

"Marry, our play is "The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe". A very good piece of work and a merry"  
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I, ii).

Discuss this mixture of "cruelty" and "merriment" in Shakespearean comedy.

Meredith, speaking of the ridiculous person, says "If you laugh all round him, tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack and drop a tear on him, own his likeness to you and yours to your neighbour, spare him as little as you shun, pity him as much as you expose, it is a spirit of Humour that is moving you"<sup>1</sup>. This is a warm, open hearted merriment, a sympathy which says "there but for the grace of God go I" and revels in our ridiculousness as we look to one another, each of us shod in feet of clay. However there is a laughter which goes further than this, one which alienates, externalises and excludes, a bullying laughter which serves to unite only the privileged group. In this essay I examine Shakespeare's exploration of the spectrum of "merriment" between these two extremes in the comedies; I define cruel merriment, I ask why we are laughing, and I look at when laughter stops. Consequently, I ask whether the saturnalia of carnival festivity can be reconciled to contemporary notions of what it is "cruel" to laugh at.

There are said to be only eleven jokes in the world. Namely: farce, slapstick, wordplay, exaggeration, comic metaphor, inappropriate response, repetition, irony, mimicry, satire and black humour<sup>2</sup>. All of these are about the subversion of expectations to one degree or another, but they do not all have a "butt", a person who is in some way touselled by the joke.

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<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p79; but quoted here from J.Y.T. Greig; *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*; first edition; (UK; George Allen & Unwin Ltd.; 1923); p191.

<sup>2</sup> Transcribed from a recording of the Radio 4 comedy panel game programme *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*, from the series broadcast 1999. Humphry Littleton read this list, paused to ruminate, then said in a disgruntled tone, "they haven't mentioned filth".

There are many instances in Shakespeare's comedies of victimless humour, particularly in the use of wordplay. In *Twelfth Night*, Feste puns, "Let her hang me. He that is well hanged in this world needs to fear no colours"<sup>3</sup>. But for comedy to be cruel requires a subject, a subject who is not only undermined, but to however minor a degree is desecrated or vilified. There are two critical factors in determining then, whether this is "Humour" as defined above, or rather something more "cruel". The first is intention. When Maria talks about the "sport royal"<sup>4</sup> which is sustained against Malvolio, she clearly has ill intentions towards her steward.

Maria: Nay, pursue him now, lest the device take air, and taint.

Fabian: Why, we shall make him quite mad indeed.

Maria: The house will be the quieter.<sup>5</sup>

Maria wishes not only to humiliate Malvolio, but to torment him; and Sir Toby rejoins that they will stop only when they are "tired out of breath"<sup>6</sup> from their "pastime"<sup>7</sup>. In contrast<sup>8</sup>, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Lord is careful to specify that the jest carried out upon Christopher Sly is to be checked with restraint; "This do, and do it kindly, gentle sirs: / It will be pastime passing excellent, / If it be husbanded with modesty"<sup>9</sup>. The second is the sense of humour of the person laughed at. An ill joke taken in good humour is not cruel, it becomes diffused, reduced to badinage, jocular banter. During the sustained rhetorical jousting between Petruccio and Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, in answer to Petruccio's

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3 <sup>3</sup> *Twelfth Night*; Act I, scene v, lines 5-6. Page 1774. All subsequent Shakespeare page references are from *The Norton Shakespeare*; first edition; Stephen Greenblatt; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1997).

4 <sup>4</sup> *Twelfth Night*; Act II. sc. iii, line 152; *Ibid.* p1786.

5 <sup>5</sup> *ibid.* Act III, sc. iv, 118-120, p1802.

6 <sup>6</sup> *ibid.* III. iv. 124, p1802.

7 <sup>7</sup> *ibid.* III. iv. 123, p1802.

8 <sup>8</sup> This is a contrast pointed out by Alexander Leggatt; *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*; first edition; (UK; Methuen & Co. Ltd.; 1974); p243.

