

Max Harris. *Sacred Folly: A New History of the Feast of Fools*.

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. xi + 322 pp. \$49.95. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4956-7.

Max Harris's *Sacred Folly* is in fact three books: as the title indicates, one is about the historiography of the Feast of Fools and the constant exaggeration of its supposed debauchery and unruliness; the second concerns ecclesiastical and lay festivities that took place from late antiquity to the end of the fifteenth century and

which, for various reasons, were confused with the Feast of Fools; the third is the revised version of the history of the Feast of Fools in order to restore “what we know from what we think we know” (74). Harris skillfully weaves all three into a very fine chronological narrative.

In the 1160s the Feast of Fools designated a seasonal liturgy of the Church led by subdeacons and minor clerics that initially included singing and outdoor processions. It emerged at a time of “economic prosperity, intellectual ferment, and architectural and liturgical innovation” (66). The Feast of Fools is therefore not the expression of subversive and Carnavalesque forces in a time of crisis, but rather a feast of subdeacons who were temporarily raised to a position of honor as part of an essentially Christian doctrine believing in the inversion of the mighty and the humble (284). Two types of fools must be distinguished: the first denies the existence of God and is an abominable blasphemer; the second lacks worldly status but is exalted by God — he is the low that shames the strong. Harris is not the first to point out that often there is an excessive emphasis on the scandalous and defamatory elements of the Feast, such as obscenity, profanation and dissent. Aimé Chérest in 1853 already complained that “most writers have considered only the feast’s burlesque side” (106–07), and yet, no one had previously attempted to offer a systematic and rigorous reexamination of all the possible exaggerations and misconceptions suggested by scholars. But Harris is determined to show that even medieval authors are unable to distinguish between the Feast of Fools and its close relatives. This part of the argument is probably the most controversial since it judges some medieval sources as ungrounded. When distinguished from its many twins the Feast of Fools no longer appears as a subversive rite of profanation but a festivity that was tolerant of ludic activities. These ludic aspects came to be associated with the Feast of Fools but they were not intrinsically connected to it. The obsessive motivation of Harris throughout the book is to decontaminate the Feast of Fools from its legendary unruly elements and to rectify the supposedly conflicting nature of the Feast of Fools and the Church (part 1, “Before the Feast of Fools”) by coming back to its liturgical origin when the cult of the Christmas season and the Feast of Fools were deeply embedded. The book also offers documentation of ecclesiastical support for the Feast of Fools (part 2, “Supporting the Feast of Fools”) offering a more nuanced and less uniform history of the reception of the Feast. The last part of the book is a fascinating consideration of festive societies in late medieval France that contradicts the usual assumption that the *sotties*, *charivaris*, and *farces* are the continuation of the Feast of Fools (see part 5, “Beyond the Feast of Fools”).

All in all, Harris offers a thought-provoking critique of the simplistic framing of the Feast of Fools as the struggle of the sacrilegious forces of profanation against the oppressive forces of the Church. Contrary to the Carnavalesque image of the Feast of Fools, Harris gives us a religious celebration that honored the “fool of lowly status” (67). But the systematic attempt to exclude disorder and violence as almost foreign to the Feast of Fools, risks bringing Harris to the opposite statement of the Feast of Fool as lacking disarray. At the end of the book Harris defends having

minimized the “potential for abuse” (288), but other than briefly referring to Peter Burke’s notion of “the triumph of Lent” (188), he intentionally avoids a political reading and refrains from considering the fools as liminal characters characteristic of periods of *communitas* (Victor Turner) or of subversive Carnavalesque times (Mikhail Bakhtin). Some scholars will no doubt judge Harris’s definition of the Feast of Fools far too rigid, turning his book into a passionate search for what the Feast of Fools was not or what was mistakenly taken as the Feast of Fools. Nevertheless, the depth of detail, the range of sources (from Roman parodies to late medieval French theater), the critical approach, the extremely well-fashioned and well-written alternative story of the Feast, are all evidence of a magisterial *coup de maître*. *Sacred Folly* is a lively, provocative, and erudite book that will be a source for further debate and controversy for many years to come.

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