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Reading the Nation: Literary Culture and Political Allegiance in 1790s Britain

By

Isaac Ward Daly

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Faculty Advisor: Steven Pincus

Preceptor: Deirdre Lyons

I. Popular Conservatism

In 1797, the British writer Isaac D'Israeli published a satirical novel. *Vaurien* concerned the hopeless quest of a radical Frenchman to bring revolution to the shores of Britain. Staunchly opposed to the extreme turn the French Revolution had taken since 1792-3, D'Israeli wrote the titular fool as an intellectual blind to the consequences of implementing his principles. When faced with death, Vaurien is not disturbed by the prospect of being "hanged, guillotined, beheaded, broken on the wheel, or empaled," because "What is inevitable, to a superior mind conveys no terror."[1] His coldly rational approach to the world purifies his own self-image but alienates him from the reader. Part of his humanity seems to be missing. Whether his political beliefs are right or wrong, *Vaurien* cautions its audience from following so suicidal a man.

D'Israeli was a conservative. True to the stereotype, in the face of present crisis, his instinct was largely to retreat to the familiar territory of his forefathers. In the words of the founder of modern conservatism, "The dislike I feel to revolutions…make it not unadviseable, in my opinion, to call back our attention to the true principles of our own domestic laws".[2] The stock image of the conservative as opposed to all change is not new. In 1791, Thomas Paine derided Edmund Burke's condemnation of any future revolutionary endeavor in Britain. So averse was Burke to political change, that his caution amounted to subjugating "the rights of the *living*" to "the authority of the dead."[3] Although there is some truth to the stereotype, it distorts creative and popular dimensions of the conservatism founded in Britain during the 1790s.

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[1] Isaac D'Israeli, *Vaurien: or, Sketches of the Times, Vol. II*. (J. Murray and S. Highley, 1797), 313.
[2] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Penguin Books, 2004), 110
[3] Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc. & J.M. Dent and Sons, Limited, 1951), 13.

Within the Anglo-American tradition, "conscious conservatism" arrived through the British reaction to the French Revolution.[4] Troubled by the enthusiasm with which some of his countrymen were celebrating revolutionary principles, Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790.[5] More than a rebuke of the Revolution, *Reflections* provided an alternate political philosophy to justify the British state as it already was. In Burke's reckoning, Britons were uniquely blessed to live in a country with a stable society and relative liberty. These qualities were not the sole products of politics; they were maintained by Britain's culture, religion, and social life. In effect, Burke advanced a view that allowed everyday life to be seen in terms of how it preserved national identity. To be was to be British.

Reflections' diagnosis of the dangers inherent in the French Revolution proved prescient. So did its author's claims about the political leanings of the British people. The reasons for Burke's opposition to the French Revolution have been poured over by contemporaries and historians alike. Less addressed is the popular dimension the conservatism of *Reflections* inspired. Once the book became a credible authority, its call-to-arms could not be ignored. Burke had declared "He is not a man who does not feel such emotions on such occasions. He does not deserve the name of a free man who will not express them."[6] Burke had written these words with reference to the revolutionary threat to property rights, but condemnation of political quiescence was not restricted to the property issue. Radical writers loomed large in the early days of the Revolution because of their prolific presence on the printed page. Burke was only one voice. To confirm what he had claimed about the true character of the British people, more of his

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[4] Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Henry Regnery Company, 1960), 4.
[5] For an overview of Edmund Burke's background and the context in which *Reflections* was written, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Introduction," in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien. (Penguin Books, 2004).
[6] Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 216.

countrymen would have to commit their views to paper. Though Anti-Jacobin literature did not emerge due to an overt set of instructions, its populist appeal was in harmony with the manner in which Burke framed radical threats and the popular writing that was needed to meet the moment. The role of novels and other more accessible modes of writing are not a niche concern. By capturing even the spheres of literary life that were historically less political, conservatives cultivated a climate of opinion that helped the reading public emerge from an age of revolution with renewed commitment to a historic British state. Through this process, Britons were unique participants in an otherwise violent age of nationalism.

II. Overlooked Subversion, Overlooked Conformity

In the early years of the Revolution, Burke's conservatism was not in fashion. The speed with which the ancien regime withered across the Channel suggested that radical writers were espousing the politics of the future.[7] When a set of new ideas has an aura of inevitability, its potency can provoke enthusiasm or alarm. From 1789 to 1792, the Revolution tilted the reception of radicalism abroad towards the former quality. Ideas about liberty and equality, once theoretical, were now be implemented in France. 1793 reversed this dynamic. The execution of Louis XVI, France's declaration of war on Britain, and the onset of the Terror turned the Revolution into a byword for chaos.[8] To many Britons, a triumphal procession towards a revolutionary future had turned into a funereal march. To be sure, the strength of a conservative shift in public opinion benefited from the formal suppression of radical politics.[9] Prime Minister

[7] O'Brien, "Introduction," 21-22.
[8] M.O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.
[9] Roger Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience, 1795-1803* (A. Sutton, 1983), 262.

Pitt and his government censored radical publications and established a spy network to root out subversive groups.[10]

If Britain's literary class merely went silent in the face of such measures, perhaps we could perceive an otherwise radical people being forcibly muzzled. That Pitt's policies coincided with an outpouring of print denouncing the Revolution casts doubt on this conclusion. Why should the literate public's voluntary rejection of radical politics matter? There is nothing unnatural about a people opposing a country they are fighting. Might a turn towards popular conservatism have less to do with Burke, and more with a reversion to an anti-Gallic norm?[11] As J.C.D. Clark has argued, the history of eighteenth century Britain can be easily distorted by our expectation of a modern nineteenth century. Contrary to theories of Britain's gradual development of modern national identity, Britain in the 1700s was an ancien regime that was not highly liberal, individualistic, or bourgeois. Its allegiances continued to be dominated by the king, aristocrats, and the Church of England.[12] Such a state was never likely to suddenly embrace a historic rival, no matter its politics.

Even if Clark's theory of the persistence of traditional society is correct, the close of the eighteenth century is still fertile ground in which to search for the beginning of modern trends. In that case, the early popularity of a radical politics inspired by a historic rival should be what demands our attention. In a period when continental Europe underwent political, cultural, and religious transformations, why should Britain's lack of a revolution be of interest? In the mid-

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[10] See William Pitt, Parliamentary Addresses on 1, 12 February, 7 May 1793, 16 May 1794, in *The Speeches of the Right Honourable William Pitt in the House of Commons, Volume I & II* (Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1808, 1809).
[11] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (Yale University Press, 2014). 376.
[12] J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), Ch. 4.

twentieth century, just these sorts of questions caused historians to reassess the influence of radical Britons. Against the convention pronounced by Élie Halévy, that revolution was never a serious prospect in Britain, E.P. Thompson argued in his 1963 book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, that "between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers."[13] Thompson's history excavated radical movements fueled by working class resentment that had been buried by mainstream history until the 1960s. These movements were numerous and the suppression of their existence was a major contributor to the character of the early nineteenth century ruling class. Following Thompson's lead, Roger Wells made a more specific argument regarding insurrectionists in 1790s Britain. He refuted "the common and unthinking assumption that the revolutionaries' failure was preordained." Wells thought insurrectionists posed a real threat to the government, their defeat was not assured, and that patterns of British insurrectionists laid the groundwork for future popular movements of resistance.[14] More recently, Don Herzog framed conservatism as an emotional attack on the part of the establishment against a rising tide of rationality and the democracy it represented.[15] The revisionism of Thompson speaks against a study of conservative literature. Would not a more authentic history of British readers single-out the underground world of radical opinion? Yet even if we wholly accept the conclusions of these historians, conservative literature merely becomes a popular form of suppressing a real undercurrent in public discourse. In other words, the genre's significance is strengthened, not diminished.

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[13] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Vintage Books, 1966), 11.
Also see Élie Halévy, *England in 1815*, trans. D.A. Barker, E.I. Watkin (Ernest Benn Limited, 1961).
[14] Wells, *Insurrection*, 253, 261-2.
[15] Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* (Princeton University Press, 1998). Ch. 12.

