

**THE WORLD UPSIDE-DOWN IN THEORY
AND AS PRACTICE:
A New Approach to the Study of Medieval Misrule
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‘It was largely an ebullition of the natural lout beneath the cassock’
E.K. Chambers on the Feast of Fools¹

One genre of medieval performance which not only made use of the theme of reversal, but took it as the premise for its very form, was festive misrule, the motley assortment of customs that gave their practitioners the opportunity of transgressing social and sexual norms on the occasion of a calendar feast. For pre-Reformation England, we can cite a number of examples: the custom of hocking, whereby the men and women of a parish were able to bind and ransom one another at Hocktide; the practice of vegetation-gathering, in which flowers and branches could be stripped from private land without retribution to provide decoration for summer festivals; and the Boy-Bishop custom, which was popular on St Nicholas’ Day in English cathedrals and parish churches at this period. These practices have long been of interest to students of medieval drama and popular culture, as well as antiquarians and local historians. Part of the interest in these customs has been descriptive, in the sense that their main features, geographical distribution, and historical occurrence have been investigated and recorded: Table One offers a summary of the customs which may be considered under the heading of festive misrule for medieval England. Alongside this descriptive interest, scholars have also sought to analyse and explain how these customs functioned within their communities and in society more generally.

This paper poses two questions about current scholarly approaches to the study of medieval festive misrule and offers two possible answers. The first question to consider is whether the kinds of explanations that are given in respect of misrule’s meaning are really the most plausible or effective interpretations of the evidence. Chambers’ opinion of the motivation for the Feast of Fools cited above represents one such explanation, making use of a particular view of clerical socialisation, or perhaps civilisation. However the most popular view that we find in the secondary literature is the suggestion that misrule, in posing what appears to be a temporary challenge to authority, in fact merely reaffirms the status

quo in the long run. This view may be termed for convenience the 'safety-valve' approach to misrule, since it uses the metaphor of a controlled release of pent-up steam to explain the social meaning of customs of this sort. It has been a popular approach because it appears to offer a way of reconciling the rebellious and bellicose nature of many of these customs with an apparent lack of evidence that they carried through the kinds of changes which they dramatised. That said, a closer look at this approach and the evidence for misrule indicates several ways in which the 'safety-valve' interpretation is less helpful or accurate than it might initially appear. In the first part of this paper, I review some examples of this approach from the secondary literature on misrule, and discuss the problems with it as a line of interpretation.

Given this situation in the scholarly literature, a second question is to ask what might therefore constitute a better means of characterising misrule as a genre, and how we can set about developing a more productive means of exploring its social meanings and dynamics. My suggestions are that we ought to adopt a definition of misrule which more accurately captures its distinctiveness as a cultural form, and that we need an approach to the evidence that enables us to explore issues of power, authority, motivation, and social change in relation to misrule. In the second part of the paper I set out what seem to me to be the essential features of such an approach, supporting my arguments by reference to some instances of misrule from medieval England for which quite detailed evidence and contextual information survives. Whilst this paper may appear to some to be overly concerned with matters theoretical or at least methodological, it should be clear that a great deal of latent theorising has been going on anyway, and so I am bringing to the fore issues which have lain close to the surface for some time now.

Recent interpretations of medieval misrule

Scholarly writing over the last twenty-five years on the subject of medieval misrule divides itself into three broad fields. One draws upon urban evidence, the second is concerned with medieval drama and calendar customs, and the third relates more generally to festal culture. Taking some representative examples from the first two of these fields, it is clear that the dominant view of misrule has been that it operated as a safety-valve in medieval society, dissipating social tensions and thereby safeguarding the status quo. However, a closer consideration of the

