The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser and Jonson

Lamb, Mary Ellen

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As a powerful vehicle for the creation and circulation of meanings, literature played a crucial role in the early modern production of popular culture. This book uses literature by Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson to investigate the social narratives of several social groups – an urban, middling group; an elite at the court of James; and an aristocratic faction from the countryside. Under the pressure of increasing economic stratification, these social factions created cultural identities to distinguish themselves often in relationship with lower status groups with which they yet retained complex entanglements. As they re-imagined an older, traditional culture according to their own agenda, literature provided a site for the circulation of their self-narratives which, in turn, shaped writings by well-known authors.

Focusing on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and Jonson's *Oberon, The Fairy Prince* and *The Sad Shepherd*, Mary Ellen Lamb explores the ways in which early modern literature formed a particularly productive site of contest for deep social changes, and how these changes in turn played a large role in shaping some of the most well-known works of the period.

This book breaks new ground by considering productions of popular culture from above, rather than from below. Drawing from theorists of cultural studies, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Roger Chartier, and John Fiske, this project synthesizes work from disparate fields to provide new readings of well-known literary works. It will be of particular interest to literary scholars, to cultural and social historians, and to general readers interested in fairies, old wives' tales and hobby-horses.

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The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson

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For John,
my only son

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1 Producing popular cultures

The use of the same term "popular culture" to refer to very different concepts has caused significant confusion in academic discussions in recent years. Sophisticated scholarship from a number of disciplines defines "popular culture" in at least three ways: (1) through an engagement in oppositional politics with mainstream groups, (2) as a simple majority of the population below the level of gentry, and (3) as participants in the traditional festive practices of an increasingly beleaguered "merrie England." Proponents of cultural studies have powerfully argued the first of these concepts of popular culture. Stuart Hall, for example, has described the popular as the culture of an oppressed population engaged in perpetual struggle with a dominant culture or "power bloc" (1992: 238), while John Fiske has argued that "popular culture is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination" (1989: 43–7). Drawing on Bahktin's theory of carnival, Michael Bristol has ably applied this essentially political model to Shakespeare's plays to explore the purposeful resistance by a plebeian culture to "any tendency to absolutize authority" (1985: 213). Similarly, Annabel Patterson links festival practices to popular protest to identify "an intense political skepticism" followed by "a mature radicalism" in Shakespeare's deepening social vision (1989: 10).

Recent studies by social historians, on the other hand, tend to define "popular" in terms of a larger "populace." In his anthology of essays *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England*, Barry Reay combines the middling sort with lower status groups to define "popular" as composing 90 or 95 percent of the population (1985a: 1), while in Peter Burke's essay, "popular" comes to mean "ordinary": "the unlearned, the non-elite, the people who had not been to grammar school or university" (1985: 31). By referring to a majority or mainstream group, this concept of "popular" naturally discovers more continuities than conflicts. As part of a larger critique, Tim Harris's introduction to *Popular Culture in England* (1995) stresses the degree of interaction or cooperation between a large populace composed of diverse groups and an elite social fraction. Scholars of the Reformation also use this concept of "popular" to stress continuities more than divisions (Collinson 1996b; Byford 1998: 44). Tessa Watt's influential study *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550–1640* counters confrontational models by stressing "consensual values, shared at many levels of society" expressed in inexpensive printed texts (1991: 3, 325). Watt points to the presence of "a core of good householders" to argue against Keith Wrightson and David Levine's claim that a militant Protestantism " 'inserted a cultural wedge' in the village of Terling, where 'godly parish notables led the attack on a popular culture of communal dancings, alehouse sociability, and the like' " (1991: 324–5).

As is apparent from Watt's quotation, Wrightson and Levine use the term "popular culture" in this third sense, to refer to festive practices – dancing (whether morris dancing or dancing around maypoles), alehouse socialibility and also church ales, amateur theatrics of various kinds involving hobby-horses, May games and processions, Yuletide celebrations, and other entertainments that represented, for the citizens of Terling, "the traditional popular culture of their forefathers" (1979: 181). In a process of social differentiation largely due to inflation and a rapidly increasing population, the "better sort" of Terling owed "their social identity to their withdrawal from and hostility to a popular culture that was slowly being transformed into a culture of poverty" (182). The contrast between their conclusions and Watt's may be attributed in part to a difference in perspective. A householder may well experience consensus in the same town where a morris dancer experiences opposition. Moreover, as shown by a recent anthology edited by Patrick Collinson and John Craig (1998), the diversity of the experience of the Reformation in English towns does not support any single model, whether an oppositional top-down suppression of popular culture by the godly or a consensual model based on community agreement. Sometimes slower, sometimes quite rapid; sometimes imposed from above; sometimes as a groundswell from beneath: the specifics of the movement of reform varied substantially among English cities. Yet however variant the specific dynamics, few historians would argue that from the early sixteenth through the early seventeenth centuries, a festive popular culture was becoming much less "popular" or widespread within the population. In fact, the significant social transformations of the early modern period were often expressed and in part experienced in terms of changes in attitudes towards a festive popular culture. In spite of, or more likely because of, their decline in status and frequency from the early sixteenth through the early seventeenth centuries, the traditional rituals of this popular culture, defined in this third sense, attained a heightened cultural significance as a social sign.

