

# **“Dye It Pink”: *Puck’s* Anti-Margarine Crusade**

**Patricia Marks**

“What Fools these Mortals Be,” *Puck* exclaimed in 1877 as it surveyed the social and political scene. From then on, this *Midsummer-Night’s Dream* quotation became the magazine’s rallying cry. During its first decade, *Puck* secured its reputation as a knavish journalistic sprite by publishing freewheeling caricatures and satire on a variety of political and social issues.<sup>1</sup> As Frank Luther Mott notes, the magazine fearlessly declared its distaste for political corruption and its “sympathy for labor,” adopting an editorial stance firmly on the side of the farmer, the worker, and the consumer and sharply critical of big business.<sup>2</sup> Its stance is exemplified by an ongoing campaign against food adulteration that began with a barrage of satirical brickbats against “Oilymargarine,” a product consistently critiqued in drawings and quips during *Puck’s* first decade. Its clarion call to “dye it pink” proved to be a rallying cry not only against artificiality but also in favor of consumer protection, a cry that failed to achieve its goal even by congressional passage of the Oleomargarine Act on July 23, 1886. This article examines the early years of *Puck’s* satirical perspective on the butter and “Oilymargarine” war, a perspective that embodies a consolidation of political and social interests with an interwoven pictorial and verbal approach that began with its 1877 inception as an English-language edition.

## ***Puck’s* Involvement in the Margarine Controversy**

*Puck’s* relentless focus on a single product can be seen, in effect, as an exemplar of its deeper concern about the changes that were taking place during

the 1870s and 1880s. In that time frame, a series of major inventions—among them, the telephone, the phonograph, and the box camera, the lightbulb, the iron, and the fan—profoundly affected social perceptions, working conditions, economic status, and politics. In this era of new choices and many changes, *Puck* took up the stanchion of satire to defend the working citizen in the face of political corruption. It railed against both the Democratic Tammany Hall and Republican politicians: the signature centerfold of May 10, 1882, for instance, showed the two sides as the “Republican Sodom” and the “Democratic Gomorrah,” with the orphans “Political Honesty” and “Political Wisdom” being led to safety by an angel [Figure 1]. Drawn by artist Friedrich Graetz, the cartoon depicts two encampments in the midst of a storm with a lightning streak of divine justice labeled “public condemnation” illuminating their tents. The editorial comment is clear, suggesting that the “two dwarfed and puny children that are starving” will be brought forth to form a “New Party.” Frank Luther Mott notes that the illustration embodies *Puck*’s “favorite reforms”: “the merit system in the civil service, lower tariffs, and correction of ballot abuses.”<sup>3</sup> This political stance underscored a concern about social issues that, as Kahn and West point out in their summary of the magazine’s development, were well diversified.<sup>4</sup>

*Puck*’s satirical approach to social and political controversies proved to be popular with the reader—by 1881, circulation was as high as 85,000.<sup>5</sup> Its perspective, which was diversified but not always inclusive, may have contributed to its popularity. For instance, it supported the case of the African American Johnson Chesnut Whittaker, court-martialed at West Point for self-mutilation, although it continued to publish racially biased pieces, and it maintained the rights of the working population while attacking immigrant laborers. A major factor, however, is that aside from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper’s Weekly*, *Puck*’s use of cartoons was innovative for American periodicals of the time. While the Roosevelt Center maintains that the content was “aimed at white men of means,” David Sloane is more class specific, pointing out the magazine’s appeal in its portrayal of “upper and lower class foibles and follies for the amusement of the middle-class—and, perhaps surprisingly, upper and some lower class readers as well.”<sup>6</sup> Dan Backer agrees and goes on to assert that while “political inspiration came from the intellectual aristocrats,” the general public was willing to pay ten cents for the news, a good value since *Puck* published considerably more illustrations than its competitors.<sup>7</sup>

Effectively, then, *Puck*’s involvement in the margarine controversy touched readers regardless of class with forthrightness and pictorial verve that can be traced to its founder, Joseph Keppler. A talented artist, actor, and cartoonist, Keppler had avidly pursued the idea of publishing a comic weekly, only to have three publications fail, one of which was the first version of *Puck*. Eventually, he joined *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* as a political cartoonist. In 1876, he partnered with Adolph Schwarzmann to revive *Puck* for a German-speaking audience; the magazine proved so successful that he began an English-language version the next year. Keppler became well known for caustic



**Figure 1:** “The Political Sodom and Gomorrah are Doomed to Destruction,” *Puck*, May 10, 1882. Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

wit and outspokenness both pictorially and verbally. His focus on protecting the interests of the common citizen may be traceable to his storekeeper father, but his generally hostile stance toward immigrants is ironic given his German background. Well trained in classics and history, he nonetheless covered a diversity of subjects in the magazine, drawing full-page political cartoons for the cover and centerfold and social cartoons for the back cover.”<sup>8</sup>

