BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Eric Montenyohl

Steven Swann Jones has compiled and Garland Press has published this annotated bibliography of studies of folklore in American literature. Jones provides an introductory essay on "the scope and method" of studying folklore in American literature. In it, he asserts: "The underlying assumption of all folklore in literature studies is that by pointing out allusions in a literary text to folk traditions and conventions, they are explicating the underlying appeal of the text. The validity of this methodology has been tested and proven by the multitude of studies in folklore and American literature" (p. xv). Jones continues to develop the methodologies proposed for the study of folklore in literature by Richard M. Dorson (in 1957) and Alan Dundes (in 1965). He adds a section on three "uses" of folklore in literature.

The design and coverage of the bibliography itself are then presented. Jones "limited the bibliography to studies published as of 1980 that in an explicit and central way examine the influence of folklore upon American literature" (p. xxvi). Four "classes of works" are cited in the bibliography: M.A. theses, Ph.D. dissertations, essays, and book-length studies. The last two have been annotated based upon the content of the work itself. Dissertations have been selected and annotated based on the abstracts in Dissertation Abstracts International. Theses have no annotations at all in this bibliography.

There are problems in both the design and execution of this annotated bibliography. The stated purpose of the study of folklore in literature in the introductory essay seems clear enough, but Jones lumps together in the alphabetically-arranged bibliography works which are analytical studies of the folklore in particular works of American literature (like Ron Baker's work on Rowland E. Robinson) with theoretical essays on the relationship
of folklore and literature (like Mary Ellen Brown Lewis's "Why Study Folklore and Literature?" and Carl Lindahl's "On the Borders of Oral and Written Art"). The trouble with the inclusion of these theoretical works is that they do not all "in an explicit and central way examine the influence of folklore on literature." And further, with the inclusion of some theoretical essays, and those by Lindahl and Abrahams come quickly to mind, Jones's own focus on folklore in literature (the "lore in lit" approach, as Abrahams dubs it) is at least ignored, if not abandoned for newer and more comprehensive analyses. Thus, Jones's own method for study and means of selection for this bibliography is subverted by the inclusion of theoretical essays urging scholars no longer to be satisfied with the "butterfly-hunting" of the "lore in lit" school and demonstrating that the study of folklore and literature need not be merely a minor methodological tool for literary explication.

As for the actual execution of the bibliography, there are obvious exclusions which limit its utility. First, despite the compiler's claim of including all works through 1980, there are no M.A. theses listed after 1967. And, in general, Alan Dundes's Folklore Theses and Dissertations in the United States (which goes through 1968 but is not limited only to works using this methodology) proves to be a better reference tool for theses and dissertations. Further, if the book is to provide first-rate aid to the scholar doing research in folklore in American literature, I would have expected inclusions of essays from a work like Bruce Jackson's The Negro and his Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals (1967) not just because essays by Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable appear there, but because those essays and others deal with folklore in American literature.

Finally, there are a number of distracting typographical errors in the book. Southern Folklore Quarterly is spelled at least three different ways in a span of six pages (pp. 151-56). These slips detract from the volume and reflect badly on both the compiler and the publisher.