

Deeper into the Bakhtinian Labyrinth: A Response to Rocco Coronato's "Carnival Vindicated to Himself?"*

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I. As "Carnavalesque" and "Grotesque," Yet Not As Positive?

Rocco Coronato's article is a reappraisal of Jonson made against the post-Bakhtinian prejudice, say, of Bristol that Carnival is less applicable to Jonson than Shakespeare; Jonson, who is allegedly learned, is less popular, hence less "carnavalesque."¹ When anatomised according to the method employed in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965), writers like Jonson are abruptly identified as the spokesmen of power with "idiosyncratic distaste for the popular canon."²

Coronato denounces this sort of "literary prejudice" as "the more revolutionary though question-begging" kind "of ferocious hyperbakhtinizing." The greatest problem, he argues, is its value system consisting of "simplified binary oppositions between the high and the low, the Court and the people, the learned and the popular," which could be epitomised in the Marxist theorem: what is popular is good, and vice versa. Through these two-term oppositions, Jonson has been accused as the enemy of the people, while Rabelais has been extolled as a guardian angel of the communist populace.

What Coronato claims is to depose this kind of "hyperbakhtinizing" in order to establish a new reconciliation between the learned and the vulgar through actual literary and historical contexts, long neglected in the structuralist synchronic value system. He invites us to focus on Jonson's use of "intertextuality" in three test cases belonging to different

*Reference: Rocco Coronato, "Carnival Vindicated to Himself? Reappraising 'Bakhtinized' Ben Jonson," *Connotations* 6.2 (1996/97): 180-202.

genres—*Sejanus*, *Epicoene*, and *Neptune's Triumph*—and to realise how Jonson filled these works with carnivalesque motifs by drawing on “the learned tradition in order to stage the popular element, aiming at depicting the grotesque.” By using his amazingly wide range of reading in the classics, Coronato reconstructs, through “the conflation of sources” after the manner of Jonson, “a sort of second hidden text where . . . people are described in action,” eventually to prove that, far from indifferent to popular elements, Jonson was a writer no less “carnavalesque” and “grotesque” than Bakhtin’s idol Rabelais, at least in his intention or orientation.

Yet despite Coronato’s effort of reappraisal and despite Jonson’s own attempt to express his interest in festivity through “intertextuality,” Jonson seems still far behind Rabelais in offering his readers a positive vision: *Sejanus* reflects nothing but bleak and bloody versions of the carnival in Rhodiginus, Dio Cassius, and Claudian; in *Epicoene*, the carnival has failed to fulfill the same function as it did in its comical sources—such as Plautus, Machiavelli, Aretino—of affecting the society or mending the fissures within its fabric; the borrowing of carnivalesque motifs from Athenaeus and Rabelais in *Neptune's Triumph* are limited to the purpose of satirizing the court culture. But this is not, according to Coronato, Jonson’s own fault; his “failure” in conveying a Rabelaisian positive outlook was simply due to the general depression of his age, when the “Triumph of Lent” was ubiquitous in Europe.

It is true that Coronato has launched a great “début,” in pointing out the necessity of reassessing the post-Bakhtinian value system, in order to make “a longer periplus through the Jonsonian invention”: he has extended Jonson’s festive spirit, which had been restricted to his “exceptionally popular” plays like *Bartholomew Fair*, to his seemingly least popular works—*Sejanus* which was disliked by the vulgar on its first day of performance, *Epicoene* dealing with a middle-class society, and *Neptune's Triumph* written for the court audience.³

But I am afraid that Coronato may be still bound in a “Bakhtinian spell” in his attempt to refute the post-Bakhtinian prejudice; he is compelled to use the selfsame terms or premises which had been used by the school—the

terms “grotesque” and “carnavalesque,” which are closely combined with the Marxist belief in what is popular, and which have contributed, not only to breed a “literary prejudice” against Jonson, but also to distort the image of the French Renaissance giant, by extolling him in a wrong way. It seems as if Coronato were entrapped into the same ring, where he has only a restricted use of his own weapon, i.e. his classical knowledge, in his exploration of “a sort of second hidden text,” which otherwise might have enabled him to discover more positive aspects in Jonson.

As will be discussed below, what Bakhtin calls the “carnavalesque” or “grotesque” is given only secondary importance by Rabelais himself—it is not almighty, even in accounting for Rabelais’s celebration of the human body.

Nor do I think Jonson’s pessimistic view of carnival is simply due to the “Triumph of Lent,” for Rabelais had to work under a more savage oppression. In his age the academic reformation in the Sorbonne compared so unfavourably with that in Oxford that each time he published a new book it brought him in conflict with the Church. Many times he was forced to take refuge, accused of heresy, for which his friends Étienne Dolet and Jean de Boissonné were burned.⁴

It should not be overlooked, for all the post-Bakhtinian prejudice, that Jonson is a writer who has a great deal in common with Rabelais in his fundamental literary attitude. Besides Jonson’s use of Rabelais in his plays and masques, several affinities between them have been pointed out, including their own versions of Lucianic or Erasmian satire and their verbal explosiveness.⁵ To these we may add their common interest in Hippocratic medicine.

