



# ARISTOPHANES

and the Carnival of Genres

Charles Platter



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To Alice

ἀνευ ἧς κάρυα διέρριπτον ἄν

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Aristophanes  
and the Carnival of Genres

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# Introduction

## Bakhtin, Aristophanes, and the Carnival of Genres

In the ancient period, early Attic Comedy and the entire realm of the serio-comical was subjected to a particularly powerful carnivalization.—Mikhail Bakhtin

Our play's chief aim has been to take to bits great propositions, and their opposites, see how they work, and let them fight it out. . . . I've twisted and turned them every way, and can see no ending to our play.—Peter Weiss, *Marat/Sade*

It has long been recognized that the work of Mikhail Bakhtin offers useful insights for the study of Aristophanes.<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin refers directly to Aristophanes infrequently, but his study of Rabelais popularized the idea of “carnival consciousness,” a mode of thought characterized by the temporary inversion of the categories of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Beggars become kings, while kings and other figures of official culture lose their elevated status and, for the duration of the festival, are the objects of parody and other more direct forms of mockery. An intense spirit of egalitarianism prevails. The hierarchies and restraints of everyday life are temporarily abandoned in favor of the urges of the body: thus the excessive consumption of food and drink is celebrated, as well as its prodigious elimination. Sexuality, far from being a source of shame, is loudly trumpeted, and death has only relative significance as the stage in the cosmic cycle that precedes rebirth. Such carnival acts, according to Bakhtin, are driven by the folk culture of the common people and tolerated by official culture, which could suppress them only at great cost. The result is an overturning of official orthodoxies that is only tempo-

rary, but which, nevertheless, leaves traces of freedom. For Bakhtin, the novels of Rabelais, with their emphasis on grotesque bodily phenomena, drew deeply from this folk-culture tradition, despite the humanistic consciousness that permeates the works.<sup>3</sup>

Such a model of festive behavior has great potential to explain some curious features of Aristophanic comedy, including the special prominence of obscenity and personal abuse, its unrestrained criticism of public officials, and the way in which Aristophanes usurps the privileges of more serious types of speech and also claims the right to “teach” his audience about the realities of Athenian public life,<sup>4</sup> conjoining such pronouncements with words and actions of the most ridiculous sort.<sup>5</sup> Such features conspire to produce a style of comedy that is not at all homogeneous, nor one wedded to the principles of dramatic realism as they were later to develop. Taken individually, they seem anomalous and contribute to the feeling of unreality that can accompany our reaction to the kaleidoscopic movements of Aristophanic comedy. One can be led to wonder how such a comedy could have been legitimately popular. In light of the folk-culture model, however, much of the strangeness disappears: the prominence of obscenity temporarily makes public what is usually private and forbidden—or at least circumscribed. In addition, together with comedy’s obsession with food, drink, and excretion, the presence of obscenity completes what Bakhtin calls the “carnival matrix”: the cycle of birth, florescence, death, and rebirth. The unrestrained criticism of public officials (*onomasti komoidein*) parallels the Saturnalian reversals of hierarchy that characterize carnival culture, as does the sententiousness with which comic characters lecture the city on matters of policy and taste.<sup>6</sup> Even what appears to be comedy’s overall aristocratic bias<sup>7</sup> becomes intelligible in carnival terms as the attempt by the polis to institutionalize carnival laughter and so limit the disruptive and destabilizing forms that carnival laughter could take. Thus Bakhtin’s “carnival culture” is an important heuristic tool for the understanding of certain comic phenomena that clarifies much about the sociology of the genre.

But the fun doesn’t stop there. Carnival’s uniquely critical perspective on official culture is more than a temporary folk rebellion against the status quo. It is also a part of the living literary culture of a period. For Bakhtin, the adversarial relationship between carnival spirit and the world of everyday life—that agonistic orientation that allows carnival to undermine all that is serious—is paradigmatic for the interactions of literary genres, a subject that is central to almost all of his published work. Particularly prominent in these accounts are the “impure genres”

that forsake the stylistic homogeneity of epic or lyric poetry in favor of forms that incorporate a multiplicity of styles and reinterpret them on a higher generic level.

Parodic genres illustrate this phenomenon clearly but do not exhaust it. The intertextual experiments in Lucian's *Zeus Cross-Examined*, in which Zeus is compelled to explain his power vis-à-vis that of the Fates (on the basis of passages in the *Iliad*), and in the sequels to Plato's *Apology* and to the *Odyssey* that appear in the second part of his *True History* take the data of the epic tradition and the Platonic dialogue and incorporate them into new literary forms that then stand in ironic juxtaposition to the originals, undermining their ability to command our unmitigated admiration. The forces working to produce such multi-form works are, in Bakhtin's view, very similar to those that bring about the inversions and transpositions of carnival culture, and he describes their effect on literature as "carnivalization." The carnivalized genres, of which more will be said later, produce far more lasting effects than the officially controlled time and space of carnival itself. Further, they have a long and under-analyzed history in Western literature, and it is my contention that Aristophanic comedy, with its wild stylistic fluctuations, benefits from being considered as a part of that tradition. These carnivalized aspects of Aristophanic comedy—for example, its juxtaposition of high poetic language with low ("Megarian") humor, as well as its critical recontextualization of tragedy and epic—are not addressed by traditional philological methods, which portray intertextual allusion as an historical phenomenon whose significance is exhausted as soon as its provenance is explained.

