

RECOVERING THE RADICALS:
WOMEN WRITERS, REFORM, AND
NATIONALIST MODES OF
REVOLUTIONARY DISCOURSE

by

Mark J. Zunac, B.A., M.A.

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ABSTRACT

Recovering the Radicals: Women Writers, Reform, and Nationalist Modes of Revolutionary Discourse

This project considers the fiction of Mary Robinson, Mary Hays, and Amelia Opie as illustrative of a gradual paradigm shift that occurred within British radical circles following the French Revolution and appealed to a nationally self-reflective conception of the natural rights of citizens. For women, while the very act of writing challenged dominant cultural narratives, contemporary reactions often overlooked or obscured theoretical nuances that symbolized deviations within the radical movement. While the works of these women consistently reveal progressive social tendencies, they also suggest the ascendancy of a reform tradition which frames the natural rights debate within a distinctly British cultural and historical context.

The first two chapters examine Mary Robinson's *The Widow* (1794) and *The Natural Daughter* (1799), both of which reveal the author's advocacy of a meritocratic society rooted in the abolition of gendered educational systems and arbitrarily rigid class structures. Through vivid depictions of revolutionary France and invocations of constitutionally protected right in Britain, Robinson locates the source of natural right within existing institutions and distinguishes it from the Enlightenment metaphysics seen to have influenced the French Revolution.

The discussion then moves to Mary Hays, who in both of her novels, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) and *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), tests the virtue of Enlightenment philosophy against the experience of its adherents. By adopting and validating the empirical philosophical tradition embodied by Edmund Burke, Hays demonstrates the gender and class disparity that is revealed against accepted cultural norms and governing political bodies. Consequently, the narratives acknowledge the necessary negotiation of historically fixed and unique systems of civil order.

An analysis of Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1805) concludes the project, and notes the author's appropriation of natural law principles to promote a more equitable distribution of political autonomy. While Opie defers to the role of custom in the advent of political authority, she depicts citizens' rights as having been usurped by the very institutions entrusted to protect them. The author's progressive reform program relies on the constancy of change intrinsic to the natural world and the authority of factual historical processes in explaining the human condition.

PREFACE

This dissertation is the culmination of long hours of sometimes futile research, enlightening conversations with faculty members and colleagues, and the all-important but often overlooked identification of those points of intersection where scholarly interest meets viable and valid topics. My desire to know more about the political history of early modern England was first nourished by Dr. John Curran in engaging class discussions and their continuance during his office hours while other students were clamoring for an audience. This interest was merged with the primary focus of this study through my introduction to the women writers of the eighteenth century by Dr. Diane Hoeveler in the summer of 2002 in a course entitled “Sensibility and its Discontents.” As its title would indicate, the focus of the course was on variations and divergences within critically established traditions, and the textual betrayal of all-encompassing unifiers. After a number of conversations with Dr. Hoeveler on critical approaches to representative texts, I produced a paper on Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray*, which kindled a greater interest in the political potential of these novels often dismissed by contemporaries as pulp. While very little of that paper was adapted for the current project, it began the process and perhaps serves as a testament to the organic and ever-changing nature of the dissertation.

Upon completion of Dr. Hoeveler’s course, I began to formulate ideas and research methods that would influence my approach to any variety of literature encountered in coursework and elsewhere. My motivation became a greater knowledge of the cultural modes that informed a given text and an understanding of the way in which novels became reflective of a given historical period. Since political writing had been largely

conceived as a predominantly masculine form of discourse, I began an inquiry into how the “feminized” novel form could be a product of and contribute to the ideological forces that had shaped responses to the political turmoil caused by the French Revolution. It became a logical choice to focus, then, on the women writing these texts, since they embodied the political force of the novel genre. What seemed like a somewhat pedestrian conclusion was pleasantly complicated over the course of my research by the engagement of the texts with diverse social and political systems of government. The more I read, the more I was compelled to acknowledge the theoretical underpinnings of the writers’ work and the ways in which they relied upon a vast knowledge of their placement along an historical continuum and an intimate awareness of material and cultural realities that often conflicted with Enlightenment ideals.

