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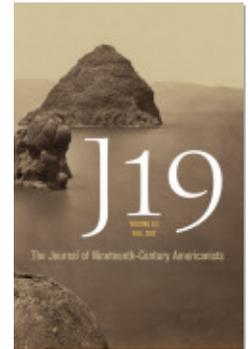
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“I Can Dig It”: Kate Beaton’s C19 Punch Lines

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When I was in graduate school, one of my friends affixed a Herman Melville finger puppet to her desk, alongside two hand-made speech bubbles proclaiming: “I would prefer not to” and “unless it’s with Nathaniel.” I loved it. It evoked a delight in the literature we studied, so nerdy as to cross into a kind of fan fiction. The sexual innuendo and diminutive puppet form of Melville refused to take this canonical writer too seriously. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that my friend took him seriously enough to entwine his familiar words with old jokes about his desire for Hawthorne. I was reminded of her finger-puppet tableau recently, while rereading some of my favorite comics about nineteenth-century culture. In retrospect, the resemblance is striking. The comics that I geek out on likewise convey their charming fascination with the past through concise, unexpected juxtapositions: of word and image, highbrow cultural references and lowbrow scatological humor, “silly” form and “serious” historical subject. While many of these texts are as delightfully impertinent as my friend’s finger-puppet sex jokes, comics’ cultural capital has grown with new scholarship and museum exhibits. Thus I face little pressure to justify why I study and teach this work. And like the Melville fan-art, sharing comics with colleagues and students creates new occasions to compare notes about our fixations on particular texts and the histories they portray.

Over the last decade, diverse comics artists have earned popular and critical acclaim, in part, by revisiting the nineteenth century. Rewritings of this era range from Kyle Baker’s superhero-inspired *Nat Turner* (2005) to Sydney Padua’s steampunk take on *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage* (2015). Like the Classics Illustrates Series and other twentieth-century comics that rewrote canonical literature, the newer works presume this genre offers an engaging way to reflect on the past. Further, recent comics reconsider whom we remember and how we tell their stories. My favorite of these works, and the subject of this essay, is the Canadian artist Kate Beaton’s webcomic *Hark! A Vagrant*.¹ Beaton’s comics, which satirize everything from Henry VIII to today’s media, include witty depictions of such American political and literary figures as Ben Franklin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ida B.

Wells. Her delightfully abundant depictions of nineteenth-century culture not only insist that readers recognize this past as influential and generative but also invite us to laugh at it.

Beaton expresses a critical attachment to the nineteenth century. That is to say, she evinces a fascination with the era that attunes her to its foibles and flaws. In turn, readers can feel a nerdy affinity for this critical attachment. To be a nerd is, in the most positive sense, to express love for a niche cultural text and become its proselyte, striving to share this object's pleasures with others.² Beaton's comics exude affection for historical and literary figures through her wordplay and "nudge nudge" style of innuendo. Beyond converting new audiences who lack prior investment in nineteenth-century culture, *Hark! A Vagrant* evokes a second layer of pleasure for readers who are history or literature buffs. We get to identify with Beaton as someone who shares our proclivities. Reading these comics is like drinking beer with a friend; it's intoxicating to savor things together. Or rather, reading Beaton's work is like tasting beers with a friend who shares my preferences, for sours and saisons, and who has fun talking about what she's drinking without sounding snooty. Beaton's comics let me revel in my particular tastes, while resisting assumptions that fixation on the nineteenth century is necessarily snobbish.

My point here—in suggesting that I like Beaton's work because I identify with her—isn't to offer a backhanded compliment. It's thanks to her wit and expressive drawing that these comics are a seductive love letter to the long nineteenth century. Beaton makes a compelling case that this period is surprising, delightful, and absurdly disturbing. Indeed, *Hark! A Vagrant* both conveys the humor of this era and demonstrates the appeal of comics' form, as Beaton deploys its conventions to blur boundaries between past and present. In interviews, she notes her twentieth-century influences, including newspaper strips like *Peanuts* and *Foxtrot*.³ *Hark! A Vagrant* models itself on their structure of set-up, beat, and punch line, which Beaton repurposes to depict historical figures and narratives. Further, she uses comics' interplay of words and images to interweave depictions of the past (e.g., drawings of characters in period dress) with reminders that she is writing from the present (especially apparent in her dialogue). This holds particular charm for scholars who experience the jarring dissonance and resonance of these periods as we spend our days toggling between the nineteenth century and the present.

