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Tim Harris

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ENGLAND,
c.1500–1850**

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Popular Culture in England, c. 1500–1850

Edited by

TIM HARRIS

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For Peter Burke

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Preface

Over the past few decades there has been a great expansion of interest in studying history 'from below'. More and more scholars have begun to shift their focus from the learned and educated few at the top of society and started to pay greater attention to exploring the ideas, values, assumptions and aspirations of ordinary people. As a result, a whole new field of enquiry has opened up, namely the study of what has come to be labelled 'popular culture'. Scholars working in this field have laid down a powerful interpretative paradigm concerning what was happening to popular culture in early modern England. The period between c. 1500 and 1850, it has been argued, saw an increasing polarisation between the culture of the elite and that of ordinary people, with the result that by the middle of the nineteenth century a great cultural chasm existed between the upper and lower classes, the high and low, the respectable and the vulgar. Two broad forces have been identified as responsible for bringing about this transformation: first, the attack on popular culture from above, by moral and religious reformers; and second, the transforming effect of certain social and economic changes, such as the rise of literacy, the commercialisation of society, the enclosure movement, the rapid growth of cities, and the impact of the Scientific Revolution. In recent years, however, historians have become increasingly critical of this interpretative framework: some have questioned the appropriateness of the two-tier model of cultural conflict, which seems to obscure the important place occupied by the middling sort in English society; others have pointed to the diversities within popular culture itself (such as regional diversities), which seem to make it difficult to talk of 'a popular culture' in the singular; still others have raised questions about the alleged chronology of cultural transformation during the early modern period. There has also emerged a recognition that more attention needs to be paid to the cultural space occupied by women, for it is by no means clear that women experienced or participated in popular culture in the same way as did men from similar social backgrounds. As our revisionism proceeds, some historians have even begun to doubt whether the term 'popular culture' is a particularly meaningful analytical category.

The time was thought ripe, therefore, for a volume which would explore some of the major issues about 'popular culture' in early modern England in the light of recent critical trends. Given the broad nature of the field, it was thought wiser to put together a collection of essays on specific themes written by experts in particular areas of research, rather than for one author to attempt a broad work of synthesis; we felt that the end-result would offer more in-depth analyses and more penetrating insights into what are unquestionably very complex historical problems than could ever be achieved by an individual working on his or her own. It is true that as recently as 1985 Barry Reay published an excellent collection of essays exploring various aspects of popular culture in his *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), but his edition focused exclusively on the seventeenth century. Many of the interesting questions about popular culture that still need to be addressed centre on changes that happened over the longer time period, from (broadly speaking) the Reformation to the Industrial Revolution. This volume has been assembled, therefore, not as an alternative to Reay's, but rather as a complement to it, building on that book's important findings, but exploring issues which it was unable to address because of its more limited chronological time frame.

Contributions have been solicited from those who could draw on their own scholarly expertise to investigate certain key themes in early modern English popular culture which, we thought, had either been insufficiently explored or were in need of fresh examination. David Underdown, for example, looks at regional variations in popular culture. Two of the chapters – those by Susan Amussen and Patricia Seleski – focus on women. Three chapters look at what have been identified as some of the crucial agencies of change, and seek to reassess their impact: Jonathan Barry looks at literacy and popular literature and examines whether it is appropriate to talk of a growing divide between a literate, respectable culture and the oral world of popular tradition; Martin Ingram explores the enormous sea-changes effected in the religious culture of English society by the Reformation and its aftermath; Roy Porter investigates certain aspects of the impact on popular culture wrought by both the alleged rise of scientific rationalism and the commercialisation of society in Georgian England in his chapter on the hitherto largely neglected field of medicine. The last two chapters look at different

aspects of the culture of the lower orders towards the end of the early modern period, to shed light on the issues of how much had changed and how resilient to change that culture proved to be. John Rule takes an urban perspective, looking at custom and resistance in the workplace between 1700 and 1850, whilst Bob Bushaway takes us into the countryside with his examination of alternative belief in nineteenth-century rural England. My own introductory chapter seeks to raise critical questions about our conceptualisation of popular culture and the way we should approach its study, in the hope of providing an appropriate context for the essays which follow.

As editor of this volume I have accumulated numerous debts along the way. I am particularly grateful to Peter Burke, who initially suggested the idea of putting this volume together. Despite certain differences of opinion which will emerge in my own chapter, I trust our friendship will survive this book; my personal debts to him will ever remain immense. Martin Ingram provided much intellectual input and constructive advice; if in the end I was not as radical as he perhaps would have liked in my attack on the notion of 'popular culture', my own thinking about these issues has certainly been sharpened as a result of our discussions. I should also like to thank Keith Wrightson for many stimulating conversations over the years on the subject of early modern English social history more generally, in places as far afield as Cambridge (England), the other Cambridge (Massachusetts) and Claremont (California). In addition, Bob Scribner has been very influential in shaping the way I think about popular culture in early modern Europe; what I owe to him will be apparent from the pages of my chapter. I benefited enormously from the discussions I had with the students in my graduate seminar on a number of the topics explored in this volume; in particular I am indebted to Susannah Ottaway, who not only read a number of draft chapters, but even carried various materials back and forth across the Atlantic for me on one of her trips to England. Above all, I need to offer my deepest thanks to my contributors and the publishers for their patience and support whilst I was putting this collection together. As these things always seem to, the whole process took much longer than I thought; I apologise for the long delay and hope they feel that, in the end, it was worth it.

