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Feminizing Presidents: Joseph Keppler and Gender in Gilded Age Political Cartoons

Jerome Gonzalez
Amid the crowded newsstands of American cities in the late nineteenth century, the average reader flipping through a copy of *Puck*, a weekly humor magazine devoted to political and social issues, may have been surprised to see an unusual print: that of the President of the United States depicted in women’s clothing, with feminine features, performing a womanly task! These few drawings, alluding to both literary and social ideas, done by the Austrian immigrant artist Joseph Keppler, appeared in his *Puck* magazine in the years 1877, 1880, and 1884, coinciding around an election year. While Presidents Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, and Grover Cleveland, our nineteenth through twenty-second presidents, all received the same treatment at one point or another, it was usually because of a scandal or problems within the presidents’ political party, all of them except Cleveland being Republican. The presidents could not be the only ones to blame. In the time period, there were a number of humor magazines circulating, due to the rise in mass market publication, and Keppler was one of the first and only to take his magazine to such a controversial level. He would not be afraid to step up against the corruption and provide his own opinion through his magazine. Overall, Keppler wished to bring his German artistic history of cartooning and political upbringing into the mainstream of American political culture in order to produce a successful humor magazine.

In order to analyze some of the reasons as to why the presidents were in female garb, potentially an insult, we shall first look at the history of the political cartoon in America, and its specific role in the eyes of political cartoon historian James Fischer. From there, we shall review the political history of the Gilded Age before discussing the rise of humor magazines. After that background, we shall return to Joseph Keppler to look at his upbringing, and then discuss his style of production in his political cartoons. Following the artist’s background, we shall look at the popularity and development of his humor magazine *Puck* before arriving at the cartoons themselves, looking at their creation from the angle of scandal and discussion on politics and
masculinity, key issues of the time period. Finally, we shall conclude by further evaluating, through the light of one imitator, the combined popularity of the jovial Keppler, his cartoons, and magazine on their overall outlook on politics of the late Nineteenth Century, the time period known as the Gilded Age.

To begin our discourse, one should consider the role political cartoons have played in American history. There was nothing entirely too new in the creation of political cartoons in the late nineteenth century, also known as the Gilded Age, for the American political cartoon had played a key part throughout the nation’s history in urging people to take a particular view on a political issue. The especially important goal of the political cartoon was to inform the public, through the easy to read format of pictures, of certain views to take on the relationship between individuals and the government, or other large institutions. Though the political cartoon form dates back centuries in Europe, Americans first used the cartoon during the colonial to provide opinions against the tyrannical nature of the British crown. Interestingly enough, the use of the political cartoons began against a country that first supplied them.¹ Benjamin Franklin, one of America’s first well-known cartoonists produced as early as 1754 one of the most famous of the rare early American political cartoons in a pamphlet against the English. In his “Join or Die,” cartoon, Franklin urged the colonies to come together against the British crown, and he did so by displaying an image based on the “popular superstition that a snake that had been severed would come back to life if the pieces were put together before sunset.”² From the onset, political cartoons in America related a serious issue down to an understanding of common and popular literary knowledge through the medium of a picture. After winning the Revolution, the freedom of the press in America’s democracy would allow for an even wider use and display of cartoons

² Ibid, 52.
on a variety of issues.

The political cartoon contains other elements, including use of imagery and allusion, that allow many individuals to read and understand it clearly. In America especially, as the political cartoon expert Roger Fischer states, “By it’s very nature, political cartoon art in a democratic society has been one of the purest artifacts of popular culture, seeking to influence public opinion through its use of widely and instantly understood symbols, slogans, referents, and allusions.”

As in the case of the Franklin cartoon, many Americans would have understood the popular story of the snake. However, in the course of American history, cartoons have also specifically depicted the people in power, and the presidents were always in danger of receiving an exaggerated portrayal. The cartoons leading into Keppler’s tradition involved the use of caricatures, which took one specific trait of an individual and exaggerated it to an extreme form as to prove a point. All the absurd aspects of the depiction of the individual came from some source that all would recognize, and spoke of the artist’s view of an event at that point.

According to Stephen Hess and Milton Kaplan, political cartoon historians, “The graphic caricature or cartoon not only provides a record of the vernacular -- the dress and design, fads and foibles -- but also represents a stop-action picture of what a group of talented observers feels is noteworthy at a particular moment." The cartoons are one way that provide access into an understanding of common aspects a certain historical time period, and what certain artistic individuals were thinking. Of course, the artist would not want to go too far in their humorous depictions if he or she had to goal of influencing public opinion. It is Fischer again who states, “Exaggeration and distortion are staples of all humor, of course, and especially essential to graphic satire. Yet to be both effective and honest, they must be rooted in some semblance of

4 Hess and Kaplan, 43.
factual reality." The politics and the presidents of the time period of the Gilded Age are events that Keppler had to be aware of in part for his work to achieve success.

