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## ‘Carnival’: More than a jolly name: Margaret Mahy’s *The Tricksters* and Mikhail Bakhtin’s Carnival Theory

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Margaret Mahy’s novels are teeming with figures who have striking names; and they carry these names for good reasons. The last name of the Tricksters of the eponymous novel is one example of such a significant name: Carnival. Felix Carnival and his brothers Ovid and Hadfield are a tri-partite re-incarnation of Teddy Carnival, the son of the first owner of the beach house and property where this Young Adult romance is set. The house is now owned by the Hamiltons, a family of seven, who, joined by a number of invited and uninvited guests, are staying there for a beach holiday over Christmas and New Year. Felix falls in love with Harry, the middle daughter of the Hamilton children. While to the other family members the Carnival brothers are simply eccentric young men, Harry suspects they are creations of her own imagination, specifically characters from the Gothic novel she is secretly writing, who have come to life and now are beyond her control. The Tricksters throw the hierarchy and relationships within the family temporarily into chaos when they drive Harry to reveal the family secret, which her siblings (except Charlie) are not aware of: Harry’s father Jack is the father of Emma’s child Tibby, Emma being the quasi-adopted daughter of the Hamiltons and Harry’s sister Christo’s best friend.

The distinctiveness of the name Carnival is highlighted by the discussions in the novel. Ovid remarks:

*‘We’ve always thought we looked like real Carnivals. And we’ve tried to exemplify the name, too. It’s an odd one isn’t it?’*

*‘I’ve always thought it sounded very jolly, like being called Birthday Party or Monster Circus,’ Christobel told him.*

*‘It means something like “goodbye to flesh”,’ Hadfield volunteered. ‘People used to eat a lot and celebrate just before Lent. They used all their appetites excessively before attempting to exercise self-control – “Carne levare” (that’s “a leaving off of meat”). “Carne vale” – Carnival.’*

*‘If our name does mean ‘goodbye to the flesh’, don’t we contradict it just by being here?’ [said Ovid].*

(Mahy 1986, pp. 87-88)

Later in the novel, when Harry asks Felix what his real name is, he laughs and repeats the etymology given by Hadfield and Ovid (p. 163), and the final words of the ghost of Teddy Carnival, when Harry has a brief last vision of him, are: 'Carne vale! (p. 306). Carnival also appears in the name of the property Carnival's Hide, suggesting a place which conceals the secrets of the Carnival family, and as the reader finds out, also the secrets of the new occupants, especially Jack's affair with Emma and Harry's hidden novel. It is clear that the author did not choose such a striking name for no reason. Of course, it hints at the fact that the Tricksters are not proper living beings of 'flesh and blood'. It also suits the imbalance between the brothers, which results from Teddy having been forced by his father to deny all emotions, including those concerning the so-called 'pleasures of the flesh'. Furthermore, the reference to carnival-festivals is obvious. These are marked by temporary changes in hierarchies and the idea of a world turned upside-down, just as they occur in the two families depicted in this book. Because of these obvious references in the novel to carnival and the frequent occurrence of carnivalesque elements in trickster tales in general (cf. Smith 1997, p. 12), it is surprising that Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnival Theory has only occasionally been mentioned in critical interpretations of the novel and then only in reference to particular aspects of the book (Winters 2008, pp. 409-410; Waller 2005, p. 24; indirectly by Marquis 2005, pp.79-80). The theory has never been systematically applied to the plot, characters and style of *The Tricksters* nor used for an interpretation of the novel as a whole. I will show that reading *The Tricksters* in terms of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque highlights a number of topics which recur in Mahy's novels: family hierarchies and their inversions and the relation between reader and writer and fiction and truth. Beyond exploring these themes, I will argue that applying Bakhtin's Carnival Theory to *The Tricksters* suggests a strong connection between these three interests of the author.

One reason why this approach has not been previously employed by critics may be that Bakhtin does not present the theory in a systematic, unified way, but often it seems to lack internal coherence or to be contradictory in itself. In particular, when speaking about 'carnival', Bakhtin sometimes seems to refer to the anthropological phenomenon, sometimes to the metaphorical-literal phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Hence it is impossible to offer a ready definition of his Carnival Theory. It is, as Dentith remarks, not 'a ready-made interpretative system which can be "applied" to a range of writing' (Dentith 1995, p. 88). However, certain central elements are repeatedly emphasised. I will provide an outline of the most important aspects of the Carnival Theory. Then I will explore where and to which effect they are employed in Mahy's novel. I will concentrate on the characters of Harry and the Trickster brothers and their development.

