

**'Here's sport, indeed!':  
interchangeable voices and mass communication  
in Renaissance England**

Aimara da Cunha RESENDE  
*Centro de Estudos Shakespeareanos – Brazil*

**ABSTRACT**

Renaissance England was a time when "voices" of most varied kinds intermingled, creating diffuse perceptions of ideologies. "High" and "low" cultures merged and/or changed place, as the advent of capitalism brought with it mobility that blurred socially hierarchical boundaries. As seen by Peter Burke, culture moved both ways, migrating either from the country, with its traditional culture, to the city, with its courtly and/or urban pastimes, or vice-versa. Thus court entertainments such as plays and masques, and political spectacles such as pageants and royal progresses – which both reinforced the splendour and power of the monarch and his/her court, and permitted some sort of participation of the crowd, offering the common people opportunity to enjoy more sophisticated cultural expressions – were nurtured by and simultaneously nurtured folklore and rural festivities. In the same way, popular pastimes that resulted from urban assimilations of both court and country entertainments, due to the rise of capital and the new middle class, appropriated and re-enacted such entertainments as part of their ideology. This article deals with such exchange between "high" and "low" cultural expressions, exploring them and discussing how and where they are exchanged as transformations take place, enhancing forms of carnivalized art such as theatre, elite and popular literature, dances and games.

**KEYWORDS:** Renaissance England, elite culture, popular culture, festivities, cultural exchange

In the country, people dance, drink, listen to music and attend performances. Two or more musicians play their pipes and drums, followed by Morris dancers. Saint George fights the dragon, is killed, and is brought back to life by a doctor. Then comes Robin Hood, the medieval outlaw of noble origin. He meets socially and economically different people like his brave companions, beggars, rich men and

beautiful women. He opposes the rich and protects the poor. Among other pastimes, in the English Renaissance, the Robin Hood plays fill the minds of the simple men, women and children, transforming their hard, monotonous everyday life into a momentary dreamland of impossible experiences come true. In the newly created medieval legend, on May Day, the hero is often accompanied by a burlesque Maid Marion, with her free, obscene behaviour, rude language and erotic gestures. In the calendar festivities, both are relished as much as food and drink. In this world there are mirth and "cakes and ale."

In London, people stand hours on end to see the pageants prepared for the Sovereign, when *tableaux vivants*, singing, and speeches take place in different locations. Pageants offer the "commoners" a chance to enjoy a free day or a festive occasion, and simultaneously introject the acceptance of royal power and supremacy. Lavishly decorated, with many allusions to classical myths, with actors dressed in Greek or Roman robes mixed with contemporary costumes, the pageants were also a kind of dream offered the poor, apprentices, the middle-class and foreigners, so that, in addition to witnessing the display of power and superiority, they might escape the hard reality of their lives, or, in the case of spectators from abroad, take home information about the English monarch's wealth, grandeur and political strength.

Pastimes and displays of power in Elizabethan and Stuart England were nourished by oral and written traditions, moving from the aristocracy's, or "high" culture's literary world, to popular, or "low" oral culture, to turn again to the gentry and nobility often through the theatre, thus forming a fabric of discourses suggesting Peter Burke's (1989) double social movement of culture.

As Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) pointed out, these discourses arise and function under the stress and through the exchanges raised by socio-political constraints as well as individual expectations. The Russian theoretician sees such discourses as subversive devices coming from the lower social strata to be assimilated, later on, by the representations of ideologies of higher social groups, bringing about awareness of the differences between both court and urban elite societies, and the rural and poor inhabitants of the "outer" world.

My belief is that there is not only this movement from "low" to "high" culture, but that there is a never-ending interchange of ideas embodied in individual, regional and/or national ideologies. Culture, in its broader sense, is made of heterogeneity, complexity,

oppositions and overlappings. Its mobility allows for unexpected exchanges, confrontations, assimilations and adaptations.

Within the language of entertainments, displays of power, and economic interests, there is always the confrontation of ideas and ideals, the strengthening of some positions, the displacement of others. In any pseudo-naïve entertainment, there is a muddle of veiled antagonism, necessary alienating relief, and an outburst of energy that, being both liberating and controlled, concretizes subtle changes resulting from the compromising attitudes that arise from the very awareness of contradiction and domination.

Dominant forms of rule bear within themselves the seeds of political dissatisfaction and social disturbances. Such predicament requires an ambivalent attitude of those in power, which reflects their anxiety, generated by the hold that popular representations have on the minds and attitudes of this dominant class. This attitude is expressed in the simultaneous presence of harsh laws based on moral and religious principles, and the temporary permissiveness that gives vent to the uneducated, badly nurtured, overworked commoners' expression of *reduced laughter* (Bakhtin, 1984: 164-165, 178n.). The rulers' apparent contradiction, which is the basis of socio-political control, brings to the fore the role of cultural representations to maintain the equilibrium and mediate between "low" and "high" cultures, thus guaranteeing the continuity of the system.

