

## The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England

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Katy Layton-Jones

In 1993 Amanda Vickery's now well-known historiographical review 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?' provided an exhaustive survey of the interpretation of the position, identity and role of English women from the early modern to the Victorian periods.<sup>(1)</sup> It was a timely project in response to the wealth of interest and research in that field over the previous decade and one in which it seemed Vickery successfully discredited the over-simplistic historiographical model of the separate spheres of public male and private female experience. However, the following decade continued to see such dichotomies shape the narrative of English women's history. Cindy McCreery's study of late eighteenth-century satirical prints of women suggests a promising new direction, not only for women's or gender history, but also for social and cultural history in the broader sense. The new approach signalled in *The Satirical Gaze* awards visual evidence a central role in the formulation of a new historiography rather than a supporting role merely illustrating historical detail. In combining the territory of art and print historians with the methodologies of social, cultural and even political history, McCreery unites two fields of historical enquiry that have hitherto proceeded on distinct and relatively unrelated paths.

Rather than fitting her study into a previously established narrative of women's history, McCreery limits her historical scope to the decades that have become known as the 'golden age' of the British satirical print in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This period also coincides with what has often been identified as a watershed in attitudes to womanhood within British society. However, McCreery's emphasis upon primary visual material, much of which has been hitherto neglected by historians, enables her to complicate, if not entirely avoid, the well-rehearsed chronology of a reactionary conservative circumscription of female

roles and behaviour during this period. The successful complication of this narrative through a close analysis of visual representations is one of the greatest strengths of this book.

The traditional, if no longer universally accepted, narrative of British women's history from the early modern period onwards is one of initial emancipation followed by the reactionary curtailing of women's public roles in the later decades of the eighteenth century culminating in the archetypal 'little woman' of the Victorian era. Even Vickery, in contesting the perceived universality of this process concedes that the nature of women's influence, if not its actual power, had changed by the mid nineteenth century. Historians have vied with each other to identify the dominant reason for this apparent 'relegation' or 'relocation' of women to a series of prescribed and limited roles within society. The reasons proffered range from the segregation of the work place and the domestic home in response to industrialisation to a reactionary response to the prominent role of women during the French Revolution and the Republic that followed. Historical wisdom implies that, whether within the domestic sphere or in the public eye, the situation of women and their various roles in society were subject to the censure or approval of a univocal public opinion. Consequently, historiography on the subject has often failed to distinguish real attitudes to women and womanhood, from those, which, even at the time of their production, were recognised as exaggerated reflections or humorous distortions of public opinion.

McCreery has not completely dispensed with established historical models. As in Hannah Barker's and Elaine Chalus's co-edited volume, *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England* (1997), the chapters are structured around a series of familiar eighteenth-century characterisations of women and female roles.<sup>(2)</sup> Categories such as 'women of the street', actresses, adulteresses, mothers and 'old maids', are attended to in turn. Similarly, the reputations and responses to specific 'real' women, as opposed to women in general, are addressed, and the important distinctions between the two are given necessary attention. In a chapter titled 'Women on the stage: courtesans and scandalous actresses' McCreery skilfully exposes the subtle but significant differences between satirical responses to specific personalities, such as Kitty Fisher and Mary 'Perdita' Robinson, and those which sought to satirise actresses in general. The extent to which such women were represented favourably or unfavourably in prints was, it seems, due as much to their individual personality, appearance and aptitude for self-promotion, as it was related to their 'scandalous' profession. While to some extent McCreery reasserts a standard series of eighteenth-century female stereotypes, she reveals that responses to such 'types' were even more various than the characterisations themselves.

Notwithstanding the strength of much of the visual analysis in this book, the account of criticism and condemnation levelled at common prostitutes, 'unnatural' mothers and affected, insincere female aristocrats contributes little to existing historical wisdom on the subject. Increasing popular interest in late-eighteenth-century personalities, and biographies such as Amanda Foreman's hugely successful *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (1998), have ensured that those with even a remote interest in the period are familiar with the censure and condemnation awarded to women from both 'high' and 'low' society.<sup>(3)</sup> However, in addition to recounting these now-familiar attitudes to perceived female transgressions, McCreery employs satirical prints to access a more diverse range of responses to female behaviour, many of which have been either dismissed or ignored by previous historical commentaries.

