

***A Left Handed Compliment:***  
**A newly discovered, early nineteenth-century**  
**lithograph by John Lewis Marks**

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A newly discovered, early nineteenth-century lithograph by John Lewis Marks (b. ca. 1795–1796, d. ca. 1857–1861), entitled *A Left Handed Compliment*, is described. In this humorous print a young boy is using his left hand to draw the face of an elderly woman who is his grandmother, and she is shocked at the boy's suggestion that he will, "just see if I can't touch off your old Phizog left handed". The source of the joke about the left-handed compliment is obscure, but more than likely it is sexual in origin. Glued to the verso of the print are early versions of two prints by Robert Seymour (1798–1836), the illustrator of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, suggesting a possible link between Marks and Seymour. From the hatch patterns on the Seymour engravings, it appears that Seymour may himself have been left-handed and perhaps therefore the butt of the joke. An alternative possibility is that Phizog is a reference to Dickens' later illustrator whose pseudonym was Phiz. It is also just conceivable that the young boy is Marks's own young son, Jacob. The print can be placed in the context of a scatological English vernacular humour that extends from Shakespeare through to Donald McGill and into the present day.

**Keywords:** John Lewis Marks; Left-handed compliment; Lithograph.

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We are very grateful to Lauren Harris for his comments and thoughts on the interpretation of this print, to John Martin for his very helpful recollections of John Taylor, and to Anthony Griffiths and his staff at the British Museum.



**Figure 1.** The recto of *A Left Handed Compliment* by J. Lewis Marks. To view this figure in colour, please visit the online version of this Journal.

In 2006 one of us (JS), at a sale of antique prints and ephemera in London, discovered the print of size 239 mm (height) × 192 mm (width), that is shown in Figure 1. The print is a hand-coloured lithograph, the image and the hand-drawn lettering being typical of that technique (Gascoigne, 2004). Entitled, at the top, “A LEFT HANDED COMPLIMENT./N°. XII”, in the bottom left-hand corner it is signed on the block, “J.L.M.”, and in the bottom right-hand corner, also on the block, is “3<sup>d</sup> Col<sup>d</sup>” (presumably,

“threepence coloured”<sup>1</sup>). The text at the bottom, that is clearly hand-written, reads, “Now Granny, sit still; and I’ll just see if I can’t touch off your old Phizog left handed [./]Mercy on us Child! what could put such an idea into your head?”. There is no date on the print, and no obvious sense of the context in which it would have been published, although it would seem compatible with the early 1830s.<sup>2</sup> The print was sold to JS by John Martin of Mayfly Ephemera and Books, who subsequently told us that the former owner was John Taylor, who could be described as “a true ephemerist”, who had amassed a large and rather miscellaneous collection, said to be “three truckloads”, which was left to John Martin after John Taylor’s death. In Martin’s own words,

The story of John Taylor is a somewhat sad one. He came from a well-to-do family in Yorkshire and travelled much before World War II (and I recall he was born in 1912). Before the war, I believe he worked in advertising before being called up. He served in the Royal West Kent Regiment and was wounded badly; although the physical wounds healed, he never recovered from what was clearly shell shock. The rest of his working life was spent as a porter in the Travellers Club [in London’s] Pall Mall. He did not relate well to people and never married. His abiding passion was the pursuit of printed trivia—ephemera collectables. He was very knowledgeable about the subject. He lived with his collection, which was never organised, in a garret in Notting Hill, choosing but few creature comforts. He died in 1992. The collection, which was more in the nature of a personal accumulation, is largely dispersed now.

The print is glued on to a sheet of thin, cheapish, bright yellow paper, on the verso of which (see Figure 2) have been glued two seemingly unrelated and unsigned prints, which are etchings<sup>3</sup> by Robert Seymour (1798–1836) (Heseltine, 2004), whose fame now rests mainly on his illustrations for the first part of Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers*. Both images have been slightly cropped, and neither image has anything on its verso. The images are entitled *Peter Simple’s Foreign Adventure No. 1*, and *A Musical Festival*.

<sup>1</sup> At least one other of Marks’ published prints, number 8 in his *Military Costumes* series, of 1831 (“Enniskillen or 6<sup>th</sup>”), has “1<sup>D</sup> plain” in the lower left corner, and “Price 3<sup>D</sup> col<sup>d</sup>” in the lower right corner (see [www.sandersofoxford.com/images/stock/8927.jpg](http://www.sandersofoxford.com/images/stock/8927.jpg)). Other prints by Marks give the price of two pence coloured. The first reference in the OED to “penny plain and twopence coloured style” (“Originally used with reference to prints of characters sold for toy theatres, costing one penny for black-and-white ones, and twopence for coloured ones”) is from 1854. A much earlier use of the phrase is in the toy theatre prints published by William West in the early 1800s as “penny plain, and twopence coloured” (Robinson & Powell, 2004, p. 10). Somewhat surprisingly, the first reference to the phrase in *The Times* is as late as Dec 15th 1880 in an article on Christmas Cards.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to Anthony Griffiths for this opinion.

<sup>3</sup> Seymour was originally a wood engraver (Engen, 1985), around 1827 he learnt copper engraving (Maidment, 1996), and from 1830 onwards he was using lithography (Heseltine, 2004).



**Figure 2.** The verso of *A Left Handed Compliment* showing the two prints by Robert Seymour, both of which have been slightly cropped. To view this figure in colour, please visit the online version of this Journal.

