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Larks in Season: *The Comic Almanack* (1835–1854)

Brian Maidment

This paper is centrally interested in the radical visual reimagining of a print genre from the late Regency period [to the early Victorian era](#) in ways that both celebrated and satirized familiar typographical and graphic conventions. This particular reimagining formed part of a wider recognition of the aesthetic, commercial, and graphic potential that might lie within the visual configuration of the printed page in the 1820s and 1830s. Such a recognition centred on, but was not confined by, the possibilities offered by two emergent reprographic technologies (the wood engraving and the lithograph) and by the broadening of the consumer base for print at this time. The print genre under consideration—the almanac—was one of few literary forms that had been for some time widely available to readers at every social level ([see](#) Capp; Perkins; St Clair 78–82, 437–38; Maidment, [“Re-Arranging the Year”](#)). Until the 1820s, the almanac had been characterized by very particular graphic structures through which the calendar year was laid out in tabular forms using a series of what had become extremely familiar typographical conventions. Yet, despite these frequently reused formal characteristics, the history of the almanac as a print genre in Britain had been both a varied and a contentious one. A formal division between almanacs produced as single broadside sheets aimed at public or domestic display and those produced in pamphlet or booklet form for domestic reading is immediately evident. The graphic organization of the broadside almanac frequently included a wood-engraved image around which the printed text was distributed, while the pamphlet almanacs depended on a series of graphic conventions in order to lay out complex information in a visually accessible way. A second historical complexity was a modal one. Almanacs traditionally functioned either as a source of information about the calendar, the agricultural and ecclesiastical year, and national institutions or, [for](#) a broad swathe of the reading public, served as a source of popular

diversion [derived from](#) implausible predictions and miscellaneous anecdotes loosely pinned onto calendar dates.

While they had remained under the broad protection of the Stationers' Company, which had been granted a perpetual corporate monopoly over the printing and selling of almanacs in 1603, a flood of unofficial and pirated almanacs had been widely available ([see](#) St Clair 58–59). The difficulties of controlling this huge and frequently unregulated mass of print became a particular subject of debate in the 1820s and 1830s as part of a wider concern about the reading habits of the increasingly literate working classes. A broad program aimed at reforming the print [material](#) available to the general populace was thus undertaken by educationalists, administrators, and legislators in the 1820s ([see](#) Gray 47–51; Ashton 58–81). The almanac, because of its familiarity and broad appeal to a wide range of readers, became a particular focus of interest ([see](#) Maidment, [“Re-Arranging the Year”](#)). While this reformist task is of enormous significance in the history of British print culture, this essay focuses instead on the development of comic almanacs that offered a satirical critique not just of the almanac form but of all attempts to use print as a form of mass education and cultural persuasion. This satirical project was largely effected through the comic subversion of the traditional graphic characteristics and characteristic visual impact associated with the almanac form.

At the centre of this subversive comic almanac tradition was the long-lived *Comic Almanack*, which ran from 1835 until 1854 and boasted a starry list of late-Regency humourists among its writers, including [William Makepeace](#) Thackeray, Horace Mayhew, Gilbert [A](#) Beckett, George Cruikshank, and [Henry George](#) Hine as its major artists ([see](#) Vogler 152; Patten 2: 197–99) [\(fig. 1\)](#). Each annual issue, usually comprising sixty-four pages, cost 2s 6d, thus suggesting a largely affluent middle-class readership. Patten suggests that the publisher Tilt and the prolific journalist James Henry Vizetelly had together mooted

