

# ARTS & CULTURE



C R I T I C U S

## Of Saltimbancoes, Quacksalvers, Charlatans, and Mountebanks

B Y G . B . T E N N Y S O N

Saltimbanco: a mountebank, a quack. Quacksalver: a pretender to knowledge or of wonderful remedies. Charlatan: a cozenor, a pretentious imposter. Mountebank: a charlatan, a quack(salver).

— “Saltimbancoes, Quacksalvers, and Charlatans,”  
Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (or,  
*Vulgar Errors*), 1646.

**I**F SUMMER comes, can the annual Critical roundup of the acts of the foolish and the fraudulent be far behind? Assuredly not. Thus, herewith this year's collection of the follies and fooleries in the culture that have come to Critical attention, especially during the summer Silly Season. The culprits are the

*G.B. Tennyson remembers that it was Lord Nelson who created the expression “England expects that every man will do his duty.” Criticus believes it is his duty to scan the media, and sometimes the skies, to bring readers the latest stupidities from the front lines of modern culture.*

modern-day equivalent of the types that form the title of this piece.

### PC on the March

#### FRIGHTENING THE HORSES

An Oxford University student towards the end of a night out celebrating completion of his English literature degree asked a mounted police officer if he knew that his horse was homosexual. The student was instantly handcuffed, taken to the police station, forced to spend the night in jail, and dispatched in the morning with a fine. It is not clear what he was charged with, presumably public homophobia. He is contemplating legal action. No word on what the horse thinks.

#### EBONICS ONCE AGAIN

No doubt all readers heard of the adoption by the San Bernardino County Board of Education of a policy to introduce the use of “Ebonics” (*i.e.*, black street

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talk, or by some politically correct linguists "African-American Vernacular English") into the teaching in public schools. The absurdity of this is self-evident, but the rationale given is even more absurd. It is to improve black student achievement to insure that more black students will go on to college. Quite. And to top it all, the educational bureaucrat San Bernardino County employs to describe the pilot program of this policy is "Students Accumulating New Knowledge Optimizing Future Accomplishment Initiative." Catchy, what?

**MORE RACIST NEWS**

The modern obsession with race is such that one can hardly keep up with the reports of racist outrages everywhere in the world. Here are some:

*Memin:* Surely everyone saw the extensive coverage of the "racially offensive" stamps that the Mexican government issued in June. The first group in a series celebrating Mexican cartoon characters featured one Memin Pinguin, described in the *L.A. Times* as "a picaresque urban child who gets by on wits and moxie." The problem is that little black Memin looks very like a caricature in the style of the old minstrels. The curious part is that it was American civil rights groups, including of course that all-purpose protestor Jesse Jackson, that decried the stamps and demanded an apology as well as the withdrawal of the stamps. The Mexican government refused, and in any case the stamps sold out in days and are now collector's items. What is most intriguing to Criticus is that certain Americans felt entitled to tell a foreign government what kind of stamps that government could issue. Cultural imperialism, I call it.

*Sambo:* Of course, Criticus ought not to have been surprised. He knew that years ago Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* had been effectively banned in the

United States because it was thought to be offensive to blacks, the reasons being both because Sambo had long been taken as a derogatory name for a black male and because American illustrations of the book often depicted Sambo as a caricature of a black boy. It is not at all clear whether Bannerman, a Scot living in British India in the nineteenth century, was aware of the negative aspects of the word Sambo. Her character is an Indian boy, and we must remember that the British typically referred (and many still do) to dark-skinned people in general as black. (See Kipling's "Gunga Din.") Nevertheless, the character has been taken in America to be black as in Negro, just as many seem to be unaware that there are no tigers in Africa but there are tigers in India.

All that is interesting enough, but what Criticus did not know was that American pressure in 1988 against the existence of a Japanese edition of *Sambo* led in turn to pressure from the Japanese Foreign Ministry on the publishers to withdraw the book. The deed was done in less than a week, and *Sambo* disappeared from Japanese view. Well, Friends of *Sambo*, know that in Japan *Sambo* was gone but not forgotten. In April this year the book was reissued in Japan and immediately rose to the top of the adult [*sic*] fiction bestseller list. Adults remembered it fondly and wanted to introduce it to their children. What will happen when the civil rights lobby finds out about this? Will Japan join Mexico in saying mind your own business, you believers in freedom of the press, or will *Sambo* once again be withdrawn? I'll try to keep on top of this for Constant Readers. Stay tuned.