Given Keppler’s interest in the way politics affected social stability, it is perhaps not surprising that *Puck* entered the oleomargarine fray during its first year of publication.<sup>9</sup> Whether *Puck*’s decadelong campaign about distinguishing margarine from butter helped foster the Oleomargarine Act of July 23, 1886, is uncertain; in any case, the magazine opposed the act, which remained in effect until 1950, imposing a heavy licensing tax for manufacturing and sales as well as an added two-cent-per-pound manufacturing tax.<sup>10</sup> An argument against the act was that it endangered the less wealthy consumer because it both increased the price of margarine and encouraged dishonest manufacturers to disguise their product as butter, which was sold at a lower price than the small farmer’s homemade product. The powerful butter lobby was vehement about the fraudulence of selling margarine as butter, claiming that it was unhealthy and improperly prepared and contained harmful chemicals. Both Calestous Juma and Bee Wilson detail the political contretemps that occurred.<sup>11</sup> One focus of the lobby was an objection to coloring margarine yellow; as one senator said, “You may take all the other colours of the rainbow, but let butter have its pre-empted colour,” in effect echoing *Puck* (in fact, both New Hampshire and Minnesota imposed “Pink Laws” until overturned in 1898).<sup>12</sup> Richard Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform* details the political and economic background to the legislative involvement, which spawned arguments seemingly based on the agrarian myth that presented an idyllic life for the individual farmer, who was seen as the foundation for democracy. The truth, of course, was somewhat different; as Hofstadter points out, the material day-to-day difficulties prompted the small farmer to engage in mechanization and commercial farming and, later, to adopt a “dual identity” balanced between the two perspectives, depending on the economic situation.<sup>13</sup> From the beginning, then, *Puck* presented a perspective that not only embraced the agrarian myth but also effectively sought to define a similar definition for the urban dweller who was perceived as an honest laborer with family obligations, one who was being duped by politicians and commercial interests. *Puck*’s satirical involvement in the controversy over the act both reflected the general issue of food adulteration caused by industrial changes and solidified the magazine’s stance against political machinations.

### **Historical Overview of Margarine Production**

A brief look at the history of margarine production provides a lens through which to view the barrage of accusations and contemporary “news” reports about margarine’s composition, production, and sales; it also lays the ground-

work for understanding the issues that prompted *Puck*'s “Dye It Pink” campaign, issues that included health and monetary concerns involving safety, illegal substitution, and the industrial effects of an inexpensive substitute for butter. Many resources exist, including those by Geoffrey Miller and Rebecca Rupp, who provide a succinct history of the “butter wars,” and James Harvey Young, who examines the development, economic threat, and congressional discussions about “this greasy counterfeit” in light of the later Federal Food and Drugs Act of 1906.<sup>14</sup> Additional details about preparation and manufacturing are given in *Terrors of the Table* by Walter Gratzler.<sup>15</sup>

In effect, the manufacturing and sale of margarine had both political and monetary implications, as its initial development shows. In 1869, under the auspice of Napoleon III, Hippolyte Mège-Mouriès was granted a patent to produce “*certaines corps gras-d'origine animale*” to answer the need for a long-lasting and inexpensive replacement for butter. Much of Mège-Mouriès's work was done at Napoleon's private farm, where his observation that even the milk of starved cows contained fat prompted him to do a number of experiments. In an early attempt, he “warmed macerated beef suet with water and chopped sheep's stomach, adding a little potassium carbonate. . . . After a few hours the enzymes in the sheep's stomach had digested any fibrous tissue in the suet, and the fat floated to the surface.” Perhaps not surprisingly, the concoction did not taste like butter. More successful was his next experiment, using “chopped cow's udder, together with milk and sodium bicarbonate.”<sup>16</sup> Aside from its white coloration, this discovery served as the basis for what was to substitute for butter. As Geoffrey Miller points out, Mège-Mouriès harbored at least two mistaken ideas: the “bizarre hypothesis” that melted cow udder fat “would produce the basic fat material of butter” and that his own potpourri contained margaric acid, normally a trace compound.<sup>17</sup> It was the latter, coupled with the color, that had earlier caused the French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul to call the mixture “oleomargarine,” *margarine* being Greek for “beef fat” and “pearl.”<sup>18</sup> By 1871, yellow coloration—annatto—was added to distinguish margarine from lard, and its production spread from Jurgens, a Dutch company, to Germany, France, and the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Margarine production, which began in the United States between 1873 and 1874, as van Stuyvenberg estimates, was in full swing when *Puck* began publication.<sup>20</sup> As Rupp points out, it arrived “to the approbation of the broke, and to the universal horror of American dairy farmers.” On the one hand, its successful development fulfilled Napoleon III's idea that “a cheaper butter alternative would benefit the lower classes and the military”; on the other hand, while *Puck* sought to protect the consumer, its satiric attacks against “false butter” became a campaign that had complex implications since it effectively supported the dairy industry as it developed into “one of the nation's most potent political parties.”<sup>21</sup> From *Puck*'s perspective, however, real butter surpassed “oilymargarine,” and dairy farming by individual farmers was the ideal; yet, as the cost of butter increased in 1875, “small producers” were transformed into “one of

the largest domestic industries,” and factories began to replace individual farmers, as did inventions like the centrifugal cream separator, which, developed in 1878, enhanced butter production.<sup>22</sup> That *Puck* had many grounds for its satirical sallies is made clear by van Stuyvenberg’s summary of the reasons for the “marked enmity,” including the threat to independent farmers, the rise of monopolies, and economic depression. As he points out, the Populist movement, representing a coalition of agrarians, grew strong against “big business,” and the resulting flurry of laws about the regulation, manufacture, and coloration of margarine proved to be largely unenforceable.<sup>23</sup> Production figures further underscore the reason for the dispute; in 1878, America produced nearly 500 million pounds of butter, the sales of which were affected by falsely advertising margarine as butter.<sup>24</sup> As the *New York Sun* complained, “Oleomargaritos brand or stamp their tubs faintly and deceptively”; moreover, at the dairy fair, “extra-well prepared samples of a substance [margarine] that probably many of them would never wittingly taste in their lives” were being distributed to attendees.<sup>25</sup> A similar scenario occurred almost fifty-five years later, when Ida Bailey Allen, a well-known home economist, offered a series of dinners for women well known in society or in their field in which the meal was prepared with Nucoa, a margarine brand. During the public talks afterward, the product received rave reviews from those who had attended the dinner.<sup>26</sup>

