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VICTORIAN CARNIVALESQUE

By Mark M. Hennelly, Jr.

> The Carnival is just over, and we have entered upon the gloom and abstinence of Lent. The first day of Lent we had coffee without milk for breakfast; vinegar and vegetables, with a very little salt fish, for dinner; and bread for supper. The Carnival was nothing but masking and mummery. M. Héger took me and one of the pupils into the town to see the masks. It was animating to see the immense crowds, and the general gaiety, but the masks were nothing.
>
> —Charlotte Brontë, letter, March 6, 1843

> . . . Humble as I [Pecksniff] am, I am an honest man, seeking to do my duty in this carnal universe, and setting my face against all the vice and treachery.
>
> —Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44)

> Women were playing [at cards and roulette]; they were masked, some of them; this licence was allowed in these wild times of carnival.
>
> —Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1847–48)

OVER FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, Allon White acknowledged "the small army of literary critics now regularly describing modern cultural phenomena as 'carnivalesque'" (109). Surprisingly, though, only advance scouting parties of carnivalesque critics have infiltrated the various war games, love feasts, slanging matches, "blood" sports, food fights, drinking bouts, carnal appetites, funferalls, body cultures, ludic acts of toasting, roasting, masking, mumming, and other folk and fair festivities — besides the recurring clowns, fools, rogues, tricksters, killjoys, and spoilsports — that significantly enliven and inform Victorian literature. When such critical forays have occurred, the role of the carnivalesque has often been contested, reflecting perhaps what White's liminal reading of cultural history calls the nineteenth-century's initial "'disowning' of carnival, and the gradual reconstruction of the concept of carnival as the culture of the Other" (102). And yet Robert Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi still speaks eloquently for various Renaissance *and* Victorian writers when he proclaims that he is but "one" of many who "makes up bands/To roam the town and sing out carnival" (ll.45–46). Indeed, his double-voiced, pantagruelian aesthetic is to "go a double step,/Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,/Both in their order" (ll.206–08), for

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> This world's no blot for us,
> Nor blank — it means intensely, and means good:
> To find its meaning is my meat and drink. (ll. 313–15)

Conversely, Charlotte Brontë's rather desultory remarks above on the Brussels "Carnival" anticipate Terry Castle's comments in *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth Century English Culture and Fiction* (1986): "By the mid-nineteenth century . . . the culture of the carnival and fair had been fragmented, and its few vestiges relegated to the sentimental realm of folkloristic 'survivals'" (100). If we make the Bakhtinian leap and logically associate "the culture of the carnival" with the influence of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–64), we'll find Huntington Brown's *Rabelais in English Literature* (1933) also anticipating Castle by concluding its impressionistic survey with a sweep only of eighteenth-century novels and simply noting that "Dickens, had he lived in the Renaissance, might have given us something Rabelaisian" (178). Much more recently, Michael J. Heath in *Rabelais* (1996) seems to echo Castle by calling Rabelais merely the suppressed "scourge of Victorian vicarages" (1) and arguing that "Victorian England . . . was on the whole infertile ground for [Rabelais's] boisterous humor, in public," though unlike Brown, Heath alleges that Dickens "shared none of Balzac's enthusiasm for Rabelais" (124).

On the other hand, Brontë's remarks also appear to refute Castle, Brown, and Heath by documenting her (Victorian) empirical acquaintance with feasting, fasting, and masking — something of which surely reappears in the midnight fête's "motley crowd" (549;38) in *Villette*. In fact, her carnival experience suggests what Samuel Kinser's post-Bakhtinian *Rabelais's Carnival: Text, Context, Metatext* (1990) calls the extremely significant "old plot of Carnival-Lent enmity [which] certainly interested Rabelais" (56) and which becomes frequently displaced in Victorian fiction as something like the following bromide from *A Christmas Carol* (1843): "when Want is keenly felt, . . . Abundance rejoices" (18;st.1). Brontë's subsequent reflections on "the immense crowds, and general gaiety" may even anticipate Bakhtin's own references to the "carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace" that "is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity." Consequently, at carnival time "the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community" (255; unless otherwise noted, all Bakhtinian references are to *Rabelais and His World*, trans. 1965). Moreover, and as I've documented in "Carnivalesque 'Unlawful Games' in *The Old Curiosity Shop*" (1993), Dickens edited and largely (re)wrote the bittersweet *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838), the celebrated English clown; owned an 1838 edition of Sir Thomas Urquhart's original 1653 English translation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*; and as editor of *Bentley's Miscellany,* assisted P. W. Banks with his lengthy "Rabelais article" (*Letters* 1: 455), which was eventually published as "Of Rabelais" in *Fraser's Magazine* (November 1839, February and July 1840). Banks, by the way, was the brother-in-law of Dickens's close friend, illustrator, and portrait painter Daniel Maclise; and these fraternal "Cork Fraserians" helped establish what Terry Eagleton has called a clear link between "Cork and the Carnivalesque" (206–11) in Victorian Ireland.

Much later in the period, as Walter Besant reports in his *Autobiography* (1902), the author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* remained popular enough to inspire the formation of the Rabelais Club: "In 1879 or 1880 a little company of a dozen or so met at a certain

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tavern and dined together, the dinner being the foundation of the Rabelais Club." This carnivalesque alliance eventually increased to "some seventy or eighty members," including Victorian notables like George Du Maurier, Thomas Hardy, Bret Harte, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Irving, Henry James, J. E. Millais, Robert Louis Stevenson, and W. F. Smith, "latest and best translator of Rabelais." The group even "collected and formed three volumes called *Recreations of the Rabelais Club*" (240–41) printed privately in 1880–81, 1882–85, 1885–88. These very rare books (only 100 copies were printed) contain 68 unsigned, but initialed essays, tales, and poems, some in imitation of Rabelais, some about or in honor of the "Master" and the Club itself, and a few only tangentially related to things carnivalesque. Most, though, celebrate what Sir Frederick Pollock termed "the blessings and benefits derived and to be derived by the true followers of our said Master from the Holy Bottle and the contents thereof" ("The Master *v*. Punch" 2: 20). In the same carnivalesque spirit, Oliver Wendell Holmes discovered divinely profane inspiration within the Club itself: "I have grown perceptively younger since bathing my soul in that Rabelaisian fountain of youth" ("To The Rabelais Club" 2: 1); and Walter Herries Pollock echoed Fra Lippo in his poetic paean to the liminal *jouissance* of both the carnal and the carnivalesque:

