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From Augsburg to Edgar: Continental Beggar Books and *King Lear*

Framed by his brother Edmund as an aspiring patricide, Edgar in Shakespeare's *King Lear* suddenly finds himself a fugitive, a wanted man with only a moment to reinvent himself, following Gloucester's orders to bar all seaports and town gates.¹ His speech of auto-transformation works as a transparent, Brechtian assumption of a fictional role that is "*not* this, *but* that" as he deliberately dons his character before our eyes, exposing its artificiality and constructedness, even as, at the end of the speech, he declares the transformation complete:

EDGAR:

I heard myself proclaimed,
And by the happy hollow of a tree
Escaped the hunt. No port is free, no place
That guard and most unusual vigilance
Does not attend my taking. While I may scape
I will preserve myself, and am bethought
To take the basest and most poorest shape
That ever penury in contempt of man
Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,
Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots
And with presented nakedness outface
The winds and persecutions of the sky.
The country gives me proof and precedent
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,
Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;
And with this horrible object, from low farms,
Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes and mills,
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,
Enforce their charity. Poor Turlygod, poor Tom,
That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am.²

Edgar resolves to perform for his life, and the performance becomes all the more telling because his "fictional" role of mad, vagabond beggar draws significantly from the actual position in which he suddenly finds himself: homeless, and thus

¹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear* [c. 1605–1606], ed. Reginald A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series (London: Thomson Learning, 1997), 2.1.80.

² 2.2.172–192.

living under the elements and at the mercy of charity; exiled; persecuted, and under intense surveillance. The role of Poor Tom is short on the kind of ruse and guile common to the English rogue books and long on sheer, naked (almost literally) performance: one vulnerable person beseeching another with the simple, but total art of the body and its theatrical projections and prostheses, which include make-up (grimacing his face with mud), costume (the semi-nakedness of a loin cloth), voice (“roaring voices,” “lunatic bans,” “prayers”) and gesture (“[s]trike in their numbed and mortified bare arms”). Creating a radically “poor theatre” out of practically nothing, Edgar shifts with nothing more and nothing less than what lies before him in his dispossessed state. The self-mutilation that Edgar either announces he will perform, or enacts directly before us during the speech, when coupled with his later chaotic but coherent narrative of sin, devil possession and penance, can be productively understood in the context of late medieval religious, penitential discourse as it was articulated by the figure of the vagabond beggar in various fourteenth- to sixteenth-century continental texts. Three salient aspects of Poor Tom’s performance should be emphasised: 1) the elementally corporeal, bare nature of his performance—a minimalist virtuosity and asceticism worthy of Jerzy Grotowski’s “holy” actor; 2) the rhetorical nature of a performance designed to “[e]nforce [...] charity”—one that if governed by trickery, operates by marshalling the full range of vocal and bodily rhetorical resources towards the end of persuading for charity; 3) the pervasively religious aura of the figure and the performance: an unsettling mixture of devil haunting, penitence, curse (“lunatic bans”) and blessing (“prayers”).

Critics have long pointed to two English rogue books, John Awdeley’s 1561 *The Fraternity of Vagabonds* and Thomas Harman’s 1566 *A Caveat for Common Cursitors*, as possible sources for Edgar’s particular type, the “Abraham Man,” who has left or escaped from Bethlem, or “Bedlam” Hospital: London’s hospital for the mentally ill. Calling himself “Poor Tom,” according to Awdeley’s extremely brief text, the Abraham Man “feigneth himself mad,” and “walketh bare-armed and bare-legged”³ or, as Edgar puts it, with “presented nakedness” and a mere blanket cast over his loins. For Harman, the swindler’s repertoire consists of an oral-formulaic collection of terrible tales about how he has been beaten in Bedlam or some prison, just as Poor Tom obscurely alludes to having

³ Good editions of both Awdeley’s and Harman’s texts may be found in Arthur F. Kinney, ed., *Rogues, Vagabonds, and Sturdy Beggars: A New Gallery of Tudor and Early Stuart Rogue Literature* (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1973), pp. 91–101 (*The Fraternity of Vagabonds*); pp. 109–153 (*A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds*). The quotation is from Kinney, ed., *Rogues, Vagabonds, and Sturdy Beggars*, p. 91.

been whipped, “stocked, punished and imprisoned.”⁴ Harman’s Abraham Man, like Poor Tom who haunts “low farms, / [p]oor pelting villages, sheepcotes and mills,” is a specifically *rural* character, whose own dispossession reflects the very poverty of the “pelting” countryside in this period of agricultural calamity as analysed by Marx. (And compared to almost all other early modern English dramatists, whose background was predominantly urban, the Stratford-raised Shakespeare might have actually seen some of these rural types.) Just as Edgar, as a “horrible object,” resolves to “[e]nforce [...] charity,” the Abraham Man accosts farmers’ houses and demands succour of its terrified inhabitants with, in Harman’s words, “fierce countenance.”⁵

