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The Royal Shambles (1816): Hiding Republicanism in Plain Sight

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In August 1816, an obscure London bookseller named William Hone, who traded from small premises at 55 Fleet Street, published a visual print entitled *The Royal Shambles or the Progress of Legitimacy & Reestablishment of Religion & Social Order -!!! -!!!*.¹ A detail from the print serves as this chapter's opening 'quotation,' with the whole image reproduced over the page.

The sheet, measuring 21.8 centimetres high and 55 centimetres long, was drawn by the leading caricaturist of the day, George Cruikshank, who was both a personal friend and business collaborator of Hone, who as publisher commissioned the work and guided the print's content. *The Royal Shambles* exists in two different states: uncoloured and hand-coloured. The price of a coloured sheet seems to have fluctuated between three and four shillings. An uncoloured sheet is reproduced in this essay. A study-quality copy of the image is available on the website of the British Museum.² *The Royal Shambles* was one of about 20,000 satirical or humorous visual prints produced in London during the years between 1770 and 1830. Taken as a whole, these visual prints testify to a remarkably vibrant culture of political polemic and invective which pulled no punches in terms of challenging good taste, social graces and sexual propriety.³

The Royal Shambles is a burlesque parody of the celebration which took place in Paris on 8 July 1816 on the anniversary of the occupation of the city by Louis XVIII.⁴ It is a satire against royalism in France and the role played by England and its allies in securing the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. Unlike most of the British political nation, which welcomed the defeat of Napoleon and the end of the war, Hone was evidently unhappy at the return of the Bourbons. *The Royal Shambles* is an explicit attack on the political settlement in France, but, it will be suggested, it also hides in plain sight a desire for the rebirth of the French Republic, in a format sensitive to the dangers of censorship.

In the print, King Louis XVIII processes through the capital on a cannon inscribed with the words *Jure Divino*. The pageant is led by monks, and followed by acolytes, and the cannon is drawn along by the Duke of Wellington in military attire. The procession tramples on the prostrate bodies of men, women and children: the people of France. Wellington plants the spiked sole of his jack-boot on the head of a prostrate man. Louis grasps Wellington's sword and is told by the Duke: 'Hold fast & never fear – but if you let go my sward you'll fall *head fore most*.' Behind the cannon comes an ass inscribed with the word 'Legitimacy', which carries the two nephews of Louis XVIII and their wives. An 'Odour of Sanctity' emanates from the rear of the animal. The route of the procession is flanked by soldiers with crosses and priests with bayonets. All but one of the civilians standing at the back shouts not 'Vive le Roi' but 'Vive l'oie', or 'long live the goose'. The vast majority of 'the people' are at the front of the print: dead or dying.

The woman standing between the cannon and the ass is identified in the print as Madame Pleignier. During the procession of 8 July 1816, she had petitioned Louis XVIII to spare her husband, Jacques, who had been sentenced to death for his part in a plot to seize Paris, overthrow the monarchy and invite Napoleon Bonaparte back to the capital.⁵ The poor unfortunates being mutilated and executed on the raised ground behind the procession represent those like Jacques Pleignier and his comrades who were decapitated at the Place de Justice on 27 July 1816 after having their right hands cut off. In this print, the word 'shambles' has a deliberate double meaning. It can be taken to refer to the confused, disorderly and shambolic nature of the royal procession but also to the 'shambles': a noxious, unpleasant area within a city where fish were gutted and animals were killed and slaughtered. Pleignier and his comrades were only a fraction of the total number of French former citizens who would die as subjects in this royal shambles.

However, *The Royal Shambles* goes beyond expressing an unpatriotic dissatisfaction with Britain's role in imposing a monarchical settlement on France. The vignette consisting of five soldiers in the top right-hand corner of the print seems to pine for the return of the French Republic. These men, one officer and four soldiers, wear the uniforms of the defeated army of Napoleon. They are dejected and down-cast, and a broken cannon lies in front of them. This piece of ordinance may represent Bonaparte's fortunes: he began his military career as an artillery officer.

One soldier holds erect a furled tricolour flag surmounted by that quintessential symbol of the Revolution: a Cap of Liberty. The officer, on the left, addresses this man: 'Unfurl that Banner & to the right about face!' The soldier answers: 'Not time yet!' The other three say to each other:

Have we no *men* in France?

