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DISSERTATION
THESIS BOOKLET

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Shakespeare’s clown
The Decarnivalization of the World
in Three of His Dramas

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1. The topic and the issues of the dissertation

The literature on different kinds of clowns, fools and their connection to the Early Modern carnivals, is far from being an integrated corpus of texts with identifiable aims and claims, and this fact also entails the difficulty of using it to interpret the artworks of the age. This dissertation would like to introduce a carnivalesque-reading that future research can actually “work with”, and tries to strengthen its theoretical considerations with cultural and historical facts and the best given coeval examples as well: Shakespeare’s plays. To find a way through the complex “system” of carnivalesque ontology, facts and concepts have to be put in order. As starting points, Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World1 and Enid Welsford’s The Fool: His Social and Literary History2 are used for this purpose.

Enid Welsford’s The Fool: His Social and Literary History is hardly identifiable as a prim disciplinary work, which it was obviously benefiting from. No one ever denied the scholarly value of the book, despite its mosaic structure built from a medley of short biographies based on primary and secondary historical sources, literary analyzes, folk anecdotes, philosophical turns and sociological considerations. Welsford never claims radical universality for the Fool character in history as a core identity for fools, jesters, madman and stage clowns, but – based on anthropological, historical and socio-historical evidence – argues in favor of a maintainable tradition grounded on the principle of comparison.

Five years later, in 1940 Mikhail Bakhtin’s dissertation about Rabelais was finished, which had a far greater impact on international scholarly opinion. I think it is a legitimate question to ask whether Rabelais and His World would have been so influential without the slow and indeterminate preparation of the topic by the Welsford-tradition, especially if one considers the long delay in the true debut of Bakhtin’s book in 1965 and its English translation few years later. The very remarkable introduction of the carnivalesque notion actually accentuated the several times mentioned but vaguely described background of fools and clowns, the way of being in the time of popular festivity. At the beginning of Bakhtin’s book, he very definitely identifies the par excellence fool or clown, as the medium of the carnival.

Among the followers of Welsford, C. L. Barber and his monograph, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy* was the first book where the festive substructure behind the group of concepts, the acts and formulas were accepted as a well-founded scholarly opinion and its perspective was embraced to process the work of William Shakespeare. Naomi Conn Liebler in 1995, 36 years after Barber’s book, recognized the festive elements which also permeate Shakespeare’s tragedies. After Bakhtin’s Rabelais-book became generally known between scholars, *Shakespeare’s Festive Tragedy* made sense. Most studies in the topic still missed a few basic elements the carnival – at least according to Bakhtin – cannot function without. The word “laughter” is not mentioned even once in Liebler’s text, neither are there any thoughts on “carnivalesque clownery”, although it is precisely that which holds the Welsford tradition and the Bakhtinian idea of Renaissance festivity together. As Welsford claims

Regarded from a certain point of view, then, the folkfestivals seem to consist of concentric rings of folly. They are times of universal licentiousness, when all revellers who take part in them are in a vaguely defined way infected with the prevailing ‘foolishness’. This ‘foolishness’ is, however, concentrated in certain performances which are regarded as buffoon-dances or fool-plays; and in these performances themselves, certain characters [...] specialize in folly, chief among whom is the grotesquely disguised figure, the Clown or Fool par excellence.  

Bakhtin continues:

They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season [...] 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 [...]  

Bakhtin’s notes on Shakespeare’s work, which he wanted to add to the Rabelais-book, were just recently translated into English. In a discussion, Sergeiy Sandler – the translator of these notes – pointed out how Bakhtin held Shakespeare’s plays to be “half-carnivalesque”. If Shakespearean tragedy can somehow – through this profane terminology – consume the carnivalesque totality, this may very much be a part of the discussion about Shakespeare’s

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fool and clown characters, who are listed among the *dramatis personae* in nearly every Shakespeare play.

2. The structure of the dissertation

Carnival is only partially functioning on an aesthetical basis, because it is also “lived” by the participants and the clowns, who are phenomenologically bound to the concept of the carnivalesque world. While the first chapter mainly deals with the literature, and the definition(s) of “Early Modern popular culture” as a concept, the second chapter of the dissertation searches for the complete carnivalesque ritual, made visible by the *clown-play* itself.

