In search of Jenkins: Taste, style, and credibility in gilded-age journalism
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In Search of Jenkins

Taste, Style, and Credibility in Gilded-Age Journalism

In the 1860s to the 1880s, the term "Jenkins," borrowed from a British expression for a windy and obsequious society reporter, was widely used in the U.S. as a derisive term for journalists whose prose was over-rich and whose prying was viewed as excessive. Critics of the Jenkins tribe ran the gamut from Mark Twain to the august George William Curtis, editor of Harper's New Monthly Magazine. *A study of the use of the "Jenkins" label offers firm clues for evaluating how readers and reporters engaged with their newspapers. It reveals specific points of rivalry between reporters; it reflects a general public anxiety that was sometimes misplaced or even deliberately exaggerated over the evolving conventions of reportorial work; and it suggests that readers had a clear understanding about relationships between style and topic in journalistic prose, violations of which opened the offender to criticism.*

It must have been a lovely ball. The reporter said so, and to prove it he supplied considerable, convincing detail, especially concerning the ladies' ravishing costumes. Mrs. W.M., he told us, "was attired in an elegant *pate de foi gras*, made expressly for her, and was greatly admired." Miss G.W. was "tastefully dressed in a *tout ensemble*, and was greeted with deafening applause wherever she went." The "queenly Mrs. L.R. was attractively attired in her new and beautiful false teeth, and the *bon jour* effect they naturally produced was heightened by her enchanting and well-sustained smile." And Miss C.L.B. "had her fine nose elegantly enameled, and the easy grace with which she blew it from time to time, marked her as a cultivated and accomplished woman of the world."[1]

The reporter was Mark Twain, and, of course, his entire report was a spoof. It first appeared in the *Territorial Enterprise* of Virginia City, Nevada, around November 21, 1865, and has often been reprinted, usually under the title "The Pioneers' Ball." But in 1867, when Twain included the piece in his first volume of collected works, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*, he called it "'After' Jenkins"--as "in the style of" Jenkins. He also suggested Jenkins "may get an idea" from what followed. That raises two questions: who was Jenkins, and why was he worth spoofing?

The answers, its turns out, may offer a modest lifeline for those navigating the convoluted thickets of journalistic prose in the Gilded Age and give some guidance for one of the hardest and most persistent challenges any historian must confront: how can a researcher crack the codes of a time long past? How can one enter the world of readers long dead and understand their experience with the printed word as it marched clean and crisp across the page in front of them instead of lying inert under the fogged and scratchy lens of the microfilm reader? How can one avoid the tendency to "museumize" popular culture, as David Thorburn has put it? That is the urge to "appropriate" the "most ordinary and habitual usages of a culture . . . for intellectual analysis" rather than attempting to read the texts "in something of the way in which the audience experiences them."[2]

Examining Jenkins may prove helpful.

Jenkins, it appears, was a popular fellow in American journalism from the 1860s through the 1880s--or, more accurately, a widely recognizable fellow although not an admirable one. In 1865, William A. Wheeler's *Explanatory and Pronouncing Dictionary of the Noted Names of Fiction* defined "Jenkins" as "[a] cant name for any snobbish penny-a-liner . . . whose descriptions of persons and events in fashionable and aristocratic society betrayed the ingrained servility, priggishness, and vulgarity of his character." He made his debut in 1843 in the British humor magazine *Punch*, among whose writers

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was the struggling young journalist and short-story writer William Makepeace Thackeray. This Jenkins was intended as a caricature of the journalists on the *Morning Post*, which was known to those at *Punch* as the *Fawning Post*, a paper largely devoted to chronicling the glittering world of royalty and fashionable society in a distinctive style best described as obsequiously baroque, or perhaps baroquely obsequious.[3]

Jenkins seems to have been introduced into the United States largely through the exertions of *Vanity Fair*, a humor magazine from 1859 to 1863, which was modeled somewhat after *Punch*. *Vanity Fair* was merciless in its assaults on the entire tribe of Jenkinses, focusing on the two characteristics that seem most clearly to define the American version: the intrusiveness of their prying and the windiness of their prose. One of *Vanity Fair*'s favorite butts was James Gordon Bennett's notorious *New York Herald*, which almost from the moment of its founding in 1835 had been hailed by its legions of fans as spicy, saucy, and racy even as it was condemned by its hosts of enemies as indecent, intrusive, and inane. "The Jenkins of the Herald goes to the inaugural ball," read a typical dispatch in 1861:

> Jenkins is as usual vulgar, happy, ungrammatical and sentimental. Jenkins commences at the beginning, as he would say himself, with a description of "the edifice" where the ball took place. A house is always an edifice with Jenkins. Jenkins . . . hastens thence to the dressing rooms which he describes as "sumptuously garnished with a punch-bowl."... [In the ball room] for the first time in his life he sees ladies, and having seen them, proceeds to slaver them with his vulgar commendations. . . . Bad manners, bad grammar, servants' gossip about dress and diamonds, appraisement of ladies costume, reportorial enthusiasm about supper, and all that tasteless fulsomeness of epithet for which the American reporter is famous.[4]

Clearly, calling someone a "Jenkins" was a catcall, not an ovation, and since the label was often explicitly applied to a reporter who worked for another publication, the enemy or the rival, it frequently served as a sly peon to the name-caller's vastly superior virtue. An Englishman, writing about a "tour" he made in the United States in 1857-58, complained that America's Jenkins "retails unblushingly what we in England would consider the most sacred secrets of life .. . and writes ... of the eyes, the hair, the lips, the teeth, the shape, the smiles, the accomplishments, and the fortune, nay, of the very age of maids, wives, and widows." Meanwhile, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* noted in 1866 that "Jenkins is a purely British product. We have toadies and weak brains, but the perfect snob is found only among the proud Britons." Southerners, noting that an "underling and paltry" tribe of Jenkinses was invading one of their finest resorts, voiced their displeasure in 1870 "at the development of a vulgarity and a nuisance there which was supposed to belong only to certain promiscuous watering-places in the North." And Mark Twain—who in the year and a half before the publication of "The Pioneers' Ball" had been challenged to a duel over his irreverent article about an actual fancy-dress ball and had been fired as "lokulitems" reporter by an editor who gently told him he was "obviously capable of greater things"—must have taken a special delight in ribbing his vacuous former colleagues for their pretentious and misplaced taste for *pate de foi gras*.[5]

Yet some critics of the Jenkins tribe had more on their minds than professional one-upmanship. These critics, concerned less with Jenkins' banality than with his methods, saw him as emblematic of an increasingly pervasive journalistic trend that they considered deeply dismaying: the eagerness of reporters to snoop, pry, and intrude into private life. Bennett had been one of the first editors to make a practice of sending energetic young men into the courts of law, the halls of Congress, the fields of battle, and the fancy-dress parties of the wealthy to witness and describe on their own terms what was going on there, but more and more newspapers also were letting their reporters do the same thing.

Now, the boldest of them were knocking at doors, pencils in hand, and demanding the right to ask questions and publish the answers in the paper. This despicable practice was still so new in 1871 that George William Curtis felt compelled to explain in his popular column in *Harper's* that the "technical term" for it was "interviewing." And a well-known Shakespearean scholar and linguist, who wrote regularly for *Galaxy*, was called upon to state in 1874 that he believed the words "to interview," "interviewer," and "interviewing" were perfectly legitimate and correct in polite discourse.[6] However, this pundit could not resist leveling a blast against the practice. The interview, he thundered,

> is the most perfect contrivance yet devised to make journalism an offense, a thing of ill savor in all decent nostrils. It elevates prying into an art.... It is a conspiracy against the privacy of the individual . . . and it places the person who either consents or refuses to be interviewed at the mercy of his tormentor.... It is in every respect a thoroughly contemptible business, which honorable journalists should shun as they would shun contamination.[7]

At *Harper's*, Curtis anointed none other than Jenkins as the symbol of everything that was awful about interviewing. In his view, hordes of nosy Jenkinses had begun to escape the confines of the society pages that had given them birth and were wandering at will into the coverage of politics, business, and international affairs. They churned out highly colored reporting of admittedly dubious accuracy that focused on the trivial and the personal, and they were doing it for the worst of reasons: to pander to the public and to sell more papers. "Mr. JENKINS has long been a familiar and amusing figure," Curtis wrote,