In *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, I use the term "popular culture" in yet another sense, related to its use as a social sign, to refer to a simulacrum existing in early modern imaginaries created from cultural materials assembled from various lower status groups. Especially as transmitted through written works, this popular culture associated with the festive or the folk was invented or produced by elite and middling sorts as a means of coming to their own self-definition. This is not to say that festive practices, from maypole dancing to ballads to old wives' tales, did not exist among the lower sort. On the contrary, in many areas, they thrived. It was precisely their continuing appeal that rendered them especially attractive, and at times especially threatening, to the identities of higher status groups. This is also not to say that these festive practices thrived only among the low. On the contrary, they were widely shared among most social fractions. But by the late sixteenth century, such practices increasingly signified the low,[1] even as they were enjoyed by other groups. To take a literary example from Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona's choice to sing an old ballad of "Willow" shortly before her death eloquently testifies to its profound and personal meaning to her. The poignancy of her choice is deepened by her identification with her mother's maid Barbary, through a shared suffering in their mutual betrayals by the men they loved. As social movements invested such practices as signifying the low, they revealed complex relationships ranging from identification to contempt, and often a mixture of these in variable proportions.

I use the term "production" rather than "representation" to refer to a popular culture assembled of elements from such diverse groups as thieves, parents of retarded children, raped women, female caregivers, and amateur performers; for there was no group sufficiently homogeneous to "represent." Their apparent homogeneity, or very different forms of homogeneity in different literary works, was in fact a principal effect of this production. Similarly, I break down the dominant culture into sometimes overlapping subgroups such as the humanist-educated male elite learned in Latin (Chapters 3 and 5), the middling sort forging its own nationalistic identity (Chapters 6 and 7), and the aristocracy of the Stuart court redefining itself in response to changing modes of consumption (Chapter 8). This project is, I believe, unique in its delineation of the specific techniques developed by each of these groups to define itself against and through lower status groups. These techniques of self-definition play a major role, I argue, in the culture and especially in the literature of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. To emphasize the centrality of these productions, I analyze works by three authors commonly perceived as canonical: Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson. The centrality of festive customs to texts by these authors has been thoroughly and persuasively demonstrated by a rich critical literature which explores, from a variety of approaches, the profound and often structural connections between early modern literature and the May Day celebrations, the ballads, and mimetic fools originating in what has been called a folk culture.[2] I use this critical literature to consider further the ideological implications of forms of self-definition emerging from these texts.

The complexity of this process of self-representation, both for the groups and for the individuals within them, is perhaps best demonstrated by a more complicated example taken from Jonson's masque, *Oberon, The Fairy Prince.* Featuring Prince Henry in the title role, Jonson's *Oberon, The Fairy Prince* stages courtiers dancing in the court of King James in representations that work simultaneously with and against established fairylore. A song near the end of the masque urges the courtiers to show by their energetic dancing that they, like the fairies of tradition, are made of air rather weighed down by the flesh of "knottie legs, and plants of clay" that "seeke for ease, or love delay" (Jonson 1941: ll.403–4). Yet courtiers must also strive to overgo merely ordinary fairies; and so the masque invents a clownish country fairy very unlike the ethereal trooping fairies and dangerous fairy queens of ballads and folk-tales. Spurring the courtiers towards yet greater efforts in the upward leaps of the corantos and galliards of the third masque-dance, the next song warns that if they "use the smallest stay," then the "beauties" of the audience will suspect that they "have no more worth/Then the course, and countrey *Fairy,*/That doth haunt the harth, or dairy" (ll.412–49). What did these fairies signify in the court of James I? Why did Jonson's masque simultaneously stage affiliation with and also distinction from traditional fairylore?

As Chapter 8 will demonstrate, the answers to these questions will take us deep within the social signifying systems of the early seventeenth century. They involve the use of dance by courtiers to increase personal charisma, and the underlying discourses of bodily control able to confer status through a virtuoso performance. They involve the coming-of-age of young Prince Henry in a court strained by tensions between King James and Queen Anne, with the consequent conflicts in filial allegiances that must be declared, negotiated, or effaced. They involve the political necessity perceived within James's court to discover, or invent, a relationship with the people of the countryside to promote an alliance against an increasingly powerful, and increasingly hostile, middling sort, while maintaining the forms of distinction on which aristocratic privilege depended. Central to the argument of this book is the relational nature of all three signifying systems – within the body, within the court, within the nation. As courtiers emulate "aery fairies," these systems identify the court with an idealization of rural life. As courtiers distinguish themselves from the "coarse and country fairy," these systems invoke an oppositional binary elevating the court at the expense of a debased agrarian culture. In both its idealized and debased aspects, this simulacrum that I will call a "popular culture" was as much a product of the imagination as Jonson's rustic fairy, and undoubtedly bore as tangential a relationship to the diverse beliefs and varied experiences of the people of the countryside.

Jonson's production was not his alone; it was part of a larger cultural movement that forms the central subject of this book. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as England became more urbanized and societal structures became more complex, a powerful field of force exerted pressure on social groups, whether newly emerging or already established, to determine modes of self-distinction inextricably linked with the legitimation of their own personal and political power. Jonson's "coarse and country fairy" serves as a prototype for the large-scale production of multiple forms of popular culture within the imaginaries of elite and middling sorts according to these self-serving agendas. Their diverse narratives of self-definition included sometimes phantasmagoric versions of a popular culture as a distorted and distorting reflecting pool through which to interpret themselves. Rendered fantastic by the desires that called them into being, early modern productions of popular culture ranged from the grotesque to the ethereal. In *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, I undertake a study of what these often self-interested fantasies reveal about the evolving self-narratives of social groups. Their shared drive towards social distinction contributes a formative context for the productions of popular cultures by such authors as Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson. As this study will demonstrate, however, works by these authors resist as well as support these projects of distinction. Like the two contrasting species of fairy of Jonson's masque, the figures used by early modern writers often reveal simultaneous desires to affiliate as well as to dissociate from the popular cultures they produce. These highly ambivalent productions reflect conflicted entanglements rather than clear-cut relationships. As these works suggest, this push and pull, this simultaneous desire and repulsion, often operated within individual subjects as well as between social groups. The struggles for symbolic domination waged within these works locate the site of contest within individual subjectivities. Thus, as I explore how the cultural meanings generated through the production of popular cultures played a determinative role in the formation of group identities, I will also argue for an understanding of a new centrality for these productions within early modern discourses of the self.