Individual prints from *Sketches by Seymour* were published by Richard Carlile between 1834 and 1836 (Maidment, 1996).<sup>4</sup> After Seymour's tragic, early death in 1836, the sketches were published in book form with appended text and verses in five volumes as *Seymour's Sketches: Illustrated in Prose and Verse by Alfred Crowquill* (Seymour, 1838), Crowquill being the pseudonym of Alfred Forrester, with editions appearing until at least 1878, when they were steel engraved.<sup>5</sup> The full text of an undated version is available online at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).<sup>6</sup> Although the Carlile prints are

<sup>4</sup> For examples of the Carlile plates see [www.pbagalleries.com/search/item\\_img.php?acq\\_no=173410](http://www.pbagalleries.com/search/item_img.php?acq_no=173410) where it is clear that the typography is different from the versions in the book, and there are also two images on a single printed sheet. The BM catalogue has a copy of *Peter Simple's Foreign Adventure No. 1*, described as an etching, catalogued as 2006,0929,40, dated 1834–1836 and of size 130 × by 107 mm. See [www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx). The BM does not appear to have a copy of *A Musical Festival*.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.antiqueprints.com/proddetail.php?prod=f9529>.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.gutenberg.org/files/5650/5650-h/p4.htm#Odd17%20Peter%201](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5650/5650-h/p4.htm#Odd17%20Peter%201) and [www.gutenberg.org/files/5648/5648-h/5648-h.htm#Odd27%20Musical](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5648/5648-h/5648-h.htm#Odd27%20Musical) for versions of the images discussed here.

similar in content to the same titles in *Seymour's Sketches*, the typography in the two versions is different and there are also minor differences in the images, suggesting that those in *Seymour's Sketches* are in a later state.<sup>7</sup> The versions on the verso of *A Left Handed Compliment* are presumably those of the Carlile or perhaps an earlier edition.

How the Marks and Seymour prints came together is not clear. One possibility is that the yellow paper is from a nineteenth-century commonplace book,<sup>8</sup> and that they were either acquired from a chapman, or were a printer's commonplace book. The fact that the Seymours are cropped through their printed matter, and the yellow paper does not extend beyond the edge of the Marks print, except in the rounded top corners, along with the Marks print being cropped very slightly (the "d" of "handed" is incomplete), suggests that some previous owner, probably in the nineteenth century, had wished to frame *A Left Handed Compliment*, and cared little for the Seymours attached to it. The importance for the present paper is that the Seymour images and *A Left Handed Compliment* were presumably all at some time in the hands of a common source, either a seller of prints, a collector of prints, or perhaps someone involved in the London printing world of the late 1820s or more likely the 1830s. A later owner presumably did not recognise any interest in the Seymour prints, since they have been cropped.

*A Left Handed Compliment* was identified as being by J. Lewis Marks, the initials "J L M" being consistent with other prints by him, as also was the style of the lettering, and in 2007 the print was seen at the British Museum by Sheila O'Connell, the author of *The popular print in England* (O'Connell, 1999), and the attribution confirmed. The museum has an extensive collection of other items by Marks from 1814 to 1832, although it is difficult to estimate the extent of his total output, not least because, as a note in the BM collection says, unsigned works published by him always seem actually to have been etched by him. However, the Museum collection does not include a copy of *A Left Handed Compliment*, and neither did this print seem to be a part of any series in their collection.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the 1838 edition images have an inscription at the bottom saying either, "Etched by H. Wallis from a sketch by Seymour" or "Eng.<sup>d</sup> by Ha. Wallis from a sketch of Seymour's". It is possible therefore that Wallis also added to some of the other etchings, which are presumably by Seymour himself.

<sup>8</sup> For a good example of a late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century scrapbook with a number of political and other cartoons, see the "Green Marble Scrapbook" at <http://www.crcstudio.arts.ualberta.ca/heritage/index.php>. For histories of the social context of prints and caricatures, see George (1959b, pp. 174–177) on the role of print shops, and George (1959a, pp. 257–260) on the rise in the early 1830s of the coloured lithograph, and of scrapbooks.

J. Lewis Marks, as he is usually known (or sometimes JL Marks or Lewis Marks; the J has been said to stand for ‘John’<sup>9</sup>) has been described as one of the most radical of the late Georgian political caricaturists who attacked the Prince Regent who was subsequently to become George IV (Press, 1977). Marks’s radicalism is well seen in a cartoon from 1819, “The massacre at Peterloo! as a Specimen of English Liberty” (Bayly, 2004). However, while Marks as a caricaturist, cartoonist and illustrator makes his presence readily visible in a host of illustrations over perhaps two decades, as an individual he is extremely elusive. The website of the National Portrait Gallery in London merely says of him, “J.L. Marks (floruit 1814–1832)” with no information on dates of birth or death, and on the internet, the Davidson Galleries have him as “fl. c. 1800–1830”.<sup>10</sup> The NPG’s date of 1814 is compatible with a set of etchings dated at 1814, entitled *Something concerning Nobody. Edited by Somebody. Embellished with fourteen characteristic etchings*.<sup>11</sup> Other works of reference are mostly silent (with the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* making no mention of Marks, despite having entries on James Gillray, George Cruikshank and Robert Seymour). The extremely brief, seventeen line entry in the *Dictionary of British Cartoonists and Caricaturists* says only that he flourished, “1814–32”, appearing as a designer in 1814,<sup>12</sup> and a publisher of political caricatures in 1817, and that his last, “trenchantly pro-Reform” prints appeared in 1832 (Bryant & Heneage, 1994). Contrary to those sources though, the dealer Marilyn Pink has items by him dated 1836, and images such as those at [www.arthouseonline.co.uk/e1.htm](http://www.arthouseonline.co.uk/e1.htm) are clearly signed and dated on the plate as May 1st, 1837, and as well as that, in 1839 there are theatrical images.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the very fine image by Marks of the fire at the Tower of London,<sup>14</sup> on October 30th, 1841, and published from Long Lane, Smithfield, shows that he was still active into the 1840s. Amongst the very limited biographical information available is that Marks published from several

<sup>9</sup> The only source which seems to suggest this is the recent reprint of *The Adventures of Paul Pry and His Young Friend in London*, which is dated to 1835, and attributed to John Lewis Marks (Marks, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> As will be seen, the 1800 is not possible.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.skreb.co.uk/caricature.php> The sepia etchings were published in London by Robert Scholey. However a similar set of etchings are sometimes attributed to George Moutard Woodward, although he died in 1809.

