



# The Carnival Features of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

**Xiaoyan Pan**

College of Foreign Languages & Literature, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou 730070, Gansu, China

DOI: 10.32629/jher.v3i3.887

---

**Abstract:** Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is a romantic comedy work, which is full of strange and absurd elements, presenting a romantic color of fantasy humor. The dramatic presentation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is very consistent with the literary theorist Bakhtin's carnival literary theory, who is from the former Soviet Union. This paper will discuss the connection between Bakhtin's carnival theory and the creation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream", and then a concrete analysis of the carnival characteristics of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is made, in order to achieve a deep interpretation of the creation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream".

**Keywords:** "A Midsummer Night's Dream", Bakhtin, carnival

---

## 1. Overview of Bakhtin's carnival theory

Carnival originated from the carnival festival culture of the Middle Ages and even earlier in Western Europe. On carnival day, people stopped all their engagements, forgot the inherent hierarchy of the daily secular society, broke the conventional mode of getting along with each other, and joined in the joyful festival celebration with a closer and more equal attitude. Carnival ceremony was held to get rid of the boundary between aristocrats and civilians, during which informal and subversive civilian culture was introduced, which was full of gags, humor, sarcasm and various vulgar language behaviors. Although carnival is a short departure from the standard life, it influenced the creation of literature and art with its subversive characteristics of fun and joy.

In 1929, Mikhail Bakhtin, the former Soviet Union literary theorist and critic, put forward the theory of "carnival" for the first time in problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, which made carnival theory in the list of the category of literary aesthetics for the first time. In 1961, Bakhtin published Rabelais and The Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, which further deepened the carnival theory. In the 1960s, carnival theory attracted the attention of the western academic circle, and set off a boom of carnival theory research. In the 1980s, Mr. Xia Zhongyi introduced Bakhtin into China, and the study of carnival theory gradually rose in the Chinese academic circle.

Bakhtin's carnival theory includes carnival style and carnivalism, and carnival is the basis of carnival theory, carnival style is the sum of various forms of carnival activities such as etiquette and performance. At the same time, the form of carnival and its derived ideology and culture gradually infiltrated into other fields, which became a part of social culture, and reflected in the cultural creation, showing the carnival cultural characteristics of literary and artistic works.

Carnival theory holds that the connotation of carnival includes the casual and intimacy between people, gagging, vulgarity and condescendency. In carnival, people threw away the hierarchy and privilege under the system and convention for a utopian state of equality. In the writings of Rabelais and the folk culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Bakhtin explained the carnival theories as: they seemed to establish a second world and a second life on the other side of the whole official world... This is a special kind of dual world relationship.

Revelry emphasizes a kind of unofficial and subversive view of the world with the participation of all the people, in which everyone lives a kind of ego that has never existed before, and all the spiritual and abstract things on the hierarchy are all condescended to the lower level of the material and physical level Bakhtin believes that Shakespeare's plays contain a large number of carnival cultural elements, especially such humorous images and forms, reflecting the carnival cosmopolitan feeling.

## 2. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and carnival theory

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" is one of Shakespeare's most famous comedies in early stage. It was played in the evening before the marriage of Sir Thomas Henage and the Countess of SAO Sampton. It was staged at the House of SAO Sampton and was considered to be a celebration of the wedding of Sir Thomas Henage and the Countess of SAO Sampton. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is a romantic story about several couples who were confused about love and eventually become married. The beautiful Hermia fell in love with Lysander, but Hermia's father promised to marry his daughter to

Demetrius. Demetrius was in love with Hermia, while another girl Helena was in love with Demetrius. In order to resist her father's arrangement, Hermia eloped with Lysander. Her good friend Helena told Demetrius the news in order to please her lover, so the young men and women who met in the forest on midsummer night, the forest elves and the artisans at the bottom of the play, had a series of humorous subversion and nonsense stories.