> but when he deserts the rosy paths of description of head-dresses and trains, or the August spectacle of high fashion, he makes a mistake. He is a *farceur*, not a historian. Yet there is now scarcely an eminent person in Europe or America who is not occasionally visited by Mr. Jenkins, pencil in hand, and solicited to impart his views upon some subject with which he is especially identified, or to state the result of his cogitations upon things in general. . . . There is, first, a profound doubt whether it was the hero or his valet who was seen. Then nobody believes that whoever was seen said what he is reported to have said precisely as reported. . . . Interviewing, therefore ... is of the least possible service, except in two ways: it gratifies the public curiosity about noted persons; and it pleases the desire of a paper to be considered enterprising.

With creatures such as these doing the work of journalism, it would be "ludicrous," Curtis fumed, to "quote a gentleman or lady as holding certain opinions because of a reported conversation printed in a newspaper." Imagine, he invited his readers, that Jenkins had obtained an interview with the great Cham of Tartary. "If the Cham dextrously avoids saying any thing," said Curtis, "we may depend upon Mr. Jenkins to make him seem to say something."[8] There was no reason to believe any reporter would act any differently.

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Month after month and year after year in his popular "Editor's Easy Chair" column, Curtis hauled Jenkins out for a drubbing. In 1876, he queried how anyone could tell that Senator A or Secretary B actually said what the reporter claimed, when there were no documents to prove it. "The disturbing thought has entered the mind even of the public that peruses the performances of Jenkins," he continued,

> that he might write his description of toilets and towels in his own quiet room, so that instead of pacing with him the actual halls and viewing the real chambers of the great, the outraged readers are merely following his unblushing imagination.... As the interviewer has similar opportunities and discretion, and as the reader must always wonder about so many things as he reads, interviews are falling under the same doubt with Jenkins.[9]

Respectable persons, he concluded, were totally at the mercy of reporters who could fabricate their stories at will.

Some of the distrust and distaste for the interview, voiced in magazines such as *Harper's* and *Galaxy*, was understandable. During and after the Civil War, as the newspaper's emphasis shifted definitively from editorializing and politicking to reporting, many journalists came to a new understanding of the importance of enterprise and aggressiveness in pursuit of the story. For them, the interview—which was the questioning of people in a position to know the answers—seemed an invaluable method not just of gathering the news but also of getting it more swiftly and more cleverly than the other paper's guy. Yet to the politicians, business leaders, and military men that they besieged, reporters' enterprise often looked much more like impertinence.[10]

"Readers of Gilded Age newspapers routinely plunged into wildernesses, even jungles, of leisurely, luxuriant prose and hothouse verbiage positively byzantine in its splendor."

Indeed interviewers could, and were at times known to, abuse the practice in exactly the ways that Curtis feared. Some reporters seemed to take pride in describing how they had faked an interview, or tricked a subject into speaking, or accomplished some other feat that would make a modern ombudsman cringe. One of them, for instance, cheerfully and forthrightly confessed in a new craft journal, *The Writer*, that if a man in public life refused to be interviewed, then "no scruples of conscience keep me from obtaining my information through a third party, and 'faking' my interview accordingly." He even assured his nervous readers that such a course of action would not "in any manner debas[e] his manhood."[11]

But it is also possible that Jenkins was at times getting a raw deal. Maybe the world did not need, in some cosmic sense, to make the acquaintance of the Great Cham of Tartary; maybe some journalists were more interested in proving their enterprise than in informing their public or depicting their subjects accurately. But Jenkins, along with those of his colleagues who were shouting questions at Senator A and Secretary B, were doing more than running roughshod over old and sometimes perfectly legitimate notions of privacy. They also were challenging ingrained habits of deference and shaking traditional assumptions about the locus of social authority. They were presenting themselves as professionals and laying claim to what has become one of the fundamental principles of the craft: their work of informing the public entitled them to enter places closed to ordinary citizens, witness events that men or women on the street were not normally permitted to see, and question public figures most people would never have the opportunity to confront. They were, in Michael Schudson's words, developing "a means of cultural control over people in the public eye" and a "novel mechanism for public watchfulness over the powerful."[12]

It would not be surprising, therefore, if the aggressiveness of some reporters often shaded over into effrontery. But the public roasting of Jenkins might have had as much to do with the rawness of the reporter's challenge to the social order as with any abuse of privacy or journalistic privilege. And the famously genteel Curtis, by repeatedly linking the credibility of all journalists to the excesses of a fictional character, who was created as a symbol of excess in the first place, may have been guilty of some excesses of his own in his determination to make his distaste plain.

