

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation:           WORLDS TRODDEN AND UNTRODDEN:  
POLITICAL DISILLUSIONMENT, LITERARY  
DISPLACEMENT, AND THE CONFLICTED  
PUBLICITY OF BRITISH ROMANTICISM

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This study focuses on four first-generation British Romantic writers and their misadventures in the highly-politicized public sphere of the 1790s, which was riven by class conflict and media war. I argue that as a result of their negative experiences with publicity, these writers—William Wordsworth, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Blake—recoiled from the pressures of public engagement and developed in reaction a depoliticized aesthetic program aligned with various forms of privacy. However, a “spectral” form of publicity haunts the subsequent works of these writers, which troubles and complicates the traditional identification of Romanticism with privacy. All were forced, in different ways, to negotiate the discursive space between privacy and publicity, and this effort inflected their ideas concerning literature. Thus, in sociological terms, British Romantic literature emerged not from the private sphere but rather from the inchoate space between privacy and publicity.

My understanding of both privacy and publicity is informed by Jürgen Habermas’s well-known model of the British public sphere in the eighteenth century.

However, I broaden the discussion to include other models of publicity, such as those elaborated by feminist and Marxist critics. In my discussion of class conflict in late-eighteenth-century Britain, I make use of the tools of class analysis, hegemony theory, and ideology critique, as used by new historicist literary critics. To explain media war in the 1790s, I utilize the media theory of Raymond Williams, particularly his conception of media as “material social practice.” All the writers in this study were profoundly engaged in the class conflict, media war, and politicized publicity of the British 1790s. They were similar in that they were negatively impacted by these phenomena, but different in their responses, depending on their discrete experiences and concerns. The various results were new conceptions of sensibility and the Gothic, new attitudes towards solitude and obscurity, all eventually incorporated into a new kind of literature now called “Romantic.”

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POLITICAL DISILLUSIONMENT, LITERARY DISPLACEMENT, AND THE  
CONFLICTED PUBLICITY OF BRITISH ROMANTICISM

By

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1:	Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2:	William Wordsworth, Vexed Publicity, and Reclusion.....	27
Chapter 3:	Embattled Publicity in the Gothic Novels of William Godwin .....	68
Chapter 4:	“Unsex’d” Sensibility and Publicity in the Polemical Works of Mary Wollstonecraft .....	113
Chapter 5:	William Blake, Antinomian Publicity, and the Tactics of Obscurity .....	169
Works Cited:	.....	220

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the fall of 1808, the young Thomas De Quincey moved into Dove Cottage in Grasmere, in the English Lake District. The former occupants—his idol William Wordsworth and William’s sister, Dorothy—were then domiciled nearby, at a nearly-completed mansion called Allan Bank. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another of De Quincey’s literary heroes, was a regular house-guest at Allan Bank. De Quincey’s reading of *Lyrical Ballads*, which was to him “an absolute revelation of untrodden worlds teeming with power and beauty as yet unsuspected amongst men,” enticed him to idyll where Wordsworth had been born and raised (19). Like Coleridge, De Quincey was drawn to the picturesque vistas and solitude of the Lake District, and to the domestic happiness shared by the Wordsworths. Reflecting on it after the fact, De Quincey wondered at the obscurity of his idols, their alienation from literary society, and plotted to bring them the attention they deserved. De Quincey claims he “paid an oriental homage” to Wordsworth, “at a time when the finger of scorn was pointed at Mr. W. from every journal in the land” (129).

By the time his tenancy at Dove Cottage ended some seven years later, De Quincey was barely on speaking terms with Wordsworth and Coleridge. When De Quincey wrote about this period in his life, in the 1830s for *Tait’s Magazine*, his bitterness curdled his grudging admiration. He did indeed bring the poets the attention he thought they deserved, and most of it was negative. De Quincey depicted Coleridge as a serial plagiarist, opium addict, and book thief; Wordsworth he exposed as a blinkered and pompous windbag who was not to be gainsaid—a man who not only ruled his own roost

but also stuck his beak in the domestic affairs of others. De Quincey's own struggle with opium and his affair with a local farmer's daughter, while living at Dove Cottage, no doubt played a part in his tense relationship with the Wordsworths: De Quincey had dared to sully the sacred solitude that they had sedulously cultivated during their own seven years at Dove Cottage. In his articles for *Tait's*, De Quincey demolished the romantic myth of Dove Cottage, showing that the new worlds of Wordsworth and Coleridge were in fact well-trodden, even run-down. De Quincey insinuated that in their precious rustic solitude the poets of *Lyrical Ballads* were as self-important, as petty, as contentious as any of the city dwellers they disdained in their writings. By making public the compromised privacy of the poets, De Quincey earned their enmity. But for De Quincey, such publicity acted as a necessary corrective to an idealized, "romanticized" privacy that ensnared admirers like himself.

De Quincey's sardonic and cynical take on the Lake poets anticipates many of the critical treatments of first-generation Romantic writers issued in the past thirty years, such as those of the new historicists. These critics have been as eager as De Quincey to dispel the myths of British Romanticism, particularly as they relate to privacy. They assail the Romantic idea that true art demands the rejection of the public sphere, and a retreat to the private sphere, ideally located in rustic environs, where the poet suffers the martyrdom of obscurity for the sake of enlightened posterity. New historicists argue that this myth obscures the once-radical politics of prominent Romantic writers. They point out, for instance, that William Wordsworth contributed to the French Revolution controversy with political poems, penned a republican pamphlet, and likely edited a radical magazine; and that Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a notoriously radical lecturer

and preacher in Bristol and edited an anti-government magazine. New historicists aver that Mary Wollstonecraft courted public controversy with her two vindications, which advocated republicanism and gender equality in education; and that William Godwin, with a pamphlet, saved radicals from the noose and wrote a best-selling anarchist treatise that suggested that public debate might replace government. They assert that William Blake wore the revolutionary cockade and authored illuminated prophecies that addressed the burning political topics of the day. In the more recent new historicist studies of these Romantic writers, this early commitment to public discourse is privileged and praised, then typically compared and contrasted with a later retreat to privacy, to the disadvantage of privacy, which many of these critics equate with political quietism or outright apostasy.

In this study, I continue this program of de-romanticization, while at the same time troubling the strict distinction between political publicity and apolitical privacy, which usually accompanies such a critique. I map the public activities and writings of the first-generation British writers listed above, arguing that each had a vexed relationship with the public sphere in the period following the French Revolution. More specifically I show how these writers became enthusiasts for publicity in the early 1790s but, after encountering class conflict and media war in the public sphere, became disillusioned with public debate and retreated to a private sphere associated with seclusion, domesticity and imaginative writing. Their anxieties about publicity remained, however, and these are represented in their writings by what I call “spectral publics.”<sup>1</sup> These spectral publics

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term “publicity” will refer to activity within the public sphere. With Andrew Franta, I distinguish publicity from the public sphere itself, seeing the public sphere as “a realm of action or reflection,” and publicity, by contrast, as “a set of practices or mode of action...as a process rather than a space” (2).



imply resistance to publicity, but also the continued, albeit ambivalent, engagement of these writers with the public sphere. I also consider the distinctive factors that made the experiences of each of these Romantic writers unique vis-à-vis publicity. All of them were forced, in different ways, to negotiate the discursive space between privacy and publicity. Indeed my study shows that, in sociological terms, British Romanticism emerged not from privacy but rather from the inchoate, in-between space between privacy and publicity.

In this introductory chapter of my study, I examine the vectors that have collectively produced the problematic publicity of Romanticism. That is, I consider the ways that radical politics, class strife, and developments in print culture complicate our understanding of British publicity during the Romantic period. In making my argument, I draw upon the insights and methodology of public sphere theorists such as the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) first popularized the phrase “public sphere.” I also retail the elaborations and contestations of Habermas’s critics, who challenge him on his flawed model.

The new historicists I draw from to elucidate the radical politics of the era are many, and include such seminal critics as Marilyn Butler, Alan Liu, Marjorie Levinson, and Jerome McGann. However, their analysis tends to adhere to a strict public-private binary in which publicity is considered political activity and privacy is thought to be an abandonment of political reform, a kind of apostasy. I counter this schematic understanding of public/private relations with a more nuanced account of how first-generation Romantic writers used their art to transform both publicity and privacy by refusing a strict adherence to either.

As with new historicism more generally, my understanding of history has been influenced by Marxist cultural critique, which includes elements of class analysis, hegemony theory, and ideology critique. However, in my analysis of class, I am more likely to draw upon a previous generation of British historians, headed by the British Marxist writers E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, both of whom were engaged with Romanticism as literary critics. With the help of Thompson and Williams, I illuminate the ever-evolving conflict among the plebeian, bourgeois, and patrician classes in the Romantic-era public sphere, something left unexplored by Habermas, as well as by most public sphere theorists and Romanticists.

Some critics have inquired into the role of print culture, or “the media,” in the conflicted public sphere of the Romantic period, but in general this has not been sufficiently theorized. I have attempted to make up for this insufficiency by incorporating the media theory of Williams, qualified by W. J. T. Mitchell, and showing its affinity with historicist and Romanticist scholarship. I contend that the class conflict in the public sphere of the 1790s was also a media conflict, as particular media came to be literally “classified” as plebeian, bourgeois, or patrician. I look at various media in historical and cultural context and examine how they both facilitated and problematized publicity. All the first-generation Romantic writers considered in this study were enlisted in this media war, which was another factor in their vexed and dysfunctional relationship to publicity.

For the remainder of the present chapter, I elaborate the politics of publicity, class, and media and the role each had in the development of Romanticism, ending with descriptions of the chapters that follow this one, which show more concretely how first-generation Romantic writers both reformed and resisted the public sphere of their time.

## **Habermasian Publicity and its Discontents**

Marilyn Butler notes that British Romantic “authors are not the solitaires of the Romantic myth, but citizens” (9-10). Similarly, Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, in *Romantic Sociability*, contest a “solitary or interiorized Romanticism” and its “traditional identification with the lone poet, withdrawn into productive introspection” (4). What seems to trouble Butler, Russell, and Tuite is the traditional and highly ideological construction of Romanticism as private and anti-public, which derives largely from the writers I consider in this study. Andrew McCann puts it this way: “The development of Romantic thought in Britain . . . is informed by a . . . move away from the political to the aesthetic as the basis of redemption and emancipation” (4). The Romantics “demarcate the space of the aesthetic as one removed from the banal necessities of everyday life or the more destructive realm of public politics,” and their poetry “is premised on a rejection of public political life, conceptualized in a very abstract and impressionistic way to include city life, market economics, popular politics and popular entertainment, and a corresponding orientation to private feeling, virtue, sensibility and pleasure” (5). Or, as Raymond Williams observes in his classic essay on the Romantic artist in *Culture and Society*: “the Poet, the Artist, is by nature indifferent to the crude worldliness and materialism of politics and social affairs; he is devoted, rather to the more substantial spheres of natural beauty and personal feeling” (30). Williams insists that this “dissociation is itself in part a product of the nature of the Romantic attempt” (30). Like a lot of critics, McCann and Williams seem to take for granted the affiliation of Romanticism and privacy. I make a case for their disaffiliation. That is, by situating first-

generation Romantic writers within the conflicted public sphere of the 1790s, we can see how they used literature to negotiate between publicity and privacy, rather than as an escape from one to the other.

Any discussion of relationship between Romantic literature and publicity must begin with *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas. Habermas's relatively detailed portrait of the eighteenth-century British public sphere—which he considered the most advanced in Europe—and his reading of key literary texts in relation to publicity, brought him to the attention of literary critics. Habermas argues that the bourgeois class initiated and sustained the public sphere. It was the means by which this class distinguished itself from the classes above and below them (patrician and plebeian, respectively), and it helped facilitate bourgeois hegemony in nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the plebs, Scarlet Bowen notes that “in the eighteenth century, the legitimation of new forms of public assembly as well as discursive sites—what Jürgen Habermas called the ‘public sphere’—entailed the relentless disavowal of popular and plebeian culture, including its associations with rude crowd behavior, noise and dirt, and bodily pleasures” (9-10).

Bourgeois publicity also confronted the “representative” or ceremonial publicity by which the patrician class maintained its hegemony throughout the eighteenth century. Seeing ceremonial publicity as a façade hiding the abuses of the *ancien régime*, bourgeois intellectuals replaced it with a free-floating forum, separate from the state. This bourgeois or “Enlightenment” public sphere was a discursive space for rational discourse, where “private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public

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<sup>2</sup> In my discussion of class, I follow E. P. Thompson in using the terms patrician, plebeian, and bourgeois, to represent, respectively, the upper class, the lower class, and the middle class. I discuss these terms, and their nuances, at more length below.

authority to legitimate itself before public opinion,” through the public use of reason (25). In doing so, the bourgeois implicitly derogates the patrician class—like the plebeian class—as irrational, non-transparent, and unjust.

Concomitant to the public sphere was the “private sphere,” localized in the bourgeois home and family. Liberated from a public function, the private sphere “was the scene of a psychological emancipation,” marked by non-coercive relationships, a “community of love,” and the cultivation of the individual (46-47). It was where individuals became fulfilled and enlightened humans. But Habermas makes clear that this was an ideological projection of the bourgeoisie. What was really at stake was capital; what privacy denoted was, more properly, private enterprise. To protect this sphere of mercantile interests, in which the bourgeois family was implicated, the bourgeois created a public sphere, a zone of negotiation between the private sphere and the state, where the bourgeois used his critical reason to confront those authorities that would restrict the free exchange of commodities, and liberal institutions, such as the free press, which enabled it.

Habermas’s compelling and detailed description of the British public sphere of the eighteenth century has been a blessing and a curse.<sup>3</sup> His public sphere appears to be empirical, but it is really just a model, a heuristic. More importantly, by focusing exclusively on bourgeois actors and their Enlightenment-based rationality in the eighteenth-century British public sphere, Habermas ignores plebeian and patrician actors and other, non-“enlightened” forms of discourse. Habermas claims that the plebeian

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<sup>3</sup> For the most recent critical overview of Habermas’s public sphere model, see *Intellectual Politics and Cultural Conflict in the Romantic Period* by Alex Benichmol (chapter 1). Nearly as recent is *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, a volume of essays edited by Nick Crossley and John Roberts. For a less current but no less valuable overview see Craig Calhoun’s introduction to *Habermas and the Public Sphere* or Bruce Robbin’s introduction to *The Phantom Public Sphere*.

public sphere was a “variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process,” but some suggest that Habermas himself suppressed it (xviii). The problem is not just that he ignored non-bourgeois participation in the public sphere, but that he universalized the bourgeois as the “human pure and simple” (173).<sup>4</sup> In *The Function of Criticism*, Terry Eagleton argues that in privileging the bourgeois discourse of reason in the public sphere, Habermas obscured bourgeois ideology and the mystifications of market forces in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eagleton also insists that even though the public sphere was potentially open to anyone, from the very beginning it was limited to male, bourgeois property-owners: “The public sphere . . . is at once universal and class-specific: all may in principle participate in it, but only because the class-determined criteria of what counts as significant participation are always unlodgably in place” (26).

As some new historicist critics have made clear, plebeians were all too visible in the British public sphere of the late eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1790s, they were publicly present in the form of corresponding societies, tavern debating societies, or the voluminous street literature produced and consumed by radical plebeian activists. Kevin Gilmartin notes that “conflict in the public sphere, and competition for control of its resources, were crucial elements” of radical plebeian strategy in the early 1790s (*Print Politics* 3). Part of this plebeian strategy was counter-publicity, the development of alternate modes, media and publicity that resisted the dominance of the bourgeoisie in the public sphere. The term “counter-public” does not appear in Habermas’s treatise, but

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<sup>4</sup> I should have said: “he universalizes the bourgeois *male* as the ‘human pure and simple.’” I will not be discussing the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public sphere in this introductory chapter, but feminist counter-publicity plays a large role in my chapter on Mary Wollstonecraft.

<sup>5</sup> On this subject, see David Worrall’s *Radical Culture*.

there are few critiques of Habermas that do not include it.<sup>6</sup> Nancy Fraser observes that “virtually from the beginning, counter-publics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech” (61).

I am not the first to consider counter-publics in relation to the first-generation Romantic writers of this study. In 1994, *Studies in Romanticism* published the papers from a special forum on Habermas and Romanticism. In his response, Orrin Wang notes that counter-publics seem particularly attractive for romanticists, who tend to be “oppositional critics” (580). For Wang, the counter-public is not only a “sign of the heterogeneity” of publicity in the Romantic period, but “a marker for the class volatility that subtends cries for both reform and radical change” (583-4). The problem with this conception of counter-publicity is that it provides critics the opportunity to invent their own counter-publics, which puts us “in danger of merely multiplying alternative counter-public spheres, which inevitably remain in a competitive relation to the over-arching concepts of the dominant bourgeois public sphere” (Eger et al 9). While I do use the term “counter-publicity” to denote opposition to bourgeois publicity, I tend to avoid the term “counter-public” because it reinforces the problematic privileging of bourgeois publicity in Habermas’s model. I prefer instead to think of a public sphere in which the bourgeois public was one public amongst many (such as plebeian and patrician publics). Thus, there was no plebeian *counter-public* per se: there was instead a plebeian *public* in a larger, conflicted public sphere.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*; Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere”; Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, chapter 1; Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature*, chapter 2; and Andrew McCann, *Cultural Politics in the 1790s*, chapter 2.

Some critics contend that Habermas's public sphere was never anything but an ideal, a fiction. For instance, Bruce Robbins describes the "phantom" public sphere as a "phantasmagoria" as Allan Bloom defines that term: an "agora" (public forum) that is a "phantasm" (ix). Jon Klancher argues that by 1790 the public sphere in Britain had become "a representation instead of a practice," or "an image to be consumed by readers who did not frequent it" (23, 24). For Klancher, the public sphere had become nothing but rhetoric and ideology, completely disconnected to praxis. I follow the more nuanced view of Gilmartin, who argues that in the 1790s the public sphere "was both representation and practice, elusive phantom and material body" (*Print Politics* 5). It was an arena of competing practices and representations of publicity, which implies competing rhetorical strategies and ideologies.

### **History, Class, and Media as They Relate to Romantic-Era Publicity**

There are other gaps in Habermas's model that bear on this study. In Habermas's version of the eighteenth-century public sphere in Britain, neither the French Revolution nor Romanticism ever happened, there was no class conflict, and medium was a neutral factor. These same gaps appear in the works of many of Habermas's critics. My study purports to fill in some of these lacunae, by showing the effects of the French Revolution and British reaction on public discourse, by examining the clash of classes in the public sphere of the 1790s, and by revealing the ways various parties utilized print media for propaganda purposes. I also adumbrate the close interconnections among history, class, media, and publicity.



In terms of history, I draw from new historicists to show how much revolution and reaction inflected publicity in the 1790s. When I speak of this critical cohort, I mean the group of new historicist scholars who, beginning in the early 1980s, countered both New Critic formalism and Yale School deconstruction with materialist historiography. This historiography is materialist in that it tends to be preoccupied with the production and reception of texts, and considers the effects of political conflict and cultural change upon these processes. New historicists also tend to privilege marginal cultural figures—many of whom are largely effaced from history—over prominent authors. Kenneth R. Johnston speaks to this. In “Whose History? My Place or Yours?” Johnston takes account of the “often invisible tensions between literature and history” during the 1790s (79). He does so in an effort to memorialize, and retrieve, those lost to history as a result of William Pitt’s “Reign of Terror,” which Johnston describes as “an interlocking system of spies, informers, packed juries, compliant magistrates, and ‘hegemonic’ vigilante forces,” such as John Reeves’s Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property from Republicans and Levelers (81).<sup>7</sup> With Johnston, I argue in my study that “British Romanticism was shaped, created, altered—whatever—by the French Revolution, the positive liberal British response to it, and the subsequent quashing of that response” (82). Johnston makes very clear what that quashing looked like; he takes new historicists to task for soft-pedaling it, writing of displacement when destruction of body and mind would be more accurate.

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<sup>7</sup> Johnston’s eloquent and chilling “litany” of repression (on pages 90-91) is worth reading in itself.

However, just as Habermas tends to neglect Romantic-era history, new historicist Romantic studies tend to politicize privacy, characterizing it as historical displacement.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Alan Liu remarks of Romantic poetry: “What is *there* in a poem is precisely what is not *there*: all the history that has been displaced, erased, suppressed, elided, overlooked, overwritten, omitted, obscured, expunged, repudiated, excluded, annihilated, and denied” (xvii). This is not a far cry from what Johnston asserts, but when new historicists map this displacement onto publicity they equate the removal of the writer from the public to the private sphere with political apostasy. As we will see repeatedly in this study, the radical/apostate binary has as much integrity as the public/private binary—which is to say not much. For the writers I examine, the border between public and private is permeable and navigable, and the traffic goes both ways. If it did not, British Romanticism as we know it would be quite different.

Class struggle was a significant factor contributing to the politically-conflicted publicity of the 1790s, as plebeian, bourgeois, and patrician vied for hegemony in society and in the public sphere. When I write of class, I distinguish between the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century sense of this term. In the eighteenth century, both the working class and the bourgeois (or middle) class were in the process of formation, confronting a well-established patrician class in Britain. That is, the working class and the bourgeoisie cannot properly be said to exist in the way that they do in the nineteenth century. And yet the signs of bourgeois and working class dynamics, and of class conflict, are evident in the eighteenth century. Thus, with E. P. Thompson, I am “employing the terminology of class conflict while resisting the attribution of identity to

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<sup>8</sup> There are exceptions, of course, including Jon Klancher’s *The Making of English Reading Audiences* and Kevin Gilmartin’s *Print Politics*, both generally considered new historicist studies.

a class” (*Customs* 73). I use terms of class proleptically because what I describe are the first skirmishes between the classes that would later vie for hegemony in the nineteenth century. More specifically, I use “bourgeois” as Habermas and Marx understand the term: as the social group that owns the means of production—the capitalist class. I use “patrician” and “plebeian” as Thompson uses these terms in his analysis of class in the eighteenth century. That is, I reserve the term “plebeian” to describe the incipient working class, including artisans and the rural peasantry; and “patrician” to describe the combination of court, aristocracy, and gentry, or the ruling class.

Thompson does not much use the term bourgeois; in fact, in his “bi-polar” argument in *Customs in Common*, the patricians and the plebs compete for control in the eighteenth century. For Thompson, the bourgeoisie was enmeshed in a mostly uncritical patron/client relationship with the patrician class during the century, and thus a non-factor until the 1790s, when this relationship began to fray. However, Thompson does acknowledge the formation of a bourgeois public in the late eighteenth century, and allows that “when the ideological break with paternalism came, in the 1790s, it came in the first place less from the plebeian culture than from the intellectual culture of the dissenting middle class, and from thence it was carried to the urban artisans” (*Customs* 86). But, focused as he is on patricians and plebeians, Thompson does not expand upon how the bourgeoisie challenged patrician hegemony in the 1790s.<sup>9</sup> In my account, the bourgeoisie posed a significant challenge during the early 1790s, but after 1795—because of patrician-encouraged class conflict in the public sphere—this class was much less of a threat. From 1796 to 1815—due to patrician co-optation of plebeian loyalists, infiltration

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<sup>9</sup> Or I should say that he does not do so in *The Making of the English Working Class* and in its de facto sequel, *Customs in Common*. In his posthumously published work (*The Romantics and Witness Against the Beast*), Thompson does more with the British bourgeoisie in the 1790s, though only in piecemeal fashion.

of the public sphere, and a stranglehold upon public debate—the public sphere cannot really be said to function at all, at least not as a zone of rational-critical challenge to “Church and King.”<sup>10</sup>

I use the term “hegemony” as Thompson uses it, referring to the theory of cultural hegemony of Antonio Gramsci. Raymond Williams contends that Gramsci’s theory is a vigorous re-thinking of Marxist determinism, but it has been used by Marxist hard-liners to perpetuate the deterministic understanding of dialectical materialism. Williams sees cultural hegemony as a dynamic process, as something that is continually “renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own” (*Marxism and Literature* 112). Thompson also argues for a more dynamic conception of hegemony, claiming that “there is nothing determined or automatic about” it: “Such hegemony can be sustained by the rulers only by the constant exercise of skill, or theatre and of concession . . . such hegemony, even when imposed successfully, does not impose an all-embracing view of life; rather, it imposes blinkers, which inhibit vision in certain directions while leaving it clear in others” (*Customs* 86).<sup>11</sup> Like Thompson, I discuss hegemonic struggle in the eighteenth century (whereas Gramsci focused mostly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), but unlike Thompson I see three classes involved in this struggle: plebeian, bourgeois, and patrician.

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<sup>10</sup> While I focus on the conflict between the plebeian, bourgeois, and patrician classes, and cite Thompson’s account of eighteenth-century class development to argue for a plebeian-patrician alliance at the end of the 1790s, I have to acknowledge that there was much fluidity between classes at this time. In *The Struggle for the Breeches*, Anna Clark makes this point, describing the blurred boundaries between the bourgeois class and the entrepreneurial plebeian class in the eighteenth century (7). There were also blurred boundaries between the “gentrified” bourgeois and patrician classes in the eighteenth century. Clark admits that these boundaries were less blurred in the nineteenth century, due to intensified class conflict.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Williams’s views on cultural hegemony, see *Marxism and Literature*, 108-114; and *Culture and Materialism*, 31-49 (“Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”).

In terms of ideology critique, I follow McGann's lead in *The Romantic Ideology*. According to McGann, the British Romantics tended to "occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations," including the importunities of money and power (82). This makes Romanticism a form of false consciousness, in the Marxist sense; that is, it is "a fortiori seen as a body of illusions" (12). The claims put forth in *The Romantic Ideology*, more than thirty years after McGann's book was originally published, are admittedly getting threadbare. But ideology critique, as part of a larger program of historicist class analysis used to analyze Romantic publicity, still has its uses and benefits. Along these lines, James Treadwell suggests that "history is the antidote to Romantic ideologies of literature" (par. 3). That is, "the critical act is almost an 'outing' of the text, moving it into the public domain and simultaneously making public (or making explicit) its secret ties to this wider contextual world" (par. 2). Such criticism shows us "a literary artifact caught oddly in the process of emerging into the public sphere while apparently also trying to withdraw into the secrecy of aesthetic space" (par. 3). In Romantic ideology critique, the aesthetic is often depicted as the antagonist to history. What concerns me in this study—and what seems to concern Treadwell above—is not the aesthetic as a general category, but rather the privatization of the aesthetic in the Romantic period. By this I mean the sequestration of Romantic literature in the private sphere. I also mean the new historicist politicization of privacy, which is as ideological as anything written by the British Romantics. I counter that the writers of this study refuse to be immured in this ideologized privacy, and that British Romanticism emerged from the conflict rather than the confluence between privacy and art.

Though the floating debate that was the public sphere occurred in public spaces such as coffeehouses, it achieved its greatest extent and impact in print. This suggests the importance of media to publicity; as in previous periods of revolutionary tumult, print production exploded during the 1790s. As I show in this study, during the French Revolution debate and in its wake, the medium of a text signaled a certain political position and class standing. Some kinds of media were used by the bourgeoisie in their attempt to maintain the rationalist ethos of the public sphere, and other forms of media were used by plebeians (both radical plebeians and plebeian loyalists, proxies of patricians) to contest bourgeois control of the public sphere. All three classes were involved in the ways in which, according to John Feather, “the published word works as an instrument of information and propaganda” (3). The medium used was part of this propaganda effort, such that bourgeois stakeholders in the public sphere made ideological distinctions between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” print media, associated with “legitimate” and “illegitimate” class interests (that is, with the bourgeoisie and plebs respectively). That is, some media were proscribed as inherently subversive, and others—considered more conducive to social order—prescribed. Historicist media theory enables us to make these important distinctions.

Raymond Williams, the critic who exemplifies historicist media theory, maintains that “media” is a notoriously variable and vague term, as reflected in his overlapping and variant definitions in *Keywords* (169-170). Two main definitions seem to be in tension. On the one hand, a medium might be considered as a material construct for conveying information, for communication. On the other hand, it might be seen as a social practice, or set of social practices. Williams is somewhat suspicious of the first definition. He touts

the dangers of seeing media as only a reified and purely material technology, leading to technological determinism, a fallacy epitomized by Marshall McLuhan (*Marxism and Literature* 159). Williams the sociologist seems much more comfortable with the second definition, though he attempts a compromise between both definitions, describing media as a “material social practice” (*Marxism and Literature* 164).<sup>12</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell has a similar understanding, stating that “a medium . . . is not just a set of materials, an apparatus, or a code that ‘mediates’ between individuals. It is a complex social institution that contains individuals within it, and is constituted by a history of practices, rituals, and habits, skills and techniques, as well as by a set of material objects and spaces” (*What Do Pictures Want?* 213). Mitchell, like Williams, prefers a Gramscian, hegemonic understanding of media, and consequently critiques the Marxist media determinism he finds in Friedrich Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (*Critical Terms* xxi). The Williams/Mitchell definition of media as material social practice is close to my own understanding. It is first of all important to consider the material, or technological, factors of the medium that help determine the production, distribution, and reception of print texts. But there are also social—and class—factors to consider.

To illustrate the distinction between the material and the social aspects of media, I would point to broadsides and books. In the eighteenth century, broadsides were cheap (generally a pence or cheaper), ephemeral squibs of one page often used by plebeian radicals to propagate their causes; they could serve this function because they were so inexpensive. By contrast, books were expensive commodities, affordable only to the upper classes and affluent bourgeoisie. Particularly when bound, books exuded a sense of

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<sup>12</sup> Media as “material social practice” would include the idea that media are a means of social production, including class formation. This is something Williams discusses in “Means of Communication as Means of Production” in *Culture and Materialism*.

permanence and authority, of being above the fray. In terms of materiality, differences between broadside and book were significant, affecting production, price and distribution. These same factors affected social function—including class affiliation—such that a person was much more likely to be prosecuted for publishing broadsides than for books, because broadsides were affordable to plebeians and books were safely out of their price range.<sup>13</sup> In similar ways, other print media associated with the plebs—such as the cheap pamphlet, the chapbook, and the radical miscellany—were thought dangerous to social order during the Romantic period.<sup>14</sup>

This class/media conflict is further illustrated by *The Rights of Man* controversy of 1791-92. Thomas Paine published the first part of *The Rights of Man* in 1791 as a riposte to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Though the publisher Joseph Johnson had issued other replies to Burke, and agreed to publish Paine's, on the day of publication he transferred ownership of *Rights of Man* Part 1 to the radical plebeian printer Jeremiah Jordan. For the bourgeois bookseller, Paine's tract was apparently too radical—and too plebeian—in its plainspoken jeremiad against the aristocracy.<sup>15</sup> After publishing Part 2 of *The Rights of Man* in 1792, Paine escalated the provocation by issuing the entire work as a cheap, sixpenny pamphlet, in order to make it accessible to plebeian activists. Ian Haywood notes that “as thousands of sixpenny issues

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<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Thomas Cooper, who penned one of the many replies to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Attorney-General John Scott admits such selective prosecutions: Scott writes: “Continue if you please to publish your reply to Mr. Burke in an octavo form, so as to confine it probably to that class of readers who may consider it coolly: so soon as it is published cheaply for dissemination among the populace, it will be my duty to prosecute”(Qtd. in Gerald Tyson, 124).

<sup>14</sup> In *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, William St. Clair attests to the power (economic, political, ideological, cultural) of the print book in Britain during the Romantic period, and the media conflict between the print book and other, including plebeian, forms of print.

<sup>15</sup> In *Romanticism, Publishing, and Dissent*, Helen Braithwaite argues that Johnson “most probably withdrew from *The Rights of Man* because he was apprised of the legal and political damage that might stem from its publication and induced not to run the risk by friends on the day” (109).



of *The Rights of Man* began to roll from the presses, and varieties of cheap-format editions flooded the nation, government supporters and ‘moderates’ realized that a sea-change in popular political sensibility was occurring” (21). To counter Paine’s enormous influence, indicated by the huge circulation of *The Rights of Man* (estimated by Thompson to be as many as 200,000), King George III issued a proclamation in 1792 against “wicked and seditious” writings that cited Paine in particular. Shortly thereafter John Reeves formed the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property Against Republicans and Levelers, whose express mission was to eliminate the texts of radical plebeian writers such as Paine, supplanting them with patrician-approved, patriotic texts. This campaign succeeded brilliantly, prompting “an avalanche of counter-revolutionary propaganda,” using such plebeian media as broadsides, ballad-sheets, chapbooks, prints—as well as imprinted cream-ware, mugs, coinage, and handkerchiefs (Brewer 22, Bindman 109-203). Partly because of such efforts, by the end of the 1790s plebeians as a class were decidedly more loyalist than radical, and patrician hegemony was temporarily secure.

As Thompson notes, patrician hegemony in the eighteenth century was supported and supplemented by older forms of public expression such as oral/aural exchange and manuscript, as well as the media of public display and performance, integral to both aristocratic “representative” publicity and plebeian “rough music.” Another factor was patrician loyalists co-opting plebeian media in order to wean plebeians from reform and revolution during the 1790s. This was seen most pointedly in the Cheap Repository Tract movement spearheaded by Hannah More. Gilmartin avers that longstanding “suspicions of the popular chapbook culture of Simple Simon assumed a new urgency under the

conditions introduced by Tom Paine. More was certainly not unique among Evangelical activists in her conviction that the available principles and institutions of moral reform could be mobilized against a Jacobin political challenge” (*Writing Against Revolution* 67).<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Gilmartin adds, patrician efforts to subvert plebeian radicalism evinced

tensions between revision and tradition; between a desire to confront radicalism on its own terms, and a deep-seated skepticism about the political legitimacy of print culture and public opinion; between an unyielding confidence in the viability of the old regime, and a realization that new social forces and cultural forms must be enlisted in its defence. And of course conditioning every dimension of the response to radical protest there is a framing tension between counterrevolutionary public expression and coercive state action. (*Writing Against Revolution* 10).

In their hostile take-over of the public sphere at the end of the 1790s, patricians not only co-opted plebeian media: they also wrested control of such bourgeois print media as the book review magazine (e.g. *Anti-Jacobin Review*), and the print book itself (e.g. Anti-Jacobin novels).<sup>17</sup>

All the writers in this study began the 1790s immersed in a vibrant public sphere that debated the efficacy of liberty, equality, and fraternity for Britain. Once war with

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<sup>16</sup> William St. Clair’s treatment of the Cheap Repository Tract campaign shows not only the development of sophisticated propaganda techniques, but also predatory business practices. More took over the old chapman network in order “to use it to distribute a type of print, mainly newly composed by herself, which would drive out both the old chapbooks and the radical pamphlets” (352). And since the tracts were financed by subscriptions from the wealthy, they were “sold at a price which undercut the commercial chapbooks and ballads. The older print was to be driven out by predatory pricing” (*Reading Nation* 353).

<sup>17</sup> For details, see Gilmartin’s *Writing Against Revolution*. He discusses the Reeves Association in chapter 1, the Cheap Repository Tract movement in chapter 2, review magazines in chapter 3, and Anti-Jacobin novels in chapter 4.

France was underway in early 1793, these values were trampled in the panicked traffic of the public sphere, which became a site of class conflict and media war. The works of William Wordsworth, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Blake are scarred by these conflicts. All these writers responded negatively to the conflicted publicity of the 1790s; however, their responses to publicity were quite discrete. In the final section of this introductory chapter, I briefly describe the author chapters that follow, showing how these discrete differences, these individuated inflections, help account for the emergence of British Romanticism.

### **Chapter Summaries**

My next chapter chronicles Wordsworth's relations with the public sphere between the years 1793 and 1815, as he transitioned from republican radical to reactionary recluse. It begins with Wordsworth's "retreat" to the West Country in 1795, focusing on some of the poetry he produced for *Lyrical Ballads*. For Wordsworth, rustic retirement was not an escape from public responsibilities but rather an embrace of universal benevolence, which was the basis of reform. The ethic of universal benevolence included engagement with the natural world, which for Wordsworth reflected rather than hid social suffering. Wordsworth's use of the ballad, known as a plebeian medium, shaped his rustic poetry of this period, and was integral to the counter-publicity he practiced in the West Country. The second half of the chapter examines Wordsworth's transition from republican retiree to Tory recluse by tracking his progress on his proposed magnum opus, *The Recluse*. I uncover incipient reaction, in which reformist retirement was displaced by what I call reclusion: a despairing disavowal of public discourse. This

includes the transformation of nature from a public space into a refuge from society's conflicts. The only part of *The Recluse* to be published during Wordsworth's lifetime, *The Excursion*, evinces Wordsworth's ambivalence about his own reclusion in the Lake District. In this work Wordsworth introduces a recluse named "the Solitary," who is beset by a poet, a peddler, and a pastor, all of whom attempt to re-introduce the Solitary to a public sphere circa 1814 that is reactionary rather than reformist. I contend that the failed attempt to reclaim the Solitary reflects Wordsworth's resistance to the patrician-dominated, legitimate, reactionary publicity of the nineteenth century.

My third chapter focuses on William Godwin, who was both a theorist and critic of the British public sphere, as well a writer of Gothic novels. My reading of these novels explores how Godwin used alienated, misanthropic heroes to trouble the relationship between the Gothic mode and Enlightenment philosophy in the public sphere of the Romantic period. My reading of *Caleb Williams* explicates Godwin's understanding of Enlightenment publicity, and how it was threatened in the 1790s by patrician reactionaries and plebeian radicals. Godwin "Gothicizes" this loyalist publicity, showing it to be spectral force that inhibits rational public debate and benevolent action in society. *St. Leon* (1799), written just five years after *Caleb Williams*, responds to a public sphere that had become dominated by the patrician-plebeian alliance that Godwin suspected in *Caleb Williams*. *St. Leon* also presents Godwin's exploration and qualification of Enlightenment historiography, which at the end of the 1790s was troubled by its unstable relationship to the Gothic. In *Mandeville* (1817), which is my primary focus in the chapter, Godwin reaffirms his progressive publicity without reverting to the hyper-rationalism of the Enlightenment. He does this by resituating enlightened publicity within

an indigenous, British context; he complicates it by utilizing an unreliable narrator—another misanthrope—to create an ironic, self-conscious, alienated romance. Thus in his fiction, and particularly in his use of alienated misanthropes, Godwin contributes to a dyadic conception of Romanticism in which public and private are in continual conversation.

Mary Wollstonecraft is the subject of chapter four, which looks at the figure of the “unsex’d female” in Wollstonecraft’s works and those of her critics, scrutinizing her ambivalent relationship to the literary tradition of sensibility in the 1790s. Specifically, I look at how the debate concerning sensibility intersected those involving revolutionary politics, class conflict, and media war in the British public sphere of the 1790s. In the polemical works she wrote at this time, Wollstonecraft distinguished between two different kinds of sensibility: chivalric sensibility, which was politically conservative, misogynistic, and threatened by public debate; and civic sensibility, where reason was used to order the passions and cultivate the social feelings necessary for public engagement. The argument between chivalric and civic sensibility plays out in her two vindications. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft assails the anti-public chivalric sensibility that pervades the writings of the conservative Edmund Burke; in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she attacks the proto-republican Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who she considers equally paternalistic and publicity-phobic. My discussion of the two vindications takes issue with those feminist critics who claim the “unsex’d” Wollstonecraft favored a masculine conception of reason in her model of civic sensibility. My examination of Wollstonecraft’s two vindications is followed by a reading of *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), in

which Wollstonecraft disavowed a strict dichotomy between chivalric and civic sensibility and attempted to recuperate private emotion and domesticity from a politicized public sphere. However, this effort was complicated and mitigated by a sensibility that inchoately combines public and private concerns. Wollstonecraft's re-fashioned sensibility infuses what would later be denoted the Romantic structure of feeling, and posits the chimerical "unsex'd" female as the ideal go-between mediating the private and public spheres.

My fifth and final chapter on William Blake explores his plebeian-based religious antinomianism in relation to publicity, in an attempt to explain his legendary obscurity. In his early texts, Blake consistently violated customary textual construction as part of his antinomian media practice. Blake used ephemeral, plebeian forms of print in an attempt to subvert Enlightenment-derived rationalist hegemony in the public sphere, which was enabled and maintained by the print book. Blake targets holy writ and its exegetes, both religious and secular, in his "Bible of Hell." In my reading of *The Book of Urizen*, the first chapter of this bible, I retail Blake's antinomian book-busting techniques and scrutinize the figure of the book in his book, making clear Blake's antipathy to a bibliography that compromised spiritual freedom and hampered the prophetic mission of the antinomian prophet. I follow this reading with one of Blake's magnum opus, *Jerusalem*, which I consider as the final book of Blake's Bible of Hell, his Book of Revelation.

However, *Jerusalem*—composed and executed some twenty years after the other books in his Bible of Hell—fails as the final chapter of Blake's anti-bible because it is too much like a book. Seemingly beating a retreat from the battle with rationalized scripture

in the form of the print book, Blake created his own testament to the book, building *Jerusalem* into a bibliographic monument that resists critique. In this work, Blake employed his antinomian tactics of textual obscurity to damn the public sphere of his day, and to offer salvation instead to the public of futurity, the priesthood of believers willing to passionately engage, and preserve, his texts. And yet in these same texts Blake continues to interrogate his readers, particularly those who would relegate him exclusively to either the private or the public sphere. Like all the writers in this study, Blake found the tension between the contraries of publicity and privacy more productive than any possible resolution. For him, Romanticism was not either/or but both/and; it was a final judgment forever held in abeyance.

## Chapter 2: William Wordsworth, Vexed Publicity, and Reclusion

When William Wordsworth published *The Excursion*, the first installment of his proposed epic *The Recluse*, his critical nemesis Francis Jeffrey famously opined that it would never do. Jeffrey's mordant diagnosis of Wordsworth and his "system" in 1814 is well known, but one aspect of Jeffrey's review is not often discussed. It is the passage where Jeffrey takes the author of *The Recluse* to task for actually being a recluse.<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey writes: "Long habits of seclusion, and an excessive ambition of originality, can alone account for the disproportion which seems to exist between this author's taste and his genius." Wordsworth needed "the collision of equal minds" to check his redundancies, extravagances, puerility, self-indulgence and self-admiration. Like "all the greater poets," Wordsworth needed to live "in the full current of society." In other words, Wordsworth must come out of the woods and attend to his public.

Jeffrey must have surmised that one of the main reasons Wordsworth shunned his public was because of negative notices by Jeffrey and other reviewers. Since the beginning of his career as a poet, Wordsworth had been reading reviews that took him to task for various political malfeasances and social solecisms. As a result, he withdrew from the public sphere of his time. Wordsworth's vaunted love of nature, and his celebration of the dalesmen's "republic" in the Lake District, characterized this withdrawal. Associated with it was the myth of the solitary poet, who must be content to work in obscurity and solitude, eschewing involvement with public concerns, debates, and politics.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations by Francis Jeffrey are taken from *Spenser and the Tradition*. Full citation and URL are in the works cited list.



However, all this was just a pose. When Wordsworth published *The Excursion* in 1814, he was very much engaged with public affairs, particularly those that concerned his patrician patrons. In 1813 he had been named the Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland County, a reward for his support of Lord Lonsdale, the son of the man who had ruined Wordsworth's father. Wordsworth was also a supporter of the controversial and ultra-conservative former radical Robert Southey, named Poet Laureate in 1813. Wordsworth was himself, of course, a former radical, a once-ardent supporter of the French Revolution who had abandoned his youthful radicalism. In short, like Southey and Wordsworth's erstwhile friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth had become a political apostate—he had publicly disavowed his revolutionary youth.

Wordsworth's apostasy is complicated, and obscured, by what I call his reclusion—his abandonment of the public sphere of the cities for a solitary life in the country. Reclusion was arguably the central issue for Wordsworth during his poetic career, as it is the subject of his projected magnum opus, *The Recluse* (of which *The Excursion* was the only part ever published). In the 1790s, the radical reformer Wordsworth associated reclusion with political reaction, and resisted it. In the early nineteenth century, when he had forsworn his radical allegiances and become politically conservative, he embraced it. Then in 1814, when *The Excursion* was published, Wordsworth attacked reclusion again, this time from the other end of the political spectrum, urging public conformity to the re-established patrician hegemony in Britain. However, *The Recluse* also shows Wordsworth's self-consciousness and ambivalence about reclusion, and political involvement generally.

