

*Dear
May Sarton:*

Sometimes one has an impulse to write to the author how much one likes a book. I happen to have seen advance proofs of your *THE LION AND THE ROSE*. I think your poem *My Sisters, O My Sisters* is one of the most extraordinary poems by a woman that I have ever read. Naturally, I would like *Not Always the Quiet Word* and *Who Wakes?* You have *saeva indignatio*. But also *The Clavichord*—so different a kind of poem—is a gem. And I have seen Texas and the Charleston plantations, and an ancestor of mine went to Natchez. You have described those parts of America and the Middle West, in your poems of teaching, so well!—And what a fine poem to the scholar. Not often can poets cope with the actuality and the dream. Your intensity is the sinew of the real poet.

Pardon this from an elderly versifier—and all good fortune go with you.

Sincerely,

William Rose Benet

WILLIAM ROSE BENET

THE LION AND THE ROSE

by MAY SARTON, is published by Rinehart & Company. Available at all bookstores, \$2.00 a copy.

NEW EDITIONS

THE TWENTY-FIRST volume to take its place in the swelling ranks of the Cambridge University Press's "Shakespeare" is "Macbeth" (\$2.50). This is an important newcomer, and its appearance marks the completion of one of John Dover Wilson's most difficult editorial tasks. While it furnishes the ordinary reader with a remarkably attractive edition of a mighty tragedy, it furnishes scholars with grist for long arguments, most of which can never be conclusive. Dr. Wilson moves boldly among thorny textual problems, but his courage is reinforced by such a body of Elizabethan and Jacobean learning as few men command. And when he can only guess, he says that he is guessing.

In his introduction he explores the historical background of "Macbeth," analyzes its principal characters, and relates its dramatic action to the original audience's belief in demonology; but it is with the history and nature of the unique Folio text that he is chiefly concerned. This, briefly, is his argument. The original version of "Macbeth" was longer than the one we know; it was probably abridged by Shakespeare himself, for a court performance in 1606; and this abridgment was handled by a "restorer," almost certainly Middleton, who added some fifty lines of his own to the witch-scenes, while cutting other scenes "drastically and crudely." Dr. Wilson believes that the earlier text, as well as the later, was written to please James I. He makes the "very daring" guess "that the earlier 'Macbeth' was the next play undertaken after 'Hamlet,' i.e., that it was written in the second half of 1601 or early in 1602." He guesses further that it may well have been "first produced by Fletcher's company in the capital city of Scotland," and he even suggests the possibility that Shakespeare himself may have visited Scotland. These are brilliant conjectures, based on profound study. If Dr. Wilson has sometimes seemed to lack poetic imagination when dealing with some of Shakespeare's metaphorical passages, it cannot be denied that his imagination puts all his learning to the test whenever problems of composition confront him.

The notes in the present edition are copious, informative, stimulating; the glossary could hardly be better; and the stage history, supplied by C. B. Young, is full and interesting. Readers will notice that, in several instances,

Dr. Wilson has been able to justify Folio words that have been rejected by previous editors. For example, the snake that all schoolboys know as "scotched" is again, as it was originally, "scorched." L. C. Knights has remarked that every rehandling of a Shakespearean text is "an essay in taste." John Dover Wilson has added another distinguished essay to his collection.

Random House's "Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural," edited by Herbert Wise and Phyllis Fraser, has become a Modern Library Giant (\$2.45). This is an excellent anthology, stuffed with tales calculated to chill the spine and challenge credence. Famous favorites mingle with stories of less reputation but equal merit. Among the former we find Balzac's "La Grande Bretèche," Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," Maupassant's "The Horla," Poe's "The Black Cat," Wilkie Collins's "A Terribly Strange Bed," Jacobs's "The Monkey's Paw," and Hemingway's "The Killers"; while the second category includes such items as Conrad Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," M. R. James's "Casting the Runes," H. P. Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Wall," and Isak Dinesen's "The Sailor-Boy's Tale." But this is only a sampling of more than a thousand well-chosen pages. And beside this Giant you may put a smaller anthology of kindred kind, which also displays sound editorial judgment: "The Pocket Book of Ghost Stories" (Pocket, 25c), edited by Philip Van Doren Stern. You will find in the two volumes some duplication of authors, but none of stories.

