The might and glory of the city celebrated – London's theatricality in Peter Ackroyd's *The Clerkenwell Tales*

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Abstract
Together with intertextuality, criminality, occultism and psychogeography, theatre culture and urban theatricality represent a cornerstone of Peter Ackroyd's conception of London. The motif or theme of theatricality appears in all his London novels, most notably in Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem *(1994), as well as in his major theoretical works on London history and the development of the English literary sensibility. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how his novel* The Clerkenwell Tales *(2003), through its multiple plots and a miscellaneous cast of characters in the best Chaucerian tradition, portrays and vivifies various theatrical aspects of medieval London and its life.*

Keywords
London, theatre, theatricality, Clerkenwell, conspiracy, the carnivalesque

Theatres, the theatre culture and milieu, together with numerous forms of performativeness and spectacularity of urban life are one of the essential idiosyncratic features of Peter Ackroyd's London, both in his non-fiction and novels. He explores this theme in detail especially in the part "London as Theatre" of his seminal work *London: The Biography* (2000), and he also repeatedly touches on it in *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (2002). As for Ackroyd's London novels, in various degrees they all depict and dramatise their author's conviction that theatricality is to be found at the very heart of the capital, its spirit and sensibility, which makes it even more unique among other large cities: "London has always had a reputation of being a city of contrast, where pathos and pantomime meet. […] It is a world of theatre. The grand theatre of human spirit which London most readily represents, and there is scenic detail and movement and passion and the action of crowds. It is quite different from other cities."[1] He also believes that theatricality is one of the crucial driving forces shaping the distinct dynamism of London and its life, making it "a performative phenomenon more accurately descried not as a place, but as that which takes place."[2] The most illustrative in this respect is *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), which is a pastiche on a late Victorian murder story whose main plotline is set in the environment of music-hall variety shows, and whose main protagonist is a successful music-hall actress, and, at the same time, a serial killer, a colleague of no less than Dan Leno, the most famous English comedian and impersonator of his time.

Most of Ackroyd's other London novels also touch upon the theme and motif of the city's theatrical nature, though not in such a complex and thorough manner as *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. *The Clerkenwell Tales* (2003), for instance, playfully yet resourcefully elaborates on the strong organic connectedness between medieval urban life and its conspicuous spiritual and material dramatic displays, those "brief but vivid

1 Daisy Banks. "Peter Ackroyd on London." An interview with Peter Ackroyd, *The Browser*, 2013, accessed 4 February 2013, http://thebrowser.com/interviews/peter-ackroyd-on-london.

2 Jeremy Gibbon and Julian Wolfreys, *Peter Ackroyd: The Ludic and Labyrinthine Text* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), 170.

intimations of London life,"[3] both organised and staged as well as spontaneous and unprompted. This conception of theatricality correlates with Ackroyd's persuasion that a combination of mythology and "materialistic forces that have […] structured London's geographical development since Saxon times"[4] lies at the core of the city's complex fabric. Although civic life in medieval London to a large extent revolved around various performative and spectacular events, it was a substantially different kind of theatricality than that of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, especially due to its integrative and communal character, but also due to its more or less manifest political dimension. "Civic London in the fourteenth century was no mere administrative and economic unit; it was theatrically oriented, valuing public and private civic display, apparently above all for its political uses although surely also for entertainment's sake."[5] It is precisely this polarity between politically motivated theatricality in the form of secret plotting, deliberate manipulation with the public and intrigues of power, and the seemingly apolitical dramatic performances during various feasts, festivals, fairs and pageantries, whose primary aim was to offer diversion to all involved. Yet these events also reinforced the sense of the local community and celebrated characteristic aspects of the citizens' ordinary lives as well as the most telling and feasible items from the Christian calendar. This polarity between theatre as politics and as diversion composes the fundamental axis of the novel's multiple plots. The present article attempts to illustrate and discuss the various ways in which *The Clerkenwell Tales* depict late fourteenth century London's theatrical occurrences and manifestations.