The controversial time period of 1877 to 1884 falls into the larger period of American history known as the Gilded Age, which actually lasted from 1865 to 1900. The name, coming from a book by Mark Twain, suggests the lavish cover up of a difficult reality and plenty of corruption and greed, beginning right after Lincoln’s assassination to the end of the century; there were very wealthy individuals living next to very poor ones. The politicians in office in the 1870s and 1880s did not care so much serving the individual average American as they did about protecting their own political safety and career, and serving the interests of the party. The Republican politicians held the power in the time period that this project examines, but they did not take a large step forward in trying to help the common man. Vincent P. De Santis, an expert in Gilded Age political history, notes as well that, “One of the most serious charges leveled against the Republican party of the Gilded Age is its failure to deal with the problems created by the industrial expansion of the post-Civil War years. It is customary to say that politics in these years became the fine art of avoiding issues.” The Republicans, having power in the midst of all the corruption, did not take a stand to actively fight against problems affecting the average American, instead quieting when the big issues came up in debate. As another Gilded Age historian, Sean Cashman, further attests, “That the Gilded Age leaves an impression of political stagnation is largely due to its procession of conservative presidents... Lincoln’s successors cut poor figures as statesmen.” Not only was the Republican party scheming to save its politicians, even the elected Presidents sat idly as they did not wish to change the status quo. The presidents

5 Fischer, 46.
also kept a silent tongue against their many scandals: President Garfield, for example, had been involved in the Crédit Mobilier Scandal of 1872 while in Congress. Unfortunately for those men in office, they were placed at the mercy of the political cartoonist. Donald Dewey, another political cartoon historian asserts that it is the president who ultimately sets the ideas in motion for the political cartoonist, and for that reason, “chief executives have served as the editorial cartoonists shorthand for four years of policy snafus, official gaffes, and government deceits... the president is the government for political illustrators.”

Needless to say, the Gilded Age Presidents received much ridicule due to their inactivity for the common man.

Coinciding with the Gilded Age era, the latter half of the nineteenth century also saw the force of print journalism, especially in rise of weekly humor magazines, and the zenith of the political cartoon as an editorial form. The large-scale distribution of humor magazines, due to the increase of wealth, provided the venue for political cartoons to have their largest readership. Despite the increased readership, however, many of the magazines ceased after short periods of circulation, and this failure may be due in part to the partisanship of the magazines. As editorial forms, the magazines, like the politicians of the time, often took a partisan slant of either Republican or Democrat. Their own particularity back-fired against them. Fischer points out, “Despite [print journalism’s] dominance, it was still a raw medium, infused with an ebullient, no-holds-barred partisanship that feared factual commentary as a formula for electoral disaster.”

As way to keep the powerful politicians in power, these various magazines would often make up salacious facts about the opposing candidate or highlight the magazine’s own selection. As such, no one presented the factual evidence about each candidate during the election, not wanting to risk the chances of success for their own candidate. There was one man, however, who rose to

9 Fischer, xii.
prominence in this time period, who, as his infatuated biographer Richard S. West suggests, “saw himself as a partisan of no individual party, only of the truth,”¹⁰ and that was the aforementioned Joseph Keppler. He rose up above the magazines of his day by providing honest opinion in a humorous manner.

Joseph Keppler himself was a stranger on the scene, just as the rise of print journalism took place. Austrian-born, Keppler was born on February 1, 1838 in Vienna and began his artistic development by drawing on the cakes of his father’s bakery. As Vienna itself was known for great artistic schools, Keppler was accepted to the prestigious Academy of Fine Arts in 1852, and received his degree shortly thereafter. While there was not much work available for artists in Europe at the time, Keppler simplified his trade to draw only for the Viennese *Kikeriki!* and his portraits, and became an actor. He eventually moved to St. Louis, Missouri, home of a large German immigrant community, in 1867 to work as an actor.¹¹ In the end, he found more success with his artistic skill, ultimately establishing the German humor magazines *Die Vehme* and the original *Puck* for St. Louis. By the early 1870s, he had arrived to New York City, working for the famous publisher Frank Leslie. Eventually, Keppler established a new German version of *Puck* in 1876, with an English edition coming out in 1877; the bilingual editions ran side by side until the 1880s. The magazines, “became highly successful because of [Keppler’s] elaborate colored cartoons of trenchant satire and lighthearted wit, which appeared on the front and back covers as well as the centerfold of the weekly.”¹² Keppler achieved great success through his production of political cartoons, and those were successful thanks to Keppler’s background in German political understanding and style of art.

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¹¹ West, 3-7.
Two aspects that led to Keppler’s success in drawing political cartoons were his Austrian upbringing focused on contemporary European politics, and the suggestions of his German actor friends in St. Louis. While Keppler’s father, Johann, taught his son the art of decorating cakes and various pastries, he “also imbued young Joseph with the political sentiments of nineteenth-century liberalism. He railed against royalty and the self-serving hypocrisy of those in power. In 1848, Vienna found itself at the center of a revolutionary cyclone then tearing through Europe.”

It was not only the teaching of his father that alerted Keppler, but as he lived in Vienna in 1848, known as the year of revolutions throughout Europe, he experienced firsthand the shock. It is of no doubt that he took to heart a deep mistrust of those in power, for the European leaders and monarchs had abused their privileges. Likewise, Joseph Keppler made friends with German and Austrian expatriates while in St. Louis, and many of those men, too, had lived through the violent period of the 1848 revolutions. In light of their background, the gentlemen would discuss politics at home and abroad. Though Keppler could not keep up with his friends in argument, he, “was a fully formed cynic, who was ready to believe the worst about anyone in power or anyone who aspired to it. Rather than reasoned argument, Keppler’s exhibitionist tendencies directed his critical energies towards satire. Inevitably, one of the Germans, raised on a hearty satiric dose of [nationalist German humor magazines]... would comment on the lack of such a comic paper in the United States.” While Keppler was very distrustful of governmental figures, he argued through his use of humor, and with his showiness as an actor, he would be ready for a new challenge to demonstrate to the world his opinions. At the urging of his companions, he established the German magazines in St. Louis, before releasing his full potential in New York in the 1870s, as we shall see in the cartoons.

