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The Shadowland of Shakespeare:

Christianity and the Carnival

In his plays, Shakespeare uses carnival elements such as subversion of authority, glorification of the grotesque, and ascension of Kings to create dialogues, which forces the audience to hear multiple voices, rather than one right answer delivered by an unquestioned authority. This strategy explains both the moral complexity of Shakespeare's works, as well as their enduring appeal. Elizabethan viewers and modern audiences can relate to man's fallibility within the morally ambiguous shadowland which Shakespeare envisions. He draws even his most beloved protagonists as deeply flawed individuals making decisions that could, depending on perspective, be wrong or right, thus providing depth rather than archetypes. Despite his refusal to provide any one right answer or all-conquering hero, Shakespeare's plays rarely leave audiences dissatisfied or cynical because he does admit a ray of light into his shadowland of moral complexity, providing illumination in the form of Christian elements such as repentance, forgiveness, and hesitations about the theater that hint at some moral perspective to be trusted instead of any one, unquestioned authority.

The complexities of this binary between Christian morality and the carnival, involving subversion of authority and glorification of the grotesque, are not lost on literary critics. As Bakhtin argues, the tradition of carnival likely developed as a means of freeing individuals from "all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety," for carnivals do not "command nor do they ask for anything," unlike ancient religions, which did a lot of both (7). Medieval carnivals, which Bakhtin groups together as one tradition of revelry, were a needed release from both the oppressive hierarchies of feudal society and the religious zeal present in

both ancient and medieval churches. In his eyes, religious and carnival elements have always balanced each other, a balance that Shakespeare captures in his plays to the delight of audiences and critics alike. But how exactly does he do it? How does he balance the carnival and the religious?

Shakespeare illustrates this binary beginning with his formation of the carnivalesque dialogue (which he uses to undermine authority), as well as the invocation of the carnival spirit's grotesque realism. This realism counters the image of aristocratic beauty, emphasizing both the crassness of the lower class while subtly bringing to light the flaws in the upper class. In Shakespeare's plays, lower-class characters have a surprising multitude of opportunities to express opinions and take control over traditional authority figures. For example, after King Lear has unwisely divided his kingdom and alienated his daughters (even faithful Cordelia), his fool says slyly, "Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb" (1.4.628). Such an observation suggests that though only one of them is wearing a dunce cap, both King and jester deserve its implications of foolishness and folly.

Another example of undermining authority, the bumbling Athenian craftsman Bottom of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes the object of the fairy queen's love, leading to the famous scene in which a donkey-headed fool copulates with the previously aloof Titania. "In the figure of Bottom the clown, the lower-class male locked in the arms of a queen," we must "seek the elusive Bakhtinian grotesque, the dimension of ugliness" that we both crave and despise (Wiles 78). In other words, Bottom is not just a donkey—he is a symbol of a marriage between the lower and upper principles in mankind's hearts. He represents the fool's relationship with the monarch, which is not one of master and servant so much as two beings who each ridicule the other, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the natural man with his divine aspirations. This

exchange could be termed a dialogue of sorts, and its related binary is a key component of the carnival in Shakespeare.

This carnivalesque element is evident in the Kenneth Branagh interpretation of *Hamlet*, particularly during Ophelia's madness scene. Not only does Ophelia enter wearing none of her previous court finery, instead clad in a dingy shift, eyes wild, spouting nonsensical poetry, but she actively avoids the grasp of the authoritative Claudius, then evades his wife's ministrations, feigning orgasms on the tiles of the Court—a literal and symbolic desecration of the seat of power. During this scene, perhaps more than any other, the viewer sees the newly crowned Claudius's ineffectiveness as a ruler. He wants to control and to contain, but there are pieces of his subjects' hearts that rebel against his domineering grip. Their loyalty to Hamlet prevents Claudius from truly assuming power, just as Ophelia's prostrate form—a representation of mankind's carnival spirit, forever resisting the dominating hand—lies between him and his throne in the physical courtroom. Claudius is not the true King, no matter what he thinks. His ambitions are repeatedly frustrated by Hamlet and then Ophelia, whose madness (real or feigned) is in itself an indication of the carnivalized dialogue between lord and subject within Shakespeare's works.

