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The diapered Donald: Comic infantilizations of a U.S. American president

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ABSTRACT

The Trump-as-Infant trope is legion. This essay engages how infantilization constitutes comic diminution by dampening the magnitude of Donald J. Trump's presidency and blunting its rhetorical force via mockery and contempt. It does so by recasting an understanding of the rhetorical presidency through the lens of Trump's cartoon presidentialism. This essay conceptualizes *reductio ad bairn*, or the comic reduction to the infantile, as a particularly potent mode of capturing perversions in the Big Other of presidentialism and disavowals among a body politic that is stuck in a childish cycle of folding perceived oppressions and resentments into political fantasies. The concept of *reductio ad bairn*, which builds on Sigmund Freud's sense of the comicality in degradation (and, indeed, the degradations in comicality) and Jacques Lacan's sense of perversion, demonstrates how the specific trope of Baby Trump stands out as an exemplar of comic infantilization. Moreover, it magnifies the failures of using caricature in a manner that does little to demystify the petty tyrannies of an abject rhetorical presidency. This essay concludes with a critical reflection on the risks of overdoing these sorts of diminutions to the effect of diminishing the possibilities of rhetorical imagination in comic judgment.

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...the manifold mischiefs that fly from that Pandora's-box, the Baby Show ... (Ambrose Bierce, "Fatlings of the Flock," 1889)

It was a sunny morning. Thousands were in attendance, all watching as the U.S. American president soared with his trademark reverse pompadour in blazing yellow atop his head, his bulbous orange face, a bare chest with a small tuft of androgenic hair, a smartphone open to the Twitter app in hand, and a diapered bottom. Trump Baby had taken flight. He hovered over Parliament Square—a giant balloon caricature (Figure 1). Beneath him gathered a collection of faux supporters. They were clad in red jumpsuits and wearing iconic "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) caps, with the added text "Trump Babysitter" emblazoned on the back. This was not President Trump's inauguration in January 2016. Nor was it a campaign rally. It was a protest scene in London that shadowed the president's official visit with the Prime Minister of the U.K., Theresa May, in mid-July 2018.¹ The logic behind the display was that an overblown, comic



Figure 1. Baby Trump balloon being flown by protestors in Parliament Square in London taken on July 13, 2018. Photo courtesy of Calum Lindsay at *Dezeen*, <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/07/13/video-donald-trump-baby-blimp-inflatable-matt-bonner-interview-parliament-square-gardens-london/>.

blimp would speak to the president in a visual argot to match his own political character by trolling him in material space much as he once trolled others on Twitter (before he was banned in 2021 for inciting political violence and despoiling the public interest). And it would do so by mimicking his own rhetorical style: insulting, puerile, full of hot air, and disposed to public optics. Trump Baby encapsulated a presidential crank by summing up a widespread, even global, perception that the forty-fifth U.S. president behaved like a choleric infant more than the measured leader of the Free World.

Images of President Trump as a baby are hardly new. They appeared within months of his announcement in June 2015 that he would seek the U.S. American presidency. Cartoonist John Branch, for instance, pictured Trump as the “Rancor Baby” with a blue bonnet on his head and a collection of barbs encircling him.² Trump was a political neophyte. However, his petulance revealed a vanity that goes beyond tender feet. As Editor at Large for *TIME* magazine, Jeffrey Kluger, wrote just weeks after Branch’s cartoon appeared in the *San Antonio Express-News*, Trump’s comportment “is less id than infant—the most narcissistic stage of the human life cycle.”³ Trump is “an infantile vulgarian,” Yale University professor David Gelernter wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* a month before the election.⁴ Gelernter endorsed him anyway, underscoring a rationale for what has come to be known as the Flight 93 Election whereby it is better to have a baby as the Chief Executive than to spoil the bathwaters of American exceptionalism by electing someone like Hillary Clinton (or Joe Biden).⁵ Trump is infantile, but infants can be controlled. The problem lurking in the infant trope is that President Trump is *not* an infant or a child; he is a political war-maker and cultural provocateur who embraced the reality-television qualities of an imperial presidency. I contend that, in diminishing him to the status of baby, infantilizations of Trump not only reduce

Trumpism to the absurd but also amplify a full-grown politics of resentment,⁶ mistaking mockery (even if in “good” humor) for the sharp criticism of a perverse egotism.

Infantilization animates a comic mode of *diminution* (a decremptive rhetorical device) by lowering the magnitude of Trump’s presidency with contumely and contempt. Plenty of comedy laughs at, let alone lambasts, President Trump. He is a pivotal butt of late night talk show hosts. He was the object of ridicule in Alec Baldwin’s portrayal on *Saturday Night Live*, and then again in Anthony Atamunik’s parody on Comedy Central’s *The President Show* and the animated series *Our Cartoon President* (the spinoff of a recurring segment from *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*). None of this is to mention the appearance of President Trump in caricatures that make up a veritable assemblage of editorial cartoons. He wears a diaper made from the American flag, overflowing with excrement.⁷ He delivers speeches from a highchair.⁸ He nuzzles his book, *The Art of the Deal*, redrawn as *The Art of the Squeal*.⁹ He shares a playpen with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and fusses, “I DON’T WANNA PLAY ANYMORE!”¹⁰ His transport is a vintage baby carriage.¹¹ The White House is a big crib.¹² Comic infantilizations like these are as lurid as they are legion, recasting narcissism as child-like self-absorption, or grownup outrage exhibited in temper tantrums. They very often align jests about infantilism with judgments of idiocy. Yet they are riddled with anxieties about the real consequences of President Trump’s imperialistic tendencies, as in cartoons featuring the president as a baby cowering in a bunker while protests for racial justice raged around the country after a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd in the late spring of 2020.¹³ Or those following President Trump’s incitement of a violent insurrection by a riotous MAGA mob at the U.S. seat of government (like one by Jeff Darcy classifying insurrectionists as Fools on the Hill with an elephant calf in a MAGA hat in place of the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol building),¹⁴ which aimed to block congressional affirmation of President-Elect Biden’s win in the 2020 election—an incident that, for many, merely confirmed the president’s childish unwillingness to except defeat, and the dangers in his perverse presidentialism. Accordingly, this essay weighs the cultural propensity to lavish scorn on an ostensibly infantile president as a means of grappling with comic reductions of the American chief executive.

I begin with the notion that President Trump might, in fact, typify a cartoon president. To do this, I build on Jeffrey K. Tulis’s formative model of the rhetorical presidency along with scholarship by Vanessa B. Beasley, John M. Murphy, Mary E. Stuckey, and others to unpack a cartoon iteration of presidentialism not unlike what Denis Diderot imagines in *Le Neveu de Rameau ou La Satire Seconde* (Rameau’s Nephew, or the Second Satire) when he fancies “a satyr in a president.”¹⁵ One caveat is that infantilizations of Trump conceive the presidency less in terms of comic relief than in a mix of tragic fatalism and political travesty. I then expand on what Sigmund Freud calls “the comic of degradation” to take in caricatures that *rhetorically* lower public figures to the status of infants.¹⁶ I also add to conceptions of infantile citizenship à la Benjamin Barber, Lauren Berlant, Ariel Dorfman, Megan Foley, and Frank Furedi to tease out the implications of a childishness that seems almost endemic to contemporary U.S. American democracy. Finally, I examine a selection of cartoon caricatures that feature an infant Trump in order to conceptualize *reductio ad bairn* as a core trope of comic judgment. A mock board book, billed as “a children’s book for adults,” by Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist, Ann Telnaes, is an exemplar in this setup. The book is *Trump’s*

ABC.¹⁷ It looks at what the publisher describes as the president's "janissaries, poltroons, and dissemblers," as well as "his public policies, his personal defects, [and] his ethical dysfunction," all of which are chalked up to the roving paroxysms of a grown-up babe-in-arms.¹⁸ I conclude by ruminating on the comedy of resentment and the fog of rhetorical warfare. Both have risen (or sunk) with Trumpism as a cloud over the American citizenry.