Such disparity between the actual product and the way it was presented prompted much of *Puck*’s criticism. While the ingredients differed radically from the product produced from fresh, heavy cream, the etymology of “margarine” suggested that an artificial compound was a much-desired “jewel.” Okun gives a good description of the production standards, which were often ignored for the sake of profit. For instance, the fat used was not just any fat but “caul,” the substance that surrounded the stomach. Immediate preparation was necessary before the cow’s body heat dissipated, melting took place at exactly 120°F, and so on.<sup>27</sup> Another detailed discussion about production standards may be found in J. H. van Stuyvenberg’s collection of essays on margarine’s history, including the roots and expansion of the industry, the processes, nutrition, marketing, and governmental roles. Such exactitude, which was supposed to guarantee the product’s quality, was not always followed; had margarine been produced as conscientiously as Mège-Mouriès’s version, it would have been difficult to tell it apart from butter either by taste or through the testing available at the time.<sup>28</sup>

*Puck*’s many satires, quips, and cartoons that appeared about margarine, then, provide an invaluable pictorial and verbal insight into the social concerns of the times. As Bert Hansen shows in “Image and Advocacy of Public Health,” *Puck*’s editorial perspective had a broad base, covering a variety of controversies related to public health aside from food adulteration, including infectious diseases, dirty streets, and other concerns related to housing. Hansen, who focuses on the effectiveness of *Puck*’s cartoons, succinctly summarizes the magazine’s stance: “the average citizen was . . . seen as suffering at the hands

of unscrupulous commercial interests.”<sup>29</sup> And it was that average citizen, “the fools these mortals be,” whom the magazine was trying to enlighten. To that end, as Mott notes, “social topics were discussed as trenchantly as those related to politics and religion,” with puns, verse, and quips supplying the “lighter wit and humor.”<sup>30</sup> The cartoons and “lighter wit and humor” could be quite trenchant at times, providing a running commentary that mirrors both the growing public interest in the product and the political debates of the time.

### ***Puck’s Crusade against “Oilymargarine”***

*Puck’s* crusade against false advertising began in its early issues, with, for instance, the October 10, 1877, poem “To a Damaged Character, by the (Ex.) Boss,” in which a reputation is likened to “Odd boots are thrown in sherry / To make Madeira wine,” just as “The best of golden butter / Is oleomargarine.” Other comments include the May 1877 and March 10, 1880, facetious suggestions that margarine is made from the March Hare and that it makes excellent candles. The February 6, 1878, issue includes a long punning fable that ends with an Aged Goat bewailing that the “hydraulic Ram . . . is, indeed, a noble Butter, while we . . . are little more than humble Oleomargarine.” In many other cases, however, the quips are directed at bogus or unsafe butter, especially the kind served at boardinghouses, where, *Puck* warns in an April 2, 1879, column called “Hairidity” that “it was difficult to find bald-headed butter. You must all remember how Tacitus says, ‘No butter should be counted hairless until it has been devoured.’” A chart reprinted on July 23, 1879, from the *New York Express* helpfully calculates the number of flies per pound of boardinghouse butter; earlier, on October 17, 1877, “Rural Pleasures” provides a description of a boardinghouse meal that includes “the sweet concentrated essence of cow-juice” decorated with flies “upon its unruffled surface, content at last to fold their wings.”

Of historical interest is a brief verse in *Puck* on November 21, 1877, that equates margarine with the notorious swindler Alfred Paraf, who claimed the Mège-Mouriès invention as his own:

A man in the swindelier line,  
 Who made oleomargarine,  
 Remarked, with a laugh:  
 “My name is Paraf—  
 And my butter I’ll call Paraf-fine.”

Innumerable articles appeared in the press about Paraf as he worked his way around the world, falsely claiming ownership of various inventions to which he sold licenses, such as aniline and madder dyes. In the “Adventures of ‘Chevalier’ Paraf,” the *New Zealand Herald’s* account,<sup>31</sup> he made a fortune from his schemes (including extracting gold from copper, the hoax that finally landed

him in prison), enough to fund a wildly extravagant lifestyle. In 1872, he left France for America, where he posed as the inventor of margarine, establishing a stock company and a factory to manufacture the spread. When he went to California to set up a new factory, his stockholders discovered the fraud, bought the rights legitimately from Mège-Mouriès, and threatened to bring Paraf to justice. Although the case was not pursued, the *New York Times* article “The Prototype of Balsamo” calls Paraf “undoubtedly the first man” to introduce margarine to the United States.<sup>32</sup> *Puck*’s association of his name with margarine, then, strengthens the claim that those who sell the product are themselves swindlers.

*Puck* ramped up its warfare against “Oilymargarine” by starting its “Dye It Pink” campaign in the 1880s. Its commentary increased substantially, fostered by escalating industrial acrimony, legislative action, and the establishment of, for instance, the NAPAB—the National Association for the Prevention of the Adulteration of Butter.<sup>33</sup> Symptoms of the growing furor about “substitute butter” can be seen in the Library of Congress’s *Chronicling America* resource: the number of articles in New York newspapers grows rapidly, from nine in 1879 to fifty in 1880. Okun suggests that *Puck* was the first one to make the suggestion “publicly” that margarine should be dyed a distinctive color, an idea that became an integral part of the magazine’s approach.<sup>34</sup> On March 24, 1880, the column “Oilymargarine” appeared in *Puck*; it exemplifies the ability of the magazine to shift from frivolous quips and verse to taking a serious stand albeit with a twist of satire. *Puck* has, the writer says, “no special objection to Oilymargarine in its original form . . . in its unextracted condition in the live ox or the tender porterhouse steak.” The problem exists when the product leaves the hands of the “honest and worthy” manufacturers and ends up in the hands of dishonest grocers who sell it as butter to, for instance, the boardinghouse owner. *Puck*’s flip comment that it should be brightly colored with “harmless dye” and labeled “Oilymargarine” became a focal point; what began as a joke morphed into a serious suggestion based on protecting the public from unscrupulous producers.