Another defining characteristic of Jenkins, his windy and bombastic prose style, did not seem to inspire the same level of personal anguish among critics, but it nonetheless raises questions rather more complicated than pure judgments of taste, or the lack thereof. Anyone who has read deeply in the journalism of the later nineteenth century will find it more multi-faceted than generally advertised. Journalism historians have long tended to focus on what is most "modern" and progressive about this period: it was at this point that the profession of reporter truly was born and the style of writing we now recognize as "journalistic" began to take root. Scholars cite a complicated cluster of contributing factors: the rise of the telegraph, which made brevity the soul of thrift; the insatiable public demand for swift and accurate news during the Civil War years; the increasing dominance of the Associated Press and other channels for the distribution of news to massive and diverse audiences; the dwindling influence of political parties and the political press; the deaths of Bennett, Horace Greeley, Henry Raymond, and other great practitioners of "personal journalism"; a growing interest in the use of scientific methods of observation and description; and a trend toward commercialization. All are credited with pressuring newspapers to adopt a leaner, cleaner, less cluttered writing style as well as a journalism that stood on facts rather than rooting itself in opinion. It was an increasingly impersonal, frill-free, and homogenous- sounding journalism careening toward what in the 1890s looked much like what we now call objectivity.[13]

A new and cleaner prose style was indeed increasingly evident in journalism throughout this period, as it was in oratory, fiction, and other genres that were beginning to turn away from the "verbose untidy" model of romanticism, according to Edmund Wilson.[14] The column of terse telegraphic intelligence, a dozen items smartly dispatched in no more than two dozen sentences, had by then become a familiar feature in the press of both large cities and small towns. Stories that seized their readers with a pithy summary lead, rather than coaxing them with a traditional, chronologically ordered narrative, were still unusual but not unknown. And strong-minded editors, such as Charles A. Dana of the *Sun*, were declaring their devotion to strong, simple language as the wave of the future and dismissing as moribund the older papers that practiced a "ponderous prolixity, majestic prosiness, elephantine heaviness, and rhinoceros

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Bombastes Furioso style."[15]

But an immersion in the newspapers of this era shows that the rhinoceros, far from dead, was still enjoying excellent health. Readers of Gilded Age newspapers routinely plunged into wildernesses, even jungles, of leisurely, luxuriant prose and hothouse verbiage positively byzantine in its splendor. In those columns one encountered drawn-out yarns, tall tales, first-person adventures, and buffoonery; poetry, short stories, and excerpts from novels; and stories about events that were clearly news. The latter stories plainly were intended to present facts to readers, but they were nonetheless swaddled in an ornate style that would have fit at the deathbed of Little Eva or on any page of Bulwer-Lytton, the man who gave the world the immortal opening line, "It was a dark and stormy night." This was prose that remembered it was living in the Victorian age—and its readers apparently liked it that way.

Tales of tragedy, violence, and carnage, not surprisingly, often called forth lush, emotional language. It could be found everywhere from the *Cincinnati Commercial*'s report of October 11, 1871, on how the great Chicago fire let loose "the dogs of hell . . . upon the housetops," to the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*'s piece of June 1, 1889, on the great Johnstown flood, which began, "The whole world shudders and sighs this morning." Samuel Wilkeson's dispatch from Gettysburg, which the *New York Times* ran on the front page on July 6, 1863, gripped readers with this memorable lead: "Who can write the history of a battle whose eyes are immovably fastened upon a central figure of transcendentally absorbing interest--the dead body of an oldest born?" After a history of the battle that was quite capable, he concluded: "I rise from a grave whose wet clay I have passionately kissed, and I look up and see Christ spanning this battle-field . . . [and] he beckons to these mutilated bloody swollen forms to ascend."[16]

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But triumph as well as tragedy could kindle the prose, as when the *Alta California* of May 11, 1869, described the completion of the transatlantic railroad.

