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**Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton**

**'making literature ridiculous': Jerome K. Jerome and the New Humour**

For the stock critic, with that suburban insight of his, cannot understand that a serious man may be humorous, still less that a humorous man is always serious.

Israel Zangwill. Preface to the sixth edition of *The Bachelors' Club* (xii).

This article seeks to show that the term 'New Humour' as it was used throughout the 1890s and beyond, was both fluid and contested, creating a disproportionate level of hostility among the very critics who refused to accord it overtly 'serious' status. But the adoption of the term by writers such as Jerome K. Jerome, Barry Pain and Israel Zangwill can also be seen as a strategic move at a time when *The Idler* (set up by Robert Barr in 1892 but edited by Jerome alone from 1895) and *To-day* (launched by Jerome at the end of 1892) were drawing a number of talented writers into their orbit. These journals provided a focus for the New Humour, which they positioned as both accessible and culturally authoritative. In a direct challenge to its critics, Jerome's editorship placed New Humour in the tradition of Dickens while also showcasing its innovative use of ordinary language as the vehicle, and not simply the object, of intelligent joking. Jerome's contributors later remembered the monthly 'Idler teas' as a meeting point for literary London; as Philip Waller observes, 'From such conviviality there emerged not just literary relationships but literary gossip, and with it an expanding branch of journalism' (418). Importantly, this journalism included satire of cultural and literary life in the 1890s, an aspect of the New Humour that is easily overlooked.

Permeating media debates on the status of writers and literature, as well as the reading habits of the lower middle class in the wake of increasing literacy and more cheaply available fiction, 'New Humour' was variously portrayed as socially divisive, a contamination and even a providential dispensation. Such fractured images came to

be seen as a defining feature of what Netta Syrett called 'The new everything' (*Under the Sheltering Tree* 150) at the fin de siècle. Associated most closely with Jerome K. Jerome, whose comic succès fou *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) delighted readers and enraged conservative critics in equal measure, the New Humour exerted a populist appeal that seems precisely what incurred such hostility among many reviewers.

One of its hallmarks was a gleeful rendering of incompetence, memorably deployed in the boating disasters of *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), whose characters reveal 'citified ineptitude in every facet of their organization' (Batts 106). To its critics the exuberant comic writing of Jerome and his circle was anti-intellectual literary slapstick, produced by non-university educated writers for a newly literate mass readership. G. B. Burgin for one seems to have protested against the homogenising of young (implicitly male) writers as New Humourists, only to meet with the rejoinder:

It is not popular estimation, but the votaries of the New Humour themselves that have chosen to rob themselves of their individuality. That the New Humourists have slight individual differentiations is doubtless true. But they are all one, and one by virtue of imitation, in certain forms of rather cheap and vulgar joking ('To a Courteous Editor'. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 June 1893).

Writers such as Jerome and Zangwill actually fought hard to distance themselves from anything they perceived as vulgar, as becomes apparent in Zangwill's strictures on cockney tourists whose enthusiasm for 'the scream of a fife in distress' (*Without Prejudice* 90) too easily distracts them from the scenery around them or who 'go about the world spoiling picturesque places by their presence' (Editorial by Jerome. *TO-DAY* 339. 18 April 1896).

However the New Humour was persistently associated by critics with the very groups - notably the 'Arry (a figure of working class, vulgar aspiration widely satirised in popular culture and the press) it set out to ridicule; tropes of disease or mania were used, often in comic strips or parodic reviews, to characterise the infiltration of the literary market by this ephemeral, lower class literature. Of course this criticism was predicated on the obviously false premise that 'vulgar' comedy was something new,

allowing the proponents of modern humour to define themselves in turn against the 'broad' jokes of earlier decades. As Israel Zangwill had complained in his preface to the sixth edition of *The Bachelors' Club*, first published in 1891, the critics had since that time seized on 'any humour that is new. As they do not seem to care for the old humour either – the humour of the pun, the pothouse, the police-court, and the pawnshop – one is driven to conclude that humour itself is under a ban' (xii). But critics expressed horror at the spread of what one paper called 'Jeromania', ('JEROMANIA'), a term which notably constructs readers of the New Humour as diseased and in need of treatment.