Here's the catch: comic infantilizations betoken perverted cultural politics. The ubiquity of Baby Trump references in everything from popular culture to presidential rhetoric is troublesome, especially since this kind of *reductio ad bairn* is a rather artless rhetorical act of reopening wounds made by an adult infant, not of reckoning with the damage done by a presidential Big Other. We might thus do more to dig into how the politics of desire overlap with objects of derision, never more so than when a body politic is made callow in its miscarriages of democratic praxis.

A cartoon presidency

In a letter to the editor for *The New York Times* published on July 5, 1930, humorist Will Rogers compared the shenanigans of Congress with the misadventures that are all but guaranteed when an infant finds a hammer.¹⁹ The letter was a not-so-subtle commentary on the comic follies of petty and pettifogging elected officials. More specifically, it was a *bon mot* for anyone befuddled by partisan bantering despite the *esprit de corps* that so often comes with Independence Day. In 1930, the American democratic experiment remained in its infancy, not three-quarters of a century out from the Civil War and Reconstruction, and less than a century away from Alexis de Tocqueville's well-known admonishments about the tyrannies of majorities (and about minoritarians). Less than a century later, President Trump embodied the Great Experiment matured into the "infantile fantasy par excellence,"²⁰ with his express travesties of unfettered life and liberty, exemplification of a third-generation capitalist who calls himself a self-made man, and will to do politics with the rhetorical equivalence of a primal scream. As philosopher Aaron Schuster observes, accusations about the president's infantile conduct proliferate because "he is narcissistic, thin-skinned, has no sense of decorum, is devoid of empathy, petty, cruel, does not read, does not listen, cannot resist trading insults or getting into 'schoolyard' scraps, lacks impulse control," and "like a needy child he is easily influenced and manipulated by strong authority figures (Bannon, Putin)."²¹ He is a cartoon president—a caricature of American *causa sui*. Trumpism, in kind, exalts the Ugly American and celebrates egotism in the national order of things.

President Trump's cartoon presidency has much to do with the fact that he built his career and his wealth on being a huckster and artiste. As the paterfamilias of The Trump Organization—a real estate corporation that is as notorious for its gaudy properties and commercial entities as it is for the gauche haughtiness of its brand—and then again as the U.S. president, Trump embraced comparisons with the "Greatest Showman," nineteenth-century King of the Circus, P.T. Barnum. So, he does not constitute a cartoon presidency simply because he is the subject of so many cartoons; rather, he is the contact point for reconsidering the U.S. American presidency for its comic layers. Much work has been done on the rhetorical force of pictorial humor, which resonates with the Trump-as-infant caricature. However, just as resonant is the cartoon space (and schema) itself as

a site of rhetorical animation. Caricature, says Martha Banta, “is the image.” A cartoon is “the space where figures brush up against other figures.”²² Caricature, for my part, is a distorted image, a visual *dédoublement* (in the words of Charles Baudelaire) that deforms a picture of some person or thing by inflating physical or psychical aspects.²³ Freud calls caricature a “comic way of looking at [the ugliness of] things,” and degrading them through mimicry, mockery, travesty, and the like.²⁴ Banta sees it as “an *isolato*—a representation of type that stands alone.”²⁵ But caricature is more an *imago* in the classical rhetorical sense, vivifying typical representations as demonstrative proofs that are laid out for comic effect.²⁶ To understand infantilizing caricatures of President Trump is to first understand the cartoon circumstances of the rhetorical presidency. After all, the rhetorical presidency is an inventional storehouse, and a comic store for images and ideas about presidentiality.

The presidency is rhetorical inasmuch as the public speech and communicative activities of a leader influence both how a nation perceives its chief executive and how a national consciousness might encourage members of a body politic to perceive themselves. The very term, “rhetorical presidency,” is a boilerplate for analyses and diagnoses of government administration at the highest level. Initially theorized by Tulis, a rhetorical president is one who uses their bully pulpit to bypass congressional prerogatives and appeal directly to voters. Woodrow Wilson, who famously crafted most of his own speeches, was Tulis’s original exemplar. He was a leader at first constrained by the Constitution who became a powerbroker cum political centrifuge for campaigns and coalitions. For Tulis, this transformation exposes how presidential rhetoric can supersede the voice of the people. In the decades since Tulis published his original formulation, however, rhetoric scholars have challenged and transformed it, developing a more robust understanding of the U.S. presidency’s rhetoricity. Presidencies tend to signify the sticking points in how we think and feel about political institutions, not to mention how we conceive of “the people.”²⁷ Presidencies also animate the attitudes that citizens and other civic actors have about the person in the Oval Office, the politics that person represents, and the presidential office itself.²⁸ They contribute to conceptions of national identity.²⁹ They influence public opinion and policymaking, plots for doing the people’s work, and executive functions for prefiguring political leanings and playing into partisanship. And, yes, they bespeak a mode of public address in which a chief executive speaks directly to a citizenry about matters of American principle and policy,³⁰ and—particularly with President Trump—of American pride and prejudice. Perhaps above all, the rhetorical presidency is a heuristic for gauging just how much (or how little) a president is a proxy for Americanism.

Heuristics can be thorny, though. This heuristic is hardly unspoiled and anything but awash with consistent or clearly identifying markers for either opinions of a president or images of collective selfhood. Presidentialism, not to mention presidential message-making, has been fragmented and atomized over time.³¹ Moreover, the presidency itself has facilitated notions of a “rhetorical public,” or a body politic that addresses the president, even talks back.³² Rhetorical publics thrive on reiterations of presidential discourse that thereby establish frameworks for public judgment. Hence why we have had commanders-in-chief who were sometimes healers-in-chief or then again professors-in-chief. Now, we have had a toddler-in-chief.³³ These iterations evoke what a presidency and/or a president embodies, and how we can sometimes learn more from

messes made by the machinations of those who might seek to secure what Thomas Jefferson called the tyranny over the minds of men than by the workings of a democratic machine. They also educe what Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles call “presidentialities,” or images that fabricate the strange truths (or fictions) of presidential fictions (or truths).³⁴ “The president is an icon,” Stuckey states.³⁵ Iconic presidents represent *how* “the people” imagine that they are governed, and not so much by *what* as by *whom*. Cartoon images are iconic. They represent a comic way of seeing presidential imagery that is at once recognizable and critical. This way of seeing is often carried out in caricatures that are farcical, disfigured, ridiculous—grotesque.³⁶ Comic icons can cast judgment on the condition of, in this case, a cartoonish presidentiality. Icons emblemize cultures when they articulate some collective experience or shared perception.³⁷ The infant imagery so rife in comic portrayals of President Trump makes a caricature of the president himself while mocking the madcap, even if maladroit, nature of his presidency. In such imagery, President Trump is not just a president in the carnival mirror; he is the carnival.

