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Pencillings, Cuts and Cartoons: *Punch* and Early Victorian Comic Illustration

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Various source media, *Punch* Historical Archive 1841-1992



Introduction

The comic images published in *Punch* have proved to be both relentlessly entertaining and endlessly informative to generations of readers even when the precise nature of the visual and verbal 'joke' has remained obscure.

The energy and vivacity of *Punch's* graphic content, which extended far beyond the localised inclusion of caricatures out into the design of every aspect of each volume, issue and page of the magazine, is immediately apparent however the magazine was, and is, read. The yearly volumes added in several visual pleasures not found in single issues through the inclusion of a title page, an illustrated preface, an index generously decorated with pictorial capitals, and the gold stamped cover design of Mr Punch on the cloth boards of each volume (or paper boards in the case of the stereotype reprints begun in 1861). Crucially, too, the yearly issues of *Punch* comprising two six month volumes, contained the *Punch* Almanack [1], a work of enormous graphic sophistication popular enough to sustain the finances of *Punch* through its unstable early years.

The structure of the yearly Almanack created both a locally riotous page for each calendar month awash with images and a thematic unity that ran across all twelve designs. Part mocking pastiche of the solemnity, inaccuracy and jargon-ridden diction of various kinds of contemporary almanacs, *Punch's* Almanack used the graphic and tabular structures of the traditional almanac form as the basis for a subversive reworking of its graphic potential, insinuating a mass of tiny tumbling figures and visual jokes, as well as satirical text, within the grid-like structure of the conventional almanac page. Even readers of the monthly parts were rewarded for their bulk purchase through the presence

of coloured paper wrappers and a considerable body of advertisements folded round their four or five issues of the magazine.

For those readers who chose to read *Punch* in its original form of weekly issues, each contained a varied, if unvarying, assembly of visual elements comprising a full page image (initially called a 'pencilling', later the 'big cut' [2], and ultimately coming to define the modern term of 'cartoon'), illustrations printed in support of articles, autonomous one-off graphic jokes dropped into the text (many of them dependent on visual/verbal interplay for their comic effect), elaborately decorative capital letters as a mechanism for introducing articles, and, in early years at least, tiny comic silhouettes. All these elements were held within the precisely calculated geometric rules that defined each double columned square-ish page, and thus prevented the verbal and visual content from spilling out, over-energetically, beyond its frame. Such manageable, and carefully managed, visual diversity was made possible by the use of wood engraving as the invariable reprographic medium used by *Punch*, a medium that allowed for graphic images to be set and printed alongside letterpress as part of the printed page.

The First Wave of Artists

In order to sustain such a varied and prolific output of humorous images, *Punch* was fortunate in being able to call on a new generation of draughtsmen such as Richard Doyle, John Leech and John Tenniel in its formative years. These artists formed a 'new' generation in several respects: more genteel in their social origins and with more substantial formal art

training than many of the rather shadowy figures who had developed and sustained caricature in the years following Gillray and Rowlandson's deaths, the first wave of *Punch* artists were acutely aware of an expanding market place for illustration in the 1840s, driven by, but not exclusive to, the rapid development of serialised fiction and middle brow periodicals. In the event, very few established comic draughtsmen became involved with *Punch*. The rather obscure figures who had drawn for humorous and satirical print publishers in the 1820s and 1830s - William Heath, Henry Heath, Henry Alken for example - were becoming outmoded by 1841. The most inventive and innovative political caricaturist of the era, C.J. Grant, remained attached to a relatively radical and down-market clientele. Prolific generalist wood engraver/artists like Robert Cruikshank and Bonner, who concentrated on jobbing work for serialised miscellanies, play-texts and topographical works, never worked for *Punch*. Survivors from the fading caricature tradition - John Doyle (whose lithographed single plate political satires enjoyed a wide circulation), George Cruikshank and Albert Forrester ('Crowquill') - found their audience elsewhere than *Punch* although there were some contributions from artists such as William Newman, who specialised in humorous silhouettes, and H.G. Hine, one of the draughtsmen who had given *The Comic Almanack* its distinctive graphic form. The two most celebrated comic artists of the era, Robert Seymour and George Cruikshank, were also absent from *Punch's* roster of distinguished illustrators.

Seymour had died in 1837, and Cruikshank's reputation was developed highly enough for him not to need any more jobbing work. Accordingly, the first generation

of *Punch* artists was uninhibited by a strong sense of deference to the caricature tradition, open to the potential of wood engraving as both a commercial and expressive medium, and aware of the massive expansion of illustrated print culture as a rewarding locale for their evident talents and energies.

