

Surfaces



Tom Hayes, *The Birth of Popular Culture: Ben Johnson, Maid Marian and Robin Hood*, (Pittsburg, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1992)

Jackie DiSalvo

Volume 2, 1992

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065237ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065237ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

1188-2492 (imprimé)

1200-5320 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

DiSalvo, J. (1992). Compte rendu de [Tom Hayes, *The Birth of Popular Culture: Ben Johnson, Maid Marian and Robin Hood*, (Pittsburg, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1992)]. *Surfaces*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065237ar>

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Book Review

Tom Hayes: *The Birth of Popular Culture*

Jackie DiSalvo

Tom Hayes, *The Birth of Popular Culture: Ben Jonson, Maid Marian and Robin Hood*, (Pittsburg, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1992).

In *The Birth of Popular Culture: Ben Jonson, Maid Marian and Robin Hood*, Tom Hayes must be credited with a number of significant accomplishments. He forges a method which synthesizes the theoretical insights of Gramsci, Derrida, Foucault, and Bakhtin but also creates a rich historical and anthropological sense of the cultural clashes and dislocations of the seventeenth century which draws upon the work of Raymond Williams, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, David Underdown, Christina Lerner, David Cressy and many others. He challenges the view of Jonson perpetrated by T.S. Eliot as a conservative spokesperson of the cultural elite who promulgated a gospel of royalism, catholicism and classicism in opposition to the assaults of middle class culture. He offers a fascinating reading of the virtually ignored *Sad Shepherd's Tale*, Ben Jonson's last, unfinished play, and, in so doing, introduces us to that great Falstaffian female, Mother Maudlin, image of the anarchic female energy which that text seeks to contain. In general, this ambitious contribution to cultural studies demonstrates theoretical sophistication, the grasp of a wide range of cultural history, and the highly perceptive readings and probing questions of an acute intelligence.

Hayes seeks to replace the Jonson of conservative nostalgia, and reconceive him as the first inventor of an author function for a modern, literate age with its growing middle-class audience. Adopting a neo-Gramscian approach, he also rejects two opposing approaches to popular culture, structuralist dismissals of it as merely a tool of elite hegemony or celebrations of its subversiveness, for a view of it is a site of complex negotiations between

contending forces. In this Bakhtinian reading, powerfully influenced by *Rabelais and his World*, he is less interested in liberating a carnivalesque sub-text than in demonstrating how Renaissance texts transform it for their own purposes. Consequently, he rejects the myth of an organic, festive culture, full of Dionysian exuberance, overthrown by Apollonian repression in early modern Europe. Instead, he focuses on the internal contradictions in Jonson's use of legends of Maid Marian and Robin Hood to demonstrate how "folk culture was simultaneously represented, appropriated and marginalized."

Hayes sees Jonson as occupying a unique and particularly modern position in this legacy of appropriation. Not only was he the first truly professional "author," writing in the vernacular for print and editing and publishing his own works, but his social position shared the marginality which would henceforth typify the alienated modern intellectual/artist. His Catholicism made him both a conservative and an outlaw, particularly in his affinities for the old culture of magic and alchemy as it overlapped with Catholic sacramentalism, both of which were under attack by a Puritan movement -- contentions that Hayes analyses in *The Alchemist*. Moreover, Jonson had to establish a persona which could comprehend a radically contradictory class position; court poet and independent professional, his voice "speaks to and for a troubled and corrupt courtly elite which, nevertheless, holds out an ideal value system that is besieged by the rising middle classes. . . . This persona is always at odds with a subversive desire to strike out at --to defame and deride -- the people, ideas and values it is expected to valorize." Hayes presents Jonson's creation of a Horatian persona of an artist always at war with itself as his expression of his fundamental irresolution.

In life a 200 pound *gourmand*, Jonson is seen as creating in his poems a textual self which is asserted through its perpetual attempt to assert the power of mind over body in quelling voracious desires. But this contradiction also involves gender with the masculine qualities of the Apollonian self: reason, restraint, decisiveness in conflict with the aberrant aspects of an effeminate Dionysianism: emotionality, indecisiveness, and carnality, and, therefore, allows the inscription of gender in the author-function to be scrutinized. Hayes argues, for example, that in Jonson's court masques, such as *The Masque of Blacknesse* and *The Masque of Queenes* with their ostensible affirmation of "an idealist concept of order, courtliness and grace" over the anti-masques' forces of Misrule, Dionysianism, often expressed by disruptive females, is never quite successfully contained.

