



Dotage of merrymaking

Tony Muller

University of Bonn, Germany

Abstract

More than in any other historical era, we find that the aim of the Renaissance is to redefine humanity, rediscover the human experience. Thereby, knowledge and gluttony walks hand in hand here. Accordingly, celebration, self discovery and knowledge coincide during the 16th century Renaissance. High culture, humanism, literature and architecture along with the excessive enjoyment of food and beauty signify the era, but always in connection with self discovery. Man rediscovered himself; his passion was a reaction due to medieval asceticism. He could dwell in his own glory. Not only was the sacred word important. Creativity was, as well. Moreover, so was folly. The Renaissance man was a celebratory individual. He was an intellectual, a gourmand as well as a gourmet. He was self-confident, passionate, brash, eager to learn and eager to drink as many pints of mead as possible. He was one of a kind, a *Uomo Universale*.

Keywords: Merrymaking, Self Discovery

INTRODUCTION

The Boboli Gardens – A Symbol of the Renaissance

The Boboli Gardens, in the back of the Pitti Palace, has a statue of court dwarf Pietro Barbuino riding naked on a turtle. This statue could function as the representative piece for this time: it is honourable and yet gluttonous. In your mind's eye, you see the ladies of the manor giggling as the little man parades naked about the grounds, shouting his magnificent ruler's words of human passion across the Tuscany plains.

Pietro is overweight. He is cocky, brash, artistic and self confident.

In spite of all this arrogance, the garden in Tuscany is an oasis, a green heaven. Fountains with marvellously handcrafted statues appear in one corner and exquisite grottos with gorgeous statuettes appear in the next. You see the nymphaeum, wander off to the amphitheatre and

finish off your tour with a peek at the Egyptian obelisk.

The main seat of the grand dukes of Tuscany, the Medici family's pride and joy, is the Italian Renaissance formed in stone and marble. The symbol of the grandeur of the 16th century awakening is related to Lorenzo de Medici's statement "*Facciamo festa tuttavvia*", an ancient version of the modern phrase: "It's party time!"

The sponsoring and support of culture and the arts during the Renaissance happened through aristocratic celebration. Here, festivity and folly collaborated with culture and knowledge: the artists, hired by kings to praise them, used mythology, history, symbolism, religion, knowledge and wisdom to praise the rulers.

In the Boboli Gardens, gluttony and wisdom meet just like in the Renaissance.

During the course of my research for this article, I have been able to use a great deal of my own knowledge from

my time as a historical tourguide at Kalmar Castle. My years of study have helped me here as well. To prove my point, though – that Renaissance wisdom and folly walked hand in hand – I have used a grand scope of literature as well as weblinks to compliment my education.

Part I: Vasa and Fugger – Money and Wealth

“Folly, at the right time, is the greatest wisdom!”

None other than the uptight Augsburg bank entrepreneur Jakob Fugger uttered these words. His house welcomed the posh aristocratic elite of Europe, who felt most welcome to accept his invitations to a feast in one of his houses. Leaving assets totalling 3 000 058 guilders when he died, he had become rich, partly because he knew how to represent his clients well and keep them happy.

The Swedish king Gustav Vasa ascended his throne in 1523, receiving help from his old home town Lübeck and, perhaps even, from the Fugger family. Vasa was as ambitious, serious and indulgent as Fugger. They have that in common. During my extensive research about the Vasa family, I used the following literature: Stina Andersson’s “Boken om historia 2: Vasatiden” and Jonas Hedberg’s “Yngre Vasatiden”. Lars-Olof Larsson’s excellent book “Gustav Vasa” and Byron J. Nordstrom’s “The History of Sweden” were fine literary additions to my research, as well.

Vasa was no stranger to folly, either, and great Renaissance folly it was, too, that he enjoyed. In his 31st year of royal reign, Vasa married his 3rd wife, the 40 years younger Katharina Stenbock, who hid in the barn upon hearing the king arrive to ask of her father’s allowance to marry her. Eventually, Stenbock had to consent in marrying the old man against her own will. Eight years later, she became the “royal widow of the nation” and remained so until her death at age 85.

The wedding in 1552 and the subsequent celebration, held in Vadstena, was grand enough, to be sure. The honeymoon, however, celebrated in Kalmar on the east coast, literally wallowed in wealth. This castle, Vasa’s pride and joy and a coastal guarding manifest, was Sweden’s last bastion before the Danish border and perfect for a Renaissance honeymoon.

