

Rereading McCutcheon's Suffrage Plots: Rising Action in the Digital Archive

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To the casual viewer, editorial cartoons may seem didactic and unsophisticated, offering flattened representations of reality. Even critics emphasize cartoons' compression of time and detail to accommodate limited frames (Greenberg). Such readings may neglect the *dialectic* relationship of cartoons—including those featuring consistent characters. Despite cartoons' compression, their intertextual narratives can expand readers' range of vision. Michael DeSousa and Martin Medhurst have suggested that cartoons "tap" or access readers' collective, cultural consciousness (84-85). Linus Abraham extends this claim to suggest that cartoons both shape and sustain cultural identities: "[C]artoons as a cultural form . . . help identity *formation and maintenance* through . . . repetitive sharing . . . [and thus] galvanize the 'collective consciousness' of readers" (161, emphasis added). Though Abraham focuses on the identity formation of readers, I would broaden his claim as follows: cartoons foster identity formation of *depicted characters* through "repetitive sharing," through both publication cycles and republication in archives. Especially when such "repetitive[ly] shared" characters are drawn from the public sphere, as in the case of suffrage, cartoons' intertextual narratives can develop the subjectivity and agency of those depicted—creating a "rising action" in terms of both nuanced identity and increased activity.

When read as multi-frame compositions, periodical cartoons can transform two-dimensional characterizations. Their serialized nature, not to mention their assemblage in archives, offers fertile ground for the emergence of three-dimensional, subjective characters—what Wayne Booth calls "dramatized" characters—in the context of what I term *macroplots*. Through such publications and re-compositions, cartoons can publicize once-controversial subjects such as the suffragette (or suffragist) in a popular format that offers her an array of faces and a depth of subjectivity. This range of vision characterizes the suffrage cartoons of John Tinney McCutcheon, the influential yet politically opaque "Dean of American Cartoonists." When read collectively as a multimedia narrative, McCutcheon's suffrage cartoons of ca. 1903-1922 suggest that he offered his immediate audience—the *Chicago Tribune's* daily readers—sustained attention to American, British, and transatlantic suffrage on the rise. At the same time, via archival conservation and recirculation of these cartoons, we as a temporally distant public are offered another opportunity

for sustained attention to early 20th-century suffrage. Moreover, in the case of collaborative, digital archives that offer an “[interactive network](#)” among images and engagements (Gatta 101, this issue), researchers sustain such attention in dialogue with others. In so doing, we recognize the limits of our assumptions, expand each other’s reading strategies, and uncover the problems and opportunities of an archive—ultimately noting its potential dissonances. To apply the language of feminist rhetoricians Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster, our reading of suffrage via the “strategic contemplation” enabled by a shared digital archive benefits from “ecologies of person, time, and context [that] stretch” beyond a rhetor’s (i.e., cartoonist’s) motives and immediate rhetorical contexts (656).

Through analysis of *macroplots*, my approach to our collection of McCutcheon’s suffrage cartoons demonstrates the merits of narrative criticism of digital archives. Such expansive temporal reading is distinct from cartoon critics’ more typical concern with time compressions or what I term *microplots*. While microplots relate closely to authorial intent and showcase a cartoonist’s skill in controlling scope, macroplots may be traced across cartoons not framed or titled in common; as such, their stories are re-composed based on other intentions and rhetorical situations, including those of contemporary critics. Thus, macroplots may arise as a consequence of cartoons’ proliferation in publications or via reassembly for preservation and scholarship. As elements of macroplots, archived cartoons allow us to reassess the stories of their subjects (e.g., the suffragette) beyond the intentions of a cartoonist, editor, publisher, or historian. Such storylines offer promising critical pathways for rhetoricians; moreover, networked archives offer promising critical collaborations.

