

The Extraordinary and the Everyday in Early Modern England: Essays in Celebration of the Work of Bernard Capp

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Bernard Capp has made an outstanding contribution to the social and cultural history of early modern England. This volume of 13 essays, by leading scholars Capp has inspired, is a fitting tribute. It is, at one level, a cabinet of curiosities, with studies of jokes, memories, miracles, insults, fairies, witches and bodily functions, each enticingly strange. The editors stress, though, that this is more than a collection of bizarre tales. Like all the best cultural history, the episodes described here are keyholes through which to peer at a diffuse framework of mentalities, at the fleeting traffic between institutions and individuals, ideas and opinions – the light and shade of the world we have lost. What Carlo Ginzburg saw in his literate miller, and Robert Darnton in that massacre of cats, were opportunities to recover evanescent but essential aspects of early modern existence, and to make them speak to big questions of consciousness, belief and agency. These historians aim to capture nothing less than the past reality of experience: its textures, ambiguities and conflicts.

As Angela McShane and Garthine Walker suggest in their (all too brief) introduction, Bernard Capp's research has reached deep into a realm of marginal existence to show us how the majority lived. There is a certain irony in this, but early modern inequalities of wealth, power and literacy meant that the relationship between the sizes of social groups and record-production was an inverse one: there are no peasant diaries. Yet a vast amount of archival sources *concern* the lower orders, sometimes vividly recording their minds, words and actions, even if not actually written by them.

The book's organizing scheme is based on the relationship between the extraordinary and the everyday, queer and quotidian, uncanny and unremarkable. Definitions vary as viewpoints vary. First, even sparing our ancestors the enormous condescension of posterity, our perspective can never be quite the same as theirs. Early modern people able and inclined to examine their lives, and to make a record, were unlike us, and the rest more alien still. Just as important are the ways in which early modern people differed from each other. Generalizations are easily made but often misleading; variety, however, speaks for itself. Its determinants are relatively limited – era, age, gender, class, occupation, location, religion – but their permutations infinite: how differently did a recusant Lancastrian gentlewoman of the 1580s see the world from a puritan apprentice in Commonwealth London? What does it mean to call both 'early modern', and is that more helpful than bracketing together people alive during the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War?

Differentiation is not just a matter of doing right by the dead, recognizing their individuality and subjectivity: it is about seeing early modern life as a dynamic equation, and thereby better understanding change. A key aspect of early modern change, and one that generated so many documents, is that it caused anxiety throughout society. In an age of overpopulation, poverty, shortages of land and food, and fraught competition, difference was a perceived source of disorder, imagined or real. Certain groups became problems: assertive women, masterless youths, vagrants, religious dissenters. The perception was more frightening than the reality; but in the hands of England's governors perceptions became truth: the political consequences of belief were tangible, and the 'other' buttressed ideals cherished by Church and state. The 16th and 17th centuries were politically turbulent and insecure, and tolerating even trivial forms of unorthodoxy might be seen to encourage social dissolution and divine destruction.

Given the complexity of this world, where culture had more battlegrounds than common ground, how are we to separate the everyday and the extraordinary? Clearly, no firm rules can be established: we need multiple perspectives and contexts of communication. To satisfy such a need, this collection offers 'an exploration of the shifting centre and the porosity at the peripheries of the "norm" in early modern England' (p. 3). The essays are arranged into two sections: the first looks for the extraordinary qualities of the everyday, the second the everyday in the extraordinary. This is an elegant formulation, but it is not clear that the essays conform to such a neat dyad. Some readers might wonder what it even means, and there is no conclusion to help them judge how well the essays live up to the prospectus. Undoubtedly, the contributions, in all their variety, do throw up interesting comparisons and connections, but we are obliged to make them for ourselves.