the possibility of a comic almanac in response to the success of Thomas Hood's *Comic Annual*, commissioning Cruikshank [initially](#) to provide illustrations but then to assume editorial responsibility. Cruikshank edited the *Comic Almanack* for many years, although editorial duties were eventually taken over by Horace Mayhew and then by [Angus Bethune Reach](#) after Cruikshank fell out with his publisher ([see](#) Patten 2: 197–99; Cohn 184). In its later years, the *Comic Almanack* struggled against the increasing popularity of *Punch* and, despite price cuts and fewer pages, lost the middle-class patronage on which it had depended. Patten describes the serial as “Cruikshank’s most sustained bid to superintend a publication entirely of his own devising and management” (Patten 2:1). With a broad enough satirical reach to transcend the immediate temporal affiliations that should have confined the appeal of the *Comic Almanack* to the particular year of each volume’s publication, the series was reprinted through the early Victorian period in volumes usually comprising three-year or four-year gatherings of the original paper-bound issues. The work was reissued in its entirety as a two-volume reprint later in the century ([see](#) Cohn 184; Vogler 152). While often used as a source of illustrations by historians and anthologists, the *Comic Almanack* still awaits proper appreciation. As Vogler noted thirty-five years ago in his collection of Cruikshank’s graphic work, “it is to be hoped that a scholarly study will be made one day to accompany a complete reissue of this impressive work” (152). While falling far short of the kind of study suggested by Vogler, this essay develops two approaches to the print historical trajectory of the *Comic Almanack*.

The first concerns the ways in which the *Comic Almanack* interested itself in reformulating the instantly recognizable typographical and graphic conventions of the almanac page in order to superimpose onto it interesting, playful, and often subversive visual elements. While primarily comic in intention and [intent on offering](#) readers visual pleasure, such reformulations also brought into the almanac a range of comic graphic elements found

widely elsewhere in popular print culture, thus giving the almanac a new visual energy and diversity. The formal hybridity that characterizes the *Comic Almanack* is symptomatic of the restless, experimental, and commercially sensitive marketplace for print to be found in late Regency London (see Maidment, *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order* 47–110). The second main theme of this essay concerns the ways in which an increasing number of comic and travesty almanacs from the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, widely influenced by the *Comic Almanack*, began to offer a sustained critique of the almanac's (and indeed all forms of print culture's) claims to authority and objectivity. In making this critique, the *Comic Almanack* exemplified a form of radicalism found more widely in 1830s print culture, which operated more through satirical pastiche and the witty and mischievous travesty of establishment values than through direct ideological confrontation (Fox 73–119). All of these themes are related to larger modal shifts within comic literature at this time. A shift of emphasis from the satirical to the diversionary, or from “wit” to “fun,” can be identified in the 1820s and 1830s as a defining characteristic of humorous publications, especially those aimed at a rapidly broadening consumer base. Many of these publications drew on new reprographic technologies in order to offer illustration as a standard element of the printed page. A further important shift in comic modality at this time was the way in which graphic comedy, especially in images like the 196 full-page etchings that Cruikshank made for the *Comic Almanack*, begins to reveal a new dependency on naturalistic forms of representation based on close social observation, thus suggesting that one of the key sources for later Victorian graphic reportage can be found in comic images from the 1830s and 1840s

[The Almanac as a Comic and Satirical Literary Form](#)

The *Comic Almanack* was undoubtedly the most sustained and successful satirical reformulation of the almanac mode that appeared in the late Regency and early Victorian period, but it was only part of a widespread recognition of the genre's comic possibilities that

emerged in the mid-1830s. Such recognition was constructed out of a complex of print cultural factors. The earnestness of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge's (SDUK) critique of the predictive almanac's carnivalesque delight in the improbable and the miraculous undoubtedly alienated many. For a wide number of publishers, readers, and writers, print forms that sought authority and used information as a form of potentially coercive social management were to be treated with suspicion or disdain, especially when they originated from the Whig-sponsored program of Lord Brougham, Charles Knight, and the SDUK. The polemical underpinning of the *British Almanac*, despite its seemingly neutral and inoffensive presentation of "useful" information, was immediately apparent to the many critics of the SDUK's cultural programme (see Fox 137–73; Anderson 50–83; Maidment, *Beyond Usefulness* 165–69; Gray 47–53). Additionally, the rapid evolution of the market for print commodities between 1820 and 1840 was beginning to offer new economic possibilities to opportunistic publishers, as well as a broad readership willing to be diverted rather than informed. The widespread repurposing of the wood engraving throughout print culture in the 1830s had drawn the medium away from predominantly vernacular forms like the broadside, the chapbook, and the song sheet and made it available for more sophisticated graphic purposes, including a broad range of comic modes. The emergence of lithography as a reprographic medium that could be rapidly produced, and that gave even down-market images a certain aesthetic gloss, also offered graphic satire a new potential at this time. The traditional graphic construction of the almanac form, with its tables, rules, and mixture of graphic and typeset elements, was both familiar and attractive to a mass readership and thus amenable to comic reworking. All of these factors combined to make the invention of travesty and satirical almanacs if not inevitable then at least highly likely.

