

Early Modern Players of Folly

Thesis Abstract

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? 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 a different discourse that constituted an important line of thought in early modernity. Eulenspiegel's example concentrated on the discourse of corporeality; Pomet recognised and exploited the folly of politics; Paleček revealed the potential of the folly of Christianity; while Falstaff illustrated the folly of play. Their paradoxical wisdom appeared in the denial of constants and universals 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 discourses. 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.