This approach constructs a larger framework within which to revisit some now-canonical texts as productions of popular culture. As a powerful vehicle for the creation of meanings, early modern literature formed a particularly generative site for the circulation of these cultural narratives. A few examples serve to demonstrate the simultaneous affiliation and alienation within these texts to their own traditional sources. Identified in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the country prankster Robin Goodfellow, Shakespeare's Puck prevents milk from turning into butter and plays practical jokes on sexually aroused horses; yet like Jonson's dancing courtier-fairies, Shakespeare's well-spoken and deferential servant to Oberon distinguishes himself through his oppositions, rather than his similarities, to his original in the rude and hairy Robin Goodfellow. Sometimes it is the use, rather than the content, of orally circulated narratives that becomes transformed. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example, appropriates the tale of Herne the hunter from "idle-headed eld" to discipline offenses by Falstaff against the values of the middling sort in a communal shaming performed by very bourgeois-seeming fairies. In the Red Cross Knight of his *Faerie Queene*, Spenser advances the cause of Protestant nationalism by incorporating and also redirecting the cultural meanings of the St. George once performed in often rowdy midsummer watches and early modern processions. In the same way, his series of fairy queens, including Gloriana herself, describe a highly ambivalent relationship with contemporary forms of narrativity performed primarily by women appropriated, and also deflected, to serve the interests of Spenser's nationalist epic.

Discussed in detail in the chapters below, these few examples suggest the complexity of these well-known texts as discursive productions. The participation of recognized authors such as Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson foregrounds the significance of these productions. While any one of these authors provides material sufficient for an entire volume from this approach, I have chosen to include works by all three in order to demonstrate the strikingly different appropriations of figures signifying a popular culture. In this study, I focus on works by William Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), by Edmund Spenser (episodes from *The Faerie Queene*), and by Ben Jonson (his masque *Oberon, The Fairy Prince* and his unfinished play *The Sad Shepherd*) to explore the diversity of the forms of entanglement encountered by often ambivalent early modern subjects. In each text, a heightened awareness of traditional material, however much it was reworked, also encodes alternative readings as stubborn reminders of what, in the creation of new social definitions, must be forgotten: the pranks of the uncouth Robin Goodfellow, the ghost tales of superstitious elders, the vigorous dance-battles of the earlier sixteenth century, ballads of fairies remembered from childhood, and through all these, a relationship to a "merrie England" that was, or was imagined to be, less complex and fragmented than the rapidly evolving society of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

This process of forgetting recorded in literary works participated in a larger process of a cultural forgetting made visible in the studies of the calendar and the ritual year by David Cressy (1989) and Ronald Hutton (1994, 1996). Tracing the elimination of most saints' days as well as the decline of traditional festivities marking the agrarian cycle, these studies foreground a forgetting that entails, paradoxically, a heightened consciousness of what must be forgotten. Duffy (1992) and other scholars have demonstrated the impossibility of obliterating the traces of Catholic rituals in Protestant England. Elizabeth Mazzola's argument for the "afterlife for abandoned symbols" (1998: 1) of the Catholic Church applies at least as well to traditional festive practices. Similarly, Linda Woodbridge argues from another perspective for the stubborn persistence of even discredited ways of thought, such as a medieval form of magical thinking whose traces "linger to structure the unconscious" (1994: 6). The mental habits of early moderns were no more susceptible to absolute change, and certainly not at the rapid rate of the social transformations from the late sixteenth through the early seventeenth centuries.

As John Barrell has pointed out, ideologies are to be discovered not only within classes, but also within individual subjects (1999: 232). Studies pertaining to early modern ways of thinking, and more specifically to ways of forgetting, move the domain of social and political transformations inward into the psyche of early modern subjects. Rather than a Freudian model, my approach to the connections between outward events and inward experiences of the self follows an insight expressed by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, that the social cannot be separated from the psychological, and the sublimation of instincts within the self cannot be considered separately from a larger strategy of cultural domination (1986: 197). For this profound connection between the social and the psychic, I draw particularly on Norbert Elias's concept of the civilizing process (1978) and Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of taste as a mode of social distinction (1984). Their theories provide ways to understand the increasingly diverse forms of self-differentiation offered to early moderns by profound economic and religious changes as unquestionably political in nature. In forging a personal, as well as a national identity, early moderns of middling and elite sorts enacted a form of cultural domination over lower status groups. It is the premise of this study that lower social fractions remained capable of their own forms of resistance and that they shaped early modern culture, to an extent not acknowledged in most studies, through the responses – the desires and fears – they elicited through their ordinary interactions with more elite subjects. Since these interactions are inevitably mediated by literate social groups, my focus remains on the subjectivity of the middling and elite early moderns by whom and for whom productions of popular culture were constructed. It is within, as well as outside, this inner domain that the great social revolutions of the period took place.

