

Passages taken from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1984). For a fuller understanding of Bakhtin's work one should read the work in full, but I hope the following will serve to introduce Bakhtin's concepts to beginning students of renaissance drama. Page numbers after particular passages refer the reader to the book. "Bakhtin's carnival, surely the most productive concept in this book, is not only not an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself. Carnival must not be confused with mere holiday or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic. The sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by church or state, but from a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival." (Michael Holquist, "Prologue," *Rabelais and His World*, xviii)

From the "Introduction"

"The aim of the present introduction is to pose the problem presented by the culture of folk humor in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and to offer a description of its original traits.

"Laughter and its forms represent... the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation.... The element of laughter was accorded to the least place of all in the vast literature devoted to myth, to folk lyrics, and to epics. Even more unfortunate was the fact that the peculiar nature of the people's laughter was completely distorted; entirely alien notions and concepts of humor, formed within the framework of bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics, were applied to this interpretation. We may therefore say without exaggeration that the profound originality expressed by the culture of folk humor in the past has remained unexplored until now.

"And yet, the scope and the importance of this culture were immense in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (4).

"Carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man. Besides carnivals proper, with their long and complex pageants and processions, there was the 'feast of fools' (festa stultorum) and the 'feast of the ass'; there was a special free 'Easter laughter' (risus paschalis), consecrated by tradition. Moreover, nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized. Such, for instance, were the parish feasts, usually marked by fairs and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals. A carnival atmosphere reigned on days when mysteries and soties were produced. This atmosphere also pervaded such agricultural feasts as the harvesting of grapes (vendange) which was celebrated also in the city. Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight. Minor occasions were also marked by comic protocol, as for instance the election of a king and queen to preside at a banquet 'for laughter's sake' (roi pour rire)" (6).

These occasions "built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a

given time of the year. If we fail to take into consideration this two-world condition, neither medieval cultural consciousness nor the culture of the Renaissance can be understood. To ignore or underestimate the laughing people of the Middle Ages also distorts the picture of European culture's historic development" (6).

"But at the early stages of preclass and prepolitical social order it seems that the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally 'official.' This similarity was preserved in rituals of a later period of history. For instance, in the early period of the Roman state the ceremonials of the triumphal procession included on almost equal terms the glorifying and the deriding of the victor. The funeral ritual was also composed of lamenting (glorifying) and deriding the deceased. But in the definitely consolidated state and class structure such an equality of the two aspects became impossible. All the comic forms were transferred, some earlier and others later, to a nonofficial level. There they acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered more complex, until they became the expression of folk consciousness, of folk culture. Such were the carnival festivities of the ancient world, especially the Roman Saturnalias, and such were the medieval carnivals. They were, of course, far removed from the primitive community's ritual laughter" (6-7).

"In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.... 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. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.... The tradition of the Saturnalias remained unbroken and alive in the medieval carnival, which expressed this universal renewal and was vividly felt as an escape from the usual official way of life" (7-8).

"Clowns and fools, which often figure in Rabelais' novel, are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. Like Triboulet at the time of Francis I, they were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period, impersonating Harlequin, Hanswurst, etc., but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were, they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors" (8).

"The **official** feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. The link with time became formal; changes and moments of crisis were relegated to the past. Actually, the **official** feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present. Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the **official** feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and

indisputable. This is why the tone of the **official** feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted. But this true festive character was indestructable; it had to be tolerated and even legalized outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace" (9 emphasis added).

"The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling... and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind" (10).

Carnival imagery was used by Erasmus, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Guevara, and Quevedo, by the German 'literature of fools'. "Without an understanding of it, therefore, a full appreciation of Renaissance and grotesque literature is impossible. Not only belles lettres but the utopias of the Renaissance and its conception of the universe itself were deeply penetrated by the carnival spirit and often adopted its forms and symbols" (11).

"The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes [sic] a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it" (12).

"Celebrations of a carnival type represented a considerable part of the life of medieval men, even in the time given over to them. Large medieval cities devoted an average of three months a year to these festivities" (13).

Sacred parody was common (14).

"The miracle and morality plays acquired... a carnivalesque nature" (15).

Carnival familiarity was reflected in speech patterns. For example: abusive language. "But we are especially interested in the language which mocks and insults the deity and which was part of the ancient comic cults" (16).

Material bodily principle is the concept of grotesque realism (18). "In grotesque realism... the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private,

egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.... This exaggeration has a positive, assertive character. The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance. Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic 'economic man,' but to the collective ancestral body of all the people" (19).

"One of the main attributes of the medieval clown was precisely the transfer of every high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere; such was the clown's role during tournaments, the knight's initiation, and so forth" (20).

