

Fairies, Old-wives, and Hobby-horses in Aristocratic Realms

Mary Ellen Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006)

With her latest book, Mary Ellen Lamb leads her reader further along the path she was guided to by her previous works.¹ The author's approach to literature can be broadly delineated as gender-conscious, culture-focused and penetrative. She aspires to show Renaissance literature as an organic part of contemporary life, as a medium transmitting culture between different layers of society. In her momentous work *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Cycle* she has already given voice to her inspection of "higher" and "lower" culture from the perspective of women.² As the title-phrase, "popular culture," suggests, the present book further elaborates the intriguing detection: the work is entirely devoted to the investigation of the impact of Renaissance popular culture on other, higher strata of literature.

Introducing her work, Lamb clarifies her key terminology. Reckoning with

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numerous – especially cultural historicist – conceptions of the term popular culture, Lamb defines her use of the notion as "related to its use as a social sign, to refer to a simulacrum existing in early modern imaginaries created from cultural materials assembled from various lower status groups. Especially as transmitted through written works, this popular culture associated with the festive or the folk was invented or produced by elite and middling sorts as a means of coming to their own self-definition" (2).

Instead of classes – as the quotation above also indicates – she speaks of "sorts," marking the fluidity of early modern English society (19). The elite, the middling and the lower sorts are in constant interaction with each other, the boundaries still being transgressable, the struggle to enter a higher layer – or at least to appear so – characterizes everyday life. In the phase of formation, different social groups strive to create their own myths, and in so doing, to fictionalize their world. The amount of effort to maintain the façade of an honourable life, and social rank are inversely proportional: the lower sorts need all their creativity and imagination to present acceptable self-narratives, to fictionalize even criminal acts as righteous.³

The oral tradition of literature was an integral part of the lives of the poor, who represented popular culture. In-

terestingly, as Lamb points out, it is the lower sort's possession of the popular register that gave reference points for the self-definition of other groups. Two distinct ways were open: the complete denial of the vulgar and popular, or – what was more frequent – the re-read, re-written transformation of narratives attributed to the socially inferior. Lamb proclaims the opinion that through the interaction between different social groups, certain motifs, myths and legends streamed from the lower sorts into the culture of the elite where they were altered, transformed to be suitable and digestible for an audience of a different, refined taste. The disturbing elements were eliminated not to counter the “official” principles and politics, and not to subvert the self-fictionalizing of the ruling class. As a point of departure, Lamb interrogates the dissemination of popular culture, she attempts to explore its origin, and its infiltration into the elite culture. This goal is admittedly difficult, or given the volatile oral nature of social myths – in its entirety – even impossible. More realistic – as the author defines – is the detection of certain motifs and figures, their reappearance in higher literature, and the exploration of popular phenomena which significantly contributed to the creation of the self-narratives of elite and middling sorts during the socially and historically turbulent 16th and 17th centuries. Elements of popular culture

were instituted from above rather than from below: their infiltration into higher narrative generated the appropriation of popular culture by the elite, which, at the same time, sought to differentiate itself from the lower sorts that it disdained. Thus, in the second half of the book, Lamb is going to show the ways in which works of three prominent and well-educated writers contributed to the production of popular culture.

Lamb first claims that three figures entered the realm of higher literature, through “three distinct forms of interaction” (12) with the lower status groups: fairies, old wives and hobby-horses. This triplet can be handled as keys to the book. The structure is also determined by these focus points: the introduction and a lengthy opening chapter discuss the leitmotifs' relevance, importance and necessity in Renaissance life, then three subchapters are devoted the in-depth analysis of these three representatives of popular culture. In these parts, the social-ethnographical context is described from a cultural-historical approach so as to serve as stable reference points for the literary analyses in later chapters, and provide the work with a strong and vivid background. The tone is anecdotal: interesting and shocking mosaics are shown from the burdensome life of the poor and luxurious pleasures of the wealthy. The reader is supplied with a

unique kind of knowledge: the neutral, far-from life, emptied motifs regain their original “function,” reaching back to their origin, and appearing as essential bases of everyday myths – or lies.

