

*The Case of 'A Late Student':
Pictorial Satire
in Jacksonian America*

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HAVING RUN TWO of a series of three anti-Van Buren caricatures in the heat of the 1832 presidential campaign, Duff Green's Washington campaign newspaper, the *United States Telegraph Extra*, found itself forced to defend the use of pictorial satire.¹ The 'conscientious scruples' of 'pure and independent' men whose opinions he respected, rather than opposition outrage, led Green to discuss the 'propriety' of political cartooning. The editor vociferously justified printing the drawings in the name of 'freedom of thought and speech.' He contended that pictorial satire stood 'precisely on the same ground as that of written satire.' While drawing might be more 'impressive and forcible,' it was a fair weapon so long as the truth was presented. 'It is the *truth* which makes the ridicule, and not the representation,' Green believed. 'Ridicule' was, after all, 'a fair weapon when fairly used.' For those who thought that public officials ought to be exempt from 'this species of warfare,' Green countered that in England pictorial

¹*United States Telegraph Extra*, No. 9 (Oct. 8, 1832), 142-143; the caricatures were published in the *Extra*, No. 3 (Sept. 17, 1832), 33; No. 6 (Sept. 27, 1832), 81; and No. 11 (Oct. 11, 1832), 161. This was a political campaign newspaper issued irregularly from Sept. 2 through Oct. 23, 1832. It is not listed in Winifred Gregory, ed., *American Newspapers 1821-1936* (New York, 1937). It was an offshoot of Duff Green's *United States' Telegraph*. The daily edition of the parent paper is cited in subsequent footnotes. Another edition was published triweekly during sessions of Congress and semiweekly at other times. See Gregory, *American Newspapers*, p. 93.

satire formed 'part and portion of the people's armory' and had 'often and successfully' been used against 'actions of tyranny and corruption.'²

In Green's view 'the enemies of the people' had no right to decide the mode of attack to be used against them. They should expect both 'the galling fire and the small arms of satire' and 'the heavy artillery of grave argument.' 'We will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,' his paper boldly editorialized, 'but we will tell it how we please.' The voice of truth would be heard, whether it spoke 'in the solemn tones and scholastic manner of syllogistic reasoning, or in the cutting language of satire . . . in words or in graphic delineations.'³

Despite such lofty sentiments, the *Telegraph* staff did not always hold pictorial satire in such high regard. Just one presidential campaign earlier, Russell Jarvis, the newly appointed co-editor of the publication, took a markedly different view of such artistic endeavors. A lawyer, who had studied under Tapping Reeve, Jarvis was known as 'a gentleman of talents' and a 'champion of the *people's rights*.'⁴ Despite the precaution Daniel Webster normally observed when using the public mails, somehow Jarvis managed to intercept a letter addressed to him from John Agg of the *Washington National Journal*.⁵ In that letter Agg informed the senator that he was sending him a caricature under separate cover which he wished a Mr. Child would get David Claypool Johnston to engrave. Agg hoped to have the drawing published and 'a hundred of them'

²*United States Telegraph Extra*, No. 9 (Oct. 8, 1832), 142-143.

³*United States Telegraph Extra*, No. 9 (Oct. 8, 1832), 142-143.

⁴Samuel Flagg Bemis, 'The Scuffle in the Rotunda: A Footnote to the Presidency of John Quincy Adams and to the History of Dueling,' *American Foreign Policy and the Blessings of Liberty* (New Haven and London, 1962), p. 281; Philadelphia *United States Gazette*, Dec. 12, 1827; Frankfort, Ky., *Argus of Western America*, Dec. 26, 1827.

⁵John Agg to Daniel Webster, Washington, Oct. 30, 1827, The Papers of Daniel Webster, microfilm edn. (Dartmouth College Library and University Microfilms), reel 6. A copy of the original letter can be found in the Russell Jarvis Papers, Library of Congress.

