

# Carnival and Literature in Early Modern England

Jennifer C. Vaught

ASHGATE e-BOOK

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CARNIVAL AND LITERATURE IN  
EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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*For my family, friends, and colleagues in Lafayette, Louisiana*

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# Carnival and Literature in Early Modern England

JENNIFER C. VAUGHT

*University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA*

ASHGATE

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# Acknowledgments

Place has been a shaping factor for this project on festivity. If I had not moved to Lafayette, Louisiana in 2001, the topic for this book most likely would have never occurred to me. My first experience of carnival in the Acadiana region outside of Lafayette was of a country Mardi Gras run, or a *courir du Mardi Gras*, in Elton, Louisiana. The elaborately colored costumes and capuchons worn by the participants imaginatively transported me back in time to the Middle Ages and Renaissance when revelers wore similar cone-shaped hats to mock the nobility or clergy. Reminiscent of mummers, such a troupe of masked individuals on foot, on horseback, or in wagons travels house-to-house collecting ingredients for a communal gumbo. Holiday rituals in rural Acadiana also include a chicken chase that may have originated from medieval and Renaissance festive practices. My curiosity about the overlap between early modern literary texts and carnival festivities in Louisiana was further piqued when I happened to see an 1871 parade drawing for the Mistick Krewe of Comus's Mardi Gras procession based on Spenser's *Faerie Queene* on display at the Louisiana State Museum on Jackson Square in New Orleans. I subsequently explored the relation between Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and the New Orleans Twelfth Night Revelers in an essay for *Twelfth Night: Selected Essays* edited by James Schiffer. I am grateful to Jim, my former department chair of English at Northern Michigan University in Marquette and now Dean of Liberal Arts at SUNY New Paltz, for including my essay in this collection. The staff at the Special Collections at Tulane University made available to me their rich resources on Twelfth Night and Mardi Gras krewes and parades in New Orleans.

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Parts of several chapters from this book have appeared in different forms in earlier publications. I am indebted to the following presses and journals for granting me permission to reprint these essays: “*Twelfth Night* and the New Orleans Twelfth Night Revelers,” in *Twelfth Night: New Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Routledge, 2010); “The Mummers’ Play *St. George and the Fiery Dragon* and Book I of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*,” *LATCH: A Journal for the Study of the Literary Artifact in Theory, Culture, or History* 3 (2010):

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85–106; “Masculine and Feminine Conceptions of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*,” *Représentation et identités sexuelle dans le théâtre de Shakespeare*, ed. Delphine Texier (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, France, 2010); and “Masculine and Feminine Conceptions of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*,” reprinted in *Lectures de The Winter’s Tale de William Shakespeare*, ed. Delphine Texier and Guillaume Winter (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, France, 2010).

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## Introduction

# Carnival and Literature in Early Modern England

Numerous writers during the English Renaissance appropriate elite and popular festive materials related to carnival and the carnivalesque for multiple causes and agendas in a wide range of dramatic and non-dramatic texts.<sup>1</sup> Although existing historical records of such rural, urban, and courtly seasonal customs in early modern England are fragmentary, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literary writers exhibit

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study of carnival and literature in early modern England I use the word “elite” to designate groups who are elevated above the majority of the populace in terms of social rank, economic wealth, or supposed artistic taste, a mutable, culturally dependent quality. The term “popular,” as I adopt it, refers to the general population or to the majority of individuals at a particular time and place. My definition of “popular” is in keeping with the word’s sixteenth- and seventeenth-century meanings as characteristic of “the general public”; “democratic”; and signifying “common people” and “plebian” rather than “nobility”: *Oxford English Dictionary*, “popular,” adj. 1, 3.a., 3.b., and 5. My use of the terms “elite” and “popular” allows for a great deal of overlap between the constituents to which the former and latter refer. I also discuss how festival materials were appropriated in early modern England independently of these binary and somewhat arbitrary social categories.

