The Meaning of Festivities in Shakespeare's Plays

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Introduction

Renaissance England understood poetry according to Neo-Platonist conceptions which seem quite different from Shakespeare's own. The indisputable authority of rhetoric and the rigid definition of clear-cut styles or categories (such as those of invention or composition...) were most probably perceived by the playwright as obstacles hindering him from saying what he had to say the way he wanted to say it – which is one likely reason why Shakespeare chooses early in his career to write only plays[1]. In fact, it would be more adequate to say that he brings poetry back into drama, regardless of genre conventions. It is therefore only to his work as playwright that we are referring here. The study of this work from the point of view of festivities has already yielded fairly precise descriptions, though less precise perhaps when it comes to the proximity between festivities and warfare. So the emphasis here is put on this aspect first. But it is also interesting to show how the immense importance of pastoral culture in Shakespeare's plays eventually corresponds not only to some sort of anti-Puritan project, as critics well know, but to a kind of anti-historical feeling, which may sound paradoxical considering the number of so-called "historical plays" that he wrote. Having demonstrated that festivities are critical in the Shakespearean play finally leads us to acknowledge that they take on the function of threshold, which provides a useful conceptual tool to account for very diverse readings of this work.

[1] As Y. Bonnefoy suggests in *Lieux et destins de l'image*, Paris, Seuil, 1999.

I- Festivities and Warfare

1- "White" Festivities

On the face of it, one might believe that the festive element belongs to comedy just as war belongs to tragedy. But this is not the case since festivities and warfare exemplify a same mingling, equalizing, differences-abolishing process. From this point of view indeed, they may even look like twin moments of society's life. What's more, a comedy or a tragedy is always the occasion of a festive night for a theatre-goer. In a way, any play could be said to be festive if the word is to be taken in a broad sense. And Shakespeare offers us no help in defining the genre of his plays for he is said to have written "problem plays" or disturbing comedies and romances. What is common to festivities and war is that they are culminating points of social time. Roger Caillois' definition of festivities (*la fête*) in *L'Homme et le sacré*[2] is that of a paroxysmal moment of society, the function of which is to *purify* society. The features of the festive moment include licence to all or almost all types of excessive behaviour, sharp contrast with everyday life, denial of weakness or sickness, and above all the fact that it recalls a kind of beginning of the world, the mythic moment when it all evolved from a state of chaos to one of order – to a *cosmos*. Festive intervals seem to take everyone back to a great fictitious era when nothing had been determined yet, when kingdoms intermingled (human and non-human), when the whole universe was still fundamentally plastic and open to virtually infinite possibilities. It is the Golden Age, the hurly-burly, the racket that came before time was oriented from left to right, from cause to effect or from birth to death. It is Saturn's kingdom of transgression, a universe of misrule, the Fountain of Youth where the world must dive periodically and emerge from, so that chaos may become order again. No wonder that festivities preferably happen when nature is being reborn (May celebrations were most important in Shakespeare's England), or during that December interval of twelve days which was used to adapt the calendar derived from the wax and wane of the moon to the one derived from the succession of days. Those twelve days hanging in suspense above passing time, the very days when ancient Rome revelled in orgiastic *Saturnalia*, correspond to Elizabethan Christmas festivities and culminate on the "twelfth night", which Shakespeare evokes in the title of a play. They were an interval of freedom and misrule, a revival of the mythic Golden Age.

[2] Paris, Gallimard, Folio-Essais, 1993.

The most blatant sign that this primary age is recalled lies, according to Caillois, in the fact that men and women swap clothes, which calls for Shakespeare's liking for plot-animating travestied episodes. Here is Viola, shipwrecked on the shores of Illyria in *Twelfth Night,* who dresses as Cesario and becomes Duke Orsino's page, with whom she eventually falls in love but on behalf of whom she will have to woo Countess Olivia. Here is Rosalind in *As You Like It* who, exiled from court, seeks refuge in the Forest of Arden under the disguise of a young boy and in the hope of finding her banished father there. Here is Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*) putting her drunken lover into bed and having a bit of fun trying his gown on and brandishing the sword that had made him famous at the battle of Philippi.

