Play in Renaissance Italy

PETER BURKE

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations

Dedication

‘Let’s joke, but seriously’ (*scherzare, sì, ma seriamente*)

In memory of Umberto Eco, playful scholar

Play in Renaissance Italy

Peter Burke

polity

First published in 2021 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-4344-1

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Preface

A Chinese painter, explaining to his pupils how to paint a grove of bamboo, told them to meditate for months on bamboo, to try to become a bamboo, and then produce their painting in a matter of minutes. In similar fashion, this essay in synthesis, although short and written in the course of a few months, has been long in the making. Writing about festivals, and in particular about Carnival, in my *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978) made me want to continue in this direction. Conversations with Philippe Ariès a few months later led to an invitation to give a paper at a conference in Tours in 1980 concerned with 'Les jeux à la Renaissance'. A conference on 'tempo libero', held in Prato in 1992, allowed me to explore the history of the idea of leisure. Writing a book about Castiglione's *Courtier*, a dialogue that is presented as a game, encouraged thought about playfulness in the culture of the High Renaissance. A conference on the cultural history of humour, organized by Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg and held in Amsterdam, was the occasion for a paper on 'Frontiers of the Comic', that turned into a chapter in a collective study of the history of humour, published in 1997.[1] In short, I feel that I have been preparing for this essay for more than forty years without knowing it. I have occasionally stolen sentences from my past self in order to construct it, but I believe that this book offers new ideas as well as developing thoughts that were originally expressed in print elsewhere in new directions.

Another invitation, this time from John Henderson and Virginia Cox, to write a short book for a series of studies of the Italian Renaissance, persuaded me to return to the subject. I do not wish to thank the recent virus, but its

result, virtual confinement at home, concentrated the mind wonderfully and allowed me to put my notes in order and produce a first draft while major libraries were closed. I cannot thank my wife Maria Lúcia enough for looking after me in that time of crisis. Telling stories was a form of light relief for the group of young men and women described in Boccaccio's *Decameron* – refugees from the plague of 1348 – and doubtless for the author himself. For me in 2020, reading and writing about play was a form of light relief from a world dominated by the Coronavirus.

1. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978; 3rd edn, Farnham, 2009); 'Le carnaval de Venise', in Philippe Ariès and Jean-Claude Margolin (eds.) *Les jeux à la Renaissance* (Paris, 1982), 55–64; Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier* (Cambridge, 1995); Burke, 'The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe', *Past and Present* 146 (1995), 136–50; Burke, 'Frontiers of the Comic in Early Modern Italy', in Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (eds.) *A Cultural History of Humour* (Cambridge, 1997), 61–75.

1
Introduction

The three principal words in the title of this book may seem clear, but each of them is problematic. ‘Italy’ in this period might be said to be both too small and too large a unit of study. On one side, traditional forms of play in Italy, from charivaris (*scampanate*) to Carnival, had parallels elsewhere in Europe, while some new forms invented in Italy, such as the comedy, were adopted and adapted in other countries. On the other side, Italy was not yet a nation but a number of regions, which varied in their cultures as well as in their economies and political systems. A written language based on Tuscan was helping to unify the peninsula at this time, but the majority of the population spoke regional dialects, and the elites often employed dialect as a playful form of language, as we shall see.

Readers will notice that the majority of the examples offered in the book come from northern and central Italy. This does not mean that play stopped south of Rome. Obvious examples to the contrary include the storyteller Masuccio Salernitano, from Salerno in southwest Italy; Pietro Antonio Caracciolo, an actor who wrote farces in his native Neapolitan; Fabrizio de Fornaris, another Neapolitan actor who was famous for his rendering of the boastful but cowardly ‘Captain Crocodile’; Giambattista della Porta, a polymath from Naples who is best known for his comedies; and Giordano Bruno, from Nola near Naples, the author of some lively and playful dialogues. The minor role played by the south in this essay is probably the result of a relative lack of evidence. The Sicilian puppet theatre, for instance,

already existed at this time, but little is known about the performances before the nineteenth century.

The term ‘Renaissance’ is also problematic. The main problem is the contrast between two common usages. The term is often employed in the traditional manner to describe a period of European history – more or less, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Nowadays, this period is more often described as ‘early modern’ and extended to the eighteenth century. In this essay, I shall be looking at Italy during a long Renaissance from 1350 to 1650.

The word ‘Renaissance’ is also used in a more precise and limited sense to refer to a movement, a collective attempt to recover and imitate the culture of classical antiquity (Greek and Roman). The focus of this essay will be on the movement, extended to include the work of the major artists and writers of the period, even when they were not inspired by the ancient world. The movement involved only a minority of the Italian population, but to place it in context it will be necessary to examine popular culture as well.

