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Unpopular Literature?

John Heywood's *The Spider and the Flie*

Abstract

This article examines an idiosyncratic, lavishly illustrated mid-Tudor English printed book, John Heywood's *The Spider and the Flie* (1556), a book condemned both in the sixteenth century and since as incomprehensible and virtually unreadable. The article argues, rather, that the book's gestation period was long and complex, but that, once this is understood, the book becomes readily comprehensible, in both its structure and implications. It looks briefly at evidence for ownership of the book, and then moves to discuss what it, along with Heywood's collected volumes of proverbs and epigrams, can contribute to a discussion of early-modern popular literature, the subject of the UNA Europa funded network, *Popular Respublica Litteraria*, to which this article is a contribution.

Keywords

John Heywood, *The Spider and the Flie*, book history, legal satire, woodcuts, Tudor rebellions, popular literature

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John Heywood (c. 1496–1578) was an English musician, singer, tutor, playwright, poet, and collector of epigrams who variously enjoyed popular success in each of these forms through the reigns of successive English monarchs from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I. A lifelong and devout Catholic, he frequently found himself out of sympathy with the Protestant religious reforms of the long, turbulent sixteenth century. Yet, unlike his uncle, Sir Thomas More, or his wife's kinsmen John and William Rastell, he always succeeded in renegotiating his relationship with the monarch of the moment, and in reinventing himself as a writer and performer for different audiences, until, that is, he finally chose exile over compromise with the religious demands of the Elizabethan Treason Act of 1563, and fled to the Netherlands in the following year.[1]

His long allegorical poem, *The Spider and the Flie*, printed in Fleet Street, London, by Thomas Powell in 1556, is a strange, idiosyncratic, contribution to the fields of both sixteenth century narrative fiction and the comic literature of folly. Literally a one-off, it was printed only this once in the period, in quarto, and runs to ninety-eight chapters (with a foreword, and coda) in over 8,000 lines of verse, across 456 pages, with ninety-eight accompanying illustrations. It would not be printed again until the nineteenth century, and still awaits a full, commercially published, scholarly edition. It is a remarkable text, and a remarkable physical artefact, that raises questions and provokes comment about almost every aspect of its production, its intended purpose, and its reception. And it is in the spirit of asking such questions that I present this essay as a case study for consideration, as the work's idiosyncrasies may cast light on some aspects of what we think of as 'popular literature', even if the text itself seems at some remove from any notion of the popular.[2]

Much misunderstood, *The Spider and the Flie* has been described as 'the least-loved long poem of sixteenth-century England',[3] and perhaps rightly so. It is unrelentingly long, and actually seems much longer, because it keeps stopping to recap its plot, for characters to rehearse and repeat their own and others' arguments, and to tell us what is going to happen next. And its allegorical narrative (which starts modestly with a dispute between a spider living in a window in Heywood's house and a fly which has flown unwittingly into its web and ends in all-out war between armies of flies, spiders, and other insects) is incredibly, indeed almost impenetrably, dense and costive. Even in the sixteenth century, when much of its context would have been more familiar, it was dismissed as incomprehensible, with the historian William

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1 For a detailed account of Heywood's family connections, life, and work, see Greg Walker, *John Heywood: Comedy and Survival in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford 2020.

2 For a detailed and engaging account of the poem that does seek to set it in a popular tradition, that of agrarian resistance to enclosures and 'aristo-capitalism', see James Holstun, 'The Spider, the Fly, and the Commonwealth: Merrie John Heywood and Agrarian Class Struggle', *ELH* 71 (2004), pp. 53–88. As what follows will suggest, I do not share Holstun's conclusions, but do share his appreciation of the poem as a serious act of political imagination. For an account that, conversely, suggests an elite context for the poem as a school book for the young Mary Tudor, see Judith Rice Henderson, 'John Heywood's "The Spider and the Flie": Educating Queen and Country', *Studies in Philology* 96 (1999), pp. 241–74.

3 Holstun, 'The Spider…', p. 58.

Harrison observing in 1577 (while Heywood was still alive) that 'neither he himself that made it [nor]…any one that readeth it can reach unto the meaning thereof'.[4]

Modern critics have tended to agree with Harrison's verdict, condemning the text as tedious, wilfully impenetrable, and unrelievedly dull.[5] Few of these critics have, I suspect, actually read it all the way through with close attention, most, probably, taking the view expressed to me by the eminent Shakespearean scholar, Steven Orgel, who joked that he was glad that I was going to write about the poem because then he wouldn't have to read it. Where scholars have tried to interpret it, they have almost universally observed that it is a sustained religious allegory, in which the spiders represent Protestants and the flies Catholics.[6] But even a rudimentary familiarity with the text would show that this cannot be correct. It is much more complex, diverse, and shifting in its focus than that, and plays games with its readers that allude to a range of different allegorical frames, intellectual contexts, and historical points of reference.

As I have argued in my recent biography of Heywood, the text is much better thought of as a work long in gestation and difficult of birth. As Heywood himself says in its prologue, it is something he originally began to compose twenty years earlier ('years more than twenty since it began' (Ss i(v))[7] – but twenty years from when, exactly?), was laid aside, and then picked up again later (I argue twice more) to be put to new work in new contexts. It begins as a light-hearted lawyers' game, something to amuse Heywood's own family and friends, perhaps, many of whom,

4 William Harrison, *The Description of England*, in Raphael Holinshed, *The first and second volumes of Chronicles comprising 1 The description and history of England, 2 The description and history of Ireland, 3 The description and history of Scotland: first collected and published by Raphael Holinshed, William Harrison, and others*…, London: Henry Denham, 1587, p. 385.