The first “public” presentation of this idea was made, in admittedly crude form, in Dr. Christine Krueger’s “History and Historicism” graduate seminar in the spring of 2005. Although the project has naturally developed and taken a somewhat different form than I had then anticipated, the feedback from both Dr. Krueger and those colleagues who patiently absorbed the rudiments of grand yet inchoate ideas has lasted throughout the writing process. That process, begun in the summer of 2002, while occasionally grueling and disheartening, has nonetheless been infinitely rewarding. Perhaps the greatest return has been the awakening to a new self-knowledge and critical identity that only comes from sorting through hundreds of separate approaches to literature until finding those few that resonate with ideas not yet articulated. As many of my English colleagues in Academic Support Facility will attest, the sheer volume of texts arranged on my shelves undoubtedly created a relative shortage in Memorial Library for other eighteenth-century

enthusiasts. After creating such a daunting scholarly presence within our hallowed ASF halls, I am only now content to admit to them that some of these formidable tomes went unread, many misunderstood, and a select impenetrable few flung across the room in dissatisfaction at my own intellectual shortcomings. This dissertation, nevertheless, is a modest attempt to engage those texts in critical dialogue and contribute, however slightly, to an important and rapidly growing field.

What I was able to excavate from them was evidence that the truths we seek of history are often informed by variables often having little to do with it. The coalescence of cultures, historical and geographical, sometimes gets in the way of candid evaluations of our subjects. However, the passage of time also allows us to breathe new life into those subjects and deploy modern theoretical techniques, informed by our own experience, to identify ideas present during a given historical period but lacking linguistic clarity to elucidate them. The challenge, of course, is not to optimistically displace our own conjectural biases onto these subjects. Yet given that vital caveat, the ideas as they present themselves as remnants of time must be identified, understood, and validated by their own merit, since to do so is to understand our own historical place and the various traditions that have brought us here.

As I emerge from the sanctity and isolation of my office in the venerable ASF, I hope to reestablish some of those relationships too often put on hold for the sake of finishing “just one more page.” This project has been a while in the making, and I have incurred a number of debts along the way. Although they can never be sufficiently repaid, they are nonetheless here humbly acknowledged. I would like to thank the research librarians at Raynor Library for their always willing attendance to research queries, and especially Nia

Schudson, whose eagerness to help me begin my research nearly rivaled my anticipation of finishing it. Also a note of gratitude to the English department at Marquette University for a dissertation fellowship which allowed me to focus solely on my research and finish in reasonable time. Thanks also to Dr. Christine Krueger, whose gracious enthusiasm and expert questions allowed me to more fully understand the scope of my topic and to articulate its place within the critical tradition. Dr. Ed Block, who also served on my exam committee and has been my long-time advisor and friend, is also acknowledged for his sage advice and counsel over the years.

I am indebted most to those who served on the final dissertation committee: Dr. Albert Rivero for his timely revision of drafts and inspiration in pursuing the literature of the eighteenth century; and Dr. Stephen Karian, whose insights into the writing process and general strategies for negotiating the graduate experience were constant sources of encouragement and much-needed good will. Special thanks to my mentor and dissertation director Dr. Diane Hoeveler for sharing her vast knowledge of the Romantic period, and for exhibiting care and patience in editing countless drafts and guiding me through the dissertation process. I am deeply grateful. Closer to home, thanks so much to my parents for their unflagging support, and to Jason Schmid, whose friendship has been invaluable and constant since our childhood summers at Washington Park. Also, many thanks to my friend and colleague Rebecca Parker Fedewa for her generous assistance in preparing the final drafts. And finally to my wife Erica, who was compelled to live and die with each day's degree of productivity for the last two years. Thanks for patiently tolerating my whimsical study habits and for your faithful belief in someday seeing this project to its completion.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Dissent from Within: Revolutionary Counterculture and the British Reformist Vision

The female advocates of Democracy in this country, though they have had no opportunity of imitating the French ladies, in their atrocious acts of cruelty; have yet assumed a stern serenity in the contemplation of those savage excesses.

