

A Vision of Freedom Through the Looking Glass of Mr Punch¹

John Constable



The pattern of significance in a novel is a narrow but intense network, each detail contributing to the plot or to the emotional resonance of the setting, as if the fictional world were the creation of a grand artificer for whom nothing is wasted. The novelist not only appears to have made the meanest sparrow fall, but intended this disaster and assigned it a function within the plan that justifies the maze of their own imaginative achievement. By contrast, our quotidian lives are a rich chaos of irrelevance and inconsequential dead ends, a buzzing confusion that drowns out, except for the most superstitious and the most egotistical, any attempt to impose upon it a coherent sense of governing direction. Nevertheless, and perhaps as a result, the characters of naturalistic fiction

¹ The standard literary source for the story of Punch is also the *locus classicus* for its visual representation: *Punch and Judy, With Illustrations Designed and Engraved by George Cruikshank: Accompanied by the dialogue of the puppet-show, an account of its origin, and of puppet-plays in England* (S. Prowett: London, 1828). This now very scarce book, which I read in a loaned copy in 1994, is available in at least two reprints, namely John Payne Collier, illus. George Cruikshank, Foreword Tony Sarg, Bibliographical note by Anne Lyon Haight, *Punch and Judy, Accompanied by the Dialogue of the Puppet Show, An Account of Its Origin and of the Puppet-Plays in England*, (Rimington & Hooper: New York, 1929), and a reprint of that edition available as John Payne Collier, et. al., *Punch and Judy: A Short History with the Original Dialogue* (Dover: Mineola, 2006). It is to this last edition that references are keyed. However, far and away the best source for those considering the subject is George Speaight, *Punch & Judy* (Studio Vista: London, 1970), but first published, with a full scholarly apparatus that is omitted in the revised edition, as *The History of the English Puppet Theatre* (1955).

are somewhat constrained by the circumstances of physical fact and, still more stringently, by the universal morality, the perennial wisdom, the golden rule. Doing-as-you-would-be-done-by is the norm, and even those characters that deviate from it are burdened with a bad conscience, or are poisoned by diabolic understanding of their transgression. These latter types are almost ubiquitous in contemporary cultural representations of evil in both literature and film. Examples are superfluous; such characters are standard.

This is surprising, for though it is true that the appeals of fiction are various, the predominating attraction for many, perhaps all, is to occupy and reward the mind with pleasing fantasies that prevent consciousness of present difficulties. How curious it is, then, that literature seems to offer only short or cluttered views of absolute liberty from moral constraints. The exception, by which we can measure the limitations of all others, is the scarcely literary character of Mr Punch, which must be almost unique in literature since it is interpretationally flat, and yet deeply mysterious. Many have tried to place Punch in a scheme of greater meaning, historical or even psychoanalytic, but the character is so superficial and contrarian that it resists any complex and consistent thematic rendering, indeed it resists explanation beyond that which is in any case already manifest. As one noted performer has remarked, the only possible answer to the question “What does Mr Punch stand for?” is that “Mr Punch won’t *stand* for *anything!*”

Conventional literary criticism fails to find any surface on which to gain traction, and instead we are left with a problem in cultural epidemiology, namely the causal explanation of the powerful and continuing appeal of a costume, a puppet face, a voice, and a set of actions, which are simple, depthless, and almost empty of reference or historical content. In spite of this barren and unpromising set of attributes, generations of observers have found the drama itself compelling in performance and on reflection both stimulating and invigorating. The strength of this attraction is so great that the poverty of our understanding is obscured, but a brief introspective survey of the principal factors of the puppet and his thin, repellent, and contradictory theatre deepens mental confusion rather than resolving it.

We could begin by observing that the accidentals of Punch, his absurd hat, motley coat, hideous visage, pigeon chest, humped back, and, principally, the squeaking voice which Steele compared to that of a eunuch,² all propose an anti-masculine and unenviable being. Surprisingly, these are laid down alongside the self-confidence of a hero, an implied reproductive potency, and a perfect absence of feminine tenderness. This combination gives Punch no obvious psycho-sexual

² Richard Steele, No. 14, 16 Mar. 1711, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1965), 60-65.

relatives. Similarly, being without obvious occupation let alone social character he appears to float free of the national political record. He is no recognisable type, has no relations and is *sui generis*.