I refer to Manne Hofrén’s excellent Swedish work “Historieglimtar från Kalmar Slott” as well as Olle Larsson’s “Sveriges Historia”. Both these academic pieces proved to be excellent material to use in order to research the festive Renaissance customs. I also refer to my references here and the work cited as references (Hofrén, 1961: 5-10; Larsson and Marklund, 2008).

In the latter part of that year of 1552 A.D., the Swedish king arrived with a total 365 courtiers. The king, his young wife and their families brought other guests along for the party. Riding in and out in through the gates over a

course of three months, the revellers drank a total of 228 000 litres (60 231 US gallons) of German beer, shipped in to Kalmar from the continent. The inventory list of the royal kitchen that year reads like the annual report of a major modern franchise: hundreds of cows, hundreds of pigs, tons of fish, ostrage, swans, peacock and lamb all kept the large palace kitchen, one storey below the banquet hall, working day and night to keep the aristocrats happy.

Calculating the intake of each guest, dividing actual numbers from the inventory with the number of people present during these twelve weeks, the daily result is an approximate seven gallons of beer and two dozen courses a person. Such an astronomical absorption is mindboggling. One can’t help but wonder how such a thing is possible. Neil Kent’s “A Concise History of Sweden” gave me fantastic information about the customs at the Vasa court. Carl Grimberg’s “A History of Sweden” and S.A. Dunham’s “History of Denmark, Sweden and Norway” provided me the necessary background material for my work, as well. A. Strindberg’s noteworthy book “The Vasa Trilogy” from 1959 should also be mentioned here and given a special place in the bibliographical list of pieces about the Vasa dynasty.

Vasa is folly and wisdom in one: a grand political strategist, a selfmade man, a statesman and a man who knew how to promote his own dynastic reign through representation.

Part II: Representative Folly

Other Renaissance feasts can top that, though. There are records of German feasts at the time where the aristocrats enjoyed a veritable 42 courses a day per person.

Can a human stomach survive such gluttony?

The answer, my friend, is not blowing in the wind. Bob Dylan might even agree to that. We find it in a form of gastronomic recycling. As a trilingual tourguide at Kalmar Castle during the 1990’s, I finished off every tour with an anecdote that divided the attention of the ordinary tourist into two categories: the people who loved hearing the story and the people who absolutely did not love hearing it.

When the aristocratic belly proved itself too dense for 16th century comfort, poisonous herbs and feathers could be used as titillation to tickle out digesting food. The person in question walked away from the table into the next room, where pigs were ready to receive vomited cuisine as nutrition. The royal belly was now open for refreshment and new comestible pork was provided to the royal kitchen, pork that had been fed with aristocratic vomit. Recycling, as stated, is nothing new to us humans.

At the same time, there was international diplomacy at work. German girls would be invited just to meet Swedish

dukes. Maybe a Spanish prince came along just to have a look at the king's pretty daughter. Over a century later, Louis XIV arranged farting contests during his soirées. The aristocrats would listen to music by Jean Baptiste Lully while engaging in flatulent exposure. And, yes: the king did have another girl every night.

That, of course, had consequences: King August of Saxony had 365 children.

The disadvantageous public result of all that folly was, it must be stated, the French Revolution. Some would say, such excess was proverbial chess in action. Members of high society met to "network", to coin a current phrase.

In the 1640's, Vasa's great-grandchild Queen Christina spent 12 percent of her state-expenses on "Stately Representation." It must be stressed, though, that Christina had little or no interest in sex. She was an all-around intellectual girl. Very few Queens in history can present such knowledge and linguistic versatility. Her upbringing had been extremely scholastic and it was much thanks to her father, the sturdy Swedish hothead Gustaf II Adolphus, that she received the education of a king: riding, hunting, combat, languages, science and the arts. Even renowned philosopher René Descartes joined her in Sweden for intellectual discussion.

In secret, the daughter of the protestant king Gustaf II Adolphus invited Italian and Spanish delegates to help her plan her upcoming abdication and conversion to Catholicism in 1654. It all happened over large mugs of mead and plates filled with grapes and turkey.

The motto? Conspire while you digest.

Part III: Artistic Wisdom

Elizabeth I of England, a generation older than Christina, was as adamant in her beliefs. Renowned for her accountability, she wrote down every penny spent on a royal feast. That did, however, not mean that she wasn't as excessive. She was known to stay up all night, watching bulls and bear and dogs fight. Parliament attempted to forbid bear-baiting on Sundays, but Queen Elizabeth overruled them.

