

**CARNIVAL AND COMEDY: ON BAKHTIN'S  
MISREADING OF BOCCACCIO**

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By Dr Adrian Stevens  
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Bakhtin's theory of carnival as it is developed in the two seminal studies *Rabelais and his World*<sup>1</sup> and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*<sup>2</sup> has impacted on a variety of disciplines. Although essentially literary in conception, it claims a historical underpinning. Bakhtin's fundamental premise is that carnival, understood as the 'sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms of a carnival type',<sup>3</sup> was a historical and cultural phenomenon of incalculable importance for the development of European comic narrative from classical antiquity onwards. He speaks of the 'determining influence of carnival' on literature (p. 122), and uses the term 'carnival' to describe particular features that the literary 'genres of the serio-comical' and actual festival forms have in common; as he sees it, the various kinds of comic writing which translate and continue the carnival tradition are 'saturated with a specific carnival sense of the world' (p. 107). For Bakhtin, carnival is a manifestation of 'folk laughter' and 'folk humour'; it embodies a popular, folk based culture which is defined by its irreverent antipathy to the official and hierarchical structures of everyday, noncarnival life. Bakhtin claims that in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance a 'boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture';<sup>4</sup> he characterizes carnival as 'the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter' (p. 8), insisting that the laughter which gave form to carnival rituals freed them 'completely from all religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism' (p. 7). Carnival laughter is for Bakhtin above all an assertion of freedom; its function is to bring about a 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' (p. 10). Bakhtin argues that the 'laws, prohibitions and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival'; and he contends

that 'what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it — that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)'.<sup>5</sup> It is the suspension of social and behavioural codes that generates 'the atmosphere of joyful relativity characteristic of a carnival sense of the world' (p. 107) by allowing 'free and familiar contact among people' who in the normal course of things are divided by 'impenetrable hierarchical barriers' (p. 123). Carnival as a celebration of freedom enables a 'new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterpoised to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life'. In keeping with his theory that carnival enacts a process of liberation from oppressive norms, Bakhtin speaks of the 'behaviour, gesture, and discourse' of people being freed from 'the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property)' which define them in noncarnival life, and notes that from the perspective of noncarnival life they appear 'eccentric and inappropriate'. On this view, eccentricity represents 'a special category of the carnival sense of the world' because it permits 'the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves'; and it is through the eccentric capacity to overturn repressions and break with taboos that the grotesque comedy of mismatches or 'carnivalistic mésalliances' is generated. All things which are, in Bakhtin's words, 'self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another' by the normative (and characteristically decent and decorous) hierarchical worldview pertaining outside carnival get 'drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations'. In its celebration of mismatches and misrule carnival 'brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid'; it dramatizes the 'sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities'; and the comedy it generates in the process of destabilizing norms is the anarchic, transgressive, topsy-turvy comedy of a world turned upside down and stood on its head.

One of the chief problems with this theory is that Bakhtin's tendency to absolutize the liberating potential of carnival and to insist that the reversal of social, ethical and behavioural norms is necessarily comic results in a view of carnival that is too idealized, and a definition of the comic that is too undifferentiated, to be acceptable. Although reversals of the kind which Bakhtin links with carnival can be comic, they can equally well be experienced as horrifying or tragic. I shall illustrate my reservations by referring to the lengthy discussion of Boccaccio's *Decameron* which Bakhtin

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> *Rabelais and his World*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp. 122-123.

inserts into *Rabelais and his World* in order to define the connection between carnival and comic narrative.<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin cites the *Decameron* as a paradigmatic example of the narrative adaptation of the 'popular-festive forms' of carnival.<sup>7</sup> According to Bakhtin, Boccaccio deployed carnival forms because he was engaged in a search 'for a new reality beyond the horizon of official philosophy'. Alluding to the way in which the stories collected in the *Decameron* are told in order to divert the narrators and their listeners from the grim noncarnival reality of plague in Florence, Bakhtin claims that the plague created 'new conditions for frank, unofficial words and images', and enabled Boccaccio to adopt 'another approach to life and to the world' by transforming the conventions of carnival into the narrative base of the *Decameron*. In the *Decameron* as Bakhtin describes it, 'all conventions' are 'dropped', and 'all laws', whether 'human or divine', are silenced; life is 'lifted out of its routine'; the 'web of conventions' is 'torn', and 'all the official hierarchic limits' that shaped Boccaccio's Italy are 'swept away'.<sup>8</sup> But the claim that in the *Decameron* the conventions, laws, limits and hierarchies that defined the society of Boccaccio and his readers are dropped or swept away on a carnivalesque tide of unofficial comic frankness is surely too sweeping. The *Decameron*, like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, is a work which combines genres and mixes comedy and tragedy, often within the same story; it moves in a highly conscious and calculated way between high and low narrative forms, shifting between the registers of language, character, and behaviour which in medieval narrative act as generic markers. The story of Griselda, with which the *Decameron* famously ends, is a case in point. It certainly contains elements which on a Bakhtinian reading could be classified as carnivalesque, but it does not simply transpose carnival into narrative in a way designed to create comic effects, nor does it endorse any notion of a comfortable division between an 'official' ordered noncarnival world and carnival as a subversive but intrinsically harmless kind of play which that world licenses and tolerates; rather it suggests that the carnival and noncarnival worlds are closely interlinked. The world of the narrator and the characters of the Griselda story is a world prone to carnivalesque disruption, and the impact of that disruption is anything but comic in the Bakhtinian sense of being liberated from official or hierarchical social and behavioural norms.