In this chapter I explore Wordsworth's reclusion, and his ambivalence about it, in

light of his vexed relationship to the conflicted public sphere of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the wake of the French Revolution, the British public sphere was riven by class conflict and media war. Wordsworth at first was an ardent participant in the political debates of the early 1790s, but he was bothered by the conflict he experienced in the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> As a result he became disillusioned by contentious publicity engendered by reformist politics and subsequent reaction. He “retired” from urban-based political activism and moved to rural England, where he could be closer to nature. Here he experimented with an alternative, rustic form of reformist “counter-publicity.” However, in Wordsworth’s writing this reformist, counter-public retirement had its anti-public shadow-side in the form of reactionary reclusion. In his poetry between 1798 and 1814, Wordsworth attempted to resolve this conflict between retirement and reclusion, but without definitive result.

This conflict haunts Wordsworth’s nineteenth-century poetry in the form of spectral publicity, which evinces his anxious attempts to exorcise the ghost of the factitious and fractious public sphere. *The Excursion* dramatizes Wordsworth’s attempt to be rid of this spectral publicity, and reclusion itself, by “curing” the character of the Solitary and bringing him back into the fold. Wordsworth failed in this mission: at the end of the poem the Solitary departs unconvinced and unreconstructed. However, this failure was productive (and perhaps intentional) in that it allowed Wordsworth to work through his reluctance about becoming a full-throated bard of reaction at a time when the

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<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth’s disgruntlement with class conflict and contentious media may be illustrated by his vexed association with the radical plebeian publisher Daniel Eaton, who issued *The Philanthropist*, a political miscellany that likely employed Wordsworth as an editor. For an extensive discussion of *The Philanthropist* and Wordsworth, see Kenneth Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth*, chapter 18. See also Nicholas Roe’s discussion of the same subject, in an appendix to *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*. E. P. Thompson also discusses it in *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age*, pp. 79-85.

British upper class had come to dominate the public sphere. That is, even as late as 1814 Wordsworth was calling into question his apostasy and harboring doubts about the restoration of the *ancien régime* in Britain.

### **Wordsworth's West Country Retirement, Benevolence, and Counter-Publicity**

It is the first mild day of March  
Each minute sweeter than before,  
The redbreast sings from the tall larch  
That stands beside our door.

There is a blessing in the air,  
Which seems a sense of joy to yield.  
To the bare trees, and mountains bare,  
And grass in the green field.

(“Lines written at a small distance from my house” ll. 1-8).

This joyous exclamation in praise of spring, from *Lyrical Ballads*, was written by Wordsworth in early 1798. It is the kind of poem that we expect from the “nature poet” Wordsworth, but it is a far cry from the agonized, politically-oriented poetry and prose (all of it unpublished) that he had written earlier in the 1790s. The sense of joy and relief the poem registers may be explained by Wordsworth’s retirement to the country in 1795. Wordsworth was not alone in his retirement. He lived with his sister Dorothy at Racedown; when they moved to the West Country in 1797, their mutual charge, young Basil Montague, joined them. Coleridge lived nearby in Nether Stowey, and there was a steady stream of visitors to the poets in the West Country, the most prominent being John Thelwall, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt. In his retirement, Wordsworth was in fact living in an alternative community that reflected pantisocratic values. This so alarmed the

neighbors and the local authorities that a spy was sent from London to monitor their activities. This was dubbed by Coleridge the “Spy Nozy” incident.<sup>3</sup>

Many critics assert that by moving out of the city, Wordsworth was abandoning political activism and progressive politics in general. As New Historicists like Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, Alan Liu, David Simpson, and James Chandler would have it, in his early retirement poetry Wordsworth begins to exhibit Burkean traditionalism, the evasion of history, and the displacement of political concerns to a beneficent nature and a privatized literary realm. But I argue, with E. P. Thompson, that Wordsworth’s retirement at this time was not yet apostasy; it was radical “disenchantment” rather than reactionary “default.”<sup>4</sup> David Collings reaches a similar conclusion, writing of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thelwall in the West Country:

These three authors wrote the lyrics of the late 1790s not to retreat from, but to think through the problem of political duty. Rather than embarking on a mystified project, they examined the absence of options available to them, the stark limits of either heroic resistance or domestic retreat. . . . In varying ways, they were thus fashioning a new kind of discourse, written from within radical traditions, that asked what one should be willing to bear or desire for the sake of social transformation. (58).

Wordsworth was retired but still a reformer during his so-called “annus mirabilis” of 1797-98. For Wordsworth, rustic retirement in the 1790s was not in any way an escape from public responsibilities.

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<sup>3</sup> Recounted in *Biographia Literaria*, chapter 10. Thompson also discusses the incident in *The Romantics*, pp. 41-50.

<sup>4</sup> See Thompson’s chapter entitled “Disenchantment or Default: A Lay Sermon” in *The Romantics* (pp. 33-74).

John Rieder notes that in eighteenth-century retirement poetry, the traditional opposition of rural estate and court had been replaced by a new opposition between country and city (194). Rieder sees this opposition at play in Wordsworth's early poetry. Similarly, David Simpson argues that "Wordsworth's views on civil society are much more coherent as an attack on urbanization than as a positive alternative in country life" (77). However, I would qualify the position of both these critics by saying that while Wordsworth shows an anti-urban animus in his poetry in the 1790s, he is not anti-public. In the retirement poetry he wrote during this time, he actively engaged the British public sphere, from an oppositional, counter-public perspective. That is, in this poetry Wordsworth was engaged in an effort to reform the contentious and dysfunctional public sphere in the 1790s.

In eighteenth-century Britain, rustic retirement was a political and ideological stance. John Williams shows that during the century, Old Whigs and Commonwealthmen used rustic retirement as a marginal space from which to counter the dominant, urban-based discourse of the time ("Revolution Politics" 80). Included in this group would be publicly-engaged "Whiggish" nature poets such as James Thomson, William Cowper, and George Crabbe. This is the poetic tradition that Wordsworth embraced in his move to the provinces in the mid-1790s. Says Williams: "Fully to understand Wordsworth, we must recognise evidence in his work of the continuation of a specifically dissident Whig strain of pastoral, 'republican' zeal which owed its vigour primarily to the survival of a Commonwealthman political tradition throughout the century" ("Critical Issues" 18). Though he had abandoned urban-based activism, in his rustic retirement Wordsworth was still very much a political being, even a republican—though now he drew upon

indigenous British traditions of republicanism (the Commonwealth), rather than the republicanism espoused by French and British “Jacobins,” inspired by the French Enlightenment. The philosophy of benevolence was one of those indigenous traditions.

In “Arguing Benevolence,” Evan Radcliffe notes that benevolence became a “hot button” philosophical issue in Britain in the 1790s.<sup>5</sup> Liberal and radical commentators (following Jonathan Edwards, Francis Hutcheson, and William Godwin) argued that universal benevolence (what we might also call “public” benevolence) was the ultimate ideal which could and should be used to ameliorate the supposedly narrow, “selfish” sympathies represented by domestic affections. Conservative commentators (following David Hume, Adam Smith, and Edmund Burke) contended that universal benevolence was a chimera and that benevolence rarely extended beyond the circle of those near and dear. This debate became politicized and polarizing in the late 1790s when “anti-Jacobin” critics attacked the adherents of universal benevolence for being anti-family and unpatriotic, and successfully associated benevolence with the French Enlightenment, and by extension the French republic.<sup>6</sup> This made the preachers of benevolence like Godwin—and one-time disciples of Godwin like Wordsworth—look like leering, fifth-columnist “Jacobins.” Radcliffe argues convincingly, however, that even after Wordsworth rejected Godwin, the poet continued to be favorably inclined towards the progressive philosophy of universal benevolence, based on the ideas of liberal British

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<sup>5</sup> Chris Jones, in *Radical Sensibility*, makes similar claims about benevolence (or more broadly sensibility) in the 1790s and in the work of Wordsworth. See particularly chapter 7, his chapter on Wordsworth.

<sup>6</sup> This was accomplished most effectively (and amusingly) by means of the withering satire of the *Anti-Jacobin Review*. George Canning’s poem “New Morality,” published in July 1798, followed the next month by James Gillray’s [famous satirical print](#) of the same name, sends up the theophilanthropy movement sponsored by Louis-Marie de La Révellière-Lepaux, a leading member of the French Directorate. What Canning and Gillray do not make clear is that theophilanthropy was a system originally developed by an Englishman, David Williams, based on the writings and ideas of eighteenth-century British moral philosophers.

moral philosophers. Wordsworth replaced reason with nature in the equation: the natural world was the seedbed of universal benevolence, not rationalism (or “political justice”), as Godwin argued.

Immersion in the natural world was an important element in Wordsworth’s conception of rustic retirement. But nature provided no escape from the human, social world. This is the sentiment of “Lines Written in Early Spring”:

To her fair works did Nature link  
The human soul that through me ran;  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man.

The poem suggests that nature not only binds us to the natural world but also to human society; and when human society is in crisis, it is reflected in nature. In *The Politics of Nature*, Nicholas Roe asserts that in the 1790s ideas of nature and political revolution were closely related. He adds that “any appeal to nature entailed reflection upon the moral, social, and historical realities of the day” (11). Alan Bewell comes to a similar conclusion, writing: “Wordsworth’s turn to nature was not motivated from a desire to avoid or evade politics, but from the belief that nature and the narratives it supports have historically been the very medium of political argument and social control” (141).

Similarly, Ralph Pite claims that “Wordsworth’s explorations of nature are constantly inquiries into social relations. Neither apolitical nor anti-radical, they continue to seek a form of social life which allows personhood and community to exist” (184). Liu adds that in eighteenth-century nature poetry “there is no nature except as it is constituted by acts of political definition made possible by particular forms of government” (104). Instead of providing refuge and escape, nature, according to Wordsworth in his rustic retirement, often reflected deleterious social reality in society. The natural world was in fact part of

the public sphere, as both a subject of, and location for, political discourse that impacted the nation.

I have already mentioned Wordsworth's rejection of Godwin, including Godwin's rationalist approach to benevolence, which was too beholden to French Enlightenment writers. Wordsworth's animus towards the ideas of "enlightened" French philosophers, and British fellow travelers like William Godwin, has been a critical commonplace for some time.<sup>7</sup> This animus is quite explicit in poems like "The Tables Turned," where the poet grouses that

Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things;  
— We murder to dissect" (ll. 26-28).

Wordsworth moved out to the country to escape the milieu of this meddling, murdering reason, which he associated with pro-French partisans in the urban public sphere. "The Tables Turned" also makes clear that the print media used by writers inspired by the Enlightenment were also suspect. The narrator, "William," urges "Matthew" to quit his books. He exclaims: "Books! 'Tis a dull and endless strife" (ll. 3, 9). By "books" Wordsworth most likely also meant pamphlets, which were used to spark and stoke public controversies in the 1790s. Most print books and pamphlets were too expensive for the hoi-polloi in the eighteenth century, and were for the most part restricted to the affluent, keeping those without money out of the discussion. Wordsworth countered this

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<sup>7</sup> A couple exceptions would be Marilyn Butler and Alan Bewell. In *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries*, Butler claims Wordsworth for the Enlightenment, saying he exhibited neo-classical values in his "simplicity of language and truth to personal experience" (60). However, Wordsworth's simple language and subjective point of view could easily be seen as anti-intellectual and anti-Enlightenment. In *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment*, Bewell cites the influence of Enlightenment anthropology on Wordsworth's writing. While Bewell's work is valuable, to argue that Wordsworth was an Enlightenment thinker based merely on his anticipation of some of the particulars of classical anthropology is not convincing, because in so many other ways Wordsworth was antagonistic towards Enlightenment thinking, particularly that originating in France.



with his rustic counter-public, which used media available to everyone, including the poor rustics he encountered in the country.

The publicity of Wordsworth's counter-public was largely based on oral discussion, rather than print. Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and whoever was visiting were wont to have intense conversations about politics and art; they also regularly shared their works in progress, reading them aloud. According to Paul Magnuson, discussions and oral readings are legitimate forms of publication, suggesting a small-scale public, a self-contained or closed communications circuit (13-14).

However, some print media, particularly those not far removed from oral culture, were also utilized. Thompson says of popular, plebeian media in the eighteenth century:

“Where oral tradition is supplemented by growing literacy, the most widely circulated printed products, such as chapbooks, almanacs, broadsides, ‘last dying speeches’ and anecdotal accounts of crime, tend to be subdued to the expectations of the oral culture rather than challenging it with alternatives” (*Customs in Common* 8).

There is one important omission in Thompson's list of popular media: the ballad. Though ballad-collecting had become fashionable in elite circles in the eighteenth century, the ballad was still largely a plebeian form, and in the form of broadsheets affordable to those who had literacy (or sometimes just ears) but little money.<sup>8</sup> James Chandler asserts that Wordsworth used ballads, and the rustic language of ballads, to counter “the encroaching ethos of letters” associated with French Enlightenment praxis in the public sphere (144). I agree with his assessment; however, this does not necessarily make Wordsworth a Burkean reactionary, as Chandler claims. Chandler equates oral

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the ballad craze in eighteenth-century Britain, and its socio-political implications, see Anne Janowitz, chapter 2, and Thomas Pfau, pp. 205-215.

culture and media with custom, and custom with Burke. Thompson complicates this by showing that “custom” was a changeable and contested term in the eighteenth century, and by illustrating the many ways plebeian rural dwellers rebelled against patrician-imposed custom in that century (3, 9). Thompson also suggests how one could use the largely-plebeian media that he mentions to attack the “enlightened,” urban-based public sphere from the left; indeed, many plebeian activists did so.<sup>9</sup>

All of the issues discussed above provide the subtext for “Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree which stands near the Lake of Esthwaite,” in *Lyrical Ballads*. This poem epitomizes counter-public, republican, rustic retirement as conceived by Wordsworth; at the same time, it evinces Wordsworth’s struggle with the idea of political and public disengagement, which takes the form of incipient reclusion. Though most consider “Yew-tree” a nature poem, some find the poem to be critical of the picturesque tradition in poetry, which offers for visual enjoyment lonely nature scenes (that were often artificially manufactured by patrician land-owners).<sup>10</sup>

The “lonely yew-tree” standing “far from human dwelling” meets the primary criteria of the picturesque—a lonely nature scene—but the poet undercuts this by emphasizing the meager pleasure garnered from the view. There is no “verdant herb” because there is no “sparkling rivulet” to spread it; the “barren boughs” of the tree “the bee not loves” (ll. 3-4). Following P. D. Sheats, Michael Mason notes that “these lines are

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<sup>9</sup> One of the best examples would be Thomas Spence, a radical plebeian land reformer who, Marcus Wood tells us, “edited two journals, *Pig’s Meat* and *The Giant Killer*, and his numerous chapbooks, broadsides, pamphlets, and handbills contained songs, hymns, poems, showman’s notices, marginalia, advertisements, letters, declarations, and constitutions” (66-67). This list does not include Spence’s production of token coinage, used as radical propaganda, which Woods discusses at some length in *Radical Satire and Print Culture*, chapter 2, from which the quote above is taken.

<sup>10</sup> “Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree” describes an actual landmark in the Lake District which had been frequented by the reverend William Braithwaite in his retirement. Braithwaite was one of Wordsworth’s masters at Hawkshead school, but as with Wordsworth’s reclusive Solitary in *The Excursion*, the recluse in “Yew-tree” is likely a composite character, not to be read as biographical.

parodically artificial and ostentatious in a manner designed to undermine the reader's conventional attitude to a landscape" (112). The picturesque elements of the scene are not intentionally marred, as in other Wordsworth poems, by decidedly un-picturesque vagrants, but in the poem Wordsworth does liken this kind of picturesque spectatorship to mental vacancy, or a trance-like "appreciation" of nature as dictated by taste-makers and landscape designers. The world, and the public sphere, intrude and trample upon the picturesque in this poem.

The poem, as Geoffrey Hartman points out, is a nature inscription, and one that is not that dissimilar to other inscription poems in later editions of *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>11</sup> It is not clear whether the inscription has been carved into, or written upon, the seat, but no matter: whether carved or written, inscriptions of this sort were not uncommon in rural Britain in Wordsworth's time. The nature inscription can be considered a viable form of rustic communication, "knowable media" in the "knowable community" of Grasmere, available to anyone who passed by. At the same time, the poem assails the print media associated with bourgeois-dominated, Enlightenment-based publicity. It does so by implying that the young recluse has given up the kind of books—such as Godwin's—which reformers are reading in the city, choosing in the country to read the "book" of nature, which includes inscriptions. In short, the nature inscription is a counter-public form set against the Enlightenment-inspired, book-based "ethos of letters" of urban centers. It is public but not urban; much closer to oral sources than to print; and something of a reprimand to the recluse described in the poem, who would prefer to remain out of the public eye.

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<sup>11</sup> Such as "Inscription for the Spot where the Hermitage stood on St. Herbert's Island, Derwent Water," "Inscription for the House on the island of Grasmere," "Lines Written with a Slate-pencil upon a Stone," "Lines Written on a Tablet in a School," and "A Poet's Epitaph."

The “Yew-tree” recluse, as described in the poem, was once an idealistic young man from the country who went to the big city,

A favoured being, knowing no desire  
Which genius did not hallow, 'gainst the taint  
Of dissolute tongues, and jealousy, and hate,  
And scorn, against all enemies prepared,  
All but neglect” (ll. 15-19).

But neglect is his fate, from which the young man recoils, becomes disillusioned, moves back to the country (the Lake District), and becomes a recluse. For Kenneth Johnston, the poem describes Wordsworth’s difficult experience of the public sphere of the early 1790s, which haunted the poet all his life.<sup>12</sup> However, Wordsworth clearly does not advocate reclusion, but in fact condemns it in the poem. The poet chastises the recluse for his pride:

Stranger! henceforth be warned; and know, that pride,  
Howe’er disguised in its own majesty,  
Is littleness; that he, who feels contempt  
For any living thing, hath faculties  
Which he has never used” (ll. 46-50).

Pride and contempt were all too evident in Wordsworth’s experience of urban publicity, if we are to believe just about anything Wordsworth wrote about cities. However, Wordsworth would likely assert at this juncture, this is no excuse for withdrawal from public concerns. Benevolence towards nature, and towards others, leading to universal benevolence, is still an option. The yew-tree recluse, however, did not think so. Benevolence remained, for him, only in a spectral, nostalgic form. The recluse was haunted by

. . . beings, to whose minds,

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<sup>12</sup> Johnston bases this on Wordsworth’s difficult experience with *The Philanthropist* in 1795, and even finds reference to this experience in “Tintern Abbey.” For a more extensive discussion of this period in Wordsworth’s life, see chapter 18 (“Philanthropy or Treason?”) in *The Hidden Wordsworth*.

Warm from the labours of benevolence,  
The world, and man himself, appeared a scene  
Of kindred loveliness” (ll. 33-36).

This is a scene from which the recluse has absented himself, though he clearly has regrets. He sighs “with mournful joy, to think that others felt / What he must never feel” (ll. 41-43). He “on visionary views would fancy feed, till his eye streamed with tears” (ll. 44-45). A strange and perverse man: he feels deeply his lack of feelings; his dearth of sympathy fills his eyes with tears. Here Wordsworth seems to be sending up the fashionable man of sensibility and his penchant for taking parasitic pleasure in the powerful feelings of others. For Wordsworth, this is perverted, selfish benevolence. The yew-tree recluse traded in universal benevolence for the spectral spectacle, the simulacrum, of human feeling.

The yew-tree recluse had abandoned the struggle. The question is: had Wordsworth done so? Based on my reading of the poem, I would say no. Benevolence and idealism are described in positive terms and the young recluse’s abandonment of the world in negative terms. Wordsworth says of the recluse:

. . . with rash disdain he turned away,  
And with the food of pride sustained his soul  
In solitude” (ll.19-21).

Clearly the poet disapproves of this kind of solitude. For this recluse, abandoning the city and absconding to the country is a “cop out.” He is not living in oppositional retirement, like Wordsworth, but rather reclusion; he does not practice counter-publicity, like Wordsworth, but is rather anti-public.

Once a definitive reading, Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire argued in the *Poetical Works* in 1940 that this poem was one of Wordsworth’s attacks on William

Godwin and his rationalist philosophy, following his break with Godwin in 1796. According to de Selincourt and Darbishire, the poem reveals Wordsworth's "revulsion from the intellectual arrogance and self-sufficiency of Godwinism, from which he recovered during his years at Racedown" (I 329). But this would imply that Wordsworth was the recluse in the poem, escaping to the country to put some distance between himself and urban reformers like Godwin. As I mentioned above, the poem does not support such a reading since the poet clearly disapproves of this kind of seclusion, and the abandonment of public engagement it implies. Nor can the recluse stand for Godwin, who was a vilified but still very public figure in 1798, and had not abandoned his principles nor sought out a rustic retreat. A rejection of Godwinism is indeed prevalent in Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* poetry, but I do not see it here.<sup>13</sup> I agree with Mary Jacobus, who contends that "the lesson preached by the Yew-tree lines is a Godwinian one of altruistic, self-rewarding involvement in society" (33). But, as Radcliffe argues, even if it were anti-Godwinian, it does not follow that the poem is necessarily regressive or reactionary.<sup>14</sup>

However, the poem certainly decries the state of the urban public sphere at the end of the 1790s, characterized by "dissolute tongues, and jealousy, and hate, / And scorn," a climate which Godwin played no small part in creating by attempting to align

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Viscomi, in his reading of this poem, also challenges the anti-Godwin interpretation of de Selincourt, suggesting instead that it was written to contest Edmund Burke's idea of the sublime and William Gilpin's conception of the picturesque (aligned with patrician interests). I find Viscomi's interpretation convincing; however, I would assert that Wordsworth is specifically assailing an anti-public picturesque, one that does not shy away from human suffering. Later in the nineteenth century, of course, Wordsworth adopts this anti-public picturesque himself, which became a key component of his apostasy.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson also argues, more generally, that Wordsworth's rejection of Godwin in 1796 need not signal reaction or apostasy. He writes: "The rejection of Godwin was accompanied by a rejection of a mechanical psychology and an abstract enthronement of reason, but not by any rejection of republican ardor. . . . It is a move away from the *déraciné* Godwinian intelligentsia but towards the common people" (*The Romantics* 34).

British publicity with its French, republican counterpart. “Yew-tree” is a critique of how the picturesque tradition had erased human suffering from the natural landscape, how “enlightened” urban-based discourse and media were superseding and co-opting rustic forms, how benevolence had become bathos. The poem also suggests an alternative to this state of affairs in the form of a counter-public rustic community where nature teaches man to love man. All that said, there are indications in the “Yew-tree” poem that the recluse represents an unwelcome aspect of Wordsworth’s personality with which he struggled even then. This struggle between the public and anti-public Wordsworth became much more intense in the years that following the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, particularly in *The Recluse*. I turn to that work now.

### **Wordsworth’s Reluctant Reclusion in the Early *Recluse***

William Wordsworth considered *The Recluse* as his *magnum opus*. Wordsworth’s family and Coleridge concurred, often taking Wordsworth to task for his dilatory attitude towards the never-completed project. Like the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Recluse* was originally conceived as a co-production of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Coleridge thought that they should

write a poem, in blank verse, addressed to those who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost Epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary philosophies. (Qtd. in Johnston, *Hidden Wordsworth*, 490).

What Coleridge describes is close to what he himself became shortly thereafter, if we consider his use of opium an expression of “Epicurean selfishness.”

I would strongly suggest that the radical lecturer and poet John Thelwall also contributed to the conception of *The Recluse*. Thelwall visited Wordsworth and Coleridge in the Quantocks in 1797 and, like the other two poets, did so to flee the contentious publicity of the British cities, seeking to “retire” to the Quantocks without completely abandoning his radical politics. In the end, like the other two poets, he found the West Country inhospitable and became instead the self-styled “new Recluse” of Liswyn Farm, in Wales. All three of these poets experienced a similar political and existential crisis in the mid-1790s, so it seems quite likely that they discussed the situation and artistic responses to it that would not compromise their ideals, such as *The Recluse* as it was originally conceived.<sup>15</sup>

In the end, only Wordsworth contributed to the project, which may be one reason why it was never finished—or barely even started. The central issue that Wordsworth grapples with in the *Recluse* project is: what do we do when “the world is too much with us”? How can the poet save his soul in seclusion and help save the world at the same time? That is, how can one help reform the world without doing so publicly, as part of a contentious, highly ideological public sphere? At its conception *The Recluse* was a reformist project which attempted to circumvent a dysfunctional public sphere. However, in the only portion of *The Recluse* ever published—*The Excursion*, in 1814—this original

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<sup>15</sup> It is also quite possible that Thelwall read to Wordsworth and Coleridge his work in progress, the poem entitled “Pedestrian Excursion,” which he was composing as he made his way west to the Quantocks. In the poem, Thelwall deals with issues such as reclusion (what he calls “sequestration”), the degradation of rural poverty, and the picturesque—all of which Wordsworth discusses in his own excursion poem. Nicholas Roe discusses this in more depth in “John Thelwall and the West Country: The Road to Nether Stowey Revisited.” See also Mary Faircloth, “John Thelwall and the Politics of the Picturesque”; Michael Scrivener, “Jacobin Romanticism: John Thelwall's 'Wye' Essay and 'Pedestrian Excursion'”; and E. P. Thompson, “Hunting the Jacobin Fox,” in *The Romantics*.



intention was subverted, even inverted, as it was a profoundly reactionary work, in a decidedly public way. In other poems that Wordsworth wrote for the project, but never published, the lineaments of the original reformist project can be discerned.<sup>16</sup>

An example would be “Home at Grasmere,” which Wordsworth intended to be the first book of the first part of the three-part poem *The Recluse*. “Home at Grasmere” is an encomium to rustic retirement, an ecstatic paean to shared solitude. It relates Wordsworth’s joyful return, with his sister, to the Lake District, after their lonely sojourn in Germany. The poet and his Emma (Dorothy) were “a pair seceding from the common world” to find

. . . a portion of the blessedness which love  
And knowledge will, we trust, hereafter give  
To all the Vales of earth and all mankind” (ll. 249, 254-56).

In this and in other ways the poem can be read as a sequel to “Tintern Abbey”: the vagrant Wordsworths had found a home, and along with it “blessedness” and “love.” Grasmere valley, in the poem, is “a small abiding-place of many men, / A termination and a last retreat”—that is, “A Whole without dependence or defect”—a self-sufficient community, and public (ll. 165-66).

Yet in the poem Wordsworth doth protest too much about the perfection of the people and the place, as if engaging urban interlocutors (like William Hazlitt for instance) who considered the provinces bastions of ignorance. Or Wordsworth may be arguing with himself, with his own doubts about rustic society and the people who live there. For instance, he tells of a pair of swans—which he identifies with himself and Dorothy—that

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<sup>16</sup> In my discussion of *The Recluse*, I only consider “Home at Grasmere,” “A Tuft of Primroses,” and *The Excursion*. Critics over the years have suggested other poems for inclusion in *The Recluse* project. For an overview of the various possible configurations for *The Recluse*, see Kenneth Johnston’s *Wordsworth and The Recluse*.

disappear one day from the valley. For a moment he suspects one of his neighbors of shooting the swans, but then chastises himself for harboring such an uncharitable thought.

For

They who are dwellers in this holy place  
Must needs themselves be hallowed. They require  
No benediction from the Stranger's lips,  
For they are blessed already" (ll. 352-369).

Later he acknowledges drunken shepherds who make "sounds articulate / Of ribaldry and blasphemy and wrath," but again refuses to condemn them (ll. 426-27). The shepherd of Grasmere is "a Freeman, therefore sound and unenslaved; / That extreme penury is here unknown" (ll. 444-45). In this Dalesmen's Republic, in

. . . this enclosure many of the old  
Substantial virtues have a firmer tone  
Than in the base and ordinary world" (ll. 466-468).

Ignoring his doubts, Wordsworth describes Grasmere valley as a microcosm and a model of the kind of republic Britain could be. In this republic, nature is not merely a playground for the rich tourist. The poet attests to the "sober truth" that nature here

. . . yields no exemption, but her awful rights,  
Enforces to the utmost and exacts  
Her tribute of inevitable pain" (ll. 837-41).

In doing so, nature, as public space, mirrors the social conflicts that ravage Britain. And yet living close to nature also yields pleasure, knowledge, peace, joy, and fruitful solitude. Compared to fruitful solitude in the provinces, there is the unfruitful solitude of the cities, the loneliness one encounters amongst the urban crowd.

. . . . He truly is alone,  
He of the multitude, whose eyes are doomed  
To hold a vacant commerce day by day  
With that which he can neither know nor love" (ll. 808-11).

Here Wordsworth describes that most unnatural of things, the urban recluse.

Wordsworth certainly extols nature in the poem but it is not escapist. I would attest, once again, that Wordsworth had not yet become a reactionary, or an apostate, when he began composing “Home at Grasmere” in 1800. “First nature” had not yet become “second nature.” Karl Kroeber acknowledges that “the poet’s retreat to Grasmere is no evasive action. . . . Grasmere is no vacation spot, no mere place in respite from the fragmented restlessness of modern life. Nor is it a symbol of utopian existence. It is an authentic alternative” (1820). Similarly, in “Fields of Liberty,” Tim Fulford asserts that the poem “disturbs, rather than confirms, the Romantic ideology”; that is, it “is not a discourse which simply retreats from politics to nature to the inner self but a political act in the tradition of Thomson and Cowper, an eighteenth-century tradition in which the poet’s view of landscape is already political because it forms a critique of the landowners” (81). Grasmere seclusion is the kind of reformist retirement that Wordsworth extols in *Lyrical Ballads*. In particular, Fulford reads the poem as an excoriation of Lord Lonsdale, the employer of Wordsworth’s father, for political corruption and economic exploitation in the form of the enclosure and engrossment of land. The poem is reflective of Wordsworth’s republican retirement in the Lake District, his solidarity with the dispossessed and with the simple Dalesmen, his belief that nature is public space, and his resistance to politically-fraught, combative urban publicity.

What the poet describes in “Home at Grasmere” is rustic, republican retirement rather than reclusion; and counter-publicity, rather than a retreat from public concerns. But Wordsworth also voices some doubts and concerns about the reformist sentiment in the poem, such as the idea that the rustics with whom the poet shared Grasmere valley

were not necessarily paragons of virtue always and forever. These tentative doubts and concerns are voiced much more emphatically in *The Excursion*, as we will see.

The first draft of “Home at Grasmere” was composed in 1800, and then finished in 1806. By 1806, Wordsworth’s rustic republicanism had been mostly effaced by, and then replaced with, incipient reaction. Publicly-engaged retirement had made way for anti-public reclusion.<sup>17</sup> This can be seen in “The Tuft of Primroses,” composed in 1808. Both Johnston and Beth Darlington claim this poem was intended as another book in the first part of *The Recluse*. “The Tuft of Primroses” was written in the spring and summer of 1808 as a follow-up to “Home at Grasmere.” After a few months away, William and Dorothy Wordsworth had returned to Grasmere valley to find lamentable changes. Due to a dispute over timber rights, many trees had been cut down, destroying quite a few picturesque views. This sad mutability is registered in the poem; it is countered by the primrose, which becomes a symbol of something that survives such changes. Frail as it is, it will “maintain conspicuously” its “solitary state / In Splendour unimpaired” (ll. 11-14). And yet, after the poet relates the environmental destruction of the valley, he ends this portion of the poem mourning how “dearest resting places of the heart / Vanish beneath an unrelenting doom” (ll. 262-63). Grasmere was not the haven he hoped it would be; the contentious world had intruded upon and disrupted the sweet solitude of the Wordsworths.

Nature is neither benevolent nor public in “A Tuft of Primroses.” There is no love of nature leading to love of man. There is instead disregard of nature leading to ignorance

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<sup>17</sup> Arguably this change, this turn from reform to reaction, is reflected in the writing and editing of the poem between 1800 and 1806. However, I have not the time nor space to go over previous iterations. For that, I refer you to the Cornell edition of “Home at Grasmere,” edited by Beth Darlington, or even better Johnston’s *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, where he compares the 1800 poem to the 1806 version in two separate chapters (chapter s 3 and 6).

of man. Rather than mediating and meliorating social conflict, nature naturalizes social inequality, covers it up and over. Instead of public space, nature is now a relentless, but apolitical, avenger of all the destructiveness of man. When all the works of man have crumbled into dust, the primroses will still be there, transforming the dust into foliage and flowers.

Wordsworth compares this mutable landscape with an ideal one. He relates the story of St. Basil, nobleman and founder of monasticism in the Eastern Christian Church. For the first time in his poetry, Wordsworth strongly defends recluses like Basil, and reclusion itself. He writes that it was not due to “dread of the persecuting sword, remorse / Wrongs unredressed, and insults unavenged” that a person flees populated places; it is not “as a refuge from distress or pain / A breathing time, vacation, or a truce” that a person seeks solitude; rather it is “for its absolute self, a life of peace” that a recluse withdraws from the world (ll. 267-68; 276-78). But then Wordsworth goes on to write that Basil had the “vain felicities of Athens, left / Her throng of Sophists glorying in their snares, / Her Poets, and conflicting Orators” in order to enjoy “his delicious Pontic solitude” (ll. 299-301, 304). In other words, he had to abandon the public sphere of his day, with its myriad conflicts, in order to find a little peace. And he does so not in a desert but a “blest Arcadia,” where “majestic beds of diverse foliage, fruits, / And a thousand laughing blossoms” (ll. 350, 332-33). The setting of St. Basil’s “delicious Pontic solitude” seems much like Grasmere valley. In this section, nature, transformed into pastoral perfection, becomes a haven from urban conflicts and public controversy, where there is

. . . no loss lamenting, no privation felt,  
Disturbed by no vicissitudes, unscarred

By civil faction, by religious broils  
Unplagued, forgetting and forgotten” (ll. 364-67).

Unlike the Yew-tree poem in *Lyrical Ballads*, or the first version of “Home at Grasmere,” Wordsworth calls for renunciation of the troublesome world, and embraces reclusion, in “A Tuft of Primroses.”

According to David Bromwich, behind the “gorgeous drapery” of Wordsworth’s language, the specter of Burke—in the form of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*—can be discerned. In his discussion of the hermit in “Tintern Abbey,” Bromwich writes: “The *Reflections*, in its argument against republican innovation, had spoken of monks and monasteries as fit subjects of natural piety” (79). Bromwich continues: “Burke in the *Reflections* goes on to say that the practices of monks, strange and superstitious as they appear to the Protestant mind, are among the ancient growths by which the mind of man has come to know its own nature; so that they now seem, as any human practice may seem after sufficient duration, part of the spirit that incorporates humanity” (79-80).<sup>18</sup> Monks and monasteries, in other words, are emblems of naturalized custom, of “second nature.” This is not how Wordsworth viewed monasticism when he critiqued it in early works such as *Descriptive Sketches*, in which he characterized the Grand Chartreuse in the Savoy as a haven for superstition and ignorance. Monasticism still represents “second nature” in “A Tuft of Primroses,” but in this later poem he “romanticizes” it rather than call it into question.

So yes, now we can say it: when Wordsworth was composing “A Tuft of Primroses” in 1808 he had fallen under the baleful influence of Burke, as Chandler would

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<sup>18</sup> Bromwich is not convinced that this makes Wordsworth a Burkean in “Tintern Abbey.” I suspect he would be convinced, as I am, that the Wordsworth of “A Tuft of Primroses” was now definitely in Burke’s camp, for the reasons I discuss in my reading of that work.

have it; he had fallen back “within the traditional frame of paternalism,” as Thompson argues; he had learned to erase political commitments and displace history, as New Historicists like Levinson and McGann claim. One excellent example of the last was the fact that Wordsworth wrote “A Tuft of Primroses” at Allan Bank, a mansion newly built in Grasmere valley by a family based in Liverpool (the Crumps), and rented by the Wordsworths while it was being finished. When Allan Bank was first being built both William and Dorothy thought it an atrocity—yet another example of how nouveau riche outsiders from the cities were despoiling their beloved valley. And yet they moved in when given the opportunity, with nary a mention of their resplendent new residence in Wordsworth’s poetry. It is also pertinent that Wordsworth had spent eight months between October 1806 and June 1807 at the Coleorton estate as a guest of Lord and Lady Beaumont, and while there, for the first time since his childhood, he had become a regular churchgoer. Wordsworth had also accepted gifts of land and employment from the new Lord Lowther in 1805 and 1806.<sup>19</sup> At this time, Wordsworth was a client to, and increasingly a spokesman for, the patrician class. The publication of *The Excursion* in 1814 would make his political tergiversation very clear.

### **Wordsworth’s Return to Publicity: Sycophant vs. Solitary in *The Excursion***

Reflecting on Wordsworth’s evident apostasy in *The Excursion*, Lord Byron called Wordsworth a “poetical charlatan” and “political parasite,” a “converted Jacobin having long subsided into the clownish sycophant of the worst prejudices of aristocracy.”

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<sup>19</sup> This is reported by Fulford. He adds: Wordsworth’s “letter to his noble patron emphasised his lack of success with the reading public and signaled his shift to a conservative position of support for the paternalist squire who protects his tenants from economic pressures” (“Fields of Liberty?” 67).

In *Peter Bell the Third*, Percy Shelley compares Wordsworth to a chameleon, and calls him a defender of “ultra-legitimate dullness.” After reading *The Excursion*, Mary Shelley simply noted in her journal: “He is a slave.”<sup>20</sup> This seems more than a matter of an “anxiety of influence” for the second generation Romantics, as Harold Bloom would have it. These comments register a sense of betrayal: the champion of rustic language and culture now defended the reactionary status quo.<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Bate seems to speak to this when he writes: “A major count in the critical indictment of Wordsworth is that he was among the many conspirators in the Great Pastoral Con Trick” (18). His persona of rustic republican retiree was now apparently just a pose, a cover for reactionary ideas and actions. The crypto-Jacobin was now clearly a virulent anti-Jacobin.

This is quite evident when one opens the book and sees on the first page Wordsworth’s fawning dedication to Lord Lonsdale, his patron. It is no different when one moves on to the prospectus, which reflects Wordsworth’s capitulation to the patrician status quo. In the prospectus (taken from the last part of “Home at Grasmere” and moved to the end of the Preface to *The Excursion*), the poet announces that his “haunt, and the main region of [his] Song” is “the mind of Man” (ll. 40-41). The poet exclaims: “How exquisitely the individual Mind / ... / ... to the external World is fitted:—and how exquisitely, too, / ... / The external World is fitted to the Mind” (ll. 63-68). If the external world consists of the estate of the Beaumonts, the estates of Lord Lonsdale, or even the mansions of the nouveau riche, what Wordsworth is describing is “fitting” the mind to paternalism. “Fitting the mind” is another way of describing false consciousness, in

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<sup>20</sup> The quotes from Byron and the Shelleys are taken from Allison Hickey, pp. 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth’s slavishness is also indicated by the fact that *The Excursion* was issued in quarto and cost two guineas. In the print marketplace of the time, this was an exorbitant sum, in a format that was clearly meant for an affluent, patrician public.



which the person is “haunted” by spectral overlords. Certainly the world Wordsworth conjures does not include urban areas, where “madding passions” are “mutually inflamed” within “the tribes / And fellowships of men” who are “barricadoed evermore / Within the walls of Cities” (ll. 73-75, 79-80). As with his *Lyrical Ballads* poems, urban publicity and media are renounced. But there is no rustic republican counter-public alternative here. Instead Wordsworth embraces the world of his patrons, the patrician public, and the dependency upon the great that this implies.

*The Excursion* begins, in Book I, with the doleful tale of Margaret, another in the long line of Wordsworth’s abandoned or vagrant women. Book I has as its basis Wordsworth’s poem “The Ruined Cottage,” originally composed in 1795-96 and later expanded into “The Pedlar.”<sup>22</sup> Like the vagrant women who continually appear in Wordsworth’s early poetry, most famously in “The Female Vagrant” in *Lyrical Ballads*, Margaret’s sufferings are largely due to an economy destroyed by war; unlike previous iterations, this war was clearly the one with France. However, New Historicists Liu, McGann, and Chandler argue that in the first book of *The Excursion* Wordsworth undercuts any kind of anti-war or social critique. Liu writes: “The ‘Ruined Cottage’, I fear, is not a poem of humanity. It is a capitalization upon inhumanity. A specific kind of capitalization, that is, is the historical form of Wordsworthian humanity. . . . ‘The Ruined Cottage’ is one of the strongest cases of the denial, the overdetermined and precise absence, that is the poet’s sense of history” (325). McGann writes that in the 1797-98 version, “the story of Margaret produces . . . an overflow of sympathy and love for the

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<sup>22</sup> To sort out the many and various iterations of “The Ruined Cottage,” including Jonathan Wordsworth’s controversial attempt to canonize the Ms D. version of the poem, see John Rieder, *Wordsworth’s Counterrevolutionary Turn*, chapter 6; and James Butler’s introduction to *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*.

sufferer rather than, as in 1793-4, a sense of outrage, and an overflow of angry judgment upon those whom Wordsworth at the time held accountable” (85). Chandler, similarly, reads “The Ruined Cottage” as a movement away from political outrage and towards depoliticized sympathy: the poem “leaves us with no sense whatever of human complicity in the causes of [Margaret’s] suffering and death” (135). Unlike Wordsworth’s earlier “female vagrant” poems *An Evening Walk* and “The Female Vagrant,” war is not the root cause of Margaret’s problems in “The Ruined Cottage.” The downfall of Margaret’s husband Robert, which leads to her own slide into depression and death, is an inopportune illness, which leads to the impoverishment of his family and eventually to his joining a regiment headed to war.

Book I of *The Excursion* also reflects a very different conception of publicity than the other iterations of the vagrant/abandoned woman narrative. Wordsworth suggests this in his description of the small library that Margaret owns. The neat library that is cherished by the unnamed female vagrant in the poem by that name in *Lyrical Ballads* is nowhere to be seen in Margaret’s cottage; instead there is only a meager collection of deteriorating chapbooks and cheap books. Her small lot of books,

Which, in the Cottage window, heretofore  
Had been piled up against the corner panes  
In seemly order, now, with straggling leaves  
Lay scattered here and there, open or shut,  
As they had chanced to fall” (I:859-64).

The loose leaves of her deteriorating books match the leaves of the trees which carpet the abandoned cottage and its garden. As he often does in his poetry, Wordsworth uses print objects to represent the state of health or ill-health of the public sphere. The rustic public he extols in *Lyrical Ballads* is now something spectral, reflecting degradation and

death.<sup>23</sup> Nature, the poet suggests, is inexorably reclaiming the print materials created out of nature, out of trees and ink.

Nature in similar ways will, in time, erase all vestiges of human society. The narrator of Margaret's story, the Wanderer, describes how he comes upon her cottage some time after being abandoned by her husband, and finds it being slowly taken over by honeysuckle and yellow stone-crop. He finds other flowers and weeds "straggling forth" in the once-neat garden, strangling the plants that had been sown there (I:753-764). In short, he finds nothing but devastation, reflecting the disordered mind of the occupant and the relentless ministrations of nature, which transforms devastation into picturesque beauty. Nature now reflects personal rather than sociopolitical concerns.

The Wanderer concludes his recollection of Margaret with an ode to Mother Nature, who turns human suffering into fecund compost:

Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,  
By mist and silent rain-drops silver'd o'er,  
As once I passed, did to my heart convey  
So still an image of tranquility,  
. . .  
That what we feel of sorrow and despair  
From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
The passing shews of Being leave behind,  
Appeared an idle dream that could not live  
Where mediation was" (I:973-83).