5 For descriptions of the poem as overlong and tedious, 'wilfully impenetrable', and 'famously bad', see Arthur William Reed, *Early Tudor Drama: Medwall, the Rastells, Heywood, and the More Circle*, London 1926, p. 129; J. Christopher Warner, *The Making and Marketing of Tottel's Miscellany, 1557: Songs and Sonnets in the Summer of the Martyrs' Fires*, Farnham 2013, p. 190 ('too long and tedious') and p. 187; Rupert de la Bère, *John Heywood: Entertainer*, London 1937, p. 30 ('bitter and tedious'); and Alice Hunt, 'Marian Political Allegory: John Heywood's *The Spider and the Flie*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature, 1485–1603*, eds. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank, Oxford 2009, pp. 337–353, p. 340.

6 See, for example, Sarah Duncan, *Mary I: Gender, Power and Ceremony in the Reign of England's First Queen*, New York 2012, pp. 128–30; John N. King, *Tudor Royal Iconography: Literature and Art in an Age of Religious Crisis*, Princeton 1984, pp. 188–9; and Alexander Samson, 'Culture under Mary I and Philip', in *Birth of a Queen: Essays on the Quincentenary of Mary I*, eds Sarah Duncan and Valerie Schutte, New York 2016, pp. 155–78, at p. 168, Dissenting voices have been remarkably few. See, for example, Holstun, 'The Spider…'; and Dennis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility*, Bloomington, Indiana 1995, pp. 31–32, where it is noted that, there is 'no consistent pattern of reference by which to identify Protestants and Catholics in the poem'. Alice Hunt, while conceding that 'it seems appropriate to interpret the opposition between spiders and flies as that between Protestants and Catholics', nonetheless finds this reading 'oddly unsatisfying', as 'the poem is not consistent in its support for the supposedly Catholic rebel flies, and doctrinal issues are hardly mentioned at all', and concludes 'It would seem that *The Spider and the Flie*, like other texts and events of its time, has been hampered by overly religious readings that ultimately just do not fit', Hunt, 'Marian Political Allegory', pp. 338 and 341.

7 *A Parable of the Spider and the Flie, Made by John Heywood*, London: Thomas Powell, 1556. For a freely accessible online text, see https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A03184.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext (accessed on 13 March 2024).

like William Rastell, were attached to Lincoln's Inn and the other Inns of Court in London in the relatively untroubled years of the mid-1520s, before the onset of the Henrician Reformation.[8] It muses wittily (over thousands of lines) over what crime might have been committed by a fly who lands in a spider's web, and so which laws might be used by the spider to justify eating him. Is it trespass? Burglary? Criminal damage? The two argue back and forth without resolving the issue (a classic Heywoodian trope) and in doing so pastiche and parody the rhetorical ploys and procedural quibbles of sharp-witted lawyers and their training debates ('moots'), and satirise the slow-moving, self-interested practices of the English common law courts. Each section of the argument is accompanied by a delightful woodcut image, each offering often quite small variations on the theme of a seated Heywood watching the insects move about in the window-frame, be joined by others, and adopt different stances, just as, over time, Heywood himself shifts position, stands up, sits back down, and moves from the left to the right of the desk and back again. The effects are subtle, and wryly comic in their attention to those fine details. One can sense the kinds of effects and the kind of readership that Heywood was writing for in this first half of the work at least. His ideal readers are evidently well educated, leisured, and both familiar with and interested in the institutions and practises of the English common law, its exponents, and their critics.

The text is prefaced by a charming image of Heywood himself – a version of the only portrait to survive of this prolific and much-printed writer – which makes it of interest in itself to literary scholars. And it is still more interesting when one realises that this is actually a version of an image printed around thirty years earlier to accompany the interlude *Of Gentleness and Nobility*, printed around 1529 by Heywood's father-in-law John Rastell. But, if we look carefully, we can see that subtle changes seem to have been made to update the likeness, and make Heywood seem older, a little leaner, and more lined in the face. So, had Heywood kept the original block with him for almost three decades so that Powell, or his engraver, could amend it for this work, or perhaps copy it, with subtle variation, for this second text? An initial mystery suggests itself.

And a similar delight in subtle variations in images marks the illustrations for the early chapters of the book, in which Heywood watches the evolving story of the unfortunate Fly and the hungry Spider. In successive chapters, we can watch as the Fly approaches the window, is caught in the web (aii(v)), by which time Heywood has sat down and picked up his pen to write. The Spider emerges from his 'house' in the top left corner of the window to truss up the Fly, and Heywood puts down his pen again to watch (Biv). The creatures start to dispute (Ciii, Civ(v), Dii(v)). They call legal advisors in the form of an Ant and a Butterfly, by which time Heywood has moved his chair around to the other side of the desk, and reopened his book (Niii(v)). Witnesses are called from among the spider and fly communities to attest

[8] For this and the following description of the narrative, see Walker, *John Heywood*, pp. 302–40.

to the long-held rights of spiders and flies in the window space, while the Fly writes his testament (Oiii). They give their evidence to the now seated Ant and Butterfly (Rii). The species then each testify while the other confers (Riii(v) and Si). Then the Spider returns to declare that all this consultation is leading nowhere (Aa i(v)). The central 'joke' of the piece is thus reinforced: it is just in the nature of spiders and flies to be predators and prey, and so hoping for them to use the law to settle their differences is hopeless. Things have reached an impasse.

