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Early Modern Players of Folly

I. Overview

This thesis examines the ways in which folly is used in early modern literature. It asks: how is it that such an ephemeral concept proliferated and endured in the culture of early modern Europe? It focuses on what was in many ways folly's heyday, when its meanings changed and exploded all over literary production. Early modern fools stepped down from the medieval morality stage and paradoxically amalgamated folly with wit, displaying a character far more nuanced in nature than their medieval likenesses they left behind. My readings of particular texts, on the one hand, and arrivals at some general conclusions, on the other, are all set against the backdrop of a realisation how momentous the early modern period is for the study of folly. My Chapter One unfolds the idea of folly I employ in the thesis and explores it within a particular historical and theoretical framework.

My understanding of early modern folly as a discursive phenomenon that was used as a way of questioning the knowledge of the ostensibly reasonable world is illustrated by case studies of four characters—four players of folly. Dedicated a chapter each, they are Till Eulenspiegel, the great German jester; Pomet Trpeza, a typically Ragusan wit of Marin Držić's *Dundo Maroje*; Brother Jan Paleček, a Bohemian representative of holy folly; and Sir John Falstaff, the embodiment of folly in Shakespeare's *1 and 2 Henry IV*. Although they emerge from different cultural, linguistic and generic traditions, they nonetheless share a propensity for employing folly in ways that uncover possibilities for new understandings and challenge rigid certainties of the world around them.

Early modernity, the era that produced the works I explore, has become associated with shifts and instabilities. In this Age of Discovery, man was compelled to understand afresh a suddenly unfamiliar world. However, where man and his reason reign, folly gladly follows. I read each of my four players of folly as commenting on—and jesting with—a different discourse that constituted an important line of thought in early modernity. Eulenspiegel's example concentrates on the discourse of corporeality; Pomet

recognises and exploits the folly of politics; Paleček reveals the potential of the folly of Christianity; while Falstaff illustrates the folly of play. The paradoxical wisdom of my four players of folly appears in their denial of constants and universals that permeate these discourses and in their ironic rejections of epistemological claims to absolute truth.

In order to grasp the shifting realities of early modern folly and its particular instances, I employ a methodology that draws on historicist mappings and textual analysis, supported by a theoretical framework based, predominantly, in the works of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari. This furnishes me with a way of rethinking of early modernity as an age that coped with its own contradictions through a tireless and joyful interest in folly. Through their foolish commentary, my four players of folly attempt to affect and transform the discourses they engage with; they succeed in revealing the instabilities in dominant lines of thought. By laying no claims to their own wisdom, however, they generate viewpoints that to this very day remind us things do not have to be how they are.

II. Till Eulenspiegel

In Chapter Two I present a reading of *Till Eulenspiegel* and its titular hero as a player of folly. First published around 1512, but in gestation for far longer, the tales of Eulenspiegel originated in an age that did not know national prides or legacies—and yet over the centuries they have become associated with precisely that. Both the character and the narrative traverse the territories of pre-national German popular taste, accumulating an impressive array of themes, associations and offshoots.

For the purposes of my study, I find Eulenspiegel best suited for an examination of how body and mind work together in performing folly. His productivity of verbal jest—hinging on explorations of language that unmask the nonsense inherent in sensible speech—I read as being ingeniously coupled with his bodily productivity. The corporeality of Eulenspiegel's jest appears most clearly in the use of scatological motifs, frequent already in medieval farce and satire. These are resorted to when his verbal humour either fails or are employed as a supplement to it.

To a certain extent, this incessant productivity, both of language and of bodily waste, make Eulenspiegel in my reading approach the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque body. On the one hand, I find Bakhtin's contention that, in early modernity, a new picture of the world was constructed "around the human conceived as a body"¹ convergent with the worldview that the *Schwankbuch* promotes. Likewise, Bakhtin's recognition of a return to "a reality, a materiality, to language and to meaning"² in Rabelaisian prose I see present in *Eulenspiegel* as well. On the other hand, Bakhtin's insistence on the centralized structure of the grotesque body, looking back at a unified, homogeneous time, and anchored in idealized pre-historic past, proves unhelpful for describing the preference of flux found in *Eulenspiegel*.

Because of his productiveness, variability and the sheer multitude of the stories he goes through, I understand Eulenspiegel as akin to the joyful "schizo"³ introduced in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. This figure, inseparable from the process of production, does what Eulenspiegel does in his flows of language, excrement and stories: he keeps moving, inseparable from nature, from his body and a particular form of desire that perpetuates production. In my conclusion, Eulenspiegel becomes an example of the affirmative appropriation of the early modern discourse of corporeality, rooted in its medieval manifestations; a player of folly who speaks and jests by means of both body and language. I read Eulenspiegel's embodied folly as his tool, one he uses to unsettle the smooth flows of dull everydayness and remind his bemused audience—both his readers and the characters he encounters in the text—that bodies are merry instruments, and not just vessels of a half-conscious survival.

