

Gargantuan Appetites

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Because food is such a quotidian and common element in the world and the individuals' experience of that world, it is often included in narratives by authors from different geographical origins and historical backgrounds; yet, food is not tied to one cultural or representational context, but has the ability to morph into a symbolic depiction of the literary structure in which it is placed. (Piatti-Farnell and Brien 2)

Taking the epigraph above by Piatti-Farnell and Brien as a starting point, this chapter investigates the fantastical literary figure of the giant and his gargantuan appetite through the prism of Bakhtin's Rabelaisian carnival with specific reference to children's literature. It is important to note that, despite the historical and geographical variety of examples, these literary and critical examples remain eminently relatable across time and space. The embodied spirit of M. M. Bakhtin's carnival forms a conceptual framework for the investigation of what can be termed the "Gargantua script" (the giant endowed with enormous strength and insatiable appetites in François Rabelais' *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* from 1532) and its appropriation in literature and culture. The lineage of this carnivalesque creature is astonishing, examples being found in a multitude of national contexts and eminently translatable across such boundaries.

This Gargantuan script and its characters see varied expression both nationally and transnationally and can be traced, with several metamorphoses or disguises, through the artistic works and cultural products of, for example, African and European folktales, the illustrations of Gustave Doré, and the novels of Charles Dickens etc. These are familiar figures that are found in diverse traditions and with legacies in modern-day popular culture, such as Elgar and Zak's children's picture book *The Brother's Gruesome* (2000), which is the primary focus of this chapter.

In taking this approach, I utilize M. M. Bakhtin's view of the medieval carnival as a social celebration with a subversive and popular character that turns class domination upside down, challenging and disintegrating, at the same time, the solemnity of those

who are possessed by its spirit. The ideas found in Bakhtin's carnival, with its topsy-turvy nature and complex relationship between food, feeding, excess, and the body can be uncovered in the more modern context of children's literature through a mode that can best be described as *carnivalesque*, particularly in relation to the excessive consumption of food. This is because food and its mode of consumption often stands as a metaphor for the historical and contextual focus of the author and their readers. For Vallone "[t]he inclusion of scenes of eating, appetite, fasting or cooking may be especially important in fantasy literature for children, as food is real, while fantasy is an extension of the real" (47).

Central to all aspects of the Bakhtinian concept of carnival is the principle of the material body with an emphasis on its lower section—this is often manifested through the reckless and excessive consumption of food. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin points out that the open, unfinished nature of the body is revealed more fully and completely in the act of eating, because the "body transgresses here its own limits ... Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself" (281).

The world of food and the bodily functions related to it are all central to childhood experiences of growing and learning, particularly in relation to practices of restraint, such as those found in relation to admonishment by the parent: excess, in terms of greed/gluttony and its consequences and transgression, in the consumption of the "wrong" thing. This may be considered common to the experience of childhood and growth across national boundaries. Again, Vallone notes how "[w]riters often resort to the food metaphor, the 'culinary sign', as Louis Marin describes the semiotics of cooking and eating in Perrault's tales of marvel as a means to discuss identity and belonging, moral character, children's behavior, power relations and gender roles" (47).

An analysis of a carnivalesque picture book is offered here in which the Gargantua/ogre figure is transposed and reappropriated through visual and verbal modalities. The medievalist character of the illustrations registers a variety of artistic representations that are centered on the image of the grotesque body. This line of argument is also enriched with particular references to paintings, particularly concerning food and eating, by various artists working in, and also defining, a number of national artistic contexts over the centuries.

The Bakhtinian Carnival: A World Upside Down

The ideas of the Russian thinker Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) on the dialogic nature of the novel and on the medieval carnival, with all its polysemous ramifications, have opened interesting perspectives for reading and interpreting literature, aligning literary texts with the powerful laughter and subversive folly of carnival. For Bakhtin, the historical carnival that characterized the Middle Ages up to the time of Rabelais (as discussed in *Rabelais and his World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*) was not only a social celebration of subversive

and populist, perhaps even revolutionary character, but also as a textualized element with artistic manifestations across generic traditions. Having a powerful liberating effect on the lives of the ordinary people who participated in its festivities, carnival subverted the hierarchies of society, creating temporary social spaces characterized by reversal, laughter, and excess. Bakhtin suggests that, in the Middle Ages above all carnival offered an alternative to the seriousness of official culture, “a completely different, nonofficial, extra ecclesiastical and extra political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations” (6).

