

Trinity College

## Trinity College Digital Repository

---

Senior Theses and Projects

Student Scholarship

---

Spring 2018

### Shakespeare and the Carnavalesque

Darcy Hughes

*Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut, darcy.hughes@trincoll.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Hughes, Darcy, "Shakespeare and the Carnavalesque". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2018. Trinity College Digital Repository, <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/720>

TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

SHAKESPEARE AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

Submitted by

DARCY BISHOP HUGHES 2018

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2018

Director: Dr. Milla Riggio

Reader: Dr. Chloe Wheatley

Reader: Dr. Sarah Bilston

## Acknowledgments

For Milla Riggio. Thank you so much for your tireless support throughout this year long process. You are the fairy god mother of thesis advisors. More than once you brought me food when I had too much work to leave your office and stayed up with me until the wee hours of morning when I needed to make a deadline. Thank you for helping me turn a chaos of ideas into a paper, and for always encouraging me even when I felt hopeless. My time at Trinity College would not have been the same without you. From Guided Studies, to Trinidad, to Rome, and back again, I am honored to be your final student after 46 years of teaching. You have taught me so much about Shakespeare, about writing, and about life.

For the English teachers at the Ethel Walker School who first inspired my love of Shakespeare.

For the Trinity College English department: I cannot remember all the books I've read any more than the papers I have written; even so, they have made me.

For Chloe Wheatley and Sarah Bilston, for being so invested in my success.

For Mima, because every good writer needs a great editor.

For Charlotte, who threatened to kick me when I called my thesis bad names.

For my Dad, who always brightened periods of thesis hibernation with food and flowers.

For my Mom, who saw the potential in my ideas when my writing was incoherent and who gave me perspective when I had none.

To all my friends and family members who encouraged me throughout this process, your support was everything: "I can no other answer make but thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks."

## Table of Contents

1. Forward	
2. Introduction: The Carnavalesque	p. 1
3. “No respect of place persons nor time:” <i>Twelfth Night or What You Will</i>	p. 13
4. Brief Introduction to the Shakespeare Venetian Plays	p. 33
5. Shakespeare’s Venetian Comedy: <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	p. 37
6. Shakespeare’s Venetian Tragedy: <i>Othello: The Moor of Venice</i>	p. 55
7. Conclusion	p. 78
8. Works Cited	p. 80

## Forward

I experienced Trinidadian Carnival during a sophomore semester abroad. One experience, colloquially known as Jouvvert, affected me so indelibly that I attribute the inspiration of this thesis to that night. During Jouvvert, the public streets of the country's capital, Port of Spain, become flooded by masses of people. All sense of normal time evaporates, replaced by a kind connected more to the darkness and the light of the world than anything so mechanical as a clock. A transformation occurs in the midst of great revels. It is a messy experience. Everyone throws mud and paint at each other, and there is this overwhelming energy of a communal life force. You move through the streets, one with the crowd, barely noticing the sun rise, until it does; and, then, you see individuals again and you become an individual again—but changed. One's sense of time, of place, and of self, feels very liquid in the festival; there is a marked sense of connection to the primordial, with prior and natural feelings—rhythms unlike those felt in the everyday. I remember so distinctly being in that tricky place between morning and night which Sir Toby describes, looking behind me and seeing everyone holding torch lights as they walked; it looked like a sea of stars.<sup>1</sup> I felt eternity in this flow of humans moved by internal and external rhythms entirely disconnected from the ephemeral, the mundane, and the quotidian.

This experience of Carnival led to an essential understanding of different planes of existence—the everyday and the festive—and a recognition that somehow the carnivalesque reveals greater truths, makes sense of the contradictions, injustices, aspirations and struggles with identity that are what make us human. I felt a kindred spirit in Shakespeare, the great humanist, and began to notice many echoes in his plays of the transformative and revelatory nature of my experience with Jouvvert. The challenge was how to construct these intuitions and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Twelfth Night* (2.3.6-9).

feelings into theories with structure when my fundamental understanding of Carnival is that the carnival-esque resists structure. My approach is holistic; I do not study the carnivalesque in any one aspect of Shakespeare's plays such as the genre, modes, or historical connection to Carnival or Italy. My goal is to argue that the carnivalesque—by which I mean an essentially fluid concept of reality—fundamentally underpins Shakespeare's worldview and pervades his creations of Place, Personhood and Time.

## Introduction

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby and his friends sing so loudly in Countess Olivia's home that Malvolio must confront the raucous revelers. He shouts,

My masters, are you mad? Or what are you? Have you  
no wit, manners, nor honesty but to gabble like  
tinkers at this time of night? Do you make an ale-  
house of my lady's house, that you squeak out your  
coziers' catches without any mitigation or remorse  
of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor  
time in you? (2.3.81-87)

In this moment, there is a clash of two worldviews. On one side, there is Malvolio, a “kind of Puritan ... a time-pleaser” (2.3.126, 131), who loves the rules of everyday order. On the other side, there is Sir Toby and his gang, who cheerfully disregard the rules in every way they can. Malvolio reprimands in a series of questions because it is unfathomable to him why these men behave the way that they do. He conceives only of rigid structures of reality: organized by proper rules of Place, Persons, and Time, and believes that Toby disrespects this order with his “uncivil rule” (2.3.115). Sir Toby, in haughty indignation, answers “We did keep time, sir, in our catches” (2.3.88). Toby aligns himself to a different kind of order; he does keep time, but with his music, in rhythm and beat, a more meaningful measure to him than clocking the hours of the night.

In this thesis, I examine how the festive, and more specifically the carnivalesque, transgresses strict rules of Place, Persons, and Time. Place need not be separated by public and private spheres, Persons defined by social roles, nor Time divided into minutes and hours. The logical and strict confinement of reality into divisions like these belongs to the everyday world

which Shakespeare mocks as he prioritizes its opposite, which in Elizabethan times was the festive, the world of leisure and imagination. Shakespeare dramatizes conflicts between rigid and fluid forms of reality and, though he consistently rejects the excesses of the festive mode, he favors the latter in the structures of the plays themselves. This is because the fluid alternatives are deeper, richer, more essential, and thus more appealing to his complex and creative mind.

Festive activities like masques, masquerades, revels, and feasts, which frequently occur or are alluded to in Shakespeare's dramas, serve a more systemic purpose than has previously been explored. They are tools, familiar to an Elizabethan audience, that Shakespeare uses to undermine strict boundaries of a properly ordered reality. Instead of seeing the carnivalesque as only a cathartic release of tension during periods of festive disorder and social inversion, I argue that in Shakespeare's plays, the carnivalesque is allied with an alternate concept of order, one which was also embedded in the social fabric of pre-industrial Europe.

To appreciate the carnivalesque, one must first understand the festival that the term comes from. Carnival, from the Italian "carnevelare" meaning a "farewell to flesh," is a time of liberation and indulgence before the penance and sobriety of Lent. Standing at the crossroads between winter and summer, the Carnival season occupies the period between Three Kings Day and Ash Wednesday. The festival originated in Italy, with particular prominence in Venice, during the twelfth century as a Catholic holiday. Whether or not the church integrated the practices of ancient pagan or Bacchic rituals like Saturnalia into their own Christian calendar is still a point of contention amongst historians. Regardless, during the Medieval era, the inversion of status became a critical part of Carnival.<sup>2</sup> For a day, the town fool would be elevated to the

---

<sup>2</sup> For the different perspective see Riggio, "Carnival," in Dennis Kennedy, ed *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, Oxford University Press, 2003, Vol 1, p. 226.



status of “king” (say, a leading local official) and a “king” would be treated like a fool, making Carnival a unique time for all members of the community to join together in celebration. By the early modern historical period Carnival itself, or at least its forms and traditions, had spread throughout much of Europe. Today, Carnival has grown around the world as an important facet of many cultures, particularly in South America, North America, and the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup>

While Carnival itself was not prevalent in Shakespeare’s homeland of England, holiday feasts and revels were, and the traditions of these, together with other celebrations throughout the year, have often been linked to the festival:

The symbols and practices of Carnival reappear in other feasts throughout the year. The broad sense of the term includes the entire range of popular festive activity, not only Shrove Tuesday but also the various feasts of Misrule, May Day and summer games and harvest festivals, in all of which the basic cognitive and symbolic order of Carnival is present (Bristol CT 641).

It is not uncommon for a broad range of festive activities to be connected to Carnival. Historian Peter Burke argues that “There is a sense in which every festival was a miniature Carnival because it was an excuse for disorder and because it drew from the same repertoire of traditional forms” (199). C.L Barber details such traditional forms when he writes:

‘Merry England’ was merry chiefly by virtue of its community observances of periodic sports and feast days. Mirth took form in ... mock ceremonies of summer kings and

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a condensation of Chrichlow and Armstrong’s explanation of Carnival. For more on the global historical development of Carnival see Chrichlow and Armstrong, “Carnival Praxis, carnivalesque strategies and Atlantic interstices” 2010.

queens and of lords of misrule, mummings, disguises, masques—and a bewildering variety of sports, games, shows, and pageants improvised on traditional models (3).<sup>4</sup>

So, while Carnival the festival was not widely celebrated in England, the carnivalesque, a concept derived from the festival, was a familiar mode.<sup>5</sup>

To better understand how the carnivalesque has been used in scholarship, I will now present the theories of Victor Turner, C.L Barber, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michael Bristol, all of whom, with the exception of Turner, describe the carnivalesque in relation to William Shakespeare. What these four critics share is a focus on the up-ending of everyday order (whether it be of state, status, customs or the church) by the carnivalesque (whether it is called Saturnalia or a “ritual of status reversal”). They largely associate the carnivalesque with the reversing of social order that allows the “low” to become “high” for a limited period of time. Turner and Barber argue that the temporary nature of these reversals paradoxically reestablish a strengthened and renewed form of normative order. Bakhtin and Bristol, on the other hand, view the carnivalesque as enfranchising the masses because they can challenge structures that disempower them.

In *The Ritual Process* (1966) cultural anthropologist Victor Turner studied rituals of status reversal around the world. His theories coincide with early literary perspectives on Carnival. Turner popularized the notion of “liminality,” a term derived from the Latin word

---

<sup>4</sup> Lords of Misrule (in England technically are the officers appointed to rule over the inversive “feast of fools,” and more generally anyone elevated to a position of temporary rule during an inversive feast); Mummings and disguises, or as they were called “disguisings” (plays in which action was only “mummed,” not spoken by masked performers); Masques (amateur dramatic performances, consisting of dancing and acting performed by masked players) are a term and form that superseded mummings and disguisings in the sixteenth century.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the term “carnivalesque,” which was not coined until the twentieth century, was not used in the Early Modern period. I am describing aspects of this festive mode that were present long before the term itself was known.

“limen” meaning “threshold.”<sup>6</sup> Liminality describes an ambiguous state of being for “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by the law, custom, and ceremonial” (95). Turner insists that a society functions better when there is time for liminal celebration, for “liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs” (167). In his theory, Time and Place, as well as Personhood, are organized by socially regularized structures that become ambiguous. He concludes that such ambiguity ultimately reinforces the correctness of everyday order, for “By making the low high and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle.... They underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society” (176). For Turner, the affirmation of hierarchy is a critical function of rituals of status reversal.

In *Shakespeare's Festive Comedies* (1959) C.L Barber applies a literary theory to Shakespeare's comic plays that parallels Turner's understandings of liminality. He calls the Shakespearean comedy a Saturnalian pattern of “release and clarification” (11). Barber views the Saturnalian, or really the carnivalesque, as a means of renewing everyday order, he writes that the “Saturnalian reversal of social roles need not threaten the social structure, but can serve instead to consolidate it, so a temporary, playful reversal of ... roles can renew the meaning of the normal relation” (277).<sup>7</sup> The carnivalesque in this sense is a temporary stress-reliever, a

---

<sup>6</sup> Term coined by Arnold Van Gennep in his 1909 work “Les Rites de Passage.”

<sup>7</sup> When Barber wrote, Carnival was often conflated with saturnalia, and for the clarity and consistency of this paper it is useful to see Barber's theory on saturnalia as a theory of the carnivalesque.

social safety valve, that rejuvenates society. While Turner and Barber understand festivity as unthreatening to social order, other scholars assert its more polemical potential.

Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and his World* (1965), interprets the carnivalesque as an alternative world order that holds revolutionary possibilities for the masses. This is a perspective no doubt influenced by his own experiences in Stalinist Russia. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is a subversive force that attacks the proprieties of the established—and to his mind, pretentious—social order. He emphasizes the grotesqueries of Carnival and glorifies the impolite functions of the human body as a means of “uncrowning” ordinary social pretensions and orthodoxy. He argues that Carnival has a “life and logic of its own independent of the world of hierarchy.” While Bakhtin applies his theories primarily to the work of François Rabelais, he does write that there is an “essential Carnival element in the organization of Shakespeare’s drama. This does not merely concern the secondary, clownish motives of his plays.... [but] organizes the serious elements also.” Furthermore, Shakespeare has “this ‘belief in the possibility of a complete exit from the present order of this life’ [that] determines Shakespeare’s fearless, sober (yet not cynical) realism and absence of dogmatism. The pathos of radical changes and renewals is the essence of Shakespeare’s world consciousness” (275). An essential quality of Shakespeare and the carnivalesque is that both wholly oppose the dogmatic rules of the everyday. Bakhtin’s perspective on the carnivalesque agrees with Turner and Barber’s in that he believes that it refreshes society, but differs from them in his equally firm belief that Carnival has a capacity for driving radical change.

Michael Bristol in “Carnival and the Institutions of Theater in Elizabethan England” (1983) and *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (1985) studies the carnivalesque in Shakespeare’s plays and in Elizabethan

theater in general. In many ways, he is aligned to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque as he directly refutes Barber. He argues that "Barber's reading of festivity and of social life in general necessarily favors a benevolent repression as the source of collective harmony" (CT 32). Writing from a populist perspective, he grants to both Carnival and Elizabethan drama the capacity to subvert everyday order:

As a socially marginal space, theater provides a focus for the carnivalesque language of plebeian culture. The repressed thematic of that culture, its acknowledgment of struggle, its critique of privilege, and its ability to imagine utopian counter models of existing conditions, are all deeply embedded in the discourse and the dramatic practice of the Elizabethan stage (CI 653).

Bristol understands the carnivalesque as a lingua franca for the plebeians of England, a multi-purpose tool of entertainment and social critique. He connects the theater and Carnival as two dramatic popular institutions that engage the masses. Bristol writes that the Elizabethan theater was the "institutionalized and professionalized form of Carnival and of popular festive activity in general. Theater and Carnival are neighboring institutions with similar logics of representation and similar orientations to social reality as a whole" (CT 637). Regardless of the impact of the carnivalesque, whether it affirms or subverts, all scholars thus far agree in its function as something separate from everyday order.

In the time when Shakespeare wrote, Puritans—collectively understood and, of course, over-simplified—embodied the extremes of the thoroughly non-festive mode of existence that I will call the "workaday" in this thesis. At the heart of the workaday is the Puritan ethic, which was opposed to both festivals and the theater because "the godly disapproved of all forms of play" (Burke 209). Puritans view "play" as unproductive and even immoral and in direct

opposition to their values, which Burke summarizes when he writes that “The ethic of reformers was one of decency, diligence, gravity, modesty, orderliness, prudence, reason, self-control, sobriety, and thrift” (Burke 213).<sup>8</sup> The excessive adherence to these values stands directly at odds with the world of leisure and imagination, and thus the character of the “stage Puritan,” like Malvolio, became prominent in the Elizabethan theater.<sup>9</sup>

With the stage Puritans came an articulation of the deeper value and worth of play (in the sense of fun, folly, amusement as opposed to work). Morris Tilley, in “Shakespeare and the Puritans,” analyzes the characters who are literally Puritans or essentially Puritanical. I say “essentially” in preparation for Tilley’s use of *Julius Caesar* to illustrate a moment in which Shakespeare directly confronts the Puritan polemic against the stage. Needless to say, there were no Puritans in Ancient Rome, and yet the essential values of the Puritans, as Shakespeare understands them, are embodied in the character of Cassius. In *Julius Caesar*, Cassius is not a literal Puritan but characterized by a similar disdain for play and workaday concerns of ambition, power, hierarchy, and wealth. Caesar vocalizes his distrust of Cassius when he says,

He loves no plays,  
 As thou dost, Anthony: he hears no music,  
 Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort  
 As if he mocked himself, and scorned his spirit

---

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this view of the Puritans is over-simplified, as they were a cluster of various religious sects, which sometimes widely differed from each other. Practically speaking, Puritans – despite their dogmatic teachings – did actually attend the theatre. But since the shorthand of using “Puritan” to define the so-called Puritan Work Ethic that Shakespeare largely critiques was used in the period itself, I am following suit by generalizing the ethos of the “workaday” under the mantle of Puritanism.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the “stage Puritan” see Morris Tilley’s “Shakespeare and the Puritan’s ‘Pensive Regard for the Well-Bestowal of Time’ (1918).

