Contrary to Ben Jonson who wrote lengthy and pedantic prologues or long theoretical exchanges (as in the dialogue between Mitis and Cordatus in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, 3.6.191–211) to define and justify his brand or style of comedy, Shakespeare “slyly” effaces himself behind the drunken tinker, Christopher Sly. Indeed, in the second scene of his Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, after he has accepted the sweet dream that he is indeed the Lord of the house, Sly exclaims:

_Sly._ Am I a lord, and have I such a lady?
Or do I dream? Or have I dreamed till now?
I do not sleep: I see, I hear, I speak,
I smell sweet savours and I feel soft things.
Upon my life, I am a lord indeed,
And not a tinker, nor Christopher Sly . . .

_E enter a Messenger_

_Messenger._ Your honour’s players, hearing your amendment,
Are come to play a pleasant comedy;
For so your doctors hold it very meet,
Seeing too much sadness hath congealed your blood
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy –
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.

_Sly._ Marry, I will. Let them play it. Is not a comonty a Christmas gambold or a tumbling trick?

_Bartbolsomew._ No, my good lord, it is more pleasing stuff.

_Sly._ What, household stuff?
Bartholomew. It is a kind of history.

Sly. Well, we'll see't. (Induction, 2.64–136)

Sly’s dream that he has become a lord and may be treated to a private performance of a “comonty” in his own house certainly anticipates Bottom’s dream that he was loved by the fairy queen before waking up and walking away from the woods to play Pyramus at the marriage revels at Duke Theseus’ court. Sly remains passive and a simple spectator of the play within, while Bottom is an actor in a “brief scene” of “tragical mirth” (5.1.56–7). But both fictions are used by Shakespeare to illustrate his style of popular, romantic comedy as opposed to the more learned, elitist form of play which Ben Jonson was to advocate a few years later. Sly’s malapropism brings out the common nature of comedy, associated with the life of the community and the “common” people, and its links with popular entertainment and festivity (“Christmas gambold,” “tumbling trick”). This spontaneous and quasi “natural” association between the world of the stage (the entertainment industry of Elizabethan London) and the cyclical holidays of the calendar – May Day, Midsummer, Whitsun, Christmas, Twelfth Night – is not a chance or fortuitous association but a form of discreet manifesto inscribed in the margins of one of Shakespeare’s early playtexts. The titles of his festive comedies refer to some well-known seasonal celebrations and thus become associated with mirth, sexual excitement and freedom and, in the case of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Peter Holland reminds us that

this rustic celebration of fertility combines neatly with the pleasures of sex in the woods that Hermia resists when Lysander proposes it (2.2.45–71). But its presence in the play is set against the notion of Midsummer itself, strongly associated with bonfires, watches, magic, and carnival parades. (Holland, in Shakespeare 1995a: 105)

So, at this early stage, without anticipating the various criteria used to define the sub-genre known as Shakespeare’s “festive comedies,” it may be useful to give the short list of the titles considered as definitely belonging to it. In my view, even though it remains a fairly awkward attempt at it, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is Shakespeare’s first sketch of his future festive “forest” comedies, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like it*. Shakespeare’s “English” comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, is also certainly to be included in the list in spite of its bourgeois backgrounds and moralistic features, were it only because of the huge carnivalesque presence of Sir John Falstaff. Finally, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, two plays that have no real “green world” of their own, should nevertheless also be added because their subplots (the enchanted world of Belmont and the carnivalesque, below-stairs atmosphere of Olivia’s household) are far more than simple counterpoints to the main plots. In a way, Portia on the one hand and Feste and Sir Toby on the other do contribute a lot to the final triumph of the spirits of carnival and reveling over the sour, anti-festive stance of Shylock and Malvolio. In a way these two plays offer both negative versions (since they use carnival and festivity as a punishment of the puritanical figures) and complements to the ebullient, topsy-turvy energies of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and
As You Like It. So I would certainly consider this group of four plays as the core of the festive group with its complex, subtle arrangement of echoes, variations, and correspondences.

The Backgrounds of Shakespeare's Festive Comedies

Indeed, in Shakespeare’s days, long after the Reformation, the calendar as it had been established by the church with its series of days consecrated to saints and its fixed and movable feasts, still played a role of major importance. It constituted a matrix of time, the effect of which was to subordinate events of secular life to those of the sacred cycle of the year (the movable feasts of the Christian liturgy governed by the Eastern cycle and ranging from Shrove Tuesday to Corpus Christi) and to commemorate a host of popular beliefs and folkloric traditions that had developed over centuries. The year was by and large divided into two halves: the winter or sacred half ranging from Christmas to June 24, which corresponded to Midsummer but also to the latest possible date for the feast of Corpus Christi, and the summer half with its mainly agrarian feasts and host of local and occasional celebrations which went from June 25 to Christmas.

Shakespeare, as a playwright, is unique in the place and importance he ascribes to popular festivity and holidays in his work, thus giving “a local habitation and a name” to what might otherwise have been regarded as “airy nothing” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 5.1.16–17). He indeed includes all and sundry, court and country, in his festive kaleidoscope firmly set on the fertile ground of the variegated traditions and customs of “Merry England,” and this without nostalgia or satire. He imbues the spirit of holiday with mirth, making it akin to the freedom necessary to comedy, as when Rosalind in male attire joyfully says to Orlando: “Come woo me, woo me, for now I am in a holiday humour, and like enough to consent” (As You Like It, 4.1.62–5). His festive comedies stage repressed or forbidden desires which are ultimately liberated and lawfully expressed in marriage through disguises, tricks, or apparently miraculous events that find a rational explanation at the end. According to Lawrence Danson,

the happiness resides in the overcoming of potential conflict between the public business of familial alliance and the private business of emotional and sexual compatibility. The marriage of Kate and Petruchio becomes the socially acceptable equivalent of a fertility ritual; their indulgence in licensed sexuality brings renewed life to the community. Shakespeare did not need anthropology to tell him about the ancient connections between comedy and the rituals and myths which ensure and explain the cycle of the seasons . . . Christianity revised the ancient myth of seasonal return in its own celebration of a god’s death and resurrection, and in the process did its best to de-sexualize the miracle; Shakespeare’s comic marriage plots restore the sexual connection. In Shakespearean comedy the reward of virtue . . . is the life-giving energy of sex contained within the licensed arena of marriage. (Danson 2000: 64–5)
Thus the festive occasion, loosely associated with the play and the sexual freedom and love games which it encouraged, can also be regarded as a rite of passage for the young, leading to their integration or incorporation through marriage into the group or community. Writing about this phenomenon in *As You Like It*, Marjorie Garber describes it in terms of “communitas” and of “transforming Shakespearean confraternities” (Garber 1981: 8).