Table One: Festive Misrule in Medieval England²

Feast and Season Names (ecclesiastical name in brackets).	Calendar Date(s).	Participants and Examples.
Shrove Tuesday; Shrovetide.	Associated with the movable feast of Easter.	'Gladman's riding', Norwich 1443.
Hock Monday and Hock Tuesday; Hocktide.	Second or third Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday. ³	Hocking; on the alternate days of Hocktide, groups of men and women would threaten to bind the opposite sex with ropes and charge money for their release.
May Day (SS Philip and Jacob).	1 May.	Early rising on May-Day to gather vegetation for decoration.
Midsummer (Nativity of St John Baptist and Feast of SS Peter and Paul).	24 and 29 June.	Election of Summer Lords and Ladies. Summer games and bonfires.
Feast of the Boy Bishop (Feasts of St Nicholas and the Holy Innocents).	6 and 28 December.	Election of a chorister or other junior to a higher rank in cathedrals and parish churches.
Christmas (Feast of St Thomas to Epiphany).	21 December to 6 January.	Lords and Abbots of Misrule. Mumming.
Feast of Fools; New Year's Day (Feast of The Circumcision).	1 January.	Lesser clergy. Liturgical inversion and parody.

explanations given for the social function of misrule in each of these fields will show that a more convincing approach is needed.

In general, the consideration of misrule in towns has been as part of a consideration of urban ceremony more generally. A line of work associated with Charles Phythian-Adams and Mervyn James has favoured a dual model, where both more formal ceremony and misrule are perceived to work together as a means of regulating urban life. For example, when discussing those 'periodic relaxations of the social order' that are found in the Coventry evidence, such as the Hock Tuesday play or the May Day celebrations, Phythian-Adams suggests that if 'such customs deliberately distorted certain aspects of the social order, there was no question of altering the whole: in disfiguring the structure temporarily, the participants were in fact accepting the *status quo* in the long run'.⁴ The work of Phythian-Adams and James, who both make use of anthropological observations to support their interpretations, has been influential on both the general and the more specific studies of the function of drama and ceremony in the late medieval town.⁵ However, other scholars have argued against James' conclusions and Phythian-Adams' emphasis on the unifying effects of formal ceremonial.⁶ Interestingly, whilst there has been a substantial discussion of James' article and Phythian-Adams' comments on formal ceremonial, there has been less in the way of specific criticism of the view that occasions of misrule also work to maintain the existing structure of social relations.⁷ The idea that occasions of misrule, whilst apparently challenging the status quo, were actually responsible for ameliorating social tensions, has proved to be an influential one in discussions of medieval urban festivity.⁸

It is possible though to question these kinds of conclusions in relation to misrule in the late medieval period, and especially the way that anthropology has been used to support them. Although scholars have drawn upon anthropological writing in order to understand how ceremony and misrule worked, it is important to recognise that the view that rituals of status reversal are safety-valves or mechanisms for securing social cohesion has continued to be debated in the anthropological literature, and that more constructive approaches and terminology have since replaced the older terms which discussions of the medieval evidence still tend to employ. For example, Phythian-Adams drew upon the work of four anthropologists, Gluckman, Norbeck, Rigby, and Turner, as a way of thinking about the function of ceremony in medieval and early modern Coventry, but the works which he cited represent different sides in an

ongoing debate rather than a unified and generally accepted position. We may also note Barbara Babcock's summary of the criticisms that have been made of Gluckman's understanding of the way that 'rituals of rebellion' operate in a given society.⁹ It therefore follows that interpretations of medieval misrule which depend upon what must now be regarded as an older anthropological model, either because they utilise its language or because they make more explicit reference to it, are also susceptible to the same sort of criticisms.

The question of the meaning of misrule has also been considered by scholars interested in the social dimension of late medieval English drama and calendar customs. Work in this area has been influenced by scholars writing on the early modern period in France, where the emphasis has been on a more flexible and open-ended view of the function of misrule.¹⁰ In a number of cases however the English evidence has still been perceived in terms of the 'safety-valve' model. For example, in a review of the evidence for the medieval custom of hocking, Sally-Beth MacLean cites Natalie Zemon Davis' view that play with images of 'women on top' offers a temporary release from stable hierarchy, as well as being part of the conflict to change the basic distribution of power within society. MacLean observes that 'Hocktide may provide some evidence of this conflict, but in the medieval context at least, it does not seem to have been an agent of social change. Rather it was another example of status-reversal rituals that reaffirm "the hierarchical principle" as described by Victor Turner'. Similarly, in a paper in the same volume, Peter Greenfield suggests that Christmas drama in aristocratic households, which 'presumably involved elements of carnival inversion and travesty of social order and authority', was in fact a means of reaffirming the authority of the lord over his household and the surrounding countryside.¹¹