England's active royal merrymaking probably included William Shakespeare, who spent his most active years writing and performing plays that honored Queen Elizabeth I. The actors, used to entertaining farmers and common citizens, were now elevated to that of royal performers. Theatre became a very popular leisure activity, one based on Greek tradition with strong influences from the mystery plays of the Middle Ages. It can be assumed, also, that Shakespeare's colleague, John Dowland, was inspired by early music when he wrote his "Third Book of Songs" for Denmark's King Christian in 1603, two years after the initial premiere of "Hamlet."

The era of the Renaissance gave birth to many artistic styles. Among them, we find ballet. The Sun King, Louis XIV, participated in performances with a tradition based on dances from the Italian Renaissance. This result was the foundation of *Academie Royale de Danse* in 1661. The musical piece *Dafne*, written by Jacopo Peri in 1597 for the Palazzo Corsi, inspired Claudio Monteverdi in 1607 to compose what is considered the first opera: *Orfeo*. Baroque art would be non-existent if it were not for the crafts of the 16th century.

Artists, it can also be said, rarely found themselves sticking to one genre. The term "Renaissance Man", coined after da Vinci's Vetruvian *Uomo Universale*, has its origin here: it describes a person who is at home in a thousand intellectual fields. Leonardo da Vinci was one, Sir Isaac Newton was one and Sir Peter Ustinov was one, and they are all to be admired.

Leonardo da Vinci played the flute as well, and his serenades on the lyre at many gatherings were enjoyed by the elite. He was reputed to have played for Ludovico Sforza, the Regent of Milan. Calling music "the sister of painting", he was like many of his Renaissance peers: artistic in every way. Certainly, even artists such as Raphael, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Titian and Caravaggio spent their time conversing with Florentine patrons and Vatican popes over jars of mead and dishes of oysters in milk or beef basted in rose-water, listening to these compositions and attending these parties. Jacopo Peri's piece is also considered to be a forerunner of Monteverdi's 1607 first opera *Orfeo*. Artists were hired to create work for royal institutions and here art and politics meet in a veritable marital ceremony of delight.

Much of the art that existed back then was indeed created to glorify the rich and famous. These orders, made by patrons in ballrooms during a pavane, a gavotte or an estampie on a quill plucked lute accompanied by a rebec or an aulos, could not have become what they are today without the connoisseurs who spent their lives regarding them with respect. The fuel that keeps art alive can be found within the heart of every individual. The royals just had the money to spend on making the art become true reality.

Pietro Monte also taught da Vinci how to play darts at an early age. It is not impossible that da Vinci came in contact with the martial artform. Diego de Valera wrote the oldest surviving manual on fencing, a 15th century work labelled *Treatise on Arms*. The sport thereby remained a major attraction at feasts and game festivals throughout the Renaissance, which leads us to combat.

Part IV: Testing Personal Strength

Money and representation made artistic endeavour possible. The artists used aristocratic money in order to spread their own view of life.

Meanwhile, another kind of folly became popular among the masses.

Any era will include a range of games that test the endurance of the population.

The bloodier activities of the era were witnessed, among others, by a gentleman by the name of Herberstein. He describes his trip to Russia with colorful tales of young men wrestling each other to the ground, kicking and beating each other bloody in games where every trick was allowed with even mortal casualties. Bullfighting accidents became so frequent, that Pope Pius V proclaimed it forbidden in 1567.

The same can be said for the tobogganing, or sleighriding, competitions of Zürich, which were classified as too dangerous and categorically prohibited.

The most barbaric of all of these activities were the public executions. In fact, these barbaric events were even considered the high point of entertainment throughout the Renaissance. Coming early to get a good seat was a necessity, mostly because of the sheer mass of people attending such gatherings.

We find a more distinguished pastime in the art of horseback-riding. The passion for this sport eventually created the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria, an establishment that now has 440 years of history to look back upon.

Part V: Political Strategy

The aristocracy used the intellectual artistry to praise themselves (who in turn used the aristocracy to get their message across), while the common man used physical games to test their own strength. The nobility, however, played political games amongst themselves.

The political ambitions of the arrangers of the Renaissance feast can be seen in the many accounts of festivities created to honor an event, a king, a liaison or a political ally. To that, we include matrimony. Marriage was, saving the one or two happy cases of true love, merely a political game. Love played no vital role in an aristocratic liaison and was sometimes seen merely as a symbiosis of forces. It was not uncommon that the newlyweds saw each other for the first time on the wedding day.

