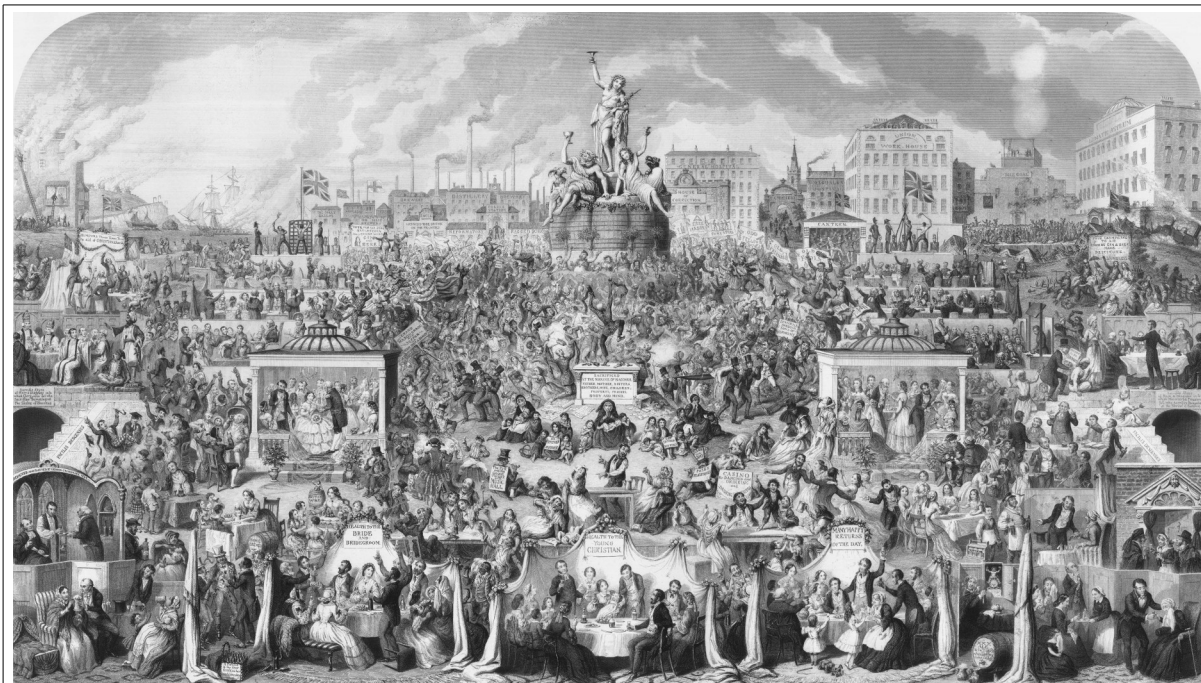# SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

A Triumph for Bacchus?

4.1   George Cruikshank, *The Triumph of Bacchus* (1864, Charles Mottram) [Tate T02268].

When George Cruikshank painted his ambitious and didactic *The Worship of Bacchus* in 1862, later worked into printed form [4.1], he presented much more than a moralising vision of a nation addicted to drink and vice, but rather a narrative framed within long-standing discourses of society collapsing under the weight of excess. Such critique was, as this thesis has shown both in George's early work and the career of his father, synonymous with a problematisation of liberty unrestrained by the duopoly of moral and customary arbitration. But George's painting, much derided by his contemporaries (hence the delay in its reproduction), was also concerned with injustice - all are consumed by drink, but it is the poor and vulnerable who suffer most acutely.

The themes this thesis explores can, whilst remaining cautious of offering overarching narratives, also be reduced to an exploration of injustice, a word which not only implies a lack of justice, and hence a lack of liberty, but also a real social division in the application of these principles. We therefore can

see Cruikshankian social satires between 1783 and 1811 as first critiquing situations and instances where a lack of justice/liberty is present, and second offering a commentary on the divisions in justice/liberty he perceives, where the applications of liberty are unjust in their lack of universality. And like his son decades later, Isaac raised exemplary perpetrators, both groups and individuals, for virtual punishment within the confines of visual culture.

