

On racist discourse in Max Beerbohm's "The Feast"

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Abstract. I interpret Max Beerbohm as entering the dispute between Christina Rossetti and George Eliot on how English parishioners talk, in his imitative fiction "The Feast."

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"Stop complaining about the mist,"

In the jungle a snake hissed.

In case you do not know, Christina Rossetti also wrote prose fiction and one of her fictions reads like a faux chapter of *Middlemarch*, though it was published before that grand novel. It is called "Pros and Cons" and it involves English parishioners debating over helping the poor. One character makes an anti-racist speech:

'Sir,' interposed Mr Blackman, 'we are all equals, whatever may be our colour or our country. But whilst the Zenana counts its victims by thousands, whilst the Japanese make boast of their happy despatch, whilst the Bushman, dwindling before our face, lives and dies as the beasts that perish, shall we divert our attention from such matters of life and death to fix it on a petty question of appearance? Pardon me if tears from our benighted brethren blind us to such matters as this.'

(2005 [1870]: 81)

In *Middlemarch*, in comparison, the rector's wife does not partake in these sentiments:

“Enough! I understand,”—said Mrs. Cadwallader. “You shall be innocent. I am such a blackamoor that I cannot smirch myself.”

(1871-2: chapter 62)

It is difficult to avoid the impression that George Eliot is criticizing Rossetti’s depiction: parishioners are actually more racist (see Edward 2022).

The debate, or what I interpret to be a debate, took place in Victorian times. Moving forward to 1912, in one of his pastiches Max Beerbohm has a character say the following:

“Reach me that ammonia bottle, d’you hear?” answered the white man.

“This is a pretty place you’ve brought me to!” He took a draught.

“Christmas Day, too! Of all the—— But I suppose it seems all right to you, you funny blackamoor, to be here on Christmas Day?” (1912:

127)

The character is a white man in exotic territory, a native hut. I think it likely that Beerbohm, thoroughly acquainted with the history of English letters, knew of the earlier dispute. What is he trying to convey? It may seem as if he is supporting Eliot, by having the character say, “you funny blackamoor.” But actually when this character nostalgically imagines home on Christmas day, it is not the provincial world of George Eliot novels:

Mr. Williams had lain back with closed eyes, on his mat. Nostalgia was doing duty to him for imagination. He wafted to a bedroom in Marylebone, where in honour of the Day he lay late dozing, with great contentment; outside, a slush of snow in the street, the sound of churchbells, from below a savour of especial cookery. (1912: 127)

Why do his memories take him to Marylebone – to central London – rather than to the provinces of England or even Gravesend, if that town somehow does not count? The material does not allow for a conclusive interpretation, but I interpret Beerbohm as communicating, “Yes, there are parishioners who talk like Mrs. Cadwallader, but it is a posh central London racism. Don’t be surprised if tea with the Prime Minister is scheduled later that day.”

References

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