

## Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism

**ED. GRAEME HARPER**

New York: Continuum, 2002.

xvi + 232 pp. ISBN 0-8264-4919-0 paper.

This is a diverse collection of essays, ranging widely over space and time, and dealing with humor and satire from the perspectives of both colonizer and colonized. Thus Terri A. Hasseler shows how London *Punch* cartoonists used dress codes to satirize what they regarded as Curzon's overly tolerant behavior towards Indians after the 1857 "Mutiny"; there is an essay on carnival in Malta; Laura Salisbury discusses the jokes by and about the Irish in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; Phyllis Lassner analyzes the ironic stance of Olivia Manning and Rumer Godden regarding the behavior of expatriates in North Africa and India; James Watt contributes an informative account of James Morier's use of orientalism in his novels set in "Persia" in the early nineteenth century. Watt's essay would make an interesting comparison with Peter Merrington's analysis of the role of Africa in Masonic fantasy and symbolism. To end the collection, Paul Arthur writes about the 1751 fantasy, *Peter Wilkins*, supposedly set in the antipodes, a fantasy that Arthur views in the context of the eighteenth-century vogue for imaginary voyages, but also in the context of a developing romantic sensibility.

Four of the fourteen essays discuss comic and fantasy genres in cultures of Africa and the African Diaspora. One of the very few contributors to examine how indigenous concepts of humor and fantasy may differ from those of Europeans is Mark Lilleleht's informative study of Zulu narratives. Lilleleht tests the limits of theories of the fantastic established by Todorov and others in the light of definitions by the contemporary Xhosa storyteller Nongenile Masithathu Zenani and the nineteenth-century Zulu tale of Ukombekcantsini, and makes a persuasive argument for the Zulu tale's narrative power and social meaning, its interweaving of the everyday and the symbolic, in the context of an increasingly unstable Zulu nation.

Lilleleht acknowledges but to some extent discounts the questions raised by the fact that the tale was told to and translated by an Anglican missionary. In "Fairies on the Veld: Foreign and Indigenous Elements in South African Children's Stories," Elwyn Jones foregrounds the issue of translation and adaptation of indigenous tales, revealing muddled motives and genres as well as anxieties that lurk behind rewriting of African tales for the consumption of white children. Ultimately the stories admitted the existence of black fairies (sometimes depicted as imps), but they were declared invisible to white children.

In "Cubans on the Moon, and Other Imagined Communities," Jill Lane provides a fascinating account of *teatro bufo* blackface performances and their significance in late nineteenth-century Cuba, as a means of satirizing contemporary politics while also imagining alternative spaces and identities. The moon was one such imagined space, but Africa was another that frequently recurs in the plays, and Lane describes an 1882 play, *Bufos en Africa*, about a group of blackface actors shipwrecked on the African coast, facing severe punishment for their impersonation, and also for their ancestral involvement in the enslavement of Africans in Cuba. Frustratingly, the manuscript is incomplete and we never discover the ultimate fate of this imaginary

group of actors in this imaginary Africa. Lane's analysis of the theater, the role of blackface, and the use of imagined space, is richly informed, wonderfully readable and suggestive.

Graeme Harper's introduction perhaps rather lamely concludes that *Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism* examines a number of instances of both comedy and fantasy in operation, "sometimes seeing that one contains or employs the other, but most notably establishing that a close examination of the function of these modes gives insight into the ways in which world views within the colonial environment are formed, confirmed and *re-formed*" (7). That is an accurate enough summary, but it does not do justice to the freshness and intellectual vitality of many of these essays, which are particularly innovative in their willingness to question received views of comedy and fantasy in the context of new terrains. There are the seeds here for several book-length studies, extending the exploration of the specific examples as well as providing comparative analyses of differing cultural manifestations of the comic and the fantastic.

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## The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English

BY JAHAN RAMAZANI

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x + 223 pp. ISBN 0-226-70342-8 cloth;

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In this thoughtful, challenging, and often challengeable book, Jahan Ramazani seeks to extend the field of postcolonial literary discussion in several significant ways. His concern is to bring poetry more centrally into the arena, for as he observes, there has been much greater emphasis on postcolonial fiction than poetry, perhaps because novels can be seen—and in Fredric Jameson's formulation have been seen—as representing the nation. Teachers often use fiction to present the contexts as well as texts for the study of postcolonial areas, whereas poetry is perceived as compressed, allusive, only oblique in its reference to the society, and perhaps apolitical.

Referring to Homi Bhabha's essays on hybridity and emphasizing postcolonial poetry as an essentially hybrid form, Ramazani argues that the interaction between languages and cultures indeed produces a particularly vibrant poetry, and brings "newness into the World." He believes that "poetry—a genre rich in paradox and multivalent symbols, irony and metaphor—is well-suited to mediating and registering the contradictions of split cultural experience" of the imposed and the inherited cultures (6). He focuses on five very different poets from varied postcolonial contexts: W. B. Yeats, Derek Walcott, A. K. Ramanujan, Louise Bennett, and Okot p'Bitek, and argues that these five poets from "Third World" areas (the Caribbean, India, and