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# Whitewashing Blackface Minstrelsy in Nineteenth-Century England: Female Banjo Players in 'Punch'

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## ***Whitewashing Blackface Minstrelsy in Nineteenth-Century England: Female Banjo Players in Punch***

*by Laura Vorachek*

Blackface minstrelsy, popular in England since its introduction in 1836, reached its apogee in 1882 when the Prince of Wales took banjo lessons from James Bohee, an African-American performer. The result, according to musicologist Derek Scott, was a craze for the banjo among men of the middle-classes (*Singing* 92). However, a close look at the periodical press, and the highly influential *Punch* in particular, indicates that the fad extended to women as well.<sup>1</sup> While blackface minstrelsy was considered a wholesome entertainment in Victorian England,<sup>2</sup> *Punch's* depiction of female banjo players highlights English unease with this practice in a way that male performance does not. Expanding our understanding of minstrel performance to include racial markers other than skin color—such as the banjo—provides a new avenue for considering the role gender plays in delineating both racial difference and English national identity in the nineteenth century. Critics have noted that contradictory cultural significations of class and nationality are bound up in the English performance of blackface minstrelsy, but their focus on male troupes neglects the way gender further complicates and unravels meaning.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "By the end of the late 1850s *Punch* had long since become one of Britain's central cultural institutions," read by "peers, politicians, and common readers alike" (Leary 1). *Punch's* humor was calculated to appeal broadly, and its images tended to be conservative. See Du Maurier (*Social* 81-82); see also Henry Miller, "John Leech and the Shaping of the Victorian Cartoon: The Context of Respectability" (*Victorian Periodicals Review* 42.3 [Fall 2009]: 267-91) on the respectability of *Punch's* cartoons.

<sup>2</sup> See also J. S. Bratton, "English Ethiopians: British Audiences and Black-Face Acts, 1835-1865" (*Yearbook of English Studies* 11 [1981]: 127-42); George Rehin, "Blackface Street Minstrels in Victorian London" (*Journal of Popular Culture* 15.1 [1981]: 19-38); and Brody, who contends that "the entire practice of blackface minstrelsy as it was performed in England had everything to do with the construction of Englishness as white" (85). Pickering argues that "British minstrelsy lent ideological support on racial grounds to the whole project of Empire . . . [but] cannot be confined to any core, unitary meaning" (xii). See also Scott, "Blackface Minstrels, Black Minstrels, and their Reception in England" (*Europe, Empire and Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century British Music*. Eds. Rachel Cowgill and Julian Rushton. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006: 265-80); Simon Featherstone, "The Blackface Atlantic: Interpreting British Minstrelsy" (*Journal of Victorian Culture* 3.2 [1998]: 234-51); Robert Nowatzki, *Representing African-Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2010); Douglas Lorimer, *Class and the Victorians: English attitudes to the Negro in the mid-century* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1978); and Vanessa Dickerson, *Dark Victorians* (Urbana and Chicago: U. Illinois P, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See Rehin, Bratton, Scott (*Singing* 81-92 and "Blackface"), Featherstone, and Pickering. White American women impersonating enslaved black women—in blackface or via dialect and gesture—in the early twentieth century signified "an elite status based on specialized

However, rather than affirming the whiteness of English national identity, women's attraction to the banjo threatens it by communicating a desire for non-white cultures and bodies.

Late-nineteenth-century *Punch* cartoons of women playing the banjo evince multiple anxieties, indicating that these illustrations do more than mock elite women for taking up an instrument connected to a popular entertainment form. A banjo in the hands of an upper-class woman was both incongruous and provocative due to the instrument's racial and working-class affiliations; it was associated with African and African-American culture, blackface minstrelsy, and the working classes who performed this entertainment on city streets, seaside resorts, and music hall stages. Thus a number of these cartoons seem to associate women, and particularly the adventurous New Woman, with threatening cultural categories. Indeed, female banjo players raise concerns that are not on display in *Punch* cartoons featuring middle- and upper-class white men playing the instrument. Cartoons with male banjo players tend to focus on the banjo's infiltration of the upper classes, often via the *nouveaux riches* who use the instrument to ingratiate themselves with an aristocracy eager to participate in the latest musical vogue. Alternately, the instrument lends caché to the male player by indicating his familiarity with the music hall and the street.<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on class mobility, whether one is climbing or slumming, brings attention to the banjo's function within the British social hierarchy; its African-American and blackface roots are not central to the humor of the cartoon. On the other hand, in representations of female players, the instrument's cultural and racial associations are usually alluded to through the cartoon's title, caption, or illustration itself. These references serve to allay anxieties about the New Woman's sexual and economic independence by associating her with a popular entertainment fad. However, the connection between upper-class women and low-brow blackface minstrelsy reveals anxieties about cultural miscegenation, as well as the adulteration of English art forms. Therefore, *Punch* cartoonists attempt to defuse these connections by couching women's banjo playing in terms of classical traditions in education, art, and music. In other words, they in effect *whitewash* these performances in order to maintain class, racial, and national differences, an attempt to reassert English culture that was not fully persuasive. The adoption of the banjo by the New Woman in particular raises the specter of racial miscegenation, her sexual liberty and infatuation with an element of black culture presenting the possibility of racial as well as cultural interbreeding. Thus, women's affinity for the banjo undermined English racial purity and national identity as white.

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racial knowledge that could only come from connections to the slave-owning past," a motive that does not apply to British women's blackface performances (McElya 64).

