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Fasting and Feasting in *Hamlet*

A Carnavalesque Interpretation

This paper aims at discussing the features of carnival in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by focusing on the notions of fasting and feasting in the drama. Carnavalesque interpretations tend to identify the characters of Hamlet and Claudius as the allegorical figures of Lent and Carnival, who during the course of the play also fight their combat. Since Lent and Carnival are primarily characterised by food-related metaphors and imagery linked with corporeality and eating, the paper restricts its scope to the investigation of gustatory conceits and their possible implications. First, it seems reasonable to outline briefly the critical background of carnivalesque interpretations of Shakespeare. Secondly, the paper attempts to establish its argumentation by placing the main characters into a carnivalesque context and, thirdly, the last section proposes to explore the rich variety of conceits related to incorporation. Hopefully, by the end the article will be able to justify its thesis and the validity of such a carnivalesque interpretation of *Hamlet*.

“[A]ll that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity. . .”
(1.2.72–73)¹

Introduction

Discourses in Shakespeare studies in the past decades often turn to the notion of carnival suggesting that Shakespearean drama can be traced back to folk traditions. L.C. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* opened the ground for carnivalesque interpretations of Shakespearean comedy, yet the real catalyst in the discourse was Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival (translated into English as *Rabelais and his World*) in which he exhaustively discusses carnival in the context of Medieval and Renaissance literature in Europe. Barber's and Bakhtin's arguments proved to be the cornerstones of discussions on Shakespeare and the carnival, and triggered a

1. All quotations and line references are to the following edition: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

series of similar interpretations extended to other Shakespearean genres such as histories or tragedies, some of which resulted in heated debates. David Ruiter in his *Shakespeare's Festive History* discusses the dynamics of festivity in the two *Henry IV* plays and bases his argument on a previous work on *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy* by Naomi Lieber. In this book, Lieber adopts Barber's argument regarding the great tragedies. She suggests that both in comedy and tragedy the community is threatened and order must be restored; yet, in tragedy these threats are more powerful than comedy's mere disturbances since they reflect the determined choices people make towards survival, and the price of those choices results mostly in chaos. While comedy performs an escape from the social restraints, tragedy performs an uncontrollable breakage at great expense and it also "celebrates," but "by reconstructing and re-remembering what is lost."²

Carnavalesque interpretations of Shakespeare focus on the clash between two opposed sets of values within the given artistic constellation.³ Not only can Shakespeare's work be traced back to carnivalesque origins, this notion was deeply embedded in the Elizabethan theatre and determined the works of many of his contemporaries as well. Therefore, it is worth having a look at the contemporaneous authors' works and see how carnival seeped into the stage productions of the age.

Carnival and the Tudor Period

Michael D. Bristol argues that the institution of Elizabethan theatre is a creation of plebeian culture of the Renaissance. It is, as he suggests, "an institutionalized and professionalized form of Carnival and of popular festive activity in general."⁴ Theatre and Carnival are "neighbouring institutions with similar logics of representation and similar orientations to social reality as a whole" therefore the "genres of drama become carnivalized."⁵ Bristol also claims that the documentary evidence related to popular culture in Renaissance England is fragmentary since it is primarily based on the oral tradition and not the written texts. However, the understanding of this culture is not so much a question of the availability of concrete materials; rather it is a matter of theoretical orientation adopted towards this material. The framework of

2. Naomi Lieber, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy – The Ritual Foundations of Genre* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 7–8.

3. Most recently Ronald Knowles edited a volume entitled *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*, which presents a collection of essays devoted explicitly to Shakespeare and Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1998).

4. Michael D. Bristol, "Carnival and the Institutions of Theatre in Elizabethan England," *ELH* 50. (1983), 637–654, p. 637.

5. Bristol, "Carnival," pp. 637–638.

popular culture seeped into Elizabethan theatre and supplied the logic and also the language of numerous dramatic texts.⁶

The works of popular tradition were not finished “products;” this culture was primarily collective and improvisatory.⁷ In his comprehensive work on early English stages, Glynne Wickham discusses the significance of both the Church and vernacular festivities. His argument begins with the claim that the dramas of Christian character from the tenth to the thirteenth century were products of annual festive celebrations in Christian history; every play that survived from the period is directly related to a particular feast, or Red Letter Day, in the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church.⁸ He emphasises that the genre of drama and festivals are closely related and he also suggests that dramatic games and rituals are the expressions of these festive traditions. Days that were considered to be of different sort demanded celebration and also demanded a temporary relief from normal, social restraints. As Wickham suggests, drama is a part of this release as an “expurgation of fear . . . as a rebellion against authority” and “as an idealization of the actual.”⁹ Through the mimetic games of festivals both actors and audience are enabled to explore and explain society to itself, and the nature of human condition.¹⁰

