

# A Serious Kind of Laughter:

## Shakespeare's Grief and Mardi Gras 2006

Oliver Hennessey, Xavier University of Louisiana

---

### Abstract

"Shakespeare's Grief and Mardi Gras 2006" approaches the critical controversy over the festive structure of *1 Henry IV* from a post-Katrina perspective. The carnival staged in New Orleans in 2006 demonstrates how popular festivity can restore order, channeling collective grief and anger through satirical and ludic rites. This specific carnival symbolized continuity and renewal for New Orleans's citizens and therefore defied the order/disorder binary frequently invoked by carnival theorists, and specifically by C. L. Barber in his celebrated exegesis of the "saturnalian pattern" in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*. As such, this essay argues for an understanding of carnival phenomena as more than mere temporary inversions of the status quo, a line of thinking that bolsters Michael D. Bristol's critique of Barber's paradigm. The example of Mardi Gras 2006 invites us to consider anew the continued role of carnival in collective civic life and to reach a deeper understanding of how a denuded popular-festive culture might have affected Shakespeare's drama in the mid-1590s.

---

*The Mardi Gras thing. It's not on the table. It's not a point of negotiation or a bargaining chip. We're going to have it and that's that. End of discussion. [ . . . ] it is vital to our very survival that the world outside of here understands just how profoundly and completely destroyed the city is right now, with desolate power grids and hundreds of thousands of residents living elsewhere and in limbo.*

*Mardi Gras is the love of life. It is the harmonic convergence of our food, our music, our creativity, our eccentricity, our neighborhoods and our joy of living. All at once.*

*We are the parade. We are Mardi Gras. We're Whoville, man — you can take away the beads and the floats and all that crazy stuff, but we're still coming out into the street. Cops or no cops. Post-parade garbage pick-up or no garbage pick-up — like anyone could tell the friggin' difference! — Chris Rose, *I Dead in Attic**

Mardi Gras 2006 almost never happened. New Orleans in the spring following Hurricane Katrina was utterly devastated; basic utilities were absent outside of the "sliver by the river." Most residents were gone, dispersed throughout the country with relatives, friends, or well-wishing strangers. Bodies were still being discovered here and there in shotgun houses and among the dank dilapidation of the flood zone. The storm was, in fact, still killing people, its death toll rising with the quiet, untracked accumulation of trauma-induced heart attacks, strokes, and people too sad and lonely to stay alive. It seemed absurd that this stick-and-mud city should, this time, go on with the show. Mardi Gras had been cancelled before, during World Wars I and II, but citizens had not been compelled before to consider the destruction of two-thirds of the city. There was a moral obstacle, too: many people had died, and the communities that constituted the back-bone of the New Orleans carnival tradition had been utterly shattered. How could the city celebrate at a time like this? How could it pretend that everything was fine and dandy? How, in short, could the good times roll?

What eventually rolled was a much-limited carnival. Krewe consolidated parade routes and sought corporate sponsorship. Royal courts were left empty; post-parade balls (often staged at the Convention Center, and, for some, the Superdome) were cancelled. The parade season was limited to one week, and, conspicuously, costumes and floats were salvaged and recycled from the stock of happier years. But roll it did, and in doing so, it restored to the city a moment of routine, of normalcy; it symbolized the commitment of the residents of New Orleans to the city and its unique cultural traditions. For *Times-Picayune* columnist Chris Rose, quoted in the epigraphs to this essay, and others like him, it meant continuity, survival, order amid chaos.

New Orleans's Mardi Gras differs in significant ways from its older European counterparts. In particular, the diverse array of carnival forms witnessed in the celebrations of early modern Europe has atrophied; organized festive practices have mostly been consolidated into the pageantry of civic parades, thus largely transforming "true" participants into spectators, albeit reveling ones. Rites of inversion — perhaps the most socially significant phenomena of early modern carnival — have also lost much of their former presence, though they are still evident in the carnival krewe's mock-royalty, for example. More generally, the Big Easy's festive rites encourage a departure from the many forms of sobriety that underpin the bourgeois norms of everyday industry. Moreover, a number of important carnival practices *have* survived, particularly the tropes of festive abuse that govern many of the parades' themes. These satirical elements were pronounced during Mardi Gras 2006, inviting us to examine the collective psychological functions of carnival, as well as its role in articulating grass-roots social power.

New Orleans's Mardi Gras is a carnival in the strict sense of the word. Tied to seasonal changes and the ecclesiastical calendar, its preliminaries begin on Twelfth Night and end at midnight on

Fat Tuesday. After that come forty days of Lent, and then Easter, which marks the end of the festive period. Closer to Fat Tuesday itself, the city erupts in a festive frenzy and fully exploits the license the carnival period customarily permits. Blowing off steam means over-eating, over-inebriation, and, more generally, a collective transgression of the norms of decorum that govern civic behavior. Traditionally, carnival encourages such excesses and misrule, but it means more than this. According to those who study collective festivity as a social phenomenon with pre-industrial roots — anthropologists, historians, literary and cultural critics — carnival has a range of social functions and involves specific kinds of ritualistic human play resembling the saturnalia of ancient Rome: travesty, parody, and burlesque are the name of the game; costuming and masquerade allow the inversion of normative social identities: the poor become kings, and men and women switch genders. Anthropologists have shown us that rituals of inversion are present in all human societies, yet this is just one aspect of carnival. Conviviality and bonhomie among neighbors; rites of collective ecstasy; assertions of grass-roots authority; satirical abuse of the cognoscenti and ruling elites; such are the "games" of carnival. Carnival rites also contain the power to manage the destructive energies of collective grief, offering their participants a temporary experience of life-in-death, and death-in-life. Contrary to intuition and popular wisdom, carnival can be serious business.

