

No Laughing Matter. Rationale of the Dirty Joke: Second Series. By Gershon Legman.

Pp. 992, subject and motif index.

Wharton, N.J.: Breaking Point, Inc., 1975. \$18.00 cloth.

Reviewed by James P. Leary

In 1968 Grove Press, an organization long noted for uncensored encouragement of the literary Avant Garde, released Gerson Legman's massive Rationale of the Dirty Joke. Some seven years later, Breaking Point Press has come forth with its sequel, No Laughing Matter. Legman tells us in his "Introduction" that, while the first volume treated only "clean" dirty jokes (those concerning the "normal and usual experiences of the sexual life," including such subjects as "Children, Fools, the Male Approach, Women, Marriage, and Adultery") this second work focuses on "dirty" dirty jokes. Under this appellation fall tales and gibes involving Homosexuality, Prostitution, Disease and Disgust, Castration, Dysphemism, Cursing, Insults, and Scatology. Not the most pleasing of folkloristic genres, the "dirty" joke is perhaps the most prevalent. Mr. Legman's two volumes are the culmination of more than three decades of painstaking, and painful, research. We folklorists should be grateful for his efforts.

Following the classic scholarly paradigm, we are presented with the results of Collection (Legman offers us 2,000 texts from a corpus of nearly 6,000 types in 60,000 variants), Classifications (Legman arranges his data in a type and motif index which incorporates and expands upon the Aarne-Thompson and Thompson schema), and Annotation (oral, popular, and literary sources--past, present, and cross-cultural--are abundantly referred to). As an alternative to conventional footnoting, source materials are given parenthetically while relevant learned articles--primarily by anthropologists, folklorists, and psychologists--are mentioned and evaluated in the text. However, No Laughing Matter is far more than a mere reference work to be utilized by those wishing to find historical and cross-cultural instances of jokes they encounter or propagate.

As the title indicates, the author is not particularly amused by the parade of shit, piss, puke, humiliation, and cruelty he has presented. Indeed, Legman is profoundly disturbed that from time immemorial man has devoted so much verbal energy to the symbolic degradation of himself and his fellows. He is even more in arms over the fact that all too frequently dirty talk is transformed into dirty actions like genocide, rape, and the destruction of the environment. Consequently, unlike F. J. Child, Stith Thompson, or Archer Taylor, Legman boldly goes beyond compilation to offer passionate and provocative analyses of the socio-cultural and psychological meaning of his material.

Intellectual coherence is lent to outrage by Sigmund Freud's Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious which serves as the underlying theoretical base of Legman's work. Indeed, all this is brought out clearly by the author's "Introduction" in which the debt to Freud is acknowledged (that jokes are symbolic pathways into the sometimes disturbed and fantastic workings of men's minds), and a number of basic observations are forcefully reiterated:

- (1) A person's favorite joke is the key to that person's character (p. 16).
- (2) Jokes are an exchange of hostilities disguised as an exchange of amenities (p. 24).
- (3) The teller is profoundly disturbed by his own materials and themes (p. 33).
- (4) The laugh jokes arouse is less often one of amusement than of relief, when the ordeal of listening is over (p. 38).
- (5) The joke-teller or actor, the comedian or clown, is thus a sort of black-mass priest in the line of ancient dancers or mimes who expresses the courage--in openly breaking taboos--that his audience by and large lacks (p. 43).

Each point is bolstered by examples and insights into the context which joking performance entails.

Taking off from these observations, Legman analyzes prevalent non-narrative joking forms (such as the insults and obscene names accompanying the "joking relationship"), as well as the rendition of joking themes in non-oral media (film, paintings, cartoons) and social trends (Gay Liberation, Sexual Freedom) in contemporary popular culture. While both quibbles and quite serious objections could be leveled against Legman's arguments, as a whole they hang together. In fact, with a little word-twisting here and there Legman's overtly Freudian invectives could be hammered into Abrahams' "Rhetorical Theory of Folklore." After all, isn't the inveterate dirty joke teller a performer whose alienated vision and social role allow him to stand outside everyday life and "name" its perversities for an anxious audience?

It would be a great error not to offer a few comments on the author's power as a man of letters. His mastery of subject matter and command of academic, literary and colloquial stylistics fuse to transport the reader beyond the limitations of frequently stale scholarly inquiry into the realm of high art. From the twisted gargoyle that looms out of the dust jacket to the final chapter's profound lament ("All to Shit") over man's destructive tendencies, No Laughing Matter is an angry and erudite creative venture on par with the grotesque canvasses of Bosch or the satiric fantasies of Swift.