That would be moved to smile at anything.  
 Such men as he be never at heart's ease,  
 While they behold a greater than themselves,  
 And therefore, are they very dangerous.<sup>10</sup> (1.2.204-211)

Throughout his canon, Shakespeare associates antipathy for music or theater with deficiency or villainy. This passage echoes a common rebuttal of play-lovers against Puritans—that contrary to Puritan belief, the theater, and more generally play, does not cause evil. In fact, leisure serves two functions: first, it provides healthy diversion and reduces the temptation to bad action, and, second, it has substantially good values of its own.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare thus establishes a value system that counters the Puritan polemic against play.

Constructing a value system based on activities of the imagination is the most idealistic aspect of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin theorizes that “No rest period or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se; something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of the practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is by the world of ideals” (87). There is, of course, a less than ideal aspect of the carnivalesque, embodied its most notorious form, in the figure of Sir John Falstaff (*Henry IV*, Parts I and II and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*).

While Shakespeare inclines toward the festive, it is important to note that he does not embrace the chaos of carnivalesque excess which can lead to violence and the destruction of community. Bristol makes this point clearly with the most obvious of examples from *Henry IV*. Pointing to Falstaff as a personification of the obese Carnival King, he writes that “Falstaff’s

---

<sup>10</sup> Tilley, “Well Bestowal of Time” (554).

<sup>11</sup> Tilley, “Organic Unity” (553-554).

girth, his perpetual drinking and eating, his disrespect of Time, Place and Person are typical features of Carnival as a festive persona and his companion and Lenten antagonist, a character known as Hal [Prince Hal] .... is a 'stock-fish' who continually chastises Falstaff and admonishes him" (*CI* 204). Bristol uses the "Time, Place, Person" terminology that structures this thesis, but because he only looks at the respect and the disrespect in extreme excesses, he misses some of the nuance of the carnivalesque.

Bristol fails to see the whole dialectic at work. Falstaff does represent the extremities of the festive for he is jolly, given to eating and drinking and, if he were only capable of it, whoring. He embodies the excesses of the carnival mode. Prince Hal must reject Falstaff's excess; this is true, not only because "if every day were playing holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work" (*I Henry IV* I.i.174-175), but because that excess leads to chaos, not to a richly synthesized concept of alternate order. In *II Henry IV*, Hal "vilely" prefers a small beer over a large procession in his honor, saying "these humble considerations make me out of love with greatness" (2.2.950, 958-959). Prince Hal is the synthesis. He successfully merges important qualities of Falstaff teachings into his everyday life. Even in a play where Shakespeare depicts the necessity to reject Falstaff, he shows that this education of Hal serves a purpose, and he humanizes the rejection by dramatizing the immense sadness of Falstaff's death as reported by the tavern owner Mistress Quickly (*Henry V* 2.3.9-27). Thus, we see how the excess of the carnivalesque may be synthesized into the everyday world, the world that Shakespeare recognizes we must live in.

The carnivalesque is multiplicitous and complex, which allows it to be many things at once. In its most aspirational interpretation, the temporary embrace of the carnivalesque is cathartic and can enhance the quality of life for those able to merge or synthesize or balance the



workaday and festive values. It also, however, has the potential to be abused; its modes can be used for the lowest aims of existence and mischief can become mayhem. Francois Laroque identifies these contradictions and links them to Shakespeare when he asserts that “Carnival is endowed with a double face, a bright as well as a dark one, and Shakespeare seems to have been particularly fascinated by this form of ambivalence or ‘contrariety.’” While Carnival is celebratory and life-affirming, it neither denies nor negates the basic presence of violence: it is also “a festival of aggression, of destruction, (and) desecration” (Burke 187). The bright face of Carnival is invested in the qualities of the festive that are cathartic and constructive, while the dark face reflects the qualities that are violent and destructive.

Shakespeare characterizes his comic villains with excesses that belong to the working world, for they are dogmatic, hypocritical, rigid and rule-oriented, such as *Twelfth Night*’s Malvolio (see Chapter Two) or in a different way *The Merchant of Venice*’s Shylock (see Chapter One). Malvolio and Shylock, however, are the nay-saying villains of comedy. Shakespeare’s tragedies are filled with those who use the imaginative forces and even the strategies of the festive for evil. Characters like Iago, Richard III, and Aaron the Moor use festive strategies for demonic purposes, becoming essentially and paradoxically “festive devils” who play with reality and warp appearances for greed, power, oppression and isolation, all of which are antithetical to the festive.

In the three chapters of this thesis I will first establish the paradigm of the carnivalesque and set up the framework for my analysis with arguably Shakespeare’s most overtly carnivalesque play *Twelfth Night* in Chapter One. Then I will analyze two plays: *The Merchant of Venice* (Chapter Two) and *Othello: The Moor of Venice* (Chapter Three), both set in Venice. By pairing one comedy and one tragedy that take place in Venice, I will explore the oppositions

and contradictions of the carnivalesque manifested through festive forms surprisingly prominent in both plays. The “bright face” of the carnivalesque in Shakespeare’s comedies depicts an evolution where a synthesis of festive and workaday values bind a community. The “dark face” of the carnivalesque, in contrast, can be seen in Shakespeare’s tragic plays and devolves into utter destruction.

## Chapter One:

### *Twelfth Night or What You Will*

*“Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?”*

—Malvolio, *Twelfth Night* (2.3.86-87)

In this chapter I establish a paradigm of how the carnivalesque structure works in the most overtly festive play: *Twelfth Night or What You Will* (composed c. 1601-1602). Shakespeare gives a specific title, one named after a festival, before he subverts the name into ambiguity. The double title reflects the double nature of the festival of Twelfth Night, which also marks the beginning of the Carnival season. Laroque writes that “This indeed was a crossroads in the year, where night won out over day ... It was a period that was placed under the aegis of the two-headed Janus.” Connecting the festival to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, he continues: “in this case he is, rather, an androgynous Janus who embodies the junction of two times and two sexes. The theme of an upside-down world is also illustrated, in this interval of mysterious time” (*SFW* 228). In describing an “upside-down world,” with “two sexes” and “two times” Laroque highlights the ambiguity of Place, Persons, and Time in this play. The double-faced nature of the carnivalesque, infiltrates every dimension of these concepts including the literal, the metaphorical, the physical, and the metaphysical.

#### Place

In this play, the literal places are the land of Illyria and the two households and estates it contains, those of Duke Orsino and Countess Olivia. The houses are metaphorically allied with the carnivalesque and the Lenten. It is Olivia’s home, which is austere, melancholic, and closed off, that undergoes a carnivalesque transgression of boundaries. Malvolio, who lives in Olivia’s home, has a very literal sense of place; for him, a house is a house, a domestic space that is

separated by walls from the public and organized by strict rules. He desires rational and pragmatic order—the parameters of which were explicitly defined in the Elizabethan era.<sup>12</sup> The make-believe land of Illyria, however, is a “Carnival society,” presenting an alternative order. Therefore, the literal sense of Place—tied to the order of the everyday, and rigidly demarcated—is subverted through physical and metaphysical transgressions of boundaries. Revelers and the masquerading Viola gate-crash into Olivia’s home, a closed space that is thereby transformed into an open one, the openness reinforced by the set-up of the Elizabethan stage. Lastly, Olivia’s home, which also contains Toby, holds internal contradictions that emphasize that a sense of Place is largely determined by perception.

Literary scholar Northrop Frye notes how Shakespeare’s comedies often alternate between worlds that he deems “normal” or “green.” His distinction roughly corresponds to my own terminology of the workaday and the festive. In reference to *A Winter’s Tale*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *As You Like it*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he writes that “there is the same rhythmic movement from normal world to green world and back again.” Physically removed from the normal, the green can be a coast or a countryside, a forest or a fairy world. In *Two Gentleman of Verona*, “the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal

---

<sup>12</sup> “Sir Toby’s freedom with Olivia’s food and drink at all hours is behavior explicitly at odds with contemporary ideas about the containment functions of a well-regulated household. The Willoughby household orders of 1572, for example, instruct the usher to control ‘all disorders in the hall . . . and if there shall be any stubborn persons, he is to expell them out of the hall.’ Similarly, the underbutler ‘is to suffer no household servant to remain tipling, or to be at all in the buttery.’ The buttery, a special container within the house itself, was to be locked at 9:00 P.M. ‘and after by no means to be opened that night without special cause. The discretion of that officer is to foresee that no filching of bread or beer be suffer’d, nor yet any want where reason doth require may be greatly both for his master’s profit and worshipp, for it is an office both of good credit and great trust.’ Olivia’s servants attempt to enforce these regulations, but the atmosphere of her household is such that all efforts at control seem destined to fail” (Crane 105).

world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world.” Differing from Barber’s Saturnalian “release and clarification,” hypothesis, Frye argues that “the green world suggests an original golden age which the normal world has usurped and which makes us wonder if it is not the normal world that is the real Saturnalia” (109). For Frye, the return to the normal world allows for its critique. *Twelfth Night* offers a variation of this paradigm; because Illyria is the only land, it is in a continuous process of metamorphosis. The dominant sense of order in the world is one of play—playing music, playing dress-up and playing pranks. Frye suggests that *Twelfth Night* “as its title implies, presents a Carnival society, not so much a green world as an evergreen one” (107). This make-believe land by definition transgresses the literal sense of Place. It is not in any sense “real,” and in it, multi-dimensional concepts of Place, aided by the imagination, prevail over the literal perspectives.

While there is only one land, the setting does shift between two oppositional households. Mary Thomas Crane in “Suitable Suits and the Cognitive Space Between,” writes that “*Twelfth Night* turns around only two poles, the court of Orsino and the house of Olivia.” She continues by saying that “A number of critics have noted the apparent suitability of a union of these two households” (102). However, a peaceful and sensible merging of Place, through the logical marriage of Orsino to Olivia, is not a carnivalesque inclination.

Generally, the prevailing orders of these homes metaphorically embody the carnivalesque and the Lenten. Duke Orsino maintains a festive household, grounded in music but tending, almost willfully, toward excess, as evidenced in the play’s opening lines:

If music be the food of love, play on,  
Give me excess of it that, surfeiting,

The appetite may sicken and so die. (1.1.1-3)

At the beginning of the play, Countess Olivia establishes a home that tends toward the Lenten, especially with Malvolio's pushy overseeing. The metaphorical alignment of these homes is obvious in how the owners mediate the boundary between inside and outside space on each estate. Crane writes that "In contrast with Olivia's ideal of closed, impermeable boundaries, Orsino thus represents himself as (...) open" (106). It is in the process of opening up Olivia's enclosed home where we see the carnivalesque transgression of physical boundaries, and finally the transformation of the household itself.

The boundaries that separate public and private are porous in Carnival. The festive term for this is "gate-crashing." In Carnival, "There was no sharp distinction between actors and spectators, since the ladies on their balconies might throw eggs at the crowd below, and the maskers were often licensed to burst into private houses" (Burke 182). In *Twelfth Night*, characters infiltrate the private home in festive ways, through the use of disguise, such as Viola in her trans-vestments, or by challenging the sobriety of the house, as Sir Andrew Augucheek does with his wine. Of course, once Olivia falls in love with Cesario, i.e. Viola in male clothing, she contrives ways to get her back into the household. Her/his first visit is the only intrusive one, and it is the most carnivalesque, in that it involves disguise, amounts to a bursting in on the Countess, and leads to Viola/Cesario's witty confrontation with her (1.5.134-277).

The Renaissance theater also contained a similar physical boundary-crossing through the interaction with the audience. Historian Robert Weimann "For the Elizabethan playgoer, the drama was more than a play taking place on a stage separated from the audience; it was an event in progress in which good listening and watching were rewarded 'by a sense of feeling part of the performance'" (Weimann 213). Crane writes that "Olivia's house replicates the complex

dialectic of public and private encoded in the physical structures of the public playhouse....

Unlike houses in *The Comedy of Errors*, Olivia's enclosed house is depicted not behind a closed door but as existing in fluid space on the open stage" (104). Not only does Olivia's protected interior space fill the entire open stage, but in 3.1 the action moves outside, into the garden, and in act 5, this previously closed household welcomes into its grounds all the major players. It is outside Olivia's house that the unmasking of Viola takes place, and marriages are arranged (between Orsino and Viola, now known to be a woman, and Olivia and Viola's impossibly identical twin brother). Orsino and Olivia are reconciled not as husband and wife, but as brother and sister (each married to one of the twins). As Olivia emerges from her mourning isolation, her household also begins literally to open up.

Carnavalesque intruders disrespect Olivia's boundaries, but there are also transgressions within the household itself. Characters who do not live with Olivia, Viola and Sir Andrew Augucheek, enter the home against her will. Characters who do live with Olivia, Sir Toby and Malvolio, clash in an opposition between festive excess and Puritan negation. Crane recognizes both these forces at work in Olivia's home:

Olivia is associated with a concept of home as container that preserves the integrity of the self by keeping the outside out. Ironically, however, Olivia's attempt to keep suitors out leads to a proliferation of suits for her hand from within her household as well as from outside it, and her attempts to regulate suitable behavior on the part of its inhabitants lead to extreme and inappropriate behavior (103).

The Countess wants a regulated and well-ordered household; however, "her household is not at all orderly. Sir Toby's freedom with Olivia's food and drink at all hours is behavior explicitly at odds with contemporary ideas about the containment functions of a well-regulated household"

(Crane 105). To some extent, of course, Olivia's household is enriched by the very process that seems to deregulate it, for Sir Toby enlivens it with wit, music, and even his excessive drink. His festive energy, and that of Sir Andrew and Maria, counterweight the heavy Puritan influence of Malvolio. Malvolio's literal sense of Place is challenged to such an extent that he cannot even accept the idea of Toby and Andrew reveling in the home. Where they see the home as a natural place in which to drink and carouse, Malvolio, illustrating how the definition of Place is determined by perception, sees it transformed into an "ale house" (2.3.83).

To a certain extent, to play on the subtitle, "what you will" a place to be, it is. Feste is the least grounded in a physical place of all the characters because, although he is Olivia's fool, he is in constant transition between the homes. Feste plays a key role in defining Place imaginatively rather than literally. One crucial, confusing scene comes when Feste mocks Malvolio's literal concept of Place after Malvolio has been placed in a dungeon in Olivia's estate. Desperate for help, Malvolio shouts: "They have laid me here in hideous darkness" (4.2.29-30).

FESTE. Say'st thou that house is dark?

MALVOLIO. As hell, Sir Topas.

FESTE. Why, it hath bay windows transparent as barricadoes,

and the clerestories toward the south-north are as

lustrous as ebony. And yet complainest thou of obstruction? (4.1.33-39)

Although Malvolio is literally correct about the physical place, there is a sense in which the actual place he is in metaphorically and even metaphysically reflects the darkness of his own perceptions. Malvolio's self-righteous, sober, and yet also ambitious, self-promoting sense of the literal truth, which makes him an easy target for the fake-letter prank, is manifest in the darkness



of the dungeon. He is physically in the dark, but he is also spiritually in the dark. Indeed, there is a kind of truth to Feste's apparently silly contradictions. Feste essentially describes the world as he, the wise fool, sees it in which his imagination brightens even the darkest place.

### Persons

In the Carnival society of Illyria, identities are often fluid and no role functions quite as it should: a woman is disguised as a man; the fool is wise; the servant is arrogant; police officers apprehend the wrong men; scholars know nothing; and surgeons are drunk when needed most.<sup>13</sup> Malvolio vocalizes the most literal perspective on personhood which he makes synonymous with social position—a perspective largely supported by Elizabethan sumptuary laws. Just as physical walls separate the interior from the exterior in terms of Place, the human body is also metaphorically divided by interiority and exteriority, a truth which Viola plays with as she disguises as a man.