Here, I suggest that McCutcheon’s body of work represents the suffragette as a more sympathetic subject than does any single cartoon.¹ I first demonstrate a macroplotted reading strategy in relation to McCutcheon himself as subject before moving to his varied representations of the suffragette. Specifically, I demonstrate the suffragette’s “rising action” (i.e., her “coming of age”) by macroplotting relevant McCutcheon cartoons, including those shared in this issue’s [digital gallery](#). In the context of lengthy narratives, a significant shift in reception of female characters from woman as *object* to woman as *subject* has been documented by such critics of the novel as Catherine Gallagher. Readers’ co-journeying with women across narratives has been linked to rising sympathy and identification. Housing narratives of similar complexity to the novel’s, an archive enables researchers to pursue macroplots—and, in turn, be pursued by them. Such dynamics intensify via networked archives and critics. Though still embedded in our subjectivities, we collectively navigate an archive’s histories and stereotypes with expanded vision.

Consider the vision acquired from macroplotting a series of cartoons honoring McCutcheon in 1940. Published as a festschrift titled *Saga of a Hoosier Boy*, these cartoons drawn by McCutcheon's contemporaries showcase not only masterful microplots but also a sweeping macroplot of his contributions to public life. An exemplar of extreme compression via microplotting, a cartoon by Karl Kae Knecht of the *Evansville Courier* (Figure 1), foregrounds McCutcheon as a Hoosier boy raised skyward by Mother Indiana's arms while depicting his long career in Chicago, with newspaper stacks flanking a bust of the mature cartoonist grinning from Lake Michigan's shores. Knecht includes an array of McCutcheon's biographical details—dates of international trips, a cumulative tally of over 15,000 cartoons, and much more—within a single-frame cartoon. In contrast to such compression, a macroplotted reading of the *Saga* reveals broad themes of praise, if little critique. Not only McCutcheon's regional prowess and prolific output but also his professional mentoring, artistic magic, regal status, and pioneering work emerge from a contemplative reading of this festschrift as archive.

Representing McCutcheon as a mentor worthy of "[d]evotion," H.T. Webster (*New York Herald Tribune*) rebrands McCutcheon's iconic dog as "all the rest of us [cartoonists]"; the faithful pup looks adoringly at a boyish McCutcheon. Similarly, Milton Caniff (*Chicago Tribune* and *New York Daily News*) republishes McCutcheon's letter of encouragement of Caniff as a "very

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

definite talent." The letter floats above a juvenile Caniff sketching at a desk with a sleeping dog nearby. The dog, a version of McCutcheon's trademark hound, guards the novice cartoonist, an "everyboy" dreaming of artistic ascent.²

In *Saga*, fellow cartoonists also repeatedly dramatize McCutcheon's unusual powers. Rollin Kirby (*New York Post*) figures McCutcheon as a genie of India ink trapped in a bottle for 70 years before emerging to receive honors. An equally inky image, "Treasure Island!" by Harold Talburt of the *Washington News*, casts McCutcheon as a crowned millionaire in paradise, counting his money from atop a drawing-board island rising above the "motley crew" of ordinary cartoonists in a sea of ink.³ In turn, Talburt imagines *Tribune* owner "Colonel" Robert R. McCormick as McCutcheon's butler, marching toward the artist with a tray of moneybags. Fellow *Tribune* cartoonist Carl Somdal retains McCutcheon's crown while placing his head in the heavens as a Man in the Moon, thus transcending the plots of the Grim Reaper on Earth (Figure 2).

Praise for McCutcheon's pioneering status in editorial cartooning also traverses the *Saga* collection. Jacob Burck (*Chicago Times*) shows McCutcheon rising "Higher and Higher" above Chicago itself, perched on an artist's stool above the skyline. Similarly, Hal Coffman (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*) dubs McCutcheon "top hand" among cartoonists via an admiring Texas cowboy who gestures toward McCutcheon's national reputation via syndication.

McCutcheon's interstate adventures progress in scenes by Charles G. Werner (*Oklahoma Times*), John Cassel (*Brooklyn Eagle*), and Jay Darling (*Des Moines Register and Tribune*), the last of whom crafts a marker for "The Trail of John T. McCutcheon," a distant figure who is both triumphant explorer and laureled deity (Figure 3).