"Founding Fathers (in a Mall)" works through the three-beat comic format to create the temporal disruption its title promises. "Shoe Laces,"



Figure 1. Kate Beaton, "Shoe Laces," from "Founding Fathers (in a Mall)," *Hark! A Vagrant*, Web Comic.

one of several strips composing this short series, rewrites the relation between past and present by placing Ben Franklin near a food court. The first panel provides the set-up, giving readers a moment to recognize Franklin and observe him; the gutter serves as the beat where we can anticipate his reaction to this setting; and the second panel delivers the punch line as we witness his pleasure. The familiar structure defamiliarizes Franklin, in effect wresting him from the domain of serious historical study through her mash-up of history and pop culture.

The absurdity of "Shoe Laces," in which a breeches-wearing Franklin eats McDonald's, conveys the fun of playing with closure in comics. Scott McCloud contends that closure—the idea that readers must fill in the gutters (or spaces) between panels—is one of the genre's key mechanisms because it engages us.⁴ At times, readers create closure reflexively. Artists can guide how we fill in the blanks between panels to move us fluidly forward through the narrative or from setting to setting. Yet artists can also leave the transitions between panels ambiguous, instead inviting us to dwell on where the story is going. Beaton's "Shoe Laces" uses a simple moment-to-moment transition: in the first panel, Franklin takes in the world around him, in the second panel he reacts. The narrative unfolds succinctly. Yet Beaton also delays closure here: she disorders chronology by locating the eighteenth-century figure in present-day surroundings. The strip suggests that comics engage readers in the work of creating closure not only across panels (as McCloud argues) but also through unexpected juxtapositions within panels. We must decide what these images of different eras have to do with one another if we want to

understand why the mall, which Franklin observes in the first panel, elicits his endorsement in the second panel.

Comics that resist an immediate sense of closure can frustrate readers. We see this, for instance, in the recent rom-com *People, Places, Things*, about a graphic novelist/professor struggling with divorce.⁵ In a lesson on closure, the protagonist juxtaposes two panels from his own novel: an image of a couple kissing and a pile of bricks. The lack of obvious transition between the successive panels elicits a student's complaint that they "just seem random." Yet if we like playing with such gaps, and if we trust there will be a pay-off, this "randomness" can be less exasperating than diverting. In the professor's graphic novel, we eventually see the connection between the couple and the bricks, which suggest the metaphoric walls he and his ex-wife have built between them. (Thankfully, no one in the movie explains this aloud.) Meanwhile, in reading "Shoe Laces," my desire to be in on Beaton's joke (to create closure) tempts me to imagine what links eighteenth-century history to contemporary pop culture. And her depiction of Franklin starts to seem delightfully apt.

The comic's absurdity becomes funnier because we can make sense of it. Given Franklin's entrepreneurial prowess and reputation for sexual "errata," it's fitting that in "Shoe Laces" he enjoys the mall's wealth of stores and bizarrely sexualized advertising. Perhaps he loves Cinnabon's pastries even more than eighteenth-century Philadelphia's cheap puffy rolls. His one short line, "I can dig it," builds in yet more temporal play. The eighteenth-century man speaks in twentieth-century slang that dislocates him from his moment but is nonetheless dated today. Beaton re-imagines Franklin as a middle-aged man who still speaks in the language of "his" youth. Implying that he would fit comfortably into the present doesn't entail celebrating him as ahead of his time. Instead, Beaton likens this mildly lascivious consumer to his present-day, middle-aged counterparts. Satirizing the founding fathers is, ultimately, not all that different from making fun of one's own dad.

As "Founding Fathers (in a Mall)" suggests, Beaton blurs the past and present not only to evince fascination with this history but also to poke fun at it. Beaton's comics more typically leave historical persons and literary characters in their own cultural settings. Still, her form, particularly her characters' use of anachronistic language, entwines the historical and contemporary. Thus Beaton doesn't strive to master the past through meticulous attention to historical accuracy, like an Oscar-bait historical drama. Instead, she invokes comics' association with

popular culture to deflate any sense of gravitas. Even as Beaton's comics resist heroic narratives of America, though, these depictions also speak to comics' own shifting status.⁶ Texts ranging from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* have established the genre's potential to rethink cultural memories through complex allusions. These changes position *Hark! A Vagrant* to reconsider the relation between our cultural moment and the nineteenth century.