While “dying it pink” provided a visual clue to the observer, *Puck* also used the verbal equivalent by equating margarine with terms that were glaringly artificial. A major article published on March 31, 1880, for instance, links margarine and Edison, who is said to have invented “Woodeo-Sawdusterine” (also called “Breadarine, Lumberine, or Rot”): “Mr. Edison says that the brilliant success of Oleomargarine suggested to him Woodeo-Sawdusterine, and he is rejoiced at finding so pleasant a companion to artificial bread as an equally artificial butter.” In the same issue appeared “Progress and Butter,” a Frederick Opper cartoon, further illustrating *Puck*’s perspective by juxtaposing icons of the past and present. On the left is a sweet-faced dairymaid stirring her butter in a homey setting, with a cow peeking in the open door; on the right, she has morphed into a devilish manufacturer, mixing pork fat, slush, soap grease, tallow, lard, and other ingredients into a large pan labeled “Oleo-margarine.” The contents are black, and the room is in disarray; smoke rises over the sign “Fresh Sweet Butter” [Figure 2]. Clearly, *Puck* was casting its support with the local producer and expressing





**Figure 2:** “Progress and Butter,” *Puck*, March 31, 1880. Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

a desire for the “good old days” when the consumer could rely on the purity of the product. Other references were embedded in columns that connected the product with popular figures and events. During the public excitement over the advent of the Great Comet of 1881, for instance, *Puck* proposes “A New Industry” on September 28, 1881, satirically offering prizes for different comet varieties, including “For best artificial comet, with oilymargarine tail.” The next year, Jumbo the Elephant, which made news after P. T. Barnum acquired him in 1882, is invoked: a letter purportedly from Slimy Slushbuckey, president of the leading Oilymargarine Manufacturing Company, offers on August 16, 1882, to match Jumbo “against half a ton of Oilymargarine.”

### ***Puck’s* Legislative Intervention**

A prime reason for the increase in number and vehemence of *Puck’s* oilymargarine responses was the controversy that heated up before the Senate’s passage of the May 19, 1880, margarine bill. As part of the investigative process, the House Committee on Agriculture sent representatives to inspect the Commercial Manufacturing oleomargarine factory. More than 200 citizens were invited to a Delmonico’s banquet where they were asked to taste and judge between unidentified samples of butter and margarine. *Puck’s* April 21, 1880, full-page cartoon “The Great Congressional Oleomargarine Investigation” offers a series of vignettes of the members of Congress who, willing to question the product’s purity, are won over by the manufacturers’ largesse. The members, caricatured but not necessarily identifiable, are initially shown to be “scandalized at the audacity of the oleomargarine manufacturers.” They write speeches in a smoke-filled room and deliver them, “each in his own peculiar style,” and then, in the last vignette, “they were received with great politeness

by the manufacturers, and invited to partake of a light repast.” In each case, the illustration is considerably more critical than the bland captions, suggesting that *Puck* understands the sub-rosa machinations of politics. The illustration of the “light repast,” for instance, focuses on the quantity of liquor served during the tasting and its effect on the final decision: “Oleo-marsh-rinesh Mush Better ’n Butter” [Figure 3].



**Figure 3:** “The Great Congressional Oleomargarine Investigation,” *Puck*, April 21, 1880. Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

Another parody of that meeting appeared on May 12, 1880, when *Puck*'s roguish commentator, Mr. Ephraim Muggins, presents his speech to the annual banquet of the Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Comfort. Muggins, president of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Insects, mentions “Ole O’Margarine” and details the contents of poor butter—“pump water and chalk, and mashed potatoes, and parsnips, and carrots, and glue, and putty, and a sprinkle of hair”—as compared to “oilymargarine,” which is made of goat. He ends with a six-stanza tongue-in-cheek verse extolling the new product:

The stoic’s dead, the epic’s slain,  
 And Plato lies, with curdled brain,  
 A thousand leagues beneath the main;  
 And still all nature sings this strain—  
     Oilymargarine!  
 . . . Now who, with tortured heart, shall deign  
 To wake old echoes up again  
 That for a thousand years had lain  
 While we still shout the glad refrain—  
     Oilymargarine!  
 . . . When bent o’er cane, with age, I’d fain,  
 My youth regain, as down the lane  
 I strode amain, to meet my Jane,  
 With deep disdain, because I’m plain  
 Attain, contain, maintain, crane, mane,  
 Vein, Sprain, drain, grain, insane  
     Oilymargarine!

One week after the poem appeared, the Senate passed the bill that amended its 1877 predecessor by verifying the spelling of the product and requiring appropriate labeling, a concession to those who wanted an identifying marker for margarine.<sup>35</sup> Later in the month, in the May 26 “Muggins Boom,” Ephraim Muggins again chimes in, complaining that the Chicago Republican Convention will deadlock over multiple candidates, including Grant, Blaine, Sherman, Edmunds, Butler, and the eccentric globetrotter George Train; as a result, he offers himself as a presidential candidate of the Oilymargarine Party, one who promotes it as a “palatable lubricator, ensuring prompt and easy legislation.” As with the Paraf verse, the over-the-top claims, false information, and illogical comments in the Muggins columns are meant to denounce margarine.

