Comic Periodicals

Nicholas Hiley

University of Kent

Humour was an essential part of British life in the nineteenth century, and comic periodicals were a vital element of that humour. Beginning as small-circulation, text-based magazines, heavy with political content, they expanded dramatically through the century to offer a mixture of politics, social comment and pure fun, delivered through a range of illustrated magazines and comics, to a host of new readers.

These humorous periodicals had their origins in London political life of the 1830s, which was a world of insiders, with its own language and jokes. They developed from the political parodies, caricatures, jokes and gossip in weeklies such as *Bell's Life in London* (1822-66) and *The Age* (1825-46), and were, in effect, a subdivision of the existing market for this type of printed material.

To understand the content of these new weekly magazines, such as *The Satirist, or Censor of the Times,* launched in April 1831, readers had also to understand the personalities and gossip of contemporary London politics. But with fierce debates over the Reform Bill, introduced in March 1831 and designed to extend the vote to the middle classes, there were enough who did.

Figaro in London

The first of these new magazines to have national impact was *Figaro in London,* a 1d weekly launched in December 1831. It was edited by the twenty year old Gilbert Abbot à Beckett, who declared his wish to imitate the success of *Le Figaro,* launched in Paris in 1826, and to have some impact 'in these reforming times, when political abuses are the general topics of discussion'.

Figaro in London was characterised by the small cartoons of Robert Seymour, by political jokes and gossip, and by its often scurrilous theatre reviews. It spawned a number of provincial imitators, including *Figaro in Birmingham* (1832), *Figaro in Sheffield* (1832-38) and *Figaro in Liverpool* (1833), and by 1834, when à Beckett handed the editorship to Henry Mayhew, reputedly had a circulation of 70,000 copies a week.

These weekly doses of political humour suited the times, and in April 1837 *The Penny Satirist* was launched under the editorship of Bernard Gregory, to provide even more abusive attacks on public figures. But a change in the political climate, in particular the rise of working-class Chartist agitation after 1838, made such attacks less appealing to prosperous readers.

Figaro in London ceased publication in June 1839, but two years later a new 3d weekly magazine appeared that was to pioneer a new respectable political humour. *Punch* was founded in July 1841, with strong links to *Figaro in London,* for Henry Mayhew was joint editor, with Gilbert à Beckett its most prolific contributor. It was also subtitled 'The London Charivari', in reference to another Parisian satirical magazine started in 1832.

Punch and Its Imitators

Mark Lemon, one of *Punch*'s original founders, became editor in 1842 and consolidated the magazine's appeal to the profitable middle ground of opinion. More expensive than its rivals, *Punch* became known for the sophistication of its humour, and its avoidance of crudity and scandal. By 1860 Lemon had raised the circulation to 40,000 a week, with jokes that were as likely to concern the 'servant problem', as contemporary politics.

Punch came to define the boundaries of respectable humour and many publications tried to imitate its success. The first was *Diogenes, a Light Upon Many Subjects,* which appeared in January 1853 and concentrated on political satire. But the first serious rival to *Punch* was *Fun,* launched in September 1861 under the editorship of Henry J. Byron, a prolific comic dramatist. *Fun* was so close a copy of *Punch* that William Thackeray called it "Funch"[1], but it cost only 1d, and thus undercut its rival.

The first number on September 21, 1861 suggested that *Fun* would appeal to those young metropolitan readers who already bought the new 'penny newspapers', such as the *Daily Telegraph.* 'Passengers by steamboats will find out that the fun'll be necessary to their getting on', boasted its punning introduction: 'omnibus riders are certain to wonder how they have bussed so long without any *Fun'.*

Fun was still a metropolitan magazine, boasting good commentary on London literature, fine arts and the theatre. By 1865 the Bookseller described it as 'the only successful rival of *Punch'*, and, with a weekly circulation of around 20,000 copies, *Fun* itself attracted further imitators. Two of these—*Tomahawk* and *Judy*—appeared in May 1867.

The Tomahawk: a Saturday journal of satire, was edited by Arthur William à Beckett, the twenty-two year old son of the first editor of *Figaro in London. Tomahawk* combined comic writing with biting political satire, and became particularly known for the big pull-out drawings of its principle cartoonist, Matt Morgan. At 2d it sat in the market between *Punch* and *Fun,* and probably sold around 10,000 copies a week.

Judy was a more serious rival to *Punch,* for it was not only—as the name suggests—a deliberate copy, but undercut it at a price of 11/2d. However, magazines like *Fun* and *Judy* were not simply rivals of *Punch,* for they subdivided and expanded the market, offering a slightly racier humour at a lower price, and employing a different group of younger writers and cartoonists. They also covered different aspects of political opinion, *Fun* being Liberal and *Judy* declaring itself 'The Conservative Comic'.

The Commercialization of Comic Periodicals

Comic periodicals were becoming a paying business, and in 1870 Henry J. Byron sold *Fun* for £6,000 to the family firm of engravers Dalziel Brothers, who treated it primarily as a business venture. Contributors were put on "measure pay" and paid by column length,

regardless of the size of type. A full column was £1, with a minimum of 6d, and no author knew how much they would be paid until the text was set.