In such a marketplace for illustrated humorous or satirical print, driven by inventiveness, opportunism, faddishness, and the reimagined or recently invented

reprographic technologies of the wood engraving and the lithograph, comic and travestied versions of the almanac began to appear even before the appearance of the *Comic Almanack* in 1835. With characteristic entrepreneurial energy, the hugely productive [Charles Jameson](#) Grant in 1833 added a “Comic Almanac” to his series of single-plate lithographs in which he offered travesty versions of contemporary periodical literature (Maidment, [“Subversive Supplements”](#)) (fig. 2). His translation of this particular print genre into a comic visual commodity was characteristically witty and ingenious. Grant’s “Comic Almanac” did away with the familiar tabular and print structures for organizing the information held within the almanac and replaced them with a complex ruled grid of tiny images. Each framed image offered a jokey graphic commentary on the traditional verbal content of the almanac suggested in a caption. Thus for “September 30 days Windy—rather uncertain—some cheerless—at the end, Thunder & Lightning” shows two hapless and inexperienced would-be marksmen loosing off guns at random to the bewilderment of their dog. The humour here, a repeated trope in Regency caricature, lies in the comic discrepancy between the more heroic and celebratory images of hunting usually found in sporting literature and the ineptitude of Grant’s rural adventurers. Despite Grant’s deconstruction of the traditional print elements of the almanac, he does find visual equivalents for the genre’s primary characteristics. At the centre of his print is a block of twelve images that form “The Annual Calendar.” A vertical strip of “Law Terms,” “Public Holidays,” and “Remarkable Saints Days” runs down the left of the image, while “Astronomical Observations” and “Eclipses” run down the right-hand side. Across the bottom of the image, “A Weather Table” and a strip of “Chief Soveriegn[sic] of Europe” complete the print.

There are a number of elements of Grant’s travesty almanac worth noting. First, published in 1833, it may well have suggested the commercial potential of the satirical almanac to a host of subsequent jobbing artists, writers, and publishers keen to exploit any

new possibility. Second, although [it was](#) first issued in 1833, Grant reprinted his “Comic Almanac” on a yearly basis at least until 1836, merely altering the date in the title. Such re-issues suggest the extent to which his work was understood as a commodity [that](#) needed to be reworked to make a sustained income for the artist and publisher; [they](#) also suggest that the almanac could be separated from its function as a useful and time-specific source of information and made available as [a](#) diversionary source of visual pleasure that alluded to but also travestied the traditional almanac. Third, Grant’s “Comic Almanac,” while allusive, witty, and sophisticated, nonetheless drew on a tradition of vernacular Regency humour, in which familiar linguistic formulations are undercut by the subversive images attached to them, images drawn largely from the stock of Regency grotesque humour and from everyday street culture. It also forms part of Grant’s sustained critique of the “March of Intellect” to be found in periodical illustrations as well as in single prints. Thus Grant’s “Comic Almanac 1833” operates on the cusp between “wit” and “fun”—[representing](#) a key moment in the history of graphic humour that is central to the modus operandi of the *Comic Almanack*.