And at this point Heywood must indeed have laid the work aside, for the next section of the text marks a very distinct change, both visually and in terms of narrative content. The scenario escalates, with very little preamble, from a small-scale legal dispute to an all-out war between spiders and flies, each side supported by other related insects. And the *mis-en-page* suddenly switches from the small, witty, low-key domestic images, to double-page scenes of hordes of insects in martial camps (Aaiv(v) and following). The allusion here is very clearly to the popular rebellions in the south west and in East Anglia that shook Edwardian England in 1549 – especially the rising known as Kett's rebellion, in Norfolk, where rebel forces camped outside Norwich on Mousehold Heath and besieged the city for weeks.[9] The details described and depicted in the images here are striking, reflecting a close knowledge of the events of the rising and the culture of the rebel camp, not least their use of a, so-called, Tree or Oak of Reformation on which they exhibited, punished, and sometimes hanged any gentleman who fell into their hands and who refused to join their cause. A similar punishment tree figures prominently in the flies' camp (see, for example, Aaiii(v) and Aaiv). So here the spiders and flies seem to represent property-owners and the insubordinate underclass, rather than religious factions, albeit there is more at stake in their stand-off now than in the earlier whimsical argument about rights of way and private property in the window.

But here again – and on a much grander scale – the images show an evident delight in the close details of the world represented, and in subtle variations of the action. The spiders in their lovingly-depicted fortress have spears, little canons, and cannon balls to defend themselves, and a fifer and drummer to accompany their captain. The flies have spears and banners, and two trumpeters alongside theirs. We see a fly mount the Oak of Reformation to address the army. (See, for example, the pages between Aav and Aavi, and note the presence of a ladder laid against the tree, a realistic detail in terms of the real-world rebellion, but comically redundant in the allegory, where winged insects might easily fly into the tree if they so wished.) The Butterfly then climbs up to talk to the rebel host, while Heywood sits and quietly watches on (following Aavi). The flies send a delegation to the spider fortress (illustration following Ccii), the spiders hold a council of war to reject the flies' demands (following C‡). The flies attack and are forced back, and the spiders' superior

[9] For detailed accounts of the rebellion, see Rev. Frederick William Russell, *Kett's Rebellion in Norfolk*, London 1859; Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Kett's Rebellion in Context', *Past and Present* 84 (1979), pp. 36–59; Stephen K. Land, *Kett's Rebellion: The Norfolk Rising of 1549*, Ipswich 1977.

firepower massacres the attackers (following sig. ¶¶). And then we are suddenly back in the widow-frame with the original Spider and Fly still disputing, and Heywood now looking on with intense interest (Ggii(v)). But still there is no reference to religious divisions, no hint that the spiders might be Protestant or the flies Catholic.

Only in the final section do we seem to move into religious territory, shooting forward in time again to the end of Edward VI's reign in 1554, and the accession of the Catholic Queen Mary Tudor, as the action moves into the council chamber of the Chief Spider (a probable allusion to the unsuccessful efforts of the Protestant Earl of Northumberland to prevent Mary's accession), and finally, a second human figure enters the story – and the illustrations – in the form of Heywood's Housemaid, who, while cleaning the window, sweeps away the original cobweb with her broom, freeing the Fly, and taking captive the Principal Spider (as he is now named) (following Oo). The latter, now clearly an analogue for Northumberland, confesses his 'crimes', and after a tearful farewell with his son and heir as his family look on, is executed by the Maid who unceremoniously stamps on him. The Maid then cleans the window and instructs spiders and flies to live peaceably together in her new household regime, as Heywood peers in through the window from outside (Rriii(v)). The Maid here, as Heywood explains in a lengthy epilogue, is an analogue to Mary Tudor, who is enjoined by the author to, having once wielded the cleansing womanly broom (and not, he stresses, the bloody, masculine sword), hereafter take a benevolent, milder approach to her insect and arachnid charges, encouraging them by her example to cohabit amicably.

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This remarkable, hugely long, and self-indulgent book was finally printed in 1556. If I am right, it reflects Heywood's interests and concerns in at least three separate periods during his life, probably separated over three decades, from his time among the lawyers of the More-Rastell family in the 1520s, through the turbulent months of rebellion known as 'the camping time' in the summer of 1549, to the accession of Mary Tudor in 1554. He published it at a point when he was back in royal favour, had access to a printer once more, and when he thought its political and moral message was timely.[10] And, perhaps significantly, the printer he chose, Thomas Powell, was the nephew and heir of Thomas Berthelet, the former royal printer to Henry VIII, who had published Heywood's commercially very successful *Dialogue of Proverbs* in 1549. In 1556, Powell had been newly made a freeman of his company, and so licensed to print on Berthelet's presses in his own right, so he may have been all the more willing to indulge Heywood's vanity project out of some combination of

[10] Heywood had been Mary's music teacher during her youth, and had, by all accounts, a very close, if deferential relationship with her. For more details of their relationship, and for Heywood's apparent aspirations for Mary's reign, see Walker, *John Heywood*, pp. 273–358.

commercial calculation, nostalgia, and family obligation.[11] But, if we can understand why it might have been printed *when* it was, questions still remain about why it was printed at all, and what Heywood intended to achieve by its publication. Who did he think would buy it? And why?

