

HUMOUR, SATIRE, AND SEXUALITY IN THE CULTURE OF EARLY CHARTISM *

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Abstract. Histories of Chartism have tended to emphasise the hegemony of respectability within the movement, and with histories of the popular press have seen the 1830s as a decisive break with older radical traditions of sexual libertarianism, bawdy political culture and a satirical, sometimes obscene print culture. However, the basis of this position is a partial reading of the evidence. Work on London Chartists has emphasised their moralistic politics and publications at the expense of their rich populist and satirical press and the clear survival of piracy and romantic literature well into the Chartist period. The neglect of an important early leader, Henry Vincent, has meant the bawdy, sensual and sometimes scatological letters he sent to his cousin in London have been overlooked as a source on the moral life of the Chartist generation. This article will address this by studying Vincent's letters in the context of London's populist press, particularly the work of his friends John Cleave and Henry Hetherington. Vincent's humour and attitude towards sexuality clearly reflects a broader tendency in London radicalism, while his own efforts as a newspaper editor in Bath indicate that acerbic humour was an important aspect not just of Chartism's political critique, but of its appeal to the provincial working class.

Introduction

In September 1840, Henry Vincent, one of the most popular leaders of the Chartist movement, was woken from his sleep in Monmouth Gaol:

I was dreaming that an angel lay in my arms, and that her swelling bosom was beating against mine, and propelling my sluggish blood, with a sort of steam engine force, through my veins. I was just in the act of kissing the sweetest and prettiest lips that ever eye beheld or heart desired, when I was suddenly aroused by a tremendous stab on my – why should I blush? – bottom!

Minikin! it was the stab of a flea!...You know how mild I generally am – but, under circumstances like these, you will not be surprised that I forgot myself, and lost my temper. I resolved to murder him. I thrust my finger slyly down to my seat of honour, approached my gentleman cautiously – and – and- smashed him! I sent him suddenly to his account “with all his imperfections on his head!” – after burying him in my what-d’ye-call-it – I snoozed off again – but my fair angel disliking my want of gallantry in such an “interesting position”, returned no more! Curse the flea! Henceforth I am the sworn foe of fleas!¹

The frank and humorous manner with which Vincent informed his cousin and close friend, John Minikin, about the location of the infestation and the inconvenience that followed for his sex dreams was far from out of character. By then a 27 year-old Chartist, of national prominence and a key organiser of the Westcountry and south Wales, substantial passages in Vincent’s letters to his cousin, two years his elder, drew on scatological and sexual themes. The reference to his dreaming of ‘interesting positions’ was a euphemism the two shared for sex, first made in an earlier letter in which Vincent discussed the news that the Queen was pregnant:

The papers say that our Queen is in an “interesting position” Mercy on me! – I have seen ladies in very interesting positions ere this – but I was never mean enough to make the matter public...I sometimes stand on my head for joy of the thought of these “interesting positions”²

This attitude was not purely born from the tedium of Vincent’s largely solitary confinement. Long before his arrest in May 1839 and imprisonment that August, he was boasting about the sexual topography of the nationwide tours he was undertaking as a member of the London Working Men’s Association (LWMA), the radical organisation that in 1838 promulgated the People’s Charter. In Birmingham in June 1838, Vincent neatly summed up his twin preoccupations:

We took a beautiful walk yesterday - I had the honour of having for my companion a highly intelligent and accomplished young lady, Miss Douglas - in whose good society you may give me credit for high enjoyment - for I know of no greater pleasure (always excepting the advocacy of Democratic and philosophical principles) than the companionship of one of the fairest flowers of creation.³

Women, sex, and crudity would become recurring content of the fifty-two letters Vincent sent to Minikin between 1837 and 1842. However, this humour also found expression in the newspaper he edited in 1839, *The Western Vindicator*, in which he combined articles on moral and political improvement with scatological, acerbically satirical attacks on the political establishments of the west of England and south Wales.⁴ In this he was clearly operating under the influence of his friends and fellow LWMA activists, the publishers John Cleave and Henry Hetherington. Throughout the 1830s Cleave and Hetherington, sometimes together and sometimes in competition, pioneered an increasingly populist and sensationalist style of journalism that merged radical politics with crime reports and humour. It was this literary scene that influenced Vincent's style of radicalism and sense of self, and which he tried to emulate with the *Vindicator*. When studied in this context Vincent, who remains without a modern biographer, left a valuable, large, and personal archive of correspondence that indicates the continued presence of a prominent and unrespectable element within London radicalism.⁵

This article will therefore assess the content of these letters before studying the culture Vincent was exposed to in his youth and the careers of his friends and mentors, Cleave and Hetherington. Far from being repulsed by the salacious and bawdy, these three influential London radicals clearly saw this culture as the basis of a popular radical press, and with that popular politics. The article will conclude by illustrating how Vincent's humour and the influence of his friends and London's print culture lead to his innovation in creating the *Western Vindicator* as a means of using London's satirical style to proselytise Chartism in the provinces. The private

lives and public careers of these men muddy the notion that the LWMA were clearly Chartism's moral faction, and with that the vanguard of working-class Victorian respectability.⁶

I

The dominant account of Chartism's attitude to morality, sexuality, and gender relations remains Anna Clark's *Struggle for the Breeches*, in which Chartist speakers and propagandists, drawing from the rhetoric of the anti-Poor Law campaign, rejected the sexual libertarianism of the 1820s in favour of a discourse that presented virtuous working-class domestic life under threat from the privileged and decadent upper-classes.⁷ Jutta Schwarzkopf's *Women in the Chartist Movement* similarly highlights women's auxiliary political position, as well as the patriarchal but orderly and respectable sexual relationships amongst married Chartists.⁸ Michael Mason has argued that Chartists advanced the anti-sensualist cause, with a strict sexual morality going hand in hand with abstinence from drink.⁹