One major difficulty with the argument that transgressive customs had a conservative social function in the medieval period is that this point has been put in the absence of primary source evidence, rather than actually proceeding from it. We might expect that if we are thinking about the social effects and consequences of festive drama, we would need to have some sort of evidence for them, as well as having evidence for the nature of the actual performances, as Meg Twycross has pointed out.¹² The problem with the 'safety-valve' approach is that the former kind of evidence has not been provided: as far as I am aware, there are no case-studies from the medieval period which provide actual evidence to show how, after a particular occasion of misrule, people from different social groups got on

better as a result of social tensions being released. Although there has been a reliance on anthropological models to fill this gap, there are, as I have already indicated, other points of view within the discipline of anthropology that take a different approach to how such rituals and practices function. Arguing that an absence of evidence for social change is indicative of the conservative function of misrule is not a secure basis for understanding how misrule works either, as I shall discuss in more detail below. Moreover, it is important to recognise that the different participants in a particular performance are likely to have reached varying conclusions as to what actually constituted its significant aspects; this further complicates the issue of the emotional and political consequences of misrule. In the light of these factors, we may prefer to adopt a more cautious approach to the analysis of the function of misrule, confining ourselves to those cases where there is sufficient contextual evidence to enable us to make a reasonable judgement.

This brief consideration of some examples from the secondary literature has shown the prevalence of what I have called the 'safety-valve' view of misrule. I have outlined some of the problems with this position, difficulties which arise in part from a misconception of what misrule is, and how it worked. As I see it, the main issue at stake is the extent to which customs and practices which make use of reversal are understood to have done so in a socially oppositional way. According to the 'safety-valve' view, the reversals of status or sexual rôles which characterise misrule are motivated by anger and frustration; the assumption is therefore that in the absence of evidence for large-scale social changes associated with these customs, the energies behind these practices must somehow have been dissipated or contained. The problem here is that this explanation adopts too narrow a view of how inversion works, since the transgression of symbolic codes is not of itself intrinsically oppositional; surely, transgression and inversion can be used for all kinds of reasons and purposes, as for example the papers collected together in the present volume testify. To my mind therefore, a more effective explanation for a lack of evidence for rebellion or social change associated with misrule in the medieval period is that these practices were not necessarily always socially or politically confrontational in the first place. Once we accept that transgression can have a variety of different meanings, we have the basis for what is arguably a more effective means of characterising and making sense of the evidence for medieval misrule.

Towards a new approach

The second part of this paper sets out some suggestions for approaching the evidence for misrule in medieval English sources, particularly for towns. My proposals will be outlined in two main sections. The first section will concentrate upon the cultural form of misrule, proposing an alternative means of characterising misrule and discussing its advantages. The second section will consider the consequences of this new definition for the way that we research and write about the social function and meaning of misrule. These proposals build upon the work of several other scholars, whose suggestions about how we should approach drama and calendar customs stand in addition to the ideas that I outline here. In particular, Charles Phythian-Adams has provided an indispensable guide to the interpretation of popular practices in the pre-Reformation period, whilst Meg Twycross has offered a number of valuable suggestions about analysis, including taking account of the differences between plan and execution (the aptly-named ‘small catastrophe theory’).¹³

As I have already indicated, many of the difficulties with modern perceptions of medieval misrule may be traced to how scholars have perceived it as a cultural form. Any terminology which incorporates a notion of a fixed function or guaranteed outcome to a particular custom, suggesting that it operated as a kind of ritual which always achieved certain ends, is I would argue problematic, since it cannot do justice to the range of possible meanings that misrule could have. Briefly, these could range from the expression of an orthodox religious message, which seems to have been the predominant sense of the Boy-Bishop custom, right through to the violent protest and political revolt associated with an event like the English Rising of 1381.¹⁴ Our model for discussing and comprehending medieval misrule must therefore be able to take into account this diversity of possible meanings and effects.

I want to suggest that we take as our starting point the analytical framework developed by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their work on European cultural history since the Renaissance, since they offer researchers in this field an extremely productive way of thinking about practices such as misrule.¹⁵ The key move which Stallybrass and White make is to argue that ‘carnival’ practices, by which they mean those which employ some element of inversion or transgression, are not unique in the way in which they manipulate symbolic imagery and action. Since this process can be found in other areas of culture too, there must be a more fundamental cultural process at work. An important source of examples in

this respect which they make use of is a collection of essays edited and introduced by Barbara Babcock entitled *The Reversible World*. Whilst the essays in this volume are on diverse subjects, ranging from William Blake to Javanese transvestites, they all seek to investigate the phenomenon of symbolic inversion, which is defined by Babcock as follows:

‘Symbolic inversion’ may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political.