The history of Punch as he now appears to be is the explanation for this incoherent and disassociated character. Neither the marionette observed by Pepys on the 9th of May 1662,³ nor the performance, which was performed by an Italian, Signor Bologna, and which Pepys describes as “pretty”, seem to have much in common with Punch as he later came to be. Johnson’s friend, the great linguist Joseph Baretto, provides a crucial account in his *Tolondron* (1786), where he explains the root meaning of Pulcinella, via which we obtain, as other sources tell us, Punchinello and ultimately Punch:

*Chickens’ voices are squeaking and nasal; and they are timid, and powerless, and for this reason my whimsical countrymen have given the name of Pulcinella, hen chicken, to that comic character, to convey the idea of a man that speaks with a squeaking voice through his nose, to express a timid and weak fellow who is always threshed by the other actors, and always boasts of victory after they have gone.*⁴

While we might entertain doubts about etymologies, which seem curiously vulnerable even when supported by remarkable scholars, the descriptive account of Pulcinella’s personality is robust and authentic; we do not doubt that this really is the character as actually observed. Moreover, it is recognisably that described at length in 1728 by Swift in his “Mad Mullinix and Timothy”, in which the former, Molyneux (the last Tory in Dublin) attacks Timothy (the Whig politician Richard Tighe) by comparing him to the impertinent and odious Punch, who is represented as a scurrilous intruder mocking the dignity of other puppets:

*And first his Bum you see him clap
Upon the Queen of Sheba’s lap.
The Duke of Lorrain drew his sword,
Punch roaring ran, and running roar’d.
Reviles all People in his Jargon
And sells the King of Spain a Bargain.
St. George himself he plays the wag on
And mounts astride upon the Dragon*

³ Robert Latham and William Matthews, eds., *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Vol. III, 1662 (Bell & Hyman: London, 1970), 80.

⁴ Joseph Baretto, *Tolondron* (London, 1786), 324.

None of these elements survive into the Punch drama familiar to us, and while we can see traces of the fierce self-confidence of Punch as we know him, the character reported by Swift is less heroic than puerile and impudent:

*He gets a thousand Thumps and Kicks
Yet cannot leave his roguish tricks,
In every Action thrusts his Nose
The reason why no Mortal knows.
In doleful Scenes, that breaks our heart,
Punch comes, like you, and lets a Fart.
There's not a Puppet made of Wood
But what would hang him if he could.
While teizing all, by all he's teiz'd,
How well are the Spectator's pleased!
Who in the motion have no share;
But purely come to hear, and stare;
Have no concern for Sabra's sake,
Which get's the better, Saint or Snake,
Provided Punch (for there's the Jest)
Be soundly maul'd and plagues the rest.⁵*

Judging from this description it would seem that in Dublin in 1728 the character was still substantially the fundamentally “powerless” Pulcinella brought to London in the early 1660s by a travelling Italian showman. Yet by the time of Payne Collier’s account and text, and Cruikshank’s astounding engravings, there is a profound change, clinching confirmation of which can be found in the invaluable remark of the German soldier, aristocrat and landscape gardener, Prince Herman von Pückler-Muskau who visited London in 1826 and recorded his impression of an English street theatrical:

*[...] the hero of the drama is Punch – the English Punch – perfectly different from the Italian Pulcinella
.... The most godless droll that ever I met with... a little, too, the type of the nation he represents.⁶*

⁵ Jonathan Swift, “Mad Mullinix and Timothy”, *The Intelligencer* (1728). In Harold Williams, ed., *the Poems of Jonathan Swift* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1937), Vol. III, 772-782.

