

The Dynamics of Urban Festal Culture in Later Medieval England

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Abstract

A distinctive subset of late medieval drama are those customs which involved an element of subversion or inversion on the occasion of a calendar feast. These customs, which may generically be labelled as *misrule*, have long been a source of interest to antiquarians, local historians and students of medieval drama and popular culture. One particular view which has dominated the discussion and interpretation of *misrule* is the approach which sees such practices as a conservative force in late medieval society, that is, by temporarily challenging authority these customs merely reaffirm it in the long run.

It is the contention of this thesis that although this model has raised the important question of the relationship between *misrule*, politics and social structure in this period, it is inappropriate both as a metaphor and as a tool for the analysis of these themes. I review the scholarly literature on *misrule* over the past twenty-five years in Chapter One, drawing attention to the problems of previous approaches. In Chapter Two I put forward what I believe to be a more appropriate vocabulary and framework in which those calendar customs with a transgressive element can be discussed. I suggest that *misrule* is more constructively approached as an instance of symbolic inversion, which enables functionalist terms like 'safety-valve' to be replaced by a neutral language that does not prejudge the function of a custom. I use this new methodology to undertake a series of case-studies in Chapters Three to Six, each of which examines the function of a particular custom. I am able to show that *misrule* could have a variety of functions in the late medieval town, playing a part in local change as part of wider strategy of resistance, as well as being one means through which social status could be accumulated and articulated.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Jonathan Newby, whose full and vital life ended just as this project began.

Note on the Text

Where a custom is first mentioned in the text it has been my practice to refer the reader to the most recent secondary works in which the custom is discussed; no attempt has been made to list exhaustively all of the secondary works in which references occur. I have used the word 'festal' in constructions like 'urban festal culture', since it signals that an occasion took place as part of a calendar feast, without implying that it was necessarily 'festive', that is, celebrated in an upbeat manner. Elsewhere I have used various terms like 'festive', 'festival' and 'festal' where a custom had a calendar context, and again they should all be understood to denote context rather than tone.

In order to avoid the problem whereby abbreviated citations appear some distance away from the original reference, I have given the full reference to a work the first time that it is cited in each chapter; subsequent references to the text in that chapter are given in abbreviated form. This should also assist the reader in identifying the sources used, since in many cases both primary and secondary source material has appeared in several different editions. Thorns and yoghs have been replaced as appropriate. The spelling of names has been left in the original where that person appears only once or twice; the names of individuals who are cited more often have been standardised in line with modern usage. All medieval dates are given in New Style. I have for the most part followed the guidance offered by Shaun Tyas in *Style Book for Medieval Studies* (Stamford, 1995).

The place of publication for all works is London unless otherwise stated.

A proportion of Chapter Three has previously appeared in print as "'To Make a New King": Seasonal Drama and Local Politics in Norwich, 1443', in *Medieval English Theatre* 17 (1995), pp. 29-41.

Abbreviations

I have opted not to use heavily-abbreviated versions of the names of the main primary sources, preferring to give the full reference for the first citation in a chapter and a shortened version in subsequent references. The few abbreviations which have been used are listed below:

EETS	Early English Text Society
O.S.	Original Series
N.S.	New Series
REED	Records of Early English Drama
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>

The problem of *carnival* (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms of a carnival type) - its essence, its deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its undying fascination - is one of the most complex and interesting problems in the history of culture. We cannot, of course, do justice to it here.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

Introduction

Late Medieval and Early Modern Calendar Customs

In late January 1443 a merchant named John Gladman rode through the streets of Norwich dressed as a king and accompanied by an entourage on horseback and on foot. Gladman's riding took place at a time of heightened tension within the city, and became implicated in a series of subsequent events which resulted in the loss of the city's liberties and the imprisonment of its mayor in the Fleet. In the version of the riding given at an inquiry at Thetford just over a month later, Gladman is said to have ridden through the city 'like a crowned king, with a sceptre and sword carried before him'; furthermore, a number of others rode on horseback before him, 'with a crown upon their arms and carrying bows and arrows, as if they were valets of the crown of the lord king ...'.¹ By contrast, in the city's defence of the incident made some years later, it was argued that Gladman had only taken part in a disport that was customary throughout the realm on Shrove Tuesday, namely to ride 'crowned as King of Kristmesse', with representations of the seasons before him and the figure of Lent following on behind.² The particular reasons why this riding took place, and why a Shrovetide procession may have occurred outside of its usual festal context, will be explored at some length in a later chapter.³ What is interesting about this incident are the two competing ways of reading it; the point is not to identify which of them is true, but to consider how and why the events came to be represented in these quite different ways. The city's defence clearly depends upon a notion of 'misrule', that is, a sense that the usual rules may be temporarily transgressed as part of a festival occasion. In this case, the potentially treasonous act of riding as a king is assumed to be mitigated by the fact that it is only a representation of a festive character. The official version of events would seem to be a more literal interpretation of the incident, denying that the festal element has any bearing upon what was actually dramatised.

¹A translation of this indictment is given by N. P. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370-1532*, Studies and Texts 66: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (Toronto, 1984), pp. 149-51 (p. 149). Tanner's translation is preferred over that of Hudson, in *The Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. W. Hudson and J. C. Tingey, 2 vols (Norwich and London, 1906-10), 1 pp. 340-1, whose version 'is much abbreviated and not always accurate' (Tanner p. 151 n. 51).

²*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 345-6 (p. 345).

³See Chapter Three for a full discussion of this incident and the scholarly literature surrounding it.

This description of a Shrovetide pageant from Norwich has for several centuries been cited as an example of the way in which the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Lent were marked in late medieval England.⁴ The fact that the medieval records of many English towns are well-preserved means that they have provided a remarkably rich source for investigations into how feasts and seasons were celebrated in this period. As well as appearing in legal cases, festival customs are also recorded in other kinds of medieval urban records such as accounts of expenditure, and they also feature in contemporary descriptions of urban life.⁵ For example, William Fitzstephen's twelfth-century description of London, part of his *Life of Thomas à Becket*, is a determined attempt to celebrate the city as 'one that spreads its fame wider, sends its wealth and wares further, and lifts its head higher than all others' in the world. After recounting London's geography, religious life, trade and fairs, Fitzstephen enjoins the reader to 'consider also the sports of the City, since it is not meet that a city should only be useful and sober, unless it also be pleasant and merry'. He then proceeds to describe these sports in their seasonal context, with cock-fighting and football at Carnival, feats of arms on Sundays in Lent, naval tourneys at Easter, archery, wrestling and other athletics on feast days in the summer and boarhunting and bull- and bearbaiting on winter feast days. He concludes with a description of ice-skating on the frozen marsh to the north of the city walls.⁶ At a later period, the town clerk of Bristol, Robert Ricart, elected in 1478, compiled a calendar of information about the town. In the fourth part of his calendar Ricart was concerned with 'sheweng the laudable costumez of this worshipfull Towne, and of the eleccion, charge, rule, and demenyng of thonourable Maire, Shiref, Baillifs, and othir officers of the same Towne in thexecuting and guidyng of their said offices during their yeres'. Beginning with the election of the Mayor on the

⁴See Chapter Three.

⁵For further details regarding written accounts of towns and urban life in the Middle Ages see J. K. Hyde, 'Medieval Descriptions of Cities', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 48 (1965), pp. 308-40.

⁶F. M. Stenton, *Norman London: an Essay; with a Translation of William Fitz Stephen's Description and a Map of London under Henry II*, Historical Association Leaflets 93 and 94 (1934), pp. 26 and 30. For a fuller discussion of this description see J. M. Carter, 'A Medieval Sports Reporter: William Fitzstephen and London Sports in the Late Twelfth Century', in *Sports and Pastimes of the Middle Ages*, ed. J. M. Carter (second edition, Lanham and London, 1988), pp. 46-57.

fifteenth of September, Ricart gives an account of the major civic events in the town up to and including Christmas; these will be discussed in more detail below. The remainder of the year is unfortunately not described.⁷

From the sixteenth century to the present day there has been a continuing interest amongst antiquarians, folklorists, local historians and anthropologists in locating, recording and analysing the evidence for late medieval and early modern seasonal observances.⁸ A great deal of local information is to be found in the numerous histories of English towns and counties which appeared in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These include John Stow's well-known account of the watches, sports and pastimes previously observed in London, which was based upon his own observations as well as incorporating material from many earlier writers including Fitzstephen.⁹ Other notable histories include Francis Drake's history of York, which contains a description of the form and supposed origin of the town's famous Sheriffs' Riding on St Thomas' Day (December 21), and Francis Blomefield's history of Norfolk, which includes an account of Gladman's riding and the events surrounding it.¹⁰ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries antiquarians and folklorists collected examples of customs and observances as part of a more general project. John Brand incorporated earlier work by Bourne to create *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, which was first published in 1777 and subsequently edited for a new edition in 1813 by Henry Ellis.¹¹ Joseph Strutt's study of *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, originally published in 1801, proceeded from the premise that '[i]n order to form a just estimation of the character of any particular people, it is absolutely necessary

⁷*The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. L. T. Smith, Camden Society N.S. 5 (1872), pp. 68-90 (pp. 68-9).

⁸See R. M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (1968).

⁹J. Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, 2 vols (Oxford, 1908), 1 pp. 91-104.

¹⁰F. Drake, *Eboracum: or the History and Antiquities of the City of York* (1736), pp. 196-7 and 217. For a further discussion of the St Thomas' Day riding and other Christmas festivities in York see A. F. Johnston, 'Yule in York', *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter* 1 (1976), pp. 3-10. Francis Blomefield, *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 11 vols (second edition, 1805-10), 3 pp. 147-55.

¹¹Dorson, *The British Folklorists*, pp. 13-21 (pp. 13 and 17); J. Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, ed. H. Ellis, 3 vols (third edition, repr. New York, 1970).

to investigate the Sports and Pastimes most generally prevalent among them'. Strutt divided his material into rural, urban, domestic and seasonal categories, and included a number of illustrations drawn from woodcuts and manuscripts.¹² Edmund Chambers' monumental study of *The Medieval Stage* was published in the early twentieth century. Chambers took a particular interest in misrule, devoting two whole chapters to discussing the Feast of Fools, associated with the feast of the Circumcision (January 1), and one chapter to the observance of the Boy Bishop, associated with the feast of St Nicholas (December 6), in religious institutions in Northern Europe during the Middle Ages. His characteristically sober judgement upon the reasons behind the Feast of Fools was that '[i]t was largely an ebullition of the natural lout beneath the cassock'.¹³

Over the last twenty-five years there has been a growing scholarly interest in the seasonal customs, observances and drama of late medieval and early modern England. On the one hand there has been a systematic attempt by the Records of Early English Drama project, based in Toronto, to make the surviving evidence more widely available and better understood. Since the mid-1970s the project has sought to publish all of the extant sources for drama in England to 1642; records have been edited by county or by important local centres with a substantial body of relevant material, such as towns like York or Coventry. In addition to greatly improving the availability and reliability of the printed documentary sources, the REED project has helped to cultivate a critical attitude to these sources, as well as opening up many new research opportunities and fields of enquiry. New sorts of analysis have become possible, such as identifying patrons and their companies and ascertaining the routes of travelling players, and this broader view has shown many earlier narratives about the changing nature of drama to be deficient. For example, John Wasson has used material from a number of published and unpublished REED volumes to question the notion that the 1590s were a decade of dramatic renaissance in England. Wasson's calculations indicate that whilst drama may have been burgeoning in the London theatres, less than one percent of parish records from the 1590s provide evidence of dramatic activity, compared with ninety percent of

¹²J. Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (new edition, 1838), p. xvii.

¹³E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols (1903), 1 p. 325.

parishes from the 1520s.¹⁴

In addition to the publication of primary evidence and texts, a substantial body of scholarship which has been concerned with describing and interpreting these observances has developed. One line of enquiry has sought to gauge the historical age and geographical distribution of particular customs, such as Cawte's study of animal disguises like the hobby-horse in the British Isles.¹⁵ More recently, Ronald Hutton's study of *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* has sought to provide a definitive account of the ritual year in England between 1400 and 1700. Observing that '[n]obody has hitherto attempted to provide a systematic portrait of English seasonal rituals and pastimes in the half-century before the Reformation', and that no-one has yet made any sustained attempt to determine their age, Hutton's first two chapters convincingly accomplish these tasks.¹⁶ Hutton then goes on to describe how the structure and observances of the calendar year changed over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Furthermore, a great deal has been written in which scholars have sought to analyse how late medieval and early modern drama and seasonal observances functioned within their communities and in society more generally. Here it is possible to distinguish between a number of different schools and approaches. The work of Charles Phythian-Adams and Mervyn James has highlighted the ways in which the civic ceremonial, customs and drama of late medieval towns were bound up with their social structure.¹⁷ In theatre and drama history, there have been a number of important studies of the Corpus Christi play cycles, as well as research into the actual means of staging the

¹⁴J. Wasson, 'The End of an Era: Parish Drama in England from 1520 to the Dissolution', in J. C. Coldewey, 'English Drama in the 1520s: Six Perspectives', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 31 (1992), pp. 57-78, pp. 70-8 (p. 71).

¹⁵E. C. Cawte, *Ritual Animal Disguise: A Historical and Geographical Study of Animal Disguise in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1978).

¹⁶R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 5 and 49.

¹⁷C. 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*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack (1972), pp. 57-85; M. James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past and Present* 98 (1983), pp. 3-29.

drama.¹⁸ Furthermore, several of the contributors to a recent volume of essays on festive drama have considered the social effects of particular plays and customs in late medieval and early modern Europe, although as the editor of this volume suggests, there are a number of difficulties with such an approach.¹⁹ The precise nature and scope of these difficulties, as well as the question of what constitutes a more suitable methodology for understanding drama as performance in the context of the late medieval town, will be the major preoccupations of this thesis, as I will explain in more detail below. In the study of Renaissance drama and literature, the approaches of cultural materialism and new historicism have combined new definitions of how texts and performances relate to the historical conditions of their production with a self-awareness of how literary criticism operates in the present.²⁰ An awareness of the work of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin and his conception of carnival has led scholars to use this idea in analyses of late medieval and early modern drama, as well as making comparisons with aspects of modern culture.²¹ There has also been a substantial amount of work on popular culture in early modern Europe by scholars such as Natalie Zemon Davis, Yves-Marie Bercé, Peter Burke, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.²²

In respect of the late medieval period, there has been one particular approach which has dominated the discussion and interpretation of misrule across the different fields of inquiry outlined above. This has been the paradigm which has seen such practices as a socially conservative force in late medieval society. As such a mechanism,

¹⁸For a comprehensive discussion of the secondary literature on medieval English drama see P. Happé, 'A Guide to Criticism of Medieval English Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. R. Beadle (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 312-43.

¹⁹*Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre*, ed. M. Twycross (Cambridge, 1996).

²⁰See J. Dollimore, 'Introduction: Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism', in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield (second edition, Manchester, 1994), pp. 2-17.

²¹See my fuller discussion of this literature in Chapter One.

²²See N. Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975); Y.-M. Bercé, *Fête and Révolte: des Mentalités Populaires du XVI^{ème} au XVIII^{ème} Siècle* (Paris, 1976); P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans: A People's Uprising at Romans, 1579-80*, trans. M. Feeney (Harmondsworth, 1979).

misrule is thought to have worked in two ways. First, misrule has been understood to act as a 'safety-valve' which enabled the frustrations of subordinate groups to be dissipated through a temporary inversion of social norms, thereby helping to safeguard the status quo. Second, by reversing established social positions temporarily, these customs are perceived to have had the effect of confirming such positions in the long run, either because the rule of authority is honoured in its breach, or due to a moment of common humanity which provides a counterbalance to the normal, hierarchical social structure. Such customs are thus seen as a means at the cultural level by which the forms of domination which operated in later medieval society - patriarchy, lordship, oligarchy - were perpetuated, or at least their excesses tempered. This view appears to accommodate the evidence of occasions on which protests or confrontations actually occurred, since this regulatory or conciliatory mechanism may not have always operated successfully. As a model for the interpretation of the way in which misrule mediated politics and social structure in the late medieval period, it is most commonly encountered in discussions of the festal culture of towns, whose local power struggles and dense population appears to make such practices an appropriate means of relieving inevitable tensions and securing differences of status. This model is found at different levels, as an explicit argument or reflected in the terminology used.

It will be the contention of this thesis that, despite its popularity and general acceptance, the safety-valve paradigm can be shown upon closer consideration to be flawed in a number of respects, which I shall examine. I argue that whilst the safety-valve paradigm has addressed important issues such as the way in which transgressive calendar customs were related to local politics and social structure in the late medieval English town, this paradigm is inappropriate both as a metaphor and as a tool for the analysis of these themes. I go on to suggest that in order to appreciate fully the dynamics of misrule in these areas it is necessary to devise a new methodology which takes into account the criticisms which I make. Finally, I apply this new approach to a series of case studies of particular customs in individual towns, as a way of offering a more satisfactory means of establishing how these customs were involved in the negotiation of urban politics and social status in this period.

Chapter One will be devoted to establishing my critique of what I call the conservative paradigm of misrule. This is divided into three sections, each covering a

separate field of study in which misrule has been an issue: one such field draws upon urban evidence, the second is concerned with medieval drama, and the third relates more generally to festal culture. I conclude Chapter One by suggesting that a new methodology needs to be devised which is able to recognise the diversity of possible functions that misrule was able to have in late medieval England. My own version of what such a new methodology should incorporate will be the concern of Chapter Two. In this chapter I propose a new means of understanding medieval misrule as a cultural form, drawing upon historical and anthropological research into inversion and transgression. In addition, I set out the three main areas which an improved understanding of misrule needs to address; these are a more critical approach to the evidence and what can be deduced from it, a better appreciation of the diversity of possible functions that misrule was able to have, and a more appropriate model of the social dynamics of late medieval society. Four case studies which utilise such a methodology then follow in Chapters Three to Six. In Chapters Three and Four I examine examples of where Shrovetide pageantry and vegetation-gathering respectively were implicated in local, urban politics. In Chapters Five and Six I look at examples of how the boy-bishop custom and the practice of hocking played a part in negotiating the identities and positions of particular social groups in the late medieval town. I conclude with a summary of the main findings of the thesis and with a number of suggestions for further research.

The arguments and case studies developed in this thesis are based for the most part upon evidence from four English towns, Bristol, Coventry, Norwich and York from the late fourteenth century to the early sixteenth century. These towns were chosen for the accessibility and the depth of their primary source material, since their civic records are for the most part available in printed editions.²³ In Bristol's case the *Little Red Book* and *Great Red Book* record the details of civic business from the late fourteenth-century onwards, and they are supplemented by the calendar of civic history and affairs compiled by the town clerk Robert Ricart in the late fifteenth-century.²⁴ For Coventry the town's

²³See the Bibliography for fuller details.

²⁴*The Little Red Book of Bristol*, ed. F. B. Bickley, 2 vols (Bristol and London, 1900); *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, ed. E. W. W. Veale, Introduction and 4 Parts, Bristol Record Society 2, 4, 8, 16 and 18 (1932-53); *The Maire of Bristowe Is Kalendar*, ed. L. T. Smith, Camden Society N.S.

Leet Book provides an extremely full account of civic affairs from 1422 onwards, whilst Hudson and Tingey's collection of material drawn from the records of Norwich makes its most important medieval civic documents available in print.²⁵ In York's case the *Memorandum Books* and *House Books* are substantial records of town business from the later fourteenth-century onwards.²⁶ I have also drawn upon urban churchwardens' accounts, the records of income and expenditure that were kept by the wardens of parish churches, and which often contain more detailed information about the activities upon which money was spent.²⁷

5 (1872).

²⁵*The Coventry Leet Book*, ed. M. D. Harris, EETS O.S. 134, 135, 138 and 146 (1907-13); *The Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. W. Hudson and J. C. Tingey, 2 vols (Norwich and London, 1906-10).

²⁶*York Memorandum Book*, ed. M. Sellers, 2 vols, Surtees Society 120 and 125 (1911 and 1914); *The York Memorandum Book: B/Y*, ed. J. W. Percy, Surtees Society 186 (1969); *The York House Books 1461-1490*, ed. L. C. Attreed, 2 vols (Stroud, 1991); *York Civic Records 2-4*, ed. A. Raine, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 103, 106 and 108 (1940-3).

²⁷Ronald Hutton has listed the surviving English churchwardens' accounts in his study of the ritual year in England, 1400-1700 (*The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, pp. 263-93).

Chapter One:

Models and Paradigms

Introduction

For 364 days of the year Lewes, the sedate county town of East Sussex, is as civilised and sleepy as any other provincial market town. On the 365th it reveals the other side to its character. Lewes Bonfire Night is an orgy of pagan bloodlust ...¹

So begins a newspaper account of the activities of the townsfolk of Lewes on November 5 1994; activities which were part of a wider celebration of Bonfire Night across the country. The participants, we are informed, organise themselves into five companies, and they burn effigies of Guy Fawkes, the Prime Minister and the Pope. The force of the piece seems to depend upon the absolute contrast which it makes between the participants' civilised and pagan behaviours, although in using the 'one night out of three hundred and sixty-five' formulation it obscures the considerable time and effort which must have been invested in the planning, organising and clearing up of such an event. Realistically, Lewes Bonfire Night is not confined to one twenty-four hour period. Lewes Bonfire Night is a contemporary example of a phenomenon or process that is found across many different cultures and historical periods, involving the temporary suspension of a perceived normality in some way on the occasion of an annual festival: in the late medieval period this may be designated as misrule. In Lewes' case the relatively innocuous British custom of burning an effigy of Guy Fawkes on November 5 has acquired an extra significance because of whom the additional effigies represent - figures of authority - and the apparent relish and enthusiasm with which the participants set about immolating them. This, the newspaper article implies, is not normal behaviour for the people of Lewes. By way of comparison, it is worth noting the Bonfire Night celebrations which took place on the same evening at Edenbridge in the adjacent county of Kent. There a huge effigy of James Hewitt, the Guards' captain who wrote a book claiming an affair with the Princess of Wales, complete with a representation of the book and a bag of money, was burned on November 5.² Clearly, the basic structure of

¹Marianne MacDonald, 'Guy Kindles Lewes Passions', *The Independent*, November 7 1994, p. 5.

²Photographs of this effigy appeared on the front covers of both the *Independent on Sunday* and *The Observer* on November 6 1994.

the custom of Bonfire Night is sufficiently flexible to enable it to be used to convey a number of different meanings, which are not necessarily dependant upon its traditional form.

In the newspaper article on Lewes, where the disparity between the participants' usual and festive behaviours is the focus, the use of a familiar contrast between civilisation and paganism represents one particular way in which this sort of event can be conceived and understood. This provides us with a useful way into the question of how misrule is understood as a historical phenomenon, and what is at stake when writing about it. In this chapter I consider the different paradigms which have been used to comprehend misrule in the secondary literature on the festal culture of the late medieval and early modern periods. My approach takes the form of three literature surveys, each of which examines a particular field of scholarship and illustrates how the conservative paradigm has dominated the discussion and analysis of medieval misrule. It is not the only paradigm, however, and I shall discuss the criticisms which have been made of this model and other models by previous scholars. The key point which emerges from my review is that accounts of medieval customs which conclude that they had a conservative or a radical social function are unconvincing because they fail to provide an adequate account of all of the available evidence. The implication is that to understand fully the dynamics of medieval misrule a new methodology for their analysis is required.

THE SECONDARY LITERATURE ON MEDIEVAL MISRULE: APPROACHES AND PARADIGMS

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 the third relates more generally to festal culture.

Approaches to urban evidence

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. Charles Phythian-Adams's influential essay 'Ceremony and the Citizen: The Communal Year at Coventry 1450-1550' was first published in 1972, in a collection of essays concerned with matters of urban history. Its originality, range of sources and depth of analysis have ensured that it has remained a key text; it has recently been reprinted in an urban history reader.³ As well as offering an extremely full account of the civic year in Coventry in the later Middle Ages, covering ceremonies of oath-taking, dinners, processions, drinkings, dancing, evergreen-decking and plays, Phythian-Adams also considers the social function of the rituals which are described. 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, he asserts that '[i]f 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'. Phythian-Adams goes on to conclude:

And it was perhaps this emphasis on preserving and enhancing the wholeness of the social order which most distinguished the ceremonies of this late medieval urban community. In a close-knit structure composed of overlapping groups or groupings, where a change of status in one sphere could so often affect standing in another, ceremony performed a crucial clarifying role. It was a societal mechanism ensuring continuity within the structure, promoting cohesion and controlling some of its inherent conflicts, which was not only valued as contributing to the 'worship' of the city, but also enjoyed by contemporaries. Even in times of crisis the plays were performed and the watches marched.⁴

³C. 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*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack (1972), pp. 57-85. Reprinted in *The Medieval Town: A Reader in English Urban History 1200-1540*, ed. G. Rosser and R. Holt (1990), pp. 238-64. All subsequent references will be to the 1972 edition.

⁴Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen', pp. 66 and 69-70.

This point of view was put forward in a more general way in Phythian-Adams's *Local History and Folklore*.⁵ Another important and influential study, which appeared in 1983, is Mervyn James' essay on the social function of the Corpus Christi cycles and processions in the late medieval town. Noting that previous writers on the Corpus Christi cult possess only a very general idea of the social context to the celebrations which accompanied the feast in towns, James sets out his aims as follows:

Briefly, I propose to argue that the theme of Corpus Christi is society seen in terms of body; and that the concept of body provided urban societies with a mythology and ritual in terms of which the opposites of social wholeness and social differentiation could be both affirmed, and also brought into a creative tension, one with the other. The final intention of the cult was, then, to express the social bond and to contribute to social integration.⁶

In James' view the hierarchical nature of the Corpus Christi procession was able to impart an ordered structure to the sense of 'undifferentiated togetherness' which the occasion created, whilst the Corpus Christi cycles 'provided a mechanism ... by which the tensions implicit in the diachronic rise and fall of occupational communities could be confronted and worked out'.⁷

The work of Phythian-Adams and James has been influential on both the general and the more specific studies of the function of ceremony in the late medieval town. For example, Peter Womack has referred to them together as two 'classic studies' in his discussion of medieval urban Corpus Christi plays and processions, and he adopts James' explanation of the role of the festival as enacting 'a ritual reconciliation of social wholeness and social differentiation'.⁸ David Harris Sacks refers to Phythian-Adams's and James' essays in a discussion of the social meaning of processions by city

⁵C. Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore: A New Framework* (1975).

⁶M. James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past and Present* 98 (1983), pp. 3-29 (p. 4).

⁷James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body', pp. 11 and 15.

⁸P. 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*, ed. D. Aers (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), pp. 91-145 (p. 98).

government officials in medieval Bristol: '[n]ot only were observers made aware of the hierarchy of power within the city, they were reminded through this symbolic expression of political authority of their own proper position in the community and of the need to show deference to its leaders'.⁹ Although unreferenced, Bettey's conclusions about the function of ceremonial occasions in medieval Bristol also utilise this sort of language and model and demonstrate its popularity: '[s]uch occasions no doubt provided a valuable outlet and release for the inevitable tensions which built up in such a tightly-packed yet rigidly-structured society as late-medieval Bristol, where all classes lived closely together and yet where there were great differences in wealth and social status'.¹⁰

However, other scholars have argued against James' article and Phythian-Adams's emphasis on the unifying effects of formal ceremonial, and we may consider three instances here from a number of examples.¹¹ In a review of studies of English religious fraternities Sheila Lindenbaum has distinguished between those accounts which have perceived fraternities as working to sustain communal bonds and those which stress their exclusiveness and dedication to class interests.¹² Lindenbaum suggests that pursuing the latter line of enquiry 'encourages us to question some well-established notions about the drama, specifically the idea that except for entertainment at court and in the noble households, medieval drama and ceremonial was largely a collective enterprise - a communal ritual in which all took part and which gave diverse groups within the community a sense of unity and shared identity'. Lindenbaum suggests that this view is

⁹D. H. Sacks, *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450-1700*, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* 15 (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1991), pp. 140 and 391 n. 31.

¹⁰J. H. Bettey, 'The Medieval Churches of Bristol', *Transactions of the Ancient Monument Society* N.S. 34 (1990), pp. 1-27 (p. 22).

¹¹See also S. Lindenbaum, 'The Smithfield Tournament of 1390', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 20 (1990), pp. 1-20 (pp. 1-2) and Lindenbaum, 'Ceremony and Oligarchy: The London Midsummer Watch', in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, ed. B. A. Hanawalt and K. L. Reyerson, *Medieval Studies at Minnesota* 6 (Minneapolis and London, 1994), pp. 171-88 (p. 172). Ruth Evans argues that James ignores sexual difference as an area of tension and division in late medieval urban society ('Body Politics: Engendering Late Medieval Cycle Drama', in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, ed. R. Evans and L. Johnson (New York and London, 1994), pp. 112-39).

¹²S. Lindenbaum, 'Rituals of Exclusion: Feasts and Plays of the English Religious Fraternities', in *Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Conference of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre*, ed. M. Twycross (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 54-65 (pp. 54-5).

'best represented' by Phythian-Adams's article on 'Ceremony and the Citizen' and James' article on 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body', and goes on to make several points in respect of James' views of how Corpus Christi processions and guild pageants worked to create and express wholeness.¹³ One is that the idea of the body as a means by which diverse members might be unified into a whole should not be interpreted literally, as an indication of actual power relations, because guild membership was exclusive; therefore, not everyone was able to participate in the 'social body' that is held to have been created through the procession and play cycle. Another point is that spectators need not have felt unity with those in the procession as it passed through the streets, and indeed its exclusivity may have worked against any such identification.¹⁴ Miri Rubin, in her discussion of Corpus Christi processions, also opposes her views to those of Phythian-Adams and James; in common with Lindenbaum, Rubin argues that '[a] procession which excluded most working people, women, children, visitors and servants, was not a picture of the community'.¹⁵ Rubin goes on to suggest that such a blatant demonstration of social difference in these processions could incite rather than ameliorate conflict, and questions whether the different interpretations of the various participants has been taken into account.¹⁶ Finally, Rosser and Holt, in their introduction to Phythian-Adams's essay 'Ceremony and the Citizen' in an urban history reader, put forward a number of suggestions regarding how ritual worked. They point out that different participants might have had different interpretations of civic events, and conclude that '[t]he importance of ritual was, arguably, not that it operated as a safety mechanism to protect the urban hierarchy, but that it brought together the different members of town society in events which provided a focus and a common language for debate about the true identity of a town'.¹⁷

The view that occasions of misrule, whilst apparently challenging the status quo,

¹³Lindenbaum, 'Rituals of Exclusion', pp. 55 and 63 n. 6.

¹⁴Lindenbaum, 'Rituals of Exclusion', pp. 59 and 59-60.

¹⁵M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 265-6 (p. 266).

¹⁶M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 266-7.

¹⁷Rosser and Holt. introduction to Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen', in *The Medieval Town*, ed. Rosser and Holt. p. 238.

were actually responsible for ameliorating tension, has also proved to be an influential one in discussions of medieval urban festivity. For example, Barbara Hanawalt has discussed how the 'riot and misrule' associated with the youth of medieval London could be channeled on festival occasions. Observing that '[m]uch of the frustration that led to riot centered on deprivation of adult status rather than a desire to prolong or glorify youth', Hanawalt goes on to argue that:

London tried to accommodate the need for a youthful release by making such holidays as St. John's Eve (Midsummer Eve) a time for general celebration, feasting, and bonfires, as well as the evening during which the mayor, the aldermen, and the respectable men of the ward paraded in the principal streets carrying torches. This was the famous Midsummer Watch. At Christmas as well, London permitted all sorts of sporting events.

Hanawalt then balances this statement with the observation that 'the city ordinances indicate a fear that the festivities might turn to riot', giving examples of the prohibition of masking and the early closure of taverns on holidays.¹⁸ Such a view of misrule as a release of potentially destructive energies has also been used comparatively. For example, in a discussion of representations of the city in medieval manuscripts Michael Camille makes a comparison between his view of the functions of both 'carnival' and marginal art in relation to 'the official order':

Often licensed by the civic authorities, all the inversion, cross-dressing, riotous drinking and parodic performance at carnival time was a carefully controlled valve for letting off steam. In this sense, carnival seems similar to what we have seen going on in the manuscript margins, since in both carnival and marginal art what looks at first like unfettered freedom of expression often served to legitimate the status quo, chastising the weaker groups in the social order, such as women and ethnic and social minorities. We have to face up to carnival's complicity with the official order, played out in the supposed subversion of it.¹⁹

¹⁸B. A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford, 1993), p. 125.

¹⁹M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (1992), p. 143. For a critical appraisal of this book see J. F. Hamburger's review in *The Art Bulletin* 75 (1993), pp. 319-27. I am grateful to

Interestingly, whilst there has been a substantial discussion of James' article and the Phythian-Adams's comments on formal ceremonial, there has been less in the way of specific criticism of the view that occasions of misrule are also held to maintain the existing structure of social relations. Clearly, Rosser and Holt's general comments about the function of ceremonial are pertinent here. We may also consider some examples of political studies in which Phythian-Adams's conclusions about these occasions of misrule and the conservative model more generally have been questioned. In a discussion of the rising of 1381 in Suffolk Christopher Dyer has questioned the view that transgression was always tolerated in 'summer games' in the later fourteenth century. 'It is usually thought that these rituals helped to release social tensions and to make real-life inequalities more acceptable. That such occasions could have the opposite effect is shown by an incident at Polstead in 1363, when John Atte Forth was amerced 40d. (an unusually large sum) because he "entered the lord's close and together with others played in the lord's hall a game called a *somergamen*".²⁰ Dyer's point is a reply to Phythian-Adams's suggestion that as well as the practice of commensality possibly making the usual rules more tolerable, there were also 'less peaceable means by which status might be honoured in its breach. At certain times of the year, it would seem, the great landholders had to accept that the laws of property, which normally sustained their positions, might be briefly ignored by right of custom'.²¹ Other scholars have referred to Phythian-Adams's work and more general debates about whether misrule is to be understood as subversion or containment. In a consideration of the oppositional nature of midsummer bonfires Steven Justice makes reference to Phythian-Adams's suggestion that the theft of vegetation was tolerated in this period, and goes on to note that '[r]ecent discussion of popular ceremonies has tended to decide that their contained, seasonal character necessarily undermined any oppositional stance', citing Bakhtin and

John Arnold and Richard Marks for the latter reference.

²⁰C. Dyer, 'The Rising of 1381 in Suffolk: Its Origins and Participants', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 36 (1988), pp. 274-87 (p. 281).

²¹Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore*, p. 26.

discussions of his work.²² Justice's alternative line of reasoning is to ask 'whether the festivities might serve, and the opposition therefore be subordinate to, some other purpose internal to the community, defined independently of (not in response to, and not therefore in the terms of) the power that rules it'. He argues that whilst the gathering of wood for midsummer bonfires encroached on the lords' forest, this encroachment was not an end in itself; rather, it was instrumental to the needs of the village at the crucial time of harvest. 'The common grudge against lordship relieved internal pressures by scapegoating (not all scapegoating is unjust; sometimes it just acknowledges fact) and presumably celebrated the self-sufficiency of the community, its ability to resolve its differences and manage its affairs independent of the lord'.²³

It should be clear from this discussion that whilst the argument that festal culture generally acted as a conservative force in medieval society is well established with respect to both formal civic occasions and misrule, this view has nonetheless also been criticised on several fronts. One such criticism has been that the approaches outlined by Phythian-Adams and James are not an adequate description of the available evidence, both of the characteristics of the events themselves and of the effects which they are claimed to have had (Lindenbaum, Rubin, Justice). Another is that there are other examples which cannot be accommodated within this model (Dyer). What these criticisms imply is that how such ceremonies or customs worked is not something which is simply deducible from their forms, in the sense that the same performance will always have particular effects and consequences. Rather, such a view must be ascertained by taking into account the full range of available evidence and considering each performance as a discrete occasion with its own meanings and effects. This approach will be developed in more detail in the next chapter. Two further points may be made. It is interesting to see how Phythian-Adams's essay on Coventry has been understood by some scholars as a more general statement about the relationship between ceremony and social structure in England in the period, although this is not the overall thrust of the argument which is made in that essay. What appears to have happened is that Phythian-Adams's case study has come to stand as a more general model of the dynamics of this

²²S. Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* 27 (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 153-4 notes 55-7 (p. 153).

²³Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, pp. 154 and 154-5.

relationship in ways which were presumably not intended. A final point may be made in respect of the use of anthropology in discussions of misrule in the late medieval period. As we have seen, many scholars have drawn upon anthropological writing in discussions of how ceremony and misrule worked, although in practice quite different uses have been made of this material, ranging from a means of thinking more generally about function to an unproblematic acceptance of anthropological conclusions.²⁴ 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.²⁵ It 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.

Approaches to medieval drama and calendar customs

The question of the function 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 such as Yves-Marie Bercé, Natalie Zemon Davis and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.²⁶ For example, Anthony Gash has suggested that research into popular festivity is relevant to the question of the social meanings of vernacular medieval plays. Gash goes on to make the following points about the relationship between drama and festivity:

²⁴For example, Phythian-Adams draws 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; the works which are cited here represent different sides in an ongoing debate rather than a unified and generally accepted position (Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen', p. 83 n. 29).

²⁵See for example note Barbara Babcock's summary of the criticisms that have been made of Gluckman's model (B. Babcock, 'Introduction', in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. B. Babcock (Ithaca and London, 1978), pp. 13-36 (pp. 22-4)).

²⁶N. Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975); Y.-M. Bercé, *Fête and Révolte: des Mentalités Populaires du XVI^{ème} au XVIII^{ème} Siècle* (Paris, 1976); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans: A People's Uprising at Romans, 1579-80*, trans. M. Feeney (Harmondsworth, 1979).

The counterpoint of hieratic formality and energetic clowning that pervades medieval drama finds its analogue in the cyclical alternation throughout the year of ceremonies which formalised group relations and idealised social distinctions with ones which symbolically inverted norms.

While English historians such as Phythian-Adams and Keith Thomas believe that the subversive potential of rituals of status-reversal and misrule was generally well controlled, and that their meaning was ultimately conservative, Davis and Le Roy Ladurie have shown for early modern France how such rituals could also provide occasions and imagery for artisan protests and revolts against tyranny and taxation. In fact, these apparently contrasting findings are not incompatible since the need for regular ritual celebrations of corporate unity are testimony to the conflicts of interest which they sought, and sometimes failed, to reconcile.²⁷

Furthermore, in a review of the secondary literature on the relationship between festivity and rebellion in medieval England and in early modern England and France, Sandra Billington has concluded that '[t]he last fifteen years have seen a fruitful investigation into the symbiotic relationship between seasonal festivity and peasant rebels who adopted mock king titles, organizing their defiance of government into festive patterns. The questions and answers which have resulted have radically altered critical views as to the "safety valve" theory of festive games'.²⁸

Not all work on early modern Europe has reached such conclusions however. In his Introduction to *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* Ronald Hutton notes that he has 'not attempted any discussion of the social function of the different categories of ritual, being satisfied with the broad categories already provided in a book such as Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978)'.²⁹ However, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter Two, Burke's work is strongly influenced by the arguments of anthropologists like van Gennep and Victor Turner, who understand rituals of reversal to be a means of reaffirming the established social structure. For example, in his

²⁷A. Gash, 'Carnival Against Lent: The Ambivalence of Medieval Drama', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. D. Aers (Brighton, 1986), pp. 74-98 (p. 81).

²⁸S. Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 1991), p. 1.

²⁹R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), p. 2.

discussion of the world of carnival in early modern Europe, Burke makes use of the 'safety-valve' metaphor to describe its function, in which it acts as 'a means for the subordinates to purge their resentments and to compensate for their frustrations'.³⁰ Thus although Hutton does not discuss the function of medieval misrule directly, his view of it is suggested by his satisfaction with Burke's analysis and from some of the language which he uses to describe such occasions. For example, Hutton notes that 'an element of legitimized disorder was built into the Twelve Days' of Christmas'.³¹ Other scholars have rejected the view that the conclusions reached about misrule in early modern France can be applied to the medieval English evidence. 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'.³² 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. '[T]he English aristocracy of the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries seem to have enjoyed the plays of local amateurs at Christmas time, perhaps not just because there was no slander in these allowed fools, but also perhaps because in the very act of allowing, and in the performing of what is allowed, authority is exercised and reaffirmed'.³³

One major problem with the argument that transgressive customs had a conservative function in the medieval period is that such an argument has been made in the absence of primary source evidence, rather than actually proceeding from it. There

³⁰P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), p. 201.