<sup>4</sup> See Du Maurier's "At Her Old Tricks Again" *Punch* 91 (Aug. 7, 1886): 70; "Country-House Pets" *Punch* 101 (Sept. 5, 1891): 114; "A Distinction with a Difference" *Punch* 78 (July 3, 1880): 303; "Mistress and Pupil" *Punch* 85 (June 7, 1883): 6; "Studies in Repartee" *Punch* 98 (Jan. 11, 1890): 15. See also "Child Chappie's Pilgrimage" *Punch* 85 (Aug. 11, 1883): 72.

### *The Banjo Craze in England*

While blackface minstrelsy enjoyed broad popularity and respectability from its debut, the minstrel's signature instrument had a longer road to propriety. Although blackface minstrel songs were a staple of middle-class home music-making, the banjo's association with this particular entertainment form kept it from being considered an appropriate drawing-room instrument for much of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> It was not until the Prince of Wales took up the instrument in 1882 that the banjo's tenuous hold on respectability was solidified.<sup>6</sup> In the decades that followed, the periodical press reported that "The banjo is all the 'rage' in high society, and our aristocrats seem prepared for any amount of the bones and burnt cork business" (*Lute* 90). Moreover, "you cannot go to a musical afternoon in the West-end, without finding that the banjo is used" ("Exeter" 125).<sup>7</sup> *The Musical News* reported on one such event on July 24, 1891: "At a fashionable concert recently given by the Duchess of Newcastle, at her residence in Hill Street, Berkeley Square, the programme included performances on the banjo" ("Comments" 420).<sup>8</sup> In 1889, *Bow Bells* breathlessly reported that "Prince Albert Victor is learning the banjo!" ("Society" 87), indicating that both the heir to the throne and his eldest son were banjo aficionados. Not surprisingly, during the 1880s and 1890s, advertisements selling banjos, lessons, instruction manuals, and sheet music proliferated, and a

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<sup>5</sup> The banjo and blackface minstrelsy were inextricably linked once Joel Sweeney brought the instrument to England as part of his act in 1843 (Pickering 12). Despite its associations with low-brow street culture, there was a drawing-room market for "wholesom[e]" minstrel songs (Scott, *Singing* 91). In 1871 *The Leisure Hour* noted that some minstrel songs can be heard in "the drawing-rooms of the rich as well as in the mean abodes of the very poor" ("Wandering" 600).

<sup>6</sup> By 1846, the *Theatrical Journal* noted the "the banjo is in the ascendant" ("To Correspondents" 96), and song books such as the *Banjo Songster, or Virginia and London Negro Melodist* were available for domestic use; by the 1860s, instruction manuals like *Christy Minstrels' Banjo Tutor* and *Chappell's Popular Banjo Tutor* were available, as were private lessons ("List of New Books." *Athenaeum* 1764 [1864]: 218). See also "Chappell's Cheap Works for Various Instruments" (Advertisement. *The Musical Times* [April 1, 1868]: 368). By 1873, the banjo was broaching upper social circles; *The Musical Standard* quoted "the celebrated English banjoist" R. Mason's claim that it "is rapidly increasing in popularity, and is now introduced in the most refined circles, who no longer consider it an instrument dedicated to negro minstrelsy only" ("Notes" [1873] 30). Yet two years later, *The Tonic Sol-Fa Reporter* contended that "the banjo [is] prohibited in polite society" ("Home Music" 177).

<sup>7</sup> See also "The Banjo" (1886); "Musical Exhibits at the Manchester Exhibition" (*Musical Opinion and Trade Review* 10.119 [Aug. 1887]: 515-56); and "The Banjo Craze" (*Musical Opinion and Trade Review* 12.133 [Oct. 1, 1888]: 26). *The Musical Times* refused to endorse the banjo—"that musical abortion" ("Coming" 599)—lumping it with such "eccentric instruments" as the Melocipede, a musical bicycle ("Songs" 20).

<sup>8</sup> *The Musical Standard* published a satiric piece about a piano recital hosted by the Duke of York, "to be enlivened by banjo solos by the Duchess of York"; the report was taken as fact and reprinted in English and foreign papers including *Bow Bells* and *Le Ménestrel* ("Crotchets" [1896] 40). See also *The Musical Standard* (Jan. 18, 1896).



number of journals sprang up to cater to the interest in the banjo and its sister instruments.<sup>9</sup>

While the fad for the banjo originated with men, it was not long before women took up the instrument as well.<sup>10</sup> On December 16, 1882, *The Saturday Review* noted:

It is with some regret that we hear rumours of the banjo becoming a favorite musical instrument in society; and with a view to checking the aspirations of those young ladies who are desirous of learning this instrument we have a suggestion to make. Why not learn the 'mandoline'? . . . it has none of the disadvantages of ugliness and twanginess of the banjo. ("New" 802)

Apparently few heeded *The Saturday Review's* advice, for *Musical Opinion and Trade Review* noted two years later that the banjo "has become the most popular society instrument now in use. Everybody seems to be learning it, and especially the ladies" ("Banjo Craze" 563). Some upper-class women took their banjos beyond the drawing room. At an amateur concert for the patients of the Brompton Hospital for Consumption, "the banjo band [was] represented by the Countess Cowper, the Hon. Mrs. Dalrymple, Miss Mary Liddel, [and] the Hon. Lionel Byng" ("Our Omnibus-Box" [1884] 223).<sup>11</sup> A few instrument makers attempted to capitalize on the female market, offering "the new instrument for ladies, the Banjoline" or a "ladies' special model" of the banjo (Banjo and Guitar Studio 459; *Musical Opinion* 50). By the 1890s, women were proficient enough on the instrument to offer lessons to others. On Nov. 1, 1891, *The Musical Times* ran an advertisement offering guitar and banjo lessons by a Miss Stable, "either at her own or pupil's residences" (Guitar and Banjo 645).

