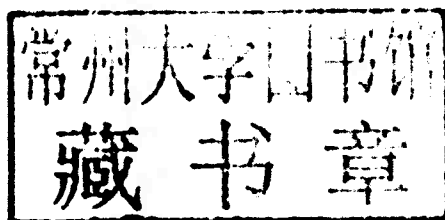


*ROMANTICISM AND
CARICATURE*

IAN HAYWOOD

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ROMANTICISM AND CARICATURE

Ian Haywood explores the 'Golden Age' of caricature through the close reading of key, iconic prints by artists including James Gillray, George and Robert Cruikshank and Thomas Rowlandson. This approach both illuminates the visual and ideological complexity of graphic satire and demonstrates how this art form transformed Romantic-era politics into a unique and compelling spectacle of corruption, monstrosity and resistance. New light is cast on major Romantic controversies including the 'revolution debate' of the 1790s, the impact of Thomas Paine's 'infidel' *Age of Reason*, the introduction of paper money and the resulting explosion of executions for forgery, the propaganda campaign against Napoleon, the revolution in Spain, the Peterloo massacre, the Queen Caroline scandal and the Reform Bill crisis. Overall, the volume offers important new insights into the relationship between art, satire and politics in a key period of history.

IAN HAYWOOD is Professor of English and Co-Director of the Centre for Research in Romanticism at the University of Roehampton. He co-edited, with John Seed, *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2012).

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To Sara and Ana

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Introduction: The Recording Angel

Caricaturing has reached its full maturity of perfection in this country; surely a land of freedom in Caricatures, as our Patriots, as well as Ministers and other eminent men, can *feelingly* testify. (J. P. Malcolm)¹

The political reformers have always been the first to appreciate the value of pictorial satire as an offensive weapon. (Thomas Wright)²

When it comes to caricature, the English are extremists ... (Baudelaire)³

The place is London Guildhall, the date is December 1817. In a packed courtroom holding around a thousand spectators, the radical publisher William Hone stands accused of committing criminal libel. His offence: to publish three religious parodies attacking political corruption and injustice. In a series of concurrent trials held over three days, each of these texts – *John Wilkes' Catechism*, *A Political Litany* and *The Sinecurists' Creed* – is separately prosecuted for blasphemy and in each case Hone is sensationally acquitted by special juries.⁴ What begins as a show trial against dissent is turned on its head and celebrated as a major victory for freedom of expression and the reform movement, a victory made all the more remarkable by the fact that an exhausted and sickly Hone mounts his own, laborious defence. What could have caused such a judicial and political upset?

The secret of Hone's success was his demonstration of the distinction between satirical target and method: drawing on all his experience as an autodidactic bibliophile and antiquarian publisher, Hone used many examples from literary history to demonstrate that it was perfectly justified to use the Bible as a satirical tool to ridicule and expose the shortcomings of a deserving target. Indeed, many of England's greatest writers had done exactly this, including Milton in *Paradise Lost*, and the technique was the stock-in-trade of religious and political controversies from Luther onwards. Hone's prosecutors had confused the means with the ends and mistaken the parodic vehicle for the parodic subject – it was politicians, not the scriptures that Hone's pamphlets (rightly) demeaned. Although the trial judges insisted that following 'bad examples' was no defence, and although Lord Chief Justice Ellenborough directed the jury to find Hone guilty, the verdict was a dramatic vindication of freedom of expression.⁵ Hone's intensive crash course in literary criticism provided irrefutable evidence of the inconsistency, double standards, obtuseness and political motivation of the government case.

Hone's triple acquittal is justly remembered as a milestone in the history of press freedom. His public display of erudition – backed up by formidable pile of books – was a highly symbolic mobilisation of the power of radical print culture. Yet one aspect of this defence, and possibly its most brilliant tactic, has received almost no serious critical attention. Though most of his sources were textual, Hone also brought into court a substantial cache of recent caricature prints.⁶ His stated reason for doing this was to show that caricatures also deployed rather than denigrated biblical and religious imagery, but the courtroom was a brilliant opportunity to showcase caricature's iconoclastic bravura and anti-authoritarian energies, even though none of the prints explicitly attacked the government.

