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Barry Reay. *Popular Cultures in England, 1550-1750*. New York: Longman, 1998. ix + 235 pp. \$31.40 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-48954-7; \$66.56 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-29296-3.

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The Diversity of the Past

Barry Reay has provided students and scholars with an admirable introduction to a fiendishly complex subject: popular culture—or cultures, as he would have it—in early modern England. He defines popular cultures broadly, as “widely held and commonly expressed thoughts and actions” (p. 1), and in six chapters he covers “Sexualities,” “Orality, Literacy and Print,” “Religions,” “Witchcraft,” and “Riots and the Law,” followed by a summary of his argument in Chapter Seven, “Popular Cultures.” The stress upon plural forms—“sexualities,” “religions,” “cultures”—is deliberate, and an important theme of the book, for Reay means to challenge an older view of popular culture which he describes as “binary” or “bipolar.” This view, which he identifies with the work of the French historian Robert Muchembled, and to a lesser degree with Peter Burke, tends to divide culture into two basic forms: “elite” and “popular” cultures which clash repeatedly until, Muchembled claimed, an older, popular culture, is “vanquished” by the power of social elites. Relying primarily upon the recent work of other historians, (his footnotes are a gold mine for anyone interested in recent literature on a wide range of subjects) and reinforced by his own research, Reay complicates the older, simpler, story. “The bipolar or binary model of the cultural make-up of early modern England,” he writes, “has slowly been replaced by a newer interpretation which stresses diversity and multiplicity” (p. 198). It is this interpretation which Reay champions. Terms such as “hybridity” (in reference to print, orality, and literacy, p. 58) and “cultural dynamism and malleability” (referring to witchcraft, p. 117) appear over and over again as he marshals his evidence and makes the case that English popular culture was never monolithic and cannot be explained as that which was simply non-elite.

The importance of the concept of diversity is apparent in Reay’s first chapter, “Sexualities.” Here, along with well-known information about reproductive habits and sexual behavior—illegitimacy rates and the like—he pro-

vides arresting examples of sexual language and attitudes towards sex to, as he puts it, “push the Foucauldian notion of multiple expressions of sex back from the Victorians to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (p. 33). This does not change the fact, as he recognizes, that sex in the early modern period was mostly heterosexual and largely confined within marriage, but it does add a new level of complexity to the story.

The issue of multiplicity is even more apparent, and as skillfully handled, in Reay’s chapter on orality, literacy, and print. He chooses this title, rather than simply calling it “Literacy” or “Print Culture” to make the point that all three of these are closely related, indeed inextricable. Though to some this might seem an obvious place to look for bipolarity as elite (i.e., printed) and popular (i.e., non-literate and oral) strive for dominance, Reay’s vision is more sophisticated. He accepts that social rank makes a big difference in what people read—or if they could read at all. Yet here again things are not so simple. Defining literacy is itself not always easy, for many who could not sign their names could read. Is such a person literate, or not? Many well-educated and prosperous individuals—the best known of whom in this period is probably Samuel Pepys—avidly read penny ballads and other examples of cheap print. Indeed one important point Reay makes is the ubiquity of print in the early modern period. Citing Tessa Watt’s work (*Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, Cambridge, 1991), he says that by the end of the sixteenth century there were millions of copies of ballads circulating though the country.

Much of this vast body of literature was about religion in one way or another, and Reay takes this subject up in his next chapter. Here he agrees with some historians, such as Christopher Haigh, that England experienced “reformations” rather than a Reformation, which led to the creation of “a divided nation rather than a Protestant one” (p. 79). But true to his own roots as a historian of Protestant radicals such as the Quakers, Reay

does not discount the force of Protestant ideas. Though their numbers were never very large, such Protestant radicals had a disproportionate impact. Roman Catholic ideas and practices (beyond the hard core of recusants) might have lived on at the popular level, but, he argues, finding them requires a close look at folkways often condemned by Protestants as diabolical—the realm of witches. Reay’s discussion of witchcraft describes what he calls the “mental framework” (p. 103) for belief in the supernatural—the combination of folklore, Roman Catholic survivals, and plain malice which made people accuse witches, or claim to be witches. He argues that historians of English witchcraft, unlike those of the Continent, have downplayed the importance of diabolism, and as a consequence have tended to view the phenomenon as one of the old culture versus the new the same bipolar view which he finds unconvincing in other contexts.

Bipolarity is also a target in Reay’s chapters covering ritual and riot. In some ways these topics readily lend themselves to a bipolar view. Civic elites squared off against the urban lower orders in struggles over rituals of misrule such as Shrove Tuesday or May Day: new versus old culture; gentry defenses of enclosures or fen drainage projects against local resistance: new culture versus old again. But Reay illustrates the complex nature of cultural forms and interplay, stressing their ambiguities. Royal entries and civic pageantry, for example, were carefully crafted combinations of high and low, appealing to all social ranks. Even riots, the epitome of disorder, were, in most instances, quite remarkably orderly, as crowds marched behind drums, elected captains, and wrote petitions. Reay does not deny that at times confrontation could be violent and notes that the law was fundamentally the servant of the social order, but he also points out the sophistication with which the lower orders

approached their putative betters—for example, through their use of the courts, or failing that, riot, for their own ends. He does not discuss political or religious disorder, however. Here he might find his multipolar model of culture to be less useful, as for example, sixteenth-century iconoclasts or seventeenth-century Tories wrought their malice against the perceived enemy.

Reay’s conclusion summarizes his views that the bipolar model of culture has been displaced. He stresses the need to trace continuities as well as change, and calls for a reassessment of the role of the “middling sort” as cultural mediators. His assault upon the bipolar model is very effective, revealing much that older interpretations had ignored or slighted. There are dangers in the new model, however. Stressing the multiplicity and diversity of all cultural activity, carried too far, can make it harder, rather than easier, to make sense of the past. At its worst it can lead to a kind of relativism which undermines the very point of writing history: no account can accurately recapture the past, therefore why bother? History becomes an exercise in navel-gazing, telling readers more about who wrote it than about its alleged subject. Reay himself flirts with this idea when he says that “histories are perpetually in flux and always contestable” (p. 220). This is a truism with which most historians would agree, but it must be qualified by the admission that some histories are better than others: some are based upon evidence and clearly-stated argument. Some are not. Barry Reay has shown the way in synthesizing a new interpretation of popular cultures in early modern England which may be less “contestable” than that which it supersedes.

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