

## Carnival

The unparalleled excellence of the festival as a context for images and, surely, Carnival. In southern Europe in particular Carnival was the greatest popular festival of the year, and a privileged time when what oft was thought could for once be expressed with relative impunity. Carnival was a favourite time for the performance of plays, and many of these plays cannot be properly understood without some knowledge of Carnival rituals, to which they often allude.

Before any interpretation can be attempted, it is necessary to reconstruct a typical Carnival from the fragmentary evidence which has survived. This reconstruction is inevitably a hazardous business. Where the evidence is the richest, there will be some knowledge of southern Europe through Italian spectacles. Most surviving evidence concerns cities and does not tell us what we would like to know about peasant culture. Some peasants lived in the town and others probably came to town for the festival. Much of the evidence comes from outsiders, foreign tourists who may have misunderstood what they saw and heard (above). No Carnival was exactly like any other Carnival. There were regional variations, and there were other differences due to the weather, the political situation, or the price of meat at a given time. However, these variations cannot be appreciated without some kind of norm to measure them against, some composite picture of an early modern European Carnival.

The Carnival season began in January or even in late December, with excitement mounting as Lent approached. The place of Carnival was the open air in the city centre: in Montpellier, Place Notre Dame; in Nuremberg, the market-place surrounding the Town Hall; in Venice, Piazza S. Marco, and so on. Carnival may be seen as a huge play in which the main streets and squares became stages, the city became a theatre without walls and the inhabitants, the actors and spectators, observing the scene from their balconies. In fact there was no sharp distinction between actors and spectators, since the ladies on their balconies might throw eggs at the crowd below, and the maskers were often licensed to burst into private houses.<sup>10</sup>

The action of this gigantic play was a set of more or less

formally structured events. The less formally structured events went on intermittently for the whole Carnival season and were spread over the whole town. In the first place, there was massive eating of meat, pancakes and (in the Netherlands) waffles, reaching a climax on Shrove Tuesday, which in seventeenth-century England was described as a time of 'such boiling and broiling, such roasting and toasting, such stewing and brewing, such baking, frying, mincing, cutting, carving, devouring, and gorbellied gourmandising, that a man would think people did take in two months' provision at once into their paunches, or that they did ballast their bellies with meat for a voyage to Constantinople, or the West Indies'. Drinking was also heavy. In Russia, according to an English visitor, in the last week of Carnival 'they drink as if they were never to drink more'.<sup>11</sup> People sang and danced in the streets – not that this was unusual in early modern Europe, but the excitement was, and some of the songs and dances and musical instruments were special ones, like the Dutch *Rommelpot*, a pig's bladder stretched over a jug half full of water. 'When a reed stick is stuck through the middle of the bladder and is moved between the thumb and fingers the instrument produces a sound not unlike one emitted by a stuck pig.'<sup>12</sup> People wore masks, some with long noses (Plate 16), or entire fancy-dress. Men dressed as women, women as men; other popular costumes were those of clerics, devils, fools, wild men and wild animals, for example bears. Italians liked to dress as characters from the *commedia dell'arte*, and Goethe records seeing hundreds of Pulcinellas in the Corso in Rome. An Englishman in Paris for the Carnival of 1786 wrote that 'popes, cardinals, monks, devils, courtiers, harlequins and lawyers all mingled in one promiscuous crowd'.<sup>13</sup> This crowd did not just dress up but acted out their parts. 'One plays the Doctor of Law, and goes up and down the streets with his book in his hand disputing with every man he meets.'<sup>14</sup> Fools and wild men rushed about striking at the bystanders with pig's bladders and even with sticks. People threw flour at one another, or sugar-plums, or apples, or oranges, or stones, or eggs, which might be filled with rose-water but might not. In Cadiz the ubiquitous English visitor noticed women on balconies pouring pails of water on the men below.<sup>15</sup> Animals were common victims of the Carnival madness; dogs might be tossed in a blanket, and cocks pelted to death. Aggression was also verbal,