III. Pomet Trpeza of *Dundo Maroje*

My Chapter Three is focused on the second player of folly and his entanglements with the folly of politics. He is Pomet Trpeza, Marin Držić's comical ruler of the ludicrous world of the comedy *Dundo Maroje*, first performed in Dubrovnik in 1550. He a master

¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981) 171.

² Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 171.

³ For a full elucidation of the figure of the "joyful schizo," see Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004 [1972]) 1-9.

of wit and folly capable of outperforming anyone he meets on his way. The intricate cultural context of the early modern Republic of Ragusa proves paramount in my reading of the play, whose comical complexity and hectic polyvocality must have gotten ample inspiration in Držić's contemporaneity. The voices represented in the comedy echo the voices intersecting in a historical moment when Ragusa was in its prime, located on the peripheries of East and West. The cultural influences of the surrounding, more powerful lands affected the Republic profoundly. Nonetheless, it was simultaneously trying to keep them at bay and preserve its ideal of *libertas* intact.

I read Držić as a man of the theatre who recognises this complex political situation and enriches his comedies with this understanding. Since comedies were his preferred mode of expression—one likely imposed on him by the censorious authorities that potentially viewed the comic as harmless—he had folly at his disposal to comment on the social and political reality. My reading of Pomet takes note of a parodic Machiavellianism and an aesthetically hedonistic Epicureanism fused in the character. By merging these philosophies, Pomet in my reading overcomes the constraints of a conservative, rigid reality. He thus becomes something of a proponent of Deleuze's vision of Epicureanism, as a Naturalism that is "the philosophy of affirmation; pluralism linked with multiple affirmation; sensualism connected with the joy of the diverse; and the practical critique of all mystifications."⁴

Informed by the understanding of early modern folly as a type of agency capable of proposing alternatives, my view of Pomet reveals in his author a dramatist with an astute sense for the folly of politics. In this folly Držić would dare to participate himself, later in his life. His attempted conspiracy, unknown in his lifetime and in the age that followed it, I read as a confirmation of the daring of folly and the extent to which it would go, seeking to imagine a change.

IV. Brother Jan Paleček

In Chapter Four I encounter a Bohemian hero who mobilises the folly of Christianity. Named Brother Jan Paleček, a hero of a short cycle of tales whose oldest manuscript is

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (London: Continuum, 2011 [1969]) 315-316.

dated 1583, he is remembered as a court jester to King George of Poděbrady. George was a ruler at the time when the country was in a complicated political situation, shattered by recent religious upheavals and local warfare. I read Paleček, a fool on the margin of reality and fiction, as firmly embedded in these circumstances.

The Bohemia of King George remembered vividly the Hussite Revolution, the great religious upheaval that divided the country by destroying the institutions of the Catholic Church, robbing it of its property and even instituting an austere proto-Reformation Christianity and a new Holy Communion ritual for the laymen. The Hussite teachings brought about the creation of the Unity of Brethren, a small Christian denomination whose member Paleček was. Their religious and social agenda was manifest in a radical pacifism that they based in Christian faith and love that follows the Word of God directly. Paleček's belonging to the Brethren is crucial my reading of his folly.

Reading Paleček as a propagator of Christian mercy and strict adherence to Scripture steeped in folly, I recognise in him a product of the text that was itself in an intertextual relationship with the Word of God. In its pages shines the folly of Christianity, emerging from *stultitia Dei*, the concept that Erasmus employed in the finale of his *Praise*. Paleček's *Histories* are charged with the revolutionary message the Brethren strove to spread, for everyone could assume their beliefs because all can be saved. Alain Badiou shows that, due to its egalitarian nature, Paul's universalism has a revolutionary potential. "The resurrected Son filiates all of humanity [which] constitutes the uselessness of the figure of knowledge and its transmission."⁵ Thus Paleček the fool can be seen as likewise affiliated to Badiou's Paul, who exposes the figure of mastery as a fraud and urges for the foundation of equality of sons.⁶

Through his words and the example he made of himself, I understand Paleček as a foolish apostle of Pauline Christianity. He embraces everyone around him—from the King down to the lowly peasant, all of whom he addressed as "brothers"—in Christian

⁵ Badiou, Alain, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) 59.