The relation between elite and popular culture in early modern England has generated a great deal of critical debate. In “The Gendering of Popular Culture in Early Modern England,” in *Popular Culture in England, 1500–1800*, ed. Tim Harris (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 48, Susan Dwyer Amussen states that “the concept of popular culture ... suggests too sharp a divide between elite and popular.” She contends instead that “by its very name, popular culture located within the everyday is plural, variable and multivalent.” Amussen concludes that “it is vital that we use popular culture as an inclusive, not an exclusive, concept” in terms of the wide spectrum of social classes it signifies (48). In *Popular Cultures in England, 1550–1750* (New York: Longman, 1998), 201, Barry Reay disputes the usefulness of the binary categories of elite and popular and argues in support of “the model of appropriation” that “will go directly to the form ... or to a particular example without assuming prior social categorization.” In “Popular Culture in Print” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 283, Garrett Sullivan and Linda Woodbridge add that during the Renaissance the elite created the artificial category of popular culture “against which to define—and usually to exalt—high culture.” Garrett and Woodbridge also note the contradiction that the elite participated actively in the very holiday practices they designated as popular as a means of differentiating themselves from the lower ranks (269). Michael D. Bristol, by contrast, defines “popular culture” in the Renaissance as “the culture of ordinary people,” a group including the middle and lower ranks, with occupations ranging from merchants to apprentices and farmers: “Everyday Custom and Popular Culture,” in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 121.

their broad awareness of a variety of holiday motifs in their plays and poetry.<sup>2</sup> The writers focal in this study—Shakespeare, Spenser, Marlowe, Dekker, Jonson, Milton, and Herrick—allude widely to native English festivities, a vital dimension of their works less widely addressed than their allusions to classical, medieval, and Renaissance printed texts.<sup>3</sup> They devour, digest, and reconstitute these elite and

<sup>2</sup> In “‘They Say’ or We Say: Popular Protest and Ventriloquism in Early Modern England” in *Historical Criticism and the Challenge of Theory*, ed. Janet Levarie Smarr (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 145 and 147, Annabel Patterson argues that “Elizabethan popular culture has been notoriously difficult to recuperate” but that a “literature-based historical criticism can do better in recovering the voices of subordinate groups, better than it has done so far, better even than has been done by social historians, by looking or listening for those voices as ventriloquized by the dominant culture, in the texts of canonical writers.”

<sup>3</sup> Relatively few folkloric studies of Elizabethan and Jacobean literary texts exist, particularly those that examine works written during the sixteenth century before legislation limiting festive customs and rituals became fierce in England. In *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 265, Robert Weimann notes that what is missing in existing criticism is a well-grounded work on folklore in Elizabethan English literature. In a brief survey of “Folklore in the Literature of Elizabethan England,” *Journal of American Folklore* 70 (1957): 10–15, John W. Ashton notes that although critics tend to focus on classical allusions in Renaissance works, “the native spirit was strong too” in those written during the Elizabethan era. He identifies Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* as “one of the greatest repositories of folk materials” (11). In a recent essay “Tell Thou the Tale: Shakespeare’s Taming of Folktales in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” *Folklore* 120 (2009): 317–26, Charlotte Artese discusses how Shakespeare adapts two European folktales, “The Taming of the Shrew” and “Lord for a Day,” which involves a lower-class man temporarily taking the place of a powerful, wealthy man, a carnivalesque inversion motif. C. L. Barber’s central contribution in his “magisterial study” *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959) is to place Shakespeare’s earlier plays in relation to festival celebrations such as Christmas, Easter, May, Whitsun, and Midsummer holidays: Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 59.

Building upon Barber’s study, I examine the subject of carnival and the carnivalesque in relation to dramatic and non-dramatic works not only by Shakespeare but also by Spenser, Marlowe, Dekker, Jonson, Milton, and Herrick. The existing body of criticism on Shakespeare and carnival is particularly useful when considering the topic of festivity in works by a number of his Renaissance contemporaries, who were writing plays and poetry within a similarly vibrant, holiday context. See, for example, the useful collection of essays, *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*, ed. Ronald Knowles (London: Macmillan Press, 1998). In *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), Leah Marcus focuses on the relation of English holiday pastimes to seventeenth century literary texts. She notes that by the time of the reigns of Charles I and II traditional festivals in England had been virtually eliminated by a “rigorous series of Parliamentary ordinances” (168). In *Jonson*

popular, carnival-related materials as if they were foodstuff.<sup>4</sup> Posthumously, these early modern writers partake of a festive banquet “not where [they] eat, but where [they are] eaten” (*Hamlet* IV.iii.19).<sup>5</sup> From the seventeenth century onward their carnivalesque works are in turn appropriated by writers, performers, and inventors of spectacles—from elite, high art to popular, mass culture—in England, Europe, and America. Attending to the folkloric dimensions of these largely canonical,

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*Versus Bakhtin: Carnival and the Grotesque* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 26, Rocco Coronato argues that “the censorship and reformation of carnival all over the continent occurred roughly at the turn of the sixteenth century.” In this study he cites Burke’s dating of the first phase of these reforms as 1500–1650 in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 207–22. Yet Coronato contends that “theater offers a favourite way of assessing how literature re-adapts festivity” despite sustained reformist efforts to contain and curtail its celebration in England and Europe (38).

