

Social and Political Satire in the English Jacobin Novel: Some Well-nigh Forgotten Names and Works

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Satire is an ancient literary genre that has taken root in all cultures throughout the world. There have always been plenty of vices and follies around for the satirist's critical eye to prey upon. However, satire is largely dependent on temporary and local circumstances; that is why there are some periods in the history of any national literature when the satirical spirit finds more favourable conditions to develop and prosper. Rephrasing a great satirist's slogan, we could say that for satire all periods are equal, but some periods are more equal than others. In the history of English literature, the eighteenth century is often coined as the "Golden Age" of English satire. In a period governed by reason, wit, decorum, manners, public life, intellectual discussions, and political concerns, we are not surprised to find a number of remarkable satirical works, such as Daniel Defoe's *The True-Born Englishman* (1701), Delarivier Manley's *The New Atalantis* (1709), John Arbuthnot's *The History of John Bull* (1712), John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Alexander Pope's *The Moral Essays* (1731-35), Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* (1762), Charles Churchill's *The Prophecy of Famine* (1763), John Wilkes's *The North Briton* (1762-63), the anonymous *Letters of Junius* (1769-71), R. B. Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* (1777), and John Wolcot's *The Lousiad* (1785).

The last decade of that century – commonly referred to as the Revolutionary Decade of the Nineties (1790s) – also has the basic ingredients for satire to spread and flourish. It is a time of great political, social, and intellectual crisis; an age of revolutionary ideas, encouraged by the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789,

which inspired a renewal of social and political criticism directed against any sort of tyranny, privilege, and persecution. One of the most important movements of political protest and reform which arose in Britain in the 1790s was that of the Jacobins, a group of liberal intellectuals who sympathised with the revolutionary principles of liberty and equality.¹ They played a leading role in various lively polemics reflected in the literature of the time: Edmund Burke's attack on current revolutionary ideas expressed in his famous tract *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), was immediately rebuked by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Thomas Paine in *The Rights of Man* (1791, 1792), and William Godwin in *The Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). A criticism of Burke's defence of aristocratic values also found immediate expression in several Jacobin novels, whose liberal ideas were similarly ridiculed and challenged in journals such as *The Anti-Jacobin*, edited by William Gifford.

In spite of all these external circumstances, satire did not really flourish during the period that marked the end of the eighteenth century. Most satirical pieces conceived in this period have received little attention by literary critics, being overshadowed by the more successful satire of other previous writers, notably that of Dryden, Defoe, Swift, Pope, Johnson, and Goldsmith. We will focus here on four English writers associated with Mary Wollstonecraft's circle who invested in the satiric novel to propagate their Jacobin beliefs: William Godwin, Robert Bage, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Thomas Holcroft. Their works have been nearly forgotten in our age and consequently rarely included in recent academic discussions or literary publications.² Why haven't these revolutionary years left a more effective and lasting satire? Evidently it is not a question of dealing with ephemeral controversies which fade into oblivion, since the battle for liberty and social reforms have always appealed to a large audience. What is it then? The aim of this paper is to study four

¹ Originally the term "Jacobin" referred to a French political group which led the revolutionary government in 1793 and 1794.

² At the beginning of this century Carl H. Grabo wrote an article about Robert Bage subtitled "A Forgotten Novelist"; these terms can still be applied today not only to Bage but to all the novelists discussed in this paper as well.

representative Jacobin novels and look at the possible reasons why the literary histories have barely recorded their contribution as satires.

Of all this Jacobin fiction the most conspicuous and recognised narrative is William Godwin's *Things As They Are; or The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), although it has usually been considered more as a psychological novel than a social and political satire.³ It is certainly true that William Godwin devotes much of his book to the description of various psychological profiles, but his main interest spills over to the ills and shortcomings of contemporary society.⁴ The adventures of Caleb Williams serve to denounce the despotism and injustice of the privileged classes. It is the story of a humble man who is appointed secretary of a tyrannical country squire, Ferdinando Falkland. He has to suffer a relentless persecution because he casually discovers that his employer has been involved in the murder of another important land owner, Barnabas Tyrrel, and has allowed two other innocent men to be executed for his crime. By Falkland's dispositions the novel's hero is unfairly accused of theft and sent to prison. Although Caleb escapes from gaol and goes into hiding, Falkland uses all his power to make his life a misery, hunting him from place to place. However, at the end, against all expectation, Falkland, the despotic murderer, repents and publicly confesses his guilt just moments before he is to die; whereas Caleb Williams, the poor victim of social injustice, survives, nonetheless, feeling responsible for his persecutor's demise.⁵ The sentimentalism of this ending comes as a surprise for the reader who expected another type of denouement in that unfair society dominated by the powerful gentry.