Excess, which is a feature of festivities in general, can be noticed in the common tendency to ingest food in monstrous quantities. The Shakespeare reader thinks of Falstaff, here. This recurring grotesque character plays the role of the clown and that of the Lord of Misrule equally. He is a jolly kind of guzzler whose puns make us laugh in both parts of *Henry IV* and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor.* Shakespeare's references to excessive and festive eating and drinking are innumerable. When Jack Cade organizes a rebellion in the second part of *Henry VI*, he has to promise his men that when the job is done, wine will flow out of city fountains as in a land of milk and plenty.

But excess is also a matter of expression and, in this context, the character of the fool or the jester takes on particular importance. Language too is the occasion of a strange kind of cuisine with Shakespeare, notably if Feste – whose name is appropriate – is the cook (in *Twelfth Night*). Olivia's jester is indeed a chef when it comes to stirring words and accelerating the chaotic process at work in the play: "A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!" (III, 1, 13-5).

Finally, there is no misrule, no festivity, without the sacrifice or at least the expulsion of a mock-king, a scapegoat carrying all of society's sins away. And indeed Falstaff, who had been Prince Hal's drinking companion in the first part of *Henry IV*, is sent to prison by the newly crowned King Henry V. No drinking companionship can stop the purification needs of the social body: now that a new monarch reigns, he must redeem the sins of his predecessors and Falstaff will go because he embodies the Lord of Misrule – until he becomes a little wiser.

What comes out of a parallel reading of Shakespeare and Caillois is the fact that the festive phenomenon is both economical and religious (in a broad sense, including archaic or pre-Christian rituals). It is a "total" social phenomenon that maximizes the circulation of wealth and takes the individual away from his personal life to plunge him into a collective whirlpool. Through festivities, society re-asserts itself as one and indivisible again. But the modern equivalent of the original festive phenomenon is not to be found in our holidays, however tempting it may be to construe them so, because they draw the individual away from society and offer him time for individual rest instead of collective frenzy. If there is anything in modern times that comes close to the essence of festivities at all, namely a culminating point of frenzy that establishes a link between the individual and the social group he belongs to, it can only be war, which Caillois defines as a sort of "black" festivity in reference to black magic.

2- « Black » festivities

It should be recalled in the first place that Shakespeare's tragedies are not devoid of rejoicing moments or allusions to them. But these festivities bear the seal of Evil. According to Hamlet, the remainder of the meat that was served hot at his father's funeral was served again, though cold, at his too quickly remarried mother's wedding banquet. When Macbeth endeavours to feast with guests, it is only to be disturbed by the ghosts of his victims. And when Pompeius invites Antony to party on one of his boats, he dismisses the opportunity to assassinate him at the last minute (*Antony and Cleopatra*). But what is more interesting to us now is the parallel that can be drawn between war-peace oscillations and festive-non festive oscillations (Holy Day *vs* everyday) in so far as they constitute fundamental laws of any human social group.

The individual is torn away from his everyday, rhythmic and personal life during war too. In war as in social revels, bodies and souls come together, goods are put in common and time is disrupted. War is a kind of collective upheaval that it is easy to compare with festivities in general: it is a monstrous, shapeless scrummage where acts which are usually forbidden are allowed, encouraged or even declared compulsory, such as killing. At war as in games similar to "Aunt Sally" (*jeux de massacre,* in French), man experiences the joy of destroying things. And wars are not wanting in Shakespeare's theatrical work. There are the wars opposing England to France for instance, as in *Henry V*.

Shakespeare describes the battle of Agincourt, one of the greatest episodes of English heroism, as a great party where all differences and social hierarchy disappear. The King, who is *disguised* because he does not want his men to recognize him, spends most of the night among his soldiers and is able to talk to them without being betrayed by his aristocratic manners precisely because he had spent much of his youth in taverns with Falstaff. The battle will take place on St Crispian's day. Here is the passage where Henry gives new life to his army's morale by playing on the proximity between the words "feast" and "feats": "The day is call'd the feast of Crispian: / He that outlives this day and comes safe home / Will stand a'tiptoe when this day is named / And rouse him at the name of Crispian (...) / Old men forget: Yet all shall be forgot, / But he'll remember with advantages / What feats he did that day." (IV, 3, 46-51).