<sup>4</sup> My project is linked to a growing literary and cultural interest in food studies, the topic of a Shakespeare Association of America seminar entitled “Food Studies/Early Modern Studies” led by Anne C. Christensen and Katherine Conway at Miami in 2001. For evidence of the sustained, critical discussion of intertextuality in relation to eating see Bruce Boehrer, *The Fury of Men’s Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) as well as studies of literary imitation as digestion by G. W. Pigman III, “Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 33 (1980): 1–32; Terrence Dunford, “Consumption of the World: Reading, Eating, and Imitation in *Every Man Out of His Humour*,” *ELR* 14 (1994): 131–47; and Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). As Kilgour argues, “in the Renaissance especially, a common way of expressing the relationship between a poet and an earlier source is in terms of eating” (104–105). In “Consumption of the World” Dunford continues that “Renaissance aesthetics recognizes the alimentary nature of literary imitation by which one ‘digests’ another’s literary style” (144). Some of the early modern literary writers I discuss incorporate carnival and carnivalesque motifs in their writings in a manner that verges on cannibalism. For a related study see Kristen Guest, “Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Identity,” in *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. Kristen Guest (Albany: State University of New York, 2001), 7. See also David Hillman, “The Gastric Epic: *Troilus and Cressida*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997): 302–303, for a discussion of the metaphorical link of satire with the compulsion to devour and bite the object of derision in a sometimes cannibalistic fashion. In *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1 and 4, Julie Sanders describes literary adaptation and appropriation as a metaphorical kind of feeding upon other texts and the creating of new ones. She adds that oftentimes “a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to re-interpret a source text” (2). As Sullivan and Woodbridge argue in “Popular Culture in Print,” “appropriation, then, properly refers not to the simply taking up of a preexisting object or practice, but to the reconstitution of that object or practice in terms of a new interpretive paradigm: to appropriate is to construct”: 269.

<sup>5</sup> *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1219. Future references to Shakespeare’s plays are to this edition unless cited otherwise.



Renaissance works is essential for challenging the misleading assumption that took hold among many from the latter half of the nineteenth century onward in America that Shakespeare and his contemporaries address elite audiences or readerships and their concerns exclusively.<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising that the vibrant, festival context during the early modern period widely informs sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays and poetry. Carnival and the carnivalesque played a dramatic role in the lives of individuals from aristocrats to commoners living in rural or urban locales in Renaissance England or Europe.<sup>7</sup> The word “carnival,” which literally means “carne-vale,” can be translated as “farewell to the flesh.”<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, people celebrated this holiday period by indulging excessively in food, drink, sex, and violence.<sup>9</sup> Then and now, the carnival season extends from Advent to Lent and includes Christmas, New Year, Twelfth Night, and Mardi Gras known as Shrove Tuesday in Protestant England. Temporary misrule, role reversals, and disguises were recurring practices during the space and time of carnival in early modern England. Masks that featured long, phallic noses; crossdressing; and elaborate, hybrid costumes of wild men or women and animals were also common.<sup>10</sup> Processions that included horse-drawn

<sup>6</sup> In *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 1–81 and 219–56, Lawrence W. Levine argues that Shakespeare’s plays were considered popular entertainment in the first half of the nineteenth century in America during which theater was a “democratic institution,” but in the second half he was portrayed as an “elite,” complex writer incomprehensible to the “populace” at large (21 and 34). This elitist trend continued throughout the twentieth century when “Shakespeare, opera, art, and music” became the “alienating” means for “maintaining the widening cultural gaps that increasingly characterized the United States” (227, 230, and 237).

<sup>7</sup> In *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), viii, Ronald Hutton notes that “it seemed clear that, far from being definitely rural, many seasonal pastimes had flourished in or around industrial towns.”

<sup>8</sup> Michael Schoenfeldt provides this useful gloss for the term “carnival” in *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14.