Recently, when I gave a paper on Beaton, a Canadian scholar in the audience said she wondered whether American readers realize Beaton is "trolling" us. If I'm representative of Beaton's American readers, I'd say we don't. Or rather, I'd argue we're not being trolled. It may be because, again, I want to be in on the joke, but my sense is that these comics don't so much troll as tease; whereas trolls conventionally dupe their targets into expressing outrage, Beaton prods us to laugh at our past. Much as identifying with her interest in the nineteenth century can be gratifying, so too can we enjoy the dis-identification of being teased. In making fun of grandiose national narratives, "Founding Fathers (in a Mall)" still recognizes American and early Americanist interests. Reading these comics is like watching the pilot of the legal thriller *Damages*: when Rose Byrne's character quotes Emily Dickinson, Glenn Close's character replies, "That bitch will say anything."⁷ There's pleasure in seeing historical figures mocked: the impish refusal to laud them is also a refusal to ignore them. Beaton's irreverence reminds me of what I find appealing about the past and why I'm so tempted to make fun of it.

In one of my favorite series, Beaton models comics' interest in and resistance to elite literary culture via an eight-strip satire of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." These strips presume that the popular genre has something to say to canonical literature: in this case, to Hawthorne's portrait of a young Puritan whose struggle with temptation leads him to read sin in his wife, church, and village. The first strip in the series ridicules Hawthorne's penchant for symbolism as a "bit on the nose."

By inviting us to laugh at the obviousness of Faith's name and the devil's serpent staff, "Welcome to My Allegory" asks how reading Hawthorne shapes our understanding of literature. Beaton addresses this question in brief remarks that appear below the series, which serve as a combination of artist's statement and endnotes. She confesses, "I used to think that for literature to be REAL it pretty well had to be chock-full of allegory and symbols." And she wonders how many students "have had to read this and suffer essays over the pink ribbons and



Figure 2. Kate Beaton, "Welcome to My Allegory," from "Young Goodman Brown," *Hark! A Vagrant*, Web Comic.

etc." The simple, colloquial diction of the dialogue and commentary pokes fun at Hawthorne's elaborate aesthetics in the very act of acknowledging his formative influence.

Indeed, Hawthorne's long-standing influence puts the "fun" in making fun of him. While Beaton conveys the frustrations of student readers through her anti-authoritarian critique, her challenge to Hawthorne also resonates with scholarship on the canon that critiques its tendency to narrow readers' understanding of "REAL literature." Notably, she frames this point as a self-deprecating joke about her younger self's naive ideas of art, which invites us to laugh not only at Hawthorne but also at her and even our younger selves, if we relate to her.

Thus Beaton's light-hearted satire doesn't elevate her own work over that of Hawthorne. In "Faith Will Save Me," she does replace his complex, formal description of Brown's temptations with the simplistic explanation that Brown "was just looking for a *little* evil." Brown hoped that "maybe [he'd] see a boob??" Her contemporary slang mocks Brown for his hypocrisy, while belittling his existential crisis via this banal expression of his desires. Yet the strip doesn't imply that comics' informal language makes for better art. Rather, Beaton's comedy depends on the contrast between her crass expression of sexual desire and Hawthorne's dense, ironic depiction of Brown's experiences. There's a cheekiness in the choice to retell Hawthorne's allegory via boob jokes that plays on simplistic notions of the differences between comics (as more crass or colorful) and literature (as more refined or stodgy) to undo such distinctions.

Beaton's informal, direct language resonates with her visual style. Her use of cartoony images—particularly the abstracted depictions of settings and caricatured facial expressions—likewise suggests levity. For example, she seems to have drawn Brown's mouth, nose, and eyebrows

with just one pen stroke each, while the shading of the forest backdrop peaks outside its outlines. Her style hints that the strips were produced quickly and thus evokes a disarming sense of immediacy (even as these inked drawings attest to her artistic skill). We may feel like we're privy to reading something hot off the artist's desk. And the lively informality of her style is all the more appealing when juxtaposed with Hawthorne's elaborate aesthetics. Beaton's re-envisioning of "Young Goodman Brown" thus reminds us that resistant readings of Hawthorne may foster enthusiasm for his work. She even notes that she wrote these strips following a trip to Salem, which left her "pumped on Hawthorne."

What's more, Beaton's readiness to delight in and mock canonical figures has garnered readers' enthusiasm for her own work. Her two collections from *Drawn & Quarterly* set up camp on the *New York Times* bestsellers' list, and her comics feature in the *New Yorker* and the *Guardian*. Though scholars have yet to publish on Beaton, she has developed a following among general readers and academics alike.⁸ Her growing audience and comics' increasing cachet let Beaton turn her readers' attention to less familiar historical and literary figures.

