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Literary Laughter and Lewdness: Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnivalesque in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in relation to notable literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival and carnivalesque literature. Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque suggests that certain works of literature reflect the social and religious freedom, crude humor, and gluttony of medieval European carnival. According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque works of literature dismantle the social and moral order of the story, giving characters the freedom to behave as they please. The purpose of the essay is to prove whether the play can be considered a carnivalesque work of literature based on how well its contents fit with the criteria of carnivalesque literature as outlined in Bakhtin's theory. The play's structure, plot, word choice, and use of literary techniques are analyzed and connected to Bakhtin's theory. The research is conducted using the play itself, several scholarly analyses of the characteristics of carnivalesque literature, and Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World*, which elaborates on his theory. Analysis of various aspects of the play reveal Bakhtinian literary techniques such as bawdy language, wordplay, and the inversion of gender and social roles. All of these techniques, which are consistent with Bakhtin's theory of carnival, can be found in the play's plot, characterization, and diction.

Key Terms:

- Bakhtin
- Social & Societal Regulations
- Gender and Role Inversion
- Carnival/Carnivalesque
- Forest of Arden
- Wordplay

Bakhtin's concept of carnival states that unrestricted celebration of carnival season permits a reversal of the typical social, political, and religious standards. In order to relieve tension that could cause a revolt among the lower classes, the hierarchal structure of medieval European society was temporarily dismantled. This allowed the revelers more freedom to behave as they pleased. Certain works of literature, including Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, through their characterization and language, embody this unusual behavior that prevails during carnival season. Carnival in medieval Europe was a time where powerful societal institutions temporarily lost their power to the jaunty festivities of the season. Bakhtin describes the freedom of carnival season in medieval and early modern Europe as "the suspension of all hierarchic differences, of all ranks and status" (Bakhtin 246). According to Bakhtin, there are two important elements of carnival have most heavily influenced carnivalesque genres such as satire and comedy—the spontaneous nature of carnival and the blatant, albeit temporary disregard for the law (Platter 10). Carnival was a time of revelry and festivity in which inhibitions and limitations from social and societal regulations were temporarily dissolved, and this freedom gave the people "the right to break the usual norms of social relations" (Bakhtin 201). The play can be categorized as a carnivalesque work of literature because the characters' personalities, actions, and words indicate that the characters experience this same freedom from the constraints of their normal lifestyles.

William Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It* exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque themes appearing in literature. The play contains several key elements that highlight the contrast between the strict social rules of elite society in medieval Europe and the unrestricted environment in the Forest of Arden. The stark contrast between these two settings mirrors the

contrast between the activities of everyday life and those of carnival season in Europe. Carnival was a form of celebration "outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity" (Bakhtin 255). The setting, characterization, and language in *As You Like It* supports Bakhtin's theory because, like the carefree activities of carnival in medieval Europe, these elements of the play offer an opportunity for festivity and an escape from the solemn, rigid customs of everyday life.

Like the arrival of carnival season for medieval Europeans, the characters' arrival at the Forest of Arden breaks the monotony of their typical day and gives them a newfound freedom from the restraints of their social class, gender, and age. The Forest of Arden is a haven where, according to Shakespeare critic C.L. Barber, "the energy normally occupied in maintaining inhibition is freed for celebration" (Barber 5). The social barriers that the characters' social class, gender, and age place upon them are lifted. Celia, among others, is optimistic about the journey to the forest, saying "Now go in we content/ To liberty and not to banishment" (1.3.129-130). Duke Senior, encouraging his exiled companions, says, "Hath not old custom made this life more sweet/ Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods/ More free from peril than the envious court?" (2.1.1-4). Both characters are suggesting that their exile into the forest should be viewed not as a punishment or a curse but as an opportunity to free themselves from the limitations that they have faced working in the Duke's court. Their new freedom from the constraints of a hierarchical social order is similar to the freedom that medieval Europeans experienced during carnival season. During carnival season, people who worked tirelessly during a typical day instead spent their time enjoying festivities such as dancing, music, and food. They were not required or expected to

adhere to the everyday social rules that limited their behavior and discouraged leisure and fun.

