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Europe 6: Plundering the Treasury

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1. William Blake. *Europe*, plate 6. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Europe 6: Plundering the Treasury

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In *The Illuminated Blake*, David V. Erdman suggests that plate 6 of *Europe: A Prophecy* (illus. 1) presents a case of incipient cannibalism, citing as evidence the gloss supplied by Blake's friend George Cumberland which labels the picture "Famine" and includes the notation, "Preparing to dress the Child," along with a quotation from Dryden: ". . . to prolong our breath We greedily devour our certain Death." Erdman observes that the picture demonstrates not only that the camp followers of War are Famine, Pestilence, and Fire, but also that "it is the rich and powerful who devour the children, the young who die of plague, women and children who perish in flames."¹ Already in 1784 Blake had assembled these apocalyptic elements in his Royal Academy picture of *War unchained by an Angel, Fire, Pestilence, and Famine following*; by 1794 he had begun a related series of pictures that would culminate in the watercolors of *Pestilence, Fire, War, and Famine*—the latter, explicitly representing cannibalism—which he completed for Thomas Butts c. 1805.² That Blake had already begun to associate cannibalism with famine by the time of *Europe 6*, however, is apparent from the relationship of Blake's design to several images from the popular and widely-circulated work of James Gillray.

That Blake was familiar with Gillray's work is evident from numerous connections between Gillray's political prints and Blake's visual works from the early 1790s.³ Only a year Blake's senior, Gillray had entered the Royal Academy in 1778, the year before Blake, and had become an acquaintance and correspondent of Fuseli in the following years. Asserting flatly that Blake "must have been acquainted with Gillray," David Bindman observes that despite their later political differences the two artists "share a sense of the unremitting corruption of the world."⁴ Precisely this sense of unremitting corruption links *Europe 6* with Gillray's work. Significantly, though, the background rather than the figures themselves establishes the tie.

The dark, arching stonework of the hearth in Blake's picture is unmistakably that of the Treasury, which appears frequently in Gillray's prints, occasionally bearing not the usual inscription, "Treasury" (which appears in prints of 21 April 1786, 29 May 1787, 14 August 1788, 3 June 1793, 24 February 1801, and 1 May 1804), but another such as "Excise-Office" (9 April 1790, where "Treasury" has been crossed out and the new

words are being inscribed) or "Granary" (19 January 1803). The most immediately relevant occurrence (and one of the earliest) of the Treasury facade is in *Monstrous Crows, at a New Coalition Feast* (illus. 2), published 29 May 1787 and extant as both monochrome etching and hand-colored aquatint. The print takes as its point of departure the recent exhibition in London of two women and a man whose remarkable greatly distended necks had undoubtedly resulted from goiter affliction.⁵ Gillray appropriated this sensational topical image for his picture of Queen Charlotte, the Prince of Wales, and George III (whom Gillray dressed as a woman, to replicate the sexes of the unfortunate trio exhibited in London) devouring golden porridge from a great bowl bearing the inscription "John Bull's Blood"—the national wealth—in a variation of one of Gillray's favorite themes: the exorbitant public expense of maintaining the royal family. The Prince of Wales, his own nearly empty craw symbolic of his perennial want of ready money, glances enviously at his greedy mother. In his left hand he holds a spoon inscribed "£10000 p^r An." and in his right another inscribed "£60000 p^r An.," these being the sums allotted him by Parliament and the king.

Visible within the arch in *Monstrous Crows* and most of the other prints in which the Treasury appears are its spike-topped gates: here the spikes surmount a horizontal line that passes behind the king's right hand. The distinctive wall, rounded arch, and gate spikes all recur in *Europe 6*, the horizontal line (in nearly the same position where Gillray locates it) split to flank the hearth-grate, the spikes modified to wavy verticals at the kettle's right and crosshatched lines at its left. Even the wavy lines indicating the wall's texture recur in *Europe 6*, as they do in other plates in *Europe* and *America*.

Gillray often ironically juxtaposed the notorious public extravagance of the royal children—particularly the Prince of Wales, whose debts were both a public scandal and a public burden—with the purportedly modest private lifestyle of the king and queen, as in his famous print of royal belt-tightening, *Anti-Saccharites, or John Bull and his Family leaving off the use of Sugar* (published 27 March 1792; illus. 3). Since the extreme frugality of the king and queen in private life was well known, considerable discussion (and much political satire) centered upon the question of what became of the large sums for which the king, citing his considerable



MONSTROUS CRAWs, at a New Coalition Feast.

