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OMINOUS FEASTS: CELEBRATION IN SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMA

BY

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Festiveness and Its Limits

Ever since C. L. Barber's seminal book *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, first published in 1959, Shakespeare's work has crucially been understood in terms of the 'festive'. In his study, Barber links comedy to the pattern of popular English seasonal rites. The comedies dramatize a movement towards "humorous understanding through saturnalian release",¹ as Barber puts it, a movement which he summarizes in the formula "through release to clarification".² Although his work continues to be criticized, updated and augmented, it remains the first port of call for critics working in this vein. In fact, a similar argument had already been made some years earlier by Richard Wincor, in an essay entitled "Shakespeare's Festival Plays", published in *Shakespeare Quarterly* in 1950. Wincor, in turn, takes his cue from the myth-and-ritual school of criticism represented by Sir James Frazer, J. Middleton Murry, Colin Still, Wilson Knight and Northrop Frye. Wincor describes folk festival elements, such as the Mock Death and Cure, the Dream, the Hope of Immortality, Fecundity, linked to the seasons, and rituals of Reconciliation, which appear to be basic patterns of human experience, transposed from ritual to the stage as professional theatre evolved. To use a more modern idiom, such patterns can be seen as conceptual metaphors in the sense described by Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980).³ The human life cycle is likened to the seasons, spring denotes Fertility, a fundamental psychological transformation is conceived in terms of Death and Rebirth, and so on. By dramatizing such basic tropes, or narratives of human existence, drama addresses human concerns at a very deep, fundamental level.

In her book *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre*, Naomi Liebler extends Barber's argument to the tragedies, arguing that "Shakespearean tragedy is 'festive' in a sense broader, deeper, and more complex than the

¹ C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 4.

² *Ibid.*

³ See George Lakoff / Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

one Barber intended for comedy".⁴ Taking an anthropological approach herself, Liebler traces the mechanisms of scapegoating as well as ritual ways of warding off "both spiritual harm and physical disease"⁵ that she sees dramatized in the tragedies, far removed from anything frivolous. The notion of 'festive tragedy' requires, as Liebler emphasizes, that "we unfasten the idea of celebration from its traditionally comic moorings",⁶ understanding that the tragic action is ultimately designed to restore cohesion and to prevent the community from coming apart at the seams. David Ruitter has in turn extended the argument to the histories in his *Shakespeare's Festive History* (2003) where he emphasizes the importance of festivity for the depiction of time and history, particularly in the second tetralogy.⁷ Yet more recently, Phebe Jensen has contributed to this discourse with her book *Religion and Revelry in Shakespeare's Festive World* (2008). She takes issue with the political and social bias of anthropological criticism, represented by Barber as well as Robert Weimann (1978) and David Cressy (1989), and criticism in the Bakhtinian vein.⁸ Jensen argues that such anthropological criticism has deflected attention from issues of religion, overemphasizing a trajectory of secularization which has, if anything, a Protestant flavour. In contrast, she seeks to "restore a sense of the devotional issues surrounding festivity to our understanding of its early modern cultural representations, and particularly to the festive world created in Shakespeare's plays",⁹ without, however, arguing for a facile dichotomy between Catholicism and Protestantism or making a case for Shakespeare's crypto-Catholicism. Examined in detail and with reference to meticulous historical work,

⁴ Naomi Conn Liebler, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre* (London / New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ David Ruitter, *Shakespeare's Festive History: Feasting, Festivity, Fasting and Lent in the Second Henriad* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁸ See Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); and David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989). For criticism in the Bakhtinian vein, see Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (London / New York: Methuen, 1985); Ronald Knowles (ed.), *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin* (London / Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); Linda Woodbridge / Edward Berry (eds), *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age* (Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965); Meg Twycross (ed.), *Festive Drama* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996).

⁹ Phebe Jensen, *Religion and Revelry in Shakespeare's Festive World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

such as Martin Ingram's work on the Church Courts, the development appears to be much more uneven, inconclusive and complicated than is often suggested, and Shakespeare's festive world may in fact be seen to register "the ongoing disputes set in motion by the English Reformation".¹⁰ Thus, the 'festive' emerges as a multi-layered concept which comprises the religious, social, political and aesthetic issues that combine to make early modern drama such a rich and resonant genre.