Mikhail Bakhtin developed his Carnival Theory in *Rabelais and his World* (published in 1968 but based on his dissertation written in the late 1930s) and in the chapter on the topic in the second, re-titled edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963; first edition: 1929). It connects two diverse and historically separate phenomena: literature and the popular-cultural festivities of the Middle Ages. During the period of carnival the world is turned upside-down. As Bakhtin puts it: Carnival spirit offers liberation from 'all that is humdrum and universally accepted (1984a, p. 34). Those who are usually of low status and considered ignorant become powerful and important for a limited amount of time (1984a, p.10; 1984b, pp. 122-123). Such a change in the hierarchies,

however, has a long-term affirmative effect, confirming the established social order (1984a, pp. 9-10; 1984b, p. 125). This carnivalesque affirmation is reflected in the way death is viewed as significant merely as the stage before rebirth in the cycle of life which consists of birth, florescence, death and re-birth (1984a, pp. 7, 24; 1984b, p. 124). The concept of re-birth is furthermore represented in the transformations and the unboundedness of bodies which hence are grotesque in their depiction (1984a, pp. 19, 317). Bakhtin writes:

*The grotesque body (...) is a body in the act of becoming. It is never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world (...).*

(Bakhtin 1984a, p.317)

This means that the grotesque body in carnivalesque literature undergoes a constant cycle of destruction and renewal or, phrased differently, a continuous metamorphosis. Hand in hand with the idea of transformation in carnivalesque literature goes the use of ambivalence (1984a, p.24, 1984b, p.132) and the mixture of various voices or styles, often in instances of what we now call metafiction (Platter 2007, pp. 11-12.), the revelation of repressed impulses (such as sexuality and excessive eating (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 18) as well as the occurrence of doubling and contrasts (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 126). Metamorphosis of course also implies a blurring of boundaries and thus liminality (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 24), which are motifs found in carnivalesque literature, as are the use of fantastical elements and the depiction of eccentric and even scandalous behaviour (1984b, p. 123). All this takes place in and in turn helps create what Bakhtin calls a 'free and familiar attitude' (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 123) among the personae of carnivalesque texts. In particular, in carnival, the boundaries between performers and spectators tend to be blurred (1984a, p. 7, 1984b, p. 122).

Of course, *The Tricksters* is not a piece of carnivalesque writing as such, but it is clear that it contains many of the elements of the carnivalesque. I will argue that that these are employed in Mahy's novel for the purposes of exploring not only the family relationships of both, the Hamiltons and the Carnivals, but also the relationships of performers and spectators, writers and readers, and fantasy and realism. The carnivalesque element most obviously featured in Mahy's novel is the overthrowing of hierarchies. This happens in both families depicted. In the case of the Hamiltons, Harry, the usually quiet child who does not get quite enough attention in the busy family and is constantly overshadowed by her brilliant, attention-seeking older sister Christobel, is in quite a lonely position in her family. Being seventeen, she is at an age where she is neither one of the children nor one of the grown-ups. In her other life, which she keeps secret from her family, she writes a fantastic and very romantic Gothic novel, the excerpts of which quoted in Mahy's book clearly reveal Harry's child-like inexperience and naïveté in romantic and sexual matters. What is more, Harry is at a point of impasse with the writing of her novel (pp. 279-280). Harry thus starts out with what Bakhtin would refer to as the role of the 'lowly'. In a modern novel such as *The Tricksters*, this does not refer to a down-trodden peasant-like figure, but to a person who is not in a very powerful position. One can, furthermore, argue that Harry is secretly admired by her sister Serena and from her attic room in the family's holiday house acts as the observer 'from above', but

all in all she is lowly in the sense that she is not in as high esteem as she would like by most of her family. She is generally overlooked, slightly neglected when it comes to attention and to begin with has relatively low self-confidence when faced with Christo. When Harry finally reveals her special knowledge about Jack's secret affair with Emma, the family hierarchy is temporarily overthrown. Suddenly it is the formerly dominant Christo who occupies the role of the lowly or powerless person, and Harry who is in a position of power.