The Bakhtinian “crownings” and “uncrownings” evoke the circular time-notion of human understanding, the always recurring seasons and the yearly readmission of fertility. The *liminal* space of carnival orients the calendar, and with it, it measures out time and space, and thus affirms life itself. Nobody else but the *clown* is able to show what happens in this magnificent show, through his so-called *clown-play*. When his misbehavior suffers harsh punishment, the *clown* is put to death. But no death is comparable to the death of the *clown*. His death, as Bakhtin mentions, is a “regenerating and laughing death”\(^8\), it is a “pregnant death, a death that gives birth”\(^9\). And it gives birth to life. When Arnold van Gennep\(^{10}\) defined liminal ritual forms, he marked those with three different phases: *separation*, margin (or *limen*) and *reaggregation*. Reaggregation, the return of the *status quo*, the victory of life upon death is the part the clown is the best at. He will rise unharmed and unscathed, so ritual laughter can rise. The reaggregation of life, as generally experienced through existence gives metaphysical consolation, so the *clown* interrupting the linear end of life and curving it into a circle releases steam. As his essence, the carnival releases, as a valve for the soul of his “participants” saturated with fear.

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Furthermore, as François Laroque and mentioned in his *Shakespeare’s Festive World*, the theatrical clown is also “the representative of popular culture on the renaissance Elizabethan stage.” The carnivalesque clown-play, the mockery of the social hierarchy and death frequently plays a significant part as well. *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night or what you will* and *Hamlet* have striking examples of clowns who problematize the ritual totality of the carnival. The upcoming order of the analyzed plays may seem entirely arbitrary, even a-historical, for not being chronological. However, my central claim is that the inner logic of the phenomenon of the carnival functions the way Shakespeare’s plays follow one another in this dissertation; the typical qualities identifiable in the carnival-tradition may get a perspicuous presentation if we allow them to build on one another in this order. This is why I have chosen these plays to introduce the phenomenon I have termed *decarnivalization*. As it will unfold below, it is my strong conviction that Shakespeare’s plays – and not only his tragedies – rely precisely on *the destruction of faith* in carnivalesque consolation. This intense device, the rather harsh *decarnivalization* of the carnivalesque drama is what some Shakespeare-critics – I think mistakenly – considered “structural aposiopesis” (S. T. Coleridge, A. C. Bradley, T. S. Eliot, Maynard Mack and James Calderwood, among others). At the same time, the meaning of the “(de)carnivalesque” will of course be further enriched and nuanced with the analysis of each Shakespeare-play and other relevant pieces.

The third chapter explains how Death wins the comic struggles of *King Lear*. Reconciliation becomes actually impossible since (nearly) all the fools on the stormy heath seem to come to a bitter end. First, the amusing clown character and the direct representative of carnival, the Fool disappears in the middle of the drama without any traces. We see how “Poor Tom”, the festive “Madman”, Edgar manages to climb back to the top of the social hierarchy. But this, in the end, seems more like a delusion; it is similar to Gloucester’s “climbing up” to a cliff at Dover. Edgar’s figure at the end of the play may be a simple device

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12 *Decarnivalization* does not simply mean depriving a play from its carnivalesque elements (as Nahum Tate, for example, “decarnivalized” *King Lear*). *Decarnivalization* is a conscious artistic technique, used by Shakespeare, so it works on an aesthetical bases. Still, it means the “ruining” of a whole ritual form of existence (the ruined ritual) so it has an ontological magnitude. Since, as Bakhtin himself explains, the carnival is positioned on the borderline of art and life itself.
to keep up our hopes for the Lear-side of the plot, to make us feel that what Lear went through was not entirely in vain. Edgar’s story is the inverse of Lear’s story where in fact reaggregation becomes impossible. Even Kent – who also could be seen here as man with a second sight – comes to the stage in the last scene only to “bid [his] king and master aye good night” (5.3.235-236).