Apart from the church related festivals, celebrations of public matters, such as coronations, weddings, births or engagements, and even ruling monarchs’ symbolic marriage with their subjects¹¹ also served as occasions of drama.¹² Wickham emphasises the significance of succession and the citizens’ willingness to celebrate it and argues that all these ceremonies serve to “ornament a folk-ritual that at heart is concerned with survival, and thus with tomorrow, rather than today.”¹³ Numerous such ceremonies were recorded during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, primarily concerned with country life: on May Day of 1579 the Queen was entertained by Sir Philip Sidney’s *The Lady of May*, which featured shepherds, foresters and the Lady of May. The interludes that survive from before the opening of the first Blackfriars (1576) employ pastoral settings and characters, but afterwards the pattern also appears in romantic comedy, supplying Nashe, Peele, Greene and Shakespeare with a

6. Bristol, “Carnival,” p. 638.

7. Bristol, “Carnival,” p. 639.

8. Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660 – Volume Three: Plays and their Makers to 1576* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 23.

9. Wickham, p. 4.

10. Wickham, p. 5.

11. For instance, James I told his first Parliament: “I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is my lawful wife” (Wickham, p. 48).

12. Wickham, p. 48.

13. Wickham, p. 54.

storehouse of materials.¹⁴ During the 1580s these theatrical pieces became less frequent, but prior to their total disappearance these non-recurrent festivals had contributed substantially to the development of dramatic expression in England.¹⁵

Even if carnival diverts both from the church festivals and the non-recurrent ones, these occasions could not have existed utterly separated: their implementation and motives are different from the carnivalesque one they were most probably interrelated, yet they were all concerned with alternate subjects of communal affairs.

Since carnival is unfinished, the discussion on a specific group of materials should be conducted flexibly: on the one hand, because the material evidence is fragmentary, on the other hand, because it does not consist so much of body of carnivalesque texts, but a certain language and logic that seeped into these works. Bakhtin highlights that one of the characteristic speech patterns of the carnivalesque framework is the use of abusive language, which is grammatically and semantically separated from the context, and therefore is considered an individual unit. This language resembles proverbs, and has a similar primitive communicative function to incantations. Carnivalesque language also includes speech patterns that mock and insult the deity, and are therefore excluded from everyday conversations.¹⁶ This language can be found in a variety of works of the period, such as the anonymous *Loctrine* and *Mucedorus*, or the works of writers like Nashe, Dekker, Marlowe, Peele and, of course, Shakespeare, which is indicative of its relevance to the discussion of Renaissance culture.¹⁷

When it comes to carnival in Elizabethan England, scholars tend to discuss Thomas Nashe, who frequently mentions the language and traditions of the common people in his works. For instance, in the *Lenten Stuff* (1599) he ironically describes a character called Humphrey King, who produced verses to mark different occasions and who was also a great fan of Morris dance. This character returns in Nashe's pamphlet entitled *An Halfe-penny Worth of Wit*, which defends the popular festivals against the attacks of Puritans, and suggests that festivals are inseparably linked to popular culture in general.¹⁸ As for dramatic works, scholars traditionally consider Nashe's *Summer's Last Will And Testament*, a dramatisation

14. Wickham, p. 55.

15. Wickham, p. 60–61.

16. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968), p. 17.

17. Bristol, "Carnival," p. 640.

18. François Laroque & Janet Lloyd, *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 39–40.

of the changing of the seasons, to be an outstanding representation of the festive tradition. This interlude features the personifications of the four seasons and lays emphasis on the delights of Spring. The holiday groups and pageant figures are typical of Elizabethan entertainments, and in Nashe's play they are brought on stage successively, which is unusual, since they tend to appear separately (coming under the Queen's window, encountering her in the garden or emerging from the woods).¹⁹ Even if the play mostly exhibits pleasures, there certainly is an underlying gloom in the pageant: it reflects the darkening prospect of plague and winter, which, ultimately, is the direction of the annual cycle. Barber sees the anticipation of Shakespeare's plays in this two-sidedness, in which indulgence and joyful revel are blended with latent bleakness.²⁰

This two-sidedness is the framework that defines carnival: its contradictory nature is in sharp contrast with the aesthetics of received culture. Bakhtin argues that in carnival life is shown in its twofold and doubtful: it is the "epitome of incompleteness."²¹ The clash of two opposite sets of values reflects the discrepancy that is fundamental to the carnivalesque pattern, not only in theatre and literature but also in the visual arts of Europe.

