

Semiotics and the Grotesque in Political Cartoons: Antebellum Editorial Caricatures as Historical Evidence

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Abstract: Through cartoonish distortion, grotesquery, and comedy, the art of caricature signals a lack of seriousness. Despite such appearances, I argue that editorial caricature is a valuable source of historical evidence that gestures toward the intersubjectivity of audience, production, and text. This dynamic interface presupposes complex cultural literacies required to “read” these cartoons. To the historian, editorial caricature presents unique insight into an artist’s imaginative appeal to a contemporaneous audience. In this article, I survey the features and expressions of the art of the caricature from sixteenth century Italy through the late Antebellum United States. I pair this brief historiography with interdisciplinary theory and an analysis of an 1856 editorial caricature by Philadelphia lithographer John L. Magee. I triangulate my analysis with inquiry in the arts and media of the period. My investigation yields evidence of patterns in this hybrid, verbal-visual discourse that recapitulate regional, national, and transnational themes. I argue that Magee’s meaning-making process in his graphic political satire titled “Forcing Slavery Down the Throat of a Freesoiler” mobilizes complex cultural matrices to identify prominent Northern Democrats as a grievous threat to the free-soil ideals adopted by an emergent Republican party. Magee’s complex, narrative and semiotic elaborations offer historical evidence of editorial caricature’s interactivity with ideology, politics, and rhetoric across both verbal and visual fields.

Keywords: semiotics; caricature; editorial cartoon; Antebellum politics; historical evidence

Introduction

When does a smirk become a grin, a grin a smile, or a smile a menacing leer? How does a viewer recognize ambivalence in the smirk of Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* or grotesquery in the famed artist's obscure caricature sketches? Such inquiry probes what semiotician Massimo Leone (2021) refers to as “cultures of the face” or “facespheres” (276). Leone argues that meanings expressed in representations of the human face indicate “a facial community” built on “oppositional patterns” and the shared recognition of “levels, gradients, and thresholds” within said oppositions (273). Artists that depict the human figure in portraiture or caricature compose within facial communities that carry unique aesthetic and semiotic implications for their work. According to Leone, alterations of the human figure, when wrought “drastically,” reveal the dynamics of facespheres most clearly (273). Therefore, as cartoon sketches typified by often-drastic distortions of the human face and figure, caricature offers graphic evidence ripe for the investigation of “facespheres” in discursive communities. These often-grotesque satirical cartoons communicate ideas and regulate meaning according to a communal index mapped in the linear oppositions of the face—in a grin, a smile, and a leer.

In this article, I study a system of signs in editorial caricature, a subtype of caricature defined by overt satire of political figures. I argue that the study of editorial caricature as a dynamic interface between audience, production, and text yields unique historical evidence of intertextual networks of communication. When “reading” an editorial caricature, viewers decode visual indices and interpret ambiguities to situate meaning in temporal and local contexts of aesthetics, genre, humor, politics, “facespheres,” and everyday life. However, sans an audience equipped with corresponding iconographical knowledge, a political cartoon becomes an obscure artifact, a curiosity. Editorial caricature's reliance on the viewer's interpretation presupposes complex cultural literacies required to “read” these cartoons. Graphic prints of editorial caricature offer underutilized historical evidence of an artist's imaginative appeal to an enculturated audience within a community of discourse.

To ground this assertion, I triangulate research in media discourse, aesthetics, and late Antebellum U.S political and intellectual history. First, I explore caricature as a participatory media that must be decoded by an enculturated audience. Next, through a brief survey of the art of caricature over time, I sketch a model of several distinct types, their features, and their affects. To conclude, I use this heuristic to analyze a lithographed editorial caricature produced in 1856 by Philadelphian John L. Magee. My analysis demonstrates that through a semiotics of caricature, Magee created visual narratives that recapitulated certain political, moral, and social attitudes as self-evident. Together, these sections describe the semiotics of “facespheres” in caricature, outline a heuristic for

analyzing caricature, and apply this lens to a historically situated intersection of producer, text, and audience.

Methods

In this essay, I contribute to studies that recognize caricature in editorial cartoons as integral historical evidence (Kemnitz 1973; Reaves 1995; Taylor 2017). I investigate the semiotic interface between producers, texts, and audiences in editorial caricature. My purpose is to encourage historical inquiry in editorial caricature by illustrating the embeddedness of “reading” this politicized art in specific cultural communities and demonstrating an approach to analysis. For this analysis, I have selected a period of national crisis and media expansion: the late Antebellum United States.

The decades preceding the Civil War marked a time of increasing volatility. During the 1850s, a profuse and vitriolic political discourse coupled with a nationalizing mass media contributing to what media scholar Richard M. Ohmann (2009) calls a time of “rapid emergence” when the dynamics of communication “reveal themselves more clearly” (271). In theory, this period of rapid advancement in media technology offers a unique period of discursive transparency, an ideal site for analysis. The semiotics of the mid-nineteenth century United States represent the response of human agency to historical causes to produce desirable effects, address social needs, and execute rhetorical strategies to these ends.

Among these strategies, representations of the human face can serve to regulate graphic discourse; this interface of cultures of the face and print media is the subject of my analysis. To locate a critical perspective, I draw on Thomas Milton Kemnitz (1973) who studies editorial caricatures as dynamic cultural artifacts. As a graphic medium, Kemnitz views editorial cartoons as an efficient means for conveying cultural ideology in which humor can “reflect social attitudes” about the subject depicted (1973:82,83). Further, Kemnitz argues that cartoons can reveal “contemporary interpretations of events [...]” (1973:92-93) as influenced by the media’s manipulation of consumers and the rhetorical construction of political personas. He outlines a model for the historical study of intersubjectivity in “popular attitudes and the cartoon” citing “the artists, the means by which the cartoons reach the public, their language and symbols, their relation to other means of communication, their intended function, and their audience” as the six components of this dynamic (Kemnitz 1973:86). This emphasis on an editorial cartoon as a distinct expression of discourse composed through dynamic interactions gestures toward concepts of intertextuality in linguistic anthropology and cultural history.

This intersubjectivity can be described in the words of anthropologists Charles L. Briggs and Richard Bauman (1992) as a “*lack of self-sufficiency*” in the “formal-functional

configuration of the discourse at hand [...]” (149). In reading an editorial cartoon, Kemnitz describes the viewer as an active participant who situates the graphic text in “relation to other means of communication” (1992:86). Briggs and Bauman describe this interaction as an audience’s requisite appeal “to other discursive formations to interpret [the text’s] patterning and significance” (1992:149). They refer to this as intertextuality. Further, cultural historian Lawrence Levine’s (1992) writing on “affective vehicles” describes textuality as interdependent meaning-making action (1392). This mutual concept of the intersubjectivity of the text in art history, linguistic anthropology, and cultural history grounds my analysis in interdisciplinary theories. To conclude, I analyze a lithographic print produced in Philadelphia in 1856 by artist and lithographer John L. Magee.

In this analysis, I ask: what kind of audience does this text imagine in its appeal? The answer gestures toward an audience of the rhetorical imaginary, the sum of the producer’s social knowledge shaped to a rhetorical task and expressed in the ideological labor of the representation. This once-dynamic discourse of a contemporaneous imagination is central to sociohistorical inquiry. Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1927) says it well when he writes, “the imaginations which people have of one another are the solid facts of society” (201-202).¹ What follows is my exploration of the means to disclose the imaginary in imagery, the “solid facts of society.”

