

R E V I E W

Esther Chadwick, *The Radical Print: Art and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*

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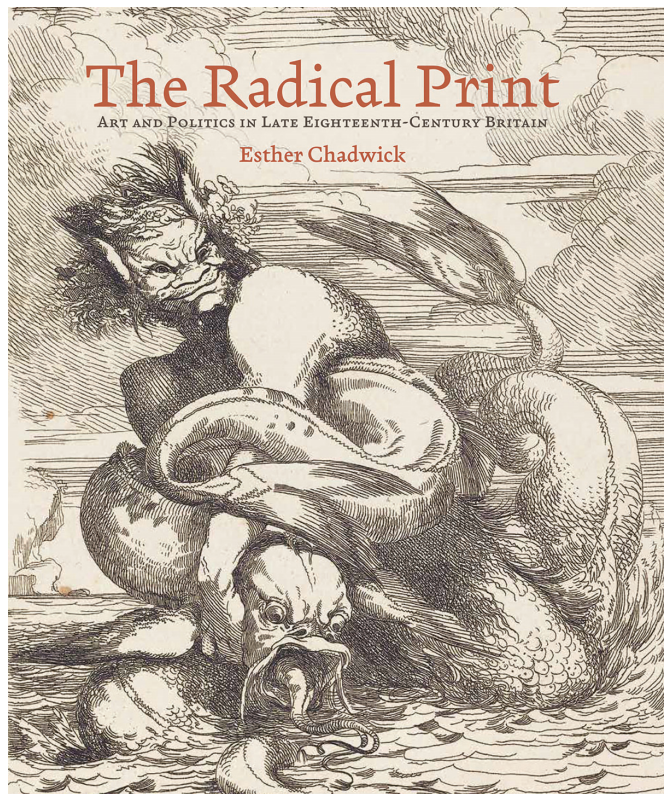
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Esther Chadwick. *The Radical Print: Art and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2024. viii + 240 pp. \$60.00/£45.00, hardcover.

Esther Chadwick, currently a lecturer in art history at the Courtauld Institute, presents *The Radical Print*, a work derived from her doctoral thesis at Yale University. The study is characterized by meticulous archival research, reflecting her fellowships at esteemed institutions, including the Paul Mellon Centre in London, the Huntington Library in California, the Lewis Walpole Library in Connecticut, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts in Washington, DC. Her curatorial experience in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum further informs her scholarly approach.

The introduction articulates the book's primary objectives: firstly, to investigate "late eighteenth-century graphic critique from the point of view of printmaking as an artistic practice," and secondly, to analyze why print served as a crucial medium for "critical image-making" during this period (1). The term "radical" encompasses both aesthetic innovation and political opposition to authority, aligning with the art and politics emphasized in the subtitle. To establish this connection, Chadwick employs specific philosophical concepts applied to the selected works and ideas of five artists/printmakers: James Barry, John Hamilton Mortimer, James Gillray, Thomas Bewick, and William Blake. Their inclusion is not unexpected within the context of late eighteenth-century British printmaking, and, as Blake's admirers will appreciate, these figures form a conceptual circle of painter-printmakers culminating in Blake's complex and revolutionary art and print practices.



In my view, the book seeks to engage with three principal dimensions: historical, technical, and philosophical. Chapter 1, titled "Barry's Contemporaneity," analyzes Barry's 1776 print "The Phoenix, or the Resurrection of Freedom." Historically, the work was created in the immediate aftermath of the American Declaration of Independence, serving as a form of political support. The composition features figures of both contemporary and historical thinkers, including Barry him-

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self, surrounding a dead goddess and gazing at a faint, distant statue of Liberty. The title, “Phoenix,” symbolizes the death of British freedom and the rise of American liberty. Technically, Barry pioneered innovative techniques, including using the reverse side of a copperplate for soft-ground etching (see fig. 16, “St. Sebastian”) and employing the then-new aquatint process to evoke a drawing effect. To support her philosophical analysis, Chadwick closely examines different states of “The Phoenix” (see figs. 27, 28), relating the roughness of the aquatint’s foul-biting to the “unpolished passion for Liberty,” a phrase used in the *London Evening Post*, July 1776, to describe the ardor of the revolutionaries. The radicalism of Barry’s print, therefore, resides in its opposition to the refinement characteristic of more commercial and fashionable intaglio techniques, such as mezzotint and stipple engraving.

