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Report on the Ph.D. dissertation
of Martina Pranić:

Early Modern Players of Folly

(in the context of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate: 'Text and Event in Early
Modern Europe – TEEME')

I.

This is a dissertation written in the context of TEEME, an inter-university European graduate school run jointly by the universities of Porto and Kent, the Charles University Prague and the Free University Berlin. Martina Pranić's dissertation rises to this international occasion already in its European dimension: it takes us, as it were, on a tour of Europe with Croatia, Bohemia, Germany and England as its main stations. Its itinerary maps folly in its various national inflections in the cultures of Early Modern Europe and this allows for highlighting cultural specificities by way of comparisons and contrasts. The project thus is a work of Comparative Literature rather than narrow national literary historiography and draws considerable strength from this: none of the four fools remains the same when seen against the background of the other three and this applies both to the internationally unknown or little known among them, Pomet and Palaček, and even more so to the global stars of folly, Till Eulenspiegel and Falstaff. But this study does not only link the fools to

each other but each one of them, in an attempt to account for the differences abetween them, to the national cultures and the concrete historical conditions from which they emerged and for which they performed. This includes the impact they continue to have upon their cultures' national self-understanding and identity formation.

This is a tall order, indeed, and one cannot but admire the candidate's versatility and bravura in moving with such apparent ease between four widely different cultural contexts and languages. Of course, one could wish for even more and ask why she has not also included, say, the Italian *Arlecchino* of the *commedia dell'arte*, the Spanish folly of Don Quixote or the humorous tales told by the *chassidim* in their *shtetls* of Eastern Europe. Nothing would have ruled that out and certainly not the differences in genre involved here, as her own four examples already stretch across narrative and dramatic representations – nothing but the limits of scope set to a doctoral dissertation with TEEME. So, instead of lamenting absences, we should be grateful for the plenty that is already achieved and offered here.

II.

There are no itineraries without maps and this also applies to Martina Pranič's dissertation. The maps for her travelogue, which re-draw the standard maps of the European Renaissance by incorporating "comic works from hitherto marginalized cultures – Ragusan and Bohemian cultures, that is – that nevertheless left a significant mark on the literary landscape of folly in Renaissance Europe" (p. 39), are the theoretical frames she designs and employs for her guidance. Three theoretical models in particular go into the intelligent bricolage of her theory design here: Foucault's philosophy of history, the meta-psychological epistemology of Deleuze and Guattari and Bakhtin's theory of carnival and laughter. Foucault's *Folie et Dérison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* provides her with the historical trajectory of her study: the *Schwelienzeit* of early modern Europe as a peak period of folly challenging both the old certainties and the truth claims of the emergent modern philosophies and sciences, beginning with Erasmus' *Encomium Moriae* and petering out in the later 17th century. Bakhtin helps her to conceptualize the

corporeality of the performers and the performances of laughter, but more important to her are Deleuze/Guattari's notions of the rhizome and of nomadic thinking for the analysis of the fool's cognitive and political destabilization of pre-given orders and systems of thought. For her, fools are not, as with Bakhtin, harking back at a lost paradise of unified being but, as she writes very near the end of her study, they "are the heralds of openness and possibility; the nomadic thinkers evading the constraints of officially sanctioned truths" (p. 248). There is a crucial extra point to her creative adaptations of these theoretical models here: her work does not only study the folly of the three fools in terms of rhizomatic textures and nomadic thought, it is, in weaving a net of interconnections and differences and moving across cultures in a non-teleological way, rhizomatic and nomadic in itself.

III.