Literary-cultural theorists of the early modern period have expended much effort in recent years reinserting the forms and symbolic meanings of popular festivity into the study of Shakespeare's work and milieu. Famously, C. L. Barber offered an anthropological interpretation of the symbolic functions of Shakespeare's "festive comedy," asserting that the carnivalesque, or saturnalian pattern of "clarification" and "release" mimicked that of other, non-literary festive manifestations of the period (Barber 1959). Many have followed Barber, altering his paradigm somewhat, but insisting on patterns of "release" and "clarification" in Shakespeare's plays. Further impetus has been occasioned by the publication in English of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, fostering interpretations of other early modern theatrical genres, such as tragedy, that take into account the robust assertion of the people's "second life," both within the forms of the plays themselves and in the festive space provided by the early modern theater. In the realm of cultural or literary history, Shakespeare's drama has been re-imagined as a repository of carnivalesque elements, his work as artificer compared to that of a *bricoleur*, his texts read polyphonically, as discursively carnivalesque, in Bakhtin's sense. Such emphasis and interpretation has been instrumental in the aggressive uncrowning of the Bard, constructing him as craftsman of the *vox populi* and his art as ritualistic fodder for an audience at least as plebeian as educated elite in its social composition.

More importantly, perhaps, such critical attention to the forms, practices, and representations of early modern English festive life has rightly demonstrated the necessity of interpreting Shakespearean texts in the context of symbolic play, and, more specifically, its carnivalesque forms and tropes: festive license, inversion of normative social roles, symbolic beatings and battles, utopian reminiscence, parodic travesty and derisory laughter, rites of *communitas*, and veneration of the lower bodily stratum. It should also be remarked that, following the new historicist emphasis on difference and divergence, literary-historical analysis has developed an ideological reflexivity, such that any study of Elizabethan festive culture and its rituals of collective joy must also shed light on the paucity of our own festive rites, their commodification, and the atrophied forms of civic, symbolic play that we, Westerners of the early twenty-first century, have at our disposal for negotiating collective grief and manifesting, albeit temporarily, alternate modes of living together.

Carnival is enormous fun, particularly when participating as a resident, when the sense of collective production and performance can truly be felt. Mardi Gras celebrates the life and continuity of the collective experience, of community and *communitas*, and New Orleans offers its revelers a rare opportunity: to experience festive forms that are largely obsolete in contemporary America, whose entertainment culture fetishizes autonomous pleasure and offers its forms of play as individualized, spectatorial commodities. In contrast, the history of European carnival traditions reveals that collective festive enterprises such as Mardi Gras cemented community bonds and articulated alternatives to stratified social configurations. With the growth of the early modern European city, rural carnival traditions were elaborated upon by complex, mutually dependent networks of guilds, neighborhoods, and socio-economic groups. They developed literary traditions, like Shakespeare's theater, that simultaneously imported festive traditions from lived social experience, preserved them like flies in amber, and contributed to their future commodification by offering them for consumption to an audience for whom nostalgia had become the primary emotional response to staged representations of increasingly obsolete rites of collective play. This history of carnival is pretty well known, and the cause of little controversy among theorists. However, theoretical analysis of this sort has invited relatively little consideration of collective festivity in our own era; few specialists are concerned with the legacy of carnival's repression on our lives today, and I consider this essay a contribution to a body of such work.

More often disputed among the carnival cognoscenti is the functional meaning of saturnalian play, both in the festive tradition and in the schema of carnivalesque literature. Is carnival's inversion of societal norms ultimately a symbolic re-affirmation of quotidian practices and discourses? If so, and given its enormous release of typically contained social energies, occasionally tipping the balance from festive misrule to outright riot, why should the authorities

permit it? It is here that I want to offer some analysis. Mikhail Bakhtin, for one, would have seen the post-Katrina Mardi Gras — unusual in many ways — as a tremendous assertion of popular, collective will, of the human capacity to endure, indeed to celebrate life-in-death, death-in-life. From a theoretical standpoint, this specific Mardi Gras deserves scrutiny because it was so clearly "about" the *restoration* of order. As such, it confounds the inversion-play paradigm of theorists who regard carnival as licensed disorder, a prescribed period of time during which the conventions of the civic everyday are travestied so that "order" — dominant civic ideology — can be reinvigorated, its behavioral norms gladly reasserted. In his exhortations to stage the Mardi Gras of 2006, the *Times-Picayune's* Chris Rose called for an understanding of what this Katrina-carnival would mean: order restored; continuity; balm for the city's fractured collective identity; solace for its grieving citizens. This Mardi Gras, I want to argue, confounds theorists' assertions of the symbolic order/disorder configuration of the carnival experience. Further, for Shakespeareans interested in the popular-festive elements of early modern drama, it also invites a re-opening of some time-worn exegeses, mostly notably concerning Shakespeare's most popular play: *1 Henry IV*.