Chadwick also examines Barry’s etchings created after his paintings for the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce. His boldness and his revisions in these prints can be interpreted as deliberate political statements. For Chadwick, this series reflects Barry’s perspective on history, which links back to “The Phoenix”—symbolizing both the American Revolution and Barry’s view of printmaking as a form of renewal. The gestures of the figures in “The Phoenix” bear a resemblance to Raphael’s renowned fresco *School of Athens* (c. 1510), with Barry placing his self-portrait within the composition, mirroring Raphael’s inclusion of his own image. Through this, Chadwick concludes that Barry sought to dialogue with and echo his contemporaries via the medium of printmaking.

Chapter 2, “Mortimer’s Caprice,” examines the prints of John Hamilton Mortimer, with particular attention to his appropriation of and self-identification with the seventeenth-century Italian painter Salvator Rosa. The primary works analyzed include the *Fifteen Etchings Dedicated to Sir Joshua Reynolds* (1778), which serve as imitative renditions of Rosa’s banditti motifs. Chadwick contends that Mortimer’s imitation of Rosa’s opposition to conventional or academic art represents a form of artistic independence achieved through “caprice.”

Mortimer’s promotional material implies that these prints were aimed at patrons possessing countercultural or oppositional tendencies. Through self-publishing and active promotion, Mortimer aligned himself with William Hogarth’s approach, engaging critically with contemporary society by depicting antisocial figures. The term “caprice,” as used in this context, derives from Edward Edwards’s *Anecdotes of Painters* (1808), wherein Mortimer’s *Fifteen Etchings* are described as “[a] Set of Monsters, and other capricious subjects.” Chadwick associates the concept with the seventeenth-century graphic genre of *capriccio* prints, which employed etching techniques to emulate engraving. Like the *capriccio*, an artistic form characterized by “deviation from classical proportion,” Mortimer’s grotesque figures and fantastical imagery serve both as a testament to artistic freedom and as a vehicle for critique (72).

However, in this section, Chadwick’s emphasis on the technical aspects of printmaking appears less convincing. The association between Mortimer and the *capriccio* genre seems to rest more on thematic content—the subjects depicted—than on specific engraving techniques, which complicates the strength of her argument.

In the section “Art World Politics,” she posits that Mortimer’s dedication of the *Fifteen Etchings* to Reynolds signifies engagement in a critical dialogue with Reynolds’s pedagogical and artistic principles. Through his participation in the Society of Artists and his association with the Royal Academy, Mortimer purportedly articulated his ideological stance via two allegorical figures, Salvator Rosa and Gérard de Lairese, representing, respectively, the ideals of liberty and academicism. Chadwick invokes the term “counterpoint” to elucidate the apparent contradiction between notions of originality and imitation within Mortimer’s work.

The chapter grapples with the complexity of asserting that Mortimer employed printmaking as a medium to respond to Reynolds and his circle. While Reynolds championed imitation and emulation as foundational to artistic practice—an ethos emphasized throughout his discourses—Mortimer considers Rosa, the libertine and emblem of independence, as an “alter ego” embodying artistic freedom and individualism (75). This juxtaposition underscores a nuanced negotiation between adherence to classical ideals and a desire for expressive autonomy. Nevertheless, Chadwick’s overarching argument faces challenges in definitively establishing how Mortimer’s prints directly mediated or contested Reynolds’s doctrines.

In this chapter, Chadwick’s arguments can sometimes appear arduous and difficult for readers lacking familiarity with printmaking techniques. Printmaking, in her words, is “a concatenation of differences born from identity.” She elaborates that “[a]s a product of transfer and reversal, each print is the result of displacements and deferrals that stand between the artist’s gesture and the resulting image” (81). While such an analogy linking printmaking to radical thoughts may seem somewhat abstract or far-fetched, it becomes more comprehensible when contextualized within her discussion of Mortimer’s engagement with Hogarth’s Copyright Act.

This historical framing clarifies why printmaking could symbolize a stance of originality and defiance—a radical voice within the artistic landscape. The chapter ultimately concludes that Mortimer attained a form of artistic independence and selfhood through the medium of printmaking, as demonstrated by his identification with Rosa and his association of “outlaw masculinity” with Rosa’s banditti figures. This linkage underscores how Mortimer’s prints embody a conception of self rooted in both artistic and masculine rebellion, positioning his work as an act of resistance against normative aesthetic and societal expectations.

Chapter 3, “Gillray’s Materiality,” opens with a detailed analysis of Gillray’s etching and aquatint “Shakespeare Sacrificed;—or—The Offering to Avarice” (1789). In this work, two young boys depicted in the lower-left corner serve as allegorical figures representing the painter and printmaker. Gillray’s satirical critique targets Boydell’s Shakespeare Gallery, illustrating avarice and greed while also voicing a broader protest against the artistic establishment’s marginalization of printmakers. Printmakers like himself were often rejected by the art world, Gillray laments, despite the recognized societal importance of and demand for printmaking as a medium.

