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Lindsey Scott
College of Charleston, scottlm@g.cofc.edu

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Recommended Citation
Scott, Lindsey (2020) "Defiance Behind a Pretty Face: The Deceptive Femininity of Irish Women in Punch," The Macksey Journal: Vol. 1 , Article 98.
Available at: https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/98

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Cover Page Footnote
I gratefully acknowledge the College of Charleston Department of English's continued support and its role in facilitating my participation in the Macksey Symposium. In particular, I thank Tim Carens for his helpful input in the revision process. I would also like to especially thank Jacob Steere-Williams whose class inspired this project and who provided valuable assistance and commentary throughout the process.

This article is available in The Macksey Journal: https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/98
Defiance Behind a Pretty Face: The Deceptive Femininity of Irish Women in *Punch*

Lindsey Scott

*College of Charleston*

Abstract

Scholars have long considered the Victorian satirical magazine *Punch* to be a window into the opinions and sensibilities of its predominantly middle-class English audience. Not only did the publication humorously comment upon life in Victorian England, but it often captured aspects of the colonial tension felt between England and its closest overseas colony, Ireland. Although much scholarly attention has been given to the figure of the Irish man in the Victorian periodical press, very little has been written on contemporary depictions of his feminine counterpart, the Irish woman. The omission is curious as the Irish woman represents an interesting figure for study. While the English stereotypes of Irish men in the nineteenth century were preoccupied with Irish male physical appearance—violent, animalistic, subservient—the Irish woman, in the eyes of their English draughtsman, dangerously belied a single archetype, I argue in this paper, precisely because her appearance did not always indicate her Irishness. Therefore, in order to identify the Irish woman’s nationality, artists in *Punch* often aligned Irish women to certain stereotypes of Irish behavior or used them to subvert the expectations of middle-class values. When appearance alone was not enough to classify the Irish woman, supposedly Celtic and feminine actions, attitudes, and sympathies dominated contemporary characterizations. The study of these depictions of Irish women in *Punch* reveals larger assumptions and anxieties that the average middle-class English public harbored towards Irish women.
Although much scholarly attention has been given to the figure of the Irish man in the Victorian periodical press, very little has been written on contemporary depictions of his feminine counterpart, the Irish woman. The omission is curious, as the Irish woman represents an interesting figure for study. While the English stereotypes of Irish men in the nineteenth century were preoccupied with Irish male physical appearance—violent, animalistic, subservient—the Irish woman, in the eyes of their English draughtsman, dangerously belied single archetype, precisely because her appearance did not always indicate her Irishness. Therefore, in order to identify the Irish woman’s nationality, Punch artists often aligned Irish women to certain stereotypes of Irish behavior or used them to subvert the expectations of middle-class values. When appearance alone was not enough to classify the Irish woman, supposedly Celtic and feminine actions, attitudes, and sympathies dominated contemporary characterizations. Punch, perhaps the most popular satirical magazine of the Victorian era, offers an interesting glimpse into the opinions and sensibilities of its predominantly middle-class, English audience. The study of these depictions of Irish women in Punch begins to reveal larger assumptions and anxieties that the average middle-class English public harbored towards Irish women.

**Stereotypes of Irish men in the Victorian Periodical Press**

Over the course of the Victorian period, the figure of the Irish Celt underwent a drastic transition. However, even before the Irish man became a frequent derisive figure, there existed a long tradition of including the Irish man in the Victorian periodical press (*Apes and Angels* 29). The volume of these depictions suggests an underlying preference in the satirical press for masculine portrayals of the Irish. Although they were less derogatory, the physical features of these examples still generally demonstrated some corresponding stereotypical character trait that

