

The Seasons of the Globe: Two New Studies of Elizabethan Drama and Festival

THOMAS PETTITT

An aspect of the Elizabethan popular theatre that seems to have struck and concerned contemporaries was its independence of the traditional festive calendar. "I could wish," complains Samuel Cox in his much-quoted "Letter" of 1591, "that players would use themselves nowadays, as in ancient former times they have done, which was only to exercise their interludes in the time of Christmas," or at least within a clearly defined season of private, household revels with performances "at Hallowmass, and then in the later holidays until twelfth tide, and after that, only in Shrovetide."¹ The tendency to break out of the festive framework and the concern at it were both evident by mid-century, witness the proclamation issued in the spring of 1559 banning unlicensed dramatic performances, as "the tyme wherein common interludes . . . are wont vsually to be played, is now past until All Halloutyde."²

This being so it is extraordinary how many of us remain convinced of the residual but still vital significance of the festive calendar, together with the traditional customs and the customary drama that characterized its major festivals, for the nature, and hence our understanding, of Elizabethan popular theatre, including the plays of its most celebrated playwright. This scholarly and critical trend achieved something of a culmination in 1991 with the publication of books on the subject by two of England's most distinguished presses, François Laroque's *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* (Cambridge: CUP), and Sandra Billington's *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon). Against this background it is surprising that François Laroque should open his study with the comment that "The theme of festivity is clearly not a *topos* or a subject for which there already exists an established critical tradition" (3), and

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that he should, accordingly, anticipate exploring "paths still barely charted" (5). In view of the many studies quoted³ or not quoted⁴ in Laroque's book, it is easier to agree with Keith Thomas's foreword (xii) that "In exploring the contribution made by the popular culture of Elizabethan England to the themes and motifs of Shakespeare's plays François Laroque follows in a well-established tradition." Sandra Billington's attitude to the existing critical tradition is equally extreme but at the opposite pole, in that she is so aware and so respectful of earlier work in the field that she denies herself the opportunity of discussing plays, and denies us the opportunity of hearing her interpretation of plays, which she believes have been treated adequately from the festive perspective by others (121).

Moreover, as Keith Thomas later implies, there are in fact *two* distinct traditions of writing about Shakespeare (or Elizabethan theatre generally) in relation to festival, and the first step in assessing any new work in the field must be to determine its relationship to them. One of these two traditions begins with E. K. Chambers at the beginning of the century (in *The Medieval Stage* [London: OUP, 1903]) and is given a mid-century boost by C. L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*. This school of thought recognizes that the interpretation of festive elements in Elizabethan drama must be prefaced by at least some scholarly effort to establish the variety of forms, contents and purposes of that Elizabethan festivity either by direct analysis of the relevant primary sources, or by alert deployment of the best (and relevant) current work on the subject. The task is difficult, does not inevitably make for exciting reading, and is not always effectively executed, but it must be attempted if the interpretative sequel is to go beyond mere assertion.

Assertion, meanwhile, is what emphatically characterizes a second, currently more fashionable approach, in which historical scholarship (oddly for something which of late tends to regard itself as a form of historicism) is largely waived in favour of an immediate plunge into sociocultural interpretation of Elizabethan theatre and drama in terms of festive perspectives.⁵ The paucity of independent historical information on actual festival is however appropriate to a tradition inspired by Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, which detects in the works

of Rabelais a popular, subversive folk mentality largely pieced together from—precisely—the works of Rabelais.⁶

It is greatly to their credit that both of the works under review here are firmly in the Chambers-Barber tradition, with substantial and extensively-documented historical sections (close to half the work in each case) on contemporary festival prefacing the literary interpretations, and qualifying the latter for serious attention. Both acknowledge the diversity of customs (Laroque by covering many, Billington by consciously isolating a small cluster), and the variety of their functions; neither misuses “carnavalesque” as meaning something vaguely festive and hopefully disruptive of the established order. The interpretative chapters are expressed in an agreeably clear scholarly idiom which manages to communicate adequately by using familiar words in their familiar meanings. And plays are treated as such, rather than documents in the “formation” or even the “historical constitution” of some aspect of pre-colonial mentality.

It remains to assess to what degree the historical reconstruction of festival is accurate and reliable, to discuss how skilfully it is deployed in interpretation, and to ponder if this is all we need or want to do with the information available. If the following assessments of two extremely thorough and frequently perceptive studies focus predominantly on what are seen as their inconsistencies and shortcomings, the exercise is undertaken in this journal’s spirit of prompting debate on significant issues in literary history and interpretation. The reviewer proceeds with the deference incumbent upon one who has for many years pursued without as yet achieving a similar quest for an historically informed and contextually alert appreciation of the role of festival and folk tradition in the emergence of the Elizabethan popular theatre and the shaping of its drama.

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François Laroque’s review of festival is by far the broader, encompassing what the original French text (1988) called *la fête*, and which, as the translator notes (xvi), covers both “feast” and “festivity” and a good deal more. While the translation is altogether extremely idiomatic and

readable, whoever is responsible for the “seasonal entertainment” of the full English title has somewhat confused matters. The arrangement of the material within and between the chapters suggests, however, that there was already some confusion in the typology applied to *fête* in this historical reconstruction. For the coverage includes (and quite rightly) clearly non-seasonal festivities such as those prompted by births, marriages and deaths, in an odd chapter used as something of a rag-bag for traditions in some way not fitting the primary “calendary” picture. These also include the festivals accompanying the completion of agricultural tasks, which are of course seasonal if not (due to vagaries in the weather) strictly calendrical, alongside church ales and wakes (in the sense of patronal feasts), which certainly are calendrical (if varying between places), plus Dover’s celebrated Cotswold Games, which although they “took place at Whitsun” (163) are grouped with fairs under the misleading heading, “Occasional festivals.”