As a professional clown who is paid for folly, Feste most productively integrates work and play into everyday life. Lacking the confinement of elite social status, Feste exhibits a certain freedom in his foolery that men in more restrictive social positions cannot indulge with respectability: “For folly that he wisely shows is fit / But wise men, folly-fall’n quite taint their wit” (3.1.63-64). “Wise men” are more inhibited than Feste, and he finds great comic material in their pompous pretensions. He mocks arbitrarily imposed regulations of status and virtue, and doing so brings relief to those of higher estate stifled by rules. Feste’s profession frees him from taking himself too seriously, and he helps others do the same. In a carnivalesque way, he brings the low high and the high low and inverts the rules of social decorum. He mocks the pretensions of Malvolio, Olivia, and Sebastian but respects those in lower positions such as the handmaid

---

<sup>13</sup> Imprisonment of Antonio (3.4), Sir Andrew (2.3), and when Sir Toby has been hurt (5.1).

Maria and the drunkard Toby, because they can match his wit. He has a knack for understanding people, a skill that is necessary for good foolery. Viola observes that:

This fellow is wise enough to play the fool;  
 And to do that well craves a kind of wit:  
 He must observe their mood on whom he jests,  
 The quality of persons, and the time,  
 And, like the haggard, cheque at every feather  
 That comes before his eye. (3.1.56-61)

Feste relieves people from the confinement of their roles, which is why they appreciate him even when he mocks them, as really there is “no slander in an allowed fool” (1.5.88-9) Feste relieves Olivia from her excessive grief. Grateful, she asks “What think you of this fool, Malvolio? doth he not mend?” (1.5.68-69). Malvolio, who cannot laugh at himself, dislikes Feste and does not see his value. Malvolio works in the opposite way as Feste, for he tries to police those around him with the proper rules of decorum.

Malvolio insists that others should regulate their behavior to rules of propriety as he fancies himself to do.<sup>14</sup> He is, however, so distracted by the behavior of others, fixated on whether it is respectful or not, that he cannot comprehend any greater depth of Personhood. This prevents any real understanding of himself or others. Therefore, Malvolio does not grasp the hypocrisy of demanding respect while being himself disrespectful. When he tries to regulate

---

<sup>14</sup> Morris Tilley in “Organic Unity” compiles a list of what Malvolio and Olivia, and the stereotypical Puritan rejected: “health-drinking, drunkenness, quarrelling, bear-baiting, fencing, bad manners, dancing, evil company, mis-spending time, poetry, plays, idle compliment, untruths, idleness, jesting, pranks, boldness, oaths, lack of regard for proper place and proper time, singing, disorderly conduct, staying out late at night, feasting, music, discourtesy, disrespect of persons, folly, fashionable dress, shallowness” (564).

Toby, Toby indicates this contradiction by asking, “Art any more than a steward?” (2.3.106). He proves Malvolio a hypocrite but also searches for the person beyond their workaday role. Sir Toby continues in a way that evokes one of the only links between this play and its title: “Dost thou think, because thou are virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale” (2.3.107-8). Cakes and ale were the body and the blood of the festival of Twelfth Night. Indeed, Malvolio has no room for cakes or ale, or by extension for the festive in any form, because he is too full of himself, which Olivia notes in exasperation, “Oh, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite” (1.5.85-86)

Shakespeare wrote in a time of sumptuary laws so that clothing was strongly linked to identity. This explains why a “blanched velvet gown” (2.5.44-45) is one of Malvolio’s first descriptions of grandeur and why a change of clothing is a request of the fake Lady Olivia who writes:

Remember who commended thy  
 yellow stockings, and wished to see thee ever  
 cross-gartered: I say, remember. Go to, thou art  
 made, if thou desirest to be so; if not, let me see  
 thee a steward still, the fellow of servants, and  
 not worthy to touch Fortune's fingers. (2.5.143-53)

The yellow stockings, abhorrent to Olivia, render Malvolio ridiculous even as he thinks they visually affirm his Lady’s preference of him to the other servants. They are anything but a sign of status so it shows us Malvolio’s ignorance of clothing and his arrogance in wanting to be better than the other servants. Malvolio’s self-love, which leaves him to be delusional about his actual status, is in contrast to Sir Toby, who despite his excesses is well aware of who he is.

When Maria urges Toby to temper his behavior, his rebuttal plays with this idea of clothing and status:

MARIA. Ay, but you must confine yourself within the modest  
limits of order.

SIR TOBY BELCH. Confine? I'll confine myself no finer than I am. These  
clothes are good enough to drink in, and so be these  
boots too. An they be not, let them hang themselves  
in their own straps. (1.3.712)

Toby is unwilling to change either his clothing or his behavior and is thus unabashedly himself.

Clothing as disguise is a major carnivalesque mode and plays a role in this play and throughout Shakespeare's drama. It is linked in a broader sense to how the theater was one of the only places in which the sumptuary laws did not apply. Crane writes that "Sumptuary laws expressly allowed players to wear elaborate clothing onstage that they would otherwise not have had sufficient rank to wear.... Suitable suits for players could both reveal and conceal their gender, status, and position in extremely complex ways" (101). Because clothing becomes costume, it allows actors/characters to dress up or dress down and, inevitably, to change their gender. Using the most basic Carnival and theatrical modes, Bristol makes the bridge to Carnival. He says that "Disguise, mistaken identity, acting for another, all of which are defining characteristics of Carnival as well as of the actor's profession, enter into most if not all the stories in the dramatic texts themselves." He then connects this description to Shakespeare's plays when he says, "The most complex focus of identity switching is in the multiple transvestitism of boy actors portraying characters like Rosalind or Viola. Gender switching, like the various inversions of social status, undermines closed and finished individuality and, like the experience of Carnival

itself, it reinserts the individual into a continuous and dynamic social process” (Bristol 652). The carnivalesque concept of Personhood is one that undermines the closed and confined sense of identity.

When Viola washes up on the shores of Illyria she compels the Sea Captain to disguise her as a man. She says:

And though that nature with a beauteous wall  
 Doth oft close in pollution, yet of thee  
 I will believe thou hast a mind that suits  
 With this thy fair and outward character.  
 I prithee—and I'll pay thee bounteously—  
 Conceal me what I am and be my aid  
 For such disguise as haply shalt become  
 The form of my intent. (1.2. 44-51)

This small speech contains many levels of complexity with regards to personhood. First, she establishes that the body itself is a boundary by calling it a “beauteous wall.” Secondly, she describes how that exterior might directly contradict an interior, although in the case of the Captain, Viola is saying that they appear to be the same. Thirdly, in asking for help and assuming a disguise as a man, she points to the way transgender disguises work in this play, as often throughout Shakespeare. Viola has come to Illyria with no position in society. She has no money and no protector so that disguise becomes a means of survival. She wants to conceal herself, but as Crane says to “reveal and conceal” go hand in hand. While she is apparently disguising her feminine identity, she simultaneously reveals an interior self that was restricted by her female

body. While hiding her gender, she paradoxically reveals qualities of herself that are otherwise stifled. She can be witty, bold, and forthright.

Viola's disguise serves both Orsino and Olivia. Viola/Cesario lures Orsino from his infatuation with the melancholy Olivia to a greater realization of his own personhood as one who loves the femininity of Viola still visible through her male disguise. In turn, Viola/Cesario pulls Olivia out of her melancholy mourning for her dead brother through her love for him/her, finally reconciled by the appearance of Viola's brother Sebastian.

The introduction of the twin brother materializes the most complex idea related to personhood; it reflects both the interior and exterior, the relationship and link between them, but also the link between the flesh and the spirit, which is crucial to understanding Carnival. The appearance of Sebastian, the identical male twin, neatly resolves the plot, providing a husband for Olivia, leaving Viola to become Orsino's wife. But this denouement leads to a more complex question of personhood and identity implicated in the notion of two persons, or by extension souls, in one, or as Orsino says of Sebastian: "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons, / A natural perspective, that is and is not!" (5.1.210-11). This two-in-one paradox, "that is and is not," raises questions about the relationship of the individual person to a larger whole that speaks to the way in which the carnivalesque helps to position the flesh in relationship to the spirit, and temporality to eternity. By fashioning the individual against the backdrop of the eternal, Shakespeare largely affirms the carnivalesque notion that the path to the spirit is achieved, not by negating the flesh, but, as scholar Milla Riggio articulates it "through the flesh."

Sebastian, Viola's long-lost twin brother, identifies the spirit as "grossly clad" within the body when he says, "A spirit I am indeed; / But am in that dimension grossly clad / Which from the womb I did participate" (5.1.230-232). The idea of the spirit as enclosed within the body is,

of course, a commonplace, but what is significant about that notion for the carnivalesque understanding of personhood is the way in which the flesh becomes the conduit to the spirit, and, ultimately, to the larger “spirit” or sense of community, in opposition to isolation, that characterizes Carnival. Bakhtin writes on concepts of the body in Renaissance society, linking it both to the earth and to what he calls a “bodily whole.” He says:

However divided, atomized, individualized were the ‘private’ bodies, Renaissance realism did not cut off the umbilical cord which tied them to the fruitful womb of the earth. Bodies could not be considered for themselves; they represented a material bodily whole and therefore transgressed the limits of their isolation. The private and universal were still blended in a contradictory unity. The Carnival spirit still reigned in the depths of Renaissance literature (Bakhtin 23).

If disguise—and particularly trans-gender disguise—can release the essence of a person, ideally connected with others, the key to what Bakhtin calls “the Carnival spirit” lies in the notion of the whole, in opposition to individual isolation. The festive celebrates the communal, its greatest enemy being an individual’s prideful self-love. Malvolio—who is recurrently called a “woodcock” (2.5.79) and “a rare turkey-cock” (2.5.28-29), with implied punning emphasis on the “cock” – epitomizes self-love. He is incapable, therefore, of comprehending the notion of a fluid soul or a communal whole, as illustrated in his Act 4 scene 2 exchange with Feste:

MALVOLIO. I am no more mad than you are. Make the trial of it in any constant question.

FESTE. What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wildfowl?

MALVOLIO. That the soul of our grandam might haply inhabit a bird.

FESTE. What thinks't thou of his opinion?

MALVOLIO. I think nobly of the soul, and in no way approve his  
opinion. (46- 53)

Malvolio is incapable of seeing credit in the concept of a fluid soul. His thinking “nobly” of the soul suggests a discrete, fixed concept that is linked not only to his own sense of self, but also to his hypocritical ambitious desire to enter the “nobility.” This notion leaves him open to the seductions of Maria, who in her letter luring him into the trap of thinking Olivia is in love with him specifically asks him to “cast thy humble slough and appear fresh,” that is, to shed his “humble” skin (as a snake sloughs its skin) and appear fresh in clothes that she suggests will better his station, but in reality, only make him ridiculous. In contrast, Feste suggests that the soul can be actualized in different forms, not unlike what he is doing with disguise.

As the embodiment of the festive spirit in *Twelfth Night*, Feste further illustrates the degree to which the catalyst for the realization of the spiritual within the physical is music. Sensing a spiritual quality in Feste’s music, in 2.3, Toby asks him “shall we rouse the night-owl in a catch that will draw three souls out of one weaver?” (2.3.55-57) Feste nourishes the souls of those he sings to. He brings them in union with each other. And in this play, that finally is the essence of personhood.

### Time

Shakespeare wrote during an epoch when concepts of Time were moving from what was prior (before the clock) to something modern and mechanical—a conflict Shakespeare dramatizes with Malvolio, who believes in the precision of time as minutes and hours, and Toby, who sees through these artificial markers. Characters with non-linear sense of time use creative metaphors, such as Viola who imagines time as untangling a knot (1.2.39-40) or Feste’s



“whirligig that brings in his revenges” (5.1.366-7). Malvolio describes time as a “treasure” not to be “wasted,” and says he will “wind up [his] watch” (2.5.56), a symbol of status he hopes to own. Time, in his sense, is inactive and something to be exploited by the human.

The transition of one time to another left Elizabethans with a need for prior time that could be experienced during festive days. In the sixteenth century, as the mercantile need for workaday time measurements expanded, there was much contention over how the calendar should be adjusted to allow enough time, that is, enough available days, for both work and play. The festive days were heavily linked to feasting, and with Carnival as the greatest feast of all, carnivalesque time may be understood not as the absence of time, but as a more fluid understanding of time that links the physical to the metaphysical. The flesh experiences physical time; it is mortal and thus inescapably temporal. The spirit connects to metaphysical time because it is eternal. Although the concepts of eternity and temporality are seemingly opposed, as in eternity time itself ceases to exist, the carnivalesque connects the two – through the flesh the spirit is reached, through the temporal the eternal is accessed. Feasting, indulgence, communal time, the time that seems “wasted” to Malvolio, is in fact “spent” in activities that enrich life in ways the measured time of the workaday cannot achieve.

In *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, historian Edward Muir describes how in sixteenth century England the exact ratio of work days and festive or feast days was in constant debate. The calendar changed as rapidly as the political and religious landscape. At the beginning of the sixteenth century there were between forty and fifty designated feast days, which to Puritans and others involved in the development of commerce felt like an excessive amount of sanctioned occasions for lecherous indulgence.<sup>15</sup> Thus, time and its use became associated with concepts of

---

<sup>15</sup> Muir 84

morality and immorality. Calendar reform, for Protestants, was “an aspect of social discipline, an attempt to reduce drunkenness and idleness, the perverse by-products of the church of Rome” (84). This led to the consolidation by Henry VIII in 1536 of local feasts into one day in order to prevent constant interruptions of the work routine. However, once Elizabeth came to power, she allowed the traditionalists, angered by the consolidation, to continue their observance of the old calendar.<sup>16</sup>

The dual rhythms of the workaday and festive define the division of time in the era. Muir writes on a certain symbiosis of the two when he argues that “The rhythms of work themselves created a sense of periodicity that demanded respite from labor, restrictive rules, and habitual antagonism.... [t]he opposition between work days and feast days came from their distinctive rhythms that demanded the counterpoint of the other” (83). Festive time served a certain psychological need of Europeans for pre-clock, or prior time, for “The expanding control of ritual structures of time over the lives of people created the need for less structured outlets, for liminal moments entirely outside of the normal rules of time. Such outlets were provided by Carnival and carnivalesque festivals” (85). Therefore, as the carnivalesque came to coexist with the clock and calendar world, it still maintained its fluid and ambiguous sense of prior time and fulfilled what Muir calls a “need” for that loosened structure. Michael Bristol says:

Theater shares with Carnival the experience of a liminal time outside the schedules of honest work and honest devotion; in fact, this is the basis for the polemic against the stage and for the frequently asserted charge that the theater is a resort of idleness. The time of performance is a festive time in which symbolic activity or play replaces productive labor (CI 647)

---

<sup>16</sup> Muir 84

The tensions and conflicts of time within the play reflect the major shift taking place in Early Modern Europe. Until the end of the fourteenth century, keeping time entailed the Ancient Egyptian or Roman method of segmenting intervals between daylight and darkness and “As a result of this system, the length of the hour varied with the season and whether it was daylight or nighttime-hour” (Muir 84). The sense of time is wholly in tune with the rhythms of nature. Around the fifteenth century, “This system began to change with the introduction of mechanical clocks that divided the entire day into twenty-four equal segments, creating a different conception of the hour because of the mechanical laws of weight-driven ratchet gears” (Muir 84). The equal hours of the clock were originally most important to fifteenth century monks for segmenting of prayer. Christianity itself relied on arbitrary differentiation of days for:

Liturgical seasons and weeks, in fact hinged upon the definition of certain days as different than others. The notion of differences, which underlay the entire arbitrary structure of the calendar, resided in distinctions among days, which created borders between the seasons and the weeks and which provided the reference points for the two major cycles of movable feasts (Muir 81).

Sir Toby speaks of how measuring the hours results in arbitrary markers of time when he equivocates between “early” and “late” bedtimes to Sir Andrew:

To be up after midnight and to go to bed then, is  
early: so that to go to bed after midnight is to go  
to bed betimes. (2.3.6-9)

Furthermore, nighttime and winter were especially linked to festivals. Laroque writes that “Night seems suited to festivity. Itself a kind of mask, it provokes illusions and stimulates the

imagination, constituting a natural invitation to disguise. Besides, during the winter season, nights are longer” (*SFW* 15).

