



PROJECT MUSE®

Ham Jones, North Carolina Backwoods Humorist, and the Art of
“Democratic Elbow-Rubbing”

Ed Piacentino

Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 64, Numbers 1-2, Winter-Spring 2011, pp.
59-74 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2011.0024>

Mississippi
Quarterly

The Journal
Of Southern Culture



Johns Hopkins University Press
350 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-2739
Phone: 410-516-7000
www.press.jhu.edu

Vol. 64, Nos. 1-2 Winter-Spring
2011

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/741000/summary>

ED PIACENTINO
High Point University

Ham Jones, North Carolina Backwoods Humorist, and the Art of “Democratic Elbow-Rubbing”¹

USUALLY SIGNING HIS HUMOROUS SKETCHES, “BY THE AUTHOR OF ‘COUSIN Sally Dilliard’” (“Cousin Sally Dilliard” being his first, most popular, and most widely reprinted work), Ham Jones is not well known in the genre of Old Southwest humor. In “Ham Jones: Southern Folk Humorist,” a 1965 article published in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Richard Walser recovered Jones from obscurity, providing a brief but reliable account of Jones’s life and work. In the same essay, Walser reprinted sketches authored by Jones and other pieces he suspected were penned by him. In 1990, George and Willene Hendrick edited *Ham Jones, Ante-Bellum Southern Humorist*, an anthology of the Jones canon first collected by Walser and included a few additional sketches that may have been authored by Jones as well as selected unsigned humorous newspaper anecdotes that he wrote between 1837 and 1839 for the Salisbury *Carolina Watchman*, the Whig newspaper that he owned and edited.

Though born in Virginia, Ham Jones lived most of his life in Rowan County and Salisbury, North Carolina.² Like most Southwestern humorists, he did not write professionally. A graduate of the University of North Carolina, Jones became a lawyer after studying law under William Gaston of New Bern, one of North Carolina’s most eminent attorneys. And between 1832 and 1839, Jones edited the *Carolina Watchman*, a conservative newspaper, which, in addition to legal notices, advertisements, articles from other newspapers, book reviews, poems, and occasional humorous sketches and anecdotes, featured speeches of Whig politicians and articles supporting the Whig position

¹The phrase “democratic elbow-rubbing” (42) is employed by James Justus to describe the conditions and sites enabling and encouraging the authors of antebellum humorous sketches and tales like Ham Jones to mingle socially with backwoods folk.

²All biographical information on Jones comes from the Introduction to Willene and George Hendrick’s anthology.

on issues such as nullification. Also a state legislator, he served four terms in the North Carolina House of Commons in 1827, 1828, 1838, and 1840. He subsequently served as solicitor for the sixth Judicial District and then as reporter for the North Carolina Supreme Court. Given his background and career path, Jones fits the profile of many of the antebellum South's humorous writers: a professional man who was also a writer by avocation.

Like Hardin E. Taliaferro of Surry County, North Carolina, and the author of *Fisher's River (North Carolina) Scenes and Characters* (1859), Ham Jones drew extensively on rural western North Carolina materials—characters, scenes, and spaces—which he either observed firsthand or heard accounts of from actual persons. The majority of Jones's published comic sketches, those authoritatively ascribed to him, draw on North Carolina subject matter and employ themes, motifs, situations, and comic strategies more prominent and prolific Southwestern humorists would also employ in their works.³ Applying Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, which he explains in *Rabelais and His World*, to Jones's humorous sketches, I will show how Jones inverts and resists society's hierarchies and authority, giving voice and space to low culture and/or marginalized characters and tolerating their sometimes bizarre and amusing behavior. In so doing, Jones challenged the order and authority of the dominant society. Bakhtin's sense of carnival contextually relates to medieval folk festivals and their comic rituals during which social inversions occurred and the restraints and conventions of a hierarchical society gave way to democratization. In such disruptions from conventionalized order, Bakhtin recognized a "temporary liberation" that created "a special type of communication impossible in everyday life" and that "permit[ed] no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberat[ed] from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times" (10). The democratic emphasis of Bakhtinian carnivalesque comic culture provides a viable avenue for examining Ham Jones's best backwoods sketches.

³Though both Walser and the Hendricks acknowledge the North Carolina fabric of Jones's humor, Walser pointing out that Jones's humorous works are "anecdotes of the folk which he had listened to" (315) and the Hendricks observing that Jones "drew his material from the Tar Heel world he saw as an attorney" (3), they do not analyze the texts in any contextual depth.