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*Keywords: Victorian Britain, English periodical press, Anglo-Irish relations, *Punch* magazine, depictions of Irish women*
the early Victorian audience would recognize as characteristically “Irish.” In his seminal work on the subject of Irish men in Victorian caricature, L. Perry Curtis Jr describes early Victorian depictions of the Irish man as characterized by “snub-nosed, big-mouthed, and prognathous” features (Apes and Angels 31). This less than complimentary appearance popular in the early Victorian period was rooted in the stereotype that historian Stephen Howe defines as the Irish man as backward and “uncultivated” (16). In the eyes of the English middle-class, such crude and rustic stereotyping would have confirmed the popular, paternalistic sentiment towards maintaining the 1800 Act of Union. However, with the rise of Fenian violence in the mid-1860s, the periodical press began sapping the Irish Celt of his humanity (Apes and Angels 37). The ultimate culmination of this depiction, according to L. Perry Curtis Jr., resulted in caricatures of the Irish man that were “more monster than man” (Apes and Angels 37). In this way, monstrous depictions became synonymous with stereotypes of Irish rebelliousness, which dovetailed with an increasingly tenuous political relationship between Ireland and England. Michael de Nie tracks this bestial depiction of the Irish even further beyond the depictions of the Fenians in the 1860s to the portrayals of the Land League in the 1880s (The Eternal Paddy 217-22). Here too, de Nie shows depictions of the rebellious Irish in the comic press were consistently “subhuman” (217). These include classic examples of the “simianized” Irish that relied on recognizable features such as “the simious nose, long upper lip, huge projecting mouth… jutting lower jaw, [and] sloping forehead” as well as depictions of the Irish as grotesque, violent pig-creatures (Apes and Angels 29, The Eternal Paddy 217). The characteristics, further indicative of the simian trope, not only represented the brutish violence of the Irish rebels, but it also came to imply the “assumed primitive state” of the Irish peasantry (The Eternal Paddy 210). Therefore, even if they were not explicitly being vilified, Irish men were nevertheless portrayed as less
intelligent and less evolved than their English counterparts. Throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century, bestial depictions of the Irish-as-terrorists crowded the pages of the Victorian comic press and continued to dominate much of the critical discussion.

However, all depictions of the Irish did not fall into this category of the subhuman rebel. Even during periods of Fenian rebellion, there seemed to be a distinction between the vilified, savage Irish rebels and the men that still represented a “Loyal Irish” contingent (*Apes and Angels* 37). Although these Irish men appeared sympathetic by comparison, they still retained some prognathous features though considerably less exaggerated (*Apes and Angels* 37). In this way, the prognathous features and physical appearance remained central to even the relatively flattering caricatures of Irish men. These stereotypes of Irish men in political cartoons captured the English public’s prejudices and preconceptions about Irish men’s violence, primitiveness, and general inferiority (“Pigs, Paddies, Prams and Petticoats” 42).

**Victorian Middle-Class Values: The Question of Respectability**

In spite of what the treatment of the Irish man within the pages of the Victorian comic press might lead one to believe, even satirical publications could not escape middle-class ideals regarding respectability. This could particularly be seen in the style and tone of *Punch* by the latter half of the nineteenth century. As historian Henry J. Miller argues, artists at *Punch* had to learn to walk the line between humor and respectability earlier in the century (268). Not only did the growing prevalence of Evangelicalism introduce a stricter standard of morality, but there was also a growing readership of women and children for the magazine (Miller 271). John Leech, a prolific and influential caricaturist at *Punch* during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, contributed to the publication’s evolution to meet the demands of the new market with satire that
was “harmless and never at the expense of others” (Miller 269). In this way, *Punch* cartoons attempted to adhere to middle-class values of decency, propriety, and domesticity (Miller 272).

These standards of respectability were also extended to the way that female subjects could be portrayed in *Punch*. This was particularly evident in *Punch*’s adherence to the domestic ideology of the middle-class. Victorian domestic ideology defined the “woman’s sphere” as the home and the woman’s concerns as those pertaining to the household and family. (Davidoff and Hall 309). In the same way, *Punch* cartoons of the late decades of the nineteenth century often constructed comedic conceits involving women within the purview of the domestic sphere. This trend is evident in *Punch*’s 1894 “True Hospitality” that satirizes a hostess’ accidental faux paus at a dinner party (Figure 1). The cartoon pokes fun at the hostess’ enthusiastic exclamation that she is “so glad” that her dinner is the first decent meal that her guest has eaten in six weeks.

![Figure 1: “True Hospitality” (Punch, 3 March 1894)]
Rather than being appalled, the hostess’s pride in her domestic achievement of presenting a man with a decent meal overwhelms her reaction. “True Hospitality” also highlights the prominence of the woman’s role in domestic affairs by positioning the hostess at the head of the table. Although her reaction is the source of the humor, the cartoon made her the object of satire without fundamentally attacking her femininity or good intentions. In the same way, many cartoons chronicle women’s misadventures raising children. The unfortunate mother in the 1893 “A Too Inquiring Mind” must handle the innocent but difficult question posed by her young son (Figure 2). Not only is the woman in the cartoon caring for her son, she is also engaging in the respectably feminine leisure activity of knitting. Her son’s question, “Was I knitted!” suggests that he has seen her knitting often enough to assume the only explanation for his creation must be his mother’s knitting.