Do we have too serious a view of the Renaissance? It certainly had a playful side, and so did many – if not the majority – of the most famous individuals who contributed to the movement, whether they were artists or scholars (the so-called ‘humanists’).

Leading artists, including Leonardo (whose notebooks show that he also collected jokes), Raphael (whose playful cherubs have become iconic), Bronzino (whose comic poems show he was not as cold as his paintings may suggest), Giulio Romano (who made architectural jokes) and Arcimboldo (who invented visual puns), all produced images that were intended to provoke a laugh, or at least a smile. Even Michelangelo, often regarded as completely serious – either in agony or in ecstasy – had a sense of

humour that was expressed in his poems (mocking himself at work on the Sistine ceiling) as well as in his art, and, according to legend, in practical jokes as well. He exchanged comic verses with the master of that genre at the time, Francesco Berni.[1]

Leading humanists, including Petrarch, Poggio Bracciolini, Angelo Poliziano and Pietro Bembo, collected jests. Cosimo de' Medici, the unofficial ruler of Florence, plays an active role in Poliziano's jestbook. Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo de' Medici wrote songs for Carnival as well as a comic poem, and Lorenzo's second son, Giovanni – who became Pope Leo X – employed several fools to entertain himself and his court. Baldassare Castiglione discussed the nature of humour. Niccolò Machiavelli wrote comedies. Great ladies, notably Isabella d'Este, took part in games. The humanist Leonbattista Alberti presented mathematical puzzles as 'jolly things' (*cose jocundissime*). Philosophers from Marsilio Ficino to Giordano Bruno were attracted by the idea of 'serious play' (*serio ludere* or *giocare serio*), while Galileo included comic passages in his lively dialogue 'Concerning the Two Main World Systems' (1632).[2] Among the greatest Italian poets of the period, Ludovico Ariosto wrote comedies and a playful romance, *Orlando furioso*, while Torquato Tasso wrote dialogues about games.

Insofar as the Renaissance was a movement of cultural innovation – sometimes disguised as renovation – some observations by psychologists may be illuminating. It has been suggested that innovation is encouraged by playing with ideas, trying out alternative solutions to a given problem. Dialogue is one form of this play, and printed dialogues, as well as oral ones, flourished in Italy at this time.[3]

Writing about play in the Renaissance is not meant to imply that there was an absence of playfulness in the Middle

Ages. On the contrary, play was a powerful presence at that time, obvious enough to anyone who reads about Francis of Assisi, for example, or looks at the margins of many medieval manuscripts, or at the gargoyles or the misericords in Gothic churches.[4] There were important continuities in forms of play between the Middle Ages and Renaissance, notably in the case of Carnival, as well as forms that broke with tradition.

What is Play?

The third problem is the most complex and difficult of all. What is play? What has a fist-fight to do with a guessing game, a comedy or a parody? Among the many theorists of play who have wrestled with this question, I should like to single out three: a Dutchman, a Frenchman and a Russian.[5]

In his essay *Homo Ludens* (1938), probably the best-known study of the subject, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga examined what he called 'the play element in culture', ranging from war to the pursuit of knowledge. What did Huizinga mean by play? He suggested that it is an activity undertaken for its own sake, in its own times and places; that it creates order by means of its rules; and that it is marked both by tension and its relief. He also distinguished two main forms of play: mimicry and competition.[6] In *Man, Play and Games* (1958), the French philosopher and sociologist Roger Caillois divided play into four types, adding chance and vertigo to Huizinga's pair of models. Neither scholar discussed either puzzles or humour.[7] The second of these gaps was filled by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1929) revived the ancient Greek and Roman idea of the 'serio-comic' and discussed what he called the history of laughter. Bakhtin emphasized the cultural importance of 'the carnival sense of the world' and

especially the central, subversive act of Carnival, the ‘mock crowning and subsequent uncrowning of the carnival king’.[8]

What follows makes use of the work of all three theorists, but, unlike them, it is concerned not with universal principles of play but with its forms and roles in a specific culture in a specific period. Many games are international – more exactly, they have been internationalized. In contrast, fun or humour, like some wines, does not travel well. What is considered playful in a given culture or a given historical period may not be found amusing in another.

To avoid this problem, one might define play as a bundle or, better, a system of practices that are recognized as playful in a particular culture. The practices resemble one another like members of a family, who share various traits though any one of these traits may be lacking in a particular individual. It may be easier to recognize what counts as play by thinking about what is excluded (the process of exclusion is discussed in Chapter 6). In Renaissance Italy, playful practices were distinguished from serious ones, and play was often justified as light relief from the serious business of everyday life as well as an escape from boredom.