The first exhibit was carefully chosen: *The Spiritual Barometer; or, The Scale and Progress of Sin and Death* is a parody of the evangelical spiritual thermometer or barometer whose title alludes to Milton's famous allegory of 'Satan, Sin and Death' from *Paradise Lost*.⁷ As Hone argued, the print's target was the familiar theme of overheated religious enthusiasm, and the fact that it was 'to be seen in every print shop in the Strand' (his own premises were in the adjacent Fleet Street) was the clearest evidence of the satire's public approval and assent.⁸ Hone's basic point was that no previous attempt had been made to suppress or prosecute either this print or any other flagrant caricature uses of religious parody, and this gave him the licence to unleash on the courtroom the two undisputed masters of 'graphic parodies', James Gillray and George Cruikshank.⁹ Gillray was the real ace in this visual pack: as Hone revealed with relish and punctilious detail, Gillray produced 'master-pieces' of religious parody such as *Apotheosis of Hoche* while in receipt of a secret government pension.¹⁰ The trial judge's retort – that Gillray's prints were indeed 'profane parodies', 'wicked publications' and 'offences'¹¹ – could not answer the charge of political bias and double standards: it seemed patently obvious that Gillray had been spared prosecution for being on the 'right side'. Hone probably knew that this was not the whole story and that caricature's unique immunity from prosecution derived from its volatile aesthetic and ideological makeup, its multiple ironies and its sheer embarrassment value (the fear of being laughed out of court seems to have deterred all serious thoughts of prosecution), but he was canny enough to keep the argument simple and exploit the opportunity to publicise the talents of Gillray's successor Cruikshank, a rising star who was also (conveniently) Hone's visual collaborator.¹² Cruikshank's best-known print to date, *Boney's Meditations on the Island of St Helena – or – The Devil Addressing the Sun* (1815), was exhibited as an example of Miltonic parody, though it was also a strongly 'patriotic' image that belied Cruikshank's liberal-radical leanings.¹³ Indeed, Cruikshank was so delighted with the publicity that the trial gave his work that he resumed his illustrations for Hone's planned *History of Parody*, a book that unfortunately never saw the light of day. Another collaborative project that failed to materialise was an illustrated account of the trial, a publication that would have reduplicated the occasion's synergies between satire, parody, radical print culture, spectacle and caricature.¹⁴

Cruikshank compensated for this loss with a series of caricature versions of the trial in which the arch-villain is Lord Chief Justice Ellenborough, the *bête noire* of