But despite these salient points of contact with Shakespeare’s Poor Tom, the English texts somewhat miss the mark in their emphasis on the Abraham Man’s ruse and craft: a quality shared by almost all of the English frauds. So Harman deems a certain Stradling (his exhibit A for the Abraham Man) to be “the craftiest and most dissemblingest Knave,” who is capable “with his tongue and usage to deceive and abuse the wisest man that is.”⁶ In claiming that the Abraham Man can “pick and steal, as the upright man or Rogue,”⁷ Harman tends to collapse his designated subject into the general, overriding archetype of the dissembling rogue. Harman’s rogues are almost infinitely resourceful (except when they are being unmasked by the author himself or another authority), but in body, voice, gait, gesture, make-up and costume they are less performatively virtuosic than the continental beggars of the catalogues. Stephen Greenblatt, of course, relates Poor Tom’s verve to the performative bravado of contemporary exorcists, as anatomised by Samuel Harsnett in his 1603 *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*: a long-acknowledged source for the names of the devils Edgar claims to be possessing him.⁸ Both kinds of texts aim to debunk fraud: Harman’s rogues bamboozle their victims regardless of religious confession (and with almost no reference to religious aura or rhetoric); Harnett sharply divides the world between credulous Catholics naïve enough to be taken in by the hocus-pocus incantations of the exorcist and the grotesque gyrations of the possessed; and wily Protestants shrewd enough to see through the exorcist’s cheap tricks. But both the Harman and Harsnett texts pose the question of belief or disbelief more starkly, I would

⁴ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.4.130 f. For Harman on the “Abraham Man,” see Kinney, ed., *Rogues, Vagabonds, and Sturdy Beggars*, pp. 127 f.

⁵ P. 127.

⁶ P. 128.

⁷ P. 127.

⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 94–128.

propose, than is appropriate for Poor Tom, who conjures up an intermediate field of performance and reception between belief and doubt, in which the truly skeptical position might be to acknowledge that the ostensive charlatan, might, after all, be telling the truth.

The English rogue books, in fact, appear to derive from a German tradition. Sebastian Brant's 1494 *Das Narrenschiff*, published in the same city as the *Basler Betrügnisse* (Basle) and translated into English by Alexander Barclay in 1509, describes in chapter 63 manifold types of beggars surely taken from other German texts, but cast in an even harsher and more censorial tone: false miracle mongers, relic sellers, cripples, epileptics and others. Bronisław Geremek argues that Robert Copland's *Highway to the Spital-House* (c. 1535–1536), which describes both “deserving” and “undeserving” types of the poor lodging in a hospice, was directly influenced by Barclay's translation of Brant's text.⁹ It may have been the case that the English writers took the idea of beggar types from *Das Narrenschiff* and (for those who could read German) from one of the myriad and frequently reprinted versions of the 1509/10 *Liber Vagatorum* or other German texts. They may well have fused the beggar idea with the notion of the vagabond-rogue that they could have absorbed from *Till Eulenspiegel*, translated into English in 1548, and that later in the sixteenth century they would have received from translated Spanish picaresque novels. The rogue tended to eclipse the beggar.

In fact these and other German texts, and a 1484–1486 Latin manuscript from Italy, capture the particular melding of religious enchantment and disenchantment operative in Poor Tom better than the almost completely a-religious and altogether debunking English texts. If Shakespeare, according to Debora Shuger, may draw on neo-medieval notions of economic redistribution for King Lear's “Poor naked wretches” speech, the idea of the beggar informing Poor Tom may be more cognate with this late medieval, continental discourse than it is with the aggressive Protestant texts of Harman and others.¹⁰

To be sure, these late medieval/early modern German and Latin texts scarcely aim to hallow their subjects, deemed frauds meriting both exposure and punishment. But they emerge from continental geographical and temporal contexts in which the public might just as easily believe as disbelieve the itinerant beggar posing as (or actually being?) a hermit, priest, friar, relic-seller, indulgence monger, baptised Jew, survivor of religious persecution or tormented soul

⁹ Bronisław Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn: L'image des pauvres et des vagabonds dans la littérature européenne du XV^e au XVII^e siècle*, trans. Joanna Arnold-Moricet et al. (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), p. 68.

¹⁰ See Debora K. Shuger, “Subversive Fathers and Suffering Subjects: Shakespeare and Christianity,” in: Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier, edd., *Religion, Literature, and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540–1688* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 46–69.

practicing penance and seeking redemption. There is a fascination, unlike anything invoked by the English texts, with both the performative aura of the beggars and their capacity to elicit feelings ranging from credence and compassion to disgust and disbelief. Tellingly, as Lee Palmer Wandel notes in a detailed iconographical study, the many title-pages fronting the frequently recycled *Liber Vagatorum* present beggars without editorial intervention, representing them as genuinely poor and disabled as they solicited alms.¹¹ The images used for the *Liber Vagatorum* reflect a general southern German tendency to depict a greater ethical range (i.e., the subjects are not all undeserving frauds) in the visual field relative to the textual arena: the Nuremberg artist Barthel Beham in 1524 published a broadsheet depicting different kinds of beggars, some of which are represented as undeserving of their fates.¹² The author of the *Liber Vagatorum*, and Martin Luther in a preface written for a 1528 edition of the text, declare their own vulnerability; they have themselves been victims of these charismatic charlatans, whose performances have evidently exercised a peculiar power. If Shakespeare, in *As You Like It*, can take an easy target of Protestant skepticism such as the hermit—excoriated in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* as a cunning fraud—and render him a plausible holy man, then he might also reverse, or at least complicate the valence of vagabond beggars who evoked the religious fears and hopes of their publics.