According to Bakhtin, the 'primary carnivalesque act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king'; this ceremony is a 'dualistic ambivalent ritual' which symbolizes 'the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position'; the carnival king is the antithesis of a real king; he is 'a slave or a jester' whose brief reign 'opens and sanctifies the inside-out world of carnival'.<sup>9</sup> Yet while mock crownings and uncrownings may be comic, they are not necessarily so; the effect of such acts is context-dependent, a matter of the circumstances in which they are performed. There is a sense in which the uncrowned Lear in Shakespeare's play is a carnival king, and his Fool certainly pokes fun at him; yet the Lear who is liberated from the trappings of kingship is anything but comic. Crownings and uncrownings play a key part in the Griselda story; but as Boccaccio presents them they, no less than Lear's, contradict Bakhtin's sweeping assumption that carnivalesque reversals and inversions of the norm are inherently and unconditionally comic. Griselda, the young woman chosen by Gualtieri, the marquis of Saluzzo, to be his wife, is the daughter of a shepherd. Their marriage, judged by the norms of feudal society, is a *mésalliance* in the literal sense that it is a social mismatch. The conventional judgment, which Boccaccio's narrative pointedly contradicts, is that in marrying a woman whose social status is so far beneath his, Gualtieri is marrying somebody who cannot be fit to be his wife; but the Griselda story is constructed in a way designed to question the kind of class prejudice that informed the received social thinking of Boccaccio's time. When Gualtieri takes Griselda to be his wife, he dresses her in the style necessary to the new and elevated social status which becomes hers by virtue of her marriage. He gives her the 'fine, rich robes', the 'rings and ornamental belts' which symbolize the wealth and power of nobility, along with a 'precious and beautiful crown' (pp. 785-6).<sup>10</sup> Clothing functions here as the dominant narrative metaphor. The change of dress that symbolizes Griselda's change of status is spectacularly choreographed. Gualtieri leads Griselda out of her father's house, demonstrating that the patriarchal authority under which she lives her life has passed from her father to him as her husband; then, 'in the presence of his whole company and of all the other people there', who will act as witnesses to the marriage, he has her 'stripped naked', makes her put on the sumptuous clothes and shoes he has had made for her, and finally has a crown 'placed upon the dishevelled hair of her head'. The mention

<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. by G.H. McWilliam, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 785-786.

<sup>7</sup> *Rabelais and his World*, p. 273.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>9</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> *The Decameron*, pp. 785-786.

of nakedness and dishevelment jars because of the obvious connotations of impropriety that it conveys. The disrobing, robing and crowning of the peasant's daughter look to be carnivalesque, yet they happen outside a formal carnival setting, in the social reality of Boccaccio's fiction, and the onlookers in the story are at a loss to explain the irruption of the topsy turvy world of carnival into their otherwise hierarchical social context precisely because it is unlicensed, and not part of a ritual framed by authority and custom as comedy. They wonder what the ceremony staged by Gualtieri 'might signify' (p. 786), and their bafflement is caused by the fact that what they are witnessing extends the conventions of carnival into a noncarnival setting. It is only when Gualtieri explains to them that he is taking Griselda as his wife that the full significance of the ceremony of dressing and crowning becomes plain to them. The social elevation symbolized by Griselda's public undressing and dressing does not define her as a carnival queen for a day, a peasant comically garbed in clothes which she does not know how to wear; on the contrary, the change of dress that marks her change of status allows her to display the innate nobility which would otherwise have remained hidden from everyone except Gualtieri – a nobility not of birth, but of character. Griselda, as the narrative emphasizes at this point, becomes 'a different woman entirely'; whatever the impropriety of the undressing and dressing that accompany her marriage, in her new role as Gualtieri's wife she acquires 'so confident, graceful and decorous a manner that she could have been taken for the daughter, not of the shepherd Giannùcole, but of some great nobleman'. The result is that 'everyone who had known her before her marriage' is 'filled with astonishment' (p. 787). Gualtieri's subjects not only accept the mismatch; they go so far as to praise him as 'the wisest and most discerning man on earth', because he alone had been able to perceive the 'noble qualities that lay concealed' beneath Griselda's 'ragged and rustic attire' (p. 787). When Gualtieri puts Griselda's patience to its cruellest test by pretending that he is divorcing her and taking another wife, she demonstrates a strength of character 'beyond the power of any normal woman's nature' (p. 790), symbolically accepting her reversion to the peasant status of her birth by giving back the dresses that define her as Gualtieri's wife, and asking only that she be allowed to wear a shift to preserve her decency when she leaves his palace. Gualtieri is cast at this point in the stock carnival role of jester or lord of misrule; but because he is no peasant made king for a day, but a ruler in the serious, noncarnival world who acts like a fool, his subjects are shocked. Far from finding his transgression of the norms of propriety in any way funny or

