Representations of France in English Satirical Prints 1740-1832

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Linda Colley's *Britons* has enjoyed a long afterlife. Her 1992 volume has become a key historiographical battleground for long-18th-century British historians. 'Four Nations' scholars have tested (and for the most part rejected) the British unity that Colley argued was forged in this period (1), while those of England have remained just as sceptical. And with his *Representations of France in English Satirical Prints 1740-1832*, John Richard Moores joins a chorus of scholars wondering if Colley picked the right 'Other' against which her Britain and her Britons were made.

In this volume Moores examines descriptions of France, the French, and anything Franco-symbolic found in satirical prints published in England (ergo – with few exceptions – London) circa 1740–1832, a period that covers the putative 'Golden Age' of the form (nomenclature first introduced by Diana Donald in her 1996 monograph *The Age of Caricature* and overdue – perhaps – a thorough critical reassessment). The structure of the monograph follows a familiar pattern: a high-level framework is established (here anti-Colley), chapters thereafter are arranged by themes and sub-themes, cross-cutting syntheses are used to draw those themes and sub-themes together.

After some well chosen opening remarks, chapter two – the first thematic chapter – examines fashion through food, taking us from the familiar territory of William Hogarth's 1749 *The Gate of Calais or O the Roast Beef of Old England* and James Gillray's *Un Petit Souper, a la Parisienne* to less well-known satires on conflicts between beaus and butchers. Moores identifies both a long tail of mocking French entertainments (via an English enthusiasm for them) and an envy of the French expressed in ridicule. Chapter three, the most substantial of the volume, explores national leaders and identifies in English satire a gradual disambiguation across the period of French rulers from those they ruled. As 'leadership' in both England and France developed – becoming gradually less foreign in the former case; abruptly non-royal, pseudo-royal, and then royal again in the latter – so did English representations of the French. And so whilst pre-1789 many English satires on the French channelled critiques of the Hanoverians through the Bourbons, the fall of the French monarchy, the rise of republicanism, and the Napoleonic ascent thereafter had a destabilising impact on the key themes and messages of English satirical prints: not least because, like George III, Little Boney did not hail from the land he ruled. Chapter Four looks at war and, to a lesser

extent, moments of peace between England and France. The chapter argues that representations of the French in English satirical prints became gradually more human across the long-18th century, with the battlefield a fertile discursive site for tracing the shift from stereotypical and emblematic representations of the French to a more human mode of caricature. There were, of course, exceptions, prints that vilified and dehumanised the French. But, as Moores argues, prints that sought to enlist sympathy for the French plight, to highlight the complicity of all leaders in the misery of ordinary men, or to construct subversively ambiguous political messages were just as common. Chapter five turns to revolutions in France during the period. There is necessary crossover here with previous chapters, but this section nevertheless offers a fair and useful summary of how English satire responded to changing events in France and how these events were used throughout as a prism through which to examine domestic affairs, especially after the convulsions of 1793. Chapter six, which closes the volume, looks at representations of female participation in and responses to French life and politics. It also seeks to provide some context to English representations of France by looking – briefly – at English representations of the Spanish, Dutch, Germans, Scots, Welsh and Irish. If nothing else, doing so underscores the important role the French played in English satirical prints circa 1740 to 1832.

The narrative that runs across these chapters is not merely one (per cultural history) that insists on complexity and ambiguity in place of atomising binaries (though there is plenty of that), but rather one which insists that representations of France in British satirical prints should be characterised by their kinship, fondness, sympathy, and admiration of the French. On, for example, the assumption that sustained mockery of French leaders in printed satire is evidence of Francophobia, Moores argues to the contrary that:

Could this [mockery] not also have had a humanising effect, and could the laughter produced here not have equally taken some of the sting out of criticisms? (p. 112)

Equally, when discussing prints on the aftermath of the 1789 French Revolution, Moores argues, convincingly, that although 'prints did become more derisive towards French republicanism as events on the continent developed' fraternity towards the French (and indeed the French liberal) survived sufficiently in the intervening years so as to not 'diminish the chances of empathy for the revolution of 1830' (p. 175). All this good feeling can seem odd if we consider how vitriolic, reactionary, and at times downright abhorrent some of the most celebrated and well-known satires of this period were: work such as James Gillray's aforementioned *Un Petit Souper, a la Parisienne*, Isaac Cruikshank's *Galic Perfidy*, or Thomas Rowlandson's *The Contrast*. But the story Moores tells rings true, not least because the satirical prints *Representations of France in English Satirical Prints* introduces are read through a number of important contextual and methodological frameworks.