![Figure 2: “A Too Inquiring Mind” (Punch, 21 January 1893)](image)

This cartoon underscores both the English woman’s domestic role and her role as mother. While it would be fallacious to claim that *Punch* only portrayed women inside this domestic sphere,
many of the examples that captured the kind of “harmless,” “respectable” satire upheld ideals of middle-class respectability. Portraying Irish women represented an interesting paradox for *Punch*, as the constraints of respectability did not extend to the Irish or any other “minorities or marginal groups” (Miller 282).

**Erin and the English Ideal of Ireland**

While Irish women have been largely excluded from scholarly considerations of the Irish caricature in the Victorian periodical press, the figure of Erin represents a notable exception to this trend. Erin, as well as the analogous figure of Hibernia, refers to the feminine personification of Ireland who was often portrayed as a young chaste maiden (“The Four Erins” 70, 84). Although she was born out of a tradition of Irish art and storytelling, Erin was also appropriated by the English to further a larger pattern of gendering the colonial encounter with Ireland (“The Four Erins” 71-76). English popular culture often imagined their colonies as female in order to justify the colonial conquest and continued involvement vis-à-vis patterns of gender norms (“The Four Erins” 72). In this way, fair and fragile Erin—as opposed to the brawny John Bull or the stalwart English lion—was a tool used by opponents to Irish nationalism to reinforce the idea that Ireland or Erin was incapable of controlling her own interests and containing threats like the Fenians and other comparable threats (“The Four Erins” 89).

Erin also became essential to visual depictions of Ireland and Irish relations. The figure of Erin and Hibernia were compelling shorthand when invoking the trope of the colonial “damsel in distress” in comic publications. Depictions of Erin often featured her being protected from the various threatening incarnations of Irish rebellion by some representative figure of England be it John Bull, William Gladstone, or Britannia (“Pigs, Paddies, Prams and Petticoats” 46). This vulnerable depiction of Erin allowed Victorian cartoonists to portray the necessity of English
involvement in preserving Erin against the Irish brutes. In the periodical press, Erin also became the Irish figure who entertained British politicians as they tried to “charm and seduce” her with legislation (“Pigs, Paddies, Prams and Petticoats” 46). De Nie points to a telling example from an 1886 edition of the contemporary publication Fun in which William Gladstone was portrayed as a suitor for Erin when rumors of a home rule bill abounded (“Pigs, Paddies, Prams and Petticoats” 46-47). As a symbol of the Irish colony, Erin acted as the recipient of Irish legislation from the revolving door of English politicians.

As a significant departure from the style of the villainized figures of the Irish in the periodical press, Erin also came to represent the favorable potential of the Irish colony. Unlike the “simianized Paddy,” Erin was not dehumanized and othered in the same way that the rebellious Irish man was (“Pigs, Paddies, Prams and Petticoats” 46). In fact, she was often placed in opposition to symbols of Irish Rebellion. In this way, Erin came to represent a “loyal Irish majority” who continuously clung to her English savior (“Pigs, Paddies, Prams and Petticoats” 45). Especially when compared to the seditious Irish rebels, Erin represented a vision of Ireland that better conformed to the vision of English paternalism.

**Deceptively Irish: Maids, Mothers, and Working-Class Girls**

While the figure of Erin was by and large protected by this idealization, such protection was certainly not extended to the figures meant to represent “real” Irish women. However, unlike the Irish men in the Victorian periodical press, representations of Irish women were not always immediately recognizable via their dehumanized appearance. Nonetheless, they were often subjected to varying amounts of scrutiny and contempt regarding their Irishness. Although the appearance of these Irish women often seemed to align her with the ideal of Erin or even her English counterpart, she nonetheless represented a member of the colonial “other.” Therefore,
the Irish woman needed to be controlled and separated from the national English sense of self. *Punch* artists often went about this by comically excluding the Irish woman from the values of middle-class respectability. These working-class Irish women portrayed in *Punch* often even defied the standards of respectability that the middle-class attempted to prescribe to the lower classes. Therefore, while managing conflicting expectations of race, gender, class, and idealization, *Punch* artists nonetheless managed to sufficiently characterize Irish women as distinctly and unfavorably Irish.