From the early 1890s commentators on the New Humour are decisive in their construction of an 'old humour', largely represented by Dickens rather than the police-court and the pawnshop identified by Zangwill, against which to measure and define it. John S. Batts observes that *Punch* (routinely critical of Jerome) was 'still in awe of the humor of Dickens and Thackeray... peculiarly aware that a vigorous counter-culture was alive, and dismissive of a new class of reader which responded enthusiastically to the "new humor" of Jerome' (102). As Burgin wrote in 1922, 'Curiously enough, a rumour spread abroad that we were "New Humorists." We did not know what it meant, we had not thought of it ourselves, but one section of the Press became bitterly hostile at our not being content to model ourselves on the "Old Humour"' (*Memoirs of a Clubman* 98). He may well have been remembering the strictures of Canon Ainger, who in a lecture in 1892, had defined the New Humour as a 'counterfeit', comparing it unfavourably to the comic work of Dickens and Thackeray and calling it 'a kind of debased wit out of which had departed the salts which constituted humour and kept it pure – the salts of reverence and charity' ('Lecture by Canon Ainger'). This lecture inadvertently reveals some of the difficulty in defining New Humour, yoking together what may now seem such disparate works as Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* and the plays of Oscar Wilde (the rationale is presumably the failure of the central characters to be sufficiently 'earnest').

Zangwill quietly subverts such supercilious attitudes in *The Bachelors' Club*, in a meta-textual inset tale that uses humour to subvert the assumptions of newspaper

critics and question the distinction of comic from 'serious' authorship. One of the bachelors writes a story based on his own experience, in which a suspiciously literate cab driver offers him a bed one foggy night and assures him that he will be safe in his house because of his daughter's presence, confiding that 'she has absolutely no sense of humour. Jenny takes life seriously – I, in a mere spirit of frolicsome irresponsibility; in that spirit I should take yours' (62; ch.3). It transpires that the cab driver has ghost written the serious novels that made the fortune of the bachelor's father, a competent critic and journalist who has no creative ability of his own. In subsequent chapters the reader is confronted with characters such as 'Israfel Mondego', whose parody of drawing room ballads unexpectedly makes him famous as a sentimental singer, and the Irish cockney author O'Roherty, whose rhapsodies on the natural world are all indebted for their detail to the work of female authors.

That the New Humour was regarded as genuinely subversive in some quarters is clear from the ritual burning of an effigy of Jerome in 1894, as he pointed out himself:

A little while ago they burned myself and two or three other "literary gents" in New Zealand. Now, the Board of Education at Wellington has been petitioned to remove Shakespeare from its curriculum on the score of immorality. This is only logical. The Bible, which is still plainer-spoken, will of course follow. But, perhaps the best and quickest method of securing the ideal men and women of the future, according to these worthy New Zealanders, would be a simple operation on every newly-born infant that would entirely remove its brain (*To-day* 23 June 1894. 211).

But such animosity was adroitly used by *To-day* both to position its readers and to reclaim the cultural status of its writers through engagement with earlier comic traditions. Resisting the accusation that their humour was somehow 'debased', *To-day's* writers produced a series of articles satirically attacking revered authors from Shakespeare to Dickens for their failure to adhere to current literary conventions. In 1893 for instance, Barry Pain took on the voice of a particularly disdainful reviewer

purportedly encountering *The Pickwick Papers* for the first time. The enjoyment is palpable as he comments:

Mr "Charles Dickens" – the name is evidently a pseudonym – is apparently one of the New Humourists. We do not remember that we have ever heard his name before, and we only notice his book at length in the hope that by so doing we may save ourselves from ever hearing his name again ('A specimen of the New Criticism').