<sup>9</sup> *The Banjo World: A Journal Devoted to the Banjo, Mandoline, and Guitar* (Nov. 1893–Feb. 1917); *The Jo: A Chronicle of Banjo, Guitar, and Mandoline News* (from Feb. 1895), renamed *The Troubador* (June 1896–Dec. 1915); and *B.M.G. A Journal Devoted to Banjo, Mandoline and Guitar* (Oct. 1903–April 1976).

<sup>10</sup> Karen Linn attributes the banjo's popularity among American women in large part to "Lotta," or Carlotta Crabtree, a favorite performer on the New York stage in the 1860s–70s who performed in blackface (30).

<sup>11</sup> Other examples of women playing the banjo in public include the all-female Continental Variety and Ballet Troupe (Advertisement, *Era Almanack* [Jan. 1887]: 114); London recitalist Kate Sampey ("Miss Kate Sampey" [The Musical World 69.43 (Nov. 16, 1889): 815]; and also "Concerts" [The Musical World 70.46 (Nov. 15, 1890): 916–17]; the Chester sisters at the Theatre Royal in Leeds ("Music in the Provinces." *The Musical Standard* 44.1487 [Jan. 28, 1893]: 73–74); and the Birmingham Amateur Banjo, Mandolin, and Guitar Orchestra which consisted of 80 "ladies and gentlemen" ("Facts" 238). Numerous plays, such as "Jack in the Box," "The Coming Clown," and "Bob" featured actresses with banjo solos; for reviews, see "The Week" (*The Athenaeum* 3094 [Feb. 12, 1887]: 233); "Our Omnibus-Box" (*The Theatre* 9 [March 1887] 167–77); "December" (*Dramatic Notes* 9 [Jan. 1888]: 178–90); and C. Howard, "Bob." Review (*Theatre* 13 [Feb. 1, 1889]: 99–100).

*Judy: The London Serio-comic Journal* neatly encapsulates the history of the banjo's rise to prominence in England in "Euterpe and the Banjo" (Sept. 19, 1888). The cartoon depicts Euterpe's enchantment with the instrument when she comes across an African-American player in Ohio. She offers her discovery to those in the "Land of Society," but when they refuse her "vulgar" gift, she gives the instrument to the "lower orders," who "black their faces and thump away on it" ("Euterpe" 144). One day a "royal prince of the land" sees her play the banjo and decides to try it. After it becomes known that the prince can play, society takes up the instrument as well; "often the goddess would spend the afternoon graciously instructing some great lady of the land in her boudoir." Once royally sanctioned and adopted by the female sex, "the banjo became the national instrument." As the cartoon suggests, women played a primary role in the acceptance and proliferation of the banjo in the upper reaches of society.

Despite fashionable society's adoption of the banjo in the 1880s and 1890s, it never lost its affiliation with blackface minstrelsy. The instrument was connected for British audiences almost exclusively with African and African-American music during the nineteenth century. The *Saturday Review* remarked in 1884 that the banjo was "characteristic of the negro race" ("Banjo and Bones" 740), and the instrument was referred to variously as "the nigger guitar," the "nigger instrument," "the humble instrument of the Ethiopian," and "the national instrument of America, (the black part of it at least)" ("Electric" 360; "Banjo" 525; "Thalberg" 503; "How" 298). This range of epithets evidences how English audiences collapsed blackface performers (also known as "nigger minstrels" or "Ethiopian serenaders") with actual people of African descent (Negroes and black Americans) in discussions of the instrument. Nevertheless, at the peak of the banjo's popularity, several other origins were claimed for the instrument, including Arabian, Egyptian, Moorish, Indian, Indonesian (the Dutch East Indian town of Banjoemas), and European (Strolling 372; Temlett 5; Crane 570; One 339; "Impromptus" 161). *The Musical Standard* was critical of this last claim, made by the *Daily Telegraph*, noting "The writer of the article is careful to state that the banjo is not of negro origin, but no musician supposed it was; though the author must have drawn largely on his imagination when he put it on record that the banjo is 'unmistakably of European origin'" ("Impromptus" 161). Interestingly, while rejecting Europe as the birthplace of the banjo, *The Musical Standard* affirms that its genesis is not African. Notwithstanding these attempts to whitewash the instrument's creation, its association with blackface minstrelsy and minstrelsy's adulterated depiction of African-American culture remained strong. As one commentator noted in 1897, "we have never ceased to associate the banjo with negro minstrelsy" (One 339). Indeed, a few years later, Egbert Roberts admonished quartet singers to "Leave the poor banjo alone, it only reminds you of slavery days" (340). Thus, the banjo was never completely divested of its African roots in the English imagination. Because of this, the banjo itself

functioned as a marker of racial difference in much the same way as burnt cork. With this in mind, I turn to *Punch*'s cartoons featuring female banjo players.

