

The Formation of ‘Calico-Tearing’:

A Study of the Uses of Stereotypes on the Riots in Early Eighteenth-Century London

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On 10 June 1719, riots broke out in Spitalfields, the eastern suburb of the City of London. Weavers working in the silk weaving industry took to the streets and tore calico gowns off from the backs of women who wore them. Such incidents lasted sporadically at least until 1720 and were commonly called ‘calico-tearing’. Historians have registered the Spitalfields riots as one of the many effects of the protracted disputes since the seventeenth century on the East India trade. In particular, the tearing of calico gowns are regarded as an example of gendered violence, stemming from misogynist discourses which blamed women for indulging in foreign imports and damaging the domestic industry.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how news reports and commentaries of the time described the incidents and reconstruct the meaning of the weavers’ violence for contemporary observers. The main source is the weekly newspaper, a new genre of news media at that time known for the variety of its contents. In this media, the weavers’ tearing of calico gowns was news of secondary importance as many reports focused instead on their manoeuvres in the streets and clashes with the militia and guards. Such reports demand explanation because, unlike historians’ common view, they did not seem to locate calico at the centre of dispute.

For this purpose, the paper refers to the three interrelated contexts: the images of disorder historically associated with Spitalfields, the circulation of partisan stereotypes in religious and political conflicts since the mid-seventeenth century, and the controversy on war correspondence in the 1710s. In light of these contexts, newspapers of the time can be considered prejudiced for focusing on the Spitalfields weavers committing violence. Indeed, the Spitalfields weavers were worthy of focus only when they were violent. As scholars have suggested, critics of foreign trade targeted women’s choice of clothes because women had long been associated with luxury whose unruly consumption was believed to cause the breakdown of society. The violent weavers seem to have been the counterpart of such stereotyped women in luxury, both of whom contributed to warning the reader against the dangers of calico imports. While acknowledging such misogynist uses, the paper also identifies another usage of the stereotype which did not touch female fashion. If the reports of the riots were read alongside war correspondence in the same newspaper, the weavers’ manoeuvres and clashes could overlap with the warfare taking place in Europe at that time. The paper’s ultimate goal is to examine the extent to which this overlap could become criticism of the government whose unceasing commitment with wars since 1688 was widely feared to cause social breakdown.