Beaton's representations of understudied figures—including her short series "Ida B. Wells"—offer new reasons to love her work. The Wells series likewise draws on the familiar comics structure to juxtapose images of historical figures with contemporary dialogue. In this case, Beaton deploys anachronism to celebrate Wells's resistance to nineteenth-century tradition, particularly to social conventions that upheld and masked anti-black racism. There's still an anti-authoritarian appeal to the comics. We see this, for example, in "The People's Grocery," as Beaton alludes to the Memphis lynching that prompted some of Wells's most incisive editorials. As in earlier comics, Beaton evokes the pleasures of the unexpected. Yet whereas her founding fathers comics surprise readers with Beaton's impertinent readiness to tease national "heroes," the "Ida B. Wells" series emphasizes the activist's own resistance to propriety. Beaton's strips convey Wells's determination to write in direct, provocative prose about rape and culturally sanctioned murder. Further, Beaton captures how Wells can startle us when we revisit history, how her expressions of resistance may elicit unanticipated delight in the midst of contemplating lynching's horrors.

"The People's Grocery," like "Shoe Laces," locates humor in contrast. Over the course of three panels, Beaton traces a shift in Well's emotions, from her initial grief at her friends' deaths to introspection and determination to contest lynching. The strip's compressed structure



Figure 3. Kate Beaton, "The People's Grocery," from "Ida B. Wells," *Hark! A Vagrant*, Web Comic.

not only relays these feelings in quick succession, thereby emphasizing Wells's radical activism, but also mimics her commanding tone and refusal to mince words. Beaton further underscores Wells's magnetism by juxtaposing her actions with her more anxious companion's reaction. While he shares her initial grief, her desire to write engenders his fear: "I can't believe we need four coffins?" Whereas Wells is direct, her frightened companion's "black" humor leaves it to readers to infer that the fourth coffin could be for her. Getting the joke requires us to reflect on the nearly absurd courage Wells's writing required. In contrast to her companion's expression of terror, she evokes power as she gazes outward from the foreground of the panel. Even the letters in her speech bubble are larger and more authoritative, marking her as the hero of this narrative. "The People's Grocery" invites readers to delight in her challenge to oppression, as Wells refuses to enact demure, Victorian femininity.

In "March on Washington," Beaton again creates an interplay of contemporary and historical references to celebrate Wells's activism. Here Beaton focuses on the obstacles Wells faced in her efforts to support women's suffrage. The three panels portray a white suffrage leader's attempt to exclude Wells from the movement. The white woman informs Ida, "You can join the suffrage parade, but like, in the back. The very back. Or the next day? Or not at all?" Beaton punctuates her character's statements with question marks. This syntax suggests she is speaking in "up talk," when the pitch of one's voice goes up at the end of a sentence to signal a question or hesitation. Notably, this character's up talk is a form of prevarication through which she tries (and fails) to conceal the movement's exclusionary tactics. Even readers unfamiliar with this history can recognize that her up talk signals her obfuscation. Likewise, when the character insists "we don't want to make it a race thing," readers can enjoy being in on the irony, as her efforts to exclude Wells forcefully

attest that the suffrage march is about race. Wells's flat rebuttal—"Yeah it sounds like a race thing"—is vastly more persuasive.

Beaton aligns readers with Wells through not only the dialogue but also the contemporary visual rhetoric of comics, particularly the use of exaggerated, abstract faces. According to McCloud, part of comics' appeal lies in this simplification of faces to abstracted representations, which encourages us to see ourselves in these images. In contrast to photorealistic representations, he argues, cartoons call less attention to characters' differences from ourselves (38). Beaton's use of this familiar cartoon style to invite identification with Wells is striking, given comics' long history of deploying abstraction in racial caricatures not to foster identification but to dehumanize African Americans.⁹ Further, Beaton's strips can let us make a more nuanced version of McCloud's claim, as she demonstrates how abstraction can direct readers to identify with some characters over others. We see this, for instance, through the characters' eyes in "March on Washington." The white suffrage leader's eyes are either dots (all pupil) or are closed; while these images are readily identifiable as an abstract depiction of eyes, they fail to convey emotion and so distance readers from this woman. By contrast, Wells's eyes are larger and more detailed. In the first panel, she stares wide-eyed down at her antagonist, registering that she is affronted. By the third panel, Wells's narrowed eyes evoke growing skepticism. Such drawings could serve to mock her emotions as hyperbolic. Yet paired with the dialogue, which conveys the white woman's pernicious racism, these panels suggest that Wells's outrage is fitting. Juxtaposing these characters' cartoon facial features, Beaton offers readers the satisfaction of readily distinguishing good from bad and of identifying with the good guys.

