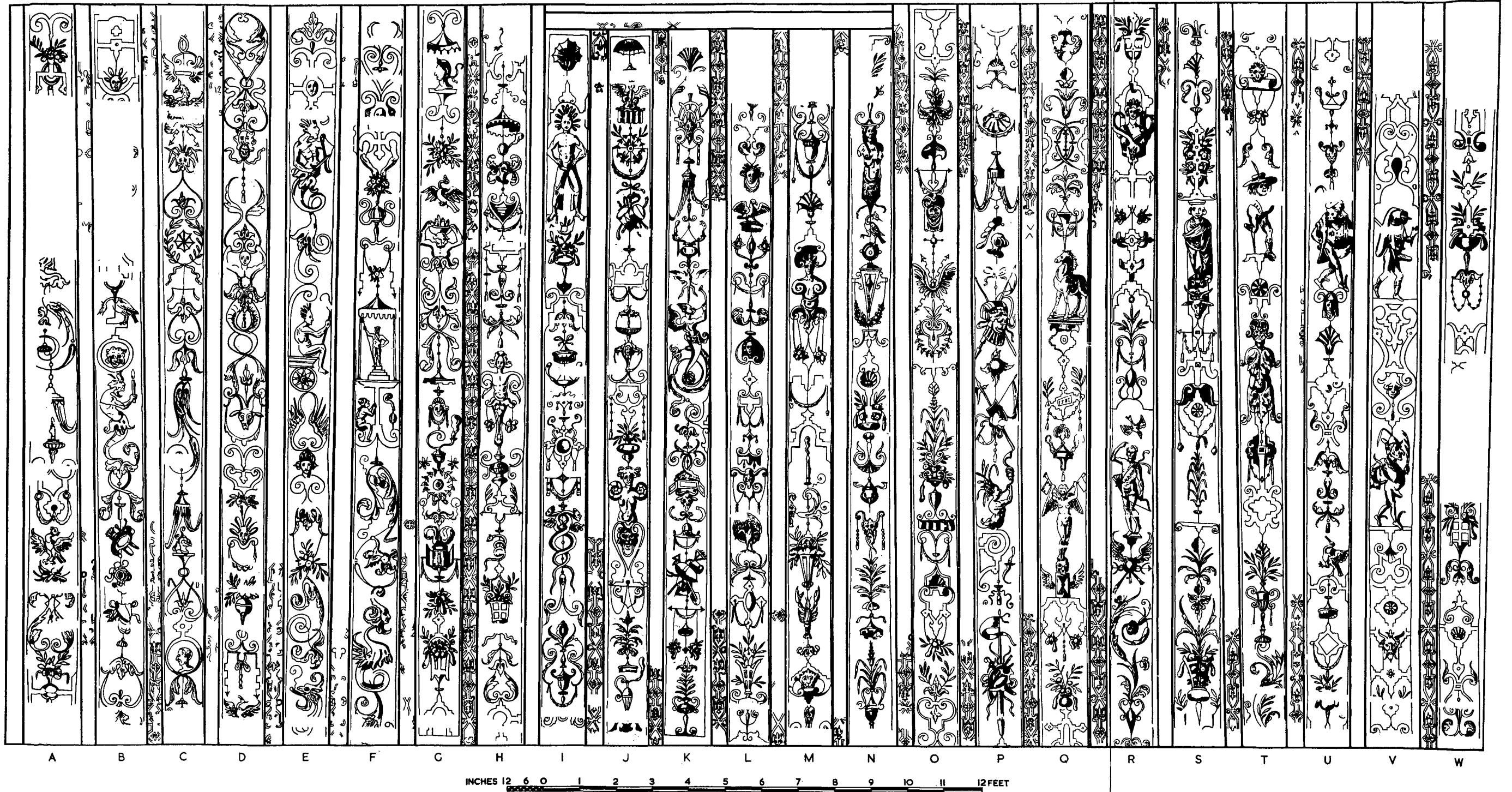


FIG 1









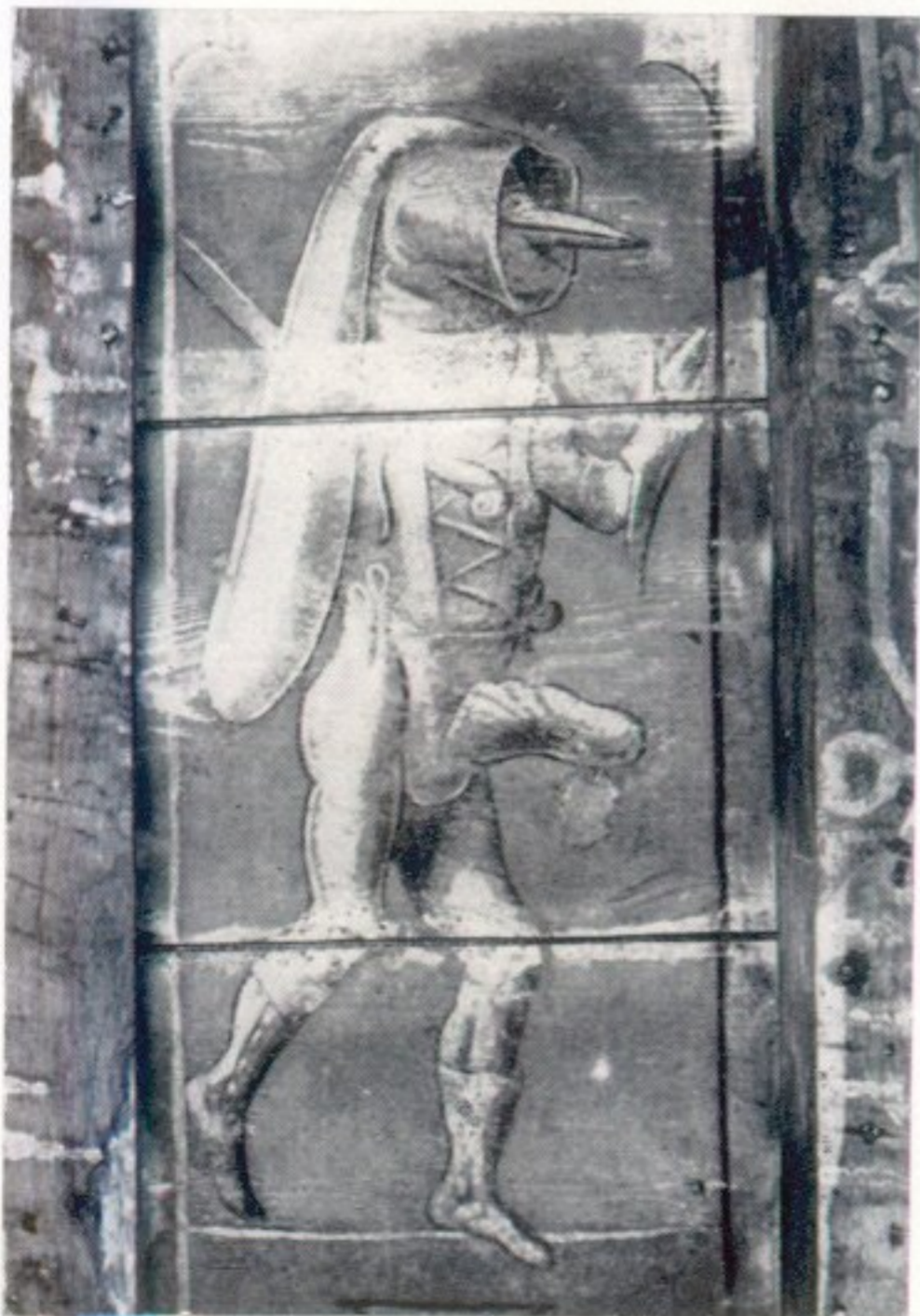
Part of the 'Mariage de Lucrese', c 1565 (photo Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)