The arrangement should more effectively have pointed out *four* distinct types of festival which can be identified by their occurrence: the strictly calendrical (including the “movable” feasts linked to Easter and determined in part by the lunar calendar); the merely seasonal (like agricultural celebrations); the “biographical,” prompted by significant occasions in the life-cycle, and the essentially sporadic responses to events unrelated to annual or biographical rhythms, such as bonfires to celebrate a political upheaval or a *charivari* to demonstrate disapproval of a husband-beating shrew. This last Laroque also treats, although predominantly because, as sometimes happened, it was “saved up” for performance at a calendrical feast (typically Shrovetide).

This awkwardness seems to stem partly from Laroque’s need to provide a suitable background for the plays, in which naturally enough “biographical” festivals like weddings and funerals tend to loom large, coupled with a determination to construct a comprehensively systematic pattern for the Elizabethan festive calendar, a “balanced interlocking system of forty day cycles” (144), neatly summarized in list form in appendix 2 and diagrammatically in appendix 3. The neatness of the pattern has been achieved at some cost, however, most substantially in the arbitrary fixing of the movable feasts at their earliest possible occurrence. Other problems concern details, but may reflect fundamental

weaknesses. It is disturbing, for example, that in appendix 2 "Christmas—25 December" is confused with the winter solstice which, to the Elizabethans, who still adhered to the Julian calendar, did not fall on 21 December, either, but on 13 December. John Donne's "Nocturnal upon Saint Lucy's Day, Being the Shortest Day" confirms both this fact and an Elizabethan's awareness of the occurrence of the solstice almost a fortnight before Christmas.⁷ The summer solstice, meanwhile, to achieve identity with St John's Day, is located on June 24, while the two equinoxes are allowed to remain on the 21st (of March and September). Less fundamental idiosyncracies include the uncertainty about the beginning of the summer season, clearly identified as 1 May in the diagram; in discussion we are informed however that Whitsun marks the transition from Winter to Summer (136), while Midsummer (24 June) marks the "Advent" (140) or the "beginning" (85) of summer. Similarly appendix 2 deals with a "Sacred or Ritualistic Half" of the year from 25 December to 24 June; appendix 3 has a "Festive Half" covering 1 November to 1 May, while the discussion of "The ritualistic half of the year" in Chapter 4 goes from 7 January to Midsummer.

An intricate pattern of relationships is threatened by these uncertainties, but the potential damage is limited, since surprisingly little of this laboriously constructed and copiously documented calendrical model is actually deployed in the subsequent interpretations of Shakespeare. We learn something, for example, about Accession Day, Ascension Day, the Assumption, Corpus Christi, Guy Fawkes, Holy Innocents, and Rogationtide, none of which figure in the discussion of Shakespeare's plays. The same applies to festive activities such as Whitsun Ales, the Twelfth Night King of the Bean, the Horn Dance, Beating the Bounds, and the feast of Fools, and to figures such as Maid Marion. Of the forty saints discussed in this part, 33 are heard of no more. Four pages of detailed investigation are devoted to the hobby horse, which reappears only in connection with a dubious reference in *Othello* (290), and there is a similar discrepancy between investment and return in the case of Lammas, Martinmas, Michaelmas, Plough Monday, and Robin Hood. Four pages of detailed and valuable documentation on maypoles remain without harvest: there are no maypoles worth discussing in Shakespeare's plays. Some extremely interesting observations are made on the

emergence of a new, national, Protestant calendar of "Elizabethan" festivals, but when it comes to interpretation, the old, traditional calendar of "pagan" festivals predominates.

The historical reconstruction of festival has evidently acquired a motivation and momentum of its own, effectively constituting an independent study of Elizabethan festival of the kind I shall call for in my concluding remarks, for the subject's significance goes way beyond its possible influence on Shakespeare and other dramatists. The value of the exercise here is undermined, however, by some significant weaknesses in the identification and treatment of the evidence. Elizabethans bent on enjoying themselves were not given to compiling informative accounts for the benefit of later historians, who consequently face a frustratingly incomplete and uneven historical record. In the case of custom and festival, as of other popular traditions, there is a particular temptation to supplement the historical records with the accounts of antiquarians and folklorists documenting much more fully the festive traditions of later times. The problem is, of course, that as living traditions rather than the mere "survivals" they were once considered to be, these customs have been subject to change and renewal, and are therefore not automatically qualified for the reconstruction of the past; the possibility of completely new traditions emerging in the social upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (as Laroque indeed documents for those of the sixteenth and seventeenth) must also be countenanced. Laroque's declared response to this problem is strictly historical, determining (12) "to concentrate upon sources that are contemporary" with Shakespeare, except that this is at once qualified as meaning sources "that either fall within the Elizabethan period or, failing that, are manifestly connected with it." The latter criterion is applied with considerable tolerance to accept, as legitimate evidence, customs recorded only recently, notably the mummers' plays, whose Elizabethan connections are anything but "manifest." This is done of course on the basis of the assumption, long since abandoned by folklorists, that such folk plays are direct descendents of ancient pre-Christian rituals, and so must have existed in the Elizabethan period even though there are no records of them, and must have resembled the modern forms since the latter include action (like a death and revival)

believed to be a direct remnant of the original sacrifice of the ritual. Quite in accordance with this brand of survivalism we are treated to a substantial disquisition on witches and fairies (21-28) and their cultic connections, which is inspired by, if it claims not to follow, the ideas of Margaret Murray,⁸ and to globalizing speculations on the relationships between ancient religions and their deities and ceremonies ("a possible conjunction . . . between the Greek festival of the Anthesteria, the Celtic festival of Dimelc and the Christian festival of Candlemas," 80) worthy of Sir James Frazer.⁹