From religious serenity to carnivalesque festivity: medieval urban theatricality

Although there were no playhouses or other potential sites of permanent dramatic activity, by the end of the fourteenth century when the novel's action takes place the city displayed miscellaneous and vivid marks of theatricality, both in terms of the performers and the audience. Medieval plays and other dramatic events were not intended for the theatre but mostly, though not exclusively (as they were also given in college halls and private houses), for public display in city streets, churches, and on special playing fields and in market-places. The fact that neither the venues, nor the actors and spectators were standardised or professionalised influenced the distinctly diverse and heterogeneous character of the era's drama. This was, moreover, further determined by the fact that most of these open-air performances were movable, staged on special pageant wagons drawn by horses, circulating around the city and stopping at selected sites where large audiences could potentially gather. "Add to this a variety of subject matter, and we have not one but a whole range of theatricalities."[6] These peculiar circumstances presented certain constraints and demands especially for the performers: the same performance was given twelve to sixteen times a day with only short breaks, a regime which required extraordinary physical and vocal stamina.[7] Even within the close city streets the acoustics

3 Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (New York: Anchor, 1999), 25.

4 Alan Robinson, *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 154.

5 Anne Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre: City Drama and Pageantry from Roman Times to 1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 65.

6 Meg Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval English plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 37.

7 Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval English plays," 42.

was rather poor, so alliterative verse with a regular rhyme scheme was used to "help the audience to recognise potentially evanescent words."[8] The size of the wagon represented a substantial limitation of the acting space, which meant that movements had to be "deliberate and significant,"[9] passing much of the weight of the message on to rhetorically structured dialogues and speeches. Related to this was the narrative and interactive, rather than purely performative and monological, nature of the plays, conducted often in the story-telling mode, meaning that if the audience needed to know something or have something elucidated, it was told openly through the characters' running commentaries or direct addressing of the audience.

As the actors needed to engage their audience, knowing its character, composition, mood and preferences was thus of central importance for the success of the theatrical event. The fact that the spectators were not regular theatregoers, but that the pageant wagon literally "came" to them meant that the individual performances were bound not only to a special occasion but also to a close-knit community.[10] At the same time, however, the whole event had a noticeably processional quality – the performances were free and so the audiences were not limited to watching the action in only one location, but could easily follow the pageant wagon to its next station and see the same piece once again. There were usually more wagons in operation during the feast with thematically connected presentations, thus the audiences could get multiple perspectives of the rendered event. Yet each of these episodes was still designed as a separate dramatic unit, so the audience's experience was "cumulative rather than integrated."[11] All this was accompanied with banners, pennants, music, singing and dancing, most notably on the side of the procession. Therefore, sheer spectacle was the most desired effect, a "sense of marvel following upon marvel."[12] The whole procession thus became, if only for a brief moment, a self-contained community of its own kind.

Many kinds of theatrical activities took place in medieval London throughout the year, religiously connoted as well as purely secular. From the latter category mummings, the feast of Midsummer Watch and the Lord Mayor's show should be mentioned. From the late fourteenth century formal mummings and disguisings were a "popular form of secular city-sponsored entertainment"[13] organised by the city magistrates mostly in order to celebrate and impress the monarch or a member of the royal family; thus these events were politically motivated. Consequently these occasions required elaborate costumes, music and choreography, the disguises were only those of higher social rank such as esquires, knights, emperors, popes, cardinals and legates,[14] and the mummers rode on horseback through the major London streets, taking the route of "all of the principal pageant stations of coronation entries,"[15] providing thus both a street spectacle and a distraction for the royalty. The Midsummer Watch originated in part as an ordinary

8 Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval English plays," 44.

9 Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval English plays," 47.

10 Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval English plays," 37.

11 Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval English plays," 45.

12 Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval English plays," 47.

13 Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre*, 41.

14 Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre*, 42.