Those of us who raid archives for a current project, view with an admiring envy a historian who has spent his life reading, and looking for, everything. Keith Thomas is famous for his envelopes stuffed with reference-slips for every ethnological detail under the early modern sun. Perhaps only he could have written an essay on farting. It is an illuminating piece: flatulence is not in itself historically important, but the manners and morals, codes and conventions, surrounding it are. Sheepishly, perhaps, Thomas insists that his piece is 'a well-intentioned attempt to illuminate some of the values, sensibilities and implicit tensions of the period' (p. 11), and trusts that Bernard Capp will understand. Farts were not merely malodorous gases: they were toxic, hazardous to expel but more dangerous to hold in. Some considered breaking wind discreetly an art; others (such as the Dutch) were less inhibited. Farting might be a weapon, like a curse or an insult. It could be used to disrespect authority, a spontaneous uncivil act at a time when civility was so important to polite status.

Essentially, or perhaps we should say fundamentally, this is an essay about the serious side of humour. So often when we laugh we betray the things that worry us, and because these change over time they have a history. 17th-century jokes 'ridiculed people whose bodies let them down at ludicrously unsuitable moments' (p. 19), and the greater the shame, the louder the laughter. Thomas suspects that viewing a fart as a breach of decorum had been less common in earlier times, which may explain post-1600 scatological humour – 'the natural release sought by people for whom intensifying standards of bodily restraint were relatively new and unaccustomed' (p. 22).

Anthony Fletcher relates the cautionary tale of Sir Thomas Isham, who in 1675, aged 17, inherited a

Northamptonshire estate. At first his behaviour was merely obnoxious, but the real trouble started when he went on the Grand Tour. Isham had taste, but an enormous appetite, and indulged unstintingly in art. In 1679 a dawning awareness that his absence and lifestyle were damaging the estate drew the prodigal son home. His affairs in chaos, Isham arranged to marry into money but died of smallpox on the eve of his wedding. Fletcher's assessment is that 'Sir Thomas proved too arrogant, too opinionated, too pleasure seeking and too mercurial to be a successful and respected Northamptonshire landlord' (p. 45). What this tells us about the everyday and the extraordinary is uncertain – except perhaps that much was expected of the young in the 17th century (especially heirs to titles and estates) and that sometimes they failed to live up to those expectations. Self-restraint turned to abandon as familial and societal constraints on their lives became unbearable – like succumbing to wind.

The unusual friendship between an old man and an orphan is the subject of Ralph Houlbrooke's essay. In 1596 Robert Robertes died without making a formal will, but had, it was claimed, made the 11-year-old Cecily White his executor, something Robertes's brothers disputed. The case could not be decided definitively, although it seems a settlement was reached. The story comes from depositions taken in a Berkshire archdeaconry court, the sort of records which 'brilliantly illuminate an exceptional relationship or situation' (p. 48). The detail in which the dispute and its background have been reconstructed is indeed remarkable, and shows the intricate nature of the legal and financial affairs of even quite ordinary people by the end of the 16th century. This demonstrates more than just the action of the state upon people's lives: lawsuits like this, in their many thousands, actually *constituted* the state, not as a set of institutions but as a web of connections with authority.

Legal records also underpin Paul Griffiths's investigation of 'punishing words', a piece packed with examples of libels and slanders tried in borough courts. He focuses on how feuding neighbours and reformist magistrates alike drew on the same visual vocabulary to threaten and cajole. The urban landscape was dotted with sites and devices of correction – bridewells, cages, pillories, gallows, whipping posts and cucking stools – comprising a 'material semiotics' (p. 68) of discipline and punishment. This, Griffiths suggests, was Foucauldian *avant la lettre*. He insists that the adoption of these images did not constitute plebeian acquiescence to the moral authority of the law, rather a pragmatic reaction to the realities of power and the urge to lay enemies low.

