

## For or against the French revolution ?

➤ Using the documents and your knowledge, explain why the English were divided about the French revolution.

Both documents are about the French revolution and represent an English standpoint. Edmund Burke was a Member of Parliament, noted for his harsh criticism of the French revolution since his *Reflections* published in 1790. The cartoon by Cruikshank is dated January 1793, just a few weeks before king Louis XVI was executed, and one month before the war started between England and revolutionary France. Contrary to Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft, the famous intellectual and feminist who wrote the “letter from Norway” (doc. 2) was an enthusiastic supporter of the French revolution when she came to France in 1792. Three years later, as we are going to see, she had nonetheless changed her mind.

Isaac Cruikshank portrays Burke as an orator and a polemicist. The famous MP holds a dagger in each hand, which symbolises his rhetorical violence. Besides, his words are extremely offensive. He blames the French for being “assassins” and “cutthroats”. Indeed, the trial of the former king had already begun and it was likely that a death sentence would follow. Hence the word “regicide” on the left of the cartoon. For the English leadership, the French revolution did not respect property (“plunderers”) and it was a threat to the political stability of Europe, including the UK (“exporters of treason and rebellion”). We know that this was the main reason to start a war against France a few weeks later. The cartoon is humorous : “republicans”, in Burke’s words, becomes an insult. And the word “disorder” appears twice. The first occurrence is when Burke calls the French “lovers of disorder”, which refers to the revolution, but also in the bottom right corner of the cartoon, in which a horrified witness says that Burke “has got the French disorder”, thus suggesting that Burke indulges in just the same ideological violence as his French nemesis. More, what is meant here by disorder is not just public disorder, but mental disorder. Cruikshank mocks Burke for his obsessional hatred of the French revolution, which looks more and more like a kind of madness. But was Cruikshank himself a supporter of the French revolutionaries ? Not so, because we should not forget the expression “the French disorder”. The cartoonist saw the French revolution as a problem, arguably a threat. He simply meant that to fight it, the English should not imitate the rhetorical violence of the French.

Wollstonecraft had witnessed that violence in France. And it was not only rhetorical. She had come as a friend of the revolution but, as an Englishwoman, she came under suspicion of being a spy. Under such a charge, she might have been sent to the guillotine. She had a narrow escape. Her letter from Norway is dated 1795. One year before, Robespierre had been arrested and executed. The reign of Terror suddenly came to an end. This extract shows that the French revolution still had supporters in Northern Europe who, in spite of the “atrocities”, “wished well” to the French republic, because the French armies were fighting for freedom (lines 4-7). We can argue that Wollstonecraft still believed in the lofty ideals of 1789 : equality, freedom of speech, liberty and the rights of man, to which she added her own vindication of the rights of woman. Her letter also shows that the English press was – not surprisingly – hostile to the French revolution (“most exaggerated accounts...”, lines 3-4). Yet, her political views had changed as a consequence of her own mishaps in France. She was now convinced that Robespierre was a “tyrant” (line 7), a word that in some of her earlier writings would have applied to the king. More, she even called Robespierre “a monster”, which is evidence of her own disgust.

Those documents have something in common : they both show a disapproval of extreme violence. Cruikshank mocks the polemical style of Edmund Burke, but he fears the “French disorder” just as much. Wollstonecraft remained true to herself, she did not renounce her ideals of liberty and equality – the “bright beams” of 1789, but she had moved from radicalism to a more moderate stance.