The idea of an abrupt breach between the 1820s and 1830s is also present in the literature on satire. Richard Hendrix's claim in 1973 that radicalism's post-war satire was not an aspect of Chartism was more recently reiterated in Vic Gatrell's study of Georgian satire that suggests it declined in the 1820s.¹⁰ The interest in Chartism's increasingly melodramatic literary output has further presented the movement's culture as a sober, often melancholic one, representing sexual deviancy as an aristocratic vice rather than something worthy of exploration amongst workers.¹¹ This is a wider problem, as research on Victorian humour generally has tended to avoid 'newspaper jokes - the most pervasive and commercially successful form of humour in the country.'¹² Vincent's case, however, suggests a continuation within Chartism of the libertarian, irreverent, and sometimes obscene culture of late Georgian and Regency London outlined by Iain McCalman.¹³ McCalman's research underlined the rise and then gradual decline within radicalism of sexual deviancy and obscene and satirical literature from the 1790s to the

1830s.¹⁴ His account ends in 1840, suggesting that although resilient the libertarian practices and ribald literature of the radical underworld were largely eclipsed and marginalised by the Chartist period. The cases of Cleave, Hetherington and Vincent suggest that in private and public the culture of the underworld was still vibrant and relevant to the movement, embraced and redeveloped by certain Chartists and clearly well-received by radicals far outside London.¹⁵

Henry Vincent was born in London but moved to Hull following his gold and silversmith father's bankruptcy in 1821. He returned in 1833, now a trained compositor, to work at Spottiswoode's, one of the capital's prestigious publishers.¹⁶ Following a trade dispute in 1836 in which Andrew Spottiswoode refused to acknowledge the London Union of Compositors, of which Vincent was a member, he left his work and was soon inducted into the London Working Men's Association, the moderate radical organisation agitating for political reform and moral improvement. Vincent's youthful enthusiasm, sociable nature and skill at speaking came to the fore over this period, and by 1837 he was paired with the successful radical publisher John Cleave on his first lecture tour. The purpose of this tour was not to spread the Charter, which would be finished and distributed a year later, but instead to expound the Association's model of organising across the country. The organisation's *Address and Rules* became the blueprint for these new Associations, the gender and sexual politics of which are clear from the first pages:

In forming Working Men's Associations, we seek not a mere exhibition of numbers; unless, indeed, they possess the attributes and character of *men*; and little worthy of the name are those who have no aspirations beyond mere sensual enjoyments - who, forgetful of their duties as fathers, husbands, and brothers, muddle their understandings and drown their intellect amid the drunken revelry of the pot-house.¹⁷

Good sexual and domestic behaviour was secured through education and declining drunkenness, and 'apart from its exclusively working-class membership, the L.W.M.A.'s aims resembled those

of the early teetotallers.’¹⁸ The LWMA’s chief aspiration was for well-behaved, well-educated husbands with wives who raised intelligent and responsible children, and these principles, taken at face value, have propelled the organisation’s presentation in the historiography of Chartism as a moralistic, elitist, and largely politically ineffectual one.¹⁹ Yet inference from documents such as the *Address and Rules* of a consistent culture across the organisation’s members overlooks a more complex picture revealed by Vincent’s private correspondence.

It is clear from Vincent’s letters to Minikin (Minikin’s replies have not survived) that almost immediately upon his first tour he turned to sensual enjoyments. In his third letter, from Huddersfield, he told his friend: ‘Tell the girls there is a profusion of bright eyed Yorkshire radical lasses’.²⁰ By the second tour in the summer of 1838, this time to spread the Charter, he was clearly becoming the object of affections. One Sunday in Huddersfield, the day Vincent tended to write his letters to Minikin, his letter abruptly ends. It restarts:

Monday Morning – I was obliged to give up writing yesterday in consequence of a piece of green silk and a pair of piercing eyes kindly volunteering to walk out with me over the beautiful hills that surround this delightful little town – How would I refuse such kindness?²¹

This passage, distinct from his evaluation of Miss Douglas’s intelligence two months earlier, sexualises his partner through reference to physical attributes and mentioning of a walk in the countryside, one venue of sexual liaisons.²² Although incongruous with the Association’s moralism or the purpose of his tours, Vincent’s fascination with the ‘fairest flowers of creation’ was not an affectation developed after he first left London. At first, these reports home seem like empty boasting or deliberate provocation on Vincent’s part, designed to tease his friend and inflate the sense of adventure. However, Vincent also shared with Minikin a sexual topography of the West End that undermines any suggestion of innocence in these passages. In one exchange shortly after his arrest, Vincent bemoans that he will no longer have opportunity to

visit a particular woman in Regent's Park, not far from Minikin's home on Great Russell Street or Vincent's near Euston Station:

Give lots of love to all friends – but especially to the young lasses – and if when walking through Regents Park (right angle) you see a young damsel, with sweet hazel eyes, intellectual forehead, lips that would turn an anchorite or a stoic and tea totaller to sin – neatly dressed in lavender silk – and a white satin bonnet – reading a gilt edge copy of Shelley's Queen Mab – go up to her – kiss her for me – and tender my warmest love.²³

Whoever this woman was, Vincent joked that Minikin's wife wouldn't mind if he did kiss her. The joking continued into the next exchange of letters, and both John and Mary Ann Minikin replied with their own jokes:

A pretty fellow you are to ask "what's the time o'day for the right angle"? You ought to have guessed that. Why, the soft and balmy hour of evening to be sure. When the sun has left us, and "the moon doffs his nightcap and squints through to the sky"; that's the time o'day, Master M - and as for the insinuation of Mary Ann, Saying "twill come out," "life though sweet is short, what thou dost do quickly"; ask her how she knows but what I have done²⁴

