

Discovering Bakhtin's Carnavalesque-Grotesque in *Judges*
adapted from Chapter 2 of *Intricacy, Design, and Cunning in the Book of Judges (Xlibris 2008)*
by

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[Note: This paper describes the features of the carnivalesque-grotesque and is a supplement to my paper on The Levite's Concubine. It is for those who need further information on Bakhtin's analysis of this genre.]

Judges is filled with comic situations. Because the book contains horror and humor in about equal amounts, the genre may be classified as "comedy of the absurd," "black comedy," "noir," and/or "grotesque realism." Being out of touch with the manners of those days, modern readers undoubtedly miss some aspects of the humor of *Judges*, but much of it is obvious and pleasurable.

Only occasionally do critics factor into their interpretations the humor that pervades *Judges*.¹ As with the violence of the language, readers and interpreters who are focusing on their own topics of interest (history, women, theology, etc.) do not notice the prevalence of humor. With the Rorschach test, if you see the inkblot as a rabbit, you can no longer see it as a duck. Just so with Comedy and its opposite, Horror.

In the Anchor edition of *Judges*, Robert Boling calls these stories "historical romances" and suggests a festival occasion for telling them. He sees two types of romance—the ideal (with the exemplary figure) and the comic. The only candidate for the first type, in my opinion, is Othniel, who won Achsah, was filled with "the spirit," conquered Cushan-rishathiam, and "delivered" Israel (3.9-10). Boling provides five or six clues to the comedy, but dismisses the comic in *Judges* as something "intended for more discriminating attention" (31-32). Other scholars mention comic situations, but do not remark about comedy as characteristic of the *whole* book. J. William Whedbee in his *Humor and the Comic in the Bible* left out *Judges* altogether. Failure to give this "discriminating attention" to the comic, as well to the other cunning and intricate designs in the book, prevents one from discovering the underlying meanings of *Judges*.

Definition of "Carnavalesque-Grotesque"

The word *grotesque* and its earliest meaning, refers to monsters and monstrosities, like the grotesque figures on Gothic cathedrals. In a eighteenth-century French dictionary, the grotesque is defined as that which is "odd, unnatural, bizarre, strange, funny, ridiculous, caricatural, etc."² There is plenty of this in *Judges*.

The grotesque is a means for describing hidden aspects of reality. Elements essential to this form are suddenness, surprise, strangeness, and dynamic action. Grotesque literature also makes the world seem unreliable and inspires us with a fear of life, writes says Wolfgang Kayser.³ According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque is an attempt to "subdue demonic aspects of the world" and thus has a liberating effect.⁴ The grotesque is a way for the folk to try to control the elements of their environment which they fear—just as our horror films of today do.

It is Bakhtin, the twentieth century Russian literary critic who discovered the combination of the comic spirit with the grotesque in Rabelais' *Gargantuan and Pantagruel* and gave us the characteristics of what

he calls the carnivalesque-grotesque in his brilliant Rabelaisian book, *Rabelais and His World* (1965, 1968).

The grotesque, he believed, began with a “primitive grotesque,” which had to do with the cycle of the seasons: “sowing, conception, growth, death.” This primitive literature is followed by a more sophisticated grotesque, in which the “cyclic” topics are embedded and are thus connected with seasonal festivals.

The two types of festivals are the official and the folk. Official festivals, exemplified by church holy days, were humorless, characterized by respect for hierarchy, recognition of the inequality of human beings in the social order, and lack of change. Folk festivals, the binary opposite of the official religious festival, were humorous and characterized by suspension of the hierarchy, bringing about the equality of all human beings—at least for the duration of the celebration—and acknowledging change. Folk festivals consisted of the carnival and other entertainments of the marketplace. Bakhtin insists on the merry, positive aspect of the carnivalesque humor. Containing the laughter of all the people, the humor of the carnival is ambivalent: “it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time, mocking and deriding” (11). The carnivalesque-grotesque, which had its origin in Rabelais’ great novel, sadly survived as a genre for only a short period of time before it was beaten back by the powers that be. (And this is an important subtext of Bakhtin’s book, that Authority—including Soviet authority, I presume—will not really countenance this kind of license for long.)

In *Judges*, the stories in their original form may have had to do with seasonal festivals, which, in my opinion, we may imagine were something like the following: Achsah with some kind of *rain* or *water* festival; Deborah with a festival honoring the *storm* god (Baal); Gideon with the *autumn grain* harvest; Abimelech with a *grape* or *fertility* festival; Samson with a *midsummer celebration* or a festival honoring the *Sun* God, who is necessary for growing crops; Jephthah with a *fertility* festival lamenting the loss of a *goddess* (a death and resurrection rite) or celebrating the transition of the girl to womanhood (a puberty rite); and the rape of the virgins of Jabesh-gilead and the daughters of Shiloh in the last story as another wine or puberty festival. Such festivals tie in with the agriculture, food, and drink keywords scattered throughout. These possibilities need further study.

The carnivalesque-grotesque of Rabelais had a historical purpose. It marked the transition from a stern authoritarian period (the Medieval) to a period in which the individual was liberated from medieval superstition and fear (the Renaissance). And here I think that the subversive part of Bakhtin’s analysis, is the hoped-for liberation of the human spirit from the Stalinist definitions and Soviet restrictions on, and censorship of, art. Art must be free.

The “monstrous” images of grotesque literature, he thought, have a “mighty awareness of history and of historic change. . . . The new historic sense that penetrates them gives these images a new meaning but keeps intact their traditional contents: copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment” (25), all of which we find—and also as subversive—in *Judges*.

