

The Practice of Caricature in Eighteenth-Century Britain

For historians of eighteenth-century culture “caricature” is a difficult word and its different, overlapping senses remain the cause of some confusion. On the one hand, we increasingly employ “caricature” to denote *any* satirical print of the period, without special regard to its dominant visual mode. In this sense, when we speak of “a caricature” we identify a particular type of object: a single sheet etching. On the other hand, caricature also retains that more specialized meaning as an art of physiognomic exaggeration and distortion; in the Italian, *carico* means “to load” or “to charge,” an etymology readily captured in the French term *portrait-charge*. It is caricature in this latter sense that I am interested here: as a technique, a practice, and a mode of charged portraiture. The past twenty years or so have witnessed a veritable explosion of scholarship on graphic satire of the eighteenth century, and Douglas Fordham and Adrienne Albright offer an excellent survey of these developments and the concerns and contestations that continue to catalyze them in their Literature Compass article “The Eighteenth-Century Print: Tracing the Counters of a Field.” By contrast, but I hope also as a complement to that overview, this present essay aims to review scholarship that has grappled with such questions as: What is caricature and how do we recognize it? Why caricature? How does caricature make itself felt within the hierarchies of eighteenth-century British culture? When and why does it emerge in Britain as a dominant mode of visual satire? What, in this cultural matrix, is its politics, if it can be said to have a politics at all? And can we speak of caricature as a verbal practice as much as a graphic one? The scholarly conversation in which these questions have been posed has unfolded only gradually, and while my emphasis here ultimately is on more recent contributions to the field I also give space to a consideration of much older work, namely because some of caricature’s most significant critical interlocutors are also its earliest.

1. In search of a theory of caricature

The history and function of caricature has been the subject of some discussion since the beginning of the nineteenth century, most notably in J. P. Malcolm's *An Historical Sketch of the Art of Caricaturing* (1813), but the first meaningful attempt to approach a theory of caricature was Ernst Gombrich's and Ernst Kris's 1938 essay "The Principles of Caricature." Gombrich and Kris were especially interested in how psychoanalysis might reinvigorate the study of art and art history and in their article, which built on earlier investigations by Kris (1936), they began by asking why caricature makes such a late appearance in the Western art (the painter Annibale Carracci is usually credited with having created the first caricatures in the latter part of the sixteenth century). Their answer was essentially twofold. First, in post-Renaissance Italy the intellectual appeal of an Aristotelian notion of mimesis weakened considerably and aesthetic value came to be defined less by how closely an artist represented reality and more by how a work of art approximated an artist's psyche. In other words, the emphasis shifted towards ideas, essences, and subjectivities and this in turn facilitated an embrace of precisely the kind of "infantile pleasure" renewed by caricature (338), which Gombrich and Kris saw to be quintessentially primitive and aggressive. Second, they contended that caricature only became a cultural possibility once belief in image-magic faded; before this moment, to distort the pictorial representation of a face was actually to harm, to strike at, that face. The logic of image-magic would hold caricature to be a matter of injury rather than play (339). But, argued Gombrich and Kris, the efficacy of caricature nonetheless depends on the residual purchase of such belief, for the caricaturist is truly successful only if the way we see his or her target is irrevocably transformed.

I've elaborated the theory Gombrich and Kris advance in some detail because it provides a central reference point for all subsequent studies of caricature, though Gombrich would later move towards an understanding of caricature's emergence grounded more in the

history of expression than in psychology (Gombrich 1960). By the late 1960s, critical attention had turned to the ideology of caricature, or, more specifically, of *political* caricature. Against the backdrop of Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement, the question now became: what political effect can caricature really have? Lawrence Streicher, who looked to the work of Walter Benjamin for inspiration, posited that caricature's function is to debunk, to deprive the original of its "aura," and that it performs this action in ways that pit it directly against the kinds of "prestige inflation" at which mass production aims (Streicher 1967, 433). Of course, the problem with a theory such as this one is that it sacrifices sensitivity to the particular exigencies of a given political landscape in its reach towards the appealingly universal. As W. A. Coupe maintained, caricature is an historically and culturally contingent practice; its practitioners react to a highly precise set of political issues and agencies, and an all-encompassing theory of it is therefore neither desirable nor possible. With this important qualification in place, Coupe offered two general observations. Responding to Gombrich and Kris, he suggested that caricature was the inevitable consequence of the "culmination of the realistic portraiture" (Coupe 1969, 86-7), and in reply to Streicher he noted that caricature might best be seen not as counter-hegemonic tool but rather as a political safety valve that helps through its humour to release escalating tensions and ease anxieties, thus allowing debate to continue. This latter argument (also made in Sherry 1978) is a compelling one, for it counter-intuitively suggests that caricature might well serve the forces of political conservatism rather than, as we tend to assume, those of critique and resistance.

