

**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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