13 West, 4.
14 Ibid, 9.
Despite the fact that Keppler expressed his critical opinion about those in power, he proved unable to escape his Viennese background in doing so. As an artist, “By and large, Keppler’s mode was sarcastic glee.”\textsuperscript{15} Though he had some serious things to say about those American presidents in power, he could do so only through his hefty use of humor, thanks to his upbringing and educational background. Accordingly, he possessed a “penchant for Viennese levity in outrageous, multicolored clutter.”\textsuperscript{16} Keppler, rather than talk seriously on politics, instead, as in these analyzed cartoons, wanted to include the absurdity of seeing a man, the president of the United States, in a dress. All of Keppler’s drawings and cartoons depicted some form of this absurdity. From the cartoons’ manner of depictions, Keppler published them in his own magazine, which reflected the absurdity.

Though Keppler and his magazine did not have the highest success rate in St. Louis, when he reestablished his German magazine \textit{Puck} in New York City in 1876, he found rousing success. The magazine achieved such a high level of popularity that Keppler and his co-founders established an English edition the following March. The magazine’s mascot, a half-naked boy, was designed after the mischievous character Puck in Shakespeare’s \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} to showcase the magazine’s drive to speak out on anything politically and not be afraid to create controversy. Indeed, the slogan of “What fools these mortals be,” a line from the aforementioned work, demonstrates the goal of the magazine to simply laugh at any political issue. No matter how controversial the political issue might be, the magazine would continue to do its work to describe the circumstances, unafraid of any repercussions. As the magazine desired one goal, “working for the premise that human foible and folly were ubiquitous, \textit{Puck} harbored no sacred cows. No matter what or whom it targeted, its intent was always bound to the aphorism

\textsuperscript{15} Dewey, 8.
\textsuperscript{16} Fischer, 29.
that graced the cover of every issue.”17 The readers of the magazine would not attack either, for
the magazine had much more to offer than other magazines of the mass market production
period. For one, the price was the cheapest of the other publications at only ten cents an issue.
Furthermore, the magazine contained sixteen 11 by 14 inch pages each issue -- pages twice the
size of a normal magazine - and each issue featured a new full page political cartoon on its front
and back cover, along with a large double-paged political cartoon at its center.18 The style and
physical appearance of the magazine added to its success.

Along with the magazine design, in addition to being its principle cartoonist, Keppler
controlled the main interest of the magazine by serving as its editor. Not only did he contribute
and provide the cartoons, but Keppler also organized his excellent staff and decided which
cartoons went into the magazine. Other magazine publishers accused Keppler of wielding too
much power, or stealing ideas, “a charge he usually laughed at in snorting Puck style.”19 Keppler
not only let his cartoons contain the foolishness, he himself displayed the same attitude. In the
end, Keppler did a good job in putting together his magazine staff and a great job with his
cartoons. As his obituary in the New York Times stated many years later, “His cartoons showed
great power, He possessed a ready comprehension of the political situations, and he was quick to
utilize every opportunity. His satire was keen and well-directed, and his drawings had artistic
truth and finish, some of the first to be done in color.”20 Keppler demonstrated his ultimate drive
for a successful magazine that began with his pristine role as chief editor.

17 Samuel J. Thomas, “Mugwump Cartoonists, the Papacy and Tammany Hall in America’s
Gilded Age,” Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation 14, no. 2 (Summer,
19 Dewey, 10.
20 “Death of Joseph Keppler,” The New York Times, 20 February 1894,
Within the magazine content, the contributing artists did all that they could to create and keep readership, and dug deep within the fountain of knowledge to provide symbols and allusions in the political cartoons. As we shall find out, the writers utilized cultural or popular social allusions of the time period. They also had to keep the creativity flowing at all times. As Fischer describes the situation, “Faced with the need to print three color cartoons a week with a minimum of trite banality, Puck... artists found inspiration in a... varied reservoir of sources... including an array of cultural allusions and referents, both elite and popular, traditional and contemporary.”21 As no other magazine staff so successfully attempted to do before, the artists at Puck demonstrated and provided a wide reach with all the references they made about the time period. Many types of people would understand the depictions by the artists, for there was a large spectrum of ideas to choose from. Whether a historic story of modern dilemma, of many different proportions, the artists were well aware of how to draw in the largest amount of readership.

The core group of those reading the magazine in the 1870s and 1880s consisted of a cohesion of immigrant Germans as well as a mixture of a wide class of readers. Despite the struggling economy of the country during the Gilded Age, it was, as West claims, “Perhaps the fact that most German-Americans had fond memories of the humor magazines of Europe helped Puck overcome the sluggish economy...[moreover] most of its subscribers and newsstand buyers lived in New York City.”22 The Germans, like Keppler, could relate to the magazines of their homeland and were pleased to finally have such a selection available in the new land of America. The fact that they had an edition in their language in the first few years of Puck’s existence also helped to alleviate any potential feelings of exclusion for the immigrants. In addition to the Germans, the cartoons attracted readership from the highly educated to those with basic

21 Fischer, 134.
22 West, 72.
understandings of the popular events of the day. It is Fischer who asserts that, “Such cartoons can
tell us much about American culture during a remarkable generation when, to judge from the
graphic art of political criticism, the traditional, essentially elite, cultural heritage of our ancestors
still competed on an equal footing with the aborning phenomenon of contemporary popular
culture, and that it did so with the same creative, imaginative exuberance we commonly associate
with pop culture.” 23 Using both traditional and popular viewpoints and allusions, the magazine
could attract a vast readership, with many people relating in their own unique way to the
cartoons. From all these points, Keppler created cartoons comprised of many different types of
references.