Babcock acknowledges that whilst in its cultural uses inversion is always symbolic, this modifying term is used to emphasise that inversion should be regarded as deliberate and self-conscious behaviour.¹⁶ Stallybrass and White prefer the term ‘transgression’ to symbolic inversion; although the former has an oppositional sense in general usage, it should be regarded as neutral with respect to purpose.¹⁷ By making reference to the wider dissemination of transgression, they demonstrate that carnival is only one of a number of cultural practices which are characterised by an inversion or intermingling of social categories. Such an analysis shifts the emphasis away from the preoccupation with the *function* of carnival and these other practices to the specific cultural processes that produce and sustain them.¹⁸ Accepting that transgression is a basic symbolic process gives us a powerful means of analysing those cultural forms which are characterised by inversion, since these are precisely the features that all examples of medieval misrule have in common. It seems to me that such an approach offers a number of advantages in comprehending the cultural form of medieval festive misrule.

One major advantage of this analytical approach is the vocabulary which it offers; it enables us to draw attention to what appear to be the defining characteristics of a custom, whilst avoiding any terminology which comments upon the social forces behind it or on its likely social function. This is not the case with the ‘safety-valve’ model, which presupposes a society where there is an unequal distribution of power, and in which the domination of one group by another is productive of tensions, and also therefore of rituals (in this case calendrical) in which an opposition to that domination can be articulated and negotiated. Whilst it is fair to presume that domination will provoke opposition, and that calendar rituals will have some sort of relationship with power structures, it is I think too

simplistic to posit the transgression found in misrule as the direct product of the unequal social relations pertaining in late medieval society. In particular, we need to think more critically about the relationship between subordination and the use of inversion by subordinates. For example, we know that men and women attempted to detain and bind one another at Hocktide, which appears to be a kind of inversion of the subordinate status of women at least. But it is a mistake to see the actions of the female participants as merely being cancelled out by the fact that men were able to return the favour each year. This is because the custom gave women a vehicle for raising money and for gaining prestige in the parish community, more money than the men, in fact; clearly then, the motives of the participants must have been considerably more complex than a simple model of contained rebellion would suggest. We may conclude that one advantage of considering misrule as transgression is that it permits us to consider a variety of possible motives for the actions and imagery involved in a custom, which is obviously not possible when using a term like 'legitimized disorder'.¹⁹ We are able to express both the continuities and the differences between customs designated as misrule; whilst they share a similar cultural process — transgression — this process will be manifest in a variety of ways in practice. They share a formal rather than a functional similarity.

So far, I have put forward a more satisfactory definition of misrule as symbolic inversion or transgression. An important consequence of adopting this more flexible definition is that it changes the practice of researching and writing about the function of misrule in a number of ways. Once we have accepted that the meaning of misrule is not for the most part the same, as the 'safety-valve' view would suggest, we need to rethink the way that we deal with misrule in the sources. I want to suggest that there are three main areas which require further attention: these are the use of the evidence itself, a fuller consideration of the range of possible functions that misrule could have, and the model of social dynamics which we use in understanding the significance of a particular occurrence. There is potentially a great deal that might be said on each of these topics, but given the confines of this paper, I will consider the first two in brief, and concentrate on the third area, making use of my own research on some instances of misrule from medieval England.

1. *Use of evidence*

As I have already pointed out, a key assumption of the 'safety-valve' approach is that whilst misrule represented a challenge to authority, the absence of evidence for any social changes following on from such incidents proves that such attempts were dissipated through their expression. My alternative line of reasoning has been to suggest that misrule should not be thought of solely as oppositional, but that it could express a range of meanings in relation to established norms. The implication of this view is that in order to know what these particular meanings were, we need to look in more detail at the evidence. Taking vegetation-gathering at Midsummer as an example, such a practice might often be performed in a relatively mundane way, where the branches needed to decorate houses or for bonfires are procured without causing too much damage to the land of a local lord. Alternatively, given the existence of local grievances and a desire to make a point, the custom could be used to make a land-owner pay a heavy price in terms of lost and damaged resources. In relation to the latter state of affairs, it should be clear that an understanding of the situation must come from a study of the wider context, rather than relying on just the record of the custom in isolation (see the example discussed below). Whatever the utility of edited collections of drama records such as the Malone Society volumes and the REED series, the entries that they record can only be a starting point where our interest is in the social meaning of festive drama. To this end, we need to cast our net somewhat wider and make use of contextual material relating to local affairs where it pertains to the performance in question.