As in "A Tuft of Primroses," nature does not encourage or reflect active benevolence towards suffering human beings, but rather naturalizes their suffering, makes it

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<sup>23</sup> In "Suffering and Sensation in *The Ruined Cottage*," Karen Swann argues that Margaret's library shows that she has fallen victim to the kind of sensational, Gothic literature that characterized the literary marketplace at the time. Her evidence is sparse, however. I contend that her library reflects more wholesome fare, in fact the kind of "old canon" literature that was at that time being replaced by such things as sensational, Gothic literature. For more on the "old canon"—often in the form of broadsheets, ballads, and chapbooks—and its replacement by a new canon, derived from the newly industrialized and capitalized print market of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, see William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, chapter 7.

acceptable and inevitable. Nature is figured as a transcendent force, the agent of mutability, rather than a space that reflects social conflict and allows public discourse. History is displaced by nature, buried under blossoms and burgeoning greenery; suffering (for the onlooker) is assuaged and forgotten, reflecting quite literally an organicism that would make Burke proud.

Wordsworth makes this affinity for Burkean organicism even more evident in the rest of *The Excursion*. In fact, he comes right out and proclaims himself a servant of Church and King, at the beginning of Book 6 (“The Churchyard Among the Mountains”). In an obsequiousness that no doubt curdled the stomachs of the second-generation Romantic poets, Wordsworth, speaking in the persona of the Poet, exclaims:

Hail to the Crown by Freedom shaped—to gird  
An English Sovereign’s brow! and to the Throne  
Whereon he sits! Whose deep foundations lie  
In veneration and the People’s love,  
Whose steps are equity, whose seat is law.  
—Hail to the State of England! And conjoin  
With this a salutation as devout,  
Made to the spiritual Fabric of her Church;  
Founded in truth; by blood of Martyrdom  
Cemented; by the hands of Wisdom reared  
In beauty of Holiness, with order’d pomp,  
Decent, and unreprieved. (VI:1-12).

Coming from the former republican poet of nature, this is apostasy, made very public. Simpson writes that the character of the Poet here “voices a strangely disembodied paean to British liberty and the established church; the lack of response to this makes him seem indeed the spokesman of authorial dogma rather than a participant in a dramatic exchange” (204). There is good reason to mistrust Wordsworth’s blatant statement of reaction in these lines, and the character of the Poet as well, in the light of Wordsworth’s many equivocations in the poem, and his penchant for self-conscious irony in other

poems.<sup>24</sup> His endorsement of Church and King rings hollow because something of the Jacobin—represented by the character of the Solitary—still occupies his imagination, and invades his poem.

In his review of *The Excursion*, William Hazlitt famously noted that in the poem “the recluse, the pastor, and the pedlar, are three persons in one poet,” referring to the three main speakers in the poem, and Wordsworth’s difficulty in distinguishing their voices (Qtd. in *The Excursion*, “Introduction,” 4). However, perhaps because it marred his Trinitarian pun, Hazlitt leaves out one character: the Poet himself. As similar-sounding as their voices are in the poem, these four figures nonetheless represent different aspects of Wordsworth’s personality, namely: Burkean organicism (the Pedlar, or here called the Wanderer), the Church of England (the Pastor), the arts acclimatized to legitimacy (the Poet), the disillusioned Jacobin (the Solitary). The Solitary most concerns me in this section, for in him we can see how Wordsworth is equivocal about, and resistant to, his own apostasy. More importantly this figure is used to show how the private-public debate continued to both energize and enervate Wordsworth’s ideological orientation circa 1814.

Even before we meet the Solitary in *The Excursion*, in fact after it is suggested that he might be dead, we encounter his ghostly print double in the form of Voltaire’s *Candide*. The Solitary had left it in a “recess” that closely resembles the yew-tree seat in the *Lyrical Ballads* poem by that name. In *The Excursion*, however, the recess is an area

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<sup>24</sup> This passage reflects what Marjorie Levinson refers to as the “deepened conception of Wordsworthian ‘irony,’ according to which the idealized surfaces of the poet’s texts are ‘ruptured’ by moments of ideological self-contradiction or ‘logical scandal,’ moments at which a latent or ‘repressed’ awareness of historical or political actuality is said to become manifest to the trained critical eye” (11). William Galperin, in *Revision and Authority in Wordsworth*, argues for a similar kind of Wordsworthian irony, which Galperin calls the “principle of revisability.” (3).

frequented by children, who had incorporated the book into one of the play houses they had built there. The Wanderer describes the book as a

. . . dull product of a Scoffer's pen,  
Impure conceits discharging from a heart  
Hardened by impious pride!" (II:510-12).

This suggests that such works have turned the Solitary into an embittered recluse. Yet the Wanderer and the Poet find that the work is "swoln / With searching damp, and seemingly had lain / To the injurious elements exposed" (II:462-64). Later the Wanderer suggests that the Solitary had left the book there on purpose, "through malice, as might seem," to indoctrinate the children in French republican and anti-clerical ideas, as adherents of Thomas Paine supposedly attempted to corrupt the youth by bundling *The Rights of Man* in "sweet-meat wrappers" (IV:1005).<sup>25</sup> But the fact that the Solitary has carelessly left the book out of doors suggests his loss of respect for the author, and for the Enlightenment-based public sphere. It is similar in this regard to the deteriorating library of Margaret, and indicates a public that has died and become spectral. The abandoned *Candide* represents the disorder and dysfunction afflicting the British public sphere in the 1790s, and the nefarious (though waning) influence of the French Enlightenment upon British publicity, all of which the Solitary now rejects.<sup>26</sup>

Shortly after finding the book, the Wanderer and the Poet find the Solitary very much alive. Thereafter we learn the import of the search for the Solitary: the Wanderer and the Poet intend to dislodge the Solitary from his lonely perch high above Grasmere valley, to coax him out of his bitter reclusion and back out into the world. Thus far I have been arguing that Wordsworth's conflicted relationship with publicity in the late 1790s

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<sup>25</sup> Discussed by Ian Haywood in *The Revolution in Popular Literature*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> So too the disorder of the Solitary's cottage, in which books are slovenly mixed in with "maps, fossils, withered plants and flowers, / And tufts of mountain moss" (II:688-90).

led him to first counter and then reject the public sphere, which included a rejection of political reform. Now I am saying that, in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth re-engages with publicity. The difference is that the public sphere he re-engages in 1814 is very different than that of 1793. In the early 1790s it had been dominated by reformers influenced by the Enlightenment, but by 1814 the public sphere had been almost completely co-opted by reactionary patricians. The reclamation project of the Solitary was an effort to get the Solitary to give up his objections to legitimacy—and legitimating, Burkean custom—to declare, in a sense, his own apostasy. But this never happens in the poem; the Solitary rebuffs the attempt to draw him out.

Critics usually focus on the Solitary's pitiable history—described in Book II by the Wanderer and then the Solitary himself—in which his wife and children die within a year, plunging the Solitary into despondency, until the French Revolution, “the glorious opening, the unlooked-for dawn, / that promised everlasting joy to France,” draws him out again (II.224-5). In due course, the Solitary became disillusioned with the French Revolution, went to the republican United States and became more disillusioned, and finally returned to Grasmere valley to become a recluse. However, I will not re-cross this well-covered ground; it is another kind of ground that I wish to cover—or rather uncover.

A central component of the Solitary's dissenting reclusion involves nature. In the poem the Solitary relentlessly assails one of the cherished shibboleths of Wordsworth the “nature poet”: that the love of nature, in the form of rustic community, inexorably leads to the love of man. Nor will he countenance the idea that nature tidies up, prettifies and erases—that is, naturalizes—human suffering. The Solitary tells the Wanderer and the Poet that the recently deceased man they had mistakenly thought was the Solitary was a

homeless beggar that few would mourn and most thought a nuisance (II:620-655). The narrating Poet suggests that the Solitary himself is insensitive and uncompassionate, but based on his words in Books XIII and IX, the Solitary clearly cares very much about the fate of his rustic neighbors. The Wanderer seems to acknowledge this in the last book, Book IX, as he speaks of “a wide compassion which with you [the Solitary] I share” (IX:156). The Solitary knows his neighbors quite well, and assists them when he can, in the spirit of mutual aid. Despite his negativity about the state of the world, the Solitary is far from a misanthrope. But he has no illusions about the supposed benevolence of nature, and has no stomach for the pieties of the Wanderer and the Poet on this subject.

For instance, when the Solitary takes the Wanderer and the Poet up to visit one of his haunts, a “nook” with interesting rock formations and a waterfall, the Wanderer rhapsodizes:

—Hail Contemplation! from the stately towers  
Reared by the industrious hand of human Art  
To lift thee high above the misty air,  
And turbulence, of murmuring cities vast;  
From academic groves that have for thee  
Been planted, hither come and find a Lodge  
Top which thou mayest resort for holier peace,—  
From whose calm center Thou, through height or depth,  
Mayest penetrate, wherever Truth shall lead;  
Measuring through all degrees, until the scale  
Of time and conscious Nature disappear,  
Lost in unsearchable Eternity! (III.105-116).

The Solitary responds by pointing out the rock formations—which, reflecting his “antiquarian humour,” he facetiously gives names such as Pompey’s Pillar, Theban Obelisk, and Druid Cromlech—and says:

The shapes before our eyes,  
And their arrangement, doubtless must be deemed  
The sport of nature, aided by blind Chance



Rudely to mock the works of toiling man. (III.128-31)

Amidst these “freaks of Nature / and her blind helper Chance,” benevolence is not to be found. Instead “blind” and “freakish” nature prevails over human culture and civilization.

Then there is the Solitary’s “vision.” The deceased old man mentioned above goes missing in the midst of a storm. The Solitary joins the party that goes out looking for him, though he fears they are too late because the woman who sent the old man forth tarried in getting help. “Inhuman!” the Solitary complains. “Was an Old Man’s life / Not worth the trouble of a thought?” (II.817-818). The search party finds the old man barely alive and brings him back to the village. While this is happening, the Solitary has a vision of a dazzling, celestial city in the clouds above the mountains:

O, ’twas an unimaginable sight!  
Clouds, mists, streams, watery rocks and emerald turf  
Confused, commingled, mutually inflamed,  
Molten together, and composing thus,  
Each lost in each, that marvelous array  
Of temple, place, citadel, and huge  
Fantastic pomp of structure without a name (II.887-894).

This is the kind of vision, and description, that we find in many of Wordsworth’s poems.

But here the Solitary immediately discounts his vision. Relating his vision to the Wanderer and the Poet, the Solitary says “I forgot our Charge [the old man], as utterly / I then forgot him:—there I stood and gazed; / The apparition faded not away, / And I descended” to tend to the old man. The Solitary relates that the old man died shortly thereafter and was the dead man the two visitors thought was the Solitary. The Solitary, in effect, abandons his life-altering vision-in-progress in order to enquire after a dying man, who after his night out of doors during a storm would be unlikely to sing in praise of picturesque and sublime nature. The Solitary is disinclined to do so as well, showing

that for the Solitary suffering people took priority over pretty vistas and transforming visions. Bates writes: “For the Solitary, the apparition is but an interlude in the course of a narration that is focused on humanity rather than nature and on suffering rather than glory” (70).

Throughout the poem the Solitary argues that immersion in the natural world does not necessarily make better people. On two occasions in the poem, he points out an “easy-hearted” or “thriving” churl, a local rustic, whom the Solitary insists has only been made more ignorant and insensitive by his isolation from society and his tutelage by “nature” (V:231-50; VIII: 406-19). Or rather “second nature”: what the Solitary resists is nature as custom, nature that indoctrinates the rustic in the changeless, hierarchical structure of paternalistic society. By contrast, the Wanderer avoids the question of the ignorance-breeding poverty in the provinces of “merry England” and instead generalizes, and naturalizes, this poverty. “The poor you will have with you always,” he seems to say, echoing Jesus in the Christian Gospels (and the apostate Bishop of Llandaff in his infamous pamphlet of 1798, a reprint of a sermon based on that text). Like the sun that shines on the just and the unjust, “the generous inclination, the just rule, / Kind wishes, and good actions, and pure thoughts,” are possible for all (IX:241-42).

No mystery is here; no special boon  
For high and not for low, for proudly graced  
And not for meek of heart. (IX:243-45).

This mutability of grace and sorrow the Wanderer calls “true equality” (IX:248). This is an equality that does not disturb class distinctions; it is a leveling that Burke would bless. These are sentiments similar to those the Wanderer uttered in regards to the tragic Margaret in the first book of *The Excursion*.

For the Wanderer, personal virtue combined with conservative custom, rather than political reform or revolution, is the answer to England's social ills. Thus, for him, the importance of national education, which is the subject of one of his longer harangues in *The Excursion*. Critics note that what Wordsworth likely had in mind here was the Madras system of the Anglican educator Andrew Bell, distinguished from a rival system developed by the Quaker educator Joseph Lancaster. The Madras system consisted of pupils being taught to teach other pupils in the lower forms. Simpson calls it "a strange mixture of Rousseau and Gradgrind; enlightened self-dependence and utilitarian efficiency constantly supporting each other" (196). Allison Hickey notes that "Bell's monitorial system is based on a hierarchy of supervision," which encourages students to discipline themselves and each other (109). Hickey continues: "The parallel to Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon' is noteworthy, and it is not surprising that Bentham later looked to Bell and his competitor Lancaster in planning his own monitorial day school based on 'the Panopticon principle'" (109). The Madras system, according to Alan Richardson, was "a radical cure for England's social ills and political unrest, a means for facilitating and justifying colonial expansion, and . . . a prop for that great edifice of stability, the Established Church" (95). Indeed, the Wanderer acknowledges that the purpose of such a system was to prevent "wild disorder," to root out the "savage Horde among the civilized, / A servile Band among the lordly free" (IX:305, 308-09). This system of national education will also lead to British colonial expansion, as Britain will ineluctably "cast off / Her swarms, and in succession send them forth," until

. . . the smallest habitable Rock,  
 Beaten by lonely billows, hear the songs  
 Of humanized society; and bloom  
 With civil arts, and send their fragrance forth" (IX:380-392).

Hickey points out that the Wanderer's harangues on industry, education, and imperial expansion "sometimes sound as though they have been lifted verbatim from tracts of the day (as some of them were)" (15). This is an important point. Wordsworth was not only making his apostasy public, but also addressing vital public issues in *The Excursion*. He was no longer hiding out in the hills and hollows of Grasmere valley, but engaging the public sphere. But the public sphere he addressed was one dominated by patricians and their proxies, eager to restore legitimacy in Britain. Whereas in earlier poems Wordsworth characterizes reclusion as something negative and anti-social, in *The Excursion* it represents the last vestige of republicanism and counter-publicity in Wordsworth, and his ambivalent dissent from the patrician project of legitimacy and the sycophancy this demanded, in the person of the Solitary.

This was a point of controversy in the more conservative reviews: in the end, the Wanderer, the Poet, and the Pastor are unsuccessful in their attempt to coax the Solitary out of his reclusion and to reconcile him to the new, old order of Church and King. Wordsworth might have become a conservative Burkean, but the Solitary would not succumb to the mental virus, the "meme" of custom, as defined by the patrician class. Nature was not a haven from social conflict for the Solitary; it was instead, as it was for the republican Wordsworth, a signifier of suffering humanity. The Solitary, unlike the Poet and the Wanderer, rejects the public sphere, but only because by 1814 it had become a reactionary echo chamber, a space that encouraged conformity and demonized dissent in any form.

## The Supplement of Publicity: Wordsworth's "Essay Supplemental"

After *The Excursion* (and the bad notices) Wordsworth issued no additional segments of *The Recluse*, or any other major poems, but instead re-issued previously published poems, or published fugitive pieces written long before. In his 1815 collected works, especially, Wordsworth monumentalized himself in the form of a medium he once attacked—the print book—issued in multiple volumes, and priced for patricians. The ballad-monger became the *bête blanc* of elite bibliophiles. However his "Essay Supplemental" to *Lyrical Ballads*, inserted into the 1815 collected works, indicates a continued, albeit vexed, engagement with publicity.

With the "Essay Supplemental" Wordsworth used the public sphere to decry past attacks upon him (and other poets) in the public sphere.<sup>27</sup> He railed against the "senseless outcry" raised against his poetry: "I am not wholly unacquainted with the spirit in which my most active and persevering Adversaries have maintained their hostility; nor with the impudent falsehoods and base artifices to which they had recourse" (62). Wordsworth then offers a catalogue of other writers in the British literary canon who, Wordsworth claims, suffered similar treatment during their life-times. The solution to such neglect, according to Wordsworth, was for the poet to create his own idealized public: "Every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed; so has it been, so will it continue to be" (80).

For Wordsworth, this idealized public is based on posterity—a visitation of the

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Magnuson notes that paratexts—such as Wordsworth's "Essay Supplemental"—are inherently public. He writes: "Paratext as used in the Romantic period is much more than an entrance. It is also an exit, the road of allusion to other works; it points to and responds to a public discourse that indicates subjects of social and political concern" (5). Wordsworth was just one of many writers who used paratext during the Romantic period to initiate or engage controversy in the public sphere.

present by the past. Wordsworth writes:

lamentable is his error who can believe that there is any thing of divine infallibility in the clamour of that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence, which, under the name of the PUBLIC, passes itself, upon the unthinking, for the PEOPLE. Towards the Public, the Writer hopes that he feels as much deference as it is entitled to: but to the People, philosophically characterised, and to the embodied spirit of their knowledge, so far as it exists and moves, at the present, faithfully supported by its two wings, the past and the future, his devout respect, his reverence, is due. (82).

The Public is spectral and factitious; by contrast the People, though representing “embodied spirit,” are real and will live on forever. The People are more or less a church with Wordsworth as the high priest; the Public is the contentious and carnal world doomed to destruction. But there are many indications in the essay that Wordsworth was not as Manichean as his words above suggest. He strove to be in the world but not of it. Or rather, as this chapter suggests, he strove to be in the public sphere but not of it.

Jon Klancher remarks that in the 1815 “Essay Supplemental” “Wordsworth imagined a readership that may arise only by renouncing its place among the Public that never ceases to crave” (148). Andrew Franta argues that Wordsworth’s “rejection of ‘the Public’ in favor of an image of ‘the People’ strives to preserve the poet’s authority in the face of the emergence of a public world which makes it increasingly difficult to imagine the face-to-face encounter between poet and reader as anything more than an impossible ideal” (75). Both of these comments shed light on Wordsworth’s alienation from the reading nation of his time. However I would assert, in answer to Klancher, that

Wordsworth was certainly not renouncing his place among the Public when he chose to publish his essay. And I would contend, in answer to Franta, that the People, “philosophically characterised,” are no more accessible to the poet than the no-longer-knowable-community of readers.

Andrew Bennett argues that Wordsworth replaces publicity with posterity, or what he calls “the Romantic culture of posterity.” Bennett cites the “Essay Supplemental” as a key text in this culture.<sup>28</sup> I do not contest that Wordsworth was a central figure in this culture of posterity,” or that this culture was Romantic. But what made it Romantic for Wordsworth was not a complete break with publicity, or a final retreat into privacy, with the understanding that the readers of the future would vindicate the poet. That is, Wordsworth’s ambivalent reclusion must be taken into account.

This ambivalent reclusion was one of Wordsworth’s unique contributions to Romanticism, and the ambivalence more than the reclusion made it significant. By 1815 Wordsworth was clearly a political apostate, but—as my reading of *The Excursion* should have made clear—he was not an un-conflicted, un-reconstructed recluse: he continued to engage publicity, albeit in spectral form. Simpson claims that in his poetry and prose Wordsworth addressed “some conscious and urgent questions to his contemporaries about the critical issues of his times. The private resolutions that so many of his poems seem to propose had a recognizable public import, against which privacy became variously a triumph and a defeat, at times something of both” (*Historical Imagination* 2). The same might be said about the *public* intentions of much of Wordsworth’s poetry: its

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<sup>28</sup> Bennett’s assessment of Shelley’s position on posterity also applies to Wordsworth. Bennett says of Shelley: “The poet’s engagement with a future life, with life after death, is bound up with his convulsive and hysterical reaction to or vision of ghosts. . . . Shelley’s cult of posterity . . . is also a ghost: his faith in the efficacy of a poetic afterlife cannot be disengaged from a belief in and fear of the spectral” (7).]

publicity also “became variously a triumph and a defeat, at times something of both.”

Wordsworth was an exemplar of a Romanticism that is both triumph and defeat because it is both public and private.

By 1815 Wordsworth had seemingly retired from the public sphere—but not completely; he had ensconced himself in the private sphere, as prophet and patriarch of Rydal Mount—but not completely. He hovered—physically, mentally, existentially—between public and private spheres. Wordsworth’s triumph (and defeat) was to make this inchoate, in-between discursive space not the habitation of the ghosts of past or future, but rather the home of flesh-and-blood denizens of a perpetual present. His Romantic contribution to literature (as well as his literary contribution to Romanticism) was to show that it is an engagement with this amorphous “both-and” slippage between public and private, rather than making an “either-or” choice between them, that fosters the most vibrant society.



### Chapter 3: Embattled Publicity in the Gothic Novels of William Godwin

In *The Spirit of the Age*, William Hazlitt writes of the still-living William Godwin as if he were a ghost. Hazlitt declares that Godwin had achieved posthumous fame in his life-time, and that “he is to all ordinary intents and purposes dead and buried” (180). Hazlitt uses language and imagery reminiscent of the Gothic to describe how the reputation of Godwin, the prominent philosopher and epitome of reason, had deteriorated since the zenith of his fame in the early 1790s. Hazlitt writes: “Is the vaunted edifice of Reason . . . gorgeous in front, and dazzling to approach, while ‘its hinder parts are ruinous, decayed, and old’? . . . Now scarce a shadow of it remains, it is crumbled to dust, nor is it even talked of” (182). Godwin’s brain had become a haunted castle. But then Hazlitt suggests that perhaps the British public sphere had become a haunted castle, not Godwin: “Is this sun of intellect blotted from the sky? Or has it suffered total eclipse? Or is it we who make the fancied gloom, by looking at it through the paltry, broken, stained fragments of our own interests and prejudices?” (184). How then does the ghostly Godwin represent the spirit of the age? As a symbol of the decline of reason and the withering of publicity, expressed in Gothic terms.

It might seem strange that Hazlitt would associate Godwin the Enlightenment philosopher with the Gothic mode, which typically deals with the overthrow of rationality and the malevolent play of supernatural forces. But then Hazlitt was an admirer of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) and *St. Leon* (1799), both considered Gothic novels. Godwin engaged the Gothic in other works as well, using the tropes and images of this mode for political purpose and ideological effect. In this chapter, I focus on Godwin’s

relationship to the Gothic in the British public sphere in the 1790s and early nineteenth century, looking at the ways in which the Gothic was both a subject and a vehicle of public debate, and Godwin's participation in that debate.

In my reading of *Caleb Williams*, I explicate Godwin's understanding of Enlightenment publicity, and how it was threatened in the 1790s by patrician reactionaries and plebeian radicals. Despite their different political orientations, Godwin saw the furtive activities of these groups in the public sphere as signs of the customary patrician-plebeian dynamic in eighteenth-century Britain, by which the British aristocracy maintained its hegemony. This publicity Godwin regarded anxiously as a spectral force, a Gothicized haunting of the public sphere. Godwin suggests that the powerful and their proxies—by co-opting popular media—were able to influence and inhibit rational public debate from the shadowy margins in the 1790s.

*St. Leon* (1799), considered by critics as Godwin's most conventional Gothic novel, reflects his exacerbated fears about patrician-plebeian publicity at the end of the 1790s, when loyalist reactionaries had routed reformers from the public sphere. *St. Leon* was written in reply to the attacks of these reactionary critics following the publication of his *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1798. *St. Leon* also exhibits Godwin's interest in Enlightenment historiography, which at the end of the 1790s was problematized by its unstable relationship to the Gothic, the political attacks upon it following the French Revolution, and dysfunctional publicity. More importantly, in *St. Leon* Godwin reconsidered some of the most important components of his version of Enlightenment publicity, including his belief in the progressive power of disinterested benevolence in the public sphere.

Next I look at *Mandeville* (1817), a historical novel that gestures towards the Gothic. I make the case that, with this conflicted novel, Godwin queried and contested many of his previous Enlightenment principles, including his conception of publicity. While I argue that in the end he did not abandon his principles, I contend that Godwin did use his novel to call into question the whole idea of political apostasy, which had become controversial the year Godwin published *Mandeville*. More importantly, *Mandeville* evinces a Godwin who is willing to cede space to the irrational in his fictions. *Mandeville* is an example of Godwin's version of a new kind of "romantic" Gothic mode, by means of which he responded to the cultural conflicts of the early nineteenth century, and attempted to engage Walter Scott and Lord Byron, who also experimented with the Gothic. In this chapter, then, I show how in the early 1790s Godwin utilized the Gothic mode to intervene in debates in the public sphere between reformers and reactionaries, then later in the decade used it to reconsider some of his Enlightenment principles, and eventually publicly re-cast them in the nineteenth century, affiliating himself with what we now call Romanticism.

### **Publicity, Enlightenment, and the Gothic, as they relate to Godwin**

Godwin's political treatise of 1793, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, argued for the replacement of the old feudal order in Britain by a society of free individuals that used reason to discuss and settle shared concerns and disputes. In other words, he advocated that government be replaced by a public sphere based on Enlightenment principles. Godwin's understanding of the public sphere is close to what

Jürgen Habermas describes, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, as the “classical” bourgeois public sphere. This public sphere challenges, and eventually replaces, the patrician “publicity of representation,” characterized by the rituals and *divertissements* of the nobility and the royal court (5-15). Habermas cites the eighteenth-century British public sphere as the best example of his model of an enlightened public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

Though his version of the public sphere closely resembles that of Habermas, Godwin’s version of enlightened publicity is based on three central Enlightenment concepts that Habermas does not discuss: benevolence, sincerity, and necessity. Benevolence, or acting on behalf of the greater good, was central to Godwin’s philosophy and was derived primarily from writers of the British Enlightenment such as Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, and Francis Hutcheson. In *Political Justice*, Godwin also calls it “disinterestedness,” “virtue,” or “justice.” He writes: “If justice is to have any meaning, it is just that I should contribute every thing in my power to the benefit of the whole” (I:81). Sincerity and necessity are related to Godwin’s cardinal principle of benevolence. Sincerity is scrupulous truth-telling, and in *Political Justice* Godwin posits the usual objections to this standard, and refutes them all. He shows how the principle of sincerity would encourage benevolent dealings in society, and discourage malevolent interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> In the first chapter of this study I listed some of the critical objections to Habermas’s model. I will not repeat them here, but I will assert that Godwin had many of the same blind-spots in regards to publicity. For Godwin, as it is for Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere *was* the public sphere, rather than just one public amongst others. And for Godwin, as it is for Habermas, it is Enlightenment rationality that guides the quest for truth in the public sphere. What this means is that, for both Godwin and Habermas, those who were not bourgeois and not informed by Enlightenment ideals were generally excluded from the public sphere.

Necessity is the idea, taken from John Locke and David Hartley, that the individual is determined by his or her sensations, experiences, and opinions. Godwin put it thus in *Political Justice*: “He who affirms that all actions are necessary, means that if we form a just and complete view of all the circumstances in which a living or intelligent being is placed, we shall find that he could not in any moment of his existence have acted otherwise than he has acted” (I:285). This means that people raised in squalor, if they are without instruction or hope of improvement, are much more likely to be thieves than philosophers. But, according to necessity, if people learn to identify their mistakes and change their habits—and if they are taught to read the right things—they can become perfect. Such perfectibility is “part of the natural and regular progress of mind,” and will lead to general enlightenment and social progress (I:50).

These three interconnected principles form the basis of Godwin’s conception of enlightened publicity. Without benevolence, enlightened discourse in the public sphere is not possible; mean-spirited attacks make a mockery of disinterested exchange. Similarly, public discourse that is not candid is counter-productive, and destructive of social comity. And, according to the doctrine of necessity, opinion is an integral building-block of the individual, and public opinion or publicity is an essential aspect of an enlightened society.

In his writings of the 1790s, Godwin suggests that this enlightened publicity was under attack. Following the lead of Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, loyalists assailed French republicans and British fellow-travelers, associating them with the French Enlightenment. At the other end of the political spectrum, plebeian radicals such as Thomas Paine distributed incendiary writings amongst the lower classes,

suggested the rise of indigenous *sans culottes* in Britain. This clearly disturbed Godwin as he wrote *Political Justice*; he especially feared the co-optation of the “mob” by patricians, who on more than one occasion in the eighteenth century were able to redirect the rage of the masses towards the bourgeois intelligentsia. For instance, there were the Gordon riots in London in 1780, which targeted Catholics and dissenters; and there were the Birmingham riots in 1791, in which the home and laboratory of Joseph Priestley—a dissenter who acclaimed the French Revolution—was destroyed. In both these cases, members of the patrician establishment were implicated in either spurring a plebeian mob to action, or turning a blind eye on the rampant destruction of property and person.

For Godwin, because of their potential for “rough justice” and rioting, even plebeian reformers were suspect. Referring to such activists in *Political Justice*, Godwin expresses the fear that “the conviviality of a feast may lead to the depredations of a riot” (I:208). The rapidity with which many plebeians went from pro-Paine activists in 1792 to anti-Paine loyalists in 1793 was proof, to bourgeois writers such as Godwin, that plebeian activists could become patrician proxies. That is, Godwin thought that because of their penchant for violence, plebeian activists impeded reform and thus, wittingly or not, did the work of patricians threatened by reform. In short, Godwin considered patricians and plebeians—both loyalist and radical—as potential enemies of free, informed, and rational publicity.

His attacks on plebeian activists made Godwin a divisive figure in the British public sphere at the end of the eighteenth century. As Ian Haywood notes, during the 1790s “anti-populism began to split the radical movement just as it began to acquire a

mass identity” (38). Haywood continues: “As a political philosopher and Dissenting intellectual, Godwin is prepared to risk prosecution for the radicalism of his ideas, but he distances himself from practical politics by invoking the stereotypical image of the mob. . . [His] attack on the ‘multitude’ is as vicious as any loyalist smear: it presents plebeian politics in purely negative terms, as a politics of the baser sensations” (41). Similarly, Andrew McCann asserts that according to Godwin, the public sphere had become “pathological,” largely because of the increasing control of the press by reactionary state agents, and the rallies and writings of radical plebeian activists.

What McCann refers to as pathological publicity I call “spectral publicity.” Spectral publicity is the anxious representation, in writing, of certain kinds of “illegitimate” public discourse that proceed under the cloak of secrecy. For Godwin, in *Political Justice*, it is the furtive infiltration of the public sphere, leading to the subversion of rational discourse. This socially destructive pseudo-publicity took various forms. There was John Reeves’s Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, a patrician front that harassed radical and liberal booksellers and the establishments that allowed reformist groups to meet. There were also periodicals in the pay of the state treasury that regularly attacked liberal publications. Godwin implies there are plebeian sources of spectral publicity. In an open letter to John Reeves, published in the *Morning Chronicle* in February 1793, Godwin (using the pseudonym “Mucius”) mentions some of these plebeian sources: “Pamphlets, tending to produce rancour and dissension, have been both sold at a trivial price, and distributed *gratis*. Hand-bills have been pasted upon the walls and dispersed in the streets. Absurd and barbarous inscriptions have been scribbled on the outside of churches and other

buildings” (*Uncollected Writings* 115). He condemns Reeves for making use of “sneaky” plebeian media in his reactionary crusade. Godwin also suggests in his Mucius letters and other publications that both patricians and plebeians made use of rumor and innuendo to anonymously attack their enemies in the public sphere. This aspect of illegitimate publicity is described by Jon Klancher, in a reading of Arthur Young’s *Travels in France*, as dissemination. It is “a kind of negative circulation” in which words and ideas “flood through the interstices of the social network” (*Making* 34). Klancher adds: “What is disseminated ‘propagates’ or reproduces itself without the orderly expansion of circulation,” which makes it propaganda (*Making* 34). Circulation was legitimate publicity, dissemination was illegitimate.

Informing Klancher’s conception of uncontrollable dissemination, and my own idea of spectral publicity as it relates to Godwin, is the Gothic. The Gothic informed the reactionary attacks upon reformers in the 1790s, many of whom were demonized, made monstrous, in loyalist tracts and reviews. It was also used to assail political reactionaries, standard-bearers of the old order. That opposing parties in public debates would use the Gothic to attack each other was not strange or anomalous in eighteenth-century Britain. Carole Margaret Davison notes that “‘Gothic’ was a much contested term that was undergoing a significant shift in meaning and value in eighteenth-century Britain” (25). Fred Botting elaborates that “the continuing ambivalence and polarisation of the word Gothic at the end of the eighteenth century was significant not only in the changes of meaning that it underwent but in its function in a network of associations whose positive or negative value depended on the political positions and representations with which



Gothic figures were associated” (89). The Gothic could be popular or polite, conservative or liberal, reactionary or liberal.

The uneasy nexus of Enlightenment and Gothic made the use of the Gothic problematic in the 1790s. Reactionaries and reformers alike used the slippery conceptions of the Gothic and the Enlightenment, and the slippage between them, for propaganda purposes. In terms of the reactionary uses of the Gothic, Edmund Burke was an exemplary figure. He was the leading promulgator of what Orrin Wang calls a “spectral poetics of revolution” or a “hauntology of revolution” (144, 147). According to Wang, in works such as *Reflections on the Revolution in France* Burke “both articulated and expelled, simultaneously” the Gothic ghost of revolution (144). That is, “Burke’s spectral descriptions of revolutionary reason are juxtaposed with his expression of the phantasmic logic of prejudices’s supplementary relation to the feudal era” (146). This “phantasmic logic” was as much satire as jeremiad, with Burke using the sensational plots and violent imagery of popular Gothic novels to mock and malign reformers. This is how many critics explain Burke’s famous account, in *Reflections*, of the *journee* to Versailles in 1789, when a mob invaded the bed-chamber of Queen Marie Antoinette. In Burke’s account, the queen was the helpless victim assailed by monstrous, unsexed poissardes. This double-edged use of the Gothic to defend the feudal order and to smear reformers as violent interlopers I call “feudal Gothic.”<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Botting notes that British reformers who “responded to Burke’s revolutionary polemics with accusations directed at his Gothic ideas” used the

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<sup>2</sup> Because they tend to feature aristocratic protagonists and generally support aristocratic hegemony, I also classify more popular Gothic fictions (such as those of Anne Radcliffe) as iterations of feudal Gothic. Marilyn Butler, in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, would agree with my characterization of Anne Radcliffe as conservative, but other critics, such as E.J. Clery and Robert Miles, would not. They regard her, particularly in her later novels, as a critic of the status quo and an incipient radical.

Gothic to signify “everything that was old-fashioned, barbaric, feudal and irrationally ungrounded” (88). Gothic, for reformers in the early 1790s, meant the mystification of feudal power arrangements in *ancien régime* Britain. Godwin uses the Gothic in this way in *Political Justice*. In his novels, however, he suggests that the Gothic can be a vehicle of progressive reform, and welcomes the challenges offered to rationality by irrationality, acknowledging that only by such “collisions” in the public sphere is society reformed. This I refer to as “enlightened Gothic.”<sup>3</sup>

### ***Caleb Williams***

When it was published in 1794, *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* was widely regarded as an example of the Gothic mode, which made it all the more intriguing because the previous work issued by the author was a philosophical treatise. Frederick Frank claims that in *Caleb Williams* Godwin “contemporized the devices of Gothic fiction, horror, terror, incarceration, pursuit, harassment, nightmares, and intellectual villainy to expose a decadent society’s victimization of the individual” (116). Kenneth W. Graham elaborates on this: “In *Caleb Williams*, Godwin’s fearful Gothic reality is almost entirely generated internally. He demonstrates his creative grasp of the psychological Gothic by founding a series of Gothic motifs and images on the swarming thought and impressions of his characters. We find the hauntings, the demonic villains, the fearful threatenings, the passion and the violence that we expect in a Gothic

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<sup>3</sup> Godwin’s distinction between “feudal” and “enlightened” Gothic is similar to Mary Wollstonecraft’s distinction between “feudal” and “civic” sensibility, which I discuss in my chapter on Wollstonecraft. Given that the Gothic is often considered an outgrowth of the literature of sensibility, and that both Godwin and Wollstonecraft engaged both sensibility and the Gothic, this affinity between the two writers should not be surprising.

novel, but all are psychologically generated” (132). Ann Maria Jones adds that “one of the cornerstones of Godwin’s political theory is the idea that political systems are inextricably linked to and formative of individual psychology—a main difficulty he seeks to address is how individuals, who are produced by their current flawed sociopolitical systems, might learn to move beyond the prejudices and misconceptions they have internalized” (139).

My reading is similar to the critics mentioned above, though I would put it another way: in *Caleb Williams* Godwin uses the psychological preoccupations of the Gothic to examine, and expose, false consciousness. That is, Godwin uses the Gothic to dramatize how individuals—and, by extension, society—are prey to the “darker forces” of government and aristocracy, including the surveillance and harassment of the populace. Godwin intended to expose false consciousness, not mystify it the way many popular Gothic fictions did. In order to do this, he sets his story in the precarious present rather than the much safer past, and uses the conventions of the Gothic to parody the pretensions of the British *ancien regime*; Godwin also uses the Gothic to show the extent to which the corrupt values of the aristocracy had been internalized by the British populace. The former concern is represented by Count Ferdinand Falkland, and the latter by the plebeian Caleb Williams.

In the novel Falkland is depicted, in his young adulthood, as the paragon of knightly virtue and honor. Speaking of him in the novel, Mr. Collins remarks that “there is a mysterious sort of divinity annexed to the person of a true knight” (166). Falkland exhibits what Habermas calls “representative publicity.” He is a god-like being that exudes an “aura” of aristocratic rectitude and honesty. In the first volume of the novel we

hear Falkland's story, in which he shows gallantry in defending the honor of a young woman. He comes to the aid of another damsel in distress after he returns to Britain, but is humiliated by the ungallant, dishonorable squire Barnabas Tyrrel. Eventually Falkland's nemesis, Tyrrel, is found murdered. Godwin writes of Falkland: "From this moment, his pride, and the lofty adventurousness of his spirit, were effectually subdued. From an object of envy he was changed into an object of compassion" (166). Referring particularly to Tyrrel's physical attack upon Falkland (which preceded Tyrrel's murder), Mr. Collins says that Falkland "was too deeply pervaded with the idle and groundless romances of chivalry, even to forget the situation, humiliating and dishonourable according to his ideas in which he had been placed" (166). That Falkland suffers from a grievous and secret wound is obvious to all, and just about everyone in the novel sympathizes with him. All of this makes Falkland a feudal Gothic hero.

Then we discover, as the result of Williams's detective work, that Falkland not only killed Tyrrel by stabbing him in the back, but also framed two innocent people for the murder, leading to their execution. This was done to preserve the honor of his noble name, which was apparently far more valuable than the lives of two peasants (and one squire). Then after Williams finds out that Falkland is an ignominious murderer, Falkland frames Williams for a robbery he did not commit, as a way to dispose of this inconvenient snoop. The feudal hero of volume one becomes the reactionary villain of volume two and three. But for most of the characters in the novel, Falkland is only a hero. When Williams attempts to expose Falkland's crimes, no one will believe him, not even plebeian rustics or thieves. The integrity of the lord is sacrosanct and any that question the honor of aristocrats are ushered off to jail or to the scaffold.

Falkland is an instance of a type which concerned Godwin in his Gothic fictions: the misanthrope. This makes him the antithesis of Godwin's conception of enlightened publicity. Having been frustrated in his benevolent actions, he becomes malevolent, particularly towards plebeians who resist his hegemonic power. In order to protect himself from scandal, Falkland abandons any pretense of sincerity and lies repeatedly, then commands others to lie to cover his own dishonesty. Falkland's mission in life is to preserve "things as they are"; that is, he will do anything within his considerable power to protect feudal privilege. Thus he represents necessity in its darker aspect, as the process by which the old order is eternally preserved, and reform suppressed. And as an extension of his aggrandizing, aristocratic power, Falkland secretly co-opts plebeian publicity in order to control others and to inhibit enlightened publicity. This, for Godwin, is a pernicious form of spectral publicity.

Falkland's use of spectral publicity is depicted by Godwin as panoptical, suggesting that he is all-knowing and all-powerful.<sup>4</sup> Falkland's panopticon is built not with bricks but with texts; and many of these texts can be found in Falkland's library. In the novel, the recently orphaned Williams, a plebeian autodidact, is employed by Falkland to act as amanuensis and librarian. This brings him into contact with books of romance that celebrated aristocrats and their values. McCann notes that Williams "is ironically unaware of his proximity to the banal, innocuous and decentralized mechanisms of disciplinary power"—that is, the books in Falkland's library (74).

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<sup>4</sup> More than one critic has analyzed *Caleb Williams* by making use of Michel Foucault's evocation of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. While Bentham's concept may be useful in this regard, Foucault's use of it in *Discipline and Punish* is not. For Foucault the panopticon epitomized over-reaching, intrusive, hubristic Enlightenment instrumentality. For Godwin it represented the repressive power of the old feudal order that would be replaced by an egalitarian society based on Enlightenment principles. For instructive discussions of Foucault and the Gothic, see James P. Carson and Stuart Townshend. For a Foucauldian reading of *Caleb Williams*, see McCann (chapter 2).

McCann's adds that "these texts are instruments of . . . the state policing apparatus and of the public opinion that it co-opts as its greatest resource" (73). For this reason, Tilottama Rajan declares the novel "a work of political metafiction. Of all his novels it is the one that most clearly raises the question of the relationship between writing, reading, and political action" ("Secrets" 239). Williams is not only an unreliable reader, but an unreliable narrator. According to Rajan, the novel presents "the story of how Caleb becomes a spy in order to 'divine' the truth, and it thus creates an infinite regress in which his 'truth' is necessarily suspect" ("Secrets" 223).

What makes Williams susceptible to patrician indoctrination is his curiosity, which draws him to sentimental and sensational reading material. We learn of this when he introduces himself on the first page of the novel: "The spring of action which, perhaps more than any other, characterized the whole train of my life, was curiosity. It was this that gave me my mechanical turn. . . . It was this that made me a sort of natural philosopher" (4). So far, he sounds like a Godwin acolyte, devoted to reason and sincerity. But then Williams immediately follows this by relating: "In fine, this produced in me an invincible attachment to books of narrative and romance. I panted for the unravelling of an adventure, with an anxiety, perhaps almost equal to that of the man whose future happiness or misery depended on its issue. I read, I devoured compositions of this sort" (4). The budding philosopher had become the romance addict, showing that, in *Caleb Williams*, rationality and curiosity are counter-intuitively opposed.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thus I disagree with Stuart Sim, who in his reading of *Caleb Williams* argues that "it will prove to be this trait of curiosity that the old order feels compelled to suppress at all costs: public inspection of its operations is the thing it wishes to happen" (125). The old order, as the novel makes clear, controls disgruntled plebeians by capitalizing on their penchant for sensationalist curiosity.

Later in the novel, Williams writes: “By a fatality for which I did not exactly know how to account, my thoughts frequently led me to the histories of celebrated robbers” (259). Such accounts are representative of a genre popular amongst plebeians, and were usually issued in chapbooks and handbills, which were the only media the poorer sort could afford. As Godwin depicts them, these works are as degraded and deceitful as those that celebrate chivalry and aristocracy. Kristen Leaver notes that Godwin shows his discomfort with romances and “penny-dreadfuls” (such as Williams’s robber narratives) by denigrating them in his novel. He offers as an alternative a “conversational” narrative which privileged Godwin’s ideal form of communication—the dyad (591). What made these works particularly dangerous was that they could be expropriated by the powers-that-be and used to contain dissent and impel compliance with the hegemonic order.