> Straight are the gates of body's pleasure,
> The joy beyond no soul can measure.
> Alas! We are but mortal,
> And much prefer the portal. ("Father Francis" I:50)

During this same period, Besant published *The French Humorists: From the Twelfth to the Nineteenth Century* (1877), which includes a lengthy chapter on "Rabelais" (99–131) and another on "La Satyre Ménippée" (148–64), a form generally "after the manner of Rabelais" (148). We should even note that in Trollope's *The Warden* (1855) Archdeacon Grantly characteristically "retire[s] to his study," "lock[s] the door," adjusts himself "into his easy chair," takes "from a secret drawer beneath his table a volume of Rabelais, and [begins] to amuse himself with the witty mischief of Panurge" until some visitor inevitably disturbs him and "Rabelais retire[s] into the secret drawer" (98–99;8) just as the Archdeacon himself had retired to his study. Remembering Heath, readers of Trollope might consequently wonder whether Rabelais is, in fact, the displaced "scourge" or the deconstructive *salvation* "of Victorian vicarages." White, again, critically situates this conflicted reading of the carnivalesque as he demonstrates both the therapeutic and the symptomatic role of "carnival debris" (99) in Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895): "the social historians who have charted the demise of carnival as social practice, have not registered its *displacements* into bourgeois discourses, like art and psychoanalysis: adopting a naively empirical view, they have outlined a simple disappearance, the elimination of the 'carnivalesque'. But carnival did not simply disappear" (101).

In *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (1980), Robert M. Polhemus more specifically points out "that four of the men whose work is central to the development of comic prose fiction — Erasmus, Rabelais, Swift, and Sterne — were ordained clerics and professional churchmen." He then analyzes Rabelais's particular version of "the old plot of Carnival-Lent enmity":

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> from within the Church, [Rabelais] launches an exuberant satire on the abstraction and silly remoteness of scholasticism and makes a gigantic joke — literally — out of its attempt to stifle the senses. But what has been branded as the monstrousness of the flesh turns out in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* to be full of mirth. Rabelais gives to the prose comic tradition a license to indulge in an outpouring of hyperbolic language and gross physical humor that conveys the wild energy of God's material creation (13).

No wonder (though somewhat paradoxically after suggesting the nineteenth-century decline of the carnivalesque) that Castle calls for a nineteenth- (and twentieth-) century equivalent of her own ludimagisterial reading of eighteenth-century carnivalesque: "To describe all the philosophical and artistic transformations of the carnivalesque in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature is a task beyond the scope of this book. Such a study, however, would undoubtedly be illuminating" (333). Although no book-length critical study of what we might dub "Victorian Carnivalesque" has appeared, several relevant articles and occasional discussions in books have occurred in the last twenty years. And so after making some brief distinctions among *Rabelaisian*, *carnival*, *carnivalesque*, *grotesque realism*, *masquerade*, *ludic*, *dialogic*, *heteroglossic*, *Bakhtinian*, and *post-Bakhtinian*, which terms have often been confused in contemporary criticism, I would like to review Banks and Besant and then survey the more recent studies of Victorian Carnivalesque. Subsequently, using *Vanity Fair* as an example, I will try to summarize what such informed readings should include and suggest where Victorian scholarship on the carnivalesque might go from here.

When I refer to *Rabelaisian* in what follows, I am noting a particular reference to or motif in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, whereas I use the term *carnivalesque* in Bakhtin's more "traditional" sense of covering a variety of representative motifs or topical "series" appearing in actual *carnivals* (like the Brussels "Carnival" cited above) and in the literary genre Bakhtin labels *grotesque realism*. In grotesque realism, the carnal, the comic, and the cosmic all coincide in a revolution which becomes both a revelation and a revaluation as Bakhtin's repeated discussion of the carnivalesque cartwheel or tumbling trope suggests:

> The entire logic of the grotesque movements of the body (still to be seen in shows and circus performances) is of a topographical nature. The system of these movements is oriented in relation to the upper and lower stratum; it is a system of flights and descents into the lower depths. Their simplest expression is the primeval phenomenon of popular humor, the cartwheel, which by the continual rotation of the upper and lower parts suggests the rotation of earth and sky. This is manifested in other movements of the clown: the buttocks persistently trying to take the place of the head and the head that of the buttocks. (353)

Rabelais's "cheeky," picaresque epic, of course, serves as Bakhtin's *locus Saturnalium* of such imagery. And as we will later discuss, several of the serial motifs covered in *Rabelais and His World* relevantly recur and overlap in Victorian fiction, particularly so-called *grotto* or lower stratum values (and vertical metaphors in general), gigantic plentitude, prandial or banquet motifs of eating and drinking, billingsgate rhetoric, play imagery, and pregnant death. Even when the "wild times of carnival" do not specifically occur (as they do in *Vanity Fair*), Pecksniff's "carnal universe" and all the carnivalesque "vice" it ironically implies still recur significantly throughout Victorian fiction.

