

The Queen Caroline Affair as a Theatrical and Dramatic Spectacle

Dana Van Kooy, Michigan Technological University

Queen Caroline's belated return to England on 6 June 1820 sparked a period of civil unrest, social anxiety, and political uncertainty. For many reasons, the series of events that followed has often been either dismissed or trivialized.¹ Traditionally, assessments of the affair's historical and cultural significance have been compromised by the pervasive disregard of graphic satire and its comparable dramatic forms, specifically, melodrama, pantomime, burlesque, and farce.² David Francis Taylor attributes this trivialization to long-standing assumptions about the inherent superficiality of visual culture. However, as Taylor and others have made clear, the intermedial play and the dense networks of allusions common to graphic satire and theatrical performance render these forms more culturally and politically relevant than previously acknowledged.³ As is apparent in the [*George Humphrey Shop Album*](#), a copious number of graphic satires were produced and printed in response to the Queen Caroline affair. Thomas Laqueur counts over 500 satiric prints in 1820.⁴ Additionally, as Laqueur also notes, most people viewed and depicted the affair

as if it were theater. Newspapers published diagrams of the House of Lords, making it look like a proscenium stage and giving the location of key players. The *Liverpool Mercury* satirized it as *The*

¹ Thomas Laqueur makes this point quite clearly in "The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV," *The Journal of Modern History* (September 1982): 417-466.

² This historical perspective of the scholarship has shifted within the last two decades. A short list includes, John Barrell's "An Entire Change of Performances?: The Politicisation of Theatre and the Theatricalisation of Politics in the mid 1790s," *Lumen* XVII (1998): 11-50; Ian Haywood's *Bloody Romanticism: Spectacular Violence and the Politics of Representation, 1776-1832* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Steven E. Jones's *Shelley's Satire: Violence, Exhortation, and Authority* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1994); Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1850* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Timothy Morton's "Porcine Poetics: Shelley's *Swellfoot the Tyrant*," in Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (eds.), *The Unfamiliar Shelley* (Ashgate, 2009), 279-85; David Francis Taylor's *The Politics of Parody: A Literary History of Caricature, 1760-1830* (Yale University Press, 2018); and my book, *Shelley's Radical Stages: Performance and cultural memory in the post-Napoleonic era* (Routledge, 2016).

³ Taylor makes this point in the introduction to *The Politics of Parody*; Moody's field-changing book, *Illegitimate Theatre* has made clear the cultural politics of legitimate and illegitimate performances and how this politicized debate positioned the theatre and drama within the literary and cultural histories of Romanticism.

⁴ Laqueur, "The Queen Caroline Affair: Politic as Art in the Reign of George IV," 429.

Green Bag, a ‘melo-dramatico-serio-comico, pantimimico-tragico, more yes-than-no farsico Burleschetto’ in four scenes which they said had been playing ‘with unbounded applause, for six years on the Continent and upwards of twenty nights running in London.’⁵

This politicized deployment of theatrical and performative elements was not new. Throughout the long eighteenth century, dramatic texts and theatrical performances circulated through



Figure 1

intermedial networks, informing graphic satires, political pamphlets, and popularizing the production of what T.J. Wooler referred to as “State Theatrical[s]” in paintings and prints, on stage, and in newspapers.⁶ In addition to prints like *Ghost as Seen in the Hamlet of St. Stephens Chapel*, (fig.1) which employs allusions to

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in its depiction of the Queen Caroline affair, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote dramas that specifically staged the fears of civil war that accompanied the Queen Caroline affair. Byron’s *Sardanapalus* (1821; performed at Drury Lane in 1834), a five-act tragedy, features a monarch who vehemently resists war and openly advocates for love. Scholars have resisted classifying this drama as a tragedy and many have found the plot and the

⁵ Ibid., 448-49.