15 Lawrence Manley. "Of Sites and Rites," in *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576-1649*, ed. David L. Smith, Richard Strier and David Bevington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 43.

security measure, a functional civic watch at midsummer, and in part as a military muster,[16] but in the late fourteenth century it developed into a civic festival which "had become also decorative and processional in or by 1378,"[17] and which was one of the most popular theatrical events in fifteenth and sixteenth century London. It is especially the disappearing of this tradition for its benefactory and charitable community value that the historian John Stow nostalgically mourns in his famous *a Survey of London* (1598), while the public theatres "distress [him] with their heteroglot character and variegated audience."[18] Yet the decline was the result of increasing concern for public order, and the Midsummer Watches were gradually replaced by the more controlled lord mayor's procession, held "on the occasion of his return from his oath-taking in Westminster."[19] Although it not only celebrated the city representatives but also reminded them of their obligations to the poor, it was a faint substitute for the Midsummer Watch in terms of the degree of communal integrity it achieved as the procession was not open to the public but consisted solely of the lord mayor's own company.[20]

Particularly in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the most significant example of a religious theatrical festival in London were represented by the Clerkenwell Plays which were performed "just beyond its walls, to the northwest, in Clerkenwell."[21] Performed on an annual or at least a very regular basis, the event lasted for several days. The plays were thematically based on biblical subject matter and their audience included a varied sample of citizens ranging from commoners to nobility and royalty. The Clerkenwell Plays were sometimes concurrent with another large religious dramatic spectacle – the feast of Corpus Christi cycle. This activity was inaugurated as a thanksgiving for the sacrifice of Jesus and "its observance rapidly became a highpoint in the religious year, being celebrated in early summer with a street procession of clergy and lay dignitaries behind the Communion Host."[22] However, to draw an unequivocal borderline between secular and religious medieval theatricality is practically impossible, since all these religious feasts contained a significant secular element, especially due to their interactive and processional character, which allowed the lay and low-born spectators to take an active part in the event. Some of the medieval mystery plays thus became predecessors of modern popular comedies, as they employed the same "low" comic devices and strategies, such as passion for sudden and excessive violence directed mostly at infants or representatives of authority, the mockery of women, contempt for foreigners, and excremental or sexual jokes.[23] Therefore, in these in essence sacrilegious renderings "played upon pageant wagons or in the open streets, there are farce and obscenity of every kind,"[24] which makes their religious context only supportive if not entirely subsidiary. As a result, the procession on the feast of Corpus Christi, for instance,

16 Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre*, 50.

17 Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre*, 52.

18 David L. Smith, Richard Strier and David Bevington, eds., *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576-1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.

19 Ian Archer, "The Nostalgia of John Stow," in *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576-1649*, ed. David L. Smith, Richard Strier and David Bevington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24.

20 Archer, "The Nostalgia of John Stow," 25.

21 Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre*, 54.

22 Tydeman, William. "An introduction to medieval English theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 20.

23 Petr Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Vintage, 2004), 280.

24 Ackroyd, *Albion*, 283.

presented a satirical and parodic version of the official Church ritual in which the bodily and grotesque-comic elements prevail over and overshadow more serious ones.

Most of the above mentioned examples of theatrical events fall under what Mikhail Bakhtin famously terms as carnivalesque popular-festive forms, which represented a significant element of civic life in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Bakhtin recognises several typical and constitutive features of the popular carnival: the people's initiative in the celebration as a festival provided by the people for themselves, one which requires no official acknowledgement or patronage. The people are not invited to pray, admire or show reverence, on the contrary they can assume whatever role they please, preferably those of the fool or madman; there is no place for respect, sobriety, piety or any externally maintained order, only ongoing, spontaneous merriment, foolery and grotesque images of the body. The crowd is internally arranged in the way of the people, outside of and contrary to the existing forms of coercive mechanisms, thus the feast is based on the cancellation of all socioeconomic and political organisations and on the suspension of all hierarchical differences, all of which are replaced by jovial familiarity and a bacchic atmosphere, the ultimate social closeness, freedom, impropriety and lack of ceremony offering complete liberation from the seriousness of ordinary life. The mode of action and discourse is prevailingly that of blows, obscenities and abuse, but these invectives are not personal but universal, always aimed at the higher level of power and authority which is to be challenged, ridiculed, punished, uncrowned and replaced. In other words, it is a system of death and regeneration where the crowd as the main and only hero kills the old world and simultaneously gives birth to the new. The king becomes the clown while the clown becomes the king, and this role switching is carried out through costume change and travesty.[25] The carnival thus represents a silently authorised reversal and subversion of law and order, an opportunity for the lowly and powerless to release their negative energy and play act a breakdown of all traditional social norms and assumptions. Therefore it has a remedial and redemptive character as it discloses the "abundant material principle, change and becoming, the irresistible triumph of the new immortal people,"[26] and offers a vision or promise, if rather ephemeral, of a more favourable future. However, this moment of disorder and liberty is only illusory and temporary and as such it "provides a release of class tension that allows the reinstatement and maintenance of the same social order."[27]

