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Introduction: Festivity during the Elizabethan age

The theme of festivity is clearly not a *topos* or subject for which there already exists an established critical tradition. The first part of this study concentrates on documents and evidence of both a historical and a literary nature. The second pursues the ramifications and transformations of the theme within Shakespearian drama. Festivity is a social manifestation linked with natural and seasonal cycles and rooted in a so-called archaic vision of time and the cosmos. It is not necessarily fundamentally connected with the written word. Oral transmission was the rule in popular festivity. Not until the second half of the eighteenth century did 'antiquarians', the precursors of the folklorists of today, set about collecting and writing down the texts of ballads, mimed dramas and other festive performances that had been sung and acted in the English countryside since very ancient times. In the case of civic and princely festivals, the archives have preserved not only the texts of pamphlets and the speeches that various personages delivered but also accounts, in which the price of costumes and the artists' fees are all minutely recorded. But the essence of these festivals lay elsewhere: in the music, the dancing, the movement and colour and also – as we should remember – in the shrieks of joy and boos of derision from the crowd of spectators in the background. It is true that a number of writers of the period set about re-creating these festivals, representing them in spicy and colourful sketches, and that in Shakespeare's works the pomp and magic of the theatrical production are sometimes successful in recapturing something of that lost splendour. But we shall never really know what the performance of a Masque at the court of Elizabeth or James I was like. We should also remember that most of the contemporary documentation on the many local or seasonal festivals is drawn from parish registers, judicial or ecclesiastical court hearings, sermons and homilies or other books of a solemn and joyless nature. Modern anthropologists have cameras and sound-recorders at their disposal, but to try to become a *historian* of something that is essentially ephemeral and intangible, the protean phenomenon *par excellence*, may well seem a paradoxical and risky, not to say foolhardy, undertaking. Conscious of the dangers as well as the inevitable limits of this undertaking, I have nevertheless decided to take up the challenge and venture forward along

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paths still barely charted in a field of study in which sociological and literary elements are closely intertwined.

My decision to investigate forms of behaviour that have now died out, surviving only as traces scattered through a wide variety of documentation, was prompted by a deep conviction which constituted my point of departure. It was the belief that the Renaissance as a whole and the Elizabethan age in England in particular were indissolubly linked with a notion of periodic celebration and rejoicing for which all and sundry prepared and in which all took part: the age was, in short, pervaded with the spirit of festivity. That spirit, generally expressed in traditional and conservative forms, may well have constituted one aspect of the rising liberalism and individualism of the age, but it no doubt also served the purposes of a monarchy now endowed with powers both temporal and spiritual, since it won it the approval and gratitude of the masses. However, by about the last two decades of the sixteenth century, voices on all sides were being raised against the waste and immorality of festivals, whether princely or popular, and darker days were in the offing, days that were to hasten their decline. Under the Stuarts, people set about retrospectively re-creating the myth of 'Merry England' and began to hark back nostalgically to a joyful, festive England in which the morose boredom of Sundays had been a thing unknown.[1] The fact that, already at this early date, it was more a matter of images and collective representations than of social or historical reality in the strict sense of the expression shows clearly enough that the history of festivity has belonged from the start to the domain of imaginary representation and what historians of today call 'mentalities'. So if this history has tended to be set apart from the strictly literary field, it is not on account of any real separation between the two domains but rather as a result of an artificial distinction made between two areas of specialist studies.

The first scholar to attempt to do away with that distinction was Jean Jacquot, the organizer and leader of a series of colloquia in the 1950s on the subject of Renaissance festivals. His three volumes on the subject opened up the way for interdisciplinary studies in a domain where the marking out of subjects for research projects could best be done through collective discussions.[2] I must, however, confess that my own project did not emerge directly from the possibilities envisaged in the course of those discussions. Rather, its obscure, almost secret, origin is to be found in a remark by Jean Jacquot at the end of his Introduction to what he appositely called his 'joyous and triumphant entry' when he observed that it

> would have been interesting to explore what palace and castle entertainments (particularly at the New Year and Carnival time) owed to popular festivals. A fine