9 <sup>9</sup> Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*. Scene i. Lines 62-64; p144.

question "Whose tongue?"<sup>10</sup>, Katherine replies sharply, "Yours, if you talk of tales, and so farewell"<sup>11</sup>. Petruccio however, in the words of Jean E. Howard, gives "as good as [he] gets"<sup>12</sup>, lewdly retorting with "What with my tongue in your tail? Nay, come again, / Good Kate, I am a gentleman"<sup>13</sup>. Neither party is the victim. Thus cruel merriment requires both parts of this equation.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, Antipholus of Ephesus is not only locked out of his house, but arrested for debt and furthermore tied up as a lunatic. As Leggatt points out, this is undoubtedly "unsettling and unpleasant for the victim"<sup>14</sup> particularly as it is accentuated by the height from which he falls from grace. He is described as a man formerly of "very reverend reputation, sir, / Of credit infinite, highly below'd"<sup>15</sup>. His fall confronts him with the nightmare of our profoundest fears about rejection and exclusion, what Munthe terms - in her study of Scandinavian bullying - the "psychological violence"<sup>16</sup> of "the use of exclusion"<sup>17</sup>. Yet, for us as onlookers, this suffering is funny, we derive merriment from his railing; and the spluttering insults - "Thou baggage, let me in"<sup>18</sup> - of bitterness and anger are comically impotent. This would suggest that we are not sympathising with Antipholus, but rather laughing at the situation which an archetypal respectable man is in. If, as Horace Walpole remarked, "The world is a comedy to those who think, and a tragedy to those who feel"<sup>19</sup>,

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10 <sup>10</sup> *The Taming of the Shrew*; II. i. 212; p165.

11 <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; II. i. 213; p165.

12 <sup>12</sup> Jean E. Howard; Introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew*; *The Norton Shakespeare*; first edition; Stephen Greenblatt; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1997)p138.

13 <sup>13</sup> *The Taming of the Shrew*; II. i. 214; p165.

14 <sup>14</sup> Alexander Leggatt; *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*; first edition; (UK; Methuen & Co. Ltd.; 1974); p8

15 <sup>15</sup> *The Comedy of Errors*, V, i., 5-6; p722.

16 <sup>16</sup> Elaine Munthe; 'Bullying in Scandinavia'; *Bullying: An International Perspective*; Elaine Munthe, Erling Roland; (UK; David Fulton Publishers; 1989); p68.

17 <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

18 <sup>18</sup> *The Comedy of Errors*, III. i. 68; p705.

19 <sup>19</sup> Quoted here from J. Y. T. Greig; *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*; first edition; (UK; George Allen & Unwin Ltd.; 1923); p192.

then surely we must here be being prompted not to feel Antipholus' bewilderment and alienation. We are distanced from his suffering because we know, as Slights notes, that "all will end happily when the pairs of twins eventually meet (as we are sure they will)"<sup>20</sup>. This is an assurance then, which seems to derive from the comedic structure we are led to expect from *The Comedy of Errors*; and it dissipates the "potential terror and enables us to laugh freely at the increasing confusion"<sup>21</sup>. It becomes possible to accept the spiral into chaos as a carnivalesque disruption of social order, a time for the suspension of rules. Effectively, we are invited to partake in a game, the theatre tells us to suspend our disbelief; yet it is not made clear whether we are to suspend our moral frameworks - when what we are viewing is after all, not real. Do we continue to stringently apply our sympathies to fictional characters in a comedy, or do we allow our sympathy to lapse along with our disbelief? Where indeed are we to receive these authorial clues? After all, we miss the emotional impact of a tragedy if we read King Lear's rage in the storm as farcical, if we laugh at Hamlet's conversation with a skull. Do the characters in Shakespeare's tragedies carry more of our sympathies than Shakespeare's comic characters?

Greig suggests the opposite. We can laugh at people largely because we have sympathy for them, albeit even a subconscious "sneaking affection"<sup>22</sup>. In the instance of a stranger, an "old gentleman who slips on the banana skin" in the street, "one is much more likely to laugh ... if one's attention has been fixed on him ... [if he] ... has been coming down the street in full view for some time, than if he suddenly turns a corner and plumps down at your feet"<sup>23</sup>.

According to Greig, this is because "We never remain utterly indifferent to anyone into

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20 <sup>20</sup> Camille Wells Slights; *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths*; first edition; (Canada; University of Toronto Press Inc.; 1993); p22

21 <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

22 <sup>22</sup> J. Y. T. Greig; *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*; first edition; (UK; George Allen & Unwin Ltd.; 1923); p126.

whose presence we are thrown; we begin at once to like or dislike him, in a mild degree"<sup>24</sup>.