Historical plays rather often suggest that war is akin to festivities thanks to imagery linked to merry Holy Days, to music and to dancing. In *Henry VI* part 2, for instance, a character refers to Jack Cade, the rebellion leader, by comparing him to a Morris Dancer: "I have seen / Him caper upright like a wild Morisco, / Shaking the bloody darts as he his bells." (III, I, 364-6). Any Elizabethan theatre-goer would remember those May Day bell-dancers who went jigging through villages with a trail of merry folk singing songs the parish priest had rather not hear. War too is a culmination of collective frenzy that must "purify" society. Philosophers have sometimes noticed that it works as a regulator, or even as a creative force. For Heraclites of Ephesus, war (*polemos*) is the father of all things. For Hegel, it is the instrument of Reason in History. For others it "accelerates" history, it is a source of civilization, a regenerating blood bath echoing the festive Fountain of Youth. War is seen as an initiation rite, a *descensus ad inferos*, the penetration of a sacred dimension of time that requires a religious state of mind: only in the war does one get a "baptism of fire".

And modern warfare has something else in common with festivities insofar as it tends to abolish the medieval codes of chivalry. Here again, the process at work is a levelling off, a destruction of rules and differences. From this point of view, *Henry V* is an extremely interesting play. To be sure, Henry wins a historical battle at Agincourt, but he also takes the decision to slaughter all of his prisoners, many of whom belonged to the ruling class, to the aristocracy, which gives him a definite advantage for the rest of the war. It takes an effort for modern minds to understand the meaning of this act in the context of the medieval or Renaissance vision of the world. The aristocracy

derived its ruling power from God, and to kill an unarmed aristocrat who was a prisoner was tantamount to disturbing cosmic order. It was as much as denying the superiority of the aristocracy. Shakespeare certainly doesn't omit to suggest that the slaughter of the prisoners was a gratuitous and frightening decision to take which evokes the festive excessive spending of goods. He portrays Henry as the first great historical figure to say that there are no codes any more but for the show, that there is no clear-cut battlefield any more since you can kill your prisoners, and that there are no more social classes that you can spare, be they aristocrats (they would have been civilians in more recent history). Henry is the inventor of total war, that great black feast.

But Shakespeare was also interested in civil war. *Henry VI* part 1 and 2 and *Richard III* evoke the War of the Roses, while *Julius Caesar* deals with Rome, though England was at the back of the playwright's mind when he wrote it. Caesar is murdered in a way that recalls the archaic sacrifice of the Lord of Misrule, the mock-king ritually slaughtered at the end of the *Saturnalia*. Caesar's wife Calphurnia has a bad dream of her husband's statue spouting blood and Decius, who is intent on talking the Emperor into going to the Senate, interprets the dream so: "Great Rome shall suck / Reviving blood" (II, 2, 87-8). He doesn't know how right he is to say so, though, for Caesar's murder is supposed to bring about the new *Pax Romana*. At the Ides of March the victim of the sacrifice had to be an epileptic, which is the case of Caesar. Therefore he is the victim of what must appear as a true ritual sacrifice, not of a mere murder: "Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius", Brutus says indeed (II, 1, 166). Brutus seeks to give his murder an aesthetic turn for the crowd to accept it. He wants the mob to accept Caesar as the Lord of Misrule, the necessary scapegoat. He needs to justify his action. It is clear that Shakespeare is trying to probe the question of the sovereign's legitimacy, a tantalizing question in his time. Likewise, when Henry V sends Falstaff to prison the day of his coronation, he is performing a ritual, however unconsciously. But the reader feels sorry for Falstaff. There is something irreducibly likable about this good old fat Bacchus, and Shakespeare very consciously portrays him so. Yet he never writes to please his audience primarily. He means to say what is true: society is founded upon the lynching of a victim whose innocence or guilt does not really matter.