The section “Fidelity and Distortion” examines Gillray’s training as a line engraver and writing engraver under numerous masters, highlighting the nuanced interplay between likeness and deformation in his satirical caricatures. His technique involved deliberate distortion and exaggeration; despite these manipulations, a recognizable resemblance persisted. This allowed him to critique and distort his subjects while maintaining their identifiable features.

Chadwick selects two prints to illustrate Gillray’s more radical tendencies. In “The Tree of Liberty, with the Devil Tempting John Bull” (1798), Gillray caricatures opposition leader Charles James Fox and the London Corresponding Society (LCS), criticizing their radicalism. Paradoxically, in another print from the same year, “The London Corresponding Society Alarm’d—Vide. Guilty Consciences,” he depicts members of the LCS—many of whom were artisans—as being intimidated or silenced. During this period, Gillray was under threat from the government’s spy system and had to disguise the figures in his caricatures.

In the section “Distortion, Disruption, Interception,” Chadwick contends that although Gillray produced works for the *Anti-Jacobin* journal and received an annual pension from the government, his visual satire often contained subtle, ambiguous messages that reversed the apparent intent. She further highlights Gillray’s technical innovations, such as the use of soft-ground etching to create textured effects, as evidence of his radicalism and experimental approach within the constraints imposed by political and social pressures.

Chapter 4, “Bewick’s Currency,” explores Thomas Bewick’s designs for currency and his innovative engraving techniques. Chadwick asserts that Bewick was deeply interested in indexicality—the notion that his images could serve as direct, recognizable signs—and describes his printmaking as “the product of a conjunction of technical, aesthetic and political experimentation” (137). In essence, Bewick adapted his wood-engraving technique to copperplate engraving to enhance anti-counterfeiting measures in paper currency.

Bewick’s distinctive white-line effect in wood engraving proved particularly challenging to replicate, contributing to the security features of his currency engravings. Chadwick notes that Bewick’s involvement in banknote design occurred

during the Restriction period of 1797–1821, “when the exchange of banknotes for gold was suspended by law” (146). During this time, the value of paper money increasingly depended on textual and visual security features, making anti-forgery measures vital.

Chadwick highlights the social status of the engraver in this context—resisting mechanization and embracing manual techniques, like Blake, Bewick championed the idea of unique, natural printing over machine engraving. These shared values between Bewick and Blake underscore a broader cultural preference for artisanal craftsmanship and authenticity. As Chadwick concludes this discussion, she connects Bewick’s practices to the focus of the final chapter, Blake’s printmaking.

Chapter 5, titled “Blake’s Millennium,” analyzes “Laocoön” (c. 1826–27), which was created in response to the radicalism associated with millenarianism and its opposition to traditionalist values. A significant issue in this context concerns whether the title of the separate plate should be “ יה & His Two Sons Satan & Adam,” as designated by Blake himself, a viewpoint notably argued by Morton Paley in *The Traveller in the Evening: The Last Works of William Blake* (2003). Although Chadwick references Paley’s publication in her notes and, later, in the section where she states that “Blake relabelled the statue with the words ‘ יה [“Yah” or God] & his two Sons Satan & Adam ...” (166), she continues to refer to the work as “Laocoön” in her text. This inconsistency raises questions regarding the accurate identification and interpretation of the piece.

She selects the work for discussion because the engraved images and inscriptions serve as Blake’s summative reflection on his career at the end of his life. In this work, he employs inscriptions to transform the classical figures of Laocoön and his two sons into allegories of Christian salvation and damnation: God and his sons Satan and Adam. The surrounding words articulate his radical critiques of commerce, politics, and religion—providing a visual and textual commentary on societal issues.

Interpreting “Blake’s *Laocoön*” within the broader framework of “Millenarian Graphic Culture,” Chadwick aligns with David Bindman’s theory identifying Blake’s print as a “hieroglyphic print”—a concept exemplified by Garnet Terry’s “Prophetic Vision: Daniel’s Great Image” (1793). Terry’s work, rich in millenarian symbolism and combining text with image, similarly critiques material wealth and worldly power, and is seen as an influence on Blake’s visual and thematic experimentation.

Chadwick further develops her argument by connecting the theme of millenarianism to the notion of “time”—tracing these concepts from apocalyptic endings to the rigorous temporality of engraving itself, a labor-intensive process that embodies a form of time’s materiality. She compares Blake’s

engraving techniques with those of William Sharp, a commercial line engraver. Given that traditional engraving demands extensive time, Chadwick suggests that this process concretizes the concept of “time-as-currency” (177, referencing E. P. Thompson)—a shared value among eighteenth-century engravers like Blake and Sharp.

