

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 12 (November 2012), No. 147

Max Harris, *Sacred Folly. A New History of the Feast of Fools*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011. xi + 322 pp. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0801449561.

Review by Teofilo F. Ruiz, University of California, Los Angeles.

Max Harris could easily have given *Sacred Folly: A New History of the Feast of Fools* a different title. For example, he could have chosen something like: *How Previous Historians and Even Medieval Observers Misunderstood and Misrepresented the Feast of Fools*; or, *How Almost Everyone Who Has Written About the Feast of Fools Has Done So as a Result of "Continuous Scholarly Prejudices"* (p. 131). These titles would have captured far more accurately the spirit of the book than the present one. Rather than a new history of the Feast of Fools, *Sacred Folly* is a long and spirited polemic against those who, in the Middle Ages or later—mostly in the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries—saw the Feast of Fools as a disorderly, carnivalesque, subversive feast of inversion in which the world was turned upside down.

Harris objects strenuously, and often, to the many descriptions of the Feast of Fools by contemporaries and later historians as anything but orderly. He also objects to those who have sought to link the feast with other pagan or subversive festive traditions. We do not find in *Sacred Folly* anything resembling the lively late medieval clerical culture, so engagingly depicted by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais and humor. When we do in some of the accounts Harris cites throughout the book, it is only to have them dismissed as having nothing to do with the Feast of Fools. In fact, Bakhtin is noticeable for his absence from this book. Instead, Harris inveighs against earlier historians of the Feast, such as Fabre (1875), Hide (1863), Petit de Julleville (1885, 1886), Chérest (1853), and, most of all, Chambers (1903), his particular *bête noir*. They all come up for harsh criticism. Not even the fabled Harvey Cox or Victor Hugo (because of what is described as a misguided description of the Feast of Fools in *Nôtre Dame de Paris*) escape untarnished. And his critique is often harsh, running from charges of scholarly "misrepresentation" and "gross mistranslation" to accusations that an author "likely exaggerates" (pp. 150–153). These indictments of long-dead scholars are also applied to the medieval sources.

The question of course is: why should we trust the few accounts that describe the Feast of Fools as part of a serious liturgical feast when the vast majority describes it as something less than sacred?

What then was the Feast of Fools? According to Harris, the first record of the Feast dates from 1160–1164 and is found in John Belet's description of the feast of the subdeacons. At specific times in the liturgical calendar, most often, although not exclusively, at the Feast of the Circumcision (1 January), subdeacons, choir boys, and others in minor clerical orders selected one of their own, usually a young boy, as "bishop," archbishop," or "abbot" to celebrate the importance of Christian humility and foolishness. In terms often invoked by Harris throughout the book (though not always in the same words) they celebrated "the twofold conviction that God sent the Christ Child to 'put down the mighty from their seat and exalt the humble' and the Christian's calling to be a 'fool for the sake of Christ'" (p. 284).

Differing from all other festivities (which Harris rejects as having nothing to do with the Feast), the Feast of Fools often had elaborate liturgies, processions, plays, the investment of the boy bishop, a

---

parade of asses, banquets, and music. Central to the Feast of Fools, however, was the image of the lowest among the clergy assuming a symbolic, though ephemeral, position of power, dressed in episcopal clothing, and, most important, receiving the homage of the clergy, including the actual bishop himself. This served as a sort of reaffirmation of the Gospel's assurance that the last would be first, even if only for a day.

As noted, *Sacred Folly* is not really an attempt to reconstruct the Feast of Fools or to trace its development over time. It is instead a constant attempt to sort out what the Feast was or was not and to establish clear boundaries between what Harris argues was the subdeacons' orderly and pious activities and the edgy Bakhtinian feasts taking place inside and outside the cloister, and in the streets before, during, and after the genesis of the Feast of Fools. Along the way, Harris denies the validity of contemporary informants or later historians who conflated the Feast of Fools with other, more ribald celebrations.

Based upon his profound erudition and intimate familiarity with a vast range of sources, Harris organizes his book almost as a hermetic talisman or an imitation of the *Divine Comedy*. A prologue is followed by five parts, each part divided into twenty-five chapters and followed by a conclusion. The chapters are almost all of similar length (between seven and thirteen pages at the most). The writing is very lively and polemical in tone and nature. Thus, it is an engaging read, even if, as is the case with me, one is not persuaded by the argument. Part one, "Before the Feast of Fools," examines five different types of celebrations that have been seen by scholars as precedents for the Feast of Fools, ranging from the pagan Calends of January (also celebrated on 1 January), festivals held in Byzantium, Roman parodies, such as the Feast of Horns, the re-enactment of Herod's deeds against the Innocents in Germany, to a fascinating description of a clerical ball game that took place in the labyrinth at Chartres and other French cathedrals. All of them, Harris insists had nothing to do with the Feast of Fools, even though some elements resonated with the later feast. This was so because the Feast of Fools, unlike all these early festive traditions, was a celebration "imbedded in the Divine Office of the Church" (p. 31).