2. *Diversity*

A second area to consider is the sheer diversity of reasons for which misrule was actually performed. In order to move away from the rather narrow view taken by the 'safety-valve' approach, we can begin to develop an awareness of the range of social rôles that misrule could play, and think about how we might assess them. We can say that even if we have a situation where the same custom takes place year after year, it does not necessarily follow that the meaning of that custom will be the same in each of those years: what we need therefore is a familiarity with the kinds of factors that might impinge upon the dramatic activities that interest us. These factors might include fashion, religious ideas, political movements, and wider social and economic changes. In relation to hocking for

example, we can suggest that the popularity of this custom for women might have depended upon more than just the enjoyment afforded by the chance to tie up a few of the local youths for the day; it may have also provided women with a chance to offset some of the social and economic changes of the period. That is, whilst women in general were facing a squeeze in their employment prospects in the late fifteenth century, the popularity of hocking at this time can be seen as reflecting the opportunities which it gave them to raise money for their parish church, and arguably enjoy a greater respectability than would otherwise have been possible.²⁰ On the other hand, *misrule* also provided the ideal opportunity for the prosecution of particular grievances, enabling its participants to take political action or make statements in a medium where it might go unnoticed, or in which contemporaries could argue was relatively harmless (the 'hidden transcript').²¹ It could also function as a repository of cultural symbols and forms of organisation which could be taken up on a larger scale if necessary, as Tom Pettitt has forcefully argued in his consideration of the relationships between drama and revolt.²²

3. *Social Relations*

A third area for closer attention is the way that changes in the structure of social relations are discussed. As we have seen, from the point of view of the 'safety-valve' model, *misrule* is not considered to be instrumental in bringing about change in most instances. Where there is a situation in which 'the wine barrel blew its top', all that it is possible to say is that there was a riot or a rebellion, that the 'frustrations' and 'resentments' that were usually contained found actual expression.²³ Presumably, the extent to which those rioting or revolting secured their aims would have to be ascertained in each particular case, although the 'safety-valve' view offers no guidelines as to how we might go about deciding this. When considered in this way, a model of social change which pits 'the subordinates' against 'the upper classes' should strike us as remarkably unlike anything which we find in the evidence for changing social relationships in the late medieval English town.²⁴ That is, where we do have evidence for direct actions on festival occasions, they tend to form part of a larger strategy or campaign that can be traced in the sources, and the factions involved are not easily reconciled into opposing class enemies. As part of an attempt to bring about change therefore, festival disturbances need to be placed alongside other forms of action such as efforts to have legislation properly observed, negotiations, confrontations,

the posting of broadsides, and appeals to the members of the royal court, to cite just a selection from the methods that were employed in the disputes over land use in Coventry in the later fifteenth century.²⁵ Clearly, the results of such actions are going to be a great deal more complex than the options of subversion or containment enable us to express. We can say then that a key deficiency in the 'safety-valve' model is the way in which it privileges the festival occasion as a vehicle through which medieval townsfolk took action to change their social position. Neither does it take into account the peacemaking mechanisms which recent research has illuminated.²⁶

By contrast, the model outlined in this paper has clear advantages for discussing how occasions of politicised misrule were able to contribute to attempts to bring about change in the late medieval town. That is, when actions were taken on festival occasions they enabled particular aspects of social relations to be contested, such as the ability of individuals to take the initiative to correct perceived infringements of their liberties. Rather than inflicting terminal damage upon the ruling class, such actions were able to prompt negotiations or force local concessions which, when considered as part of a wider strategy, could prove effective in achieving specific aims and goals. This is the argument that I have made in respect of the deployment of Shrovetide pageantry at Norwich in 1443 and in respect of the exploitation of vegetation-gathering at Coventry in the later fifteenth century.²⁷ These two cases can briefly be considered in order to illustrate the general point made above.