Though the theoretical framework that Chadwick constructs involves complex ideas and nuanced connections, she aims to articulate a link between millenarian imagery, the passage of time, and the laborious techniques of engraving, ultimately positioning Blake’s art within a broader cultural discourse of temporality and spiritual urgency.

The subsequent section explores “Magical Thinking about Print” (178), focusing on Sharp’s engraving practices and his spiritual beliefs, particularly his admiration for contemporary prophetesses and prophets like Joanna Southcott and Richard Brothers. Chadwick relates Sharp’s and Blake’s approaches to engraving to their spiritual ideologies: “In 1832 one commentator ... suggest[ed] that it was precisely the work of engraving that facilitated Sharp’s spiritual beliefs, allowing his mind to wander as his hand repeated its familiar rounds” (181). The work that Chadwick highlights to interpret this idea is Blake’s “Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion” (1773, c. 1810–25). In this engraving, Blake transforms a figure from Michelangelo’s *St. Peter*, depicting him as Joseph of Arimathea, who was credited with bringing Christianity to England. As with “Laocoön,” Blake’s reinterpretation of a reproduction into an original work exemplifies his tendency to radically transform existing images through print.

In the section titled “Immediacy,” Chadwick discusses Blake’s response to a contemporary event—the seizure of the *Laocoön* sculpture by Napoleon from Rome in 1796 and its subsequent return in 1816. Blake employed reproductive engraving techniques, such as cross-hatching, in “Laocoön,” but he used inscriptions to subvert the sculpture’s traditional meaning, signaling his refusal to accept art as a domesticated, socially sanctioned institution. Chadwick cites Christopher Wood’s *Forgery, Replica, Fiction* (2008) to support this, emphasizing Blake’s stance against art commodification.

This ties back to the paradox that she presents at the outset of the chapter: Blake’s desire “to liberate the artist from engraving *by means* of engraving” (161, citing Robert N. Essick), referring to his innovative attitude toward reproductive processes. His utilization of the *Laocoön* icon was thus a radical gesture, allowing him to craft a compelling argument “for a radically different conception of art itself: ‘Christianity is Art’; ‘Prayer is the Study of Art / Praise is the Practise of Art’ ...” (190). These phrases were inscribed around the sculpture, encapsulating Blake’s all-encompassing view that art, spirituality, and daily practice are intrinsically intertwined.

Overall, *The Radical Print* succeeds in situating its detailed technical investigation within a rich historical context, offering a compelling philosophical argument about revolutionary printmaking. Its most significant contribution lies in the careful observation and analysis of innovative print techniques that challenged traditional paradigms.

The book is rich in material research. Beyond single prints and paintings, Chadwick incorporates a wide array of evidence from the paper age, including advertisements, book illustrations (frontispieces, title pages, vignettes, tailpieces), study drawings, trade cards, various states of print, charts, admission tickets, handbills, receipts, banknotes, experimental specimens, test prints, nature prints, transfer drawings, and progress proofs.

In terms of printmaking technique, her analysis is thorough and detailed. As noted, fig. 16 (p. 22) presents Barry’s soft-ground etching “St. Sebastian” (c. 1776), which bears a platemaker’s stamp, indicating it was printed from the back of a copperplate. From a private collection, this example, carefully identified by Chadwick, offers valuable insights into print production. Particularly valuable are her studies of unfinished proofs—works not published, and thus unseen publicly—sourced from museum collections. These include Gillray’s aquatint “Lawful Liberty; Liberty without Law” (1793, fig. 96) and Bewick’s “An Experiment by T. Bewick” (c. 1818, fig. 126), which provide a rare glimpse into artistic and technical processes.

For Blake scholars, a central concern is whether Chadwick offers any meaningful contribution to Blake studies. While the chapter does not present many new discoveries, given the extensive secondary literature on Blake, *The Radical Print* remains a valuable resource. Its detailed examination of Blake’s role as a printmaker enhances understanding of his place within eighteenth-century British art history and print culture.

A potential controversy arises from the central thesis of the book—namely, whether there exists a connection between the radical political views of the artists and their innovative graphic techniques. The author clearly advocates for this link and has engaged extensively in the discussion. However, a long-standing debate persists concerning the relationship between the hand and the mind in artistic practice. Regardless of whether the artist or engraver’s hand closely collaborated with the intellectual process, the author tends to concur with the poet’s assertion regarding the unity of execution and invention or conception, as articulated in the *Public Address*.

This ongoing discourse highlights the complex interplay between ideology, technique, and artistic intention, ultimately inviting further reflections on the deeper connections between creators’ beliefs and their methods of expression.