"To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one.... Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving" (21).

"Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other. This especially strikes the eye in archaic grotesque" (26).

Such grotesque figures are found "in the frescoes and bas-reliefs which adorned the cathedrals and even village churches of the 12th and 13th centuries....

"This image of the body acquired a considerable and substantial development in the popular, festive, and spectacle forms of the Middle Ages: in the feast of the fool, in charivari and carnival, in the popular side show of Corpus Christi, in the diableries of the mystery plays, the soties, and farces" (27).

Curses (28).

"It is quite obvious that from the point of view of these canons the body of grotesque realism was hideous and formless. It did not fit the framework of the 'aesthetics of the beautiful' as conceived by the Renaissance" (29; see Castiglione, *The Book of the*

Courtier for a widely known renaissance expression of that official aesthetics, which was essentially the neoplatonic aesthetics of renaissance humanism. Barrie).

"Even more important is the theme of the mask, the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles" (40).

"...in the parodical legends and the fabliaux the devil is the gay ambivalent figure expressing the unofficial point of view, the material bodily stratum. There is nothing terrifying or alien in him" (41).

"Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter.... Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world."

From the first chapter, on laughter

"The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. The very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase" (62).

"The Renaissance conception of laughter can be roughly described as follows: Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (66).

"In the 'Hippocratic novel' the laughter of Democritus had a philosophical character, being directed at the life of man and at all the vain fears and hopes related to the gods and to life after death. Democritus here made of his laughter a whole philosophy, a certain spiritual premise of the awakened man who has attained virility. Hippocrates finally agreed with him" (67).

"Rabelais and his contemporaries were also familiar with the saying of Pliny that only one man, Zoroaster, began to laugh at the time of his birth; this was interpreted as an omen of his divine wisdom." (69)

Lucian's Dialogues: "Let us stress in this Lucianic image of the laughing Menippus the relation of laughter to the underworld and to death, to the freedom of the spirit, and to the freedom of speech." (70)

"Let us stress once more that for the Renaissance (as for the antique sources described above) the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning. This clearly distinguishes it from the later theories of the philosophy of laughter, including Bergson's conception, which bring out mostly its negative functions" (71).

"In the Middle Ages folk humor existed and developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature, but precisely because of its unofficial existence, it was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness. Having on the one hand forbidden laughter in every official sphere of life and ideology, the Middle Ages on the other hand bestowed exceptional privileges of license and lawlessness outside these spheres: in the marketplace, on feast days, in festive recreational literature. And medieval laughter knew how to use these widely" (72).

"The walls between official and non-official literature were inevitably to crumble, especially because in the most important ideological sectors these walls also served to separate languages--Latin from the vernacular. The adoption of the vernacular by literature and by certain ideological spheres was to sweep away or at least weaken these boundaries" (72).

"As we have said, laughter in the Middle Ages remained outside all official spheres of ideology and outside all official strict forms of social relations. Laughter was eliminated from religious cult, from feudal and state ceremonials, etiquette, and from all the genres of high speculation. An intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness is characteristic of official medieval culture. The very contents of medieval ideology--asceticism, somber providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering, as well as the character of the feudal regime, with its oppression and intimidation--all these elements determined this tone of icy petrified seriousness. It was supposedly the only tone fit to express the true, the good, and all that was essential and meaningful. Fear, religious awe, humility, these were the overtones of this seriousness" (73).

"Summing up, we can say that laughter, which had been eliminated in the Middle Ages from official cult and ideology, made its unofficial but almost legal nest under the shelter of almost every feast. Therefore, every feast in addition to its official, ecclesiastical part had yet another folk carnival part whose organizing principles were laughter and the material bodily lower stratum. This part of the feast had its own pattern, its own theme and imagery, its own ritual. The origin of the various elements of this theme is varied. Doubtless, the Roman Saturnalia continued to live during the entire Middle Ages. The tradition of the antique mime also remained alive. But the main source was local folklore. It was this folklore which inspired both the imagery and the ritual of the popular, humorous part of the feast.

"Lower- and middle-class clerics, schoolmen, students, and members of corporations were the main participants in these folk merriments. People of various other unorganized elements which belonged to none of these social groups and which were numerous at that time also participated in the celebrations. But the medieval culture of folk humor actually belonged to all the people. The truth of laughter embraced and carried away everyone; nobody could resist it" (82).

However, medieval laughter is not a subjective, individual and biological consciousness of the uninterrupted flow of time. It is the social consciousness of all

the people. Man experiences this flow of time in the festive marketplace, in the carnival crowd, as he comes into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste. He is aware of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people. This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts" (92).