Post-Renaissance culture, Bakhtin argues, witnessed a decline in the significance of carnival as feudalism was replaced by the new bourgeois order, which placed greater emphasis on the private sphere. As a result, the ritual practices associated with carnival—spectacles, pageants, and folk festivities—were either eliminated or assimilated by the private sphere. As part of this shift, a new-found (bourgeois) focus on restraint, considered in terms of rationality and order, came to the fore. In discussing restraint in the context of Victorian Britain, Scholl makes the point that “[e]xcess and moderation are unavoidably culturally contingent...” (4). After all, “...in the cultural context of food consumption, diet is rarely solely to do with nutritional requirements” (16).

In the process, popular laughter lost its carnivalesque connotations and acquired, instead, a more negative and restricted significance and carnival stopped playing such a prominent role in the lives of ordinary people. However, even though carnival as a specific cultural practice has been diminished, its tradition and function are still alive today. Vice (150) has suggested that the medieval carnival, as studied by Bakhtin, can be considered the precursor of today’s carnivals, such as the Mexican Day of the Dead, Mardi Gras, and the Brazilian Carnival. Moreover, traces of carnival can still be detected in many aspects of today’s cultural practices, rituals, and celebrations.

Bakhtin argues that carnival introduced a totally inverted world—a world upside down.¹ Carnival subverted the hierarchical structure of the society such that:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is non carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). (*Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* 122-123)

In much the same way, one might suggest a similar distinction between the formal, “adult,” everyday world, and the confusion of sights, sounds, and smells and hyper-emotionalization of carnival. The carnival provided a space where adults could let their hair down and enter a state of childlike wonder in a world where the normal rules no

longer apply.

As such, carnival can be seen to reverse all the normal hierarchical positions, which is clearly shown in its central ritualistic act—the crowning, enthronement, and subsequent dethroning of a false king. Often this mock carnival king was a fool or jester, or merely a person of humble origin.² This all took place against a backdrop of *carnavalesque laughter*, all-encompassing and “full-throated” (Gibson 15) and having physical and psychological effects on participants.

Physical, and often scatological, laughter in the Middle Ages was embraced with great enthusiasm by people of all kinds, classes, and conditions and was even commodified (Gibson 146) and circulated throughout western Europe via the performances of professional jesters and, of course, the joyful, playful, and bizarre activities that took place during carnival festivities: masquerades and feasts, processions and spectacles, and games and jokes.

Carnival also celebrated the *hic et nunc* (the “here and now”) pleasures of the body, in defiance of the morbid gravity of official religion and culture. The *debasement* of things is another carnival feature, since, in carnival, everything is brought down to earth, to the level of the body, albeit a body which is grotesque, exaggerated or distorted comically. In the context of children’s literature, another form of carnal excess, one that is also found in the free-for-all of carnival, is often represented by food, where “[t]he sensuous delight of these descriptions of food reveals that in children’s fiction, eating seems to occupy the place that sex does in adult fiction” (Nodelmann 196).

Conclusively, the Bakhtinian carnival presents, above all, a social and cultural realm of multiple meanings, interrelated opposites, and transgressive identities. The literary examples that follow sketch out a historical and transnational trajectory, culminating in the modern children’s picture book *The Brothers Gruesome* (2000). We can clearly see how the topsy-turvy world of carnival and its celebration of excessive consumption and the grosser functions of the body are engaged in the generation of wondrous stories of the strange and unreal that continue to entertain and enthuse children today.

Gargantua and the Ogre

Bakhtin’s point of departure for the study of carnival was the work of François Rabelais and his irreverent masterpiece, the pentalogy *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (1532-1564). Gargantua is a giant endowed with enormous strength and insatiable appetites. He is a glutton—possibly the glutton *par excellence* in literature, as the etymology of his name indicates (the root “garg” in Latin means throat)—who motivates certain scatological motifs throughout the books and, most importantly, the principle of grotesque realism, which serves as the *dominant* of the whole oeuvre. In a world often plagued by famines and against the backdrop of increasing religious oppression and misallodoxy,³ Rabelais

offers a utopia through the figure of a character who eats and drinks to excess, indulging repeatedly in the pleasures of the body. According to Bennett (68-69) Gargantua's extravagant bodily action is a metaphor that seeks to destabilize Christian morality and subvert the established social order.

Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins (or the seven vices) and is therefore invested with a certain theological significance. In the art of the contemporary Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel (ca. 1525-1569), however, it acquires (as the other deadly sins) strong comic overtones (Gibson 34-35), thus aiming to amuse and not to warn against the consequences of fallen human nature. The same humorous and satirical vein can be detected in Rabelais' hero who is accompanied in his gluttonousness by other gluttons, such as "the drunkards," who are monks and therefore totally ridiculous.⁴ Several banqueting images in *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel*, situated in the broader context of medieval literature, are usually centered on this figure of the monk, portrayed as a glutton, drunkard, and lecher.

Nevertheless, except for his blasphemous affinity with religious yet sinful persons, Gargantua is also a creature of mythological origin and can be seen as a positive manifestation of the figure of the *ogre* in folktales. With his voracious appetite, he resembles the ogre in Perrault's *Little Tom Thumb* who ate a whole spitted sheep for supper (Bouloumié 913). The ogre is a familiar figure in folktales from different traditions of African and European origin with various avatars in folklore and popular culture. The lineage of this figure is very long and has deep roots in mythology and the collective imagination (Bouloumié). Among the common features that Gargantua shares with the ogre, beyond their common etymological link with the lexical root "garg," are his enormous appetites and physical capacities, as well as his frightful bogeyman appearance. However, the ogre has some typical features of its own that are often characterized as weaknesses, such as weak eyesight (from Polyphemus in *Odyssey* to the child-eating ogre in Guillermo del Toro's dark fantasy movie *Pan's Labyrinth* in 2006) and, most importantly, low intelligence; these are characteristics that make the ogre vulnerable to deception (as in *Little Tom Thumb*), while remaining an extremely dangerous, carnivorous, or even anthropophagic creature, and one that is both fear-inducing and intriguing to those with fertile imaginations.

By tracing, in a more detailed manner, the fundamental characteristics of the outward and facial appearance of both Gargantua and the ogre, we can seek to better understand their symbolic significance and archetypal quality, as well as their deeper bonds with the collective unconscious. Looking at some selected engravings of Gustave Doré for *Little Tom Thumb* (a fairytale from 1862) and *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais (1873), we can easily detect some similarities between the two giant creatures. They have blank unfocused eyes, prominent mouths edged with teeth (sharp in the ogre's case), and features that associate the ogre with its primal avatar, the wolf, whose fearsome sharp-toothed jaws are used to tear its prey to pieces. It might be interesting (even important) to consider that

Rabelais and Perrault wrote in the 1500s, 1600s, while Doré made his illustrations in the 1800s. This reveals the way that this imagery has travelled through time. There is also a prominent connection that can be drawn to the infernal figure of Goya's imagination, Saturn/Cronus, who, with the same blank eyes, tears at his headless child with his teeth, goggling with the paranoia of his insatiable bulimia and utterly reversing the normal relationship of the parent feeding their child (Figure 1).

Another striking feature of both the ogre and Gargantua is the wide-open cavity of the mouth, establishing an ambiguous link between the idea of the devouring and