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Castle typically (and I think misleadingly) conflates *masquerade* with the *carnivalesque* so that, for example, the masquerade tropes and Carnival-Lent tensions respectively animating two popular contemporary films, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) and *Chocolat* (2000), would seem to produce two similar audience responses, which they decidedly do not:

> The carnivalization of eighteenth-century English fiction is thus a multifaceted phenomenon. If the process begins with a localized or strictly anecdotal representation of the masquerade — the discrete scene or set piece — it does not end there. The invocation of the conventional topos almost always coincides with an elaboration of plot, and in particular the comic plots of sexual consummation and social mobility. At the same time the scene injects an enigmatic and destabilizing energy into the ordinarily polite and reactionary world of eighteenth-century representation. . . . But the masquerade novel also had a compelling historical specificity. By embracing the spectacular, secretive figures of the carnival world, eighteenth-century English writers reenacted a larger contemporary flight into irony and illusion. The fiction of the masquerade was an epitome of the imaginative regime in which it flourished — and a mark of the eighteenth-century's own ambivalent escape from consistency, transparency, and the claims of a pervasive decorum. (125, 129)

Much of what Castle writes does apply to nineteenth-century, as well as eighteenth-century fiction, but also much does not — especially the material following the ellipsis; and her coverage of the eighteenth-century carnivalesque itself would appreciably broaden if she covered *more* (quantitatively and qualitatively) "comic plots" like those of Sterne and Smollett. Specifically, the phrase "multifaceted phenomenon" implies the motley, medley, and mongrel forms of *heteroglossia* appearing, for instance, in Mrs. Jarley's waxworks in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and the denizens of Mixen Lane in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. That is, clownish patchworks invested in *différance*, which represent *more* and *other* values than simply the dyadic "two voices" of the Victorian tower and the turf classically located in "The Lady of Shalott" or even the dialogic "double voicings" that Wendell Harris finds so problematic in "Bakhtinian Double Voicing in Dickens and Eliot" (1990): "the variety, flexibility, and subtlety achieved by certain Victorian novelists through various kinds of double voicing and hybridization have not, I think, been enough noticed" (457). For Bakhtin, carnivalesque contrasts and their subversive reversals are themselves much more ambivalently and uncannily "dual-bodied, dual-faced, pregnant. They combine in various proportions negation and affirmation, the top and the bottom, abuse and praise" (409). In fact, as Michael Holquist argues, *heteroglossia* "is a master trope at the heart of all [Bakhtin's] other projects" (xix), even though Bakhtin himself stresses that this heteroglossia is most significantly *embodied* "in the symbolic images of the rogue, the clown and the fool" (*The Dialogic Imagination* trans. 1981, 405). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. 1984), Bakhtin further relevantly argues not only that "the *masquerade line* of development . . . preserved in itself [merely] a bit of the license and some faint reflections of the carnival sense of the world" (130), but also that the carnivalesque gradually turned more social than secretive:

> The combination of carnivalization with the adventure plot and with pressing social themes of the day was found by Dostoevsky in the social-adventure novel[ists] of the nineteenth-century [he later specifies Dickens along with French writers like Balzac]. . . . The most

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> essential feature in these novels is an application of carnivalization to the portrayal of contemporary reality and contemporary everyday life; *everyday life* is drawn into the carnivalized action of the plot; the ordinary and constant is combined with the extraordinary and changeable. (158)

Although Hardy, for example, unlike Dickens, never writes a carnivalesque novel, his works typically contain Castle's "discrete scene[s] or set piece[s]" which infuse carnivalesque "enigmatic and destabilizing energy" into Hardy's already enigmatic and destabilized Wessex: the circus in *Far From the Madding Crowd*; the bonfires, Christmas play, dice match, rural dance, and Maypole festivities in *The Return of the Native*; the furmity and skimmity-ride episodes in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; the "Saturday Night in Arcady" dance and deflowering in *Tess* (symbolically orchestrated by that darkly carnivalesque mistress of revels *Dark Car*); and the *diablerie* of erasing the "Nots" from the mural Ten Commandments and the Remembrance Games in *Jude*. On the other hand, Victorian Carnivalesque seems less centrally intrigued with either (Castle's) "secretive figures of the carnival world" (Gothic/Decadent "masking" like Wilde's and Beardsley's proves the rule) or with large "flight[s] into irony and illusion," perhaps because of the intervention of Romanticism's dynamic organicism and dialectic of discordant oppositions. In any event, the village green, fairground, and marketplace tend to replace the drawing-room or ballroom "masquerade" as the "epitome of the imaginative regime" of the carnivalesque in Victorian fiction. And in novels like *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *Alice Books*, the carnivalesque looms as centrally as it does in Rabelais or another "contemporary" film, *Moulin Rouge* (2001) with its revolving windmill, "underworld show folk," and cosmically comic stage without footlights.

We should also note here that although "a gay and free play with objects and concepts" (Bakhtin 380) animates the carnivalesque, all ludic phenomena are not necessarily carnivalesque. There are, of course, significant studies of play forms in Victorian fiction like Kathleen Blake's *Play, Games, and Sport: The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll* or Nancy Morrow's more general *Dreadful Games: The Play of Desire in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, which actually discusses the "fear" of play in realist fiction and its displacement into ludic metaphors: "What appears, in so many nineteenth-century novels, to be an antipathy toward play, is, in fact, a fear of the way that game playing distorts the nature of both virtue and vice, making these opposites almost indistinguishable" (172–73). Bakhtin would add "quite so," and hence the compensatory complement of *grotesque realism*. Even Paul Schlicke's very relevant *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* never mentions Rabelais or Bakhtin, though Edwin Eigner's more focused *The Dickens Pantomime* sporadically references both: "Like carnival, Dickens and pantomime are associated with traditional holiday times of the year, but they do not serve tradition." Instead, their goal involves exactly the kind of carnivalesque gnosticism that Morrow's realist texts appear to eschew: "[they] provide the anarchical holiday space that Bakhtin saw as essential for the rethinking of ingrained moral and political systems and that Dickens perceived as an opportunity for changing his readers' basic stories about the nature of reality" (Eigner 41).

