Caricatures: The Visual Impact of the Dreyfus Affair

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[1. Introduction]

The political impact of the Dreyfus Affair was certainly magnified by the sensationalism exhibited by the French press of the time. Under the new Republican regime, the Press had been totally free since 1881: it was starting to feel its power, and it used any mean to attract an audience. Tabloids, as well as highbrow papers, played the whole gamut of public emotions in countless articles, interviews, pamphlets, illustrations, and caricatures. The mass of iconographic propaganda from both sides of the political spectrum is considerable, as demonstrated by the Family Beitler collection.

Month after month, in the name of Justice, the Press appealed to traditional values and patriotism, presented trivia as definite proof, displayed intolerance and innuendoes and enjoyed enlarging pointless events to please their avid – yet soon saturated audience: all the problems of sensationalism and political manipulation that we know so well today. The Affair had undoubtedly all the melodramatic twists and turns of the popular soap operas of the era: it was filled with coups de théâtre, double agents, anonymous letters, planted evidence, assassination attempts, mysterious deaths, forgeries and bribes, veiled ladies, courageous heroes, poignant victims, and arrogant villains.

For the general public, less inclined at spending time in reading lengthy articles, caricatures were especially useful to add the impact of a striking insult to a somewhat more tasteful written injury. So here I would like to talk briefly about the visual impact of some of these political cartoons. And, mind you, I chose the most classy ones.

[2. Caricaturing Zola]
For instance, a lot of caricatures of writer Émile Zola (one of the heroes of the Dreyfus Affair) are usually making reference to his literary work, especially his antimilitaristic novel *La Débâcle* or his famous article “J'Accuse...!,” which energized so much of the pro-Dreyfus camp: most of the time, the antidreyfusard cartoons are rehashing the same theme of Zola as a pornographic writer, because of his successful naturalistic novels in which some ultra-realistic details were found too risqué for some prudish readers. In the caricatures, he is, therefore, usually associated with a smelly pig as well as with many stinking bodily functions. But Zola is easy to spot because his “emblems” are easily recognizable. But often some details are more difficult to decipher. For instance, in this cartoon, one may recognize “the German,” “the Austrian,” and “the Italian” and “the Jew,” but one might wonder who is this character dressed in 16th century dress, all in black? In fact, he represents “the Huguenot,” as the French Protestant church sided heavily with the Dreyfusard cause.

Another example is, for instance, the issue which was raised during the Affair between—the contrast between civil justice and military justice, and many jurists of the time recalled the famous line by Cicero which was, said in Latin, “*cedant arma togae*” (which means “let the military might yield to the law”). Here are three cartoons using that sentence. The first one makes a pun by replacing the Latin word *togae* (the robe, symbol of the law) with the French word “*toqués,*” meaning “fools” and, therefore, the twisted quote now gets a new ironic meaning as “let the military might yield to the fools.” Illustrating the same Latin caption, another one (here by Forain) shows a judge kicking a military cap. The cartoon appeared in the antidreyfusard magazine *Psst . . .!* in order to point the finger at civilians trying to attack the French Military, the sacred defender of the homeland. But, in contrast, here comes the antithesis of the same cartoon (this time drawn by Ibels), which appeared soon after in its rival dreyfusard magazine *Le Sifflet* (“the Whistle”), and here it shows a general, kicking at the scales of Justice. This time the caption reads “Allons-y”: “Let's do it! Let's roll.” This is a direct reference to a moment during the trial against Zola, when he was sued for libel after his article “J'Accuse . . . !” At one point, one of the officers, Colonel Henry, when questioned about the botched preliminary investigation of Captain Dreyfus, shouted angrily in the courthouse “So, you want more detailed information? Well, here it comes, let's roll! “allons-y!” This bravado, macho attitude in a court of law was wildly applauded by the antidreyfusard mob as showing the true colors of a real military man. In magazine articles as well as in cartoons, tit-for-tat was very common—very common to contrast two positions, and two magazines, *Le Sifflet* and *Psst . . . !*, embodied this often ruthless cartoon warfare.

[3. Attacking Dreyfusards and Jews: The *Musée des Horreurs* and the *Musée des Patriotes*]

Another antithesis is a series showing *Le Musée des Patriotes*, which is “The Hall of Fame,” presenting famous antidreyfusards, anti-Dreyfus, in heroic and dignified proportions. But the same publisher soon printed another successful series: its name was *Le Musée des Horreurs*, “The Freak Show,” similar to the sideshows exhibited in the circus. Here, instead of half-man/half-beast creatures, such as the elephant man or the giraffe lady, we are shown shady pro-Dreyfus characters.

None of them is identified, of course, but they are all easily recognizable. Once again, Émile Zola, the pornographer, is represented here as “The King of Pigs,” sitting on his most infamous
disgusting novels, and tarnishing the map of France with international excrement. The adjective “international” is in fact a code word for anyone considered as anti-French, such as the British (the “hereditary enemy”), but also the Germans, the Austrians, and the Italians, members of the Triple Alliance Pact signed against France (and one must remember here that Zola's father had been an immigrant from Italy). Obviously, in this international plot against France, one must also count the Jews, considered as stateless, and as the eternal “Wandering Jew,” and therefore non-patriotic vis-à-vis any civilized country.