If William Godwin develops his themes by a persecution plot, our second Jacobin novelist, Robert Bage, prefers satirical portraits of the

³ According to Gary Kelly as early as the Romantic Period critics began to see this novel as a psychological study of a pursued criminal (179-80); Patricia Meyer Spacks in her study on the "Novels of the 1790s" also refers to the psychological analysis that this novel provides for recent readers (260).

⁴ M. E. Speare includes this story in his study of *The Political Novel* and affirms that William Godwin had "a conscious purpose in mind" (357).

⁵ Godwin had previously written a different ending in which Caleb Williams is imprisoned again and slides into madness without being able to unmask Falkland; the manuscript of this version is printed in the edition of McCracken (Appendix I, 330-4).

Theophrastian type and short dialogues to denounce every form of social and political abuse. It is his last novel, *Herm sprong: or, Man as He Is Not* (1796), that best reflects the influence of revolutionary thought in his criticism of the hierarchical composition of society and inherited privileges. To carry out this task, Bage invents several satirical characters: Lord Grondale, the old tyrannical aristocrat; Dr Blick, the intolerant sycophantic Anglican parson; Sir Philip Chestum, the deformed pedantic snob; Maria Fluart, the flamboyant unconventional lady; and several other rakes and fashionable ladies. In this corrupt world a new type of hero arrives, Herm sprong, a type of “noble savage” who was brought up amongst the Red-skins in the more natural and egalitarian America; he manages to subdue Lord Grondale’s despotism, marry his fair daughter, and inherit his large state, since Herm sprong happens to be Sir Charles Campinet, the long-lost true heir. Again we find here the typical happy ending of the sentimental novel in which the protagonist is usually rewarded for his virtuous deeds with a good marriage and a good fortune.

Elizabeth Inchbald’s *Nature and Art* (1796) is yet another much ignored polemical novel of the 1790s, a social and moral satire which focuses on the wrong use of riches, the artificiality of conventional education, and the vanities around fashion. It displays a conflict between reason and prejudice (the “nature” and “art” of the title) illustrated by the story of two completely opposite brothers, William and Henry, and their sons. The ambitious and worldly William becomes a bishop, while the humble and virtuous Henry loses his humble wife and is forced to leave England. Their differences are reinforced in their sons, who receive two contrasting types of education: the younger Henry, who has grown up on an African island, returns to England and is taken aback by the so-called “civilised world” of his ambitious and cold cousin, educated in a gentleman’s manner. Henry continually questions the class system and other social values of the time. After several misfortunes, at the end there is poetic justice and the “uncivilised” Henry finds happiness and peace of mind, crowning his adventures with a wonderful marriage to his faithful sweetheart Rebecca. The author then concludes her novel with a moralising maxim uttered by the elder Henry which, once more, reminds us of other contemporary novels of sensibility:

How much indebted are *we* to providence, my children, who, while it inflicts poverty, bestows peace of mind; and in return for the trivial grief we meet in this world, holds out to our longing hopes, the reward of the next! (ii 194)

Finally, let us consider the work of another leading English Jacobin, Thomas Holcroft, whose revolutionary story entitled *The Adventures of Hugh Trevor* (1794-97) contains a great deal of satire unleashed against the corruption of the University, the Church, the Law, and the State. It is a picaresque novel in autobiographical form which traces the misfortunes of a young man in pursuit of a proper career, framed within an unjust world dominated by the privileges, vices, and follies of the upper classes. Upon his father's death, Hugh Trevor debuts in this cruel world as a humble farm labourer, but has to run away from a merciless employer. Adopted by a rich grandfather, he tries a career in the Church, but he is refused his degree at Oxford. After taking up legal studies, he is deeply disappointed to discover the difference between law and justice. He then becomes a politician, but only to end in gaol persecuted by his former protector. It is very difficult to find a useful profession in a society brimming with flattering tutors, manipulative lawyers, corrupt politicians, hypocrites, and social climbers. Notwithstanding, our *picaro* is miraculously rescued at the end by a stranger whom he had once helped and who happens to be his long-lost rich uncle Elford. Thus, Hugh Trevor is finally able to find happiness in these dreadful surroundings and live in accordance with the canons of a virtuous gentleman, accompanied by his beautiful and exemplary Olivia Mowbray, whom he marries in the end.