The first and most popular of Jones's humorous sketches, "Cousin Sally Dilliard," also one of the earliest texts in Old Southwest humor, was published in *Atkinson's Saturday Evening Post* on August 6, 1831. It was reprinted several times in William T. Porter's New York *Spirit of the Times* and subsequently in his anthology of humorous sketches and tales, *The Big Bear of Arkansas and Other Tales* (1845) as well as in other newspapers. Repetitive and rambling, "Cousin Sally Dilliard" showcases many of the features of antebellum Southern humor, but contrary to previous critical opinion, it does not reflect the rigid class consciousness associated with the *cordon sanitaire* theory advanced by Kenneth S. Lynn in *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* in 1959. Emphasizing the separation of authors (often represented in their works by frame narrators) from the plain folk characters featured in their humorous tales and sketches, *cordon sanitaire* has, for a long time, been generally misapplied in discussions of the divisive relationship between the South's gentleman humorists and the common folk that populate many of their humorous works. In Lynn's view, a perspective that has since been widely disputed and discredited, Southern Whig humorists, "morally irreproachable Gentlem[e]n," were satirists who consciously distanced themselves from "the tainted life [they] described," so that they were "outside and above the comic action" (64). An ardent supporter of the Whig ideology, Ham Jones, in the August 2, 1839, issue of the *Carolina Watchman*, his last as owner-editor, reaffirmed his commitment to Whig principles, reminding his readers that his paper "has been the rallying point for our doctrines in the Western part of the State" and "that these principles will still be maintained in the Watchman with increased zeal and ability" (3). Yet, despite Jones's constant professed Whig allegiance, his humor is not Whiggish. Nor can he be conveniently pigeonholed as an exemplar of Lynn's *cordon sanitaire*. James Justus, the author of the preeminent study of antebellum Southern humor, offers illuminating insights about Southern humorists of Whig persuasion and perceptively argues that they likely

subscribed in some general way to party principles: a belief in education, social hierarchy, civic duty, public sponsorship of physical improvements to ensure material prosperity. Since many of them were lawyers, judges, doctors, and preachers, they clearly believed in the power of institutions to effect social change. Like most Whigs, the authors expected inequality in social conditions, not as the price for economic prosperity, but as an inevitability. The old paternalistic politics of deference, which was anathema to rabid Jacksonians, they accepted as a given in

any well-regulated society; yet the very conditions of southwestern life eroded their automatic endorsement of such prescribed social continuities. For all their practical alignment with the planter class, the humorists found their affective life—and their most productive moments—in the pervasive styles of yeomanry values. Though they may have believed them to be retrograde, the patterns of rural pursuits, work and play, religion, courtship and marriage customs, sporting protocols, and storytelling techniques all, in the words of one scholar [Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America*], “exhibited a general retreat from formalism, complexity, and sophistication,” qualities which the Old South elite yearned for and which eastern visitors promoted as national norms. (70-71)

His first sketch, “Cousin Sally Dilliard,” serves as a case and point of Justus’s claims. Set in a North Carolina “Court of Justice,” this piece features multiple voices: the formal voices of educated gentry, the frame or authorial narrator, and various embedded voices, including the unnamed lawyer (whom the authorial narrator mockingly dubs “a beardless disciple of Themis,” the ancient Greek goddess of law and justice).⁴ In addressing the court, Themis harshly passes judgment on the fight that took place at Captain Rice’s:

May it please your Worships, and you, Gentlemen of the Jury, since it has been my fortune (good or bad I will not say) to exercise myself in legal disquisitions, it has never before befallen me to be obliged to denounce a breach of the peace so enormous and transcending as the one now claiming your attention. A more barbarous, direful, marked and malicious assault—a more wilful, violent, dangerous and murderous battery, and finally, a more diabolical breach of the peace has seldom . . . been your duty to pass upon one so shocking to benevolent feeling as this. . . . (295)

Another character, disparagingly named Lawyer Chops, shows extreme impatience and condescension toward the “stupidity of the witnesses.” Chops reports: “one, that he heard the noise, but didn’t see the fight—another, that he saw the row, but don’t know who struck first—and a third, that he was very drunk, and could’nt say much about the scrimmage” (295-96). After apologizing to the court for wasting time screening such dubious witnesses, Chops says he has found a reliable person, a Mr. Harris, “a fat, chuffy looking man, a ‘leettle’ *corned* [inebriated],” “who was well acquainted with all the circumstances of

⁴All references to Ham Jones’s work, unless otherwise indicated, are quoted from Walser, who was the first to collect Jones’s humorous sketches.

the case, and who was able to make himself clearly and intelligibly understood by the court and jury” (296).