I have briefly rehearsed some important strands of the long-standing debate surrounding the 'festive' since no account of celebration in Shakespeare's work could disregard it, but I suggest that this approach, based on the ritual roots and anthropological functions of drama, needs to be supplemented by a differentiated analysis of the more idiosyncratic elements of plotting and performance. I argue that individual instances of celebration in Shakespeare's drama are often deployed to counteract the 'festive' as defined by the critics mentioned above, and that this enhances the psychological and aesthetic subtlety and effectiveness of the plays. While the 'festive' mode is firmly linked to the community, sustaining the community even in tragedy as Liebler has argued, I consider it crucial that the plays always juxtapose communal dynamics to the pressing concerns of individuals. It is therefore necessary to address instances of celebration which are not part of the festive 'apparatus' and to look for celebration which can be idiosyncratic, even interstitial, and which may happen out of turn. A broad distinction can be made between two types of celebration: on the one hand, 'celebration' as 'dwelling on', acting out, which may induce an exploration of the matter being performed. For example, Markus's blazon of the violated Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, his lyrical description of her mutilated body, has given some concern,¹¹ since it appears to offer a linguistic celebration of an atrocious act of violence – an aspect of celebration also closely linked to spectacle. While this is a fascinating issue, I will foreground celebration in the second sense: celebration as a positive act, enjoyment, immersion in the moment, an affirmation of life.

Shakespeare's power as a dramatist can be seen in the way he dramatizes human rites of passage, moments of crisis and conceptual metaphors, the great tropes of existence, but he does so, I would argue, in conjunction with contrapuntal elements which serve to minimize the mechanical aspects of communal ritual. As Ruiter observes, anthropological arguments focused on this aspect of ritual tend to "create a well-oiled, if somewhat mechanical structure"¹² and Stephen Greenblatt also em-

¹⁰ Ibid., 22. For Ingram's work on the Church Courts, see Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹¹ Cf. Verena Olejniczak Lobsien, "Passion und Imagination: 'Signs and tokens' der Leidenschaft in *Coriolanus*, *Titus Andronicus* und *Cymbeline*", *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 140 (2004), 45–65.

¹² Ruiter (2003), 2.

phasizes in his foreword to a new edition of C. L. Barber's book that the anthropological approach which Barber advocated, incidentally also exemplified in François Laroque's influential work *Shakespeare's Festive World*,¹³ had its pitfalls: "an increase in detailed understanding of the rituals and the historical conditions of village life has made it difficult for them [anthropological critics] to sustain Barber's intense aesthetic focus".¹⁴ This insight suggests that, while the structural, anthropological approach highlights a crucial dimension of the drama, it must be supplemented by an attention to the complications of the pattern introduced by individual circumstance. We may half-consciously hear the great wheel turning, but we attend to the syncopated song that is most audible in the foreground.

Ominous Feasts and the 'Technique of Syncopation'

A focus on celebration draws attention to the many instances of ominous, precarious or 'false' celebration in Shakespeare's plays. The best moments are often remembered as having occurred in the past or anticipated for the future, and ritual celebration or feasting is often contrived. Extraneous motives are conspicuous here, such as the fulfilment of social expectations and the display of status. Many examples of 'ominous feasts' can be given: In *Henry IV*,¹⁵ Eastcheap revelling eventually leads to Falstaff's banishment. In fact, it becomes clear very early on that Prince Harry only temporarily "uphold[s] the unyoked humour" of his companions' "idleness" (*IH4*, 1.2.173–174). In *Hamlet*, the "funeral baked meats" which "coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.179–180) provoke a long drawn-out revenge action. In *The Tempest*, the masque celebrating the betrothal of Ferdinand and Miranda (4.1) is interrupted by the insurrection of Caliban; in *Richard III*, the celebration of a "glorious summer" brought about "[n]ow", as Richard deceptively announces, "by this son of York", masks the fact that Richard Gloucester's own "winter of [...] discontent" (1.1.1–2) is by no means over. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the party celebrating the return of Don Pedro and his men (2.1.) provides the frame for missed encounters, an unsuccessful proposal of marriage, frustration, insult and sexual jealousy; in *The Comedy of Errors*, Ariana

¹³ François Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*. Trans. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, "Foreword", in C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), xiv.

