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In: *Roman Jakobson*. Mikulášek, Miroslav (editor). 1. vyd. V
Brně: Masarykova univerzita, 1996, pp. [317]-322

ISBN 8021014377

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/132392>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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IV. DRAMA A DIVADLO

JAKOBSON AND HIS CONCEPT OF MEDIEVAL DRAMA

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Roman Jakobson has impacted our theoretical and practical approach to the medieval drama, as he has many other areas of verbal art. He has not elaborated on this subject matter on purely theoretical grounds, yet he has shown in his analyses that his interpretations were well supported by a clearly defined conception of poetics. As evidence we shall be able to use essentially one of his critical texts, namely his contribution to the *Festschrift* for L. Spitzer (1958)¹ under the title **Medieval Mock-Mystery (The Old Czech Unguentarius)**. This study is an excellent example of Jakobson's way of reasoning, his display not only of a vast range of knowledge inside and outside the discussed subject, but also his ability to associate it with areas of knowledge far beyond the field of Slavic studies. Beside his study of *Mastičkář* one might also analyse Jakobson's introductory essay from his edition of *Spor duše s tělem* from a much earlier period, namely 1927.² Here we encounter certain conceptions of the dialogue either. I feel somewhat deprived to have to use and exploit one single essay to establish a theory of medieval drama in Jakobson's heritage, but the fact that this essay is ground-breaking may compensate for its lack of quantity.

The question arises from the very beginning how a structuralist deals with phenomena of a more distant past, since we know that new schools of criticism mostly develop their ideas with respect to their contemporary literature and art. The Russian Formalists had their connection with Futurism, the Prague Structuralists were closely associated with the school of Poetism. The Middle Ages, however, are distinct from modern literature in many ways, and it appears particularly important to adapt modern concepts of criticism to the circumstances of a culture so far apart in time and space. Jakobson, on the other hand, has demonstrated his ability of dealing with medieval cultures sufficiently before he wrote his article on *Mastičkář*.

1 Written 1954–1955, published in *Studia philologica et litteraria in honorem L. Spitzer*, Bern 1958. Also in: R. J., *Selected Writings*, vol. VI/2, Berlin, New York, Amsterdam, 1985, pp. 666–689; henceforth quoted from there as MMM.

2 *Spor duše s tělem. O nebezpečném času smrti, s úvodní studií R. Jakobsona*, Prague: Ladislav Kuncíř.

His approach to the subject matter is from the side of semiotics. His first observation concerns the topic of the ridiculous, the joke. What constitutes a joke is defined by the environment that creates and accepts it. "A well-known joke defines a foreigner as a man who laughs at everything but a joke."³ So even jokes have their code which is conditioned by the set of the well-known functions established by Jakobson:

context		
(referential)		
receiver	information	source?
code		

And this diagram, evidently, also applies to non-verbal communication.

Hence, what constitutes the ridiculous depends on the environmental circumstances. In Czech medieval miniature, e. g., the profile means caricature, in Ancient Egyptian art, on the contrary, the full face signifies the same and is used to depict the vulgar or the abominable⁴, while the sublime is shown in profile. Mastičkáf is a combination of two viewpoints, the vulgar/ridiculous, and the sublime. As in some of Picasso's works, we are confronted with a double-face portrait, that shows us one single object both full face and in profile.

In the ensuing article, then, Jakobson uses the essential messages of the ridiculous and the sublime to investigate their code. From a casual discussion of these semiotic aspects he passes over to culturally anthropological statements. His major attention is occupied by the idea of the Fool-Ass-festivities which constitute part of medieval ecclesiastical life — a marginal part perhaps, but an essential one.

At first he defines the position of the ridiculous as an answer to the sublime from the Middle Ages all the way to the Reformation. The *Asinaria*, the mock-liturgies were practiced in most parts of western Europe, in cathedrals, churches and monasteries, as historians of culture (Gardiner, Chambers, Reinach, Fluck etc.) have demonstrated. Even famous Christian personalities, such as Jan Hus, have confessed their participation at some point of their lives.

It is a historical fact unknown to many students of the Middle Ages that the official church tolerated the parody of its rituals to some degree within certain festivities⁵, in particular the carnival, but also at New Year's day (feast of circumcision) and Christmas. This mock-mystery appears to be more than just a temporal counterbalance to the sublime areas of life, such as religious

3 MMM, p. 666.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Cf. E. Mätzner, "A Sermon against Miracle-plays." *Altenglische Sprachproben*, Berlin 1869.

liturgical practice or the area of official governmental or state rituals. It is an attitude which may emerge at various circumstances, as Jakobson demonstrates with a story of the so-called Mak-farce with its mock nativity. The Mak-farce, which is derived from the medieval English shepard's play *Secunda Pastorum*, has survived into most recent times.