Similar to Harry's role in her family, Felix at first is the lowly member of the Carnival-trio. This is explained by the education that Teddy Carnival received which suppressed all emotions: As a triple re-incarnation of Teddy Carnival, Ovid represents the intellect, Hadfield the instinct and Felix the emotions (p.87). The representation of this personality in terms of a physical divide into three brothers symbolising head, body and heart, enables readers to more easily understand Teddy's dilemma and its resolution. The neglected part of the person Teddy (as represented in Felix) eventually unbalances the other two parts (cf. Gose 1991, p. 8.). This ultimately leads to Teddy provoking his father who, in an attempt to control his son, kills him (pp. 267, 281). We are shown how the repressed emotional side of Teddy claims his rightful part among the three and finally overpowers the other parts, at which point the dilemma of Teddy's imbalanced personality is resolved and the Tricksters disappear, but not without showing themselves one last time to Harry and the reader as a single, complete figure of Teddy Carnival (pp. 305-306). This indicates that the changes which occur in the family hierarchies are not lasting: the carnival brothers re-unite into a complete whole. The Hamiltons soon regroup and forgive each other. In the long term, it is made clear, the Tricksters, like the licensed fool [of carnival], serve to reinforce the family hierarchy (Lawrence-Pietroni 1996, p. 37). The temporary nature of the overthrown hierarchies, and the affirmative, rather than disruptive effect of such occurrences are typical elements of carnival, which lasts only for a few days every year and serves to give the lowly an outlet so that the established social structures will remain stable for the rest of the year (Bakhtin 1984a, pp. 9-10, 1984b, pp. 125). Historical and Bakhtinian carnival is, of course, a periodic occurrence, celebrated once a year. The inversion of the hierarchies in the Hamilton and Carnival families, in contrast, is a singular event. However, what matters here is not the frequency and regularity of the occurring carnivalesque events, but their effects, which are clearly carnivalesque.

This affirmation and regrouping within the two families is a form of re-birth in Bakhtinian terms. It is also typical of traditional tricksters of folktale (Garner 1975, p. 9). The processes of rebirth begin when the individuals Harry and Felix mature and gain confidence within their families. For Harry, the maturation starts with her body. First she takes more interest in her outer appearance (p. 50), her sexuality is awakening, and at the time of the 'death' of the Tricksters she also experiences a mental and intellectual rebirth, reflected in the way she sees the world more clearly (pp. 328-329). She develops new, more grown-up ideas about her writing: the fairy-tale-like opening of her new piece of writing links Harry with those adults who tell such stories, (Marquis 2005, p. 62). The Hamilton family as a whole also undergoes a sort of re-birth. After the Tricksters, as we have seen, have managed to temporarily throw the hierarchy of the Hamiltons into confusion, the individual roles of the family members may not be fixed anymore, but they re-unite as a stronger unit when they all

return to Carnival's Hide (Lawrence-Pietroni 1996, p. 37). Christo even invites Emma along, having realized the importance of forgiveness and friendship. Serena reveals her admiration for Harry; and Harry can now forgive Christo her attention-hogging behaviour. This is an 'affirmation' which is linked to regeneration and renewal as mentioned in Bakhtin's Carnival Theory (1984a, p. 19, also Dentith 1995, p. 67).

In addition, the shifts of power and the 'death' of the Carnival brothers are depicted as part of a process of regeneration and as a stage of re-birth, as is typical in carnivalesque writing: We learn that Teddy Carnival was killed by his father, but his ghost temporarily returns to life, even if now in the shape of not one but three young men. When they disappear again after a few days, no-one in the Hamilton family, except Harry, cares very much. This metamorphosis of Teddy's body first into a corpse which mysteriously disappears in the sea, then in a tri-partite re-incarnation and finally falling apart 'like a jigsaw-puzzle man' (p. 295) into nothing is clearly grotesque. The unboundedness and transformation of the grotesque body is another typical element of carnivalesque writing (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 317). It is also highlighted in the name of Ovid which is taken from the cover of a copy of *Metamorphoses* in the Hamiltons' bookshelf (p. 83, 303). Moreover, The Tricksters' disintegration happens exactly at the point when Felix overpowers his brothers and Harry becomes disillusioned with her own, childish fantasies. The brothers' death is thus connected to the death of Harry's novel which at the same time represents her own rebirth as a writer and a member in an altered family.