All in all, the *Saga* provides a laudatory macroplot for McCutcheon, proclaiming his prominence and worth while dramatizing his multifaceted contributions to cartooning and American culture. In contrast, McCutcheon's macroplotting of the suffragette is considerably more varied, even dissonant. Such dissonance might be expected of a cartoon character representing not only thousands of historical women

Figure 3.

but also a cause as controversial as suffrage. More importantly, such dissonance should also be expected of an archive less ideologically controlled than a festschrift or personal scrapbook—indeed, of a digital archive collaboratively assembled and then multiply read by critics. In such an archive, the danger of objectifying or flattening the suffragette diminishes, and the suffragette emerges as a subject worthy of sustained attention, even discord. Macroplotting McCutcheon's suffrage cartoons, as this digital archive allows, will demonstrate how they foster a more sympathetic subjectivity for the suffragette, though not uncomplicated or neatly heroic.

In keeping with the norms of early 20th-century cartoonists loyal to publishers and the public (Katz), McCutcheon's autobiography avoids overt commentary on controversial matters such as suffrage. In *Drawn from Memory*, McCutcheon offers glimpses of his domestic life, international travels, and professional routines—but few internal revelations. Given that McCutcheon's suffrage cartoons may reveal his perspective while also, necessarily, engaging public opinion and navigating *Tribune* politics (largely Republican and less-than-progressive), how can we fruitfully read the "rising action" of his macroplotted suffragette? Regardless of clear political intent, McCutcheon's body of work makes the suffragette a character worthy of public contemplation. Via macroplotting enabled by publication cycles and sustained by unfolding activism, McCutcheon's suffragette inhabits a range of personae. Frequently an object of humor in his early cartoons, the suffragette later reappears in a range of representations: as activist, soldier, orderly exemplar, angel, political consumer, and tamer of political "dogs"—as a voter exerting moral, peaceable influence. Ultimately, McCutcheon depicts the suffragette as a target not only of jokes but also of aggressive political rhetorics. The suffragette's shift from controversial rhetor-activist to a necessary *audience* and *pacifist force* signals a transition in her public perception and political agency.

The suffragette as activist may be the character's least surprising guise, but McCutcheon's treatment of activism affords narrative twists. Chronologically, his sketches of the suffragette-activist progress from the use of unattractive, reactionary figures to more attractive, restrained, and patriotic ones, particularly when representing American women. In the 25 Sept. 1905 cartoon "Evidently Mr. Cleveland Never Expects to Run for Office Again," McCutcheon depicts suffrage clubwomen as matronly and agitated, grimacing, waving brooms, and even grinding axes in response to President Cleveland's published anti-suffrage pronouncement: "WOMEN SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO VOTE." With clenched fists and jaws, McCutcheon's clubwomen arrest viewers' attention and call each other "TO ARMS!! TO ARMS!!" On the wall of the club, the revised French republican motto "Liberty, Equality, *Sorority*" (emphasis added) suggests transatlantic influence on the women's

fury (Figure 4). The motto looms large over this scene of agitation as a clubwoman removes Cleveland's portrait from the wall in protest; national authority is deposed, and transatlantic rhetorics are rising. Later, in "An Englishman's Home" (Gallery Image 1), the cartoonist casts British women's activism as "invasion" with a mob of grim-faced suffragettes rushing at the windows of Prime Minister Asquith's study (a domestic compression of the political movement). Even more extreme is McCutcheon's "In Merrie England" (5 April 1913) with a triptych of "probable dispatches" of violence

Figure 4.

and disorder in the U.K. "if the destroying angels continue their crusade" of suffrage, as captioned. In this hyperbolic depiction of British suffrage activity in the 1910s, McCutcheon imagines "[t]hrongs of militant suffragists" destroying trains and national landmarks; the activists appear both reactive and destructive.