The plot of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is characterized with obvious features of celebrating wedding, and the theme is consistent with the property of carnival theory. At the same time, in addition to completing the love design of four men and women, and Fairy King and Fairy Queen, the comedy also was plotted with the magic mischief of fairies and conflicts between Fairy King and Fairy Queen. And the antics of the artisans add to the eerie and wild carnival atmosphere of the play. The carnival square emphasized in Bakhtin's carnival theory was also reflected in "A Midsummer Night's Dream". The two plots with the most carnival theory significance are: one took place in the forest on a midsummer night, and the forest acted as a carnival square for all characters to come on stage and become undifferentiated carnival characters; The other is the drama within the drama of the palace craftsmen of Theseus. This group of "low people" have no acting experience and professional understanding of drama, thus staging a carnival farce between the audience and actors.

### **3. Analysis of the carnival characteristics of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"**

#### **3.1 Appearances of carnival characters in time and space**

Bakhtin's carnival theory holds that carnival style has no boundary and the whole people participate in it. Carnival has the nature of the universe, which is a special state of the whole world and the regeneration and renewal of the world in which everyone participates. In the carnival world, the privileged class and the common class are included. In a kind of rules similar to the game, the privilege and prohibition are no longer meaningful, showing the equal state of all people participating. Although the plot of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is mainly about the love entanglements of two couples, which was interpreted in a carnival way. In the play, there were Dukes and queens, aristocrats, gentlemen and ladies, as well as lower-class people who live by the corpus and work hand in hand, and even fairies and elves in the forest connected with the mythological world. Characters in the real world and virtual world all participate in the carnival of love story. Aristocrats and commoners, real characters and mythological images appeared at the same time in the same space and time — the forest on a midsummer night, where each character broke away from the usual thinking and ethics mode, and took part in the out-of-nature, illogical and arbitrary carnival plot. Lysander fell in love with Helena when Puck mistakenly carried out Oberon's orders, and demetrius fell in love with Helena. The once friendly Hermia and Helena began to quarrel and sarcasm. The Fairy Queen Titania somehow fell in love with the donkey become the civilian weaver Burton, The characters appear in the carnival of the irrational disorder mode, until the Fairy King Oberon began to give Puck issued orders to make this site an orgy of curtain call, the plot to normal development, the different time and space characters curtain call out, and in a sense, has realized the freshman of the self. In addition, in the performance scene of the Palace of Duke Theseus, the artisans Koons and Burton, who are not theater actors, mysteriously appeared on the stage of the royal drama. On the surface, the nobles were watching the drama performance of the common people, but the ordinary actors who did not follow the common rules turned the performance into a dialogue with the nobles, and the noble audience also became a part of the carnival performance, completing the almost absurd performance in a kind of close communication.

#### **3.2 Carnival character characteristics**

Since the carnival culture takes humorous performances as the main content, and the typical humorous performers are clowns and fools with carnival literature characterized with a significant feature of grotesque figures to replace clowns and fools in carnival. Bakhtin believed that carnival literature requires the protagonist to be mad and stupid. Under the appearance of such madness and stupidity is the resistance of the form and dogma in which people rule the society. It is this abnormal thinking and expression form that provides people with another perspective on the world. In "A Midsummer Night's Dream", the most prominent characters with carnival characteristics are the elf Puck and the civilian Burton and others. Puck is an iconoclastic spirit with complex personality traits that make people laugh by playing pranks and causing embarrassings, closely resembling carnival clowns. It was his dripping flower juice on the eyelids of Lysander and Demetrius that made the two gentlemen switch from loving Hermia to loving Helena, causing the confusion of the two girls, and thus the carnival farce. Weaver Burton, on the other hand, has the qualities of a carnival fool. He often nags, but his ideas are often comical. In addition, he was transformed into a monster with the head of a donkey under the magic of the elf Puck. This kind of character characteristic just reflects the downgrade in the carnival theory, which is the transition from high to low, and the submission from personality to animal desires. At the same time, Burton gave full play to this kind of fool in the performance of the Palace, but just as Bakhtin said, "stupidity is the opposite of wisdom", Burton completed the rationality of a funny drama

in a seemingly stupid way of acting.

