

Cynicism in Honoré-Victorin Daumier's Caricatures of Nineteenth Century Paris

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Oida: "to have seen" and "to know"

Honoré-Victorin Daumier¹ did much to parody the regimes of his state in nineteenth century Paris, France. Daumier reacted to the then contemporary events in a striking, yet, predictable way in his caricatures by representing power as grotesque. Sentimentality counters the sharp wit of Daumier's prints and busts of politicians (fig. 1) and other prominent Parisians. The notion that power necessarily corrupts dominates Daumier's caricatures. That his prints widely disseminated in Paris suggests this was a popular sentiment and reflects an ideology that led to a debilitating cynicism on the Left following the 1830 and 1848 revolutions.

Figure 1



Honoré Daumier
Ratapoil
v. 1891
Bronze
Paris, Musée d'Orsay

¹ 26 February 1808 - 10 February 1879. Daumier was born in Marseilles and died in Paris.

Daumier's caricatures of those in power under the reign of King Charles X,² the "citizen-king" Louis Phillipe³ and the first President of the Second Republic and second Emperor of the Second French Empire Napoléon III⁴ disseminated mostly throughout Paris via lithographic prints in *La Caricature*,⁵ a periodical edited by the Republican Charles Philipon. The July Revolution of 1830 that forced the last of the Bourbon Kings, Charles X, to abdicate the throne and then the 1848 Revolutions that forced King Louis-Phillipe's July Monarchy to an end would be succeeded by governments which would disappoint a Republican such as Daumier. Each revolution led to a bourgeois dictatorship.

Daumier's use of caricature with the advent of the invention of lithography became an opportunistic way to represent the bourgeoisie and royalists. On the one hand, Daumier's subjects justly deserve critique and, on the other hand, his critiques justly deserve critique.

Daumier subscribes to the myth of the ignorant tyrant in his caricatures of contemporary events and portraits of those who participated. The word caricature comes from a French translation of the Italian word *caricatura* from the Latin word *caricare*, which means "to load" or "to exaggerate." In part, such exaggerations by Daumier most likely were influenced by his publisher, Charles Philipon, and appear grotesquely Rabelaisian. Writes Howard P. Vincent in Daumier and His World:

[the] Rabelaisian style of wit was more congenial and habitual to Philipon than to Daumier, all of whose independent satire—that is, work not in association with Philipon—had compassion and, in general, was unliterary and unallusive to fiction. (It is also significant that Daumier never used Rabelais again. His satiric forebearer and favorite was Molière.)⁶

The caricatures, nonetheless, distort the likenesses of the subject in an excessive way.

That the caricatures appear grotesque does not come at the expense of truth. Instead, they appear distorted for the purpose of making a spectacle that makes personalities seem extraordinary and distant from their everyday appearance. They appear monstrous in a way that recalls the ending of the play *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. Historian and philosopher Michel Foucault writes that:

"at the end of the play, Oedipus is a superfluous figure. He is superfluous in that this tyrannical power, this knowledge of one who wants to see with

² r. 20 May 1824 to 1830

³ r. 1830 to 1848

⁴ In power from 10 December 1848 to 2 September 1870

⁵ *La Caricature* was founded 4 November 1830

⁶ Vincent, Howard P., Daumier and His World, pp. 27

his own eyes without listening either to the gods or to men enables an exact match-up of what the gods had said and what the people knew. Without meaning to, Oedipus succeeds in establishing the junction between the prophecy of the gods and the memory of men. Oedipal knowledge, the excess of power and the excess of knowledge were such that he became unnecessary: the circle closed on him or, rather, the two fragments of the tessera were fit together—and Oedipus, in his solitary power, became unnecessary. Once the two fragments were conjoined, the image of Oedipus became monstrous. With his tyrannical power, Oedipus could do too much; with his solitary knowledge, he knew too much... Oedipus, the double man, was excessive with regard to the symbolic transparency of what the shepherds knew and what the gods had said.”⁷

Daumiere makes the subjects of his caricatures appear superfluous by rendering them in a spectacularly grotesque way.

That Daumier’s caricatures represent those who hold powerful positions within the French government makes them both tragic and comedic. They appear tragic for the reason that they appear distant from the everyday, and, thus, are destined to fall. In other words, they have reached their zenith and will have to tumble as the myth goes.

Daumier’s caricatures of politicians represent power as ignorant. Yet, if power equates with knowledge, then, by representing the powerful as non-knowledgeable, Daumier only preserved the myth that naturalized the dumb politician. How much Daumier affected the course of events is not known, however, his caricatures’ popularity in Paris mean that such sentiments would have found a broad audience.

When the time came for the 1830 and 1848 revolutions, no viable alternative knowledge of power beyond that of the bourgeoisie and royalists surfaced. The failure of the provisional government of the Second Republic exemplifies an inability to hold power by the Republicans and Socialists. Instead, the figure of the powerful grotesque or the ignorant tyrant, which, according to Foucault, dates back to Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*, would continue after the 1848 Revolution in popular myth.

Daumier parodied the then contemporary events with cartoons and caricatures with several starts and stoppages. Ordinances passed by different regimes censored critique of the monarchy, first by King Charles X⁸ and then by the Chief of Paris police’s officer squads⁹ during the administration of King Louis-

⁷ Foucault, Michel, *Power*, pp. 30

⁸ On 26 July 1830 King Charles X authorized Polignac, chief minister, to publish repressive laws known as “ordinances” that censored the press, altered electoral laws and ordered new elections

⁹ Known as *guisquetaires*

Phillipe. The officer squads would invade newspaper offices and print shops for the purpose of seizing papers that were thought inflammatory in tone or intent. For the production of *Gargantua*, December 1831, Daumier was sentenced to two years in prison following his, Aubert and Delaporte's trial on 23 February 1832. They faced the crime of "fomenting disrespect and hatred against His Majesty's government and of offense to the King." Daumier served for six months at Ste Pelagic in 1832.