The particular character of the mock-mystery which penetrated the quackdoctor-plays has religious sources in part. As its investigators E. K. Chambers⁶ and Gayley⁷ have pointed out, the *Asinaria* possibly are a parodistic response to the canticle *Magnificat* with its verses "Deposuit potentes de sede, Et exaltavit humiles" (He deposed the powerful, And he raised the humble...-Lc. 1:52). There is an element of social leveling in this idea. And this "democratic" feeling forces its way into the public.

Once Jakobson has reached this conclusion, he easily finds access to all the aspects of such irreverence to the sublime. The functioning of such parody is not an element of the literary, of literariness, but an outgrowth of certain socio-cultural data. On the one hand Jakobson notes the aspects of the bible and of the year-round ritual which lend themselves to be subjected to such ritual laughter, on the other hand he traces the process of parodying as a literary product. And this constitutes the major part of his essay, the presentation of the material. I do not want to elaborate on this aspect because it no longer displays the theoretical concept of Jakobson's understanding of medieval drama.

I should, however, discuss two aspects of his presentation: one, because it is missing, (by which Jakobson distances himself from the tradition of scholarship of the medieval drama), the other, because, as mentioning above, there are striking similarities with contemporary theories on ritual laughter in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. The cultural-anthropological aspect is dominant in this article, which reflects and confirms Jakobson's frequent occupation with this field of knowledge in the 50es and his cooperation with Claude Lévi-Strauss. The author is concerned with reflections of nature religion, respectively winter- and spring rituals.

1) The aspect which is notably absent from Jakobson's essay on medieval drama, although referred to in the bibliography, is a discussion of the medieval drama as a survival of pagan, pre-Christian rituals as it had been promoted in the 30es of the 19th century by R. Stumpf⁸ et al. Jakobson does not deny the possibility of survivals of spring rituals, which in effect he sees represented in the triangle quackdoctor (*Severín*), the uxor (the quackdoctor's wife), and the young lad (*Rubinus*). *Severín* represents winter, the uxor stands

6 *The Mediaeval Stage*, I-II, Oxford 1903 1903, cf. MMM, p. 667.

7 MMM, p. 667.

8 *Kultspiele der Germanen als Ursprung des mittelalterlichen Dramas*, Berlin 1936.

for nature, and the young lad is spring. The loss of Severín's reproductive power signifies the end of winter. The fact that Severín is divorced by his wife, as it occurs in some of the complete MHG versions of Unguentarius, means that nature now abandons herself to spring and chases winter away.

Jakobson accepts this view, yet he does not construe the existence of Germanic ritual plays which Stumpfl thought to be the substrate of the medieval mystery play in general. This view, by the way, controversial even in the 30es, is widely rejected in modern theories of medieval drama. Moreover, there are downright rejections of the idea of pagan relics.

Contrary to this, however, Jakobson believes in an interaction between the sacred Christian sphere and its parody which may not have been conceived at this time as negative or degrading at all but rather as the necessary counterbalance to the sphere of the sublime. This interaction or symbiosis may even penetrate such nature rituals as the carnivalesque, which in turn symbolizes the season of upcoming spring. The Christian context as well as the pagan make use of mock-mystery: the mentioned triangle quackdoctor — uxor — young lad abounds in scatological and sexual explicitness, the Christian story of Christ's resurrection finds its parody in Isaac's mock-resuscitation in the *Schlägel /Drkolná* fragment, and Jakobson presents ample, in part new material on this matter.

This, by the way, is the aspect which made it so difficult to literary historians of the 'Victorian' era to assess Mastičkáf and all the Unguentarius-plays properly. In their puritan views they found themselves disgusted with this abundance of sexual and scatological imagery.⁹

2) The most intriguing part of Jakobson's contribution, however, is its concept of ritual laughter and its parallels with Bakhtin's idea of ritual laughter, developed in his study on Rabelais (1965).¹⁰ There are certain similarities between Bakhtin and Jakobson. Both consider ritual laughter as a sort of conspiracy against the seriousness of officially sanctioned art and socially established expressions of dramatic action.

Again, as in the first aspect, that of the element of spring rite, we are dealing with a non-literary phenomenon that has entered literature. And again both scholars, Bakhtin and Jakobson, do not hesitate to include a non-literary phenomenon into their study of a work of verbal art. Bakhtin, in his greater theoretical awareness, has expressed and justified this procedure: "The pro-

9 E. G. Truhlát (1891) or Dürre (1915): MMM 680f.

10 *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaya kul'tura srednevekov'ya i renessansa*. Moscow. - Cf. also the English translation by Helen Iswolsky: *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, Massachusetts — London, 1968. On Bakhtin's theory of laughter cf. also Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson: *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of Prosaics*, Stanford, 1990, chapter 10. *Laughter and the Carnavalesque*, pp. 433–470.