"The Crack'd Joke"

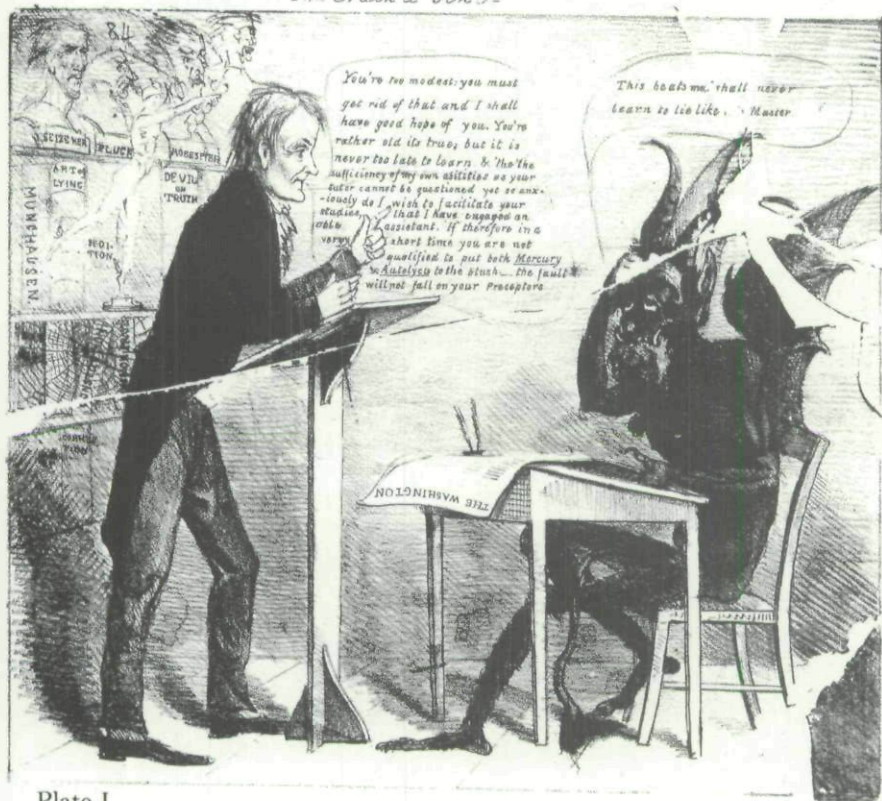


Plate I

A LATE STUDENT

sent to him in Washington.⁶ The cartoon depicted Duff Green teaching the devil to lie, and it bore the title 'A Late Student.'⁷ (See Plate I.) As Jarvis recalled it, the artist made Green advise the demon that though he was old it was 'never too late to learn.' 'If I cannot teach you alone,' Green continued, 'I have

⁶Agg to Webster, Washington, Oct. 30, 1827, Webster Papers, reel 6. 'Mr. Child' is probably David Lee Child, who edited an anti-Jackson publication in Boston.

⁷Malcolm Johnson dates this drawing '183-?' in his *David Claypool Johnston, American Graphic Humorist, 1798-1865* [Worcester and Boston, 1970], p. 33. The drawing is listed under 'cartoons for which dates' were 'not ascertained' in Frank Weitenkamp, *Political Caricature in the United States in Separately Published Cartoons: An Annotated List* (New York, 1953), p. 171. 'A Late Student' (Plate I) is from the collections of the American Antiquarian Society.

lately engaged an assistant, and both of us will surely succeed.'⁸ That assistant was Russell Jarvis.

Enraged by the content of the cartoon, Jarvis, a native of Boston, sought out David Claypool Johnston.⁹ Johnston, whom some called an 'American Hogarth,' had 'a perfect perception of the ludicrous.'¹⁰ He had already stung Jacksonian sensibilities with an engraving entitled 'Symptoms of a Locked Jaw.'¹¹ Confronted by Jarvis, the unsuspecting Johnston readily showed him the drawing and offered to explain its meaning to him. Upon hearing the description, Jarvis revealed his identity and threatened the artist with 'severe personal chastisement.' Johnston wished 'no difficulties.' He claimed that he had been 'merely employed to engrave the picture.' Although the stone was already in the possession of the lithographers, Johnston offered to omit the portion which referred to Jarvis. Unsatisfied, the new editor of the *Telegraph* 'immediately visited' the shop of John and William Pendleton, lithographers, to prevent publication 'of the whole' cartoon.¹²

What actually happened in the office of the men who pioneered lithography in America is open to conjecture.¹³ Both parties in the dispute told different stories in the public press. They did agree on one count: during his visit to the printers Jarvis had damaged the stone upon which 'A Late Student' was drawn. Jarvis reported his version of the story with all the excitement of a modern soap opera. The new *Telegraph* editor contended that the Pendletons, like Johnston, did not recognize him. One of the brothers purportedly explained the content and intent of the drawing in answer to his queries. Jarvis

⁸Russell Jarvis to the *United States' Telegraph*, Boston, Dec. 10, 1827, in the *Telegraph*, Dec. 15, 1827. See Plate I for the correct wording.