In his allegorical painting, *The Battle between Carnival and Lent*, Pieter Bruegel the Elder depicts a hurly-burly of allegorical scenes, the representations of Carnival plays. In the description of such allegorical fights and masquerades performed at public squares "Lent, Princess of Fasting and Penitence" exhorts "Carnival, Emperor of the Drunkards and Gluttons" not to forget his soul over the feasting. Carnival is put into jail and escapes. Christmas eventually reconciles the two and Lent is permitted to rule for forty days of the year and for two days each week.²² This theme put on canvas by Bruegel was flourishing in the Medieval and Renaissance era and scholars of Bruegel and Shakespeare are familiar with the resemblances between the two artists, so much so that they occasionally label the works of the painter as "almost Shakespearean."²³ Although the similarities are remarkable, this paper does not seek to draw up a comparative analysis of Bruegel and Shakespeare, yet, mentioning the Dutch painter gains significance since it provides a starting point for the discussion of carnivalesque features in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*,

19. C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 59.

20. Barber, p. 61.

21. Bakhtin, pp. 25–26.

22. Hanns Swarzenski, "The Battle Between Carnival and Lent," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 49, No. 275 (1951) 2–11, p. 2.

23. Anthony J. Lewis, "Man in Nature: Peter Brueghel and Shakespeare," *Art Journal* 32. 4 (1973) 405–413, p. 405.

in which Lent and Carnival also fight their allegorical combat. This paper aims at presenting a carnivalesque interpretation of the play by focusing on the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius.

The Combatants

Hamlet's black costume evokes Bruegel's Lent-figures as well as the widely-known disorder of melancholy, which, according to Renaissance physiology, is due to the misbalance of humours and the proliferation of black bile in one's body. Besides the commonplaces concerning melancholy often quoted by Shakespeare scholars,²⁴ it is also significant that Saturn was the planet most closely associated with this temperament: "children of Saturn" were both blessed and cursed; they could have the unusual gift of contemplation which was, however, bound up with their solitude and alienation from those around them.²⁵

Saturn has carnivalesque connotations as well. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues in his introduction to *Rabelais and his World*, the carnival spirit derives from the ancient Roman Saturnalia, which were perceived as a "true and full, though temporary, return of Saturn's golden age upon earth."²⁶ The Saturnalian tradition seeped into the Medieval and Renaissance episteme and remained unbroken and alive in the carnival custom, and they expressed the universal renewal and a possible escape from everyday life.²⁷ Both Hamlet's black costume and Saturn's power over melancholic people strengthen the idea that Shakespeare's character denotes the Lent figure combating with the impertinent Carnival, who in the play seems to be Claudius. The king organises feasts and entertainments throughout the play, he is mocking kingship by appointing himself (and not being appointed by divine power) and he is incapable of praying, which is also typically carnivalesque as these rites are "completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer."²⁸ Michael D. Bristol emphasises that the funeral of Hamlet's father goes alongside with a wedding feast, and this "odd mingling of grief and of festive laughter is typical of the play as a whole."²⁹ Claudius could be inter-

24. Such as melancholy being also considered as the temperament of people exceptionally gifted in politics and the arts.

25. Bridget Gellert, "The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of *Hamlet*," *Studies in Philology* 67.1 (1970) 57–66, p. 59.

26. Bakhtin, pp. 7–8.

27. Bakhtin, pp. 7–8.

28. Bakhtin, p.7.

29. Michael D. Bristol, " 'Funeral Bak'd Meats': Carnival and Carnavalesque in *Hamlet*" in *Shakespeare's Tragedies – Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Susan Zimmermann (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 237–255, p. 250.

preted as a variant of the Lord of Misrule, he mocks kingship by “appearing in the usurped finery of the ‘real’ king,” he killed his predecessor and overtook his place in the queen’s bed. His coronation and marriage, “a kind of joke at his victim’s expense, can be an occasion of Carnival mirth . . . his use of the carnivalesque [however] is intended only as a mask for the strategic advancement of private goals and ambitions.”³⁰ Bristol suggests that Claudius is not only a usurper of the throne but also that of the carnivalesque spirit, since his using of it serves only one purpose: to legitimise his dubious political authority; the authority which, ironically, is mocked by carnival.³¹