The Interdependence of Meaning in Editorial Caricature

In this section, I connect interdisciplinary theories as a framework for understanding the intersubjectivity of editorial caricature. First, I connect Massimo Leone’s (2021) articulation of “facespheres” to the historical study of editorial cartoons. With emphasis on the caricature’s “pictorial” quality, Roger Penn Cuff (1945) asserts the importance of caricature distortion to the regulation of meaning in the persuasive art (87). Next, I reflect on the role of caricature in this meaning-making process by engaging with a philosophical discourse on the epistemic value of caricature in editorial cartoons. Here, I draw on the work of philosophy professor and aesthetician Christy Mag Uidhir. In “Epistemic Misuse and Abuse of Pictorial Caricature” Uidhir (2013) explores the seemingly “revelatory” quality of caricature in the editorial mode (137). Rather than a revelation, he argues that the apparency of the caricature’s claim is a manifestation of unconscious bias (137). Next, I build on this theoretical ground by exploring the art of pictorial representation, a quality both Cuff and Uidhir locate at the core of caricature’s function. To define these pictorial qualities, I reference aesthetician John Hyman (2000). Finally, I conclude by triangulating theories of intertextuality from literary studies, linguistic anthropology, and cultural history. David Francis Taylor (2014), Charles L. Briggs and Richard Bauman (1992), and Lawrence Levine (1992) each approach the concept of intertextuality through a different lens; together, their theories serve as a critical tool to better understand the intellectual and social functions of caricature in editorial cartoons and their value as historical evidence.

My purpose, here, is to offer theoretical backing for the assertion that caricature serves as an effective intersubjective medium for the regulation of meaning and intertextuality in editorial cartoons. Tensions perceived in the human face reinforce a semiotics of opposition grounded in sociocultural factors and what Massimo Leone (2021) calls biological “clusters and ranges” of faces (272).² According to Leone, these dynamics “continuously structure the ‘facesphere’ of a society [...] in contrast with other ‘facespheres’” (276). By distorting the face or figure of the subject, caricature mediates value in the visual field of the editorial cartoon. Read against the boundaries of a facial community, artful exaggerations and contractions of the human form eschew ambiguity. In an editorial caricature, then, the semiotics of the “facesphere” foreground a specific judgement through coded pictorial characterizations of those depicted. This is the key function of caricature in editorial cartoons, as a means of communicating ideological claims. My purpose is to examine this and other traits of caricature as intertextual signifiers comprehensible within the boundaries of a “facesphere” (e.g., by members of a facial community) and other cultural matrices. I argue that mapping Massimo Leone’s theory across interdisciplinary scholarship in caricature studies suggests new paths for analyzing the ideological labor performed by editorial caricature within a discursive community, with an emphasis on the semiotics of the face as the basis for rhetorical appeal.

The persuasive capability of editorial caricature is long-established. In a study of American editorial cartoons, Roger Penn Cuff (1945) writes that editorial cartoons are “designed to produce a humorous effect and to teach a lesson [...]” (87). The caricaturist frames this lesson to justify, condemn, or mock certain political identities represented in the grotesque figures. To Cuff, the editorial cartoon’s “pictorial” composition expresses an angle of vision and a valuation of the topic and of the figures depicted (87). This judgement is the rhetorical end of the editorial graphic.

Aesthetician Christy Mag Uidhir (2013) demonstrates that this judgement stems from rhetorical action not epistemic warrant. He acknowledges that an editorial cartoon is intended “to inform/instruct its audience” but argues that “insofar as the editorial cartoon standardly employs pictorial caricature in service to that end, the editorial cartoon is to that extent epistemically [...] defective” (2013:138). Here, the artist’s rendering of pictorial distortion (i.e., caricature) regulates the cartoon’s moral, political, or social claim. Uidhir’s work indicates that caricaturists employ the unspoken language of “facespheres” as the driving force of an editorial cartoon’s ideological labor. He attributes the influence of caricature to its intersubjectivity: to “certain caricature-elicited behavioral response biases” in which persons demonstrate a “preference for or avoidance of unusual stimuli” (2013:137,141). By disrupting the familiarity of the “facesphere,” caricature regulates

meaning by foregrounding distortions, or flaws—a visual abnormality is read as a moral, intellectual, or social one.

Both Uidhir and Cuff indicate the importance of the pictorial quality of resemblance in this process. In “Pictorial Art and Visual Experience,” philosopher and aesthetician John Hyman (2000) surveys the field of “pictorial representation” to articulate a “plausible theory of depiction” (21; 24). He argues for an understanding of pictorial art in accordance with two general principles that incorporate multiple dimensions: one reliant on human subjectivity and cognition, the other on objective forms and colors in the picture. His theory emphasizes interaction between the viewer and the graphic and asserts the intersubjectivity of pictorial art.

1. First, the pictorial “must be tailored to fit our visual habits and our visual skills—even if it can sometimes modify the habits and extend the skills—because the measure of an artist’s success in representing an object is the spectator’s success in discerning what he has represented: the first succeeds in showing if the second succeeds in seeing” (Hyman 2000:45).
2. Second, “what a picture depicts must ultimately depend on the shapes and colors on its surface, in a manner which can be defined without referring to the experience that the picture will produce in us [...] Because we normally see what a picture depicts by perceiving these shapes and colors correctly” (Hyman 2000:45).

His first principle identifies a didactic function in pictorial art that educates the viewer in the discourse of its forms, perpetuating intersubjective capacities. Recognizability in representation is essential to the pictorial element and relies on *both* a representative form and a psychological reaction from an enculturated audience. The audience interacts with interpretive indices described by professor of eighteenth-century literature David Francis Taylor (2014) as multifaceted “cultural matrices” (4). Drawing on theory in linguistic anthropology, Taylor’s “matrices” can be understood as a reference to intertextuality.

For instance, Taylor (2014) describes “intertextuality” as the “literariness of graphic satire [...]” as it requires the spectator to do more than simply “read a given print’s elaborate architecture of narrative, characterization, and allusion” (2017:3-4). He goes on to describe how the viewer of an editorial caricature engages imaginatively with the cartoon’s “meaning and sociopolitical orientation” as a component of a “cultural constellation [...]” (Taylor 2017:4).³ Similarly, in linguistic anthropology, Charles L. Briggs and Richard Bauman (1992) note “the *lack* of self-sufficiency and autonomy” in formal visual properties when articulating a discrete message, arguing that “recourse must be made to other discursive formations to interpret its patterning and significance” (149). Both Taylor’s “cultural constellation” and Briggs and Bauman’s “discursive formation” describe intertextuality as incomprehensible outside a dynamic interface. While Taylor references intertextuality briefly, Briggs and Bauman explore the concept in depth.

According to Briggs and Bauman (1992), "intertextual relations" inevitably create "intertextual gaps" (149-150). In these "gaps" the audience co-constitutes the text by recognizing its "intertextual relations" and interpreting their meaning. The producers of texts, meanwhile, employ strategies "by which intertextual distance is suppressed and foregrounded" (Briggs and Bauman 1992:149). The pair reference Bauman's (1987) earlier work in which he described the potential of "intertextual gaps as powerful creative tools" (Briggs and Bauman 1992:154). Their articulation of intertextuality indicates the rhetorical action of the producer in manipulating "intertextual distance," the active role of the audience in bridging "intertextual gaps," and, of course, the relational aspect of the text itself as a recapitulation of prior discourse.

Cultural historian Lawrence Levine (1992) does not explicitly reference intertextuality in "The Folklore of Industrial Society"; however, in this article he describes a concept of intersubjective communication that compliments Briggs and Bauman's scholarship on intertextuality. Levine (1992) writes about "affective vehicles" or "open texts" (1392). He describes these texts as sites of interaction where producer, text, and audience engage through "a series of interpretive choices that invest the text with meaning and significance" (Eco 4, 22-23, qtd. in Levine 1992:1392). Levine argues the importance of the audience's "own values, needs, and expectations" in "the filling in of gaps or vacancies in the text" (1992:1385). Much like that of Briggs and Bauman (1992), Levine's model of "affective vehicles" positions the audience as active participants in the text through "the filling in of gaps or vacancies" (Levine 1992:1385). This perspective foregrounds the interdependence of textual meaning.