This explains both Elizabeth I's and James I's seemingly contradictory acceptance of the pastimes of both the closed, "contained" court and the open, "free" rural poor. These two rulers maintained ambiguous attitudes towards festivity, since they knew that on the permanence of traditional rituals and "carnival laughter" depended the stability of the State. Elizabeth seems to have enjoyed such pastimes. James, however, merely put up with them, because he was sure that they were a necessary political articulation, though he could not find pleasure in them.

As a result, under Elizabeth, not only was traditional festivity enjoyed by the people, despite the persecution of Puritans, but also the players had the freedom to perform both at court and at the public theatres as well as in the country. James, though, preferred attending court performances, especially *masques*. Under him, even the ritualistic space of the church, which had been freely used by the rural poor for their communal celebrations, the most frequent being cyclic festivities, becomes an enclosure where only God can be "celebrated". Little by little, this sacred space is separated from the

“common” man, and the people’s entertainments previously linked to religious symbolism, are segregated from it.

When one thinks of English Renaissance culture, two ideas are predominant: the undeniable force of the theatre and the incomparable mutability of Elizabeth I’s image, so theatrical in itself. Innumerable examples can be drawn from the “Virgin Queen’s” behaviour in her relationship with political advisers, courtiers, foreign ambassadors, wooers and the people in general. I will cite here just one example. This is how Francis Peck describes her response to the orator, in 1564, on a visit to Cambridge University:

First he [the orator] praised and commended many and singular virtues set and planted in her majesty, which her highness, not acknowledging of, shaked her head, bit her lips and her fingers, and sometimes broke forth into passion and these words, ‘Non est veritas, et utinam –’ [‘It is not true, would that it were –’].

“[When he praised virginity] she said to the orator, ‘God’s blessing of thine heart: there continue’ .... When he had done, she much commended him, and much marveled that his memory did so serve him, repeating such diverse and sundry matters, saying that she would answer him again in Latin but for fear she should speak false Latin, and then they would laugh at her. (apud Marcus 2000: 87)

At the conclusion of the visit, at St. Mary’s Church, she made her speech ... in Latin!

The preponderance of the theatre, as both a site and the repository of entertainment tends to blur the importance of numerous other cultural expressions. These cannot be overlooked lest the blend that forms the identity of a group loses its character, and the real, expressive traits of communality that impregnate the life experiences and the behaviour of such group tend to be effaced, so that the aspects that form/conform behaviour, tastes, and beliefs lose their distinctive character.

As was shown by Peter Burke (1989), there seems to have been a movement from the “higher tradition” to the “lower tradition,” and back again, a movement that exemplifies Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of the relativity and interchange of discourses. As argued by the latter, there is no single, original discourse, since every speaker, when he/she utters a thought, is somehow aware of the response to come from his/her interlocutor. Besides, every discourse is already loaded with other discourses, and the new idea is merely a

metamorphosed embodiment of previous thoughts and social stances.

Burke shows how “lower” tradition adapts representations from “higher” tradition for its own uses, so as either to reinforce or to subvert the values of the time and milieu of the culture appropriating the adapted text (I here use *text* in its broad sense of a representational device of whatever kind, not only literary). Not only does “lower” culture appropriate “high” culture, but the reverse process is also common.

In the English Renaissance, when both Elizabeth I and James I say that they are on the stage, such statement shows how clearly aware they are of their ambivalent position of “Player Queen/King” and “Queen/King Player,” and of the fact that they are observers of and participants in the incidents of their time, but also observed on the royal stage. Such ambivalence is especially displayed in Elizabeth’s theatrical socio-political manouvres as well as in her transvestite behaviour, speeches, and image. Her transvestism is a direct descendant of the rituals and representations of ambivalence in the traditional culture of her country. The Queen adapts popular representations in an endeavour to blur the boundaries between sovereignty and commonness, and in so doing she attempts to recreate the make-believe aspect of the theatre, when the line between fiction and reality disappears, promoting the image of commonness to a falsely higher status, exactly where it is implicitly absent and insistently denied. Like Robin Hood, or Long Meg, she is socially, politically, and physically transformed.