This becomes an important theme in the novel. While he is on the run from Falkland, Williams encounters hawkers selling handbills and chapbooks that depict him as “the notorious house-breaker, Kit Williams” (330). We eventually learn that the plebeian turncoat Gines, after being hired by Falkland, published the chapbook in order to help flush Williams from hiding (which it eventually did). In this manner, Leaver argues, Falkland “effectively puts [Williams] in his social place, countering what he feels to be Caleb’s outrages against class” (595). Similarly, McCann claims that the distribution of such “halfpenny legends” was part of the policing apparatus used by Falkland. They become “an extension of Falkland’s authority and panoptic omniscience,” and enlist “public outrage and invigilation as a crucial component of this apparatus” (73). In addition to the authorities monitoring potentially subversive plebeian literature, they

use street literature to monitor and harass plebeian dissidents like Williams. Garrett Sullivan makes a similar claim, arguing that *Caleb Williams* depicts popular print culture as a tool of aristocratic indoctrination: “Godwin sees post-Revolutionary print culture not as an expanding set of practices to which writers of all classes have equal or near-equal access, but as another vehicle for upper-class power” (336). For this reason Godwin indicates that plebeians, because of their customary association with the aristocracy, could not be trusted, and should not be allowed to use the public sphere as a forum: one never knew to what extent they were motivated by reason, or by false consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Things, in other words, remain as they are—particularly if we consider *Caleb Williams* in terms of publicity that had been corrupted by incursions from above (patricians) and below (plebs), as part of a reactionary loyalist program devoted to preserving aristocratic hegemony. Godwin’s novel was an attempt to expose this co-opted publicity at a time when this was still possible, to spur his audience to think about how things could be. What he did not consider was that, for some, things as they are might be preferable to things that could be. At the end of the 1790s, what could be was an even more repressive and reactionary Britain.

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<sup>6</sup> My position slightly differs from Sullivan’s in that I argue that Godwin does not condemn print culture *en toto*, but rather condemns only aristocratic and plebeian infiltration of print culture. Scarlet Bowen has a reading that is almost diametrically opposed to Sullivan’s reading, and mine. She claims that the Kit Williams chapbook is an empowering text, and evidence that Godwin was favorably inclined towards plebeian publicity. She writes: “Scholars who have considered *Caleb Williams* in the context of radical debates about whether to include plebeians in the political public sphere have ironically painted a picture of Godwin’s views that is remarkably similar to that of anti-Jacobin satire” (136). However, to claim that because Godwin condemns plebeian literature he is necessarily anti-Jacobin is fallacious. It is even more fallacious to say Godwin is pro-plebeian because popular publications such as the Kit Williams chapbook potentially “lend themselves both to hegemonic and subversive readings” (149). Perhaps, but in the novel they have a greater potential for use by patricians as loyalist propaganda, a reading that is consistent with Godwin’s discussion of the negative effects of plebeian publications and publicity in *Political Justice*, his Mucius letters, and his 1795 pamphlet on the “Gagging Acts.”



## Publicity, History, and the Gothic, as they relate to Godwin

Godwin's next novel after *Caleb Williams* was *St Leon*, published in 1799. This novel has many of the trappings of the Gothic, which I discuss in my reading below. But it is also a historical novel, set during the wars of religion in sixteenth-century Europe. This introduces a complication that is not a factor with *Caleb Williams*: history, particularly in relation to the Gothic and to Enlightenment philosophy. Enlightenment historiography is a hallmark of enlightened modernity, which, Stuart Townshend argues, "distinguishes itself through the dawning of a profound historical awareness" (1). In fact, he claims that "it is at the end of the eighteenth century that notions of history, historicity, and historiography, at least in their most recognizably modern forms, are invented" (2).

In many of his earlier works Godwin exhibited an enlightened historicism—that is, historical inquiry based on scientific or empirical principles—but in the late 1790s he began to see the benefits of using fiction to explore historical subjects. In fact, in his 1797 essay "Of History and Romance," Godwin transposes history and fiction, showing how the novelist was better at writing history than the historian:

The writer of romance then is to be considered as the writer of real history; while he who was formerly called the historian, must be contented to step down into the place of his rival, with this disadvantage, that he is a romance writer. . . . True history consists in a delineation of consistent human character, in a display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances. (Qtd. in Clemit, "Godwinian Novel," 81)

Rajan shows that in the eighteenth-century, the novel defined itself in opposition to “romance,” which was considered an antiquated, patrician mode at the end of the century (*Romantic Narrative* 166-67). In *Caleb Williams*, Godwin clearly deplored the romance for this reason, so here he would seem to be appealing to a retrograde understanding of literature, but I would argue instead that he is critiquing the highly ideological “realism” on display in the politically conservative novels of the early nineteenth century, as well as skewed conceptions of history.

Jon Klancher speaks to this in his reading of the essay. He writes: “Godwin forged a critique of Enlightenment universal history . . . and promoted in its place the reflexive historical romance as a superior mode of historiography capable of changing ideologies of modern history” (“Republican Romance” 147). This was part of Godwin’s struggle “to convert the conservative uses of romance against Enlightenment historicity into a new, reflexive, and progressive—if ultimately and paradoxically impossible—mode of historical knowledge” (“Republican Romance” 155). Godwin also proposed using the romance to “investigate, if ultimately to reinforce, the very distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ upon which the British public sphere was built” (“Republican Romance” 157).

In her discussion of the essay, Clemit relates something similar: “Godwin’s primary concern with the pressures of politics and society on individual lives is reflected in a blend of psychological observation and political analysis which blurs the distinction between public and private concerns. This move beyond the study of inner states to explore historical causes opens up the possibility of reform” (49). That is, by “rejecting factual accounts of dates, places, and events in modern works of history [in his essay],

Godwin emphasizes the different kind of truth offered by an imaginative rendering of the past” (“Godwinian” 80). The fact that Godwin conducted a historical inquiry according to these principles in Gothic novels like *St Leon* should not be considered anomalous because, as most historians of the British Gothic point out, the mode evolved from the romance and the two terms (“romance” and “Gothic”) were used interchangeably in the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

For both Clément and Klancher, Godwin’s intermixture of romance and history, privacy and publicity, along with his historical and textual reflexivity, makes him Romantic. I will elaborate on this below. But here suffice it to say that *St Leon* evinces a very different agenda than *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, and a very different attitude towards Enlightenment vis-à-vis history. Post-1798, in his Gothic fictions, Godwin called into question many of his bedrock, “enlightened” philosophical ideas. None of his contemporary critics went so far as to call him out as an apostate, but this was suggested by some reviewers. But for Godwin, changing one’s ideas—even (or especially?) ideas derived from the Enlightenment—is often a necessary step on the road to enlightenment.

### *St Leon*

In 1798, not long after the death of his wife Mary Wollstonecraft in childbirth, Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This incited a firestorm of controversy in the public sphere, due to Godwin’s supposed

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the close relationship between the romance and the Gothic, see Fred Botting’s *Gothic*, chapter 2.

“indiscretions” about his recently-deceased wife, which provided an opening for reactionaries to smear both Godwin and Wollstonecraft as writers with French morals and sympathies. William St. Clair remarks that, following the publication of the memoirs: “At the moment of his deepest grief Godwin found himself one of the most hated men in the country, deserted by friends, and spat at in the streets” (192). This was not Godwin’s fate alone: at the end of the 1790s, “Jacobin” reformers were regularly attacked by “Anti-Jacobin” activists, in person and on the page. St. Clair notes that “ever since Burke’s warnings the British conservatives had been gathering their strength. In 1798, with panic in the air, they were able to press their counterattack to a victory so complete and so decisive that it became dangerous to raise even the faintest protest” (192). Mark Philp adds that political reactionaries “had a near monopoly of propaganda, enforced by the sedition laws, and there was no need for other methods. But just as the French Jacobins had resorted to the guillotine when propaganda failed, everyone knew that the British Government had plentiful legal instruments for breaking necks if this should prove necessary” (196-7).

Godwin’s initial response to this—what St. Clair calls his “counterattack”—was the novel *St Leon*, published in 1799 (210). This four-volume work features the tale of a sixteenth-century French noble named Reginald de St Leon who acquires from a mysterious stranger the alchemist’s “philosopher’s stone” and *elixir vitae* which, respectively, gives him the ability to produce gold at will and grants him immortality. These boons have disastrous consequences for St Leon and his family. St Leon himself is reduced to wandering Europe under various guises and pseudonyms, trying to use his supernatural gifts for the good of humanity, but he is thwarted time and again by

ignorance, greed, and fear. In that Godwin makes use of the supernatural paraphernalia common to Gothic novels (philosopher's stone, *elixir vitae*, but also uncanny or monstrous strangers, haunted castles and prisons, conspiracies, and Catholic superstition), critics consider *St Leon* Godwin's most conventional exercise in the Gothic.<sup>8</sup>

In *St Leon*, Godwin interrogated—quite as fiercely as the title character's tormentors—the possibility of enlightened publicity. Since *St. Leon* is set during the sixteenth-century, there is nothing resembling the rational public sphere that Habermas (or Godwin) describes. There is, however, something that predates Enlightenment publicity: the representative publicity of the aristocrat, combined with the forms of dissemination used by plebeians. The novel begins with an account of a pseudo-medieval pageant featuring the young and resplendent Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France at the “Field of the Cloth of Gold” in 1520—“a scene of the most lavish splendor that the world perhaps ever contemplated” (5). The young Reginald de St Leon is a spectator, along with the flower of English and French aristocracy. St Leon remarks: “The splendor of the dress that was worn upon this occasion exceeds almost all credibility. Every person of distinction might be said in a manner to carry an estate upon his shoulders” (5).

Publicity here is nothing more or less than panoply and pomp, the aura of aristocracy, in which power was communicated and maintained by external indicators: by

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<sup>8</sup> Some critics, such as Gary Kelly and Pamela Clemit, argue that Godwin retreated from political engagement and was preoccupied instead with Romantic social alienation in *St Leon* (Kelly, “English Fiction,” 36-37; Clemit, introduction to *St Leon*, xx). However, critics such as James P. Carson argue to the contrary that Godwin's novel is quite political: “Godwin's *St Leon* . . . establishes a clear analogy between the Spanish Inquisition's suppression of heresy and the Pittite repression of political radicalism in the England of the 1790s” (262). The novel is also quite critical of riches and war, as well as European aristocracy and a fanatical Catholic Church; as in *Caleb Williams*, Godwin uses Gothic conventions to expose the corruption at the heart of the *ancien regime*. But as this section should make clear, Godwin's attitudes concerning the Enlightenment were quite changed, and his incipient Romanticism was part of this change.

dress, bearing, refined manners, and armorial insignia. All this St Leon loses to a gambling addiction and spends the rest of the novel trying to buy back for himself and his family. He is thwarted in this by those who believe he had besmirched his public persona as aristocrat, and the aristocracy itself. These antagonists use the communication channels available to them to keep St Leon permanently outside the golden circle of aristocratic command. Whenever St Leon believes himself free from such imputation, by way of indiscretion or rumor he is found out and is forced to flee. These rumors shadow St Leon in ways similar to the ways in which innuendo shadowed Caleb Williams, and Godwin himself at the end of the 1790s.

St Leon also has to contend with the indiscretion and rumors, the illegitimate pseudo-publicity, of the common folk. Wherever he goes, people of the lower orders are suspicious and think St Leon is in league with the devil. This is usually because they have been fed false information by powerful patricians. The most dramatic example of this in the novel occurs when St Leon moves with his family to Pisa. At the impetus of a local aristocrat named Agostino, a mob assails them. St Leon tries to reason with the mob but is pelted with mud and shouted down. St Leon recounts: “It was a critical moment, a last experiment upon the power of firmness and innocence to control the madness of infuriated superstition. It was in vain. I was deafened with the noise that assailed me. It was no longer shouts and clamours of disapprobation. It was the roaring of tigers, and the shriek of cannibals” (285). The plebeian mob burns down his house and then proceeds to torture and kill St Leon’s Negro servant, Hector. This Gothic scene evokes the memory of the Birmingham riots in 1791, but it is also reminiscent of some of the more outrageous atrocities of mobs in republican France. The *sans culottes* of *St Leon* are

(even more) demonized versions of the plebeians that Godwin describes in *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*. In this scene in *St Leon*, Godwin shows once again the dangers inherent in a customary plebeian-patrician alliance; however, he offers no enlightened publicity to counter it.

This may be Godwin's commentary on pre-Enlightenment publicity in Europe, but it could just as easily be a statement about post-Enlightenment publicity in Britain following the de facto shutdown of the reformist public sphere in the late 1790s. In any case, with representative and plebeian publicity running rampant without check from a bourgeois intelligentsia, *St Leon* can be read as a withdrawal from the kind of enlightened public sphere that Godwin championed in earlier works. Enlightenment publicity seems to be replaced in the novel with the domestic intimacy of the home, represented by the discussions between St Leon and his long-suffering wife, Marguerite de Damville.

Readers of *St Leon*, both sympathetic and unsympathetic, see in Marguerite a portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>9</sup> Compared to the version offered by Godwin in the *Memoirs*, the Wollstonecraftian Marguerite is a paragon of domesticity, which Godwin associates with apolitical privacy. St. Clair contends that "the portrait of Marguerite was intended to signal an important recantation. In the Preface to *St Leon*, Godwin publicly withdrew his previous view that personal considerations should carry no weight in the impartial calculation of justice" (211). That is, he distances himself from his own conception of political justice, by which the individual uses his or her reason to determine

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<sup>9</sup> St. Clair argues that Marguerite is an ideologically-inflected caricature of Wollstonecraft: "As if in expiation of the impiety of the *Memoirs*, *St Leon* is a celebration of the traditional feminine virtues. Marguerite is loyal, supportive, forgiving, long-suffering, domestic, motherly, religious, and lacking in any kind of overt sexuality. If she shares any authentic features of the real Mary Wollstonecraft they cannot now be detected. If Marguerite is the culmination of the perfecting policies recommended in *Political Justice*, few people of either sex would wish to accelerate the process" (211).

how to act in order to benefit the most people possible. This is also known as “universal benevolence,” something that was regularly attacked by those who saw the more intimate domestic affections as the basis of social good.<sup>10</sup> In the 1790s, these latter critics attributed the idea of universal benevolence to conspiratorial groups like the Illuminati, who were supposedly devoted to the destruction of family ties in the name of universal harmony.<sup>11</sup> This Gothic theme finds its way into quite a few feudal Gothic and Anti-Jacobin novels.

In the preface to *St Leon*, Godwin writes: “Some readers of my graver productions will perhaps, in perusing these little volumes, accuse me of inconsistency; the affections and charities of private life being every where in this publication a topic of the warmest eulogium, while in the Enquiry concerning Political Justice they seemed to be treated with no great degree or indulgence and favour” (xxxiii). Godwin claims his central premises in that work have not changed; however, he now apprehends that “domestic and private affections [are] inseparable from the nature of man . . . and [he is] fully persuaded that they are not incompatible with a profound and active sense of justice” (xxxiv). Though Godwin did not characterize this new position as a recantation, some of his contemporary reviewers did.<sup>12</sup>

This is not the only way that Godwin backs away from the principles of *Political Justice* in *St. Leon*. Godwin also reconsiders the core Enlightenment tenets of benevolence, sincerity, and necessity, which together comprise his version of enlightened

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<sup>10</sup> This is discussed by Chris Jones in *Radical Sensibility*, Chapter 1 (“Varieties of Sensibility”).

<sup>11</sup> The two works that initiate and attempt to document this claim are John Robison’s *Proof of a Conspiracy against all the Governments of Europe* (1797) and Abbé Barruel’s *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1797-98).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, in the Broadview edition of *St Leon* William Brewer notes that “in an 1800 review of *St Leon* [in *The Monthly Review*] Christopher Lake Moody argues that the novel recants ‘some of the leading principles of [Godwin’s] system’” (16).



publicity. One of the main themes of *St. Leon* is the futility of benevolence. I have already described above how Godwin, in emphasizing domestic affections, retreated from the ideal of universal benevolence. This is thematized in other ways in the novel. For instance, after using his alchemical gifts to save his family from starvation and poverty, St Leon devotes himself to works of benevolence. He goes to Hungary, devastated by wars between Christians and Muslim Turks, builds houses for peasants, and attempts to revive moribund industry. As a result of his pains, St Leon (using the name de Chatillon) is considered by the peasants an interloper with a hidden, selfish agenda; a subversive by the Turkish authorities; and a traitor by the Hungarian Christians—including his son Charles, a soldier of fortune on the side of the Christians. St Leon reflects: “I had looked for happiness as a result of the benevolence and philanthropy I was exerting; I found only anxiety and a well grounded fear even for my personal safety. Let no man build on the expected gratitude of those he spends his strength to serve!” (382).

St Leon’s benevolent efforts, once again, land him in jail. He is imprisoned in the labyrinthine dungeon underneath the castle of Turkish partisan Bethlem Gabor. Gabor, depicted as a tormented Gothic villain residing in the obligatory spooky castle, was once a good man but turned evil after his family was murdered and his previous castle destroyed. Gabor is at first the subject of St Leon’s philanthropy; this Gabor secretly resents. St Leon’s crime, in the eyes of Gabor, is precisely his benevolence. St Leon gives and gives even after he is insulted and scorned, which Gabor considers unmanly. Gabor tells St Leon “You took upon yourself to be the benefactor and parent of mankind. . . . I was compelled to witness or to hear of your senseless liberalities every day I lived. Could I submit to this torment and not endeavour to remove it? I hate the man in whom

kindness produces no responsive affection, and injustice no swell, no glow or resentment” (416). Gabor is, like Falkland in *Caleb Williams*, a misanthrope, the malevolent anti-type of enlightenment publicity, according to Godwin. Godwin also suggests that, as a result of his own misadventures, St Leon himself becomes a misanthrope. According to Rajan, St Leon “is very much a figure of the Enlightenment, both in its more benevolent aspects and in those critiqued by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*” (146).<sup>13</sup> Misanthropy is the dark side of the Enlightenment, its Gothicization. I will have more to say about the figure of the misanthrope when I discuss *Mandeville* below, but suffice it to say that in *St Leon* Godwin exhibits a very skeptical attitude towards the ideal of benevolence, and a public sphere activated by this ideal.

Godwin seems equally skeptical of the principle of sincerity, another core principle of his Enlightenment philosophy. As already mentioned, a condition of St Leon’s acquisition of the philosopher’s stone and *elixir vitae* was a vow of silence, which alienated him from his family and friends. This small seed of silence grows into a forest of lies. To do any good at all, St Leon has to continually change his name, his back-story, even his costume. St Leon will not even elaborate upon his experience in the jails of the Inquisition because he was forced to take a vow of silence, which he inexplicably honors long after he has escaped the horrors he encountered there. Clemit points out that “although at the start of the narrative St Leon protests his sincerity, he later dismisses the possibility of openness with his audience” (*St Leon* xxii). She goes on to note that “the

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<sup>13</sup> I refuted above the contention that in *Caleb Williams* Godwin offers a critique of Enlightenment instrumentality, the *bête noire* of the Frankfurt School. But here I admit that there is something of this critique in *St Leon*. I will also note that Godwin’s suspicion of popular media anticipates a similar suspicion in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

gaps and equivocations in St Leon's narrative undercut expectations of frankness and sincerity in human dealings," and in fact make him an unreliable narrator (xxii). Rajan adds: "*St Leon* crystallizes [the] problem of conveying private judgment into the public sphere, as the aporia produced when Godwin, who espouses Enlightenment values of frankness and public discussion, uses a character like St. Leon to convey his ideas" (163).<sup>14</sup>

Also key to Godwin's Enlightenment thought is the principle of necessity. In *St Leon*, Godwin does very little to expose how people are blighted by prejudice, and he holds out little hope for perfection. Basically, in the novel Godwin suggests that people are the way they are and will never change. This is expressed by Bethlem Gabor. Gabor hates mankind rather than just the murderers of his family, because, he suggests, people are the same everywhere: "All men, in the place of these murderers, would have done as they did. They are in league together. Human pity and forbearance never had a harbour but in my breast; and I have not abjured them. With something more of inwrought vigour and energy, I will become like to my brethren" (415). Earlier in the novel, following the destruction of St Leon's home in Pisa, the aristocratic marchese Filosanto expresses similar sentiments. He laments "that there was a principle in the human mind destined to be eternally at war with improvement and science. No sooner did a man devote himself to the pursuit of discoveries which, if ascertained, would prove the highest benefit to his

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<sup>14</sup> There is one character in *St Leon* that is scrupulously sincere in the ways Godwin advocates in *Political Justice*. This is Hector (mentioned above), who was one of St Leon's jailers in Constance. When St Leon attempts to bribe Hector, Hector is compelled to turn him in. For his honesty, Hector is imprisoned himself. When he is released he becomes St Leon's servant and later is responsible for an unwitting indiscretion that endangers St Leon's family. As a result, when they are beset by a mob in Pisa, Hector feels it is his duty to protect St Leon's property; he ends up being slaughtered by the mob. Sincerity, in the case of Hector, indirectly results in an unspeakably horrible death. *St Leon*, rather than an explication of sincerity, is a cautionary tale about the dangers of being honest.

species, than his whole species became armed against him” (290). This “dark” necessity leads ineluctably to the repression of revolutionary aspirations.

The idea that nothing really changes is always to the benefit of those in power, and is often based on a static view of history. As mentioned above, *St Leon* is not just a Gothic novel but a historical novel. But its historicism is not teleological or progressive, as it is in Enlightenment thought, but rather cyclical and unchanging, as it is in medieval or feudal thought. The individuals mentioned in the paragraph above (Bethlem Gabor and marchese Filosanto) express this feudal conception of history in their despairing assessments of humanity. In this novel set in the period of the Reformation, Godwin implies that true reformation is not possible because historical progress is not possible. History is cyclical, “a state of ebb and flow”; in the future, “men shall learn over again to persecute each other for conscience sake; other anabaptists or levelers shall furnish pretexts for new persecutions; other inquisitors shall arise in the most enlightened tracts of Europe” (338). This suggests that Godwin considered his experience of irrational persecution in the public sphere as something to be expected in the order of things, as a recurring pattern. Reaction leads to reaction leads to reaction, as the pendulum of public opinion precipitously swings back and forth forever. Thus, in *St Leon* Godwin uses the Gothic mode to recant some aspects of his conception of both Enlightenment publicity and Enlightenment historiography. However, this is not the same thing as political apostasy, as I explain below.

## Publicity, the Gothic, and Romanticism, as they relate to Godwin

Romanticism and the Gothic have been linked since the nineteenth century, when critics generally viewed them as two aspects of the same phenomenon. However, with the rise of interest in Romanticism in the twentieth century, critical appreciation of the Gothic declined. For those particularly indisposed to the Gothic, it was seen as a corruption of Romanticism: the Gothic went from legitimate to illegitimate relation of Romanticism. For others, the Gothic was a “juvenile” phase of Romanticism, but without value otherwise. Maggie Kilgour asserts that for these critics the Gothic was “a transitional and rather puerile form which is superseded by the more mature ‘high’ art of superior Romantics” such as Coleridge, Keats, and Byron (3). This was the attitude of Robert D. Hume in 1969 when he argued that Romanticism needed to be sealed off from the Gothic to protect it from contamination. More recently, Geoffrey Hartman has made a similar argument.<sup>15</sup> However, amongst Romanticists working on the Gothic this perspective has become anomalous. Michael Gamer, for one, has attempted to break down the strict separation between the Gothic and Romanticism; he sees the relationship between the Gothic and Romanticism as dialectical, in which Romantic aesthetics develop in reaction to the Gothic. Orrin Wang argues that “Romanticism and the gothic are intimately connected,” and maintains that the abraded border between Romanticism and the Gothic provides a good deal of the energy driving the British Romantic movement (219, 142). Coming from a feminist position, Anne Williams also links

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<sup>15</sup> See Geoffrey Hartman, “The Psycho-Aesthetics of Romantic Moonshine: Wordsworth’s Profane Illumination” (cited in Wang, *Romantic Sobriety*, 142).

Romanticism and the Gothic, while differentiating between male and female conceptions of the Gothic.

More politically engaged critics have come to see the Gothic, in Davison's words, as the "early or radical left-wing branch of Romanticism," otherwise known as "Dark Romanticism" (7-8). Beginning with David Punter in 1980, followed by critics such as Botting and Townshend, new historicist scholars have contributed to the consideration of the relationship between Gothic and Romanticism. However, in regards to Godwin, I object to some of the findings of new historicist scholarship. In general terms, Romantic new historicists tend to view a "turn to history" or to the past as an evasion of politics. They also tend to associate Romanticism with the same evasion. I have already responded above to the criticism that Godwin evaded politics in his historical/Gothic fictions. Here I make the same answer to those who claim Godwin's turn to Romanticism—in novels like *Mandeville*—indicates political evasion or retreat. Even though Godwin critiques the Enlightenment in *St Leon*, he does so in an attempt to find a discourse that would link or fuse private feeling and public engagement. I argue that this discourse is a politically progressive Romanticism that recuperates many Enlightenment principles, and that Godwin is one of the first to articulate it. His essay "Of History and Romance"—where he argues that fiction is better than facts in elucidating history because it reveals the individual, psychological development of historical actors—was one of his first attempts. *Mandeville*, as we will see, is a more mature and considered expression of Godwin's Gothic Romanticism.

## *Mandeville*

In 1817, Godwin published *Mandeville*, a historical novel set in seventeenth-century Britain, at the time of the English Civil War and the ensuing Commonwealth. The central figure, and narrator, is Charles Mandeville, the misanthropic heir to a large estate. In the novel Mandeville relates his personal development and eventual disintegration—due to horrific violence, vicious fanaticism, and political opportunism—from his early youth until the age of eighteen. For that reason, and for the reasons elucidated below, *Mandeville* is a novel that utilizes the Gothic in significant ways. What keeps other critics from labeling the novel as Gothic—besides the fact that the novel has attracted very little critical attention—is that Godwin once again enlists the Gothic in defense of the principles of enlightened publicity which he elucidated in *Political Justice*. Given that 23 years separate these two works, and that *Mandeville* is more properly a historical novel, we can expect this defense to be different, and it is. The main difference between the two works is that in *Mandeville* Godwin not only attacks the feudal order in Britain but also affirms a Romanticism that reforms and reconstitutes his Enlightenment philosophy for a new century.

As with *St. Leon*, *Mandeville* is set before there is a bourgeois or “classical” public sphere. There are, nonetheless, varieties of publicity on display: representative and plebeian, legitimate and illegitimate, concrete and spectral. We can read the novel as both a historicization of British publicity, and as commentary by analogy upon the embattled public sphere of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The character Mandeville epitomizes aristocratic representative publicity. Though still a juvenile, he looks forward

to a future in which he will take up his public role as patrician. He expects to be judged by his beautifully caparisoned person, by his illustrious name, and values his family honor above all things. Instead, he is brought low by innuendo and rumor, which are components of the shadow-side of representative publicity, and indicative of a fledgling, pre-enlightened public sphere in seventeenth-century Britain.

Mandeville comes to believe that all publicity is spectral, though it is he for the most part that Gothicizes publicity in his first-person account. Everything he hears and reads (he believes) is part of a vast conspiracy designed to drive him mad. In this he is not completely paranoid. Early on in the story Mandeville describes his perfervid perusal of *Fox's Acts and Monuments of the Church*, whose famously gory illustrations depict “all imaginable cruelties, racks, pincers and red-hot irons, cruel mockings and scourgings, flaying alive,” which are employed against Protestants by Catholics (I:136). Mandeville admits that the book “kept me awake whole nights, that drove the colour from my cheeks, and made me wander like a meagre, unladen ghost” (I:136). At the end of volume I (chapter 12) he has trouble with another book, a collection of satirical prints mocking King Charles I, then a prisoner awaiting execution. This book is planted in Mandeville's rooms in Winchester School by his only friend there, Waller. Waller knows that Winchester School is rabidly royalist, and not wanting to be discovered with the book, hides it in Mandeville's rooms, where it is found. It leads to a trial for Mandeville before a student jury. This is a turning point in the novel, as Mandeville is found guilty, his name blackened, his person forever suspect. His unearned infamy shadows him throughout the novel, blighting his every attempt at public engagement.



At the beginning of the third volume, Mandeville comes across a copy of an early newspaper, the *Mercurius Politicus*, which increases his mental darkness. He learns from this newspaper that his *bête-noire*, Clifford, has renounced Protestantism and become Catholic. At first this thrills Mandeville because Clifford's apostasy gives Mandeville justification for his hatred of Clifford; but later when Clifford's apostasy is discounted and more or less forgotten, it crucially exacerbates the madness of the fanatical Mandeville. Godwin suggests that this is illegitimate dissemination as opposed to legitimate circulation, and in so doing exposes the corruption at the heart of aristocratic representative publicity.

Unlike in *Caleb Williams* and *St Leon*, Godwin depicts this spectral publicity reflexively and critically: it represents Mandeville's anxiety concerning publicity, rather than Godwin's. *Mandeville* is also distinct from the two previous Gothic novels in that Godwin offers an alternative to spectral publicity. This enlightened publicity is represented by Mandeville's devoted sister, Henrietta. Like Marguerite in *St Leon*, Henrietta is arguably a portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft. But whereas the portrait in *St Leon* turns Wollstonecraft into a victim immured in the domestic, her portrait in *Mandeville* makes her out to be an Enlightenment philosopher urging public engagement from the redoubt of the domestic. In most of a long chapter in volume II, while visiting Charles in a madhouse, Henrietta revisits many of Godwin's burning concerns in the 1790s.

Before I tend to these concerns, however, I need to discuss the passage that provides the text for Henrietta's sermon: *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury. This classic of the British

Enlightenment, enormously popular in the eighteenth-century, examines the relations between virtue, sensibility, and political liberty. The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson built his philosophy of universal benevolence upon the ideas of Shaftesbury, and Godwin's system of political justice is based on the ideas of both men. Noting that it is one of the favorite passages of Henrietta and Charles, Godwin excerpts a segment in which two unnamed figures debate universal benevolence. The first figure declares his preference for friendship over citizenship, and makes clear his indifference to public opinion. The second figure argues that friendship is not enough and that true happiness is not possible without a benevolence that extends to as many people as possible. He says "consider then, what it was you said, when you objected against the love of mankind . . . and seemed to scorn the public, because of its misfortunes! For, where can generosity not exist, if not here?" (II:139).<sup>16</sup> As Chris Jones notes, Shaftesbury "stressed the necessity of keeping the partial affections like those to kindred under the direction of universal benevolence which sought the good of the widest system of which man was a part" (*Radical Sensibility* 61).

The dialogue taken from Shaftesbury could be read as a fanciful recreation of a debate between Shaftesbury and Thomas Hobbes, who disdained public benevolence, seeing it as delusional in the "war of all against all."<sup>17</sup> It could also be read as a late-eighteenth-century debate between those who championed domestic affections and attacked universal benevolence, and those like Godwin who saw universal benevolence—

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<sup>16</sup> In *Radical Sensibility*, chapter 2, Chris Jones describes the ideas of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson on universal benevolence, and the controversy these ideas engendered in the 1790s when sensibility came to be associated by loyalists with subversion.

<sup>17</sup> The shady lawyer Holloway, who does his utmost to deprive Mandeville of his inheritance, is arguably a personification of Hobbes. He gives a long speech in praise of greed in volume II, chapter 5, which begins: "The whole world . . . the civilised world, was a scene of warfare under the mask of civility" (II:75).

including domestic affections—as the praxis of perfectibility. Through Shaftesbury, Godwin re-engages the critics who attacked him in the 1790s; he had not given up this fight, and still declares for universal benevolence. But this time Godwin historicizes benevolence, showing how it derives from an indigenous, British Enlightenment represented by the well-respected figure of Shaftesbury.<sup>18</sup> And by putting these sentiments in the mouth of Henrietta, who argues (as did Mary Wollstonecraft) that there was no real separation between the public and the private spheres, Godwin romanticizes benevolence as well.

Henrietta decides that Charles’s disease is misanthropy and the cure is universal benevolence. Or as she puts it: “We are all exactly fitted to contribute to the good of all” (II:139). Henrietta, like Godwin, sees benevolence in relation to necessity. She exclaims: “Man is but a machine! He is just what his nature and his circumstances have made him; he obeys the necessities which he cannot resist. . . . Give him a different education, place him under other circumstances . . . and he would be altogether a different creature” (II:143). If we practice justice, we will become perfect, and when enough people do this, society will become perfect. But if we continue to believe the lies of the aristocracy, and submit to them, society will be but one large prison. That is, without enlightened discourse, without enlightened publicity, perfect people and a perfect society are impossible. And sincerity is a necessary ingredient in any scheme of perfectibility. Henrietta is scrupulously sincere, and tries in vain to get Charles to be more so. In her mind, open, enlightened discussion is based on the presupposition that “the words that

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<sup>18</sup> In a note at the end of volume II, Godwin admits that the passage from Shaftesbury comes from a work published after the events in the novel (in 1711). That Godwin would make use of such an anachronism, and admit to it, strongly suggests that he was addressing issues under debate in the public sphere, or attempting to initiate such a debate.

[someone] utters may be supplied by that reason, to which the high and the low, the rich and the poor, have equally access” (II:149).

In the dyad she forms with Charles, Henrietta performs the publicity that she extols. We see this when Charles makes an extended visit to his sister at Beaulieu, in the New Forest. Henrietta lives with Mrs. Willis, and her retired-sailor husband, and is friends with the Montagu family, who are local gentry. The discussion of this unassuming group—which includes reports of books read, and letters exchanged—is largely responsible for Henrietta’s enlightened views. Charles himself describes Beaulieu in these words: “Everything I saw was frank, and easy, and communicative, and sensitive, and sympathetic. It was like the society of ‘just men made perfect,’ where all sought the good of all, and no one lived for himself, or studied for himself” (I:210-211).

But in the end Charles the patrician cannot or will not exchange the splendid but corrupt representative publicity of the aristocrat—though he is victimized by it in terms of the rumor and innuendo that shadow him—for the more modest benefits of transparent, enlightened discourse. He becomes instead a misanthrope, the antipode of Enlightenment publicity. After his hatred of Clifford makes his life impossible, Mandeville embraces malevolence as his mission in life. He is unable to be sincere with any human being, though he comes closest with Henrietta. His adherence to necessity shows itself in his Presbyterian belief in pre-destination, which does not allow for perfection but rather election: only God is perfect, a small remnant will be saved but only due to God’s grace, and the mass of men are condemned to eternal hellfire. In his mind, the public sphere is as “fallen” as man, a site of corruption. Publicity is the realm of

delusion and damnation, rather than enlightenment or salvation. In short, *Mandeville* is a case study of the aristocrat who, by ignoring enlightened publicity, becomes a monster.

In *Mandeville* Godwin focuses on the religious roots of the Gothic. They are the same, in fact, as Godwin's religious roots in Presbyterianism, the sect in which he was raised and was a minister for some years, before abandoning his beliefs (after reading the French *philosophes*). Mandeville is clearly obsessed and deluded by his extremely morbid religion. He refers to the "satanic rebellions" and the "carnival of diabolical suggestions" by which he is beset (III:17, 25). He constantly evokes apocalyptic scenarios taken from the Bible, particularly the Book of Revelation. These ravings are not inspiring, but rather dispiriting, for the reader. But what are we to make of all this, coming from the mouth of a self-confessed madman, the ultimate unreliable narrator? Godwin's Gothic exhibits a self-consciousness here, showing the contingency and falsity that underlie the mode, cueing the reader to interrogate the account that is being read. In this way Godwin uses the Gothic mode to show how religion can be Gothicized, made to serve political and ideological ends.

Mandeville is not the only one to use the Gothic in this way. His fanatical tutor, the "evil genius" Hilkiah Bradford, Gothicizes Catholicism. Mandeville relates that Bradford "was particularly shocked with the unbounded usurpations and arbitrary power of the church of Rome" which he compares to the Beast and the Whore of the Biblical Book of Revelation (I:125). Mandeville continues: "My preceptor was further revolted at the sanguinary character of the church of Rome. She put the dagger into the hands of her votaries, and caused them to commit innumerable massacres" (I: 125). The royalist Catholic Lady Lisle takes a very different position but one that also utilizes the Gothic to

demonize opponents. Her particular animadversion is Oliver Cromwell, who is Lord Protector during the time the novel is set. She calls him “the special pupil and ward of devils” and goes on to compare him to sea-monsters and lamiae (II:64-65). Here Godwin reveals himself as an historian of the Gothic, showing the various ways people historically use this mode to support their ideological positions, or to attack the ideology of their opponents. Godwin makes clear that Gothicization is sometimes politicization, or propaganda.

*Mandeville* also presents an “enlightened” attitude towards apostasy. Being a novel related by a Presbyterian fanatic, set during a time and place (the Commonwealth in Britain) which was characterized by intense religious debate, it is not surprising that religious apostasy would be a theme in the novel. Godwin himself was just such a religious apostate, forswearing Presbyterianism and thereafter attacking Christianity in numerous publications. The presentation of apostasy in *Mandeville* quite likely reflects Godwin’s autobiographical concerns. But it also seems likely that in the novel Godwin is commenting on the debate concerning political apostasy that was raging when *Mandeville* was published in 1817. In early 1817 *Wat Tyler*, a radical play written in the early 1790s by Robert Southey, had been published in a pirated edition. Given that this exposed the radical views of Southey’s youth, and could be easily compared to Southey’s reactionary writing for the *Quarterly Review* circa 1817 (something that William Smith did in Parliamentary debate), Southey was understandably non-plussed and fought back in a pamphlet. Defenders (such as Coleridge) and detractors (Hazlitt and William Hone) joined in the controversy.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the *Wat Tyler* controversy, see Charles Mahoney’s *Romantics and Renegades*, chapter 4. See also the electronic edition of [Wat Tyler published at Romantic Circles](#).

*Mandeville* was Godwin's contribution to the apostasy debate that preoccupied the British public sphere in 1817. Godwin's position in this debate was somewhat surprising, given his reputation as a political radical. In *Mandeville* he uses religious apostasy to analogize political apostasy, in order to suggest that apostasy was not always and in every case politically regressive. That is, Godwin insinuates that apostasy might be considered as a stage on the road to personal and societal perfection. In this sense apostasy is *necessary*—part of a general scheme of social progress. Apostasy would have benevolent effects if it led to the abandonment of outmoded, feudal conceptions of religion, as well as irrational, atavistic, anti-Catholic views. And sincerity demands the kind of public truth-telling that apostasy occasions. In other words, apostasy could be enlightened, part of a scheme of perfectability.

Granted, none of this is dealt with explicitly in the novel, but it informs a key plot-point. In the third volume, Mandeville develops a twisted friendship with Mallison (son of Malice?), who as a boy tormented Mandeville at Winchester School. The manipulative Mallison goads Mandeville by convincing him that Clifford's apostasy was not the career-killer (or soul-killer) that Mandeville thought it was. Mallison opines that "the Protestant episcopal religion is the faith that becomes an English politician, while the Catholic is the religion of a gentleman. There is no other creed to be found at the courts of Versailles, Madrid, and Vienna, the great receptacles of all that is magnificent and brilliant in civilised Europe" (III:131). This comment destroys what remains of Mandeville's sanity by removing the last remaining logical justification for his hatred of Clifford. It is certainly possible to construe Clifford's apostasy as being opportunistic and

Machiavellian (since he converts to Catholicism to inherit a large estate, along with the power this entails), but this does not seem to be Godwin's attitude towards Clifford.

Nor is it necessarily the attitude of Mandeville. There is a fascinating passage in volume III, chapter 3, when after excoriating Clifford once again, Mandeville plays devil's advocate and constructs a much more sympathetic account of Clifford's apostasy, one in which the uncle who has named Clifford his heir begs Clifford to convert to Catholicism. Clifford resists at first but then out of a sense of benevolence gives in to his uncle's demand. Not long after this sympathetic account Mandeville reverts to form, calling Clifford a monstrous deformity and fantasizing about bathing in his blood. Clifford is technically an apostate, but he is otherwise admirable in every way, and maintains his integrity throughout. Clifford's apostasy might be read as prudent, as befitting an enlightened statesman, rather than the opportunistic villainy that Mandeville sees. Evincing the kind of inversion that characterized Godwin's late Gothic, the winners at the end of the novel are Catholics—particularly benevolent, sincere, non-sectarian, public-minded Catholics like Clifford.

Godwin does not appear to subscribe to the radical-reactionary binary that characterized political apostasy during the Romantic period. Instead, he takes a middle way between the two extremes, showing some of the progressive possibilities of apostasy and characterizing as unenlightened public attacks on people for changing their minds. For Godwin, misanthropy was a much more serious public problem than apostasy. In this he anticipates, and to some extent critiques, the Romantic figure of the alienated outcast, which had been made popular by Lord Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the Oriental tales; and, to a lesser extent, by Sir Walter Scott in his Waverly novels. This was



recognized by Percy Shelley who, after reading *Mandeville*, sent a copy to Byron, calling Godwin's character "a Satanic likeness of Childe Harold the first" (Qtd. in Clemit, *Godwinian Novel* 96). Later Shelley reviewed the novel positively for the *Examiner*. Other reviewers, such as John Gibson Lockhart at *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, saw the Satanic resemblance (*Godwin Reviewed* 339). Just as Byron's alienated heroes are mouthpieces for Byron's cultural critique, Mandeville in the novel by that name can be regarded as Godwin's critical response to lingering disaffection with the government and his refusal to affirm the re-established feudal legitimacy in post-Napoleonic Europe.

Some of the reviewers of *Mandeville* also made comparisons between Godwin and the author of the Waverly novels, later to be revealed as Walter Scott. *Mandeville* is, at least in part, a rebuke to Scott's conservative historiography. Anthony Jarrells notes that Scott's fiction "helps not so much in understanding history as in accepting it. Scott's romances serve what we might call the Burkean end of making the nation lovely: they do not challenge the national institutions but rather accouter them in the generic clothing of romance" (33). At the same time, as Davison notes, Scott "strategically employs" the Gothic to demonize the opponents of "things as they are" by associating them with the backwardness of Celtic culture and Catholicism (189). "This Gothicization of a savage and superstitious Celtic periphery" in Scott's novels "served to promote a fantasy of shared national feeling" which was decidedly loyalist and reactionary (189). In championing aristocratic, feudal hegemony, and in using the Gothic to smear his opponents, Scott's novels are indicative of the Gothic feudalism that Burke utilized in his *Reflections*. In *Mandeville*, by contrast, Godwin employs history to show the damage

done to individuals by social institutions, by “highlighting the failure of the individual to rise above the violence of history” (Jarrells 28).

On the basis of these evaluations, and its affinity with the alienation espoused and troubled by Byron and Scott, I read *Mandeville* as a Romantic novel—or, more specifically, a Romantic Gothic novel—with the proviso that in its treatment of social alienation and in its conception of history, Godwin comes much closer to Byron than Scott. But here, at the conclusion of my discussion of the novel, I would like to show how *Mandeville* is uniquely Romantic in its own right, and what this means. Clemit says of *Mandeville*: “Godwin’s study of fanaticism from the point of view of the fanatic explores the doubts about man’s rational capacities” (“Godwinian Novel” 99). Kelly remarks that *Mandeville* shows that “as a man, as a philosopher, as a writer, Godwin had changed from a *philosophe* to a Romantic” (“Jacobin Novel” 249). If by “Romantic” we mean anti-Enlightenment and politically conservative, *Mandeville* is *not* Romantic. But if we understand the term as a recuperation of Enlightenment principles within a larger framework that affirms feeling, in both the public and private spheres, and acknowledges cultural dissidence in the form of alienation/misanthropy—the novel *is* Romantic.

More specifically, *Mandeville* is Romantic in that it has as its hero an alienated, self-deluded, unreliable first-person narrator, with the narrative serving as his confession. But it is a confession that admits nothing, and reveals little of the inner life of the narrator. Rajan remarks that Mandeville’s “refusal to be cured breaks open the institution of confession so as to expose the pathology of normalization” or political legitimacy (*Romantic Narrative* 136). The narrator’s psychological disintegration is telling. Rajan writes: “in *Mandeville* . . . this disintegration of characters and the stories they tell goes

hand in hand with a radical deconstruction of the ideological field itself' (*Romantic Narrative* 142). Mandeville's madness is emblematic of a crumbling *ancien regime* in Britain. Due to the narrator's opacity and his antiquated values, the reader is discouraged from sympathizing with the patrician Mandeville, to distrust everything he says, and to read between the lines. This "distancing" is a key part of what makes the text reflexive. With Rajan, I interpret textual reflexivity as one of the emergent aspects of Romanticism.<sup>20</sup>

Marilyn Butler describes *Mandeville* as a *bildungsroman*; but, if so, it is a coming-of-age tale that is Gothicized, in that it is the portrait of a fledgling lunatic who nurtures an insane antipathy to a school-mate, the charmed Clifford ("War of Ideas" 63). I think it better to describe *Mandeville* as an *anti-bildungsroman*, in which the conventions of the form are inverted, showing not the progressive development but rather the disintegration of the protagonist. This is another way in which the novel is reflexive. The shortness of the text also signals reflexivity: *Mandeville* is a three-volume novel (compared to the four-volume *St Leon*) that seems to be missing a final volume. This might be why the novel ends so suddenly, with Mandeville, finally and irrefutably insane, at the tender age of eighteen years. Godwin refuses to supply a satisfying ending to his novel. In this sense, *Mandeville* resembles Godwin's edition of Wollstonecraft's posthumous works, particularly *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Women*, in which he provides suggestive scraps rather than a fully worked-out text, making a virtue of contingency.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This, anyway, is my reading of her readings of Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and Blake in *The Supplement of Reading and Romantic Narrative*. In the former work, Rajan contends that "the novels of Wollstonecraft and Godwin . . . cross a particularly 'romantic' threshold in the history of the genre, in that they raise the problem of the textuality of political writing" (167). They "use fiction self-consciously to make us aware of reality as a 'text' or system of misrepresentation, but also of ideology as a form of textual desire" (167).