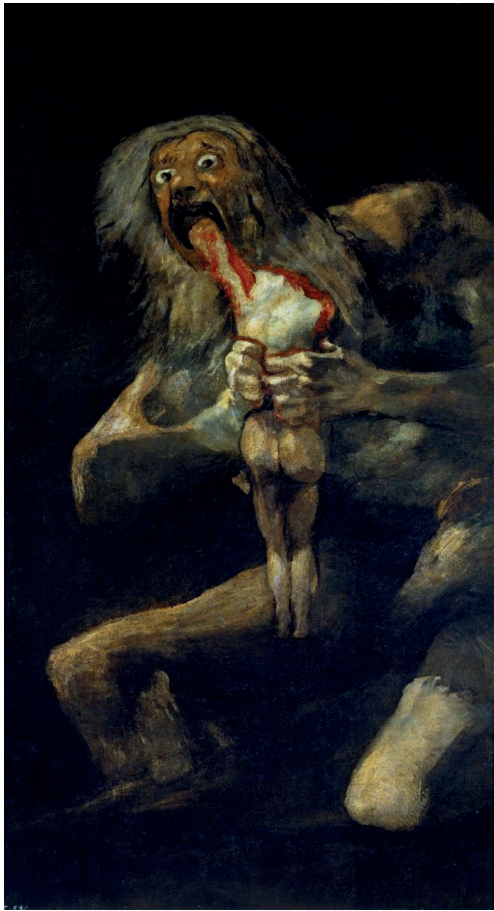


Fig. 1
Francisco Goya, Saturn Devouring His Son

swallowing mouth and the notions of both life and death: the shadow of the tomb and the abysmal darkness of the womb. The yawning mouth stands simultaneously for tomb and womb, it is a *bocca dell'inferno*, and a spring of life—this is a powerful iconological motif and can be seen in Bruegel's painting *Dulle Griet* (1562) where the entrance to Hell is portrayed as a gaping mouth edged with teeth.

It is worth noting that these characteristics—an open mouth with ferocious teeth; devouring and swallowing—persist throughout the long history of the metamorphoses of the Gargantua/ogre figure. One of the most impressive examples of the ogre's representations in the modern period can be found in the work of Charles Dickens. The author appropriated his primal fear of the dissembling wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, “who ate her grandmother, without making any impression on his appetite, and then ate her, after making that ferocious joke about his teeth,” for the creation of one of his most disturbing fictional characters. This is the villain of *The Old Curiosity*

Shop (1840-41), Daniel Quilp, who is portrayed as a gargantuan glutton, a devouring ogre. He is described as eating “hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with their heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness drank boiling tea without winking” (Dickens 46). Quilp is usually illustrated (or played) as an ugly hunchback with the mouth and teeth of a predator. His prey is Little Nell, a virtuous young girl to whom he is the complete antithesis.

Contemporary Gargantuas and villainous ogres can also be found in popular

culture—in comics, films, and TV series. The figure is always present behind various evil characters who have horrifying teeth, big, open mouths, and voracious appetites to consume anything that can be eaten. Examples range from *Gargamel* in the Smurfs (with the same lexical root)⁵ to Jaws, the James Bond villain, a giant assassin so named because of his weapon of choice—a set of stainless steel teeth; to V. M. Varga, a contemporary bulimic ogre with a prominent mouth, rotten gums, and horrendous teeth in the Coen Brothers' TV series *Fargo* (Season 3, Episode 6: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, 2017).

It is apparent that the Gargantua/ogre figure is inherently ambivalent and constantly shifting between good and evil, life and death. Gargantua's gluttony and his excessive bodily functions (urination for instance) are clearly linked to the reproductive power of the earth and the body. The banqueting imagery, frequently recalled in Gargantua, is ludic, because eating and drinking signify the ambivalence of the grotesque body. Characterized as both positive and negative activities, they reveal how the body transgresses its own limits 'and takes in the world' (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 281). In contrast, the ogre is more strictly malevolent, a lethal enemy, whose gluttony serves as a powerful signifier of wickedness. However, the ogre is equally transgressive, violating many dichotomies or taboos associated with eating: the taboo of cannibalism, most importantly, since it devours or gulps, literally or metaphorically, living, animated beings. Another dichotomy that the ogre transgresses is that of the binary opposition described by Lévi-Strauss in terms of the raw and the cooked. It is, then, an ambiguous creature that crosses the boundaries of a number of categories, shifting constantly between nature and culture. Young children have a similarly complex, and at times transgressive, relationship with food, their bodies (particularly the body's responses to consumption), and the world around them. Children are drawn towards novelty and excess, and the development of self-control in relation to what they consume often happens through a process of discipline, treated as a vital stage on the path to the formal, non-*Rabelaisian/carnivalesque* world of adulthood. For example, it has been argued that food in children's literature constitutes a measure of the child's adjustment to the social order' (Katz 193). As such, it should come as no surprise that these themes, characters, and contradictions are addressed in children's literature.