> The virgin solitude of pathless deserts has been disturbed; the iron messenger which has just reached us from the East is the first that ever burst into the silent sea of natural life which has so long rolled its green waves in the midst of the broad continent. . . . The last rail is laid, the last spike is driven in the line of communication which forever changes the ancient order of things . . . and the great event of the age has brought us all home at last.

Sometimes, however, the purple passages misfired, even in a newspaper that built its reputation in large part on its distinctive, if controversial, style. Of the rhetorical modes of the *Herald*, perhaps it is safe only to say, as Lincoln is supposed to have commented about a book, that "people who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing that they like." The paper had always prided itself on what it considered a bold and modern style. In its early years, Bennett had enjoyed challenging the "mawkish" and "sentimental" taste of the times; as the *Herald*'s managing editor later put it, he had "introduced a new style of writing. It was fresh, original, clear. It was the French style, with an infusion of the dash and vigor of the young Republic. Our journalists had previously aped that of modern England—solid, argumentative, heavy."[17]

To its critics, however, that same vigorous style often felt not dashing but overwrought and off-pitch. *Vanity Fair* delighted in deconstructing the *Herald*'s rhetorical gaffes and affectations. And even some of those who were dazzled by the African adventures of ace reporter Henry Morton Stanley deplored the fustian prose that conveyed them. The book drawn from his Tanganyikan dispatches—the climactic one of which, published on August 10, 1872, took nine sentences and nearly 200 words to tell readers that he was eager to announce he had discovered David Livingstone—was famously called by Florence Nightingale "the very worst book on the very best subject I ever saw in my life."[18]

The *Herald*'s difficulties in this case arose from its efforts to re-ornament the streamlined cable style, to plaster over naked telegraphic prose with adjectival fig leaves, which it did with an ulterior motive. It did not want to look cheap. Joseph I.C. Clarke, a longtime *Herald* managing editor, recalled that in the early 1870s, when cable charges for news from abroad came to the enormous sum of a dollar a word (about fourteen dollars in today's money), the task of editing the dispatches was entrusted to "a quaint old fussy Irish gentleman. . . . [He] was relied on to make every five words a hundred in print. His method was simply a magniloquent verbosity–his 'words of learned length and thundering sound' were held to amaze the world of the Herald's reckless outlay." The gentleman's "crowning effort," Clarke added, "was 'the royal sore throat which the Court physicians diagnosed upon examining the laryngeal processes of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's second daughter, the Princess Alice, as of mild character, is rapidly improving' by way of expanding the cable dispatches 'Alice's cold better.'" Yet, as Clarke acknowledged, the old Irishman's heroic efforts soon began "making a good many titter."[19]

Here is where Jenkins might be particularly useful. Primed by everything from their familiarity with AP style to their amusement over Snoopy's literary ambitions to regard all Victorian prose as overblown kitsch, today's readers may quail at the prospect of deciphering why some newspaper pieces caused titters while others drew tears, let alone figuring out which was which. But taking Jenkins as a sort of canary in the mines of extravagance and excess, the embodiment of what his own contemporaries considered journalism that was over the top, might provide some clues to help readers.[20]

For instance, *Vanity Fair*, though it clearly enjoyed poking fun at the *Herald*, was an equal opportunity satirist; it did not spare the *Herald*'s great rival, Greeley's *Tribune*, even though in many quarters that paper enjoyed a reputation for literary grace and intellectual heft. The humor magazine skewered the *Tribune* scribe who was inspired to lyric heights by the discovery in Trinity Churchyard of an old and half-hidden gravestone bearing a brief, cryptic inscription about the dead man's noble ancestry. "And is this all the history, O granite, thou hast to show of him whose name thou bearest?" wailed the *Tribune*. "Can'st tell us nothing of what Withamus de Marisco was, and did, and suffered, during the forty five years of his existence?" And on,

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and on. *Vanity Fair* giggled that the reporter "strikes his best Hamlet attitude" and "rushes into a mellifluous, but maudlin moan over a monument," and then ended with a speculation on the epitaph that Jenkins might have enjoyed.[21]