Though the situation here resonates with the familiar clash of social classes often scripted in antebellum Southern humor, it also fits the paradigm of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. Contrary to the common view of Willene and George Hendrick that Jones mocks the rustic Harris because his testimony is circular, incomplete, irrelevant, and clearly unreliable, I contend that he uses this character to undermine and destabilize authority. Harris, as his comments reveal, does not really know what happened at Captain Rice’s (or is too drunk at present to remember even if he does know) and avoids disclosing any information that would shed light on the specifics of the fight that occurred there. His obvious drunkenness, vernacular discourse, and repetitive, rambling manner appear to disparage him in the eyes of the court. In his many attempts to testify, Harris always begins with the same nonsensical, irrelevant information—“Captain Rice, he gin a treat, and cousin Sally Dilliard, she came over to our house and axed me if my wife, she mout’nt go” (296). And Lawyer Chops is unsuccessful in getting the witness to provide any usable and substantive testimony, a situation that aggravates the impatient lawyer to anger and frustration. In fact, Chops repeatedly does not allow Harris to go beyond this preamble. Though the Court intervenes and declares to Chops “that we may save time by telling the witness to go on in his own way” (296), Harris’s response, while expanding his incongruous and disjointed narrative, does not deliver the desired cause of the fight and the sketch ends anticlimactically. Thus in his nonsensical and deliberately evasive monologue, Harris is not only given the last word, he effectively employs it to disarm the legal authorities.

Several things serve to empower this rustic witness who challenges the social order by sabotaging the authority and propriety of the courtroom. In juxtaposing two discourses, formalized eloquence and free-wheeling and profane vernacular, and two disparate social classes, Ham Jones seems to favor the drunken Harris, allying himself with the rustic and empowering him through his humorously colloquial voice to defy the interrogating attorney and to evade satisfying the expectations of the court. The reversal that Jones effects creates a ludicrous situation that invites both those in the courtroom and the reading audience to enjoy. And interestingly, it is the Court, attempting to get the desired

information from Harris, demanding that he be allowed to tell about what happened at Captain Rice's in his own manner, that provides the opening for the witness to make fools of the legal fraternity. Yet, as the Hendricks note, "The judge is unable to control the garrulous witness" ("Jones" 244). In short, in his conscious manipulation of the narrative dynamics in "Cousin Sally Dilliard," Jones employs subversion by intentionally seceding from direct narrative control after his opening statement in the frame. He then turns over the unraveling of the plot to voices embedded in the narrative, including that of the rustic, which becomes the most dominant. In doing this, Jones indulges Harris's idiotic circumlocutions and digressions, even finding them rather entertaining. As a consequence, Jones subverts social hierarchies one last time by giving Harris the final word (actually about two hundred words) and ultimate control over the outcome of the sketch.

What is going on in "Cousin Sally Dilliard" illustrates what Justus calls the "humor of verbal maundering" (370), a staged foolishness that enables a vernacular character rather than denigrates him. Viewed in the context of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, in which comedy and irreverent spontaneity prevail, Jones equalizes the playing field. To Bakhtin (and this applies to "Cousin Sally Dilliard" as well), carnival encourages a "liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). In showcasing characters like Harris, Jones gives voice, space, and performative dominance to invest him with power to influence outcomes. Such liberal license indicates in the context of this sketch that the author clearly likes, even privileges, the rustic over his presumed social betters. As Justus persuasively argues, in many Southwestern humorous sketches, including "Cousin Sally Dilliard," one finds

a continual negotiation in cross-cultural encounters between backwoodsmen and authorial narrators (and the educated groups for which they are stand-ins). If the narrator is superior, it is at a level that is worked out in actual moments of intercourse, however brief. His literacy and professional status are taken for granted not only by himself and his peers, but also by the backwoodsmen in whose company he finds himself. The narrator is a figure in Southwest humor who knows and appreciates skills and talents that are not his. (63)