Even though local traditions were pretty strong and accounted for important holidays and celebrations in the various parts of the realm, the main source of recreation came from a number of court activities which gave the impression that royal festivals provided the general impulse and rhythm for all sorts of different rites and rejoicings taking place in the provinces and at all social levels. In other words, the queen was regarded as the center, the *primus mobile* of all forms of merry-making and festivity. The queen’s year was also divided into two halves. The season of the Revels in winter used to begin on November 17 when, in a jolly atmosphere of bell-ringing, bonfires, and jousts, Queen Elizabeth returned to Whitehall to celebrate the anniversary of her accession to the throne in 1558. During the twelve days of Christmas, the court was alive with all sorts of entertainments, including plays, organized by the Master of the Revels. On Candlemas or Shrove Tuesday the court set off for Greenwich or Richmond, when the ceremony of the washing of the feet of twelve poor people took place on Maundy Thursday. The Garter ceremony was traditionally held at Windsor castle on St. George’s Day, April 23. The summer was devoted to royal progresses through the provinces. The entertainments (Kenilworth, Elvetham, etc.) organized for the queen were highly extravagant affairs laid on by the great aristocratic families of the realm. The whole court followed and the high favor which was then granted to one of them to lavish princely hospitality to the sovereign and her train for several weeks certainly called a great deal of national attention to the house and county on whom the expensive honor befell. Shakespeare alludes to these events in Oberon’s description of the magic flower called “love-in-idleness” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which is generally thought to have been inspired by the extraordinary festivities organized for Elizabeth at Elvetham in 1591:

*Oberon.* My gentle puck, come hither. Thou rememb’rest
Since once I sat upon a promontory
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin’s back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
To hear the sea-maid’s music.

*Puck.* I remember.

*Oberon.* That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal thronèd by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
As it could pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid’s fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat’ry moon,
And the imperial vot’ress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free. (2.1.148–64)

This passage probably conflates memories of this particular entertainment, which had apparently been one of the most spectacular and lavish in the entire reign of Queen Elizabeth, with its gorgeous water pageantry and its mythological apparatus, with the cult of the chaste vestal identified with the “cold moon” Cynthia and the celebration of the “Virgin Queen” (Strong 1977: 16). For Louis Montrose, “the pervasive cultural presence of the Queen was a condition of the play’s imaginative possibility” (Montrose 1996: 160). Interestingly, this subtle and oblique poetic evocation of the queenly presence by Shakespeare offers a striking contrast with Jonson’s masque-like epiphany of Queen Elizabeth at the end of Every Man Out of His Humour. This rather obtrusive impersonation of the queen at the closure of comedy was used by Shakespeare’s rival to replace the traditional reconciliation concluding festive comedy. Stephen Orgel argues that, by openly miming the person of the queen on stage, “the theater was considered to have overstepped its bounds . . . Only Jonson would have presumed so far, using the power of royalty to establish the authority of his fiction” (Orgel 1985: 23).

Even in the heart of the woods, the real source of power was rarely forgotten or ignored. But if Jonson’s characters in Every Man Out begin in the country and end in the city, Shakespeare’s festive comedies are structurally built on a contrary movement that takes its protagonists away from court into the green world. As Anne Barton puts it, “Shakespeare’s comedies deliberately bypass the teeming life, not only of contemporary London, but of cities generally. They are filled with evasions of the urban” (Barton 1994: 305). The contrast between London and the provinces was then to become an increasingly important one with the spectacular urban and commercial boom that took place in the last decades of the sixteenth century. To Jonson and the upholders of city comedy, London was the center of throbbing life, a kaleidoscope of manners, of intrigue, vices and folly, and a great source of comic inspiration. Not so Shakespeare. In fact, the opposition between the city and the country lay at the heart of the whole phenomenon of festivity, for even if it was through the towns that festivals were developed, embellished and enriched, the festival itself was still the product of a rural, popular culture whose seasonal rhythms and pre-Christian beliefs were linked with the mysteries and the magic of natural fertility. For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the countryside lying outside the city walls was still the object of superstition and deep-rooted fears. The forest associated with royal privileges was the domain of hunting, of wildness and the sacred (Marienstras 1981: 58–9). There was also the world of folklore and the ballads of the “old Robin Hood” as well as the iconography of the homo sylvarum or Wild Man echoed in texts as different as Spenser’s The Fairie Queene or the anonymous play Mucedorus (1590), which was performed by Shakespeare’s troupe, the Chamberlain’s Men.
As Elizabethan England was gradually shifting from a ritualistic and relatively static system to a more secular one, the themes and images of popular festivals were disseminated at the very moment when their existence was being questioned by Puritan pamphleteers like Philip Stubbes in his *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583). It is quite possible that these attacks made local games and traditions better known, as attention was drawn to them when University Wits like Thomas Nashe stood up in the defense of popular pastimes, a tradition later continued by Ben Jonson, Robert Dover with his Cotswold Games (Laroque 1991: 163–4), and by such remote disciples of the Tribe of Ben as Robert Herrick, the genial, nostalgic poet of *Hesperides* (1648). The defense of the traditions of “Merry England” led to what Leah Marcus (1986) has called “the politics of mirth,” thus arousing a pre-ethnological interest as it were for the forgotten games, customs, and festivals in the most remote corners of the land. A famous letter by Robert Laneham, giving an account of the royal progress at Kenilworth, tells of a local craftsman and colorful figure called “Captain Cox” and of his efforts to ask Queen Elizabeth to stand in defense of the “Hocktide” games which had been banned by the local Puritans (Laroque 1991: 337; Montrose 1996: 183).

Shakespeare, whose childhood in rural Warwickshire and possible Catholic background (Honigmann 1985; Wilson 1997: 11–13) made him particularly alive to the importance of ritual and festivity, was then to find out what astounding dramatic use he could make in his comedies of all the local games and traditions and of the vestiges of folklore. He had the flair and vision to see what profit he could make in his festive comedies with these generally despised bits and pieces of local popular culture. He quickly assimilated the fairly primitive dramatic structures emerging from seasonal mimes and dramas like the folk plays and the morris dance, and then incorporated them in his plots or subplots or in his poetic imagery. Ass-headed Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has thus been compared to a mummer wearing an animal mask for some local performance (Holland, in Shakespeare 1995a: 78–9), while the foresters’ song in *As You Like It* (“What shall he have that killed the deer?” 4.2.10–19) seems reminiscent of the Abbots Bromley Horn dance in Staffordshire (Laroque 1991: 167).