Lucrezia Borgia (1480 – 1519) was, at age 10, given away to the 25-year-old Don Cherubino de Centelles, a Spanish nobleman. Lucrezia lost her virginity to him, but that couldn't hide that the relationship was doomed to fail. Renaissance matchmaking was not always a successful enterprise.

Part VI: The Holy Church

What about the institutions that made the holy matrimony

possible?

Funnily enough, within the one institution that is considered to be exempt from worldly tradition we find all of the worldly rituals.

Convents create a link between the aristocracy and the people. Here, we find both the sacred and the profane. Monks, nuns and clerics were educated and literate scribes that taught the people about religion and artistic skills such as writing and singing, but convents also had breweries, they danced, enjoyed good food and had secret affairs on the side. Grand feasts were common also in convents, sometimes with feasting going on until the early morning hours. In convents and churches, we find scribes and intellectuals who teach and write, feast and drink, whilst preaching holy matrimony.

The church, accordingly, is everything the Renaissance is: an extravagant saint.

Part VII: The Common Man

When the dancing and the devouring ended, who was left to clean up the mess? Not Rodrigo Borgia, not Gustav Vasa, Lorenzo de Medici, Jakob Fugger nor Queen Elizabeth I. The ordinary man was allowed to stand and watch the aristocrats eat, who in turn made it a sport to throw food at him. In more cases than one, the servants were allowed the left-overs. Sometimes, the left-overs were given the beggars. But the common man had to clean up.

The hand that gave could also take away. Gustav Vasa toured all of his renovated Vasa-castles, collecting the natural taxes given to him by his people. This kind of behavior caused ordinary people like Nils Dacke, a kind of a Swedish Robespierre, to revolt against the crown. This time, the ordinary man lost, his head speared on a pole as a warning.

Renaissance usurpers discovered the status of owning a black slave, thanks to Columbus and Vasco da Gama. The Lisbon court of Queen Catherine of Austria was one of the many Renaissance communities that sported these live imports from exotic places. In the second half of the sixteenth century, obligatory baptism of the slaves was widespread. The focus on newly discovered places like Africa became obvious in the arts as well. *St. Maurice and the Theban Legion* from 1515 or Annibale Carracci's *Portrait of a Black Servant* from 1580 are two examples of Africans in established art.

Part VIII: Food

The black servants may have crisscrossed the palaces, but the ordinary citizens kept to themselves. Forks may have travelled from the Byzantine empire in the 11th century to arrive by the year 1600 in England, but the

common man usually used spoons and bowls. And so, history took its own course and people made their own choices. An 11th century priest even complained that God had given us the natural table utensils named fingers, so, in quote, “why on Earth should we should we use something as trivial as forks?”

In other ways, as well, the classes differed in the way they baked their cakes and bread. In the poor man’s world, bread could contain wheat bran, barley, grain, beans or even chestnuts. Bread, as such, was actually long a substitute for the plate and any other food served was placed upon it during a meal. Beef was the most common meat, while rice remained more or less rich man’s food.

In many cases, one sees a more healthy diet among the more common folk. Onions, garlic, beans, cabbage and rye bread played a more important role in the lives of poorer families. High class products were peaches, melons and white bread. Imported spices, such as cinnamon, nutmeg and even sugar, were used in cooking. Of course, these spices increased in value the higher up the social ladder one climbed.

Columbus’ famous journeys to the new world also brought many new things to Europe. Chili-peppers, tomatoes, corn, cocoa, squash and beans, to name a few, were New World imports. The potato made its triumphant march through Europe, finally arriving in Scandinavia by the beginning of the 18th century with the help of a certain Mr. Jonas Alströmmer in Alingsås.

Food also played an important part in the Florentine Carnival. When the 40-day period of Lent was on its way, citizens had the possibility to wallow in bliss for a short time. *The Spirit of Carnival*, a fat man carrying sausages, battled *The Spirit of Lent*, a thin woman carrying a herring. Here, we see traditional wisdom and folly coincide again. Ritualistic custom is being upheld, artistic improvisation nourished, and yet the common man and the noble prince are both kept happy with a theatrical game filled with silliness.

Pies and ragout were served on the street by the *traiteur*, a caterer, who also made it possible for the guest to eat his food on the spot. Bakers were among the first to serve their goods on the street. They were professionals with a long education and very sought after craftsmen.

