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Doctor Syntax: A Physical Object Analysis

BY JAMES BAKER   ON APRIL 23RD, 2012   NO COMMENTS

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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.

Rowlandson, T. "Doctor Syntax Tumbling into the Water" (6 August 1813, R. Ackermann)

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*

The Comics Grid

Journal of Comics Scholarship

ISSN 2048-0792

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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 '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 seperately, if the latter,

descriptive letter-press if given.

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[1] The orthodoxy that graphic satire was a popular medium is vehemently rejected in Nicholson, Eirwen E. C., 'Consumers and Spectators: The Public of the Political Print in Eighteenth-Century England', History (January, 1990), 5-21, and more recently by the present author in 'Isaac Cruikshank and the notion of British Liberty: 1783 – 1811' (University of Kent PhD thesis, 2010).

[2] Other copies held at British Library C.117.a.46.

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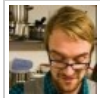
About the author

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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.

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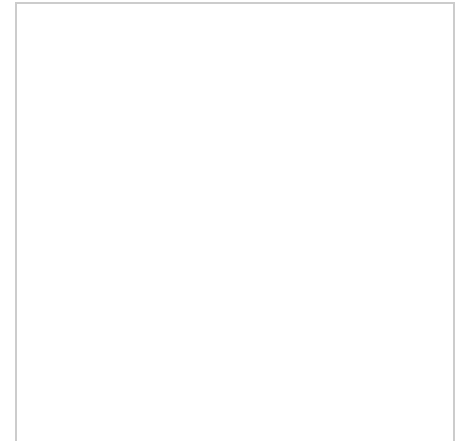
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