It is not so much that all this speculation on ancient times may be wrong: it is simply irrelevant to the festivals as conducted and experienced by Elizabethans and to the form in which they will have influenced the dramatists, which must be established by contemporary historical evidence. It is indeed to avoid this danger from a geographical perspective that Laroque determines (12) to focus on the festive traditions of Warwickshire and London, to allow for regional as opposed to chronological variation, and to isolate the local traditions Shakespeare himself could have experienced. In the event, however, this restriction is not adhered to; the state of the sources making it virtually unattainable anyway, but in another ironic twist, as handled by Laroque, this particular restriction proves to be irrelevant. Now the "festival" that may have influenced Shakespeare is understood not merely as the customary activity which Shakespeare may have seen or even participated in, but also as the contemporary *literature* it gave rise to, and which he may have *read* (5-6).

As the reference to Bakhtin on Rabelais suggested earlier, another danger facing those who would establish the nature of a folk culture as a preliminary to exploring its impact on a literature, is the circular manoeuvre of reconstructing the folk culture out of that same literature, so that the identification of correspondences is virtually guaranteed. Laroque is aware of this problem, but handles it awkwardly. He resolves to distinguish systematically between the subject, Shakespeare, and the historical sources of the reconstruction, but the latter include, somewhat arbitrarily, other literary sources not deemed to be on an aesthetic par with Shakespeare (5), and in practice Shakespeare's plays themselves are sometimes appealed to as sources, for example when the behaviour

of the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is offered as "a good illustration" of youth mores at the summer festivals (112; cf. 120, 133).

The survey of festivals and festive practices is also marred by several small shortcomings as regards the facts, interpretation or balance, for example: no documentation is offered for the surprising assertion that a "duel between different seasons . . . is a constant feature of folk plays" (102); is Jack of Lent destroyed on Palm Sunday (103) or Easter Sunday (104)? The Hock Tuesday play performed before Queen Elizabeth during her entertainment at Kenilworth in 1575 was performed—as the source quoted indicates, by men "of," not "in" Coventry (109); does it really matter (to Shakespeare research) whether 90% or merely 60% of the young maidens spending May Eve in the woods lost their maidenheads before they came home (113)? There is no reason why *tales* of Robin Hood should not be told at any time of year, as opposed to the performance of Robin Hood *plays* which would normally belong to the summer games (145). The belief that bears came out of hibernation at Candlemas is unlikely to have had much significance in Elizabethan England (48); there is no evidence that the sword dance was introduced into England by the "Danes and Saxons" (51) except to the extent that the latter simply means "English." The Revesby Sword Play is not "the best example" of a mummers' play (52)—it has a highly problematic relationship to the tradition as a whole¹⁰—and it is wrong to say (53) that the mummers' play, as opposed to the Sword Dance Play "includes no heroic characters": the major genre is called the "Hero Combat Play" precisely because it does. The Robin Hood plays are not "a summer version of the mummers' play," and there are no instances where Robin Hood is pitted against Guy of Warwick or George a Green (54).¹¹ If Shrove Tuesday "fell after the first new moon of February," how could it oscillate "between 3 February and 9 March" (81)? Do the fools accompanying the plough-trailing really *all* fight a hobby-horse or a dragon (94)—and are there *any* instances of a dragon accompanying a plough-trailing? When Machyn wrote in his diary that an event occurred on "Shroyff monday" by what procedure can he be taken to mean "Shrove Tuesday" (100)? Apart from the presence of the saint himself, the St George plays and ridings of St George's day in no way resembled the mummers' plays (110), and the plays performed at Manningtree fair

were morality, not mystery plays (165; cf. 105).¹² With these reservations Laroque's review of Elizabethan festival offers a substantial miscellany of often very useful documentation, and often quite perceptive commentary, a substantial vantage-point from which to explore these themes in Shakespeare.

Sandra Billington's approach to Elizabethan festival is in contrast extremely focussed, restricted as it is to the mock-king figure, although encompassing his manifestation in both winter revels (largely as the King of the bean or Lord of Misrule of aristocratic, institutional and royal households; ch. 2, "Kings of Winter Festive Groups") and summer games (mostly as the Summer King, sometimes alias Robin Hood, of rural communities; ch. 3, "Summer Kings and Queens"). The research offered on the mock king of custom is detailed, accurate, and apart from a slight tendency to digress (e.g. 37-38; 44-46) well-presented; in contrast to Laroque Billington sticks to early evidence, does not speculate on ancient origins, and only once (36) adduces as evidence a play (the anonymous *Timon*) which will later be the subject of analysis from the perspective of the customs here being documented. The confusion of names for the summer leader (king, lord, Robin Hood) and the confused and overlapping nature of the summer festivals (May Day, Midsummer, Whitsun) accurately reflect the historical reality. It is extremely salutary to be reminded that while we tend to see festive custom as something repeated, almost as a reflex action, year after year, it could be the subject of deliberate manipulation, as when the Christmas lord of misrule was revived at the court of Edward VI by the Duke of Northumberland "to take Edward's mind off the impending execution of his uncle Somerset" (40).