There were several other witty and subversive reinventions of the almanac form as a comic graphic commodity in the mid-1830s. Grant surpassed even the inventiveness of “The Comic Almanac” with a version of an almanac print designed to be worn inside a hat (Pound 66–67). The team that produced the bohemian/radical periodical *Figaro in London* reworked Robert Seymour’s wood-engraved vignette caricatures into a *Figaro in London Almanac* (William Strange 1836), a broadside single sheet that surrounded a conventional calendar with Seymour’s images, thus finding an ingenious way of reusing the original blocks for commercial purposes. Seymour, along with Grant and Cruikshank the most inventive and visually experimental of 1830s comic artists, also provided the wood-engraved illustrations for *The Political Almanac for 1836*, which was issued by Effingham Wilson, a publisher well known for his sympathy to progressive views (Maidment, [Beyond Usefulness](#) 173–79). While

The Political Almanac promised (and delivered) what its title page described as “The Natural Phenomena, Festivals, Holidays, Etc.; with a large quantity of political and commercial information,” its distinctiveness lay in “Thirteen Humorous Engravings from Designs by Robert Seymour with Poetical Contributions from Popular Pens.” Seymour’s wood engravings were scaled-down political caricatures drawn using the graphic vocabulary and emblematic gestures of late-eighteenth-century visual satire and accompanied satirical verses on contemporary public events. Thus *The Political Almanac*, aimed at a readership schooled in the sophisticated discourses of Regency political debate, suggested something of the extent to which complex visual elements not traditionally associated with the almanac could be assimilated into print forms that, while retaining something of the traditional structures and content of the form, could also offer a satirical commentary on its stiffer elements, and bring a new visual pleasure to the consumption of information.

The Comic Almanac 1835-1854

Emerging from this expanding range of experimental almanacs, the *Comic Almanack* drew on its contributors’ extremely well-informed understanding of the marketplace to construct a complex hybrid form that displayed considerable graphic bravado. Something of the visual energy and allusive complexity of the *Comic Almanack* can be immediately gleaned by looking closely at a double-page spread from an early issue—“November” from the 1836 volume (fig. 3). While the eye is immediately attracted first to the full-page etching and, immediately afterwards, to the complex construction of the type-set page, one key element in the visual construction of the *Comic Almanack* is the decision to use a small, or more specifically a “pocket-sized,” page (*Comic Almanac for 1836, 25*). The use of such a format was of course entirely appropriate for a handy source of information that might accompany its owner everywhere. But in the 1820s and 1830s, a particular aesthetic had become associated with the miniature volume—and particularly with illustrated texts, especially

books that depended on offering [either](#) communal or individual pleasure or [that](#) were mainly used as gift books, most obviously annuals aimed at the Christmas market. Comic annuals illustrated mainly by small-scale wood engravings had been notably successful in the early 1830s. *Hood's Comic Annual*, which ran from 1830 until 1842, was perhaps the best known, but the *Comic Offering* had enjoyed a five-year run between 1820 and 1835. A number of one-off publications in this idiom had also done well commercially, most notably the 1832 *New Comic Annual*, which contained a mass of small-scale wood engravings by William Brown. These bijou anthologies of comic illustration, miscellaneous punning poetry, narratives, and anecdotes were highly conscious of their visual appearance and particularly eager to make their bindings distinctive through the use of printed glazed boards or, in the case of the *Comic Offering*, rather delicate tooled leather. The *Comic Almanack* was clearly indebted to the comic annuals for building an aesthetic of smallness that could accommodate the scale of the wood-engraved vignette or silhouette and build pages in which type and image could cohabit and collectively construct visual pleasure.

Given this aesthetic and culturally allusive interest in smallness, it is interesting that Cruikshank chose to use full-page etchings rather than wood engravings to give the *Comic Almanack* its distinctive visual identity. Each issue of the *Almanack* carried twelve etchings, each tied to a particular month. (In later issues, the number was reduced to six to save on costs.) Much of Cruikshank's comparable delineation of urban incident in the 1820s and early 1830s had been [conveyed](#) through wood engravings that retained the characteristics of the vignette even when used as full-page illustrations. In such publications as *Sunday in London* (1833), a polemical pamphlet on the observation of the Sabbath, Cruikshank had brought exuberant comic celebrations of urban variety to bear on serious topics, combining the tropes of late-eighteenth-century caricature with a new intimacy of scale appropriate to the constraints of the wood engraving. Thus his choice of the more expensive reprographic