Both in the carnivalesque and “official” registers feasts are central. Bakhtin argues that the so called “official feast,” that is, the one sponsored either by the state or the church, sanctioned the already existing patterns of things or asserted all that was stable, including the given hierarchy, religious, political and moral values as well as norms and prohibitions, as opposed to the suspension of the hierarchical rank during the carnival. Feasts have mostly been linked with crises or breaking points (such as death and birth) in nature’s cycle or in the life of the community, which always led to a festive perception of the world.³² That *Hamlet* dramatises such a turning point is manifest throughout the play, even from the very first line (“Who’s there?”) which, by focusing on the question of identity, suggests the presence of some sort of crisis. Hamlet sticks to the hierarchical code and cannot accept the arbitrary nature of carnival; as a Lenten figure he is against misrule and boisterous indulgence. Moreover, due to the custom of primogeniture, he was supposed to be crowned king instead of Claudius. By usurping the throne, his uncle displaces time and creates the festive context of the play in which the only way for Hamlet is to adopt the attributes of lent, thus defeating the affray of carnival. He borrows carnivalesque means: he organises festivities as well, moreover, he stages the mouse-trap scene, which enables the involvement of the audience on and off stage via the device of metatheatre.

Glynne Wickham suggests that apart from the mimetic games and rituals, athletic games also took place as adjuncts to certain festivals. They mostly exhibited trials of strength (wrestling, horsemanship, archery etc.) and were supposed to reflect a common interest in survival, since the skills displayed in these games were crucial to win a battle. In ancient Greece and Rome, these sports events were closely associated with the shrines and religious festivals of Apollo, and they also figured in funeral rites.³³ These athletic games also involved the audience and allowed them to

30. Bristol, “‘Funeral Bak’d Meats,’” p. 255.

31. Bristol, “‘Funeral Bak’d Meats,’” p. 256.

32. Bakhtin, pp. 9–10.

33. Wickham, pp. 8–9.

explore and interpret the underlying drives of society (namely, the competitive force, rivalry and the survival of the fitter). The sword fight at the end of *Hamlet* highly resembles the above mentioned festive games, and the bloodshed in the last scene transforms the festival into a battlefield, even a funeral. Consumption is central to this bloodshed: the royal couple drink from the poisoned wine, which fits well into the recurring imagery of feasting. The word ‘company’ derives from the word “com-pane,” which means to have bread together, to eat together; feasting is certainly a most communal act, to which *Hamlet* provides a great store-house of images.

Fasting versus Feasting

In Bruegel’s painting, the personification of Carnival, the allegory of bodily pleasures, rides a wine barrel instead of a horse and the combatants also carry kitchen utensils instead of weapons. Carnival’s spear is substituted with a roasting spit with a pig’s head, a chicken and sausages skewered on. Various characters of Carnival wear articles of food or kitchenware on their heads (kettle or waffle hat) and Carnival himself is crowned with a meat pie that somebody has bitten into.³⁴ Consumption is central to carnivalesque spirit since, on the one hand, it draws attention to the mundane aspects of life, and, on the other hand, it is the time of incorporation preceding the constraints of piety, reason and fasting. In *Hamlet* there are ample examples of similar gustatory conceits.

The play begins with a wedding feast and after Claudius and Gertrude leave the stage Hamlet connects sexuality with eating: “Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on” (1.2.143–145). Consumption-related themes saturate the play and the use of images linked with corporeality brings the tragedy to a more down to earth level. As Bakhtin highlights, to degrade means to bury, to sow and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something new. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs.³⁵ With the emphasis on consumption, the play establishes a discourse based on incorporation; be that of food, sexuality or the characters themselves. Figures of the play feed on one another: Gertrude feeds on her new husband and Claudius feeds on Old Hamlet’s royal position. Polonius is also identified with a rat, a parasitical animal, and Hamlet in his comment on his death explicitly articulates that the ones who feed on others can easily become fed on. When Claudius queries where Polonius is, Hamlet responds: “At sup-

34. Bristol, “‘Funeral Bak’d Meats,’” p. 251.

35. Bakhtin, p. 21.

per" (4.3.18), and he adds "Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. . . . We fat all creatures else to / fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and / your lean beggar is but variable service – two dishes, but / to one table" (4.3.23–26).

In carnival the world is turned upside down and everything is unpredictable since it operates according to a completely different set of rules than the non-carnavalesque order. Kings can easily become beggars and vice versa, and those who eat can also turn into food for worms. In this context life is random and therefore full of perils, irrespective of one's social rank or status. The "fat king" and the "lean beggar" in the same context highlight the two extremes of the social framework, yet, they are considered equal: two dishes on the same table.