The first framework is the vast corpus of satirical prints made easily available as a result of over two decades of digitisation work at memory institutions that include the British Museum and the Library of Congress. This has been a particular boon to scholars of the messages these prints contain, and Moores does a fine job – working within the constraints of the monograph form (the book does not encourage multi-directional reading, is not networked, and rarely flatters detailed illustrations) – to bring a wide range of these prints to the attention of his reader.

Allied to this, the second framework is longitudinal. By choosing a wide chronological scope *Representations of France in English Satirical Prints* does occasionally suffer from dense, summative prose and narration. But the approach also reaps benefits that include the aforementioned comparative reading of representations of French revolutionaries between the 1790s and 1830s; and the astute observation that religious definitions of France in English satirical prints declined from the 1750s onwards (*Catholic* France was it seems not the stable 'Other' Colley assumes it to have been).

The third framework is the understanding that graphic satire was (and remains) a form not known for offering constructive comments or suggestions. It is a 'downbeat' (p. 71) form and as a consequence the

historian must read shifts in discourse and messaging carefully so as to grasp when positive or ambiguous portrayals of phenomena – subsumed beneath a cloak of spite, vitriol, and hate – were being evinced.

The fourth framework is Moores's mature conception of the physical form and place in society of the prints that contained these 'downbeat' representations. He writes:

They are a product of a certain areas of London. They are most representative of this region. Their reach is debatable but they were not seen exclusively by people residing here, nor only by those who could afford them. They gave the opportunity for artistic expression, albeit one which was directed by the necessity for commercial appeal, to artists outside of the academy, both amateur and professional, who would otherwise have had little or no means to disseminate their work publicly. Their relative freedom from censorship and suppression meant that they had the potential to say things that could not be said elsewhere, though how far this went was tempered by their customers, those who commissioned and published prints, and the attitudes of the artists themselves (pp. 19–20)

This is a fine summary of what satirical prints were and how they fit into the story of long-18th-century Britain. And this perspective opens Moores up to prudent, medium-led readings of the prints under examination. In discussions of anti-French revolutionary and anti-Napoleonic satires where distaste might be read as the prevailing message, Moores more often than not sees ambiguity, attentive as his volume is to the saleability of prints that a range of consumers might identify with politically and philosophically. Elsewhere, on this occasion with respect to Anthony Walker's 1747 *The Beaux Disaster*, a satire on an imagined conflict between an effete 'macaroni' and a butcher (in short, the former is hung by his fine clothing on the latter's meat hook for the amusement of the passing crowd), Moores writes:

It is tempting to read *The Beaux Disaster* in terms of class. The no-nonsense people of the street are celebrated for having taught the preposterous and pretentious Fribble a lesson. Were they to exist, however, the ragged citizens depicted would never have been able to afford the print in which they feature. This may suggest that Walker's work is an example of the upper classes laughing at themselves, or at the more ostentatious among them (p. 39).

Again the 18th-century life is used to frame the possible interpretations of print content.

Not everything works well. The discussion in chapter four of prints on Anglo-French peace contains jarring shifts of pace and scattered focus. A section on allies in the same chapter is underdeveloped. Chapter six, especially the section on Other 'Others', is far too condensed and cursory a glance at the phenomena under discussion. This is a shame, for this section is intended to tease out the relative complexity of English representations of the French by describing the flat and reductive representations of other European peoples in the English satirical corpus. English representations of the Irish, for example, are far more complex, volatile, and – indeed – sympathetic to the wily, jovial, and downtrodden 'Paddy' than Moores allows. I'd also have liked to have seen closer engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of the 'Othering' so crucial to Colley's thesis and – in turn – Moores' critique. The turn to anthropology for theoretical frameworks, identified by Lawrence Stone in his classic 1979 essay [\(2\)](#), saw the notion of the 'Other' – per Claude Levi-Strauss – embed itself in historiographical discourse. Useful as it is, if anthropology has moved on from this framework then so should we. Volumes such as *Representations of France in English Satirical Prints* are ideal venues in which this process could take shape.

Nevertheless there is much to recommend here. In a year where Waterloo will no doubt rehabilitate and ossify in the public consciousness those small number of late-Georgian satirical prints that depicted a deep English antipathy towards the French, *Representations of France in English Satirical Prints* is a timely reminder that even at times of conflict and in depictions of that conflict, representations of the enemy were

and are not always hostile. Your enemy and your fellow belligerent are not always one and the same. Rather, as this lively volume makes clear, conflict can serve as a painful reminder of just how much you share with your supposed foe.

Notes

1. *Parliaments, Nation and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1600–1850*, ed. Julian Hoppit (Manchester, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lawrence Stone, 'The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history', *Past & Present*, 85 (1979). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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