- Richard Polwhele, Footnote to *The Unsex'd Females* (1798)

Human perfection is a slow process. It must go through the patient discipline of domestic duty, and the unapplauded toils of retired life, ere it make a sure advancement.

- Charles Lloyd, *Edmund Oliver* (1798)

I

In his probing and incisive article detailing the conservative roots of the abolition movement in early modern England, Nicholas Hudson reveals the cognitive dissonance that can occur when confronted with evidence that a decidedly progressive movement was championed by erstwhile defenders of monarchy, state religion, and patriarchal dominance. He writes,

According to a critical consensus in modern scholarship on the abolition of slavery, this event marked a historic victory for nonconformist, radical, or otherwise antiestablishment elements in British culture. Some major scholars of abolitionism have acknowledged the participation of Anglicans and social conservatives in early antislavery, but even they agree in

interpreting abolition as a social revolution instigated by intellectual and economic upheaval, or by the alienation of workers in nascent industrial capitalism.¹

Such are the assumptions under which many scholars of eighteenth-century radicalism operate, transposing current cultural and doctrinal logics onto a time when Whig and Tory were perhaps more fluid political bodies than today's Democratic, Labour, or Republican parties. Thus we are apt to locate within studies of the events, procedures, and literature that helped shape a definitive historical period what are presumably modern political equivalents. One is not surprised, then, to find accounts of the "conservative assault" on Bill Clinton and Anita Hill interspersed in a comprehensive study of the British constitution in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries² or casual commentaries on the Tory "hegemony" that lasted a full eighteen years in late twentieth-century Britain.³

Yet scholarship in this or any other literary field is no longer the exclusive domain of any current political framework. More attention is being paid to the dangers of a postmodernist creation or revision of historical truths, since such tendencies have shown themselves to demean their subjects and reduce the intricacies of individual works to case studies of oppressor and oppressed. To do so is to ignore the complexity inherent in each work and renounce the autonomy of an author in favor of political pandering and extrinsic, rather than immediately contextual, criticism. Thus each new study of

¹ Nicholas Hudson, "'Britons Never Will be Slaves': National Myth, Conservatism, and the Beginnings of British Antislavery," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 34.4 (2001), 559.

² Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 220-223.

³ Amanda Vickery, ed., *Women, Privilege, and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 45.

previously underrepresented groups is an invaluable contribution to the field and advances a more thorough knowledge of discursive eighteenth-century social and political systems. This aims to be such a study, as texts written by women bespeak the discrepancies, deviations, and inconsistencies of any given labels bestowed on them, either by contemporaries or current critics.

Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan note the political roots of feminist criticism, writing that “feminism in the 1970s through to the early 1980s often characterised its own divisions through defined political ‘tendencies’ – liberal, socialist, radical, bourgeois.”⁴ They go on to note, however, that “the uncertainties about the fate and future of progressive agendas in the West, has encourage[d] a more patient, historically attentive approach to the complexity of women’s involvement in cultural production” (3) than earlier feminist scholarship had allowed. Yet this continued focus on progressive agendas such as human rights, global citizenship, and their Enlightenment precursors are tinged with political allusions and condescension towards a “capitalist modernity.” These most recent political developments are often enmeshed in scholarship of the eighteenth century and seen as extensions of the Enlightenment-era “rights of man” debate and the next logical phase of human progress.