Spectacles of delight and terror – *The Clerkenwell Tales*

Ackroyd deliberately chooses Clerkenwell as the setting for the ingeniously enigmatic plot of his novel not only for the place's intense theatrical activity, but also because he considers this part of London to have been known from medieval times as one with multifarious sides: a visionary and spiritual place, a refuge for the outcast and the outlaw, a site of strenuous radicalism, a locus of lunatics, eccentrics and strange existences living as if outside the city's official time. This distinctly heterogeneous character of the area was further fuelled and reinforced by the fact that numerous events that always attracted a large number of participants and audiences took place there, such as fairs,

25 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 196-257.

26 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 274.

27 Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 129.

festivals and other forms of public entertainment, as a result of which the place was "for many hundred years […] notorious for its dramatic representations […] that charge Clerkenwell and its environs with an essential presence."[28] These fairs and festivals in fact created a simulacrum of the London of that time as they drew from the routines and practices of the city's life, imitating, rendering and parodying its most noticeable or showy manifestations, especially those with the potential to undermine its well-established law and order. Consequently, these events represented "a symbol of disorder and anarchy, threatening to overwhelm the values of a humanised and civilised London with all its vulgar paraphernalia of," in Wordsworth's words, "shews, machines, and dramatical entertainments, formerly agreeable only to the taste of the Rabble."[29] It was exactly this often low and bawdy spectacle of the fair that dramatised "a permanent aspect of London life,"[30] as they helped perpetuate the inhabitants' feeling of temporal liberation from the restraints of their daily routines, offering a "perpetual consolation from the violence of material inequality,"[31] while, at the same time, affirmed their sense of belonging to the city's tradition. Districts like Clerkenwell thus best embodied London's fundamental theatricality, becoming "a stage upon which were presented spectacles for the delight and terror of the urban audience,"[32] through the unrefined mimesis of the most familiar aspects of their own lives.

Diverse types of theatricality permeate the coarse texture of Ackroyd's medieval London in *The Clerkenwell Tales* both metaphorically and literally. The metaphorical level revolves around the ultimate discrepancy between the official and unofficial spheres of the city foremen's lives. The first includes the respectable citizens' public image, connected with and derived from their influential position within the city's hierarchy of authority and power, while the latter refers to their private acts deliberately concealed from any public scrutiny as they often disregard and subvert exactly those values and principles these people espouse as officials or magistrates. These acts vary from relatively innocent ones, such as attending brothels and other similar dissolute places, up to secret reactionary, political and religious plottings whose aim is to discredit or dispose of those who occupy the highest ranks in the establishment's hierarchy, the king foremost. William Exmewe is the most striking example of such a double-faced character. As an irredeemable conspirator, he not only plots against the king but also against the very conspiracy he organises and for appearance's sake works for. He is a pragmatic solitaire for whom life is an ongoing risky, adrenaline game, one in which he can play on as many sides as possible. Therefore, he realises the necessity of play--acting and the flexible assumption of different roles in different situations and contexts. He takes London as a stage, a realm of deception, "no more than a veil, a pageant cloth, which must be torn asunder to see the face of Christ shining."[33] Exmewe is thus a director of an urban drama in which he simultaneously plays the main role, using the less gifted and more diffident as pawns to be unscrupulously indoctrinated, manipulated and sacrificed for his own ends. Symptomatically, after his treacherous practices have been found too extreme and uncomfortable for those holding official power, his punishment

28 Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (New York: Anchor, 2003), 457.