The *Liber Vagatorum* derives from a long line of German beggar catalogues that actually have their origins not in literature, but in municipal registers. They arise at precisely the same time (the fourteenth century) and place (southern Germany) where the first early modern European poor laws were devised. What unites these early German texts, their development and flowering in Italy and Germany, and the late English catalogues of Awdeley and Harman, is the persistent, indeed obsessive impulse to name, typify and categorise beggars and vagabonds. Faced, for the first time, with numbers of poor so great that one could not possibly know each of their names, the problem of identification became paramount—and it was easier to think in terms of categories than individuals. If, following the new poor laws, one was compelled to evict itinerant beggars out of the city back into the devastated countryside to a fate of probable starvation, it was easier if you believed these individuals were evil imposters wrongly diverting the scarce resources of charity from the deserving, and local poor. To the terrifying prospect of squadrons of beggars invading European cities beginning in the late

¹¹ Lee Palmer Wandel, *Always Among Us: Images of the Poor in Zwingli's Zurich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 103.

¹² Pp. 101–104.

fifteenth century, the beggar books satisfied a kind of blessed rage for order: the comfort of categorising and rationalising the dizzying and threatening multitude.

Such an account, admittedly psychological and speculative, is not incongruent with Geremek's more historical and discursive explanation: "This procedure is the effect of the method of medieval teaching, which relies upon the principle of classifying by means of enumeration."¹³ The very method of analysis into disparate categories, with talismanic names distinguishing one indigent group from another, thus derives for Geremek from figures such as the Carolingian scholar Alcuin. As with medieval bestiaries, one comes to know the unknown through the known. Still, Geremek, and other historians of poverty such as Brian Pullan who have addressed this issue,¹⁴ insist that the beggar catalogues are hardly written out of whole cloth, concluding that "there is no doubt that [...] [such judiciary documentation] is based on real facts."¹⁵ For all their evident literary verve, the clerks at Augsburg and Basle were responding to *something*. The insistent and practical need to distinguish between two fundamental groups of beggars—those deserving and those undeserving of charity—could have easily been expanded to an extension and multiplication of categories beyond the practical binary one.

Many details of the beggar catalogues simply have the ring of truth. They describe wretched performers exploiting both the "aura" and the simple convenience of liminal spaces around churches, such as doors and thresholds, in ways that match archival documents. The large number of religious frauds detailed in the continental books (again, at variance with the English rogue catalogues) reflects the pervasive presence, especially in fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, of itinerant religious who either were fraudulent or easily gave off the appearance of so being, and thus came under attack from reformers such as Martin Luther. Additionally, they evoke a world, also congruent with archival documents, in which a very thin line obtained between itinerant entertainers (musicians, acrobats, storytellers, actors) and vagabond beggars. What most plausibly matches the beggar catalogues and real life, however, is that the need for identity transformation and fictional role playing—what Edgar experiences in the "happy hollow of a tree"—appears to be all but structured into the poor laws. In Milan, as Giovanni Liva has demonstrated, special attention was devoted to identifying and persecuting "foreigners" in liminal places, such as seaports, city

¹³ Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn*, p. 75.

¹⁴ Brian Pullan, "Poveri, mendicanti e vagabondi (secoli XIV–XVII)," in: *Storia d'Italia: Annali*, vol. 1: *Dal feudalesimo al capitalismo*, edd. Ruggiero Romano and Corrado Vivanti (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), pp. 981–1047, p. 1013.

¹⁵ Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn*, p. 77. ("[I]l ne fait pas de doute [...] qu'elle [la documentation judiciaire] repose sur des faits réels.")

entrances, boats travelling near borders and inns. Fiction, however, provided a way out for the starving beggar with his wits still about him. The controls, argues Liva, “ignored the fact that it was very easy [...] to give a false name,” whence a late seventeenth-century edict fining any foreigner who had tricked the authorities by “altering their declarations of first and last name, country or the place from where they came.”¹⁶ Itinerant improvisation, taking on various roles and identities in order to survive to the next day, exaggerating, distilling, reversing and transforming the raw facts: this was the stuff of existence as the disciplinary screws of the authorities tightened around the poor. The life of the street and the art of the disciplining beggar books may have worked in mutually reinforcing ways. Illiterate beggars were clearly not reading the new literature, but those involved in the discourse and practice of enforcement may have been, and actual beggars could have played into the discursive categories prepared for them.

Early German Texts

In the 1342 Augsburg municipal register account of five fraudulent beggar types, four out of the five trade on specifically *religious* motifs, all featuring virtuosic one-on-one performance techniques rather than the criminal networking characteristic of the English rogue books and German and Spanish picaresque novels. Anticipating a category from Teseo Pini’s *Speculum Cerretanorum*, the *Hürlentzer* posed as Jews baptised—presumably in a serial fashion—to Christianity. The *Clainnier*, or false pilgrims, cleverly exploit the liminal spaces bordering churches, as do several of the types from *Liber Vagatorum*. The *Grentzier*, the only one of the five types not given an explicitly religious function, feign sickness. The *Münser* pose as Capuchin monks and the self-flagellating *Serpner*, as penitents.¹⁷ In just a year, the Augsburg categories expand to nine, broadening the range of penitential performance techniques. Included in the added categories are the *Fopperin*, “die nement sich unsinne an”¹⁸ [who call themselves mad]. Another category of

16 Giovanni Liva, “Il controllo e la repressione degli ‘oziosi e vagabondi’: La legislazione in età spagnola,” in: Danilo Zardin, ed. *La città e i poveri: Milano e le terre lombarde dal Rinascimento all’età spagnola* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1995), pp. 291–332, p. 311.

