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978-0-521-45786-6 - Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage

Francois Laroque

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European Studies in English Literature

Shakespeare's Festive World

This book offers an exciting new perspective on Shakespeare's relation to popular culture. Shakespeare drew extensively on the Elizabethan world of festival and holiday, including in his plays many of its events and traditions. He mingled popular culture with aristocratic and royal forms of entertainment in ways that combine or clash to produce new meaning, offering surprises which anticipate the Stuart Masque. This process evolved from the early, romantic festive comedies into the late plays which recover the celebrations and patterns of renewal initiated in the 'green world'. The values of festivity are inverted in the comedy of misrule and of the world turned upside-down, and finally perverted in the darker forms of the history plays and tragedies. François Laroque reconstructs the principal events, customs and games of the Elizabethan festive tradition and demonstrates the need for reconsideration of Shakespeare's techniques of amalgamating literary traditions with the folklore and ceremonies of popular pastimes and seasonal celebrations.

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Translated by Janet Lloyd



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In memory of my parents and for my wife, Yolande

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Foreword

In exploring the contribution made by the popular culture of Elizabethan England to the themes and motifs of Shakespeare's plays, François Laroque follows in a well-established tradition. Sir Edmund Chambers' great studies of *The Mediaeval Stage* (1903) and *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923) gave original and authoritative treatment to the calendar customs and festivals which still retained their vitality in Shakespeare's lifetime. Charles Read Baskerville's study of medieval folk festivals and Enid Welsford's investigation into the social and literary history of the fool helped to relate the dramatist's work to conventions of calendrical misrule. What Northrop Frye called the 'green world', to which Shakespeare's characters so often escape, can be related to the periodic emancipation afforded by traditional holidays, and in C.L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959) the saturnalian pattern of festive release became a central principle of interpretation. A few years later, the English translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* inaugurated two decades of critical writing in which the debt of the carnivalesque to the folk humour of popular ritual and spectacle would become a commonplace.

François Laroque's book, however, has two particular strengths. The first is that it rests upon a close acquaintance with the numerous studies of popular culture which have been made in recent years by historians of early modern England. This has enabled him to replace vague invocations of 'carnival' and 'misrule' by a precise reconstruction of the festive calendar of Shakespeare's time and a nuanced understanding of its social implications. Professor Laroque freely acknowledges his debt to the pioneering work in this area of Charles Phythian-Adams. But his own extensive reading in the primary sources of the period and his close acquaintance with the *Annales* school of historians enable him to bring an individual, and in some ways distinctively French, perspective to his subject.

François Laroque's other strength is that he is a critic as well as an historian; and he uses his historical material to illuminate the whole range of Shakespeare's dramatic writing. His readers will be able to judge as well as I how far his distinctive approach has resulted in a new interpretation of the plays. My own feeling is that his demonstration of the

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ubiquity of festive themes and images in Shakespeare is admirably successful, not just in the case of the comedies, where we might have expected it, but also in the tragedies, where we are convincingly shown how festivity can take on a disturbing and sinister aspect. Professor Laroque is particularly instructive on the way in which Shakespeare's dramatic work reveals conflicting attitudes to the whole festive system, a conflict of values which mirrored changes in society at large.

It is very satisfying to see historical writing put to such effective use. Historians have long been indebted to Shakespearean scholars, who, in the course of their unceasing efforts to discover more about the dramatist's work or to illuminate some obscure passage in his works, have turned over thousands of unpublished documents, thereby generating, almost incidentally, an enormous amount of fresh historical information about the Elizabethan age. It is pleasing to see that on this occasion some of the debt has been repaid and that, through François Laroque's skilful mediation, historians have been able to make an unintended contribution to literary understanding.

*Corpus Christi College, Oxford,
Twelfth Night 1991*

Keith Thomas

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Preface

This book is the product of several years of work and research pursued in France, England and the United States. Festivals were fleeting affairs but, paradoxically enough, the shorter they were, the longer the time necessary to reconstruct them turns out to be. Studying them also involves moving about from one place to another, from outdoors to indoors, from the street or village square to a desk in a library or some other archive. So my work would not have been possible without the welcome assistance that I received from the British Library in London, the Bodleian in Oxford, the library of the Shakespeare Institute in Birmingham, the libraries of the University of Texas at Austin, the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Library of Congress in Washington, the library of the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Elisabethaines of the Université Paul-Valéry in Montpellier and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

I am also grateful for the advice and suggestions that I have received from many colleagues: Professor Jean Fuzier and Professor Jean-Marie Maguin at the Université Paul-Valéry in Montpellier, Professor Louis Lecocq of the Université de Lyon II, Professor Bernard Paulin of the Université de Saint-Etienne and Professor Michèle Willems of the Université de Rouen. I should also like to express my gratitude to Professor Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie of the Collège de France and Sir Keith Thomas of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, for their assistance and encouragement in the areas of historical background and the analysis of mentalities. I am especially indebted to Professor Stanley Wells, the director of the Shakespeare Institute, for his invaluable advice and suggestions and for the material aid that he afforded me, in the shape of a research scholarship at Stratford-upon-Avon. This greatly facilitated the revision of and the additions to this book, originally published in France in 1988 under the title *Shakespeare et la fête*. I am furthermore indebted to him for being so kind as to read over the proofs.

My thanks go to Dr Levi Fox for the hospitality of the Shakespeare Centre, which provided me with a study in which to work as well as with all the resources of the library, and to Dr Susan Brock and Dr Marian Pringle, the librarians of the Shakespeare Institute and the Shakespeare Centre, and the rest of their staff for all their help and unfailing kindness.

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Finally, I am grateful to Professor Jacques Berthoud of the University of York, whose remarks and suggestions were most useful and helped me to clarify and complete some points in the book for this revised and enlarged edition.

A note on texts

Unless otherwise specified, all the quotations from Shakespeare come from *The Complete Works*, Compact edition, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford, 1988).

Translator's note

Translating such polysemic terms as *la fête* poses problems in English, for reasons grounded in history, religion and modes of thought. As Michael Bristol shrewdly remarked in his review of the French version of François Laroque's book in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40: 3 (Autumn, 1989), '*La fête* is an expression with a somewhat broader range of meanings than feast or festivity. Both these ideas are included in *la fête*, but *la fête* also contains the Latinate sense of 'solemnity' or formal observance and . . . has the additional meaning of a "Saint's day".'