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Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order, 1820-50

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It is 50 years since Edward Thompson introduced historians to the phrase, the idea, the reality of 'the condescension of posterity'.⁽¹⁾ And while Thompson restricted his lens to the poor and forgotten of late 18th- and early 19th-century Britain, for a number of years a small number of historians, John Barrell notable among them ⁽²⁾, have reminded us that there is another not insignificant condescension which scholars of this age have also engaged in: that toward its art. In short, the historic art we like possesses a striking influence on the historic art we write about. This is not of course a truism applicable to all art and to all histories of art, but certainly to speak of the history of comic art is largely to speak of William Hogarth, James Gillray, George Cruikshank and Mr Punch. It is to speak of comedy unsullied by filthy lucre, of passion unbridled, of audiences gagging for more, of art for art's sake, of satire for satire's sake. And although these men and their publications did indeed represent the foremost comic art of this era, scholars could do more than to follow the whims of collectors, of those who elevate particular bodies of work to the status of 'good' art for reasons other than their scholarly merit.

Perhaps with one eye toward this narrative, Brian Maidment's *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order, 1820-50* sports a work on its cover resembling the very same tradition it seeks to question and concludes

with a brief study of the canonical publication *Punch*. These framing elements are misleading, one suspects quite knowingly and deliberately, for the comic art which occupies the core of Maidment's volume derives from unfamiliar names, from unstable and protean formats, from work of indifferent quality. Of course indifferent should not be confused with poor, to do so would be to condescend the vernacular forms Maidment recovers, rather its use here is testament to the minimal significance aesthetic quality is afforded in Maidment's prose, a fetishism trumped by a desire ? as is the *modus operandi* of his book ? to restore what posterity has disregarded to their contemporary status: as loved objects.

The book proceeds in two parts. The first tackles Regency and early-Victorian humour, in particular its 'modes and markets', and opens with a refutation of David Kunzle's haughty characterisation of work from this period as little more than 'graphic bric-a-brac'.⁽³⁾ For whilst Kunzle saw in the 1820s a change for the worse, Maidment sees just change and in the following chapter seeks to evaluate this change against the accompanying loss of a Georgian caricature tradition as experienced by post-Regency comic artists. This loss was no phantom: the single-sheet satire so prominent in Georgian London did indeed wither away. And yet this withering was driven by a confluence of technological innovation and widening demand for comic images, and as Maidment deftly illustrates in the third and final chapter of the opening section, many of the comic tropes common to Georgian and Regency forms retained their vitality in the early-Victorian marketplace. This lengthy chapter, entitled 'Continuity, innovation and change: comic visual culture 1820?1850', forms the core of the book and is in its own right a significant contribution to the history of comic art.

The second part of the book takes the themes of continuity, innovation and change discussed with regard to the medium and reapplies them to the message, to a series of thematic case studies. These begin with a vibrant discussion of prints which depicted print shop window scenes and is followed by a chapter which focuses on the work of Robert Seymour, a 'jobbing' comic artist perhaps best known for his role in the creation of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. The focus then moves from an individual to an event, or more precisely to a series of social and cultural changes which vexed Seymour, his contemporaries and their audiences: the so-called 'march of intellect'. The final chapter of this part, and indeed the book, returns to stereotypes of dustmen: an old favourite of Maidment's and a useful example of how comic tropes could endure and evolve across and beyond the decades under discussion.

Contained within these chapters are a number of significant arguments. The emphasis on experimentation in comic productions from the 1820s foregrounds the centrality of commerce to the production of comic art. Medium and size, in a nod perhaps towards Jordanova⁽⁴⁾, remain constantly, unconventionally and vitally in view. And consumers are under Maidment's care far from passive agents grateful to receive comic art, rather they are active in making, remaking and reusing ? collectors might say mutilating ? the objects they bought. All this Maidment argues, makes the period under discussion not merely a post-Georgian or pre-*Punch* lull in the glorious history of British comic art, but instead a fascinating, turbulent and glorious period unto itself.

