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[Review] *Nostalgia in Print and Performance, 1510-1613: Merry Worlds*

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Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol.12, 'Nostalgia' (2020)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.109

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*Moveable Type* is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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# MAKING MERRY

Fraser McIlwraith

*Nostalgia in Print and Performance, 1510-1613: Merry Worlds.*

By Harriet Phillips. 2019. Xi + 248p. £75.00. Cambridge University Press.

ISBN 978-1108482271.

In Jan Steen's 1668 painting *The Merry Family*, at least three generations pile on top of one another around a dining table, disporting themselves in all manner of family delights. Meat sits on the table and musical instruments fill the arms of a man and his son, while a boy smokes a pipe and a dog wags its tail. It is an image entirely typical of Steen, whose work reproduces boisterous and crowded everyday scenes, with a sharp eye for pleasure as well as havoc—paintings of his detail everything from the joys of schoolroom riots and drunkenness to the chaos of tavern brawls.

*The Merry Family* gestures to much of what is at issue in Harriet Phillips's new book, and it can be no accident that it is to the centre of Steen's painting that the reader's eye is first drawn when looking at its cover—where two women are sitting reading lyrics together from a loose sheet with affection written on their faces, and with the rest of their family joined, happily, in song. It is to scenes such as these, and the relationships they suggest, that Phillips's study of early modern nostalgia will return again and again. Broadside ballads, including their representations on the stage, are, in many respects, at the centre of this book's argument, which proposes that Elizabethan and Jacobean popular culture was deeply rooted in consumer demand for nostalgic fictions, which served to strengthen communal and familial bonds in an England still reeling from the shocks of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Like a number of recent studies, amongst which Jennifer Richard's *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance* (2019) is perhaps most prominent, Phillips's book emphasises orality and communality in its account of how reading cheap printed texts—however ephemeral they might appear to modern scholars — facilitated reconciliation and healing, as English men and women struggled to make sense of their recent history.

This book-historical approach—which pays minute attention to the readership of nostalgic songs and stories, as well as the material forms in which they circulated—is coupled with a word-historical approach, which allows Phillips to put pressure on a series of the key terms on which, she argues, early modern writers depended in their

accounts of the past. Taking a cue from Roland Greene's recent experiments in 'critical semantics', Phillips considers the ways in which words such as 'mirth' and 'merry' provided English writers with a mildly kitsch vocabulary which they could use to negotiate the recent past. Terms such as these, Phillips argues, were multivalent, and could be put to radically divergent uses, depending on the spaces and the contexts in which they were spoken. In one of the book's most illuminating sections, for example, it is shown by examining parish records and depositions that attestations to a bygone, 'merry' past could prove highly controversial in the first half of the sixteenth century when used in complaint of serious, personal grievances. Yet Phillips argues that, in the hands of pamphleteers and ballad-writers, such terms were able to be defused of their political charge and adapted so as to make available the notion of the 'merry world' for the pleasures of nostalgia and communal revelry. Popular culture, in the wake of twentieth-century theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer, tends to be viewed cynically as an instrument of control which makes use of nostalgia to stifle affect and inhibit the ability of its consumers to engage critically with their past. While citing this paradigm, Phillips departs significantly from it in terms of her own critical observations, which are far more alive to the genuine human needs—for reconciliation, for a communal understanding of national history—which she suggests drove the demand for 'merry' fiction in a period following decades of political trauma and religious upheaval. Indeed, in this study, whatever political resonances the merry world may have sought to convey frequently appear secondary to its provisional, pseudo-historical, and, ultimately, playfully fictive form, which evokes a quasi-medieval England comprised of tight-knit communities, and populated by interchangeable stock characters including pranksterish priests and disguised kings. The England that emerges from the ballads and plays which Phillips discusses is an incoherent patchwork of late-medieval tropes and contemporary inventions about the recent past—yet, she reminds us, it is precisely this incoherence which allows their authors to produce such compelling opportunities for readerly escapism. Making extensive use of that figure central to modern notions of kitsch, the collage, Phillips characterises sixteenth-century representations of 'merry England' in terms of their willingness to mingle historical fact with folk-beliefs and fiction, and their indulgence of anachronism. A. D. Nuttall's analysis of Spenser's 'pasteboard' aesthetic is cited approvingly at the close of the book's first chapter, establishing a useful motif early on in Phillips's book which recurs during her exciting discussion of *The Merry Wives of*

*Windsor*, and Falstaff's role at the centre of that play's 'collage of ageing or discarded elements'.<sup>1</sup>

Phillips's reading of this neglected comedy is one of the highlights of her book. Nonetheless, one issue which proves troublesome elsewhere in the book's readings of Shakespeare is a matter of terminology. Phillips's study encompasses the years 1510-1613, spanning pre-Reformation history and the literature of Jacobean England, and including texts written not long after the Union of Crowns, like *King Lear*. This extended chronological sweep might have provided the opportunity to consider, at the book's close, whether 'merry England' fictions grew more or less important following the succession of a Scottish king to the English throne, and whether or not they might have served any significant purpose in paving the way for union in the final years of Elizabeth's reign. In Chapter VI, however, when *Lear* is under discussion, the term 'merry England' instead fragments into a cluster of terms—'Lear's Britain', 'merry Britain', 'merry world'—which are used near-interchangeably. Such expressions are nuanced, and have decidedly different resonances to 'merry England', with strong implications for how we read an author like Shakespeare, who—as the author of Scottish and British histories, from *Macbeth* to *Cymbeline*—has serious investments in their meanings. Greater reflection on the implications of this shift in the book's critical terminology would have been a welcome addition.

Yet this is a minor complaint to raise against what is an altogether outstanding contribution to the study of early modern popular culture and nostalgia. Phillip's study shows 'merry England' to be the product of a genuinely participatory, consensual, and collaborative process between the producers and consumers of early modern texts, and leaves us with the strong sense of a nostalgia geared more towards readerly delight than coercion and control. By looking back at Renaissance nostalgia, Phillips's *Nostalgia in Print and Performance* poses new questions and opens new avenues for the study of popular culture in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Phillips, *Nostalgia in Print and Performance, 1510-1613: Merry Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019), p. 203.