Chapter 1
The Premise

Mieux est de ris que de larmes escrire.
Per ce que rire est le propre de l'homme.

[Better to write about laughter than tears,
For laughter is inherent to man.]¹

I

Laughter, the original, perennial and general instinct, is the exclusive monopoly of humans as ‘Of all living creatures only man is endowed with laughter’ [Aristotle’s De Anima, Book 3, Chapter 10] (RHW 68). Yet this positive faculty, i.e., the element of laughter, was traditionally accorded the lowest position in the entire corpus of literature devoted to myths, folk lyrics and epics. The inclusion of laughter was considered to annihilate the dignity of a work. Even Aristotle in his Poetics considers comedy ‘an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly’ (15:5:144 9a).

Laughter, which, like language, is uniquely characteristic of human species, à la Bakhtin, remained ‘the least scrutinized sphere of the
people's creation' (RHW 4) till the Renaissance. It was during the Renaissance that the folk laughter and the typical culture of the marketplace in all its manifestations began to receive literary attention. During this time, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, this instinctive characteristic came to attain a better status: 'laughter was seen as man's highest spiritual privilege, inaccessible to other creatures' (RHW 68). Pierre de Ronsard, in his poem dedicated to Belleau broadened the scope of laughter:

\[
\text{Dieu qui soubz l' homme a le monde soumis,}
\]

\[
A l' homme seul, le seul rire a permis
\]

\[
Pour s'esgayer et non pas a la beste
\]

\[
Qui n'a raison ny esprit en la teste.
\]

[God who subjected the world to man,

To man alone permitted laughter

To be merry, not to the beast

Who has neither reason nor spirit] ²

Indeed, the importance of laughter was not altogether unknown to ancient civilizations. A third century Egyptian alchemist's papyrus, now preserved in Leiden, attributes the creation of the world to the divine laughter: ‘... when God laughed seven gods were born to rule the world...

when he burst out laughing there was light ... he burst out laughing for the
second time, the waters were born, at the seventh burst of the laughter the soul appeared’ (RHW 71).3

The word ‘comedy’, which makes its entry in the European vocabulary from its Latinized form ‘comoedia’, is derived from κωμός, ‘a revel’ (Howarth 22). F.M. Cornford in The Ritual Origins of Comedy (1914) observes that comedy undoubtedly began to take shape in connection with Dionysiac or Phallic rituals. In ancient histories of literature, it was the custom to portray the village feasts as paying homage to Bacchus, the God of Wine, accompanied by processions and dances which were often marked by wild disorder and abundant drinking. Being intoxicated with the wine and public excitement, the rustic poet used to burst out into satirical sallies and buffooneries, applauded by shouts of laughter from the crowd of reeling revelers (Palmer 67).

Elements of laughter were also included in tragedy as manifested in the Attic culture. A satyric play usually followed the tragic trilogy to complement the latter on the comic level. Attic tragedy was not apprehensive of laughter and parody, and would rather assimilate it as a corrective and complement. The world literature abounds in such exquisite works where seriousness and laughter coexist and balance each other, creating a perfect whole. Euripides’ Alcestis may be a striking instance
where tragedy is followed by the satyric drama. Aristophanes’ comedy displays more riotous humour and public themes while the works of Menander manifest less hilarious and more domestic comedy.

Gilbert Murray, in his critical work *Aristophanes* (Oxford; 1933), observes that all comedy involves what modern psychologists call a ‘Release’ (2) which ‘appears in its most unmistakable form in Old Comedy, [which] is probably as important a legacy of the ritual origins of comedy as the pattern of combat, mock death and regeneration’ (Howarth 24). ‘This release and liberation from everyday restraint’, says Michael Anderson [in a chapter titled ‘The Comedy of Greece and Rome’ in *Comic Drama*], ‘can be traced, certainly, in the scurrility and abuse in which Aristophanes so clearly delights, but more importantly in the freedom from everyday logic which marks the language, plots and staging conventions of his drama’ (Howarth 24). Aristophanes’ first extant comedy *Acharnians* (425 B.C.) displays a constant contrast between rustic simplicity and urban sophistication in the Aristophanic peasant, up early gazing

Out over the fields, craving for peace,

Hating this city aching for my village, (ll. 32-3)
one perceives a sort of 'authenticity missing from the roughest of the gentlemen farmers of the later comedy, and the enforced separation from his smallholding invests him with a sense of deprivation' (Howarth 24).