*World Cultures:* Finally, on the race front, know that a zoo in the German city of Augsburg has been reviled and threatened with attack because it staged a festival of African culture, showcasing tribal dances and the like in an effort to "bring African culture and products closer to the people." The offence in this case? They placed the display next to a baboon enclosure.

**GO SEMINOLES!**

Critics has several times had his say on the matter of school mascots that supposedly offend American Indian groups, but the issue never seems to go away. Everyone will have heard of the recent edict from the NCAA that will prohibit the display of eighteen American Indian nicknames and mascots that it considers "hostile or abusive" in postseason tournaments starting early in 2006. This was greeted with praise in the usual quarters, which included a huge spread on

the first of the Sunday sports pages of the *Los Angeles Times* featuring a large color photo of a white man made up as Florida's Seminole mascot and a fawning article in praise of the ban by major *Times* sportswriter Bill Plaschke. This is a step towards the future banning of these "abusive" nicknames and mascots altogether for NCAA events starting 2008. For now, they only must cover up the offending signs rather like strippers wearing pasties. What happens if there is a wardrobe malfunction?

**B**UT HARK! Not all agree with the ban, chief among them (pardon the pun) being the Florida Seminoles. The trustees of Florida State have voted to appeal the decision, pointing out that the Seminole Tribe itself fully supports the use of the Seminole name and all the signs and symbols that go with it. The trustees are prepared to take court action if the appeal to the NCAA is turned down. Florida State is not alone. Criticus notes that in the "Morning Briefing" column by Pete Thomas inside the sports section of the *Times* we learn that Mike Downey in the *Chicago Tribune* did a comic piece about getting rid of Notre Dame's bellikose leprechaun. Also from Thomas we read of a *Playboy* survey of 768 Native Americans in which 90 percent said they were not offended by the name of the Washington Redskins. Moreover, it looks as though the fans are not persuaded of the horror of mascots either. By the Saturday sports pages when they run letters to the editor on sports a chorus of dissent from the NCAA-Plaschke view dominated the letters. Fans lambasted Plaschke for his arrogance and ignorance (he knows nothing about mascots or Indians) and generally deplored the whole business of attacking the idea of mascots. They made Criticus seem fainthearted in his criticisms. Is it possible that we have the beginning of an uprising from the people who actually make college football the profitable activity it is?

Of course none of this is likely to stay the hand of the NCAA (headquartered in INDIANapolis), considering that these people are after all part of the academic establishment, which is mainly composed of the Bourbons *de nos jours*. That is to say, they forget nothing and they learn nothing. One battle the anti-mascoteers are *unlikely* to win, however, is with the professional sports teams. The Redskins of professional football, and the Indians and Braves of professional baseball, are not subject to the whims of the NCAA, and besides they are worth much more money than even collegiate sports and are thus unlikely to jeopardize such wealth by offending loyal fans. If threatened,

all they have to do is to bring back the pictures of Jane Fonda in her Ted Turner days doing the "Toma-hawk Chop."

*FLASH:* After the foregoing was written the news came that, in response to a threat to sue from the President of Florida State, the NCAA had removed its ban on the Seminoles as team mascot and the use of Seminole imagery at athletic events. The NCAA suddenly recognized the "unique relationship between the university and the Seminole Tribe of Florida." Time elapsed from the NCAA announcement of the ban and NCAA reversal was 18 days. During the first week of the ban the *Los Angeles Times* ran four articles on the issue, one on the front page of the paper and the Plaschke display story on the front page of the sports section. There was also the page of protesting letters referred to above. Florida State resolved to protest five days after the ban was announced. Twelve days later the ban was lifted. This retreat was reported in the *Times* in a six-paragraph article and a black and white photo of the Seminole mascot on the seventh page of an eight-page sports section. This is not quite a burial but it is a quiet drawing of the curtain on the subject. Let us hope that the remaining seventeen schools on the NCAA list take note. The Illini seem to have good case to make, but Criticus is pulling for Southeastern Oklahoma State. Its teams are called "Savages."