To a large extent, President Trump’s critics come by their rhetorical infantilizations quite honestly. He emotes like a child. He lashes out against resistance and criticism. He is, by many standards, mischievous and untrustworthy. He also exemplifies a politics of petulance, and an approach to policymaking that is as much about tit-for-tat as it is about sticks and stones. Like immature sprogs, President Trump projected negative traits onto others, obsessed over the self, responded to negative stimuli less with logic than with rage, and maintained a general lack of awareness (or care) about misconduct that might be deemed somehow inappropriate or unbecoming. What is more, his puerility attracted repugnance on one hand and, on the other, represented the source of President Trump’s appeal when he was seen as being outspoken, candid, and blunt. This brashness is what has long made him an icon of American pop culture in spite of, or maybe because of, “his racism, misogyny, lying, churlishness, childish name-calling and utter disdain for everything and everybody not named Donald Trump.”³⁸ It is a part of his brand identity and the crux of his political character. Infantilization underwrites an identitarian mode of politics that reduces citizens to consumers of egocentric solutions over the hard work of deliberation, simple answers over complicated truths, and fast outcomes over the slow muddling-through of democracy. As the organizing principle of President Trump’s deal-making ethos and dogmatic orientation to salesmanship, infantilization let slip his preference to play the chief executive on television over truly inhabiting the high office of the presidency.

This as-seen-on-TV aspect of Trump’s presidency overlaps with the president-as-infant trope. It underpins President Trump’s rise to political power, which Tulis expresses in a sort of paradigm-shifting foreword to the twentieth-anniversary edition of his germinal book, *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Tulis insists that social media platform Twitter perverts the notion that all politics are personal. President Trump earned the moniker Commander-in-Tweet (in addition to Insult Comic in Chief and Reality-TV President),³⁹ posting rants and outrageous ramblings with a discomfiting blend of narcissism and brand management. Before he even became president, Trump was “a king among men” in using Twitter for an unrelenting spew of “childish put-downs.”⁴⁰ Tulis turns this observation into a judgment of political disgrace. President Trump is “so unscripted and intemperate,” says Tulis, “that people imagine his handlers and advisors

taking his phone away and doing all they can to prevent him from hitting *send*.”⁴¹ In fact, numerous reports relayed the concern among Trump administration aides about his infantile behavior and his refusal to grow *into* his role as president, or better yet grow *up*.⁴² Others expressed alarm about the fact that President Trump’s loyal base is mostly “dismissive of his maturity, judgment, and prudence.”⁴³ Tulis provides a framework for looking at Trump’s rhetorical presidency in terms of his very reputation for being the #ToddlerInChief, an *enfant terrible*, a fussy baby. It is bad enough that he has been called a fascist sympathizer, an uncritical nationalist, a faux populist, a corporate kingpin, and more. Worse still is that President Trump is an “infantilist.”⁴⁴ He embodies the tragedy of an American commons wherein self-interest and self-centeredness have polluted the wells of democracy.

The key here is that President Trump, with his polemical and invective-laden disposition to public speech and demeanor, represents something of a limit case for the rhetorical presidency. As a comic figure, he pushed the presidency to the end of its line, especially with his express “scorn for the codes of propriety that historically constrained presidential talk.”⁴⁵ The paroxysms of a puerile president stand in tension with the guarded precision that is commonly expected of those who are at least wont to act “presidential.” Trump converted the rhetorical presidency into vulgar pageantry. He is, in Joshua Gunn’s words, a *pervert*, and Trumpism is a *perversion*.⁴⁶ Neither Trump nor Trumpism heeds “a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.”⁴⁷ Trumpism is about Making America Great Again by making the best of a Barnum-like spectacle. It is cynical, despotic, and perverted, and yet inspires a dark humor, the suffering of which accommodates not only desire but also idiocy. Political cartoons that portray the president as King Trump the Foolish and Emperor Incurable carry the same rhetorical weight as those that weigh in on him as a Tweeting Twit of a Baby. The Trump-as-infant trope makes Trump into a caricature of presidential leadership, and the rhetorical presidency into a comic farce. “Baby Trump” is not just a moniker for a globular blimp or a political stunt, but also the nomenclature for an entire rhetorical culture of comic imagery that pictures the president as a childlike buffoon. Infantilization is comic reduction to the absurd. The comicality of such reductions is less about absurdities and anomalies than about proof by contraries as proof by congruities. So it is that I characterize comic infantilization as *reductio ad bairn*, or a comic reduction to the absurd by way of an amplification of that which is fatuously, perversely, *childishly* out of humor.

Reductio ad bairn

As epistolary wisdom professes, children speak and understand and think like children, but grownups do away with childish things, for those in the grown-up world come face to face with themselves as that dim reflection in a mirror. Perhaps. But, as writers such as Lewis Carroll, C. S. Lewis, and many others have observed, there is comic wisdom in seeing like a child, even in being childish, since childlike imaginations can generate complex images of reality. The same can be said of caricature, which lightens dark mirrors with glaring distortions. Reductions to the bairn, then, can add comical depths to otherwise wretched surfaces.

Of course, comic distortions are only as good as the insights they reveal about the deformed persons or things that they misrepresent. In August 2017, writer and comics critic Michael Cavna opined that it might be time to stop portraying President Donald J. Trump as an unruly, unhinged infant. The infant caricature, Cavna wrote, risks trivializing and minimizing the all-too-adult consequences that a president's words and deeds have in the real world.⁴⁸ For sure, there is an element of dismissiveness in the Trump-as-Infant trope, treating the peevisish president as consequential but not to be taken seriously. This element actually gets at one of the troubles with representing President Trump: as a "rhetorical artifice" in esse,⁴⁹ he is a branded image outside and beyond himself, so much so that counter-images merely prefigure, reproduce, and even skirt the political work that he actually does. So many critics and commentators refer to President Trump as a caricature of himself. In this regard, a caricature of an infant *as* an infant is hardly a caricature. It simply uses comicality to express some "exaggeration and overstatement of the truth for the sake of amplification or diminution."⁵⁰ This is where a turn to Freud is instructive.

According to Freud, "everything is comic that does not fit the grown-up."⁵¹ The comic is that which interrupts or disrupts the economies of feeling that come with adulthood, which include social proscriptions, cultural norms, legal and other prohibitions, and political limitations. The child is incapable of practical reasoning, but joyfully—even ignorantly—so. The child is uninhibited. The child is pleasure-seeking. The civilized adult, conversely, is bound by notions of conventional wisdom and good judgment, which constrain behavior and inhibit self-motivated desires. To delight in the childlike is to derive pleasure from a degradation of the adult world. For Freud, there are a few ways that this sort of degradation can happen. One is with images of grown persons who appear *as if* children. Another is with observations of persons who enact the attributes of a child. Another still is in the very activities that allow audiences to find childishness in particular dispositions. Comic degradation is a rhetorical act of "lowering to the level of the child."⁵² It is a form of comparison (i.e. imitation or exaggeration) based in hyperbolic portrayals that amplify what is deemed diminutive in those who are out of humor. This is not to say that the child or infant should be held to the same standard of character or conduct as the adult. Quite the contrary, infantile or childish behavior is comic because it distorts normative standards, reminding us of the pleasures that can attend freedom from responsibility and restraint. Diminution of that which is childlike is the "source of comic pleasure."⁵³ And it is a rhetorical resource for unmasking the relationship between expectation and disappointment. We expect children to act like children, and so are not disappointed when they are in ill humor or out of sorts. Relatedly, we expect that adults will by and large *not* act childish, and so are disappointed when their buried puerility betrays them, whether in the form of those who appear to be acting out or in the fault of those who never (or refuse to) grow up.

