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Themes of Medievalism in *Punch*

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



Introduction

The gothic revival began long before Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne, but it was in the nineteenth century that it reached new heights. Triggered by the works of Sir Walter Scott, a veritable craze for all things medieval swept through Britain. Stage productions based on Ivanhoe (1819) delighted audiences for decades, and Astley's Amphitheatre, London's first purpose-built circus, became the place to see staged tournaments. The popularity of Scott's work not only led his imitators to invent ever new tales of knights and derring-do, but also resulted in a re-examination of the concepts of knighthood and chivalry, and attempts to redefine chivalry for modern times.

Medieval Themes in *Punch*

Much of Victorian literature, art and architecture reflected the widespread contemporary interest in the Middle Ages, and *Punch* was no exception: throughout the nineteenth century and, indeed, beyond, articles and cartoons took up medieval imagery and themes. While the large cuts [1] were often used to lend a certain gravitas to the subject - often with reference to art or literature - in the rest of the magazine, medieval themes were mostly used to satirise medievalism. Those who took chivalry too seriously, or even attempted to apply it to modern life, were mocked mercilessly, as were chivalric themes in the arts and literature. In the 1840s, for example, Charles Barry's new Houses of Parliament became the butt of many jokes: Perhaps one of the most brilliant pieces to mock the historicising style of decoration that was used within and without the new buildings appeared in the issue from 29 January 1848: in a letter to the architect ("Our Barry-eux Tapestry"

33) Mr. *Punch* offers him a design for a tapestry for the House of Lords. This design, "Ye Foraye of the Frenche" (33-38), takes the form of a series of cartoons by Richard Doyle that stretches across six pages of the issue and that is indeed modelled on the Bayeux Tapestry. In contrast to the medieval model, Mr. *Punch*'s parody does not celebrate a French victory; instead, with reference to the contemporary invasion scare, an attempted invasion by the French is foiled by Mr. *Punch*, his dog Toby, and the wooden pavement in some of the streets of London. Thus, the piece can also serve as an example of the way the humour in *Punch* often works on several different levels and makes fun of several things at the same time.

Another such multi-level attack against Victorian medievalism can be found in 1866, namely George du Maurier's series "A Legend of Camelot" (5 parts: 3 March 1866, 94; 10 March 1866, 97; 17 March 1866, 109; 24 March 1866, 128; 31 March 1866, 131). With its allusions to "The Twa Sisters" (Child 10) and to Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott", the burlesque ballad pokes fun at both the ballad revival and the vogue for Arthurian romances, while the accompanying illustrations parody the style of the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers, in particular the style of book illustration made popular by the Moxon Tennyson from 1857.

Punch also mocked the application of the concept of chivalry to modern times. A good example of this is "Sir Lancelot and Sir Jingo" (10 April 1880, 161), which not only criticises the use of chivalric terms, but also the rampant jingoism so often connected to this. Yet in its

sharpest attack in this regard the magazine launched at politicians who romanticised the Middle Ages as a time when the Crown and the aristocracy had been strong. In the early years of the magazine's existence the attack was levelled in particular at the Young England movement around Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli himself was mocked by *Punch* writers and artists not only for his political views and for their expression in his 1844 novel *Coningsby*, but also for his ethnicity. In his case the criticism of medievalism often acquires anti-Semitic overtones as in "Young England's Old Habits" (7 June 1845:252)), which depicts Disraeli as an old clothes' seller, an occupation associated with Jewish men in the nineteenth century. He tries unsuccessfully to sell John Bull old habits (a pun on clothes/conventions), among them medieval armour. Apart from constituting a general attack on the Young England movement and a personal one on Disraeli, the article and the cartoon can also be read as a reference to the Victorians' fondness for collecting medieval armour.

Another type of parody can be found in Richard Doyle's and Sir John Tenniel's initial letters from the 1840s and 50s. Doyle, who was known as the "Professor of Mediæval Design" among his colleagues, delighted in drawing caricatures of little knights and fair maidens for his initial letters. In many cases these acted as an extension of the satirical thrust of the magazine, as when a mock-report of a fictional political discussion on the situation in Ireland during the famine was accompanied by an initial letter of a little knight saving a young woman from a ghastly dragon ("Punch's Privy Council," 6 December 1845:244). The knight's behaviour stands in ironic contrast to the political parties at

Westminster, who initially did nothing to save the damsel in distress, i.e., Ireland.