<sup>21</sup> Rajan describes Godwin's editing of Wollstonecraft's *Maria*: "On the one hand, Godwin's philological scrupulousness evinces an honesty about the state of this text, the roughness of which makes visible something more fundamental about textuality and narrativity. On the other hand, one cannot quite say that the editor has given us 'the words, as well as ideas, of the real author,' or that his editing 'has intruded

*Mandeville* concludes when the narrator is no longer capable of telling his tale coherently, which is long before the reader expects or desires it. Instead, we are left with a monstrous joke. In his final confrontation with Clifford, Mandeville is accidentally cut by Clifford's sword. "The sword of my enemy had given a perpetual grimace, a sort of preternatural and unvarying distorted smile, or deadly grin, to my countenance," Mandeville relates afterwards (III:366). Before his hatred for Clifford was an act of imagination, but now he carries it around on his person, like a brand upon his flesh.

*Mandeville* is also Romantic in a specifically historical way. Enacting the ideas set forth in his essay "Of History and Romance," Godwin makes Mandeville the source of a highly subjective and unreliable account of history, in a way that discourages a suspension of disbelief and encourages critical demurral and rebuttal. The novel evinces history aggrandized by a narcissistic aristocrat who then refuses to countenance it. As some commentators note, in *Mandeville* we learn precious little about the turbulent history of the Commonwealth, mostly because it does not concern the insulated and self-involved misanthrope who is reciting the tale. As Rajan notes, "the historical backdrop of the novel is the scene of a lost Republican moment that never materializes because, disappointingly, there are no Republican heroes in the text" (142). This makes the novel historically "decentered, in ways that make politics, like character, a scarred and defaced project. . . . [*Mandeville*] is a historical novel in which, paradoxically, Mandeville's psychic history usurps the foreground, while the clash of religious and political factions provides the background" (141). We must be careful not to attribute Mandeville's aggrandizement and avoidance of history to Godwin. Rather, because it posits that people

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nothing of himself into the work'" (quotes within quote from Godwin's editorial notes) (174). That is, Godwin had a critical textual agenda which we would now label "self-referential."

in power attempt to abscond from history, the novel is perspicacious and progressive in its historicity. But it is a Romantic historicity.

Finally, the novel is Romantic in that it suggests a conflicted but productive relationship between private feeling and public polity. In *Mandeville*, Godwin shows how public animosity feeds a festering hatred in private, in the case of Charles Mandeville; and conversely how the private domestic sphere—following Shaftesbury—nurtures feelings of public benevolence, in the case of Henrietta Mandeville. These things might seem contradictory, and *Mandeville* a fatally flawed, “mixed” text. But I argue that this lack of cohesion and closure in the novel is what makes it Romantic. Rather than denouncing his Enlightenment principles, in the novel Godwin re-affirms publicity, as well as the efficacy of the principles of benevolence, sincerity, and necessity, in campaigns for social amelioration and reform. But Godwin qualifies and complicates Enlightenment discourse by yoking it to the Gothic, utilizing irrationality in the form of inversion and irony, affirming the positive by addressing the negative, paradoxically shining shadows upon the world to reveal it in its true light. By combining these two disparate discourses in *Mandeville*, Godwin suggests that it is in the “collisions” between public-oriented Enlightenment and private-oriented Gothic that truth is to be found. This mapping of the inchoate space between public and private, more than anything else, makes Godwin a Romantic writer.

## Chapter 4: “Unsex’d” Sensibility and Publicity in the Polemical Works of Mary Wollstonecraft

In 1798, William Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in commemoration of his recently deceased wife, Mary Wollstonecraft. In response, Richard Polwhele published *The Unsex'd Females*—his own, very different, commemoration of Wollstonecraft. In his memoirs, Godwin characterized Wollstonecraft as a heroine of sensibility, “a female Werther.” In his poem, Polwhele pictured Wollstonecraft as a *monster* of sensibility—a hermaphrodite who is both masculine rake and feminine ingénue. As rake, Wollstonecraft manages to seduce a whole band of women writers; as ingénue, she is seduced by the painter Henri Fuseli. In his notes to the poem, Polwhele makes explicit his criticism of Wollstonecraft the “unsex’d” female: “Nature is the grand basis of all laws human and divine: and the woman, who has no regard to nature, either in the decoration of her person, or the culture of her mind, will soon ‘walk after the flesh, in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government.’” In his poem, Polwhele clearly deplores Wollstonecraft’s sensibility, which he characterizes as too masculine in its rationality, and too feminine in its emotionality. This is what makes her, in Polwhele’s estimation, “unsex’d” and monstrous: she subverts the traditional, customary gendering of both men and women under the regime of sensibility by taking on aspects of both. More egregiously, she performs this “gender bending” in public, using her “unsex’d” sensibility to confuse and conflate the domestic private sphere (assigned to women) and the political public sphere (dominated by men).

This is what motivates Polwhele to raise, and remonstrate with, Wollstonecraft's ghost in an attempt to exorcise her from the body politic.

In this chapter I examine Wollstonecraft's subversive "unsex'd" sensibility within the context of publicity. Specifically I look at how Wollstonecraft in the 1790s intervened in public controversies in which gender, sensibility, and domestic politics were being re-negotiated, as part of the larger French Revolution debate. I make the case that Wollstonecraft distinguished between two different kinds of sensibility in these controversies. "Chivalric" sensibility, which was politically conservative and invested in the preservation of a patriarchal status quo, viewed women as pretty playthings that had no agency, thoughts, property, or rights of their own. Wollstonecraft countered this with "civic" sensibility, which used reason to order the passions and cultivate the social feelings necessary for public engagement. She pointedly included women in this formulation, re-situating the domestic within an "unsex'd" public sphere.

In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft indicted the conservative, "feminized" Edmund Burke for his reactionary chivalric sensibility and its attendant misogyny. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft exposed the French republican Jean-Jacques Rousseau as another vector of chivalric sensibility, suggesting that his version was even more insidious because it made misogyny palatable to political reformers. However, in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, Wollstonecraft seemed to change course. In this epistolary work she entertained chivalric sensibility, seemingly rehabilitating both Burke and Rousseau, and looked askance upon the civic sensibility she had championed in her vindications. But in the end, this conflicted text falls short of vindicating either reactionary or republican

misogyny. Rather, in the work Wollstonecraft put into dialogue—into mutual interrogation—chivalric and civic sensibility. The result of this dialogue was a new, hybrid “romantic” sensibility that attempted to transcend the divisions between male and female, rational and emotional, political and domestic, public and private—in effect creating a buffer zone where neither the contentious publicity nor the reactionary domesticity of late-1790s Britain had a place. Thus I maintain that, rather than retreating to the private sphere or staking out territory for women in the public sphere, the “unsex’d” Wollstonecraft of *A Short Residence* found the inchoate discursive space between public and private, and the slippage between the two, more congenial to cultural advancement.

In each of these readings, I am particularly interested in exploring how sensibility was both a subject and vehicle of publicity in Britain in the 1790s. I therefore map out the public debates involving sensibility, to investigate how the ethic of sensibility affected those public debates, and to adumbrate Wollstonecraft’s role in both efforts. I also consider how issues of class and media inflect these debates, and to what extent Wollstonecraft’s evolving attitude towards sensibility affected her relationship to incipient Romanticism. I focus on the three polemical texts mentioned above—in addition to Wollstonecraft’s early reviews for the *Analytical Review*—because they were all intended as public interventions in controversies concerning sensibility. I exclude other sentimental texts from this chapter—such as Wollstonecraft’s novellas *Mary, A Fiction* and *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Women*—because they were written in a more



private, reflective mode, and were immature, inconsistent, and/or fragmentary forays into sensibility.<sup>1</sup>

In explicating Wollstonecraft's texts and making my argument, I draw from the ongoing and energetic debate concerning Wollstonecraft and her critical legacy—particularly the relationship between sensibility and gender in her writing. Some critics upbraid Wollstonecraft for fiercely criticizing paternalistic sensibility in her early works, while others see her submitting to paternalism in these same works. That is, for some she is too feminine, for others too masculine; for some she is too beholden to reason, for others too beholden to feeling; for some her rejection of sensibility indicates political betrayal, for others her championing of sensibility supposedly makes her a traitor to progressive politics. Thus in the critical history, as in Polwhele's poem, Wollstonecraft is “unsex'd.” The bulk of this chapter is devoted to an exploration of this perceived gender “confusion” in Wollstonecraft, vis-à-vis sensibility, during an epoch in which the British tradition of sensibility was undergoing fierce debate in the public sphere.

### **Sensibility and Publicity**

In eighteenth-century Britain, the meaning of the term “sensibility” was in flux. Syndy Conger notes that during this time sensibility could mean “emotional consciousness”; “quickness and acuteness of apprehension of feeling”; “capacity for refined emotion”; “delicate sensitiveness of taste”; or “compassion for suffering, and [the

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<sup>1</sup> These two novellas are nonetheless quite illuminating in what they reveal of Wollstonecraft's evolving attitudes towards sensibility, as recently published editions of these two works make clear. I recommend in particular two editions that combine both texts in one book: Michele Faubert's Broadview edition (2012), and Gary Kelly's Oxford edition (2007).

capacity] to be moved by the pathetic in art” (xxxix). Susan Todd defines sensibility more generally as “the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering’ (*Sensibility* 7). The term was often associated with a number of different concepts, four of which I will mention here. The physical basis of sensibility was *sensation*, in the way John Locke uses that term, referring to the sense impressions and experiences that together comprise the individual. The engagement with, and refinement of, *sentiments* (or feelings) was an important component of sensibility. There was an interpersonal aspect of sensibility, in that it encouraged an emotional connection, or *sympathy*, with others. On a societal level, sensibility led to *sociability*, discussion in public and print, which was a key aspect of eighteenth-century British life.<sup>2</sup>

Chris Jones isolates three main strains of sensibility in eighteenth-century Britain:

1. Self-indulgent sensibility, in which one became a slave to super-refined feelings;
2. Conservative sensibility, which fostered emotional attachments to tradition, hierarchy, and social custom; and
3. Radical sensibility, which emphasized social sympathy, benevolence, and reason (“Radical Sensibility” 69).

The first kind of sensibility (“self-indulgent”) was condemned by the other two, though I argue that later in the 1790s, self-indulgent sensibility was often coded as conservative by radicals and radical by conservatives. These “three trends in sensibility, the potentially radical, the conservative, and the self-indulgent, seem to coexist throughout the century, often uneasily cohabiting within the same text or providing parameters for the development of an author’s attitude” (*Radical Sensibility* 15).

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<sup>2</sup> John Mullan focuses on sociability in the context of sensibility, in *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*.

The conflict between “conservative” and “radical” sensibility was based on the philosophical differences between two wings of the British Enlightenment. Representing conservative sensibility, David Hume and Adam Smith propounded the view that sensibility served the cause of social harmony by cultivating in the individual feelings of reverence for tradition, hierarchy, and aristocratic rule. Hume and Smith argued that these deferential feelings were largely generated in the home, in the form of “domestic” or “partial” affections. As Jones puts it: “Hume . . . appealed to the contagion of the passions, and Smith feelingly evoked the human desire for unbounded sympathy, yet both explored the mechanisms by which Providence directed this capacity to the limited ends insuring the stability of society” (“Radical Sensibility” 71). The writers of conservative sensibility tended to denigrate the role of reason in the construction of a harmonious society, championing instead passions ordered by social deference. If sensibility fostered social conformity, it was acceptable; if it fostered personal expression and individuality—or even worse, reformist sentiments—it was anathema.

This conservative sensibility was countered by the proto-utilitarian view of Francis Hutcheson, who popularized the ideas of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. The proponents of (what became) radical sensibility emphasized “universal” benevolence over customary deference, and “stressed the necessity of keeping the partial affections like those to kindred under the direction of universal benevolence which sought the good of the widest system of which man was a part” (*Radical Sensibility* 61). For writers of radical sensibility, the ideal forum for the practice of universal benevolence was an unfettered public sphere, where disinterested debate and shared intellectual work would inevitably lead to social amelioration and enlightenment. The writers of radical

sensibility also had a high regard for the role of reason in the moral and political progress of society, and in countering the prejudices of aristocracy. Individual expression and reforming zeal was not only acceptable but a necessary component of radical sensibility.

The eighteenth-century debate in the British public sphere between conservative and radical conceptions of sensibility was complicated by issues of class and gender. Chris Evans notes that “sensibility was believed to be most commonly found among the middle classes. The poor were too brutalized by their labours and their wretched living conditions to be capable of the heightened emotional receptivity that was true sensibility. As for the aristocracy, their palates were too jaded by dissipation and excess. Indeed, the idea of sensibility soon became a vehicle for criticism of the fashionable aristocracy” (114). Sensibility, then, became a signifier of class. Avoiding the degradation of the plebs, and the dissipation of patricians, sensibility became a special quality of the bourgeoisie. According to this scenario, middle-class Britons represented the glue that held society together and vouchsafed the social advancement of Britain as a whole. This advancement had a commercial aspect, implicating sensibility in the development of capitalism in eighteenth-century Britain, something that is implied but not explicitly discussed in the eighteenth-century literature of sensibility.

More specifically, sensibility was a movement associated with middle-class *women*. This is not surprising given that it was women, for the most part, who both wrote and read novels of sensibility in eighteenth-century Britain. But the association was also based on a general conception that empathy, sympathy, and sociability were things that were more “natural” to women than to men. As we will see, this gendering of sensibility was, at best, a mixed blessing for eighteenth-century British women. According to Todd,

sensibility was used “to justify the new exalted subordination of women” (*Sensibility* 20). That is, women were seemingly exalted as superior beings when it came to feeling, but in fact this refinement was used to put them in their (domestic) place, making them second-class citizens. As Conger puts it, “man uses the notion or the language of sensibility to flatter woman into a posture of weakness, then declares her weak by nature (according to God’s will) and accordingly denies her access to ‘manly’ pursuits” in the public sphere” (113-14). However, as I argue below in my reading of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Man*, this “false,” feminized sensibility was not the only strain. What the critics above refer to above as sensibility was really conservative sensibility, as Jones defines it. It is what I call chivalric sensibility, in contradistinction to the civic sensibility that Wollstonecraft develops in her vindications.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1790s, the philosophical debate concerning sensibility became bitterly politicized; the catalyst was the French Revolution. Claudia Johnson remarks that “the welfare of the nation and the tearfulness of private citizens—actual as well as fictional—were understood in the 1790s to be urgently interconnected” (2). Nicola Watson notes that in the 1790s

Both conservatives and radicals (and all shades of partisan in between) accused those of other political persuasions of excessive sensibility and of exploiting an essentially sentimental rhetoric, and all equally indignantly denied the charge. If Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, could base her critique of

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to Wollstonecraft’s distinction between “feudal” and “civic” sensibility is her husband William Godwin’s distinction between “feudal” and “enlightened” Gothic, which I discuss in my chapter on Godwin. There was a close association between sensibility and the Gothic in the eighteenth century, and Wollstonecraft and Godwin were similarly engaged in efforts to champion the Enlightenment at the expense of the old feudal order. So it should come as no surprise that these two writers should work in similar modes, towards similar ends, after encountering similar cruxes.

Burke's politics upon accusations of muddy sentimental thinking, constructing him as all crocodile tears and about as much sympathy, Gillray, the noted conservative caricaturist, was, for his part, just as comfortable producing a cartoon of Sensibility as a woman crying over a dead bird, with the volumes of Rousseau in one hand and a foot carelessly resting on the French king's severed head. (27)

At issue were the main topics discussed by Hume, Smith, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson earlier in the century. Jones argues that

in espousing the principles of the French Revolution, radical sensibility politicized ideas which had previously been points of debate within the same tradition and took to extremes ideas which had been firmly restricted by prevailing practice. So it is that during the 1790s the idea of the domestic affections is so charged with conservative force, and universal philanthropy considered a dangerously radical propensity, that the ability to regulate passion assumes a high profile in radical writers, often uneasily coupled with pleas for a more accommodating public morality (*Radical Sensibility* 101-02).

As we will see, in terms of the controversy associated with sensibility in the 1790s, Wollstonecraft ardently rushed into the fray. Her exploration of the opposing strands of chivalric and civic sensibility, which roughly correspond with conservative and radical sensibility, was the result.

It should be clear from the preceding that the literature and discourse of sensibility was an eminent subject of debate in the eighteenth-century British public sphere. But the importance of sensibility to publicity extends beyond this. Sensibility

plays a vital role in various models of the public sphere, particularly that of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas argues that the eighteenth-century public sphere originated in “a rational-critical debate in the world of letters within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself” (51). Literature made public the concerns and preoccupations of the bourgeois home—what Habermas calls the private sphere—thus making literature a factor in the negotiation between the private sphere and the state. The literature of sensibility, according to Habermas, was one of the vehicles used in this process of bourgeois class consolidation in that it provided ideological legitimation, by naturalizing and universalizing the intimate experience of the bourgeois. In the words of Habermas: “The subjectivity that had become fit to print, had in fact become the literature appealing to a wide public of readers. The privatized individuals coming together to form a public also reflected critically and in public on what they had read, thus contributing to the process of enlightenment which they together promoted” (51). Habermas cites novels of sensibility such as Richardson’s *Pamela* and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* as exemplary works of literature in this regard. He does not cite, however, the many women writers of sensibility in eighteenth-century Britain, or note the general consensus that sensibility was a woman’s genre. Regardless, in Habermas’s model, the psychological ethic and interpersonal praxis of sensibility made the development of eighteenth-century publicity possible.

However, while Habermas cites the importance of sensibility in the literary public sphere, he is quite vague about its role vis-à-vis the political public sphere, which according to his model arose out of the literary public sphere. Habermas admits that the

political public sphere and literary public sphere “blended with each other in a peculiar fashion” (55). For instance, Habermas notes, “women and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere, whereas female readers as well as apprentices and servants often took a more active part in the literary public sphere than the owners of private property and family heads themselves” (56). The implication here is that female readers had some power, and indirectly exerted influence upon the politics of the nation. Women were active in the bourgeois public sphere, according to Habermas, though they did not actively engage in politics. Along these lines, Michael McKeon observes that “Habermas has been chided both for ignoring women’s exclusion from the public sphere and for ignoring their access to it—or to alternative publics, counterpublics, or ‘subaltern counterpublics’. In fact his position lies somewhere between these two claims” (73).<sup>4</sup> Habermas might have avoided feminist criticism had he perused more closely Wollstonecraft’s writings, in which she is a perceptive and proleptic critic of his model. He might also have seen more clearly the relationship between the literature of sensibility and the political public sphere, and gained insight into how sensibility functioned *as* publicity in the late eighteenth century.

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<sup>4</sup> For many feminist scholars, a controlling interest in literature does not make up for the lack of political agency, particularly at a time in which much of the literature written by women, and genres associated with women, was treated with condescension by male writers and readers, thus sapping its political impact. For this reason feminist critic Joan Landes, in *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, concludes that Habermas’s model is hopelessly masculinist. Nancy Fraser, in *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, goes so far as to propose a feminine “subaltern counterpublic”: a “room of her own” in the public sphere for the eighteenth-century British woman. But more recently feminist critics eschew this kind of separatism and increasingly re-structure the public sphere by revising the terms of the debate (which I discuss in more detail below).



## Wollstonecraft's Apprenticeship in Sensibility and Publicity: Reviews for the Analytical

In 1788 Wollstonecraft left her governess position with the Kingsborough family and took a job in London as editorial assistant at a new literary review magazine called the *Analytical Review*, published by the man who would publish all her books: Joseph Johnson. Review magazines had by this time achieved huge popularity and influence. Marilyn Butler rightly calls the eighteenth-century Review “culture’s medium,” particularly in its role as arbiter of literary production at a time in which both print and literacy were expanding at a prodigious rate.<sup>5</sup> Reviews were key institutions not only in print culture but in the public sphere. They dwelt at the intersection of the literary and political spheres, and were central to the bourgeois reformist agenda. Butler notes that in 1790, all four major Reviews were published by bourgeois dissenters and supported reform and the fledgling French Revolution (130). Johnson’s *Analytical Review* was one of these, and arguably the most liberal of the four. Wollstonecraft was not only a reviewer at the *Analytical*; she was also a de facto section editor. This made her “the first of a new genus” and gave her a good deal of power in a public sphere that was supposedly out-of-bounds for women.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Marilyn Butler, following Derek Roper in *Reviewing Before the Edinburgh*, contends that the Reviews in the latter half of the eighteenth century achieved the high-point of their cultural hegemony. This counters the previous understanding that the Reviews were basically unsophisticated advertizing vehicles until the *Edinburgh Review* came along in 1803. Most critics now attest to the general excellence of Reviews before the *Edinburgh*—thanks to the work of Butler, Roper, and others—and given the size of the reading public in the second half of the eighteenth century, the sales figures are arguably similar (5,000 monthly for the *Monthly Review* in 1797, compared to 2,000 for the initial run of the *Edinburgh* in 1803, and 4,000 on average in 1805—though, admittedly, a far cry from the 13,000 sold in one month in 1815) (Roper 24, Butler “Culture’s Medium” 126).

<sup>6</sup> “The first of a new genus” was a phrase from a letter of Wollstonecraft to her sister Everina (7 November 1787) that many critics cite in their discussions of Wollstonecraft’s importance in the print culture and the public sphere at this time. See in this regard Mary A. Waters’s article “‘The First of a New Genus’: Mary Wollstonecraft as a Literary Critic and Mentor to Mary Hays.”

Wollstonecraft's public influence at this early stage was largely due to the anonymity—and perceived maleness—of reviewers. Mary Waters writes: “The anonymity of reviews meant that a woman writer could trespass on territory usually reserved for men, and no one other than her employer need be the wiser” (422). It also meant that Wollstonecraft was compelled to write in the “house style” (of both review magazines and the public sphere), which was in the masculine voice. However, Waters argues that “Wollstonecraft at least occasionally exploited her anonymous position subtly to revise accepted notions of gender”; in addition, anonymous reviewing for Wollstonecraft helped her develop “a strong sense of the conventions of masculine versus feminine discourse, and a consciousness that these differences arose not from nature but from strategies of language” (422). That is, even at this early stage, Wollstonecraft was being educated in the contingencies of gender in the eighteenth century, and developing tactics to denaturalize paternalistic gender roles.

Wollstonecraft is decidedly unsentimental and satirical in her evaluation of fashionable novels of sensibility, which she calls—in one of her first reviews in one of the first numbers of the *Analytical*—“those misshapen monsters, daily brought forth to poison the minds of our young females” (*Analytical Review* 1 [June 1788]). Conger claims that only when Wollstonecraft “becomes a regular contributor to Joseph Johnson's newly formed *Analytical Review* in the late 1780s does she begin to see sensibility as part of the problem rather than the solution” (86). Conger continues: “Wollstonecraft's many acerbic reviews of sentimental novels make it easy to misconstrue her articles as fragments of one long, fairly sustained attack on sensibility and everything connected

with it” (86). But in her reviews, Conger concludes, Wollstonecraft “objects not to sensibility per se but to its abduction by mediocre writers” (87).

Mitzi Myers concurs: “While Wollstonecraft demystifies the contemporary feminine specialty, the novel of sensibility so often ‘told in letters’ and written by ‘A Lady’ . . . she was certainly not ready to jettison the positive attributes associated with feminine sensibility” (“Literary Reviews” 83-84). Indeed, “throughout her career she defined sensibility in glowing terms, repeatedly equating it with genius and forever waxing ardent over Rousseau’s ardors” (“Literary Reviews” 93). According to Myers, Wollstonecraft had an “ideological commitment” to expose woman writers of sensibility “for serving as passive channels through which linguistic and cultural codes flow without resistance. She finds oppression and repression inscribed in the feminine texts she reads” (“Literary Reviews” 84). What Wollstonecraft targets in her reviews is “cultural conditioning masquerading as fiction” and “the self-sabotaging myths of [‘false’] sensibility” (Myers 88, Conger 88). The point I wish to emphasize here is that as a reviewer, in challenging gender constraints and the false consciousness of paternalistic sensibility, Wollstonecraft was flexing her critical muscles in the public sphere and making distinctions between “true” and “false” sensibility. She was also making pronouncements about sensibility and gender that critics now, particularly feminist critics, tend to ponder and parse in order to pinpoint the advent of her feminism, or the initial moment of its supposed betrayal.

## *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*

After tinkering with it for a year, Edmund Burke finally published his highly-anticipated *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in early November 1790. After not tinkering at all, writing at a feverish pace over a matter of weeks, Wollstonecraft published her anonymous reply in the same month. The title *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* most obviously refers to the “Rights of Man,” promulgated by the National Assembly in revolutionary France, and attacked by Burke in his *Reflections*. But the title also has a satirical edge, in that Wollstonecraft is not only vindicating the “Rights of Man,” but also criticizing a political and cultural system in which the rights of men are reserved only for men who abandon their manliness, while women are left without any rights and even their femininity is taken from them. This has come about, Wollstonecraft charges, because men have feminized culture for their own benefit, and used sensibility to do so.

Wollstonecraft’s first vindication was the initial shot in the propaganda war that erupted in Britain shortly after the fall of the Bastille in 1789. Like Burke’s *Reflections*, it must be noted, Wollstonecraft’s reply was a pamphlet. The pamphlet, one of the major media of the eighteenth-century public sphere, is distinguished from the book in that pamphlets tended to be quickly produced in order to capitalize on public controversy. Pamphlets also tended to be much cheaper than books, to ensure the widest possible distribution. Later in the 1790s, dissenting political sentiments published in the medium of the pamphlet would also ensure state prosecution, exactly because it was cheap and

thus available to the masses.<sup>7</sup> One, imperfect, way prosecution could be avoided was to publish anonymously. This is a convention that Wollstonecraft capitalized upon in her first vindication, something which (after the second edition made it clear that *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* was written by a woman) left the reviewers nonplussed. As I discuss below, critics now also look askance at Wollstonecraft's bold act of male ventriloquization in her pamphlet.

Most commentators note that, in her first vindication, Wollstonecraft seemed more interested in attacking the style than the content of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke's sentimental style obscures and prettifies his reactionary screed attacking the French Revolution and with it British reform. This is indicated by his chivalric encomium to Marie Antoinette. Deborah Weiss notes that in this passage Burke's expression of voyeuristic sympathy with the suffering female victim—what Burke would call “sensibility”—is used in support of a paternalistic ideology (216). Conger claims that “Burke commits the final outrage, in Wollstonecraft's eyes, of pressing the language of sensibility into the defense of an antiquated, corrupt, and oppressive political structure” (102). She continues: “Burke's attack on the French Revolution serves as an unwelcome catalyst in Wollstonecraft's intellectual life: it takes her largely untested faith in sensibility by surprise and forces her to sift its contradictory values and truth-claims in order to decide which, if any, she can reaffirm and which she should reject or deny” (103).

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<sup>7</sup> The best example of this phenomenon was when Thomas Paine re-published his *Rights of Man* as a pamphlet and was shortly thereafter tried in absentia for treasonous libel. E. P. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, discusses Paine's pamphlet and the attacks upon cheap periodicals in the 1790s (95-125). For a more recent account, see Ian Haywood's *The Revolution in Popular Literature*, 17-25.

Burke's language and imagery, drawn from the tradition of literary sensibility, provides an "idle tapestry" or fanciful "drapery" that blocks from view the "empty pageant" of aristocratic hegemony (*Vindication* I 12, 43). Wollstonecraft writes:

Throughout your letter you frequently advert to a sentimental jargon, which has long been current in conversation, and even in books of morals, though it never received the *regal* stamp of reason. A kind of mysterious instinct is *supposed* to reside in the soul, that instantaneously discerns truth, without the tedious labour of ratiocination. This instinct, for I know not what other name to give it, has been termed *common sense*, and more frequently *sensibility*; and, by a kind of *indefeasible* right, it has been *supposed*, for rights of this kind are not easily proved, to reign paramount over the other faculties of the mind, and to be an authority from which there is no appeal. (*Vindication* I 23)

For Burke, sentiment or feeling trumps reason, and vitiates societal enlightenment. As Claudia Johnson puts it: "For Burke, the continuance of civil order resulted not from our conviction of the rational or metaphysical rightness of certain obligations or arrangements, but rather from our attachment to customary practices, practices which are unconflictually sustained because we feel emotions of veneration, awe, desire, solicitude, gratitude, loyalty, endearment towards them and towards the persons who represent them" (3). Or as Wollstonecraft herself presents it: "We are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience: nay, that, if we do discover some errors, our *feelings* should lead us to excuse, with blind love, or unprincipled filial affection, the venerable vestiges of ancient days" (*Vindication* I 8).

Chris Jones remarks that “it is easy to see how this type of Sensibility leads to the affirmations of Burke that all our feelings are formed by the habitual associations of the *status quo*, and that any departure from these divinely implanted guides will bring anarchy” (“Radical Sensibility” 72). Indeed, according to Jones, Burke is the exemplar of the late, highly-politicized, conservative sensibility of the 1790s—what I term “chivalric” sensibility. Opposed to Burke’s chivalric sensibility was the supposedly radical civic sensibility of Richard Price, the dissenting divine that Burke attacks in his *Reflections*, and the mentor that Wollstonecraft defends in her first vindication. Eighteenth-century conservative sensibility privileged custom and feeling over reason and benevolence, and radical sensibility did the opposite. Jones contends that Price “held that natural Sensibility should be regulated, but maintained that it was the narrow, partial affections which had to be regulated by the expansive conception of the good of the whole and a rational assessment of ways and means. The main development of conservative Sensibility had been to restrict a potentially unlimited capacity for sympathy to the exclusive bounds of country and family,” which is the position of Hume, Smith, and Burke (“Radical Sensibility” 74).

Burke defends what Wollstonecraft calls “natural feelings,” which for Wollstonecraft represents a dangerous, mystifying kind of sensibility. This includes the charity that disguised itself as benevolence, providing crumbs to the poor while ignoring the structural causes of poverty. Wollstonecraft writes: “Sensibility is the *manie* of the day, and compassion the virtue which is to cover a multitude of vices, whilst justice is left to mourn in sullen silence, and balance truth in vain” (*Vindication* I 7). Wollstonecraft argued that reason was a greater authority than natural feelings and false benevolence,

particularly in structuring social relationships and confronting authority in the public sphere. In her vindication, as in her reviews in the *Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft attacked conservative, chivalric sensibility because it was used to create false consciousness, especially in women.

Though Wollstonecraft spends much of her pamphlet attacking Burke's position, she does suggest an alternative to chivalric sensibility. The somewhat rudimentary conception of civic sensibility that she develops in her first vindication is based on the cultivation of reason in the performance of the God-given rights of men. Wollstonecraft writes: "The birthright of man, to give you, Sir, a short definition of this disputed right, is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact" (*Vindication* I 7). A little later she writes: "It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights" (*Vindication* I 11). For Wollstonecraft, the use of reason is tantamount to the worship of God, and a life of virtue is impossible without reason, for it orders and contains the passions. The use of reason makes social benevolence possible and effective, encouraging justice rather than just charity. What Wollstonecraft describes is reminiscent of the rational religion of dissenters and "Commonwealthmen" like Richard Price. Wollstonecraft's innovation is in describing this rational religion in terms of public-oriented sensibility, performed as a civic duty. It is only with feelings ordered by reason,



directed outwards for the widest possible benefit, that the individual—and eventually the nation—becomes virtuous.

Wollstonecraft illustrates how chivalric sensibility is closely connected to the aristocratic, ceremonial “publicity of representation” which in Habermas’s model is replaced by bourgeois publicity.<sup>8</sup> As I contend in my introductory chapter, aristocratic publicity did not go as quietly as Habermas suggests; in the 1790s it was resurgent and, for a while, made counter-aristocratic bourgeois publicity impossible. Aristocratic publicity is uninterested in, and threatened by, reasoned discussion in the public sphere. In that sense, it is anti-public, exclusive, and private. At the same time, its express purpose is social conformity, which is to say obeisance to paternalism. Its messaging is based entirely on spectacle and pageantry. It often permeates society surreptitiously, as propaganda does, forming what I call “spectral” publicity. In attacking this secretive, sentimental pageantry—which she also calls “prejudice”—Wollstonecraft in effect vindicates what replaced it: the public use of reason to confront the seemingly sublime power of the state.

The court of King Louis XVI, particularly Queen Marie Antoinette, exemplified this pageantry-as-publicity. Some might argue (some no doubt did argue) that Burke’s chivalrous defense of the French queen indicated a high regard for women. Wollstonecraft, in her first vindication, had the effrontery to point out that this supposedly pro-woman chivalry was anything but. In effect, Wollstonecraft’s charge is that Burke had “feminized the discourse” in the service of aristocratic paternalism, using

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<sup>8</sup> Burke is credited by Habermas, in his account, as a key architect of the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere in Britain. Burke’s abandonment of rational-critical public debate in favor of aristocratic prejudice (or representative publicity) in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, I would argue, was a significant aspect of his supposed apostasy. This, anyway, seems to be Wollstonecraft’s view in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. See Habermas, pp. 94-95.

the language of sensibility to do so. In *The Rape of Clarissa*, Terry Eagleton explains that this feminization of discourse in eighteenth-century Britain was not in any way feminist, but rather part of the consolidation of patriarchy. He writes: “the ‘feminization of discourse’ witnessed by the eighteenth century was not a sexual revolution. It was imperative to mollify ruling-class barbarism with the milk of middle-class kindness, but not, naturally, to the point where virility itself came under threat. Male hegemony was to be sweetened but not undermined; women were to be exalted but not emancipated” (95). Johnson, in *Equivocal Beings*, also reflects upon the negative effects of the feminized discourse upon women. In the 1790s, Johnson writes, “the ‘masculinization’ of formerly feminine gender traits, and . . . the affective practices associated with it are valued *not* because they are understood as feminine, but precisely and only insofar as they have been re-coded as masculine” (14). As a result, Johnson argues, “sentimental man, having taken over once-feminine attributes, leaves to women only two choices: either the equivocal or the hyperfeminine” (11). This in effect leaves “women without a distinct gender site. Under sentimentality, all women risk becoming equivocal beings” (11, 12).<sup>9</sup> That is, the risk of being masculinized, or “unsex’d.”

Wollstonecraft’s strategy for combating the paternalistic feminization of discourse in Burke’s *Reflections* was to recast it as an *effeminization* of discourse. E. J. Clery explains that in eighteenth-century Britain effeminization was “employed as the sum of a complex of derogatory ideas also gendered ‘feminine’, including corruption, weakness, cowardice, luxury, immorality and the unbridled play of passions. The ‘effeminate’

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<sup>9</sup> Both Anne Mellor and Alan Richardson speak of the “feminization of discourse” in the eighteenth century, arguing that the male Romantic poets more or less colonized and stole feminine sensibility from women writers. See Richardson’s “Romanticism and the Colonization of the Feminine” and Mellor’s *Romanticism and Gender*.

man...takes on the qualities of self-indulgence, wantonness, vanity and hysteria traditionally attributed to women by misogynist rhetoric. His manners towards women may be excessively gallant, while secretly he sneers at them, attempting to reduce them to his level” (10). Religious dissenters, especially those drawing upon the British republican Commonwealthman tradition, were prone to this line of attack. G. J. Barker-Benfield notes that eighteenth-century Commonwealthmen “urged that the individual be freed from the control of his own and government’s unnatural passions and prejudices. Like other Commonwealthmen, they were deeply critical of the luxury and dissipation of the ‘ins,’ the ruling class. Conversely, they presented ‘the middling people’ as the repository of morality and civic virtue” (40). That is, aristocrats were effeminate and bourgeois were manly. Barker-Benfield notes that James Burgh, Joseph Priestley, and Richard Price—authors published by Wollstonecraft’s employer and publisher Joseph Johnson, and all personally known to Wollstonecraft—effeminized their upper-class opponents in the public sphere. Barker-Benfield argues that “the Commonwealthman’s particular sexualization of virtue and corruption would provide a *point d’appui* for Wollstonecraft” (43).

The problem with this approach, critics point out, is that in order to attack Burke for being effeminate Wollstonecraft had to adopt the persona of a man. In her vindication Wollstonecraft not only repeatedly calls into question the “manliness” of Burke; she vows, unlike Burke, to give “a manly definition” to the “rights of men” in her vindication (6). In doing so, Mary Poovey claims, Wollstonecraft rejects the “feminine position” in favor of male rationality (63). That is, she engenders reason as masculine, as a counterweight to a feminized sensibility. Johnson claims that Wollstonecraft

“consistently presumes that manliness and liberty are virtually synonymous” (31). The consequence of this, Barbara Taylor contends, is that “the condemnatory weight of [Wollstonecraft’s] polemic falls heaviest on women themselves” (70). That is, “the overt message of the *Rights of Men* is that the male sexual imagination is to blame, but the insistently idealising tone in which true masculinity is evoked (as contrasted to Burke’s effeminacy), combined with the hostile tone in which women and Burke’s womanliness are described, suggests otherwise” (70-71). She goes on to claim that “the rhetorical weight of Wollstonecraft’s attack falls so heavily on her own sex as to make a reader begin to wonder whether the aim is less to free women than to abolish them—an aspiration strongly implied at various points in the text” (13).

The immediate rebuttal to the characterization of Wollstonecraft as an equivocal, “unsex’d,” misogynist in her first vindication is that she was adapting herself to the conventions of (male) publicity, but I grant this is a weak reply. A better rebuttal is that Wollstonecraft inverted gender affiliation for a rhetorical purpose. Wendy Gunther-Canada asks (rhetorically) how might a “woman write with authority on the rights of man? Wollstonecraft’s gender-bending answer to this discursive dilemma was to masquerade as a man, treating gender in her text not as a stable category but rather as a rhetorical position” (78). An even stronger rejoinder to those who criticize Wollstonecraft for being masculinist in her first vindication is that Wollstonecraft does not blast all women with her criticism. Gunther-Canada contends that “Wollstonecraft repeatedly contrasted the diseased anatomy of the aristocracy to the healthy physique of the middle classes. At the center of her analysis was an attack on the twin evils of female degeneracy and male effeminacy, both of which she associated with the gender politics of

court culture” (85). Wollstonecraft was not attacking women *qua* women, but rather aristocratic women (and bourgeois women who “ape” their lifestyle) who have traded their public role for the blandishments of chivalric sensibility. That is, the issue of class over-rides that of gender. In my reading of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* I argue that the charge of misogyny is more justified, but here my explanation for Wollstonecraft’s supposedly “Amazonian” discourse is not that it is unconscious misogyny, or just a rhetorical position. Rather, I argue that Wollstonecraft uses seemingly anti-feminine sentiments and language *satirically*.

In this regard I would like to look a little more closely at a passage in the first vindication that often leaves critics flummoxed. It is a passage found at the climax of the work, and it is actually the punctuation, rather than the words, that are noteworthy. Wollstonecraft writes, addressing Burke, “You mourn for the empty pageant of a name, when slavery flaps her wing, and the sick heart retires to die in lonely wilds, far from the abodes of men” (*Vindication* I 57). “Such misery,” Wollstonecraft asserts accusingly, “demands more than tears” (*Vindication* I 58). Here Wollstonecraft’s text dramatically breaks off, followed by a line of dashes to insinuate that the author is overcome by emotion. The critics that notice this passage proffer different explanations for this break in the text. Gunther-Canada describes it as a moment in which Wollstonecraft reveals her sensibility and her gender, suggesting an identity crisis (89-90). Virginia Sapiro characterizes it as Wollstonecraft dramatically performing her own silencing by feminized discourse (205). Gary Kelly argues that it is meant to show Wollstonecraft’s authentic feelings, in contradistinction to Burke’s hysterical rhetoric (99). My explanation is that in this passage Wollstonecraft was satirizing the appropriation of the

feminine by the patriarchal order by pretending to be a man who breaks down in tears while trying to make an argument. With her dramatic dashes, Wollstonecraft may have even been making a clever allusion to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, one of the classics of the sentimental canon, which employs many such typographical illustrations for satirical effect. Granted, not many got Wollstonecraft's joke, but contemporaneous readers and reviewers of the second edition (in which Wollstonecraft revealed she was the author) did see the irony of a woman impersonating a man to attack a man for being too much like a woman.<sup>10</sup>

Reading the entire vindication as a satire of the effeminized misogyny that is at the dark heart of chivalric sensibility, and Wollstonecraft's inversion of gendered terms as ironic, goes some way towards explaining why a radical feminist writer would supposedly betray her own gender. It also might help explain why none of her contemporaries, male or female, took Wollstonecraft to task for misogyny in her first vindication—although reviewers did take umbrage for her presumption, as a woman, to lecture men on issues beyond her ken. Quite a few other critics of Burke in the Revolution controversy followed Wollstonecraft's lead by highlighting how Burke used sensibility to cloak the patriarchal arrangements of society with “pleasing illusions.” Thomas Paine would be the best example of this line of attack, epitomized by his famous assertion that in his *Reflections* Burke “pities the *plumage*, but forgets the dying bird.” In Wollstonecraft's account, Burke is an effeminized rake at large within the public sphere, attempting with honeyed sentiments to seduce the nation into accepting the false compliments of paternalism. Burke, not she, is equivocal; men who adopt a feminine

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<sup>10</sup> Janet Todd, in her recent biography of Wollstonecraft, seems to “get the joke” about this passage and Wollstonecraft's tactical use of gender reversals for satiric effect: Todd calls it “comical” (163).

sensibility in order to hoodwink women, not women who impersonate men in order to point this out, who are “unsex’d.”

### **Gender, Publicity, and Separate Spheres**

In eighteenth-century Britain, gender difference was thought to be publically manifested and structured in terms of “separate spheres.” According to the thesis of separate spheres, men represented the public and women the private; that is, men had all the responsibility and power in the public sphere, but women were granted control over the domestic sphere. In actuality, in eighteenth-century Britain men lorded over both society and the home; it was a “separate but unequal” arrangement. Such a division played into the idea that men were stronger and more intelligent than women, better fitted by nature for public exertion, and that women were best left uneducated and weak because they “only” needed to raise children, manage the household, and keep their hard-working men sexually satisfied. Having no public duties (or rights), and no education, bourgeois women had little better to do than cultivate beauty and refinement, and narcissistically indulge their more extreme emotions, making them hyper-sensitive. Paternalistic men encouraged this emotional indulgence in women. So did novelists of sensibility.

Beth Elshtain notes that the idea of separate public and private spheres can be found as early as Aristotle and is at the heart of Western (Greco-Roman) tradition, but it was not until the eighteenth century that the separate spheres became gendered and cultural commentators began to see such a gendered division as “natural” (6). As

numerous critics have pointed out, Habermas's bourgeois public sphere uncritically concedes this gendered division. Moyra Haslett argues that "the model of 'separate spheres' in which men are associated with and situated within a public sphere, and women with a private sphere . . . dominated thinking about gender until, arguably, the late 1980s" (140). Following the general trend of new historicism in the academy in the 1980s and 1990s, feminist critics (particularly in history and in literature) have challenged and revised the separate spheres thesis, usually in the larger context of publicity. These critics claim that the separate spheres were never that separate.