Carefully reworking the most familiar criticisms of the New Humour, he dismisses the use of character tropes such as the propensity of the Fat Boy to fall asleep, with the withering remark, 'One would have thought that this trick was so cheap and so simple that a child could have worked it' ('A specimen of the New Criticism').

Of course as Batts suggests, the continued animosity of reviewers denigrated the readers as well as the purveyors of the New Humour. But in the weekly editorials forming a key ingredient of *To-day* from its inception, Jerome routinely responds to criticisms of the New Humour by constructing a knowing and engaged reader, who is more sophisticated than the critics suppose, and therefore allied to the journal's writers by literally 'sharing the joke'. In January 1894 for instance, he reacted with mock horror to the announcement of a 'pathos competition' in the *Pall Mall Gazette*:

I foresee so clearly the result of ventilating such a question. The critics will make up their minds as to what is pathos and what is not, and tell the public what they are to weep over and when they must refuse to shed a tear. All the serious young writers will be dubbed "New Pathosists." Canon Ainger will travel the country denouncing the New Pathos (27 January 1894, 18).

Sure enough, in March 1894 he gleefully pointed out that the press really had begun to use the term 'new pathos' - reiterating his warning that 'Canon Ainger will lecture about it through the country' (editorial 3 March 1894, 113), he suggests that press critics air their own pretensions by inventing absurd and ill-fitting labels for innovative literature.

Unlike such self-satisfied and possibly idle observers, Anne Humpherys notes that the persona exemplified in *The Idler*:

is implicitly positioned against a life of “working,” that is, he is not so much a man who has the leisure to roam the modern city streets observing the flow of human lives and activities, but rather a figure momentarily freed from work for a day or weekend’ (6).

An awareness of the shared experience of work, and often social isolation, in the city also permeates *To-day*, which had its office on Arundel Street, Strand. While he famously marketed himself as ‘an idle fellow’, Jerome confided to friends that the daily running of the journal was extraordinarily hard work, a point often missed by observers. This position as a busy editor at least made for good copy, and incidentally allowed Jerome to claim the status of a dedicated worker without compromising his comic persona. Presumably with this in mind, he exercised his irritation through facetious allusions to the ‘entire stranger [who] calls on the day that we go to press for no other motive than to tell me (in the course of a two hours’s [sic] chat), how he would run this paper if he was doing it himself’ (editorial 11 January 1896. 306-7). In an article on ‘The Editor’ of 13 June 1896 Pain urged the fictional author of ‘The Faded Cowslip’, ‘Do not be put off. Be firm. No known animal is more fertile in excuses than the human editor. He will make excuses for not seeing you. When he does see you he will make more excuses for not doing what you want. Take no notice of them; they are all lies’ (192). In such articles the reader is at once invited in to the editorial office as a privileged observer and discreetly warned against wasting the editor’s time.

Significantly Jerome seems to have modelled his journal with one eye on the weekly *Household Words*. The original plan for editorials has recently been discovered and includes such Dickensian notes as ‘Broadminded toleration and desire for truth to be evident’, the last word being struck out and replaced by ‘paramount’ (‘Suggestions’). Clearly it was intended to be more than simply a comic weekly; like *Household Words*, *To-day* aimed at ‘a real and useful influence’ (Suggestions) on its target audience. In a letter of 1914 responding to a proposal to set up a new paper,

Jerome claimed that with a circulation of nearly 100,000 *To-day* had both been a successful venture and reached 'a better class public' than a penny paper could attain. He may well have been commenting obliquely on his original weekly in urging that for a new paper, 'My own idea would be not to compete with the penny weekly, where one has to cater chiefly for the office-boy, but to go for a public at present un-catered for: the man who takes life seriously but who does not want dullness' (Letter to Robert Donald). In this aim he is also of course paraphrasing Dickens's comment on the target audience for *All the Year Round* as 'intelligent' but 'rather afraid of being bored' (letter to Thomas Beard, 25 March 1861, 395).

