A King’s Decapitation

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Abstract:

This research proves that the painting of Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) from 1800 (*The Cannibals*), and his paintings from 1820-1823 (The Black Paintings, *Judith* and *Saturn*, and Miniature, *Judith*) represent changing ideas on decapitation of a monarch. First, one must look at representations of decapitations before the turn of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century with focus on the French Revolution and Louis XVI. Then one needs to compare the early depictions with those twenty years later under the rule of Fernando VII in Spain when decapitation is represented in a new light through the works of Goya. The research strategy employs semiotics to determine the change in the representation of decapitation in relation to the King and his rule.
**Introduction**

Decapitation has always been present in our world. From the beginning of man and the first sharp tool, humans have been fascinated with the separation of the head from the body. The body is essential, thus the body has always held great importance (Regina IX). The body is the basis for symbolism because humans share and understand the importance of the body for life. Changing the body in any way has meaning. When the human head is separated from the body, the action is no longer just one of violence but means something more (Janes X). There is no such thing as natural decapitation; in nature decapitation is accidental. The head cannot naturally separate from the body unless a deliberate act is done for a greater purpose (Janes 2). The desire to decapitate a body affirms the need of someone to obtain the “power” that is symbolic between the body and head.

The head as a symbol can be used in many different ways. It has two primary earnings, one religious and the other political. The head taken for political gain, as a trophy of war, is presented to people either as a symbol of political struggle or a symbol of public execution (Janes 14). The latter trophy head, or head taken for presentation, faded out with the formation of city-states, but the power decapitations represented then is still relevant. Heads taken for political gain have come to show that justice has been served: the sovereign’s law has been enforced but the sovereign is no longer pulling the cord of the guillotine only placed his head over the basket. What does it mean when the king is decapitated? How is the king’s head different than that of the common people? Since the Middle Ages the king has been seen to have two separate bodies: the natural body, which he is born, and the political body which he inherits. Both represent different forms of his status (Kantorowicz 3-6).
The king is seen as the center of law, *corporation sole*, and the body of the king as the state itself. Through the king, his heirs, and their successors, the law is carried and survives forever; thus the king’s body never dies. The mortal body exists only as a pedestal for the other, carrying out duties set by the political (Kantorowicz 20-23). When these two halves no longer agree or contradict one another, the mortal body is destroyed to allow the political body to carry on. The head of the king is the seat of the power of the kingdom. To take a king’s head is to separate the mortal body from the political body, which defines mortality and the legacy of his law.

One of the most famous executions of a king is that of King Louis XVI. The events that led up to and took place after his death separate his execution from other beheadings. The head of Louis XVI symbolized more than just the transfer of power but represented the change of power from an old regime to a new type of political body. This idea profoundly impacted Goya.

**The French Revolution and Louis XVI**

The French revolution began in 1789 and lasted ten years, resulting in the fall of the absolute monarch in France. In 1793, the revolution took the head of Louis XVI, the king of France. Before Louis XVI was led up to the stage, he was stripped of his title and was no longer royalty. Thus mortal body of Louis XVI no longer represented the body of the state. In the years following the decapitation of Louis XVI, a new constitution was written and a new type of government emerged. In 1795, the new constitution was enacted and formed the Directory.

The Directory allowed the ex-royalty and aristocrats, who had been hunted down and imprisoned during the Terror, the opportunity to gain power again. The new freedom they found with the constitution and the memory of the Terror led to hold a vendetta against the bourgeois of France (Doyle 318-340). Though the constitution was meant to stop the senseless killing of
the Terror, but many people were still killed. The new Republic was geared for freedoms and was anti-royalist, censorship and the ex-royals ruled to create a false sense of freedom and enlightenment.

The beheading of Louis XVI was pictured in paintings and prints, but one scene was reproduced more than others. In Figure 1, Louis XVI is beheaded and a young soldier hastily grabs the king’s head. The young soldier displays it to the crowd that has gathered around the stage. This image became the visual embodiment of the decapitation of Louis XVI.

Before addressing Goya’s response to the king’s decapitation the French understanding of barbarous behavior must be explained. The sixteenth-century French writer, Michel de Montaigne’s essay titled “Of Cannibals” comments on the barbarity of the modern French government. Montaigne compares the “modern” society to that of a barbaric culture from the Americas. Though the barbarians are fictional, Montaigne makes a point to show the humanity of their practices compared to those in Europe. The barbarians of Montaigne’s essay live in a “liberal” society that Montaigne hints at being the ideal way to live (Keohane 363-390). Montaigne scholar Nannerl Keohane says that Montaigne’s cannibal’s idea of equality was foolish (Keohane 13-14). Even in the sixteenth-century we had progressed too far to return to a true egalitarian society.

Having established the context for beheadings and cannibalism, we may now try to understand Goya’s use of these themes. In Cannibals Contemplating Human Remains (Figure 2), a darkening cave is the scene of a huddle of naked bodies in which one stands above the rest, with a hand and head held aloft. The cave, set in an unknown wilderness, recedes quickly into darkness. The standing figure is the main focus of the painting, illuminated by the small amount of light that penetrates the entrance of the cave. Beneath the standing figure is the rest of the
body from the head and hand. The figures huddle around the standing figure and focus their attention on the main figure and the contents of his hands.