By the 1980s such questions about caricature were beginning to emerge in scholarship expressly concerned with the graphic satire of Georgian Britain. In his essay "The Private Comedy of Thomas Rowlandson" (1983), for instance, John Barrell invoked Gombrich's and Kris's contention that caricature bespeaks the security of both the artist and the artist's public

to suggest that Thomas Rowlandson's ribald images of rural life occupied the space of the private, both materially and discursively, and therefore stood apart from and could comfortably exist alongside exactly the polite protocols of public life that they seemed to contravene. In *Caricatures and Constitution, 1760-1832* (1986) H. T. Dickinson asked what effect caricature – by which he meant *all* satirical prints – had on public opinion in the period and also noted the difficulty that caricaturists faced when they tried to represent something other than the individual, such as larger political structures. Other studies sought to think in more precisely formal terms about caricature. In an article of 1983 Robert L. Patten considered the “conventions” of caricature in the period, noting especially the lessons it learned about physiognomy and facial expression from the works of Charles Le Brun and Johann Kasper Lavater, as well as theories of acting, while in an essay of 1987 James Sherry offered a taxonomy of eighteenth-century caricature by distinguishing its four modes: portrait caricature (for instance, the macaroni prints produced by Matthew and Mary Darly in the 1770s); satiric caricature (e.g. James Gillray); comic caricature (e.g. Henry Bunbury); and grotesque caricature. For Ronald Paulson, however, the grotesque was *the* defining feature of late-eighteenth-century caricature. In the final chapter of *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)* (1983) he traced the period's association of the grotesque with artistic and political freedoms and argued that, as a mode that legislated an eschewal of the formal rules of art, the grotesque practised by caricaturists such as Gillray represented a pictorial response at a deep structural level to the abiding spirit of the French Revolution. For all its careful historical adjudications, Paulson's understanding of caricature in terms of release (sometimes libidinous, sometimes violent, always revolutionary) suggests just how indebted scholarship remains to Gombrich's and Kris's psychoanalytical elaboration of caricature's procedures.

2. Modernity, caricature, and cultural politics

The past twenty years have seen the publication of a number of major critical studies of late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century caricature (Donald 1996, Gatrell 2006, Rauser 2008, Porterfield 2011, Kremers and Reich 2014), as well as books dealing with the depiction of London in caricature (Bills 2006), with caricature's embodiments of the nation (Hunt 2003), with the caricaturing of specific public figures (Robinson 1996, Baker 2005 and 2007, and Clayton and O'Connell 2015), and with three of the period's major caricaturists: Gillray (Godfrey 2001), Rowlandson (Phagan 2011), and Richard Newton (Alexander 1998). In different ways, each of these studies either tells or relies upon the familiar historical narrative of caricature's progress: first of its arrival in Britain in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, having been brought over by grand tourists who'd encountered *caricatura* in Italy, principally in the work of Pier Leone Ghezzi (see Hillier 1970); then of the aristocrat George Townshend, who in the 1750s took what was an elite and behind-closed-doors practice and employed it for the first time in political prints (see Donald 1983 and Atherton 1985); and finally of graphic satire's full embrace of caricature in the 1780s. Yet, while few would quibble with these broad outlines both the finer details of this story and, more especially, the cultural politics of caricature's emergence are matters of significant debate.

