Selected Sources


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*The Lewis Walpole Library*

154 Main Street Farmington, CT

Yale
From the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 until the end of the Reign of Terror in France in 1794, British responses to the Revolution were varied and evolving, but almost always highly intense. Graphic satires and political pamphlets played important roles in the lively debate that surrounded the events in France. This exhibition seeks to demonstrate the intersection of two kinds of responses: prints that depict the brutality and depravity of the Revolution, on the one hand, and on the other, pamphlets and satires that deal with political divisions in Britain itself. The title of this exhibition is taken from the print by James Gillray (1792, 792.12.21.04+) that reverses the perceived meaning of freedom and slavery as it juxtaposes “French Liberty” (that is, squalor and violence) with “British Slavery” (luxury and plenty). Gillray’s print abridges the revolutionary situation by reducing it to a stark division between France and England, between poverty and riches, wretched vice and prospering virtue. The prints in this exhibition that show the decadence and violence of the Revolution are similarly reductive, and often condense the Assemblée nationale and the complex structure of revolutionary constituents to a mob of coarse and violent sans-culottes. If one were to judge the French Revolution by these images, it would seem to have taken place solely in Paris, and Paris would seem to have been a site of unending massacre.

But there is another element at play in the visual representations of the prints, as well as in the written accounts in the pamphlets. A portion of this exhibition is devoted to pamphlets written by British political and religious thinkers as well as to caricatures printed in response to them. This material demonstrates that the elements that led to these reductive representations were actually multifaceted debates on patriotism and citizens’ rights, and were affected by the political lens through which British thinkers viewed the Revolution. Revolution and regicide could only bring back memories of Britain’s Glorious Revolution in 1688 and the regicide of King Charles I in 1649. In addition, the eruption of the French Revolution in 1789 coincided with Britain’s own monarchical anxieties, the Regency Crisis, revolving around King George III’s illness and inability to rule. Even Burke’s explosive pamphlet against the Revolution, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), was a response to Richard Price’s pro-Revolutionary sermon rather than simply an analysis of the Revolution itself. Burke’s pamphlet led to a chain of responses on both sides of the debate, including pamphlets by Thomas Paine, the Earl of Stanhope, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others. The exhibition also seeks to portray public and private responses to these pamphlets. Not only is Dr. Price’s sermon on view, but caricatures of the major figures in the debate on the Revolution: Burke, Price, and Paine. Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) may also be found here, together with the manuscript of the letter in which Horace Walpole famously calls her a “hyena in petticoats.”

The exhibition concludes with the consolidation of an all-but-official British position against the French Revolution. While the legacy of English liberty initially inclined the British public to sympathize with the French struggle for liberté, by 1793 the execution of Louis XVI and the beginning of the Terror caused the tide of public opinion to turn. By 1796, gag laws such as the Treasonable Actions Act and the Sedition Acts were in place. These, as much as revulsion against the progress of the Revolution itself, went far to ensure that displays of radical sympathy with Jacobinism in England were silenced.