⁶ T.J. Wooler, Leigh Hunt, William Cobbett, and other writers produced state theatricals to satirize political events on a regular basis. Wooler penned his first “State Theatrical” for the *Black Dwarf* on Wednesday, April 16, 1817, No. 12, pp. 191-192. During this period, for example, George Henry Harlow created *The Court for the Trial of Queen Katherine* (1817, Royal Shakespeare Company Collection in Stratford-upon-Avon), a painting that features the first family of London theatre, the Kemble brothers and their sister, Sarah Siddons. This scene, taken from Shakespeare’s *All is True or Henry VIII* and performed regularly at Covent Garden from 1806 until 1812—memorializes the theatrical performances of a former generation.

character of Sardanapalus farcical or unreal.⁷ Shelley's *Oedipus Tyrannus; or, Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820; published anonymously), with its Chorus of Swine and its myriad allusions to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and a broad selection of classical dramas, has similarly befuddled modern readers who have been reluctant to acknowledge the seriousness and the tragic overtones of this play.

The political anxiety in these dramas is most accessible and visible in the private papers of the English aristocracy. Laqueur cites Lady Jermin's diary, where she compares the Queen Caroline moment to the disastrous "days of Charles I."⁸ Others write about their "alarm" at these events. This politically-charged word was often associated with the fear of invasion and links this historical moment to the political uncertainty that followed in the wake of the French Revolution, particularly during the invasion scare of the 1790s.⁹ Percy Shelley, in his letter dated 30 June 1820 to the Gisbornes, links this grave concern about current events to popular performances of *Punch and Judy*:

Well, what think you of public affairs in England? How can the English endure the mountains of cant which are cast upon them about this vulgar cook-maid they call a Queen? It is scarcely less disgusting than the tyranny of her husband, who, on his side, uses a battery of the same cant. It is really time for the English to wean themselves from this nonsense, for really their situation is too momentous to justify them in attending to Punch and his Wife. Let the nation stand aside, and suffer them to beat till, like most combatants that are left to themselves, they would kiss and be friends.¹⁰

⁷ I have discussed Byron's drama at length in "Speculative Tragedy and Spatial Play: Scaling Byron's *Sardanapalus*," *Studies in Romanticism* 58.1 (Spring 2019): 77-104.

⁸ Laqueur, "The Queen Caroline Affair: Politic as Art in the Reign of George IV," 422.

⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, uses this word in the title to his 1798 poem, *Fears in Solitude*. Written in April 1798, During the Alarms of an Invasion."

¹⁰ ¹⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Clarendon Press, 1964), 2.207. I have written about this play as a "plaything of the imagination" in *Shelley's Radical Stages: Performance and cultural memory in the post-Napoleonic era* (Routledge, 2016), 58-96.

Shelley refuses to give quarter to either party. Both the King and the Queen are unfit to rule in his view, and their actions, he asserts, adhere to the familiar script enacted by puppeteers in street performances of *Punch and Judy*.¹¹ While Shelley hopes the “combatants” will eventually “kiss and be friends,” he must have realized how improbable such a conclusion would be. Months later Shelley wrote his more extensive response to the Queen Caroline affair, *Oedipus Tyrannus; or, Swellfoot the Tyrant*, a two-act burlesque tragedy. The epigraph to this satiric drama—“Choose Reform or Civil War”¹²—suggests that Shelley shared Lady Jerningham’s apprehensiveness about the potential for civil war in this period. The play’s sustained allusions to Edmund Burke’s “swinish multitude” in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and the more radical responses to Burke, which include Thomas Spence’s *Pig’s Meat, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude* (1793-94) and Daniel Isaac Eaton’s *Hog’s Wash: A Salmagundy for Swine* (1793-95) revive the revolutionary cultural politics of the 1790s. Other allusions in the drama look back further to the Civil War era of Charles I.

Briefly, Shelley’s drama mimics and synthesizes a gallimaufry of literary and dramatic references. Its Advertisement identifies the play as a pseudo-translation of a recently found ancient text and, as such, it claims to both retrieve and reclaim a “lost” political and cultural history as well as its accompanying social sensibility. The opening scene features the “magnificent Temple” of the goddess, Famine. The temple is “built of thigh-bones and death’s

¹¹ Dressed in a fool’s motley, Punch wields his slapstick to threaten and beat other characters to death, including his wife, Judy. Originally the shrewish Joan, Judy likewise makes Punch’s life as miserable as she can. The standard plot at the time featured scenes of marital badgering, and the violence escalated through a series of catastrophes—sudden albeit expected turns for the worse—as verbal insults give way to physical abuse and then murder. The characters did not express remorse for their actions, and each relished the suffering they imposed on the other.