⁹Jarvis letter, *United States' Telegraph*, Dec. 15, 1827.

¹⁰Boston *Bulletin*, quoted in the *United States Gazette*, country edn., March 24, 1829.

¹¹John Sullivan, 'Jackson Caricatured: Two Historical Errors,' *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXXI (Spring 1972), 39-44, deals with two of Johnston's best known anti-Jacksonian drawings, 'Symptoms of a Locked Jaw' and 'Richard III,' and corrects errors in the Weitenkampf list regarding their publication.

¹²Jarvis letter, *United States' Telegraph*, Dec. 15, 1827.

¹³Harry T. Peters, *America On Stone* (Garden City, N.Y., 1931), p. 312.

'immediately threatened' both of them in order to stop the caricature from being issued. One brother supposedly cautioned the newsman not to 'repeat' the threat. Jarvis did, several times, in order to leave 'no doubt' as to his intentions. Discerning 'no disposition to desist from the publication' of 'A Late Student,' Jarvis claimed that he 'deliberately seized and effectually demolished *the plate, the whole plate, and nothing but the plate.*' A scuffle then took place. 'Unarmed and single-handed,' Jarvis took on 'an unprincipled coalition' consisting of the two Pendletons and their assistant. Jarvis thought himself 'in somewhat *straitened circumstances*' when one of the 'courageous' Pendletons pinioned his arms so that the other one could 'beat' him at leisure. As 'no embargo had been laid' on his feet, the newsman kicked at his assailants. With what must have been the best of high-flown, nineteenth-century style, or the result of a highly inflated ego, Jarvis described the struggle as one of 'power against right.' In facing such odds, he recalled, 'I was somewhat like Sancho among the staff carriers; yet, being the advocate of a Military Chieftain, and having held a military commission, which I keep carefully locked up, as did Gil Blas his patent of nobility, I felt bound, like the New England Gentlemen in Congress, in 1800, "*to come out and take the risk of civil war.*"' After a brief tussle, however, Jarvis 'retreated like Xenophon thro' the enemy's country,' still 'unhurt and undisordered,' satisfied that he had both '*cracked their joke, and the ribs of one of them,*' judging 'from a kick which sent him staggering among the fragments of the tables.'¹⁴

Although less spectacular, the Pendleton brothers' account was as open to question as the Jarvis story. The printers explained that Johnston had acquired a stone from them 'in the ordinary way of business' a few days earlier. An hour after it had been returned with the design in question upon it, but before the brothers 'understood the intention of the drawing,' or had decided anything regarding it, 'a respectable *looking*

¹⁴Jarvis letter, *United States' Telegraph*, Dec. 15, 1827.