"The Lost Breeches," published in the *Carolina Watchman* on January 19, 1833, and the most overtly didactic of Jones's humorous works, also

shows affinities to Bakhtin's carnival culture. The frame story describes Captain Andrew Kincannon of Surry County, North Carolina, an actual garrulous "old Gentleman," storyteller, and Revolutionary War veteran, whom Jones knew when still alive and to whom Jones attributes "The Lost Breeches." Kincannon, "remarkable for an uncommonly strong mind. . . , [and] for evenness of temper, and for a certain quaint humor" exhibiting a "manner. . . unpretending and extremely dry," Jones observes, "combined more of the useful, the wise, the pleasant and innocent than any man we ever knew, he was truly '*as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove*'" (298). Jones also points out in the frame that since his intent is to print others of Captain Kincannon's "diverting stories" (298), his detailed description of him will be a useful point of reference. However, this plan may never have materialized since no other stories of Kincannon from the *Carolina Watchman* have been found.⁵

Though exhibiting a less dramatic form of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque than "Cousin Sally Dilliard," "The Lost Breeches," also set in western North Carolina, is a cautionary tale. It features two gentlemen from Guilford County, the more loquacious and arrogant one being "a round, consequential looking man on a fat horse" (299) who has high expectations and desires regarding the extent of hospitality he seeks from Captain Kincannon at whose house (he mistakes for an inn) he requests to spend the night.⁶ This talkative stranger aggravates Captain Kincannon, who, the narrator points out, endures "a good deal of loquacity and presumption until bed time," hearing of his "wealth, his manner of churning of threshing, of plowing, of bringing up his children, managing his family" and describing "things happening in Guilford county, as if he thought it lay beyond the Atlantic—strange sights, scenes, battles, murders" (299). Furthermore, he insults his host's generous hospitality by insisting on paying him.

When this pretentious Guilford gentleman forgets his "breeches," leaving them at Captain Kincannon's house, he regrets having to go back

⁵The Hendricks accurately note that about half the issues of the *Carolina Watchman* during Jones's tenure as editor are not extant and no additional stories of Captain Kincannon have been found in that newspaper.

⁶Walser (298) recognizes a plot similarity between the first part of the sketch and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, which also features "two brash young gentlemen [that] mistake their host's country house for an inn."

to a place “where [he] had put on so many airs of a gentleman” (300). This situation sets him up to become the victim of duplicity. The Bakhtian social inversion occurs largely due to the Guilford gentleman’s vanity and naiveté. He finds two of the Captain’s wood cutters, informs them of his predicament, mentioning the money in his pants, and innocently hires them to retrieve those pants. As a consequence of losing both his “breeches” and his money, the Guilford gentleman departs, wearing an oversized pair of the Captain’s pantaloons “in which he could have carried his whole person” (300). What happens here is an instance of hierarchical leveling, cast in the familiar humorous script of the presumed sophisticate duped by countrymen.⁷ The inversion that ensues exemplifies the destabilization of class categories. And the resulting comedy derives from what Bakhtin calls the “peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (*à l’envers*), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear” (11). The gentleman from Guilford, humiliated by the savvy and opportunistic woodsmen, never recovers his money, his pants, or his arrogant self-esteem. Emphasizing the gentleman’s now “humbled” status, Captain Kincannon does not seem sympathetic to the victim’s misfortunes, nor seem bothered that his own woodcutters have taken advantage of the stranger’s naïve trust. Kincannon’s story concludes, noting that the Guilford stranger has regressed and withdrawn to the comfort zone of the security and insularity of home. And because of his experience in western North Carolina, he has become complacent, accepting and resigning himself to the pejorative identity of fool: he “took the road homewards, and never ventured upon his travels again. He used afterwards to say, that he had learned more in that one days trip than many find out in their whole lives; he had found out that he was a fool, and that home was the best place for him” (300).

A similar kind of rustic empowerment within the context of what Bakhtin describes as the liberating function of comedy, temporarily disrupting and inverting the social hierarchies, can be found in Jones’s “McAlphin’s Trip to Charleston,” a sketch featuring different social levels. Published in Porter’s *Spirit of the Times* on July 11, 1846, and reprinted in his anthology, *A Quarter Race in Kentucky and Other*

⁷While Walser 299 says the paradigm is “town slicker-made-dupe-by-country-yokel theme,” the Hendricks in *Ham Jones*, on the other hand, misread the status of the man from Guilford, identifying him as a yokel (36).

