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 THE COMIC GALL OF X. J. KENNEDY

by JOHN LUCAS

*In A Prominent Bar in Secaucus: New and Selected Poems, 1955-2007*

by X. J. Kennedy

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ONE OF THE BEST OF THE CARICATURES that make up Max Beerbohm's famous collection, *The Poet's Corner*, shows Matthew Arnold in slippers, soft-collared shirt and wide cravat, elbow propped up against a mantelpiece and smiling sardonically down at his small niece, Miss Mary Augusta, who looks steadfastly up to him, hands behind her back as she solemnly enquires, "Why, Uncle Matthew, Oh why, will you not be always wholly serious?" By the time the drawing was made, in 1904, Arnold was dead, one of the previous century's Eminent Victorians as Lytton Strachey was about to dub them, and his niece, who had become the famous novelist and campaigner against women's suffrage, Mrs Humphry Ward, seemed equally to belong to a past age. Her biographer, John Sutherland, calls the caricature malicious as well as funny, and it certainly skewers her humourless approach to life, although as anyone who knows anything about her experiences with a feckless husband and dissolute son will accept, she had a lot to be humourless about. But Beerbohm's image of Arnold, Mr Kidglove Cocksure, in louche *dishabille*, while true to some of the prose, hardly reckons with the high seriousness that typically characterises Arnold's poetry, a seriousness which in a number of poems, 'Empedocles on Etna' perhaps chief among them, drops into a plonking lugubriousness. Aiming for grandeur, it achieves only grandiloquence. Arnold's poem would, you feel, have benefited from an injection of some of that comic spirit which his niece found so reprehensible. This was certainly what I felt when, as an undergraduate in the late 1950s, I was supposed to give 'Empedocles on Etna' my respectful attention.

'Empedocles' is one of a number of "High Victorian" works, in prose as well as verse, that between them give seriousness a bad name. But why can't you be altogether serious in comic mode? The answer, at least back then, seemed to be that comic equalled facetious equalled trivial. The 19th century certainly didn't lack for facetious poets (Thomas Hood, C.S. Calverley), but what about Browning? What, for goodness' sake, of Clough? Arnold was shocked by his friend's work, and not merely because of "the deficiency of the *beautiful*". In writing poems such as *The*

*Bothie of Tober na Fuolich* and *Amours de Voyage*, Clough had apparently “mistaken the whole method and function of poetry.” Nonsense, surely. But Arnold was the lawgiver. Clough and Browning, of whom his great admirer Henry James said “none of the odd ones have been so great, and none of the great ones so odd,” were rarely if ever on syllabuses. For all I know, they still aren’t. (Though nowadays it wouldn’t be their readiness to embrace the comic spirit that made them untouchable, it would far more likely be their class, ethnicity and gender.)

But still, the silly, often snobbish, dislike and distrust of the comic goes on. I recently heard that self-made and no doubt self-aware caricature, Brian Sewell, try to dismiss Gilbert’s libretti because they weren’t “serious.” The person called on to defend Gilbert said that you didn’t need to take them seriously because what he wrote was “only entertainment.” But as Auden knew, the ability to write exact rhyming lyrics in the manner of Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart or Irving Berlin, doesn’t come easily. To wave this ability away as “only entertainment” is to be on the side of those who think that ‘Empedocles on Etna’ is somehow what culture is all about, and that it’s frightfully good for you, like standing under cold showers and sleeping on bare boards. Could Arnold, at his best an admirable and now undervalued poet, have rhymed with any of Gilbert’s panache? No, is the answer to that. Browning certainly could. ‘The Pied Piper of Hamelin’ must be the greatest rhyme-fest in the language. And a fat lot of good it’s done Browning.

It will be by now obvious that I’m talking about a specifically English disease. Scotland has Burns. It can also claim Byron. (Who, according to Hugh MacDiarmid at least, was made by the land of his birth. I’m reminded of the Duke of Wellington’s retort to the man who claimed that as the Iron Duke had been born in Ireland he must be Irish. “You might as well call a man who was born in a stable a horse”, the Duke retorted.) The English have of course always produced great comic poets. But I can’t be alone in feeling that for many this isn’t necessarily “A Good Thing.” It’s significant that most academic Chaucerians prefer ‘The Knight’s Tale’ to the one told by the Miller, that, until recently at least, Shakespeare’s tragedies were automatically (I use the word deliberately) held to be superior to the comedies, and that Arnold – him again – held Dryden and Pope to be classics of an age of prose rather than of poetry.

They order these things better in America. At least, I think they do. Hence the fact that X. J. Kennedy’s merits can be considered *sui generis*. He doesn’t have to be typed, corralled, contained. But what’s this? I read on the back cover of his well-produced *New and Selected* that “Kennedy is widely regarded, and occasionally disregarded, as a practitioner of light verse. But he serves his light with a healthy dose of darkness.” So, anyway, says the *New York Times Book Review*. “Light verse”. Back to facetiousness, then, to not being wholly serious? But no. Even a glance through these nearly 200 pages of poems chosen from nearly half a century of work, guarantees that Kennedy is quite capable of a seriousness that isn’t muffled by heavy-duty, wrap-around solemnity ...