For instance, Diane E. Boyd and Marta Kvande contend that it is simplistic to see the terms "public" and "private" as functioning monolithically in eighteenth-century Britain. "Neither term had a simple, single definition; not only did the terms shift in meaning over the period, but they also could be used in multiple senses and contexts. While it has been common for scholars and critics to appeal to a separate spheres paradigm to show the way in which women were restricted to the domestic and the private, such a paradigm does not adequately account for the realities of social behavior and experience for women or for men" (19). Similarly, Joan Landes sees "mutual imbrications of public and private" and claims that the "line between public and private is constantly being re-negotiated" in the eighteenth century (*Feminism, the Public, the Private* 3). Michael McKeon claims that "the interpenetrative conflation of the public and the private" is "characteristic of modernity" and of the public sphere (48).

Currently, feminist critics make use of the slippage between public and private to argue for political agency for women in eighteenth-century Britain. Linda Colley writes that "the conventional critical notion of separate spheres . . . immediately appears



problematic and inaccurate if approached through the contemporary writings of women” in the eighteenth century (3). She notes that during the eighteenth century, “at one and the same time, separate sexual spheres were being increasingly prescribed in theory, yet increasingly broken through in practice” (250). Some of the ways that women “broke through” to political agency were election canvassing, subscription campaigns, and patriotic activities such as clothing drives and collecting donations for the troops fighting on the Continent. Amanda Vickery lists additional arenas for female political agency in the eighteenth century, such as involvement in print culture, clubs and debating societies for ladies, community actions and parades, dissenting religion (in which women were sometimes allowed to preach), and in particular philanthropy. She lists these to back up her argument—made across a number of publications—that the idea of separate spheres in the eighteenth century, with the private assigned to women and the public to men, is a myth. She seeks to extend the “definition of the public sphere of politics further still to include the supposedly ‘private’ world of family connections and friendship networks— fora in which political ideas were debated and new social practices played out” (*Women, Privilege, and Power* 3).

However, Vickery acknowledges that it was mostly aristocratic or genteel women who participated in political activities in eighteenth-century Britain. That is, she is concerned with “the way rank, property, and inheritance [confers] de facto political power on privileged women,” and seemingly unconcerned about the lack of opportunity for middle and lower class women in the public sphere (*Women, Privilege, and Power* 2). My focus, by contrast, is bourgeois women, who had less opportunity for public engagement (because they had little by way of “rank, property, and inheritance”) and

were expected to conform to the separate spheres schema, which was largely the invention of bourgeois men. This includes men of the Commonwealthman tradition, who believed that the public practice of virtue was best left to bourgeois men, and bourgeois women could best serve the cause by raising conscientious children—which meant teaching them to conform assiduously to their assigned class and gender roles.<sup>11</sup> However, according to Wollstonecraft, aristocrats and plebeians could not benefit from this dispensation; the public practice of virtue was impossible for them. This Commonwealthman understanding of separate spheres, in the context of Wollstonecraft’s writings, raises the same sort of critical issues as those that are involved in the Commonwealthman use of gendered rhetoric (discussed above). When it came to class, Wollstonecraft was a Commonwealthman; but when it came to gender she was a Commonwealthwoman—another way in which she was “the first of a new genus.” In any case, the thesis of separate spheres bears heavily upon Wollstonecraft’s understanding of sensibility, as praxis and topic of debate in the public sphere. This is quite clear in her second vindication.

### *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft’s second vindication is often considered a sequel to the first. Wollstonecraft likely thought the same thing, as the similar title and her barely cloaked critique of Burke at the beginning of the second vindication would seem to indicate. As in her first vindication, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft exposes the

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<sup>11</sup> This attitude, according to Barker-Benfield, was expressed in the writings of James Burgh and Joseph Priestley, two of the prominent Commonwealthmen in eighteenth-century Britain, and both known to Wollstonecraft (41).

denigrating effects of chivalric sensibility on women. Mary Lyndon Shanley writes that “*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* analyzed the ways in which patriarchy was rooted in what Wollstonecraft called ‘sensibility’ and social mores; its goal was the reformation of manners in order to reeducate the passions and undermine the habits that sustained patriarchy” (355). In making such a critique Wollstonecraft unremittingly attacked paternalistic sensibility. In the final chapter of the *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft writes: “Another instance of that feminine weakness of character, often produced by a confined education, is a romantic twist of the mind, which has been very properly termed sentimental” (*Vindication* II 183). Wollstonecraft condemns such sentimental women, “who are amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists, who, knowing little of human nature, work up stale tales, and describe meretricious scenes, all retailed in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste, and draw the heart aside from its daily duties” (*Vindication* II 183).

But the main brunt of her criticism in her second vindication is directed not at the “stupid novelists” of sensibility (presumably women) but rather at the more insidious books written by men that inculcated female subservience in the name of “improvement” and refined sensibility. Drawing a good deal of her ire was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was perhaps the most dangerous advocate of sensibility in Wollstonecraft’s eyes because he seemed—particularly in his republican politics—the most progressive.

Wollstonecraft’s main issue with Rousseau is that he would “degrade woman by making her the slave of love,” by which Wollstonecraft means a slave of her super-refined, often tortuous, feelings (*Vindication* II 91). At certain points in her life, Wollstonecraft was such a slave; she even claims, in her correspondence, that for much of her adult life she

had been half in love with Rousseau, and she praises him in a number of her reviews for the *Analytical Review* (*Collected Letters* 263).<sup>12</sup> However, in her second vindication Wollstonecraft is quite sparing in her praise for Rousseau. She concludes that his sensibility was not that much different than Burke's. Though on the opposite end of the political spectrum, Rousseau like Burke was a philosophical rake. Both writers used the language of sensibility to seduce women into accepting what in fact degraded them, and did so on behalf of "social harmony." Both writers made it seem reasonable to bar all women from participation in the public sphere, because their sex, and their sexuality, supposedly made them unfit for public debate.

In her second vindication, Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau takes up the bulk of the chapter entitled "Animadversions on Some Writers." That chapter functions very much like the kind of book reviews she wrote for the *Analytical Review*—the book being, in this case, *Émile*—abstracting long passages, accompanied by her critical exegesis. She focuses not upon *Émile* but upon Sophie, *Émile*'s consort. Rousseau depicts her as a creature that is both complaisant and cunning, but only to the extent that her man wants her to be. Wollstonecraft quotes him:

Hence we deduce [another] consequence from the different constitutions of the sexes; which is, that the strongest should be master in appearance, and be dependent in fact on the weakest; and that not from any frivolous practice of gallantry . . . but from an invariable law of nature, which, furnishing woman with

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<sup>12</sup> According to the attributions established by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler in their collection of Wollstonecraft's reviews for the *Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft published six reviews relating to works by Rousseau (*Confessions* Part II), or works that deal substantially with Rousseau (such as the memoirs of Baroness de Staël), from 1788 to 1791. All these reviews assess Rousseau in positive terms.

a greater facility to excite desires than she has given man to satisfy them, makes the latter dependent on the good pleasure of the former. (*Vindication* II 78)

According to Rousseau, then, women use their “feminine charms,” their beauty and their perceived weakness, to control men through the offering and withholding of sex. The cultivation of exquisite feeling is also the responsibility of women, and this too they supposedly use to attract and keep men. Rousseau asserts that girls should be taught how this hyper-emotional, sexualized and gendered system of sexual separate spheres works. Wollstonecraft argues that “these fundamental principles lead to a system of cunning and lasciviousness,” and that this kind of education—or rather false consciousness—is “a school for coquetry and art,” in which girls are taught to listen to compliments rather than instruction (78, 81). Thus, as Johnson puts it, Wollstonecraft’s “strategy in *Rights of Woman* is . . . to discredit chivalric sentimentality for concurring to an intolerable equivocality of gender and power. She exposes it as a ruse, in effect as a sort of drag show whereby queens perversely become tyrants, kings become queens, and men conceal the grossness of their power beneath the skirts of the beautiful” (34-35).

Wollstonecraft suggests that, for Rousseau, mindless, unthinking women were more desirable than those who cultivate and use their reason. This, supposedly, is because thinking women—as opposed to *feeling* women—would abscond from their “natural” domestic role, which would threaten social order. For Wollstonecraft this is paternalism and Rousseau’s chivalric sensibility is integral to it. “Sensibility,” for Rousseau’s perfect woman, “is nurtured at the expence of the understanding,” making her weak and dependent (*Vindication* II 90). Wollstonecraft acknowledges that women should be educated to be good wives and mothers, but seriously doubts that Rousseau’s proposed

“sensible” education for women—which includes instruction in the “wanton arts of the mistress, termed virtuous coquetry”—will achieve these ends (*Vindication* II 91). The separate sphere to which Rousseau designates women can only retard and blight their development into virtuous individuals. Without the development of reason, even if they are good wifely companions and mothers, women remain “immured in their families groping in the dark” (*Vindication* II 5). They can have no knowledge of civil affairs, and take no part in the public sphere; their super-refined sensibility leaves no room for such mental excursions and incursions.

Though their sensibility makes them unfit for participation in the public sphere, women must submit at all times to public opinion. Rousseau writes that women must “remain either under subjection to the men, or to the opinions of mankind; and are never permitted to set themselves above those opinions” (83). These are, Wollstonecraft argues, truly the “opinions of *mankind*”: women have no part in it. What is more, for Wollstonecraft, Rousseau’s public opinion is not the same as publicity. Rather than the product of informed and rational discussion in the public sphere, it functions much more like Burke’s prejudice. Habermas makes this distinction himself in his own discussion of Rousseau: “Public opinion had the form of common sense. It was dispersed through a people in the form of prejudices” (120). Wollstonecraft likens public opinion to Procrustes’s bed, “the iron bed of fate,” in which women are mentally (and physically) mutilated in order to fit the preconceptions of men (*Vindication* II 79). When it came to women, Rousseau’s public opinion was really public prescription, and its purpose was the subjection of women under paternalism.

In her second vindication, Wollstonecraft resisted opinion-as-prejudice, threw a wrench in the mutilating machinery of male-defined gender roles, and broke out of the immurement of women in the private and the domestic. The literature of chivalric sensibility epitomized by Rousseau encouraged super-refined emotionality, the cultivation of prejudice, strictly separate spheres and gender roles. It vouchsafed power to women, but only in the domestic realm (the kitchen, the nursery, the bedroom); women who tried to escape their silken fetters, who “unsex’d” themselves, were forcibly returned to their place or permanently removed from it. Wollstonecraft would have none of it. Raising children, and instilling in them patriotic values, was public work. Wollstonecraft writes in her dedication: “If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations” (*Vindication* II 4).

According to Wollstonecraft, then, to be a good mother and citizen a woman needs to engage publicity in some way; to fulfill this duty, she needs to be educated properly, reading books of history and science rather than novels of sensibility, and she needs to be able to participate in public debates that intimately concern her and other women. Wollstonecraft writes elsewhere in her vindication: “I have endeavoured to shew that private duties are never properly fulfilled unless the understanding enlarges the heart; and that public virtue is only an aggregate of private” (*Vindication* II 192). Women need understanding that “enlarges the heart,” or a rationalized, civic sensibility, which is oriented to the public sphere. Johnson argues that “maternity as Wollstonecraft sees it

entails no insurmountable division of the public and private spheres. . . . The duties of maternity . . . do not block women from participating in civic life any more than the equally important duties of fatherhood customarily inhibit men's circulation in the public sphere" (48). The public sphere as Wollstonecraft conceives it in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is not just where men go to use their reason to protect their domestic interests (including their wives and children), but a sphere where patriotic wives and mothers go to educate themselves and help shape their world. It is precisely because they are mothers, and educators of children, that women should be assigned a space within the public sphere.<sup>13</sup>

What Wollstonecraft proposed in *The Rights of Woman* was a civic sensibility for women. Women needed to cultivate their hearts and minds, rather than pamper their bodies and pander to their passions, as in novels of sensibility. Women should be encouraged to cultivate a sense of benevolence which is directed universally, rather than towards kith and kin—and paramours—exclusively. Sapiro contends that Wollstonecraft's "brief to women was that they must not be embedded only in the family and domestic, particularist concerns because public spirit is the foundation on which private affections become truly virtuous. Their affections must be expanded outward to include 'universal benevolence'" (178). Mitzi Myers similarly claims that in her second vindication "Wollstonecraft aggrandizes, heroizes the maternal mission, elevating woman's status by making her familial roles the linchpin of a new society. Although she does not suggest that woman's only possible place is the home, motherhood provides a pervasive rationale for better education, as well as for civil existence and work" ("Reform

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<sup>13</sup> This claim is also, as Claudia Johnson points out, contra many of her allies in the dissenting reform movement, including Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, and, as we will see, William Godwin (25).



or Ruin” 210).<sup>14</sup> This makes Wollstonecraft’s civic sensibility an expression of British republicanism. It reflects Wollstonecraft’s adherence to the dissenting, Commonwealthman tradition, which idealized the republican, civil humanist values of the mid-seventeenth-century interregnum in Britain.<sup>15</sup>

Wollstonecraft’s republican civic sensibility needs to be distinguished from what Joan Landes calls “republican motherhood,” which derives from French republicanism.<sup>16</sup> Landes writes: “According to the logic of republican motherhood, woman’s major political task was to instill her children with patriotic duty. It followed, then, that the home could serve as the nursery of the state” (*Women and the Public Sphere* 138). Novels of sensibility, needless to say, were unwelcome in the “nursery of the state.” Says Landes: “If women are to be good mothers and good household managers, old habits of sensibility must be destroyed. In this respect, Wollstonecraft shares Rousseau’s suspicions of women, though she aims to portray women as victims of false education rather than as inferior creatures of nature” (*Women and the Public Sphere* 132). In her account Landes makes the case that republican motherhood was predicated on a strict separation of private and public spheres, and reflects republican ideology following the French Revolution.<sup>17</sup> Landes observes that the price of a virtuous public,

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<sup>14</sup> In *Romanticism and Gender*, Anne Mellor makes a similar claim. She maintains that Wollstonecraft advocated rational, egalitarian “‘family politics’ as a political program that would radically transform the public sphere” by “invoking a new political program, one that would inexorably change the existing systems of patriarchy and primogeniture” (84).

<sup>15</sup> What I call “civic sensibility” is a feminist version of civic humanism, as described by J. G. A. Pocock in “Civic Humanism and its Role in Anglo-American Thought” (chapter 3 in *Politics, Language, and Time*), and qualified by Isaac Kramnick in *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism*. For civic humanism in the context of art, see John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*. Sapiro discusses Barrell and civic humanism in relation to Wollstonecraft’s first vindication, in *A Vindication of Political Virtue*, 208-210.

<sup>16</sup> Both French republicanism and British Commonwealthman republicanism enshrined the concept of separate spheres based on gender. On this topic see G. J. Barker-Benfield, “Mary Wollstonecraft: Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthwoman.”

<sup>17</sup> This is the understanding that governed the thinking of Talleyrand-Perigord in his proposal for separate-

according to Rousseau, “is the silencing of women, their banishment to the domestic sphere” (*Women and the Public Sphere* 89). This republican separation of private and public spheres, Landes asserts, makes the public sphere inescapably masculinist. This might be true of French republicanism, and the French public sphere following the revolution, but it does not apply to Wollstonecraft, whose formulation of civic sensibility is based on very different models of republicanism and publicity.<sup>18</sup>

Barbara Taylor has her own answer to the contention that Wollstonecraft hates women in her second vindication. Taylor claims that Wollstonecraft was targeting aristocratic women, not all women; in other words it was class rather than gender that motivated her critique of the kind of women found in many novels of sensibility. Taylor writes:

The specific issue of Wollstonecraft’s misogyny is clearer [when] we see that it was the eroticized lady of fashion at whom her hostility was largely directed, as it was in the writings of most bourgeois moralists, male and female. Along with the ideological mileage to be gained by such sentiments, there were important social factors contributing to them. The first chapter of the *Rights of Woman* denounced the spread of “false refinement” from the aristocracy to the middle class, and particularly to newly affluent women who now, Wollstonecraft writes, “all want to be ladies,” that is, to ape the leisured lifestyle of the rich in place of the modest, work- and home-oriented lives of the traditional middling orders. (505).

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sex education in the French Republic. In her dedication to Talleyrand-Perigord in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft rebuts his proposal. Shanley notes: “The belief that men and women would (and, further, should) occupy separate spheres and perform wholly different tasks resulted in their receiving quite distinct educations, and led to the corruption that Wollstonecraft deplored” (356).

<sup>18</sup> For the view that Wollstonecraft is masculinist in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, see Mary Jacobus, “The Difference in View”; Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (chapter 2); Cora Kaplan, “Pandora’s Box,” and, for the most strident (and borderline misogynist) formulation of Wollstonecraft’s misogyny, see Susan Gubar’s “Feminist Misogyny.”

Wollstonecraft seeks to counter this gentrification, and the role the literature of sensibility plays in it, in her second vindication. Distinguishing bourgeois from aristocratic women was vital to this effort.<sup>19</sup>

Orrin Wang would also likely contest Landes's charge that Wollstonecraft was masculinist. In his deconstructionist reading of her second vindication, Wang convincingly shows that Wollstonecraft disrupts "the gendered identity of reason as a masculine identity defined by its difference from an emotional feminine alterity" (121). Instead, Wollstonecraft's text "preempts" this gendered binary "by destabilizing the opposition between reason and the host of terms the text contrasts with reason" and doing similar things with sensibility (124). As such, he concludes that "the moral is the dialectical limit reason and passion impose on each other's perceptual powers" (138). As we will see in my discussion of *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft continued to experiment with this practice of slippage until the end of her life.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is often described as a treatise on female education, which I will not deny.<sup>20</sup> But it is also a primer on civic sensibility.

Wollstonecraft presses upon women the need to use their reason and aptitude for benevolence to inculcate in children their political and public duties, and to participate in public debates themselves. It was on behalf of this campaign that Wollstonecraft sought

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<sup>19</sup> And what of those who claim Wollstonecraft is too feminine, or too sentimental, in *The Rights of Woman*? McCann writes that "despite its well documented attempt to repress the feminine, it remains, by its own account of flawed femininity, a persistently 'feminine' text, in its rehearsal of sentimental, proto-Romantic language very similar at times to the sentimental ideology for which she so roundly criticized Burke in *Vindication of the Rights of Men*" (151). Barbara Taylor agrees that "the *Rights of Woman* is often as florid as the 'sickly' writings it condemns—and as emotive in its readerly address" (52). However she goes on to say that "a romantic eloquence that is explicitly repudiated becomes Wollstonecraft's implicit rhetorical strategy" (52).

<sup>20</sup> R. M. Janes points out that reviewers initially considered the second vindication "as a sensible treatise on female education," and ignored its more controversial political positions. That is, they downplayed the work by categorizing it as a work of the domestic sphere, as opposed to a work of the public sphere. This was a politically motivated interpretation that I oppose in my own argument. See "On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*."

to dismantle of gendered binaries, which prevented the unfettered praxis of publicity for both women and men.

### **The Confluence of Sensibility, Publicity, and Romanticism in *A Short Residence***

*Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* is a book of travels in the form of a series of sentimental letters supposedly written while Wollstonecraft was traveling through Scandinavia on business at the behest of her estranged lover, Gilbert Imlay.<sup>21</sup> In its day, the work was very popular and admired for its expression of sensibility. This is odd, because the moments of sensibility in the work are few and far between—brief interludes in a highly polemical text. Wollstonecraft opined and argued about many of the things she saw on her journey, comparing Scandinavia to more developed regions of Europe, touting the republican ideals permeating the hinterlands, chronicling the eclipse of the aristocracy, and warning of the corrupting power of commerce—which Wollstonecraft called “a species of gambling” (143). As Caroline Franklin points out, many of Wollstonecraft’s pronouncements were controversial, but neither she nor the work were considered as such (164). Mary Heng notes that the feminist republican Wollstonecraft should have drawn more criticism at a time (1796) in which political reaction was in the ascendant. Heng’s explanation:

Wollstonecraft recognized that her social position and political ostracism placed constraints on her rhetorical power. Under siege and alone, she did what

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<sup>21</sup> Per Nyström gives the most comprehensive account of the business investigations and negotiations involved in the trip, which until his article in 1980 were generally not discussed (due to lack of information) in works on Wollstonecraft. Richard Holmes, in the introduction to his edition of *Short Residence*, gives perhaps the most readable summary of Nyström’s findings. For more see Nyström’s *Mary Wollstonecraft’s Scandinavian Journey*.

nonconformist writers have long done: she went underground, and quite successfully. *A Short Residence in Sweden* essentially is a primer for subversive texts, in which the author not only escaped personal attack but also earned praise, notoriety, and social acceptance. (295)

In other words, Wollstonecraft used a popular mode—sensibility—to obscure her politics and her criticism of “things as they are.”

But Wollstonecraft was doing more with sensibility than just using it as a cover for her reformist politics during a reactionary period: she was attempting to separate sensibility from polemics, which actually makes *A Short Residence* quite polemical. She both attacks and recuperates some aspects of chivalric sensibility, and some aspects of civic sensibility. *A Short Residence* evinces a divided author and a divided book.

However, Wollstonecraft was well aware of this division and for the first time embraced her “unsex’d” public persona. She saw the benefits of incorporating into her sensibility balanced binaries such as political and conservative, male and female, public and private. That is, in the last work she published in her lifetime, Wollstonecraft began to delineate a new hybridized kind of Romantic sensibility that, instead of assigning one kind of sensibility to the private sphere and the opposite kind to the public sphere, acted as a bridge between them. Instead of utilizing sensibility polemically, she suggested using it to heal the divisions of her time, avoiding the extremes of a reactionary domesticity and a contentious, dysfunctional publicity.

As already mentioned, *A Short Residence* is both travelogue and epistolary narrative in the sentimental vein, making it, in terms of genre, a hybrid work. In that it is a public narrative comprised of purportedly private letters, it is also a hybrid in terms of

medium and publicity. Habermas notes that “in the age of sentimentality letters were containers for the ‘outpourings of the heart’” (49). He argues that as the basis of epistolary sentimental fictions, letters were an important part of the process by which the British bourgeoisie developed the subjectivity and critical reasoning skills needed to confront the state in the public sphere. Mary Favret claims that in the 1790s, “the letter had, in fact, become a phenomenally useful political tool, available to anyone with a pen. . . . What the individual writes, the masses read; experience is translated from the private to the public domain, and back again” (9). Elizabeth Cook argues that epistolary fictions show “how the thematic of the domestic and the erotic can be made to encode and even to regulate ostensibly public matters; in the inverted structures of epistolary narrative the private is thoroughly colonized by the public” (177). Similarly, Moira Haslett remarks that “it is in epistolary fiction . . . that the paradoxical necessity that the ‘private’ be ‘publicised’ is most apparent” (112). Where I differ with these critics is in regards to the public standing of the letter in epistolary fictions. Such correspondence facilitated communication between public and private, but it was not public or private per se; it inhabited and helped delineate a zone of negotiation between the two.

The hybrid nature of the work, in terms of genre, medium, and publicity was likely a factor in the hybrid sensibility presented in *A Short Residence*. In his memoirs, Godwin extols this sensibility in Wollstonecraft’s work: “Perhaps a book of travels that so irresistibly seizes on the heart, never, in any other instance, found its way from the press. . . . If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book” (249).<sup>22</sup> Conger notes that “*Letters in Sweden* marks . . .

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<sup>22</sup> Deborah Weiss makes a very strong case that Godwin’s sentimentalization of Wollstonecraft—his project in his memoirs of Wollstonecraft and in his edition of Wollstonecraft’s posthumous works—is

Wollstonecraft's complete and newly self-conscious return to the ethics and aesthetics of sensibility" (147). She continues: "In *Letters in Sweden*, Wollstonecraft is neither shy, as she is in *Mary*, nor equivocal, as she is in *Rights of Men*, about her allegiance to sensibility. She declares an end to the war she launches against it in *Rights of Woman* and emphasizes anew its psychological benefits" (148). Poovey, who cites Wollstonecraft's previous forays into sensibility as evidence of false consciousness, contends that Wollstonecraft finally got it right in *A Short Residence*. In this work, "Wollstonecraft openly appeals . . . to her reader's emotions because for the first time she openly acknowledges the primacy of her own feelings and the power of those feelings to engage and persuade" (83). What Godwin, Conger, and Poovey do not make clear is that Wollstonecraft's re-engagement with sensibility was highly ambivalent. In her new appreciation of sensibility, she incorporated elements of both chivalric and civic sensibility—not in an effort to close the gap between them, to decide the matter once and for all, but rather in an attempt to transcend their differences.

In an appendix to *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft admitted that her intention was to consider "the grand causes which combine to carry mankind forward, and diminish the sum of human misery" (198). That is, she was still motivated by universal benevolence, and civic sensibility. She notes that "the meliorating manners of Europe" have brought much improvement to the condition of the Scandinavian countries. However, "innumerable evils still remain . . . to afflict the humane investigator, and hurry the benevolent reformer into a labyrinth of error, who aims at destroying prejudices

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essentially chivalric (199-203). By focusing on her suffering and her super-refined emotionality, and downplaying her intellectual development, Godwin turns Wollstonecraft into the type of sentimental heroine that both Burke and Rousseau would applaud. As I argue in this section, however, Godwin's project was not necessarily Wollstonecraft's; her sensibility was more nuanced than Godwin suggests.

quickly which only time can root out, as the public opinion becomes subject to reason” (199). This becomes a major motif in *A Short Residence*: cultural advancement takes time and reformers often make matters worse by being precipitate. No doubt she had the French Revolution in mind when reaching this conclusion.

*A Short Residence* reveals other moments of ambivalence in regards to the effect of the French Revolution on the physical and moral improvement of Europeans. Wollstonecraft notes, for instance, that the Norwegians “love their country, but have not much public spirit. Their exertions are, generally speaking, only for their families; which I conceive will always be the case, till politics, becoming a subject of discussion, enlarges the heart by opening the understanding. The French revolution will have this effect” (103). But, in other passages, she has her doubts. In their general introduction to *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler reference Wollstonecraft’s approval of the pro-republican, pro-French sympathies of common Norwegians in the work. Wollstonecraft writes that “they sing, at present, with great glee, many republican songs, and seem earnestly to wish that the republic may stand” (103). Yet Wollstonecraft says of the same people that they are non-political, and “appear very much attached to their prince royal” (103). Todd and Butler write that Norway, as Wollstonecraft describes it, “is a country of smallholdings, which leads locally to a form of republicanism in which mayors and judges, [Wollstonecraft] notes approvingly, ‘exercise a form of authority almost patriarchal’” (20). Wollstonecraft does not use the word “republican” to describe these men, and her use of the word “patriarchal” suggests a friendlier attitude towards paternalism. Wollstonecraft does find impressions of “the cloven foot of despotism”—in the form of a corrupt court—in the capital of Norway, Christiania, and later in



Copenhagen, but this is offset by a more positive attitude towards aristocrats outside the major cities. In general, her message seems to be that the Scandinavians have the potential for an egalitarian society, republican government, and universal benevolence in the form of civic sensibility—but had not yet realized it.

Wollstonecraft makes the case that the class most responsible for holding back Scandinavia was the one that should have led the charge: the bourgeoisie. That is because the Scandinavian bourgeoisie was obsessed with getting rich. Conger claims that in *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft “sees sensibility as the chief protagonist in a general struggle over the human spirit: it nurtures progress, the refinement of manners, the improvement of minds and social institutions. Its antagonist is sensuality, but sensuality now in the specific modern form of middle class commerce” (149). In the second half of her book Wollstonecraft repeatedly excoriates commerce and those involved in trade. As anti-commerce Cassandra, Wollstonecraft claims that “a man ceases to love humanity, and then individuals, as he advances in the chase after wealth; as one clashes with his interest, the other with his pleasures: to business, as it is termed, every thing must give way; nay, is sacrificed; and all the endearing charities of citizen, husband, father, brother, become empty names” (193). As commentators are wont to point out, Wollstonecraft condemned the business practices of republicans such as her former lover Gilbert Imlay, whose “business interests” (smuggling and gun-running) precipitated Wollstonecraft’s journey, and she implied that this was yet another way in which the French Revolution had gone off course. As her words above make clear, Wollstonecraft found commerce and civic sensibility to be profoundly incompatible. She even goes so far as to claim that “the tyranny of wealth is still more galling and debasing than that of rank” (150).

It should come as no surprise, then, that in *A Short Residence* rank—or more generally aristocracy—is reappraised in positive terms. Indeed, Wollstonecraft seems to endorse certain aspects of Burkean prejudice and chivalric sensibility. Wollstonecraft writes that “the great [aristocrats], who alone travel, in this period of society, for the observation of manners and customs made by sailors is very confined, bring home improvement to promote their own comfort, which is gradually spread abroad amongst the people, till they are stimulated to think for themselves” (119). The person of the aristocrat circulating through the people communicates political, social, aesthetic ideas, rather than the rationalist bourgeois in the public sphere. This “trickle-down” conception of culture seems to reverse Wollstonecraft’s previous association of harmful prejudice with the aristocracy: now the benighted sailors and farmers of Norway suffer because of their ignorance, and the aristocrats, by means of a strategic use of prejudice, “enlighten” them. Wollstonecraft thus grants the aristocracy—at least the Scandinavian equivalent—a role in social advancement.

At the same time, there is something nostalgic and melancholic about Wollstonecraft’s rendering of prejudice in *A Short Residence*, suggesting that the aristocratic hegemony in Europe was no more. In a number of passages, Wollstonecraft relates her tours of the abandoned residences of church officials, aristocrats, and royals in Scandinavia, suggesting that the ceremonial publicity of the state—a key component of chivalric sensibility—had become spectral. For instance, after Wollstonecraft visited the Rosenborg palace in Copenhagen, she wrote: “This palace, now deserted, displays a gloomy kind of grandeur throughout . . . and I listen for the sound of my footsteps, as I have done at midnight to the ticking of the death-watch, encouraging a kind of fanciful

superstition. Every object carried me back to past times, and impressed the manners of the age forcibly on my mind. In this point of view the preservation of old palaces, and their tarnished furniture, is useful; for they may be considered as historical documents” (175). As historical documents, Wollstonecraft suggests, the piles of the powerful have much to contribute to an understanding of the past, and to the arrangements of civil society in the present. But this only became possible after the aristocracy had lost its way and its sway, after ceremonial publicity had become mere pageantry, and chivalric sensibility an instructive kind of nostalgia.

In *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft hails the republican sentiments of the plebs, condemns the greed of the bourgeois, and offers an olive branch to the aristocracy. This makes her seem ambivalent, and her text conflicted, particularly when compared to her more strident pronouncements in her vindications. She seems equally confused in regards to sensibility, finding fault with civic sensibility and discovering positive social uses of aristocratic ceremonial publicity. However, unlike in her vindications, Wollstonecraft seems well aware of her ambivalence and strives to make it productive. This ambivalence provides an inchoate discursive space, and a sensibility, that transcends the divisions of class, politics, and ideology and breaks down the public-private binary. In this way, Wollstonecraft embraces her hybrid nature, and a hybrid view of society, that is not just “unsex’d” but also “unclass’d,” and “unpubliciz’d.”

Wollstonecraft does this most dramatically in her descriptions of the sublime and the beautiful in *A Short Residence*. A number of critics have focused on Wollstonecraft’s expropriation of ideas presented by Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* and their close connection to sensibility in *A*

*Short Residence*. Todd, for instance, records that “Wollstonecraft’s letter writer [in *A Short Residence*] showed herself moved by Burke’s version of the sublime, the sense of mystery in nature, the obscure but definite affinity of the solitary searching soul with the animated wildness outside” (“Enlightenment Desire” 347). In Norway, Wollstonecraft engages the sublime when she visits a waterfall near Frederickstad. She writes: “The tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited, were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose, with renewed dignity, above its cares—grasping at immortality—it seemed impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me—I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come” (153). Such passages also show Wollstonecraft’s debt to Burke’s version of the beautiful. However, she pointedly does not distinguish it from the sublime:

What misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and the sublime, when it is exercised in observing animated nature, when every beautiful feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the harmonized soul sinks into melancholy, or rises to ecstasy, just as the chords are touched, like the Aeolian harp agitated by the changing wind. But how dangerous is it to foster these sentiments in such an imperfect state of existence; and how difficult to eradicate them when an affection for mankind, a passion for an individual, is but the unfolding of that love which embraces all that is great and beautiful. (9)

For Wollstonecraft in *A Short Residence*, the beautiful and the sublime are nearly interchangeable, and each melds into the other. Her sensibility is dependent on both, and on their dialectical coexistence.

Wollstonecraft also re-casts Burke's aesthetics by degendering ("unsex'ing") the sublime and the beautiful. A number of critics have discussed the "unsex'd" Wollstonecraft in *A Short Residence*, and particularly how she identifies with the masculine sublime.<sup>23</sup> According to John Whale, *A Short Residence* indicates Wollstonecraft's "involvement with the masculine aesthetic of the Romantic sublime and its capacity to operate at the expense of woman" (170). Whale describes one nature scene in particular: "A reverie over the tranquil sea-scape of Tonsberg culminates in a sublime crescendo which is the type of the classic scene of subjection to the figure of the father.... Paradoxically, out of this sublime obeisance or subjection, Wollstonecraft announces a defiant new subjectivity, as she self-consciously identifies with the literature of sensibility" (172). However, I do not see obeisance to a masculine sublime in *A Short Residence*, but instead a male-female hybridity. That is, Wollstonecraft inflects the sublime with femininity, disassociating it from its strictly masculine Burkean sense; and she inflects the beautiful with masculinity, also reversing Burke's categories. Then going further, Wollstonecraft relates this "unsex'd" beautiful/sublime binary to the public/private binary embedded in Burke's chivalric sensibility, destabilizing this binary as well. These transpositions trouble the identification of sensibility with either privacy or publicity, with either chivalry or civic involvement. Aristocratic ceremonial publicity is vitiated by private effusions; private effusions are inflected by a newly efficacious sense

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<sup>23</sup> Deborah Weiss notes "the prevailing tendency to separate feeling from philosophy in analyses of *Short Residence*," and how these two categories are usually assigned to different genders (female and male respectively) (203 n8). She cites Mary Favret's *Romantic Correspondence* in this regard, as well as Carol Huebscher Rhoades, who writes of Wollstonecraft's "non-gendered" sublime. Weiss also mentions a more recent tendency to see *A Short Residence* as "unsex'd," as combining (and vexing) masculine and feminine qualities. This tendency, it should be clear, characterizes this chapter. For more on this topic, see Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*; and Patricia Yaeger, "Toward a Feminine Sublime."

of prejudice. Wollstonecraft has traveled beyond both chivalrous and civic sensibility to arrive at a compromise which utilizes elements of both.

Along with Burke's, the spectral presence of Rousseau can be discerned in *A Short Residence*. It is Rousseau the author of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, and the wounded sensibility he displays in that work, that engage Wollstonecraft in *A Short Residence*. Favret writes that "as another stage in Wollstonecraft's lifelong dialogue with the works of Rousseau, the *Letters from Sweden* replay the themes of the solitary walker: the search for the source of human happiness, the stoic rejection of material goods, the ecstatic embrace of nature, and the essential role of sentiment in understanding" (104). Caroline Franklin notes that like Rousseau Wollstonecraft "paints herself as the melancholy genius whose extreme sensibility is too overwrought for repose" (160). In numerous places in her writings, Wollstonecraft condemns Rousseau for his super-refined sensibility, and for foisting it upon women. This, as you will recall, was the basis for Wollstonecraft's claim that the republican Rousseau, like Burke, promulgated a form of chivalric sensibility.

In *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft occasionally wallows in super-refined sensibility, suggesting that she had become a woman in the Rousseauvian mode, and a late convert to chivalric sensibility. For instance, Wollstonecraft writes: "Let me catch pleasure on the wing—I may be melancholy to-morrow. Now all my nerves keep time with the melody of nature. Ah! let me be happy whilst I can. The tear starts as I think of it. I must fly from thought, and find refuge from sorrow in a strong imagination—the only solace for a feeling heart. Phantoms of bliss! ideal forms of excellence! again enclose me in your magic circle, and wipe clear from my remembrance the

disappointments which render the sympathy painful” (128-129). Reason cannot save her; she must flee from thought. In this passage, she seems equally skeptical of imagination, which she likens to phantoms and falsehood. Her feelings bring her pain, but try as she might she cannot escape them. She resembles the super-refined female slave that Rousseau describes.

However there are other passages in the work that suggest that it is not really escape from feelings or from thought that Wollstonecraft seeks; rather she attempts to exploit the slippage between rationality and sentimentality to strike a balance between the two, to initiate dialogue. In Wollstonecraft’s most succinct articulation of this position in *A Short Residence*, she writes: “We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel” (171).

Throughout the work she suggests that the converse is also true: “We forcibly feel, when we reason deeply.” Once again, as Wang says of Wollstonecraft’s second vindication, “the moral is the dialectical limit reason and passion impose on each other’s perceptual powers” (138). Such passages in *A Short Residence* indicate that an analytical self-consciousness about feelings, combined with “the melody of nature”—a solitary immersion in the natural world that offers an opportunity for emotional catharsis—makes feelings much less pernicious in their capacity to oppress women.

In her second vindication, Wollstonecraft berated Rousseau (in works such as *Discourse on Inequality*) for his claim that humans develop their true selves in solitude rather than in society (13-17). Her objection was based on Rousseau’s gendering of solitude and society, with men finding freedom in a state of nature, and women being forever subject to public opinion. This makes solitude integral to Rousseau’s version of chivalric sensibility. In a number of passages in *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft seems

to subscribe to Rousseau's position. In her first letter, Wollstonecraft echoes Rousseau's anti-social attitude expressed at the beginning of *Reveries*. Wollstonecraft writes: "How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proved unkind. I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind" (69).<sup>24</sup>

But then, like Rousseau, she continues to aspire to community, in the form of Rousseau's state-of-nature "golden age." In a paean to the small farmers of Norway, she writes: "The description I received of them carried me back to the fables of the golden age: independence and virtue; affluence without vice; cultivation of mind, without depravity of heart; with 'ever smiling liberty', the nymph of the mountain.—I want faith! My imagination hurries me forward to seek an asylum in such a retreat from all the disappointments I am threatened with; but reason drags me back" (149).<sup>25</sup> Once again, she seeks "asylum" from her "disappointments" but is dragged back by her reason. But it is important to note that in this passage imagination provides escape but is not *an* escape: imagination is an intermediary between private and public spheres, as well as between feeling and reason.

In *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft attempts to show that solitude and civic engagement work in tandem. She claims to be "more and more convinced that a metropolis, or an abode absolutely solitary, is the best calculated for the improvement of

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<sup>24</sup> Compare Wollstonecraft's statement with the one that begins *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*: "So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbor or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest. With all the ingenuity of hate they have sought out the cruelest torture for my sensitive soul" (27).

<sup>25</sup> Letter 9 and letter 1 also mention Rousseau's golden age. In letter 1, as in letter 14 (quoted above), the reference is positive. In letter 9 she speaks of "Rousseau's golden age of stupidity" to say that happiness is not found in "unconscious ignorance" but in "the high-wrought mind" (122). Wollstonecraft is clearly torn between Rousseau's vision of community in nature and the refined society typically found in more developed countries, and in urban environments.



the heart, as well as the understanding; whether we desire to become acquainted with man, nature, or ourselves. Mixing with mankind, we are obliged to examine our prejudices, and often imperceptibly lose, as we analyze them” (79). Elsewhere she writes: “My thoughts fly from this wilderness to the polished circles of the world, till recollecting its vices and follies, I bury myself in the woods, but find it necessary to emerge again, that I may not lose sight of the wisdom and virtue that exalts my nature” (122). She finds solace by burying herself in the woods, but she finds virtue by frequenting “polished circles”: one is not possible without the other. In the state of nature there is no male or female; there is instead a sublime solitude of which all, of whatever gender, can partake. Like the sublime and the beautiful, Wollstonecraft “unsex’d” solitude and society.

This might be interpreted as a movement from privacy to publicity, and back again, without disturbing the gendered associations affixed to these terms. But this, I maintain, is not generally the case in *A Short Residence*. Wollstonecraft might bury herself in the woods, but she would not immure herself in the family. The private sphere as limned in *A Short Residence* is not equivalent to the feminine domestic sphere, nor is the public sphere equivalent to a masculine zone of rational debate. Similarly, the distinction between chivalric and civic sensibility breaks down. What Wollstonecraft proposes is a sensibility that contains both, just as it contains both public and private. This sensibility is what I and other critics call Romantic.

For Favret, the active ingredient in Wollstonecraft’s romantic sensibility is imagination, which knits together feminine and masculine, sensibility and reason. In *A Short Residence*, “Wollstonecraft concludes that imagination generates and nourishes

both the emotional and the intellectual progress of civilization” (122). Favret adds: “Traveling between the two spheres of ‘home’ and ‘business,’ the letter-writer claims allegiance to neither. Instead she appeals to an imagined and imaginative community, one which would free her from a domestic economy and provide a productive alternative to a capital-industrial-based society” (99). I would qualify Favret’s assessment by saying that Wollstonecraft did not replace sensibility or publicity with imagination, as Favret seems to suggest. Instead, imagination made possible a sensibility that could function in the inchoate zone between private and public spheres. In her other writings, Wollstonecraft is quite suspicious of imagination, which she sees as a pander to licentiousness. Imagination “debauched” Rousseau and perverted his sensibility, according to Wollstonecraft in her second vindication; the readers of his novels of sensibility, she asserts, were equally debauched (91). But in *A Short Residence* Wollstonecraft often had recourse to imagination as a mediator between feeling and rational analysis. Thus, in her schema of romantic sensibility, imagination works with rather than transcends reason.

For Franklin, the active ingredient in Wollstonecraft’s romantic sensibility is self-consciousness: “Wollstonecraft’s travel book is a seminal text for the development of British Romantic writing. It became the prototype for liberal writers in reflexively examining their own role as artists through meditative passages, in the course of traversing landscapes and cultural sites which allow them to reflect obliquely on the loss of their political hopes” (165). In this sense, Todd and Butler point out, Wollstonecraft resembles other Romantic writers who focused upon creativity and political displacement, particularly Lord Byron. They write “[*A Short Residence*] precedes *Childe Harold* by sixteen years: the ‘plot’ of the introverted traveler, nursing memories of a

tragic and perhaps guilty passion, wandering off into desolate, dangerous places, is Wollstonecraft's before it is Byron's" (23). However, contra Franklin, Todd, and Butler, I maintain that Wollstonecraft's self-reflexive romantic sensibility was not a retreat from reformist politics, nor an escape from society into the natural world. That is, in the end she disavowed the chivalric sensibility of Burke and Rousseau and began to develop instead a sensibility that would put a progressive construction upon a sensibility that contains both thinking and feeling, both solitude and society.

The active ingredient in Wollstonecraft's romantic sensibility, for Todd and Butler, is alienation and egoism. They even go so far as to claim that Wollstonecraft is as self-involved as any male Romantic. They conclude that "the common modern critical assertion that subjective egotistical Romanticism is a male mode owes more to the sociology of reception over two centuries than to an authentic gap in the literary record" (24). They claim that Wollstonecraft exhibits in *A Short Residence* what Ann Mellor calls "feminine Romanticism," which resists the masculine appropriation of feminine sensibility. My position is that Wollstonecraft was no longer, as in her vindications, concerned with fighting off male incursions or planting a feminine flag within a masculinist public sphere. In *A Short Residence*, her intention seems instead to breach the walls separating female and male, private and public, in an effort to establish a more inclusive public sphere and society. Her romantic sensibility is part and parcel of this effort. It is not a matter of masculine or feminine Romanticism, any more than it is a matter of masculine or feminine sensibility. Rather what Wollstonecraft proposes, albeit ambivalently—or perhaps "prematurely" is the better word—is a Romanticism that transcends without effacing gender difference, an "unsex'd" Romanticism.