In Shakespeare’s plays, markers of either workaday or leisure time are constantly interrupting each other. In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia says, “The clock upbraids me with the waste of time” (3.1.124) when it strikes in the middle of her flirtations with Viola/Cesario. Malvolio is a “time-pleaser” who always instructs others on how to use their time. When he imagines lecturing Toby, the use of time is a critical part of that. He says, “I frown the while; and perchance wind up my watch” while telling him, “you waste the treasure of your time with a foolish knight” (2.5.56, 73-4). Sir Andrew is a foolish knight who does not treasure his time as Malvolio does. In the midst of his revels with Sir Toby, he says, “I’ll stay a month longer. I am a fellow o’ the strangest mind i’ the world; I delight in masques and revels sometimes altogether” (1.3.99-101) Tilley writes that “in a moment of regret [Sir Andrew] repents that he has misspent his time in fencing, dancing, and bear-baiting.” Tilley says that “Shakespeare makes high comedy here and elsewhere out of the exaggerated preciseness of the extreme Puritan in insisting upon the proper time of day, place, and company for allowed amusements” (SP 556). When Feste asks Toby if he should sing a song of love or good life, Sir Andrew says, “I care not for good life,” and we have to imagine he means “good” in the sense of moral or “proper” as tied to Malvolio (2.3.36,34).

Feste sings:

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;  
 Present mirth hath present laughter;  
 What's to come is still unsure:  
 In delay there lies no plenty;  
 Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,

Youth's a stuff will not endure. (2.3.45-50)

There is little certain about the future except that we age. The brevity of life is linked to the idea of a dying body, “youth’s stuff,” which makes time very physical. It is this realization of temporality that emphasizes the importance of enjoying the moment. This does not mean one can always be in “playing holidays,” but time should be made for “mirth and laughter” because those activities make life livable.

Leisure time was largely associated with feast days, and as Bakhtin writes, “The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the reoccurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness” (9). While there is a sense of the body as temporal and the greater world as eternal in *Twelfth Night*, it is not until *The Merchant of Venice*, to be studied in the next chapter, that we will see leisure time seriously linked to food and feasting. Nevertheless, in *Twelfth Night*, the sense of physical time can be identified with the temporality of the flesh while metaphysical time evokes the eternal in connection to the soul, the soul that is nourished by activities of imagination and leisure.

Feste says, “The whirligig of time brings in his revenges” (5.1.366). He has a cyclical idea of time, which acts as the great equalizer, and in this case, as a revenger who is the instrument of comic, rather than tragic, justice. He recognizes time’s great power while also reducing it to a small toy, a pinwheel. Life here on Earth will be sorted out, and there is a sense of what goes around comes around, but the reduction of this to a whirling toy indicates that against the backdrop of eternity these small things do not matter so much, and this is true, at least in the decidedly comic world of *Twelfth Night*.

Barber notes how the “holiday occasion and the comedy are parallel manifestations of the same pattern of culture, of a way that men can cope with their life” (58). In *Twelfth Night*, festive

activity is a force of positive social good most basically in the joy and relief it brings to those who engage with it. It is a cathartic force in the community, and those who deny festivity, comedy, and laughter end in isolation. The most successful use of the festive is when it can transcend the stifling and confining in a way that both liberates the individual and bonds the community. The carnivalesque encapsulates the tools necessary for playing with literal, physical, metaphorical, and metaphysical boundaries of reality. The play ultimately leans towards the fluid order of the festive, while the boundaries of the Lenten exist to be transgressed. In this comic world, the carnivalesque is all about reaching the deeper, the more essential, which paradoxically connects to the greater, the bigger, the universal, the eternal.

In essence, Shakespeare conveys a worldview through the carnivalesque that resists rigid and concrete interpretations of reality. In Shakespeare's more fluid understanding of existence, concepts of Place, Persons, and Time are multi-dimensional and complex. Rather than workaday notions that divide, contain, and segregate, the carnivalesque works as a merging force, where opposites can meet, either in conflict or mediation. The carnivalesque provides physical and conceptual tools Shakespeare utilizes not only in this festive play, but throughout his canon. In the next half of this thesis, I will be looking at the two plays which take place in the home of Carnival, Venice. In the comic and evergreen world of *Twelfth Night*, the carnivalesque functions in a way that is personally and communally cathartic. When the "normal world" of Venice becomes a part of his plays, the function of the carnivalesque becomes more ambiguous.

## Introduction to the Shakespeare's Venetian Plays

### *The Merchant of Venice and Othello: The Moor of Venice*

Of Shakespeare's thirty-six plays, thirteen are set in Italy, in locations ranging from Verona to classical Rome. Two of these plays, *The Merchant of Venice* (composed c. 1596-1599) and *Othello: The Moor of Venice* (composed c. 1604-1605) were set in Venice, Italy's most famous Carnival city. Both plays bear the name of the city itself in their title; both reflect aspects of Venetian history well known in the early modern period: its economic stability (associated with the Merchant) and its cosmopolitan nature (reflected in the prominence of the Moor). While Carnival itself is not mentioned in either play, *The Merchant of Venice* does contain a carnivalesque masque and both include carnivalesque modes—disguises and masking, both literal and metaphorical, music, revelry, the use of a particular kind of wit, chari-vari gatecrashing, and social and cultural inversions. These are, however, used to opposite ends in the two plays, which find their place along a continuum from the brightly festive *Twelfth Night* to the darkly tragic *Othello*, with *The Merchant of Venice* in between.

Laroque emphatically asserts that Shakespeare was influenced by Italian Carnival. In fact, he “was the first playwright in England who gave such paramount importance to Italy in his drama.” He makes this connection through Italian theater, which was heavily influenced by the tradition of Carnival. He writes that “it seems likely that carnival shows and plays became associated with Italian comedy and thus left their imprint on Shakespeare's creative imagination.” Among these effects are the festive tools I have largely discussed in the prior chapter. Laroque describes the festive modes akin to the Italian Carnival, “Shakespeare's representation of Italy and performance of scenes borrowed from popular drama should include

carnavalesque elements with masques, torches, fifes and drums, cross-dressing, as well as more subversive aspects such as those concerned with sexuality and satire” (SIC 204). Between *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, all these modes come into play.

One of Laroque’s central points is that carnivalesque oppositions had a strong influence on Shakespeare’s Italian plays. He argues:

Italy, alongside with its Carnival tradition and satirical comedies provided Shakespeare with a vast stock-in-trade of stories and characters. This was the world which inspired his daring generic inventions in plays where laughter and terror, joy and disaster are constantly on each other’s heels, thus making the ebullient life, the energy and the exuberance that are among the hallmarks of Shakespeare’s specific genius and extraordinary modernity (SIC 219).

On the whole, for the characters who play and engage the carnivalesque, the bright side of the carnivalesque is affirmed. This is ambiguously true of *The Merchant of Venice*, to be discussed in Chapter Two. In *Othello: The Moor of Venice*, however, the concept of fluid reality is manipulated demonically by Iago so that tools of the festive all become perverted to the point of total destruction of the individual and of the community (see Chapter Three). Both plays convey the deeper truth of Shakespeare’s fluid, carnivalesque-inflected world view.

While *The Merchant of Venice* resolves itself in a reasonably bright carnivalesque way in its return to Belmont, the ending is problematic in several respects. There are great ambiguities that surround the power dynamics of the couples at the end and the scapegoating of Shylock looms over the play despite the fact that he seems all but forgotten by the characters. *The*



*Merchant of Venice* is darkly tinged with that sense of excluding the other, one of the negative ramifications of putting community above all else.

Laroque argues that “Shakespeare debunks the hypocrisy of the Venetian Carnival, used and abused in so many ways, just as he exposes the ambiguous attitudes of the Christian husbands who never forget their interests, even if they claim that they act in the name of religion” (SIC 214). He focuses on the scapegoating of Shylock as part of the darker side of the carnivalesque. He writes that “carnival could simultaneously become a byword for inclusion and hospitality as well as a means of expressing satirical laughter against strangers, a way of using festive customs as part of the traditional cathartic ritual of blaming the violence and sins of the city on the scapegoated alien in a then-enforced Christian community” (SIC 219).

The darkest side of Carnival, however, goes unmentioned by Laroque in his analyses of these plays. Ritual aggression is a part of carnival; it is contained, it does not pose a threat to order... unless it turns violent. Muir explains how “Most of the time in most places, Carnival, and carnivalesque festivities, and charivari expressed the habitual social conflicts of normal life, provided outlets for those conflicts, and stimulated creative solutions to dangerous situations that were fraught with the potential for violence” (112). Occasionally, however, Carnival transgressed its own boundaries between contained, ritualistic aggression and actual violence. Muir describes the “Cruel Carnival” in 1511 that began with the tensions a long feuding Italian family.<sup>17</sup> He writes how “Every year at Carnival time tensions between the two sides escalated...

---

<sup>17</sup> “The Ritual nature of feuding is strikingly evident in the most famous Italian vendetta of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the 200-year-long struggle between the Zambarlano and Strumiero factions in Friuli, which serves as an inspiration for *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*” (113)

the ‘Cruel Carnival’ of 1511 was bloodiest of all.” After ritual contests of insulting the enemy the Carnival became one of real violence when militia men turned their aggression to the aristocratic families on the opposing side of the historic family feud when a group of young men blamed aristocratic families for their grievances in a sort of scape-goating en masse that escalated to massacre. Disregarding the rules of ritual aggression, the night turned into violent chaos for “Cruel Carnival rioters most graphically displayed the connection between carnivalesque mockery and vendetta vengeance” (114).

The revenge vendetta of Cruel Carnival plays a role in both *The Merchant* and *Othello*. In *The Merchant*, Shylock craves a pound of flesh from Antonio, and he tries his best to achieve it legally. However, the dark face of Carnival shaded into *The Merchant* as much around the scapegoating of the Jew, as around Shylock’s grotesque desire for a pound of flesh. Shylock creates a temporary disorder, but one that Portia in carnivalesque disguise can maneuver, though only by removing the entire society of Christians at the end out of Venice to Belmont. The scapegoating isolation of Shylock is not so easily resolved. The revenge vendetta plays a much more terrifying role in *Othello*, a tragedy where Iago’s revenge leads not to disorder, but to chaos as Iago channels it through even the brightest of carnivalesque modes.

## Chapter Two:

### Shakespeare's Venetian Comedy: *The Merchant of Venice*

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the workaday features prominently in the economic and law-abiding world of Venice. This is different from *Twelfth Night*, where the workaday existed more conceptually, limited as it was to Malvolio's Puritan-ethic, and posed no real threat to festive values. In this play, Shylock, the great negator of festivity, is similar to Malvolio in his "kill-joy qualities" (Barber 8) and his "Puritan austerity" (Gross 131).<sup>18</sup> Shylock is a far more powerful character than Malvolio in part because he lives in an established workaday world, a world of strict rules of Venetian law and commerce on which he thrives. Negating the festive is an essential aspect of Shylock's understanding of order. He channels even his revenge, which is ironically carnivalesque in nature, within the rules of business and commerce. Portia, on the other hand, most effectively subverts workaday order. She most fully incorporates the bright-faced values of the festive into her everyday life. In this play, the characters who play with workaday boundaries of Place, Persons, and Time are the most successful.

Few scholars connect this play to festivity because its economic focus seems quite contradictory to the notion. There are at least two, however, who do see the connection. Laroque and Barber both describe an opposition between kill-joy and revelry and in both analyses, the scholars argue that wealth plays a significant role in defining the opposition. Barber argues that the ill use of wealth is anti-festive but that wealth itself can be used in a festive way. For him, it is the ill-use of wealth that differentiates Shylock from the Christians. Laroque ties the play

---

<sup>18</sup> Laroque writes that "we detect in the figure of Shylock a kind of amalgamation of the typical Jewish moneylender and the Puritan whose keen desire for profit had become proverbial in the Elizabethan theater" (*SFW* 256).

specifically to the carnivalesque and argues that there is an obsessiveness of wealth on both sides so that scapegoating Shylock is hypocritical.

For Barber, the idea of beneficence is an essential aspect of festivity. The title of the play indicates that “the beneficence of civilized wealth, the something-for-nothing which wealth gives to those who use it graciously to live together in a humanly knit group” (172). Wealth by nature is not anti-festive; “Our econometric age makes us think of wealth chiefly as a practical matter, an abstract concern of work, not a tangible joy for festivity.” The difference is that “for the new civilizations of the Renaissance, wealth glowed in luminous metal, shone in silks, perfumed the air in spices” (167). The Christians in the play embody beneficent wealth. Antonio is the merchant who trades in metals, silks, and spices, the profit from which he gives to his spendthrift, best friend Bassanio. Antonio and Portia give away their wealth impractically but in so doing, cultivate human relationships.

In the 1590’s London and Venice were both cosmopolitan commercial centers. Barber writes that “London was becoming conscious of itself as wealthy and cultivated, so that it could consider great commercial Venice as a prototype. And yet there were at the same time traditional suspicions of the profit motive and newly urgent anxieties about the power of money to disrupt human relations” (167). He explains how “Shylock’s name has become a byword because of the superb way that he embodies the evil side of the power of money, its ridiculous and pernicious consequences in anxiety and destructiveness” (168). Thus, Shylock is anti-festive in his self-interested use of money compared to the beneficent Christians. Laroque, on the other hand, argues that the Christians are hypocrites because they reprimand Shylock for his greed when they themselves are greedy. He argues that “Shakespeare debunks the hypocrisy of the Venetian carnival, used and abused in so many ways, just as he exposes the ambiguous attitudes of the

Christian husbands who never forget their interests, even if they claim that they act in the name of religion” (SIC 214).

Both Barber and Laroque use festivity in this play, as tied to wealth, as a way to put Shylock on one side and the Christians on the other. However, there is a greater dialectic at work than the analyses of Laroque and Barber realize. While grouped together with the Christian revelers, Antonio is a melancholic man, and despite his disdain for festivity, Shylock’s character is rather carnivalesque, especially as he dons a mask of “kindness” in act one and in the nature of his bond of flesh.

Shylock and Antonio, despite their different uses of wealth, are economic men who follow the rules of the workaday world. Neither knows how to use festive nor carnivalesque modes or meanings in a way that could benefit them. It is the other characters in the play, who use the carnivalesque to subvert rigid order, that are the most successful. They are the ones who end up coupled off by the end of the play while Shylock and Antonio remain alone.

### Place

Although the opposition of Place in *The Merchant of Venice* is between the commercial center of Venice and the essential fairyland of Belmont, the play also contains two actual households: that of Portia in Belmont and of Shylock in Venice. While in *Twelfth Night*, Illyria contains both of the oppositional households, in *The Merchant of Venice* the two households are, literally, worlds apart—separated by geographical space but also by their overall ethos.

Shylock’s home is a place where the workaday is taken to extreme excess; it is a place without pleasure. Feasting, music, disguise, and romance—or in other words all that thrives in Belmont—are banned from Shylock’s home. As with *Twelfth Night* there is gate-crashing. Lusty suitors, whether the Venetian Christians or foreigners from abroad, threaten or invade these

domestic spaces through festive modes. A Christian masque affronts Shylock's home, as his daughter escapes disguised as a masculine torchbearer; suitors with wooing games invade Portia's. The values of the two households are apparent in how they cope with actual or potential intrusions of their domestic space: as in the prior play, the one who uses carnivalesque modes is more successful.