³¹Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 9.

³²S.-B. MacLean, 'Hocktide: A Reassessment of a Popular Pre-Reformation Festival', in *Festive Drama*, ed. Twycross, pp. 233-41 (pp. 238-9 and 239).

³³P. H. Greenfield, 'Festive Drama at Christmas in Aristocratic Households', in *Festive Drama*, ed. Twycross, pp. 34-40 (pp. 34 and 38).

are two areas to consider here: the characteristics of the practices themselves and the effects which they are claimed to have had. As we have just seen, Peter Greenfield argues that in the late medieval and early modern periods lords were able to confirm their authority and power over their households and local people by permitting performances of subversive drama at Christmas. In the main body of this paper Greenfield writes that '[t]he entertainments most likely to have been imported into aristocratic households by local players were the Christmas games or plays they performed in their own towns and villages ... [which] would have offered image of resistance to authority before culminating in gestures of concord and obeisance'. However, he admits in an accompanying footnote that '[e]xtant household records unfortunately provide no clues as to the nature of what the local players actually performed in the households at Christmas'.³⁴ Clearly, one factor here is our personal attitude towards what constitutes a reasonable observation about evidence or the lack of it. As Meg Twycross points out in respect of Greenfield's suggestions, '[w]hen it comes to writing about the possible social structure of a performance-event, it seems to me important that we should know what the actual performances were'.³⁵

We can also add that if we are thinking about effects and consequences, we need to have some sort of evidence for them too. Another problem with the conservative approach is that evidence for effects has not been provided. In fact 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, or because they had been brought closer together and shared a moment of common humanity. Although there has been a reliance on anthropological models to fill this gap, there are other points of view within the discipline of anthropology which take a different approach to how rituals may be understood to function. Talal Asad, for example, is sceptical of general anthropological concepts of ritual, and in the case of medieval monastic rites he argues that they should not be understood as evoking or releasing universal human feelings, as Victor Turner's model might suggest, but rather that they construct and reorganise historically specific

³⁴Greenfield, 'Festive Drama at Christmas in Aristocratic Households', pp. 36 and 39 n. 17.

³⁵M. Twycross, 'Some Approaches to Dramatic Festivity, Especially Processions', in *Festive Drama*, ed. Twycross, pp. 1-33 (p. 21).

emotions.³⁶ In the case of medieval misrule, I would argue that it is unrealistic to suggest that symbolic transgression automatically has the effect of releasing personal animosities and frustrations, since it may equally be said to concentrate the participant's attention upon inequality and subordination; clearly, it is pointless to debate these issues in the abstract, as conclusions must be argued from the historical evidence rather than the other way around. 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, as is evident from the contrasting views of Gladman's riding at Norwich mentioned above; this further problematizes the issue of the emotional and political consequences of misrule. Of course, one constraint which we face in such a consideration is that these effects and consequences are rarely recorded in the sorts of evidence that we are dealing with, although recognising this situation has several implications. First, it should make us more modest about the sort of functions which we feel able to ascribe to medieval festival occasions. Second, it signals that the conclusions offered about the function of misrule have a particular status which is not usually acknowledged; they are based upon a choice of interpretative models, a choice which profoundly affects the view that is reached in the analysis of this material. Finally, it raises the question of why it is that some scholars should have decided to favour the conservative approach, when other kinds of approaches, such as those taken by Davis or Le Roy Ladurie, are clearly available. The way in which certain paradigms have become established and naturalised within disciplines is obviously an important factor here, but it is also a matter of an individual's personal politics and his or her willingness to accept a particular view of the past.

Approaches to festal culture

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My final field for consideration is the literature devoted to a more general view

³⁶T. Asad, 'On Ritual and Discipline in Medieval Christian Monasticism', *Economy and Society* 16 (1987), pp. 159-203 (pp. 161-7). 'The problem that has, in my view, received inadequate attention may be stated as follows: although the formation of moral sentiments is dependent on a signifying medium, we cannot read off that formation from the system of significations that may be authoritatively identified and isolated as a distinct semiotic phenomenon. The reading is a product of social discipline, and 'the text', the symbol, the rite, is the product of (varyingly) disciplined performers who discourse with one another in historically determinate ways' (p. 165).

of the festal culture of late medieval and early modern Europe. Here I concentrate on the work of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, whose exuberant descriptions of the various historical incarnations of what he terms 'carnival' have done much to popularise a particular view of late medieval festivity. I also consider how Bakhtin's work and the problems which it poses have been taken up by subsequent writers.

The details of Bakhtin's lengthy career and the extraordinary conditions under which he worked for much of his life make for fascinating reading, and they do not easily lend themselves to a concise summary.³⁷ As I am concerned here with Bakhtin's exposition of carnival and the specific form that he accords it in the medieval period, I shall concentrate only upon the two works in which he discusses the subject. The most well-known of these is *Rabelais and his World*, originally Bakhtin's doctoral thesis and revised for publication in 1965, with the first English translation appearing in 1968. The other work is *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the first edition of which appeared in 1929 and the second, revised edition in 1963; the first English translation was published in 1973.³⁸ It is worth emphasising that Bakhtin does not set out in either of these books to investigate carnival itself; rather, he reconstructs it as a way of helping to explain the particular characteristics of the writings of these two authors. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin uses various derivatives of the term 'carnival' to denote certain qualities common to a range of historical forms, including literature and festival life, stretching back to antiquity. His concern is to identify how elements of carnival have come to be transposed into literature:

Literature that was influenced - directly and without mediation, or indirectly, through a series of intermediate links - by one or another variant of carnivalistic folklore (ancient or medieval) we shall call *carnivalized literature* ... In our opinion the problem of carnivalized literature is one of the very important problems in historical poetics, and in particular of the poetics of genre.

...

³⁷ See K. Clark and M. Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge and London, 1984).

³⁸ Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 354-5. The most recent English translations are M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984) and M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. C. Emerson, *Theory and History of Literature* 8 (Manchester, 1984). All subsequent references are to these two editions.

The problem of *carnival* (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms of a carnival type) - its essence, its deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its undying fascination - is one of the most complex and interesting problems in the history of culture. We cannot, of course, do justice to it here. What interests us here is essentially only the problem of carnivalization, that is, the determining influence of carnival on literature and more precisely on literary genre.³⁹

For Bakhtin there are four 'carnivalistic categories' that were transposed over thousands of years from carnival forms into literature. These categories are a lack of distinction between actors and spectators, the suspension of hierarchical differences between people, a free and familiar attitude towards the world, and profanation.⁴⁰ Having established this general thesis, Bakhtin examines how it was played out in different historical periods; thus, *Rabelais and his World* is an exploration of the influence of medieval carnival on the writings of the French author. Bakhtin's description of medieval carnival is dispersed throughout this book, but he does include a concise summary of what he perceives to have been its main features in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

In the Middle Ages the vast comic and parodic literature in vernacular languages and in Latin was, one way or another, connected with festivals of the carnival type - with carnival proper, with the "Festival of Fools," with free "paschal laughter" (*risus paschalis*), and so forth. Essentially every church holiday in the Middle Ages had its carnivalistic side, the side facing the public square (especially those holidays like Corpus Christi). Many national festivities, such as the bullfight, for example, were of a clearly expressed carnivalistic character. A carnival atmosphere reigned during the days of a fair, on the festival of the harvesting of grapes, on the performance days of miracle plays, mystery plays, *soties* and so forth; the entire theatrical life of the Middle Ages was carnivalistic ... It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, *two lives*: one was the *official* life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror,

³⁹Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 107 and 122.

⁴⁰Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 122-3.

dogmatism, reverence, and piety; the other was the *life of the carnival square*, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything. Both these lives were legitimate, but separated by strict temporal boundaries.⁴¹

Bakhtin's work poses several problems which should be familiar enough to us by this stage; these are the social function of carnival which he proposes, and the question of how his view of the past relates to the actual historical evidence.

The first issue to consider is whether there really is a coherent or well-developed notion in Bakhtin's work of how medieval carnival mediated politics and social structure. In respect of this question, it is important to note the political climate in which he was working, and how his comments compare with those made in the 1930s by Lunacharsky, the former Commissar of Education. Clark and Holquist, Bakhtin's biographers, portray Bakhtin's ideas as diametrically opposed to those of Lunacharsky, fitting neatly into the subversion/containment problematic which now invariably accompanies discussion of Bakhtin's work. 'Whereas Bakhtin maintains that in carnival the lower orders deal a blow to the epistemological megalomania of the official culture, Lunacharsky concludes that institutions like the carnival are merely "safety valves" which the ruling classes use as a way of allowing the lower orders to let off steam in a harmless, temporary event'.⁴² As we shall see in more detail below, although this reading of Bakhtin as showing how carnival enabled an opposition to official culture has been a common one, it does unfortunately miss some of his more subtle formulations. For example, discussing the possibilities of freedom that medieval laughter offered, Bakhtin observes that '[i]t would therefore be a mistake to presume that popular distrust of seriousness and popular love of laughter, as of another truth, could always reach full awareness, expressing a critical and clearly defined opposition'.⁴³

Many critics have taken Bakhtin's description of carnival as an objective account; one way in which carnival has been cited is as a radically transgressive cultural practice

⁴¹Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 129-30.

⁴²Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 313.

⁴³Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 95.

of the late Middle Ages that has subsequently been lost historically, and as such it provides a useful point of comparison with more modern practices. For example, Tony Bennett uses carnival as a yardstick against which to measure a particular experience of Blackpool Pleasure Beach:

For Bakhtin, the carnival of the late medieval period was not just a festival of transgression. It was characterised by the inversion not just of everyday rules and behaviour, but of the dominant symbolic order. As his study of Rabelais makes clear, carnival was a festival of *discrowning* in which the axial signifiers of medieval ideology were scandalously and often scatologically debased ... The Pleasure Beach is simply not like that, not even remotely. The body may be whirled upside down, hurled this way and that, but, in the coding of these pleasures for consumption, the dominant symbolic order remains solidly intact and unwaveringly the right way up.⁴⁴

It is important to note that when carnival is cited in this comparative way, it is not often backed up by concrete historical examples of such a use, and that where an example is cited it is invariably Le Roy Ladurie's discussion of Carnival in Romans in the later sixteenth century. Another difficulty is that the more that the critic insists on the essentially radical nature of carnival, the more vulnerable that position becomes to the simple rejoinder that carnival was predominantly a licensed affair, whose oppositional potential was undermined precisely because of its permitted excesses. This latter view has been taken by a number of scholars when discussing Bakhtin and carnival in the abstract. For example, Umberto Eco writes that:

Carnival can exist only as *authorized* transgression (which in fact represents a blatant case of *contradictio in adjectio* or of happy *double binding* - capable of curing instead of producing neurosis). If the ancient, religious carnival was limited in time, the modern mass-carnival is limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen.

In this sense, comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law

⁴⁴T. Bennett, 'A Thousand and One Troubles: Blackpool Pleasure Beach', in *Formations of Pleasure*, ed. T. Bennett *et al.* (1983), pp. 138-55 (p. 153).

reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule.⁴⁵

We can also mention Terry Eagleton's often-cited remarks regarding Bakhtin and carnival from his discussion of the work of Walter Benjamin. Contrasting Benjamin's 'negative theology' with Bakhtin's carnival, Eagleton observes that '[i]ndeed carnival is so vivaciously celebrated that the necessary political criticism is almost too obvious to make. Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art'.⁴⁶

The second issue to consider is how Bakhtin's work relates to the actual literary and historical evidence to which his discussion refers: we may cite three critiques from a number of works which have addressed this question.⁴⁷ In their study of transgression Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have been able to shift the terms of debate away from an apparent choice between the polarised viewpoints of subversion or containment through a historical investigation of the theme of transgression. Assembling an extraordinarily wide range of evidence, both historically and socially, they are able to demonstrate that the cultural practices that have become designated as carnival are merely one set amongst a number of practices which are characterised by an inversion or intermingling of social categories. Such an analysis shifts the emphasis away from the *function* of carnival and these other practices to the specific cultural processes that produce and sustain them:

It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression. The most that can be said in the

⁴⁵U. Eco, 'The Frames of Comic "Freedom"', in *Carnival!*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Berlin, 1984), pp. 1-9 (p. 6).

⁴⁶T. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981), p. 148.

⁴⁷See also A. Gurevich, "'High and Low": The Medieval Grotesque', in A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. J. M. Bak and P. A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 176-210, particularly pp. 176-80, and G. Klaniczay, 'The Carnival Spirit: Bakhtin's Theory on the Culture of Popular Laughter', in G. Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power: The Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-Modern Europe*, trans. S. Singerman and ed. K. Margolis (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 10-27.

abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*.⁴⁸

In addition, Richard Berrong has undertaken a critical appraisal of Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais, suggesting that the carnival elements in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* are concentrated towards the beginning of this work, rather than being dispersed throughout it as Bakhtin implies. Berrong also questions Bakhtin's notion of carnival in the terms of the sources that were available to him:

What, one might or should ask, are Bakhtin's sources, his basis for so extensive and elaborate a description of popular culture? One will have to keep on asking, I'm afraid. Bakhtin indicates very few primary sources, and one often has the impression that his "medieval and Renaissance popular culture" is largely an amalgamation of Goethe's notes on eighteenth-century Venetian carnival and Bakhtin's own preconception of what that popular culture should have been.⁴⁹

Finally, more recent historical research offers a rather more complex picture of the form and function of carnival festivity in comparison with Bakhtin's description of it, with corresponding implications for the subversion/containment debate. Simon Dentith has usefully summarised the historical arguments which work against the idea of a wholly anti-authoritarian carnival culture. First, it is not accurate to say that carnival was the property of the 'people', since it enjoyed a wider participation in the period in question. Second, some practices which involved inversion or degradation such as *charivari* seem actually to have mobilised in support of conservative social norms. Third, there were also carnival occasions on which there was actual violence to put down social struggles.⁵⁰ These factors mean that whilst carnivalesque practices have a formal quality in common, this does not extend to their actual function in any particular situation. As

⁴⁸P. Stallybrass and A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), pp. 11-14 (p. 14).

⁴⁹R. M. Berrong, *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Lincoln and London, 1986), pp. 128-9 n. 11.

⁵⁰S. Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (1995), pp. 74-6.

Dentith concludes after a discussion of Le Roy Ladurie's work, '[t]he carnival at Romans, therefore, suggests not that the carnivalesque has one univocal social or political meaning, but that it provides a malleable space, in which activities and symbols can be inflected in different directions'.⁵¹

As the limitations of the radical model of carnival have become clear, there has been a corresponding move towards a more plural understanding of how the festal culture of the late medieval and early modern periods worked. However, it would be clearly be wrong to draw too distinct a line between Bakhtin's work and that of what Dentith calls 'modern historians of early modern European popular culture', since some of the scholars in the latter category have also utilised rather general models of how carnival worked in this period. I have already pointed out, for example, that Peter Burke views carnival as 'a means for the subordinates to purge their resentments and to compensate for their frustrations'.⁵² Bakhtin and Burke therefore have rather more in common than perhaps Dentith implies. One way in which they differ is the extent to which an interpretative model is interposed between the evidence and the account of this evidence; in the case of Bakhtin, his model is assimilated into the account of the evidence which he gives, whilst in Burke's case the model stands between the evidence and his account of it. However, they are both open to the criticism that their models are insufficient for an adequate understanding of the dynamics of late medieval and early modern festal culture, because the function of the customs which they discuss has already been decided in advance, rather than proceeding from a close analysis of their form and context. The preceding discussion has shown that it is more helpful and constructive to limit the discussion of function to the level of the specific occurrence. We can say then that, whilst more work is obviously needed in this area, on how misrule mediated politics and social relations in this period, it is also clear that there needs to be a substantial amount of thought about what models and methodologies are appropriate for conducting this further research. Clearly, if the dynamics of particular occurrences are to be analysed and compared, the methodology which is adopted must be able to deal with the characteristics which are common to a range of transgressive customs, as well

⁵¹Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought*, p. 75.

⁵²Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, p. 201.

as enabling us to appreciate what is different about each particular occurrence. This new methodology will be my concern in the next chapter.

Chapter Two:

Towards A New Methodology For the Study of Medieval Misrule

Introduction

In this chapter I will describe a number of proposals which constitute what I believe to be a more effective methodology for approaching the evidence for misrule in medieval English urban sources. This methodology will form the basis for my investigation of misrule in the remaining chapters of the thesis. My proposals, and the issues raised in Chapter One which they address, will be outlined in two main sections. The first section will concentrate upon the cultural form of misrule, since a key issue arising from Chapter One is the basic sort of cultural form or process which it is understood to be. In many instances it is never properly defined, and I have shown how many of the assumptions about the character of misrule cannot be sustained with regard to the historical evidence. I propose an alternative framework for characterising misrule and discuss its advantages. The second section will address the lack of critical discussion of the social functions and purposes attributed to misrule. In Chapter One I suggested that there are a number of problems with attempts to establish the function of particular customs, problems which have never been properly discussed or addressed in the secondary literature. I will discuss the different contexts in which misrule may occur and consider the difficulties of investigating the social function of these customs.

The proposals set out in this chapter are intended to be taken into account in the analysis of evidence from English towns in the period between the mid-fourteenth and the mid-sixteenth centuries. As will become clear, they build upon the work of a number of other scholars. In particular there are two scholars whose work on the approaches and analysis of medieval evidence have been influential on the shape of what follows. In *Local History and Folklore* Charles Phythian-Adams sets out a preliminary framework for the analysis of popular practices. Phythian-Adams includes an outline of the four inter-related facets of social customs before the Reformation, which are considered to be the context of popular beliefs, and their physical location, calendrical timing and social function, as well as devoting a section to the analysis of source material.¹ This framework has been influential in the development of my own methodology for approaching medieval misrule more specifically. Also valuable is Meg Twycross's

¹C. Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore: A New Framework* (1975), pp. 12-30 and 31-5.

introduction to *Festive Drama*, a collection of essays on late medieval and early modern European drama, customs and processions. As we have already seen, Twycross's discussion of the different approaches to this subject and her criticism of Greenfield and MacLean preempts to some extent the arguments about function that I make in Chapter One. Twycross makes use of a distinction between theatre history, where the concern is with the "rhetoric" of an occasion, the ways in which its contents are arranged and presented, and cultural history, where the interest is in its social function and meaning.² This is a distinction which I find useful and which will be employed in the following discussion. Furthermore, Twycross concludes with some suggestions about analysis, which include ensuring that we have all the available evidence, considering the practicalities of performance, and taking into account the 'Small Catastrophe Theory', that is, the differences between plan and execution.³ These three suggestions stand in addition to the proposals which I will be putting forward in this chapter.

CHARACTERISING MISRULE: SYMBOLIC INVERSION IN A FESTIVAL CONTEXT

Many of the problems which were encountered in the discussions of misrule in Chapter One may be traced to how modern scholars have perceived it as a cultural form. As we saw there, the view of misrule as a festival period when 'the world' was temporarily 'turned upside-down', implying a practice with a universality of observance which incorporated all symbolic images and actions, cannot be sustained with respect to the historical evidence. Even if this term is taken figuratively rather than literally, the quite specific nature of the transgression in localities where misrule is found and the lack of evidence for continuity between places mean that its use is misleading and inaccurate in an English context. Similarly, any terminology which incorporates a notion of a fixed function or guaranteed outcome to any particular custom, suggesting that it operates as a kind of ritual which always achieved certain ends, has been shown at the end of the

²M. Twycross, 'Some Approaches to Dramatic Festivity, Especially Processions', in *Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre*, ed. M. Twycross (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 1-33 (pp. 6 and 17).

³Twycross, 'Some Approaches to Dramatic Festivity', pp. 20-6 (p. 24).

previous chapter to be problematic. The question of what criteria and evidence are necessary to support such a conclusion is not usually addressed, and even in cases where explanations are given these are unconvincing. Clearly then, our model for discussing and comprehending medieval misrule must take into account these specific criticisms and be able to accommodate other factors that have been noted, such as the deployment of transgressive customs outside of a festal context.

I want to suggest that we take as our starting point for this model the analytical framework developed by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in their work on European cultural history since the Renaissance. As we saw in Chapter One, their 1986 book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* is often cited for its discussion of the work of Bakhtin and the scholarly debate about the radical or conservative nature of carnival. However, their attempt to think beyond this intellectual impasse by means of a critical reworking of Bakhtin's notion of carnival has received relatively little attention by comparison. This is unfortunate, given that their work offers researchers in this field an extremely productive way of thinking about practices such as misrule. The key move which Stallybrass and White make is to argue that carnival practices are not unique in the way in which they manipulate symbolic imagery and action; since this process can be found elsewhere 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*.⁴ Whilst the essays are on diverse subjects, 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

⁴*The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. B. Babcock (Ithaca and London, 1978).

modifying term is used to emphasise that inversion should be regarded as deliberate and self-conscious behaviour.⁵ 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.⁶ 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:

If we treat the carnivalesque as an instance of a wider phenomenon of transgression we move beyond Bakhtin's troublesome *folkloric* approach to a political anthropology of *binary extremism* in class society. This transposition not only moves us beyond the rather unproductive debate about over whether carnivals are politically progressive or conservative, it reveals that the underlying structural features of carnival operate far beyond the strict confines of popular festivity and are intrinsic to the dialectics of social classification as such.⁷

Accepting that transgression is a basic symbolic process gives us a powerful means of analysing those cultural forms which are characterised by inversion. 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 misrule, and these advantages and their implications for the study of misrule will now be outlined in some detail.

Vocabulary

The first 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

⁵B. Babcock, 'Introduction', in *The Reversible World*, ed. Babcock, pp. 13-36 (pp. 14 and 15).

⁶Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), pp. 17-18.

⁷Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 26.

custom whilst avoiding any terminology which comments upon the social forces behind it or its social function. One impediment to our understanding of customs involving misrule has been the way that they have been understood and described as 'rituals of rebellion'.⁸ The basic model is that in a society with an unequal distribution of power, 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 too simplistic to posit the transgression found in misrule as the direct product of the unequal social relations pertaining in late medieval urban society. In particular, we need to think more critically about the relationship between subordination and the use of inversion by subordinates. For example, women attempted to detain and bind men during Hocktide, which appears to be a kind of inversion of their subordinate status. However, the custom gave women a vehicle for raising money and for gaining prestige in the parish community, and not every woman participated; clearly then, the motives of the participants must have been considerably more complex than the 'rebellion' model would suggest.⁹ We can say then 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'.¹⁰ It also means that we can avoid descriptive terminology which comments upon the function of misrule. The function of a custom is of course something that we will still want to investigate, but as I have already argued, our comments about function must be limited to specific performances rather than being made in a general way. If we are talking about customs in a generic way it is inappropriate for the terminology that we use to involve a comment about their function.

⁸The acceptance of the established order as right and good, and even sacred, seems to allow unbridled excess, very rituals of rebellion, for the order itself keeps this rebellion within bounds. Hence to act the conflicts, whether directly or by inversion or in other symbolical form, emphasizes the social cohesion within which the conflicts exist. Every social system is a field of tension, full of ambivalence, of co-operation and contrasting struggle'. M. Gluckman, *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa: Collected Essays* (New York, 1963), p. 127.

⁹See the fuller description in Chapter Six.

¹⁰R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), p. 9.

The approach outlined above gives us a useful vocabulary for drawing attention to the specific features of a custom which avoids such functional judgements.

A comparison of the basic form of even a few customs suggests that whilst they all might have some kind of transgressive element in common, the nature, purpose and extent of that transgression varies considerably. For example, whilst both the boy-bishop ceremony and hocking involve a temporary and symbolic exchange of roles, the motives and effects of that transgression obviously vary considerably. We can say then that the cultural materialist approach enables us 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.

Production

A second advantage of this approach is that we are able to focus upon the question of the means by which transgression is actually brought about, something which is almost always overlooked in the discussions of misrule which were examined in Chapter One. In a late medieval urban context, the possibilities for transgression of any sort were obviously dependent upon the laws, customs, beliefs and practices which pertained at any one time. As regards transgressive festival customs, it is clear that in order for us to identify them as transgressive in the first place, we must have some sense of the ways in which they breach established systems of belief and action. This may come from explicit comments on the customs by contemporaries or by inference from what we know about late medieval urban society. The transgressive aspect of a custom that we are able to identify in retrospect is therefore something which has been actively *produced*, and it is possible to analyze and gain a critical awareness of the different stages of this process. In order to create the conditions under which an action is perceived as transgressive, there need to be discourses which demarcate what is permissible and acceptable behaviour, such as 'common sense', rules and laws, what are usually referred to as social 'norms'. Recent thinking about the way in which individuals observe such norms has emphasised their 'performative' nature, that is, rather than these norms existing as some prior structure which shapes the way that individuals act, these

norms are only in place by virtue of the fact that they are constantly performed in this way. Judith Butler for example argues that we should think of the symbolic as the 'temporalized regulation of signification' rather than as a 'quasi-permanent structure'.¹¹ The difference is a subtle one, but the main point is that the process is seen as ongoing and open to contestation, rather than static and causative. Another point at which transgression is produced is at the actual moment at which, for whatever reason, these norms are not performed. Here we must give due weight to the agency of the individuals involved and acknowledge that the action taken is a deliberate choice rather than a reflex response to historical processes; as Aaron Gurevich has argued, '[t]he objective processes of history in themselves are only potential causes behind the behaviour of people; they become its effective causes only after they have been transformed into facts of social consciousness'.¹² The final sense to consider is the way in which the action is produced/reproduced for an audience, in that it is recognised and recorded in a particular document. Since by definition this is how we gain access to the other means by which we understand transgression to have been produced, the textual representation of an incidence of transgression will always require very careful attention. This need for critical awareness is most obvious when we are faced with competing representations of ostensibly the same event, as we shall see in Chapter Three in respect of Gladman's riding, but it should be standard practice in the use of any documentary source.

Other Practices

The third advantage of the approach outlined above is that it enables us to understand how misrule relates to other practices which involve transgression, and with which it therefore shares characteristics. There is a tendency in some scholarship to designate anything which involves a hint of inversion as 'carnavalesque'. As Stallybrass and White make clear, the process of transgression is not something which is confined

¹¹J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London, 1993), p. 22.

¹²A. Gurevich, 'Medieval Culture and Mentalité according to the New French Historiography', in A. Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Howlett (Chicago, 1992), pp. 21-49 (p. 48).

to carnival practices; it is a fundamental process which operates in many different cultural registers and spheres. The term transgression is useful in that it allows us to discuss these forms without implying that they are ultimately derived from occasions of misrule, as the term 'carnavalesque' tends to imply. I want to illustrate this point by looking briefly at another context in which we find transgressive tropes being deployed in the late medieval town; this is in public punishments, as a consideration of two examples drawn from the York records will show.

One form of public punishment in this period was to place an individual on horseback and parade them about the local area facing towards the tail-end of the beast.¹³ Such a punishment was prescribed at York in 1536.¹⁴ In mid-August of that year, various individuals were questioned about certain 'slanderous bills' that had appeared in diverse places about the city on the night of August 5. The precise content of these bills is not given, but the targets of the slander were prominent figures in the city, Master John Hogeson and Master John North and their wives.¹⁵ Hogeson and North were members of the civic elite; Hogeson had been mayor in 1533-4 and North was to become mayor in 1538, following the death of John Shawe during his term of office. Both went on to become members of parliament.¹⁶ On August 15 one Nicholas Green confessed that he had written three of the bills the previous Michaelmas, from a copy written by Thomas Abney. He claimed that Elizabeth Abney, Thomas' wife and his sister, 'made and of her malicyous mynde devysed the severall sclaunders conteyned in the seyd bylls'. The posting of the bills was however delayed because Hogeson's wife was pregnant at the time.¹⁷

¹³See R. Mellinkoff, 'Riding Backwards: Theme of Humiliation and Symbol of Evil', *Viator* 4 (1973), pp. 153-76, for a fuller discussion of the historical uses of this device. I am grateful to Christa Grössinger for this reference.

¹⁴This episode is recorded in *York Civic Records 4*, ed. A. Raine, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 108 (1943), pp. 7-13.

¹⁵*York Civic Records 4*, ed. Raine, pp. 11 and 10.

¹⁶John Hogeson, described as merchant and alderman, was sworn in as mayor on February 13 1533. He was chosen as M.P. in 1541 (*York Civic Records 3*, ed. A. Raine, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 106 (1942), p. 149 and *York Civic Records 4*, ed. A. Raine, p. 72). John North was elected mayor on February 14 1538, after John Shawe's death, and was chosen as M.P. either at the end of 1544 or the beginning of 1545 (*York Civic Records 4* pp. 27-8 and 122-3).

¹⁷*York Civic Records 4*, ed. Raine, p. 10.

Thomas and Elizabeth, who had already been examined once, were examined again the next day and both confessed this time, although the motives for their actions are unclear. Thomas was later to confess that he was behind other bills that had previously been posted about the city.¹⁸ Consequently, the mayor and bretheren, on the advice of the sheriffs and the mayor's counsel, ordered that on August 24 Thomas and Elizabeth were to be delivered to the sheriffs' officers outside of the door of the Kidcote, the mayor's prison:

... and the seyde Abney to have no more clothyng but onely his shyrt, dowblet, hosyn, cap and showes and the serjaunts and other offycers of the seyde Shiryffs at the seyde prison dore shall so sett the seyde Thomas Abney of a hors bak, setting of his face to the hors tayle, and a paper to be set of his hede and also he to have another lyke paper to hold betweyn bothe his hands with this scrypture folowyng to be writtyn in bothe the seyde papers; "For setting up of sclaunderous bylls and wylful perjury, thus to be punysshed deservyd have I." And that the seyde Elizabeth his wif to be set of another hors of the contrary and wrong syde of the seyde hors and she bere other too papers with lyke scripture of them ...

They were to be led from the mayor's prison on Ouse Bridge to Coney Street, Stonegate, and then to Walmgate Bar, returning to Pavement where they would be led three times around the pillory. From there, they were to be led to Micklegate Bar and there charged to leave the city within fifteen days. The sheriffs' officers were to be assisted by a constable and two men from every parish.¹⁹ Such a punishment was clearly designed to humiliate those involved, and it works through a simple inversion of the usual, 'common-sense' way of riding a horse.

This form of punishment is also recorded in London in the sixteenth century. *Wriothesley's Chronicle* describes how in 1549 one John Abram, butcher, was punished for having kept a neighbour's wife and for hiring a man to kill him:

Memorandum: the first daie of March, 1548[9], being Fridaie, John Abram, botcher

¹⁸*York Civic Records 4*, ed. Raine, pp. 8-9 and 10-12.

¹⁹*York Civic Records 4*, ed. Raine, pp. 11-13 (p. 12).

in Saint Nicholas Shambles, was had from the Counter in Bread Streete, and sett on a horse with his face to the horsetaile and so leed up Cheepe to the Newgate on one side of the streete and coming downe Saint Nicholas Shambles on the other side of the streete, and so through Cheepe, the Pultrie, Stockes, Cornehill, Gracious Streat, Fishe Streat, and along Thames Streete to Queenehith, and their turned up to Bread Streete, and so to the Standard in Cheepeside, where he was sett on the pillorie with a paper pynned over his heade and another pynned on his backe, upon which papers was wrytten in great lettres as followeth "for the keepinge of an other mans wiefe and hiringe a man to kill her husband." And thus he stoode on the pillorie from eight of the clocke in the forenonne till half an hower after aleuen, and then he was taken downe and sent to warde againe.

Unfortunately for Abram, the assassin, one Head, who had received forty pounds to do the deed, had confessed prior to carrying it out. Abram had been seized on the day before his punishment and detained with the instruction that no one was to speak to him, 'so that when he came to doe his pennance no person knewe it till he rode aboute'.²⁰ It might be suggested that these sort of punishments were 'carnavalesque', given that they involved the deliberate breach of normal practice which is characteristic of misrule. However, whilst misrule and riding backwards both make use of transgressive actions, there are substantial differences between them which are important to recognise. In the two cases described above the recipients were presumably unwilling and the punishments are administered by local officers; furthermore, the transgression is personal and individual rather than making reference to any higher authority such as a monarch. This brief analysis underlines the advantage of using a term like transgression in its purely neutral sense; it captures what both misrule and riding backwards share, whilst avoiding any implication that they were somehow part of the same festal culture, as 'the carnivalesque' tends to imply.

In the York Mystery Plays, transgressive tropes can be found in the language and action surrounding the figure of Christ, and images of inversion and the mixing of high and low forms were of course a feature of medieval Christian iconography more

²⁰*A Chronicle of England During the Reigns of the Tudors, from A.D. 1485 to 1559. By Charles Wriothesley. Windsor Herald, ed. W. D. Hamilton, 2 vols, Camden Society N.S. 11 and 20 (1875 and 1877), 2 p. 8.*

generally. The humiliating punishments that Christ undergoes in these plays depend upon transgression for their effect. In the York Tilemakers' pageant designated as *Christ Before Pilate (2): The Judgement*, Caiaphas convinces a reluctant Pilate that Christ should be put to death because he claims to be a king. Pilate orders that Christ, who has already been clad in white as a fool by Herod, receive a scourging before being brought before him again. This beating duly administered, the soldiers array Christ as a mock king, giving him a stick for a sceptre, a crown of thorns, and sitting him on a throne. He is then subjected to a series of mock greetings and praise:

1 SOLDIER: ...

Ave, royal roy and *rex judeorum*,

Hail, comely king that no kingdom has kenned.

Hail, undoughty duke, thy deeds are dumb,

Hail, man unmighty thy meinie to mend.

3 SOLDIER: Hail, lord without land for to lend,

Hail king, hail, knave uncunnand.

4 SOLDIER: Hail, freke without force thee to fend,

Hail, strong, that may not well stand

To strive.

1 SOLDIER: We, harlot, heave up thy hand,

And us all that thee worship are workand,

Thank us, or ill mote thou thrive.²¹

These phrases work by altering a conventional form of greeting to either negate a form of praise ('undoughty duke, thy deeds are dumb') or present an absurdity ('strong, that may not well stand'), and Christ is finally humiliated by having to thank his tormentors for what they have done. The force of the drama at this point depends upon a conjoining of high and low imagery and action, social spheres usually kept separate, to produce the hybridised figure of a mock king in the play. It is also possible that a contemporary audience would have seen some parallels with the mock kings elected at festival periods, and it might be suggested that the playwright had in this case imported some elements

²¹ *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. R. Beadle and P. M. King (Oxford, 1984), p. 207.

from the festival practice into the drama, that he had drawn upon 'the carnivalesque'. However, to do so would be to locate festal culture as the privileged origin of such imagery; rather, we can make the point that the image of the mock king occurs in both medieval theological discourse and festival practices because they both utilise symbolic resources available in the culture at large. Indeed, Sandra Billington has shown how the image of the mock king had a wide currency in late medieval and early modern England, suggesting that this transgressive figure proved useful in all sorts of ways.²²

THE FUNCTION OF MISRULE

In the previous section I put forward the basis for a new framework for approaching misrule which enabled us to identify the fundamental cultural process which these customs had in common - transgression - and thereby avoid other terminology which was unsatisfactory because of its functional implications. Such a separation of form and function is useful for theatre history, where the interest is in the specific characteristics of a custom rather than what it does, and it is also a necessary step if we are to address the question of the function of a custom, a primary concern in cultural history, in a more critical manner. We have already seen in Chapter One that there are a number of problems with studies which attempt to ascertain the social effects of particular customs. The first and obvious advantage of thinking about misrule as transgression is that it avoids predetermining the sorts of conclusions that will be reached about the purpose and function of the specific performance of a custom when investigating it, which is clearly not possible if misrule is characterised from the outset as something like 'legitimized disorder'. However, this approach does not give us much of a guide as to how we might go about ascertaining what this function actually was and the problems that are involved in such an investigation. In this section I want to build on the framework that has already been established and put forward a number of propositions to be taken into account when attempting to ascertain the function of misrule.

As we saw in Chapter One, many of the discussions of urban festal culture make

²²S. Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 1991).

claims about the social function of individual customs or misrule as a type, ranging from a passing remark to a broad evaluation over an entire historical period. Although the sorts of cultural work that are perceived as being done vary, misrule is for the most part held to be conservative, controlling social conflict and helping to maintain the status quo. In Chapter One I outlined some of the problems with this kind of analysis. The main concern was with the surviving evidence and the sorts of conclusions which were being drawn from it. In some cases, for example in Peter Greenfield's discussion of Christmas drama in aristocratic households, insufficient evidence was produced to identify firmly the situation as transgressive in the first place. In the majority of cases though it was argued that insufficient evidence was produced in support of the conclusion that was reached about the local effects of the performance. This is not 'poor writing', in the sense that the argument in the text could be strengthened if more of the evidence was made available to the reader. The problem is that there is no such additional evidence; such conclusions are reached on the basis of often quite meagre primary source material. Thus we need to think critically about what can plausibly be inferred from the evidence that survives, a key issue being the practice of utilising other secondary material such as anthropology or the conclusions of other scholars in order to help 'bridge the gap'. It was also noted that in other cases where further evidence was available, the willingness on the part of scholars to accept established conclusions had meant this evidence had been ignored or overlooked.

Having put forward a more satisfactory definition of our subject in the last section, based on the understanding of misrule as symbolic inversion or transgression, I now want to make a number of propositions regarding the actual practice of researching and writing about the function of misrule. My suggestion is that there are three main areas which would repay more critical thought: 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. Each of these will be considered in turn in this section. A recurring theme will be that whilst scholars have utilised various methodologies and critical approaches in their work on urban misrule, there has been almost no discussion in the secondary literature of the reasons why such approaches were taken or considered to be more appropriate than others. Such a discussion about why particular choices about

methodology were made is important for a number of reasons. Most obviously, having to justify one's own approach encourages critical thought about the relative merits of particular models, which on the whole have been found to be lacking in various respects.

Evidence

In what ways might we cultivate a more critical approach to the evidence for misrule and its function, and what are the advantages of doing so? One common practice which needs to be addressed is the way in which historians make inferences about the continuity of customs and their social effects from the evidence which survives. In *Local History and Folklore*, Phythian-Adams discusses the problem of incomplete documentation in studying social customs and gives a number of guidelines for the use of chronologically-scattered references in studying the evidence for the social customs of a single community. 'A highly critical attitude is obviously essential, but purism may also be pushed too far. To reject the possibility of historical continuity (within certain limits) is often likely to be a less scholarly decision than *vice versa*'.²³ Such inferences are reasonable and indeed necessary if processes such as the transmission of customs are to be understood. However, it seems to me to be stretching the case somewhat if comments are then made about the function of an observance where there is only the presumption of continuity between two recorded occurrences, especially where this function has only been inferred rather than supported with evidence. This is the position which I take in respect of David Harris Sacks's work on the boy-bishop custom at Bristol in Chapter Five. This point also applies in cases where the evidence for a custom from a later period is extrapolated back to suggest that it also took place at an earlier period; again, whilst this can be done, it seems to me to be going too far to then argue that the practice had the same function at this earlier period. Such an objection can be made, for example, in respect of Phythian-Adams's comments about the function of hocking in late medieval Coventry, as there is no firm medieval evidence for the observation of the custom there (see Chapter Six).

As well as appreciating the limitations of much of the evidence that we encounter,

²³Phythian-Adams. *Local History and Folklore*, pp. 31-2 (p. 31).

it is also important that we recognise that in some cases it will be possible to collate further material which can illuminate the dynamics of a particular performance. For example, where individuals are named they can be traced in other records; assembling individual biographies in this way contributes to our perception of what is different and unique about each incidence and the possible functions which it may have had. In Chapters Three and Four I take two commonly-cited occurrences of calendar customs and attempt to reconstruct as far as is possible the local context in which they occurred, enabling me to give a reading of each incident which differs from the sorts of conclusions that have been reached when the evidence has been considered in isolation. In some cases then it is possible to exploit further evidence in the consideration of the function of a custom and in my view the 'ritual year' approach to festival customs, where evidence has been grouped by its calendar occurrence, has meant that this sort of closer analysis has tended to be neglected. It is my belief that only where this closer analysis has been undertaken is it possible to make a reasonably confident statement about the function of a particular incidence of misrule. Such a position obviously has implications for the way that anthropological models are used in the analysis of calendar customs, and this issue will be discussed in more detail below.