To be clear, Wollstonecraft's (little "r") romantic sensibility may infuse her (big "R") Romanticism, but it does not completely define it. Wollstonecraft's most significant contribution to Romanticism is arguably her conception of sensibility. This is not to say that Wollstonecraft's ticket to the Romantic hall of fame was punched only after (and because) she abandoned feminism, society, and/or progressive politics. *A Short Residence* shows that she may have reconsidered her previous positions vis-à-vis sensibility, even acknowledging youthful errors, but in the end she resisted ideological gallantry and the divisions it fostered. She was no apostate; neither was she captive to the Romantic Ideology. She was "unsex'd" but not neuter: in reference to Wollstonecraft's gender politics, it is not in the end a matter of "either-or" but rather "both-and." Instead of abandoning one gender for the other, or the public for the private sphere, she attempted to establish a discourse in which such contraries could speak to one another. In this sense, Wollstonecraft embodied that strangely unpoetic phrase of John Keats, so often bruited as a definition of Romanticism: "negative capability." It is only when she finished *A Short Residence* that she finally seemed "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason"—or closure, in terms of enthroning male over female (or the converse), progressive politics over regressive (or the converse), publicity over privacy (or the converse) (*Keats Letters* I.193). At the end of her penultimate letter, after bewailing the evils of war speculation and the slave trade, Wollstonecraft exclaims: "Why should I weep for myself?—'Take, O world! thy much indebted tear'" (196).<sup>26</sup> She had wept enough for her own pain, and now the world had

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<sup>26</sup> In his edition of *A Short Residence*, Richard Holmes cannot find a source for this quotation. A quick search online suggests a possible source: Robert Burns's 1786 song "A Farewell," in which Burns writes: "Thee, Hamilton, and Aiken dear, / A grateful, warm adieu: / I, with a much-indebted tear, / Shall still remember you!"

need of her pity. We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel, and vice versa. We also engage the world when we forcibly feel, as much as when we utilize reason. This epitomizes Wollstonecraft's both-and, in-between, liminal, inchoate sensibility and Romanticism.

## Chapter 5: William Blake, Antinomian Publicity, and the Tactics of Obscurity

Allan Cunningham, one of the first biographers of William Blake, wrote of Blake's *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion*:

It seems of a religious, political, and spiritual kind, and wanders from hell to heaven, and from heaven to earth; now glancing into the distractions of our own days, and then making a transition to the antediluvians. The crowning defect is obscurity; meaning seems now and then about to dawn; you turn plate after plate, and read motto after motto, in the hope of escaping from the darkness into light. But the first might as well be looked at last; the whole seems a riddle which no ingenuity can solve.<sup>1</sup>

Cunningham was not the first and probably not the last to complain about Blake's "crowning defect" of obscurity. Contemporaries of Blake, such as Frederick Tatham and Henry Crabb Robinson, expressed their utter bewilderment when attempting to assess the meaning of Blake's works. Since then obscurity has been a perennial complaint in Blake criticism.

According to one of the latest critical trends, Blake's obscurity is explained (at least in part) by his adherence to antinomianism, a radical religious movement that flouts religious and civil law. This chapter is intended as an intervention in this critical discussion concerning Blake's antinomianism, as it relates to publicity. Like some of the critics who identify Blake as antinomian, I complement historicism with bibliography, and examine Blake's book-making methods in cultural context. I make the case that

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<sup>1</sup> From the life of "William Blake" in *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, reprinted in *Blake Records*, edited by G. E. Bentley, Jr., 641-42.

Blake consciously violated the laws of textual construction, making his texts obscure, as part of his antinomian media practice. At the same time I argue against the idea that Blake's textual obscurity indicated alienation from the public sphere, and a retreat into privacy, by situating him within an antinomian public that had revived in the 1790s. That is, Blake utilized techniques typically used to preserve privacy to instead create coded texts that antinomians (and few others) could access. Thus the focus of the chapter is the tension between Blake's antinomian media practice (textual obscurity) and antinomian publicity (public obscurity), at a time when antinomianism was under attack in the public sphere.

I argue that the textual objects Blake created in the 1790s had more in common with letter bombs than *belles lettres*. That is, Blake's "books" violated the codes of book-making, in an attempt to subvert the rationalist hegemony in the public sphere of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which was enabled and authorized by the print book. Blake targeted religious books, particularly the Holy Bible, in his bibliographic crusade. As an antinomian, Blake was suspicious of the overweening power of scripture in his society, and its use by religious and political authorities to justify inequality and oppression. But as critical as Blake was of the Bible and the way it was used to prop up church and state, he was equally suspicious of attempts by deists and dissenters to rationalize the Bible, and supersede it with the dogmatic creed of science.

Blake countered the abusive power of holy writ and the proselytization of religious and scientific exegetes with his antinomian Bible of Hell, which contained *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*. It is this biblical parody that I exegete in this chapter, with a particular focus on *The Book of Urizen*. Some critics have

focused on the question of “difference” in *The Book of Urizen*, noting that none of the extant copies is the same and venturing various explanations for this. My explanation is that Blake the textual antinomian was attempting to destabilize the fixity of print and thereby undermine Enlightenment rationalism in the public sphere. I also discuss the ways Blake utilized the figure of the book in *The Book of Urizen* to support his critique of rationalized publicity. However, I contend that with his Bible of Hell Blake resisted a flight to privacy, in the form of public obscurity and ideological retreat, and was attempting to revive an embattled antinomian public—though in the end he decided his Bible was too dangerous to publish widely.

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a reading of *Jerusalem*. I consider this work as the final book of Blake’s Bible of Hell, his Book of Revelation. However, I argue that *Jerusalem*—composed and executed some twenty years after the other books in his Bible of Hell—fails as the final chapter of Blake’s anti-bible because it is too much like the books Blake assailed in the 1790s. In the end, instead of attacking rationalized scripture in the form of the print book, Blake created his own testament to the book, building *Jerusalem* into a bibliographic monument that resists critique (and comprehension) facilitating canonization and reflecting what seems to be a retreat from the public sphere. However, I maintain that *Jerusalem* also shows Blake’s ambivalence concerning canonization and privacy, indicated by a vestigial publicity that can be glimpsed in the poem. *Jerusalem* is haunted by the rationalist public of the 1790s, which had been suppressed at the end of the decade. This public is countered by another: an antinomian commonwealth of liberty that exists only in the imagination, in privacy, in the past—and, potentially, in the future—but not the present. *Jerusalem* shows that Blake



consciously courted public obscurity in the nineteenth century, using his antinomian tactics of textual obscurity to damn the public sphere of his day, rather than appeal to an antinomian public. He offered salvation instead to the public of futurity, the priesthood of believers willing to passionately engage and proselytize his texts. Thus, in *Jerusalem*, Blake engaged three different publics: that of the antinomian past, the rationalist present, and the utopian future. However I conclude that this inchoate, multi-vocal, carnivalesque publicity—instead of representing an escape from society—was the means by which Blake negotiated between private and public spheres, whose relationship he came to see as one of balanced contraries—an opposition that was true friendship.

### **1790s Antinomianism as it Relates to Class, Media, and Publicity**

As mentioned above, according to a recent critical trend Blake was a radical antinomian.<sup>2</sup> Antinomianism was a heresy that originated in the early Christian communities, was reprised in Britain during the seventeenth-century Commonwealth, and again in the early 1790s. Briefly stated, in a Christian context antinomians hold that Jesus Christ died for the sins of humanity once and for all, so that believers are unconditionally forgiven forever and, since they are already saved, need not worry about adhering to any moral laws. Stephen Behrendt argues that antinomianism “contends that obedience to (any) law leads to the perpetuation of the obedient individual’s oppression. That is,

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<sup>2</sup> The most recent study of Blake’s antinomianism is *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity* (2007) by Robert Rix. A little less recent is *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* by Saree Makdisi. Jon Mee discusses Blake’s antinomianism in *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, in the context of enthusiasm, but he focuses more exclusively on antinomianism in “The Doom of Tyrants” and “Is there an Antinomian in the House?” In the posthumously published *Witness Against the Beast*, E. P. Thompson also writes about Blake and antinomianism. Thompson acknowledges that he was inspired by *The Everlasting Gospel* by A. L. Morton, which links Blake to the Ranters, who were commonly thought to be antinomian. I cite a few other shorter studies in the chapter.

disobedience to the letter of the law can be—and generally is—regarded from the antinomian perspective as both salutary and entirely laudable” (“Bible of Hell” 42). According to Mike Goode, Blake’s illuminated books “constituted a tactical counter-regulatory foil to the laws of churches, bibles, and states in Blake’s day, a foil that did not always address readers about the law so much as use them to undermine it” (7). A. L. Morton, one of the first critics to associate Blake with antinomianism, locates Blake in the tradition of the Ranters and claims that antinomianism “was a tradition of revolution” that was particularly active during the 1640s. He writes:

The Seekers, Ranters and the rest flourished when England had overthrown the feudal order in a civil war and when it seemed to thousands that a new age was about to begin. Their ideas, fantastic as they sometimes appear to us, were a reflection of their hopes: in essence they were political ideas in a religious form. A new age was indeed beginning, but it was not the age they had expected. Even during the Republic they were often persecuted, and after the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 they were driven underground, preserving their faith in little, obscure conventicles, treasuring subversive pamphlets in old cupboards, holding the ideas of the revolution, as it were, in suspension, until towards the end of the eighteenth century, the world seemed ready for them again. (35-36).

Saree Makdisi claims that many of these “subversive pamphlets” were taken out of the old cupboards and reprinted during the revival of antinomianism in the 1790s, either as separate tracts or as part of ad-hoc anthologies (304-6). E. P. Thompson links Blake with the Muggletonians, who preached a number of antinomian beliefs and were active during

the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Thompson concludes that Blake was an antinomian “writing within a known tradition, using terms made familiar by seven or eight generations of London sectaries” (106). Jon Mee offers historical evidence that shows “that [Blake] was far from being the last antinomian” and that there was “a conscious revival” of antinomian ideas in the 1790s (“Antinomian in the House” 43). All this suggests that there likely was an antinomian public to which Blake might have appealed in the 1790s.

Historically, antinomianism was generally a phenomenon of popular, plebeian culture, and was often in conflict with ruling classes and institutions (e.g. the established church). This was certainly true in the 1790s, except that plebeian antinomianism confronted both the established hegemony of the British ruling class *and* the up-and-coming cultural dominance of the British bourgeoisie. In the opening chapter of this study I discussed these eighteenth-century class distinctions, based on those theorized by Thompson in *Customs in Common*. In this chapter, I apply these distinctions to Blake, following the lead of those critics who affiliate Blake with the plebs.<sup>4</sup> As an artisan, Blake was plebeian, the social class that both competed and cooperated with patricians in eighteenth-century Britain, according to Thompson. While Thompson mostly excludes the British bourgeoisie from this binary system in *Customs in Common*, he makes up for this exclusion in his account of Blake’s mental combat with bourgeois rationalism in *Witness Against the Beast*. Thompson shows that the bourgeoisie, more so than the

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<sup>3</sup> In “Recovering the Lost Moravian History of William Blake’s Family,” Keri Davies and Marsha Keith Schuchard convincingly disprove Thompson’s contention that Blake was a Muggletonian. However, they do not disprove that Blake was antinomian: they instead make the case that Blake was associated with the Moravians, who they acknowledge had antinomian tendencies. Besides, Thompson argues that Blake was antinomian in a more general sense, beyond Muggletonianism. Thompson writes: “[W]e must see that [Blake] is writing directly in this antinomian tradition, but also that he is employing its terms in original and idiosyncratic ways not sanctioned by any part of that tradition” (*Witness* 94).

<sup>4</sup> David Worrall is one of these critics, as shown in a number of the articles he has written or edited, particularly “Blake and the 1790s Plebeian Radical Culture.” E. P. Thompson, in *Witness Against the Beast*, has also focused on the plebeian Blake, as has Saree Makdisi in *Impossible History*.

patrician class, was the prime antagonist in Blake's "mental fight," as reflected in his Bible of Hell.

This antinomian "mental fight" involved various forms of plebeian media, such as short pamphlets, chapbooks, and broadsides. The use of such ephemeral media tended to be regarded as illegitimate by cultural elites because they were cheaply and miscellaneously made. Antinomians were certainly guilty in this regard. Mee contends that many of the plebeian antinomian writers in the 1790s made use of bricolage in creating their miscellaneous texts. They "threw together anthologies of other people's writings, and inserted their own verses wherever they were able. They appeared to offer no coherent body of work. . . . They seemed to be at one moment willing to dispense entirely with the 'author function', cutting up and reassembling whatever was at hand, while at another moment making shockingly presumptuous claims for the divine basis of their inspiration" ("Strange Career" 166). Similarly, antinomians were prone to parody in their writings and would, as a matter of course, use bibliographic means to undermine authoritative texts, even and especially scripture. All this, as we will see, is what Blake was attempting with his Bible of Hell.

Plebeian media, as utilized by antinomians, were considered suspect to bourgeois rationalists because they were secretive, making them irrational in their lack of transparency. Antinomian texts also tended to be willfully obscure, strangely coded, and circulated through informal channels. The way antinomians spread their message was mostly via hand-written epistles distributed amongst members and published tracts by "prophets"—that is, by a mix of manuscript and cheap print (*Witness* 117). Antinomians in the 1790s tended to have a strained relationship with print culture. They wanted to

spread the message of spiritual freedom from the law, but not in ways that would lead to their persecution or prosecution (much the same thing in eighteenth-century Britain).

They used cheap print and non-print sources but cloaked their radical antinomianism with arcane symbols, bizarre images, and equivocal language largely adapted from authorized scripture—particularly the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Their texts resembled the many gospels, apocalypses, and apocrypha (“secret books”) that proliferated in the first few centuries of Christian history, before the New Testament canon was established and orthodoxy had gained the upper hand over heresy.<sup>5</sup>

Largely due to their tactics of textual obscurity, eighteenth-century antinomians also had a conflicted relationship to the public sphere. They were typically counter-enlightenment and thus ill-disposed towards “the formation of the classical bourgeois public sphere whose own authority lay in its appeal to Reason” (Mee, “Doom of Tyrants,” 97). More importantly, antinomian publicity tended to incorporate rather than resist obscurity. Robert Rix cites nineteenth-century writer William Hurd, who claimed that the Moravians made it “their study to speak and write in order not to be understood” (8). Thompson notes that the Muggletonians, like other antinomians, were “anti-evangelical. For they had survived the rational bombardments of the century by lying low and keeping their heads down” (*Witness* 88). Nor did antinomians worship publicly in churches or meeting houses, but rather met in taverns, private homes, the streets, the fields, and even in boats (*Witness* 68). In times of trouble, antinomians turned inward,

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Elaine Pagels for my knowledge of early Christian history, as elucidated in *The Gnostic Gospels* and the recent *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, & Politics in the Book of Revelation*. Pagels’s subject is ostensibly the Gnostics, but she makes it clear that the Gnostics were largely antinomian in their theology and disposition towards ecclesiastical authority.

breaking into smaller groups, and avoided publicity in the larger society. They kept their radical critique of society to themselves, and appeared to be quietistic in politics.

At the same time, antinomians depended on a secretive, conspiratorial publicity to propagate their beliefs and pass them on to the next generation. Melinda Alliker Rabb notes that in the eighteenth century, “the counterpart to the public sphere is not domestic, familial, or architectural, but often secretive, psychological, and textual” (8) Rabb refers to satire during the period, but she might just as well have been describing antinomian texts. These texts required encoding and decoding—which needless to say complicate publicity. However, antinomians did not abscond to the private sphere, hiding themselves from the gaze of the public. Rather, antinomians were “counter-public,” particularly in the ways they opposed the mainstays of society—law, state, church—and rationalist debate in the public sphere. To the bourgeois rationalist public, the antinomian public was spectral—ghostly, uncanny, disturbing; to the antinomian public, the contrary was true. All this should sound familiar in regards to Blake. If we accept the premise that Blake was associated with, or influenced by, one or more of these antinomian communities, his avoidance of mainstream publication and his quietistic tendencies are at least partially explained. It also helps explain his vexed attitude towards publicity, and his obscurity—both textual and public.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In “Inconvenient Truths,” Keri Davies and David Worrall register their dissent concerning Blake’s antinomianism, as part of their argument that Blake was associated with the Moravian sect. However, Davies’s and Worrall’s case is weak. For instance, they dismiss Blake’s antinomianism as an invention of Swinburne in 1868, completely ignoring the many allusions to antinomian thought in Blake’s writings, which critics such as Morton, Thompson, Makdisi, and Rix have shown to have been in abundance his whole life, not just in his works of the 1790s (see for instance Blake’s late poem “The Everlasting Gospel”). Besides, the bulk of their argument is designed to prove that Moravianism was not antinomian (despite the fact that in Blake’s lifetime they were generally considered as such), which is not the same thing as proving that Blake was not an antinomian.

## Blake's Battle with the Book in the Bible of Hell

The first book in Blake's Bible of Hell is *The [First] Book of Urizen*, composed and executed in 1794; the second and third books of Urizen, *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*, were both produced in 1795.<sup>7</sup> Behrendt remarks that in these three books Blake "most visibly engages, subverts, and explodes the received Bible" (37). He does so by mimicking the bibles of his day: "the visual appearance of the texts recalls conventional printed bibles, right down to the double-column verbal text and the partitioning into chapters and numbered verses. Illustrated bibles routinely featured full-page plates as well as both decorative and illustrative headpieces, tailpieces, and initial letters" (48). Despite these continuities, Blake's biblical books are radically unstable as texts. This is particularly true of *The Book of Urizen*, of which eight copies survive, all of them different. This variability is, according to Steven Leo Carr, built into Blake's production process: "each 'copy' of a work differs from all others. This radical variability is embedded in the material processes of producing illuminated prints, and thus always enters into the verbal-visual exchanges generated within each page. The characteristic variation of detail in Blake's art challenges aesthetic beliefs deeply associated with conventional modes of producing books and prints" (182). In each of his illuminated books, Blake "extends and accentuates the play of differences. Variation is the necessary condition of the production of a work of illuminated printing" (185).

Critics present various explanations for Blake's practice of difference.<sup>8</sup> One of the most influential is that offered by Jerome McGann, in his article "The Idea of an

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<sup>7</sup> In my commentary on *The Book of Urizen*, I refer to Copy A at the [Blake Archive](#).

<sup>8</sup> Some critics discuss difference as *différance*—that is, in terms of Derridean deconstruction. Most of the

Indeterminate Text: Blake's Bible of Hell and Dr. Alexander Geddes." McGann argues that the variability of Blake's Bible of Hell, particularly *The Book of Urizen*, reflects a "conscious response to the new developments in textual studies which we associate with 18<sup>th</sup>-century German scholarship," or "Higher Criticism," which focused on biblical exegesis (303). McGann maintains that Blake drew upon new Enlightenment-based hermeneutical theories regarding the Bible, found within the works of the Scottish Catholic priest Alexander Geddes, who in the 1790s was employed in various capacities by the bookseller/publisher Joseph Johnson, who also employed Blake as a book engraver.<sup>9</sup> According to McGann, these hermeneutical theories—particularly Geddes's "Fragment Hypothesis"—argued for a "Bible comprised a heterogeneous collection of various materials gathered together at different times by different editors and redactors"; that is, rather than being the inerrant word of God, the Bible was a very contingent and fallible collection of documents, haphazardly compiled (321). McGann claims that Blake mounted this attack upon the Bible "from the vantage of the late Enlightenment revolution in textual studies of the biblical deposits" (305).

McGann's thesis does indeed explain Blake's practice of bricolage in his Bible of Hell, but there is ample justification for contesting the association of Blake with the Enlightenment. As I show in my reading below, Blake's Bible of Hell assails Enlightenment-based hermeneutics as part of his antinomian campaign to undercut the power of rationalist print. Besides, I argue that Blake was more concerned with *fixity* than

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essays in *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality*, edited by Nelson Hilton and Thomas A. Vogler, deal with Derrida and deconstruction. Of these I recommend "Illuminated Printing: Toward a Logic of Difference," by Stephen Leo Carr; and "*The Book of Urizen* and the Horizon of the Book," by Paul Mann.

<sup>9</sup> Geddes published, with Joseph Johnson, his *Prospectus for a New Translation of the Bible* in 1786. The controversial newly-translated Bible appeared in several volumes from 1792-1800. Geddes also published, with Johnson, five pamphlets in the late 1780s and 1790s defending his work. Finally, Geddes was the religion editor of Johnson's *Analytical Review* in the 1790s (Prickett and Strathman 126).



difference: it was not so much a matter of Blake producing different versions, as subverting any definitive, authorized, canonized version. Elizabeth Eisenstein has put forth the provocative thesis that the printing press, using movable type, changed the course of history by establishing texts in fixed editions, which eventually enabled both the Reformation and the Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> Adrian Johns has countered that fixity was slow to develop after the invention of printing, and was the result of social practices, not the technology of print; in fact, he argues, early print production was buffeted by many contingencies that Eisenstein does not acknowledge.<sup>11</sup> Blake's antinomian media practice in *The Book of Urizen* multiplies such contingencies, as a way of exposing the idea of fixity as fallacy.

Goode claims that this is part of Blake's practice of disintegrative bibliography, in that Blake's "laborious process of ensuring the chromatic, iconic, and textual uniqueness of each copy of his illuminated books as a work of making sure that the books' word-picture integrations would produce different deflective or diversionary dynamics across copies" (21). In its ability to reify ideas, to authorize them and make them more permanent, print—particularly in the form of books—is hegemonic. In their commentary on *The Book of Urizen*, Kay and Roger Easson remark that "Blake thought the book, because of its abstract and static form, had become the vehicle of error, the adversary of transformation in culture" (88). John H. Jones, in "Printed Performance and Reading *The Book[s] of Urizen*" makes a similar point. In reference to eighteenth-century print technology, he writes: "Because of print technology's ability to stabilize a text, print

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<sup>10</sup> See Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, as well as *Print Culture and Enlightenment Thought*.

<sup>11</sup> See Adrian John, *The Nature of the Book*. Johns and Eisenstein aired their differences in an issue of *American Historical Review* (February 2002). These articles are listed in the works cited.

began to take on connotations of increased authority” and “the medium itself began to take on the authority of truth. . . . Blake’s mechanical method of book production . . . undoes the fixity of traditional printing by making each copy of each book a new version or retelling of the same basic story, an new performance that differs from all other versions” (74). In assailing fixity, Blake was also assailing canonicity—the cultural authorization of certain literary works, genres, and media.

Morris Eaves argues that Blake’s attack upon fixity, or rationalized print, was also an attack upon the “interchangeability” of the materials, technologies, components, laborers, and consumers of books (*Counter-Arts* 261). Blake objected to “rationalizing a mode of production by means of the venerable idea that the wild horse of inspiration must be broken; we want its energy but not its chaos” (*Counter-Arts* 178).<sup>12</sup> In creating his illuminated books, Blake resisted the rationalized fixity that resulted from the assembly-line. He pointedly did not divide his various labors, and made sure every book he produced was an original work of art rather than a copy, preserving the “aura” of each book that issued from his printing press. I define “aura” as Walter Benjamin does in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. According to Benjamin, the aura of a work communicates its uniqueness, its originality, and its resistance to commodification and consumption. This bibliographic uniqueness gives the work authority, and enhances

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<sup>12</sup> Makdisi also recognizes that Blake’s bibliographic practice in his Bible of Hell was intended to subvert fixity, and was inspired by his antinomianism. Makdisi cites the Bible of Hell as evidence of Blake’s resistance to the industrial rationalization of the book trade, and concomitant commodification of the image, in the late eighteenth-century. Makdisi urges us not to “dismiss the interpretive significance—that is, the broad cultural and political significance—of the variability built into Blake’s printing process. Blake developed a mode of production that *necessarily* produced heterogeneous products at precisely the historical moment when manufacturers—and not just those in the art world—were seizing on the potential offered by another mode of production that would, in order to spew out a stream of identical products, ultimately reorient not only the way in which people work but the entire cultural and political organization of societies all over the world” (201). Makdisi asserts that bourgeois liberals promoted these new modes of production, which they associated with freedom and individualism, and these same bourgeois liberals Blake resisted in his own book-making process (151).

its canonicity. I contend, however, that in the first three books of his Bible of Hell Blake was not as interested in preserving the aura and uniqueness of his texts as he was in dissipating the spectral aura and authority of print books, particularly that of supposedly sacrosanct “holy” books, via practices of textual disintegration. Destruction, not preservation, motivated Blake the antinomian book-maker in his attempt to free the spirit of prophecy from its bibliographic chains.

The term I use for Blake’s antinomian bibliography is textual obscurity. One of Blake’s tactics in this regard was *détournage*, defined as the parodic re-purposing or remediation of texts.<sup>13</sup> Blake’s *détournage* is distinguished by the ways he used it to confuse and contest the class affiliation of various media. For example, given the shortness of the work (27 plates total) and the octavo page size, *The Book of Urizen* could be produced as the kind of cheap pamphlet that circulated amongst plebeians. And if you removed full-page designs that seem to have little bearing on the narrative (such as the four elements designs; see below), it could appear as a chapbook, which was a cheap, plebeian medium of 24 or fewer small pages (about the size of Blake’s 16mo pages in *The Book of Urizen*), and was typically illustrated, as are Blake’s illuminated works. The other two, much shorter books of Blake’s Bible of Hell—*The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*—are even better candidates as cheap pamphlets or chapbooks.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The situationist Guy Debord uses the term “*détournement*” to describe the re-purposing of works of art for partisan propaganda purposes (“[Users Guide to Détournement](#)”). “*Détournement*” means deception, deflection, diversion, or hijacking. *Détournage* is the result of such hijacking. I should also note that, in my analysis, *détournage* re-purposes media, rather than just content.

<sup>14</sup> In my introductory chapter, I describe various plebeian media, including cheap pamphlets and chapbooks. Much of my knowledge of these forms comes from *The Oxford History of Print Culture*, edited by Joad Raymond. That study deals with cheap print in Britain and Ireland up to 1660. However, as William St. Clair points out in *The Reading Nation in Romantic Period*, plebeian media changed very little between the early modern and Romantic periods. After that, it changed very rapidly, such that chapbooks were practically nonexistent by the end of the nineteenth century.

Mee discusses a related tactic of textual obscurity: bricolage, or the integration of different kinds of print media into one main text.<sup>15</sup> But, once again, Blake's textual obscurity was more about disintegration than integration. That is, a kind of planned obsolescence is built into Blake's texts, reflecting a bibliography that is actually biblioclasm.<sup>16</sup> For example, Blake inserted into his *Bible of Hell* full-page illustrations that might serve as detachable prints that hang as decorations upon the walls of home or workplace.<sup>17</sup> One of these full-page illustrations, plate 18 of *The Book of Urizen*, draws upon the iconography of the Holy Family, an image found on the walls of many a humble cottage, though Blake inverts the image by using it to depict the "fallen" family of Los, Enitharmon, and Orc. Plate 3, which depicts a figure we might assume is Urizen, shows an old man with a long biblical beard and a halo, in chains (and in one copy at least, tears). This figure might refer to Laurence Sterne's prisoner in the Bastille in *A Sentimental Journey*, a popular subject for engravers of prints; or, equally popular during the Revolution controversy, the Comte de Lorges, prisoner of the Bastille, representative of the injustice of the legal system under the *ancien régime*.<sup>18</sup> Another example would be

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<sup>15</sup> It was in *Dangerous Enthusiasm* that Jon Mee, borrowing from Claude Levi-Strauss, first applied the idea of bricolage to Blake. See in particular Mee's introduction.

<sup>16</sup> I understand "biblioclasm" as the bibliographical equivalent of iconoclasm. While it has not been previously applied to Blake, the term itself has a history. The examples history affords, however, are quite different than the way Blake might be considered biblioclastic. Blake's biblioclasm may denote an attack upon rationalism, but it is a far cry from the mass book burnings of Savonarola or the Nazis.

<sup>17</sup> William St. Clair notes that illustrations in chapbooks and on ballad sheets often served double-duty as prints to be hung on the walls and workbenches of those who could not afford more expensive, stand-alone prints (343). John H. Jones, in his discussion of Blake's production methods in "Printed Performance," asserts that the art-print engraving was the main media of access for most people in the 1790s: those who could not afford expensive books with engravings could buy a single-page print to hang on their walls (26). Eaves and Essick make the claim that in the 1790s there was a market for crude, single-page prints, which were affordable for low-income people; and that Blake issued separate prints of his book designs (but not for low-income people). See Jones, "Printed Performance," 26; Eaves, "Introduction" (to *Cambridge Companion to William Blake*), 6; and Essick, *William Blake Printmaker*, 140.

<sup>18</sup> See David Bindman, *Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution*, 37-42. The Comte de Lorges, it should be noted, was eventually proved to be fictional and a figure of propaganda. Bindman suggests that Charles Dickens used the Comte de Lorges as the basis of Dr. Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities* (41).

plate 25, which depicts a child begging and a dog howling. While some commentators associate this image with “the dog at the wintry door” of plate 26, it could easily be a stand-alone image that a pious, charitable Christian might hang upon the wall, thinking it depicted the plight of poor beggars in the metropolis. However, Blake the antinomian is more likely surreptitiously condemning than extolling such pious charity with this image; antinomians were dismissive of “justification by works.” Finally, there are four full-page designs (Plates 7, 15, 21, 23) that represent the four elements (water, air, fire, and earth, respectively). Such images were commonly issued as separate prints, or as illustrations in cheap print publications. But the main point to be made here is that by creating separable prints, Blake was encouraging and facilitating the disintegration of his texts.

Another way Blake practiced textual obscurity was by removing (movable) print from his books. By featuring text disguised as handwriting, or print that pretends it is not, Blake offers a commentary and critique upon print culture and the processes of reification and rationalization that print technology demanded. In Blake’s works, as W. J. T. Mitchell points out, the conflict between manuscript and print is often symbolized by the contraries of the scroll and the book. Mitchell comments: “In the context of Romantic textual ideology, the book is the symbol of modern rationalist writing and the cultural economy of mechanical reproduction, while the scroll is the emblem of ancient revealed wisdom, imagination, and the cultural economy of hand-crafted, individually expressive artifacts. We might summarize this contrast as the difference between print culture and manuscript culture”—which Mitchell ties to “oral performance” (“Visible Language” 64-65, 74). For Blake, the closer a work was to “oral performance,” the closer it was to prophecy. Tellingly, unlike in many of Blake’s other illuminated texts and book

engraving, the scroll is not represented visually by Blake in *Urizen*; instead only print books are depicted, representing a bibliographic monopoly controlled by Urizen.

As in most of Blake's illuminated works, there appears to be an antagonistic relationship between the text and the designs in *The Book of Urizen*, which is yet another tactic of textual obscurity. As readers have noted for some time, in his illuminated books Blake tends to place distance between his text and his designs, such that the image on a plate might illustrate the text inscribed on another plate. This is what Mitchell calls "visual-verbal independence" or (borrowing from Northrop Frye) "syncopation" (*Composite Art* 10). "The independence of Blake's text and designs," Mitchell writes, "allows him to introduce independent symbolic statements, to suggest ironic contrasts and transformations, and to multiply metaphorical complexities" (*Composite Art* 11-12). Thus Mitchell allows that Blake uses such syncopation critically, with designs offering satirical commentary upon the text, and upon the bibliographic construct of the book. Along with Goode, I would take this further, and insist that in his Bible of Hell Blake's texts and designs are at loggerheads, which amplifies textual obscurity. In Goode's words, Blake's words and images "amplify the force of each other's powers to deconstruct and disperse themselves" (21).<sup>19</sup>

Plate 24 of Copy A is a typical example of text-image antagonism in Blake's Bible of Hell. On the plate we see Urizen meandering through the darkness "with a globe of fire lighting his / journey" (22:54-55). As my citation makes clear, the text for the design on plate 24 is found on plate 22 (they are separated by a full-page illustration in

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<sup>19</sup> In the recent article "The Joy of Looking," Mike Goode critiques the "composite art" approach that he claims begins with Frye and continues with Mitchell, Viscomi, Essick, and others. Goode would rather "substitute the notion of an open, disintegrable text for a closed, composite book or art" (3). As I hope I have made clear, my approach throughout this chapter is similar to Goode's.

Copy A). Likewise, the text of plate 24, which describes the birth of Urizen's first four sons, finds its (full-page) illustration on plate 4. The designs of plate 24 and plate 22 both seem to offer ironic commentary on the text of the plates on which they appear. The text of plate 24 describes (in addition to the births of Urizen's sons), a world that "teemed vast enormities / Frightening; faithless; fawning / Portions of life" (24:2-4); it is a teeming world that "Urizen sicken'd to see" (24:9). The design, by contrast, shows Urizen very eager to see, as he carries forth his lantern-sun into a dark, confined space, with none of the horrors mentioned in the text depicted. In fact, as in the design for plate 28, the image on plate 24 shows Urizen pushing out the bounds of the page, trying to escape his confinement on the page. As he surveys his domain, Urizen seems distracted. His distraction may be due to the lion that he nearly stumbles over. It is equally distracting to the reader, since no lion is mentioned anywhere in *The Book of Urizen*.

What does the lion signify? In his commentary to *The Book of Urizen*, David Worrall gamely cites some possibilities, but the lion seems to signify nothing of import and serves only to distract. Turning to plate 22, we see in the design a young child, surrounded by a nimbus of flames, falling towards Earth. It refers to the birth of Orc, which is described on plate 19. The text on plate 22 does refer to Orc—but not the Orc we see in the design. The text describes a worm become human, a terrorizing rebel who needs to be chained, whose cries wake the dead. The design shows a harmless-looking child tumbling, unscathed, through flames. The design to plate 22, like that of plate 24, is much more playful than the text it is meant to illustrate. It dispels the atmosphere of doom that enshrouds the plate, and the book as a whole, calling it into question.

In addition to this kind of ironic juxtaposition, ornaments invade the page from the margins. Plate 24, for instance, is embellished with a variety of squiggly figures which wriggle between the lines of the text. The central vine-like figure resembles a weed, the kind that as it grows splits rocks and pavement. It is not at all clear whether it originates in the text space on the plate, or the design space; it appears to hover rootless above Urizen's head. There is also the suggestion of serpents and worms on the page (these figures can be discerned on other pages in *Urizen*), which are, again, figures that disrupt reading. The figure that wriggles through the middle of the right side of the plate could even be seen as a long-tailed sperm; such sexual innuendo is not unknown in Blake's books.<sup>20</sup> Worms, serpents, or sperm, they all evoke antinomian teachings, such as—respectively—the “illusion” and transience of the material form, the deceptions of false prophets, and free love. These figures illustrate some of the phrases in the text of plate 24: the children of Urizen are born of “monsters, & worms of the pit” (later, in the design of plate 26, we see that they are serpent-like); and Urizen “saw that life liv'd upon death” (more worms) (Pl. 24: 24, 31-32). The vines, the worms, the serpents: all of these figures represent agents of disintegration—they break down material form—and have this function in the page design as well, boring into and breaking down the page as a semantic unit.

Blake's battle with the rationalized book in his Bible of Hell goes beyond textual obscurity. He also represents this battle thematically. In the Bible of Hell, Urizen is obsessed with writing and books, and dogmatically subscribes to the Enlightenment

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<sup>20</sup> Blake's sexuality has been trending in academia recently, particularly in connection to the Moravian sect, which had a reputation for being “sex-positive.” The most comprehensive treatment of this subject is *Why Mrs. Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision* by Marsha Keith Schuchard. Craig D. Atwood, in “Christ and the Bridal Bed: Eighteenth-Century Moravian Erotic Spirituality as a Possible Influence on Blake,” gives a good summary of the work of Schuchard and others.



rationality that subtends print and its attendant publicity. In this sense, Urizen represents spectral publicity, or Blake's anxious projection of the public sphere. William Rowland argues that Blake "associated printed books with the 'books formd of metals' and the 'book of iron' written by Urizen, the repressive god of reason in Blake's mythology . . . while he conceived of his own engraved and hand-colored books as works of liberation rather than repression, in both form and content" (65). Robert Essick also notes that there is some "relationship, however deflected and transmuted, between Urizen, with his 'books formd of metals' . . . and Blake's ideological contentions in his book[s] printed from metal plates" (202). Paul Mann would seem to agree, arguing that in the Bible of Hell, Blake deconstructs the "Urizenic and therefore potentially oppressive features of all bookmaking and book culture—the book's historical power to 'impose'" (49).

Certainly religious scriptures, in book form, had the power to impose, but so too did the books of anticlerical rationalists. Blake's Bible of Hell is replete with critiques of rationalist fundamentalism, beginning with the title page of *The Book of Urizen*. In the design, Blake introduces a gray-bearded patriarchal figure that we will come to know as Urizen, crouched upon a book, marking his place with his toe. Iconographically, he represents a biblical, Moses-like figure; but in the text we know him to be the primeval arch-priest of reason, "an abstract reasoning power that reifies itself into material nature" (Essick 200), the promulgator of "iron laws" which none can keep, a primordial scientist who vivisects existence with his "dividing rule" and "brazen quadrant" (Pl. 24:26, Pl. 22:35,38). Mann argues that Urizen personifies the book: "The very insistence on books [on the title page] gives the book an eerie precedence, as if to say: to take on a body, Urizen must first be a book" (51). In the title page image we see that in one hand Urizen

holds a pen, in the other a graver, as he simultaneously inscribes two more books from the book he marks with his toe. Behind him are two stone tablets that refer to the Decalogue, symbolic of the crushing weight of the moral law, which antinomians deplore. Of note is the grotesque positioning of the figure, involved as he is in his various writing tasks. Blake does not always use such impossible gymnastics in his works for satirical effect, but that seems to be his purpose here.

Part of the satire is the fact that Urizen is surrounded by different forms of textual transmission related to the production of print, particularly print books—on the one hand (literally), he writes the textual commentary, and on the other, he engraves illustrations to accompany the text, without looking at either, suggesting he consumes and transmits text blindly, uncritically. Urizen, the ultimately isolated figure, is here trapped within his own solipsistic mini-print culture, surrounded by excessive text, imprisoned by the very media he employs.<sup>21</sup> This might be interpreted as the primal scene of hegemonic transmission, as the *dictat* of the ruling class (or the bourgeois class that would replace it) is filtered into and through the culture: from Urizen's book of laws (which would include moral, juridical, and scientific laws; as well as "laws" of composition and medium), to the various tasks and technologies of the print shop, eventually to take the form of print books. Overseeing the process is the unwritten code of cultural hegemony, or the mystified relations of power and property, symbolized in the antinomian lexicon by the tablets, hovering in the background like stone-carved angel wings or tombstones. In other words, Blake is implicating the book *qua* book in the proliferation of excessive textuality,

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<sup>21</sup> As Mitchell suggests, Blake here may be indicting his own role in the print culture of his time: engraving images for mass production ("Visible Language" 56).

used by both political reactionaries and bourgeois radicals to sustain their power in the public sphere.

The critique of the book represented by the image on this plate has a counterpart in that of plate 8, which depicts Urizen holding open a book, ostensibly the same book that he crouches upon in the title page.<sup>22</sup> Here we can see more closely the “text” printed upon the page. It is gibberish, indeterminate paint blobs in a hodge-podge of color, insinuating that the text is nonsensical, has no worth, or is a medley of madness. Urizen’s book has brown-colored pages covered with what might be described as ordure, an apt depiction of Blake’s antinomian critique of scripture as used by state religion, or prominent and venerated scientific works used to rationalize culture.<sup>23</sup>

There is one extended verbal portion of *The Book of Urizen* that deals specifically with books, although it is on a plate that has been struck from most extant copies. This is plate 6 of copy A, which presents the only first-person account of Urizen in *The Book of Urizen*. Urizen describes his isolation, and the products of this isolation: “Here alone I in books formd of me- / -tals / Have written the secrets of wisdom / The secrets of dark contemplation / By fightings and conflicts dire” (Pl. 6:24-27). He continues in the next verse: “Lo! I unfold my darkness; and on / This rock, place with strong hand the Book / Of eternal brass, written in my solitude” (Pl. 6:31-33). There are many things we can say about this plate vis-à-vis books. First, Blake associates books with darkness, occlusion, ignorance, isolation, and privacy. Secondly, books are clearly delineated as products of print, that is of metals (from which the letters of movable type are cast)—in this case, the

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<sup>22</sup> Hoagwood notes that, at least on one occasion, Blake printed this plate as a separate print—which underscores what I have been arguing in this section (109). Hoagwood also discusses a number of possible models for the design on this page, and other treatments by Blake of the same design (117-19).

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell discusses Blake’s use of excrement—or the “excrementitious”—in his works. See “Chaosthetics: Blake’s Sense of Form,” 181-82.

metal is brass, commonly associated with falseness and fraud (in its impersonation of gold), offering a powerful indictment of print books by analogy. Thirdly, it depicts the print book as a monolithically homogenizing, monologic force, suppressing diversity and dissent: “One command, one joy, one desire / One curse, one weight, one measure / One King. one God. one Law” (Pl. 6:38-40). Also: one book and one way of making books, according to rational criteria—which Blake the antinomian book-maker must resist. The illustration at the bottom of Plate 6 depicts a tormented figure, possibly mad, behind what look like the bars of a cage. This suggests the inner state of the person who has been infected with the viral load of Urizen’s “secrets of dark contemplation” (Pl. 6:26). Urizen’s book of brass has been the means through which the tormented figure has been “Sin-bred” with the “terrible monsters” of soul-killing state religion and rationalism, which now “inhabit” his “bosom,” a euphemism for a colonized consciousness (Pl. 6:28-29). The tormented figure has been interpellated into Urizen’s spectral, rationalist public.

Blake etched his Bible of Hell over the two-year period of 1794-95. This was at a time of intense class conflict and media war in the British public sphere, as bourgeois liberals attempted to scour the public sphere of plebeian influence, and loyalist reactionaries attempted to do the same to bourgeois liberals. With the suspension of habeas corpus in 1794, the arrests and prosecutions of the leaders of the London Corresponding Society that same year, and the passage of the “Gagging Acts” in 1795, dissent—whether bourgeois or plebeian, rational or irrational—had been more or less criminalized. William Willcox relates that political reactionaries “saw in every critic of the status quo a Francophile conspirator, and their alarm infected the government and the judiciary. Any attempt at change came to be regarded with suspicion” and “freedom of

the press was . . . drastically curtailed: cheap newspapers were forced out of business by stamp duties, and printers were held strictly accountable for publishing anything that displeased the government. The rights of the citizen, in short, no longer included the right even to grumble at the established order” (201; qtd. in Chandler 68). This was particularly true of *plebeian* citizens like Blake. Whereas before the early 1790s plebeian printers were tolerated because their publications were cheap and ephemeral, after 1794—and the publishing sensation that was Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* in 1792-93—it was their cheapness and ephemerality that made them suspect, because this made them available to the masses. This suspicion of radical plebeian publicity extended to prominent stakeholders in the bourgeois-dominated public sphere, such as Joseph Johnson.<sup>24</sup> The fact that rationalist dissenters were considered suspect by the political establishment made them even more alacritous to distance themselves from the plebeian “mob.”

Plebeian religious writers, particularly those like Blake whose works exhibited antinomian tendencies, were “collateral damage” in this conflict. They were able to cloak political critique with biblical language and religious sentiments earlier in the decade. But this had become difficult at mid-decade, as antinomian “prophets” like Thomas Spence and Richard Brothers found themselves in jail or the madhouse, their religion and reliance upon the Bible no longer providing cover for their radical ideas.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> Johnson initially was the publisher of the first volume of *The Rights of Man*, but on the day of publication transferred publishing rights to the radical publisher Jeremiah Jordan, likely because its radical, plebeian appeal was too evident. In this Johnson was prescient. For more, see Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism, Publishing, and Dissent: Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty*, 106-110.

<sup>25</sup> On 4 March 1795 Brothers was arrested and charged under an Elizabethan law against false prophets; he was found guilty by reason of insanity and detained in a madhouse, where he remained until his release in 1806. Paley contends that as religious writers Blake and Brothers were quite similar, and that Blake could very easily have been detained under the same statute against false prophets (“Prince of the Hebrews” 262). Spence was incarcerated after habeas corpus was suspended in May 1794. Two other printer-prophets with

conservative religious atmosphere that was ascendant post-1794 explains why Paine, who was lionized after the publication of *The Rights of Man*, found a very different reception with *The Age of Reason*, which was published in two volumes in 1794-95. This work drew criticisms across the political spectrum, from the radical Joseph Priestley to the reactionary Hannah More (Worrall “Introduction” to *The Urizen Books* 23-24).<sup>26</sup> Worrall remarks that the three books of Blake’s Bible of Hell, engraved 1794-95, “exhibit all the characteristics of having been produced amidst a debate fuelled by *The Age of Reason*’s threat to percolate infidelity down to the lower classes. . . . Against Paine was united an organized counter-revolutionary, anti-French establishment which was intent on consolidating religion into a means of social control” (24). Worrall argues that Blake’s Bible of Hell was his contribution to this controversy.