It is obvious to everyone that the four novels discussed above have a distinctive feature in common: the happy ending characteristic of the sentimental novel. All these stories finish in a tender, moving, idealistic way, sometimes with idealised romantic love, sometimes with incredible coincidences, and sometimes with sudden complete repentance. These elements taken from the conventional romance plots appear rather strange, or perhaps we should say incongruous, for this type of satiric portraits of society, and they do not preserve the novel's social or political criticism. Although satirists may offer fantastic and grotesque visions of the world, they commonly try to create an illusion of reality in the reader, lending

verisimilitude to their stories. Alvin Kernan clearly illustrates this idea with an appropriate example:

... of all the major literary genres satire has traditionally made most pretense of being realistic. The man who after reading *Gulliver's Travels* tried to find Lilliput on the map may have been a fool, but he was led on by Swift's elaborate apparatus of verisimilitude. (2-3)

However, the sentimentalism of Falkland's sudden moral transformation that leads to the protagonist's final triumph in *Caleb Williams* does not satisfy the demands of logic. After all the despicable and cruel persecutions, the reader expects a more tragic and violent finale in which Falkland would remain a complete villain, and henceforth the previous critical attitude against the landed gentry could be reaffirmed.⁶ Bage's bland satiric spirit is also evident at the end of *Hernsprong*, when the protagonist turns out to be an aristocrat who inherits the privileges of that social class and marries the daughter of the despotic lord he had been fighting against. Similarly, Inchbald's sentimental ending of *Nature and Art* softens the social exposé expressed in the previous pages because, as Gary Kelly states, "the pious tone of the elder Henry's thanksgiving is quite contrary to the method of the rest of the book" (104). Again, the way Holcroft resolves his plot in *Hugh Trevor*, with the providential arrival of Elford and the happy wedding of the protagonist, is more appropriate for a romantic sentimental comedy than for a harsh satiric novel which spells out social ills and political corruption.⁷

This blend of criticism and sentiment is seldom operative in satire. Romance plots and sentimental happy endings do not help at all the satirist to capture the vices and follies of society. Conventional poetic justice, with its distribution of earthly rewards and punishments in proportion to the

⁶ The critic D. G. Dumas claims that Godwin's ending is contrary to his Jacobin beliefs expressed in *The Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (584); also, in "William Godwin's Novels" Lesley Stephen wonders what has happened to the moral of the story, to the wickedness of the government, at the end of the novel.

⁷ See Virgil Stallbaumer's article entitled "Thomas Holcroft: A Satirist in the Stream of Sentimentalism".

virtue or vice of the characters, is not really essential in the satiric mode. Instead of focusing on the rewards of virtue and the happiness of the good characters, effective satiric fiction usually places more emphasis on the punishment of the villains or even on the unfair chastisement of the innocents. Of these two ways of punishment which are generally employed to show the consequences of vice, Ronald Paulson maintains that most satirists, in fact, prefer the punishment of the victims, because the “attack is less direct and less optimistic than the straightforward administration of justice” (11); he also adds that “the knave is less a knave when his villainy fails or back-fires, or when he is punished; these consequences may turn his knavery into folly” (21). In the Jacobin novels discussed here, the evil characters are usually punished appropriately, but the happy sentimental endings shift our attention to the reward of the victims, dissolving to a great extent the satiric spirit of the novel. A shocking scene in which the innocent succumbs to the powerful evil gets the message across much more clearly. Moreover, some of the knaves of these novels not only fail to carry out their villainies, but they even repent in the last moment – like Falkland in *Caleb Williams* and Wakefield in *Hugh Trevor* –, an act that mitigates their crimes even more in the end.⁸