It is difficult to discover what early modern people thought, but this should not stop us trying. David M. Turner's excellent contribution examines a serial publication, *Poor Robin's Intelligence*, available between 1676 and 1677. Its stock-in-trade was 'prodigies, cheats, sham doctors, astrologers and the mishaps and sexual misadventures of the city's inhabitants' (p. 86). Disdained then and since, the newspaper actually offers a rich seam of historical evidence. It was written in an esoteric, elliptical style, full of innuendo, puns, metaphors and literary allusions – 'a kind of learned vulgarity that was based on varied cultural resources' (p. 100). Turner is especially interested in the way it connected with tastes and topical interests, and its uses as a guide to the interplay between humour and political debate. More broadly, its content 'offers an intriguing insight into how London's inhabitants located themselves mentally and geographically within the expanding metropolis' (p. 87).

Garthine Walker, sticking closer to her own editorial brief than some contributors, challenges the dominant idea that witchcraft was an exceptional crime: the *contemporary* notion that it was exceptionally difficult to determine, and the *historical* notion of its exceptional non-existence. Instead, she sees it as 'a mundane, everyday crime', the unexceptional quality of which 'was precisely wherein lay its power to bring about exceptional outcomes' (p. 106). Walker recommends that we see English witch-trials not in the context of other European witch-trials, but 'in the more immediate context in which it existed, namely in that of felony within the English criminal justice system' (p. 109). In everything from body searches to the evidential admissibility of hearsay, witch-trials conformed to normal legal procedure, and convictions were neither casual nor hysterical: they were the logical outcomes of complex decision-making processes by intelligent people with laws and beliefs different from our own.

Here we leave the extraordinary in the everyday, and move to the reverse formulation, although the essays in

the first part fit this description too. Peter Marshall recounts how in the mid-1640s Cornish maidservant Ann Jeffries allegedly acquired healing powers after encountering some fairies. 50 years later, a London printer made a pamphlet of the tale, part of a campaign 'to stem a perceived tide of atheism, scepticism and unbelief sweeping the nation' (p. 128) by displaying the extraordinary works of God and the devil. The episode exemplifies brilliantly a moment in late 17th-century epistemology when the credibility of such phenomena hung in the balance. Many were unsure; some were vehemently defensive; others openly scoffing. It is particularly interesting that the battle-lines did not follow lines of social demarcation: this was an elite controversy.

Alexandra Walsham follows with a superb account of the legend that a bone belonging to John Wyclif, posthumously condemned as a heretic and disinterred, caused a healing well to spring up where it fell. That 'the morning star of the Reformation' should be remembered with exactly the same kind of miracle story that Protestants reviled seems less ironic when we realize that, as in Peter Marshall's essay, belief was embedded in culture and met needs that were social as well as spiritual. Walsham compares Wyclif's veneration in folklore and 'the reciprocal processes by which Luther was assimilated into older paradigms of sainthood' (p. 149). Old habits died hard, and not from ignorance but due to the sheer power of traditional customs – customs that were meaningful, evocative and satisfying. The supposed 'miracle' was intimately bound up with rural *lieux de mémoires*, 'a tendency to spin an imagined past around visible topographical features that is deeply ingrained in human cultures' (p. 142).

Catherine Armstrong dissects Jacobean reports that starving colonists in Jamestown had resorted to cannibalism, arguing that the 'truth' of this cannot be separated from political ideas about the New World, and the means by which they were communicated. Captain John Smith promoted America almost as vigorously as he promoted himself, and his off-colour joke about a man who ate his wife may well be an indication of his disillusionment with Virginia and a new-found affection for New England. That humans have eaten other humans, as rituals of triumph and from desperation, is beyond dispute; but it may also be the case that 'what is important about cannibalism is that people think it exists, rather than whether it does exist' (p. 168). This, it seems then, is a very good example of the way that the extraordinary inhabits the everyday: as a horrific idea that keeps norms in place.