Caricatures that reduce President Trump to the bairn play on these themes of childlike fatuity and infantile folly in their comic degradations. Take the cover of *The Economist* by caricaturist Jon Berkeley from January 2018, which advertises a headline report on the "one year old" presidency with a subtitled wonderment as to whether it is "really this bad."⁵⁴ Accompanying the cover story is a cartoon image of an infantilized Trump lounging in a blue baby carriage adorned with the presidential seal. He tosses a pacifier from one hand and holds a hamburger in the other. At his feet in the carriage

is a doll of the First Lady. Scattered on the floor around him are various playthings, including a toy box filled with missiles, a picture book edition of *Fire and Fury* (an insider's look at the Trump White House written by journalist Michael Wolff), colored blocks spelling the word "WALL" (in reference to his campaign promise to build a wall on the U.S.–Mexico border), and two Russian nesting dolls (one of Vladimir Putin and the other of his son, Don, Jr.). President Trump is a comic degradation. He is a failure of presidential leadership around matters of international relations and global security, immigration, foreign policy, and national character. As one commentator for *Foreign Policy* put it in 2015, even candidate Trump made clear that he would either remain what Shakespeare dubbed the first age of man ("the infant, mewling and puking in the nurse's arms") or embody the last stage of human evolution (a "second childishness and mere oblivion").⁵⁵ The latter man bunks off the lessons of tutelage, real combat, wisdom, judgment, and experience. Plainly, President Trump would never deign to be, well, presidential.

As such, it is not enough to approach *reductio ad bairn* as a comic diminution that amplifies images and ideas for either amusement or admonishment. Nor is it enough to take comic infantilizations as mere cartoon responses to presidential cartoonishness. In the case of President Trump, one imagines a childlike adult as the degraded embodiment of childishness. Consider an editorial cartoon by Rick McKee in which President Trump is a baby cowering in the bunker beneath the White House while protests for racial justice rage around the country following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020.⁵⁶ Or consider a similar rendition from the following month in which Steve Sack portrayed President Trump as a baby in a cage of an entirely different sort than previously imaginable.⁵⁷ So-called "babies in cages" became the moniker for classifying migrant children kept in detention under the Trump Administration's immigration policy and the cross-border practices of U.S. Immigration and Custom's Enforcement. In Sack's image, Trump is the caged baby, peeking out of a bunker in a miniature version of the White House, enclosed by black fencing. In each instance, caricatures reinforce comic degradation as a pathway to approaching the problem as seen through comicality and the comic *as a problem*.

Comic degradation views rhetorical affairs through imagery that invokes cultural repressions, political hysteria, and social fixations. The cartoon imagery of an infantile president is fodder for a decidedly public sense of childishness and its consequences on and for a citizenry. This framework is fertile for an examination of how and why a man in the highest political office ascended to it on a platform that both ceded to (in speech, anyway) the desires of others and yet utterly deviated from standards of decency, civility, prudence, and more (and so bore out the perverse desires affixed to articulations of bigotry, xenophobia, misogyny, jingoism, and sexism).⁵⁸ President Trump occupies the rhetorical positioning of an adult who is stuck in a childlike state of dependency on public acclaim (or merely attention) that mirrors a reliance on parental custody and care. He is narcissistic. He is an object of reception and consumption, never mind desire. But he is comically problematic, indeed perverse, in that cartoon images of Trump as a child render him incapable of actually being an adult.

There is much beyond the pleasure principle when it comes to perversion in the structures of social and political relations. Jacques Lacan described this sort of perversion as what I would call a rhetorical loop wherein a visible image becomes a veritable individual

—object becomes subject, subject becomes object. Fittingly, Lacan called this loop a missile, which—in perversion—doubles as the target.⁵⁹ This is even more fitting in light of Lacan’s view of the comic as that which privileges the image over the individual.⁶⁰ Why? Because the comic (as per Freud) and perversion (as per Lacan) are enantiomers, or mirror images.⁶¹ There are “infantile perversions” we never grow out of,⁶² and they can brim over with comicality. Perceived slights over what we cannot have or cannot do. A desire to satisfy instinctual drives. Candidly, I watch my young children explode into fits of rage or despair when some toy has been “stolen” or some play creation has been ruined. Sometimes, I laugh. I laugh at this “infantile omnipotence, a mistaken narcissism ubiquitous in early life, that one can control the universe or bend reality toward one’s will,” in childhood via fabulations and occasionally fights, and before that “through urination, defecation, and finally crying—in multiple senses.”⁶³ Do comic infantilisms not exploit desire in relation to the despair of others, enjoyment in their torment, and the potential humor in pointing out how our own wants leave little room for the wants of others? Crudely, comic degradation is perverse.

The comic problem (or the problem with comic degradation) here is that Trump’s rhetorical presidency, and Trumpism besides, has grown up in the wake of democracy’s relative decline. Democratic governance now emboldens politics as fetish. Big Lies, ingrained feelings of victimhood, and wild distrust of the very institutions that might protect and preserve the populace all provoke fantasies of resentment over things taken away. President Trump reveled in his unwillingness to fit the lineage of Founding Fathers or presidential predecessors. He never had any interest in disciplining his political base. Quite the opposite. He took pride in acting like the pre-political child *qua* pure citizen, and thereby personified a model of perversion—demagogic, authoritarian, fascist—that is baked into the very structure of U.S. American democracy.⁶⁴ As a result, some of his most ardent MAGA acolytes took up arms and ransacked the Capitol building in dismay over Trump’s presidential demise. Some of the insurrectionists turned looters and louts actually defecated in the building and even smeared feces on the hallways, tracking it through offices and daubing it on the walls. If not for these crudities, the clownishness and degeneracy might lead to a sense that the insurrection was little more than “a goofy, childish act,”⁶⁵ with the mob much like its apparent Commander-in-Folly: “childish, stupid, dangerous, and confirmed in their fear.”⁶⁶ But the result of this relation is more than disavowal that comes off as the hysterics of distraught children.

Without dwelling more than is necessary on the Freudian and Lacanian undertones, Baby Trump represents a rhetorical heuristic in the comic triumph of infantilism as a grotesque mode of cultural politics that supplants its own perverse enjoyment over a Big Other. The caricature makes any desire for a better way of doing cultural politics self-defeating, and overlooks a political culture wherein white (male) sovereignty does not reign supreme with an infantile president at the rhetorical reins. So it is important to account for the rhetorical characteristics of *reductio ad bairn* as they appear in some of the foremost Trump-as-infant caricatures.

