

O joy, O joy, the Hobby-Horse is Remembered

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“For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot” laments Hamlet in Act 3, Scene 2, and while the feeling of loss that resonates in his words is duly noted by contemporary readers, theatergoers, and editors alike, the cultural context and connotations of the Hamletian hobby-horse, or those of the supposed song he is quoting from, are mostly lost. This emblematic, yet also enigmatic Hamlet-quote is the starting point of Natália Pikli’s *Shakespeare's Hobby-Horse and Early Modern Popular Culture*, which promises a journey into the whereabouts of the Shakespearean hobby-horse in early modern popular culture, but ends up providing the reader with much more than that. A tour de force of socio-cultural as well as theater criticism, where the hobby-horse serves as a central image that guides the reader through the intricacies of early-modern popular culture, visual culture, and theater, the book also reads as a detective story where we trace the fading steps of Elizabethan hobby-horses.

Pikli starts her investigation by defining what a hobby-horse meant for an early modern reader and theater-goer, and thus uncovers a palimpsest of meanings that all interacted whenever the hobby-horse was mentioned. The word, in the most literal sense referred to “a breed of small horse, often of Irish origin” (9), however, it most commonly recalled the half-human, half-animal character of the Morris dance. Furthermore, it also referred to the play-horses of children, and often connoted sexuality and foolery. A separate chapter is dedicated to each layer of meaning, preceded by an introductory first chapter that delineates the theoretical background of the research. Chapter 2 follows the vicissitudes of the phrase “for O, for O, the

hobby-horse is forgot” in pamphlets and plays, contextualizing the fate of the Morris dancing horse in the “war of the theatres,” and chapter 3 investigates gendered discourses that link the hobby-horse to unruly female sexuality and, surprisingly, also to anti-Irish sentiments. Chapter 4 follows the dramatic discourse by turning its focus towards academic playwrights, while chapter 5 introduces the iconography of the hobby-horse through English and continental pictorial examples.

In the first chapter, Pikli offers a detailed history of the Morris dance, then she describes the correlations of the oral tradition to written and pictorial sources, a web of references that she later makes much use of. She also expands her research topic in the wider context of cultural memory studies, focusing on how the hobby-horse as a cultural cipher is remembered or forgotten in the early modern cultural products she investigates. She uses two terms to locate the hobby-horse in Elizabethan cultural memory, contrasting Leah Marcus’s idea of “antiquarian nostalgia”—a nostalgia towards traditions that are no longer alive, a critical, satirical nostalgia—with “living nostalgia,” a term coined by Pikli that describes a nostalgia towards events of the immediate past. Amidst fears that their aging Queen would die with no heir, the hobby-horse for Londoners at the end of the sixteenth century recalled the more tranquil times of “merry old England,” when young Bess sat on the throne, as well as a culture that many Londoners associated with their rural origins. This is why “living nostalgia” surrounded the hobby-horses appearing mostly as Morris dancers or figures, recalling the Morris tradition in Elizabethan pamphlets, plays, and visual representations, alongside a longing for earlier, happier times. In Jacobean drama, argues Pikli, this nostalgia is no longer present; it is replaced by a more satirical tone towards earlier folk traditions and the hobby-horse (39). This is apparent, for example, in Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) or in Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* (1611). The distinction between these two types of nostalgia unites the diverse material throughout the book in an effective way, and will no doubt be of great use for further research

on early modern popular culture as well; therefore, I find this conceptual pillar one of the highlights of the volume.

In what follows, Pikli navigates at ease between venues and genres, maps the intricate interrelatedness of early modern theater-makers, and gives confident readings of renowned as well as of lesser-known plays. Pikli's work is a treasure trove of early modern cultural and theater history, where everyone finds matters of interest, yet it is the book's conscious performative stance that appeals to me the most. The hobby-horse's role in the Morris dance adds a primary performative connotation to the word, by conjuring up aspects of that popular ritual, such as interaction with the audience, bawdy, dancing, and prancing. Therefore, we get a detailed account of the Morris dance alongside with its connections to the Robin Hood myth, madrigals, and pictorial representations. A rich tapestry of plays that quote and connote the hobby-horse motif unfolds from all these literary and cultural allusions, and so does an argument on the possible origin in a folk song tradition of the Hamletian line quoted above, a contention that is especially enticing and convincing. Since the hobby-horse in its origins is part of a popular cultural tradition, the research never loses focus of the popular context, furthermore, in analyzing the plays, Pikli never fails to consider the performative situation, and her thoroughly theatrical readings of the early modern play texts are, I would argue, the second greatest assets of the book.

This performative standpoint is also evident in Pikli always paying attention to the audience and the venue of the plays. For instance, while public playhouses attracted a wider spectrum of an audience and had to cater for their diverse tastes, private theaters, such as St. Paul's Boys, mainly performed bawdy and misogynist plays written for a more elite audience, and university plays were written and performed in Latin for a close circuit audience. Pikli masterfully delineates how the venue, the audience, and their views on popular culture influenced what registers of the hobby-horse references were brought into the play.

Disregarding the cultural register and frustrating audience expectations could be fatal for plays. This is illustrated by Pikli in the diverse fates of two university plays, George Ruggle's *Ignoramus* (1615) and Barten Holiday's *Technogamia* (1618). Both use the same references to hobby-horses and the Morris dance, yet in widely different ways, and, as Pikli contends, these references might also have influenced their fates on the early modern university stages where *Ignoramus* was a huge success, whereas *Technogamia* failed miserably, so much so that the supposedly disgusted James I wished to leave the performance. In *Ignoramus*, the hobby-horse, already a part of the forgotten "antiquarian nostalgic" tradition of popular culture, is pushed into the marginalized paratextual and metatheatrical domains of two prologues, and becomes a welcome intrusion of the popular hobby-horse into an elite context, whereas in *Technogamia* it physically threatens the stylized allegorical characters, as it did in the Morris dances of the past. However, by the Jacobean era, it had come to be viewed as a character physically and metaphorically intruding on the elite and was rejected as an unwelcome visitor. Pikli's insightful analysis of both plays contextualizes the appearance of the hobby-horse in the theatrical moment and convincingly supports her claim of its importance in the plays.

Concerning textual analyses, Pikli explores scenes and plays with the performative situation in mind, the best examples of which are the brilliant analysis of Bianca's lines in Act 4, Scene 1 (169–76) in *Othello* (1603)—highlighting the hobby-horse's connotations of female infirmity (125)—and her astute assessment of, and pop cultural commentary on the mousetrap scene in *Hamlet* (1601) (77). Even the emblem books of the Elizabethans are discussed as parallels to the public theater, thus adding to the performative nature of their supposed interpretative processes that combine reading the title, the image, and the poem (214).

Pikli's sense for the theatrical and her vast knowledge of early modern popular culture render her book an insightful history on the interplay of the theater, popular culture, and memory in early modern England. Her style and often witty personal comments on Jonson's or

Marston's plays transform the vastly informative book into a joyful read. Her research places the hobby-horse on the map of early modern cultural and literary studies, so we can all breathe a sigh of relief, o joy, o joy, the hobby-horse is remembered.

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