

‘Caricature’ in the 1890s

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In the *fin-de-siècle* French press, released from the shackles of censorship by laws passed in 1881, augmented by the increasingly easy and cheap reproduction of images, caricatural representations of the arts, artists and musicians abound. In particular, a fashion for opera in cartoon form was exploited in a number of journals, most frequently appearing in *Le Journal amusant*, *Le Charivari* and *Le Triboulet*.

While Roberta Montemorra Marvin has demonstrated how the parodic spectacle of operatic burlesque crossed class boundaries, transforming a high art genre and repertoire into one for the lower classes, iconographic parodic treatment works very differently. While the mode of consumption is radically transformed – from the theatre to the home, from the public to the private sphere, from the serious to the comic genre, from the exclusive to the mass produced representation – operatic parody in iconographic form comprises a set of codes which must be shared in order to be comprehended. Thus authors – men of letters and the establishment – continuously solicit the ‘cultural capital’ of their readers, their peers, in order to communicate irony and satire. Moreover, as parodic adaptation of operas, as well as the operatic genre, these cartoons constitute an authorised, temporary subversion of recognizable forms which inscribe the mocked conventions onto themselves, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence. Thus, in contrast to the pedagogic irony and satire of mid-century moral caricature of the likes of Daumier and Grandville, as well as the political caricature – particularly of Wagner – issuing from the world of the ‘contre-pouvoir’ in an age of relative freedom of expression of the press, operatic parody

of the *fin de siècle* provokes no critical reflection on cultural practices, it suggests no renovation or renewal, but reinforces the dominant aesthetic and moral mores.

My paper presents a selection of the iconographic parodies of high profile opera premières which appeared in the Parisian press during the 1890s as an intriguing test case, in order to explore the function of parody in this context. While capable of satirical humour with regard to that which was flawed in society and operatic tradition, operatic parody in the press nevertheless presented a consensual view of the artistic establishment which brought the singers, dancers, musicians, authors, composers and directors, as well as their foibles, trials and tribulations, directly to the heart of the *fin-de-siècle* home.