The synopsis of what might be called the 'British female experience' of the late eighteenth century outlined in *The Satirical Gaze* is one of diversity and ambivalence in which images and 'popular' attitudes to women were subject to many caveats and variations depending upon the social and political context of not only the female protagonist, but also the vendor and viewer. This multiplicity of perspectives is a recurrent theme of the book and particularly evident in the chapter dealing with prints that address the relatively familiar historical territory of the 'fashionable mamma' and the 'natural mother'. Some of the imagery included is almost too familiar. Portraits such as Joshua Reynolds's paintings of the Duchess of Devonshire pictured with her mother and daughter respectively have come to define both academic and popular notions of eighteenth-century femininity. Equally, some of the Gillray prints called upon have been so extensively analysed as to appear exhausted as a historical resource. However, it is the mixture of these over-familiar images with less well-known and ambiguous prints that lends weight to the author's commentary. The famous images that have been previously interpreted as evidence of narrow and prescriptive attitudes

towards women are, within the context of the wider print market, revealed as merely one component of a fluid and often-contradictory discourse surrounding women in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Images as wide-ranging as 'Lady Squab taking a Ride' published in the *Rambler's Magazine* in 1784 and 'The Neglected Daughter; An affecting tale' published by Laurie and Whittle in 1804, indicate a vast corpus of female representation which, although 'public' in both its production and consumption, provided anything but a singular voice in response to women, their influence and behaviour.

At the other end of the social and moral spectrum, in a chapter titled 'Prostitutes and market vendors', McCreery discusses the representation of one of the most contentious female 'types' and objects of public scrutiny, both by eighteenth-century contemporaries and historians alike. Along with the more obvious characterisations of prostitutes as disease-ridden objects of vice, such as the procuress in Hogarth's *Harlots' Progress*, the various levels of these working women and their respective modes of representation are identified and explored in detail. The visual images that underpin McCreery's research represent the entire scale of the hierarchy of prostitution from the common 'Bunter' to the elite courtesan and 'demi-rep' and reflect an equally wide range of attitudes and responses to these stock 'types'. Bunters, the lowest level of street prostitute, were often depicted as mildly comical figures rather than a danger to society. In later years, the condemnation of these women became somewhat more vehement. However, this shift in attitude manifested itself in the exclusion of such women from satirical imagery and the sentimentalising of the theme of the female repentant, rather than in the explicit demonisation of the 'fallen' woman.

One reason for this progressive occlusion rather than overt condemnation of undesirable themes was consumer preference. McCreery quite rightly acknowledges the importance of 'popular' appeal and decorative value. Though many satires appear to us vulgar or explicit, there were other subjects that proved either totally unacceptable or simply unappealing to eighteenth-century consumers. An unpalatable subject or the explicit delineation of a dark social anxiety was less likely to sell than a humorous, albeit crude, joke or a sentimental scene. Certainly tastes were constantly changing and a convincing account is provided of the transition from a relatively light-hearted attitude to marginalised women such as prostitutes and 'old maids', to a less compassionate tone in later images. Still, despite this general shift, satirical prints continued to reflect a wide range of attitudes to women and womanhood throughout the late eighteenth century.

The range of the quality and cost of prints covered in *The Satirical Gaze* also contributes to the overall argument of wide-ranging attitudes to women. Although McCreery has limited her main focus to satirical prints (explicitly excluding caricatures), this format itself included many variations in quality, style and genre. The examples range from small-scale engravings of 'street characters' to frieze prints, mild pornography, political cartoons and periodical illustrations that were increasingly incorporated into such publications as the *Rambler's Magazine*. In addition, a range of non-satirical imagery provides a visual and social context for this satirical material. Both printed images, such as those that made up the long-running 'Tête-à-Tête' series in the *Town and Country Magazine*, and grand portraits in oil like Richard Samuel's group portrait, *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain* (1778), add to the wealth of visual material that underpins McCreery's thesis.

The marriage of images with historical analysis in the manner attempted in this study is still a rare undertaking. Although visual material has been used for decades to support or refute pre-existing historical arguments, it is only now, in the age of digital databases, the internet, and the rising popularity of interdisciplinary research, gaining the status it deserves as a historical resource in its own right.<sup>(4)</sup> It is perhaps not surprising then that some passages of *The Satirical Gaze*, particularly those that describe and address specific prints in detail, sometimes appear laboured and occasionally over-step the line between analysis and speculation. However, this is a small criticism in a work that constitutes one of the first substantial attempts to privilege 'low' visual material in this manner.

It is a well-rehearsed cliché that through satire society sees itself more clearly. Nevertheless, it seems remarkable that a book dedicated to images that simplify and exaggerate should reveal such diversity in the perception and representation of women and womanhood throughout this period. In addition to this contribution to the historiography of eighteenth-century women's history, possibly the most influential and

enduring legacy of McCreery's project will be the wider utilisation of visual material in revising and shaping our most fundamental conceptions of the past.

## Notes

1. A. Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, 36.2 (1993), 383–414.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles Representations and Responsibilities*, ed. H. Barker and E. Chalus (London and New York, 1997).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. A. Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (1998).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For a discussion of the importance of visual material in historical enquiry, see R. Porter, 'Seeing the Past', *Past and Present*, 118 (1998), 186–205.[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author accepts the review and does not wish to add anything at this time.

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