Chapter 2

Carnival and the Female Grotesque

This exaggeration has a positive, assertive character. The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth and a brimming-over abundance . . . The material bodily principle is a triumphant, festive principle, it is a ‘banquet for all the world’.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*

In this chapter, I examine the female grotesque in the context of the carnival and the carnivalesque. In the first section I briefly discuss the concept of the carnival with special attention to Bakhtin’s ideas and subsequent critiques, noting in particular the carnival’s ambiguous attitude to women and the gendered implication of the grotesque body. In the second and the third sections I explore the scope of applying Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival and ‘grotesque realism’ in understanding the representation of the female grotesque in two Renaissance plays, Ben Jonson’s city comedy, *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and Shakespeare’s history plays, *1Henry IV* (published in 1598, but performed probably in 1596/7) and *2Henry IV* (1598). By way of introducing the notion of Falstaff as the ‘female grotesque’, I refer to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597), the comedy in which Falstaff appears in female disguise as the grotesque old ‘Mother Pratt.’ In the final section of this chapter I focus on the ‘carnivalesque’ elements in *King Lear* which was performed in 1606 and appeared in print in the Quarto edition in 1608.

I. Carnival and the ‘second life of the people’: Bakhtin’s contributions

Carnival was celebrated throughout Europe in the early Modern Period, reaching its climax on Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras just before the beginning of Lent. Carnival is a time of festive abundance and over-indulgence; meat is consumed in large quantities. Carnival encourages drunkenness, disruptive behaviour and symbolic and disorderly conduct, actual misrule including increased sexual promiscuity, street violence and civil commotion. It is also the occasion for masquerades, disguise and processions, featuring role reversals and gender switching, together with special performance activities featuring both topical drama and traditional narratives.

Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theatres: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*
Contemporary critical interest in the carnival and the carnivalesque as a useful analytical tool in the conceptualization of social formation and social conflicts received a new impetus with the publication of the English translation of *Rabelais and his World* (1965) Indeed the overarching presence of Mikhail Bakhtin in discussions of the carnival often occludes the fact that carnival theory or its accounts did not originate with him. Bakhtin’s theories of the carnival have foregrounded two issues: the concept of ‘grotesque realism’ and the idea of carnival as a utopia. Since Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque body has been discussed in detail in my earlier chapter on theory, this introductory section attempts to provide a brief account of the Bakhtinian notion of carnival and the carnivalesque.

Bakhtin’s thesis on the carnival in Early Modern Europe is organized around his avowed aim to reassess the genius of François Rabelais who, he argues, has been misunderstood by and large because of the ‘nonliterary’ nature of his work, ‘that is the nonconformity of his images to the literary norms and canons prevailing in the sixteenth century and still prevailing in our own times.’ Rabelais’ images, says Bakhtin, have a ‘certain undestroyable nonofficial nature.’ He points out that since Rabelais’ work is deeply embedded in the tradition of folk culture, it requires a thoroughgoing understanding of the popular culture of the Middle Ages.

In Bakhtin’s analysis this folk culture may be understood as operating primarily along three axes: first the ritual spectacles or carnival pageants in fairs and marketplaces, second, the oral and written comic parodies of Latin and vernacular language and finally the various genres of billingsgate, that is, the coarse and familiar speech of the marketplace with its repertoire of curses, oaths, and profanities. All these aspects are broadly connected to folk humour and festivity, which are distinct from the ‘serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political cult forms and ceremonials.’ Equally significant is the carnival’s total disregard of ‘all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions’ and its hostility to ‘all that was immortalized and completed.’ Carnival festivity is not merely holiday recreation during a period of rest from work. It has a larger spiritual and ideological dimension because feasts always celebrated the recurrence of events in seasonal or historical cycles of time and were moreover linked to the juncture of symbolic death and renewal in the life of the community. Carnivals are thus ‘the second life’ of the people, a liberating possibility.
outside the repressive one of officialdom that allowed the folk to enter the ‘utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance.’ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note that for Bakhtin carnival is not simply a popular festive occasion but a condition of topsy turvy that operates on all levels—social class, language and forms of behaviour—creating a world where ‘all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled.’

It is evident that Bakhtin’s nostalgic longing for the lost tradition of medieval carnival is rooted in his attempt to seek a political alternative of social formation that is opposed to the repressive Stalinist regime during which he wrote his book. It is Stallybrass and White point out that, ‘Carnival for Bakhtin is both a populist Utopian vision of the world seen from below and a festive critique, through the inversion of hierarchy of the high culture.’

Ideologically Bakhtin’s view of carnival stands in direct opposition to what anthropologists have regarded as the ‘safety valve’ theory of the carnival. According to this view the carnival is an officially sanctioned ceremony that allows comic debunking and reversal in order to provide a safe outlet for the frustration and resentment of the populace, which might otherwise erupt in rebellion or revolution. Thus, a typical anthropological position—that of Max Gluckman in this case—argues that though the ostensible role of the ‘rites of reversal’ in a carnival is protest against established order, its ultimate intention is ‘to preserve and strengthen the established order.’

According to this conservative estimate the ultimate ideological function of carnival is containment of subversive potential and a consolidation of the power of authority. For a Marxist critic like Terry Eagleton, carnival does not embody any revolutionary potential because it is a ‘licensed affair’, a ‘permissible rupture of hegemony’ and is thus ineffectual.

However, the notion of carnival as a sanctioned and licensed interval of misrule breaks down in the face of historical evidence such as the people’s uprising that took place in 1580, in the carnival at the medieval French town of Romans, where urban craftsmen, labourers and peasants planned to murder the wealthy landowners and merchants. According to Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, the Romans carnival was an occasion where the plebeians symbolically acted out and rehearsed the bloody
encounters of February 1580; the carnival, ‘was a way to action, perhaps modifying the society as a whole in the direction of social change and possible progress.’

It is important to note that despite his radical reinterpretation of medieval popular culture Bakhtin makes no attempt to address the disruptive or subversive potential of such symbolic inversion as is occasioned by the carnival. While he recognizes ‘the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions’ during carnival, he places greatest stress upon the mingling of the utopian ideal and the real in carnival experience. Yet, in spite of Bakhtin’s eulogy of the egalitarian communal nature of popular culture expressed through carnival’s celebrations, not all members of the community enjoyed equal rights and freedom from oppressive conditions. Indeed, the weaker and marginalized sections of society—women and other minority groups—were often violently abused and demonized during carnivalesque rituals.

Bakhtin’s view of the carnival is thus an idealized and universalized account of carnival festivity and he is silent on the gendered dimension of such rituals. Of the few references that Bakhtin makes to the female grotesque in his work the most famous is the description of the terracotta figurines of senile pregnant hags:

This is a typical and strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed.

The glorification of popular festive traditions leads him to conclude that carnival is in no way ‘hostile to women’ and ‘does not approach her negatively.’ On the contrary women appear to embody the principles of grotesque realism:

In this tradition woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily sustenance to things, and destroys; but first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb. Such is woman’s image in the popular comic tradition.
Feminist history and literary scholarship have, however, been concerned with the question of women’s participation in carnivals, focusing on issues of whether carnivals created a space and time within which women could explore alternative forms of behaviour and gain a temporary liberation from sex-role stereotyping as well as various forms of patriarchal oppression. Natalie Zemon Davis’s influential essay ‘Woman on Top’ is an invaluable feminist enquiry into the gendered aspect of carnivals. Davis’s thesis argues for a radical re-valuation of the conservative anthropological view of carnival’s reversals or inversions as a safety valve and as a reinforcement of gender status quo in a hierarchical society. Sexual inversion— switches in gender roles—played a prominent part in popular cultural practices like the carnivals. They could range from transvestite disguises to the adoption of behaviour characteristic of the opposite sex, and carried radical social and political implications. Davis points out that the ‘image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place.’ According to Davis the woman on top was a ‘multivalent image’ that widened behavioural options for women both within and outside marriage and also sanctioned ‘riot and political disobedience’ for both men and women. However, she also notes that unruly women could be paraded through the marketplace in skimmington rides or ducked in ponds as punishment for being scolds or shrews. Thus it is possible to argue that popular carnival festivities display an ambiguity about unruly women. On the one hand the disorderly woman emerges as a threatening figure imbued with power to question, challenge and subvert various forms of social / political oppression through carnival’s topsy-turvy; on the other hand actual carnivals were not entirely positive and celebratory in their attitudes towards women. Popular festivities could be harsh in their dealing with unruly women or scolds who received spectacular and exemplary punishment. Thus the unruly woman, oppressed by other marginalized groups during festive inversions, was transformed into a figure of ‘displaced abjection.’

II. Women and carnival: the female grotesque in *Bartholomew Fair*

In this section I explore the possibility of reading Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) through Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnival and the gendered implication of his theory of the grotesque body. Chronologically *Bartholomew Fair* is a much later play than Shakespeare’s history plays, *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* and his tragedy *King Lear*;
however, the generic nature of Jonson’s play and its location in a fair facilitates an entry into the discussions of the carnival and carnivalesque, in the typically Bakhtinian sense of the terms. This is the logic of positioning *Bartholomew Fair* at the beginning of this chapter on the ‘female grotesque and carnival.’ I argue that though Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque body is meant to be ungendered, its attributes—open, protruding, porous, and transgressive—get encoded as female, and Ursula functions as an embodiment of this carnivalesque female grotesque.

In *Bartholomew Fair*, Quarlous’s diatribe against Winwife’s ‘widow-hunting’ introduces the image of the ageing female body as a figure of the grotesque:

There cannot be an ancient tripe or trillibub i’ the town, but thou art straight nosing it, and ‘tis a fine occupation thou’lt confine thyself to, when thou hast got one; scrubbing a piece of buff, as if thou hadst the perpetuity of Pannier Alley to stink in; or perhaps worse currying a carcass that thou hast bound thyself to alive.

(I. ii. 61-6)25

In the rest of this long passage Quarlous harps on the carnal aspect of marriages, comparing copulation to tomb raiding and tanning leather.26 Quarlous’ speech oscillates between sexist humour and revulsion. It is reminiscent of the grotesque satirical prose of Nashe and Aretino.27 The rhetoric of misogynist satire is just one mode through which this play expresses the notion of women as grotesque. However, it is the fair itself that provides the context for the play’s most powerful image of the grotesque female—the obese, sweating, shrewish Ursula. As the provider of roast meat, ale, tobacco and prostitutes, the plebeian ‘pig woman’ (II. ii. 69) caters to the carnal appetites of the fair-goers. She is an embodiment of what Bakhtin calls the ‘grotesque realism’ of the carnival, characterized by an abundance of the ‘material bodily principle’, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation and sexual life.29

However, Ursula does not enjoy the wholly celebratory status that Bakhtin’s thesis implies. Her representation is shaped by, and brings into sharp focus, cultural ambivalences towards women’s presence and participation in carnival festivities. As Stallybrass and White point out:
Carnival often violently abuses and demonizes the weaker, not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who don’t belong—in a process of displaced abjection.30

Ursula is a symbol of carnivalesque festive plenty—its physical and linguistic abundance—but her corporeal and verbal excesses also make her a butt of male ridicule and derision. The lubricious corpulence of Ursula arouses the revulsion of Quarlous. He describes her as ‘a walking sow of tallow’ (II. v. 72-3) and, unable to cope with her abusive language, even proposes that she be dunked into a horse pond (II. v. 108-10)—a ritual punishment meted out to the scold in the carnival.

The historical Bartholomew Fair31 was located in the Liberties of London, which also housed the theatres, hospitals and lazar houses.32 The location of Smithfield plays a crucial role in shaping the idea of woman as grotesque in Bartholomew Fair. According to Bakhtin carnivals enjoyed a certain ‘extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology.’33 However, it is crucial to remember that the ‘extraterritoriality’ of the ‘Liberties’ is a compromised, problematic arena where terms like liberty, freedom and license are double-edged. The duality of the fair’s notion of freedom is most prominent in Jonson’s representation of Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo. In the fair at Smithfield these women, unaccompanied by their husbands, are perceived as ‘free women’, a slang term for prostitutes.

The complex and multivalent image of female grotesque in Bartholomew Fair may be related to the changing face of the marketplace. Along with the transformations in the literal and metaphorical nature of the marketplace in Jacobean England, contemporary urban attitudes to marketplace festivities had altered significantly. The audience for whom Jonson and Middleton wrote their plays would ‘have both been aware of the traditional forms of celebration, and unable to accept them uncritically.’34 As a case in point one may turn to the historical Bartholomew Fair after which Jonson named his play. Though there was originally no distinction between the recreational and the commercial aspects, gradually the business potentials of the fair dwindled while the pleasure fair gained notoreity as a
season of utmost disorder and debauchery, by reason of the booths for drinking, music, dancing, stage play, drolls, lotteries, gaming, raffling and what not.\textsuperscript{35}

It is evident that for the authorities and for a large section of the bourgeois city-dwellers carnival festivity not only smacked of coarseness and vulgarity but was an occasion for plebeian anarchy, disorder and moral dissoluteness.

‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’: The fair at Smithfield

The notion of the carnival in contemporary records stands in sharp contrast to the ideological and symbolic function that Bakhtin traces in his analysis of the popular culture of the early modern period. Bakhtin views the marketplace as a secular public space free from the encroachment of official culture, where there is frank and free exchange among the members of the community and a total suspension of social hierarchies.\textsuperscript{36} Susan Wells has argued that while Bakhtin’s model of the carnival holds true for Rabelais’ France, it is not adequate for an understanding of the nature of carnivalesque festivities in Middleton and Jonson’s England. According to Wells, the marketplace became circumscribed by the ‘official order’ and had lost its quality of ‘openness and play’; it became the ‘location of exchange and profit’ rather than a ‘gathering place, a common place.’\textsuperscript{37} Susan Wells notes that this change was reflected in city comedy where:

the two contradictory aspects of the marketplace, a central urban institution of the preindustrial city—commerce and celebration—confront each other dramatically. Thus, the city comedy is an attempt to recover, by stating in new terms, that harmony between the commercial and communal organization of the city.\textsuperscript{38}

Jonson’s attempt to reconstitute the relationship between these contradictory aspects of marketplace festivities is marked by ambivalence. In \textit{Bartholomew Fair} Jonson seems willing to suspend his ‘deep mistrust of festivity and prolixity’\textsuperscript{39} to evoke the spirit of the carnivalesque practices associated with the marketplace. \textit{Bartholomew Fair} vividly evokes the popular festive spirit of abundance and conviviality; the smell of roast pig wafts through the fair, people converge in Ursula’s tavern for communal drinking and smoking, hobby-horses and ginger-bread are sold
while the entertainment includes puppet theatre and ballad singing. The fair’s regulars use a billingsgate rhetoric of obscenity and abuses and engage in mock or real skirmishes living up to the claims made in the Induction to present a play ‘merry, and as full of noise and sport, made to delight all, and to offend none.’ (Bartholomew Fair, Induction, ll. 74-6).