<sup>9</sup> See Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 186, for his discussion of these major themes during the carnival season. In *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13, 19, 26–8, and 40, Ronald Hutton catalogs holiday rituals centered upon food and drink such as “the wassail cup or bowl” during Christmas and the “eating up the remaining stocks of meat, eggs, cheese, and other commodities” during Shrovetide before the Lenten season of fasting. Secular festivities throughout the calendar year that involved communal eating and drinking included St. George’s Day on April 23; May Day; and Midsummer Day among numerous others.

<sup>10</sup> As Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter argue in *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 61, “carnival masking did not belong solely, or even chiefly, either to the popolani or to the aristocracy or authorities. Either end of the spectrum might at times dominate or appropriate it.”

parade floats and other forms of pageantry were key during this protracted carnival season as well.<sup>11</sup> Performances of plays, mummers, dancing, and elaborate spectacles such as masques at court were often central. Parodies of religious or political figures, burlesques, and farce were abundant during ritualized, seasonal occasions, as were forms of “billingsgate,” a Bakhtinian term referring to curses, scatological jokes, and comic tricks often instigated by the folkloric figure of the trickster.<sup>12</sup> The improvisational antics and banter of theater clowns and jesters were in keeping with the spirit of misrule that predominated during carnival.<sup>13</sup> Annual celebrations in early modern England and Europe tended to focus on what Bakhtin describes as “the lower bodily stratum,” including the stomach, buttocks, and genitals.<sup>14</sup> Such an emphasis on the lower body was often tied to a cyclical emphasis on renewal and rebirth.<sup>15</sup>

Carnavalesque, grotesque, and parodic motifs particularly relevant to the subject of carnival and early modern English literature are not necessarily limited to those

<sup>11</sup> See Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 183–4, for a useful discussion of processions, pageants, and other performances during carnival. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 8, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White also note that “Carnival in its widest, most general sense embraced ritual spectacles such as fairs, popular feasts and wakes, processions and competitions.”

<sup>12</sup> In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 8, Stallybrass and White provide this useful list of rhetorical and performative modes during English festivals as well as a definition of the term “billingsgate.” See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 5 and 16, for his discussion of this kind of street talk, which is characteristic of carnivalesque folk festivities and includes curses and oaths mocking or insulting authority figures like the deity.

<sup>13</sup> As Weimann argues in *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, 650, the clown “brings into the theater the familiarizing gesture of the street and public square.” He continues that “theater provides a focus for the carnivalesque language of plebian culture” (653). One of the aims of my project is to extend Weimann’s argument about the transgressive nature of clowning to Shakespeare’s dramatic and non-dramatic contemporaries. In *Shakespeare’s Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) David Wiles relevantly demonstrates the importance of the Clown, which descended from the medieval Vice figure and often served as a type of the carnivalesque Lord of Misrule, in relation to Shakespeare’s plays.

<sup>14</sup> In *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 61, Patterson uses this phrase to describe Bakhtin’s emphasis on the lower regions and oftentimes grotesque dimensions of the body. In *The Bottom Translation: Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 43, Jan Kott adds that “on festive days such as the Twelfth Night, Plough Monday, the Feast of Fools, and the Feast of the Ass, merry and often vulgar parodies of liturgy were allowed.”

<sup>15</sup> In “For Allon White: Metaphors of Transformation,” in *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing: The Collected Essays and Autobiography of Allon White*, by Allon White and introduced by Stuart Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 7, Hall argues, “the carnivalesque . . . represents a connection with new sources of energy, life, and vitality—birth, copulation, abundance, fertility, excess.”

associated with a sacred or secular occasion during the festive calendar. Instead, a number of the literary episodes focal in this study convey a larger sense of misrule not limited by a particular spatial or temporal moment. The word “carnavalesque,” which literally means “characteristic, or of the style, of the carnival” season, describes not only festivals that occurred during the winter months but also those set during the fall, spring, and summer in early modern England.<sup>16</sup> Feast days that were celebrated then included Saint George’s Day, May Day, Whitsuntide, Saint Bartholomew’s Day, Michaelmas, and Halloween among many others. In addition to its association with misrule, the term “carnavalesque” aptly describes literary works and cultural history artifacts that foreground excessive bodily indulgences or forms of transgression beyond normal boundaries or limits.<sup>17</sup> Carnavalesque episodes and motifs in the texts I discuss commonly exhibit “grotesque” and “parodic” aspects. The term “grotesque” refers to the intermingling of people and animals in a fantastic or bizarre way or a literary figure or style that exhibits comic distortion or exaggeration and is ludicrous, strange, or absurd.<sup>18</sup> Parody, which Bakhtin describes as “double-voiced discourse,” provides the opportunity for challenging and undermining dominant, authoritative voices.<sup>19</sup> In the carnalesque works I have selected for discussion the dynamic interplay between elite and popular voices is fundamental for interpreting them.<sup>20</sup> Failing to attend to either side of this dialogue—high or low—threatens to diminish the literary and cultural complexity of these Renaissance texts in which the matter of carnival is vital.