29 Ackroyd, *London: The Biography*, 140.

30 Ackroyd, *London: The Biography*, 141.

31 Alex Murray, *Recalling London: Literature and History in the works of Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair* (London: Continuum, 2007), 131.

32 Ackroyd, *London: The Biography*, 275.

33 Peter Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales* (Chatham: Quality Paperbacks Direct, 2003), 21.

is carried out in the form of a grand spectacle in order to mask the true schemes: while the crowds are watching the condemned walking "barefoot to Dover carrying the cross before him"[34] where he is to repent and pray for a boat to take him away from England, the high officials on the scaffold have already secured for him immediate transport to France and a comfortable home confinement in a small castle near Avignon. As such a dull existence will be torturous for someone with Exmewe's character, he is at least given one more chance to perform his part and enjoy being in the limelight in front of a keen audience.

Even more astute and sophisticated is the collaboration between the bishop of London and Sister Clarice, the "mad" nun of Clerkenwell convent. Sister Clarice's acting skills prove to be far more effective and convincing than Exmewe's: she manages to create around herself an air of being endowed with prophesising, visionary powers, and starts disseminating mad-sounding apocalyptic future visions about London and the kingdom by which she scares her mother superior who locks her within the walls of the convent in order not to perturb the public. However, rumours concerning her exceptional ability have been spreading all over the city and people's increasing curiosity to hear her prophecies sets her free from the confinement of her cell. This is what she needs for her mission to turn public opinion against Richard II. Her warning speeches in various parts of the city stir her numerous audiences' fear of their future under the current king and make them more approving of the invasion of Henry Bolingbroke, in which she succeeds as upon Bolingbroke's arrival at Westminster the streets are in an uproar. It is only when Clarice is summoned, imprisoned and interrogated by the bishop that she turns out to be not only perfectly sane but also an associate and instrument of a secret group called Dominus, clerical conspirators cooperating with Exmewe with the sole purpose of dethroning the king. With the help of Clarice's raging rhetorical performances, Dominus not only helps dethrone the hated king, but the group also gets rid of Exmewe, an ally too dangerous once he loses faith in their aim. And so while Richard II is despatched "to the Tower for his own 'safety' against the supposed wrath of the London populace,"[35] and Exmewe arrested and charged with treason, the bishop and the nun "were raising cups of wine and congratulating one another on a drama well staged."[36]

The affiliation between ordinary Londoners and the city's theatricality is completely different from that of the dignitaries: it is more physical, less subtle, and associated with officially authorised events that contain a strong element of spectacle. This is chiefly because their ability to affect the public state of affairs is negligible and their everyday duties too consuming and exhausting to feel any desire to play-act in the minimum of their spare time. Yet, as in the case of their more noble-born fellow citizens, behind their need for drama lies another kind of paradoxical inconsistency. What they look for in these occasions is, on the one hand, a confirmation and celebration of the stable, recurrent, commonplace processes and happenings, and the natural cycles that re-connect urban life with rural roots, but, on the other one, they seek diversion and escape from the demands and monotony of their ordinary existence. It is for this reason they like markets, fairs and religious festivals, sites where the source of pleasure stems from the combination of the abundance of produce and products and moderate, controlled amusement, but why they also revel in unrestrained excessive pastimes, the Bakhtinian popular

34 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 203.

35 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 162.

36 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 163.

festive-forms, which offer not only passive entertainment but, more importantly, immunity from prosecution, boisterous subversion and disruption of routine and order, in which everybody is allowed to actively participate and temporarily assume whatever identity he or she longs for. Ackroyd is well-aware that a "rich round of ceremonies and rituals regulated the medieval world,"[37] and his portrayal of late fourteenth century London includes several scenes depicting such set events, yet always emphasising their carnivalesque character and the consequent socially liberating effect.