Greig thus elucidates how a situation only becomes funny when our distance from it allows us to divide sympathies between the characters involved in it:

If I set out to horse-whip another man, I go through with it without any temptation to laugh, for hatred is in undisputed possession of my mind. A close friend of my own, watching the episode, and persuaded that I have good cause for what I do, will not laugh either; he sees only with my eyes. A close friend of the other man, eager but powerless to interfere, will not find the episode amusing; he sees only with the eyes of the other man. It is the more impartial spectator, who can and does see with the eyes of both parties to the dispute, that gets laughter out of it. His sympathies are divided.<sup>25</sup>

Whether we laugh because our sympathies are divided or because our sympathies are suspended, the stage provides an ideal environment for the comic detachment of the "impartial spectator"<sup>26</sup>. The people we see before us are imaginary, they are actors pretending to be characters - the events are not affecting the lives of real people. The play within the play, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* demonstrates well the comic effect of detachment. Theseus and his court can laugh at the farcical deaths of two lovers Pyramus and Thisbe - which would have been treated as tragic in *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>27</sup>, because of the obvious artifice through which it is related. In attempting to see the characters behind the actors we constantly bump up against the clumsy artifice of the mechanical performance. This representation of love is comical - they talk through a living wall ("[*Wall shows his*

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23 <sup>23</sup> Ibid.; p127

24 <sup>24</sup> Ibid.

25 <sup>25</sup> Ibid.; p120.

26 <sup>26</sup> Ibid.

27 <sup>27</sup> Pointed out by Stephen Greenblatt in his introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream; The Norton Shakespeare*; first edition; Stephen Greenblatt; (USA; W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1997); p811.

chink]"<sup>28</sup>), yet as Theseus points out, there is no reason why this should not be as real to us as it is to the performers. "If we imagine no worse of them than they of them-/ selves, they may pass for excellent men"<sup>29</sup>. The mechanicals have furnished this scene in their imaginations, and are able to take it seriously, yet we do not. When the lovers Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena, found that the course of their love did not run smooth, they felt anguish and yet the audience was able to laugh at the farce which ensued. In the same way, the mechanicals' play distances the lovers from sympathising with the suffering of obstructed love, and so allows them to enjoy the humour which the audience had derived of them<sup>30</sup>.

Christopher Sly's presence as a spectator to *The Taming of the Shrew* encloses Katherine's story within the parentheses of (this is not real). We are reminded of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* wherein the "clowns mirroring, in a comic way, the events of the love plot"<sup>31</sup> render the same situations comical by virtue of the distancing effect of re-representation. This effect is itself framed by the apparent meta-theatrical awareness of the clown Speed, who is apparently aware that he is speaking in rhyme - "Nay, I was rhyming"<sup>32</sup> - and reveals "All this I speak in print, for in print I found it"<sup>33</sup>.

If we begin to remove these frames, we must also question what it is that we are laughing at, and how it is that we have allowed ourselves to be beguiled into suspending our moral assumptions. Thus when Puck leads Lysander and Demetrius by inciting their anger towards

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28 <sup>28</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i. 175-6, p855.

29 <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, V. i. 211-212, p855.

30 <sup>30</sup> Derived from G.K. Hunter; *William Shakespeare: The Late Comedies*; (London, 1962); p14; and Bertrand Evans; *Shakespeare's Comedies*; (London, 1967); p40; but taken here from Alexander Leggatt; *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*; first edition; (UK; Methuen & Co. Ltd.; 1974); p97.

31 <sup>31</sup> Alexander Leggatt; *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*; first edition; (UK; Methuen & Co. Ltd.; 1974); p22.

32 <sup>32</sup> *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, II. i. 128; p95; but observed by Alexander Leggatt; *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*; first edition; (UK; Methuen & Co. Ltd.; 1974); p24.