However, as Huizinga for one was well aware, there are no fixed borders between play and the surrounding culture. ‘The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid.’[9] For example, what was a joke for the joker and the bystanders might be a deadly serious offence from the point of view of the victim. The satires of the Renaissance were playful in form but serious in content, aimed at the destruction of the person targeted. Popular protest often took place during festivals, especially Carnival, and it made use of carnivalesque forms such as cross-dressing, masks and joyous violence, but the goals of the protest were

serious ones. Ambiguity was common and might even be the purpose of the game. The sixteenth-century garden of Bomarzo, to be discussed in Chapter 5, was filled with stone monsters and images of the underworld that probably provoked fear as well as laughter. One of the aims of the reformers of play was to eliminate ambiguities, drawing clear distinctions between what was playful and what was serious, as well as between what was permissible and what was not.

In our own culture, most of us recognize playfulness most of the time, though not always – hence the frequency of the remark 'just kidding!'. In the case of other cultures, past or present, recognition is more difficult. To assist in this task, we need to study the language of play in different times and places.

In English, 'play' is a term that includes playing the violin, playing cards, playing the game, playing the fool, playing tricks, horseplay, child's play, foreplay and playhouses. Even fountains play. Around this vague but central keyword (necessarily vague, like the term 'culture', precisely because it is central), we find diversion, entertainment, facetiousness, fun, games, jokes, mockery, pleasantries, pranks, ridicule, teasing and trickery.

The equivalent central term in Huizinga's Dutch was *spel*. In the French of Caillois, it was *jeu*. In Italian, the central term was and is *gioco*, referring to a spectrum of meanings, from joy via jests, games and plays to insult and deceit, not forgetting sexual intercourse.[10] The medieval Italian terms *ludere* and *ludo* were less frequent and had a more restricted meaning – more or less, 'game' (although the term *ludicro*, like the English 'ludicrous', reminds us of the links with humour). In this respect, Italian was the opposite of classical Latin, where *ludus* was the central term while

the term *iocus*, like the English 'joke', was limited to wordplay.[11]

As in English, the Italian keyword was surrounded by a periphery of associated terms. Some of these described the effects of play, frequently mentioned in the defences discussed in Chapter 4: effects such as *allegria* ('joy'), *diletto* ('delight'), *diporto* ('sport'), *divertimento* ('diversion'), *passatempo* ('pastime'), *piacevolezze* ('pleasantries'), *recreazione* ('recreation'), *riposo* ('relaxation'), *sfogo* ('release'), *solazzo* ('solace'), *spasso* ('fun'), *svago* ('distraction'), *trastullo* ('pleasure') and *trattenimento* ('entertainment').

What these terms have in common is their opposition to *noia*, at that time a word with a range of meanings for unpleasant feelings such as sadness and anxiety. To poets, the contrast and the rhyme of *gioia* and *noia* proved irresistible. *Annoiare* meant 'to bother someone', while *noisoso* meant 'fussy'. In Renaissance Ferrara, the ruler built a villa near the city and named it Schifanoia, 'avoid *noia*'. Although life was absurdly short, as Renaissance poets regularly remarked, time often hung heavily on people's hands, to judge by the popularity of terms such as *passatempo* or *fuggilozio* ('avoid idleness' – or, perhaps, 'find something to do'). The idea of boredom is said to have emerged only in the eighteenth century, but it is surely hiding behind some of the terms listed above, together with 'tedious' (*tedioso*).[12]

Other terms were more precise. *Inganno* meant 'deceit', itself a keyword that will recur in this essay, just as the practice recurred in Italy at this time. *Burla* was defined by Castiglione in his famous *Book of the Courtier* (*Il Cortegiano*) as 'a friendly trick' (*un inganno amichevole*). The literary term 'burlesque' is derived from it, and a leading comic poet of the sixteenth century, Francesco

Berni, was described by a colleague as ‘master and father of the burlesque style’ (*maestro e padre del burlesco stile*). *Beffa* refers to a practical joke, a common practice in Renaissance Italy – a word that generated related terms such as the adjectives *beffardo* and *beffabile*. The term *scherzo* ranged from child’s play to adult wit.