The carnivalesque fair in the play is meant to cater to the taste of the riotous and raucous populace satirically denigrated as ‘understanding gentlemen (Induction, l. 44).’ At the same time, it would appeal to the educated intellectual young men who frequented the Inns of Court. Jonson was himself familiar with the Inns of Court that were marked ‘not only by a lively literary and political atmosphere, but by a rich tradition of feasts, of times of ‘liberty’.’ The Inns of Court celebrations had much in common with the popular and secular marketplace festivities and their satires were linked to the carnival’s tradition of abuse, curses and profanities.

Yet, the festive atmosphere of the fair is vitiated by its foul deals. The Induction cautions the audience not to have unrealistic expectations from the play they are about to witness. The chief dramatis personae do not belong to the ‘sword and buckler age of Smithfield’ but are listed as a ‘strutting horse-courser, with a leer drunkard’, a ‘fine oily pig woman with her tapster’, a ‘consort of roarers for music’, a ‘civil cutpurse’, and ‘a sweet singer of new ballads allurant’ (Induction, ll. 105-14).

With these rogues, cutpurses and bawds, the fair’s ‘foulness’ is well established. Trickery and swindling, a patent feature of city-comedy, has become the business on which the fair thrives. As the owner of the pig booth and tavern, Ursula is a canny businesswoman ready to adulterate her tobacco and ale and overprice the roast pig as the occasion arises. Apart from housing Whit’s prostitution ring, her booth is the convenient bank for stolen goods and purses that Edgeworth steals from gullible customers like Bartholomew Cokes while Nightingale engages the latter’s attention with his ballad which is aptly titled ‘A caveat against cutpurses’ (III. iv. 29).

Instead of being the spontaneous exuberant expressions of an agrarian community that Bakhtin’s theory presupposes, carnival in Bartholomew Fair is a marketplace dominated by the plebeian whose festive celebrations are also shady business deals. The changing nature of the market economy with its tendency to commoditize all aspects of social and communal existence has facilitated this. The
spontaneous and exuberant communal festivity has been recast as commodities of pleasure for the likes of Littlewit, his wife, and Bartholomew Cokes. Cokes’ acerbic governor Wasp sums up his foolish ward’s naïve acquisitiveness and the temptations that the fair might hold for him:

If he go to the Fair, he will buy of everything to a baby there; and household stuff for that too. If a leg or an arm on him did not grow on, he would lose it i’ the press. (I. v. 107-9)

Ironically, it is Cokes’ betrothed Grace Wellborn who expresses her class snobbishness towards the fair through her contemptuous statement ‘there’s none goes thither of any quality or fashion’ (I. v. 123). However, almost all the Londoners, recognizable types from other city comedies, end up in the fair where pleasure has become business. With the exception of Quarlous, Winwife and Grace, they are either gulled or duped by the fair’s operators or their pretensions and hypocrisies are exposed through the events of the fair. The choice of the fair as the play’s locale fulfills Jonson’s attempts to link the satirical and moral imperatives of city-comedy with his need to represent a wide cross-section of society—the city with its variety, richness, muddle and sordidness—on stage.43

Jonson’s complex negotiation with marketplace festivities in Bartholomew Fair makes it notoriously difficult to classify either as satire or saturnalia. The play continually oscillates between the two modes so that the events and incidents in the fair become open to a host of interpretative possibilities. The fair, in the tradition of medieval morality plays,44 serves as a moral testing ground exposing the follies, hypocrisies and pretensions of its denizens as well as of outsiders or interlopers.

In the foul deals that the fair engages in, the crucial question is the social and class relation between those who cheat and those who get cheated. The very fact that London’s respectable bourgeoisie and figures of authority are cheated or humiliated in the hands of the plebeian community is strongly evocative of carnival’s world upside down where the symbolic and socially ‘low’ reigns over the ‘high’. Carnival’s central motif of inversion of social order45 as well as the ritual thrashing and abuse of a figure of authority are clearly indicated in the treatment meted out to Adam Overdo, Zeal-of-the-Land-Busy and Humphrey Wasp. As their names suggest they are exaggerated caricatures of legal religious and social authorities who have set themselves up as
keepers of order and sanctity. The carnival’s festive logic of topsy-turvy ensures that all these killjoys are put into the stocks. The fair clearly gives the upper hand to the rogues, bawds and cony catchers who constitute the socially and economically marginalized underbelly of seventeenth century English society. The ‘cheerful vulgarity’ of the plebeians is used as a ‘weapon against pretence and hypocrisy of the powerful.’ Through all these functions the Fair at Smithfield functions as the ‘privileged locus of inversion.’

Carnival’s topsy-turvy and the privileging of the material bodily principles, as Bakhtin stresses, are the festive expressions of the plebeian community. However, the stress on the collective communal nature of such celebration often occludes the specifically gendered implications of carnival practices. Carnival’s attitude to women’s participation in its rituals of inversions is fraught with anxieties about the destabilization of gendered hierarchy that may be caused by the ‘woman on top’. Such contradictions inform the representation of Ursula. The attributes of corporeal excess, fertility, comic sanctity and bawdry may be understood as aspects of what Bakhtin regards as the ‘grotesque realism’ of the carnival. However, unlike Bakhtin’s eulogy of popular culture and festivity, the female embodiment of ‘grotesque realism’ in Bartholomew Fair is expressive of carnival’s problematic negotiation with women.

‘The Sow of Smithfield’: Ursula in Bartholomew Fair

John Littlewit’s entreaty to his wife to express her longing for pig’s meat in ‘the heart of the Fair’ (I. v. 144-5) anticipates Ursula’s pig booth and tavern. Presiding over the booth dispensing roast meat, beer and ale to the Fair’s customers is Ursula. Like the meat that she sells, Ursula in her own assessment is ‘juicy and wholesome’ (II. v. 78). In her understanding pig’s meat is the panacea to all trouble; as she tells Knockem:

you shall not fright me with your lion-chop, sir, nor your tusks: you angry? You are hungry. Come, a pig’s head will stop your mouth, and stay your stomach at all times. (II. iii. 47-9)

Ursula is not only the chief provider of food and drink but she also caters to men’s carnal appetites by acting as a pimp. Adam Overdo identifies her as a ‘punk, pinnacle and bawd’ (II. ii. 71-2) who has been produced in the magistrate’s court. Ursula’s physical attributes and her status as the owner of the booth, which functions
as a tavern and a brothel\textsuperscript{50} make her the locus of all forms of fleshly appetite and bodily needs.

Bakhtin’s ideological compulsion to foreground the cosmic, social, collective Utopian nature of the carnival precludes any discussion of the gendered aspect of the grotesque body. Yet as feminist scholars have noted\textsuperscript{51} the open, communicative grotesque body may be culturally coded as feminine.\textsuperscript{52} The absent or repressed female element in Bakhtin’s universalized and essentialized grotesque body appears as the ‘pig woman’ in \textit{Bartholomew Fair}. Ursula is not only an obese woman. In Adam Overdo’s assessment she is the ‘the very womb and bed of enormity’ (II. ii. 102), a symbol of carnivalesque excess.

Bakhtin refers to the themes of ‘fertility, growth and brimming over-abundance’\textsuperscript{53} as characteristic of the bodily principle. As has been noted earlier, Ursula as ‘the mother of pigs’ is a comic Demeter, the goddess associated with ancient fertility cults. As Bakhtin notes, anatomical parts like belly and womb occupy a special position of significance vis-à-vis the grotesque body. Degradation and debasement in grotesque realism are positive. They are linked to a bringing down to earth which is the great womb and grave. The earth regenerates even as it swallows. Degradation is also linked to the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth.\textsuperscript{54}

Ursula delights in her corpulence, calling herself a ‘plain plump soft wench o’ the suburbs’ (II. v. 77-8). She draws attention to the ‘grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable’\textsuperscript{55} images of her body as she rebukes her servant and attendant Mooncalfe: ‘did not I bid you should get a chair let out o’ the sides for me, that my hips might play?’ (II. ii. 62-3)

Yet for all the carnivalesque association with fertility and feasting, Ursula’s corpulence makes her the very image of uncontrolled femininity. She is depicted as the threatening yet comical ‘other’ who evokes the typically grotesque responses of comic laughter and revulsion in the characters who are inexorably drawn to her booth. Quarlous mocks her immense bulk by referring to her as a ‘quagmire’ and a ‘bog’ (II.
v. 83-4). Ursula’s fatness becomes the subject of a bawdy sexist joke between him and Winwife:

Quarlous. Yes, he that would venture for’t, I assure him, might sink into her and be drown’d a week ere any friend he had could find where he were.

Winwife. And then he would be a fortnight weighing up again.

Quarlous. ’Twere like falling into a whole shire of butter; they had need be a team of Dutchmen, should draw him out.

(II. v. 87-92)

She is above all identified with her pig, an animal with rich and varying symbolic significance. Associated with gluttony in the Greek rhetorical tradition, the pig was identified as unclean in Judaic dietary laws. The biblical parable of Christ casting out the demons (St Mark 5:9-13) literally demonized the pig and turned it into a symbol of the outcast. In Medieval and Renaissance literature the pig was treated as an abomination, an emblem of ‘greed, drunkenness and lechery.’ From the seventeenth century it became associated with all that is contrary to bourgeois good manners and thus to be shunned by members of the polite society. Even within the carnival where the pig was at the centre of festivity it ‘was the locus of conflicting meanings’ and might become ‘the symbolic analogy’ of scapegoats and demonized ‘others’.

Like the pigs, which constitute her chief ware, Ursula becomes the repository of the contradictory meanings of appetite and abomination. This is perhaps best expressed through the responses of the Puritan Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. The gluttonous preacher holds the brief for pig as ‘a meat that is nourishing and may be longed for, and so consequently eaten; it may be eaten; very exceeding well eaten’ (I. vi. 50-2). Yet, this does not prevent him from condemning Ursula as the ‘fleshly woman’ who has to be ‘avoided’ as the chief temptress because she has ‘the marks upon her of the three enemies of man: the World, as being in the Fair; the Devil, as being in the fire; and the Flesh, as being herself’ (III. vi. 33-5).

Overdo’s response to her as the ‘very womb and bed of enormity’ encapsulates the response aroused by the abjected other. Ursula is a figure of ‘brimming over-abundance’ and fecundity, but this fertility is not necessarily joyous
and celebratory. On the contrary it evokes the culture’s horror and dread of female sexuality, a sexuality that exists outside the controlling mechanisms of the patriarchal family and state. Ursula’s reproductive capacity, metaphorically magnified, is monstrous because it is imagined as giving birth to the carnival’s monstrosities, or what Overdo calls ‘enormity.’ Located in the body of the plebeian woman, such a reproductive function is politically subversive and threatening to the body politic.

Ursula’s embodiment as carnivalesque excess links her to the Kristevan notion of the abject. The abject, according to Kristeva, is that which exists ‘beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.’ In spite of proximity it cannot ‘be assimilated.’ Most importantly ‘it beseeches, worries, fascinates desire, which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced’. Desire is sickened and rejects the abject. It draws the subject beset by abjection to ‘an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned.’

Ursula’s function as a symbol of carnivalesque excess is manifested not only in the huge uncontrollable bulk of her body but also in her behaviour and speech. Carnival, as Bakhtin observes, fosters frank and free exchange among members of the community and such exchange—conventionally termed ‘billingsgate’—often involves abuses, curses and oaths. This feature is evident in Ursula’s ability to hurl expletives at men who attempt to turn her into the butt of their sexist jokes. Of the language of the marketplace, or billingsgate, Bakhtin points out:

> Abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech. They were and are still conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability.

Bakhtin’s observations on the liberating potential of marketplace language have special significance for women who are more constrained than men by societal expectations of etiquette, civility and respectability. Thus, while Quarlous, Winwife and even Wasp can abuse or curse freely, such freedom of expression is unthinkable in women like Mistress Overdo or Win Littlewit who belong to the same social class. Ursula’s class identity frees her from the constraints of silence and good manners imposed on bourgeois citizens’ wives. Ursula has access to the obscene, billingsgate rhetoric of the market place that is otherwise a masculine prerogative. She curses Mooncalfe continually, calling him an ‘unlucky vermin’ (II. ii. 73), ‘a rogue’
(II. v. 43), ‘a thin lean polecat’ (II. v. 57) and ‘weasel’ (II. v. 61). Knockem is a ‘horse-leech’ (II. iii. 13) who has spread rumours of her being dead from a surfeit of tripe and ale. Aroused to fury by Quarlous’s insults and abuses she rails at him, ‘Out, you rogue, you hedge-bird, you pimp, you pannier-man’s bastard’ (II. v. 111-2). As Quarlous continues to laugh Ursula breaks into frenzied, almost hysterical torrents of sexual obscenities regarding his bastard status:

Do you sneer, you dog’s-head, you trendle-tail! You look as you were begotten a’top of a cart in harvest time when the whelp was hot and eager. Go snuff after your brother’s bitch, Mistress Commodity;

(II. v. 214-7)

Winwife, who suggests to Quarlous to make good their escape because ‘her language grows greasier than her pigs’ (II. v. 123) is subjected to her tongue-lashing:

Does’t so, snotty nose? Good Lord! Are you sniveling? You were engendered on a she-beggar in a barn, when the bald thrasher, your sire, was scarce warm.

(II. v. 224-6)

Ursula’s ability to communicate in the predominantly male linguistic register of abuses, curses and profanities places her at par with her male peer group; it allows her to be part of a ‘special collectivity, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally.’ At the same time it turns her into the proverbial scold or shrew. Carnivals were particularly hostile to the scold who was also by symbolic analogy the ‘the woman on top.’ Typical carnivalesque punishments included the cucking stool or the ducking stool,

a chair-like apparatus into which the offender was ordered, strapped and then to the jeers of the crowd, was dunked several times in water over her head—water that might be a local river but was equally likely to have been the local horsewash pond

When Ursula, aroused to fury by Quarlous’s reference to ‘sweating sickness’, accuses him of being an impecunious imposter and a carrier of venereal disease (II. i. 439-42), Quarlous takes recourse to the threat of the cucking stool:
Do you think there may be a fine new cucking-stool i’the Fair, to be purchased; one large enough I mean? I know there is a pond of capacity for her.