Yet the concept of human rights, and for the purposes of this study, the rights of man, are more nebulous than is often acknowledged, leading to questions surrounding the hitherto unqualified endorsement of such doctrine by established eighteenth-century radicals. As outlined by Russell Kirk, the concept of human rights is comprised of the complex amalgam of civil liberties and natural law, and is contingent upon the steady

⁴ Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan, eds., Introduction to *British Women’s Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century: Authorship, Politics, and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

presence and progress of those two things within any given culture. Kirk writes of this concept's recent prominence in the West, having its roots in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, heartily endorsed at the time by Thomas Paine and the revolutionaries, but rejected in England and America as the "illegitimate notion of imprescriptible universal 'rights.'" According to Kirk, the amorphous doctrine of human rights is derived neither from "religious or quasi-religious convictions about the nature of man" nor "a nation's political development over a long period of time," thus becoming nebulous "abstractions (with) no sanction in the positive laws of most countries."⁵ Lynn Hunt adds that "in the twentieth century the distinction between political and civil rights has been blurred because, increasingly, people assume that individuals should enjoy both (hence the more general term *human rights*)."⁶ This has also, then, blurred modern perceptions of how the radical cause in the eighteenth century was altered, and either directly or indirectly nearly defeated, by the course of events that comprise this revolutionary decade.

Perhaps more importantly, it has led to the construction of a false dichotomy between British radicals and what has been construed as their nationalistic, patriarchal, and loyalist opposition. Consequently, a study of how voices of dissent formed opinions of the French Revolution, responding to what are now rationalized away as its "excesses" and labeled as Jacobin as part of a much larger campaign to suppress dissent of any kind, will help efface the line that has been constructed by contemporary detractors and hopeful historians seeking within literature the progenitors of modern day radicalism. It is

⁵ Russell Kirk, *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things are Written on the Sky* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, Inc., 1987), 37-9.

⁶ Lynn Hunt, ed., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996), 1.

not, then, implausible to argue that the heavy-handed suppression of dissent imposed by the British government following the sanguinary actions of Robespierre in 1793 has contributed in some degree to our perception of the level of radicalism that was indeed present during that time.

Indeed, as W.A. Speck hypothesizes, somewhat inconveniently to modern scholars of the radical movement, there is a conspicuous lack of evidence for the preponderance of radical activity in the 1780s and 90s that is often a presupposition for those writing on the roots of Enlightenment thought and pioneers of socio-political heterodoxy. Significantly, the resistance of the emergent working class and women, two groups putatively unified by their subordinate status, to the prevailing aristocratic and patriarchal power structure “has been exaggerated.”⁷ Speck then anticipates the argument that such seeming complaisance on the part of those we now recognize as radicals can be ascribed simply to government’s sanctioned efforts to silence them. He writes, “during the years of war with France loyalism was not only cultivated from above by the government and such agencies as John Reeves’s Association for the Protection of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers; it was also genuinely popular.” Furthermore, we are told that “in Britain there is so little evidence of subversive activity that historians of radicalism have been reduced to arguing that it went underground during these years.” The latter notion, according to Speck, is elided by the fact that “unlike in Ireland, revolutionaries could not count on the sympathy of a significant section of the population, an essential ingredient for sustaining an underground movement.”⁸ Nonetheless, the radical movement, in its admittedly fragmented form, sought to capitalize on the accelerated and

⁷ W.A. Speck, *Literature and Society in Eighteenth-Century England 1680-1820: Ideology, Politics and Culture* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc., 1998), 143.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 143-44.

sudden fall of what was felt by some in Britain, somewhat precipitately, to parallel their own social and political system. Yet the Revolution created a quandary for those who had agitated for reform well before 1789. While the upheaval it created augured well for the reformist factions, the reaction to it facilitated a blockage in the measures gradually making headway in Parliament. This setback was troublingly not to be remedied until passage of the Reform Act more than thirty years later, though even that failed as comprehensive redress.