Gargantuas and Ogres in Children's Literature

The concepts of dialogism, polyphony, and carnivalesque revolt help us to understand more profoundly and more completely that literature "is not merely an ideational phenomenon but has to be considered as a unique epistemological instrument that concerns intellectual, imaginative and emotional attitudes" (Bemong et al.: iii).⁶ The work of Bakhtin also proves useful in the analysis of children's literature because the latter is often marked by what John Stephens has called "a playfulness which situates itself in positions of nonconformity" (Stephens 121). Several works of relevant scholarship, such

as those by Stephens (1992), McCallum (1999), and Nikolajeva (2010), have recognized Bakhtin's theories as powerful constructs for understanding literature written for children and young adults. Stephens suggests that carnivalesque texts "interrogate the normal subject positions created for children within socially dominant ideological frames" (120). McCallum uses a Bakhtinian approach to discuss matters of dialogic subjectivity, language, and narrative in children's and young adult fiction, while Nikolajeva utilizes carnival theory to address issues of power in texts written for children.

Carnavalesque features can be found not only in postmodern/contemporary books, but also in older literary works for children, and, as a matter of fact, in many books throughout the history of children's literature. Some Greek satirical poems, for example, published in the early 20th century, easily lend themselves to a carnivalesque reading. However, Bakhtin's analysis of carnival and the carnivalesque offers a theoretical framework that critics and educators can apply to the analysis of books written for young readers and to pedagogical practices related to teaching literature (Kalogirou and Economopoulou; Flegar).

Carnavalesque imagery draws on the mischievous and playful spirit of carnival, which mocks authority, subverts power relationships and hierarchies, and, by emphasizing the body, laughter, and reversible oppositions, creates a new upside-down world. A book that can be considered carnivalesque is one characterized by one or more of the following: a mocking attitude towards everything that is supposed to be official, authoritarian or sacred; an emphasis on the lower section of the body and its concerns with food and drink; a focus on things gross and degraded; a subversive attitude towards socially established ideologies concerning children's behavior, morals, parenting, and schooling, etc.; the use of taboo language and the employment of polyphony and dialogism via multiple narrators; the mixing of diegetic levels; and the multiplicity of focalization.

In general, as Stephens has suggested (121-57), carnival in children's literature is playful and subversive in nature. Books that retain the nature and function of the medieval carnival as described by Bakhtin express opposition to authoritarianism and seriousness, represented by parents, teachers, and political or religious institutions. They challenge adult authority by breaking social norms and overturning social hierarchies. Carnavalesque texts often use taboo language or wordplay and make fun of conventional social manners; by doing so, they offer an escape from the habitual constraints of society. They also cause uncanny feelings within readers, raising ambivalent responses. According to Nikolajeva (10), a carnivalesque text shows features such as: interrogation of authority; distortion; an "upside-down-world"; the creation of a topsy-turvy reality; imagery of the grotesque body; hyperbole; and the transgression of limits, etc. A carnivalesque text is often written in an amusing, extravagant, and *satirical* vein, featuring much crudity, *scatological humor*, and even violence, though in a humorous literary style.

The Brothers Gruesome written by Susan Elgar and illustrated by the Czech artist Drahos Zak, is a powerful example of a challenging children's book that clearly displays carnivalesque features. It can be connected to other picture books from the turn of the millennium, as a representative example of carnivalesque books which is an important tendency in contemporary writing (McCallum). At once disturbingly funny, nightmarish but beautiful, haunting, but teasingly amusing, it appropriates the basic tenets of carnival theory, as well as the figure of the Gargantua/ogre in all its recklessness and excessive behavior, transgressing the barriers of logic and conformism.