Shylock tries to maintain a household of strict order. Scholar Roy Booth notes how he "identifies completely with his house, which shares personality with him" (24). He, like Olivia, tries to keep the boundaries of his home closed to the public. Crane writes that Olivia is "especially concerned to enforce what she sees as suitable behavior within her stronghold" (103). Shylock tires to fortify against the festive. When he hears of an impending masque, he says:

What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica,  
 Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum  
 And the vile squealing of the wry-neck'd fife,  
 Clamber not you up to the casements then,  
 Nor thrust your head into the public street  
 To gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces,  
 But stop my house's ears (I mean my casements).  
 Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter  
 My sober house. (2.5.29-37)

Shylock does not want his sober and sacred space corrupted by the sights and sounds of Carnival. As we know, a disdain for music is a warning sign of villainy. Laroque explains how "Like the Puritan, Shylock is alarmed by festivals. The mad dissipation is an affront to his own austere religion, his manic, almost grotesque avarice and his taste for private life strictly

protected from external intrusions” (*SFW* 256). The carnivalesque, however, is attracted to closed doors and locked up spaces, and the carnivalesque is what Jessica engages to escape. The revelers do not intrude in, but rather Jessica, cross-dressed as a man, window-crashes out into the open world.<sup>19</sup>

Because Shylock keeps festivity out of his home, there is nothing to bond him with his daughter Jessica or servant Lancelet. Jessica and Lancelet, however, may bond in their own private laughter. Jessica calls her home “hell” and tells Lancelet that his role as a “merry devil, didst rob it of some taste of tediousness” (2.3.1-3). When he has left him, Shylock says, “The patch is kind enough, but a huge feeder; Snail-slow in profit, and he sleeps by day more than the wild-cat. Drones hive not with me; therefore, I part with him to one that I would have him help to waste his borrow'd purse” (2.5.47-52). Shylock is happy to send his servant Lancelet to waste the money of his enemy instead of his own, thinking of him only in terms of profitability. The same could be said when his daughter abandons the home too, stealing his money. It is unclear as to what he cares for more, when Solanio reports of him having shouted in the streets, “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!” (2.8.20). Shylock’s relationship to Lancelet is one of authority tinged by his unwillingness to feed or clothe his servant;<sup>20</sup> his relationship with his daughter, whom he professes to be his “flesh and blood” and whose departure is tragic for him, is

---

<sup>19</sup> Laroque connects masque scene in this play to gate-crashing in *Romeo and Juliet*. He writes: “the masque scene (2.4-7) refers to a time of merrymaking and carnivalesque exuberance when Jessica secretly leaves her father’s house at night in order to elope with her Christian lover, Lorenzo. This in fact reverses the Verona Carnival in *Romeo and Juliet* where the feast consists in a group of masks gate-crashing into Capulet’s house only to be welcomed by the host along with the invited guests (213).

more complex, but he does attempt to lock her up in a “sober house.” His house is devoid of those activities that cultivate community.<sup>21</sup>

Portia, like Jessica, uses carnivalesque modes to subvert the order imposed on her by her father. Their precise predicaments, however, stand in contrast to each other. Shylock does not want to leave anything up to chance as he orders Jessica exactly what to do while he is away. Portia’s father makes a lottery of his daughter’s future. Jessica is ruled by an over-bearing father’s severity, and Portia is ruled by an absent father’s game.<sup>22</sup> One father closes his daughter away from the world while the other exposes her fully. Portia complains about the gate-crashers when she says, “Whiles we shut the gates upon one wooer, another knocks at the door” (1.3.133-134). Suitors travel to Belmont from across the world to try their luck at Portia’s hand. She is frustrated by her lack of choice and tells Nerissa as much: “the will of a living daughter curbed by / the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that / I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?” (1.2.24-26). Tormented by the prospect of marrying a man whom she does not respect, because of the will of a man who is no longer alive, Portia ventilates her dismay through carnivalesque jest.<sup>23</sup>

While Shylock tried to lock out the world, Portia maintains her authority through a carnivalesque mediation of order and disorder. She adheres to her father’s rules, greeting every suitor with hospitality, but maintains herself through her mockery. Bakhtin describes carnivalesque laughter: “this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time

---

<sup>21</sup> In contrast, when Bassanio—one of the most festive of the characters—takes in Lancelot, his first actions are to clothe him and to ask him to prepare supper (2.2.14-15; see time section of this chapter)

<sup>22</sup> For the rules of the lottery see (1.2.27-33)

<sup>23</sup> In this play, Portia uses mockery to express what she did not value in men. In *Othello* Iago takes that comical mode and inverts it for perverted misogyny (2.1.140-175).



mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival” (12). This is the laughter of Portia. She says of one suitor, “God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man. / In truth, I know it is a sin to be a mocker” (1.2.56-58). To her, the Scotsman is unmanly for his cowardice for, “he hath a neighborly charity in him, for he / borrowed a box of the ear of the Englishman and / swore he would pay him again when he was able” (1.2.79-82). She finds that the German drinks excessively so, “when / he is best, he is a little worse than a man, and / when he is worst, he is little better than a beast” (1.2.86-89). Later she suggests that a wine glass be placed on the wrong casket so that the German chooses incorrectly. One criticism of the County Palatine shows Portia’s disdain for sad men, for “He doth nothing but frown. . . he hears merry tales and / smiles not: I fear he will prove the weeping / philosopher when he grows old, being so full of / unmannerly sadness in his youth” (1.2.46-50). By inverting her words, we learn what Portia actually values through what she mocks: for her, a man should be courageous, moderate, and merry. She uses a carnivalesque coping mechanism effectively to handle the imposing suitors.

When Portia does meet the man whom she wants to marry, her carnivalesque strategies morph from caustic wit to subversive action. She meets her father game for game. She plays music as Bassanio makes his choice that gives a clue to the answer: “*Tell me where is fancy bred,/ Or in the heart, or in the head? / How begot, how nourished?*” (3.2.65-67). The words “bred” “head” and “nourished” all rhyme with the metal of the correct casket (lead).<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Though her assistance to Bassanio, whose love would probably have led him to choose the lead casket on his own, is subtly subversive –visible if at all, in song only –, the possibility does reinforce her use of carnivalesque strategies.

Once the casket game has been successfully played, and Portia is chosen by—or chooses—a man she loves, Belmont assumes the character it will sustain for the rest of the play. It is a place where money, untainted by commerce, flows freely. For the rest of the play, the strangers who come to visit Belmont will stay there and live together. Portia casts off her role of diligent daughter for a new one of diligent wife. She turns herself, and her belongings, over to Bassanio:

Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours  
 Is now converted. But now I was the lord  
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
 Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,  
 This house, these servants, and this same myself  
 Are yours, my lord's. (3.2.170-178)

The “sum” of her is his. If this play were *Taming of the Shrew*, the play would end here.<sup>25</sup>

However, once Bassanio leaves to save Antonio, the subversive Portia comes back into focus, as she dons a masculine disguise and follows right after him.

At the time of this play, Venice was well known both for its court of law and its commerce. This play includes both. Antonio and Shylock first meet on the Rialto to create their bond. But it is in the courtroom where all the places merge and the characters meet. Despite Shylock and Portia's different senses of order, they must adhere to the court of law, in which justice does triumph but only in a highly carnivalesque way: The Duke would be forced to enforce the bond. But Portia, dressed as a man, enters first to try to persuade Shylock to mercy and then when he refuses, she turns the letter of the law, by which he has attempted to enforce

---

<sup>25</sup> (*Shr.* 5.1.145-180).

his bond, against him. While this seems to be a triumph for the Christians and their sense of order, the strictness of the law that Portia enforces seems even here too rigid. After losing his bond of flesh and being denied even the principle of his loan, he is offered Christian “mercy,” to be allowed to convert to Christianity. With all these losses Shylock offers up his life:

Nay, take my life and all. Pardon not that.

You take my house when you do take the prop that doth sustain my house;

You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live. (4.1.390-393)

In summary, Shylock orders his home in line with rigid workaday rules which are begging to be subverted by the carnivalesque. He keeps his house locked with his daughter inside and commands her to reject all things festive. Jessica escapes in a sort of reverse gate-crash into the public world to join the masque with her betrothed. Thus, Shylock’s authority over his home is subverted by the carnivalesque until ultimately claimed by it—when he loses his home in court after the subversion of a different woman dressed as a man. In contrast, Portia orders her home in Belmont in an order allied to imaginative ideals: directed by poetry, romance, and music. However, it is her father’s authority over her marriage choice that exposes her to the world. Merging the public into the private sphere, she uses the carnivalesque to cope with her frustration with wit until she meets the man she wants to marry and arguably takes subversive action. Shylock’s order is strict and his boundaries closed. His desire to keep his private space segregated from the public sphere ultimately leads to Jessica’s sense of stifling containment. Portia mediates her authority in the affront of gate-crashing suitors and maintains order by using the carnivalesque to subvert behind the scenes. By the end, Shylock loses his home and Portia and her friends are all under her roof.

### Persons

Generally, characters tend toward the festive or the workaday in their overall mode of life, but even these distinctions are sometimes too simplistic. In the first scene of the play, Gratiano describes nature's strangest kind of men:

Now, by two headed Janus,  
 Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time  
 Some that will evermore peep through their eyes  
 And laugh like parrots at a bag-piper,  
 And others of such vinegar aspect  
 That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile  
 Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable. (1.1.54-59)<sup>26</sup>

There are personalities so fixed to either the festive or workaday that they become preposterous. This is why he does not understand Antonio who is wholly tied to his melancholy. Gratiano calls it "a will full stillness" (1.1.90) Antonio explains himself: "I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano, / A stage where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one" (1.1.81-83). Gratiano counters, then "let me play the fool," he says, "with mirth and merriment let old wrinkles come" (1.1.84-85). If one must play a part, then why should one not play with their parts? The carnivalesque, which resists rigid confinement, allows for many modes of personal expression. All essential characters, excluding Antonio, use the carnivalesque in one way or another.

The characters do, however, tend toward the festive or the workaday in their overall mode of life. Gratiano, whose name means free or without charge, is perhaps a watered-down,

---

<sup>26</sup> See Laroque for more information on the bag-pipes as an instrument of Carnival (*SFW* 49)

younger version of Sir Toby, the kind of Toby who can still pass in the realm of respectability. He is nevertheless the most excessive amongst the characters who play. Bassanio indicates that Gratiano talks to excess: “Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice” (1.1.121-122). Indeed, his speech is more carnivalesque than any of the actions we can witness on stage as he constantly combines analogies of sexual and gastronomic images of flesh. He justifies his gift of gab with a witty phrase, for “silence is only commendable / In a neat's tongue dried and a maid not vendible” (1.1.118-119). He can always be counted on for a good bawdy joke; he even ends the play with one referring to his wife’s “ring,” a pun on the keepsake ring he received from his wife Nerissa and her vagina. Gratiano describes sexual relations in terms of appetite (as later Iago will do); he asks, “who riseth from a feast / With that keen appetite that he sits down?” (2.6.9-10)

Antonio is easily the Lenten figure. He does not participate in the joy of revels, he is—as his opening line suggests—naturally melancholic. Antonio is detached from his flesh. He gives it away freely in a bond; he does not indulge it either sexually, for he is single, or with food, for he is emaciated by the end of the play—when he describes himself as “a tainted wether of the flock...meetest for death” (4.1.116-115).<sup>27</sup> He even perhaps implies a connection between himself and Christ in this image of a ram. Antonio’s Lenten characterization differs from others I have discussed; unlike Olivia he remains melancholic throughout the play and unlike both Malvolio and Shylock, he is not Puritanical; he is generous and giving rather than self-centered.

And then there is the greater cluster of characters who are decidedly more festive, which seems fitting for a comedy. In the group of festive characters there is most centrally Bassanio whose opening in the play is “When shall we laugh? Say, When?” (1.1.69-70). Others include

---

<sup>27</sup> Folgers: “wether: male sheep, ram (usually neutered ram)” (148).

his friends Gratiano and Lorenzo, ultimately the clown Lancelot, and in a more complex way Shylock's daughter Jessica who abandons her father by means of a masque (though, oddly, she is never "merry" when she hears "sweet music." (5.1.77)).

Most of all, there is Portia, associated more than anyone else with music, who upholds the highest ideals of the carnivalesque, and uses wit and disguise to express herself and, ultimately, to save the community. Shylock, while decidedly anti-festive, is very carnivalesque: he is witty, his pound of flesh "bond" is grotesque and quite literally connects to the language of Carnival ("carne" meaning meat). If Portia embodies the positive spirit of Carnival, she is set in opposition to Shylock who is associated with its more nefarious qualities, echoes of what Muir terms Cruel Carnival. With his revenge vendetta Shylock tries to mediate this carnivalesque "pound of flesh" into the everyday but is thwarted by Portia—the most successful carnivalesque synthesizer. Superficially, with their respective connections to Belmont and the Rialto, Portia and Shylock represent the opposition of festive and workaday Person, but more important is the outcome of their respective uses of carnivalesque modes to achieve their goals. Portia prevails.

Portia incorporates carnivalesque strategies into her everyday life in the way that she maintains her public and private self. She reduces gender roles to performative parts, once when she is playing the role of the ideal woman and once when she is playing the role of a man. During her wedding to Bassanio, she calls herself "an unlessoned girl, unschooled, [and] unpracticed" and calls him her "lord, her governor, her king" (3.2.163,169). She must assume this virginal, deferential role, before she can subvert it with carnivalesque modes to express more essential qualities of herself. It is through this kind of synthesis that she maintains her authority.

Before Portia can go to court and save the day as the lawyer Balthasar, she dons a male disguise. She describes her idea of assertive masculinity when she says that she will "turn two

mincing steps / Into a manly stride, and speak of frays / Like a fine bragging youth, and tell quaint lies” (3.4). When in court, however, Portia does not play either the feminine or masculine performances she describes; she is, instead, her true self. She comes into the court room without bravado, but speaks with calm patience as she offers Shylock many moments to forgive. She is in fact lessoned, schooled, and practiced. Gratiano even calls her “learnèd judge” (4.1.326). In the courtroom, removed from the expectations of her everyday station in life, Portia is free to be outwardly witty and authoritative. Thus, she manifests her essential nature that we have seen glimpses of throughout the play.

Shylock is firmly anti-festive but the grotesque bond with Antonio is highly carnivalesque. He announces himself to the audience, as Iago will do, in his opening scene, as wearing a mask of “kindness,” playing a game of pretending to love and forgive Antonio; evoking the festive, he calls this game a “merry sport” and what he achieves a “merry bond” (1.3.155, 157, 185). Shylock lends Antonio money that Bassanio needs to woo Portia, which Antonio must return within three months or else forfeit a pound of his flesh. Laroque writes that “The pound-of-flesh motif serves to carnivalise business transactions” (*SIC* 214).

Shylock constantly plays with images of cannibalism. When he sees Antonio he says, “Your Worship was the last man in our mouths” (1.3.62). When he leaves for the dinner invitation with the Christians, he says, “I’ll go in hate, to feed upon the prodigal Christian” (2.5.15-16). Scholar Kim Hall links cannibalism to a Jewish stereotype, when she says, “The associations with eating and starvation link outsiders, particularly Shylock, with one of the most compelling tropes of colonialist discourse: the cannibal. Cannibalism...seemed to be one of the final lines drawn between the savage Other and the civilized self” (93). It is as if Shylock knowingly plays with this stereotype, emphasizing it in dark humor whenever he can.

When Muir describes the vendetta murders of Cruel Carnival, he notes that “some conceived of the cannibalism as fraternal, and probably carnivalesque, communal feast, however repulsive such an idea may seem. By making their victim food the rebels had turned him into prey, just as had the vendetta murderers of Antonio Savorgan” (Muir 121). I hypothesize that the name Antonio is no coincidence, for Muir also writes that Shakespeare was familiar with Cruel Carnival. Regardless, there is precedence of cannibalism as linked to the carnivalesque revenge vendetta, and indeed, several times Shylock says of Antonio’s flesh, “if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge” (3.1.53-54).

The butchering of animals is a large part of Carnival. When Muir describes the Cruel Carnival” he says, “Much of the violence toyed with the usual Carnival themes of social inversion and the butchering of animals” (Muir 114). In a grotesquely comic parody of the carnivalesque, Shylock sharpens his knife in preparation to butcher Antonio in court. In dark but witty humor, he answers a question from Bassanio,

BASSANIO. Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly?

SHYLOCK. To cut the forfeiture from that bankrupt there.

GRATIANO. Not on thy sole, but on thy soul, harsh Jew,

Thou makest thy knife keen; but no metal can,

No, not the hangman's axe, bear half the keenness

Of thy sharp envy. Can no prayers pierce thee? (4.1.123-128)

Shylock channels cruel carnivalesque modes through the law, so that his revenge vendetta is all legal. This is what makes him so dangerous. At the beginning of the play, Portia says, “The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree” (1.2.18-19). Shylock channels his passion through cold decrees of the law.



Both Shylock and Portia meet in the court with their carnivalesque games, working within the law, in a battle of revenge and forgiveness, the “bright face” of Carnival helps Portia win her case. This is a comedy that only allows for carnivalesque disorder and does not descend into the chaos we will see in *Othello*.

### Time

In *The Merchant of Venice*, it takes Bassanio three months to travel from Venice to Belmont but only a few hours to return. These idiosyncrasies frustrate modern readers. The play itself expands and contracts so that often a sense of how much time has passed is unclear. Within the plot itself, however, the rhythms akin to festive time must be mediated into everyday life.

