

The Efflorescence of Caricature: 1759-1838

Review Number:

1084

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 June, 2011

Author:

Todd Porterfield

ISBN:

9780754665915

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

240pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

James Baker

‘International, intergenerational, and interdisciplinary’ (p. xv) is how Porterfield positions this ambitious collection which analyses caricature between 1759 and 1838. A product of a conference of the same name, the essays it contains fulfil this remit admirably whilst attempting to explain the rise of caricature. Moreover, as Porterfield writes in his introductory offering, these essays seek to loosen the study of caricature from the orthodoxies of satirical print scholarship, and one suspects from the canonical texts of the field familiar to scholars of the long 18th century. This is not to say that those canons are rejected, rather *The Efflorescence of Caricature* foregrounds the vibrancy and variety of current research in this area, not least by moving away from the anglocentric narratives of anglophonic scholarship and the assumptions they contain. Thus in this desire to ask new questions of this source material alone, the collection represents a far from insignificant success.

Porterfield's opening essay then, as good editorial pieces should, offers the theoretical framework within which the collection operates. Not that it seeks to constrain the contributions that follow; 'no single line of thinking was imposed on our authors' (p. 2) he writes. Nonetheless his disrespect for 'some of the orthodoxies of caricature' (p. 2) is central to the volume as a whole. The progressive teleology of Early Modern symbols and signs becoming disentangled in the late 18th century and replaced with 'the uncoded, truthful, and transparent' form of exaggerated physiognomy is rejected. So too is the positioning of caricature as 'high art's antithetical, sycophantic, and lowbrow other' and an agent of freedom acting with a conscience directed towards a greater good. Moreover, and most provocatively, Porterfield states that the collection will deny 'the claims that caricature succeeds, persuades, and communicates easily and unfailingly' (p. 2). These claims then have consequences for all scholars using satirical prints from this era in their work.

In place of these values, which tend, Porterfield suggests with some justification, to push scholars towards unidirectional metanarratives, three new areas of study are proposed – the global spread of caricature; the production of caricature (in respect to art, design and entertainment); and the consequences of the efflorescence of caricature – 'the nature and limits of its claims on art and society'. These areas are directed towards one singular aim, to understand whether and to what extent caricature in this period of study (which curiously remains within the orthodox 'Golden Age') succeeded in fulfilling its brief of communicating to a public.

Dominic Hardy's essay on the caricatures produced by George Townshend whilst on military service in Quebec under General James Wolfe provides a fitting opening foray. Indeed the piece represents the revisionist ethos of the collection in extremis. Townshend's caricatures are not only unpublished sketches, but are shown to be deeply private affairs refracting the public vitality of graphic satire in London through distinctly local concerns and discourses. The Wolfe of early 1759 is 'an effete, snivelling, latrine-obsessed womanizer', 'a vindictive and cruel military commander' (p. 11), and a bloodthirsty Cromwellian protector; a vision far removed from the martyr Benjamin West presented in 1770. By October 1759 of course, reports of Wolfe's death at L'Anse-au-Foulon had crossed the Atlantic, as had news of the French surrender. The rhetoric of Wolfe's victory in death allows Hardy a privileged insight into the impact of circumstance on the function of caricature. Despite their brilliance Townshend's caricatures remained in Quebec, never to be published, as, Hardy writes, 'they were inadmissible in the posthumous program of commemoration' (p. 23). This caution is not a sign of conservatism (though it does demonstrate the medium was far from a belligerent agent of freedom), rather it illustrates that although international in artistry and design, caricature was deeply rooted in the local and the personal.

Pierre Wachenheim makes a convincing case for rejecting both anglocentric narratives and those which emphasise the decline of emblem during the efflorescence of caricature. Here French caricature is shown as indebted to early-modern Dutch artisans and traditions, and stepped in emblem throughout the second half of the 18th century and beyond. Reva Wolf approaches the figure of John Bull, and goes beyond Tamara Hunt's *Defining John Bull* (1) by suggesting that caricature was embodied by John Bull. Hence with John Bull a symbol of English liberty on the continent, Wolf argues that foreign printers displayed an understanding of caricature and England as inseparable and mutually defining.