II

Ultimately, the reform movement was radicalized as much by those advocates of the Revolution as their conservative opposition. Throughout the 1790s, reform became conflated with radicalism, and principles of equality – specifically gender, class, and parliamentary – that had hitherto stimulated public debate were suppressed as symptoms of rebellion. Yet while many scholars have remarked on the alteration of radical writers during this time and their collectively restrained tone, the tendency is to attribute such moderation to the desire for a return to those “original principles” that had spawned the French Revolution. I will argue that this is not always the case. Rather, it seems that the confluence of traditional English common law, the success of the American War of Independence, the clear distinction between the 1688 and 1789 revolutions, and the untoward course of the latter, indicated a return not to the original principles of the French Revolution, but those of the reform movement as it was prior to the fall of the Bastille, founded on an ancient constitution, and debated by a representative, bicameral legislative body. Indeed, such representation was by no means all-encompassing, and

there was to be found a fundamental imbalance in the appropriation of power, land, and political influence. Yet as many British citizens, radical and conservative, were aware, civil liberties and natural rights must have been firmly entrenched within a national culture in order to be extended outwards.

Thus, much of the literature denounced at the time for its inducement of “Gallic frenzy” and unabashed Francophilia was indeed progressive. However, its focus was the foundation of a distinctly British society and its intent was not to maintain an inhibitive status quo or uproot the constitutional monarchy, but to represent the status quo as an ironic perversion of the British ideals it sought to protect. Using female authors that at one time or another associated with some of the leading radicals of the 1790s, I will argue that the British reform tradition is as prominent in their works as any endorsement of the Enlightenment ideals that drove the French Revolution. Moreover, I will present evidence which suggests that many of the writers instinctively labeled Jacobin were increasingly more sympathetic to a nationalist program for the fulfillment of natural rights and liberties. Tragically, their reputations were cemented by contemporary reviews and reflexive dismissals of anything thought to be influenced by revolutionary ideology. Thus, any appeals to the British constitution or the prescriptive rights it promised are overshadowed by a false conflation with the ambiguous French Declaration, which answered monarchical tyranny with anarchical absolutism.

Although the greatest violence incited by the Revolution ended in 1794, the specter of the Terror led even its proponents to identify the “rights of man” with a paradoxical imposition on those who were thought to deny its infallibility. Ralph Hancock and Gary Lambert write, “the repressed memory of these years haunts the legacy of the Revolution

because their violence was not merely the random or incidental effect of a society reduced to chaos, but the deliberate, systematic, institutionalized policy of the Jacobins.”⁹ Consequently, the 1790s mark a resurgence of not only a strictly preservative legislative authority, but also a rhetorical shift by English radicals away from French conceptions of universal liberties towards a domestic reformism respectful of the historical and cultural contexts by which such a program could be actuated.

The inevitable association between the Terror and the mere principles which defined the Revolution was certainly made by much of the British public during the tumultuous decade of the 1790s. One needs to look no further for evidence than the proliferation of unabashed anti-Jacobin literature, perhaps epitomized by the epigram from Lloyd’s *Edmund Oliver* that begins this chapter. Certainly conservative in nature, the work of the anti-Jacobins was meant to stem the tide of revolutionary fervor, and exploit fears of a French-style revolt in Britain. Thus radicals, before and especially after the Jacobin Terror, were impugned for the promulgation of feminized “French” precepts, and accused of treasonous conspiracies against the present government. Yet as much as anti-Jacobin authors and polemicists have been dismissed – and perhaps not unjustly – as fear mongers and unflinching devotees of the status quo, their influence on our own identification of their opposition has been extraordinary.

Indeed, one rarely finds any historicist commentary on Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, or Charlotte Smith devoid of at least passing reference to Polwhele’s incendiary sketch of these author’s “unfeminine” acts. As social commentators in the 1790s, which a comparably large number of women indeed were, these authors provide an invaluable

⁹ Ralph C. Hancock and L. Gary Lambert, eds., Introduction to *The Legacy of the French Revolution* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 3.

barometer of the degree to which women were able to participate in the public political realm. Evidence suggests that it was indeed high. Yet until recently there has been an innate dissonance between the marginalization of these writers in critical circles and the rather high level of success they enjoyed in their own time. It must be acknowledged that their works provide accurate and historically verifiable accounts of social and economic gender inequality. Often, their overt resistance to these gender-specific constraints is used as evidence to point towards a wholesale radicalism shared with many of their male peers. In essence, their feminist agenda is seen simply as a component of a broader large-scale radical ideology. Yet eighteenth-century feminism – a term not yet existing at the time – was not so neatly placed. It benefits us to think of the gender issues at play in many women's works as not mutually exclusive from separate social and political ideologies that did not always coincide with a radical agenda.