¹⁵ All references from Shakespeare's works are from William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

gives dinner to the wrong Antipholus (2.2), and presents go astray. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth has to remind her distracted husband of his convivial duties:

My royal lord,
 You do not give the cheer. The feast is sold
 That is not often vouched, while 'tis a-making,
 'Tis given with welcome. To feed were best at home.
 From thence, the sauce to meat is ceremony,
 Meeting were bare without it.

(3.4.32–36)

She points out, quite rightly, that the feast is a social occasion which follows rules. At precisely this moment, of course, the ghost of Banquo enters and puts paid to any further attempts at merriment.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, the party in Act 5.2 is aborted as the ladies refuse to dance with the King and Lords, masked and disguised as Russians. The play famously does not end with the generically expected weddings, but with a song sung by spring and winter, drawing on the traditional dialogue between these seasons, where in this case winter has an un-festive last word. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the “star-crossed lovers” (Prologue 6) meet at the Capulet’s “old-accustomed feast” (1.2.18). Old Capulet has promised his daughter to the County Paris, and anticipating that his daughter’s fate will be in tune with the general festive atmosphere, he tells him:

This night I hold an old-accustomed feast
 Whereto I have invited many a guest
 Such as I love, and you among the store,
 One more most welcome, makes my number more.
 At my poor house look to behold this night
 Earth-treading stars that make dark heaven light.
 Such comfort as do lusty young men feel
 When well-apparelled April on the heel
 Of limping winter treads even – such delight
 Among fresh female buds shall you this night
 Inherit at my house; hear all, all see,
 And like her most whose merit most shall be,
 Which on more view of many, mine, being one,
 May stand in number, though in reck'ning none.

(1.2.18–31)

Despite this promise of festive culmination, Juliet’s trajectory is not festive, but tragic: so when she “look[s] to like” (1.3.99) at the night of the party, her eyes happen to fall on Romeo. Both in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the

festive cycle is simultaneously evoked and counteracted by individual circumstance.

Such instances of ostentatious or abortive feasting are complemented by expressions of the nostalgia produced by the memory of happy times as well as the dynamics of deferral set in motion by evocations of future celebration. We find the nostalgia for example in *The Winter's Tale*, in King Leontes' and Polixenes' reminiscences of their perfect youthful friendship. The dynamics of deferral is powerfully addressed for instance in Henry V's St. Crispin's Day speech. In this rhetorical feat, the king vividly evokes an observance of yearly celebrations:

He that shall see this day and live t'old age
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours
And say, 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian.'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars
And say, 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words –
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester –
Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.

(4.3.44–55)

The king knows at least as well as any corporate coach today how powerful the projection of success and the anticipation of reward can be as an incentive to action. At the same time, both memory and anticipation are to a certain extent anathema to feasting because they counteract the abandon that is an important ingredient of *jouissance*. Moments of 'real' celebration occur in the here and now, and the hearts of those who participate have to be in it.

I propose to call Shakespeare's negotiation of these issues his 'technique of synco-pation'. Individual trajectories are set against communal patterns in order to recreate, and to do justice to, the complexity of social interaction. In order to achieve a more thorough understanding of this mechanism, it is instructive to ask whether dramatized instances of celebration are 'false' or 'true' in terms of the drama's structure. When I speak of 'true' and 'false' celebration, I hasten to add that moments of 'false' celebration are of course also dramatically very effective. They provide spectacle, ceremony and entertainment, but while audience members may enjoy the spectacle and feel the pull of the festive impulse, they are surely also aware of its precarious or problematic nature. For example, *Henry VIII* is full of pomp and circumstance, which may not entirely succeed in covering up the morally dubious action and the King's break with Rome over his marriage issues. In fact,