### 3.3 Carnival plot advancement

Carnival theory includes carnival style. Corresponding carnival literary works have carnival ritual form to promote the development of the plot. The most representative carnival ceremony is the coronation and uncoronation, as well as a variety of subversive, abnormal way of playing. In this case, religion and power are no longer dominant, and life itself gives birth and means to the game. In the plot design of "A Midsummer Night's Dream", the obvious coronation plot is that Oberon sent Puck to drip the flower juice with the effect of bewitching love on the eyelids of the Fairy Queen Titania, making the Fairy Queen fall in love with the civilian weaver Burton. Burton has the characteristics of a fool in the play, and was turned into a half-ass and half-human by Puck at that time, and the Fairy Queen regarded Burton as her lover and provided him with the noble service of a Fairy King. It's clear that the episode fits perfectly with the carnival theory of coronation, and of course Burton is quickly removed from the coronation and returned to being a simpleton commoner. In addition to coronation and uncoronation, carnival drama plot or jump, full of absurd carnival comedy characteristics.

In the play, Puck, the prankster, destroyed the relationship between the two lovers by first dripping the juice of flowers that is meant for Demetrius to Lysander, and then dropped the juice of flowers on Demetrius, changing the original situation of love forever. Puck then pretended to be Lysander and Demetrius, separating the two men who had decided to fight, and finally arranging a happy ending for the two couples. The plot design obviously does not conform to common sense and normal development mode, but has a kind of absurd and humorous carnival plot characteristics.

### 3.4 Carnival language features

Bakhtin's carnival theory holds that the language of carnival is unofficial and expresses the world's feelings of the bottom people. As a result, carnival language is often vulgar and vulgar, including swearing, cursing, and swearing, etc., which is Bakhtin's square language. The demotion theory is proposed in the carnival theory, so in terms of language, the carnival also subordinates the official written language to the humorous language of life. In addition to the main plot of love, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" also added the scenes of the bottom civilians. The language of the commoners is markedly vulgar. When Koons assigns Frut the role to play the female Thisbe, Frut's response is "Don't ask us to play a bitch, our beard has grown"; after the Fairy Queen Titania falls in love with Burton who turned into a half-ass, when the fairy queen proposed to give Burton some fresh hazelnuts, Burton said, "Please tell those people not to disturb us, we want to get some fucking sleep." These languages all embody the vulgar features of carnivalized language. In addition, swearing is also an important feature of carnival language. When Lysander does not love Hermia, he uses "black tartar", "poison", "disgusting thing" and "underdeveloped three-inch" and other vicious language to insult Hermia. And Hermia insulted Helena, whom she misunderstood, with "liar", "worm in flowers" and "thief of love". The above language features can fully show the carnival language features presented by Shakespeare in "A Midsummer Night's Dream".

## 4. Conclusion

Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was written during the Elizabeth I era when the Renaissance and Humanism flourished. The carnival comedy features embodied in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" represent the society's call for freedom, happiness and equality of human nature at that time. Bakhtin's carnival theory is based on the reflection of carnival culture in literary works, and it interprets that a world feeling develops freely under the cover of carnival. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" has a strong carnival characteristic in character appearance, character image, plot advancement and language features. It can be said to be a representative work of Shakespeare's carnival drama.

## References

---

- [1] William Shakespeare. *Complete Works of Shakespeare*[M]. Translated by Zhu Shenghao. Beijing: China Literature and History Press, 2013 (09).
- [2] (Soviet Union) Bakhtin. *Complete Works of Bakhtin Volume 6: Rabelais Studies*[M]. Translated by Li Zhaolin et al. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 1998.
- [3] Hou Jing, Li Lai. A Study of Shakespeare's carnival characteristics from the film "A Midsummer Night's Dream"[J]. *Movie Literature*, 2017 (21) : 91-93.
- [4] Tian Ni. Discussion on the Carnival characteristics of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"[D]. Wuhan: Central China Normal University, 2006.