Douglas Fordham unpacks the cultural significance of James Gillray's depictions of global courtly encounter. The artist, who was granted an audience with George III '(o)n an unspecified day in late 1793' (p. 61), adheres remarkably to the official sketches of William Alexander drawn during Lord Macartney's audience with the Chinese emperor in September 1793. However neither Gillray nor (crucially) Alexander had witnessed such encounters, and the former's mock encounters (Macartney in China, and 'Mahometan' Whigs in a fantastical court of George III) present only what was expected of a royal audience. The courtly encounter, therefore, becomes a little more than a static setting for the absurd which was 'perfectly legible within an ornamentalist visual tradition' (p. 73). Fordham's is an intriguing and engaging close reading of this visual trope, emphasising both the problems and limitation of its communicative agenda, and usefully illuminating David Cannadine's 'Ornamentalism' at its inception.

Helen Weston provides a close reading of the Lanternist in caricature, showing both professions as symbolic illuminators of the enlightenment in post-revolutionary France. Complementing Weston and Wachenheim is Richard Taws' superb contribution, which demonstrates why both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary caricature flourished in revolutionary France independent of English influences. As Taws writes:

(T)he breakdown of traditional systems of patronage and display and the incentive to produce art that referenced an ever-changing political scene meant that the production of established genres for the state exhibition of power – history painting, monuments, and architecture in particular – was difficult and often altogether impossible (p. 96).

Taws analysis focuses on the meaning of the *assignat*, the government bond turned revolutionary paper currency, and how its literal instability as a regularly forged currency was utilised symbolically in satire. Royalist caricature in particular utilised the *assignat* to accuse revolutionaries of gambling with the financial stability of the nation. Taws foregrounds therefore that efflorescence 'was not written solely by the winners', and moreover that efflorescence was not attached exclusively to liberalisation. The chapter, like Hardy's, also shows that narratives of local imperatives need not act in conflict with those of international transmission (rather narratives of anglocentric international transmission). One print in particular, a partial copy of James Gillray's *French Liberty / British Slavery* with trompe-l'œil *assignat* additions, unfolds through close reading into a document of significant analytical value. As Taws writes:

An image of the French mediated via the work of a British artist for a German audience, this print speaks to the confluence of caricature and paper money across international borders, and unequivocally situates the *assignat* as central to discourses of consumption, dearth, and bodily decrepitude in Revolutionary France (p. 108).

In conclusion Taws suggests that caricature possessed, albeit briefly, genuine cultural currency in post-revolutionary France, and hence significant communicative efficacy. This problem of communicative or, more specifically 'persuasion', is picked up by Mike Goode. Goode identifies influencing public opinion as the British caricatures brief, and seeks to question the assumption of their success: '(t)hat caricatures to some extent actually realised this brief', he writes, 'has been an article of faith among scholars of the form' (p. 117). Drawing influence from, among others, Michael Baxandall, Benedict Anderson, and Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Goode argues that caricature essentially lacked persuasion as the taxonomising of society it traded in eroded that very taxonomy. Instead as caricature displayed society as a set of types, caricatures interacted with the public by offering a precedent for society to order itself by type.

The final three contributions each take further novel approaches to this problem of communicative success. Robert Patten ponders the value of seeking knowledge in order to appreciate caricature, and asks whether scholars might be better served by looking at and drawing conclusions from signifiers found across caricature. The pyriform shape, he demonstrates, shares meaning in the caricature of Charles Philippon and

George Cruikshank, but more broadly allows us to read difference between English and French caricature. Patten's methods might seem speculative, yet as he usefully concludes:

But even if, upon closer study, we were to find my conclusions inadequate, we would at least be discussing signifying shape and recognizing that certain shapes had powerful associations that crossed frontiers and morphed into successive images ripe with visual, literary, political, social, and ideological resonance to different observers in different cultures (p. 154).