Keppler’s depictions of the presidents as women may have also suggested that women
were the symbol for weakness, which had not always been the case for their symbolism in the
political cartoons of America. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, the role of the female
was one of high honor in American political cartoons; for example, artists used a female version
of Columbia to stand in for the entire nation. Yet, the meaning of the symbol of women in
cartoons changed as, in the eyes of Dewey, “The plethora of national symbols... was inevitable
for a fledgling republican seeking an identity. The first to lose significant purchase was
Columbia.” 24 Like the nation changed in the way it viewed itself, so did the roles of symbols for
the nation fade with the times. The key of the political cartoon, though, was to have signs and
symbols relevant to the time, so that all readers could recognize them. While Columbia would
have been known to be a famous sign, she soon gave way to Uncle Sam, and Keppler did not
want to overuse her original status as a symbol for the nation. Therefore, the place of honor for
females diminished with the cartoons produced later in the century. However, rather than use the

23 Fischer, 147.
female strictly for an insult, Keppler could use the female to provide better expressions and emotion for the president depicted, which he would not have been able to do if he drew them otherwise.

One last fact to comprehend before looking at the cartoons of the presidents as women is to understand their German counterparts from the 1848 Revolution, which fulfilled the duty of criticizing those in power in a satirical manner for the German people. Keppler based his Gilded Age American political cartoons off of the historic German prints from the time period. During the 1848 revolutions in Germany, “a host of satirical journals sprang up, most of which sought to spice their collections... with at least one full-page cartoon of political content. The treatment of political topics varied from journal to journal, but generally speaking the tendency [was] to ‘play it for the laughs.’”\(^\text{25}\) In that explanation, one potentionally sees how an entire page of political commentary, a cartoon, made its way into \textit{Puck}’s layout to bring about success from an earlier source, and how Keppler’s drawings were meant to provide the utmost amount of satire on the varying political issues. As Keppler came over from Europe and witnessed these transactions through his work, he brought aspects of the German tradition into America. Keppler also fulfilled his role as a harsh critic on the presidents and politicians, similar to the German artists. In that regard, “Traditionally, the cartoonist tends to be radical in politics: he lives by his opposition to the powers that be and it is, at least in times of peace, virtually a professional necessity for him to be in some measure ‘against the government.’”\(^\text{26}\) Whereas the original German artists opposed those in the royal class, Keppler accomplished his task against the presidents of the United States. He did what he could to provide an honest overview and opinion of each president. Therefore, Keppler acted in accordance with his satirical political cartooning background.

\(^{26}\) Coupe, 160.
In turning to the specific presidents and cartoons, one of Keppler’s original forays into depicting the presidents as women came after the 1876 election in March of 1877, with his work, “Grand Pas de Trois” (see Fig. 1). In this very simple work, one sees three figures: two miniature caricatures, President Rutherford Hayes on the left and the defeated Democrat candidate Samuel Tilden on the right, and tiny character Puck between them. Keppler uses the basic format of caricature in this cartoon, with Hayes’ large bearded head matching Tilden’s large head, with both heads placed in tiny versions of a normal-sized body. Both men are dancing in celebration and in tutus, with Hayes having a slightly kick most likely due in part to his winning the election. Puck dances as well and holds the hands of both competitors stating, “Hurrah! they’ve counted us in.” Overall, there is a spirit of camaraderie and joy among all three competitors. This happiness stems from the ugly Election of 1876 finally reaching its conclusion: Tilden had won the popular vote, but Hayes won the election by receiving all the electoral votes from the southern states in exchange for his agreement to take the post-Civil War troops out of the south, an agreement which became known as the Compromise of 1877.\textsuperscript{27} West also describes the cartoon and Keppler’s own intention by the work, “When the Returning Board [whose role was to determine the outcome of the election] named Hayes to the presidency, Keppler celebrated... Like most of the rest of the country, Keppler was glad the sordid, tension-illed affair had come to a peaceful close.”\textsuperscript{28} Keppler enjoyed the calm resolution, rather than revolt, but still displayed his watchful eye on those in power, satirically dressing up the two candidates as ballerinas.

And yet, there is a significance of having all three figures at about the same size: it would be a chance to show how all groups would be treated the same way. Keppler’s ultimate goal was to bring the presidential candidates to the size of the mascot Puck, in the very least making all

\textsuperscript{28} West, 138.
three figures the same size to show how all Democrats and Republicans would be on the same level as *Puck*, and both parties would be open to the same scrutiny. The creation of the cartoon, “was probably prompted by Keppler’s overweening desire to see *Puck* become a part of the American mainstream. In the magazine’s early days, Keppler strove to be agreeable. This led him to emphasize wit over satire, analogy over commentary, and a good-spirited impartiality over partisanship... Whatever the reason, this desire to be agreeable soon faded. Within a few years, Keppler was drawing uncompromisingly severe political cartoons.”

Keppler used a cautious entrance into his grand depictions of the presidents, and earnestly sought the approval of those who would read his publication. In this way, they would become accustomed to his European humor and understand his comical depictions of the president as a way to satirize the one in power.