Whether or not subversive types posed more of a threat to the British establishment than has previously been supposed, historians still have to contend with the fact that they did not carry the day. In his 1985 article on the British state's use of terror during the 1790s, Clive Emsley argued that the state was less effective and more permissive than traditionally thought. Had Britons possessed a firmer commitment to a radical political agenda, Pitt's policies would not prove an insurmountable barrier to success. Why, then, was radicalism unsuccessful? Part of Emsley's explanation lies in a distinction between "exemplary terror"—the official coercive power of the state, which was weak—and "unofficial terror"—by which he meant "beatings, inquisitions, sackings and ostracism."[16] In other words, if, as Wells contended, radical causes posed a serious political threat, but the state's ability to prosecute radicals was lighter than historians have thought, we can hardly credit a conservative turn solely to state terror. Radicals had to contend with pervasive social opinion that did a much more comprehensive job of snuffing them out than agents of the state could. Alongside the government's response, there was a popular disapproval of radical politics.

"Unofficial terror" was not merely social censorship; it had the positive agenda of promoting a conservative brand of "Britishness" rooted in the veneration of institutions that underpinned the country throughout the eighteenth century. As the legitimacy of long-standing political arrangements were questioned, Europeans were called to reassess their political identity. The British public responded differently to this challenge than the French, but proved no exception in the "national" framework of their answers. Though Christian and royalist allegiances remained powerful authorities, they were now aspects of one's allegiance to nation.

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[16] Clive Emsley, "Repression, 'Terror,' and the Rule of Law in England during the Decade of the French Revolution," *English Historical Review* 100 (1985), 802.

Ian Christie lamented that the historian of 1790s Britain merely pursues "causes for the non-occurrence of events."[17] Instead of seeing popular conservatism as another culprit in this uninspiring search, its literary expressions should be recognized as part of the emergence of modern national identity in Britain.

The emergence of a patriotic culture in Britain has long intrigued historians. In her book *Britons*, Linda Colley explained how the British establishment remade itself throughout the long eighteenth century. Membership of the British "elite" grew during this period to include a rising middle class.[18] For both the newly-affluent and older aristocratic families seeking to retain their position, it was advantageous to exemplify the virtues of the existing order. By the late-eighteenth century the British elite were a more meritocratic sort than their aristocratic forebears and possessed a new spirit of national devotion. The result was "the forging of a workmanlike British nation and national ideology between 1707 and the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837." *Britons* primarily addressed the rise of nationalism through the lenses of politics, economics, and material culture.[19] Colley had relatively little to say on the contributions of literary culture. Compared to the press, popular fiction is a neglected subject, though books by M.O. Grenby and Kevin Gilmartin are noteworthy exceptions.[20] Their scholarship approached conservative novels for their political significance in bolstering anti-French, anti-radical feeling. Beyond politics, however, the models literature provided for how to live well as a member of one's nation remain understudied. Moreover, the relationship between conservative ideology, more rigidly expressed in political and philosophical spheres, and the diluted and accessible style in which the

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[17] Ian R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution* (Clarendon, 1984), 2.
[18] Colley, *Britons*, 154.
[19] Colley, *Britons*, xiv.
[20] Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*; Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

conservatism was expressed through the relatively informal modes of literary expression, have not been adequately addressed.

Popular literature needs to be the starting point for a study of popular response to political change. Colley described her project as rescuing the "conventional voices of those far greater numbers of Britons" who have proven less fascinating in the historical record for their conformity.[21] This approach can be applied to the unremarkable writers who adopted the views of a major thinker. *Reflections* is already one of the most written-about political works in British history. Burke was an intellectual elite and one of the most important figures of the 1790s, but if the radicalism or conservatism of any one "elite" figure is to be taken as representative of broader feeling, should we not also survey the wider literature that expresses the sentiment inspired by the "great" work? The influence of a famous mind can be overshadowed by the very attention paid to the author. It is Burke's life, Burk's thoughts which become examined at the expense of the much larger number of people who made his ideas live in the years that followed. Burke himself died in 1797. He left the earth increasingly convinced that the French Revolution represented a "relentless drive for renewal" that "threatened [his] values with extinction." Yet his popularity lived on after death and the conservatism he inspired allowed people to organize around resistance to reform.[22] In Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, he credited the survival of conservatism after Burke's death to "men of learning and genius." What about the conservative multitudes he dismissed as the "many dull and unreflecting people [who] have lent their inertia to the cause of conservatism"?[23] Rather than remain within the confines of elite

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[21] Colley, *Britons*, 5.
[22] Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 926-7.
[23] Kirk. *The Conservative Mind*. 1.

opinion, historians should ask how ideas, which may initially be expressed by an elite mind, actually became part of the everyday views of the more average middle class. The true sign of a thinker's achievement is when someone who is not an intellectual and has not read his "great" work, still has an impression of it from other sources.

Following the turn of 1793, dozens of authors took it upon themselves to spread anti-radical views among all Britons. Part of this project involved the pretense that a writer spoke for all classes. Here, the study of popular literature encounters its major limit: who constituted the reading public? Popular literature cannot give the historian insight into all Britons; as late as the mid-nineteenth-century, a large minority of Britons were still illiterate.[24] It is a sad limit on literature that, despite its boundlessness in some respects, large sections of the working class remain unilluminated by literary modes of communication. This shortcoming should not deter the historian from gaining what insights novels, plays, and pamphlets do hold into the middle and aristocratic classes. In the eighteenth century, the two groups were growing closer. Colley described the development of British identity as the result of the ruling elite opening itself to a larger membership. The class-specific readership of the press contributed to this process. The lowest rungs of the social ladder that consistently read the news were the "skilled working classes," meaning "artisans and craftsmen." There is little evidence that the press made much effort to "court potential readers at social levels below this." Its readership primarily belonged to "the middling and upper ranks of society." Over time, the bourgeois character of the reading public meant the press could serve as an instrument by which "metropolitan standards and values among the propertied parts of society" could be diffused. Was popular literature any different? In

[24] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2016) 75.

its subject matter ("sensationalism," "escapism," "interest in magic and prophecy") its appeal was less elitist, but it was still a bourgeois media.[25] That did not stop writers from taking it upon themselves to represent all Britons. Some bourgeois stories were set among farmers and day laborers, with certain characters serving as exemplars of Britishness.[26]

If it was not always clear what "Britishness" meant, the universal starting point was its opposition to revolutionary France and the radical ideas propagated by British subversives. The conservative Briton and the radical were often set against each other in caricatured heroes and antagonists. While conservative literature was not confined to this stale format, it largely displayed little intellectual innovation, the authors instead parroting Edmund Burke. More significant was the accessible style in which such literature was written for its middle class readership, lending the Burkean mindset a ubiquity and purchase Burke's work alone would have struggled to emulate. By studying the common forms of text people were reading in addition to canonical works, we can see how publics at the time interacted with a supposedly influential idea.

The other reason for shifting focus from Burke to popular conservative works is more obvious. British conservatism is part of a history of nationalism, and any accounting of that phenomenon must also be a history of the literate public. As Jürgen Habermas famously claimed, Britain at the time possessed one of two fully developed "bourgeois public spheres," the other belonging to France, which was capable of producing "public opinion." Drawing less attention is his observation that "matters that are taken for granted in a culture…are of a different sort from

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[25] Bob Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press: Britain and France, 1620–1800* (Routledge, 1996), 107-8.
[26] See "A New Dialogue between Monsieur Francois and John English on the French Revolution,'" in *Political Writings of the 1790s, Volume VIII*. Edited by Gregory Claeys. (William Pickering, 1995).

the ideas sustained by conviction."[27] The implications of Habermas' claims for this study are twofold: 1) British writers could access a publishing infrastructure capable of facilitating a public discussion of politics; 2) The monumental task of defending fundamental tenets of Britishness—from political principles to social conventions to religious faith—forced writers and readers to actively believe in conventions practiced absent-mindedly before 1789.

Literature was the "public square" where strangers could bond over those tenets. According to Benedict Anderson, the press was responsible for creating an "imagined community" whereby a literate public could perceive abstract groups through the media they were consuming. As the "Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm," the "*sovereign*" nation became a new authority to order the mental worlds of readers. Without a strong print culture, this new authority could never have taken hold. Unlike aristocrats, who would routinely "marry each other's daughters or inherit each other's property," the bourgeoisie were strangers to each other. Because of print-language, however, in their everyday lives they were forced "to visualize in a general way the existence of thousands and thousands like themselves."[28] Following Anderson, one would expect a study of the conservative reaction to focus on newspapers. Bob Harris has done just that, arguing that the "circulation, readership, censorship, interventions in political life" of the British press were hugely significant to "social and cultural discussion and debate," which in turn created new "perceptions of nation."[29] Neither Anderson nor Harris were incorrect in their

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[27] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (The MIT Press, 1991), xvii, 245.
[28] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7, 77.
[29] Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press*, 106-7.

assessment of the press's importance, but their treatment of nationalism overlooks the similar role literature played in its emergence.