The main idiosyncrasy of this exercise, reflected in the paradox of the book's title, is precisely the medieval focus of the documentation, given that this is all prefatory to an exploration of the mock-king figure in *Renaissance* drama. In contrast to Laroque's more logical juxtaposition of chronologically contemporary festivity and theatre there is no major effort here to establish the nature of the custom in the Renaissance period when the plays were actually written, or, conversely, to examine the impact on *medieval* drama of the medieval mock king. As other reviewers have observed this is at least a potential weakness, for the Elizabethan

dramatists may have learnt the way to handle the mock king not from a direct encounter with the custom itself, but from the procedures already achieved by late-medieval dramatists.

That the mock-king figure did have relevance for the late-medieval drama, and that contemporaries were aware of these and of its other implications, is effectively demonstrated in a quotation which Sandra Billington includes, but could have made more of (if she had placed it in its appropriate chronological context). Contemplating the public's acquiescence in the manifest theatricality of the Duke of Gloucester's reluctance to accept the crown, Sir Thomas More in his *Richard III* observes, "these matters be kynges games, as it were stage playes, and for the most part played upon scaffolds."¹³ Custom ("kynges games") and regular drama ("stage plays") are here virtually equated, while the ambiguity of "king" and "scaffolds" signals the breadth of Billington's coverage on another axis, for in addition to exploring the influence of the customary mock-king figure on drama she also, in this historical section, explores its use by the leaders of rebels and outlaws, and in the real power-game of late-medieval and sixteenth-century politics.

These are interesting topics, but, I think, hardly apt to clarify the general picture: it is certainly confusing that we hear of the mock king as leader of rebels and outlaws (ch. 1, "Outlaws, Rebels and Civil War") before meeting what I presume is the original figure in customs (chs. 2 and 3). In contrast to the latter the available documentation for these supplementary functions is rather limited in quantity and quality. In chapter 4, "The Role of the Sovereign," the comment on Richard of Gloucester just quoted is one of very few convincing instances of the mock-king figure used in the discussion of real kings and kingship, and many of those appealed to, like "the most graphic example" (87) from Erasmus's *Moriae Encomium* are perhaps over-interpreted: a king who (as in Erasmus) is "a subject for mockery and derision" is not necessarily being equated with the "mock king" of custom. The French ambassador's reference to Lady Jane Grey as "nothing but a Twelfth-day Queen" (100) is rather more striking but not (presumably because not medieval) accorded much prominence.

The chapter on the mock king as outlaw and rebel leader is similarly disappointing with regard to convincing documentation. Billington

acknowledges herself (11) that there is only “one extant example of an outlaw setting himself up as such a king” (a Yorkshire gang-leader who in 1336 styled himself “Lionel, king of the rout of raveners”), and while John Gladman’s insurrectionary parade as “King of Christmas” in Norwich in 1434 (19) is probably as well qualified, the meagre harvest of hints and vague surmises in between does not justify the conclusion (27) that “in the Middle Ages, . . . most of the *organized* disorder we know about was expressed through mock king analogy.”

As a final complication, Sandra Billington devotes a substantial section of her chapter on the summer games (60-85) to exploring a fascinating and potentially very significant analogy between the custom of “midsummer competitions, games of physical prowess on a hilltop to decide a [mock-] king title” (60) and the figure of Fortune conceived of as reigning on a hilltop (or Fortune’s darling so poised). Here again the direct evidence is explicitly acknowledged to be limited, and this time “the only medieval record” (63) of hilltop competitions for the mock kingship, a complaint of midsummer disorders in the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, is less than satisfactory, as there is no hill, and there are competitions only if the source’s “commessationibus” is so translated rather than as “with immoderate feasting” as might be expected from the usage of the M.E. cognate, “comessacioun” (*Middle English Dictionary*). The main item of later evidence provided by Dover’s Cotswold games is also undermined by its indirectness, as we have only a literary reconstruction (the *Annalia Dubrensis*) of Dover’s consciously antiquarian seventeenth-century reconstruction of the traditional medieval Whitsun sports. It is in the face of this specific problem that Sandra Billington temporarily follows Laroque in relaxing her criteria on documentation: in the absence of direct historical evidence for these hilltop competitions they have to be reconstructed in reverse from literary evidence (“detected mainly through the use of allegory,” 60) prior to being used to interpret literature. But even with this premature appeal to literary evidence the figure of Trowle sitting on his hill in the Shepherds’ Play of the *Chester Mystery Cycle* (63) is acknowledged to be “The one complete medieval example of sophisticated interpretation of such sports”; the remainder are not so much unsophisticated as incomplete, and in later interpretation “Trowle-like” will be used as a device for hinting-without-quite-claiming

a character's similarity to the mock king (127; 136). There are many references to hills, to mock kings, to midsummer and to Fortune, but none to all of them at the same time and painfully few to any significant permutation of them. Sandra Billington may have identified here a significant literary *topos*, but its link to custom is extremely tenuous, and perhaps the main value of this pursuit of hilltop kings is its occasional reference to traditions of uncertain value to the immediate discussion but adding to our picture of the regular summer games in general: the play on the death of the summer lord at South Kyme, Lincolnshire, in 1601, for instance (72) and the analogous dying of the figure of summer (the analogy obscured by intervening discussion) in Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (74).