<sup>12</sup> George (1959a, p. 263) describes him also as, “Publisher of theatrical prints (Toy Theatre) by himself . . .”. These may be the undated toy theatre sheets published by Marks in New York (see <http://www.nypl.org/research/lpa/the/pdf/theweyhe.pdf>).

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.dramatispersonae.com/ST.htm>. Also [http://www.catalogue-host.co.uk/mallams/oxford/2007-03-09/lot\\_8?prev\\_page=illustrations%2c%20page%201%20of%203&prev\\_url=%2fmallams%2foxford%2f2007-03-09%2fillustrations\\_1](http://www.catalogue-host.co.uk/mallams/oxford/2007-03-09/lot_8?prev_page=illustrations%2c%20page%201%20of%203&prev_url=%2fmallams%2foxford%2f2007-03-09%2fillustrations_1). The quality is distinctly less than that in the earlier prints, and it may be that Marks is only the publisher of these images.

<sup>14</sup> The image can be seen at the website of the Bridgeman Art Library in New York (<http://images.bridgeman.co.uk/cgi-bin/bridgemanImage.cgi/600.GHL.86290.7055475/6089.JPG>).

London addresses, including “17 Artillery Street, Bishopsgate”, “Sandy’s Row, Bishopsgate”, and “No 37, Princes St, Soho”. In 1850, Marks was publishing children’s books such as *Puss in Boots* and *Blue Beard*, the back cover of which says “A GREAT VARIETY/OF/CHILDREN’S BOOKS;/PAMPHLETS/THEATRICAL/CHARACTERS/CARICATURES,/PRINTS/PLAIN AND COLOURED/ALWAYS ON SALE/AT/J. L. Marks, 91, Long Lane/Smithfield”,<sup>15</sup> an address at which Todd’s *Directory* suggests Marks was printing from 1836 to 1857 (Todd, 1972).

Census records are now readily available on the internet, and a search of census records for 1851 finds a John Lewis Marks, aged 55, and hence born in about 1796, described as a “victualler and publisher”, living at 2 Long Lane, Aldersgate, with his wife Sarah (aged 45), and children Maria, Benjamin and Mary, aged 18, 15 and 8. Two years earlier, on Oct 20th, 1849, the license for the Portland Arms, in Long Lane, had been transferred to a “John Lewis Marks”.<sup>16</sup> The 1841 census has a record for “John Marks”, aged 45, described as an Engraver, living at 91 Long Lane, St Bartholomew the Great, with his wife Sarah, aged 35, and nine other members of the Marks family, Rachel, Jacob (himself described as an engraver), Isaac, Hannah, Maria, Louisa, Nathaniel, and Benjamin (aged 19,15,14,12,10, 8, 5 and 3), as well as a three-day-old son as yet unnamed; whether all of these are John and Sarah’s children is not stated, but is possible. A search of London marriage records found that a John Marks married a Sarah Tibble at St George’s, Bloomsbury, in 1836, but it is unclear if this is our Marks, although it could be. There is no record in the 1861 or subsequent census for any John Marks of the right age living in London, and the Portland Arms at 2 Long Lane was now being run by a Peter Jupp.<sup>17</sup> A search of nineteenth-century death records found no obvious candidate for John Lewis Marks, and although several John Marks were found, none were of the right age. Probably what can be concluded is that Marks lived from 1795 to 1796 to somewhere between about 1857 and 1861.

Marks was clearly a prolific illustrator, and was also very inventive, his “The progress of Boney !!!”<sup>18</sup> of about 1817 being one of the earliest strip cartoons, which is notable not only for its imaginative use of stick figures (Kunzle, 1973), but also for Marks’s love of exclamation marks (albeit he

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.cts.dmu.ac.uk/AnaServer?hockliffe+1195+hocccview.anv>. The website also comments that “William B. Todd’s *A Dictionary of Printers* locates Marks at this address from 1836 to 1857”. For a more complete list of children’s books see the back page of <http://www.archive.org/details/marksshhistoryofa00londiala>.

<sup>16</sup> “Transfer of Licenses”, *The Era (London)*, Oct 28th, 1849, issue 579. (Available online from the British Library’s *Nineteenth Century British Library Newspapers*.)

<sup>17</sup> As in the 1859 *Post Office Street Directory*, although in the 1852 *Post Office Street Directory* the Portland Arms is still listed as “John L. Marks”.

<sup>18</sup> See [www.flickr.com/photos/deathtogutenberg/423202004/in/set-72157600003169123/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/deathtogutenberg/423202004/in/set-72157600003169123/)

was not alone in that). Although *A Left Handed Compliment* is subtitled, “N<sup>o</sup>. XII”, it is not clear whether this is the twelfth in a series of illustrations of left-handed compliments, or is twelfth in a more general series. What does seem to be clear, though, is that Marks and others did publish series of themed prints, of which this is likely to be one. Others of Marks’ series include *Illustrations of Plays* (of which number 17 is in the British Museum), *Military Costumes*, and *Double Entendres*.