Why did conservatism resonate with a large segment of the reading public? How did they adopt and spread Burkean thought? The suppressive role of the state can make Britain's conservative transformation seem a top-down affair, but conservative public opinion was sustained by a steady stream of literature produced by bourgeois writers. The entry of conservatism into popular literature was especially important because of how fiction was perceived. Compared to the non-fiction content of the press, it was primarily for the reader's diversion. Anna Larpent, wife of a censor, read widely on the French Revolution during the early 1790s. Most of her information came from newspapers and pamphlets. She was happy to listen to her husband read plays under his review, but primarily valued other fiction for the "lighter vein" they provided for conversation "in the family circle."[30] Was Larpent wrong to view fiction as innocuous? By the end of the decade, it was common for volumes of frivolous fiction to also contained criticisms of radical politics and models for British living. "Anti-Jacobin fiction" became a favorite genre as a wide array of authors deliberately wrote against fashionable radical positions through stories that blended conservatism with patriotism. Expectations for fiction did not change immediately. Authors were still obligated to engage with the "social and moral" implications of otherwise political debates.[31] The demands of the medium proved conducive to the goals of conservative writers. When placed in settings that were not primarily political, the revolutionary threat could be presented in terms all readers could understand.

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[30] John Brewer, "Reconstructing the Reader: Prescriptions, Texts, and Strategies in Anna Larpent's Reading," in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. James Raven, Helen Small, Naomi Tadmor. (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 242.
[31] Grenby. *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*. 206.

Novels are especially useful sources for studying the spread of ideas among the public because they have both public and private qualities. Newspapers address a general audience and appeal to readers in general terms. Literature is similarly aimed at an audience of strangers. Novels do not assume shared personal knowledge between reader and author. In this respect, fiction is closer to the press than it is to the diary. In terms of the significance to which the two types of writing aspire, however, they are very different documents. Novels and newspapers both enter the home as public products. Unlike the newspaper, the novel is meant to stay there. Its resting place is the shelf, not the waste bin. If well received, a book is circulated among a select group of known people, traveling within a private world. Where the newspaper seeks to bring the private reader into public, literature seeks to embed a public topic of general concern into the personal life of an individual.

Fiction, filled as it is with the emotional and the personal, may seem shaky ground on which to study the diffusion of ideas among the public. Yet if "elite" ideas become influential, as intellectuals always hope they will, those ideas are always changed as they are accepted or rejected by a public untrained in intellectual inquiry. Inevitably, ideas will be morphed by the everyday concerns and the emotional lives of real people. Rather than view distortion as a problem, we should examine it as a potential mechanism by which an idea in a book can become a sentiment among the public. The popularization of Burke's views necessarily led to a "short-hand" of conservatism that could evoke a range of patriotic positions among less-educated readers. Through the unacademic use of conservative sentiment in popular literature, we see how an idea "travels" from an elite text to a general public. The journey involves a good deal of stereotyping, but that simplification also permits a critical mass to make an idea "useful" beyond the ivory tower. In an age when politics grew both popular and nationalistic, the distorting effect

a public can exert on an idea it adopts is significant to our study of modern political movements. What were the mechanisms by which conservative opinions become patriotic sentiments? Literary culture was the marketplace for the exchanges by which distortion and popularization took place.

The consequence of revolutionary instability was that the solution to it was a popular nationalism that was at once historically-minded and liberating, yet also profoundly destructive. The Western model of nationalism has proven a doggedly determinative force in modern times. In light of the many conflicts waged in its name, nationalism's violent inception from 1789 to 1815 can appear a dismally appropriate harbinger for the wars that followed it. Britain's exceptionally stable experience of growing national consciousness in the 1790s, far from a dull side-story, merits attention for its peacefulness. Can the transition to modern national allegiance be achieved without the attendant destruction? The emergence of an energetic conservative defense of Britishness suggests so. Can a people form nationalist identities absent an external domestic conflict? In British popular literature they are recorded as doing just that.

III. Radical Experiments

This paper's focus on conservative literature is not meant to underplay the presence of radical novels in the 1790s. Especially in the early part of the decade, radical writers sought to spread views sympathetic to revolutionary principles among the reading public. Before the Revolution discredited itself with regicide and Terror, developments in France could be welcomed by all types of Britons. Those already inclined towards radicalism could celebrate the triumph of their principles over an absolute monarchy. More traditional types could revel in the sudden collapse of a historic rival. Plenty of Britons saw in the formation of the National Assembly and constitutional monarchy a despotic nation undergoing its own 'glorious

revolution.' Perhaps an enemy was finally coming around to the British mode of governing. In this environment, the "tut-tut" quality of Edmund Burke was hardly the most alluring position to take.

In the wake of 1789, British radicals did find their discursive position enormously improved. They were not, however, overnight creations of events across the Channel. As early as the 1760s, the populism of John Wilkes had inspired riots. During the French Revolution, British MPs, particularly follows of Charles James Fox, displayed "a new sensitivity to liberty" that was "probably a register of the impact of the Wilkite and subsequent agitations."[32] Following the loss of the American colonies in 1783, British politics entered a period of savage self-criticism. Radical journalists published abrasive and personal attacks on government officials and their policies to a degree that had previously been considered impolite. Britain was in a uniquely weak position. A huge portion of its North American empire was lost, and a second empire in Africa and Asia had yet to bloom. Disillusionment following military defeat and a reviving tradition of radical agitation made the country vulnerable to new political winds. Conversely, a mood of "defensive introspection" caused a resurgence of royalist affection for George III, who was seen as a fellow victim of Lord North's ineptitude.[33] By the time news of Revolution arrived, the lineaments of radical and conservative responses were already laid. The highly literate British public had a natural "mass demand for print."[34] That the fiction of the early 1790s engaged with radical principles was a reflection of a consistent commercial interest in public writing and the logical next step of ongoing political developments.

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[32] Emsley, "Repression, 'Terror,' and the Rule of Law in England during the Decade of the French Revolution," 824.
[33] Colley, *Britons*, 212-13.
[34] Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press*, 14.

In both the radical and the conservative spheres of British literature, women were especially prominent. This is one of the advantages fiction offers the historian: what it loses in truthfulness it gains in representation. In the early 1790s, radical women were in the ascendant. The most famous of these women was Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Vindication of the Rights of Man* was the first major radical response to Burke's *Reflections*. The text celebrated the French Revolution and encouraged readers to see developments in France as a model to emulate. Wollstonecraft's name remains current today because of her follow-up, *A Vindication for the Rights of Women*, published in 1792. That work has established Wollstonecraft as a founder of modern feminism. She has rightly attracted much scholarly attention for her overt and systematic argument for equality between the sexes, a novelty in the British tradition. Though her works were widely read, they were also political treatises. What would the principles of radical womanhood look like in real life? Women and men tried to engage their readers on this matter through novels.[35]

When the French Revolution arrived, Helen Maria Williams had already established a name for herself as a poet and abolitionist. Her work had invited praise from Samuel Johnson and the admiration of William Wordsworth. Like Wollstonecraft, Williams regarded the French Revolution as a glorious event. She set out for France to see the Revolution for herself in 1790. Over the next decade, Williams raised her profile by regularly publishing *Letters from France* (1790-6), political commentary based on her eyewitness account of the Revolution. Although her

[35] For scholarship on Mary Wollstonecraft's influence on other writers of her period, see Claudia L. Johnson (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

closest French friends were Girondins and Williams was herself horrified by the Terror, she remained committed to the promise evinced by the early days of the Revolution.[36]

Between her poetry and political writing, Williams only published one novel. *Julia* was released in 1790. The book is neither a literary masterpiece nor is it overtly about the Revolution. Yet both of these qualities make *Julia* a useful text for our purposes. What views did an "average" novel espouse in the early days of Revolution? How did the author embed her politics in what was otherwise a work of diverting fiction? *Julia* is on its surface a typical romance about well-mannered aristocrats. The titular heroine falls in love with her friend Charlotte's husband, Frederick Seymour. Her affection is reciprocated but neither party acts on their feelings. When Frederick dies shortly after Charlotte gives birth, Julia despairs of finding happiness in love and instead finds comfort in Christianity and caring for the Seymour's child.