At the end of the English Renaissance, James I tended to reassert the boundaries between élite and popular culture. He supported the private theatres and, in the case of the court masques, limited the participation of his subjects, restricting them to the nobility. Elizabeth, on the other hand, in her public appearances, extensively borrowed from popular culture and, in so doing, transformed the challenges and dangers she was faced with, chiefly for being a single woman. She veiled her vulnerability under her apparent androgyny, incarnating burlesque representations of gender relations and socio-political roles. In her theatricality, the Virgin Queen, Cynthia, Hippolyta, Astrea, Diana, of élite culture, shares features with Robin Hood and Long Meg familiar to her less literate subjects. Like the latter, she is presented as the protector of the poor and punisher of the dishonest rich; she moves among the people and respectfully listens to them, as is attested by her progresses and

contemporary reports of the deep attention she paid to speeches in her honour as well as to petitions from city mayors and, sometimes, praise or requests coming from a common man or woman.

Robin Hood, an outlaw, at first, then a hero “born great,” a medieval subversive aristocrat who left his noble environment to fight for an ideal, moves from the lower to the higher level of society and back again. His mutations take place alongside the representations of ascending capitalist ideologies. From medieval ballads, he moves through popular entertainment, especially Mummer’s, appears in Masques and plays – it was then that the anti-Catholic Anthony Munday gave him a name and the title of Earl, in his *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington* (both entered in the Stationers’ Register in 1600) – and is firmly grounded in the Renaissance chapbooks. As Margaret Spufford says,

Robin Hood was yet another hero with a very respectable medieval pedigree, that runs at least back to the fourteenth century, although there is lively disagreement about whether he originated as a hero for peasant audiences then or for a gentle audience which disliked the forest laws and shrieval administration of the thirteenth century. By the end of the fifteenth century he had become a hero of some Mummer’s Plays, and in the sixteenth century presided widely in England as King of May. (1981: 231)

That Robin Hood ends up as a chapbook hero deserves attention. Chapbooks, typical popular literature, are also essentially a commercial product. While they acquired an outstanding position among other books aimed at more educated people, they were written with the less literate but economically ascending “middling sort” in mind. Their printers and distributors aimed at such a public, which is why the heroes and heroines embodied values and responded to aspirations characteristic of that group. The representation of chapbook heroes and heroines bears the signs of the evolving mercantilism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although arising from chivalric ideals, with the passing of time and the advent of possibilities for social ascendancy, these popular figures were transmuted so as to incorporate the dreams of the lower members of the realm. The chapbooks, which were an important means of alienating the less fortunate, dealing with the misfortunes of the poor, and the unreal possibility of reprieve by someone brought in almost miraculously among them, helped to efface the

awareness of socio-economic differences while simultaneously bringing profits to those creating and distributing them.

The chapbook novels of Thomas Deloney, that appeared between 1597 and 1600, are a telling example of the interplay between élite and popular cultures in Renaissance England. Probably read by the aristocracy, the gentry and the commoners alike, these stories highlight city life and stress the ever increasing power of trade. But the most evident proof of the interplay of cultures is to be found in the heroine Long Meg. The chapbook *Long Meg of Westminster*, first printed in 1582, tells the adventures of a strong-minded lower class girl who makes use of several devices typical of popular heroes, including transvestism, secret nocturnal walks, succesful struggles against dishonest and/or immoral men, to reach the ideals of the social class she belongs to.

The similarities between Long Meg and the androgynous representation of Elizabeth I are undeniable. Both are shown as protectors of the poor, play male roles when necessary, are unarguably stronger than men. And both are essentially seen as women. Though Long Meg gets married and becomes a submissive wife, while the Queen does not, both act according to the ideals they champion. Long Meg is obedient to her husband; Elizabeth is apparently submissive to her country and her people, to whom she more than once declares she is married. When the occasion so requires, she displays the male traits proper to a ruler and calls herself "Prince" to reassert before her advisors and other subjects that *she* is the only Master. But as a ruler, she knows quite well that her supremacy rests on the acceptance of her sovereignty by her subjects. Based on this awareness, therefore, she also plays the role of the submissive wife. An example of this display is found in an exchange between her and Sir John Harington's wife, as was reported by him, in *Nugae Antiquae*:

The Queene did once ask my wife in merrie sorte, "how she kept my goode wyll and love, which I did always mayntaine to be trulie goode towards her and my children?" My Mall, in wise and discrete manner, tolde her Highnesse, "she had confidence in her husbandes understandinge and courage, well founded on her own steadfastness not to offend and thwart, but to cherishe and obey; hereby did she persuade her husbande of her own affectione, and in so doinge did commande his" – "Go to, go to, mistresse, saithe the Queene, you are wisely bente I finde: after such sorte do I keepe the good wyll of all my husbandes, my good people." (apud Marcus 1988:59).