The largest problem with Bakhtin, as has been fully demonstrated in Berrong’s *Rabelais and Bakhtin* (1986), is his forced attempt at “popularizing” the French humanist, for the purpose of which he exploited the Romantic cult of the “grotesque,” as opposed to the classical or humanistic ideal. It is important to recognise that Bakhtin’s idea of *un Rabelais populaire*, greatly influential outside the realm of Rabelais studies, has been generally neglected by academic critics and historians; proving that in the age of Rabelais there was no such cultural segregation between the popular and

the learned as Bakhtin argues, Berrong accuses him of hindering the reader from putting Rabelais in a proper perspective.⁶

What I should like to propose is to take over Coronato's anti-post-Bakhtinian enterprise of restoring Jonson's image, but while Coronato's target is limited to the post-Bakhtinians, I am going to trace the problem back to the very root—Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*.

If we probe deeper into this book, we can detect still other inconsistencies and inaccuracies, besides the historical weakness pointed out by Berrong, which may well develop "prejudice," whether in favour of Rabelais or against Jonson. By pinpointing where the Russian Marxist critic went astray in interpreting the French humanist, I am going to reconstruct the value system advocated by Jonson and Rabelais, which was lost or blurred in the Bakhtinian labyrinth. I believe this also will help to offer a more positive view of the three works of Jonson chosen and discussed by Coronato, i.e. *Sejanus*, *Epicoene* and *Neptune's Triumph*.

II. Breaking the Myth of the "Grotesque"

Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* has established a new image of Rabelais as a writer with an anti-classical and anti-intellectual tendency, whose primary concern is the popular carnival in celebration of the "grotesque" bodily elements. His argument may be summarised as follows:

Rabelais does not embody classicism, but prefers "the lower genres" to "higher levels of literature"; he belongs to "the preclassic times," which still retained the popular (or "lower") tradition of the Middle Ages, where the physical (lower, or popular) aspect of human beings overwhelmed the spiritual or intellectual (higher, or aristocratic). "The concept of the body in grotesque realism," which is "in flagrant contradiction with the literary and artistic canon of antiquity," is manifestly represented in Rabelais's carnivalesque licence. Like ribaldry in festive occasions, it liberates the people from the fear of oppression, even from the fear of death, by making them realise that "death is the 'other side' of birth," and that they are immortal as a mass. By thus depriving "the image of death" of "all tragic or terrifying tones," it eventually invites them to sing in "the laughing chorus of the marketplace" that celebrates "not the rejuvenation of the biological individual but of historic man's culture."⁷

What Bakhtin attempted, as was mentioned, was to make a Marxist idol of the author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; a sine qua non for that purpose is to wipe out, ironically, the intellectual image of the Renaissance humanist. Rabelais above all "ought not" to embody classicism, which, in Bakhtin's mind, is closely related to the absolutist reign of Louis XIV.⁸

From this point of view, it seems only natural that Jonson, a champion of classicism and who worked under the auspices of Stuart kings, should be regarded as a spokesman of power and the enemy of "the popular canon." His failure in showing a positive vision of carnival only puts him at a greater disadvantage. In the worst case Jonson is compared to the French politician Richelieu, the founder of Bakhtin's much hated French Academy, eventually to be condemned with him for masterminding the revival of the classical canon for the purpose of oppressing the people with its ideology.⁹

But although Bakhtin's one-sided praise of popular pastimes has been widely accepted and has aroused numerous issues of interest in Jonson scholarship,¹⁰ it still leaves several questions to be answered.

Whatever Bakhtin says, Rabelais's classical erudition, for which he was known as *doctissimus* to his contemporaries, is irrefutable.¹¹ How could Bakhtin claim, in the first place, that Rabelais's books on *Gargantua and Pantagruel* are void of classicism, when they are filled with citations and quotations from classical and Renaissance authors (no less so than the works of Jonson), and a series of encyclopedic issues related to almost every field of learning? As every novice may find, they are by no means easy to read, even for the intellectuals of our time.

Secondly, how could Bakhtin maintain that Rabelais prefers the popular tradition to the literary and artistic canon of antiquity, when the author celebrates the arrival of an age when "the mindes of men are qualified with all manner of discipline, and the old sciences revived, which for many ages were extinct," finding "robbers, hangmen, free-booters, tapsters, ostlers, and such like, of the very rubbish of the people, more learned now, then the Doctors and Preachers were" in the previous generation (*Gargantua and Pantagruel* II.viii)? Thirdly, if Bakhtin so abhors Louis XIV as the embodiment of absolutism and the patron of classicism, how would

he explain the fact that the most powerful protector of Rabelais was Francis I, a monarch influential enough to vie with Charles V for the hegemony of Christendom?

