

- His comedies create opportunities to explore the world might look and feel with the dead weight of prevalence and probability lifted from its shoulders. Tragedy is preoccupied with the destruction of the potential by the actual, of the more desirable forms living might take by the forces currently conspiring to obstruct their realization. His comic gaze is leveled at the remote horizon of what could be, rather than absorbed in the immediate tyranny of what is. The primary concern in comedy is to dramatize the surrender of the prevailing to the possible, the triumph of benevolent human desires over the harsh constraints of historical actuality.
- If this novel exploits the special freedom of carnival to turn the Medieval world upside down, it does so only to reinforce the rationale for keeping it the right way up; “Just as a saturnalian reversal of social roles need not threaten the social structure, but can serve instead to consolidate it, so a temporary, playful reversal of sexual roles can renew the meaning of the normal relation.”¹
- Yes...at the close of the Carnival, kings remain kings, and clowns clowns; but what *is* dramatically altered is our perception of the stratified structure of society.
- With these Carnavalesque dreams, we are entering a licensed temporal period, a liminal dream-time, during which we may expect the reverse of what officially passes for normal to prevail. Hierarchies of social and sexual power may be turned upside down or leveled, sexual identities transformed and confused, and all fixed positions and settled assumptions destabilized and laid open to dispute.
- By diverting our attention across a range of conflicting selves and standpoints, comedy strives to free us from the reductive grip of a single attitude or interest. Its covert mission is to release all the positions it dramatizes into dialogic solution, and thus divest it of the authority each might exercise alone over our conception of the world. The experience of assimilating a discordant plurality of theatrical voices fosters a leveling mode of perception. Eco’s multivocal Carnavalesque cuts across the lived divisions of class and gender, breaking down the barriers of language and ideology which protract their dominion.
- Salvatore: does he foreground the vision of the play that happens to house him? Certainly he is a curiously amphibious creature, dwelling in a borderland at once within the world of the story and yet outside it, watching with the eyes of the audience. He is fettered to no fixed identity, social position, mode of language or point of view. He prefers to slip opportunistically from one provisional attitude to another, inventing himself afresh to each new encounter – in order to deflate whatever mental or emotional pose confronts him at the moment. The value of the fool, as Bakhtin points out while discussing his role in early modern narrative, is that by his very presence in the text “he makes strange the world of social conventionality.” For the fool is invested with “the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available.”²
- The escalating androgynous confusions of Adso’s dreams suggest that sexual identity is more plural, discontinuous and volatile than the official definitions and approved models can afford to admit.....By means of the many tropes present in

¹ C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy* (Princeton, N.J., 1959) p.245.

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, Texas and London, 1981), pp. 404, 162

- Adso's dreams, this version of comedy disrupts the system of differences on which sexual stereotyping depends. "By calling in question that set of relations between terms which proposes as inevitable an antithesis between masculine and feminine, men and women, it strikes at the very basis of patriarchy, unfixing the assumptions and categories which legitimate it, and holding out the possibility of sexualities unbridled by these reductive, disabling distinctions."³
- "To fix meaning, to arrest its process and deny its plurality, is in effect to confine what is possible to what *is*. Conversely, to disrupt this fixity is to glimpse alternative possibilities... New meanings release the possibility of new practices."⁴
 - The novel's gratuitous flights of verbal fancy and manic-digressive equivocation expose the fluid, unfixable nature of language, and hence the instability of the structures of meaning which encode and perpetuate the conventions of contemporary life.
 - As Feste, Olivia's self-confessed "corrupter of words" (3.1.36), remarks in *Twelfth Night*, "A sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may be turn'd outward!" "Nay, that's certain," replies Viola, "They that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton" (3.1. 11-15). The quip neatly captures the promiscuous, ungovernable disposition of both language and sexuality, of meaning and desire alike. (Link to #7)
 - Comedy dramatizes the utopian within the historical. It excites our hope that these dreams of release from history's coercions might one day be realized, by giving us provisional images, lodged in recognizable and thus more persuasive forms, of what such a realization might look and feel like. But our sense of the real world's intransigence is never allowed to dissolve into an escapist delusion of fantasies vicariously fulfilled. On the contrary, as this novel takes pains to caution us, the bridges between the lives we tolerate and a truly happy ending of historical struggle in genuine community have yet to be completed.

³ Catherine Belsey, "Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies", in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. Drakakis, pp. 190, 167.

⁴ Belsey, "Disrupting sexual difference", pp. 166-7, 190.