In response to organised police forces and organised efforts to clear the streets of prostitutes, some in the West End responded by advertising their services more subtly and dressing more genteelly.²⁵ In areas like Regent's Park streetwalkers could receive upwards of a pound from well-heeled customers, and Vincent's description is similar to one given by A.J. Munby describing a prostitute on nearby Regent Street in the 1850s, 'arrayed in gorgeous apparel'.²⁶ Clearly Vincent and Minikin were engaged in urban exploration, and the prominent innuendo and talk of late evening walks through the park suggests they at least fantasised about using her services.²⁷

This is supported by further allusions to a sexual history in the West End. Vincent seems to have conducted a relatively serious, potentially illicit relationship with a woman dubbed 'Mrs. V' (possibly to elude censors) that was disrupted by Vincent's travelling and ended by his imprisonment. The first mention of her came in September 1837, when Vincent requested Minikin 'remember me' to her, amongst other friends in London.²⁸ Later, when on tour he wrote: 'You'll give my love to Mrs. V. tell her, though absent, my affections are as strong as ever. Tell her although my body is in Yorkshire my heart is somewhere under her apron-strings.'²⁹ After his arrest, he told Minikin: 'Tell Mrs. V. of Kentish Town that I cannot Sweetheart her now'.³⁰ At the very least, these letters suggest a tone of friendly flirting. However, the letter that most strongly suggests a sexual relationship was from October 1838, when he told Minikin to tell Mrs. V that 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder', before adding: 'asking you that I bear in mind your favourite motto Discretion is the better part of valour.'³¹

More than just a private matter, Vincent's sexuality bled into his public appearances and his relationship with female Chartists. Robert Gammage, an active Chartist who became the first historian of the movement, suggested this when he described Vincent's famed abilities as an orator and noted that they elicited a sexual response:

With the fair sex his slight handsome figure, the merry twinkle of his eye, his incomparable mimicry, his passionate bursts of enthusiasm, the rich music of this voice, and, above all, his appeals for the elevation of woman, rendered him an universal favourite.³²

Dorothy Thompson glosses over the sexual content of these letters when briefly discussing the 'interest and enthusiasm of women' evident in them.³³ Jutta Schwarzkopf also dismisses Gammage's attitude as insinuating that women's involvement hinged 'on male personality'.³⁴ Rather than as being at all sexual, Schwarzkopf argues that the public interaction between Vincent and female Chartists frequently used the template of an extended family, with

Vincent cast as a brother and the activists as sisters. However, when read in the context of the bawdier and more honest passages of the correspondence between Vincent and Minikin, the sexual aspect of Chartist inter-gender interaction that Gammage hints at seems more justified. Women were responding to an activist who took them seriously as a constituency and saw their work as a vital part of the movement, yet simultaneously it is clear that sexual interaction, ranging from flirting at meetings to more substantial dalliances, was acceptable amongst activists and even between leaders and the grassroots of the movement.³⁵ A report from Vincent to Minikin of a respectable tea party in Bath in October 1838, and packed with seminal and bodily humour, allows an insight into how this sexual culture was conducted:

I have lots of sweathearts Married! And single. Some of the ladies joke and say they are afraid there will not be 'a bit of me left' ... I should tell you that when I leave Bath I shall leave at least three Henry Vincents behind me! Now don't laugh! I don't mean to say, to use a holy phrase, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh – but made namesakes by the aid of a little holy water and a few mystical words pronounced by one of God almighty's Lambs the parsons! – There is Henry Vincent England Henry Vincent Jones and Henry Vincent Young – Do you call that nothing?³⁶

The naming of children after leaders was a recurring and solemnly held aspect of Chartist culture, and Vincent's allusions to producing these children through affairs with both single and married women is a particularly ribald joke that is overlooked in Thompson's discussion of the same passage.³⁷ Yet the women joking that there will not be 'a bit' of him left seems innuendo equal to Vincent's own.

Vincent's sexual availability was even written into pageantry by female activists. On a visit to Trowbridge the previous month, Vincent was greeted in the streets by flags and a crowd of 10,000. Later:

I was presented with a handsome green silk scarf by a pretty smiling young lady who trembled from head to foot. She put it round me herself in the presence of the assembled thousands for and on behalf of the single ladies of that town. Do you call that nothing? ³⁸

The act is comparable to other acts of symbolic practice noted in the historiography of Chartism.³⁹ In this case, the silk represented the women's roles as labourers within the declining weaving industry, the green represented radicalism, and their selection as single women represented the sexuality of youth, and the evident eligibility of Vincent, creating a sort of symbolic version of the artisan's courtship process.⁴⁰ It also bears some relation to Peter Bailey's work on parasexuality, Bailey's example being the Victorian barmaid, a sexual object even when not participating in overt sexual relationships or activities.⁴¹ The girl and the single women are presented in terms of their radicalism, class and availability, but in being the object of the presentation, so too was Vincent's attractiveness, youth, and status as a well-known politician being celebrated and implicitly sexualised.

The respectable and polite rhetoric that Schwarzkopf highlights was certainly something Vincent encouraged along with his general encouragement of female activism. His public addresses on women's activity in the movement closely followed the outlook of the LWMA in advocating the political, yet auxiliary, engagement of an intelligent and radical female population. In March 1839, for instance, Vincent rhapsodised in the pages of the *Western Vindicator*:

The object of the Working Classes in forming Female Associations, has been repeatedly declared, and is simply this: - they know the influence which women justly exercise over the other sex, and they are desirous, by extending them sound political knowledge, to give that influence in political matters a proper direction... They seek, too, in women, not mere machines to do their drudgery

and satisfy their passions, but intelligent companions, capable of giving and receiving pleasure by the development of their ever acute, but too often uncultivated minds.⁴²

Yet acts of solidarity from those female activists could be rather crudely sexualised by Vincent. Three months later in June 1839, while awaiting trial, he wrote of the gifts he had received from his admirers, and facetiously invited Minikin to come visit him to see him wearing them:

You will find me in a stylish morning gown sent to me by a pretty little lassie (God help her); with a paper-cap, cut á la Napoleon; and sundry other little nick-nacks made by the sweet-little-teasing-bewitches! - I shall pay them all, in kind, for all their little kindnesses when I get “among them” again.⁴³

The gifts of clothing formed a material complement to the addresses women regularly wrote to prisoners.⁴⁴ This visit likely buoyed his spirits, since one of his first assumptions upon being put in gaol was that he would have little opportunity to interact with women. Two weeks prior to the visit of the ‘pretty little lassie’, he told Minikin:

I have no sweet young lasses here to wile away my time with, or with whom I might fall away from the staid and sober regions of studious solitude into the pleasing, yet, I fear, naughty Elysium of young love’s reliefs, there is but little dought I shall make an effort to climb the steep hill of improvement.⁴⁵

In the event Vincent had little reading material, and by February 1840, after nearly a year of imprisonment and increasingly depressed, Vincent was complaining to Minikin that he missed the women of Bath.⁴⁶ His attitude to these women was twofold: they were both siblings in the struggle and a crucial auxiliary for the movement, a position politically necessary to keep the

movement functioning, but simultaneously they were doting, sexually available and attracted to him.

In his political pose Vincent was therefore aligned with that which has been outlined by Clark and Schwarzkopf, in which women's activism was seen as auxiliary and therefore largely confined to the home.⁴⁷ Vincent never discusses with Minikin women's sexuality in terms of political liberation, and in this regard he correlates with the chronology of Clark's argument that sees Chartists abandoning sexual experimentation, such as Richard Carlile and the Owenites' advocacy in the 1820s of free love and relatively progressive attitudes towards women.⁴⁸ However, his writings to Minikin do indicate a sexually open culture within Chartism, with titillation rather than liberation its object. Sexual interactions were unremarkable, not only as a personal affair between activists but even to the extent that sexuality could be written into Chartist pageantry.⁴⁹ Vincent indicates that in the very first years of the Victorian period, aspects of the underworld culture that McCalman argued was becoming marginal in London were in fact flourishing on the route of Vincent's tour and in his letters home. The innovative sexual culture of the 1820s still existed, but for Vincent it was depoliticised, less about free thought and more about sensual pleasure. To understand this in more depth, it is necessary to investigate the culture that Vincent joined in 1836.

II

The letters bear comparison to the Gregory Watt/William Creighton correspondence analysed by Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob. In these intensely scatological letters from the 1790s, the pair experimented with sexual and gender roles 'for the sheer pleasure of it', spurred on by their radicalism, Romanticism and the context of the French Revolution.⁵⁰ The Vincent/Minikin correspondence was by no means as scatological as the Watt/Creighton letters, or even as experimental; but at the same time it is clear that Vincent's early boasts to Minikin were an

attempt to establish a sexual identity which was further utilised as a homosocial bond. His later writings from prison, often far darker than his earlier letters, suggest Minikin as something of a vicarious sexual outlet. Vincent's 'affective style', to use Hunt and Jacob's phrase, rested on a triad of sexuality, bawdy humour, and boasting.

The correspondence is important not just as evidence of the sexual courtships and exhibitions of a young itinerant speaker, but also as a means of appraising the cultures that he had grown up in. The culture of humour and innuendo that Vincent and Minikin enjoyed was clearly also the culture of the London composers. Practical jokes and bawdy, alcohol-fuelled parties that centred on clever speeches exhibiting puns and 'filthy and disgusting' ideas were reported in literature on the culture of printing offices during the years Vincent worked in one.⁵¹ Alongside this, his affective style was also clearly drawn from the culture of Vincent's political incubation in London; the nature of his radical milieu meant that this was also a sexual initiation. In their analysis of the Watt/Creighton letters, Hunt and Jacob point out that although lived vicariously, 'the French Revolution did have a somatic effect that resonated outward into many of life's domains'.⁵² Similarly, the excitement of the Chartist period, and Vincent's central position within it, allowed him a great deal of experimentation with his sexual and political self-presentation, and it is clear from his social and literary life in London that he drew on a culture that remained sexually libertarian. His boasting of both sexual and political successes seems to have been a conscious construction on Vincent's part of a Byronic hero, and it gave him intense pleasure when he was received as such.⁵³ Immediately after describing the presentation of the scarf to Minikin Vincent quoted Byron:

Oh that they had one rosy mouth!

I'd kiss them all from north to south.⁵⁴

The quote is a slight paraphrasing of a line in Canto VI of *Don Juan*, in a stanza advocating sexual love as a humanist virtue.⁵⁵ It is significant that Vincent memorised this line, albeit incorrectly, since Canto VI was the most controversial of the epic poem. Byron wrote the entire poem between 1818 and 1823, and delays between the publishing of the cantos were largely due to accusations that they were immoral.⁵⁶ Byron was important as both a political and erotic writer. For mid-Victorians, 'the introduction of anything from the corpus of Byronic material could be counted on automatically to release an erotic response'.⁵⁷ The Chartist Thomas Frost, an associate of the pornographer and publisher William Dugdale, testified that during the period radicals still toasted, read and aped Byron, and the influence of Byron in the work of Chartist poet Thomas Cooper has been studied.⁵⁸ More than an author, men of Vincent's generation saw his work as influencing 'not only the novel, poetry and drama, but fashion, social manners, erotic experience, and gender roles.'⁵⁹ He also unites the early and later Chartist periods, since the *Northern Star* began printing a regular 'Beauties of Byron' column in 1845, attesting to his continuing popularity and his status as a master that the small army of amateur working-class poets would do well to emulate.⁶⁰ *Don Juan* is evidently one of the frameworks that Vincent applied to his own life, imagining himself as a man, like Juan, both appealing to women and easily seduced by them.⁶¹ The Chartist Byron may have figured 'primarily as a champion of liberty at all costs', but evidently a complimentary reading of him as a sexual champion was still allowed.⁶²