33 <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, line 151; observed by Leggatt; *Ibid.*; p24.

each other - "Thou coward, art thou bragging to the stars / ... I'll whip thee with a rod"<sup>34</sup> - we can observe this out of context and feel slightly disturbed by his provocation of blood-lust. It is the frame of unreality, the auspices of a mischievous and playful Puck, indeed the auspices of the theatre, which inure us to this. The "jingling rhythm and rhyme"<sup>35</sup> of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* lulls us into abeyance and we try not to notice that Helena's "hold the sweet jest up"<sup>36</sup> is a cry of confused, hurt, desperation. In *The Comedy of Errors*, our willing suspension of moral beliefs deadens us to the physical pain, the cruel suffering which is the price of mistaken identity - "I have some marks of yours upon my pate / some of my mistress' marks upon my shoulders"<sup>37</sup>. This is the legitimised violence of slapstick, the price paid too by Sir Toby and Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* with their "bloody coxcomb"s<sup>38</sup>. We must accept that much of the time, our laughter at cruel merriment is not involuntary. We are invited to this wilful abandonment of ethical hesitations by the nature of comedy, for without subversion much of what we could laugh at is lost. Yet despite the facilitating mechanisms of the framing curtain, despite our own acquiescence to visions as "no more yielding but a dream"<sup>39</sup>, there are nevertheless times when laughter stops; When the "merry sport"<sup>40</sup> of Shylock's bond with Antonio transubstantiates into a bitterly vengeful blood contract, when in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the fiercely rhetorical banter of Petruccio and Katherine is cut across by Petruccio's warning, "I swear I'll cuff you if you strike again"<sup>41</sup>. We are no longer aware of "festive abuse"<sup>42</sup> in Sir Toby's vicious "Will

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34 <sup>34</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III. iii. 408 ... 411, p844.

35 <sup>35</sup> Alexander Leggatt; *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*; first edition; (UK; Methuen & Co. Ltd.; 1974); p96.

36 <sup>36</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III. ii. 240, p840.

37 <sup>37</sup> *The Comedy of Errors*, I. ii. 83-83, p695.

38 <sup>38</sup> *Twelfth Night*, V. i. 172, p1816

39 <sup>39</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Epilogue, line 6, p860.

40 <sup>40</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, I. ii. 141, p1099.

41 <sup>41</sup> *The Taming of the Shrew*, II. i. 216, p165.

you help - an ass-head, and a coxcomb, and a knave; a thin-faced knave, a gull?"<sup>43</sup>, in the final scene of *Twelfth Night*. The tone has been irreconcilably darkened, by violence in these instances, to the hope of salvaging laughter. It is a case of humour "out of season"<sup>44</sup>, where more is at stake for the victims of comedy than we are prepared to trivialise with our colluding laughter. Thus in *The Comedy of Errors*, Adriana's long emotional speech is comical when misdirected to Antipholus of Syracuse - "Plead you to *me*, fair dame?"<sup>45</sup>; yet when Egeon later misdirects a plea to his Ephesian son to save his life - "But perhaps, my son, / Thou sham'st to acknowledge me in misery"<sup>46</sup>, the joke has left us, the situation is vacant of comedy<sup>47</sup>. If there is laughter when an angry and humiliated Malvolio cries "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!"<sup>48</sup> then it is closer to what is described - of the plays of Harold Pinter - as the comedy of menace. Although all merriment can lead to laughter, this nervous laugh points back to fear and the release of tension, not to merriment.

Before laughter stops, there exists an occasion for laughter wherein what merriment there is, is mingled with a little too much regret. The sympathy towards the victim of cruel laughter has not yet accrued enough weight to drown out laughter, yet our merriment must be mixed with guilt or regret. We are sympathetic enough towards Feste, a man who wins us over upon his first appearance as he wins over Olivia: with his bold comic skill - "Do you not hear, fellows. Take away the lady"<sup>49</sup>. Malvolio has been described as a man "sick of self-love"<sup>50</sup>

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42 <sup>42</sup> C. L. Barber; *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*; first edition; (USA; Princeton University Press; 1959); p73.

43 <sup>43</sup> *Twelfth Night*, V. i. 198-199, p1817.

44 <sup>44</sup> *The Comedy of Errors*, I. ii. 68, p695.

45 <sup>45</sup> *The Comedy of Errors*, II. ii. 147, p702.

46 <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, V. i. 322-323, p728.

47 <sup>47</sup> A contrast pointed out by Alexander Leggatt; *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love*; first edition; (UK; Methuen & Co. Ltd.; 1974); p5.