blem of carnival, its essence, its deep-seated roots in primeval society and primeval thinking of man, its development in class-society, its vitality, its never ending fascination, is one of the most difficult and most interesting problems of cultural history...We are concerned in first place with the phenomenon of carnivalisation, that is to say: the determining influence of carnival on literature, in particular its genre structure."¹¹

This justification we do not find in Jakobson's article, yet it seems to follow similar guidelines. Bakhtin determines what he calls 'carnival', 'carnivalisation' of culture in greater detail, and it appears that Jakobson's 'mock-mystery' constitutes a similar phenomenon, or better, one aspect of carnival. These are the ingredients of carnival according to Bakhtin: a) an element of excentricity — an answer to the element of harmony within the sublime; b) the atmosphere of intimate family relationship as answer to the official note of official culture; c) what Bakhtin calls 'carnivalistic *mésalliance*', i. e. combinations and contacts between areas considered exclusive, the sublime and the humble etc.; d) profanation, ridiculing, "carnivalistic profligacy, a system of carnivalistic degradations and 'groundings', filthy speeches and gestures which refer to the generative power of earth and body, carnivalistic parodies of holy texts and quotations."¹²

Bakhtin also covers the phenomenon of "risus paschalis", "feast of fools", and "feast of the ass": "The feast of fools" is one of the most colorful and genuine expressions of medieval festive laughter near the precincts of the church. Another of its expressions is the "feast of the ass" commemorating Mary's flight to Egypt with the infant Jesus. The center of the feast is neither Mary nor Jesus, although a young girl with an infant takes part in it. The central protagonist is the ass and its braying. Special 'asinine masses' were celebrated. An *officium* of this mass composed by the austere churchman Pierre Corbeille has been observed. Each part of the mass was accompanied by the comic braying, 'hinham!' At the end of the service, instead of the usual blessing, the priest repeated the braying three times, and the final Amen was replaced by the same cry. The ass is one of the most ancient and lasting symbols of the material bodily lower stratum, which at the same time degrades and regenerates."¹³

So, in a sense, Bakhtin does more and less than Jakobson: he subsumes all the phenomena within the profane response to the sublime under the term of carnival (which, in fact, originally did not cover all these phenomena, but convincingly establishes this category and makes it workable), and he comes

11 Michail Bachtin, *Literatur und Karneval. Zur Romantheorie und Lachkultur*. Munich: Reihe Hanser, No. 310, 1969, p. 47. Translated from the German by the author.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

13 *Rabelais and His World*, p. 78.

up with a description of the entire cultural attitude which fits very well Jakobson's object of investigation. Bakhtin generalizes and does it very successfully, while Jakobson studies an object and similar related objects and arrives at a similar definition.

In particular the last quotation from Bakhtin seems not only to fit *Mastičkář* perfectly, but also to add some aspects to it from the side of the generalizing view: in *Mastičkář* we are dealing with a system of degradations, 'groundings', 'filthy language and gestures which refer to the generative power of earth and body, carnivalistic parodies of holy texts and quotations'. Jakobson, in his familiarity with old Czech literature and biblical texts, was able to trace many of these irreverent quotations and parodies back to their Czech context.

Both scholars, who seem to have worked without contacting each other,¹⁴ share their use of a non-literary, anthropological aspect within the discussion of a literary structure. Except for Jakobson's quotations of textual parallels from Old Czech literature, however, they do not refer to the literary context as such. There could have been a discussion of such literary topoi, antique, medieval and later, like the one called "the world upside down" (*verkehrte Welt*).¹⁵ Such elements may be traced to their anthropological roots, it is true, but they also could provide material for an art-bound explanation of phenomena like *Mastičkář*. An entire new dimension may be opened by confronting *Mastičkář* as a literary phenomenon to the traditions of drama, again as literary phenomena, and simply juxtaposing their "literariness", albeit on the basis of a code so distant from ours as the set of medieval values.

It appears that Jakobson's and Bakhtin's studies constitute two sides of a coin. They differ in their approach and still are remarkably unanimous in their results. Jakobson's and Bakhtin's isolated investigations, could they have been coordinated, would have resulted in even more remarkable discoveries. Perhaps one day a scholar will be able to summarize and to harmonize their findings by combining the general approach to the specific. Both studies, however, have brought new visions to our concept of the Middle Ages.

14 Bakhtin's study was published in 1965, but, according to its own data, was written in the 1940es. Jakobson's article, as mentioned above (fn. 1), was published in 1958 and written in the years 1954-1955. There are no quotations of Jakobson in Bakhtin's book and vice versa. The idea of "ritual laughter" and the fool-ass-play, has, of course, been expressed before. Cf. Jakobson's references, furthermore E. R. Curtius' *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, 2nd edition, Bern 1954, chapter "Die Kirche und das Lachen" (pp. 421-423) etc. with a marked absence of the aspect of ritual.

15 Curtius, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-108: "Verkehrte Welt".