While *Puck* focused on satire, it could take a serious tone as well. On April 21, 1880, before the bill was passed, the magazine published a “faithful record of a conversation held with an officer of the Commercial Manufacturing Co.” In the interview, the officer defends the purity of his product; *Puck*'s complaint is that the manufacturer, while not actually a party to the imposition, is “morally . . . not clear of blame” since the product is misrepresented as butter once

it goes into the hands of hotel and boardinghouse owners. The magazine's plea is that the manufacturer dye the product pink or blue or green to "put it out of the power of unscrupulous people to pass it off as butter." A week later on April 28, 1880, *Puck* announced its policy: it would accept advertising from oleomargarine companies, but "the literature bearing on this subject in the editorial columns will . . . be of a distinctly different character" until the product is sold at "face value, even if it has to be dyed pink." What appears near the end of that issue explains the policy statement: a three-page disquisition from the Commercial Manufacturing Company titled "Oleomargarine Butter: The New Article of Commerce. Chemically Analyzed by the Most Skillful and Distinguished Scientists, Demonstrating Its Purity." In the accompanying advertisement, a reproduction of the "Medal of Excellence" awarded in 1878 is paired with a series of scientific testimonials. In distinct contrast is a short letter from the produce company of Walter Carr that appears in the first half of the issue: titled "Oilymargarine and Honest Dealers," it supports adding dye to margarine "so that the unsuspecting may be able to buy and eat it for 'what it is.'" The letter underscores *Puck's* own concern and effectively contrasts with the Commercial Manufacturing agent who maintains that dye will "spoil our business."

*Puck* continues its serious tone in May, linking its margarine campaign to the Johnson Chesnut Whittaker case, the full account detailed by John Marszalek in *Assault at West Point*.<sup>36</sup> Whittaker was an African American West Point cadet found wounded and unconscious in bed; accused of self-mutilation, he was court-martialed and expelled (later, he went on to a career as lawyer and teacher and was commissioned posthumously by President Clinton). *Puck* links the incident to its campaign by pillorying Major General Schofield, who had published general orders commending the cadets who were accused of attacking Whittaker for "their manly bearing under the grievous wrong and injustice which they have recently suffered." On May 5, 1880, *Puck*, using the verbiage of Schofield's orders, has the Commercial Manufacturing Company assuring "Oilymargarine of their unshaken faith in its cleanliness and wholesomeness, and of their appreciation of its brave bearing under the grievous wrong and injustice which it have [sic] recently suffered." The statement closes with affirming its "character and conduct," removing "all restrictions heretofore imposed by legal order upon the usual privileges of bogus Butter." Such a remark illustrates a kind of editorial fearlessness coupled with a considered stance that refuses to be silenced by well-known power brokers. A similar bravado is evidenced by *Puck's* comments about a letter written to the editor by food manufacturers H. K. and F. B. Thurber. The Thurbers, who in a clever political move signed themselves as "sales agents" for the Commercial Manufacturing Company, sent a check to the president of the Butter Dealers' Society to help defray expenses in supporting legislation that prevented marketing margarine as butter; they include a *Scientific American* comment to underscore their suggestion that to recognize margarine as a legitimate product will force the makers of "poor butter" to upgrade their output.<sup>37</sup> Despite the argument, *Puck* re-

mains adamant, taking the side of the naive consumer and insisting on May 5, 1880, that it will be a “remorseless opponent” until “oilymargarine” is tinted pink, red, or green to distinguish it from butter. The follow-up three weeks later shows that the dairy agents were politically astute, not only returning the check but also sending their refusal to be bribed to be printed in *Puck*. In commenting on the letter’s charges that margarine had been deliberately sold to those retailers who falsely represented it as butter and that most consumers are “against this adulteration,” *Puck* simply says that it will no longer need to publish such a letter “when the law compels the Oilymargarine manufacturers to Dye their product Pink.”

### ***Puck* and the Aftermath of the Oleomargarine Act**

After the act was passed, the phrase “dye Oilymargarine pink” became *Puck*’s mantra, to be found at the end of many columns. As *Puck* maintained again and again in its March 1881 issues, the dye is necessary since the legally required “Imitation Butter” label was insufficient: it is necessary, despite the claim that “parasitic diseases” are not spread through margarine, since Chicago doctors attributed the cholera epidemic to pork components; it is necessary, otherwise “unscrupulous” dealers will fool the gullible public in the same way the margarine manufacturers seek to fool gullible editors into printing articles about the product’s genuineness, thereby saving advertising money. The “necessary” mantra also appears on April 6, 1881, in a long commentary about the Albany legislative investigative committee’s reports, which included comments about factories’ “bad odor”; floors “thick with dust, milk, and grease”; and “filthy” workers wearing nothing but large bags. Two issues later, *Puck* invites consumers to “put their grocers through a severe course of questioning” to determine whether what is sold as “butter” is actually margarine and to “prosecute the offender” in an article ending, as expected, with “dye Oilymargarine pink.”