On an interesting side note, at the time Keppler produced his first cartoon of the President in a dress, there was a great concern in America over masculinity. As the sociologist Michael Kimmel points out, “Although four of every five American men were self-employed in the first decades of the century, by 1870, only one-third were self-employed... Manhood had meant autonomy and self-control, but now... More and more men were economically dependent, subject to the regime of the time clock.”

Remembering the problems in the Gilded Age, the ideals of the self-made man in America were also in question. Not only was it the general feeling that the individual man had lost his way of controlling many aspects of his life, but he struggled even more by falling in line according to some other mechanism than his own true drive, whether it be machines or the opposite of masculinity, femininity, which the clock suggests. Kimmel continue to suggest that one way in which men counteracted this fear of diminishment by

Another interesting connection with that idea is that Hayes, already having won the presidency on a deal, actually kept a dry White House and served no liquor at official functions. Not only was he avoiding alcohol, but, as one observer at a White House function mentions, “I think, however, that total abstinence [from liquor] was more her [Hayes’ wife, Lucy] creed than his; but he yielded to her on this issue as one others. It has been pointed out sufficiently that Rutherford B. Hayes was utterly lacking in the politician’s sense of politics.” In a possible connection to the reasoning of his depiction in a tutu, Hayes was also known for avoiding alcohol and listening closely to his wife’s requests, rather than assert his own free choices as a man. It may even be that his lack of acting like a politician had something to do with listening earnestly to his wife amid the problems of masculinity in the Gilded Age, something which Keppler may have foreseen. I leave it open for conjecture as to whether Keppler knew of this suffering of man, but it does adds another dimension in analyzing the depiction of presidents as females.

Returning to our main task at hand, Keppler’s next depiction of the president in female garb appeared at the next election cycle in the cartoon, “The Cinderella of the Republican Party and Her Haughty Sisters,” published October 13th, 1880 (see Fig. 2). As one can read in the title itself and the depiction, this cartoon demonstrates precisely how Puck’s cartoonists were “extremely fond of the literary allusion.” In the case of this particular cartoon, Keppler and his artist chose to focus on the popular, traditional German tale of Cinderella, which would have been known by many of the readers viewing this cartoon. Additionally, although it is not shown in this work’s appendix, the same exact cartoon appeared in the German version of Puck, complete with a German nameplate at the bottom of the page. With the allusion, readers would

31 Kimmel, 85.
33 Hess and Kaplan, 114.
recognize President Hayes sitting to the side as the lowly maid Cinderella preparing prosperity soup while her step sisters, former President Grant and New York Senator Roscoe Conkling, also Republican, disregard her as they head off to a special campaign ball. In this instance, Keppler demonstrates his Austrian criticism of those in power and specifically laughs at the foolery of the Republican Party in dishonoring President Hayes, whom Keppler felt did not do the worst job in his office. We are fortunate to have the accompanying text from this issue of *Puck* containing the cartoon, and should take a look at it to understand the background of the political problems:

Mr. R.B. Hayes, then incumbent of the Presidential Chair was treated with studied neglect and coldness by the leaders of his own party. Although General Grant had failed to get the nomination, in spite of the vigorous efforts of Mr. R. Conkling, the ex-President and his ally were prominent in the campaign of their own account.

‘They speak at mass-meetings, they are interviewed, they write letters; they are never out of the public eye,’ says PUCK of October 13th, 1880. Mr. Hayes, however, received no pressing invitation from the party managers to assist in electing their Republican ticket. Undoubtedly this deliberate slight was due to the extreme sensitiveness felt by all classes of Republicans on the question of Mr. Hayes’s title to the office which he held; and it was in its inception a creditable feeling that prompted the desire to keep him in the background. At the same time, it was severe, almost a cruel retribution to be visited upon a man who had tried hard to atone for his capture of the Presidential chair by trick and device, by giving the country an uncommonly good, and, in some respects, decidedly courageous administration. Messrs. Grant and Conkling seemed to be solicitous to draw attention to their complete silence concerning the outgoing administration, and their enthusiasms in Mr. Garfield’s behalf. Although, to quote again from PUCK, ‘both these talkative gentlemen might have found their eloquence at a discount if Mr. Hayes had not kept up the sore of the part though the last four years…

‘He has done his duty as he saw it. If he has made himself ridiculous by carrying the contemptibly small social practices of a little Ohio town into the wider sphere of life to which Fate has introduced him, it is a pardonable fault. Let us say for him, after all, that, considering the wretched way in which he got to be President, he has done far too well with his chances to be snubbed by men in such equivocal terms as Messrs. Grant and Conkling.’

As President Hayes had provided decent service to the country despite the controversial Compromise of 1877, there would seem to be no reason for his own party to forget about all he had tried to accomplish during his administration in reforming the office. Instead, Keppler speaks

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contemptuously of the men who try to diminish what was some good work accomplished. Once again, Keppler shows his distrust of those seeking power.

A closer reading of the cartoon also reveals further insights into the politics of the period, demonstrating that great skill and quality of Keppler’s work. Grant’s numerical pin signifies his vote tally at the 1880 Presidential convention and the feathers in his hat honor his war record and party service. Likewise, Conkling showcases his service to Garfield and the other Republicans aside from Hayes. Their showy display goes against Hayes and all his honest good work, as demonstrated by the pots and pans behind him.\(^{35}\) In addition to all these subtle, though distinct features, one can see Keppler’s background as an actor. As the art historian Thomas Blaisdell suggests, “Joseph Keppler took his inspiration for many of his cartoons from the theater. The large colorful tableaux which he favored, like this one, were splendid showcases for Keppler’s witty and appealing sense of theatrics... His use of prevailing color, in this case, blue, to coordinate a scene owes as much of a debt to his years as a set designer in Vienna as does the stage like composition itself”\(^{36}\). Readers were delighted with the grand cartoon centerfolds in color, enjoying seeing the politicians in such a way. In the similar manner, those readers knowing the famous Cinderella story, and many of them would, would feel for the maid Hayes suffering after all her hard work. Indeed, Keppler utilized this aspect of femininity to better express those feelings.