(II. v. 108-10)

Given the context, we know that Quarlous’ words are largely in the mode of a sexist joke but the point about the ambiguous status of women in carnivals is driven home; the carnival apparently creates a space for the unruly woman, but it also cruelly curbs actual instances of female insubordination. Thus within the patriarchal logic of the carnival it is entirely befitting that the fat fierce termagant should fall on the scalding pan that she was attempting to wield as a weapon against her abusers (II. v. 144). The ruckus that follows the accident is also an occasion for further sexist humour among Ursula’s male companions. The treatment of Ursula’s scalded leg creates the opportunity for a grotesque description of female body:

Knockem: Body o’me! She has the mallanders, the scratches, the crown scab, and the quitter bone i’ the other leg. (II. v. 167-8)

Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival refers not only to linguistic transgressiveness, but to the body, which ‘is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits.’ Unlike the classical body whose smooth, finished exterior is fenced off from other bodies, the open porous grotesque body presents apertures, orifices and protuberances through which it is in continual touch with the world outside. The Bakhtinian grotesque body connects to the world not only through eating, drinking death and birth but through its fluid excretions like tears, sweat and urine. As she makes her first appearance Ursula complains that she is all ‘fire and fat’ (II. ii. 48) and will melt away to ‘the first woman, a rib again’ (II. ii. 50) Supervising the roasting of pigs, her body becomes a vessel through which the copious sweat pours out:

I am afraid. I do water the ground in knots, as I go, like a great garden pot; you may follow me by the S’s I make. (II. ii. 48-51)

The connection between production of bodily fluids and the construction of the grotesque body acquires specifically female dimensions once it is read in conjunction with Renaissance discourses about the female body’s tendency to produce excessive fluids. As Gail Kern Paster points out, ‘medical texts, iconography and the
proverbs of oral culture’ inscribed ‘women as leaky vessels.’ Medical theories regarded women’s bodies as made of watery substances and as marked, therefore, by the production of fluids—tears, milk, menstrual blood and excess urine. The production of such fluid and its evacuation were seen as a specifically female lack of bodily control.

‘A free-woman and a lady’: City Wives and Carnival

Ursula is not the play’s only leaky vessel. Early modern culture’s ideas about the excessive production of fluids in women and the need for their evacuation is manifested most strongly in Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo, both of whom feel an urgent need to relieve their bladders at the fair. The biological function of excretion in women is staged ‘as an engendered joke’ which simultaneously endangers their social respectability. Bourgeois city wives, constrained by the socio-cultural norms of decorum and manners proper to ladies, are deeply embarrassed by this natural need. For them the functions of the body natural belong to the category of the unmentionable and can only be articulated through euphemisms. The pregnant Win Littlewit broaches the subject to her husband as a ‘thing I am ashamed to tell’ (III. vi. 114). If Win can only refer to her need as ‘I have very great what sha’call’um John’ (III. vi. 120), Mistress Overdo’s position is further compromised; she has to ‘entreat a courtesy of’ (IV. i. 218) none other than the inebriated Captain Whit, the keeper of the fair’s brothel. She ‘cannot with modesty speak it out’ (IV. iv. 188) and like Win Littlewit must whisper it in the man’s ear.

It is Ursula who provides the fair’s only pisspot, the bottom of an old bottle. Enraged by Whit’s suggestion that she help the ‘velvet woman’ to a ‘jordan’, Ursula treats Mistress Overdo as a common punk. The fate of the Justice’s wife is not limited to suffering Ursula’s verbal abuse; she has to encounter the wrath of the actual punk Alice and is subjected to a thrashing while she enters Ursula’s booth to take her turn at the chamber-pot. Alice’s attack is based on assumption that Mistress Overdo is one of the ‘privy rich’ (IV. v. 69) whores from the city who lure away the fair’s customers by virtue of their ‘caps and hoods of velvet’ (IV. v. 69). Alice presumes Mistress Overdo is a prostitute because sex-workers used pissing after copulation as a form of contraception and as a preventive against venereal diseases.
The semiotic connection between whores and the fair’s only chamber-pot has significant gender and class ramifications—all women who venture into the public, carnivalesque domain are potential prostitutes. Even before Alice hurls her accusations at Mistress Overdo, the canny Ursula perceives this link and seizes it as an opportunity to further her flesh trade:

An’ you be right Barthol’-mew-birds, now show yourselves so: we are undone for want of fowl i’ the Fair, here. Here will be ‘Zekiel Edgworth and three or four gallants with him at night, and I ha’ neither plover nor quail for ’em. Persuade this between you two, to become a bird o’ the game, while I work the velvet woman within, as you call her.

(IV. v. 14-19)

For bourgeois women to roam unescorted in the fairground, to express their bodily needs of excretion is to become ‘fowls’ of the Fair. Ursula’s punning metaphor draws upon the problematic of women’s visibility in the public space; it turns the woman into a consumable food item, a fowl, and also morally indicts her as foul. Grace Wellborn’s contempt for the Fair is class snobbishness compounded with an internalization of patriarchy’s norms of behaviour befitting a lady. Openly antagonistic to carnival festivity, Grace maintains her distance from the fair’s hoi polloi and its hurly-burly. Her cold chastity makes her the picture of femininity approved by writers of conduct books and sermons. If Grace embodies the official ideal of the classical body, closed, monumental and sealed off from the world, the bourgeois city wives present its polar opposite—the female body which is ‘naturally grotesque.’ According to Stallybrass’ famous postulation, the carnivalesque grotesque body—open, porous and transgressive—acquires special valence in the context of the early modern culture’s norms and strictures regarding female conduct. Patriarchal surveillance ‘concentrated upon three specific areas: the closed mouth, chastity, and threshold of the house’ and often collapsed the three.

The sight of Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo, sans husband, is culturally overdetermined. Since they inhabit the carnivalized space of the Fair located in ‘London’s licentious Liberties’ it is natural that men should take the liberty of propositioning them into taking up prostitution. By identifying women’s presence
outside the threshold of the house with a lack of chastity, this covertly misogynistic
text represents Win and Mistress Overdo as transgressive, grotesque women. The
multiple possibilities of Win’s transgressions are hinted at early in the text. She falls
in with her husband’s plan and uses her pregnancy as an excuse to insist on her
longing for pig’s meat at the Fair. Dame Purecraft regards her daughter’s desire as a
‘natural disease of women’ (I. vi. 41) and Busy similarly attempts to give his learned
opinion on the connection between ‘carnal disease or appetite’ and female nature
(I. vi. 48-9). In the figure of the pregnant Win Littlewit and her longing to feast on
pig’s meat the text collapses appetite and female sexual desire. The latter always
runs the risk of becoming excessive or uncontrolled. As Littlewit so perceptively tells
his wife, once she has ‘begun with pig’ she may ‘long for anything’ (III. vi. 8-9).

Win does indeed express her longing for other forms of forbidden pleasure. ‘Is
not this a finer life, lady, than to be clogged with a husband?’ (V. iv. 58) Edgeworth
asks Win Littlewit in the puppet booth where they are waiting for the play to begin.
Win’s prompt reply, ‘Yes, a great deal’ (V. iv. 59) is an indication that Knockem and
Whit were after all correct in their assessment of Win’s longing for freedom from her
silly husband. Mistress Overdo, who has been mocked by Wasp as a bossy, ‘control-
Freak’ woman trying to usurp the prerogative of her Justice husband, commits greater
acts of transgression. She gets herself drunk on ‘Urs’la’s ale and aquavitae’
(V. iv. 31) and when Adam Overdo intends to unveil the final enormity of the fair he
discovers his wife vomiting into a basin.

In the fair’s distorted relation between commerce and celebration, women—
irrespective of their social class and calling—become commodities that men buy for
the pleasure at the fair. In a grotesque parody of the blazon, Jordan Knockem, horse
courser, makes an assessment of Win’s physical assets as if she were a ‘delicate dark
chestnut’ filly being sold in the fair (IV. v. 21-27). Knockem and Whit, the fair’s
operators in the sex trade, realize that in order to trap Win Littlewit to become ‘a bird
o’ the game’ they must bait her with the idea of freedom as an attractive proposition.

Freedom or liberty is one of the most important motifs of the carnival but in
the specific space of the marketplace and its tangled relations between business and
pleasure, freedom is riddled with contradictions. As Susan Wells points out:
To ‘take up the freedom of the city’ denoted, ideologically, participation in the City’s independence, in that communal existence legally recognized in the Charter. But by the Jacobean period, ‘taking up freedom’ was a purely commercial act, and not a very wise one at that.

Festive liberty carries dubious implications for the bourgeois women in the carnivalesque fair at Smithfield, where a ‘free woman’ is a slang term for a prostitute. Whit similarly presents the ‘de honest woman’s life’ as ‘a scurvy dull leef’, the life of a ‘bondwoman’. Once she is willing to get rid of her honesty or marital chastity as a piece of useless baggage, she will be able to lead the life of a ‘free woman and a lady’. Jonson’s satire on city women is expressed in Knockem and Whit’s neat formulations about what it means to be a lady. In the fair at Smithfield woman’s freedom is troped exclusively in terms of multiple, and often extravagant, relations to commodities; thus plebeian women like Ursula and Joan Trash are sellers of commodities, whereas bourgeois women are turned into sexual commodities and this in turn ensures their status as ‘ladies’ because moneyed women are the largest consumers in the burgeoning market.

According to Bakhtin, carnival’s ‘grotesque realism’ prioritizes the protuberances and orifices of the body connected with eating, drinking, defecation, copulation, pregnancy and birth. Male and female sexual parts—the penis, the breast, the vagina—coalesce to produce a truly hermaphroditic entity or what is commonly understood as an ungendered body, an idealized collective corporeality. How can such a synthesis of marketplace corporealties be re-presented in the theatre? *Bartholomew Fair* singles out an obese, sweating, scolding ‘pig-woman’ as the embodiment of the carnival’s ‘grotesque’ corporeality. Through her the subversive potential of the unruly ‘woman on top’ gets transformed into an entertaining spectacle equivalent to the risqué joke of the fat fiery termagant wielding her ineffectual scalding pan. Indeed, the last image we have of Ursula in the play is her pursuit of Troubleall who has stolen her dripping pan. The revelation of her identity to Overdo signals the comic denouement of the play. Adam Overdo, the judge of the Court of Pie-Powders, which met for three days of the year, for ‘the redresse of all disorders’ committed in the Fair, is introduced in Act II as an over-zealous judge who has taken upon himself
the task of detecting, ‘those foresaid enormities’ of the Fair (II. i. 41-2). When he finally encounters ‘the sow of enormity’ (V. vi. 57) the play momentarily creates the possibility of a harsh punishment for Ursula whose booth is the centre of the fair’s criminal activity. Yet the carnivalesque topsy-turvy of the fair has been more than playfully subversive in its ‘reversal of the hierarchic levels’. As Jonathan Haynes points out,

the plots follow the uncrowning, mocking, and humiliation of the bourgeois city characters’ pretensions to honour (Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo), righteousness (Rabbi Busy) and authority (Justice Overdo and Humphrey Wasp). The symbolic leveling—a clear indication of the fusion of the Saturnalian and the satiric impulses of the play—determines its comic closure. In the final scene of Bartholomew Fair Quarlous reminds Justice Overdo that he is ‘Adam, flesh and blood’ (V. vi. 97) and prevails upon him to invite everyone to supper at his place to ‘drown the memory of all enormity in your biggest bowl at home’ (V. vi. 100-1). The demands of the comic genre, no less than those of the carnival, in Bartholomew Fair, allow Ursula to be included in the off-stage communal feast which is promised at the end of the play. Ursula is perhaps the crucial link in the intertextual relation between Ben Jonson’s Bartholomew Fair (1614) and Shakespeare’s Henry IV (1596-7). John Falstaff names a certain ‘old Mistress Ursula’ as his fiancée; he claims that he has been sending a letter to her and has ‘weekly sworn to marry’ her ‘since I perceived the first white hair of my chin’ (2 Henry IV, I. ii. 241-2). Though Ursula is never referred to again in 2 Henry IV it is likely that Jonson may have developed, in his ‘pig woman’, the feminine possibilities already present in Shakespeare’s obese unruly knight.

In Bartholomew Fair, the fair at Smithfield is the site where Jonson conducts his complex negotiations with the satire and Saturnalia. The fair, characterized by an atmosphere of festive joie de vivre, and also with a form of social leveling, provides an obvious example of the carnival. Dominating the carnival at Smithfield is Ursula, the ‘fatness of the fair’. The bulging, oversized, protuberant body of Ursula, dripping sweat as she moves, is in constant touch with the world. Her corporeality is represented as lacking borders and margins. It disrespects rules and positions and
occupies the condition of the ambiguous and in-between. This makes it both grotesque and what Julia Kristeva terms abject; it simultaneously fascinates desire and creates sickening revulsion. However, the notion of carnival need not be limited to specific festive occasions nor to spaces like the fair or marketplace exclusively. As Stallybrass and White have pointed out, the significance of the carnival lies in its emergence as an epistemological, analytic category especially when displaced into the categories of symbolic inversion and transgression.\textsuperscript{82}

**III. Carnival and feminization of the male body: the fortunes of Falstaff**

Critics like Robert Stamm have noted the demystificatory potential of the carnival, its attitude of critical disrespect, and its radical opposition to the illegitimately powerful.\textsuperscript{83} The idea of the carnival as a privileged locus of inversion, a topsy-turvy of social hierarchy as well as a celebration of heteroglossia, allows spaces to become carnivalized. The tavern of Eastcheap in *Henry IV* (especially part I) becomes such a carnivalized site. Characterized by excessive feasting, drinking, and merry making, a social leveling between Hal the heir apparent and Falstaff the ‘misleader of youth’, the tavern enjoys an extraterritoriality or liberty that according to Bakhtin characterize the carnival.

Falstaff’s feminization occurs through the representations of his body as open, wet, obese and reproductive.\textsuperscript{84} The continual references to Falstaff’s obesity—particularly his belly as womb—and garrulity make him the feminized embodiment of carnivalesque ‘grotesque realism’. Through his role as the carnivalesque lord of mis[s]-rule\textsuperscript{85} Falstaff poses a feminized challenge to the patriarchal and masculinist ideologies of chivalry, kingship and the nation state that mark the history plays. In psychoanalytic terms Falstaff’s metonymic position is that of the ‘fantasized pre-oedipal maternal’\textsuperscript{86} who plays a crucial role in shaping Hal’s male subjectivity. Falstaff is the grotesque mother who has to be abjected so that Hal can achieve the true phallocratic ideal in his coronation as Henry V. The fortunes and fate of Falstaff indicate the ideological imperative of the history plays to expel the grotesque feminized ’other’ so that the map of patriarchal culture may be carefully drawn.


Playing the woman’s part: Falstaff in The Merry Wives of Windsor

In The Merry Wives of Windsor (1597) Sir John Falstaff makes a brief appearance as Mistress Ford’s ‘maid’s aunt, the fat woman of Brentford’ (IV. ii. 67) providing a unique instance of a cross-dressed male character in a Shakespearean play. Falstaff’s transvestite disguise that turns him into an obese bearded woman serves as an apt theatrical metaphor of his grotesque feminine presence in The Merry Wives of Windsor and Henry IV parts 1 and 2. At the level of plot, Falstaff’s female disguise is a sequel, and as Roger Moss notes, a rather weak one, to the genuinely comic laundry basket fiasco in Act 3 Scene 3. Falstaff is subjected to a second bout of chastisement for his lechery and Ford is convinced that his suspicion of being cuckolded by Falstaff is a figment of his jealous imagination. The ‘merry and yet honest’ (IV. ii. 95) wives of Windsor prove for a second time how adept they are at engineering plots to fool men.