### *The Banjo in Punch Cartoons*

"North and South" (Fig. 1), by George Du Maurier, provides the earliest depiction of a woman playing a banjo in *Punch*, its appearance in 1885 coinciding



Fig. 1 George Du Maurier, "North and South" *Punch* 89 (Sept. 12, 1885): 130.

with the instrument's rise to prominence among the upper classes and among women in particular. Thus, in Du Maurier's cartoon, Miss Brown "practices accompaniments" on an instrument currently very popular among fashionable society despite its "vulgar" associations with African-Americans and the "lower orders." In addition to reflecting the latest music fad, the cartoon also plays on the

geographical and cultural distinctions between North and South in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the latter, these terms continued to signify slaveholding southern states and abolitionist northern states well after the Civil War. In Great Britain, the North connotes the manufacturing provinces of northern England or Scotland, represented here by a man in a plaid kilt playing bagpipes, whereas the South is associated with both the idyllic countryside (as in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*) and the cosmopolitan metropolis of London, depicted in the young woman playing the instrument that was all the rage in English high society. However, Miss Brown's instrument also calls to mind the South of the United States, familiar to British audiences from the music and skits of blackface minstrels. Du Maurier seems to find it ironic that cultured and fashionable Londoners have taken up a musical craze with roots in the retrogressive American South. The woman of fashion is linked with African-American "otherness" not only through the banjo but also through her proximity to the bagpipe player. Although the two musicians are depicted in a rural setting, they would have more commonly appeared together on city thoroughfares, since both blackface minstrels and bagpipe players were a regular feature of urban street music. However, even though Du Maurier invokes blackface minstrelsy to critique urban sophistication, at the same time, by placing these musicians in a bucolic setting, he attempts to distance "the youngest Miss Brown" from the city street and from blackface minstrelsy, suggesting unease with the connection between this low-brow entertainment form and upper-class women.

In "The New Verb" (Fig. 2), published seven months later, the location has shifted indoors, and the female banjoist now plays with a male banjoist. The drawing-room setting lends a sense of propriety to the activity, as the musicians are no longer in the open air. The setting also evokes a scene of courtship, with the banjo replacing the drawing-room piano as the musical facilitator of this event. The romantic nature of this musical activity is also conveyed by the supposed "new verb" conjugated in the cartoon's caption, "banjo," which replaces the traditional Latin verb memorized by beginners: "amo" or "I love." The substitution implies that playing the banjo is akin to falling in love. The Latinate conjugation of "banjo" in the caption also links the banjo duet with a classical education since Latin was a standard part of the middle- and upper-class male's curriculum. This classical education was becoming available to women in the 1880s as well; the poem on the same page, "A Story of Girton," reminds us that women were starting to attend university at this time, a development often associated with the New Woman. Here, Du Maurier provides an early example of the link some made between the New Woman and the banjo. *The Musical Standard*, for example, noted that the harp has been rejected "by our modern 'wild-woman' in favour of the—banjo" ("Crotchets" [1892] 440). According to *The Church Musician*, "No one can have failed to remark on the growing number of ladies—old, middle-aged, and young—who perambulate the streets of London carrying violin cases or banjo boxes . . . Some of these cases and boxes are of extraordinary form and more than usual size, but this only proved

that no matter what shape a musical instrument might assume, the New Woman was prepared to tackle it" ("Notes" [1894] 182). Thus, some New Women demonstrated their autonomy by rejecting traditionally feminine instruments, instead taking up "masculine" and unwieldy ones like the banjo. As the banjo signaled non-English cultures and traditions, it was an apt symbol of the New Woman's rejection of her own society's values.<sup>12</sup> The irony of women communicating their independence with an instrument associated with a formerly enslaved people seems to have been overlooked.



Fig. 2 George Du Maurier, "The New Verb." *Punch* 90 (April 17, 1886): 186.

The cartoon's sexual undertones reinforce the idea that the female figure is a New Woman. Phallic banjo necks, angled toward each other, rise out of the laps of

the two players, suggesting the man and woman are on the verge of a genital encounter. The woman appears to be not only familiar with Latin conjugations but also with greater sexual freedom than the traditional Victorian woman, in this case the liberty to be visibly, if symbolically, aroused by a banjo duet. That her arousal is represented by a phallus reflects contemporary depictions of the New Woman as masculinized.

Du Maurier's cartoon links the New Woman's educational advancements to women adopting prevailing musical fads, undermining the former by association with the latter. As a result, this scene of musical practice, performed on an instrument associated with blackface minstrelsy, is overlain with a patina of formal education and courtship conventions associated with the middle- and upper-classes. While Du Maurier skewers both social developments, perhaps implying that banjo playing is one consequence of educating women, I would argue that the allusion to higher education eases anxieties about the sight of a banjo in a drawing room, the middle- and upper-class associations of a classical education counterbalancing the working-class and racial connotations of the instrument.