⁶ Badiou 59.

love and hope. The image of Paleček's folly that emerges from this reading is one that could open up a world where Christianity becomes the ultimate power of practical humanism. In Paleček's world thus conceptualised, individuals could be joined in an ideal that folly itself presupposes: one of no hierarchies and open possibilities.

V. Sir John Falstaff of *Henry IV*

The final player of folly I choose to study is a player in every sense of the word. Sir John Falstaff, Shakespeare's comic creation of thespian power, plays a big part in his *Henry IV* plays. I encounter Falstaff on the threshold of political play, influencing, mirroring, but never completely entering it. I read Falstaff as an exploiter of his superiors, namely Hal, his "sweet young prince" (*1 Henry IV*, I.ii.77-78), striving to secure for himself the perpetuation of gratuitous foolery and parasitic existence. I show him, however, to be equally exploited by others. Namely, the presence and utility of Falstaff secure Hal with a newly fashioned royal persona, dexterous in employing mendacity.

Falstaff is also the only one of the four players that is explicitly renounced, banished and killed off by the playwright. This choice of rejection of folly, however, I see as far from absolute, basing this view on the fact that Shakespeare in the two plays favours neither the deeply flawed politics of the crown, nor the steamy lushness of Eastcheap. Falstaff's folly I see as the folly of play—the stage-play, but also the incessant playing of authority made manifest in the folly of eloquence, power and deceit. The folly of such play will continue even after he is removed from the stage. Hal will keep on playing, and his performance will never be free from his tainted past.

Far from seeing him introduced simply to be discarded by the new state power, I read Falstaff's comedy in *Henry IV* as integral to the world where constant crisis has its dominion. Falstaff casts a bulky shadow over the exchanges in the world of history proper, but he neither transcends it, nor is completely absorbed in it. What emerges as his role and his importance is to incessantly remind us, in his self-serving banter—the banter that debases all value, even the word of Scripture—that man is but "foolish-compounded clay" (*2 Henry IV*, I.ii.6).

Given his inexhaustible dimensions, Falstaff in my reading functions well as an example of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage. "An assemblage," they say, "in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously (independently of any recapitulation that may be made of it in a scientific or theoretical corpus)."⁷ Falstaff, changeable and adaptable in his propensity to constantly perform, moves along these flows and mocks them, just as he mocks the ostensibly serious players of history, and—through his own—uncovers their folly.

VI. Conclusions

My exploration of folly in early modernity shows that its uses can be seen as innumerable and the motivational energy of fooling always very different. Each of my chapters concerns itself with some of the main outcomes of folly's specific employments, cross-referencing the four players and their contexts, comparing and benefiting from juxtapositions. The choice of characters in the thesis—mirrored in my own doctoral journey that saw each of the countries—was guided by the intention to present as great diversity as possible. By juxtaposing two major cultures, Renaissance English and German, with two cultures hitherto under-represented in English-language scholarship, early modern Bohemian and Ragusan, now encompassed within Croatian culture, my study offers a polyphonous take on the concept of folly in the period in which ideas, just like people and objects, were on the move.

The contextual parts of my chapters present the past taking into account its elusive, nomadic quality. In them, I aim to move away from what the early, teleological histories of literature tried to achieve and subsequent ones perpetuated, namely to contribute to the developing concept of a nation. My four fellows of infinite jest, each embedded in his own culture, have on occasion been treated as national treasures. This places them within narratives of national identity. Yet, when they are allowed to speak for themselves, they challenge the notion of specific, man-made national identities. Their counter-discourse of folly in different ways questions representation and shows that a boundless ludic interplay of meanings is a necessary complement to knowledge.

⁷ Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004 [1980]) 25.

Early modern folly, as Foucault sees it, is “the object of argument, it contends itself against itself; it is denounced and defends itself by claiming that it is closer to happiness and truth than reason, that it is closer to reason than reason itself.”⁸ In my conclusion, the four players of folly are shown as heralds of openness and possibility, as nomadic thinkers evading the constraints of officially sanctioned truths. It is precisely their folly that, I believe, takes them beyond such constraints—a folly that reached a peak in early modernity when the voices of fools were endowed with access to a different kind of truth, one that resists certainty. Each in his way, they thrive in paradoxes and each could be described, and yet not exhausted, by Viola’s unforgettable sketch of Feste:

This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,
And to do that well craves a kind of wit.
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time,
And, like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eye. This is a practise
As full of labor as a wise man’s art,
For folly that he wisely shows is fit.
But wise men, folly-fall’n, quite taint their wit. (*Twelfth Night*, III.i.53-61)

⁸ Foucault, Michel, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 2006 [1964]) 12.