Indeed, the identification of source texts, and the requisitioning of appropriate cross-references, is only the first step in describing the textual interactions of Aristophanic comedy. This *merely* philological level does not go far enough, as Bakhtin implies: "It is much easier to study the *given* in what is created (for example, language, ready-made and general elements of world view, reflected phenomena of reality, and so forth) than to study what is *created*" (1986.120; emphasis in original). It is not sufficient to treat the Aristophanic "givens" as discrete phenomena, capable of explication outside of the comic context in which they appear. It is necessary instead to understand what happens when the genres "sampled" by Aristophanes are inserted into the new comic context. The resulting juxtaposition creates a dynamic relationship between the elements with effects that are both obvious and subtle. By attending to these interactions, we are better able to appreciate the original agonistic orientation of Aristophanes and perceive the interactions of



style in his comedies with what Bakhtin refers to as “*a sharpened dialogic relationship to the word*” (1981.352; emphasis in original).

To point to the limits of traditional philological techniques, without which the study of Aristophanes is, after all, impossible, is not to denigrate them in favor of “literary” appreciations of Aristophanic comedy. Rather, it is to deploy philology even more comprehensively as the only frame from within which a historically nuanced literary appreciation can emerge. To do so, however, philology must not be applied narrowly, as though the collection of linguistic data was an end in itself, but rather must be used to address the full range of stylistic interactions. This principle is not always observed. As Bakhtin complains: “Linguistics, stylistics, and the philosophy of language that were born and shaped by the current of centralizing tendencies in the life of language have ignored this dialogized heteroglossia, in which is embodied the centrifugal forces in the life of the language. For this reason they could make no provision for the dialogic nature of language, which was a struggle among socio-linguistic points of view.”<sup>8</sup>

For ancient texts, it is particularly necessary to develop philological techniques for establishing contexts within which to evaluate evidence that is fragmentary. It is otherwise impossible to restore the dialogic relations embedded within such texts. Although these techniques are not an end in themselves, they constitute the instrument by which the language of Aristophanes—and of other ancient authors—loses its two-dimensionality and regains its dialogic complexity.

It is this intensely historicized aspect of Bakhtinian reading that most clearly distinguishes the approach that I have taken here from works more directly dependent on poststructuralist methodologies and, in particular, deconstruction, though it is also unsurprising that a methodology derived from Bakhtin’s work would have numerous aspects in common with poststructuralist thought. Although Bakhtin’s first appearance in English is with *Rabelais and His World* (1968), it is Julia Kristeva’s work (1969, 1980) and Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Dialogic Principle* (1984) that first place Bakhtin on the map of contemporary theoretical discourse. It is apparent to Kristeva and Todorov, among others, that Bakhtin is important for their own (poststructuralist) projects, and both acknowledge in his work a line leading through neo-Kantianism and Russian formalism (although it might also be said that Bakhtin establishes the conditions under which either continues to provide viable approaches to literature).<sup>9</sup>

Yet despite this filiation, and Bakhtin’s fondness for abstract expression, he does not share the metaphysical orientation of deconstruction.

His primary interest lies instead with the conditions that structure individual linguistic events (utterances) that occur within uniquely meaningful contexts (see Barta et al. 2001.4–5). The intricacy of these events, both oral and textual, is difficult to overstate. Nevertheless, it is within this context that the homologies between Bakhtin's approaches to discourse analysis and to literary history are to be understood, for the appearance of stability that characterizes the materials of each is belied by complexities that cannot be comprehended by attention to their immediate contexts alone. That is to say, both discourse analysis and literary history have borders that are porous and therefore allow the infiltration of various historical forces. In actual conversations, of course, these forces are, for the most part, related to the personal histories of the participants: childhood, education, acquaintances, and so on. Participants, as a result, enter a conversation with complex and often conflicting expectations and forms of expression. For this reason, a transcript of many meaningful conversations will seem stilted and without depth.