Another “tasteful” cartoon represents here Fernand Labori, who was the lawyer of both Zola and Dreyfus. During Dreyfus’s retrial in Rennes, in 1899, Labori was critically shot by a man who was never apprehended. Labori didn’t die but was wounded enough to be unable to plead in court for his client. The bullet shown here seems just harmless and even comical, but the nickname associated with Labori, as a donkey, must not be simply translated as “Bullet Hole.” The meaning is more derogatory: a “bullet hole” is also, in French slang, the metaphor for an “asshole.”

The next one represents Colonel Picquart, the courageous whistle-blower who started the processes which would eventually show that the original case against Captain Dreyfus had been unfair, and that many false evidences had been planted by the military brass. Here Picquart is characterized as a camel. But the word “camel” is used in French to call a really nasty person. However, the nickname mentioned on the page is adding an extra insult: Georges Picquart is here nicknamed “Georgette,” an allusion often made by his enemies to his presumed homosexuality. The nickname and the “nasty camel” suggestion would be an equivalent in English of calling him a “bitch.” These type of innuendoes were adding to the suggestion of shady deals between all the entities conspiring against the ideal, holy France: Jews, Germans and, why not?, gays as well. All guilty by association, all potential traitors, since gays were also credited at the time as having an international “agenda” as some would say today, a corrupting agenda perceived to be similar to that of the Jews.

With the Jews, the Musée des Horreurs, the Freak Show, has a field day. If the “freaks” such as Zola, Labori or Picquart are drawn by simply adding their recognizable faces on the body of an animal, the facial features of the Jews are all caricatural. For instance, this is Joseph Reinach, one of the first defenders of Dreyfus, represented here as a hairy monkey. The stocky Reinach was a very sophisticated political writer who penned a monumental passionate history of the Dreyfus Case. The pun of his nickname on the cartoon refers to a short story by Guy de Maupassant called Boule de suif, “Tallow Butterball” which is the nickname of a plump little prostitute. The play on words is on “Suif” and “Juif,” and “Boule de Juif” therefore means “Jewish Butterball.” That “hilarious” nickname was an instant success and was going to be used ad nauseam against the Jew Reinach.

Look also at the faces of the Baron Alphonse de Rothschild as a one-eyed octopus, and his sons, Philippe de Rothschild, Edouard de Rothschild, and Karl Mayer-Rothschild: the caricatures here are grotesquely distorting their faces in order not simply to mock them, like Picquart, Zola, and Labori, but also to demonize them. This is when political cartoons go beyond simple political charge and fall into blatant anti-Semitism. Compare for instance, the early caricatures of feminist journalist Séverine, “La Dame Blanche,” here represented as a cow. Compare it with the
malicious one representing Leonora de Rothschild. Leonora never had any notable activity during the Dreyfus Affair, but she is here mixed among important figures of the Dreyfus case, viciously ridiculed in the “Freak Show” here as an old goat. And this simply because she is a Jew.

[4. Conclusion]

This is when one can see how slowly, but surely, a botched spy case dragged part of the French public opinion into the most disgusting fanaticism. The need for the caricature to be elliptic, keeping the decoding easy and funny, leads to the dangers of sensationalism by exaggerating attitudes and deforming nuances. The goal was to invite a gut reaction from the man in the street. The mob was the ultimate target. But the mob, indeed, often answered the call for action.

These often tasteless and outrageous documents are indeed part of the collective memory which transcended a judicial error into a test for the French Republic and a symbol for the fight for basic human rights.

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3. [Caricature of Zola as a pig], Collection of Professor Jean-Max Guieu.


7. “Cedant arma togae,” *Psst . . . !*, no. 3 (February 19, 1898) [caricature by Forain].

8. “Allons-y,” *Le Sifflet*, no. 2 (February 24, 1898) [caricature by H.-G. Ibels], Dreyfus Affair Collection, Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

9. *Musée des Patriotes (Supplément du “Musée des horreurs”)*, no. 3 (Edouard Drumont), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

10. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 6 (Alfred Dreyfus), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.
11. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 4 (Emile Zola), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

12. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 5 (Fernand Labori), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

13. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 8 (Georges Picquart), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.


15. “Baptème intellectuel,” *Psst…!* , no. 2 (February 12, 1898) [caricature by Caran d’Ache].


18. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 2 (Alphonse de Rothschild), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

19. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 32 (Philippe de Rothschild), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

20. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 41 (Edouard de Rothschild), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

21. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 43 (Karl Meyer de Rothschild), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

22. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 11 (Séverine), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

23. *Musée des horreurs*, no. 46 (Leonora de Rothschild), V. Lenepveu, illus., 1899-1900.

24. “Vox populi,” *Le Sifflet*, no. 1 (February 17, 1898) [caricature by Hermann-Paul], Dreyfus Affair Collection, Rare Book & Manuscript Library.