Despite Williams' radical politics, the values *Julia* espoused are conservative in some respects. A young woman is seized with a desire to pursue romantic love at the cost of a marriage. She resists temptation and is rewarded with the suffering that marks a good Christian life. Williams provides several hints to the reader, however, that indicate her political leanings and complicate what might otherwise be a straightforward conservative reading of the story. *Julia* is set in 1776 and the American War for Independence serves as a backdrop. This setting, coupled with the timing of *Julia*'s publication a year after the start of the French Revolution, would have stood out to readers familiar with the author's radical views. *Julia* also bears striking resemblance to Rousseau's novel *Julie* (1761), in which a young woman falls in love with her plebian tutor before eventually marrying an atheist. Rousseau's French "Julie" may have

[36] For the most recent major work on Helen Maria Williams, see Deborah Kennedy, *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution* (Bucknell University Press, 2002).

transgressed further than Williams' British "Julia," but the latter woman is still an allusion to the more liberal literary tradition of the country Williams admired. In case these conspicuous coincidences were lost on readers, Williams has a character write a furious letter to his sister when he learns she is living under the protection of "a man who had drawn his sword against America."[37] Later in the novel, Williams inserts a poem describing the fall of the Bastille in victorious terms.

What was Williams trying to impart to her reader? Although Julia's self-negation and submission to Christian living are hardly revolutionary, the heroine has implacable moral character and as a woman possesses an independent spirit. When she discusses *The Sorrows of Young Werther* with Seymour, she upbraids him for his high regard for a book lacking the correct "principles." Seymour tries to retort that a well-written character should not be perfect but evince "the feelings and infirmities of man," but if he is a proto-Romantic, Julia is not. [38] She is committed to a model of womanhood that is guided by moral commitments and is not moved by passion. In resisting the temptation of an affair, she exemplifies a self-mastery antithetical to the drama of *Werther*. Upon Seymour's rebuttal, Julia does not pursue a conversation that might ignite their feelings for one another. Such a conclusion would be to hand Seymour the victory. Rather than give into passion, Julia abruptly leaves. Her self-control is a message: with enough conviction, an individual's conduct can vindicate her principles. Julia's caution can be mistaken for conservatism. It is in fact in step with the overt displays of radicalism elsewhere in the novel. By not allowing her feeling to master her, Julia represents the prudent deliberation Williams believes the ideal woman requires. After all, despite Julia's meek appearance, she ultimately

[37] Helen Maria Williams, *Julia, a Novel, Interspersed with some Poetical Pieces*. *Vol. I.* (T. Cadell, 1790), 258.
[38] Helen Maria Williams, *Julia, a Novel, Interspersed with some Poetical Pieces*. *Vol. II.* (T. Cadell, 1790), 202-3.

refuses to marry. Seymour remains an impossibility, but Julia's desire for him remains also. At the novel's conclusion, the choice she makes is the only option that conforms both to goodness and her individualistic desires. A true conservative would have fulfilled her social obligation by marrying another. In light of Williams' abolitionist background, *Julia* is consistent with its author's radical commitment to the autonomy of the individual. In light of her Girondin friendships and opposition to Robespierre, the novel is also consistent with the author's opposition to the overthrow of traditional values. Julia's achievement is to honor her own wishes within a familiar Christian worldview. Williams is a reminder that radicals came in different degrees. As the decade wore on, the relative moderation of writers like Williams could be overlooked by conservative caricatures of radicals as a whole based solely on their more extreme members. John Scott-Waring made this exact complaint in *A Letter to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke*. He belonged to one of the radical societies Burke warned was attempting to provoke revolution in Britain, but considered himself a patriot who belonged to the Church of England and honored the king.[39] As with subsequent "left-right" debates, many people did not fit the caricatures one side made of the other.

On the other hand, conservative writers were not dealing in pure fiction when they described the extremities of radicals. Other radicals writers went further than Williams. Elizabeth Inchbald was a writer, actress, and radical friend of William Godwin.[40] In Inchbald's 1791 novel *A Simple Story*, Miss Milner is a vivacious young lady who aggressively pursues the men she desires. She is an orphan and is being raised under the guardianship of a Catholic ward, Fr.

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[39] John Scott, *A Letter to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, in Reply to his "Reflections on the Revolution in France, &c."* (J. Sheppard et al, 1791), 1-2.
[40] See Ben P. Robertson, *Elizabeth Inchbald's Reputation: A Publishing and Reception History* (Pickering and Chatto), 2013.

Dorriforth. Milner's romantic adventures culminate in her falling in love with her much older father figure. Through fortuitous circumstances, he must for familial reasons forsake his vows and marry. Milner reacts initially with "astonishment and joy" before becoming jealous that Dorriforth is not "immediately fixed upon her."[41] She sets out on a campaign to win his affection and succeeds. His Catholicism is an obstacle, but the book is not actually concerned with religious matters. Inchbald's interest is in the taboo of crossing denominational boundaries. Milner does so with ease for no greater reason than that her heart commands her to. *A Simple Story* was a hit upon release in large part due to the outrageous behavior of its central character. Traditional teachings against forwardness in a young lady and mingling with Catholics were torn up within the pages of the novel seemingly without a thought.

The radical politics implicit in *A Simple Story* are plain, but the intentionality of its message is complicated by the novel's long gestation. Inchbald drafted the most controversial sections of the story in the 1770s. The intentions of radical authors become easier to discern beginning in 1791-2, due in large part to the publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, which quickly cemented itself as the canonical argument against Burke. Thereafter, radical Britons had their own intellectual tome to rally around. Thomas Holcroft was a dramatist and friend of Paine's and assisted him in the publication of *Rights*. Holcroft's 1792 novel, *Anna St. Ives*, was yet another marriage plot, but its politics were easier to discern. The story concerns Anna, a young woman from an affluent background. She is an idealist educated in Enlightenment-thinking, both egalitarian and utilitarian. Anna must choose between two suitors. Coke Clifton is the traditional candidate, an upper-class man with a low opinion of women and boorish tendencies. Then there is Frank Henley, in every way better suited to Anna. He has educated

[41] Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story* (F. C. and J. Rivington et. al., 1820), 105, 107.

himself and holds Enlightenment views similar to hers. Fatally, he is hampered by a working-class background. The novel is mainly concerned with conversations between these characters. Anna and Henley fall in love through agreeing on things, while Anna is constantly challenging the unthinking Coke for his backward views. Through these conversations, the novel attacks prevailing beliefs about the worth of virginity and the family-centric model for raising children. As the characters discuss opinions falling well outside the social norm, the novel is further distinguished by its conspicuously irreligious framework. The Christian consequences of characters' actions seem never to occur to them at all.

The courtship of Anna concludes when she agrees with Henley that she should marry Clifton. This is the enlightened choice. Henley would not become a better member of society for marrying Anna. He has already been born to "enlighten, reform, and bless" his country.[42] Clifton, on the other hand, could be improved by Anna. Despite Anna's egalitarian love for Henley, reason must rule passion. The story's resolution does not follow the usual pattern of shrinking from its radical qualities through the sudden discovery of secret relatives and wealth. The novel ends by embarking upon the enlightened project Anna has thus far only considered. There is no compromise as in *Julia*. The consequences of that novel were ultimately for the benefit of the individual. The outer world is left intact. In *Anna St. Ives*, Holcroft showed readers how each person could maximize the enlightened transformation of society.

Charlotte Smith was already a famous figure by the 1790s, having established herself as a major poet of sensibility with her collection *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1784. Over 1792-3, she published two novels, *Desmond* and *The Old Manor House*.[43] *Desmond* consisted of a series of letters

[42] Thomas Holcroft, *Anna St. Ives. Volume V*. (Shepperson and Reynolds, 1792), 153.
[43] See Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography*, (St. Martin's Press, 1998).

between the eponymous character and Mr. Bethel. The story begins sometime in 1790 and unfolds over the first years of the French Revolution. Lionel Desmond is an idealistic young man who is ruled by his principles and feelings. He is in love with a Geraldine Varney, a married woman. The personal component of *Desmond* has its own radical undertones. Desmond is repeatedly dissuaded by Bethel from pursuing Mrs. Varney, but he disregards this advice, trusting in the purity of his feelings as a kind of vindication for the correctness of his actions. Yet what made the novel a sensation among radicals and attracted the ire of other readers, was the political commentary weaved throughout *Desmond*. When news of the French Revolution arrives, most characters are horrified. Desmond is not, and uses every opportunity to defend revolutionaries from the slander he hears in England. Eventually, Desmond travels to France, where he writes in adulatory terms about the reforms he sees being implemented. *Desmond*, and novels like it, were not themselves "news." The reader would have already been familiar with the revolutionary developments of which the characters of *Desmond* hear. Smith's book does not inform—it normalizes. First, Smith makes revolutionary events the subject of a commonplace novel. Then, she depicts a range of reactions to the Revolution, of which her readers were likely to have experienced one kind or another. Smith knew this was likely and in the preface to her novel, wrote that the "political passages dispersed throughout the work" were "drawn from conversations to which I have been witness, in England, and in France."[44] Crucially, the reaction that is given the most authority is Smith's herself, through Desmond's positive interpretation of events. Alongside its romantic narrative, *Desmond* provided both a catalogue of Britain's most recent political conversations and advanced the position on those issues Smith thought correct.