The changes in the power-relationships of the Carnival brothers occur in a parallel development to Harry gaining more and more confidence regarding her position in her family. Felix and Harry strengthen each other through their relationship, which for both seems to be their first romantic experience. The threatening sexually-charged encounter with Felix's twin brother Hadfield also helps to mature Harry (pp. 123-125), as she realizes that 'being ravished' is not quite such a thrilling experience as she imagined it in her novel. The paradox that it is a fantasy figure who increases Harry's sense of reality (Gose 1991, p. 10) accords with carnivalesque writing. Hadfield's violence is certainly far less extreme and much more easily contained than violent acts in Bakhtinian carnival, since the novel is aimed at a Young Adult audience.<sup>ii</sup> The violence of the narrative is still extreme enough, though, for Harry to gain new understanding in matters of sexual conflict. The Trickster-brothers act as a catalyst for the family's and specifically for Harry's development, both by making Harry mature through her positive and negative romantic experiences and by bringing her to temporarily overthrow the established hierarchy of her family. They are ambivalent in terms of their character and intentions, but at least partly represent Harry's darker side (Gose 1991, p. 8).

Carnavalesque literature tends to be metafictional, and so Mahy's novel draws on traditional trickster tales: Like trickster figures from folktales the Carnival brothers are simultaneously disruptive and beneficial to the family (cf. Lovell-Smith 2008, p. 105; Garner 1975, p. 9; Smith 1997, p. 26). They seem responsible for adding to the Christmas and New Year's celebrations a 'carnival license, an incentive to release inhibitions, to reveal repressed impulses of both love and anger' (Gose 1991,

p. 8). These feelings are represented by Felix and Hadfield. It is striking that the two are identical twins yet complete opposites in their behaviour, both a doubling and a sharp contrast as is typical of carnivalesque writing.

Another striking contrast can be found in Harry's family: Jack's affair is in stark contrast to his behaviour as a loving and helpful father. The affair is particularly shocking because of Emma's quasi-adopted status in the family (pp. 97-98), which makes the relationship almost incestuous. Harry comes to terms with the knowledge of her parents' sexuality, at the same time that she comes to terms with her own. These processes occur simultaneously because she is an adolescent at a liminal age in a liminal place and time (cf. Marquis 2005, p. 79). As the depiction of liminality and the connected blurring of boundaries are a feature of carnivalesque writing, it is worth mentioning the main aspects of Harry's liminality here: Harry is in a liminal phase because of her age, physically, emotionally and intellectually changing from child to adulthood. It has been pointed out repeatedly in interpretations of the novel that Harry's liminal position is reflected in the novel's setting at the beach and the time of year depicted (Hebley 2005, pp. 204-206; Lovell-Smith 2008, pp. 93-108; Feingold 2005, p. 216; Marquis 2005, pp. 78-79). The beach, being the constantly changing borderline between dry land and water, also symbolizes the fragility of the family as a whole and the fluidity of reality and imagination in Harry's world. This setting appears to have a more far-reaching significance in Mahy's story in that the sea can also be compared to a mirror (Marquis 2005, pp. 68-69). In a pivotal scene in the book, Harry looks into the mirror and suddenly sees herself in a totally different way as a possible enchantress (p. 218), which is a turning point in the plot of the book as it shows her newly acquired self-confidence and her first step from unnoticed spectator to noticed performer in her family.

As to the season, Mahy (in an interview) emphasises the paradox of a New Zealand Christmas which is in summer but contains many of the elements of a northern-hemisphere winter Christmas, as is stressed in *The Tricksters* through the presence of the Englishman, Anthony (Feingold 2005, p. 217, Hale 2005, p. 18). The change into another year at New Year's eve is also clearly a time of transition. Harry's liminality is further expressed in her split name Ariadne/Harry and her sex (Hebley 2005, pp. 204-205, as is particularly obvious in the above-mentioned mirroring passage where Ovid, who after all sprang from Harry's own romantic imagination, tries her night-gown against himself.<sup>iii</sup> Her liminality is one of the reasons why Harry is most strongly connected with and affected by the Tricksters, who themselves are clearly liminal figures somewhere between life and death and imagination and reality, like tricksters from traditional folktale (Smith 1997, pp. 7-8, quoting Victor Turner). There is even a description of how the Tricksters' bodies are somehow fluctuating and flickering with moments of brief disappearances (p. 294), and the first place where they appear is, tellingly, the beach (p. 70).