Finally, we must distinguish between what we have been presenting as basically the Bakhtinian version of the carnivalesque and post-Bakhtinian qualifications, which, like Umberto Eco's and D. Franco Felluga's, are critical of "Bakhtin's overly optimistic

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conception of the carnival tradition" (Felluga 588) or support Mary Russo's related charge that "Bakhtin's view of Rabelais and carnival is in some ways nostalgic for a socially diffuse oppositional context which has been lost, but which is perhaps more importantly suggestive of a future social horizon that may release new possibilities of speech and social performance" (218). Michael André Bernstein's *Bitter Carnival:* Ressentiment *and the Abject Hero* (1992), which diagnoses *carnivalesque abjection* in writers as diverse as Horace, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and Céline, also argues against Bakhtin's focus on "the Saturnalia's optimistic and celebratory assumptions" (18), positing instead that "when the tropes of Saturnalian reversal of all values spill over into daily life, they usually do so with a savagery that is the grim underside of their exuberant affirmations. It is precisely the festival's bitter side, the relationship between its celebratory and its rage-filled aspects, that I want to probe" (6). Somewhat differently, the San Diego Bakhtin Circle Editors posit in a recent *Bucknell Review* volume dedicated to *Bakhtin and the Nation* (2000) that "Bakhtin's unusual work" is caught between not only the French Renaissance and his audience in Stalinist Russia but also "between two opposing camps shaped mercilessly by the [current] struggle over the Soviet 'nation'" (21). In a less political and more literary reading, Kinser stresses the difference between Bakhtin's basic structuralism and his own post-Bakhtinian, poststructural, post-Foucauldian narratological approach, which, for example, discovers a great deal of narrative ambivalence (if not Romantic irony) in what Bakhtin sees as a fairly clear-cut Carnival-Lent polarity in Rabelais:

> Bakhtin's exaltation of Rabelais as the leader of the Renaissance chorus of subversively laughing people is misleading in its overtones: Rabelais's effort at totalism was ultimately cultural more than social, and it was limited by a supernaturalism implicit in the instruments upon which he relied for synthesis, organicism and spiritualism. But in terms of Bakhtin's strategy toward both his immediate public, the audience of state censors without whose imprimatur his book would be in danger, and toward his remoter, larger public of twentieth-century students of cultural history, emphasis on the carnivalesque side of Rabelais's energies was astute. It explains the text in a manner that perfectly suits our divisive, mass-cultural context — our context, not Rabelais's. In Rabelais's context there were only partitive communities and emergent individuals, only mixed Carnivals, jointly invented by elite and popular groups, and only Carnival-Lent traditions in flux. (256–57)

With these distinctions in mind, we can now turn to Banks's and Besant's Victorian accounts of Rabelais. Banks's gargantuan essay is frequently digressive and heavily citational as it provides a running comparison of Rabelais with Dante, Homer, and Shakespeare in order to place *Gargantua and Pantagruel* securely within the Victorian canon of great works. Its primary intent, then, is "to say something about Rabelais, his life, and works" (Nov. 1839, 514) and especially to popularize the more arcane and syncretistic attractions of the Renaissance humanist for the Victorian audience:

> In his romance, independent of the admixture of perishable self, there were elements in the construction which must ever keep it a sealed book to the millions; for instance, in addition to the quaint buffoonery and grossest indecency, there are the multitudinous dialects of French in which it is written; the vast variety of words, phrases, idioms from other languages, dead and living, which are introduced. In short, the scholar, the accomplished linguist, the man of the world, the lover of frolic, fun, and conviviality, and the scholarly enjoyment of

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> communion with the human heart, can alone understand, relish, and learn from the chronicles of him to whom Paris is indebted for its yellow river, and of his thrice-renowned son, the friend of Panurge, who made the miracle-teeming voyage in search of the magic bottle. (Nov. 1839, 520–21)

Banks, on the one hand, emphasizes Rabelais's "sense of ridicule" and "discursive habit of fun" over "the world of reality" (Nov. 1839, 529) including "the new-fangled schools of your professed utilitarians" (Nov. 1839, 526) which Mr. Sleary's carnivalesque circus also topically ridicules in *Hard Times*. On the other hand, Banks anticipates many post-Bakhtinians by also preferring Milton over malt, Lenten melancholy over Carnival mirth in Rabelais, and even seeing pantagruelism as the material padding which protects more profound truths: "the monstrous buffoonery with which some of the noblest passages are surrounded was necessary for [Rabelais's] protection. It enabled him to mystify dunderheads" (Nov. 1839, 517). Later, Banks relates such profundity to the (stereo)typic Victorian virtue of moral *earnestness*: "there is in all an intense earnestness, which, as we contemplate it, deepens and darkens; and beneath all there is a substratum of melancholy, which acts wholesomely upon the brain and heart" (Feb. 1840, 219). Moreover, Banks has much to say about "the education of Gargantua" (July 1840, 76), which stresses both playing and praying under the tutelage of Gymnast and others and which thus provides a well-rounded, heteroglossic nurturing like "what the Greeks call 'circle-learning'" (July 1840, 65) as again emblemized in the cartwheel and thus in Dick Swiveller's revolving and *revolutionary* tutelage of the Marchioness in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Finally, Banks also prefigures post-Bakhtinian interrogations of Rabelaisian ambiguity by stressing the importance of the ambiguously transformative "spirit of Panurge" (Feb. 1840, 215) — "the author's own pet character. . . . Panurge is, in my opinion, to Rabelais what Falstaff was to Shakespeare" (Feb. 1840, 223). In Heath's more recent words, Panurge's quest for the Holy Bottle and the oracle's advice on his possible marriage "establishes the new character of Panurge [versus the previous rogue] as a resourceful but self-seeking dialectician" (72). And the spirit of this shape-shifting Panurge (arguably) inspires Victorian characters as diverse as Becky Sharp, Pecksniff, and Sergeant Troy in *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

A generation later, Walter Besant again takes up Banks's great cause of adding Rabelais to the Victorian canon: "It is not impossible that England will yet learn to appreciate more largely this glorious wit and satirist," especially his *circle-learning* and its "widening the boundaries of thought, and leading the world through laughter rather than censure"(126). Also like Banks, Besant celebrates the educational ideal of "Do what thou wilt" at Rabelais's Thelemé, though without noting the possible narrative and dramatic irony at Friar John's monastery as modern commentators have. Besant likewise celebrates Rabelais's *all-thirsty* "Pantagruelian philosophy" of the Magic Bottle "sum[med] up . . . by the magic word, 'Drink'" (122), that is, the imperative need to drink up life in all its heteroglossic variety. Unlike Banks, however, Besant repeatedly opposes Rabelais to the importance of being earnest: "He destroyed effectually, perhaps for centuries yet to come, earnestness in France. He found men craving for a better faith, believing that it was to be found, and left them doubting whether any system in the world could give it" (128). Besant also counters Banks's carnivalesque canonization of Panurge with more lentan values (though both agree on the importance of Rabelaisian melancholy): "The real hero of Rabelais is Pantagruel, son of Gargantua, and not Panurge at all, not withstanding all that

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has been said" (113) — indeed, Panurge will always "betake himself to the nearest available protector, and be as full of animal spirits, as jovial, as reckless as ever. Panurge is a man with every faculty, but *without a soul.*" Still, Besant is quick to add that no "master-key" can unlock *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and that any "kind of allegorizing is dangerous" (116). In fact, "perhaps" Rabelais's alleged death-bed words best characterize his work's overall ambiguity: "'I go to seek the great Perhaps'" (107).