The carnivalesque-grotesque includes the following features: 1. Many Body parts. 2. Dismemberment and mutilation. 3. Food, wine, and banquets. 4. Degradation, or the downward slope. 5. Positive aspect of this degradation. 7. Topsy-turvy world. 8. Wrong use of common objects. 9. Suspension of normal rules of behavior. 10. Disguises and masks. 11. Exaggeration of numbers. 12. Heterogeneity. 13. Madness. 14.

Parody, travesty, and burlesque. 15. Irony. 16. Satire. 17. Riddles, puzzles, and games. 18. Women as destructive of men or as foils. 19. Focus on the common people. 20. Accurate topography of the world. 21. Quirky nomenclature.

Not emphasized by Bakhtin, but important to *Judges*, is that of the Trickster, whose great archetype is Samson. Bakhtin, however, makes no mention of Samson or of *Judges* in his study.

Judges at first sight seems nothing like Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, but when examined closely can be found to have all the categories in abundance from beginning to end. The raucous mischief and merry-making of the carnivalesque, however, are nonexistent. But, as I believe after working with these stories for many years, the "carnivalesque" component was in the domain of the storyteller, who could use these stories as scenarios for his performances and embellish them as serious or trivial, comic or tragic, sacred or profane, depending on what kind of audience he had. *Judges* was designed in such a way as to allow this, while enabling the more enlightened listeners to think about the various behaviors of the characters and to reach judgments about them, a process helpful a young society in developing a system of ethics and law. The comedy was there largely to keep the restless members of the audience engaged.

Each of the categories as I describe them below overlaps the other characteristics. Afterward I will analyze the story of the Levite's Concubine..

1. *Body parts*

Extremely important to Bakhtin are grotesque mutilations, dismemberments, and references to the "material bodily lower stratum"—the genitals, bowels, and other parts of the human body connected with food and sex (18-21 et passim), which he mentions over and over again. These images are linked with the theme of dismemberment and "degradation" or "descent" as well. "The site of comedy is the body," as Seth Lerer writes.⁵ Bodily element are not negative, says Bakhtin, but are "deeply positive [and] presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people" (19).

Throughout *Judges*, I find all the limbs and even many internal organs or parts (*heart, brain, womb*, for example), some of them a number of times, and not only human parts, but animal parts as well (e.g., the camel's *necks, hooves* of horses, *jawbone* of an ass, *carcass* of a lion, foxes' *tails*). All the main parts of the body are given in the Samson story, signifying that Samson is a most sensual being who loves sweetness and physical contact of all kinds. Hands, which are mentioned many times throughout the book, receive special emphasis in the Samson story, and we watch with amusement how useful his hands are for his odd exploits.

Here is a list of the body parts which I have found in *Judges*:

Body Parts (*excluding* Samson's):

anklet (2x), back (1x), belly (3x), blood (1x), body (6x), bone (2x) carcass (1x), ears (6x), eyes (8x), face (3x), feet (13x), flesh (16x), hands and palms (43 important instances), head (23x), heart (27x), hooves of horses (1x), knees (8x), mouth (8x), navel (1x), neck (3x), nose (8x), shoulder (1x), side (1x), skull (1x), soul (8x), spirit (6x), temple (3x), thigh (3x), thumbs and toes (2x), tongue (3x), voice (10x), and womb (2x). References to virginity and rape may be thought of as references to sexual body parts. Bodily References in the Samson Story (Including "Hands"):

Arms (2x), Belly (see Womb), Body (3x), Bone (see Jawbone), Carcass, Corpse (3x), Eyes (not counted when used 5x in an idiom) (13x), Face (1x), Hands [but not when used 7x idiomatically] (17x), Hair of Head (3x as

“locks, 1x as “hair”) (4x), Head (5x), Heart (4x), Hip [as in Hip and Thigh] (1x), Jawbone (4x as body part and 5x as place name), Knees (1x), Penis (allusion to, in “uncircumcised”) (4x), Shoulder (1x), Soul (2x), Spirit (not, strictly speaking, a body part) (5x, and 1x implied), Tail (1x), Thigh as in Hip and Thigh] (1x), Voice (2x), and Womb (7x).

2. *Dismemberment*

In the carnivalesque-grotesque, the body is shown as continually undergoing change, being taken apart, being reproduced. Nothing is fixed or eternal.

Mutilation and dismemberment occur in *every* story in *Judges* except the Achsah and Luz stories (ch. 1). It all begins on a small scale—the thumbs and big toes of Adoni-Bezek—and ends on a large scale—the slicing up of the body of the Concubine⁶ into 12 parts. It includes disemboweling of Eglon, decapitating of the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, and disfiguring of the body—as the gouging out of Samson’s eyes. Unlike the *Iliad*, dismemberments produced in warfare are never mentioned; but they are strongly alluded to through frequently-given statistics of the hundreds and thousands of people killed and the cities destroyed throughout the book. The binary opposite of destruction is present in the references to the building of cities after warfare and the rebuilding of an altar after it has been torn down.

In dismemberment, as Bakhtin shows, what is *inside* (hidden) is brought outside. In *Judges* we see the intestines and excrement of Eglon, the brains of Sisera, the skull of Abimelech, the bloody insides of the Concubine. Not only people, but also animals are victims, like the lion, the ass, and the foxes in the Samson story. According to Bakhtin, dead bodies signify fertilizer, although fertilizer is nowhere mentioned explicitly in *Judges*, and perhaps the storyteller never had that in mind.

Mutilations and dismemberment also exist in great numbers in present-day black humor: in the TV series, *The Simpsons*, *Mad Magazine*, and Montey Python skits and movies like *The Life of Brian*. In a scene in *Montey Python and the Holy Grail*, two knights meet each other in single combat and begin hacking each other to pieces, until all that is left of them are two stumps.⁷ The audience always finds this hilarious.