[44] Charlotte Smith, *Desmond. Volume I* (G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1792), ii.

The Old Manor House also displayed the author's sympathies towards revolutionary France, but crucially, the novel was composed over the second half of 1792. British public opinion cooled during these months, as from the September Massacres on the comparatively moderate settlement of the early Revolution began to unravel. By the time *The Old Manor House* was published in 1793, the enthusiastic reception a book like *Desmond* could receive a year earlier had vanished. Unsurprisingly, Smith's follow-up novel was more oblique in its radicalism. *The Old Manor House* is a more domestic story, is set during the 1770s, and has the more distant American Revolution for its allegorical backdrop. Its story concerns the inheritance of a large estate and the role property plays in romance. Both Smith novels contained radical content. *Desmond* made the author's revolutionary views plain through direct commentary on current events. *The Old Manor House* was more a work of British radicalism, in that its criticisms were about the oppressive role the propertied exerted over the propertyless. If the latter subject had more explosive potential in the long run of British history, in the changing atmosphere of 1793, it was the safer book to publish.[45]

IV. Conservative Literature

From the September Massacres until Britain's entry into the Revolutionary Wars, the discursive position of radical writers steadily deteriorated. 1789-1793 was a relatively tolerant period for their politics. It was not, however, a radical period. The image of Burke as the "single-handed" producer of counter-revolutionary propaganda is incorrect.[46] In the early years of the Revolution, there was plenty of conservative hesitancy about the new France. When the French Revolution grew violent Britons who were suspicious from the start saw their fears realized. As

[45] For more on *The Old Manor House*'s political implications, see Carmel Murphy, "Jacobin History: Charlotte Smith's *Old Manor House* and the French Revolution Debate." *Romanticism* 20, no. 3 (2014).
[46] O'Brien, "Introduction," 53.

the tide of opinion shifted, "hostility to reading and its agencies received new impetus" among the educated elite. The consequences of rising literacy were characteristic concerns of eighteenth century Britons, and some were alarmed by the popularity the Revolution had leant British radical writers.[47] Yet curtailing reading was not a viable strategy. Much as the scolding type enjoyed worrying about an increasingly literate public, they were in fact eager to engage it. Britons unsettled by the revolution were still fascinated by the French and would sooner read books deriding radicals them they would books that ignored the subject entirely. Rebuttal the both the more natural and the more urgent response than censorship. This was especially true of the Anglo-Irish. Burke, for one, may have been more threatened by revolutionary specters than his London friends because of his Anglo-Irish origins. Since the 1780s the British press was associated with controversial radical critique. As Harris has observed, it was also a "vehicle through which the traditional political classes could renew their hold on political power and revitalize their appeal."[48] Could the same be said for fiction?

Overtly conservative writers were slower to adopt fiction as a mode of popular communication. Their preferred method of discourse was still of the more purely political stripe. Early on, however, we can already detect the foundational role Burke played in the work of conservatives inspired to write against the revolution. In 1791, Thomas Green, a small-time poet from Ipswich, published a short pamphlet, "Political Speculations, Occasioned by the Progress of a Democratic Party in England." Green identified Burke's views as the provocation for the torrent of radical writing that had poured forth over the months since *Reflections* was published. Like Burke, Green deplored absolute obedience to preexisting authority. Britons ought to

[47] Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 13.
[48] Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press*, 109.

question why they were ruled the way they were and seek to improve their system of government, but radical calls for greater suffrage and in extreme cases republicanism went too far. Where radicals strayed, Green argued, was in their belief that human beings could be perfected and that a state should be organized to bring about and maintain an ideal society. Any element of the previous order that did not conform to the new goal of liberty was to be abolished, without regard for its historic importance or validity by other metrics. In Green's dystopian vision of radical Britain, liberty would be misunderstood as human happiness itself, rather than as a common means to it. Though correct in their goals for an ideal world, radical proposals were inhumane and unworkable precisely because of their failure to recognize humanity as it actually was. Attachment to property would be the strongest barrier to a true overthrow of pre-revolutionary attachments; it would not be the only one. To achieve their new world, radical rulers would have to resort to destructive force that would merely replace the tyranny they had sought to overthrow.

Green thought that the best system of government defined limited rights applicable to specific situations. These laws arose not as the precepts of a single ideology, but as the forms of mediation that had been tested successfully throughout the centuries. The "Natural Rights" of the Revolution purported to be self-evident, but were in fact invented by a group that was not representative of the people for whom they claimed to be speaking. Moreover, it was untested. Imbued with religious authority, belief in natural rights would make any future restraint of their expansion difficult.

Having critiqued radical alternatives to governance, Green mimicked Burke and concluded that the British state was a grand inheritance, the evidence of which could be seen in a rich culture and economic prosperity. The system ought to be constantly improved upon—taxes

were too high, Green thought—but did that mean that the British should, "with the petulant perverseness of children, reject the good we have, because it is no better?"[49] Burke's cautious, incremental improvements were the route Britons ought to take, while extreme reforms like universal suffrage were to be guarded against, lest the fortunate link to a repository of historical wisdom be severed through unnaturally excessive change. Either *Reflections* had defined Green's view of English radicalism and the French Revolution, or Burke had tapped into a previously unarticulated regard for British institutions. Whatever the case, for a poet to whom the virtue of the Revolution was not self-evident, Burke's was an argument onto which his mind had latched. Green was far from alone. In Wordsworth's *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793), the author expressed disappointment that the Bishop had fallen under the influence of Burkean thinking.[50]

Because radicalism initially commanded attention, radicals themselves could underestimate the degree to which their proposals remained unconvincing for many readers. Even after 1793, the increasing conservatism of the literary scene took time for them to register. In 1794, Reverend William Jackson was sent to London to assess the political temperature on behalf of radical lobbyists in Paris hoping for French support for their own revolutionary causes. He was surprised when, in meeting MPs, he was informed of the general revulsion the public now held towards revolutionary France.[51] The French had shown by then, through their governance of subjected states, that their revolution would be spread by invasion. This message struck a different chord than the idea of a popularly inspired movement in one's own country. From 1791 to 1805, and especially beginning in the middle of the 1790s, "as many as fifty

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[49] For the quote and content of the past three paragraphs, see Thomas Green, "Political Speculations, Occasioned by the Progress of a Democratic Party in England," in *Political Writings of the 1790s, Volume VII*. edited by Gregory Claeys (William Pickering, 1995), 28, 30-8, 40.
[50] Cited in O'Brien, "Introduction," 79
[51] Wells, *Insurrection*, 15.

overtly conservative novels were published in Britain," while less political novels were still marked by "conservative elements."[52]

The most explicit types of fiction were not always novels. As Thomas Green demonstrated, the most straightforward approach for a lesser writer to address politics was political writing. Still, by mid-decade, a fiction was becoming a stylish pretense to adopt as a cover for advancing political values. Not everyone who tried it was as subtle a storyteller as Williams or Inchbald. In an anonymous dialogue published in 1793, Monsieur Francois attempts to convince John English that his country should adopt the Republic's ways. English explains that any such attempt would be disastrous. England was a constitutional monarchy, in which the king's rights had been restrained gradually over the centuries. A balance existed that allowed him to preserve order without becoming a tyrant. In essence, Britain had a law-abiding culture. Ancien Regime France, on the other hand, was ruled by a despot. The author's argument illustrates a distinction between radical and conservative writing. Radicals spoke of matters in general, universal terms, to which conservative apologetics responded by examining specifics. English continues to say that Francois' description of republican life makes it sound like a worse situation than what had existed before. So committed were the French to the principle of equality that they had scarcely hesitated to jail or execute leaders of the Revolution for being superior to their countrymen. The dialogue ends on an ominous note. Francois speaks of how his people wish their system to be spread to their neighbors. English balks at the prospect, and the tone is meant to rouse the reader to take up arms as "an Englishman."[53]

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[52] Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 1.
[53] "A New Dialogue between Monsieur Francois and John English on the French Revolution,'" 15.