If one consults the "Subject Index" of MLA Bibliographies since 1981, one will find listed only *seven* full or partial carnivalesque readings of Victorian literature (three of these are dissertations), though MLA has missed a few others. Since some of those both listed and omitted are my own, I'll begin with them. Initially, though, we should note that all of these studies variously attempt to flesh out the carnival "influence" that Barbara Babcock-Abrahams celebrated over a generation ago in "The Novel and the Carnival World" (1974):

> The influence of carnival themes, forms, and symbols and the related Renaissance concepts of the wisdom of folly and the philosophy of serious play on eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature is considerable. Although carnival recedes into the background, it never disappears entirely from the novel. Rather the semiotic is formalized; carnival becomes an aesthetic means to serve aesthetic aims — a counterpoint to the serious message and essentially metynomic [*sic*] structure of the novel, contributing to the form's ironic possibilities. (930)

First, then, my "Carnivalesque 'Unlawful Games' in *The Old Curiosity Shop*" (1993) documents Dickens's significant involvement with Rabelais and the carnivalesque tradition, arguing that the novel presents "a grotesque if not gnostic quest for the life-meaning of the Holy Bottle, which meaning seems personified in the carnivalesque nature of Quilp, that prodigious feeder-drinker appearing downside up in coaches and Nell's bed — the inside out spirit of what most of us conceal, the virtual incarnation of the *mundus inversus*" (68). Along the way, the essay notes comparable "tripe," "curiosities," liminal and ludic motifs in both Rabelais and Dickens, ultimately concluding, though, that Dick "Swiveller turns *real* in a more identifiably human sense than Quilp does because for all his pleasant fictions, Dick celebrates the value of suffering and loving as well as the more explicitly playful dimensions of reality" (102). Indeed, of all the wonderful resources his lady love discovers in her underworld cellar, "the most excellent thing and desirable enjoyment that the Marchioness meets below is her swiveling, swilling, delivering, but most of all *living* embodiment of the carnivalesque grotesque, Mr. Richard Swiveller" (110).

"Courtly Wild Men and Carnivalesque Pig Women in Dickens and Hardy" (1998) focuses on the values "of seeing Dickensian play scenes in the comparative context of play motifs flourishing throughout nineteenth-century fiction" (1). It then posits that "Dickens stands far above" other novelists preoccupied with ludic themes, "even Lewis Carroll, not only because of the way [Dickens] reinvigorates traditional play motifs but also because of the way he reinterprets (one could almost say reinvents) them, especially those of the folkloric" (3) or carnivalesque variety as represented by Bakhtin's notions of grotesque realism (for example, "billingsgate, bodily organs, banquet liberties, and boisterous buffoonery," 5). Employing *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Jude the Obscure* as comparative examples, the essay then argues "that nineteenth-century literary play motifs rebound between

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the *courtly* tradition inherited from the Provençal troubadour poets and the *carnivalesque* tradition of *Bartholmew Fair*" (8). It concludes that "both Hardy and Dickens emphasize the ritualistic pedigree of play and rely more on carnivalesque and popular festive motifs than any other nineteenth-century novelists." For Dickens, though, "recovering and then adapting more primitive play forms could still ultimately redeem humanity, . . . while for Hardy, choric hymns to residual or ritual forms of primitive folk play only ironically chant its haunting absence in his dispassionate, dis*court*eous, and deritualized waste land" (26–27).

The five-part "'Deep Play' and 'Women's Ridicules' in *Oliver Twist*" (1997–1999) traces five "play codes" through that novel (romance, carnivalesque, liminal, deconstructive, and psychoanalytic) and then argues that a feminist reading recontextualizes each of these critical codes with its own unique play of difference. Part II includes "The Carnivalesque Code" (147–50) and traces through the novel what Bakhtin calls "'the carnivalesque game of images,'" which are "'unrestricted by any framework of meaning'" (148). These images include the cornucopian motif of plenty or "more," the game of negation, the symposium or love-feast, grotto or lower-stratum values, pantagruelian drinking bouts, praise-abuse ambivalence, nasal motifs, and *pregnant death*. When Monks ironically curses "babbling drabs" or cackling midwives, he ultimately celebrates the carnivalesque play of the "traditional caquet powers who preside over Agnes's opening labor in the workhouse and the related opening-up of the labyrinthine mystery of 'women's ridicules' . . . at [midwife] Sally Thingummy's death" (150).

Finally, section V (51–59) of "The 'Original Tess': Pre-Texts, Tess, Fess, Tesserae, Carnivalesque" (1998) discusses the carnivalesque underpinnings of Chapter X in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which was omitted from the original serial version (1891) in the *Graphic* and was not restored (and revised) until the 1912 Wessex Edition. This chapter records Tess's adventure at the Saturday night dance and its saturnalian romp (again) presided over by that darkly carnivalesque mistress of revels, Car Darch or Dark Car. The discussion traces Hardy's membership in the Rabelais Club and dedication to traditional carnivalesque motifs, the motley and mongrel implications of which crucially contextualize Tess's (in)famous "purity." Specifically, Chapter X poses a significant series of carnivalesque questions: "Tess is not, nor could be, carnivalesque Car. But *should* she be? Or rather should her culture, like the rustic subculture, see sexuality as simply one sympathetic movement in Nature's eternal rhythm? And finally, if the carnivalesque does celebrate frank, unashamed sexuality like Car's, does it equally condone duplicitous, covert sexuality as Alec's violation of Tess seems to be?" These questions cannot be univocally answered, but Car's grotesque gymnastics "widen the carnivalesque lense from such a narrow focus on the carnal to the metaphysical origins of the entire natural world" (54).