However, during performance, the sight of Falstaff in drag has immense comic potential. The audience’s expectation of crude slap-stick humour is fulfilled as Ford thrashes Falstaff and hurls a volley of abuses at him: ‘Out of my door, you witch, you rag, you baggage, you polecat, you runnion!’ (IV. ii. 171-2). More importantly, the sequel scores over the original; the entry of the obese lecherous knight ‘with a great peard’ (IV. ii. 180) in an old woman’s gown, and muffler is a moment of great visual comedy. In the context of the contemporary public theatre dependent on stage male transvestitism—boy actors playing the woman’s part—Falstaff’s female disguise has multiple levels of signification. On stage where slim beardless boys played the role of nubile heroines it is Falstaff’s fatness, memorably captured in Mistress Ford’s image of him as a beached whale with ‘tuns of oil in his belly,’ (II. i. 62), that turns his disguise into a joke. Yet, paradoxically, the very fatness that makes his transvestism ridiculous also sanctions it. The fat man is akin to a woman and Falstaff’s cross-dressing underscores the gendered implication of his obesity.

The fat man was believed to be lacking in sexual potency, culturally endorsed medical notion that can be traced to Aristotle. In Falstaff’s case suspicion of his failing virility is further accentuated by the sexual quibble implicit in his name—he is fall-staff or fallen / limp penis. He has to suffer the ignominy of being put into a buck-basket crammed with foul smelling clothes full of grease and thrown into the
Thames (III. v. 80-113). Ducking into the river or pond was the traditional punishment reserved for the scold. To Mistress Quickly’s malapropism about Ford’s servants who ‘misted their erection’ (III. v. 38), Falstaff retorts wryly: ‘So did I mine, to built upon a foolish woman’s promise’ (III. v. 39-40). Erectile failure and hence a form of emasculation implies femaleness. In 2 Henry IV Mistress Quickly’s anxious query to Falstaff, after he has had a scuffle with Poins ‘Are you not hurt i th’ groin? Me thought’a made a shrewd thrust at your belly’ (2 Henry IV, II. iv. 207-8), shifts the emphasis from a ‘masculine groin (in danger of castration) to the more feminine belly, the ‘already castrated’ vulnerable recipient and receptacle of a ‘shrewd thrust.

The feminized implications of Falstaff’s body and belly are brought out through his discovery that that ‘water swells a man’ (III. v. 14). The similarities between Falstaff’s swollen body/belly and that of a pregnant woman is explored in the punning metaphor that he could well have become a ‘mountain of mummy’ (III. v. 16-7). Given the play’s build-up of Falstaff’s feminized corporeality, stepping into a woman’s clothes seems the most obvious choice.

If the male disguise of the heroine of Shakespearean romantic comedy serves to flaunt the boy actor’s maleness then Falstaff in woman’s attire highlights the semiotic connection between fatness and repulsive femaleness. It drives home the point that the gross corporeality of the fat man—protruding belly, buttocks and fleshy chest reminiscent of breasts—can only be negatively construed as female. This is expressed through Falstaff’s incarnation as Mother Prat. Falstaff’s transvestitism evokes the misogynistic fears of men who do not like it ‘when a ‘oman has a great peard’ (IV. ii. 180).

The bourgeois setting of The Merry Wives of Windsor foregrounds propriety and property relations, robbing the fat truant knight of the charismatic vitality of the Mock King, or Lord of Misrule—roles that he plays with great élan in the carnivalesque realm of Eastcheap. In 1 Henry IV, Falstaff’s carnal desires can transform time magically; as Hal’s famous opening greeting puts it, Falstaff’s need to know the hour is determined solely by whether clocks are: ‘the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping –houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta’ (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 8-10).
In a carnivalized world, Falstaff’s lechery and wantonness are attributes to be celebrated. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Falstaff’s attempts to seduce Mistress Ford and Mistress Page can only be interpreted as his lack of true gentlemanly behaviour and breeding. The city wives are not the tavern keepers and whores of Eastcheap but sophisticated and ‘virtuous’ women. They take offence at Falstaff’s audacity in regarding them as sexually available. As the outraged Mistress Ford puts it, she has been misled by Falstaff’s outward shows of courteousness:

> And yet he would not swear, praised women’s modesty, and gave such orderly and well-behaved reproof to all uncomeliness that I would have sworn his disposition would have gone to the truth of his words

(II. i. 54-8).

Falstaff stands no chance against these wives of Windsor, who are a dangerous combination of mirth and honesty. Moreover, they are city women and not tavern keepers and prostitutes. He can hardly dismiss them as he did Mistress Quickly with ‘Go to, you are a woman, go’ (*1 Henry IV*, III. iii. 60). That these ‘merry’ wives are capable of practicing deception and cruelty is brought out through Mistress Ford’s plan of revenge:

> I think the best way were to entertain him with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease

(II. i. 63-5).

Since these women are also ‘honest’, the play ensures that the function of these rather unusual figures of marital chastity is to consolidate and further the interest of the bourgeois family. Essentially conservative in their sexual stance, they have the power to curb the sexual excesses and obsessions of men—Falstaff’s lechery and Ford’s suspicions of being made a cuckold. Yet despite the apparent power that these women wield over the lives of men, to play a woman—as Falstaff’s disguise brings out—is to be rendered powerless.96

Legend has it that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was written within fourteen days at the behest of Queen Elizabeth, who having taken great delight in Falstaff’s role in *1 Henry IV*, wanted to see a play in which the knight was in love.97 If one were to accept this as truth, then Shakespeare’s comedy about of the fate of Falstaff’s
amorous ventures expresses his deeply ambivalent attitude towards the power of the female monarch to command the playwright. Master Ford’s fulminations against the cross-dressed Falstaff, ‘A witch, a quean, an old cozening quean!’ (IV. ii. 158), not only collapses the figure of the witch and the whore but its sly punning on quean / queen is a daring, almost scandalous allusion to the highest authority, the figure of the female monarch. Ford is obviously a ridiculous figure, a caricature of a husband obsessed with the fear of being cuckolded, but his words may not be dismissed entirely; his reiterations ‘we are simple men’, (IV. ii. 160), that ‘such daubery as this is, beyond our element’ (IV. ii. 162-3) and ‘we know nothing’ (IV. ii. 163-4), emphasizes male insecurity and anxiety with the specifically feminine form of cunning that witchcraft entails. The play’s generic status—as a bourgeois city comedy—creates scope for dispelling masculine anxieties about ‘grotesque’ mannish women through the carnivalesque thrashing of the witch of Brentford. As Falstaff in The Merry Wives of Windsor realizes, feminine ‘masquerade’ is a risky business. It entails being driven beyond the threshold of the house into the street to be publicly shamed and humiliated, to become the figure of abjection whose body bears the brunt of carnivalesque brutality.

The Henry IV plays had created a Falstaff whose charm rests on the power of his tongue to create multiple identities and ‘extricate himself from any awkward situation with rhetorical ingenuity.’ By contrast, the ‘admirable dexterity of wit’ (IV. v. 112) that Falstaff in The Merry Wives of Windsor claims to have saved him from the stocks is mere bombast, a pathetic attempt to revive the reputation for verbal ingenuity that the audience associates with him. Falstaff’s transvestite disguise in The Merry Wives of Windsor foregrounds patriarchal responses to the grotesque woman in a provincial middle class setting where the witch is not a figure arousing supernatural fear and dread, but a prostitute-cum-procuress who works her charms and spells under the guise of fortune-telling (IV. ii. 161-2) The fat old Mother Prat, the witch of Brentford, is threatening because s/he has access to the private chambers of the women and can carry secret missives from potential lovers. S/he is the medium through which the outside infiltrates the closed, sealed ‘patriarchal territory.’

The bearded witch is not only physically grotesque, but also an agent through whom we can view, from a distorting perspective, the grotesqueness potentially
It is of course dramatically ironic that Falstaff who had come with the intention of seducing Mistress Ford should be punished for his presumed role as a bawd. The episode of his being beaten by Ford is a parodic enactment of the carnivalesque practice of the ritual thrashing of the scapegoat. By transforming Falstaff into the fat woman of Brentford, the city wives make a scapegoat of and punish the grotesque feminine. Though Falstaff does not make an appearance in the guise of a woman in 1 and 2 Henry IV, his famous ‘polymorphous perversity’ is displayed through the multiple levels in which he plays the woman’s part in the history plays, which otherwise provide little or no scope for women’s active agency.

Playing Holidays: Falstaff as the Mistress of Misrule in 1 Henry IV

I return to the Henry IV plays, therefore, from a perspective upon Falstaff’s ‘femininity’ provided by The Merry Wives of Windsor. The paradox of the Henry IV plays—that these are Shakespeare’s finest histories as well the least historic—owes much to the presence of the fat Falstaff. The exchanges or ‘flytings’ between Hal and Falstaff (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 1-105) evoke an atmosphere of jolly conviviality, the easy camaraderie of a homosocial culture, which is entirely free of moral opprobrium. As Neil Rhodes argues, the vigorous use of base comparisons and low abuse owes much to Nashe’s grotesque comic prose for its vitality. Falstaff addresses the heir apparent as ‘lad’, ‘sweet wag’, ‘mad wag’, and ‘the most comparative, rascalliest sweet young Prince’ (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 1, 23, 43, 77-8) terms, which imply his complete disregard for social hierarchy. The conversations between the Prince and his ‘old lad of the castle’ (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 40) evoke the ‘freedom, frankness and familiarity’ shared by community members in the carnivalesque marketplace. The tavern at Eastcheap becomes a privileged festive site, enjoying what Bakhtin identifies as ‘a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology.’ In the carnival at Eastcheap, Falstaff presides as an ageing, scurrilous and subversive figure of Misrule. He treats Prince Harry not only as a social equal but also with amused condescension, mockingly transferring on to Hal the role of Vice:

O thou hast damnable iteration, and art indeed able to corrupt a saint.
Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal. (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 87-8)
Falstaff creates romanticized myths of his Robin Hood-like, carnivalesque, nocturnal revelry:

Marry, then sweet wag, when thou art king, let us not that are squires of the night’s body be called thieves of the day’s beauty. Let us be Diana’s foresters, Gentlemen of the Shade, Minions of the Moon; and let men say we be men of good government, being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal.

(1 Henry IV, I. ii. 22-8)

Falstaff presents his subversive activities—‘stealing’—as good government, expecting an endorsement from the heir apparent. Through his desire to be regarded as ‘Diana’s forester’ (I. ii. 24) he is making an appeal to the Virgin queen of England—commonly referred to as Cynthia and Diana—seeking the approval of the Queen herself for his unruliness. The specifically feminized form of unruliness evoked through the presence and authority of powerful women is, as Laroque points out, implied through the pun on misrule:

the allusion to Diana and the moon contributes to making Falstaff the champion of carnivalesque misrule in the history plays linked to the ‘monstrous regiment of women’—by witches like Joan of Arc or amazons like Margaret (wasn’t misrule essentially regarded then as a ‘rule of mis(s)?’)

Falstaff’s misrule is significant in the context of the play’s misogyny, expressed through its exclusion of powerful women; the four women characters who appear in Henry IV 1 and 2 are largely cameos and powerless either in high or low life. More importantly, the play creates vivid images of unnatural and monstrous feminine presence. Right at the beginning of the play, Westmorland’s reports about the fate of Mortimer’s men (I. i. 38-46) contains accounts of Welshwomen who commit monstrous acts of ‘beastly shameless transformation’ (I. i. 44) on the corpses of English soldiers. At Shrewsbury Falstaff re-enacts this monstrous, ‘feminine’ act when he stabs the dead Hotspur in the thigh (1 Henry IV, V. iv. 126). The negative associations of femininity in 1 Henry IV may be traced to the history play’s ideological bias towards a phallocratic ideal and its status as a masculinist genre.
The valorization of a masculinist world order is perhaps best expressed through the fear of effeminacy that haunts both Hotspur and Hal. Hotspur’s angry declamation against the effeminate courtier (1 Henry IV, I. iii. 46, 55) as well as his sarcastic remarks about Glendower, whose musical accomplishments are seen as signs of effeminacy (1 Henry IV, III. i. 124-32), may be read as signs of this anxiety. Hotspur equates masculinity with physical valour; he asserts this when he tells his wife, before he leaves for the battle, that this is no time ‘To play with maumets and to tilt with lips’ (II. iii. 88).\textsuperscript{113}

At Eastcheap Hal mocks and mimics a typical day in the life of the Hotspur Percy who kills

some six or seven dozen of Scots at breakfast, washes his hands, and says to his wife, ‘Fie upon this quiet life! I want work’ ‘O my sweet Harry,’ says she, ‘how many hast thou killed today?’ Give my roan horse a drench,’ says he, and answers, ‘Some fourteen’ an hour after; ‘a trifle, a trifle’ (1 Henry IV, II. iv. 100-6).

Despite this caricature of Hotspur’s militarism, Hal can only vindicate himself in the eyes of the world and his father by giving up his youthful ‘follies’ and asserting his true manhood in the battle at Shrewsbury. A tone of defiant self-congratulation is evident in Hal’s apparent disparagement of his own inadequacies as a lover when he woos Catherine at Agincourt (Henry V, V. ii. 133-68):

If I could win a lady at leap-frog, or by vaulting into my saddle with my armour on my back . . . I should quickly leap into a wife.

(V. ii. 137-140)

The phrase ‘leap into a wife’ is telling because it clearly instantiates his erotic relation with Kate as an extension of his military identity. Henry V’s courtship with the French princess is akin to his military aggression and conquest of France. Like Hotspur, he too has great contempt for fellows ‘of infinite tongue, that can rhyme themselves into ladies’ favours’ (Henry V, V. ii. 156-7) and regards eloquence and lover’s protestations as effeminate and hypocritical (Henry V, V. ii. 144-145).

As a stereotypical ‘braggart soldier’ Falstaff’s words and actions run counter to the chivalric code of masculinist military honour that Hal and Hotspur glorify. He
debunks codes of chivalry through his catechism on honour (1 Henry IV, V. i. 129-40) and before the battle at Shrewsbury, he tells Hal, ‘I would ’twere bed-time, Hal and all well’ (1 Henry IV, V. i. 125).114 Falstaff’s subversion of the masculinist ideologies of chivalry and valour is best brought out in his engagement in the battle of Shrewsbury. This mistress of Misrule is a canny opportunist who turns war into profit-making business by getting ‘in exchange of one hundred and fifty soldiers three hundred odd pounds’ from the king’s exchequer (1 Henry IV, IV. ii. 13-14). He conscripts a grotesque ragamuffin army:

slaves as ragged a Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton’s dogs licked his sores—and such as indeed were never soldiers, but discarded unjust servingmen, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen, the cankers of a calm world and a long peace, ten times more dishonourable-ragged than an old feazed ensign;

(1 Henry IV, IV. ii. 24-31)

Falstaff’s lack of moral or humane compunctions functions as a devastating critique of war where soldiers are mere cannon fodder. To Hal’s censure that he ‘did never see such pitiful rascals’ (1 Henry IV, IV. ii. 63), he replies nonchalantly:

Tut, tut, good enough to toss, food for powder, food for powder.
They’ll fill a pit as well as better.