But the carnivalizing in *Hamlet* that reflects defiance of authority is not confined to a few scenes. It undergirds the entire plot. In a fanfiction forum dedicated to *Hamlet*, I asked if the other members agreed that Hamlet's madness is a means of circumventing the rigid social hierarchies that Claudius and Gertrude wish to impose upon him. One of the members agreed, then added that the "conflict between [Hamlet's] goal of killing Claudius and his inability to accomplish it manifests as a general lashing-out, easily accomplished under the pre-planned guise of insanity. As his frustration grows, so does the intensity of his outlash, until his original

plan to avenge his father's death devolves into a petty 'revolt' against all authority and anyone within range." She continues, arguing that the "futility of it all transforms [Hamlet] into the husk we find at the end of the play. He goes out not with a bang, but with a sigh, dead long before the final duel." For Hamlet, the carnival madness he exhibits is a manifestation of his dangerous relationship with power—both his uncle's power, which is being used against him, and his right to the throne, which frightens and motivates him throughout the story. He is corrupted, but he never succumbs to Claudius' fault—a lack of self-awareness. Rather, Hamlet is defined by his self-reflection and ability to undercut power, though awareness alone is not enough to save him.

Other carnivalesque elements that create the moral shadowland of Shakespeare, composed of a thousand gray areas, include his obsession with ascending thrones, exaggeration, sheer tumult of action, and what Gorfain labels as a "recurrent pattern of momentum and interruption" which "assaults orthodox order" and reinterprets "reality through representation" (156). Shakespeare adeptly creates the aura of the carnival in which anything goes and nothing is as it seems by incorporating feasts, grotesque realism, interrupted dialogue, and many other careful inclusions of carnival traditions into his texts, not to mention a humorous emphasis on the body's lower strata. To simplify, Shakespeare's dialogues and other carnival elements allow him to become an author of shadows. His shadows define his light. There is a doubleness to his truths, and his plays are full of conversations in which even the simplest of matters are questioned, from scenes in *Henry IV* in which the Dauphin of France argues over the merits of his horse, to Hamlet's play depicting his father's assassination, to the debate between Lear and his fool while waiting for Goneril to appear and explain her refusal to admit them.

The purpose of this carnivalization, this desecration of the sacred and undercutting of the monarchy, as well as the inclusion of various carnival elements, is to demonstrate how powerful

characters are fallible and mankind's natural tendencies repulsive. The purpose is *not* to elevate the lower class simply for seeing the faults of the upper class. The audience cannot be expected to revere Bottom, even if he does unwittingly seduce a fairy queen. Nor does the audience exactly trust Ophelia as she raves, though this lunacy is prompted by her sincere heartbreak over Hamlet. Her actions evoke pity, even understanding, but it's clear that she deserves authority no more than Claudius. What she has, as does Lear's fool, is an honest comprehension of the flaws in the system which structures her world. The brilliance of Shakespeare's portrayal of Bottom, Ophelia, and Lear's fool is seen in their ability to draw comparisons between themselves and the authority figures, the monarchs and the common man—an ability to simulate a utopian world, in which social boundaries are temporarily dissolved, allowing them to explicate on universal themes, drawing closer to larger truths, such as the importance of compassion, the madness of love, and the foolishness of prioritizing politics over family.

And this is indeed the purpose of carnival—the inclusion of everyone, both upper and lower class, in the ribaldry of life. It isn't that the lower class is lampooning the aristocracy alone, but that everyone is acknowledging each other's madness, as everyone simultaneously acknowledges his own. As Bakhtin says, carnival is not a "spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (7). This freedom means both a rejection of typical social restrictions and hierarchies as well as the boundaries between audience and performer.

In his typical meta style, Shakespeare frequently incorporates theatrical performances within his plays to comment on this carnival element—this universal stage, on which we all become fools. The emotion Hamlet exhibits, for instance, when instructing the band of

performers about how best to act their parts, hints at this sort of self-awareness, an acknowledgment that the lines between the performance and real life are blurry at best and, during carnival, practically nonexistent. For example, Prince Hamlet declares, “For there be of them that will themselves laugh, to / set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh” (3.2.39-42). Yet even as he utters these lines, Prince Hamlet seems aware that he himself is a performer desperate to elicit emotion as he continues his role, ridiculing and being ridiculed in turn.