Inn and taverns have existed for thousands of years, but the term *Restaurant* arose in the 18th century through the initiative of a man name Boulanger. Perhaps it did so through the influence of the Renaissance *traiteur*, who was a kind of travelling fast-food merchant. Boulanger’s promotion consisted of offering troubled stomachs restoration through a dish labelled *Restaurants*, which were pieces of meat with dough drenched in gravy.

Part IX: Festive Tradition

In some Renaissance households, the turkey replaced

other meat and stiffened plum porridge would turn into the flaming Christmas pudding in 1670. Maybe the pudding was a reaction to Oliver Cromwell’s 13 year English Christmas ban that was lifted when the puritans lost that year.

All these baroque and rococo traditions find their influential origin in 16th century customs. The Renaissance also gave birth to two Christmas traditions: in 1521, the first English Christmas-Carol collection was published. In 1531, then, the first published mention of a Christmas tree in Germany.

The modern day mind-map of the season appeared in small spurts, as well. The Holy Days and Feasting Act of 1551 clearly states, “every citizen must attend a Christian church service on Christmas Day and must not use any kind of vehicle to get there.”

The Renaissance Man was not only a strolling man, who walked to church on Christmas Day, he was also a celebratory individual. He was an intellectual, a gourmand as well as a gourmet. He was self-confident, passionate, brash, eager to learn and eager to drink as many pints of mead as possible.

He was one of a kind, a *Uomo Universale*.

Among the published works about the Italian Renaissance, there are a few titles that have to be mentioned. They were a valuable addition to my research. In Burckhardt, J., 1990: *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, I found many wonderful background stories about 16th century life in general. The following titles can be added as very well written pieces that will provide any researcher with fine historical material to work with: Durant, W., 1980: *The Renaissance* – Simon & Schuster 13. Plumb. J.H., 1961: *The Italian Renaissance* – Mariner Books. Finally I mention two books that, more than anything, helped me in my work: Brotton, Jerry, 2003: *The Renaissance Bazaar* – Oxford University Press 15. Cronin, Vincent, 1992: *The Florentine Renaissance* – Pimlico.

Part X: The Renaissance Man

The Renaissance is the also the great-grandmother of our modern world, with its free vote and ability to voluntarily express emotion. History is man’s memory. Without it, we are intellectually poorer. It should therefore be considered a duty to study the past accordingly.

Walking around in the Boboli Gardens of the Pitti Palace, giggling as we see court dwarf Pietro Barbuino ride on his turtle, it becomes obvious that the Renaissance was both sacred and blasphemous. We are left with a suprising thought: the Renaissance Man was actually an extravagant saint. But, then again, aren’t we all?

CONCLUSION: The Renaissance – A Symbiosis of Forces

The nobility paid artists money to praise them. The artists used this money to do so, but inserted beauty, wisdom and spirit into their work. This inspired a festive tradition that promoted ballet, opera and artistic tradition. Kings and Queens invited actors to present theatrical stagings that lifted their history to the skies (see Shakespeare's Royal Plays, my references 11 – 15 and my referred weblinks 6 – 11).

The result was an intellectual process that links the enjoyment of physical treasure, festive tradition and artistic work. It is a link that survives to this day.

REFERENCES

1. Hofrén M (1961). *Historieglimtar från Kalmar Slott* – Tidningen Barometern
2. Larsson O, Marklund A (2008). *Sveriges Historia* – Historiska Media
3. Andersson Stina/ Ivansson, Elisabeth, 2008: *Boken om historia 2: Vasatiden* – Svenska
4. Hedberg, Jonas, 1985: *Yngre Vasatiden* – Militärhistoriska Förlaget
5. Larsson, Lars-Olof, 2005: *Gustav Vasa* – Nordstedts
6. Nordstrom, Byron J., 2002: *The History of Sweden* – Greenwood Press
7. Kent, Neil, 2008: *A Concise History of Sweden* – Cambridge University Press
8. Grimberg, Carl, 2008: *A History of Sweden* – Dodo Press
9. Dunham, S.A., 2013: *History of Denmark, Sweden and Norway* – Pergamum
10. Strindberg, A., 1959: *The Vasa Trilogy* – University of Washington Press
11. Burckhardt, J., 1990: *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* – Penguin Classics
12. Durant, W., 1980: *The Renaissance* – Simon & Schuster
13. Plumb. J.H., 1961: *The Italian Renaissance* – Mariner Books
14. Books 14. Brotton, Jerry, 2003: *The Renaissance Bazaar* – Oxford University Press
15. Cronin, Vincent, 1992: *The Florentine Renaissance* – Pimlico