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Methodical Madness: Carnivalesque Folk Patterns in *Boss for Three Days*

Medieval drama may seem bizarre and offensive simply because the ideas and underlying premises are so foreign to twentieth-century cultures. Even students skilled in medieval languages or having access to faithful translations may miss much of the meaning in a medieval play because the world view within which it was composed has disappeared. So it is with the Middle Dutch play *Boss for Three Days*. Riddled with obscene and profane language, reeking with gender oppression and humiliation, rife with references to savage physical violence which was certainly acted out on the stage, and generally disruptive and chaotic, *Boss for Three Days* challenges modern standards of decency and aesthetics.

Certainly *Boss for Three Days* is no model of refinement, but it was never intended hhto be. Indeed, the play is clearly hostile to ideas of order and propriety. The play was probably acted out before a lower-class audience in a marketplace or festival setting, and it clearly represents the values of a festival environment. It is an excellent example of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "carnivalesque," a term meant loosely to incorporate the expressions of a world view prevalent in the Middle Ages, but which largely disappeared after the seventeenth century.

Scholars have documented the existence in medieval Europe of an established and tolerated subculture that celebrated a value system often at odds with accepted social hierarchy and official Christian doctrine. This culture was centered around the fertility and regeneration rituals of an ancient, cyclical world view. It was related to the saturnalia and bachanalia of the classical world, although Germanic traditions undoubtedly derived from separate but parallel rituals. Medieval Europeans celebrated the themes of fertility and regeneration in highly ritualized behavior during sanctioned carnivals and marketplace festivals, although numerous accounts of peasants dancing in churchyards also attest to unauthorized celebrations.

Functioning within the context of a lower-class existence which must have been brutal and brief, these folk celebrations were times of release from the strictures and hardships of that existence. Carnivals and festivals were marked by license and rioting. Morality was ignored, law was suspended, and social rank was put aside. In *Rabelais and His World* (tr. Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), his landmark study of carnival culture as it appears in Rabelais, Bakhtin writes:

> Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (10)

What was completed or immortal was static and without life. Life depended on the death and decay of others. Regeneration was begotten by degeneration. Folk culture "demanded ever

changing, playful, undefined forms" (Bakhtin 11). On a more abstract level, regeneration was acted out through ritual indulgence in chaos. As John Wesley Harris tells us, "chaos, or disorder, was recreated for a brief period so that it could clearly be seen to be overcome and order restored" (*Medieval Theater in Context,* New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 62). Thus, the celebration of regeneration followed patterns that deliberately invoked the chaotic, the profane, the material, and the violent — the very elements that are so unpalatable in *Boss for Three Days*. The play is not the crude creation of an ignorant mind, however, but the creation of an artist who sought effects we can no longer easily appreciate.

The theme of seasonal or cyclical regeneration (and, hence, fertility) was a mainstay of medieval folk culture. A primary manifestation of this theme was ritual reversal and usurpation of authority. During folk celebrations a "lord of misrule" or other mock authority figure would be elected from the lower classes to replace the regular civil and ecclesiastical authorities. When the festival was over, the mock authority figures were themselves overthrown through abuse and mock beatings in order to complete the symbolic cycle of seasonal change, death, and renewal. In keeping with this general theme, reversal of any manner of established order, whether it was the churl ruling the king, the mule riding the man, or the wife controlling the husband, became a popular image and symbol in carnivalesque art and celebration. Bakhtin tells us that folk festivals displayed "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" (Bakhtin 11).

This principle of reversal is graphically clear in *Boss for Three Days*, where the plot is structured around a double reversal. In medieval culture, the man was usually expected to rule his own house, and especially to control his wife. In Jan's house, however, Bette is obviously the one with authority. Jan says:

> I have a bad wife, as you know well,
> who always scolds me and orders me around.
> She scolds me at night about seven times as much, so I think that I shall die.
> And if I defend myself when she hits me, she does it even more. Thus all is bad, and if I flatter her, she does not stop. (75-81)

Such an arrangement is a clever reversal of expected roles, particularly worthy of representation because it is so unusual. In Jan's house, however, it is the established order. In reversing this order by bribing Bette with jewels and a fur, Jan initiates a reversal of a reversal, a plot twist common in medieval folk literature (see, for example, the play *Nu noch* in the Fall 1994 issue of this journal). Jan's plan of usurpation is doomed, but when the play returns to the original order with Bette in control at the end (as I assume it does), it will be returning to inherent usurpation, a subtle irony that festival and marketplace crowds would have appreciated. These reversals function as the central driving conflict, and the chaos accompanying them places the play firmly within the boundaries of regenerative, carnivalesque patterns.

Another important element of folk festivals was ritual violence. Mock beatings were used to represent the death caused by winter, the death of winter in spring, and, in general, the violence inherent in cyclical change. Fake, heavily exaggerated beatings were used to highlight significant parts of ritual ceremonies, as when the lord of misrule was deposed, but beatings were also general symbols of the entire process. Bakhtin tells us that in folk rituals, "thrashings and abuse are not a personal chastisement but are symbolic actions directed at something on a higher level" (179). In fact, ritualized beatings were a dramatic illustration of the larger cyclical principle. Bakhtin says, "Abuse is death, it is former youth transformed into old age, the living body turned into a corpse" (197). In keeping with

their illustrative function, mock beatings were greatly exaggerated, and as the death of the material body, they were usually accompanied by specific anatomical references (see Bakhtin 197-211).