The dissertation is transparently divided into six chapters, with the central four chapters, dedicated respectively to the German Eulenspiegel, Marin Držić's Ragusan Pomet, the Bohemian Paleček and Shakespeare's Falstaff, framed by a detailed introduction presenting Renaissance folly and the four paradigmatic players of folly and a conclusion that sums up its findings. There is a pleasing symmetry to this arrangement which is further enhanced by introductions to each of the chapters dedicated to her players of folly which set the historical and theoretical stage for them. These introductory chapters and sub-chapters manage to capture the reader's interest at once by a – seemingly – anecdotal approach full of surprises, which nevertheless leads to the heart of the matter right away: Slavoj Žižek's performance of folly for the Occupy Wall Street crowd in 2011 (chap. I.i), Eulenspiegel's flight of folly and the enigma of his historical identity (II.i), the grotesque fortunes of Držić's monument for modern Dubrovnik (III.i).... They begin by looking *par derrière* at early modern folly and this link with the present, which again and again will disrupt the chronology, highlights today's relevance of what is historically reconstructed here. The fool's *Wirkungsgeschichte* – for instance the continuing presence of Eulenspiegel in German culture as the second model of German identity (next to Dr. Faustus), or Paleček's transmutation into a protagonist for children's books and a rival to Švejk's astuteness in Czech culture – is an important part of her argument

sustained by highly perceptive readings of the 'original' texts. (Only the penultimate chapter, that on Falstaff, falls a bit short in this; here, with this over-researched incarnation of folly, his continued presence is almost entirely reduced to responses of academic critics.)

IV.

Reading Martina Pranić's dissertation is – what cannot be said about too many dissertations – a pleasure. Her English – her second language after all – is, a few easily mendable infelicities of expression apart, not only correct but elegant, pregnant and often witty. Even where she rewrites the theories she employs, she does not produce jargon but often gives a new life to them in her own graphic paraphrases. Reading her dissertation is, however, more than merely a pleasure: it is illuminating in her skillful arrangements of comparisons and contrasts, in her perceptive and detailed discussions of the texts and the pointed conclusions she draws from them with theoretical subtlety. I myself have naturally profited most from her analyses of texts that were entirely new to me. This applies in particular to Marin Držić's *Dundo Maroje*, a comedy written some forty years before Shakespeare began to write comedies and yet in many ways a blueprint for what the over-towering pivot of the canon of world drama was to be striving for. It is to be wished that this dissertation will contribute to putting Držić on the map of more Shakespearean scholars and critics.

Without any hesitation I recommend Martina Pranić's dissertation for the 'defence' and propose the mark 'distinction'.

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Martina Pranić: *Early Modern Players of Folly*
Supervisor's Report on PhD Thesis submitted in the programme
Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate Text and Event in Early Modern Europe

Using the decline of the medieval carnival as a starting point, Martina Pranić embarked on a difficult yet very rewarding pursuit exploring culturally productive and socially recuperative potentialities of folly in early modern Europe. Her research and its output are unique in several aspects discussed below:

1. The choice of a comparative perspective linking four fairly remote cultures, Croatian, German, Czech and English, which are significantly related both to Martina's cultural identity and to the history and culture of the three countries on her mobility path in the TEEME programme. In this way, the thesis reads as a highly reflexive travel narrative (p. 49) establishing transversal connections among diverse European cultures. For such an approach, the focus on the "interconnected polyphony" of early modern Europe (p. 19) is evidently more suitable than recent comparative approaches using the model of the "republic of letters" and pointing out the role of cultural centres (Pascale Casanova).
2. The emphasis on polyphony and transversality of cultural developments in early modern Europe accounts for the choice of an adequate methodology. Critical reflection of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, especially of its simplified understanding of time and essentialist concept of subversive carnival laughter (pp. 30-32), combined with a thoughtful discussion of universalizing approaches to folly (including Foucault's *History of Madness*, p. 24), open the way for a productive consideration of numerous writings on cultural and literary representations of folly (e.g., in relation to the changing notions of "physical, social and moral law", as in *The Fool* by Enid Wellsford) and lead to the development of a "rhizomatic" notion of folly based on Deleuze's and Guattari's "nomadic" thought. This methodological turn generates new approaches to cultural dynamic and social cohesion eluding the grasp of the centralizing, hegemonic power of the State. Apart from the rectification of Bakhtin's notion of the "grotesque body" based on the assumption of the unity of natural and social time (pp. 41-42), Martina's methodology generates an alternative approach to folly, different from both the generalizing accounts and particular, literary or theatrical, views (e.g., the numerous discussions of Shakespeare's fools or clowns, p. 32) and comparing its specific "uses" in diverse cultures (p. 49), seen as a heterogeneous and dynamic system. Even the "early modern players of folly" are not understood as individualities, rather as "multiplicities" of movements and powers, whose trajectories are mapped in the thesis (p. 47).
3. The exemplary nature of the approach, namely the selection of literary characters typical of the four studied cultures may be criticized as arbitrary and reductive; nonetheless it has also significant advantages. Apart from the focus on comparative perspective rather than on specific cultural and social contexts, it leads to the multi-layered comparison and reflection of different cultural representations of folly, which are not defined in an essentialist way but are made to work together as a heterogeneous, dynamic and decentralized system (which