The importance of pirated texts to earlier radicals has been outlined by McCalman, and with Byron it continued into the Chartist period.⁶³ A work of similar importance amongst radicals was Shelley's *Queen Mab*, which possessed a notorious endnote on free love, 'Even Love is Sold'. In the work the fairy Queen Mab comes to earth, showing Ianthe a past of oppression and the utopia to come in the future, brought about by the virtues progress would grant humanity.⁶⁴ The book was first pirated in 1821, and the security of the pirated editions was ensured by Shelley's inability to prevent its distribution since it was deemed obscene and

therefore ineligible for copyright.⁶⁵ This was still the case by the late 1830s, as *Queen Mab* was published by Henry Hetherington once in 1839 and fellow LWMA member John Watson five times between 1839 and 1851. George Bernard Shaw referred to it as the ‘Bible’ of Chartism, but as well as outlining a general theory of humanity’s progress ‘Even Love is Sold’ plead for love to be freed from the tyranny of marriage and for women to be allowed to pursue the natural appetites of sexual passion.⁶⁶ Vincent’s reference to the woman in Regent’s Park holding a copy suggests that it was closely linked to female sexuality in his mind. *Don Juan* and *Queen Mab* both provided touchstones with which Vincent structured a self-identity as a sexualised and political hero, which he conveyed to Minikin in his letters and his followers in his papers.

There is much more to suggest that the tone of Vincent’s letters was a reflection of his wider milieu. Cleave and Hetherington were ambivalent towards free love and contraception despite their open hostility towards Richard Carlile’s popular book of sex theory and practical contraceptive advice, *Every Woman’s Book*. Carlile’s belief in free love and divorce, drawn from ‘Even Love is Sold’ as well as his own experience and justification of the open sexual culture of London’s artisans, was opposed by Cleave and Hetherington because of his support for Malthusianism.⁶⁷ The two were also opposed to Carlile’s second ‘moral marriage’ to Eliza Sharples in 1830, a speaker at Carlile’s Rotunda theatre.⁶⁸ However, Carlile’s estranged sons, both pornographers who pirated his book in the late 1830s, defended themselves by saying that they did so to pre-empt Cleave and Hetherington, who were prepared to pirate it themselves.⁶⁹ Cleave and Hetherington did continue to publish birth control literature throughout the Chartist period, and despite his criticism of Carlile’s second marriage, in 1840 Cleave moved his mistress into his family home while his wife was still alive, who had a nervous breakdown soon after.⁷⁰

Cleave’s infidelity had minimal repercussions for his moral politics. In 1841, Cleave, along with a number of moral improvement Chartists including Hetherington and Lovett, sent a draft of the first address of their new organisation, the National Association of the United Kingdom for promoting the Political and Social Improvement of the People, to Francis Place,

the influential, wealthy self-made tailor and key Westminster radical who was aligned with the LWMA. Upon receiving this, and angry to see Cleave's signature on such a document, Place wrote to William Lovett that Cleave was '[c]ruel in the extreme towards his wife whom he always boasts of as his delight, his friend, his companion and his helpmate' and that his 'conduct was disgraceful beyond expression towards his daughters', concluding that his 'name is a blur upon the paper, a name to make men doubt its sincerity, and to consider it as a cunningly devised piece of hypocrisy [sic].' Yet he added that '[i]n a mere trading concern I should say nothing about him, but in a case like this, anything can surely be more out of place, nor more incongruous.'⁷¹

This concession illustrates a disjunction between private conduct, public moralism, and the requirements of business that seems a common attitude amongst these radicals. Place's clear distinction between trade and morality suggests that these men held morality to be a multifaceted affair, and notably other activists were still happy to work with him. Cleave remained an ally of Lovett, who described him in his autobiography as being 'rude and bluff in his manner at times, but [with] a warm and generous heart; always ready to aid the good cause, and to lend a helping hand to the extent of his means.'⁷² Hetherington and even Vincent, who in January 1841 married Cleave's daughter Lucy, still worked with him. Despite the familial rupture, Vincent would remain a key partner of Cleave's throughout the 1840s.

This pragmatic attitude is further indicated by Cleave and Hetherington's roots in London's pornographic underworld, as surveyed by McCalman towards the end of his study. William Benbow, a pornographer and pirate in the 1820s and later Chartist prisoner, was a close associate of Cleave between 1830 and 1835. "Bawdy, *bon ton*, anti-establishment and 'crim. con'" publications of the sort produced by the suppliers of pornography and obscene literature were being advertised in Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian* in 1834, and during this time Cleave was also a close associate of William Strange, to whom McCalman attributes the obscene anti-clerical publication *The Confessional Unmasked*, printed in 1836.⁷³ As McCalman speculates, it is clear that

these men illustrate the conduit between the culture of the Regency underworld and the mass culture of Chartism propagated by Vincent and Minikin's generation.⁷⁴ This, coupled with Vincent's evident regard for the pirated literature of Byron and Shelley and his admiration for their models of masculinity, suggests that the traditions of bawdiness, free love and sensuality had not faded by the Chartist period. Hetherington, Cleave and their protégé Vincent were all steeped in the culture of the underworld in the 1830s, and were morally malleable in their interactions with it. The significance of this was not just complexity or turpitude in their business or sexual lives, but also the way they redeveloped the culture of the underworld into a viable popular literature that expounded moral and political reform while also purveying satire and near-obscurity.