II- Pastoral Festivities

1- Fasting* versus *Feasting

Shakespeare's plays are rife with either court, aristocratic, popular or pastoral festivities. The latter seem to be more central to the playwright's general project which was also, if we are to trust Yves Bonnefoy[3], to voice the life of Elizabethan country folk inasmuch as it expressed a different experience of the universe from that which underlies intellectualised representations. One of the many reasons why Shakespeare is great is his ability to clearly stage his time's assumptions regarding matters of importance. And in many respects, his time was a period of transition, not to say a period of crisis. Shakespeare belongs to the Renaissance, when what we now call Modernity was only just being born along with a new type of rationality. He belongs to times which, faced with tremendous progress in conceptual thought, started regretting the old medieval way of thinking that made room for order, harmony and finality. The myth of "Merry England" was a Renaissance invention. Indeed, Hamlet mainly suffers from being unable to live in his deceased father's world, when it was easy to move from the experience of the senses (*eros*) to the feeling of harmonious order (*cosmos*). He suffers from hypertrophied rationality (*logos*). He cannot reach the plenitude of life any more: "I have of late, – but wherefore I know not, – lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" (II, 2, 312 sq.) In fact, Shakespeare is more generally reacting against an ontological conception of Form as it was first developed by Plato, than against the natural sciences which begin to suspect that the world is a "congregation of vapours". Form is proportion between the several parts of an object. Thanks to this perfect balance between the parts, the mind has a chance to make its way up to immutable and eternal Ideas which, beyond space and the perceptible world, know neither disorder, nor accident or ambiguity. Form drives one away from the tangible world. It is locked upon itself, wholly intelligible and inaccessible to the senses. But Shakespeare is reluctant to adopt this out-and-out philosophical idealism, which is why agrarian culture takes on so much importance in his work. He keeps coming back to festivities, to

[3] *Lieux et destins de l'image*, Paris, Seuil, 1999.

country ribaldry, and he deliberately chooses the words which describe the natural world as it appears to the senses. And in doing so he criticizes Platonist and Neo-Platonist devotion to Form, along with the surreptitious ascetic virtues that Puritanism is trying to impose upon his time. If there is one capital sin for Shakespeare at all, it is to shun the experience of the world which the senses provide immediately.

But by the middle of the 16th century, festivities are starting to be condemned systematically for the waste of wealth and lewd conduct that they occasion. It is the beginning of their decline, and the birth of the myth of Merry England. For a certain Philip Stubbes, who publishes *An Anatomy of Abuses* in 1583, May celebrations with their Morris Dances, their Lord of Misrule and the amorous excursions of the youths in the hills at night were nothing less than satanic rituals[4]. Under the reign of Elizabeth though, festivities are somewhat revived. To be sure, the emphasis is on court festivities and the country-town divide is still quite strong, but all festivities come from rural customs and the mysteries of natural fertility. They are social events linked to the natural cycles and rooted in archaic conceptions of time and the cosmos. They date back to pre-Christian paganism for the most part. Christianity at first, at the time of Pope Gregory the Great, had decided not to confront populations too harshly and had assimilated many of the old rituals, except that the names of the divinities worshipped were replaced by the names of Saints. But the Reformation set out repressing the pagan (and now Roman-Catholic) substratum radically to establish itself on firm ground. As soon as Puritanism appeared, being grave and solemn suggested that one was therefore virtuous, to such good purpose that anyone who rather enjoyed laughter became an adept of popular festivities. And just as much as the reader sympathizes with Falstaff when Henry sends him to prison, he cannot but applaud like a child when Malvolio is expelled in *Twelfth Night*. This joy-killer's crusade against mirth and good cheer evokes that of Puritans like Philip Stubbes. Although it is a little disturbing to see Malvolio locked up in a dark room for a while, for then he may evoke the asylums of the time, this feeling does not last. Shakespeare therefore stages the combat between a certain serious attitude and a kind of ribald, satirical, sometimes slightly cruel rusticity. He confronts the clown and the joy-killer, Carnival and Lent, feasting and fasting. What mattered for the

[4]See F. Laroque, *Shakespeare et la Fête*, Paris, PUF, 1988.