Daumier produced a number of busts following his trips to parliament, which contributed to his "legislative belly" series during the reign of King Louis-Phillipe. The series featured busts of individual legislators (fig. 2) and cartoons in which the legislators were seated with the rows in the legislature mimicking the upper arches formed by their gigantic bellies. The busts exaggerate features of their subjects. What makes the legislators distinct is not their ideology, but, rather, their idiosyncratic and personal characteristics. Such representations appear anecdotal following the revolutions.

Figure 2



Honoré Daumier
Busts
c. 1830
Bronze
National Gallery, Washington DC

Daumier had also produced a typology of masks to place over the “pear,” which became symbolic of Louis-Phillipe’s reign (fig. 3). Pear in French also may refer to a simpleton. Thus, the pear serves as the archetypal head upon which various masks are placed, yet, despite the exchange, its root form remains that of a simpleton. Foucault writes of the history of the ignorant tyrant that, “[w]ith Plato there began a great Western myth: that there is an antinomy between knowledge and power.”¹⁰ Daumier continues this myth of an antinomy between knowledge and power by virtue of the fact that he represents those in power as grotesque and ignorant, showing ambivalence to their knowledge without proposing an opening for an alternative.

Figure 3



Honoré Daumier
Masks of 1831, 1832
 Lithograph
 21.2 X 29 cm

Daumier’s caricatures that parodied the monarchy tested laws that were enacted for the purpose of censoring criticism of the King and his government. Daumier would transgress those laws with the support of the paper *La Caricature*. Many others would as well. Subsequently, many intellectuals met in prison and could discuss opposition to the monarchy and the bourgeoisie.

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel, Power, pp. 32

Daumier's Gargantua became symbolic of the opposition to the censorship of the press by the ordinances because it had been these print that the prosecution would use against Daumier as evidence for committing an offense to the King and his government during the trial in which Daumier was one of the defendants. The print depicts King Louis-Phillipe as a giant who sits on a *chaise percée* being fed by the poor while notes are collected from his posterior end.

The censoring of Gargantua led to more prints of the same subject with slight variations. One of the latter prints depicts a chair substituted for the *chaise percée* and the King removed; another features King Louis-Phillipe's legs underneath the seat of a chair. These subsequent prints are reactive. This instance of reaction to the censoring of the first print of Gargantua defines much of Daumier's work. Daumier proposes almost no alternative to the present governing structure through his parodies while he would use the technology of caricature in order to render the government absurdly monstrous with ambivalence towards the knowledge such a subject may possess. This has a naturalizing effect on forms of knowledge, which, in the West, says Foucault:

would be dominated by the great myth according to which truth never belongs to political power: political power is blind—the real knowledge is that which one possesses when one is in contact with the gods or when one remembers things, when one looks at the great eternal Sun or one opens one's eyes to what came to pass."¹¹

Oddly, Daumier produced several caricatures of his friends and colleagues, including a bust of Philipon, conscious or unconscious of such an effect.

The excesses of caricature naturalize the myth of the ignorant tyrant or grotesque king. It functions to propagate a myth in which power comes with blindness and, thus, has no right to knowledge. Yet, Foucault writes, "[t]his great myth needs to be dispelled. It is this myth which Nietzsche began to demolish by showing... that, behind all knowledge [*savoir*], behind all attainment of knowledge [*connaissance*], what is involved is a struggle for power. Political power is not absent from knowledge, it is woven together with it."¹² If caricature, figures subjects with excess personality and imagines power as grotesque, then Daumier was supporting a system of knowledge that would undercut the revolutions which he admired via his caricatures.

Napoleon III's installment as President of the Republic and second Emperor of the Second French Empire deflated the hopes of the Second Republic following the 1848 revolution. His installment was seen as opportunistic and a result of the disorder of the provisional government. A revolution greatly

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 32

influenced by Socialism and Republicanism was succeeded by the bourgeois dictatorship of Napoleon III.

Daumier produced a number of prints and paintings depicting clowns, saltimbanques (fig. 4) Don Quixote and Sancho Panza despite a career of parodying images of the bourgeoisie and the monarchy. The latter were produced mostly after the 1848 Revolutions.

Figure 4



Honoré Daumier
Clown Playing a Drum
 c. 1865-67

Pen and black and gray ink, brush and gray wash, watercolor, touches of gouache, and conté crayon, over black chalk underdrawing; 354 x 256 mm

Why does Honoré Daumiere shift his focus from satires of the bourgeoisie and the monarchy in order to depict clowns, saltimbanques, scenes from Don Quixote and Sancho Panza after the 1848 Revolutions? In many of Shakespeare's tragicomedies, the clown or fool is the character who *knows*, the one who proves ever the wiser by their premonitions despite their lowly position and indignation.

The clown or fool counters the tragedy of the tyrant who does not *know*, much like Foucault's description of the peasant according to Sophocles. Foucault: "[t]hus, beyond a power that had become monumentally blind like Oedipus, there were the shepherds who remembered and the prophets who spoke the truth."¹³ Daumier parodies entertainers after producing thousands of prints that parody those in power. Yet, the entertainers are serious in these prints and paintings.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 32

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