By this point, one may ask whether Keppler believed himself to be a Republican or Democrat, and as one might also already know, he would be neither. Keppler actually considered himself in favor of an independent party that would field better people in the elections than the conniving Republicans or Democrats. Keppler went so far as to display the, “Independent Voter -

\(^{36}\) Blaisdell, 118.
- a figure in red shirt, boots, and slouch hat who carried around an axe for destroying the political corruption embodied by the two standing parties."^37 As humorous as that image is to imagine, it actually reflects Keppler’s true political belief. West even goes so far as to claim that in Keppler’s political vision, “he refused to believe that either side in a debate had a corner on the truth. Primarily a satirist, Keppler wanted to enlighten and to entertain.”^38 Keppler’s overarching desire would be to look at the truth of the situation and realize the corruption of those running for office. From there, he could guide the people in a better way of truth.

An earlier cartoon than the one of Hayes we just saw, done in the same light, though not by Keppler, appears in an earlier issue, August 25th, 1880, and is entitled, “Shocking!” (See Fig. 3). Though the work was done a few months earlier by Keppler’s hired artist, James Wales, one can see the similar features that Keppler would later display in his “Cinderella” cartoon, and may also remind one of the earlier claims that Keppler borrowed the work of his fellow artists by the sheer fact of his holding the chief editor position. Regardless, we see the same depictions of President Hayes looking quite peculiar as a humble young maid, sitting next to a steaming pot, looking outside to see the New York newspaper proclaiming that old maids and cats must go. We know it is Hayes due to the cup of tea imprinted with his initials. Additionally, Hayes wears the pendant saying one term, which he also promised during his election. Other similar features to the other cartoon include Hayes’ placement in a domestic setting, surrounded by cats reflecting the issues that Hayes believed in, which the other Republicans ridiculed. Though Hayes meant well, the newspaper, representing the party leaders, wanted him out immediately. Once again, Puck’s staff demonstrated Keppler’s thoughts of mistrusting those in power.

In the same election cycle of 1880, Keppler also took his hand at depicting the eventual

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37 Dewey, 19.
38 West, 128.
Republican candidate, James Garfield, as a bride in a wedding dress in his August 25th work, “Forbidding the Banns” (see Fig. 4), and as such, his attention detail worked in line with his “design to introduce a recurring symbol or theme into each Presidential contest.” This cartoon was also the last in this series to appear exactly the same in the German version of *Puck*, complete with a German nameplate like the aforementioned cartoon. Candidate Garfield had been involved in the Crédit Mobilier Scandal of 1872, and his depiction as a bride would provide an excellent groundwork to remind everyone of the scandal eight years earlier. In the cartoon, we see the ballot box just beginning to pronounce Uncle Sam, representing the entire nation, and Garfield as man and wife. In the wedding party, the father of the bride is Republican Chairman Marshall Jewell, and the rest of the party and congregation are all Republicans. In the tail end, we see Democratic chairman W. H. Barnum running into stop the ceremony by holding Garfield’s suppose baby had out of wedlock – a recognizable social dilemma of scandal. As such, “the baby he holds in his hands, labeled ‘$329,’ refers to the amount of money Garfield was said to have received in the Credit Mobilier scandal of the early 1870s. Garfield’s coy response, ‘But it was such a little one,’ doesn’t see to comfort the aghast groom.” This cartoon, rather than reflecting Keppler’s criticism of the Republican Party as whole, reflects Keppler’s strict disagreement with Garfield profiting off a scandal at the suffering of the average tax-paying American. Hess and Kaplan describe that that scandal would not be the worst thing the cartoon had done, as they say, “But there was nothing enigmatic about ‘Forbidding the Banns,’ the most notorious cartoon of the campaign. Americans were not shocked by the suggestion of a Presidential candidate being involved in a financial scandal -- that was an often-aired charge -- but putting Garfield in the garb...

40 West, 196.
of an unwed mother was considered Rabelaisian for the times.”

Keppler indeed went the most controversial route in sharing his disdain for the Republican nominee Garfield, and his mistrust for those in power. Though the scandal had happened years before, almost a decade previous, “Keppler... never forgot the scandal and never forgave ... Garfield for [his] involvement in it.”

Here he was quite critical of political corruption, but in a colorful and jestful way.

The fact that Keppler went the distance to demonstrate his dislike of Garfield’s scandal showed that he was ready to take up any controversy with his magazine in order to present the truth; since he took such a daring step, he achieved a “shocking triumph [that made] the cartoon the hit of the campaign.” As a matter of fact, it was this cartoon by Keppler that caused one of the first instances of the two parties responding to his work. Both the Democrats and Republicans provided their own response to the amount of money, $329. In fact, Herbert Clancy, an expert on the Campaign of 1880, states that, “During the campaign, Democrats capitalized on the [Crédit Mobilier] scandal by chalking the telltale figure, $329, on fences, walls, and buildings.”