This scene can be compared to the prints of Louis XVI’s decapitation. The French crowd is replaced with a huddle of savages. The head of the victim in both works is held out to the crowd who look on with interest. The king’s head is replaced with a head and severed hand. The executioner is replaced with a sexless savage. Based on the similarities and timing of Goya’s image, the research argues that the painting represents the chaos that followed the decapitation of Louis XVI. Goya, an informed and educated man, could not have conceived a decapitation without considering the French King’s execution three years earlier. In Montaigne’s essay a liberal society is compared to that of cannibals. The regime of Louis XVI and the absolutist France were replaced with a liberal Republic that was set to restore the will of the people and rebuild France. The liberal Republic was supposed to be free and enlightened, but it consumed itself with violence and fear that can be seen in the barbarous society of Montaigne. Goya uses cannibals to represent the new liberal government of France and credits their rise to power to the fall of the king. Goya’s paring of imagery, cannibalism, and decapitation alluded to the negative connotation that is read from the primitive nature of both acts.

Goya’s use of cannibalism, which is seen as being primitive and negative, and the beheading of Louis XVI, who was an absolute monarch, places Goya on the side of the Old Regime. Goya as a royal painter in Spain was very close to the monarchs under whom he painted. Louis XVI’s decapitation was especially savage because he had been stripped of his title before he was beheaded. Why behead a man who no longer has any clout within the kingdom? Too many preservation of the monarch would have been the most important thing, as can be seen after the revolution in Spain.
Fernando VII in Spain

Twenty-two years after the execution of Louis XVI, Fernando VII came to the throne of Spain. Fernando VII spent six years in Valençay as the prisoner of Napoleon Bonaparte. The citizens saw the return of Fernando VII as a sign that Spain would return to the glory of the pre-war years. In turn, Fernando VII stated three days after his release that he would do everything in his power to benefit his people (Bergamini 165). The French revolution had turned many Spanish citizens against any sign of liberalism. The return of Fernando VII and an absolute monarchy was refreshing for the Spanish people, who had lived as little more than slaves during the French occupancy.

Unfortunately, the reign of Fernando VII did not fulfill its promise. He found refuge in narrow-minded piety and was mistrusting of those who were smarter than he. The inquisition was of great interest to Fernando VII, and he showed great cruelty to those who were thought to be against the empire. In 1812, two years before Fernando returned, a new liberal constitution was drafted and waited for the return of the king to enact the changes (Bergamini 163). When Fernando returned, he proceeded to hunt down all the liberals who drafted and signed the constitution. He additionally nullified some of the reforms made by eighteenth-century enlightened kings before the French invasion of Spain. The initiatives taken by Fernando VII during his rule showed brutality above all else, and until 1820 Fernando VII answered to no one.

A call for revolt on the first day of 1820 marked a turn in Fernando VII’s rule. By March, after small rebellions in the Spanish providences, the crown finally attempted to meet with the rebels. Fernando declared that he would observe the constitution of 1812 by stating, “Let us step out boldly, I at your head, along the constitutional path” (Bergamini 174). His words would later be shown in vain.
Goya recognized the viciousness shown by Fernando VII. The work of Goya between 1820 and 1823 reflects Fernando VII viciousness. Goya’s paintings depict a very different interpretation of beheadings. Goya’s “black” frescos on the wall of Quinta del Sordo use chiaroscuro to create an eerie atmosphere. Two of these paintings Saturn and Judith (Figure 3 and Figure 4) share a wall and are, this research argues, representations of Goya’s thoughts of Fernando VII.

Goya’s black paintings, like those of the cannibals, use decapitation as a metaphor for reform, but unlike the cannibals the black paintings call for it. Saturn and Judith depict decapitation in two different phases. Saturn has already decapitated his victim and has started to consume the rest of the body, while Judith is raising her sword, preparing to strike at the neck of Holofernes. These two scenes from Greek mythology and the Old Testament show Goya’s changing views on the decapitation of Kings.

Goya’s Saturn Devouring his Children is a metaphor for Fernando VII’s treatment of his citizens. Saturn is a Roman God whose mythology is very similar to the rule of Fernando. Saturn was born from Terra and Caelus. Caelus hated his children and began to lock them in the center of the earth. Terra became angered and asked her children to fight their father. Saturn, the only one to comply, defeated his father; and became the ruler of the universe. It was prophesized that someday one of Saturn’s sons would rise up against and kill Saturn. Saturn became paranoid and devoured every child his wife had. The prophecy comes true when his wife smuggles a child to Earth, Zeus, who returns to defeat his father.

In comparison Fernando VII was believed to be the great savior; he was to come back from imprisonment and bring back the formal glory of Spain. He received a warm welcome back to Spain, which quickly faded when he started taking away liberties citizens had enjoyed before
the French invasion. Fernando VII stated on several occasions that he wished to do what was best for Spain, but he would raise a group up only to send the army after them a week later. Fernando VII, like Saturn, ate his children for fear of what they could do to him.

