Introduction

The French Revolution and the British Novel in the Romantic Period

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“Dorothy did not rhapsodize with Rousseau, or reason with Voltaire, nor did the arch sceptic Hume make part of her library; but she drew her knowledge from a fund more enticing, because less dry: she studied works adapted to her meridian; the labours of those, who, having dipped into the originals, and presuming on the ignorance of the multitude, propagate, at second hand, and in new dresses and decorations, the opinions and doctrines they have thus picked up”

—Dorothea; or, a Ray of the New Light, Mrs Bullock (1801)

Mrs Bullock’s conservative novel Dorothea; or, a Ray of the New Light, is a novel about other novels. Its eponymous heroine is led astray by her reading of radical novels, such as Thomas Holcroft’s Anna St Ives (1792) and William Godwin’s Caleb Williams (1794), with catastrophic consequences. As our epigraph suggests, Dorothea’s reading is dangerous not because she immerses herself in the works of revolutionary philosophers and political theorists, but because she becomes acquainted with their views through the medium of the novel. From the perspective of Mrs Bullock, novels—enticing, readable and accessible (especially to young women)—were thus potentially more dangerous even than the works of Rousseau, Voltaire and Hume. That Mrs Bullock’s fear of radical novels induced her to write a novel opposing them attests to the extraordinary popularity and perceived power of the novel in late eighteenth-century Britain.

Scholarship on those novels, however, long proved unwilling to engage seriously with their notions of revolution and counter-revolution. Critics were traditionally more interested in the responses of the male Romantic poets to the French Revolution, taking as an archetypal narrative the initial enthusiasm, then subsequent disillusionment, of William Wordsworth and his contemporaries, such as Coleridge and Southey. Thus, while there has been a long line of scholarship dealing with the conceptual and socio-political impacts of the French Revolution on Romantic poetry, only within the last twenty years has there been similar investigation into the novel. And that investigation has revealed more diverse responses by novelists to the concept of revolution, as well as to its actual or imagined impact on both individuals and communities, than were demonstrated by the male Romantic poets. As Adriana Craciun and
Kari E. Lokke point out, in relation to female novelists: “[T]he surprising range, politically and generically, of British women’s responses to the Revolution attests to the complex, and often contradictory, nature of British literary responses as a whole, beyond the range of responses traditionally ascribed to canonical writers”. It is no surprise, then, that critics have been increasingly interested in reading beyond the novels of Scott and Austen, rediscovering long-forgotten writers such as Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson.

Over the past ten years, in particular, there has been a surge of interest in women’s novels of the 1790s. Those novels used to be dismissed as formulaic and of little interest to a modern readership, but there has been growing recognition of the ways in which female authors used the novel to explore and intervene in the great political debates of their time. Although some of the female novelists dealt with in this volume also wrote political pamphlets, the novel was considered a far more acceptable form for a respectable (or semi-respectable) woman writer, since the novel was thought a ‘domestic’ form, suited to women’s interests. Writers such as Frances Burney, Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson produced domestic tales about the lives of girls and women, yet those novels deliberately engaged with the languages and ideologies of revolution. From Charlotte Smith’s staunchly radical novel of the French Revolution, *Desmond* (1792), to the novels of the strident counter-revolutionary Jane West, the novel proved to be a form well suited to exploration of revolutionary politics.

Thus the novel enabled revolutionary politics, personalities, and events to be written about and read in fundamentally domestic, and often romantic, terms. For example, politically eminent and divisive figures were frequently recreated in novels by way of symbolic domestic roles. Louis XVI was often represented as first the good, then the corrupted father, while Marie Antoinette was often likewise the bad, licentious mother leading France into dissipation and disarray. Jane West’s *A Tale of the Times* (1799) recasts the French Revolution as a domestically focused seduction narrative. A previously virtuous English housewife is seduced by a dangerously attractive French Jacobin villain in an obvious allegory of the potential danger posed to Britain by Revolutionary France. On the other hand, the romantic resolution of Charlotte Smith’s *Celestina* (1791), a novel of extreme optimism about the beneficence of Revolution, is effected only as a direct result of the fall of the Bastille. And, of course, Edmund Burke famously decried the lack of chivalry exhibited by the revolutionaries towards Marie Antoinette in a manner recalling that of a romance novel: “[T]en thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult”.

Locating notions and practices of revolution in the domestic sphere thus re-presented the foreign (but not remote) political phenomenon that was the
French Revolution in terms immediate, intense, and personal. As Mitzi Myers argues, with specific reference to Maria Edgeworth, “The politicians who chopped off the head of the father king created the French Revolution as a family romance in the Gothic mode; Edgeworth rewrites the thriller as a different family romance, a tale of domestic education”. Recent critics have identified many ways in which the Revolution was closely tied to the novel. In fact, so closely linked were the Revolution and the novel that Nicola Watson has argued: “[R]evolutionary politics were understood crucially in terms of sentimental fiction—and in particular the plot of a single novel, *La Nouvelle Heloise*”.\(^7\) Indeed, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s sentimental romance reverberates widely through late eighteenth-century novels, peopled as they are with female characters called Julia, Julie or Eloisa. *La Nouvelle Heloise* is represented variously as both an inspiring and a potentially dangerous work, depending on the political sympathies of a given author. It is hardly a surprise, therefore, to read Mrs Bullock’s account of a woman who gains all her knowledge of revolutionary thought through novels. Novels of the period, it seems, were intensely politicized.