A major interest of *A Left Handed Compliment* is what it tells us about the perception of left-handedness at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and an immediate question of interest concerns the handedness of Marks and also Seymour. The handedness of an artist can usually be determined in drawings by looking at the hatch marks made when shading, these typically running from bottom-left to top-right in right-handers (////) and from bottom-right to top-left in left-handers (\\\\). A good example of the hatchmarks of an undoubted left-hander can be seen in the drawings of Adolph Menzel (Maaz, 2008). An important complication arises when prints are being made. Traditionally prints such as wood cuts, wood engravings, etchings and the like, are made by making marks on a surface and the ink is then transferred from the surface to the paper, with the result that marks on the surface become mirror-reversed on the paper (and artists from the Renaissance onwards have evolved techniques for the reversal of images—see Bury, 1996). The important implication for present purposes is that on any such print the hatch marks of a right-hander, particularly since hatch marks are the most automatic of the marks used in representation, would slope in the opposite direction to that on a pencil or other drawing (i.e., they would slant \\\\). A further complication though, that cannot be ignored, is that some engravers used a mirror while working, to help in reversing the image.

A subtle but important complication arises with lithographs. In their simplest form, as invented by Alois Senefelder in Munich in 1796, a lithographic image is drawn onto a stone (or metal) block, and the image becomes reversed when ink is applied and the block pressed against the paper. However, Senefelder also developed what is known as “transfer lithography”, in which the drawing is first done on a sheet of specially prepared paper which is then pressed against the stone, transferring the image to the stone, so that the image is then transferred to the paper; for a good history of the importance of the technique, see Twyman (2001). The double contact process means that the image on the sheet of paper is printed without left-right reversal. The technique was first mentioned briefly in English in the 1816 edition of Bankes’ *Lithography* (Twyman, 1976). As Raucort (1820, p. 27) later explained, in the 1820 English translation of his *Manual of Lithography*, “The necessity of reversing both writing and drawings on the stone, has made the use of [transfer] paper indispensable

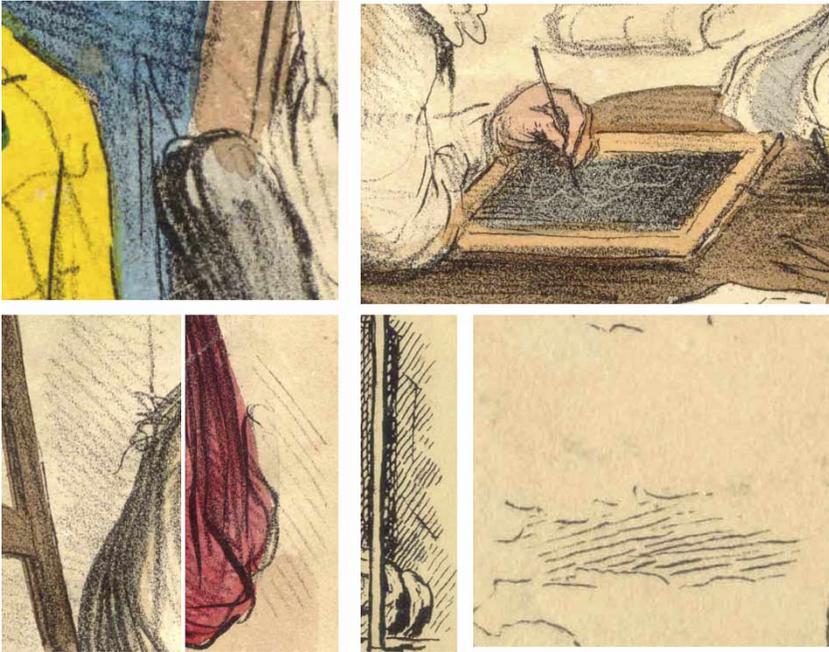
to all those who are not in the habit of writing reversed". The commercial advantages of transfer lithography were enormous, for as Bryans (2000) says, it, "solved the difficulty of printing picture and text separately", particularly for complex printing such as of music, of maps, of non-Roman characters, of scientific diagrams, and of large amounts of text within images, since the artist or illustrator did not have to be able to write or draw in a mirror direction, with its high likelihood of error. Large numbers of illustrators therefore used transfer lithography, so much so that even though Senefelder's monograph was not published until 1818, "he reported that transfer lithography was already popular with jobbing printers for handwritten lettering ..." (Gascoigne, 2004, 20.a). Marks undoubtedly produced lithographs from at least 1818, his *Found it out; or, a German P- humbuged*, saying at the bottom, "Inv.d Drawn & Printed from stone! by J.L.Marks No.2 Sandy's Row Artillery St. Bishopsgate".<sup>19</sup> There is however no clear evidence that he ever used transfer lithography.

In *A Left Handed Compliment*, the hatch marks around the right hand side of the grandmother's dress, in the chair back, and at the back beneath the clock are all running from top left to bottom right (\\) (see Figure 3), which in a drawing would be typical of the marks drawn by a left-hander. Assuming that the print is a conventional lithograph (and expert opinion suggests it is not a transfer lithograph), then the print would have been reversed in the printing, and so we can probably conclude that Marks was right-handed, and therefore is probably not making some veiled personal comment on the treatment of left-handers in society.<sup>20</sup> Intriguingly, however, the cross-hatchings in the Seymour wood engravings that somehow came to be attached to the back of *A Left Handed Compliment*, can be seen to run in large part from top right to bottom left (//) (see Figure 3), as would also seem to be the case in other Seymour engravings. The implication, since the engravings would have been reversed, is that Seymour may well have been left-handed.<sup>21</sup> Given also that it seems likely that Seymour and Marks would have known one another in the close world of radical Georgian publishing (and Seymour and George Cruikshank were certainly close friends (Heseltine, 2004)), then Marks may have been making some sort of comment on Seymour's handedness.