17 Friedrich Kluge, *Rotwelsch: Quellen und Wortschatz der Gaunersprache und der verwandten Geheimsprachen* (Strasbourg: Karl S. Trübner, 1901), p. 1; Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn*, p. 78. Kluge provides editions of the Augsburg registers, *Die Basler Betrügnisse der Gyler* and several other texts preceding the *Liber Vagatorum*.

18 Kluge, *Rotwelsch*, p. 2.

pilgrims, the *Mümser*, drag chains; the *Sinweger* repent having killed their family relatives; and the *Spanvelder* mutilate their legs in order to simulate wounds.¹⁹

Apart from a 1350 Breslau document that catalogues eleven types of petty criminals, and a 1381 municipal register in Constance that provides the names (or nicknames) and salient characteristics of notorious brigands,²⁰ the next major German text, and quite possibly the chief textual antecedent of the c. 1509 *Liber Vagatorum*, is an important fifteenth-century report from Basle. Like the Augsburg catalogues, *Die Basler Betrügnisse der Gylar* issues from municipal registers—texts with an avowedly documentary aim. According to Friedrich Kluge, three nearly identical copies of the text survive: one from a book of municipal depositions dating 1411–1463 (and probably written between 1430 and 1444); the second as a text added to a judicial statute of 1457; and the third as an insertion of the Basle chronicle of Johann Knebel in 1479.²¹ The multiplicity of texts, as Bronisław Geremek argues, suggests the wide interest and dissemination of this particular text and those like it.²² As well as furnishing a likely source of the *Liber Vagatorum*, the *Basler Betrügnisse* may well explain the transmission from Germany to Italy of the beggar catalogue genre. Teseo Pini, the Italian vicar and author of the late fifteenth-century *Speculum Cerretanorum*, served under Bishop Girolamo Santucci (1427–1494), who was sent by Pope Sixtus IV to Germany, where he stayed until 1478. As Piero Camporesi argues, “[it] is very probable [...] that in one of the returning legate’s chests also travelled the manuscript of *Die Basler Betrügnisse der Gylar*, which constituted the nucleus of the *Liber Vagatorum*: pages that were not turned in vain” by Santucci.²³

The *Basler Betrügnisse*, consisting of twenty-six to thirty categories depending on the version, constitutes a major expansion of the genre, reprising a few of the Augsburg types but adding many more, versions of which will be recycled in the *Liber Vagatorum* (and a few in the *Speculum Cerretanorum*).²⁴ (Generally, types often resurface in these texts under altered or altogether different names.) Several categories (*Grantener*, *Sweiger*, *Valkentreiger*, *Brasseln*) practice the kind of self-mutilation and the application of grotesque substances to the body that we have observed, and which is cognate with Poor Tom’s striking of his “numbed and

¹⁹ Ibid.; Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn*, pp. 78 f.

²⁰ Kluge, *Rotwelsch*, pp. 2 f.; Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn*, pp. 79 f.

²¹ Kluge, *Rotwelsch*, p. 9.

²² Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn*, p. 80.

²³ Piero Camporesi, “Introduzione,” in: Camporesi, ed., *Il libro dei vagabondi: Lo Speculum Cerretanorum di Teseo Pini, Il vagabondo di Rafaele Friano e altri testi di ‘furfanteria’* (Torino: Einaudi, 1973), pp. IX–CLXXV, p. CLX.

²⁴ Kluge, *Rotwelsch*, pp. 8–16; Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn*, pp. 80–84.

mortified bare arms” with various sharp objects. As in all the continental texts, much attention is given to religious fraud: the converted Jew (*Vermerin*, following the *Hürlentzer* of the Augsburg registers), the relic seller (*Theweser*), the pilgrim (*Klamerierer*, following Augsburg), the false priest (*Galatten*) and others. Anticipating a somewhat fuller development in the *Liber Vagatorum*, the *Spanfelder* seem particularly apposite to Poor Tom: arriving into a town, they deposit their clothes, kneel nakedly in front of churches and shake with cold and utter fearful cries. The *Krochere*, who also prostrate themselves naked before churches, clarify the penitential nature that is merely implicit in many of the other types: desiring to expiate their sins they sit naked in front of a church and beseech those passing by to whip them. It is the *Vopper* (expanding from the *Fopperin* of the 1343 Augsburg register), however, who most strikingly evoke Poor Tom, conjuring a spectacle like nothing to be found in the English texts. The *Vopper* are divided into two types: the first tear apart their garments. The second, the *Vopper, die da ditzent*, claim that they have been possessed by a demonic spirit, and only an offering on behalf of a saint will deliver them.²⁵ The overall tone of the *Basler Betrügnisse* is relentlessly harsh and censorial, and no accompanying visual imagery softens the blow, but, in its elaboration of the performative techniques and narratives of the types well beyond what is indicated in the Augsburg entries, it points the way to the *Liber Vagatorum*.

Liber Vagatorum

The *Liber Vagatorum: Der Betler Orden* was a seminal text, published in countless editions, under three different titles, from 1509 to 1755.²⁶ In this German text, the beggar catalogue reaches its mature form, and it is hard to imagine cosmopolitan English writers not being aware of it. Martin Luther, who actively advocated for the reformation of poor relief along with his campaign against the mendicant orders, wrote a preface to a 1528 edition—a version that was frequently republished.

Of all the types described in the *Liber Vagatorum*, the *Schwanfelder* (elaborated from the *Spanfelder* of the *Basler Betrügnisse*) seem particularly apposite to

²⁵ Kluge, *Rotwelsch*, pp. 13 f.

