of *Merlin* in the Shakespeare apocrypha, and later to George Lillo and Samuel Foote. Later, too, the juxtaposition of Wagner’s *Tristan* and *The Pirates of Penzance* is a bold one.

The ongoing medievalism that was natural in the initial period of language revival, given that Robert Morton Nance had based his revived language on that of the medieval mystery plays, persisted in the English and Cornish writings of Nance himself and others, even in the parodies of Peggy Pollard. Kent rightly looks at the slow move not just from medieval but from specifically religious themes, and he also examines the ‘performance’ of the Cornish Gorseth, a re-creation of a Welsh re-creation, and a phenomenon comfortingly parodied in more recent material (see his comments on ‘Bards of a feather’, p. 736). On the other hand, there have been two modern nativity dramas in the past decade, both impressive, written to fill the gap in the *Ordinalia*, one in Cornish by Ken George and one in English by Kent himself. The lively modern theatre companies still draw on medieval and later Cornish themes, but it is interesting that Kent’s concluding chapters shows how they have expanded and moved away from this material to a large extent; the medieval tradition of Cornish is extremely long-lasting.

The book is engagingly written (as might be expected from a playwright and novelist) and attractively produced. Of course there are a few typographical hiccups – at different points both Homi K. Bhabha and St Mary Magdalene undergo misspellings, the word ‘liripipe’ in the context of a bench-end carving is interestingly rearranged, and a German passage from Wagner’s *Tristan* suffers rather more – but they are not serious. More significantly, the book is provided not only with a chronology, but with well over a hundred illustrations, including reproductions of manuscripts, bench-ends, windows, and photographs of playing-places, and also scenes from modern performances, including (to mention just one) a photograph of the cast and crew of the 1969 production of the *Ordinalia* recreating an imagined medieval theatrical lifestyle around the actual performance. Within medieval drama studies, Cornish was for some time at best on the margins, although in recent years it has begun to take up its proper position. This fully documented and interesting study – the first, as indicated, to take proper account of Bewnans Ke – is a welcome contribution to Cornish drama as part of the drama of Britain as a whole.

Stirling

BRIAN MURDOCH


Max Harris has responded to the challenge laid down by Aimé Chérest more than 150 years ago, to produce fresh ideas on the Feast of Fools. He takes the same starting point as Chérest, the office for the Feast of the Circumcision compiled by Peter of Corbeil for Sens Cathedral in the early thirteenth century.
Like Chérest, Harris demonstrates from this office that the celebrations for the Circumcision at Sens were orderly, serious, and fitted well into the existing liturgical practices of the period. The inversion of hierarchy with the subdeacons taking the lead and occupying the highest places in the choir was intended, not to mock the cathedral’s most important figures, but to remind the congregation of those who were ‘fools for the sake of Christ’. Chérest concluded his study by criticizing the historians who reduced the feast to burlesque and exaggerated its abuses. Harris has gone far further. In order to isolate the true Feast of Fools from the travesties attributed to it by its usually ill-informed critics, he has produced a survey of all the festivities for the period between Christmas and Epiphany for the whole of the Middle Ages, distinguishing the clerical festivities from the lay, the rituals performed inside the church from those performed outside, the new from the very old. The necessity for such a broad survey lies in the fact that the Feast of the Circumcision occurred on the same day as New Year, which had been greeted at least since about AD 400 with masquerades and dancing. Harris argues that the Feast of Fools, far from emerging from pagan roots, was instituted in northern France towards the end of the twelfth century by bishops anxious to protect their clergy from unsuitable lay celebrations of the New Year. They provided an alternative, a set of services characterized by seasonal Christian rejoicing and moderate feasting. The boy bishop who played a central role in most Feasts of Fools symbolized the Christ child. The subdeacons and younger canons who led the worship symbolized the humble and meek who, according to a phrase in the Magnificat, would be raised up by Christ. On a more prosaic level, the young men were also being prepared for the positions they might occupy in their later years. The religious message of the festivities explained the strength of local attachment to the Feast of Fools, the adherence to it in the face of growing criticism from popes and doctors of the University of Paris. Harris argues that the cost of providing feasts for the clergy may have been as strong a reason for its eventual abandonment as the cacophony of criticism it encountered. Sacred Folly is a splendid response to Chérest’s challenge, clear headed, well structured, based on very wide reading and sensitively handled material. It deserves to be widely read. Yet, as Harris himself makes clear, it was not surprising that critics of the Feast of Fools were confused about its true nature. Local variations in the way it was celebrated were marked. Elements of the lay New Year partyings were incorporated into clerical celebrations conducted outside the church building. The inversion of hierarchy central to the Feast was almost bound to be connected, in the minds of onlookers if not of participants, with the mockery central to the charivari inversions so popular at the time. Even its most ardent defenders conceded that abuses could easily creep in. If Gerson was ill informed in his criticisms, there is no proof that he was totally misled in denouncing the ‘abominable disorders and insolences’ which accompanied some Feasts. Furthermore, perhaps Harris’s argument depends on a distinction between the laity and the clergy which is too clear cut for the period. Were choirboys, major players at the Feast, young clerics or simply clerks? The canons, both of cathedral and of collegiate churches, who
were the strongest adherents of the Feast of Fools, were frequently noted for their reluctance to become priests. Those who remained subdeacons for life were clerics of an unusual sort, neither competent to say mass nor enjoying cures of souls. The contemporary critics of the Feast and the generations of historians who followed them had some justification at least for the confusion that dogged their minds.

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Katherine Breen’s book presents a bold and provocative re-envisioning of what it meant to write in the vernacular in late medieval England. This study thus encourages us to re-imagine what lay behind the great flourishing of vernacular literary culture in the late fourteenth century. Scholars of Middle English are familiar with the emergence of the vernacular as having both political and aesthetic ramifications for literary and cultural history, but Breen insists on the ethical dimensions of authors adopting English as being of equal significance. Breen examines how orthodox religious thought conflated moral *habitus* (which she defines as ‘internalized Christian virtue’ (p. 4)) with a mastery of Latin grammar, subtly exploring the a priori challenges this conflation presented to authors who wrote in the vernacular for an audience untrained in grammar and, hence, potentially unhabituable. In chapter 1, Breen specifically contends that the fourteenth century witnessed a ‘crisis of habit’, as the word *habit* became widely used in Middle English, denoting both the garb of the religious elite and the set of behaviours that led towards or away from right living. In the fourteenth century, most poignantly in the work of Mirk’s *Festial*, we see writers in English beginning to wrestle with how – and whether – vernacular readers might be habituable, able to be formed into moral subjects without the benefit of a grammatical curriculum.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine various Christian writers’ attempts to theorize *habitus*, particularly how the study of grammar inflects various Christian virtues – both systems, that is, are grounded in rules governing right from wrong, whether moral orientation or noun declensions. Breen situates the *Orrmulum* within this discourse, revealing how Orrm attempts to graft the order inherent to Latin grammar onto English orthography, as he simultaneously attempts to use the vernacular to encourage right living in his readers. As such, Orrm ‘defines all the inhabitants of England as potential members of a virtuous textual community’ (p. 115). But the *Orrmulum* ultimately represents a fitful and inchoate attempt to harness the vernacular for ethical ends, as its narrative devolves into an endless series of homilies lacking in textual organization.