The novel's portrayal of an annual cycle of mystery plays in Clerkenwell during the week of Corpus Christi is an example of the first mentioned commoners' theatrical diversion. This is a feast that addresses all people regardless of their social status and so it naturally attracts those who are not traditionally welcome to more venerable religious ceremonies, yet one organised by the city authorities and therefore closely controlled and inspected by respective officials, which in reality means it is held "under the guidance and supervision of the guild of parish clerks."[38] As a result, the Clerkenwell plays are composed of a specific mixture of the religious and the secular, the sacral and the mundane, reverence and ridicule, loftiness and indecency. The plays are based on biblical stories and are officially conceived as "mummings and interludes that celebrated the cycle of the city's year,"[39] but they bear striking comic, or even farcical, features, mostly satirising the universal human temperaments and vices or commenting on or alluding to topical popular issues, using wide linguistic and dramatic registers ranging from ostentatious verbosity and scenes abounding with pathos and dramatic vividness to obscenities, vulgar invectives and lascivious gestures.

In "The Reeve's Tale," Ackroyd manages to authentically capture this peculiar atmosphere of the mysteries in which veneration and solemnity naturally give way to hilarity and derision. On a special platform the story of Noah's Ark is being presented, a scene in which God, walking on stilts and wearing a gilded mask, is conversing with Japhet, who is riding on a donkey. Yet the stage dialogues are frequently interrupted by loud comments from the crowd, as most of the spectators know the identity of the performers. These shouts thus mockingly refer to the civil professions, personal traits and acting skills rather than on the play's action. Moreover, the younger actor is notorious for his impudence and quick wit, thus the audience impatiently awaits some unscripted verbal exchange or rude remarks. Its wish is soon granted by a series of obscenities passing between the boy and his donkey, "culminating in a mock attempt by the boy to penetrate the beast's rear end."[40] As everybody knows the story well, comicality and topicality are the piece's crucial qualities – it is the manner in which the piece is presented together with all the spontaneously improvised additional elements spiced with spitefulness and ribaldries that determine the success and reception of the play, while the logic and plausibility, necessary to sustain the dramatic illusion in the modern sense prove insignificant:

> In the same rhythmic chant, which seemed to the audience to come from some source beyond speech and song, God commanded Noah to build an ark and to shelter there two of every beast or bird upon the earth. The fact that the ark could already be seen upon the

37 Barry Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus: Possessing the Past in Peter Ackroyd* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 130.

38 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 77.

39 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 81.

40 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 80.

> green was of no consequence; past, present and future were intermingled in the small area of Clerkenwell. The audience assembled knew precisely what would occur in front of them, but they were always surprised and entertained by it.[41]

Despite its hallmark of institutional authorisation, the festival is actually governed by an unwritten rule: the audience is presented with light, undemanding entertainment packaged as serious liturgical drama, yet although they know precisely what they can expect, they always appear taken aback and amused. This is thus a theatrical process that requires an active dramatic contribution and play-acting from both sides involved.

The public urban theatrical tendency of programmed excess and eccentricity best finds its outlet in the rituals of the carnivalesque masquerades which represent an institutionalised form of spontaneous subversive acts of excessive hilarity as well as the short-term reversal of traditional social standings. This spontaneity and freedom of expression, however, are strictly restricted by the temporariness and territoriality of the feast, and are severely punished if their participants' exuberance transgresses these limits. *The Clerkenwell Tales* portrays one such occasion, the pageant celebrating the feast of Midsummer's Eve, and demonstrates its ultimate theatricality: central to the celebration is a gaudily painted stage carried around the area of Clerkenwell on which a satirical scene about King Richard II and Providence is performed. After the stage goes a pageant wagon drawn by horses containing a glittering and coloured model of the universe, on which an astrological scene is shown. This moveable drama is followed by a large procession of respectable Londoners in all thinkable noble disguises of lay as well as clerical dignitaries, some of them having robes and costumes borrowed from the mysteries, suggesting that rather than separate, unrelated units the city's theatrical events compose one cyclical continuum in which it is difficult, if not wholly impossible, to distinguish between the religious and the secular in terms of the performances' form and purpose.