I have read the three dissertations on various versions of the Victorian Carnivalesque only in the form of the author's abstract. Susan Elizabeth Blalock's "The Carnivalesque in Browning's *The Ring and the Book*" (1983) argues that "The poet-narrator's frame in the first and last books of *The Ring and the Book* creates a narrative time and space dominated by the upside-down/inside-out world of the carnival. Set in this carnival frame, the central monologues not only vie with each other as modes of discourse with generic claims to truth-telling but also clash with a series of conflicting images, discourse types, and narrative stances." The results of this heteroglossia again approximate a kind of *circle*

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learning: "the cyclic time of the festival challenges the authority of linear historical time" (*DA* 8329808). Brian Keith Evenson's "The Carnival of Negativity" (1993) moves into post-Bakhtinian territory and "questions the assumptions that carnival and dialogue have liberatory value," arguing instead "that there is a disturbing side to carnival which Bakhtin too often glosses over" (*DA* 9417006). Evenson than traces this "carnival of negativity" from a series of eighteenth-century writers through Mary Shelley to Joyce and Beckett. He does not, though, devote specific chapters to Victorian authors. Robert M. Sproul's "Modus *Opera*ndi: Carnival poetics in W. S. Gilbert's Savoy Operas" (1996) does, however, locate "late Victorian Britain as a site of struggle against dominant social and cultural orders, and fortification against changes the struggle fostered." This conflict prompted Gilbert to use the carnivalesque, especially the topsy-turvy "fool figure, who traditionally disrupts authority," so as "to critique an 'unbalanced' distribution of political power in Britain." Sproul concludes with a discussion of Arthur Sullivan "to reveal the degree of carnival within the marriage of Sullivan's music and musical reputation to Gilbert's material derived from Victorian popular theatre" (*DA* 9632880).

Lawrence Frank's "Imagining the Antipodes: Lewis Carroll's Midsummer Night's Dream" (1984) relevantly compares "saturnalian" impulses in Carroll and Shakespeare but fails to deploy the concrete carnivalesque insights which would greatly strengthen his thesis regarding the historical waning of the Bard's dream of Saturnalia: "Alice awakens from *her* dream, only to have its implications falsified by the sister who must reduce it to a proper Victorian moral fable, full of reassurances about childhood innocence and parental benevolence. Saturnalian release is frustrated; clarification dispelled. Carroll responds not only to the Mrs. Grundies of Victorian England . . . , but to his own ambivalent response to the insights he has achieved" (115). Robert Lougy's "Repressive and Expressive Forms: The Bodies of Comedy and Desire in *Martin Chuzzlewit*" (1992), on the other hand, does sporadically employ carnivalesque insights, relating "Rabelais's fascination with the grotesque body" (38) to "Dickens's carnivalesque imagery and iconography of the human form" (40). Since Dickens "is fascinated by those bodily concavities and convexities that shatter, disrupt, or violate images of wholeness and intactness" (37) in *Chuzzlewit*, the novel figuratively morphs into a kind of "carnival freak-show" (41).

David Krause's "William Carleton, Demiurge of Irish Carnival: *Fardorougha The Miser*, 1839" (1994) discusses Carleton "as a striking example of what W. B. Yeats called the Celtic Demiurge, the symbolic creator who reigned over the primal and palpable peasant world of Ireland." Although he also pledges to treat Carleton's *Fardorougha The Miser* as the "quintessential illustration of what . . . Bakhtin called the carnival world of comic fiction" (25), he delivers too little and too late on this promise by waiting until the last three pages of his lengthy essay to address the carnivalesque in any specificity. The shame here is that Krause really misses the boat along the way by failing to relate Carleton's "boozing . . . mockery of religion" or his "gallows humor" (38) to traditional carnivalesque *topoi* like *drinking theologically* and *pregnant death*. Moreover, his spirited treatment of Mary Moan as the "druidic" or "hieratic midwife" (32–35) — Carleton's version of Sally Thingummy — begs for the explanatory powers of Rabelais's marvelous midwives and, especially, Bakhtin's critique of this *caquet* tradition.

D. Franco Felluga's "The Critic's New Clothes: *Sartor Resartus* as 'Cold Carnival'" (1995) much more insightfully explores "Carlyle's carnivalesque efforts to expose all systems as limiting and false" (583). Indeed, what "much Carlyle criticism lacks is a

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willingness to examine how the carnivalesque and dialogic exposition of Carlyle's ideas affects the 'transcendental' aspects" of his thought, "which he presents in a carnivalesque form in order to keep open-ended his confrontation with questions of truth" (585,587). Felluga then borrows Umberto Eco's notion of "cold carnival" to argue that "*Sartor Resartus* approaches the more radical kind of social critique" that Eco upholds over "Bakhtin's overly optimistic conception of the carnival tradition" (588). He concludes with a final question and answer which reaffirm that the carnivalesque *theatrum mundi inversi* survives without footlights: "to what extent does the carnivalesque form of *Sartor Resartus* affect its content? For one, the reader assumes a more active role in interpreting Carlyle's text and comes to understand the very process of trying, and inevitably failing, to constitute one static system of meaning" (594).