Reformation above all in the Elizabethan context was to forget this carnival-like vision of the world Mikhail Bakhtine writes about in his study of Rabelais, as well as to control the use of bodily functions as much as possible. Morris-dancing, swapping clothes or romping naked at night in churchyards, as the custom was, was now to be got rid of.

And yet those reputably degrading customs did belong to a consistent vision of the world. Shakespeare seems to have understood that they were not mere pagan bad habits, since he picked the best representative of popular culture and made him one of the most important recurring characters of his plays: the clown. He is the one who sets language free in a meaning-pervading manner that brings contraries together but triggers off a burst of laughter. His name can be Feste (*Twelfth Night*) or Dogbery (*Much Ado about Nothing),* Touchstone (*As You Like It*) or Falstaff (*Henry IV*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) amongst others. The clown is the one who, by commenting cynically on the main plot, introduces the saturnalian pattern of inversion into the play, which is another feature of the carnival-like vision of the world inherent to medieval and early Renaissance Europe. He is the one who puts on animal masques and disguises, thereby signalling that magic and supernatural forces are about to be released. When Falstaff is disguised as Herne-the-Hunter at the end of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he evokes the stag-man of the archaic Celtic civilisation, mighty Zeus-Cernunnos, as well as the comedy stock-character of the cuckold with his antlers, of course.

What characterizes pastoral festivities in Shakespeare's century is that they are dependent on a conception of time as heterogeneous and made of periods endowed with different quality. Time is not seen primarily as something that can be measured quantitatively but as a succession of tiresome and merry days. The opposition between time in cities and time in the countryside is becoming a sensitive issue and when Shakespeare wants to express positive values, he uses the metaphors of cosmic cycles. On the contrary, the Puritans were obsessed with exactness in the calendar, which was impossible as long as holidays were based on the revolutions of the moon. This exactness, which was to bring about increased productivity, was imposed at the expense of bio-cosmic rhythms. Medieval "idleness" had to be repressed and the calendar had to be reorganized. Shakespeare is very conscious of this issue and it is interesting that he should have wished to write *Twelfth Night* in reference to a winter festive period, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in reference to summer festivities (in

fact, the Midsummer Night wake usually came in June), or that the longest scene in *A Winter's Tale*, indeed the longest scene in Shakespeare's whole work, should be set during a traditional rural fair organized at the end of the sheep-shearing period (IV, 3). There is not one single play that doesn't refer to the festive calendar in one way or another with the definite purpose of sparking collective memories and streaming the affective response of the audience. François Laroque has listed these references in his book on Shakespeare and festivities[5]. The scene in *The Winter's Tale* is Shakespeare's own "Pastoral Symphony", as Laroque writes. Autolycus sings idyllic ballads ("When daffodils begin to peer...") and shepherds dance like satyrs or fauns wearing hides instead of their normal clothes. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, lovers elope to the woods to spend the night there. This is a direct reference to a May tradition that infuriated the Puritans. "Lasses" used to run to the hills at night once a year and meet the "lads" there to celebrate Summer, which sometimes brought about the birth of children who would be left for the Parish to take care of. Those unwanted births are now known to have been far less numerous than what Philip Stubbes claimed in his *Anatomy of Abuses*. Indeed, weddings were much more frequent to follow since these festivities primarily had a match-making function. Nevertheless, the custom was made illegal on the 8th of April 1644, the very same day that theatres were closed down.