While in Du Maurier's cartoon the banjo promotes courtship, Mary L. Pendered depicts the instrument as autoerotic and, consequently, a threat to marriage. In her cautionary tale, "A Baneful Banjo!," Pendered tells of receiving a banjo as a gift from her brother, recently returned from Africa. The banjo "cast[s] a spell over" her, making her increasingly dissatisfied and unhappy and spurring her to break off her engagement with her fiancé (278). Pendered's description of the banjo's influence echoes contemporary discourses on masturbation as a sordid and enervating practice. The instrument is described as "not too clean," and all songs played on it "lose their vitality" (277). Moreover, playing the banjo makes her lose "all interest in the ordinary affairs of life"; she becomes "hysterical," "melancholy," and fears she is going insane, reflecting the common belief that masturbation caused nervous disorders (278). Nevertheless, Pendered "was always longing to pull its strings" and "could not pass an hour without touching it," indicating the addictive appeal of the activity. She even feigns faintness at a ball in order to "get back to my own room, and—yes—the banjo!" This sexually obsessive behavior is triggered by her encounter with the "other," not only because the instrument that arouses these feelings comes from Africa, but also because this particular banjo drum was made from the skin of a "coffee-coloured" African chief (248). Pendered's uncontrolled desire to touch black skin raises the specter of Englishwomen seduced by, or under the spell of, African men. Therefore, the story stigmatizes women's sexual self-sufficiency through masturbation by connecting it with the threatening cultural category of blackness, while also hinting at miscegenation, metonymically represented by Pendered's attachment to the instrument. Clearly, English racial purity is threatened by women's fever for the banjo.

The New Woman's rejection of traditional English femininity via African and African-American culture is evident in Du Maurier's "What Shall We Do with Our

<sup>12</sup> Representations of women and the banjo in nineteenth-century American art reveals that "Euro-American women who took up the banjo proclaimed their modernity and independence" (Burns 90).



Girls? (Their Perverseness)" (Fig. 3), a cartoon that makes the connection between banjos and blackface even more explicit. Constance has spent so much time "strumming away" on the instrument that she has a reputation for performing as well as "a professional nigger"; indeed, she can be seen as a blackface minstrel without the burnt cork. However, as with previous cartoons, this female banjo player is distanced from street music. Not only is she depicted indoors, she is also associated with the established social order and the traditional education of middle- and upper-class girls. The letters after her father's name indicate he is a member of the Royal Academy and the Royal Watercolour Society, both exclusive organizations for artists. This member of the English art establishment is attempting to teach his daughter that staple component of a genteel woman's education—painting. In this cartoon, painting also has classical associations in that Constance is supposed to be



Fig. 3. George Du Maurier, "What Shall We Do with Our Girls?"  
*Punch* 94 (June 9, 1888): 270.

copying the Romanesque bust on the table before her. The emphasis on her gentility indicates an attempt to mitigate the depiction of a female minstrel in a middle-class

domestic setting. Nevertheless, tensions remain. Not only does Constance prefer to practice a form of entertainment with precarious social meaning rather than paint: she also chooses "that abominable instrument" over one more common to middle-class women, such as the piano. Instead, she includes the banjo in the general category of "music"—a term that, when applied to young ladies' accomplishments, generally denoted the piano or singing, thereby signaling the degeneration of middle-class music-making. Her rejection of patriarchal instruction in favor of an instrument associated with African-American culture and the British working classes both marks the New Woman's rebelliousness and undermines the class status usually connoted by female accomplishments.



Fig. 4. George Du Maurier, "Black Syrens" *Punch* 99 (Sept. 27, 1890): 150.

The tensions and anxieties hinted at in the previous cartoons' depictions of culturally compromised elite women come to a head in Du Maurier's "Black Syrens" (Sept. 27, 1890) (Fig. 4), revealing the fluidity inherent in social constructions of female sexuality, class, race, and nationality. In this cartoon, four middle-class women are depicted in blackface, performing at a seaside resort. They are positioned in the standard minstrel configuration of performers in a single row with the



tambourine and bones at the ends, while their swallowtail jackets and striped skirts replicate typical minstrel costumes. They are not drawn with the exaggerated features often used to depict Africans or African-Americans at this time, indicating that they are white women in blackface. This is also suggested by the visual pun on their last name, the "Miss B[ro]wns," whose English name describes their supposed skin color. Their upper-middle-class status is evident in that common epithet for genteel women, "lovely and accomplished," and in their address in Portland Place. On Charles Booth's poverty maps for 1889-90, Portland Place is marked "upper middle and upper classes." That these well-off women are performing as working-class street musicians to "defray the expenses of their sea-side trip" is one indication of the irresolvable contradictory thinking underlying this cartoon, as their upscale address would seem to indicate that their motive is not financial. However, Portland Place also has a feminist pedigree as it terminates in Langham Place, the famous meeting place in the 1850s for activists Barbara Leigh Smith, Bessie Rayner Parks, and Anna James.<sup>14</sup> The cartoon's publication date and the Portland Place address implies they are simply middle-class New Women exercising their autonomy.

There were actual counterparts to Du Maurier's fictional Misses Brown in the nineteenth century. Although women sang minstrel songs in the home, several scholars contend that women "blackening up" and performing in public were rare.<sup>15</sup> While not as abundant as male performers, female blackface minstrels performed in a variety of venues during this period. Some were street musicians, as Arthur Munby notes (Hudson 158). More often, women performed in music halls and concert rooms. In 1847 the *Theatrical Journal*, bemoaning the fate of the English ballad singer in the face of competition from blackface minstrels, listed ten troupes currently performing in London. Of these, half included or consisted entirely of women: the Male and Female New York Ethiopian Serenaders, the Females Bayadere, the Buffalo Girls, the Male and Female Ethiopians, and the Female American Serenaders ("English" 162). The most successful of these troupes, The Female American Serenaders, could be seen at both Crockford's Saloon and St. James Assembly Rooms in 1847.<sup>16</sup> The same year, the Ethiopian Harmonists, "consisting of two ladies and four gentlemen," were engaged at White Conduit

<sup>14</sup> Three years after the publication of "Black Syrens," George Gissing set Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn's girls' clerical training school in the adjacent Great Portland Street in *The Odd Women* (1893).