Christina Oberstebrink examines the posthumous reputation of James Gillray, and considers whether he qualified for Charles Baudelaire's definition of 'modern'. Positioned at the battle between ancients and moderns, Gillray, Oberstebrink writes, was an ideal modernist – a portrayer of the everyday, and an imaginative transgressor of artistic strictures. Finally Ségolène Le Men foregrounds the *Musée de la caricature*, published between 1834 and 1838. This 'panorama of six centuries of French visual satire' (p. 175) is illustrative of a culture of antiquarianism yet one stubbornly anti-elitist which 'comes to function as an anti-museum of French history' (p. 188). Le Men demonstrates, therefore, the ability of caricature to resuscitate and reinvigorate alternative perspectives upon a shared national past.

Remarkably for an edited volume, the text is free of typographical errors and stylistic inconsistencies. Particular praise must be given to the editorial team for placing detailed descriptions alongside each figure, though regrettably consistency in information provided is not always strictly observed.⁽²⁾ On two occasions (pp. 41, 84) this reader felt an omission of prints crucial to the discussion hindered the clarity of argument. On one occasion (p. 53, fn 10) a reference crucial to further investigation is absent. The bibliography provides a significant tool for any researcher either acquainting themselves with or revisiting the field of caricature, though the omission of a few volumes is regrettable (notably those by David Alexander on the caricaturist Richard Newton, Mark Bills *The Art of Satire*, and Gatrell's *City of Laughter* ⁽³⁾). Finally the index is welcome and well focused addition, allowing the reader to browse across contributions with ease.

The summaries I have presented here are far from complete. Various complexities, contentions and analytical pathways have been omitted for the sake of brevity. The richness of this collection cannot, I fear, be captured in the present review. Nonetheless what strikes one when considering the contributions on offer as a whole is how their sheer diversity, driven, we might speculate from Patten's conclusions, by an appreciation that ambitious work can be fruitfully wrong, forces us to abandon assumptions of the communicative efficacy of caricature. Efflorescence this volume tells us does not unproblematically indicate success.

There remains however a thunderous silence respecting the realities of reception and the influence of the consumer on the processes of production. The majority of surviving caricatures used by scholars for analysis of the past were, after all, printed and sold into a commercial environment receptive to graphic satire (I make a deliberate distinction here – caricature is an artistic form; graphic satire a commercial output, typically, though not exclusively, containing input from caricature forms). This commercial environment was not detached from the processes of production, both artistic and technological. Graphic satire then did not exist in a vacuum. The making of graphic satire by both artist and publisher could not have occurred without the consumer.

What *Efflorescence of Caricature* does not do then is approach these problems with clarity, nor does it, somewhat ironically for such a radical collection of essays, reconsider a number of orthodoxies surrounding reception, production, and commercial environment.

Repeatedly commercially minded interpretations are underdeveloped. Fordham, in conclusion, enters graphic satire into the 'world of commodities' (p. 74), suggesting that Gillray's power as a maker of commodities complemented his abilities as a caricaturist in securing him an audience before the King. Similarly Taws describes *L'Homme aux assignats* (1791) as a print which was 'very successful, and served

as a model for many subsequent caricatures' (p. 97). It is unclear however how its role as a marker of a shift in counter-Revolutionary caricature from book-based publication to single-sheet satire is evidence of 'success' (especially as the tenor here is of commercial success). Goode opens his contribution with a starkly positivist statement regarding the value of 'visual caricatures' – they were as important in transforming the public sphere as novels and newspapers; they were part of 'everyday political and cultural life'; their audience was unproblematically British; they responded to events with rapidity; and they shaped 'social attitudes and current political events as they unfolded' (p. 117). Given Porterfield's introductory remarks, such statements, based largely on those classic texts (notably M. Dorothy George and Diana Donald) whose orthodoxies the volume seeks to problematise, are jarring. Problems of cost and geography are not considered with respect to audience; methods of production are not considered with respect to rapidity of response (the process of production could not be achieved overnight like newspapers) and influence over attitudes (volume of production was limited by the fragility of materials; dissemination was limited by print presses differing from standard newspaper presses, and therefore only proving cost-effective in peculiar commercial environments). Elsewhere Goode favours abstract analysis over the commercially inclined, satires depicting print shop window scenes are read here as 'metacaricature' (pp. 124–5); a less theoretically inclined scholar might simply define them as advertisements. The suspicious eye is also drawn to the argument that 'caricatures arguably sought to transform viewers' minds by stimulating their senses in ways not entirely dissimilar to Romantic drug use' (p. 132).