2. James Gillray. *Monstrous Craws, at a New Coalition Feast*. Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

debts, regularly petitioned Parliament. Knowing the royal couple's stinting lifestyle, many attributed these petitions to pure greed.⁶ Hence the immediate relevance of Gillray's daring double caricature, *Frying Sprats* and *Toasting Muffins* (published 28 November 1791; illus. 4), in the former of which the queen's overflowing pockets emphasize the hypocrisy of economizing. Prominent in this double print is the bar-grated hearth at which queen and king prepare their plain fare. Eight months later, in *Temperance enjoying a Frugal Meal* (28 July 1792; illus. 5), the king and queen enjoy a thrifty meal of sauerkraut and boiled eggs while another ornate barred fireplace in the securely bolted royal apartments has fallen into such disuse that behind the bars appears

not a fire but a floral arrangement whose three drooping white blooms (perhaps meant to suggest the *fleur-de-lis*) testify to its state of neglect. This print, too, appeared as both monochrome etching and aquatint, enjoying in both "the highest reputation."⁷

Blake's fusion of the familiar images of barred hearth and Treasury facade produces in *Europe 6* a harrowing image that goes well beyond the scope of Gillray's prints and imbues the caricaturist's elaborate play upon the act of eating, in *Monstrous Craws* and elsewhere, with distinctively cannibalistic overtones. As in *America*, what is cannibalized is the very basis of society, the family: humanity consumes itself. There are no men, for instance, in *Europe 6*, for they are presuma-



3. James Gillray. *Anti-Saccharites, or John Bull and his Family leaving off the use of Sugar*. Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

bly occupied elsewhere as the makers or the casualties of war. The roaring flames and billowing smoke of *Europe* 6 indicate that the national wealth—human and monetary, as well as spiritual and ethical—is being boiled away and that neither rich nor poor (as denoted by the women's garb⁸) are spared. Blake's conversion of the Treasury into cooking-hearth is doubly ironic, since it is the Treasury that funds the recurrent wars that consume England's resources. Moreover, if the child here is male (as is particularly suggested by its placement on the train of the woman's dress, a detail that occurs frequently in Renaissance Nativity scenes and that lends a doubly ironic note to this scene of child death), then Blake's design echoes *Monstrous Crows* in its numbers of male and female figures. And in the great kettle Blake has

worked a subtle variation upon Gillray's bowl of "John Bull's Blood," for John Bull's children constitute the real "blood" and wealth of England, sacrificed in a desperate "meal." Blake was still too much an active radical at this point in his career to be either unaware of the specifically political dimension of his imagery or unwilling to exploit that dimension to its utmost in *America* and *Europe*.

As in *America*, in which the family unit is consistently depicted as shattered by death or enforced separation, in *Europe* the only "whole" family occurs in the large illumination to the final plate (illus. 6), where a man carries an apparently unconscious woman while compelling a female child to climb the stair with him. Blake's arresting image derives almost certainly from



London, Pub^d, Nov^r 28th 1791. by H. Humphrey N^o 18, 22 Bond Street.

FRYING SPRATS.



5. James Gillray. *Temperance enjoying a Frugal Meal*. Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.



6. William Blake. *Europe*, plate 15. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Flaxman's *The Fury of Athamas* (1790-94; illus. 7),⁹ but it bears thematic associations also with the escape of Lot and his family from Sodom and Gomorrah (a scene Blake had engraved c. 1781 for *The Protestant's Family Bible* and which likewise includes in the figure of Lot's wife a woman looking backward toward the flames), Raphael's painting of the fire in the Borgo, the story of Aeneas rescuing his father and child, and the expulsion from Eden (eighteenth-century illustrations of which frequently involve stairs of one sort or another and allude to the flaming sword that bars the return of Adam and Eve).¹⁰ In *America*, plate 3, Blake had recently employed a related image (borrowed from John Singleton Copley's *Death of Major Peirson*) of a backward-glancing family of three—the only complete family unit depicted in *America*—fleeing from surging flames.¹¹

That the family in *Europe* 15 is ascending the stairs past a broken classical column is a relatively positive sign, a visual hint of liberation from the dungeon of

Europe 13 and an indication of at least potential post-millennial survival. Given the apparent escape, intact, of this family unit, humanity seems yet to stand a chance of avoiding total self-immolation. On the other hand, considering the bloody turn the Terror-ridden French Revolution had taken by the time Blake completed *Europe*, these ominous, ambiguous flames may be those not of liberation and purification but of blind self-consumption, a possibility underscored by another particularly grisly Gillray print.