2- The « Green World »

In order to get a better picture of what pastoral festivities meant to Shakespeare, it is worthwhile reading Northrop Frye's article entitled « The Argument of Comedy »[6]. Frye demonstrates how Shakespeare turned his back to classical comedy models and tapped the English stage tradition of the Middle Ages, though not exclusively, so that he quickly elaborated what Frye names "the drama of the green world". As a matter of fact, the most beautiful scenes in *The Merchant of Venice* are set in Belmont ("lovely mountain", if one hears the French echoes in this name), where Portia's domain lies. In *As You Like It*, the Forest of Arden is a beneficent and mother-like place (and the reader may bear in mind that Shakespeare's mother's name was Mary Arden). In the surroundings of Athens lie enchanted woods (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), as in the surroundings of Windsor (in *The Merry Wives*) where tensions are

[5] *Ibid*.
[6] In *Shakespeare's Comedies*, Laurence Lerner ed., Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967, p. 315-26.

appeased and the comedy comes to an end. For such is the "green world": a pastoral refuge, a haven of pagan joy, a world different from that of History where the War of the (red and white) Roses is taking place. Yet the green world is not just a forest or the vegetal world. It is a concept that embraces all places where metamorphosis, freedom, love, youth, nature, contemplation or music are welcome. From this point of view, the Boar's Head Tavern (in *Henry IV*) belongs to the green world. It is in this tavern that Falstaff and young Prince Hal drink the night away and enjoy the merry company of Mrs Quickly and Doll Tearsheet. So Shakespeare uses pastoral festivities to confront the green, "warm" and florid world of nature or the tavern, with the "cold" world of History or of Puritanical opposition to theatre. At the end of *The Tempest* a Masque (a disguised party with actors and shows) is organized on Prospero's island. In this Masque, Ceres, goddess of the earth, blesses Miranda and Ferdinand's betrothal with words recalling harvesting festivities. She brings together corn and vines in her song, evoking their transformation into bred and wine by human action. There is enough in this song alone to please the "groundlings", the ploughmen and common people who recognized merry events of their life, as well as more cultured spectators who were able to enjoy the mythological references. But there is also an attempt to bring together the pagan mythological past and the Christian present time with the allusion to the Eucharist (bred and wine). And this may be the way Shakespeare tried to delineate the possibility of a new world, both pagan *and* Christian.

III- Festivities as Passage

1- From Obscurity to Clarity

Festivities belong to the global rhythm of Shakespeare's plays which, in the case of comedies, is binary. C. L. Barber has evidenced that such a pattern defines a type of comedy which he calls specifically "festive"[7]. In this new theatrical genre, festivities provide the opportunity to trigger an emotional release which prepares the audience for a better understanding of the relationship between man and the world or between culture and nature. A Shakespearean festive comedy is supposed to lead one to a deeper awareness of one's relationship to the cosmos, to the universe, the horizon of human beings. Release and understanding, such is the pattern according to Barber. But the process of release is also binary in its turn. It requires invocation (of a

[7] *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1959.

power or of a divinity – Robin Hood as a metamorphosis of the "Woodwose" or wild man, for example) and invective, abuse, which is part and parcel of the saturnalian pattern developed by the clown. In other words, Shakespeare blends poetry and satire in a new sort of comedy. But researchers have revealed that these were the fundamental elements of an archaic cult of Nature which it is possible to trace back as late as Aristophanes for instance. Understanding, or what can be called *clarification*, depends on a preliminary emotional process: the audience should be brought to release some nervous energy first and only then is the mind ready to understand what Shakespeare is getting at. Pleasure and joy thus become real criteria with which to consider the characters: whoever is incapable of them shall be excluded from the comedy's final festivities, which is the case of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* or Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

A closer look at *Love's Labour's Lost* shows that the play's story is of no real importance. The fact that the Princess and the three Ladies enter the play just after the King and the three Lords have sworn off revelry, banqueting and the company of women, hints at a likely *dénouement*. They will of course be forsworn in the end. The play is not about telling a story but about showing a ballet. Four men and four women perform the same actions each in his or her turn. What matters is not their individuality but the fact that they are experiencing something collective. They are part of a greater movement, something like a dance: witty love making, aristocratic, courtly wooing. Interestingly enough, no wedding is celebrated in the end, contrary to the conventions of the genre. As Berowne puts it: "Jack hath not Jill" (V, 2, 883). But that is because Shakespeare can do without conventions. Instead, he inserts the seasonal songs ("When daisies pied and violets blue...", V, 2, 931 sq.) in order to underscore the importance of human beings' participation to natural, super-individual movements.