If we are to establish what can now be considered eighteenth-century women's activism as indeed radical, it is also then of some benefit to examine the ways in which women's political voices diverged from domains which were immediately specific to women (female enfranchisement, etc). As I hope to show, it was indeed possible, and not uncommon, for women writers to agitate for greater rights within a decidedly British historical framework, at the expense of the ideals promulgated by the French Revolution. The divergence was both cultural and ideological. It would be understatement to assert the inconvenience to any progressive writer of advancing a reformist agenda in the wake of what had become a bloody and devastating purge of non-conformists by the Jacobins. Yet often overlooked and subsumed by assertions of the sanctity of "original principles" of revolution, is the reconsideration of their efficacy. For many, the ideals which

prompted both the French Revolution and the English radical support for it, had not been perverted but rather manifested by the atrocities committed in their name. In short, many were turning to another revolution as the basis for greater rights, one which was seen to have validated the rights of citizens by placing them within the tradition which culminated in British constitutional authority.

III

Although the Glorious Revolution was claimed by both conservative and radical voices, it could serve as a point of mediation on which a legitimate progression towards the realization of natural rights could be founded. However, these progressive yet nationalist philosophical principles, contrary to recent criticism, did not always clearly distinguish their purveyors from the subjects of virulent anti-Jacobin satire or polemic. What becomes sometimes obscured by the radicalized nature of the French Revolution and its influence abroad are the ways in which the reform movements of previous decades, especially those in Britain, had begun to manifest themselves. Its failures are often attributed to usurpers of the rights of man promised by the Enlightenment in the form of characters like Marat, Robespierre, or Napoleon, who are seen as violators rather than products of the revolutionary ideal. Conversely, revolutionary failures in France and their radical correlatives in Britain are more often than not attributed to steady conservative resistance. Indeed, Dostoevsky's maxim that those who begin with unlimited freedom must end with unlimited despotism resonates with the climate in

France following the Revolution.¹⁰ It is because it was not entirely defeated, at least in the long term, that historians can now look to the Revolution as having sown the seeds of government and social reform as well as what we now can legitimately term the “human rights” debate.

However, it was not so during the 1790s, and while radicals in Britain were finding their constitutional rights increasingly under siege, they also began to approach this newly defensive posture in myriad ways. Many of the grievances brought to the French King were certainly, if not explicitly, aligned with those expressed by various factions of the British public against their own government. Yet the British public and the French public had very different frames of reference. Britons’ constitutional rights, a forging of Locke’s principle of natural rights and contractual governance with ancient common law dating back to the Magna Carta of 1215, had been solidified by the signing of the Bill of Rights by William III in 1689. Similarly, the American revolutionaries, also popular in the minds of British radicals, had propitiously modeled their own Bill of Rights and democratic government after that of the British, producing the kind of bicameral legislative body that had checked monarchical absolutism upon William’s accession to the throne.

Such a transition was made difficult in France by its lack of a precedent for a universal, all-encompassing national legal system. As Peter McPhee explains, France was hardly a unified nation, comprised of very individualized and largely self-sufficient agrarian provinces.¹¹ This presented a formidable task for the French revolutionaries and

¹⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Devils*, trans. Michael R. Katz (1872; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹¹ McPhee, *The French Revolution 1789-1799*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), estimates that the French nation was inhabited by 28 million people, most of whom occupied 38,000 rural

their desired system of government, whose skeptics felt that “democracy might be suitable to the Americans with their custom of equality but could not be introduced in France, with its heritage of feudalism and aristocratic privilege.”¹² Indeed, many felt that the French Revolution was simply evidence of the relatively rapid diffusion of principles of liberty realized in their native country 100 years earlier. But to have thought so was to cast aside deeply rooted and distinctly English traditions, that while admittedly androcentric, hierarchical, and in need of reform, would simply not allow for the progress of such a seismic and violent insurrection.