The ending of Francois and English's dialogue is a patriotic call to arms. Its disinterest in character—the allegory behind the names is hardly opaque—and rote recitation of anti-French sentiment make it neither literary nor groundbreaking. In the words of English himself, "all the natural enemies of Great Britain" wish for his country to convert to their own ways.[54] Revolutionary France is no exception in this regard, compared either to its neighbors or to the Ancien Regime itself. To English, a war with France signaled continuity with the past and defending the British Isles was still a righteous cause.

Jane West was a poet whose work mainly concerned the moral improvement of her readers. Storytelling was not her primary aim and her stories might very well fail to entertain. West was by no means a radical, but not all of her views were conservative. She strongly believed in women's education. Although West's own sense of right conduct was domestic and traditional in Christian terms, she thought it was essential that women who behave well choose to do so. In this narrow sense, West resembled Williams' Julia. Indeed, radicals and conservatives were alike in believing that a person should decide for herself to think and act correctly.[55]

West's journey to conservative fiction was gradual. Her first novel, *The Advantages of Education* (1793), concerned Maria Williams, a young woman deciding whom she should marry. Readers of the book would not have picked up radical suggestions embedded in the plot, yet conservative readers would still have to contend with the prominent role female relationships played in the novel. Maria's primary confidant is her mother. The meat of the book consists of the older woman giving the younger woman advice; in other words, educating her. The picture of marriage that emerges from their conversations is realistic yet hopeful. Her mother performs a

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[54] Ibid.
[55] See Marilyn Wood, *"Studious to Please": A Profile of Jane West, an Eighteenth-Century Author* (Shaun Tyas, 2003).

duty by helping Maria make her own decisions, and in return, Maria affirms "that nothing should deter her from practising the indispensable duty of referring to the parental sanction every proposal of marriage she should receive."[56] In a muted sense, *The Advantages of Education* could be received as an endorsement of a traditional institution, albeit one that advises more education beforehand. West's book made it clear, however, that even if a tradition is good, each person who enters into it should be educated about its realities and make a conscious choice to submit.

West's literary profile grew with the publication of her second novel, *A Gossip's Story*, in 1796. Yet another marriage plot, the novel featured two sisters, Louisa and Marianne. Louisa represents rationality and Marianne represents feeling. *A Gossip's Story* may have imparted warnings against a cult of reason or unbridled passion, but its significance in literary history lies in being a possible inspiration for Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Overt political leanings would not be revealed until a year later, when, upon the death of Edmund Burke, West published a florid *Elegy* whose overtones verge on the hagiographic.[57] In 1799, her third novel, *A Tale of the Times*, was released, along with a book of poems called *The Mother*. The poems pedaled more of West's conservative-leaning advice about how to be a proper lady. *A Tale of the Times* was a marriage plot similar in scope to *The Advantages of Education*, but by this point even West found it necessary to address the French Revolution directly. Characters make reference to turmoil on the continent. The backdrop of the French Revolution gives rise to radical political positions which are portrayed as the social ills of the age for good people to resist through patriotic and

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[56] Jane West, *The Advantages of Education; or the History of Maria Williams* (T.N. Longman and O. Rees, Lane, Newman, and Co., 1803), 150.
[57] See Jane West, *An Elegy on the Death of Edmund Burke* (London: T.N. Longman, 1797), 1-3. for an impression of her lofty prose style.

Christian lifestyles. West's issue with the Revolution was primarily moral in scope. She did not comment either on the virtues of a new republic or the stability of a traditional state. Rather, she was concerned with the assault of new ways of thinking on a person's soul. Her next novel, *The Infidel Father* contained a more concentrated condemnation of the atheism to which radical politics could lead.

Though her work has largely been forgotten, West's moral tales were enough to make her a role model in 1790s society. In a 1799 issue of *Gentleman's Magazine*—the first periodical to use "magazine" in its title—West was mentioned in a letter featured in the section, "Miscellaneous Observations—Review of Novels." The writer, "X.Y.," referred to an idea circulating among his fellow readers that "a particular review of the Novels and Plays…would be beneficial to the morals of the rising generation." Considering the literature that might be included in a review, X.Y. singled out "the works of Mrs. West, as they certainly aim, by their pure morality and forcible arguments, at something far more valuable than mere innocent amusement." X.Y. praised her for exemplifying models of moral womanhood in her fiction which could work against the "licentious manners" so lately fashionable among a new breed of women.[58] It is a shame, he continued, that she her wholesome prose was being overlooked in favor of immoral foreign trends. Three years later, another entry cited Mrs. West for proving "that true politeness is inseparably united with principle, morality, and religion." When it became known that West lived in a rural setting, she was further praised for living out the virtues of her fiction "As a wife, mother, daughter, and *a farmer's* wife."[59] West welcomed her reputation as a

[58] X.Y., Letter in *Gentleman's Magazine* 69 (1799), 1128-9.
[59] Letter in *Gentleman's Magazine* 72 (1802), 7, 99.

model British woman; in 1806 published a non-fiction work *Letters to a Young Lady*, a book of advice not dissimilar from the mother-daughter conversations in *Advantages of Education*.

As a didactic writer on morals for women, West was concerned with a marginalized group. Henry James Pye aspired to the conventional genres in which matters of state were measured. He was descended from "a very ancient and respectable family," whose "great-great-grandfather was Auditor of the Exchequer to James I." He became an MP in 1784 and in 1790 was appointed Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, a position he held from 1790 until his death in 1813. Despite his august position, Pye was by no means a celebrated literary figure. His appointment was more a product of Pitt's political favor and the gap between title and talent became something of a joke among Britain's literary class.[60] Even his obituary conceded that "The Poetry of Mr. Pye cannot, perhaps, upon the whole, be said to be of that very superior kind."[61]

Still, Pye did on occasion aspire to live up to his position. In 1794, he released the three-act tragedy *The Siege of Meaux*, a patriotic retelling of an episode of the Hundred Years War. With Britain freshly at war with France once again, the significance of the timing of Pye's drama would not have been lost on the audience. The 1790s saw Pye go on to write two anti-Jacobin novels. *The Democrat* (1795) offered Pye a measure of redemption by proving him a decent prose writer. It told the story of Jean le Noir, a French agent who is sent abroad to spread revolutionary ideology. Le Noir is a comic figure, whose foolhardy attempts to make the world more democratic make him an object of mockery. Pye made his opinion of the protagonist clear

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[60] Robert Southey, "To Grosvenor C. Bedford, Esq.," in *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey (Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1851), 312: "I have been rhyming as doggedly and as dully as if my name had been Henry James Pye."
[61] "Memoirs of the Late Henry-James Pye, Esq. Poet Laureate," in *Gentleman's Magazine* 83, no. 2 (1813), 293-4.

in his introduction. Employing his poetic profession, he inserts on the title page, "Let grumbling Sans-culottes our Laws decry; let Fox harangue, and baffled Priestly fly: let snuffling Stanhope hie to Gallia's shore, and hug his canting comrade, Jean Le Noir."[62] Although Le Noir was a Frenchman, Pye principally directed his attack against fellow Britons who had supported the Revolution in its early days. To Pye, the legacy of their enthusiasm was the ideology that had to be resisted.