This prefatory effort to assign to the mock-king figure literary and intellectual significance, partly prompted by the paucity of evidence for the variant applications (rebel, real king, fortune's minion), has diverted space and attention from the traditional mock-king customs, which in themselves are significant enough in regard to Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and of which a good deal more could have been said. For example a whole class of documentation which is not deployed is provided by the texts currently miscategorized (and so receiving the wrong kind of attention) as "Middle English Lyrics" or "Carols." They include a number of songs clearly designed for performance at household winter revels (as distinct from the songs, noted by Laroque, which merely invoke or describe them), of which several, although from different sources, constitute a sequence or cycle marking the reign of a winter Lord of Misrule or Christmas King. Following the ceremonial expulsion of a figure representing Advent, "We will be mery, grete and small, / And thou shalt goo oute of this halle" (R. L. Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. [Oxford: Clarendon P, 1977] no. 3; and cf. no. 4), "My lord Syre Cristemasse" is formally welcomed (no. 5), lustily singing "Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell" outside the door to advertize his arrival (no. 6). He demands that "all be mere here" (no.10), and in his role as Lord of Misrule promulgates that no man be allowed to "cum into this hall / . . . But that sum sport he bryng withall" (no. 11). But as Candlemas passes and Lent approaches he is obliged sadly to take

his leave ". . . at the gud lord of this hall / . . . and of gestes all" (no. 141).

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There is a kind of balance between the two works under discussion. While Laroque attempts a comprehensive reconstruction of Elizabethan festival for a circumscribed aim—the explication of festival themes and references in Shakespeare alone—Sandra Billington deploys her narrow focus on the mock king across a broad range of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Laroque's more limited application permits a corresponding intensity of treatment, and whatever transpires in the following, the undeniable long-term value of the interpretative section of *Shakespeare's Festive World* will be as a near-definitive listing of Shakespeare's allusions to festival, feasting, and general merriment. Sandra Billington's coverage, in contrast, is as already noted explicitly and deliberately incomplete, in that she declines to discuss further a number of plays, including some by Shakespeare, which she considers to have been adequately covered elsewhere. But however perceptive and skilfull, the interpretations of Barber, Donaldson and others did not approach Elizabethan plays from the precise perspective of the mock king as constructed by Billington, and it is regrettable that we are thus denied a sustained discussion of the mock-king figure in say, *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*, or *Hamlet* (where Claudius is dismissed by his nephew as a vice-like "king of shreds and patches"), which to judge from remarks she makes in passing Sandra Billington was alert to as potentially rewarding objects of analysis.

Despite their near-comprehensive coverage of festival in Shakespeare, and their occasionally perceptive analysis of isolated moments in the plays, Laroque's interpretative chapters fail to achieve overall coherence and conviction. There is for example the same confusion between Shakespeare as the object of interpretation and Shakespeare as documentary source, as when we are informed (188) that "A whole body of Celtic or Teutonic rites and legends could be reconstructed from the clues provided by [specific features in] . . . *As You Like It*, . . . *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, or . . . *1 Henry IV*." Unless there is reliable independent

evidence on these Celtic or Teutonic rites apart from these "clues" in Shakespeare we have here learnt something about the rites, not about Shakespeare's plays.

As in the historical section, modern traditions of unproven antiquity such as the mummers' play are still invoked as background to Shakespeare's plays, and a striking instance of the result is provided by the discussion of *Othello* (290-91). There is an interesting reference to the morris dance (a well-documented Elizabethan tradition), legitimately and perceptively prompted by this play's including "a Moor with a 'begrim'd face' . . . who repeatedly calls himself a 'fool,'" combined with the less convincing relevance of a handkerchief and a possible reference to a hobby-horse, but it meanders through an inaccurate and muddled equation between morris dance, sword dance (of which two varieties are confused), folk play, Hero Combat Play and mummers' play, and into the following remarks on "the scene of *Othello's* fit of epilepsy" where "the general's blackout is followed by his revival at the hands of Iago":

The general's ensign here masquerades as a healer/poisoner figure and this scene may be interpreted as a dramatic variation of the popular shows put on at Christmas and Easter in the villages of Elizabethan England. The Mummers' play ritually presented a battle between a Christian Knight (generally embodied by the figure of St George) against Beelzebub or a Turkish Knight, the latter being both endowed with blackened faces. After the first clash, St George was clubbed to the ground, where he lay unconscious, until he was revived by a miraculous Doctor who emerged from the crowd of spectators. So, according to the scenario imported from the Mummers' play, Iago would appear under the double persona of the medicine man and of the white Christian knight who defeats the dark, pagan African (291).

