Representations of Courtship and Marriage in Cartoons of the Mid-Victorian Period

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Introduction: Relating to the Victorians

I was introduced to *Punch* in a graduate seminar on "Victorian Humour". My professor joked that she was challenged by her colleagues to demonstrate that the Victorians were not as dour, repressed and humourless as their reputation suggested by teaching a course dedicated to defying the perception that Queen Victoria was not amused. Of all the texts chosen for the course, *Punch* most forcefully demonstrated the long-standing Victorian commitment to satire, parody and fun despite the earnestness of the era. To drive this point home, my professor sent us to the library to peruse the pages of the premiere vehicle for Victorian humour in order to identify one cartoon that we would analyse in a short paper and present to the class. [1]

This assignment had a profound impact on my scholarly development, sparking my interest in Victorian periodicals and influencing my future research. There was something almost magical about turning the pages of *Punch* that made me feel connected to the nineteenth-century readers who had enjoyed the magazine more than 100 years ago.

I was fascinated by what I discovered in *Punch*, particularly the cartoons on fashion and romance, which resonated with my own experiences. I was drawn to illustrations of women whose ridiculously impractical outfits got them into tricky situations. The immense circumference of a fashionable crinoline skirt in the 1850s and 60s could make it nearly impossible for a lady to pass through a narrow doorway, fit into a carriage, walk through a shop without knocking merchandise over, or venture outside on a windy day without revealing one’s underclothes or being turned inside out like a giant umbrella. Images poking fun at such fashion trends made the Victorians human and allowed me to see myself in them. Likewise, images of women and men flirting or trying to impress each other but often inadvertently embarrassing themselves also struck a chord. Romance has always involved a bit of savoir-faire bordering on ridiculousness or outright deception. Both love and fashion are themes that, while bound by their own social and historical contexts, serve as a good starting point for studying *Punch* because of their familiarity. The accessibility of such cartoons can capture the attention of students and make them think more deeply about nineteenth-century social conventions. Yet, there are always details or implications that remain out of reach without further research and analysis. Thus, inviting students to identify and write about cartoons on such themes is an excellent way to draw them in while also asking them to learn how to reconstruct the nuances of the past.

Fashion and Romance

Cartoons satirizing both fashion and courtship are frequently intertwined in the pages of *Punch* as both subjects highlight confusing and rapidly shifting gender, class and social norms. For example, crinoline skirts were used to comment on the restrictive nature of middle-class courtship practices and the rebellion that accompanied its proscriptive rules. In "Crinoline Convenient Sometimes. A Warning to Mothers" (4 October 1856: 131) a young lady is able to successfully hide her beau from her unsuspecting mother with her large skirt, indicating the potential transgressions of both courtship and fashion. Indeed, the implication is that the gentleman could hide under her skirt just as likely as behind it. In an era in which unchaperoned meetings between middle-class couples were
forbidden, any kind of secret rendezvous would have been quite provocative, particularly one that would put a couple in such close physical proximity. In contrast, "Under the Mistletoe" (3 January 1857: 10) demonstrates that a large skirt could also keep a young man away from the object of his affection. Despite the invitation offered by the holiday greenery overhead, poor Augustus is confined to the far edge of the cartoon frame, too far away to land a kiss due to the "detestable invention" of the crinoline skirt. Here fashion is either a cumbersome barrier to love or a desirable protection from unwanted advances, depending on one's romantic inclinations.

As with its depictions of fashion, *Punch* exaggerated the absurdities of romantic entanglements and the disappointments of married life, yet it captured a kernel of truth that rang true for its readers. At a time when marriage was usually a lifelong arrangement, one’s actions leading up to it took on great importance. Marriage loomed large in the pages of *Punch* for good reason: it was a defining moment in the lives of both men and women. During the Mid-Victorian period, marriages were imagined as matches made for personal fulfilment as much as for status and power. Indeed, love was the driving force behind the Victorian concept of companionate marriage, though finding a mate who was of at least equal status was a given. It was important to make marital choices informed by both the head and the heart. Courtship was a trial period to ensure that one’s potential partner was suitable on both counts. Yet, as *Punch* frequently pointed out in its reports on the proceedings of the Divorce Court featured in the series "Punch’s Essence of Parliament", marital decisions were fraught with peril. To avoid a disastrous match, conduct books encouraged ladies to scrutinise their suitors for signs of disrespectful behaviour, a lack of religious feeling, or any inclination toward expensive tastes or vulgar amusements. A gentleman was to be on the lookout for ill-tempered or coquettish behaviour as well as for evidence that his potential bride was attentive to her household duties, affectionate to her parents, and pleasant to be around. [2] Of course, the biggest impediment to determining the character of one’s future spouse was that young ladies and gentlemen were not allowed to spend time alone together. The working classes were the exception as they had much greater freedom to interact without supervision. Middle- and upper-class men and women met and interacted mainly at supervised events such as home visits (also known as "calls"), tea parties, formal dinners, picnics, balls, or garden parties that often featured outdoor games such as croquet.

