Late-Georgian graphic satire manifested itself in a variety of such physical forms – single-sheet engravings (both uncoloured and finely coloured), crude lottery puffs, decorated pottery, and illustrative book plates. These forms extend beyond the purview of those fragmentary contemporary assertions, often used as a barometer of popular interest by historians,[1] of seeing multi-class crowds ‘consuming’ single-sheet graphic satire at London’s print-shop windows.

Of course, such viewing was no doubt common in the Georgian metropolis and functioned as useful free advertising for print-shop proprietors, but these viewers were not the same as consumers. And given that the production of graphic satire at this time was a labour intensive process involving considerable capital investment, publishers were hardly likely to aim for the assent of the homogeneous crowd. Rather the different products these different publishers made were aimed at different consumers, at different notions of disposable income. To rationalise these complex business dynamics in the absence of sales ledgers, business records, and folios of letters between artists and publishers, the scholar of Georgian graphic satire must then turn to the physical objects in which these designs appeared to explore questions of consumption, audience, and reception.

A collection of objects recently donation to the British Cartoon Archive provide a snapshot of how this process can work. The collection centres around Thomas Rowlandson and in particular his Doctor Syntax designs, a body of work completed between 1809 and 1822. Syntax combined verse and image to comic effect, the former composed by an ageing William Combe (formerly a pensioned government pamphleteer during the French Revolutionary Wars) after designs by Rowlandson. Rudolf Ackermann, whose Repository of Arts stood at 101 Strand, published these works and orchestrated the collaboration. As Combe writes in the advertisement printed inside the The Tour of Doctor Syntax, In Search of the Picturesque (1812) [i-ii]:

The following Poem, if it may be allowed to deserve the name, was written under circumstances, whose peculiarity may be thought to justify a communication of them […] The designs to which this volume is so greatly indebted, I was informed would follow in a Series, and it was propos’d to me to shape out a story from them. – An Etching or a Drawing as accordingly sent to me every month, and I
composed a certain proportion of pages in verse, in which, of course, the subject of the design was included: the rest depended on what my imagination could furnish […] the Artist and the Writer have no personal communication with or knowledge of each other.

Text and image were printed side-by-side and this artist-publisher-author dynamic was repeated in The Second Tour of Doctor Syntax, in Search of Consolation (1820), The Third Tour of Doctor Syntax, In Search of a Wife (1821), and The History of Johnny Quae Genus the Little Foundling of the late Doctor Syntax (1822).

Rowlandson, T. "Doctor Syntax Made Free of the Cellar." (January 1819, R. Ackermann)

Holdings of these texts at the BCA include various editions and later reprints from Ackermann’s originals. These objects reveal that the books were light-weight, sturdily covered, and small-enough for fit a coat pocket. But they also reveal that to read the complete versions of these books is to miss the whole story. Syntax started life in Ackermann’s Poetical Magazine, a curious serial comprising of poetry and criticism interspersed with the occasional graphic plate (satiric or otherwise). As is well known letter and image presses could not be combined at this time, so in the Poetical Magazine, as with the Syntax books, plates had to be inserted during or after binding. This latter point is particularly revealing when considering how the items in the BCA collection describe the physical relationship between text and image.

Ackermann’s publications twice read ‘List of the Plates’ with instructions ‘To face p.’ (1816, 1822), once say ‘Index to the Plates’ (1817) and ‘List of Plates’ (1817), on another occasion ‘Directions for Placing the Plates’ (1820), and finally ‘Directions to the Binder for placing the Plates’ (1821). Illustrated book from other publishers in the BCA collection repeat this disparity of wording – ‘Directions for Placing the Plates’ (Thomas Tegg, 1808), ‘List of the Plates’ with instructions ‘To face p.’ (W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1818), and ‘Illustrations in the English Spy’ with instructions ‘To face page’ (Sherwood, Jones, and Co., 1825).