The Spider and the Flie as Commodity

The production of the book, like the narrative itself, obviously represents an extraordinary investment – intellectual, financial, and artistic – on the part of Heywood himself, the unknown illustrator, and the printer, Powell. Those many illustrations – so lavish, so playful, so idiosyncratic (and thus so non-reusable in other books), involving so much repetition with minor variations over so many quarto pages – how long would they have taken to make? How much must they have *cost* to make? Would each woodcut have had to be made from scratch, or could a common template have provided the basis for several? How long would the book as a whole have taken to prepare, typeset, and print? And how much would it have cost to produce? Presumably Heywood would have had to underwrite the costs of publication himself, as the culmination of a long-cherished vanity project. But, even so, could he have hoped to recoup some at least of the financial outlay through sales? Because the book is so idiosyncratic, it is hard to judge *ab initio* what a reasonable price for it might have been. But we do have one piece of evidence to help us here. In 1556, the year of its publication, a Member of Parliament, William More of Loseley in Surrey, evidently bought a copy, and for the not inconsiderable price of 20d. For his book of accounts lists a copy of 'The Spider and Flie' among his recent purchases, evidently while it was still a new title, hot from Powell's press, as it was in More's possession by 20 August 1556 when the inventory of his goods was drawn up.[12]

What we know of William More (1520–1600) helps us to speculate about why he might have been drawn to purchase Heywood's idiosyncratic work. While it is not always easy to untangle which of the books in his extensive library may have been his own purchases and which he inherited from his father, it does seem that his interests overlapped with those explored in *The Spider and the Flie*. More was the only surviving son (of five sons and seven daughters) of a prominent administrator at the court of Henry VIII, Sir Christopher More (pre-1483–1549), who had spent time at one of the Inns of Court, the Inner Temple, before becoming a clerk of the

[11] Peter Blayney has suggested that Berthelet's widow, Margery, may have run her husband's press in the interim, so it is possible that she was Heywood's initial point of contact with the printing house. Peter Blayney, *The Stationers Company and the Printers of London*, 2 vols., Cambridge 2013, II, pp. 789–91.

[12] John Evans, 'Extracts from the Private Account Book of Sir William More of Loseley, Surrey in the Time of Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth', *Archaeologia* 36 (1856), pp. 284–31.

Exchequer and finally King's Remembrancer in 1542.[13] Thus, although little is known about William's own education, there was a clear family connection to the community of lawyers for whom Heywood seems to have begun to write the poem, before setting it aside for the two decades mentioned in the text. Despite the coincidence of surname, William was not, however, related so far as is known to the More-Rastell family into which Heywood himself married, and which probably formed the primary early audience for his works.[14] Nor, it seems, was this More, like Heywood, a religious conservative, who would have shared the moderate Catholic, pro-Marian sentiments expressed at the conclusion of the text. His most recent *ODNB* biographer, William Robison, refers to William More, indeed, as both a Protestant and an evangelical, enthusiastic to advance the Reformation in his native county of Surrey, and brought before the Queen's Council for 'lewd words' spoken, seemingly, in a religious context, in the very year in which he bought *The Spider and the Flie*.[15] But if he was such, he was also, like Heywood, someone who was willing to reach across religious divisions. He had a number of Catholic friends in his circle (including Anthony Browne, Viscount Montague, and the former Marian archbishop of York, Nicholas Heath), and he pointedly did not join any of the conspiracies to attempt to unseat Mary Tudor during her reign.

It may thus have been the legal comedy of the first half of the book that drew More towards the text. Alternatively, it could have been the extended reflection on the Norfolk rebellion in the middle section that attracted him. For his second wife, Margaret, the daughter of Ralph Daniel of Swaffham in Norfolk, whom he married in 1551, was a native of the region at the heart of the rebellion. Then again, it could have been the work's wry, Lucianic, satirical tone and address towards contemporary politics and social issues that interested More. Among the other books in his well-stocked closet in August 1556 were, in addition to the legal textbooks, chronicles, almanacs, religious and classical works that he may have inherited from his father, a large volume of Chaucer (perhaps the William Thynne edition of the poet's *Works* printed in 1532 and reprinted in revised form in 1542), a Juvenal, a Horace, copies of More's *Utopia*, and of *The Praise of Folly* and *Adagia* of Erasmus, Skelton's *Bouge of Courte* and *Works*, Alexander Barclay's satirical *Eclogues*, and Sir Thomas Elyot's *Defence of Good Women* (as well as his *Dictionary*, and perhaps his satirical *Image of Governance* too, if that is what is meant by the allusion to a copy of an 'Alexander Severus').[16] More may even have enjoyed other recent work by Heywood himself, as the inventory lists a number of books of proverbs in his collection, one of which was probably in manuscript (it is described as 'a *written* book of proverbs', my italics)

13 William B. Robison, 'More, Sir Christopher (b. in or before 1483, d. 1549), landowner and administrator', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 19 Dec. 2021, from https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-77080.