¹² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Oedipus Tyrannus; or, Swellfoot the Tyrant* in *The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson [1905], cor. G.M. Matthews. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970. I refer to this copy of Shelley’s play because it is still the most readily accessible print version. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text. There is also a digitized copy of the first edition held by Oxford University and published by J. Johnston available at <https://archive.org/details/dipustyrannusor00shelgoog/page/n6>



Figure 2

heads, and tiled with scalps” and it is this grotesque and cannibalistic scene that sets the stage for the conspiracy against Queen Iona,¹³ a caricature of Caroline of Brunswick. The drama illustrates how the monarchy has been supported—propped up and sustained—by a famine that has driven the pigs to threatening to eat their offspring. Before the audience sees Queen Iona, Swellfoot, a burlesque parody of Sophocles’ Oedipus, steps onto the stage with his “kingly paunch [...] and most sacred nether promontories,” which support an “untroubled

brain,” the “emblem of a pointless nothing!” *Swellfoot* concludes with a carnivalesque scene of civil war. Queen Iona saves herself by grabbing the green bag and spilling its contents over her enemies. In the subsequent metamorphoses, they transform into animals, the pigs mutate into John Bull, and the hunt begins with Iona Taurina riding the bull in pursuit. In Shelley’s burlesque tragedy, power changes its “face” but it remains oppressive and violent.

Lord Byron’s *Sardanapalus* stages the Queen Caroline affair as a domestic tragedy: one that has personal as well as imperial scope. In contrast with Shelley, Byron depicts the Queen—Zarina, in this case—as noble and kind. She has been estranged from her husband for many years and despite this, she remains loyal to him. Her brother, Salemenes refers to her occasionally, but

¹³ For different reasons, Shelley and Bryon associate their depictions of Queen Caroline with Greece and specifically with the revolt of Greek nationalists against the Ottoman Empire. The Greek War of Independence began in March of 1821 when Alexandros Ypsilantis entered the Ottoman-controlled area of Moldavia.

her only stage appearance occurs at a critical moment before the palace is destroyed. The main female character is Myrrha, a Greek (Ionian) slave to whom Sardanapalus is devoted. Despite her status, she too is noble and compassionate and is fully aligned with the cause of Greek independence in this period. Characters repeatedly describe Sardanapalus as self-indulgent, wanton, intemperate, and weak. His closest advisor, Salemenes claims in his opening monologue that he will “not see [...] thirteen hundred years / Of Empire ending like a shepherd’s tale; [Sardanapalus] must be roused”¹⁴ When the rebellious challenge is made clear to Sardanapalus, he releases the offender, citing his longstanding loyalty to the Assyrian empire. This action opens the floodgates to a civil war between the imperial state of Assyria and the rebellious Medes and Chaldeans. Despite Sardanapalus’ repeated attempts to make his reign an “inoffensive rule” and to secure an “era of sweet peace ’midst bloody annals” (4.1.511-12), he is forced by circumstances to adopt the role of a military hero who will, in the end, fight until additional troops fail to arrive. He then steps on to a pyre with Myrrha and the scene closes with the fall of the empire’s “enormous walls” into “reeking ruin” (5.1.481).

The cultural landscape of the Romantic period has changed substantively in the past two decades. Scholars are now more actively reevaluating the political and cultural significance of the period’s dramas and graphic satires and subsequently reassessing events like the Queen Caroline affair. It is no longer possible to dismiss



Figure 3

¹⁴ I quote from *Sardanapalus: A Tragedy*, in *The Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama*, eds. Jeffrey N. Cox and Michael Gamer (Broadview Press, 2003).

this series of events as merely the mud-slinging contest it appears to be in the print, *Which is the Dirtiest; So Foul the Stains Will Be Indelible* (1820) ([fig.3](#)). As the nineteenth-century cultural investment in the Queen Caroline affair becomes more visible, the visual and performative spectacles associated with these events become more visibly indicative of the civil war that many feared would ensue in this period.¹⁵ Thanks to the curators of *Trial by Media: The Queen Caroline Affair*, we now have an opportunity to more fully comprehend the cultural contexts of romanticism and to see more clearly the sophisticated intermedial cultural productions through which writers and artists represented and commented on the Queen Caroline affair.

¹⁵ Ian Haywood discusses these issues at length in *Bloody Romanticism*.