In the eyes of Hamlet everybody is potential meat to be cooked and served during a feast. This is supported by the idea that Old Hamlet's funeral is held together with the wedding feast, like the end of the play where the bloodshed is embedded in the occasion of another feast organised by Claudius. Additionally, the "funeral baked meats" (1.2.180) conjure up the image of meat pie, pastry filled with stew and the conceit also connotes the corpse of Hamlet's father. On the other hand, later in the play Hamlet claims that Claudius "took [his] father grossly, full of bread," which, as G.R. Hibbard points out, recalls the Ghost's statement that he is "for the day confined to fast in fires" (1.5.11).³⁶ Nonetheless, these images also strengthen the above mentioned interchangeability between consuming and being consumed: the pastry around the meat connotes the bread having been eaten by Old Hamlet, which poisoned his body and deprived him of Lenten purgation.³⁷

Claudius is the source of contamination, the exact opposite of the purifying process of the lent. He is also recurrently linked with parasites in the text; for instance, Old Hamlet laments virtue at court and remarks that "lust, though to a radiant angel linked, / Will sate itself in a celestial bed / And prey on garbage" (1.5.55–57). Maggots feed on garbage and, moreover, this imagery is also connected to worms depicted as being generated in dead dogs by the sun (2.2.181). Here, procreation and decay appear in the very same conceit and the prey, the corpse, turns into a "womb" for parasites, which fulfils the criteria of the Bakhtinian grotesque body, the body in transformation that dies and is born simultaneously.³⁸ In this unfinished

36. Note to l. 3.3.80.

37. Metaphors of cannibalism frequently occur in Shakespeare's plays, most notably in *Titus Andronicus*, in which serving the human meat pie during the feast is the means of Titus' revenge on Tamora.

38. This self-destructive imagery originates in antiquity: Saturn was traditionally depicted with a scythe which he carried, and the allegorical story of him devouring his own children also connected his figure to temporality. Saturn, or Chronos, is also often characterised as an old man with long beard, as "Father Time," whose nature is ambiguous since he gives life but

metamorphosis both poles of transformation are detectable: the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the process. From the aspect of, in Bakhtin's wording, "classic" aesthetics, which is the aesthetics of the completed, these grotesque bodies are ugly and monstrous.³⁹ Nevertheless, in carnivalesque aesthetics the grotesque body is not separated from the world, it is not closed and completed. Instead, it is wide open and therefore the stress is laid on those parts through which the world can enter or through which the body can exit to meet the world: the mouth, the genital organs, the potbelly or the nose.⁴⁰ Being generated by the sun in dead dogs mirrors this grotesquery, albeit this corporeal depiction is by far not the merry procreation usual to carnival. These maggots are parasitical, they feed on the dead womb and thus it is highly unlikely that any form of procreation could occur in this context. It seems that contamination is vital to the survival of these parasitical organisms, for which Lenten cleansing would be lethal.

Eating-related metaphors impregnate the play and the entire state of Denmark might be perceived as a decaying body being eaten by maggots. The density of metaphors of rankness and the fact that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.65), with "things gross and rank in nature" (1.2.136), suggest that just as Polonius turned from consumer into flesh being consumed, the feasting country can also easily become a dish being served.

The analogy between the human body and state was a frequently exploited in the Renaissance. Maybe the most significant comprehensive work on this issue is that of Ernst H. Kantorowicz's, who deduces the fiction to "The King's Two Bodies" from the English jurists of the Tudor period (mostly from Edmund Plowden's *Commentaries or Reports*), claiming that besides his physical body the king also has a body politic that legally never dies. Kantorowicz's starting point is a collection of medieval judicial records, from which it turns out that the source of the king's absolute power was not some abstract law or not even an abstract state, but rather an "abstract psychological fiction" of the king being almighty and unquestionably just.⁴¹ "Bodifying" social institutions (even the king) was common from the late Middle Ages and the image of the state was also captured as an organic whole, conceived as a "body" being unable to exist without its constructing components, namely the members of the community.⁴² In this context both the body and the

also takes it. With reference to the grotesque body images, "Father Time" / Saturn "pregnant" with his devoured children seems to be the ultimate carnivalesque / grotesque body.

