

Probably the most difficult context to appreciate festive misrule taking place is when it occurs in a religious setting, such in medieval parish churches, monasteries and cathedrals. It is not always easy to see how misrule might be accommodated within the sober and respectful atmosphere that we usually associate with these spaces. That said, the use of reversal and inversions in religious ritual and custom is just one part of a wider 'world upside-down' theme associated with medieval religion, and which also includes the grotesque images found in margins of manuscripts, and in the decoration of stonework and choir-stalls in churches.<sup>19</sup> This was an important aesthetic in its own right: opposites, inversions and reversals were not automatically excluded from public representation in this period, but carried messages which demonstrated morality or folly, as well as subjects to provoke healthy laughter. In terms of misrule, there were several customs associated with important festival periods that depended for their significance on some sort of inversion or breach of religious decorum. Examples from medieval Europe include the boy-bishop and the Feast of Fools. Although the purpose of such practices was not always clear to contemporary or later commentators, it is possible to make a sensible case for why they were used. As Eamon Duffy notes of the boy-bishop 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 shall 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'.<sup>20</sup> 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: in fact, the boy-bishop custom can be seen as perfectly exemplifying religious teaching about humility and salvation. That said, the limitations of such an explanation in the analysis of particular cases also needs to be recognised: in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries prominent churchmen complained that

boisterous activities such as mud-slinging, playing pranks and praising demons were taking place in churches and cathedrals at Christmas, suggesting that not all misrule was tolerated or even understood.<sup>21</sup>

Among all the erudite scholarly discussion of misrule's meaning and social significance, it can be easy to overlook the fact that play with classificatory categories was and continues to be something enjoyable and worth pursuing for this end alone. Although this can of course be done at any time of the year, we are interested here in customs which are associated with particular periods in the calendar. Christmas was the most obvious example, with even the higher echelons of society being willing to indulge in festive humour and hilarity. Olga Horner's account of Christmas entertainments at the Inns of Court contains plenty of examples of what can be designated as transgressive behaviour among gentlemen who went on to assume prominent positions at court. At the Inner Temple we find that 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, the name of an alleged leader of the English Rising of 1381. Again though, preferences changed, and in 1519 Jack Straw and his adherents were banned from Lincoln's Inn.<sup>22</sup>

There were sometimes points when the abstract or symbolic transgression of misrule was equated with or directed at real people and situations, either on festival occasions or at other times. Some of the views of misrule considered in chapter 1 give the impression that misrule was on the whole progressive and democratic in its impulse, and that its victims generally had it coming. The alleged effects of watching Robin Hood plays, probably written by Sir Richard Morison and communicated to Henry VIII sometime after the dissolution of the monasteries, might be seen in this light: '[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, whilst these good bloodes go

about to take from the shiref of Notyngnam one that for offendyng the lawes shulde have suffered execution.<sup>23</sup> Here the implication is that those who watch such plays, and perhaps also the performers themselves, might seek to emulate such disrespect for royal authority outside of the play. This example in isolation tends to bear out the idea that the politics of misrule were a continuation of class warfare by other means.

That said, misrule could target the marginal as well as the powerful, sometimes with derogatory language and earthy symbolism, but at other times with murderous intent and deadly consequences. After foreign craftsmen and merchants and their property were attacked in London on 'Evil May Day' in 1517 a number of apprentices and their ringleaders were put to death, and the future observance of May Day was curtailed. The allegation was that under the cover of the events of May Day, the apprentices had planned an assault on foreigners in the city: the apprentices were to gather together in large numbers in the fields, and then return to the city with the leafy branches used to decorate houses in order to avoid any suspicion.<sup>24</sup> This was not the only occasion when festive celebrations were used to disguise violent intent: both Henry IV and Henry V survived plots to have them assassinated while they were watching a mumming.<sup>25</sup> In considering examples like these, it needs to be remembered that misrule was just one of a number of practices used for more aggressive purposes in medieval England: there was no judicial monopoly on violence or retribution. For instance, in his discussion of unlawful hunting in England between 1485 and 1640, Roger Manning has shown that as well as conventional poaching there were also cases of what are termed 'general huntings', which were 'a kind of skimmington by which the local community attempted to punish possessors of game reserves for outrageous behaviour'.<sup>26</sup> To sum up, misrule did not take place in some autonomous festive sphere removed from the concerns of everyday life: in common with other activities like hunting and outdoor sports in the Middle Ages, it was sometimes implicated in concerns far removed from its ostensible purpose. The self-conscious sense of transgression

on which it depended may have made it more susceptible to such uses.

Finally, it is also important to recognise that features of misrule could also appear outside of what we would consider to be their usual festival context. This was especially the case with political and social upheavals or confrontations such as riots or revolts, when imagery or forms of organisation from popular customs might well find their way into events. For instance, in an important article Thomas Pettitt has explored the interaction of seasonal festivity and social revolt in England. He refers to work by Yves-Marie Bercé on popular revolts to try to explain why elements that are normally associated with festivity are present in incidents ranging from the English Rising of 1381 to the Bristol bridge riots 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.

So Pettitt's suggestion is that aspects of misrule, such as the groups into which people were organised, or the disguises or language that they used on festive occasions, could sometimes appear outside of their usual calendar occasion, in order to make a particular protest or rebellion more effective.<sup>27</sup> In the next chapter an example of this transferral is examined, in a case where a group of Norwich citizens put on a Shrovetide procession in January as a way of making a particular point about local issues.

This brief examination of the range of contexts in which we find misrule in the medieval period has shown something of the breadth of its possible functions. In relation to our example from St Mary at Hill, we can try to place hocking within this variety of meanings. In fact, despite all the talk of radicalism or revolutionary intent that we encountered in the previous