Varieties of Pastimes

Who did, or was expected to, take part in what genre of recreation? It goes without saying that, in Renaissance culture and society, such distinctions as those based on social status, gender and age mattered significantly.

Leisure and social hierarchy

Differentiation based on status has already emerged in some of the material we have so far examined. In both Gontier and Bicaise (see above, Chapter 3), for instance, we found a clear opposition between the characteristics of élite versus folk music; whereas the Dutch Calvinist Daniel Souter especially recommended music to the literate. During the late medieval and early modern period, horsemanship and hunting were clearly regarded and retained as status symbols for the nobility – a tenet that informs contemporary literature of moral and political advice.¹ On a different level there were popular festivals, from which members of the aristocracy were under increasing pressure to withdraw; unless, like Castiglione’s courtier (Cortegiano, II, 11), they joined in wearing a disguise (‘onlesse he were in a maske’). Masking, in the latter case, formally stripped the members of the élite of their hierarchical status (‘bringeth with it a certaine libertie and lycence’), and thus enabled them to mingle with the crowd, without any loss of dignity.² The tradition of medical writing on the health of the literate offered further advice along the same lines. When Plemp (see above, Chapter 3) listed, among others, the game of bowling a hoop, he commented: ‘You may observe that it is not decent for intellectuals to play this game. That is correct, if they bowl those hoops along in town squares, as our children do. It would not deserve blame, on the other hand, if they do it in their own houses or in the country.’³
It would be hazardous and inappropriate here to generalize and try to estimate the extent to which such cultural prescriptions were actually observed. It is worth mentioning, though, that some forms of recreation were regarded not simply as the monopoly of a privileged group, who could use them for purposes of display, but rather as the very rites of passage via which membership of an élite was secured. In Ancien Régime France, this was the case for hunting, a practice charged with the educational function of offering a young aristocrat the occasion to prove his worth, his right to belong to his social group.\(^4\)

Jacob Burckhardt regarded the civilization of the Italian Renaissance as a society in which men of different status could have some joint social intercourse, as long as they shared some common ground, such as similar patterns of education. It goes without saying that the rich and powerful and the educated are never exactly overlapping groups, and the learned but comparatively poor (from Roman slaves to medieval clergy, to say nothing of the modern scholar) are never hard to find. Burckhardt’s assertion refers in particular to such social practices as conversation. In his opinion, this ‘equalization of classes’ marked a new development in European history, in contrast to the reality of the Middle Ages, and was documented, among other pieces of evidence, by the emergence of theoretical criticism of noble birth.\(^5\)

It is difficult to share such a view, and twentieth-century scholarship has, if anything, pointed the attention at historical trends of social differentiation, rather than equalization. Pre-modern Europe constituted, from some respects at least, a ‘one-class society’ in which differences of power, status and wealth were surely not absent, but they did not stop people from sharing a sense of identity as a community, a set of values and some traditional customs, best represented by festivals and the devotion to patron saints. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century a process of gradual withdrawal of the élite from such practices has been identified, originally by Peter Burke in his analysis of popular culture and of the specific case of Venetian Carnival.\(^6\) Further research seems to have confirmed the pattern and the heuristic value of the Idealtype of a ‘triumph of Lent’.

A form of popular entertainment particularly rooted in the customs of Italian late medieval and early modern cities was that of mock battles (battagliole), fought with fists, sticks or stones mainly by groups of young males. The case of the Venetian ‘war of the fists’ has been the object of the most accurate analysis, Robert Davis’s study of a rich manuscript documentation. It confirms the complexity of a phenomenon, which its scholar interprets as a sign of a strong factionalism, the other side of