and many insults were exchanged and satirical verses sung.<sup>16</sup>

Other happenings were structured rather more formally, were concentrated in the last few days of Carnival and in the central squares, made more of a distinction between actors and spectators, and were often organised by clubs or fraternities led by 'Kings' or 'Abbots' of Misrule and recruited particularly, but not exclusively, from young adult males of the upper classes, as in the cases of the Abbaye des Conards (Rouen), the Compagnie de la Mère Folle (Dijon), the Compagnie della Calza (Venice), or the Schembartläufer (Nuremberg).<sup>17</sup> The performances which they organised were 'improvised' in the sense that there was no script and (probably) no rehearsal, but they were coordinated by a group who knew one another, who had taken part in such occasions before. The performances were not exactly fixed but not exactly free, just as they were not exactly serious but not exactly pure entertainment, something in between. They often included the following three elements.

In the first place, a procession, in which there would probably be floats bearing people dressed as giants, goddesses, devils, and so on. In Nuremberg there was one float or *Hölle*, which was drawn through the streets on a sledge to the main square. It often took the form of a ship, reminiscent of the German ship-wagon processions which are occasionally mentioned in ancient and medieval times. The floats were particularly numerous and famous in Florence. The actors would represent gardeners, wet-nurses, fencers, students, Turks, *Landsknechten* and other social types, and they would sing songs composed for the occasion, which they addressed to the ladies on their balconies looking down on the procession as it passed. In some French Carnivals, husbands who had been beaten by their wives or had recently got married were carried in procession by the officials of the 'great prince Mardi Gras', or led through town mounted backwards on an ass.<sup>18</sup>

A second recurrent element of the Carnival ritual was some kind of competition; running at the ring, horse-races and foot-races were popular. The Roman Carnival included a race for young men, a race for Jews, and a race for old men. Or there might be jousts or tournaments on land or water; at Lille in the eighteenth century, the jousts stood on two boats in the river. Football matches on Shrove Tuesday were common in Britain and northern France. In Ludlow, there was a tug-of-war; in

Bologna, one side threw eggs at the other, which tried to ward them off with sticks.<sup>19</sup>

A third recurrent element in Carnival was the performance of a play of some kind, usually a farce. However, it is difficult to draw the line between a formal play and informal 'games'. There were mock sieges, popular in Italy, in which a castle erected on the main square would be taken by assault; mock lawsuits, or *causes grasses*, popular in France; mock sermons, popular in Spain; mock ploughings, popular in Germany, with unmarried women pulling the ploughs; and mock weddings, in which the bride might be a man, or the groom a bear (cf. p.122 above, on parody). Many games of this kind centred on the figure of 'Carnival' himself. 'Carnival' usually took the form of a fat man, pot-bellied, ruddy, cheerful, often hung about with eatables (sausages, fowl, rabbits), seated on a barrel, or accompanied (as at Venice in 1572) by a cauldron of macaroni. 'Lent', for contrast, took the form of a thin old woman, dressed in black and hung about with fish – the English 'Jack a Lent', a male figure, seems to have been the exception. This Carnival context should enable us to explain the names and guess at the characteristics of several famous clowns of the period; 'Hans Wurst' was surely a Carnival figure with a sausage, while 'Pickleherring' and 'Steven Stockfish' were emaciated Lenten types.<sup>20</sup>

There is some evidence to suggest that battles between Carnival and Lent were not just figments of the imagination of Brueghel, Bosch and other painters, but were enacted in public; in Bologna in 1506, there was a tournament between 'Carnival', on a fat horse, and 'Lent', on a thin one, each with a squadron of followers. The last act of the festival was often a drama in which 'Carnival' suffered a mock trial, made a mock confession and a mock testament, and was given a mock execution, usually by burning, and a mock funeral. Alternatively, a pig might be solemnly beheaded, as happened every year in Venice, or a sardine might be buried with full honours, as was the case in Madrid.<sup>21</sup>