1. Problematising Popular Culture¹

TIM HARRIS

All students of popular culture would acknowledge the intellectual debt they owe to Peter Burke's seminal study *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. In this impressively wide-ranging work, Burke laid down a powerful model of cultural change in early modern Europe. Culture he defined as 'a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artifacts) in which they are expressed or embodied'; by popular culture he meant the culture of 'ordinary people' or the 'subordinate classes', those below the level of the elite (though not necessarily excluding the elite). In the Europe of 1500, according to Burke, 'popular culture' was everyone's culture. Although there existed a separate culture of the learned and educated few – the 'great tradition' – the elite at this time also participated in the 'little tradition' of the rest. The following three centuries, however, saw an increasing polarisation between these two traditions, with the result that by 1800 European elites 'had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes, from whom they were now separated, as never before, by profound differences in world view'. Burke identified two broad forces responsible for this transformation: first, the attack on popular culture from above (the clergy and lay reformers), motivated by the desire for moral and religious reform; and second, the transforming effect of social and economic changes, such as the divisive impact of the spread of literacy, the commercialisation of society, the impact of the Scientific Revolution, and the rise of a culture of manners which caused the elite to withdraw from what they saw as the 'uncouth' practices of the lower orders. By the early nineteenth century the gap had become so large that the elite needed to rediscover popular culture, and some educated men began to collect and record popular songs, beliefs and festivals which appeared both exotic and quaint, belonging to a world that was now totally alien to them.²

Burke's account is tempered by an awareness of the complexities of regional variations and of specific exceptions to the rule, but on the whole he feels that the model he develops is generally applicable to all of Europe, including England. Indeed, much of the specific scholarly work into various aspects of popular culture in early modern England seems to confirm Burke's picture. In their detailed reconstruction of life in the Essex village of Terling between 1525 and 1700, Keith Wrightson and David Levine documented an increasing socio-economic polarisation between the village elite and the village poor which was accompanied by a concomitant cultural polarisation: 'new distinctions of education and religion, of attitudes and manners' emerged, and as the parish notables, many of whom are known to have been Puritans, 'gradually withdrew from traditional popular culture', they 'attacked it', attempting 'to impose a new form of social discipline that would reinforce their own position' and using the courts 'to redefine and mark out anew the boundaries of permitted behaviour'.³ In his influential textbook on English society, Wrightson argued more generally that by 1680 'The poor had become not simply poor, but to a significant degree culturally different':

At the time of the Armada, rural England possessed a vigorous popular culture of communal recreations and rituals. By the time of the Exclusion Crisis this traditional culture had been greatly impoverished, while its surviving manifestations were discountenanced by respectable society and participation in them was largely confined to the vulgar.⁴

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century scholarship has also served to endorse the appropriateness of Burke's model for England. Robert Malcolmson has shown how traditional recreations were gradually undermined in the period 1700–1850 (especially from the later eighteenth century), partly as a result of social and cultural changes, such as the enclosure movement and the rapid growth of cities, and partly as a result of attempts at suppression by 'respectable society' – evangelical reformers and those concerned with imposing a more rigorous labour discipline. In addition, 'enlightened' opinion became increasingly hostile to certain traditional pastimes, in particular cruel animal sports such as bull-baiting and cock-fighting, whilst there was also growing alarm amongst local

elites at the disorders that might be promoted by popular recreations, particularly so after the outbreak of the French Revolution.⁵ Other important studies have also identified changes in the structure and organisation of leisure occurring during the Industrial Revolution, related to attempts to impose greater social discipline and adapt to the conditions of industrial production.⁶ Reviewing the state of the field in an essay published in 1985, Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson were able to conclude that between 1500 and 1800 'a polarisation was occurring that detached the gentry and some of the middling ranks from labourers and the poor, finally leaving the traditional culture, a culture imbued with symbolism, magic and superstition, high and dry ... By the end of our period a chasm had opened between the mentality of the gentry and the people that was not apparent at its beginning'. As a result of 'a process of withdrawal by the gentry and middling sorts', they continued, we can detect 'a whole series of developing polarities – of speech, dress, manners, living conditions, leisure pursuits and literary interests'.⁷ And more recently still, Peter Borsay, from his work on English provincial towns in the period 1660–1770, has concluded that 'from the very end of the seventeenth century there was a marked acceleration in the rate at which the privileged and affluent withdrew from traditional beliefs and activities', with the consequence that 'a widening cultural gap emerged between polite society and the majority of ordinary people'.⁸

However, as our explorations in the field of early modern popular culture have become more advanced – as we move from the stage of 'pioneers' to 'settlers', to employ Peter Burke's metaphor⁹ – some of our received wisdom about both the nature of popular culture and what was happening to it during this period has come under increased critical scrutiny. Part of the discussion has centred on the problem of methodology, and the extent to which it is possible, from the available sources, to recreate the contours of the culture of the subaltern classes. Even more critical attention has been paid to conceptual problems. What precisely do we mean by the term 'popular culture'? What is meant by culture, and what range of phenomena should be included within this category? What precisely does the term 'popular' signify, and who were the popular classes who were supposed to have inhabited this particular cultural space? Some have questioned the appropriateness of the two-tier model of cultural conflict, others would point to the

diversities within both elite and popular culture themselves, whilst still others have noted the continued interaction of the popular and elite spheres throughout this period. Questions have also been raised about the alleged chronology of cultural transformation during the early modern period, with some now coming to place greater emphasis on continuity rather than on change.¹⁰ One glaring weakness with existing scholarship is that it has largely focused on the culture of men. Burke candidly confessed that he had ‘too little to say about women, for lack of evidence’.¹¹ In the light of recent important developments in women’s history, this omission can no longer be acceptable.