Throughout the novel, Mahy leaves open the question who the Carnival brothers really are. All the family members can see them and interact with them. Harry even has a physical relationship with one of the brothers, but their mysterious appearance after Harry's dive into the sea, their obvious similarity to the fictional figures from Harry's novel, their displays of magical powers and their

abrupt disappearance at the end of the novel show that they, despite their corporeality, are ghostlike and in their fantastic nature somewhat carnivalesque.<sup>iv</sup> In this context, the strength of Harry's imagination cannot be stressed enough. Her first sight of an uninvited guest – note the similarity in sound of 'guest' and 'ghost' (Feingold 2005, p. 232 n.4) – after her dive into the sea is that of a bleeding Teddy Carnival. She emotionally rejects this apparition and it disappears. Soon it manifests itself in the Trickster brothers who are closely modelled on figures of Harry's own imagination which she lives out in the novel she writes. This similarity to Harry's imagination, coupled with Harry's Christmas wish for a book that transforms the world while one reads it and possibly the presence of a Carnival descendant (Anthony) at Carnival's Hide, seem to be the reasons why the Tricksters are able to come alive, stay around for a while and disappear again when Harry becomes disillusioned with her imagination which she had expressed in her novel. Harry's writing has literally become creative.

The roles of writer (of Harry's novel) and reader (of the book that transforms the world) are confused when her own fiction comes to life. This is already hinted at in the beginning of the novel, when Harry replies to her siblings' objection that there is no such thing as a reality-transforming book: 'I'll write it myself then' (p. 35). Scally associates authorship (or 'author-ity', as she calls it) with power, truth and desire: 'Story, in Mahy's novels, is a metaphor for coming to terms with the world and one's own place in it, and for gaining power and mastery over the world and the self. It is particularly in relation to a character's position in his or her family that story, truth and desire interact' (Scally 2005, p. 131. This is exactly what happens to Harry and her writing in *The Tricksters*.

It has been argued in relation to traditional (mostly North American) trickster tales that the act of reading trickster texts is itself a 'liminal activity' (Monsma 1996, p. 95) and that 'the writer as trickster blurs the boundaries ... between the real and the fantastic, and even between story and audience' (Smith 1997, p. 21). Trickster figures are liminal, and so are the texts which tell their stories: they 'cause us to question continually the knowledge and motivations we bring to texts as well as what we wish to take from them' (Monsma 1996, pp. 82, 94-95). The boundaries between reader and writer are blurred. Mahy plays with the same ambiguity in *The Tricksters*.

The themes of creative writing and reading run through and connect the different parts of *The Tricksters*. Several of the Hamiltons, including Harry, are prolific readers and are indeed shown reading (e.g. pp. 22, 94, 108, 207, cf. also pp. 99-100). Mahy shows writing within a piece of writing, by reproducing excerpts from Harry's novel. The crass mixture of writing styles achieved through this technique is typical of carnivalesque writing,<sup>v</sup> and so is the scandalous behaviour of the villain depicted in the excerpts from Harry's writing. The blurring of the roles of writer and reader is central to Mahy's novel. It is a strong carnivalesque element which helps emphasize the blurring of the boundaries of fantasy and reality in Mahy's novel.

Harry's imagination as a writer gives her power. At the same time it makes her vulnerable: she is the one who is most affected by the Tricksters. Because they somehow know about her secret novel, they have power over her. Further, they use their knowledge of the family secret of Jack's affair to

gain power over Harry's entire family. The Tricksters claim to be performers and show some magic tricks, but they act just as much as directors – one can even say the puppeteers – of various family members. This is particularly obvious in the scene where Ovid makes up Christo for the Christmas-party: 'She had become the marionette of his dreams, a toy of precious but lifeless treasure' (p. 241). Harry, tellingly, decides to not dress up for the party. She wants to show everybody her new-found real self, referring to her temporary metamorphosis into an 'enchantress'. She wants 'to draw wonder up out of herself' (p. 237). She is now leaving the role of the spectator in the family and becoming more of a performer – a performer of her own nature and desires.