Extended to editorial caricature studies, I argue that this concept can be used to describe the degrees or distance between caricature distortion and the norms of a "facesphere" — between a smile and a leer. Further, these "gaps" can be understood as the outcome of intertextual relations encoded in the cartoon by the artist and decoded by an informed audience. Produced by a cartoonist, encoded in a text, and interpreted by a viewer these intertextual "vacancies" describe the dynamic interface through which editorial caricatures produce meaning.

In this study, I approach editorial caricatures as narrative "affective vehicles" that depend on identification with an audience for the resolution of intertextual gaps. I ask: what can be learned about a producer, a text, and an audience from the evidence of their interaction in a complex interpretive text designed for their consumption? How does this dynamic interface function in the performance of ideological labor? I seek evidence of a once vibrant discourse that recontextualized regional, national, and transnational politics; ideological values; and cultural knowledge in the satirical caricature prints of late Antebellum America.

Consumers of nineteenth century editorial cartoons did not participate in this media in obvious ways. Restricted by the limited capacities of print media, consumers engaged with graphics through the maintenance and interpretation of a complex visual index of allusions. Situated in a broader cultural context, writes David Francis Taylor (2014), “graphic satire” creates links—intertextual relations—that “give shape to the political present”(4). Like Taylor, I seek that “shape,” what British art historian Michael Baxandall calls “the period eye” (qtd. in Taylor:4). I seek understanding of “the way these complex images were viewed, read, and deciphered in their historical moment” (4). Taylor’s method of visual analysis depends on repositioning the images “in terms of implied readers, of the kinds of public caricatures imagine for themselves” (4). This consumer-focused analysis views graphic prints of editorial caricature as intertextual artifacts. A complex and nuanced understanding of caricature as a process of interaction is essential to probing the art for historical insight.

A Critical Model of Caricature

To investigate editorial caricature as a vehicle for intertextuality it is important to describe the structural features of *caricature* and to articulate their impact on discursive reception. By providing a brief survey of caricature from sixteenth century Italy to the middle decades of the nineteenth century United States, I outline several types of caricature. Of course, any definition of the art hinges on historical and cultural factors. These culturally and historically situated definitions, however, anticipate and overlap generic boundaries. With this qualification, then, a brief survey of caricature studies reveals transnational historical trends in the practice of editorial caricature. Though not a large field, artists, art critics, and art historians have sustained a discourse on the shifting form and conception of caricature for nearly 500-years.

Art historians situate caricature’s origins in sixteenth century Italy. According to E.H. Gombrich and Ernst Kris (1938), caricature’s defining feature— “distortion of the features of a person with the aim of ridicule”—emerged in Italy post-Renaissance (319). The first caricaturists, much like subsequent generations, did not place much stock in the practice as an art. To Italian artists Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598 – 1680) and Giambattista Tiepolo (1696 – 1770), caricaturing served as play, not “artistic labor,” writes art historian James Sherry (1987); Sherry describes this artistic pastime as the earliest “mode” of caricature (1). This sixteenth century practice mirrored the casual, recreational attitude with which its practitioners treated it.

Strolling through the streets of Italy, a caricaturist would register unusual faces or features in their mind’s eye (Gombrich and Kris 1938:320). Later, after reproducing a sketch of a subject’s face, the artist would play with transforming its features. The early caricaturists established a practice of contorting realistic profiles into grotesque, dream-like figures

suggested by unique features in the human face. This process would produce a visually disruptive version of a bulbous nose, a heavy brow, or deep scowl. Though caricature operates on distortion, this dynamic feature depends on an overall conformity to established forms of the “facesphere,” to an index recognizable to the audience in other elements of the image. These recognizable, conservative features provide the medium for distortion.

At this initial moment in the development of caricature, the narrativity of the modern editorial form was absent. These sixteenth and early seventeenth century Italian caricaturists casually sketched portraiture altered only by distortion. This transformation produced a particular affect. Art historian James Sherry (1987) describes this expression as a “primitive visual comedy or wit” that is the outcome of the interaction of “an exaggerated or buffoon element in the distortion of feature or form deflated by an ironic element [...]” (6). Interacting heavily with “facespheres,” contrast and opposition become a fundamental index in caricature. Unlike traditional portraiture, however, the subjects of caricature were typically random. The anonymity of the figures in early caricature denied the elaborative process of intertextual relations on which editorial caricatures would later rely. These early caricatures operated through

1. pictorial depiction (i.e., a subtype of portraiture that maintains a resemblance to the human figure)
2. ironic distortion (e.g., transformation contingent on dialectic irony suggested in the pictorial depiction).

The affect mobilized in this basic form of caricature is

- a. the expression of visual comedy or wit.

Produced circa 1510-1520 before the birth of the Italian Carracci brothers—who are often credited as the founders of caricature (Sherry 1987:1)—Leonardo da Vinci’s “Five grotesque heads, and three heads of men in profile” typifies this early experimental process in artistic distortion and exaggeration of human features (figure 1).



Figure 1. “Five grotesque heads, and three heads of men in profile,” by Leonardo da Vinci, c.1510–20. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, Public domain). My Modern Met. mymodernmet.com/caricature-art

Dominating the center of Da Vinci’s sketch, the “three heads of men in profile” illustrate the transformative defrocking of what appears to be a clergyman. Through layers of reinterpretation, each iteration alters and emphasizes different features: nose, eyes, chin, jowls. The “five grotesque heads” surround these three profiles, playing with further exaggeration and transformation. In these sketches a large nose becomes an obtrusive protuberance with elongated nostrils; the brow and lip swell up as if absorbing the weight of the sagging, wrinkled jowls that have been effaced. Then, these bulging features transform into the hollow-eyed visage of a human-ape hybrid. Near the bottom of the sheet, a bald, weak-chinned head gazes listlessly at a fist-sized chin thrust out from beneath the stern glare of the last figure, a man with devil’s horns. Close looking reveals that the specific contortion of each figure extends a subtle resemblance in the realistic profile on the left of the sheet. One might assume that this undistorted image of a face is a rendering of someone Da Vinci encountered while strolling the streets of Italy about 500 years ago.

Tracing the development of caricature, James Sherry (1987) identifies the second kind as “portrait caricature” (4). Like the early Italian sketches, portrait caricature “depicted a specific individual, rather than a general type”; however, like traditional portraiture “subjects were known and identifiable, rather than anonymous” (5). According to Gombrich and Kris (1938), this marked a significant departure from most earlier comic art that had been “made to ridicule types” rather than to “reshape an individual as a type” as caricaturists did (321). Sherry asserts that as a kind of portraiture, [portrait] caricatures aimed “to reveal the true character of the sitter” through “the lines of the face or the attitude of the figure” (1987:5). As caricature is a branch of portraiture, portraiture “is a branch of physiognomy, the systematic relation of psychological characteristics to facial features or bodily structures” (1987:5). Unlike the ambivalent response elicited by the pictorial subtlety of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, caricature emerges from a process in which the artist, much like a physiognomist, destroys ambivalence in the human form by emphasizing features that reference the indexicality of “facespheres.” In the historical development of caricature, Sherry’s definition of portrait caricature recaptures the personal identification that typifies portraiture. As such, portrait caricature consists of:

1. pictorial depiction,
2. identification (i.e., the recognizability of the subject/s to the viewer),
3. and ironic distortion.

The expressions of portraiture caricature are:

- a. visual comedy or wit
- b. and conventional persona (an identifiable characterization that diffuses complexity by recapitulating the singular as the whole).