In 1872 Dalziel Brothers also bought *Judy*, and ran the two magazines side by side for sixteen years, despite their differing politics. *Punch* remained the market leader but, as the contemporary commentator Henry Fox Bourne noted, it was 'at its lowest level after 1874, when Tom Taylor became editor'[2]. Rival publications sprang up, including two from Birmingham, *The Dart and Midland Figaro* launched in October 1876 and *The Owl: A Journal of Wit and Wisdom* started in January 1879, as well as *Moonshine, a Conservative* imitator of *Punch*, launched in July 1879.

These humorous journals gave increasing space to social topics, and their political comment was generally blunted by comic detachment. Despite the fragmentation of the market, their readers, as Donald Gray suggested, probably came from existing metropolitan social groups, 'comfortable within one or other of the established political parties':

They must have been read by people who had been conventionally educated and therefore could laugh at the point of parodies of familiar literary texts, who read a newspaper daily and therefore could understand allusions to very current events, who read new books and attended new plays, who bought new fashions and employed servants, gave dinner parties and went through rituals of courtship and went for vacation to Scotland or the sea[3].

Soon, however, a new form of illustrated comic journalism appeared, that broke away from the old and could truly claim to have created a new readership. The forerunner was *Funny Folks,* launched in December 1874 and subtitled 'A Weekly Budget of Funny Pictures, Funny Notes, Funny Jokes, Funny Stories'. *Funny Folks* sold for 1d, was heavily illustrated and bore little similarity to the older political weeklies. It was aimed at adults, but became the model for all later British comics.

Funny Folks profited from two factors transforming magazine production: wood pulp newsprint and the photographic printing block. Paper mills had traditionally relied upon rags for the fibres from which to make newsprint, but around 1870 the first wood fibre began to appear, and by the middle of the decade the manufacture of newsprint entirely from cheap wood pulp was a practical possibility. The prevailing price of newsprint was more than £30 a ton, but over the next twenty years it fell to £10 a ton, not only through the cheapness of the new raw materials but also from keen competition.

The second transformation came in illustration, which was now a vital part of humorous journalism. Illustration had previously involved the laborious process of wood engraving, but it was now transformed by photo-zincography, in which the woodblock was replaced by a zinc printing plate, created photographically from a black and white original. First demonstrated in the 1860s, and spreading rapidly in the 1870s, these cheap and quickly-produced "photo-zincos" gradually replaced woodblocks for the reproduction of all line drawings, including cartoons.

Cheap illustrations on cheap paper transformed the production of humorous magazines and offered publishers access to quite new readerships. In May 1884 the Dalziels grasped the potential of the new technology and created *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday,* a weekly 1d comic featuring a number of characters from *Judy.* The title referred to the Saturday afternoon "half-holiday" given to workers, indicating a broad audience and a focus on working-class leisure.

Two quite separate models were now emerging for British humorous journalism. The first was the *Punch, Fun* and *Judy* model of light social and political comment, which was followed by magazines such as *Pick-Me-Up,* launched in October 1888. The other was the *Funny Folks* and *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday* model of pictorial jokes and stories, which Alfred Harmsworth followed in July 1890 with the 1/2d *Illustrated Chips.* The difference between the two strands of comic journalism was vast. The hero of *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday* might confer the F.O.S. ("Friend of Sloper") Award of Merit on William Gladstone, but readers weren't required to know anything about his politics.

Humorous political comment gradually returned to the daily and weekly newspapers, which were expanding their content under the influence of cheap paper and consumer advertising. The staple of humorous magazines became cheap illustration, and competition was such that magazines like *Pick-Me-Up* had problems filling space. According to Frank Reynolds, who started contributing to *Pick-Me-Up* in 1893, when only seventeen years old, its owners bought 'whole consignments of continental drawings', for which the staff had to invent jokes. Sadly 'some of them were very weak and rather in the nature of what is known in the trade as 'he and she' jokes, or simple captions like 'Fishing for Jack' - ...a picture of a gay girl with rod and line giving the eye to a 'masher' leaning over the bridge'.

When a cheap magazine called *Sketchy Bits* was launched in 1895, Reynolds began contributing to that as well, recalling that its editor liked his drawings of figures in evening dress: '"Ah!" he said. "That's the stuff! I can do with plenty of that! Society people! See?" And "see" I did, for later I plied him with these subjects good and plenty'. It was in this sea of cheap illustration that the older tradition met its end, for *Fun* underwent a reduction in page length of issues., before being finally sold off and, in June 1901, incorporated into *Sketchy Bits.*

Judy suffered a similar ignominious fate. The Dalziels sold their interest in 1895, and the magazine began to fail. It started to carry announcements for 'Peculiar Photo Novelties, Choice Books and Cards' from an address in Paris, and 'Male and Female Model Studies for Artists' from Munich. In 1906 one of the proprietors was prosecuted for carrying indecent advertisements, and in the following year it folded, after making its owner, Amy Woodiwiss, bankrupt. Only *Punch* survived to carry the old tradition into the new century.

NOTES

[1] Alvin Sullivan, *British Literary Magazines: The Victorian and Edwardian Age, 1837-1913*. (London: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 135.

[2] Fox Bourne Vol. II, p.299.

[3] Donald J. Gray "A List of Comic Periodicals Published in Great Britain, 1800-1900, with a Prefatory Essay," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 15 (March 1972), pp. 2-3.

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