

**MAPPING THE COMMUNAL IDEOLOGY OF THE POOR:  
CARNIVALESQUE TECHNIQUES OF SUBVERSION IN THOMAS  
DELONEY’S JACK OF NEWBURY**

*Victoria Zaevska*

*St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo*

Central to this paper will be the concept of social mobility and the problematisation of traditional Christian moral values in England in the late 1590s. Taking into account the social turbulences of the period, the paper will focus on the communal ideology of the poor as depicted through the eyes of Jack of Newbury, anti-hero of Thomas Deloney’s eponymous narrative. I attempt to communicate how Jack’s manipulative wit is used to deride the official socio-political order of the time. Special attention is paid to the mockery to which the agents of the official order are subjected in the text.

**Key words:** communal ideology, mockery, social mobility, socio-political order, the poor

My paper has at its focus the communal ideology of the cloth weavers and it problematises their social struggle in 16<sup>th</sup> century England. I examine the narrative *Jack of Newbury* from the perspective of the individual who tests the ideas of Elizabethan moral values through experience. These values are to be seen as the social consciousness of Renaissance clothiers. Another aspect this paper touches upon is the carnivalesque technique of subversion which Thomas Deloney uses to deride the official socio-political order of the time. This makes Deloney’s text be seen as a critical contribution to the culture of protest in the difficult decades of the 1590s (Hentschell 2001: 43).

London at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was a difficult place to sustain a steady income. The cloth trades, central to the English economy, encountered many setbacks. Due to the number of immigrants fleeing to the capital, cloth workers feared losing their positions in the silk-weaving profession. It was a time when the lack of sufficient employment opportunities, especially in the cloth trade, and the declining subsistent economy led to begging and crime. Along with the economic instability

gathering pace there were several poor harvests toward the middle of the decade, which contributed to the most severe inflation in English history back in 1597. It is within this difficult economic context that we must place balladeer and novelist Thomas Deloney. Even though Deloney is probably best known for *The Gentle Craft*, dedicated to the craft of shoemaking, it is his novel, *Jack of Newbury*, which directly addresses the cloth trades.

The vagrant behaviour of the poor and the rising tide of theft, treason and murder gave way to a different kind of literary art which no longer favoured a focus on chivalric behaviour. It was a move from “arcadia to the battle fields of Europe” (Rohmann 2005: 8), and this slogan very much comprises the growing interest in the crudities and harsh conditions of the period. According Francis Bacon and his philosophy on the reformation of all learning, the imaginative transformation of beliefs began in the Renaissance when writers such as Deloney sought to “render, interpret and specify common moral experience” (Mazzeo 1967: 308). Thus, London produced a generation of pamphleteers (including Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, and Thomas Dekker) whose immersion in the city’s market-place led to new claims for literary professionalism.

In *Jack of Newbury (or the Pleasant History of John Winchcombe)* (1597), Thomas Deloney pioneers a new type of prose romance, appropriating the genre’s conventions to celebrate an imagined idea of the glory and success of cloth weavers (Keenan 2008: 198). Being both a balladeer and a cloth weaver, Deloney attempts to transform the state of the cloth industry and portray it in more favourable colours. However, his fantasy of the cloth trade as a booming one builds on an oppositional strategy of contrastive ideas (Hentschell 2001: 51 – 3). On the one hand, he draws the reader’s attention to the workers’ sorry plight from the opening chapter of the novel. His glorification of the clothiers, on the other hand, Deloney begins even before his narrative has started, in the prefatory letter to his readers, stating that he is going to “*raise out of the dust of forgetfulness a most famous and worthy man*” (Deloney 1859: 3). In a wish-fulfilment manner Deloney addresses the importance of cloth weaving as a nourishing industry, referring to it as the “*Art of Cloathing*”, a gift which is a sole prerogative to the poor workers in this profession (Deloney 1859: 3).