The dialogue that Shakespeare creates is useful because it forces everyone onto a metaphorical stage. The interactions he facilitates between aristocrats and peasants, fairies and donkey-headed fools, serve to emphasize the frailties of both upper and lower classes, performers and viewers, providing a carnivalesque atmosphere of Utopian inclusion and self-disparagement. Nothing is safe from the scalpel of the satirist for nothing is sacred, and nothing is allowed to maintain its dignity unquestioned. In the true spirit of his work, even Bakhtin’s theories, which embrace “*one* definite form of power that enforces its censorship law on *one* subterranean carnivalesque culture,” have come under suspicion of violating Bakhtin’s own tenets (qtd. in Coronato 20). Bakhtin postulates a “historical-semantic continuum through which we should be able to gauge the interclass power relationships,” but as we see in Shakespeare’s works, even the “old king of transgressive Carnival is not immune from uncrowning,” (qtd. in Coronato 20-21), which leads to the true paradox of carnivalization. This paradox is the idea that we must question all authority, which means questioning the voices questioning the authority.

For in the very act of ridiculing the social structures that define ordinary life, carnival participants actually support these structures. In fact, their very mockery bears within it the seeds of their subordination. In the words of John Fiske, the “culture of the subordinated and disempowered . . . always bears within it signs of power relations, traces of the forces of

domination and subordination that are central to our social system and therefore to our social experience. Equally, it shows signs of resisting or evading these forces. [The] popular culture contradicts itself” (4). The carnivalesque can “entail the expression of both domination and subordination, of both power and resistance,” which allows participants to “partake of both of its forces simultaneously and devolves to them the power to situate themselves within this play of forces at a point that meets their particular cultural interests” (4). Thus we see that in Shakespeare’s works, though he questions the hierarchies, in the end, they are always restored to at least a semblance of their former glory.

Titania does not remain enamored of Bottom, but is restored to her fairy king, Oberon, and they bless the newly-wedded couple, Theseus and Hippolyta, the two royals whose dignity has not been compromised despite the other characters’ wild forays into magic and zoophilia. Similarly, Lear may have given away the titles that he was born with, but when he reconciles with Cordelia, she, Kent, and even Edgar, to some extent, acknowledge him as the true King (1.4.675). He dies of grief and madness, but he dies the King nonetheless, making it clear where Shakespeare’s loyalties ultimately lie. Even in *Hamlet*, Prince Fortinbras is allowed to triumphantly ascend the throne in a courtroom strewn with the others’ bodies, all pomp and wisdom and active dominance as he proclaims, “With sorrow I embrace my fortune: / I have some rights of memory in this kingdom, / Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me” (5.2.372-5). He then orders Hamlet’s body to be borne out of the hall, accompanied by soldiers and rites of war, for as Fortinbras says of him, Hamlet “was likely, had he been put on / to have proved most royally” (5.2.381-2). While this order may be read as a sly undercutting of Hamlet’s right to the throne, which was tested, and which did not (according to some) exactly prove up, it is more often read as a sincere sentiment of regret on the part of Fortinbras, who expected a fight

and instead found his political opponents dead in their own palace. The viewer is left to mourn with him as Hamlet is carried away. Despite all his flaws, despite his part in Ophelia's death and the deaths of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Polonius, Hamlet is still a man cut down in his prime—prevented by grief and vengeance from assuming the throne that should have been his.

That key word, "should," lies at the heart of carnivalization's paradox. According to the traditions of the carnivalesque, there is no "should." The structures that determine what "should" be are themselves suspect. But the ribaldry and the lampooning that endure within carnival cultures cannot detach themselves from this "should," these hierarchical structures, without undoing the tradition of carnival entirely. There must be something to ridicule, some upper crust to criticize, some everyday pattern of life to depart from, or there can be no carnival. As Robinson observes, the "carnival bridges the gap between holism," so "it absorbs its authoritarian other in a way which destroys the threat it poses." This means that while carnivals may foment social and political revolutions, they more often balance the sacredness of the authoritarian elements they question, for the one cannot exist without the other. The very act of ridicule supports the object of the ridicule.