#### TO THE VICTORS BELONG THE NAMES

**F**ROM EARLIEST times place names were bestowed by the first settlers and changed as others moved in, often by force. Thus the romantic-sounding Byzantium became Constantinople when the emperor Constantine decided to make it the seat of the eastern Roman Empire. When the Islamic Turks swept away most of the Greek inhabitants they also swept away the name of the city and renamed it Istanbul. People have been changing the names of places and even buildings ever since. In recent years we have seen inner-city school districts rename public schools that bore names like Washington and Jefferson in order to replace them with names of contemporary black luminaries, the argument being that the original names were those of slaveholders. Well, the passion for this sort of thing goes on.

#### MEMPHIS

There is the case of three parks in the city of Memphis — Forrest Park, Confederate Park, and Jefferson Davis Park — each containing statues of Confederate

heroes, such as the president of the Confederacy and Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest. The mayor of Memphis has refused to act on calls that these parks be renamed. But politician that he appears to be, the mayor declared he would ask the city to give the parks to the University of Tennessee and a nonprofit organization helping to develop the city's waterfront. The university has reserved comment until it can review the proposal, but Criticus can see what's coming. The university after all will not come up for re-election.

## ISLINGTON

**I**N THE trendy and leftwing section of north London called Islington (Tony Blair lived there before moving to Downing Street) there is a state supported church school named St. Mary Magdalene that has been there since 1710. The Islington council wants to incorporate the primary part of the school into a new academy for five- to 18-year-olds but wants the word "saint" dropped from the name so that it is clear that "it is a school open to everybody." Parents and teachers are objecting, and rightly so. They should have pointed out that Mary Magdalene started out as far less than a saint, so the name is promising for everybody, even residents of Islington. Prayers for the parents and teachers are herewith requested.

## PRETORIA

Back in the world of city name changes, Criticus regrets to report that an official commission of the South African government has changed the name of the country's administrative capital from Pretoria to Tshwane. The move was opposed by Afrikaners and, less predictably, by the native Ndebele tribes in the area. The reason for the change was that the city was named after Andries Pretorius who led the Afrikaners on the "Great Trek" from Cape Town in 1835 to escape British rule and set up their own nation. The city was founded and named in 1855 by Pretorius's son, but to activist South Africans the name, simply because it is that of an Afrikaner, is an unwelcome reminder of the apartheid era. But here is the comic part. Although the local black authorities say that Tshwane was the name for an Ndebele tribal leader and means "we are the same," others contest that meaning, saying that it is pure fabrication and that in

any case the name had nothing to do with any tribal chief. Criticus tried to pursue the matter of the meaning and found that, according to one version, the name Tshwane was the name of a river and furthermore that it means "little ape." Remember, I did not make this up.

To counter the comic part, there is also a truly sad part of this story. Pretoria has long been known as the "city of jacarandas" and is awash in their purplish blooms in the spring. These have now also been banned because they are not native to Africa. The government is imposing a \$900 fine on any resident who fails to rip out jacaranda seedlings but is allowing for the time being large established trees to remain. Considering that it is now winter in the southern hemisphere, Criticus recommends a trip to Pretoria-Tshwane this autumn (their spring) for what may well be the last sight of thousands of jacarandas in full glory.



Jefferson Davis

## The Merely Odd

### OUTWITTING THE SMOKE POLICE

The nannying European Union has decreed there may be no more tobacco advertising in Formula One racing. Ferrari has found a loophole in that the "directive applies to cross-border cultural and sporting events." Therefore, Ferrari will still display tobacco ads on its cars in the Grand Prix in Monza, Italy, because it is a national, not a cross-border, event. Hungary has joined the rebellion and passed a law describing all future Formula One races as "events of outstanding economic significance" — which evidently side-steps the ban — rather than as sporting or cultural events. Other teams with tobacco sponsors have taken to subliminal ads, such as outfitting cars with the distinctive red target associated with Lucky Strike but leaving out the brand name.

**A**NOTHER TEAM with Benson and Hedges as a sponsor now adorns its cars with the slogan "Be on Edge" in lettering like that used on B&H cigarette packages. The moral of the story is that if you overload people with too many intrusive laws and regulations, people will find ways around them.