In the process of audience inference, this conventional persona can be described in terms of Charles Peirce’s concept of semiosis: interaction between hierarchical categories of *firstness*, *secondness*, and *thirdness*. Aesthetician Codruta Hainic (2019) describes this as “a triadic process by which a first determines a third to refer to a second to whom it refers” (26). The viewer’s interpretation of the caricature as the identification of a known subject opens a field of intertextuality to the artist. By making visual references within the sitter’s depiction to the sitter’s character, the caricaturist adds depth to the irony of distortion and reduces the subject to a comic persona. Yet without narrativity, the portrait caricature might be thought of as a kind of visual pun, a redundancy in figure rather than word. Pier Leone Ghezzi’s *Drawing of Dr. Thomas Bentley* (ca 1725-26) illustrates this formulation of portrait caricature (Figure 2).

The title suggests the drawing’s resemblance to a real figure. While the subject—a Dr. Thomas Bentley—may not be widely recognized, those acquainted with him would be expected to make the connection when viewing the caricature. Despite its distortions, the

profile is rendered with pictorial detail. The drawing's ironic transformation is self-evident. The figure's head appears too heavy for its slender body, a common feature of caricature that James Sherry describes as a "[c]ontrast between inflation and deflation, exaggeration and economy [...]" (1987:6). The subject's head is topped with an abundant pile of curly white hair. From its peak, the the pile of hiar slopes down the figure's forehead at a 45-degree angle, past two heavily hooded eyes embedded in the deflated, sloping forehead. The line of the forehead abruptly meets the line of the caricature's most prominent feature, a large, protruding nose cut deep with one gaping nostril. Beneath this, a sliver of a grin creeps across the exaggerated line of the figure's mouth. Finally, below the grin (or is it a smirk?) a recessed chin emphasizes the grotesque overstatement of the rest of the profile. Beyond the qualities of recognizability (to a small audience of friends) and distortion, the caricature exhibits wit without commentary. The lack of action, the empty setting, and the void of depth in the drawing demonstrate the absence of the narrative and verbal elements so important to editorial caricature later that century. The distortion alone indicates a simple visual humor of excess, its intertextuality largely limited to its relation to "facespheres."



Figure 2. Drawing (ca 1725-26) of Dr. Thomas Bentley by Pier Leone Ghezzi, perhaps the first professional caricaturist--Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library

Part of the appeal of portrait caricature, explains James Sherry (1987), is its “implicit contrast” to the “norms of formal portraiture” (6). These norms, of course, have their own intertextual relation to “facespheres.” Traditional portraiture depicted the subject as “larger than life” with “heroic stature” (7). Gombrich and Kris (1938) point out that the visual rhetoric of “heroic sense” in portraiture had a parallel in portrait caricature; caricature “does not seek the perfect form [like portraiture] but the perfect deformity, thus penetrating through the mere outward appearance to the inner being in all its littleness or ugliness” (326). Through the manipulation of lines and curves, the caricaturist creates the impression of drawing out the subject’s inner traits and inscribing them on his figure in comic fashion. In this way, the artist regulates intertextual distance between the form of the human subject and that of their caricature depiction. “The caricature portrait,” writes Sherry, “diminishes the sitter in its size, technique, and portrayal of character. Its subject is not a god or a hero, but a pygmy, dwarf, or puppet whose character can be summed up with all the reductiveness of a lampoon” (7). In this way, caricature is reactionary—it responds to opposing norms or ideals in the “facesphere” that can be ironically subverted. Herein, we can identify the triad of artist, content, and audience that makes caricature a rich source of historical value. Cultures of the face are a central referent in the most fundamental feature of caricature: wit.

To express wit to the audience, explains Sherry, the artist creates a work of portrait caricature that “assumes sophistication or ‘knowingness’ at every step along the way:

It assumes a knowledge of the norms of portraiture for without that knowledge one could not initially distinguish the caricature from the sketch. It assumes a knowledge of the identity of the sitter for without that knowledge one could not be sure whether the caricature was of an individual or merely a type. Finally, it assumes a knowledge of the appearance and reputation of the sitter for without that knowledge, as we have seen, it is nearly, impossible to read the fable behind the features. Consequently, portrait caricature is essentially an elitist form. Like verbal irony it addresses itself to a sophisticated audience who can appreciate its subtlety and finesse. (1987:9)

Significantly, these drawings require an informed community of consumers who possess knowledge requisite to interpret the caricature. In the case of portrait caricature, this knowledge depends on “the norms of portraiture” and the “identity” and the “reputation” of the subject, a narrow sphere of reference for most. Portrait caricature, with its small body of elite consumers and its benign comedy, had little social impact relative to the editorial form. Caricature, explain Gombrich and Kris (1938), reached its “culmination as a social weapon only when it entered [...] broadsides and cartoons” (326). The industrial revolution, then, which expanded the capabilities of print and produced an explosion of these media influenced the development of editorial caricature. Gombrich and Kris identify

eighteenth century and early nineteenth century England as a period in which the caricature transformed what had been the “studio joke” of artists “into one of the most feared of social weapons, unmasking pretension and killing it by ridicule” (326). This Golden Age of satire in England built on the Italian modes to produce a rich tradition of editorial caricatures.

Wendy Wick Reaves (1995), curator of prints and drawings at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, explains that the influence of Italian caricature engravings helped facilitate a discourse in this pictorial art (6). These British graphic prints marked an important point in the development of editorial caricature. Unlike portrait caricature, writes Reaves, “[t]he human condition, rather than the human figure provided the subject matter for these engravings” (6). British caricaturists, she explains, sought

Not just to amuse but to criticize the foibles of society and to protest the abuses of political power. Artists probed beneath appearances to expose disreputable character traits. The distortions of the figures played a role, providing the parody of a well-known likeness or establishing a comic type for ridicule, but the actual portrait was secondary to the satiric message of the cartoon. In the hands of such artists as William Hogarth, Thomas Rowlandson, and James Gillray, the meaning of the word ‘caricature’ expanded to encompass a range of social and political satire. (Reaves 1995:6)

Reaves’ description highlights the new rhetorical focus of caricature. James Sherry (1987) refers to this mode as “satiric caricature” (12), a kind, I argue, of which editorial caricature is the central type.

Satiric caricature, is a more complex form than portrait caricature, employing both a representational component and a rhetorical component (Sherry 1987:12). Satiric caricature goes beyond “the exaggerated, distorted or grotesque” to frame such alterations as “the expression of moral conditions” and to forge a “link between the physical and moral realms” (12). The basic difference, then, between portrait caricature and satiric caricature, writes Sherry, is “a specific and controlling moral direction” that requires a “corresponding difference in form” (12). That difference in form is narrativity, or, as Sherry describes it an “elaboration of context [...]” (12). Unlike portrait caricature, then, defined by its contextual vagueness, the satiric caricature expresses a specific moral through the resolution of a satirical graphic drama. This dramatic form of caricature requires an expansion of graphic detail.

Based on this historiography of the development of the features and expressions of caricature to this point—the early nineteenth century—the elements of editorial caricature

are:

1. pictorial depiction,
2. identification,
3. ironic distortion,
4. and elaboration.

This assemblage:

- a. expresses visual comedy or wit,
- b. establishes persona,
- c. and asserts a moral claim.

The increased complexity of graphic prints of satiric caricature requires parallel growth in knowledge on the part of the audience.

Consequently, the more points of graphic narrative development in an editorial caricature, the longer the shadow cast by the imagined audience to which the caricaturist crafted the cartoon's appeal. This body of allusion through which satiric caricature operates is a plane of intertextual dynamism. Satiric caricature, writes James Sherry (1987), presents a world where subjects—both high and low—become “fantastic creatures, creatures whose distortion and exaggeration mark them as products of a particular political vision” (18,20). The narrativity of editorial caricature finds expression through this visual language. Now, with this element of narrativity, the satiric caricature transcends pun; it becomes a graphic *space* for ideological work. Exemplars of this trend, the cartoons of James Gillray are among the most enduring of the Golden Age of satire in England. Though verbally sparse, Gillray's 1786 cartoon “A new way to pay a national debt” illustrates the elaborative process of narrativizing caricature (figure 3).