(1 Henry IV, IV. ii. 64-6)

His bombastic lie about the bottle of sack in his holster: ‘There’s that will sack a city’ (1 Henry IV, V. iii. 54-5), serves to deflate military honour. In his ‘resurrection’ and eloquent defense of counterfeiting death (1 Henry IV, V. iv. 112-125), Falstaff embodies the popular truth that ‘Carnival, like the king, never dies.’115 Hal’s description of him as the ‘sweet creature of bombast’ (1 Henry IV, II. iv. 318) evokes both Falstaff’s corpulence and his verbal copia. Obese, drunken, lazy, lying and cowardly, Falstaff nevertheless embodies carnival’s joie de vivre.
Girth, garrulity and the grotesque feminine

Fatness is the essence of the carnival. Bakhtin refers to a popular seventeenth century comic folklore figure called Gros Guillaume (Fat William), who was regarded as an incarnation of festive feasting:

He was unusually obese and had to make well-planned contortions to reach his own navel. He was girt with two belts: one under his chest, the other under his belly, so that his body resembled a wine barrel. His face was thickly powdered with flour, which he shed on all sides when he gesticulated. Thus the figure was the symbol of bread and wine in bodily form.116

Hal’s mocking question ‘How long is’t ago, Jack, since thou sawest thine own knee?’(1 Henry IV, II. iv. 318-9) echoes the later images of Gros Guillaume. The exchange between the Lord Chief Justice and Falstaff (2 Henry IV, I. ii. 137-144) with its puns on belt, waist and waste, similarly evoke the carnivalesque expanse of the latter’s body with its focus on his great belly. The belly and the mouth are the anatomical parts most closely linked with carnivalesque feasting as well as the Bakhtinian ‘grotesque realism’. Eating and drinking are among the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its open, unfinished nature, its interactions with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense.117 Falstaff’s corporeality is memorably associated with his phenomenal consumptions of sack that distend his belly and affect his brains. He is ‘fat-witted with the drinking of old sack’ and unbuttoning ‘after supper’ (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 2-3).

In his mock role-playing as the king who takes his wayward madcap son to task for his disreputable companions (1 Henry IV, II. iv. 435-46), Hal’s speech focuses on Falstaff’s gross corporeality, a bodily excess that is integrally related to carnival feasting. Falstaff’s body becomes objectified into:

that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly (II. iv. 439-41).118
Falstaff’s fate is not restricted to being transformed into roast beef. He is referred to as an ‘old boar’ (2 Henry IV, II. ii. 138) by the Prince and as ‘Bartholomew boar pig’ (2 Henry IV. II. iv. 227-8) by Doll. The last reference in particular connects Falstaff’s porcine corporeality to pagan carnival feasting. In the context of the carnival the pig is an ambivalent symbol; it is celebratory and yet employed to convey a form of demonized otherness. Through the many references to his love of sack and capon, his metaphoric identity as succulent juicy meat—the pig in particular—Falstaff becomes an embodiment of carnival. The exchange of abuses and profanities between Falstaff and Hal enact the popular festive confrontation between Carnival and Lent. Hal’s invectives are directed at Falstaff’s obese, lubricious corporeality. He is ‘gross as a mountain, open palpable’ (1 Henry IV, II. iv. 219), the ‘clay-brained guts’, the ‘whoreson obscene grease-tallow-catch’ (II. iv. 219-21). In his retort, Falstaff abuses him in terms that evokes images of Lenten leanness, ‘S blood, you starveling, you eel-skin, you dried neat’s tongue, you bull’s pizzle, you stockfish’ (II. iv. 238-9).

According to popular folk custom Carnival wins this battle because Lent’s followers ‘fish and vegetables, lack the restorative succulence of meat and wine.’ In Shakespeare’s play too it is Falstaff’s fatness that carries the day with its celebrated Rabelaisian verve. With the wisdom typical of the Fool, Falstaff formulates his own worth in a moment of great histrionic display: ‘Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world’ (1 Henry IV, I. iv. 466-7). With Hal’s ‘I do; I will’ (1 Henry IV, II. iv. 468), the tavern suddenly loses the magical mirth and playfulness of mingling kings and clowns. It is clear that even in this mock-theatrical exercise, the heir apparent means business. His brief but resolute reply chills the bone with the knowledge that carnival’s mock king will die a natural death when ‘playing holidays’ are over in the England of Henry V.

Falstaff’s girth and garrulity have strong feminine associations. Falstaff is bloated and his belly distended like a pregnant woman’s. He is in Mistress Ford’s words, a ‘puffed man’ (The Merry Wives of Windsor, V. v. 151), a sow which kills its litter with its own weight (2 Henry IV, I. ii. 9-10). In Galenic theory, women were supposed to have colder metabolisms than men. This was because the slower burning-up of food led to deposits of fat in the blood, which were used for the nourishment of the foetus and for lactation. Falstaff, both fat and frail, is potentially feminine and
maternal. Little wonder that critics have equated Falstaff’s famous fatness with the reproductive female body. W H Auden notes that a fat man ‘looks like a cross between a very young child and a pregnant mother.’\textsuperscript{125} Coppelia Kahn finds in Falstaff a ‘curiously feminine sensual abundance’ and compares him to a pregnant woman observing that his fatness is ‘fecund, it spawns symbols.’\textsuperscript{126} Referring to the incident of Falstaff’s stabbing of the dead Hotspur, Barbara Everett astutely comments that ‘the sheer fatness of Falstaff, most male of men, allows him some of the soft freedoms of the female role; and now, some of its betrayals too.’\textsuperscript{127} Falstaff is not merely physically gross; he is as Hal puts it ‘fat witted.’ (\textit{1 Henry IV}, I. ii. 2) Though Hal’s remark is meant to be derogatory it exemplifies what Neil Rhodes calls an ‘incarnative view of language, the word becoming flesh.’\textsuperscript{128} It is this larger expansive sense of Falstaff’s fat wit, which leads Patricia Parker to include Falstaff among the ‘literary fat ladies.’\textsuperscript{129} According to Parker, Falstaff is like Circe. He seduces both protagonist and plot away from the linear progression of history and closure. His function is to extend, thicken and fatten the comic subplot, by shear girth and words, till it threatens to take over the play.\textsuperscript{130}

It is old Jack’s plumpness that makes him a symbol of feminine lubricity. When he is in a mood for theatrical mimicking of the blood-thirsty militarism of Percy, Hal summons Falstaff, ‘Call in Ribs, call in Tallow’ (\textit{1 Henry IV}, II. iv. 108) because ‘that damned brawn shall play Dame Mortimer his wife’ (\textit{1 Henry IV}, II. v. 107). In Hal’s mock abusive mythopoeia Falstaff resembles a dish of butter that melts at the kiss of Titan (\textit{1 Henry IV}, II. iv. 115-17). The continuous references to Falstaff as tallow draw upon the contemporary homophonic links between suet (fat) and sweat.\textsuperscript{131} After the Gads-Hill incident Hal creates a vivid image of Falstaff’s escape:

\begin{quote}
Falstaff sweats to death,
And lards the lean earth as he walks along.
\end{quote}

(\textit{1 Henry IV}. II.ii.105–6)

This particular image—echoed in Jonson’s representation of the huge porcine body of Ursula oozing sweat\textsuperscript{132}—is fecund and feminized. Contemporary medical discourses associated excessive production and evacuation of bodily fluids with womanliness.\textsuperscript{133} Falstaff larding the earth with his sweat becomes akin to contemporary culture’s image of woman as a ‘leaky vessel.’\textsuperscript{134} His excessive and sweating may imply a
specifically female lack of bodily control. This feminized body is grotesque because it is an open entity continually in touch with the world outside through its forms of bodily excretion. The lack of control associated typically and most infamously with women is garrulity.

The tongue was regarded as an unruly member, one which had correspondences with the penis. Falstaff’s ability to wriggle out of compromising or embarrassing situations through his verbal dexterity and rhetorical ingeniousness testifies to his grotesque feminized virility. This conjunction of the power of the phallic tongue and the sexualised belly occurs in the facetious exchange with Coleville about names, places and conditions (2 Henry IV, IV. iii. 1-17). Falstaff constructs his own identity as a pregnant verbose female through a powerful grotesque image of multiple tongues in his womb:

I have a school of tongues in this belly of mine, and not a tongue of them all speaks any other word but my name. An I had but a belly of any indifferency, I were simply the most active fellow in Europe. My womb, my womb, my womb, [emphasis mine] undoes me.

(2 Henry IV, IV. iii. 18-22)

Falstaff’s tongued belly has remarkable similarities with the image of Rumour represented as a grotesque creature with several tongues painted on her body. (2 Henry IV, Induction, 1). As Laroque points out Rumour is:

a visual metonymy of the many-headed monster and the several venomous mouths that swell the body politic with the ill wind of calumny or false news and, in its final metaphor, it reveals the aesthetic discourse that lies at the background of the play.

The image of Rumour as a duplicitous female is also linked to Erasmus’ Folly. The associations that gather around Falstaff, duplicitous in his dealings and a misleader of men (II. v. 421), has striking similarities with those of Rumour. Embodiments of unstable, unreliable feminized narratives, Rumour and Falstaff challenge the hegemony of a single, stable unified vision of history produced by official discourses.

Kirsten Poole points out how the anti-Martinist tracts, that influenced the representation of Falstaff, used the image of monstrous births to signify sedition and
political disturbance. Martin was represented as a transvestite male; his ‘cozening corse’ appeared to have died in the process of delivering a monstrous child ‘no bigger than rebellion’; the ‘dead’ body seemed to have a swelling in the paunch, as though he had been in the labour of a little babie, no bigger than rebellion; but truth was at the Bishoppes travaile: so that Martin was delivered by sedition, which pulls the monster with yron from the beastes bowells. When I perceived that he masked in his rayling robes, I was so bolde as to pull off his shrowding sheete, that all the worlde might see the olde foole daunce naked.

Images of Falstaff as a pregnant woman giving birth to monstrous lies culminate in his representation as a sow, which has overwhelmed its litter (2 Henry IV. I. ii. 10-12). The ambivalence of the pig—a symbol of carnivalesque celebration as well as demonization of marginalized groups—is used here to signify both fecundity as well as unnatural maternity. The image of the grotesque sow, that destroys its babies even as she gives them birth, brings out the ambiguity of maternal figures in patriarchy.

_Falstaff and Hal: Sons and Lovers_

Falstaff’s first words in the play, ‘What time of day is it, lad?’ (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 1), are directed at Hal. The familiar address ‘lad’, and the mock abusive banter that follows sets the tone of the relationship between these ‘gentlemen of the shade’ (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 25). In the light of this exchange, it becomes difficult to regard Falstaff merely as the necessary evil in Henriad’s plot that centers round the Tudor myth of the miraculous conversions of the prodigal Prince Harry into an ideal monarch. Shakespeare gives an unusual twist to the moral tale of the ‘reverend Vice, that grey Iniquity, that father Ruffian’ (1 Henry IV, II. iv. 441-2) who has led the young heir-apparent astray. The ‘old white-bearded Satan’ (1 Henry IV, II. iv. 451) does indeed have a special interest in the young man and its nature cannot be limited to the traditional structure of morality interludes or even the mutually dependent relationship between ‘Appetite’ and ‘Authority’ in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare’s sonnets, addressed to the Young Man, provide a closer equivalent to the nature of the relationship between the ageing knight and the young royal. Falstaff’s addresses to the newly crowned king as ‘sweet boy’, and his ‘heart’
(2 Henry IV, V. v. 43, 46), may be opportunistic and canny, but at the same time they cannot be dismissed entirely as spurious. It is because of emotional purchase of Falstaff’s declarations of his love that audience and readers, over centuries have been shocked by the harshness and cold formality of the newly crowned king’s words, banishing Falstaff.\textsuperscript{147}

The complex nature of their bonding does not preclude the homoerotic strain though it seems to be predominated by homosocial camaraderie. The carnivalesque atmosphere of Eastcheap fosters this bonding between Hal and Falstaff. It is here that Falstaff and Hal put on a mock-theatrical show, rehearsing the scene when the latter will be ‘horribly chid’ (1 Henry IV, II. iv. 362) by his father for his waywardness. While they gear up for the performance it is Hal who wants Falstaff to ‘stand for my father and examine me upon the particulars of my life’ (II. iv. 380). Hal’s choice expresses his unconscious desire to have Falstaff as his father substitute.\textsuperscript{148} This meta-theatrical device is a psychodrama in which Hal enacts first by deposing Falstaff to play the king himself (II. iv. 421-2) and then, through his rejection of the latter (II. v. 468), his repressed fantasies of parricide.\textsuperscript{149}

While the troubled father-son dynamics can be displaced onto and displayed in acts of homosocial camaraderie, Hal’s ‘fantasy of the pre-oedipal maternal’\textsuperscript{150} is mapped onto the homoeroticism of the Hal/ Falstaff relationship. As discussed earlier, Falstaff’s girth, garrulity, references to his ‘womb’ and the descriptions of his porcine body oozing tallow-like sweat combine to produce a powerful image of maternal corporeality. The grotesque body and the maternal body become interchangeable.\textsuperscript{151}

Early modern medical theories and cultural practices contributed to the construction of the maternal as a site of ambivalence; it situated the mother at the centre of a complex web of desire, resentment and fear. For the male child the mother is self, as well as other. She is frightfully close to the male’s physical and psychological being, yet her reproductive body is at the remotest extreme from the classical closed body encoded as male. Janet Adelman has pointed out that the desire for masculine autonomy and supremacy was contradicted by inescapable signs of male dependence on women, resulting in mothers being perceived as ‘suffocating,’\textsuperscript{152} Consequently, for the young man, access to ideal masculinity necessitates a break from the suffocating grotesque body and from the presence of the mother. Hal’s
rejection of Falstaff after his coronation is an enactment of this ultimate dissociation from the maternal.