3. *Food, wine, and banquets*

Bodily processes are connected with the intake and output of food, especially urination and defecation.

References to wine, bread, and several varieties of grains are plentiful in *Judges*, especially in the Gideon and Samson stories, and *wine* is notable in the carousing of Gaal and his partners in the vineyard and temple, probably at the wedding banquet of Samson and the Timnite, in the carousing of the Concubine’s Levite and his father-in-law, and in the dancing of the daughters of Shiloh at the wine festival at the end of the book. They are also plentiful in keywords referring often to agriculture and animal husbandry as well as to *food/drink* and *wine/intemperance* categories throughout the book.

The bodily processes most frequently seen in *Judges* are *eating* and drinking. Defecation (so popular with Rabelais) is alluded to once—in the Ehud story, when the servants think that Eglon is “relieving himself” and when Ehud stabs Eglon through the belly, and the “dirt” comes out at his back. Other references may be hidden elsewhere in the book, but I have not noticed them.

Eglon’s name, as is often noted, means “fatted calf,” and so Eglon is one of the first of a long list of “offerings” to Yhwh in the book: obvious ones like Gideon’s extravagant meat and bread offering to the visiting messenger-angel, the burnt offering that Samson’s mother and father made to another such visitor, and the offering when the Israelites are trying to propitiate (or bribe) Yhwh before going into war against the Benjaminites. There is also the meat offering (specifically, a *burnt* offering) of the body of Jephthah’s daughter to Yhwh. Meanwhile, people are killed on slaughtering stones—like animals being prepared for offering—as when Abimelech kills his seventy brothers on “one stone” (probably a slaughtering stone) and when he in turn is killed by “one stone”—not a slaughtering stone, to be sure, but an agriculture implement, an upper millstone. Then there is the blind Samson grinding grain in the Philistine prison, or as Milton puts it, “eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves”—another reference to food.

Agriculture has an important place in *Judges*. To cite just one example, Gideon is a producer and protector of food and agriculture, while the Midianites are the consumers and destroyers of those things. Samson is a consumer of food and a destroyer of the fields, orchards, and vineyards of the Philistines. The roles have been reversed.

4. *Degradation*

“The essential principle of grotesque realism,” writes Bakhtin, “is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). And the motion of the action is always downwards, going from good to bad, to worse, to worst. This aspect may be what turns so many readers of *Judges* away in disgust.

In *Judges*, numerous characters are shown lying on the ground or in a prone position, as is shown in a table of the Iconic Poses appended at the end of this paper: look at Eglon, Sisera, Abimelech, Samson, and the Levite's Concubine. Notice especially the extended "falling" passage in the Jael scene (5.27). And notice that the body of the Levite's Concubine lies in a position exactly like that of Eglon, except that the Concubine lies *outside* a locked door, while Eglon lies *inside* a locked door. This kind of symmetry, extremely important in *Judges*, is also a carnivalesque-grotesque feature, belonging to the category of strange patterns.

Many other examples of this downward motion can be found in internal structures such as in the stages of fighting given in *Judges* (ch. 2), the deterioration of the tribes, and the increase of flaws in the so-called heroes. It is Guinness book of world records of serious mistakes of character and judgment.

5. *Positive aspect of this degradation*

Dismemberment, degradation, downward motion, which may be thought of as disgusting, are actually positive as they lead to a rebirth, for as Bakhtin fondly tells us, only if something dies, can it spring up to new life (Bakhtin 20-21, 34). Readers of *Judges* are not likely to regard this as positive, but might agree that at least the very last chapter of *Judges* can be viewed in this light if and when the storyteller brings out this possibility in his performance.

6. *Weddings*

Comedies usually end with nuptials. Weddings, of course, ring in the new and lead to birth. In Rabelais, they are connected with banquets and are sometimes with thrashings and warfare (Bakhtin 198-200, and *passim*).

The Samson story follows this pattern, for the aftermath of his wedding is his slaughtering of the 30 Philistines for their festal garments. And in the very last story, following the mass slaughter of all the tribe of Benjaminites except for 600 remnants, comes the swift seizing of the virgins of Jabesh-Gilead and the daughters of Shiloh, during what seems to be a wine festival. It might be considered a "shotgun wedding" (with the gun aimed at the women, not the men) or a "mock wedding." This signifies a somewhat bawdy *resurrection* of the tribe of Benjamin. After a mass rape of 600 virgins, a generation of baby boomers will replenish the empty nests.

7. *Topsy-turvy world*

In the carnivalesque-grotesque, the world is all upside-down, and the wrong people are often in charge as when women replace males in conquering the enemy. This characteristic also includes usurpation and "uncrownings" (394). In *Judges*, either the "right" person is uncrowned (Eglon, though not the "right" king for the Israelites); or the "wrong" person is crowned and then "rightly" usurped and uncrowned (Abimelech); or the "wrong" person is uncrowned (Samson). As the storyteller twice makes explicit, there was no order in Israel because there was no authority (18.1, 19.1) and everyone was doing what he thought right in his own eyes (17.6, 21.25). This chaos, which is so troubling to modern readers, is the norm in carnivalesque-grotesque.

8. *Wrong use of common objects*

Odd uses of common objects, improvisations such as kitchen utensils serving as musical instruments, and household objects used as weapons, are also characteristic of the carnivalesque-grotesque (411).