It is within this context that many British radicals began to reassess the revolutionary vision, as it became apparent that the worse the situation in France, the further away they were from the realization of even modest reform in their own country. Consequently, divergences and discrepancies within the radical movement, especially after the rise of Robespierre and the proportionate disintegration of falsely promised liberty, have been given inadequate attention.¹³ This is no more apparent than in the treatment of what we have called radical women writers, who in many cases at least initially endorsed the Revolution’s promise. Indeed, many intellectual women whose demands for greater political autonomy are naturally ascribed to their radicalism were in fact usually building on national traditions. As Elizabeth Eger notes, “their emphasis on conversation between the sexes was not radical but rather aimed to build upon and consolidate new ways of

communities or parishes. As further evidence of its disunity, McPhee states that “the monarchy had long sought to impose linguistic uniformity by requiring priests and lawyers to use French. However, most of the king’s subjects did not use the French language in daily life” (1-3).

¹² Hunt, 15.

¹³ Patricia Howell Michaelson serves as an exception, noting a fundamental difference between French revolutionaries and British radicals: “The arguments supporting the [French] Revolution were predominantly secular. In England, by contrast, most political beliefs had a religious component.” See, “Religion and Politics in the Revolution Debate: Burke, Wollstonecraft, Paine,” in *The French Revolution Debate in English Literature and Culture*, ed. Lisa Plummer Crafton (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 28.

thinking about the relation between private and public life, responding, in particular, to notions of civic virtue.”¹⁴ While a great number of women joined the radical cause for their well-documented social inequality, their disillusionment with the Revolution’s failures was more pointed and perhaps even more significant than their male counterparts, since they signaled a new age of resistance to that relation between public and private. After all, many seemed to have overlooked immediate shortcomings in the allocation of public representation upon the organization of the French National Assembly, which magnanimously extended elusive liberty to literally “all men,” including servants and the poor, both previously excluded from political activity.¹⁵

In hindsight, this is not difficult to understand, for as Timothy Tackett relates, “with little or no experience in practical politics, the patriots in the Assembly were increasingly dominated by the radical faction of Jacobins, naively embracing Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s conception of a unitary general will and rejecting the very idea of political pluralism.”¹⁶ Thus, while progressive reformers in England had been intent on building upon national traditions, Jacobin ideology assumed a predominant place within the discourse. It is difficult to escape the notion that radicalism in Britain, especially during the 1790s, was inextricably tied to the French Revolution. After all, Louis XVI’s ill-fated but well-intentioned convening of the Estates General and solicitation of public *cahiers de doléances* followed by utter collapse of his monarchy brought hope to those radicals in Britain who felt their own king had similarly abused his power and subscribed to an

¹⁴ Elizabeth Eger, “‘The Noblest Commerce of Mankind’: Conversation and Community in the Bluestocking Circle,” in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, eds. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 292.

¹⁵ See Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

¹⁶ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture, 1789-1790* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 6.

authoritarian absolutism. As Anne Mellor points out, one of the Revolution's most ardent and unrelenting British defenders, Helen Maria Williams, was unable to see that gender restraints in Britain could not find their redress in the ever darkening situation in France. Mellor writes that "Williams was naïve. Despite the subtle and finally effective repression of women by the leaders of the French Revolution, Williams continued to affirm the overt rhetoric of the revolution."¹⁷ In essence, Williams continued to believe from afar not even in the original principles of the Revolution, but in their rhetorical – and false – idealism. Such was the case for a number of British radicals, men and women, who ultimately held out hope that the Revolution would fulfill its promise of universal liberty, equality, and justice.