The presence and performance of the chorus bring Old Comedy closest to the primal καύμος or revel where its origin lies. The chorus may appear in animal disguise, it may comprise of a group of old men entering the stage excitingly, dancing, and sometimes agitated at the hero’s enterprise. Hardly have they favoured the protagonist who has to overcome their stringent opposition through a series of scenes, which start in bustling performance and finish in a presentation of the opposite outlook with a tinge of formality.

However, the importance of chorus met a steady decline. During the age of Menander it only provided interludes devoid of any connection with the play and in the Roman comedy it disappeared altogether. This decline has been supposed to signify 'the shift in balance from public to private, from political to personal, from the actual to the general' (Howarth 25).

The evidence of the earliest comic piece in Italy is traced back to the fifth century B.C. when Epicharmus of Syracuse framed a play based on the then prevailing fashionable philosophy of Herbalists. Castelvetro and Maggie dealt with the elements of laughter in detail. Scaliger discovered that
the test of all comedy was laughter: ‘There was not just one manner of comedy, for so long as comedies won laughter they needed nothing else’ (Howarth 63).

The pivot around which the Italian tradition of laughter rotates is the *beffa* which originated in the plays and other literary works much before Boccaccio and which flourished later in the plays of Eduardo and Peppino de Filippo. Recent researchers on the *beffa* investigate ‘about whether and why it makes us laugh, about whether and in what way it is cruel, and about the essential difference between those stories where the emphasis is on the *beffatore*, the joker, and those where it is on the *beffato*, the dupe’ (Howarth 68).

In Spain, the theoreticians and dramatists like Bartolomé de Torres Naharro mingled tragic and comic elements in *comedia* where characters could vary from the noble to the base and the subject matter is seemingly endless. From the eleventh century onwards ‘A carnival-like procession escorted the Host in the Corpus Christi parade. There was no sense of impropriety in the use of the comic to relieve or more probably heighten through contrast, the religious significance of an occasion’ (Howarth 82). In the sixteenth century play *Aucto de los desposorios de Joseph* (Joseph’s Marriage) a *bobo* (simpleton) apart from providing laughter, stimulated
much of the action. In the early years of the same century the *églogas* (eclogues) by Jual den Encina were composed to amuse the aristocrats with "antics of boorish rustic characters speaking in dialects" (Howarth 82). Though the Spanish playwrights disregarded the three unities, they strictly maintained the principle of decorum. In contrast to the protagonist and the main characters, there were the servant and the maid. Either singly or together, they provided the element of laughter mimicking their superiors, passing down-to-earth remarks on the sentiments of the chief characters or performing in contradiction to the prevailing code of honour. It is interesting to note that the role of the servant, the *gracioso*, or funny man, was performed often by the most famous actor of the theatrical company. One such actor, 'Juan Rana' (the pseudonym of Cosme Pérez), became so popular, that many interludes were composed keeping him in view and his name became proverbial for his comic skill.

Lope de Vega (1562-1635), the writer of a huge number of plays, perceived from his experience that the spectators, after being moved to tears, relish laughter as a sort of relief. His plays have stood the test of time largely because of this perception and simultaneous application of this formula; 'A tragic event like the rape of the bride from the village of Fuenteovejuna, is
made bearable by the mock-heroic behaviour of some of the rustics' (Howarth 88).

Contrastively Molière in the seventeenth century France, presented a form of intellectual comedy in his mature plays. Labiche and Feydeau constantly produced verbal comedy. Emile Augier observes of Labiche: ‘His theatre gains one hundred per cent on being read, not just seen: its burlesque element stands out less clearly, but the comic element comes fully into its own. When you laugh, it is no longer with the reflex action of a man being tickled by a feather; it is with a whole-hearted kind of laughter in which the intellect too has its part’ (Howarth 119-120).