Raymond's biographer, Augustus Maverick, who apparently defined Jenkins solely in terms of his prose style and not his reportorial methods, seemed fond of the breed, as one might be fond of an ugly dog or a three-legged cat. In 1870, he described the Jenkinses of the press as "a distinct collection; men gifted with vivid imaginations and possessed of a fluent style.... They have a faculty of spinning endless stories on exceedingly small foundations of fact." As an example, he quoted at length from a report about a heavy rain that had run in something identified only as the "Dummy-and-Dilution Paper"—perhaps the *Herald*. "Flood and Tempest," the headline screamed. "How Jupiter Pluvius Descended upon the Country—How the Storm Lashed the Streaming Panes—How the Houseless Poor Shivered and Suffered."[22]

And Frederic Hudson, a *Herald* managing editor and the author of the first general history of American journalism in 1872, claimed to have discovered the "original Jenkins" at work as early as 1776. In late February of that year, as General Henry Knox and his army of patriots were massing at Cambridge, Massachusetts, to plan their attack on the British troops occupying Boston, an eager scribe for the Tory-leaning *Boston News-Letter* was gushing over the preparations for an upcoming masquerade ball. "Almost all the Milliners and Mantua Makers in Town," he informed his readers, were working on the costumes, "ten Capital Cooks" were already preparing the supper, and everyone knew it would be "the most brilliant Thing ever seen in America."[23]

What is common to all these items is, at bottom, their commonness. In each, the reporters used extravagant language to tell stories that were neither unusual, nor important, nor even very interesting. An old gravestone turned up in a churchyard. It rained really, really hard. A bunch of cooks and tailors was preparing for a party. A queen's daughter was recovering from a scratchy throat. Fire, flood, and the death of a beautiful youth, in contrast, as well as the triumphant twining of coast to coast, were stories of high human drama. They required a high style to do them justice, a rich and emotional prose that complemented and reinforced the significance of the stories being told. The silliness of the Jenkins stories lies not in the gaudy language per se but in the mismatch between the opulence of the language and the poverty of the events described, a mismatch that readers were capable of seeing, appreciating, and tittering over. They knew when the clothes had no emperor.

In fact, the Jenkinsian dress code was apparently so well understood that sometimes reporters and readers colluded in manipulating it. Such was the effort Maverick hailed, if that is the word, as "one of the best specimens of [Jenkins's] peculiar kind of work": the *New York Tribune*'s account of the fire that destroyed P.T. Barnum's museum and menagerie in the heart of Manhattan on July 13, 1865. On the following day, the paper devoted the entire front page to the tragedy. Most of the story, under the subhead "Our Reporter's Vision of Life and Death," was said to have been written by a *Tribune* man who happened to be in a room across the street from the museum when the fire broke out and could see inside the blazing building.

The wild animals, the reporter said, "sprang against the iron bars and strove to rend them with their teeth, at the same time sending forth savage and frightened cries which were almost human in their agony." Soon, the cages gave way, releasing the beasts. Through "the lurid light of the flames," he could see the tiger and the lion "locked together in close combat." In the cage of the "Happy Family," where an assortment of mismatched animals supposedly lived in harmony, "the felicitous adder was slowly burning in two.... The joyful rat had lost his tail by a falling bar of iron; and the beatific rabbit [was] perforated by a red hot nail." The boa constrictor "was slowly tightening his fatal coils round the panting body of the lioness, which, however, bit and struggled.... The floor was crimson with their blood.... One of the alligators was killed almost immediately by falling across a great fragment of shattered glass, which cut open his stomach and let out the greater part of his entrails to the light of day." After the fire, the *Tribune* reporter concluded, "Several high-art epicures groping among the ruins found choice morsels of boiled whale, roasted kangaroo, and fricaseed [sic] crocodile, which, it was said, they relished."

> ***"But any historian bent on the perilous enterprise of understanding Gilded Age journalism in the spirit it was created will do well to remember the lessons of Jenkins, and to take his* pate de foi gras *with a grain of salt."***

This was a different kind of Jenkins—a Jenkins with a knowing wink. Here, too, the floweriness of the language resulted in a comic effect, but unlike the writer maundering among the gravestones, this Jenkins was doing it on purpose. As tasteless as today's readers might find a story making a joke about a catastrophe such as the destruction of Barnum's museum—in which, rather miraculously, no humans died—the *Tribune* man was intentionally using extravagant language to tip his readers off that they should take him no more seriously than they would any other Jenkins.