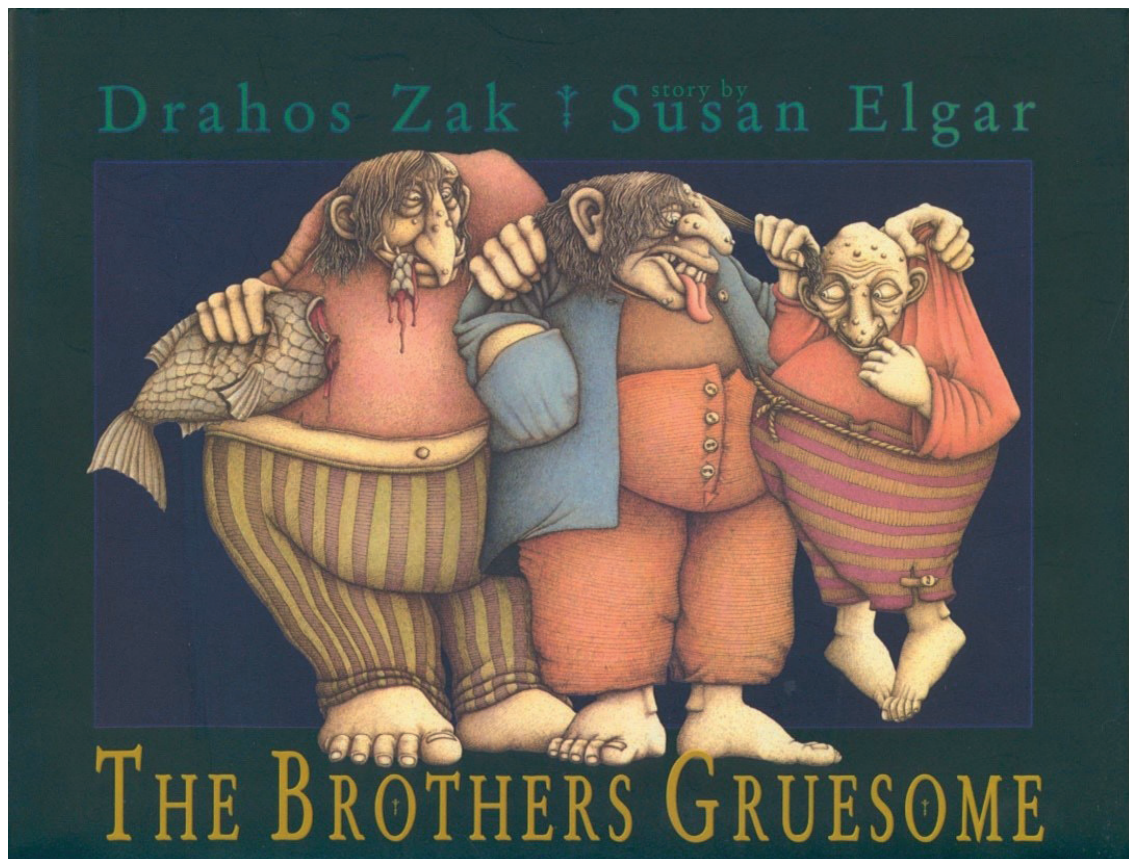


Fig. 2

Susan Elgar and Drahos Zak, *The Brothers Gruesome* (cover).

The Brothers Gruesome celebrates the Bakhtinian category of the open, unfinished nature of the body and its interactions with the world. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin points out that the open, unfinished nature of the body is revealed more fully and completely in the act of eating, because the “body transgresses here its own limits” (281). He notes how, through different bodily openings, such as the mouth, nose, and anus, that, within them, the confines between bodies, and between the body and the world, are overcome. In the following passage Bakhtin describes the most important events in the life of the grotesque

body:

Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and the new body. (317)

Almost all the above notions (excepting that of copulation), have been drawn to an extreme extent in *The Brother Gruesome*, contributing to its overall carnivalesque nature. The grotesque bodies of the three brothers and the animals featured in the illustrations are in a constant and excessive mingling—they merge into each other, losing track of their boundaries and their individual characteristics. Within the limits of this absurd, cruel, and repulsive world everything must eat and be eaten. The three brothers are undoubtedly gruesome, abnormal, horrible, and voracious beings and, like their literary prototypes, the giant Gargantua and the ogre, they have an apparently insatiable appetite—not only are they gluttons with an irrational desire to consume food, but they are also carnivorous, even anthropophagic creatures. It is clear, that they transgress all the cultural barriers and taboos associated with food, since they devour or swallow everything. They consume food both raw and cooked; all sorts of living animals, from sheep to mice; and they are also cannibals, eating each other and even their own mother whom they swallow without thinking—a deeply disturbing, taboo-violating, and unthinkable act that totally defies sense and moral order, for as Daniel puts it, “[o]ne of the most fundamental cultural messages that children have to learn concerns how to eat correctly, that is, to put it simply, what to eat and what not to eat or who eats whom”.

The brothers’ whole existence goes beyond any logic and is reduced to the excessive consumption of any kind of food. They keep on eating, cannibalizing, and destroying everything until another creature, bigger, hairier and hungrier than the three brothers, gobbles them up. In a series of highly ironic pictures, they are depicted as ridiculous and idiotic in their ignorance of the upcoming danger. The book exemplifies the carnivalesque, characterized in its entirety by visual and verbal irony, hyperbole and grotesquery. It is also heavily invested with intertextual allusions, thus embracing a long tradition of food and drink imagery in literature and the arts.