Indeed, though people are able to perceive the sublime morale imparted by serious comedy, they crave for witnessing what is familiar and easy. In the tenth and eleventh century this natural craving reverted, as a reaction against monastic culture, to the milieu of fields and forests, and to simple folly for the mere fun of it. Thus throughout Christendom pagan festivals related to agriculture were revived. Even the liturgy was parodied and caricatured, with a legitimate consent of the church, in the annual ceremonies pertaining to the Feast of the Ass, the Feast of Fools, the Boy Bishop and Carnival (Shrovetide).
A class of bourgeois merchants cropped up in some parts of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Naturally their prosperity incurred jealousy and resentment among the lower strata of the social milieu due to conspicuous differences in their respective social status. This jealousy sought for a catharsis through communal festivals aiming at the inversion of normal social order. ‘The Feast of Fools, Shrovetide and Carnival provided the principal occasion for this release of emotion, and the Lord of Misrule, the Boy Bishop, the French sot and the German Narr represent in their names and persons the degree of license accorded to it’ (Howarth 44). Though possibly the spirit of these celebrations was initially informed with anti-feudal, anti-bourgeois and anti-clerical attitudes, gradually it was transformed into a generalized attack on hierarchy. Nevertheless they provided mirth, merriment and laughter.

II

Nicholas Udall’s Ralph Roister Doister (1552), written in imitation of Terence and considered to be the first English comedy, eulogizes ‘mirth’:

For Mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health,

Mirth recreates our spirits and voideth pensiveness,

Mirth increaseth amity, not hindering our wealth. (Palmer 35)
With reference to this, Palmer observes, ‘Mirth is not scornful laughter but the merriment of pastime and game’ (11). Chaucer’s Host in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* applies the word ‘mirth’ while placing his proposal that the pilgrims tell tales to each other on their way to Canterbury:

Fayn wolde I doon yow myrthe, wiste I how,

And of a myrthe I am right now bythoght,

To doon yow ese, and it shal coste noght. (766-8) [Palmer 11]

The healing power of ‘mirth’ is emphasized also by Shakespeare in *The Taming of the Shrew* when the players arrive to entertain Christopher Sly:

[...] And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,

Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.

(Induction, scene ii, 132-3) [Palmer 12]

Much later in the eighteenth century Henry Fielding in ‘Affectation and the Ridiculous’ (1742) defended burlesque on the grounds that ‘it contributes more to exquisite mirth and laughter than any other; and these are probably more wholesome physic for the mind and condue better to purge away spleen, melancholy, and ill affections, than is generally imagined’ (Palmer 12).

The coexistence of gravity and levity continued in the late sixteenth century in the plays of Shakespeare. He juxtaposed, in the words of
Howarth, the so-called ‘high’ comedy “involving wit, repartee, perhaps some intrigue and usually some romance, among people for the most part young and apparently with all the time in the world to fleet away the golden hours and characters drawn much more closely from ‘low’ life (or the real world, depending on the point of view), village rustics, small-town craftsmen and ‘tradesmen, peddlers, serving men, discharged soldiers, the parson and the schoolmaster, materials for his clowns to embroider and exploit with all their practical skill” (126-7).

Furthermore, Shakespeare took the characters of his so-called ‘low’ comedy from the lower-middle class society in which the Bard of Avon himself had grown up and with which he came across in his immediate precincts at London — the quiddities, eccentricities and naïvety — out of which emerged Dogberry, Bottom, Holofernes, Nathaniel, Lancelot Gobbo, Christopher Sly and such like.

Ben Jonson’s less renowned play Bartholomew Fair (1614) presents hilarious laughter and extravagant jollity against the backdrop of a fair attended by coarse and idiosyncratic plebeians enjoying holiday in a mood to rip off all the barriers of social inhibitions. It manifests the comic jest of the lower stratum of society, evoking simultaneously the spirit of tolerance, which is typical of festive occasion when a heterogeneous conglomeration of
cheats, dupes, rogues, fools, confidence tricksters, bawds, ballad-singers mingle in the crowd. Coburn Gum comments in his book *The Aristophanic Comedies of Ben Jonson* that *Bartholomew Fair* indicates how Jonson 'temporarily put Plautus and Terence aside, forsook the *Plutus*, and surrendered completely to the spell of Aristophanes' (191). The reader is obviously reminded of the *Acharnias* and *Clouds*, but in its essence it is genuinely English and Jonson introduces here a spirit of sheer abandonment to uninhibited revelry and merriment.