Traub notes that the Galenic one-sex model generated male anxieties of ‘reverse teleology’, of being turned back into women, or more imperfect versions of themselves, a process which appeared possible in a system which did not postulate any ontological differences between men and women. The Mother is the despised point of origin, which threatens to overwhelm and reclaim the superior male, suck him back into the coldness and moistness of femininity. This threat of regression into the womb and a feminine identity was accentuated by the cultural practice of dressing young children of both sexes in smocks, thus making the boy’s identity inseparable from the girl’s. The gendering of the male child—the rite of passage where he was ‘passed out of the hands of women’ into the ‘hands of men’—was symbolically achieved through the sartorial practice of ‘breeching’. It is perhaps significant that Henry of Monmouth’s mother, Mary de Bohun, died when the prince was only seven or eight years old, the age when he would be breeched. The death of his mother at this crucial age would also signify that Hal has not had the opportunity to pass out of the woman’s world; his continuing association with Falstaff signifies his deferred transition from his ungendered childhood to a full-fledged masculine identity. In the all-Halloween summer holiday of Eastcheap life, Hal continues to play a precocious infant to Falstaff’s surrogate mother; for the time the prince is the ‘sun’ (son?) who permits the ‘base contagious clouds / To smother up his beauty from the world (I. ii. 188-9).

Yet, Hal is aware that ‘all the year’ cannot be ‘playing holidays’ and the sun/son can when he so chooses to break ‘through the foul and ugly mists / Of vapours that did seem to strangle him’ (I. ii. 192-3). That Hal’s ‘breeching’—his rite of passage into manhood—is a source of continual anxiety for him, that is expressed through his flamboyant monologic assertions of how he will redeem himself in the eyes of the world (I. ii. 198-207). Later, in his private dialogue with his father, Hal reiterates the pledge to redeem ‘all this on Percy’s head’ (III. ii. 32), by asserting his masculine martial identity. His true identity as his father’s son will be revealed:
When I will wear a garment all in blood,
And stain my favours in a bloody mask,
Which, washed away shall scour my shame with it

(1 Henry IV, III. ii. 135-7)

Hal imagines his heroic martial identity emerging through bloody fratricide; Harry Percy, with whom he shares a name and who has been the acknowledged ‘child of honour and renown’ (III. ii. 139) is a surrogate brother whom he must kill in order to be reborn. This birth in the battlefield does not require the womb; by dispensing with the abhorred maternal grotesque reproductive body, Hal becomes ‘not born of woman’ (Macbeth, V. vii. 3). The Prince’s dream of heroic masculinity is founded upon the repudiation of motherhood and encapsulates the patriarchal fantasy of male childbearing.

In the beginning of 2 Henry IV we hear the Lord Chief Justice, telling Falstaff ‘the King hath severed you and Prince Harry’ (I. ii. 201-2). Hal too complains of being ‘exceeding weary’ (2 Henry IV, II. ii. 1) and though he plans with Poins the old game of taking Falstaff by surprise (2 Henry IV, II. ii. 161-8), it lacks the spiritedness of the Gads Hill episode. The Prince and his dog (2 Henry IV, II. ii. 101) are seldom found together . The ground is thus laid for the moment of his rejection of Falstaff, the embodiment of nurturing, seductive yet smothering, suffocating, contaminating grotesque maternity. The rejection is couched in language that leaves little doubt that this is also a metaphorical killing of the mother:

Make less thy body, and more thy grace,
Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape
For thee thrice wider than for other men

(2 Henry IV, V. iii. 52-54)

In psychoanalytic terms, by rejecting Falstaff Hal moves from the fantasized maternal ‘imaginary’ into the symbolic order. Falstaff as the mother is the abject and Hal’s identity as king is crucially linked to his ability to make a total break with the maternal body. As Kristeva puts it,

The abject confronts us . . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the maternal entity . . . thanks to the autonomy of language. It
is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as secure as it is stifling.162

Through his rejection of the grotesque feminized Falstaff, Hal as the newly crowned Henry V achieves the perfection of the ‘classical’ body, closed, homogenous, monumental, centred and symmetrical. Thus, while Jonson’s festive comedy ends with the promise of the plebeian Ursula sitting at the same table with the elite, snobbish Grace Wellborn Shakespeare’s history play does not tolerate the proximity of Falstaff and the newly crowned Henry V. The teleology of Shakespeare’s second tetralogy, which moves towards the establishment of order and stability and the celebration of the national hero, expels the abject, carnivalesque grotesque feminine. Yet, the convention of epilogue allows Falstaff to have the last words:

All the gentlewomen here have forgiven me; if the gentlemen will not, then the gentlemen do not agree with the gentlewomen, which was never seen before in such an assembly

(2 Henry IV, Epilogue, 22-5).

The Epilogue, hoping that the audience is ‘not too much cloyed with fat meat’ promises that ‘our humble author will continue the story with Sir John in it.’ (2 Henry IV, Epilogue 27-8). Yet in Henry V, Falstaff is only a poignant off-stage presence. He is a man who is reported to be very ill (Henry V, II. i. 81); his ‘heart is fracted and corroborate’ (II. i. 19), and the person responsible for this is the King, Henry V who has ‘killed his heart’ (II. i. 84). Falstaff’s end is fittingly feminized; according to Hostess Quickly’s report Falstaff fumbles with the sheets, plays with flowers (II. iii. 12-13) and dies babbling of ‘green fields’ (II. iii. 15-16). Falstaff the grotesque mother is tellingly transformed before his death into a ‘christom child’; the phrase curiously foreshadows the death of Lear, a ‘child–changed father’ (King Lear, IV. vii. 17). Associations of infirmity and delirium feminize the grotesque body of the dying clown who seems to appear in a new avatar in King Lear.

IV. King Lear, generic hybridity and carnivalesque topsy-turvy

In this section, I explore the carnivalesque elements in Shakespeare’s tragedy King Lear. I begin by noting that the grotesque elements in this Shakespearean text may be
traced to its generic hybridity and its carnivalesque topsy-turvy or social inversion. I argue that the play’s powerful misogyny may be related to carnival’s practices of denigrating and thrashing the unruly ‘woman-on-top’. The displaced abjection that characterizes the violence of the carnival is sited on the bodies of Goneril and Regan, the play’s aggressive, disorderly women. However, the most interesting instance of the female grotesque in *King Lear* is the King himself who experiences his own powerlessness as a grotesque effeminization.

*King Lear* occupies a privileged status in the Shakespearean dramatic oeuvre. It is regarded as the most profound and metaphysical of Shakespeare’s tragedies, it affirms human dignity and grandeur through an apotheosis of pain and loss. Yet the play is also an example par excellence of a ‘mongrel tragi-comedy’ created by the mingling of kings and clowns. The play flouts neo classical norms of decorum by thrusting in the Fool’s bawdy ballad about ‘The codpiece that will house / Before the head has any’ (III. ii. 27-8) beside Lear’s articulations of tragic suffering during the storm (III. ii. 14-24).

Early twentieth century critics have identified the intrusion of the comic strain in tragedy as the source of the grotesque in *King Lear*. It has been argued that it is the incongruity of the ‘low’ comic in the ‘high’ tragic that creates the sense of grotesque. The mingling of incompatible comic and the tragic elements in *King Lear* produces a new incongruity where the ‘comedy of the grotesque’ becomes sublime. However, the generic hybridity of *King Lear* is not merely a matter of incongruous mixing of comic and tragic. Indeed, Goldberg points out that pure generic forms ‘are a Renaissance anomaly; hybrids are the rule.’

It has been argued that during the Renaissance, distinctions between dramatic genres like history and tragedy were not sharp, and ‘plays identified as tragedies took their subjects from history.’ *King Lear* had been classified in the first Quarto not as a tragedy but as a ‘True Chronicle History’. As several critics have noted, there are strong points of similarity between *King Lear* and the tetralogy that begins with *Richard II*. A recurrent pattern in the Chronicle-History plays like *Richard II* and *Richard III* is the treatment meted out to the ‘foolish king’ who is ‘thrashed, uncrowned and finally victimized and murdered by an energetic crowd.’ *King Lear* shares with these history play the features of the abjection and victimization of a
‘foolish king’ that occurs in the wake of unsuccessful succession and transfer of authority. The elements of cruelty and brutality that Kott identifies as the source of its grotesque in King Lear\textsuperscript{173} may be owing to what Natalie Zemon Davis calls the ‘stylized violence’ that accompanies the reallocation of authority.\textsuperscript{174}

My submission is that in \textit{King Lear} the source of ‘comedy of the grotesque’ as well as the grotesque ‘theatre of cruelty’ may be traced to the ‘carnivalesque’ quality of the play. It must be noted that in the context of \textit{King Lear} the term ‘carnivalesque’ is used primarily as an ‘instance of the generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high / low relations across the whole social structure.’\textsuperscript{175} The carnivalesque elements in \textit{King Lear} may be located in the play’s preoccupation with conditions of ‘topsy turvy’, the ‘world-upside-down’ or ‘symbolic inversion’. In \textit{King Lear}, it is the king’s decision to abdicate and transfer authority to his daughters that sets in motion the carnivalesque ‘topsy-turvy’.

\textit{‘Majesty falls to folly’: Uncrowning and symbolic inversion}

Lear initiates his own ‘uncrowning’ in the very first scene through his decision to abdicate (I. i. 38) and divide his kingdom among his three daughters, in a royal public display, commensurate with their expressions of filial obedience and love. Swayed by the rhetoric of flattery of his two elder daughters Lear is blinded by rage when Cordelia refuses to participate in this competition of ‘the glib and oily art’, (I. i. 223) asserting instead that she loves him ‘According to my bond; no more no less’ (I. i. 92). The enraged patriarch not only disinherits his favourite daughter and distributes her dower between the two elder ones but severs all ties with Cordelia disclaiming ‘Propinquity and property of blood’ (I. i. 113). Psychoanalytic feminist criticism has traced the excessive nature of Lear’s anger to his incestuous desire for Cordelia as well as an infantile desire to be mothered.\textsuperscript{176}

Kent attempts to check the ‘hideous rashness’ (I. i. 150) of Lear’s action by pointing out that the king is stooping to court folly (I. i. 148). Lear’s ‘all-licensed’ (I. iv. 198) Fool takes up the issue of royal folly as soon as he makes his appearance (I. iv. 92). But it is the Fool who points out to Lear that his folly has dangerous social and political consequences. By vesting his daughters with authority and power Lear has inverted traditional familial, social and gender roles. He tells Lear that he is full of songs ever since:
thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav’st them the rod and putt’st down thine own breeches.

Then they for sudden joy did weep,
And I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play bo-peep,
And go the fools among. [emphasis mine]

(I. iv. 168-174)

The image of Lear subjecting himself to his daughters’ whipping is part of a tradition of ‘inversion’ integral to comedy. As Donaldson points out, inversion ‘involves a sudden switching of expected roles: prisoner reprimands judge, child rebukes parent, wife rules husband, pupil instructs teacher, master obeys servant.’ Babcock notes that the word ‘inversion’ implying a ‘reversal of position, order, sequence, relation’ (OED) has been used since the early Renaissance to indicate a turning upside down.

The ‘world upside down’ constitutes a key element of the ancient rituals of Saturnalia and the early modern carnivals. Bakhtin notes that carnivals are characterized by the logic of ‘turnabout’ in which there is a ‘continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear.’ He further points out that the ‘numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings’ of the carnival create a ‘world inside out.’ In King Lear, it is the Fool who persistently draws attention to a carnivalesque reversal, its vision of the ‘world inside out’. Margot Hienemann points out that the Fool speaks ‘wisdom in the proverbial idiom of the people, often coarsely, in contrast to the hypocrisy and folly of formal and ceremonial utterance by the great.’ The Fool mocks Lear’s own ‘uncrowning’ and travesties the ‘crowning’ of his daughters:

When thou clopest thy crown i’th middle and gavest away both parts,
thou borest thine ass o’th back o’er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest they golden one away

(I. iv. 156-60)

He evokes the carnival’s logic of ‘turnabout’—a shift from front to rear—when, in response to Goneril’s humiliation of her father, he observes: ‘May not an ass
know when the cart draws the horse?’ (I. iv. 221). Later he speaks of going to bed at noon (III. vi. 83) as his deranged master expresses his desire that ‘We’ll go to supper i’th’ morning’ (III. vi. 82). On the heath he talks of a world upside down when he utters the prophecy that ‘Merlin shall make’ about a confusion in the realm of Albion (III. ii. 81-95).

Carnivalesque inversion of social order is not restricted to Lear’s world. Gloucester speaks of the large-scale cosmic and social upheaval that plagues the times in terms of the perversions of nature (I. ii. 102-6). When Gloucester denounces Edgar and reinstates Edmund, his ‘Loyal and natural boy’ as heir to his land and property (II. i. 82-3) he fulfills his bastard son’s desire that ‘Edmund the base / Shall top th’ legitimate’ (I. ii. 20-1). In so doing he completes the cycle of topsy-turvy set in motion by the king’s denunciation of Cordelia. This work argues that in all these cases, the carnival’s topsy-turvy or inversion does not carry the liberating utopian potential that forms the basis of Bakhtin’s theory. On the contrary, in King Lear the carnivalesque ‘world upside down’ is a symptom of chaos and disorder; its constitutive elements are transgressions that destabilize the rigidly coded hierarchized feudal world. Heinemann argues that the politics of King Lear should be traced to a demystification of the ‘mysteries of state’, the knowledge that ‘holders of sacred office’ may also be fallible human beings; the representation of the world upside down serves as a tool of that political critique. She further points out that the realization of this—the impossibility of justice and security in a society split between the powerful and the powerless—is driven home to Lear and Gloucester only when they discover their own worlds turned upside down. The carnivalesque condition thus offers a radical insight into the workings of authority, to authority figures once they can see the world with the eyes of the dispossessed.¹⁸² Lear’s first experience of powerlessness and re-coding of relationship with his daughters occurs within this scheme of inversion and carnivalesque topsy-turvy.

In Goneril’s assessment since ‘Old fools are babes again’ (I. iii. 20) his father has to be treated ‘With checks as flatteries’ (I. iii. 21). This image of symbolic inversion in age—with the aged king turned into a child—is repeated in the Fool’s song in which Lear is perceived as playing ‘bo-peep.’(I. iv. 173). Goneril regards him as a riotous unruly ‘Idle old man / That still would manage those authorities / That he
hath given away’ (I. iii. 17−19). Thus Lear’s belief that he could ‘retain / The name and all th’addition to a king’ (I. i. 134−5), while distributing the revenue and execution of his kingdom to his daughters effectively turns him into the carnival’s mock king—a festive but powerless parody of authority. It is the Fool who succinctly sums up the king’s condition—he has been reduced to ‘Lear’s shadow’ (I. iv. 228).

The analogy between Lear and the carnival king is made by Goneril who comments that the behaviour of Lear and his train is boisterous and rowdy, like that of Riot in a carnival:

> Not only, Sir, this your all-licensed Fool,  
> But other of your insolent retinue  
> Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth  
> In rank and not-to-be-endured riots.