Ostensibly, the direct linking of maternity with the act of eating in the book—the mother of the gruesome trio gives birth to them only to be devoured by her own children—is something that draws the book closer to Rabelais and his giant hero, Gargantua. It is worth noting that Bakhtin insisted on the importance of the scene in *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (Book 1, Chapter VI) in which Gargamelle, Gargantua’s mother, gives birth

to her son. Her labour begins once she feels disturbed in her lower parts (because she has eaten too much tripe):

A little while later she began to groan and wail and shout. Then suddenly swarms of midwives came up from every side, and feeling her underneath found some ill-smelling excrescences, which they thought were the child; but it was her fundament shipping out. (52)

Gargamelle dies shortly after, and her child is delivered through his mother's ear. This is a pivotal scene in terms of carnival poetics precisely because it confuses the devourer with the devoured, the belly with the womb and, more importantly, the dying body with one that gives birth. As with Gargantua's birth scene, so *The Brothers Gruesome* draws attention to the image of the grotesque body, which, in this case, also presents the image of two bodies in one: "the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated and born" (26). Equally as ironic and provocative as the illustrations is the accompanying text by Elgar, the rhythmic (iambic pentameter) and rhyming nature of which enhances the absurdist character of the very act of eating: "When their mother could not fill up their bellies, they gobbled her up with her raincoat and wellies."

The pervasive medievalism of the illustrations increases in the reader the overall feeling that they have entered a Bakhtinian cosmos of medieval laughter and carnival feast. At the same time, "medievalism" as an artistic style⁷ raises important questions concerning the use and implementation of the past by the illustrator. It could be said that he employs the Middle Ages as a metaphor, suggesting something beyond the conventionally historical. An interpretative reading here would suggest that the illustrator chose the medieval era not only because it is a period typically connected with ignorance, filth and violence, but also, more importantly, because it evokes Rabelais and his insatiable giant, Gargantua—the literary progenitor of the gruesome brothers. However, the medieval trope here has the capacity to signify something beyond the conventionally historical by pointing out several correspondences between the medieval (that of the gruesome brothers) and postmodern/contemporary (our) world, which is equally punctuated by absurdity and suspiciousness, fear and despair, violence and catastrophe. The suffering, misshapen, and tortured body of poverty, and greed and hostility between individuals, have both been part of the core of human existence uninterruptedly up to the present.

It is also painfully ironic that the book concludes with an apocalyptic calamity of nature, both real and symbolic, in which there is nothing left to be destroyed. It is almost certain that the bigger creature that ate the three brothers soon will itself be gulped down and eliminated.

Indeed, if the reader looks more closely at the framing and point of view of this



Fig. 3
Susan Elgar and Drahos Zak, *The Brothers Gruesome*.

standing on top of a huge birthday cake and surrounded by devilish creatures. This picture enhances the teasing nature of the overall illustration and its carnivalesque tendency, both reversing and inverting the traditional form and order by placing an event associated with nativity unequivocally in the Underworld. The artist subverts the visual representation of Hell commonly found in painting (in the mediaeval artistic tradition, or the work of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel) and playfully reappropriates some of the most important iconographic elements of the theme.

Another feature of the illustrations is their highly elaborate and painterly style. They evoke the paintings of Northern Renaissance and Baroque art, respectively the works of painters such as Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel, conveying the same bizarre, *avant la lettre* surrealistic atmosphere expressed by both artists in their depictions of a gamut of boisterous peasants, quarrelsome people, and fantastical hybrid creatures. Likewise, the whole book could be considered a visualization à la manière de Bruegel of the proverb “the big fish eats the little fish,” a Flemish saying frequently illustrated by the artist who would visually render proverbs, common expressions, and sayings for humorous effect. The illustration may also recall a nightmarish detail of the left-hand panel of Hieronymus Bosch’s “The Temptation of Saint Antony” (ca. 1501, Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga) where a demonic fish with a cathedral tower on its back eats a smaller fish. A

last picture (the real reader peers at the creature from behind), then they will understand that there is something lurking outside the pictorial space ready to attack the greedy creature who, at the same moment, is ironically unaware of this threat at its back. The monster is vulnerable to the (devouring) reader’s gaze, as well as to any kind of danger.