The parallels adduced here between the mummers' plays and *Othello* may or may not achieve assent but what has to be insisted on is firstly that the summary of the former is inaccurate (Beelzebub is not one of St George's usual opponents; St George is as often the victor in the combat as the defeated combatant requiring treatment by the doctor) and secondly, the mummers' plays—in the form recorded of late—cannot be documented with any certainty earlier than the eighteenth century. It has to be added that in much of this Laroque is in *very* good company,

and it is rare among theatre historians to find an awareness that the medieval, let alone the prehistoric, origins of the mummers' plays cannot be assumed. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that we shall one day be able to document their history to within reach of the Elizabethan theatre, even in something like their recent forms. It would help if just a few of the people bent on finding parallels to the mummers' plays in stage plays contributed to looking for such evidence in the historical record; without it all these parallels could just as well—may very well—prove that our recent folk drama is *gesunkenes Kulturgut* from the professional theatre (say via drolls, travelling companies, and local interluders).

The pagan origins assumed for many customs are similarly carried forward into the interpretation of the alleged allusions to them in the plays, as, for example, when festival in Shakespeare's tragedies is claimed to "revert to being . . . an occasion for sacrifice . . . it becomes a pagan High Mass of disorder . . . a cannibal feast" (304). On other occasions, independent of chronology and origins, the juxtaposition of multiple factors strains credulity. For example the discussion of *Othello* just glanced at continues (291), on the reflection that Iago is a Spanish name: "If we bear in mind this Spanish connection, we see that Iago torments Othello with cuckoldry, the nightmarish green-eyed and horned monster, just as a bull-fighter will bait and tame a savage bull. The fighting of bulls had long been a popular sport in the south of Spain where it was used as a test of strength between Christian knights and the Moorish chieftains."

This is one of a number of assertions which to this reviewer border on the eccentric. Under this heading I would also put the suggestion (205) that an audience, told by the Nurse that Juliet was born at Lammastide (1 August), would at once calculate that she must have been conceived at All Hallows (1 November), and from their understanding of the deeper significance of this festival conclude that this "constituted a covert hint as to her destiny." On the same level is the suggestion of significance in the fact that Julius Caesar, Jesus Christ, and Jack Cade share the same initials (281). Furthermore, I am not familiar with "psychoanalytical mythology" (276) but if its findings "converge" with the idea that in *Hamlet* the wedding feast of Claudius and Gertrude can

be seen as "an avatar of the cannibal banquet in which the king/father, sacrificed by the primitive horde which lusted after his wife, is ritually consumed by his subjects/sons," then I am happy to remain ignorant. This is "myth-and-ritual" interpretation of the kind that, a recent survey suggests, becomes fashionable in variant forms once every generation.¹⁴ As literary appreciation it may be legitimate or it may not; it has nothing to do with Elizabethan festival.

Laroque's appeal for support from arcane disciplines such as psychoanalytical mythology may be a means of handling what seems to be a degree of disappointment or even bewilderment at the way Shakespeare, on the level of mere everyday reality, fails to make much use of the Elizabethan traditional calendar so carefully reconstructed. For while Laroque feels obliged to persist in his assertion that "the theme of festivity, treated from many different angles, seems . . . to occupy a place of central importance in Shakespeare's plays" (197), there are moments of doubt when he concedes that the way Shakespeare actually treats festival seems to reveal ". . . an attitude which, while not quite implying a desire to reject or repress popular festivals in the strict sense of the expression, nevertheless does lead to a certain marginalization of them" (244). Between these extremes of centralization and marginalization is the notion of the creative artist who will manipulate the received patterns to suit his purpose, so when we encounter ". . . allusions and references to festivity which are bound to appear atypical when compared with the working system of the calendar, as described in the first part of this study" (234), or if "there is nothing particularly systematic or orthodox about the way in which he . . . draws on tradition and the rites of folklore" (228), then this is the result of "Shakespeare's desire to shake free from . . . the constricting framework of strict reference to the unwritten laws of the festive calendar" (231). Not that this reduces the value of reconstructing these "unwritten laws" which Shakespeare "shakes free from," for it may be he thereby intended to give festival even greater prominence: "the dramatist may choose to conceal his subject, the better to reveal it" (306), or perhaps he wasn't really aware of the material's true significance (47). These citations are taken out of context from separate discussions, but they suggest

nonetheless a hesitancy in settling for a consistent response to Shakespeare's not entirely convenient manner of treating festival.

In Sandra Billington's interpretative chapters in contrast the problem is not so much the recalcitrance of the dramatists as the ubiquity of the figure or concept of the mock king. The custom itself is claimed to be so "volatile" (119), and the dramatists' use of it so characterized by "variability" and "creativity" that it sometimes seems that any figure potentially usurping power, or any figure with power who does not live up to its demands, is encompassed by the mock-king image, which if so general loses a good deal of its interpretative value. The sense of uncertainty is increased by the flexibility of the terminology, so that "king play/game" can mean (as carried over from the first part) the actual custom of electing a festive king, and in connection with what people do in plays both behaving like a king and playing a game (like chess) that kings often play (e.g. 249); "player king" (e.g. 128) acquires a similar ambivalence.