The time was thought ripe, therefore, for a volume which would explore these issues in the light of recent critical trends. All of the essays compiled here, in their different ways, offer important critical perspectives on the model of cultural transformation offered by Burke and others, some challenging the validity of seeing a simple polarisation between elite and popular cultures, others the chronology and extent of change during this period. However, there has been no attempt to impose a particular editorial line, because the aim of this volume has been to open up critical debate by exploring the complexities of the cultural dynamics of early modern England, rather than foreclose it by attempting to establish a new consensus. The purpose of this introductory chapter, therefore, is to set the context for the following essays, not by trying to develop an alternative interpretative paradigm, which the various contributors may or may not endorse, but rather by raising critical questions about our conceptualisation of popular culture and the way we should approach its study.

It will be argued here that the initial formulation of the concept of popular culture by pioneers in the field was extremely fruitful, since it forced scholars to pay more attention to the humbler ranks of society and the cultural framework within which they experienced their world and acted out their daily existence. However, as our enquiries progress, the concept of popular culture itself has become constraining, because it fails to problematise certain areas of historical enquiry which are now in need of further investigation. The language we use often limits the questions we ask and structures the way we conceive the phenomena and processes we are seeking to understand. The use of the term ‘popular culture’ in the singular encourages us to think of the culture of those

below the elite as if it were a coherent whole, and directs our attention away from a consideration of the diversities within popular culture itself. Similarly, the way our approach has been conceptualised in terms of a dichotomy between popular and elite culture encourages us to see the subordinate classes as an undifferentiated group, which clearly does an injustice to social, economic and cultural realities. Did all of those below the level of the elite really inhabit the same cultural world, or do we need to introduce more sophisticated distinctions, dependent upon social status, geographic location, religious affiliation and gender? Likewise, formulating the question in terms of a conflict between elite and popular culture which the elite eventually (and inevitably) won distracts us from considering the degree of interaction between the cultural worlds of the educated and the humbler ranks of society as well as the degree of resistance to pressure from above exhibited by those from below. It is true that many of the pioneers in the field of early modern popular culture, Burke included, were aware of these issues. My point, however, is that the language of Burke's conceptual model does not invite us to identify these complexities as central areas for historical investigation.

This introduction therefore seeks to unpack the concept of 'popular culture' in order to problematise those issues which need further enquiry for our understanding in this field to progress. I shall start with a consideration of the problems of the sources, before moving on to an examination of the meaning and usefulness of our central terms 'culture' and 'popular'. I shall then explore the question of the alleged elite/popular dichotomy, suggesting that it is unhelpful to think in terms of a bi-polar model of cultural relations in early modern England. A final section will consider the extent to which the culture of the subordinate classes was transformed during the early modern period, and the mechanisms by which this was achieved, where I shall warn against the view which sees 'popular culture' as being perpetually impoverished as a result of attacks from the elite. Some of the efforts to reform 'popular culture' came from those who themselves were below the level of the elite. Moreover, whereas some elements of traditional culture did disappear, many aspects survived the attempts at reform, whereas in other areas the culture of the ordinary people can seem to have become enriched, as it developed in new ways and met changing situations and needs.

At the heart of any discussion of 'popular culture' must lie a consideration of what this critical term means. Yet in many respects, the quest for popular culture began as an attempt to identify a field of enquiry rather than as a search for a clearly defined structure that was believed to exist: the aim was simply to shift attention away from the learned and educated few, and invite more scholarly enquiry into the cultural world of ordinary people. For this reason, we should start with a methodological question, and ask whether the sources exist which might enable us to explore this cultural world, before moving on to the question of how we categorise the cultural system that emerges as a result of our enquiries.

The source problems, however, are quite severe. Ordinary people in the early modern period seldom left direct evidence of their own beliefs, values or attitudes; our access to the culture of the subordinate classes is therefore normally indirect, mediated through sources produced by those who belonged to the learned culture of the elite. What becomes difficult is to discern the extent to which the historical record of this popular culture has been contaminated by these elite mediators. The risk of contamination is most apparent when dealing with elite descriptions of popular activities and practices. For instance, accounts of riots and demonstrations by those in positions of authority who were responsible for maintaining peace and order often give a somewhat tainted view of the activities they were purporting to describe. As John Morrill and John Walter have recently shown, much of the evidence upon which historians have traditionally relied to investigate the nature and extent of agrarian unrest in England in the 1640s 'reveals more about the propertied classes' fears than the rioters' intent'.¹² Likewise, descriptive accounts of lower-class religious movements or radical groups from contemporary observers who sought to distance themselves from the attitudes and beliefs they were recounting have to be treated with extreme caution, as the recent debate over whether the Ranters existed has shown.¹³ These are stark examples, but the difficulty persists – perhaps in less obvious but nevertheless in equally problematic forms – with many of the sources on which historians of popular culture have to rely. We must not confuse what the elite perceived and feared with what ordinary people actually believed and practised.