Diversity

What is the possible range of situations, outcomes and functions of misrule, and what are the advantages of a better understanding of this diversity? In Chapter One we saw that discussion of the function of misrule has been quite circumscribed, in that it tends to focus on the question of whether misrule, either as specific incidences or in general, was able to change things or not. I have already argued this is an overly reductive view of the nature of misrule and that the evidence for deciding its function is in any case often lacking. Part of the problem in such analyses is that the range of different functions that both an individual custom and customs in general may have is not fully appreciated. Indeed, even if the same custom takes place in very similar conditions over consecutive years, with the same status of individuals involved, the meaning of each performance is bound to vary, for example, as a sense of tradition develops. I want to suggest that a better understanding of these dynamics can assist in

our understanding and interpretation of misrule. Phythian-Adams's discussion of social function is a useful starting point, giving some idea of the range of possible meanings that customs may have had, although it is necessarily suggestive: '[u]nfortunately, so little historical work has been done on this important subject, that it will be possible here only to suggest and indicate certain relationships which might repay future detailed testing at the local level'.²⁴ Subsequent research and my own investigations in this area make it possible to flesh out the range of possible functions which we should have in mind in the analysis of evidence for misrule. Whilst I am reluctant to compile anything which may be construed as a kind of 'checklist' of possible functions, it is possible to set out the range of different circumstances in which misrule is found, in order to illustrate the diversity of use of the basic trope of transgression in festival contexts and the range of possible functions which it may have.

A modern audience may find it more difficult to appreciate transgression when it occurs in a religious setting, in parish churches, monasteries and cathedrals. The term 'misrule' is used in this context to designate those practices which were associated with important festival periods and which depended for their significance on some sort of inversion or breach of decorum. Examples include the practice of elevating children during the Christmas season, the Feast of Fools, and Easter laughter. Although the purpose of such practices was not always clear to contemporary or later commentators, it is possible to make a case for why they were used. As Eamon Duffy notes of the child-clergy custom, '[a] perfectly good Christian justification could be offered for these popular observances, however close to the bone their elements of parody and misrule brought them: Christ's utterances about children and the Kingdom of Heaven, Isaiah's prophecy that a little child should lead them, and the theme of inversion and the world turned upside-down found in texts like the "Magnificat" could all be invoked in their defence'.²⁵ As I argued above, as in any other system of thought and practice, transgressive tropes were a part of religious discourse. Jarmila Veltruský makes a similar point about the contribution which parody could make towards the celebration of Easter in an analysis of a paschal play from fourteenth-century Bohemia. In this play the

²⁴Phythian-Adams, *Local History and Folklore*, p. 25.

²⁵E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), pp. 13-4.

Apothecary, who supplies the three Marys with the spices to embalm the body of Christ on Easter morning, carries out a mock-resurrection by pouring faeces onto the backside of Isaac, the dead son of a character named Abraham.²⁶ This kind of generalised explanation is very useful in that it prevents such practices from being regarded merely as forms of opposition to a more austere church doctrine. However, it is important to recognise the limitations of such an explanation in the analysis of particular cases, where the dynamics of the situation may not be as equanimous as this general account implies. It may be that local circumstances meant that the practice was contested to a greater degree, or that the occasion was used in a more confrontational way.

One noticeable feature of academic inquiry into misrule is how the sober pronouncements about its social function can sit rather uncomfortably with the raucous nature of the subject material. It is easy to overlook the fact that play with classificatory categories was and continues to be something which is enjoyable and worth pursuing for this end alone. Such things can of course be done at any time of the year, but we are interested here in customs which are associated with particular periods in the calendar. Olga Horner's account of Christmas entertainments at the Inns of Court contains plenty of examples of what can be designated as transgressive behaviour. At the Inner Temple individuals were given grotesque names such as "Sir Bartholomew Baldbreech of Buttocksbury, in the County of Breakneck", whilst Lincoln's Inn had a Christmas King called Jack Straw.²⁷ These were people who went on to assume prominent positions at court. Again though, when we come to the analysis of specific examples the particular dynamics of the situation must be established; what one party regards as pleasurable may not be to the liking of everyone. In 1519 Jack Straw and his adherents were banned from Lincoln's Inn.²⁸

As well as being part of celebrations, transgressive customs were also a means through which the participants could take action to intervene in local affairs. Although some accounts that I examined in Chapter One give the impression that such actions

²⁶J. F. Veltruský, 'The Old Czech Apothecary as Clown and Symbol', in *Festive Drama*, ed. Twycross, pp. 270-8.

²⁷O. Horner, 'Christmas at the Inns of Court', in *Festive Drama*, ed. M. Twycross, pp. 41-53 (pp. 45 and 46).

²⁸Horner, 'Christmas at the Inns of Court', p. 46.

were generally 'oppositional' and 'progressive', the variety of action taken should really preclude us from making any evaluative conclusions of this sort. For example, after aliens and their property were attacked in London on 'Evil May Day' in 1517 a number of the participants were put to death, and the future observance of May Day was curtailed.²⁹ Also, when thinking about how misrule was used in an overtly political way, it is important to recognise that it was only one amongst a number of practices which were adapted as a means of expressing discontent or taking action in this period. For example, in his discussion of unlawful hunting in England between 1485 and 1640 Roger Manning has considered the range of activities that may be considered under this heading, including poaching, feuding, and "general huntings", which were 'a kind of skimmington by which the local community attempted to punish possessors of game reserves for outrageous behaviour'.³⁰ As well as this sort of direct intervention, misrule could also be used to express a kind of symbolic dissidence or defiance. We can consider here the suspicions, probably written by Sir Richard Morison, about Robin Hood plays which were communicated to Henry VIII sometime after the dissolution of the monasteries: '[i]n somer comenly upon the holy daies in most places of your realm, ther be playes of Robyn hoode, mayde Marian, freer Tuck, wherin besides the lewdenes and rebawdry that ther is opened to the people, disobedience also to your officers, is tought, whilist these good bloodes go about to take from the shiref of Notyngnam one that for offendyng the lawes shulde have suffered execution'.³¹

Finally, it is also important to recognise that features of misrule could also be deployed outside of what would be considered as their usual festival context. In a seminal article, Thomas Pettitt has explored the interaction of seasonal festivity and social revolt in England, utilising a theoretical framework provided by Yves-Marie Bercé to explain how and why elements that are normally associated with festivity are present in incidents ranging from the English Rising of 1381 to the Bristol bridge riots

²⁹*The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil A.D. 1485-1537*, ed. and trans. D. Hay, Camden Third Series 74 (1950), p. 245; J. Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, 2 vols (Oxford, 1908), 1 p. 99.

³⁰R. B. Manning, *Hunters and Poachers: A Social and Cultural History of Unlawful Hunting in England, 1485-1640* (Oxford, 1993), p. 2.

³¹S. Anglo, 'An Early Tudor Programme for Plays and Other Demonstrations Against the Pope', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 20 (1957), pp. 176-9 (pp. 177 and 179).

of the eighteenth century:

On the one hand ... the misrule attendant on seasonal festival can boil over to produce serious social upheaval ... On the other hand there is a converse, and potentially more significant, relationship: the 'apparatus' of festivity, Bercé suggests, can detach itself from its specific seasonal context and acquire a function in revolt or unrest at other times, triggered by other factors ...

Pettitt's suggestion is that these practices were to some extent mobile and were able to be deployed outside of their usual festival context when appropriate, and this interaction between festivity and revolt may be thus be studied according to its patterns of organisation, movement and behaviour, including disguise and verbal expression.³² In Chapter Three I examine in some detail how the well-known 1443 incident at Norwich, commonly termed 'Gladman's Insurrection', may be understood as the deployment of a Shrovetide procession outside of its usual calendar context by a group of Norwich citizens.

This brief examination of the contexts in which we find misrule in the medieval period should enable us to appreciate the range of its possible functions and thus avoid the problems of essentialising the function of transgression. Given that this has been the purpose of the exercise I have not attempted to indicate the broader historical changes which are of course critical to any analysis.

Social Dynamics

In Chapter One I argued that many of the accounts of misrule utilised an unsatisfactory model of the social dynamics of such customs. In this section I want to put forward what I believe to be a more plausible model for understanding how misrule was implicated in social change in the late medieval period. This will be accomplished by a close analysis of an example which uses the conservative paradigm, making explicit the assumptions upon which it rests, and then advancing alternative explanations.

³²T. Pettitt, "'Here Comes I, Jack Straw:': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore* 95 (1984), pp. 3-20 (pp. 3 and 6).

Sally-Beth MacLean's paper on the medieval custom of hocking reviews the evidence for this custom and concludes by suggesting that the functions outlined by Peter Burke for Carnival also apply to Hocktide; these are entertainment, communal celebration, competition between different groups and 'finally and perhaps most importantly, a cathartic release of social tension channelled through ritualised inversion of the hierarchical social order that is characteristic of the Middle Ages'.³³ MacLean goes on to cite an observation made by Natalie Zemon Davis about images of 'Women on Top', where Davis suggests that such a manipulation of roles offers a temporary release from stable hierarchy and is also part of the conflict to change the basic distribution of power within society, and then observes:

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, who argues that such rituals 'lead to "an ecstatic experience", an enhanced sense of community, followed by a "sober return" to the normal social structure'.³⁴

Focusing on the issue of this political function, we can consider the basic assumptions that are made in this passage and how they enable this particular conclusion to be reached. One assumption is that it is possible and realistic to come to a firm conclusion about how every incidence of a custom operated across an entire historical period. Another is that the evidence upon which such a conclusion will be based is readily available from surviving historical sources. It is also presumed that anthropology can offer a model to explain in a general way how a custom operates and achieves its effects. The expectation is that if hocking was involved in social change we would have some indication of this; in the absence of such 'evidence', the conclusion must be the other alternative, that it functioned as a 'safety-valve' where, as some anthropologists have suggested, the contestation of norms only serves to reaffirm them. MacLean's citation

³³S.-B. MacLean, 'Hocktide: A Reassessment of a Popular Pre-Reformation Festival', in *Festive Drama*, ed. M. Twycross, pp. 233-41 (p. 238).

³⁴MacLean, 'Hocktide'. pp. 238-9 (p. 239).

of Victor Turner is actually taken from Peter Burke, who argues for the relevance of such anthropological analyses in the study of carnival forms in early modern Europe:

The world turned upside down was regularly re-enacted. Why did the upper classes permit this? It looks as if they were aware that the society they lived in, with all its inequalities of wealth, status and power, could not survive without a safety-valve, a means for the subordinates to purge their resentments and to compensate for their frustrations. They did not use the term 'safety-valve', because boilers were not equipped with these devices till the early nineteenth century, but they did make the same point by means of technologically simpler metaphors.

Burke refers here to the French clerics who in 1444 criticised the defence of the Feast of Fools as a time when foolishness could be dissipated and the analogy with wine skins and barrels, which would burst if their air-hole was not opened from time to time.³⁵ However, he then goes on to note that Carnival and other festivals cannot be interpreted in these terms alone: '[t]he wine barrel sometimes blew its top'. There could be 'a "switching" of codes, from the language of ritual to the language of rebellion', which would explain the festival occasions upon which there were serious riots and rebellions.³⁶ It is also possible to outline the sorts of assumptions that underpin Burke's account. One such assumption is that transgression at festival periods was a form of protest. Another is that this sort of expression helped to ameliorate the frustrations and resentments of the participants. Burke also presumes that misrule was licensed by a ruling class, that is, that they could have put a stop to such activities if they had so wished, and that they were content to let it continue because the participants were unaware of the real effects of their actions. Furthermore, it is suggested that riots and rebellions occurred when this control mechanism failed to work.

In Chapter One and in the present chapter I have already gone some way to questioning and proposing alternative explanations for a number of these assumptions. I argued in Chapter One that citing the views of an anthropologist on status-reversal rituals does not give a definitive or objective explanation of a custom, since as a

³⁵Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), pp. 199-202 (pp. 201-2)

³⁶Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 202-4 (p. 203).

discipline anthropology has its own internal debates. I have also argued in this chapter that transgression at festival periods should not be understood solely as protest; the manipulation of symbolic categories is not of itself an oppositional act. Rather, it is clear that customs involving misrule had the potential to assume a political dimension, and so it is the nature of the transgression and the context in which it is deployed that needs to be examined in order to ascertain its political import. It follows that it is unrealistic to argue that there was continuity in the function of a custom across a wide geographical area and over a long historical period.

However, there are several points which still remain to be addressed. Even if we do accept that for example hocking could be undertaken in a more confrontational manner, it could be argued that the absence of evidence for any social changes following on from such an incident proves that such attempts were dissipated through their expression. This is what MacLean implies when she writes that although hocking may provide some evidence for the contestation of power, it was not actually an agent of social change. There are several points to make here. One is that we might wonder whether we are looking for change in the right place. That is, rather than looking for evidence accompanying hocking for signs of social change, this evidence can itself be seen as the actual result of change, as an outcome of historical processes. As I suggest in Chapter Six, it can be argued that whilst women in general were facing a squeeze in their employment opportunities in the late fifteenth century, in some areas groups of women were enjoying a strong role in raising money for the parish church. Another point to make is that surely the reason why there is not evidence for drastic social changes following a politicised bout of hocking is because this sort of event is only a temporary dramatisation or playing out of an altered set of social relations, rather than a concerted attempt to actually put such relations into practice. As it does not even begin to have the qualities necessary to effect such radical changes in the first place, there is little sense in debating whether it failed or was contained in the short-term sense; we are not dealing with a practice that operates on a revolutionary scale. As Nicholas Davis has pointed out, 'social changes toyed with "in play" were often too thorough-going to be assimilated into everyday life'.³⁷ The fact that the participants return to everyday life

³⁷N. M. Davis. 'The Playing of Miracles in England between c.1350 and the Reformation'. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis (Cambridge, 1977), p. 27.

afterwards does not necessarily mean that they accept their situation any the more.

We can suggest then that a more appropriate explanation for the lack of evidence for the effects of more overtly political misrule is that the sort of political effects which it produced are unlikely to have been recorded in surviving historical documents. Here we are using the term 'political' to signify the structure of everyday social relations as well as the wider sense of institutions and networks. A useful exposition of the former sense is given by Lawrence Levine in his discussion of the function of Negro secular song, where he argues for a more realistic definition of what constitutes protest and resistance:

There has been an unfortunate if understandable tendency in our political age to conceive of protest in almost exclusively political and institutional terms. Thus group consciousness and a firm sense of the self have been confused with political consciousness and organization, "manhood" has been equated with armed rebellion, and resistance with the building of a revolutionary tradition. To state that black song constituted a form of black protest and resistance does not mean that it necessarily led to or even called for any tangible and specific actions, but rather that it served as a mechanism by which Negroes could be relatively candid in a society that rarely accorded them that privilege, could communicate this candor to others whom they would in no other way be able to reach, and, in the face of the sanctions of the white majority, could assert their own individuality, aspirations, and sense of being.³⁸

An appreciation of how resistance can be articulated at the level of the everyday has important implications for the conservative model of misrule. In the conservative model the function of a custom is ascertained by rather indiscriminating criteria; a lack of change signals stasis and a revolt signals an attempt at change. By contrast, I have suggested that misrule could carry political meanings in rather more subtle ways. Misrule gave an opportunity for dissident political sentiments to be articulated through festivity, a medium which contemporaries could argue was relatively harmless. It could function as a repository of cultural symbols and forms of organisation which could be taken up on a larger scale if necessary. It is important to stress though that even in

³⁸L. W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), pp. 239-40.

instances where misrule clearly did carry a political import, the effects of that meaning cannot be decided in the abstract, but will always depend upon the forces at work in that particular situation.³⁹

Continuing with the theme of politicised misrule, another point to be addressed is the difficulty of talking about changes in the structure of social relations in the terms under which the conservative model operates. As we have seen, for the most part misrule is not considered to be instrumental in bringing about change in any case. 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. Presumably, the extent to which those rioting or revolting secured their aims would have to be ascertained in each particular case, although the model offers no guidelines as to how we might go about deciding this. When considered in this way, the 'boom or bust' 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. 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 reconcilable into opposing class enemies. As an attempt to bring about change, festival disturbances need to be placed alongside other forms of action such as attempts 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.⁴⁰ 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

³⁹Just as containment theorists should not judge a priori that all subversion is contained, so its opponents cannot decide a priori that all power structures are subvertible; each instance, if it can be decided at all, can only be done so historically' (J. Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford, 1991), p. 85). See also A. Sinfield; 'when, in any instance, either incorporation or resistance turns out to be the more successful, that is not in the nature of things. It is because of *their relative strengths in that situation*' (Cultural materialism, *Othello*. and the Politics of Plausibility', in A. Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 29-51 (p. 48)).

⁴⁰See Chapter Four.

conservative model is the way in which it privileges the festival occasion as the main 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.⁴¹

What is needed then is a more constructive language for discussing the dynamics of the interplay between the various agents in cases of politicised misrule and the effects which were achieved through it. For such a vocabulary it is possible to look to other instances where this sort of issue has been debated. In the secondary literature on early modern English drama there has been considerable discussion of the extent to which the apparently subversive elements in these plays actually worked to *secure* the power of the state, that is, their subversion was produced and permitted so that it could be all the more effectively contained.⁴² This position has obvious similarities with the conservative model of misrule that we have been examining. In a suggestive article Theodore Leinwand has reviewed this debate and has put forward a more productive model for thinking about how social change operates. Noting that the debate has been framed in terms of either subversion *or* containment, as either one or the other being successful, Leinwand goes on to argue:

Perhaps we can reconceive the binarisms of social process as other than conflict leading to one-sided victory. Compromise, negotiation, exchange, accommodation, give and take - these bases for social relations and change are as recognizable as those mentioned thus far ... I believe that a model based on negotiation and exchange may prove useful where now familiar paradigms seem unsatisfactory. In particular I want to attribute change to something other than subversion ... Unlike subversion, negotiated change is dependent on the agency of two or more parties that are not entirely content with the status quo. A model of change that makes room for negotiation acknowledges the persistence of coercive discipline but argues that disciplines themselves, not only the forces resisting them, may be eroded or

⁴¹See for example B. R. McRee, 'Peacemaking and its Limits in Late Medieval Norwich', *English Historical Review* 109 (1994), pp. 831-66.

⁴²See D. S. Kastan and P. Stallybrass, 'Introduction: Staging the Renaissance', in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. D. S. Kastan and P. Stallybrass (1991), pp. 1-14 (pp. 5-7).

curbed.⁴³

Such a model 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 wider strategy, could prove effective in achieving specific aims and goals. This is the argument that will be 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 in Chapters Three and Four.

⁴³T. B. Leinwand, 'Negotiation and New Historicism', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 105 (1990), pp. 477-90 (p. 479-80).

Chapter Three:

Seasonal Drama and Local Politics in Norwich, 1443

Introduction

This chapter will explore the relationship between misrule and politics in the late medieval English town by means of a case study of material concerning a Shrovetide pageant from mid fifteenth-century Norwich.¹ This case study will show that the performance of such customs was not restricted to festival enclaves but that they could also be deployed outside of their usual contexts; furthermore, this deployment makes sense as part of a broader campaign of resistance to what was perceived to be an unsatisfactory political situation in the town at that time. As a background to this discussion, I introduce the range of practices which were associated with Shrovetide in late medieval England and elsewhere in Europe.

In the Middle Ages, as in the present, Shrove Tuesday is the last day before the beginning of Lent, the period preceding the most important event in the Christian calendar, Easter. The establishment of the Easter Festival and the observances and celebrations associated with it in the Middle Ages have been discussed by a number of scholars.² Since Shrove Tuesday is dependent upon when Easter Sunday falls, and Easter Sunday is a movable feast, there are a range of possible dates between February 3 and March 9 upon which Shrove Tuesday can fall.³ Mary Mansfield has noted that Carnival is difficult to trace in popular religion before the later Middle Ages, suggesting that this is in part due to a lack of consensus regarding the date at which the Lenten fast should begin. Mansfield follows Bossy in linking the historical development of Carnival with the evolution of religious rites of penance. 'The first hints of Carnival around 1250 coincide with the establishment of Ash Wednesday as a significant rite of penance for the whole community, not just for the public penitents alone; clearly Carnival depends upon a dramatic Ash Wednesday'.⁴ There have been a number of discussions of the

¹Material from this chapter has appeared in print in C. Humphrey, "'To Make a New King": Seasonal Drama and Local Politics in Norwich, 1443', *Medieval English Theatre* 17 (1995), pp. 29-41.

²See E. O. James, *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals* (1961), pp. 204-23 and 246-57, and accompanying notes.

³*Handbook of Dates for Students of English History*, ed. C. R. Cheney (1995), pp. 84 and 152.

⁴M. C. Mansfield, *The Humiliation of Sinners: Public Penance in Thirteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London, 1995), pp. 138-40 (p. 140).

customs and practices associated with Shrovetide/Carnival in late medieval and early modern Europe, as well as discussions of its form in more recent times in other parts of the world. In the former category we can mention general studies such as those by Bakhtin and Burke, and the more detailed investigations of particular towns and cities by Le Roy Ladurie (Romans), Carroll (Venice) and Simon (Lübeck), and of particular countries like France (Davis) and the Netherlands (de Roos).⁵ In respect of more recent occurrences, the discussion of Shrovetide contests in nineteenth- and twentieth-century England by E. O. James, the study of modern Brazilian Carnival by Monica Rector and the bibliography of Carnival and other festivals by John Cowley may be cited.⁶

As my interest in this chapter is to consider a body of evidence from late medieval England, the characteristics of English Shrovetide practices in this period may also be examined. In fact, a lack of evidence makes it rather difficult to say very much about the sorts of activities which were linked with Shrovetide in England in the late Middle Ages. Whilst there are a number of references to both cock-fighting and ball sports in late medieval England, activities which are commonly associated with Shrovetide, it is in practice harder to find them definitely related to this particular season as opposed to festivity or recreation more generally. The earliest association of these two activities with Shrovetide in England occurs in William Fitzstephen's late twelfth-century account of London, which we have already encountered in the Introduction:

⁵For a discussion of Bakhtin's view of Carnival see Chapter One above. See also J. Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, ed. H. Ellis, 3 vols, (third edition, repr. New York, 1970), 1 pp. 63-94, and P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), Chapter Seven: The World of Carnival, pp. 178-204. Local studies include E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans: A People's Uprising at Romans, 1579-80*, trans. M. Feeney (Harmondsworth, 1979); L. L. Carroll, 'Carnival Rites as Vehicles of Protest in Renaissance Venice', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985), pp. 487-502; E. Simon, 'Organizing and Staging Carnival Plays in Late Medieval Lübeck: A New Look at the Archival Record', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 92 (1993), pp. 57-72. Studies of a wider geographical area include N. Z. Davis, 'The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France', *Past and Present* 50 (1971), pp. 41-75; M. de Roos, 'Battles and Bottles: Shrovetide Performances in the Low Countries (c.1350-c.1550)', in *Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre*, ed. M. Twycross (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 167-79.

⁶James, *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals*, pp. 300-4; M. Rector, 'The Code and Message of Carnival: "Escolas-de-Samba"', in *Carnival!*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Berlin, 1984), pp. 37-165; J. Cowley, *Carnival and Other Seasonal Festivals in the West Indies, U.S.A. and Britain: A Selected Bibliographical Index*, *Bibliographies in Ethnic Relations* 10 (Coventry, 1991).

Moreover, each year upon the day called Carnival - to begin with the sports of boys (for we were all boys once) - boys from the schools bring fighting-cocks to their master, and the whole forenoon is given up to boyish sport; for they have a holiday in the schools that they may watch their cocks do battle. After dinner all the youth of the City goes out into the fields to a much-frequented game of ball. The scholars of each school have their own ball, and almost all the workers of each trade have theirs also in their hands.⁷

It is not entirely clear whether this is an early reference to football, or whether it denotes some other ball sport or sports.⁸ Other later examples can be adduced to show the link between cock-fighting, ball sports and Shrovetide. The accounts of John Heron, Treasurer of the Chamber, record a payment in 1493 of 20s. to Master Bray, 'for rewardes to them that brought cokkes at Shrovetide at Westminster'.⁹ There is also evidence from Chester for quite elaborate presentations and games or 'homages' which took place in the town on Shrove Tuesday in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, central to which appear to have been balls of various sorts.¹⁰ The first mention that we have of these homages is from a document which records the proceedings of January 10 1540, when the mayor, aldermen, sheriffs, common council and the crafts that were involved met and agreed to certain modifications to the way in which the homages were observed.¹¹ This account furnishes us with a detailed description of what went on prior to the changes that were made. It is noted that as far any man could remember, the shoemakers had always, on Shrove Tuesday afternoon before the mayor in the town centre, given the drapers 'one bale of Lether Caulyd a fout baule of the value of iij s iiij d or Aboue to pley at from thens to the Comon haule of the Said Citie And further At

⁷F. M. Stenton, *Norman London: an Essay; with a Translation of William Fitz Stephen's Description and a Map of London under Henry II*, Historical Association Leaflets 93 and 94 (1934), p. 26.

⁸F. P. Magoun Jr, 'Football in Medieval England and in Middle-English Literature', *American Historical Review* 35 (1929-30), pp. 33-45 (p. 34).

⁹S. Anglo, 'The Court Festivals of Henry VII', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 43 (1960), pp. 12-45 (p. 28).

¹⁰REED: *Chester*, ed. L. M. Clopper (Toronto, 1979), pp. li-ii.

¹¹REED: *Chester*, ed. Clopper, pp. 39-42.

pleasure of euill Disposid persons ...'. Furthermore, the saddlers had presented the drapers with 'Apayntyd Baule of Wood with floures and armes vpon the poynte of a spere Being goodly Arayd vpon hors bake', whilst all the men married within the city since the previous Shrove Tuesday were to present the drapers with a ball of silk or velvet.¹² According to the resolution, the shoemakers were instead to give the drapers six silver glaives, each valued at 6*d.* or above, to be awarded to whoever ran the furthest and best on foot on that day or any other. The saddlers were instead to give a silver bell worth 3*s.* 4*d.* or above for whoever ran best and furthest on horseback, whilst every man married within the city since the previous Shrove Tuesday was to give a silver arrow worth 5*d.* or above instead of the ball of silk or velvet.¹³ It was claimed that these alterations were made for the maintenance of archery and for the avoiding of the inconveniences that were associated with the football game.¹⁴

There is also evidence that plays were performed in aristocratic households and in towns at Shrovetide. The Northumberland Household Book records that 10*s.* was to be given 'in reward to them of his Lordship Chappell and other his Lordshipis Servaunts that doith play the Play befor his Lordship uppon Shroftewsdays at night yerely', although it is not clear what the subject of the play was.¹⁵ It has also been suggested from internal evidence that the fifteenth-century morality play *Mankind* was played at this time of year. Whilst the dominant view has been that *Mankind* was performed outside by a touring group of players, in Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, Tom Pettitt has forcefully argued that the play was written for and performed at the winter revels of a household, institution or guild.¹⁶ The problem here is that whilst there is evidence for a continental tradition of *Fastnachtspiel*, there is less in the way of evidence for such an English tradition. Examples from the medieval period which Pettitt cites are the surviving fragment of a Lenten play which was printed by William Rastell in 1533, as well as Gladman's riding

¹²REED: *Chester*, ed. Clopper, pp. 40 and 41.

¹³REED: *Chester*, ed. Clopper, p. 41.

¹⁴REED: *Chester*, ed. Clopper, pp. 39-40, 40-1 and 42.

¹⁵'The Earl of Northumberland's Household Book', in *The Antiquarian Repertory*, ed. F. Grose and T. Astle, 4 vols (1807-9), 4 pp. 9-344 (p. 258).

¹⁶For a discussion of these different viewpoints see T. Pettitt, 'Mankind: An English *Fastnachtspiel*?', in *Festive Drama*, ed. Twycross, pp. 190-202 (pp. 190-1).

at Norwich in 1443.¹⁷

On the basis of the evidence that has been considered so far, we might wonder about the extent to which Shrovetide was actually characterised by customs of a transgressive nature in medieval England. There are several points which can be made here. First, it is likely that for religious reasons, Shrovetide/Carnival did not develop in England in the way in which it developed in other parts of Europe in the Middle Ages, although this is an area which still requires further research.¹⁸ Accepting that we are not dealing here with a monolithic European Carnival culture but with a practice which had substantial variations depending in part upon regional religious factors leads us to consider several possible scenarios. One is that in medieval England, Shrovetide may simply have had fewer customs of a parodic or transgressive nature associated with it. Another is that such customs may have been relatively well-practised, but that they were less institutionalised, and therefore less likely to appear in the surviving evidence. In addition, it may be that for a number of reasons, the situation changed over the period in question, and it is clear from the Chester example that in any case there were substantial regional variations in degrees of institutionalisation. This situation does not pose a problem for the current thesis, as I have approached misrule as just one example of a wider cultural use of transgressive actions and imagery, whose application and function is not a given constant but is dependent upon the circumstances in which it takes place. Each case in the evidence represents an autonomous occurrence whose significance may be considered in its own right. I do not therefore have a stake in trying to argue for example that one occurrence of a Shrovetide custom suggests a wider dissemination either through time in that community or over space or both. By contrast, proponents of the conservative model tend to extrapolate a presumed function from a few examples to produce multiple but imaginary occurrences with the same function over time and space. This must be the case if they are to offer quite generalised conclusions about the function of misrule in particular communities and societies. This

¹⁷T. Pettitt, *'Mankind'*, pp. 196-7. The date of Gladman's riding is mistakenly given as 1444 (p. 196). For the text of *Good Order* see 'Old Christmas or Good Order: A Fragment of a Morality Printed by William Rastell in 1533', *Collections 4*, Malone Society (1956), pp. 33-9.

¹⁸An examination of the regional pattern would require further investigation of the medieval origins of Carnival and a fuller survey of penance in the various regions'; Mansfield, *The Humiliation of Sinners*, p. 140.

is not to say that such a process of extrapolation is intrinsically wrong, but that it must be used with caution, especially where the function of a custom is concerned.

A second point to consider is that transgression need not take place at the level of form, but that it may be accomplished in other ways in performance. It may be for example that the more subtle effects of tone, which cannot always be recovered from historical documents, were able to be exploited in performance from what might otherwise appear to be quite straightforward works or practices. As Anthony Gash has argued, a play like *Mankind* had transgressive potential, in the sense that the actors could exploit the text's ambiguities in order to articulate social and political grievances within the overall play performance, depending upon the nature of their audience.¹⁹ Gash stresses that the political meanings of these texts would have been generated *in performance*, and depended upon the active participation of the audience.²⁰ Although there is no evidence that *Mankind* was performed in this way in the fifteenth century, evidence from sixteenth-century sources does support the notion that dissident political sentiments could be expressed through festive drama. Sandra Billington has cited a number of cases, including the well-known incident at certain May games in Suffolk in 1537, where an actor playing Husbandry "said many things against gentlemen more than was in the book of the play".²¹

As I have argued in Chapters One and Two, the relationship between misrule and politics in the late medieval period is not satisfactorily explained by either the conservative or the radical paradigms. In order to gain a proper appreciation and understanding of this relationship, I have suggested that we must proceed from the historical evidence and undertake case studies upon which our generalisations may be more securely based. The evidence associated with the 1443 Norwich incident that has become known as 'Gladman's Insurrection' is sufficient to enable us to gauge its dynamics, and to consider its political meaning for the community in which it took place.

¹⁹A. Gash, 'Carnival Against Lent: The Ambivalence of Medieval Drama', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. D. Aers (Brighton, 1986), pp. 74-98.

²⁰Gash, 'Carnival Against Lent', pp. 94-6. For a discussion of audience responses to Tudor drama see P. W. White, 'Politics, Topical Meaning, and English Theater Audiences 1485-1575', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 34 (1995), pp. 41-54.

²¹S. Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 218-9 (p. 218).

First though I consider the important aspects of late medieval Norwich and the extant sources for a study of the town.

Late Medieval Norwich

In common with the other English towns which form the basis for this study, there is an excellent set of primary sources for late medieval Norwich. In the early part of this century a large portion of Norwich's records was made available in print by the publication of Hudson and Tingey's collection.²² Material relating to Norwich guilds appears in Toulmin Smith's collection of fourteenth-century returns, whilst records relating to the religious institutions of the town, particularly the Cathedral Priory, have been published by local and national record societies.²³ The surviving versions of the Norwich Grocers' Play have been edited, and a volume of evidence relating to drama in the town after 1540 has appeared in the Records of Early English Drama series; a volume of records prior to this date is forthcoming.²⁴ In addition, the chronicle of the Norwich monk Bartholomew de Cotton, who mentions the burning of the monastery at Norwich by the citizens of the town in 1278, has been edited in the Rolls Series.²⁵ There

²²*The Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. W. Hudson and J. C. Tingey, 2 vols (1906-10), a compilation of documents relating to city government from c.1086-1695. See also 'Extract from the Books of the Corporation of Norwich', ed. G. Johnson, *Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society* 1 (1847), pp. 294-9; *Leet Jurisdiction in the City of Norwich during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, ed. W. Hudson, Selden Society 5 (1891); 'Roll of the Mainpernors and Pledges before the Justices of the Peace at their Sessions at Norwich and Lynn Episcopi, 1394-1397', trans. L. J. Redstone, in *A Miscellany*, Norfolk Record Society 8 (1936), pp. 1-14.

²³For guild returns from Norwich see *English Gilds*, ed. T. Smith, EETS O.S. 40 (1870), pp. 14-44 and 443-60; see also *Records of the Guild of St. George in Norwich, 1389-1547*, ed. M. Grace, Norfolk Record Society 9 (1937). For Bishop Nicke's visitations to religious institutions in the town in 1526 and 1532 see the *Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich, A.D. 1492-1532*, ed. A. Jessopp, Camden Society N.S. 43 (1888). Other records include *Norwich Consistory Court Depositions, 1499-1512 and 1518-1530*, ed. E. D. Stone and B. Cozens-Hardy, Norfolk Record Society 10 (1938); *The Customary of the Cathedral Priory Church of Norwich*, ed. J. B. L. Tolhurst, Henry Bradshaw Society 82 (1945-6); *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428-31*, ed. N. P. Tanner, Camden Fourth Series 20 (1977).

²⁴For the Norwich Grocers' Play see *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. N. Davis, EETS Supplementary Series 1 (1970), pp. xxii-xi and 8-18. Drama records from the town from 1540 onwards may be found in *REED: Norwich 1540-1642*, ed. D. Galloway (Toronto, 1984).

²⁵*Bartholomaei de Cotton. Monachi Norwicensis, Historia Anglicana*, ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series 16 (1859), pp. 146-9.

is also a sizeable body of secondary source material. The Norfolk antiquarian Francis Blomefield drew extensively on the town's archives for his history of Norfolk, which includes a volume on Norwich.²⁶ More recent accounts of Norwich in the late medieval period include the discussion in a volume in the Historic Towns series, and Pound's work.²⁷ As well as these general surveys, there are also a number of studies which explore more specific themes as they relate to medieval Norwich, including religion and ecclesiastical institutions,²⁸ guilds,²⁹ law and order,³⁰ population³¹ and drama.³²

The main features of Norwich's medieval history may be recounted. Although there was little occupation of the site before the ninth century, the town grew substantially in the century and a half before the Conquest.³³ In the late eleventh century the cathedral seat was moved to Norwich, whilst a charter of 1194 granted the citizens of the town a number of rights including that of *firma burgi* and the same liberties and customs as the citizens of London.³⁴ During the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries Norwich

²⁶F. Blomefield, *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 11 vols (second edition, 1805-10); volume 3 is concerned with Norwich.

²⁷*The Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. M. D. Lobel, 3 vols (1969-91), 2 'Norwich'; J. F. Pound, *Tudor and Stuart Norwich* (Chichester, 1988).

²⁸See E. M. Sheppard, 'The Reformation and the Citizens of Norwich', *Norfolk Archaeology* 38 (1981-3), pp. 44-58; N. P. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370-1532*, Studies and Texts 66: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (Toronto, 1984); S. Justice, 'Inquisition, Speech, and Writing: A Case from Late-Medieval Norwich', *Representations* 48 (1994), pp. 1-29.

²⁹See B. R. McRee, 'Religious Gilds and Civic Order: The Case of Norwich in the Late Middle Ages', *Speculum* 67 (1992), pp. 69-97, and 'Unity or Division? The Social Meaning of Guild Ceremony in Urban Communities', in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, ed. B. A. Hanawalt and K. L. Reyerson, Medieval Studies at Minnesota 6 (Minneapolis and London, 1994), pp. 189-207.

³⁰See P. C. Maddern, *Violence and Social Order: East Anglia 1422-1442* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 192-205; B. R. McRee, 'Peacemaking and its Limits in Late Medieval Norwich', *English Historical Review* 109 (1994), pp. 831-66.

³¹See E. Rutledge, 'Immigration and Population Growth in Early Fourteenth-Century Norwich: Evidence from the Tithing Roll', *Urban History Yearbook* (1988), pp. 15-30.

³²See J. Dutka, 'Mystery Plays at Norwich: Their Formation and Development', *Leeds Studies in English* N.S. 10 (1978), pp. 107-20; C. Humphrey, '"To Make a New King": Seasonal Drama and Local Politics in Norwich, 1443', *Medieval English Theatre* 17 (1995), pp. 29-41.

³³*Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. Lobel, 2 'Norwich' p. 7.

³⁴*Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. Lobel, 2 'Norwich' pp. 8 and 9; *Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 12-14.

was troubled by a series of disputes over representation, government and elections in the city; it is in this context that a number of changes were made to its constitution.³⁵ In 1404 the city received a charter separating it from the county of Norfolk and making it a county by itself. This charter permitted the citizens and commonalty to choose a mayor and two sheriffs in place of the four bailiffs who had previously managed the city's affairs.³⁶ After disputed elections in the early fifteenth century, a composition which sought to regulate the method of electing civic officials was drawn up in 1415; appropriately enough, it was sealed on St Valentine's Day, 'whan creatures thourgh love of kynde as it [is] seid chesen her make'.³⁷ A further charter of 1417 permitted the citizens and commonalty to elect twenty-four aldermen who would continue in the office for life unless there was reasonable cause for their removal, as well as sixty other citizens to form a common council.³⁸ A tripartite indenture between the mayor, sheriffs and aldermen of 1424 encouraged these officers to give an example of good and quiet government.³⁹ However, further disputes were to follow in the 1430s and 1440s, and it is to these events which we now turn.

Gladman's Riding

As we have already seen in Chapter One, a merchant named John Gladman rode through the streets of Norwich dressed as a king in January 1443, an incident which has subsequently become known as 'Gladman's Insurrection'.⁴⁰ The political climate in Norwich at this time was tense, and Gladman's riding (as I think it is more appropriately called), along with certain other incidents which followed, were considered by the royal authorities to be of sufficient gravity to warrant the imprisonment of the mayor in the

³⁵McRee, 'Peacemaking and its Limits', p. 831-2.

³⁶*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 31-6.

³⁷*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 93-108 (p. 93).

³⁸*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 36-7.

³⁹*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 109-14.

⁴⁰Transcriptions of the documents which relate to this incident and its context are brought together under the heading of 'The Riot called "Gladman's Insurrection"' in *Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 338-356.

Fleet and the seizure of the city's liberties. We have also seen that there are two rather different surviving accounts of this incident. In the earlier account, the official version of events given at an inquiry at Thetford just over a month after the procession took place, Gladman is said to have ridden through the city 'like a crowned king, with a sceptre and sword carried before him'; furthermore, a number of others rode on horseback before him, 'with a crown upon their arms and carrying bows and arrows, as if they were valets of the crown of the lord king ...'.⁴¹ By contrast, in the city's defence of the incident made some years later, it was argued that Gladman had only taken part in a disport that was customary throughout the realm on Shrove Tuesday, namely to ride 'crowned as King of Kristmesse', with representations of the seasons before him and the figure of Lent following on behind.⁴² The differences between these two accounts obviously raise a number of questions, including which of them is to be treated as the more reliable basis for establishing what actually happened on this day. Although several scholars have already examined this incident in some detail, and many more have referred to it in passing, it will be my intention here to offer a new understanding of these events, which emerges from a consideration of how this particular case of misrule was implicated in the local political situation in Norwich at this time.⁴³

The most detailed study of Norwich in the period prior to the 1440s is Ben McRee's recent article on peacemaking mechanisms in the city. In an analysis of the ways in which conflicts and tensions in the city were addressed by urban leaders in the period between 1369 and 1437, McRee has argued for the 'existence of a well-recognized set of active peacemaking practices that leaders habitually used to check

⁴¹A translation of this indictment is given by N. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, pp. 149-151 (p. 149). Tanner's translation is preferred over that of Hudson (*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 340-1), whose version 'is much abbreviated and not always accurate' (Tanner p. 151 n. 51).

⁴²*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 345-6 (p. 345).