Appropriations of carnival and the carnalesque in early modern texts vary widely in ideological function. A number of critics have debated whether the practice of such festivities is essentially conservative or radical, but the cumulative

<sup>16</sup> *OED*, “carnival,” n., Compounds C2, derivatives “carnavalesque,” adj. In *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 192, Burke notes that “most obviously ‘carnavalesque’ were a number of feast-days which fell in December, January, and February, in other words inside the Carnival period in its widest sense.” In *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 41, Michael D. Bristol adds that “carnavalesque manifestations pervade every celebration, those of May and midsummer no less than the winter observances.”

<sup>17</sup> According to Chris Humphrey in *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 3, the word “carnavalesque” refers to “art or activities which convey a sense of copiousness, abundance, or transgression, from ancient times through to the present day.”

<sup>18</sup> *OED*, “grotesque,” n. 1. and 2. See Frances K. Barash, “Definitions: Renaissance and Baroque, Grotesque Construction and Deconstruction,” *Modern Language Studies* 13 (1983): 60–67, for an insightful discussion of the term “grotesque” in relation to Spenser, Shakespeare, and Renaissance art more generally.

<sup>19</sup> M. M. Bakhtin uses this phrase in *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Vadim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 324.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce R. Smith discusses the importance of auditory voices in early modern printed texts and argues that “orality and literacy, far from being polar opposites, exist only in terms of each other”: *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 177.

evidence indicates that the rituals, customs, and habits associated with annual, seasonal holidays can be appropriated for most any cause or agenda—preservative and normative or revisionary and transgressive.<sup>21</sup> Celebrations of carnival can act as safety-valves that allow the lower ranks to vent discontent during a limited period of misrule that ultimately reinforces the status quo;<sup>22</sup> alternatively, these festivities can lead to riots, rebellions, and other violent conflicts that address, expose, and critique social and economic practices that oppress the weak.<sup>23</sup> My

<sup>21</sup> In “*Richard II* and Carnival Politics,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 34, David M. Bergeron provides a useful summary of critics who argue that carnival is fundamentally subversive: Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, 24 and 26; Bristol, *Carnival and Theater*, 200; Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 203; and Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 19. Though Stallybrass and White focus on the transgressive aspect of carnival, they contend that “it actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are intrinsically radical or conservative” (14). Disagreeing with Bakhtin’s populist, communal interpretation of festivity, Coronato in *Jonson Versus Bakhtin* argues that “the nature of festivity remains polysemic, and so is the use of the epithet ‘popular’ for feasts such as Christmas or New Year’s Day that were de facto organized by the ruling class” for elite purposes (17). In *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*, 63, Twycross and Carpenter note that carnival can be appropriated by the upper, middle, and lower ranks for diverse, ideological agendas, notably “conservative, revolutionary, communal, or stabilizing ends.” In “Festivity and the Dramatic Economy of Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*,” *ELH* 51 (1984): 656, Jonathan Haynes contends that “the festive moment is essentially conservative in a strong and stable society, potentially evolutionary in an unstable or sclerotic one.” The collective, ideologically diverse perspectives of this wide range of critics indicate that carnival and carnivalesque motifs in early modern literature and culture can be either normative or transgressive in nature or purpose and sometimes both. In “Jack Cade’s Legal Carnival,” *SEL* 42.2 (2002): 261, Craig A. Bernthal argues that “whether carnival is inherently revolutionary or conservative is trumped in Shakespeare’s theater by its use as a commercial device to give everyone in the audience some of what they want, even when those desires are contradictory.”

