

Reviews

Barbara A. BABCOCK, ed. *The reversible world: Symbolic inversion in art and society*. [In the series *Symbol, myth, and ritual*, VICTOR TURNER, series ed.] Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978. 302 pp. including index. Cloth. n.p.

Role reversal goes back at least as far as the Roman Saturnalia or perhaps the Indian festival of Holi, and the challenge of accounting for inversion of this type has proved irresistible to many theoreticians, notably Durkheim, Hertz, Mauss, van Gennep, and, recently, Edmund Leach.

The present book casts a net that takes in much more than reversal of *roles*. It attends to many inverted patterns of culture, involving itself not only with religious inversion, but with linguistic, artistic, social, and political inversion as well. This broadening of perspective at once brings into view a wide range of data not usually seen synoptically and puts a strain on previous explanatory frames by pressing for greater inclusiveness.

From the very outset I should probably confess that for the most part I found reading this book an exhilarating experience. It gives one a sense of adventure, of seeing things in new ways, of recognizing connections to which one had previously been blind. Any book that can do these things has a lot to recommend it.

The book is divided into two parts, each containing five studies. Since it would be tedious to discuss all ten, I propose to focus on the ones I personally found most provocative.

In part 1, "Inversion in image," the first study is David Kunzle's "World upside down." Here he examines some sixty European broadsheets spanning a period of three centuries ending with the nineteenth. His study includes not only reproductions of some of these broadsheets with translations of their captions but also a number of comments that assist one to understand them. He points out, for example, that they invariably typify relationships between two parties, one dominant, the other dominated, in a way that reverses their normal roles. Thus husband and wife may be portrayed with the husband sitting and spinning yarn, the wife standing and holding a weapon. Gentlemen serve beasts at table, peasants give orders to

their masters, fish attack birds, the ass rides the miller, the ox slaughters the butcher, etc. Kunzle provides a helpful discussion of the political background of such broadsheets, linking them to the spiritual and social contradictions that occasioned and followed the Reformation. He also offers the interesting surmise that broadsheets stood in antithesis to proverb collections, the latter accepting the world as it is and appealing primarily to the self-satisfied bourgeoisie, the former recognizing social contradiction and finding its clientele primarily among lower-class dissidents.

Natalie Davis's article "Women on Top" takes up the theme of male-female relationships in pre-industrial Europe and during the transition to industrial society. She sees this period as a time when two conditions applied: (1) the female sex was considered subordinate, disorderly, and lustful, and (2) traditional hierarchical structures and disputes over the distribution of power in family and political life served as stimuli to inversion play. She presents a rich tapestry of materials in support of her view that comic and festive inversions of the female role served not only to keep women "in their place" but also "to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage, and to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest" (p. 154). Her research introduces us to variations on the theme in literature, in festival transvestism and Abbeys of Misrule, and in areas of political and social change. After reading her study, it will be hard for anyone to interpret role reversal as functioning *solely* to reinforce the status quo.

Part 2, "Inversion in action," begins with a study by Roger Abrahams and Richard Bauman entitled "Ranges of festival behavior." Of particular interest in this study is the challenge it poses to religious studies specialists with respect to the widely held view that festival rites of reversal are the converse of behavior observable during profane, non-festival time. Field research into carnivals at St. Vincent in the West Indies and into Christmas mumming or belsenicking in the La Have Islands of Nova Scotia leads the authors to hypothesize that a model positing festival disorder as over against non-festival order represents an analytical distortion, for those who express festival license turn out, on inspection, to be the same persons who act as "community agents of disorder" throughout the rest of the year. The authors suggest that unquestioning acceptance of the antithetical

model has skewed our perspective on festivals generally, and that in order to redress the balance, we must attend not only to *ideal* normative systems (which may indeed call for antithesis) but also to “the licensed and expected contraventions of such systems in society and culture” (p. 196). The effect of this reorientation is to call attention to the coexistence of complementary systems of behavior and judgment within the same community. The authors allege that, as over against the usual functionalist argument that rites of reversal permit the harmless expression of latent social tensions and thus actually support the established order, the rites studied in St. Vincent and La Have function not to express hostility or conflict but to draw opposing elements of society together more harmoniously than at any other time of the year. This allegation, in my view, is not fully convincing because their reformulation is still compatible with the functionalist view it purports to find inadequate. But the challenge to the largely unquestioned notion of role reversal as a matter of playing normal roles back to front, and the opening up of the possibility of perceiving and systematically studying coexisting behavior systems within a given community—these are matters well worth noting.

James Peacock’s study of “Symbolic reversal and social history” is a structural analysis of the meaning of transvestites vis-à-vis clowns in contemporary Java. The transvestite, he observes, reverses categories of sex, the clown categories of rank. But whereas the Javanese transvestite is typically a male impersonating on stage a rich, pseudo-aristocratic female (with a tendency to carry his role over into off-stage patterns of eroticism), the clown on stage is typically a servant who mocks or transcends his master’s attributes. More important, Peacock proposes a distinction between a classificatory and an instrumental world view, suggesting that when the former is dominant (as in Java), there is a peculiar excitement that derives from “abnormal combinations that connote disorder, or perhaps paradoxically, a more ultimate order than that of the surface” (pp. 217-18). Thus the transvestite, with his unusual combination of male and female qualities, and the clown, who reduces high to low, illustrate through personal symbol “the underlying unity of the cosmology” (p. 218). But in groups with an instrumental world view, such as revolutionary nationalists and reformist Muslims, the clown and transvestite are viewed with suspicion and hostility. Peacock suggests that this attitude stems from the unconscious recognition that the clown and

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transvestite are meaningful symbols only within a classificatory world view that permits an enchantment with form, whereas these same symbols threaten to undo a world view based on the notion of process, struggle, and forward movement.

With this, perhaps enough has been said to show something of the freshness and excitement this book communicates. It will be surprising if at least some of its theoretical perspectives are not taken up for exploration in the context of Japanese religious studies.

I only wish that the book had included, in addition to the useful reference notes and index, some means of identifying the contributors. Perhaps this will be done in future publications in this excellent series.

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