39. Bakhtin, pp. 24–25.

40. Bakhtin, p. 26.

41. Ernst H. Kantorowicz *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 4.

42. Kantorowicz, pp. 270–271.

state are hierarchically arranged organisms fighting for survival and both exist by constant tensions and conflicts among their component parts. The complexity of this matrix is evidenced by the various parts of the body linked with their political counterparts in the society. According to the examples listed by Naomi Lieber, the head was usually associated with the prince, while the other organs, e.g. the belly, were assigned a referent with certain variety. William Averell related it to the aristocracy, Bacon to both deprived populace and troubled aristocracy, and Edward Forset to the sovereign of a healthy digestive system.⁴³

The digestive allusions in *Hamlet* suggest that the state of Denmark evokes the image of a digesting body which repeatedly needs to be purified of congested pollution. Even Gertrude's words to Hamlet in act 1 scene 2 point out that "all that lives must die, / *Passing through nature* to eternity" (1.2.72–73). As a Lenten figure, Hamlet's task is to cleanse this organism; this process, however, is hindered by Claudius's anti-lenten indulgence.⁴⁴ Besides the "funeral baked meat" (1.2.180) there are further references to food made out of animals. In Gertrude's chamber Hamlet accuses her of lasciviousness and holds her fornicating "[i]n the rank sweat of an enseamed [greasy] bed" (3.4.84) against the queen, thus suggesting the image of the royal couple as two bodies being roasted on the heat of their incestuous sheets dripping with their own fat. Abstaining from meat during Lent would be essential for purgation, yet, the whole play seems to be soaked with the greasy sweat of the characters.

The murder of Old Hamlet is described variously: first, the ghost claims it was caused by "juice of cursed hebenon" (1.5.62) poured in the king's ear, later Hamlet accuses Claudius of taking his "father grossly, full of bread" (3.3.80). In both cases, Claudius is the cause of congestion which hinders the circulation of the body (the eventual reason for Old Hamlet's death: 1.5.64–70): the rankness of Denmark is condensed in Claudius and he appears to be similar to a blockage in the vein of the country that, in order to restore healthy circulation, has to be removed.

In tragedies, as Lieber suggests, the tragic heroes are the *pharmakoi*, that is, human scapegoats (often slaves, cripples or criminals) who were chosen and cast out of society at times of disaster, hence enabling purification, and who construct and are constructed by the community at the same time. Their removal, or sacrifice, reconfirms the community of the image it has chosen for itself. However, the entire socio-political organism that contains both hero and society, in turning against the

43. Lieber, p. 15.

44. The most obvious instance of Claudius being a source of contamination is the fact that he murdered Hamlet Senior by pouring poison in his ear. Moreover, at the end of the play he attempts to repeat this villainy, but there the poison is accompanied by wine consumption.

representation of itself (the hero), turns against itself (the community), thus evoking the highly Shakespearean image of self-devouring humanity.⁴⁵

The transformation of the hero into the locus of crisis places him into the position of the scapegoat. In his work, *The Scapegoat*, in relation to myths, René Girard emphasises the harmful omnipotence of the scapegoat, and its persecutors' belief that all initiative come from it. There is only one person responsible for everything, and since this person is the root of sickness he has to be responsible for the cure as well. Scapegoating is only effective at times of crisis when human relations are broken down and this crisis also has exterior implications, such as sickness, plagues or droughts.⁴⁶ The *pharmakos* localises hostility that saturates a given community; it embodies the socio-political taint, disease or disruption that produces political anxiety. The deaths of tragic heroes at the end of the plays represent a sort of self-surgery, a ritualised form of cleansing and reclaiming of the community's primary values.⁴⁷

The theatrical representations of the above mentioned rites were common in the Middle Ages and manifested themselves in ceremonies that intended to purge the community of bad luck. This driving-away of evil or other disruptive forces became central to some forms of social theatre, such as the anti-masques of the sixteenth century.⁴⁸ The scapegoat-type ceremonies sometimes took a more universal form and depicted allegorical conflicts between forces such as winter and spring or darkness and light. These mock-combats (taking the form of war-dances) usually occurred at the beginning of the year, and the two forces gradually turned into the spirits of the old and the new year, or carnival and lent.⁴⁹

So it seems that for the sake of the purgation of the communal body, the embodiment of crisis within the society has to be annihilated. In *Hamlet*, the locus of crisis is Claudius: he is the embodiment of rankness in the state of Denmark; yet, the "self-surgery" is carried out by Hamlet since he is the protagonist, who identifies the problem first,⁵⁰ hence he reflects the crisis the community faces. It is problem-

45. Lieber, p. 16.

46. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), p. 43.