Of babies and bathwaters

There is little reason for the Trump-as-infant trope to simply be thrown out. There is a good deal of historical precedent for rhetorical infantilizations in politics, and to good

comic effect. Comic degradations of rhetorical presidencies date back at least to the late nineteenth century. A cover image for *Puck* from 1880, for instance, shows Ulysses S. Grant as a baby in a highchair being spoon fed “3rd Term Pap” by Roscoe Conkling and J. Donald Cameron.⁶⁷ In 1872, a cartoon entitled “The old nurse and her foundling” portrays Senator Charles Sumner as a mother figure imploring Senator Henry Wilson to not turn his back on civil rights initiatives for freedmen. In it, a “Civil Rights Bill” is a creepy baby swaddled in Senator Sumner’s arms, depicting policy measures as helpless infants.⁶⁸ President Theodore Roosevelt, who earned nicknames like the Rough Rider and the Old Lion, appeared in a cartoon from *The Boston Herald* in 1910 as a toddler sitting on a table in the White House pantry feasting on jars of jam labeled as first, second, and third terms.⁶⁹ In 1906, Roosevelt graced a cover of *Puck* as an “Infant Hercules” facing off with the serpents of Nelson W. Aldrich, then leader of the Republican Party, and John D. Rockefeller, head of Standard Oil.⁷⁰ Notably, the rag baby was a regular feature in the caricatures of Thomas Nast, so-called “Father of the American Cartoon.” Nast used the child’s toy to represent a U.S. electorate held hostage to inflation in 1876 (Figure 2). The point here is that the infant trope has long been a potent, even productive, source of comicality in cartoon renditions of U.S. presidents, politics, and policies.

But the Trump-as-infant trope is different. First, there is the sheer magnitude in its purchase as a marker for presidential character. Second, it fits President Trump’s approach to both policymaking and cultural politics. Before the end of his second year in office, he had earned nicknames like “Man-Baby,” “King Baby,” and “Baby Trump.”⁷¹ He had also been characterized as infantile by a variety of personages from cabinet members through psychiatrists to stand-up comedians and even foreign heads of state. Numerous critics, commentators, and reporters have also dubbed President Trump’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the 2020 presidential election exemplars of his immature and self-centered comportment, with a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations once lamenting his “childish antics, temper tantrums, willful ignorance and lack of foreign policy prowess.”⁷² Third and finally, Baby Trump provides a useful frame for characterizing Trump’s presidency through reductions to the bairn in comic degradations.

A month after Trump was elected, a particularly mortifying political cartoon was circulated online. It was the feature image for a story in *Verdens Gang* (VG), a popular Norwegian tabloid, before being shared widely on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites. The story responded to the political pessimism that seemed to define 2016, and it emphasized a sense that laughing at even the most foolish politicians had become difficult in light of rampant populist sentiment and a prevailing nationalistic brinkmanship peddled by various political leaders around the world. The comic image was drawn by Norwegian artist, Christian Bloom. In it, President-Elect Trump is an infant crawling across the floor with fecal matter seeping out of his diaper. The side profile of his face is unmistakable, even photorealistic, but his baby body is soiled from hand to chin, foot to mouth. So is an American flag that doubles as a tablecloth. Baby Trump is reaching out to yank Old Glory from a table, atop which sits a classroom globe.⁷³ The lesson seems clear, and it alters the anti-Trump slogan —“Elect a clown, expect a circus”—that emerged during the first year of his presidency: elect an infant, expect a shit show. Other cartoons played on the world-wrecking theme, too, like one by freelance American illustrator John Kachik, who portrayed the president



Figure 2. Thomas Nast, "The Haunted House; or, The 'Murdered' Rag Baby Will Not Be Still," *Harper's Weekly*, April 8, 1876, p. 288.

holding a desk globe like a rattle and breaking it on the floor.⁷⁴ This portrayal came after the president's speech before the United Nations in September 2017. According to former National Security Adviser Susan E. Rice, the speech was petulant and in poor

taste, casting the U.S. and the president himself as “reckless, alone and ridiculed.”⁷⁵ In their nascence and beyond, comic degradations of the Trump presidency display a new world disorder.

Still, while cartoons of Trump as an excremental babe in the political woods make bodily waste into a visual metaphor for mucking things up, many others go around the *persona non grata* to emphasize the impacts of an infant running amok in the Oval Office. One cartoon by R. J. Matson from January 2, 2018 has an anthropomorphic elephant with a black baton, top hat, white gloves, and yellow sash dragging President Trump into the new year.⁷⁶ The president’s carriage is an oversized diaper overflowing with the refuse of the Grand Old Party. President Trump is lounging in a diaper of his own, and sending tweets from his mobile phone. Many other cartoonists have portrayed the president in a high chair, variously playing with nuclear weapons, throwing a tantrum, pretending to be a king on a throne, refusing food, and more. Together, these cartoons constitute a comic *imago* of President Trump as a man rich with filthy principles, a fatuous head of state, and an infantile figurehead for the corruption of the GOP. To discern the rhetorical force of humor in this comic imagery is to grasp widespread concern over a cartoon presidency that infantilized American government *in situ*—but also for its aggrandizement of what, in baby talk, might be called a tiny tyrant.

The tyranny perpetrated by a democratically elected leader is the most potent of the comic infantilizations that attempt to diminish the appearance of real Constitutional powers bestowed upon U.S. American presidents. For this reason, the *reductio ad bairn* is exemplary in the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist, Ann Telnaes. She has a longstanding reputation for edgy, sharp, and aesthetically unpretentious cartoons about “any variety of injustice, oppression, hypocrisy, or sham.”⁷⁷ Sometimes she takes on official politics. Sometimes she takes on normative gender relations and matters of national identity. Sometimes she reimagines the American people. Unlike those by so many of her cartoonist confrères, Telnaes’s comic degradations of President Trump amplify the all-too-real power that lurks behind and within his ridiculous puerility.

Telnaes’s caricatures of President Trump reveal what sardonic fabulist Ambrose Bierce once defined in *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1906) as a particularly American iteration of majesty: a contemptuous king not unlike any other deplorable Grand Master, Chancellor, or Imperial Potentate.⁷⁸ As Arthur Schlesinger famously characterized it, the imperial presidency exemplifies a bid for executive power. Telnaes uses these terms in her cartoons about President Trump. However, what she captures is an imperious chief executive. Her “children’s board book for adults,” *Trump’s ABC*, stands out in this regard, but only in light of a series of cartoons that actually postdates it. That series appeared as an opinion piece for *The Washington Post* on June 8, 2018. It is titled “The Lyin’ King,”⁷⁹ a pop cultural reference to the Disney film *The Lion King* and, with it, a riff on monarchical illegitimacy. At the center of Telnaes’s argument are President Trump’s anti-democratic tendencies, ignorance of the basic tenets of the Constitution, brazen disregard for the rule of law, and inclination to run the country by fiat. Her comic imagery mocks a core touchstone of American politics, which is that we elect presidents not kings. President Trump executed his office like a kingly infant, with the vagaries of a democratic head of state who imagines himself an emperor.

