

NOTES AND QUERIES

IN SEARCH OF THE QUADRENNIAL PERENNIALS

Shortly after the November 1972 political debacle of George McGovern, an acquaintance provided me with a well-worn Xerox copy of a slightly scurrilous political parody aimed at candidate McGovern. The version had been passed from hand to hand in the office of a business firm in Jacksonville, Florida. The informant, who is an upper middle-class white male, could not recall the original source of the parody.

The untitled text reads in full:

McGovern is my shepherd. I shall not want.
He leadeth me beside the still factories,
He maketh me lie down on park benches,
 He restoreth my doubts in the Democratic Party.
 He guideth me to the path of unemployment for the party's sake.

I do fear evil for thou art against me.
 Thou anointeth me with income taxes
 So that my taxes run over my income.
 Surely poverty and hard living shall follow the Democratic
 party
 And I shall live in a rented house forever.

Five thousand years ago Moses said,
 "Pack your camel, pick up your shovel,
 Mount your ass and I shall lead you to the Promised Land".

Five thousand years later Franklin D. Roosevelt said,
 "Lay down your shovel, sit on your ass and light up a camel,
 this is the Promised Land".

Today McGovern will tax your shovel, sell your Camel,
 Kick you in the ass and tell you there is no promised land.

P.S. I am glad that I am an American
 I am glad that I am free
 But I wish I were a dog and McGovern were a tree.

Ed Cray reports a similar verse recited by children in the Los Angeles at the time of the 1948 election:

I've always been a Democrat
 A Democrat I'll always be.
 But I wish I was a dog,¹
 And Truman was a tree.¹

Our version is in part a variant of the 1948 version--note however the proper subjective verb "were" in the adult satire. The McGovern parody consists of three parts: the Psalm Twenty-three parody,² the three parallel promise land verses, and the post-script.

The verse appeals in its collected form to the conservative biases of this northern Florida city. It attacks Senator McGovern precisely on those areas in which he is most vulnerable among the business community: taxation and welfare statism. Like good satire, it ridicules the out-group by emphasizing the differences between their wild beliefs and the beliefs of most reasonable men. Proposed changes from the status quo are magnified ad absurdum to produce laughter through incongruity. McGovern is likened to the Lord--though a foolish, irresponsible, incompetent Lord. With subtle switches in imagery he is portrayed as the evil leader, and finally as an anthropomorphic urinal. These images are grotesque and abhorrent to a people whose political beliefs uphold the Puritan work ethic of laissez-faire capitalism. The verse is considerably expanded from a child's rhyme, but the urethral image is constant.

It is not clear to what extent this verse is an example of folklore or of popular culture. We should, however, not assume that merely because it is typed and mechanically reproduced, it can not be folklore. In a literate, industrial society a Xerox copy can be as "personal" as a story-telling session--although the reproducing machine does not allow for any textual variations.

One should realize that doggerel is not merely the province of children, but occurs throughout society. Political satire is a legitimate area for folklorists to study, and no doubt a moderately intensive investigation would turn up many of the same themes and images from other parts of the nation. The same jokes are continually being refurbished for use for a panoply of American politicians. Like ethnic jokes which have themselves only recently been studied, political humor can be used and transferred among a broad spectrum of groups and individuals. A frequently told jest is about the President so dishonest that whenever he left the White House the Secret Service would count the silver.

With the political climate in America so distrustful of politics and politicians, the folklorist has a plentiful supply of material easily available. The cautionary note must be to be aware of the influence of the mass media in the joking process--a factor more

worrisome for political or "public" humor than for the less acceptable ethnic slur or smutty remark.

I would appreciate hearing from any folklorist who might be able to assist me in tracking down other references for this McGovern parody, or anyone who has information in the general field of political humor.

NOTES

1. Ed Cray, "The Quadrennial Perennials," Western Folklore, 23 (1965), 199-200.
2. See Robert A. Baker (Ed.), A Stress Analysis of a Strapless Evening Gown and Other Essays for a Scientific Age (Doubleday Anchor Book, 1969) for two other parody versions of the Twenty-third Psalm, pp. 81-82.

Gary Alan Fine
Dept. of Psychology And Social Relations
William James Hall 549
Harvard University
Cambridge, Mass. 02138