47. Lieber, pp. 16–17.

48. These anti-masques usually displayed disorder, hence ridiculing the traditional genre of the masque.

49. John Welsey Harris, *Medieval Theatre in Context: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 61.

50. In Gertrude's bed chamber when the queen says "thou hast cleft my heart in twain" Hamlet responds that she should "throw away the worser part of it, / And live purer with the other half" (3.4.152–154). Hamlet's words as daggers penetrate Gertrude and remove the infected organ so that the body can be purified.

atic to identify the scapegoat in this very situation: discourses on the subject most often assign this function to Hamlet since the scapegoat role is traditionally cast on an innocent member of the community. However, Hamlet is most certainly not an innocent figure: he kills Polonius without the slightest sign of remorse or pity, he drives Ophelia into despair and he also sets up the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Regardless of the often applied double standard in case of murder in Shakespeare (namely that regicide cannot be compared to other murderous deeds), Hamlet does have villainous traits. Therefore it might not be far-fetched to suggest that there is more than one sacrificial object present in the play: for Hamlet, the root of all rankness in Denmark is his uncle and vice versa, Claudius assumes that were Hamlet to be eliminated, he would be freed from the embodiment of everything that might oppose his pattern. Additionally, the play is based on mere assumptions, unspoken words, procrastination and uncertainty; the only indubitable evidence for Hamlet that Claudius assassinated Old Hamlet is his reaction to the mouse-trap scene.⁵¹ This, however, is persuasive only for Hamlet and not the whole community. Moreover, the public suspects nothing of the assassination, which from a communal aspect renders the king free from guilt. In this sense, both Hamlet and the king could be cast in the role of the scapegoat; eventually, even if circuitously, they eliminate each other, thus depriving the community of both scapegoats and both extremes.

Another way of transferring sin and thus cleansing the community was to apply so called “sin-eaters,” a custom in practice in Britain as well. Its earliest record is a manuscript from the middle of the seventeenth century (*The Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*) which mentions the Welsh custom of a sin eater consuming a piece of bread over the corpse in order to take upon himself the sins of the deceased. The major difference between the scapegoat and the sin-eater rituals is that the former appealed to the living whereas the latter to the already dead.⁵²

The death of the royal family at the end of *Hamlet* purges the community of the living, yet, there is an allusion to the deceased ones as well, and it is, again, feast-related. When Fortinbras marches in and discovers the bloodshed he asks “Oh, proud Death, / What feast is toward in thine eternal cell, / That thou so many princes at a shot / So bloodily hast struck?” (5.2.317–319). These lines echo Hamlet’s riddling utterance concerning the whereabouts of Polonius’s corpse: “Not where he eats, but where he is eaten” (4.3.20). Polonius is dead here, therefore,

51. Even if the encounter with the Ghost triggers the consecutive events and supports Hamlet’s already existing suspicion, the endless line of studies on the Ghost’s identity suggests that his words are to be taken with a pinch of salt.

52. E. Sidney Hartland, “The Sin-Eater,” *Folklore* 3.2 (1892) 145–147, pp. 145–146.

being literally eaten by worms, but on the other hand, being allegorically eaten by Death. The king's final feast turns into a funeral (again) and a Feast of Death, or even a Dance of Death.

The iconography of the Dance of Death enjoyed massive popularity in early modern Europe. Its earliest documented example was a fresco, from which the name 'Danse Macabre' is derived, painted on a cloister wall of the cemetery of Les Innocents in 1424–25.⁵³ Depicting the Dance of Death was often accompanied by carnivalesque features: for instance, in the depiction of a Dance of Death by Michael Wolgemut (1493), five skeletons are displayed, one of them playing the flute, one of them lying in a grave-like hole and the rest are dancing to the tunes. In early modern Europe, the superstition that at certain times the graveyard dead would rise and dance was widespread, and it might have been related to the churchyard dances and revelry amongst the living.⁵⁴ Johannes Nohl in his work *The Black Death*, describes the carnivalesque grotesquery of these performances, highlighting that in this Dance of Death the joyous festive atmosphere is turned into a dead march, during which a young man throws himself on the ground and plays the dead man while girls and women dance around him endeavouring to caricature mourning the dead in as comical a manner as possible.⁵⁵ In this game the living attempt to mock Death "in a wild travesty of funeral rites,"⁵⁶ whereas in the authentic Dance of Death the figures of Death perform the carnival laughter. Shakespearean tragedies usually end in bloodshed, so Danse Macabre, the devouring womb of the grave, is "inevitable" to the authentic Shakespearean solution; however, in *Hamlet* this Dance of Death is directly linked with feasting⁵⁷ and due to the carnivalesque pattern human beings are equal in both festivals and death. Fortinbras arrives into this dismal sight, in order to regenerate the body of the state and he describes the horrid image with gustatory conceits. This act of consumption also seems to be of a parasitical nature,

53. Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Morality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 51.