I wish to claim that this attitude – so much uncharacteristic of him in the scenes before – may actually mean that he is already dying when he enters the stage for the last time. He does not have to know here that his king is going to die; he only suspects his own impending death. Being unable to make Lear identify him and realize who he is, and, especially who “Caius” has been, makes the scene even more tragic. For a more stringent border than the life-death border will separate them: the border of a death without after-life, without the hope to be rejoined in being “dead as earth”.

The meaning of death here includes the death of the Fool that becomes strikingly mixed up with the death of the “loved one.” Lear with his dead daughter in his arms says:

My poor fool is hanged (5.3.305)

What if Cordelia’s death becomes entangled with the Fool’s death on purpose? In other words, what if Cordelia’s death is somehow “contained” in the Fool’s strange, never qualified disappearance? What if the experience of death becomes even harsher if it is set parallel with the death of the clown, this carnivalesque vitality-spirit and immortal hope of reconciliation? The last moments in which Cordelia seems to be alive actually build up the inverse image (“image of that horror”) of Gloucester’s “grotesque somersault of death”. In the latter, death becomes a ridiculed moment of life, not taken seriously. As Jan Kott mentions:

The blind Gloster who has climbed a non-existent height and fallen over on flat boards, is a clown. A philosophical buffoonery has been performed.14

But Cordelia’s mock-revival bitterly mocks this stunt, and as a reverse clown-play, it mutes laughter. This is what we may mean by the “decarnivalization of a play”.

The fourth chapter takes on the carnivalesque reading of Twelfth Night, or What You Will15. In this play, as a fake representative of a strict principle, the puritan Malvolio forms a

perfect Whiteface clown. In the well-known clown-opposition of the August and the Whiteface, the Whiteface, according to Fellini, embodies the maintaining of the cultural norms, the consciousness of power, the proper behavior, the rationality: he is the Champion of civilization. Malvolio is a “Killjoy”, a “Wet Blanket”. As a Whiteface he becomes a bogeyman, who embodies responsibility, or – in Freudian terms – repression. After all, his name means, literally, “ill will”. His yellow stockings could also actually denote his folly (as the yellow color meant madness or “folly” through centuries). Feste, Sir Toby Belch and all the others, as August clowns, mean “subversion in terms of anarchy” and chaos, the denial of cultural norms, the absence of power, impropriety, irrationality, sloppiness and ignorance; they are the Champions of carnival. They defeat Malvolio, so laughter can bring new Life into being.

Quoting Bakhtin (about Rabelais):

> […] hypocritical monks, morose slanderers, gloomy agelasts, are killed, rent, beaten, chased, abused, cursed, derided; they are representatives of the old world but also of that two-bodied world that gives birth in death […] the punishment is transformed into festive laughter.\(^\text{16}\)

Still, in the secondary literature, carnivalesque ease has become distant from the play, whereas Malvolio’s fraud features as a major issue. In fact, the seriousness of the harm done to him was already striking even in the Early Modern world. Charles I of England in his own copy of the second folio directly “addresses” the play to Malvolio, implying that for him Malvolio is the principal character\(^\text{17}\). This myth of the “too much harm” comes from a retrospective uncanniness felt by the audience, which would never have occurred if Malvolio had returned to his original position, like an always self-repeating clown should. Instead, he says:

> I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you. (5.1.355)

Letting the clown fall and remain on the ground, showing the damage caused paradigmatically, and seeing him totally isolated break the carnivalesque logic, show the inability of transgression; all these rather imply the triumph of Death. Our laughter fails to


\(^\text{17}\) As mentioned by Charles Knight in his *The Pictorial edition of the works of Shakspere*. London: Charles Knight, vol. 2. Comedies, 1838. p. 185
crack when Malvolio excludes himself from the carnival. His departure retrospectively deprives the play of its clownish carnivalesque ease. His exit does not work as the ritualistic expulsion of Death because it leaves us without the last part of the ritual: the purified return.