It is worth lingering on these arguments a little longer, to allow their import to percolate. On commerce, Maidment emphasises how pressure from consumers forced publishers and in turn comic artists to experiment and innovate. The consequence is to downplay the role of individual comic artists as agents of historical change. Thus on the comic artist Robert Seymour we read that 'however important the reputations and popularity of his illustrations might have been to the success' of Seymour's publisher William Kidd that 'Kidd depended on the relentless use of his brand name as a publisher to market his work' (p. 156). Elsewhere shifts in taste are elevated above artistic preference, with flexibility to commercial demands as opposed to idiosyncratic style considered the key quality of a successful artist. As Maidment writes: 'If adaptability had long been a characteristic of the jobbing artist and engraver, it was given a new intensity by the developing marketplace, of the 1820s and 1830s' (p. 80). On occasion Maidment seems pained by this suppression of artistic agency, reporting with some glee the revival of caricaturists names and their growing independence from text after 1830. And yet commerce dictated that even when comic artists were afforded a blank canvas, the size and format of that canvas was not of their own choosing: fold out pages, for example, were a compromise necessitated by the popularity of pocket sized books (p. 66). In a sense the

aforementioned Seymour exemplifies these themes. In order to adapt to the incorporation of comic art into print culture Seymour made himself and his work as adaptable as possible, and yet, Maidment reminds us 'in Seymour's case even such versatility was not enough, tragically, to ensure survival' (p. 172). Unlike their late-Georgian predecessors and in spite of their restless innovation and prodigious workloads, the artists of this era proved more often than not to be commercial failures.

On the varied and changing physical appearance of comic art which introduced such instability to the lives of comic artists, Maidment attributes this dynamic decisively to novel patterns of consumption. He writes:

In order to take advantage of the new mass readership being formulated at this time, comic art underwent a major change in scale (essentially becoming smaller), became widely associated with a variety of circumambient text, adjusted to seriality as a major mode of distribution and consumption, and learnt to use the monochrome linearity of the wood engraved vignette as a simultaneously expressive, decorative and humorous medium (p. 21).

Thus if work was not pocket-sized, it would often consist of large sheets filled with numerous miniaturised scenes and figures. Here the old tradition of political caricature could endure, though in 1830s serials such as McLean's *Monthly Sheet of Caricatures* or the *Looking Glass* it did so in smaller and wood-engraved form. Crucially, this shift from single-sheet single-scene caricature to single-sheet multi-scene caricature was not driven by demand for more but rather for modularity. As Regency comic art integrated with text, typically in the form of sheets bound into books, so modularity and choice became common features of comic art: the 'same' book could then be bought with no, some or all of the accompanying illustrations, the illustrations could be bought independently from a text, or the illustrations could be gradually bought and bound into a text. These developments predate and in a sense foreshadowed a wave of publications from the 1820s which 'gave readers considerable authority over their reading experience' (p. 33). Foremost among these was 'the scrap': sheets of uncoloured caricatures designed to be cut up, customised, remounted and collected. Maidment appears particularly enamoured by scraps, and not without reason. A 'rage for scraps' in the 1830s is, he argues, a critically undervalued aspect of British comic heritage, crucial not only because it exemplifies the need to reassess the stability 'of such categories as ?text?', '?illustration?' and '?book?' in this period' (p. 33) but also because this instability, coupled with the popularity of modularity and customisation, disrupts our ability to read patterns of consumption through traditional barometers such as price, quality and volume.

As we have seen, some early Victorians perceived in all this change the loss of a tradition of late-Georgian and Regency caricature. In a literal sense this was no phantom. The single sheet image, the one-time medium *de jour*, was indeed all but discarded by the 1830s, its message retained by nostalgia for the freedoms of an earlier age, for obsolete trades such as dustmen, for the tropes of caricature. Maidment's triumph is to see through change to draw deep and persistent continuities between Georgian and Victorian comic modes, to use the period circa 1830-50 as a vibrant discursive and commercial bridge. The afterlives of a genre of prints known as 'miseries' are a case in point. Developed in the late-1790s to send-up the 'miseries' of urban living complained of by London's new and old money alike, by 1810 artists including George Cruikshank, George Woodward and Thomas Rowlandson as well as publishers as unrelated as Rudolph Ackermann and Thomas Tegg had achieved significant commercial success with volumes explicitly advertised as 'miseries'. In these publications the accidents common within urban settings were transposed and reinterpreted onto the country, travelling and society at large. Thus the 'Miseries of...' genre had been born, the apotheosis of which came with the spectacular commercial success of Ackermann, William Combe and Rowlandson's three *Tours of Dr. Syntax* (1812-21). It follows that after success came assimilation, and miniaturized miseries became a commonplace feature of the modular multi-image comic productions prevalent in the 1830s. Early-Victorian anxieties saw this format renamed, albeit briefly, to 'nuisances', and yet the same familiar scenes remained:

... raucous street cries, the importunities of street vendors, pedestrians being battered by passing traffic, noisy dustman, and collisions between well dressed and filthy passers-by (p. 57).