As might be inferred, recent scholarship on the French Revolution and the British novel has focused particularly on the writings of female novelists. Studies such as Janet Todd’s *The Sign of Angellica*, and even Dale Spender’s *Mothers of the Novel*, initially brought the novels of eighteenth-century women back into the critical spotlight, challenging conventional views on the novel’s history.\(^9\) Both Todd and Spender argued that traditional accounts of the birth of the novel, such as the version given in Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*, with its focus on five canonical male novelists—Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, Sterne—failed to take into account the contribution of women novelists to the development of the genre.\(^10\) Similarly, Anne Mellor’s seminal work, *Mothers of the Nation*, highlighted the contributions women made, often through the medium of the novel (but also through other of the literary kinds), to public political debate, an activity that previously had been perceived as closed to women:

They openly and frequently published their free and reasoned opinions on an enormous range of topics, from the French Revolution and the abolitionists campaigns against the slave trade through doctrinal religious issues and methods of education to the economic management both of the individual household and of the state.\(^11\)

One outcome of the renewed interest in women novelists of the late eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries has been a tendency to consider their works in groups: “radical/Jacobin”, or “counter-revolutionary/conservative”. As is perhaps predictable, scholars have tended to show interest in the

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\(^7\) Myers (1990, p. 9).

\(^8\) Watson (1994, p. 9).


\(^10\) Mellor (1977, p. 9).

works of the so-called ‘Jacobin’ novelists, whose ideals align more closely with now-contemporary ways of thinking. It is arguably easier for a modern audience—academic or otherwise—to sympathize with the proto-feminist ideals of Mary Wollstonecraft, or the radical social idealism of Charlotte Smith, than with the works of the arch-conservative, Hannah More. The interest in Jacobin novelists has to some extent been balanced, however, by inquiry into the works of counter-revolutionary novelists such as Jane West, Elizabeth Hamilton and Sophia King, thus revealing the novel’s capacity to voice many forms of political sentiment. M. O. Grenby’s The Anti-Jacobin Novel charts the growing popularity of these politically conservative novels, highlighting both their satirical elements and their self-reflexive interest in the medium of the novel itself. Jane West, in particular, has benefited from this increasing interest in anti-Jacobin novels. In a useful essay, Daniel Schierenbeck examines the work of this conservative novelist only to find that “West’s model of female education in [her novel] The Advantages of Education demonstrates similarities not only with the writings of conservatives, such as Hannah More and Sarah Trimmer, but also with radical, rational educational reformers such as Wollstonecraft.” Schierenbeck’s assertion reveals the manner in which, within the last five or so years, there has been a move away from sorting novelists into groups, based on political affiliation, to a more nuanced analysis of their works.

Ideas emanating from the French Revolution reverberated throughout English society. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Revolution is such a vexed issue in the novels of the period. Some of the novelists discussed in this volume, such as Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft, were so excited by the revolutionary ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality, that they even travelled to France in order to experience the Revolution first-hand. Of course, the French Revolution ultimately disappointed British liberal expectations and, as the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth, conservatism and counter-revolutionary sentiments succeeded earlier enthusiasms. That ideologies of revolution are reflected upon so variously and intensely in the novels of the period is hardly surprising. More surprising is how long criticism has taken to notice and to explore those reflections.

Exploring and illuminating those reflections is precisely the task of the contributors to this volume. What each demonstrates is that responses by novelists to the Revolution and its actual or anticipated consequences were often mixed, sometimes skeptical, and that they by no means always developed predictably over time. Whether driven by hope, pessimism, or an urgent spirit of investigation, novelists sought to analyze the desirability and plausibility of revolution in relation to the inchoate violence, the competing ideologies, and the social confusion of the French Revolution itself. They sought ways of
discriminating between revolution as intellectually defensible, or as practicable, or as effective and revolution as mere fashionable posturing, as willfully and naively impracticable, and as making no fundamental change to social practices. The volume seeks, then, not to classify novelists simply as revolutionary or as counter-revolutionary but to suggest how they negotiated those alternatives: to trace the nuances of their responses to the Revolution, whether or not they themselves were for the most part sympathetic to or hostile to the events in France at any given time. In doing so, the book aims to offer fresh understanding of both particular authors and the English novel in revolutionary times. It offers re-readings of the novelists, their writings, and the reception of the French Revolution in Britain.

M. O. Grenby’s analysis of the role of political commentary in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century children’s literature illuminates the scope of anxiety and debate within the adult novels engendered by and engaging with the Revolution. Grenby explores the ways in which children’s literature was drawn into the so-called ‘war of ideas’ of the 1790s and early 1800s. He argues that in the 1790s and during the Revolution Crisis, the politicization of childhood became the subject of much more open and urgent complaint. The underlying concern is the potential undesirability of children being knowledgeable about contemporary politics, and hence, arguably, the need to patrol their reading more carefully to control the spread of various political sympathies, a view shared, with some exceptions, across the political spectrum. Grenby demonstrates that this concern extended to authors electing to sidestep the political controversies of the day in writing for children while others embraced a political silence in their children’s books that is missing in their writings for adults.

Grenby’s interest lies in the reasons for this new reticence and orthodoxy, and the extent to which it was adopted or imposed, arguing that it must have been changed political circumstances that gave rise to this new anxiety. Political questions were more polarized, more ferocious, and more critical than in earlier decades with France’s example bluntly demonstrating that that the future of the state, the Church, and the established social order was in the balance. Those children’s texts that did engage with contemporary events and debates in the 1790s and 1800s enlisted current affairs to advance their more traditional didactic schemes, making social and moral points that had been in circulation long before the Revolution crisis, as evidenced by the interesting and distinct sub-genre that developed in the late 1790s, the children’s émigré novel. Thus, Grenby suggests, the politics of the novel are put to the service of—or perhaps we should say excused by—other, more conventional didactic agendas.