Although it was well into the trend of characterizing Irish men as violent savages, the Irish maid in Charles Keene’s 1877 “A Set-Down” (Figure 3) appeared to escape such dehumanizing stereotypes. Keene endowed her with facial features that were delicate and attractive, consistent with the way that English women were depicted in *Punch* (Miller 270). Notably, her features were marred by none of the prognathism that characterized even the most favorable depictions of Irish men. In addition to her humanity, the maid also retained her femininity. Her dress also contrasted the ragged, disheveled appearance of the Fenian caricatures. Her manner of dress was both neat and becoming of her station; she appeared to conform to English middle-class standards for their domestic servants. Without the caption christening her “Biddy,” nineteenth century slang for an Irish maid, it would be difficult to immediately identify the Irish maid from any other English maid (“Biddy”). In this way, Biddy more closely resembled the English ideal of Erin than the vicious Paddies that infested the pages of *Punch*. However, although she maintained her feminine appearance, Keene also used “A Set-Down” to introduce the idea that Irish women harbored an impertinent spirit reminiscent of their male counterparts. The humor of “A Set-Down” revolved around Biddy’s response to her
Mistress’ displeasure at the maid’s thumb print marring the dinnerware. Rather than accepting the critique and apologizing, Biddy retorted that the Mistress is being exceedingly “particular.” She proceeded to double down on her bold response by reproaching her mistress for not even appreciating the quality of the thumb print. In this way, the Irish maid begins to move into the space of characteristic Irish impertinence. The caption also functioned on several different levels in order to drive home the insolence of Biddy’s sass. On one hand, the “Set-Down” referred on the most basic level to a play on the sit-down meal that the Mistress and her husband hoped to enjoy. However, a mid-nineteenth century definition of a “set-down” recontextualizes the
caption as it denoted both a severe scolding and a humiliating rebuff (“Set-Down). Keene played with a double entendre in the cartoon. While the Mistress intended to reprimand Biddy for her mediocre cleaning of the dishes, Biddy usurped her Mistress’s attempt to correct her. In this way, the “set-down” links the Irish maid to an aggressive, disrespectful attitude that is unbecoming of a domestic servant.

Furthermore, Keene’s composition of the cartoon contributed to the unusual dynamic at play between the Irish maid and her Mistress. Although the Mistress originally intended the “set-down” to reprimand Biddy, Biddy occupies a higher position than her Mistress in the frame. Spatially, this suggests that Biddy wields a position of power in the scene. In this way, Biddy seems to be talking down to her Mistress with her disrespectful retort. In addition to the downward angle of Biddy’s face, there also appears to be a level of contempt in her otherwise delicate features. Finally, although he does not play into the interaction between Biddy and her Mistress, the husband’s reaction further indicates the unexpectedness of Biddy’s reaction. In spite of its relative lack of detail, the husband’s expression suggests genuine shock at the way the “set-down” turned out. Rather than correcting their maid’s behavior, this English couple received an insolent, characteristically Irish, retort. While Biddy’s appearance adhered to hegemonic standards of femininity, her response began to suggest that Irish women may also embody a certain amount of Irish insubordination. Unlike “True Hospitality” and “A Too Inquiring Mind,” which created comedic conceits that did not offend the respectability of their subjects, the humor of “A Set-Down” derives from maligning the Irish maid as incompetent and disrespectful. With its treatment of Biddy, Punch departs from its characteristic “harmless” humor to send up the Irish maid.
Although not a maid, the 1894 “Tripping Merrily” continued the trend of the young, Irish working-class woman whose temperament and sympathies overcome the attractiveness of her appearance. The short story, “Tripping Merrily,” that accompanied the cartoon in Figure 4 chronicles a boat trip made by several English people. While stopping in Queenstown, County Cork to acquire a few “knickknacks,” they meet with the “daughter of Erin,” who appears in the image. The story offered an interesting insight into the way that the English men perceived the young, attractive, working-class Irish woman. A great deal of attention was given to how attractive the narrator finds her. In fact, we were introduced to her through physical description. The narrator describes her as “a delicately pale beauty of Erin, dark-haired, slim waisted, and as elegant as might be any natty girl from County Trim” (“Tripping Merrily” 143). His initial impression of the Irish shop girl centered around her appearance: her dark hair, slim waist, elegance, and fashionable style. Because of this, the narrator repeatedly associated Irish shop girl to Erin. She was described initially as a “beauty of Erin” and a “daughter of Erin.” Similarly, the narrator also described the shop girl’s demeanor as generally melancholy, an emotional state often attributed to Erin (“The Four Erins” 75). Because he connected her to the ideal of Erin, he believed that if he expressed his pity for the continued violence in Ireland she would certainly agree and express a more English stance on the Irish “O’Capulet and O’Montague rows.” The figure of Erin influenced the narrator’s perception and mediated his expectations of the Irish shop girl.

