REVIEWS

The Victorian Comic Spirit: New Perspectives, edited by Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.

It is hardly news that comedy, wit and humour were prominent elements in the Victorian scene. We have long since moved beyond the stereotyped image of a fat little Queen dressed in black, uttering the grim-faced declaration, "We are not amused." Victoria was a cheerful eighteen-year-old when she came to the throne, and from then until the premature death of her beloved Albert, she read her Dickens and was an avid patron of the theatre, especially when circus acts were imported to Drury Lane. Similarly, whereas once upon a time earnest university professors pointed to the solemn pronouncements of the Victorian sages as the only writings from the era worth attending to, for at least the past half century undergraduate courses have featured other – often comic – voices more prominently, even as scholars have emphasised the humour to be found at the core of the vision of Carlyle, of Arnold and of George Eliot.

Ever since Socrates put Aristophanes to sleep with his disquisition on comedy, it has been recognised that definitions of the subject are tricky, and whereas Aristotle set the agenda for discussions of tragedy ever afterwards, the absence of a seminal theory of comedy has meant that there is little agreement as to its basic characteristics, whether aggressive or genial, psychological or physiological, formal or culturally conditioned. Nevertheless, there is general recognition now, just as there was in the nineteenth century, that the Victorian age produced a vast quantity and rich diversity of comic art. Inevitably that art covered a wide spectrum in quality, ranging from the enduring output of those giants of the comic novel, Dickens and Thackeray, to the (thankfully ephemeral) puerile witticisms of an army of hack journalists. In between were the writings of such lesser luminaries as Douglas Jerrold, Thomas Hood, Theodore Hook, Robert Surtees, Leigh Hunt, and Richard Henry Barham.

As technical capabilities of printing progressed, periodical literature proliferated, and comic engravings formed a staple component of many a printed page, most notably in *Punch*, the success of which was described by Richard Henry Horne in *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844), as "one of the most striking and encouraging features of the age" (1: 281). Nineteenth-century theatre production generally offered a triple bill, with a farce or travesty customarily concluding each night's entertainment. The burlesque plays of Gilbert Abbott À Beckett were forgotten almost as fast as he churned them out, but his *Comic Blackstone* and his *Comic History of England* and *Comic History of Rome* were widely reprinted throughout the century, and several of Dion Boucicault's comic melodramas have been successfully revived in recent years. Actors such as Robert Keeley and Charles James Mathews staked their claims to fame on their histrionic talent for comic roles, and *The Ascent of Mont Blanc*, the humorous travelogue of the raconteur Albert Smith, ran at the Egyptian Hall for some 2000 performances. The mid-nineteenth century was the heyday of the circus, and the

music hall grew from strength to strength as the century progressed. The Victorians themselves lamented the inability of their age to produce great tragedy, but their entertainers gave them abundant opportunity for laughter.

All this being so, Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor gets things off to an unpromising start with the opening sentence of *The Victorian Comic Spirit: New Perspectives*, in which she declares that "the very notion of Victorian humour [. . .] sounds like a contradiction in terms" (xiii). She quotes Arnold ruminating on "this strange disease of modern life" as evidence, but she might better have quoted Sam Weller – vastly more widely read by Victorians than Arnold ever was – speculating on the fate that has removed him from "play[ing] at leap-frog" with life's troubles and, having made him a gentleman's servant, is as likely "one of these days" to make him a gentleman himself (*The Pickwick Papers*, ch. 16). Sam's peculiar virtue is to confront life's slings and arrows with genial good humour, and he epitomises the Victorian tendency to use wit as corrective, to expose cant and hypocrisy, to recognise absurdity, and to promote contentment.