The most contentious issue concerns the manner in which this newer tradition of caricature superseded an older (and supposedly opposing) one of emblematic graphic satire that made political figures, groups, and events known by means of a language of symbols, ciphers, and motifs. In *English Political Caricature: A Study of Opinion and Propaganda* (1959), M. Dorothy George presented this shift as a fairly straightforward matter of historical succession, of one pictorial mode supplanting another (1: 147), though by the 1980s there were already calls to see the two traditions as more complexly intertwined (Godfrey 1984, 11). Diana Donald gives the issue special attention in her landmark monograph *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (1996). Noting that graphic satire tends to get caught, or lost, in the interstices between art history and social or political

history, Donald challenges the politics of style that underwrites conventional accounts of the triumph of caricature, and of naturalism, over emblematic and seeks to recuperate the latter as an “art of the excluded” (51). For her, emblematic was a language that had its roots in the politics of the street, as evidenced in the emblematic play of Wilkesite prints of the 1760s; the displacement of this aesthetic in favour of caricature by the close of the century signals, for Donald, “the growing estrangement of popular and polite culture” (74). Yet this thesis was itself swiftly challenged by Eirwin Nicholson, whose essay ‘Emblem v. Caricature: A Tenacious Conceptual Framework’ (1996a) charges Donald with perpetuating the very linear historical model she claims to be revising and offers a critique of Donald’s mapping of social class on to visual mode. Why, asks Nicholson, do we regard the emblematic as a retrograde visual mode? The answer, she suggests, is that we inherit this bias from the eighteenth century itself, whose whiggish cultural arbiters militated against the emblem because they feared its ambiguity, polysemous character, and lack of transparency.

For all Nicholson’s concern – and also efforts to identify a coherent pan-European tradition of caricature that begins with Leonardo da Vinci (McPhee and Orenstein 2011) – Amelia Rauser offers a conceptually ambitious defence, and further elaboration, of such teleological history in her book *Caricature Unmasked: Irony, Authenticity, and Individualism in Eighteenth-Century English Prints* (2008). Drawing upon and extending the thesis advanced in Dror Wahrman’s *The Making of the Modern Self* (2004), Rauser insists that the “rise” of caricature in Britain was “a consequence of the emergence of the modern self” and that caricature was indeed “a technology for representing this new self” (15). She argues that the key, transitional moment at which the typological mode of emblematic gave way to caricature can be fairly precisely located to the 1770s, when the American War eroded the efficacy of established forms of political rhetoric and gave urgency to the need for a new and “natural” language. Such a language was found, Rauser contends, in the body and the private self: caricature heralded a new episteme in which the “individual was now the standard of

truth rather than the type” (93). This is a compelling argument to the extent that it recovers the grand narrative of caricature’s arrival precisely by attending to rather than neglecting caricature’s complex embeddedness within a much larger cultural constellation. Yet it raises the questions of both how far the body is ever accepted as a “natural” signifier and how this conception of caricature fits with the allusive, typological texture of much late Georgian graphic satire. And like any thesis that identifies a specific epistemic juncture, *Caricature Unmasked* necessarily makes itself vulnerable to the citation of earlier examples and contemporaneous counter-examples.

Of course, the emergence of caricature has other cultural implications. For one, its coming did not mean that satirical prints ceased to be laden with texts of various kinds, and David Bindman (1996) and Nicholson (2004) have explored the relationship between caricature and graphic satire’s pronounced verbiage at some length. Equally, Shearer West (1999) has considered the practice of caricature in terms of the shifting symbolic value of deformity in the period. And the ways in which women interacted with this culture of caricature have also received attention. Cindy McCreery’s *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Eighteenth-Century England* (2004) reminds us not only that women across the social spectrum were subject to caricature in the period but also that a number of upper-class women are known to have practiced it, at least in the privacy of their own homes. Through the reading of Maria Edgeworth’s 1801 novel *Belinda*, the plot of which in part hinges on the fallout of one woman’s caricaturing of another, David Francis Taylor (2014) has considered the gendering of caricature as a “masculine” discourse and practice, one that in the eighteenth-century made use of the female body as an index of national or constitutional well-being.