⁴³The most detailed examination of this incident and its context is given by Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, pp. 192-205. Other notable discussions (in chronological order) include Blomefield, *History of the County of Norfolk*, 3 pp. 147-55; R. L. Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster* (1966), pp. 220-5; Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, pp. 146-52; Gash, 'Carnival Against Lent', pp. 85-6; S. Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 18-20; E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), p. 14; R. H. Hilton, *English and French Towns in a Feudal Society* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 123-5.

nascent disorders'.⁴⁴ Gladman's riding and the events which preceded and followed it have to be seen in the light of these ongoing disputes and the various attempts that were made to resolve them. One individual in particular, Thomas Wetherby, who was mayor of Norwich in 1427 and 1432, played a prominent role in the disputes of the 1430s and 1440s, dividing the civic elite against itself for much of this period.⁴⁵ By October 1441, the city had become involved in a number of disputes, and the corporation had agreed to submit to the arbitration of the earl of Suffolk in order to reach a settlement. These disputes included the long-running battle between the city and the priory over jurisdictional matters, and the claim from the abbot of St Benet's Hulme that the city's newly-built mills interfered with the mills on his manor. The retrospective account in the city's *Liber Albus* of 1482 claimed that these new mills had been built to replace the city's four 'ancient' mills: 'for by cause the seid auncenne mylles stodyn longe decayde in somuche that it hadde be leke to be a desolation if the Cite hadde not the newe mylles by good dysspo[s]yd peopyll ...'.⁴⁶ Whilst the jurisdictional matters were clearly of importance to the city, the people of Norwich faced a more immediate problem in that any threat to the mills was also a threat to their food supply. The earl's verdict was issued in June 1442, and one of its demands was that the city's new mills should be removed before 30 April next. As well as entering into bonds of £50 with the prior and bishop, the mayor, sheriffs and commonalty were also to be bound £100 to oblige them to observe all decisions made about matters between them and the abbot. According to the *Liber Albus*, when this verdict was read to the commons 'they under stode by the warde that they shulde loos the myllys whyche shulde be an utter desolacion for the Cyte And shuldee cause the pepyll to goo owte of the Cyte ...'.⁴⁷

Understandably, the corporation were reluctant to put the city's seal to any documents which threatened such adverse consequences, and various legal counters to

⁴⁴McRee, 'Peacemaking and its Limits', p. 834.

⁴⁵McRee, 'Peacemaking and its Limits', p. 854.

⁴⁶*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 349-50 (p. 350) and Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, pp. 193-4. Blomefield suggests that the new mills were built in 1430 (*History of the County of Norfolk* 3, p. 147 n. 4).

⁴⁷*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 349-50 (pp. 349-50) and Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, pp. 194-5.

the award were attempted.⁴⁸ However, matters appear to have been forced to a head in the latter part of January 1443. For an account of these events, which included Gladman's riding, a city assembly where the common seal was borne away, and the 'siege' of Holy Trinity Priory, we have three main sources of information. First, there are the two indictments taken at the inquest at Thetford on February 28 1443, one of which has already been mentioned. Second, there is the city's defence of Gladman's riding which occurs in the presentments made against Wetherby's faction, thought to have been written circa 1448, also mentioned above. Third, there is the account in the city's *Liber Albus*, written 1482, which recalls these events.⁴⁹ Whilst each of these documents is selective in what information it relates and what it leaves out, something of an overall picture can be pieced together from them.

According to the *Liber Albus* account, Wetherby's supporters and the abbot's counsel put pressure on the corporation to call an assembly where their bond could be sealed:

And after this for the dylyvere of the [a]warde Anno xxj^{mo} [of the reign of Henry VI] grett labours were made be the seid Wederby and hys adherentes and the councell of the seid Abbott's to have hadde the seid obligacion of an C *li* under the Comon Seall of the Cite And the Comones wold never agree And so after warde in the day of the convecion of Seynt Poule Anno xxj H. vj^{ti} [January 25 1443] the seid Thomas Wederby and the Abbott's Councell and other that they cowde gette ouer to them come to Norwich and caused on William Hempsted that tyme beyng maire to sette a Semble And so he dede ...⁵⁰

This account, written almost forty years after the event, reads as if the assembly was called immediately, but we might expect that some advance notice would have been

⁴⁸Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, pp. 195-6.

⁴⁹As mentioned above, one of the 1443 Thetford indictments has been translated by Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, pp. 149-51, and it is also translated and summarised in *Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 340-1. Maddern has briefly summarised both indictments (*Violence and Social Order*, pp. 196-7). Extracts from the presentments against Wetherby's faction written circa 1448 are given in *Records of the City of Norwich* 1 pp. 343-6, whilst the 1482 *Liber Albus* account is given on pp. 350-2.

⁵⁰*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 350-1.

necessary in order to organise affairs. The city's fourteenth-century city Custumal recommended that assemblies be called on holy days, when there were no markets in the city, for the convenience of merchants; although this guidance was not always adhered to, a matter of this magnitude would have clearly required a full turnout, and so January 25 would have been a likely date for a meeting after Christmas.⁵¹ Thus the citizens who, according to the *Liber Albus*, had 'seid that the Abbott shude neuer have ther obligacion under ther comon Sealle in destruccion of the Kyng's Cite to performe that a warde', were faced with the prospect of a common assembly where exactly that was to be done.⁵² It is in this context that on Tuesday January 22, three days before this critical city assembly, that Gladman's riding took place. Although some commentators have expressed doubt as to exactly when it happened, the account taken at Thetford just over a month later clearly states that it was on this Tuesday that the mayor and commonalty, allegedly planning an insurrection, 'then and there arranged for John Gladman of the said city, merchant, to ride in the city on a horse, like a crowned king ...'.⁵³ As we have seen, it was claimed that Gladman had a sceptre and sword carried before him, and that he was accompanied by others acting as valets of the crown, and he also alleged to have had a hundred more people following on horseback and on foot behind. 'They went around urging people in the city to come together and to make an insurrection and riots there'.⁵⁴ The city's version of these events, written circa 1448, gives a somewhat different view of the incident. Their account appears in a presentment which details the wrongs done to the mayor, aldermen and commonalty of Norwich by Sir Thomas Tudenham and John Heydon, allies of Thomas Wetherby, and others. The city alleged that at the inquest at Thetford on 28 February 1443 Tudenham and Heydon, 'fyndyng in their conceyt no maner mater of trouthe wherof they myght cause the said meir and comonalte ther to be

⁵¹Chapter 45, in *Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 191-2. There is a mitigating clause to this recommendation; 'unless it be that it ought to be done for some special business specially touching the lord King or very urgent business of the whole city wherein turns peril to the same, in which case no consideration of any time can be had' (Hudson's translation). Whilst the latter situation could no doubt be said to apply in this case, the corporation had hardly acted as if it did - by the time the assembly met, over seven months had already passed since the award was issued.

⁵²*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 p. 350.

⁵³Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, p. 149.

⁵⁴Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, p. 150.

indited, ymagyned thus as insueth':

And wher that it was so that on[e] John Gladman of Norwich which was ever and at this oure is a man of sad disposicion and true and fethful to God and to the King, of disporte as is and ever hath ben accustomed in ony Cite or Burgh through al this reame on fastyngong tuesday made a disporte with his neighbourghs having his hors trapped with tyneseyle and otherwyse dysgysyn things crowned as King of Kristmesse in token that all merthe shuld end with [th]e twelve monthes of [th]e yer, afore hym eche moneth disgysd after [th]e seson [th]erof, and Lenten cladde in white with redde herrings skinnes and his hors trapped with oyster shelles after him in token [th]at sadnesse and abstinence of merth shulde followe and an holy tyme; and so rode in diuerse stretes of [th]e Cite with other peple with hym disgysed making merthe and disporte and pleyes; the said Thomas and John Heydon amongs many other ful straunge and untrue presentments made by perjury at the seid Inquest caused the seid meir and comonalte and the said John Gladman to ben indited of that, that thei shuld an ymagined to a made a comon rysyng and a coroune the said John Gladman as kyng with coron ceptre and diademe wher thei never ment it ne never suych thyng ymagined as in the said presentment it shewith more pleyn ...⁵⁵

The city appear to have been arguing that a procession that was customary to Shrove Tuesday ('fastyngong tuesday') had been presented to the jury at Thetford as a common rising, and although they do not give the date of this procession it is clear that they were referring to Gladman's riding on January 22 1443.⁵⁶ The issue of why a procession that was customary to Shrovetide was put on at this time, five weeks prior to Shrove Tuesday, is carefully avoided, but the passage depends for its force on the premise that a mock king who is part of a Shrovetide celebration is harmless enough, associated as he is with 'merthe and disporte and pleyes'.

The significance of Gladman's riding and the problem of these two rather different

⁵⁵*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 345-6.

⁵⁶Some commentators have read 'on fastyngong tuesday' as the actual date of Gladman's riding, but it is clear that we should envisage a comma after this phrase (see for example Hilton, *English and French Towns*, p. 125). The city were only claiming that Gladman had put on a procession that was *customary* to Shrovetide, and do not in fact mention a date at all, since presumably it would be obvious enough which procession they were referring to, and what time of the year that it took place.

accounts of it will be discussed in more detail below. First though, it is important to have some idea of the events which followed, in order to understand the relationship of the riding to them. We continue from where we left off in the *Liber Albus* with the mayor, William Hempstede, having called an assembly on Friday January 25:

[the] which Semble hewlde from [blank] of the Cloke tyll v after And grete importunes labours made to have hadde the obligacion sealed under the Comon Seale the Comons of the Cite gaddred them to geder in a grett number And come to the halle and token a wey the Comon Seall to that entent that the obligacion shulde nott be a Sealyd ...⁵⁷

Also on this day, the indictments taken at Thetford (so presumably after the assembly) allege, the mayor, commonalty and three thousand others gathered in the city, summoned by the ringing of various bells. Shouting "Let us burn the priory, and kill the prior and monks", they laid siege to the priory until four o'clock on the following afternoon, when the monks handed over certain evidence concerning an indenture made in 1429.⁵⁸ This document had been sealed in order to resolve an earlier jurisdictional dispute between the city and the priory, although its outcome had been to the priory's advantage. Philippa Maddern has argued that the Thetford account of a violent 'siege' of the priory is not borne out in the surviving evidence; the only known damage done was to the priory's prison and stocks, and the besiegers even had to kidnap a neighbouring gentlemen and threaten to break his windows if he would not aim a gun at the priory walls.⁵⁹ Still, these disturbances were sufficient grounds for the abbot of St Benet's and Wetherby to accuse the mayor and citizens of riot and insurrection; they 'made a Subgestyon to the Kyng and hys Councell ageynste the seid maire and many other[s] that they werre rysers ageynst the Kyng ...'.⁶⁰

Consequently, a commission of oyer and terminer was established on February 11 in order to make enquiries into the lack of good government by the mayor, sheriffs and

⁵⁷*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 p. 351.

⁵⁸Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, p. 150.

⁵⁹Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, pp. 182-3 and 197-8.

⁶⁰*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 p. 351.

aldermen.⁶¹ In addition, the mayor and other citizens were summoned to Westminster, and after appearing 'before the lords' on February 13 the mayor was fined £50 and committed to the Fleet, remaining there until March 26.⁶² As we have already seen, an inquest took place at Thetford on February 28, at which the accusation was that Gladman had ridden through the town like a crowned king; this inquest was adjourned, and it was at a further hearing at Norwich on March 4 that the city's attorney abandoned their plea, allegedly due to the influence of Thomas Wetherby. At a final inquest at Thetford on March 14 it was judged that the liberties and franchises of the city should be seized; they were not restored until November 12 1447, after a payment of 1000 marks.⁶³ This course of events can be followed in the minutes of the meetings of the Privy Council, where the king asked for a search of the pipe rolls of the Exchequer in order to see how the franchises were last seized, and preparations were made for John Clyfton to become governor of the town in such an eventuality.⁶⁴ In addition, in the absence of the mayor at Norwich, 'Thomas Wedyrby and his adherentys in the mene tym toke upon them to be rewlars of the cite ...'. On March 10, they took the common seal from the common chest and sealed obligations to the abbot of St Benet's and to the prior and to the bishop of Norwich, although the bond between the mayor and aldermen and the abbot was later proved to be illegal, since the mayor had been in prison when it had been sealed.⁶⁵ This was apparently not the only sealing which took place on this day; an indenture which exempted the Bishop's Palace from the jurisdiction of the city, according to the judgement of the earl of Suffolk, was also sealed on March 10, 1443.⁶⁶ The contested mills were also damaged to such an extent that the town's bakers were

⁶¹*Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1441-6*, p. 199.

⁶²*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 p. 351. The certificate of the imprisonment of Hempstede, sealed July 3 1482, is given on pp. 354-5.

⁶³*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 351-2 and 343. An exemplification of the restitution of liberties, granted December 1 1447, is given on pp. 355-6.

⁶⁴*Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council of England (1386-1542)*, ed. N. H. Nicolas, 7 vols (1834-7), 5 (1835), pp. 229, 235 and 242-4.

⁶⁵*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 p. 352-4 (p. 352).

⁶⁶'Indenture between Thomas Bishop of Norwich and the Mayor, Sheriffs, and Commonalty', *Ecclesiastical Documents*, ed. J. Hunter, Camden Society (1840), pp. 75-7.

forced to use mills ten miles away from the city for a time.⁶⁷

Previous scholarly discussions of Gladman's riding have tended to take the line that the two different accounts of the incident are mutually exclusive; in some cases, an explanation has been put forward for which of them is to be preferred, whilst in others, only one of the versions has been cited. Norman Tanner for example suggests that the Thetford indictment 'seems nearer the truth than the city government's version for several reasons', including the fact that 'the city government offered no explanation why a "disport" such as was customary on Shrove Tuesday took place more than a month earlier'.⁶⁸ Philippa Maddern has taken the view that in the document of circa 1448 the citizens were trying to pass Gladman's riding off as a harmless Shrove Tuesday procession, when in fact it had been martial in character and associated with the events of March 25:

Their whole endeavour was to prove it innocent, rather than riotous, by alleging that it was part of the customary 'merth and disporte and pleyes' of Shrovetide ... This was a lie; January 25 fell a good five weeks before Shrove Tuesday in 1443. We must therefore assume that the city hoped, by these means, to palliate an undeniable truth.⁶⁹

Maddern's reasoning is that since Shrove Tuesday was at least five weeks away (on March 5), the procession could not possibly have been part of the celebrations associated with Shrovetide.⁷⁰ Hence, in the absence of any explanation for why a Shrovetide procession might have occurred in January, the Shrovetide link is perceived to be a cover story designed to exonerate the city, leaving the Thetford indictment to become the 'truth' of what actually took place. A more overtly martial procession may also help to explain the disturbances which were to follow on Friday 25 and over the weekend. There are certain problems with this argument, such as how those who wrote the circa 1448

⁶⁷*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 p. 352.

⁶⁸Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, pp. 148 and 148-9.

⁶⁹Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, p. 197.

⁷⁰*Handbook of Dates*, ed. Cheney, p. 144.

passage could have hoped to pass off a misrepresentation of this magnitude, given that any recourse to the Thetford indictments would have exposed them immediately. More importantly though, the plausibility of this argument depends upon the absence of a reason for *why* a group of citizens might have chosen to put on a Shrovetide pageant at this particular time. I believe that it is possible to put forward an explanation for why Gladman's riding may have taken this form.

As we have seen, Gladman's riding took place several days prior to a crucial common assembly, at which the city's representatives were due to seal a document binding the city to carry out the Earl of Suffolk's judgement to dismantle the new mills before April 30. My suggestion is that a group of Norwich citizens chose to stage a public display of their dissatisfaction with the situation, and it is also possible that they had the intention of affecting the outcome of the forthcoming assembly. Accordingly, they drew upon and mobilized festival imagery that was particularly appropriate to the situation that the city faced, thereby confronting its population with a symbolic dramatisation of their own predicament; the imagery deployed was the procession customary to Shrove Tuesday, presumably in a similar form to that outlined in the document of circa 1448. Clearly, the citizens and other people who encountered these celebrations outside of their usual calendar context would have been struck by their anomalous timing, and made to think about their purpose and what they signified. As we saw in Chapter Two, Pettitt has shown how festival customs were a feature of English revolts between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century, and I would argue that this case shows how such customs also had a place in disputes of a more local, non-revolutionary character.⁷¹

Gladman's riding highlighted the opposition between the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Lent; in the procession the figure of Lent followed after the King of Christmas. This image would have had an especially topical meaning in the context of the city's disputes with a number of local ecclesiastical institutions. As Lent was a period of fasting, the personification of Lent this early in the year may have helped

⁷¹T. Pettitt, "'Here Comes I, Jack Straw:' English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore* 95 (1984), pp. 3-20. Pettitt does mention Gladman's riding, treating it as an example of 'seasonal revelry [which] degenerated into a serious riot' (p. 5). In light of the above discussion it should be clear that this incident is more properly considered as an example of where a festival custom was deployed outside of its calendar context, according to Pettitt's scheme.

to focus anxieties about how the city would be victualled in the future, given the impending destruction of the city's mills. Furthermore, whilst the calendar period of Lent would come and go, questions about food supply would continue to trouble the city; Easter Sunday fell on 21 April in 1443, just over a week before the deadline for the mills' demolition.⁷² The fact that Lent was at the rear of the procession, 'in token that sadnesse and abstinence of merth shulde followe and an holy tyme', had more than just a seasonal meaning in this context; it was a symbolic expression of the city's predicament, and perhaps also an incitement to take action to forestall these consequences.⁷³ In making this link with the question of food supply, I am not of course suggesting that this was the only meaning that Gladman's riding could have had. Given the complexity of civic affairs at this time, there are no doubt all sorts of other meanings that could be drawn from this incident. However, as the choice of imagery in this situation appears to have been particularly well-suited to the immediate context in which it was deployed, it offers a plausible explanation for why Gladman's riding may have taken the form of a procession customary to Shrovetide.

The appropriateness of its imagery was not the only strategic feature of the Shrovetide format. A further advantage which it offered was that if a defence of the incident became necessary, the participants could always plead that their actions were entirely harmless, just play and nothing else. This is in fact the defence that the Norwich citizens had recourse to some years later, stressing that Gladman's riding had involved 'making merthe and disporte and pleyes', rather than the common rising of which they had been accused.⁷⁴ This use of a particular discourse of play is also found in other cases where drama or games were involved in contentious matters. To cite two examples, at York in February 1538 one Thomas Atkinson, merchant, 'of the aige of xxvj yeres or ther abouts', and John Bean, innholder, went to the house of Sir Christopher Painter, priest and chaplain to the mayor of York, between ten and eleven o'clock (it is not clear whether this was in the morning or the evening). Their purpose was apparently to play a practical joke on the priest by imitating the mayor's servants. Thomas confessed to

⁷²*Handbook of Dates*, ed. Cheney, p. 144.

⁷³*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 p. 345.

⁷⁴*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 pp. 345-6.

saying to him, 'Sir Christofer, my Lord Mayer prays you to be with hym in the mornynge betyms for he hath strangers, that he must bryng a pyke in the mornynge very tymelie about thre or iiij of the clokk for they ryd very tymly fro my Lord Mayer'.⁷⁵ Unfortunately for the hoaxers they were recognised and consequently brought before the city council to be examined. Thomas accused John of putting him up to it, but in his defence John declared that he, Thomas and six co-conspirators were 'all agreyd that the said Thomas Atkynson shuld say suche words unto the said Sir Christofer *for a sport and Pastyme and for noon other purpos*'. They were all committed to ward to await punishment at the mayor's discretion.⁷⁶ Another example comes from Lancashire in 1536, in the context of the Pilgrimage of Grace. In this case it was alleged that one Hugh Parker and others, with 'their faces colored and disguysed and in harnes', visited various houses in Chorley around midnight in order to see if certain householders would be sworn to the commons. In his defence before the Justices of the Peace of Lancaster, Parker declared that he had met two men who had been playing games at an alehouse; he 'thoght they had gon to make pastym for he being ignorant of their vngracious purpose foloed theym *and no other thing dyd nor intended to doo but myrthe and pastyme* orels he wold not haue foloed theym in nowise ...'.⁷⁷

Whilst the defendants in these two cases were not in a position to deny their actions, they could at least hope to diminish their significance by claiming that these actions were interpreted the wrong way, having only been in play or jest. In the case of Gladman's riding, this is exactly what was attempted some years later, although it is not clear whether such a defence was used at the trial which followed the incident itself. The *Liber Albus* account suggests that Thomas Delrow, who had been appointed by Wetherby in Hempstede's absence to represent the mayor, sheriffs and commonalty on March 4, 1443, relinquished their plea 'at the request of the seid Thomas Wedyrby and his adherents', and so we do not know what their defence would have been.⁷⁸ In the light

⁷⁵*York Civic Records 4*, ed. A Raine, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 108 (1943), pp. 28-9 (p. 28) (my emphasis).

⁷⁶*York Civic Records 4*, ed. Raine, pp. 28-9 (p. 29).

⁷⁷*REED: Lancashire*, ed. D. George (Toronto, 1991) pp. 11-13 (pp. 11 and 12) (my emphasis).

⁷⁸*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey. 1 p. 352.

of the defence that was put forward in the circa 1448 document though, I think that it is reasonable to assume that it may have been along similar lines. To sum up then, I have argued that there are two key reasons to support the view that Gladman's riding took the form of a Shrovetide procession; first, it was an apposite comment on the city's current situation and second, it offered the participants a means of covering themselves if that proved to be necessary.

The irony of Gladman's riding is that some of the individuals who stood against the city were opponents of equal creativity and resourcefulness. At the Thetford inquest on February 28, Tudenham and Heydon chose to represent the procession as an usurpation of royal authority, thereby framing all of the events which followed in a narrative of rebellion and insurrection. Also, according to the *Liber Albus*, efforts were apparently made by the abbot of St Benet's to have the mayor and other citizens arrested as traitors even before their appearance at Westminster on February 13. Whilst in London, Benedict Joly was confronted by a sergeant-at-arms, who asked him if he was from Norwich, and Joly replied that he was. 'Than seid the seriant of armys that he was a traytour And a Ryser ageynst the Kyng And that he was one of thoo[se] for to make a newe Kyng And so he ledde hym forth to pryson ...'.⁷⁹ The narrative of insurrection was clearly persuasive at the time, even perhaps being one reason why the Norwich citizens abandoned their defence on March 4, and, as we have seen, it has had an influence upon modern scholarly accounts of these events. We have also seen the consequences that followed, which included the destruction of the city's mills, the imprisonment of the mayor and the loss of the city's liberties and franchises. In the short term then, Gladman's riding does not appear to have been very much of a 'success', if we were expecting it to have had some immediate and beneficial impact upon the city's fortunes. In the longer term however, as Philippa Maddern suggests, 'the city's policy of calculated bravado did it no harm. Suffolk's hated award of 1442 was never properly sealed; after 1447 the city repaired the broken mills, argued their case again with the abbot of St Benet's Hulme (1481), and, after renegotiating the dispute with the priory (1517-24), finally brought it to a more favourable settlement'.⁸⁰

⁷⁹*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. Hudson and Tingey, 1 p. 351. A further irony was that the mayor and other citizens were boarding at 'the Kyng's Hedde in Chepe'.

⁸⁰Maddern, *Violence and Social Order*, p. 205.

In Chapter One we saw that in both the conservative and the radical paradigms misrule was considered to be an expression of resentment to class or gender subordination; where these paradigms differ is on what they perceive the effects of this expression to have been. In political terms, part of the perceived motivation for misrule is that it attempts to alter the existing state of power relations, although the form of the practice is such that it may not succeed in securing these aims. My argument in Chapter Two was that since transgression is a basic cultural process which works by means of an inversion or intermingling of social categories, it is mistaken to argue that misrule is *intrinsically* political; the degree to which it offers a challenge to the status quo will always depend upon the contingent factors which give rise to and develop during a specific situation. Furthermore, I argued that even in cases where misrule carries a political import, the effects of that meaning cannot be decided in the abstract (subversion *or* containment), but will again depend upon the forces at work in that situation. In the case of Gladman's riding at Norwich, we have a concrete example of how both of these dynamics were played out. First, we can see how the practice of mounting a Shrovetide pageant, rather than being something which is inherently radical because it contains a mock king, actually *became* politicised as a result of the context into which it was deliberately inserted. As such, the political significance of the pageant was the fact that its imagery was particularly apposite *for the local situation at that juncture*. The discourses of rebellion and of harmless play which have been identified may be understood as opposing ways of negotiating the political meaning of Gladman's riding and the subsequent events in which it was implicated. Second, it is clear that the outcome of this performance cannot be decided in isolation from the other tactics which were employed by the citizens in January 1443, and that the resulting political gains and losses must be considered over the longer term. These conclusions offer an altogether different means of understanding the relationship between misrule and politics in late medieval England in comparison with the existing paradigms.

Chapter Four:

***Vegetation-gathering at Coventry
in the Fifteenth Century***

Introduction

In common with the preceding chapter, the aim of this chapter is to explore the relationship between misrule and politics in the late medieval English town by means of a case study, and in this instance I will be concerned with the custom of vegetation-gathering at Coventry in the later fifteenth century. This case study will examine how the custom figured in a long-running local dispute over land-use and rights in the town at this period. First, I will consider the custom more generally as it existed in late medieval England.

Ronald Hutton's account of the ritual year in England circa 1490 to circa 1540, which forms the first chapter of *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, supplies a welcome overview of the ways in which vegetation was used in festival occasions in late medieval England. These uses include holly and ivy for decoration at Christmas, branches for Palm Sunday, rushes and flowers on Easter Day, maypoles at May Day and bonfires and decoration at Midsummer.¹ As regards holly and ivy, Hutton notes that '[t]he urban churchwardens' accounts for the period virtually all show payments for these evergreens, and their absence from the accounts of country churches is almost certainly due to the fact that they were freely available in the parish'.² This would suggest the existence of a market for seasonal vegetation in towns, with demand coming from churches, guilds and householders. Individuals wanting vegetation did not necessarily have to pay for it though, since there is evidence for customary rights to vegetation from private land at festival periods: this is a matter which Hutton does not address. Although it comes from fourteenth-century France, a well-documented case of vegetation-gathering provides a clear example of the sorts of issues that were at stake when such a practice encroached upon private land.³ In 1311, a dispute arose between the Hôtel-Dieu of Pontoise and the commune of Chambly, over the use of the wood of the Tour

¹R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 5-48 (pp. 5-6, 20-1, 25-6, 27-30 and 37-9).

²Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 5.

³A. W. Lewis, 'Forest Rights and the Celebration of May: Two Documents from the French Vexin, 1311-1318', *Medieval Studies* 53 (1991), pp. 259-77. I am grateful to John Arnold for this reference.

du Lay:

The wood of the Tour du Lay had been given to the Hôtel-Dieu of Pontoise by Saint Louis in 1261. The religious claimed that they had enjoyed uncontested possession of it since then, but it emerges from the dispute that the inhabitants of Chambly had by custom exercised some rights to gather wood and other materials from it ... According to the spokesman for the religious, in the past the *ministres* of the Hôtel-Dieu, in their goodness and innocence, had allowed the townsfolk to gather flowers and leafy boughs from the wood on feast days during the month of May; but the spokesman claimed that only twenty persons at a time had gone there for that purpose. On two occasions in early May 1311, however, large crowds from the town - five hundred persons on the first day, more than one thousand on the second - went to the wood at the direction of the communal officials, collecting great quantities of timber and doing extensive damage to the forest.⁴

The full details of the case need not concern us here; for our purposes, it is sufficient to note that in the accord of 1318 that was concluded between the officers of Chambly and the Hôtel-Dieu, the townspeople were limited to collecting just one bundle or handful of greenery each from the wood on May 1 until noon.⁵ Unfortunately the reasons why so much damage was done or was alleged to have been done in early May 1311 do not emerge in the evidence. It is conceivable that the custom of vegetation-gathering was exploited by the inhabitants of Chambly in this instance as a way of articulating local grievances about the Hôtel-Dieu, or that the religious community decided for some reason not to tolerate the usual, relatively mild damage that the custom entailed, and made these allegations to limit it still further. In fact, these two explanations may be considered less as alternative scenarios and more as different perspectives upon the same set of events.

Where vegetation-gathering did encroach upon private land in this way, the practice fits the criteria of misrule, that is, the temporary transgression of a law or norm as part of a festival occasion. The practice of vegetation-gathering has not received anything like the degree of attention in the secondary sources that other transgressive

⁴Lewis, 'Forest Rights and the Celebration of May', pp. 259-60 (p. 260).

⁵Lewis, 'Forest Rights and the Celebration of May', p. 266.

customs have had, probably because the evidence for it is fairly scarce; cases are only likely to have been recorded when the custom became disputed locally or was involved in a more substantial incident. In the latter class, we may consider Steven Justice's arguments regarding the evidence for the public burning of documents during the English Rising of 1381.⁶ Justice suggests that these conflagrations in Corpus Christi week anticipated the bonfires customary at midsummer which, because of where the firewood came from, helped to celebrate neighbourliness and community prior to harvest:

Midsummer fostered "amity amongst neighbors" by celebrating enmity against the lord, from whose land the firewood seems to have been poached in symbolic contempt of a resented seigneurial privilege ... The rebels in 1381 translated the symbolic resistance of midsummer into actual resistance, building their fires not from the underbrush of the manorial forests but from the literate underpinnings of manorial rule.⁷

There are two important points here. The idea that the sense of community traditionally associated with midsummer bonfires was something that emerged through encroachment is an interesting one, although it is not clear what evidence we would use to substantiate this thesis. More significant is Justice's suggestion about the possible correspondence between midsummer bonfires and the public burning of documents in 1381. This example may be understood in the terms of the arguments that were set out in Chapters One and Two, which were that rather than being conceived of as mere safety-valves, in certain circumstances transgressive customs could give shape and meaning to direct political activity.

On a smaller scale than risings and revolts but nonetheless extremely important are the cases where the custom of vegetation-gathering was involved in local incidents of protest and opposition in late medieval England. Our sample here will depend upon the

⁶S. Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* 27 (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 150-6.

⁷Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, pp. 150-1 (pp. 151 and 155); "amity amongst neighbors" comes from Stow's description of midsummer bonfires at London (J. Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, 2 vols (Oxford, 1908), 1 p. 101).

extent to which we are prepared to infer that this practice became an issue in cases where it is not explicitly mentioned. For example, Rosamund Faith has discussed the struggles over labour, rights to game and timber, and the use of hand-mills on the St Albans manor of Park in Hertfordshire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Although Faith does not mention what this timber was used for, it may be that prosecutions for taking wood from private woodland represent the procurement of vegetation for festival occasions as well as for building and for firewood. It is interesting to note that at St Albans in 1381, when gates and enclosures were destroyed in the abbey woods, branches taken from the trees were handed around at a meeting of townspeople and peasants.⁸ There are more concrete examples however, such as 'Evil May-Day' in London in 1517, probably the most well-known English example of where direct action coincided with a festival occasion; this incident will be discussed in more detail below.⁹ There is also evidence that vegetation-gathering became an issue at Coventry in the later fifteenth-century. As we have already seen, Charles Phythian-Adams has discussed the Coventry evidence, suggesting that this was just one of a number of festival customs where everyday norms were breached, but which meant that the participants were accepting the status quo in the long run.¹⁰ I have already reviewed Phythian-Adams's comments in this area and the objections that have been raised by other scholars. As I have argued, conclusions about how such customs were related to local politics and social structure can only be reached *in the particular*, not just at the level of the individual community but also over time, since repeated performances of what is ostensibly the same custom in fact take place in different circumstances and with different participants. A proper understanding of the relationship between misrule and politics must always proceed from a close consideration of the historical evidence. My aim in this chapter therefore will be to examine how and why vegetation-gathering

⁸R. Faith, 'The "Great Rumour" of 1377 and Peasant Ideology', in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 43-73 (pp. 66-8 and 65-6).

⁹For discussions of this incident see for example J. J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (1976), pp. 98-9; P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), p. 204; T. Pettitt, "'Here Comes I, Jack Straw:': English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore* 95 (1984), pp. 3 and 5.

¹⁰C. 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*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack (1972), pp. 57-85 (p. 69).

became an issue of contention in Coventry during this period. The way in which recreational and festival activities were used tactically in local conflicts in late medieval England is I suggest the appropriate model for considering the evidence for vegetation-gathering at Coventry. I will first consider the sources for such a study and some of the important features of the medieval town.

Late Medieval Coventry

A discussion of the civic archives by the City Archivist provides a useful overview of the primary sources surviving for medieval Coventry.¹¹ The town's *Leet Book*, which covers affairs between 1422 and 1555, is one of the most well-known and widely-cited civic documents from medieval England.¹² A number of other important documents have appeared in print, for example in Jeaffreson's report on the manuscripts of Coventry and in local and national record society publications.¹³ The records of the town's most prestigious guild, the Trinity guild, have been edited, and Coventry guild returns appear in Toulmin Smith's collection.¹⁴ Unfortunately there is very little material associated with the town's religious institutions surviving; as well as losing its cathedral during the Second World War, Coventry also lost its original cathedral priory after the Reformation. The fifteenth-century constitutions of the parish clerks of Holy Trinity

¹¹A. A. Dibben, 'Midland Archives Collections: II. The City Record Office, Coventry', *Midland History* 2 (1973-4), pp. 99-109.

¹²*The Coventry Leet Book*, ed. M. D. Harris, EETS O.S. 134, 135, 138 and 146 (1907-13).

¹³'The Manuscripts of the Corporation of Coventry (Second Report)', ed. J. C. Jeaffreson, in *The Manuscripts of Shrewsbury and Coventry Corporations ... and Others*, Historical Manuscripts Commission Fifteenth Report, Appendix, Part 10 (1899), pp. 101-60; *Rolls of the Warwickshire and Coventry Sessions of the Peace 1377-1397*, ed. E. G. Kimball, Dugdale Society 16 (1939); *The Statute Merchant Rolls of Coventry, 1392-1416*, ed. A. Beardwood, Dugdale Society 17 (1939); *The Early Records of Medieval Coventry*, ed. P. R. Coss, *Records of Social and Economic History* N.S. 11 (1986).

¹⁴*The Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John the Baptist and St. Catherine of Coventry*, ed. M. D. Harris, Dugdale Society 13 (1935); *The Records of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John the Baptist and St. Katherine of Coventry*, ed. G. Templeman, Dugdale Society 19 (1944). For guild returns from Coventry see *English Gilds*, ed. T. Smith, EETS O.S. 40 (1870), pp. 226-38.

church have been printed.¹⁵ Two Corpus Christi plays from Coventry survive and have been printed, those of the shearmen and taylor and the weavers, whilst a volume of material relating to drama in the town has appeared in the Records of Early English Drama series.¹⁶

There is a substantial body of secondary material relating to medieval Coventry. The town is discussed in Dugdale's study of Warwickshire, whilst Harris' study of the medieval town was published at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Other discussions of medieval Coventry have appeared in volumes of the Victoria County History and Historic Towns series.¹⁸ Phythian-Adams's major study of the town and its economic fortunes has been extremely influential in the field of urban studies.¹⁹ There has also been extensive discussion of the early history of Coventry and whether it can be said to have been divided into an Earl's half and a Prior's half, a situation which is complicated by the fact that some of the charters have been identified as forgeries; notable discussions include those of Lancaster, Davis, Coss and Gooder and Gooder.²⁰ The

¹⁵Appendix I: The Constitutions of the Parish Clerks at Trinity Church Coventry Made in 1462', in *The Clerk's Book of 1549*, ed. J. W. Legg, Henry Bradshaw Society 25 (1903), pp. 57-63.

¹⁶*Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. H. Craig, EETS E.S. 87 (second edition, 1957); *REED: Coventry*, ed. R. W. Ingram (Manchester, 1981). See also E. Baldwin, 'Some Suggested Emendations to the Records of Early English Drama: Coventry', *REED Newsletter* 16 (2) (1991), pp. 8-10.

¹⁷W. Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (second edition, 1730); M. D. Harris, *Life in an Old English Town: A History of Coventry from the Earliest Times, Compiled from Official Records* (1898).

¹⁸*Victoria County History of Warwickshire* 8 (1969), pp. 1-416; *The Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. M. D. Lobel, 3 vols (1969-91), 2 'Coventry'.

¹⁹C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Coventry, 1979).

²⁰J. C. Lancaster, 'The Coventry Forged Charters: A Reconsideration', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 27 (1954), pp. 113-40; R. H. C. Davis, *The Early History of Coventry*, Dugdale Society Occasional Papers 24 (1976); P. R. Coss, 'Coventry before Incorporation; A Re-interpretation', *Midland History* 2 (1973-4), pp. 137-51, and review of Davis, *The Early History of Coventry*, (1976), in *Midland History* 4 (1977-8), pp. 123-4; A. and E. Gooder, 'Coventry before 1355: Unity or Division?', *Midland History* 6 (1981), pp. 1-38. See also Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, p. 118 n. 1.

town's craft guilds²¹ and its architecture²² have also received attention. We may also note an early work by Sharp on drama in the town, French's discussion of the Lady Godiva legend, and Phythian-Adams's article on civic ceremony.²³

The historic association of Lady Godiva with Coventry is well-known: Leofric, Earl of Mercia, had married Godiva by 1035 and the couple founded a Benedictine abbey at Coventry in 1043. This abbey was taken over by the Bishop of Chester when he transferred his seat to Coventry in the late eleventh century. By means of forged charters the Bishop established his right to Holy Trinity church and its parish to create the 'Prior's Half'.²⁴ As mentioned above, there has been considerable discussion of the extent to which Coventry was divided and ruled by separate lords prior to early fourteenth century, although the recent scholarly view has been that this division perhaps mattered less in practice than in theory. In 1330 the manor of Cheylsmore devolved on Isabel, queen of Edward I, and following a judgement against the priory during this decade the Queen became lord of the town.²⁵ The town subsequently gained the right to elect a council, mayor and bailiffs, these privileges being granted in 1345.²⁶ The prior continued to contest these settlements, and whilst a tripartite indenture between the Queen, the mayor and bailiffs and the prior in 1355 sought to resolve the situation, there were further disputes over rights to land in the fifteenth century, and it is these matters which form the basis of this chapter.²⁷ My discussion will be divided into two parts, with

²¹M. H. M. Hulton, *'Company and Fellowship': The Medieval Weavers of Coventry*, Dugdale Society Occasional Papers 31 (1987).

²²F. W. Woodhouse, *The Churches of Coventry: A Short History of the City and its Medieval Remains* (1909); J. C. Lancaster, *St Mary's Hall: A Guide to the Building, its History and Contents*, The Coventry Papers 3 (second edition: Coventry, 1981); R. K. Morris, 'St Mary's Hall and the Medieval Architecture of Coventry', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society* N.S. 32 (1988), pp. 8-27.

²³Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen'; T. Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* (repr. East Ardsley, 1973); K. L. French, 'The Legend of Lady Godiva and the Image of the Female Body', *Journal of Medieval History* 18 (1) (1992), pp. 3-19.

²⁴*Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. Lobel, 2 'Coventry' p. 3.

²⁵*Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. Lobel, 2 'Coventry' p. 6.

²⁶*Calendar of Charter Rolls, 1341-1417*, p. 36.

²⁷*Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. Lobel, 2 'Coventry' p. 6.

a section on the events of 1469 setting out the background to those of 1480.

Disputes at Whitley and Hasilwood, 1469

The period between 1469 and 1471 in England was a politically turbulent one, and Coventry had a direct involvement in this upheaval, as many of the entries in its *Leet Book* during these years testify. For example, the city received requests from both Warwick and the king for troops in July 1469, whilst in August 1469 Lord Rivers and Lord John Woodville were beheaded on Gosford Green in Coventry.²⁸ William Saunders, a dyer, was mayor of Coventry during this year, and he helped to finance troops for the king, including a contribution of £5, so that the poor of the town would be spared having to pay.²⁹ Saunders had served as chamberlain in 1450-1, as sheriff in 1452-3 and he went on to serve as master of the Trinity Guild in 1472-3.³⁰ It was during his mayoralty that a number of measures were introduced in order to regulate the use of the river Sherbourne and the common lands of the town. The Michaelmas Leet of 1469 forbade any encroachment on or pollution of the river and decreed that the bounds of the city were to be ridden every three years. Furthermore, no uncommonable beasts were to be grazed on the common lands, and all common lands that were unlawfully enclosed were to be reopened before November 1 that year.³¹

One immediate consequence of these measures was that they brought the town into renewed conflict with the Bristow family, who were owners of land at Whitley, to the south of the city. Several decades earlier, after he had held civic office, there had been a dispute with John Bristow, a draper who had been chamberlain in 1421-2, bailiff in 1422-3 and mayor in 1428-9.³² He was accused of enclosing common land and sowing

²⁸*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 341-3 and 346.