medium of etching for the *Comic Almanack* was an interesting one, perhaps driven by a sense that etching offered a sense of gentility and expense that was missing from the comic annuals, which almost exclusively depended on wood engravings. In the “St. Cecilia’s Day” image reproduced here, the corners of the linear frame have been left unfinished, as if in deference to the shape and character of the wood-engraved vignette, which blurred the border between image and page. In the long run, the *Comic Almanack*’s dependence [for its visual impact](#) on the relatively expensive illustrative mode of etching helped to hasten its decline, keeping its price high against its competitors like the *Punch Almanac*.

Cruikshank’s choice of St. Cecilia’s Day as his subject for November allowed him to combine one of his favourite subjects, a crowded street scene, with a comic, if somewhat fraught, delineation of street noise. The cacophony [that](#) had to be endured on London streets was a traditional subject for caricature and had been extensively explored by Hogarth. Humorous responses to wandering musicians and singers were based on the comic discrepancy between traditional definitions of “music” and the frequently talentless bawling and scraping of street performers. But beneath the humour ran a strong current of exasperation or even anxiety about the ways in which street musicians encouraged assembly and spectatorship along with more general chaos. Cruikshank’s etching shows a multitudinous gathering of the producers of street noise arranged as a theatrical spectacle mainly oriented towards the shared viewpoint of artist and *Almanack* reader. As well as an astonishing variety of street musicians and singers, Cruikshank includes a broad range of non-musical contributors to the babble of sounds—a braying donkey, a barking dog, a coachman cracking his whip, and a dustman ringing a bell and shouting out “Dust O!”—all of them traditional caricature tropes [for](#) urban chaos. At the centre of the image is a wonderful group of opened-mouth “O”s, echoed distantly by the black dot of a baby’s mouth seen in its mother’s arms [through](#) the back window of an omnibus. Cruikshank’s image is essentially

celebratory and affectionate rather than anxious, and it imports into the almanac form an unprecedented visual pleasure that offers a new kind of naturalistic observation connecting readers to the everyday experiences of urban life.

If the full-page etchings import an entirely unprecedented visual experience into the almanac form, the recto page concentrates on providing a travesty version of the genre's familiar graphic elements. Just enough remains to remind the reader of the almanac norm—the calendar grid, the presence of the hieroglyphs in the right hand column, the use of a wide variety of typefaces, including mock-ancient Gothic letters. A few traditional almanac entries are ascribed to particular days—a saint's day and a list of birthdays of public figures are attached to the 1st of November, the 5th has the Gunpowder Plot, and the 30th has "insurrection of the Poles, 1830." But apart from these mementoes of the familiar almanac, everything else on the page forms a facetious reworking of the form. In particular, Cruikshank, Hine, and the assembled writers import into the page a comic disquisition on modes of urban disorder that range from mischief to threat. The top section of the image above the double rule sets a short poem against a small image drawn largely as a silhouette. The poem describes the adventures of a young boy, who after burning his straw Guy Fawkes (contrary to "civic law"), looks to extend his evening's entertainment by blowing up the stock of a sleeping street fruit seller, a jape represented by the accompanying silhouette. Of particular visual appeal is the wonderfully unexpected depiction of the sleeping stallholder and her bonnet that forms an almost abstract black form.

A typical almanac entry giving the dates of the legal terms—"first day of term" for November 2nd—is subversively undermined by puns. The "term" punningly becomes the prison sentence handed out to "sundry idle gents" who are "pressed to 'man the Fleet,"—that is, sent off to serve their term in the Fleet prison. The *Almanack's* evident delight in this punning account of social disorder is carried into the verses and silhouette below. "The Fifth