Wagner-Lawlor's collection covers a healthy range of subjects, but the historical focus is decidedly skewed, with the bulk of the volume (eight of the twelve essays) dealing with the decadent dying days of Victoria's long reign. Only Abigail Burnham Bloom, writing on *Sartor Resartus* (first published in 1836, which, strictly speaking, makes it pre-Victorian); Eileen Gillooly, writing on *Cranford* (1853); Joseph Gardner, writing on *Hard Times* (1854); and James Najarian, writing on Arnold's prose (primarily *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869) have chosen to deal with high Victorian topics. Otherwise the volume is narrowly concentrated on materials from the 1880s and 1890s, hardly representative of the Victorian spirit at its full tide.

The primary "new perspectives" of the book's sub-title are a theoretical attention to comic expression, and an exploration of its political dimension. The essays share, Wagner-Lawlor states, "a common supposition that there exists a dialogic interchange between the humorous text and its culture" (xvi). In fact, theoretical approaches do not dominate any of the essays, and seem altogether absent from others. The most speculative in this way is Joseph Gardner's essay on *Hard Times*, which approaches the novel as "dystopian metacomedy," arguing that Dickens pushes beyond comedy, beyond tragedy, beyond romance, to a vision of "creative myth-making" which "sees man and the cosmos in play" (146, 151). Gardner's aim is not to apply a particular theoretical approach to the text, but to define abstractly the nature of Dickens's enterprise in the novel.

Other essays make more straightforward use of theory. Patricia Murphy invokes Bakhtin in order to problematise Rider Haggard's celebration of imperialism in *King Solomon's Mines*. Freud provides ammunition for Rob K. Baum to give us a depressingly lascivious peep at Wilde's *Salomé*. David Nash draws on – and challenges – Stallybrass and White's concept of transgression in discussing secularist attacks on religion. By way of contrast, Eileen Gillooly offers an old-fashioned New Critical discussion of the narrator's function in *Cranford*, and Carolyn Williams offers an analysis of Gilbert and Sullivan's Savoy operas as generic hybrids.

The literary and social context of texts is central to the concerns of several essays. John S. Batts argues that Jerome K. Jerome owed his popularity to the nature of his humour, but fell foul of contemporary critics who considered his writing un-English. Jerome's exaggerated narration, self-deprecating narrator and slangy idiom, Batts proposes, reveal him to be an exponent of an American style of humour and a "disciple" of Mark Twain (92). Margaret D. Stetz places the ambivalent approach to comedy of "New Woman" writers in the atmosphere of male ridicule and vilification, which made women hesitant to laugh back at men, in pre-Freudian recognition that comedy was a "cudgel" of aggression (219). Patricia Marks investigates E.J. Milliken's 'Arry, the vulgar Cockney figure who featured in verse letters in *Punch* for twenty years, to expose the "contradiction" which made the Cad and the Toff almost identical, reflecting the shifting stance of *Punch* itself, "as its youthful radicalism mellowed into a comfortable Old Boyishness ill-suited to the changing social scene" (67).

The Victorian debate about the relation between wit and humour, the complex and troubling nature of class and gender relations, and the generic status of various manifestations of comedy are themes which run through the volume. The essays are – perhaps inevitably in a project such as this – uneven in scope and quality, and are far from adding up to a comprehensive overview of the book's (admittedly huge) topic. But the collection is intermittently illuminating, and at its best in the essay by David Nash, "Laughing at the Almighty: Freethinking Lampoon, Satire, and Parody in Victorian England." Primarily an analysis of the secularist newspaper, the *Freethinker*, edited by George William Foote, Nash's essay is firmly grounded both theoretically and historically. Nash situates Foote in the nineteenth-century tradition of secularism and its reaction against the hegemony of religion, and uses his evidence to warn against the danger "of seeing carnivalesque inversion and transgression as almost an end in itself." Rather, he convincingly argues, Freethinkers "had their own stringent and absolute moral orders to defend" (64). In showing how comic depictions of Christianity expressed "real sentiments with real effects" (65), Nash thereby demonstrates the genuine value of serious discussion of laughing matters.

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