



# Satirising the Breast

representations of transgressive femininity in eighteenth-century British caricature

## OVERVIEW

This project explores representations of the transgressive breast in caricature. One of the most recognised symbols of femininity, the breast always stands for something more than itself. My thesis seeks to understand the politics behind its presence within satirical prints.

The breastfeeding mother was a politically charged symbol in eighteenth-century Britain, exemplifying selflessness, nurturance and sexual virtuosity - behaviours conducive to an ordered and productive society. But sentimental images of nursing mothers were matched by satirical etchings of unnatural women whose misconduct, this thesis argues, was embodied in their perverse breasts. Caricaturists used the breast to valorise and criticise specific aspects of femininity, and particularly to condemn insufficient devotion to motherhood. Women too preoccupied with politics, sex, education, fashion, or their social lives were figured as physically corrupted; with grotesque, debauched, and destructive breasts.

Scholarship has traced the ways in which political anxieties about national morality, the family, gender and sex bled into debates about the roles of women and their bodies. However, it has neglected to recognise how often these debates centered around the breast. Situating a series of social, medical and philosophical debates in relation to discourses of the breast, this thesis illustrates how public concerns transmuted into deeply personal caricatures.

## SOURCES

Close analysis of satirical prints is combined with consideration of the didactic, polemical, and propagandist texts which addressed ideas of appropriate femininity through the breast. These sources are largely medical, philosophical and political, and range from poems and personal memoirs to anatomical atlases, medical treatises and constitutional tracts.

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*The Injured Countess*, James Gillray (1786). The licentious Lady Strathmore suckles two cats. To her right, a little boy cries "I wish I was a Cat my Mama would Love me then".



Detail from *The Apotheosis of Hoche*, James Gillray (1798). A female Fury storms over a scene of military ruin, poisonous milk or gun fire shooting from her breasts. Satirists not only drew transgressive breasts as unsightly or inhuman but also as literal weapons; shooting milk, discharging gunfire, and poisoning infants.



*Sin, Death, and the Devil*. Vide Milton, James Gillray (1792). Queen Charlotte was perceived as improperly involved in politics. Here she defends the Prime Minister William Pitt. Gillray travesties her as Sin, a hag with Medusian hair, serpent legs, and shriveled, pendent breasts.

Satirical prints from The British Museum.  
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