of November” opens by suggesting that a traditional occasion for licensed mischief—Guy Fawkes’s night—has on this occasion been thwarted by its falling on a Sunday, thus meaning that “little blackguard boys” will be robbed of the “pretty simple joys” of burning effigies of Guy Fawkes and the pope. But, the poem suggests, “fires have always been the test / for proving orthodoxy best” and so, perhaps, the pope will give dispensation for postponing his incineration until the following day. Such anti-Catholic sentiments are reinforced by the vigorous accompanying silhouette of street urchins in the process of burning their effigies. The account of licensed disobedience and urban street play is furthered in the entry and illustration immediately below. The entry for 26 November contains the apparently factual statements “first night of Tom and Jerry” (presumably a revival of a play derived from Pierce Egan’s hugely popular 1821–22 serial novel, *Life in London*) and “Larks in season.” But the “Larks” in question are not so much seasonal food as the roistering “larks” of young men about town seen in the silhouette overturning a watchman’s hut (a famous image drawn from play-texts and performances of “Tom and Jerry”). Thus the staid informational aspects of the traditional almanac are here overlaid with exuberant visual depictions of disorderly conduct and a sequence of verbal jokes that disrupt traditional meanings with more disreputable second meanings. Wordplay and horseplay unite here to turn the solemnity of almanac information into a celebration of the Regency urban carnivalesque.

One final section of page 43 remains to be discussed. Down the right-hand side of the page, under the disrespectful heading of “Prognostications,” the *Comic Almanack* offers its readers a sequence of the hieroglyphs used in the traditional prophetic almanac to bring legitimacy to forecasts of coming events. The graphic variety and obscurantist function of the hieroglyphs as well as magniloquent phrasing that surrounded them are duly acknowledged but are here subverted into a sustained joke at the expense of traditional almanac wisdom. What the hieroglyphs say, with the full authority of “Rigdum Funidos” (the pseudonym under

which the *Comic Almanack* was edited), is that “the doom of Turkey may be looked for as fixed at Christmas.” The predicted fall of a mighty nation is of course undercut by the more banal reading of this “fixed” event: many turkeys will inevitably be killed for Christmas dinners.

In turning the almanac from a major source of “useful information” and a repository of popular superstition into a field of playful verbal and graphic energy, the *Comic Almanack* offered sophisticated readers a new source of pleasure that persisted into the nineteenth century. In particular, the *Punch Almanack* was directly descended from the *Comic Almanack*. The runaway success of the first issue of the *Punch Almanac* in 1842 was largely responsible for sustaining the finances of the magazine through its early years, and it enjoyed several advantages over the *Comic Almanack*. The page used by *Punch*, a squarish, large, double-columned graphic space, proved more adaptable to complex graphic organization and permitted an even more riotous and varied page than that introduced by the *Comic Almanack*. And, crucially, *Punch* was entirely illustrated by wood engravings, which could sit on the typeset page without the expense of separate printing. While, without doubt, Cruikshank’s single-page etchings defined the graphic style of the *Comic Almanack*, they also proved a major reason for its decline.

[The Legacy of the *Comic Almanack* in Early Victorian Print Culture](#)

The comic potential developed by the continuing and demonstrably successful combined presence of the *Comic Almanack* and the *Punch Almanac* into the 1840s and 1850s was widely recognized and developed within a number of varied print formations. One strand sought to exploit the popularity of the comic almanac idea by tying it to a host periodical as *Punch* had done. The relentlessly energetic and ever inventive Gilbert A. Beckett, who had been closely involved with both the *Comic Almanack* and *Punch*, launched his own hybrid periodical called *Almanack of the Month* in January 1846. The tabular elements of the

almanac were relegated to a single page at the end of each monthly issue of the magazine, and, despite the title, [A](#) Beckett clearly interpreted the idea of the almanac very broadly [as](#) something closer to a diary or journal illustrated with comic wood engravings than [to](#) a traditional almanac. Indeed, the very idea of a “monthly” almanac suggests a highly idiosyncratic and potentially contradictory exploitation of the genre. Another relatively short-lived satirical periodical, the *Puppet Show Almanac*, produced a similarly genre-bending almanac published in late 1848 and intending to cover 1849 (Maidment *Beyond Usefulness*, 189–90). But so open had the almanac become to variation that half of the *Puppet Show “Almanac”* was devoted to describing events from the year just past, thus forming something closer to an [annual](#) than an almanac. While the traditional almanac print formations and categories were retained and satirized, they were printed in the form of disassembled elements bundled together in a double-page spread. Nonetheless, the *Puppet Show “Almanac”* made a considerable effort to reproduce the visual exuberance and satirical energy that had characterized the *Comic Almanack*.

