To the inhabitants of Great Britain, the French Revolution was “an hour of universal ferment,” either the culmination of the political and social upheaval provoked by the Enlightenment or its betrayal. For William Wordsworth, as we all know, it was first the one and then the other: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive” Wordsworth recalled feeling, till he was subsequently sickened by the “domestic carnage” of the Terror, “Head after head, and never heads enough/For those who bade them fall.” That same political shift can be seen in the works of novelist Charlotte Smith—one of the English Jacobins—between Desmond of 1792 and The Banished Man just two years later.

If it was hard for English men and women to come to terms with what they thought and felt about the the ideas underlying the Revolution, the publication of political discourse was complicated by the fact that England was almost continuously at war with France from the execution of Louis XVI in 1793 to the final fall of Napoleon in 1815. Promulgating Jacobin ideas was considered inciting the public in favor of the national enemy, and a group of English radicals were tried for their lives in 1794 for the novel crime of “constructive treason.” No one was convicted, but the prosecutions had the effect of driving revolutionary discourse underground.

Both before and (especially) after 1794, the conflict between radical and conservative social thought was often waged in the pages of novels, where fiction conferred the freedom to speak one's mind. Some novels are of merely historical interest, but many still make delightfully amusing, and even exciting reading today.

We shall read some of these novels, along with some of the most important philosophical and political treatises and pamphlets that inform their positions, though we shall try to remain conscious, as we read the works and attempt to understand the era that gave birth to them, that complicated and wildly unpredictable things sometimes happen to ideas when they start operating inside literary texts. And we should be clear that the arenas engaged by what one side called the conflict between order and anarchy, and the other freedom and tyranny, involved gender as well as class, custom as well as law.

The Jacobin novels that appear on our primary reading list (or may be used as topics for writing) include: Elizabeth Inchbald: A Simple Story (1791); Thomas Holcroft: Anna St. Ives (1792); Charlotte Smith, Desmond (1792); William Godwin: Things as They Are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams (1794); Robert Bage: Hermsprung, or Man as He Is Not (1796); Mary Wollstonecraft: Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman (1798); Amelia Opie: Adeline Mowbray (1805).

We will be reading fewer Anti-Jacobin novels, as many of them are not generally available. The ones that are available include: George Walker: The Vagabond (1797); Maria Edgeworth: Leonora (1806); Jane Austen: Mansfield Park (1814). Others that I can make available to you on reserve in the form of PDF files include Edward Sayer: Lindor and Adelaide (1791); Charlotte Smith: The Banished Man (1794); Henry James Pye: The Democrat (1795); Anon: The History of George Warrington, or the Political Quixote (1797); Many others can be read and downloaded from ECCO (Eighteenth-Century Collection Online), a database accessible through Rosenthal Library.

The texts that are in print are available at the QC Bookstore, but there are texts that are not in print, and these will be available via e-reserve at the Rosenthal Library. To access the texts, just go to the library webpage http://www.reserve.qc.edu/eres/courseindex.aspx?error=&page=search

First find the course using either my name or the course number. Your password, to access all the files, is ric722

Learning Goals:

Students in this course will learn (1) how Jacobin and Anti-Jacobin political texts (by Burke, Paine, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin) address social, cultural, and political concerns; (2) how the novels of the 1790s (and thereafter) dramatize, explain, reflect upon, and rethink human experience in both the public sphere and the domestic private sphere. Students in this course will also learn to draw and articulate substantive connections between various texts by the Jacobin and Anti-Jacobin factions in England, and the consequences of this war of ideas in domestic novels by canonical writers like Edgeworth and Austen.

Tentative Schedule

February 3: Introduction to the course.


Early “state of nature” and “natural rights” oriented thinkers include:


February 24: The English Jacobins’ reactions to Burke: Wollstonecraft and Paine. Readings: A Vindication of the Rights of Men (Wollstonecraft); The Rights of Man (Paine) ;

March 3: The revolution novelized: Charlotte Smith’s Desmond

March 10: Education and character, nature and nurture: Elizabeth Inchbald’s A Simple Story
March 17: Political justice novelized: William Godwin’s *Adventures of Caleb Williams*

March 24: Sexual Politics: Wollstonecraft’s *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*

Spring Break. No class on March 31

April 7: Satirical fables on Rousseauvian themes: Robert Bage's *Hermsprong*.

April 14: The Anti-Jacobin Satirical Fable: George Walker: *The Vagabond*.

April 21: Conservative melodrama: Maria Edgeworth’s *Leonora*.

April 28: Conservative comedy: Jane Austen: *Mansfield Park*.

May 5: The schizophrenic aftermath of the French Revolution: Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.

May 12: Final Session.