Pye's next novel, *The Aristocrat* (1799), was similarly marked with frequent derisory comments about revolutionary France. A wealthy young man named Edward is kept by Lady Eaglefield from attending a foreign academy in France because of "the disturbances that were now beginning to agitate" that country. He is wisely kept in England for his education, much against the wishes of the fashionable Mr. Mortlock, "who was particularly anxious that his young cousin should be a witness of the dawn of liberty and benevolence that was just opening on the regions of Europe." Mr. Mortlock later sees the coast of France as he crosses the Channel. He cannot help rhapsodizing about the utopian promise the new regime holds for the future. Pye describes Mortlock's naivete as an "Amiable and pardonable error!"[63] Here was a conservative acknowledging that radicals were initially correct to be inspired by France. Because *The Aristocrat* is set in the early phase of the Revolution, references to France could provoke dramatic irony on the part of readers who knew how poorly things would turn out. Though sympathetic to radicals, *The Aristocrat* assumes they are to be pitied for not seeing where their freedoms would lead. Before the reader is allowed to consider whether Mr. Mortlock is correct for thinking what he thinks, he is already labeled a fool. The novel does not honestly engage the

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[62] Henry James Pye, *The Democrat* (James Rivington, 1795), iii. Charles Stanhope was an English radical and former Whig member of Parliament.
[63] Henry James Pye, *The Aristocrat* (Sampson Low, 1799), 28-9, 38.

ideas of this radical character. That is the advantage of the form. Because novels make no pretense to argument, its convictions can be conveyed through a jumble of elegant prose, feelings, assertions, and a sprinkling of political references. If the novel is well-written, its immersive qualities will make its political undertones convincing for the very reason that they are embedded in prosaic observations. The casual reader, if at all attentive, can shut the book with plenty of impressions but no convictions.[64]

George Walker was a middle class bookseller who became an author in his own right during the 1790s.[65] He began by writing generic Gothic novels (*The Romance of the Cavern*, *The Haunted Castle*, *Cynthelia*). His later work featured international settings and was full of patriotic feeling (*The Battle of Waterloo, A Poem*). Walker was best-known, however, for his satiric novel *The Vagabond*, published in 1799. The hero joins a radical riot only to discover that it is no different from a mob.[66] Further misadventures give Walker opportunity to ridicule several radical thinkers and beliefs. The most direct attack is reserved for William Godwin. He is represented by Stupeo, a mentor figure for the protagonist who journeys to the New World to establish a utopian community. He does not make much progress before he is captured and burned alive by Native Americans. No friends of subtlety, Walker attacked radicalism directly, using the pretense of fiction as the thinnest of veils. In this regard, he is closer to the dialogues of Monsieur Francois than to the socially conservative novels of Jane Austen. No conservative novels from the 1790s have survived to become a classic. The significance of the genre lies in its simple style, popularity, and accordance with the dominant mood of the day.

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[64] See Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 206.
[65] Ian Haywood, *Bloody Romanticism: Spectacular Violence and the Politics of Representation, 1776-1832*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 196-8.
[66] See George Walker, *The Vagabond* (G. Walker, 1799).

Conservative novels were not exceptional works of art. What they were was an attempt by ordinary writers to create works defending Britishness and thereby demonstrate that theirs was the majority opinion. “Britishness” was taken for granted as settled, but in fact conservative novels asserted a specific way to be British, one rooted in good sense, Christian living, and veneration of the past. Overall, the defining characteristic of most conservative stories was a wariness of change in favor of stability. The mockery with which Walker portrayed Godwin cannot be reduced to lambasting the dissenters. *The Vagabond* was discrediting different sets of values through the actions of radical caricatures. In an era when literate people were adopting political philosophies to live their lives by, Walker could imaginatively track the effects a radical lifestyle had on his protagonist to suit his broader concerns. What were the consequences of traveling to the New World to found a utopia? How well-suited was a young individual for creating a world from nothing? The answers were not encouraging. *The Vagabond* imparts through its satiric lesson a political lesson: creation is difficult and not a task one person, or even a group of people, can accomplish easily in a generation. Walker’s work did not enjoy the longevity of *Reflections*. In an academic sense, it is not convincing. Yet for a literate Briton at the time, *The Vagabond* could serve one of two purposes. 1) It could function as an intelligible mode through which an anti-Jacobin message could be conveyed. For a reader unable to understand Burke’s theories about preservation, *The Vagabond* could playfulness mix satire with historic anti-Gallic feeling to convey a general sense that the new ways of the French were “bad.” Perhaps a simple basis on which to base an opinion, *The Vagabond* was just as valid a document through which a Briton could receive conservative instruction. 2) The presence of the book itself as an everyday object would lend “conservative opinions” an additional type of authority. Aside

from the arguments of conservatism, was a sense that it was "in the air": even minor political satires were mimicking the prejudices associated with conservative ideology.

The authors analyzed here are a small sample of a large pool. Conservative literature was a generic genre, and its varieties were few. Given the gendered dynamic in other areas of public life, women played an outsized role in fiction. In Elizabeth Hamilton's 1800 novel *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, the author indicates that women should be better educated, but they should also retain their traditional social role. The story is more risqué than Jane West's work—the three female leads embrace an individualistic lifestyle before traditional domesticity—but the conclusion of self-conscious acceptance of social norms is the same.[67] Conservative literature whose subject was not domestic womanhood largely embraced a satirical misadventures to convey either the innocent impracticality or dangerous severity of radical persons. Some of the more notable titles in this mode include the polemical works *The Infernal Quixote* (1800) *Dorothea* (1801), as well as the less pronounced but still conservative, *Edmund Oliver* (1798), and *Douglas* (1800), and *Saint Godwin* (1800).

Useful as literary texts are, a historical study also requires the explicit statements of authors and readers as to what they made of the books they wrote and read. Fortunately, authors often made their intentions clear in the openings of their novels. Hamilton knew that *Memoirs* could be misconstrued a reactionary broadside. In a contrived frame story, she has a point-of-view character stress that the novel's worth lies in not attacking radical individuals, but in illustrating the shortcomings of radical thought, especially Godwin's.[68] In the preface to his satire *Percival* (1801), R.C. Dallas stated that his aim was "To improve the heart," and "be the

[67] Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (G.G. and J. Robinson, 1800).
[68] Hamilton, *Memoirs*, xiv.

auxiliary of the Divine and of the Moralist."[69] The goals of conservative authors were to improve British society by both renewing public fervor for the traditional pillars of society and discrediting radical political causes. In their first aim, conservatives were indeed operating in the mode of the ancien regime described by J.C.D. Clark. Because of the unique challenge of the French Revolution, however, the defense of traditional society was also part of Colley's history of emerging British national identity.

Readers also sensed that the importance of literature in national debates was growing. In an 1800 issue of *The Monthly Review*, novels were evaluated in terms of their "purity" as opposed to "*Genius*."[70] By this measure, conservative novels were vastly superior to their radical counterparts. Elsewhere, *Saint Godwin* was well reviewed as "a happy travesty of St. Leon, a tale by Mr. Godwin." The best parts of the book were when the author ridiculed "the fallacious doctrines, absurd principles, and pernicious dogmas, of the modern philosopher."[71] Meanwhile, in *The Critical Review*, the caricatures of radical Britons and Frenchmen in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* was stamped with only mild approval. More impressive to the critic was its ability to "delight the amiable feelings that sympathise with the progress and the reward of virtue."[72] Some readers preferred conservative political attacks; others preferred the display of traditional virtue; both types had come to respect fiction's role in signaling a certain type of national character. The "lighter vein" with which Anna Larpent regarded fiction in the early 1790s still lingered among some members of the public, but this state of affairs was recognized and lamented. In the *Gentleman's Magazine* issue of 1800, K. wrote in regarding a request published

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[69] R.C. Dallas. *Percival, or Nature Vindicated* (T.N. Longman and O. Rees, 1801). ix.
[70] "Miscellaneous," in *The Monthly Review* 31 (1800), 112.
[71] Review of *St. Godwin* in *Gentleman's Magazine* 70 (1800), 160.
[72] Review of *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, in *The Critical Review* 29 (1800), 311.

by one of the periodical's previous correspondents. This other person had called for "a Review…in which the merits and demerits of those publications which rank under the name of *Novels* were particularly examined." K. assured readers "that such a publication has been for some time projected," yet would probably struggle to be patronized because "Novels are not regarded as objects of so much importance as most seriously belongs to them."[73]

The partnership of literature and patriotism was not without precedent. In the 1750s, a libertarian patriotism was fashionable among British authors. Likewise, the election of William Pitt's government in 1783 meant the government was already inclined to take conservative positions before the 1789. Yet not until the 1790s did Britain have to contend with a radical government across the Channel. The fall of the Bourbons transformed the stakes of public discourse. Radical and conservative Britons alike believed that they were living through an epochal change. Victory over the French would determine more than the dynamics of the next chapter of geopolitical competition. The intellectual, social, and religious allegiance of individuals was at risk as well. Aspects of the culture that usually engaged less in public discourse were marshalled for political causes. Literature responded to the anxieties of its age, and not for the first time. Britain had undergone more acrimonious periods in the seventeenth century, and British writers had not failed to produced major works then. By the 1790s, however, the terms of the conflict were not primarily religious or monarchic. Though both God and king remained importance aspects of British identity, the terms of debate primarily concerned the character of the nation and the harmony of its polity. Although the conservative writers studied here had literary and political predecessors, the impetus and result of their writing was unique.

