BLOCK 336

Spekyng Rybawdy

Hettie Judah

> … here's a downy crater
> To tame your pecker;
> A perch for your peaches,
> Here you go: get to the upper reaches.
>
> Gwerful Mechain, c.1490[i]

A culture in which female desire was a given (if feared), where men and women exchanged swaggering boasts of sexual prowess in verse, and filthy humour was used to lampoon the powerful: Europe of five hundred years ago has a lot to say to our present moment. This was a period of great human movement, when groups of pilgrims travelled to religious sites around the continent. Visual humour appealed in this largely pre-literate era, and the vocabulary of comic objects became a common language shared and spread by pilgrims as they travelled.

Melanie Jackson's *Spekyng Rybawdy* immerses us in this medieval sensibility through a contemporary lens. The characters we meet in her paintings, ceramics, sculptures and animations – jaunty penises and vaginas heading out for a walk, winged phallus birds, lusty rustics, and randy animals – are all derived from bawdy pilgrims' badges worn between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Traditional pilgrims' badges – usually cast in alloys of lead – showed saints and devotional imagery. Sold at holy shrines, they had talismanic properties and were worn as protective emblems on the hat or clothes. Sold at the same sites, the bawdy badges were their vulgar cousins, though these, too, may have had protective powers: one theory suggests badges with genital imagery warded off the plague.

Dismissed by Victorian archaeologists as obscene objects of marginal interest to scholars, Jackson sees these badges as important working class artefacts that offer insight into the popular humour of the period. Many seem subversive or satirical in intent, mocking the conventions of courtly love glorified by the nobility.

Made by the same craftspeople responsible for the more saintly pilgrim badges, the production of bawdy pins would have been a side-line: an expression of the metalworker's inventive humour, and the skill he or she could bring to carving designs in bone or soft stone. Possibly inspired by much earlier Roman emblems in which the phallus performed as a lucky charm, ease of manufacture allowed the ideas and emblems to spread and new designs to be produced locally. Transported on the body, these humorous objects spread around Europe much as memes make the rounds on social media today. Understood by those in on the joke, the images were part of a collective vernacular, available for endless modification and enhancement. Thousands of such badges have been found: the designs that appear in Jackson's work were found in Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Germany as well as the UK, preserved in clay after being discarded following the Protestant Reformation.

Centuries below ground have stripped the badges of their paint. In her paintings and animations, Jackson restores their colour using the rainbow palette of an image-making convention of our own era: views into a world invisible to the human eye offered by the electron micrograph. For all our apparent sophistication, something in the modern mind is still drawn to neat formulae that allow us to see patterns that 'explain' complex phenomena such as human health or personality. Physicians in the Middle Ages looked to the four 'humours' – blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm – balance between which was necessary to maintain good health. Jackson sees a contemporary equivalent of the four humours in the simplistic understanding of brain chemistry that identifies distinct temperaments dominated by dopamine, serotonin, testosterone or oestrogen.

Tinted with polarising filters, it is imagery of these organic chemicals seen through an electron microscope that lend their colour palettes to the flying, flapping, ambulatory medieval genitals as they appear in Jacksons films, sculptures and drawings. There is, she feels, something interestingly contemporary about these sexual organs wandering free from gendered bodies. The badges offer a precedent not only for the celebration of pleasure, but also for rebellion and ridicule: they offer a glimpse into the inner lives of people little evident in written histories.

Over six years exploring bawdy badges, Jackson has been in contact with historians involved in bringing these artefacts of popular culture back into public view: that they have so long remained hidden in archives is testament to the unease their imagery provoked until recently. Jackson's explorations of medieval sexuality also led her to the irresistible work of Welsh poet Gwerful Mechain, whose writing in the late fifteenth century celebrated female desire and condemned men for abusive behaviour. The ribald lines quoted above come from one of her many exchanges with Dafydd Llwyd in which the poets take turns in extolling the magnificence of their own sexual parts and challenging the other to satisfy them. Mechain's bawdy poems circulated in the same volumes as her devotional verses. As with the pilgrims' badges, the sacred and sexual occupied a common space: all were elements of daily life.

In projecting her animations of these tiny metal figures at human size, Jackson revels in the expressionistic crudeness of their manufacture. She also brings us into their universe: suddenly we're immersed in a walled medieval garden, in which ambulatory vaginas on stilts tower over us, while women spit roast a penis the size of pig. The subversive thrill – and perhaps even shock – delivered by these characters reminds us how potent obscene and filthy imagery remains. When those in power seem to act with impunity, references to sex and other bodily functions remain essential weapons within the satirist's arsenal.

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[i] Gwerful Mechain, 'Conversation between Dafydd Llwyd and Gwerful Mechain' translated by Katie Gramich from *The Works of Gwerful Mechain: A Broadview Anthology of British Literature Edition*, (Broadview Press, UK, 2018)