And any modern reader who can force himself or herself to read the verbiage and concentrate on what the words were actually saying also will realize the whole story was salted with jokes. There was a description of how a bear wandered down to Wall Street, strolled into the Custom House, "seemed to lose his sense of vision," and fell down the steps, breaking his neck. The minute he did, the paper reported, stock prices rose. Or take the adventure of the escaped orangutan that showed up in Bennett's office at the *Herald*. The *Tribune* man speculated that the beast may have been looking for a job and had "instinctively taken refuge in the inner sanctum" of the notoriously crass paper. Bennett managed to recover his equanimity almost immediately, the report continued, "perhaps from the fact that he saw nothing strange in the visitation." And what about those copperhead snakes that eluded capture and found refuge at two other papers, the *World* and the *News*? Recall that the Civil War had been over for barely three months, and copperhead" was the name given to Yankees who sympathized with the south. As had the *World* and the *News*.

So, while interviews denounced as false might on occasion have had some truth to them, it also is possible that news presented as true might on occasion have been false, or at least highly embellished. But what is important is that readers understood what was going on because they understood what the prose style signified. Aside from a

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few grumbles in a few papers on the next day about the "Munchausen" press (that particular epithet came from the *World*, which had, of course, been singed by the copperhead remark), there is no evidence that anyone was particularly offended by the *Tribune*'s story. It was a baroque piece about a baroque institution—a museum stuffed with freaks and fakes of all descriptions, which was run by a master of humbug whose trademark tactic was to challenge his visitors to decide for themselves what was true and what was not.[24] Readers knew how to read it in precisely the spirit it deserved.

By the 1890s, Jenkins had faded away. That was partly because he had simply become yesterday's slang (now a reporter who used too many polysyllabic words was accused of writing "flub"[25]), but it also was because journalism was changing, and the sins that Jenkins caricatured were less painfully evident, or perhaps simply less painful. That dreadful new invention, the "interview," had become a common and accepted technique increasingly guided by evolving understandings about professional behavior. And more and more leading newspapers were embracing the emerging ideal of the straightforward and scientific presentation of fact-based news, for which the rhinoceros Bombastes Furioso style was clearly outdated and inappropriate. But any historian bent on the perilous enterprise of understanding Gilded Age journalism in the spirit it was created will do well to remember the lessons of Jenkins, and to take his *pate de foi gras* with a grain of salt.

NOTES

[1] Mark Twain, "The Pioneers' Ball," in Edgar Marquess Branch and Robert H. Hirst with the assistance of Harriet Elinor Smith, eds., *Early Tales & Sketches, 1864-1865*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 369-70. The original version in the *Territorial Enterprise* has not survived. The piece was reprinted within the week in both the *Californian*, which used the "Pioneer Ball" headline but the Jenkins lead, and the *Golden Era*, which used a slightly different lead that did not mention Jenkins. The latter apparently has become the standard version, clear testimony that Jenkins' fifteen minutes are now long over.

[2] David Thorburn, "Television as an Aesthetic Medium," in James W. Carey, ed., *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1988), 49, 54.

[3] See Richard D. Altick, *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841-1851* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 77-79; and M.H. Spielmann, *The History of "Punch"* (London: Cassell, 1895), 209-10, 319-21.

[4] "The Herald Jenkins," *Vanity Fair*, March 16, 1861, 181. The original article to which it refers covered nearly two columns in the *Herald* of March 6, 1861.

[5] See Charles MacKay, *Life and Liberty in America, or, Sketches of a Tour in the United States and Canada, in 1857-8* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1859), 293; George William Curtis, "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1866, 394; Edward A. Pollard, *The Virginia Tourist: Sketches of the Springs and Mountains of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1870), 233; and Nigey Lennon, *The Sagebrush Bohemian: Mark Twain in California* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 31-37, 56.

[6] See George William Curtis, "Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, April 1871, 774; and Richard Grant White, "Wedding, Interviewing, Et Cetera," *Galaxy*, December 1874, 826-27.

[7] White, "Wedding, Interviewing, Et Cetera," 827.