Literary history provides numerous instances of excellent satires whose endings do not include happy marriages or wonderful revelations of unknown identities. Don Quixote, for example, does not marry any Dulcinea at the end of his adventures; in the conventional Spanish picaresque novel, the *picaro* does not progress toward a happy ending or moral wholeness, as Hugh Trevor does, but simply toward a better understanding of his position in the world. If we look at other successful novels of the English satiric tradition, we can also see that their endings do not usually enjoy the degree of sentimentalism that are patent in the Jacobin novels. Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) ends with disillusioned Lemuel back home, being much more at ease with horses than with humans; in Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall* (1928) Paul Pennyfeather returns alone to Oxford University in order to resume his abandoned studies under a new identity; the noble savage in Huxley’s *Brave New*

⁸ Alvin Kernan, in his description of the satirist’s vision of the world, also argues that in satire “every effort is made to emphasize the ~~destruying~~ ugliness and power of vice” (11).



World (1932), takes his own life as the only way out of that “utopian” world; Margot Stamp fails to protect her husband from the world of politics in Wyndham Lewis’s *The Revenge for Love* (1937); Winston Smith is completely defeated and destroyed by the Big Brother in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); and other dystopian novels – such as Angus Wilson’s *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961), Anthony Burgess’s *Clockwork Orange* (1962), Emma Tennant’s *The Time of the Crack* (1973), Zoe Fairbairns’s *Benefits* (1979) – also sound similar pessimistic overtones in their final resolutions.

One might reasonably suppose that the Jacobin prose satirists were contaminated by the development of a trend of sensibility that had dominated the works of several writers after the 1740s. The sentimental novel, with its emphasis on the deepest feelings and the distress of the virtuous, began with Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and continued with other classic examples such as Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), and Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771). This form of fiction tried to demonstrate that a sense of honour and moral behaviour should be justly rewarded at the end; therefore, these novels accommodate appropriate wonderful happy endings for those who deserve it. This fashion also affected some gothic novels, notably Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), where after all the horrific experiences endured by the innocent victims, they end up happily reunited, whereas the villains suffer the penalty of their crimes. Even the realistic picaresque novel by Tobias Smollett *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) modifies its conventional form and ends with reconciliations and happy marriages. So it is only natural to assume that Jacobin novels followed the dominant trend of marvellous endings reserved for heroes and victims of terrible ordeals.

On the other hand, it would not be surprising if these Jacobin novelists intentionally softened their satires with sentimental closures. After all, we should be aware that their novels were defending the basic principles of the French Revolution at a time of a great anti-Jacobin reaction in Britain. Sympathies for the French revolutionaries were drastically devaluated after 1793, when England went to war with France and the news of organised repression reached London. Therefore, those

Jacobin reformers who published their novels from 1793 onwards, such as Godwin, Bage, Inchbald, or Holcroft, had a double stigma: they might have appeared as seditious sympathisers with the enemy, or as supporters of a republican doctrine which could bring the regime of the guillotine to their own country. This double threat of unpopularity, combined with the conservative reaction in England after the failure of French revolutionary ideas, might have made these writers act more prudently, conditioning the satiric temper of their novels.⁹

Regardless of the reason, the fact is that these novels diluted their satire with sentiment, two literary modes which do not mix very well, especially at the end of fictional stories. E. M. Forster, in his celebrated study *Aspects of the Novel*, maintained that one of the most difficult tasks with which novelists have to cope is to round off their narratives adequately, and that is why many novels fail at the end: "This, as far as one can generalise, is the inherent defect of novels: they go off at the end" (94). And this is precisely one of the main drawbacks of these Jacobin novels: the inappropriate happy sentimental endings which make their satire blander and, therefore, less efficient. Although other weaknesses could be found in their dialogues, characters, plots, and rhetorical strategies, the inclusion of woefully deficient endings surely justifies the reason why these Jacobin novels have received only scant reference in the history of English satire and why their authors are not regarded as high-profile satirists today.

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⁹ Gary Kelly refers to this anti-Jacobin reaction in Britain when he explains Godwin's decision to change the ending of *Caleb Williams* (189).

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