The feast thus in fact seamlessly fuses two differently, if not even contradictorily, motivated and socially targeted theatrical events – a comic play intended chiefly for a lower-class audience which satirises authorities, including the king, and the mummings, which supposedly are meant to pay tribute to the monarch and which involve mostly higher-ranked participants. The satire and mockery thus go hand in hand with dignity and solemnity as the stage, the wagon and the disguised, riding citizens move as one mass slowly around the city. The physician Thomas Gunter observes the picturesque procession in detail:

> Gunter grimaced at the guns upon the walls and bulwarks were 'shot for joy', in the phrase of the mayor, while the merchants of the several crafts walked in procession past the Great Cross of Cheapside. […] There followed behind them a group of citizens riding in disguise, as if for a mummery. Some were dressed as knights, in coats and gowns of red, with visors upon their faces, one was arrayed as the emperor and after him, at some distance, came one like the Italian pope accompanied by twenty-four cardinals. In the rear were seven others masked with black visors, unamiable, as if they were in service of some foreign prince; they were hissed by the crowd of spectators, who were eager to enter the spirit of the proceedings.[42]

41 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 82.

42 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 114.

All this is accompanied by the omnipresent din of shouting, trumpet calling, the lighting of bonfires, minstrel music and singing. The scene is watched by the excited mob composing an integral part of this grand spectacle during which "the might and glory of the city were celebrated."[43] Yet, although the carnival is an opportunity for the common people to assume the identity of noblemen and dignitaries, its egalitarianism is not unconditional, as not all free Londoners are allowed to participate equally – while only worthy Londoners can participate in the official parade, the poor men, known as "masterless men," "the lowest level of commonalty before the stage of abject need and misery"[44] are given their own procession separate from that of their more respectable fellow-citizens. As spontaneous, broadminded and free-spirited as they strive to appear, the novel shows that the medieval carnivalesque revelries are still marked by an imprint of social hierarchies and conventions.

The daily intersection of official and public ceremonies and other spectacular rituals is shown in "The Man of Law's Tale:" at first at Westminster, Martin, a young man of law, assists his master and teacher, the sergeant-at-law Miles Vavasour, in putting on his ceremonial coat and a special round cap signifying his rank, and then accompanies Vavasour on the way from the chamber of the robes to the court in the Great Hall. "Such rituals enhanced the dignity of office, just as they add to the verisimilitude of Ackroyd's fiction."[45] Upon leaving Westminster Hall, as it is St Helen's day, Martin observes the procession held in the saint's honour. On the pageant wagon a scene depicting the unearthing and finding of the Holy Cross features a man disguised as St Helen who, however, "in a most unsaintly fashion" blows "kisses to those assembled along the path."[46] Eventually, even this supposedly peaceful religious feast gets disturbed by a riot as some of the spectators take advantage of being in the area where the municipal and religious authorities reside and with swords and staffs in their hands they demand release of the nun of Clerkenwell from the bishop's dungeon, while two other men mount the wagon and drive it against the rioting crowd. Within its social upheavals and turbulences, the entertaining and political dimensions of the medieval city's theatricality become inseparable.

Because of the enormous gathering of mostly mutually unfamiliar people, large--scale consummation of alcohol, and seeming absence of official surveillance, both the discussed forms of the city's dramatic manifestations always teeter on the edge of uncontrolled violence and rioting. Bogo, the summoner, experiences this personally. Aware of his great unpopularity among many Londoners present due to the duties of his job, he instinctively avoids "crowds and torchlight" as "he might be buffeted or threatened."[47] Nonetheless in an unguarded moment he is dragged into an ominous *danse macabre* that grows into a fierce mob, during which he is beaten up, his clothes and shoes singed with fire, and his earlobe bitten off in an imitation of a street fight: "He howled and the women, sensing his pain, yelled in triumph. It was the savage yell, hard, prolonged, exultant, which often sounded through London. It was the cry of the city itself."[48] This vengeful ritual punishment upon an innocent representative of the executive power becomes a symbolic act of defiance and a settling of accounts with the power

43 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 114.