“The Lyin’ King” evinces *reductio ad bairn* by mingling the childish elements of President Trump’s policymaking with the surface features of his cultural politicking. Iconic markers of majesty are crucial here. They include references to fictional monarchies, classic symbols of royalty, and visual idioms of crowned heads. One of Telnaes’s cartoon images portrays then-candidate Trump as a crude iteration of the Queen of Hearts from Lewis’s Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). His face is bright red, and his attire is that of the infamous queen, complete with a bulging red corset and pastiche scepter. Towering over a diminutive, boyish king, the Trumpian Queen shouts the familiar line from Carroll’s tale: “OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!!” A caption reads, “Trump thinks he’s running as an absolute monarch.” The caricature pre-figures an irascible president prone to name-calling, giving orders, and pronouncing sentences before verdicts. It also exemplifies Carroll’s characterizations of a queen “crimson with furry,” not to mention Alice’s predilection to call out her majesty for a tetchy manner that is unbecoming of a doyenne. Another cartoon from the series expands on the imperial thematic. A bloated President-Elect Trump stands in side profile from the chest up with an iconic red MAGA hat on his head, which is equipped with a tiny crown topped with a gold “T.” Yet another cartoon, originally published a week after President Trump took office in January 2017, animates the president adorned in kingly regalia sitting on a throne. The red carpet beneath the regal chair can be seen rolling out before him. A caption brands President Trump “his royal Grumpiness” and suggests that he derives his own sense of royalty from judgments about who of his political cadre is or is not loyal to him. One more kingly travesty portrays “Emperor Trump” in a robe. This animated cartoon sees the president flashing his onlookers with a nude body. Trump’s genitalia is covered by a black box containing white letters that read, “FAKE NEWS.” The president is finally converted into an utter charade of the denuded emperor, designated by Telnaes the “imperial president,” with purple habiliments, a gaudy and bedazzled crown, and the trappings of an un-American quisling who is more committed to his own megalomania than the Republic.

Most outstanding in her comic compendium, though, is the infantilizing linchpin that comes right in the middle. It is an image of President Trump as a toddler-like Trump Baby, dubbed “the little king.” The cartoon is animated, and the president is caricatured as a small child jumping up and down in a fit of rage. His mouth is open. His face is red. He is throwing a tantrum, and the tiny crown bounces atop his red hat amidst the outburst. It is easy to approach this portrayal in terms of how the comic of degradation can reduce the significance of its target or topic by disrupting the real weight of magnitude. Yet, because it reiterates broader tropings of Baby Trump, Telnaes’s infantilizing hook has the comic effect of amplifying the president as a grown man too disproportionately small for his political role. President Trump is the very least of the adults in the room, making the royal treatment of caricature a metaphor for mocking his clear and present perversion of the rhetorical presidency. Furthermore, as Telnaes documented President Trump’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic, *reductio ad bairn* can be seen for its comic reach insofar as it speaks both to and of his incorrigible base. In a cartoon from July 16, 2020, Telnaes caricatures the stereotypical white male Trumpster. He is wearing a white t-shirt emblazoned with an American flag and a characteristic red MAGA hat. He is also lounging in a rocker, a pacifier in his mouth, a scowl on his face, and three infectious coronavirus blobs dangling above his head as mobiles. A thought

bubble above him betrays his attitude: “I’M NOT WEARING A MASK.” Below him, a caption sets things right: “American Exceptionalism.”⁸⁰ The examples of this reciprocal perversion of civic virtue continued through to the Capitol insurrection, to which Telnaes responded with a “Seal of the Trump Presidency.”⁸¹ Trump is splayed out in the center, sitting on a stack of cash, encircled by red coronaviruses, gripping tiki torches in one hand and a flamethrower in the other, and heralded by signs of his two impeachments and an undying refusal to take any responsibility for his words or deeds. This is why *Trump’s ABC* is a comic take on President Trump not simply as an infantile man, but rather as the Big Other who betrays just how much presidentialism is a cornerstone of civic (dis)identification.

Trump’s ABC offers a laughable take on what President Trump pushed and what pulls some into the dregs of Trumpism. It is constructed as a children’s board book filled with adult content. The cover features the president sitting at a round table with his arms crossed in front of his hulking body, clad in a black suit with a white shirt. He looks like a gussied up Gargantua. The blotchy titian face. The white areas around squinting eyes. His iconic yellow coiffure. He is smug. On the table in front of him are three alphabet blocks and his familiar oversized red tie. Together the blocks spell “CON MAN,” thereby advertising the book’s very status as a comic degradation of the notion that the president is little more than a childish power grabber. Various topics bear this presidential infantilism out. Telnaes emphasizes the president’s corrupt business dealings, beginning with his trades of money for political influence and ending with his myopic pursuit of personal and familial gain. She derides his inflated ego by caricaturing him with a balloon for a head being filled up with hot air. Telnaes reasserts the popular critique that President Trump is a narcissist. She makes his quotable diatribes on things like “fake news” into caricatures of a childlike, yet conniving, attempt to control the very discourse of truth. She makes fun of his storied history of sexual infidelity. His nepotism. Even his infamously small hands and orange hue. What is more, Telnaes pictures a structure of political feeling in “Trump’s America” by characterizing the lasting impact of his presidential tenure, such as when she draws the Statue of Liberty with a severed head and a doused torch to represent “Y,” the “years” of damage done.⁸² Most importantly, Telnaes coalesces the broader implications of the Trump-as-infant trope by honing in on his tyrannical predispositions.

Take the two-pages that contain “S” and “T.” On one side is a waist-up view of a monstrous Trump in side profile wearing a red MAGA hat affixed with an emperor’s crown, atop which sits a gold “T.” On the other side is a corpulent Baby Trump sitting in a diaper with a bonnet on his head. There is a bottle on the floor beside him. In his hand he holds a smart phone while birds that look like the logo for Twitter flit about. The juxtaposition is jarring. On one side is a comic image showing that “S” in the ABCs of Trump “is for separation of powers abuse.” On the other, an infantile president promulgates his petulant displeasures under the avowal that “T” is for the sorts of “thin-skinned and obtuse” remarks that are so prevalent in his tweets (Figure 3). Herein lies Telnaes’s expression of the Janus face that typifies *reductio ad bairn* in Trump’s rhetorical presidency: one can see the comic ruse in portraying the president as an adult who sinks to the level of a child just as one can see the calamity that comes with a chief executive who sinks himself by indulging in childish rage.



is for tweeting, thin-skinned and obtuse

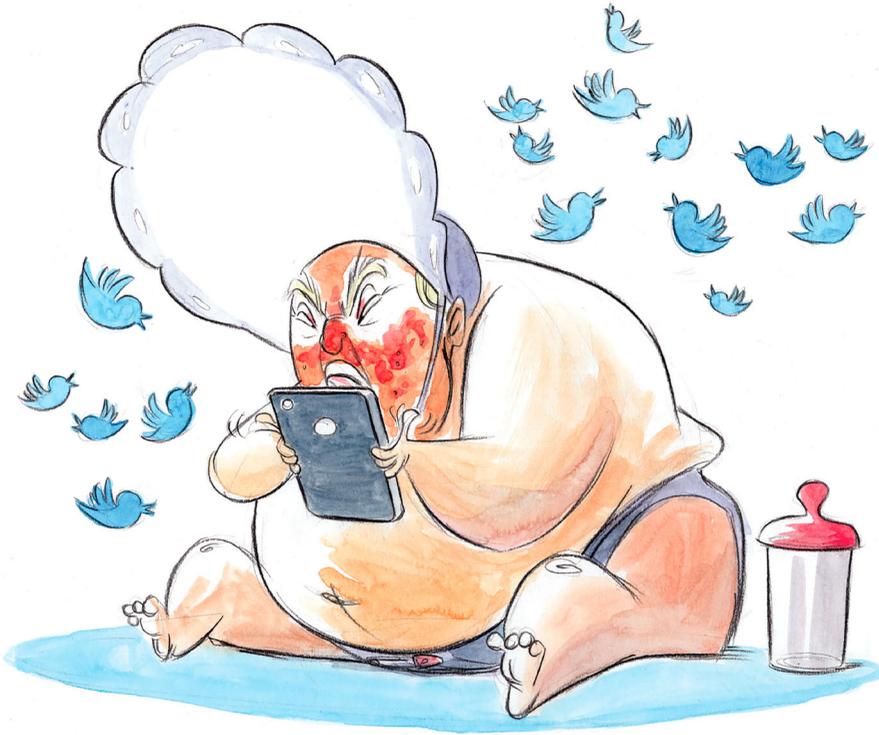


Figure 3. Ann Telnaes, “T is for tweeting,” in *Trump’s ABC*, p. 20. Copyright © Ann Telnaes. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books (www.fantagraphics.com).