*Puck*’s continued effort to alert its readership to look for fraud is especially evident as it sought to pinpoint political machinations that pitted public weal against personal greed. Its determination to identify false butter may in part have contributed to the fact that by 1902, thirty-two states had passed color restrictions.<sup>38</sup> Its effort is especially obvious in its early *cri de coeur* on May 18, 1880, against legislative dishonesty: “if the bill introduced by this or that member has any money in it for the others, it is at once put upon the legislative market. If it has none, it is promptly crowded out.” Once New York Governor Alonzo Cornell vetoed the bill that called for coloration, *Puck* accused him of overarching “sympathy” with Oilymargarine manufacturers and stated adamantly on June 15, 1881, that it would continue to pursue its goal of making the product distinguishable from butter. One of the complications of the proposed legislation was, as Geoffrey Miller points out, its effect on the price of both butter and margarine, which impacted the consumer.<sup>39</sup> *Puck* did recognize that legislative action could have both positive and negative effects on those it

was intended to protect, walking the fine line between acceptance and criticism as its May 18, 1881, cartoon “Rough on the Small Boy” suggests. The drawing, which implies that governmental legislation can be an invasion of privacy, shows a police officer intruding into the family kitchen and interrupting a small boy asking his mother for bread and butter: “There’s a law agin calling that stuff anything but Oilymargarine,” he warns sternly [Figure 4]. As Calestous Juma notes, “Any housewife who served margarine . . . ‘cheapened’ the entire family and cast doubts on her husband’s ability as a provider.”<sup>40</sup> Paired with the “Small Boy” cartoon is “Careful of Himself,” in which Mr. Guzzle addresses a bartender who is mixing his punch: “Say, try that milk with a lactometer afore you make my punch! I ain’t a-goin’ to ruin the coatin’s of my stomach—not much.” In effect, the cartoon is a heads-up that the ordinary customer may need to be wary of trusting his health to industry, whose prime concern is profit.

As the arguments over legislative involvement increased, *Puck* continued to stress the basic issue of impurity and the collusion between the manufacturers and politicians. On June 13, 1883, for instance, political cartoonist Bernhard



**Figure 4:** “Rough on the Small Boy,” *Puck*, May 18, 1881. Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

Gillam takes former senator Roscoe Conkling to task, labeling him “The Boss ‘Drummer’” in a cartoon titled “Lord Roscoe is Out in the West.” Conkling, known for his antireform stance in the Republican Party, argued against a state’s right to ban margarine sales in Missouri [Figure 5]. In other quips and verse, *Puck* accuses the manufacturers of contracting “with Sitting Bull for all the scalps he takes” on June 1, 1881, and in “The March of Progress,” on September 21, 1881, complains about ingredients such as cottonseed oil. In an untitled poem of August 17, 1881, the magazine uses scrambled wording to represent the impure ingredients in “bogus butter”:



**Figure 5:** “Lord Roscoe is Out in the West,” *Puck*, June 13, 1883. Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

The conservative people of Shawangunk  
 Have some very queer notions amawangunk;  
 But to think they would swallow  
 Steam-axle-grease tallow  
 For butter, is greatly to wrawangunk.

In addition to “oilymargarine,” *Puck*’s satirical barbs were directed at “Boarding-house butter,” particularly the “hairsute” kind. On December 26, 1883, for instance, the magazine published a lengthy tongue-in-cheek “scientific article” that classified the product as “Butterus hirsutus” (hairy butter of three kinds: goats, grocer’s butter, and oilymargarine) or “Butterus lenis” (bald butter of two kinds: Farmer’s butter and axle-grease). Later, on September 17, 1884, and July 8, 1885, it complains that butter may be made of pears or of beef suet; on February 11, 1885, it suggests that butter often contains ashes because of “a common misfortune on the farm”:

Now we hear the farm-wife mutter  
 That if she could sell the butter  
 Which she’s dropped into the ashes—  
 Why, her joy would be too utter.

“Particular Taste,” a more subtle cartoon that appeared on June 8, 1887, suggests that even a hungry tramp may refuse handmade “fresh grass butter” because he has become used to the taste of a tainted product. As the tramp explains, “It’s fresh enough, but it lacks flavor. You see, I was born an’ raised in Philadelphia” [Figure 6]. The bucolic farm setting in itself suggests old-fashioned purity, as does the farmgirl, dressed in bonnet and long skirt, with her butter-making apparatus behind her. The question of butter’s varying taste persisted; as late as 1935, the question of taste was an ongoing issue, as Schlink’s comment suggests: “Many do not realize that in refusing butter with the distinct flavor of the farm they are encouraging all sorts of pasturizing and renovating processes which make butter bland . . . [and] devoid of the substances which give natural butter its high nutritive value.”<sup>41</sup>

As the political arguments escalated, *Puck* grew less and less happy with congressional action on a number of fronts, including the taxation of margarine. One of its primary concerns had to do with whether the federal government should regulate private enterprise; other concerns included low-income consumers who would be penalized by the tax as well as the possibility that ingredients would be compromised by manufacturers seeking to make a profit.<sup>42</sup> “A Pretty Dish to Set before the Nation,” the August 4, 1886, cover, illustrates the problem. In the cartoon, a bowl labeled “Legislation Mush 49th Congress” is flanked by a lump of margarine labeled “taxes,” as Benjamin Harrison and Samuel J. Randall attempt to pull the United States away from eating by offering a “Bill of Fare” including “Protection Roast,” “Free Trade Broil,” and





A PARTICULAR TASTE.

WOMAN (to TRAMP).—Does n't that bread an' butter suit ye?

TRAMP.—The bread 's all right, ma'am; but I ain't stuck on the butter.

WOMAN.—It 's fresh grass butter. I made it myself.

TRAMP.—It 's fresh enough; but it lacks flavor. You see, I was born an' raised in Philadelphia.