Maid Marian is another interesting folkloric type whose flamboyant sexuality is often intermingled with elite culture. She is supposed to have first appeared as Robin Hood's sweet companion in Adam de la Halle's French version of the legend, *Jeu de Robin et Marion*. According to J.C. Holt, "Maid Marian became Robin's partner in the May Games between 1450 and 1500" (quoted by Tom Hayes, 1992:60). If she is originated in *Jeu de Robin et Marion*, she, too, is transmuted over time and place to become the vulgar, riotous character of the May Festivals. According to François Laroque (1993: 125),

Maid Marian had thus become the embodiment of, in some cases, effrontery and vice, in others of extreme vulgarity. The Puritans denounced her as 'the Whore of Babylon' while others, like Lady Bornwell in Shirley's *The Lady of Pleasure* (1637), suffered from vapours at the very mention of her name.

It is worth noting, though, with Peter Stallybrass (1985), that this transmuted Maid Marion became a chaste maid when introduced into the literature of elite culture, which would avoid sophisticated ladies' vapours at the mere sound of her name. The fact that Maid Marion can be transmuted, not only as a transvestite, but also from a vicious "whore" to a chaste maid and back again, once more highlights the uninterrupted movement of culture backward and forward between high and low traditions. The "Other", be it embodied in the lower class, seen from above, or the higher society, seen from below, is always an object of simultaneous fear and desire.

Besides folklore stock types in the Calendar festivals and in chapbooks, other figures from popular culture appear here and there in the articulate discourses of the English Renaissance. For one, ballads and pamphlets help toward the continuation of idealized relationships and imposed faith. The half literate readers of ballads and pamphlets turned them into *the* mass media of the time, as can be seen in the enormous output and wide readership of these broadsheets. The use made of pamphlets by supporters of the monarchy as well as by religious representatives whether Puritan or Catholic, to manipulate the people, was notable and doubtless worked as propaganda and marketing. Through satire, and both mercantile and "innocent" appeals, chapbook propaganda had great

success in the selling of either pleasantly erotic stories or guides to reach Heaven. As one advertisement of *Small Godly Books*, published in a list of chapbooks printed in the sixteen-fifties shows, faith and thrift are intertwined: "Read them over carefully, and practice them constantly, and rest assured thou wilt find comfort in them to thy own Soul, and are but twopence a piece" (apud Spufford 1981: 198).

The cheap price of chapbooks, be they *Small Pleasant Books*, *Small Godly Books*, ballads or pamphlets, guaranteed their large scale diffusion among the members of the lower social strata. The *Small Pleasant Books* catered for young men and women, creating an erotic atmosphere for idealized love. They told love stories, often adapted from chivalric romances, and originated interestingly vulgar and grotesque types, such as Mother Bunch, the ale wife, an enormous woman, who

spent most of her time in telling of tales, and when she laughed, she was heard from Algate, to the Monuments in Westminster, and all Southwark stood in amazement, the Lyons in the tower, and the Bulls and Beares of Parish-Garden roar'd (with the terror of her laughter) lowder than the great roaring Megge ... She danced a Galliard on Tower hill, and London shook as it had been an Earthquake (apud Spufford 1981:53)

Mother Bunch, as the Epistle to the Reader says, is the mother to "our great greasie Tapsters, and fat swelling Ale wives, whose faces are blown as bigge as the froth of their bottle Ale, and their complexion imitating the outside of a Cooks greasie dripping-pan, and you could hardly go round about her in a Summer after-noon." The type represented in Mother Bunch moves, for example, from popular literature into Jonson's Ursula, of *Bartholomew Fair*. This is how Ursula is seen by Justice Overdo, on the one side, and the horse courser Knockem, on the other:

Jus. [Aside] This is the very womb and bed of enormity! Gross, as herself! This must all down for enormity, all, every whit on't. (2, 2, 95-7)

Kno. Thou art such another mad merry Urs still! Troth I do make conscience of vexing thee, now i' the dog-days, this hot weather, for fear of foundering thee i' the body; and melting down a pillar of the Fair. [...] I'll ha' this belly o'thine taken up, and thy grass scoured, wench; (2, 3, 46-51)

Ambivalence charges Justice Overdo's expression *enormity* – used by him in the sense of great social wrong – with the suggestion of Ursula's ponderous size, an idea that is reinforced by his comparison: *gross as herself*. In Knocker's speech, too, the Rabelaisian traits of fat and grease, especially related to the belly, are openly asserted: she may be *foundered in the body* – once again, the play on the verb *founder*, meaning *foundering* [in the body of a horse with a surfeit], and *foundring* [melting down]; if she is *foundred*, Knockem sardonically asserts, a pillar of the Fair may be melted – the pillar made of her belly and the grease all over her, that Knockem threatens to rub off.