Part two, "Shaping the Feast of Fools," examines the origins of the Feast, the presence of asses in these celebrations, and Innocent III's complaints against what the Pope described as clerical excesses, which Harris dismisses as "unsubstantiated complaints" (p. 86). This is followed by a close examination of the liturgy and music of the feast, with Peter de Corbeil, Archbishop of Sens, as an important contributor to this aspect of the Feast of Fools. Liturgical plays, such as those of Daniel and Joseph, also became associated with the Feast of Fools at Beauvais, Laon and elsewhere, and are examined in this part of the book.

Part three, "Supporting the Feast of Fools," ranges over diverse topics from Gerson's condemnation of the Feast and reports of rumors of disorder, which Harris again dismisses outright, to evidence that chapters and lay authorities continued to support the Feast of Fools financially in spite of growing opposition. Youth groups and their activities, including their raucous intrusion into sacral spaces, also come to Harris' attention, as do rare notices of the celebration of Feast of Fools-like performances (as defined by Harris) in England. The section on finances is problematic. Contributions were often very small, attesting to the little importance given to the feast. The chapter of Saint Urban contributed five *sols*, even at a time when, as Harris admits, "the feast may eventually have disappeared" (p. 213). Continuous royal support, also modest in nature, did not necessarily mean that the Feast of Fools had survived or that it was orderly and pious. Parts four and five focus on the suppression of the Feast of Fools under the combined attack of Jean Gerson, the Council of Basle, and the University of Paris masters of theology's vigorous charges of clerical impropriety--charges that Harris, as he does throughout the book, finds to be based on unreliable evidence or borrowed *in toto* from previous ecclesiastical condemnations of the Feast. These sections include a lively and wonderful description of festive societies and feasts that succeeded the Feast of Fools during the cultural transition from

---

medieval to early modern. But, as argued earlier in the case of the Calends, none of these celebrations had any connection to the actual Feast of Fools.

Harris also places ecclesiastical and learned attacks against the Feast of Fools into a broad explanatory scheme—once previously advanced by Peter Burke and others—of a reform of popular culture. Remarkably, there is a notable absence of anthropological or theoretical explanations, which would have helped provide a “thick description” of the Feast of Fools and of parallel or, in my view, overlapping festivities. Looking at these festivals through the lens provided by the works of Victor Turner, Bakhtin, and others may have yielded a different understanding. But then, Harris’ aim was not to provide a close reading of the feasts or a history of the Feast of Fools but, as noted earlier, to engage a dated historiography on the subject and to defend the orderly and sacred nature of the Feast, and, in doing so, to vindicate the Feast from the enduring attacks of medieval witnesses and later historians.

I am not a scholar of the Feast of Fools, and my comments here are those of an outside observer. Nonetheless, I find Harris’s arguments unconvincing. Surely there was an element of ribaldry and inversion intrinsic to the feast that could, and often did, easily turn into disorder. We have sufficient evidence, as for example in David Nirenberg’s magisterial *Communities of Violence*,<sup>[1]</sup> that young clerics in the low ranks of the Church—subdeacons, choir boys, and the like—were quite prone to violence and mischief. That was made clear during Holy Week celebrations in the Crown of Aragon. Moreover, the sharp boundaries between orderly and disorderly that Harris has sought to create are difficult to posit for the fluid world of late medieval culture. Extremes were often found in close association, and order and disorder, piety and ribaldry could, more often than not, be part and parcel of the same event. The Corpus Christi processions, to cite just another example, incorporated diverse and, often, contradictory festive traditions. Nor do I think that one can neatly separate Calends and other early festive traditions from later ones. Medieval culture was, if anything, marked by profound and continual borrowing of symbolic language and festive motifs from different sources over many centuries. It resulted in a fascinating and wondrous *mélange*. If one reads the evidence Harris carefully mustered and then dismissed as prejudicial, secondhand, and incorrect from a different perspective, one may assume that the Feast of Fools did often end up as something entirely unsacred.

When, towards the end of the book, Harris cites Philip the Good as evidence of the continued support, and thus legitimation, of the Feast, the Duke of Burgundy’s confirmation is in ironic mocking verse. How seriously are we to take this? Philip, or most likely a clerk at his court, concluded with the admonition that the feast should be “without outrage or mockery” (p. 273). Harris’ interpretation is that “(t)he last phrase is standard cautionary language of the time and no indication of misbehavior. On the contrary, Philip’s strong endorsement is in itself presumptive evidence of a dignified office of the Circumcision” (p. 273). I, for one, would have read this as a tongue-in-cheek satirical confirmation, aware and even welcoming of outrage and mockery.

If I do not agree with Harris’ emphasis on the sacred nature of the Feast of Fools, his desire to isolate it from other festive forms, and his unrelenting critique of the sources’ validity and all previous scholarship, I am, nonetheless, enormously impressed by his vast erudition and scholarly range. In this very handsome and well-produced book, rather than a new history of the Feast of Fools, Harris offers a history of diverse festive forms from Late Antiquity to the early modern period. In doing so, he makes an important and lively contribution and provides an excellent guide to ecclesiastical and secular festive traditions in France. As such, this book deserves to be commended, read, and mined for its endless number of details and insights.

NOTE

---

[1] David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Teofilo F. Ruiz  
University of California, Los Angeles  
[tfruib@history.ucla.edu](mailto:tfruib@history.ucla.edu)

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172