Much of what happens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be seen as a dance too. The steps taken by the Athenian couples who have fled to the woods are as following: the play (or "dance") starts with a triangle of two men and a woman, plus a lonely woman. The dance goes on and they come to form a new triangle of two men and a woman, plus a lonely woman again, except that the women have swapped places. The dance goes on and there now comes a cross-movement between the two men (in the play, they confront each other), and an identical cross-movement between the two women. It all ends in a finale

where everyone finds a partner, though not the same one as in the beginning. Puck, the "merry wanderer of the night", finally declares that "Jack shall have Jill, / Nought shall go ill" (III, 2, 460-1). It could seem that he is saying the contrary of what Berowne was saying in *Love's Labour's Lost*, but in fact he is saying exactly the same. Here again, love appears as an impersonal force above human individuality and personal choice.

2- From mirth to wonder

For other readers[8], Shakespeare's comedies can be described according to a ternary pattern this time. They move from terrestrial mirth to a consciousness of evil as an obstacle to overcome in order to open one's eyes onto the world again with a feeling of amazement and wonder. This is precisely what happens to the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or in *The Merchant of Venice*, or again to Hero in *Much Ado*. There is a dimension of experience where the world and the self seem to space themselves out reciprocally, an experience of what is extraordinary and fantastical about this terrestrial and real world, even though it contains potential evil. It is the awareness of a mysterious "otherness", something on the other side of things and events. Shakespeare writes about the supernatural quality of everyday life. He seeks to reach a point of view "beyond Good and Evil", so to speak. From this very high point of view, evil seems laughable. This is not to say that Shakespeare disregards the seriousness of existence, but that he finds a *comic* point of view on it. The Shakespeare comedy is but the vision of chaos overcome by joy and wonder, the vision of a "brave new world" indeed, as Miranda exclaims at the end of *The Tempest* (though she does so because more males than she has ever seen are reaching the shores of her father's secluded world, comically enough). Shakespeare's art brings together a kind of Dionysian tragic joy and an Apollonian sort of serenity. He manages to unite Caliban and Ariel, Prospero's fantastical servants – the cannibal and the lyre, the wild and the wise, the sensual and the spiritual. But reaching this wonderful experience is no easy task and there are dire straits of the soul that may deter one from going that way. How many symbolical deaths in Shakespeare's plays though! How many Heroes or Hermiones come to life again though everyone thought they were dead! Amazement, a very rare joy, will be granted only to the explorer of his own

[8]See Michael Edwards in *Shakespeare et la Comédie de l'émerveillement*, Bruxelles, Desclée de Brouwer, 2004.

inside island as Gonzalo puts it at the end of *The Tempest*: "O rejoice / Beyond a common joy!" (V, 1, 206-7).

3- From Deception to the Truth

It is hard to deal with festivities as a passage to a state of greater consciousness without mentioning René Girard, whose book on Shakespeare has marked recent criticism[9]. If Shakespeare is one of the greatest writers of all times, Girard says, it is because he dismantles the mechanism of collective violence and reveals it to a world who does not want to know about it. Girard critically uses Freud's work and more recent developments in psycho-analysis to develop another theory of desire, which cannot be discussed here but summed up only and accounted for as fairly as possible. The fundamental element of this theory is that we always desire what someone else, a "mediator", points out to us, however unconsciously. Desire is "mimetic" in essence. Imitation entails rivalry between the desiring subject and his mediator. Rivalry in its turn spreads across the social group by "contagion", which leads to a "mimetic crisis" when violence opposes each individual to everyone else. At this point of the process, no superior entity is left to draw the limit between legitimate violence and illegitimate violence since no alliance can be made between members of the group. Girard then taps anthropological studies and develops the theory of the emissary victim or "scapegoat": there comes a time when violence is streamed towards one single victim. The death of this victim appeases violence and therefore impresses the group so that they now deify him for having prevented society from sinking into total chaos. As anthropologists and sociologists have evidenced, festivities are derived from archaic sacrificial rituals. They imitate the primary mimetic crisis, when differences were abolished and anarchy in the most violent sense of the term was let loose. Ulysses very famously describes this process in a tirade of *Troilus and Cresssida*: "O when degree is shak'd, / Which is the ladder to all high designs, / The enterprise is sick" (I, 3, 101-3). Festivities are sacrificial rituals without the sacrifice: once men noticed that the sacrificial process was a blessing for society, it was periodically renewed until the human victim was replaced by an animal one, which in its turn became a symbolic one. Nowadays, only dummies are burnt for Carnival, but Carnival does recall the ancient rite.