The May Day and Midsummer morris dance was also a significant festive occasion, even though, as Hamlet complains, the hobby horse was often “forgot.” Indeed, as David Wiles puts it, this “centre-piece of Elizabethan folk culture . . . symbolized the sense of community that everyone supposed to have existed in some past golden age. It was . . . associated with anti-authoritarian summer festivals in which the boundary between game and rebellion was ill-defined” (Wiles 1987: 44). Michael Mangan explains how it progressively left the green of the local village to become incorporated on the London stage:

> Morris dancing itself forms a significant strand in the development of comedy: part entertainment and part ritual, it acts as a bridge between the general festivities of the country community and the performance in the London theatres . . . As the dominant culture of England became more urban . . . the spirit of misrule grew away from its seasonal roots. (Mangan 1996: 40)
In fact, Shakespeare's comedies take us back to the roots of romance away from the urban centers. The park in Love's Labour's Lost, the woods near Athens in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Windsor forest with its local legends and folklore in The Merry Wives of Windsor, or the forest of Arden in As You Like It, are all Shakespearean versions of the pagan, ritualized vision of a traditional green world with its hunting rites and grounds, chance or sporting games and its utopian, topsy-turvy scenarios. The green world was regarded as a place of escape from the constraints of the law and of everyday life, a place of change (of gender or of identity or both) and deep interior transformation. According to Edward Berry, the confrontation with these “enchanted landscapes” is an experience which is “akin to the sacred places of initiation”:

> Often located in nature, these landscapes can be anywhere... for they represent a geography of the mind. Sometimes hostile, sometimes benign, these realms always disorient; their contours are the meandering lines of identities in transition. (Berry 1984: 144)

This sense of disorientation is expressed through images related to the labyrinth, while the world suddenly becomes a maze for the lovers (“the mazed world... / Knows not which is which”: A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2.1.113–14). Sometimes, on the contrary, the adoption of the pastoral convention made the contact with nature and “old custom” the source of content and fulfillment, as Duke Senior's in As You Like It:

> Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,  
> Hath not old custom made this life more sweet  
> Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods  
> More free from peril than the envious court? . . .  
> And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
> Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
> Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (2.1.1–17)

But the green world is not just limited to forest and green pastures. It also corresponds to Portia's home in Belmont where Lorenzo and Jessica listen to the harmonies of celestial music at night (5.1.1–88) and, in this particular case, it becomes a byword for perfection and enchantment. But not all festive comedies insist so much about harmony.

Indeed, in The Taming of the Shrew Shakespeare explores the theme of comic sexual warfare between men and women, a theme to which he will return in a more sophisticated way in Much Ado About Nothing. The taming of Katherina by Petruchio may indeed be taken as a dramatic variation on the traditional Hocktide games that playfully opposed the sexes in Warwickshire at Easter-tide (Laroque 1991: 108–9). In Much Ado the theme of sexual warfare leading to marriage is verbalized in the witty sparring between Beatrice and her cousin Benedick:

> Leonato. You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them. (1.1.57–60)
The merry interlude at Messina represents the equivalent of a carnival period when the local court indulges in a hectic bout of laughter, alcohol, and dancing after the trials and dangers of the war that has just come to an end. In this “weak piping time of peace” (*Richard III*, 1.1.24), love games also form “dangerous liaisons” beset with all sorts of risks even when they are pursued amid the rowdiness of the ball and the carefree festive intrigues that take place at the governor’s palace. But in spite of the jolly atmosphere that seems to prevail at the surface of things, the happy ending and final marriages are difficult to achieve. Benedick tries his best to be a festive, romantic lover, but he confesses that he “cannot woo in festival terms” (5.2.31). It is true that the frictions or “flyting” games remain somewhat marginal in Shakespeare’s plays, since his festive comedies teem with examples assessing the preeminence of women, which probably simply reflects the fact that in many popular celebrations they often happened to be more numerous or more active than the men. According to Susan Snyder, this phenomenon “harks back to the festival roots of comedy, those rites of spring in which women played a prominent part. May queens were more common in English village festivals than May kings” (Snyder 1979: 27). This is also why feminist criticism in the wake of Juliet Dusinberre, Linda Bamber, Jeanne Addison Roberts, Irene Dash, Marianne Novy, and many others has expressed preeminent interest in the gender games and subversion of patriarchy found in Shakespeare’s festive comedies.

Late spring festivals prompt confusion and disorientation as well as a questioning of identity and sexual desires. Shakespeare indeed associates the popular May Day festival with the disorder of the senses. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* he plays on the similarities between the festive customs of May Day and Midsummer in order to add to the overall confusion. The sequence of comic chaotic situations symbolizes the unpredictability of the festive time in the green world (“there’s no clock in the forest” says Orlando in *As You Like It*, 3.2.291–2), marked by fortune, chance, or luck. Enchanted time, now suspended, now accelerated, working in mysterious lunar cycles, is the true counterpart of these enchanted places.

In popular memories, Midsummer was still linked to the London parades. The famous Midsummer Watch, suppressed in 1539, was replaced by the Lord Mayor’s Show on St. Simon and St. Jude on October 28. It was usually staged at nightfall with torches, with the presence of St. George and the dragon (popularly referred to as “Old Snap”), of giants and of Wild Men (“woodwoses”) all equipped with candles, lanterns, or “cressets” (Laroque 1991: 344–6). This created among its audiences a tinge of delight and fear, analogous to the ambivalent reactions prompted on contemporary English stages by fairies’ magic as well as by demonic or ghostly apparitions. “Why, this is very midsummer madness” (*Twelfth Night*, 3.4.53) Olivia exclaims when she sees her besotted steward sporting yellow stockings cross-gartered with a large conniving smile, suggesting that Malvolio has been “moon-struck” and now behaves like a lunatic or like one of these fantastic Midsummer dreams or apparitions. The whole moment is steeped in a sort of crazy topsy-turvydom, like much of what happens in this fairly somber comedy of eros and errors. This is not just an innocent or chance proverbial saying on the part of Olivia in a comedy that takes its title from
an allusion to the winter solstice, or rather from the twelfth night that follows, and it looks ahead to its summer counterpart or calendrical antipodes, six months later.

After the summer, essentially marked by open-air pastoral rejoicings (harvest home, Lammas or sheep-shearing) in the country, and fairs and wakes in the towns and parishes, came the autumn festivals. Besides these great holiday cycles, echoed and sometimes mirrored in the situations or imagery of his comedies, Shakespeare was also attentive to occasions and commemoration. But the calendrical allusions are far from being systematic or even accurate, since not all of these customs were consistently observed. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there is as much confusion in festival dates (the night of the comedy could be situated any time between St. Valentine's Day and Midsummer) as in the phases of the moon; this, in spite of a number of sophisticated scholarly explanations (Wiles 1993), is certainly deliberate on the part of a playwright who generally refuses to follow any strict, rigid series of rules. This muddle over the calendar is analogous to Shakespeare's usual disruption of the unities of space, time, and action in Aristotelian, classical dramaturgy, except for a few, highly visible exceptions like *The Comedy of Errors* or *The Tempest*. Such desire to break free from constraints of all sorts was one of his main disagreements with Jonson who, quite unlike him, was a poet and playwright constantly obsessed with the introduction and discussion of rules and theory in his plays. Shakespeare's point is to use festivity in a romantic way, as a means of abolishing continuous time altogether and to make it the equivalent of sleep or a form of "re-creation," so that a sense of wonder or enchantment may be produced.