⁶ Quoted in George Speaight, *Punch & Judy* (Studio Vista: London, 1970), 131. Perhaps in either *Briefe eines Verstorbenen* (4 vols., 1830-1831, trans. Sarah Austin, *The travels of a German prince in England*, London 1832), but perhaps also in

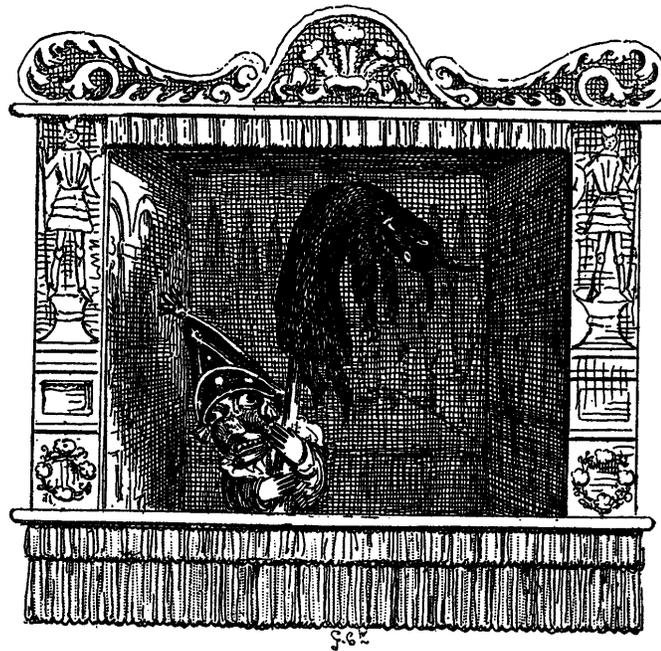
While, we may suspect that Baretto's description was grounded more in his own Italian childhood than the street performances of later 18th century London, which were perhaps closer to Pückler-Muskau's Punch, the rapidity of the transformation, in around a century is curious and not easy to explain, though it is tempting to speculate that the densely populated London world may have placed peculiar strains on the intuitive sense of moral rectitude and thus made the vision of liberty we find in the English Punch particularly attractive.

Whatever the underlying causal factors, the speedy metamorphosis of chicken-hearted timidity into heroic omnipotence leaves many vestigial remains, and so also contributes to that sense of internal dissonance that makes Punch so indeterminable. Without this quality it is doubtful that the performance would offer, as I think it very successfully does, so satisfying a delineation of absolute freedom. The character's history is, of course, insufficient to create the necessary degree of contextual independence, but a puppet is a perfect armature for such a loose assemblage of traits, and gives the representation an invulnerability beyond inquisition. An actor, by contrast, and however brilliant a dissembler, would inevitably betray links with his all too human origins, not least because an actor can only distort his own personality, pulling a face as it were, and even though nearly unrecognisable the human substrate must inevitably remain. The puppet avoids this contamination with the exception of the showman's voice, and this is rendered alien by long established use of a swazzle or swatchel, a metal and cloth reed held between the tongue and the roof of the mouth. Furthermore, this is a monodrama, with all parts played in effortless synchronisation by the two hands of one professor; Punch is a performance by one person and about one person (and arguably *for* one person). Indeed, solipsism is the defining characteristic of the entire experience, and Punch himself, as found, is both superficial and rootless, so much so that there appears to be no close parallel in English and perhaps in any language. But there is no mystery in explaining his making; this harshly delineated character emerged in something under a century by a process of subtraction, a process of de-creation, rather than positive accretion. The difficulty is explaining why such a monster should then stabilise and persist in the world of cultural representations.

Any attempt at this begins with the story, and while performances vary enormously, we can offer an abstract narrative, like a best-fit line describing a scatter of points on a graph. Punch first rejects the ties of family by tossing his child from the window, beating his distressed wife to death, and then evades the consequences by despatching the law in the person of the Beadle or

Ludmilla Assing-Grimelli, ed., *Pückler-Muskau's Briefwechsel und Tagebücher* (Pückler-Muskau's letters and diaries, 9 vols., Hamburg 1873-1876, reprinted Bern 1971).