[8] George William Curtis, "Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, April 18[illegible].

[9] George William Curtis, "Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, October 1876, 785. For more on Jenkins by Curtis also see the "Easy Chair" columns in *Harper's*, February 1870, 457-9; *Harper's*, February 1872, 455-56; *Harper's*, August [illegible], 469-70; and *Harper's*, February 1884, 479-80.

[10] See Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 201; and Michael Schudson, "Question Authority: A History of the News Interview," in his *The Power of News* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 72-93.

[11] John Arthur, "Reporting, Practical and Theoretical," *The Writer*, February 1889, 35. The following issue carried a rebuttal by a journalist, who called Arthur's remarks "astounding" and argued that the reporter "has no special ethical privileges or excuses. A reporter is a man (or woman) and has a soul, for which he is responsible." See H.R. Shattuck, "Reporters' Ethics," *The Writer*, March 1889, 57-58.

[12] Schudson, "Question Authority," 93.

[13] A classic interpretation of the professionalization of journalism in the 1880s and 1890s was made by Michael Schudson in *Discovering the News: A Social History of the American Newspaper* (New York: Basic, 1978), 61-120.

[14] Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (London: Hogarth Press, 1987), 636-39.

[15] See Marcus Errico et al., "The Evolution of the Summary News Lead," *Media History Monographs* 1:1 (1997/8) [online journal], available from http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/mediahistory/mhmjour1-1.htm; and Charles Wingate, *Views and Interviews on Journalism* (New York: F.B. Patterson, 1875), 57. On the varieties of journalistic style in the 1860s and afterwards, see Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 56-57.

[16] See also Michael Barton, "Journalistic Gore: Disaster Reporting and Emotional Discourse in the *New York Times*, 1852-1956," in Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 155-72.

[17] See [Isaac C. Pray], *Memoirs of James Gordon Bennett and His Times, by a Journalist* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1855), 266; and Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States, from 1690 to 1872* (New York: Harper, 1872), 467.

[18] For examples, see "Jenkins on the New Hippodrome," *Vanity Fair*, December 8, 1860, 290; and "The Herald Jenkins," 181. Nightingale is quoted in Frank McLynn, *Stanley: The Making of an African Explorer* (London: Constable, 1989), 224.

[19] Joseph I.C. Clarke, *My Life and Memories* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1925), 125-26.

[20] Beyond the scope of this article, but intriguing to consider, is the possibility that labeling a journalist's or paper's style as Jenkinsian was to some extent a class-conscious snub. It was a time when reporters were still generally considered closer to tradesmen than professionals and when many of the "popular" papers were struggling to gain greater respectability and to transcend their long association with the working class. In his original, British incarnation in *Punch*, the "Jenkins reporter" was clearly a lower-class striver dancing around the edges of the glittering world that he knew he had no right to enter and understanding just enough about refinement to ape it almost convincingly. In America, "high-falutin'," bombastic talk was often seen as a characteristic of the socially inferior. As Kenneth Cmiel put it, "Pomposity was a style of the half-educated." See *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 64-65.

[21] "The Tribune on Tombs," *Vanity Fair*, December 31, 1859, 14. The original article appeared in the *Tribune* on December 13, 1859.

[22] Augustus Maverick, *Henry J. Raymond and the New York Press for Thirty Years: Progress of American Journalism from 1840 to 1870* (Hartford, Conn.: A.S. Hale, 1870), 258-60. It is not clear whether the "Dummy" story was authentic, but Maverick was clearly presenting it as a classic specimen of the genre. He had, in fact, copied it second-hand from a mocking article in the *Tribune* (for which he gave no date), which had set "the news after the Dummy-and-Dilution paper had fixed it up" side by side with its own much shorter version "in plain English."

[23] Hudson, *Journalism in the United States*, 65.

[24] Visitors who asked Barnum about the authenticity of his exhibits received his standard reply: "That's just the question: persons who pay their money at the door have a right to form their own opinions after they have got up stairs." Quoted in Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 77.

[25] Robert Luce, "Words, Words, Words," *The Writer*, May 1887, 24-25, includes many examples of what he calls "flub," such as using "perambulate" for "walk," "purchase" for "buy," "commence" for "begin," and "at the time that" for "when."

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