Mother Bunch, one of the original popular female characters of Misrule, like Gargantua, embodies in her exuberance the lower bodily life of carnivalized Renaissance, and is reproduced in the dramatic literature of the period in the wonderfully grotesque lower class women, whose lack of education, liberal behaviour and vulgar language highlight the veiled side of feminine reality, since from them and their response to life one can deduce how idealized the "coy mistresses" of elite Renaissance poetry are. In broadsheets, women, after all, had desires.

Such types did certainly exist prior to the sixteenth century. But it is in the Renaissance, with the upsurge of capital, and consequent class mobility, that these characters inhabit the threshold between elite and popular entertainment. Renaissance texts of whatever kind where such figures appear are typical crossroads in the construction and reconstruction of cultural discourses. Like a tennis ball, these dialogical "products" rocket from one point to another, to simultaneously introduce or reinforce ideas and destabilize them. This can be seen, for instance, in the juxtaposition of Mother Bunch and Juliet's nurse, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The similar imagery found in the way they address young girls points to feminine yearnings and doubts, in general, as well as the constraints forced on maids (and maidenheads) by social imperatives. Here is Mother Bunch's advice to young girls, interspersed with guidance on how to discover who will be their future husband, and avoid sexual problems: "those that languish in single sheets till fifteen. I will tell how you shall know and see the persons that shall ease you of the simple thing, so much talked of, called a *Maidenhead*, by him that must be your husband" (apud Spufford 1981: 63). She tells what a girl should do, on St. Agnes Eve and Midsummer Eve, to dream of her future husband, but advises

her to be careful, in case the dream simulates reality too closely: "if he offered to salute thee, do not deny him, but show as much favour to him as thou can; but if he offer to be uncivil to thee, make sure to hold thy Leggs together" (apud Spufford 1981: 62). Or, when she tells a dream she had, on St. Agnes Eve, of her third husband to be, who

was of the Gentle-Craft and he came to me with his Awl in his hand, and would need prick me, aye, and did prick me, but did it not hurt me, for when I awakened out of my dream I was never the worse, but I thought the time very long until he came again, and so will all Maidens do, who have a desire to be married. (apud Spufford 1981: 63)

In act 1, scene 3, of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, when Lady Capulet tells Juliet of Paris's proposal, and ends up saying: "So shall you share all he doth possess, /By having him, making yourself no less," the nurse replies: "No less, nay bigger. Women grow by men." Her erotic innuendos are heard again, in act 2, scene 5, when, back to Juliet, after having told Romeo to meet the girl at Friar Lawrence's cell, and in answer to Juliet's anxious questions, she tells her:

Hie you to church. I must another way  
To fetch a ladder by the which your love  
Must climb a bird's nest soon when it is dark.  
I am the drudge, and toil in your delight,  
But you shall bear the burden soon tonight. (2.5: 72-76)

In the social environment of the English Renaissance, where marital relations are expected to conform to a hierarchy that places man above woman, requiring that she be obedient to her "lord", another popular, often riotous demonstration of attachment to such precept is the riding, or skimmington. *Skimmingtons* (the French *charivaris*) were demonstrations that included large groups, basically of people from the lower social strata, but often supported by members of the gentry and nobility, in which those considered offenders had their houses invaded and/or their sleep disturbed. Large parties would parade the streets, playing pipes and drums, beating pans, ladles and skittles – hence another name for them, *rough music*, due to the noise of the parade. They danced, shouted and performed scenes related to the offensive act, addressing the offenders with bawdy and violent language, and carrying effigies

and symbols representative of the world-upside-down. Skimmingtons would often start as merry-making and end up as violent attacks.

The original causes of these demonstrations were deeds or behaviour considered offensive to society, especially the beating of husbands by their wives, the disturbance created by scolding women, female adultery, racial and ethnic prejudices. On a deeper psychological and social level, though, they were rituals of inversion and destabilization of the socio-political establishment, especially because of their close relationship with one sort of officially promoted parades: the "carting" of bawds, prostitutes, slanderers, and criminals, who were objects of debasement through verbal and physical attacks by the onlookers. The ducking stool, used at the end of some skimmingtons, was an extension of the punishment, once again mostly of women seen as witches, adulteresses, or scolds. An essential feature of skimmingtons was the *riding*, when the ridiculed person, especially the docile husband, or the neighbour who had failed to come to his help during the beating, was forced to go along the streets sitting astride a horse or donkey with his face to the tail which served as the bridle, and followed by a band of riotous men, women and children. Sometimes both husband and wife rode the horse, sitting back to back. Horns were probably the most prominent feature in such symbolism. This ritual served as open ridicule of unobserved social rules, but it simultaneously suggested, in its inversions, transvestism, and the enactment of the impermanence of hierarchical boundaries, the thin thread upholding authority. As Martin Ingram (1984: 96-97) says,