III

By 1839 Vincent was spending most of his time in Bath, and with several friends from the city and Bristol he began producing his own newspaper, *The Western Vindicator*. Its satirical passages make it clear that Vincent's irreverence and bawdy sense of humour were carried over into his new career as an editor. It is also significant not only as illustration of the longevity of satirical forms inspired by the acerbic Georgian tradition, but also as evidence that Chartism found a receptive audience for such a style in the cities and countryside of the west. Just as Vincent was a popular agitator, *The Vindicator* was a popular newspaper, often selling almost all of its weekly print-run of 3,400 copies. As Owen Ashton has suggested, thanks to the practice of literate workers reading newspapers to audiences it was probably consumed by around or above 60,000 people weekly.⁷⁵

Just as Vincent's private letters reflected the print culture surrounding the LWMA, so too did his own publication. Vincent's debt to Cleave and Hetherington was not total; in the *Vindicator* Vincent was far more directly and aggressively satirical, and unlike Cleave neglected

satirical woodcuts, which were too expensive to regularly print, especially outside of London. Nevertheless Vincent adopted the basics of their style. Cleave and Hetherington's standout contribution to the radical movement was the seamless splicing of moral and intellectual instruction and political material with muck-raking journalism, humour, and popular culture. It was this format and structure that Vincent would adopt with the *Vindicator*, creating a consciously moralistic but also humorous and smutty publication.

Cleave's *Weekly Police Gazette*, published between 1834 and 1836, had a circulation of 40,000 copies and like Hetherington's work combined sensational crime reporting with political news and commentary.⁷⁶ Throughout the 1830s both men knew that sex and violence sold, and both consequently were successful businessmen. Hetherington's *The Destructive and Poor Man's Conservative*, founded in 1833, was a more sensational compliment to his crusading *Poor Man's Guardian*. Although articles on police and court news were present from the first issues, by June 1833 Hetherington was receiving letters from readers demanding a greater number of more exciting stories. On June 15th he inserted a note acknowledging these requests, and in the same issue reported extensively on William John Bankes, the Tory MP for Dorset, who had been discovered late at night in a churchyard near Parliament with a soldier, the panels of both men's trousers being open.⁷⁷ Criminal reports were present and prominent in almost every issue from that point on, and space was found for them only at the expense of useful knowledge and parliamentary reports.

In 1834 *The Destructive* came to an end, but Hetherington replaced it with the broadsheet *Two Penny Dispatch*. Having learned what people wanted, he bluntly stated that the new paper 'shall abound in...Murders, Rapes, Suicides, Burnings, Maimings, Theatricals, Races, Pugilism...it will be stuffed with every sort of devilment that will make it sell.'⁷⁸ The paper was a crucial chronicler of the early Chartist movement after being merged with Cleave's *Police Gazette* and renamed *The London Dispatch and Social Reformer* in 1836, but it still maintained regular articles

on murders, suicides and coroner's reports, alongside columns on moral improvement and political reports.

Cleave's *London Satirist and Gazette of Variety* (later *Penny Gazette of Variety*, *Gazette of Variety* and finally *Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement*) was founded in 1837, a year after the merger of the *Police Gazette* with the *Two-Penny Dispatch*. The lessons Cleave had learned about page-layout from the *Police Gazette* came in useful for the new paper, which like its antecedent had a satirical print below the banner on the front-page every week. An explicitly political editorial would be included on the inside pages, often on the same topic as the front page's satirical woodcut. This served a dual purpose: the image on the front attracted potential customers' attention, but the editorial hidden on the internal pages allowed Cleave to avoid paying stamp duty for political commentary.⁷⁹ The *Police Gazette* employed Richard Seymour, the illustrator of *The Pickwick Papers*, and C.J. Grant for these prints. By the point of the *Satirist's* founding, Seymour had shot himself but Grant was retained and became its illustrator. Grant's retention of the older grotesque style of drawing was acknowledged by Thackeray in his attack on the popular literature of the working class, 'Half-a-Crown's Worth of Cheap Knowledge': 'Rude woodcuts adorn all these publications, and seem to be almost all from the hand of the same artist - Grant by name. They are outrageous caricatures; all squinting eyes, wooden legs, and pimpled noses, forming the chief points of fun.'⁸⁰ Miles Taylor has noted that Cleave and Grant's recurring depiction of John Bull as a 'victimized taxpayer' is firmly in the Hanoverian tradition.⁸¹ This satirical form set Cleave apart from the *Northern Star's* imagery which instead published portraits of prominent radicals in an effort to equate itself with respectability and prominent aristocratic politicians.⁸²

Hetherington and Cleave's experimentation and innovation in the period immediately after the relaxation of the stamp duty went a long way towards defining the modern press, but this development was clearly based on the bedrock of the underworld's salacious content and irreverent style. The *Police Gazette*, argues Virginia Berridge, was an important point in the development of the hugely popular working-class Sunday papers of later decades, and

Hetherington and Cleave's innovation in combining satire, sensation, and politics commercialised the radical press.⁸³ However, as Ian Haywood has argued, in the short-term and like Hetherington's *The Destructive* and later *Dispatch*, the *Police Gazette's* merger of festivity and radicalism created a hybridised discourse of populist radicalism.⁸⁴ At the same time the *Police Gazette* clearly wanted to be taken seriously, adopting the broadsheet format more common to stamped papers like *The Times*.⁸⁵ As with Peter Bailey's assessment of respectability as calculated and situational, the LWMA's aloof moralism seems context specific, not held by these men as a universalism.⁸⁶ The bawdy and sensational press allowed access to a wide audience and complimented rather than contradicted moral and political comment, and was therefore a legitimate tone for radical politics. Far from ending by the end of the 1830s, the traditions of the underworld were in fact freshened and re-invigorated.

