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Hobby-Horses, Horseplay, and Stephen Crane's "Black Riders"

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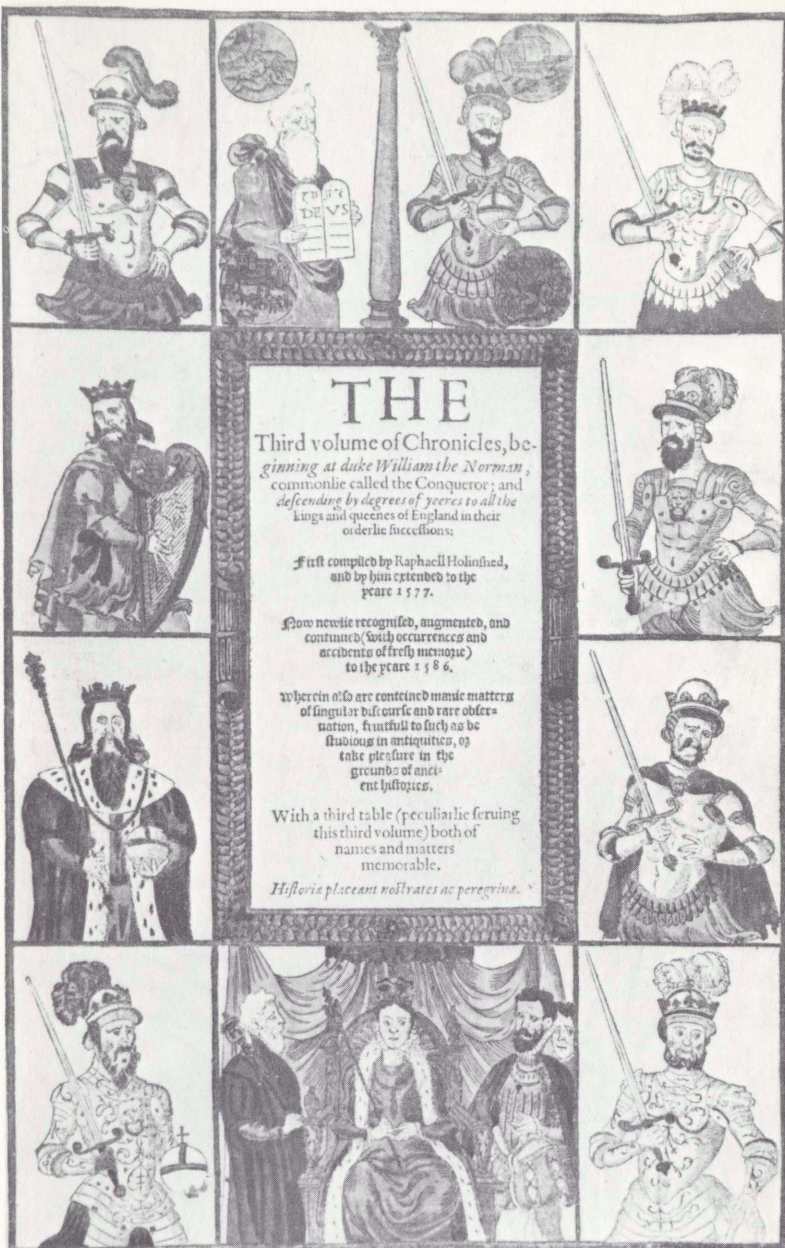


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TITLE PAGE TO VOLUME III
 Holinshed, *Chronicles*, 1587 ed.
 (about one-half actual size)

Sol Feinstone Collection, Syracuse University

THE COURIER

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The Roycroft Quarterly

A SOUVENIR AND A MEDLEY:
SEVEN POEMS AND A SKETCH BY
STEPHEN CRANE



May '96. PRICE 25 CENTS. No. 1.

HOBBY-HORSES AND BLACK RIDERS

Hobby-Horses, Horseplay, and Stephen Crane's "Black Riders"

By Donald Vanouse

Not long ago, on a visit to the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, I saw a bizarre little illustration on the cover of the *Roycroft Quarterly* occasioned by the publication of Stephen Crane's first volume of poems, *The Black Riders and Other Lines*. (Boston: Copeland and Day, 1895). The Roycrofters had substituted polka-dotted rocking horses for the death symbols of Crane's black horsemen. The imagery seemed a surprising anticipation of the Dadaism which occurred about twenty years later in the wake of World War I. The Beardsleyesque, Art Nouveau style of the drawing exemplified the ironies of Crane's work and the rich relationship between literature and the visual arts during the 1890's.

Furthermore, the design of the *Roycroft Quarterly* showed that the Roycroft Workshops at East Aurora, New York, were capable of more valuable work than the critical commentary in the literature on Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters had suggested. Thus, in addition to providing a brilliant parody of Stephen Crane's poetry, the cover drawing pointed toward a re-consideration of the achievements of the Roycroft workshops themselves.

Inspired by the Arts and Crafts workshop of William Morris in England, the Roycrofters, under the leadership of the flamboyant Elbert Hubbard, emulated the standards of craftsmanship set down in England, though without achieving the impact that Morris had had in Europe and America.

Since completing his Ph.D. dissertation on Stephen Crane at the University of Minnesota in 1971, Donald Vanouse has been teaching American literature at the State University of New York, Oswego. The Roycroft Quarterly illustration discussed here has led to a broader inquiry, "The Assimilation of Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters," which has been assisted by a grant from the State University of New York Research Foundation.