Sketches (1847), the sketch is partly set in Robeson County in southeastern North Carolina and involves Brooks, a major landholder and owner of a grocery (saloon), who desires to purchase a tract of land owned by Colonel Lamar of Charleston and adjacent to his own property. To negotiate for this parcel, “better in quality than the average of his own domain” (303), Brooks sends Angus McAlpin, whom he misperceives as the “smartest man in the neighborhood” (303). Characterized by acquisitiveness and excessive greed, Brooks, Jones tells us, during McAlpin’s absence, “had got himself into a very fury of impatience. He kept his eyes fixed on the Charleston road—he was crusty towards his customers—harsh towards his wife and children, and scarcely eat or slept for several days and nights, for he had set his whole soul upon buying the Lamar land” (303).

As the sketch progresses, McAlpin proves unsuccessful in acquiring this land and returns to Robeson County. In his embedded narrative, McAlpin gradually discloses to Brooks what had transpired in Charleston. From McAlpin’s revelations, it becomes clear, at least on the surface, that he is a naïf, a fool, thereby encouraging the reader to anticipate that this is just another countryman going-to-the-city script, a popular subject in antebellum humor. While McAlpin’s innocence and shallowness cause him to be a dupe subjected to the low tolerance of city sophisticates (when he asks a man for directions to Colonel Lamar’s house, his terse and inhospitable response is: “*Go to h—I, you fool!!*” [304]), his inexperience actually works to his advantage, causing him to alienate and unnerve his social betters. Eventually McAlpin finds his way to Colonel Lamar’s house and informs Mrs. Lamar of his business to purchase the land; however, she tells him that Lamar has ridden to the country but will return soon. McAlpin waits an inordinately long time, admiring the finery and luxury of the Lamar house. When Colonel Lamar does not return home and Mrs. Lamar asks McAlpin to carve the turkey, he blunders, creating disruption and desolation. Taking a knife, “a great big knife as big as a bowie knife, and a fork with a trigger to it on the other side,” as McAlpin describes it, he further relates to the reader’s amusement:

in the first e-fort I slashed the gravy about two yards over the whitest table cloth you ever seed in your life. . . . Well! I felt the hot steam begin to gather about my cheeks and eyes. But I’m not the man to back out for trifles, so I makes another e-fort and the darned thing took a flight and lit right in Mrs. Lamar’s lap! (304-05)

His mission unrealized, McAlpin runs away, and as he puts it, “cuts for North Carolina!” (305).

McAlpin’s sustained narrative of his experience in Charleston, uninterrupted by Brooks, his presumed social better, becomes an amusing apology for his failure to negotiate successfully for Lamar’s land in Robeson County. His failure, though apparently unintentional, nevertheless enables McAlpin to accomplish two things: to thwart the obsessive greed of the landowner Brooks and to interject chaos in the staid and stuffy genteel space of Charleston aristocrats.

The Bakhtinian carnival spirit is also manifested in “The Sandy Creek Literary Society,” one of Ham Jones’s most amusing and lively sketches. The sketch was published in the *Spirit of the Times* on August 15, 1846, its frame a brief letter from Jones to William T. Porter, the editor of the paper. The sketch’s source, Fred Thompson from Salisbury, North Carolina, “kept an excellent house of entertainment, and used to tell some good stories upon his ignorant neighbors” (306). One of his neighbors, Squire Ben Primm, Jones describes as “a small man, with a thin face, small mouth, straight nose, and dark projecting eyes,” “a man of pretty good sense,” which was “spoiled” “by the largeness of his pretensions” (306) and by the idiosyncrasies of his speech and demeanor:

[he] always delivered his words as if he was making a *set talk* or harangue. . . . His voice was pitched to a particular key, and he never so far deviated from the line of strict propriety as to fall below or rise above that pitch. His words were delivered as if they had been weighed and measured, and every syllable of every word, was as distinctly audible as the ticking of a clock in a bed room. . . .