— No they all died with ye Republic!

— Who is that dragging the [----]?

— He is of a Nation that once put their Tyrant to death but they *forget!*

The '[----]' refers to the king, although this could always be denied in court. The man dragging the king is, of course, the Duke of Wellington. Wellington was born in Ireland, but the comment that 'He is of a nation that once put their Tyrant to death' is evidently intended to refer to England in particular, or Britain in general. The tyrant put to death by the British must surely be read as a reference to Charles I, executed in 1649. This scene on the hill is a favourable comment on regicide in British history, a statement of regret for the loss of the Republic in

France, and a hope that it will be reborn in time. The shouts of '*vive l'oie*' – (long live the goose) – give a hint of how that rebirth is to be achieved: geese were usually harvested by bringing a blade down upon their necks. This explains why Wellington warns Louis that British military forces prevent him falling '*head fore most*'. It is not accidental that at the centre and top of the print, above all the squalid slaughter of the royal shambles, stands Madame La Guillotine: clean, quiet and supremely effective. The basket in front of the machine waits to be filled. The shambles of 1816 consists of those being killed by kings. At some point in the future – 'Not time yet!' – the tide will turn.

This reading of *The Royal Shambles* contradicts everything that we think we know about William Hone and his politics. Hone played a minor role in the struggle for the reform of Parliament during the 1810s, but was catapulted to national prominence in December 1817 by the decision of the Attorney General to try him for blasphemous libel for publishing three parodies of the Anglican liturgy which attacked the corruption, venality and cruelty of the government. Hone faced three trials on three consecutive days, and on each occasion his rousing speeches to the jury (which have been described by E. P. Thompson as among the best ever made in an English court) convinced them to acquit him.⁶ This unprecedented defeat for the authorities meant that he became the most prominent polemicist in favour of Reform in England. Between 1818 and 1821 his satires and squibs sold in their tens of thousands.

The modern literature on Hone presents him as a sensible, moderate radical – a reformer – who actively eschewed violence.⁷ Hone's polemics are consistently placed within a constitutionalist idiom which condemned current abuses but tended to place the blame on one person or a small clique of ministers and implied that the system could be successfully reformed once this person or clique had been removed from power. Hone was certainly at pains to stress his moderation and reasonableness in both his public utterances and private correspondence. It is natural to assume that this position represents Hone's actual politics, and it would go too far to see him as a violent republican, but there are occasions when one can detect decidedly radical undertones in his work, and he consciously adopted particular forms of publication in order to circumvent punishment by the state.

During this period even moderate, peaceful reformers were often subject to harsh penalties. One of the reasons that Hone confined his condemnation of the settlement in France to a visual print must surely have been the traditionally wide degree of latitude given to these items, partly because of the high social status of those expected to purchase such expensive items, but also due to the

difficulty of proving the transgressive nature of any print or portion of a print. A defendant could always argue that: a prosecutor had read a meaning into a print which was never intended to be there; a particularly grotesque rendering of an individual was not actually intended to represent that individual; or that an objectionable idea simply represented the thoughts of those drawn in the print.

In 1817, Hone mistakenly calculated that attacking the government through printed parodies of the Anglican liturgy would protect him from prosecution. At exactly that time a government rattled by recession and economic unrest was anxious to teach the radical press a lesson, and Hone was carefully selected for punishment because it was believed that it could be suggested that his offences were not against the government, but against God and the Church. It is intriguing, though, that in court Hone expressed bewilderment that he had been prosecuted because, he argued, parodies were as old as printing itself, and there had never been a prosecution for parody in an English court.⁸ The absence of any previous prosecution in connection with a parody must have been a factor in determining his decision to deploy this genre against the government during that very dangerous year.