I think that this tension between public spectacle and private manoeuvring determines the character of the whole play. Katherine of Aragon is presented as a victim of the King's machinations, and her elaborate vision at the end of Act 4 may still linger in the minds of audience members when they are asked shortly afterwards to join in the holiday spirit evoked by Cranmer's prophesy of an Elizabethan Golden Age. So 'false' celebration is also celebration, in terms of the performance of festiveness, but it may not command the audience's wholehearted participation. Moreover, it is often juxtaposed or contrasted with instances of 'true' celebration, which, I would argue, offer important clues for a sustained interpretation of a play's central concerns. In what follows, I will elaborate on this, presenting brief, exemplary readings of *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Antony and Cleopatra: The Roman Exorcism of Celebration

Antony and Cleopatra dramatizes the time just before the establishment of the Roman Empire and the reign of Octavius Caesar as Augustus, through the subjugation of territories including Egypt, ruled by Cleopatra as a member of the Ptolemy dynasty. On the surface, as is well known, a contrast is established between the warlike, rational, stern and masculine Rome and an effeminate, passionate and decadent Egypt, represented by Cleopatra. However, the treatment of celebration undermines the superficial dichotomy to the point where it is possible to argue that the play severely criticizes Roman ways. It may be instructive in this regard to think of *Antony and Cleopatra* as the pre-history of *Titus Andronicus*, though of course in the Shakespeare canon *Titus Andronicus* is the much earlier play. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, we see the victory of the Roman Empire, which, in *Titus Andronicus*, has declined into a "wilderness of tigers" (3.1.53) where violence has replaced the law, cynicism reigns supreme, and defeat at the hands of the Goths is imminent. Exercising historical hindsight, it might be asked whether it was indeed wise to replace the Republic with an Empire. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar is of course a figure of authority, who is given the last word, but there is something about this character that is decidedly unpleasant. He uses his sister as a pawn in his power games, he does not keep his word, and he tries to trick Cleopatra into giving herself up, purposing to display her in an undignified way despite his promise to treat her with honour. One might well ask what kind of ruler such an untrustworthy man will be, once he is all powerful. After the audience has just seen Antony depart from Egypt to take on his responsibility in Rome, Caesar's opinion of him appears somewhat uncharitable:

To give a kingdom for a mirth, to sit
And keep the turn of tippling with a slave,
To reel the streets at noon, and stand the buffet
With knaves that smells of sweat.

(1.4.18–21)

Repeatedly, there appears to be an element of slander in Roman depictions of Egypt, and the Romans dwell in fascinated disgust on their projections of Egyptian debauchery, which are actually never seen in the play. Instead, Cleopatra has a fairly accurate idea of how she and her lover will be misconstrued by posterity:

The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I'th' posture of a whore.

(5.2.212–217)

There is thus a warrant to read the Roman condemnation of Egypt as a justification, if not a pretext, for an imperial colonial project.

The issue becomes most conspicuous in the staging of an 'ominous feast' in Act 2, which takes place on Pompey's ship. On this suggestively unstable ground, the triumvirs drink with Pompey and his men, pretending to be reconciled. While the party is in full swing, Menas suggests to Pompey in a stealthy exchange that now would be a good time to murder the leaders of Rome. While drinking, Pompey and his guests talk about Egypt, urging each other to indulge more, since this is "not yet an Alexandrian feast" (2.7.89). Enobarbus suggests that they should "dance now the Egyptian bacchanals, / And celebrate our drink" (2.7.97–99) So ironically, the only characters who are actually seen engaged in drunken dancing and singing, with the significant exception of Caesar, are the Romans who think that they are celebrating like Egyptians. Antony is repeatedly shown to be partial to wine, but it is not clear to what extent this results from Egyptian influence. While this deceptive merrymaking is happening on the surface, it is undercut, as I have pointed out, by murderous plotting. Even though Pompey refuses to kill his guests, this is certainly not 'true' celebration. In contrast, when matters have already become rather desperate, Antony and Cleopatra are granted an offstage moment of happiness:

Antony: Come,
Let's have one other gaudy night. Call to me
All my sad captains. Fill our bowls once more.
Let's mock the midnight bell.

Cleopatra: It is my birthday.
I had thought to've held it poor, but since my lord
Is Antony again, I will be Cleopatra.