It is telling that Telnaes begins *Trump’s ABC* with “A” for “Americans who elected this guy.” This placement of blame is one of numerous comic reductions. Across the book so-called “Trumpsters” are deaf and dumb. They are bigots and imbeciles, and the worst of White America (from a conspiratorial cabal that includes members of congressional leadership through the cultural institution of Fox News to the KKK). Nevertheless, *Trump’s ABC* epitomizes the Trump-as-infant trope by insinuating not just that Trump is a puerile conman but also that the fruits of his political labors are borne of an infantilized, maybe even conned, *citizenry*. In the words of Benjamin R. Barber, an “infantilist ethos” eats away at the core of an otherwise “democratic ethos” in Trump’s America,⁸³ converting presidentialism into a cult of personality that perverts an ethic of caveat emptor. The authority of the president as a symbolic representation of “the people,” or better the “rhetorical fiction” of the presidency itself,⁸⁴ thereby becomes a farce. After all, an infantile president is not all that different from the infantilized citizens of American democracy.

Baby Trump is part and parcel of a babied body politic—one that Telnaes continued to insinuate as a tormented populace subjected to the “authoritarian tactics” of “Trump and his minions” in pandemic (and seditious) times.⁸⁵ The danger, of course, is that the infantilist can become the imperialist.

There is a verse from a poem by Langston Hughes. The poem is “Let America Be America Again,”⁸⁶ and the verse goes like this: “O, let America be America again —/The land that never has been yet—/And yet must be—.” This sentiment permeates the comic infantilizations in Telnaes’s caricatures of President Trump. That is, it recollects Hughes’s notion that such an America rejects the schemes of tyrants and the connivances of kings. It reeks of “the poor white, fooled and pushed apart.” It recoils at the scars of slavery. It peers in the looking glass and sees the Old World, here before us, in a present day still riddled with the “rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies.” President Trump proclaimed his intent to Make America Great Again with the mindset of a child who is at once innocent and utterly in the wrong precisely because he does not know better. So the America imagined by Hughes merges with a certain childishness envisaged by James Baldwin when one looks at Trump’s imperial presidency. “A child,” Baldwin wrote in *The Devil Finds Work*, “is far too self-centered to relate to any dilemma which does not, somehow, relate to him—to his own evolving dilemma. The child escapes into what he would like his situation to be.”⁸⁷ The tyranny of an infant president is the byproduct of a perverse enjoyment in Trumpism and its identifications between a Big Other and those looking for affirmation. It is contaminated with social and political imbalances that fuel frustration, and frustration that rouses resentment. These markings of infantilism—if left unrefined—fuel fantasies of Selves and Others, which in turn encourage temper tantrums, poor impulse control, oppositional behavior, and knowledge deficits.⁸⁸ When the fantasy falters, it appears in the cultural politics of a failed political mirror stage, distorted in both directions. This is Telnaes’s point.

In comic iterations of Trump and Trumpism is a temptation to throw out the baby with the bathwater. This is especially the case if one adds to the draw of infantilization a deep, dark history of portraying Native populations and Black persons as childish people needing to be “civilized”—or enslaved.⁸⁹ President Trump’s rhetorical presidency adhered to a racist, ethnocentric playbook, littered with appeals to an American heritage of rugged individualism as self-centered chauvinism. He obsessed over what might be called the No True American fallacy. In making his vision of American Greatness coincident with an image of himself, Trump exuded a rhetorical mode of speech, thought, and action that scarcely moves beyond the Self. His response to the COVID-19 pandemic amplified this truth, with the use of press briefings and task force updates as infomercials for Trump’s ultimately failed re-election bid, the relegation of responsibility to states and individuals, the rebuff of recommendations from public health experts, and the implicit policy of casting off any blame for disaster mismanagement. Comic iterations of Trump as an infant capture the cultural and truly rhetorical consequences of enacting a will to do what thou will, everyone else be damned.

Infantilization here is the rhetorical display of childishness as an all too American penchant to act as if everyone is in it for themselves, with factions functioning as unthinking hordes spurred on by so many constituencies of one. In early May 2020, Telnaes caricatured President Trump in side profile with a bright red face and a piercing look in his eyes. He is wearing a facemask. Just not on his face. The ties are wrapped

around his waist and knotted on his stomach. The mask is covering his rear end. From one vantage, Telnaes's cartoon encapsulates President Trump's singular interest in covering his own ass. From another vantage, though, the mask is a diaper, containing the mess of scorched earth diatribes, racist rants, snake oil sales pitches, nationalistic delusions, and grouchy paroxysms that spew out of him whenever the president talks out of his backside. These ejections are the rhetorical equivalents of Freud's omnipotent infant who pees and poops in a bid for control, and whose behavior reappears in the actions of a cruel, sadistic, *infantile* adult. They are the comic waste matter that combines with the excreta of Lacan's view of perversion. So, the mask is actually in its proper place. Where Telnaes put it, it will do the most good for a democratic polity.

Conclusion: of rhetoric and diapers

There is an old saying that politicians need to be changed as regularly as a baby's diapers, and for the same reason. Something similar could be said about rhetorics of infantilization.

Even though the Trump-as-Infant trope articulates perspectives of the president, it also transforms the repute of the office, and by extension the electorate that put an infantile chief executive into it. A Freudian take on comic diminution helps us unpack this quandary. Recall that a core aspect of the comicality in *reductio ad bairn* entails the extent to which who or what is reduced—and so amplified for comic effect—is unbecoming of the status of adult. In other words, there is an Otherness (even a Big Otherness) to caricatures that cast the American president as a baby. As Vanessa B. Beasley attests, not just the rhetoric of a president but also the rhetoric about a president composes “the people” as a national civic community.⁹⁰ Similarly, we as a people are largely defined by who we put in office, meaning that images and ideas about presidentiality bring about Americanism, and perhaps never more so than when a president celebrates the war of all against all over and above more democratic senses of compassion and togetherness.⁹¹ In these ways, to recognize the president as an infant (or some other variant of babyish neonate) is to recharacterize the American body politic as infantile in its shared approach to self-centered, acquisitive, and uncaring democratic politics. As much accords with the sort of comic imagery that turns images back on themselves, rendering Baby Trump a visual encapsulation of an I-know-you-are trope even as he himself is put on blast for having been a puerile and petulant president. Surely, Trump's own “presidential” rhetoric infantilized the American citizenry. The Trump-as-infant trope, too, is infantile. But this does not mean that the trope should be changed. Instead, it means that we need to change our approach to the rhetorical presidency.