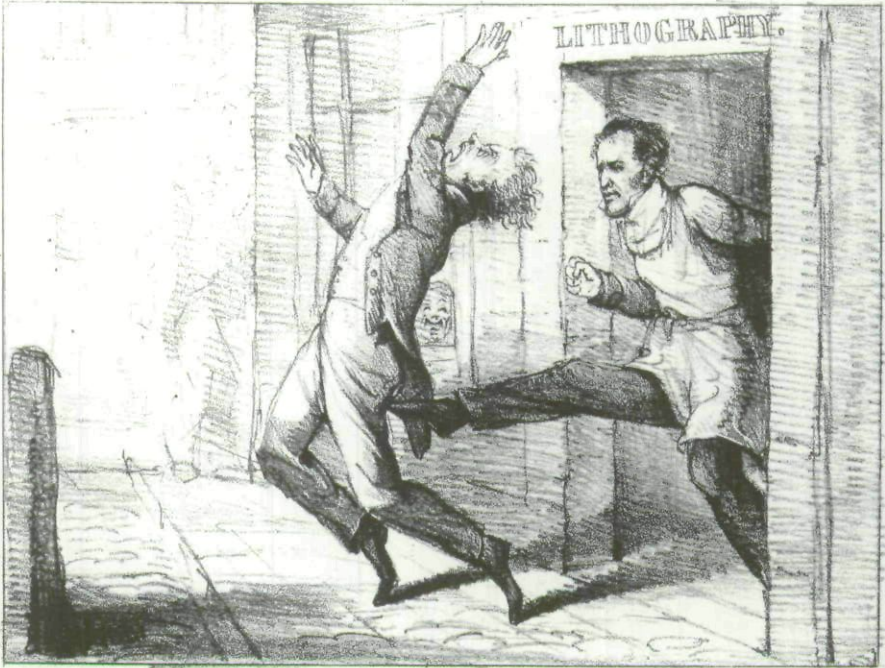


Plate II *Xenophon's retreat out of the Enemy's country.*

person called to see it.' That person was Russell Jarvis. The brothers showed him the stone and read the inscription to him at his request. When the Pendletons claimed that they could not identify Duff Green's assistant, Jarvis announced that he was the one satirized. Jarvis then damaged the stone in a 'whirlwind of passion' despite the Pendletons' plea that they were unfamiliar with the drawing and 'in no way interested in its publication.' The brothers immediately put Jarvis 'out of doors.' 'As to *broken ribs and spirited defence,*' the brothers noted, 'Mr. Jarvis had too much care for his health to offer any such personal violence, or to do any damage that a few shillings would not repair.'¹⁵

Jarvis's attack and his pretensions about the great victory he had scored for the people did not intimidate the Pendletons. They repaired the damage done to 'A Late Student' and issued

¹⁵Letter from the Pendletons, Dec. 21, 1827, in Boston *Patriot*, reprinted in Boston *Columbian Centinel*, Dec. 29, 1827.

it under the heading 'the *Cracked Joke*.'¹⁶ (Plate I.) John and William Pendleton published yet another caricature. (Plate II.) 'Xenophon's retreat *out* of the Enemy's country' featured one of the Pendletons kicking Jarvis out the door of their business establishment. Like the first drawing, this work came from the skilled hand of David Claypool Johnston.¹⁷

Although he did not admit publicly that either of these two caricatures had been published, Jarvis did not let matters rest. In his initial exposé of the set-to with the Pendletons, Jarvis had attempted to make the most of Daniel Webster's connection with the 'dirty job.' Senators should make laws for 'the good government of Society,' the newsman had charged, not 'aid in their violation' by helping 'to libel a fellow citizen by abusive pictures!'¹⁸ On January 3, 1828, the *Telegraph* editor devoted three columns to Webster's character. He again reminded readers that the senator had aided in 'the publication of a base and scurrilous libel.' Since Webster did not answer the charge he must be guilty, Jarvis contended. In possession of a copy of the Agg-Webster letter, the newsman obviously hoped the senator would respond. If he did, Jarvis reported, he would 'meet him publicly with PROOF—*clear, decisive, incontrovertible* PROOF.'¹⁹ Webster would not be drawn out; he believed that if Jacksonians could not find 'just ground' for complaint against administration leaders, they would surely create it.²⁰ Webster's friends likewise refused to respond to the 'vile effusion' from the editor's pen. They held Jarvis 'below contempt.'²¹ In late February Jarvis again rebuked Webster for combining 'with the scum of Piccadilly, the refuse, the

¹⁶ Augusta, Maine, *Kennebec Journal*, Jan. 4, 1828.

¹⁷ Peters, *America On Stone*, p. 322. The drawing (Plate II) is from the collections of the American Antiquarian Society. Johnson, *Johnston*, p. 33, dates it '183-?'; Weitenkamp does not list the caricature.

¹⁸ Jarvis letter, *United States' Telegraph*, Dec. 15, 1827.

¹⁹ *United States' Telegraph*, Jan. 3, 1828.

²⁰ Daniel Webster to [John Agg], Boston, Oct. 25, 1827, Webster Papers, reel 6. The original can be found in the Webster Papers, Dartmouth College Library.