To theorize this model of the early modern subject as the site of social forces, an internalized version of Gramsci's concept of hegemony usefully moves the negotiations between cultures to a locus within divided subjects (2000; Hebdige 1988: 203–7). According to an internalized Gramscian paradigm, the early modern self becomes not merely ambivalent, but more specifically composed of what Tony Bennett calls "a mobile combination of cultural and ideological elements derived from different class locations" (1985: xv). For some early modern bourgeoisie, the consensus achieved within the self required the accommodation of opposing values that rendered its own social affiliations open to negotiation and compromise. To refuse to accommodate was to risk an instability of self that, like rigid political structures, became subject to overthrow by unresolved allegiances. Productions of popular culture enacted these inner negotiations with ideologies derived from a range of possible forms of interactions with members of the lower sorts. As this book will demonstrate, the type and intensity of negotiation varied according to the primary forms of interaction. An elite male inculcated as a child by his female caregivers into the mysteries of prophesy by analyzing the burning coals of the hearthfire experienced a different ideology, and experienced that ideology differently, than a haberdasher parodied by grotesques in a raucous Whitsuntide procession in seventeenth-century Wells.[3] For some early moderns, such as those tradesmen whose interactions with the lower sort were characterized by mutual hostility, the creation of a bourgeois self in opposition to the values of lower status groups would require little ideological negotiation. For others, such as young men who experienced loving intimacy from caregivers of childhood, the achievement of an inner hegemony required more complex accommodations yielding a more unpredictable and perhaps a more volatile form of inner consensus. It is the premise of this project that many early modern subjects remained on a continuum in-between, neither entirely rejecting nor entirely comfortable with common traditions once shared with lower status groups; and that productions of popular culture served to negotiate among the tensions emerging from contradictions that were experienced at once within and without, as psychological and social.

Since this paradigm represents the psychological as inextricably connected to the social, it is useful to situate this discussion in terms of an ongoing and relatively testy debate concerning the place of popular culture within the socio-political sphere. The degree of political engagement described by critics such as Bristol and Patterson has been challenged by Scott Shershow, who describes elite and popular, high and low, as only "participants in intricately interrelated fields of cultural production whose distinctions are merely self-constructed and self-proclaimed" (1998: 24). This focus on discursive self-definitions has led Shershow to question the possibility of political action, as he objects to an insistence, in this case voiced by Frederic Jameson, on "the essentially polemic and subversive strategies that characterize the culture of subordinate or dominated groups" on the grounds that the existence of "autonomous and alternative subcultures" was not possible (30). In this claim, Shershow strikes a blow to a passionately held belief in radical resistance shaping studies not only of popular culture, but of cultural studies in general.

Cultural historians have argued vehemently against the "linguistic turn" underlying positions such as Shershow's. Protesting against the "the dangerous reduction of the social world to a purely discursive construction," Roger Chartier argues for the formative effects of symbolic domination, a process by which the dominant culture attempts to subjugate less powerful groups by imposing an identity that they may, however, resist, so that "the history of the construction of social identities . . . becomes a history of relations of symbolic force" (1997: 4–5). Chartier quotes Pierre Bourdieu's seminal text *Distinction* to affirm the experienced effects of symbolic discourse:

> The representation which individuals and groups inevitably project through their practices and properties is an integral part of social reality. A class is defined as much by its being-perceived as by its being.
>
> (1984: 483, quoted in Chartier 1997: 101–2)

As Chartier insisted in an earlier work, "the representations of the social world are themselves the constituents of social reality" (1988: 44).

In this project, I use Chartier's perception of the experienced social effects of representations to modify, but not entirely to dismiss, Shershow's discursive emphasis. In an important sense, I find myself in agreement with Shershow's declaration that the versions of popular culture produced in the early modern period articulate a social force field through distinctions that are, in Shershow's terms, "merely self-constructed and self-proclaimed" (1998: 24). From this perspective, I question the identification by Bristol and Patterson of a common or plebeian culture, even if consisting of interlocking constituencies, that is irremediably poised in political opposition to a dominant power bloc. Yet, with Chartier, I perceive the representations, or what I will call the productions, of a popular culture, however fictive, as expressing and also generating material effects in a process of domination that extends beyond the symbolic into the real. While no large subjugated group remained sufficiently homogeneous to express concerted and strategic opposition, local resistances were possible and, as I will argue in my discussion of fairies, such resistances in fact occurred through strategies all the more effective for remaining unobtrusive.

In distinction from critics and historians who discuss popular culture from the perspective of beneath, this project explores the discursive productions of popular culture from above.[4] More than the content – the beliefs, practices, and texts – of any one culture, I am concerned with how, as well as why, a group comes to awareness of itself as a social body, as expressed through literary texts, as well as the implications of that awareness for those represented as alien or different. In this way, the term "culture" defines a social group in the same way, and with many of the same difficulties, as "identity" defines an individual. Individuals come to a sense of their own identity through contact with others, often defining themselves against those whom they perceive, sometimes erroneously, as most unlike themselves. Subject to the self-delusions endemic to the human condition, an individual's own sense of identity seldom correlates absolutely to a definition grounded in objective facts. In this and other respects, this project is profoundly influenced by Frederic Jameson's argument that cultures, like individual identities, do not exist in themselves but as part of a social field through which at least two groups interact. For Jameson, culture represents an "objective mirage," a "nimbus perceived by one group when it comes into contact with and observes another" (1993: 33). In this way, any perception of a culture is always already distorted by the agendas and desires of the observing group. These desires often, according to Jameson, affect the self-definitions of the observed group as well, for what we perceive as our own culture is "often the recuperation of the other's view of us" (33). Jameson's model of culture as an objective mirage provides a vehicle through which to accommodate the discursive and often essentially fictive self-definitions of groups with the potential for localized action. Just as a mirage deceives thirsty travelers into departing from their route, misrecognitions have real effects.

While Jameson does not specifically address the early modern period in this discussion of culture, two primary forms of group relationship he describes – envy and loathing, often in oscillation – fit the simultaneous idealization and debasement of figures representing an older agrarian culture. As an act of "collective envy," even powerful groups may pay tribute to subjugated social fractions by borrowing "forms of cultural expression" (1993: 35). This model applies well, for example, to courtiers attempting to enact the ethereal movements of the dancing fairies described in homely country narratives. At the same time, according to Jameson, a group may also defend its boundaries through loathing what are necessarily "collective abstractions" of the other group (35). Like the racism identified by Jameson as a form of cultural loathing, the masque's invitation to despise the "coarse and country fairy" defends the boundaries of court culture precisely against the group for which the masque also expresses envy. This double movement of envy and loathing parallels the double movement of desire and shame in a more inward-looking model described by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986: 5–6) to explain the continued power of popular carnival within the imaginative life of the dominant classes:

> The "top" attempts to reject and eliminate the "bottom" for purposes of prestige and status, only to discover . . . that the top includes that low

> symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. . . . The low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is imaginatively constituent of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture.