My own work on the records of Norwich and Coventry, which were both substantial towns in the late medieval period, has indicated how misrule could indeed play a part in local disputes and help to shape their outcomes. At Norwich for example, the 1443 incident that has become known as 'Gladman's Insurrection' can be understood as a direct attempt to use festive imagery and practices to influence events in the town. In this case, a Shrovetide pageant featuring a King of Christmas and a personification of Lent riding behind was deployed out of its seasonal context in January, as a means of commenting upon and perhaps encouraging local people to take action against the impending destruction of the city's mills, which were built on contested land and due to be demolished. This demonstration appears to have particularly appropriate to the situation which the citizens faced, playing as it did upon a contrast between Christmas and Lent, with the personification of Lent perhaps helping to focus anxieties about how the city would be supplied with food

once its mills were gone: ‘After Crystenmasse com þe crabbed Lentoun, / Þat fraystez flesch wyth þe fysche and fode more symple’, as the *Gawain*-poet notes.²⁸ Another example of where misrule featured in an ongoing local dispute comes from fifteenth-century Coventry. There, the custom of vegetation-gathering in the summer months became one means by which the citizens of the town were able to exert pressure on the local prior, who had been grazing his sheep on the common lands, apparently with the blessing of the mayor. Faced with a situation where their complaints to the civic élite went unheeded, some of the citizens appear to have adopted alternative strategies by which they could influence these matters. One such strategy was to pile dung and other refuse at the gate of the prior’s orchard, thereby preventing him from taking his carriage through his orchard as he had been accustomed to do. Another strategy was to take birch and other vegetation from the priory’s lands, ostensibly for the purpose of decorating houses for midsummer festivals. However, the prior’s complaints about the excessive amounts of vegetation that were taken, to the value of a hundred shillings yearly, suggest that this custom was exploited as a means of applying pressure in this dispute. Both of these cases show how customs which had a transgressive aspect to them were indeed used as part of wider oppositional strategies in the late medieval town.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the study of misrule in the Middle Ages has been dominated to a large extent by a paradigm which sees such customs as expressing but ultimately dissipating social tensions and frustrations. I have described the limitations of this point of view, suggesting that there are serious problems with both its conception of misrule as a cultural form, and with the social functions which it ascribes to drama and calendar customs of this type. I have put forward the basis of an alternative model which suggests that whilst such practices certainly have a common feature in their form, that is, that they are all based upon some degree of transgression, this similarity does not extend to their social function, which must always be investigated for each particular occurrence of a custom. I have outlined in brief some of the factors which need to be taken into account in such an investigation, supporting this with examples which are taken from my own work. Overall, I aim to have shown

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something of how a new methodology can illuminate and revitalise the study of medieval misrule.

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NOTES

Earlier versions of the paper were given at the Medieval English Theatre meeting at York in 1998 and at the ninth SITM colloquium at Odense: I am grateful to the participants of both conferences for their helpful comments and suggestions. The new approach to misrule which is set out in this paper, and the case studies which I refer to, are developed more fully in my forthcoming book *The Politics of Carnival: Critical Approaches to Festive Misrule in Medieval England* (Manchester University Press, 2001).

1. E.K. Chambers *The Mediaeval Stage* 2 vols (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1903) 1: 235.
2. This table draws upon materials from J. Harper *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) and R. Hutton *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1996).
3. The date of Hocktide is commonly given by modern scholars as the second Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday. However, many antiquarians give the date as the third Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday, a formula which is corroborated by the few examples of medieval dating evidence that I have been able to trace. See C. Humphrey 'The Dynamics of Urban Festal Culture in Later Medieval England' (Unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of York 1997) Appendix. This question will be the subject of a forthcoming article.
4. C. Phythian-Adams 'Ceremony and the Citizen: The Communal Year at Coventry 1450–1550' in *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500–1700: Essays in Urban History* edited P. Clark and P. Slack (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1972) 57–85 (66 and 69); M. James 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town' *Past and Present* 98 (1983) 3–29.
5. See for example P. Womack 'Imagining Communities: Theatres and the English Nation in the Sixteenth Century' in *Culture and History 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* edited D. Aers (Harvester, Hemel Hempstead, 1992) 91–145 (98).
6. See for example R. Evans 'Body Politics: Engendering Medieval Cycle Drama' in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her*