In this graphic lampoon of King George III, Gilroy positions the clearly gluttonous royal at the center of the image. His head is shrunken, no bigger than the bulging crotch of his pants where gold coins burst from the seams. A coat far too small for his bulk emphasizes the king's swollen midsection—a nod to his gluttony. Coins spill from his coat pockets and the waist of his trousers—a nod to his greed. The exaggerated midsection of the King asserts his appetites, and the diminished head suggests the subversion of reason to consumption. Behind the king, the open gate to an empty treasury expresses a theme not of wealth, but of waste. Standing in a ring around the king, musical performers play their instruments to celebrate their leader as gold coins leak from the pockets of their red coats. Here, Gillray mocks the king's vanity and cronyism. Next to the king, stands Queen Charlotte, holding her skirt laden heavy with gold coins, further testament to the king's spendthrift ways. In the bottom left corner, a sullen-faced man sits on the ground, an empty hat—presumably for alms—resting between his prosthetic, wooden legs. The

man's figure is fit and trim, quite unlike the doughy king, but he has no limbs, no way to play a fiddle for a gold coin. His financial wont is exacerbated by his destitute position; his manliness brought low by the amputation of his labor and his wealth. On the far right, the Prince of Wales provides another contrast with King George III. The prince stands partially barefoot and dressed in rags. What must be the state of the Welsh people if this is the condition of their royalty? The answer lies in the bill the tax collector submits to the Prince of Wales. The message is clear: a crippling inequality of wealth in the kingdom can be blamed on the greed and excess of the king, a ruler who only cares what his subjects can do for him. The cartoon expresses this with minimal language, just the word "TREASURY" and the print's title.



Figure 3. James Gillray (1786). "A new way to pay the National-Debt." The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

The complex indices of verbal and visual allusion on which a graphic satire like Gillray's relies illustrate the social embeddedness of intertextuality. Sherry describes the work of interpreting satiric caricature as "special knowledge" collected in "the public domain"

(1987:20). At the time these graphics were published, he writes, someone encountering them could hardly “escape being educated not only in the identity of these figures but also in the techniques of their representation” (1987:20). Editorial caricature is didactic, building a communal discourse of signs capable of increasing complexity. To outsiders, this elaborative process erects a certain opacity that stifles interpretation and muddles the ideological work of the caricature. While a lack of intertextual knowledge is the source of this ambiguousness to outsiders, inside a discursive community a caricaturist can regulate intertextuality to conceal ideological labor. At times, such strategies succeed even in veiling ideological work from scholars, including James Sherry.

Sherry posits a form of caricature he calls “comic caricature.” Like satirical caricature, he explains, comic caricature contrasts with formal portraiture in “the irony generated by the exaggeration and deflation of the caricatured portrait” (1987:21). However, he separates satiric caricature from comic caricature according to the foregrounding of ideology in the satiric form. He argues that the comic form of caricature amounts to nothing more than “taking delight in the absurdity of human nature” (1987:21). However, the formulation of this mode of caricature is distinguished from satiric caricature not in form, but in rhetorical style. Rather than subsuming the joke to the ideological work—as in satiric caricature—the comic style veils the ideological work behind the punchline.

Ironically, in defining comic caricature as a separate mode from satiric caricature, Sherry reveals this distinction’s flaw. Both forms are narrative, he writes, “but whereas satiric caricature disposes its figures to suit a rhetorical purpose or satiric ‘point,’ comic caricature exploits a dramatic situation for its humorous potential” (1987:24-25). The difference, then, can be described rhetorically, as the caricaturist applies the same tools in differing degrees to different purposes. In narrative caricature, the satiric point, as a statement on a condition in the world, is inherent; its explicit expression is not. Sherry, despite his attempt to distinguish comic caricature as a non-vector for ideological work, demonstrates just the opposite. Comic caricature is merely euphemism in satiric caricature, an obfuscation that maintains distance from content and audience and avoids serious scrutiny.

This critical distance maintained by caricature helps to license the bold aggressions of the editorial form. Satiric caricature transcends the visual punning of portrait caricature; it becomes a didactic expression of ideology with a unique license to dabble at the boundaries of taste and descend into the disturbing and the grotesque. In the end, it is the elaborative essence of the narrativity of editorial caricature that proves most valuable to the historian. It is in this space of narrative elaboration that the rhetorical moves of the editorial caricaturist play out against the organizing principal of distortion in caricature: the semiotics of the grotesque that appear to warrant the cartoon’s political, moral, or social

judgements through the implicit biases engrained in contrasts within a “facesphere.” It is through this semiotics that the literariness, or intertextuality, of the editorial caricature can be read as historical evidence.

| Table 1. Features and Expressions of Caricature | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|--------------------|
| | Pictorial depiction | Identification | Ironic Distortion | Elaboration |
| Visual Comedy or Wit | | | Early caricature Portrait caricature Satiric Caricature | Satiric Caricature |
| Persona | | Portrait caricature (limited audience) Satiric Caricature (broad audience) | Portrait caricature (limited audience) Satiric Caricature (broad audience) | Satiric Caricature |
| Moral Claim | | Satiric Caricature | Satiric Caricature | Satiric Caricature |
| Distance | Early caricature Portrait caricature Satiric Caricature | | Early caricature Portrait caricature Satiric Caricature | |

To this point, through the articulation of a theoretical framework, a survey of the history of caricature, and the analysis of several images I have described developments in the form and function of caricature leading up to the nineteenth century. These features and expressions of caricature are visualized in table 1. Next, I analyze an artifact from the late American Antebellum period. In this analysis, I examine the framework developed in this essay as a heuristic for analyzing graphic satire as historical evidence. I recognize that this construction is inevitably reductive, incomplete, and in need of ongoing revision. Further, it suggests a false sense of stasis to the fluidity of culture. The goal of this analysis is to introduce a point of reference to stimulate response and revision as part of a larger discourse on editorial caricature as historical evidence. Through deductive application of the heuristic outlined above (Table 1), I investigate an 1856 editorial caricature print from Antebellum artist and lithographer John L. Magee. I situate this analysis in a context of cultural, intellectual, and political history.

Caricature in Context

1850s Philadelphia was a city with a rich lithography and publishing industry. But, despite the city’s connection Benjamin Franklin—America’s first political cartoonist—it was not

known for its editorial caricatures. New York publications like *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly* dominated the market for satiric graphic prints. To this day, New York's caricaturists remain at the center of studies in nineteenth century American editorial caricature.

Born in the Big Apple, John L. Magee began his career as a lithographer working for New York firms like Currier & Ives. Though he published prints of cartoons and events in some of the same publications as Thomas Nast, Magee never earned fame in New York. Census data from 1860 and 1870 and Philadelphia Business and City Directories, show that Magee tried his hand at painting in the mid-1840s, exhibiting three paintings in all. And, soon after, he began engraving illustrations for children's books. Still in New York, by 1850, Magee, despite a lack of notoriety, had established himself as an independent lithographer, setting up his own business at 34 Mott Street, where he printed his cartoons. Then, in 1855, John L. Magee transplanted from New York City to 316, Chestnut Street, Philadelphia (Library Company of Philadelphia 2022).

He left the hub of the U.S. editorial caricature industry to apply his practical experience in a new city. In Philadelphia, Magee proved a prolific editorial caricaturist. Participating in a national transmedia network, Magee produced satiric graphic prints that recapitulated affects, ideas, and values in graphic forms. Though his name is not well-known, even in the twenty-first century his editorial caricatures are part of a variety of discourses. For instance, a small copy of a print of Magee's 1856 editorial caricature "Forcing Slavery Down the Throat of a Freesoiler" can be found on display at the Gettysburg Museum and featured as the thumbnail image of any number of Youtube videos on the history of the free-soil party.⁴

In this grotesque image, Magee depicts the Antebellum sectional debate through layers of allusion. To understand the complex elaboration of Magee's editorial caricature, I situate the graphic in context, beginning with the titular caption. A brief survey of the political lineage of the free-soil movement begins in the early 1840s with the rise of U.S. third-party politics. As national parties lost cohesion under the strain of increasing sectional division and in the face of a growing, national mass media, new parties emerged in the North around anti-slavery alternatives to abolition (Foner 1970:9). While abolitionists focused on moral appeals to end slavery, members of the Liberty party, the Free-Soil party, and, finally, the Republican party sought political power to limit slavery's expansion and to promote a Northern vision of economic and social progress, instead.