So therein lays a paradox that perhaps encumbers scholarship in this field. Restrictions on women in what has been identified as the public realm did not extend to the literary marketplace nor did it in theory disallow them from engaging in discourse that helped shape public policy. Margaret Doody has posited that "if we often sign over the 'commodification of culture,' we should recognize that such commodification gave women a chance they had lacked otherwise."¹⁸ Thus that very same society that imposed rigid restrictions on political participation and selective moral codes was also that which allowed the marketplace of ideas to flourish. Conceding the ineluctable presence of a dominant patriarchy in eighteenth-century Britain, Linda Colley astutely explains its potential for female empowerment. Writing of the calculated divide between the traditionally feminine domestic and the masculine public, Colley states that this "separate

¹⁷ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1993), 72.

¹⁸ Margaret Anne Doody, "Women Poets of the Eighteenth Century," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700-1800*, ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 217.

sphere rhetoric could supply a way for women to assert their important role in British society and to protect their rights such as they were.”¹⁹ For Colley and other historians, women’s relegation to the private sphere was as much contractual as it was despotic or tyrannical.

Citing a speech made by a Miss Patterson to a London volunteer regiment in 1799, Colley notes the rather conservative concessions to the limited female role made paradoxically by a woman speaking publicly to a silent group of military men. By tacitly accepting her assigned role, Patterson also reminds the men that they too, had obligations to fulfill. In essence, “what she was insisting upon was a mutually binding contract: I, as a woman, will do my duty. But you, as men, must do yours.”²⁰ While this episode is admittedly an exception rather than a commonality, it is emblematic of the problems one encounters while engaged in textual and contextual criticism of women writers. On one hand, it is always necessary to highlight the debilitating and stringent injunctions on women’s behavior and morality imposed by a patriarchal society. Yet on the other, it is incumbent on the scholar to relate women’s endeavors to overcome such prejudice and convey the impact of their work on society at large in spite of it. In other words, their physical bodies were confined and their ideas suppressed, yet both were present enough to elicit the kind of sharp rebukes from male contemporaries that we today see as evidence of a socially sanctioned campaign to keep women out of the public sphere.

IV

¹⁹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, 2nd edn. (1992; Yale University Press, 2005), 262-63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

A feminist critique of presumably feminist authors – so often identified simply by the subversive act of writing – fails to make a clear enough distinction between feminism and eighteenth-century political radicalism. Indeed, politically factious rivalries have spilt into modern scholarship, and it is my contention that it has been to its detriment. In as much as this type of work has laudably broadened the literary canon and disabused us all of the notion that literature is as monolithic as its “dead white male” exemplars would lead us to believe, it is incomplete. The juxtaposition, or even inclusion, of non-traditional canonical authors such as Elizabeth Montagu or Anna Barbauld with High Church Tories like Samuel Johnson or pleasure-seeking Romantics such as Byron leads invariably to a discourse of opposition, a referential appreciation of marginalized authors defined largely by what they are not. Of course, this notion of alterity is a hallmark of feminist criticism, whereby female identity becomes a refraction of its dominant opposite, displaced so as to be consumed entirely by masculine modes of discourse.

The value of studying women writers is that their works provide the kind of cultural and textual richness that derives from a cautious calculation of the personal cost of transgressing their traditional space by the very public act of writing. Although as transgressive as this public act may have seemed, it certainly did little to hinder women from pursuing its advantages. According to Vivien Jones, “it is clear that the numbers of publications in all genres – and particularly by middling women – rose steeply in the last third of the (eighteenth) century.”²¹ That they were so heavily scrutinized – and usually condemned – by contemporaries for threats to conventional morality, cultural codes of female chastity, and the exclusion of what could only be their sexual political influence, can be used as evidence of both contemporary and current misrepresentations of their

²¹ Vivien Jones, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain*, 4.