Basically, Deloney envisions an England whose past as well as future relies on the interests of the merchants and labourers (Hentschell 2001: 51). His writing becomes an instructive form of protest, one which aims to construct a new vision of the English cloth workers as a cohesive group of individuals. The episodes where Jack meets Cardinal Wolsey, for example,

reveal a most straight-forward conflict between the state and the cloth industry, a result of Wolsey's economic policies to tax clothiers in order to save money for the war with France (Morrow 2006: 404). Straddling a molehill, Jack announces himself to be the "scant marquesse [...] chosen prince of ants [...] to defend and keepe these [his] poore and painfull subjects from the force of the idle butterflyes" (Deloney 1859: 51). In this allegorical image Wolsey serves as the villain, later on likened to a caterpillar or a grasshopper who along with his butterfly courtiers idly feed off the industry of the hard-working ant/clothiers (Wright 1978: 165). Thus, in response to the perceived government passivity to the cloth worker's crisis of the period, Deloney creates an idealised version of a nation of ants where workers are to be revered and given "their winter provision", or else, a nation, governed by Jack the markees rather than by the king of England (Deloney 1859: 51), the latter, it seems, being the lesser ruler.

Upon a later meeting with the king and queen, who pay Jack a visit in his own "jolly clothiers house" (Deloney 1859: 54), Jack entrusts the king with a gift, ironically making another allegorical reference to the English state. Jack's wife presents the king with a "bee-hive, most richly gilt with gold, and all the bees therein were also gold". From the top of the hive there is a tree which "bore golden apples [but] at the roote thereof lay divers serpents seeking to destroy it" (Deloney 1859: 54). However, the depiction of such plenitude is not to be associated with the official order in the monarchy. Rather, this is a representation of Jack's almost "Eden-like commonwealth ... reflected in the orderly operation of his household" (Davis 1969: 247). In this household the flourishing cloth-weaving trade bears fruit and the clothiers labour with delight, trying to "beat the drones to death". They are not forgetful of the observable downfall of the serpents either, who represent moral degradation as they have lost their "natural goodness" (Deloney 1859: 54) and no longer govern the stately matters in the hive.

In order to understand this transfer of political and social responsibilities between the workers and the crown, we need to delve deeper into the ideology of the poor workers. Therefore, it would be of interest to explore the term "household", which Deloney mentions in the book on a number of occasions. Jack's "great household family", his "household [of] servants" (Deloney 1859: 50) or simply his "household" (Deloney 1859: 31) is perceived as an orderly state, integrated within the idea of the traditional order of the home (Dorsinville 1973: 234). Jack's world of middle-class workers serves as the better kingdom, which rests

upon moral virtues and labour for its stability. Interestingly, the responsibilities seem reversed. Thus, through his well-developed ethical position he illustrates the collective social struggle of cloth-weavers. This allusion to the state is a replica of the ideal state imagined by Deloney, and of a monarch whose authoritative position is to be respected.

We cannot help but see that Deloney's text is a bold critique of the challenges faced by the community of workers in the 1590s. The wealth of the nation appears to be founded upon the common people, since the labour of the cloth workers is most effective in defining England as a unified community, or as a household which serves as "the microcosmic kingdom of the middle class" (Dorsinville 1973: 236). Thus, Deloney's text constructs the image of his own profession and its contributions to England and, in so doing, reveals the nation's very fissures. What is more, *Jack of Newbury* might be regarded as Deloney's metaphor, his myth of a rebuilt industry and a unified nation that stands in opposition to the threatening realities faced by his fellow cloth workers. (Hentschell 2001: 52) Deloney never ceases to look back nostalgically on what G. D. Ramsey calls "the heyday of the large-scale clothier", where men like John Winchcombe employed hundreds of workers in their factories and the trade flourished (qt. in Morrow 2006: 398).