In most cases the validity of the parallel with custom will be a matter of critical judgement, and judgements may differ, but there are also instances of measurable overinterpretation, as in the case of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. In a narrative version of the story from 1571 *Tamburlaine* was indeed elected as a mock king (or at least chosen "in sport") by his fellow shepherds (160), but Sandra Billington proceeds to transfer this to "Marlowe's hero" who "begins as a summer king" (162) and to his play, which thus acquires "opening suggestions of a mock election" (165). In the case of Shakespeare's *King John* it is acknowledged that this play does not have the explicit mock-king elements in one of his sources, but saying they have been "removed" (129) seems to imply that they ought to be there, and it is suggested that this somehow gives more scope to less tangible implicit mock-king elements. There is an odd sideways injection of mock-king elements into Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI* with the observation that the rose-plucking scene in 2.4 takes place in the garden of one of the Inns of Court, which was "noted for its misrule traditions" (141); this may be true but its practical relevance is questionable, and hardly warrants equating the seven men involved (by implication) with a fool and six morris-dancers. Another form of awkwardness involves the identification of traditional features whose

status as such is questionable; thus *The Misfortunes of Arthur* has dumb-shows "such as could have been staged at a Whitsun gathering" (135), but I am far from certain how characteristic dumb-shows were of Whitsun customs or indeed of folk-drama in general—the point is not prepared for in the preceding review of customary traditions. The somewhat desperate quest for fools on hills continued from the first part has also led (219) to "uplandish" being taken to encompass "hillside" (as well as merely "rural").

The major impact of these problems however is not so much to undermine the value or integrity of Sandra Billington's interpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays as to detach them from her point of departure in the introductory review of customs. Just as Laroque's preliminary construction of the Elizabethan festive calendar acquired a motivation and momentum of its own, so Sandra Billington's interpretative chapters offer a series of complex, always fascinating, sometimes brilliant interpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, which while they may ultimately in her own mind have been prompted by the notion of the mock king of custom, do not always reflect a convincingly organic relationship between custom and drama within the historical reality, despite the intrusion of key-words like "misrule," "mock," and "hill" whenever occasion permits (cf. the discussion of *Measure for Measure* 242-48). This sense of detachment from the book's title is reinforced by the recollection that many of these interpretations are not merely dubiously linked to custom, but as pointed out earlier the custom itself (like the midsummer hilltop games) has a somewhat dubious historical status. Hence there is much in this book, and much that is good, which is not truly related to the question of drama and festival and so not germane to the perspective of the current review.

The problem is largely one of focus. Having eschewed some of the more obvious manifestations of the theme the book ranges widely over Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in a somewhat breathless quest for (more or less convincing) mock-king figures. It is certainly refreshing to find festive themes in tragedies and histories as well as in the more predictable and more often treated comedies, and it is similarly highly informative to see the familiar Shakespearean works interpreted alongside less celebrated plays, but the overall impression is that too

little—and too little that is squarely in line with the book's title—is said about too many plays, and perhaps the wrong plays at that. *The Book of Sir Thomas More* is accorded an intense half-page of discussion (230) at the tail-end of a line of thought on subversion and censorship which has brought us far from the mock king; Peele's *Edward I* is accorded only a passing reference (120) which is just enough to suggest it has considerable potential for analysis from the mock-king perspective.

This is confusing and depressing, for when Sandra Billington turns the direct force of her interpretative skills on a play where the festive and mock-king element is clearly relevant, the result can be striking and extremely useful. This is predictably the case with Falstaff; it is with a shock of recognition, however, that in the analysis of *Troilus and Cressida* one sees Pandarus emerging with a clearly extra-dramatic function as an Inner Temple lord of misrule. Another enlightening surprise is Wolsey in *Henry VIII* ("While Wolsey is in control, all the pageants in the play are disordered," 251). It would have been more effective, in other words, to have dwelt at greater length on the more amenable plays, characters and scenes, some of which, one feels, might have been more rewarding: Lear with his crown of flowers, for example, or the mock kings or would-be kings in the *Henry VI* plays, Antony and Cleopatra enthroned in "the common show place" (210). The footnotes to these chapters also include truncated remarks and references warranting elaboration in the main text (for example on *King Lear* 209n47; on fools as executioners 244n18) if necessary—indeed preferably—at the expense of the less rewarding items that are there. There are also occasions when festive themes are downplayed to make room for less relevant matter; the discussion of *Woodstock* for example includes a substantial and detailed analysis of its contemporary relevance (perchance under the baleful shadow of new historicism) which dilutes the impact of the fascinating discussion of Richard as mock king; the latter meanwhile misses the parallel between Richard appointing his favourites to high offices of state (1.3.184-88, cited 224) and the Lord of Misrule, as described by Stubbes, choosing his cronies as officers.¹⁵ The uncertain focus persists with the subsequent discussion of *Richard II*, which dwells on the link to the Essex rebellion but declines to explore the misrule

implications of the reference to a “mumming trick” in some lines quoted in this connection.

A more concentrated focus on the really convincing instances of the mock-king figure in drama would also have facilitated greater attention to the extra-poetic, contextual and dramaturgical factors heralded in Sandra Billington’s forcefully-written “Critical Introduction” to her interpretative section, where she insists that the mock-king complex is not merely a source of themes and motifs, but *structural* to the drama, supplying “popular structures,” “staged iconography,” which facilitated the transition from medieval moralities to Elizabethan stage-plays: “these traditions were more than an ancient rag-bag of motifs, with which writers sprinkled their plays . . . they provided seminal and elastic structures for developing dramatic ideas” (118). Indeed: and it is perhaps the absence of much discussion of “staged iconography” that is most frustrating about this book, the rapid movement from one play to another giving more the impression that these are “motifs,” “sprinkled” across Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

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This last observation is equally valid for Laroque’s discussions of Shakespeare, for despite some perceptive opening remarks about the residual festive nature of theatre as an institution, of going to the theatre as a festive experience, he seeks primarily, almost exclusively the festive traditions “echoed” in Shakespeare’s texts as “themes,” “images,” “symbolism,” and “metaphor” (303). Despite their many differences in focus, approach, and execution, these two books share an essential and essentially limiting quality as exercises in literary criticism, designed to enhance our appreciation of plays as literary compositions. They seek to render our appreciation of a body of poetic drama historically more informed and accurate by deploying in its interpretation knowledge and understanding of an aspect of contemporary life—festival and custom—which loomed large in the experience and mentality of playwrights, players, and audience. In this, with the reservations offered, Laroque and Billington are successful, but it is hard to repress the feeling that there should be something more, something deeper, to the relationship.