²⁶ For a German-English edition of the *Liber Vagatorum*, see David Biron Thomas, ed., *The Book of Vagabonds and Beggars: With a Vocabulary of Their Language and a Preface by Martin Luther*, trans. John Camden Hotten (London: The Penguin Press, 1932). For bibliographic details regarding the *Liber*, see Geremek, *Les fils de Caïn*, p. 53.

Poor Tom, for their implicit “stage directions” of divestiture, shaking from cold, self-mutilation with sharp plants and supplication:

Das sind betler wenn sie in ein stat kommen so lassen sie die klaider in den herbergen und sitzen für die kirchen bey nackend und zittern jamerlichen vor den lewten das man wenen sol sie leyden grossen frost so haben sie sich gestochen mit nesselnsamen und mit andern dingen das sie sunckel werden.²⁷

[These are beggars who, when they come into town, leave their clothes at the inn and then sit down naked in front of churches, and shake miserably in front of the people in order to make them think that they suffer from terrible cold. They prick themselves with nettles and other things to make themselves shake.]

Here, and throughout the text, religious fraudulence plays centre stage. The *Lossner*, who like Poor Tom claim to have been in prison, carry their chains still with them as a continual sign of penitence governed by the vows they have made to various saints. Even more performatively virtuosic penitents are the *Klenckner*, who at church doorways or religious gatherings bemoan their past captivity at the hands of the infidels and “umb deren [der Heiligen] willen sie mit grosser jaemerlicher klagen der stymm bitten und haischen”²⁸ [for the sake of the saints with loud, mournful cries of their voice supplicate and beg]. The *Vagierer*, wandering scholars who profess to know the black arts, are explicitly called “devil conjurers” (“beschwerer der tewfel”)²⁹ for their capacity, according to the author, of unleashing devilish powers. The *Dobisser*, or false anointers, exploit the credence of simple farmers by touching them with images of the Virgin or of saints; like the canny *Schlepper* (along with the *Kammesierer*, false priests) they make profit from donations of worship materials (candles, altar cloths, etc.) that they presumably need for their unholy masses. The *Deutzer*, feigning sickness, beseech alms to go on pilgrimage on behalf of “this or that” saint.³⁰ A *Veranderin*, a woman who purports to have converted from Judaism (cf. the Augsburg *Hür-lentzer*), will reward charity by telling the credulous donor the fate of their father or mother in the afterlife.

All of the *Liber’s* mendicants, with one exception, are “*Veranderen*”: changers and shape shifters. The only unambiguously good category in the catalogue is that of the *Breger*: “[D]as sind petler die kain zaichen von den heyligen oder wenig an inen haben hangen und kommen schlechtlich und einfaltigklich für

²⁷ Thomas, ed., *The Book of Vagabonds*, pp. 102 f.

²⁸ Pp. 74 f.

²⁹ Pp. 84 f.

³⁰ Pp. 92 f. (“Das sind petler die sind lang kranck gelegen (als sie sprechen) und haben ein schwer fart verhaissen zu dem heyligen und zu ihenem.”)

die lewt gangen und haischen das almosen umb gottes und unser lieben frawen willen[.]”³¹ [They have no or very few tokens of the saints hanging about them and proceed clumsily and simply up to people and beg alms for God’s or the Holy Virgin’s Sake]. They are “one-sided” (“einfaltigklich”) and pose no threat because their appearance matches their reality. The author grudgingly concedes that in some cases aid may also be given to the second group, the *Stabeylern*: vagrants who work the country from one saint’s shrine to the next, with dozens of saints’ tokens hanging from their hats and cloaks. But here we are already plunged into the world of theatrical deceit, semiotic confusion (the very problem that the beggar catalogues are supposed to alleviate), and what might be called “a war of signs.”³²

If the clothes of the *Stabeyler*, cluttered with tokens of all the saints, are made of one hundred pieces like that of the mythical Harlequin, their verbal repertoires can similarly be seen as “rhapsodic,” or stitched together, in the manner of oral compositions performed by actors, singers and storytellers. In fact, much of the *Liber Vagatorum* goes to enumerating the typical narratives deployed in the imposters’ street theatre, as with the *Lossner*, close readers of late medieval romance or contemporary captivity narratives: “These are knaves who say they have lain in prison six or seven years, and carry the chains with them wherein they lay as captives among the *infidel* [...] and they have forged letters, as from the princes and lords of foreign lands [...].”³³ Typical speeches recorded in the *Liber Vagatorum* are presented in an oral-formulaic manner, with alternative phrases enumerated at various insertion points.

Liber Vagatorum recounts one after another prodigious feat of acting: acting designed to move the hearts and minds of gullible bystanders to charity via pity or terror. Masters of theatrical *techné*, these travelling actors exploit the full gamut of performance semiotics, enlisting the signs of costume, make-up extending through the entire body, gesture, stance, facial expression, gait, non-verbal voice and sound, a rich verbal repertoire of speeches and stories, props, even occasionally addressing the senses of touch and smell. Even more impressive than the *Dützpetterin*, beggar women who can feign both miscarriages and pregnancy,

31 Pp. 68 f.

32 For a semiotic analysis inspired by Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, see William C. Carroll, *Fat King and Lean Beggar: Representations of Poverty in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 44 f.