During Jerome's editorship *To-day* professed a unique relationship with just this audience. But where Dickens envisaged his journal as infiltrating the homes of his readers (his original formulation for *Household Words* was based on the idea of a cricket on the hearth, a phantom, or other 'felt' presence), Jerome's strategy was rather to invite readers in to the journal as active participants with a shared status. This readership appears to have been, as the critics assumed, predominantly middle or lower middle class. The tone of the editorials is carefully democratic, insofar as Jerome notably identifies himself with the class of readers he hopes to reach. He himself was not significantly higher in the social scale than his target readership, in fact he had been brought up largely among the working class population of the East End. As he pointed out himself, 'I know the working classes a good deal better than do their so-called representatives, who have never met them except on platforms. I have lived amongst them. I was bred amongst them' (13 January 1894. 17). This affinity with the working class, in the teeth of hostile reviewers who accused him of purveying 'cheap' or 'vulgar' humour, was clearly important to Jerome. In 1895 he reiterated the point:

When TO-DAY was young... I took the liberty of remarking that I knew the British working-man a good deal better than did most of his representatives. I was born and bred among them, I have talked to them, not across a platform, but across their own table' (20 July 1895. 337).



As a New Humourist then, Jerome exploits his ambivalent position to reassure readers whose social class mirrors his uncertain literary status. As he wrote in 1895:

To find the *Daily Chronicle* complaining of too much style in literature is a hopeful sign of the times. Our literary prigs have been making literature ridiculous for the past ten years, degrading the great English language by their mountebank tricks, and a school of criticism has arisen to extol artificiality, contortion, and affectation, and to condemn simplicity and directness. To express your meaning in a sentence when it might have been hammered out over two involved pages; to employ a familiar word where an uncouth monstrosity could be dragged in, and to construct your sentences according to the recognised rules of the language has been to lay oneself open to the charge of "cockneyism" – whatever that may mean (15 June 1895).

Defending its own consciously lower middle class tone, *To-day* was stalwart in its rejection of social affectation, complaining of magazine illustrations that are not consistent with the texts that they accompany:

You may bankrupt the hero of your story, and pack him off by rail to the nearest almshouse, but unless you keep a very close eye on that illustration you will find your hero depicted in a first-class carriage, with two guards and a stationmaster on the platform in front touching their caps to him. Of course, when the hack society journalist is off on that visit to a scion of the peerage, he describes himself as travelling in a first-class carriage. He really does travel first-class, too, occasionally. True, the magistrate's comments on the fact subsequently, are severe, and there is the fine to pay (editorial 10 August 1895).

In referencing the snobbish aspirations of society journalists, Jerome of course reassures the readers of their columns, whose own social anxieties he tries to allay. Through his conversational editorials and the development of the 'correspondence' section of the journal, Jerome invited readers to see themselves as members of their own literary club. Through its London-centric editorial focus (readers are expected to

know particular parts of the city and occasionally even police the locations where instances of cruelty to cab horses have been reported), the journal emphasises its symbolic position in the heart of club-land. The assumed reader would not necessarily have had access to the world of the gentleman's club, but as one letter duly enthused:

[*To-day*] is the paper for young men. Among my friends it is regarded as our paper. ... There is a kind of clubbishness and fellow-feeling amongst the readers of TO-DAY that requires no organisation or society rules, but that owes its uniqueness to our mutual friend, TO-DAY (C.H.M.H.).

This sense of clubbishness was further emphasised after May 1895, when the column originally titled 'Answers to Enquirers' became the more reciprocal 'Correspondence'. An 1895 editorial clearly predicated on just such reciprocity, directly invites readers to enjoy their engagement with the journal and its editor:

The dozens of letters that come in every day from subscribers give me great pleasure, for they show the close sympathy between TO-DAY and its readers. Indeed, I sometimes flatter myself by thinking that there can be few journals that have established so close and intimate a relationship with their readers' (editorial, 5 January 1895. 275).

