Hamlet's Journey to Carnival:

A Marxist and Carnivalesque Interpretation

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William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be interpreted in several different ways, each providing the tragedy with unique meaning. Many critics choose to look at *Hamlet* through the Marxist school of criticism, which author Michael D. Bristol defines as the analysis of "class consciousness" and "class struggle" throughout a novel. A major idea of this perspective is carnivalism, where social order is seemingly reversed and the continuity of social life is a primary focus. Hamlet, being the prince of Denmark, is forced to live under the rules of a standard social hierarchy; however, in order to complete the task of assassinating the king, Hamlet transitions away from this standard hierarchy and follows the ideas of carnival.

In the beginning of the tragedy, Claudius hosts a small gathering in which he plans to honor the life of the recently deceased king and celebrate his new marriage with Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. This juxtaposition of mourning and merriment within the same event suggests that Claudius does not want to lower the morale of Danish citizens, but instead inspire them with good news. Hamlet, however, is not affected. Donning black robes, he is in mourning of his father's death and is disgusted with Claudius's choice to hide behind his hasty marriage. In his comment to Horatio, Hamlet says that "The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.187-188), suggesting that although the Danish court riles with merriment, Hamlet believes that the death of his father is of primary concern, as the future of Denmark is in question and he should have been king. Feeling above the distorted views of the court, Hamlet pleads to escape to the uncarnivalized Wittenberg, but is denied the privilege. Through Hamlet's mournful attitude and dark attire, Hamlet is in heavy contrast to the rest of the members of the court, especially Claudius. This same scenario takes place in Pieter Bruegel's painting, *The Battle of Carnival and Lent.* King Carnival, who is mounted upon a barrel of wine and wears a meat pie for a crown, ignores the seriousness of the oncoming lent season in order to party with others who feel the same way. The opposition, who look upon the king with disgust, wear black robes

and segregate themselves from the festivities. Just like in the painting, King Claudius parties and ignores the seriousness associated with the death of a king, while Hamlet fulfills his princely duty by respectfully mourning the death of his father. These opposing viewpoints show that Hamlet follows the rules of Danish social order, while Claudius is carnivalesque in his actions, ignoring social order and embracing social continuity by hosting a party that all could attend, no matter their social class.

As time goes on, Claudius's identity as King Carnival is only strengthened. In the face of serious situations such as death, Claudius hosts feasts, plays, and even fencing matches. He then escapes the seriousness of these events through drink. As author Zita Turi points out in her essay *Fasting and Feasting in Hamlet*, Claudius also makes a joke of the entire monarchical structure by becoming a self-appointed king, voiding any establishment of divine right. He later admits that he is incapable of praying, further mocking the established monarchical system (Turi, 32). This behavior seems to be enjoyed and even encouraged by the Danish population. However, Hamlet believes that Claudius's actions make Denmark “traduced and taxed of other nations” who call them “drunkards” (1.4.20-21). Although he is only a prince, Hamlet is embarrassed by the king's carnivalistic actions and believes that his father did better. His attempts to spread these thoughts through rational discussion, however, are met with rejection.

In dealing with the rejection, Hamlet decides that he needs to use other methods in order to get the attention of Claudius and the Danish people. Taking up the carnival idea of promoting social events in a time of seriousness, Hamlet hosts a play in which the court of Denmark is to attend. This carnivalistic action gets the attention of Claudius, but no one else. Hamlet receives the attention that he wants, however, when he accidentally murders Polonius. He is interrogated by those below him, mainly Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and by those above him, mainly Claudius. However, due to Hamlet's social rank, he is free of serious punishment for murdering a member of a subordinate class. This rise in attention without consequence marks a changing point in Hamlet. He realizes, just like Claudius, that

he must act violently and carnivalistically in order to get attention, and as Bristol suggests, everything that Hamlet says has new meaning (Bristol, 358). Feeling confident, Hamlet challenges the loyalty of Rosencrantz by calling him a “sponge that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities” (4.2.15-16). Unfortunately, Rosencrantz does not understand this comment, hinting at the lower levels of intelligence in the lower ranks of society. During his discussion with the king about where the body is hidden, Hamlet reports that Polonius is “at supper”, where his body is being eaten by maggots (4.3.22-27). These maggots, being seemingly worthless in value to society, lie at the very bottom of the classic medieval social structure. However, Hamlet's new carnivalistic perspective on society causes him to invert social rankings, putting the maggots on the top of society and government officials on the bottom. This swapping of rank may be due to the actual value that either position has in society. Maggots decompose human remains, producing nutrients for the soil that allow all other species to live. Kings and government officials, on the other hand, simply direct large groups of people. Thus, worms play a much larger and more significant role in society than kings. This thought process is reflected by Hamlet's next comment to Claudius, where he suggests that “a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (4.3.34-35). As the members of high society are recycled and eaten by those at the bottom, their mindless remains are abused by those who were once highly inferior to them. This realization by Hamlet suggests that social ranking disappears after death, a belief not shared by those who are noncarnivalistic in thought.