The oppositions of festive and workaday combine in strange concert as the characters are incredibly punctual—but about their meals. There is a that workaday precision of time but always in reference to the most derivative meaning of the festive, the feast. This is a characteristic of the playful Christian community, for Shylock does not mention time. Time for Shylock is only the deadline of his bond, the date of which thwarts the betrothal feast. Beyond this, the idea of merging the carnivalesque into everyday life is most explicit in the workaday world of Venice and with regards to Bassanio’s feast. The feast does not occur on stage, but it emphasizes the prioritization of community and the necessity of making time for the needs of the body when natural rhythms of the body cannot be followed.

Bassanio’s feast dominates much of the urgency of the second act of the play, an urgency that is reflected in the structure of the play, which moves through eight short scenes rapidly. Bassanio says to Lancelet, “You may do so; but let it be so hasted that supper be ready at the farthest by five of the clock” (2.2.114-115). Later Bassanio orders Leonardo to, “Return in haste, for I do feast tonight / My best esteemed acquaintance. hie thee, go” (2.2.170-171). When

Lorenzo steals Jessica away, he too implores her to hurry for the purpose of the feast, when he says, “But come at once, / For the close night doth play the runaway, / And we are stayed for at Bassanio's feast” (2.2.50). Time hurdles forward as characters hasten to their meals. The feasts and revels of the play always occur outside the play itself. Feasts are about community and togetherness and carnivalesque feasts celebrate flesh. We do not get to witness this communion, or even the wedding feast in Belmont. But Portia describes the importance of leisure time for bonding:

for in companions  
 That do converse and waste the time together,  
 Whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love,  
 There must be needs a like proportion  
 Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit (3.4.11-15).

This is her justification for wanting to help Antonio—his spirit is akin to Bassanio’s in a bond formed over wasted time (she thus inverts Malvolio’s sense of this concept). The waste of time is not given an extended scene, however, until the end of the play when business is resolved and Time may relax in Belmont.

### Conclusion

The last act of the play ends on the island of Belmont where the community of friends have retreated. All seems right with the world, and yet, there is great ambiguity. In act 5 scene 2, Jessica and Lorenzo rest and jest under the clear night sky. “In such a night” they repeat as they tease each other with comparisons of mythic men and women who betrayed their lovers in the nighttime. In this moment, Jessica and Lorenzo connect themselves to a great mythos of human love, rife with treacheries and betrayals. Their language seems internally contradictory, as “In

such a night” suggests almost idyllic pastoral contentment, which is quickly and paradoxically undercut by the actual, epic stories of betrayal (Dido and Aeneas, Troilus and Cressida). It is as if the language itself had taken on a kind of carnivalesque disguise, internally contradictory to itself. Thus, there is an eeriness to their conversation—does Shakespeare foreshadow an unhappy end to their relationship? In the next scene, Bassanio and Gratiano must confront their wives after giving away their wedding rings. And the same question arises.

Before the arrival of the others to the house, Lorenzo looks out at the night sky and ponders man’s relationship to the heavens, defined in terms of music, the most festive of forms:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank.

Here will we sit and let the sounds of music

Creep in our ears; soft stillness and the night

Become the touches of sweet harmony.

Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven

Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st

But in his motion like an angel sings,

Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.

Such harmony is in immortal souls,

But whilst this muddy vesture of decay

Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. (5.1.62-73)

Harmony exists only amongst the heavenly bodies, but while we remain in our imperfect human bodies, we cannot hear it. The condition of humanity is imperfection, which closes us out of the immortal world imaged as “the floor of heaven...thick inlaid with...bright gold” and filled with

the music of the spheres. This is why the rules of the workaday world, which are so clean cut and rigid, are so often incompatible with the messy disorder of the human experience. The carnivalesque taps into that liminal reality of complex mixing and merging that the workaday tries so hard to regulate. Just as it seems that Lorenzo suggests that as mortals, we are cut off from the immortal, he follows with an invocation to musicians—human musicians—to “awaken Diana with a hymn” and to draw their “mistress home” with the “sweetest touches” of music, the essence of the festive world.

Because humans are flawed creatures, forgiveness is essential to a happy life. Jessica and Lorenzo finish their banter as Lorenzo says, “In such a night did pretty Jessica slander her love and he forgave it her” (5.1.26-27). Portia and Nerissa renew their vows with their husbands. The human experience brings frustration, injustice, sadness, and confusion, but in the midst of all this there are ways to make life worth living, “touches of harmony,” as Lorenzo calls it; there is earthly music, poetry, and there is love.

All this is true and bound into the happy ending of this comedy. And yet, this play is shadowed not only by the weight of Shylock’s intended vendetta, his eating of Christian flesh, but perhaps even more by this final isolation. The enforced conversion to Christianity forces him to leave the scene in Venice in Act 4 saying “I am not well,” (4.1.413) resulting not in his actual inclusion in the Christian community but in his exclusion from all community. The play has achieved its happy ending only by removing itself from Venice, returning to Belmont where within the circle of the included, forgiveness reigns and music welcomes. The bright face of the carnivalesque triumphs, but the dark shadows, which will control the tragic world of *Othello*, are not fully extinguished.

**Chapter Three:**

**Shakespeare's Venetian Tragedy: *The Moor of Venice***

All things that we ordained festival,  
 Turn from their office to black funeral:  
 Our instruments to melancholy bells,  
 Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast,  
 Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change;  
 Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corse,  
 And all things change them to the contrary.

—*Romeo and Juliet*, 4.5.84-90

Capulet gives this speech in *Romeo and Juliet* when he finds his daughter dead on the morning of her wedding day. The music, the feast, the communal gathering will now take on a new meaning. In *Othello* too, the festive modes of feasting, music, and communal revels become devoid of the positive and cathartic possibilities that they held in *The Merchant of Venice*. With *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedies* Naomi Liebler makes a play on Barber's well-known book title *Shakespeare's Festive Comedies*. She insists that "Festive tragedy' is not an oxymoron," as she moves beyond light-hearted associations to point out the original meaning of the word "festive." She writes:

The Latin root, *festum* ("feast") incorporates the sacramental, patterned, and entirely serious functions and meaning of ritual as communal activity. In this sense, the meaning of the word 'festive' expands to include 'ceremonial,' 'solemn,' 'celebratory,' and 'consecrative.' In fact, in its early use, the term 'feast' incorporated ritual, and especially sacrificial ritual. (Liebler 12)

In this sense Shakespeare's tragedies can certainly be read as festive. While Liebler does not discuss *Othello* explicitly, there are many solemn rituals in the play. Desdemona makes vows of friendship, and Othello ceremoniously relinquishes his profession and makes a vow to heaven, Iago lodges his vows in hell. In the last scene Desdemona's bed becomes a sacrificial altar of sorts upon which the couple lies dead.

Laroque discusses the ritual violence of Carnival, what he calls the "dark face of carnival" in the play. In *Othello*, despite "tragic overtones, we remain in a world of improvisation, trickster comedy, and carnivalesque jokes, even if Iago pushes the sexual farce to grotesque, nightmarish confines... *Othello* is another extraordinary Shakespearean variation on Italian theatrical structures" (SIC 217).<sup>28</sup> He links the generic ambivalence of Shakespeare's plays to the generic ambivalence of Carnival, which can be both joyous and aggressive. Laroque mentions that Iago pushes these activities' capacity for comedy to their most grotesque extreme. I take a different approach. Laroque asserts that there was an essentially comic dimension to each one of the activities of dark-faced carnival, but he does not touch on the very real, and not at all comic, violence integral to the carnivalesque.

Ritual or symbolic aggression is a part of Carnival and typically does not pose a threat to community order unless it turns violent. Muir writes that, "Most of the time in most places, Carnival, and carnivalesque festivities, and chari-vari expressed the habitual social conflicts of normal life, provided outlets for those conflicts, and stimulated creative solutions to dangerous

---

<sup>28</sup> Muir describes Chari-Vari: "chari-vari was a ritual of popular judgement typically employed in cases involving some apparent violation of the community's standards for proper sexual or marital behavior." At its simplest it involved the defamation of a couple or an individual by means of mocking songs... The mood was carnivalesque... if all went well according to the typical ritual script, the chari-vari ended with a payoff from the victims, a round of drinks, and an evening of revelry. If the ritual took a different turn, it could end in quarrels, fist fights, even murder" (106).

situations that were fraught with the potential for violence” (112). Beyond this, however, as earlier defined, he describes the particularly Cruel Carnival in 1511 of revels that escalated into massacre.<sup>29</sup>

In *Othello*, Iago executes his vendetta through festive modes. He employs aggressive festive modes like chari-vari (gate-crashing), cuckoldry farce, and scape-goating, but never in a way in which he can be identified as the manipulator behind-the-scenes. When in the company of others, and under his metaphorical mask of goodness, he uses witty mockery, song, and revels. He appropriates all these tools of the carnivalesque for his malign vendetta. In *the Merchant of Venice*, these modes brought laughter and catharsis, self-expression and communal bonding. Through them, the rigid structures of the everyday were subverted so that more essential truths could come to the fore. In *Othello*, Iago plays with fluid concepts of Place, Persons, and Time to fashion and unfashion reality like a demonic playwright. Iago so disrupts Othello’s perception of truth that he comes to see hell in places, demons in people, and damnation in time.

Iago synthesizes carnivalesque modes into the everyday but with opposite meanings; thus, it is the synthesis of the dialectic that turns to excess, not the other way around. For much of the play, Iago is in full control, but eventually violence turns uncontrollable, and the chaos consumes him along with his victims. In this way, though the plays are generically different, Shakespeare’s final dramatic statement in *Othello* resembles that of *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*: repression and excess are the existential threats to the ability of humanity to achieve its highest potential. Love, art, freedom of expression and the fostering of community bonds are the finest expression of humanity. When perverted, as in *Othello*, carnivalesque modes become modes of tragedy.

---

<sup>29</sup> Muir 112.

### Place

As in *The Merchant of Venice*, there are two geographically separated lands in *Othello*, the city of Venice and an island. Again the “normal” world is Venice; however, in contrast to *The Merchant*, after Act 1 the setting moves to Cyprus for the rest of the play. Unlike Belmont, a land of love, Cyprus is quite literally an isle of war. Historically real, Cyprus is a Venetian stronghold, an outpost on the edge of civilization that serves as a base camp in the war against the Turks.<sup>30</sup> Even the workaday Venice is portrayed with a darkly carnivalesque shadow, slightly off-kilter, facing transgressions against the boundaries of home and state.

Iago constantly challenges the order of Place through festive modes. In Venice, he disturbs public order and private peace through gate-crashing. The Venetian court, as we have seen, enforces the order of the land, so that the conflict resulting from Iago’s meddling is nothing that the Venetian court cannot resolve. In contrast, Iago subverts the boundaries of Place further and further in Cyprus, moving beyond temporary disorder. Iago brings hostile conflict to every dimension of Place in the play.

Iago transgresses literal boundaries of place through gate-crashing. Unlike the gate-crashing of Olivia’s and Shylock’s homes, which contributes finally to the communal bonding in those plays and is essentially festive, it becomes a more malicious mode in *Othello*. In the first scene, Iago violates the peace of the only household in the play as he and Roderigo verbally

---

<sup>30</sup> In the Battle of Lepanto, October, 1571, a coalition of Christian ships had aided the Venetian fleet in briefly defeating the Turks at sea during *The War of Cyprus*. Though this was a short-lived victory, it provides a historical analogue for the battle in this play. For the battle, see <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/modern-europe/wars-and-battles/battle-lepanto>. For a countering argument that Shakespeare simply ignores history in the Venetian-Ottoman conflict, creating only a fantasy of Venetian victory, see <http://www.phillyshakespeare.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/War-Between-Turks-and-Venice.pdf>



intrude on Brabantio's home.<sup>31</sup> It is as if the elopement of Jessica has taken place and Solanio and Salerino have joined forces to mock Shylock, but this time without any hint of comedy. Significantly, in *Othello*, the focus is on Iago's and Roderigo's rude intrusion, not on Desdemona's likely joyous elopement.

Whereas in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock locked up his own house, in *Othello*, it is Iago's disembodied voice intruding into the domestic sphere that introduces the concept of locking and sealing the house; Iago says, "Are your doors locked? (1.1.92) and "Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags! Thieves, thieves!" (1.1.97-98). Laroque notes similarities to the prior Venetian play when he writes that "The situation puts upside down the carnival scenes of *The Merchant of Venice* where the Christians take advantage of festive confusion, of masks and darkness to 'gate-crash' into Shylock's fast-bound house and get hold of his daughter and his bags" (SIC 217). Iago maintains his anonymity as Roderigo must identify himself to be rejected by Brabantio, who in frustration says,

And now in madness,  
 Being full of supper and distemp'ring draughts,  
 Upon malicious knavery dost thou come  
 To start my quiet. (1.1.106-112)<sup>32</sup>

This is the first reference to revels in this play, and Brabantio identifies eating and drinking as "malicious." His crotchety sentiments against one he presumes to be a reveler echoes Shylock's diatribe on "shallow foppery." Furthermore, he quotes Malvolio, when he says, "what are you" and "have you lost your wits?" (1.1.95, 93). Iago's disturbance of the peace of the place

---

<sup>31</sup> Brabantio would be a Senex character in *commedia dell' arte*.

<sup>32</sup> "knavery" in (1.1.11) is the reading of both the Quarto and Folio texts; my edition says "bravery."

is anti-festive; moreover, it is an instance of “carnival upside down” because unlike Toby’s revels or *The Merchant of Venice*’s masque scene, he acts for himself and not a community of friends. His jokes are perverted, his intentions malign. He does not physically cross any boundaries of Place, but gets inside Brabantio’s head with a psychological gate-crashing and grotesque mockery of Othello and Desdemona.

Venice is a place of order. Brabantio asserts the civilized reputation of the state when he shouts, “This is Venice. My house is not a grange” (1.1.118-119). Roderigo therefore substantiates his claims with the force of Venetian law. He says, “If she be in your chamber or your house, / Let loose on me the justice of the state / For thus deluding you” (1.1.148-155). Brabantio’s domestic distress becomes a threat to public order as Desdemona’s escape from her home is taken to court. In what seems to be a carnivalesque reversal, at the same “odd-even hours” of the night, the Venetian Senate (a body that naturally meets by day) was meeting to address the threat of the Turks, which thickens the uneasy atmosphere of the land. Nevertheless, Venice’s court of law remains a decisive force, as in *The Merchant of Venice*, and resolves both matters. After hearing Brabantio’s charge and Othello’s defense, the Duke not only rules in his favor but continues with the deputation of Othello to lead the war against the Turks. He says, “Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you” (1.3.254-255). Though unrecognized as a perpetrator, Iago, the internal Venetian enemy, is more of a threat to the General, and thus the state, than the Turks. In Cyprus, his disruption of public and domestic place grows to violence.

It is easier for Iago to subvert the order of the state in Cyprus where there is no court and the authority of the state is invested in Othello. Again, Iago uses the festive as a tactic. Othello orders a victory party but explicitly urges temperance: “Let’s teach ourselves that honorable stop—not to out-sport our discretion” (2.3.2-3). Cassio hoped that Othello would “Give renewed

fire to our extinct spirits, and bring all Cyprus comfort” (2.1.89-90). However, Iago thwarts Othello’s decree, flooding the soldiers with a different kind of spirit. He says: “Three else [three other soldiers] of Cyprus, noble swelling spirits, the very elements of this warlike isle, have I tonight flustered with flowing cups (2.3.57-60). In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby’s excessive drinking, despite challenging the order Olivia wants for her home, is comic. Here, it is dangerous. The revels turn to violence as Iago orchestrates an incident between Cassio and Montano, the governor of the island.

In a way, Iago has indirectly gate-crashed again, once more using sound as the weapon of assault. He disrupts both the private space, when the fight draws Othello from his bedroom, and the public space, with a quarrel in the streets. Othello enters the scene and in disgust he says,

What, in a town of war,  
 Yet wild, the people’s hearts brimful of fear,  
 To manage private and domestic quarrel,  
 In night, and on the court and guard of safety?  
 ‘Tis monstrous. (2.3.227-231)

This “monstrous” intrusion of a domestic quarrel into the public sphere has lasting ramifications through the play, as the firing of Cassio becomes both a matter of the public world and of the private, as his friend Desdemona, Othello’s wife, pleads his case. The entanglement of public and private prevents effective workaday order from functioning. By the end, Othello becomes “accuser, penitent, judge, defendant, witness, jury and, finally, executioner” (Perez-Diaz). Far from the cathartic festive revels of the comedies in which intrusion into place furthers community, the intrusion of one space upon another is both confusing and destructive, carnivalesque strategies leading to tragic conclusions.