The Democrat supporters utilized the number that Keppler provided in his cartoon to try and gain an advantage in the campaign. In spite of that usage, the Republican supporters turned the attack on their candidate to their advantage as they painted the number everywhere, in even more places, so that no one would remember what the number even meant! While Keppler demonstrated the scandal through a heavy social dilemma of the time period, and though Garfield won the election, to the dismay of Keppler, the artist achieved his first level of professional success as the number he emphasized took hold among the parties.

41 Hess and Kaplan, 106.
42 West, 65.
43 Ibid, 197.
Garfield’s victory would be short-lived, for he was assassinated only a few months into office. And so, his running mate, Chester A. Arthur, succeeded to the presidency in 1881. By the time of the next election cycle in 1884 (although Keppler began ridiculing Arthur a few years earlier, albeit in a different manner than putting a dress on the president), though, Arthur received the same ridicule as his recent predecessors in the January 23rd, 1884 cartoon, “The Beauty Party” (see Fig. 5). This cartoon suggests the popular and contemporary social event of the Gilded Age time period with its beauty contest backdrop. As Fischer states, “High fashion competition provided another tempting vehicle for lampooning leading public figures by drawing them as sissified fops... Keppler seized on the same theme and the essential absurdity of beauty pageants, to draw two dozen possible presidential contenders as hideous female impersonators in his 1884 Puck centerfold.”46 The awkward poses and humorous faces of the judged Republican candidates convey that the cartoon is truly of Keppler’s finest works in depicting the political absurdity. That appearance, combined with Fischer’s detestable voice on the contest, also suggests that Keppler was not entirely in favor with having women displayed in a negative way. The entire contest likens that people cast ballots on the election based on the wealthiest and best looking man alone instead of actual political concern for the well-being of the country.

That the centerpiece of the contestants is Arthur wearing the only white, and brightest, dress of all the candidates represents Keppler’s mistrust of those in power, his disdain for the wealthy politicians, and dislike of the Republican Party and voting process in general. The white dress hints at Arthur’s wealth, for it is the finest and spotless of all the dresses. The dress shows no real concern on Arthur’s part for the plight of the common man. Arthur’s sign also names him the “Empire State Enslaver,” which evokes Arthur’s own concern for wealth and appearance in his service of New York state politics – at the expense of many others along the way. Arthur

46 Fischer, 136.
would be well-deserving of the criticism that Keppler hints at in the work. Rather than live modestly and serve as leader, Arthur looked after only himself. Cashman informs of Arthur’s desire for looking good: “In fact, [Arthur] was quite the dandy. He had eighty pairs of trousers. His taste was impeccable.” The Gilded Age historian H. Wayne Morgan provides the same conclusion in looking at actions Arthur did early in his administration: “[Arthur] enjoyed spending [money], and had a reputation for ‘high living’... [after redecorating the White House] Arthur rounded up a staff equal to the redecoration, versed in French cuisine and flower arrangement. There was no talk of temperance.” In a near opposite form to the teetotaler-like qualities in the Hayes White House, Arthur lived more in luxury than in honored service and dedication to the American people. Accordingly, as George Howe states in his biography of Arthur, “No human physique could withstand the strain to which Arthur subjected himself in partaking so freely of the pleasures... of Washington life.” In light of all these depictions of Arthur as a lavish person, Keppler drew this cartoon. By drawing Arthur as vain debutant, Keppler could utilize the manner of feminine depiction to indicate that Arthur really knew nothing in running the country.

In our final cartoon of the series, also from 1884, Keppler depicts the then-potential Democratic Presidential candidate Grover Cleveland as Samuel Tilden’s daughter in, “He Courts the Mother and Means the Daughter,” in the June 4th, 1884 issue of Puck. In this cartoon, we see the then-New York governor Cleveland in the background working diligently as a seamstress while the Democratic national chairman, Daniel Manning, woos Cleveland’s mother, the former Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden, now much more advanced in age. The cartoon showcases

47 Cashman, 256.
the good work ethic of Governor Cleveland. As Cleveland’s biographer, the aptly named Rexford Tugwell, writes, “Talk of Cleveland as a potential presidential candidate began soon after his inauguration as governor [in 1883]. By June of 1884, the talk had become widespread circulation... [yet Cleveland realized] that the nomination was more likely to come to him if he continued with the business of governor, than if he neglected the state’s affairs and worked to be chosen.”50 At the outset of the campaign, through the biography, one sees that Cleveland appeared to be the hardest working candidate yet in the Gilded Age.

At the same time, the cartoon demonstrates once again Puck’s artists’ alert demonstration of a traditional social phenomenon in terms of a bachelor going through a mother to get to the daughter. Likewise, present once again in the cartoon is Keppler’s slight dislike of the organized party – Democrat in this case – in each presidential election. As the cartoon suggests, though Tilden was well-liked by his party and did his duty as party elder, members only wanted to, “get access to his wealth (“barrel of money”) in order to finance the upcoming campaign. The real object of the Democratic party’s affection in this cartoon is the hardworking current governor of New York, Grover Cleveland, who appears busily sewing up reform bills in the New York state assembly.”51 The dollar-sign locks of hair further demonstrate Tilden’s wealth, but his aged, motherly dress shows that he is no longer in his prime. Meanwhile, Cleveland sits in the background working diligently as seamstress, sewing together reform bills. Humorously, though, “The accomplishments Keppler came up with were vague… or insignificant… hardly the stuff of great presidents. But… the magazine could in good conscience say to the Democrats that if they nominated Cleveland, they would be giving ‘manly and friendly aid to the cause of honest

government.” In an interesting turn of events, Keppler appeared to earnestly support a candidate. By making Garfield a woman, Keppler was able to explore the unique emotional perspective of Grover Cleveland’s hardworking attitude against the control of a political party.