The dubious morals of the fairies translate the socially unacceptable traits of marginalized groups. Extramarital pregnancy, rape, theft, and “the murder of deformed or otherwise unwanted infants” were, for instance, all commonly attributed to fairies (13). Meanwhile, these kinds of explanations of various unfortunate incidents served as a “weapon of the weak,”⁴ a kind of resistance against the ones endowed with power. Still, Lamb also directs the reader’s attention to an example of the upper class’s alteration and re-reading of myths according to its needs: although “illicit or at least unspoken acts” (32) remained integral parts of the fairies, and referred to lower status groups, the aristocracy seemed surprisingly prone to be identified with fairies.

One of the most common and probably most influential connections between lower and higher groups was the institution of nursery. Nurses served as primary transmitters of popular culture, and thus “exerted an especially powerful and continuing influence on early modern culture” (49). Young boys – up to the age of seven – were dominated by women, and were therefore influenced by female narratives.⁵ Lamb, not betraying her gender-conscious

perspective, suggests that there was an important clash between these early female narratives and the later, male-created narratives of formal education, since humanist education aimed to suppress the faults remaining from an “earlier period of female domination” (52). Lamb also introduces an intriguing parallel: she compares the rivalling – male *vs.* female – narratives told to the developing male child to the Renaissance theory of humours.⁶ The change from female to male narratives thus turns out to be analogous to the change in the human beings’ system of humours. Gender, rather than being based on a binary model, was imagined to be a continuum: men are ideally hot and dry, with a proper balance of blood and choler, while women are normally cold and wet, being dominated by bile and phlegm. However, due to an imbalance of fluids, “some men are colder and wetter than others; some women are hotter and drier” (183). Since early modern society required males to act according to their gender, and effeminacy was regarded as a sign of weakness and failure (50–51), males had to suppress their female side. However, even though old-wives tales that threatened with femininity drew contempt, they never stopped possessing a touch of nostalgia (50). The three authors Lamb analyzes in the next part are also products of opposing cultures. During their early childhood they were sur-

rounded by the fairies and witches of their caregivers' tales, but after entering school, humanist education prevailed. Lamb argues that the clash between the male/female Latin/vernacular historical/fairy narratives produced a never-ending dichotomy in educated Renaissance males.

The third element Lamb enumerates as an indicator of popular culture is the hobby-horse, and with it the morris dance festivities. In this ethnographic chapter, the author describes the process of the increasing vulgarization of the tradition; how hobby-horses gained sexual and vulgar tones, and, in parallel with the advance of Protestantism, how the legend of Saint George lost its dignity and gradually merged with the image of morris dancers.

After having presented the most characteristic figures of popular culture, the author faces a methodological challenge: the selection of concrete pieces of literature displaying the reappearance of these popular elements. In the second half of the book, Lamb analyzes Shakespeare's *The Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Jonson's *Oberon, The Fairy Prince* and *The Sad Shepherd*. This choice appears to be slightly arbitrary: "While any one of these authors provides material sufficient for an entire volume from this approach, I have chosen to include works by all three in order to demon-

strate the strikingly different appropriations of figures signifying a popular culture" (5–6).

The analyses of Shakespeare's pieces aim to prove the claims made in the opening chapter. In both dramas, fairies are mischievous but by no means dangerous: Puck's figure is reminiscent of the coarse Robin Goodfellow, but is notably tamed and domesticated and, similarly, the Merry Wives' appearance as fairies also deprives the magical creatures of dramatic weight. Other key figures in the plays can be seized through the persona of the contemporary actor, William Kemp. Lamb argues that Bottom and Falstaff acquired certain characteristics because the roles were created to be acted out by him. The author's argument seems somewhat tenuous at this point. Presumably, every fictional character had a real life equivalent or at least pattern, but the scrutiny of this background is highly contingent, since true traces are inaccessible. Embarking upon the path of searching for models of fictional characters can lead to a bottomless abyss, and only provide the reader with an immense amount of data concerning potential information that might have had an impact on the writer's creative process.