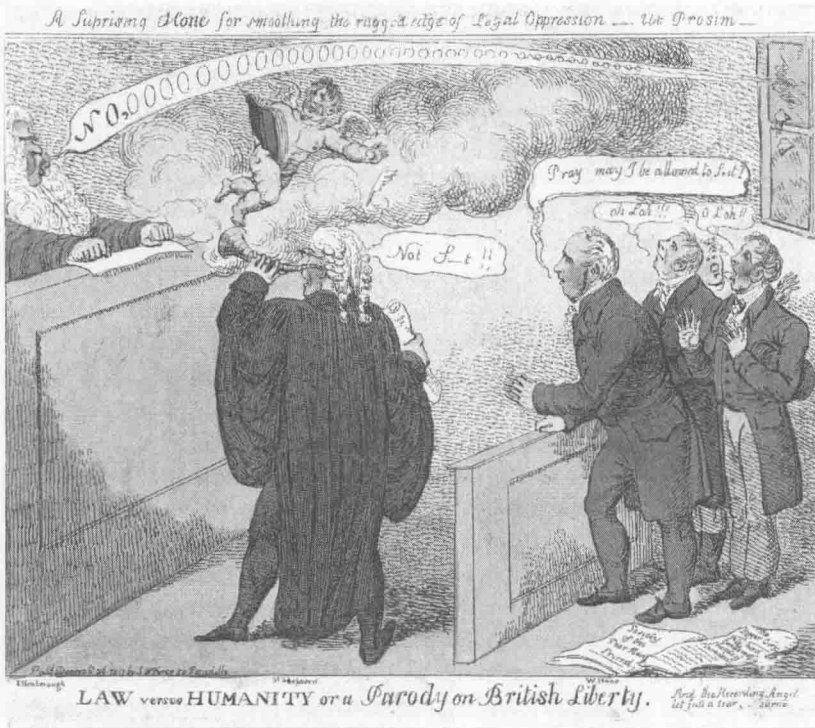


Figure 0.1. George Cruikshank, *Law versus Humanity; or a Parody on British Liberty* (December 1817)

the post-war radical movement.¹⁵ As things turned out, Ellenborough was so devastated by his humiliating defeat at the hands of the plebeian Hone that he declined into ill health and died within the year, but in the immediate wake of the trial he was the principal target of the caricaturist's ire. The most effective and engaging of the Cruikshank trial-prints is *Law versus Humanity; or a Parody on British Liberty*, which may have been intended as a frontispiece to the unrealised illustrated edition of the trials.¹⁶ Here Cruikshank shows a characteristic flair for combining Gillrayan, carnivalesque effects with a cogent use of textual allusion (Figure 0.1). Published within days of Hone's third acquittal (the crudeness of the design suggests that it was composed in a hurry),¹⁷ the print is a prolonged scatological joke that re-imagines the trial through the lens of an incident that allegedly occurred when Hone was first taken into custody in May 1817. As part of his defence, Hone told the court that he was treated extremely badly when he was arrested: despite the fact that he was 'retiring for the purposes of nature' he was bundled into a coach and taken to see Ellenborough at Westminster Hall. When Hone asked if he could sit down to relieve his discomfort, Ellenborough allegedly refused in such a loud voice that he 'might have been heard at the further end of the hall'.¹⁸ Cruikshank magnifies and

coalesces these incidents into a comically grotesque encounter between radical innocence and judicial inhumanity: not only do Ellenborough's words literally shatter the windowpanes at the back of the hall, but his deafening refusal is also witnessed by a recording angel who drops his pen in startled shock or disgust. The visionary clouds surrounding this very mature-looking putto provide the central comic touch to the scene, as they resemble a flatulent accompaniment to the verbal thunderbolt: only the judge has the right to 's[hi]t'. The trial is restaged as an infantile blast of authoritarian ego, reducing 'humanity' to a lavatorial 'parody' of civil liberties: Ellenborough is an almighty old fart, a windbag of bluster and malevolence. This carnivalesque power of caricature carries the force of deep-seated resistance to authority, 'the uninhibited person who shows his behind to the *Political Father*' in Roland Barthes' definition of textual pleasure.¹⁹ With hindsight, the falling pen of the angelic recorder carries an ominous chill, as if Ellenborough is being signed out of official history and handed over to the lethal imagination of the caricaturist.

Once the print is seen in this way, as an inverted Judgement Day rather than a frolicsome running of the familiar trope of radical martyrology, the angelic cloud begins to resemble a theatrical puff of diabolical smoke. What the print finally adds up to is an entertaining revenge fantasy: historical events are dismantled, reassembled and distorted through the lens of visual 'parody' and excess. And although the image functions autonomously as a slapstick encounter between political good and evil, its seemingly primitive satisfactions are deceptively complex. The print's subtitle, 'A Parody on British Liberty', clearly alludes to the main platform of Hone's defence and implies that Cruikshank was intentionally repeating Hone's blasphemous 'offence' in his own comic use of religious iconography. If the viewer has learned the correct lessons from Hone's courtroom lectures, he or she would know that the biblical allusion to the recording angel was a device to ridicule Ellenborough's lack of judicial credibility (habeas corpus being the equivalent of divine testament). Like Gillray, Cruikshank knew his Bible well.²⁰ Also like Gillray, Cruikshank knew English literature intimately: squashed into the bottom right-hand corner is a quotation from Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: 'And the Recording Angel let fall a tear, – stern[e]'. The literary allusion deepens the print's satirical dynamic as it brings into play an incident in Sterne's novel in which Uncle Toby insists that the wounded Lieutenant Fever 'shall not die by G—' if he is welcomed into the Shandy household. Sterne follows up this profanity with a mock-epic parody of the oath's divine reception:

The ACCUSING SPIRIT, which flew up to heaven's chancery with the oath, blushed as he gave it in; – and the RECORDING ANGEL, as he wrote it down, dropped a tear upon the word, and blotted it out for ever.²¹

By re-imagining the trials as a parodic 'heaven's chancery' in which Ellenborough is the misguided 'accusing spirit' who is 'blotting' his professional and legal copy-book, the intertextual allusion acts as a brilliant endorsement of Hone's literary methodology. But there is yet another dimension to this reference, as it is almost certain that

Cruikshank was alluding to Sterne indirectly though a 1791 Gillray print that used the whole of the quotation as its title.²² The intervocal richness of caricatures is often underestimated by critics, yet it is one of the key ways in which the satirical prints preserved, transmitted and mobilised historical memory. The 1791 print is a satirical attack on the Reverend Matthew William Peters, a minor artist who designed illustrations for major printsellers such as the Boydell brothers. Peters is depicted as the ‘accusing spirit’ who is handing a piece of paper to a glum-looking recording angel: on the paper is inscribed Uncle Toby’s oath ‘He shall not dye, by ***’. Seen in relation to *Law Versus Humanity*, the precise details of Peter’s biography are less important than the evocation of that tempestuous earlier decade in which the caricature ‘record’ of passing events became such an important feature of the political imagination and in which Pitt’s government conducted the first major offensive to suppress Romantic-era dissent. Moreover, certain details of the earlier print take on a more pronounced significance in the recast version: the insignificant scrap of paper in Gillray’s scene could be regarded as the implicit voice of resistance in Cruikshank’s reworking (Hone is the putative martyr of a government plot), and the quaint orthography for the word ‘dye’ is also surely a self-approbatory nod towards the visual medium.

The tearful recording angel is an appropriately unstable and ironic emblem of caricature’s public role as the people’s unofficial ‘chancery’: the seemingly high-minded, dutiful ‘blotting’ out of wicked reputations and offences is an impressive feature of the ‘Golden Age’ of visual satire, but this mission is nearly always realised through forms of character assassination, setting ‘low’ visual pleasures alongside ‘high’ cultural reference, and an indulgence in the genre’s unprecedented aesthetic freedoms that constantly push modes of representation to the point of ‘extraordinary graphic hyperbole’.²³ Caricature is certainly a ‘record’ of Romantic political history, but it realises this documentation through its own unique talents and pleasures. For Leigh Hunt’s radical newspaper the *Examiner*, this ‘mixture of notorious matter of fact and emblematical allusion’ enabled satirical prints to ‘move the heart in the cause of liberty’.²⁴ But even if the explicit link between caricature and progressive politics is not as secure as some Romantic radicals believed (many prints, after all, attacked the reform movement), there is still a powerful mischief-making appeal in graphic satire’s ability to transform political events into grotesque and absurd spectacle. The methodology of caricature is premised on a demotic disrespect for public image and a suspicion of the ‘official’ version of events. As Marcus Wood puts it, ‘in popular political satire anything might be joined with anything else’.²⁵

As this book hopes to show, somewhere near the heart of caricature’s proliferating layers of intertextual and intervocal meaning is the self-reflexive ‘signature’ of the caricaturist, a visual imprint of the point at which history passes over into fantasy and phantasia through the transforming agency of the satirical imagination.²⁶ In *Law versus Humanity* this figure is the recording angel, a comic symbol of divine intervention and sublime authority whose facial features have more than a suggestion of Cruikshank about them. Indeed, by dropping his pen, the angel could be yielding the field of representation and the historical ‘record’ to the ‘pencil’ (meaning the