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study could be made of folklore's contribution to the aristocratic festival, its role in the pastoral and the 'fairyland' element that the little rural deities, intermingled with the nymphs and dryads of classical mythology, added to the Masques or comedies performed at court.[3]

The idea that festivals, poor and rich alike, draw upon the same mythical and imaginary stock is an attractive one, for it could blow apart the watertight compartments set up by ideologies and call into question the idea that the class struggle is universal. Nor does the suggestion of a mutual interaction and influence between the various manifestations of festivity of the period necessarily imply an old-fashioned, paternalistic view of the situation. Festivity is profoundly ambivalent and, for that very reason, tends to repel dialectical interpretations.

As for my method for analysing texts which are bound to raise the delicate question of how adequately festivity can be reflected within a written corpus of literature to which it does not necessarily belong, I decided to distinguish between two main categories of texts: those used as sources of evidence or documentation (which might be economic, juridical or literary in character) and texts in which the subject of festivity plays a structural, metaphorical or symbolic role. Of course, in practice, the dividing line between these two types of texts is not all that clear or easy to draw: informative texts are frequently also metaphorical, and *vice versa*. All the same, it seems safe to assume that the meaning of the second type of text depends upon our knowledge and understanding of the first type. The corpus of the material on festivity as a whole comprises a vast range of data – networks of imagery and symbolic systems – that provided for the Elizabethan dramatists a language of allusion, a whole panoply of rhetorical devices and a pattern of symbolic references. So the first thing to do is to identify and classify the disparate and scattered data available to us (even if, as some historians have insisted, it will probably never be complete).[4] In the first part of the present study, which will be historical and anthropological in character, I shall try to present a synthesis of the documentation that I have read or to which I have referred, within the general framework of a calendary classification. This should make it possible to define the questions to be asked and determine a method of approach to the literary and imaginary representation of festivity in the theatre of Shakespeare.

I have chosen to limit this study to the period that coincides with Shakespeare's dramatic activity, covering the last fifteen years of Elizabeth's reign and the first ten of James I's, that is to say 1590 to 1613. The reason for that decision is my desire to emphasize the close relationship I detect between festivity and literature during this period. Of course, this does not mean ignoring the continuity of festive folklore

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and traditions,[5] for it will clearly be necessary to look back at the past to discover elements that influenced the young Shakespeare and are to be found later, in transposed form, in his works. Nor should we underestimate the importance of changes that took place during those years as a result of decisions taken by the secular authorities. Festivals undeniably convey messages about time that are not restricted to the usual historical points of reference, but they were also affected by many changes that took place over these years in the religious, political and administrative domains, both nationally and locally, as a result of decisions made by the authorities. Thus, the royal decrees issued by Henry VIII put a stop to religious festivals that had been observed for centuries. But even as the old Catholic calendar was being changed and purged, new festivals of a civic or national nature were being created. Furthermore, although many local festivals were encountering the hostility of municipal authorities, magistrates and Puritan worthies, at the same time the theatres of London were enjoying a considerable boom and more theatrical companies were touring the provinces. On the other hand, we should, albeit somewhat circumspectly, bear in mind the publication of works such as *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) by Philip Stubbes. This was a passionate diatribe against the mores of the period and what the author presents as so many evils affecting society, ranging from the enclosures to the extravagant fashions and costumes paraded at court, and taking in the 'satanism' of the festivals of May and those of the Lord of Misrule.[6] The undeniable popularity of this work points to the existence, among the élite and the educated, of quite a strong movement of opposition to festivity, while at the same time testifying indirectly to its persistent vitality and popularity among the masses. On the other hand, it is fair to suppose that, as I shall be showing later, this violent yet inspired diatribe is just as likely to have exerted a seductive fascination upon certain minds as to have inspired others with a salutary reaction of repulsion. That is frequently the way with works devoted to evil and depictions of hell: instead of ridding the soul of its poisons, they tend to sow the seeds of disturbance there. But the reason why Stubbes is still read and often cited even today is, paradoxically enough, because his denunciation of the abuses of his time constitutes one of the most useful contemporary anthropological sources of evidence on traditions that – certainly unwittingly – he helped to salvage from oblivion. Furthermore, it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that Shakespeare himself may have had the work in mind while writing certain passages of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *Othello*.