Examples of this in *Judges* are the curious weapons including a tent peg (Jael); a weaving pin (Delilah); horns, jars, and torches (Gideon); and the jawbone of an ass (Samson). Of great interest is the upper millstone dropped on Abimelech by the woman in the tower of Thebez. This is a stone with a difference, and its user a woman with a deadly aim. Such weapons often involve trickery (deception). Samson's last and strangest weapon is the Temple of Dagon, which he topples and with this act, kills more than 3,000 men and women, who were on the roof, not counting those who were in the temple below.

9. *Suspension of normal rules of behavior*

The mood of the grotesque is like that of the Roman Saturnalia, "festive" and "joyous," symbolizing the suspension of ordinary rules of conduct (52, 92, et *passim*). Perhaps the Samson episodes suggest something of this mood. From a realistic point of view, the ending of *Judges*, with the seizure of the dancing daughters, is very horrible indeed, but from another point of view, it is one of madcap joy and success. A real combination of the carnivalesque with the grotesque.

10. *Disguises and masks* (See Item #14 below)

Though disguises and masks are lacking in *Judges*, a few people assume roles that they are not really entitled to play: Ehud comes to Eglon disguised as a right-handed man, Jael feigns friendship to

Sisera, Abimelech masquerades as king—a usurper (himself usurped)—and the mighty Samson plays the game of how guess-how-I-can-be-made-weak. All these are satirized.

11. *Exaggeration of numbers*

Numbers in grotesque fiction are “unstable,” says Bakhtin, or may be over-precise and exaggerated to the point of monstrosity (463-465). Numbers are important throughout *Judges*, as I note in my book with a complete list of the manifold horrors. As is clear from the use of large numbers of men fighting and falling in the many battles, the Israelites understood the principle of “overwhelming force.” Of course, archaeologically speaking, these are very small towns and the population of the country is sparse.

Though I have analyzed all the main uses of numbers in the book, from time to time I also point out little patterns in which numbers are important, such as the 22 doublets and triplets and the 12 instances of cowardice in the Gideon story and the frequent use of numbers involving “3” in Samson—for example, 3 kinds of animals (lion, fox, and ass) and 3 agricultural crops that Samson destroys (vineyards, orchards, and grain fields).⁸ There are also the 3 mothers in the Deborah story, 3 trees in the fable of Jotham (olive, fig, and vine), while Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah are also a trio of sorts. Some of these lists are hidden; the readers must ferret them out and count them for themselves. I have tried to find them all, but probably missed a number of them. They are well-concealed.

The storyteller is unusually exact in telling us the times of day or night when something happens or the number of days that pass in an episode—not simply using the concrete as evidence of verisimilitude but to heighten suspense or mystery and often to give us comic relief. Gideon and his men appearing from out of nowhere “just after midnight at the beginning of the middle watch” (7.19) with their flaming torches, crashing pottery jars, and raucous shofars at the outpost of the Median camp and using psychological warfare and acoustic warfare on them, are a very ancient version of a modern strategy of the military and police—the use of blinding lights and ear-destroying acoustics as deadly weapons (screaming sirens, babies crying, dentist drills, and an endless amount of nerve-wracking music, including Tibetan chants and Christmas music) to disorient the likes of David Koresh and the Branch Dravidians in their Compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993. Or else the scene in Gideon is simply a bizarre nightmarish Halloween prank—the trick, but not the treat. (This is one of the “Twelve Preposterous Acts” appended at the end of this paper.)

Sacred numbers are parodied in the carnivalesque-grotesque, according to Bakhtin. Though I do not find these keywords in *Judges*, it is possible that there are some sacred numbers, but that I do not recognize them.

12. *Heterogeneity*

In *Judges* the characteristic of heterogeneity is embodied in the “anomalies,” odd little details stuck in here and there which seem to have no purpose, but actually play an important help in deciphering the hidden code. The strange weapons and mutilations are examples, as are the three terms already mentioned, topsy-turvy world, wrong use of common objects, and suspension of normal rules of behavior. I would also include (though Bakhtin does not) the use of the binary opposites of hundreds of keywords. Part of the communication system, these help us visualize the episodes, and as well contribute to the dynamic effect of the action.

13. *Madness*

“Madness makes men look at the world with different eyes. . . . In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason . . .” (39) as it is the opposite of wisdom (260). Samson is the most obvious example of someone who goes berserk. A close cousin of madness is folly—like that of Abimelech, Gaal, and Jephthah. (Again, see the Preposterous Acts listed at the end of this paper.)

14. *Parody, travesty, and burlesque*

Three related techniques, called “forms of the mask” by Bakhtin (39-40), are disguises of sorts—1 and 2) *travesty* being a grotesque or exaggerated *parody*, while 3) *burlesque* makes the subject seem ridiculous by treating it as incongruous. Bakhtin’s examples have mostly to do with the parodying of official feasts, liturgies, and sacred writings, something we do not find in *Judges*, unless we consider the stories in Genesis as “sacred,” to which at least three incidents in *Judges* allude: the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter being a travesty of the Akedah, or binding of Isaac; the Samson theophany being a travesty of the Abraham/Sarah theophany; and the thrusting out of the Concubine to the rapists, by the Levite, being a travesty of Lot offering his virgin daughters to the mob to save his angelic guests.

Akin to *parody* in *Judges* is the storyteller’s use of “parallel texts,” or “inner intertextuality”—the use of correspondences and contrasts between stories (discussed fully in the first chapter of my book) and their connection with “keywords”—which I also call “hidden objects” since they are largely invisible to most readers—though they are there, staring us in our faces.