(3.13.184–189)

Here as elsewhere, Shakespeare resorts to the dramatic device to situate 'real' celebration offstage, "untalked of and unseen" (*RJ*, 3.2.7), as Juliet says in her poetic anticipation of her love's consummation.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, 'true' celebration is in fact always connected to Cleopatra. Various scenes celebrate Antony and Cleopatra's relationship as a truly passionate one that is worth a great deal of sacrifice, and Enobarbus' blazon of Cleopatra celebrates her regal beauty in images which powerfully contrast with the slanderous depictions of the Egyptian queen. The very elements appear to be engaged in a joyful consummation of Cleopatra's beauty. Music and fragrant perfumes combine with the visual impact to overpower all senses. As Enobarbus relates,

Enobarbus: [...] Antony,
Enthroned i'th' market-place, did sit alone,
Whistling to th'air, which but for vacancy
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature.
Agrippa: Rare Egyptian!
Enobarbus: Upon her landing Antony sent to her,
Invited her to supper. She replied
It should be better he became her guest,
Which she entreated. Our courteous Antony,
Whom ne'er the word of 'No' woman heard speak,
Being barbered ten times o'er, goes to the feast,
And for his ordinary pays his heart
For what his eyes eat only.

(2.2.220–232)

Antony is converted, but Roman power play has to resignify spectacle, beauty and sensual pleasure as over-indulgence and debauchery, which may be seen to translate the Roman victory into a kind of cultural and human loss. Caesar's prejudice is so strong that it blinds him to Cleopatra's ruse after she has been taken prisoner, because he just cannot imagine that she would prize her honour above worldly goods. Thus, he fails to prevent her moral triumph, achieved through a self-determined death. Cleopatra dies with great ceremony – a celebration, with a funny note provided by the bantering with the Clown, and a royal dish for the snakes. It is therefore possible to see *Pax Romana* as the antithesis to the celebration of variety, passion and beauty. Caesar concludes:

Our army shall
 In solemn show attend this funeral,
 And then to Rome. Come, Dolabella, see
 High order in this great solemnity.
 (5.2.253–256)

His last words ominously suggest that the predominant Roman mode of festiveness is the funeral march, or alternatively, the triumph of displaying vanquished foes in a rather one-sided celebration of Empire.

The Winter's Tale: *From the Ominous Feast to the Celebration of Theatre*

Audiences and critics have long admired Shakespeare's daring in *The Winter's Tale* in introducing, at the beginning Act 4, the figure of Time, who nonchalantly announces a gap of sixteen years in the action. In the event, the gap is smoothed over, or made more organic, by the fact that when Time "turn[s] [his] glass" (4.1.16), he effects the transition from the winter's tale to spring, signalled by Autolycus's song "When daffodils begin to peer" (4.3.1–22). The ensuing sheep-shearing feast is another ominous feast, however. For a start, it is introduced by a rogue, who will cheat the celebrating locals out of their money. Perdita is also out of step with the merriment and embarrassed by her finery. When berated by her father to "present yourself / That which you are, mistress o'th'feast" (4.4.67–68), she distributes "flowers of winter" (4.4.79) to Polixenes and Camillo, whose presence, in disguise, dooms the feast to failure. In her reading of *The Winter's Tale*, Phebe Jensen agrees with C. L. Barber that it is "one function of the sheep-shearing scenes [...] to provide [...] the saturnalian movement 'from release to clarification' through the terms and images provided by a contemporary festival occasion".¹⁶ Incidentally, she offers this reading in the context of a reassessment of festivity in Shakespeare's plays from the perspective of Catholic studies. For Jensen, Leontes' madness is a kind of iconoclasm for which an antidote is "provided by the festive celebrations of Bohemia in Act 4, and the veneration of a statue in Act 5".¹⁷ In keeping with this, Perdita's initial reluctance to act as the Mistress of the Feast, and her initial choice of inappropriate flowers, are read as a kind of false start. She will then leave behind her own iconoclasm and learn to accept transformation. Although Jensen makes some interesting points, I cannot agree with her reading because it does not acknowledge how problematic this sheep-shearing feast actually is. True enough, before the King reveals his identity and breaks up