The feast of Hallowmas is only mentioned in a rather puzzling passage in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when Simple asks a rather astounding and apparently nonsensical question about a book of riddles: "*Book of riddles? Why, did you not lend it to Alice Shortcake upon Allhallowmas last, a fortnight afore Michaelmas?*" (1.1.184–6). By putting the order of festivals upside down (Michaelmas corresponds to September 29 and Hallowmas to November 1), Simple provokes hilarity among the audience. Time seems to be running backward in this saturnalian, festive comedy with an English background. But there may be another meaning in this passage, as Jeanne Addison Roberts suggests, confirming that Shakespeare's one English, citizen comedy is in fact steeped in an autumnal background as well as a number of connections with carnival and charivari customs (Roberts 1972: 107–12).

At the end of year, Christmas and its train of twelve happy days represented a long parenthesis that had been originally devised to bridge the gap between the solar and the lunar calendars. In *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.2.460–8) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (Induction 2.131–2) Shakespeare associates Christmas with the performances of the minstrels or mummers who were all vaguely associated with the spirit of comedy and mirth.

Though rare and rather paradoxical in comedy, a song of winter may be used to end a festive comedy. This is indeed the case at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*, which closes on a "Song of the cuckoo and the owl" where the two birds respectively stand for Spring and Winter and compete with rival themes. This final song echoes and encapsulates the main topic of the comedy, which could be interpreted as a long
struggle between the forces of Lenten meditation and study, on the one hand, and those of Carnival, love-making, and marriage, on the other. Contrary to all the other comedies, marriage is finally postponed when the death of the French king is announced and the play that had begun with a vow of asceticism and penance ends in frustration, atypically and ironically confronting the young men with their anti-festive pledge:

Princess. ... go with speed
To some forlorn and naked hermitage,
Remote from all the pleasures of the world:
There stay until twelve celestial signs
Have brought about the annual reckoning.
If this austere insociable life
Change not your offer made in heat of blood;
If frosts and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds
Nip not the blossom of your love . . .
Come challenge me, challenge me by these deserts,
And, by this virgin palm now kissing thine,
I will be thine . . .

Berowne. Our wooing doth not end like an old play;
Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesy
Might well have made our sport a comedy. (5.2.782–858)

This ending is totally unconventional for a festive comedy since it turns its back on “old play(s),” but it may be explained in part by the desire to prepare the audience for a sequel which may well have been the mysterious Love's Labour's Won, a comedy that was probably lost and for which many different hypotheses are regularly being proposed (Mangan 1996: 149).

Definitions of Festive Comedy

Comedy is in itself hard to define – most critics agree on this point. Shakespearean comedy is even more elusive as there is no theoretical definition of it and even less a sort of master code or master key to explain it. “It is impossible to provide a magic formula,” says Kenneth Muir (1979: 2). Some critics are happy to define it in a chronological manner (early comedies, mature or romantic comedies, problem comedies, and late comedies or romances), while others have tried to make them fit a number of pre-defined molds or categories. In Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy Leo Salingar (1974) by and large distinguishes between three main groups: the woodland comedies, Two Gentlemen of Verona, Love's Labour's Lost, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and As You Like It, whose plots are situated in a park or forest and marked by the influence of pastoral romances like Sidney's Arcadia or Lodge's Rosalynde; then comedies based on classical sources or Italian plays belonging to commedia erudita, like The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, and The Merry Wives of Windsor; finally, the problem
plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*, which are derived from Italian *novelle*. This way of classifying the comedies by looking at their sources or at the specific “comic tradition” they belong to rather than by analyzing their specific plots and forms is certainly interesting and intellectually stimulating, but it also offers the risk of downplaying Shakespeare’s own invention, additions, or variations in his playtexts. And in the case of his festive comedies the importance taken on by the sources (as in *Love's Labour's Lost* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for instance) seems precisely less than in his other works. This is why Northrop Frye, who was marked by anthropology and myth-oriented studies, remains one of the most influential critics of Shakespearean comedy. It is he who first associated Shakespeare’s comedy with what he calls “the drama of the green world,” thus presenting the reader with a fascinating account of Shakespeare’s use of symbolic geography in a way that turns its back on the traditional fear and refusal of “la selva oscura”.

The earlier tradition established by Peele and developed by Lyly, Greene and the masque writers, which uses romance and folklore and avoids the comedy of manners, is the one followed by Shakespeare. Those themes are largely medieval in origin, and derive, not from the mysteries or the moralities or the interludes, but from a fourth dramatic tradition. This is the drama of folk ritual, of the St George’s play and the mummers’ play, of the feast of the ass and the Boy Bishop, and of all the dramatic activity that punctuated the Christian calendar with the rituals of an immemorial paganism. We may call this the drama of the green world and its theme is once again the triumph of life over the waste land, the death and revival of the year impersonated by figures still human and once divine as well. (Frye 1948: 85)

This is indeed a green world in the sense of an enchanted, golden world where summer triumphs over winter and fertility prevails over sterility and death. The winners of comedy are then the characters who place themselves in tune with the natural forces of life renewal and who corroborate the idea that nature is the great ally of love. In a later study, *A Natural Perspective*, Frye (1965) develops parallels between Shakespeare’s comic structure and three phases of seasonal ritual: a dark and rather tense moment of preparation, a time of license when the world is put upside down, which is then followed by a period of fertility and celebration (marriage revels with music, songs, and dancing).

This was the line taken up by C. L. Barber in his pioneering and seminal book, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy* (1959). According to him, the main function of festive elements in Shakespearean drama is to trigger an emotional release and help create an atmosphere of joyful liberation in the face of an archaic moral order or tyranny. This, according to his optimistic view, is bound to produce a movement of clarification in the characters themselves, but also in the various complications or entanglements of the play:

The *clarification* achieved by the festive comedies is concomitant to the release they dramatize: a heightened awareness of the relation between man and “nature” – the nature
celebrated on holiday. The process of translating festive experience into drama involved extending the sort of awareness traditionally associated with holiday, and also becoming conscious of holiday itself in a new way. (Barber 1959: 8)

Barber’s analysis sounds on the whole more Freudian than historical or political and it argues that the presence of a popular festival energizes the younger characters in the comedy and presents them with a possibility of reaching freedom and emancipation from patriarchy so as to express their own desires against the mutilating or castrating nature of the law of the father. In this connection, carnival, with its satirical inversion of rank or gender roles, seems to offer the occasion or the welcome detour that allows the young to get away with transgression and abuse. When Jessica elopes from old Shylock’s house and “gilds” herself with her father’s ducats (The Merchant of Venice, 2.6.49–50), she evolves in a jolly atmosphere of revelry and almost innocent revolt.