The Stallybrass/White model helps to explain the continued pull of figures signifying a popular culture within the imaginaries of the elite and middling sorts. Turbulent cross-currents within literary texts reveal that early moderns were yet prone to an irrational attraction, like Titania's magically induced desire for lowly Bottom with his ass's head, to that which they believed should be despised.

As the optical illusion implicit in Jameson's term "mirage" might suggest, any shimmering vision of a unified "people" and a coherent "popular culture," whether celebrated by radicals or denigrated by elitists, dissipates upon closer inspection. The binaries that emerge when a group perceives itself, however erroneously, in terms of another group, often bear little resemblance to the messier and very human relationships they purport to represent. For historically based studies, the use of binaries has, in fact, become something of a red flag, and much recent scholarship by cultural historians vigorously dismantles binaries that have, for some critics, come to cast the entire enterprise of studying popular culture into doubt. Excellent scholarship has rigorously interrogated, for example, a common binary opposing popular and elite in terms of a familiar distinction between oral and literate social groups. Not only were many illiterate persons likely to have heard printed material read aloud, but the term "literate" itself suppresses a spectrum of levels of reading between barely literate and advanced (Spufford 1982; Barry 1995; Hackel 1999). Rather than clear-cut differences between oral and literate, critics have emphasized their mutual influence (Chartier 1987; Warner 1994: 24). For a number of genres – ballads, proverbs, nursery lore, tavern libels – Adam Fox has authoritatively shown the absolute interpenetration of oral and printed modes (2000).

More generally, the terms "popular culture" and "elite culture" themselves imply a sense of false coherence among groups diverse in vocation, geography, and religion (Burke 1985; Hall 1992: 238; Harris 1989; 1995: 5). A London laundrymaid of a Calvinist persuasion, for example, would not likely have identified with boisterous miners from Wales. Tim Harris points out that the bipolar model implied in the opposition of "popular culture" to "elite culture" does not reflect the complexities of actual interactions and collaborations between groups (1995: 14; see also Barry 1985: 80). Individual affiliations do not uniformly conform to one's position in a social formation; a person may identify herself as having more in common with a group higher or lower in social status. In one's subjective experience, affiliations may be multiple. Because of their participation in festivities of common people in the sixteenth century, for example, Peter Burke has famously described elite males as "amphibious" or bi-cultural, educated in the classical or "great culture" but also participating in the "little tradition" of the people "as a second culture" (1978: 28). Finally, any binary opposing elite and popular must take account of the presence of a middling sort, increasing in numbers and prominence in the early modern period (Reay 1985a: 20; Wrightson 1991: 49; Leinwand 1993: 292). This increasingly influential middling sort tended to disappear in the early modern's own bipolar model of elite and popular, identified by Peter Stallybrass (1986) as a means of effacing an emerging middling sort in the interests of the aristocracy.

Perhaps most problematic for studies of popular culture is the inevitable mediation of the values and oral tales by lower status groups through transmission through written texts. Their relative powerlessness in the political sphere rendered the "low" especially vulnerable to distorted representations as a popular culture that were then reified in the discursive productions of enduring cultural texts. Much of what has been said of the "folk" comes from other groups. As Sullivan and Woodbridge have eloquently put it, "'Popular' culture keeps receding as we approach. Whether or not the Folk ever significantly contributed to what looks now like 'popular' literature, mediation by the educated seems always already in place" (2000: 282). Written versions of orally circulated fairy-tales provide striking examples of such distortions (Bottigheimer 1987: 4–20). In seventeenth-century France, a prominent collector Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier rationalizes her numerous refinements in a revealing metaphor comparing the mouths of common people to a ditch or sewer:

> These stories became filled with impurities as they passed through the mouth of the common people; in much the same way as pure water becomes defiled with rubbish as it passes by a dirty culvert.
>
> (quoted in Warner 1994: 174)

Similar interpretive problems disturb written records of acts. Woodbridge has ably demonstrated that Thomas Harman's descriptions of the workings of the Elizabethan underworld, supposedly obtained through firsthand interviews with perpetrators, fit the genre of jestbook more readily than realistic journalism (Woodbridge 2001: 39–79). Stephen Gosson's prurient descriptions of how females were groped in the Elizabethan theaters bear suspicious resemblances to passages in Ovid's *Art of Love* (Zitner 1958: 206–8). As evidenced by witch trials, official records even from court sessions do not represent transparent reports. As Tim Harris states, "We must not confuse what the elite perceived and feared with what ordinary people actually believed and practiced" (1995: 6).

It was from what the elite perceived and feared and also, I would add, from what they desired, that popular cultures were produced within the early modern imaginary. These productions were never innocent of ideology. As Sullivan and Woodbridge have argued, "Once popular culture – the culture of the People, the Folk – had been created as a category, it was ever after available for ideological uses" (2000: 283). It is this creation of popular culture as a category that represents the primary project of this book. As these searching critiques suggest, while many of the practices and experiences of holiday pastimes, for example, may be identified, it remains unlikely that scholars will ever recover a pure and unmediated understanding of the popular culture of early modern England. What would seem to be a loss, viewed from another angle, becomes a gain. If isolating the “purely popular” has become an exercise in futility, a focus on the interactions between elite and popular cultures themselves provides a valuable subject of study (Harris 1995: 10). If the binaries emanating from this illusory cultural mirage bear little relationship to the lived experience of lower status groups, they remain immensely informative about the agendas of those members of the bourgeois and elite who produced them. From this perspective, then, *Popular Culture* takes as its primary project not the recovery of an originary, unmediated common culture, but its early modern portrayals. In this understanding of popular culture as an artificial category produced by and for other social formations, I avoid the numerous and knotty problems discussed by recent scholars in some detail. Rather than a reconstruction of what has been lost – it is, for the most part, truly gone – this project explores the ideological uses to which representations of a popular culture were put.