Figure 6: “A Particular Taste,” *Puck*, June 8, 1887. Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

“Surplus Fry.” Uncle Sam pushes the bowl away in disgust, saying to the “Wrangling Congressional Cooks,” “I don’t care who made it—it’s the worst I ever tasted!” [Figure 7]. The cover was predictive: during Harrison’s 1889–1893 presidency, protective trade legislation was passed, including the McKinley Act, which boosted import taxes by fifty percent. In the cover’s accompanying editorial, *Puck* ranted that this was the worst Congress ever because it penalized the average citizen: “we have had no legislative assemblage in Washington so weak, so wasteful of the people’s time and money, so unfruitful of good and so prolific of all bad deeds.”

After the political contretemps had somewhat died down, *Puck* pursued a broader satirical road. Serious diatribes specifically against margarine become fewer; rather, “Oilymargarine” was connected with other kinds of food adulteration as well as with current events. An excellent overview of the popular images of such adulteration appeared as a series of articles written by Suzanne Junod for the 1906 Pure Food and Drugs Act Centennial. *Puck*’s appeal to the “well-informed skeptic” is well highlighted, as is its single-minded drive to protect the vulnerable consumer.<sup>43</sup> To that end, the magazine extended its “Oilymargarine” campaign to include a variety of counterfeit food items,

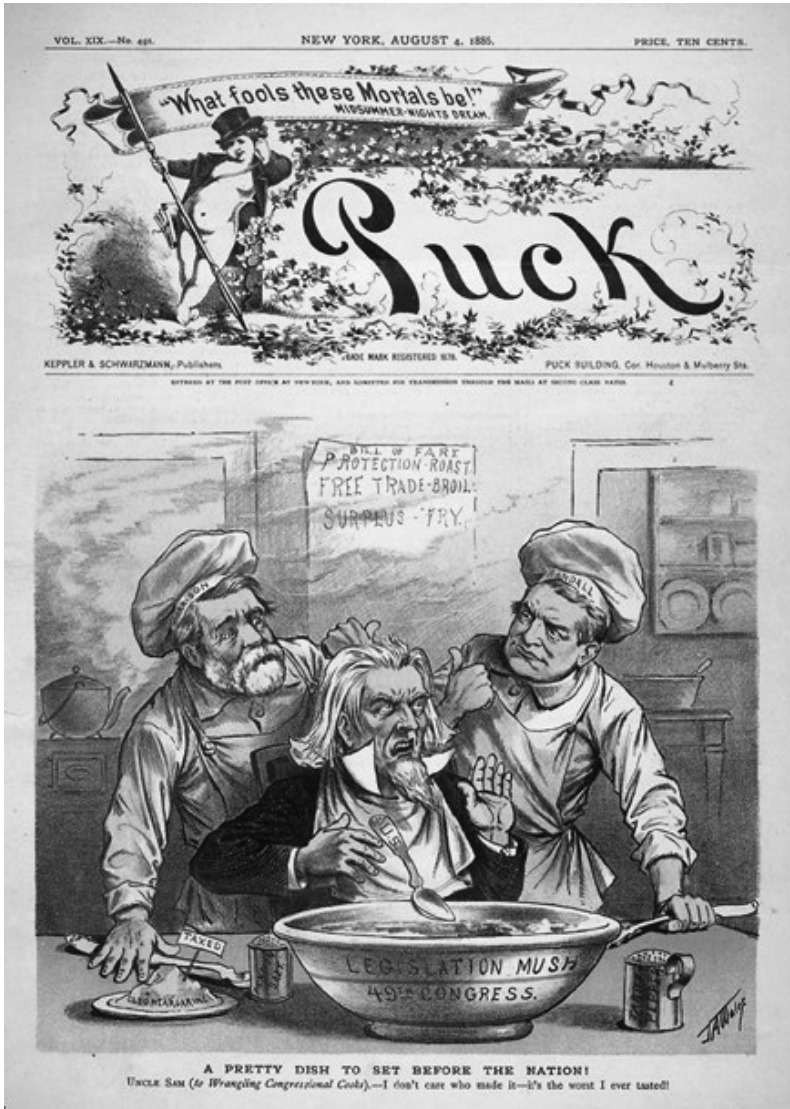


Figure 7: “A Pretty Dish to Set Before the Nation,” *Puck*, Aug. 4, 1886. Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

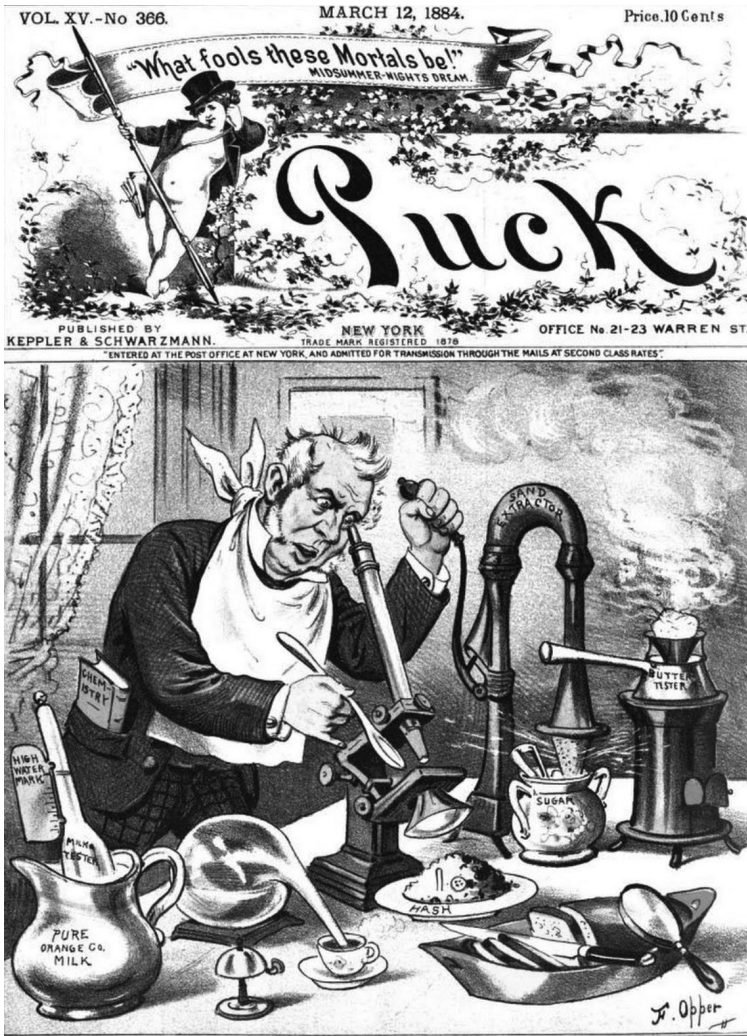
complaining on May 5, 1880, for instance, that an evening meal in New York features “saleratus and alum, disguised as bread; chicory [sic], in the guise of coffee; terra-alba, masquerading as pulverized sugar; glucose that claims to be syrup; chalk and water, playing at being milk.” Three years later, on May 23, 1883, *Puck* responded in a similar vein to the *déjeuner d’artifice* at the