Like Cleave's papers, the *Vindicator* exploited the same loopholes in the Stamp Acts, avoiding printing 'news and occurrences' by printing tracts by Tom Paine and others, news in the form of letters, poetry, satire, and even dream sequences.⁸⁷ The *Vindicator*, like the *Gazette* and *Satirist* series, was priced at 2d and used the more expensive broadsheet format.⁸⁸ However, The *Vindicator* was above all a local paper, designed to cater for the working class of Somerset, Wiltshire, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and south Wales, and so disregarded the London-centric tales of corruption Cleave and Hetherington emphasised in favour of parochial satire that relentlessly attacked local politicians. One particular target was Thomas Phillips, the Mayor of Newport. Phillips was scatologically re-imagined as Thomas Philpotts, who in turn was regularly lampooned in the *Vindicator* for his simian appearance, mental defects and womanising. A spoof report of a trial was included, where Philpotts – or the 'Chimpanzee' as the *Vindicator* called him – brought a libel suit against Vincent.

The plaintiff, who conducted his own cause, opened the pleadings by briefly remarking – "Mr. Mayor, and gentlemen of the Jury, it is a true adage, that he who advocates his own cause has a

fool for a client” – (Hear, hear, from the Jury). “I shall, therefore, *simply* state gentlemen – *very simply* indeed – that this action is brought by my own very magnificent self, for recovery of damages in being stigmatised as a *Baboon* and a *Chimpanzee*, whereas, in truth and in fact, I am only a harmless *Monkey*.”⁸⁹

Later, a witness who was present at his birth was sworn in to provide evidence for Philpotts. She insisted that Philpotts’ father referred to him as a ‘baboon’ upon first seeing him. In the cross-examination, Vincent indulged his talent for wordplay and enjoyment of bodily humour, with the *Vindicator* reporting that she told Philpott she was: ‘sure the word baboon was used; knows the difference between a *baboon* and a *monkey*; the former has no tail, the latter has; there appeared a *slight protuberance* in plaintiff, though *exceedingly minute*.’ At the end of the trial, the Jury returned and announced that: ‘We find the plaintiff to be a *real Chimpanzee*; in fact, a *complete Baboon*; and we earnestly recommend him as an invaluable acquisition to any Zoological Society.’ Following this, ‘the plaintiff fell into an hysterical fit, foamed and grinned horribly, and bit and scratched the policemen’.

Melodrama was also spoofed, and served as the basis for the on-going satirical saga of the Chimpanzee. Two weeks after the trial report, the *Vindicator* reported the Chimpanzee’s suicide and the resulting coroner’s inquest. Here, the Chimpanzee’s sexuality was mocked, through invocation of the fallen woman motif:

Witness...[w]as a servant to Mrs. Matthews, in whose house deceased lodged; deceased, was very kind to her when they first met; soon after felt *excruciatingly* ill; deceased for some time gave witness medicine, but the *malady* increasing in virulence, witness went, by deceased’s order, to Mr. Jukes, a druggist, who was to supply all requisite medicines at his, (deceased’s) expense. That witness’s mistress discovering her extreme illness, and observing, by the labels on the pillboxes and phials, that Mr. Jukes supplied the medicines, applied to him and learnt the nature and extent of her cruel malady, which led to her immediate discharge, with only 9s., amount of wages then

due...[the witness] through the retch, *lost* her virtue – her situation – her character – and her constitution – irretrievably and hopelessly lost forever (Here the poor girl fainted, and was carried out of Court).⁹⁰

Vincent's talent as a satirist came, in part, from the verisimilitude of his writing; the report of the Chimpanzee's death is suitably melodramatic to conform to the conventions of cheap literature and the sensational elements of papers such as Hetherington and Cleave's, which reported on real rapes, affairs, and pregnancies. The trial report follows the steps of a real trial, while the joke is only pushed to its limits when the Chimpanzee returned as a ghost 'fighting in the tap-room of the Castle Inn'. In one column of fake correspondence, Phillips supposedly wrote to Vincent demanding to know whether or not Vincent had threatened to 'pull my nose'. Vincent published the following apology: 'I, the undersigned, solemnly declare, that, having the most ineffable contempt for Thomas Phillips, jun., I never will soil my fingers by pulling his nose; nor degrade my foot by kicking him.'⁹¹ Like some of the jokes that Vincent crafted when writing to Minikin, this fake correspondence was carefully structured to give maximum impact to the punchline. It is only obvious that the correspondence is satire towards the end of the piece.

This was also the case with the *Vindicator's* spoof report on the ball of Lord Powerscourt, the Tory MP for Bath. As with his treatment of Phillips, Vincent was keen to encourage rumour and innuendo to present Powerscourt as a debauched simpleton. Powerscourt was a favourite target of Bath's radicals since J.A. Roebuck, the city's radical MP, lost the 'Drunken Election' to him in 1837, when the Tories bribed the electorate with alcohol, leading to drunken disorder. The enmity between the two men grew, and in March 1839, Roebuck and Powerscourt fought a duel after Roebuck claimed Powerscourt had insulted him during 'some drunken exhibition.'⁹² It was this reputation that the *Vindicator* was clearly playing off of with its reports on the ball. The article opened by noting Powerscourt's abilities as a politician: 'As an orator he possesses extraordinary powers – he never wearies members of 'the house,' *for he never speaks*; and he

seldom votes incorrectly, *for he never votes at all!*⁹³ After the first dance refreshments were brought over, consisting of ‘glasses of gin, wine, rum, cake, and a few pots of half-and-half’. In a notable invocation of a recurring image of Georgian satire, as the two disguised radicals telling the story observed Powerscourt ‘we could not help pitying his lordship, for he had two such fat girls on his knees.’ After a dance the crowd once again ‘partook of heavy, gin, wine, &c.’ This drinking led to sexual immorality and physical violence amongst a group described in the imagery of Georgian grotesque humour:

We had well nigh a regular row. For there was a little stumpy fellow, with bandy legs, who had brought a carrot-haired six-foot girl to the ball – he had gone down the room to light his pipe and fetch her a glass of gin, when Col. Daubeney, taking a cowardly advantage of his absence, had talked some soft nonsense to her in a corner.