<sup>22</sup> In *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* Burke cites a 1444 text written by French clerics who compared the usefulness of carnivalesque practices such as the Feast of Fools to providing an air-hole for a barrel to prevent it from bursting (201–202). See Ivo Kamps’ discussion of Barber’s safety-valve theory of “saturnalian holiday festivals” in which the earlier critic argues that they provide a “‘release’” of popular discontent but ultimately a “‘clarification’” of “everyone’s proper place” within the existing social hierarchy: “Madness and Social Mobility in *Twelfth Night*” in *Twelfth Night: New Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Routledge, 2011), 283, and Barber, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> For discussions of historical carnival festivities that led to riots and rebellions see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 97–123; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, trans. Mary Feeney (New York: George Braziller, 1979), 229–63; and David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 44–72, esp. 47–8. In “Is this a holiday?”:

study thereby challenges more restrictive, binary understandings of carnival as either authoritarian suppressions of popular, rebellious energies by those at the top of the social hierarchy or as grassroots movements tied to social protest and liberation of the folk and disempowered groups. I argue that festivity during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was neither the jurisdiction of high nor low constituents but was ideologically malleable and accessible to everyone. *Carnival and Literature in Early Modern England* charts a middle course in the existing, critical conversation about the relation of popular culture to the upper and lower ranks by focusing on how the cultural elite as well as the folk actively created holiday rituals.<sup>24</sup> The dramatic and non-dramatic writers I discuss in this study incorporate episodes, motifs, and figures associated with carnival and the carnivalesque for purposes as diverse as criticizing institutions or groups—the Catholic Church, the monarchy, the aristocracy, Puritans, and the merchant ranks—or defending (and in other cases curbing) the liberties of lower-ranking commoners.<sup>25</sup>

Although carnival and carnivalesque festivities were less abundant in Protestant England than they were in Catholic Europe, a great deal of evidence attests to their vitality there during the early modern period.<sup>26</sup> The festive customs of consuming cakes and ale and appointing a Lord of Misrule recur throughout

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Shakespeare's Roman Carnival," in *New Casebooks: Julius Caesar*, ed. Horst Zander (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 57, Richard Wilson argues that "as historians such as Peter Burke have demonstrated, revelry and rebellion were entangled in Renaissance popular entertainments, and it was no coincidence that insurrections such as the Peasants' Revolts of 1381 and 1450, the Evil May Day riot of 1517, or Kett's Rebellion of 1549 should have been sparked off at seasonal plays or have had vivid carnivalesque scenarios."

<sup>24</sup> My position on the inclusive nature of carnival as a form of popular culture, high and low, differs in emphasis from the view of Sullivan and Woodbridge, who argue that the cultural elite largely fabricated the artificial concept of popular culture, and the opposing perspective of Bristol, who defines popular culture in terms of the middle and lower ranks exclusively: cf. Sullivan and Woodbridge, "Popular Culture in Print," 283, and Bristol, "Everyday Custom and Popular Culture," 121. Carnival offers a useful lens for illuminating the ways in which the upper and lower ranks participated simultaneously in the fashioning of their shared, holiday culture.

<sup>25</sup> In "'Wee Feaste in Our Defense': Patrician Carnival in Early Modern England and Robert Herrick's *Hesperides*," *ELH* 16 (1986): 236, Peter Stallybrass observes, "in Venice, as elsewhere in early modern Europe, the ruling elite attempted to direct the carnivalesque into the celebration of church and state." In *Jonson Versus Bakhtin*, 30, Coronato demonstrates, by contrast, that "Continental carnival was in fact used to expose Catholic idolatry" and was thereby marshaled for Protestant, reformist agendas. In "Hysteria and the End of Carnival: Festivity and Bourgeois Neurosis," *Semiotica* 54.1–2 (1985): 97–112, here 110, Allon White similarly refers to the ruling elite and questions, "What happens when a hegemonic group destroys the physical, ritual practices of a whole society and then endeavors to utilize the symbolism and purely discursive forms of those rituals for its own ends?"