From the Pilgrim Press comes a new edition of William Allen Knight's "The Song of Our Syrian Guest" (\$1), a tiny book that has been a best seller for over forty years by virtue of its interpretation of the Twenty-third Psalm.

Kenneth Fearing's "The Big Clock" (Grosset, \$1), written with ingenuity and pace, is a much-better-than-average murder yarn; whereas Donald Henderson Clarke's "Murderer's Holiday" (Triangle Books, 59c) and Hugh Holman's "Slay the Murderer" (Grosset, \$1) are plain-average . . . "Chicago Murders" (Pocket, 25c), a collection of real cases written by various hands, includes the famous Wynekoop Case, recently in the news again as a result of the defendant's release from prison after a fourteen-year stretch.

BEN RAY REDMAN.

A HALF CENTURY OF COMIC ART

(Continued from page 30)

Comic strips are a childish, or at least a primitive, form of art, literature, and entertainment. They would scarcely warrant a second critical thought if it were not for their immense popularity, outranking all the rest of what Gilbert Seldes long ago labeled "the seven lively arts." Unquestionably, the comics are the most avidly consumed art form yet produced in the civilized world. The statistics are awe-inspiring. I daresay some sort of serialized cartoon appears in every American newspaper save only *The New York Times* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Even allowing for the percentage of readers (less than twenty per cent) who skip the comic pages, their total readership exceeds 70,000,000 persons and approaches 100,000,000—from one-half to two-thirds of the population of the United States, every day of every month, year after year. Only the movies can come anywhere near this, with an attendance of 95,000,000 per week, or only one movie-goer for every five or six followers of the comics.

And that's not all. The comic strip

habit, like chewing gum, follows American arms and enterprise to the ends of the earth. No one knows the size of the foreign audience, but comic books, of which perhaps 15,000,000 to 20,000,000 are sold each month in this country, are also shipped abroad in such numbers as to worry chancelleries strapped for dollar-exchange. In London recently a Member of Parliament, cribbing J. B. Priestley's October diatribe in '47 magazine, denounced this "Niagara of piffle." An ironic choice of metaphor, for the comic invasion is no easier to stop with epithets than the great cataract would be with a spoon.

American newspaper cartoons, too, are sold abroad; and even when the physical importation of our books or matrices is prohibited, native imitators spring up to replace them. This has already happened in the British countries, Scandinavia, Latin America, and perhaps elsewhere. I saw signs of it even in the one-sheet post-war press of Republican Italy.

By the history of all the arts we are warned against confusing mere popularity with genuine quality, but

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devotes itself almost exclusively to contemporary American poetry, and even prides itself upon being perhaps the chief and last remaining publishing institution on this continent to which an unknown poet of talent may turn with justifiable hope. Moreover since it subsists almost totally on poetry, *The Press of James A. Decker* can afford to be partial to no special school, but must rather strive to serve all schools—to remain tolerant of tradition no less than friendly to experiment. It is our aim to preserve for the laurels of posterity the work of whatever 20th century American poet the higher verdict of history may judge worthy of such recognition.

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TO THE FUTURE

In anticipation of the time, perhaps in the far future, when there will be a revival of taste for genuine poetry, as distinguished from the sort of thing now in vogue, we make the following announcement:

We have just published, as a non-commercial undertaking, a volume of poems by Granville Trace.

Those who know Mr. Trace's work, and are also aware of the present literary and publishing conditions, will need no explanation. To future readers of this page—there will be some—we may say that a number of publishers have praised the book in such terms as the author does not care to have quoted here, but their unanimous pronouncement is, "There is no money in poetry." Conclusive, that.

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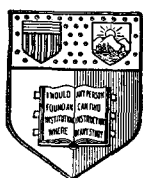
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by the same token we may not ignore, even in the arts, that living principle of democracy: the ultimate validity of mass opinion. The first English novel was hack stuff, a newspaper serial aimed at newly-literate maidservants. Even the great Shakespeare was a bit of a crowd-pleaser in his day. Whether the comic strip is a real "art," or major creative invention, may very well be decided in our own time.