48 <sup>48</sup> *Twelfth Night*, V. i. 365, p1820.

49 <sup>49</sup> *Twelfth Night*, I. v. 34, p1775.

50 <sup>50</sup> *Twelfth Night*, I. v. 77, p1776.

and may distance us by the offence he gives others - "If it be worth stooping for, there it lies, in your eye"<sup>51</sup>. But in act IV scene ii, we begin to feel pity for this man first shamed, and now incarcerated for his inability to be a part of the group. Here we see the Malvolio, who prefers solitude - "Let me enjoy my private"<sup>52</sup>, who stands aloof from "the rough give-and-take of the real world" in the words of Slights<sup>53</sup>; in a state of dejection and disenfranchisement. Had he been of more yielding humour, we may have treasured the prank. Instead the psychology of the butt of this joke, turns its countenance into that of a bully. We are thus more inclined to see as dubious, Feste's role as his tormentor. His dressing up as Sir Topas elicits laughter, but laughter marred by a feeling of guilt that this joke has gone too far. Similarly, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Gratiano's savage jokes "Therefore, thou must be hanged at the state's charge"<sup>54</sup> make us have sympathy for Shylock; and laughter at Lancelot's practical joking with the blind Old Gobbo - "I will try confusions with him"<sup>55</sup>, is tinged with the guilt of cruelty. As the court interrupt Starveling's one line for the third time in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we sense that his patience is tested - "All that I have to say is ..." <sup>56</sup>, and are reminded of Portia's sentiment "I know it is a sin to be a mocker, but ..." <sup>57</sup>. If we see ourselves as extending a grace towards the less fortunate or less privileged, we must surely be prompted to question the appropriateness of laughing at the slips of the "rude mechanicals" in their

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51 Ibid. II. ii. 13, p1782.

52 Ibid. III. iv. 82, p1801.

53 Camille Wells Slights; *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths*; first edition; (Canada; University of Toronto Press Inc.; 1993); p227.

54 *The Merchant of Venice*, IV. i. 362, p1135.

55 Ibid., II. ii. 30, p1102.

56 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i. 247, p856.

57 *The Merchant of Venice*, I. ii. 48, p1095.

uneducated "abusage" of words: the misuse of "he comes to disfigure"<sup>58</sup> the moon;  
"translated"<sup>59</sup> for transformed; and "defect"<sup>60</sup> for effect.

The insipid insinuation of political correctness into all spheres of life has made comedy's task a prickly one. If to laugh is to subvert, then the carnivalesque ritual of sending up the marginalised becomes more difficult. Greig points out that the reason we can laugh at a person with a big nose, is because this is a deviation from what we think of as the "norm" - "it is the nose that is outside the average ... which ... may occasion a laugh"<sup>61</sup>. In this way, humour tends to reassert the values of the centre, it is by this mechanism that the "communion"<sup>62</sup> of laughter gains its strengths. But what then if this person is, like Shylock, Jewish. The gentiles of the play find fellowship in the excluding laughter at the "other" - "I never heard a passion so confused / ... "My Daughter! O, My ducats! O, my daughter!"<sup>63</sup>; but under the aegis of political correctness, such inappropriate solace becomes, like its victims, socially excluded. In this respect, whilst it rehabilitates the marginalised, stigmatising comedy with strict ethics can serve conversely to evacuate the centre. Whereas Old Gobbo being lead astray<sup>64</sup> was once funny, we are now tentative, nervous to laugh, because Old Gobbo is blind and Jewish. The social bounds of what is "cruel" interpose upon merriment, and in the "culture of victimhood"<sup>65</sup> in which the supposition of absolute social "norms" is seen as oppressive, humour has fewer cultural assumptions which it can validly subvert.

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58 <sup>58</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III. i. 52, p832.

59 <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, line 105, p833.

60 <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, line 34, p831.

61 <sup>61</sup> J. Y. T. Greig; *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy*; first edition; (UK; George Allen & Unwin Ltd.; 1923); p111.

62 <sup>62</sup> C. L. Barber; *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*; first edition; (USA; Princeton University Press; 1959); p9

63 <sup>63</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, II. viii. 12-15, p1111.

64 <sup>64</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, II. ii. 30, p1102.