(I. iv. 198−201)

Goneril’s is the voice of Lenten severity; she represents a puritan attitude that contrasts strongly with Lear’s notions of hospitality and merrymaking. This battle between Carnival and Lent takes on an ominous note through Lear’s exchange with Goneril about the behaviour of his loyal knights. Goneril insists that Lear’s followers are:

> Men so disorder’d, so debosh’d, and bold,  
> That this our court, infected with their manners,  
> Shows like a riotous inn: epicurism and lust  
> Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel  
> Than a grac’d palace.

(I. iv. 239−243)

It is interesting to note that despite her Lenten severity Goneril is also marked out as the carnivalesque ‘woman on top’ early in the play. This pertains not only to her role as the daughter who rules over her father but also that as the aggressive wife who assumes sexual and military initiative in chastising and deriding her husband’s cowardice. As I have discussed earlier, while the image of the disorderly or unruly ‘woman on top’ carried the possibility of liberation it simultaneously sanctioned various communal forms of symbolic or actual violence upon women. In King Lear,
the carnivalesque scourging of the unruly or deviant daughters is expressed powerfully in Lear’s abuses and curses directed at Goneril and Regan and the mock arraignment of his daughters on the heath.

_Misogyny and the carnivalesque scourging of unruly women_

Humiliated and distressed by the signs of Goneril’s filial ingratitude Lear experiences a volatile anger that is characteristically expressed through curse and abuse. His invocation, ‘Hear Nature, hear! Dear Goddess hear’ (I. iv. 273) is in response to what he understands as Goneril’s doubly monstrous act in refusing to comply with the duties that she owes to him as a subject and as a daughter. Since he cannot punish her as a subject the patriarch’s helpless rage unleashes itself through his angry curses asking the goddess nature to turn her sterile (I. iv. 276-9). In Lear’s curses Goneril’s body metamorphoses until she is no longer recognizably a woman. Lear’s eldest daughter, who lacks conventional feminine feelings, is to be punished by being transformed into an unnatural woman lacking reproductive and nurturing ability. Lear’s imaginary disfigurement of his daughter’s body is symptomatic of his fear of female sexuality, which in his mind is the site of pollution and disease.

As a more horrifying alternative Lear wishes her to bear a ‘child of spleen’ who will live to be ‘a thwart disnatur’d torment to her’ (I. iv. 280-81). The passage ends with the image of Goneril being tormented through a child possessing viperous nature—‘that she may feel / How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a thankless child!’ (I. iv. 285-7). Animal imagery pervades his rhetoric of abuse; Goneril is a ‘detested kite’ (I. iv. 260) and a wolf (I. iv. 306) and later he refers to Goneril and Regan as ‘Pelican daughters’, who have sucked his blood for sustenance. When Lear realizes that Regan, to whom he had turned to provide succor, is in league with her sister, both his daughters, are transformed into grotesque ‘unnatural hags’ (II. iv. 276). After his exchange with Goneril and Regan, Lear rides out into a ‘wild night’ (II. iv. 306) exposing himself to a terrible storm. Initially he interprets the storm as a sign of cosmic fury and vengeance resulting from the violation of natural order through filial ingratitude (III. i. 6-9). Yet the storm soon becomes the ‘servile ministers’ of his ‘pernicious daughters’ (III. ii. 21-2) raging in battle against ‘A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man’ (III. ii. 20). The realization of his own weakness, infirmity and vulnerability makes Lear empathize with the deprivations of the ‘Poor
naked wretches’ whose ‘houseless heads and unfed sides’ (III. iv. 28, 30) have to ‘bide the pelting of this pitiless storm’ (III. iv. 29). It is at this juncture that Lear encounters Edgar, disguised as Tom O’Bedlam. Critics have pointed out that Edgar’s role as Tom O’Bedlam is meant to expose the fraudulence of demonic possession demonstrated by Samuel Harsnett as ‘theatrical role-playing instigated by the suggestion and rehearsals of exorcists.’ However, for the play’s larger purpose, Tom’s discourse about foul fiends who have exposed him to conditions of physical and moral depravity (III. iv. 50-61, 126-140), represents the vulnerability and wretchedness of the poverty stricken, marginalized multitude. Lear recognizes the truth about human existence his acknowledgment to Tom / Edgar: ‘thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art’ (III. iv. 104-6). Bristol argues that the mock king (Lear), the Fool, the bedlam beggar (Edgar) and carnival bully (Kent) constitute the society’s ‘liminary outcasts.’ Drawing upon Van Gennep’s analysis of liminality as the experience of the social ‘other’ Bristol points out that the ‘liminary participants enter a peculiar and ambiguous social space’ which is ‘betwixt and between’. He further argues that this socially elsewhere space ‘confers immunity for otherwise unlawful acts.’

In *King Lear*, the heath may be regarded as this liminal space in which Lear, Edgar and the Fool can engage in carnivalesque critique of authority, social disorder and corruption. In Shakespeare’s play women’s bodies become the primary site for the displacement and abjection of the ‘liminary outcasts.’ The female grotesque is *produced* in the play through the many instances of patriarchal equation of aggressive femininity with chaos and disorder and through the representation of unbridled female sexuality as the source of society’s corruption. In *King Lear*, therefore, the carnivalesque punishment of the ‘women on top’—Goneril and Regan—takes the form of a mock arraignment of the ‘she-foxes’ (III. vi. 22). The king whose ‘wits begin t’unsettle’ (III. iv. 159) identifies with Tom O’Bedlam as a ‘discarded father’ (III. iv. 71), strenuously maintaining that ‘nothing could have subdu’d nature / To such lowness but his unkind daughters (III. iv. 69-70). Lear sets up a court in which he appoints Edgar as the ‘most learned justicer’ (III. vi. 21) the Fool, ‘his yoke -fellow of equity’ and Kent a member ‘o’th’ commission’ (III. vi. 37, 38) and proceeds to conduct the painfully comic trial in which the joint stool serves as his daughters (III.
vi. 51). In his hallucinatory court ritual Lear attempts to redress the wrongs suffered by him. He arraigns Goneril first, taking his oath that she has kicked her father (III. vi. 48), and becomes furious when he imagines that Regan, ‘whose warp’d looks proclaim / What store her heart is made on’ (III. vi. 52-3) has made good her escape (III. vi. 53-5). His daughters are transformed into ‘Tray, Blanch and Sweetheart’, dogs who humiliate the judge and bark at him (III. vi. 61-2); soon after this the mock arraignment is aborted.

Interestingly, carnivalesque abuse of women is not restricted to Lear’s delirious discourse and hallucinatory trials of justice. Misogynistic images of women characterize the rhetoric of Edgar, who ‘assumes the speech of demonic possession’ in his disguise as Tom O’Bedlam. As Carol Thomas Neely points out, ‘Although Edgar’s betrayal and exile have nothing to do with women Poor Tom’s feigned madness is laced with misogyny.’ In Tom’s imaginary catalogue of his own sins he is the serving-man who ‘serv’d the lust of [his] mistress’ heart’ and did the ‘act of darkness with her’ (III. iv. 84-5). He cautions against the sophisticated lady’s charm: ‘Let not the creaking of shoes or the rustling of silks betray thy poor heart to woman’ (III. iv. 92-4). In Tom’s fraudulent discourse of possession, the male demon Flibbertigibbet meets an incubus and her nine offspring and betrays her in order to curb her powers through exorcism (III. iv. 117-121). This conflation of the witch and the whore by turning female sexuality and maternity into the monstrous is an expression of patriarchy’s pervasive desire to demonize and then control women.

During his encounter with the blind Gloucester, Lear creates fantasy scenarios of justice thwarted by the ubiquitousness of adultery, which results from women’s insatiable sexuality (IV. vi. 109-114). He asks the onlookers to

Behold yon simpr’ing dame
Whose face between her forks presages snow;
That minces virtue, and does shake the head
To hear of pleasure’s name

(IV. vi. 117-20)

The body of the whore is seen as the source of all social evils. In Lear’s crazed imagination, women—the root of corruption—are hybrid monsters
Lear’s misogynist revulsion is expressed in his image of female genitalia which is nauseous and stinking like hell:

Beneath is all the fiend’s: there’s hell, there’s darkness
There is the sulphurous pit—burning, scalding,
Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!

(IV. vi. 126-28)

Yet, in the second instance of his fantasy of authority, the whore cannot be isolated and punished as the sole begetter of the vice of lechery. In the social leveling that characterizes carnivals, the ‘rascally beadle’ is asked to ‘Strip thine own back’ since he is guilty both of lusting hotly after the whore and of the hypocrisy of subjecting her to whipping (IV. vi. 158-161). Neely argues that ‘these fantasies expose Lear’s habit of persecuting others to conceal his own guilt.’ However, it seems that while Neely’s assessment holds true for the first instance, the second case is markedly different.

Indeed, on the heath and earlier Lear’s response to women and to the feminine oscillate between contradictory positions: a desire to exteriorize and excoriate the female as the alien and threatening ‘other’, and a realization that this unruly feminine other is intimately located within the self—his body and his being. Even as Lear tries to distance himself from the feminine ‘other’ through his horrified revulsion at unbridled female sexuality which is imagined as the source of all corruption, disorder and evil, he is himself pushed to the verge of becoming an unruly female through the play’s continual references to his feminization.

Experiencing the ‘other’ in the ‘self: The grotesque feminization of Lear

This brings my discussion to the second aspect of the grotesque in King Lear. This aspect is related to Lear’s own acknowledgement of his corporeal vulnerabilities. Recounting his experience of the storm (IV. vi. 100-103) Lear acknowledges that he had been misled by the flattery of his people: ‘they told me I was everything; ‘tis a lie, I am not ague proof’ (IV. vi. 104-5). Subject to physical pain and suffering, the classical, closed body of the king is made grotesque in its vulnerability and nakedness.
King Lear has several instances of Lear’s acknowledgement (albeit resentful) of his feminine weakness and frailty. Though men’s tears in Shakespeare’s plays have positive values of compassion and empathy, Lear understands his weeping as a debilitating sign, a symptom of effeminacy and weakness. When he is humiliated and distressed by Goneril’s attack on his loyal knights he tells his daughter that he feels ashamed,

That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
Should make thee worth them

(I. iv. 295-7)

He vows to punish himself for this effeminate weeping by plucking out his ‘Old fond eyes’ (I. iv. 299-300). When he experiences similar abuse from Regan, he resents this expression of feminine tame grief, praying to the gods to restore in him a masculine noble anger:

And let not women’s weapons, water drops,
Stain my man’s cheeks!
[ . . . ]
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I’ll weep

(II. iv. 275-6; 281-3)

Indeed, Lear’s feminization—a condition caused by his own folly—is hinted at early in the text through the reverberations of Cordelia’s ‘nothing’ in Lear’s exchange with the fool (I. iv. 125-130). The Fool’s word-play which links the folly of Lear’s uncrowning with femininity culminates in his image of the king as ‘an O without a figure’ (I. iv. 189.). For the play’s contemporary audience the Fool’s reference to ‘o’ would signify the female genitalia. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have pointed out that it is crucial to make a distinction between two forms of grotesque; they argue that the second mode is:

a boundary phenomenon or hybridization or in mixing in which the self and the other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous
dangerously unstable zone. [emphasis mine] What starts as a simple repulsion or rejection of symbolic matter foreign to the self inaugurates a process of introjection and negation which is always complex in its effects.¹⁹⁶

My submission is that Lear’s experience of the persistent presence of the weak, degenerate feminine ‘other’ within his royal, authoritative masculine ‘self’ creates this dangerous hybridization in the king; it marks him out as the female grotesque. A remarkable instance of this condition of corrupt ‘in-mixing’ is sited on the body of the patriarch; Lear’s comparison of Goneril to a diseased eruption on his skin reconstitutes the king’s classical, closed, body into a grotesque infected one:

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter,
Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,
A plague sore, an embossed carbuncle,
In my corrupted blood.’

(II. iv. 219-23 [emphasis mine])

Coppelia Kahn points out that a similar idea is echoed in Gloucester’s acknowledgment to Lear: ‘Our flesh and blood, my lord, is grown so vile / That it doth hate what gets it’ (III. iv. 143 4).¹⁹⁷ Like the sores of plague or those caused by venereal diseases the ungrateful monstrous daughter is a mark of shame on his body. Perhaps the most famous instance in the play of Lear’s grotesque feminization is his reference to the choking fits of his anger, shame and sorrow:

O! how this mother swells upwards towards my heart!
\textit{Hysterica passio!} Down, thou climbing sorrow!
Thy element is below.

(II. iv. 54-6)

Lear’s ‘\textit{Hysterica passio}’ refers to the ‘disease of the hyster or the womb which was also referred to in Renaissance medical discourses as \textit{Suffocatio}, or \textit{Strangulatus uteri}. As critics have noted ‘mother’ was the most commonly used term for this ailment specific to women.¹⁹⁸ Edward Jordan’s \textit{A Brief Discourse of a Disease called the Suffocation of the Mother} (London, 1603) was the most famous
and influential medical text of the period; it ascribed women’s hysteric fits to the movement of the unruly mobile uterus or womb which could push against organs like the heart and create a sensation of choking. Thus Lear’s identification of his sorrow and anger as the signs of the ‘mother’ is rather unusual in the context of Renaissance medical discourses. However, Kenneth Muir has pointed out that there is a reference to male hysteria in Samuel Harsnett’s work, and several Renaissance critics have discussed in detail the influence of Harsnett on King Lear.

In her psychoanalytic reading of King Lear, Coppelia Kahn discovers the presence of ‘the maternal subtext’—an imprint of mothering on the male psyche—in the text. Accordingly, she interprets the ‘hysterica passio’ passage as Lear’s ‘repressed identification with the mother.’ By rising up, the womb or the uterus, a sign of weak, disabling, female irrationality threatens to destabilize Lear’s rationality. Thus Lear’s hysteria, the unchecked, hence feminine, expression of grief and sorrow, has to be suppressed within the body politic. However, the reproductive maternal, belonging to what Bakhtin calls the ‘material lower bodily stratum’ is also a sign of the carnivalesque grotesque; its intrusion thus also hybridizes Lear’s royal masculine classical body.

On stage the most powerful visual image of Lear’s feminization (linked to his insanity) is his entry fantastically dressed with flowers (IV. vi. 81: stage directions) This recalls Ophelia, the iconic image of feminine grief and madness on the Renaissance stage. As Showalter points out, the conventions of female insanity on Elizabethan stage determined that Ophelia ‘dresses in white and decks herself with ‘fantastical garlands’ of wild flowers.’ The weak, vulnerable, insane Lear is not only feminized but in a literalization of the play’s early reference to symbolic inversion becomes a truant child, playing hide and seek with the attendants sent by Cordelia to rescue him:

What! I will be jovial:

Come, come
[

Come and you get it, you
shall get it by running. Sa, sa sa, sa.
(IV. vi. 196-7, 199-200).
Cordelia’s presence creates a hope that the nightmare on the heath may come to an end and the union with his beloved daughter may fulfill the ‘child-changed’ (IV. vii. 17) Lear’s wishes. He had hoped to ‘set my rest / On her kind nursery (I. i. 122-3). However, even Cordelia’s redemptive influence is short-lived; her death at the hands of Edmund’s hangmen destabilizes the sanity that Lear had regained in his recognition: ‘For, as I am a man, I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia’ (IV. vii. 69-70). If Cordelia’s compassionate femininity makes her a Christ-like figure then her death transforms Lear into the figure of a pietà—an idea created through the entry of Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms (V. iii. 256: stage directions). With Cordelia’s death Lear regresses into his delirium, oscillating between acceptance of his daughter’s death—‘She’s dead as earth’ (V. iii. 260) and a hope of her regeneration—‘This feather stirs; she lives’ (V. iii. 264). Unlike the violent and glorified ‘masculine’ deaths of Shakespeare’s other tragic heroes, Lear’s passing away is brief and de-glamerized; he dies quietly, probably from suffocation of his heart, requesting assistance: ‘Pray you, undo this button: thank you Sir’ (V. iii. 308).