The exemplary artifact for examining the intersection between Jonson's persona and the cultural mediations which produced popular culture here is *The Sad Shepherd: Or, A Tale of Robin-Hood*, a text in which elements of folk and courtly culture are problematically combined. Robin Hood legends, ballads and plays had expressed the subversive festival spirit of the May Games with which they were so frequently associated. But as the aristocracy

used folk culture to reinforce their bonds to their local tenants in opposition to middle class challenges, the legends were subsumed in a moderating pastoral frame which turned Robin into a nobleman who has descended briefly to show solidarity with the people. Hayes identifies the contending social ideologies in the play by placing it in the historical context explored by Underdown, Cressy and others in which "Pagan pastimes" came under attack from a Puritan middle class determined to replace such laxity with their own sobriety. Johnson, who consciously defined for himself a position on the margins of court culture, alienated both from it (especially after his quarrel with Inigo Jones), and from the emerging popular culture, was uniquely suited to mobilize these tensions. With all its characters opposing the values of Puritan, middle class culture, *The Sad Shepherd* "protests the business world's takeover of an older agrarian economy." Its introduction into a courtly pastoral of a Robin Hood stripped of all aristocratic pretensions and returned to lower class culture "may be said to revalue traditions of folk culture that had been appropriated by the courtly culture." Whereas courtly versions nostalgically recall a non-existent past in which class hierarchy was also harmony, Jonson is understood here to project an idealized past into a utopian, egalitarian future full of love-making and celebration.

Foregrounding the profane announcement of "what all women covet / To see: the common Parent of us all!" Hayes offers a simultaneously psychoanalytic and social interpretation in which "the phallocentrism of courtly culture is unveiled, stripped of its mystification under pastoral discourse." He supports this conclusion with a deconstructive reading of the plot in which a phallic deer, identified with Robin through his avatar Red Deer, is hunted by Maid Marian under the eye of a raven which embodies the witch Mother Maudlin. Marian's slaughter of the deer as a bounty for her lover, followed by her aggressive lovemaking, is presented as an ominous act of gender inversion of the sort being decried at the time in what Underdown called "the flood of Jacobean antifeminist literature and the concurrent public obsession with . . . domineering wives." Maudlin's attempt to usurp distribution of the deer further supports its signification of the phallic function represented by Robin but threatened in both the decaying aristocracy and rising middle classes by the castrating woman. This inscription of a threatening femininity is further explored in the play's witchcraft motif where Robin Hood's capture of Mother Maudlin's magic belt is seen to overthrow unbridled female sexuality.

For Hayes this also represents the crucial moment in the construction of Jonson's gendered author-function and in the birth of popular culture from the "gap that opened up between folk and courtly or "high" culture": "In *The Sad Shepherd* the legend of Robin Hood, identified with folk culture, remote woodlands, and outlawry, intrudes upon and subverts courtly pastoral conventions. In this perspective witchcraft, which is part of the same folk culture from which the legends of Robin Hood and Maid Marian spring, may now be seen as a transgressive alternative within popular culture." As the Robin Hood legend assimilates the potentially subversive elements of folk

culture and suppresses the more transgressive female witch cult, Robin is appropriated by popular culture to legitimate a patriarchal ethos. The witch, however, is still alive; no conquest is final within the clash of contending ideologies that undermine each other line by line, only a dubious succession of victory proclamations which are all hopelessly premature.

This refusal of closure may be inevitable within the deconstructive stance adopted here in which Hayes is less interested in offering a definitive interpretation than in demonstrating a process which attends to the complexity of language and its continual undermining of perspectives. Through the gaps of this unstable text he wants us to see the unresolved jostling of the discourses of this transitional era. In this extremely detailed analysis of the text his eye is ever on the confusions of identity (the appearance of Maudlin in Marian's form), the slippages of signifiers, the intrusion of disruptive meanings and the consequent multiplying of possible readings. The undermining of gender and class hierarchies is finally seen as a reflex of a self-conscious textuality which demonstrates "an often noted ambivalence in Jonson's texts between an expressed desire to establish a fixed authorial presence -- an individual transcendent ego -- that controls and directs all discourse within a text and thus manipulates our desires, and an opposing desire -- often implied -- to set one's creations loose upon the world, to grant them autonomy and release them from authorial control." Whether its source is Jonson's will to chaos, or Hayes own methodological bias, the result is an exceptionally rich and lively reading of a work he has rescued from the shadows and rendered as an intriguing window into the processes of cultural formation.

Jackie DiSalvo

Baruch College

City University of New York

New York, NY 10010

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