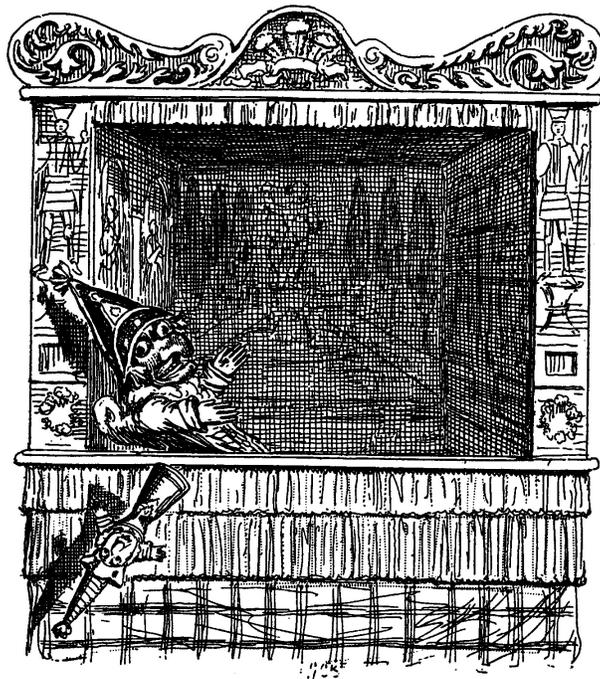
Policeman. Ill health, as represented by the Doctor, is as rapidly dealt with. Then enters Death, conventionally represented by the hangman Jack Ketch, who was appointed executioner under Charles II and is still notorious for the botched beheading of the Duke of Monmouth, begun clumsily with an axe and terminated with a despairing knife. After a struggle both physical and intellectual, Ketch is cheated of his prey and himself destroyed. In culmination, the Devil appears and engages his victim in a terrible final struggle, which concludes with Punch beating his oldest adversary to death and lifting the limp corpse on his stick. Disburdened of responsibilities, triumphant over all threats, and free from the consciousness of sin and the threat of eternal punishment, Punch dances and sings with an unclouded and infinite delight. (The curtain closes; the children ask for ice-cream; and the attendant fathers wonder why, in spite of the responsibilities biting at their knees, and the prospect of a long drive home, they feel weirdly buoyant.



This outline of the action and the implied character is probably a relatively recent creation, and may indeed be characteristically English. While this is suspiciously gratifying to our vanity, the distinction between the moral vacuity and insuperable power of the English Punch, and the humanly recognisable substance and weakness of Pulcinella is obvious, and perhaps embarrassing. Nevertheless, variants from the central type of the English Punch are, of course, common, but serve to define and illuminate the qualities which make the “godless droll” so distinctive. In some performances Punch has been carried off to hell, as if in a medieval morality play, or merely

cheats the Devil by palming off the body of Jack Ketch as his own; and in much of the 20th Century the conflict with guilt is transformed into the good natured and less resonant squabble over sausages with the crocodile, though in several of the most polished performances that I have seen Punch's triumph over the devil has reappeared to popular acclaim as a magnificent and manifestly superior climax.

Another variant closely resembles the central case, but is more or less imperfectly moralised in being humourless. This variant is perhaps best represented by Harrison Birtwistle's opera, from the first performance of which Britten is said to have walked out in horror and disgust. This type seems uncommon, doubtless because the lack of laughter on and off stage betrays a sense of guilt, and results in a self-consciously moral drama that offers little by way of imagined liberty to the observer. It is interesting to note in passing that the murders in these instances are psychopathic and delight in the act of rendering lifeless, whereas Mr Punch exults in victory and his own capacity but not in the murders themselves, as murders, which are only the means to an end and quickly forgotten.



The writer-painter and Punch-admirer Wyndham Lewis remarked in 1917 that “Beauty is an icy douche of ease and happiness at something suggesting perfect conditions for an organism”. Ten years later when revising this sentence for book publication he added, for the avoidance of doubt, that “it remains suggestion”. Often enough this insubstantial quality is a cause for regret, but at other times it can only be welcomed, and however deeply alluring the triumph of the individual in

a Punch drama, we are, in fact, pleased to think that this dream is confined within the straitened bounds of the street or beach booth and not a general feature of the watching population of strangers standing at our shoulder. A man who sees Punch engaged in the guiltless murder of all limits on the individual male might be pleasantly agitated with longing, but will also be troubled by the probability that a similar desire in others may reach real fulfillment. Is that why, in spite of coincident and authentic laughter, the watching of Punch is so lonely a theatrical experience for the adult spectator?

About the Author

John Constable has edited I. A. Richards' works, 1918-1938, in ten volumes for Routledge (2001), and is the co-discoverer, with Professor Hideaki Aoyama, of the mathematical distinction between verse and prose in English. With John Fowles he edited the previously unpublished Regency satirical narrative poem, *The Lymiad* (2011). He now works on UK energy policy, as well as writing the literary blog libellus.co.uk.