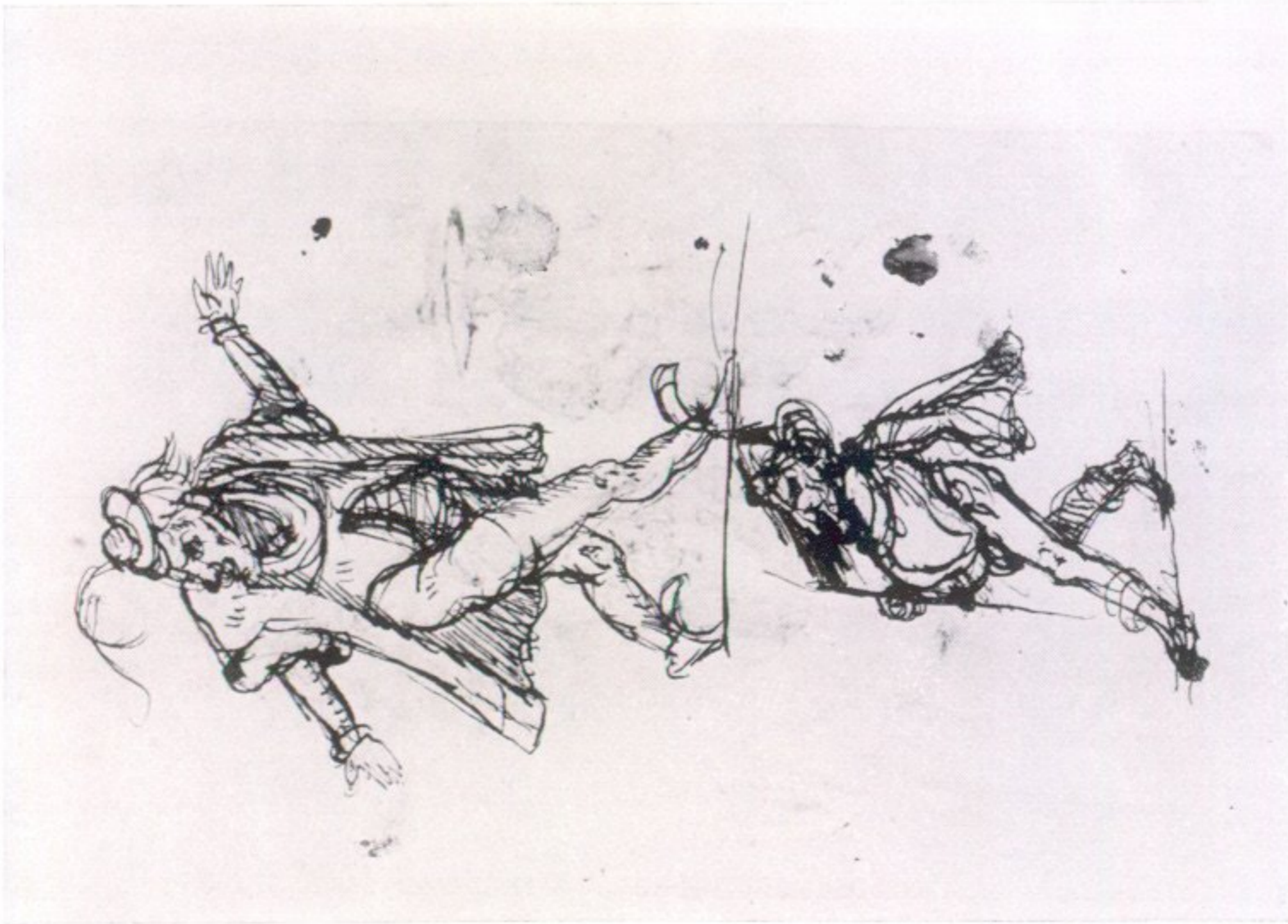
The four 'drollities' from the *Songes drolatiques*, 1565





The four 'drollities' from the Prestongrange ceiling, 1581





'Fowre Grotesques or drolities' sketched by Inigo Jones, 1640 (photo Courtauld Institute)