The places of the play—the street outside Brabantio’s house, the Duke’s court, the streets of Cyprus and the interior of Othello and Desdemona’s quarters—are real, but they transition also into psychological, metaphorical, and metaphysical spaces. Iago corrupts every dimension. Roderigo calls Othello a “wheeling stranger of here and everywhere” (1.1) and Othello even describes his prior life as one of much movement. He remains physically free from the greatest confinement, prison, although threatened with incarceration at bookends of the play. Brabantio says, “To prison, till fit time of law and course of direct session call thee to answer” (1.2.106-108). By the end of the play, Lodovico says, “You shall close prisoner rest, / till that the nature of your fault be known / To the Venetian state” (5.2.394-396). In *Twelfth Night*, literal prison was linked to perception, and in this play that sentiment is taken to its greatest tragic extreme. Othello escapes the physical prison, but in Act 3 Iago imprisons him in his own mind, a psychological prison so confining that by Act 5, he must commit suicide to free himself from it.

Throughout the play, space fluidly morphs in this way from literal to metaphorical or symbolical, physical to metaphysical, for example, in between Venice and Cyprus is the physical waterway, where the war with the Turks is resolved. Like the storm in 1588 that had made Elizabeth’s England so powerful by sinking the Spanish Armada, the Turks are easily “drowned.” This sea is not only the transit space, literally liminal in that it is in between Venice and Cyprus, but it also serves as a metaphorical space; the storm that drowns the Turks visually confuses the boundary between water and sky; “I cannot, 'twixt the heaven and the main, / Descry a sail.” (2.1.3-4). While the literal sea serves the play’s narrative by ridding it of the Turks, who were never the central issue, the external storm becomes a visual metaphor for the internal storm that will ultimately undo the heroic General:

The wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane,

seems to cast water on the burning bear,  
 And quench the guards of the ever-fixed pole:  
 I never did like molestation view  
 On the enchafed flood (2.1.13-17).

Demonic Iago will have the force of the violent and disorienting sea, indeed more threatening to Othello's distressed boat than the Turks, as the storm douses the fire of the burning bear (the constellation Ursa Major) and obscures the North Star, heaven's steadiest star, the one by which sailors set their compass. It is not a stretch to hear in this description a foreshadowing of the "monstrous" transformation of Othello's fixed "nature/whom passion could not shake. whose solid virtue/ The shot of accident, nor dart of chance/ Could neither graze nor pierce?" (4.2.265-270.) When one soldier asks "What ribs of oak, when mountains melt on them, Can hold the mortise?" or Cassio's prays: "O, let the heavens / Give him defense against the elements, / For I have lost him on a dangerous sea," (2.1.49.51) the answer is that Othello can survive the physical storm, but he cannot survive the internal one, created by Iago, which so influences his perception that it destroys his sight. Where he previously saw Heaven in Desdemona, he begins to see Hell all around him.

In effect, from Act 3 on, the play itself is poised essentially between Heaven and Hell, not as literal places but as imagined realities, metaphysical spaces that ironically replace the ideal world of the spirit with a demonic hellscape. Iago's greatest triumph has been his ability to penetrate into Othello's apparently impenetrable interior, to create an entirely imagined interior world of darkness, through which he sees hell both within him and even outside in his own rooms, as he says to Emilia, the companion of his maligned wife: "You, mistress, / That have the

office opposite to Saint Peter, / And keep the gate of hell!” (4.2.89-91). Heaven has given way to hell in his mind, and that perception governs the way he sees the actual world around him.

By the end of the play, the interior of Othello and Desdemona’s bedroom—the only interior domestic space that serves as a setting in the play—has collapsed several spaces into one. It is literally their bedroom and physically, all the central characters gather there. It then becomes effectively a courtroom in which Lodovico judges Othello quickly for the murder of his wife and Emilia exposes Iago and effectively divorces him as she asks for leave to speak in a manner reminiscent of Desdemona in the Act 1 courtroom scene.<sup>33</sup> It also becomes a metaphorical place where Othello, realizing the monstrosity of his delusion, returns to his former self, to plead his case for “one that loved not wisely, but too well” (5.2.404) and then executes himself. This last interior scene takes up the entire stage, as the bedroom has itself expanded to become not only the household, but also the final court of law and even the metaphysical center of a kind of divine justice. The play comes full circle. It began with the gate-crashing of Brabantio’s home from which Desdemona had fled and ends inside a room in which the public literally gate-crashes, and Desdemona is dead.

### Persons

Iago embodies all the negative values that Shakespeare associates with the villains of the workaday. Like Gratiano at the beginning of *The Merchant of Venice*, Iago describes the two kinds of men in the world, except this time, it is a matter of those who defer to authority and those who do not. His personhood, thus, is wholly tied to power. He does not respect the first

---

<sup>33</sup> Emilia says “Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak. / Tis proper I obey him, but not now. / Perchance Iago I shall ne’er go home again” (5.1.194-196). In act 1, Desdemona asks “Most gracious Duke, to my unfolding voice, lend your prosperous ear” (1.3.241-242). Neither woman speaks without permission, and Emilia separates herself from her husband before she speaks against him.

man; he says, “Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave / That, doting on his own obsequious bondage, / Wears out his time, much like his master’s ass” (1.1.48-51). Rather, he identifies with the second kind of man who undermines those above him in covert self-seeking. He appreciates men who nefariously “lined their coats” at their master’s expense; he says, “These fellows have some Soul, / And such a one do I profess myself (1.1.58, 59-61). Iago is ambitious like Cassius, Julius Caesar’s assassin, and he is a fiend for money like Shylock. He is sick with self-love like Malvolio. He combines all three characteristics when he says, “I know my price, I am worth no worse a place” (1.1.11-15). He has an incredibly firm sense of self; it is all he cares for, and all he values, but he marries this with a skillful maneuvering of contradictory appearance.

Iago does not merely want to kill his enemy, but annihilate him. He destroys Othello’s sense of self by masking all his friends in falseness. Othello soon questions his ability to perceive the truth of people, as Iago robs him of the sense of self that once grounded him. He exploits the fundamental problem of personhood, in which interior and exterior are not always married. He plays a role to convince Othello that his own instinctual knowledge, his best guide throughout the play, is false, that he is merely being deceived by good actors. Iago understands personhood in a large part as a performance, but one that obfuscates rather than clarifies; he must always make a conscious effort to perform in a way that contradicts himself. It is the understanding of personhood as performance that liberates self and helps the community in comic plays. In this tragedy, Iago convinces Othello that his wife and his closest friend are feigning their love for him.

Desdemona does not need masks, metaphorical or otherwise, because she is in fact, a rather transparent character. She is virtuous; her name quite literally means “not demon,” she is “divine Desdemona” (2.1.80). She keeps her vows, telling Cassio: “Assure thee, if I do vow a

friendship, I'll perform it to the last article" (3.1.22-25). Desdemona is persistent even when Othello does not want to hear her. There is a pointed moment when Othello interrogates Emilia for proof of Desdemona's deception; he asks if Desdemona ever sent her from her room "To fetch her fan, her gloves, her mask, nor nothing" (4.2.10). This is the only use of the word "mask" in the play, and while he speaks of a literal mask, which apparently Desdemona seems to own along with her fan and gloves, he presumes deception. Desdemona's interior self is harmoniously married to her exterior, just as Othello's was before Iago's assault on his sense of self, and because of this they were harmoniously married to each other.

If Iago's identity seems to lie primarily in what he is not, and in his ability to change endlessly, to twist and turn in any direction, Othello is just the opposite. Like Desdemona, he has a fixed character, embedded in his inner self, which at the beginning of the play is allied both to his body and to his public honors: "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.36). Once perverted by Iago, Othello remains absolute, but this time in his desire for revenge. He ceremoniously relinquishes his prior self when he says, "Othello's occupation's gone" (3.3.409). He has bidden farewell to his heroic self and awakened instead a hellish avenger. He and Iago exchange not so merry bonds; Othello says, "I am bound to thee forever" (3.3.249) and Iago responds, "I am your own forever" (3.3.546). In a pact with the devil, Othello seals his fate.

Iago hides his darkness under a mask of light, much like another set of festive characters, the tempting devils of English medieval morality plays, such as Lucifer in the anonymous fifteenth century *The Play of Wisdom*.<sup>34</sup> Although there is no evidence that Shakespeare ever saw

---

<sup>34</sup> I am indebted to Milla Riggio for this connection: *The Play of Wisdom: Its Texts and Contexts*, Milla C. Riggio ed. New York: AMS Press, 1998.



or read *Wisdom*, there are striking parallels between the character of Lucifer in that play and Iago. Just as Iago needs help from hell (“Hell and night / must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (1.3.446-447), so too does Lucifer who says, “To all the devils of hell I make a vow” (372). Both Lucifer and Iago realize the necessity of disguise to a successful temptation. Thus, both disguise themselves as friends in the community when they are truly foes to all. Armed with the knowledge that the devil in his own appearance would only terrify, Lucifer says, “I will change myself into brightness / And so him beguile” (375-376). Iago has a similar understanding of the social unacceptability of his true self. He says,

The native act and figure of my heart  
 In complement extern, ‘tis not long after  
 But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
 For daws to peck at: I am not what I am. (1.1.71)

In the comic plays so far discussed, disguise was both personally liberating and socially beneficial. When Viola says, “I am not what I am” after disguising as a man, there is nothing sinister in her meaning. In this play, it is deadly. Once Roderigo begins to be aware of Iago’s tricks, he says, “Your words and performances are not akin together” (4.2.214).

Iago corrupts Othello’s sense of Desdemona by convincing Othello that Desdemona only “performs” virtue. In *The Play of Wisdom* Lucifer similarly turns perfection into sinfulness, and virtue into wickedness. Iago says:

For whiles this honest fool  
 Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,  
 And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,  
 I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear:

That she repeals him for her body's lust;  
 And by how much she strives to do him good,  
 She shall undo her credit with the Moor.  
 So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
 And out of her own goodness make the net  
 That shall enmesh them all. (2.3.368-382)

The devil Lucifer says,

I shall show him that perfection is sinfulness  
 And prove virtue to be wickedness  
 Thus, under colours, turn all to perverseness.  
 I shal never rest till the soul I defile. (373-380)

In his free-wheeling uses of wit, music, masquerades and other carnival devices, Iago can moreover be likened to the Carnival character known as the “festive devil.” There was a sense that the devil could be festive; there were Carnival devils in the era, particularly in Spain and Germany.<sup>35</sup> In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica calls Lancelet a “merry devil” and even Feste is linked to a sort of festive devil. After the prison scene with Malvolio, Feste sings a song, and Claire McEachern writes, “It is an energetic ballad sung in the voice of the devil—appropriate enough considering that Feste has been undertaking a kind of exorcism” (McEachern 286). Although often fearful and even dangerous in their festive confrontation of revelers, the witty festive devil who sings and teases and who can genuinely frighten, finally brings mirth. The

---

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/923724/Devils-of-Luzon-carnival-festival-creepy-pictures-spain-horror-Luzon-photos>  
<https://www.german-way.com/history-and-culture/holidays-and-celebrations/fasching-and-karneval/>

devil who is contained does not turn to real violence, just as the scene with Malvolio in prison, though dark and disturbing, does not turn to violence. In the prison scene, Feste challenges Malvolio's idea of the soul in a festive way by asserting that it is more fluid than the inflexible Malvolio can understand. He sees through Malvolio; he challenges him, and he and his friends create a disturbing punishment for him that, to many modern readers, seems excessive (in the spirit of the darker carnivalesque), but they do not destroy him.

In contrast, Iago uses festive modes to confuse others, so that they lose themselves. He seems unable to comprehend any higher form of morality or goodness (all love is lust, for instance), so that through the flesh, instead of reaching the spirit in a positive way, he reaches and destroys the soul. During the revels, Cassio knows his limits and refuses to drink. Iago, however, tempts him with song. Cassio fails to recognize the devil and instead blames the alcohol: "That we with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause transform ourselves into beasts" (2.3.310-312). From his perspective, "the devil drunkenness" has "give[n] way to the devil Wrath...to make me frankly despise myself" (2.3.285-287). Carnavalesque excess leads not to self-knowledge but to self-hatred.

Iago uses flesh and appetite in a way that recalls *The Merchant of Venice*. When he thinks of Othello and Desdemona's love he constantly speaks of her growing sexually wary of his body. "When she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice" (1.3.393-394). Like Gratiano he allies lust with appetite, (see 2.1 250; 2.3. 367). Like Shylock, he links food to revenge; he speaks falsely of an affair Othello had with Emilia, which he says, "partly led to diet my revenge" (2.1.316). Emilia thinks of men in a way that is likely colored by her own marriage; she says, "They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, they belch us (3.4.121-123).

While Iago turns the ordinarily cathartic and bright aspects of the carnivalesque to their darkest modes, it must be noted that he is also realizing the potential that Carnival had at its most violent, to cross the line between ritualized festive, contained aggression and actual violence. Iago uses festive modes to channel his all too genuinely violent revenge vendetta, a dangerously radical direction in which carnival occasionally turned. In this play, Iago destroys the idealized images of the flesh for his greater goal of destroying Othello's soul. When Iago constantly talks of animals whom he is leading to self-slaughter, he is in a dark sense calling upon "carnavalesque rituals [that] played with blurring the distinctions between animals and humans...vendetta killers represented themselves as rabid dogs. The rituals of manners radically reinforced animal-human oppositions" (Muir 135).

In defaming Desdemona to Othello, Iago prompts Othello to his own even bloodier urges of revenge vendetta, in which humans become likened to dogs. Cassio speaks of Bianca in a sexual manner and Othello, thanks to Iago, interprets that he is speaking of Desdemona. Othello says, "I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I would throw it to" (4.1.161). Othello has dark and bloody images of destroying Desdemona's body. Like the carnivalesque revenge vendetta butcher, he says, "I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me?" (4.1.219). The difference between Iago and Othello in their revenge vendettas is that Iago, like the very devil, is more interested in the soul. He hides his vendetta in contained festive modes. Othello is not interested in containment or in souls. During the murder scene, he tells Desdemona, "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit; / No; heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul" (5.2.31-32). Both times when Iago is revealed as murderous, he is called dog. He stabs Roderigo who says, "O damned Iago! O inhuman dog!" (5.1.74). When his plot is found out in the end, Lodovico says, "O, Spartan dog" (5.2.424). Othello directly calls Iago a "demi-devil" when he asks "Demand the demi-devil / why

he hath ensnared my soul and body?" (5.2.298-299). And Iago appears to confirm this attribution, first by pointing out that he "bleeds" but is not dead: when Othello has said that if he is a devil, he cannot kill him: "If thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" (5.2.337), Iago replies: "I bleed but not dead" (5.2.338). And then with his final vow of eternal silence: Iago says. "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.300-301).

By the end of the play Iago has so divorced Othello from any sense of himself that he is literally split: "That's he that was Othello. Here I am" (5.2.334). Once he learns the truth, and returns in some measure to his former self, Othello's final speech attempts to repair this inner division, to assert the emotional truth of the two contradictory self-images that have haunted him throughout the play. In a paradox that can only be resolved in death, Othello becomes imaginatively both the 'Venetian' hero, doing service to the state by killing a treacherous Turk, and the treacherous infidel himself. With a shattered soul Othello promptly kills his body.

### Time

The greater force of time in *Othello* is fluid. It expands and contracts like the ancient Egyptian hour. In the Venetian act, there is but one evening in which all the events occur, at the unsettled "odd-even and dull watch o' the night" (2.2.45). The time-table in Cyprus is less straight-forward. There seems again to be just one traceable night in all four acts, and yet, though not accounted for, time does seem to pass, as for instance when Othello speaks of the time he has spent with Desdemona.<sup>36</sup> Thus, as in the comic plays, the actual play time itself has the fluidity of unmeasured, or only partially measured, Carnival time. Within the play, there are moments of

---

<sup>36</sup> "I slept the next night well, fed well, was free and merry. I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips" (3.3.391-393).

regulating leisure time, such as when Othello must “obey the time,” by limiting his time with Desdemona to an hour or when the herald announces exactly when the victory revels should cease.<sup>37</sup> In this play about soldiers, however, it is surprising that a more regulated and precise sense of overarching time does not guide the play.