Indeed there is no denying the excess of physical topics in Rabelais which might be regarded as “grotesque,” or *obscaenus* as it was called by the Sorbonne authorities, but before joining Bakhtin’s “laughing chorus of the marketplace,” let us also listen to a voice nearer to Rabelais’s age—the 1653 English translator of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*:

He will appear some noble table writ,
 In th’old Egyptian Hieroglyphick wit;
 Where though you Monsters and Grotescoes see,
 You meet all mysteries of Philosophie.
 For he was wise and Sovereignly bred
 To know what mankinde is, how’t may be led:
 He stoop’d unto them, like that wise man, who
 Rid on a stick when children would do so.¹²

What seems to be most precarious about Bakhtin’s uncritical praise of Rabelais’s carnivalesque exuberance by naming it “grotesque realism” is that the premise is negated by Rabelais himself, who warns us against putting the primary importance on it. In his prologue to the First Book, Rabelais tells his readers not to come to the hasty conclusion that “there is nothing in them but jests, mockeries, lascivious discourse, and recreative lies” only from its surface, i.e. his “invention, comme *Gargantua, Pantagruel Fessepinte, la Dignité de Braguettes, des Poys au lard cum commento, etc.*”:

Therefore is it, that you must open the book, and seriously consider of the matter treated in it, then shall you finde that it containeth things of farre higher value then the boxe did promise; that is to say, that the subject thereof is not so foolish, as by the Title at the first sight it would appear to be.

Far from inviting his readers to indulge themselves in carnivalesque frenzy, he demands their cool restraint for painstaking perusal. It is a “Treatise,” not a funny book, the English translator underscores, which requires “a sedulous Lecture [reading], and frequent meditation,” for it contains “a doctrine of a more profound and abstruse consideration, which will

disclose unto you the most glorious Sacraments, and dreadful mysteries, as well in what concerneth your Religion, as matters of the publike State, and Life œconomical."

The sincerity of this declaration has also been endorsed by the contemporary biographer Michel Ragon, who points out that Rabelais had the same purpose as Dolet and Clément Marot, i.e. of writing in defence of humanism.¹³ The only difference between them, he explains, is that while Dolet and Marot showed their cards too openly—an act careless enough to incur death or persecution, Rabelais chose to wear a fool's cap. By so doing Rabelais aimed at infusing the spirit of the New Learning into "the very rubbish of the people" who had never opened serious books in their life.

We may notice here that what Rabelais describes as his ultimate purpose—to instruct people in matters of the private and public life by sugarcoating his writings with "Monsters and Grotescoes"—is no different from that of Jonson, who claimed that "*the principall end of poesie*" is to "*informe men, in the best reason of liuing*":¹⁴

The Study of it . . . offers to mankinde a certaine rule, and Patterne of living well, and happily; disposing us to all Civill offices of Society. . . . And, whereas they entitle Philosophy to be a rigid, and austere Poesie: they have (on the contrary) stiled Poesy, a dulcet, and gentle Philosophy, which leads on, and guides us by the hand to Action, with a ravishing delight, and incredible Sweetnes.

(*Discoveries* 2386-2400)

Once liberated from the Bakhtinian myth of "grotesque," Rabelais proves to be a writer very close to Jonson; besides classical erudition and royal patronage, he had an acute consciousness of enlightening his reader on what he believed to be philosophically true.

Both poet's purpose to teach and delight their readers is grounded in their classical learning. As was mentioned above, the influence of Rabelais on Jonson as well as their common liking for the Lucianic or Erasmanian satire has already been pointed out, but their interest in the two writers connotes a still deeper classical ideal than is generally considered.

The first thing to be noted is that Rabelais was an ardent follower of Erasmus. Addressing him as his "humane father," Rabelais was to preach the same doctrine, though in a somewhat louder voice.¹⁵ By some coincidence he was to take refuge in the same Church which had sheltered Erasmus, when persecuted under the suspicion of learning Greek, the forbidden language.¹⁶

As far as Erasmus and Tudor humanists (we can include here their successor Jonson) were concerned, the study of the Greek language, which they regarded as the most powerful weapon in their campaign against the old-fashioned scholastic establishment of the day, was primarily related to the works of Lucian.¹⁷ Professedly it was useful for teaching Greek, the language of the New Testament through common dialogue; tactically it carried the potential for undermining the dogmatism of the Church and the despotism of the government in its satiric comments on Greek philosophy, religion, and mythology—especially of the Pythagoreans, the Platonists, and the Stoics who, in Lucian's view, concealed vice under a hypocritical show of virtue.¹⁸ Moreover, Lucian was regarded as an epitome of classicism: in the opinion of Erasmus, none had achieved Horace's ideal, "to teach and delight," better than Lucian, by "reviving the sharpness of Old Comedy (i.e. of Aristophanes), while stopping short of its abusiveness."¹⁹

As a devotee of Erasmus, Rabelais was closely related to both: in the *Defense et illustration de la langue françoise*, Joachim du Bellay praises him as "he who calls Aristophanes to life again, and feigns so well the nose of Lucian,"²⁰ and calls him "L'utile-doux Rabelais" in the same passage, with a reminiscence of Horace.²¹

These descriptions remind us, surprisingly, of the very image we have of Jonson. Besides the keen interest in Erasmus and Tudor humanists, especially More, Thomas Linacre, and Juan Luis Vives,²² Jonson shared with Rabelais the favouring of Aristophanes and Lucian.²³ No doubt Jonson was also well aware that the imitation of these writers leads to the achievement of the classical ideal of Horace, with whom he aspired to identify himself in *Poetaster* and elsewhere, by estimating him as "the best Artist" (*The Masque of Queens* 8) who deserves to be "the first in estimation"