From all the various oppositional strategies illustrating a distorted reality we get the impression that the "*nouveau riche*" wish to counterbalance the power of the courtiers. Given the preconceptions of their social status, cloth weavers are depicted as building a world of new social identities where a nation of economic stability and prosperous commerce thrives (Hebron 2008: 105). If we venture deeper into the surface structure of the plot, however, we would find that this idealised trade is interspersed with the signs of dilapidation. Deloney tells its readers of a time and place upon which the clothiers had to join forces and send a petition to the king asking for their dying trade to be saved before "the flame consumes the candle" (Deloney 1859: 79) and not "fling them on the dunghill" (Deloney 1859: 80). The ironic allusion with the dunghill Deloney makes here is to accentuate on the opinion clothiers had of the king as sovereign of the State, who rejected the worker's plea for support in the most difficult years of closure of the markets abroad.

This clash of ideologies Jack contrasts with the superlative, "God save the king of England, [he who] brought great peace to the poore labouring people" (Deloney 1859: 52). His exclamatory speech is hereby produced to twist reality in a mock-epic way, thus making an indirect, yet vivid emphasis on the lack of meaningful discourse between the middle

classes and the unsympathetic government officials, including the king and queen. (Morrow 2006: 401) After all, of “gracious” kings and “faithful subjects” (Deloney 1859: 81) we only read in fairy tales and utopian socio-political relations.

In order to help chart Deloney’s investments in middle class ideas I use David Morrow’s term “communal ideology” to refer to the dominant characteristics in establishing the moral values and beliefs of clothiers. The communal ideology is hereby understood as a web of values and practices ultimately associated with the face to face relationships of village life, where workers define themselves in relationship to a community (Morrow 2006: 397). One of the most impressive of all allegorical events which illustrates this strong relationship is the pageant show where a group of children from Jack’s household appear before the king in gilded attire, accompanied by the goddess of War and her three daughters, Famine, Sword, and Fire, followed by Fame and Victory, who “[give] unto his majesty a sweete smelling gilliflower” (Deloney 1859: 67 – 8).

The significance of the pageant implies the existence of two realms: those of Good and Evil. Interestingly, Evil is being neutralised by the forces of Good, and these forces are identified with the cloth weavers in the household. We see once again how the world of the middle class is contrasted with that of the court (Dorsinville 1973: 236). According to Michael McKeon Deloney “cognitively deploys bourgeois ideology” (qt. in Morrow 2006: 405). What is more, he anticipates the emergence of capitalist ideology where self-interest is replaced by the common social struggle of the middle class. Thus, a new vision of the English workers as a cohesive group of individuals is suggested. Deloney makes it clear that to value the cloth workers and their honourable trade is to value England.

According to Jonathan Dollimore, however, the Renaissance self is characterised not by a confident new subjectivity, but by its opposite – a crisis of identity. I reject this last statement and believe all these examples and contradictions set in Deloney’s plot attempt to create and maintain the existence of a community of the traditional Christian moral values of the poor, hence suggesting the complexity of the discursive field of labour and social struggle in Elizabethan England (Morrow 2006: 406). Taking into account Jack’s representation of the communal ideology of the workers, we can conclude that despite the turbulent times of socio-political disorder, clothiers have preserved a strong ideological position.

As an example of the unrelenting spirit of the impoverished workers we can look at the maidens’ song serving as a warning to the English king. The song is an account of the undoing of a young maiden by a faithless

Scottish knight she has helped to escape. The maiden ends her lines of grief and sorrow saying she has all been but a fool to believe a disrespectful man as him: “O, false and faithlesse knight, quoth shee,/ And canst thou deale so bad with me,/ Dishonour not a ladies name,/ But draw thy sword and end my shame” (Deloney 1859: 65). The woman in this ballad represents the qualities of fidelity and astute loyalty of the working-class girl, whereas the Scottish knight on the other hand points out to the perils which threaten the state. Thus, the natural goodness of the working-class and their values are contrasted with the deceitful behaviour of the courtier who seduces the lady through lies unto leaving her family and loved ones.

