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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to a century of bad behaviour. Forget the tales of the great and the good: this is a history of flawed and imperfect people. People whose misdemeanours lead us deeper into their world, as they show us the way that they carved out a life for themselves and reveal some of the thoughts and feelings that made them tick.

For behind the much vaunted gloss of ruffs and shimmering silks, the deeply committed religious reformers, the political visionaries and the great literary figures of the years between 1550 and 1660 lurks the rest of humanity and human experience in all its grubby glory and tarnished glister. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was a place of vitality, experimentation, expanding horizons and lots of small-minded, petty, badly mannered, irritating and irreverent oiks, guls, gallants and harridans. And I love them all.

Every age and every social stratum has its bad eggs, those who break the rules and rub everyone up the wrong way. People who behave like square pegs in round holes abound in history just as much as in contemporary life. There are people who genuinely don't understand the social conventions of their day, who struggle to follow the subtleties and unwritten rules that govern daily life, and then there are those who deliberately and knowingly flout all codes of conduct. Sometimes

the 'flouters' act alone as rebellious individuals, ploughing their own furrow, like Mary Frith who smoked, drank, swaggered and wore men's breeches in public on a regular basis, both shocking and intriguing her fellow citizens. Sometimes people join together in their rule breaking as an act of defiance and seek to forge their own separate group identity, like the idle, arrogant youths of the Damned Crew who drank, fought and bullied their way around the capital, or the 'holier than thou' hotter sort of Protestants, who irritated their neighbours secure in their own sense of superiority. Some navigate their way around and between the rules for their own ends, and others are tossed into transgression by circumstances. The subversion of normal rules can have many causes and many motivations. But the rules are the rules.

Societies in all times and all places are governed by intricate, overlapping codes of conduct. Some of these rules are both open and explicit in the manner of legal pronouncements or formal regulations; others stem from religious beliefs and understandings that can have a more nebulous edge, sliding into the realms of unexplained taboo. Still more grow from allegedly factual interpretations of the world around us that designate certain behaviours right and 'natural' and others perverted and strange. Some have long lost their rationale entirely but persist as part of widely held traditions, rules that demand obedience because 'we have always done it like that'. Many are implied or understood rather than formally spelt out, learnt from the reactions of family, neighbours, colleagues, enemies and friends. They cover every form of social interaction, from hanging out the washing in a communal yard to drinking with mates in the alehouse. The most socially aware and adept individuals can take all these interwoven, and occasionally conflicting, rules and turn them into a seamless performance of confidence and belonging – at least some of the time. For historically, just as now, many people struggled to pull it off, to behave perfectly at every encounter and in every situation.

I have a sneaking sympathy for all of them: for the blithely clueless bumbling through the disapproving looks; the acutely embarrassed who would conform if only they knew how; the deliberately curmudgeonly who define themselves by their resistance; the makers of new rules who seek to change the world; the calculating social climbers who pick and choose when to be good and when to be bad; the furiously angry who have gone beyond all care and restraint; the comedians poking fun and the downright mischievous who just can't resist giving the world a little stir.

This is a book for, and about, all of them. It is an exploration of the written and unwritten rules of Tudor and Stuart England, and how people went about breaking them. It is not a history of criminal behaviour as such, although some of the activities in this book will edge into the legally dubious; rather it is a study of all the niggling, antisocial, irritating ways that people used to kick against prevailing social mores. And because the offence and the meaning is all contained within the specific details of these behaviours, you will find, too, within these pages, step-by-step instructions that lay out exactly how to be that annoying and irritating person. We shall rehearse the various ways in which you could embarrass your parents, mock a sober clergyman, disgust your dinner guests and put down your enemies. There are instructions for fighting in various styles so that you can hold your own against the city watch, or at least intimidate the uninitiated into letting you have your way. There are crib sheets of verbal insults outlining the vocabulary but also providing you with a key so that you can extemporize upon certain themes and customize your linguistic attacks to suit the occasion. You will find pointers about sartorial inelegance in several forms that could cause terrible worry to stuffy parents, and also diagrams of rude gestures to assist you in performing them with accuracy for maximum impact. It is a sort of

basic tool kit for navigating your way around the edges of society and sliding between the gaps.

And why this particular hundred years? Well, that is very personal. I always have trouble articulating exactly why it is this bit of English history that so captures my attention, heart and soul. But it does, and I can't help but hope that it captures yours, too. I love the combination of the exotically different mingled with the almost familiar, the way you can trace ideas, words, attitudes and habits that at first glance seem so alien as they gently shift into the background of modern life. So much of the twenty-first-century way of life can be illuminated by an understanding of this era. Our current brand of religion and non-religion was shaped at this time. Both the emergence of new forms of worship, the hammering out of new creeds and religious practices and the beginnings of a deep and almost visceral distrust of fundamentalism and overly enthusiastic spiritualism can be found here. Secularism, as well as Quakers and Baptists of various denominations, emerged from these years.