Strangely enough, Barber includes only five of Shakespeare’s comedies in his study, namely Love’s Labour’s Lost, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, and Twelfth Night, thus leaving out comedies like Much Ado About Nothing and The Merry Wives of Windsor. He preferred to deal with the carnivalesques Falstaff of 1 and 2 Henry IV rather than with the slightly farcical, ludicrous knight who is simultaneously courting two perfectly respectable wives of a provincial and bourgeois community. In an article called “The Two Worlds of Shakespearean Comedy” Shearman Hawkins (1967) has proposed a second type presenting a number of significant variations on the original model. According to this critic, comedies like The Comedy of Errors, Love’s Labour’s Lost, Much Ado About Nothing, and Twelfth Night, are built on an “alternate pattern” according to which, instead of leaving the court to move into the green world, the characters stay put and are visited by outsiders who upset the daily life of the community (like Cesario arriving in Illyria, for instance) (ibid: 67–8). The obstacles to love do not come from the opposition of a tyrannical old father but from inside the lovers themselves, so that the conflict of generations is replaced by the battle of the sexes. Shearman Hawkins calls these the “comedies of the closed world” and their two principles are “acting out” (releasing latent desires or impulses) and “fixing the blame,” thus locating the madness or evil in one particular character (Falstaff, Don John, or Malvolio) who may be overpowered or driven out of the community (ibid: 71). Two remaining comedies, The Taming of the Shrew and The Merry Wives of Windsor, are “mixed comedies,” in that they combine both patterns in their double plots (ibid: 65).

Besides these proposed variations on the “green world” model, other reproaches have been leveled against Barber’s anthropological method, namely that he depends for his approach on a now obsolete anthropological model, which is no other than the one worked out by Sir James Frazer and the Cambridge ritualists, Francis Cornford and Margaret Murray. Moreover, his analysis of Elizabethan festivity remains general and tentative and often lacks historical detail. After the books of Keith Thomas, David Underdown, David Cressy, or Ronald Hutton, to name only a few of the historians of popular holiday, the political dimension of festivity has become increasingly important to modern critics. As Richard Wilson puts it:
If modernist Shakespeareans obeyed Henry James’s dictum to ‘Dramatize! Dramatize!’ a timeless contemporaneity, postmodernist critics take as their watchword Frederic Jameson’s imperative to ‘Always historicize.’ From James to Jameson, the historical turn in Shakespeare studies is a shift, then, of global to local, order to process, speech to writing, and langue (language as a system) to parole (specific utterance). (Wilson 1993: 20)

For Marxist critics like Mikhaïl Bakhtin, Robert Weimann, or Michael Bristol, on the other hand, festive license is deeply indebted and fundamentally allied to popular culture. Bakhtin’s concept of carnival as a form of popular culture showing subversive irreverence for authority and a way of indulging verbal exuberance and vulgarity, even obscenity, that revels in ambivalence (confusing high and low, birth and death . . .) and celebrates the pleasures of the body, especially in its orifices, protuberances, and appetites, has been the most widely used and discussed over the past thirty years. To the eyes of the Russian critic, carnival makes mutability and topsyturvydom the main energizing poles of the popular culture of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

During the century-long development of the medieval carnival, prepared by thousands of years of ancient comic ritual, including the primitive Saturnalias, a special idiom of forms and symbols was evolved – an extremely rich idiom that expressed the unique yet complex carnival experience of the people. This experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense of immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (à l’envers), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrowning. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a ‘world inside out.’ (Bakhtin 1984: 11)

This taste for putting the world upside down, for travesties and “uncrownings,” is certainly echoed in the atmosphere of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, where Bottom’s hairy head literally “translates” him into an “ass,” a visual and grotesque pun that also amounts to a form of bodily reversal emphasizing the “lower bodily stratum” so important in carnival and popular culture according to Bakhtin.

For Bakhtin and his followers, carnival grotesqueries in Shakespeare are indeed endowed with a truly subversive power and with a desire to destabilize authority and its serious, official, one-sided, vertical vision of the world. Popular festivals and charivaris, local forms of popular justice against sexual offenders also known as “skim-mingtons” or “rough music” (Underdown 1985: 100–3), thus contributed to the expression of dissent, to the simultaneous presence of multiple voices, including those of children and women (through the rites of inversion of the Boy Bishop or cross-dressing). Contrary to the historian David Underdown, who argues that “on the stage,
as in carnival, gender inversion temporarily turns the world upside down – but to reinforce, not subvert, the traditional order,” Louis Montrose claims that “in specific instances, such marginal symbolic actions [i.e., “game, play, or drama"] may have constituted intervals of a creative or contestatory counter-order that generated critical perspectives upon, or rowdy parodies of, ideologically dominant forms and practices” (Montrose 1996: 121).

It would seem that popular festivity, even when staged in a play, cannot be reduced to the function of a simple interval or “safety valve.” The context of a network of communal obligations might suggest that it was not indispensable for each individual to take responsibility for his own destiny, while Shakespeare’s entire work lays stress on the promotion of self-knowledge rather than on any particular action or mode of behavior recommended within some ritualized system. For all that, Shakespeare’s festive comedy is certainly to be contrasted with Ben Jonson’s gallery of eccentrics in a comedy like Every Man in His Humour, which Gabrielle Bernhard Jackson has called a “comedy of non-interaction,” opposing it to Shakespeare’s “comedy of interaction” (Jonson 1969: 2) where the minds of the lovers have been “transfigured so together” and “grow to something of great constancy” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 5.1.24–6).

**Clowns and Jigs**

In the London playhouses that attracted increasing numbers in the 1590s due to the establishment of fixed and professional stages, but also to fierce competition between them, the stage clown was to become a most significant figure for the whole atmosphere, life, and structure of Shakespearean comedy, from Launce and his dog in Two Gentlemen of Verona, to Feste in Twelfth Night. The clown was indeed one of the last upholders and defenders of the old popular tradition of the carnivalesque. One of his functions was to cut down intellectual pretension and to draw attention to what Bakhtin has subsequently called “the material bodily lower stratum” (Bakhtin 1984: 368–436), i.e., the vulgar world of anality and sex associated with basic human appetite. This is a way of giving the spectator a chance to distance himself/herself from high-minded activity and discourse, as in Love’s Labour’s Lost, where Costard and Jaquenetta unabashedly express their bodily needs against the high-flown, far-reaching and pretentious aspirations of the courtiers: “Such is the simplicity of men,” says Costard, “to hearken after the flesh” (Love’s Labour’s Lost, 1.1.214–15). In A Midsummer Night’s Dream it is the sphere of romantic love itself which is refracted in a burlesque, farcical manner in the mechanicals’ bungled performance of “Pyramus and Thisbe,” while the bergamask at the end (5.1.354) is clearly a reminiscence of the pantomime wooing dances or jigs performed at seasonal festivals and weddings (Berry 1984: 117). In Much Ado About Nothing the “shallow wits,” Dogberry and his hilariously inefficient watch, “bring to light” the simple truth that the wiser characters could not discover (Much Ado About Nothing, 5.1.205–6); in The Merchant of Venice the clown Gobbo gives a farcical version of the main plot and of the tense
family relations inside the Christian and Jewish communities. Strangely enough, Shakespeare's most extraordinary clown and expert in all tricks and saturnalian disguises and reversals – carnivalesque jokes, theatrical ad-libbing, bibulous word games or superb comic monologues to obfuscate his lies or cover his bad faith – Sir John Falstaff – is mostly present in 1 and 2 Henry IV and appears in one comedy only, The Merry Wives of Windsor. In his one and only English comedy with a semi-urban, semi-rural background, the fat knight of the Henriad is purged of his lust as well as of his sexual and financial pretensions to make him cut a sorry figure at the end. The festive side is far from ignored, but it is the corrective dimension that clearly prevails in the main plot, which presents a rather un-Shakespearean form of sexual, urban comedy with tentative seduction of married middle-class women by a down-and-out, aged aristocrat, with resulting male jealousy and the fear of cuckoldry as some of its main comic ingredients, while the romantic strain is only present and preserved in the subplot. Indeed, the secret love between Anne Page and Master Fenton allows them in the end to get rid of rivals and of parental opposition and to turn the confusion of the final comedy of tricks and errors to their own advantage and marriage.