However, reality came to correct the narrator’s idealization of the Irish shop girl when she responds. In spite of her delicate beauty that reflects the figure of Erin, her sympathies firmly stood with the Irish people and their actions. The Irish shop girl’s response to his regret that shillelaghs were permitted was “an’ what would the poor Boys use, an’ they not allowed fire-
"TRIPPING MERRILY."

That holiday cruise on board the good steamer Connie Donia! Did I say that it was a fine, fine, fine cruise? or was it a run of the mill? or was it a run of the mill, or was it a run of the mill...? It seems like yesterday or like years ago, and I know it was neither.

"Old Kate’s son’s!--let us say middle-aged KEMP’s ---'work was done' pro tem., and he could not neglect so great an opportunity, or refuse so inviting an invitation as that sent him by Sir Charles CHERIE, the Chairman, to come aboard for the trip, the G.S.S. Connie Donia. So, I middle-aged KEMP, was done as advertised, did then and thereby become TOMMY the Tripper, and, as such, went aboard the gallant SS., unannounced, all-but-the-contrary, nevertheless, and notwithstanding.

And what a goodly company! Sir CHERIE and Lady CHERIE, perfect host and hostess in themselves. Here too was was our TOBY, M.P., waggish as ever. "I am not the son of the owner of guests as 'TOBY'," quoth he. "And why?" I gave it up. "Because, TOBY," he, answering his own question, "I am a free and independent spirit, and there is nothing to be done about it.

The sea air agrees with TOBY, M.P. "And where would the Member for Berkshire be," he asks, "prospecting astern were another and a better puzzle, " but aboard a bonnie bark? My bark," he continues, "may be worse than my life, but--not aboard that". The bugle-call to breakfast sounds, and from ocular evidence I can easily assert, that whatever his bark may be, I will back his bite -- and this without backfiring, of which, as I trust, neither of us is capable -- against that of any two of the three and the strongest, with one eye to the main chance, and another to the corresponding comfort of his opposite, the one never in his steadfast course, as indeed we all, the rest of us, through the hose of toast and butter; over the shallows of eggs;isky through the straits of Kipper and Kurr, with a pleasant time in Hot Tea Bay; then, over the dangerous rocks of Bread and Brownie; lastly, the daily Marmalade Sea, where we ride at anchor and all is well.

From the end, the cigar, or pipe, with conversational accompaniment, what time we pace the quarter-deck. Prospective visions as to probable weather are "taken and offered" by sagacious-eyed guests, who, in a general way, may be supposed from their seagoing costume to "know the ropes". Here is the ever amiable and truly gallant Sir Peter PURLE, looking every inch the ideal yachtsman, as honorary member of the Upper House of Owes and Hyde Piers. Wonderful man Sir Peter! I know everybody, is liked by everybody; has been yachting and sailing and voyaging for any number of years; knows even the smallest waves by night, and, if asked, could probably tell you their names. One day he will write his "Yachtsman".

We anchor off Queenswurt. The estimable, jovial VALERINE ‘Tadhana!’ From the North, must shun about some thrilling knick-knocks the way of memenoes of the war. Instead of "knick-knocks" he lays in a stock of "knock-knacks", yule-tide "shillings", which are serried out to him by a delicately pale beauty of Erin, dark-haired, slim waisted, and as elegant as might be any natty girl from County Trim. She shows us some dozen shillings, and some more, looking, brilliant knobs.

"Boy!" whistles VALERINE YELM, M.P., weighing one of the shillings in his hand. You might get rather a natty cross from this, I agree with him, and this is what I mean: what about this, regards us sadly and sympathetically.

And I eye her with a look wherein admiration is tempered with pity. It occurs to me that I will say something appropriate, just to show her how I, a stranger, and a Saxon, feel for her. It may lead her to think of her friends, and to this end I point to the three deadly fauns with the armed constabulary. So I say, with a touch of deep indignation in my tone. "It's a shame that one can say things as these -- and I nod gravely at the shillings which YELM, M.P., is twirling meditatively, one in each hand, as if right and left were about to light it out!" "It's a shame that one can say things as these should be permitted!"