Joseph Keppler also placed Cleveland in a feminine role that seemed to more accurately depict what many of the women in United States history strove for in their lives. Though the character of the maid existed in legend and reality, and bride always existed, and the beauty contestants seemingly always partook in their shows, Cleveland’s seamstress role, of caring for the family, seems to be more in line with not only the female’s duty in the 1880s, but within the positive concept of Republican motherhood as well. As the gender labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris declares, “Most families assigned an available female -- wife, daughter, or sister -- the task of organizing the household and of stretching the limited incomes... Clothes had to made, then made over again after the cloth had worn through.” In that assignment, the female fulfilled her duty of service to the family, and in doing so taught the members through example what each should do in service to the nation. Cleveland himself was doing just that in the political reality as a man, through his hardworking mentality and in translating that duty into a female role in Keppler’s cartoon, Keppler achieved his finest results.

The cartoon, “He Courts the Mother but Means the Daughter,” proved to be Keppler’s most successful of the cartoons depicting the presidents and presidential candidates as women, for not only did it receive reaction from political supporters, but the Democratic party even made a change due in part to its production. Following this cartoon’s publication, “On June 9, [Daniel] Manning [New York Democratic state chairmen] went to Greystone [in Yonkers, New York] to hustle on a letter of declination from Tilden. Tilden obliged, and with that the Cleveland boom

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52 West, 283.
was under way.”⁵⁴ From that point, Cleveland went on to win the election.

Ironically, with Cleveland’s winning of the 1884 election after Keppler’s finest work, Keppler began to abate his role as the controversial defender of the truth in politics. West describes Keppler’s subsequent decline:

In 1880, Keppler lost the political battle he waged but had won widespread popularity that assured his success. In 1884, something of the reverse occurred. Although he won the political battle, his victory signaled the beginning of his professional decline. Keppler’s success and power originated in his satiric impulse, in his jaundiced, skeptical eye... He saw himself as a partisan of no individual party, only of the truth.

Now Cleveland had won. The man Keppler promised would bring honesty and reform to the federal government would soon hold the reins of power. Keppler had staked his reputation on Cleveland’s commitment to reform. Regardless of what Cleveland did, Keppler could not deny his share of responsibility for Cleveland’s presence in Washington in the first place. Indeed, Cleveland even went on record saying that he owed his election to Puck. ... Keppler came to viewed as one of the president’s chief supporters. This blatant partisanship made Keppler soft, took the edge off his work, and compromised his effectiveness as self-appointed guardian of truth.⁵⁵

Though Keppler had been cynical with those in leadership roles, even he himself fell prey to supporting one politician of the era in a more partisan fashion. In supporting Cleveland during the campaign, Keppler would have to, as a sense of honor, continue to support Cleveland’s presidency. Grover Cleveland himself gave thanks to Puck’s work, and so Keppler would have to continue following suit, thus stepping back as a displayer of the truth.

Regardless of the changes, Keppler had had at least one, if not many, imitator of the works he drew from 1877 to 1884. One particular imitation, “Full Dress Rehearsal of the Grand Presidential Corps de Ballet” came from the short-lived Chic magazine and depicts the James Garfield-Chester Arthur ticket from February 1880 as women in a ballet, comprised of other Republican candidates as women (see Fig. 7). As a sign of imitation, the artist depicts Garfield and Arthur in tutus, reminiscent of “Grand Pas de Trois.” He also has Uncle Sam in the pivotal

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⁵⁵ West, 287-8.
role of directing the ballet. Finally, in the far right corner, the luxury viewing boxes is labeled
with “$329,” subtly referencing the scandal as Keppler did. As David Sloane describes the
magazine, “Chic was the first imitation, in a long line of imitators of Puck of New York… it
presented itself in their format... [but] lack of circulation... probably killed it.”56 Due in part to
Keppler’s great work, the magazine popped up, although quickly folded. At that moment, though,
Keppler’s magazine accomplished its task in becoming the dominant humor magazine, a goal
Keppler always had in mind. The one example of Chic was one of many exhibiting the change of
the political cartoon medium in America from having a direct British connection to having its
own homegrown example. As West ardently states, “Without exception, every weekly American
humor magazine before Puck blindly adopted [the British] Punch’s format and, while attacking
Great Britain and the English in their pages, never managed to free themselves from the weighty
bonds of slavish imitation.”57 Keppler’s magazine, though, solidified a prominent political
cartoon resource in America. Keppler proves to be one case of an immigrant using his or her
tradition to alter the ways of American culture.

57 West, 74.
Appendix I: Cartoons

Fig. 1 - “Grand Pas de Trois” - March 7, 1877.
Fig. 2 - “The Cinderella of the Republican Party and Her Haughty Sisters” - October 13, 1880.
Fig. 3 - “Shocking” - August 25, 1880.
Fig. 4 - “Forbidding the Banns” - August 25, 1880.
Fig. 5 - “The Beauty Party” - January 23, 1884
Fig. 6 - “He Courts the Mother and Means the Daughter” - June 4, 1884.
Fig. 5 - “Full Dress Rehearsal of the Grand Presidential Corps de Ballet” - February, 1880.
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