The analysis in the plays of these themes, motifs, symbols, and dramatic ideas from custom could equally well be applied to other significant features of contemporary life—say the legal system or disease and medicine—to which the drama also alludes. To this degree an earlier reviewer was right if mischievous to characterize Billington's book as being on the model of a "Yale dissertation" in "identifying a distinctive literary pattern" and tracing it "through several key texts, noting its permutations in each" (John D. Cox in *Comparative Drama*); and the same could be said, except that there are fewer key texts and many more "distinctive literary patterns," of Laroque's study.

Yet there could, and should, be more, for in relation to theatre festive custom is not just any literary pattern or any aspect of contemporary life and thought. As Laroque points out, the two are closely analogous, in that custom has many dramatic features, or could provide the auspices for fully-fledged dramatic performances. And the connection could be closer, in that in all probability the Elizabethan theatre partly emerged from the dramatic customs, or the customary drama, of the later Middle Ages (this is not the same genetic relationship as that once postulated between ritual and drama in western civilization as a whole, of which Laroque is rightfully wary). Either way, by analogy or inheritance, there are grounds to anticipate that festive customs and customary festival would be more deeply and more vitally embedded in (and so more significant in the interpretation of) Elizabethan theatre and drama than a matter of motifs, symbols, *topoi*, or even dramatic ideas: as action and dramaturgy, costume and properties, the shape and relationship of stage and auditorium, the interaction between players and audience, and the latter's composition, behaviour and mood. It would have been interesting and significant to learn, for example, whether such festive features loom larger in the drama of the private theatres—which may have remained closer to the private auspices of domestic feasts—than of the public theatres; or if the one form of theatre invoked a different set of festive motifs, moods and dramaturgical patterns from the other: a case could be made for seeing the private theatre as the inheritor of the indoor, domestic, household revels of the winter season, the public theatres as commercializations of the outdoor, community, summer festivals. The question of the relationship between festival and early English theatre

history remains to be fully confronted, and requiring as it does the deployment of material and methods from social and literary history, folklore, and theatre studies, may indeed be beyond the resources of a single scholar.

Odense University
Denmark

NOTES

¹Cited in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 4 (1923; Oxford: Clarendon P, 1961) 237.

²*Tudor Royal Proclamations*, eds. Paul Lester Hughes and James F. Larkin, vol. 2, *The Later Tudors (1553-1587)* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969) no. 458, p. 115.

³C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972); Alan Brissenden, "Shakespeare and the Morris," *RES* ns 30 (1979): 1-11; Douglas Hewitt, "The Very Pompes of the Divell: Popular and Folk Elements in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama," *RES* 25 (1949): 10-23; Janet Spens, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Relation to Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1916); W. B. Thorne, "The Influence of Folk Drama upon Shakespearean Comedy," Diss. University of Wisconsin 1965; and Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).

⁴E.g. Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside Down: Comedy from Jonson to Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970); W. Montgomerie, "Folk Play and Ritual in *Hamlet*," *RES* ns 30 (1979): 1-11; M. B. Olson, "The Morris Dance in Drama before 1645," *Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota* 10 (1920): 423-35; and Richard Wincor, "Shakespeare's Festive Plays," *ShakQ* 1 (1950): 219-40.

⁵See for example Michael D. Bristol, "Carnival and the Institutions of Theater in Elizabethan England," *ELH* 50 (1983): 637-54, and his *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985); Michael McCandles, "Festival in Jonsonian Comedy," *RenD* 8 (1977): 203-19.

⁶Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, transl. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology P, 1968); for this observation see Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, transl. Anne and John Tedeschi (Harmondsworth: Viking Penguin, 1982) xvii.

⁷*The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (1912; London: OUP, 1963) 39.

⁸Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1921); *The God of the Witches* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931); *The Divine King of England: A Study in Anthropology* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954).

⁹J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (Cambridge, 1890).

¹⁰See my guarded "English Folk Drama in the Eighteenth Century: A Defense of the *Revesby Sword Play*," *Comparative Drama* 15 (1981): 3-29.

¹¹See David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1981).

¹²Much of the above, particularly with regard to the mummers' plays, reproduces my general animadversions on the field in "Early English Traditional Drama: Approaches and Perspectives," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 25 (1983, for 1982): 1-30, and "Approaches to Medieval Folk Drama," *Early Drama, Art and Music Newsletter* 7.2 (Spring 1985): 23-27.

¹³Sir Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*, ed. R. S. Sylvester (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964) 80-81; Billington cites (96) the derivative—i.e. Elizabethan—passage in Holinshed.

¹⁴Woodbridge, Linda, and Edward Berry, eds., introd., *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and his Age* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992).

¹⁵Philip Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), conveniently quoted in Laroque 134.