

Proposal *JSBC* 2018/1
Early Modern Spectacles
(Susanne Größ & Lena Steveker)

In the recent *Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Culture in Early Modern England* (2014), the editors state that “[r]eading popular culture is a demanding task and an invigorating challenge, one that cannot be ignored if we wish to make sense of the world in which our ancestors lived in” (Hadfield, Dimmock & Shinn, 7). With this issue of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, we want to take up this challenge. While ‘popular culture’ as such remains a contested category for the early modern age – Sue Wiseman has noted the term’s “tendency to slide from defining an approach or approaches to cultural analysis into being an imagined location, sphere or level of early modern culture” (2009, 27) – early modern cultural products and practices have recurrently been interpreted with reference to their ‘popularity’ as well as to their spectacular appeal in recent years. It is this specific angle on the ‘spectacularity’ of early modern popular culture that we propose to explore.

Spectacles are a prominent element of cultural life in early modern England. Pamphlets and ballads proliferate sensational news about spectacular events – monstrous births, divine portents and hideous crimes. In theatre performances, spectacles abound as gods descend from heaven and devils ascend from hell; fairies and ghosts roam the stage; severed limbs are carried around, statues come to life and villains are struck by lightning. Urban and royal spectacles – civic shows, pageants, revels and masques to name but a few – negotiate political ideologies as a spectacular entertainment for socially diverse audiences and participants. Fairs and annual festivals such as Shrove Tuesday and the Christmas Revels offer grotesque and carnivalesque forms of spectacle while more violent forms of entertainment are available to the audiences of bear-baiting, witch trials or the ‘spectacle’ of the scaffold. While the violent spectacles of state punishment or the royal pageants as a spectacular reminder of the prowess of Elizabethan and Stuart rulers might have served to visualise and maintain royal power, other forms of spectacle (such as the excessively imaginative violence of early modern drama or the abundance of ‘monster news’ or annuals fairs) might have made use of the spectacular to more transgressive ends.

With this issue of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, we want to explore the cultural as well as the ideological impact and functions of the ‘spectacular’ in early modern popular culture. We invite contributions that address any form of early modern spectacle. Papers could focus on (but are not limited to) topics such as:

- theorising ‘spectacle’ and ‘the spectacular’ in early modern England
- staging spectacles on the early modern commercial stage
- the spectacular in early modern visual culture
- political spectacles – spectacle and politics (civic shows, pageants, revels, masques)
- the spectacular in early modern pamphlets and/or ballads
- violence as spectacle in early modern England
- the spectacle of the other

If you are interested in contributing an article to this issue of *JSBC*, please send your brief abstract (max. 300 words) to the guest editors by May 31, 2017. Essays (5,000 words) will be due by November 30, 2017.

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