An important cluster of words centred on the idea of madness (*pazzia*) and included ‘oddities’ (*bizarrie*), ‘caprices’ (*capricci*), ‘whims’ (*ghiribizzi*) and ‘eccentricities’ (*stravaganze*), all terms that may now seem negative but were used at the time in a positive manner as well. They were associated with jesters and clowns (*buffoni*), some of them much admired at court as well as in the piazza, and also with creative individuals such as Leonardo, whose *ghiribizzi* are described in the life of the artist by Giorgio Vasari. These terms were also employed on the title-pages of comic texts as a kind of advertisement. Take the case of the Venetian comic actor Andrea Calmo, whose letters were published under the title *Cherebizzi* (a dialect form of *ghiribizzi*), while his verses were described as concerned with ‘ridiculous and bizarre subjects’ (*soggetti ridicolosi e bizzarri*). Calmo’s contemporary Alessandro Caravia, a goldsmith and a comic poet, recounted the exploits of a sympathetic ruffian under the title *Naspo Bizzarro* (1565).

In the Middle Ages, only a few of these terms were in use, among them *buffone, derisione, diletto, diporto, giocare, ludere, recreazione, solazzo, spasso, svagare* (‘to amuse’) and *trastullo* (‘pleasure’). A witty saying was already described as a *motto*, while to produce one was known as *motteggiare*. In the fourteenth century, the writer Giovanni Boccaccio used the words *beffa, festevole* (‘light-hearted’), *piacevole* (which meant ‘witty’ as well as ‘courteous’), *scherzare, trastullare* (‘to deceive’) and *trattenimento*, (‘entertainment’).

If texts are to be trusted (since they usually lag behind speech), the number of words available to describe forms of play expanded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the fifteenth century, we find *baia*, a synonym for *beffa*; *canzonare* (‘to joke’); *ciurmare* (‘to deceive’); *furbo* (‘trickster’) – a term still common in Italy, with a positive meaning; *ludicro* (‘funny’); *mottevole* (‘witty’); *scherzo* (‘joke’); *stravagante* (‘over the top’); and *uccellare* (‘to fool’).

In the sixteenth century, leading Renaissance writers such as Aretino, Ariosto, Bembo, Berni, Castiglione, Grazzini, Machiavelli and Vasari added terms such as *acutezza* (‘wit’); *arguzia* (‘shrewdness’ or ‘wit’); *bagatelle* (‘frivolities’); *bizzaro*; *buffoneria*; *burla, burlesco*; *capriccio, capriccioso*; *commedia* (in the sense of ‘comedy’); *faceto* (‘witty’); *furbesco* (‘sly’); *ghiribizzi*; *giocamente* (‘for fun’); *grottesco* (‘grotesque’); *passatempo*; *pazzeggiare* (‘to act like a mad person’); *piacevolezze*; *ridicolo* and *ridicoloso*. The proliferation of words is surely a sign that more attention is being given to play than before, a conclusion that is confirmed by the rising number of treatises on particular games, and the learned discussion of the nature of humour.

In what follows, Chapter 2 describes forms of play in Renaissance Italy. Italians of the period played many games, including mock-battles and the ancestors of football, tennis, and some ‘parlour games’. Chapter 3 is concerned with different kinds of humour, in words, images and actions, from comedies to practical jokes. Chapter 4 discusses the debate about play, the critics and the defenders. Chapter 5 adopts a sociological approach, asking who played, where and when. Chapter 6 discusses changes over the long term, from the fourteenth to the early seventeenth century, while the Epilogue continues the discussion up to our own time. Throughout the book, I shall

be concerned with the uses and functions of play, which are surely just as important as work in the construction, expression and maintenance of both individual and collective identities.

As the Further Reading makes abundantly clear, this book is very far from the first contribution to the subject. Academic historians only began to take play seriously in the last few decades, from the 1970s or 1980s onwards, but they had a long chain of predecessors, a varied, unexpected and sometimes eccentric group of pioneers.

The History of the History of Play

A concern with the history of play goes back to the Renaissance itself. Books about play, such as the treatise on games of chance by the polymath Girolamo Cardano or the dialogue on games by the Sienese patrician Girolamo Bargagli, illustrated the antiquity of games with examples from ancient Rome, while the humanist physician Girolamo Mercuriale wrote a treatise on ancient Greek and Roman gymnastics.[13] In the seventeenth century, a study of the comic poetry of the ancients was published by the poet and scholar Nicola Villani.[14] After Villani, the history of play fell out of favour. A few eighteenth-century historians, notably Ludovico Muratori and Girolamo Tiraboschi, wrote on the subject, but not very much and often with disapproval. Muratori's dissertations on Italian medieval antiquities discussed what the author called 'public games', while Tiraboschi's history of Italian literature described the 'frivolities' (*frivolezze*) of the Renaissance academies, including the 'ridiculous names' of these organizations.[15]

In the early nineteenth century, Isaac D'Israeli, an English man of letters (as well as the father of Benjamin Disraeli), wrote an essay on the Italian academies in which, following