- Sect edited R. Evans and L. Johnson (Routledge, New York and London, 1994) 112–39.
7. One exception is S. Justice *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics 27: University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1994) 153–5.
 8. See for example G. Nijsten ‘Feasts and Public Spectacle: Late Medieval Drama and Performance in the Low Countries’ in *The Stage as Mirror: Civic Theatre in Late Medieval Europe* edited Alan E. Knight (Brewer, Cambridge, 1997) 107–43 (129): ‘By once a year allowing a reversal of the social order so that criticism and aggression could be expressed, the town council was able to control and monitor emotions and disruptive forces among the town population throughout the rest of the year. In this way carnival was ultimately a confirmation of the *ordo*, an imposition of the hierarchy from above’.
 9. Phythian-Adams ‘Ceremony and the Citizen’ 83 note 29; B. Babcock ‘Introduction’ in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* edited B. Babcock (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1978) 13–36 (22–5).
 10. See for example N.Z. Davis *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Duckworth, London, 1975); E. Le Roy Ladurie *Carnival: A People’s Uprising at Romans 1579–80* translated M. Feeney (Scolar, Aldershot, 1980).
 11. S.-B. MacLean ‘Hocktide: A Reassessment of a Popular Pre-Reformation Festival’ in *Festive Drama* edited M. Twycross (Brewer, Cambridge, 1996) 233–41 (239); P.H. Greenfield ‘Festive Drama at Christmas in Aristocratic Households’ in *Festive Drama* edited Twycross 34–40 (34).
 12. See M. Twycross ‘Some Approaches to Dramatic Festivity, especially Processions’ in *Festive Drama* edited Twycross 1–33 (21).
 13. C. Phythian-Adams *Local History and Folklore: A New Framework* (Bedford Square Press, London, 1975); Twycross ‘Some Approaches to Dramatic Festivity’ 20–6 (24).
 14. Humphrey ‘Urban Festal Culture’ 49–53.
 15. P. Stallybrass and A. White *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Methuen, London, 1986).
 16. Babcock ‘Introduction’ 14 and 15.
 17. Stallybrass and White *Politics and Poetics* 17–18.
 18. Stallybrass and White *Politics and Poetics* 26.
 19. The phrase used to describe the Twelve Days of Christmas by R. Hutton *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford University Press, 1994) 9.
 20. Humphrey ‘Urban Festal Culture’ 157–61.

21. The idea of the 'hidden transcript' is discussed by J.C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1990). For the application of these ideas to dramatic activity see Max Harris 'Muhammed and the Virgin: Folk Dramatizations of Battles Between Moors and Christians in Modern Spain' *The Drama Review* 38:1 (1994) 45–61; 'The Return of Moctezuma: Oaxaca's *Danza de la pluma* and New Mexico's *Danza de los matachines*' *The Drama Review* 41:1 (1997) 106–34; see also *Festivals of Aztecs, Moors, and Christians: Dramatizations of Reconquest in Spain and Mexico* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 2000). I am grateful to Max Harris and Tim Rueter for bringing Scott's work to my attention.
22. T. Pettitt "Here Comes I, Jack Straw:" English Folk Drama and Social Revolt' *Folklore* 95 (1984) 3–20.
23. Phrases taken from the discussion of 'The World of Carnival' by P. Burke *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Temple Smith, London, 1978; revised reprint, Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1994) 203 and 201.
24. Phrases taken from Burke *Popular Culture* 201.
25. Humphrey 'Urban Festal Culture' 58.
26. See for example B.R. McRee 'Peacemaking and its Limits in Late Medieval Norwich' *English Historical Review* 109 (1994) 831–66.
27. See C. Humphrey "To Make a New King": Seasonal Drama and Local Politics in Norwich, 1443' *Medieval English Theatre* 17 (1995) 29–41; 'Festive Drama and Community Politics in Late Medieval Coventry' in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe* edited A. Hindley (Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 1: Brepols, Turnhout, 1999) 217–30.
28. *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* edited M. Andrew and R. Waldron (Edward Arnold, London, 1978; revised edition, University of Exeter, 1987) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lines 502–3.