Central to the symbolism of charivaris were notions of hierarchy, inversion, reversal, rule and misrule, order and disorder – the world upside down. The most straightforward explanation of charivaris is that they stigmatized as ridiculous inversions of the "natural" hierarchy. This was clearly true at one level. Yet it is arguable that at a deeper level of psychology these customs reflected a sense of the precariousness or artificiality of that hierarchy; and that the laughter of charivaris bore witness to ambiguities and unresolvable conflicts in the ideal and actual social stratum.

The "unruly woman" and the cuckold of the skimmingtons are transposed to the theatre, often subtly inserted in the plays through suggestions of the symbolism they offer in their oral tradition. The dialogical use of cuckoldry and feminine dominance in

Renaissance texts, especially plays, is easily found. François Laroque deals with Shakespeare's subtlety in echoing the licentiousness and vulgar language of popular expressions, and shows how Iago pictures Othello as a cuckold. Laroque (1993: 287) observes how the representation of the skimmington is transported to the beginning of the play:

The first important festive tradition echoed in *Othello* is that of waking someone up or of creating some public disturbance to protest against a marriage of which the local community disapproved, namely the tradition of charivari, better known in England under the names of 'rough music,' 'Skimmington riding' or 'riding the stang.' Iago probably has this popular custom at the back of his mind when he says to Roderigo at the beginning of the play:

Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight,  
Reclaim him in the streets, incense her kinsmen. (1, 1, 67-69)

Iago's language, as he informs Brabantio of Desdemona's elopement, is charged with the vulgar expressions of the skimmington. An example of such argot is found in his telling Brabantio, in the same scene (1,1,110-12): "you'll have your daughter covered with a barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans."

The cuckold will appear insistently in other plays. Once again, Jonson, in *Volpone*, creates Corvino, the husband who uses his wife to catch the miser's wealth. Hoping to become Volpone's heir, Corvino decides to take Celia, his wife, to lie with the old and supposedly dying miser. As she refuses to comply with his intention, he rails at her, and shows his mind:

Honour? Tut, a breath;  
There's no such thing in nature: a mere term  
Invented to awe fools. What is my gold  
The worse for touching? Clothes, for being looked on?  
Why, this is no more ...  
And for your fame,  
That's such a jig; as if I would go tell it,  
Cry it on the Piazza! Who shall know it?  
But he that cannot speak it; and this fellow,  
Whose lips are i' my pocket: save yourself,  
If you'll proclaim it, you may. I know no other  
Should come to know it. (3, 7, 38-42; 47-52)

The fairs, like the marketplace, were the most outstanding loci for communal expression. They offered chances of entertainment and trade, since all sorts of incidents and exchanges took place in them. It was in the fairs that plays were performed, puppet shows were seen, dances, games, eating and drinking had their turn. It was also in the fairs that men bought and sold cattle, country women offered their vegetables and poultry for sale, city women bargained for them and city gentlemen put on their private shows of fashionable garments to woo their social equals or had a rendez-vous with some prostitute, a meeting arranged by the bawds (like Jonson's Ursula) who might also be selling pigs or other wares. Monstruous or deformed creatures were displayed, peddlers and hawkers brought their ballads, pamphlets, laces, trinkets to the fairs. As Stallybrass and White (1986: 28-29) put it, "the fair, like the marketplace, is neither pure nor outside. The fair is at the crossroads, situated at the intersection of economic and cultural forces, goods and travellers, commodities and commerce."

The Medieval and Renaissance fair is the embodiment of Renaissance dialogism. All sorts of contemporary *texts* were exchanged, parodied, reinforced or subverted in the fairs. They were the crossroads where popular and elite cultures merged, incessantly forming and transforming social, political, and individual values and intentions, generating new discourses, relativizing truths, simultaneously effacing with their multifariousness the boundaries between the existing hierarchical systems. Jonson's dedicatory "Prologue to the King's Majesty", in *Bartholomew Fair*, synthesizes the dialogical character of the fairs, in an encounter of literature, nobles' entertainment and popular pastime, flattery and political manouvres:

Your Majesty is welcome to a Fair;  
 Such place, such men, such language and such ware,  
 You must expect: with these, the zealous noise  
 Of your land's faction, scandalized at toys,  
 As babies, hobby-horses, puppet-plays,  
 And suchlike rage, whereof the petulant ways  
 Yourself have known, and have been vexed long.  
 These for your sport, without particular wrong,  
 Or just complaint of any private man,

(Who of himself, or shall think well or can)  
The maker doth present: and hopes tonight  
To give you for a fairing, true delight.