Competitors

Such 'newness' in its choice of illustrators, and the magazine's sense of the potential readership for a gentler, less personally directed mode of political satire, may account for the authority with which *Punch's* illustrative style came to dominate graphic humour in comic periodicals for at least the fifty years between 1840 and 1890. Many illustrated humorous periodicals, both early rivals from the 1840s such as *Joe Miller the Younger* or *The Puppet Show* and later magazines like *Judy and Fun*, adopted a page layout using ruled double columns and both full page and vignette wood engraved illustrations that were often hard to differentiate from *Punch*. Other weeklies competing against the early *Punch* for readers, such as *The Squib* (illustrated by occasional *Punch* artist William Newman), enlarged the scale of the *Punch* page without fundamentally altering its constituent elements. Other competitors saw the need for challenge rather than imitation, either by miniaturising the format, like *Man in the Moon* and *Gilbert à Beckett's Monthly Almanac*, which sought to combine the virtues of the small format pioneered by the *Comic Almanack* with the varied range of illustrative types made available by *Punch*.

A few magazines, particularly in mid-century, introduced new types of cartoon drawn on a massive

scale, in the belief that using the kind of spectacular double page two colour woodcuts by Matt Morgan that invigorated each issue of the Tomahawk would create a distinctive identity for the periodical. Will-o-the-Wisp, too, offered huge two-page folded cartoons by James Proctor which could be pulled out for display elsewhere, yet for all this attempt at individuality, the magazine still looked like a clone of *Punch*. It took a growing awareness of the potentiality of the comic strip, and especially the increasingly visible and popular presence of magazines built round the adventures of the wry everyman figure of Aly Sloper, to challenge the hegemony of the kinds of visual content established and sustained by *Punch* as appropriate and necessary for a successful comic journal.

Creating *Punch's* Visual Identity

Why was *Punch* so dominant in providing a model of how a comic magazine should look in the nineteenth century? Was such dominance the cause or the outcome of *Punch's* success? The obvious answer to such questions would be to refer to the individual and collective brilliance of the starry list of illustrators assembled to support the genteel bohemian bonhomie of the *Punch* brotherhood. The *Punch* Ledgers will for the first time allow us to get a firm sense of who was drawing what for *Punch* in its early years, and study of the ledgers may well cause a revised narrative of the magazine's graphic content to emerge [3]. If, as R.G.G. Price remarks 'at first Art was regarded as unimportant compared with the text', and the early issues of the magazine were filled with images by lesser known, but not inconsiderable, artists such as Hine, Newman, Thackeray (an underrated draughtsman who had offered his services to Dickens as a potential

illustrator of *The Pickwick Papers*) and the young Kenny Meadows, by the time that the renowned pairing of John Leech and Richard Doyle took over the main task of providing illustrations in the late 1840s the visual identity of the magazine had become central to its popularity. On Doyle's resignation in 1850, John Tenniel took over responsibility for much of the political satire to be found in the magazine. In the same decade Charles Keene joined the staff of *Punch*, and his interest in the comedy of contemporary manners even among the lower classes pushed the magazine even further towards social topics.

All of these early *Punch* artists became well known for their work outside of *Punch* as book illustrators, and all became well aware of the ways in which working for the magazine allowed them to collect and republish their work. *Punch* allowed its best known artists to sign their full-page images with initials or monograms, and identifying the artist must have been one of the pleasures of reading the weekly issues. In the 1860s, Leech, who had perhaps lost some of his comic energy, was joined on the staff by George du Maurier, whose penchant for smart drawing rooms filled with fashionable repartee won him sustained popularity among *Punch's* more sophisticated readers. Although Keene and Tenniel worked long into the century, other late Victorian *Punch* artists of note included Linley Sambourne, Harry Furniss, Bernard Partridge and Phil May. After the first generation of artists left *Punch* in the 1850s, *Punch* illustrations, both the 'big cuts' and the smaller images, became increasingly naturalistic in mode, losing the grotesque elements originally brought over from the caricature tradition, and frequently replacing satire with whimsy. It is important to

acknowledge that the outstandingly able and versatile team of loyal artists assembled by *Punch* was immensely well attuned to the interests and values of the magazine's readers. But it is probably true to say that, in laying out the forms, shapes and modes of graphic content in the 1840s in ways that came to dominate Victorian comic magazines *Punch* was not so much innovative as acquisitive.