<sup>26</sup> In *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 191, Burke notes that "Carnival did not have the same importance all over Europe." It was "at its weakest in the north, in Britain

English Renaissance literature and culture. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* Sir Toby Belch refers to "cakes and ale" in a play whose title alludes to the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6, a date that denotes the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of carnival.<sup>27</sup> Pancakes were consumed during pre-Lenten Shrove Tuesday as well.<sup>28</sup> In *All's Well That Ends Well* the Clown alludes to this holiday when he states, "As a pancake for Shrove Tuesday, a morris for May-day" (II. ii.23–4). Lords of Misrule, who reigned from November 1 (All Soul's Day) through Shrove Tuesday, appeared not only in country folk festivals but also in courtly settings, universities, and the houses of gentlemen in early modern England.<sup>29</sup> A Lord of Misrule could be an aristocrat, gentleman, or servant who acted as master during the topsy-turvy, Christmas and New Year celebrations by wearing a crown, giving toasts, and leading the drinking.<sup>30</sup> In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) the Duchess refers playfully to her steward-turned-husband, Antonio, as "Lord of Misrule" (III.ii.7).<sup>31</sup> Such an estate steward was usually a member of the lower gentry.<sup>32</sup> Sir George Ferrers, one of the authors of *Mirror for Magistrates*,

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and Scandinavia, probably because the weather discouraged an elaborate street festival at this time of year."

<sup>27</sup> *Twelfth Night*, ed. J. M. Lothian and T. M. Craik, Arden Shakespeare (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 50, II.iii.115. Future citations of the play are from this edition.

<sup>28</sup> In *As You Like It* the Clown Touchstone's mentioning of "pancakes" adds to the plausibility that this play was performed during Shrovetide at Richmond Palace on February 20, 1599 (I.ii.62–3). In "Pancakes and a Date for *As You Like It*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54 (2003): 371–405, Juliet Dusinberre bases her convincing hypothesis that the play was performed then on an extensive web of significant associations linking the play to this cultural event. Phebe Jensen considers *As You Like It* in terms of the May games of Robin Hood as well as the sacred meaning of sports more generally in "'Mirth in Heaven': Religion and Festivity in *As You Like It*," in *Shakespeare and Religious Change*, ed. Kenneth J. E. Graham and Philip D. Collington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 153–75.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the varied social ranks of Lords of Misrule see Charles Phythian-Adams, "Ceremony and the Citizen: The Communal Year at Coventry, 1450–1500," in *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500–1700*, ed. Peter Clark and Paul Slack (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 67–9. E. K. Chambers notes that in sixteenth-century England "nobles and even private gentlemen would set up a Lord of Misrule in their homes": *The Medieval Stage*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925): 404, 418–19. Barber concurs that this holiday figure was commonly appointed in "noblemen's houses, and among great housekeepers": *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 25. Those at the "Universities and the Inns of Court" also appointed Lords of Misrule: Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 407.

<sup>30</sup> Bridget Ann Henisch, *Cakes and Character: An English Christmas Tradition* (London: Prospect Books, 1984), 18.

<sup>31</sup> *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington et al. (New York: Norton, 2002), 1785.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Cahill, "The Problem of Malvolio," *College Literature* 23 (1996): 64, and D. R. Hainsworth, *Stewards, Lords, and People: The Estate Steward and His World in Later*

served as Lord of Misrule at the royal palace under Henry VIII for two Christmas seasons from 1551–1553.<sup>33</sup> Both high and low individuals thereby participated in these holiday customs.

Christmas rituals in early modern England also included mummers' folk plays as well as court masques. The term "mumming" refers to the wearing of a festive mask or disguise and derives from the Greek word "mommo," meaning "mask." Mummers frequently wore animal head masks, skins, or horns, creating grotesque, hybrid figures.<sup>34</sup> The term "momerie" first appeared in Britain in the thirteenth century, and by the sixteenth century the folk practice of mumming had contributed to the development of the masque featuring masked performers, a genre most prominent at court and other elite, private settings with largely aristocratic audiences.<sup>35</sup> On Twelfth Night, January 6, 1559, an anti-Catholic masque with crows as cardinals, asses as bishops, and wolves as abbots was performed at Whitehall Palace before Elizabeth I.<sup>36</sup> Such parodies of religious and political figures also appear in literary texts focal in this study such as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* with its mockery of the pope and friars and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in which reigning Lucifera parodies Queen Elizabeth in the House of Pride, an episode that exhibits distinctive features of a mummers' play.

During the Twelve Days of Christmas in early modern England, local villagers wearing masks went house-to-house performing mummers' plays.<sup>37</sup> Central in

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*Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 405. Interestingly, Protestant evangelicals in England by the 1530s appropriated misrule and theater as zealously as their Puritan descendents opposed them by the seventeenth century. See, for example, Robert Hornback, "'Sports and Follies against the Pope': Tudor Evangelical Lords of Misrule," in *The English Clown Tradition from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 63–101.