²⁹Named as a dyer in the *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 247; as mayor on January 25 1469 (p. 339); his contributions are recorded on pp. 343-4.

³⁰Named as chamberlain on January 25 1450 in the *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 252; as sheriff on September 30 1452 (p. 272); as master of the Trinity Guild on January 25 1472 (p. 373).

³¹*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 347-8.

³²Named as a draper in the *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 246; as chamberlain on January 25 and February 6 1421 (pp. 22 and 34) (Harris has bailiff in her translation on p. 22, which is clearly incorrect); as bailiff on October 3 1422, January 25 and April 13 1423 (pp. 42, 43 and 54); as

his own crops there, as well as grazing his animals on common pasture on the Coventry side of Whitley brook when not entitled to do so. Although the townspeople appear to have put a stop to John Bristow's encroachments by allowing their cattle to eat his corn and by impounding his animals, his son William apparently renewed the practice some years later.³³ Late in 1469, presumably after the Michaelmas Leet as it was in line with the measures passed there, one of William's walls in West Orchard that 'was sette to ferre in the comyn reuer by a fote & more' was pulled down. When William subsequently sued the mayor and commonalty in the county court, they conveniently 'remembyred' that William was using common land on the Coventry side of Whitley brook, and asked him to show how he had claim to it. The parties agreed that Sir John Nedam should arbitrate in the matter, and the land in contention was examined on November 29. Whilst William unfortunately 'had no evydens to shewe whereby he shuld comyn a thys syde the water of Whitley', on the town's behalf many 'agyt men' declared that when his father's cattle had strayed onto the Coventry side in the past, they had been impounded and a fee charged for their release. As a consequence, the commons opened up these and other grounds enclosed by Bristow's father to the south of the town on the Monday next after St Andrew's Day, December 4.³⁴ Bristow responded by petitioning Edward IV in the following year, describing the warlike array of the citizens involved and the riotous manner of their actions.³⁵ Furthermore, he noted how William Pere, alderman, by commandment of the mayor, William Saunders, and Richard Braytoft, alderman, "browght with hym the wayteys of the same cite to the seid riotours in reresyng [rehearsing?] of their seid rioteys, and like as the[y] hade doon a grete conquest or victori, ... made theym pype and synge before the said riotours all the weye ... to the said cite, which ys by space of a myle largele or more". As if this were not enough humiliation for Bristow to have suffered, later that day "these men were in the tavern

mayor on January 25 1428 (p. 113).

³³See Harris, *Life in an Old English Town*, pp. 206-9 for a discussion of the city's dispute with John Bristow, and pp. 208-18 for a discussion of the dispute with William Bristow between 1469 and 1473. William Bristow's dealings with the city are also discussed by C. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 539-42.

³⁴*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 349-50 (p. 349).

³⁵'The Manuscripts of the Corporation of Coventry', ed. Jeaffreson, pp. 156-7.

setting, avauntyng and reresyng of their gret riotes, saying that if your seid besecher sueyd any persone ... for that cause by the course of your laweys, that they wold slee him".³⁶

It is interesting to note that whilst the debate over the common lands was at this stage framed in terms of access to grazing, later discussions stress the other uses to which these lands were also put. In 1472, when the matter between Bristow and the city again went to arbitration, a group of elderly men testified on behalf of the city that William had occupied common land at Whitley since his father's death. This land, they said, had formerly been used by the commonalty for "shutynges, rennynges, daunsynges, bowelyng aleyes, and other their disportes as in their owne ground".³⁷ Similarly, in a bond to submit to further arbitration made in 1482, the mayor and community claimed that certain parcels of land were in Coventry rather than Whitley; as well as claiming the right to pasture and building materials, they were also 'to have and carry on in the same parcels of land all kinds of play and games daily throughout the year whenever it shall please them viz. to shoot arrows, wrestle, run races with men and horses, and to dance and also to have and hold feasts there without any hindrance whatsoever'.³⁸

The second incident that appears to have been related to the measures passed at the Michaelmas Leet in 1469 took place two days after Bristow's lands at Whitley were opened up on December 4:

Item, on Seynt Nicholas day in the same yere [December 6], the comyns of this Cite, that were sympull persons, wenton & cast downe with-owt the Gray-fryre yate serten gardens that were of the town rent & fylde & closys of dyuers menys, and of the priores a lesow callyd the Piores-wast, brake vp the hegis & in diuers places cast downe the dyke. Wherefore the priour was gretely grevyd & purposyd to have trowbelyd with the Cite. And the meyre with his consell entreyd the sayde priour to shewe more ffavour to the Cite in-as-muche as no men off grett reputacion was wyllyng to that brekyng ...³⁹

³⁶Harris, *Life in an Old English Town*, pp. 210-12 (p. 211) (Harris' ellipses).

³⁷Harris, *Life in an Old English Town*, pp. 216-17 (p. 217).

³⁸*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 506-9 (p. 508) (Harris' translation).

³⁹*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 350-2 (p. 350).

Although these actions took place immediately after those of December 4, there was a clear difference between them and the sequence of events in the Bristow case, in that the status of the lands involved was not the same. As regards the gardens outside Greyfriars Gate, it was at the Michaelmas Leet in September that the wardens of the town had been instructed to receive the profits of the seven gardens outside Greyfriars Gate on behalf of the town. Back in 1422, the commons had destroyed certain gardens outside the Greyfriars Gate, although it is not clear why this happened or if these were the same as those targeted in 1469.⁴⁰ Presumably, in the 1469 case, the rental of these gardens was not seen as favourable. It is possible to be a little more specific about the Prior's Waste, which was a piece of ground in Hasilwood, to the north of the town. As a portion of Hasilwood lay in Whitmore Park, which had been made several to the priory in the tripartite indenture of 1355, this appears to have created some ambiguity about the status of the Prior's Waste.⁴¹ The group of 'aunceant and wise men' who were appointed to survey the common lands in the eastern part of the city in 1423 were of the opinion that 'hit is comyn as thei haue herd of oold tyme, but thei say, as in that as for as they may thynke, hit hathe byn othur whylis holden as Comyn, and otherwhiles as seuerall'.⁴² It is not clear how the land was used in the intervening period, although the actions of December 6 and the prior's indignation would suggest that it had of late been enclosed and used by the priory.

The description of the commons who took action on December 6 as 'simple persons' is an interesting choice here, given that its meanings include innocent, low-status and ignorant.⁴³ These different meanings of the word enable this passage to be read in various ways, which was perhaps deliberate; it may imply that those involved were acting in good faith, although mistakenly, or that they were ignorant commoners acting without regard for proper law and procedure. The observation that no 'men of great reputation' backed their actions contributes to this sense of a group of the commons

⁴⁰*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 348 and n. 4.

⁴¹*Victoria County History of Warwickshire* 8, pp. 76-7, 201 and 259.

⁴²*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 45-53 (pp. 45 and 46).

⁴³*MED simple* adj. (1) [a], (3) [a] and 5.

acting upon their own initiative, without suggesting a motive for what they did. It is possible then that this choice of words represents a tactful way of rendering the different opinions regarding what had happened, and as far as we know no-one was ever caught or punished for these actions. However, measures were taken to pacify the prior, by promising him that in future he should have the land at Hasilwood in several at all times of the year, and that the priory was also to have a piece of land outside Newgate. The names of the two hundred and twenty-nine persons agreeing to this were written into the *Leet Book*.⁴⁴ The motives of the town council in arranging this deal were revealed a few years later, in the main case that we will be considering shortly; in 1481, the prior and Convent alleged that this deal with the Newgate land and other fields had been made so 'that thei, ne non of their successours, euer after shulde be vexed ne trobeled be-cause thei shulde nott take their suytt when Will. Briscowe toke his suytt for such offens don to hym in the same season'.⁴⁵ There are signs, though, that this resolution was not endorsed by all the citizens; at the Easter Leet in 1472 it was ordered 'that no persone of this Cite frohensfurth brek vp the Priours-waste, nor a close of the same priours lying withoute the Newe gate', on pain of a 40s. fine and forty days imprisonment.⁴⁶

So far, we have looked at the events of late 1469 in order to establish a background to the events of 1480. Although this has been a cursory examination, it is clear that the events that have been described are of considerable interest as regards the main themes of this thesis. One point to make is that they provide further support for the principle of specificity in discussions of urban festal culture. We can suggest that the changing status of the lands at Whitley for example was bound to have affected the meaning and significance of the games and feasts that were held there, or elsewhere when prevented. This whole episode gives an indication of how elements of festal culture, rather than necessarily being intrinsically radical or conservative, could become politicised in response to changing circumstances. It is also interesting that the action at Hasilwood was taken on December 6 in 1469. Locally, December 6 was significant in that it was the day that Coventry's charter of incorporation had come into effect in 1451, after Henry

⁴⁴*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 350-2.

⁴⁵*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 471.

⁴⁶*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 375.

VI's visit to the town in the September and October of that year. The charter stated that 'the city or town of Coventry ... from the feast of St. Nicholas shall be one whole county incorporate by itself, separated from the county of Warwick, and named the county of the city of Coventry'.⁴⁷ Furthermore, on the occasion of Henry's visit the *Leet Book* notes that the mayor, brethren and commonalty waited for the King as he journeyed from Leicester 'in Haselwode be-yonde the brode Oke', and greeted him there.⁴⁸ The Prior's Waste in Hasilwood, where the damage was done on December 6 1469, was also known as 'Brodwocke' or Bradock Waste.⁴⁹ A second point concerns the importance of thinking critically about modes of representation, in both the text and in historical narrative. The picture that Bristow's petition constructs in order to indite Saunders and others is clearly working to a particular agenda and is not to be understood literally. In fact, the term 'legitimized disorder' might be usefully rehabilitated as a way of describing the kind of impression that Bristow's petition conveys. The citizens are depicted as riotously destroying his property with the blessing of the council, who by implication should have taken measures to curtail such activity. Indeed, the council are even alleged to have sent the waits to accompany the rioters and devise songs celebrating the occasion, a clear act of legitimation.

Further Disputes with Bristow and the Priory, 1480

My main interest in this chapter is to look at a bill of complaints that was submitted by the prior to the mayor of Coventry in November 1480. This bill contained a large number of grievances, which ranged from the rather serious allegation that the terms of the 1355 tripartite indenture had been broken through to the charge that the townspeople had blocked the gate of the Prior's Orchard with dung, and so prevented him from taking

⁴⁷*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 262-6; *Calendar of Charter Rolls, 1427-1516*, pp. 116-17 (p. 116).

⁴⁸*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 263.

⁴⁹Harris suggests that the 'Prior's Waste and Bradock Waste were apparently identical' (*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 439 n. 2). As evidence for this, the chamberlains' petition of 1480 may be cited; 'Item, the seid Chamberleyns on Lammas Even last past desyred the Recordor to looke the meerus for the Brodwocke with other felde kept seuerall be the Priour: wheruppon he answered and seid they were seuerall be composicion in the time of Will. Saunders, then beyng Meire' (p. 439).

his carriage through it as he was accustomed to do.⁵⁰ Several of the complaints are of particular interest in that they provide evidence to suggest that festival customs which may be designated under the term 'misrule' were being employed in a confrontational way at Coventry in this period as part of a wider tactical campaign. The prior's bill of complaints was delivered after a turbulent few months in city politics, and it will be helpful to summarise in brief the details of these events.

Laurence Saunders and William Hede, both dyers, were elected as chamberlains of Coventry in January 1480. It was their insistence on fulfilling their duties to the letter rather than according to the customary practices which suited other members of the city government that led to a protracted conflict which ran from the April to the October of that year.⁵¹ Laurence was the son of William Saunders, the mayor who, as we saw above, introduced the measures to safeguard the common lands in 1469. After taking up the position of chamberlain in 1480 Laurence spent the next decade and a half campaigning to protect the common lands from encroachment and enclosure, before disappearing into the Fleet in November 1495.⁵² William Hede was on the common council by 1477, and whilst he held with Saunders during the events of 1480 he eventually submitted to the then mayor, William Shore, in the October, declaring openly that 'he neuer was of Counceill with his ffelowe ...'.⁵³ There were two disputes which arose during their term of office, and both appear to have resulted from differences of

⁵⁰*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 443-53 (pp. 444 and 447).

⁵¹Laurence Saunders and William Hede are named as chamberlains on January 25 1480 in the *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 424. Laurence is named as a dyer on p. 510 and William on p. 403. This episode is recorded on pp. 430-43.

⁵²Other incidents involving Laurence Saunders can be found in the *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, on pp. 510-3, 556-7, 564 and 574-80. The bill set up on St Michael's door after Lammas in 1495 also comments upon his situation (p. 567). For an account of Saunders' campaign see M. D. Harris, 'Laurence Saunders, Citizen of Coventry', *English Historical Review* 9 (1894), pp. 633-51 and *Life in an Old English Town*, pp. 219-28 and 236-52. Evidence that William Saunders was Laurence's father is to be found in the chamberlains' petition of 1480. On Lammas Eve of that year the Recorder told the chamberlains that certain lands were made several to the prior in the time that William Saunders was mayor; 'the forseid Laurens, on of the seid Chamberleins, grugged, in-so-moche as the seid late Maire decessed was his ffader & might not answeere for hymself (*Coventry Leet Book* p. 439). Laurence was committed to the Fleet in November 1496 (pp. 579-80).

⁵³Named as a member of the forty-eight in 1477 in the *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 421; he submitted to the mayor on October 14 1469 (pp. 435-6). William Shore is named as mayor on January 25 1480 (p. 424).

opinion over the responsibilities of the position of chamberlain. One dispute arose with the mayor, William Shore, probably in May 1480. The chamberlains had refused to pay the wages of labourers who had been digging stone for the city wall; '[t]he seid Laurens theyre seying presumptuously to the seid Maire That they that set them awarke shuld pay for hym'. Hede and Saunders were committed to ward and bound under a recognisance of £40 to obey the mayor and council in future, and a fine of £4 was also levied.⁵⁴ The second dispute arose over rights to pasture on the town's common land, and lasted from April to October 1480. The events of these months are recorded in a petition which the chamberlains submitted to Edward, Prince of Wales, on September 20; Laurence had requested permission to ride to Southampton, but instead rode to Ludlow to deliver the petition, a copy of which is entered into the *Leet Book*.⁵⁵ The first incident that is described in the petition took place on April 8 of that year, when the chamberlains had distrained two hundred sheep belonging to William Deister which were found grazing on common land; however, the chamberlains were committed to prison by the mayor for doing so, and the sheep were freed without the fee of 'pynlok' being levied, the charge made by the chamberlains for penning animals. Mary Dormer Harris suggests that the animals were distrained either because they exceeded the number that each individual was allowed, or because sheep were non-commonable animals.⁵⁶ On April 18, having been prevented from speaking at the Easter Leet, the chamberlains were bound £40 each by the Recorder, and were told that pinlock was to be taken as he saw fit. This 'they grugged to doo, in-so-moche as they were solemply sworn to the contrarie. Wheruppon the seid Recordor answered that he wolde rule them be custome and not be sweryng'.⁵⁷ Later in the year, when sheep belonging to William Bristow and the prior were grazed on common land, the chamberlains were again preventing from levying a charge.⁵⁸

The matter appears to have escalated in late September, for at the same time as Laurence rode to Ludlow, 'ther appered diuers variance to be betwixt the Prior & the

⁵⁴*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 430-2 (p. 431).

⁵⁵*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 432; the chamberlains' petition is on pp. 436-40.

⁵⁶*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 437 and n. 2.

⁵⁷*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 437-8 (pp. 437-8).

⁵⁸*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 438 and 439.

Town & also Briscowe & the Town for Comon of pasture ...'.⁵⁹ It may be that Bristow and the prior were cooperating to some extent, judging by a question that was put to the new prior in 1481; following an incident at Whitley at Lammas involving Bristow, the mayor had consulted the brethren, 'amonges whom hit was thought goode that the newe Priour were spoken with, whether he wolde take parte with Briscowe as his predecessour did or not etc.'.⁶⁰ After correspondence between the mayor and brethren and the Prince about the chamberlains' petition at the end of September and the beginning of October, a meeting was arranged, and William Hede was one of those who rode to Ludlow, after having submitted himself to the mayor's rule.⁶¹ The verdict of the Prince's council, contained in a letter dated October 22, was that Laurence Saunders was to be punished, and sometime after the receipt of the Prince's reply, Saunders was summoned to appear at St Mary's hall, where the letter was read to him. 'And theruppon the seid Laurens kneled don before the seid Maire & ther openly knoleched his offence & dissobeysaunce had & made to the seid Maire in tyme past; whereof he besought hym of foryffenes; and there openly & lowely submytted hym-self vnto the correccion of the seid Maire etc.'. Saunders was committed to prison until a recognisance of £500 was taken from his friends, obliging him to appear at subsequent general sessions 'till certente were had of the sadde demeasnyng of the seid Laurens'.⁶²

The prior's bill of complaint was delivered to the mayor and brethren on November 16, and so began another dispute just as the episode with the chamberlains was drawing to a close.⁶³ A number of the grievances contained in this bill relate to incidents that we have already looked at. For example, the prior complained that he had never received satisfaction for the incident at Whitmore in 1469, having not been able to sue those responsible; as we have already seen, he was later to suggest that he had agreed not to take any action at this time because William Bristow was pursuing his suit, in return for

⁵⁹*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 441.

⁶⁰*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 489.

⁶¹*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 432-6 and 436.

⁶²*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 441-3 (pp. 442 and 443).

⁶³*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 443-53.

sureties regarding a croft outside New Gate and other lands.⁶⁴ Another complaint was that he suffered slander from Laurence Saunders and other persons who said that he kept pastures in severalty which ought to have been common; these claims were made in Saunders' petition to the Prince, as we saw above.⁶⁵ Other grievances appear to have been of a more personal nature, perhaps as part of a campaign of harassment:

Also the pepull of the seid Citie carryen their Donge, Ramell [refuse] & swepyng of their houses & leyen hit vnto the walles & yate of the Priours orchard without the Coke-strete-yate, and stoppen vp the wey ther, that the prior may not haue his Carriage thorough his orchard as he hath vsed to haue. Where of late tyme they leyde ther nothyng but swepyng of their houses, which was carried a-wey by men of the Contrey to donge their londe; and now be-cause they leyth her Ramell ther no man Carry a-wey there as they were wont to doo, and so hit encreseth dayly more & more to the hyndraunce & grete hurt of the seid Priour.⁶⁶

The complaints that are most interesting in respect of the present inquiry are those which describe how people of the city trespassed on and caused damage to priory lands through their sports and other activities. In the fifth article of his bill, the prior complained that 'the people of this Cite yerely in somer throwen down & beren away the vnderwode of the seid Priour, & birches, holyes, ooke, hawthorn and other at Whitmore parke & his other closez, & breken his hegges to his hurtes yerely C s'.⁶⁷ Birch-boughs appear to have been used for decoration at midsummer in this period; for example, the churchwardens' accounts of St Mary at Hill record a payment of 3*d.* 'for byrchen bowes a-yenst mydsomer' in 1488, as well as in other years.⁶⁸ John Stow includes 'greene Birch' as one of the types of vegetation that was used to decorate the doorways of houses in

⁶⁴*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 444 and 471; on the grants made following the events of December 6 1469, see pp. 350-2 and the discussion above.

⁶⁵*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 447-8.

⁶⁶*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 447.

⁶⁷*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 445.

⁶⁸*The Medieval Records of a London City Church (St Mary at Hill) A.D. 1420-1559*, ed. H. Littlehales, EETS O.S. 128 (1905), p. 131.

London at the feasts of St John the Baptist and Sts Peter and Paul.⁶⁹ The prior's complaint about the loss of his underwood is clear evidence that at Coventry in this period, the different sorts of vegetation required for summer festivals were being procured from lands outside of the town and without the consent of the landowner. Furthermore, the ninth article of the bill alleges that people of the city 'yerely breken the hegges & dikes of the seid Priour in other diuers places in their shotyng called rovyng', causing 100s. worth of damage annually and sometimes more. Mary Dormer Harris has suggested that roving was the practice of shooting at mobile targets.⁷⁰ Finally, the eleventh article claims that people of the city damaged the Prior's Orchard 'with schotyng & other games', and 'when they ben chalenged by his seruantes they gyven hem schort langage, saying that they will haue hit their sportyng-place'.⁷¹

There are two sorts of explanation which we can consider here. It may be that although these activities were tolerated whilst relations between the town and the priory were amicable, by late 1480 the climate had deteriorated to the extent that the prior was no longer willing to sustain them. This view is borne out in some measure by the town's reply, which appeals to the 'goode will' of lords and gentlefolk, as we shall see below. Another possibility is that a proportion of the townspeople, dissatisfied with the priory's use of common land, took advantage of these activities in order to cause damage to priory lands, in a situation where other means may not have been possible or to their advantage. Evidence to support this view comes from the fact that the townspeople appear to have been exploiting other activities, such as roving and rubbish disposal, in order to harass the prior; indeed, the prior complains that the obstruction of his orchard was caused by a recent change in the sort of refuse that the townspeople chose to deposit at its gateway. These are both plausible explanations, and it seems to me that there is little point in trying to argue one against the other. What we can say is that the customarily tolerated encroachment in question was a negotiated compromise arrived at locally and at a particular historical moment; as such, it was open to change, whether through a shift in attitude on the prior's part or because it was exploited by some of

⁶⁹J. Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, 2 vols (Oxford, 1908), 1 p. 101.

⁷⁰*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 445-6 and 446 n. 1.

⁷¹*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 446.

Coventry's inhabitants.

The mayor and brethren took their time in responding to the prior's bill; their answers were recorded on December 26 and delivered to the prior on January 2 1481.⁷² The answers to the complaints about roving and vegetation-gathering are interesting, in that they recognise their transgressive nature but appeal to a customary tolerance of them. In response to the prior's complaints about roving on his land, the mayor and Brethren claim that this is a matter concerning individuals rather than the generality, and so by implication is not something that they should have to deal with. However, whilst noting that roving is a punishable offence, they go on to appeal to a customary tolerance of the activity; 'such offenders owen to be punysshed be accion atte suyt of the partie greved; for it is grete hurt to all persones hauyng lyffelode about the Citie, although such rovyng about the Citie of London & all other grete Cities is suffred'. They also refer to town ordinances forbidding the practice, and suggest that if the names of offenders are given to the mayor, he will seek to reform them.⁷³ In response to the prior's complaints about the loss of vegetation, the mayor and brethren make a similar appeal to the principle of customary tolerance:

To this the seid Maire & his Brethern seyn that yerely the Maistirs of euery crafte of the Cite be commaundement of the Mair chargen the people of their Crafte to restreygn such dedes to be don be theym & their seruauntes in eschewyng the doughtfull censures of the Chirch & also to be punysshed be the temporell lawe. And yf eny vndisposed creature offend to the Contrarie ayenst their will no defalt therin oweth to be ascryued in them, remembryng that the people of euery gret Cite, as London & other Citeez, yerely in somur doon harme to diuers lordes & gentyles hauyng wodes & Groves nygh to such Citees be takyng of boughes & treez, and yit the lordes & gentils suffren sych dedes ofte tymes of their goode will. And ofte tymes the offenders can-not be knowen wher-thorough punysshement myght be don etc.⁷⁴

⁷²*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 454-68 (pp. 454 and 473).

⁷³*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 457-8 (p. 458).

⁷⁴*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 455.

The mayor and brethren are in effect arguing that by custom, individuals carrying out certain activities may be regarded as exempt from the usual legislation. Initially, they claim that the practice of procuring vegetation is an offence which they annually denounce. It is the sort of answer that we might expect to be given by one set of governors to another, invoking the spiritual and temporal laws for which they each had responsibility. However, they then go on to excuse such actions by an expansive appeal to custom. This disjunction in the statement is striking; it is as if we have two radically different ways of perceiving the custom of vegetation-gathering, one in terms of 'the law', where responsibility is taken and delegated, and the other a much more sober outlook on the realities of urban life. It is interesting to note how closely the language of this passage resembles the defence of Gladman's riding which was made by the citizens of Norwich circa 1448; the 1443 riding was said to be a custom that was practised 'in ony Cite or Burgh thugh al this reame on fastyngong tuesday' (see the preceding chapter). The Coventry example differs, though, in that there *is* further evidence to support the claim that the custom was practised in other cities and indeed perhaps in Coventry itself. However, one danger that we face in undertaking such a review is that we use it merely to sustain the mayor and brethren's claim that vegetation-gathering was a widespread and tolerated activity, when it should be clear from the Coventry case alone that practice actually varied depending upon the local circumstances at any point in time. The 'yearly harm that is suffered in every great city' is thus a statement that is to be understood rhetorically rather than accepted at face value, as the examples from other towns will show.

Two cases from late fourteenth-century Coventry illustrate how persons taking vegetation from private land outside of the summer months were liable to prosecution. An urban peace commission for Coventry in February 1397 heard how William and Juliana Wheelwright, Robert Golding and Richard Leygrove had entered a close and carried away trees and shrubs worth 100s. in the previous month. In July of the same year the commission heard how the same William and Juliana, and Richard Tumby had entered the close of Henry Wychard and uprooted and carried away shrubs worth 10 marks in the October of the previous year.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, we do not know the outcome

⁷⁵*Rolls of the Warwickshire and Coventry Sessions of the Peace 1377-1397*, ed. E. G. Kimball. Publications of the Dugdale Society 16 (1939), pp. 80 and 86.

of these cases, nor is it clear what these people were doing with this vegetation; these cases do not enable us to say anything about vegetation-gathering in the summer months at Coventry at this period. An order issued at the Easter Leet in 1448 does indicate though that wood was being procured for use at St John's and St Peter's Eves in this period:

No one to do damage in pastures, closes, or other places in cutting branches, under the penalty of 12s. And that no one break the pavement to place branches on it on St John's and St Peter's eves, but every one to have coal and large fuel [grossum ffocale] on the same penalty.⁷⁶

The fact that this order was issued at all suggests that some damage was being done to private land, although it may also have been designed to limit the damage to common land. The mayor and brethren of Coventry referred to London as one of the other cities where such practices were tolerated, and the most obvious case to consider in this respect is 'Evil May-Day' in 1517. Contemporary sources which mention this incident suggest that it was customary for servants and apprentices to gather vegetation from the surrounding fields on May-Day morning. For example, Polydore Vergil notes such a practice in his discussion of the alleged scheme of John Lincoln and the apprentices: '[t]hey determined that early on the morning of May Day, when traditionally accustomed to do so, they would pour out into the fields, and then return, carrying back leafy branches so that no suspicion of slaughter would be aroused; then they would attack the foreigners ...'.⁷⁷ Francesco Chiericato, papal nuncio, was less specific about where this vegetation was obtained from, and felt no need to explain the practice: '[o]n the day of St. Philip and St. James (1st of May) there was a plot to cut to pieces all the strangers in London, in number from 6,000 to 7,000; it was to have been executed by the servants of the Londoners (the apprentices) when they went to take their nosegays'.⁷⁸ The

⁷⁶*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 233 (Harris' translation).

⁷⁷*The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil A.D. 1485-1537*, ed. and trans. D. Hay, Camden Third Series 74 (1950), p. 243.

⁷⁸*Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts, Relating to English Affairs, Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice, and in other Libraries of Northern Italy*, ed. R. Brown, 38 vols (1864-1940), 2 (1867), p. 385.

evidence for London is inconclusive, since although these commentators did not take this opportunity to berate the servants and apprentices for theft, which may point to some customary sufferance of the practice, this may equally have been because the vegetation was obtained from common land.

There is also post-Reformation evidence from other towns which indicates that vegetation-gathering in summer was practised there. An ordinance at Leicester in November 1551 decreed that any man, woman or child taking oak or hawthorn boughs to set at their doors or windows in summer was to forfeit 12*d.* and be sent to prison.⁷⁹ There are clear similarities between this passage and the complaint of the prior of Coventry; both specify oak and hawthorn as types of tree that are targeted, and both refer to the summertime. Interestingly enough, this does not appear to have entirely deterred the Leicester townspeople, considering that 'the citizens of Leicester hacked down timber for use on May Day in the woods of Sir Henry Hastings in 1603 ...'.⁸⁰ Evidence which may suggest that vegetation-gathering was practised at Bristol comes from a condemnation of May customs by John Northbrooke, in his treatise against dicing, dancing, plays and other pastimes, submitted for publication in 1577.⁸¹ Northbrooke was the curate of St Mary Redcliffe in Bristol in the late 1560s and early 1570s, and he also preached at St Ewen's church.⁸² It may be that he had first-hand knowledge of these customs from his residence in Bristol, although I am not aware of other evidence for their observance in this locale. Northbrooke's *Treatise* takes the form of a dialogue between Age and Youth. In a lengthy discussion of dancing, Age makes reference to young men and women dancing in the summer, and the custom of procuring and erecting a maypole:

... In summer season, howe doe the moste part of our yong men and maydes, in earely rising and getting themselues into the fieldes at dauncing? what foolishe toyes

⁷⁹*Records of the Borough of Leicester*, ed. M. Bateson, 3 vols (1899-1905), 3 p. 68.

⁸⁰Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen', p. 68.

⁸¹J. Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes. With Other Idle Pastimes*, ed. J. P. Collier (1843), p. xv.

⁸²M. C. Skeeters, *Community and Clergy: Bristol and the Reformation c.1530-c.1570* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 134 and 183.

shall not a man see among them? What vnchast countenances shall not be vused then among them? or what coales shall there be wanting that maye kindle Cupid's desire? - truly none. Through this dauncing many maydens haue been vnmaydened, whereby I may saye, it is the storehouse and nurserie of bastardie. What adoe make our yong men at the time of May? Do they not vse nightwatchings to rob and steale yong trees out of other men's grounde, and bring them home into their parishe with minstrels playing before? and when they haue set it vp, they will decke it with floures and garlandes, and daunce round (men and women together, moste vnseemely amd intolerable, as I haue proued before) about the tree, like vnto the children of Israell, that daunced about the golden calfe that they had set vp, &c.⁸³

This brief examination of the evidence for vegetation-gathering in other towns suggests that the mayor and brethren's appeal to a yearly harm that is suffered in every great city is not to be taken as literally describing a state of affairs which existed in England in this period. Rather, it is a rhetorical trope which seeks to legitimise to some extent the local practice under a certain set of circumstances.

In his reply to the mayor and brethren, made January 4, 1481, Prior Deram did not pursue the issue of vegetation-gathering on his land any further.⁸⁴ The following Lent, John Boteler, Coventry's steward, went to London to meet the prior and establish a date on which the two parties could meet in Passion Week, but the prior died whilst in London and the matter was postponed. Richard Coventre was elected as the new prior on June 4, 1481, and appears to have been less combative than his predecessor, as no more is heard of the matter.⁸⁵

The aim of this chapter has been to investigate the relationship between misrule and politics in the medieval English town in a case where substantial evidence survives. In conclusion, it is clear that the custom of vegetation-gathering became a matter of contention between the priory and the citizens in the later fifteenth-century, and that this matter formed only one part of a wider dispute about land-use in and around the town

⁸³Northbrooke, *A Treatise*, pp. 175-6.

⁸⁴*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, pp. 468-73.

⁸⁵*Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Harris, p. 474; *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1476-85*, p. 257.

in this period. It is not possible to establish with any certainty whether there was a deliberate exploitation of the custom by disaffected citizens to cause excessive damage, or whether a particular prior merely chose to suspend the customary tolerance of this activity at this time. However, the fact that the custom continued to be practised at a time of strained relations at least had the *effect* of producing a sense of harassment, as is evident from the prior's complaint, and this is the more significant conclusion to draw. Clearly, the meaning of the activity changed in response to developing events in the town, and these meanings were also contested at the legal level by means of particular discourses of financial loss (the priory) and of customary tolerance (the mayor and brethren). As regards the outcome of the dispute, it may be inferred that the clandestine activities against the prior had somewhat more success than Laurence Saunders' attempts to pursue his complaints through the proper channels, although the stance of the mayor and brethren in each case appears to have been crucial. Firm conclusions one way or the other would be inappropriate, since as well as having a long history, these disputes were to continue for many years afterwards. What can be said is that misrule became implicated in the local politics of Coventry in such a way as to assume a confrontational meaning, and that when considered as part of a wider situation, significant gains were made by those citizens who undertook such activities.

Chapter Five:

The Boy-Bishop Custom at Bristol

Introduction

This chapter explores the relationship between misrule and social structure in the late medieval English town by means of a case study of the boy-bishop custom at Bristol in the fifteenth century.¹ I will be arguing that such an analysis must take into account the historically-specific nature of both the form and the function of this custom, and I am able to demonstrate the problems with Sacks's approach, which fails to acknowledge these factors. As a background to this discussion, I look briefly at the form of this custom in late medieval England.

The practice of elevating choristers or junior members of the clergy to a higher status during the month of December appears to have been well-established in many English parish churches, abbeys, schools and cathedrals in the later medieval period.² As is well-known, boys were dressed as bishops on feast days that were associated with children, such as St Nicholas's Day and Holy Innocents' Day, December 6 and 28 respectively, and they participated in the religious services and other celebrations which accompanied these feasts. Although this practice is usually known as the custom of the 'boy-bishop', it is I think more appropriate to use the term 'child-clergy' when we refer to this custom in general, as we know that females were also involved and that the office assumed was not always that of bishop. For example, the practice of electing a Christmas abbess was prohibited at Carrow Nunnery in Norfolk, after its visitation by Bishop Nicke in 1526.³ The first mention of a boy-bishop in an English source is from York Minster around 1220, and Ronald Hutton has suggested this practice is found in every English cathedral which has a medieval archive. Receipts of money collected by

¹I have drawn upon material from this chapter for two conference papers. I spoke on 'The boy-bishop custom at Bristol in the fifteenth century' at the 1996 British Archaeological Association Conference, and on 'The keeping of time at Bristol in the late Middle Ages' at the 1997 Social History Society Conference. I am grateful to participants at both conferences for their helpful comments and feedback.

²For a bibliography of the secondary sources on the boy-bishop custom see S. Shahar, 'The Boy-Bishop's Feast: a Case-Study in Church Attitudes towards Children in the High and Late Middle Ages', *Studies in Church History* 31 (1994), pp. 243-60 (p. 243 n. 1). See also R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 10-12 and 53-4.

³*Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich, A.D. 1492-1532*, ed. A. Jessopp, Camden Society N.S. 43 (1888), pp. 208-10 (p. 209).

boy-bishops are also found in the churchwardens' accounts of many parish churches, as far north as Yorkshire, as far east as Suffolk and Kent and as far west as Dorset and Shropshire.⁴ The custom was put down by royal proclamation in 1541, but it did see a revival in the reign of Mary, and there have also been modern revivals, for example at Hereford Cathedral.⁵

As we might expect, the way in which the custom was celebrated varied from place to place, depending on the nature of the institution and the local circumstances. At Salisbury Cathedral, the boy-bishop was involved in the services of Holy Innocents' Eve and Day, December 27 and 28. On the eve of Holy Innocents' Day the boy-bishop, dressed in miniature episcopal robes and accompanied by his entourage, processed to the high altar, and the cathedral clergy exchanged their usual seats with the choirboys for the duration of the feast.⁶ At York Minster, the boy-bishop was elected on St Nicholas's Day, December 6; a set of accounts from the visitations of John de Cave, boy-bishop of York Minster in 1396, has survived, indicating that he went on visits to local monasteries and aristocratic households in order to gather money.⁷ For example, he received money from the Priors of Kirkham, Malton, Bridlington and Drax amongst others on his travels in early January 1397. The most generous donation was from the Countess of Northumberland at Leconfield, who presented the boy-bishop with 20s. and a gold ring. After deducting expenses, including a penny for the barber at Selby, John de Cave was left with a balance of more than 40s.⁸ At St Paul's Cathedral, the boy-bishop delivered a sermon on Holy Innocents' Day. The text of several of these sermons survives, suggesting that they were in fact written by adults; a sermon from St Paul's

⁴REED: *York*, ed. A. F. Johnston and M. Rogerson, 2 vols (Toronto, 1979), 1 p. 1; Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, pp. 10, 12 and 53.

⁵*Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin, 3 vols (1964), 1 pp. 301-2; N. Mackenzie, 'Boy into Bishop: A Festive Role-Reversal', *History Today* 37 (December 1987), pp. 10-16 (pp.15-16).

⁶Mackenzie, 'Boy into Bishop', p. 12.

⁷T. B. W., 'York Boy Bishops', and F. R. Fairbank, 'York Boy Bishops', *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 12 (1893), pp. 399-400 and 487-9; 'Two Sermons Preached by the Boy Bishop' and 'Appendix', ed. J. G. Nichols, and E. F. Rimbault, 'The Festival of the Boy Bishop in England', *The Camden Miscellany Seven*, Camden Society N.S. 14 (1875), pp. i-xxxvi and 1-34 (pp. 31-4).

⁸'Appendix', ed. Nichols, pp. 31, 33 and 34.

given sometime during the reign of Henry VII includes a passage on the vanity of English youth.⁹ At the parish level, it appears that the boy-bishop went about the parish collecting money for church funds, and church inventories sometimes mention the trappings that were worn on such occasions.¹⁰

The exclusive mode for approaching the boy-bishop custom has always been the wider historical and geographical survey, and where conclusions about its function are made they have always been based on this sort of general examination. For example, Shahar discusses the feast in terms of the 'relief' which it provided, where 'the temporary reversal was supposed finally to reinforce the normal classification' into different age-categories.¹¹ As I have argued in Chapters One and Two, the dynamics of misrule in the late medieval period cannot adequately be described by such a general approach; a proper understanding of particular customs can only be reached by means of detailed case studies where sufficient primary source material survives. The purpose of this chapter is to consider one such example, the boy-bishop custom at St Nicholas's Church in Bristol, and the way in which it worked in relation to the social structure of the city in the fifteenth century. Since there is already a discussion of this custom and its place in the festal culture of late medieval and early modern Bristol by David Harris Sacks, my method will differ slightly from the preceding two chapters. That is, as well as preceding my analysis with a brief look at the sources for medieval Bristol and the main features of the town in this period, I also take this opportunity to develop a critique of Sacks's work on Bristol ceremony and ritual against the criteria which were established in Chapters One and Two. Whilst a critique of Sacks's whole discussion would be a timely and worthwhile exercise, my interest here is to examine how he understands occasions of misrule to be involved in negotiating the social dynamics of late medieval Bristol.

⁹'Two Sermons Preached by the Boy Bishop', ed. Nichols, pp. 1-13 (p. 10).

¹⁰Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 12, and see below.

¹¹The feast reflects the recognition that school attendance must have borne down with behavioural and psychological weight that demanded periodic relief. The boy bishop's feast accorded such relief, both through the temporary permitted unruliness and the inversion of the proper order of ages, which was at the same time also a temporary role-reversal. During the feast the binary opposition of child versus adult, or pupil versus master, was reversed. And the temporary reversal was supposed finally to reinforce the normal classification into the various age-categories, each of which had its proper place in society'. Shahar, 'The Boy-Bishop's Feast', p. 249.

Late Medieval Bristol

The accessibility of the records of Bristol appears to have been considerably improved since the later nineteenth century, when Toulmin Smith was to fulminate against the 'supremely ridiculous' and 'historically criminal' conduct of the corporation in withholding access to its records.¹² The *Little Red Book of Bristol*, published 1900, was one of the first civic record books from medieval England to appear in print.¹³ In the twentieth century Bristol has been fortunate enough to have a very active local record society which has published editions of the town's more important medieval records and documents. These have included the *Great Red Book*, the *Great White Book*, and compilations of Bristol's charters and sixteenth-century ordinances.¹⁴ A further important document civic document that has appeared in print is *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, a record of Bristol's history and contemporary usages which was compiled in the late fifteenth century by the town clerk, Robert Ricart.¹⁵ Extracts from the *Kalendar*, along with fourteenth-century guild returns from Bristol, have appeared in Smith's volume on English guilds.¹⁶ Very little material survives for the town's religious institutions, although there are some records for St Augustine's Abbey and St Mark's Hospital.¹⁷ The churchwardens' accounts from the parishes of All Saints' and St Ewen's

¹²*English Gilds*, ed. J. T. Smith, EETS O.S. 40 (1870), pp. 283-4 (p. 283).

¹³*The Little Red Book of Bristol*, ed. F. B. Bickley, 2 vols (Bristol and London, 1900).