Contrast these scenes of suffragettes' agitation and aggression—which, in McCutcheon's framing, are often blamed on international examples and influence—with the composed, civilized, and patriotic groups in his American scenes of a similar time. The 4 March 1913 cartoon "In the Nation's Spot Light," published the morning after a large suffrage parade, shows a symbolic line-up of six suffragettes celebrating President Woodrow Wilson's first inauguration with clapping and flowers (Gallery Image 3). An elegant, smiling suffragette shares Wilson's foreground of fame, to the chagrin of some male supporters, including a frowning vice president, Thomas R. Marshall. The macroplotting of McCutcheon's attractively restrained American suffragette-activist continues in an October 1913 cartoon (Gallery Image 6); it portrays U.S. suffrage states as a rank of women assembled to show Emmeline Pankhurst "what we've done by orderly methods . . . not a single window broken." This allusion to the demonstrations depicted in "An Englishman's Home" suggests McCutcheon's distaste for British activism. Consider, too, the patriotic cartoon of 24 May 1916, "Taking an Interest in their Country," which gives a female "Suffragist Parade" figure the most prominent position in a marching rank of patriots, otherwise composed of three generations of males (Figure 5). Synchronized and resolute, each marcher carries a U.S. flag.

*Figure 5.**Figure 6.*

Later that year, McCutcheon reinforced the orderly patriotism of American suffragists by depicting suffrage states as two sleek lines of women divided by the majority's support of the incumbent, Wilson, versus those backing Republican challenger Charles Hughes (Figure 6). In a similarly congenial depiction of suffrage groups, the 11 Jan. 1918 "Hands Across the Seas" ([Gallery Image 7](#)) shows smiling British suffragettes and American suffragists offering a congratulatory handshake across the Atlantic after legislative victories on both shores. Here, differences among international suffragettes are understated, and both national figures are attractive, if exaggerated for comic effect. Both art and life, then, honor the suffragette-activist's capabilities at home and abroad, despite McCutcheon's earlier reservations.

Many McCutcheon suffrage cartoons play on the 19th-century ideal of woman as domestic angel while translating that moral force into political force; this translation of the angel into a public agent is, of course, one rhetorical tactic used by suffragettes themselves. While early McCutcheon cartoons poke fun at the political role of the suffragette-angel, later cartoons show her as a necessary audience and counterbalance for morally suspect politicians. In effect, macroplotting the suffragette-angel shows the growing power of women voters, even when framed by a conservative rhetoric of moral influence.

As early as 1903, McCutcheon's "The Federation of Women" cartoon (Figure 7) offers domestic angels a political role. However, this depiction fans fears about the activism of the "fair sex," applying hyperbole to the influence of the Illinois Federation of Women's Clubs.⁴ In six frames, McCutcheon humorously forecasts the effects of the federation's call for women to unite:

Figure 8.

first, formation of a Fair Sex Union with nearly a billion members; then, interrupted weddings, delayed baby and husband feedings, and denied access to medical treatment for grandmothers (if not unionized). McCutcheon narrates the imagined Union as the source of all such consequences. The supposed interruption of domestic routines—especially stalled meals—mockery at the angel of the house, now represented as a conniving “demon” of politics. Cartoons of the 1910s show a shift in attitude toward women’s involvement in politics while still invoking their angelic role. A 1911 daily news cartoon, for instance, offers a moderate position on political angels (Figure 8). In the top frame, McCutcheon lauds the Los Angeles Ladies’ Political Marching Club: “In the ‘City of the Angels,’ the latter voted for good government.” Smiling club-women approach the voting booth two by two, each wheeling a smiling baby. Here, McCutcheon mobilizes the domesticity of political angels and emphasizes their patriotism with U.S. flags flying in the background. Three cartoons of 1913 reinforce the moral role of women voters. In the first and last scenes of a five-frame cartoon, women voters are praised as agents of many reforms, from child labor laws to proper bar conduct (Figure 9). Similarly, women voters are cast as reformers in both “Chicago Gambling Joints and Women’s Votes” (Figure 10) and “Political Methods—Old and New” (Figure 11). In the latter cartoon, the “new politics” emerge as increasingly “bi-sex” and collaborative—as well as “clean” and “respectable.”

McCutcheon gives the evolving angel more authority in the 1910s, narrating her transition from suffragette to voter while retaining her moral and domestic influence; in effect, the suffragette-angel becomes not merely a

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

Figure 11.

Figure 12.

voter-angel but also increasingly shrewd. To appreciate such an evolution, consider first McCutcheon's earlier, less savvy depictions of femininity—e.g., in a 1907 cartoon titled "Miss Chicago (Picking a Mayor)—'Eeny, Meeney, Miney, Mo,' Etc." (Figure 12). As the title suggests, Chicago is figured as a naive woman, a feminized city unsure about its next leader, and thus choosing one randomly from a line-up of male hopefuls. Though this editorial critique is aimed at Chicago versus all of the suffrage movement, McCutcheon chooses

Figure 13.