All the same, sixty years later, Stubbes' ideas were posthumously realized when a law was passed banning all the great religious festivals of the calendar: the festival of Christmas was replaced by a day of fasting on

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25 December 1644 and, in 1647, the celebrations of Easter and Whitsun were banned. It is hard to ignore these events on the threshold of the Elizabethan age, for retrospectively they are bound to affect any analysis of festivity during this period. It would nevertheless be mistaken, I think, to see things purely in relation to the zero degree of festivity represented by Cromwell's Commonwealth, for that would lead to our looking everywhere and prematurely for the signs of a decline all the more inevitable given that we know the end of the story. The period that interests us abounds in difficulties, tensions and contradictions, but nothing seems to have been a foregone conclusion at the time. Festivity continued to punctuate the days and seasons in the countryside, to animate civic processions in the towns and to enliven court life with celebrations of unprecedented pomp. Of course, there were protests from the Puritans and sermons and pamphlets rained down, but there was nothing particularly exceptional about these recriminations: they were part of a long tradition of homilies delivered from the pulpit, castigating excesses of all kinds and condemning the abandonment of spiritual duties in favour of the satisfaction of desire and appetite.

Yet, the Renaissance festival was no longer quite the same as the medieval one, especially in England, where the emancipation of the national Church from the domination of Rome speeded up a break with the spirit of medieval religion and led to the suppression of the traditional cults of saints and also of certain religious festivals. The changes made in the liturgy, services and ceremonies of the Church tended towards a general anglicanization (Latin services being replaced by the Book of Common Prayer), simplification (the spectacular aspect of religion being toned down) and a reduction in the number of the feast days that had studded the old calendar of pre-Reformation days.[7] Thus Corpus Christi, which had been instituted in England in 1264 and was the occasion for dramatic performances and processions in many provincial cities (such as York and Chester) was suppressed by Edward VI in 1547, and the pageant of Saint John's Day (the Midsummer Watch) created by Henry III in 1253, which took place in more and more places after the tragic 'Ill May Day' of 1517,[8] was abolished by Henry VIII in 1539.[9]

It is hard to gauge the real impact of these prohibitions that upset the pattern of secular practices. The decisions of the Privy Council were certainly not implemented immediately, for these were troubled times when, in the absence of any centralized bureaucracy, only patience and vigilance could hope to overcome the many pockets of local resistance. To make the point simply, it was certainly not until well into the second half of the sixteenth century that the reforms adopted at the end of the first half can have been applied and assimilated. In the sixteenth century, the notion of change spelt more anxiety than hope and the considerable

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effects of the inertia of popular mentalities were also something that had to be taken into account. After the upheavals of the period from 1535 to 1558, Elizabeth's reign was to introduce greater stability and moderation in the face of the two extremes of Catholic reaction, on the one hand, and iconoclastic Puritan zeal, on the other.

In the towns and among the educated élite, the changes may have brought some people to recognize the precarious nature of festivals and a few to regard them as pointless. In the countryside, however, they appear to have influenced customs passed down from one generation to the next hardly at all.[10] On the other hand, those customs were soon to be affected by the socio-economic evolution of Elizabethan England, which was to give rise to numerous satirical couplets on subjects such as the all-powerful nature of money, the attraction of the cities and the landed aristocracy's lack of respect for the traditional duties of charity and hospitality which used to make it a moral obligation to receive the parish poor at one's table during the Christmas festival period.

However, just because tradition was fighting a losing battle in late-sixteenth-century England, we should not assume that festivals were everywhere on the defensive. Even as the great religious festivals of the Catholic calendar were banned and decline set in for the saints' festivals associated with the corporations, clerks and youth organizations (such as those of Saint Nicholas, Saint Clement and Saint Catherine), new popular festivals of an essentially national and Protestant nature were coming into being. Two of the best-known examples are the celebration of the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne on 17 November and the commemoration of the Gunpowder Plot on Guy Fawkes' Day, 5 November.