14 See Walker, *John Heywood*, pp. 1–161.

15 Robison, 'More, Sir Christopher'.

16 For Thynne's Chaucer and Elyot's texts, see Greg Walker, *Writing Under Tyranny: English Literature and the Henrician Reformation*, Oxford 2005, pp. 56–99 and 239–75 respectively.

but the other was seemingly a printed work, and might refer to one of Heywood's collections of 'Hundreds' of proverbs, two of which (along with the earlier *Dialogue of Proverbs* (1546)) had been printed by 1556.[17]

Whatever prompted him to buy the book, however, More was prepared, as we have seen, to pay 20d for it, a price that would have placed it among some of the more expensive works in his possession. The most expensive volumes he owned were the books of statutes (valued at between two and five shillings each), the two chronicles (Fabian's *Chronicle* and the *Polychronicon*) and the Chaucer, each valued at five shillings, a (perhaps lavishly illustrated) 'Book of Ptolemy', Elyot's *Dictionary*, and a copy of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (each valued at 3s 4d[18]), an English New Testament, a copy of 'Flores Bibblie', and a book of Froissart in French (each listed as worth 24d, or 2s, apiece). At 20d, *The Spider and the Flie* ranked alongside an identically priced New Testament in French, was a little cheaper than the New Testament in Italian valued at 21d, and was significantly more expensive than any of the Petrarch (16d), the *Adages* of Erasmus (12d), More's *Utopia* (8d), Ovid's *Epistles* (6d) and Elyot's *Defence of Good Women* (2d). Indeed, what is perhaps most striking about the inventory is just how cheaply many of the books were valued. Skelton's *Bouge of Courte* and Barclay's *Eclogues*, for example, were among the many works valued at a single penny each, the same value as the penknife and the foot-rule that More also had in his closet at the time.

The Spider and the Flie and Literary Popularity

So, *The Spider and the Flie* was not only a lavishly produced volume, but also a relatively expensive one. To buy it, as More did, would represent a considerably greater investment than that needed to acquire most of the better-known literary works available at the time. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that its only known contemporary purchaser was a man like More, a member of the social elite, a gentleman and parliamentarian with expansive literary tastes and a major library, who might pick up a copy while he was staying in his London residence during parliament time. Such a book is not, then, an obvious candidate for inclusion in the category of European *popular* literature. So, what might it have to tell us about the questions that are of interest to a project like 'Popular *Respublica Litteraria*: The Circulation of Narratives in Early-Modern Europe'? The answer, I would suggest, is: quite a bit, if only by inverse analogy.

Much, of course, depends on what we mean by the term 'popular literature'. And this is famously (perhaps infamously) open to diverse and often contradictory

[17] Walker, *John Heywood*, pp. 241–72.

[18] The recurring round sums suggest that many of the prices listed might be estimates of value rather than actual purchase prices, especially, perhaps, for the older or less well-known works.

interpretations. Do we, for example, following Gramsci, see the *popular* as exclusively the preserve of the non-elites, the subordinate classes, of 'unofficial' cultures beyond secular and clerical authority?[19] Or do we follow Peter Burke and others and add nuance to this, thinking of popular culture as the culture of those beyond the preserve of formal education, 'craftsmen…women, children, shepherds, sailors, beggars, and the rest'?[20] This would align the popular with notions of folk culture and folklore, an environment that is predominantly oral, non-literate, and regional, divided into a bewildering multiplicity of provincial, local, even village languages, dialects, sub-dialects, and micro-cultures, each with their own favoured genres, tropes, and idioms.[21] The idea of studying the *literature* of such an environment might seem something of a wild goose chase, or at very least a challenge. For, as Burke observes, while we rely on print as often our only record of much of the oral culture of previous centuries, print, by definition, records a version of that culture produced by elite witnesses (often at some remove) rather than the unmediated thing itself. And, in the longer term it was the standardising, internationalising capacities of print that would undermine traditional oral culture in the very process of recording it.[22] Thus it is perhaps tempting to misquote Walter Benjamin on civilisation and observe that there is no document of popular culture that is not at the same time a document of elite culture, or perhaps more specifically, of elite culture's interpretation, adaptation, translation, and co-option of popular culture into its own languages and idioms, for its own purposes.

What, then, might constitute a *popular book*? Would it be a book known to have been produced in many editions, and which thus probably sold well, or was thought likely to sell well, over time? Such books may have been very useful, but perhaps only to certain, perhaps quite small groups, professions, or communities. One might think here of the books of statutes, legal primers, and yearbooks bought in large quantities by lawyers in the English Inns of Court such as William More's father Christopher, books likely, in their standardised detail and eccentric law French argot to be quite impenetrable to those outside those cadres. What, then, about books that deal with 'the people', in the sense that lower class characters and settings feature prominently in them? Yet, books *about* common people need not be necessarily either *by* or *for* them, or even necessarily sympathetic to their ambitions and values. One need think

[19] See, for example, Antonio Gramsci, 'Observations on Folklore', in *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs, 2nd edition, London 1988, pp. 360–362. Roger Chartier takes a similar line, suggesting that, in early-modern France, 'popular readers' might be thought of as 'all those who belonged to none of the three "robes"…the black robe of the clergy, the short robe of the nobility, or the long robe of official office-holders great and small, lawyers and attorneys, men of letters, and medical doctors', noting that this would extend the boundaries of 'popularity' to include 'peasants, journeymen, masters in the crafts and trades, merchants, including retired merchants often designated as "bourgeois"'. Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, transl. Lydia G. Cochrane, Princeton 1987, p. 146.