Lastly, Patricia Marks's "'*Mon Pauvre Prisonnier*': Becky Sharp and the Triumph of Napoleon" (1996) intermittently references Bakhtin and the carnivalesque tradition (though never directly citing *Rabelais and His World*) to argue that Thackeray's discourse in *Vanity Fair* becomes "'carnivalized'" and "disrupted by the incursion of foreign phrases" (77). Thackeray also transfers "the mythic resonance of Napoleon to Becky Sharp"; and Becky's consequent "transformations associate her" with life's mysteries, "with the *picara* tradition, and with carnival masquerade and its eschatological tendencies" (78), which all help support "the idea of Becky's power of carnivalizing the text" (84). In fact, Marks continues, "Becky's exile is a reenactment with linguistic and carnivalistic overtones of the Napoleonic invasion," especially at Pumpernickel where "Becky's mask — her rouge, her clothing, her escort — reveals her status rather than hiding it, and so the carnival is decentered" (86). At the conclusion, "Thackeray's urgent cry for *la vérité* can only be answered by putting 'up the box and the puppets,' a reminder that the landscape of his fiction is itself carnival, 'rant, tinsel, and stage-play,' and that the only way to tell the truth is, finally, to fall silent" (88).

I want to conclude this review with a preview, that is, by again taking up the canonical *Vanity Fair* and suggesting how future approaches to the Victorian Carnivalesque might move beyond (or even *before*) Marks's provocative reading which, nevertheless, neglects carnivalesque material as basic as the text's "prodigious quantity of flesh and beer"(372;32). In this sense, not only do the "wild times of carnival" animate the Pumpernickel chapters, but the subversive laughter of the carnivalesque more generally reflects the central *fair* metaphor which, through Bunyan's cautionary critique of his Vanity Fair's "jugglings, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues" (125), helped inspire Thackeray's entire celebratory performance. And this performance repeatedly pits the "puritan" or lenten values of *agelasts* (Bakhtin 172) like Mr. Sedley or Lady Southdown against the differing carnival values of Joseph or Becky. Indeed, Bakhtin himself calls *Vanity Fair* "an especially lucid example of this new element" of performative Pantagruelism (*DI* 166) and elsewhere notes that "even if there was no carnival, strictly speaking, its atmosphere reigned at every fair" where "the collective gaiety of the people gathered" (154,146). And as Alcofribas posits in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, carnivalesque "laughter" defines and refines all that "is truly human" (577; V: 25), though the Priestess of the Holy Bottle later counters that "*Trink* is an oracular word," and so "it is drinking, not laughter, which makes men human" (617; V: 46).

In fact, in the drunken Vauxhall episode, it is "That bowl of rack punch [which] was the cause of all this history. . . . this bowl of rack punch [which] influence[d] the fates of all the

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principal characters in the 'Novel without a Hero'" (93; 6). Thereafter carnivalesque *spirits* flow so freely — as in "floods of beer" (373; 32) — that one could almost view Mr. Sedley's commercially failed "Wine Project" (682; 59) figuratively as the text's central carnivalesque success. It also proves quite impossible, however, to separate thematic series of drink, food, laughter, sex, plenty, play, and gaming, as Joseph (with "his super-abundant fat") *vainly* illustrates when he offers Becky (who cries until she laughs) the forbidden fruit of "chili" — with "cayenne pepper" — and thereby turns the Sedley household "topsy-turvy":

> "How fresh and green they look!" [Becky] said, and put one into her mouth. It was hotter than the curry; flesh and blood could bear it no longer. She laid down her fork. "Water, for Heaven's sake, water!" she cried. Mr Sedley burst out laughing (he was a coarse man from the Stock Exchange, where they love all sorts of practical jokes). (58–61; 3)

As Bakhtin would put it, the thematic point of this typical episode again becomes its "gay and free play with objects and concepts, but it is a play that pursues a distant, prophetic goal: to dispel the atmosphere of gloomy and false seriousness enveloping the world and all its phenomena, to lend it a different look, to render it more material, closer to man and his body." Indeed, just as Becky levels all lifeless areas of society through lively laughter (often at herself), "Folk culture strove to defeat through [such] laughter this extreme projection of gloomy seriousness and to transform it into a gay carnival monster" (380,395) again like the elephantine Joseph "in motley-coloured clothes" (522;44) and the siren-mermaid Becky who reads (Rabelaisian) French novels.

As we have just illustrated, one of the first critical gestures of a Victorian Carnivalesque reading must, then, be what Bakhtin calls "the construction of series [*rjady*] [*sic*] of the most varied types, which are at times parallel to each other and at times intersect each other" (as they do in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*), such as "(1) series of the human body, in its anatomical and physiological aspects; (2) human clothing series; (3) food series; (4) drink and drunkenness series; (5) sexual series (copulation); (6) death series; (7) defecation [or bodily secretion] series" (*DI* 170). As we've further implied, a second and consequent critical gesture must be establishing the thematic goal of such Rabelaisian series, that is, to counter gravity with gaiety, celebrate the manifold mixtures of life's cocktail, and drink it all in with gusto. And this goal should qualify, if not challenge, past readings by seeing, for example, Becky's "transformation" as Panurgic or Joseph's corpulence as embodying Elspeth Probyn's recent, suggestive thesis in *Carnal Appetites* (2000): "In eating, we grapple with concerns about the animate and inanimate, about authenticity and sincerity, about changing familial patterns, about the local rendered global, about whether sexual and alimentary predilections tell us anything about ourselves, about colonial legacies of the past for those of us who live in stolen lands, about whether we are eating or being eaten" (3). Along the way, of course, such a reading must document the Victorian writer's specific familiarity with Rabelais or at least with the carnivalesque tradition. Thackeray, for instance, occasionally but always significantly references Rabelais in his letters and essays. Indeed, an 1845 review seems to damn Milton with faint praise in order to celebrate Rabelaisian "fun":

> There is no doubt that in the public estimation the sublime has the *pas* of the ridiculous, and that Milton, for rank and brains, must certainly be classed before Rabelais. Writers of fun

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> must live in the world and go out of it with this woeful conviction, that there is a kind of art incomparably higher than theirs. . . . But theirs is no bad position after all. It is something to be *Mercutio* if you can't be *Romeo*. (*Thackeray: The Critical Heritage* 101–02)