### BEER GARDEN GIRLS

Not that the European Union will be deterred by



Critical wisdom. Another of its recent decrees demands that those Fräuleins one sees in Germany with their astounding ability to carry massive tankards of beer in each hand and their low-cut dirndl costumes have been ordered to raise the necklines on their costumes to avoid becoming sunburnt on the upper bosom. Yes, from all that eternal sunshine in Germany. One wonders whether those lawgivers in Brussels have ever looked at the truly sunny Mediterranean beaches where bikinis and often no tops at all are commonplace.

#### THE ADVENTURES OF OPRAH

She may be the richest woman in America or even the world, but Oprah is not universally recognized and therefore does not always prevail. On the elegant Rue du Fauborg St. Honoré in Paris Oprah tried to get the Hermès shop to reopen just after closing time when she arrived. The clerks turned her away, saying they often get "these troublesome North Africans wanting special treatment." Ah, those tolerant French. Of course Oprah is not North African, which may have added to her eagerness to proclaim that she is of Zulu descent in and around that same time but in Johannesburg. She said she had her DNA tested and the results showed she is a Zulu. This baffled her South African audience and was totally rejected by local historians. They pointed out that there was no connection between Zulus and the African slave trade. If any such had been taken as slaves, which is unlikely, they would have been transported to the east by Arab slave traders. Slaves brought to North America were almost entirely from West Africa, thousands of miles from Zulu territory. It would have been commercially counterproductive to have slave ships make the trek from extreme southern Africa to ports on the American east coast. But Oprah is still loved in South Africa. Perhaps we could get her to campaign against the removal of the jacarandas in Pretoria.

#### WHO WRITES THE SPAM?

Criticus gets what he thinks is more than his share of spam e-mail. Fortunately he has a program that separates spam from regular e-mail by putting the regular in the inbox and the spam in a separate box marked appropriately "junk e-mail," which can be highlighted and deleted in its entirety. Of course some spam still gets through to the inbox and of course the curious Criticus will periodically check the spam to see what the latest miracle cures and the like may be. He has noticed over the years that more and more spam is riddled with spelling errors, chiefly in the sub-

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ject entries, and that more and more spam will contain in the message itself utterly extraneous lines of text, sometimes consisting of a sequence of unrelated words and other times of actual statements with no connection to the subject of the message. And increasingly the names of the senders have become more and more contrived and absurd and even intentionally comic. Recent examples of this latter chosen almost at random: Atahualpa J. Palaver, Division O. Chowder, Naiad F. Compass, and once even G.B. Tennyson (writing from a different e-mail address, needless to say). And speaking of e-mail addresses the following actually appeared on a piece of spam: *simonbenzalphenylhydrazoneDC2Ne@yahoo.ca.ip*.

**W**HAT DOES it all mean? For a long time I thought all these spelling errors were probably coming from some out-sourced internet sweatshop in India. But surely the Indians wouldn't know who Atahualpa was (the last Inca ruler of Peru, by the way) or think of joining Naiad with Compass or Division with Chowder. And then recently I read somewhere, though I can't remember where, that all these misspellings and unrelated strings of words and sentences were intentionally done to thwart spam-spotting programs, to fool them by making it appear that these were real messages. By and large it doesn't work, at least not with my spam detector; but sometimes they actually slip by and show up in the regular e-mail inbox. Still it's rather a waste of time, for as soon as one opens such a piece of stealth, one sees that it is still spam and one reaches for the delete button. But doubtless spammers are even now working on other ways to get into the inbox and we shall have spam with us even unto the last days.

#### The Ridiculous and the Sublime

##### "KISS ME, HARDY"

The British know how to stage a spectacle, and

they did themselves proud in June in restaging off the south coast of England the Battle of Trafalgar commemorating the 200th anniversary of that victory.