The first of these parties, the Liberty Party, formed in New Hampshire in 1842 as a reaction against the censure of Democrat senator and attorney John Hale by his own party for his resistance to the expansion of slavery (Hayes 1885:6-7). The Liberty party

articulated an individualistic, working-class premise for American freedom. In a failed attempt to recruit the influential anti-slavery Whig Thaddeus Stevens, Liberty party leader Salmon P. Chase sent Stevens a letter that included a speech. In the speech, Chase described the Liberty party doctrine. In his address, Chase presents the Liberty party as a political anti-slavery alternative to the moralism of abolition:

The one sought to abolish slavery everywhere, the means being only of a moral nature, as by argument, reason, and persuasion. The Liberty party, on the other hand, sought only to abolish slavery wherever it exists within reach of the constitutional action of Congress, to restrict slavery within the Slave States, and to deliver the government from the control of the slave power. (Chase qtd. in Woodburn 1913:67-68)

By the 1850s, the Liberty party had dissipated, and the Free-Soil party had stepped in to carry the banner of slavery restriction into the next decade. Meanwhile, abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison grew increasingly indignant to political measures. Garrison, and those like him, refused to accept anything less than the end of all slavery in the United States. They rejected political solutions as ineffectual and corrupted by Southern influence. Despite the abolitionists stark differences with these third-party restriction platforms, pro-slavery rhetoric consistently conflated all anti-slavery groups as radical abolitionists.

Now, united under the slogan “free labor, free soil” political arguments against the expansion of slavery took a new shape. Historian Eric Foner (1970); explains that to the Free-Soil party *free labor* stood for “social mobility and economic growth,” for equal opportunity among northern whites (20). In short, free-soil ideology “reflected an adaptation of [the Protestant] ethic to the dynamic, expansive, capitalist society of the ante-bellum North” (13). As new territory came under the control of the federal government, the North and the South engaged in debates over which territories would be introduced as slave states and which as free. The anti-slavery rhetoric of the free-soil campaign promoted commercial and industrial growth through the restriction of slavery. They campaigned for wage labor but paid little attention to the lives and liberties of slaves themselves. *Free land for free men*, another catchphrase, meant economic opportunity for white men unencumbered by the labor competition represented by the presence of Black persons, free or enslaved. The party’s slogans championed an ideology that outlived the party itself. By 1856, when John L. Magee published his “Freesoiler” caricature, the Free-Soil party had been dissolved and its membership and its rhetoric had been incorporated into an emerging Republican party.⁵

Like its Free-Soil predecessor, in the idiom of the Republican party *free labor* meant economic opportunity and white nationalism. Westward expansion, they claimed, would be the “safety valve” where the unemployed of the North go West to exercise free labor on public lands (Foner 1970:27). After the rise of the party in the mid-1850s, Republicans adopted the view that the South constituted a direct threat to “free-labor civilization” (39). They espoused a belief that slave power’s “fixed hierarchy” would restrict the social mobility of free labor (42); the two could not coexist. As free-soil Republicans saw it, to extend slavery to Kansas, to the land annexed from Mexico, or to the territory beyond would be to trample the freedoms of Northern white labor and commerce, a concern that dominated the party’s platform.

The ideology of the new Republican party recognized slavery as a moral problem; however, its argument focused on slavery as “an obstacle to the material progress of the free states” (4). To early Republicans, explains Eric Foner (1970), free-labor represented “a model of good society” grounded in “the dignity and opportunities which it offered the average laboring man” (11), as long as he happened to be white.⁶ In his 1856 cartoon, John L. Magee expressed the free-soil argument of the Republican party through the editorial elaboration of caricature.

Magee depicts four well-dressed lilliputian white men in the act of force-feeding a Black man to a white giant with sharp features and square, oversized teeth (figure 4). The distressed giant is tied to a wooden table labeled “democratic platform.” Printed on the table in ascending order, each smaller than the last, are the words *Kansas*, *Cuba*, and *Central America*. On top of the platform, each tightly gripping the giant’s hair, stand Democrat presidential nominee James Buchanan (1791-1868) and Democrat senator Lewis Cass (1782 -1866). Across from these figures, perched on the giant’s chest, are two more Democrats, senator Stephen Douglas (1813-1861) and President Franklin Pierce (1804 -1869). On his knees, Pierce grips the giant’s beard while Douglas lends a boost to an anonymous Black figure who dives past the giant’s gruesome teeth. Trapped between the politicians as they force feed him the Black man, the horrified giant cries out from a speech bubble: “**MURDER!!!** *help—neighbors help, O my poor Wife and Children.*” Sketched lightly in the background, two grim vignettes further darken the tone. On the left, a woman and child flee a housefire, on the right, a hanged man dangles from a tree.