¹⁴*The Great Red Book of Bristol*, ed. E. W. W. Veale, Introduction and 4 Parts, Bristol Record Society 2, 4, 8, 16 and 18 (1932-53); *The Great White Book of Bristol*, ed. E. Ralph, Bristol Record Society 32 (1979); *Bristol Charters 1155-1373*, ed. N. D. Harding, Bristol Record Society 1 (1930); *Bristol Charters 1378-1499*, ed. H. A. Cronne, Bristol Record Society 11 (1945); *Bristol Charters 1509-1899*, ed. R. C. Latham, Bristol Record Society 12 (1946); *The Ordinances of Bristol, 1506-1598*, ed. M. Stanford, Bristol Record Society 41 (1990). See also *Accounts of the Constables of Bristol Castle in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries*, ed. M. Sharp, Bristol Record Society 34 (1982); *A Bristol Miscellany*, ed. P. McGrath, Bristol Record Society 37 (1985).

¹⁵*The Maire of Bristowe Is Kalendar*, ed. L. T. Smith, Camden Society N.S. 5 (1872).

¹⁶*English Gilds*, ed. Smith, pp. 283-8 and 413-31.

¹⁷*Two Compotus Rolls of Saint Augustine's Abbey, Bristol, for 1491-2 and 1511-12*, ed. G. Beachcroft and A. Sabin, Bristol Record Society 9 (1938); *Cartulary of St. Mark's Hospital Bristol*, ed. C. D. Ross, Bristol Record Society 21 (1959); *Some Manorial Accounts of St. Augustine's Abbey, Bristol*, ed. A. Sabin, Bristol Record Society 22 (1960).

have appeared in print, as have extracts from the records of St Nicholas's Church; the churchwardens' accounts and church book of this parish were destroyed in bombing during the Second World War.¹⁸ There are also the perambulations of William Worcestre, the son of a Bristol burgess who recorded the layout of medieval Bristol in great detail in the later fifteenth century.¹⁹ As regards secondary sources, early accounts of the town are given by Barrett and by Nicholls and Taylor.²⁰ More recent discussions include those by Ross, Little and by Sacks, whose work is discussed in more detail below.²¹ There is no Victoria County History volume for Bristol although there is a discussion of the city in the Historic Towns series.²² As well as these general surveys, there are also studies of individual themes in relation to medieval Bristol, including religion and the churches in the town²³ and its drama and ceremony.²⁴

¹⁸*The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints', Bristol: Part I*, ed. C. Burgess, Bristol Record Society 46 (1995); *The Church Book of St Ewen's, Bristol, 1454-1584*, ed. B. R. Masters and E. Ralph, Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society Record Section 6 (1967); E. G. C. F. Atchley, 'On the Mediaeval Parish Records of the Church of St. Nicholas, Bristol', *Transactions of the St. Paul's Ecclesiological Society* 6 (1906) pp. 35-67.

¹⁹*Antiquities of Bristow in the Middle Centuries; including the Topography by William Wyrcestre, and the Life of William Canynges*, ed. J. Dallaway (Bristol, 1834); *William Worcestre: Itineraries*, ed. J. H. Harvey (Oxford, 1969). Further biographical details are given in I. Gray, *Antiquaries of Gloucestershire and Bristol* (Bristol, 1981), pp. 31-3.

²⁰W. Barrett, *The History and Antiquities of the City of Bristol* (Bristol, 1789); J. F. Nicholls and J. Taylor, *Bristol, Past and Present: An Illustrated History of Bristol and its Neighbourhood*, 3 vols (Bristol, 1881-2).

²¹C. D. Ross, 'Bristol in the Middle Ages', in *Bristol and its Adjoining Counties*, ed. C. M. MacInnes and W. F. Whittard (Bristol, 1955), pp. 179-92; B. Little, *The City and County of Bristol: A Study of Atlantic Civilisation* (East Ardsley, 1967); D. H. Sacks, *Trade, Society and Politics in Bristol, 1500-1640*, 2 vols (New York, 1985); D. H. Sacks, *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450-1700*, *The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* 15 (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1991).

²²*The Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. M. D. Lobel, 3 vols (1969-91), 2 'Bristol'.

²³C. Burgess, "'For the Increase of Divine Service": Chantries in the Parish in Late Medieval Bristol', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), pp. 46-65; C. Burgess, 'A Service for the Dead: The Form and Function of the Anniversary in Late Medieval Bristol', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* 105 (1987), pp. 183-211; J. H. Bettey, 'The Medieval Churches of Bristol', *Transactions of the Ancient Monument Society* N.S. 34 (1990), pp. 1-27; M. C. Skeeters, *Community and Clergy: Bristol and the Reformation c.1530-c.1570* (Oxford, 1993).

²⁴K. Barker, *Bristol at Play: Five Centuries of Live Entertainment* (Bradford-on-Avon, 1976), pp. 1-2; D. H. Sacks, 'The Demise of the Martyrs: the Feasts of St Clement and St Katherine in Bristol, 1400-1600', *Social History* 11 (1986), pp. 141-69; D. H. Sacks, 'Celebrating Authority in Bristol,

The main features of the medieval town may briefly be recounted. The core of the medieval town was situated on a ridge of high ground at the confluence of the River Avon and the River Frome, and there had been a settlement on this site since Saxon times.²⁵ The town was unusual in that it fell into two dioceses, those of Worcester and Bath and Wells, although in 1542 St Augustine's Abbey was made a cathedral church and the seat of the new bishopric of Bristol.²⁶ As regards the government of the town, there had been a mayor of Bristol since 1216, and in 1344 an agreement was made to elect a common council of forty-eight members to advise the mayor and assist him with town business.²⁷ In 1373 Bristol was created a county in its own right by charter, separating it from the counties of Gloucester and Somerset and giving it the right to its own sheriff, who was to be chosen by the King from three names submitted to him annually.²⁸ However, within the town there remained two jurisdictional enclaves, the liberties of St Augustine's Abbey and of the Temple Fee.²⁹ In 1499 an additional charter was granted which replaced the town's two bailiffs with an additional sheriff, as well as establishing the positions of six aldermen and a chamberlain.³⁰

Sacks's View of Bristol

As we saw above, David Harris Sacks has published three lengthy articles and two monographs on the town, and he is the first scholar to have written in any detail about the festal culture of Bristol in the late Middle Ages.³¹ In his review of *The Widening*

1475-1640', in *Urban Life in the Renaissance*, ed. R. F. E. Weissman and S. Zimmerman (Newark, Toronto and London, 1989), pp. 187-223.

²⁵*Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. Lobel, 2 'Bristol' p. 1.

²⁶Skeeters, *Community and Clergy*, pp. 2, 123 and 125.

²⁷*Bristol Charters 1378-1499*, ed. Cronne, p. 74; *Little Red Book of Bristol*, ed. Bickley, 1 pp. 24-7.

²⁸*Bristol Charters 1155-1373*, ed. Harding, pp. 119-41.

²⁹Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, pp. 137-8.

³⁰*Bristol Charters 1378-1499*, ed. Cronne, pp. 163-88.

³¹In addition to the works given in the notes above, see D. H. Sacks, 'The Corporate Town and the English State: Bristol's "Little Businesses", 1625-1641', *Past and Present* 110 (1986), pp. 69-105.

Gate, Alan Dyer confesses to being uneasy with the way that Sacks utilises theory in this book; 'the conventional urban historian is a rather prosaic character, and Sacks inserts passages of abstract theorizing which sit unhappily amidst his economic historian's matter-of-factness; if the theory and the matter appeared to have much to do with each other, that would add a welcome dimension to early modern British urban history - but they do not; many readers will skip these sections without much loss'.³² One use which Sacks makes of theory is to understand the rituals of the late medieval town. Sacks himself recognises that in choosing to examine this subject, 'we set forth into perhaps the most troubled waters of historical interpretation', since many historians believe that the meanings that past rituals had for their participants cannot be recovered. His rejoinder is that such an understanding *is* possible, if only because such interpretations are something that we do in everyday life; we make the behaviour of other people intelligible by judging what they do against the context in which it occurs. 'In interpreting language and other forms of social action, we need to know what issue is being raised in order to understand the response, and this means understanding the context - the environment - in which the actors find themselves'.³³ Thus, according to Sacks, the meanings that formalised actions had in the past can be understood if we reconstruct the contexts in which they occurred. Such a formulation seems to make sense in the abstract, although there is still the question of deciding exactly what is to count as the context or background to a piece of evidence. Indeed, the problem which Sacks does not address is that any amalgamation of evidence that is designated as the context of an recorded action is itself also necessarily composed of recorded actions; the distinction between historical action and historical context is not therefore a feature of the source material but is something which is created in the process of historical inquiry. For Sacks, the context which makes the festal culture of late medieval Bristol intelligible is the way in which political life turned from protecting the privileges of the borough to regulating matters between the citizens following incorporation in 1373:

In this era, more than before, the burgesses of Bristol lived according to the ideals

³²A. Dyer, review of Sacks, *The Widening Gate* (1991), in *Urban History* 21 (1994), pp. 158-60 (p. 159).

³³Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 131-6 (pp. 133 and 135).

of social unity but the realities of social division. They bound themselves in a compact body by oaths promising complete devotion to the city's commonweal and thorough commitment of their wealth and power to its aid. Yet they resided in a town whose topography segregated them into distinct neighborhoods and whose economy placed them in separate social groupings.³⁴

According to Sacks it was these dynamics of unity and division which were mediated by the civic ceremonies and rituals of Bristol. Our main interest in this section is to look at Sacks's understanding of misrule and how it related to these dynamics; in fact he accords them a extremely important role:

Bristol's social and political rituals were aimed at purging the disruptive forces from the community and reinforcing the moral and spiritual foundations of the community by direct confrontation with the most vulnerable points in the social body. The ceremonies and festivities at the annual inauguration of the mayor addressed only the yearly transfer of authority from one individual to another, a threatening and dangerous moment in the life of any body politic. It was also necessary, however, to deal with the even greater source of potential trouble, the fact that Bristol's public officials were also private men who might be tempted to put themselves or their families and friends above the common good.

Sacks's argument is that these public officials 'needed to be reminded of their duties as servants to the community', and that whilst the commons had a fairly passive role on St Michael's Day, when the civic officers took their oaths, '[i]n other festivities they were more assertive, intervening to mock the civic authorities for their folly, to chastise them for their failures, and to instruct them in their duties'. He suggests that there were three particular festival occasions when such actions could be carried out; St Katherine's Day, at Christmas and on the festival of the boy-bishop, St Nicholas's Day.³⁵ In the abstract, such a state of affairs would appear to be extremely interesting and perhaps unique in the English urban sources. However, as I shall demonstrate below, a closer inspection of Sacks's arguments reveals that they are not substantiated by the actual evidence which

³⁴Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, pp. 136-7.

³⁵Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 180.

he cites in any of these three cases. There is a methodological problem here, in that given the scale of the claims that Sacks makes for these occasions, we would expect him to be able to give examples of how, over a substantial period of time, named office-holders in Bristol's city government who did abuse their positions were subject to mockery by citizens on these occasions and were subsequently reformed. The reality is that no such evidence exists; Sacks's arguments are based upon quite imaginative readings of civic ceremonies and other material recorded by the town clerk in his *Kalendar*, which was only begun in late 1478 or early 1479 (see below). Furthermore, Sacks gives no explanation of why he believes that the occasions recorded by Ricart were celebrated in this way both before and after Ricart wrote. I want though to go further than just pointing out that Sacks's account of these occasions is not substantiated by the evidence, that is, I want to try to identify *why* it is that Sacks feels able to read the evidence in such a way. What I will suggest is that it is Sacks's model of how festival occasions negotiate the dynamics of urban culture that is at fault here, and that the problems which we encounter in Sacks's work are the result of a failure to think critically about precisely this issue. I will look at each of the three occasions which are singled out by Sacks in turn.

Sacks's discussion of the function of St Katherine's Day is embedded within a larger argument about the maintenance of territorial unity within the city. As we saw above, within late medieval Bristol there were two jurisdictional enclaves, the liberties of St Augustine's Abbey and the Temple Fee. Sacks suggests that the activities that were associated with the feasts of St Clement and St Katherine were a means by which these two areas could be reconciled with the rest of the city. This argument is based upon a reading of the account of these activities that is given in Ricart's *Kalendar*:

Item, on Seynt Clementez even, the Maire, Shirif, and their brethern, haue vsid to walke to Seynt Clementis chapell within the Berthelmeus [presumably St Bartholomew's Hospital]: there to hire their evensong, and on the morowe their masse, and to offre there.

And on Seynt Kateryns even, in semblable wyse, the saide Maire and Shiref and their brethern to walke to Seynt Katheryns Chapell within Temple church, there to hire their evensong: and from evensong to walke vnto the Kateryn halle, their to be worshipfully receiued of the wardeyns and brethern of the same; and in the

halle theire to have theire fires, and their drynkyngs, with Spysid Cakebrede, and sondry wynes; the cuppes merelly filled aboute the hous. And then to depart, euery man home; the Maire, Shiref, and the worshipfull men redy to receyue at theire dores Seynt Kateryns players, making them to drynk at their dores, and rewardyng theym for theire playes.

On the next day the mayor, sheriff and brethren were to assemble at the Temple Church and from there were to process about the town, returning for mass and to make an offering.³⁶ Sacks's argument about the significance of these two observances is long and complex, but can be summarised as follows.³⁷ With respect to observances associated with the feast of St Katherine, Sacks suggests that this is divided into three parts, 'typical of rites of passage as they have been described and analyzed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner'.³⁸ The initial procession to the Temple Church raises the problem of its anomalous jurisdictional status within the city. The meeting at St Katherine's Hall is the first part of the transitional stage, in which order is broken down. 'In the drinking of healths and the eating of spiced cakebread the sharply delineated hierarchy apparent in the processional breaks down, most probably in a degree of inebriation, a kind of licensed drunkenness. Drunkenness is the opposite of order'.³⁹ The second part is the reception of St Katherine's players, where the city governors gave them treats. 'By giving them, the city's governors subordinated themselves symbolically to Katherine's divinely inspired authority and, therefore, not only to the virtues she exemplified but to the community she represented'. The procession the next day helps to reincorporate the Temple Fee into the borough community.⁴⁰ Sacks interprets the corporation's attendance at St Clement's Chapel in St Bartholomew's Hospital, which he places on the College Green, in the same way, suggesting that it 'seems very much a ceremony of unification'.⁴¹

³⁶*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. 80.

³⁷Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, pp. 136-59.

³⁸Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 140.

³⁹Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 141.

⁴⁰Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 142.

⁴¹Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 138-40 (p. 140).

Altogether, '[t]hese two festivals recognized the fact of territorial, jurisdictional, and social cohesion within the divided city and reaffirmed its ideals of harmony, uniformity and solidarity'.⁴²

Although Sacks's analysis is at first reading a sophisticated and persuasive one, there are several points which can be made which cast doubt upon its veracity. First, with respect to the evidence on which Sacks's argument is based, I have already noted that we should be sceptical about the extent to which the ceremonies that Ricart describes were or continued to be observed in such a manner either before or after he was writing. In the absence of other evidence I would suggest that it is safer to see these occasions as associated with the narrower period in which they are dated rather than a feature of the whole later Middle Ages. Second, Sacks makes a basic error in where he locates St Bartholomew's Hospital in Bristol, and as a consequence he also misplaces St Clement's Chapel, whose location is clearly vital for his argument. As we saw above, in Ricart's account of how feast days were observed by the mayor and brethren it is implied that St Clement's Chapel was situated within St Bartholomew's Hospital. In the absence of other corroborating information this location has been the one which has been accepted by other historians, including Sacks. In discussing the visit to St Clement's Chapel, Sacks notes that '[w]hen Ricart wrote, St. Clement's Chapel was located at the Hospital of St. Batholomew [*sic*] in the College Green, within the enclave of St. Augustine's Abbey'.⁴³ However, this latter point is a mistake. St Bartholomew's Hospital was not on the College Green, but was in fact in the parish of St Michael, in the north-west part of the medieval town; the remains of the hospital may still be visited today. Sacks appears to have confused St Bartholomew's with Gaunt's or St Mark's Hospital, which certainly was located opposite the abbey on the College Green.⁴⁴ Such a mistake

⁴²Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 143.

⁴³See for example R. H. Warren, 'The Mediaeval Chapels of Bristol', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* 30 (1907), pp. 181-211 (p. 197); Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, pp. 138-9. In a petition to establish a fraternity within St Bartholomew's Hospital which was made in 1445, one of the saints mentioned is St Clement (*Little Red Book of Bristol*, ed. Bickley, 2 pp. 186).

⁴⁴See the maps in *Atlas of Historic Towns*, ed. Lobel, 2 'Bristol'. M. Skeeters has also identified this error (*Community and Clergy*, p. 220 n. 103). William Worcestre is quite explicit about the position of St Bartholomew's Hospital: 'Ecclesia Sancti Bartholomei, quondam prioratus canonicorum regularium per antecessores domini de le Warre fundata, et modo hospitale pauperum

rather weakens Sacks's argument that the feasts of St Katherine and St Clement formed a pair and that both of them had a reconciliatory function with respect to the jurisdictional enclaves within the city. Finally, Sack's analysis of the significance of the drinking and the reception of St Katherine's players is also debatable; there is really no way of judging the tone of this occasion from the evidence that is given, and invoking anthropological models does not substantiate anything about its function, as I have argued above (Chapter One). It could equally be read as a confirmation of social difference rather than as the inversion of the usual state of affairs. The key point here is that Sacks assigns a fixed function to a particular occasion and then presumes that this will apply right across the period. In contrast, I have suggested that the meaning of such occasions would have varied each time they were celebrated, depending upon who was involved and the issues that were at stake at that particular historical moment.

Similar arguments about evidence and interpretation pertain to Sacks's identification of Christmas as a period when the usual structures of authority were suspended. Sacks suggests that 'at Christmas a Lord of Misrule issued satiric proclamations and ordinances endorsing licentiousness, approving disorder, and encouraging drunkenness, idleness and other misdemeanors, thereby standing authority on its head and criticizing its shortcomings'.⁴⁵ Although this sounds as if should be a very exciting piece of evidence, the actual evidence which Sacks refers to is rather more prosaic; it is a Christmas proclamation that is recorded in Ricart's *Kalendar*, which makes no mention of any of the features which Sacks claims for it:

Item, the Maire of Bristowe shal, by vsage this quarter the next markett day byfore Christmas daie, or ellis on Christmas eve, do make open proclamacion for gode rule and governaunce to be hadde and kept within the saide town, duryng the holy dayes, under this maner of fforme:-

The Maire and the Shiref chargen and commanden, on the kyng our souuerain lordis behalf, that no maner of persone, of whate degree or condicion that they be of, at no tyme this Christmas goo a mommyng with cloce visaged, nor go aftir curfew rong at St. Nicholas, withoute lighte in their handes, that is to sey skonce

annui valoris ... est scita prope et extra portas vocatus Frome-yate, in boreali parte villae Bristoll' (*Antiquities of Bristow*, ed. Dallaway, p. 88 (ellipsis in original)).

⁴⁵Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 180.

light, lantern light, candel light, or torche light; and that they goo in no wyse with wepyn defenssibly araied, wherbye the kinges peas may in eny maner wise be broken or hurt, and that vpon peyn of prysonment, and makyng ffyne and raunson to the kyng.⁴⁶

A marginal note in the printed edition does gloss it as a 'Proclamacion for peace during the Christmas holidays, and the reign of the Lord of Misrule', but a perusal of the original manuscript reveals that this gloss has been added in the preparation of the printed edition of the *Kalendar*.⁴⁷ Now, we may accept that there is no single, correct reading of the meaning of a piece of evidence and that different methodological approaches to the same piece of evidence will inevitably produce different readings of it. However, I also believe that there are certain conditions of plausibility that will make some readings more convincing than others, and in this case Sacks conspicuously fails to say why he believes that this proclamation should be interpreted satirically. It also makes no mention of drunkenness, idleness or licentiousness. There is evidence to suggest that the civic officers did enjoy an annual round of Christmas drinkings in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, something which Sacks neglects to mention; a reorganisation of this occasion less than a decade before Ricart was writing provides an indication of its tone. At a council meeting on December 10, 1472 it was observed that whilst in the past diverse mayors of the town had held their Christmas drinkings on Christmas Day; this posed a problem, in that the mayor's servants were labouring on the day that men should be the holiest. Therefore, it was decided that in future mayors were to hold their drinkings on St Stephen's Day instead (December 26). Similarly, the sheriff was to hold his drinking on St John Evangelists' Day, and the two bailiffs to hold theirs on Holy Innocents' and New Year's Days (December 27, 28 and January 1 respectively). Finally, the city council were to meet the abbot of St Augustine's on the Twelfth Day (January 6).⁴⁸ This concern with the labour of the mayor's servants hardly fits with

⁴⁶*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, pp. 85-6.

⁴⁷Bristol Record Office, Ricart's *Kalendar*, f. 164.

⁴⁸*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 3 pp. 95-8. It is not clear how this pattern would have altered following the changes made to the civic structure in 1499, when the two bailiffs were replaced by an additional sheriff (*Bristol Charters 1378-1499*, ed. Cronne, pp. 163-88 (p. 178)). In the sixth year of Henry VIII (1514-15) it was 'agreed that from hensforthe the Shriffes of Bristowe shall kepe

Sacks's account of the Christmas period as one of idleness and the acceptance of misdemeanours, which appears instead to arise from an (incorrect) understanding of medieval Christmas as a period of blanket misrule.

The observances associated with St Nicholas's Day are the third occasion upon which, according to Sacks, the civic authorities were to be mocked, chastised and instructed by the commons. His reading of this custom is based upon the well-known and widely quoted passage in Ricart's *Kalendar*, which describes how the mayor, sheriff and their brethren were to hear evensong at St Nicholas on the eve of the feast, and that they were to hear mass and the boy-bishop's sermon there on the feast itself. After dinner, they were to assemble at the Tolzey and play at dice until the boy-bishop and his entourage arrived to sing for them, and they were to return to St Nicholas for evensong:

Item, on Seynt Nicholas Eve, yn semblable wyse, the Maire, and Shiref, and their brethern to walke to Seynt Nicholas churche, there to hire their even-song: and on the morowe to hire their masse, and office,⁴⁹ and hire the bishop's sermon, and have his blissing; and after dyner, the seide Maire, Shiref, and their brethern, to assemble at the mairez counter, there wayting the Bishoppes comming; pleyng the meane whiles at Dyce, the towne clerke to fynde them Dyce, and to have 1d. of every Raphill; and when the Bishope is come thedir, his chapell there to synge, and the bishope to geve them his blissing, and then he and all his chapell to be serued there with brede and wyne. And so departe the Maire, Shiref, and their brethern to hire the bishopes evesonge at Seynt Nicholas churche forsed.⁵⁰

In Sacks's view, the role of the boy-bishop in the celebration associated with St Nicholas's Day is both satiric and didactic, with the dicing at the Tolzey being the key

but oone drynking the Cristmas weke whiche shalbe kepte on Newyeres daye' (*Ordinances of Bristol*, ed. Stanford, p. 8). In 1518, when William Dale complained of the excessive costs that the Sheriffs had to bear (see below), the sum of £13 6s. 8d. for '[t]he Drynkyn at Cristmas for bothe the Shrifis by estymacion' is given in the list of their charges (*Great White Book*, ed. Ralph, p. 78).

⁴⁹The printed edition of the *Kalendar* has 'offre', but an examination of the original manuscript suggests that this word should be read as 'office'; there are clearly six letters rather than five (*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. 80; Ricart's *Kalendar*, Bristol Record Office, f. 161).

⁵⁰*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, pp. 80-1.

to his understanding of this observance.⁵¹ Quoting passages from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Boke named The Governour*, Sacks suggests that whilst dicing was a common pastime in the later Middle Ages, 'this form of gambling was also understood to be a pernicious vice, one that indicated the corruption of those who played at it'.⁵² For the mayor and councillors to sit dicing represents the 'absolute abandonment' of their official duties and responsibilities. However, the involvement of the boy-bishop has the effect of criticising their inevitable failings and also purging their official sins, emphasising that they are ultimately subject to the chastisement of those that they govern.⁵³

As with Sacks's interpretation of the observances associated with St Katherine's Day and Christmas, it is possible to question both the evidential basis upon which his reading of St Nicholas's Day is based and the actual specifics of that reading. However, my objections will be deferred to a point later in the chapter, as in this instance there is sufficient evidence to allow us to explore at greater length the dynamics of this particular occasion, at least in the form that it is described by Ricart. The main part of this chapter will be given over to an investigation of how the events which took place on St Nicholas's Day in Bristol in the fifteenth century were related to the social structure of the town. This analysis will proceed in two parts. The first will concentrate upon the form of the occasion, establishing that Ricart's account of this occasion need not be seen as describing a format that was annually repeated throughout the period in question, but that these details may be particular to a shorter period of time when William Spencer was a prominent figure in the city government. The implication here is that the relationship between the custom and social structure is always going to be a historically-specific one, shaped by the particular individuals who were involved. The second part will concentrate upon function, suggesting that rather than being an occasion on which the civic officers abandoned their usual demeanour, it is more plausibly understood as an opportunity to stress the social distance and difference of these officers from the rest of the population.

⁵¹Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, pp. 180-3.

⁵²Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p. 181.

⁵³Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, pp. 182-3 (p. 182).

St Nicholas's Day in Bristol: The Form of the Custom

In their chapter on St Nicholas's Church Nicholls and Taylor note that '[i]n the records of St. Nicholas Church there are many references to the festival of the boy bishop', suggesting that it was 'kept up with great completeness'.⁵⁴ Unfortunately the church records were destroyed when the church was bombed in the Second World War, and so for evidence of this custom at St Nicholas we have to rely for the most part on material that was published from the church book and the churchwardens' accounts by Atchley in 1906, as mentioned above. There are also possible references to the trappings associated with this custom in the records of All Saints' church.⁵⁵ The earliest evidence which indicates that the boy-bishop custom was observed at St Nicholas's church is from a church inventory made on March 5 1433, which includes the following entries: 'Item j cloth of wyght with a crowch a-fore synt Nycholas' and 'Item i myter & j crowche'. Presumably, the 'crowch', a crozier, and the mitre were worn by the boy-bishop and the cloth would have been used to cover the altar.⁵⁶ According to Ronald Hutton, the boy-bishop of St Nicholas had a procession bearing eight banners, an observation which is presumably based upon an entry which immediately precedes that of the mitre and crozier in this inventory (no page reference is given by Hutton): 'Item viij bonners for leynt ...'. These banners were clearly associated with Lent rather than St Nicholas's Day.⁵⁷ The passage in Ricart's *Kalendar* describing the events of St Nicholas's Day is the next piece of evidence chronologically; whilst the date at which the *Kalendar* was begun can be dated fairly precisely, it is not clear when the actual entries were made or for how long the custom had been observed in this manner - further suggestions will be made below. In his introduction Ricart writes that 'William Spencer, as nowe beinge Maire of

⁵⁴*Bristol, Past and Present*, ed. Nicholls and Taylor, 2 p. 162.

⁵⁵An undated entry records that Thomas Parnaunt gave a mitre for St Nicholas's bishop, whilst an entry in the account year 1447-8 notes a payment of 22*d.* for making the mitre and cross of St Nicholas (*The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints', Bristol: Part I*, ed. Burgess, pp. 24 and 85).

⁵⁶Atchley, 'Parish Records of St Nicholas's', pp. 42, 43 and n. 5.

⁵⁷Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, pp. 12 and 296 n. 21; Atchley, 'Parish Records of St Nicholas's', p. 43. The full entry for this line reads 'Item viij bonners for leynt & j bonner for the cross of sylke for the crosse'.

this worshipfull Toune of Bristow, in the xvijth yere of the full noble reigne of oure moost dradde souueraigne lord kinge Edward the fourth, hath commaunded me, Robert Ricart, the same yere electid and admitted into the office of Toune Clerk of the saide worshipfull towne, for to devise, ordeigne, and make this present boke for a remembratif evir hereaftir, to be called and named the Maire of Bristowe is Register, or ellis the Maire is Kalender'.⁵⁸ The eighteenth year of Edward IV ran from March 4 1478 to March 3 1479; William Spencer served as mayor from Michaelmas 1478 to Michaelmas 1479 and Ricart was elected town clerk on Michaelmas 1478.⁵⁹ Following the passage describing the arrangements associated with St Nicholas's Day in Ricart's *Kalendar*, the next piece of evidence that we have is an entry in a document which specifies the tasks expected of the clerk and suffragan of St Nicholas, dated 1481: '[t]he Clerke and the suffrygann to Dress vppe the Bysshopes Sete A-yeniste . Seynte Nicholas Daye vndyr payne of vjd a-pece'.⁶⁰ This is the highest fine that was levied for the failure to complete a duty, ranking alongside failure to sweep the church, dress the altars on principal feasts, ring for thunder or ring noon and curfew on principal feasts. Such a duty was clearly of considerable importance to the parishioners of St Nicholas. In 1518, William Dale, one of the town Sheriffs, complained of the excessive costs that those in this office had to bear, and the list of these charges given in the civic records shows how elaborate civic celebrations had become by this time.⁶¹ The case went to the Star Chamber, and Wolsey's review of these costs was read before the common council on October 4 1519, at which Dale 'then and there in right odebyent maner with watery teres submitted hymself to the due Ordre and establishmentes which then and there were made ...'. One of the costs altered was for '[t]he Drynkyn on Saynt Nicholas Day at the Tols[ey]', cut from 5s. to 2s., suggesting that at least part of the custom as described by Ricart was

⁵⁸*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. 3. Further biographical details for Ricart are given in I. Gray, *Antiquaries of Gloucestershire and Bristol*, pp. 34-5.

⁵⁹*Handbook of Dates for Students of English History*, ed. C. R. Cheney (1995), p. 23; 'William Spencer beinge the thirde tyme Maire of the Towne of Bristowe bifore saide that is to wete in the yere begynnyng at the feste of Sainte Mighell the XVIIIth yere of the Reigne of our moost dradde Souueraigne lorde Kyng Edward the fourth ...' (*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 4 p. 57); *Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. 1.

⁶⁰Appendix III: Duties of the Clerks at St. Nicholas Church, Bristol, in 1481', in *The Clerk's Book of 1549*, ed. J. W. Legg, Henry Bradshaw Society 25 (1903), pp. 66-70 (p. 67).

⁶¹*Great White Book*, ed. Ralph, pp. 72-85.

being observed at this date and was expected to continue.⁶² Returning to the churchwardens' accounts of St Nicholas, there was some outlay towards the upkeep of the boy-bishop's seat in 1527-8: 'Item John Kyte for mendyng the bysshoppes stall, iij d. Item payd to the clarke for dressing vp the byshopes stale, viij d'. Atchley says that there were also annual payments for dressing the church at St Nicholas tide, but gives no dates or amounts.⁶³ Nicholls and Taylor note two such payments; in 1520, when 12*d.* was paid for the hanging of the church and for meat and drink and 12*d.* to minstrels, and in 1532, when the sexton was paid 12*d.* for 'hangyng of the bedds', possibly beads or bedspreads.⁶⁴ Whilst there is evidence for the observance of the boy-bishop custom at St Nicholas for nearly a century, and evidence that there was drinking at the Tolzey on St Nicholas's Day in the earlier part of the sixteenth century, it is only in Ricart's *Kalendar* that we actually get a crossover of these two sources. We must therefore be cautious about the duration of the link which we suppose between the civic and the parish celebrations, as we may be dealing with a particular conjuncture rather than an ongoing custom. In such circumstances it is clearly important to have some understanding of the relationship between the church of St Nicholas and the civic government.

The church of St Nicholas occupied an important place in the medieval town. Geographically, it was one of the town's four 'gate-churches', an unusual design of which St John's is the only surviving Bristol example. St Nicholas's Gate opened out onto the town bridge and the southern parishes of Temple, Redcliffe and St Thomas; to the north was the High Street and the centre of the town. William Worcestre gives a detailed description of the church and its location:

Ecclesia parochialis Sancti Nicholai scita supra portam pulchram vocatum Seynt Colas yate, id est porta Sancti Nicholai, cum turri quadrata et magnum pinaculum sive spera de mearenno elevato cum plumbo cooperto, et cum pulcherrima volta de

⁶²*Great White Book*, ed. Ralph, pp. 81, 78 and 84. For a more detailed discussion of this case and the Star Chamber documentation see 'Brystowe, Sheriff of v. Mayor &c. of', in *Select Cases before the King's Council in the Star Chamber commonly called The Court of the Star Chamber Volume II A.D. 1509-1544*, ed. I. S. Leadam, Selden Society 25 (1910), pp. cii-cxviii and 142-65.

⁶³Atchley, 'Parish Records of St Nicholas's', pp. 43 n. 5 and 56.

⁶⁴*Bristol, Past and Present*, ed. Nicholls and Taylor, 2 pp. 162 and 163.

arcu lapidum ac fenestris, cum capella in honore sanctae crucis.

...

At Seynt Collas yate in the north syde of the yate meten acrossse wyse IIII weyes, whych ben the shamelys and Seynt Nicholas strete, the waye entryng to the hogge-yate, and the seyde Hygh-strete.

At the sout-side of Seynt Collas yate meten twey chyff weyes, the chieff brygge upon IIII grete arches of x vethym yn hyth, and the fayre chappelle upon the v arch, and the second way havng the space of a tryangle goyng to bak [The Back] by Seynt Nicholas chyrch.⁶⁵

Over the gate were a clock and a statue of Henry II, who was educated at Bristol Castle in the household of Robert, Earl of Gloucester.⁶⁶ A schematic and highly stylised representation of the core of medieval Bristol, showing the four principal streets leading away from the High Cross towards the four gates of St Nicholas, St John, St Leonard and New Gate, is given in Ricart's *Kalendar*. It follows a section describing the foundation of Bristol by King Brynne.⁶⁷ The upper part of St Nicholas and the gate were demolished in 1762, and a new church was built over the medieval crypt. This upper church was destroyed during the Second World War, although it has now been restored.⁶⁸

A survey of Bristol's chantries in 1548 found that three of the chantry chapels in St Nicholas's Church had been founded by former mayors of the town, Eborard Le Francey, Richard Spicer and William Spencer.⁶⁹ Eborard Le Francey was seneschal in 1332-3 and a member of the forty-eight in 1344.⁷⁰ The composition establishing the

⁶⁵*Antiquities of Bristow*, ed. Dallaway, pp. 138 and 41.

⁶⁶Barrett, *History and Antiquities of the City of Bristol*, p. 494; N. Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy 1066-1530* (1984), p. 55.

⁶⁷*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. 10 and facing page.

⁶⁸N. Pevsner, *North Somerset and Bristol*, *The Buildings of England* (Harmondsworth, 1958), pp. 404-6.

⁶⁹Chantry Certificates, Gloucestershire (Roll 22)', ed. J. MacLean, *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* 8 (1883-4), pp. 229-308 (pp. 237-40).

⁷⁰Named as seneschal on November 5 1332 in the *Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 2 p. 179; named as a member of the forty-eight on November 25 1344 in the *Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 1 p. 26.

arrangements for the chantry of Le Francey and his wife Johanne was made in 1350; it provided for two chantry priests to celebrate for the souls of the couple in St Nicholas, as well as a chest which contained a missal, a chalice, two cruets and three pairs of vestments, amongst other things.⁷¹ Richard Spicer was on the common council by the mid-fourteenth century and was mayor in 1360-1, 1372-3 and 1374-5.⁷² The composition establishing the arrangements for the chantry of Spicer and his wife Cecilie was made in 1377. Provision was made for £2. 10s. to be distributed amongst those who attended the obit, including 2s. for the vicar of St Nicholas, 1s. for the clerk for ringing the bells and 6d. for the suffragan. The civic officers were also to be rewarded for attending.⁷³ An undated set of expenses for the obit records that the dirige was on May 31 and the mass on the day after.⁷⁴ By the time of Dale's complaint in 1518 the cost of this obit had risen to £3. 13s. and this charge was now borne by the Sheriffs; the sum of 4s. was now allocated for ringing the bells. Although not mentioned by Ricart, who only covers events in the last four months of the year in his *Kalendar*, this appears to have been an important civic occasion, and it was to be maintained at the same rate after Wolsey's review of the Sheriffs' charges in 1519.⁷⁵ Finally, William Spencer had a long and distinguished career in the government of medieval Bristol. He was bailiff in 1449-50, serving on the common council by 1452, and became sheriff after many years of trying in 1461-2.⁷⁶ He served as mayor on three occasions, in 1465-6, 1473-4 and 1478-9, and

⁷¹*Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 1 pp. 195-8 (pp. 195 and 196-7).

⁷²Named as a member of the common council in an undated document which Bickley suggests is written about 1350 (*Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 1 p. 21); named as mayor on December 14 1360 in the *Little Red Book* 2 p. 38 and on July 27 1361 in 1 p. 100; named as mayor on August 17 1373 in the *Little Red Book* 1 p. 16; named as mayor on January 28 1375 in *Little Red Book* 1 p. 211.

⁷³*Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 1 pp. 215-221 (pp. 217-8).

⁷⁴*Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 1 p. 202.

⁷⁵*Great White Book*, ed. Ralph, pp. 78 and 83.

⁷⁶Named as bailiff in the *Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 1 pp. 128 and 130, and the *Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 2 p. 233; named as member of the common council in the *Great Red Book* 1 p. 135; named as candidate for sheriff between 1455 and 1461, attaining office in the latter year, in the *Calendar of Fine Rolls, 1452-61*, pp. 140, 176, 200, 226, 267 and 284, and *Calendar of Fine Rolls, 1461-71*, p. 11; also named as sheriff in the *Little Red Book* 2 p. 128.

also represented the town in parliament.⁷⁷ Spencer is recorded as occupying a tenement in St Nicholas Street in 1459 and made contributions to St Nicholas's Church over a number of years. In 1468 William, described as 'parrochianus', contributed towards the building of a new reredos over the high altar. At an unspecified date he gave £3. 6s. 8d. towards the new organ, and he also provided vestments for the church, as did one Alice Spencer, who Atchley suggests was his widow, again at unspecified dates.⁷⁸ The obit and chantry of William Spencer were founded in 1481.⁷⁹ From these gifts and arrangements it appears that Spencer had a close association with St Nicholas, and since as we saw above Ricart was instructed to begin his *Kalendar* in William's last mayoralty (1478-9), it is possible that the celebrations associated with St Nicholas's Day that Ricart records were peculiar to the period when William was influential in city government, rather than being a permanent feature of Bristol ceremonial.

Another way in which St Nicholas was linked to the civic government was through the keeping of time. From the second half of the fifteenth century it was the church from which curfew was rung, and the hours of its clock were used as a reference for regulating trade. In this way St Nicholas combined two functions that need not necessarily have been carried out by the same church. Unfortunately it is not possible to say for certain when this practice began, as prior to the 1450s civic ordinances do not specify a particular church when they refer to the keeping of urban time. For example, in a series of proclamations dating from the fourteenth century it was ordered that no taverner was to keep their guests sitting after curfew, and that no-one was to wander after curfew without a light, but the means by which curfew was signalled is not recorded. Other proclamations in this group forbade fishmongers and victuallers from

⁷⁷Spencer's first tenure as mayor appears to have been in 1465-6, as he is named as such on October 23 1465 in the *Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 2 p. 118. The period of his second tenure is less clear; whilst named as mayor on August 3 1473 in the *Great Red Book* 2 p. 146 he also appears to have occupied this office in the following year, as he is named as mayor on October 19 1473 in the *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1467-77*, p. 399. It may be that the former entry is a mistake, since he is described as 'late Mayor' on June 13 1475 in the *Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 2 p. 215 and a period of tenure in 1473-4 accords with his entry in *Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. 45; it may also be that he took office early in 1473 for reasons unknown. Spencer's third period of tenure as mayor was in 1478-9 (see above). He is named as M.P. in 1468 in the *Calendar of Fine Rolls, 1461-71*, p. 237.

⁷⁸*Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 1 p. 248; Atchley, 'Parish Records of St Nicholas's', p. 47.