(*Discoveries* 2511). Nevertheless, Jonson is still considered by far the stricter of the two when it comes to classicism: while Rabelais seems to be entirely free from the "bond" of classicism, Jonson appears too aggressive, consistent and self-conscious to be so.²⁴

Here again it is Bakhtin who is largely responsible. Although he once placed Aristophanes and Lucian among writers who are supposed to have inspired the "grotesque" vein into Rabelais, he deletes their names from his list in subsequent modifications. Bakhtin first refers to the ancient Doric comedy, "satiric" drama, Sicilian comic forms, the works of Aristophanes, mimes, Atellanae, Hippocrates, Galen, Pliny, the symposia, Athenaeus, Macrobius, Plutarch and others, as "writings of nonclassical antiquity."²⁵ From his next list, however, the name of Aristophanes is deleted—together with Plautus and Terence—as a promoter of the classical discipline. Now we are given Lucian, Athenaeus, Helius, Plutarch, and Macrobius, who Bakhtin asserts created the "preclassic" climate of the sixteenth century.²⁶ Still discontented with this, he goes on to exclude Lucian from his third list, asserting that Lucian's laughter is more "abstract, ironical, devoid of true gaiety"—i.e. less "grotesque"—than that of Rabelais.²⁷

Most probably in the process of writing Bakhtin noticed that Aristophanes virtually belongs to the classic tradition,²⁸ and that Lucian is nearly fatal to his project, for the name is inevitably linked with Erasmus, the paragon of the intellectual Renaissance and the leader of the humanist movement.²⁹ Through these painstaking reshufflings, Bakhtin has somehow succeeded in burying Rabelais's mastery over Greek and his Horatian classical ideal—as well as his affinity with Jonson—into years of oblivion.

III. Carnavalesque or Cannibalesque?

What remains after the meandering course of Bakhtin's "demonstration" are Pliny, Athenaeus, Macrobius and Plutarch—"the representatives of ancient prandial talks"; to these he adds Hippocrates (or the Hippocratic *Corpus*) who "exercised the greatest influence on Rabelais," whose "main images of the grotesque body and of grotesque bodily processes, such as

“the genital organs, the anus and buttocks, the belly, the mouth and nose” and “dismembered parts”; “eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing off the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body” have all been inspired by Hippocrates.³⁰

Having remodelled the learned scholar into a “popular writer” by blotting out his classicism, Bakhtin’s next job is to transform the Hippocratic physician into a breeder of the “grotesque” carnival. Yet his last catalogue again is not unproblematic. It is impossible to read any of those “prandial” writers—who are Jonson’s favourites as well—without encyclopedic knowledge of classical *belles lettres*, and more importantly, they never encourage unbridled spree at feasts but recommend temperance.³¹

Still less convincing is the idea that the Hippocratic *Corpus* is the main source of the notion of the “grotesque” body in Rabelais’s world. Indeed we cannot exaggerate the impact of Hippocrates on Rabelais, who collated the *Aphorisms* and performed one of the first public dissections in France, but it is very difficult to imagine that those who engage in medical science should regard any part of the body or any bodily function enumerated by Bakhtin (save “dismemberment” and “swallowing up by another body”) as “grotesque.” They know too well that those are something to be observed as inherent in human physical nature—not as ugly or beautiful, abominable or agreeable but as purely physiological phenomena which have to be diagnosed as correctly as possible. If we read the *Corpus* including the passage quoted by Bakhtin without prejudice, we would find “close, even minute, observation of symptoms and their sequences, acute remarks on remedies, and recording, without inference, of the atmospheric phenomena, which preceded or accompanied certain ‘epidemics,’” in a “truly scientific” way, “in the modern and strictest sense of the word,” for no other purpose than of saving the life of each particular patient.³²

Jonson was no less devoted a student of the Hippocratic school, who, though no medical practitioner like Rabelais, is acknowledged to be “the most learned of poets” of his age in the art of medicine, with his medical

metaphors and allusions as well as the gallery of humours filling his works.³³

What is most misleading for the readers of Rabelais as well as of Jonson is Bakhtin's argument that Rabelais, a devotee of Hippocrates, was also under "some direct influence" of the Neoplatonist school and the Paracelsians, such as Pico della Mirandola, Pomponazzi, Porta, Patrizzi, Bruno, Campanella, and others, because it was one of "the general tendencies of the Renaissance."³⁴ The Hippocratic school of medicine shared the anthropomorphic cosmology with the Paracelsians, Bakhtin claims, which contributed to destroy the hierarchical picture of medieval cosmology based on Aristotle. By demolishing and reconstructing the old vertical system into a "horizontal line of time, from the past to the future"—typical of the Marxist world picture—their cosmology contributed immensely to the creation of the Rabelaisian "grotesque" carnival, where "cosmic life and the life of the human body are drawn intimately together" "in their obvious unity of imagery."³⁵

