

## BLACKFRIARS

men, who sought to be holy men, found themselves in circumstances in which to be violent seemed the least of evils.' As Mr Jones rightly stresses, these missionaries could not 'ignore the customs of the people with whom they had to deal', and their response was to adopt flogging as the standard punishment. They turned to the Bible for guidance as to the amount, and Dr Laws of Livingstonia Mission lashed 'In accordance with Deuteronomy xxv : 3 : he laid down forty lashes as the limit'.

EVERSLEY BELLFIELD

PRaisERS OF FOLLY: ERASMUS, RABELAIS, SHAKESPEARE, by Walter Kaiser; Gollancz; 42s.

This comparative treatment of the fool in Renaissance literature is published by a firm whose name is not usually associated with heavyweight works of scholarship. It is moreover written in a lively and engaging style, and seems to make a bid for the general reader's, as well as the scholar's, attention. But danger lurks in this. The ordinary reader, oppressed by excessive erudition, and resentful at seeing great literature used as a kind of raw material to keep the wheels of scholarship endlessly turning, is apt to mutter sardonic remarks about 'the Shakespeare industry' or to recall, with horrid jubilation, the American professor who wrote several pages of brilliant exegesis based on a single phrase of Yeats, 'soldier Aristotle', blissfully unaware that this was a misprint in his edition, and that 'solider Aristotle' was what Yeats actually wrote.

This is not, of course, the kind of folly praised by Mr Kaiser. He makes great play with St Paul and 'fools for Christ's sake'; so much play, in fact, that one longs to remind him of how the word fool can also mean oaf, ass, dolt, slubberdegulion, clown, codface and imbecile; and this wasn't at all what St Paul meant. Also he seems to forget that although paradox is very fine in its way, it becomes pointless, not to say tedious, if overdone. After three hundred pages of Mr Kaiser on the Wisdom of Folly one begins to sympathise with the anti-Chestertonian who threatened to lecture on 'The Shallowness of the Profound'.

The most complete, and therefore the wisest fool, according to Mr Kaiser, is Stultitia, used by Erasmus as the mouthpiece of his *Moriae encomium*. The author has a lot to say about the enormous influence of Erasmus—'one of the seminal minds of the modern world'—on Renaissance literature; but he fails to convince us that *The Praise of Folly* is anything much more than a clever man's elaborately ironic *jeu d'esprit*. And when Mr Kaiser turns from this to discuss, without any change in attitude or tone of voice, masterworks of creative imagination such as those of Rabelais and Shakespeare, one begins to see what the war between criticism and scholarship is all about.

Panurge is also a fool, but not wise enough to persist in his folly; it is Pantagruel who points to the truly wise foolishness of the sage who 'rids all his Senses of Terrene Affections, and clears his Fancies of those plodding Studies, which har-

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bour in the Minds of thriving Men: All of which neglects of Sublunary Things are vulgarly imputed Folly'. Sir John Falstaff, 'the last of the great fools of the sixteenth century', triumphs (in a sense) over Hotspur's fevered idealism, and over law and order as represented by Justice Shallow. Now, all this is interesting enough, and a kind of connection is more or less established. But what, ultimately, is it meant to be in aid of? The support of an extreme anti-rational or romantic position, at one point stated quite bluntly by the author: '... the irrationality of the heart is always mightier than the rationality of the head'.

However, even if the book's main contentions seem over-laboured or even pointless, it can still be read with interest and profit simply as a commentary on Rabelais' *Tiers Livre* and Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Mr Kaiser's erudition certainly gives off sparks, and the reader soon finds himself in the bemused and slightly incredulous state of one who witnesses a virtuoso performance. *What* does 'theopneustic' mean? And 'Lucianic adoxography'? And in what exactly does St Paul resemble Euripides? Ah yes, of course, they were both praisers of folly. (Mr Kaiser is presumably thinking of the *Bacchae*; not, surely, a typical work). Falstaff's connection with the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a bit too subtle to be fully explained here. But Erasmus and Wallace Stevens? A famous university provides the link, and the author quotes a delightful poem of Stevens which begins:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.

We shall return at twilight from the lecture,

Pleased that the irrational is rational . . .

Hardly daring to challenge Mr Kaiser on his own scholarly ground, I was surprised to find him making a point (admittedly a minor one) based on the assumption that Falstaff babbled of green fields on his death-bed. I thought it was now known for certain that this is a textual corruption, sharing with 'Brightness falls from the air' the distinction of being the most striking phrase in English literature ever created by accident.

KEITH MITCHELL

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GOD, by J. Hillis Miller; Harvard University Press, Oxford University Press; 45s.

Professor Miller has given us a lucid and generous book. His method is to choose five nineteenth-century writers, viewing the work of each of them as a single unit, and then to evoke the informing principles that underlie their art. The thesis that appears is that all the writers, while believing in God, testify in their work to a God who is far and transcendent rather than near and immanent. 'Almost all the romantic poets begin,' Professor Miller writes, 'with the sense that there is a hidden spiritual force in nature.' The writers discussed here—De Quincey, Arnold, Emily Brontë, Browning, Hopkins—lack that sense, and so their 'literary strategy . . . must consequently be more extreme, more extravagant, as the gap between man and the divine power seems greater.' For these writers, we are told,