From the judicial exercise, incident to the office of Justice of the Peace, he had acquired a fondness for the use of law slang, particularly for the word “aforesaid.” And when I have added that Ben always pronounced an O as it were an A, thus—“*harse*” for “*horse*,” “Thampson” for “Thompson,” etc. (306-07)

The story that follows Thompson’s introductory frame serves as a mockery of Ben Primm, the president of the Sandy Creek Literary Society and his fellow pretenders to culture, whose purpose, in Primm’s words, is to recommend a “*catterlog*” (308) of books from “*ancient and modern history*,” excepting novels, “to prvide the means to fartify our minds against ignorance and preju-*dice*” and “to promote *vartue* and *marality* among the rising generation” (307). Yet “scarce one among them . . . had ever read a book” (307). Though much of the humor of the

sketch depends on Jones's burlesquing of Primm's and his fellows' ignorance, pretense, and verbal miscues, it is a young village prankster and wag, Bill Jenkins, an "unedecated varmint" (309) recognized for "his propensity for *devilment* and fun" (308), who undermines their efforts to bring culture to the backwoods community and who engages the reader's admiration in the process. Bill Jenkins, as Justus notes, reflects a "subversive resistance to progress" as seen in Irving's 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,' playing "a sneaky version of Brom Bones to Squire Primm's Ichabod Crane," and shares a kinship with Longstreet's Ransy Sniffle and Hooper's Yellow Legs, "fomenters of mischief and tormentors of frauds" (477). But more importantly, Jenkins, who in his fun-loving roguery and shrewdness directed against deserving victims, anticipates George Washington Harris's likable rogue, Sut Lovingood. And his two pranks interrupt the proceedings of the Sandy Creek Literary Society, creating blatant comic disorder, and undermining their efforts to elevate the cultural level of the community. The rowdy Jenkins fabricates two timely, physically humorous disruptions. The one involves Squire Primm's stallion Selim and Thompson's Grubber, a "black, rough-looking pony" that clearly demonstrates he can "take care of himself." In contending with Selim, Grubber triumphs in the fray, kicking Selim, "whirling his hind parts" and giving "his assailant such a *clew* upon the under jaw, that [Squire Primm's horse] was fain to retire from the conflict" (308). And the other Jenkins executes in the Sandy Creek Church during the Squire's drawn-out prayer when the prankster tosses a small hornets' nest into an open crevice of Primm's breeches, an action that not only creates havoc and public embarrassment for Primm but also destroys the Sandy Creek Literary Society, which "never met again" (310). Again, Jones privileges chaos, the disruptive fun of a wag, and humiliates a pretentious, ill-equipped society opting for cultural uplift through regulation and reform. In doing this, Jones employs a motif of Southern frontier humor (flying stinging insects) used to celebrate comic chaos and disorder in a Bakhtinian carnival framework. First mined by Henry Junius Nott in *Novellettes of a Traveller* (1834), this popular motif was subsequently used with great comic effect in George Washington Harris's "Sut Lovingood's Daddy, 'Acting Horse'" (1854) and "Sut Lovengood's Version of Old Burns's Bull Ride" (1858), in one of Christopher Mason Haile's Pardon Jones letters (*New Orleans Daily*

Picayune August 17, 1841), and in Mark Twain's "A Boy's Adventure," published in the Hartford *Bazar Budget* in 1880 (Blair 243).

Like the previous four sketches, "The Frenchman and His Menagerie" is set in North Carolina, specifically Jefferson in Ashe County, a village "between three lofty mountains—the Negro, the Phoenix, and the Paddy," where the "inhabitants," Jones informs us, "were not of the 'law and order' party" (312). Published in the *Spirit of the Times* on March 16, 1850, this sketch too celebrates the Bakhtian carnival spirit, privileging the outright social anarchy of the folk community over the pretense and deception practiced by two outsiders, a Frenchman, Ponte Feezle, and an unnamed Yankee, his partner. The locals voice their resistance when they boisterously complain that the price of admission to the Frenchman's animal show is too high. Since many of the animals in the Frenchman's former menagerie, consisting of various "Asiatic" beasts, have died during the winter, he and his partner expediently try to replace them with some wild animals and few "not very common in these wild parts; such as an ass, and a goat, of an uncommon color, and an extraordinary beard" (312).