Though the broader types of parody may be intelligible to all, as an art form they are difficult to unpack and enjoy, for they demand that the reader first, be familiar with the parallel text and second, be able to hold in mind not only the text being parodied, but also the one it parodies or burlesques. Success depends on how well-informed the audience is. Readers lacking specific knowledge of both texts will not be sensitive to all the nuances of the differences between them. Since so much of the ultimate meaning of these stories depends on information gained from comparing and contrasting texts, however, we can assume that at least the more elite of the ancient audience knew a version of their Genesis counterparts well enough that they could derive important benefits thereto. Otherwise, the storyteller would not have developed such techniques.

15. *Irony*

Bakhtin does not elaborate on irony. His one comment, however, is helpful:

In the world culture of the past there is much more irony, a form of *reduced laughter*, than our ear can catch. The literature, including rhetoric, of certain eras like Hellenism and the Middle Ages is flooded with various reduced forms of laughter, though we have ceased to be aware of some of them (135, my emphasis).

“Reduced laughter,” a term which Bakhtin lifts from Jean Paul, describes the kind of laughter that *Judges* evokes.

Jephthah, Abimelech, and Samson are “hoist in their own petard,” as I have discussed in my book. Micah, who is perhaps practicing trickery by relying on idols for protection, is duped when his “protectors” (the idols and the priest) arouse covetousness and are stolen. In the last story, it is “all-Israel” (not including the tribe of Benjamin) who become the supreme tricksters in finding a way to supply wives for the Benjaminites. They dupe themselves and end up committing the very act that they are punishing the Benjaminites for—this time aiding and abetting a mass gang rape.

A most interesting and challenging game of intellect that the reader might play (either as solitaire or in groups) is to list and classify all the ironies in *Judges*. The longer the list, the more examples one continues to find.

16. *Satire*

Overlapping with irony is satire. According to Schneegans, a German critic of the late nineteenth century quoted by Bakhtin, the grotesque can be defined as “caricature that has reached fantastic dimensions, . . . exaggeration of the inappropriate to incredible and monstrous dimensions. . . . Therefore the grotesque is always satire” (Bakhtin 306).

To give but three examples from *Judges* in addition to the ironies already given, the story of Gideon satirizes the warrior, the story of Samson satirizes machismo, and “women on the top” (Jael and Deborah) satirize male prowess.

In ancient times, satire had the function of trying to shame deviants into conformity, and it still does—whenever the public can agree on standards of behavior. In my opinion, satire is “the last straw,” a throwing up of hands in despair at the behavior of people or nations. We have a great deal of that in the 21st Century.

17. *Riddles, puzzles, and games*

The most obvious example of this category in *Judges*—so important to Bakhtin—is Samson’s riddle, which he propounds to the wedding guests. Another conundrum is the one the Israelites in the last story propound to themselves: how to give wives to the Benjaminites without violating their vow not to do this thing.

In this category of riddles, puzzles, and games we may include the symmetrical designs and the category of keywords having to do with secrets, as well as the many diverse patterns that the storyteller inscribes in each narrative. Upon first reading the book, one is likely to regard the Gideon story as having a clumsy structure; the action and character at first seem blurred. But all comes into focus the moment one realizes that the writer has devised a structure of doublets. This strange presentation of doubles of everything throughout is one of the storyteller’s many “games.” It is up to us to figure out its meaning.

Among the more sober games are parallel stories which can be treated as “law cases” in which the various characters are judged. These present the reader with many more riddles and puzzles to solve.

18. *Women as destructive of men or as foils*

In grotesque literature, women are presented non-ideally, either as destructive of the male, or as a contrast to male behavior—the female as “the foil to his avarice, jealousy, stupidity, hypocrisy, bigotry, sterile senility, false heroism, and abstract idealism” (Bakhtin 240). Deborah is such a foil to Barak, as is Jephthah’s daughter to her father. Just as her father behaves stupidly, so she behaves nobly and tragically.

More numerous than one at first realizes, women in *Judges* are presented in all their various roles: mother, daughter, sister, child, wife, barren wife, trophy, captive, concubine, prostitute, noble woman, lady-in-waiting, servant, military leader, prophet, worshiper, and killer, among others. (No fortune-tellers, witches, or mediums.)

Jael, Delilah, and the woman in the tower of Thebez (the Abimelech story) are examples of women who destroy men. As if to more than even the score, in *Judges*, are men who destroy or abuse women, Jephthah's daughter, the Timnite, the Levite's Concubine; the virgins of Jabesh-Gilead; and daughters of Shiloh.

19. *Focus on the common people*

The carnival-grotesque overflows with people of all kinds—the folk. “The comic stage, from its metropolitan standpoint, has habitually tended to ridicule the denizens of the small town,” writes Harry Levin.⁹

Most of the people in *Judges* have lowly origins. Aristocracy and luxury (except for the luxury items that Gideon captures in war) are mostly lacking. Though some critics claim Sisera's mother is a queen, there is no evidence for this. She is elite, as is Eglon, but significantly, neither of them is an Israelite. Abimelech has a steward. The only king among the Israelites—Abimelech—is an upstart. As for wealth, Gideon receives a pile of gold ornaments as plunder from the Midianites, Delilah receives for money as an “informer,” and Micah's mother has money (which her son covets and steals), perhaps inherited from a deceased husband (who is not mentioned).

But the lifestyle of all the characters is otherwise simple. These are all small farmers and villagers, not craftsmen, teachers, or urban dwellers. They don't live in elegant households with servants, though Eglon (King of Moab), Sisera's mother, and the Ephraimite host in Gibeah have servants or attendants. There are no slaves.