44 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 115.

45 Lewis, *My Words Echo Thus*, 131.

46 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 173.

47 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 118.

48 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 120.

itself. The executive body remaining far outside their reach, the mob makes do with anybody on hand who is at least loosely associated with its perceived-as-unfair doings. The Lollards who happen to be spotted and recognised by the spectators during the Clerkenwell mysteries are far less fortunate than the summoner. As generally hated public enemies, in a short but more merciless act of rage they are either killed or fatally wounded on the spot. The onlooking reeve observes the split-second metamorphosis of the peaceful crowd into a mindless mob: "the crowd became one living creature with a single purpose. It hurled itself against the assailants of the mystery."[49] The pathos, hysteria, violence and ridicule on the stage have a strong tendency to find their mirror images in the minds and acts of the originally uninvolved spectators, making thus the distinction between the actors and the audience of the street drama indistinct, if not utterly irrelevant.

Bread, circuses and intrigues - conclusion

Ackroyd's treatment and rendering of the theme of theatre and theatricality in *The Clerkenwell Tales* differs substantially from those in his novels set in the more recent past such as *The Lambs of London* and *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. Using separate scenes rather than a coherent storyline he aptly demonstrates that medieval theatre was very much unlike its modern counterpart. As there were no permanent sites of dramatic entertainment and the individual dramatic events were based on the climaxes of the religious as well as the secular calendar, theatre was not a completely separate site of entertainment and escape which rarely had a tangible impact on the world beyond the walls of the playhouse or music hall, but an organic part of people's everyday life and the year's cycles. Moreover, as Ackroyd shows, the medieval world was one of rigid and immutable social hierarchies which rigidly distinguished pastimes for the noble from those for the lowly. Therefore, following the "bread and circuses" principle, the dignitaries often perceived these theatrical events as occasions for distracting the rabble and giving them a secure opportunity to release their negative energy while they themselves were involved in more concealed performances of power schemes, plottings and conspiracies in which play-acting and drama-staging became a means for achieving much more momentous and far-reaching goals exceeding the concerns and worries of their ordinary fellow-citizens.

Although the novel loosely follows the scheme of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* by employing the same cast of characters, among other things it lacks the unifying common narrative framework of its predecessor. Ackroyd's characters are drawn more or less directly and consciously into actions and events whose course and consequences they are often unable to foresee or even comprehend. Hence instead of being relaxed and carefree pilgrims enjoying a harmless tale-telling contest they find themselves, willingly or not, in a turbulent spectacle – exciting for some, menacing for others, yet dangerous for them all – stemming from the underlying, and often contradictory, double-sidedness of all its dwellers' existence in contemporary London. On the one hand, the intrinsic discrepancies between the public image and personal desires and aspirations of those in power, resulting in a hypocritical, treacherous world of political intrigues and pretence, keep its participants in a permanent state of stress and paranoid alertness, which might result in unscrupulously pragmatic behaviour lacking the essential elements of humanity.

49 Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, 86.

On the other hand, the commoners' need for theatrical entertainment which would plausibly reflect their life, re-affirm its order and emphasise its stable institutional, social and religious, framework, contrasts with that for a temporary escape in the form of an excessive, spontaneous and boisterous, carnivalesque festivity. It is precisely this dramatic tension between the conflicting realms of the homogeneous, official, seemingly appropriate, and the heterogeneous, private, undocumented, subversive and irrational that makes Ackroyd's fragmentary image of late fourteenth century London in *The Clerkenwell Tales* vivid and convincing despite the novel's episodic structure.

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