The Renaissance laughter was represented by Shakespeare in England, Cervantes in Spain and Rabelais in France. When Bakhtin defines laughter in his *Rabelais and His World* his immediate reference is this Renaissance conception of laughter: 'Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter' (66). He also observes, 'A millennium of folk humour broke into Renaissance literature' (72). Bakhtin feels that on the one hand this thousand-year-old
laughter fertilized literature; on the other, laughter itself was enriched by the humanist knowledge and advanced literary technique.

Jonson, in the preface to *Epicoene* (1609), claimed —

The ends of all, who for the scene do write,

Are, or should be, to profit and delight!

A similar uninhibited laughter can also be found in some Restoration comedies. Bonamy Dobrée in *Restoration Comedy*, observes that there are some comedies which seem to stand out from the rest by virtue of the fact that these make the reader feel no superiority, inculcate no moral, but the reader seems to gain a release, ‘not only from what Lamb called the burden of our perpetual moral questioning, but from all things that appear to limit our power’ (13-14). Etherage, Rengard, like their illustrious ancestor Aristophanes, provide the best examples of such comedy where one feels that ‘no values count, that there is no rules of conduct, hardly laws of nature. Certainly no appeal, however indirect, is made to our critical or moral faculties. We can disport ourselves freely in a realm where nothing is accountable; all we need to exact is that the touch shall be light enough. We take the same delight in the vagaries of Sir Foppling Flutter as we do at the sight of an absurdly gamboling calf. Judgment, except the aesthetic, is out of place here. We are permitted to play with life, which becomes a charming
harlequinade without being farce. It is all spontaneous and free, rapid and exhilarating;’ (Dobrée 14). According to David Daiches, however, in Restoration Comedy rural commoners are consistently ridiculed for their uncouthness and lack of sophistication (538). According to him, Restoration drama ‘represented stylization of a deliberately cultivated upper-class ethos’ (540). In the seventeenth century literature, laughter stood for levity and inferiority serving as social punishment at times. The attitude towards laughter of this century and of the years that followed can be defined by using Bakhtin’s words: ‘Laughter is not a universal, philosophical form. It can refer only to individual and individually typical phenomena of social life. That which is important and essential cannot be comical. Neither can history and persons representing it -- kings, generals, heroes -- be shown in a comic aspect. The sphere of the comic is narrow and specific (private and social vices); the essential truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter. Therefore, the place of laughter in literature belongs only to the low genres, showing the life of private individuals and the inferior social levels. Laughter is a light amusement or a form of salutary social punishment of corrupt and low persons’ (RHW 67).

In the eighteenth century laughter suffered the worst jolt when Voltaire considered the work of Rabelais as ‘a mixture of erudition, dirt and
boredom' (117) and the latter was called by him ‘chief among buffoons’ (117). Rabelais’ own announcement (in the prologues) that he writes only while eating and drinking was taken in its literal and trivial sense by Voltaire. During this century carnival forms and themes were applied in literature in a formalized sense to compose satires, and laughter was degraded to mere mockery.

The general critical position vis-à-vis ‘Laughter’ does not appear to change until well into the nineteenth century. Wimsatt and Brooks in Literary Criticism: A Short History, mention that during the nineteenth century the Scottish psychologist Alexander Bain (1818-1903) postulated the theory of laughter as ‘the rebound of hilarity’, a sudden deliverance from emotional and moral constraints (570). Charles Renouvier reinforces the observation when he comments that laughter is also a deliverance from the hindrances of rationality itself. We are also informed that Auguste Penjon, many years before the publication of Bergson’s Le Rire, wrote an essay entitled Le Rire et la Liberté where he interpreted laughter ‘as the sudden surging up of the sense of freedom’ (570). The American psychologist L.W. Cline sums up Penjon’s theory thus: ‘The humor stimulus gives glimpses of the world of uncertainties, of spontaneities and of life, and in so doing creates the sense of freedom of which the sense of humor is the obverse

It is possible to study Hardy’s treatment of the element of laughter of the common folk in his fictional works from this perspective.