Interpreters of *Judges* usually focus on the heroes and fail to notice that many minor characters have significant and multivariied social roles, like the sons, brothers, lads—such as Jether (Gideon's youngest son); Purah (the boy who goes down to the enemy camp in the middle of the night with Gideon); the educated boy (who writes down the list of elders for Gideon to punish with thorns and briars); Abimelech's armor-bearer (who slew Abimelech); the lad leading the blind Samson in the temple; and the Levite's boy (a servant) in the Concubine story. (For a complete census of the amazing number of people in *Judges*, see my book.)

20. *Accurate topography of the world*

Despite the invention and fantasy, “the topography of the grotesque world is described with remarkable precision” (444). Bakhtin does not explain why this should be, but the storyteller in *Judges* gives the impression of being perfectly familiar with the lay of the land, though he suspects that the reader may not be, as when he gives directions on how to get to Shiloh (21.19),¹⁰ knowing that at the time he was telling the story, Shiloh, was no more. (For Shiloh delenda est.) This seeming precision concerning cities, tribal areas, shrines, etc. is what tempts the reader to regard *Judges* as history.

Place names in *Judges* seem to be actual names, and not invented for this book, but some places such as Akkrabbim, meaning “Scorpion Pass” (1.36), may have been selected as a gloss on the narrative. Scholars, moreover, have had difficulty connecting some of the locations with the known topography. And the storyteller didn't really know where these cities were, either.

21. *Quirky Nomenclature*

In comedy, quirky nomenclature (the adjective is mine) is a source of amusement. “Aristotle had indeed allowed that comedies might use invented names. . . . Comedy has habitually set great store by onomastics, the science of naming,” writes Levin (73).

Gideon's name, for example, means *Hacker* or *Hewer*, a name appropriate to his occupation not only of chopping down the Asherah but also of chopping down the Midianites and especially the two kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, whom he hews as expeditiously as Samuel hews Agag. *Caleb means dog*, *Oreb means raven*, and *Zeeb means wolf*—subtle allusions to animals who are helpers or enemies to the farmer. The name *Micah* in its longer form means *Yhwh-the-Incomparable*, no doubt ironic for a man who is an idolater (Boling 258).

Not unusual in the Bible, this practice takes on added importance in *Judges* and was surely a source of enjoyment for the audience. Regrettably we lose these things in translation.

The trickster

Oddly enough, Bakhtin does not emphasize the role of Trickster per se in his analysis. Yet obviously, this figure is one of the chief components of the grotesque, as it is in *Judges*.

The Trickster is anyone who achieves his ends by trickery, deceit, cunning, or design. The dictionary defines him as “a mischievous supernatural being found in the folklore of various primitive peoples, often functioning as a culture hero, and much given to capricious acts of sly deception.”¹¹

He is a practical jokester who is depicted as clever, lascivious, gluttonous, vain, and deceptive, but is also a dupe. He is a culture hero, who brings knowledge of cultural skills, who steals fire, who releases impounded game, slays monsters, and ordains norms of social behaviour. He is a transformer, who, after creation, changes the often chaotic original world and primeval beings into the present world. In some traditions, he is the creator who establishes the earth.

The characteristic trickster tale is in the form of a picaresque adventure: as the trickster was “going along,” he encountered a situation to which he responded by knavery or stupidity, he met a violent or ludicrous end, and then the next incident is told.

All these characteristics can be found in *Judges*. Samson fits the job description perfectly. He and other characters of *Judges* have much in common with the great *picaros* like Don Quixote, all tricksters.

To Jung, the Trickster plot is a way of explaining to human beings that marvelous truth, that “anything can happen.” (Who would have imagined the twin towers would be demolished not by bombs, but by airplanes improvised as missiles?) One of the best critics of the Trickster is Paul Radin, who tells us that this character is used to explain tricks of fate or experiences in life when “everything goes wrong and nothing intelligent happens except by mistake at the last moment”.¹²

In American Indian myths, Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being (xxiii).

The obvious character in *Judges* who is “at the mercy of his passions and appetites” is, of course, Samson. Among the other Tricksters are Ehud, Jael, Gideon, the woman in the Tower of Thebez, and Jephthah. These Tricksters vary in the degree to which they use trickery to help Israel (and Yhwh). As we progress through the book, the trickery becomes more self-oriented and the Trickster more likely to be duped. Already mentioned are Jephthah, Abimelech, Samson, and Micah as Tricksters. In the last story, it is “all-Israel” (except the tribe of Benjamin) who become the supreme tricksters in finding a way to supply wives for the Benjaminites. But they are duping themselves.

In *Judges*, when a Trickster is lacking is as significant as when one is present. In the failure to save his daughter, Jephthah lacks the Trickster element, though he certainly is a master trickster when it comes to slaughtering 42,000 Ephraimites. Since trickery is so important to the characters who succeed, something must be wrong with those who either have not got this knack, have lost it, or do not have it at the right time.

In the most ancient literature, the Trickster has a divine nature. Radin, with remarkable insight, tells us that this divine characteristic of the Trickster is secondary and “largely a construction of the priest-thinker, of a remodeller.” Priestly writers of all literature, Radin says, equated the Trickster with Deity. “Thus he was a figure that could not be forgotten, one that had to be recognized by all aboriginal theological systemizers.” Though martyrdom is not an essential part of the picture, the actions of the hero bring about “ridicule and humiliation and result in pain and suffering” (164). Again, think of Samson, who with all his flaws is transformed by a host of interpreters into a type of Christ.

The Trickster plot is an important element of the carnivalesque-grotesque: (1) it is comic, (2) it allows the storyteller to play the wonderful game of “one-upmanship” ad infinitum (à la Rabelais), and (3) it is a way the folk vent their sheer frustration in trying to get some measure of control over, or at least an understanding of, a world gone mad.