For several years after Doyle's resignation from the magazine, his successor Tenniel continued the tradition of initial letters with medieval caricatures until he became responsible for other illustrations in the magazine, and the drawing of initial letters fell to other artists. By the 1860s medieval caricatures had mostly disappeared from the initial letters. However, Tenniel frequently used medieval themes for his large cuts, e.g., "The Knight and His Companion" (5 March 1887: 115), a caricature of Bismarck that is modelled on Dürer's *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. Moreover, for several title pages to the magazine's bound semi-annual volumes, Tenniel transformed Mr Punch himself into a knight, starting with his very first title page for Volume 19 (1850). In most of these depictions Punch becomes the Champion of Britain (see Prelim page to Vol. 118, 1 January 1900), who receives a laurel wreath from Britannia (Prelim page to Vol. 81, 9 July 1881) or rides on the British lion (Prelim page to Vol. 53, 1 July 1867). These illustrations display a curious mixture of mockery of Victorian medievalism, pride in the achievements of the magazine, and self-deprecating humour. The latter is more than apparent in the contrast between Mr Punch's heroic poses on the one hand and his strangely shaped body and his spotted horse on the other. To heighten the parody, on the title page of Vol. 66 the proud steed is very clearly made of wood and looks like a toy horse with moveable joints Prelim: 1 January 1874.

Using the *Punch Historical Archive*

The *Punch Historical Archive* is an immensely helpful tool to trace themes of medievalism in *Punch*, even if several of the more obvious search terms turn out to be surprisingly unhelpful: for example, "knight" renders rather unsatisfying results due to the fact that it is also a surname as well as a title (narrowing the search to include only cartoons considerably improves the results), and a search for "Middle Ages" for the most part points to references about middle-aged persons. "Chivalry" results in a better list of targets and, more importantly, makes obvious to what extent medieval terms had become part of everyday speech. A search for "Ivanhoe" shows the influence of Scott's work throughout the nineteenth century: more than once, artists and writers drew a parallel between Scott's story and politics, for example in "Punch's Essence of Parliament" of 3 May 1873: 180.

Searching for specific persons in the archive shows what a long memory Mr Punch had-or perhaps, Victorians in general, for the writers and artists clearly expected their audience to get the joke even when they were referring to some long-ago event. Thus, a quick search reveals that Lord Eglinton's youthful folly of hosting a medieval tournament at his Scottish country estate in 1839 followed him all his life; and similarly, *Punch* never allowed Disraeli and Lord John Manners to forget that as members of Young England, they once considered elements of feudalism the perfect means to improve the condition of Britain: during the 1868 election, Tenniel depicted Disraeli as a knight in the large cut "Before the Tournament" (21 November 1868: 216-217), and in 1887 "Essence of Parliament"

still refers to Manners' "Young England days" (25 June 1887: 313).

"Young England" itself makes for an interesting search term and reveals how language changes: while in the 1840s the phrase was used to refer to a specific political group, by the 1860s it was increasingly used to refer to the younger generation, especially in the social cuts. "Tournament," too, reveals a shift in language usage, for towards the end of the century the word came to be increasingly used for sports competitions - the shift in meaning is remarked upon in *Punch* itself, namely in "Merry England in the Modern Times", a short piece in the Almanack for 1884. The term thus makes clear to what extent everyday life became permeated by chivalric language and chivalric ideals.

As this overview of possible search terms indicates, the *Punch Historical Archive* forms an extremely useful tool for students and scholars from a broad range of different disciplines, including, but not limited to, literary studies, media studies, history, political science and linguistics. For example, in a teaching unit on the historical novel, articles and cartoons from *Punch* might be used to discuss conventions of, and attitudes to, the genre: in a past seminar on the historical novel and the adventure novel, excerpts from *Punch* were used to introduce the concept of parody and then to bridge the gap between Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Thackeray's *Rebecca and Rowena*. Looking at satires and parodies of medievalism from *Punch* before turning to Thackeray's story also helped students with the interpretation of text-image relations in the latter.

Conclusion

As *Punch* is a satirical magazine, articles and cartoons need to be put into context in order to be fully understood. For instance, it might not be immediately obvious to students why Doyle's initial letter for "The Late Fight between the Premier and Young Ben" shows two tilting knights, especially when the article itself uses boxing metaphors. To fully appreciate the visual joke, you need to know that the initial letter refers to Disraeli's involvement with Young England. In a case like this, the digitisation of newspapers and magazines allows students and scholars to quickly establish the historical context, i.e. what this fight between the Premier (Peel) and Disraeli was all about, by conducting searches in other periodicals. This cross-referencing reveals that the *Punch* author, Percival Leigh, uses quotations from the actual parliamentary discussion - in other words, such cross-referencing helps us to understand the satire in *Punch* and its construction in more depth.

Yet it is exactly this cross-referencing which often presents the greatest challenge for students, especially in an environment where introductory lessons to the use of digital archives are not part of the regular curriculum. However, in such a case, it can be particularly rewarding to explore the possibilities of digital archives in the classroom. Focusing on a very narrow topic (e.g., the use of medieval themes in connection with one specific event) helps students to gain better results from their own research and to develop strategies they can use for future projects.

NOTES

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

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