Renaissance England's various *voices* clash in this text, bringing to light the opposed forces of unilateral zealous puritanism and plurivocal energetic popular expressions; royal entertainment and individual interest (present in the author's intention); promised theatrical performances of the "lower" tradition parodically appropriated in Jonson's "higher" theatre. These *voices* reinstate the system in the very process of relativizing its representations through the dramatization of the essence of the symbolic fair in its *free familiar contact*, and its *world-upside-down*.

Speaking of the market square, the urban reproduction of the rural fair, Stallybrass and White (1986:27) say that "The market square – that epitome of the 'common place' – so definite and comforting in its phenomenological presence at the heart of the community, is only ever an *intersection*, a crossing of ways."

Urban violence and rural festivity, strange and local, high and low, inside and outside meet at this intersection; and probably the best representative of the hybridity of both marketplace and fair is to be found in Tom o'Bedlam. Such a type, duplicating the imitation of real Bedlamites, forms a crossroad where the urban criminal and the rural fake meet and blur the image, so conspicuous all over Renaissance England, where they originated. On the one side, there is the urban Tom o'Bedlam, a criminal permanently haunting the popular imagination. On the other, there is the joyful fake Bedlamite, singing, dancing and asking for alms, who also became part of folk tradition. This jovial Bedlamite is another kind of pseudo-madman, different from the awesome urban type appearing on farms to take food and money from the women when the men were in the fields.

The best known Tom o'Bedlam is one of the most frightening figures of the English underworld, a familiar marginal type originating in the former patients of Bethlehem Hospital, the mental asylum. Thomas Dekker, in his *The Belman of London* (1608), describes in detail the organization and activities of the criminal Tom o'Bedlams. Such men were false types that impersonated the characterization, language and behaviour of the real madmen to rob and steal, scare country women and terrify city dwellers. They usually had a blanket round their waist, were dubbed with tar, and moved around repeating the words "Poor Tom is a'cold."

Such type is highlighted in Shakespeare's *King Lear* through Edgar's transformation. What is noteworthy about Shakespeare's bedlamite is the fact that he, like his model, is built on a lie: Edgar, to escape his father's wrath, puts on his new terrifying role, thus lying to the world. As his reproduction of a false madman is a lie duplicating another lie, the process of the literary creation of the type – and its correspondent idea – is a construction through *mise-en-abîme*, a specular fabric, suggestive of the gay relativity of parodied popular motifs.

To validate his new identity, Edgar/Tom insistently uses the language found in Samuel Harsnett's *Declarations* (1608), a work that aimed to bring to light the fraud practiced by Jesuits, who forced people to behave like lunatics. As madmen were supposed to be possessed of devils, the Jesuits brought these "possessed" people before large audiences, where they conjured up the fiends. In his description of these frauds, Harsnett lists a series of expressions used by the supposed devils as well as their names. As his book was widely known, the parodic use made of its contents by Shakespeare, together with reversed passages and expressions from the Bible, endows Edgar's characterization with traits of folk culture, at the same time parodically relativizing the "true" word, that is, both the Bible and Harsnett's widely read book.

As a foil to Edgar/Tom, there is the insane Lear, who subtly appears as another kind of Tom o'Bedlam, the one often seen in the most striking public/folk site: the fair. This other Tom o'Bedlam, different from his frightening companion, was an exuberant, lively type. In *Bedlam*, Anthony Masters (1977) describes him as a fake Tom who appeared in fairs and markets, gorgeously dressed and wearing a garland of flowers and weeds, sounding a horn, dancing, singing, jesting and asking for alms.

Compare this description to how Cordelia paints Lear:

As mad as the vex'd sea; singing aloud;  
Crown'd with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,  
With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,  
Darnell, and all the idle weeds that grow  
In our sustaining corn. (4. 4: 2-6)

The presence, in the play, of this other type of Tom o'Bedlam allows for the passage from the image of the king-to-be to the desacralized image of the past king, now turned into a carnival king,

embodying suggestions of joyful relativity, eccentricity, and the world-upside-down. On the stage, that is, in elite culture, there is the appearance of a type from popular imagery that destabilizes the cultural discourse assimilating it at the same time that it illustrates the movement of cultures, showing how weak or impossible the separation between them is.