[20] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd edition, London 2009, p. xiii.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. xv.

only of the mid-twentieth-century debate about the origins of and intentions behind the medieval *fabliaux* to see the questions that might be raised in this context.[23]

Might we, then, think rather of books that deal with common stories, narratives, or characters that cross national and linguistic boundaries (such as hagiographies, merry tales, fables, or the cycles of stories associated with Lancelot, Arthur, and Roland, with Reynard the Fox, or Solomon and Marcolphus, or with common archetypes, trickster figures, or martyrs)? Or by *popular* do we mean, instead, non-canonical literature, that which is distinctive to each region, outside of the mainstream of those texts that now form the early-modern canon? In this way of thinking, a text like the collected plays of Shakespeare could not be popular, despite the fact that it was bought by many people and the plays themselves seen or heard by so many more. Or does popularity mean precisely those texts that were bought and which survive in the largest numbers? But there are problems here too. Does survival suggest widespread readership or use? Might not the very fact of a text's survival suggest that few people ever read it, touched it, or found it useful, hence it might survive, while other more heavily thumbed, frequently passed around texts would wear out and be lost? (Peter Burke suggests that the survival rate of seventeenth-century chapbooks, for example, may have been as low as one in every 10,000 copies (0.013%)).[24] Again, are we thinking about numbers of readers or types of readers, numbers of texts, or the nature of their contents? What do numbers really tell us? In this last sense, might 'popularity' even be a synonym for the not very good?

So, on one immediately obvious level, any attempt to study the trans-European popular literature of the early-modern period is, if not fundamentally misguided, at least a vertiginously uphill struggle.[25] If we wish to look at the texts that cross European boundaries, that travel, migrate, are translated or adapted across national and regional frontiers, then these are almost always stained, like the dyer's hand, with the cultures of the elites. For it was the social elites alone who were more obviously pan-national and pan-regional. It was the aristocrats, merchants, scholars, and clerics who travelled and exchanged books and ideas in the transmissible international languages of Latin and French. And it was 'the people' who stayed largely within national, regional, or even local boundaries. So, while it clearly remained within English territory and culture, Heywood's text does not readily fit such a class-based conception of the popular.

But to leave things there would be too simplistic, and too defeatist. As in many other areas of life, the more generative question to ask is, perhaps, not how we might rigidly define the categories we wish to analyse, separating out the elite and the popular, the official and the unofficial, but how we might examine their interactions with each

[23] See, for example, R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, Chicago 1986, and Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, Geneva 1973.

[24] Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, p. 347.

[25] For brief comments on the issue, see, for example, Stanley Kahrl, 'Secular and Popular Piety in Medieval English Drama', in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan, Tennessee Studies in Literature, 28, Knoxville 1985, pp. 85–107, at pp. 85–86.

other. And here books (even a book like *The Spider and the Flie*) may have a more useful, evidential role to play. Thus, with Roger Chartier, we might suggest that texts and artefacts are not in themselves fundamentally either popular or elite (even the most apparently obstruse or quotidian of them) but are available for either popular or elite *use* and *re-use*.[26] Latin bibles and prayers might have distinct and powerful significances in largely illiterate communities. Scatological jokes, fables, and merry tales might be valued in aristocratic and clerical ones. Chivalric narratives might happily migrate between noble and artisan, male and female readerships, offering distinct attractions and pleasures to each. It is what texts allow, their *affordance*, that gives them their cultural value, rather than anything intrinsic to themselves alone. Thus, a project like 'Popular *Respublica Litteraria*' has an imaginative dimension as well as a purely empirical one. We need not only to trace the circulation and translation of stories and texts, but to think imaginatively about what that circulation might have meant to the individuals and groups involved. It is one thing, for example, to show that some forms of writing (chapbooks, say, or ballads, fables, or 'popular' romances) could reach down into the lower strata of society, quite another to ask what happened when they got there. Once again, affordance is all. We need to ask, not only whether a certain group or class of people had access to a text, but also what they did with it once they had it. What did these books *mean* to these people in the specific circumstances in which they received them?

So, there are fundamental questions at play in any enterprise like this. What exactly do we mean by 'popular'? Is it simply, 'of the people'? If so, of which people? Peter Burke, questioning the value of a term such as 'popular culture' suggests we think in terms of 'common culture' instead.[27] But that only raises the question, 'common to whom?', and in what ways? And does that mean that *only* those texts and practices that were shared by upper and lower social classes alike can be considered truly common? That would suggest another kind of narrowing, exclusivity of definition, albeit one that divides and narrows along a different analytical axis. The Bakhtinian market place, that almost proverbial habitat of 'the people', probably contained a wide cross-section of local society, elite and non-elite, each member of which may have been there for a specific and quite different purpose.[28] As we have seen, a true literature of the lowest social strata is almost by definition a misnomer, as most members of the

[26] Chartier, *Cultural Uses of Print*, especially pp. 3–5 for doubts over whether 'popular culture' can be readily or usefully defined. Chartier suggests rather that culture beyond that of certain, narrowly defined elites, was an unstable and shifting notion. Instead of finding a rigid division between the cultures of 'populaire' and 'savant', he saw evidence of 'fluid circulation, practices shared by various groups, and blurred distinctions' (p. 4).