When the man returned he demanded instant satisfaction, the Colonel replied coolly: ‘Sir, I know not who you are. But mark me, I consider every lady in a ballroom...is public property.’ The Colonel was promptly punched in the mouth, leading to a large brawl that the two disguised radicals watched, laughing. The night eventually ended with Powerscourt ‘so gloriously drunk that several of the ladies were laying him gently on the floor at one end of the room, after which they carried him out.’⁹⁴

These ‘festive distortions of almost every element of a respectable newspaper’ were a core element in the work of T.J. Wooler and the content of his *Black Dwarf*, a Regency-era paper that Vincent read and which was likely a strong influence.⁹⁵ As with Vincent’s spoofs, this style granted verisimilitude to satirical articles by closely copying the language and structure of court reports and society or correspondence pages in local newspapers, utilising the discourse of the establishment as a means to attack it. A similar effect was brought about by the *Vindicator*’s inclusion of entirely respectable, non-satirical material. Just as Vincent’s merger of the serious

and the humorous in the satirical articles sharpened the critical impact of both forms, the proximity of satire to the *Vindicator's* variety of serious content juxtaposed an immoral upper class with an intellectual and moral working class. Recurring columns in the *Vindicator* outlined scientific principles with the clear intention that these were to be used by families to teach one another. These columns often included instructions for basic household scientific experiments, but reprints of a series of dialogues went one further by giving parents a script to read to their children as they conducted these experiments.⁹⁶ Paine's 'Dissertation on the First Principles of Government' ran through the early issues of the paper, while essays on Washington, Franklin or Cicero were common. Frequently editorials advocated the virtues of education:

Get knowledge, young men. Read books on political subjects; and, above all, dive deep into political economy. Read the political works of Godwin, Cobbett, Bentham, Barlow, Paine, Cartwright, Algernon Sidney, Smith, and others; read these works, and you will soon acquire the habit of *thinking for yourselves*.⁹⁷

These articles on science, history, and philosophy and extensive adverts from bookshops such as Cleave's were formed a core part of radicalism's ideology of men and women using the family to create a politically aware and active generation of radicals. This content was also contrasted with the stupidity, naivety and excessive drunkenness of the ruling class. The result was the *Vindicator* possessing a double nature as both a satirical journal that appealed directly to the bawdy, ribald humour illustrated in Vincent and Minikin's exchanges, while using that humour to impart political and moralistic messages. Far from hindering these messages, the satire, sexual tales and bodily humour of the bawdy press of the 1820s was retooled to advance Chartism's moralism and intellectualism.

Vincent's popularity outside London, the centrality of jokes to his relationship to Minikin and the clear influence on his life of the radical underworld suggests that Chartist humour can elucidate not just how politics was made appealing to the working class but also the continuities of popular culture across the period. Chartism's archival legacy, in the form of speeches, newspaper columns and personal correspondence, could become a fertile means of understanding the more festive and ribald aspects of early Victorian life and political culture. Newspapers such as the *Vindicator* provide opportunity to move such study away from the focus on *Punch*, as well as into communities outside of London.⁹⁸ On the quotidian level, Vincent's letters and his humorous output in the *Vindicator* correlates with Peter Bailey's arguments that Victorian respectability was 'situational' and context-specific.⁹⁹ The simultaneously moralistic but also transgressive activities of men like Vincent and Cleave suggest that a clear practical division between respectable and unrespectable behaviour did not exist even in the mid-nineteenth century.

This study also undermines several aspects of the concept of a clear breach between the culture of the Chartist era and that of its precedents. McCalman suggests that by 1840, the underworld had demised but shown 'great resilience...in the face of powerful countervailing forces.'¹⁰⁰ In fact, Hetherington, Vincent and Cleave's hybridisation of unrespectable politics with the new, high-minded moralistic politics shared by both the LWMA and the rival O'Connorite wing of the Chartists indicates not mere resilience but instead overt and successful continuation and redevelopment of several core aspects of the underworld. This challenges Mason and Clark's notion that Chartism ushered in outright hostility towards sexual libertarianism since it is clear that these three men, amongst the most closely associated with the politics of moral reform, were also the most keenly populist; Vincent and Cleave in particular are far from anti-sensualist in their attitude to sexuality. Furthermore, their popularity suggests that they have to be considered more than a subculture adrift off of the Chartist mainstream, as with Steven Marcus's 'other'

Victorians, but instead as Malcolm Chase says of Cleave ‘closer to grass-roots opinion than historians have allowed’.¹⁰¹

Beyond the literary and political, the valuable evidence Vincent has left on sexuality suggests continuity in the sexual practices of young, skilled working-class Londoners. The breadth of the topics discussed in his correspondence is remarkable, indicating that even by the late 1830s an unmarried man in his 20s still saw the world in very similar sexual terms to men of previous generations. Vincent’s lifestyle and his status as a well-educated compositor suggest that Francis Place’s belief that the relaxed sexual culture of his youth had largely disappeared amongst middling-class Londoners was incorrect.¹⁰² This is also the case with Cleave and Hetherington, two decades older than Vincent, yet still publishing the contraceptive advice and Romantic poems consumed by people of his generation just as it had been consumed by theirs.

Although further study of other Chartist activists is necessary, Vincent’s private life and the print culture of the London radicals suggests that far from a breach with the marginal counter-culture of an earlier radical tradition, certain aspects of the underworld – its irreverent treatment of authority, its risqué humour and its fascination with smut, the body, and sexuality – were not eclipsed by the Chartist period, but rather retooled as integral parts of the culture of a mass-movement that extended across the country. In this respect, Chartism ended the underworld by bringing it above ground, exposing it to the nation, and expanding it.

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