65 <sup>65</sup> A newspaper buzzphrase used at least in *The Independent* during 1997, with reference to the litigation culture of America and the psychological landscape generated in part by such a culture, in which minority groups and pressure groups can exert considerable leverage upon politics, large companies, the media etc.

In the theatre, we are granted a holiday from our obligations to sympathy and concern.

Martin Buzacott describes the regular appearance in newspapers sometime after the carnival festivities in Rio de Janeiro, of statistics relating the greatly increased incidences of rape, stabbings, muggings and murders<sup>66</sup>. That these are systematically ignored by the Brazilian authorities is seen by Buzacott as an instance of "censoring the historical precedents of Carnival as an outlet for aggression and disaffection"<sup>67</sup>. For carnival requires that we do not care too much, for to do so would define us as "kill-joys"<sup>68</sup> Barber observes, who are "too preoccupied with perverse satisfactions like pride or greed to "let the world slip" and join the dance"<sup>69</sup>. Malvolio is the kind of "pale faced companion"<sup>70</sup> shunned by Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and thus the "subject for aggressive festive abuse"<sup>71</sup>. If as Hegel suggests, we can only understand an idea oppositionally in terms of its "dialectic"<sup>72</sup>, then in opposition to merriment we begin to see the roots of the suffering which needs to be showcased during carnival. Buzacott refers us to "the charivari"<sup>73</sup> which was "one of the more repressive and malicious forms of this carnival humiliation, taking the form of a noisy demonstration of popular justice in which the wrongdoer was paraded through the streets and his crime re-enacted"<sup>74</sup>. We are made to understand our own mirth in its oppositional definition to another's suffering. Thus it is, Barber writes, that "behind the laughter at the

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66 <sup>66</sup> Martin Buzacott; *The Death of the Actor*; first edition; (UK; Routledge; 1991).

67 <sup>67</sup> Martin Buzacott; *The Death of the Actor*; first edition; (UK; Routledge; 1991); p63.

68 <sup>68</sup> C. L. Barber; *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*; first edition; (USA; Princeton University Press; 1959); p8.

69 <sup>69</sup> Ibid.

70 <sup>70</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I. i. 15, p814.

71 <sup>71</sup> C. L. Barber; *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*; first edition; (USA; Princeton University Press; 1959); p9.

72 <sup>72</sup> G. W. F. Hegel; "Dialectics"; *Literary Theory: An Anthology*; first edition; Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan; (GB; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.; 1998); p243.

73 <sup>73</sup> Martin Buzacott; *The Death of the Actor*; first edition; (UK; Routledge; 1991); p61.

74 <sup>74</sup> Ibid.

butts there is always a sense of solidarity about pleasure, a communion embracing the merry-makers in the play and the audience"<sup>75</sup>.

The "Merry England"<sup>76</sup> of May games<sup>77</sup> and Lords of Misrule<sup>78</sup> evokes a myth of social cohesion which the gentiles of the Merchant of Venice can only create in the last scene - in Belmont<sup>79</sup> - by the social exclusion of multicultural Venice. Sir Andrew and Sir Toby can only enjoy their "cakes and ale"<sup>80</sup> by ostracising the "kind of puritan"<sup>81</sup> that is Malvolio. The audience's delight at seeing Bottom's head turned into that of an ass<sup>82</sup>, requires his expulsion from humanity. If carnivalesque merriment requires this "ritualised cruelty"<sup>83</sup> to the excluded minority of the "other", it is a mixture of cruelty and merriment which sits uneasily with our capacity for sympathy. In Shakespeare's comedies, the approach of that Lenten time when laughter stops is deferred by frames of comic detachment. It is within this facilitating artifice that we can willingly suspend our obligations to correctness. For so long as our volatile sympathies can still peaceably mix with cruel merriment, the carnival may go on.

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75 <sup>75</sup> C. L. Barber; *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*; first edition; (USA; Princeton University Press; 1959); p9.

76 <sup>76</sup> Ibid.; p22.

77 <sup>77</sup> Ibid., p18

78 <sup>78</sup> ibid.

79 <sup>79</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, V. i. 17, p1138.

80 <sup>80</sup> *Twelfth Night*; II. iii. 104, p1785.

81 <sup>81</sup> Ibid., line 125, p1785.

82 <sup>82</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III. i. 100, p833.

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