While the Frenchman does not anticipate the active resistance of the "strong, stout, dare-devil mountaineers" who storm the entrance to his show and knock him down in the process, the authorial narrator shows no sympathy for the victim. Instead, he reacts lightheartedly, mocking the situation and exclaiming that "Before poor Crapeau had regained his feet and brushed the dirt from his clothes, (for that is an office the Frenchman never forgets,) the whole crowd of rowdies and bullies had entered" (313). In fact, whether cognizant or not, the Frenchman, bemoaning the injustice and "his loss of profits," creates a wordplay that diminishes his pathetic status even more in saying "Dis de land of liberty. I ting so ver much. He take great liberty wid de stranger" (313). Once inside the menagerie, the mountaineers perceive duplicity, noting that the Frenchman's ferocious "Grand South American Tiger" is in fact a "Black Mountain *Paynter*," whom they boast they can "whip." (313). And they do just that, violently subduing the panther into capitulation:

Bill Reaves first planted a sledge-hammer blow right between his eyes. Hiram Ray gave him a horse kick on one side; while Douglas Dickson gave him another on the other side. Then kicks and licks, and cuffs and stamps, came down upon him so thick and heavy, that the poor brute, making one effort to disengage himself, jumped back into his cage, and fairly groaned in the spirit. (313)

Their carnivalesque violence continues when the rowdies initiate a fight between two of the Frenchman's other animals—a big monkey and a catamount—the latter “fasten[ing] upon the throat of his adversary, and [holding] on until the vital spark in the poor monkey was extinguished” (313). Incongruously desiring to “try the catamount for murder,” the mob moves to the court house, carrying the “prisoner” with them and expanding their disorderly activities to include a mock trial (with judge, counsel, and jury), which becomes a travesty of justice. When no verdict can be reached and the court takes a recess to “liquor,” in the meantime someone “had slipped into the court house, and had hanged the catamount until he was dead” (313). While we learn in the sketch's frame that the mob has been indicted by the Superior Court for inciting a riot, no verdict is disclosed, perhaps as indirect indication of Jones's endorsement of and justification for the comeuppance, the “fun” that the mountaineers directed against the Frenchman, a shrewd outsider who attempted to deceive them.

“Going to Muster in North Carolina,” published in the *Spirit of the Times* on July 18, 1846, provides a different application of the democratic leveling process seen in the previous sketches. The source, according to Jones, is John S. Guthrie of Chatham County, North Carolina, a long-time state legislator who “was distinguished for his good sense, fine wit, and occasionally some of the most extraordinary bursts of eloquence” and who recounted, “with inimitable glee” (305), the story about his attending his first muster at the age of eighteen. While George and Willene Hendrick see the sketch as satiric, Jones “hold[ing] up to scorn the institution of military training” (37), the principal amusement generated in “Going to Muster” depends on a reversal of the hierarchal gender power structure. In fact, the sketch's action is minimal and relatively subdued. Neither the central character, John Guthrie, nor the older gentleman Mr. Emerson, who plans to accompany him to the militia drill, is actually seen engaging in the free-wheeling activities—heavy drinking, fighting, and other masculine pursuits—typically associated with antebellum military musters. Instead, the sketch celebrates a form of Bakhtinian carnival subversion, which emerges when marginalized character Mrs. Emerson is moved from the periphery to the center as she vocalizes her strong opposition to and thwarts her husband's intent to attend a muster. When young Guthrie, hoping to

find a way to pass the time as he waits for Mr. Emerson to prepare for the muster, tries to converse with Mrs. Emerson, he readily discovers that she is unreceptive, is “in no very serene condition of temper” (306), her responses are curt and uncongenial; in short, she has no interest in talking to him. Yet this seemingly taciturn and reserved woman is much more than she appears to be. Guthrie also notices in Mrs. Emerson “a pent up storm in her face,” her anger seething; and when her husband, his muster clothes in hand, “proceeded towards the door of an adjacent room” (306), the narrator reports that she “boiled over” and verbally lacerates him:

“Old man!” said she, straightening herself up and pointing with a long skinny finger right at him; the old fellow stopped, and made a sort of half face to the right. “Old man!! Now you are going to that nasty muster, and there you’ll get drunk and spend all your money; and you’ll wallow in the dirt, and I shall have your clothes to wash. You *shan’t go!!*—YOU RAILY SHANT GO!!!” (306)

Although Mr. Emerson gets in the last word to his wife—“old woman . . . there was no use in making such a terrible to do about it, for I had partly gin it out any how!” (306)—he readily capitulates and young Guthrie abruptly departs for the muster, not “wait[ing] for any excuse from the old man” (306).