<sup>15</sup> See Pickering (56n3) and Scott, *Singing* (89). Most scholarship on blackface minstrelsy in England does not address female practitioners.

<sup>16</sup> For reviews, see "The Female American Serenaders" (*Theatrical Journal* 8.387 [May 15, 1847]: 153-54) and "Female American Serenaders" (*The Musical World*)—the latter noting that "the entertainments differ but little from those given to the public at the St. James Theatre and elsewhere, but they are rendered infinitely more interesting by their being presented by members of the gentle sex" (267). The group was probably not American: although "thoroughly bronzed," they have "limbs of the stoutest English form and fabric" ("Varieties" 324), and they may have been from Manchester (Meer 149).

Gardens ("White" 237). Proving that blackface minstrelsy could be a family affair, a Mr. and Mrs. Dwight toured music halls in England and Ireland in the early 1850s; by 1855, their daughter Rosa had joined the act.<sup>19</sup> In 1870, an unnamed troupe of "female christies" sued the proprietor of the Wellington Music Hall and Circus in Cheltenham for terminating their engagement after a single performance instead of the agreed upon six-night run ("Female Christies" 358). They may have been one of the three troupes that Harry Reynolds, of Reynolds' Minstrels, describes in his memoir: an unnamed troupe managed by "Madame Christy," The Virginia Female Christys, and Andy Merrilee's Armour Clad Amazon Female Christys, fifteen young women who wore silver armor for their shows.<sup>20</sup> May Henderson's solo act was also very popular, according to Reynolds. And in the mid-1890s, the Columbians, "a clever quartet of lady vocalists who sing plantation songs, to the accompaniment of banjo and guitar, in a peculiarly fascinating manner," toured London, Bournemouth, Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle and Liverpool (B., W. 325).<sup>21</sup> Blackface minstrelsy appealed to female performers as well as female audiences, and women in blackface could be seen on streets and stages throughout the nineteenth century. Among the middle and upper classes, however, Englishwomen donning burnt cork probably were not a widespread occurrence, which makes the "Black Syrens" a puzzling example.

While it would not have been unusual for the women of Portland Place to be familiar with minstrelsy—or even, as we have seen, to play the banjo—performing on a seaside pier is another story. According to Scott, the few female minstrel shows that did exist "would nowadays merit the description 'soft porn,'" suggesting that *respectable* troupes were all-male (*Singing* 89).<sup>22</sup> Certainly not all female troupes would have been considered risqué, but those who performed in the open air would have been more subject to speculation that they were prostitutes than those who

<sup>19</sup> For reports of the Dwight family, see "Dublin" (*The Theatrical Journal* 12.600 [June 1851]: 193); "Our Little Chatter Box" (*Theatrical Journal* 14.695 [April 1853]: 111); "Metropolitan Theatres" (*Theatrical Journal* 14.969 [April 1853]: 114-16); and "Metropolitan Theatres" (*Theatrical Journal* 16.798 [March 1855]: 99-102).

<sup>20</sup> Despite the militaristic style of the Amazon Female Christys' costumes, they sang mostly sentimental songs, "rich in poetry and pathos, naturally taking their place in the hearts of all who hear them" ("Female Christy's" 120).

<sup>21</sup> See also "Other Concerts" (*Musical Standard* 4:103 [Dec. 21, 1895]: 405-06); "Madame Josephine Chatterton" (*Musical Times* 37:635 [Jan. 1, 1896]: 50); "Music in Birmingham" (*Musical Times* 37:639 [May 1, 1896]: 322-23); "Newcastle-on-Tyne" (*Musical Standard* 6:153 [Dec. 5, 1896]: 356); "Provincial" (*Musical News* 12:307 [Jan. 16, 1897]: 67); and "Notes on News" (*Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review* 20:234 [March 1897]: 373-75).

<sup>22</sup> Female characters in minstrel shows would most often be portrayed by male actors: "The practice of white men pretending to be black women on stage served complicated desires for misogyny, sexual freedom, and racist ridicule" (Brody 83). See also Annemarie Bean, "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy" (*Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*. Eds. Annemarie Bean, et.al. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1996: 245-56) on the gender politics of American blackface minstrelsy.

performed in concert halls. For example, Arthur Munby records his "astonishment" at coming across the two female "Ethiopian Serenaders" in Scotland Yard, but they "were both very decent and modest in behavior; and were protected by their male companions, if they needed protection" (Hudson 157-58). The Misses Brown (Fig. 4), on the other hand, are unprotected as they sing and play out of doors, calling into question their respectability. They are also earning money via public display (they are the object of the gaze of the men on the wharf below), an activity suggestive of prostitution, thereby invoking working-class mores regarding female sexuality. In addition to class sexuality, the Misses Brown's impersonation evokes nineteenth-century constructions of black women as sexually licentious.<sup>23</sup> The supposed voracious sexual appetite of black women was both a marker of British superiority and a justification for British "civilizing" colonial projects. However, in this cartoon that quality is superimposed on its ideological opposite—sexually restrained, culturally refined, white, middle-class British women. The issue of sexuality is further complicated by the middle-class New Woman's association with free love. Thus, no clear categorization of these women on the basis of sexuality is possible, highlighting the shifting ideological grounds on which conceptions of female sexuality are built.