A short while after *The Red Badge of Courage* had made Stephen Crane famous in England and America, Hubbard promoted a banquet in Crane's honor. Held in Buffalo, the dinner promised to be "the greatest pleasure" in the young novelist's life.¹ Crane bought a new shirt, borrowed an overcoat and a pair of patent leather shoes, and arranged for his friend Willis Brooks Hawkins to meet him in Buffalo for the occasion. Established writers sent greetings from all across America, and both the menu for the dinner and the May 1896 issue of the *Roycroft Quarterly* were published as souvenirs with examples and illustrations of Crane's writings. But the dinner itself was no more solemn and dignified than the polka-dot rocking horses on the souvenir issue of their quarterly, which the Roycrofters had designed to satirize Crane's "Black Riders." The banqueters were raucous and boisterous, and at least one man, Claude Fayette Bragden, berated them for insulting the guest of honor.² Crane's own responses to the dinner suggest that he was not offended by the festive fusion of mockery and respect. His well-developed sense of irony probably enabled him to accept the "horseplay" of the banquet as a social equivalent to the critical parody expressed in the polka-dot rocking horses.

The cover of the souvenir issue of the *Roycroft Quarterly* epitomizes the mockery and respect in the Roycrofters response to Crane's works. Furthermore, the cover of this issue, shown here, depicts the relationship of Crane's imagery to symbolist literary conventions and clarifies the pattern of irony which unifies *The Black Riders and Other Lines*.

In the lower-right corner of the Roycroft cover, there is a little man shown in a preposterous pursuit of the unreachable horizon. His grasping hands and pursuing feet are appropriately enlarged to emphasize the intensity of his efforts. This simple caricature refers to a poem in *The Black Riders* which begins, "I saw a man pursuing the horizon." It captures the tension between satire and sympathy which is found in many of Crane's poems.³

The central figures in the cover illustration constitute a rather impertinent visualization. The Roycrofters' drawing parodies the apocalyptic "Black Riders" of the title poem by presenting their steeds as polka-dot rocking horses. To see the focus of this parody more clearly, we should remind ourselves that Crane's imagery is not unusual.⁴ In William Butler Yeats's "The Shadowy Horses" (1896), for example, the "horses of disaster" plunge with "tumultuous feet" and show that "sleep, hope, dream [and] endless desire" are all vanities. Similarly, poem XXXVI in James Joyce's *Chamber Music* (1907) refers to charioteers in "black armor" that are charging across the land.

¹*The Letters of Stephen Crane*, ed. R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes (New York: New York University Press, 1960), p. 81.

²See: *The Letters of Stephen Crane*, pp. 85-86.

³*The Complete Poems of Stephen Crane*, ed. Joseph Katz (1966; Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972).

⁴For another approach to this image, see John Berryman's psychoanalytic interpretation in *Stephen Crane* (1950; Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 320-322.

Like Crane's black riders which "came from the sea," these images by Yeats and Joyce exploit conventional associations between blackness, charging horses, and the evil of the world.⁵ Crane's poem ends by naming "the ride of sin;" the others end with references to love as a shelter from sin. In the context provided by all these poems, the *Roycroft Quarterly* cover can be seen as a nearly Dadaist parody of the literary conventions exploiting blackness and horsemen as symbols of evil.

In the later poems in *Black Riders*, as well as in other works, Crane himself is less conventional in his presentations of sin and sinners. Just as he did in *Maggie, Girl of the Streets*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and "The Blue Hotel," so in these later poems Crane supplements and subverts conventional interpretations of colors, gestures and sins. "In the desert" (p. 5), "Well, then, I hate thee, unrighteous picture" (p. 14), "A god in wrath" (p. 21), and "There was one I met upon the road" (p. 35), are poems in which Crane's images for sin are more complex than the "black riders" of the title poem. In the next to last poem of *The Black Riders*, "God lay dead in heaven," Crane qualifies the sentiment, offered by Joyce and Yeats, that love shelters from chaos. The woman in Crane's "God lay dead in heaven" merely *attempts* to shield "The head of a sleeping man/From the jaws of the final beast" (p. 71). There is no assurance that the gesture will succeed: the lover simply tries to provide a shelter. The beast is final.

The last poem in *The Black Riders*, "A spirit sped through space," adds an ultimate irony to Crane's depictions of the human relationship to evil. The spirit in that poem, after seeking and praying, finally despairs and asserts, "There is no god." At that moment, the spirit is smitten by His hand. Even our bleak, apparently godless universe contains the possibility of a last, monstrous meaningfulness. Our awareness is limited, Crane says, and neither our fears nor our desires are appropriate anticipations of the earth's stunning unpredictability. Crane's *Black Riders and Other Lines* leads the reader through possible perceptions of his relationship to sin and evil. The book concludes by affirming the limits and the ironies of such perceptions.

The hobby-horses on the cover of the *Roycroft Quarterly* are a visualization of the ironies developed in Crane's first volume of verse: that our versions of sin are based upon illusion, like the pretenses of children at play. The double parody of the polka-dot rocking horses and the horseplay at the banquet, acknowledged a promising and uncompromising literary ironist.

⁵These poems have been reprinted in *The Symbolist Poem*, ed. Edward Engleberg (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1967), pp. 269 and 274. Engleberg's book reveals how deeply the poems participate in the period's concern with evocative imagery.