"What, old acquaintance? Could not all this flesh / Keep  
in a little life? Poor Jack, farewell!" — *1 Henry IV*

How did Shakespeare grieve for the death of his son? We have no real evidence to assess this, other than the art he created in the aftermath of Hamnet's demise. Even then, we are faced with critical methodological controversies; can the mind and heart of a writer be detected in the work he produced for a theater, and for audiences that demanded their own dramatic and lyrical concerns be assuaged in histories and comedies and interludes? The fallacy of intentionalist reading has long been exposed, the specter of discursive containment long since developed as an alternative model to the Romantic myth of unfettered personal expression in art. Of course, we don't know how Shakespeare grieved, *whether* Shakespeare grieved, or how it might have affected his literary work. But we do know something about his culture, its coping rituals, and collective grieving rites. We know from historians of the period that childbirth was too often a time for great sorrow, and that during early childhood a young Hamnet's chances of survival were slim, precarious, his soul attached to his body with gossamer delicacy. We know from our historical attention to parish birth records, religious tracts, and the ephemeral forms of popular ritual that supernatural forces were at work in the infant's microcosmos: a battle being waged for his soul; a host of antimonious forces at large in his material and spiritual wellbeing. For the man with a head full of ideas and questions, the death of a son might very well leave its dark imprint in the products of his imagination. Stephen Greenblatt thinks so: "Shakespeare drew upon the pity, confusion, and dread of death in a world of

damaged rituals [. . .] because he himself experienced those same emotions at the core of his being. He experienced them in 1596, at the funeral of his child, and he experienced them with redoubled force in anticipation of his father's death" (Greenblatt 2004, 321). Greenblatt's conjecture is that religious reform, and the attendant reform of popular culture, provoked a kind of morbid uncertainty and a radical loss of spiritual coherence in the mind and work of Shakespeare and his kind: children of the old ways, who had grown up watching their deepest traditions attacked, their rituals of solace questioned, their vivid social imaginary denuded. For Greenblatt, the shifting cultural sands produced a masterpiece: "He responded not with prayers but with the deepest expression of his being: *Hamlet*" (321).

This might be true; we can't say. Still, Shakespeare was not writing *Hamlet* in the aftermath of his son's death. According to Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells's chronology, he was working on historical-festive plays in these years, producing *1 Henry IV*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *2 Henry IV*, and *Much Ado About Nothing* before tackling the weightier stuff of *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*. If we are thus to extrapolate any father-son relationship from the works to the man, then surely it is less the young and old Hamlets that point to Shakespeare's grief than Hal and Falstaff, respectively apprentice and Lord of Misrule. Of course, like Greenblatt's guess, this too is conjecture. Inured against the shock of infant-death by its very ubiquity, perhaps Shakespeare did not grieve at all; perhaps his grief was sublimated in ways other than his literary output, ways that our extant documents cannot reveal. All the same, Falstaff was a product of these years post-Hamnet, and for this reason the possibility at least bears consideration.

It seems ironic or inappropriate to modern sensibilities, perhaps, that a comic figure of material superabundance could be fashioned from a mind turned by circumstance to considerations of infant mortality, disease, and the fragility of human life. But as Bakhtin and his followers have shown, figuring the Hamnet-Falstaff connection as an incongruity tells us more about the current state of *our* collective social imaginary than Shakespeare's. Life-in-death; sadness in laughter; serious mockery: such are the forms and topoi of medieval and early modern festive culture in England. In the round of seasonal celebrations, carnival and holiday co-mingle grief and celebration, just as they render social identities and delineations provisional, arbitrary, ambiguous. Falstaff himself is a festive clown *par excellence*, and as such, he is as much a monster of grief, of death, of destruction as he is figure of festive misrule and hypertrophic life. As Francois Laroque reminds us, "Alternation, contrast and reversal are the basic concepts that are always inseparable from the phenomenon of festivity" (Laroque 1991, 235). Yet, *pace* Laroque, could we not make the same general assertion about many non-festive phenomena? Inversion-topoi are indeed central to festive forms and images, but it is hazardous to over-emphasize this aspect of the carnivalesque at the

expense of other important elements. Twentieth-century literary critics have been content to do just this, with C. L. Barber's exegesis of the comic saturnalian pattern establishing itself dogmatically as the primary avenue into thinking about Shakespeare's festive comedies. Thinking about grief, and its popular-social remedies, encourages us to move beyond a reductive binarism of "order" and "disorder" and to foreground other significant festive forms. The elevation of the saturnalian pattern in literary thinking has obscured other festive modes that deserve our critical attention, particularly ritualistic abuse, a phenomenon that figures crucially in the play of carnival, as well as the expiation of grief. However, such is the totalizing presence of Barber's paradigm in the socio-literary study of carnivalesque forms, that before turning our attention to the festive-abuse topos in *1 Henry IV*, it is necessary to first address his thinking.