<sup>19</sup> See also *Bess and her R-l humbug* of 1818 (BM Satires 12992).

<sup>20</sup> A potential problem is that not all of the hatch marks in Marks' drawings are consistent. On the British Museum website, some of the early images of 1817 and 1818 appear to show // hatches (e.g., BM 12876, 12990, 12991, 12992, 12989, which are between 1817 and 1818, whereas several of the *Doubles Entendres* series of 1832 seem to have \\ hatching.

<sup>21</sup> The assumption is of course that Seymour engraved these images himself. Some of his earlier prints were however wood engraved by George Dorrington (Engen, 1985, p. 233).



**Figure 3.** Anti-clockwise from top right: details from *A Left Handed Compliment* (the slate and drawing instrument; the needle held in the left hand through the stocking; hatching from beside the chair back; and hatching beside the grandmother's dress); and hatching from Seymour's *A Musical Festival*, and Peter Simple's *Foreign Adventures, N°. 1*. To view this figure in colour, please visit the online version of this Journal.

The phrase, “A left-handed compliment”, is only first described in the Oxford English Dictionary as coming from 1881. Earlier usages are however easy to find, and there was a cartoon in *Punch* in 1853 entitled *A left-handed compliment*.<sup>22</sup> The first usage of the phrase in *The Times* is on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1791:

The MAJESTY OF FRANCE, with all that divinity supposed to hedge a King, could only procure a feat on the LEFT hand of Mons. Le President—with all the subsequent VIVE LE ROI's! of the National Assembly, surely this was but at best a kind of LEFT HANDED compliment. (Spelling modernised)

Although the next usage in *The Times* was not until June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1847, those two usages bracket Marks's print, and other early nineteenth-century examples can readily be found in archives such as Google Books. Searching *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* finds but a single use of the phrase, which is from 1768, in William Donaldson's novel, *The life and adventures of*

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.john-leech-archive.org.uk/1853/left-handed-compliment.htm>

*Sir Bartholomew Sapskull, Baronet* (Donaldson, 1768), where the King grants the right to have Concord on a coat of arms, but it is felt that because “she is placed on the sinister side, that Concord was intended as a left-handed compliment” (p. 104). A search of *19th Century British Library Newspapers* and *19th Century UK periodicals* finds, for instance, uses in *The Liverpool Mercury* of March 28th, 1823 and Dec 31st, 1824. The phrase itself seems to be uncomplicated in general,<sup>23</sup> for as Ira Wile says, “No one can mistake the irony of the reproach in a left-handed compliment” (Wile, 1934, p. 42) (although unfortunately Wile says nothing about the origins of the expression). Occasionally the ironic or sarcastic reversal of the normal meaning of a phrase, is compounded, as in both examples above, with the added effect of a more literal use of left or right. We can probably conclude that in the early decades of the nineteenth century the phrase was being used in its modern sense.

The most mysterious part of *A Left Handed Compliment* concerns the nature of the compliment itself and the grandmother’s shocked response. The young boy is clearly drawing on his slate with his left hand, and the faint image on the plate is compatible with the drawing being of the grandmother. The grandmother herself has her left hand inside a stocking which is being darned, that being a typical way for a right-hander to sew or darn. In a nice touch, the very fine needle can also be seen to be held, through the sock, by the left hand (see Figure 3). Clearly the boy has said or intimated something that has shocked the grandmother, causing her to throw up her arms, and she says, “Mercy on us Child! what could put such an idea into your head?”. What that idea is though, is less than clear. The boy has said, “Now Granny, sit still; and I’ll just see if I can’t touch off your old Phizog left handed”. We presume that this is a family scene, and that drawing the grandmother would be easier if the model stays still (but then she probably would have been still if she were darning). The tricky bit is the expression, “I’ll just see if I can’t touch off your old Phizog left handed”. The inclusion of “left handed” perhaps implies that although the boy is drawing with his left hand, that may not be the normal way in which he draws, and therefore the drawing will not be as good as usual. If so, though, it is difficult to see why the grandmother is quite so shocked. However, just as “left-handed” means a reversal of normal proprieties and an inversion of sense and relationship, as in

<sup>23</sup> However an additional usage of the phrase, both literal and metaphorical, is also found repeatedly in the reports in, say, *Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* of June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1828, where of a prize fight between pugilists it is reported, “Each stopped a left-handed compliment” (presumably a left hook to the jaw); a similar usage occurs 20 years later, when the same periodical reports, “Martin . . . delivered a good left-handed compliment on his [opponent’s] brow” (*ibid.*, Oct 1<sup>st</sup>, 1848). This usage does not seem to be in the *OED*. It also bears mention that the same sources often also refer to the face as the “phizog”.

“left-handed compliment” itself, or in a host of other expressions such as a left-handed marriage (a morganatic marriage), a left-handed wife (a concubine), a left-handed sugar-bowl (a chamber pot), a left-handed cigarette (one containing marijuana), a left-handed bricklayer (a freemason), or simply “left-handed” (a term for homosexual), so it might be that in *A Left Handed Compliment* something similar is happening.