Then, in some cases, the prohibition affecting a festival would result not in its extinction, but in its transformation or transfer to another date in the calendar. Thus, the Midsummer Watch, officially suppressed in 1539, survived in the form of the Lord Mayor's Show, thenceforth celebrated in London on 28 October, on the feast day of Saint Simon and Saint Jude.[11] The rulers of the land, now also the supreme authorities over its religious affairs, seem to have been at pains to encourage the constitution of an Anglican calendar markedly different from the Roman one. In this connection, England's refusal to ratify the Gregorian reformed calendar that was adopted by the countries of mainland Europe in 1582 was a negative manifestation of that same concern.

As well as favouring the perpetuation of the civic bourgeois festival now liberated from its former dependence upon the Church, Elizabeth's accession to the throne ushered in a veritable rejuvenation of festivity. Court activities and the queen's visits to the provinces were timed to coincide with various symbolic dates situated at the cardinal points of the

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calendar, producing the impression that it was royal festivity that provided the general impulse and rhythm for all the different rites and celebrations that took place in the various provinces and at all social levels. The monarchy usurped the place of the Church, with the result that the erstwhile cult of the Virgin and saints was now transferred to the sovereign and her entourage. The activities and daily amusements of the queen and the court followed a quasi-ritual order based upon the division of the year into two. The winter season (the 'season of the revels') began on 17 November, the day when the queen returned to Whitehall to celebrate the anniversary of her accession to the throne, and this was followed by the twelve days of Christmas. Candlemas or Shrove Tuesday were the days for the court to set off for Greenwich or Richmond, where the ceremony of the washing of the feet of twelve poor people took place on Maundy Thursday. The Garter ceremony, on Saint George's Day, 23 April, took place at Windsor. The summer half of the year, known as 'high summer', was devoted to 'progresses' through the provinces, in the course of which the queen received the homage of her subjects and at the same time enjoyed the lavish receptions that the great aristocratic families laid on for her.[12] The entertainments organized for these progresses are well known thanks to the texts and evidence collected by John Nichols.[13] These seasonal festivities were complemented by occasional celebrations – entries, coronations and royal christenings, weddings and funerals – all of them pretexts for displays of liberality and rejoicing much appreciated by the masses. All this pomp and ceremony, connected with the Tudor myth and a revival of Arthurian chivalry, reflected a trend towards absolute monarchy that was to speed up under the Stuarts.

Festivity had always been an outlet for popular energies; under Elizabeth and James I, it became an instrument of government as much as a means of amusement. The genealogical tree that was displayed for the multitude to see on the occasions of royal entries justified the sovereign's legitimacy in the eyes of the masses,[14] while the encouragement of local festivals to mark a royal progress in the provinces was a way of making trouble for the Puritan municipalities who strove to ban them.[15] These festivals furthermore gave the supernatural new associations with the person of the sovereign, for a cult of the 'virgin queen' gradually superseded the old festivals devoted to the Virgin Mary.[16]

Elizabethan festivity is thus marked by secular trends that tended to remove many traditional celebrations from the orbit of religion. In Coventry, for example, the day for the mayor's induction was switched after the Reformation. Until then, it had taken place on the day of the Purification of the Virgin Mary (that is to say, Candlemas, 2 February); now it was moved to 1 November, a date with fewer suspect connections

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with papist idolatry.[17] But the most general consequence of these trends was probably the progressive eclipse of the extrovert religious feeling that had hitherto been demonstrated in the streets at the high points of the religious year, to the encouragement of a religion of a more austere and individual nature. The rise of the spectacular coincided with an internalization of the sacred.