The most important and vexed questions remain those of caricature’s audience and, concomitantly, its position in relation to the cultural and political hegemonies of the day. In reading the movement from emblematic to caricature as one of cultural contraction and the

relegation of popular politics Donald counters the notion, most fully articulated by Charles Press (1977), that the emergence of caricature as an aesthetic rendered graphic satire more immediately and widely comprehensible, an argument with which Nicholson (1996b) also forcefully takes issue. Along similar lines, recent critics have repeatedly dismissed the long-held view of caricature as inherently oppositional (see George 1959). In *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (1993), Marcia Pointon argues that formal portraiture and caricature ought not be seen as dichotomous but rather as modes “situated along a single axis” (93) that were consumed by the same well-to-do clientele; John Barrell (2008) notes the telling absence of radical caricature in the 1790s; Todd Porterfield (2011) calls on us to question the “ethical goodness” of caricature; and in *The City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (2006), which points to the scatological humour of caricature to counter the historiography of Georgian “politeness,” Vic Gatrell reads satirical prints as exercises in the kind of carnivalesque transgression described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), but gives short shrift to the idea that caricature might in any way be subversive. Yet, despite both the weight of these arguments and also the evidence that shows many politicians and royals to have purchased the very caricatures that mocked them, the understanding of caricature as something that in its very nature defies or even short-circuits the logic of hegemony nonetheless persists. Heather McPherson (2003) encourages us to regard eighteenth-century caricature as “*imago populi*,” as a “counter-discourse” that challenged the prevailing hierarchy of cultural production, while Ian Haywood’s *Romanticism and Caricature* (2013) remains committed to a reading of caricature as a fundamentally popular aesthetic, the “carnavalesque power” of which – *contra* Gatrell – “carries the force of deep-seated resistance to authority” (4).

And if caricature’s coming continues to be a source of scholarly disagreement, so too is its going. The orthodox account that caricature in the tradition of Gillray and the Cruikshanks went into terminal decline in the 1830s, as the abrasive contours of etching gave

way to the soft tones of lithography and Georgian license gave way to Victorian prudery (see George 1959, Kunzle 1983), is now a matter of dispute. On the one hand, Gatrell (2006) has recently offered a new version of this narrative, one that emphasizes the importance of King George IV's purchasing, at considerable cost, of satirists' silence in the 1820s (530-46). On the other hand, Brian Maidment contends in *Comedy, Caricature, and the Social Order, 1820-50* (2013) that respectability did not simply triumph and that caricature in fact played a vital role in early Victorian culture even as the single-plate satirical print disappeared.

3. Caricature beyond the satirical print

Up to this point I have dealt with scholarship that is concerned with caricature as it appears in graphic satire. But, of course, in the eighteenth century the practice of caricature was also to be found on the stage, in poetry, and in prose fiction; as a mode of satire it was (and is) highly mobile, permeating a variety of media. At root, this insight is far from new. Long ago, Jean H. Hagstrum (1972) argued that the poetry of John Dryden and Alexander Pope excelled in caricature; such verse satirists were adept, he maintained, at producing portraits in which "resemblance remains intact while the representation distorts to achieve satirical meaning" (189). Robert Adams Day (1981), Byron Gassman (1985), and Elizabeth Kraft (1992) have all discussed the satirical texture of Tobias Smollett's fiction in terms of caricature (the latter again drawing on the work of Kris). At the level of methodology, Vincent Carretta's *George III and the Satirists from Hogarth to Byron* (1990) elicited the relays between textual and graphic satire by insisting that they be considered within the same analytical bracket. And, within the field of theatre history, Leo Hughes (1984) has pointed to the abundance of caricature on the early eighteenth-century stage, most especially in the plays of Henry Fielding.

Provocatively, if with little supporting evidence, both Hagstrum and Hughes posit that caricature *moves* from poetry and the theatre into the graphic arts, with the latter contending that this shift was in part a symptom of the 1737 Licensing Act. Though this suggestion has still to be engaged with, the past decade has nonetheless seen exciting critical efforts to rethink how caricature was practiced on the eighteenth-century stage and in the eighteenth-century novel. Jim Davis's *Comic Acting and Portraiture in Late-Georgian and Regency England* (2015) considers the cross-fertilization between styles of comic acting and comic painting in the period. For Davis, the connection between low comedy and caricature was a deep and dynamic one: the comic actor John Bannister was a friend of Rowlandson's, while the comedian Charles Mathews possessed a library that included prints by Hogarth and Gillray, as well as volumes of Lavater's work on physiognomy. Similarly, recent scholarship on British romanticism offers a more nuanced understanding of verbal kinds of portraiture. Christopher Rovee (2006) finds caricature in Burney's fiction and Edmund Burke's speeches (54-9), while Joe Bray (2016) regards caricature as an especially sophisticated type of portrait and contends that the supposedly "anti-Jacobin" novels of Jane West and Elizabeth Hamilton deploy it as a strategy of ideological evasion in much the same way that James Gillray's wilfully polysemous images frustrate the possibility of coherent interpretation.