The earliest entry in the OED to “Physog” is to F. Grose’s *Lexicon Balatronicum* [subtitled: A Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit and Pickpocket Eloquence]: “Physog, the face. A vulgar abbreviation of physiognomy”. And there are then frequent uses throughout the nineteenth century. “Physiognomy” was also in frequent use throughout the eighteenth century, Eighteenth Century Collections Online finding it in 3546 works, 97 of them being within the first decade, and interest in it going back many centuries earlier. “Physiognomy” was also used, in examples in the OED from 1483 to 1603, as is itself a term for “A representation of a face; a portrait”.

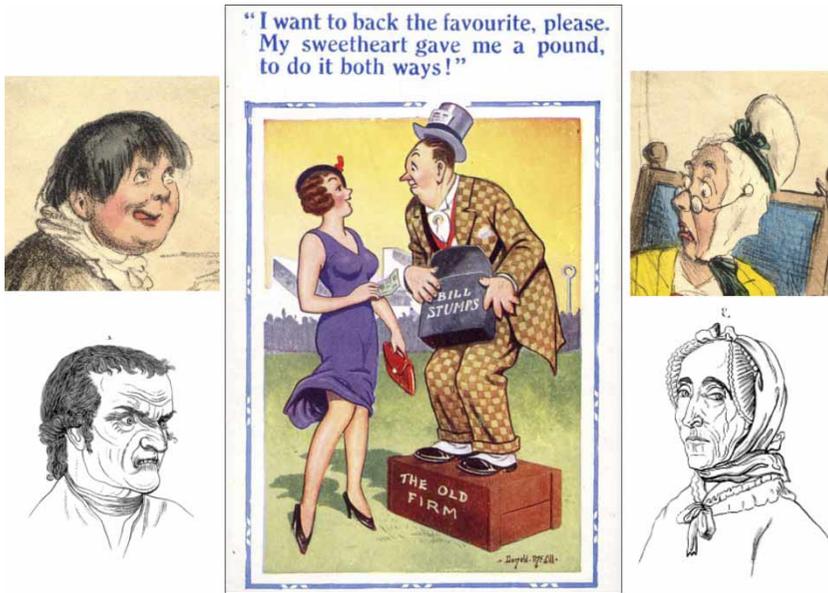
Physiognomy as a pseudo-science was popular from ancient through mediaeval times, and perhaps reached its heyday in the eighteenth century, with the publication of Johann Kaspar Lavater’s *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, published between 1775 and 1778, and translated into English in 1789 as the *Essays on Physiognomy designed to promote the knowledge and the love of mankind*. Given Marks’s reference to Phizog, it is intriguing that in many ways both of the faces in *A Left Handed Compliment* could have come from Lavater’s *Physiognomy* (and perhaps have been adapted by Marks for that very purpose). The grandmother is remarkably similar to the third figure on Plate 77 of Lavater<sup>24</sup> (see Figure 4), for which the text says,

The most accurate female housewifery: the forehead entirely feminine; the nose indicative of household discretion; the eye sharply attentive; the mouth kind, but strictly economical; the undulation of the jawbone as effeminate as possible; all the wrinkles express good sense, confined within a small domestic circle.

Indeed the grandmother is, in some ways, a stock figure who appears in many contexts (and see for instance G. M. Woodward’s “The dutiful grandson” of 1792,<sup>25</sup> or George Cruikshank’s “The age of intellect” of 1828, or indeed for that matter, the Old Woman in the plate entitled *The Bumpkin* in volume 3 of *Seymour’s Sketches*). The first decade of the nineteenth century saw British artists looking back to small-scale seventeenth-century

<sup>24</sup> The figures are taken from Digital Lavater at [www.newcastle.edu.au/department/fad/fi/lavater/](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/fad/fi/lavater/), and are based on the 4th edition of Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy*, translated by Thomas Holcroft, London, ca. 1844.

<sup>25</sup> A copy is in the National Archive, catalogue D5459/2/3/1. See [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/A2A/records.aspx?cat=026-d5459&cid=-1&Gsm=2008-06-18](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/A2A/records.aspx?cat=026-d5459&cid=-1&Gsm=2008-06-18)



**Figure 4.** Centre: Post card by Donald McGill (obtained from [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:McGill\\_betting.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:McGill_betting.jpg)), along with (top right and top left) details of the heads from *A Left Handed Compliment*, showing the similarity in the expressions. Bottom left and right show two of the physiognomic heads from Lavater, which have been left-right reversed from the original to match better the two figures in *A Left Handed Compliment*. To view this figure in colour, please visit the online version of this Journal.

Dutch domestic works (Solkin, 2008, pp. 37–77), and genre paintings such as David Wilkie’s “The Cut Finger”, Thomas Heaphy’s “The Family Doctress” and James Northcote’s “The Village Doctress” all feature elderly women wearing similar bonnets and, in the case of the latter two paintings, with glasses perched on their noses, of a type which both Seymour and Marks have here satirised.

In contrast, Marks’s boy, while not quite looking lascivious, does look up to some sort of mischief with the strange position of his tongue and his ruddy face. He could well be a younger version of the first figure on the same plate (see Figure 4), for which Lavater says,

Corrupt rudeness, and malignity, contemning morals. Natural power degenerates into obstinacy, in the forehead. Affection is far distant from this countenance. Insensibility usurps the place of courage, and meanness the seat of heroism. Alas! what must thy sufferings be ere thou shalt be purified equal to thy original destination! The thing most pitiable in this countenance is an expression of the conscious want of power to acquire the degree of malignity it may wish, or affect to possess.