Between 1818 and 1821, Hone collaborated with Cruikshank to produce a series of wonderfully comic satires against the regime in Britain. Many of these best-selling squibs aped the form, look and language of children's rhymes, stories and songs. This was at least partly to render ridiculous any potential prosecution: what rational person could possibly take offence at childish rhymes and ditties? A key example, *The Man in the Moon* of 1820, blends together a host of influences from popular chapbooks, ballads, songs, lullabies, catches and rhymes.⁹ It is ostensibly nothing more than a witty satire against the Prince Regent. There is nothing particularly seditious about the pamphlet until one reads the two epigrams at the start of the text in their original context. The first, on the title-page itself, is from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Act III, Scene I, when the Roman official Caius Lucius informs the British King Cymbeline that he has not paid the necessary yearly tribute to his Overlord, Caesar. Cymbeline's son Cloten speaks the words quoted by Hone – 'if Caesar can hide the Sun with a blanket, or put the Moon in his pocket, we will pay him tribute for light' – as a way of asserting that his father should refrain from prostrating himself before the tyrant. Cymbeline then asserts that it is fitting for a 'warlike people, whom we reckon/Ourselves to be' to throw off Roman tyranny, and draws encouragement from the other peoples of the Roman Empire who 'for/Their liberties are now in arms.'

The theme of armed resistance to tyranny is continued in the second of the epigrams quoted at the start of *The Man in the Moon*:

Is there not
Some hidden thunder in the stores of heaven,
Red with uncommon wrath, to blast the men
Who owe their greatness to their country's ruin?

These words are from Act I, Scene I of Joseph Addison's 1713 play *Cato*, which portrayed the Roman senator Cato (95–46 BCE), descendant of Cato the Censor, as the noble, heroic and high-minded defender of the republic, who committed suicide rather than surrender to the victorious tyrant Julius Caesar. Addison's play opens with Caesar marching on the beleaguered members of the Roman Senate in the north African town of Utica. The odds are heavily against Cato but he is determined to fight 'the cause/Of honour, virtue, liberty, and Rome', and he tries to rally his supporters with a speech which ends with a rousing call to arms: 'A day, an hour of virtuous liberty,/Is worth a whole eternity in bondage'. At the end of the play, with the fall of Utica imminent, Cato commits suicide, but as he dies news arrives that Spain has risen against Caesar. One of Cato's sons is left to lament: 'Were Cato at their head, once more might Rome/Assert her rights, and claim her liberty.' As with the first epigram, there is hope for the future even in the most difficult of times because there are brave souls in Europe in arms against tyranny.¹⁰

It is hard to delineate the exact contours of Hone's political ideology. He embraced constitutionalism in his printed polemics and tended to campaign under a series of broad slogans: 'liberty', 'freedom', and an end to 'tyranny'. He was also adept at embedding his polemics within formats and genres which he believed were less likely to be censored than traditional printed texts. His surviving private correspondence is very measured and careful, partly because he knew that the authorities commonly intercepted and read such communications. It would be foolish to argue that Hone was 'really' a republican who contemplated the use of violence to achieve his goals. However, this short essay has examined two of Hone's publications in which one can detect oblique praise of revolutionary violence if one focuses on the margins of the texts.

These works display a tension between the desire to communicate a dangerous idea and the need to restrict the number of those who were conscious of its presence. Most who saw *The Royal Shambles* would undoubtedly have laughed at Louis XVIII. Many would have felt sympathy on a human level with Jacques Pleignier and the other condemned men, but it is not clear how many

properly understood the small vignette of the Napoleonic soldiers, and probably only those already sympathetic to republicanism. The same might be said of the epigrams in *The Man in the Moon*, which are perhaps even more oblique. So perhaps these asides are best thought of as functioning not as a means of winning over a wide audience, but as a 'code' for a select group of like-minded friends and comrades 'in the know'.

Censorship was a very real danger for Hone and its presence forced him to adopt strategies to minimize his personal risk. There is, however, a more insidious reason why Hone's revolutionary asides have long been overlooked. During the second half of the 1820s he moved away from radical politics, and built a national profile for himself as a peddler of apolitical books built around entertaining historical snippets and tales. He now actively re-wrote his earlier radical career to downplay or erase his involvement with a number of his most famous pamphlets, including *The Man in the Moon*.¹¹ During the 1830s Hone's political trajectory led him to publicly oppose parliamentary reform, embrace a politically conservative form of evangelical Christianity, and portray his life before being saved by Jesus as that of an 'infidel'. This double censorship – first having to hide radical messages in texts and then choosing to rewrite his early life – ensured that historians have long overlooked the extent of Hone's radicalism during the turbulent years between 1816 and 1821.