The *Comic Almanack* also offered a precedent for later almanacs to import a mass of tiny, vigorous, and generally rather crudely drawn humorous images into their pages even when the ostensible purpose of the almanac seemed far removed from the comic. There was no obvious reason beyond their visual appeal and a general lightening of atmosphere for *The Epicure’s Almanac for 1842* (London: How and Parsons 1842) to fill out many of its pages with whimsical small-scale visual jokes, for example. While the second half of this almanac was devoted to recipes and other culinary information, the first half used double-page spreads with traditional tabular monthly information on the verso opposed with a recto of typographical and visual elements held within rules; [the first half also included](#) short comic verses, punning anecdotes, and visual/verbal images that supplied disruptive comic visual equivalents for well-known culinary phrases—thus a “black fryer” is represented by a skillet

and a “welsh rabbit” shows the a rabbit playing the harp. These comic drawings form a vertical column on the right-hand side of the page, much as they do in the *Comic Almanack* and the *Punch Almanac*. Equally unexpected is the use of small strips of comic images as headers for many pages of *Poor Richard's Almanac* a British reimagining of Benjamin Franklin's famous and popular almanac of the same name that had sought to dispense both information and wisdom to the mass of the American population through twenty-five years of the mid-eighteenth century. Published by the progressive populist publisher William Strange, the British *Poor Richard*, dating from the mid-1840s, used a hybrid format, retaining the monthly chart of information, shrinking the listing of information to a bare minimum, and developing a page that brought together anecdote, advice to artisans about how to live their lives, and miscellaneous pieces of information. At the top of each monthly chart, there appeared a strip of crudely drawn but vigorous comic images that celebrated the month's characteristics—a disruptive wind for March, for example, and a huge Christmas pudding for December. As with the *Comic Almanack*, even if evidently less well drawn and ambitious, these clumsy images nonetheless both depicted and showed pleasure in the day-to-day activities of the lower classes. The humour of these images was inclusive and celebratory rather than satirical and suggests the ways in which graphic elements could be used to attract readers to the generally utilitarian contents of the almanac.

Even before *Punch* was launched in 1841, a central characteristic of the comic almanac form—the relatively genial and good-humoured illustrated travesty of “official” or standard texts—was hardening into a distinct literary genre. Both the specific term “comic” and a developing conceptual awareness of the importance of this term to understanding the tastes and interests of readers in the 1830s underpinned a range of subsequent publications, many of them published from the *Punch* Office. Percival Leigh's *The Comic Latin Grammar or a Facetious Introduction to the Latin Tongue for the Use and Amusement of Schoolboys*

came out in 1839, two years before *Punch* began publication. Issued by Charles Tilt, the publisher of the *Comic Almanack*, the “divers illustration” combined full-page etched plates by John Leech with wood-engraved vignettes dropped into the text, exactly the combination of graphic embellishments used by the *Comic Almanack*. *The Comic Latin Grammar* also took endless delight in parodying the typographical structures of the “grammar” using numbered lists, daft examples, mnemonic verses, italics, bold headlines, and the like to suggest the traditional patterning of a dull school textbook. The result was perhaps too sophisticated for “the use and amusement of schoolboys” but it is easy to see the pleasures on offer to those educated readers who had previously undergone the tedium of a classical education. It was rapidly followed by a *Comic English Grammar* (Richard Bentley, 1840). Leech became something of a specialist in this genre, working with Gilbert A. Beckett, also a mainstay of *Punch*, on the *Comic Blackstone* (*Punch Office*, 1846), a parodic version of the most significant British legal textbook. A serialized *Comic History of England*, published in two volumes in 1849 but widely reprinted in cheaper formats (even reaching a Dicks edition later in the century), and a *Comic History of Rome* (1852), followed, both originating from the *Punch Office*. In all of these later exercises in the genial travesty formal or definitive sources of knowledge, the humorous illustrations combined full-page plates with vignettes dropped into the text.