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[73] K., Letter in *Gentleman's Magazine* 70 (1800), 6.

IV. Ideas and Feelings

Just as conservative criticisms were a constant of the Revolution from its inception, radical Britons continued to register their views even after 1793. In the 1780s, the radical Thomas Spence had begun the utopian series *A Supplement to the History of Robinson Crusoe*. The fictional work depicted a group of Englishmen shipwrecked on an island. Over the course of five major works, Spence narrated the community they established based on egalitarian Enlightenment ideals. Spence did not allow the conservative mood of the 1790s to slow his project. The second and third entries in his series were published in 1794 and 1798. In 1796, Robert Bage published his radical philosophical novel *Hermsprong* and Elizabeth Inchbald released another novel of social criticism, *Nature and Art*. In 1798, Wollstonecraft's novel, *The Wrongs of Woman* was posthumously published despite the story in essence being the *Rights of Woman* in literary form.

For committed radicals, access to radical literature remained possible in Britain. Nevertheless, by the late 1790s, pro-revolutionary views no longer enjoyed public favor. Most literature was either apolitical, had conservative traits, or was overtly conservative. Though the radical camp of authors contained far more names which have enjoyed longer afterlives in literary history, the more pedestrian styles of conservative writers more successfully captured the nature of British identity that prevailed at the time. In a period of revolution, the British pulled back from change in favor of tried and true practices. The affirmation of political, religious, and social values was especially well-communicated to readers through fiction, which simulated experiences that could represent revolutionary issues in both everyday contexts and in adventurous settings.

A figure like Mary Pilkington captures the spirit of her times. Like Jane West, she was a conservative woman who believed literature should impart morals before it concerned itself with good storytelling. She also shred West's interest in the education of conservative women. *Edward Barnard* (1797), for instance, was a classic example of a conservative novel of moral progress. The titular character's adventures illustrated that rakishness was the consequence of radical social views, while conservative positions led to virtue rewarded.[74] More significant to this study, in 1804 Pilkington published *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Characters*. The volume contained entries of women Pilkington considered models for her female readers. Both Pilkington's novel and her encyclopedia were written as public goods. British women needed to be educated, and they could seek education through books.[75] Whether through the moral example of *Edward Barnard* or the history of virtue presented in *Memoirs*, Pilkington's work represents the paradox in Britain's conservatism: while it sought to preserve the past, the activist, self-conscious manner in which it did so was itself one of the innovations proceeding from the modern age it claimed to repute.

Mary Pilkington was a conservative woman. Was she a nationalist? Her conservative colleagues fervently defended God and country virtues. Did their fidelity to an idea of nation become nationalistic? The quietism of marriage plots and satiric adventure may not sit well with the modern image of nationalism as involving powerful personalities and destabilizing military conflicts. Stodgy patriotism in an otherwise stable country does not seem significant in comparison. Yet the literate public of late-nineteenth century Britain was certainly cultivating a self-conscious national identity. Even within the private world of fiction, authors and readers

[74] See Mary Pilkington, *Edward Barnard; or, Merit Exalted* (E. Newbery, 1797).
[75] See Mary Pilkington, *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Characters* (Albion Press, 1804).

found it important that the medium perform a wider societal good. Some books took up a less innovative and more personal defense of traditional social and religious practices. Others contained explicit attacks on foreign influence and celebrations of British principles. Through these expressions, Britons popularized the ideas pronounced by Burke. In making the conservatism of *Reflections* ubiquitous, however, authors and readers downplayed its intellectual arguments in favor of assertions of allegiance to a Britain that stood against revolutionary change. Conservative authors who relayed Burke's message gradually made his ideology indistinguishable from expressions of patriotic feeling. Through mere assertion novelists presented statement to readers that carried the authority of an argument already won when an argument did not in fact take place. The ease with which conservatism was adopted by a literary culture increased its powers of persuasion. In the 1790s and early 1800s, conservative opinion appeared to have inundated spheres of communication outside politics, especially in literary culture. Conservatism was better suited to this mode of communication than radicalism was. Radicals saw themselves as allies of the Enlightenment; their literary heroes tended to argue for a set of principles because of that intellectual background. Conservative heroes tended to espouse feelings. Although Burke himself was a serious thinker, the popularity of *Reflections* was partly owed to the relative ease with which less serious thinkers could adopt Burke's program. For a greater number of British readers, valorizing what one already had came easier than reasoning one's way to revolution. To claim that George Walker or Mary Pilkington were nationalists is to overstate the mater, but conservative writers were certainly moving the conversation about British identity toward a national framework in the modern sense.

The conservative victory in Britain was not final. Though the radical press grew steadily smaller during the 1790s, reaching its nadir in 1798-9, over the long run its audience would

grow.[76] Yet radical political movements in the nineteenth century would achieve their goals through reform rather than revolution. The destabilization that Britons feared during the revolutionary period did not arrive. Does the characteristic "steady and deliberate path of Britain" owe its modern origins to the conservative culture in the 1790s?[77] Certainly not. As conservative writers would have been quick to assert, their own time was one of cultural precarity. In the late eighteenth century, the British briefly saw themselves as "post-imperial" and in decline. They responded with a spirit of reconstruction, determined to rebuild on firmer ground, at home and abroad. Linda Colley has noted that at a time when aristocrats lived in perpetual fear that the masses would seize their property, "Only in Great Britain did it prove possible to float the idea that aristocratic property was in some magical and strictly intangible way *the people's property also*."[78] Colley's use of the term "magical" indicates a disjuncture in how the history of national identity has been told. What "magic" allowed people to identify in the property of a few a national quality of which all could be proud? Literature was not the sole producer of this ability, but it played a part in informing people that being British was exceptional, threatened, and needed constant cultivation. So long as Britons remembered these truths, they could share in their Britishness with their countrymen. A sense of instability had inspired Burke publish *Reflections*. The actual threat of revolution may not have been as great as conservative writers feared. Whatever the case, the perception of threat caused Britons to adopt a

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[76] Emsley, "Repression, 'Terror,' and the Rule of Law in England during the Decade of the French Revolution," 819.

[77] This caricature of the British as orderly is a commonplace in historiography and has been the basis of many studies. The quote comes from Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain, 1700-1850* (Yale University Press, 2009), 423. Christie has described the caricature as a "deep isolationist English love of country, the sense of solidarity of a people set apart, an instinct better conveyed by poetry, the language of the heart, than by philosophic prose," *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 218.

[78] Colley, *Britons*, 179-80.

view of their own past, especially since the Glorious Revolution, as an asset to be guarded rather than overturned.

The 1790s may have seen "the origins of the politics of insurrection," but it also proved "the unwillingness of more than a minority to become activists in an insurrectionary movement".[79] Britain's stability has caused some historians to argue that it should not viewed as part of an "age of revolution," as that would create "a presumption that a revolution might have occurred but somehow did not."[80] Although the growth of national sentiment hardly qualifies as a revolution, Britain's sense of purpose was part of a wider European period of change. The decade witnessed literate, non-elite people peacefully and actively participate in the growth of modern national identity through literary culture. Fiction which simplified and distorted conservative ideology through storytelling helped make conservatism seem respectable and ubiquitous, such that people who had never read *Reflections* would quickly acquire some of its ideas if they regularly read the latest novels.

1790s Britain underwent the conservative form of a phenomenon observable in modern political movements. Whenever a movement has a popular dimension, and any modern movement inevitably does, the ideas which guide it grow simplified as more people adopt them. Literacy does not equal the ability to engage carefully with ideas one can then faithfully relay. As an idea becomes popular, historians should track how the less educated communicate a "short-hand" version of it to each other. Ideas may become mere assertions, but the power of fiction as a vehicle for communication is that it places something abstract in an everyday context and can use the emotions produced by storytelling to persuade. If these methods would not prevail in an

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[79] Wells, *Insurrection*, 265.
[80] Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain,* 25.

academic context, they can still be politically effective. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, fiction helped nurture national allegiance even within mediums that were not historically considered politically important. In Britain during the 1790s, novels turned a conservative image pronounced by Burke into the deliberately cultivated lifestyle practiced by the ideal British characters.

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