III

Before exploring the elements of laughter and carnival in Hardy’s fiction it is useful to have a quick glance at the functional aspects of carnival laughter as a popular cultural heritage of Europe and England which our author had possibly imbibed. Bakhtin considers Carnival ‘the people’s second life’ organized on the basis of laughter (RHW 8). In recollection of the Golden Age the Romans celebrated Saturnalia, a winter festival when masters used to serve the slaves, to celebrate the reign of Saturn. Bristol shows that in these celebrations Saturn was considered a working god presiding over various agricultural tasks including the sowing of seeds. Saturnalian feast anticipated the rearing, harvesting and consuming of the agricultural products and the renewal of human life. The ‘reign of Saturn’ celebrated the memories of a time when the human race as a whole, irrespective of the wealthy and the penniless, supposedly enjoyed the products of the earth without hindrance or inhibition. This utopian idea of Saturnalia continued to
inform early modern Europe in various legends and also in the characteristic idiomatic language and imagery of Shrovetide feasting (88). Carnival, strictly speaking, signified the celebration of hilarious feast every year immediately before Ash Wednesday and attended the consumption of meat preceding the penitential fast of Lent. Carnival, in general sense, however, was associated with a protracted season extending from the feasts of the Christmas cycle to those of Easter. As Bristol observes, ‘one of the functions of Carnival is to facilitate the annual transition from celebrations fixed by the solar calendar, including All Souls’ and the Twelve Days of Christmas, and the ending with Candlemas on February 2, to celebrations fixed by the juxtaposition of the lunar calendar with vernal equinox, including Lent and Easter, and ending with Ascension Day. [...] As the liminal event par excellence, Carnival is a pivotal link in the annual cycle of festivity, and carnivalesque manifestations pervade every celebration, those of May and midsummer no less than the winter observances’ (Bristol 41). The autumn feasts of Saint Martin and Saint Michael contained a Bacchanalian overtone, as these saints were the patrons of winemaking. On the occasion of feast of Saint Lazarus in Marseilles, processions with horses, mules, asses, bulls and cows were arranged during the performance of the “great dance” (magnum tripudum).
Carnival festivities played a major role in the calendars of the medieval Europe. Besides major festivals there were Feast of Fools (*festa stultorum*), Feast of the Ass and Easter Laughter (*risus paschalis*) and parish feasts usually celebrated with fairs and various open-air amusements. These are drastically different from the serious official, political or ecclesiastical ceremonies. In sharp contradiction to the official feast, carnival celebrated temporal release from the official ideology and established rules and regulations. It temporarily suspended hierarchical privileges and prohibitions: 'Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed' (*RHW* 10). The suspension of hierarchical division was significant as class was extremely dominant in the Middle Ages; during the carnival all were considered equal, free and familiar interaction among different strata of society formed the essence of carnival spirit. People were, as if, reborn to form unadulterated human relations. The utopian conception and actuality mingled with each other in this carnival experience which was especially significant for the plebians who formed the bulk of the total population, and to whom this was 'our yeere of Iubile: and when the pancake bel rings we are as free as my Lord Maior' (*I*, 80) [*Bristol 41*].
Bristol observes, “As a critical and interpretive concept, Carnival draws attention to the radical ‘otherness’ of literary works, even by the most canonical of authors. Bakhtin is not concerned with abstract and universalized ‘otherness’: he focuses on one specific form of the social ‘other’, that is, ‘the people’, and in particular the culture and pattern of collective life of the common people in early modern Europe” (22). He also finds that the plebeians neither corresponded to the concept of a ‘unified populace’, nor do they fit in to the idea of ‘mass society’. They are unified by their exclusion from the privileges of high society. The plebs included people linked with production, such as farmers, craftsmen, small merchants along with other allied unprivileged groups like servants, apprentices and journeymen (42).

As carnival festivities were popular and collective, hierarchies were frequently toppled — beggars were made kings, fools played the wise; opposing factors such as facts and fantasy, heaven and hell conglomerated; the sacred was made profane. The ‘jolly relativity’ of all things was proclaimed: ‘Everything authoritative, rigid or serious is subverted, loosened and mocked. This essentially popular and libertarian social phenomenon has a formative influence on literature of various periods, but has become especially dominant in the Renaissance. [...] The earliest carnivalized
literary forms are the Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire' (Selden and
Widdowson 40). Selden and Widdowson also observe that some of the New
Historicists have utilized the concept of Bakhtin to escape from the apparent
structural closure of Foucault’s historical theory.