¹⁶ Jensen (2008), 217.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

the party, there are dances by shepherds and shepherdesses as well as satyrs, people buy ballads and trinkets and sing songs, prior to having their purses cut. But ceremony and spectacle do not have to be bolstered by a festive spirit, though they may be pleasing to the eye, and all the while, the ostentatious celebration is undercut by an awareness of the impending catastrophe, which happens when Polixenes removes his disguise and casts off his disobedient son in a scene that mirrors Leontes' behaviour in Act 2. If anything, this even serves to highlight the hypocrisy of the pastoral genre which has courtiers, who do not have the slightest intention to endorse upward mobility, masquerade as shepherds. It also highlights Polixenes' hypocrisy in praising grafting as the salutary practice of marrying a "gentler scion to the wildest stock" (4.4.93). Quite obviously, he does not believe that this botanical harmony can be transferred to the human sphere. In this case, spring has come, the feast has happened, but it has not brought comedy and reconciliation. This holds true, I think, even though genre expectations and hindsight may serve in this case to mitigate the ominous effect of the sheep-shearing feast. Crucially, Shakespeare's technique of syncopation emphasizes the fact that the cycle of the seasons and the communal observation of festive rites is not necessarily in synchrony with an individual's situation, and that this asynchrony, or incongruousness, is the essence of drama, to which ostentatious spectacle serves as a foil. Intriguingly, Prince Harry, in *1 Henry IV*, elaborates on this image of the foil in connection with the issue of celebration and display:

If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work;
But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.

(1.2.182–185)

He anticipates that his new virtue will shine like a day of holiday celebration, set off from the everyday:

By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.

(1.2.189–193)

In his ominous feasts, Shakespeare follows this same insight, but turns the image round: ostentatious celebration becomes a foil to calamity, which shines out more darkly on a glittering background. Through this inversion, the aborted feast also brings home powerfully how far theatre and drama exceed 'mere' spectacle.

In contrast to the 'ominous feast' in *The Winter's Tale*, the first 'true' moment of celebration again happens offstage, when Perdita's real identity is discovered, all impediments to her union with Florizel are removed, and the old friends are reunited. This is marked as a 'private' moment, reported in hyperbolic language by some courtiers in conversation, who fear that they are making a "broken delivery of the business" (5.2.8). One gentleman reports the "passion of wonder" (5.2.14), the mingling of "joy" and "sorrow" (5.2.16), another relates that "[t]here was casting up of eyes, holding up of hands, with countenance of such distraction that they were to be known by garment, not by favour" (5.2.42–44). In view of the structure of the final act, I would argue that Shakespeare eschews the actual dramatization of celebration at this point – although he chooses that option, in the spirit of pastoral tragicomedy, in *Cymbeline* – because there is another celebration in store for the audience, namely, the celebration of the theatre itself. The relationship of art and nature had already been discussed by Perdita and Florizel during the sheep-shearing feast, and the matter is taken up again with reference to Hermione's statue, made by the "rare Italian master Giulio Romano" (5.2.87–88), whose works appear fit to decide the *paragone*, the contest between the arts for precedence, in favour of sculpture. One courtier reports admiringly: "had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, [he] would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape" (5.2.88–90). Could he but put breath into his work and be a second Pygmalion – but he cannot. The dramatist, however, has eternity, being able to pass over 16 years with a sleight of hand, and he can put breath into his work. I think that the moment when Hermione steps off her pedestal is a more reverent celebration of Shakespeare's chosen medium than anything that happens in *The Tempest*, or *Hamlet*, or any other play. And crucially, this occurs at a moment when all the people that matter are ready for celebration, and there seems to be no more to say. The magic of theatre is a lawful magic, as "[l]awful as eating" (5.3.111), and the first thing that Hermione does is to invoke the power of the gods to give a blessing to her long-lost daughter, thus involving the audience in a holy rite that is more like communion than seasonal festiveness.¹⁸ But that moment of the consummation of general happiness is brief, necessarily so, and the play closes with the promise of further, leisurely private conversations.