[27] Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, p. 134.

[28] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana 1984, *passim*. For the intersection of popular and institutional cultures in festive settings in early-modern France, see Chartier, 'The Fête in France', in *Cultural Uses of Print*, pp. 13–31, especially the observation at pp. 21–22 that 'the raw materials of the fête in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries…were always a cultural mix, the components of which it is not easy to separate…by dividing popular from official festivity'.

lowest social strata could neither read nor afford to buy books, yet might still have access to their contents through communal readings in households or other shared spaces.[29] Thus, we need to investigate not the categories of popular and elite, oral and written in themselves, but rather the interconnections between them.

And here Heywood does provide a useful case study, if not through *The Spider and the Flie*, then through another of his projects, those volumes of 'Hundreds' of proverbs and epigrams that he collected and published through the latter part of his career. For proverbs seem an ideal example of that 'common' literature described by Burke. Circulated both orally and in written form, they readily crossed and recrossed the boundaries between groups and social classes, between spoken, manuscript, and print culture. Widely adaptable to local conditions, they are a portable, amphibious genre that is as frequently found in elite literary texts (in an English context one thinks of both Chaucer's romances and Skelton's courtly satires, and of the volumes in William More's library) as in records of common speech. And Heywood's deployment of them in printed form demonstrates that generous malleability of affordance that distinguishes the truly useful cross-cultural artefact. In the 'Hundreds' he records sets of proverbs with something of the air of a folklorist *avant la lettre*, gathering as many examples of folk wisdom and witty advice as he can. But he then makes use of them for his own ends, 'descanting' on them (as the later commentator John Davies of Hereford observed),[30] pointing out the limitations and the vagueries of what initially appear to be nuggets of practical advice, setting a proverb counselling caution alongside one that advocates seizing the day, and thereby turning the genre itself into an object of wry amusement. All of this suggests the subtleties and nuances at work in the reception and affordance of even so apparently straightforward a form as the proverb or maxim. The genre is an ideal object of study in its ubiquity and transnational reach, but it is vital to notice that, wherever it is deployed, it invites a kind of semi-detached ironic reception. It is always contained within implicit quotation marks as something already said by someone else, and said somewhere elsewhere in space and time, and which must thus be treated with a degree of detached caution if it is to be useful in the current context. However we use the term, then, the 'popular' need not imply either the simplistic or the unnuanced.

Returning briefly to Heywood's *The Spider and the Flie* might allow us to put some specific details into such general or theoretical questions. While it is, perhaps, a rather eccentric example, the book nonetheless falls into a number of literary subgenres or categories in which we are interested in this project. It is a beast fable, sharing some of the same themes and comic energies that drive the stories in the *Reynard the Fox* cycle, for example, and more specifically, as James Holstun points out, a continuation of 'the mock-heroic tradition of the battle of the insects, which goes back to the *Batrachomyomachia*, falsely attributed to Homer'.[31] It is a broadly

[29] See Chartier, *Cultural Uses of Print*, p. 347.
[30] Walker, *John Heywood*, p. 248.
[31] Holstun, 'The Spider…', p. 58.

comic narrative (albeit it loses its comic focus at times). And it relies on an ironic, satirical attitude to human (and insectoid) folly, in which various tropes and stock figures are deployed (the Fly, for example, is at various points a trickster figure in the Reynard tradition, a clever young lawyer, a rebel, a proto-martyr, and a fool).

The very fact that it is written and published in English (Heywood was no great Latinist, having trained as a musician rather than a scholar) meant that it could not find an international readership, and would remain a product of the very particular London book trade and book market with which Heywood was familiar, at least until the mid-1530s, having married a printer's widow, Joan Rastell née Pynson, and having one printer (John Rastell) for a father-in-law, and another (John's son William Rastell) for a brother-in-law. Had he written the work in Latin, it might, ironically, have found him a much wider European audience, and a longer, stronger legacy in the annals of the comic narrative literatures of folly. As it is, the text remains resolutely insular and literally domestic in aspect, and largely unread, then and now. Whether Queen Mary, the woman who would have been its ideal intended reader, ever saw it is uncertain. If she had, it is interesting to speculate what she would have made of her own appearance in the text (and illustrations), translated into the homely figure of Heywood's Housemaid. Surely only a writer very sure of his relationship with the queen, and of her capacity to take a joke, could have contemplated so daring and potentially offensive a literary metamorphosis for their monarch?

Yet the text does draw, if only loosely, on European literary traditions – primarily, perhaps, the Reynard stories, and the Erasmian literature of Folly and the satirical colloquies with their merry, Lucianic approach to authority and pretention of all kinds. Heywood was also familiar with the French dramatic folly traditions of the *sotties* and farces, having translated and borrowed from at least two of these in the 1520s.[32] It is also a profoundly multimodal work, its full effect lying in the clever, witty dialogue between the text and the accompanying woodcuts.[33] In this it seems to draw inspiration from a number of European traditions. One such is the pan-European vogue for fool-literature and the motif of the *Narrenschiff*, especially as exemplified by Wynkyn de Woorde's English edition of Sebastian Brant's text, published as *The Ship of Fools*, in 1509, with its detailed woodcut depictions of each kind of folly described. And there are also clearly humorous effects being created by the dialogue between the classically inflected ornamentation that punctuates Heywood's

[32] Walker, *John Heywood*, pp. 6–10.