Moreover Goode's piece highlights the seemingly unproblematic consideration of audience and public as an undercurrent to the volume (see pp. 133, 163). Wolf, for example, states when discussing a French print which obviously, at the expense of artist fluidity, copies the image of John Bull from that in Gillray's classic *French Liberty / British Slavery* (1792) that '(t)he borrowing is so blatant that it must have been intended to be obvious to viewers of the French print' (p. 51). This is abundantly clear. Yet quite apart from this statement relying on the power of English caricature (a position the volume and the previous chapter by Wachenheim reject), no consideration is given to who these 'viewers' might be, or if these viewers existed outside the sphere of artistic self-referencing and quotation. There is then in the volume an assumption of audience homogeneity present which is unstated but at the same time uncontested.

The reliance on James Gillray (and for the later period George Cruikshank) as a synecdoche for English caricature perhaps best exemplifies the volume's continued attachment to a number of orthodoxies historians, who are more inclined towards menial tasks such as counting, have begun to question. In terms of artistic quality Gillray was without equal. But as scholars such as Alexander, Gatrell, and this reader [\(4\)](#) have demonstrated, there was a huge output and variable trade dynamic which existed outside of the Gillray/Humphrey paradigm. Indeed we might even venture to suggest by analysing London's multifarious Golden Age satirical print-sellers that Gillray's process of production was far from representative of the trade as a whole.

These problems can best be traced to Porterfield's opening comments where he states:

Our volume makes major inroads into the growing question about whether caricature succeeds in its brief, in the *social and artistic work* that it is assigned to do (p. 6; my emphasis).

Perhaps this is focus on the social through the artistic is hardly surprising; the contributors are, after all, drawn from the fields of Art History and English literature studies. Without doubt the perspectives these disciplines provide have proved crucial to the radical rejection of various orthodoxies this collection must be applauded for undertaking. Yet satirical prints at present find their way into various works whose period of enquiry touch on this Golden Age of caricature (here we need only consult the covers of many monographs published in recent years). And one suspects that although historians will be compelled by the questions this volume asks of the orthodoxies the canonical texts of Golden Age satire rely upon, they will be less satisfied with the answers this volume provides. The disappointment with this otherwise highly commendable collection then comes from failing, despite a self-proclamation of interdisciplinarity, to address the problems

of production, sale and environment a historian might expect to find during the course of its much needed radical reappraisal of caricature. Our understanding of communicative efficacy would surely be richer if, despite the absence of traditional sales and business records, we developed new strategies of socio-economic analysis to complement those novel strategies with respect to representation which this volume expertly provides.

Notes

1. Tamara Hunt, *Defining John Bull: Political Caricature and National Identity in Late Georgian England* (Aldershot, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nonetheless the volume is closer to achieving the standardisation of image descriptions encouraged by Ludmilla Jordanova than most volumes; see Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Image Matters', *The Historical Journal*, 51, 3 (2008), 777–91.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Alexander, *Richard Newton and English Caricature in the 1790s* (Manchester, 1998); Mark Bills, *The Art of Satire: London in Caricature* (London, 2006); and V. A. C. Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. James Baker, 'Isaac Cruikshank and the notion of British Liberty: 1783–1811' (PhD thesis, University of Kent , 2010).[Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1084#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5495>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>