The black painting of Saturn describes what Goya perceived as Fernando VII’s true nature. Saturn stands in the middle of the picture frame with a limp body in his right hand. He holds the body so tightly that blood can be seen seeping from his grip. Saturn’s body is drawn back and is cast in shadow while his head and arms hold his victim out in front of him. Saturn’s head, though not in direct light, is the main focus of the painting. His facial expression is that of a scared child, eyes wide open, staring past the viewer at some unknown entity. His mouth is wide opened about to take another bite. Saturn’s, or should I say Fernando VII’s face is that of uncertainty and fear. As king, Fernando VII frequently changed his mind, calling for the death of those he had just raised to power for fear of being overtaken.

Goya compares Fernando VII to Saturn to show the corruption of Fernando VII, who, like Louis XVI, had lost sight of his body. He could no longer keep the balance between his natural body and the body of the king. Fearing for his natural body above the political, so he ate it, he sought to stay in the good graces of the group. He thought to hold power to save his mortal head but would then use his political power to get rid of the group. Fernando VII’s selfishness of body is not what a king should be. Kingship is an effigy of God. The king is the animate law and is a deity on Earth (Kantorowicz 499-500) Fernando VII held none of these values and his virtue was in question.

If the cannibalizing, decapitating Saturn represented Fernando VII, Goya’s Judith slaying Holofernes painted a different picture. The book of Judith is from the Old Testament and speaks of virtue’s conquest of vice. Judith was a widow of Bethulia who took it upon herself to save the
city from the Assyrian Captain Holofernes. Judith and her maid gained entrance to the Assyrian camp and into Holofernes tent. After Holofernes had fallen asleep, Judith took his sword into her hands and hacked off his head. Holofernes’s head was presented to the governors of Bethulia and placed on the gates as a sign of the Assyrian captain’s defeat (Ploeg).

_Judith_ is the epitome of virtue and her defeat of Holofernes is, this research argues, a metaphor for the destruction of Fernando VII and his vices. Judith is the focus of the painting. She is fully illuminated while her maid who is praying is in shadow. Judith holds Holofernes sword in her right hand, while her left hand (not in the picture frame) grasps the hair of Holofernes. Judith, as a representation of virtue, is raising the sword to decapitate Holofernes, or vice. The action is the main point of this painting. Goya uses light and dark to add emphasis to Judith’s actions. Judith, fully illuminated, is placed in a dark background. Her upper body, arm, and sword create directional cues from the sword from Judith to Holofernes head. The sword through virtue conquers vice. Goya here advocates that Holofernes or Fernando VII’s vice be conquered by virtue.

In 1824, Goya left Spain for Bordeaux, where he continued to paint about the Spanish monarch. Goya created a miniature on ivory of _Judith_ (Figure 5). Goya’s depiction of Judith on ivory is very different from the black painting of Judith from two years earlier. Goya had gone into voluntarily exile in France because he had had enough of Fernando VII tyrannical rule (Bergamini 182). Goya gave up on the idea of reform for Fernando VII and believed that it was time for strong action.

_Judith_ on ivory is no longer about the action of vice over virtue but about the decapitation of the “head.” The same Judith from the black paintings is depicted in the miniature. The women share a similar dress pattern with bare shoulders. The sword remains in her right hand but this
time she has struck the neck of Holofernes once. The overcoming of vice is no longer important, but the destruction of it is the new goal. The slight blue of Judith’s dress separates her from the background and Holofernes. The use of red for the sword draws the eye from Judith in the center of the image to Holofernes. The slight blurring of Judith’s right arm denotes movement; this eludes the lifting of the sword from the neck only to be brought back down again. Goya’s strong lines add the feeling of restlessness and urgency. Goya’s image shows lack of patience for reform and a call for action.

**Conclusion**

Goya’s use of decapitation in *Cannibals Contemplating Human Remains*, the black paintings of Saturn and Judith, and his miniature Judith, shows his feelings about the beheading of a monarch. Louis XVI’s decapitation allowed for the takeover of “cannibals” in France. Goya’s use of cannibals to represent the Directory and the “liberals” of the French Revolution show that he felt Louis XVI’s beheading was not beneficial. Later in Spain with the rule of Fernando VII, Goya’s paintings show the advantage of decapitation of a monarch. Goya’s images of Saturn and Judith show that the decapitation of Fernando VII would bring virtue back to Spain. His ivory miniature produced after his exile speaks to the quick action that Goya felt should be taken against Fernando VII. Using decapitation in his work, Goya depicted not only events in the past but pushed for future action.
Works Cited


Figure 1. *Journeé du 21 Janvier 1793*. Print.
Figure 2. Goya, Francisco. *Cannibals Contemplating Human Remains*. 1800-8. Oil on wood. 32.7x47.2cm.
Figure 3. Goya, Francisco. *Saturn Devouring One of his Sons*. 1820-23. Mural Transferred to canvas. 1460 x 830 mm.
Figure 4. Goya, Francisco. *Judith and Holofernes*. 1819-23. Painting.
Figure 5. Goya, Francisco. *Judith and Holofernes*. 1824-25. Carbon black and watercolor on ivory. 9.0 x 8.5 cm.