Some critics contest Worrall’s characterization of Blake’s Bible of Hell parodies as being amongst his “most politically specific and historically topical works” (159). For instance, Eric Chandler rehashes the critical narrative that around 1794-95 Blake backed away from radical political commitment.<sup>27</sup> Chandler claims that, irrespective of the polemical content in Blake’s Bible of Hell, the fact that Blake never widely published these works damns him as obscure and politically quietistic. “Blake’s refusal to publish anything new in the midst of England’s counterrevolutionary reaction does unflatteringly suggest that Blake watched out for his own skin despite his recognition of the call to

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antinomian tendencies had run-ins with the law around this time: Daniel Isaac Eaton was arrested in 1793 and tried in 1794; Richard “Citizen” Lee was also arrested in 1795. On Spence, see Ian McCalman (chapters 6 and 7); on Eaton, see Michael T. Davis; on Lee see Mee’s “The Doom of Tyrants.”

<sup>26</sup> Robert Essick discusses Blake’s Bible of Hell in relation to the *The Age of Reason* in “William Blake, Thomas Paine, and Biblical Revolution.” Essick focuses mostly on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which weakens his argument since *Marriage* was probably already complete when the first volume of *The Age of Reason* was published in 1794.

<sup>27</sup> Chandler admits this is a critical commonplace, and cites Marilyn Butler, Leopold Damrosch, and David Erdman as critics who see a changed, more conservative and reclusive Blake post-1795 (57-58).

action” (57). Chandler counters David Erdman’s contention that, despite his apparent abandonment of the public sphere, “Blake maintained his radical views—that Blake’s political viewpoint and the substance of his social criticism does not change; while the form becomes an experiment in secrecy and codes for the protection of the message, this message remains inviolable” (58). Chandler sees instead changes in Blake’s “aesthetic and ideology that resulted from his real fear of the reactive trends in the political climate” (58).

With so much “harrowing fear rolling round” his “nervous brain,” Blake was clearly cowed and somewhat paranoid as he etched his Bible of Hell (*Urizen* Pl. 10:10). But given the political climate in which he labored, he was justified in his textual obscurity. Does this mean that Blake’s textual obscurity indicates *public* obscurity—a disconnection from publicity, as well as political activism, as Chandler suggests? Not necessarily. As adherents of the antinomian Blake point out, there was a plausible radical antinomian public to which Blake might have appealed in the first half of the 1790s. However, by mid-decade that public had been driven (back) into hiding. In short, while there is some credence to Chandler’s position regarding later works like *Jerusalem*, and though Blake’s fear of publication during the 1790s counter-revolution was certainly real, the lack of publication circa 1795 does not indicate that Blake had abandoned the struggle. Indeed, such circumspection (and circumlocution) characterizes antinomian publicity, whose “serpent wisdom” is invoked for the protection of simple, dove-like innocence.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Here I cite scripture, which—as Shakespeare points out—the devil is also wont to do. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). This phrase describes antinomian publicity well. (“The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose” is from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act I Scene 3).

## **The Publics of *Jerusalem***

By the time Blake completed *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion* around 1820, the antinomian public to which Blake might have appealed with his Bible of Hell could no longer be found. It had been driven underground, as Morton describes; the subversive pamphlets had been surreptitiously returned to the old cupboards. However, a vestigial form of antinomian publicity can be divined in the pages of *Jerusalem*. It was Blake's bulwark against the rationalist public which had been suppressed in the late 1790s. There is a third public that engages Blake in his masterwork: the public of the future. This continued engagement with, and complication of, publicity calls into question the critical contention that in the nineteenth century Blake consciously courted public obscurity and in "fear and trembling" hid himself away in the private sphere. *Jerusalem* presents ample evidence that publicity remained one of Blake's central concerns, and was something he was not yet willing to write off, even though he seemed even more reluctant to publish his illuminated works. As my reading below shows, the complex publicity that haunts *Jerusalem* suggests a zone of negotiation between public and private spheres.

Blake's appeals to an antinomian public and his remonstrations regarding the rationalist public sphere are, of course, closely connected. The appeal to one is a rebuff to the other. William Rowland remarks that "the profundity of *Jerusalem* is bought at the cost of willfully excluding contemporary readers," by which Rowland means the rationalist readers of Blake's time (73). "Blake was winnowing out his readers like the Christ who separated the saved from the damned, by speaking in a manner increasingly



inaccessible to corporeal hearing. . . . Blake appeals to the fearsome version of the Christ who speaks in parables in order to damn his hearers. . . . Blake's late work is not intended to save the reader, but to exclude him; Blake in effect invites the reader to be damned" (74). That is, "*Jerusalem* itself was intended to be 'incomprehensible / to the Vegetated Mortal Eye's perverted and single vision'" (Pl. 53:10-11) (73). According to this argument, Blake created "closed" texts which turned away rationalist readers and subverted rationalist publicity.

Roger Easson is less damning of Blake's supposed damning obscurity. Easson acknowledges that *Jerusalem* "is a sincere contention of friendship, and reading it requires entering the burning fire of thought" (310). This is not to say, however, that such a reader is enlightened; in fact, he or she may be *too* enlightened. *Jerusalem*, as an antinomian tome, is rebarbative to the rational mind. Easson writes: "*Jerusalem*'s reader is a citizen of a fallen world; his perceptual abilities are obstructed by the values and concerns of that fallen world. Each fallen reader approaches *Jerusalem*, initially at least, in the spirit of the Spectre—unloving, unbelieving, unforgiving, and reasoning" (310). He elaborates: "Sublime poetry terrifies the reasoning mind, because it denies the centrality and dominance of the reasoning faculty. And, in this way, it threatens to disorient the reader to overthrow reason, and to let loose the disintegrating forces of chaos" (316). That is, "*Jerusalem* mirrors the state of the reader; and if the reader is still dominated by the spectral reason when he attempts to thread his way through the verbal maze, then he will be led deeper and deeper into the enigma, into the darkness of Blake's allegoric night" (314).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mike Goode raises red flags about the elitism that attends many critical readings of Blake's sublimity, arguing that Blake's works "may long have wanted more than just to arrest, block, and overwhelm a

This “allegoric night” is the result of what Blake calls “sublime allegory” (E730). According to Easson, “sublime allegory is poetry that speaks to the intellectual powers without penetrating the intermediate stage of the corporeal understanding. It is poetry that is, quite literally, beyond reason. . . . Sublime allegory is designed to arouse the intellectual faculties by its grandly manipulative obscurity so that the individual’s humanity may awake and cast off the dominance of reason” (316). On the other hand, Vincent De Luca argues against the correlation of the sublime and obscurity in Blake’s works, insisting that Blake’s sublime is “everything that [Edmund] Burke’s sublime is not; instead of obscurity, indefinite vastness, and threatening power, there must be determinacy, concentration, and intellectual play. It must provide an element of difficulty and awe without signaling man’s impotence or his diminished state” (5).

Quite a few critics, besides Easson, contest De Luca’s assertion that Blake’s sublime allegory is determinate, rather than obscure—particularly when Blake’s bibliography is taken into account. Along these lines, Essick discusses his conception of the “bibliographic sublime” in the context of *Jerusalem*. Essick writes that “in the bibliographic sublime, the author perceives that conventional verbal representation, closeted in normative modes of publication, is inadequate to the task of signification. In response, the author is thrown back onto the physicality of the book, which in turn is manipulated into an alternative semiotic that ‘lets us see’ the ‘inadequacy’ of conventional forms” (“Bibliographic Sublime” 514). Blake’s sublime is bibliographic, and a means—a code—by which the antinomian sheep might be separated from the

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privileged few” (8). Goode argues that Blake’s illuminated books “supplement their elitist sublimity with what amounts to an unexpected transformation of the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the beautiful into a viral force of social, political, and intellectual corrosion” (8).

rationalist goats.<sup>30</sup> This bibliographic sublime suggests antinomian publicity in that such books are open to antinomians and closed to rationalists.

Nicholas Williams further describes this divisive publicity: “To those who can understand his prophetic message, Blake’s poem appears an open gate, the gate which formerly was hid amidst a chaos of obscure reference and ‘backward’ syntax; to those deaf to his message however, *Jerusalem* will remain a forbidding wall, unassailable in its solid opacity” (187). There is a biblical precedent for such opacity: Williams points to the Gospel of Matthew (11:25), where Jesus praises God for hiding things from the wise but revealing them to the simple (187). This is, as Rowland put it, the “Christ who speaks in parables in order to damn his hearers.” Williams argues that a “‘hiddenness,’ a cunning backwardness, characterizes Blake’s relationship to his audience in *Jerusalem*, curiously circumspect and even duplicitous” (186). This is reflective of Blake’s antinomian publicity, and the fact that the antinomian public was now more legend than reality.

In *Jerusalem*, Blake damns his contemporary rationalist readers (the public of the present), while at the same time acknowledging that his antinomian readers (the public of the past) remained only in the memory of a hidden remnant. There are, however, flesh-and-blood readers that still might decipher Blake’s text: these readers comprise the utopian public of futurity. Michael Ferber enquires: “Why is Blake so difficult? To rouse our faculties to act, to raise us into a perception of the infinite” (Ferber 60). Ferber is clearly referring to present-day readers, whom Blake commissions in *Jerusalem*. Easson also seems to have the present-day reader in mind when he writes: “*Jerusalem* is a poem

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<sup>30</sup> Other critics who have written on Blake and the sublime are Steven Vine, “Blake’s Material Sublime”; David M. Baulch, “‘To Rise from Génération’: The Sublime Body in Blake’s Illuminated Books”; Morton Paley, *Energy and the Imagination* (1–60); David Simpson, “Reading Blake and Derrida—Our Caesars neither Praise nor Buried”; and most recently Mike Goode, “The Joy of Looking”; and Hélène Ibata, “William Blake’s Visual Sublime: The ‘Eternal Labours.’”

about itself, about the relationship between the author and his reader. A grand allegory concealed by a rhetorical veil of error, *Jerusalem* may be read as a poem about the experience of reading *Jerusalem*; it is a poem that enjoins the reader to participate with its writer in the creative process” (309).

This reader-response, “writerly” approach is characteristic of post-structural analyses of *Jerusalem*.<sup>31</sup> Fred Dortort’s is one of the more recent. He notes that it is only after they are “freed from the compulsion to search for a consistent, orderly path through *Jerusalem* [that] readers can begin to develop alternatives” (10). But they can only do so if they “significantly adjust their own internalized, yet consensually determined, strategies for problem solving and reality testing. In looking outward at *Jerusalem* they must also look deeply inward into the constituent factors determining the makeup of what appears to be perceptually and intellectually derived everyday reality. To a considerable degree these inward-directed efforts will transfer the arena of redemption from the page to the readers’ actual lives” (10).

It should be noted, however, that the “redemption” Dortort mentions is more work than play—more job than *jouissance*—for the reader. This seems to be the point that Molly Rothenberg makes in *Rethinking Blake’s Textuality*, when she writes: “The Blake I read cannot transform us into ‘better’ people or lead us through an apocalypse to a new Garden of Eden, but this Blake can provide us with extraordinary means of identifying and exposing the varieties of oppression we foster in the name of Universal Humanity” (4). In her post-structural reading, Rothenberg argues that in *Jerusalem* Blake is particularly self-reflexive, revealing his bibliographical machinery in order to make the

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<sup>31</sup> My references to “writerly” texts (as opposed to “readerly” texts) and *jouissance* are taken from Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*.

reader question it (4-5). She continues: “Blake’s poem begins by problematizing the entire question of authority—divine, authorial, and interpretive; he consistently confronts the reader with his or her own tendency to read by attaching a traditional priority and a standard valence to ‘transcendent’ signifiers” (5). Such reading is hard work and was not really possible for Blake’s contemporaries. But it is possible for future readers who wish to participate in Blake’s utopian project, and are willing to put in the work this entails.

Tilottama Rajan also writes of Blake’s “writerly” or “open” texts as part of a post-structural reading. She asserts that in his early illuminated works, Blake “must keep putting things together differently, avoiding the homogenized vision of a text finalized for commercial publication. Blake’s method of production is in fact an attempt to avoid the alienation of labor: both ours and his” (214). In doing so, Blake is “creating a text that is open to revision from its readers” (214). However, she argues that Blake’s early works are more writerly than his later works. In his illuminated books of the early 1790s, Blake exhibits a “revisionary hermeneutics in which intertextuality replaces canonicity,” but this is reversed in *Jerusalem* (199). *Jerusalem* marks “Blake’s abandonment of the heuristic text in favor of the ‘work,’ admittedly conceived as ongoing labor, yet tending nevertheless to reify process as a product in itself. *Jerusalem* consolidates the later Blake’s commitment to a traditional hermeneutic, and in its discursive passages it provides exegetical principles for normalizing the earlier texts” (270-71). Thus, she concludes that *Jerusalem* is a “closed” canonical text. As my reading below shows, *Jerusalem* is certainly a conflicted text, showing Blake to be torn between canonization and antinomian obscurity. But I contend contra Rajan that the “gates” of *Jerusalem* are

not completely closed and sealed. Blake leaves at least one such gate open a crack, ingress for future readers, who make up the utopian public of futurity.

In his article entitled “William Blake and the Future of Enthusiasm,” Steven Goldsmith seems to refer to this utopian future public when he discusses some critics’ enthusiastic claims for Blake’s enthusiasm. These critics write

as if enthusiasm itself were a continuously streaming counterpoint to modernity, a potentiality to be otherwise, a future waiting to be mobilized by an audience whose faculties will have been properly roused to act. The very desire to historicize enthusiasm, and thus to identify its difference from our own modernity, is indistinguishable from a desire to activate that difference anew, to put it to work in our still needy world. In Blake criticism, enthusiasm has been every bit as much about enabling the future as it has been about respecting the archive of neglected premodern radicals. (442)

While Goldsmith suggests that the critics who focus on Blake’s enthusiasm tend to uncritically “express the enthusiasm they set out to describe,” and goes on to describe this in terms of the incorporation of emotion into the critical enterprise, he is also clearly arguing Blake’s relevance to present-day readers—the futurity that Blake beheld in his lifetime—and its ongoing utopian potential (441). What I would add to Goldsmith’s analysis is that it is not just Blake’s enthusiasm that enthuses his critics. Lately there is a similar excitement about Blake’s antinomianism, which shares many of the qualities of enthusiasm.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jon Mee makes this eminently clear in *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, and in his articles on antinomianism since (all of which are listed in the works cited).

In *Jerusalem* Blake suggests that there are welcome and unwelcome readers, as well as welcome and unwelcome publics. The rationalists of Blake's time damned him for his religious "mystifications," which supposedly undermined reasoned inquiry and encouraged atavistic irrationality. Blake, in turn, damned them and endeavored that they would be unable to decipher his antinomian code. These readers were led astray by their rationalism—by their very effort to crack the code. For these readers, Blake intended the work to be Sisyphean. But for those who committed themselves to the hard work of reading with the middle (spiritual) eye, and had the wherewithal—the knowledge of the Bible and familiarity with esoteric, antinomian thought—to decode Blake's text, there was a resting place at the bosom of the "Divine Humanity." The antinomian public was no longer viable when Blake finished *Jerusalem*, but Blake also appealed to the spiritually enlightened readers who would come after him—his utopian public of futurity. When it comes to *Jerusalem* the book, many are those who take the wide road to damnation and few are those who enter the narrow gate to salvation—or even find it. It is a gate that can only be found in the past or in the future.

### **Public Collision and Collusion in *Jerusalem***

*Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion* is not generally considered part of Blake's Bible of Hell.<sup>33</sup> There are a number of discontinuities between *Jerusalem* and the

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<sup>33</sup> Searching for the word "moral" in [David Erdman's concordance](#) of Blake's works produces 34 results in *Jerusalem*, often qualified by the words "virtue" or "law." All of these instances of the word are negative, which is consistent with the way Blake characterizes morality in his antinomian Bible of Hell, and the way that antinomians generally conceived it. Other words (besides "virtue" and "law") associated with "moral" are justice, duty, sin, repentance, revenge, vengeance, reason, and rational. Words used to express the counter-vision to "moral" are liberty, mercy, forgiveness, faith, and imagination—all antinomian code words.

other books in the cycle. For instance, *Jerusalem* does not mimic the form of the Bible in the way that the books of Urizen, Ahania, and Los do: there are no dual-column pages or verse numbers in *Jerusalem*. And Urizen, the arch-priest of reason who presides over the proceedings in the earlier books, keeps to the background in *Jerusalem*. These discontinuities complicate any reading of *Jerusalem* as part of Blake's Bible of Hell; but then discontinuity figures in all of Blake's works, including the books in his infernal Bible, and should be no reason to exclude *Jerusalem*. Besides, there are also some significant continuities: namely, Blake's antinomianism, his practices of textual obscurity, and the close resemblance of the work to a biblical book—in this case the final book in the Christian Bible, the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse.

I argue that it is the continuities rather than discontinuities that are problematic in *Jerusalem*. Blake's poem not only resembles the biblical Book of Revelation, it draws upon its canonical authority, its designation as the capstone and omega-point of Christian revelation. Blake continued his battle with the book in *Jerusalem*, but his campaign had become equivocal. *Jerusalem* is at cross purposes with itself: the centrifugal force of Blake's antinomian media practice wars with the centripetal force of canonization, just as publicity wars with privacy. Typically in Blake's works this war of contraries is not a stalemate but rather a productive tension, a balancing of opposites. This war is threatened by a peace understood as the conflation of contraries and the cessation of "public collusion." *Jerusalem* offers this kind of Pyrrhic peace, one that tempted the Blake of the nineteenth century, and has tempted his critics since.

As in the previous books in Blake's Bible of Hell, *Jerusalem* shows the ravages of Blake's subversive antinomian bibliography, but there are forces that vitiate its critical



impact. *Jerusalem* parodies the Bible in a number of ways. It contains lists of places and people that mimic similar catalogues in the Bible, its language and cadences also evoke the Bible (particularly the King James version), and there are many ornaments that might be found in illustrated bibles such as the *Biblia Pauperum*. And with its four chapters, *Jerusalem* has the familiar four-fold form of the Christian gospels. This is supplemented by the many allusions to the biblical Book of Revelation. But *Jerusalem* differs from the earlier Bible of Hell in that it suggests that Blake was expropriating the Bible to grant authority to his work, and this expropriation functions more as homage than satire.

In terms of détournage, *Jerusalem* remediates media associated with the plebs, but unlike the previous books in his Bible of Hell, Blake erases most of the traces that distinguish plebeian from elite bourgeois media in *Jerusalem*. If you remove the opening “epistle” of each chapter along with the full-page designs that begin and/or end each chapter, *Jerusalem* could be seen as an anthology of four short pamphlets or chapbooks—a Bible in parts (popular in the eighteenth century), or a collection of gospels, which in the earliest days of Christianity circulated separately—except that the large folio page size would not accommodate such a scheme. The epistles (the addresses “To the Public,” “To the Jews,” “To the Deists,” and “To the Christians”) could comprise a separate smaller collection of single-page handbills. But the fact that critics do not take notice of such détournage in *Jerusalem* (unlike, say, *The Book of Urizen*) is witness to Blake’s success in sublimating—even abjecting—plebeian media under the aegis of the print book.

Similarly, Blake works against his disintegrative bricolage in *Jerusalem*. This is not a book that is meant to be pulled apart—actually or cognitively. The work coheres.

There are, as in the previous Bible of Hell books, full-page prints which seem detachable, making the text unstable. However, they are not randomly placed, as in *The Book of Urizen*. Each serves either as a frontispiece to each of the four chapters, or, like plate 100, as an end-piece. In *Jerusalem*, these images have been tethered to the task of textual integration, rather than the biblioclasm that characterizes the other books in Blake's Bible of Hell. Also serving textual cohesion is the length of the *Jerusalem*, which at a hundred pages offers a pleasing sense of completion. *Jerusalem*, as mentioned above, could be separated into epistles and gospels. This does not undermine this cohesion but rather adds to it. Readers should be familiar with, and think nothing of, this mix of epistle and gospel, since the Bible and its apologists had long since normalized this kind of textual heterogeneity. Neither would "scientific" exegetes of the Bible be bothered by this heterogeneity, since they too took it for granted. Blake, in other words, undercuts readerly alienation by making *Jerusalem* too much like the Bible, and he does so in ways that both orthodox and heterodox exegetes would consider a matter of course.

The faux manuscript that we see in all of Blake's illuminated books is certainly present in *Jerusalem*. But the sheer amount of such manuscript, particularly on the many pages that present nothing but text—what De Luca calls "walls of words"—nearly cancels out the critical effect of such text, and adds instead to the monumentality of the work. Instead of interrogating print, the sheer amount of compacted verbiage, along with the removal of images that would break its sublime spell, lulls the reader into a sense of complacency and dulls the alienating (dys)functionality of the text. It seems a nostalgic throw-back to medieval illuminated manuscripts, rather than a protest against rationalized print.

In terms of the text-design conflict seen in the earlier works, there is much less of it to contend with in *Jerusalem*. Instead of critical “chatter” between the words and the image, there are parallel verbal and visual narratives that are not conversant with each other. For instance, on plate 11 we see two designs, one on the top of the page and the other on the bottom with text in between. The design at the top shows a swan with the body of a woman seated in shallow water. The design on the bottom shows a naked woman swimming through water (though she also seems to be surrounded with fire). In his commentary, Paley mentions the resemblance of this woman to a Meso-American Indian, but then identifies her as one of Blake’s “finny beings” (146). Neither of these identifications is satisfactory, but they are as good as anyone else’s guess. Water connects the two images, and brings the page together visually—there is a blue wash over the text to make it seem like it is underwater (the marginal fish enhance this impression). But there is a great disparity between the images and the words, which describe Los at his furnaces: “With great labour upon his anvils, & and in his ladles the Ore / He lifted, pouring it into the clay ground prepar’d with art” (Pl. 11: 3-4). Design and text inhabit completely different worlds.

The same might be said of the marginal decorations in *Jerusalem*. In earlier books in the Bible of Hell marginal decorations are quite intrusive; here they are less so. Rarely do they bore into the text or comment upon it, as in *The Book of Urizen*, but instead present a different, virtual reality. Four such parallel realities can be discerned in *Jerusalem*: Generation, Ulro, Beulah, and Eden. For instance, on plate 13 the marginal design shows insects and a vine with leaves, and then in the bottom half a man trying to swat (or capture) with his hat a very large, black insect that resembles a Spectre. Paley

comments that this image introduces a “grotesquely comic element” to the page (150). It also suggests how in one reality, such as Generation, a vine might be a picturesque symbol of fecundity, a black-winged creature might be just an insect, and a man might be as winsome as a child; whereas in another reality, such as Ulro, the vine might represent the trap of vegetative existence, the insect might be a spectre ravening for the souls of the dead, and the man might be violently contending with his own abstracted reason. But in any case, the images have nothing to do with the text on the page, which describes, in a series of biblical lists, the city of Golgonooza. Here and elsewhere in *Jerusalem* the design and the text are not antagonists, but neither are they on speaking terms. This distinguishes the work from the other books in Blake’s Bible of Hell. In *Jerusalem*, word and image evoke different but parallel realities, suggesting that Blake had called a truce in the war between design and text.

Similarly, the representations of Urizen and the book are largely effaced in *Jerusalem*, and what representations remain evince Blake’s equivocation in relation to rationalized print. In Blake’s final poem, Albion and his sons seem to have taken the place of Urizen.<sup>34</sup> But another reading is that Urizen is all the more prevalent in the work by being abstracted, in the form of the ubiquitous Spectre. “It is the Reasoning Power / An Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing / This is the Spectre of Man; the Holy Reasoning Power / And in its Holiness is closed the Abomination of Desolation” (10:13-16). Blake clearly links the Spectre not only to reason, but to the depredations of “moral virtue”: the Spectre is produced by the sons of Albion when they “take the Two Contraries which are calld Qualities, with which / Every substance is clothed, they name

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<sup>34</sup> Though it should be noted that Urizen is mentioned in the text 23 times, according to Erdman’s Blake concordance.

them Good and Evil” (10:8-9). The sons of Albion are later more explicitly linked to Urizen, when they construct their dragon temples following the blueprint of Urizen the “Architect” (25:4, 66:4).

There are a few pictorial representations of Urizen in *Jerusalem*. Arguably, his image first appears on plate 39, which shows a white-bearded patriarch pulling back a bow—an object often associated with Urizen throughout Blake’s corpus. On plate 58 Blake depicts Urizen’s skeleton, which is overshadowed by a monstrous spectre. A figure strongly resembling Urizen appears on plate 64 and again on plate 87. His head appears in one of the designs that emblemize the fall of the Four Zoas, on plate 92. In *Jerusalem*, there are two depictions of Urizen in particular that seem to extend Blake’s critique of print in ways consonant with the other books in his Bible of Hell. Plate 64 has designs at the top and the bottom of the page which together show the conflict between prophecy and print. At the top of the page there is a recumbent, haloed, entranced scribe, who is writing upon a scroll. At the bottom, there is another recumbent figure that most commentators associate with Urizen, peering censoriously at the figure at the top, while holding his place in a book with his finger. In his commentary on plate 64, Paley cites Mitchell’s distinction between the prophetic scroll and rationalist book which I cited earlier in this chapter. In my reading of plate 64 of *Jerusalem*, the Urizen figure is attempting to curtail prophetic activity by pointing out its divergence from his “book of laws,” which govern Urizen’s spectral, rationalist publicity.

Plate 41 does not show Urizen, but it does depict a conflict between scroll and book. The design depicts a despairing giant Albion, with his hair flowing down to his feet. With Mitchell, I read what might seem to be Albion’s sleeves as a curved, open

book upon which he looks to be imprinting his face. Mitchell writes: “His head is buried so deeply in the center of his book that it seems about to break through the spine” (“Visible Language” 65). At the same time, Albion sits upon a scroll: “The scroll is beginning to ‘grow’ on Albion, become one with his garments” (“Visible Language” 65). There is “an elfin scribe writing what Erdman calls a ‘merry proverb’ in reverse engraver’s writing” (“Visible Language” 65). What the elfin scribe writes is: “Each Man is in / his Spectre’s power / Untill the arrival / of that hour, / When his Humanity / awake / And cast his Spectre / into the Lake.” The sentiment is antinomian and apocalyptic, in that it evokes images from the biblical Book of Revelation. It is also clearly an emblem of the liberation offered by prophecy (on the scroll), opposed to the despairing activity of rationalist book production.

Offsetting these negative representations of rationalized print and Urizen are images that suggest Urizen’s role in Blake’s economy of salvation. This is based on identifications that, to my knowledge, only I have made. I maintain that the designs featuring a long-bearded patriarch on plates 96 and 99, at the apocalyptic end of *Jerusalem*, represent Urizen. They both show a Urizen-like figure embracing a naked female. In the Blake Trust edition, Paley claims that these two identical figures are, respectively, Albion and Jehovah. Iconologically, that is in terms of Blake’s typical depiction of Albion and Jehovah in *Jerusalem* and other works, this makes little sense.<sup>35</sup>

Neither of the pages on which the figures appear mention Urizen—but then most of the

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<sup>35</sup> In his commentary to the Blake Trust edition, Paley identifies the first instance of the figure on plate 96 as Albion, noting that “we are free to imagine Albion as either this patriarch or the athletic youth of [plate] 95, since human forms are no longer time-bound” (292). This is quite a stretch: why would Blake depict a youthful, beardless, rising Albion (on plate 95) and an old, bearded hovering Albion (on plate 96), on opposing pages—especially when in all other depictions of Albion in *Jerusalem* he is shown as the younger figure? Paley identifies the figure on plate 99 with Jehovah, agreeing that the image resembles his mis-identified Albion on plate 96, but refusing to identify him as such, choosing instead the arbitrary association of the figure with Jehovah, who is not otherwise depicted in *Jerusalem*.

designs in *Jerusalem* depict figures that seem to have no bearing on the text. Identifying the figures on plates 96 and 99 as Urizen indicates a redeemed Urizen, re-united (as in *The Four Zoas*) with his emanation Ahania.<sup>36</sup> The apotheosis of Urizen and Ahania suggests a declaration of peace, a mystical conflation of contraries, which implies that Blake had in the end abandoned his critique of reason in the form of the print book, and the rationalist publicity it empowers.

The best piece of evidence in this regard is *Jerusalem* seen as a whole. Blake's tactics of textual obscurity are in play, but their critical effect is overshadowed by, if not buried under, the great bibliographic edifice that is *Jerusalem* the book. Instead of encouraging distancing and a querulous attitude towards the work, Blake confronts the reader with a bibliographic sublime that discourages critical engagement with the text. Instead of destabilizing fixity, Blake creates a book that is a monument. Instead of attempting to dissipate the aura of the book, he cultivates it. As Mann writes of *Jerusalem*: "One could argue that one of Blake's fundamental purposes was to produce the most intransigent aura—perhaps, strictly speaking the only aura—in English literature" (22). Its intransigence, its obscurity, is an integral part of its aura. Ferber adds that "aura and difficulty are independent if mutually enhancing effects" (65). The bibliographic aura of *Jerusalem* thus reverts to the cultic, to reverence and worship. If, as Benjamin claims, mechanical reproduction "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual," dissipating its aura and bringing it into the realm of politics, Blake's hand-crafted holy book seems to reverse the process (216).

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<sup>36</sup> I also identify the figure of the old patriarch and young woman riding the monstrous chariot of plate 46 as Urizen and Ahania, rather than Albion and Jerusalem. This identification follows my rejection of the old, patriarchal Albion discussed in the note above.

In his address “To the Public” in *Jerusalem*, Blake writes that everything is “studied and put into its place.” Given the disturbing chaos of the text, most commentators scoff at this assertion, but I argue that the work coheres despite itself. More so than in his other illuminated books, there is a method—a system—to Blake’s bibliographic madness. On plate 12, Los exclaims: “I saw the finger of God go forth / Upon my Furnaces, from within the Wheels of Albion’s Sons: / Fixing their systems, permanent: by mathematic power / Giving a body to Falsehood that it may be cast off forever” (10-13). This is what Blake does bibliographically in *Jerusalem*: his book gives “a body to Falsehood that it may be cast off forever.” Broadsides, cheap pamphlets, chapbooks, and other ephemera cannot do this; the only medium with the authority and longevity to do this is the print book. However, the print book might also give Falsehood a body that cannot be cast off and that, in fact, lives forever. For the Blake of the 1790s, such a book would be the Bible, which is why it needed to be countered by a Bible of Hell, an anti-book; but the Blake of the nineteenth century is more than willing to risk preserving falsehood between the covers of a new Bible, the most magisterial of books, in order to promulgate a message that would survive the vagaries of time. In 1793, Blake wrote: “The Labours of the Artist, the Poet, the Musician, have been proverbially attended by poverty and obscurity; this was never the fault of the Public, but was owing to a neglect of the means to propagate such works as have wholly absorbed the Man of Genius” (E692). In the 1820s he learned that the means to propagate his works was not illuminated printing per se, but rather the medium of the print book.

In the case of *Jerusalem*, its pseudo-biblical literary form enhances its bibliographical authority. Over the years, there have been many ingenious explanations



of the form of *Jerusalem*, and in his commentary Paley notes some of them.<sup>37</sup> Paley himself argues that, in form, *Jerusalem* closely resembles the biblical Book of Revelation, or Apocalypse. In particular, he shows how seventeenth-century exegetes of the Book of Revelation provided a reading that seems to explain some of the supposed idiosyncrasies of *Jerusalem* (124-125, 285-289). In *Unbuilding Jerusalem*, Steven Goldsmith also argues that Blake's works, including *Jerusalem*, are influenced by the biblical apocalypse, the Book of Revelation.<sup>38</sup> For Goldsmith, apocalypse as a form was not conducive to Blake's radical politics, or his antinomian bibliography. He writes: "Apocalypse is a 'bookish' phenomenon, not just in that books feature prominently within the visions themselves, but also in the fact that apocalyptic revelation often comes indirectly through a book. Classical prophecy is typically (though not invariably) spoken; the word passes from Yahweh to the prophet without mediation . . . and the result of such inspiration is speech rather than text" (28). The result of a book of apocalypse, by contrast, is both the end of history and the end of prophecy, in the form of a book. Goldsmith argues that the canonized Apocalypse of John of Patmos (the Book of Revelation) "contributed in no small measure to the West's idea of the book. More to the point, it helped set the two in opposition, helped create the tradition whereby the book came to be conceived as a space into which history did not significantly enter, a space, in other words, where history [and subsequently political amelioration] came to an end" (48). Michael Farrell adds that "canonical texts . . . are models of authority and represent a standard by which to judge all other texts and how they are to be read," which means

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<sup>37</sup> *Jerusalem* is modeled after an "encyclopedic anatomy" (W. J. T. Mitchell), the prophet Ezekiel (Harold Bloom), the Synoptic Gospels (Joanne Witke), and Milton's *Paradise Regained* (Stuart Curran) (284).

<sup>38</sup> In this, he follows in the footsteps of not only Paley, but also Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, and Jerome McGann, all of whom see apocalypse as a "primary topos" in Blake's works (135-136).

that “the canonization of texts potentially results in the institutional control of interpretation” (35).

Goldsmith points out an inherent contradiction in the canonization of religious texts: “John wrote the Book of Revelation on the cusp between an internally diverse religious movement and its subsequent consolidation as an institution. His vision of the end of history at once preserves the antinomian impulse of prophecy and the antithetical, stabilizing imperatives of ‘official’ prophecy, canonical prophecy” (82). Goldsmith extends this analysis to Blake, contending that Blake resisted this kind of canonicity, undermining it with self-reflexive production practices and radical political ideology. In his defense, Goldsmith cites Rajan, who claims that Blake “encourages canonical reading, while at other times stimulating resistance to it” (197). However, Rajan makes it clear that it in his earlier works Blake stimulated resistance to canonicity, but in his later works he encouraged canonicity. She claims that *Jerusalem* exhibits “self-canonization” and uses “the biblical paradigm to limit reading” (198). It is about “the creation and not the interrogation of a system,” such as we see in Blake’s earlier books (271).

Like Rajan I see Blake divided by the exigencies of prophecy and canonization, but, unlike Rajan, I contend that this struggle continues in *Jerusalem*. I concur with Goldsmith’s argument that the literary form of apocalypse lends itself to the privileging of the print book and canonical reading, but I am less convinced that Blake systematically resisted this privileging on the level of bibliography. The literary form of *Jerusalem* is an apocalypse that resists canonization, but its media form (the book) embraces such canonization. Unlike the other books in Blake’s Bible of Hell, *Jerusalem* is decidedly a book. And not just any book: it is a gorgeous production, with colored text; richly colored

illustrations (a number of them single-page designs), including silver and gold leaf; and large, octavo-size pages. In *Jerusalem*, Blake concedes to the exigencies of time: in order to preserve and promulgate his prophetic message, he needed to present it in a medium that would last, that was not ephemeral. This suggests that Blake had abandoned the public sphere of his day in order to appeal to the public of futurity.

Blake's alienation from the public sphere is dramatically on display at the very beginning of *Jerusalem*. In Blake's address to "The Public" on plate 3, a number of words and even entire lines are missing. Paley remarks that "at some point Blake attacked the copper plate, gouging out words and entire passages that suggested intimacy with the reader" (11). Some of these missing passages have been reconstructed by Erdman, amongst others. For instance, there is this passage, with Erdman's reconstructions added in parentheses:

"Reader! [Lover] of books! [Lover] of heaven.

And of that God from whom [all books are given] (E145)

The mutilated, gouged words indicate that Blake was, to say the least, conflicted about books and readers. "The only explanation for such battery upon the plate," Paley explains, "is that Blake received a rebuff from a potential buyer, one that so enraged him that he wanted to remove all traces of personal intimacy and spiritual communion with his readership" (11).<sup>39</sup> But this is not the only explanation. Another is that Blake received a more general rebuff from a public sphere dominated by the print book. By the second

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<sup>39</sup> In his commentary to the Blake Trust edition, Paley lists a number of possible reasons why Blake had become alienated from the public: 1. Blake's failure to land the commission to engrave his own designs to Blair's *Grave* in 1805; 2. Robert Hunt's unfavorable review of Blake's *Grave* designs in *The Examiner* in 1808; 3. the failure of Blake's exhibition, and another bad review in *The Examiner*, in 1809; 4. Blake's contention that his former "corporeal" friend [first name] Stothard had stolen his idea for his painting/print on the Canterbury pilgrims, in 1811; 5. the bewildered reception of Robert Southey when Blake showed him some samples from *Jerusalem* in 1811; and 6. the little-seen exhibition at the Water Colour Society of "Detached Specimens" from *Jerusalem* in 1812.

decade of the nineteenth century, Blake finally had to acknowledge that his antinomian public no longer existed in the time and place in which he lived. However, ghostly vestiges of the antinomian public haunt Blake's *Jerusalem*.

In contradistinction to Blake's address "To the Public," the other addresses in *Jerusalem* (to the Jews, the Deists, and the Christians) can be read as epistles, in that they resemble the pastoral letters that come after the gospels in the Christian Scriptures. Like these epistles, Blake's engage specific religious communities in a religious public sphere. However, I do not agree that Blake's epistles were meant to preface the chapters that they immediately precede, as was once commonly assumed. The epistles address religious communities; the chapters do not. Blake addresses the Jews, Deists, and Christians of his own time with his epistles, but there are also ancient controversies within Christianity that motivate Blake. For instance, in his address to the Jews, Blake takes the reader into the distant past, when the Jews were Druids, and England was "the Primitive Seat of Patriarchal Religion" (4-5). But then the Jews, once transported to the Holy Land, apostasized, choosing "cruel Sacrifices" and law rather than "Forgiving trespasses and sins / Lest Babylon with cruel Og, / With Moral & Self-righteous Law / Should Crucify in Satans Synagogue!" (Pl. 27: 110, 41-44). The antinomian, freed from such a law and such a synagogue, offers spiritual liberty and the Divine Humanity to the Jews, exhorting them to "Take up the Cross O Israel & follow Jesus" (115).

When Blake addresses the Deists, he clearly references debates of his own day, taking "Voltaire Rousseau Gibbon Hume" to task for their skepticism (Pl. 52: 38). But, once again, he fixates upon the ancient origin of this skepticism, identifying it with "Greek Philosophy" (Pl. 52: 19). Deism, he tells the Deists, is nothing less than "the

Worship of the God of this World by the means of what you call Natural Religion and Natural Philosophy, and of Natural Morality or Self-Righteousness, the Selfish Virtues of the Natural Heart” (Pl. 52: 33-36). Here Blake the antinomian evokes the struggles of Christians and pagans at the dawn of Christianity. Similarly, in his address to the Christians, Blake writes in the spirit and tone of early Christian controversialists. He urges orthodox Christians to reclaim their prophetic and apostolic gifts, to “cast out devils in Christs name / Heal thou the sick of spiritual disease / Pity the evil. for thou art not sent / To smite with terror & with punishments / Those that are sick” (Pl. 71: 71-75). As an antinomian, Blake confesses: “I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination Imagination the real & eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow & in which we shall live in our Eternal or Imaginative Bodies, when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more. The Apostles knew of no other Gospel” (Pl. 71: 17-22). He urges the Christians to “expel from among you those who pretend to despise” this gospel (Pl. 71: 37-38). It may be that in his epistles Blake is attempting to speak to some of the religious controversies of his own time, but he does so by bringing it back to the time when antinomian Christianity was a viable alternative to Judaism, paganism, and orthodox Christianity—that is, to the first centuries of the common era, before it became the official religion of empire in the fourth century CE. It was the publicity of the past that concerned Blake, much more so than the publicity of the present.

Albion is often characterized in commentaries as representing the public sphere of Blake’s time. For instance, Mitchell calls Albion “the English-reading Public or Universal Man” (*Composite Art* 185). According to the general arc of the narrative of

*Jerusalem*, at the apocalyptic ending Albion is resurrected. However, Albion-as-public in the nineteenth century remained in the stony sleep of death. I have already mentioned that the antinomian Blake may have addressed some of the religious controversies of the early nineteenth century in *Jerusalem*; I have also discussed how Blake's debate with Enlightenment rationalism continued in the form of the surreptitious Urizen and the Spectres, who control the sons of Albion. But, as with the previous books in his Bible of Hell, Blake chose to produce *Jerusalem* in small quantities rather than publish it widely. Thus what might have been a contribution to the public sphere of Blake's time—what may have brought Albion back to life—instead functions as spectral publicity. Deprived of a public platform, these figures become ghostly. They haunt the text because they are trapped there, with no outlet. That is, in *Jerusalem* there is no way into the time-space continuum of nineteenth-century Britain. That gate is sealed.

The gates that open to the past and the future, however, remain unsealed. The public of futurity, like the public of the past, is present in spectral form in *Jerusalem*. This public of futurity has now become a public of the twenty-first-century present. Blake used his tactic of textual obscurity to gain a circle of adherents who have passed along to subsequent generations the “secret book” that is *Jerusalem*. Taking his cue from the biblical Book of Revelation, Blake utilized the obscurity of *Jerusalem*—its riddles, its sublimity, its uncanny resemblance to Scripture—to give it an afterlife that continues to this day. That is because, unlike previous books in his Bible of Hell, Blake promulgated his book of revelation in the form of a deluxe, magisterial book. He chose a perennial, rather than an ephemeral, form to evangelize his antinomian gospel. In this sense, Blake's Book of Apocalypse is a media apocalypse: the culmination of not only his Bible of Hell

but his entire corpus is in the form of a print book. Take away *Jerusalem* and there is nothing left in Blake's corpus that resembles a book as we have come to know it; instead, there are a number of texts that mix together ephemeral media associated with plebeian popular culture (such as the broadside, the cheap pamphlet, the chapbook) that Blake calls books. *Jerusalem* is arguably the one true book Blake produced, and it secured his place in the canon.

And yet there are indications that Blake meant to resist canonization in *Jerusalem*. The infamous obscurity of the work is part of this. Blake hid his meaning and his intentions from the public sphere of his day; at the same time, he provided clues and reading instructions for future readers—his public of futurity. In *Jerusalem*, as Eason points out, Blake may be “the trickster poet who has recognized that in the fallen world ‘deep dissimulation is the only defence an honest man has left’” (311 [J 49:23]). But it may also be the case that Blake expected that his future readers would be able to tease out of his text a profound significance, a deep simulation, and created a text that would make this possible. That is, Blake offered in *Jerusalem* a canonical text that would continually undermine its own canonicity, by encouraging critical reading of both the content and construct of the work. Adherents of the “writerly” Blake, by advocating guerilla tactics that would continue Blake's un-holy war, have taken up Blake's challenge. These readers have inherited both Blake's utopian vision and his ambivalence concerning bibliographic cohesion and canonicity.

Canonizers and biblioclasts alike claim Blake as a Romantic, but at issue is how this relates to bibliography and publicity. Does Blake's Romanticism denote an escape into the private sphere, an absconding into public obscurity, or rather an ongoing

engagement with an embattled public sphere without hope of resolution, a “negative capability” at the level of publicity? I subscribe to the latter position, despite the “severe contentions” posed by a monumentalized *Jerusalem*. Even in this work the contraries of private and public remain precariously in balance, indicating both the evils and the efficacy of “public collusion” (Pl. 90:65). This balanced contrariety, rather than the apocalyptic conflation of opposing terms, makes Blake Romantic. According to this formulation, Blake’s Bible of Hell is not Romantic, for it renounces privacy and appeals to an antinomian public that existed when he composed it. But when this public disappeared into irrelevance and utter obscurity, when antinomians disappeared from public view, when Blake receded from the public sphere without retreating to the private sphere, he showed himself to be Romantic. In the inchoate space between public and private, in the inchoate time between past and future, Blake laid down the golden string that will “lead you in at Heavens gate, / Built in Jerusalems wall” (J 77:9-10).



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