Representing violence in France 1760-1820

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Violence was an inescapable part of people’s daily lives in eighteenth-century France. The Revolution in general and the Terror in particular were marked by intense outbursts of political violence, whilst the abuse of wives, children and servants was still rife in the home. But the representation of violence in its myriad forms remains aesthetically troublesome.

Drawing on correspondence, pamphlets, novels and plays, authors analyse the portrayal of violence as a rational act, the basis of (re)written history, an expression of institutional power, and a challenge to morality. Contributions include explorations of:

• the use of the dream sequence in fiction to comprehend violence;

• how rhetoric can manipulate violent historical truth as documented by Burke in his Reflections on the Revolution in France;

• the political implications of commemorating the massacre at the Tuileries of 10 August 1792;

• how Sade’s graphic descriptions of violence placed the reader in a morally ambivalent position;

• the differing responses of individuals subjected to brutal incarceration at Vincennes and the Bastille;

• the constructive force of violence as a means of creating a sense of self.

Thomas Wynn, Introduction

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French studies

‘Most of the essays refract the question of violence through literary genres and authors: the roman noir, émigré literature, sentimental fiction, Revolutionary pamphlets, [along with] a consideration of gambling in fictional life-stories. [They] show how a distinctly literary sensibility permeates our grasp of past violence.’