33 Thomas, ed., *The Book of Vagabonds*, p. 73; italics in the original. (“Das sind pettler die sprechen sie seyen vi. oder vii. jar gefangen gelegen und tragen die ketten mit inen darin sie gefangen sind gelegen unter den unglaubigen [...] und haben das loesaffot aus frembden landen von dem fürsten und von dem herrn [...].”; p. 72.)

is the male variant: men who feign to be pregnant. The false women lepers, or *Junckfrawen*, deftly combine make-up and intense physical acting, as do the *Grantner*, afflicted with the falling sickness of St. Vitus. Close attention is given to the make-up, prostheses and foul substances used by the histrionic frauds, which match the swampy eco-spheres inhabited by Poor Tom: the *Schweiger* besmear horse dung onto their arms and legs; the *Seffer* coat themselves with a foul type of salve. If we think of the actor playing Gloucester rather than the fictional character, Shakespeare's play is again invoked by the destitute, but also sanctified *Zickische*, or blind men, who take cotton, apply a blood-like substance to it and attach it to their eyes with a kerchief. All in all, the *Liber Vagatorum*, by far the single most important early modern beggar catalogue from an international perspective, provides an exhaustive and compelling account of destitute performative techniques (certainly exaggerated, but not without a basis in reality), drawing from a very minimalist and raw form of theatre.

Speculum Cerretanorum

Not much is known about the life of Teseo Pini, the author of *Speculum Cerretanorum*, who appears to have been a vicar from Urbino, and also involved in the legal profession, both as a doctor in law and as a judge. As we have pointed out, there is a strong possibility that Pini may have had access to the *Basler Betrügnisse der Gylar* through his superior, Girolamo Santucci, who had lived in Germany during the 1470s and in whose library was included a manuscript treatise in Latin on “cerretani”: the very term, of course, used by Pini.³⁴ To be sure, there were also important Latin and Italian texts available to Pini on the figure of the *cerretano*, *ciarlatano* and *vagabondo*, such as the fifteenth-century humanist Flavio Biondo's *Italia Illustrata* (composed 1448–1453), which provides an account of the origins and practices of the *cerretani* to which Pini is clearly indebted.³⁵ Piero Camporesi speculates that the *Speculum*, probably written between 1484 and 1486, may not have been published because of the author's death, although it does appear to have circulated in manuscript. Ironically, it was only due to an act of blatant plagiarism by the Roman Dominican priest Giacinto de'Nobili, who used the pen name of Rafaele Frianoro, that Pini's work ever saw the light of day. Frianoro translated the text from Latin to Italian, changed the names of popes

³⁴ For this manuscript, see Camporesi, “Introduzione,” p. CLXII.

³⁵ P. CXIV.

and other historical figures to fit his own time, and shifted from the first to the third person whenever Pini narrated *in propria persona*.

Resting squarely within the censorial bounds of the beggar book, Pini certainly continues to represent almost all vagabond beggars as fraudulent, but the discourse around poverty is somewhat more cosmopolitan and many-sided than that of the German texts. The *Biantes*, used alternatively as a generic name for the vagabonds and for one sect, are said by Pini to derive their name from Bias of Priene, a sixth-century BC philosopher considered one of the Seven Sages, and, while not explicitly a Cynic, famous for sayings such as “I carry all my things with me.” Several of the categories closely match the picture of the Cynic sage, living naked under the elements, in a way congruent with Poor Tom. So Pini’s *Cocchini*: “[D]icti sunt a quatiendo, qui per hiemem nudi vadunt, quasi sua quatientes membra, stridentes dentibus, ut maiorem vim frigoris se concepisse ostendant. Ii prae se ferunt nihil praeter egestatem nuditatemque habere [...]”.³⁶ [Are so called from the shaking, for those who go about naked through the winter, shaking their arms and legs, gnashing their teeth, in order to show that they suffer from the tremendous force of the cold. They claim to have nothing more than their nudity and poverty.]

Similarly, the *Apezentēs* “dicunt se nihil praeter victum concupiscere, spernere vinum et nuditatem amare [...]”. [Say that they desire nothing but minimal sustenance, spurning wine and loving nudity].³⁷ A striking sign that Pini extends the bare beggar catalogue into a wider discursive terrain is provided by his entry for the rebaptised Jews, or *Iucchi*: a surprisingly recurrent category that appears in the Augsburg registers, the *Basler Betrügnisse* and the *Liber Vagatorum*. Pini is the first to give these figures a social context related to the contemporary problem of poverty: [H]i fingunt se quondam fuisse Iudeos ditissimos fenerario quaestu, et visiones vidisse terribiles, miraculaque inaudita et pene incredibilia proferunt, quibus allecti, more Apostoli, dimisisse talentum et omnia que habebant, ut Christum pauperem sequerentur pauperes et perfecti [...].³⁸ [These pretend to have once been Jews made extremely rich by usury, but who, having seen horrible visions, and astonishing and incredible miracles which they recount, have been drawn, in the same way as the Apostles, to give up all their possessions and, perfected in poverty, to follow the poverty of Christ.]

³⁶ Teseo Pini, *Speculum Cerretanorum*, in: Camporesi, ed., *Il libro dei vagabondi*, pp. 3–77, p. 40.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pp. 44 f.

Within the bounds of a late medieval anti-Semitic discourse, these fraudulent opportunists point to a genuine critique of usury, and advocacy of radical Christian economics as an antidote.