Michael Bristol argues that Greenblatt and Dollimore fail to perceive
the vitality and power of popular culture in the Elizabethan period. Bakhtin
regards Carnival as a ‘second culture’, which was opposed to the official
culture, and which was continued by the plebeians throughout the Middle
Ages and well into the early modern period. Bakhtin’s idea that carnival
inserts into official structures ‘an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open­
endedness’ [DI 263] underscores the response of subjects to dominant
discourses through the modalities of ‘counter-identification’ or even
‘disidentification’. Obviously, Foucauldians may comment that carnival is
also permitted officially and it is a meticulously controlled manifestation of
subversion which, though mocks, but actually confirms the authoritative
power by its ritualization.

Emile Durkheim considers carnival as catharsis and survival of
traditional form (348). Though he was concerned with preindustrial and
preliterate societies, his observation is applicable to more complex social
atmosphere. The individual is reunited with the collective in any festive
occasion thus strengthening the bond of solidarity among people who practically benefit from it. The necessities of each individual are supposedly best satisfied when he or she is identified with and supported by the collective. Therefore people willingly participate in activities, which would promote and conserve harmony. Bristol observes, “The most intangible ‘Semiotic material’ of Carnival is the organization of the festive crowd itself, which gives to its members an experience of a larger human physicality where individual self-consciousness sharply diminishes and identification with the collective ‘other’ intensifies” (57).

Carnival is an occasion of travesty of established order. Hierarchy, political and social authority and even theology are appropriated for the sake of festive laughter. In it a crown may be considered a funny hat and vice versa. During carnival

the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot bishop, or archbishop was elected at the “feast of fools”, and even in the churches directly under the Pope’s jurisdiction a mock pontiff was chosen. The members of this hierarchy of fools sang solemn mass. At many of these feasts kings and queens were elected for a day as on Epiphany and on St. Valentine’s Day. The custom of electing such ephemeral kings and queens (rois
pour rire) was especially widespread in France, where nearly every popular banquet was presided over by them. (Bakhtin, RH 81).

Carnival manifests people's expectation of a happier future, of a more just social and economic order, of a new truth. The ecstasy of carnival apparently provided the image of this happier future of general worldly affluence, solidarity and mental release like Saturnalian declaration of return of the Golden Age. Carnival is also a medium of launching protest against arbitrary imposition of authoritative domination, particularly when the constraints imposed are felt "as an aggression against the customary norms of surveillance and social control" (Bristol 52). The temporal suspension of reality and hierarchy during carnival gives rise to a special kind of communication unfamiliar in everyday life. This enhanced the formation of a particular form of marketplace speech and gesture, free and frank, minimising the distance between the participants of the carnival, releasing them from the etiquette and decency prevailing normally in social milieu.

Through carnival a second world of folk culture is formed to subvert the extra-carnival life; it presents a world 'inside out'. But undoubtedly carnival is never the negative and formal parody as seen in modern age.
According to Bakhtin 'Folk humour denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture' (RHW 11).

Carnival festivity accommodates abundance and overindulgence in consuming liquor and food. Besides, it encourages drunkenness, disruptive attitude and symbolic disorderly conduct including street violence and sexual promiscuity (Bristol 40). The human genitals and buttocks, what is termed as "lower bodily stratum" by Bakhtin (RHW 21) constituted an indispensable part of carnival. This was also the occasion for masquerade, disguise and processions.

Carnival is not a performance witnessed by the people but it is performed by themselves, people participate in it; so long as carnival continues, there is no life external to it. The entire society becomes subordinated to its rules— the laws of freedom. It imitates the renewal and revival of the world (RHW 7).

Carnival laughter is festive in nature. Instead of being an individual response to an isolated comic happening, it is the manifestation of collective enjoyment. Moreover, this laughter is universal; it may be targeted at everyone including the participants themselves. Bakhtin observes that carnival laughter is ambivalent: 'It is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives' (RHW 11).
Though the particular pattern of celebrating carnival varied from one country of Europe to another, the general characteristics were more or less similar. As carnival is basically celebrated during winter, in the Southern parts of Europe they were widely outdoor enjoyments. Nevertheless, even in cold countries carnival became an annual event. It practically reached its climax on Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras on the eve of Lent.

