

An open sewer beside polite society

Sarah Wise applauds a brilliant history of the satirists and caricaturists who pricked the pomposity of the Augustans

City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in 18th-century London

by Vic Gatrell
697pp, Atlantic Books, £30
£26 (plus £1.25 p&p) 0870 428 4112

In December 1854, William Thackeray mused briefly on his boyhood awareness that many children had grandfathers who kept rarely exhibited portfolios of “very odd” artworks. These coloured prints, pasted into large albums, could never be shown to girls, and some were not to be shown to boys either. Thackeray, writing from the deep decorum of the mid-century, recalled the prints as “wild, coarse, reckless, and ribald”; but tellingly, he also felt that they had a quality he could only call “generous” – a value he believed was missing in the satirical caricatures and cartoons produced since the 1830s.

It is the nature of this “Old Laughter” – the world of “bog-house” humour and savage visual punning – and its eradication by the cult of respectability that Vic Gatrell explores in his survey of the London caricaturists, printsellers and their clients in the late Georgian era. The book justifies its cover price for the pictures alone – almost 300 of them, reproduced in full colour, and many unseen by a wider public for the best part of two centuries. That you should also get a text that conveys so many insights and cultural analyses makes it doubly worth your money.

Gatrell throws an unusual spotlight on the Hanoverian age: not for him the Hogarthian miserabilism and Blakean gloom that has permeated so much historical writing about the 18th-century city. Instead, he returns to the record of that other Georgian London – of exuberance and a keen sense of the ridiculous. When, one night, some blackened chimney-sweeps are walking through Lincoln’s Inn Fields and come across three Chinese men, both parties’



Cocky: 'Royal Hobbies or the Hertfordshire Cock-Horse!', 1819, by George Cruikshank, from 'Teggs Caricature Magazine'

astonishment at seeing a type of human previously unknown to them leads to convulsions of laughter, in which passers-by join in. Whatever else it is, this is a town that loved to laugh at itself.

Indeed, London consumed some 20,000 satirical or humorous prints between 1770 and 1830. Price restricted their circulation to just one in 10 Londoners, but print-shop windows were regularly thronged with a “picture-fuddle” – a crowd composed of all social classes – ensuring that the bawdiness, gossip and swingeing personal attacks could be enjoyed by all.

The prints were a beautifully colourful open sewer that ran alongside Augustan “politeness” and, later, Romantic sensibility. This was a time and a place of rampant adultery, of drunkenness and gambling on a colossal (often fatal) scale, of social-climbing, political corruption, religious posturing – all of which was ripe fruit for satirists. No one was safe. In fact, the higher born, the more vulnerable to such men as George Cruikshank, Thomas Rowlandson, and above all, James Gillray – the most vicious and the most brilliant of his circle. Gillray’s *A Voluptuary Under the Horrors of*

Digestion (1792) took the lampooning of the future George IV to new heights (or depths) of nastiness, revealing his full 17 stones (as official portraits did not) and a grossly distended belly straining at the royal breeches, a supercilious sneer on his portly chops. Around him is the detritus of his debauched life: meat-bones gnawed clean, emptied decanters, a shelf filled with anti-venereal pills and potions, gambling receipts, and a chamberpot brimming over with something extremely unpleasant.

The Prince attempted to prosecute the printseller but failed, and Gatrell

diligently tracks the extent to which – in comparison with written libels – the satires remained free to dish out the most obscene insults to the nation’s elite. The best method of suppression was the purse, and both Gillray and Cruikshank would eventually be silenced by cash payments, from the Tory party and the Prince respectively.

The burgeoning nouveaux riches provided a rich source of humour, too. The beautiful adventuress Miss Gunning was discovered, in 1791, attempting to blackmail her way to marriage into the aristocracy. To the delight of the *bon ton*, she was depicted in *The Siege of Blenheim* indecorously astride a phallic cannon (going “gunning”) shooting forged letters at the Marquis of Blandford – one of her real-life victims; the marquis responds with a volley of turds fired from his buttocks, which are mooning out of a Blenheim Palace window.

Foreign visitors were astonished at this freedom of expression, and a brisk export market to the Continent was enjoyed by most of the West End printsellers. Many foreign buyers did not recognise the personalities or scandals depicted, but roared with glee none the less. The English were habitually disrespectful, Continentals believed, and, says Gatrell, long may it be so: there is a poignancy throughout this brilliant book for the lost spirit of pugnacity and insolence in these satires. (He throws down the gauntlet to Victorianistas to name one single fart reference in any mainstream work of literature published between the 1830s and 1900.) The spirit began its return in the 1960s but now, Gatrell states, we are becoming “deferential to corporate, managerial, religious and other forms of fashionably correct values” – and that is precisely why we should admire the late Georgian era’s “refusal to put up with bullshit”.