Shakespearean critics in Barber's mold have tended to focus primarily on the order/misrule dichotomy implicit in periods of festive holiday, offering critical approaches to the second tetralogy that typically delineate the ways in which Hal, by eventually abandoning Falstaff and his carnival world, asserts the end of holiday and the primacy of state authority. According to this reading, carnival functions primarily as a metaphor for the disordered state, its various tropes constituting recognizable memes for an audience attuned to the symbolism of festive life; its literary function to structure an allegory of youthful exuberance maturing, and so an ideology that idealizes the nation-state and normalizes the unquestioned authority of the singular monarch. Festive misrule, by this argument, is an aberration that cannot be perpetuated beyond the allotted holiday-time. In Barber's exegesis, society demands that Hal abandon Fat Jack and his carnivalized ethos of permanent parodic travesty:

[I]n a static, monolithic society, a Lord of Misrule can be put back in his place after the revel with relative ease. The festive burlesque of solemn sanctities does not seriously threaten social values in a monolithic culture, because the license depends utterly on what it mocks: liberty is unable to envisage any alternative to the accepted order except the standing of it on its head. But Shakespeare's culture was not monolithic: though its moralists assumed a single order, skepticism was beginning to have ground to stand on and look about — especially in and around London. So a Lord of Misrule figure, brought up, so to speak, from the country to the city, or from the traditional past into the changing present, could become on the Bankside the mouthpiece not merely for the dependent holiday skepticism that is endemic in traditional society, but also for a dangerously self-sufficient everyday skepticism. When such a figure is set in an environment of sober-blooded great men behaving as opportunistically as he, the effect is to raise radical questions about social sanctities. At the end of *Part Two*, the expulsion of Falstaff is presented by the dramatist

as getting rid of this threat; Shakespeare has recourse to a primitive procedure to meet a modern challenge. (Barber 1959, 213-14)

By asserting that "liberty is unable to envisage any alternative to the accepted order except the standing of it on its head" and that "a Lord of Misrule can be put back in his place after the revel," Barber is endorsing what has come to be known as the "safety-valve" theory of carnival function, whereby periods of license and popular exuberance are promoted, or at least tacitly permitted, by a culture's ruling authorities so as to let those being ruled blow off steam, venting potentially dangerous ill-will before they return to the metaphorical yoke. Proponents of this theory consider the carnival experience as simply an inversion of accepted societal norms, tolerated by authorities, as a 1444 Paris School of Theology letter suggests, "so that foolishness, that is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man, might freely spend itself at least once a year" (Bakhtin 1984, 75). Pursuing this argument, the letter then invokes the carnivalesque image of the human wine-barrel, which, like its literal counterpart, is likely to burst from the pressures of fermentation, should a little gas not be allowed to escape from time to time. Indeed, this line of thinking seems intuitively right; Mardi Gras is followed by Lent; drunkenness by hangover; inversion by righting.

Yet this is not what Bakhtin had in mind when he said that carnival was the "second life" of the people; indeed, as Natalie Zemon Davis has shown in her studies of festive confraternities in early modern France, festive play constituted a primary mode of existence, and the symbolic rites of violence she outlines developed from salutary forms that dispersed authority among the collective. In other words, carnivalized play manifests collective forms of authority and precedes the idealization of monolithic state power, a point made forcefully by Michael D. Bristol:

The culture of common people or plebeians in its political, social, philosophical and artistic manifestations is already everywhere; government and the nation-state as institutional forms are latecomers. Holiday, or holy-day, Carnival and misrule are not isolated episodes in a uniform continuum of regularly scheduled real-life: the experience of holiday pervades the year and defines its rhythm. (Bristol 1989, 362)

Scrutiny of the festive practices of early modern England reveals that the distinction between "holiday" and "everyday" was not readily apparent. Given the patchy, ad hoc nature of festive repression and reform during Shakespeare's lifetime, any assertion of the early modern calendar's impermeability ought to be dismissed as anachronistic fantasy.

Recent anthropologically-minded literary and cultural critics, like Bristol, have followed Bakhtin in asserting the progressive capabilities, and primary nature of carnival. Thus, we have



Zemon Davis's repeated assertions of its potential to re-imagine societal norms: "I would say that [. . .] the structure of the carnival form can evolve so it can act both to reinforce order and to suggest alternatives to the existing order" (1975, 123); in Dominick LaCapra's lucid commentary on Bakhtin, we find the bold assertion, "Carnival is not a mere safety valve — or, when it is, it has lost much of the carnivalesque" (LaCapra 1993, 305); and, again from Bristol, a further elaboration of this point:

Carnival was not merely a satirical and *purely temporary* reversal of the dual social order, finally intended to justify the status quo in an "objectively" conservative manner. It would be more accurate to say it was a satirical, lyrical, epic-learning experience for highly diversified groups. It was a way to action, perhaps modifying the society as a whole in the direction of social change and *possible progress* [. . .] Popular festive form celebrates and briefly actualizes a collective desire for a freer and more abundant way of life. (1989, 50, 88, citing Le Roy Ladurie; italics in original)

Again, the point here is that inversion-play in all its forms — masquerade, transvestism, parody, burlesque, travesty — does not turn the world upside-down to make people work harder the rest of the year; nor does it necessarily consolidate those practices and representations associated with the normative way of things. Rather, it recognizes a dispersed social authority: a carnival treatment of reality makes visible the discursive construction of the social realm and demonstrates that the status quo relies upon its participants' willingness to continue the performances underlying its everyday existence.