Laughter and merriment had been condemned from the very outset of Christianity. Bakhtin relates that Tertullian, Cyprian and John Chrysostom preached against ancient spectacles, particularly against the jest and laughter in mimes as, Chrysostom declared, they came from the devil. While struggling against the Aryans, the Christians were, however, accused of including songs, gesticulations and laughter in religious services.

Nevertheless, this suffocating seriousness of the official ecclesiastic rules gradually led to the initiation of the process legalizing laughter and jest that had been erstwhile rejected by the establishment. Thus parallel to official festivals, forms of popular laughter started to appear. Simultaneously, some of the religious rites which originated from antique rituals, were influenced by the Eastern cults and pagan rites related to fertility. Primary forms of amusement and laughter could be traced in the liturgy, funeral rites, rites of baptism, wedding and other religious services.
These rudimentary forms of laughter acted as a parallel to the official cults. Thus the 'feasts of fools' during the feast of St. Stephen, on New Year's Day, the feast of the Holy Innocents, of the Epiphany, and of St. John were celebrated by schoolmen and lower clerics. Though these feasts were primarily celebrated within the periphery of the churches, towards the end of the Middle Ages, they were banished from the ecclesiastical boundaries though without being extinguished altogether. They continued their existence in the streets and taverns. Bakhtin observes, 'The feast of fools showed a particular obstinacy and force of survival in France (fête des fous). This feast was actually a parody and travesty of the official cult, with masquerades and improper dances. These celebrations held by the lower clergy were especially boisterous on New Year's Day and on Epiphany. Nearly all the rituals of the feast of fools show a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level: gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing' (RHW 74).

Carnival merriment was also observed in the 'feast of the ass' which commemorates Mary's flight to Egypt with the infant Jesus. Though a young girl with an infant participates in it, the focus of this feast is neither Mary nor Jesus but a braying ass.
During the Easter season the ecclesiastical authority permitted laughter and jokes even within the church premises. The priest could tell amusing tales and jokes from the pulpit. After the days of latent grief he was licensed to spark off laughter among the gathered mob as a token of gay regeneration. The jokes and tales were related to material physical aspects. Laughter was permitted along with huge consumption of meat and resumption of sexual intercourse (forbidden during Lent).

Apart from these, there was Christmas laughter which was expressed through merry songs. The contents of the songs were often grossly worldly and they were sometimes sung to the street tunes.

Thus, laughter, which had been banished from official rituals of the Middle Ages, flourished unofficially under the canopy of almost every feast which had folk carnival characteristics. The organizing principles of these feasts were laughter and physical enjoyment. Bakhtin observes, 'Doubtless, the Roman Saturnalia continued to live during the entire Middle Ages. The tradition of antique mime also remained alive. But the main source was local folklore. It was this folklore which inspired both the imagery and the ritual of the popular, humorous part of the feast' (RHE 82).

Carnival as a tradition has its long roots in England. It had been an integral part of folk-culture in the country as elsewhere in Europe till the
advent of the modern age following industrialisation and urbanisation. Christina Hole’s *British Folk Customs* and Samuel Pepys’s *Penny Merriments* evoke in detail the carnival atmosphere that attended the folk customs of England. Thomas Hardy’s emotional-artistic moorings in the folk customs and ways of Wessex have been generally acknowledged by biographers and critics (like Pinion, Weber, Millgate *et al*). A study of Hardy’s novels and short stories from this perspective can show how consistently and delightfully he had captured the carnivalesque spirit embedded in this tradition.

In the following chapters I propose to examine Hardy’s novels and stories in order to trace the articulation of this spirit in his fictional works, and also to trace any possible line of development or withering of the same.

**NOTES**

1. The concluding lines of Rabelais introductory poem to *Gargantua* [*Rabelais and His World*, 68].


4. The translation by Patric Dickinson.
5. His disciple and early biographer Montalbán attributed 1800 plays to him, he himself spoke of 1500. Modern researchers grant him at least 350-400.