REVIEW ESSAY

Bruce Brooks

Poetry Comics by David Morice. Simon & Schuster, 1982, 186 pages.

AMERICA CAME ALONG too late to initiate the honorable tradition of comic poetry. By the time Ebenezer Cooke was snapping off wry hudibrastics in the early 1700s, the Greeks had been chuckling over Aristophanes for twenty-one centuries. But now America has initiated another tradition equally amusing, if not equally honorable: poetry comics.

The Aristophanes of poetry comics is Dave Morice, a 1972 graduate of the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. He has been publishing small magazines of hallowed verse set to jaunty cartoons for four years, in irregular issues of a periodical also called *Poetry Comics.* Last year, however, Morice's unique artwork hit the big time and became a book: Simon & Schuster published *Poetry Comics: a Cartooniverse of Poems* in hardback and paperback, and the first printing of 22,000 sold out by December.

The basic effect of poetry comics is a complicated amusement somewhere between the ridiculous and the critically insightful. If Gershwin had made an opera out of *Billy Budd* and we noticed, after laughing, that the story was actually pretty deep and the music pretty nice, this would approximate the range of Morice's work. Certainly he lampoons American comic styles, and often sabotages the austerity of verse, but the ultimate conclusion is that poetry and cartoons both can be good stuff.

Morice shows himself to be a sufficiently stuffy anthologist, en route to being a witty literary critic. The book contains more than 50 poems, including many of the unavoidable mainstays of undergraduate collections. These old warhorses suffer the most acerbic illumination, and produce the greatest cheer.

Walt Whitman blazes across interstellar space in cape and leotard, fighting the body electric and speaking the password primeval. Wordsworth's lonely cloud wanders on stubby boots o'er vales and hills, dancing with leggy daffodils reminiscent of 1930's cartoons in which no living thing was safe from the pen of any animator who wanted to give it an anthropomorphic face and make it bounce to insipid post-swing tunes. Ben Jonson's "To Celia"

gets spoken by passionate love-comics brunettes and dudes at a cocktail party, drinking to each other only with their moony eyes and pointing to martini glasses as they leer "Leave a kiss but in the cup. . ."

Somehow, the solipsism of the poem does not suffer for sharing the page with seemingly irreverent drawings; one is forced almost to read the verse all the more keenly, to exact its every articulation so that the contrapuntal force of the cartoon can be appreciated in perfect balance. Rarely have I had a better *reading* of "Kubla Khan" than in the midst of Morice's reptilian images, and never have I felt the eerie chill of Emily Dickinson's *"Because I could not stop for death etc. . ."* more directly than in the balloons over the heads of his kewpie characters.

Such clever quasi-farces would be enough to recommend *Poetry Comics* —but there is more. In presentations of some strangely chosen works, Morice's visual play brings out intriguing effects that add to the nature of the verse. Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" shrieks quite horribly through a Marvel Comics style that evokes the nightmare era in which the best minds of a generation were destroyed by madness. The exhaustive detail of the Rube Goldberg rendering of William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" perfectly mocks the arch-coy simplicity of that precious sixteen-word poem. Robert Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" becomes a sort of metacartoon, with mice narrators slipping in and out of the R. Crumbish story, hiding behind the voice balloons and frames that are the comic's material.

Morice subtitles *Poetry Comics* "The book you wish you'd had in English 101." Is this irreverent and disrespectful? No; at least, not of poetry. What it says about English 101 may be taken as chiding, but the fact is that a lot of us probably *should* have had this book in English 101, whether we were taking it or teaching it.

It's never too late for a refresher course. *Poetry Comics* is a smart and amusing companion.