The apparent lack of social security and the not responsive and very unsympathetic government were among the current problems of cloth weavers. Deloney’s dialogical approach to these matters unearths a picture of a recognisably unstable state where social tensions and moral degradation are to be found. Hence, the debasement of life in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is depicted through yet another method of Renaissance self-fashioning (coined by Stephen Greenblatt in his eponymous work, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980)), and this is the element of carnivalisation. Building a nation through laughter has a regenerative aspect, where the degrading and blaspheming of the official world view is to be found. Carnival must not hereby be perceived or viewed as a holiday or confused with the type of carnivals organised by the government officials. However, as Bakhtin puts it, carnival derives itself from a force called folk, which demonstrates its cunning nature through such carnivalesque practices (Bakhtin 1984: xviii).

The encounter of Will Sommers with the witty weavers’ maidens who outsmart him, for example, reveals a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations which opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. Sommers offers the maidens wine but since he refuses to pay for it unless they “take in out in kisses”, the women decide to revenge upon his untoward behaviour. He is therefore brutally offended and later on sent to abide among a company of swine until he finally condescends that his “pennance is but to serves the hogs” (Deloney 1859: 73). At first deeply ambivalent, this carnival scene can also be seen as a way to deride the official socio-political order of the time and is part of the characteristics of Bakhtinian carnival practices to be found in Deloney’s text. Farce, satire and the destruction of the official picture of events, purposefully shift our focus of attention towards the cultural

dynamics of the time and help us delve into the middle class values and interests of the clothier.

Another element of the carnival revolution imbedded in this prose narrative in which humour is used to question social order is to be found in Chapter 7. This episode gives enough evidence of the moral dignity and well-developed ethical position of the working-classes. Here an Italian merchant called Master Benedick falls in love with one of Jack's female servants, whom he attempts to court with gifts and love rhetoric delivered in broken English. The lady's disrespect for him, however, triggers Benedick's revenge upon her and eventually he directs his wooing towards one of her friends instead. As he awaits her arrival in the bed chamber, Benedick is left unaware of the sow the merchants leave in his bed. When he salutes and kisses the sow, the wealthy merchant is repelled by the stench and, when the animal begins to grunt, he runs out like a madman thinking it is the devil, whereas everyone else laughs out loud.

The very significance of this mock chamber scene lies in its social confrontation with the conventions of reality. It is hereby seen as an allusion to the state, where Deloney satirises details and examples of the strains experienced by his imagined community where masters and servants are being confronted. The latter two are ideological constructs of real exploitative relationships where the criticism of their actions is governed by carnival laughter. The festive gaiety with which everyone seems to mock the merchant is evidence of what Bakhtin calls carnival revolution. The language of the marketplace is cynical, often vulgar and the laughter it triggers brings along "the death of the old and the birth of the new world" (Bakhtin 1984: 149). It is a carnivalesque gesture on Deloney's side which is both politically and ideologically motivated.

What is more, the fact that we have an Italian merchant being mocked at and turned into the laughing stock of the household, is of great significance here, since the Elizabethans favoured this negative stereotyping of the Italians as being lusty, frivolous and foppish. With these comic scenes interspersed in his text, Deloney masterfully combines carnival and clownish elements together with images of ambivalent obscenities. Such medieval parodies where jesting and foolishness reside help build "a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (Bakhtin 1984: 6); they become the expression of folk consciousness and folk culture and relate the text to the jest book tradition of writing comedy.