If popular cultures served primarily as objective mirages through which social fractions constructed their own self-narratives, these diverse fabrications were yet constructed from shared forms of contact with lower status groups. In particular, three distinct forms of interaction become embodied, repeatedly and over time, in three figures: fairies, old wives, and hobby-horses. As later chapters will demonstrate, all three figures make their way together, one way or another, into Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Merry Wives of Windsor*, prominent episodes from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, and Jonson’s *Oberon, The Fairy Prince* and *The Sad Shepherd.* As re-imagined within the self-defining narratives of dominant cultures, these figures suggest a great deal about the nature of interactions with members of various lower status groups. Rather than a unified culture, these three figures suggest the diversity of the forms of entanglement encountered by often ambivalent early modern subjects. In their variety, they represent what Foucault would call “genealogical fragments” of illegitimate and subjugated knowledges that yet bear marks of historical struggles (1980b: 82–3). Their repeated inclusion together in the same works shows the effect of a centralizing force designed to generate a false sense of homogeneity among these groups classed together as lower status. Little is known of these groups themselves. No one can legitimately identify for them any single, specific population or a shared social consciousness. Rather like black holes that become visible only in their effects on stars circling around them, what remains known of these groups is a record of their interactions with other of higher status groups who represent their influence, sometimes in the process of denying it. Chapters 2 through 4 discuss the figures of fairies, old wives, and hobby-horses in more detail, as they rise to (in)visibility to become at once more discernible and less understood.

A brief discussion at this point describes how very different interactions between groups come to form common raw material for the production of various popular cultures.

Chapter 2 traces allusions to fairies in cross-class collaborations designed to evade the strictures of early modern society. This is not to say that all fairy allusions forwarded cross-class collaborations. Wendy Wall has ably detailed references to fairies in the domestic sphere of housekeeping, especially among the middling sort (2002: 112–26). Not all collusions crossed class lines. Explanations of "found" or stolen goods allegedly given by the fairies, the murder of deformed or otherwise unwanted infants left as "changelings," instances of rape and extra-marital pregnancy by "fairies," rebel claims to deer in the name of "Queen of the Fairies": these evasions of social controls function as what James C. Scott would call a "weapon of the weak" benefitting those of lower economic status marginalized from established modes of power (1985). But for early moderns belonging to dominant social formations, collaborations with lower status groups constituted the most visible aspect of the popular; and it is these collaborations with literate groups that become recorded in plays, diaries, and prose tracts.

To illustrate with one example from Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, the Old Shepherd's identification of the infant Perdita as a changeling child left by fairies glosses over his assumption of her presumably illegitimate origin. When he first finds Perdita as an exposed baby, he expresses unambiguously his conviction of her illegitimacy:

> Sure some scape. Though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape. This has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door-work. They were warmer that got this than the poor thing is here. I'll take it up for pity.
>
> (1997: 3.3.70–4)

Yet when he presents the baby and the money placed with her to his son, he swerves from this conviction to describe her as a changeling with "fairy gold":

> Look thee here; take up, boy. Open't. So, let's see. It was told me I should be rich by the fairies. This is some changeling. Open't. What's within, boy?. . . This is fairy gold, boy, and 'twill prove so. Up with 't, keep it close.
>
> (3.3.112–15; 119–20)

Declaring the money as "fairy gold," neither earned nor stolen, enables the Old Shepherd to assert his rights to it without further explanation. His actual justification lies in the unspoken understanding implicit in these circumstances, that the money represents payment, presumably by the gentlewoman-mother, to whatever stranger would rear this infant. To take an example from *King Lear*, the blinded Earl of Gloucester invokes "fairies and gods" (4.6.29–30) to prosper the purse he offers to his disguised son Edgar, whom he believes to be a half-mad beggar, in payment for leading him to a cliff where he may commit suicide. Blessed by fairies, this treasure received from a suicidal earl and hunted outlaw requires no explanation to outsiders.

These and other incidents depict members of higher status groups adopting fairy allusions as the appropriate language for specific forms of social trespass, often involving either sex or money, considered the proper provenance of the lower sort. In staging these cross-class collaborations, Shakespeare's plays publicize this clandestine use of fairy allusions as an insider knowledge to his primarily urban audience. Through the use of fairy allusions, available to those of higher status through shady cross-class interactions, various disparate groups, from old shepherds to mad beggars, became misrecognized in a cultural imaginary as a homogeneous "popular" culture characterized by forms of trespass against conventional social values and laws.

Chapter 3 explores a very different mode of interaction between the better sort and lower status groups through old wives, as the tellers of tales. This intimate relationship between women caregivers, often of a lower sort, and the children of middling or aristocratic status exerted an especially powerful and continuing influence on early modern culture and, I will argue, on its self-narratives. Like the cross-class evasions encoded in fairy allusions, adults' memories of old wives' tales created a false sense of a homogeneous popular culture. Oral tales were composed and performed by men as well as women, and what has survived of their content suggests a primary audience of adults rather than of children (Warner 1994: 21–2). But to little children lying at their nurses' feet or sitting in their laps, these tales became a part of their induction into what seemed a predominantly female culture. Later references by adults convey the association of these tales with the influence of women, for better or for worse, on the children they had once been. For the most part, the cultural meanings of these tales, and the female influence which their narration enacted, would not have come into place until children, and especially elite young boys, left this domestic sphere.