So, recognizing the "Battle of Carnival and Lent" topos at work in the structure of *1 Henry IV* does not require us to accept an analogy whereby carnival represents a dangerous loss of order or "dangerously self-sufficient everyday skepticism," and Lent stands symbolically for the necessity of statist/Tudor/Plantagenet rule, especially when the ideology of the centralizing proto-nation-state recommended the association of "order" with the idealization of Tudor power. No; Shrovetide and Lent are part of one festive period, and although the demands of Lent appear restrictive, strictures to eat fish instead of meat hardly signify fasting or ascetic gustatory control, particularly given the abundance of fishing territories off the coast of England. If anything, carnival and Lent *together* oppose the non-festive "everyday." Barber's cognitive error here, having internalized the safety-valve theory of misrule, is to make Falstaff a figure of foolish inversion, not of parodic travesty, whose uncrowning discourse ultimately consolidates concepts such as "honor," these the ideological handmaidens of monarchical authority. Furthermore, dismissing by fiat the young Hal's

festive idiom as immature constitutes an ideological error that discursively blocks alternate modes of inquiry into some very grown-up functions of carnival: its ability to expiate grief, for instance.

It is time for critics to turn from the totalizing critical narrative of saturnalian patterns and scrutinize other carnivalesque elements at work in *I Henry IV* that enrich the play's social texture and provide dramatic structure and contrast. For instance, verbal abuse figures prominently in this play, establishing a discursive connection between the supposedly inverted worlds of Hal and Hotspur. There is, however, a discernible difference between Hotspur's splenetic ire and the more playful invective of his princely counterpart: "Why, thou clay-brained guts, thou knotty-pated fool, thou whoreson, obscene, greasy tallow-catch" (*I Henry IV*, 2.4.205-206).<sup>1</sup> Hal's insouciant wit pervades the Eastcheap scenes, its copia and superabundance moving us to laugh at the expense of its objects: "Why, thou whore-son, impudent, embossed rascal, if there were anything in thy pocket but tavern reckonings, memorandums of bawdy houses, and one poor pennyworth of sugar candy to make thee long-winded . . . I am a villain" (3.3.139-44). But it is a redemptive abuse, harsh and yet salutary. It signifies differently in the sphere of Falstaff and his carnivalesque realm. This is the ambivalent festive abuse that Bahktin delineates throughout *Rabelais and His World*, a seriocomic rhetoric that playfully threatens, mocks, and yet elevates its object. It is a language of the marketplace that undergirds what Bahktin regards as the joyous fearlessness of the carnival worldview. Unlike Hotspur's scorn, it cements social bonds and, crucially, permits the kind of redemptive laughter characteristic of carnival: the laughter that banishes fear. Festive abuse is thus a serio-comic technique that grants its agent a certain degree of social power, and that, I argue, provides a means of countering the gnawing solipsism of grief through the externalization of fear and anxiety. Utterances dislocated into the topsy-turvy world of carnival symbolism are rendered polysemous, ambivalent, absurd. So, although abuse is a speech-type that typically directs anger, pain, and fear at its object, carnival ensures that its action does no real harm.

Carnival play's ambivalence tames fear through mocking laughter and playfully disrupts the normative processes of signification, questioning social conventions of thought and action. For instance, a discursive framework of inversion and alternation renders the celebration of the material body's growth — the grotesque body — simultaneously a playful recognition of the body's limits. Tropes of unfettered physical growth, in the language of carnival, travesty the pious clichés with which classically-influenced cultures fantasize about the body's stasis and the individual's immortality. In other words, while literary critics should beware the habits of thought that construct a binary between order and disorder, theorists of carnival must recognize that collective festive play may also constitute ritualized performances of grief that appear grossly incongruent with

contemporary bourgeois norms. And so, a terrible, existential shock, like the death of an infant son, might cause an early-modern father to question the rites, doctrines, and consolations of the Church, to see them as arbitrary assertions discursively normalized. It might require him to perform his grief, or at least write its performance, in the language of festive mockery that renders ambivalent even the binary of life and death: "To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man; but to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed" (*I Henry IV*, 5.6.114-16). By this token, a grieving, devastated city might also vent its ire through festive play. Anger in joy; order in chaos; life in death: carnival logic seems strange to us postmoderns. But is it too much of a stretch to see in *I Henry IV* a jazz funeral for Hamnet?