The comic strip is not "folk art," nor is it truly "primitive." It is as contrived a product as a movie, a musical comedy, or a popular song, with \$\$ for its Excelsior. As drawing, comic art is of the same genre as the doodles or sketches that schoolboys pencil on the margins of geography books, or ebullient salesmen on restaurant menus. But to this raw material an element of craft is applied. The fast sketch is developed with imagination and design until it is clear, vivid, active, and concise—but at that point, beyond which it would lose the appearance of spontaneity and ingenuousness, its development is deliberately arrested. There is no further "improvement" in the classic sense. Assistants faithfully copy the master's original doodles, and I know of one famous comic strip heroine whose proportions were standardized with calipers.

"Primitivist" may be a better word for this than "primitive," but even that is far-fetched. Comic art can only be understood in terms of its function, which is the delineation of characters and the narration of their adventures. The illusion is theatrical; the funny man borrows the tricks of the variety stage, the straight storyteller those of the drama or cinema. Within the confines of a few pictures or "panels," and within the limitations of a crude reproduction process, comic artists must perform a daily *tour de force* of showmanship.

Actually, the art work of a comic strip is subordinate to the story it tells, while the story, in turn, is secondary to the character whose story it is. You do not willingly laugh at the jokes of disagreeable people, or take much interest in the daily lives of strangers; but you roar when your own little boy merely says "peanuts," and worry sympathetically if your wife cuts her finger. The central character of a comic strip wins you to a similar attachment. It is the one element that cannot be manufactured but must be created; the chlorophyll, the living seed that establishes its creator as a true artist.

If comic strips are not "folk art," they are nonetheless a thing of the people. The good ones are alike in one quality, something I like to call "earthiness." Significantly, the giants

of the comic strip world have been almost exclusively men (not women) out of the common herd. Not many are college-educated (Milton Caniff, who made "Terry and the Pirates" famous, is one of the few.) More frequent in their backgrounds is a fling at some colorful trade, such as vaudeville, the circus, or the sea, or attachment at adolescence to the newspaper trade itself. As people, comic artists are delightfully ordinary Joes blessed with humor or keen perception. Only by retaining this commonness amidst great wealth, like "Jiggs" in "Bringing up Father," can they avoid the occupational diseases of the comic-strip business: big-headedness, boredom, brain-fag, or the bottle.

Money-making writers and artists from other fields have a hard time with this elusive simplicity and earthiness. The syndicate business is littered with their failures. Booth Tarkington could never make a comic strip out of "Penrod," while the success of "Tarzan" stems not from Edgar Rice Burroughs but from a series of comic-trained ghosts. Painters like George Luks or Clyde Forsythe found the pace of comic art wearing. But Rudolph Dirks, now about seventy, still wears the peaked cap of the sporty young working-man of 1910, as if to remind himself never to advance beyond the perfected youthful exuberance of his "Katzies."

AS MIGHT be expected, this creative spark is rare. About 500 so-called comics, funny and unfunny, are for sale by syndicates ranging from Hearst's giant King Features down to one-man ventures with cosmic names. Not all the 500 possess quality, by any means, and a good many don't earn enough to feed a St. Bernard dog. The New York press prints about 125. Even in this selected group, not more than nine or ten can be considered first-class. The rest are workmanlike features with a solid but unspectacular following, successes of the past now on the way down, untested newcomers, imitations, mediocrities, or plain junk.

The flood of comic art apparently confuses critics (including Mr. Waugh), who imagine that every published feature is profitable and popular, and find themselves stretching for reasons to explain it. Comics are ultimately dependent upon popular favor, but there is a considerable time-lag. Meanwhile they can be artificially maintained by commercial deals or by the arbitrary fiat of some publisher with little flair for features. The *New York World-Telegram*, for example, once turned down "Li'l Abner," saving money with the "blanket service" of NEA, a Scripps-Howard

affiliate. And the *Sun* to this day has never stumbled upon a comic-strip hit.

In the search for greatness, it is also misleading to go overboard for the darlings of the literati. If you remember "Krazy Kat," the Charlie Chaplin among strips of its time, you may wonder why it did not survive the death of its originator as so many famous comics do. Mr. Waugh speculates that no one could be found to match the unique fantasies of George Herriman, but the real reason was that poor "Krazy" had been losing money for years. The moment a comic strip leaves the solid earth, the moment its creator begins to fancy himself sophisticated, arty, esoteric, precious, poetic, or "significant"—at that moment it begins to sere like a banded tree. No comic artist can afford to sever his umbilical cord to the belly of the common people.