Now Bakhtin betrays his lack of knowledge of medical history by mixing up the principles of the two opposing schools of medicine in the Renaissance—the Hippocratic (or Galenical) that spread mainly from the University of Padua (therefore the name of Pomponazzi ought to have been excluded from his list)³⁶ and the Paracelsians, closely related to Neoplatonism which thrived at the Florentine court of Medici—which were rarely compatible with each other.³⁷ The crucial difference between the two schools is that while the Paracelsian was deeply imbued with Hermetism combined with Pythagorean and [Neo-]Platonic mysticism, the Hippocratic (or Galenical) held fast to rationalism. Inheriting the attitude of the Milesian natural philosophers, who explained the world in terms of visible constituents without recourse to supernatural intervention, the sixty-odd works of the Hippocratic *Corpus* are virtually free from magic and supernatural elements.³⁸ The Paracelsians, on the other hand, based their doctrines mainly on the *Corpus Hermeticum*, falsely attributed to an ancient Egyptian writer, Hermes Trismegistus, and the *Asclepius*, a book on magic medicine believed to be written in ancient

Greece. They believed in the possibility of the occult arts in accordance with their anthropomorphic cosmology.³⁹

Considering both Rabelais and Jonson were professed anti-Paracelsians, we may imagine how dangerous Bakhtin's confusion could be in interpreting their works. Rabelais's antagonism towards the Paracelsians and the Neoplatonists is most manifestly revealed in his idea of "le mot de la Bouteille trismegiste" (V.xlvi), introduced as a parody of their cult of Hermes Trismegistus. He had written several books of mock astrology prior to *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and he published his Second Book (practically his first) under the comic pseudonym of "M. Alcofribras, abstracteur de quinte essence [i.e. the alchemist]." He also shows his disapproval of occultism in *Gargantua's* letter to *Pantagruel* where he advises "let passe neverthelesse, the divining and jucicial Astrology, and the Art of Lullius [i.e. magic and alchemy professed by Raymond Lully]" (II.viii).⁴⁰ In the Fifth Book we are told that the sentence on the temple-gate of the *Bouteille trismegiste* reads: "έν οίνω ἀλήθεια, c'est à dire 'En vin verité'" (V.xxxvi).⁴¹ The moral is: words vomited by a drunken man are far more believable—since he not only betrays his true colours but also reveals others' secrets⁴²—than theories that boast, for example, of being able to divine the future, transform base metals into gold and silver, or cure incurable disease. They are ultimately to be reduced to the absurd catalogue of the impossible which are reportedly accomplished by the abstracters of quintessence in Chapter 22 of the same book, such as extracting "Water out of Pumice-Stones," pitching "Nets to catch the Wind," or getting "Farts out of a dead Ass."

Interestingly enough, Jonson declares that he has borrowed the idea of the *Oracle of the Bottle* or *Hogshead Trismegistus* (77-78) in the opening scene of *Neptune's Triumph* directly from Rabelais's Fifth Book, and in precisely the same connotation. In the masque, the architect Inigo Jones is transformed into the Master Cook in a spirit of mockery, after the manner of Athenaeus⁴³—a favourite writer of Jonson and Rabelais:

He'has *Nature* in a pot! 'boue all the *Chemists*,
Or bare-breechd brethren of the *Rosie-Crosse!*

He is an *Architect*, an *Inginer*,
 A *Souldier*, A *Physitian*, a *Philosopher*,
 A generall *Mathematician!* (102-06)

As a spiritual successor to the Elizabethan magus John Dee and a friend of Robert Fludd, the Paracelsian doctor, Inigo Jones shared basic ideas with the Neoplatonists and the Paracelsians mentioned by Bakhtin—Pico della Mirandola, Porta, Patrizzi, Bruno, Campanella and others—excluding Pomponazzi.⁴⁴ It is announced that the Poet—supposed to be Jonson himself—has been in the cellar to consult the *Oracle of the Bottle*. Here, too, the *Hogshead Trismegistus* is used in a similar way, to undermine the Neoplatonic ideals of the court shows and the court taste in the presence of the royal sponsor and his guests. It seems more likely that its master architect Inigo Jones is criticised for inspiring the Neoplatonic mysticism into the future king than, as is asserted by Coronato, for his “grotesque pendant.”

There is still another difficulty in Bakhtin’s forced adoption of the Neoplatonic or Paracelsian cosmology; he speaks as if Rabelais ordained that each of the people be incorporated into the plebeian species, for whose maintenance they are requested, ironically enough, to forget their own carnal existence, in an upsurge of “the laughing chorus of the marketplace” which celebrates their immortality as a mass.⁴⁵

And to give “proof” to this, Bakhtin asserts that “bloodshed, dismemberment, burning, death, beatings, blows, curses, and abuses—all these elements in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* are steeped in ‘merry time,’ time which kills and gives birth, which allows nothing old to be perpetuated and never ceases to generate the new and youthful.”⁴⁶

But this myth about Rabelais’s defiance of death is utterly false to his Hippocratic principle. Rabelais engaged in the collation of the *Aphorisms* with peculiar care because inaccuracy in a physician’s book is not merely censurable but criminal: “A single little word added, or struck out, nay, even the inversion of an accent, or its addition in a wrong place, often involves the death of many thousands.”⁴⁷ Nor is it relevant to Jonson to “maime a man for euer for a iest” (*Epicoeue* 4.5.135), or to incorporate each

individual into the organic whole of the body politic and kill his or her own individuality. As we clearly see in the titles of his comedies which have been inspired by the Hippocratic (or Galenical) pathology—*Every Man in His Humour* and *Every Man out of His Humour*—his primary concern is the cure of each particular person with his or her own particular humour or peculiarity.