Women in blackface destabilize Victorian constructions of class as well. The "Black Syrens" put their middle-class musical accomplishments to economic use, thereby undermining their rank since women of this class generally did not perform paid labor. The success of their endeavor is evidenced by the coins at their feet. Therefore, this cartoon confounds minstrelsy's typical portrayal of blacks as self-indulgent, lazy, and carefree. Michael Pickering argues that these stereotypes contrasted with and reinforced an English national identity based on middle-class values of industry, self-denial, integrity, and rationality, a thesis based on the performance of all-male troupes (113-14). Plausibly, blackface minstrelsy's inverted representation of middle-class English values is complicated when the audience is presented with women whose work replaces the leisure that marks their socio-economic status. Female labor while on holiday thwarts the contours of middle-class national identity by simultaneously summoning opposing class- and gender-based values: leisure and industriousness.

In addition to minstrelsy's depiction of African-Americans, given the cartoon's publication date of 1890, blackface is also a possible reference to Africa. England's imperial interests in South Africa in the 1880s and 1890s were threatened by other

<sup>23</sup> See also Yvette Abrahams, "Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain" (*Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*. Eds. Pierson and Chaudhuri. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998. 220-36); Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature" (*"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1986: 223-61); and Phillipa Levine, "Sexuality and Empire" (*At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*. eds. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 122-42).

colonial powers and native Africans unhappy with colonial encroachment on their lands. Against the backdrop of British Empire and world politics, women in blackface assert the English national identity of their audience by placing before it the supposedly less civilized and more primitive non-European cultures of Africa and black Americans. Again, this performance is not totalizing since middle-class women's musical skills, honed in their leisure time, are a distinctive element of European culture. Moreover, the cartoon's title invokes classical mythology with its reference to "syrens." This allusion to beautiful female creatures making irresistible music at the water's edge is reflected in the physical position of the women in the cartoon and in the minstrel song they sing about a pretty girl "by the Ohio" River. Whereas in previous cartoons allusions to a classical education were employed to offset the banjo's racial associations, here the depiction of non-Western cultures invoked by blackface is inextricably intertwined with Western civilization. The degeneration in taste evidenced in previous cartoons by the upper classes' adoption of the banjo becomes full-scale cultural miscegenation. This depiction of white, upper-middle-class women's cross-racial performance resists stable meaning in regard to sexual, class, racial or national distinctions. The Misses Brown's attempt at "passing" does, however, concretize anxieties about the instability of categories on which Victorian middle-class difference depends.

Du Maurier's depiction of white women in blackface is not without precedent in the pages of *Punch*, though such illustrations occurred infrequently. Early examples portray female stage performers (who would not otherwise appear in burnt cork) as a means of critiquing contemporary entertainment fads or audiences. The author of "Ethiopian Fashions" (1846), for example, critiques "Ethiopian-mania" by stating that he expects this favorite entertainment to soon encroach on high art forms such as the ballet and the opera. The article is accompanied by an illustration of a ballet dancer in blackface, exaggerating the possible outcome of minstrelsy's popularity. "The Black Marseillaise" (Nov. 10, 1855) represents the famous French actress Mademoiselle Rachel in blackface next to an article about her New York performance of a version of the Marseillaise sung "in Negro dialect . . . with her face and arms blacked" (186). The lyrics, included in the article, incite African-American slaves to rebellion against their oppressive owners. The article ends noting that "the House rose at Rachel before the end of the song," thereby critiquing both American theater audiences who had reacted violently to foreign actors in the past and Americans who were not prepared to extend the principles of liberty on which their country was founded to enslaved African-Americans.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Brownstein does not mention this incident, indicating the event was a *Punch* fabrication. The French press did not expect Americans to appreciate Rachel ("the rabble could only admire her as a rabble-rouser" [204]). A precedent was the "bloody and destructive" Astor Place Riots of 1849, when "drunken patriotic supporters of Edwin Forrest had protested the visit of the English actor William Macready" (205).

Blackface minstrelsy was also occasionally linked with women's clothing trends in order to portray women as slaves to fashion.<sup>25</sup> For example, the author of "Ethiopian Fashions" expects "Ethiopian-mania" to extend "to the occupants of the boxes as well as the performers on stage" in the form of "Ethiopian headdresses and Ethiopian masks for the upper part of the face" (138). The article is accompanied by an illustration of a white woman in just such a costume. Whereas this is a speculative example of women's fashion, *Punch* mocks actual trends such as large bows and tiny hats by placing women beside blackface minstrels whose oversized or ill-fitting costumes resemble the women's clothing.<sup>26</sup> These women appear to have inadvertently adopted blackface costumes with their dress, suggesting they are blindly following fashion dictates, unaware of the ironic overlap between high fashion and the costumes of working-class minstrels, which were based on the supposed apparel of impoverished African-Americans.

In "Derby Costume a la Christy Minstrel" (June 3, 1876), however, a woman is depicted in an outfit that purposely replicates a blackface minstrel costume—including blackened hands and face. Claiming "a very slight addition to one of Mr. Worth's latest Parisian novelties," the cartoon presents the woman in a striped dress, a checked swallowtail jacket featuring exaggerated buttons, and an outsized collar (Sambourne 222). The blackface minstrel is superimposed on the fashionable upper-class woman in this image, collapsing the racial and class differences indicated by skin color and attire. Women and women's fashions are ridiculed as the female figure wears to the prestigious Epsom Derby an outfit that speaks of poverty, and the extent of blackface minstrelsy's popularity is again exaggerated.<sup>27</sup> Du Maurier takes this image a step further in "Black Syrens" by presenting women in blackface not for the sake of fashion but for the purpose of performance. As with his previous cartoons, Du Maurier critiques the New Woman by linking her greater mobility, economic liberty, and sexual expression with blackface minstrelsy. However, rather than reassure the viewer, "Black Syrens" places before it an image not only of English cultural degeneration but also racial miscegenation, featuring black women with English features. Underlying this attempt to discredit the New Woman is the fear that English women's infatuation with the banjo might lead to "blackening up" both culturally and biologically.