As with the German texts, most of the imposters traffic in religious motifs, but the various religious transactions performed by the beggars are considerably more articulated in the Latin text. Several of Pini's fraudulent beggars, posing as priests, conduct the Mass itself (in exchange, of course, for palpable reward) and generally Pini's charlatans can be seen to perform the various speech-acts and transactions of the Holy Office. The first specific type described by Pini, the *Biantes*, are called such for their general claim to *bless* ("vel quia beatitudinem promittunt")³⁹—just as poor Tom can dispense prayers as well as "lunatic bans." The *Affratres*, or false friars, deceitfully bedecked in priestly habit, both *confess* and *absolve*, cannily pinching the Mass offerings for their unholy uses. Selling counterfeit *indulgences*, the *Biantes* promise to procure spiritual benefits for one's ancestors in hell or purgatory. Several of the types offer to audiences the spiritual gift of *witness*: the *Acatosi* claim to have been captives of the Turks or Saracens, bearing and brandishing chains to prove it, testifying to the endurance of their faith under the harsh deprivations they experienced in prison, where they still have relatives. Several categories perform the vicarious expiation, and perhaps the homeopathic cure, of compelling physical *penitence*, especially the *Affarfantes*:

Fingunt enim multa miracula dicentes se magna perpetrasse flagitia divinoque quodam nutu morbo aliquo percussos et voto obtinuisse morbi liberationem, ut peccatum suum et gratiam eis factam cunctis gentibus paenitendo nuntiarent; percutiunt enim nudum corpus suum aliquibus levibus catenis, [...] aiunt oportere eos talem agendo paenitentiam totum peragrarare orbem.⁴⁰

[They claim to have witnessed many miracles, saying that they have committed terrible sins and were stricken by a terrible infirmity from God, they were liberated from the infirmity by a vow they made to God that as a penance they would travel the world witnessing before all of the people to their sin and to the great mercy of God, striking their bodies with light chains of iron.]

In these kinds of penitential performances and generally throughout the *Speculum Cerretanorum*, a high degree of physical virtuosity is required: from the *Acadentes*, who simulate falling; from the *Atrementes*, or "Tremblers"; from the Tarantulists, or *Attarantati*, who vibrate and shake their heads, tremble at the knees,

³⁹ P. 18.

⁴⁰ Pp. 31 f.

sing and dance, flutter their lips, and shriek and agitate like mad people. Vocal virtuosity seems to be a particular hallmark of Pini's charlatans: the *Asciones*, who like the *Attarantati* pretend to be mad, "[n]ihil petunt sed inarticulatas voces emittunt, nutuque quid velint indicant"⁴¹ [ask for nothing but utter forth inarticulate sounds, indicating what they want simply by moving their heads]. And the performative nature of their activity is made even more clear here than in the German texts, with a fuller picture provided of the piazza arena of performance and the public credulously flocking to see them. Of the *Spectini*, it is said that "[...] homines feminaeve ad eorum contiones confluant non minori delectatione quam ad videndum spectacula cucurrissent."⁴² [Both men and women flock to their assemblies with no less pleasure than if they were running to comedies.] The *Alacrimantes*, or Weepers, and the *Acadentes* (Fallers), take care only to perform when large crowds have collected. Interestingly, many of Friano's minor additions have to do with filling out the performative context—in his version, the *Aca[p]tosi* clear out a performative space in the piazza with the very power of their strange cries in Arabic and Hebrew.⁴³ Still, as we have seen here, the Latin text of Pini that Friano appropriated was already rich in performative detail.

Poor Tom

Although Poor Tom does not exactly position himself in the liminal zone of a sacred space, like the *Schwanfelder* and so many other beggar types described in the catalogues, he invokes spiritual aura through other means. If the exorcism intertexts also informing Poor Tom, as Stephen Greenblatt has argued, point to the "sham theatricality" projected from Samuel Harsnett's debunking, dis-enchanting point of view, so do those of the fraudulent beggar, which describe Edgar's chief object: to "enforce charity."⁴⁴ Poor Tom might be seen as performing a kind of auto-exorcism, but it is put to the service of his fictional superobjective of supplication. The devils tormenting him are tantamount to furious, soul-possessing sins—"of lust, as Obidicut; [...] Mahu, of stealing; Modo, of murder"⁴⁵—that he must expiate, with the help of the Ten-Commandments-style platitudes that

⁴¹ P. 34.

⁴² P. 41.

⁴³ See Rafaele Friano, *Il vagabondo ovvero Sferza de' bianti e vagabondi* [1640], in: Camporesi, ed., *Il libro dei vagabondi*, pp. 79–165, p. 115.

⁴⁴ Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, pp. 94–128.

⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.1.62–64.

he spouts (“obey thy parents, [...] commit not with man’s sworn spouse”)⁴⁶ and the bystander’s charity. In Edgar’s fiction, the destitute speaker has fallen into poverty for unbridled womanising, dicing, stealing and greed: sins that expose the opulence and inequities of the wealthy. Poor Tom, according to his own crazed but actually coherent narrative, had been a court servant “proud in heart and mind” who “served the lust of my mistress’ heart and did the act of darkness with her [...]. Wine loved I deeply, dice dearly; and, in woman, out-paramoured the Turk [...].”⁴⁷ Poor Tom’s devil discourse, rather than merely rehearsing mad snatches from Harsnett, inscribes the demons into a densely poetic, if also formulaic narrative of the sin, moral repentance and spiritual charity familiar in the narratives of sham beggars.