"What, is it a time to jest and dally now?" — *I Henry IV*

The Mardi Gras that almost never happened, happened. Despite New Orleans's bankruptcy, which threatened policing and garbage collection; despite the lack of corporate sponsorship requested by Mayor Nagin; despite the absence of so much of the citizenry, Mardi Gras happened in 2006. That it did so is a testament to the will of the people who, like reporter Chris Rose, could not countenance the symbolic surrender that its cancellation would have meant. Numerous residents and city officials articulated the critical need for Krewes to roll in order to assert civic continuity and broadcast New Orleans's survival to the rest of the world. For Sheriff Harry Lee of Jefferson Parish, the carnival was not merely an invitation to revel: "I don't think we need to party. My thing is to tell the world we're alive and well" (Guenin-Lelle 2007). Thus, Katrina forced the consideration of collective festive rites as something more than sophomoric goofing-off. Local writer Tom Piazza reiterated a generation of post-Bakhtinian carnival theorists in his *Why New Orleans Matters* by stating it simply: "What looks on quick examination like a day when everyone is issued a license for the total stripping away of inhibitions is in fact something more subtle, involving not a dulled but a heightened awareness of, or sensitivity to, possibility" (Piazza 2005, 98). As we have seen, carnival is not merely a safety-valve; it asserts collective forms of authority and manifests utopian longings in ways that potentially can alter the everyday status quo. Moreover, its forms do more than merely mirror the practices and representations that constitute a pre-carnival, normative set of social structures. Again as demonstrated above, carnival does not simply invert "order," producing temporary "disorder." It would perhaps be more accurate to say that it travesties both "order" and "disorder" as discursively normalized categories of thought.

Unlike perhaps any other carnival period in New Orleans, Mardi Gras 2006 demonstrated the capacity of festive collective enterprise to hold a city together against catastrophic infrastructural

damage and in spite of governmental malfeasance. Furthermore, this specific Mardi Gras, as I have suggested above, offers theorists an example of a carnival that collapses the binarism inherent in much scholarly thinking about festive practices such as licensed misrule and inversion-play. Resting so precariously on its tourist industry, New Orleans needed Mardi Gras both to reinstate its identity and to survive economically. Post-Katrina, carnival meant "order" and continuity, and while its collective energies generated a much-needed sense of *communitas*, objectifying collective grief in forms of play, its traditional function as a vessel of satirical abuse and *serio ludere* permitted vitriolic, yet productive assaults on the culpable: the storm, the various levels of government, and particularly FEMA. Indeed, Mardi Gras 2006 was more concerned with festive abuse than previous incarnations. The centerpieces of New Orleans's carnival, the parades of the community krewes, troped governmental incompetence with Juvenalian glee. The Krewe du Vieux, for instance, kicked off the parade sequence with the theme "C'est Levee":

New Orleans has learned a lot this past year. We've learned new meanings for "open house" and "waterfront property." We've learned that there are nine different types of mold and they all smell worse than a Congressional Appropriations Committee. We've learned that sometimes you can't help but sleep on the wet spot. We've learned that FEMA's just another word for nothing left to lose. And all because the Army Corps of Engineers doesn't know a London Avenue dike from a Bourbon Street dyke [. . .] Faced with this rising tide of disaster, in true New Orleans fashion Krewe du Vieux says, "C'est Levee." Life's a breach, and sometimes you just gotta go with the contraflow. ("Krewe de Vieux" 2006)

Here, the Krewe du Vieux's publicity captures perfectly the heteroglossia and travesty so abundant in Carnival's linguistic play. With Falstaffian élan, the Krewe appropriates the metaphorical niceties of the real estate industry, uncrowns official government discourse by plunging it into the lower bodily stratum, references Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee," with its well-known invocation of regional bohemia, and ends in a dizzying spiral of multi-idiomatic puns and popular aphorisms. Other krewes followed this lead, riding themed floats with titles such as "Drove my Chevy to the Levee But the Levee was Gone," "Bureaucratic Hurdles," "Insurance Adjuster Wrestling," and "Nagin Backstroke."

Carnival laughter, generated by such abuse, does more than blow off steam. Bakhtin understood it to be a collective folk philosophy asserting the triumph of life over death and a symbolic means for dealing with fundamental existential dread; clearly, it registers an alternative to normative, individualized emotional responses to death and suffering. Festive activity can objectify anger, loss, and grief, just as readily as it does *bonhomie*, *eros*, and ecstasy, and the semantic

open-endedness within which carnival forms play — collapsing and uncrowning official discursive structures — challenges the belief of the cultural right in a transcendental signified or ideal order, against which carnival stands as licensed disorder, or temporary inversion. Carnival even travesties itself, as demonstrated by the "Blue Roof" Krewe of Mid-City, whose floats had been submerged for weeks after the storm. Mirroring the blue tarpaulin-covered roofs of storm-damaged homes, the Krewe's floats rolled with blue-tarp covers, thus playing a game of signification that simultaneously publicized the city's devastation and mocked it, poking fun at the provisional, improvised nature of this particular Mardi Gras while trumpeting the will of New Orleans's citizenry to push on, to struggle, to endure. Against a backdrop of physical devastation and social dislocation, this carnival represented renewal, its laughter permitting the collective expiation of grief, deriding not merely external, governmental authority, but also the idealization of social harmony and civic continuity itself. On what solid ground, it asked, can we build our assurances of future social stability, when a storm can turn the world on its head in an instant? More than this, Mardi Gras post-Katrina fulfilled its age-old function of conflating life and death, laughing meanwhile at our absurd cognitive attempts to separate and co-ordinate them. Katrina may have killed New Orleans, but carnival brought it back from the dead.