liberating, they openly take Griselda's side, imploring him in vain 'to let her have a dress, so that she who had been his wife for thirteen years and more would not have to suffer the indignity of leaving his house in a shift, like a pauper' (p. 791). The narrative at this point leaves no doubt that they see nothing comic in the symbolic debasement of Griselda, and the inference is that in their eyes Gualtieri, by disrobing, uncrowning, and repudiating his wife in so humiliating a way is behaving capriciously and unjustly. When she returns to her father's house, Griselda, 'bravely enduring the cruel assault of hostile Fortune', puts on the 'coarse, thick, woollen' peasant's garments she wore before her marriage (p. 792); but her reversion to a peasant's dress does not mark a reversion to peasant behaviour. Despite Gualtieri's provocations, Griselda never once deviates from the stoical patience that demonstrates her exemplary nobility of character. When at the end Gualtieri reveals that he has only been testing her and reinstates her as his wife, and the ladies of the court divest Griselda once again of her 'tattered garments' and clothe her 'anew in one of her stately robes' (p. 794), the dress they give back to her becomes her not just because they are proper to the wife of a nobleman, but because they are the external manifestation of her inner nobility of character.

Dioneo, the narrator of the story of Griselda, notes that in the opinion of his subjects Gualtieri was 'very wise, though the trials to which he had subjected his lady were regarded as harsh and intolerable, whilst Griselda was accounted the wisest of all' (p. 794). But Dioneo himself displays a much more overtly critical attitude towards Gualtieri than Gualtieri's subjects in his story; he speaks in the introduction to his tale of Gualtieri's 'senseless brutality' towards Griselda, and his concluding commentary is as full of admiration for Griselda as it is full of contempt for Gualtieri. He describes the trials to which Gualtieri subjects his wife as 'cruel and unheard of, and when he contrasts the 'celestial spirits' who 'may sometimes descend even into the houses of the poor' with 'those in royal palaces who would be better employed as swineherds than as rulers of men' (pp. 794-5), he leaves little doubt that he sees peasant Griselda as the celestial spirit and the nobleman Gualtieri as the swineherd unfit to be a ruler. Moreover, he concludes with the reflection that perhaps it would have served Gualtieri right 'if he had chanced upon a wife, who, being driven from the house in her shift, had found some other man to shake her skin coat for her, earning herself a fine new dress in the process' (p. 795). The abusive 'swineherd' and the graphically obscene allusion to another man shaking Griselda's pubic hair (her 'skin coat') as he has sex with her calculatedly transgress what Bakhtin might term the 'official' or

'hierarchical' codes of decency and decorum and place the narrative retrospectively in a carnivalesque frame. The 'other man' can, of course, be read as a figure of Dioneo himself, fantasizing about taking Griselda from her undeserving swine of a husband and having heavy sex with her. There is a very real sense in which Dioneo's lustful fantasy can be read as a 'carnivalistic mésalliance' which combines the lofty with the low, but far from being liberating in its flouting of decorum, it is offensive in its coarseness and its obsession with sex as embodying male domination and violence and female submission. It reveals that while Dioneo may see Griselda as a person remarkable for her patience and the constancy of her love for her husband who deserves respect, he also sees her as a sex object whom he would enjoy degrading not only by using her in bed, but by paying her off as if she were a prostitute by giving her a fine new dress. Dioneo in his closing commentary tears the veil of convention much in the manner that Bakhtin's theory of carnival describes; but in doing so he does not usher in a vision of a brave new world constructed on the healthy foundations of folk humour in which 'all the official hierarchic limits have been swept away':<sup>11</sup> rather, he exposes the chauvinist limitations of the carnivalesque counter culture he briefly but memorably articulates as he reflects on the implications of his own story. Panfilo, the king who presides over the tenth day of storytelling in the *Decameron*, compliments the company in the aftermath of Dioneo's story for having successfully diverted themselves from the horrors of the plague in Florence 'without any loss of decorum'. Although he concedes the capacity of tales like the ones they have told each other to 'encourage unseemly behaviour among those who are feeble of mind',<sup>12</sup> he acquits his companions of any such feeble-mindedness and the unseemliness it provokes, and compliments them on their 'constant sense of propriety' (p. 796). The compliment may be tactical, but Panfilo's stress on the preservation of decorum and propriety does not chime with Bakhtin's talk of the capacity of carnival to sweep away behavioural norms; the inversion and suspension of those norms in medieval comic narrative may, *pace* Bakhtin, serve as a subtle and ironic means of validating them. As Boccaccio himself remarks in the author's epilogue which he appends to the *Decameron*, 'language that is less than seemly cannot contaminate a mind that is well ordered' (pp. 799-800).