Un petit Souper, a la Parisienne; or, A Family of Sans-Culotts refreshing, after the fatigues of the day (illus. 8), published 20 September 1792, makes concrete and explicit the ravenous cannibalism of the Revolutionary France of the September massacres. Here a skewered child hangs before another of those horizontally-barred fire-grates, "dressed" for cooking and basted by a pistol-packing hag while other *citoyens* feast on a variety of body parts, including a heart. On the table in gruesome parody of the familiar subject of St. John the Baptist is a severed head on a platter, its right eye and ear hungrily devoured by a scrawny Frenchman. Interestingly, at the lower right another man sits on the naked torso of



7. John Flaxman. *The Fury of Athamas*. The National Trust, Ickworth.



8. James Gillray. *Un petit Souper a la Parisienne; or, a Family of Sans-Culotts refreshing, after the fatigues of the day.* Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

a female figure whose posture, lying on her back with arms outstretched in cruciform fashion, appears frequently in Blake's visual art: e.g., the illumination to "A Poison Tree" (*Songs of Experience*) and both versions of *Michael Foretells the Crucifixion*, from Blake's illustrations to *Paradise Lost*. *Europe 6* would seem to turn the violent anti-gallicism of Gillray's print against itself, universalizing the theme of cannibalism by stripping the image of its nationalist propaganda. *Europe* moves beyond *America's* attack on England's war with America (and, by analogy, with France) to expose the cannibalistic nature of war itself. In a very real sense, the flames from which the family group of *Europe 15* flees are also those that heat the cauldron in *Europe 6*.

A final word about Gillray's many variations on the topos of eating is appropriate in conclusion. The act of consuming provided a singularly pertinent metaphor for the self-destructive state of affairs in England (and on the Continent) as caricatured by Gillray and his contem-

poraries.¹² Popular art furnished abundant precedents for the sort of references to actual and metaphorical cannibalism we encounter both in Blake's visual art (e.g., the *Famine* of c. 1805, the background of which still echoes the Treasury facade) and in his illuminated poetry (e.g., *Jerusalem*, plates 25, 69, and 85). Gillray's well-known *A Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion* (2 July 1792; illus. 9), which immediately preceded *Temperance enjoying a Frugal Meal* and epitomized profligacy and gluttony, furnishes a stark contrast to the emaciated figures either depicted or described in *America* and *Europe* and represented in visual works like *Pestilence, Famine, and War (A Breach in the City, the Morning after the Battle)*, all of which were evolving in the 1790s. Furthermore, the sharply anti-gallican double print of 21 December 1792, *French Liberty [and] British Slavery* (illus. 10) ironically contrasts the relative luxury and security of the fat Englishman (a John Bull type), who laments his high taxes while carving for him-



9. James Gillray. *A Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion*. Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.



11. James Gillray, *San-Culottes feeding Europe with the Bread of Liberty*. Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

1977), [N40], as well as Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1969), *passim*. On Blake's use of other visual material from political cartoons, see also Nancy Bogen, "Blake's Debt to Gillray," *AN&Q* 6 (1967): 35-38, and Stephen C. Behrendt, "'This Accursed Family': Blake's *America* and the American Revolution," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 27 (1986): 26-51.

⁴David Bindman, *William Blake: His Art and Times* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1982) 25.

⁵Richard Godfrey, *English Caricature, 1620 to the Present* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984) 81-82.

⁶Thomas Wright, *The Works of James Gillray, the Caricaturist* (1873; rpt. Amsterdam: S. Emmering, 1970) 78.

⁷Wright 133.

⁸Erdman suggests that the two women and the child in *Europe* 6 may derive from emblems in Blake's notebook, numbers 73 and 83, the latter of which depicts a well-dressed woman holding on her lap a similarly stiff and presumably dead child. The position of the child in *Europe* 6 echoes that of the child in the wheatfield at the bottom of *America* 9—which child Erdman regards as, like the

French Revolution, "new born"—and it recalls also the position of yet another recumbent child from page 77 of the notebook. See *The Illuminated Blake*, 164, 147, and *Notebook*, [N73], [N83], [N77].

⁹Although Flaxman did not return to England from Italy until 1794, he had periodically sent back to England both his own works and plaster casts after antique pieces. *The Fury of Athamas* is itself based upon *Gaul Killing His Wife* (c. 240-200 BC), which Flaxman had copied from all angles at the Villa Ludovisi. See Sarah Symons, *Flaxman and Europe: The Outline Illustrations and their Influence* (New York and London: Garland, 1984) 83. Importantly, both these works center upon the disruption or destruction of the family unit.

¹⁰For the Lot illustration, see Roger R. Easson and Robert N. Essick, *William Blake: Book Illustrator* (2 vols.; Memphis: American Blake Foundation, 1972-79), 2, pl. XX, 2. Erdman suggests the relationship to Aeneas in *The Illuminated Blake*, 173, contending that the man is Los rescuing his daughters.

¹¹See Behrendt, "'This Accursed Family,'" 43.

¹²See also Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1983) 200.