The pale, and, beautiful daughter of Erin, regards me mournfully, and then, in a tone expressive of astonishment mixed with firm remonstrance, she asks: "En what sound the poor boys use, an' they not allowed fire-arms?"

That was all. No smile is on the lips of Erin's pale daughter. She is apparently in earnest, though both VALERINE and myself, are talking it over subsequently, until opinion that, perhaps, she has been too rarely stopped at, the splendid and unique opportunity of getting at the Saxons.

There are no recommending sticks and photographs, and did a good bit of business with our generous YELM. M.P., who returned, laden with gifts for various of the guests aboard the good SS. Connie Donia.

What amusing nights and delightful days. The ladies dress "em -- all charming, and very Barkisness in their perpetual 'willings' to do anything and everything that might give pleasure and afford amusement. Two fairy-pitched maidens in particular maintain us mightily with a capital dramatic sketch of the constitution; others follow suit, playing the piano; and a sestet perform, without previous preparation, glees, madrigals, part-songs, and choreuses to popular plantation melodies, under the leadership of that masterly musician Tom Torbey, whose only regret is that he has not been able to press his name among those of the Press--of some few thousand pounds, though, as he explains to us, he would have done so, had this musical mammoth been only comparable with the flowers of fifty of our ordinaries, a sestet.

However, a prise orgues, we have with us a representative of one of the greatest organs of the Press--of true saws and modern instances: as jolly as a sandpiper, or rather as a schoolboy out for a holiday. A sailor every inch of him, and this is saying a great deal, as he must be over six feet, and broad in proportion.

Appropriate, too, as absurd "the crust," is the presence of the Grand Secretary, M. Benjamin Biss, A.M., F.G.M., &c., and the still greater, Grander Something Else, P.P.M., &c., SIR JONATHAN JACBI, mysterious officers, Arcades ambo, of the Secret Bites of Masonry, full of nobs, wins, books, wreathed smiles, signs, secrets, fun, frolic, and tales galore.

Ah! the happy days! And the happy evenings! What excellent teas! and returnings of thanks! by my Leicet, M.P., who is Sir Poseidon a Vinzio (President of the Anchorage Court), by MACKERLY (secretary of the Argonautic Firm), to the good ship Connie Donia), and the lightestest speech of all by Sir Charles CHERIE.

Round to Falmouth, up the Fal, "with our Fod, lal, la," as singeth our brilliant sestet to piano, or, to quote Sir JONATHAN, "our P. O.," accompaniment.

Then the seas and the air... But! "hero break we off."

Thus do I briefly make record of a "trial trip," and may no trial than any of you may make, whether involving a trial or not, have expressed results than has this, of which I have been the blind and glorious as it has done--and such be the Connie Donia's fate evermore--I am privileged to write this slight record, and proud to account myself henceforth as

ONE OF THE TRIPERS.
arms?” Although the image caption described her tone as “plaintive,” the story characterized her response very differently. The narrator described her tone as “astonishment blended with firm remonstrance.” Unlike “plaintive,” “remonstrance” denoted a forceful reproach. In this way, the shop girl’s forceful and subversive reaction more closely resembled Biddy’s impertinent attitude than Erin’s melancholy demeanor. In the same way, although her facial expression lacked the contempt captured in Biddy’s, it does seem to express surprise and dissent. Although the Englishmen are left wondering if her response was merely intended to “get at the Saxon,” the Irish shop girl’s response suggested that she not only harbors an insolent temperament but also sympathizes with their “poor boys.” “Tripping Merrily” furthered the portrayal of the Irish woman, who in spite of their attractive appearance, harbored a temperament and sympathies that aligned with the Irish stereotype of rebellion.