The isolation and lack of rules in the Forest of Arden give characters the liberty to speak and behave in uncharacteristic ways. Literary critic Francois Laroque expands on the comparison of the Forest of Arden to a “green world,” a phrase originally coined by Barber, commenting, “The green world is a place of change and metamorphosis, where the reinvigorating contact with nature enables people to free themselves from the constraints and injustices of society” (Laroque 193). Roles in the social hierarchy that people held before carnival season temporarily lose their importance because when social constraints are absent, “Differences between superiors and inferiors disappear for a short time, and all draw close to each other. Nobody cares what may happen to him, while freedom and lack of ceremony are balanced by good humor” (Bakhtin 246). For example, in act two, Orlando acts harshly toward Duke Senior and Jaques when he demands food from them. Orlando allows himself to put on “the countenance/ Of stern commandment” because he is under the false impression that forest dwellers have a more hostile temperament (2.7. 108-109). His suspicion of forest dwellers and his disregard of the possible consequences of his actions cause this atypical behavior. Rosalind, through her disguise, develops a stronger nerve in the forest when she boldly criticizes the appearance and behavior of Phoebe, a forest dweller, saying, “For I must tell you friendly in your ear,/ Sell when you can; you are not for all markets./ Cry the man mercy, love him, take his offer./ Foul is most foul being foul to be a scoffer” (3.5.59-62). Rosalind, taking advantage of her disguise and the obscurity of the forest, does not hesitate to reveal her true opinion about Phoebe. Rosalind gives Phoebe such a blunt criticism because she feels liberated by the dense forest and her disguise. Her choice of words would have been limited by the expectations

placed on her because of her gender and social position. In addition, Touchstone, the fool, exhibits a similar audacity when he threatens William, the young man who desires a romantic relationship with Touchstone’s lover, Audrey. Touchstone boldly declares, “I will deal in poison with thee or in bastinado or in steel. I will bandy with thee in/ faction; I will o’errun thee with policy; I will kill thee a hundred/ and fifty ways. Therefore tremble and depart!” (5.1.48-51). This daring threat highlights the fact that Touchstone is not required to behave graciously because he is no longer under the authority of the duke. Also, he is not constrained by rules of etiquette imposed by the duke and by society. These rules would have that required him to suppress his anger. The “unbounded liberty”—the perceived absence of social regulations and the diminished contact with authority—that the characters experience in the Forest of Arden influences them to behave abnormally, and this separation from mainstream society creates the carnivalesque effect of deviation from the normal social standards. The play concludes with the restoration of Duke Senior’s reign and the resolution of the conflict in the Forest of Arden. All confusion is made clear, and it is implied that the characters return to their previous social positions. This ending reflects the termination of carnival season, when the customary hierarchy was reestablished after the mayhem of carnival season died down.

Bakhtin’s idea that gender and societal roles reverse during carnival is observed in the play. The characters’ new identities and disguises change their behavior and create amusing confusion in the play. For example, Rosalind, who is desperate to discover Orlando’s true feelings for her, uses her disguise to trick Orlando into flirting with her. In his literary analysis titled *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy*, Shakespeare critic C.L. Barber says of Rosalind’s disguise, “A tyrant duke forces Rosalind into disguise; but her mock wooing

with Orlando amounts to a Disguising, with carnival freedom from the decorum of her identity and her sex” (Barber 4). Rosalind’s freedom through her disguise gives her the opportunity to express her love for Orlando by openly flirting without the limitations of her gender. In act four scene one, Rosalind says to Orlando, “Come—woo me, woo me, for now I am in a holiday humor and like enough to consent. What would you say to me now an I were your very, very Rosalind?” (4.1.57-59). The phrase “holiday humor” alludes to the fact that during the Carnival holiday season, people were more likely to consent to unusual things because of their pleasant mood. Rosalind, knowing that her gender prevents her from being able to ask Orlando directly about his true feelings for her, takes advantage of the lighthearted atmosphere. Rosalind, who is dressed “all points like a man:/ A gallant curtal-ax upon my thigh,/ A boar-spear in my hand” (1.2.109-111), knows that by asking Orlando to woo Ganymede as if he were really Rosalind, she will achieve her goal of discovering his true feelings. Rosalind’s disguise relates the play to carnivals of medieval and early modern Europe, where cross-dressing and role-playing were common occurrences. Adding to the amusement is the fact that the role of Rosalind, and all female roles, were played by males during this time. Rosalind’s costume provides a carnivalesque escape from her typical identity and it gives her the boldness to become a new character.