Not condoning the libertine activities of the muster gathering, a form of male bacchanalia affording men a temporary escape from the social restrictions of marriage, Mrs. Emerson, a character in the mold of Dame Van Winkle, the shrewish and controlling wife in Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle,” challenges staid patriarchal authority, successfully undermining and reversing the hierarchal gender order by vehemently resisting her husband’s muster designs and absolutely forbidding his attendance. Jones also insinuates that Mr. Emerson’s attending musters in past times likely provides a pretext as well as a context for her diatribe. Mrs. Emerson, it seems, has reached the point of no tolerance, unable to ignore and accept any longer her husband’s yearnings of “going to muster” where he can bond with other men seeking temporary liberation from civilized or conventional restraints and find an outlet for his immature inclinations.

Ham Jones’s “Cousin Sally Dilliard,” “The Lost Breeches,” “McAlphin’s Trip to Charleston,” “The Sandy Creek Literary Society,” “The Frenchman and His Menagerie,” and “Going to Muster in North

Carolina” may be viewed contextually as representations of Bakhtinian comical carnivalesque. Each of these sketches undermines the prevalent strains of solemnity and authority and extends dialogic privilege to the lower social order, including the marginalized. While Willene and George Hendrick generally see Jones’s comic sketches as “subversive [and they are that], holding up to ridicule the very institutions he and his class consciously upheld” (2), this claim is only partially true. More accurately Jones, in his travels on the legal circuit in western North Carolina, had ample opportunity to interact not only professionally but also socially with common folk since, as Justus observes, the Old Southwest (and certainly in the 1830s and 1840s this includes the sparsely settled region of western North Carolina) was a “permeable society,” one “discourag[ing] those conventional [class] biases” (42). Like many Southwestern humor characters, aptly designated by Mark Twain biographer Ron Powers as the “fictionalized boys,” Ham Jones, though publicly a bona fide Whig, favored and featured in his own sketches similar rustics, those Powers calls “the spoilers of the civilized order[and] the sworn destroyers of Whig manners and moderation” (156). As we have seen, in his sketches Jones (or his authorial persona) is neither judgmental nor condescending in his interactions with or descriptions of his marginalized characters. Rather, one senses his appreciation (perhaps even admiration) and certainly toleration of their antics, lifestyles, and even cultural and moral transgressions. Moreover, Jones typically delights in celebrating the unrestrained and sometimes aberrant behavior of his characters—drunken witnesses, rascally woodcutters, innocent fools, pranksters, fun-loving and violent mountaineers, and angry and assertive women. In featuring such characters, Jones, and by extension his readers, could á la Freud in the context of the medium of humor find vicarious enjoyment by defying personal inhibitions, social restrictions and moral repressions, and class and gender prejudices, gaining, if only temporarily, freedom from the constraints of their regimented lives and conventional experiences.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. 1968. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

- Blair, Walter. *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1960.
- “By the author of “Cousin Sally Dilliard”[Ham C. Jones]. “Capt. Kincannon of Surry” and “The Lost Breeches.” Walser 298-300.
- . “The Frenchman and His Menagerie.” Walser 312-13.
- . “Going to Muster in North Carolina.” Walser 305-06.
- . “McAlphin’s Trip to Charleston.” Walser 303-05.
- . “The Sandy Creek Literary Society.” Walser 306-10.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Trans. James Strachey, New York: Norton, 1989.
- Hendrick, Willene, and George Hendrick. Introduction. *Ham Jones, Ante-Bellum Southern Humorist: An Anthology*. Ed. Hendrick and Hendrick. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1990. 1-27.
- . “Jones, Hamilton C.” *Encyclopedia of American Humorists*. Ed. Steven H. Gale. New York: Garland, 1988. 243-46.
- Jones, Hamilton C. “Cousin Sally Dilliard.” Walser 295-97.
- Jones, H. C. “To the Patrons of the Watchman.” (Salisbury, NC) *Carolina Watchman* 2 Aug. 1839. 3.
- Justus, James H. *Fetching the Old Southwest: Humorous Writing from Longstreet to Twain*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2004.
- Lynn, Kenneth. *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*. 1959. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976.
- Powers, Ron. *Dangerous Water: Biography of the Boy Who Became Mark Twain*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1999.
- Walser, Richard. “Ham Jones: Southern Folk Humorist.” *Journal of American Folklore* 78(1965): 295-316.

