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Jerome K. Jerome, Sexual Panic and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle

by

Carolyn Oulton

Jerome K. Jerome knew full well that he would be remembered primarily for his 1889 comic masterpiece *Three Men in a Boat*. If he had wanted to be renowned as the author of a disturbing novella about sexual betrayal, the 1892 *Weeds*, he should perhaps have put his name on the title page rather than allowing his authorship to surface only during an auction of letters at Christie's in 1968. But understandably he was concerned that as "the best abused author in England", notorious for giving the lower middle classes something to laugh about at the end of a day (half day on Saturdays) at the bank, there was simply no point in trying to reinvent himself as the fin de siècle prophet of Degeneration Theory.

He was primarily associated with London, home to the intellectual and literary metropolitan elite at the vanguard of late nineteenth century debates on gender and sexuality. However, critics persisted in undermining his work by associating him with a less glamorous embodiment of London life, the cockney "Arry", or flashily dressed but uneducated working class man on the make. Accused of laughing at serious subjects whenever he did make a considered pronouncement, Jerome was in effect forced to entrench his position by using humour in his own defence. In response to the constant descriptions of him as a bank-clerk and cockney, he responded that:

I have never been a bank-clerk. I have served as clerk in most other offices, but never in a bank. To call me "Cockney" is even more unjust. Meaning from the beginning to be a writer, I took the precaution of selecting my birthplace in a dismal town in the centre of the Staffordshire coalfields, a hundred and fifty miles, at least, away from London.¹

Notwithstanding this typecasting as the primary agent of the "New Humour", as it was known, Jerome also wrote extensively on the related and highly topical themes of sexuality and degeneration during the 1890s. The anonymous *Weeds* tells the story of Dick Selwyn, a young clerk living in a faux aesthetic house in the suburbs, whose middle-class aspirations are derailed by his obsessive sexual thoughts and a destructive fling with the cousin of his naive wife Daisy. The publisher Arrowsmith had brought out *Three Men in a Boat* three years earlier; however, Mr Arrowsmith was so horrified by the plot of *Weeds* that Jerome was forced to edit the seduction scene in order to make it appear that Dick and the pre-Raphaelite stunner Jessie do no more than kiss on the fatal night. Even with this amendment, the lack of extant copies suggests that the book

¹ Jerome, J.K. 'The Idlers' Club', *The Idler* 4 (August 1893–January 1894), p. 108.

was never released for general sale, and it was not made widely available until the Victorian Secrets edition of 2012.

Within a year of this debacle Jerome was publishing essays and short stories in his own journal *The Idler*, in which the themes of sexual obsession are pivotal to the plot. In the 1893 story “The Woman of the Saeter”, a newly married man travels to Norway with his wife, only to fall in love with the ghost of a murdered femme fatale. The man’s descent into atavistic madness is traced in a series of letters, as:

here, amid these savage solitudes, I also am grown savage. The old primeval passions of love and hate stir within me, and they are fierce and cruel and strong, beyond what you men of the later ages could understand. The culture of the centuries has fallen from me as a flimsy garment whirled away by the mountain wind; the old savage instincts of the race lie bare.²

In the same year the journal ran a series called *Novel Notes*, based on the idea of four writers who try to write a book together. One particularly haunting passage outlines a dream in which a male protagonist apparently abandons his lover, only to encounter her again as the prostitute who has unwittingly followed him in order to solicit his custom. No wonder the narrator states grimly at one point, “That is all a man can do, pray for strength to crush down the evil that is in him, and to keep it held down day after day.”³ Indeed Jerome would maintain in his autobiography *My Life and Times*⁴ (published in 1926, the year before his death) that “All cruelty has its roots in lust”. In his fiction it is not men alone who are capable of cruelty (or for that matter, the more censor-friendly forms of lust). The short story “Two Extracts from a Diary” is related by one of Jerome’s most chillingly exploitative narrators, a woman who manipulates a man into marriage despite knowing that he loves another woman called Jenny. Jealous of her more attractive rival, the narrator steals this woman’s new lover Gascoigne while she is at it, thus depriving her of the possible consolation offered by a new relationship. The narrator then tells Jenny what she has done, with the result that – as she plans – Jenny elopes with the husband who has always loved her. The narrator’s final act of revenge is to refuse to divorce her husband (meaning that he cannot marry Jenny and she is irrevocably ruined as a “fallen woman”). Once past the dizzying complexities of the plot, the real interest of the story lies in the narrator’s exploration of unrequited desire. She suggests that her own

² “The Woman of the Saeter”, *The Idler* 3 (February–July 1893) pp. 579–593.

³ Jerome, J.K. (1893/1991) *Novel Notes*, Alan Sutton, Stroud, 1991 [1st ed publ. by Leadenhall Press, London, 1893], p. 130.

⁴ Jerome, J.K. ([1926/1992] *My Life and Times*, Folio Society, London, 1992 [Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1926].

passions have been perverted as a result of her long-term disability, which in turn allows her to pose as an uncomplaining victim of male faithlessness, “To-night I am going to burn this diary page by page, and the world will only know me as a sweet and much-injured lady. But it is good to read the truth, even if it is necessary to destroy it immediately afterwards.”⁵ Fully aware that her fate will be to “fawn upon” her unloving husband, she observes that, in the same way, “Gascoigne would marry and fawn upon me, and love me the better for my contempt and indifference. We are animals, we men and women, and we love our masters.”⁶

It was not of course unusual for writers to publish work of widely different type and quality, anonymously or otherwise, in a range of outlets. Jerome’s significant achievement was to balance the guaranteed publicity of his status as a famous humorist with the freedom and opportunities provided by his journal editorship, enabling him to join pressing debates on a series of contentious issues, from female employment to animal rights (he was a formidable opponent of vivisection). While his attitude towards the “crimes” of Oscar Wilde is best forgotten, it can be said on the other side that he was one of the few successful editors in London (in addition to *The Idler*, he edited the weekly *To-Day*) who refused to capitalise on the 1895 trial by running detailed accounts of the drama in court, surmising – probably correctly – that readers’ supposed outrage masked a considerable level of salacious interest.

An innate pessimist despite his famous “J” persona, he had little confidence in the beneficence of human nature or the progressive doctrines put forward by many of his contemporaries. In fact, with a slightly dubious grasp of Darwin’s theories, he held that:

you can take an ape and develop it through a few thousand generations until it loses its tail and becomes an altogether superior ape. You can go on developing it through still a few more thousands of generations until it gathers to itself out of the waste vapours of eternity an intellect and a soul, by the aid of which it is enabled to keep the original apish nature more or less under control. But the ape is still there...⁷

But when *The Times* described him in a somewhat condescending obituary as a naïve “typical humourist of the eighties”, completely bypassing his response to some of the most important social

⁵ ‘Two Extracts from a Diary’, *The Idler* 5 (February–July 1894), pp. 558–560.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 559.

⁷ Jerome, J.K. (1893/1991) *Novel Notes*, Alan Sutton, Stroud, 1991 [1st ed. publ. by Leadenhall Press, London, 1893], p. 128.

questions of the 1890s (not to mention his political activism during and after WWI), the laugh was surely on them.