

Don Marquis: The Tragic Humorist

By John Hallwas

Illinois has produced some nationally famous humorists, including newspaper columnists Eugene Field, Finley Peter Dunne, and George Ade—all associated with Chicago—but the most broadly talented figure of that kind was Don Marquis, who enjoyed success as a newspaper columnist, fiction writer, poet, and playwright. He amused his fellow Americans from World War I into the 1930s—becoming the most well-known humorist of his era—and he also wrote some serious works as well. But ironically, his life was marked by one tragedy after another during his later years. When Marquis died in 1937, newspapers across the country carried articles celebrating his work, but since then, he has become an obscure figure.

Marquis was born in 1878 at Walnut, a hamlet east of Rock Island in Bureau County. The son of a physician, he graduated from the local high school at age 15. Like Carl Sandburg, who was born in the same year, at nearby Galesburg, Marquis worked at



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many jobs around his home town—in a drug store and a clothing store, for a sewing-machine company and a poultry slaughterhouse, at the post office and the local newspaper.

In 1898 he moved to Galesburg, to study at Knox College, but for financial reasons, he dropped out after a few months. He returned to Bureau County, where he taught in country schools and edited a village newspaper—jobs that required no college education. Influenced by Eugene Field and George Ade, he wanted to write a newspaper column. But his experience with small-town culture convinced him that better opportunities were found in cities.

Marquis moved to Washington, D.C. in 1900 and worked in the Census Bureau and for the *Washington Times*. He was also a reporter in Philadelphia for a short time. Then he moved to Atlanta, where he wrote newspaper editorials and later assisted humorist Joel Chandler Harris by co-editing, and writing for, *Uncle Remus Magazine*. Of course, Harris often wrote about animal characters, especially Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox, who are central to “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story” and others, so that probably influenced the young writer from Illinois.

Marquis moved again, to New York, in 1909, and soon became widely known as a columnist for the *New York Sun* and the *Herald Tribune*. He also wrote his first book, the novel *Danny’s Own Story* (1912), about a youth whose disillusioning experiences are akin to those of Huckleberry Finn. As that suggests, the aspiring author was deeply influenced by Mark Twain.

But the most famous literary characters created by Marquis were animals, Archy and Mehitabel—an insightful cockroach who used a typewriter and an old cat who claimed she had a human soul. Their adventures and discussions formed a humorous commentary on contemporary interests and values. (Marquis always wrote the imaginative columns reflecting their views without using any capital letters,



Born in Walnut, Illinois, Don Marquis had a distinguished career as a newspaper columnist in Washington, D.C., and New York City. Photos and illustrations courtesy of Western Illinois University Archives.

claiming that Archy composed them, and typed them out at night, but was unable to reach the shift key on the typewriter.)

A literary cockroach, Archy rails at many social problems, but he often takes a pragmatic view of intellectual matters. Referring to Einstein’s relativity theory, for example, he says,

“old doc Einstein has abolished time, but they haven’t got the news at sing sing yet.”

Mehitabel is an amorous but aging alley cat of easy virtue and wide experience, whose persistence in the face of challenges is inspirational. As she says in “the song of mehitabel,”

“i have had my ups and downs
but wot-the-hell, wot-the-hell . . .
my youth i shall never forget,
but there is nothing i really regret.
wot-the-hell, wot-the-hell,
there’s a dance in the old dame yet.”

As that suggests, the free-spirited Mehitabel is always undefeated, despite her impoverished circumstances and the challenges of old age.

It is now hard for us to realize how well-known these two animal commentators were in the first half of the 20th century, but the Archy and Mehitabel articles were later published in three collections that went through several editions.

Marquis went on to write 32 books, most of which were volumes of humorous or satirical writing in verse or prose—such as *Hermione and Her Little Group of Serious Thinkers* (1916), *Prefaces* (1919), *Poems and Portraits* (1922), *The Almost Perfect State* (1927), and *Chapters for the Orthodox* (1934). Because he was a congenial drinker, his favorite topic was Prohibition, and he often ridiculed the socially insensitive anti-liquor movement. Or as Archy once put it,

“prohibition makes you want to cry into your beer and denies you the beer to cry into.”

It is not surprising that one of the most engaging short stories by Marquis is “How Hank Signed the Pledge,” which appeared in his story collection, *The Revolt of the Oyster* (1922). I discussed it long ago in a scholarly article for *MidAmerica* (1979), pointing out that it was “about an unregenerate drinker who obstinately stands against the efforts of an entire town to reform him,” and “it satirizes those people who put stock in temperance pledges and other outward indications of decency, such as church membership.” So, it reveals some shallow aspects of Midwestern small-town culture. I also indicated that the central figure in the story, Hank Walters, was inspired by a man who had lived in Walnut, Illinois, when the author was a boy.

Another Marquis short story that I also discussed years ago is “Country Doctor,” which appeared in *American Magazine* in 1935. It portrays the most admirable man in a small town, who has great concern for those around him—and it was an attempt to pay tribute to the author’s father, who had

been a popular physician in Walnut. As those stories show, despite his long experience in New York,

Marquis did some-times base writings on his Illinois background. Indeed, his insightful but unfinished, posthumously published novel, *Sons of the Puritans* (1939), also reflects small-town culture and was obviously influenced by his background in Walnut.

He also wrote a very successful play called *The Old Soak* (1926), in which

the main character is a humorous, good-natured drinker. It had a long run on Broadway and was also performed in many towns during the Prohibition era—including Skowhegan, Maine, where Marquis himself played the lead in a summer stock production. (It was eventually filmed, in 1937, as *The Good Old Soak*.) Marquis wrote a few other plays that were performed in New York, but they were not as successful. He was also an occasional screenwriter in Hollywood.

Marquis was eventually elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and was awarded the Mark Twain Medal for his outstanding contribution to American humor.

But if he was fortunate as a writer, his private life was just the opposite. His only son, a precocious child named Bobby, died of a degenerative disease in 1921, at the age of five. Marquis blamed himself for not saving the boy—even though he had taken Bobby to several physicians for treatment. Two years later, his wife, Reina, suddenly went into convulsions and died at their home, with Marquis looking on helplessly. He was devastated.

Marquis took in his unmarried sister, Maud, to help raise his only

other child, a daughter named Barbara. But Maud was an unstable person and soon became a constant source of concern and expense. In fact, by 1925 she had become a dope addict, so he struggled to help her.

Marquis gave up his column to be at home and help his daughter cope with her mother’s death. And he was remarried in 1926, to an actress named Marjorie Vonnegut, who was a good stepmother for Barbara. But tragedy struck again, for Barbara died of pneumonia in 1931, at age 13. Marquis had difficulty coping with that loss. Then, in 1936, Marjorie became ill and died also, at the age of 44. So, the socially outgoing American humorist eventually had no family.

By that time, too, Marquis had already suffered a stroke, so he spent the last couple years of his life in ill health. He died in 1937, at age 59.

In one of his finest poems, “A Gentleman of Fifty Soliloquizes,” Marquis expresses the emotional strain involved in close relationships—and the potential for tragedy. He ends that poem with an anguished appeal for humor, as a kind of relief for one who has known so much sadness, and who harbors profound personal losses:

“Give me your mirth.
It bores me when you weep.
My loves you cannot touch.
They’re buried deep.”

In famous author E. B. White’s introduction to a posthumous collection, *the lives and times of archy and mehitabel* (1940), he asserts that Marquis was “a parodist, historian, poet, clown, fable writer, satirist, reporter, and teller of tales”—in short, a multi-talented writer. He was indeed, and his best works deserve continuing appreciation. 

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