In this context it is crucial to note that the family has left its everyday life and spends time away at the beach, just as carnival is a limited time apart from everyday life. This leads to the required 'free and familiar attitude' (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 123), as it is reflected in the relaxed holiday spirit of the family, the easy-going attitude with which they welcome strangers into their lives and the spontaneous mini-performances of the Tricksters. Bakhtin in this context mentions the lack of a formal division of performers and spectators (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 7; 1984b, p. 122). This is visible in Mahy's novel in which performing (including role-playing) and watching or hearing performances are themes which connect the various parts of the story.

Harry is, as we have seen, used as a puppet by the Tricksters, but her imaginative force as a writer makes her something of a puppeteer herself, as it is through her imaginative power that the Carnival brothers come into being, even though they leave her control. Further, the way she decides to hold back from telling her siblings about Jack's affair for most of the book also could be said to give her a puppeteer-like power (Feingold 2005, p. 225). Harry's writing is not intended for public performance which is why she hides it and is so infuriated when the Tricksters have made Christo get hold of it. When Harry enters the house after a romantic encounter with Felix, she finds her whole family and their guests sitting together as the captive audience of Christo's – quite carnivalesque – dramatic-parodic reading of her secret novel. In this passage, Ovid's role has changed from performer to director, as is particularly obvious when he nods at Harry who is about to reveal the secret of who Tibby's father is (290). Harry realizes that she is doing exactly what Ovid wants her to do, but she also understands that this what she herself really wants (290). The Tricksters thus cause her to act out a long-hidden desire. She is not merely a performing puppet, steered by Ovid, but is actively performing in this situation. Whereas before, her family and she herself seemed to view her role mainly as that of the spectator of Christo's performances, at the turning-point of the novel she finds herself as a performer – yet not in the way she was hoping to perform by showing her amazing self to everybody, but entirely unwillingly: 'But Christobel had turned on the spotlights, and Harry had woken out of a dream to find she was performing before an audience which was laughing at her' (p. 287). The fact that Harry is now in the role of the performer, when she reveals the family secret in order to shock Christo, is further underlined by the fact that she is completely aware that at this moment she is wearing her 'enchantress-face' (pp. 289-290). The roles of performer, spectator and director are presented in the novel and in particular at its climax as changing and somewhat blurred, as in a Bakhtinian carnival situation.



To take these observations a step further, in many ways the story can be compared to a play, even to a traditional Greek tragedy: It features supernatural powers and has strong parallels to ancient Greek myth: that of Harry's namesake Ariadne who acts as the typical mythological helper maiden to the hero Theseus, as Harry is to Felix, but with the difference that Harry increasingly takes on the role of the active heroine (Marquis, 2005, pp. 62-80). In mythology, Ariadne is rescued and married by Dionysus after Theseus deserts her on the island of Naxos. The carnivalesque connection of the god of wine, drama and ecstatic emotions is obvious. Similarly, Felix – the brother who represents the emotions – is associated with sensual pleasures in *The Tricksters*. However, while Ariadne as Dionysus' wife obtains an even more passive role than as Theseus' helper-maiden, Harry's relationship with Felix brings her forward in the process of her own maturation, as is shown in her increased self-confidence and proactivity.

To return to the comparison of *The Tricksters* to a Greek tragedy, Mahy's story is set in one place – Carnival's Hide serves as the stage – and in the very short span of time of a few summer days. The family undergoes a reversal of fortune. However, unlike in a tragedy, the tragic events have no lasting negative effect on the Hamiltons and the catharsis which according to Aristotle (*Poetics*, Chapter 6) affects the audience of the tragedy, here applies to the family members at the centre of the play themselves. They are the audience of the spectacle that they themselves are performing. The gap between performers and audience is, in a very carnivalesque manner, completely confused.

To sum up, I have shown that the plot of the story is developed in carnivalesque terms: everyday life is temporarily inverted, hierarchies change for a time, the 'urges of the body' are important, in particular we hear about various family members' recent and past sexual experiences, and there is certainly much talk about eating and feasting, as it is the holiday season of Christmas and New Year, which include celebrations, as carnival does. Death is represented as a stage before re-birth. I have also noted stylistic elements typical of carnivalesque writing, such as mixing literary styles and genres, doubling and contrasts, paradoxes and liminality, connected with a blurring of the borderlines of reality and imagination.