### **The world upside down**

What did Carnival mean to the people who took part in it? In a sense the question is unnecessary. Carnival was a holiday, a

game, an end in itself, needing no explanation or justification. It was a time of ecstasy, of liberation. In another sense the question needs to be multiplied. Why did the game take these particular forms? Why did people wear masks with long noses, why did they throw eggs, why did they execute 'Carnival'? Contemporaries did not bother to record what Carnival meant to them – it must have seemed obvious – so we shall have to proceed indirectly, looking for recurrent themes and their most common associations.<sup>22</sup>

There were three major themes in Carnival, real and symbolic: food, sex and violence. Food was the most obvious. It was meat which put the *carne* in Carnival. Heavy consumption of pork, beef and other meat actually took place and was symbolically represented as well. 'Carnival' had chickens and rabbits hanging from his clothes. In Nuremberg, Munich and elsewhere the butchers played an important part in the rituals, dancing or running through the streets or ducking one of the juniors. At Koenigsberg in 1583, ninety butchers carried in procession a sausage weighing 440 lb.

*Carne* also meant 'the flesh'. Sex was, as usual, more interesting symbolically than food because of the ways in which it was disguised, transparent as these veils may have been. Carnival was a time of particularly intense sexual activity, as historians of eighteenth-century France have been able to show with their tables of the seasonal movement of conceptions; the peak was in May–June, but there was a second peak in February or thereabouts. Weddings often took place during Carnival, and mock weddings were a popular form of game. Songs with double meanings were not only permitted at this time, but were virtually obligatory. Typical is the one sung by a float of Florentine 'key-makers', who told the ladies, as they passed under their balconies, that

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|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <i>E bella e nuova ed util masserizia</i>    | <i>Our tools are fine, new and useful;</i> |
| <i>Sempre con noi portiamo</i>               | <i>We always carry them with us;</i>       |
| <i>D'ogni cosa dovizia,</i>                  | <i>They are good for anything,</i>         |
| <i>E chi volesse il può toccar con mano.</i> | <i>If you want to touch them, you can.</i> |

In Naples in 1664, the ladies were shocked to see a wooden

phallus, 'the size of a horse's' being carried through the streets.<sup>23</sup> Given such an incident, it does not seem too far-fetched to interpret long-nosed masks or horned masks as phallic symbols, let alone the sausage carried in procession at Koenigsberg; or to draw attention to the sexual significance of the 'ploughing' in which unmarried girls had to take part, and of the pig's bladder which was used to make music, play football, and strike people. The cock and the pig were contemporary symbols of lust, while the hairy woodwoses and the bears who frequently appeared at Carnival and might kidnap ladies were surely symbols of potency.

Carnival was not only a festival of sex but a festival of aggression, of destruction, desecration. Indeed, one should perhaps think of sex as the middle term connecting food and violence. Violence, like the sex, was more or less sublimated into ritual. Aggression was licensed this season; maskers were allowed to insult individuals, to criticise the authorities. This was the time to accuse your neighbour of being cuckolded or beating his wife. In the carnival procession at Madrid in 1637, one who seemed to be skinned, carried the inscription:

*Sisas, alcavalas y papel sellado  
Me tienen desollado.*

*(The excise, the sales tax and the stamped paper have fleeced me.)*<sup>24</sup>

Other figures, alluding to the emperor's in honours, carried the costumes of the military leaders, with inscriptions 'For Sale'. Aggression was often vented in mock battles, or in football matches, or it was directed against objects which could not easily defend themselves. Pigs, cocks, dogs, and Jews, who were pelted with stones on their appearance through Rome. More violence not infrequently occurred, whether because insults went too far or because the season was too good an opportunity to miss for paying one's grudges. In Moscow, a number of killings in the street occurred during the Carnival season, while an English visitor to Venice at the end of the sixteenth century recorded that 'there were on Shrove-Sunday at night seventeen slain, and very many wounded; besides that they reported, there was almost every night one slain, all that Carnival time'. In London, Shrove