All in all, with his realistic framework Deloney chases the moral ambivalence of his characters. His value as a writer of prose fiction resides in his down-to-earth realism and his creation of images of the

commonwealth where, in the words of Eugene Wright, he “merges the traditional order and obedience of the medieval hierarchy with a new democracy which encouraged social and economic mobility” (qt. in Brown 1981: 31). His prose narratives picture daily life of the middle and lower classes at its best. The plots represent chronological accounts of the ups and downs of tradesmen who act as heroes in the stories. The realistic elements and loosely strung incidents in a style similar to the jest books make Deloney’s narrative style dialogically innovative for its time. His plots reveal the life of English tradesmen, predominantly shoemakers and clothiers, addressing issues of poverty, hunger, unemployment, and even larger social and structural changes (Morrow 2006: 396). His romance *Jack of Newbury* (1597) traces the life of a virtuous factory owner in the cloth trade, drawing allusions to the rapid advance of manufacture where individual workers and landowners thrived outside the city.

Consequently, although “not a sufficient condition of the modern idea of progress” (Mazzeo 1967: 277), this new form of erudite humanist realism gave Deloney his mastery of dialogue, supplanted by a heightened self-awareness. If Gascoigne’s *The Adventures of Master F. J.* tests courtly love against the reality of lust where the pastoral element of disguise was still prevalent, in later prose writers like Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe and Deloney we see a liberation from such ideas, an exploration of the facets of our existing reality, a chance rather than action which governs the manner and behaviour of the characters. What is more, what the prevalent element of realism relies on with these writers is mockery; mockery for the sake of establishing the moral values of a dying trade.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Bakhtin 1984:** Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

**Brown 1982:** Brown, H. Dorothy. *The South Central Bulletin*. Vol. 42, No. 1/2. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, 31. Issue date: spring-summer 1982, accessed: 22.06.2011

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3188409>>.

**Davis 1967:** Davis, Walter R. Thomas Deloney and Middle-Class Fiction. // *Idea and Act in Elizabethan Fiction*, Princeton University Press, 1969, 238 – 80.

**Deloney 1859:** Deloney, Thomas. *The History of John Winchcomb, usually called Jack of Newbury, the Famous Clothier*. Ed. By James O. Halliwell. London: Thomas Richards Print, 1859.



- Dorsinville 1973:** Dorsinville, Max. *Design in Deloney's Jack of Newbury*. PMLA, Vol. 88, No. 2. Modern Language Association, 1973, 233 – 239. Issue date: March 1973, accessed: 22.06.2011, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/461488>>.
- Hebron 2008:** Hebron, Malcolm. *Key Concepts in Renaissance Literature*. Palgrave Key Concepts, 2008, 105.
- Hentschell 2001:** Hentschell, Roze. Clothworkers and Social Protest: The Case of Thomas Deloney. // *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 32(1). Los Angeles: University of California, 2001, 43 – 52.
- Keenan 2008:** Keenan, Siobhan. *Renaissance Literature. Edinburgh Critical Guides. Chapter 3. Prose*. Edinburgh University Press, 2008, 198 – 205.
- Mazzeo 1967:** Mazzeo, J. A. *Renaissance and revolution: The remaking of European thought*. London, 1967.
- Morrow 2006:** Morrow, David J. The Entrepreneurial Spirit and “The Life of the Poor”: Communal Ideology and Social Struggle in the Prose Fictions of Thomas Deloney. *Textual Practice* 20(3), Routledge Taylor and Francis, 395 – 418.
- Rohmann 2005:** Rohmann, Gerd. *The English Novel in the Time of Shakespeare*. University of Kassel, 2005, 8. Issue Date: 25 Jul 2005, accessed: 15.05.2012  
<[https://kobra.bibliothek.uni-kassel.de/bitstream/urn:nbn:de:hebis:34-200604129845/1/Early\\_English\\_Novel.pdf](https://kobra.bibliothek.uni-kassel.de/bitstream/urn:nbn:de:hebis:34-200604129845/1/Early_English_Novel.pdf)>.
- Wright 1978:** Wright, Eugene P. Thomas Deloney: “Dead Dullness?” // *The South Central Bulletin*, Vol. 38, No. 4. Studies by Members of the SCMLA. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 164 – 166. Issue date: winter 1978, accessed: 22.06.2011, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3187393>>.