The movement away from demonstrative religious manifestations was accompanied by a tendency if not to centralization, at least to a relocation of the more grandiose festive occasions. In the Middle Ages, celebrations of the Mysteries and Corpus Christi processions were to a large extent a feature of the towns of the provinces (the most famous, in this connection, being Coventry and Chester); the Elizabethan age saw such creative initiatives decline in the provinces but increase in the capital.[18] In London, the Midsummer Watch was replaced by a Lord Mayor's Show that became ever more lavish as the years passed, but no such replacement for it was introduced in the provinces. Furthermore, the dissolution of the guilds and corporations that used to be responsible for financing and organizing religious festivals and performances was also a factor that hastened the end of these spectacular ceremonies. The traditional calendary festivities probably remained unaffected, for they were the preserve of amateurs (artisans, fraternities or youth associations) and were occasions more for making money than for lavish spending. In the larger cities and in London, in particular, it was at this juncture that, thanks to aristocratic or royal protectors there, permanent troupes of players and professional artists sprang up and began to cater for a paying public by putting on daily performances which took the place of the erstwhile seasonal religious spectacles that used to provide free entertainment for all and sundry.[19] The existence of these troupes of players, who also toured in the provinces, inevitably dealt a fatal blow to the village folk plays and 'May games', which began to decline from 1580 onwards.[20]

The contrast between London and the provinces was increasingly accentuated by the astounding urban and commercial boom that subsequently spread to affect the whole of Elizabethan England. Yet the town/country opposition still lay at the heart of the whole phenomenon of festivity, for even if it was through the towns that festivals were developed, embellished and enriched, essentially the festival was the product of a rural civilization whose seasonal rhythms and magico-religious beliefs were linked with the mysteries of natural fertility. Furthermore, for Shakespeare's contemporaries, the countryside (whether cultivated or fallow or forest), lying *extra muros*, beyond the town walls, was still the object of ancient beliefs and deep-rooted fears. The forest, linked with royal privileges, was the domain of hunting,

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wildness and the sacred, as is testified by the ballads and legends of Robin Hood, the wealth of iconographic variants on the grotesque theme of the *homo sylvarum*, or wild man, and the juridical treatises of John Manwood.[21] Symbolic flowers and plants were gathered at Christmas time, on 1 May or Saint John's Day, to be arranged in people's houses or displayed in the village squares. These were ritual gestures that moved from the outside inwards, betokening a twofold desire: to overstep boundaries and to appropriate wild nature. At other periods of the year, this town/countryside relationship was reversed, particularly when pastoral festivals were celebrated. These took place during the secular half of the year[22] and were a pretext for urban dwellers to flock out of their towns to take part in the labour and amusements of the fields. Consider, for example, the following complaints expressed by the city of Westminster, bewailing the fact that its inhabitants deserted it in even greater numbers during the summer than at the end of each of the four annual terms:

> Those throwes of sorrowe come uppon mee four times every yeare, but at one time more, (and with more paines) than at all the rest. For in the height and lustiest pride of Summer, when every little Village hath the Bachilers & her Damsels tripping deftly about Maypols; when Medowes are full of Hay-makers: when the fields upon the workidaies are full of Harvesters singing, and the town greenes upon Hollydayes, trodden down by the Youthes of the Parish dancing . . . Then (even then) sit I like a Widdow in the middest of my mourning: then doe my buildings shew like infected lodgings, from which the Inhabitants are fledde . . .[23]

It is interesting to note how the festivities that at regular intervals or on special occasions emptied the town of its inhabitants, who all flocked to the countryside, are here indirectly assimilated to the plague ('infected lodgings, from which the Inhabitants are fledde').

The general opposition between town and countryside, which during the Elizabethan period gave way to an increasingly marked opposition between London and the provinces, was compounded by the great regional diversity that characterized all festive or folkloric ceremonies. Most festivities had a distinctly local character, in some cases one peculiar to the area around the church or to a particular part of a town or village. This made for a quasi-protean diversity in the customs, rites and traditions associated with every major calendary ceremony. England was a veritable mosaic of local customs reflecting a multitude of cultural enclaves and local peculiarities, but the most striking disparities were usually to be found in the Celtic fringes and in the northern regions of the country. Unlike the counties of the South-East, which were better served by roads and more receptive to continental influences, those regions still, in the sixteenth century, remembered their own secular traditions and