"He that rewards me, God reward him. If I do grow great, I'll grow less; for I'll purge, and leave sack, and live cleanly, as a nobleman should do." — *I Henry IV*

"[L]ive cleanly, as a nobleman should do": would this line have raised a jeer from its early modern audience? Would it have stirred a knowing laughter from those who were fully aware of the profligacy and plebeian tastes of young gallants? Is Falstaff engaging in a little irony here? Certainly, the play serves its anachronistic, idealized representations of aristocratic warrior-politesse with a healthy side-dish of skeptical parody. Perhaps Shakespeare is making good use of his Lord of Misrule here, cracking a joke at the expense of the blue-bloods, introducing a satirical note with the word "should." Others have argued that the *sous-entendu* of festive structures is at work here, figuratively aligning the serious behavior of princes with the strictures of Lent. But to abandon carnival is to abandon Lent, too. Perhaps there is another way to approach this. As Shakespeare was writing, England's festive life was dying. The history of the reform of popular culture during this period is well documented and is generally attributed to cultural, epistemic forces such as the advent of capitalism, the Protestant and Catholic reformations, the centralization of the Tudor state and concomitant explosion of London, and the withdrawal of the old social elites from public life. Certainly, as traditional festive periods were altered and removed from the calendar (at least in and around metropolitan centers), the festive system itself atrophied, along with

the structures of thought and feeling from which both arose and initiated festive play: camaraderie, reciprocation, hospitality. In *Shakespeare's Festive World*, Francois Laroque thus invites us to consider the representation of status, rank, and social obligation in the tragedies in light of an increasingly anemic festive culture:

In each case, we witness the fall of those who believed in the value of the festive system and lived by its rule of hospitality, conviviality, gift and counter-gift, generosity and respect for community traditions. Now, all [these] plays [. . .] portray an historical or political situation based upon a contradiction between on the one hand the old order, whose institutional and economic foundations have collapsed, albeit leaving behind them an ideology and set of values that live on, and, on the other, a new society in that those who are taking over the positions of authority no longer understand or will no longer tolerate the beliefs and customs of the *ancien regime*. Such, in broad terms, was the position of England between 1600 and 1640. (1991, 262)

Such is the world we visit in *Hamlet*: funeral meats furnishing forth marriage tables, dead jesters, false amity from old friends. *Hamlet*, we might say, provides an anatomy of mourning in a non-festive world. Among its numerous carnivalesque tropes and forms, the play's attention to the arbitrariness of categories of thought and representational practices would seem to signal the play of carnival, as would the witty abuse that Hamlet levels at his opponents. There is little that is redeeming, however, in Hamlet's assaults on Gertrude and Ophelia; and the laughter provoked by his manipulation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is tempered by their entirely non-symbolic status as agents of royal malevolence. Again, as Hamlet dispatches with facility Osric's foppish rhetoric towards the play's end, his imitative abuse serves an uncrowning function; yet his carnivalesque idiom is less than salutary: Osric makes an easy target as a social inferior, and within the context of the play's final scenes, this display of wit only alienates the young prince further from his courtly circle. Festive abuse does not isolate its speaker this way; hence its efficacy in mourning rites. Clearly, this playful scorn is something different from the scatological synonymy with which Hal thrashes Falstaff: "that trunk of humors, bolting hutch of beastliness, swollen parcel of dropsies, huge bombard of sack, stuffed cloakbag of guts" (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4.400-402). Laroque labels it "Dark Carnival." In the context of a denuded festive system, Hamlet's word-play and burlesque signify alienation and confusion, while Hal's punning generates bonhomie and profusion. Hamlet's grief is comprehensible to us postmoderns in its radical skepticism and despair — hence Stephen Greenblatt's biographical conjecture — but the kind of grief that may have been expressed through

the serio-comic, anachronistic *I Henry IV* is difficult for us to imagine. Collective, festive grief means *serio ludere*. Carnival grief means a serious kind of laughter.

According to the hermeneutic fallacies of C. L. Barber and the "safety-valve" school, Hal's return to Plantagenet behavioral protocols signals the end of carnival, a righting of the world, and a restoration of order. Critics such as Michael Bristol and, here, myself, have rightfully queried this exegesis on the basis of Barber's idealization of "order" (Bristol's point), and on the broader issue of the critical elevation of inversion-play at the expense of other carnival topoi. There are further problems with Barber's reductive analysis: as is typical of carnival's polsemy, the festive impulse also manifested itself in *conservative* forms, despite the progressive, utopian articulations that, as I have argued, constitute carnival's central themes and salutary social functions. Bristol lucidly puts it like this:

Carnival is an heuristic instrument of considerable scope and flexibility. Though it is a festive and primarily symbolic activity, it has immediate pragmatic aims, most immediately that of objectifying a collective determination to conserve the authority of the community to set its own standards of behavior and social discipline, and to enforce those standards by appropriate means. At the same time Carnival is a form of resistance to arbitrarily imposed forms of domination, especially when the constraints imposed are perceived as an aggression against the customary norms of surveillance and social control. It is, finally, an idiom of social experimentation, in that utopian fantasies are performed and collective desires for a better life are expressed. These objectives are realized through the characteristic expressive features of Carnival, which include masquerades, that take the form of travesty and misrepresentation, stylized conflict and agonistic misrule, and utopian imagery of unlimited material abundance and social peace. (1989, 52-53)