In two essays Mary-Céline Newbould has looked at Laurence Sterne as a caricaturist. The first (2009) uses a close reading of Richard Newton's illustrations to *A Sentimental Journey* to suggest how the registers of sentimental naturalism and of caricature sit beside one another in Sterne's book in ways that entwine pathos and comedy. Newbould's second article (2013), meanwhile, concerns the language of caricature in *Tristram Shandy* and approaches a more nuanced conception of caricature's discursive effects by observing Sterne's modulated his use of it, at some points for purposes of derision and at others to evoke a more generous-spirited humour. What Newbould doesn't trouble is the binary of caricature and character, an opposition she openly borrows from Fielding's preface to *Joseph*

Andrews, where, it should be said, it is invoked to very specific ends. For Newbould, that is, and also implicitly for the many other scholars who have written about verbal caricature, character is an operation or effect of mimesis while caricature is an operation or effect of distortion.

There are two exceptions here. The first is Deidre Lynch's *The Economy of Character* (1998), which offers an extended discussion of Hogarth's campaign against caricature (56-70). Importantly, Lynch pits herself against exactly the "rise of the modern subject" thesis subsequently endorsed by the likes of Rauser and argues instead that the later eighteenth-century move towards a culture in which readers looked for depth and complexity in fictional characters ought to be understood in terms of newly commercialized social practices and interactions. In this context, Lynch reads Hogarth's insistence that he dealt in characters not caricatures as an anxious response to a profit-oriented industry that pushed useless over-particularity at the expense of general truth, on the one hand, and, on the other, to caricature as an indulgent practice that bespoke an aristocratic disregard for the dictates of the marketplace and aesthetic value. Yet, for Lynch, this ambivalence mutated the more Hogarth grappled with it. Ten years after his print *Characters and Caricaturas* (1743), which explored the 'fine line' between these polarized categories, the plates in *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) show a new recognition that "Caricature, far from being the antithesis of character, may be read as its extension" (69). The second exception, Jane Stabler's pioneering article "Jane Austen and Caricature" (2007), advances a similar insight but does so through a nuanced analysis of Austen's fiction. Striving to move beyond D. W. Harding's (1968) hard and fast distinction between the characters (Elizabeth Bennett, say, or Mr Knightly) and the caricatures (Mr Collins or Miss Bates) of Austen's novels, Stabler calls for a "more mobile definition of *caricature* as a condition stage in characterization" (2). Through a sequence of careful readings, she argues that Austen shows caricature to be not the inverse of character

but rather a vital part of “realistic characterization” in that it distills the fictional subject in the grammar of momentary postures or expressions (15).

Such interventions suggest the cogency, and necessity, of interdisciplinary approaches to caricature, precisely because in the eighteenth century the practice of caricature traversed different media. The new and ever-expanding digital archives at our disposal furnish us with an unprecedented opportunity both to look at caricature prints and to bring diverse genres, modes, and media into meaningful comparative relation. Can we, for instance, locate convergences between caricature and parody as equivalent and perhaps overlapping modes of distortion? In terms of the satirical print, how might we describe the relations between the equally prevalent practices of physiognomic exaggeration and cultural allusion? And in terms of the poem, play, novel, or political polemic, how far were their strategies of characterization shaped by the circulation of caricatures by the likes of Gillray and Rowlandson? What if “the golden age of caricature” often seen to span 1770 to 1820 were to become a way of thinking about moment in literary history as much in art history? As we learn to make better use of the new resources at our disposal, the challenge we face is not only to develop critical studies of eighteenth-century caricature that think in more rigorously intermedial terms but also to explore the ways in which we might find in practices of caricature a prism through which to trace the deep intermediality of the period’s culture.

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