A variety of approaches have been suggested for gaining more direct access to what was authentically popular. For instance, we

can exploit those sources that can be said to have been 'popular' in the sense that they had a mass consumption. Here we might include cheap printed wares, such as illustrated broadsides, ballads and chapbooks, which were accessible to those on the margins of literacy or even people who were illiterate: pictures could be viewed, ballads could be heard, and chapbooks were written in a simple enough style that they could be read aloud to those who could not read themselves. Because publishers had to make a living, what was printed, and especially what was reprinted, must to some degree have represented consumer choice, and therefore might tell us something about the values and tastes of the consumers. The trouble is, as Tessa Watt has recently shown, the idea that such cheap print was 'aimed at and consumed by a definable social group may be a myth'. Gentry and people from the more prosperous middling ranks of society accounted for a significant proportion of the buyers of such material. It may be that in some cases such sources tell us not so much about popular culture as about a tradition of popularised learned literature.¹⁴ 'Popular' devotional literature is a case in point: to what extent does this tell us about popular piety, and to what extent does it reflect elite notions of piety targeted at a mass audience? The same observation would be pertinent to all forms of moralistic and prescriptive literature. It would be wrong, of course, to assume that the more humble consumers did not internalise the values contained in such material – although it is virtually impossible to know how they did internalise them. The point, however, is that the values being internalised often came from 'outside'; at best such sources tell us about the interaction between the culture of the elite and that of ordinary people.

Some 'popular' printed material was of a deliberately propagandistic nature. During the Exclusion Crisis at the end of Charles II's reign, for example, a number of prints and illustrated broadsides were produced in order to represent the dangers posed by the Popish Plot and the evils that might befall the nation should the Catholic heir become king. This material was certainly targeted at a mass audience, and it clearly sought to exploit what was perceived to be a deep-seated hostility towards popery amongst the English population. To a certain extent, therefore, such propaganda must have reflected the sentiments and anxieties of the audience it was seeking to reach. Yet it was also designed to

persuade, to shape or even re-direct opinion – in this case, to convince people of the necessity of excluding the Catholic heir from the succession. As a result, it becomes very difficult to distinguish between what was genuinely popular sentiment and what was the propagandist's opinion, which he hoped his audience would come to share. In this particular case we in fact know that many people did not buy the argument of the propaganda; there is quite considerable evidence now emerging of 'popular' opposition to the policy of exclusion.¹⁵

Another approach is to search for what appear to be vestiges of a traditional oral culture, such as ballads, folk-songs, folk-tales and proverbs. Many of these have been transcribed into printed sources, some of them in major collections assembled by folklorists and antiquarians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even when we can feel confident that the collectors merely recorded what they took to be oral tradition, and did not introduce any distortion of their own, we cannot readily assume that here we have firm evidence of authentic popular culture. For example, it has now been shown that the vast majority of folk-songs gathered in the great compilations at the turn of the last century can be traced back to printed broadsides. Whilst some of these might represent an early recording of an oral tradition, many such ballads owed their origins to musical hacks or even professional composers who published for a living.¹⁶ Folk-tales and proverbs present similar problems. The origins of many of the Luther folk-tales collected in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, can be traced back to the hand of a pious Lutheran pastor, and some of them appear to have been deliberately created for a propagandist function.¹⁷

A third line of enquiry has been to exploit court records (both ecclesiastical and secular), to discover what infractions of the social and legal norms established by the elite can tell us about popular beliefs and attitudes. Here, so it seems, in the accusations of seditious words, in the allegations of witchcraft, in matrimonial disputes, and so on, we can find the authentic voices or actions of ordinary people: we can hear what people said about politics, for example, or discover what they thought about the power of maleficent magic. A large number of excellent studies, on a wide range of subjects, have been undertaken using such sources, and there can be no doubting that valuable insights into the world of

ordinary people can be gained through an exploration of court records. Yet as a means of gaining access to popular culture, the sources are problematic. Court records do not tell us, in unmediated form, what ordinary people said or thought; they tell us what some legal official, given his own prejudices and his own understanding of the law, thought worthy of recording in order to initiate legal proceedings. Indictments for seditious words, for example, record those words allegedly spoken which were regarded as legally seditious; they do not necessarily record the whole of the speech, nor tell us how such a seditious conclusion was reached, nor perhaps even what the accused regarded as the most important points of his speech. The degree of filtering that went on can be seen when we can compare indictments with depositions, which are often much fuller and typically provide much information that never found its way into the indictment. Unfortunately depositions do not always survive, especially before the eighteenth century; but even when they do, we have to realise that the justice of the peace who took the deposition might have been writing down only selective parts of the allegations, those which struck him as legally significant.¹⁸ The methodological problems of using court records as a way of gaining access to popular culture have been exposed by Clive Holmes in an essay on early modern English witchcraft. Although English witchcraft accusations were predominantly initiated from below, and to that extent reflect popular beliefs and concerns, they found expression, as Holmes put it, through 'a complex machinery staffed by members of the elite who might shape those concerns in the light of their own attitudes'. These sources, in the end, tell us not, in any simple way, about popular culture, since they are 'the product of a complex interweaving of the concerns of the elite and those of the populace'.¹⁹