Even more explicit was an editorial of January 1896, in which Jerome thanked his unknown readers in emotional terms, 'I can hardly tell those who have written to me how much I value their friendship, or how closely I feel drawn to them' (4 January 1896. 275). In addition to writing 'directly' to particular correspondents in this way, editorials sustained and drew a wider range of readers into conversation on both topics of the day and the conduct and literary content of the journal itself.

Jerome's satire of class consciousness and his occasional tirades against literary censorship would in themselves account for the antagonism his writing provoked. But notwithstanding his critique on class structures he is certainly not an indiscriminating apologist for Syrett's 'New everything', a point that becomes clear in the New Humour's often conservative critique of psychological and New Woman

fiction, with its pivotal challenge to traditional gender roles. Zangwill memorably described introspection as 'the highest and most intellectual form of lunacy' (*The Bachelors' Club* 170), while in the letters column of *To-day* Jerome found space to argue with one correspondent who:

thinks men are as nervous of criticism as ever women are, and wonders what they would say if women were to show up all their weak points. I do not say that they would like it, but it occurs to me that we have been having our weak points shown up by the New Woman for the last years pretty freely. According to the modern lady novelist, we appear to be all weak points (to F.B.W. 9 January 1897. 329).

A series of articles on 'Men I Have Murdered', written by Barry Pain and published in *To-day* in 1894, includes a supposed victim who 'said he called a spade a spade. What he really meant was that he frequently used in full the words which are only printed in the form of blanks with initials. ... His idea in literature was The Pretty Hot' ('William Gorldford 152).

In this context both *To-day* and *The Idler* can be seen as almost belligerently resistant to social change. In some instances *To-day* eschews humour altogether in its treatment of gender debates, or uses it simply to position a heavy handed commentary. Notably the management of the home is a topic of recurrent advice. A surprisingly lifeless series by 'Paterfamilias' on 'The Domestic Blunders of Women' in 1896, took the middle class wife to task, arguing in one article that 'She will willingly pay the butcher for tons of bone and fat in the year, but if you ask why you can't have a cauliflower to make two shillings worth of tough beef palatable, you will be told cauliflowers are far too dear... In the first years of their married life, or management of a house, they tell you, afterwards, they were robbed' (Paterfamilias 228). In an attempt to retrieve the rather dull writing and leaven it with humour, the accompanying illustration shows a crowd of angry women mobbing the *To-day* office after the previous week's article, demanding the name and address of Paterfamilias.

On Boxing Day of that year Jerome wrote regretfully that the series had been brought to an end, following abuse from his female acquaintance:

I cannot say that his letters were liked, but they attracted an enormous amount of attention, and, in this way, did the paper good; so... editorially, I regret their cessation. But, personally, I am glad they are done with. ... I have assured my indignant lady friends that I am confident he is wrong. I have, with cowardice characteristic of mankind, meanly thrown him over. I have agreed that he was a cross between a Mephistophelian villain and a harmless lunatic' (editorial *To-day* 266. 26 December 1896).

Ironically the integrity of the editor in his coverage of serious issues was apparently not remarked in the general media storm, when in 1895 *To-day* was among only a small number of journals that refused to cover the Oscar Wilde trials. While Jerome's opinion of homosexuality itself now appears regrettable, he was quick to condemn the hypocrisy of theatres who famously suppressed Wilde's name while continuing to run his plays. It may not have occurred to Jerome himself that Wilde's foppish Jack and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, first produced earlier that year, could be seen as an upper class parallel to his own parodically workshy J, Harris and George in *Three Men in a Boat*. But he was evidently horrified by the behaviour of the theatrical managers, lambasting them in an editorial of 20 April 1895:

Various good men in England and America, who have been, and who still are, making money out of Mr Wilde's works, are very energetic in suppressing the name of the author. Do these excellent managers and the excellent people who form their audiences really imagine that they are doing anything beyond making themselves ridiculous by this piece of thoughtless nonsense? The plays are good plays, and there is no getting over the fact that they are written by Mr Oscar Wilde, which only goes to show that man is a complex animal, and can contain within his soul a good many personalities. Because we condemn the bad that is within a man, there is no need to condemn the good that is in him, and were this new morality to be applied to all art, I fear very much that some of the earlier classics might have to disappear from our libraries. A work when it goes out of a man is an accomplished fact, utterly independent of the man himself. You can

obtain a good work of art from an exceedingly depraved person; you can obtain some very wicked work from an exceedingly good man. To confuse the two things is foolish – utterly foolish (337; bk2. ch.7).

This response itself implicitly critiques less perceptive critics, who could not or would not separate the status of the writing from the personality of the author.

At a personal level, Jerome's insistence that the writer should not be identified with his work is surely informed by his own frustration after years of thoughtless criticism conflating his private character with his literary persona. In the 1902 novel *Paul Kever* the eponymous Paul learns among other lessons not 'to confound the artist with the man... Clearly they were two creations originally independent of each other, settling down into a working partnership for purposes merely of mutual accommodation; the spirit evidently indifferent as to the particular body into which he crept' (334; ).

In *My Life and Times*, published a year before his death, Jerome explained something of how his own style had developed rather against his own inclination. As a young man his only published story, about a maiden who fell in love and was finally turned into a waterfall, being followed by no further success, he tried a new direction with 'the story of a hero called Jerome who had run away and gone upon the stage' (48), the autobiographical *On the Stage and Off* serialised in 1883. *Three Men in a Boat* itself was not initially intended to be humorous; as he wryly pointed out, 'There was to be "humorous relief"; but the book was to have been "The Story of the Thames", its scenery and history. Somehow it would not come. ... About the "humorous relief" there was no difficulty. ... It seemed to be all "humorous relief"' (*My Life and Times* 75).

From this time Jerome was deeply ambivalent about his fame as a humourist, once complaining (in a *To-day* editorial of 21 March 1896) that, 'were I discovered to be the original Jack the Ripper, a large number of journalists in England would set to work to discover the joke' (210). *Paul Kever* memorably explores the trajectory of Paul's career as a lawyer's clerk, actor and finally comic writer, who is likened to David Copperfield but who aspires unsuccessfully to Dickensian stature. Despite the

reservations of Paul himself, the novel ultimately claims humour as providential, irrespective of the questionable status of the actual writer. Explaining to his friend Dan, who serves as the moral voice in the novel, that he wants to make the world 'think', Paul is met with an argument on the intrinsic value of laughter and his own divinely appointed place as a writer in the social order:

Make it think! Hasn't it got enough to think about?... Who are you to turn your nose up at your work and tell the Almighty His own business? You are here to make us laugh. Get on with your work, you confounded young idiot!  
(335; bk. 2; ch. 7)

At this stage Paul's narrow understanding of literature as an art form means that he is unable to reconcile the idea of humour with literary 'work', and it is this attitude, so familiar in criticism of the 1890s, that leads to his downfall when he succumbs to the false teaching of a detractor of the New Humour. Significantly the only one of his circle 'who understood me, who agreed with me that I was fitted for higher things than merely to minister to the world's need for laughter' (335; bk. 2; ch. 7) and who never laughs himself, turns out to be a confidence trickster, who takes Paul into partnership in a theatrical scheme and embezzles the takings. The heroine Nora, who ultimately rescues Paul from despair by persuading him to publish humorous journalism and use the proceeds to repay his partner's victims, represents the value of hard work and integrity; it is instructive that she sees humour as compatible with intelligent work and even as a call to arms in the regeneration of a vitiated society. She fully endorses Dan's position at the end of the novel, urging:

We see but a corner of the scheme. This fortress of laughter that a few of you have been set apart to guard – this rallying-point for all the forces of joy and gladness! How do you know it may not be the key to the whole battle?  
(398; bk. 2; ch.10)

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