Of course, *Punch* was centrally responsible for making the term 'cartoon', rendered distinct from the fading idea of 'caricature', an aspect of its modernity. The shift undertaken by *Punch* that moved graphic satire from 'caricature' first to 'pencilling', and then to 'big cut' and 'cartoon' certainly signalled the democratisation of graphic political satire, with the satirical 'bite' of the engraver and etcher replaced with the tentative outline of the 'pencilling' and then the demotic energy of the '(wood) cut' and the 'cartoon', now redefined as the central form for visual political commentary. The 'newness' of *Punch*, in terms of its visual content, lay more in its ability to pull together the potentialities of a broad range of forms of graphic comedy that had been evolving in the 1820s and 1830s and had been able to draw a vastly increased number of consumers into the market place.

The Weekly 'Big Cut'

The 'big cut' - the full page cartoon on a political or socio-cultural topic that anchored each issue of *Punch* in its immediate historical moment - derived from a number of experimental attempts in the 1820s and 1830s to locate topical large scale political caricature within periodical or serial formats. John

Doyle's long series of topical lithographs, drawn as somewhat wispy and understated lithographs, and C.J. Grant's lengthy series *Political Drama* (1833-1835), innovatively produced as a series of eye-catching gigantic woodcuts, were two attempts from the 1830s to sustain single plate political caricature into a more democratised and fun-seeking market-place. Both used simplified linear outlines and eschewed tonal complexity. There had been attempts to adapt large-scale lithographed political caricature to periodical forms as early as *The Glasgow Looking Glass* in the mid-1820s, but it was only in the 1830s that Thomas McLean's *Looking Glass* found ways to combine traditional graphic political satire and an increasing demand for smaller scale, more diversionary humorous visual 'jokes' into a viable magazine. *The Looking Glass*, illustrated successively by William Heath, Robert Seymour and Henry Heath was inevitably expensive and, by using lithography as its reprographic mode, could only offer limited text, which had to be drawn on to the stone, as a part of the caricature's form. Nonetheless, the bringing together of images of greatly differing scale that offered both traditional caricature commentary on topical events and amused scrutiny of social mores was a major step forward in the development of the comic magazine.

Punch presciently adopted the wood engraving for its large scale weekly 'big cut', thus retaining the scale and presence of a long tradition of graphic political satire, and then separated much of the smaller scale socio-cultural visual commentary into wood engraved vignettes that could be dropped into the printed text either to support articles or as autonomous free standing jokes. For these smaller

illustrations, *Punch* was drawing on the rapidly increasing popularity of small scale humorous images that were beginning to populate a wide range of print cultural forms in the 1830s and early 1840s. Many such publications were produced as annuals, of which Hood's Comic Annual, which ran from 1830 to 1842, is perhaps the best known, or as Christmas gift books like the Comic Offering (1831-1835), but the comic small scale wood engraving had invaded and/or even conquered the market place for visual humour in the 1830s, finding its way into play texts and song books as well as ostensibly decorative publications. The small scale of the wood engraved image had been widely assimilated into publishing practice, and magazines like Gilbert à Beckett's Comic Magazine (1832-1834), illustrated by Robert Seymour, gave aesthetic credibility to the tiny vignette as a comic form.

Through such publications, a wide range of highly competent draughtsmen/engravers had emerged into public visibility, Robert Cruikshank and Robert Seymour among them, and the presence of an established named artist became one of the mechanisms through which such publications thrust themselves into the marketplace. *Punch* was quick to see the value of 'named' artists to its brand identity. The wood engraved comic vignette was also being increasingly used in the 1830s by artists like George Cruikshank as a relatively naturalistic aspect of early social exploration, and such well known Cruikshank illustrated texts from the 1820s and 1830s as *Sunday in London* and *Mornings in Bow Street* that offered a comic but acutely observed account of low life London, encouraged the *Punch* artists' burgeoning interests in adopting street life and the comedy of manners as their subject.