We should not paint too bleak a picture. Historians always have to confront the methodological problems of their sources, and although the difficulties facing the student of popular culture might be particularly extreme, with the right approach and with sensitive handling the sources can be extremely revealing. On the other hand, it must be recognised that trying to reconstruct something we might label popular culture in early modern England is an extremely difficult task. Rather than struggling to overcome the limitations of the sources, which might not, in the end, be

particularly productive, a better approach could be to play to the sources' strengths. That is, since the sources tell us about the interaction of elite and popular culture, maybe we should make the nature of that interaction the focus of our study, rather than the attempt to isolate what was purely popular, which could end up being a futile endeavour.

Having considered some of the methodological difficulties involved in reconstructing the culture of those below the level of the elite, let us now turn to definitional problems, and confront the issue of whether the concept of 'popular culture' is a particularly meaningful one. What do we mean by 'culture' in this context? In the seventeenth century culture carried the meaning of cultivation, whether of plants (as in agriculture), or of the mind, faculties, manners, and so on. When applied to human beings it was synonymous with improvement or refinement through education or training. As Thomas Hobbes put it in *Leviathan*, 'The education of children [is called] a culture of their minds'.²⁰ To early modern English people, then, 'popular culture' would have been a contradiction in terms: by definition there was no culture of the unrefined and ill-educated masses. The modern usage of the term as applied to human societies did not emerge until after 1750, and initially was confined to the German language; it was first used in the English language in the modern anthropological sense in 1871 by E. B. Tylor. Today the term itself has become rather broad, possessed with a variety of meanings: a semantic history written in the early 1950s identified close to 300 definitions of culture as applied to discussions of human societies.²¹ Even if we agree to work with Burke's definition of 'a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms in which they are expressed or embodied', it is a definition which embraces a wide range of phenomena for the historian to investigate, and seems capable of almost indefinite expansion. Popular culture is not just what ordinary people did to amuse themselves whilst the toffs went to the opera; it is about how they saw their world, how they lived, worked, worshipped, what they believed, their attitudes towards the law, politics, the church, the supernatural, their family, marriage, in short, perhaps about everything. Ludmilla Jordanova has argued

that 'all history is cultural history, since there can be no processes, whether economic, social or political, which are not mediated through ideas, concepts, theories, images or languages'.²²

This broadening of the concept is to be welcomed. What we might broadly term cultural considerations must surely be placed alongside other factors, such as material circumstances, in explaining both how people experienced their world and the way they reacted to it. Yet the broader the concept becomes, the less coherence it is likely to possess as an analytical category. Does it make sense to talk about 'a popular culture' in the singular, or are we going to see a variety of different 'popular cultures' – or at least a variety of sub-cultures – depending on which different aspects of human existence we choose to focus on?

An earlier generation of structural anthropologists tended to view 'an individual culture as a coherent whole', as Malinowski put it, as an integrated and internally consistent belief system which formed, in Mary Douglas's words, 'one single, symbolically consistent universe'.²³ Such a conceptualisation has been particularly influential in shaping historians' thinking. For example, Robert Muchembled, in his important study of popular culture in early modern France, insisted on the need to 'seek out the *internal coherence* of this system of explaining the world'.²⁴ The value of such an approach is that it can help reveal why it made sense for a particular people to hold beliefs which by modern western standards seem irrational and superstitious. As Bob Bushaway shows in his chapter on alternative belief in nineteenth-century rural England, by seeing alternative belief as a coherent and holistic structure, we can free ourselves from the view, adopted by contemporary elite commentators, that the rural poor were essentially stupid and held slavishly to popular delusions, and begin to comprehend the meaning and significance such a belief system had for many labouring families. But Bushaway's essay also makes it clear that not all people below the elite subscribed to this value system and, of those who did, not all related to it in exactly the same way.

The danger of the holistic approach, with its stress on cultural integration, is that it can tend to imply an over-consensual view. Cultures are seldom monolithic, even in primitive societies; they are certainly not so in complex, hierarchically structured and regionally diverse societies such as early modern England. Instead, as many historians and even anthropologists would now warn us,

we need to recognise the existence of cultural pluralism, and of various oppositions and contradictions which create fractures and tensions within the whole.²⁵

The question of pluralism becomes immediately apparent when we consider the issue of regional variation. Contemporaries were well aware of the difficulty of generalising about the culture of England as whole. As one observer put it in 1672:

has not every county their particular rites and customs, not only different, but even contrary? He therefore that shall ascribe the particular customs of any one county, as Yorkshire, or Devonshire, to England in general, does he not expose himself to the just censure and indignation of those ... that have better knowledge of the country?²⁶