It is important to recognize how Bristol's assessment here encourages ways of thinking about carnival in non-binary terms; contrary to the implications of the binary, the collective festive practices that fill this holiday period were, indeed, often conservative in their symbolic (and, historically-speaking, actual) manifestations of social justice. For example, Natalie Zemon Davis, in her account of the functions of male confraternities in medieval and early modern France, demonstrates how carnival offered opportunities for festive organizations to enforce repressive local norms, while, as Bristol points out, simultaneously resisting "arbitrarily imposed forms of domination" (1989, 53). French festive confraternities routinely chastised women for scolding their husbands, articulated disapproval of second marriages that were perceived as having occurred too soon after the death of the first husband, and thrashed male outsiders who wished to marry into

the local community. At the same time as they enforced the tacit norms governing community standards of decorum, such groups targeted the ruling classes during festive periods when "customary norms of surveillance and social control" were under threat from external structural and epistemic change: in Shakespeare's England, the Tudor bureaucratic centralization of the sixteenth century and the concomitant religious reformations, for example. In other words, it is simply too reductive to invoke an order/disorder configuration without asking "*whose* order?"

Of course, C. L. Barber's anthropological approach to the festive comedies was accomplished and important. Yet, as I hope to have shown, his emphasis on the saturnalian elements of carnival and carnivalesque forms remains problematic. Carnival is not "about" inversion-play; inversion-play is one, albeit fundamental, element of a complex set of practices and rituals. Carnival does not necessarily oppose "order"; in itself it is an alternate form of "order," and its utopian elements, as Bristol notes, imagine future social configurations while idealizing the purported organicism and health of the mythical past: "popular festive form is an image of collective desire for enhanced material abundance and freedom from expropriation. These images seem deliberately to confuse a utopian future with a recently past golden age — in Elizabethan England, the "good old days when Abbeys stood" (1989, 58). As the sixteenth century drew to a close, the theaters of London staged festive forms that were disappearing from English popular life. Furthermore, the mode of festive abuse — an essential feature of discursive uncrowning — was itself becoming more suspect. Following the "Oldcastle" and Marprelate controversies and the Bishops' ban on verse satire in 1599, humorous invective increasingly faced state scrutiny: Hal's mouth was being gagged. Given these circumstances, we might say that *I Henry IV* witnesses a watershed moment in the representation of festive abuse, that, despite its salutary functions — mitigating against the isolating effects of profound grief, for instance — was more often viewed as threatening to the ruling elite. No wonder, then, that the play is so packed with festive topoi and nostalgia for a popular culture whose rich forms, as Shakespeare wrote, were emaciated, and whose revelers were already being transformed into that most modern of celebrants: the spectator.

Festive abuse and utopian reminiscence — the conflation of a fecund, "organic" future society with its legendary simulacrum — more than inversion-play, thus characterize Shakespeare's carnivalesque treatment of chronicle history. Given the decline of the late medieval festive system in and around English towns and cities, *I Henry IV*, we might say, was itself an exercise in wishful nostalgia for a father, and, perhaps, an audience in need of consolation. In his grief, did Shakespeare turn imaginatively to contemplate those collective rites and the carnival indeterminacy that had once truly comprised the "second life of the people"? Did the games of collective festive enterprise woven into the play constitute a performance of grief, obscure to us, but still available,



and occasionally practiced, as it was in 2006? Certainly, the Katrina-carnival instigated the slow, painful recovery of New Orleans, not just by representing symbolically the refusal of its citizens to abandon their city and their unique culture, nor simply by attracting tourist dollars, but also by allowing residents to grieve collectively in mocking laughter and revel. Mardi Gras 2006 began a healing process by conflating the city's most enduring myth — of unfettered, collective good times — with visions of future prosperity. Like *I Henry IV*, Mardi Gras 2006 was no safety-valve: instead, it offered the promise of social vitality, renewal, and, in New Orleans at least, festivity.

### Notes

1. All references to the play are to the Norton edition, edited by Gordon McMullan (2003).

## References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Barber, C. L. 1959. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bristol, Michael D. 1989. *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*. New York: Routledge.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon. 1975. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays by Natalie Zemon Davis*. Stanford University Press: Stanford.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2004. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: Norton.
- Guenin-Lelle, Dianne. 2007. "New Orleans Mardi Gras 2006." *International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities & Nations* 6.4: 75-80.
- "Krewe Du Vieux Says 'C'est Levee.'" nola.com. 23 January 2006. Available online at [http://www.nola.com/mardigras/index.ssf/2006/01/krewe\\_du\\_vieux\\_says\\_cest\\_levee.html](http://www.nola.com/mardigras/index.ssf/2006/01/krewe_du_vieux_says_cest_levee.html) [cited 1 January 2011].
- LaCapra, Dominick. 1993. "Bakhtin, Marxism, and the Carnavalesque." In *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 291-324.
- Laroque, Francois. 1991. *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Piazza, Tom. 2008. *Why New Orleans Matters*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Rose, Chris. 2005. *I Dead in Attic*. New Orleans: Times-Picayune Publishing Corp.
- Shakespeare, William. 2003. *I Henry IV*. Edited by Gordon McMullan. New York: Norton.