54. Neill, p. 63.

55. Neill, p. 64.

56. Neill, p. 64.

57. In her comprehensive work on the history of European drama, Erika Fischer-Lichte describes similar festive occasions related to the human mocking of Death. These were connected to the religious festivals of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, most notably the Easter tropes and the Passion plays in Europe. By this time, these festive events went beyond the range of the Church and were often held in cemeteries. Feasting, drinking and turbulence were so central to these carnivalesque occasions that, according to records, during one of these lengthy festivals events deteriorated to an extent that the cemetery had to be reconsecrated (*A dráma története* [2001], p. 74).

however, it is inexorable for the renewal of the community; the character of Fortinbras is reminiscent of a “dramaturgical scavenger,” a socio-political bird of prey waiting for the body of the state to die. He is a marginal figure in the play, yet, he periodically appears and his presence is constant throughout the tragedy. His figure resembles a vulture hovering over its prey until it finally dies and can be devoured. In this sense, Denmark is really a decaying body, the space of feasts, which eventually devours itself. Fortinbras “[s]harked up a list of landless resolute / For food and diet to some enterprise / That hath a somach in’t” (1.1.98–100), upon which G.R. Hibbard in his edition remarks that the allusion to food might firstly mean that the landless resolute are to serve as rations (“food and diet”) to the personified “enterprise” that has a challenge to their pride (“stomach”) in it; secondly, Hibbard suggests, these men will participate in any enterprise that promises something for the stomach to digest,⁵⁸ which in this “bodified” context is the state of Denmark.

Once Fortinbras is in charge, he starts to give orders and clean up the bloodshed both by rearranging the corpses (“Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage” 5.2.349) and by urging the story to be told, thus restoring the name of Hamlet and enabling purification via the catharsis of representation:

Let us haste to hear it,
And call the noblest to the audience.
For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.
I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me. (5.2.339–343)

In this sense, Fortinbras is not only a scavenger cleaning the battle field of the dead bodies, but he is also a sin-eater, who allegorically takes away Hamlet’s sins by justifying and representing his deeds. Throughout the play Hamlet is, first, the personification of melancholy, the killjoy who casts a dark gloom over the wedding feast of Claudius; later, the figure of the madman who commits outrageous deeds (lies, deceit, murder), due to which his reputation within the community is at least dubious. As a contrast, in the last scene Fortinbras depicts him as a valiant soldier who was likely to “have proved most royally” (5.2.351) and would have become a great king. Additionally, Hamlet, as a student of Wittenberg, is a man of reason, which in Shakespearean drama is frequently linked with memory. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth calls memory “the warder of the brain” (1.7.66), to which Kenneth Muir in the Arden edition adds that anatomists in Shakespeare’s time divided the brain into three ventricles, in the hindmost of which, the cerebellum, they placed the memory, which was the warder of the

⁵⁸. Note to ll. 1.1.98–100.

cerebellum warning the reason against attack.⁵⁹ Memory and remembrance is also crucial in *Hamlet* and it is synonymous with reason. The Ghost urges Hamlet to remember him and the consecutive monologue suggests that the encounter made Hamlet restructure his previous conception of reason:

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain. . . (1.5. 98–103)

The code valid in Wittenberg fails in carnivalesque Denmark, where the memory of Old Hamlet has faded away, and therefore Hamlet needs to readjust to the festive pattern which instead of the head appeals to the lower stratum of the body. In the framework of corporeality reason is exiled and replaced by passion, indulgence and madness, characteristically carnivalesque attributes and the complete opposites of Lenten abstinence and spirituality. Fortinbras, as the one in charge of memory in the kingdom, restores the Lenten pattern by representing the story for the “noblest audience,” in a communal act, which, again, is typical of carnival.

Conclusion

Although the characters carry the traits of carnival, and the play can be perceived as an allegorical battle between Lent and Carnival, the infertility and the lack of reproduction give the carnivalesque approach a slight twist and in many senses it seems the play offers rather an anti-carnivalesque solution. The pattern of festivity is completed in the final scene in which Claudius arranges a feast with sports and games, albeit lethal ones. At the end of the drama Carnival and Lent eliminate each other leaving the stage empty for something upcoming and new. Even though *Hamlet* offers no proper carnivalesque outcome (present, e.g. in the marriages at the end of the comedies), some sort of renewal and regeneration does occur in the end: the restoration of the pre-carnivalesque framework of “re-membering” and reason.

59. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth: The Arden Shakespeare*, Kenneth Muir ed. (The Arden Shakespeare, 2006), note to l. 1.7.66.