Hidden Objects, an Afterthought

Though *Judges* is a serious work of art, the storyteller is playing games, amusing himself and us in performing many sleight-of-hand tricks with all kinds of objects: These we often find in the keywords and their binary objects, and unless we spot them and analyze them, we will miss much of the information that the storyteller is trying to convey. I cannot do more at this time than to refer you to my book. They fall in the following categories: People and Relationships; Body and Body Parts; Tools, Instruments, Vehicles; Fabric; Agriculture and Animals; Buildings, Doors, Entrances, Gates (which represent the Open/Shut, Inside/Outside of experience); Containers; Food and Drink, Water; and Invitations and Hospitality. We may call them “hidden” because previous interpreters have scarcely noticed them, and when they do, see only a few and, as far as I know, do not glean from them the important information they hold. It is through them that we are able to grasp so many of the carnivalesque-grotesque features of the book. Thus, as *objets trouvés*, they also serve an artistic purpose.

Presenting these keywords in such a way that the reader or listener is not even aware of them, the storyteller, through them, is telling us subliminally much about the society of that time.

Seth Lerer, lecturing on comedy, compares the “stone” passage in Samuel Beckett's *Malloy* with Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the passage in which Malloy is passing sixteen stones from pocket to pocket and sucking on them:

Rabelais is similarly interested in finding comic ways of organizing experience, of organizing the things of this world. Now Rabelais does this by in effect *creating catalogues, great lists* that . . . are comic parodies of the encyclopediac tradition—that is the way you organize experience by making *great lists* . . . (emphasis mine).

To what purpose are Rabelais' catalogues of things?

The central question is, How do we organize the things that experience or nature has provided for us? But secondly, how do we organize them in such a way that we are not given to monotony or boredom. . . . The rut of the job can be varied . . . by in effect making sure that you don't suck the same stone twice in a row, . . . that you don't have the same experience over and over again, that you have some variety in life and also that you have what you think is a rational way of giving you that variety.¹³

Beckett's *Malloy* comes to the conclusion that variety is an “illusion,” and he does not “give a fiddler's curse about it.” The storyteller of *Judges* also has lists. Unlike Rabelais, he does not string the words out in long impressive catalogues but scatters and hides them throughout. He delights in them. He does give a damn.

All these categories of objects give us glimpses of the peace and quiet that exist in this otherwise violent, vicious ancient world with its deadly combats, warfare, slaughter, and rapes. Such details are comparable to the way that Homer brings in the domestic lives of ordinary people through his profusion of epic similes—little islands of peace amidst the raging battles of the *Iliad*.

These objects convey richness of meaning about plot, character, ethics, and history, but a different kind of history than is usually meant by the term, not a history about men and women who actually lived, though they may have had prototypes in the distant past, but about how we need to make judgments about human behavior, how difficult it is to do this, yet how important to our own history.

What I have tried to establish in my study can be called a Special Theory of Relativity. We have discovered a boiling cauldron of objects bubbling around and colliding with each other at a furious rate and have tried to comprehend—to a certain extent—how these collisions affect meaning. By forcing us continually to compare and contrast these objects and various aspects (like the carnivalesque-grotesque features) of each story, the storyteller makes us realize that everything is relative, that with all their various ramifications, no case is clear-cut, black-and-white, that values are not, and cannot be, absolute, with one exception: in this book, it is always wrong to worship any other god but Yhwh.

Did the storyteller expect his readers or listeners to perceive this complexity?

Presumably the storyteller had not studied higher mathematics and may not have comprehended, in the chaos he created—in which every single atom is related to every single other atom—what a nearly infinite sum of relationships would be involved. It is a vast network of relationships like the neural network of the human brain, a wiring problem with millions, maybe trillions, of connections. There ceases to be any such thing as merely *one point in time*; everything flows seamlessly into everything else. This complexity did not get into the book fortuitously. It is too consistently present to be an accident. The storyteller no doubt was aware of the complexity, though perhaps not the extent of it. What program was he running on his computer? Possibly his software was beyond the grasp of his hardware. Or vice versa.

But would he not have been amused to hear some of the scholarly debates on his book during the past half century, those who noticed the forest, but not the trees in it, and who failed to grasp the larger overall picture of his world that these details supply?

My thanks go to analyzers of the comic and especially to Bakhtin in helping me to understand and express the carnivalesque-grotesque comedy that has given me such pleasure in *Judges*.

Appendix

(adapted from *Intricacy, Design, and Cunning in the Book of Judges* E. T. A. Davidson (Xlibris, 2008) Twelve Preposterous Acts

- 1) Ehud's escape from the locked room in Eglon's palace (3.23)
- 2) Shamgar's killing of 600 Philistines with an oxgoad (3.31)
- 3) the roll-calling of the elders of Succoth so that Gideon could “thresh” them with thorns and briers (8.16)
- 4) Abimelech's hired men managed to kill all 70 of Abimelech's brothers on one stone (9.5)

- 5) the accuracy of the aim of the women in the tower of Thebes in dropping the upper millstone squarely on Abimelech's head (9.53-54)
- 6) the Gileadites identified 42,000 Ephraimites in the Jephthah story by asking each one to pronounce the word "shibboleth" so that Jephthah can kill them (12.5-6)
- 7) Samson's killing of the 30 Ashkelonites not only to wrest 60 articles of clothing from them to pay off the wedding companions, but also of getting back to the party, one man, heavy-laden with 60 garments (14.19)
- 8) Samson's catching of 300 foxes, carrying them all to the fields of the Philistine, tying them in pairs by their tails, setting their tails on fire, and succeeding in burning up the Philistines' crops (15.4-5)
- 9) Samson's feat of killing of 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (15.15)
- 10) Samson's ability, when at his most powerless (blind and in chains), to perform his greatest feat, pulling down the Temple of Dagon (15.29-30)
- 11) Delilah weaving Samson's hair into the fabric on her loom (16.14).
- 12) the Israelites identified the 400 virgins of Jabesh-Gilead, separated them from the married women, and carried them off to become the wives of 400 Benjaminites (21.10-12).