Deleuze and Guattari call a “machine”). These representations reveal a lot about early modern uses of folly, from the resistance against the control of the people as “collective body” (Eulenspiegel), via the subversion of political Machiavellism (Pomet Trpeza) and positive social uses of negative theology (Jan Paleček), to the multi-layered folly of Falstaff, merging highly creative theatrical practice with sombre dreariness of individualist struggle for survival.

4. Finally, the chosen approach explores the potentialities of literary and cultural history which is not based on summary accounts of movements and tendencies but on confrontation and comparison of “big canonical texts” (p. 51) and their interpretations. The confrontation of the uses of the “black hole” metaphor by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (as the accumulation of meaning and interpretations) and by Deleuze and Guattari (as the force of annihilation) neatly demonstrates the advantages and risks of Martina’s approach as well as its explorative nature, well in keeping with the early modern material and bias of the thesis. It seems to evoke an important question of the “economy” of folly and its play referring to all the approaches discussed in the thesis, namely of the relation between its “restrictive” and “general economies” discussed by Georges Bataille.

To work with Martina was a pleasure: she was always able to incorporate my theoretical suggestions into her methodology, elaborate on them and venture into new directions. As a result, there is very little in the final output that I can criticize. Perhaps the uses of the term “ideology” in the chapters on Držić and Paleček would need more reflection: not only along theoretical lines, contrasting the approaches to ideologies as mental fictions (Karl Mannheim) and necessary symbolic activities (Clifford Geertz), but also in view of the specific uses of folly in the two works. Although the thesis contains several illuminating comparisons of Pomet Trpeza and Jan Paleček, the wider historical and ideological framework of both works and their characters could be outlined in a clearer way. Modern interpretations of Paleček by the late nineteenth-century political emancipation movement (T.G. Masaryk’s “Realism”) could be contrasted with the representations of Ragusan “libertarianism” in modern Croatian historiography, echoed in Martina’s own interpretation (e.g., pp. 108-109). While in the case of early modern Ragusa, folly could still create an alternative agency to conservative ideology of stability, masking the oligarchic nature of the regime, in the Czech late nineteenth-century political ideology, folly - rationalized and Christianized as a “humanistic” ethical value - was appropriated by the ideology of the national emancipation, masking as “realism”.

It can be concluded that Martina’s thesis studies folly as a discourse, but goes far beyond the Foucauldian universalizing and generalizing perspective. Her confrontation of the uses of folly in four diverse European culture shows both its subversive and recuperative possibilities and her thoughtful choice of exemplary literary and dramatic works enables her to reveal the relevance of the early modern folly for the study of cultural emancipation and social cohesion across centuries. The detailed treatment of her material combined with a synthetic and flexible methodological approach produce a valuable book confronting early modern representations of folly with their recent reception. Since the originality and quality of the argument are on much higher level that can usually be expected from a PhD dissertation and the knowledge presented makes it a lasting contribution to the comparative research of early modern cultural history, I not only recommend the thesis for examination but propose that it should be awarded a “distinction”.

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