In what is often regarded as the highest achievement of Shakespearean tragedy, the dramatist creates a grotesque play at several levels. A generic hybrid that incongruously mixes ‘kings and clowns’ and incorporates elements of history plays, King Lear evokes a carnivalesque topsy-turvy where class, rank and gender hierarchies are turned upside down. Encouraged by Lear’s folly in ‘uncrowning’ himself, his ungrateful daughters rise against him, becoming aggressive, ruthless ‘women-on-top.’ The play’s misogyny centers upon a carnivalesque, symbolic scourging of the unruly female grotesque, identifying female sexuality as the root of social corruption and chaos. Yet the play also draws attention to the ambiguous feminization of its hero, a senile, ageing king,’a very foolish fond old man, / Fourscore and upward’ (IV. vii. 60-1). Interpreting his folly and tears as signs of debilitating feminine weakness, the king locates in himself the unusual experience of hysteria—a specifically feminine ailment connected with the womb. The intrusion of the maternal renders him vulnerable and grotesque. In King Lear Shakespeare carnivalizes the sacred space of tragedy, creating what Bakhtin terms as ‘a carnival sense of the world itself.’
The carnival’s punishing of the unruly woman is organized around rituals that publicly shame and humiliate the offender. Central to such rituals of social correction is the phenomenon of the spectacle. My next chapter explores the cultural politics of the spectacle and how it is sited on the body of the woman.

Notes


5 Ibid. p. 3.

6 Ibid. p. 5.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. p. 10.

9 Ibid. p. 9.

10 Ibid. p. 6.


12 Ibid. p. 7.


16 Ibid. p. 292.


20 Ibid. p. 240.


22 Ibid. p. 162.

23 Ibid.


26 Cf. Rhodes, *Elizabethan Grotesque*, p. 141: ‘Quarlous’s vision of the female body as rotten offal, rank as tannery, verges on the hysterical; indeed it is difficult to believe that he is actually talking about sex, for the harshness of the tone is matched by a series of literally abrasive images—of tanning, scraping and grating—which reduce copulation to an industrial process.’

27 Ibid. p. 145.

28 Rhodes, *Elizabethan Grotesque*, p 141. Rhodes points out: ‘In *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson discovered an image that the wildly exploratory writing of Nashe was incapable of formulating.’


31 See entry in www.metaweb.com/wiki.phtml?title= Stephenson: Neal: Quicksilver: 385: Bartholomew_Fair_(Alan_Sinder). Bartholomew Fair was one of the oldest and most famous fairs in England. It was held on St Bartholomew’s Day, 24th of August from 1133 to 1855. The charter authorizing its holding was granted by Henry I. to his former minstrel, Rahere, who had taken orders and had founded the priory of St Bartholomew close by. The Fair had two parts, a cloth fair, a business affair that took place within the walls of the priory, and the pleasure fair which took place outside the walls.


Traditional criticism has also noted the play’s scheme of inversion which works by treating the socio economically privileged group, possessing rank, wealth and authority, as the interlopers / outsiders. The outsiders, with the exception of Adam Overdo and his mad deputy Troubleall, are all introduced in Littlewit’s London home that serves as a prologue to the main action of the Fair. Cf. C G Thayer, *Ben Jonson: Studies in his Plays* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), p. 132. Also see, Neil Rhodes, *Elizabethan Grotesque*, p. 144.

Robert Stamm, ‘On the Carnivalesque’ *Wedge 1*, 1982, p. 47. Even critics who do not necessarily read the play in terms of carnivalesque inversion have commented that in *Bartholomew Fair* almost all the characters who come to visit the Fair thinking that they can remain outside it undergo a chastising process.


Thayer, *Ben Jonson*, pp. 132-33. Occupying a central position in the Fair Ursula plays multiple roles in which the classical and the Biblical, the profane and the sacred merge. Not only is she Demeter, the goddess of fertility, but her complaint about the heat causing her to melt away to a rib (II. i. 99-100) aligns her in a comically debunking mode with Eve.
Ursula’s identity as a comic goddess and enchantress is reinforced through Knockem’s reference to her both as ‘old Urs’la’s mansion’ and ‘bower’ (II. v. 39). She is not only the ‘mother o’ the pigs’ (II. v. 69) but also ‘mother o’ the bawds’ (II. v. 70). Moreover the sacred and the profane mingle in her; she plays a comic Eucharist presiding over the sacrament of pork and ale, which all the visitors to the Fair come to receive. At the same time Ursula’s links with the comic devils of medieval tradition is established through her pig booth, which situated to the stage left corresponded to the hell’s mouth of morality plays. The association with inferno is strengthened by Ursula’s first words complaining that hell ‘is a kind of cold cellar’ (II. ii. 41-42) compared to her kitchen where she roasts her pigs.


Ibid. p. 19.

Ibid. p. 21.

Ibid. p. 19.


Ibid. p. 51.

Ibid. p. 53.

Ibid. p. 53.


Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 16.

Ibid. p. 187.

Ibid. p. 188.

Boose, ‘Scolding Brides’, p. 245.

Bakhtin, *Rabelias*, p. 26

Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid. p. 39.

70 Ibid. p. 25.

71 Ibid. p. 24.

72 Ibid. pp. 28-9. Paster quotes an interesting passage from John Harrington’s *The Metemorphosis of Ajax* to illustrate how laws of urinary segregation are construed in terms of class.

73 Ibid. p. 38.


75 Ibid.

76 In this context it may be worth noting that Gargamel’s labour is induced by an excessive consumption of tripe,’ she did eat sixteen quarters, two bushels, three pecks and a pipkin full.’François Rabelais. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, [1532-35] tr. Thomas Urquhart and Peter Motteux (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), p. 17.

77 Wells, ‘Jacobean City Comedy’, p. 43.


86 Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, p. 53.


Aristotle, *The Generation of Animals*, 2.3.737a; 4.3. 767b; 4.6.775a.


Boose, ‘Scolding Brides’, p. 245.

Critical comments on the feminine quality of Falstaff’s fatness will be discussed in the section on *Henry IV*.

Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, p. 57.

In his romantic comedies Shakespeare exploits the theatrical convention of stage male transvestism with great wit and finesse. Feminist critics have commented extensively on the implications of such cross dressing. See Howard, ‘Crossdressing’, pp. 18-44. Cf. Carol Thomas Neely, ‘Lovesickness, Gender and Subjectivity: *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*’ in Dympna Callaghan ed. *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, pp. 276-98.


Moss, ‘Falstaff as a Woman’, p. 33.


Moss, ‘Falstaff as a Woman’, p. 33.


Ibid. p. 126.

Shakespeare’s history plays lack of strong women characters. Even when they are present, as in 1, 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, women like Joan and Margaret are demonized.

See Barbara Everett, ‘The Fatness of Falstaff: Shakespeare and Character’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 76, 1991, p. 120. Everett argues that in comparison to *Richard II* which is ‘an exquisite unpeopled verse exercise’ and may be regarded as a thin play *Henry IV* is fat


106 Ibid.


108 In 2 *Henry IV*, Falstaff tells the Lord Chief Justice that contrary to the popular opinion of his having misled the young Prince, it is the Prince who has misled him. He refers to himself as the ‘fellow with the great belly’ and the Prince as his dog. (I. ii. 146-47).


111 Everett, ‘The Fatness of Falstaff’, p. 120.

For a detailed and perceptive reading of the masculinist anxieties of the heroes of the Henriad, see Paromita Chakravarti, ‘Renaissance discourses on folly illustrated with examples from English Renaissance drama, especially Shakespeare,’ M.S. D Phil, University of Oxford, 2005, pp. 349-50.

Moss, ‘Fatstaff as Woman’, pp. 36-7.

Laroque, ‘Shakespeare’s ‘Battle of Carnival and Lent’, p. 95.

Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 292

Ibid. p. 281.

Hal’s opening greeting (I. ii. 2-12) similarly constructs a gluttonous, drunk, lazy and lecherous being whose identity is inseparable from ‘cups of sack,’ ‘capons,’ ‘bawds’ ‘fair hot wenches’. It makes Falstaff an embodiment of carnival’s festive preoccupation with food, drink and sex. Moreover, Hal’s insinuations about the superfluity of Falstaff’s need to know the hour of day emphasizes that the latter is always in the carnival holiday mood and mode.


See Rhodes, *Elizabethan Grotesque*, p. 103. The Lenten imagery associated with Hal (eel-skins, stock-fish and small beer) and used by Falstaff to describe an improbable alter-ego (herrings, bunches of radish, gurnets and peppercorns) forms the traditional army of Lent; likewise the tripes, the ribs and tallow, and the sweet beef which fill the frame of Falstaff are the army of Carnival. Cf. Laroque. ‘Shakespeare’s ‘Battle of Carnival and Lent’, p. 83. Laroque points out that: ‘The Falstaff scenes in 1 and 2 Henry IV provide the spectator with a dramatic counterpart of Pieter Bruegel’s famous painting ‘The Battle of Carnival and Lent’. ’

Falstaff’s attacks on Hal are essentially sexual, associating leanness with impotence.


Everett, ‘The Fatness of Falstaff’, p. 125. Everett points out that the play begins with the grotesque accounts of the Welswoman’s emasculation of the enemy dead in battle.

129 Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 20-2. Parker points out that Falstaff’s verbal *copia* and distended body pervade the play, acting as a dilatory, distracting presence, slowing down and deflecting the hero’s march towards his political destiny.


133 Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, p. 25.

134 Ibid. p. 25.


142 See Everett, ‘Fatness of Falstaff’, p. 121. Everett points out that the term ‘Lad’ denotes a ‘kindly contempt, used to those or lower in the social scale than oneself’. By using this familiar address, Falstaff is ‘manifesting from the first his cheerful arrogant resistance to social hierarchy.’

143 Shakespeare’s Hal is no green horn being corrupted by a ‘villainous, abominable misleader of youth’ (*1 Henry IV*, II. v. 467-8) but a new Machiavellian hero, a strategist whose
association with the ruffians of Eastcheap is part of his scheme of holiday ‘loose behaviour’ to be cast off when the need to redeem time occurs (1 Henry IV, I. ii. 192-214). Cf. A D Nuttall, A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 143-7.


145 Cf. Danby, Shakespeare’s Doctrine, pp. 95-6.

146 Cf. Traub, Desire and Anxiety, op cit. p. 59. Traub notes that ‘the connection between Falstaff and Hal seems to invert the power relations we so often assume structure male homoerotic relations: rather than involving a powerful older man who protects and mentors his young lover, the Falstaff / Hal relation concerns an older, less attractive, socially marginalized man who is emotionally and financially dependent on a younger, more attractive, increasingly independent and powerful aristocrat.’

147 The rejection scene seems to echo lines from Sonnet 49: ‘Against that time when thou shalt strangely pass / And scarcely greet me with that sun, thine eye’ (ll. 5-6); and from Sonnet 87: ‘Thus have I had thee, as a dream doth flatter, / In sleep a king, but waking no such matter’ (ll. 13-14).

148 Traub, Desire and Anxiety, p. 54-5. ‘Psychoanalytic criticism of the Henriad has tended to perceive the Prince Hal’s developmental problem as a choice between two fathers: a biological father, Henry IV, standing for conviction, duty and control, yet burdened by his guilty acquisition of the crown; and a father substitute, Falstaff, whose hedonism, lawlessness, and wit provide an attractive, if temporary, alternative.’

149 See Ernst Kris, ‘Prince Hal’s Conflict’, Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art (New York: International University Press, 1952), pp. 273-88. Kris argues that Hal dissociates himself from the court to escape his own unconscious temptation to parricide. After his father’s death when he ascends the throne, his parricidal impulses are displaced onto Falstaff. His harsh rejection of Falstaff thus acts as a symbolic killing of his father.

150 Traub, Desire and Anxiety, p. 55. Traub argues: ‘Falstaff represents to Hal not an alternative paternal image but rather a projected fantasy of the pre-oedipal maternal whose rejection is the basis upon which patriarchal subjectivity is dependent. Traub further argues
that ‘homoerotic desire infuses the relationship of Falstaff and Hal, signaled by Falstaff’s ‘feminine’ qualities and Hal’s predominant lack of interest in women.’ (Ibid. p. 59).

151 Ibid. p. 57.


157 Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, p. 69.

158 Ibid. p. 60.

159 2 Henry IV, V. iii. 47-70.

160 Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, p. 58. Patriarchal fears about the female reproductive body was expressed in the early modern culture’s rites of purification or ‘churching’ that women were made to undergo after menstruation and childbirth. Such rituals based on the female body’s powers of contamination and pollution linked the maternal with the grotesque

161 Earlier too Hal refers to grave and death as return to the maternal.


163 G K Hunter, *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1978), p. 251. According to Hunter, ‘It is the greatest of tragedies because it not only strips and reduces and assaults human dignity, but because it also shows with the greatest force and detail the process of restoration by which humanity can recover from degradation.’


166 See A C Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Macmillan, 1904), p. 333. Bradley compares the Porter in Macbeth with the Grave-digger in Hamlet and the Old Countryman who brings in the asp for Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra and finds them more fittingly comic or humorous.

167 Farnham, Shakespearean Grotesque, p. 34.


172 Bristol, Carnival and Theatre, p. 197.

173 Kott, Shakespeare our Contemporary, p. 113.


179 Bakhtin, Rabelais, p. 11.
180 Ibid. p. 11.


182 Ibid. p. 78.

183 Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre*, p. 211.

184 Discussed earlier in the section on Falstaff.


188 Ibid. p. 30.

189 Neely, ‘Documents in Madness’, p. 90.

190 Ibid. p. 90.


194 Chakravarti, ‘Renaissance discourses on folly’, p. 335.

195 Ibid. p. 334.


197 Kahn, ‘The Absent Mother’, p. 43.


201 Kahn, ‘The Absent Mother’, p. 35.

202 Ibid. p. 36.

203 Bakhtin, Rabelais, p. 21.


205 Kahn, ‘The Absent Mother’, p. 47.