A Midsummer Night's Dream: *Asynchrony and Celebration*

If it is true, as I have argued, that *The Winter's Tale* celebrates the theatre's capacity to represent real life more faithfully than any other art, it could be seen to

¹⁸ For the Catholic implications of this, see Jensen (2008), 194–233.

follow that the depiction of what I have called ‘syncopation’ is an intrinsic part of this verisimilitude. Thus, to stage an ominous feast is to draw attention to the complexity of social exchange between individuals with very different goals and trajectories, and to the fundamental asynchrony of life. As the famous passage in Ecclesiastes 3 has it:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose vnder the heauen.
 A time to be borne, and a time to die: a time to plant, and a time to pluck vp that which is planted.
 A time to kill, and a time to heale: a time to breake downe, and a time to build up.
 A time to weepe, and a time to laugh: a time to mourne, and a time to dance.
 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together: a time to imbrace, and a time to refraine from imbracing.
 A time to get, and a time to lose: a time to keepe, and a time to cast away.
 A time to rent, and a time to sow: a time to keepe silence, and a time to speake.
 A time to loue, and a time to hate: a time of warre, and a time of peace.

(*King James Bible*, 1611, “Ecclesiastes” 3, 1–8)

That is true, Shakespeare seems to say, but what if that time is not the same for everyone? As Macbeth says in response to the news of his wife’s death: “She should have died hereafter. / There would have been a time for such a word” (5.5.16–17). He has not yet accepted that for him also, it is now a time to die. Ominous feasts work on at least two levels, thus dramatizing life’s asynchronies and highlighting how precious, and rare, general moments of festivity actually are.

I would like to close with a very brief look at *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* because this comedy offers an interesting variant on the treatment of asynchrony and celebration. The *Dream* emphasizes the role that anticipation plays in any notion of festiveness, linking this to the asynchrony I have outlined above. Athens is preparing for a wedding celebration, the “nuptial hour” which “[d]raws on apace” (1.1.1–2), as Theseus says, but the couple’s very first exchange already shows that their ‘pace’ is different, and the “pomp”, “triumph” and “revelling” (1.1.19) will have to wait, though Theseus is so ready for it. For Oberon and Titania, it is a time to quarrel, for the young lovers a time to wade through a series of confusions which amount to rites of passage, and the mechanicals have to rehearse what they mean to perform. At one level, the whole action in the woods is about procrastination, and if the play was really performed as part of the entertainments at a historical wedding, this is very fitting. The element of procrastination is even mirrored in the mechanicals’ additions to their play, as they decide on a series of prologues which must explain matters before the action can begin. On the wedding day, Theseus can barely contain himself:

in the position of Christopher Sly in *The Taming of the Shrew*, who finds that after the enjoyment of his dream of mastery, he has to go on with his imperfect life (and his imperfect wife). In any case, the spirits' festiveness suggests that 'true' celebration often occurs out of turn, preposterously, spontaneously, obliquely, in defiance of authority and as a pleasant surprise to all concerned.

To sum up: It is one central function of celebration in Shakespeare's plays to throw into relief the asynchrony of people's joys and woes along with the way that they are syncopated against the rhythms of community, as expressed in the rites of religious observance and the seasonal festive calendar. As no other medium can, the playhouse can dramatize extreme moments of alienation as well as moments of supreme togetherness, linked and framed by the spectacle of performance, which remains even when there is nothing much to celebrate – perhaps as a kind of consolation.

Zusammenfassung

Den Ausgangspunkt der Überlegungen bilden die einflussreichen anthropologischen und kulturhistorischen Lektüren von Shakespeares Werk in der Nachfolge von C. L. Barbers *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959), die das Drama in der Tradition gemeinschaftlicher festlicher Reinigungsrituale sehen. Diese Lesart ist jedoch durch eine Detailanalyse der dramatischen Handlungsstrukturen zu ergänzen, da Shakespeare in seinen Stücken systematisch in einer 'Technik der Synkopierung' den Rhythmen der Gemeinschaft individuelle Momente der Feier und des Leidens oder Trauerns gegenüberstellt. Es fällt auf, dass dramatische Darstellungen von Festlichkeiten oft einen ominösen Charakter besitzen, obwohl sie als Bühnenspektakel durchaus der Unterhaltung dienen, während wahre Momente des Glücks im Verborgenen stattfinden. Durch diese performative Betonung des asynchronen Verhältnisses zwischen Individuum und Gemeinschaft gewinnt das Drama an Komplexität und an psychologischer und ästhetischer Überzeugungskraft.