



JOHN BULL, PUBLIC SENTIMENT, AND THE REASONABLE MAN

Simon Stern

THE IMAGE OF “JOHN BULL THE JUDGE” (fig.1, on the next page) convicting the “Conspirators at the Bar” (1820) indexes several vital features of the process by which the trial of Queen Caroline was itself scrutinized in the bar, or court, of public opinion – a term that does not appear expressly in the print, but that is implicit in the image as a whole and in its rendering of the conspirators as figures to be judged by the viewer. The label (“General Execration”) behind which they congregate, and the motto above the judge’s head (“Vox Populi” – the voice of the people) both indicate that the public has already reached a verdict; the print thus describes the response it also seeks to elicit.

That prominent trials were influenced by public sentiment was not a new idea, but only in the 1790s did the phrase “the court of public opinion” come into colloquial use, and its adoption signals an increased degree of consciousness about the press’s role as an agent for assessing, representing, and influencing the attitudes of the populace. This was an era of heavily politicized prosecutions against radical thinkers like Thomas Paine, and the communal attitude which the phrase expressed was itself part and parcel of the widespread coverage of those trials. These prosecutions – many of which involved charges of seditious libel – provoked heated debate over

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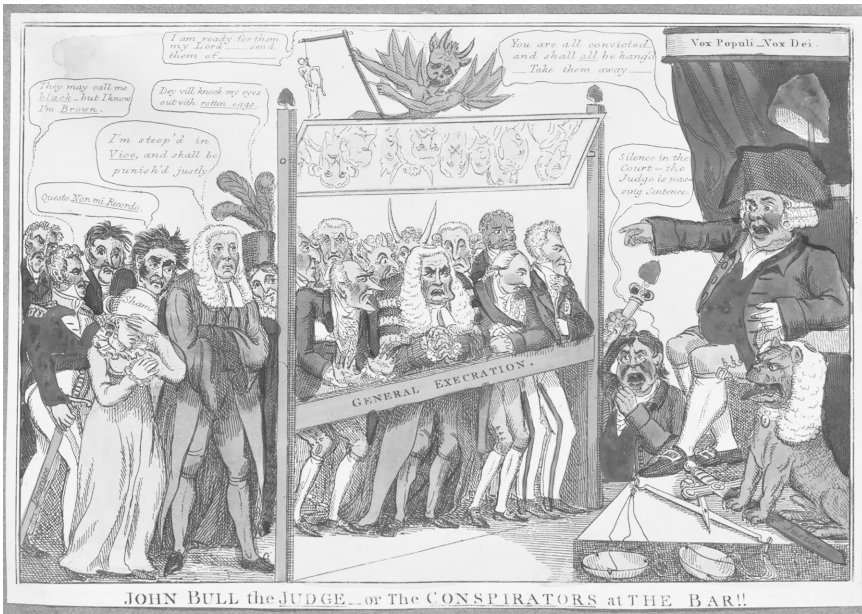


Figure 1. Title: *John Bull the judge, or, The conspirators at the bar!!* Publisher: John Fairburn. Source Title: George Humphrey shop album. Contributor: Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. Identifier: Folio 75 H89 821 (Oversize) <http://findit.library.yale.edu/catalog/digcoll:4771996>.

freedom of the press, and featured publishers as well as writers among the accused. Newspapers frequently addressed these concerns in their coverage of the trials, helping to create the public tribunal whose existence they were defending.

Fox's Libel Act of 1792 had provided a crucial legal tool in this battle, by placing in the jury's hands the determination as to whether a statement was libelous in its tendency, rather than leaving that as a question for the bench to decide. Nevertheless, a series of statutes enacted later in the decade imposed new restrictions on political speech and press freedom, including the Seditious Meetings Act (1795), which limited the size of political meetings, and the Newspaper Publication Act (1798), which required registration of printing presses. These efforts continued into the nineteenth century: the 1817 "Gagging Acts" reinforced the provisions of the anti-sedition acts passed in 1795, and 1819 saw the passage of the "Six Acts,"

John Bull, Public Sentiment, and the Reasonable Man

including the Newspaper Stamp Duties Act, which changed the definition of “newspaper” to increase the cost of the inexpensive radical journals, effectively putting them out of business. All this is to say that the very freedoms being celebrated in the picture of John Bull on the bench were still very much in dispute, and – as so often with satire – the print’s aims are aspirational as well as descriptive.

John Bull was already well-established as an embodiment of English national identity, but the depiction of this figure in a judicial role lent a new aspect to his personality. This print appeared shortly after Queen Caroline’s trial ended, on November 10, 1820, and it presents the “Conspirators” condemning themselves out of their own mouths. Thus, for instance, Colonel James Brown, who had been sent to Italy in 1818 to gather evidence against the Queen, acknowledges that he appears “black.”

Similarly, Theodore Majocchi, one of the chief witnesses for the prosecution, says “non mi ricordo” (“I do not recall”) – the answer that he uttered numerous times, during the cross-examination of his testimony, and which became, in effect, his nickname after Lord Brougham destroyed his credibility by eliciting this response so often (illustrated also in Figure 2, a print by William Hone, which helped to memorialize this phrase). John Singleton Copley, who prosecuted the case, admits that he is “steep’d in Vice,” and expects to be “punish’d justly.” Enclosed in the frame of a bar that bears some resemblance to a guillotine (and also to a pillory), the conspirators do not seem to notice their images in the mirror suspended above them, which presents them to the viewer upside-down. John Bull, equipped with conventional insignia of justice and fairness, emphatically condemns them all. His conventional hat here performs double duty as the black cap of a judge pronouncing a sentence of capital punishment.

The political motives for the print may be associated, in part, with the movement to expand the franchise: a good part of Queen Caroline’s support came from politicians and radicals who associated the government (and the small majority in the House of Lords that approved the Pains and Penalties Bill) with the forces of reaction, aligned against the middle and working classes. When the government withdrew the bill, realizing that it would not pass in the House of Commons, the result was a setback for the reform movement. Insofar as the print celebrates John Bull’s power, as an



Figure 2. Title: "Non mi ricordo!" Creator: William Hone. Contributor: Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School. Identifier: <https://search.library.yale.edu/catalog/b1261560>.

John Bull, Public Sentiment, and the Reasonable Man

ordinary Englishman, to make his voice heard, the influence that he seems to enjoy here would not start to gain political recognition until the passage of the First Reform Act in 1832.

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