Many of the same complexities and conflicts exist in the discourse of literary history, which can likewise be understood as a conversation, this time between texts and genres rather than individuals. The presence of these historical forces within texts creates a diachronic dimension to the utterance that cuts across the synchronic axis formed by its intratextual relations, that is, how the different parts of a text affect each other. Traditional philology excels at discovering both intertextual and intratextual connections in literary works, but is less consistently successful at putting them together—limited, it sometimes seems, by prior assumptions about the limits of expression for an author, an epoch, or a genre. Thus while our reading of literary history and the literature of an historical period will employ many, if not all, of the traditional techniques of philological study, the creation of a “Bakhtinian philology”<sup>10</sup> will additionally require a determined effort to read dialogically beyond the immediate context and into the intertextual dimension that is both the past and present of the text. Whereas traditional philology seeks to uncover the originary intent of the speaker and the meaning of the word, Bakhtinian philology focuses on the quality of the exchange—both intratextual and intertextual—where no single aspect of the dialogical situation is the sole determiner of meaning. As a result, in attempting to describe these phenomena, we encounter a dynamic ambivalence in the language (Bakhtin's word is “unfinalizability”<sup>11</sup>) that is complicated further by the presence of multiple audiences and interlocutors on the comic stage and in the theater.

At this level, admittedly, Bakhtinian ambivalence and the poststruc-

turalist infinite deferral of meaning can begin to look alike. The similarity is illusory. What is superior about Bakhtin's approach is his commitment to an historical and linguistic specificity continually evolving as a sequence of discrete moments over time. In so doing, he avoids the charges of anachronism that are often deployed by critics of post-structuralist thought while preserving the sense of open possibilities that we get from our experiences of literature and conversation. Indeed, as participants in linguistic events, we do not encounter deferral so much as presence in the form of multiple, shifting lines of possibility. Deconstruction does not analyze speech in this fashion, but Bakhtin's emphasis on the proliferation of meaning within the socially constructed world of language produces a model that is fraught with ambivalence without giving way fully to the play of language.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us return to Bakhtin's account of literary carnivalization, distinguishing it more carefully from the related phenomenon of carnival laughter and attempting to describe its effects on the interaction of genres. In addition, we must pay particular attention to two related strains of Bakhtin's thought: his understanding of the novel and his understanding of what he called Menippean satire and the other "serio-comic genres" of Greco-Roman antiquity, phenomena he saw as fundamentally connected. With that understanding, we can then return to the world of Aristophanes, along with its scholarly commentaries, literary subtexts, and historical backgrounds, to see how the Aristophanic intertext works to produce what might be termed a "carnival of genres," with diverse and unpredictable effects.

### **Carnivalization**

During the 1930s and 1940s, Mikhail Bakhtin was assumed by many to be dead. He had been arrested soon after the publication of the first version of *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics* for his participation in a variety of religious-philosophical groups and charged with corrupting the youth. He narrowly escaped being sent to a labor camp. In 1930, he was instead sentenced to five years of internal exile in Kazakhstan, where he worked as a bookkeeper. Later he was allowed to teach in the Department of Literature at the Mordovia Pedagogical Institute in Saransk. He remained there, except for the duration of the war, until he was "discovered" to be alive in the 1960s by a new generation of students; he was eventually allowed to return to Moscow where he stayed until his death in 1975.<sup>12</sup>

Although Bakhtin had dropped completely out of sight during this early period, he was not idle. In addition to his official duties, he wrote

the essays that appeared in English as *The Dialogic Imagination*, several works on the history of literature (the novel in particular) that have been lost, as well as the monograph that would later become *Rabelais and His World*.<sup>13</sup> This work was submitted to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow for a doctoral degree. Its acceptance was delayed for political reasons, partly due to Bakhtin's status as a political criminal and partly due to the reactionary turn in postwar Soviet literary criticism (the so-called Zhdanov period). Yet despite reservations that Bakhtin's research was insufficiently pro-Soviet, he was eventually awarded a degree in 1953 (Clark and Holquist 1984.324–35).

In *Rabelais and His World*, as well as in the essays that constitute *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin develops the idea of “carnival culture,” which he understands both as a characteristic phenomenon of human culture and as a metaphor based in history and embodying a particular way of looking at the world that juxtaposes elements that are normally separate: “Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (1984.123).

Particularly significant is the elevation of the profane, understood as “a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings, etc.” (1984.123). Profanation makes carnival a negative force that undermines the separation between elements that are unequal in everyday life. Although part of its function is to elevate the lowly, this upheaval or reversal occurs not for its own sake but to discredit what was previously elevated. First of all, it directly undermines the sacred by conjoining it with the profane—specifically by drawing attention away from the soul to the body, the source of physical desire, fecundity, and decay. In this way, what is conventionally regarded as eternal and pure is desacralized by its forced cohabitation with what is temporary and unclean. Thus the status of official religious cult as the ordering principle of human life, and as the court of final appeal, is compromised when it is subject to carnival laughter in the form of parodies of its rituals and sacred texts. But carnival's attack against hierarchies does not stop there. The social order is likewise inverted, as are the divisions occasioned by wisdom, real or feigned, when the low are elevated at the expense of their betters, and those who know nothing are esteemed above the wise.<sup>14</sup>

This characterization of carnival laughter must be understood in at least two ways, although it is not always obvious which sense of the term predominates for Bakhtin. It is clear in some passages that he uses