Figure 14.

to embody a naïve city as a woman, a trope he repeats in 1914 in "The Long Ballot" (Figure 13). He does, however, dramatize the development of women's political knowledge—i.e., in "There are to be Schools for the Instruction of Women Voters" (Figure 14), in a four-part serial called "Bab's Ballot" running January through March of 1914 (Figures 15-18), and in "Women Juries for Women Criminals" (Figure 19).

McCutcheon's cartoons of the 1920s further develop the rhetoric of the voter-angel, sketching the woman voter as a formidable audience, an informed consumer and agent of politics. In "She's Been Kidded by Experts," a two-part narrative reinforces the voter-angel's political and rhetorical coming-of-age (Gallery Image 8). In these scenes, politicians become salesmen, and the voter-angel learns to stand her ground. The voter-angel who bought into President Wilson's faulty promise that his policies would prevent U.S. involvement in war⁵ in 1916 resists a similar rhetoric from presidential candidate James Middleton Cox, struggling to gain support for the new League of Nations four years later. The nature of the woman voter's refusal is distinctly domestic: with the failed goods of Wilson filling her shelves, she claims she is "still paying on the set" from a previous salesman—thus, performing a political refusal via the role of a wronged consumer. A later cartoon intensifies the voter-angel's power. On 26 April 1922, McCutcheon's "The Women are Uniting Against War" first represents War itself as a plump, uniformed soldier—drunk with his "War Habit," trashing past treaties, and reclining in laughter at a headline announcing women's peace activism (Gallery Image 9). A female figure bearing the banner of "Woman's Influence" responds to her adversary's mockery

Figure 15.

Figure 16.

Figure 17.

Figure 18.

with a brash "So!" McCutcheon's captions tease: "If she is in earnest, we . . . [c]an see his finish." In a second scene, the voter-angel leads the way for a domesticated War wheeling the couple's smiling children, Peace and Prosperity. This restyled gentleman follows his fictive bride on her political journey, their path completed by "dogs of war" trailing meekly behind. Here, McCutcheon revises his trademark dog into a trio that looks as peaceable as the offspring of the voter-angel and the sanctified demon of War.

Such domestic depictions of the suffragette-turned-voter are worthy of contemplation. Even if founded on conservative rhetorics of womanhood, they grant rhetorical and political agency. Indeed, Booth might call our attention to the increasing dramatization or subjectivity of McCutcheon's suffragette over time. Macroplotting these cartoons, as this digital archive makes possible, allows us to observe the empowered angel extending a hand to the suffragette-activist of McCutcheon's evolving imagination, and a guarded respect for a new voting population emerging from the handshake. Though

Figure 19.

McCutcheon never drew this particular handshake in a single cartoon, our contemplation of his body of work on suffrage makes the image hold long enough for us to receive it—and with it, a productive dialectic of suffrage.

Notes

- 1 Arguably, McCutcheon's increasingly progressive attitude toward women in politics also improved his representation of the suffragette ([Barrett-Fox 60](#), this issue).
- 2 [Jaqueline McLeod Rogers'](#) examination of Canadian cartoonist Newt McConnell's suffrage cartoons reveals the trope of a dog as well. In his "Mayor Oliver" and "James L. Hughes" cartoons (ca. 1910 and 1905-1914, respectively), McConnell may well be invoking McCutcheon's suffrage cartoons via allusion to his trademark dog even as McConnell sharply critiques suffrage sympathizers.
- 3 Here, art mirrors life insofar as McCutcheon did own an island in the Bahamas, Salt Cay, which his family called "Treasure Island," though Talburt inflates McCutcheon's royal status.
- 4 [Kristie S. Fleckenstein](#) makes a detailed case for this cartoon's anti-suffrage influence within its "visual media ecology."
- 5 *Tribune* readers may well have read this voter-angel's pacifism through the lens of Jane Addams's founding of the Woman's Peace Party (WPP) in 1915.

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