Moreover both these injustices invoke custom. This thesis has argued that 'Golden Age' graphic satire indicates the presence of a moral vacuum, which by 1809 the bourgeois gentlemen ranks attempted to fill in order to avoid, on one hand, the universality of legal application and access to public space being undermined by a reinvigorated elite desire for exclusivity and enclosure, and, on the other, unrestrained excesses of liberty creating a national, moral collapse. But if the bourgeoisie increasingly framed morality and custom in this period, the generations of graphic satirists that followed Isaac, from George Cruikshank to Gerald Scarfe, Brian Talbot and Martin Rowson, show that the battle for representative moral authority over British liberty was never won by that one group.

This thesis then, although offering some insights into themes and controversies of concern to the public facing artist/publisher/consumer nexus is not really about what liberty was, it is not really about distinguishing what values liberty contained and did not. Indeed the boundaries and spheres of liberty encountered in late-Georgian London are considered too loose, complex, contradictory, multifarious and fluid to be precisely defined, as were the imaginative constructions of those stereotypes (Othered or not) against whom British liberty was negotiated. Which is not to say that such a conclusion is without value. It is the contention of this thesis, as argued at length in chapter 3.2, that the protean nature of British liberty and its antipodes in this period should be embraced by the historian; the ability of Britons to reshape, reconfigure, renegotiate and redefine stereotypes of individuals and groups, and even to occasionally rehabilitate exo-cultural Others, should be celebrated.

Instead this thesis is really about the fight over liberty. The fact that reshaping, reconfiguring, renegotiating and redefining of both liberty and the stereotypes 'identity talk' depended upon seemingly took place in this period, suggests a contest between groups over the right to shape (to

culturally construct) these discourses in public arenas, media, and spaces. Cruikshankian satire in particular, as a historical source which appeared in various registers of metropolitan visual culture, indicates the drift of that fight, where it went both ideologically and geographically, who (broadly speaking) the protagonists were, and where those concerns were played out. In sum it suggests the hegemony over opinion in public facing visual culture drifted away from the West End elites between 1783 and 1811 towards a broader gentleman Londoner whose concerns were less with international war and high politics than domestic breaches of custom, liberty and morality (from both the 'left' and 'right') which were damaging the ideal of a collective, universalist urban environment that matched (the now lost) Arcadian rural idea. This critical conservative bourgeois gentleman was concerned with the injustice of daily life, and print publishers responded in kind, offering him productions of material and financial value that both jovially and viciously satirised those who perpetrated his libertarian ideals. And above all, by offering these satirical moralisings as reproductions sold in a commercial setting, printmakers provided these Londoners with a like-minded imagined community from which they could take solace and comfort.

Cruikshankian graphic satire (like that of his contemporaries) was of course also designed to be funny and rude, without which neither Isaac nor George would have enjoyed such long and successful, if in the case of the former not particularly distinguished, careers. Nonetheless humour alone did not dictate consumption. People do not typically laugh at jokes they do not ideologically agree with. We may all occasionally surprise ourselves with what our sub-conscience finds funny, but broadly speaking we are unlikely to invest our disposable incomes on objects and/or publications which display values we disagree with or abhor. This thesis has viewed past actors through a similar framework, constructing plausible audiences for graphic satire from the ideological content of the humorous narratives they offered, and although in doing so it has identified an increase in bourgeois gentlemanly power over notions of liberty in public visual culture between 1783 and 1811 this does not mean that similar patterns existed outside the metropolis, nor that this trajectory continued thereafter. Events such as the OP War do not simplistically prefigure, either virtually or in reality, the

Great Reform Act of 1832; as George Cruikshank shows in his representations of the Peterloo Massacre the road between such brief triumphant moments of victory over elite hegemony was hardly smooth. And as George reiterated in *The Worship of Bacchus* some years later, the contests between law and custom, excess and restraint, justice and injustice, in short differing notions liberty, were not only an unrelenting features of British communicative culture, but vital and perpetual battlegrounds of British society. What this history of communication tells us is that although we may not be able to clearly define the ideological boundaries of British liberty, we can celebrate the extent to which those notions of British liberty were (and indeed still are) characterised by contestation and fight.