The final appearance in *Punch* of a woman playing the banjo is an untitled cartoon by Bernard Partridge, published the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, 1897 (Fig. 5). One of several cartoons *Punch* published contrasting the

<sup>25</sup> *Punch* reviled fashions that made women look as if they were black. "Shocking Result of Dark Veils" (Mar. 5, 1870) features a fashionably dressed woman whose black veil obscures her face. The caption reads "We humbly beg this young lady's pardon (who is *really* rather a pretty girl), but, being short-sighted, we positively took her for a lady of colour!" (94).

<sup>26</sup> See Sambourne's "My Health" (*Punch* 62 [Jan. 20, 1872]: 29) and "Social Science for Ladies" (*Punch* 60 [June 17, 1871]: 254).

<sup>27</sup> As Epsom Derby was held in early June, this is likely the event referred to in the June 3<sup>rd</sup> cartoon.

present year with the year of Victoria's ascension to the throne, this illustration attempts to provide an antidote to the anxieties and contradictions raised by "Black Syrens" by giving the instrument the imprimatur of middle-class respectability. By juxtaposing an illustration of a woman playing the harp with one of a woman playing the banjo, the cartoon indicates that the preference for one stringed instrument has simply been replaced by the preference for another as times and fashions have changed. The African and African-American cultural associations of the banjo are downplayed, since there are no allusions to blackface minstrelsy as seen in the other cartoons. In fact, there is almost no information—in the text or illustration—by which to contextualize the women and their instruments. Therefore our attention is drawn to the physical correspondences between the two women. Both are attired similarly, in evening dresses, and have almost identical hair styles. They are both sitting in demure attitudes, leaning over their instruments, and are intent on the music they are producing. Even the position of their hands as they play is similar. These likenesses imply that the only thing that has changed in sixty years is the instrument of choice; genteel young ladies still demonstrate their class status and respectability via music. Just as commentators tried to claim European origins for the banjo, this cartoon erases the instrument's racial and cultural associations by placing it in a genealogy of Western musical instruments suitable for middle-class women. Moreover, it links the banjo to a supposedly purer time in England, before the explosion in popularity of blackface minstrelsy in the 1840s or colonial expansion in Africa in the 1880s, thereby distancing the English from the banjo's threat of racial and cultural miscegenation.

Commentators began predicting the demise of the banjo as much as ten years before Partridge's cartoon. In 1887, for example, *Theatre* noted, "the banjo craze has of late subsided with astonishing completeness" (Clavichord 333). Others forecast which instrument would replace the banjo in the hearts of society women; the main candidates included the flute, the mandolin, and the bagpipe.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in 1900, the *Musical Opinion and Trade Review* reported that "The banjo is said to be rising in the estimation of the public" ("Notes on News" 317); the *Musical Herald* continued to print banjo queries in its "Questions and Answers" section into the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Media interest in and public controversy over the instrument faded by the start of World War I, but examination of the banjo "craze" and its gendered representations reveals the instrument's enduring ties to

<sup>28</sup> See "Echoes of the Month" (*Musical Herald* 22 [Oct. 1, 1890]: 519-21; "Echoes of the Month" (*Musical Herald* 579 [Jun. 1, 1896]: 181); "Echoes of the Month" (*Musical Herald* 583 [Oct. 1, 1896]: 311. On Oct. 3, 1896, *Musical News* reported that "'the bagpipes are to be the fashionable society instrument this winter, and hundreds of men and maidens, who erstwhile swore allegiance to the banjo, will soon be ardent devotees of the bagpipes" (B., J.E. 284).

<sup>29</sup> Also in 1900, *Musical Opinion and Trade Review* reported that in Lancaster, "the fancy for the banjo is steadily growing" (Argus 56).

blackface minstrelsy and African-American culture as well as the extent of blackface practice in the nineteenth century.



Fig. 5 Bernard Partridge, Untitled cartoon. *Punch* 112 (June 19, 1897): 309.

While blackface minstrelsy is typically recognized by its hallmark of visages darkened with burnt cork, these late nineteenth-century depictions of women reveal that the banjo itself was another signifier of blackface performance. Broadening our

understanding of blackface minstrelsy to include racial markers other than skin color allows us to recognize women's wider participation in this entertainment form. As these cartoons demonstrate, this participation complicates current understandings of blackface minstrelsy as a performance of racial and national difference because it indicates the potential for cultural and racial hybridity. Cartoonists affiliated the New Woman with the banjo and blackface minstrelsy to claim she was a sign of English cultural degeneracy. But their attempt to discredit the New Woman in this fashion reveals fears that her sexual agency and affinity for the banjo could lead to racial miscegenation, thereby undermining Englishness as white. Thus, women's cross-racial performances subvert the commonly understood function of minstrelsy—solidifying and reinforcing English national identity—instead exposing a desire for the "other."

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