⁷⁹Atchley, 'Parish Records of St Nicholas's', p. 47.

buying for resale before the third hour, but no specific timepiece against which this order was to be reckoned is given.⁸⁰ In 1422 we have the first reference to time being measured by a clock in Bristol. It is recorded in the *Little Red Book* that on January 2 1422, Nicholas Bagot, the sheriff, died between ten and eleven o'clock before the hour of dinner, and that the town council assembled at the second hour after dinner to discuss how to proceed.⁸¹ The first mention of St Nicholas's clock in relation to trade and curfew appear in the early 1450s. An ordinance of 1451 ordered that there was to be no regrating of birds before ten o'clock was smitten at St Nicholas, on pain of a 40*d.* fine.⁸² In a group of proclamations apparently recorded in the following year it was decreed that no taverner or tapster was to open his door on a Sunday when mass was being held at St Nicholas's church, nor were they to have folk sitting in their houses before this hour on a Sunday, unless they were strangers. Furthermore, no man was to go about the town without a light after curfew had been rung at St Nicholas.⁸³ Barrett, the Bristol antiquary, records that there were six bells in the tower of St Nicholas, with the clock bell fixed in the steeple above the rest. It was inscribed with the following phrase; 'Georgius Campana Bristow ad voluntatem maior et communit. removetur tempore Walteri Darby, maioris, A.D. 1369'.⁸⁴ Whilst this may point to an earlier date for a clock at St Nicholas than the documentary evidence suggests, it may also be that this is an older bell which was moved to the steeple when the clock was installed, or which had subsequently replaced a clock bell at a later date. It is not possible to verify this further, as the upper part of the church and the gate were demolished in 1762, leaving only the medieval crypt over which a new church was built. As we have no explanation for why St Nicholas was chosen in this capacity in either case, nor why curfew was also rung from there, the most that we can say is that St Nicholas was fulfilling this dual function from the second half

⁸⁰*Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 2 pp. 224-32 (pp. 225, 226 and 229).

⁸¹*Little Red Book*, ed. Bickley, 1 p. 142. Other early examples of where an unspecified clock is referred to are in 1436, in a record of the time of death of the mayor, John Milton, who had been (somewhat ironically) the replacement for Bagot the sheriff some years earlier, and in 1445, when nine o'clock was set as the time of a meeting to establish a new fraternity amongst the Mariners (*Little Red Book* 1 p. 178 and 2 p. 187).

⁸²*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 1 p.135.

⁸³*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale. 1 pp. 145 and 141-2.

⁸⁴Barrett, *History and Antiquities of Bristol*, p. 495.

of the fifteenth century.

Further information about how time was kept at St Nicholas comes from the list of duties of the clerks of St Nicholas made in 1481. It was the task of the suffragan to ring curfew with one bell at nine o'clock, for a half of a quarter of an hour, on pain of a *2d.* fine, whilst the clerk was charged with the ringing of noon and curfew on principal feasts at eight o'clock, on pain of a *6d.* fine. It is not stated to whom the fines should be paid. On Saturdays, the clerk and suffragan were to ring noon with two bells, on pain of a *4d.* fine, double feasts excepted.⁸⁵ Presumably, the ringing at noon on Saturday was to signal that work should finish, in order that preparations could be made for the observance of Sunday. This would not be necessary if the Saturday was a double feast. In the list of the sheriffs' charges of 1518 there is a payment of *26s. 8d.* for '[t]he keypyng of Saynt Nicholas Clok'. Whilst this might indicate either a payment for wages or for maintenance or both, this charge is described as 'for the wages of the Clerke of the same Church kepyng the clock there' in the 1519 review, when the chamberlain was made responsible for its payment instead (see note).⁸⁶

This brief review of the evidence for the relationship between the city government of Bristol and the church of St Nicholas shows that both the corporation as a whole and individual members of it had interests there. We can suggest that this relationship may have been particularly close during the mayoralties of William Spencer. Since Ricart's *Kalendar* was begun in Spencer's last period of tenure, at his request, it is conceivable that the celebrations which Ricart records for St Nicholas's Day were a feature of this particular period, rather than existing prior to it. It is even possible that what we have here is an account of a particular celebration that was associated with Spencer's election as Mayor in 1478, a recognition by the members of his parish of his achievement on the day of their patron saint. Ricart had also just come to office, and as he received money

⁸⁵Appendix III', ed. Legg, pp. 67, 68 and 66.

⁸⁶*Great White Book of Bristol*, ed. Ralph, pp. 78 and 83; the figure of *25s. 8d.* for the clerk's wages which is given in the 1519 list of sheriff's costs in the printed edition is an error, and should be *26s. 8d.* (Bristol Record Office, *Great White Book*, f. 56v.). There appears to have been a duplication of three payments in the lists of costs that were to be borne by the sheriffs and the chamberlain in the 1519 settlement; for the clerk's wages, for Spicer's Obit, and to the four orders of Friars (*Great White Book* fs. 56v. and 57.). This is probably due to a copying error in the sheriffs' list in this volume, since another copy of the sheriff's schedule omits these three items (*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 2 pp. 153-5 (p. 154)).

from the dicing on this day, this may have been a way of welcoming him into civic office, or part of a more general custom of rewarding clerks upon St Nicholas's Day (see below). Clearly, although there is insufficient evidence to reach any firm conclusion on these suggestions, it is important to recognise that the festivities recorded by Ricart do not necessarily represent an ancient format that was repeated annually in the same way until 1541, when the boy-bishop custom was put down by royal proclamation.⁸⁷ If we accept the likelihood that they were peculiar to a particular period, then Sacks's argument about their function is seriously weakened, as in his view they are integral to the harmony of the borough community throughout the later medieval period. We can say that a key deficiency in such a model of urban festivity is its presumption of a continuity of evidence where none exists in the surviving sources. It should be obvious that such a presumption actually derives from and is even demanded by Sacks's particular model of festivity, which perceives all such occasions to contribute in some way towards civic harmony, unity and solidarity. Having examined in some detail the form of this custom, we may now turn to the question of its function, through a more specific analysis of Ricart's description of the celebrations associated with St Nicholas's Day.

St Nicholas's Day in Bristol: The Function of the Custom

As we saw above, Sacks's argument regarding the significance of the dicing by the civic officers in the St Nicholas's Day observances is that it represents an absolute abandonment of their responsibilities, although they are supposed to be redeemed by the involvement of the boy-bishop. There are two important points to be made here. The first is that we can question whether the two texts which refer to dicing that Sacks chooses, separated as they are by over one hundred and fifty years, really offer the best way of establishing a context for these actions. I want to suggest that a more appropriate way of gauging the significance of the dicing in this custom is to examine some historical evidence of where the use of dice is actually recorded, and in the absence of any wider study I have examined some accessible civic and royal records for such references. This

⁸⁷*Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. Hughes and Larkin, 1 pp. 301-2.

brief survey enables us to suggest that whilst in the period in question there appear to have been some measures taken to prevent servants, apprentices and labourers from dicing, along with certain other games, individuals of a higher status appear to have been exempt from such legislation. The second point to be made is that Sacks does not explain why the town clerk is described as receiving money from the dicing on this occasion, and I will offer two possible explanations for why he may have been rewarded in this way.

There are several references to dicing in the civic records of York. For example, there are three apprenticeship indentures enrolled in the *York Memorandum Book B/Y*, dated the August 1 1371, October 4 1372 and November 21 1510. They all prohibit the apprentices from playing at dice; the first two also prohibit frequenting the tavern or brothels and playing at chess, whereas the third also prohibits chess and other illicit games.⁸⁸ Also, on October 24 1484 one John Tinley, a mason, came into the council chamber of York and declared that he had been robbed of a piece of gold whilst playing dice in the tapster house of The Dragon in Lop Lane.⁸⁹ Whilst this incident may not enhance our perception of the honesty of the average dice-player, it nevertheless suggests that Tinley did not fear punishment, or at least considered it less important than recovering his money. Finally, in 1530 the city council made two recommendations relating to the ways in which those of lower status spent their leisure time. The first was that poor labourers should be subject to a curfew, because they were alleged to have frequented taverns and alehouses and played there 'at dyverse cards and oder unlauffull games ageynst the fourme of dyverse statuts in that behalf provyded'. The second was that 'no man of this City shall suffer any apprentyce to dispend any money within thayre howsys nor play at dyes, cards nor none oder unlawfull games'.⁹⁰

In respect of parliamentary statutes, the anti-gaming legislation of this period appears to have been directed at those of a lower social status. The legislation of 1388

⁸⁸*The York Memorandum Book: B/Y*, ed. J. W. Percy, Surtees Society 186 (1969), pp. 4-5, 5 and 247; the first of these indentures is also found in the *York Memorandum Book A/Y*, ed. M. Sellers, 2 vols, Surtees Society 120 and 125 (1911 and 1914), 1 pp. 54-5.

⁸⁹*The York House Books 1461-1490*, ed. L. C. Attreed, 2 vols (Stroud, 1991), 1 pp. 310-11.

⁹⁰*York Civic Records 3*, ed. A. Raine, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 106 (1942), p. 133-4 (p. 134).

specified servants and labourers as those groups prohibited from playing particular games on festival days and Sundays, including dicing, and this statute was reaffirmed by Henry IV in 1409. A resume of previous legislation in 1477 stated that 'no Person should use any unlawful games', which may suggest that the prohibition was extended; alternatively, it may be understood as only applying to those persons who had already been mentioned in that previous legislation. The Act Against Vagabonds and Beggars of 1495 prohibited servants, labourers and apprentices from playing dice and other games at any time outside of Christmas, and only then in the presence of their masters.⁹¹

We may also note that dicing appears to have been popular at the court of Henry VII, since there are a number of references to the practice in the accounts kept by John Heron, Treasurer of the Chamber. An entry in March 1493 records that 16*d.* were paid for a pair of tables and dice, and 40*s.* were paid for the Prince 'to pley at dice' in September 1496. In October 1497, £7 15*s.* were paid to Hugh Denes 'for the Kinges pley at dice opon Friday last passed', whilst James Braybrook received 30*s.* 'for the Kinges losse at dice'; a further sum of 40*s.* in respect of losses was paid in the November. In January 1502 66*s.* 8*d.* were paid for the Duke of York to play at dice, and in February 33*s.* 4*d.* were paid to one Weston 'for the Kinges losse at disse opon Srove Monday'. In April 1508 11*s.* were paid for tables, chessmen and dice.⁹²

This brief overview suggests that dicing may have been a more acceptable practice amongst those of a higher status in this period, as long as it did not take place in gaming houses. We need not therefore attach any particular ritual significance to the fact that the mayor, sheriff and brethren of Bristol played at dice as they waited at the Tolzey for the arrival of the boy-bishop, in the sense that this was a means by which (according to Sacks) they humbled themselves before the commons of the town. Indeed, quite the contrary argument could be proposed. St Nicholas's Day would have been observed as a feast day by the parishioners of St Nicholas's Church, and probably by the rest of Bristol's population too.⁹³ However, whilst the mayor, sheriff and brethren were able to

⁹¹*Statutes of the Realm*, 11 vols (1810-28), 2 (1816) pp. 57, 163, 462-3 and 569.

⁹²S. Anglo, 'The Court Festivals of Henry VII', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 43 (1960), pp. 12-45 (pp. 28, 30, 32, 38 and 43).

⁹³The feast days of particular towns are an area where more work is required; as Mary Mansfield has recently observed, '[t]he link between the ecclesiastical calendar and the *urban* cycle of work

enjoy a game of dice on such a day, the legislation discussed above would have meant that many other residents would not have been able to; servants, labourers and probably apprentices too. We can say then that by spending their time in dicing before receiving the boy-bishop on St Nicholas's Day the civic elite had the effect of actually *emphasising* the differences between themselves and other participants, since they were exempt from the legislation which required those of lesser means to spend their time in archery practice on such days. Furthermore, if one resonance of the boy-bishop custom was the youthful usurpation of adult authority, in this instance such a meaning was met with a solid display of high-status privilege. This is not of course to say that any sense of subversion was thereby contained; what I am drawing attention to here are the dynamics of this situation, whose actual outcome cannot and should not be specified in the abstract and in the absence of concrete evidence.

As I suggested above, a second point which can be made about Sacks's analysis of the dicing in the St Nicholas's Day observances is that he overlooks evidence which may suggest that what we have is more than just a game here. If we refer back to the passage from the *Kalendar* that has already been quoted, it is clear that whilst the mayor, sheriff and their brethren were waiting for the boy-bishop, they would be 'pleying the meane whiles at Dyce'; also, it was the task of 'the towne clerke to fynde theym Dyce, and to have 1d. of every Raphill'.⁹⁴ The word 'raphill' has several meanings in this period: '[a] game of chance played with three dice, in which the winner was the one who threw the three all alike, or, if none done did so, the one who threw the highest pair; also, the throwing of a doublet or triplet in this game'.⁹⁵ The second sense of this word would seem to be more appropriate in the example that we are dealing with; the town clerk, in this case Ricart himself, would have received 1d. from every throw of a double or a triple on the dice which he provided. Unfortunately, we have no information as to how

has never been much discussed' (M. C. Mansfield, *The Humiliation of Sinners: Public Penance in Thirteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London, 1995), p. 137 n. 23 (Mansfield's emphasis)). The suggestion that St Nicholas's Day was observed as free from work in Bristol is based upon the inclusion of this day in the lists of *festa ferianda* for the dioceses of Worcester and Bath and Wells (C. R. Cheney, 'Rules for the Observance of Feast-Days in Medieval England', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 34 (1961), pp. 117-47 (pp. 136-7 and 143)).

⁹⁴*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. 80.

⁹⁵*MED* rafle n. (1).

many throws of the dice there would have actually been, whether these throws were part of actual games, or how many of the brethren would have participated. It is therefore very difficult to ascertain exactly what was going on here, although I think that there are several possible explanations that can be advanced. As mentioned above, it is possible that this was a means of welcoming Ricart into civic office, although we may consider two further frames of reference.

First, this practice may have been part of a wider custom in Bristol whereby clerks were rewarded on St Nicholas's Day. Such a possibility is substantiated by the fact that the parish clerk of St Nicholas also received a customary reward on this day. The evidence for this is found in the 1481 list of duties of the clerk and suffragan of this church, in the section which deals with the rewards available to the clerk and suffragan: '[a]lso the Clerke to haue the vaylys on Seynt Nicholas nyghth goenge wyth *Sospitati*'.⁹⁶ This entry is a little difficult to understand, and it is helpful to quote the note of Legg on this point. He suggests that this reference to '*Sospitati*' denotes 'the beginning of the prose that used to be sung in the Sarum use after the ninth respond at matins on the feast of St. Nicholas, 6. December. Evidently the clerks went round the parish singing this hymn after the fashion of the Waits and Carol-singers of later days, and the "avails" or "tips" obtained on this occasion went to the parish-clerk'.⁹⁷ Although Legg's account of how the clerk obtained his rewards might be debated, the general point is clear; by 1481, it was the custom in the parish of St Nicholas to reward the parish clerk on St Nicholas's Day. Similar provision was made for rewarding the suffragan; he was 'to haue the vantage of the virgyn' on All Hallows' Day, although it is not clear what was meant by this.⁹⁸ From this evidence we can suggest that the situation described by Ricart in his *Kalendar*, whereby the town clerk was rewarded at the Tolzey on St Nicholas's Day, may be understood as a parallel custom to the one that was observed at St Nicholas's Church on the same day. There are two ways in which this might have come about. It may be a custom that was established by Ricart himself; L. T. Smith suggests he kept the Parish Book of All Saints in Bristol for twelve years, probably as vestry clerk, before

⁹⁶Appendix III', ed. Legg, p. 70.

⁹⁷*The Clerk's Book*, ed. Legg, p. 123.

⁹⁸Appendix III'. ed. Legg, p. 70.

taking up his position as town clerk.⁹⁹ It is therefore possible that Ricart introduced this custom of yearly privileges based upon his own experience, although the rules for the parish clerk of All Saints, written between 1455 and 1469, are short and do not mention any such rewards.¹⁰⁰ Another possibility is that this custom has something to do with clerks more generally. Legg notes that '[i]t may be remembered that parish clerks are under the patronage of St Nicholas. The London Company was the Fraternity of St. Nicholas's.'¹⁰¹

A second frame of reference for the dicing at the Tolzey on St Nicholas's Day is custom is the Christmas season, since dicing was associated with mumming. For example, a pair of dice were used in an entertainment put on for Prince Richard by the citizens of London, prior to his coronation in 1377. On the evening of the Monday before Candlemas, one hundred and thirty men 'disguizedly aparailed and well mounted on horsebacke' rode to Kensington to perform a mumming for Richard.¹⁰² One group were dressed as knights and esquires and followed by an emperor; the others were dressed as cardinals and legates and led by a pope:

... and when they were come before [th]e mansion they alighted on foot and entered into [th]e haule and sone after [th]e prince and his mother and [th]e other lordes came out of [th]e chamber into [th]e haule, and [th]e said mummers saluted them, shewing a pair of dice upon a table to play with [th]e prince, which dice were subtilly made that when [th]e prince shold cast he shold winne and [th]e said players and mummers set before [th]e prince three jewels each after other: and first a balle of gould, then a cupp of gould, then a gould ring, [th]e which [th]e said prince wonne at thre castes as before it was appointed ...¹⁰³

Joan of Kent and the lords were also given the opportunity to win gold rings, and

⁹⁹*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. i.

¹⁰⁰Appendix II: Constitutions for the Parish Clerk at All Saints Bristol between 1455 and 1469', in *The Clerk's Book*, ed. Legg, pp. 64-5.

¹⁰¹*The Clerk's Book*, ed. Legg, p. 123.

¹⁰²E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols (1903), 1 p. 394 and n. 4 (p. 394 n. 4.).

¹⁰³Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 1 pp. 394-5 n. 4.

predictably did so, following which the whole company danced and drank. Noting that mumming had been prohibited in London in 1334, Chambers observes that 'the disport which they denied to less dignified folk the rulers of the city retained for themselves as the traditional way of paying a visit of compliment to a great personage'.¹⁰⁴ Although Ricart was hardly a personage equivalent to Richard, the part of the St Nicholas's Day observances that occurred around the Tolzey and the royal mumming do share certain characteristics. There is the feature of the dice themselves and the rewards that are made. The boy-bishop was a costumed figure who along with his entourage visited the civic officers, and they were rewarded with bread and wine. Furthermore, mumming was one of the activities that was prohibited in the Christmas proclamations recorded in Ricart's *Kalendar*.¹⁰⁵ It may be that some elements of the mumming custom were incorporated into this particular civic occasion, although whether this occurred before or after the prohibition of mumming in the town is not discernable.

A closer analysis of the dicing in this occasion has shown that we are dealing with something that is a lot more complex than Sacks makes it out to be. To begin with, we saw that the dicing need not have been understood as a symbolic abandonment of civic responsibility, in which the civic elite subordinated themselves to the commons, but that it was a pastime that was only legitimately enjoyed by individuals of a particular status. We have also seen that it is likely that the dicing was used in some way as a means of rewarding the town clerk. The problem with Sacks's analysis is that whilst he sees the social divisions of late medieval Bristol as part of the background context for this occasion, he suggests that its function is actually to help resolve such divisions. Sacks does not perceive this occasion to be in any way instrumental in actually bringing about or helping to sustain such divisions in the first place. My analysis of this occasion suggests several possible ways in which social differences could be emphasised. As well as the dicing by the civic officers, we may also draw attention the way that they received the visit of the boy-bishop, in a manner comparable to that of secular and ecclesiastical lords (see the York example of 1396 above). This is I suggest as far as we can go with the issue of social structure, since in the absence of supporting evidence it is not realistic

¹⁰⁴Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 1 pp. 395 n. 4 and 394.

¹⁰⁵*Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, ed. Smith, p. 85.

to speculate further, and in any case the meanings of the occasion are bound to have varied as successive mayors were involved in the custom. It is interesting to note that in March 1479, after the first celebration of this custom with Robert Ricart as town clerk and William Spencer as mayor, Spencer was to be accused of treason by a local gentleman. Although it is not clear why this dispute arose, I will show that the terms upon which the dispute was conducted certainly appear to derive in part from the ideals of high-status citizenship that were associated with occasions like St Nicholas's Day.

As mentioned above, William Spencer's third and last term as mayor ran from Michaelmas 1478 to Michaelmas 1479 and John Twynyho, Bristol's recorder at this time, entered a long account of a particular incident which occurred during Spencer's term of office into the *Great Red Book*.¹⁰⁶ The general tenor of Twynyho's account is evident from the manner in which it began. 'HERE FOLLOWETH a Remembraunce Nevir to be put in oblyvion but to be hadde in perpetuell memory of all the trewe Burgeises and lovers of the Towne of Bristowe of the Innaturall demeanyng and the Inordinate behavyng of Thomas Norton of Bristowe Gentleman against the noble famouse and trewe merchaunte William Spencer ...'.¹⁰⁷ Twynyho records that on Friday March 12 1479 Norton came before Spencer at the Tolzey and accused him of high treason.¹⁰⁸ The next day Spencer was imprisoned in Bristol whilst these claims were investigated; the common council, 'with wepinge eyes and sorowfull hertis in Righte Pituouse and hevy maner ... as sonnes seeng their naturell fader in perill adventeur and jeopardy', chose eight of their number to be co-auditors during his absence, which as it happened only lasted ten days.¹⁰⁹ The town's submission to the King, made on March 15, contained glowing praise for William Spencer and contrasted his demeanour with that of Thomas Norton:

... the saide Thomas hath Reteigned in fourme biforeshpecified diverse and many idell and misgouvernid persones and is a Commyng haunter of Tavernes and sittithe there

¹⁰⁶*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 4 pp. 57-93.

¹⁰⁷*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 4 p. 57.

¹⁰⁸*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 4 pp. 57-9.

¹⁰⁹*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 4 pp. 59-61 (p. 60).

with them and other suche Raylinge for the more nightely unto midnichte and drawith unto his company Riottous and eville disposid persounes and doith not associate him self with honnest nor welrewlid company Lieth in his bedde tyll it be IX or X at the bell daily as well the holidayes as the werkyngdaies not attendyng to Devine Service As belongith to a gentleman of his degree spendinge the afternonnes when sermones and evensonges been seieng in pleyng at the Tenyse and othir suche fryvolous disportes Whereby But if due redresse be sette in shorte tyme in repressinge of his saide Riottous disposicioun and others of his associacioun grete mischief is like therof hastily to ensue ...¹¹⁰

It obviously matters little whether Norton *really did* behave in the manner that he is alleged to have done; the point here is that he is constructed in such a way as to emphasise certain differences between him and Spencer. These points of difference are expressed in quite general terms, that is, how a man of Norton's status should behave. However, I think that they can be located more specifically, and would go as far as to say that they can be related to the particular functions and practices which were associated with St Nicholas's Church. We saw that it was the place from where curfew was rung and where the time regulating everyday life was measured. The civic elite attended mass, a sermon and evensong there on St Nicholas's Day, a holy day, and dicing took place at the Tolzey whilst the civic elite waited for the boy-bishop and his entourage. We can say then that the way in which Norton is represented in this passage depends upon a concrete notion of what the legitimate terms of participation in the events of the civic calendar for a man of his standing should be, and that these terms were arrived at and maintained *in performance*, on occasions such as the boy-bishop custom at St Nicholas's Church. Participating in the festal culture of the town was thus one part of a wider set of practices through which the elite of Bristol were able to cultivate and perform a distinctive social identity. Although the ways in which festival occasions are represented in the sources may suggest a sense of community and co-operation, a closer analysis has shown how these occasions could work to *produce* social differences and distinctions: what are important are the relationships between the various participants, rather than just the fact of their mutual involvement.

¹¹⁰*Great Red Book*, ed. Veale, 4 pp. 64-71 (p. 69).

The aim of this chapter has been to investigate the relationship between misrule and social structure in the late medieval town in a case where substantial primary source evidence survives, and we may now consider the conclusions which may be drawn from the foregoing analysis. In Chapter One I showed that the argument has been made that by temporarily reversing social status, misrule in fact helped to confirm established social positions in the long run. This is essentially the argument which Sacks has developed in respect of the function of the boy-bishop custom at St Nicholas's Church in Bristol; in his view it is the position of the civic elite which is debased, before being confirmed by the liminal figure of the boy-bishop. In contrast, I have offered an alternative understanding of this occasion which has paid closer attention to the historical evidence and which has operated with a more realistic conception of the ways in which misrule could function. First, I have argued that the form of the custom as it is recorded by Ricart is as far as we know particular to the later fifteenth century, and so our conclusions regarding its function can only safely be applied to this specific period. Second, I have shown that Sacks's interpretation of the significance of the dicing in this custom is incorrect, and that it is more convincingly understood as a means by which the town clerk was rewarded on this day, with the implicit effect of emphasising social differences between those who were able to dice and those who were not. In the absence of other evidence it is not possible to reach any firm conclusions on this matter, since we cannot know what the actual effects of such a display were. The case of William Spencer and Thomas Norton in 1479, in which particular assumptions about the proper behaviour for a high-status citizen were at stake, suggests that discussions of social structure in the late medieval town must acknowledge that social differences exist only insofar as they are constantly performed as such, with the implication that they are always open to contestation and to alternative readings.

Chapter Six:

***Hocking in Urban Churchwardens' Accounts
and the Coventry Hock Tuesday Play***

Introduction

The format of this chapter will differ from that of the three preceding chapters, since it does not take as its main theme a case of study of a particular custom in a specific town.¹ The nature of the surviving evidence for hocking is such that it constrains any investigation of the relationship between misrule and social structure in the medieval English town, although as I will argue it is still possible to rule out some conclusions in favour of a more limited set of observations. My investigation will look at two discrete bodies of evidence. First, I will consider the evidence for the Hock Tuesday play in Coventry, since this play has been cited in the literature as an example of a custom in which a temporary reversal of roles had the effect of securing the status quo.² I will suggest that such a view cannot be sustained once the evidence for this play is considered. Second, I will examine the receipts for money collected from hocking which are found in urban churchwardens' accounts, suggesting that a clustering of evidence in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries may be understood in relation to the social and economic pressures which women faced at this period. I begin by reviewing the general form and derivation of the custom of hocking in medieval England.

Somewhat ironically, it is a mid-fifteenth century episcopal prohibition which supplies the most detailed description of what the medieval custom of hocking involved. In 1450, Bishop Carpenter of Worcester issued a letter to the almoner of the Cathedral and to the clergy of the diocese. In his letter Carpenter describes how on a certain day which followed Easter, women have bound men, and on another day men have bound women, to raise money for the church. The bishop alleged that on many occasions this had led to scandal, adultery and other crimes, to the manifest offence of God and to the peril of the souls of the participants. The clergy were therefore to warn their flock that

¹Material from this chapter was presented in a paper given to the University of York Medieval Urban Studies Research Group, entitled 'Hocking in Urban Churchwardens' Accounts', in May 1996. I am grateful to the members of the group for their helpful comments and suggestions.

²These customs ... had built into them, as it were, certain safeguards for the preservation of the structure. In all cases those in subordinate roles encroached in some way only on certain *attributes* of socially superior positions. At Hocktide representatives of the women overcame the menfolk in their unaccustomed masculine role as warriors and not as husbands or householders'. 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*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack (1972), pp. 57-85 (p. 69).

the customary bindings and dishonest games, commonly called 'hoc-dayes', were to cease upon penalty of excommunication.³ As far as we are able to ascertain, the basic form of the custom of hocking ran as follows. There were a pair of days which were known as Hock Monday and Hock Tuesday which were observed on either the second or the third Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday: the problems involved in dating them more precisely are discussed in Appendix I. On one of these days it appears that the women of a parish went about the streets with ropes and attempted to detain male passers-by in order to raise money for the parish; on the other day it was the men's turn. It is not entirely clear whether the victims were first captured and tied before money was demanded for their release, or whether the binding was only a threat which could be avoided by payment of a sufficient sum of money. The outcome could presumably vary depending upon the intentions of the practitioners and the personal inclinations of the victims. We might note though that at Shrewsbury in 1549, two men were "smothered under the Castle hill", when part of it collapsed upon them, as they attempted to hide from a group of female hockers.⁴ This intriguing custom has been discussed by many writers who have considered the seasonal customs of the later Middle Ages.⁵ The Hock Tuesday play at Coventry has also been discussed in various works on the town.⁶

The earliest evidence that we have for the actual custom of hocking in England is a London ordinance of 1406 prohibiting it.⁷ However, a day of the year known as a

³J. Leland, *De Rebus Britannicis Collectanea*, 6 vols (1774), 5 pp. 293-4 (p. 294).

⁴E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols (1903), 1 pp. 156.

⁵See S. Denne, 'Memoir on Hokeday', *Archaeologia* 7 (1785), pp. 244-68; R. T. Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium; or Dates, Charters, and Customs of the Middle Ages*, 2 vols (repr. New York, 1978), 2 p. 204; J. Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, ed. H. Ellis, 3 vols (third edition, repr. New York, 1970), 1 pp. 184-9; E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols (1903), 1 pp. 154-6; R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 26 and 59-60; S.-B. MacLean, 'Hocktide: A Reassessment of a Popular Pre-Reformation Festival', in *Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre*, ed. M. Twycross (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 233-41.

⁶T. Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* (Coventry, 1825; repr. East Ardsley, 1973), pp. 125-32; M. D. Harris, *Life in an Old English Town: A History of Coventry from the Earliest Times, Compiled from Official Records* (1898), pp. 347-8; Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen', pp. 66-7.

⁷*Memorials of London and London Life in the XIIIth, XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. H. T. Riley (1868), pp. 561-2.

'Hockday' had existed for at least two centuries earlier. The earliest entry in the *Middle English Dictionary* is from the Caen Cartulary, circa 1175.⁸ Other references from the early thirteenth-century onwards in England suggest that Hockday was used as a quarterly term date for the payment of rent. For example, a 1209 account makes reference to a payment of 2s. for one marling of land from Hockday until the feast of St Peter ad Vincula.⁹ There are also references to this day in a legal capacity in the records of towns such as Worcester and Colchester.¹⁰ Ronald Hutton has suggested that the earliest reference to hocking as a means of actually gathering money for parish funds is from Cambridge in 1469-70, and he goes on to note that hocking 'became widespread during the next three decades, reaching its full recorded range during the early sixteenth century'.¹¹ Such a date for the earliest reference to hocking is probably too late, since it overlooks Bishop Carpenter's reference mentioned above and a reference from 1445: amongst the receipts of money for repairs to the parish church of Lyd in Kent in 1445 was a receipt for 29s. 11d., collected by men and women on Hock Day.¹² Since Hutton relies for the most part upon churchwardens' accounts, the general pattern which he identifies reflects the fragmentary survival of these records from the earlier part of the fifteenth century in England.

As regards the geographical distribution of hocking, Hutton has noted that it was a predominantly urban custom, although 'it is not recorded at Bristol, in the four south-western counties, north of Cambridge and Coventry, or in most London parishes'.¹³ This may give us a clue as to the possible historical event that the custom was meant to commemorate, as there has been ample discussion of the possible derivations of this

⁸*MED* *hok* n. [b].

⁹*MED* *hok* n. [b]. For further references to Hockdays as dates for the payment of rent, see under *hok* [b] in the *MED* and A. R. Wright, *British Calendar Customs: England*, ed. T. E. Lones, 3 vols, Folk-Lore Society Publications 97, 102 and 106 (1936-40), 1 p. 126.

¹⁰At Colchester, there was a Lawhundred on the Monday after Hockday (R. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300-1525* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 27). At Worcester the ordinances, constitutions and articles of 1467 mention 'the lawday a hokday' (*English Gilds*, ed. T. Smith, EETS O.S. 40 (1870), p. 385).

¹¹Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 60;

¹²Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts. *Fifth Report* (1876), pp. 527-8 (p. 528); *MED*.

¹³Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 26.

custom.¹⁴ One party holds that the custom alludes to the massacre of the Danes on St Brice's Night, 1002 (November 13), whilst another party prefers a celebration of the death of Hardicanute on June 8, 1042. As neither of these dates correspond with the actual date of the medieval observance, there have been various ingenious attempts to explain how it came to fall on this date. Denne, a supporter of the Hardicanute view, argues that as Hocktide was 'a time of diversions and licentiousness', it would not have been allowed to have been kept when June 8 fell on a Sunday, or in Pentecost week. He therefore suggests that the observance was moved to a more suitable date, in the same way that church dedication feasts were when they fell at inconvenient times like harvest. Denne substantiates this claim by pointing out that June 8 fell on a Tuesday in 1042, which links up with the new date of Hock *Tuesday*, whereas November 13 1002 was a Friday.¹⁵ Evidence from the mid-sixteenth century points however to a medieval tradition which understood Hocktide to be a celebration of victory over the Danes. In a treatise written for Henry VIII within a few years of the dissolution of the monasteries, probably by Sir Richard Morison, the king was urged to set up a number of commemorations celebrating his triumph over the bishop of Rome. The writer makes parallels with certain customs that were already observed, one of which is Hocktide. 'Women for the noble acte that they did in the distruction of the Danes, whych so cruelly reigned in this realme, have a daie of memorye thereof called hoptide, wherein it is leaful for them to take men, bynde, wasshe them, if they will give them nothing to bankett: howmoche more ought ther to be an yerely memoryall of the distruction of the bisshop of Rome out of this Realme?'¹⁶ This corresponds with the view of John Throgmorton, recorder of Coventry, who in 1566 explained to Elizabeth I that the town's Hock Tuesday play represented the overthrow of the Danes (see below)¹⁷. Such a tradition may be reconciled to some extent with the geographical pattern of survival, which is mainly to the south and west of the Danelaw but which excludes the far south-west, with the London evidence perhaps

¹⁴See Denne, 'Memoir on Hokeday', p. 245 and following pages for a summary of this debate.

¹⁵Denne, 'Memoir on Hokeday', pp. 252-5 (p. 254); *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History*, ed. C. R. Cheney (1995), pp. 124 and 113.

¹⁶S. Anglo, 'An Early Tudor Programme for Plays and Other Demonstrations Against the Pope', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 20 (1957), pp. 176-9 (p. 178).

¹⁷*REED: Coventry*, ed. R. W. Ingram (Manchester, 1981), p. 233.

being accounted for by post-plague migration to London from these areas.

In common with other medieval customs which involved an element of transgression or inversion, hocking has been seen as a conservative practice in which the temporary reversal of the subordinate role of women was a means of actually maintaining the status quo. As we saw in Chapter One, this was the function which Phythian-Adams proposed for the Hock Tuesday play at Coventry in his essay on 'Ceremony and the Citizen', and we saw in Chapter Two how Sally-Beth MacLean's recent 'reassessment' of this custom designated it as a status-reversal ritual which reaffirmed the status quo.¹⁸ As with the boy-bishop custom, conclusions about the way in which hocking mediated social structure in late medieval England have always been based upon this sort of general examination and supported by reference to anthropology. There are several points to make here. As was argued in Chapter Two, the manipulation of symbolic categories is not of itself an oppositional act; any discussion of the social effects of a transgressive custom must proceed from specific examples where evidence for tone and context is available, and this has been the approach which has been adopted in the previous three chapters. So, whilst the basic sense of hocking may be transgressive in the way that it gave its practitioners the opportunity to detain passers-by on a festival occasion, with a particular resonance when carried out by women, in practice the custom must have had a range of possible manifestations in the period. The problem with regard to hocking is that the contextual approach is much more difficult to pursue in this case, since the sort of evidence that we have for this practice consists mainly of receipts for Hocktide gatherings in churchwardens' accounts; as far as I am aware we do not have the sort of detailed contextual information which has sustained the previous three chapters.¹⁹ Therefore, in order to investigate the dynamics of hocking and in particular its relationship with social structure, we require an approach which enables us to make the best use of the evidence which we do have. In this chapter I will be pursuing this theme by means of two main lines of inquiry. First, I examine the medieval and early modern evidence for the Hock Tuesday play at Coventry, suggesting that a lack of early evidence means that it is not realistic to offer any firm conclusions about the social

¹⁸Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen', p. 69; MacLean, 'Hocktide', p. 239.

¹⁹For a list of churchwardens' accounts in which hocking receipts appear, see Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 300 n. 68.

function of this play. Second, I look at the evidence as it occurs in urban churchwardens' accounts, arguing that a close analysis of individual sets of records suggests that hocking was able to offer groups of women a strategy by which they could negotiate the prevailing social and economic pressures of the late fifteenth century.

The Coventry Hock Tuesday Play

The most comprehensive account of the Hock Tuesday play at Coventry is that given by Sharp in his seminal study, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry*. Sharp's *Dissertation* is of considerable historical importance for several reasons. Although an early student, Sharp was always careful to cite the evidence upon which his account was based. Also, it contains extracts from primary sources which have since been lost, as many of the manuscripts that were used by Sharp were destroyed in a fire at the Birmingham Central Reference Library in 1879.²⁰ In particular, Sharp transcribed several references to the Hock Tuesday play from annals and guild accounts that have been lost. Until the publication of the *Records of Early English Drama* volume for Coventry, scholars have had to rely upon Sharp for most of their information about dramatic activity in the town, as the relevant extracts from annals and guild accounts have not been available in print elsewhere; there are no references to the Hock Tuesday play in the *Coventry Leet Book* for example. The civic material from Coventry may be supplemented by Robert Laneham's letter, which describes the performance of the Hock Tuesday play for Elizabeth I at Kenilworth in July 1575.²¹

A brief review of the evidence for the Coventry Hock Tuesday play shows the problems that are attendant upon attempts to deduce its social function in the late medieval period. The sixteenth-century annals that Sharp used and quoted from date the

²⁰REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, pp. xxv-xxvi.

²¹There are several printed extracts of this description of the Coventry Hock Tuesday play. See 'Laneham's Letter', in *The Progress and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth ... Collected from Original Manuscripts*, ed. J. Nichols, 3 vols (1823), 1 pp. 420-84; the passage concerning the Coventry Hock Tuesday play is given on pp. 446-56. Other printed extracts from Laneham's letter are given in Sharp, *Dissertation*, pp. 126-9 and REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, pp. 272-5. The REED version will be used here.

introduction of the Coventry Hock Tuesday play to 1416; '[t]he Pageants and Hox tuesday invented, wherein the King and Nobles took great delight'. However, as Sharp points out, the evidence for the Coventry Corpus Christi pageants dates back to the late fourteenth century, and so the annalist is incorrect in this respect, perhaps confusing the two.²² Henry V entertained Emperor Sigismund in this year, and it is possible that the plays may have been put on if the royal party stayed at Kenilworth Castle, although there is no evidence to confirm this.²³ Apart from these annals, there are no surviving medieval references to the Hock Tuesday play in Coventry. Indeed, the only mention of any celebrations accompanying Hock Tuesday in the medieval records of Coventry is an entry in the dyers' accounts for 1469, when 18*d.* was paid for bread, ale and meat at the hall on 'hogh tuysday'.²⁴ Whilst this may point to some post-production celebrations, it could also have been for another unspecified occasion, and there are no similar payments in the dyers' accounts in the period 1453-1533. Of course, it is perfectly possible that there *were* performances of the Hock Tuesday play in the medieval period, and that they were not recorded in the kinds of evidence which survive. However, in the absence of any evidence for the sort of contexts in which it was deployed, I think that it is unrealistic to try to reach any conclusions about the social function of this play based upon this assumption alone.

The post-medieval evidence for the play is rather more substantial. In 1561 the annals note that '[t]his year was Hox tuesday put down'.²⁵ The play cannot have stayed suppressed for very long though, if we accept the words of John Throgmorton, Coventry's recorder, whose speech to Elizabeth I on her visit to the town in August 1566 included the following claim:

... & after the Arryvale of the Danes who miserably afflicted the people of this Realme; the inhabitantes of this Citty with there neighbours vtterly ouerthrew them in the last conflict with the Saxons. A memoriall whereof is kept vnto this day by

²²REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 7; Sharp, *Dissertation*, p. 125.

²³REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 542 n. 7.

²⁴REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 47.

²⁵REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 215.

certaine open shewes in this Citty yearely ...²⁶

As mentioned above, Throgmorton's derivation of the play has been cited as evidence in the debate over the origins of Hocktide. Elizabeth probably saw the Hock Tuesday play two years later, as the city annals note that the pageants and play were put on when 'the Queene came to Killingworth [Kenilworth] vnlooked for'.²⁷ Expenses in guild accounts for harnessed men in this year help to confirm this.²⁸ In July 1575, Elizabeth again got the chance to see the play, whilst staying with the Earl of Leicester at Kenilworth. Robert Laneham gives a detailed account of the revived Hock Tuesday play that 'certain good harted men [*sic*] of Couentree' performed for the Queen.²⁹ He suggests that the play had not been put on for some years prior to 1575, since he notes that the performers had 'made petition that they moought renu noow their olld storiall sheaw' that was 'tyll noow of late laid dooun ...'.³⁰ The last performance prior to this date may have been in 1569, when the smiths' company paid 8*d.* for 'ij harnis men upon hocks twesday', unless this charge was carried over from the previous year or Sharp mistranscribed the year.³¹ Laneham describes the content of the play as showing how 'the Danez whylom heere in a troublous seazon wear for quietnesse born withall & suffeared in peas', until on St Brice's Night 1012 [*sic*] they 'wear all dispatcht and the Ream rid'. The play was apparently thought by the performers to be appropriate for Elizabeth, since 'the matter mencioneth how valiantly our English women for looue of their cuntree behaued themseluez: expressed in actionz & rymez after their maner, they

²⁶REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 233. Sharp has 1565 for the year of Elizabeth's visit (*Dissertation*, pp. 125-6).