Rowlandson’s designs might then have underpinned the construction of Combe’s words in Syntax, but these objects reveal a marketplace where text often functioned without accompanying images. Here the physical state of the objects offers valuable insight. A number of texts in the BCA collection present pristine bind – suggesting text and image were combined at the point of sale. Others are roughly bound – suggesting plates were inserted and the editions rebound. One object, a 1808 edition of Chesterfield Travestie published by Thomas Tegg, [2] even includes a plate facing the wrong way, defying the ‘Directions for Placing the Plates’.

From studying this selection of objects a picture emerges of a trade where incomplete editions of texts, counter to the typical holdings of archives and libraries, were normal. Such editions were both more affordable and closer mimicked the serialised production of culture aimed at the middle orders in the late-Georgian period. Coloured plates were not integral to but rather additions to cheap literary volumes, thus posing many questions regarding the discord between the commercially dictated modularity of these consumer products and their presentation to the historian as complete works of art. Indeed perhaps one advertisement placed at the rear of an edition of The Miseries of Human Life (William Miller, 1807) in the BCA collections exemplifies how the physical object must be central to our reading of Georgian graphic satire.

Also this day is published, price 12s. boards

A SERIES OF SEVENTEEN HUMOROUS COLOURED ENGRAVINGS, intended to illustrate the Two...
Volumes of the MISERIES of HUMAN LIFE; designed and etched by J. A. ATKINSON, Author of the Manners and Costumes of the Russian Empire, &c.

N.B. This Set of Plates is intended either to bind up with the Work, or kept separately, if the latter, descriptive letter-press if given.


REFERENCES

Paston, G. (1905) Old Coloured Books (London: Methuen)
Wolf, Edward C. J. (1945) Rowlandson and his illustrations of eighteenth century English literature (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard)

About the author

James Baker has published 5 articles on this journal.
I am an Associate Lecturer in School of History at the University of Kent, Canterbury, Project Manager of the ESRC funded ‘City and Region, 1400-1914’ project, collaborator with the British Cartoon Archive, and lead investigator of ‘Cradled in Caricature’ (symposium June 2011; conference Spring 2012). In September 2010 I completed a PhD in Cartoons and Caricature at the University of Kent, Canterbury, the title of which was ‘Isaac Cruikshank and the notion of British Liberty, 1783-1811’. My thesis explored liberty through fashion, gender and custom, and sought to apply economic and technological exigencies to our understanding of the processes of print production. My interests include Georgian visual satire, the Covent Garden old price riots of September 1809 to January 1810, diachronic themes with respect to the construction and communication of humour in graphic discourses between the seventeenth and late-nineteenth centuries, and the digital humanities. In what spare time is left I moonlight as a neurohumanities skeptic.

Blog | Twitter

Related posts:

- Ergodic texts: In the Shadow of No Towers
- It’s a bird - Steven T. Seagle and Teddy Kristiansen
- Pascal Blanchet’s White Rapids and the Sense of History

Leave a Reply

NAME [REQUIRED]

---

On Facebook

Academic Diary

May 17, 2012 – Contemporary Screen Narratives: Storytelling’s Digital and Industrial Contexts, 17 May 2012, University of Nottingham, UK

May 19, 2012 – Symposium: Popular Media Cultures - Writing in the Margins and Reading Between the Lines, 19 May 2012, London

June 15, 2012 – Rocky Mountain Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels, 15-16 June 2012, Denver, Colorado

June 28, 2012 – The Third International Comics Conference: Comics Rock, 28-29 June 2012, Bournemouth University, UK


July 16, 2012 – Digital Humanities 2012, 16-22 July 2012, University of Hamburg, Germany

July 22, 2012 – Comics & Medicine: Navigating the Margins 22-24 July 2012 Toronto, Canada


November 15, 2012 – 2º Colóquio Internacional Filosofia e Quadrinhos. 15-18 November 2012, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

June 24, 2013 – Joint International Graphic