Our form of democracy, too, was first argued about and fought over at this time. Ideas about votes for all men (alas, not women) get their first hearing in the 1640s. Representation and taxation become deeply entwined as a principle and the monarchy is forced to take several large steps back from power. The impact of these struggles and arguments upon the global stage is profound and ongoing.

No one can seriously dismiss the impact of linguistic evolution at this time, either, as it emerged on the streets, the stages and the printed page, brimming with vigour and creativity, to be carried outwards by trade and colonization far from Britain's shores.

Nor were any of these great ferments purely the preserve of the wealthy and elite members of society. People from the humblest of backgrounds found ways to make their voices heard upon the great matters of the day.

The poor, elderly widow at the very bottom of the social heap could be engaged in the most profound of spiritual speculation and navigate her way to services and debates of her choosing. Those who propounded the most radical of political ideas hailed in large part from the workshops rather than the manor houses. The period's greatest poets and dramatists were drawn from a variety of backgrounds and often had patchy and incomplete formal educations.

Despite its powerfully hierarchical and misogynistic social structure, this was an era with a surprising degree of room for manoeuvre. There were gaps through which the brave, determined and lucky could find opportunities for independent thought and action. It is an era, too, that holds more than its fair share of shocks, violence and dramatic moments. The medicine was terrifying and the diseases and epidemics that such poorly equipped physicians were attempting to treat were among the most virulent and unpleasant of all time. Threats of invasion proved to be mere precursors to the military pain of civil war that tore up and down the country, and there are few historical moments more dramatic than the beheading of a king.

All these are good arguments for highlighting these years, but for me there is also a more intimate fascination with people's motivations at this critical moment in history. I want to know why our forebears did things in particular ways. How did it all hold together as a worldview? I want to know what was going on inside people's heads; I want to know what they cared about, how they understood their world. I would love to find out which things gladdened their hearts and which things annoyed and irritated them. I am drawn again and again by a desire to understand the human experience of this rapidly developing culture.

Bad behaviour can be so much more illuminating than the world of the respectable conformist, for it is those who push against the boundaries of cultural etiquette who most accurately define where the

lines are drawn. It is easy to dismiss, for example, the role of bowing in the smooth running of society until you encounter the few who refused to make the gesture. Their stubborn denial of this seemingly trivial courtesy provoked outrage, anger and violence, the vehemence of which give us a sure-fire indication that bows were far from frivolous trifles. Indeed, these instances of transgression show how bowing occupied a central role in peacekeeping and social cooperation.

Within the community of those who did bow to convention we find many subtler ways of offending, ways of poking fun or subverting the central message of the bow proper. Those who were too perfunctory in their performance and those who extended and elaborated the gesture help us to see the range of meaning, from respect to contempt, wrapped up within this commonplace interaction. Bad bowing speaks volumes about personal tensions within society, about interactions between different social groups and where the dividing lines lie.

Armed with an understanding of the differing forms of badly executed bows it becomes possible to unpick aspects of Tudor and Stuart life that went unvoiced. When Queen Elizabeth left the French ambassador deep in a bow for fifteen minutes before giving him the sign that permitted him to rise, she was signalling her political displeasure, her determination to stand against the international pressure France was attempting to exert. The ambassador, in holding that bow for those agonizing fifteen minutes, chose to bear that displeasure with the dignity and pride befitting his and his nation's position. It was high political drama, without a spoken word. This is just one example of the communicative power of the convention; bowing can also express an adherence to tradition, a preference for fleeting fashion, or an expression of political affinity or dissent. All of these meanings could well have escaped our notice if it had not been for those who flouted conventions by using foreign or inappropriate forms, who sneered and jibed about

the Frenchified effeminacy or rustical leadenness of other people's bows, who performed their curtsies sloppily or with a sneer.

If bowing is perhaps an unexpected form of communication, vulnerable to subversion, it is just one among many of a whole realm of badly behaved interactions that open up a window into the past. Other forms of body language, from rude gestures to mimicry, nose-blowing to hat choices, join together with verbal faux pas and deliberate insults in telling us something about what people thought and felt. Social interactions are made up of these many small things and their multifarious tiny nuances. When people behave with perfect manners, in full accord with all the social rules, much of the performance is taken for granted and is commented on only in the most general terms. But bad behaviour receives much more attention and much more detailed discussion and analysis. Anger, disgust, revulsion and deep disquiet are expressed over and over again by people wishing that others were better behaved. Irritation and annoyance spur people into print where harmony and quiet would not.

Luckily for us there was no golden age when everyone lived in peace and harmony, no time when manners were perfect. Speech has never been free of profanity and clothing has always been sexually provocative. In following the antics of rustic drunks in the alehouses, aristocratic hoodlums in the taverns and investigating the insults hurled in the streets we gain a rounder, fuller picture of just what made the British Renaissance world so special.