It is interesting that, in Elizabethan England, neoclassical writers regularly criticized the presence of clowns on the stage. Sir Philip Sidney delivers strictures to plays "mingling kings and clowns" (Sidney 1965: 135), while Ben Jonson made the decision to eliminate this character from the genre of comedy and indeed managed to do without one in his last two comedies (Bednarz 2001: 113). Against them, Shakespeare made sure that the clown – and here no strict distinction should be made between country rustic and court jester, since the line between the two is blurred in plays where the entertainer is alternately called "fool" and "clown" – kept an important place and function in his festive comedies. In As You Like It Touchstone is pitted against the satirist Jaques, and he embodies festive comedy in all its facets and contradictions. The difficulty seems to have remained at the level of the critical interpretation of the plays where, as David Wiles explains, the clown has remained "an embarrassment":

So long as the accepted task of the critic was to seek out the moral purpose of the text, the unity of the play's construction, truth and consistency of character, the inspirational kernel which generated the play's themes, then the clown remained an embarrassment. The theory of 'comic relief,' with its mysterious cathartic overtones, was evolved to conceal a conceptual vacuum. The clown escaped from marginalization only when such critics as C. L. Barber, Northrop Frye, and Robert Weimann began to show how Shakespearean comedy was patterned by the popular festive tradition, and not by classical notions of form. (Wiles 1987: 165)

So the understanding of the real importance of the clown in the festive comedy of the Elizabethan stage was definitely achieved by a number of anthropology-oriented studies that demonstrated the structural links that existed between Shakespeare's comedies and seasonal mirth and misrule.
**Mirth vs. Laughter**

There are two main types of comic strategies. One uses laughter to ridicule some deficiency or error in a character that can be shown as foolish. This tradition belongs to corrective comedy, a genre best depicted by the famous Latin motto *castigat ridendo mores*.

The second type relates comedy to festive rejoicing and it presents us with convivial laughter in which simple mirth is opposed to the more aggressive aspect of ridicule. The latter, which is meant to expose, cleanse, or correct vices and follies, encourages one to laugh *at* someone else, while in mirth and foolery, people laugh *with* the fool or rejoice with the happy crowd that is making merry. Mirth provokes release and it licenses the potentially anarchic and subversive spirit of carnival with the celebration of the life-force that triumphs over its enemies.

These two comic attitudes may be called derisive laughter and festive mirth. In *An Apology for Poetry* or *The Defence of Poesy* Sir Philip Sidney clearly opposes the two notions, which he defines at some length:

But our comedians think there is no delight without laughter; which is very wrong, for though laughter may come with delight, yet cometh it not of delight, as though delight should be the cause of laughter; but well may one thing breed both together. Nay, rather in themselves they have, as it were, a kind of contrariety... Delight hath a joy in it... Laughter hath only a scornful tickling. For example, we are ravished with delight to see a fair woman. We laugh at deformed creatures, wherein certainly we cannot delight... But I speak to this purpose, that all the end of the comical part be not upon such scornful matters as stirreth laughter only, but, mixed with it, that delightful teaching which is the end of poesie... For what is it to make folkes gape at a wretched beggar, and a beggarly Clowne: or against lawe of hospitalitie, to ieast at a straunger, because they speake not English so well as we do? (Sidney 1965: 136–7)

In general, the scurrilous and satirical humor represented by the Old Comedy of Aristophanes is condemned at that time. On the other hand, mirth is well regarded, and Nicholas Udall, the author of the first English comedy, *Ralph Roister Doister*, starts with an apology of mirth in the Prologue to his play:

> For mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health,  
> Mirth recreates our spirits and voideth pensiveness,  
> Mirth increaseth amity, not hindering our wealth. (ll.8–10)

This quasi-therapeutic function of comedy that dispels the darker humors and is the source of good health is taken up by Shakespeare at the end of the Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew* (see above, p. 23). Heywood, in his *Apology for Actors*, seems to support this view when he explains that the lessons of comedy

> are mingled with sportful accidents, to recreate such as of themselves are wholly devoted to melancholy, which corrupts the blood: or to refresh such weary spirits as are tired
with labour or study, to moderate the cares and heaviness of the mind, that they may return to their trades and faculties with more zeal and earnestness, after some small soft and pleasant retirement. (Heywood 1612: sig. F4)

Such a view is fairly close to the safety-valve theory of misrule and festive irreverence as a temporary transgression of established order, whose function is not to upset authority permanently but, on the contrary, to reinforce it. We find a similar attitude in an observer of the time, the Dijon physician Pierre Gringoire, for whom

the feast of fools and celebrations of misrule served the same function for a rigidly hierarchical society as the bung-holes did for a wine-cask: these indeed needed to be opened occasionally to release the pressure of the fermenting wine and to prevent the barrels from breaking altogether. (Mangan 1996: 37)

These two poles of the comic are naturally, not mutually, exclusive or incompatible, since they are often combined in Shakespeare’s comedies. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream things are perhaps a little more complex as – if the mutual scoffs and taunts of Helena and Hermia (3.2) may be placed in the first category of scornful jests – the main stress in the play remains the one often put on the incongruous, as in the nightly encounter and embrace of Bottom and Titania, and on the display of delightful absurdity, as in the performance of “Pyramus and Thisbe” which Hippolyta describes as “the silliest stuff that ever I heard” (5.1.209). Sometimes the plays take on the dimension of a charivari used to punish whores or unruly women reputed to cuckold or beat their husbands. In The Taming of the Shrew, for example, the courting of “wild Kate,” the shrewish Katherina, seems so problematic that old Grumio cantankerously suggests replacing the ritual of seduction by shaming practices:

Baptista. If either of you both love Katherina
Because I know you well and love you well
Leave shall you have to court her at your pleasure.