[33] And yet, for a work so immersed in its own materiality, and so seemingly self-delighted by its own status as a work of print (a dialogue set out in verses with bespoke illustrations), *The Spider and the Flie* is strikingly devoid of any verbal acknowledgement of its own status *as* a printed book. It has no overt references to its own production in print, no reference in the text itself to the printer or the work of producing it, no open investment in what Rachel Stenner as suggestively termed 'the typographic imaginary'. Stenner notes that 'While there are similarities in the ways that manuscript and print writers reflect on the tools and dilemmas of their creative activities, the differences are significant', Rachel Stenner, *The Typographic Imaginary in Early Modern English Literature*, Abingdon 2018, p. 8. But from Heywood's preface, which describes the text as a 'parable' (title page and sig. iii) and a 'book' to be read, one would get no sense of whether he initially intended that book to be read in manuscript or print.

text and the homely subject matter of the early images, which add to the pleasure of reading the book as an artefact of visual as well as (perhaps still more than) narrative pleasure. This, like the more elaborate European editions of Brandt's text, is clearly a book that asks to be held in the hand and lingered over with the eye, rather than one to be quickly devoured at a sitting, or listened to being read by someone else.

Another aspect of the work that marks it out as a book for reading, and a markedly *avant garde* one at that, lies in those extraordinarily detailed woodcuts of the spiders' fortress and the rebel flies' camp. These, along with the accompanying narrative, display, as I have suggested, a great deal of detailed knowledge of the events in the rebel camps during the risings of 1549. That Heywood must have had access to sources describing the East Anglian rising and the camp at Mousehold Heath with its Oak of Reformation (so prominently depicted in the woodcuts) is relatively well known. But other, apparently throw-away details such as his mention of rebel ordinance suggest he may also have known a good deal about the parallel rising in the South-West also referred to in passing in the narrative.[34] And a still more strikingly *avant garde* aspect of the treatment of the war between the spiders and flies lies in Heywood's use of diagrammatic images of the opposing camps at all. For the use of such military maps was itself a newly emerging aspect of European publishing, instigated by such works as the panoramic woodcut of the first Turkish siege of Vienna (1529) produced by Nikolaus Meldemann, which would find its fullest expression only in subsequent decades in works such as the woodcut depiction of the Siege of Polatsk (1579) by Stanisław Pachołowiecki.[35] Again, Heywood's use of this strikingly modish form sets his work in a fashionable European intellectual tradition yet to find a secure place in the indigenous English publishing world. Alongside his verbal pastiches of lawyer's moots in the opening section of the book, this aspect of the work provides further evidence of the poet's capacity to pastiche prestigious forms for the amusement of an educated, well-informed readership assumed to be already familiar with them.

The Spider and the Flie thus strains our definitions of 'popular literature'. But it is nonetheless vernacular, jocular, convivial, and its discussion of the plight of the landless flies is very much 'on the side of the people' in a Bakhtinian sense. But it is hardly easy or accessible reading, and was unlikely to have found many (or perhaps any) appreciative readers outside Heywood's immediate circle and the contemporary politico-legal elites. It might better, then, be thought of as a rare example of 'uncommon' or 'unpopular' literature – hardly 'High' in tone or content, but not quite 'low'

[34] I am very grateful to Professor Mark Stoyle of the University of Southampton for this suggestion and for the chance to discuss the text with him on a number of occasions.

[35] *Der stadt Wien belegerung, wie die auff dem hohen sant seffansthurn allenthalben gerings um die gantze stadt, zu wasser vnd landt mit allen dingen anzusehen gswest ist*…, https://sammlung.wienmuseum.at/en/object/125187-rundansicht-der-stadt-wien-zur-zeit-der-ersten-tuerkenbelagerung-1529/ (accessed on 13 March 2024) and 'The Siege and Capture of the Polatsk Fortress by the His Majesty Stephen, the King of Poland' (*Obsidio et expugnatio munitissimae arcis Polocensis per serenissimum Stephanum Poloniae regem*) by Stanisław Pachołowiecki. I am very grateful to Professor Jakub Niedźwiedź for drawing my attention to these fascinating parallels.

either, perhaps *about* but not really *of* or *for* the people. As such it did not, so far as we know, 'travel'. It was never translated into another language, for example, never reprinted in Europe, and probably never read there. It thus, perhaps, represents a point of terminus rather than a nexus of transmission in the network of popular literary exchange. If not quite Finisterre or Ultima Thule, it is at least one of those distant western end-points of the London Underground, an Uxbridge or Amersham of European narrative literature. But, even so, it allows us to test the affordance of many of the forms explored in this project, suggesting the adaptability of the literature of folly or the beast fable, their capacity to travel across space and time, to cross national, cultural, and linguistic frontiers and find new homes, often in the most unlikely of places, and to do new cultural work there.

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