Knickerbocker Club, which was said to be “Oilymargarine for butter, red lead for Cayenne pepper, gelatin for jam, ground nut-shells for spice, Canadian peas for coffee, logwood and water for Port-wine, blackberry-leaves for tea, cabbage-leaf cigars, and roast donkey for spring-lamb.”

*Puck*’s broader focus continued during the lager beer and glucose controversy of 1881, when, on August 31, it accused brewers who use “glucose, rice, starch, corn meal” to be like the “Oilymargarine” contingent. The poem ““What Is That?,”” a riff on the way farmers managed the issue, speaks of tea made of alder and bay leaves, of pepper made of dust and peas, and of “butter, to those whom the scoffer calls green; / To the elect, it is oilymargarine.” Milk, too, is not what one thinks, *Puck* suggests on January 11, 1882; rather, like the artificial ingredients in margarine, it comes from the “chalk-pit and pump that is near” rather than from a “sensible cow.” In other sorties, salad dressing, or “Salade á la Catherine de Russe,” is said to be a mixture of “oilymargarine,” mucilage, and nitroglycerine on April 11, 1883, and Ephraim Muggins, inspired by the success of bogus butter, makes an argument for “artificial eggs” on December 26, 1883.

One of the best examples of *Puck*’s gradual shift toward addressing a wider field of adulterated foods is the March 12, 1884, cover “Look before You Eat.” The subtitle—“and see if you can discover any unadulterated food”—underscores the drawing of a horrified citizen, chemistry book in pocket, staring at “hash” through a microscope. His hand is on a sand extractor in the sugar, while nearby a “butter tester” steams away. The tester in the milk shows a “high-water mark,” the hash is composed of nonfood items like a button, and the bread loaf looks moldy [Figure 8]. “Oilymargarine” makes its appearance in the January 7, 1885, editorial comment, which describes it as “made out of finest and fattest carcasses of animals.” The column ends with a slam against “the grocery-man’s inhumanity to man.” Less than a year later, the magazine angrily attacks the “fiends” who put poison in “candy that glads the eye of childhood,” underscoring its remarks with an “Our Mutual Friend” cover graphic in which glucose along with arsenic and other poisons appear in the candy bar that both doctor and sexton proffer.

It is that kind of “poisoning” of unsuspecting consumers that sparked *Puck*’s campaign against “Oilymargarine” and, later, against a host of other substances that it considered subject to food adulteration. The “dye oilymargarine pink” campaign, however, is a prime example of the way the magazine fulfilled its masthead mantra, “What fools these mortals be!” Despite the risk of offending the wealthy and powerful, *Puck* took its mission seriously to protect its readers. *Puck* was not alone: along with its original quips, columns, and cartoons, the magazine also republished countless fillers from other periodicals across the nation, demonstrating that others were also concerned about the unhealthiness of the new butter substitute. A primary danger was margarine’s contamination by hair, chalk, and other indigestible ingredients, especially when the substance was produced in poorly regulated factories by workers who disregarded



LOOK BEFORE YOU EAT—  
AND SEE IF YOU CAN DISCOVER ANY UNADULTERATED FOOD.

**Figure 8:** “Look Before You Eat,” *Puck*, March 12, 1884. Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

sanitary laws. The composition of margarine was just one aspect, however. Such manufacturing, even when done under correct conditions, produced a product that had economic and moral overtones. On the one hand, money was siphoned off from the independent farmer (which *Puck* generally portrayed in an idealistic setting of sturdy animals, flowing wheat fields, and flourishing, healthy families); on the other, the unsuspecting consumer could be easily bilked by

unscrupulous dealers who made a profit selling the cheaper product marked as butter. Even when margarine was correctly labeled, the impoverished buyer might be sold an inferior, disease-riddled product. *Puck*'s persistence in advocating consumer safety in terms of food purity broadened as it shaped satirical and graphic responses to new products. To trace a specific editorial campaign such as the margarine question through the issues of *Puck*'s first decade is to gain insight into the magazine's editorial objective—a determination to support what it considered to be an ethical stance, whatever the fallout, with skilled writers and artists who appealed to the readers' concerns about health, family, and economic well-being.

## Notes

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21. Rupp, “The Butter Wars,” n.p. Miller, “Public Choice at the Dawn of the Special Interest State,” 88, 108.
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