From a comic vantage, changing how we engage the Trump presidency means changing how we understand the specifically comic problem of disappointment, and maybe desire. It would be easy to suggest that caricatures of Trump, if done right, open up spaces for citizens to imagine the former president and Trumpism in terms of counter-factuality.⁹² From editorial cartoons through late night television show mockeries to protest blimps, comic infantilizations of Trump showcase the dire consequences of putting an infant into power. *Vanity Fair* made its own show of this with a video in October 2016 just before the election featuring a look-alike toddler taking over a miniature Oval Office to play with toys, mess about on Twitter, and ultimately throw a temper

tantrum and destroy a copy of the Bill of Rights.⁹³ It is also easy to suggest that President Trump is disappointing, if not laughable, because he failed to meet expectations about being the apex of democratic comportment. Or to lambast him for debasing the Executive Office or corrupting the common good with his own self-interest. A greater challenge, though, lies in seeing possibilities for the failure of the comic, namely in the chance that the comicality of *reductio ad bairn* is counterproductive.

So many caricatures of Baby Trump take the fantastical nature of an infantile president to such an extreme that they feel somewhat foolish. Freud rightfully suggests that a comic reduction to the infantile is a special case of comic degradation. And he follows Immanuel Kant's sense that comicality tees up an expectation only to diminish it to nothing, which is the nadir of disappointment.⁹⁴ My sense, however, is that the disappointment of comic degradation in iterations of Baby Trump emerges out of a simultaneous image of the body politic lowered to the level of a child and the realization that the comic—heretofore widely regarded as the proper framework for speaking truth to power—might be an inapt foil for demystifying the rhetorical presidency (at least Trump's rhetorical presidency). Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai posit that “comic failure” poses a crucial dilemma when it diminishes opportunities for communal elevation, self-development, and betterment.⁹⁵ This is because such a failure reinforces uncritical frameworks for seeing the world anew. It reminds us of a collective disdain for “childlike manifestations” of citizenship, but also their strange draw.⁹⁶ In its diminishment (which doubles as amplification), the failures of comic degradation lessen the political force of rhetorical judgment.

The comic resentment in the Baby Trump caricature mirrors, however distortedly, the perceived slights and insecurities of those seeking to maintain a grasp on normative power and privilege. Instructively, a rallying cry in the popular resistance to President Trump was “This is Not Normal.” Resentment, à la Freud, is the outward manifestation of guilt, fear, or anger. It is built on victimhood. It is driven by selfishness and even solipsism. It is infantile—childish. If a sense of humor marks the comic in the mature, then the sort of immaturity that can be associated with humorlessness (or tyranny) actually folds into resentment. Humor, comicality: these are social phenomena and experiences. Similarly, resentment revels in *shared* notions and representations of imagined wrongs that have never been righted. Resentment is deeply personal. But, insofar as it circulates among cultures in and through media networks that are hyper-attuned to the performance and spectatorship of it, resentment is perversely public. Or, as Casey Ryan Kelly puts it, resentment today mixes an “indulgence in cruelty, revenge, and victimhood” with “the melodramatic norms of reality television and the vitriolic media ecology of social networking.”⁹⁷ Resentment makes people feel that those who are *not* suffering are fools. They are dupes of the system, stooges of the mainstream. Nothing can be laughed off in this milieu. Every perceived injustice from the past must be kept melancholic for the ones who feel oppressed even as they might appear ripe for mockery by those who refuse to grant legitimacy to the misapplied fantasies of sufferance. Baby Trump channels these politics of resentment. Caricature struggles to contain them.

What, then, of desire? When resentment filters into the rhetorical presidency, it summons troublous matters of pleasure and pain in the politics of cultural production. Trumpism appears so perverse because it stakes many of its claims, delightfully and at times festively, in both policymaking and political speech that blend into racism,

misogyny, bigotry, egoism, and white supremacy. The mantra of MAGA typifies “a self-serving imitation of the good.”⁹⁸ More harmfully, it empowers Trumpism to evacuate Trump as the Big Other in order to become a Big Other of its own, with the desire for some image of True Americanism as the organizing principle of disavowal and the goad for “childish,” pre-political commitments to blood, soil, and self. One way for rhetorical critics to reconsider Trumpism might be to articulate desires without displacements. In cultural politics and political culture, this means articulating common goods in terms other than those rooted in lack, deficiency, privation, and want. We should name what people need and do not have, to be sure. But what of desire in the spillovers between selves and others that do not require recourse to perversions in the politics of difference? A comic approach to such spillovers might help us avoid categorizing people with something approximating political separation anxiety as “infants without families.”⁹⁹ It might also help us, as human beings, to avoid perverted desires and fantasies of superiority in whatever form. Alternative facts, conspiracy theories, Big Lies—they attach habits of civic engagement to an hysterical realpolitik. Similarly, attachments like those to Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism, and indeed the rhetorical presidency, fail to recognize political travesties like Trumpism as a comic woe.

The point here is that any caricature so heavily reliant on a projection that is already amplified does little to disrupt a prevailing sensibility about the Divided Self, or the Citizen Sufferer, that might typify the American National Character. Caricatures of a Baby Trump are not all bad. They’re not even all wrong. A caricature of Trump from July 2020 mirrors Telnaes’s ABCs in its version of the president as a childish pesterer standing behind Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci, as the medical expert testifies on the severe uptick in cases at a congressional hearing on the federal government’s pandemic response.¹⁰⁰ President Trump is variously covering Dr. Fauci’s eyes, sticking his fingers in his ears, and covering his mouth. Captions for the cartoon images read, respectively: “SEE NO FAUCI.” “HEAR NO FAUCI.” “SPEAK NO FAUCI.” The caricature displays President Trump’s approach to power politics as one who has long been spared the rod.

Baby Trump caricatures emblemize a self-fulfilling rhetoric of comic display that reproduces a self-serving and self-defeating ruse. President Trump embodies the Lost Cause of America First. Infantilizing caricatures of the president express disappointment in the loss of an adult in charge of the sacred ovular room. Resentment in both instances amounts to a certain ugliness that suffuses much rhetoricizing about the presidency itself. Resentment *is* ugly, as Jeremy Engels makes plain, whether in the guise of “fools and idiots and weaklings,”¹⁰¹ in the serpentine speech of a tub-thumping demagogue, or in the comicality of a caricature that disappoints in its inability to move beyond its own disavowals. Presidentialism here keeps the president paradoxically above the people even as he is a political leader lowered to the level of a child. Caricature, in this case, does not really put the rhetorical president in his place. In other words, the comic is a disappointing modality of constituting the rhetorical presidency if it makes caricature less about capturing the Big Other (political culture) behind a Bigly Other (the president himself) than about characterizing a big baby as, well, a big baby. It is a difference of approaching the rhetorical presidency from the comic of degradation or the degradation of the comic.

Notes

1. Baby Trump has been flown at numerous protests and marches across the United States and around the world: outside Mar-a-Lago in September 2018 to mock the president's response to Hurricane Maria; at the Women's March in Chicago in October 2018, and then again in Los Angeles in January 2019; at Politicon in L.A. (Oct 2018); at an Impeachment Rally in New York City in October 2018; during a march protesting the president's visit to Paris in November 2018 to mark the 100th anniversary of armistice; at a protest in the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin in June 2019; outside the venue in Tulsa, Oklahoma in June 2020 where President Trump held his first rally since the COVID-19 outbreak; and elsewhere. As of 2021, the Trump Baby balloon will be on display in the Museum of London.
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