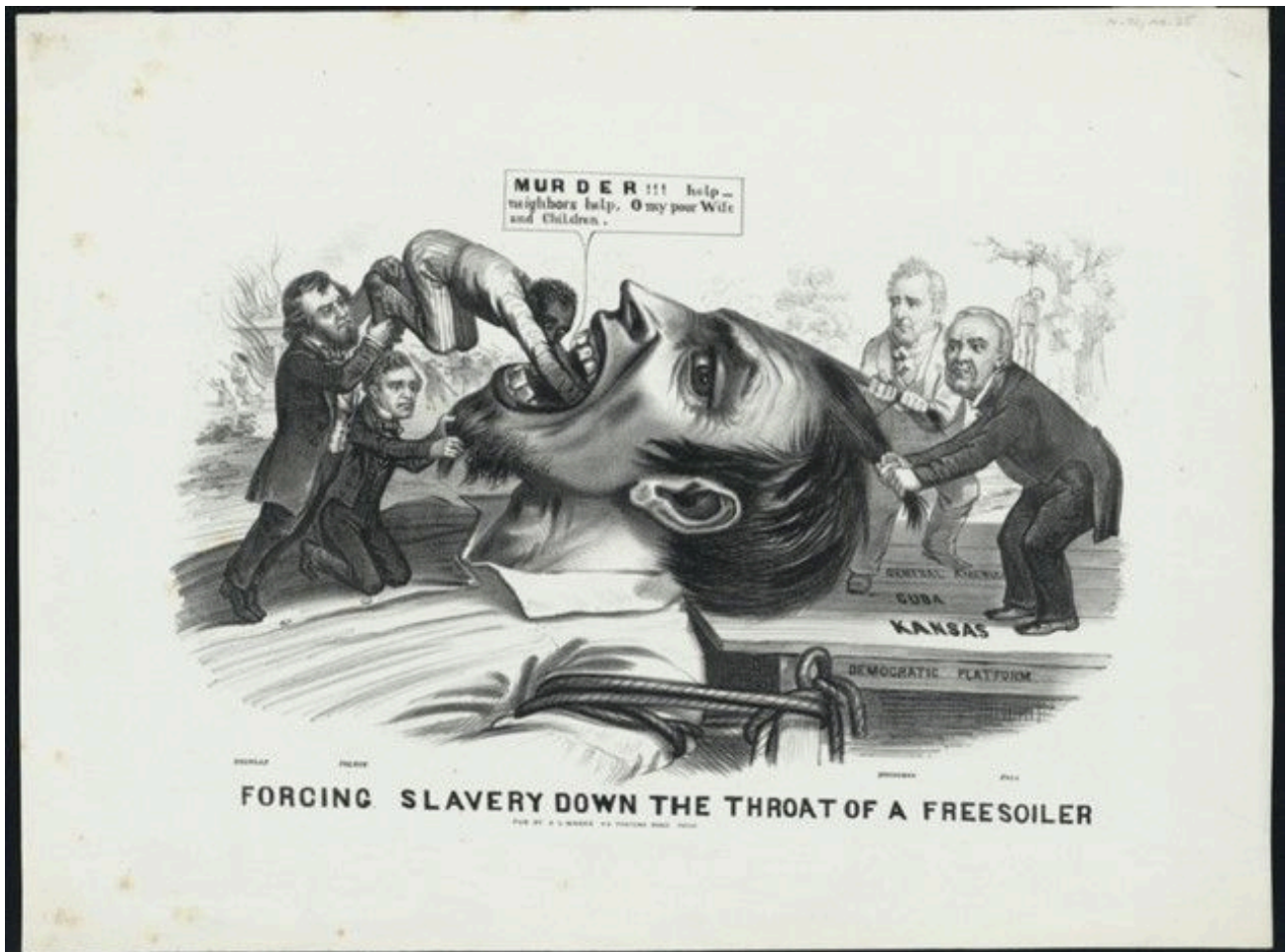


Figure 4. Forcing Slavery Down the Throat of a Free-soiler, United States, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Philadelphia, Cuba, 1856. J.L. Magee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photograph. [loc.gov/items/scsm000326/](https://www.loc.gov/items/scsm000326/)

The editorial caricature contains six pictorials, four depicting individuals, two depicting types. The four miniature portraits of highly recognizable Democrats served as foundational elements of identification and distortion. Spectator recognition of these pictorials as the politicians they depict opens an imaginative space for persona (that Peircean *thirdness*), for the reduction of the person to a particularly desirable political stature. In Magee's image, the ironic deflation of these larger-than-life figures shows the politicians as cruel, belligerent, dangerous, and inept. President Pierce, depicted on his knees, appears sad and ineffective as he pulls limply at the giant free-soiler's beard, an afterthought in the scene. Standing over him, Stephen Douglas boosts a Black man poised as if to leap down the giant's throat. Through the image, Magee accuses Pierce's administration of empowering the Illinois Democrat to push the interests of slave states at the expense of the Northern white workingman. Douglas literally violates the white body of the free-soiler with the Black body of the slave. Here, Magee has translated the presence of a Black man into a violation of the most basic rights of the white man. Standing on the other side, restraining the free-soiler, James Buchanan and Lewis Cass represent the

popular sovereignty doctrine that threatened to expand slavery to new states by circumventing Union authority. Despite hailing from Northern states, these Democrats become Southern stooges in Magee's cartoon.

The words branded on the "Democratic Platform" reference the slave power's ambitions in Kansas and the Western territories and potential colonies like Cuba and Central America. The association of the four identifiable figures with the political agenda of slave power lends them villainous persona in this sociopolitical imaginary. The two pictorial representations of types—the slave and the freesoiler—do not levy judgment against a person or class. Rather, these two figures serve to elaborate the judgment Magee levies against Northern Democrats. Magee's depiction of the cannibalistic forced feeding expresses no sympathy for the Black victim. On several levels, the Black man is treated as an intrusive object. The focus of the horror rests on the injustice inflicted on the white homesteader by the threat of slavery, by the Black man in the West. Tied to the platform with rope, restrained by his own hair, the giant free-soil man has been stripped of the mobility promised by his political ideology. In his struggle against the manipulative representatives of Slave Power, the free-soil man is denied free labor. Instead, Democrats leverage his own body against him. Perhaps most interesting of all, however, is the way the depiction of the Black man in Magee's image acts as a fulcrum for white identity as the figure of each man performs a drama whose sole purpose is to determine his level of control of or submission to the Black man's body.

After distortion of the caricatured figure and elaboration of the action and frame, other layers of identification emerge through intertextuality with familiar literature, dialect, politics, events, and so on. For instance, in this case the ironic deflation of the Black victim and the politicians and the inflation of the freesoiler to the size of a giant evokes the story of Gulliver and the Lilliputians by Jonathan Swift (1776). This literary allusion informs the editorial caricature's elaboration of a moral and serves as another common point of identification. Like Magee's work, Swift's novel satirized national politics in caricature, but Swift's metaphors, distortions, and grotesqueries were wrought through verbal imagery printed in lines of text. The small, lilliputian stature of the politicians and the giant oversized free soiler offer an easily accessible visual depiction of a familiar literary image. Jonathan Swift's satiric novel *Gulliver's Travels* includes a well-known story about a regular-sized man who finds himself tied down by a cast of miniature people in the island nation of Lilliput, just like the subject of Magee's caricature. An illustration from an 1875 edition of Swift's book depicts Gulliver's head and chest, his body strapped down. A gathering of leaders and dignitaries stand atop his chest to address him (see figure 5).



12321155highres www.fotosearch.com

Figure 5. “Producing his credentials under the Signet Royal,” from Gulliver's Voyage to Lilliput in Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift, 1875. Fotosearch. fotosearch.com/DSN555/12321155highres/

Over time, through the proliferation and repetition of certain forms in graphic satire, a visual index of allusions accumulates, adding another layer of identification. One instance of this indexicality is the head of the giant in Magee's caricature. The giant's head resembles one in an editorial caricature from 1850 that depicts Southern political leader Stephen Douglas (figure 8). This editorial caricature by an unknown artist also centers on the debate over control of Western territory; it also deals with the issue through the theme of forced cannibalism. Was this specific caricature figure associated broadly with Douglas? Did Magee intentionally render the similarity as an allusion to the earlier cartoon's gruesome cannibalism? Answers to such questions are hard to come by; however, in asking the question one wanders down a lightly trodden path of history. John L. Magee's local audience in Philadelphia participated in regional, national, and transnational graphic discourse in which editorial caricaturists drew on a broad index of visual types as a primary source of narrativity.