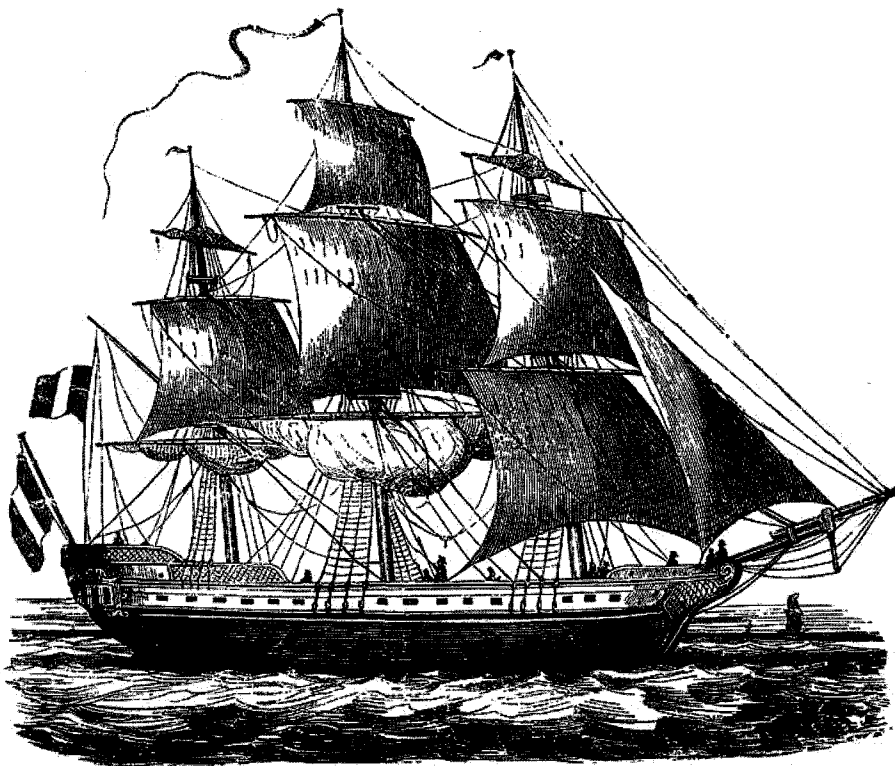
**T**HE ACTUAL date of the battle was in fact 21 October, but June offered much better weather. Trafalgar was the naval victory of Britain over a larger combined French and Spanish fleet that decisively put an end to Napoleon's hopes of invading England. It also sealed Britain's role as the supreme maritime power in the world, ushering in a century of the Pax Britannica. At the same time it saw the death of Admiral Nelson on the appropriately named HMS Victory a few hours after being shot but when it was clear that the British had won.

It was at the moment of death that Nelson is reported to have said to the captain, "Take care of my dear Lady Hamilton, Hardy, take care of poor Lady Hamilton," and then very faintly, "Kiss me, Hardy," which Hardy did on the cheek. Nelson then said, "Now I am satisfied. Thank God I have done my duty." Thereupon he died. Hardy then knelt again and kissed Nelson on the forehead. Only in after years was the "Kiss me" line challenged, probably from prudery and misapprehension of its meaning, but

there were three witnesses who confirmed it. Set in its full context as given here, it seems to Criticus that what Nelson was saying was something akin to "Give me a final blessing," and that it was a salute to life at the moment of death.

The re-enactment of the battle brought more than a hundred warships from countries all around the world as well as a huge gathering of tall ships and countless private vessels. It was the largest massing of ships off the coast of England since the Allied D-Day invasion in 1944. On shore a quarter of a million people gathered to watch the re-enactment. There was only one thing that was ridiculous in the face of all the sublime pomp. In order not to offend the French, it was determined that the battle would be staged as between the red ships and the blue ships with no nationalities being mentioned. This made it sound like summer camp — "Red Rover, come over" — with the red team and the blue team. Needless to say, no one paid any attention to this tomfoolery, except possibly Jacques Chirac and those across the channel that the British call after the name of an amphibian. Besides, what do French and Spanish visitors to London think Trafalgar Square and Nelson's column are all about?

CPR



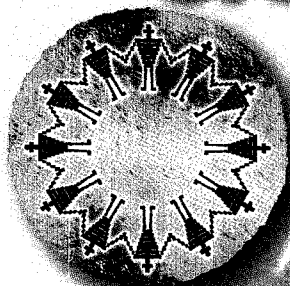
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