In 1855, comic travesty versions of standard texts reached their ultimate form by self-referentially taking on the almanac itself. *Blackwood’s Comic Zadkiel*, written by the jobbing writer Hain Friswell, illustrated by William McConnell, a prolific periodical and book artist, and published by James Blackwell, claimed on its title page to be “An almanac at once prophetic and profitable, logical and astrological, quizzical and physical, ombrological and symbological, astronomically comical, and comically astronomical.” Largely comprising a miscellany of commentary on contemporary politics and manners in various forms—jokey

advice letters, sarcastic poems, humorous play texts, and so on—the *Comic Zadkiel* retained a Regency love of extravagant wordplay and an exuberant facetiousness of tone as well as the traditional graphic structures for laying out calendar information. But its graphic elements were basically a later Victorian reworking and updating of the visual content of the *Comic Almanack*, with full-page framed wood engravings mostly commenting on contemporary politics in the manner of the full-page *Punch* “big cuts,” horizontally shaped wood engravings acting as headings for the monthly charts of information, and a range of smaller vignettes and silhouettes dropped into the text. While lacking the finesse and gentility of the visual appeal of the *Comic Almanack*, the *Comic Zadkiel* was nonetheless deeply indebted to its predecessor. The good-natured and self-reflexive ridicule of the almanac to be found in the *Comic Zadkiel*—it self-professedly claimed to contain “full prophecies on everything which nobody wishes to know”—summarized the long tradition of affectionate mockery of the form that had begun twenty-five years earlier and had been sustained into the mid-Victorian period by both the *Comic Almanack* and *Punch*. With its fold-out coloured frontispiece, whole-page political cartoons, monthly headpieces, and scattered small-scale graphic jokes, the *Comic Zadkiel* provided an anthology of the range of visual pleasures that, since the *Comic Almanack*, could be made available within the travesty almanac.

[Travesty, seriality and graphic profusion – the almanac’s recipe for Victorian popularity.](#)

The popularity of the travesty almanac can be explained as simply one aspect of the increasingly inventive market for humorous visual culture in the 1820s and 1830s, a market moving beyond single-plate etched and engraved caricature as its staple product and instead driven by a commercial instinct for passing crazes and fashions, an increasing awareness of seriality as a mode of production and consumption within print culture, and a recognition of the need to extend and democratize the consumer base for visual comedy. It is, however, the double interest of the comic almanac in combining the potential of seriality as a mode of

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production and consumption and the opportunities for graphic experimentation offered by the tabular layout and visual self-consciousness of the almanac that seem to me to have inscribed the almanac so firmly within the repertoire of comic literature between 1820 and 1850.

Writers and artists alike found the complex geometries of the almanac page, its solemn avowal of the ludicrously predictive, and the portentousness of its contents an irresistible source of humour. Such humour, modally located as pastiche or travesty, manifested itself particularly in graphic form and was driven by the innovations that had been introduced by the *Comic Almanack* in the 1830s. In particular, the dialogue between the linear and tabular organization of the traditional almanac and the carnivalesque profusion of images and text poured onto the page by Cruikshank and Hine had opened the way for *Punch's* hugely successful *Almanac*. Travesty almanacs supplied verbal and visual pleasures that belied and subverted the “useful” immediacy of the traditional almanac. Detached from an immediate temporal frame of reference, the persistent reprinting of both the *Comic Almanack* and the *Punch Almanac* throughout the nineteenth century in volume form shows the extent to which the travesty almanac succeeded in both celebrating and satirizing a literary form that, despite sustained ridicule, remained deeply inscribed in the popular consciousness. It also brought a visual and graphic energy to the printed page that was rarely found elsewhere in Victorian print culture.

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