Such persistence can be explained by more than mere nostalgia on the part of artists. Rather it is clear that consumer demand for 'miseries' spanned more than 30 years, suggesting a complex interaction between image, text and humour which bridged what have become the scholarly silos of Georgian and Victorian comic art. As Maidment writes, miseris demonstrate the existence of a nuanced 'dialogue between continuity and change':

Continuity being provided by a shared vision of urban misadventure and inconvenience, and change by the relinquishing of the large scale single plate engraved image as the dominant graphic comic mode to be replaced by wood engraving (p. 58).

Not that the emergence of wood engraving or lithography would entirely supplant the copper plate engraving. Using three contemporaneous satires on the 'march of intellect' as his focus for some pages (p. 194-8), Maidment argues once more that for all the fear of loss the tropes of Georgian satire endured. Not only did this occur in those occasional reproductions from copper plates which most obviously resembled work from earlier eras, but did so too in the modes of graphic production and presentation being experimented with during the 1820s and 1830s. In short, comic prints made in different ways may not have looked the same but their meaning could often be comparable, drawn from the same Georgian tropes. This modal and tropic fluidity ensured that 'traditional' caricature would appear simultaneously and nostalgically as miniaturised scraps, as prints which faithfully replicated both traditional form and content, and as comparable prints merely divested of all original form.

Comedy, caricature and the social order presents British comic art circa 1820-50 as an irreconcilably complex and unstable corpus of work situated between two far more manageable corpora. This instability made life hard for artists and publishers, leaving the historian few clear narratives to tell, few enduring names to hook onto. And those whose names have rang out in 20th-century historiography, George Cruikshank and Robert Seymour, have done so largely as a result of activities outside of the purview of this book: by virtue of their connection to serial and mass-market literature. Thus bereft of consistent forms and celebrity names this period has been condescended to, rendered of lesser significance to that which preceded it and that which would follow. And yet as Maidment argues such judgements critically undervalue the significance of this period of comic art, a significance exemplified by the very same ceaseless innovation, ruthless commercial environment and fluidity of personnel that has until now proven its scholarly downfall.

In seeing past decades of critical condescension, *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order* is a book of few missteps and plentiful insight. On occasion the Georgian print is unfairly represented as a flat and undynamic comparative to the prints that followed, arguments are reinforced to the point of repetition, and digital sources are referenced with insufficient detail. But these are mere quibbles, for the book also challenges text centric accounts of British culture between 1820 and 1850, it adds nuance and complexity to the 'mass' audience that emerged at this time, it shows how illustration and graphic satire played a role in making the novel reading habits of working people less threatening to the middle and upper classes, and it argues convincingly that Georgian graphic satire remained a strong influence into the 1850s: even finding its way into the pages of *Punch*. But above all *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order* is a book of huge warmth, a book littered with 'I's, a sense of passion for the subject matter, an acknowledgement to both the presence and the limit of interpretation, and an openness to the process of research - to the finds and collecting which underpin the volume. And all this personality lends itself well to comic subject matter. Few books manage to explore the comic and not only retain the comedy of the sources being explained but also build on them. To quote Maidment in full flow:

More menacing still, in 'The Suicide Punster; or, Wit reduced to Extremities', published in 1836 in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Comic Magazine*, 'The Great Unmentionable' concluded a ghastly Hood-like litany of puns with the following verse: 'Tis over, madness seizes me; a knife To put an end unto my puns and life! Yet, to be staked in the cross-roads, despair! Or should, perchance, down yonder lime-pit there - Be that my art! I go; and should men come Unto the spot I make my final home, Let them thus write my epitaph and crime, In life ridiculous, in death sub-LIME!' Clearly punning and self-destruction were also closely allied (p. 40²).

In Maidment's hands these puns come alive, any disdain toward this crudest of comic forms falls away, and the miscellaneous media which contained them are returned to something approximating their contemporary status. As they deserve to be, they become loved objects once more.

Notes

1. Edward Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 13. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge, 1980). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadside from c. 1450 to 1825* (Berkeley, 1973). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Image matters', *The Historical Journal*, 51, 3 (2008), 777-91. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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