As one of the few physical activities that took place in a mixed audience of ladies and gentlemen, croquet offered an opportunity for young people to interact more freely with each other than they were able to do in other, more formal social settings. In addition, the pairing off of croquet partners who could hold private, unsupervised conversations made this outdoor amusement particularly risqué. "The Romance of Croquet", a *Punch* essay about the game, notes that it offers "lots of opportunities" for "fluttering flirters" to say "sweet things" (4 August 1866: 49). Cartoons about croquet were surprisingly popular and typically focused on the game as a courtship activity, even if an accidental one as it is for Mr Spencer Poffington whose poor eyesight and clumsy gait cause him to trip over a
croquet hoop and plummet toward the unsuspecting Lady Honoria Bouncer, who is certainly not the intended object of his desire (30 April 1864:177). Cartoons about the game of croquet are one instance in which courting men get as much if not more ribbing than women. In “New and Ingenious Idea for Croquet” it is suggested that men do so little playing and so much flirting that they might as well be put to work as hoops in the game (19 October 1867: 158). By the 1870s and 80s roller skating and bicycling rivalled croquet as rebellious activities that facilitated courtship by allowing participants to evade supervision and strike up intimate exchanges.

Courtship and Marriage

Even racier than croquet was the notorious practice of advertising for a spouse. By about mid-century, personal marriage advertisements, professional matrimonial offices, and matchmaking correspondence clubs were possible - if not respectable - venues for seeking a marital partner. No longer was it enough to rely on tight-knit social circles for introductions to acceptable mates; young people were taking the matter into their own hands. [3] In addition to the alternative methods of courtship that permeated the periodical press, matrimonial bureaus promising a more hands-on approach to matchmaking arose. *Punch* even offered up its own fictional matrimonial agency in response to the inundation of letters from young ladies “complaining of the present most appalling state of proposal destitution” (“Punch’s Matrimonial Agency” 2 April 1842: 135). The editors register their fear that “should the present Government take no measures to alleviate” the lack of proposals “the fair sufferers will rise en masse, and marry the existing bachelors by sheer force”. While women’s lives were supposed to be bound my marriage, their active roles in seeking spouses are comical here, perhaps because they unsettle notions of proper feminine behaviour. In “Pretty Innocent!” (26 November 1864: 224) a similarly active, though naïve and unassuming, young lady enters the Register Office where civil marriages are performed expecting to be paired with a husband rather than to marry one she’s already obtained. Confusing the registry office with a matrimonial agency, she informs the clerk that she thought she would “find somebody who wants me”. The business-like aspects of nuptial arrangements horrified those preoccupied with the idea that love was the precursor to any successful marriage. Even worse was the idea that women who aggressively sought to nab a husband were essentially selling themselves like products in the marriage market. In “A Caution”, a woman waiting for an omnibus accidentally stands next to a sign that reads “Young Man Wanted” (3 December 1864: 225). The humour comes from the implication that she is advertising her need for a “young man”, though the ad is presumably for the warehouse whose name appears on the threshold above. But the comic effect also comes from the equation of matrimonial advertising with prostitution since the woman (even if unwittingly) offers herself to men on the street.

While matrimonial ads and agencies are extreme examples that exaggerate the contractual exchange of marriage, “Punch’s Physiology of Courtship” series highlighted the more mundane qualities of marital negotiations as it dissected how and why marriage proposals occurred. The second cartoon in the series (30 March 1867: 134) critiqued nuptial decision-
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“garden party”, “theatricals”, “balls”, “country dances”, “rotten row” (a fashionable area of Hyde Park for horseback riding) and “seaside”. Of course, the results always require a great deal of sorting through to determine what is relevant. While browsing through the results, one will surely discover additional terms that lead in new directions. I caution students that keyword searches, while often highly productive, can be disappointing if one does not know the period appropriate terms to use in a search or does not pay attention to terms that arise during initial searches and that can guide them in new and unexpected directions. The best advice I can offer is to expect a great deal of trial and error, be persistent and learn to capitalise on the initial results of such searches.

I also encourage virtual browsing to capture the excitement of serendipitous discoveries as well as the insights that come from understanding the context in which any piece is placed. For example, understanding that some cartoons are a part of a series like “The Physiology of Courtship” can give students insight into the complexity of *Punch*’s exploration of a given subject. Such cartoon serials deserve more attention and would make an excellent jumping off point for further research. Likewise, the series “Punch’s Essence of Parliament”, which explored many of the debates about marriage laws and married women’s property rights culled from The Times, sometimes spawned companion cartoons or narratives on particularly interesting issues. The question of how much income a gentleman required before marriage was one of the topics raised by a Times correspondent that generated a series of responses in Punch in 1858, including the article “The Great Marriage Question” (23 January 1858: 32) and the cartoon “The Frugal Marriage Question” (30 January 1858: 50). [See Gary Simons’s essay in this database for more on the relationship between *Punch* and the Times]

Recognising the interplay of these selections is an important and sometimes overlooked part of using a database like the *Punch Historical Archive*, which is notable for its preservation of full page browsing even while offering keyword searches that go straight to particular items of interest. Above all, when searching digital periodical databases, I encourage my students to be patient and embrace the challenge of the hunt as the process is often as important as the final result. In the end, students who use the *Punch Historical Archive* are sure to find something that sparks their interest and takes them closer to understanding the important ways in which the experiences of the Victorians resonate with our own lives.

**NOTES**

[1] I’d like to thank Dr Clare Simmons for introducing me to the wonders of *Punch* at the Ohio State University Cartoon Library.