We cannot but wonder whether the notion of the immortality of the masses is perhaps not so very different from the religious abuses of the old Church, or the new occult philosophy of the Neoplatonists and the Paracelsians, which were denounced by Rabelais, Jonson and many other humanists of the day, including their forerunner Erasmus.

It is important to notice that the Hippocratic rationalism of Rabelais and Jonson is closely connected with their admiration of Erasmus, who appreciated Aristophanes and Lucian for scorning the superstitious elements in philosophy and religion. We find Hippocrates (along with his follower Galen) and Erasmus among the writers who rejected occultism in Reginald Scott's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), a book written (at least partly) for the purpose of confuting magical arts professed by the Paracelsians and the Neoplatonists.⁴⁸ Scott also quotes Erasmus's *Colloquia*, one of the main sources of Jonson's *The Alchemist*, which was intended as a counterblast to Paracelsian medicine and its magical arts.

Now we may recognise that Bakhtin's denial of the influence of Aristophanes and Lucian on Rabelais is doubly misleading, in obscuring his classical erudition and his lucid rationalism fostered through the study of Hippocrates and fixed by reading Erasmus.

IV. *Ad aedificandum, non ad diruendum*

Now that Rabelais's motif of carnival has been proved to be more negative and pessimistic than is generally believed, we no longer have to worry because Jonson has "failed" to offer a positive vision of carnival in the three works selected by Coronato.

To begin with *Sejanus*, in representing the Roman Saturnals—"a theatre of martyrdom, where real and metaphorical slaves attend the ludicrous spectacle of the fall of actual slaves and, eventually, of the exalted slave who aspired to power,"⁴⁹ Jonson's aim is equivalent to that of Rabelais, i.e. to reveal the Tacitean "secrets of the Councill and Senate," which are no less grotesque than monstrous.⁵⁰

The tragedy seems to give us nothing but "a series of savage mandates, or perpetual accusations, of traitorous friendships."⁵¹ Worse still, things have changed so violently from their former simplicity that people can discern right from wrong, or expedient from disastrous only with the help of "native intelligence" (*prudentia*). Yet in that sordid monstrosity of power politics, Jonson tells us never to despair, for, though difficult, it is not altogether impossible to work out ways to survive within the compass of human wit, if we keep our sanity and observe "the experience of others" (*aliorum eventis*) with lyncean eyes.⁵² Like the Hippocratic *Corpus*, the tragedy gives us "close, even minute, observation" of the "savage mandates, or perpetuall accusations, of traitorous friendships": their causes and effects, the particular nature, "diet, way of life, . . . speech, silence, thoughts," even "sleep or insomnia, dreams" of each person concerned, who survived, who did not, and how, in the prevalence of carnivalesque or cannibalesque fever under the reign of Tiberius, the tyrant.

Nor do we have to deplore any supposed failure of *Epicoene* to mend the fissure of society, now that we have begun to suspect that the purpose of the comedy lies elsewhere. It may be a little too naive to explain (like Ian Donaldson) *Epicoene's* festivity in terms of the comic spirit which punishes eccentricity to allow the restoration of the order of society.⁵³ In the city everyday is a holiday, with its constant noise which afflicts Morose, where *Sejanuses*—masculine or feminine, wild or domestic—threatening to depose their masters never cease to appear as *rerum natura*.

After disclosing "the most glorious Sacraments" concerning "the publike State" in *Sejanus*, Jonson reveals in *Epicoene* the "dreadful mysteries" about "Life œconomical," which has also been in carnivalesque disorder. The comedy is focused not so much on legacy-hunting as on Morose-baiting. Morose embodies the Stoic ideals shattered to pieces in *Sejanus*, which

are now transplanted from ancient Rome to Jonson's London; he is the ghost of "the good-dull-noble lookers-on" (*Sejanus* 3.16), the virtuous few who were entirely disabled from living or dying nobly under the rule of "Monsters and Grotescoes." He "loues no noise" because his Stoic father advised him to "collect, and contayne my [his] mind, not suffring it to flow loosely" (5.3.48-50); he would lose "an eye . . . a hand, or any other member" (4.4.8-9) if only he could divorce his boisterous wife.

What the comedy suggests is that we should adapt ourselves to the time and place where we live. Rather than reject and curse the depravity of the age and hurt ourselves like Morose—or go mad like, say, King Lear—and lament because womankind has turned Centaur, we are recommended to turn the monster into the playful lady to entertain us. At length we are instigated to expel the inner Morose from our brains, in order to rehabilitate ourselves to a "Life œconomical" of our own, without losing our wits. The ironic ending concerning legacy-hunting would be a mere excuse for the deviant acts of the wits; the effect resembles that of the sudden appearance of Lovewit at the end of *The Alchemist*.