²¹ Gerry Fairbanks to Daniel Webster, Boston, March 12, 1828, Webster Papers, reel 6. The original is housed with the Webster Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society.

outcast from the vermin of Grub-street, to fabricate obscene and scurril[ous] jests upon a fellow citizen.'²²

Pressing political and personal matters soon turned the attention of both of the *Telegraph* editors away from Webster's character and political caricature. In the House of Representatives an important debate raged over the tariff. There, too, the general's opponents sought to exploit the affair of six militiamen whom Jackson had supposedly ordered executed during the War of 1812. The newsmen also found themselves faced with the task of preparing an *Extra* to run for the duration of the presidential campaign. They did, however, have time to concern themselves with matters of personal honor. In late January Duff Green tweaked the nose and pulled the ears of fellow newsman Vernon Sparhawk because of comments he had made about the senior editor of the *Telegraph* in a letter to the *New York American*.²³ His action led anti-Jacksonians to recall Jarvis's trip to the Pendletons in Boston. These attacks, in the opinion of one editor, were but 'a small foretaste of the Jackson reign.' 'We expect soon to hear of the senators themselves dirking, biting and gouging each other.'²⁴ Following the example of his editorial colleague, Russell Jarvis tweaked the nose of an even more important opponent, President Adams's son.²⁵ This newest outrage brought forth even more editorial comment from Jackson's opponents regarding the downfall of a nation under military rule. Recognizing the political power of the *Telegraph* editors, Vernon Sparhawk told his readers that nothing would come of a congressional investigation of the Jarvis-Adams affair. He charged that Jacksonian leaders considered such an investigation 'a mere matter of sport'; one of them spent much of his time asking how the 'Nose committee' was doing.²⁶

²²*United States' Telegraph*, Feb. 27, 1828.

²³*United States' Telegraph*, Feb. 1, 1828; *United States Gazette*, Feb. 1, 1828.

²⁴*Kennebec Journal*, Feb. 8 and 15, 1828; *United States Gazette*, Feb. 1, 1828.

²⁵Bemis, 'Scuffle in the Rotunda,' pp. 279-288.

²⁶Letter to the *New York American*, May 17, 1828, in the *Columbus Ohio State Journal*, June 5, 1828.

While the Jarvis-Adams affair gained more publicity than the editor's earlier tussle with Johnston and the Pendletons, in some ways the first encounter was both more interesting and more significant historically. It raised not only the question of freedom of expression in an age when newsmen preferred to handle editorial libel with the pistol and the whip, it also introduced the problem of the acceptability of satire as a legitimate mode of proof in Jacksonian America. It is significant that of the large number of political caricatures which appeared during the general's two terms in office, only a few supported the Tennessean's cause. Certainly the absence of such drawings cannot be explained by lack of party organization or support. While it might be plausible that the majority of the engraving community opposed Jackson's candidacy, if several caricatures supporting his cause could be circulated then so could a large variety. One likewise need only read the newspapers of the period to recognize the relatively heavy use of fictional forms for proof in the anti-Jackson press as compared to the journals devoted to the general. Adams men, not supporters of the Hero of New Orleans, relied on hypothetical discussions between Washington and Jefferson to support their candidate. Nor was the Jarvis outrage an isolated incident. At least two other drawings by David Claypool Johnston merited some form of censorship from Jacksonians.²⁷ Indeed the literal interpretation placed on the most famous of the satirical pieces employed in the 1828 campaign, the Harris 'forgery,' typified the Jacksonian attitude toward this form of argument.²⁸ Their refusal or inability to deal with such works of 'imagination' led one anti-Jacksonian to ask if one must write out 'this is irony' in capitals before the Tennessean's friends could comprehend such an attack. Jacksonians, he concluded, had to be 'illiterate'

²⁷Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, Sept. 7, 1828; Johnson, *Johnston*, pp. 11-12.

²⁸This letter such as 'might' have been written to Andrew Jackson by John Harris, one of the six militiamen the general ordered put to death near the end of the War of 1812, appeared first in the Philadelphia *Democratic Press*, June 2, 1827. It caused an outrage among Jackson's followers.

as well as 'stupid' not to understand the nature of such an attack; they probably would have denounced *Gulliver's Travels* as a forgery had they read it.²⁹

While their evident distaste for political satire does not mean that Jackson's followers were devoid of humor, it does indicate something about the way they viewed the process of persuasion. Those who placed a premium on the people's ability to discover the truth had little regard for sophisticated argumentative forms. The man of action, not the man of words or of the brush, was most admirable in their world view. Caricature distorted the reality Jacksonians professed to admire. It is ironic, however, that these same men could create a larger-than-life view of their own hero and yet neither anticipate, appreciate, nor understand that the very image which they created forced their opponents to find ways to counteract it.

²⁹Letters from a 'Fellow Citizen' in the Lexington *Kentucky Reporter*, Sept. 12, 1827, and March 26, 1828.

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