

Next-Door Neighbours: Contrast and Caricature in the early 1790s

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Abstract

The ‘contrast’ image, such as those produced by Rowlandson or Gillray, are staples for any student of British responses to the French Revolution. By the autumn of 1792, Britain was for the most part experiencing a conservative backlash, as the September massacres, the declaration of the French republic and the decisive French victory at the battle of Valmy brought the threat of war or the export of revolution closer to home. These contrast images, therefore, provided black-and-white (or sometimes gloriously technicolour) depictions of English virtue, stability, dignity and liberty versus French excesses, violence, irreligion and Terror.

The article argues that prior to the events of 1792, British caricature was ensconced in the language and signifiers of debate rather than stark contrast, as evidenced by a sustained recourse to the dialogue pamphlet. Whilst this conversational format was a traditional one, often used to iron out debates between different classes or professions, in the early 1790s it took on a particularly cross-Channel character. In the dialogues between English and French national stereotypes, which take place in textual caricature but are also marked out and negotiated in visual satire, we see not only a forerunner of the contrast model but also contemporary enthusiasm for a dialogue between England and France.

Using Elizabeth Inchbald’s 1791 comedy *Next-Door Neighbours* as a signifier of this cultural nuance, the article suggests that textual caricature could articulate a blurring of lines and boundaries which was unique to the early revolutionary period. *Next-Door Neighbours* has much in common with the contrast print but, like the conversation pamphlet, it also radicalises the depiction of opposites by allowing an interaction between them and, more importantly, an eventual upheaval of their respective states.

Keywords: Inchbald, contrast, caricature, conversation, pamphlet, French Revolution, loyalist, radical