

Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism

Graeme Harper

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The title of the collection *Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism* raises an immediate definitional problematic. What are we to understand by the three terms of the title and what, in addition, are we to understand by their conjunction? The first two terms evoke something of the spectre of Freud, suggesting, perhaps an investigation or a series of investigations of the relation(s) between the comedic, whether the linguistic slips and plays prevalent in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* or the dark humour of the human finitude attested to in the late essay, 'Der Humor', and fantasy, as a product(ion) of the imaginary arising from defensive processes. Despite Harper's dismissal, in the introduction to this work, of Freud as a commentator on the individual at the expense of the social whole, it is perhaps useful to retain something of Freud's insights in negotiating the various perspectives, interpretations and analyses which comprise the thirteen essays of *Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism*. This is because Freud, with his followers, provides us with a pre-eminent apparatus with which to understand the various manners by which comedy functions as a psycho-social coping mechanism and, in addition, the manners in which fantasy functions to structure our perceptions of what would constitute our (social) reality. Such an assumption is, implicitly at least, at work throughout *Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism* and, rendering it, on a readerly level, more explicit perhaps provides the glue which might hold together the titular concepts.

Without such an adhesive device, the promise of a sustained and coherent collection evaporates early in the volume as it transpires that what we are to be presented with is a series of loosely related treatises, hung together on little more than the vaguely rendered third term of the title, *Colonialism*. What we are presented with here is a collection of essays that address various literary texts which might be understood, in some way or another, to fall under the banner of (post-)colonial writing. Of course, the very term "colonial," and by extension, post-colonial or pre-colonial, resists any straightforward definition. As Graeme Harper himself points out in his illuminating "Displacement, dualism and belief: exploring colonial comedy and fantasy," the first essay proper of the collection, just as the

term *post*-modernism both invokes a certain chronology and refuses, upon analysis, to be contained within any such chronology, so too does the “post” of post-colonialism point more to the perspective from which the texts in question are read rather than the time in which they may have been written. Consequently, the object texts of the volume range from the transcription of a story from the Zulu oral tradition (Lilleleht) to nineteenth century picaresque novels (Watt) to Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Hartje). The closest point of convergence is perhaps, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the nineteenth Century; what might be understood to be the height of colonialism and the period from which the majority, although by no means all, of the object texts here are taken.

Of course, collecting and adequately presenting thirteen disparate essays written by authors, each with their own particular understandings of the terms under which their contributions are to be pinned, is never going to be an easy task. And with this in mind, it is perhaps best to approach this collection as a series of separate takes and perspectives, separate issues and agendas. It would seem commonplace to accept that no such volume is ever going to hold together with anything approaching perfect coherence. It does, however, raise the question of the intended audience of the collection. As each of the essays contained here is concerned with its own particular agenda and focused on its own take on what might be meant by the terms comedy, fantasy and colonialism, and, significantly, the import and specificity of the relations between these terms, however defined, it is unclear how the volume functioning as a whole might be appropriated and utilised to inform upon other literary works and the study of literature more generally.

It is this problem of transference, of offering analyses, however disparate, which might offer insight into other object-texts, which might offer the possibility of generalised questions and issues, if not, for obvious reasons, generalised concrete answers, which mires the collection. This is not, however, to dismiss the volume out of hand or even to criticise the particular contents of the separate works. The thirteen essays presented here do, each in their own way, offer insights and more or less coherent arguments. Each taken on their own, they are of interest and do raise important questions for the study of literature and its reception. One is, however, still left wondering to whom the collection might be addressed. I imagine that most readers would not find all of the essays relevant to their own particular studies or research. Only the most curious reader, with more time than most of us would probably have at our disposal, would find themselves working through all the

essays. That said, as a work of reference, to dip in and out of, depending on one's interest, there is a great deal of value on offer here.

The volume opens with Harper's "Displacement, Dualism and Belief," a carefully structured and illuminating discussion of the psychoanalytic function of displacement evident in fantasy applied to 'magic realist' or fabulist post-colonial writing. Harper's focus here is on what we might call the inter-cultural aspects of what he terms post-colonial writing, the refusal of such writing to settle in any one tradition and the concomitant duality that emerges through the prose. What is most appealing in Harper's piece is precisely the attention to the problem of transference indicated above. While he utilises revealing and evocative examples, he allows them to function as illustrations of a wider point, thus freeing the concept and issue from the specificity of the particular case in point.

It is this deftness of movement and clarity between general and particular which is conspicuous by its absence in much of what follows. Lilleleht's examination of the Zulu tale, "Ukcombekcantsini," for example, although it begins promisingly with clear definitions of the key terms it employs before moving into an amusing and concise relation of the object story, ends up saying little of any great insight.

This stands in contrast to Watts' discussion of the orientalist nature of James Morier's *Hajji Baba* novels which offers interesting insights into the relation between fictional representation and popular (mis)conceptions; insights which resonate with contemporary (mis)conceptions propagated through media representations of both the descendents of the Persians Morier (mis)represents and the English who would have received such (mis)representations. It is here that a notion of fantasy which works beyond the assumed-to-be fantastic (fabulist, magic-realist etc) comes to the fore, making Watts' piece one of the more interesting and thought provoking essays in the volume.

Elsewhere, Laura Salisbury delivers a fascinating and unsettling analysis of the temporal modalities of "the Irish joke," Jonna Mackin considers the manner(s) in which humour is used to organise social 'reality' with reference to the works of two Anishinabe novelists, Louise Erdich and Gerald Vizenor. Where Salisbury's piece says little explicitly about fantasy, it is an admirable textual analysis of the functioning of the told joke. Mackin's piece, on the other hand, is more determined to demonstrate how humour itself can be understood to function as mode of fantasy and contributes to the construction of social reality. The volume also offers interesting discussions

on and analyses of, among others, works by Olivia Manning and Rumer Godden (Lassner), Raimundo Cabrera (Lane), Victor Pohl (Jenkins), the magazine *Punch* and its illustrative rhetoric of dress in relation to the Indian rebellion of 1857 (Hasseler), Maltese pantomime and carnival (Cremona and Sant) and the genre of the fantastic voyage in relation to the colonisation of the antipodes (Arthur). Due to the aforementioned fact that the various essays do not exactly cohere around shared definitions or shared contentions, it would be redundant to prioritise between them. The real value of each depends upon the interest one would have in its particular themes and objectives.

That said, in terms of the potential for transferring the insights accrued around the examples chosen to illustrate and develop the insights and arguments of each piece, two of the thirteen essays do stand out. The second of these is Hartje's "Magic Realism: humour across cultures," which as the title suggests, advances the hypothesis that, due to its presentation of the fantastic and the realistic on one plane, magic realism, as a genre, cannot be contained within or reduced to any one specific cultural context. The first, as stated above, is Harper's own contribution, "Displacement, dualism and belief" which, along with his introduction and conclusion, not only go some way to recover a certain coherence to the other works, but, moreover, stand up as the most coherent pieces in their own right.

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