It is this dependence on authority, this seemingly contradictory aspect of the carnival, that enables Shakespeare to redeem his characters and provide that promised ray of light, which illuminates the morally uncertain shadowlands of his works. The tradition of the carnival, which he embraces through dialogues between peasants and aristocrats, fairies and craftsmen, invites him to question all that is sacred and all that is dignified, turning even the most regal of characters into debased frauds and the most foolish of characters into social critics. But these carnival elements cannot exist independent of the sacred elements that they are intended to mock. And so, true to the binary, Shakespeare returns to this sacred sincerity in each of his plays

after deviating into carnival mockery. Such a return explains the various Christian elements that exist within his works, hidden alongside the more obvious paganism, such as Lear's desire to be forgiven by Cordelia, Claudius's repentant prayer witnessed by his nephew, and the serious debate in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* between Theseus and the performers about the questionable morality of performing false storylines, a real Christian objection to the theater that Shakespeare no doubt encountered many times (5.1.94-98). Christianity is always present albeit subtle, as one would expect of Elizabethan-era plays.

But what makes Shakespeare special is his ability to effect change through the use of carnival elements. His characters do generally continue existing within the social structures they questioned, but what prevents the plays from becoming didactic or moralizing in the extreme is Shakespeare's ability to question the foremost authority figures in his figures, then question those questioning these figures, then, after demonstrating the folly of both sides, show the need for true authority in the form of some higher moral standard. He then provides this authority very subtly through the inclusion of Christian themes like forgiveness and redemption. By referencing Christianity, Shakespeare does not rob his tragedies of their sting, nor render his romances in any way didactic, but his propensity to exhibit tenderness and offer some hope is reminiscent of the rebirth aspect of carnival. Bakhtin argues that in the midst of the carnivalesque exists a potential for renewal because earth is an element that "devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence" (21). The disparity between the carnival and the religious was balanced with their connected promise of rebirth, meaning that religion offered a fresh life for weary sinners. This promise bled into the very traditions of the carnival, strengthening the binary. Therefore, despite Shakespeare's criticism actually supporting the ruling system he criticizes, the very act of criticizing the system creates an opportunity for rebirth

which, far from maintaining the status quo, really provides renewed hope through religious symbolism.

This hopeful symbolism is manifested in the carnival tradition of crowning a fool king. In the ultimate attempt to mock authority, carnival-goers would often select a Dionysian fool to represent King. This was a figurative overthrow of the monarch, which enabled them to ridicule his claims to the throne, claims that did seem ridiculous within the atmosphere of the carnivalesque, in which social hierarchies were temporarily dissolved. However, at the end of the carnival, the true king would return, often killing the unfortunate fool king, and ascending the throne in order to symbolize a restoration of his rightful authority. (This tradition is particularly evident in Fortinbras' ascension of the Denmark throne.) Such ascensions are part of a meaningful theme in both carnival and political literature for two reasons. They validate Fiske's argument about the contradictory nature of rebellion among the masses because even at the height of mockery, the carnival's participants leave a space for the true authority to reclaim. These ascensions also explain the significance of the Christian themes within Shakespeare's works, providing a fresh glimpse at the true nature of the carnival/religion binary.

Along with his themes of questioning authority, Shakespeare employs an older theme—the theme of an absent ruler, fated to return. His plots, even those of his darkest tragedies, imply a figure of power beyond man, which provides light in the midst of human folly. Therefore, Shakespeare is not attempting to overthrow the system through his use of carnivalization. At least, not that of a divine authority. Rather, he purposelessly leaves room on his stage for his true King, a type of Christ, which enters unexpectedly and illuminates the shadowland of the natural man which Shakespeare has so skillfully exposed.

The enduring appeal of Shakespeare is not simply that he forms a dialogue without moralizing. In a way, Shakespeare does emphasize the need for some true authoritative values, which is a sort of moralizing. But this moralizing is subtle, growing out of a slight grain of faith—a belief in mankind’s need for salvation, which someone above human nature’s faults must provide. All men become part of the carnival because all are subject to human folly. But there is one who does not participate in the carnival—a figure of divine authority, a type of the Christian God, which Shakespeare quietly invokes even at the height of his carnivalization. Thus Fortinbras assumes the throne in a corpse-strewn courtroom, setting the state of Denmark right with an authority to command that not even Horatio questions. Claudius cannot fully assume the throne he obtained so treacherously, though neither can its rightful owner, Hamlet, whom we see as a type of ourselves. The true ruler had to be an outsider. It had to be someone who wasn’t completely human. And so Shakespeare envisioned mankind waiting for its Fortinbras, praying in the midst of the carnival that the revelries will soon come to an end so that the true King may claim his throne.

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