**The Lord of Misrule**

In late medieval and Tudor England (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), the Lord of Misrule was an official appointment. The man selected was to be responsible for organising the Christmas festivities at the King or Queen’s court – there were also Lords of Misrule in many of the great houses. Earlier than this, it was generally young people who participated in the festival and they would choose one of themselves to be the Lord of Misrule.

The festivities, which lasted for the whole Christmas season, were noisy and boisterous, with much drinking, dancing and general revelry. Rules were suspended and usual roles reversed, with cross-dressing, mocking of authority figures and masters waiting on servants. The Lord of Misrule presided over the Feast of Fools, a gathering of rowdy elements that traditionally took place on January 1st.

The Feast of Fools itself was banned in the mid-fifteenth century because it was considered to be blasphemous, mocking Church institutions. It appears to have arisen from the customary feasts held by the upper sections of the clergy, the Feast of Fools being a way for lesser clergy to hold their own version, which tended to end up as a parody of the more sedate feasts of their superiors. The Lord of Misrule sat at the head of the table and led various rituals and ceremonies, including mock versions of prayers and even the Holy Communion.

Figures like the Lord of Misrule were also appointed in other countries, such as France. The origins of the role go back to Roman times, when the Lord of Misrule dressed as the god Saturn and presided over the Saturnalia (the rowdy and chaotic harvest festival that pre-dated Christmas). There was a very dark side to the role in those times, though, as the Lord of Misrule was also a scapegoat figure, whose throat would be cut on the last day of the festival.

Despite the trouble these festivals caused, they have often been seen as providing a necessary safety-valve for the tensions built up in times of great inequality and repression. Having a short period of anarchy, where people could more or less do whatever they wanted with impunity, may have served the useful social function of letting the lower orders get their frustrations and feelings of injustice out of their system so that they were ready to conform to convention for the rest of the year.

 