Bakhtin's carnival theory is thus indeed applicable to Mahy's novel and viewing the modern YA novel in the terms of this theory helps highlight some important features, especially the temporary changes of the hierarchies in the Hamilton family and the development of the power-play between the Carnival brothers. The inversion of hierarchies, as in a true carnival situation, ultimately has a positive, affirmative rather than disruptive effect, as I have shown. Both the Hamiltons and the Carnivals have overcome the traumatic events of the past. As Charlie concludes about Jack's and Emma's affair: 'Look – who cares whose fault it was? I don't. Not now' (299); and the Carnival-descendant Anthony remarks about Teddy's death: 'It's an old story, as far as I'm concerned. There's none left to praise or blame' (268). This change within the families is presented through the collapse of the separation of the roles of spectator and performer in the main figure, Harry. This central theme of the novel can best be explained in terms of Bakhtin's Carnival Theory. It is certainly facilitated if not only possible because of the carnivalesque situation at the time depicted in the novel, set in a liminal space and time with liminal main characters and the constant fluidity

between reality and fantasy, as represented by characters from a book coming to life and by their magic abilities.

The highly successful connection of fantasy and reality in *The Tricksters* has frequently been commented on by critics in interpretive statements, such as ‘illusion and reality run into each other, so that the narrative depends on them both’ (McVeagh 1999, p. 18) or that *The Tricksters* is ‘both credible and incredible’ (Hebly, quoted Duder 2005, p. 197). Claudia Marquis sums up the book’s carnivalesque flavour precisely in her observation that Harry is shown to produce ‘an invention that invents herself as its final effect’ (Marquis 2005, p. 62.). Margaret Mahy notes about this and other fantastic-realistic texts of hers that ‘[t]he books have a fairy tale structure ..., but they are disguised fairy tales. They have a lot of realistic reinforcement’ (Mahy, quoted Duder 2005, 197). The success of this mixture of fantasy and reality, which works perfectly, giving the novel a supernatural feel but not making it seem ‘untrue’, can be explained when viewed through the lense of Carnival Theory which stresses liminality, a sense of unboundedness and the idea of a world upside-down.<sup>vi</sup> To conclude, looking at carnivalesque elements does help to interpret the novel and it is indeed no coincidence that the Tricksters’ last name is Carnival. Moreover, reading the text in terms of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival highlights the connection in this book of three main interests of Mahy which re-appear in her novels and which she has also frequently discussed and commented upon in reflections upon her writing: power reversals, the relation of reader and writer and Mahy’s pre-occupation with fiction and truth. One could even say that carnival provides Mahy with a new way of re-thinking her perennial reflections on the nature and relation of fiction and fact.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>On this and other scholarly critiques of the theory cf. Dentith 1995, pp.73-85.

<sup>ii</sup>For the same reason, sex is treated in a very restrained manner by Mahy, as opposed to Bakhtin.

<sup>iii</sup>Another kind of liminality is suggested by Winters 2008, pp. 409-410, who comments that the body of a Pakeha adolescent, like Harry’s, is a mixture of European time and Maori space.

<sup>iv</sup>Lovell-Smith 2008, pp. 104-105 connects the brothers’ appearance with the Maori myth of Maui as a lost son who was abandoned at sea as dead but comes alive again.

<sup>v</sup>Mahy’s intertextuality is highly literary and the works used are mainly canonical and treaded respectfully, unlike in Bakhtin, but the mixture of styles and genres in itself is carnivalesque. Mahy has used this stylistic device in a way which suits the characters of the educated, middle-class, modern New Zealand Hamilton family.

<sup>vi</sup>My observations accord with Claudia Marquis’ in her 2005 book chapter. Marquis comes to similar conclusions, but from a Freudian and Kristevan viewpoint. Kristeva, of course, draws on Bakhtin in her earlier works. Marquis, focussing on liminality, in particular notes the confusion of the borders between reader and book and rightly concludes that *The Tricksters* is a ‘fantasy of transgression’.

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