<sup>34</sup> François Laroque describes mummers in these terms in *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 48.

<sup>35</sup> Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, 11–12.

<sup>36</sup> Marion Colthorpe, "Anti-Catholic Masques Performed Before Queen Elizabeth I," *Notes and Queries* 33 (231): 317. Here Colthorpe is citing a letter describing this particular masque and dated January 23, 1559 from Il Schifanoia, a Mantuan: *Calendar of State Papers ... Venice* (1890), vii, 11.

<sup>37</sup> In *The Politics of Mirth*, 77, Marcus argues that a traditional Christmas in great country villages involved "mumming and St. George plays performed by local villagers." In "Early English Traditional Drama: Approaches and Perspectives," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 25 (1982): 8, Thomas Pettit notes that "Mummery seems to mean simply a seasonal (winter) house-to-house visit by a group of local people who put on some kind of show for the households on which they intrude." Mary Ellen Lamb cites Pettit's definition of mummery in "The Red Crosse Knight, St. George, and the Appropriation of Popular Culture," *Spenser Studies* 18 (2003): 193. In *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*, 84, Twycross and Carpenter add that "in England [mumming] belonged particularly to the Twelve Days of Christmas." In *The Rise and Fall*

these plays is the popular, legendary figure of St. George, an English national hero. Features of mummers' plays include his single or multiple combats with a Turkish opponent or with a Valiant Soldier most commonly called Slasher, as well as a doctor and an assistant who bring St. George's defeated combatant back to life in a "cure scene," along with Beelzebub and a little devil.<sup>38</sup> In Spenser's House of Pride Redcrosse Knight battles and defeats a Saracen, who is healed after his descent into the underworld. The spirit of mumming informs other aspects of *The Faerie Queene* as well. Pertinent to Redcrosse's name *Georgos*, the Mummers' Play *St. George and the Fiery Dragon* is still performed in London today during the Christmas season as well as for St. George's Day.<sup>39</sup> In one version of this comedic play St. George battles a dragon that roars, demands meat, and performs a summersault.<sup>40</sup> Its slap-stick style is characteristic of this popular legend that infuses Redcrosse Knight's heroic battle with the dragon near the end of Book I of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* shortly after he discovers his identity as St. George.

Following the carnival season that extends from the Feast of the Epiphany through Shrove Tuesday, ritualized festivals such as the Feast of St. George on April 23 as well as May Day, Whitsuntide, and Midsummer rounded out the calendar year for all ranks of individuals in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. The patriotic celebration of St. George's Day often involved parades that featured the popular figure of Old Snap the Dragon whose wooden jaws made a snapping sound.<sup>41</sup> A number of these spring and summer festivals also included morris dancers accompanied by a wickerwork, snapping-jawed hobby-horse fastened around the waist of one of the performers. Morris dancers frequently wore painted masks and hoods and danced ceremonially around May poles, which Philip Stubbes and

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*of Merry England*, 8, Hutton similarly remarks that mummers in "festive costumes" in fifteenth and sixteenth century England "were a feature of the Twelve Days" of Christmas, a celebratory time that included "the widespread custom of carrying carved animals' heads or skulls around streets ... usually requesting money and singing." In "Orion's Flaming Head: Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, II.ii.46 and the Feast of the Twelve Days of Christmas," *Spenser Studies* 7 (1987): 97-8, John N. Wall, Jr. demonstrates that "fundamental aspects of *The Faerie Queene* came to Spenser through the cultural inheritance represented by the Elizabethan Christmastide festivities" such as mumming, a holiday custom particularly relevant to Redcrosse Knight's battle with Sans Joy in the House of Pride in Book I.

<sup>38</sup> In *Stations of the Sun*, 70 and 75, Hutton provides these descriptive details of mummers' plays.

<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.thelionspart.co.uk/stgeorgeandthedragon/index.html> for a slide presentation of a December 2006 performance of "The Ballad of St. George and the Dragon" at the Globe Theatre in London. I am grateful to Gail and Joe Andriano, Professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, for bringing this performance to my attention.

<sup>40</sup> Alex Helm, *The English Mummers' Play* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1980), 33.

<sup>41</sup> Hutton, *Rise and Fall of Merry England*, 215-16.



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