

STYLE AND CULTURE

Spectators of a Meaner Sort? A Study in Composition and Behavior of Early English Sport Audiences

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On Sunday, January 12, 1583, a scaffold collapsed at a London Bear Garden killing seven “common-class” citizens and seriously injuring many others (Field, John, A Godly exhortation . . . showed at Paris Garden. January 17, 1583.). Those not hurt were subject to verbal ridicule from disgruntled preachers and city officials who viewed attendance at sporting activities as “lewd behavior” which only distracted people away from more important activities such as work or Sunday worship. In fact, an initial perusal of the political and religious documents of the period suggests that the crowds were completely comprised of only the most despicable of people.

But during Elizabeth’s reign organized sporting was readily available to all London citizens. Sports and games dominated many feast and holiday celebrations. The annual Lord Mayor shows brought a variety of “feats of activity” to London. But none were quite as popular as the organized “contests of combat” which became firmly rooted within London’s professional theatrical enterprise. Spectators could witness fencing matches wrestling bouts, and animal contests within the city and after 1576, the numerous sporting events performed at the suburban playhouses.

During the sixteenth century, Europe witnessed the growth of carnival. Originally, conceived as the specific days between Christmas and Lent carnival is now more broadly defined as a popular festive form. Central to the carnival experience is a conscious effort by the participants in play to mock official ideology and to make fun of the existing social order by substituting themselves for the socially elevated. For instance, in the traditional Feast of Fools many of the sacred ceremonies of the Church were turned into ridicule by appointing a Lord of Misrule a mock pontiff or a jester king. Struggle and violence were also common themes in carnivalesque. For example, Hocktide celebrations often ended in a hearty tug of war, and the symbolic warfare associated with the Shrovetide football matches led to frequent hostile outbursts, and on several occasions, ended in serious rioting.

Part and parcel to the language of carnival, and more specifically to the spectator behaviors of the plebeian classes, were elements of misrule, a conscious effort to exist temporarily outside of the

official culture. Disorderly conduct, parodic mockery, and active participation, instead of passive obedience defined the carnival festive-form. Local and city authorities kept a constant surveillance of these activities but the sports of the common people remained an important part of the everyday life of pre-modern England.

Attention paid to the sporting practices by puritan, city and court officials acknowledges the importance of these events to the majority of English citizens. But while sport enjoyed mass appeal, one must still question why the ruling authorities allowed them to openly protest the existing social order, and why authorities chose not to ban these spectacles. All which leads to the larger question of what social function these plebeian sports served. Certainly, one viewpoint considers these contests as a means of social control, a chance for “oppressed” groups to vent their frustrations harmlessly by openly criticizing the social conditions. Alternately, recent inquiry has begun to sort out the play and games of the common-folk and recognize them as functional characteristics of pre-industrial societies. For instance, after a comprehensive study of the works of Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin interprets popular culture as a source of liberation and renewal for its participants. He further asserts that carnival does not reinforce the serious institutions of society, but rather, by giving the people experiences of life without fixed categories of official medieval culture, it helps them to consider alternatives and to encourage change.