Back in the chili episode, it's not just that Becky promiscuously mixes tears and laughter or thinks that the hot "chili was something cool," it is also that like Mercutio she creates contagiously magical comedy which collapses class distinctions and transforms the figurative fasting of Mr. Sedley's pompous dinner — he "brought home the best turbot [flatfish] in Billingsgate" (57; 3) — into a real, if momentary, love feast or carnivalesque symposium. In fact, at a later somber dinner, such Billingsgate realism (and Bakhtin repeatedly locates ambivalent "abusive language as . . . a special [carnivalesque] genre of billingsgate," 16) turns into another *figure* in the prandial series: "Having concluded his observations upon the soup, Mr. Osborne made a few curt remarks respecting the fish, also of a savage and satirical tendency, and cursed Billingsgate with an emphasis quite worthy of the place" (162; 13). Whether or not such references to billingsgate rhetoric abjectly establish *Vanity Fair* as a post-Bakhtinian example of Bernstein's "bitter carnival," other types of "merry linguistic game[s] in the Rabelaisian spirit" also abound in the text, especially the "carnivalesque game of names" (as with Lady *Bareacres*, the Earl of *Portansherry*, and the royal Pumpernickel House of *Schlippenschloppen*) and the "carnival game of negation" (Bakhtin 468, 461, 412) involving wordplay with negative forms. Like Dickens in *Bleak House*, Thackeray occasionally plays the *Nemo* game (Bakhtin 413-15) by punning "no one," but he toys much more significantly with the more general carnivalesque tradition of the *yeabynay* or *via negativa* and its exploration of the negative capabilities of the word *nothing*. For example, in the chapters (36–37) devoted to "How to live well on Nothing a Year," we read that the profound "truth is, when we say of a gentleman that he lives elegantly on nothing a year, we use the word 'nothing' to signify something unknown" — in this case, "our friend the Colonel [Rawdon] had a great aptitude for all games of chance" (429;36).

Vanity Fair also significantly addresses other carnivalesque thematics, as when it compares Becky's versions of *circle learning* (like her play at roulette's wheel of fortune) with more institutionalized and linear brands of higher learning, which either outlaw the carnal or "embrace the degrading corporal severities still practised at the ancient places of education" (654;56). Indeed, much like "Tom Fool" in the introductory "Before the Curtain," Becky ultimately "lives by [her] tumbling," whether or not "the general impression is one more melancholy than mirthful" (33), more cautionary lenten than celebratory carnivalesque. Near the end, she even lives with a "band of renowned Bohemian vaulters and tumblers" (755; 65). As Marks argues, Becky's revolutionary polylinguism does evoke heteroglossia, but the added fact that she "sang, she played, she laughed, [as well as] talked in two or three languages" (780; 67) places her more materially in the carnivalesque *caquet* tradition of disorderly "women, who get together and hiss, and shriek, and cackle" (221; 18). And female pairing, especially involving oppositional values like Becky's sybaritic need for a spiritually female "sheep-dog," also recalls for Thackeray the monstrous metaphor of *pregnant death* doubly personified as crone and maiden or Death and the Lady: "as jolly a reminder as that of the Death's head which figured in the repasts of Egyptian *bons vivants*, a strange sardonic memorial of Vanity Fair" (444; 37). In her critique of "the omnified stage of carnival," Julia Kristeva suggestively views such abject representations as documenting "the history of the struggle against Christianity and its

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representation; this means an exploration of language (of sexuality and death), a consecration of ambivalence and of 'vice'" (80).

Kristeva's mention of *vice* brings us full circle back to Pecksniff's ironic battle against the "carnal universe" and all its carnivalesque "vice." In Thackeray's "A Vagabond Chapter" (64), directly following "the wild times of carnival" in Pumpernickel, he notes that "the moral world . . . has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice" but hypocritically evinces "an insuperable repugnance to hearing vice called by its proper name." He then famously compares Becky to "fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims" and concludes this hyperbolic exploration of his own grotesque realism by demanding whether he has ever directly "showed the monster's hideous tail above the water?" Thackeray slyly insists, though, that "those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy," thereby recalling the Rabelaisian insistence that "underground there are vast treasures and wonderful things" (621; V: 48) besides La Bruyère's own "famous comments" on Rabelais's beautiful beasts who sport "'a lovely woman's face with the feet and tail of a serpent'" (Bakhtin 107–08). Self-dramatizing without footlights, the text's metacarnivalesque commentary on Becky's pregnant death staged as Persephone's *danse macabre* particularly focuses on female readers (just as it features Becky's "hideous and slimy" tail). It argues that "we . . . in Vanity Fair . . . will no more bear to read an authentic description of vice than a truly refined English or American female will permit the word breeches to be pronounced in her chaste hearing" (737–38). In this carnivalesque sense, the passage even ironically recalls Thackeray's remarks on ideal and improper female reading fare in a January 18, 1840, letter to his mother: "it is better that ladies should not relish such grotesque humour [in a just cited work]: Rabelais, Fielding & so forth (apart the indecencies) are not good reading for women" (412). In "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory" (1986), Mary Russo clarifies such dubious distinctions, arguing that "both in the history of carnival and in its theory, the category of the female body as grotesque (in, for instance, pregnancy or aging) brings to light" the meaning of Kristeva's notion of "'displaced abjection.'" Still, "How this category might be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire, would be the subject of another study" (221).

It seems to me that any such subsequent study should further explore the carnivalesque status — whether Bakhtinian or post-Bakhtinian — of *Vanity Fair*'s forsaken mermaid in order to decide whether it is the abject spectre of the "haggard, weary, and terrible" (612; 52) Becky or the ribald revenant who finally creates "stalls at Fancy Fairs for [both] the benefit of . . . hapless beings" (797;67) and the bounty of their benefactors that more accurately characterizes Thackeray's notorious "female grotesque." Such a reading might also pursue a gendered approach to the Victorian Carnivalesque (and possibly be surprised to discover that George Eliot more than any other female novelist celebrates carnivalesque motifs). Ideally, it might even take up Castle's challenge and develop into a general book-length reading of this playful genre in motley, which Victorian critics are only beginning to recognize but which surely deserves much more sustained and much more serious attention. For as Thackeray suggests, in Victorian England the figures of Fat Tuesday and Ash Wednesday are never very far apart: "for good streaky beef, really mingled with fat and lean, there was no country like England" (327;28).

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