Gremio. To cart her rather! She’s too rough for me. (1.1.52–5)

The court/cart pun here obliquely refers to the Shrove Tuesday practice of dragging prostitutes from houses of ill-fame and parading them through the town in carts for the crowds to jeer at them (Laroque 1991: 100). But in other cases it was the husband or his nearest neighbor who were publicly humiliated for allowing his wife to have deceived or humiliated him:

I have sometimes met in the streets of London a woman carrying a figure of straw representing a man, crown’d with very ample horns, preceded by a drum, and followed by a mob, making a most grating noise with tongs, gridirons, frying-pans and saucepans. I asked what was the meaning of all this; they told me that a woman had given her husband a sound beating for accusing her of making him a cuckold, and that upon such occasions some kind neighbour of the poor innocent injured creature generally performed this ceremony. (Misson 1698: 70)
This form of popular justice corresponds to the situation of Falstaff when he is seen wearing the ample horns of Herne the hunter at the end of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (5.5.1–120). When, after being pinched by the Windsor fairies, he finds out that he has been gullied (made an “ass” or an “ox”) and made the victim of the two wives’ hoax, he realizes that the horns are more the badge of humiliation than of sexual potency, contrary to what he had thought (Salingar 1974: 236–7; Laroque 1984: 27). As in a local charivari, he is now wearing the horns of the cuckolded husband. He has become a substitute or *doppelgänger* of Ford disguised as Master Brook, a character whom his pathologically comic jealousy leads to the door of cuckoldry with the help of Falstaff, whose lust and financial appetite he is unwittingly encouraging. If the furious husband is finally purged of his jealousy, Falstaff has become a comical sexual outlaw who must be banished from the community for offending its codes.\(^9\)

It is ironical that the motto of the Order of the Garter (*Honi soit qui mal y pense*) is here turned into a moral condemnation to scoff at the “corrupt and tainted in desire” (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 5.5.68, 89).

So, on a general level, the two comic attitudes of laughing *at* and laughing *with* define the two main trends or strains of comedy: the satiric and the jocular. If one subtext of comedy is indeed carnival, festivity, rejoicing, and liberation, another is containment, exclusion, and regulation. One is Dionysiac and celebratory, the other normative and corrective.

**Festive Comedy vs. Comical Satire**

Festivity, celebration, carnival – these are words that have positive, genial, exciting connotations attached to them, while laughter, satire, ridicule, and folly sound cruel, punitive, expository. The first group implies freedom or liberation, the belief in the power of imagination and of the dream, and a surrender to nature and to the irrationality of desire in the hope that all will end well and that Jack shall have Jill. The second group is linked to scrutiny and suspicion, to a form of intolerance towards difference, deviance, or eccentricity, as well as towards all forms of vices and follies that must be exposed and laughed away at the expense of the vain, the selfish, or the gullible. It is in this sense that the city comedy developed by Ben Jonson is poles apart from Shakespeare’s sensibility and personal preferences, even if in his comedies of the “closed world” he does not refuse the idea of scapegoating Don John, Shylock, or Malvolio. In a festive comedy like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the unmarried young lovers find in the natural environment of the green world a locus where they freely indulge in the irrationalities of desire, where the complications of the double plot add tricks and errors only to disentangle their misalliances towards the end in a dream-like, miraculous way that allows the comedy to end happily. Even though the comic follies of the lovers are fully displayed in a sometimes rather harsh and bitter manner, the magic of the green world soon takes over to produce its beneficent effects and exorcize the potential violence. So the “story of the night” does produce a sense of estrangement, loss, and amazement, as in the lots that were traditionally drawn on
Valentine’s Day (Laroque 1991: 106–7) or in the excesses often noted on the night of May Day or Midsummer eve. But in the end a “great constancy” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 5.1.26) is discovered which restores not only harmony and peace but sexual satisfaction and happiness. Indeed, the two companionate marriages which Egeus, as senex iratus, was stubbornly opposing at the beginning are now possible and are about to be celebrated and consummated. In a nutshell, the freedom from constraints and subversion of authority, observable both in the erotic alliances and erratic wanderings in the forest, on the one hand, and in the text’s noted absence of sources, on the other, produce a truly carnivalesque euphoria and energy.

Far from this, the marriage feast in Jonson’s comedy of humors often proves impossible. Indeed, at the end of Every Man in His Humour, the wedding feast turns into a violent tavern scene in Every Man Out, a play that focuses on the collapse of Delirio’s marriage to Fallace. Contrary to the happy ending of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the satirical play reveals how marriage may be destroyed by a husband’s discovery of his wife’s unfaithfulness. In his treatment of sexual attraction, Jonson puts the stress on exposure and he challenges Shakespeare’s faith in the intrinsic value of desire at the expense of reason and judgment. Shakespeare sanctions desire in the spectacle of numerous weddings at closure, while Jonson subjects his characters to the chastening or humiliating vision of satire that exposes their folly or gullibility. This corresponds to what Ian Donaldson has called “leveling comedy,” namely “comedy of unmasking, comedy which reveals unexpected and embarrassing brotherhood in error, comedy which . . . stuns, disables and humbles its protagonists” (Donaldson 1984: 108).

Jonson’s public humiliation runs against Shakespeare’s encouragement or condoning of a spirit of rebellion against the constraints of law. It is true that in Romeo and Juliet he wrote a play which may be regarded as a companion piece to A Midsummer Night’s Dream and which illustrates the dangers of blindly following the dictates of Cupid and ignoring the law in favor of passion and romantic love.

According to James Bednarz, Shakespeare wrote two of his festive comedies, As You Like It and Twelfth Night, in order to counter Jonson’s move to try to displace romantic comedy, whose inner flaw was supposed to be its absence of rules and authority, with comical satire and the comedy of humors (Bednarz 2001: 13), an interpretation that partly accounts for the complexity and sophistication of these two highly metatheatrical comedies. Indeed, by returning to pastoral and to a plot based on a prose romance by Thomas Lodge, Rosalynde, after writing the urban comedy of Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare tried to test the standards of art and judgment against the more spontaneous impulses of nature and “folly.” His festive comedy deliberately included “cross-wooing” and a “clown,” two elements which Jonson had censured in Every Man Out of His Humour when Mitis derides weak comic plots with “cross-wooing [and] a clown to their servingman” (3.6.198). So the Stratford man was returning to authorities which Jonson would have disapproved of as “artless.” Furthermore, in As You Like It the clown Touchstone is allowed to baffle and silence the bitter satirist Jaques (to be pronounced “Jakes” in order to bring out the pun on a “privy” or closestool), who is generally thought to represent Ben Jonson himself, later to be purged under the character of Ajax (with always the
same pun on “jakes”) in *Troilus and Cressida* (Bednarz 2001: 107). According to James Bednarz,

Touchstone, like Rosalind, exemplifies C. L. Barber’s notion of ‘a mocking reveler,’ a character who yields to festivity by accepting the natural as irrational . . . In contrast to Jonson’s attempt to distinguish the judicious from the humoured, Shakespeare emphasizes their common fallibility. Whereas Jonson’s satirist makes absolute moral judgments and resists desire, Shakespeare’s fool derides a natural condition he embraces. (ibid: 112)

The holiday, carefree atmosphere of the forest of Arden imbues the comedy with a sense of natural teleology, since the green world, in this romantic perspective, can only bring about maturation and reconciliation. As Susan Snyder puts it, “chaos is held in check by comedy’s arbitrary natural law” (Snyder 1979: 55).