Lamb also relies on historical data to deal with Spenser and Jonson, although to a lesser extent. For instance, Sir Henry Lee's entertainment for Eliza-

both I in 1575 and its influence on *The Faerie Queene* (172) seems slightly laboured. Such as the fact that in the analysis of Jonson's *Oberon, The Fairy Prince*, Oberon's and Prince Henry's figure are almost indistinguishable. This interpretation is rather perplexing, although there is a historical fact justifying it: "Performed in the court of King James on New Year's Day, 1611, Jonson's masque *Oberon, The Fairy Prince* was the second of two masques commissioned by Prince Henry, who entered a new phase of public life when he was created Prince of Wales in June 1610 at the age of sixteen" (200).

Despite these deficiencies, the section on *The Faerie Queen* is highly inspiring. Questions are asked that so far escaped the notice of Spenser scholarship. For instance, if fairies are morally dubious characters, how was it acceptable that Queen Elizabeth was one of them, albeit the highest in rank? Or else: what is implied when the impeccable Redcrosse Knight of Book I appears as the embodiment of Saint George, whose reputation in the 16th century was far from beyond reproach?

The register-analysis of the *The Sad Shepherd* is also revealing: the shifts between certain traditions and myths convey much about the contemporary perception of narratives. One of these is the myth of Robin Hood, whose point of departure was on the higher end of the stylistic scale, but became a con-

stituent of the vulgar discourse. As Lamb points out, this was mainly due to the merge of the noble Lady Marian and the coarse Mother Maudlin. The fact that these roles were played by male actors might have facilitated this process.

As a summary, it can be stated that the author's ambition for writing this book was fulfilled: despite some seeming arbitrariness regarding the choice of the background data, the survival of elements of popular culture in the chosen pieces is convincingly demonstrated. The lucid style and the exhilaratingly new perspectives are also measures of the book's fine qualities.

Ágnes Pajtók

Notes

1. Mary Ellen Lamb, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Chicago: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); "Apologizing for Pleasure in Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*," *Criticism* 36 (1994) 499–520; "Engendering the Narrative Act: Old Wives' Tales in *The Winter's Tale*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*," *Criticism* 40 (1998) 529–53.

2. "There is some evidence that the effect of gender-restrictions was weakened in lower classes and that a competing lower-class perception of gender and sexuality left its trace in some works produced by and for those members of the lower middle class who had access to written materials. Especially accessible to lower-class influence were popular works circulated orally as well as in print" (Lamb, *Gender and Authorship*, p. 15).

3. “[T]he use of fairies as ‘white lie’ for property theft was practiced primarily although not wholly by males. The female domain, in the bearing and raising infants and small children, provides a somewhat more complex use of fairy allusions” (41).

4. J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

5. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 78–79.

6. G. K. Paster, *Humouring the Body* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); M. C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

New Books by Hazlitt, New Place for Hazlitt

Duncan Wu (ed.), *New Writings of William Hazlitt*, 2 volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

These two lavishly edited volumes of new writings by William Hazlitt might come as a surprise to those who still see Hazlitt as an interesting minor voice from the Romantic period. With these books on the table, one looks back on the changing reputation of the essayist as an amazing story of success (with the unavoidable dissenting opinions). After the steady, but almost unexamined reception of his work through the Victorian period, and the relative neglect of it in the first half of the twentieth

century, Hazlitt began to come into his own with the rise of scholarly interest in the history of criticism in the mid-century. Walter Jackson Bate, for example, cast a very influential vote in placing Hazlitt among the most significant critics of all times in his *Criticism: The Major Texts* (1952).

In lending authority to Hazlitt’s criticism, the significance of this anthology, in which 7 pages are allotted to Plato, 19 to Aristotle, while to Hazlitt an astonishing 38, can hardly be overstated. In his introductory essay to the Hazlitt section, Bate stressed the importance of the sympathetic imagination in Hazlitt’s moral psychology and his criticism as well.¹ He elaborated the history of that concept in a well-known paper of 1945,² and went on to present it as a central problem in his great study of Keats, in relation to the poet’s ideas connected to “negative capability.”³ With this he managed to place Hazlitt in a critical tradition of unquestionable importance, but left an important question open: examining Hazlitt’s work seems justified only in so far as it contributes to our understanding of the theory and practice of Keats.

David Bromwich in his 1983 *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* still felt it necessary to justify producing a very thick book on the essayist in the following terms: “In making large claims for a critic better known to his contemporaries than to posterity, one faces the