The same could also be said about witches, examined in the next essay. Darryl Ogier examines 'the dreadful record of Channel-Island witch hunting' (p. 178), and observes how a lack of external scrutiny explains relatively high numbers of prosecutions. Within the islands themselves, the authorities 'made common cause against un-neighbourliness with the wider population, serving the advancement and retention of power' (p. 187). Like Garthine Walker, Ogier identifies the everyday concerns in the extraordinary crime of witchcraft: the nuts and bolts of daily life manipulated and threatened by demonism. Throughout the early modern period, popular attitudes to the devil were complicated. Not all engagement with magic implied satanic power, unless of course it was condemned as such by a clergyman or law officer. Again, meaning, malign or benign, depended on perspective.

Darren Oldridge's essay on the print history of the Mother Shipton legend shows her transformation from sorceress to witch to diabolist, each with its own inflection, during the middle decades of the 17th century. These shifts, Ogier suggests, 'indicate the power of popular stereotypes to mould the image of the literary characters in dramatic ways' (p. 223). Interestingly, Shipton was not necessarily becoming more frightening: it was perfectly possible to represent her as a comic figure in the 1660s, and to the same audiences that would continue to fear witches for generations to come. Reading these tales, and discovering how a 17th-century audience read them, requires careful contextualization and a degree of imagination.

The next story is a case in point. In 1650 some drunks in Berkshire decided to honour their exiled king by eating flesh sliced from their buttocks. In a richly researched and conceptually sophisticated piece, Angela McShane suggests that 'such events, rather than simply appealing to our taste for the bizarre and spectacular, can illuminate something of the everyday experience of royalism in interregnum England' (p. 192). She subjects the episode to 'multiple imaginary readings' (p. 192), and argues that it might be seen as a 'secular sacrament' (p. 193) arising from a desire among traditionalists to restore monarchy and remake the body

politic. Cavaliers were rootless, disinherited, incoherent, which explains why bonding rituals may have been unusually important in the 1650s, a means for them to 're-engage emotionally both with each other, and an imagined State to come' (p. 205). Like blood, drink could seal an impromptu covenant, banishing melancholy, dulling pain and galvanizing hope.

The thaumaturgical power of blood also features in Steve Hindle's contribution, focusing on an affray in the Cheshire town of Nantwich in 1572 which left a gentleman named Roger Crockett dead. The investigation that followed was convoluted, attended by allegations that witnesses had been suborned and their testimony false. A remarkable aspect of the inquest was recourse to the ritual of touching, where, it was believed, a murderer might be exposed by the fresh bleeding of a corpse. Hindle does some impressive detective-work on the evidence, engaging fully with the problem of the ordinary and the extraordinary at the heart of this volume. From the welter of depositions generated by the crime, including a file from a prerogative court, it's hard to say what was true in any objective sense, and the story of Crockett's demise 'evaporates into ether of Star Chamber rhetoric, leaving only half-heard echoes of mutual recrimination' (p. 237).

Hindle's fine epilogue rounds off the entire collection. He suggests that dividing the strange from the normal is unhelpful unless we thoroughly investigate their relationship, in different eras and contexts. We must recover not just otherness, but forms and rates of change. Change is about the big picture, not always well served by the microhistorical approach, at least in the Italian *micro-istoria* tradition rather than that of English local studies. As the contributors show, links between the extraordinary and the everyday could be ambivalent, conflicted, and intricately arranged by circumstance and contingency. Furthermore, the things we find remarkable in the past were sometimes the same as our ancestors found strange in their present; why else would they have recorded them with such wonder, shame, horror and glee? Things were remarkable in that they were worth *marking* upon; to see something as extraordinary was to notice change, and often to be troubled by it. This reaction produced a fabulous array of documentary sources telling wonderful and frequently weird stories. Therein lies much of the appeal of studying the early modern period: 'its almost unlimited capacity to disclose the co-existence of the strange with the apparently familiar, the interpenetration of the ordinary and the extraordinary' (p. 239).

The editors thank Dr Gaskill for his review and do not wish to comment further.

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