The fifth (and last) chapter snoops around Shakespeare’s most widely known play, *Hamlet*. *Hamlet*’s carnivalesque scene in the graveyard seems actually as a scene stolen from Rabelais. Clowning and clowns in sceneries of death are easily recognizable in other works (as the “porter scene” in *Macbeth* for example), and are also easily interpretable through their transgressing and psychopomp skills. The gravedigger, while standing in the grave, is in fact topographically halfway in Hell (the space beneath the trap-door of the stage in the Elizabethan playhouse) where he profanely throws up bones and skulls from “down under”. He is the perfect agent of Hamlet’s celebrated rebirth, escorting him to the “undiscover’d country”. He and his friend also successfully change the mood after Ophelia’s shocking death, while they also mock her suicide and mock death in general. Their riddles and jokes about alcohol and social hierarchy, their comments on contemporary Elizabethan life, their singing and dancing acts are the archetypical clown games of the carnivalesque theatre. But shortly thereafter, the earth reveals the skull of a Fool.

Where be your jibes now – your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning, quite chapfallen. (5.1.179-182)

Yorick is described as a clown doing exactly the same things that the gravedigger and his friend have been doing. Yorick is a carnivalesque clown but also different from all other carnivalesque clowns, because he is a clown who is dead. Yorick is the failure of the carnivalesque ritual. And again, the Fool’s death comes into picture with the death of the “loved one.” Ophelia’s death – after the death of the clown and the contemplation on the terminating power of death – is no longer the death Hamlet literally feared in the first four acts of the play. Death becomes victorious, it terminates origins and motivations, identities and the differences in destiny. There is no more reaggregation, because death becomes the end of the world, the natural aposiopesis of existence. Revenge ceases to do justice in this world, where there is nothing to be done for the dead anymore and nothing to be done for

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ourselves when we are going to die. In the decarnivalized world only memories remain of life after death, the memories of “others”.

In the decarnivalized world of the “clown’s dead skull” and the dead body of Jesus Christ – as seen in Hans Holbein’s well-known picture – the triumph of death is the actual “Entzaubertes Welt” (Weber). In the world after fate and providence, the human being is already left alone, without a god, with only one chance to “do things right”. Claudius dies and Hamlet dies with him. And there is no coming back, no rise of laughter anymore, as the dying individual without the promise of afterlife can never become someone “once more” with the privilege of “mocking his own grinning”.
3. Theses

1. The literature on “the popular” theatrical traditions of Shakespeare’s age is fragmented, scattered, uneven, trapped in the shackles of the different disciplines and unable to reflect on its own, holistic object.

2. The concept of carnival in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* and the clown- and fool-studies related with Enid Welsford’s *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* are capable of grasping the subject-matter, as the parallel phenomenology of the carnival and the *clown par excellence* is tangible through the *clown-plays* of Whitefaces and Augsts.

3. Shakespeare deconstructs the meaning of carnivalesque folly on the stage of *King Lear*, that is, he problematizes the complexity of the notion of *folly*.

4. The tragic functioning of *King Lear* lies in how it deprives the world of its promised carnivalism at the end of the drama through reversing the *clown-play* to its inverse, and with that, it “spoils” the ritual process.

5. *Twelfth Night* is a carnivalesque play that can be divided into a series of *clown-plays* wherein Whitefaces and Augsts struggle with each other in their carnivalesque fights.

6. With Malvolio’s withdrawal from the carnivalesque reaggregation (Gennep) at the end of *Twelfth Night* – because of his inability of carnivalesque transgression – Malvolio loads the drama with tragic qualities retrospectively.

7. It is not the figure of either Claudius or Hamlet where *Hamlet’s* carnivalesque qualities can be found, but in the gravedigger scene.

8. The skull of Yorick, the dead *clown par excellence* introduces the time-paradigm of a new age where the individual posits itself from death, thus, the skull indicates the end of the world apprehensible as carnival.
9. Shakespeare’s theatre can only be understood through the world’s carnivalesque mode of being; its clowns and clown-plays occur all the time, while it is especially the problematization of the losing of the world’s carnivalesque side where its relevance can be found.
4. Publications in the topic