In Edgar’s extended, auto-stage direction, he enumerates the forms, postures and techniques of the actor’s body as he prepares to play Poor Tom. First, he applies facial make-up, liming his face with grime. Next, he attends to costume, or rather anti-costume, taking off all of his clothes but a loincloth (as the mad Lear, in his “Cynic” imitation of this “learned Theban,” will try to do later: “Off, off, you lendings: come, unbutton here.”⁴⁸). Then, he applies a kind of debased wig, tangling and matting his hair. A “roaring voice” will be his fallback vocal register, and then, as so many of the beggar books detail, he marks his body with signs of mutilation. Ambiguously sacred, or *sacré*, in the French sense, Poor Tom can both curse and bless: he will have prepared both curses, or “lunatic bans,” and prayers in the fashion of itinerant beggars building up verbal repertoires.

From his first appearance out of the hovel to the point an act later when he casts aside the role—not accidentally just after his father gives a powerful speech on charity and redistribution—Edgar performs for his life. Deftly melding gesture and voice, his frozen shaking beats to the time of senseless speech: “O do, de, do, de, do, de [...].”⁴⁹ and “Humh”⁵⁰—both added to the Folio text as possible incorporations of the actor’s improvisations. Poor Tom frequently utters the kind of fear-some, non-verbal sounds frequently described in the beggar books: “Alow, alow, loo, loo!”⁵¹ and “suum, mun, nonny.”⁵² Wild, grotesque, violent motions could easily complement lines like “The foul fiend bites my back”⁵³ and deictically rich

⁴⁶ 3.4.78–80.

⁴⁷ 3.4.83–90.

⁴⁸ 3.4.106 f.

⁴⁹ 3.4.57 f.

⁵⁰ 3.4.46.

⁵¹ 3.4.76.

⁵² 3.4.97.

⁵³ 3.6.17.

utterances fire the actor's gestic invention: "*There* could I have him now, and *there*, and *there* again, and *there*."⁵⁴ (Here again the Folio text, by adding the fourth "*there*," may be incorporating actor's improvisations.) Grotesque head movements might accompany Poor Tom's declaration that he will "throw his head"⁵⁵ at the imaginary dogs that Lear has conjured for the trial scene, and we can generally guess that Poor Tom has mastered the body language of the suppliant beggar, as he explicitly begs: "Do Poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes."⁵⁶

What might be a quintessential instance of sham theatricality, of course, turns out to have immense power—power for many critics, viewers and readers of the play and for the play's internal audience members. Edgar's particular rendition of a beggar, with the powerful gestic, kinetic and vocal features described above, captures something like the athletic and ascetic actor of Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre," with Edgar taking "poor" in an even more literal sense than the Polish director-theorist. For Grotowski, the figure of the naked, suffering, vulnerable actor, stripped of the distractions of stage lighting, props and even costume, is fundamentally compelling in a way that returns us to the elemental power of theatricality itself. We might then consider the representation of a beggar to be the Ur-role, or ground fiction, of the actor himself. Actors can play the full gamut of human experience, and reveal to us the constructed nature of societal roles: a revelation which may carry either conservative overtones, as with the stable balance of *Pobre* and *Rico* in the neo-medieval system of Calderón's *El gran teatro del mundo* (c. 1633–1636), or radical implications in Hamlet's upsetting observation that the body of a dead beggar serves "politic worms"⁵⁷ as well as that of a king.

The effect of Poor Tom on the play's internal audiences, especially King Lear and Gloucester, is both traditional and radical, in that Christian theology, especially from patristic and medieval sources, traditionally advocated the redistribution of wealth in ways entirely inimical to early capitalism. Poor Tom draws much of his power, symbiotically, from his association with the dispossessed king on the heath; like Lear, he has elected to "outface / The winds and persecutions of the sky." Lear's powerful "Poor naked wretches" speech may be literally prompted by his sudden designation of the Fool as "houseless poverty"⁵⁸ as he sends him into the hovel. While the Fool is inside the roofless shelter, and before

⁵⁴ 3.4.60 f.; my italics.

⁵⁵ 3.6.62.

⁵⁶ 3.4.59.

⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare, 2nd Series (London: Thomson Learning, 2005), 4.3.20.

⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.4.26.

Poor Tom has emerged, Lear utters the speech, which conjures the state of dispossessed vagabonds like Poor Tom so aptly that it appears to function as his cue.

LEAR:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.⁵⁹

It is as though Lear is already responding to Poor Tom, in a speech that sublimely melds notions of traditional, medieval charity with radical arguments for economic redistribution. As Debora Shuger has argued, "'superflux' is a Shakespearean coinage, a translation of a technical term from medieval canon law referring to that portion of a person's income or goods that is *owed* to the poor."⁶⁰ In fact, at the time when *King Lear* was written many were challenging some of the more draconian elements of the new poor laws implemented throughout Europe by appealing to Greek patristic writers such as St. John Chrysostom and medieval writers such as Aquinas, who each argued that greed and hoarding were tantamount to robbery and that economic redistribution was a moral imperative. The continental beggar books, censorial though they are, reflect a late medieval/early modern world when the poor laws were not yet written in stone, when it was especially difficult to tell whether an itinerant "holy man" might be swindling or saving your soul, and when begging, increasingly untethered from large charitable institutions, was a performance. The *Basler Betrügnisse*, *Speculum Cerretanorum* and *Liber Vagatorum* also beckon us to the world of Poor Tom.

⁵⁹ 3.4.28–36.

⁶⁰ Shuger, "Subversive Fathers and Suffering Subjects," p. 53; italics in the original.