The carnivalesque theme of role inversion is also seen through the relationship between Orlando and his servant, Adam. Adam, a fragile, elderly man, has been serving Orlando’s family for almost sixty years, and he has endured mistreatment from Orlando’s brother, Oliver. Adam’s and Orlando’s roles as servant and master, respectively, are reversed when Adam, who had once asked Oliver, “Is ‘old dog’ my reward?” (1.1.65), becomes

Orlando’s master in the Forest of Arden. When Adam, weary from travel, lies down and prepares to die from starvation, Orlando promises, “If this uncouth forest yield anything savage I will either be food for it or bring it for food to thee” (2.6.4-6). Further, Orlando explains to Duke Senior and Jaques, “Till he be first sufficed--/ Oppressed with two weak evils, age and hunger--/ I will not touch a bit” (2.7.131-133). Orlando, who usually gives orders to Adam, switches roles to serve Adam. Orlando’s willingness to sacrifice himself for Adam and his refusal to eat before Adam is served shows his transformation from a member of the wealthy class to a humble forest-dweller. This change in Orlando’s personality is similar to the transformations that participants in carnival underwent during the festivities; during carnival, the distinction between social classes diminished, and people largely disregarded the societal rules that distinguished servants from their masters (Laroque 1).

Literary techniques such as role inversion and scatological humor can be connected to the temporary lack of social roles during carnival season. Barber and Laroque analyze carnivalesque literature using this concept. In his essay “Festivity and Its Images in Shakespeare’s Plays,” Laroque acknowledges Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque in literature, writing, “Carnival allows participants to invert the ordinary social hierarchy for a temporary period (hence, its populist appeal) and encourages them to revel in the grotesque, the ambivalent, the contradictory, the morally perverted, and the fantasy of extreme personal license and unbounded liberty” (1). The sense of unregulated fantasy that participants of carnival enjoyed during this temporary season is reflected in the play’s various instances of identity reversal and its use of sexual language that would otherwise be inappropriate if not for the setting. Throughout the play, characters that were previously restrained by their social or political

positions are separated from the rules that had dictated their behavior and thinking. Because of this separation from the normal rules, the characters, like the revelers of carnival season, are encouraged to adopt new personalities and thought processes, a concept identified as “carnival consciousness” by Bakhtin (Platter 1). This allows for the use of scatological humor—obscene language relating to human excrement. Such humor, referred to as “images of the material lower bodily stratum” (Bakhtin 368), is primarily used in the play by Touchstone the fool, and it reflects the complete collapse of proper social etiquette that occurred during carnival season.

In addition to the play's setting and characterization, the language in *As You Like It* contains characteristics of the carnivalesque, as theorized by Bakhtin. Concerning this phenomenon, Bakhtin writes, “Such speech forms, liberated from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom, become...a peculiar argot...[creating] a special collectivity... people...who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally” (188). Touchstone is truly carnivalesque in a Bakhtinian sense because he uses unusual slang to make fun of official court language. For example, Touchstone uses a paranomastic pun (a play on the multiple meanings of a word for humorous effect) when Celia complains of being exhausted from the walk through the forest. Touchstone takes advantage of the word *bear* to create comedic effect during their conversation:

CELIA. I pray you, bear with me; I cannot go no further.

TOUCHSTONE. For my part, I had rather bear with you than bear you; yet I should bear no cross if I did bear you, for I think you have no money in your purse (2.4.7-10).

When teasing Celia, Touchstone uses two different meanings of *bear* (to tolerate and to carry) to imply that he would rather tolerate her complaining than carry her and that he would not feel guilty for stealing her purse because it is empty. The clever wordplay lightens the mood of the scene by adding carnivalesque humor to the otherwise serious situation. This punning disrupts normal structure of the discourse in the way that carnival season disrupts the normal structure of society. According to Barber, “Clowning could provide both release for impulses which run counter to decency and decorum, and the clarification about limits which comes from going beyond the limit” (Barber 11). Touchstone uses bawdy, coarse and lewd language to test the limits of appropriate speech in an extended metaphor when he remembers his relationship with a former lover. He recalls, “And I/ remember the wooing of a peascod instead of her, from whom I/ took two cods and, giving her them again, said with weeping/ tears, “Wear these for my sake” (2.4.43-46). The word *peasecod*, originally meaning “pea pod,” is used to refer to the scrotum, while *cods* is a reference to the testicles. Later, Touchstone uses crude language when speaking to Corin, saying, “That is another simple sin in you: to bring the ewes/ and the rams together and to offer to get your living by the copu-/ lation of cattle, to be bawd to a bellwether and to betray a she-/ lamb of a twelvemonth to a crooked-pated old cuckoldy ram, out/ of all reasonable match” (3.1. 67-71). This vulgar description of mating a ewe with a ram serves as a metaphor, comparing the ewe to a prostitute and sexual intercourse between the ram and the ewe to a betrayal. Like the festive revelers during the carnivals of medieval Europe, Touchstone uses wordplay to convey a sexual message. For the clown, blatantly mentioning sex would be inappropriate, especially around his superiors; however, the sexual humor becomes uncharacteristically appropriate and welcomed in this context because of the unrestricted environment of the Forest of Arden. The