The inversion of social rank classic to carnivalism is present everywhere that Hamlet goes. Upon entering a graveyard with Horatio, Hamlet meets two gravediggers who are both given the title of “Clown”. This title is based on the gravediggers' position within Danish society, where those who perform grueling manual labor are located at the bottom of the social tree. This title, of course, suggests that anything said by these gravediggers should not be heeded as true. When analyzed carnivalistically, however, the gravediggers become the experts on society. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the

minds behind the theory of carnival, in his book *Rabelais and His World,* fools and clowns are the only members of society who constantly live in carnival (Bakhtin, 8). Opposed to everyone else, who enters and leaves the carnival as they please, fools and clowns are forced to remain inside the realm of reversed social structure, making them experts on everything social. The gravediggers portrayal as clowns, therefore, suggests that they are knowledgeable about the subjects they discuss, and Hamlet listens to them as such. Before Hamlet approaches the gravediggers, they discuss the burial rights of members of the upper class. It is commonly believed that if someone commits suicide, they do not have the right to a proper burial. However, the gravediggers point out that Ophelia, who committed suicide, is receiving a proper burial. This is due to the idea that "great folk should have count'nance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even-Christian" (5.1.28-30). Although Ophelia committed suicide willingly, she still receives a burial because she is of high class, meaning that wealth and social rank are of heavy influence to one's fate after death. Not only does this discrimination of social rank cause resentment in the gravediggers, but according to Bristol, also causes satisfaction since members of the upper-class are encouraged to commit suicide for lack of repercussion (Bristol, 359). This observance of social rank after death is in large contrast to the recently adopted views of Hamlet, who believes that social class simply disappears after life. This view is apparently also shared by the gravediggers, who toss the skulls of a lawyer, Alexander the Great, and Caesar to the ground as if they were rocks, objects that never housed life or personality. Hamlet takes no special notice of these skulls, but pays close attention to the skull of a "mad rogue", Yorick – a jester who performed in the king's castle. Although there is no identifying factors to the skull, Hamlet associates it with the memories of Yorick: nostalgia, laughter, and qualities of festive life. This nonchalant juxtaposition of merry life and solemn death provides humor in an otherwise depressing scene, but causes Hamlet to finalize his carnival ideas – social rank is of no importance in life as we all share the same fate after death. Upon this realization, Hamlet unintentionally mocks the upper class by commanding Horatio to tell his

“lady” of this news. Through this command, Hamlet is suggesting that news sprouted by a “mad rogue” is as equally important as “my lady” (5.1.199-200). Hamlet's new realization of the unimportance of social class also causes him to fight with Laertes during the funeral for Ophelia, reflecting Hamlet's new carnival attitude where he ignores the seriousness of events and instead acts upon his own social interest.

Hamlet's complete transformation to a carnival attitude can be seen in the final scene, where instead of focusing on the assassination of Claudius, Hamlet accepts an invitation to fence with Laertes – a casual event for a not-so-casual time. This carnivalistic attitude is also seen in Claudius, who hosts the fencing match during the mourning of Ophelia's death. This ignorance of seriousness is a classic attribute of carnival attitude, and it is now shown that Hamlet has risen to Claudius's carnival level in order to defeat him. During the match, as Claudius watches his wife drink a cup of poison and her son fight to the death, Claudius enjoys sips of wine. Despite the dramatic situation, Claudius still ignores any possible consequences and instead consumes an alcoholic beverage. As Zita Turi points out, this idea of consumption and feasting repeats itself throughout the tragedy whenever someone wants to avoid the seriousness of an event (Turi, 34). Therefore, the refusal of drink by Hamlet may suggest that he is more aware of the situation than Claudius, providing him with an upper-hand advantage. After the fight, the redundancy of Claudius's death serves as an ironic end to the carnivalistic king. Not only is he slain by his own habits through the forced consumption of poisonous wine, but he is also betrayed by the classical social structure as he is stabbed by a poisoned sword (Bristol, 364). Hamlet's final wish to Horatio also demonstrates his belief in reversed social order. He trusts Horatio, a member of a lower social class, with retaining Hamlet's image and relaying Hamlet's heroic story, a story about the upper class. Claudius's carnivalistic reign disappears with his death, as Hamlet's appointment of Fortinbras as Denmark's new king marks a changing point in the governmental structure of Denmark. Fortinbras will most likely retain a strong social structure, ignoring the ideas of carnival brought about by Claudius

and Hamlet. Hamlet, through his carnival rebellion, becomes another prop in someone's plan as Denmark is returned to its previous classical structure (Bristol, 365).

In order to accomplish his goal of exposing and assassinating Claudius, Hamlet moves away from his previously observed boundaries of classical society. Being influenced by Claudius, the gravediggers, and his own thoughts, Hamlet soon realizes that the disorganization of social structure calls for attention from both those who agree and those who disagree. According to Bakhtin, Carnival is not a spectacle, but a new way of life (Bakhtin, 8). Hamlet embraces this way of life as he breaks away from the social norms that guided his father, his mother, and himself as he becomes a unique rendition of King Carnival, only to be reused and recycled upon his death. Through his actions, Hamlet demonstrates that in order to accomplish goals that lie outside of the accepted moral code, one must go against the accepted social norms.

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