An additional twist on Phizog is that it is also close to the nineteenth-century expression “phiz-gig”, defined in Partridge as “An old woman dressed young”, but also, which becomes relevant with the meaning of “touch off” (see below), as “A pyramid of moistened gunpowder, which, on ignition, fuses but does not flash” (Partridge & Simpson, 1973). “Phiz-gig” isn’t in the OED.

Finally, while discussing “Phizog”, it surely bears mentioning that the most well known of Dickens’ illustrators, Hablot Knight Browne (1815–1882), used the pseudonym Phiz throughout his career, starting while working on the *The Pickwick Papers* (published 1837) (Patten & Lester, 2004). In 1836, although only aged 21 and running his own studio, and after Robert Seymour committed suicide in 1836, it was Dickens who suggested that Browne become his new illustrator. Browne, who was clearly very talented as a young man and whose father was also a talented artist, had lived mostly in London, and for a while attended the Life School in St Martin’s Lane. Again, given the small world of London illustrators, is it possible that the talented young man in Marks’s drawing relates to the artist who was to become Phiz? One detail which may support that interpretation is that “Phizog” in the print’s caption is capitalised, suggesting that it is meant to be associated with a proper name. Although the standard story for Phiz’s pseudonym is that the name went harmoniously with Dickens’ own pseudonym of Boz (Patten & Lester, 2004), it is perhaps possible that the artist named himself Phiz, or perhaps was so named by his friends, because of his talents as a “phiz-maker”—a “maker of grimaces”, although grimaces made not with the face but with the pencil. As Jane Cohen has said, “the old humorous, colloquial abbreviation of physiognomy [was] an appropriate pseudonym for one who excelled in capturing facial expressions with a few deft strokes” (p. 63). If a young Browne is indeed being referred to, then a crucial detail is that Browne would appear to have been right-handed (as shown, for instance, in the hatching of the pencil sketches in Cohen (1980, pp. 92–93). If a young Browne is indeed featured in *A Left Handed Compliment*, then his normal handedness has presumably been intentionally reversed for some humorous purpose.

The phrase “touch off” is an interesting one. Although originally used in the sense of firing off a cannon or musket, by the mid-eighteenth century the OED shows it was also being used in the sense of “representing exactly”, a meaning clearly germane to drawing, and also in the sense of taking the measure of someone so that they can be conned, which may perhaps relate to the intentions of the boy in the picture. Given the ways in which prepositions subtly modify verbs in English it is not surprising that “Touch off” is also closely allied to “touch up”, for which three meanings are given in the OED. “To improve, finish, or modify by adding touches or light strokes”, is clearly related to touching off a likeness. The second meaning includes, “to rouse

the emotions of”, and the third meaning is explicitly sexual, coming from Grose’s *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, of 1785, where it is defined as, “to touch up a woman; to have carnal knowledge of her”, and Partridge defines it as, “to caress intimately in order to inflame (a person to the sexual act)”. The closeness to “touch up” suggests that “touch off” may also have sexual connotations, perhaps allied to setting off an explosion, such as that of an orgasm, a usage that later appeared in Nabokov’s novel *Ada or Ardor*, where the author talks of how an encounter might “touch off internal fires”.

The drawing in the picture is being made on what looks like a slate of the sort used by children in school. One might therefore expect that the writing instrument would be chalk, but this instrument appears to be dark in colour, and quite thin, and may therefore be a slate pencil, which also leaves a pale line on the slate.<sup>26</sup> In the present context, the sexual connotations of the instrument cannot be ignored. “Pencil” is, of course, derived from the Latin *peniculus*, which means a little penis, and according to *Grose’s Dictionary*, a nib or neb, is “the slit of a pen”, and figuratively is, “the face and mouth of a woman; as, She holds up her neb: she holds up her mouth to be kissed” (and “slit” as OED also says, is itself a slang term for the vulva). Finally, it is possible that the drawing medium is meant to be an engraving plate, covered in a black ground to make the image more visible, and the thin instrument is an etching needle. Is it perhaps possible that the compliment is being paid to a fellow left-handed engraver, who might be Seymour? That the drawing is indeed on an engraving plate might be supported by the picture on the rear wall, which looks remarkably like an image of the grandmother, but with black lines on white (i.e., either printed or drawn with pencil on paper), which may be an earlier work by the boy (and hence the reference to, “*Now Granny sit still, . . .*” (our emphasis).

Throughout this article the implication has been made that Marks had included an explicitly sexual sub-text to *A Left Handed Compliment*. That suggestion is supported by an awareness of a growing market at the beginning of the nineteenth century in obscene images, both politically motivated, and also simply for their pornographic value. In an influential historical article by McCalman (1984) entitled “Unrespectable radicalism: Infidels and pornography in early nineteenth-century London”, it is interesting that although he is not mentioned by name in the article, Marks was responsible for three of the seven plates illustrating the piece. One print of circa 1820 shows Lord Conyngham discovering that his wife was the mistress of the King (see also Colligan, 2005); a second dated June 1820, ironically entitled “Chastity!” showed the Prince Regent seated on the laps

<sup>26</sup> See <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/images/oversite/store/catalog4/slate-pencil.jpg> and also [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slate\\_%28writing%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slate_%28writing%29), where it says that a slate pencil “is a rod made of soft slate, soapstone, or pressed clay, which makes a thin white line on the slate”.