While stage directions do not exist in the manuscript of the play and we therefore do not know how much violence was acted out in *Boss for Three Days*, the play does include numerous threads of violence. Jan tells us of his wife's aggression, and she herself tells him at the beginning of the play, "I shall polish your hide" (44). The violence is characteristically exaggerated as well, with numerous references to the anatomy of the body. Jan says, "Then she cuffs and hits me, until / I think that my ribs crack" (94-95). When he returns home, Bette tells him "I'll give you such a beating / that your ribs will crack" (162-63). While trying to talk Bette out of her bargain, Lijsbet says, "I would rather beat him / till he spits blood, the idiot" (374-75). Such references to violence also fit into the context of cyclical reversal. While Bette is the master, she mentions violence towards the usurped Jan, but when he usurps her and becomes master, he threatens violence toward her:

> Now go and don't be so fresh,
> just stop, because, to tell the truth,
> you'll quickly catch more blows
> around your ears than good grace.
>
> (328-31)

When Lijsbet begins to initiate the return to the original order, the violence again turns against Jan, and the violence of the play, like the chaotic reversals, fits the established patterns of carnivalesque art.

Another related theme in folk festivals was the celebration of the material body. Bakhtin says of carnivalesque art that "the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role" (Bakhtin 18). Unlike modern interpretations of bodily images, however, these images stand for "fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance" (19). They comprise the lower body, the zone of belly, buttocks, and genitals, or of life, death, and regenerative fertility. This zone is directly opposed, in a symbolic sense, to the upper body, the zone of the speaking mouth, mind, and soul, the zone of immortalized language, ideas, and religion (Bakhtin 21). In other words, references to the carnal, which a modern audience might find disgusting, were deliberately fostered and used to degrade and thus fertilize the static, completed world of the intellectual and spiritual.

In his opening remarks in *Boss for Three Days*, Imbrecht announces that "we shall play here a piece of shit on your forehead," or, as Therese Decker's more literal translation puts it, "way above your heads" (12-13), hinting both that the play is excrement on the foreheads of the audience, and that it is too complex for them to understand. In an image not unlike Chaucer's Absolon putting his mouth to the buttocks of Alison and then of Nicholas in the *Miller's Tale*, the upper body is debased by the lower one, or the barren spiritual and intellectual zone of man is lowered into the realm of the fertile and regenerative. Such degradation was common and important, according to Bakhtin:

> Degradation ... means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. (Bakhtin 21)

Degradation and profanity are therefore intended, like violence, as a positive action, a rich invocation of the regenerative principle. When Imbrecht says, "by St. Nick's behind" (36), and when Jan says "no arse is any good without discipline" (336), they refer to a philosophy which celebrates the material body and its regenerative

significance. Imbrecht's opening statement that the actors, with and through the play, will place a piece of shit on the forehead of the audience may strike us as simply vile and crass, but in fact it is a symbolic declaration of the intention of the play. The piece of shit that is the play will degrade holy and intellectual concepts such as marriage and order by plunging them into the material grotesque, and in so doing will celebrate the carnivalesque concept of regeneration and renewal.

The principal celebration of the material body in *Boss for Three Days* takes the typical form of feasting:

> Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of the body is its open, unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body here transgresses its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. (Bakhtin 281)

Feasting is a celebration, the triumph of life within and through the regenerative process, and this is precisely the role feasting serves in *Boss for Three Days*. Eating and drinking are characteristically excessive in the play. Jan says of Bette:

> I know that she would leave me in peace
> if I would take her to drink with me.
> She would pour for herself, too,
> and drinks as much as her thirst demands.
> Then she doesn't stop even if she should burst,
> until she has licked the last drop from the drinking cup.
> And if she doesn't have a cup,
> then she puts the pot to her mouth.
> Thus she doesn't stop until she sees the bottom. (96-104)

Jan wishes to drink in like manner, but in the beginning of the play, Bette restricts "his drinking night and day" (145). In this way, the feasting in the play fits into the overall cyclical pattern. As soon as Jan has usurped Bette and become master, he indulges in totally free, excessive drinking, as the following conversation indicates:

> Jan
> Now I want to go drinking, till I am drunk.
>
> Neighbor
> Well, sir, drinking? Tell me! Listen, neighbor, how did you fare?
>
> Jan
> I shall tell you without leaving a word out,
> but first, in any case, I must drink.
>
> Neighbor
> You take the mug. I shall pour.
> Drink it all up. It's good beer.
>
> Jan
> Ah, me. God has brought me here.
> This beer helps my total well-being. (223-31)

Jan invites Imbrecht and Lijsbet over to his house for celebratory eating and drinking. Once there, he orders Bette to bring "everything which is to eat big and small" (300). Bette, now usurped by Jan in the reversal of authority, is not allowed time to drink or eat, although she expresses a clear desire to do so (316, 326-27), but Jan and Imbrecht indulge in excessive drinking and eating. Jan orders Bette to make pastry after pastry, and Imbrecht says of their fare, "here is food beyond compare" (399). In this way the play presents indulgent festive consumption within a cyclical pattern.

Thus, *Boss for Three Days*, while perhaps at first vile, chaotic, and incoherent to the modern audience, creates a meaningful, unified philosophical expression within the context of carnivalesque folk culture. The system of images confronts with remarkable courage the meanness, indignity, and brevity of medieval existence and finds within it hope, renewal, and the promise of life. Attitudes have changed and, with rare exceptions like Mardi Gras weekend, the values of *Boss for Three Days* no longer fit our sense of propriety. Nonetheless, knowing the terrible hardships and struggles faced by the medieval lower classes, we can at least respect the enduring integrity of a literary artifact that captures an unlikely and unexpected optimism, and that allows its audience the rare illusion of mastery, even if only for three days.