²⁷REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 243.

²⁸There are two relevant entries in 1568: 'Item payd to ij men for theyr drynkyng & poyntes for waryng owre harnys vpon hockestewysday ... vj d' (Weavers' Account Book); 'Item payd for carryenge of ij harnesses & poynts uppon hoc-tewsdaye ... vj d' (Cappers' Accounts) (REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, pp. 244 and 246). See also Sharp, *Dissertation*, p. 126.

²⁹REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, pp. 272-5 (p. 272).

³⁰REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, pp. 272 and 273.

³¹REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 251.

thought it moought mooue sum myrth to her Maiestie the rather'.³² The main 'actionz' of the play were a series of combats fought between players dressed as Danish and English soldiers: '[t]wise the Danes had ye better, but at the last conflict, [they were] beaten doun, ouercom, and many led captiue for triumph by our English weemen'.³³ The latter action forms a clear link with the binding custom of Hock Monday and Tuesday. Unfortunately, Laneham gives no indication of what the 'rymez' that he mentions might have been. Finally, in 1591, there appears to have been a summer revival of the play.³⁴

Obviously, we cannot know how far the revived version of the play that was put on for Elizabeth actually resembled the medieval version, which itself may have changed over the course of time. Laneham says that the revived version was 'without ill exampl of mannerz, papistry, or ony superstition', which might suggest some discreet editing of a medieval version, or perhaps points to an approval of its overall content. Interestingly, Laneham also offers a 'safety-valve' view of the function of the play, noting that it 'did so occupy the heads of a number, that likely inoough woold haue had woorz meditationz'; this is a further example of the continuity between the views of contemporary commentators and modern historians.³⁵ Perhaps female actors may have been amongst this number of disaffected performers whose energies Laneham feared would now be directed elsewhere. This short consideration of the evidence for the Hock Tuesday play has suggested that although it is possible to assume that the play had a medieval antecedent, it is not feasible to base any observations about the function of the play in this period on this assumption.

³²REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 273.

³³REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 275.

³⁴REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, pp. 332. See S. K. Wright, "'The Historie of King Edward the Fourth': A Chronicle Play on the Coventry Pageant Wagons", *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 3 (1986), pp. 69-81, for a further discussion of the nature and context of this revival.

³⁵REED: *Coventry*, ed. Ingram, p. 273.

Hocking in Urban Churchwardens' Accounts

Receipts of money from hocking are recorded in the surviving churchwardens' accounts of a number of urban parishes and in one set of borough records (Henley).³⁶ Some of these surviving sets of accounts have appeared in printed editions, although their quality varies; those of St Edmund, Salisbury are quite fragmentary, with many of the years undated or missing (see below). When these printed accounts are examined and considered together, one overall point becomes clear. As a practice, hocking was not an annual custom in which all of the men and women of a parish participated during the whole of the late medieval period. Rather, what is striking is the diversity of its observance between and within parishes, in the context of its more general popularity in the period between the 1490s and the 1540s. For example, at Henley there are references to receipts from hocking in 1474, 1499, 1504 and 1520, suggesting that it was an occasional practice there.³⁷ In other parishes there are clear runs of evidence which nonetheless display a marked variety of different forms within these years, even to the extent that there are differences in practice in consecutive years. As we shall see in more detail below, in a twenty-year run of accounts at St Mary at Hill, London, there were years in which only the women hocked, whilst in other years no receipts from hocking were recorded. These observations enable us to suggest that hocking must always be understood locally, as a practice which was undertaken in response to local needs and inclinations.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, in order to examine the ways in which customs like hocking were related to social structure in the late medieval town, the older terminology of subversion or containment must be replaced by a more constructive vocabulary and a subtler form of analysis. My aim in this section will therefore be to examine the evidence for hocking from two parishes and consider their language and dominant characteristics. I will suggest that we are able to reach certain conclusions about how this custom may have functioned in relation to one particular social group, higher-status women in urban parishes, at a particular period, the late fifteenth and early

³⁶See Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 300 n. 68.

³⁷*Henley Borough Records: Assembly Books i-iv, 1395-1543*, ed. P. M. Briers, Oxfordshire Record Society 41 (1960), pp. 75, 125, 147 and 189.

sixteenth centuries. A further significance of this study is that it addresses the question of how medieval festival customs were structured sexually, an area which has not been taken up in any detail in the secondary sources.³⁸ This is in part a problem of source material, a difficulty which has beset the study of the subject in the history of leisure more generally, as Walton and Walvin have noted.³⁹ However, it is also a matter of approach, since even where women are mentioned in the medieval sources, the emphasis upon festival and leisure activities as pleasing pastimes or as a simple means of blowing-off steam has prevented the proper discussion of how these practices worked to distribute power and status between the sexes.⁴⁰

The first set of churchwardens' accounts for consideration are those of St Mary at Hill, London.⁴¹ These accounts have a continuous run between 1496 and 1515 where receipts from hocking are recorded in most years. At St Mary at Hill it was the women of the parish, referred to as the 'wyves' or 'wyffes', who practised this custom on Hock Monday. For example, the receipt for the donation of 1499 records that it was given by the 'wyves yn in the parish', whilst the sum for 1504 is glossed as 'appon hokmonday, gaddyrd by the vyffys'.⁴² The men in turn hocked on Hock Tuesday. In twenty consecutive years at St Mary at Hill, there were four years (1501, 1507, 1509 and 1513) in which no receipts from hocking are recorded in the churchwardens' accounts, although interestingly in one of these years (1513) the sum of 6s. 8d. was received from

³⁸Phythian-Adams's discussion of role of women in the ceremonies, customs and plays of late medieval and early modern Coventry is one exception; 'Ceremony and the Citizen', pp. 58-9 and 66-7.

³⁹[T]he absence of appropriate sources, and the silence of existing ones, makes certain important themes particularly difficult to pursue. For example, in the explosion of feminist historiography we are now learning a great deal about the sexual division of labour, but very little has yet surfaced on the sexual division of leisure'. J. K. Walton and J. Walvin, 'Introduction', in *Leisure in Britain 1780-1939*, ed. J. K. Walton and J. Walvin (Manchester, 1983), pp. 1-9 (p. 4).

⁴⁰I take up the issue of how an emphasis on pleasure can lead to a neglect of the contested dimension of medieval leisure activities in my review of C. Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes in Medieval England* (Stroud, 1995), in *Medieval Life* 3 (1995), pp. 35-6 (p. 36).

⁴¹*The Medieval Records of a London City Church (St. Mary at Hill) A.D. 1420-1559*, ed. H. Littlehales, EETS O.S. 128 (1905). These accounts run from Michaelmas to Michaelmas, and so Hocktide will have always fallen in the later of the two calendar years which each account year spans.

⁴²*St. Mary at Hill*, ed. Littlehales, pp. 232 and 253.

the '[g]adryng of the Maydens on seint Barnabes day (June 11).⁴³ However, there were three years (1497, 1503 and 1504) in which hock money was received from the women only; furthermore, in 1524 and 1527, when hocking receipts are again recorded, these were both from the 'wyffis' and not from the men.⁴⁴ These entries suggest either that the women of the parish were more keen to practise the custom than the men, or that they gave some or all of the money that they collected to the church in years when the men did not; the rounded figures suggest that at least some fractions were dispensed with. There is, though, no evidence to suggest that hock money was not passed on, and no apparent means of finding out whether a sum was retained by the hockers. In the ten years where separate sums are recorded for the women and the men, the women's total exceeds the men's by at least double as much in every year, with the largest proportionate difference being between 20s. and 4s. in 1512.⁴⁵ There are several reasons why there might have been such a disparity between the collections; it may have been simply that men carried around more cash than women, or that they made larger donations. Alternatively, the women may have been the keener practitioners, or perhaps they gave a larger sum of the money that they collected to the church in comparison with the men, as we do not know whether the whole collection was actually donated. No doubt all of these factors could have been in operation. Finally, there were three years (1506, 1508 and 1510) in which joint receipts were recorded.⁴⁶

The second set of accounts for consideration are those of St Edmund, Salisbury.⁴⁷ The practice in this parish was similar to St Mary at Hill, in that the women hocked on the Monday and the men on the Tuesday of Hocktide. Whilst receipts from Hocktide

⁴³*St. Mary at Hill*, ed. Littlehales, p. 283; 5s. was also received from a collection on this day in 1502 (p. 244).

⁴⁴*St. Mary at Hill*, ed. Littlehales, pp. 221, 248 and 253; pp. 324 and 341.

⁴⁵These years were 1496, 1498-1500, 1502, 1505, 1511-12 and 1514-15; *St. Mary at Hill*, ed. Littlehales, pp. 221, 228, 232, 235, 244, 257, 276, 279, 286 and 290. As the men's gathering was not separately recorded in 1514, the amount was determined by subtracting the women's gathering from the total amount.

⁴⁶*St. Mary at Hill*, ed. Littlehales, pp. 259, 263 and 271.

⁴⁷*Churchwardens' Accounts of St. Edmund and St. Thomas, Sarum, 1443-1702*, ed. H. J. F. Swayne, Wiltshire Record Society 1 (1896). The accounts of St Edmund's run from Easter to Easter, and so Hocktide will have always fallen in the former of the two calendar years which each account year spans.

appear in a number of account years, only fourteen of these account years may be reliably dated between the inclusive years of 1489, when the first reference to hocking occurs, and 1543. Hocking receipts appear in every one of the years which may be reliably dated, although there is no receipt in the next surviving account year, 1549-50.⁴⁸ At St Edmund there were three years in which only the women appear to have given money from hocking (1489, 1497 and 1510), and two years in which apparently only the men did so (1499 and 1517).⁴⁹ What is interesting about the latter entries is that the accompanying glosses emphasise the women's role as donors, despite the fact that it was the men who actually gave the whole sum to the church. For example, following Hocktide in 1499, 5s. was received 'of diuerse Wiffes & maydens to saue tham from byndynge in Hok' Tuysday', and in 1517, 5s. 1½d. was received 'ffor hoc money for byndynge of wyfys & maydyns ...'.⁵⁰ The next three entries after the 1518-19 account year record the sum received under Hock Tuesday, which may imply that only the men donated in these years; they are however recorded as of 'the devocyon off the pepull' rather than acknowledging the role of either sex.⁵¹ Even in the two years where the separate receipts of both sexes are recorded, 1538 and 1540, the former still has 'ye devotyon of ye people' on Hock Tuesday, whilst only the latter has 'gatherede at Hocketyde by the churche men' at Hocktide.⁵² Finally, there were four years in which it is not specified which sex the money was received from or if it was received from both.⁵³

This close analysis of two sets of churchwardens' accounts suggests that whilst there was a diversity of actual practice across the years in which receipts for money from hocking are recorded, the position of women is consistently strong throughout, both in the way that they contributed larger sums of money to the parish church and in the way that their role is emphasised in the language of these receipts. Having identified the main

⁴⁸*St. Edmund and St. Thomas*, ed. Swayne, p. 89.

⁴⁹*St. Edmund and St. Thomas*, ed. Swayne, pp. 370, 47 and 56; pp. 50 and 59.

⁵⁰*St. Edmund and St. Thomas*, ed. Swayne, pp. 50 and 59.

⁵¹These are the years 1523, 1532 and 1534; *St. Edmund and St. Thomas*, ed. Swayne, pp. 66, 70 and 71 (p. 66).

⁵²*St. Edmund and St. Thomas*, ed. Swayne, pp. 83 and 85.

⁵³These are the years 1490, 1500, 1518 and 1543; *St. Edmund and St. Thomas*, ed. Swayne, pp. 36, 52, 63 and 87.

characteristics of this evidence, it is now possible to consider the conclusions which may be drawn about the relationship between hocking and social structure in these parishes, and the role which this custom played in defining the social position of the women who took part. I want to suggest that the evidence for the popularity of hocking amongst certain groups of urban women in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries may be explained by reference to changing economic and social circumstances in England in this period, and more specifically the pressures which women in urban areas were facing at this time. These circumstances may briefly be considered. In respect of more general changes, Marjorie McIntosh has argued that various developments in the economy, population, religion and education in the later fifteenth century 'combined to create a series of social and administrative problems' which varied by the region of the country.⁵⁴ McIntosh suggests that these developments prompted a variety of initiatives at the local level, including schemes for poor relief and attempts to address the behaviour of migrants, servants and labourers.⁵⁵ In addition, Jeremy Goldberg has argued that in the later fifteenth century women in England were facing a decline in their opportunities in the labour market, with an accompanying ideological challenge to the sorts of economic roles which they had been previously been able to assume.⁵⁶ My suggestion is that the evidence for hocking in Salisbury and London indicates one possible strategy by which women who were of a higher social status, as is indicated by their prominent role in raising money for the parish church, were able to confront and successfully address these changing circumstances.⁵⁷

⁵⁴M. K. McIntosh, 'Local Change and Community Control in England, 1465-1500', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 49 (1986), pp. 219-42 (p. 227). McIntosh suggests that 'there was considerable regional variation in the extent and impact of economic change: southeast England, parts of the Midlands, much of the southwest, and some market towns elsewhere prospered, while the northeast and probably the northwest suffered relative decline' (p. 220).

⁵⁵McIntosh, 'Local Change and Community Control in England', pp. 227-33.

⁵⁶P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c.1300-1520* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 299, 347-8 and 361; P. J. P. Goldberg, 'Women', in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. R. Horrox (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 112-31 (p. 131); see also C. M. Barron, 'The "Golden Age" of Women in Medieval London', *Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989), pp. 35-58 (pp. 47-9).

⁵⁷See K. E. Lacey, 'Women and Work in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century London', and S. Wright, '"Churmaids, Huswyfes and Hucksters": The Employment of Women in Tudor and Stuart Salisbury', in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England*, ed. L. Charles and L. Duffin (1985), pp. 24-82 and 100-21, for a discussion of women's employment in these towns.

As I have argued in this thesis, our understanding of the social dynamics of medieval urban festal culture has been hampered by an interpretative model which has perceived occasions of misrule to be rebellious in their form but conservative in their social and political effects. The advantage of the approach which I have adopted in this thesis is that it enables us to go beyond what our first impressions of a custom might indicate, and examine the concrete manifestations which a custom had in different communities. The secondary literature on the custom of hocking has already been discussed earlier in this chapter, and as we have seen the conclusions that have been reached have favoured a conservative interpretation of it. A close analysis of the churchwardens' accounts from St Mary at Hill, London and St Edmund, Salisbury enables a set of rather different conclusions to be reached. It is my suggestion that in these parishes, hocking would have offered its female practitioners the opportunity to cultivate a particular sense of prestige and respectability in the local community, through the substantial contributions which they were able to make to the upkeep of the parish church. The popularity of hocking can therefore be seen as a means by which groups of higher-status women were able to offset to some extent the patriarchal values and reduced work opportunities which they were facing at this time.⁵⁸ This understanding clearly depends upon a distinct notion of agency, that is, how individuals might seek to address the changing economic and social circumstances in which they find themselves, rather than being mere passive victims of these circumstances. A broader framework within which my arguments may be situated has recently been outlined by Gervase Rosser, who has suggested that membership of fraternities, guilds and clubs provided a means by which individuals and groups might negotiate the structures and experiences of work in the medieval town. Rosser suggests that women's participation in fraternities may have continued to give them a standing in the community, even though they were being excluded from craft associations in the late Middle Ages.⁵⁹ The groups into which some women organised themselves for the purposes of hocking may therefore be

⁵⁸The earlier fifteenth century especially allowed some women an unusual freedom to support themselves in employment and to make their own decisions regarding marriage. Only with economic recession later in the century were patriarchal values most forcefully articulated and most strongly felt'. Goldberg, 'Women', p. 131.

⁵⁹G. Rosser, 'Crafts, Guilds and the Negotiation of Work in the Medieval Town', *Past and Present* 154 (1997), pp. 3-31 (pp. 7 and 22).

understood as one such form of club or fraternity, in this looser sense of this term. The twin factors of social status and work opportunities which this custom was able to negotiate may now be considered.

As I have shown, the evidence from the parishes of St Edmund and St Mary at Hill suggests that the custom of hocking provided the groups of women involved with the opportunity to make quite substantial donations to their parish church; indeed, as Ronald Hutton has noted, 'by contemporary standards their sums were handsome, occasionally (for example at Lambeth) furnishing more than any other parish collection of the year'.⁶⁰ These kinds of financial contribution also had a corresponding social investment, in the sense that the parish church and its accompanying structures provided one domain in which social prestige and respectability might be articulated and accumulated. In Chapter Five for example I showed that this was one way in which the civic elite's involvement in the boy-bishop custom at Bristol in the later fifteenth century could be understood. Similarly, rather than understanding the large donations which the groups of female hockers made to the parish church as a by-product of a subversive but ultimately conservative social activity, these donations instead represent one way in which these women were able to signal their respectability and standing within their communities at this time. We can suggest that what groups of women were able to accumulate through hocking was different to what the men derived from it, in both a financial and a social sense. Clearly, if higher-status women were facing a challenge to the sorts of roles that had been established during the course of the fifteenth century, the custom of hocking offered such women one means by which they might continue to contribute to their standing and reputation in the parish community, in a period when patriarchal values threatened that standing.

My suggestion is therefore that in the two parishes which I have considered, hocking was undertaken by a distinct group of women who were probably of a higher social status in the parish community, and the popularity of the custom was one means by which such a standing could be both articulated and maintained. Other evidence which supports the notion that women hockers were of a higher status at this period may be cited; as MacLean has pointed out, the churchwardens' wives were responsible for

⁶⁰Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 26.

delivering the profits from hocking at Southwark, whilst Henry VII was hocked at Greenwich in 1505-6.⁶¹ Further confirmation of the significance of the contributions which the female hockers were able to make comes from the sizeable feast and expenses with which they were rewarded, or which were able to secure for themselves; their male counterparts do not appear to have received any such benefits. For example, at St Mary at Hill in the account years 1497-8 and 1498-9 money was spent on food and drink for the women who took part: 'Item, for iij Rybbes of bief to the wyves on hokmonday, & for ale & bred for them that gaderyd ... Summa, xvj d', and 'Item, ij Rybbes of bieff & for bred & ale to the wyvys yn the parish that gaderyd on hokmondaye ... Summa xiiij d'.⁶² Similarly, the women at St Edmund appear to have had a meal at Hocktide in 1510.⁶³ Richard Morison's comment that men would be bound and washed if the women hockers were not given money with which 'to bankett' may even suggest that the feasting became an integral part of this custom.⁶⁴ The scale of the feasting at St Mary at Hill suggests a prestigious social event which provided the women involved with the opportunity to maintain a high social profile, perhaps as a distinct group but perhaps also as hosts to other members of the community. In the context of changing social and economic circumstances, this kind of event is what Gervase Rosser has described as 'social politics in action', as a means by which new networks of influence and solidarity might be forged.⁶⁵ The evidence for feasting amongst the groups of women hockers at St Mary at Hill and St Edmund is a thus further indication of the important role which these occasions played in the negotiation of social status in the parish community.

A second factor which helps to support this argument about the role of hocking in these communities is the changing situation in the sorts of work which women were able to undertake in this period. As we saw above, Goldberg has argued that in a period of

⁶¹MacLean, 'Hocktide', p. 236.

⁶²*St. Mary at Hill*, ed. Littlehales, pp. 230 and 234.

⁶³'Et de iijs iiijd soluti pro prandio mulierum in die le Hockes'; *St. Edmund and St. Thomas*, ed. Swayne, p. 57.

⁶⁴Anglo, 'An Early Tudor Programme for Plays and Other Demonstrations Against the Pope', p. 178.

⁶⁵G. Rosser, 'Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England', *Journal of British Studies* 33 (1994), pp. 430-46 (p. 438).

economic growth in the later fifteenth century, women were facing a squeeze in their employment opportunities, with female servants being displaced from artisan activity into unskilled and domestic roles, whilst other women took up lower-status work such as the retailing of ale and prostitution.⁶⁶ In this climate, it is possible that the custom of hocking gave women of a higher status, the 'wives' of the hocking receipts, a legitimate means of obtaining money which avoided the lower-status connotations associated with activities such as ale-selling, which other women had no choice but to engage in. Contemporary literature such as Skelton's poem *Elynour Rummyng* offers some indication of these attitudes.⁶⁷ In addition, although most of the money donated from the hocking collections appears to have gone into the general church funds, there were also occasions when collections were put towards the purchase of more prestigious works, with the effect of raising the profile of their donors still further. For example, at St Edmund in 1497, the sum of 15s. 10½d. which had been collected by the wives was given towards a new window for the church.⁶⁸ At St Martin in the Fields, the women's gathering in 1531-2 was put towards new altar hangings.⁶⁹ Thus although women may have been increasingly relegated to the domestic sphere economically, the narrative on which the custom of hocking was based enabled groups of women to take to the streets in a highly-visible but nonetheless legitimate manner. The monies raised gave them a form of disposable income, which in turn means that they were able to continue to contribute to the fabric and to the more substantial purchases of the parish church.

A close analysis of the evidence from two sets of churchwardens' accounts has shown that the idea that hocking was an annual custom whose function was to provide a safety-valve for the frustrations of medieval women cannot be sustained. I have argued that the clustering of receipts from hocking that are evident in these two sources may indicate one strategy by which local women were able to counteract some of the effects of the social and economic changes of the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

⁶⁶Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy*, pp. 155 and 200.

⁶⁷J. Skelton, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. J. Scattergood (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 214-30.

⁶⁸*St. Edmund and St. Thomas*, ed. Swayne, p. 47.

⁶⁹J. C. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts from the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (1913), p. 262.

That is, by taking up a custom which attributed women a strong role historically, and which gave contemporary women the opportunity to obtain money for the parish church, the female hockers were able to maintain a higher social profile and a greater sense of respectability in ways that would otherwise not have been possible. It should be clear that a consideration of hocking in terms of both its characteristics in particular parishes and its relationship with wider historical processes offers a better approach than the previous scholarship, which has tended to concentrate in a rather unsatisfactory way upon its likely effects.

In this chapter I have examined the evidence for the custom of hocking and considered its relationship with social structure in the late medieval town. My argument has been that the generalised conclusions about the function of hocking, such as those which are offered by MacLean, cannot be sustained for number of reasons. I have suggested that the receipts for hock money in churchwardens' accounts indicate a wide diversity of actual practice, rather than a single conservative function common to all occurrences. I have also argued that there is insufficient evidence for the medieval performance of the Coventry Hock Tuesday play to permit any conclusions about its social function in the town in this period. Finally, the popularity of hocking in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries may indicate that the custom provided higher-status women with a means of raising money for the parish and for establishing reputation at a time of declining economic opportunity.

Conclusion

This thesis opened with a quotation from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, in which he acknowledges the complex and interesting 'problem' of carnival in the history of culture, and also makes it clear that he will not address the subject directly. Rather, as he goes on to say, his interest is in 'the problem of carnivalisation', the influence of carnival forms on literature and literary genre since the Renaissance. I have shown that carnival, or more properly misrule, has continued to fascinate scholars over the last twenty-five years, not only as a subject of enquiry but also in the way that it has been accorded a central function in late medieval and early modern society, as either a vehicle for or an inhibitor of social change. I have also shown the conservative paradigm to be an inappropriate tool and metaphor for the analysis of such occasions, thus casting doubt upon the conclusions reached using this approach, and I have argued that the idea of a radical and oppositional carnival culture cannot be sustained. The challenge of this thesis has been to continue to pursue misrule as a subject in its own right whilst at the same time situating it within the local contexts and structures in which it occurred. The approach that I have taken has been to conceive of misrule as symbolic inversion or transgression and to take into account the wide variety of its possible functions: these factors have contributed to a more effective methodology for investigating its relationship with politics and social structure in the late medieval period. The four case-studies which have utilised this methodology have shown the different ways in which misrule was bound up in local power struggles, negotiations and alliances in English towns in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Altogether, I have been able to make what I believe to be a substantial contribution to the study of the performance of drama and calendar customs in an urban context in the late Middle Ages.

In the process of investigating misrule a number of areas where further research is required have become clear. First, even within the rather narrow set of parameters in which it is feasible to consider the social and political dimensions of misrule, there are other major incidents associated with misrule in the English urban evidence which could form the basis of a case-study, such as 'Evil May-Day' in London in 1517. As well as enhancing our understanding of how broader historical themes are realised at the local level, additional studies of this nature would provide a body of material from which more general theoretical ideas could be developed. A second area of interest are the more formal civic occasions such as Corpus Christi processions where there is

accompanying evidence of their effects and consequences. For example, in York in the 1490s there was a prolonged dispute over the order of precedence in which some of the craft guilds of the town were to march in the city's Corpus Christi procession.¹ Although such 'exceptional' incidents are crucial to the perception of urban culture as for the most part expressive of a communal identity, there has not as yet been any systematic investigation and comparison of these disputes or their causes, nor of the attempts that were made to resolve them. In fact explanations where given tend to be fairly ahistorical, pointing to the inevitable danger of loosening social constraints at festival periods, or assuming that guild rivalries could not always be contained.² Third, the extent to which transgressive calendar customs were a feature of other kinds of settlements apart from larger towns and cities, and the corresponding social and political roles which these customs had in those communities, are further areas to be investigated. The main constraint here will obviously be the nature of the surviving evidence.

In addition to opening up these new areas of historical enquiry, researching and working in the area of festive drama and calendar customs has also made apparent the limitations of the ways in which previous research has been conducted, suggesting that certain key principles and assumptions need to be rethought. As regards the study of the performance of festive customs and drama in the late medieval town, one important implication of this thesis is to underline the limitations of play texts, or our understanding of the usual form of a custom, when considering the social function of such performances. That is, whilst for example a play text may provide the basic dialogue for a performance which is indicated in the historical sources, the actual circumstances in and through which that performance was realised must also be taken into account when considering its meaning and effects. The methodology which I set out in Chapter Two of this thesis, along with the case-studies which constitute Chapters Three to Six, indicate how it is possible to draw upon a number of different classes of

¹For this dispute over the participation of the cordwainers and weavers guilds in the Corpus Christi procession at York in the early 1490s see *York Civic Records 2*, ed. A. Raine, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series 103 (1940), pp. 56-8, 70-1, 73-4, 89-90, 93-94 and 96-100. See also A. F. Johnston, 'The Guild of Corpus Christi and the Procession of Corpus Christi in York', *Medieval Studies* 38 (1976), pp. 372-84 (p. 382).

²M. James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past and Present* 98 (1983) pp. 3-29 (p. 28).

historical evidence in order to develop such a properly historicised reading of a particular performance of a custom.

A second issue for consideration is the question of how and why calendar customs came to be transmitted over time. With other cultural forms such as literary texts there are a number of ways in which transmission and dissemination may be understood, such as the inheritance of the manuscript itself, or the copies which were made of it. However, the ways in which non-textual practices like customs were transmitted either geographically or over time in the Middle Ages is not an issue which has been discussed at any length in the secondary literature on festivity and drama, although Phythian-Adams's study of the activities at May Day in London at a later period presents one means by which such a diachronic study might be undertaken.³ There are several reasons why this subject may have received little attention in considerations of the medieval evidence. Most obviously, in the Middle Ages the evidence for the transmission of a custom and how it came to be adopted by other groups is going to be difficult to find in comparison with something like the bequest of a book in an will. Also, the conservative model contains an implicit model of transmission which has meant that until now, the issue has remained submerged and perhaps taken for granted. That is, if misrule is presumed to provide a community with social stability through the dissipation of resentment, it seems likely that the custom would be repeated and passed on to subsequent generations as a means of securing cohesion. In effect both the assumption of continuity argument, where customs are presumed to take place in years where no evidence is recorded for them, and the conservative model of how these customs work, to secure social cohesion, tend to support one another.

The advantage of the approach that has been adopted in this thesis is that once the conservative model is replaced by one which understands misrule to have had a variety of different manifestations and meanings in practice, the issue of transmission and the presumptions that are made about how it operates are opened up for critical examination and exploration. It becomes possible to suggest a number of different reasons for how and why customs came to be repeated in the same communities, as well as making us

³C. Phythian-Adams, 'Milk and Soot: The Changing Vocabulary of a Popular Ritual in Stuart and Hanoverian London', in *The Pursuit of Urban History*, ed. D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (1983), pp. 83-104.

think more critically about why we should want to assume that customs were practised in years when no records survive. I would argue that whilst it is reasonable to presume some sort of continuity between two references to a custom in the records, there are other ways in which they might be linked rather than just by an annual performance in between. For example, in Bristol's case I have suggested that the evidence for the boy-bishop custom in Ricart's *Kalendar* is related to the third mayoralty of William Spencer, perhaps reviving an older custom for this particular occasion: we do not have to assume as Sacks does that the custom was performed annually throughout the period in question.⁴ Once these implications are accepted it becomes possible to rethink the whole ritual year paradigm, replacing the language of repetition, continuity and cohesion which has dominated the discussion of the calendar year with a more fluid model which is able to accommodate the disjunctions and contingencies of the historical evidence.

As well as opening up new areas of research and allowing certain key assumptions to be rethought, this thesis has also offered a distinctive model of how the spheres of economic, political and cultural life were related to one another in the late medieval town. That is, rather than understanding the festal culture of a town to be a mere product or reflection of its economic base and social structure, or as an entirely autonomous sphere of pleasure and diversion, I have shown that festival customs were able to offer distinctive opportunities in their own right, whilst at the same time being closely integrated with other spheres of social life. The implication of this is that a full consideration of the dynamics of urban festal culture must acknowledge both the meanings which cultural forms accrue over time, as well as the possibilities which they offered with the wider political and social structures of the communities in which they occurred. By adopting this approach I have been able to pursue the relationship between misrule, politics and social structure in the late medieval town in a more productive way than the reductive models which have dominated most of the previous scholarship have hitherto permitted. Furthermore, I have presented a new agenda in which questions of this nature are addressed at the level of the historical evidence, by means of individual case-studies over shorter periods of time. Even where conclusions are reached about the functions of particular customs, these outcomes must be understood to be specific to the

⁴See Chapter Five.

place and the period under consideration, and therefore open to subsequent change and modification. Whilst medieval misrule does indeed present one of the most interesting and complex problems in the history of culture, I have established a new approach which has gone some way to addressing the questions which misrule raises, as well as offering a comprehensive framework for further research.

Appendix I:

The Dating of Hockett

As I noted in Chapter Six, there is a sizeable body of writing on Hocktide, and the most startling aspect of this commentary is that nearly all of these writers have discussed this observance without ever once mentioning the fact that different commentators have assigned its dates to different weeks following Easter. Hampson, in 1841, considered the possible alternatives and gave the 'commonly understood' date for Hock Tuesday, but following Hampson no other writers have acknowledged that this uncertainty exists.¹ The implications of such a situation are quite serious; it means that historical dates that have been ascertained by reference to Hocktide may differ by a whole week, depending upon the dating scheme favoured by the authority that was consulted. The great majority of scholars, including Hampson, Harris, Cox, Wright, Cheney, James, Phythian-Adams, Ingram, Duffy and Hutton, place Hocktide as the second Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday.² They are contradicted by Denne, Strutt, Sharp, Brand and Chambers,

¹R. T. Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium; or, Dates, Charters, and Customs of the Middle Ages*, 2 vols (repr. New York, 1978), 2 p. 198.

²It is not always obvious whether authors use 'Easter' to denote Easter Day or Easter Week. It has been assumed that where writers are referring to the number of weeks after Easter that Hocktide fell, they use Easter in the latter sense, as Denne does (see the next note following). '[A] popular custom prevails in some parts of the south on the second Tuesday after Easter' (Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium*, 2 p. 204). 'On Hox Tuesday - the second Tuesday after Easter - certain games were held' (M. D. Harris, *Life in an Old English Town: A History of Coventry from the Earliest Times, Compiled from Official Records* (1898), p. 347). 'The Hocktide festivities were held on Monday and Tuesday of the week following Easter week' (J. C. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts from the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (1913), p. 261). 'The second Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday are together called Hocktide' (A. R. Wright, *British Calendar Customs: England*, ed. T. E. Lones, 3 vols, Folk-Lore Society Publications 97, 102 and 106 (1936-40), 1 p. 124). 'Hocktide, Hoketide ... 2nd Mon. and Tues. after Easter' and 'Rope Monday ... 2nd Mon. after Easter Day' (*Handbook of Dates for Students of English History*, ed. C. R. Cheney (1995), pp. 52 and 60). 'On the following Monday after Low Sunday, called Hocktide' (E. O. James, *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals* (1961), p. 307). Phythian-Adams calculates the date of Hock Tuesday in 1519 to be May 3, using the second Tuesday after Easter Sunday formula (C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Coventry, 1979), p. 55 n. 21). In the REED volume for Coventry Ingram gives no specific formula, but he clearly utilises the second Tuesday after Easter Sunday formula for calculating the date of Hock Tuesday in 1416 (*REED: Coventry*, ed. R. W. Ingram (Manchester, 1981), p. 542 n. 7). 'The hock ceremonies, held on the Monday and Tuesday of the second week of Easter' (E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), p. 13). 'Just as Christmastide culminated in the merry-making of Twelfth Night, so the celebrations which began on Easter Day could find a climax in Hocktide, the second Monday and Tuesday following' (R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994), p. 26).

who all place it on the third Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday.³

The obvious course of action here is to review the evidence that these writers have cited, to establish whether one of the parties is in error or indeed if we are faced with a custom whose date of occurrence could vary in the Middle Ages. As Hocktide was a secular observance, it is not possible to deduce its calendar occurrence in the usual way, that is, by reference to ecclesiastical calendars. In fact, none of the writers proposing the second Monday and Tuesday after Easter option actually refers to any primary source evidence to support their position, with the exception of Hampson. The problem is that he cites some of the same references as Denne, Strutt and Brand, namely passages from Matthew Paris' *Chronica Majora* and an *Inspeximus* that appears in Madox's *Formulare Anglicanum*. Whilst Paris' references are the earliest evidence from which we might be able to deduce the dates of Hocktide, the difficulty with them is that Paris uses an ambiguous Latin phrase, 'in quindena Paschae', in combination with Hockday to date one of the parliaments of 1255:

Anni quoque sub ejusdem circulo, die videlicet Lunae, quae ipsum diem praecedit proximo quem Hokedai vulgariter appellamus ... [1252].

Circa idem tempus, scilicet in quindena Paschae, quae vulgariter Hokedai appellatur, convenerunt Londoniis omnes nobiles Angliae ... [1255].

Et post diem Martis, quae vulgariter Hokedai appellatur, factum est parlamentum Londoniis ... [1258].⁴

³*Quindena paschae* was the season of celebration; by which, as is obvious, must be meant, not the second Sunday after Easter, but some day in the ensuing week'; also, 'the second week after Easter' (S. Denne, 'Memoir on Hokeday', *Archaeologia* 7 (1785), pp. 244-68 (pp. 246 and 255)). 'This popular holiday ... was usually kept on the Tuesday following the second Sunday after Easter-day' (J. Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (new edition, 1838), pp. 349-50). '[A]nd it must not be forgotten that the festival was celebrated on a Tuesday, and that Hoke-Tuesday was the Tuesday in the second week after Easter' (T. Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* (repr. East Ardsley, 1973), p. 130). 'So that Hoketyde season, if you will allow the pleonasm, began on the Monday immediately following the second Sunday after Easter' (J. Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, ed. H. Ellis, 3 vols (third edition, repr. New York, 1970), 1 p. 187). 'Hock-tide is properly the Monday and Tuesday following the Second Sunday after Easter' (E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols (1903), 1 p. 156).

⁴M. Paris, *Chronica Majora*, ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series, 7 vols (1872-84), 5 pp. 281, 493 and 676.

On the one hand, 'in quindena Paschae' may be read as 'within fifteen days of Easter'. Since the number of days counted in such a formulation was inclusive, as with the octave of a feast, the fifteenth day would be the second Sunday after Easter Sunday. Hockday would therefore fall within this period, on the second Tuesday after Easter Sunday. This is the formulation that Hampson preferred.⁵ On the other hand though, Denne's suggestion is that 'quindena Paschae', the fifteenth day after Easter Sunday, denotes the name for the whole week which followed. He cites the cases of Easter, Rogation and Whitsun weeks as other examples of this practice.⁶ This would place Hockday in the week called 'the fifteen days of Easter'; it would therefore fall on the third Tuesday after Easter Sunday. Further evidence to support such a view comes from the fact that we might have expected Paris to have located Hockday by reference to Low Sunday or *Quasimodo*, the next Sunday after Easter Sunday, rather than by the second Sunday following, if he was trying to locate Hockday on the second Tuesday after Easter. Also, the *Annales Monastici* mention an assembly on April 11 1255, which was the second Sunday after Easter, making a date for Hockday in the following week more likely.⁷ However, whatever our interpretation of Paris' reference, merely knowing one of the dates on which Hockday fell in one year does not help us to establish a firm calendar date for it. This is because we cannot ascertain from just one date whether the observance in question was a mobile one, which was always linked to when Easter fell, or if it was just a fixed feast that happened to coincide with Easter in this year. Clearly, we have to look for further correlating evidence, either where a fixed calendar date is specified or where the observance apparently has the same temporal relation to Easter in a different year. A 1369 Inspeximus of a document from 1289 that is printed by Madox and which is also cited in the *MED* satisfies the latter requirement; 'scilicet semel die Martis proxima post quindenam Paschae quae vocatur la Hokeday ...'.⁸ From this

⁵If, in this particular instance, the quinzime or Easter fortnight commenced with the festival, as it seems always to have done in England ... Hoke-day fell on Tuesday, April 6, or second Tuesday after Easter Day, March 28' (Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium*, 2 p. 198).

⁶Denne, 'Memoir on Hokeday', p. 249 n. q.

⁷*Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. F. M. Powicke and E. B. Fryde (second edition, 1961), p. 501; *Handbook of Dates*, ed. Cheney, p. 96.

⁸T. Madox, *Formulare Anglicanum* (1702), pp. 225-6 (p. 225); *MED* *hok* [b]. Easter Sunday fell on March 28 in 1255 and on April 10 in 1289 (*Handbook of Dates*, ed. Cheney, pp. 96 and 122).

phrase, it is clear that in this example Hockday was reckoned to fall on the Tuesday *after* the second Sunday after Easter, that is, on the third Tuesday after Easter Day.

This dating formula is also borne out in evidence from the fifteenth century. Two proclamations against hocking were made in London in the early fifteenth century, in 1406 and 1409. The proclamation of 1406 was made on the Friday before the quinzaine of Easter, and prohibited hocking 'on the Monday or Tuesday next, called "Hokkedayes"'. Clearly, it would have been too late to prohibit the Hockdays of that year if they are reckoned to have fallen on the second Monday and Tuesday after Easter, which had already passed, unless this proclamation was meant to refer to the next year. The proclamation of 1409 is unfortunately not dated and gives no information as to the timing of Hocktide in that year.⁹ There is also an entry in the accounts of the first Duke of Norfolk in 1465 which indirectly leads to the same formula; 'Item, the last day of Aprylle my master gaff to the hoxpott xxd'. In 1465, April 30 fell on the third Tuesday after Easter.¹⁰ It would appear then that where there is sufficiently unambiguous dating evidence, Hocktide was reckoned to fall on the third Monday and Tuesday after Easter in the Middle Ages. It is possible that it may have also been celebrated a week earlier in some places, or at an earlier period, although there is not as far as I am aware any clear evidence from the Middle Ages which supports such a view. What is clear is that further research into the dating of Hocktide is required.

⁹*Memorials of London and London Life in the XIIIth, XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. H. T. Riley (1868), pp. 561-2 and 571 (p. 562).

¹⁰See *MED* and 'Accounts and Memoranda of Sir John Howard, First Duke of Norfolk, A.D. 1462, to A.D. 1471', in *Manners and Household Expenses of England in the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. B. Botfield, Roxburghe Club 57 (1841), pp. 147-621 (p. 510); *Handbook of Dates*, ed. Cheney, p. 130.

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