Chiasmus of Iconic Poses

- A. Achsah, newly married, alighting from her ass (1.4). (She is not, dead, or old, or stiff, but very much young, active, and alive in contrast to her counterpart at A , the Concubine, who is dead.)
- B. Eglon, sword stuck through his belly, lying *inside a room with a locked door* (3.25);
- C. Sisera, tent peg through his temple, lying in bed covered with a blanket (4.22; 5.26-7);
- D. Joash (with Gideon perhaps cringing behind him) being threatened by a mob of angry men (6.30);
- E. The decapitation of the two Midianite princes by the Ephraimites: Oreb on the rock and Zeeb at the wine press (7.26) and the slicing up of the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, by Gideon [8.21];*
- F. Gideon and a small army of 300 men chasing after an army of 15,000 Midianites;
- G. Abimelech slaughtering his 70 brothers on one stone;
- H. Abimelech, skull crushed by a millstone (one stone), sword through his body (9.54);
- G. Jephthah slaughtering 42,000 Ephraimites for one word as they crossed the river;
- F. Micah and a handful of neighbors chasing after an army of 600 men (18.22)
- E. Samson fallen beneath the rubble of the collapsed temple amid a tangle of corpses (16.30);
- C. Samson lying prone, asleep, his hair being woven with a weaving pin into the fabric of a loom (16.14);** [the item is out of place in the chiasmus];
- D. The Ephraimite host trying to negotiate with the mob of the base Benjaminites surrounding his house (the Levite, perhaps, cringing behind him) (19.22-24);
- B. The Concubine fallen dead *outside a locked door*, with her hands on the threshold (19.27);
- A. The corpse of the Concubine, thrown over an ass, ready to be transported home (19.28)

Add to these the pictures of animals being killed or used by Samson:
 the lion being torn apart by Samson, bare-handedly (14.6), and later seen as a decomposing carcass (14.8);
 the ass—a skeleton (carcass with the flesh removed)—from which Samson takes a jawbone and kills a thousand Philistines (15.15);
 and the foxes—300 of them, tied by their tails together in pairs, a torch tied to each pair, soon to be charred carcasses (15.4-5).

Representing things symmetrically is an integral part of the design and art of Judges, and it is also an aspect of the game (humor). There are many other symmetries. From analyzing the differences in a given symmetry we elicit significant meanings.

* 2 + 2 are killed here (Midianite enemies of the Israelites), while only one is killed in E (an important Israelite enemy of the Philistines)

** E is not an exact mirror image of E, however, except that the fallen Midianites were princes and kings and

Samson was the reigning Israelite champion.

¹ Two critics who note the interplay of the tragic and comic in the Samson story are J. Cheryl Exum and J. William. Whedbee: "This interplay . . . is essential to the vitality of these visions, for without the tempering of a comic perspective, tragedy moves into the realm of melodrama, while comedy without a recognition of tragic potential becomes farce (cf. Frye, 1965:50). . . . "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," Radday and Brenner, 135. See also Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), ch. 2 et passim. Whedbee's full-length book, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* does not analyze humor in *Judges*. (Cambridge University Press, 1998. Repr.: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

² Dictionnaire universelle de la langue française by Schmidlin (1771), in Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (trans. Ulrich Weisstein; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1957, 1963), 28.

³ *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1957, 1963), 184-88, passim.

⁴ *Rabelais and His World*. (Trans. Helene Iswolsky Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press), 1965, 1968, 49.

⁵ "Lecture One," *Comedy Through the Ages* (audio tapes; [Chantilly, Va.]: The Teaching Company, 2000).

⁶ Because she has no name, I have capitalized "concubine" when it refers to the Levite's Concubine.

⁷ The best-known exemplar of black comedy is no doubt Voltaire's *Candide*, in which the body is disfigured with syphilis, flogged, scourged, tortured, examined with surgical instruments and dissected, dismembered—legs, hands, buttocks, heads, testicles cut off—drawn and quartered, ripped to pieces, cannibalized, disemboweled, raped, hanged, burned, thrown upon a dunghill, and whatever—a series that ultimately ends in a bragging competition between Cunegonde and the old woman about which one has endured more suffering, the old woman having had half of her burdocks sliced off for food. Only the power of humor enables us to contemplate what the body endures in this story. Another exemplar is *Don Quixote*.

Not all readers will find *Monty Python's Holy Grail*, *Candide*, *Don Quixote*, or *Judges* humorous, to be sure, as they are "black comedies." It's a matter of taste. And who is the audience? An *agelast* (unlaughing), to use Rabelais' term for a killjoy like Malvolio? Sir Toby, one of Malvolio's tormentors, asks Malvolio: "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" One can be *too* pious, as Shakespeare thought. Or would the audience be someone newly sprung from Comedy Central? *Judges* is in some respects the pulp fiction of the ancient world.

⁸ In *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (ed. Susan Niditch; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1990), 47-56, passim.

⁹ *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 157.

¹⁰ See also 20,31, when the storyteller gives information about two of the "main roads."

¹¹ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* [1981].

¹² *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken, 1956, 1972), 206.

¹³ "Lecture 21," *Comedy Through the Ages* (audio tapes) ([Chantilly, Va.]: The Teaching Company, 2000.)