Historians would now place greater emphasis on the geographical determinations of culture: cities, towns and villages might all have distinctive cultures of their own, as might also different agrarian and economic regions in the countryside. Jonathan Barry's work on Bristol, for example, has pointed to the existence of an indigenous social and political culture in what was at this time one of England's major provincial urban centres. With regard to the countryside, David Underdown has identified important cultural differences between the 'chalk' and the 'cheese', that is, between the communal culture of the densely settled, open-field parishes of the arable villages, and the more individualistic culture of the scattered parishes of the wood-pasture areas.²⁷ Underdown picks up this theme of regional variation in his contribution to this volume, where he evaluates the usefulness of a number of analytical categories for making sense of the many local variations in cultural forms. Distinctions need to be made between town and country, between large, imprecise regions such as the North, the West Country and East Anglia, between smaller ones such as counties, and of course, between the arable and wood-pasture areas which, in a slightly modified form from his earlier work, he still insists to be a particularly useful conceptual model. From his essay it becomes clear that there was no singular culture of the non-elite in early modern England: different parts of England had their own distinctive cultures; 'Cornish tin-miners inhabited a different culture from that of East Anglian fen-dwellers' (below, p. 29).

The extent to which we can talk about a single culture of those below the level of the elite becomes even more questionable once we introduce the category of gender into our analysis. In the light of recent research in women's history, the assumption that men and women from similar social backgrounds and geographical environments inhabited the same cultural space seems highly doubtful. Amongst other things, culture influences how individuals behave towards other individuals and also what is expected from them. In that sense, it has been said, 'any culture is a system of expectancies' – about what type of behaviour might be deemed appropriate, for example, or might be condoned or condemned.²⁸ It is undoubtedly the case, however, that the way women were expected to behave, and the way they were treated when they did not conform to expected norms, was very different from men's experience. Women were supposed to be subordinate, scolds were liable to be prosecuted at law, wives who beat their husbands were likely to be subjected to village shaming rituals known as skimmingtons or charivaris. There was a double standard with regard to sexual behaviour: a man was expected to be sexually experienced, a woman was expected to be chaste: adultery may have been regarded as a sin, but a sin much more readily forgiven in a man than in a woman.²⁹

Many scholars would now recognise that men and women experienced popular culture in very different ways and that they did not occupy the culture of their class in the same way.³⁰ Susan Amussen, in her chapter in this volume, explores the critical role the values and cultural assumptions of the lower orders played in sustaining gender relations in early modern society, and emphasises the way that gender affected the meaning given to the behaviour of women and men in virtually every aspect of their daily lives. She also shows, however, that cultural conceptions of gender were not fixed. Although the core values of the culture of the masses were deeply misogynistic, stressing women's subordination, in practice the extent of women's subordination was sharply contested, allowing women a certain degree of authority and respect. The cultural space occupied by women, and the way issues of gender and class interacted, are themes explored by Patty Seleski in her chapter on domestic servants in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London. The eighteenth century saw the articulation of a new domestic ideology, especially powerful amongst the

middle class, which posited certain natural differences between men and women and which sought to restrict women to the private world of the household, with women being seen as the 'natural' managers of family life. Yet this contemporary project of dividing the world by gender, Seleski reminds us, should not cause us to lose sight of the question of class relations, and the differentials of wealth, status, and power that divided women amongst themselves. As is clearly brought out in her study, domestic servants experienced this new definition of womanhood differently from their female employers, and the feminised household was often itself an arena of cultural confrontation between the differing value systems of different classes of women.

The problems involved in talking about 'popular culture' in the singular become even more apparent when we scrutinise the other term in this formulation, and consider exactly what is meant by the term 'popular'. Most scholars have defined 'popular' in juxtaposition to what it is not – it is not official culture, it is not the culture of the elite, or the educated classes. Such a strategy has led to the development of a bi-polar frame of analysis. As a result, we have come to think in terms of a series of dichotomies: between elite and popular; patrician and plebeian; high and low; rulers and ruled; learned and unlearned; literate and illiterate; godly and ungodly. Under critical examination, however, many of these alleged dichotomies break down.

Let us first ask whether the bi-polar model does justice to the sociological realities of early modern England. It is true that members of the elite did sometimes embrace an 'us' and 'them' vision of society. They often described the subordinate classes in contemptuous terms, referring to them variously as the vulgar, the rabble, the many-headed monster, the giddy multitude, and, from the later seventeenth century, as the mob.³¹ The high-church Tory, Charles Leslie, discussing the partisan allegiances of the electorate in the Parliamentary elections of 1705, made a distinction between 'the principal gentry, both for estates and reputation', and 'the refuse and scum, the beasts of the people' (the latter of which, not surprisingly, Leslie thought supported the Whigs).³² A few years later, the high-Tory cleric, Francis Atterbury, could maintain that

'the voice of the people is the cry of hell', and that 'the people are by the voice of heaven declared foolish, sottish, void of understanding, wise for wickedness, and senseless for good'.³³

