

Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe. By Piero Camporesi. Translated by David Gentilcore (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989) 212 pp. \$27.50

If most historians of popular culture romanticize their subject, this author is definitely swimming against the current. Camporesi, a literary scholar known for his innovative studies of popular poetry and the literature of crime and vagabondage in early modern Italy, has administered a severe corrective to the Bakhtinian vision of popular culture as

3 Charles Creighton, *A History of Epidemics* (Cambridge, 1894), II, 18.

4 For the possible contribution of historical epidemiology, see Ole J. Benedictow's important review, "Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England*," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, LXIII (1989), 655–659. The English concept of famine has recently been criticized, and a fresh perspective given to the experience of famine in the developing world by Alexander de Waal, *Famine That Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984–1985* (Oxford, 1989).

a celebration of life and laughter in the face of the humorless pieties of “official” culture.¹

Bread of Dreams, originally published in 1980, is merely one among a series of studies focusing on the material conditions of lower-class existence during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.² Its theme is hunger, and the ways in which persistent near-starvation, along with the narcosis produced by many bread substitutes, nourished a teeming world of fantasies, dreams, and nightmares. Drawing upon a remarkably wide variety of sources, including medical texts and treatises on magical remedies and arcane “secrets,” Camporesi paints a fascinating if repulsive portrait of an underworld existence near or below the level of subsistence.

This book has much to recommend it. To call Camporesi an “imaginative” historian would be an understatement. Moreover, he accompanies his forays into the underside of early modern consciousness with shrewd observations and a sure instinct for telling details. For example, he emphasizes the diverse ways in which patricians and plebs, despite the gaps in their terms of existence, shared much of their cultural experience, especially regarding questions of cosmology and physiology. This viewpoint comes as a welcome corrective to depictions of the relations between high and low cultures as distant and unilaterally favoring the hegemony of the elite. Finally, his repeated attacks against traditional history and literary criticism for ignoring the “tough existential reality” of the early modern era and the fascinating texts which it engendered serve to call attention to the narrowness of the evidential base from which most of our knowledge of the past derives (63).

One can hardly quibble with Camporesi’s insistence on the harsh realities of early modern life on the margin, but the general conclusions that he draws are much more questionable. At times it seems that the “culture of poverty” debates of an earlier generation have been transferred to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—especially when one reads that the inhabitants of this bleak house were paralyzed by a dismally acute “sense of impotence in the governing . . . of destiny,” or that popular riots were “convulsive jerks of an epileptic kind . . . existing as they did outside of time and space” (29, 127). Is it equally true that early modern peasants lived in isolation from nearby cities, enclosed in their own archaic, magic universe (86)?

Questions of this sort arise in part thanks to Camporesi’s penchant for overstatement. His approach is deliberately calculated to imitate the baroque style of his sources—hence the book’s repetitiveness and internal inconsistencies, carelessness in details, and recourse to the tactic of over-

1 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

2 See also Camporesi, *Il Paese della Fame* (Bologna, 1978); *idem*, *La Carne Impassibile* (Milan, 1983), translated by Tania Croft-Murray and Helen Elsom and published as *The Incorruptible Flesh: Bodily Mutation and Mortification in Religion and Folklore* (Cambridge, 1988).

whelming readers by piling on example after example, with scant regard for context or chronology. More importantly, Camporesi's exclusive reliance on formal texts leads him to ignore many of the findings of more recent social history, such as Levi's analyses of alternative, popular forms of "rationality," which suggest that many early modern peasants and workers did not remain passive in the face of harsh material realities, but rather devised complex strategies to counter or minimize their effects.³

A more interdisciplinary approach, one which integrated more fully the literary texts with social history, would have produced a more balanced study. However, doing so was not the author's intent. Rather, in *Bread of Dreams* Camporesi has made a provocative statement for a different sort of history, rendered literally of flesh and blood, and far removed from the bland caution of traditional academic monographs. Some readers will appreciate this book as a fascinating curio cabinet of out-of-the-way texts. Others—the majority, one suspects—will reject it as a mishmash of lurid tales, containing far more fantasy than food.

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