The schoolroom environment in which boys learned Latin provided a powerfully distorting objective mirage through which to understand the feminized culture of childhood differently. In the process, women's tales acquired powerful ideological meanings. As boys enacted their individual separations, their childhood experiences – their relationships with the women who raised them, their own perceived androgyny, their limitation to a simpler vernacular or "mother" tongue – took on new and sometimes unpredictable significances within the rigorous and often ascetic conditions of a grammar school or individual tutelege. As Richard Halpern has pointed out, the deliberate alienation of boys from "the more spontaneous forms of popular learning," including tales by women, was implicit in the humanist pedagogy of the early modern schoolroom (1991: 25). Whether produced in accordance with or in defiance of schoolroom values, the ways in which boys interpreted or even remembered their childhood experiences inevitably bore a mark of the early modern institutional system. Contemporary references to the continuing power of these experiences even into adulthood resonate with Carolyn Cooper's account of the persistent and visceral effects of the oral culture of her Jamaican childhood as "noises in the blood" (1995: 2–3, 8). The particular and ongoing power of these experiences induced some and perhaps many writers to associate or, more often, to disassociate their imaginative writings with women's tales heard in childhood. Transmitted over time and across disparate groups, old wives' tales disturbed the patriarchal gender relations underlying notions of individual authorship.

In Chapter 4, I discuss productions of the popular through various forms of amateur performativity, designated for convenience through a prominent figure, the hobby-horse. Cross-group encounters through amateur performances contribute an understanding of an aesthetics of the early modern body as a factor in the vulgarizing, or conversely the idealizing, of the festivities of an older and merrier England. An understanding of the rapidly declining prestige of these performances historicizes an insight voiced by John Fiske: "The struggle for control over the meanings and pleasures of the body is where the social is most convincingly represented as the individual and where politics can best disguise itself as human nature" (1989: 70). The struggle over changing meanings of the body emerges from Elias's account of how the civilizing process, operating through an advancing threshold of shame (1978: 129–38), rendered the control of "bodily carriage, gestures, dress, facial expressions" (55) as a mark of social class. In the process, robust or spontaneous forms of movement became increasingly perceived as vulgar or grotesque. Amateur performances characterized by their use came to signify both an aesthetic of the low and also a past time before this aesthetic was in place.

This increasing gap between the aesthetics of high and low becomes most visible in the radical decline of the hobby-horse. A respected and well-loved performer at church ales in the reign of Henry VIII, the hobby-horse came to signify low taste or even illicit sexuality by the close of Elizabeth's reign. This low aesthetic of the body categorized other amateur performers as well, such as St. George skirmishing with his dragon (a large form of hobby-horse), and a cross-dressed Maid Marian dancing the morris, where the hobby-horse also began to prance his steps. Revealing the startling extent to which once separate "genealogical fragments" (Foucault 1980b: 82–3) blurred by the early seventeenth century, the animalistic qualities attributed to the lower sort became expressed by another over-sexed human–animal hybrid, the classical satyr. These formerly distinct figures merged significances in a chaotic whirl of sensory activities often associated with a seasonal festivity such as May Day or the twelve days of Christmas. A sense of general confusion and festive disorder emerges from contemporary accounts by Henry Machyn and Philip Stubbes, as well as the records of court proceedings against the continuing festivities enacted at Wells in 1607. As their energetic modes of embodiment came to mark plebeian social status, these figures reveal how the aesthetics of the low took shape as a cultural category. In this way, the hobby-horse and fellow-travelers enter works by Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson as representations of a low aesthetic by which these writers measured their own evolving professionalism. Yet surreptitious or even overt identifications of their works with these amateur performances also reveal a persistent struggle of aesthetics that was not yet resolved.

Fairies, old wives, and hobby-horses are not the only figures through which early moderns produced a popular culture. Others, such as ballad heroines and maypole dancers, also make their way into early modern versions of the popular. The qualities attributed to old wives sometimes became transmuted into the abundant bodiliness of garrulous alewives who provided adult forms of nourishment as they, too, told fantastic stories. At least as early as Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fairies became associated with Robin Goodfellow. But it is these relatively disconnected figures – fairies, old wives, and hobby-horses – that appear together, with striking regularity, in the same works. From modes of trespass, to childhood dependence on female caregivers, to amateur entertainments: the variety of these interactions delineates the breadth of category of the popular. With its outlines changing according to the interests of various groups, popular culture shifted its shape to look, like Polonius's clouds, "like a camel indeed" and also simultaneously backed "very like a whale" (*Hamlet* 3.2.376, 381). Yet the simultaneous inclusion of fairies, old wives, and hobby-horses, sometimes in transmuted forms, in well-known works suggests that early moderns tended to identify these figures, and the interactions they signify, as common reference points through which to measure their own relationships against as well as through these lower status groups.

This need of middling and elite groups to measure their distance from lower status groups was part of a shared impetus for distinction from the "low" becoming particularly evident by the late sixteenth century. To understand this impetus, it is necessary to review a much-discussed paradigm proposed by Peter Burke. In a seminal pronouncement, Burke proclaimed that in 1500 "popular culture was everyone's culture; a second culture for the educated and the only culture for everyone else. By 1800 the clergy, the nobility, the merchants, the professional men – and their wives – had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes" (1978: 270). Burke identified two major forces behind a withdrawal from popular culture. With its first phase between 1500 and 1650, a culture of the godly led a movement directed against festivals, taverns, ballads, and plays, to reform the culture of ordinary people according to orderly and pious values (207–43). At the same time, the nobility and some bourgeoisie increasingly internalized an "ethos of self-control and order" (276) leading to more "'polished' manners, as well as the "new and more self-conscious style of behavior" modeled in courtesy books, according to which the more spontaneous outbursts of popular festivity were perceived as not so much ungodly as vulgar (244–86).