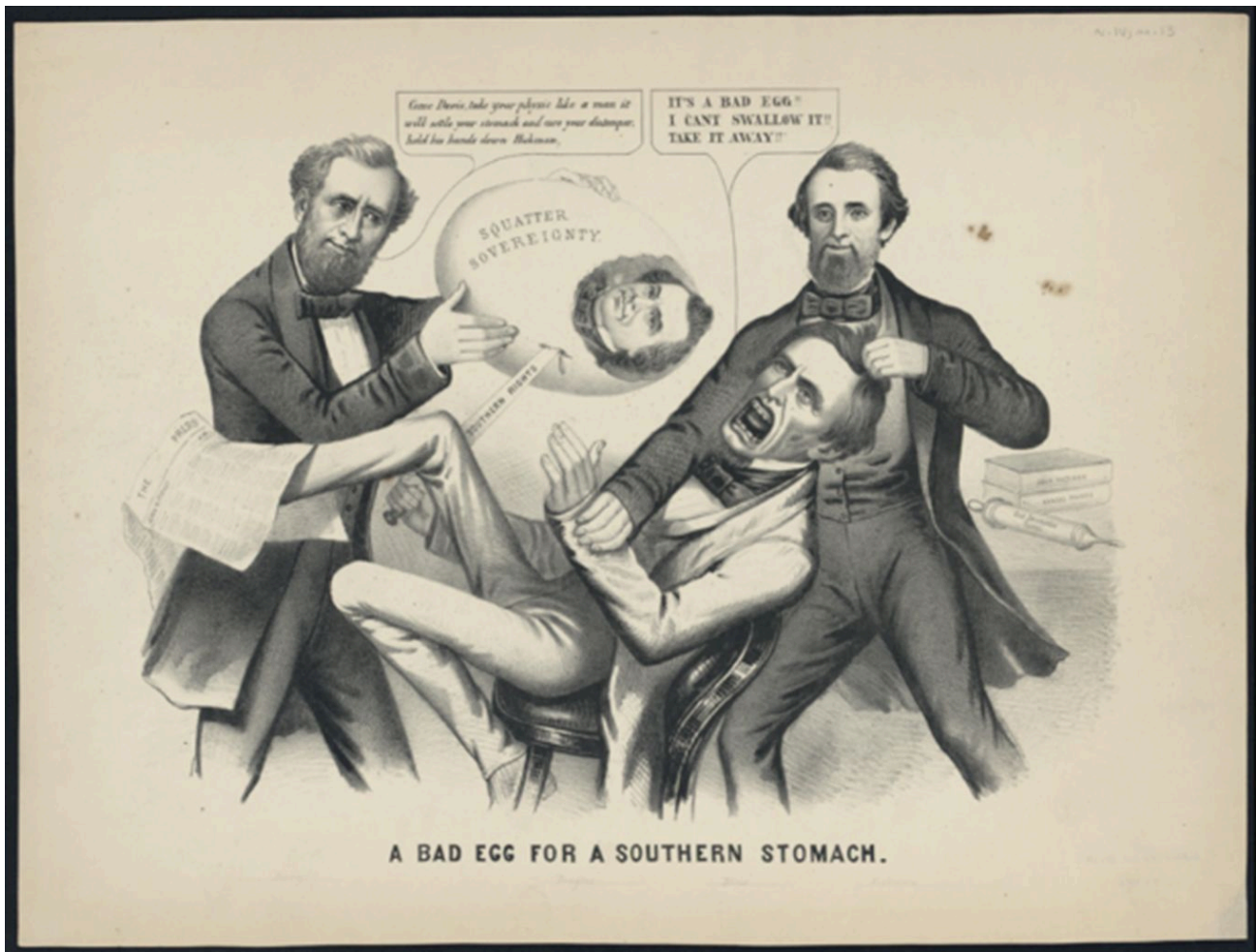


Figure 6. A Bad Egg for a Southern Stomach. United States Kansas Douglas Lecompton, 1850. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/scsm000318/>

Beyond the proliferation of type-figures in graphic cartoons, elaboration in Magee's caricature also relies on vignettes. These small and simple illustrations could often be found occupying space in the background of a cartoon print. Magee features two of these in the top left and top right corners of his editorial caricature (figure 4). A miniature scene of a house fire with a distressed woman and child and a figure hanged from a tree, both vignettes reference familiar scenes of violence the audience would be expected to recognize from newspaper reports and political speeches. These elaborative allusions of image and concept help produce the necessary identification with an audience; but they are also essential to the graphic text's narrativity and moral.

Through variations on a received visual index, verbal references to specific concepts, and allusions to literature and politics the editorial caricature produces a complex assemblage of meaningful parts that must be "read" alongside the audience it implies. The special knowledge possessed by those who embodied the cultural discourse would have been applied to "fill in the gaps" in the narrative and resolve the "satiric point" of the editorial caricature. For instance, while the grotesque depiction of forced dysphasia and

cannibalism in John L. Magee's editorial caricature projects horror at the surface level, only through interpretation of elaborative elements can the rhetorical direction of the caricature's discomfort be determined. At the center of this process, distortion as a contrast to a local "facesphere" determines the moral character of the subjects. The complexity of such a reading is a historical problem of too broad a scope for my purpose in this search for a methodology. From the pro-South democratic platform of 1857 and George Fitzhugh's *Cannibals All!* published that same year, to the decline of the Free-Soil party several years prior and the speeches, publications, events, and rumors of the intervening years, the editorial caricature serves as a valuable intersection for historical inquiry. The reconstruction of a historically situated kind of shadow context for an editorial caricature, enables the analysis of rhetorical purpose and implied audience at the once dynamic interpretive intersections that generate the wit, persona, and moral of this satirical art.

Studying caricature as a performance of traditional visual forms and literary allusions transmitted through graphic print opens interdisciplinary approaches. In the beginning of this essay, I asked: what can be learned about the ways audiences consumed, read, and understood these complex and interpretive graphic texts designed for their consumption? Through a survey of the features and expressions of the art of editorial caricature and an analysis of a nineteenth century graphic artifact, I investigated patterns in this hybrid verbal-visual discourse that recapitulate regional, national, and transnational cultural matrices. Amidst this intertextuality, the provenance of caricature can be located in the casual interplay between human imagination and biological and cultural forms of the human face—in "facespheres" (Leone 2021:276).

Caricature is an elaboration of the frontier between a grimace and a frown, a smile and a leer. In short, caricature is a satiric comment on the dynamics of "facespheres" (Leone 2021:276). Early caricaturists expressed sardonic curiosity as they identified what they saw as odd or unique features in the faces they encountered and returned to the studio to lampoon eyes, noses, ears, and mouths through distortion and exaggeration. But what does it mean when a friendly smile is distorted into a grotesque leer? Massimo Leone's (2021) account of the face as a medium of "oppositional patterns" indicates that the transition from the pleasant smile to the unpleasant leer is determined by an enculturated interpretation of the "levels, gradients, and thresholds" of visibility and contrast between features of the visual composition of the face (273). Caricature, then, as an artistic and satirical byproduct of "facespheres" can be understood as intersubjective at the most granular level, in the artist's semiotic discernment of the face to be caricatured and their determination of what constitutes meaningful exaggeration or distortion in the eyes of their viewers. Through this lens, an editorial caricature can be viewed as a graphic artifact

deeply informed by and indicative of the aesthetic, cognitive, and material subjectivities of a culture in dynamic interaction.

Endnotes

1. James Axtell explores “History as Imagination” and “Imagining the Other”; he references Charles Horton Cooley’s (1927) notion of the social construction of historical reality (1927) and describes the work of historians as a kind of “controlled imagination.” James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 12.↵

2. Massimo Leone (2021) describes three phases of scholarship in studies of the face. The first two failed in different ways; physical anthropology was grounded in “racial prejudice” and “determinism” and, later, Boasian anthropology “tended to dogmatize” the cultural provenance of “facespheres” (271-272). Leone calls for an studies on “the deep connection between the cultural variability of facial signification and its biological roots” (271).↵

3. Taylor illustrates this point through reference to Charles Lamb’s comments on William Hogarth: “‘His graphic representations are indeed books: they have the teeming, fruitful, suggestive meaning of words. Other pictures we look at, —his prints we read’” (qtd. in Taylor 2017:4).↵

4. On a visit to the Gettysburg Museum in July of 2022, I viewed a small copy of the cartoon on display as a secondary piece in an exhibit that featured sound and video about Antebellum politics. In a quick search in Youtube for “free-soil party,” the top ten hits include four videos that feature Magee’s cartoon in the thumbnail image (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%22free-soil+party%22search. Accessed December 31, 2022).↵

5. For information on the free soil movement, in addition to Eric Foner’s (1970) *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, see Frederick J. Blue (1973) *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics, 1848–54*, George M. Frederickson (1965) *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of Union*, William E. Gienap (1987) *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856*, Mason I. Lowance (2003) *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865*, David M. Potter (1976) *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, Joseph Rayback (2014) *Free Soil: The Election of 1848*, and Elizabeth R. Varon (2008) *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859*.↵

6. Recently, historians and scholars are writing about the Black Antebellum experience, highlighting the cultural and political influence exercised by both free and enslaved Black people from inside and outside of political party. For more on these studies see Lance Newman (2009) “Free Soil and the Abolitionist Forests of Frederick Douglass’s ‘the Heroic Slave’”, James Finley (2013) “‘The Land of Liberty’: Henry Bibb’s Free-

Soil Geographies”, Kristen Epps (2016) *Slavery on the Periphery: The Kansas-Missouri Border in the Antebellum and Civil War Era.*

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