We need to be careful about how we treat such remarks, however. There was often a polemical purpose behind statements which posited a sharply polarised view of social relationships, with the dichotomy between the worthy 'us' and the unworthy 'them' being deliberately overdrawn in order to achieve a desired effect or make a particular point. Contemporaries typically had a more subtle conceptualisation of the sociological make-up of their society.³⁴ The best-known contemporary commentators on the social hierarchy of early modern England never adopted a bi-polar model. William Harrison, writing in 1577, stated that 'We in England divide our people commonly into four sorts'. The four groups consisted of first gentlemen (which could be further differentiated into the titular nobility, knights, esquires and simple gentlemen), second the citizens and burgesses of the cities and towns, third the yeomanry of the countryside, and finally a group embracing day labourers, poor husbandmen, artificers and servants.³⁵ The late seventeenth-century demographer Gregory King divided England into twenty-six 'ranks, degrees, titles and qualifications' of people, though these in turn could be grouped into three broader 'classes' which he described as 'the poorest sort ... the middle sort ... the better sort'.³⁶ All sorts of evidence, from formal works of social and economic analysis to more casual remarks in writings and speeches, suggests that for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contemporaries most commonly embraced a three-tier view of their social hierarchy. The mid-seventeenth century radical, George Foster, when he spoke of a vision he had about the levelling of social hierarchies, did not talk of 'us' becoming equal with 'them', but rather reported a vision in which he saw a man on a white horse 'cutting down all men and women, that he met with, that were higher than the middle sort', and who 'raised up those that were lower than the middle sort and made them all equal'.³⁷ In a speech in Parliament in November 1761, Member of Parliament William Beckford made it clear that when he spoke of the people he meant neither those at the top nor the bottom of society (and certainly not 'the mob'), but rather 'the middling people of England, the manufacturer, the yeoman, the merchant, the country gentleman'.³⁸

Social historians have seldom found a bi-polar description of early modern English society subtle enough for their analytical purposes. Wrightson and Levine, in their study of Terling between 1525 and 1700, thought it most useful to employ four broad categories in order to make sense of what they termed 'the finely graded hierarchy of wealth and social position within the village'.³⁹ Most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historians would at least wish to adopt a three-tier hierarchy, stressing the importance of the 'middling sort' – those engaged in the professions, commerce or business (from doctors, lawyers and merchants through to the more prosperous local tradesmen and shopkeepers) and the yeomen farmers and richer husbandmen in the countryside.⁴⁰ This was not an insignificant group. One historian has estimated that in the eighteenth century the middling sort accounted for over 30 per cent of the population and were in receipt of nearly 60 per cent of the national income.⁴¹

The existence of this middle layer not only questions the validity of thinking in terms of a basic social polarity, but it also provides problems for the posited dichotomy between rulers and ruled, since at the local level the middling sort played an important role in the governance of the realm. They filled many of the local offices of the parish or ward, serving as churchwardens, vestrymen, constables and beadles, and on the night watch. They also played a vital part in local regulation and the administration of justice by serving as jurors: whilst the grand juries of the assizes were composed mainly of gentry, men of lesser status got to sit on the quarter sessions grand jury, trial juries, hundred presentment juries and coroner's juries.⁴² The potential for involvement in some of the processes of government at the local level extended fairly far down the social scale, as contemporaries themselves recognised. In a tract of 1686, Nathaniel Johnston, a fairly extreme Tory who believed that the kings of England were absolute, wrote of the 'common people':

They have according to their several capacities and abilities, a participation of offices in their particular hamlets, parishes, wapentakes, or counties, either relating to the assistance to the justice of the land in juries, or conserving of the peace, in being petty, or chief constables, or other officers.⁴³

Some historians who recognise the existence of these middle ranks would nevertheless persist in the view that a process of cultural polarisation was taking place, maintaining that culturally the middling sort came to identify themselves with the values of the elite. This is what Wrightson and Levine argue in their study of Terling.⁴⁴ Likewise Morrill and Walter have maintained that those from the middle ranks of society who dominated their local communities in their capacity as parish or manorial officeholders allied themselves firmly with the gentry as magistrates, an alliance which was 'eased by an identity of economic interests in service of the market, facilitated by the trend towards enclosure by agreement and cemented where there occurred a shared religion and literate culture'.⁴⁵ Edward Thompson, defending his categorisation of eighteenth-century English society as divided between patricians and plebs, has recently asserted that 'in between, where the professional and middle classes, and the substantial yeomanry, should have been, relations of clientage were so strong that, at least until the 1760s, these groups appear to offer little deflection of the essential polarities'.⁴⁶

It is certainly true that the middling orders often sought to create social and cultural distance between themselves and those beneath them, and that they could be highly critical of the mores, manners, customs and disorders of the poor. We also find plenty of evidence of the middle ranks 'straining to imitate their betters', as Lord Chesterfield put it in the eighteenth century.⁴⁷ Yet it is by no means clear that we should invariably locate the middle ranks of society on the elite side of the cultural divide. It is revealing, in this respect, that Barry Reay's recent collection of essays on popular culture in seventeenth-century England encompasses both the 'middling' and the 'lower sort of people'; indeed, the middling sort have a high profile in the various contributors' investigations into the culture of the non-elite.⁴⁸ In his study of fenland riots in the later seventeenth century, Clive Holmes has shown that the middling sort allied themselves with the landless poor and took a prominent role in organising local opposition to the drainage and enclosure of the fens.⁴⁹ Recent work on the law has shown that the middling sort often played a powerful role as mediators in the exercise of justice, and that they did not automatically or instinctively adopt the values of the governing elite. Trial juries (composed, as we have said, largely of those from the middle ranks of

society) frequently failed to convict those with whom they felt themselves in broad sympathy, a notable example being those who had offended against the game laws, which explains why gentry game preservers were often forced to use summary conviction instead.⁵⁰ We can discern a definite anti-aristocratic flavour within the value system of the emerging middle class. For example, the middle-class emphasis on thrift and condemnation of extravagant expenditure on leisure reveals as much a sense of cultural distance from those above as from those below.⁵¹ Similarly, the Wilkite reform movement of the 1760s and 1770s, which was spearheaded largely by men of middling status, took on a distinctively anti-aristocratic tone, as John Brewer has shown.⁵²