elimination of conventional decorum creates an atmosphere that welcomes such language. In addition to adding humor through sexual references, Touchstone creates a carnivalesque confusion in his conversation with the old shepherd, Corin:

CORIN: And how like you this shepherd's life, Mr. Touchstone?

TOUCHSTONE: Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd's life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious (3.2.12-16).

Touchstone's language relates to the carnivalesque concept of general disorder and confusion because it is a mixture of upper-class sophistication and lower-class brashness. The deliberate contradictions and the lack of a true meaning in Touchstone's words prevent his true message from being revealed.

Rosalind's use of wordplay and her interpretation of language represent the inversion of gender roles that took place during carnival. Lawrence Dunson, author of *Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres*, notes, "The social androgyny of Shakespeare's comic heroines (whether literally disguised or not) derives not only from their physical embodiment by boy-actors; it derives also from the doubleness of their embodiment in language" (Dunson 75). In late 16th century Europe, all roles were played by male actors, regardless of the gender of the character. In a performance, the female characters would have been comical not only because they were played by males, but because they acted outside of their traditional gender roles. In addition, Rosalind's character is doubly hilarious because she is pretending to be male.

As Dunson notes, unconventional language in females was especially common in instances where gender roles were reversed. For example, Rosalind proves her own wit with a paranomastic pun in the following conversation:

CELIA. Didst thou hear these verses?

ROSALIND. Oh, yes, I heard them all and more too, for some of them had in them more feet than the verses would bear.

CELIA. That's no matter; the feet might bear the verses.

ROSALIND. Ay, but the feet were lame and could not bear themselves without the verse, and therefore stood lamely in the verse (3.2.149-154).

While criticizing Orlando's love poems, Rosalind creates comedic effect by using the meaning *feet* that means a metrical unit of poetry. Rosalind anthropomorphizes this definition of *feet* to suggest that the verse and meter in Orlando's poem are weak. Instead of simply stating her opinion about Orlando's poems, Rosalind shows her wit by playing on the multiple meanings of "feet". Rosalind's pun is carnivalesque not only because she uses paranomasia, but because she is female. Rosalind's quick, clever wit and her bold analysis of Orlando's poetry while she is disguised as a male demonstrates gender inversion. According to Dunson, "Rosalind, in *As You Like It*, takes control of the play's language and manipulates its central symbols. Orlando writes his bad love poems and publishes them on Arden's trees, but Rosalind gets to interpret and correct them" (Dunson 75). The fact that the job of interpreting Orlando's writing is left solely to Rosalind shows that the Forest of Arden switches her role from a subordinate to a leader. The use of wordplay and wit in both Touchstone the fool and Rosalind reflect the inversion of typical behavior that was permitted during carnival season.

The Bakhtinian elements of *As You Like It* are revealed through the setting, characterization, and language that emphasize the societal and behavioral differences between everyday life and carnival season. These characteristics of the play demonstrate Bakhtin's idea of the disordered social and moral norms in carnivalesque literature because the escape from the mundane activities of daily life liberates characters such as Rosalind, Touchstone, and Orlando in terms of their behavior and speech and creates a humorous inversion of gender and social roles. This temporary suspension of order during carnival season ultimately had a positive effect on the state of society as a whole. The brief, festive chaos leaves the revelers refreshed and willing to settle back into their respective social ranks. The freedom of the Forest of Arden can be compared to the freedom of carnival because both permit comical personality changes and uncharacteristic behavior. During carnival season, as well as throughout the play, servants become masters and civilized people become bold leaders as typical social and societal constraints are lifted.

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