Wiley Sypher writes that in *Othello*, there are “two different time schemes, the urgency of the present moment and the slow, extended pace” (122). Sypher’s definition of the two time-schemes in the play is apt, capturing essentially the oppositional time frame of the carnivalesque, poised between the immediate moment and the hovering presence of eternity. However, Sypher divides the two times between the two characters of Iago and Othello which is too simplistic. Iago describes both urgent and extended time when he articulates his plot and manipulates other characters’ sense of time, encouraging either impulsiveness or patience whenever it best suits him, even if it least suits them. For Othello, his connection to prior time gives him a more organic experience, although one frighteningly linked with death, as he feels both the physical time of the flesh and the metaphysical time of the spirit. It is through Desdemona’s heavenly body that he finds harmony so soul-satisfying that he wishes to die in a moment of perfect bliss:

O, my soul’s joy...  
 If it were now to die,  
 ’Twere now to be most happy, for I fear  
 My soul hath her content so absolute  
 That not another comfort like to this  
 Succeeds in unknown fate. (2.1.199, 205-209)

---

<sup>37</sup> “Come, Desdemona, I have but an hour of love, of (worldly matters,) and direction to spend with thee. We must obey the time.” (1.3.340-342) “All offices are open, and there is full liberty of feasting from this present hour of five till the bell have told eleven.” (2.2.8-10).

And, indeed, if he had actually died then, before Iago brings discord that damns his soul, he would, in the words of Macbeth, have “lived a blessed time” (*Macbeth* 2.3.69).

When dividing time between the two characters, Sypher argues that the tension is between Iago’s urgent “Puritan time” and Othello’s slow “prior time,” which harkens back to the work/play dialectic embedded in the calendrical conflict over feast days in the Elizabethan Age (See Chapter One of this thesis). He explicitly links Iago to the stereotypical opportunistic Puritan, saying that he “drives the Moor to think and act in the importunate mode of opportunist, compulsive time, making a perpetual crisis” (122). Using Othello’s description of his life before Venice, Sypher illustrates what he means by prior time:

It is a savage past, but repetitive, unchanging in its monotony. Othello can recount what has happened to him only as a succession of ‘battles, sieges, fortunes’ since he was seven, one so like another that his experience was monolithic. For Othello, there is little to tell because it is all so cyclic: again and again, for ‘such was the process,’ .... The total effect of his narrative is to create a sense of his sufferance (123).

Sypher associates what he calls prior time with the greater rhythmic forces that are cyclical and require patience (like Feste’s whirligig). Again, he is half right. Othello does have a natural link with prior—or cosmic—time, perhaps as a result of his own free-wheeling past. He is initially patient. And he does see the moment in relationship to eternity. However, Iago is not the negating “kind of Puritan” of other plays but the great manipulator of the festive. A more apt division would be that Iago knows when to use either the moment or extended time as it serves his plot, whereas Othello sees himself always as a suffering victim of time.

Sypher writes that “The irony is compounded when Iago, who has taught impatience, urgency, restlessness, keeps preaching patience to both Roderigo and Othello” (125). What he

fails to notice is that this indicates how shrewdly Iago utilizes the different time schemes. It adds to the sense of him as demonic playwright, whose greater understanding of time allows him to render it differently from other characters in whatever way necessary. Iago's mastering of time, the give and take, action and submission, embrace and patience, allows him to manipulate time for other characters. He urges others to act in the moment, rather rashly, or wait in patience, as in the case of Roderigo, for something that will never come. Sypher speaks of "the blind improvising of Iago" (Sypher 128). However, if Iago were a mere improviser, he would not have been able to carry out a plot in which the proper timing of every detail is essential. He effectively subverts time itself, turning it to his own uses and manipulating others to follow his time scheme, as he lures them into his larger scheme for their destruction.

Sypher writes, "Had Iago any concern beyond the moment, he would recognize that his meddling is a mortal peril to him" (112). This is simply false. Iago does urge his own time forward; he constantly speaks of time in his asides. He encourages himself to "Dull not device by coldness and delay" (2.3.410) and to "keep time in all" (4.1.109). Furthermore, in a workaday sense, time should not be wasted, "It is now high supper time, and the night grows to waste" (4.2. 274-274). But he never loses sight of his own long-term goal. He thinks ahead. Thus, he has both a *carpe diem* approach to time, which plays a large role in the success of his plots, and an extended, temporal overview of his entire plot. Like the (anti-)festive devil he is, he essentially turns time against itself, and against his enemies.

Iago knows when to wait or act and when to submit himself to the future. He trusts time as a co-conspirator, a sort of monstrous overlord, bringing to fruition his plot, which he describes as a process of gestation and "monstrous birth." He says, "There are many events in the womb of time which will be delivered" (1.3.412-413). He repeats again and again an awareness of the



greater forces of time. “Hell and night / must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (1.3.446-447). He mixes the most natural process of the body, birth, with associations of hell and monsters. If it is the womb of hell, it is perhaps the forbidden fruit that he offers Roderigo as he once again urges patience, using festive terms to beguile the fool he has called a “snipe”:  
 “Though other things grow fair against the sun/fruits that blossom first will first be ripe, Content thyself awhile. (By th’ Mass) ‘tis morning! / Pleasure and action make the hours seem short” (2.3.398-400).

However, like all his strategies, Iago’s flexible understanding of time is not benign; he uses that understanding as a manipulative tool. He exploits the rooted fears and weaknesses of men and then suggests a joyful coping mechanism. He echoes the sentiments of Feste’s “*youth’s a stuff will not endure*” in his own song. During the revels he sings, “*A soldier’s a man / O, man’s life’s but a span, / Why, then, let a soldier drink*” (2.3.74-76). This is a song that could be pure in meaning were it not corrupt in intent. As in the comic plays, the flesh is connected to physical time as the “muddy vesture of decay” (MV 5.1.62), the “stuff” that “will not endure,” a realization of which is inextricably linked to death. Feste sings of the passing of youth as a call to love; Iago sings of the brevity of life as a call for soldiers to “drink,” a festive suggestion that could be celebratory, but Iago’s intentions in getting the soldiers to drink are to lead them into a drunken brawl that will become destructive, exploiting carnivalesque excess for violent ends.

For all his wily cunning, however, Iago’s demonic link with hell, which turns him from a comically festive devil to a tragic force, prevents him from seeing eternity or eternal time as in any way transcendent. Of these two central male characters, only Othello has a sense of eternal time, the soul after the death of the body. Iago has a sense of the temporality of the body, but never thinks of his own soul. While Iago attempts to ensnare Othello’s soul, he himself remains

tethered to lower regions—to the bestial and the demonic. His sense of time is correspondingly bound up in the temporal, until the final moment of the play when he says, “From this time forth, I never will speak word” (5.2.17). In this instance, hell seems to yawn eternally before him.

Overall, throughout the play Othello is more connected with the greater forces of the universe and the possibility of eternity after temporality, a connection he consistently makes through his love for Desdemona, whose death seems to him an event so enormous that it should create a rift in nature and break up the temporal regularity even of the planets:

O insupportable! O heavy hour!  
 Methinks now should be a huge eclipse  
 Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe  
 (Should) yawn at alteration (5.1.122-125)

Indeed, the very existence of the universe is dependent on Othello’s love for Desdemona: “when I love her not, chaos is come again,” (3.3.91-92).

Iago alters this connection. Othello’s time becomes “damnèd minutes” (3.3.198) as he loses his sense of a heavenly Desdemona. He imagines himself as the “Fixèd figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow unmoving finger at” (4.2.63-65). The carnivalesque concept of witty mockery is here imagined as a darkly destructive image of Time itself pointing forever at the cuckolded Othello. In the disrupted connection between body and soul, Othello wishes that finite body time could recur infinitely. In reference to Cassio he says, “O, that the slave had forty thousand lives! / One is too poor, too weak for my revenge” (3.3.502-503). He wishes Cassio had endless lives so he could presumably murder him over and over again.

Desdemona pleads urgently for the delay of her death:

Desdemona. “Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight” (5.1.100)

Faced with death, she does not welcome it, as Othello recurrently seems to do. Here, she does not direct her urgency towards speeding up time but towards slowing it down, though not perpetually. In one of the few moments in which time is literally measured in this play, she asks first to live only “tonight” and then pleads “but half an hour” (5.1.103). Whereas the old Othello would have stopped time to hold onto a moment of bliss, Desdemona pleads only to prolong her life. Both ultimately are at the mercy of the master manipulator, who, instead of being a time-pleaser like Malvolio, is one who uses the process of time to please himself.

### Conclusion

Iago embodies the most dangerous use of the imagination. He synthesizes the carnivalesque into the everyday world, but he divorces the literal so far from its meaning that he becomes an agent of chaos. Iago uses the same tools that brought individual expression and communal bonding for destruction and perverts all the brightness of the festive. He uses all the strategies of the festive devil but undermines community and thus distorts the carnivalesque from its affirmative path. He does this in the name of his own sickness of self-love, which involves hatred of all others, all the while wearing a mask of goodness.

### Thesis Conclusion

Even though Shakespeare names one of his major comedies *Twelfth Night* with the name of a festival, that festival does not actually occur in the play, or at first glance seem to have anything to do with the plot. Indeed, it is referenced only indirectly one time by Sir Toby, who tells Malvolio “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous/ There shall be no more cakes and ale.” Nevertheless, the festive—and by extension, the carnivalesque—is everywhere present in this play because for Shakespeare, the festive is not separate from the everyday world.

In a period where the discussion on the number of festive days was contentious, the dialectical opposition of work and play was significant. As a playwright, Shakespeare naturally perhaps favored the value of drama, music, poetry and other festive modes. However, he did not do so simplistically. Carnavalesque modes and meanings are linked to a fluid and imaginative experience of the world we live in. At the same time, the carnivalesque is internally contradictory.

Carnival involves both higher and lower dimensions. On the higher side, in what Francois Laroque calls the “bright face” of Carnival, it enables celebrants to access the spirit through the flesh. Festive entertainments not only provide release from the workaday world, but in the form of the carnivalesque they allow for self-expression and communal bonding. They are closely linked to identity, and they stand in a productive dialectical opposition to the workaday world. As he develops his own sense of the value of the festive, Shakespeare allows for the temporary suspension of workaday time for leisure purposes. The carnivalesque finds a resolution, a synthesis between the festive and its opposite. In its brightest forms, this provides a balance that directs Shakespeare’s world view.

However, Carnival and the carnivalesque also have a capacity for aggressive violence,

usually contained and restrained, but not always. The violence can break the boundaries of a festival and a mode that in themselves are boundary-crossers. Carnival exists at the crossroads of seemingly rigid, even paradoxical oppositions. The carnivalesque works in between.

Shakespeare's imagination is complex, and even in his comedies, the carnivalesque can be shaded with tragic overtones. In a play like *Othello* a festive manipulator pushes every boundary to its worst extreme.

In this thesis, I have examined the function of the carnivalesque, and its dialectic, in three plays, which on the surface would seem to have little in common: *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello: The Moor of Venice*. My analysis suggests that this mode could be examined in a much wider selection across Shakespeare's great canon.

### Works Cited

- Armstrong, Piers and Michaeline Chrichlow. "Carnival Praxis, Carnavalesque Strategies and Atlantic Interstices." *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*. Taylor & Francis group. 2010. pp. 399-414.  
[www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13504630.2010.497693](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13504630.2010.497693). Accessed 1 December 2017.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *Rabelais and His World First*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Barber, C.L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom*. Princeton, Princeton U.P., 2011.
- Bristol, Michael D. "Carnival and the Institutions of Theater in Elizabethan England." *ELH*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1983, pp. 637–654. [www.jstor.org/stable/2872921](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872921).
- . *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*. New York, Methuen, 1985.
- Booth, Roy. "Shylock's Sober House." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 50, no. 197, 1999, pp. 22–31. [www.jstor.org/stable/517757](http://www.jstor.org/stable/517757).
- Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. New York, Harper & Row, 1978.
- Crane, Mary Thomas. "Suitable Suits and the Cognitive Space Between." *Shakespeare's Brain*. Princeton University Press, 2001. pp. 87–111. [www.jstor.org/stable/2872921](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872921).
- Hall, Kim F. "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in 'The Merchant of Venice.'" *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 23, 1992. pp. 140-154.  
[www.jstor.org/stable/41917285](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41917285).
- Kirkham, Matthew. "The Devils of Luzon." *Express Co.* United Kingdom. Published Sunday, February 25, 2018/ Online. Last accessed April 1, 2018.

“Fasching and Karneval,” in *History and Culture: Holidays and Celebrations*. Last accessed

April 1, 2018. Online.

<https://www.german-way.com/history-and-culture/holidays-and-celebrations/fasching-and-karneval/>

Frye, Northrop. “The Argument of Comedy.” *Narrative Dynamics*, edited by Brian Richardson,

The Ohio State University Press, 2002, pp. 105-110. *Google Books*.

[https://books.google.com/books?id=kY8XFN6smdsC&pg=PA107&lpg=PA107&dq=as+its+title+implies,+presents+a+Carnival+society,+not+so+much+a+green+world+as+an+evergreen+one"&source=bl&ots=HPwvsjRam9&sig=8\\_jkQK48mn4PNCuqIli\\_JrnCmsA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj](https://books.google.com/books?id=kY8XFN6smdsC&pg=PA107&lpg=PA107&dq=as+its+title+implies,+presents+a+Carnival+society,+not+so+much+a+green+world+as+an+evergreen+one). Accessed 5 October 2017.

Gross, John. *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1992.

“Lepanto, Battle of,” in “Wars Between Turks and Venetians.” *Encyclopedia of the Early Modern Period*, 2004. Last accessed April 8, 2018. Online.

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/modern-europe/wars-and-battles/battle-lepanto>.

Laroque, François. *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

---. “Shakespeare's Italian Carnival: Venice and Verona Revisited.” *Shakespeare and Renaissance Literary Theories: Anglo-Italian Transactions*. Ashgate, Routledge, 2011. pp. 203–219.

Liebler, Naomi Conn. *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy The Ritual Foundations of Genre*. Taylor & Francis Group, 1995. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trincoll/detail.action?docID=169183](http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trincoll/detail.action?docID=169183).

- Muir, Edward. *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Pérez Díaz, ÁGueda, et al. "A Carnival of Shadows: Perverting Festivity in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*." *A Carnival of Shadows: Perverting Festivity in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello**. 2015.
- Riggio, Milla. "Carnival," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, edited by Dennis Kennedy. Oxford University Press, 2003, vol 1, p. 226.
- . *The Play of Wisdom: Its Texts and Contexts*. NY: AMS Press, 1998.
- Riggio, Milla, Angela Marino, and Paolo Vignolo, eds. *Festive Devils of the Americas*, Mumbai, India: Seagulls Press, distributed in the US by the University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Edited by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2011.
- . *Othello*. Edited by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009.
- . *Twelfth Night*. Edited by Claire McEachern. New York, Barnes & Noble. 2007. pp. 286.
- Sypher, Wiley. "Patience: *Othello*." *The Ethic of Time*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1976. pp. 109-128.
- Tilley, Morris P. "The Organic Unity of *Twelfth Night*." *PMLA*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1914, pp. 550–566. [www.jstor.org/stable/457019](http://www.jstor.org/stable/457019).
- . "Shakespeare and the Puritan Pensive Regard for the 'Well-Bestowal of Time'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1918, pp. 546–564. [www.jstor.org/stable/457019](http://www.jstor.org/stable/457019).



Turner, Victor. "The Ritual Process." New York: Cornell University Press, 1966. PDF.

[http://www.iupui.edu/~womrel/Rel433%20Readings/SearchableTextFiles/Turner\\_Ritual  
Process\\_chaps3&5.pdf](http://www.iupui.edu/~womrel/Rel433%20Readings/SearchableTextFiles/Turner_Ritual_Process_chaps3&5.pdf)

"War between Turks and Venice." *Phillyshakespeare.org*, November, 2014. Last accessed April 8, 2018. Online.

<http://www.phillyshakespeare.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/War-Between-Turks-and-Venice.pdf>