

Alan H. Nelson and John R. Elliott, Jr., eds. *Inns of Court*.

3 vols. Records of Early English Drama. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010. xcix + 1,066 pp. \$340. ISBN: 978-1-84384-259-0.

In volume 1 of the three-volume collection *Inns of Court*, we learn from the *Black Books* (the official records of Lincoln's Inn) that in 1518–19 the governing body of the Inn (Council) decreed “that Iack Strawe & all his adherentes be ffrom hensforth uttrely banyshed & no more to be used in lincolles Inne” (47). That one of the legendary leaders of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 should have figured as a character in the revels at Lincoln's Inn is indicative of the subversive form (as opposed to the subversive intent) of these seasonal festivities. The prohibition by council of Jack Straw is suggestive of political sensitivity to perceptions of the Inn's practices by those outside its enclosed environs: one practical purpose of participation of honourable members in the revels was after all “to prepare gentlemen for life at court” (xviii). In their introduction to volume 1 of *Inns of Court*, the editors remind the reader that the Latin root of “revels” is “rebellare,” meaning to rebel or revolt (xxxvii). The theme of rebellion was endemic to the Inns of Court revels, and was personified therein by the Lord of Misrule, whom the seventeenth-century antiquary William Dugdale recorded in *Origines Juridicales* as being “abroad” (during the Inner Temple revels of 1561–62) from seven o'clock in the morning until “After Breakfast ended,” at which time his power was

suspended “until his personal presence at night; and then his power is most potent” (774). C. L. Barber interpreted festive rites such as those practised at the Inns of Court as “a temporary license, a ‘misrule’ that implied rule” (C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy*, 1968, 10); while for Mikhail Bakhtin, their purpose was more inflammatory, representing the destruction of authority and the assertion of popular renewal. For Bakhtin, the laughter engendered by “carnival” was “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1984, 11–12). Was a function of the revels to reaffirm extant hierarchic structures, or was it rather to subvert them, thereby implying alternative and preferable models of governance, within and without the walls of the Inns?

I emphasize the above interpretative aspect of the revels because subversion emerges strongly as a thematic motif of the material which has been collated and edited for inclusion in *Inns of Court*. This is not to suggest that the revels acted as a manifestation of dissatisfaction with governance at the Inns, as purported by the membership; still less, that the revels were representative of wider political unrest or indeed of opposition to the crown and its government (this was highly unlikely, given that Tudor and Stuart monarchs and their courts were active patrons of, and occasional participants in, the revels). But there is evidence to suggest that the revels, and the subject-matter of the masques and dramas presented during these festivities, were indicative of a critical perspective of prevailing governmental norms. This was never more apparent than in *Gorboduc* (also known as *The Tragedy of Ferrex and Porrex*), performed in January 1562 by members of the Inner Temple at the royal court in the presence of Elizabeth I. Written by two members of the Inner Temple, Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, its dramatization of political themes (including the royal succession, rebellion, regicide, and civil war) was unprecedented in the history of English theatrical performance. In the court of King Gorboduc, the voices of temperance and sagacity are provided by learned counsellors (Arostus, Dordan, Philander, and Eubulus), echoing the relationship between the queen and her learned counselors at the Inns of Court: they enact the role of advisers or counselors to the prince (*amici principis*). The proposition that royal entertainments such as those presented by the Inns contained a didactic element is lent weight by an anonymous account of the above performance of *Gorboduc*, included in volume 2, part 4, “Eyewitness Accounts.” In this distinctive interpretation of the play, the author of the account refers explicitly to the relationship between Elizabeth I and Lord Robert Dudley (later, First Earl of Leicester): “howe that men refused the certen and tooke the uncerten, wherby was went that yt was better for the Quene to marye with the Lord Robert knowen then with the king of Sweden” (684). Uncertainty surrounding the royal succession was central to the drama of *Gorboduc*, as it was to the political drama of the English nation.

*Inns of Court* is published under the aegis of Records of Early English Drama, and aims to include archival references (drawn from the four Inns) to entertainments of every kind. These include revels, masques, plays, music, dancing, equestrian and martial exercises (coming as they did largely from landed families, honorable

members were invariably skilled horsemen). Documents included in the collection extend over a period of 235 years, from the earliest available, in 1407–08, to 1642 (the year in which Parliament issued an Ordinance prohibiting all stage plays). Much of the material is derived from the official records of the four Inns: *Gray's Inn Pension Book*, *Inner Temple Parliament Book*, *Middle Temple Parliament Book*, *Lincoln's Inn Black Books*. From these, and other archival sources in the libraries of the Inns, we gain insight not only into the form and content of the entertainments themselves, but more generally into the ordered conviviality that characterized the extended periods of seasonal festivities celebrated by the legal profession (the 1594–95 revels at Gray's Inn, famously recorded in *Gesta Grayorum*, lasted from 20 December 1594 to 11 February 1595). Inventories feature heavily, and these tell the reader much about diurnal activities at the Inns. For example, at Furnival's Inn (an Inn of Chancery, affiliated to Lincoln's Inn) during the Christmas period of 1491–92, a total of nine shillings was spent on the following: "Kitchin Chardges, Venison plentie, also Brawne, Doulcetts, Baked wardens, Cressettes, Players, harneys from the Armorer, handgonnes, horses, Rushes, Musick, and mynstralsy extraordinary / Also Pottes spent in this tyme extraordinarie" (21). Readers may be disappointed to learn that the baked warden included in the above inventory refers to a type of pear, rather than an official of Furnival's Inn. Quotidian details such as the Christmas inventories are included in volume 1, "The Records," along with extensive extracts from the recorded proceedings of the Masters of the Bench, and related literature. Volume 2, "Appendixes," contains the texts of revels held between 1561–62 and 1635–36, and texts also of Inns of Court masques, performed between 1612–13 and 1635–36. In volume 3, the section entitled "Translations" provides literal translations from Latin of "The Records" published in volume 1. Hence, "Pro octo [gal] Lagenis Bastardi" in volume 1 (4) translates as "For eight gallons of bastard" in volume 3 (819). A comprehensive set of endnotes, an invaluable Latin glossary, and an index of all honorable members named in the collection, are also included in volume 3. The collection is a useful resource for scholars of early modern English social history, legal history, and drama. It is unfortunate that on a few of the pages in volume 1, the text is smudged . . . suggesting the intervention perhaps of a ghostly honorable member, disgruntled at his omission from the records included in this august collection.

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