Silhouettes and other Graphic Tropes

Further evidence of *Punch*'s eclectic and inspired gathering of available visual resources can be found in its use of tiny silhouette jokes in the 1840s in particular, drawing in specialists in this illustrative mode such as William Newman and H.G. Hine to work for the magazine. Little silhouettes of this kind had invaded the pages of periodicals like C.J. Grant's *Everybody's Album* as space fillers, often forming visual/verbal puns where a common phrase or saying was given a de-familiarising twist by its accompanying image. The use of decorative capitals to begin articles, or to act as introductions to each letter in the index, was derived from a subversive adaptation of medieval manuscripts. All these varied resources showed themselves to best advantage in what may well be *Punch*'s finest visual achievement, the early years of the *Almanack*, where the graphic potential of the two column square-ish page chosen and sustained by *Punch* throughout the nineteenth century was overlaid, but not entirely abandoned, by an exuberant admixture of graphic and typographic elements drawing on the full range of graphic tropes and traditions available in the 1840s. Traditional almanacs, with their mixture of improbable prognostications and dull tables of 'useful' information, invited sarcasm and pastiche.

Their comic potential had been wonderfully exploited by *The Comic Almanac* (1835-1853) which combined several forms of illustration (full page etchings by Cruikshank, for example, but also tiny silhouettes by Hine dropped into the graphic structure by which the almanac traditionally formatted information) into the general scepticism and sarcasm that the editorial team brought to the publication. Several *Comic Almanack*

contributors, including draughtsmen such as Hine and authors such as Thackeray and the Mayhew brothers, worked for *Punch* thus bringing with them their experience of one of the most successful comic serials of the early Victorian period.

The Character of Mr Punch

Most important of all the lessons that *Punch* learnt from late Regency and early Victorian culture was the central importance of constructing the identity of a magazine through personification. Mr Punch, at the same time a complex satirical persona, a reiterated visual presence, and an abstract tutelary spirit for *Punch*'s way of seeing, proved an endlessly fertile and easily identified mechanism through which the magazine shaped itself. The use of memorably named satirical personae as a means of exploring the follies of contemporary society had originated in the comic literature and caricature of the late Regency period. The urban adventures of Tom and Jerry together with their chosen companion Corinthian Tom had shaped Pierce Egan's enormously successful and much imitated *Life in London*. Less frivolously, William Combe's *Dr Syntax* had launched himself on various tours of both city and countryside. Caricaturists of the late Regency, eager to adopt a persona that both characterised their satiric purpose and gave a memorable identity to their work, used signatures, both verbal and graphic, such as 'Crowquill', 'Paul Pry', and 'Sharpshooter' to suggest the qualities of their satirical eye. The value of such a verbal/visual presence was quickly taken up by satirical magazines, most famously the long running *Figaro* in London, edited by Gilbert à Beckett and mainly illustrated by Robert Seymour, who had drawn the image of *Figaro* that acted as the

magazine's masthead. Other magazines were less successful in trying to follow the same process - *Asmodeus* in London somehow lacked *Figaro*'s ubiquity and cultural allusiveness, and quickly vanished from the market place. While *Punch* drew much inspiration from French sources, notably its deferential subtitle of 'The London Charivari', it was the British cultural history evoked by Mr Punch that carried the most resonance. Turning such resonance into an immediately recognisable visual form was one of the central reasons for *Punch*'s continuing success.

Conclusion

Punch was extremely fortunate in being formed at a moment when it could capitalise on the rapid, innovative and varied market place that had been recently established for graphic and illustrated humour. The magazine's first two decades of publication saw the forms, modes and characteristics of its graphic content become the model for comic journals to aspire to, or at least to imitate. There is no proper or sustained history of the magazine's visual content. Spielmann's wonderfully detailed account of the history of *Punch*, published in 1895, based on memory and some primary records, still offers more information about the journal's history than any other single source. There are both late nineteenth-century and recent biographies of many of the artists who contributed substantially to *Punch* that situate their work for the magazine within the broader context of their artistic lives. It is to be hoped that this online edition, together with the new information to be found in the ledgers, will make it more possible to give the visual content of *Punch* the attention that it deserves.

ENDNOTES

[1] *Punch* deliberately used the '-ck' spelling of 'Almanack', which even in the 1840s would likely have been regarded as archaic. This was probably the intention. *Punch* was making a slightly ironic appropriation of the idea of an almanac, and the use of '-ck' spelling arguably serves to emphasise the irony.

[2] This is also referred to as 'Large Cut' by a number of scholars and academics

[3] Contributors to *Punch* wrote or drew for the magazine anonymously. However, the *Punch* office kept editorial ledgers that recorded who contributed to each issue. The author data from these ledgers is included in the *Punch Historical Archive*, allowing users to see for the first time who contributed specific pieces to the magazine.

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