of two skimpily glad, buxom women; and a third, which was anti-clerical as well as anti-Royalist, was dated April–May 1821 and showed Lady Conyngham having her left breast squeezed by a tonsured George IV who promises her absolution. (A further cartoon by Marks featuring Lady Conyngham can be found in Kaellgren (1992), and a detailed account of the Queen Caroline affair can be found, along with another engraving by Marks of George IV wanting to be proclaimed a cuckold so that he could then obtain a divorce, can be found in Hunt (1991)). As the McCalman article says, “during [1820–1821] London’s radical and gutter presses had poured out salacious prints, pamphlets, songs and chap-books, many of them lampooning the sexual habits of the Prince Regent”, where it is made clear that cartoons inspired by political radicalism, particularly during 1820–1821 in the face of the sexual scandals surrounding the Prince Regent, were bordering into the below-the-counter world of frank pornography (McCalman, 1984). Including sexual content or innuendo in *A Left Handed Compliment* would not therefore have been out of character for Marks, whom the print historian Dorothy George described as being, amongst his contemporaries, the “least hampered by considerations of propriety” and possessing “a seeming love of vulgarity for its own sake” (Bryant & Heneage, 1994).

A final intriguing possibility, which was stimulated by finding the census records for Marks, is that *A Left Handed Compliment* is precisely what it seems to be—a charming domestic scene, faithfully recorded, in a household where books were certainly being read. The census records of 1841 show that Jacob Marks, the oldest child in the household, who was by then already recorded as an engraver by trade<sup>27</sup> was then 15 years old, and hence in 1831 or 1832, when *A Left Handed Compliment* was produced, would have been about five or six years old. If so, then perhaps the boy in the picture is indeed Marks’ own son—a son who later clearly had at least some talent for drawing—who perhaps was already drawing on a slate, and perhaps drawing his grandmother. And maybe he was indeed left-handed. And as is often the case in families, perhaps the child had innocently produced his double entendre, and the father recorded the scene as a family joke.

Taken overall, *A Left Handed Compliment* is an intriguing image, with its connections to Marks and those other great illustrators Robert Seymour and Hablot Browne. It can also be seen as being in a tradition of risqué, saucy images with sexual overtones, often relying on words or phrases having alternative meanings, that within popular British culture culminated in the saucy seaside postcards of Donald McGill (1875–1962). The example of

<sup>27</sup> A search of the later census records finds no evidence for Jacob Marks, and certainly not for anyone of that name whose trade was engraver. It seems probable therefore that he did not have a career that followed in Lewis Marks’s footsteps.

McGill's work that is shown in Figure 4 and was used in McGill's obscenity trial in 1954, has many of the same properties as *A Left Handed Compliment*—the young, apparent innocent on the left, using an expression rich in sexual double entendre, and the expression on the face of the older man on the left which is reminiscent of the grandmother, both of whom clearly know enough to recognise the ambiguity of the statement; and of course the viewer also recognises the ambiguity, for thence comes the humour. In his famous essay on McGill, George Orwell commented that,

... at least half of McGill's post cards are sex jokes, and a proportion, perhaps ten per cent, are far more obscene than anything else that is now printed in England. Newsagents are occasionally prosecuted for selling them, and there would be many more prosecutions if the broadest jokes were not invariably protected by double meanings. A single example will be enough to show how this is done. In one post card, captioned "They didn't believe her", a young woman is demonstrating, with her hands held apart, something about two feet long to a couple of open-mouthed acquaintances. Behind her on the wall is a stuffed fish in a glass case, and beside that is a photograph of a nearly naked athlete. Obviously it is not the fish that she is referring to, but this could never be proved. ... [J]okes exactly like McGill's are the ordinary small change of the revue and music-hall stage, and are also to be heard on the radio, at moments when the censor happens to be nodding. ... In the past the mood of the comic post card could enter into the central stream of literature, and jokes barely different from McGill's could casually be uttered between the murders in Shakespeare's tragedies. That is no longer possible, and a whole category of humour, integral to our literature till 1800 or thereabouts, has dwindled down to these ill-drawn post cards, leading a barely legal existence in cheap stationers' windows.

Several of Marks's prints makes Orwell's point exactly, his 1816 print entitled "THOSE THAT WISH TO SEE A FULL MOON! MUST VISIT HYDE PARK ON A WINDY AFTERNOON".<sup>28</sup> A corpulent young lady in the park stands with her back to the wind, which is blowing the cloth of her dress tightly against her outstretched buttocks, to the shape of full moons, while the comments from various onlookers are invariably ambiguous with their emphasis on flatus, one emphasising the point by saying, "What a rude wind this is ...". Likewise, the British Museum has a series of prints entitled *Doubles Entendres*, of which there were at least six. Number two (BM 1951,0411.4.59) shows a young girl reaching up to take a pear from a tree, and, shockingly for the day, revealing her ankles and calves. The print is titled, "WHAT A FINE PEAR.", the ambiguity being rather over-emphasised by pear being spelled "~~P~~APEAR". The same basic joke was still

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.michaelfinney.co.uk/caricstock.htm#J%20Lewis%20Marks> where the print is identified as BM12842.

being used in the film *Carry on Doctor* (1967), where a character seeing the large-breasted Barbara Windsor eating a pear, comments, “Oh you’ve got a nice pear!”.

*A Left Handed Compliment* is, we believe, a part of that same vernacular, exuberantly scatological, literary stream which is found in abundance in Shakespeare, and is still a live part of oral culture, seen particularly well in stand-up comedians, and which thrives on sexual ambiguity and pornographic punning, in this case perhaps also with some personal humour directed at an associate of Marks. That the ambiguity itself derives from alternate readings of lateral references means that the humour itself is well described in several senses as “left-handed”.

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