Many of the other alleged dichotomies implied by our traditional conceptual framework also appear difficult to sustain. The view, once commonly held, that popular culture was essentially oral and that a fundamental cultural fissure developed in early modern England between the literate and illiterate classes, can no longer be readily held, as Jonathan Barry's contribution to this volume makes clear. There was a substantial overlap between the oral and literate worlds.⁵³ Although it is true that illiteracy rates get higher the further one goes down the social hierarchy, some humble types could read and write, with the result that literacy and the world of print had already begun to penetrate the culture of the lower orders. Indeed, literacy and illiteracy might even co-exist within the same families.⁵⁴ Besides, there were many ways of bridging the gap between the literate and oral worlds, such as by reading newspapers or printed tracts aloud, or even singing published ballads. Furthermore, as Barry points out, to make a basic distinction between those who were literate and those who were not is too simplistic, since there are qualitative dimensions to consider, such as how well one could read or write, what sort of reading material one had access to, and how one read (whether privately or publicly).

The alleged dichotomy between a godly elite and an irreligious multitude is another that does not bear up to critical scrutiny. It is true, as many historians have shown, that for the late Elizabethan and early Stuart England the hotter sort of Protestants were particularly visible amongst the more prosperous middling sorts and the upper ranks of society, whilst throughout the early modern period we can find many traces of religious ignorance or scepticism

and superstitious practices amongst the mass of the population (especially in the countryside). But there is also evidence to suggest that as a result of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and the political and religious struggles of the seventeenth, the religious divisions that emerged in England cut vertically through this society rather than horizontally. The elite became divided, between those who wanted to continue the Reformation further (Puritans), and those who remained attached to the established church of bishops, prayer book and the thirty-nine articles. In addition, not all those below the level of the elite can be styled 'ungodly'. Recent research has shown that, even before the Civil War, Puritanism was not without its appeal to the poorer sort, whilst some of the more radical religious movements which emerged during the 1640s and 1650s – such as the Baptists, Fifth Monarchists and Quakers – generated much of their support from plebeian types. Studies of Restoration nonconformity have shown that dissenters were drawn from all sections of society, including the very poorest. And if we look at the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, we find that Methodists drew many of their supporters from the middling and lower ranks of society. Of course, such religious 'enthusiasts' were a small minority of the population, but even if we look at the conforming majority, we can uncover evidence of popular Anglican piety and even a zealous attachment to episcopacy and the prayer book. Indeed, it is arguable that poor Anglicans possessed a stronger sense of cultural identity with upper-class Anglicans – and likewise poor dissenters or poor Methodists with their more well-to-do counterparts – than they did with people from a similar social background who did not share their religious leanings. There is plenty of evidence of plebeian hostility towards Puritan, sectarian, nonconformist and Methodist groups in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, manifesting itself in various forms, from peaceful petitions and addresses to ritualised demonstrations, and even physical attacks on individuals or property. Such religious tensions tended to translate into vertical political allegiances, particularly during the turbulent seventeenth century. Under the later Stuarts, as has now been well documented, nonconformists and those sympathetic to dissent tended to ally with the Whigs, whilst high-Anglicans sided with the Tories; even the 'London crowd' was divided.⁵⁵

We must nevertheless remain alert to the possibility that the way people understood or internalised their religious culture might have varied according to social and economic status; or, in other words, a poor Anglican might have experienced his religion differently from a rich one. The theme of 'popular religion' between c. 1540 and 1690 is addressed by Martin Ingram in his contribution to this volume. He stresses that popular religion can only be understood in relation to the official or dominant religion, emphasising the need to explore the degree of mismatch between official prescription and popular practice. What he uncovers is a range of overlapping popular religious cultures, which were not necessarily separated off from those of the upper ranks of society, and which interacted in complex ways with official precepts and doctrines which themselves were neither unitary nor unchanging.

The previous sections have stressed the problems involved in thinking in terms of an elite/popular dichotomy, suggesting that such a model is not sophisticated enough to make sense of the complex social and cultural realities of early modern England. In particular, it has been shown that more attention needs to be paid to regional variations, the issue of gender and the position of the middling sort. At the same time, attention has been drawn to the considerable degree of interaction between the high and the low and the fact that cultural tensions could sometimes divide this society vertically rather than horizontally. When taking on board these critical reflections, we must be careful not to lose sight of the fact that there clearly was a considerable degree of cultural conflict between the upper layers of society (those in positions of power and authority) and the subordinate classes. There undoubtedly were attempts to reform the traditional culture of the masses in early modern England, and the culture of the non-elite was certainly transformed in many significant respects during this period, as the researches of Wrightson, Malcolmson and others have shown. But in turning to the question of transformation, a number of observations need to be made, which taken together invite further refinements to the received model of cultural conflict.

In the first place it is worth re-emphasising that the attack on the culture of the subaltern classes was not continuous throughout