In his last festive comedy, *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare returns to cross-wooing with a fool with a backward glance at his first Plautine comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*. He contrasts the selfless love of Viola for Orsino with Malvolio’s ridiculous self-infatuation and, according to the other festive comedies that insist on the restoration of a broken or impossible union, this play “presents mutability as a laudable component of desire” (Bednarz 2001: 188). The comic resolution is not achieved through fidelity, but through fluidity or flexibility, as Olivia is quite happy to take Sebastian for Viola and Orsino Cesario–Viola for Olivia. At the same time, unrequitable desire is exposed and stigmatized in Aguecheek and Malvolio, who embody the antitypes of hypocritical restraint on the one hand, and ridiculous excess on the other. The below-stairs carnivalesque subplot may provide some boisterous or obscene moments in performance, as in Adrian Noble’s production for the RSC in 1998:

Later as the fool, Andrew, and Toby sang ‘Hold thy peace,’ Feste mimed the erection of an enormous ‘piece’ (or phallus) from the front of his trousers, up which the knights apparently climbed as though it were an invisible beanstalk. This totemic penis was then carried above their heads as they processed drunkenly around the kitchen and only following the entry of the incandescent Malvolio was the wilting erection fed back into the flies of the jester.10

Maybe modern audiences need to be presented with linguistic puns in this visual, insistent manner so that they can understand what “cakes and ale” really mean! This also looked ahead to the sexual frustration of Malvolio. By allowing Olivia’s steward to isolate himself in the subplot and commit himself to an angry promise of revenge (“I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you,” 5.11.368), Shakespeare powerfully illustrated “the wisdom of folly” in a farewell to the genre which may certainly also be read as a manifesto in favor of the superiority of festive comedy over comical satire (Bednarz 2001: 190). According to Leo Salingar, *Twelfth Night*, whose title “proclaims an affinity with the season of Christmas and carnival,” “deals with the psychological value of revelry and its limits as well” and should be read as “a comedy about a comedy” (Salingar 1974: 239–42).
So, at a time when Puritan ministers and pamphleteers repeatedly attacked the abuses and excesses of “papist” rejoicings and popular festivals that were taken to be pagan remnants and forms of superstitious or licentious idolatry, Shakespeare stood in the defense of “old holiday pastimes,” as these seemed to him to anchor his plays deeply in local tradition while allowing him a measure of flexibility as well as a world of phrases, images, and symbols, all chiming together to create a tightly woven network of associations and resonances. In his festive, green-world comedies and later romances, he chose festivity and mirth rather than the city intrigue and comical satire advocated by his colleague and rival Ben Jonson.

Shakespeare’s festive comedies revel in a carnival spirit of liberty and irreverence. They sanction sexual desire to be crowned and licensed by companionate marriage and they praise the wisdom of folly, as constancy and happiness are ultimately proved right once the young lovers are allowed to leave the labyrinth of errors, tricks, or illusions that have been wrought upon them.

Songs, music, and lyrics are particularly important in Shakespeare’s festive comedies. They are there to entertain the audience, but also to contribute to the general mirth and to the dancing spirits that accompany the rites of love and restore harmony like some final, almost impossible miracle. Contrariwise, Jonson’s comical satires or Shakespeare’s subplots that take up the tricks of humours and the cruel games of deception and exposure – illustrated in the conflicts between Shylock and Antonio in The Merchant of Venice or between Sir Toby, Feste, and Malvolio in Twelfth Night – insist on dissonance and cacophony or on men who have no music in them. As You Like It presents the character–singer Amiens who, though he is shivering with cold, sings the “green holly,” repeating that “this life is most jolly” (2.7.175–94). To C. L. Barber “the songs evoke the daily enjoyments and the daily community out of which special festive occasions were shaped up. And so they provide for the conclusion of the comedy what marriage usually provides: an expression of the going-on power of life” (Barber 1959: 118). This evocation of the “daily enjoyments of the daily community” does indeed seem to tie in with Christopher Sly’s “comonty,” i.e., with the special, subtle, unmistakable festive note which it is otherwise so difficult to isolate and define. Yet, for Philip Edwards, the festive comedies do not really end in clarification and in a resolution of the contrary forces of holiday and everyday: “A strong magic is created: and it is questioned” (Edwards 1968: 70). This shows that one cannot do away with the basic discrepancy between ritual and reality and it is also meant to remind the spectator–reader of Shakespeare’s festive comedies that it is quite necessary to reestablish a critical perspective after enjoying the sweet impossibilities of romance.

Notes

1 See Peter Holland in Shakespeare (1995a: 18–19).
3 Dusinberre (1975); Bamber (1982); Roberts (1991); Dash (1981); Novy (1984).

Frye (1965: 73).

The first three chapters of the book, “‘A mingled yarn’: Shakespeare and the cloth workers”, “‘Is this a holiday?’: Shakespeare’s Roman carnival” and “‘Like the old Robin Hood’: *As You Like It* and the enclosure riots”, offer an excellent illustration of this method of historicizing and politicizing festivity and using it as a background for reinterpreting Shakespeare’s text as a distant echo of these ideological or social disputes.

On this see Laroque (1984: 25).

This refers to a text by a doctor of Auxerre, Pierre Gringoire, comparing the clergy to “nothing but old wine casks badly put together [that] would certainly burst if the wine of wisdom were allowed to boil by continued devotion to the Divine Service”. Quoted in Welsford (1935: 202).

Louis Montrose (1996: 119) finds that the “fundamental contradiction of the Elizabethan gender system that was articulated in charivaris may also have found controlled expression in the anxious and aggressive aspects of Elizabethan courtship comedies such as Shakespeare’s”. He mentions in particular what he calls “the ubiquitous jokes and fears about cuckoldry” which are found in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*.


**References and Further Reading**


Dagnino, Arianna. “Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s).” CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.5 (2013): This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field. Victorian Literature and Culture seeks to publish innovative scholarship of broad interest to the field. We are especially interested in work that contributes or responds to the current moment of heightened methodological reflection, theoretical energy, and formal experimentation. We welcome submissions that aim to reimagine the field of Victorian studies in the twenty-first century, whether by interrogating the field’s scope, boundaries, methods, and