[9] Girard, R., *Shakespeare (les feux de l'envie)*, Paris, Grasset, 1990.

Girard shows that society's mythology is created by the mimetic crisis, and he believes that Shakespeare was the first to understand this. Indeed, it is right after the love rivalry in the woods that the fairies appear in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is because of the war of Troy that Helen acquires her supernatural beauty for Troilus (*Troilus and Cressida*, I, 1, 86-7). The supernatural emerges from the crisis. And a play is a kind of festivity too. The stage is a place where to wear a masque and lie and tell stories. It too comes from sacrificial rituals, the Dyonisian origins of Greek tragedy are here to provide evidence for this fact. It seems that Shakespeare's understanding of theatre was that it could preserve (or attempt to preserve) society's cohesion in a period of crisis by reviving the deep-buried emotions present in old festivities, that is to say in even older sacrificial rituals. Antonin Artaud was to follow in Shakespeare's footsteps at the beginning of the 20th century with his own "theatre of cruelty" (*théâtre de la cruauté*), plays which dismantle the sacrificial process on which society is based. In the rest of his highly stimulating and controversial work, René Girard attempts to demonstrate that the Gospel is a so-called "mythical" text which is different from others since, instead of merely telling the story of a crisis again, it denounces the sacrificial mechanism and claims that the victim being innocent, men must renounce violence: Christ is a different kind of "scapegoat" insofar as he offers himself in sacrifice. However, this is not the subject of this paper.

Conclusion

In a sense, all great readings of Shakespeare's work are equally true. The power of synthesis, the coherence, the intimacy with texts and the capacity to put them in perspective, as well as the keen perceptive qualities that they require is exhilarating. It matters little whether one disagrees with such or such detail, such or such philosophical assumption as long as these studies make one desire to read Shakespeare again and again. However, because of these very qualities, all great readings of Shakespeare are also equally wrong if they reduce the work to absolute clarity. Because this work is also obscure in a way, and contradictory. It is alive. By and large, there are three ways to read Shakespeare today. Orthodoxy sees him as a verbal genius with a conservative temperament who wrote brilliant plays but for a few puzzling or disturbing ones. Another approach to this work demonstrates that there is always a deeper layer of meaning in the plays. Shakespeare indeed had to protect

himself from the reprobation of his contemporaries if he was to go on in his career safely. He had to put on the masque of othodoxy and it is likely that only a very small élite of literary friends around Europe had the clues and the ability to understand the core of his works. Yet both approaches intend to clarify everything, the first one even attributing to failure what doesn't fit in with this theory. But it is rather presumptuous to assume that obscurity in Shakespeare's plays is due to mere weakness. On the contrary, it is possible to consider that the plays are all perfect in the genre that they invent for themselves. This is not to deny that there is an evolution in his work but to suggest that maybe Shakespeare already belongs to the Baroque era as an artist and no longer to the Renaissance – obscurity being a definite feature of Beauty in the Baroque vision of the world. But if we dare ask again *who* William Shakespeare was, since some have cast doubt about the identity of the playwrite, we may answer at least that he was an artist who believed that the world could only regenerate through the joy of rural festivities transfigured by art, and the action of exiled children. He was an artist who did not believe that salvation was to be expected from History.

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