As for *Neptune's Triumph*, I consider it no small attempt to undermine the Neoplatonic mysticism of the courtly ideal. "The Art of Lullius," rediscovered and united with Neoplatonism in Florence, had thence spread among almost all major monarchs and princes in Renaissance Europe.⁵⁴ It tended to make those in charge of government abandon the care of the minute details of domestic and foreign affairs and retire into an escapist seclusion, where they could indulge in the mystified glorification of their own political power.⁵⁵ In *Neptune's Triumph*, the architect's project for the Neoplatonic idealizing of the court is totally upset by the Rabelaisian nonsense of the *Hogshhead Trismegistus*. It is the Poet's Pegasus, from whose hoof flows the spring of the Muses that inspired the whole idea of the masque (77-79). It is highly suggestive that Rabelais stood in direct antagonism to Ronsard, the leader of the Pleiades, who exerted himself to deify the French monarchs according to his Neoplatonic ideal.⁵⁶ Similarly the problem Jonson found with Jones's mystic philosophy was its political influence on the successor to the British throne. That his fear was not groundless was to be proved when Charles I isolated his court of lofty

ideals "from the madding crowd" to begin his personal government just before the Civil War.⁵⁷

Thus the brief survey of the three works from a viewpoint free from the [post-]Bakhtinian prejudice has shown that Jonson as a writer does not essentially differ from Rabelais, but is almost identical to him in making classical ideals his basic principle. As is generally acknowledged by Rabelaisian scholars, Bakhtin and his followers went astray in trying to contrast the popular with the aristocratic by attributing the grotesque trait to the former and the classical to the latter. The Bakhtinians seem to have forgotten that even in the classical tradition there was a conflict between two opposing ideas, e.g. the comic and the tragic, or the realistic [or materialistic] and the idealistic. It may be true that the academic side of Rabelais had been too much exaggerated before Bakhtin, but too violent a reaction is no more commendable, when the truth lies in between, as Coronato claims.

Considering Bakhtin's principle as a structuralist, it may have been unavoidable that he should show an "anti-humanistic" tendency to focus on impersonal systems and, as a result, to minimise the humanist tradition and the individual person. But, as we have seen, his argument is interspersed with too many fallacies and mistaken ideas about classical writings, which are fatal to the study of humanist authors like Rabelais and Jonson; it may even implant misconceptions in the minds of those who have been just initiated into the study of literature.

The "longer periplus through the Jonsonian invention" proposed by Coronato is likely to be a very troublesome journey; we are expected to pay the debt of the anti-humanist bias which has been prevalent for the last two centuries. It tends to reject the cultural heritage of the western world, which had once been "restored unto its former light" from the oblivion brought about by "the infelicity and calamity of the Gothes" (*Gargantua* II.viii). What we have acquired, in exchange for correct knowledge of the classics, is the various literary "criticisms" bent on innovation which have been gaining ground since the restoration of the Gothic spirit in the Romantic era.

NOTES

¹M. D. Bristol, "Carnival and the Institutions of Theater in Elizabethan England," *ELH* 50 (1983): 637-54.

²P. Womack, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 135.

³The carnivalesque as well as "grotesque" elements in Jonson have already been discussed in Neil Rhodes's *Elizabethan Grotesque* (London: RKP, 1980), but its main focus is *Bartholomew Fair*, which is extolled as "the apotheosis of the Elizabethan grotesque" (141).

⁴Charles Whibley, introduction, vol. 1 of *Rabelais: Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Thomas Urquhart and Peter le Motteux, 3 vols. (1653-94; New York: AMS, 1967) xi. English quotations from Rabelais hereafter are taken from this edition, and French quotations are taken from François Rabelais, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Guy Demerson (1973; Paris: Éditions du Seul, 1995).

⁵Anne Lake Prescott, "The Stuart Masque and Pantagruel's Dreams," *ELH* 53 (1984): 407-30, at 410.

⁶Richard M. Berrong, *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986). For the reception and influence of Bakhtin's book on Rabelais inside and outside the realm of Rabelais studies see Berrong 3-4. Gray endorses the correctness of this observation by pointing out that only a limited number of scholars—Michel Beaujour and Jean Paris, for example—have followed Bakhtin: see Floyd Gray's introduction to François Rabelais, *Gargantua* (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 1995) 15-16.

⁷Citations from Bakhtin are taken from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolski (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

⁸Bakhtin 107.

⁹For the whole argument see Timothy Murray, *Theatrical Legitimation: Allegories of Genius in Seventeenth-Century England and France* (Oxford: OUP, 1987).

¹⁰Bruce Thomas Boehrer cites those of Ian Donaldson, Peter Womack, Leah Marcus, Peter Stallybras, and Allon White by way of example in his *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997) 14-19.

¹¹Whibley, introduction xvi.

¹²Quoted from a set of verses dedicated to the English translator Thomas Urquhart signed J. de la Salle; Whibley (introduction lxxix) ascribes it to the translator, Sir Thomas himself.