By depicting these incidents from Wells's career through today's textual and visual language, Beaton performs the work of a popularizer. She offers an accessible account of this past to readers who may well be unfamiliar with Wells's activism. In remarks beneath the comics, Beaton encourages us to delve into nineteenth-century history by describing the museum exhibit that piqued her interest and linking to Wells's writing and a review of Paula J. Giddings's *Ida: A Sword among Lions*. Beaton thereby directs readers whose initial curiosity on seeing the comics might tempt us to dive headfirst down this Internet rabbit hole. She models an ethical citation practice in acknowledging her debt to Wells and to scholars of color whose recovery work is central to understanding Wells. Rather than treating such citation as mere obligation, Beaton

reminds us that part of the fun of being a nerd is getting to pass along our favorite texts.

Nonetheless, “Ida B. Wells” takes a risk by locating humor in America’s Jim Crow era. Reading these strips raises the question of why this past is a source of pleasure. As I started writing about the series, I wondered whether these comics offer a troubling form of reassurance. Do they teach white liberal readers to feel good about ourselves for appreciating Wells’s activism and let us assume that this work is over? My sense is no. Beaton’s juxtaposition of different eras does first distinguish the past from the present; comics like “March on Washington” depend on readers to recognize that a nineteenth-century suffrage leader was unlikely to have insisted something was “nawwt a race thing.” But in establishing this contrast, Beaton also places present-day language in the mouths of nineteenth-century racists and anti-racists. In other words, her work suggests that history’s racial tensions can be articulated in today’s terms and thus implies that our language can speak to us about this history of violence and activism. More troublingly, our language can also deny the past’s ongoing legacy. Beaton’s mash-ups offer a provocative, humorous claim for nineteenth-century culture’s often disturbing relevance that reminds us why we want to remember Wells.

In representing Wells, Beaton doesn’t strive to construct a new official narrative of history. Rather her comics explore how light-hearted humor can disrupt expectations that history will remain firmly in the past, where it can validate reductive claims of “progress.” In other words, my appreciation for *Hark! A Vagrant* stems from its use of comic form to unsettle our relation to the past by challenging canonical literature and popularizing minoritized figures. Beaton’s depictions of Franklin, Hawthorne, and Wells alike play on comics’ status as both inside and outside the canon to satirize US culture, while supporting recovery work. Yet I love *Hark! A Vagrant* not only for its intellectual commitments but also because Beaton models an appealing affective relation to the nineteenth century. Her comics are perennially thoughtful and silly, affectionate and critical. On days when my research isn’t going well, Beaton’s archive offers a reminder of my own feelings for this past and a winning example of how one might—in proper nerd fashion—share such feelings with others.

Notes

Thank you to Amanda Dykema for her incisive comments on earlier drafts, as well as to Kate Beaton for allowing us to include a few of her comic strips.

1. Kate Beaton, *Hark! A Vagrant*, <http://www.harkavagrant.com/>. Subsequent comics cited in text.
2. Here I draw from comics reviewer Glen Weldon, who argues that “nerd culture” is less about “what you love, than how you love it.” Audie Cornish, “Small Batch: Glen Weldon’s *The Caped Crusade*,” *NPR Pop Culture Happy Hour Podcast*, streaming, March 23, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510282/pop-culture-happy-hour>.
3. Chris Mautner, “I’m a Careful Person’: An Interview with Kate Beaton,” *The Comics Journal*, November 4, 2015, <http://www.tcj.com/im-a-careful-person-an-interview-with-kate-beaton/>.
4. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: William Morrow, 1993).
5. *People, Places, Things*, directed by James C. Strouse (2015; Venice, CA: Beachside Films).
6. On comics’ unstable status, see Christopher Pizzino, “The Doctor versus the Dagger: Comics Reading and Cultural Memory,” *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 631–47.
7. H/T to Martha Nell Smith, who so relishes this line that she joked I had to watch the show before passing my comprehensive exams. “Get Me a Lawyer,” *Damages*, written by Todd A. Kessler, Glenn Kessler, and Daniel Zelman, directed by Allen Coulter, *FX*, 2007.
8. For instance, we can see Beaton’s popularity with academics in the Hilary Chute and Alison Bechdel series of comics “Roland Baretheses,” which deploys Beaton’s style. Hilary Chute and Alison Bechdel, “Bartheses: Barthesian Doubt Edition,” *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2014): 52.
9. For instance, see Jasmine Nichole Cobb’s *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).