In the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer's version of the story, Griselda is not carnivalized in the way she is by Dioneo. Chaucer's clerk is a more genuinely

decorous narrator than his counterpart in Boccaccio, and the host and the merchant, the two members of his audience who express an opinion on Griselda, take the opportunity to contrast her with their own less patient and less virtuous wives. The host, who characterizes the clerk's story as a 'gentil tale',<sup>13</sup> remarks that he would rather his 'wyf at hoom' had heard it than have a barrel of ale (ll. 1212c-d), and the merchant is even more explicit, commenting ruefully on the 'long and large difference' between Griselda's 'grete pacience' and the 'passyng crueltee' of his own wife of two months' standing, 'the worste that may be', who, if the devil were coupled with her 'would him overmacche' (ll. 1218-25). To the host and the merchant Griselda seems larger and more virtuous than life, but neither voices any desire to uncrown her in the way Dioneo does; it is not the heroine of the clerk's story they subject to a carnivalesque commentary, but their own wives and their marriages which, in comparison with Walter's, are topsy-turvy in a sense that neither of them, especially the merchant, relishes. In the *Canterbury Tales* as in the *Decameron* the narrative frame within which the individual tales are set is important because it provides a locus for commentary on them, and that commentary is far from offering any idealisation of the inversions of carnival. The exchanges between the host and the miller which make up much the prologue to the *Miller's Tale*, and the cautionary words of the author-narrator which end it, mix evident social-hierarchical and moral prejudice towards the miller, a 'cherl' (l. 3182)<sup>14</sup> telling a 'cherles tale' (l. 3168) who will not 'forbere' (l. 3169) or moderate his language for anyone, but uses the vulgar and indecorous linguistic registers of the *fabliau* tradition. He shows himself to be a true peasant, and in that he is the opposite of Griselda, whose decorousness and exemplary determination to act in ways that are proper and becoming lend her a nobility which her husband recognizes and brings into the open, but which he cannot match. The miller's tale is characterized before he tells it as being bereft of 'gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse' (ll. 3179-80), but although all this invokes the special carnivalesque privilege of a suspension of the norms of propriety and virtue, it does not invalidate them in the minds either of the host or of the author-narrator. The members of the miller's audience laugh when he finishes his tale, but their laughter does not imply any revolutionary resolve to abrogate their allegiance to the various hierarchies which structure their (and Chaucer's)

<sup>11</sup> *Rabelais and his World*, p. 273.

<sup>12</sup> *The Decameron*, p. 795.

<sup>13</sup> Larry D. Benson (gen. ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 153, l. 1212e.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

society. Comedy has, and is seen to have, its limitations. The miller is a comic figure not just because he is the narrator of a funny story, but because he gets laughed at and ridiculed in a way which relativises his judgment and calls it into question. Neither in Boccaccio's nor in Chaucer's version of the Griselda story do carnivalesque inversions of the norms of decency and propriety function unequivocally as a liberating force in the way Bakhtin describes; for all its seductiveness, Bakhtin's theory of carnival needs substantial qualification if it is to be useful in understanding comedy in general and comic narrative in particular. As the Griselda story shows, the topsy-turviness which is characteristic of carnival is only comic in contexts which are themselves comic; far from being a comic universal, carnival is a recurrent feature of tragedy, and in tragic contexts, where extremes of human brutality and suffering are revealed, it can be both cruel and unfunny; even when it is funny, the fun is not innocent, but mixed with cruelty and horror. The relationship between the carnival and noncarnival worlds on which Bakhtin's theory turns is more complex than Bakhtin allows; but to redefine that relationship is to redefine the role and function of carnival and comedy both in fictional contexts and in the nonfictional contexts with which fictions are, according to another of Bakhtin's theories, permanently in dialogue. Comedy can neither be thought nor can it be written except in relation to the sense of decorum and decency on which it is dependent and by which it is validated. Inversions of the norm of the kind which interest Bakhtin and inform his picture of carnival can justify and legitimize conventions and taboos as well as subverting them.

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