Does the comic strip have an artistic future? The chances are that it has. Does it have a degrading or retrogressive influence upon literature and the ability to read or think? The chances are that it hasn't. Through its use in advertising, in war propaganda, and in educating the young people of the armed forces to their duties, this art has lately proved itself an extremely fast, effective, and supra-lingual means of communicating ideas. But the swelling statistics of literary consumption meanwhile indicate that pictorial journalism tends to create new readers out of ex-illiterates. Although my completely unlettered daughter, aged three, is not yet ready for Dickens, her early fascination with comic sequences will most likely get her there the faster.

To enjoy comic strips, one is not required to be either a child or a dolt, although conceivably it helps. One is required, however, to relax for the fun of it, to turn off the intellect like a faucet so as not to dampen the comics' earthy vivacity. Those who

fancy such momentary amusements should at present view the comics with some alarm. Currently, American comic art is passing through a sterile period. The liveliest strips, like "Li'l Abner," "Blondie," "Gasoline Alley," "Dick Tracy," and "Nancy," are all of prewar vintage, at least ten or fifteen years old; the wartime GI artists are floundering in the complexities of peace; and most of the postwar newcomers are following paths worn as deep as the wheel-ruts of Pompeii. One reason, perhaps, is the gradual disappearance of the syndicate editor, whose creative role in comic art is akin to that of the motion-picture director. His place has

been taken by salesmen, which is as if businessmen producers were to direct their own pictures.

Comic art needs and awaits a young man with fresh ideas, a new approach to humor, and delight in humanity, a new character with a story to tell. I will cheerfully predict that he will be another man of the people. If he comes of a higher social or educational level than his greatest forebears, it will be a sign that the people, too, have progressed.

William Laas, managing editor of *United Features Syndicate* for about ten years before the war, recently joined '48 as managing editor.



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DOUBLEDAY

On the Horns of Aries

By Henry John Firley

PROSERPINA now urges her raven-flanked fillies
Of the deep prairie loam to gallop full distance
Of the corn-growing orbit. Wild spring is in the wing
Of the mallard bronzing along the long river;
Lynx-breasted the willows pad softly the mist.
Purple voice of the trillium and the heart talk together.
The ice-stone is broken in the throat of the year.

Spring sperm grows heavy in the bones of the weather.
The flush of chlorophyll gains full possession.
Wicks of the oak flare green in the branches
When the year's first dimension is circled in green.
The time holds a temper for waiting much longer,
For again there's new earth. Pink blossoms are needed
For keeping our balance through blizzard and drought.

Spring is a truce between both ends of the weather.
March, April, May move with unrehearsed rhythm.
The fields begin sunning to white bread and honey;
There is wine in the making in small clusters on vine.
The lilacs burst color like purple-red popcorn;
Jade silence keeps sifting through the year's door ajar
Half-telling the secret of the wide sprawling Midland.

Spring is sweet clover fled from the hayloft
Far to the field, is the long green shadow
At the heel of the year, the shallow of time
Near brimful with genesis, and a strong bow bending
Horizon-halved with arrow of long June flight
Shot from the bloom of the moon-white hepatica.
Too soon the wild violet is over and long.

Spring holds the answer like a lone-marked steeple
Filled with the ringing of Easter Bells.
Now the bough shades wholly both bole and the dreamer.
Spring-marks are here of anemone blooming
Like snow-starred doves playing sleight of breast
In last autumn leaves, and of bloodroot with thick veins
As red as the tongues of our lost buffalo.

The morning-light posture of low drifting mist
Drapes like a bearded saga of cloud
On the stubble-green lanes of the lake shell scented.
The blue moldboard and shear of the afternoon sky
Plow furrows across the fenceless stretch
Of the inland lake where the gray fog smuts
And the gulls fluff breast in the whitecap dust.

The flush of the quail or the spout of the whale
Are identical with the sycamore's flow
When the season is in the "good morning" of year.
Spring strikes like a fabulous bass, rainbow-hooked,
Slapping green thunder from gunmetal clouds
With its tail, and showering its emerald scales freely
Over the ripples of the autumn-ploughed turf.

A flame hangs again in the near thunderhead,
and the wind-stars wound both cheeks of the lover.
Blustering spring is a white-plumed cockerel
High roosting in the boughs of the wild plum thicket
Shattering early dawn into full vernal bloom
With his silvery boasting to the high running sun;
While brute glory of equinox stampedes the blue tundra.