¹³Michel Ragon, *Le roman de Rabelais* (Paris: Édition Albin Michel, 1933) 187.

¹⁴*Volpone, Dedication to the Universities* 107-09. Citations of Jonson's works refer to *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1925-52), designated H & S.

¹⁵Whibley, introduction xxv, lviii.

¹⁶Whibley, introduction xvii.

¹⁷Douglas Duncan, *Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979) 26-29.

¹⁸Duncan 28-29.

¹⁹Erasmus's dedication of *The Dream, or The Cock* to Christopher Urswick, quoted in Duncan 28.

²⁰Quoted in Whibley, introduction xlvi.

²¹Whibley, introduction xvli.

²²Both More and Linacre are referred to in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; for influence of Vives on Rabelais see Madelaine Lazard, *Rabelais et la Renaissance* (Paris: P.U.F., 1979) ch. 4.

²³For the influence of Lucian see Duncan, *passim*.

²⁴Boehrer 16.

²⁵Bakhtin 28n.

²⁶Bakhtin 97-98.

²⁷Bakhtin 386-87.

²⁸Bakhtin 98n. See also Lane Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy: with an Adaptation of the Poetics and a Translation of the Tractatus Coislinianus* (1922; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969) 90-92: he points out that despite the coarse appearance, Aristotle nowhere condemns the comedy of Aristophanes, and that Cicero and Quintilian regarded his diction and wit as refined and graceful.

²⁹Duncan 26.

³⁰Bakhtin 354-55, 355, 317-19.

³¹See Pliny, *Natural History* XXIII.xix; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* X. 431-33; Plutarch, *Moralia* I.v.

³²W. H. S. Jones, general introduction, vol. 1 of *Hippocrates*, trans. and eds., W. H. S. Jones and E. T. Withington, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1929-31) xv.

³³Henry Silvette, *The Doctor on the Stage: Medicine and Medical Men in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Francelia Butler (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1967) 121. Jonson is reported to have boasted that he first discovered the circulation of blood and discovered it to Harvey (Silvette 243). For Jonson's devotion to Hippocrates see *Conversations with Drummond* 141.

³⁴Bakhtin 363-65.

³⁵Bakhtin 356, 363-65, 400-01. Here, too, Bakhtin is barely consistent in asserting this; having accused Aristotle as the founder of the hierarchy of the fixed medieval cosmology, he condemns the Areopagite, medieval Neoplatonists, for combining Neoplatonism with Christianity, thus exerting "an important influence on the entire medieval philosophy" and "the metaphysical and moral world order."

³⁶Luce Giard, "Charles Schmitt (1933-1986): Reconstructor of a History of Renaissance Learning," *New Perspectives on Renaissance Thought: Essays in the History of Science, Education and Philosophy*, eds. John Henry and Sarah Hutton (London: Duckworth, 1990) 278-79. Properly speaking, I also should mention Neo-Aristotelianism, but in the present paper there is no space to discuss the relationship between Neo-Aristotelians and Hippocratic medicine.

³⁷See, for example, Silvette 127.

³⁸James Longrigg, *Greek Rational Medicine: Philosophy and Medicine from Alcmaeon to the Alexandrians* (London: Routledge, 1993) 26.

³⁹Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: RKP, 1964) 398-407.

⁴⁰Elsewhere Bakhtin admits that Rabelais took neither seriously (366), which makes his argument all the more confusing.

⁴¹Though the authorship of the fifth book is uncertain, it seems at least certain that it was written according to the principle of the preceding four books.

⁴²Erasmus, *Adages* I.7.7, pointed out in Demerson 1316.

⁴³See H & S 10: 664.

⁴⁴For the relationship between Dee and Jones see Vaughan Hart, *Art and Magic in the Court of the Stuarts* (London: Routledge, 1994) 62-78.

⁴⁵Bakhtin 407.

⁴⁶Bakhtin 211.

⁴⁷Whibley, introduction xxi.

⁴⁸Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), ed. Montague Summers (London: John Rodker, 1930) 162, 212. See especially Hippocrates, *De morbo sacro* and Galen, *De comitali morbo*.

⁴⁹Coronato 187.

⁵⁰*Conversations with Drummond* 146.

⁵¹Tacitus, *Annals* IV.xxxii-xxxiii; citations are taken from: *Histories and Annals*, trans. C. H. Moore and J. Jackson, 4 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1937).

⁵²See *Sejanus* 4.473, where Lepidus, one of few survivors of the tyranny of Tiberius, is compared to Lynceus, one of the Argonauts whose lynx-eyes were proverbial.

⁵³Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down: Comedy from Jonson to Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970) 30-39.

⁵⁴René Taylor, "Architecture and Magic: Consideration on the Idea of the Escorial," *Essays in the History of Architecture Presented to Rudolph Wittkower*, eds. D. Fraser et al. (London, 1967) 81-109.

⁵⁵Hart 192.

⁵⁶Ragon 217.

⁵⁷Kevin Sharpe, *Politics and Ideas in Early Stuart England: Essays and Studies* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1989) 274.