As Mary Ellen Lamb (2000:280) says, after Louis Montrose, “collective social structures within early modern England were experienced by the subjects as ‘multiple, heterogeneous and even contradictory’; early modern theater in particular had within itself ‘the capacity to produce heterodoxy’ even within the ‘context of absolutist ideology’”. What better example of theatre produced heterodoxy than the use Shakespeare makes, in *King Lear*, of duplicated lies, contradictory images taken from the popular imaginary – the two opposed Tom o’Bedlams – to simultaneously reinforce and destabilize, on different discursive levels, the dominant ideology?

The type running from Cordelia’s envoys who come to take him to his daughter, in act 4, scene 6, is a tragicomic creation, incorporating the transmutations typical of cultural movements. Like mad Tom, Lear transgresses the norms and engenders new texts that will destabilize the power of both socio-political hierarchy and “high” culture.

Edward O’Donoghue (1914: 135) thus talks of the Tom o’Bedlam of the fairs:

Imagine him – to give the last touch to the picture – carolling with a calculated disregard of simple arithmetic:  
Of thirty years have I twice twenty been engaged,  
And of forty thrice fifteen been caged.  
Oh! The lordly lofts of Bedlam with stubble and dainty:  
Brave bracelets strong,  
And whips ding-dong,  
And wholesome hunger plenty.  
Yet do I sing – any food, any feeding, drink or clothing.  
Come, dame or maid,  
Be not afraid!  
Poor Tom will injure nothing.

In act 4, scene 6, Lear uses similar language, when he talks of his suffering – as Tom of the fairs does, referring to Bedlam Hospital – and then addresses the apothecary:

There's hell, there's darkness,  
There's the sulphurous pit,  
Burning, scalding, stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah! –  
Give me an ounce of civet; good apothecary, sweeten my  
imagination; There's money for thee. (121-123)

In these two passages, even the order of ideas is the same: first comes the request (“Give me an ounce of civet” / “any food, any feeding, drink or clothing”); then both address someone (“good apothecary” / “dame or maid”); and finally there is the outcome (“there's money for thee” / “Poor Tom will injure nothing”).

The playwright, with his duplication of Bedlamites, recreates the environment of the fair and of the underworld of Renaissance England. Interspersed with this duplication, one has the representation of reversed gender hierarchy (so frequent in folkloric figures such as Long Meg and Maid Marion), in the parallel characterization of the “unruly women” (Goneril and Reagan), and the self asserting female (Cordelia); the world-upside-down in family relations, as represented in the Edmund/Gloucester and Cordelia/Lear affairs, highlighting the image of the fool, an enlightened being who occupies the ambiguous position of no sense and mystical vision, as it was perceived at the time. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare produces a portrait of his society that, borrowing from “low” culture, assimilates it to the “higher” culture of the theatre, and ambiguously reinforces/debases the political *status quo*, in the loan of marginal fake madness as embodiment of both past and future sovereignty. Popular culture becomes elite entertainment and elite entertainment speaks through the voices of popular culture.

The exchange of ideas, images, values, symbolism between popular tradition, be it written like what was seen in pamphlets and chapbooks, or oral and performatic, like pageantry, royal progresses and public festivals – and elite entertainments like the private theatre, masques and court dances so often reproduced or referred to in the plays, illustrates the hybrid multiplicity of social, political and artistic discourses characteristic of Renaissance England. As Burke has noted, some of the folk entertainments, like dances, were appropriated by the court and, after the rising “middling sort” have also started assimilating them, discarded and then often reappropriated by the folk. There is no linear movement in the appropriations then taking place. There is rather a blurred mapping

of representations: sometimes overt, sometimes subtle borrowing and lending, the ambiguous speech and conspicuous relativization of the dominant political, religious or artistic hierarchies.

The life and sounds of Renaissance England, through its festivals, skimmingtons, chapbooks and masques, its royal speeches, pageants and progresses, its theatre with the parodic displays of relativized moral, pomp, and circumstance, where the Player Queen/King and the Queen/King Player merge while multiplying the representations of the commoner's world, have been reenacted for centuries, with their ebullient crowning and decrowning of truth and constant erasing and rearrangement of hierarchical boundaries. Such representations offer a spectacle worth Cleopatra's ambiguous exclamation, when dying Antony is being lifted up to her monument, in act 4, scene 15: "Here's sport, indeed!"

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*Author's address:*

Rua Guaxupé, 355 · Serra – 30. 220-320 Belo Horizonte · Minas Gerais · Brasil  
aimara@terra.com.br