Early Theatre
A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama

Volume 5 | Issue 1 Article 12

1-1-2002

Book Review: Chris Humphrey. *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England*. Manchester UP/ Palgrave, 2001.

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Recommended Citation
Ashley, Kathleen. 'Book Review: Chris Humphrey. *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England*. Manchester UP/ Palgrave, 2001.'. *Early Theatre* 5.1 (2002): 107-9 (paper). Article 12.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/earlytheatre/vol5/iss1/12

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information about English Renaissance stage conditions (about such matters as casting, stage conventions, and theater architecture) than Butler includes in his fine chapter, which is more narrowly focused on Jonson's love-hate relationship with theater. A new chapter might be devoted to the post-Renaissance performance history of Jonson's plays. The sketchy biographical chapter might be expanded, and a reproduction of the National Portrait Gallery painting of Jonson might be included. Separate sections on each of the major plays might be added to the Selected Bibliography. Although there is room for improvement, this is a valuable resource as it stands, an amiable companion at the service of both scholars and general readers.

james hirsh

Chris Humphey. *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in England*. Manchester Medieval Studies. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. Pp xiii, 113.

This slim book of 113 pages takes on two issues of concern to medievalists these days: first, how to understand the applicability of contemporary theory to medieval materials, and, second, how to establish a dialogue with scholars working in later periods. While I would describe it as a valiant attempt to deal with both issues, I'd rate its success as decidedly mixed.

The history/theory divide is acutely felt by many medievalists; contemporary theory seems to ignore the complex contingencies revealed by close examination of historical facts. In this book, Chris Humphrey reviews well-known theories of festive misrule in the first two chapters and then tests them through specific case studies of Norwich and Coventry in chapters three and four. The Manchester Medieval Studies series aims to combine scholarship with recent approaches 'in a form accessible to the non-specialist reader'. Perhaps this goal accounts for my sense that the book is, paradoxically, both sketchy and long-winded. At times the pace of argumentation in the review of theory (chapters 1 and 2) seemed very slow, but presumably this was deliberate given the aims of the series. Conversely, the two historical case studies in the politics of civic performance (chapters 3 and 4) were interesting but seemed more suited to an article than a full-length study.

As Humphrey notes, the widespread interest in the meaning of carnival festivities, inversions, and transgressions can be traced to Mikhail Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and his World*. Given the amorphousness and ahistoicism of

Bakhtin's concept of carnival, Humphrey prefers the term 'festive misrule', which permits discussion of the various forms of festivity associated with ritual and popular culture at times other than the pre-Lenten season. He terms the central feature of such customs – following Barbara Babcock – as 'symbolic inversion', defined as 'any act of expressive behaviour 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' (41).

In the first chapter, Humphrey notes that interest in medieval misrule has come from 'three main directions: urban history and the culture of medieval towns; medieval drama and festive life; and the wider history of drama and popular culture' (11). He reviews the dominant models for the social effects of festive misrule, the most popular of which presents misrule as a 'safety-valve' for the community. He cites the 'classic studies' of Charles Phythian-Adams and Mervyn James, and the work of scholars like Barbara Hanawalt, Claire Sponsler, or Michael Camille, for whom carnivalesque behaviors or images ultimately work to reinforce the status quo. Then he mentions various cultural critics who tend to see festive misrule as a form of social opposition, and others (most importantly, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White) who think it had variable functions depending upon the specific socio/political context. Humphrey's sympathies clearly lie with this third interpretive alternative.

In his second chapter, 'A new approach to the study of medieval misrule', Humphrey outlines a historically-responsible methodology for determining the social meaning of a transgressive custom drawn from such studies as Charles Phythian-Adams's *Local History and Folklore* or Meg Twycross's *Festive Drama*. One of his strongest points is that potentially subversive meanings may have emerged principally *in performance*, as scholars such as James Scott, Anthony Gash or Sandra Billington have argued. Such meanings would be difficult if not impossible for medievalists to recuperate from the written records of events. Certainly, they could not be predicted via the application of a theoretical model, whether of 'containment' or 'subversion'.

The presentation of cultural theory in these two chapters, while not inaccurate, is of necessity reductive since Humphrey must be so selective. Except for the limited citation of ideas from Barbara Babcock and James Scott, the book ignores the rich discussion of the semiotics of ritual inversion and festive performance found in the writings of symbolic anthropologists, which are more relevant to the interpretation of medieval culture than the formulations of contemporary cultural studies. The resulting tone of hostility to

'theory' that pervades the argument results less from theory's shortcomings, I would submit, than from the inability of this slim volume to take into account much substantial theoretical work that goes beyond the binary of 'containment vs. subversion'. A related problem is the tendency of the argumentation to fall back on common sense formulations for interpretation of historical context, ignoring the very rich theoretical analysis of reception and appropriation in literary and cultural studies.

In the two case studies that comprise chapters 3 and 4, Humphrey explores local records to interpret the notorious 'riding' of John Gladman in 1443 Norwich and an incident in which summer festival boughs were gathered from lands owned by the priory of Coventry. Both cases involve competing interpretations of the action, one by the civic authorities and one by the rival authority or property owner, and in each case the town records defend the riding or gathering as conforming to traditional holiday custom. After an in-depth examination of the various controversial issues surrounding these events, Humphrey concludes that such incidents of festive misrule were not inherently oppositional *per se*, but were politicized by their insertion into a specific historical context where they might be used to achieve a political goal.

Although this study is in many ways too sketchy to be truly satisfying as cultural analysis, the incidents from Norwich and Coventry described by Humphrey do suggest that any approach to festive performance that does not embed it within the wide and specific social context must be understood to be incomplete. If we are to understand the politics of carnivalesque activity, it is important to research the historical situation framing such actions – on this point Humphrey's book is persuasive!

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Cameron Louis (ed). *Records of Early English Drama: Sussex*. Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press & Brepols Publishers, 2000. Pp cx, 403.

This volume deals with the fifteenth region covered by the *Records of Early English Drama* (REED) series. Including the present volume, the series has now explored the evidence for dramatic and musical performance in the local records of some twelve counties and eight towns in England, although with the extension of its projected coverage to Wales and Scotland there remains considerable work to be done. In common with the other volumes in the series, the present publication aims to include all relevant material (taking into