Burke's theories have elicited considerable support as well as important refinements. Two anthologies, in particular, elaborate and complicate Burke's paradigm, even as they demonstrate its continued centrality to current critical conversations. Using Burke as its point of departure and featuring his contribution as its lead essay, Barry Reay's *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-century England* notes common cultural capital in ballads and other activities shared among groups of differing status, yet also observes that the roles assumed by wealthier participants as patrons or organizers could "reinforce rather than deflate hierarchy" (1985a: 15). In this more complicated social model, Reay draws on Gramsci's concept of hegemony to describe the process of reform as a continuing struggle, never reaching completion, that accommodates, in various negotiated forms, both class rule and popular resistance (18). Dedicated to Peter Burke, Tim Harris's *Popular Culture in England,* c.*1500–1850* similarly complicates Burke's model by stressing continuities as well as tensions among groups, and by noting significant variations by region and by gender. Rejecting the view of popular culture as a "passive victim of historical process," Harris locates some of the impetus for change within the lower orders themselves, adapting to meet the conditions of an evolving world (1995: 23–4). Perspectives expressed in these and other anthologies contribute to a general critical consensus that the lived experience of the Reformation was much more complex and resistant to generalizations than had been earlier theorized.

No such critical consensus has emerged to resolve the debate, of particular relevance for the period discussed in my own project, over the beginning and end points of the social separation described by Burke. In his study of sexual conduct and marriage practices, Martin Ingram interprets the reform of popular culture as "an intensification . . . of processes at work for centuries" rather than a major change in cultural perspective (1985: 138, 160). From the other side of the time frame, Ronald Hutton confirms that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the reformers' hostility to popular festivity produced "a sharper separation . . . between the sophisticated and the vulgar" (1994: 111); yet he objects to Burke's thesis as an anachronistic "error" since this movement was not completed until sometime between 1740 and 1850, when the "literate really did come to regard traditional popular pastimes as belonging to a different world to their own" (246). Along similar lines, Sullivan and Woodbridge have argued that, since popular culture belonged to "everyone" in 1500, it cannot function as a "historically specific descriptive category" (2000: 268–9): since, as Peter Burke has claimed, "by 1800 popular culture was for the lower classes," then it came firmly into place, paradoxically enough, only when it was no longer "popular"; that is, when its customs and practices became identified as the property of a smaller and less prestigious group, sometimes to slip from historical record entirely. Yet in between these dates of the early sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Sullivan and Woodbridge also observe that in "the elite creation of the Folk, the popular, as a category . . . the Renaissance laid the groundwork" (282). While these scholars criticize Burke for prematurely identifying a defined "popular culture" in the Renaissance, none deny that by the end of the sixteenth century the category of the popular was undoubtedly in formation. This in-between quality of a concept coming to visibility but not yet wholly distinct usefully offers the opportunity to understand the process of this withdrawal while it was still underway within society and, more importantly, within the subjectivities of early moderns.

In identifying two separate groups – the godly who attempted to reform contemporary values, and the nobility (with some bourgeoisie) who internalized an ethos of self-control – Burke wisely refused to attribute this social shift to any one group or to any one motive. Defining themselves according to differing if not absolutely opposing values, social fractions simultaneously distanced themselves from lower status groups characterized alternatively as socially vulgar or spiritually reprobate. The question remains: Why did these disparate groups share an impulse to differentiate themselves by the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries? To rephrase Sullivan and Woodbridge, *why* was the groundwork for the "creation of the Folk, the popular, as a category," laid in the Renaissance? What was the ideological impetus underlying the production of popular cultures against which, and through which, early moderns could then perceive themselves? The answers are as diverse and as complex as those underlying the Reformation. From a broad viewpoint, it seems clear that various forces, operating at variant intensities, combined to sharpen the compulsion for early moderns to distinguish themselves in terms of other, and particularly of lower, groups. Sometimes distinct and often intermingling, economic as well as ideological, these forces include (1) the unprecedented availability of goods, combined with social stratification caused by inflation and population increase, (2) religious movements that created new meanings for previously neutral practices that came to signify a popular culture, and (3) a nationalist fervor that fostered competing modes of patriotic self-definition. To understand the agendas shaping various groups, it is necessary to address briefly each of these forces.

Rather than a simple withdrawal, the widening gap established by the elite and middling sorts from those of lower status was part of a larger process of social stratification already in its early stages by the high Middle Ages, intensifying during the sixteenth century and still in process for at least another century after. By the sixteenth century, social fractions multiplied in response to an economic system poised between feudalism and capitalism. In addition to continuing expansion in trade and industry, a dramatic rise in population accompanied by significant price inflation accelerated a process of economic stratification. As Paul Slack has noted, the increased demand for goods attending this rapid population growth produced wealth for larger landholders and poverty for those whose real wages could not keep up with inflation as, by the third quarter of the sixteenth century, real wages fell 30 percent below their level in 1500 (1988: 47). Straining available resources of charity and punishment alike, the numbers of homeless poor increased, according to A.L. Beier, at "an alarming rate" between 1560 and 1640 (1985: 14). In the meantime, consumer demand exploded.[5] The period from 1570 to 1650 was, according to Craig Muldrew, one of particularly intense social polarization with the rising levels of poverty juxtaposed to increasingly comfortable modes of living for those especially of the middling sort (1998: 49). Probate inventories confirm William Harrison's amazed observation of the rapid changes in consumption, as even "inferiour artificers and manie farmers" have now furnished "their cupbords with plate, their joined beds with tapistrie and silke hangings, and their tables with carpets & fine naperie" (1877: 239; Orlin 1994: 255). In a restless search for increasingly higher levels of refinement, wealthy aristocrats and merchants embarked upon similarly spectacular improvements in their living arrangements, their clothing,