The medievalism of the book is also closely connected to the symbolic pattern of the topsy-turvy universe or upside-down world (Babcock) of carnival, which is introduced through the seventh picture where the three newborn gruesome brothers, along with their mother, are depicted in Hell,

later artist, Salvador Dali, was long fascinated and inspired by this disconcerting and imaginatively powerful image of Bosch. In his painting “Dream caused by a flight of a bee around a pomegranate, one second before awakening” (1944, Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza) a similar image can be found—an enormous fish is depicted spewing a pair of leaping tigers. In a similar vein, *The Brothers Gruesome* provides a palimpsest code, weaving texts and artworks together in a meaningful context that is intertextually open to comparisons with works of painting (those of the mediaeval period, the Northern Renaissance, the Baroque, and Surrealism) and literature (such as Rabelais’ masterpiece).

In Lieu of a Conclusion

If, as asserted in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, the reader begins to negotiate the meaning of the text from within their present situation and an ‘anachronism of the present’ occurs inevitably in any interpretative process, then we may be right to approach the figure of Gargantua/ogre and its mythic obsession with eating, in terms of their embeddedness in our current social and cultural milieu. My personal experience from teaching *The Brothers Gruesome* and other carnivalesque texts (such as the picture books of Tony Ross, or the funny stories of the Greek writer Antonis Papatheodoulou, or the poems of the great satiric canonical author Georgios Souris to name a few) to different classes and in various educational contexts (primary schools, vocational schools, and, of course, universities) has shown that the reading of such books is always a stimulating and open-ended aesthetic experience for readers of all ages. Many readers choose to see the gluttonous, predatory figure as a powerful allegory of our highly competitive, aggressive, hostile, conspicuously consumptive, and ecologically unsound societies. They also often assert that they had felt more empowered after having read and reflected upon such provocative narratives, which, while being disgusting, absurd, or annoyingly amusing, are never boring and always challenging. Inherently elusive or contradictory as signifiers, the Gargantua/ogre figure invites readers to engage in a constant dialogue about our current situation in the world and situates them squarely in the camp of the carnivalesque. We should perhaps recall here Bakhtin’s optimism about the potential for carnival to enact anything new or transgressive and to suspend social oppression by invigorating and empowering people. Likewise, through the reading of carnivalesque texts, readers can become more capable at deciphering the conflicting discourses contained in literature and deconstructing texts to tease out their complexities.

Rabelais used the metaphor of eating to offer some brilliant advice to his readers in the “Prologue” to *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* about how they should read his book. What they should do, he says, is to read the book wisely and intensely so as to break up its bones and suck out its marrow:

Now you must follow this dog's example, and be wise in smelling out, sampling, and relishing these fine and most juicy books, which are easy to run down but hard to bring to bay. Then, by diligent reading and frequent meditation, you must break the bone and lick out the substantial marrow ... in the hope and assurance of becoming both wiser and more courageous by such reading. (38)

Carnavalesque texts are often full of substance and their reading can be a powerful and imaginative experience, a form of resistance against dogmatism, and part of a life-enduring quest for the freedom and independence of thought.

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Notes

- ¹ The symbolic reversal correlates to many inverted patterns of culture, involving not only religious inversion, but also linguistic, artistic, social, and political inversions. See, Babcock (1978).
- ² Most carnival festivities in Greece, for example (as in many other cultural traditions), usually culminate in the ridiculous burning of the effigy of a mock Carnival King.
- ³ The war between Catholics and Huguenots (1562–1598) marked the sixteenth century.
- ⁴ The figure of the monk as drunkard, glutton, and lecher constitutes a comic topos in Medieval Latin recreational literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It belongs to an entire literary tradition that Rabelais drew upon for his chapter “Why monks love kitchens” (Coletti 129-30).
- ⁵ The name is a homophone of that of Gargantua’s mother, Gargamelle.
- ⁶ The theories of Bakhtin on popular laughter have been widely discussed. See, Emerson (1997, Ch. 4: 162-206); Berrong (1986); Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis, (1988); Klaniczay (1990); Karatsinidou (2005); Allen (2007).
- ⁷ For the concept of medievalism as an artistic style, I follow Alexander (2017).