One of the most well-studied examples of the violent, simianized Irish stereotypes is John Tenniel’s 1867 “The Fenian Guy Fawkes” (Figure 5). Most of the scholarly attention has been lavished on the titular Fenian Guy Fawkes himself while the Irish woman behind him has received none. However, her inclusion in the cartoon has a lot to say about middle-class English conception of the Irish woman’s role in the ongoing issue of Fenian violence. 1867, the year that “The Fenian Guy Fawkes” was published, was a year that saw an increase in Irish insurrection (Whelehan, xiii). In particular, on the thirteenth of December, just fifteen days before the illustration was published in Punch, a group of Fenians famously bombed the Clerkenwell prison in London in a botched attempt to free the Fenian prisoners being held there (Whelehan 72). With the Fenian threat now striking closer to home, Punch produced a cartoon that not only indicted the Fenian bombers represented by the Fenian Guy Fawkes, but also included a figure of
Figure 5: “The Fenian Guy Fawkes” (Punch, 28 December 1867)
indicted the Fenian bombers represented by the Fenian Guy Fawkes, but also included a figure of a nursing Irish mother. The question therefore becomes is the Irish mother an inevitable victim of the growing threat of Fenian violence or has she too been found guilty in the court of the Victorian periodical press?

On one hand, the Irish mother stood to be among the next victims of the Fenian bombings. As previously mentioned, even in the heightened world of satirical cartoons there existed a relative sympathy for the “Loyal Irish” among Punch’s artists (Apes and Angels 37). The Irish mother’s proximity to the Fenian agitator’s gunpowder plot might remind the audience that innocents among the Irish, in this case represented by women and children, would also be obliterated by the continued Fenian violence. The Irish mother could also be associated to some extent with the idealized figure of Erin. Like Erin, the representation of the Irish woman as a nursing mother certainly plays into a larger trope of vulnerable femininity (“The Four Erins” 86). This may further align the Irish mother with an innocent and pitiable contingent in need of English protection.

Although this reading would suggest that the artists encouraged sympathy be extended toward the Irish woman, the cartoon did not definitively label her blameless. Although her vulnerable femininity aligned her with Erin, the Irish mother’s reaction to the Fenian menace was entirely unlike that of Erin. While Erin habitually fainted towards the nearest English protector in her appearances in Punch, the Irish mother appeared entirely unfazed by the destructive madman in her midst. In this way, her vulnerable nursing acted as her own indictment – she was so comfortable with the Fenian threat that she was able regularly attend to her youngest child. The deviation from the representations of Erin’s plea for paternalistic protection suggested that the Irish mother may not be so innocent after all.
In the same way, the Irish mother fails to live up to the domestic ideal dictated by the English middle-class. To begin with, the Irish fecundity that the nursing mother represented its own threat to English authority for the middle-class English audience. The audience’s perception of Irish families would likely have been influenced by the reputation of Irish emigrants in England’s large towns and cities. Irish emigrant communities were invariably characterized as not only filthy and immoral, but also rapidly expanding (Davis 130, Swift 264). Therefore, the audience would associate the Irish family less with domestic bliss and more with the implicit threat of an expanding Irish population in both England and Ireland. Furthermore, the children surrounding the Fenian Guy Fawkes were fascinated, not terrified, by him. The boy on the righthand side of the cartoon, whose face is the most visible and detailed of the children, seemed particularly impressed as he gazes up at the wild bomber. Therefore, the interest that the Irish children lavish on the Fenian Guy Fawkes suggested that the children represent Fenians and Irish Nationalists in the making, not victims. The responsibility, however, was not leveled at the children. Instead, according to the values of the Victorian middle-class, the mother became the guilty party. The mother’s duty involved caring for her children. In this case, that certainly would have involved steering them away from the homicidal maniac. By allowing them to continue staring in admiration at the Fenian Guy Fawkes, the Irish mother seemed to be enabling them to idolize him. In this way, the Irish mother with the baby at her breast is indicted for producing the next generation of Fenian agitators.

The figure of the Irish woman received a distinct but unmistakably anti-Irish treatment in *Punch*. Although she lacked the immediately recognizable, derisive physical characteristics of the Irish man, the Irish woman harbored an impertinent attitude and rebellious sympathies that defied her attractive appearance. The incongruous characteristics of the Irish woman rendered
her separate from her English counterparts. Her deceptive Irishness also reified the English attitude that the Irish require supervision to keep both the rabble-rousing Fenians and their insolent wives, mothers, and sisters in line. While this pattern of representation speaks to one dominant trend in the Victorian periodical press, the figure of the Irish woman can hardly be confined to a single stereotype. Further analysis of *Punch* and other satirical publications of its ilk stand to uncover more subversively threatening depictions comparable to the deceptively attractive Irish woman as the Victorian periodical press sought to diffuse their own anxieties about the Irish woman through humor.
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