

THE ANTI-JACOBIN  
NOVEL

*British Conservatism and the French Revolution*

M. O. GRENBY



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CHAPTER I

*Novels reproved and reprieved*

It was said by Fletcher of Saltoun, 'Let me make the ballads of a nation, and I care not who makes the laws.' Might it not be said with as much propriety, Let me make the novels of a country, and let who will make the system?

Anna Lætitia Barbauld, *An Essay on the Origin and Progress of Novel Writing* (1810)

A rhetoric of opposition to the spread of reading, and to the educational and distributive processes that seemed to facilitate it, grew steadily throughout the eighteenth century. This was generally a rather petulant and sporadic resentment against the trickle down of a literary competence, but it occasionally found a tighter focus. Institutions which could be painted as inventions only of the present iniquitous age were seized upon as simultaneously causes and symptoms of the problem. Chief amongst these were the circulating library, the Sunday or charity school, and the novel. In the conservative imagination, the Sunday school taught the illiterate to read; the circulating library enabled them to do so affordably; and the novel enticed into the habit those who had previously been unwilling. What these institutions have in common is that they could all be arraigned for spreading the reading habit to new sections of society, to the lower orders, to women, to children.<sup>1</sup> It was the spread of literature to these inexperienced and susceptible readers which was to be condemned, conservative commentators were careful to point out, not reading itself, which few Protestants, few believers in the past glories of English literature, and few who read themselves, would be prepared to do. New readers were, they insisted, not sufficiently discriminating to distinguish between the wholesome food and the poison into which literature had always been divided.

This suspicion and hostility to reading and its agencies received new impetus from the French Revolution and the British radical response to it. The bout of conservative introspection brought on by the Revolution

crisis of the 1790s endowed by then established attitudes to the trickle down of the literary habit with a new urgency. Education of the poor, and the dissemination of reading materials to them, had consistently been condemned because they unfitted them for their station in life. Humphrey Repton's 1788 perspective was typical, not least in its vagueness: 'I contend that some degree of ignorance is necessary to keep them ['the lower orders'] subordinate, and to make them either useful to others, or happy in themselves.'<sup>2</sup> But by 1797 this had become a distinctly political concern:

A man of no literature will seldom attempt to form insurrections, or plan an idle scheme for the reformation of the State. Conscious of his inability he will withdraw from such associations; while those who are qualified by a tincture of superficial learning, and have imbibed the pernicious doctrines of seditious writers, will be the first to excite rebellions, and convert a flourishing kingdom into a state of anarchy and confusion.<sup>3</sup>

In an age when 'every pen was raised in the cause of freedom and equality' and 'a new system every day broke from the groaning press', as one novelist was convinced, any broadening of literature's constituency must be dangerous.<sup>4</sup> In an age when Paine's quick-acting poison was reputed to have reached one in ten Britons, it was only natural to conclude that it would be better if no one could read at all than that they should be able to read the *Rights of Man*.<sup>5</sup> A little learning created 'a predisposition for the reception of nonsense, and especially innovating nonsense', and 'Tom Paine's book was wonderfully adapted for circulation'.<sup>6</sup> A reading public had become a revolutionary public.

Because of its formulation as simply the opposite of all that was good, Jacobinism itself did not have to do anything to draw literacy, education and reading into its orbit. It was conservatives who cast them there, influenced as they were by the all-encompassing conspiracy theories of the day, and the general sense of crisis which seemed to induce the detection of Jacobinism in all things in any way offering a challenge to the old order. Thus Samuel Horsley could claim in the House of Lords, with no obvious evidence, that 'schools of jacobinical religion, and of jacobinical politics; that is to say, schools of atheism and disloyalty' were appearing 'in the shape and disguise of charity-schools and Sunday-schools, in which the minds of the children of the very lowest orders are enlightened; that is, taught to despise religion and the laws, and all subordination'.<sup>7</sup> The extent of such paranoia is astonishing. The treatment of Hannah More serves as an example. After her *Village Politics* (1792), the authorship of

which was soon discovered, her *Remarks on the Speech of M. Dupont* (1793) and the Cheap Repository Tracts (1795–8), few could seriously have suggested that More was actively sponsoring Jacobinism. Yet allegations made during the Blagdon crisis of 1800–3 clearly made the accusation. In establishing her contentious Somerset schools dedicated to teaching the poor to read the Bible she had, after all, endowed them with a literary competence, dangerous since they were held to be inexperienced and precipitate enough not to be able to discern those books of appalling tendency which everyone agreed existed. Even schools devoted purely to the propagation of religion must become suspect: ‘if a disposition for reading is *in any degree* indulged,’ wrote one reluctant critic of education, ‘the sublimity of the Sacred Scriptures is perhaps bartered for the effusions of some superficial or political pamphleteer.’<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Hannah More was as deeply horrified by the books readily available in the 1790s to even the lowest class of readers as anyone alive. ‘Vulgar and indecent penny books were always common’, she knew, but the ‘speculative infidelity’ which she saw ‘brought down the pockets and capacities of the poor’, she thought formed a ‘new æra’ of depravity in history.<sup>9</sup> It was More who, perhaps more than anyone else, was responsible for the recognition that the damage could not be undone and that the peril had somehow to be countered. Fascinatingly, she dramatised her own realisation of this in her Cheap Repository Tract ‘The Sunday School’ (probably 1795). The prevailing defeatist conservative stance on reading, with which she could empathise but not agree, is represented in the tale by Farmer Hoskins. Her own reinvigorated optimistic faith in the power of reading to preserve the old order is represented by Mrs Jones, who is attempting to found a school. They start poles apart. ‘Of all the foolish inventions and new-fangled devices to ruin the country,’ says Hoskins, ‘that of teaching the poor to read is the very worse.’ ‘And I, farmer,’ rejoins Jones, ‘think that to teach good principles to the lower classes, is the most likely way to save the country. Now, in order to do this, we must teach them to read.’ She soon wheedles out of the Farmer the real, and familiar, reasons for his anxiety. In More’s approval of these fears, and her careful rebuttal of them, we witness the reclamation of reading, and education, for the conservative cause:

‘I am afraid my own workmen will fly in my face [protests Hoskins] if once they are made scholars; and that they will think themselves too good to work.’ ‘Now you talk soberly, and give your reasons,’ said Mrs Jones, ‘weak as they are they deserve an answer. Do you think that man, woman, or child ever did his duty the worse, only because he knew it the better? . . . Now, the whole extent of

learning which we intend to give to the poor, is only to enable them to read the Bible . . . The knowledge of that book, and its practical influence on the heart is the best security you can have, both for the industry and obedience of your servants. Now, can you think any man will be the worse servant for being a good Christian? . . . Are not the duties of children, of servants, and the poor, individually and expressly set forth in the Bible? . . . Will your property be secured so effectually by the stocks on the green, as by teaching the boys in the school, that *for all these things God will bring them unto judgement?* Is a poor fellow who can read his Bible, so likely to sleep or to drink away his few hours of leisure, as one who *cannot* read? He may, and he often does, make a bad use of his reading; but I doubt not he would have been as bad without it; and the hours spent in learning to read will always have been among the most harmless ones of his life.<sup>10</sup>

Convinced by this, Hoskins becomes a supporter of the school. It thrives, and needless to say, the village community flourishes in harmonious tranquillity.

In fact, More, in her own activities, went further than her *alter ego* Mrs Jones. Her whole Cheap Repository scheme was in itself an attempt to use the written word as a weapon to fight Jacobinism, and an attempt to spread a sense of political urgency throughout the nation. This is not to say that More wished for a *debate* on the Revolution, encouraging any actual *opinions* amongst the people.<sup>11</sup> But she did realise that it was the appeal of popular literature that, just as it had been its undoing, could make it positively useful. When we read the key résumé of More's activities by William Roberts, her first biographer, this becomes clear. 'As the school of Paine had been labouring to undermine, not only religious establishments, but good government, by the alluring vehicle of novels, stories and songs,' he asserted, 'she thought it right to encounter them with their own weapons . . .'<sup>12</sup> Other conservatives were recognising this too. Their utilisation of institutions and techniques that had formerly been deemed the province of the enemies of the state opened an active front for the conservative campaign. The tactics which had been used with such effect by the forces of radicalism, as it seemed to many conservatives at least, once appropriated, enabled the protectors of the *status quo* to face their enemies on battlefields chosen long ago, and until the mid 1790s, left almost entirely undefended against the advance of the Jacobins. There had long been a general recognition that the great effectiveness of radical propaganda was derived not only from the persuasiveness of its message (obviously, no conservative could believe the substance itself would be convincing), but from the way in which it was delivered in an appropriate and seductive form and from the means by which it was disseminated. As much had been said at the trial of Paine for

Seditious Libel, when the Attorney General had warned the jury to 'be pleased to take into [their] consideration the phrase and manner as well as the matter'.<sup>13</sup> For More, and other like-minded conservatives, imitation of this formula was naturally the next step to take in their crusade. Together with other parallel conservative endeavours, like the tracts of the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property, the Cheap Repository securely established a tradition of conservative pamphlets which both outnumbered and outclassed the radical publications which had provided the initial inspiration. Exactly the same pattern was to recur with the novel. A fear of a reading public, and a fear of radicalism's ability to capture those readers, would suddenly combine to enable and encourage the anti-Jacobin novel to flourish.

As has been well documented, during the last three or four decades of the eighteenth century the novel form had been subjected to a welter of censorious criticism unbalanced by any serious or sustained apology.<sup>14</sup> The substance of this abuse is too well known to require repetition, however delectable the put-downs by reviewers, or provocative the self-righteousness of moralists' warnings. But the key characteristic of this fear of fiction, as with the attacks on Sunday schools and circulating libraries, is that it was built not on concern about the novel in itself, but rather on the question of who was reading it. The apprehension that novels were particularly adapted to those on the edge of the apparently widening circle of readers – that is to say the lower orders and especially women – was what chiefly motivated the denunciation of fiction. Criticism of the novel, effectively, had become a stalking horse for addressing a deeper malaise in society, the formation of an educated, literate, unsettled and ambitious tendency amongst those who ought to have occupied humbler and more submissive places in society. This was the anxiety which led commentators to suggest that a tax should be placed upon novels to elevate them beyond the reach of the poor, or – only half in jest – that 'none should be permitted to peruse a novel unless possessed of an estate of seven hundred a year'.<sup>15</sup>

As we have seen, such a readership was putatively dangerous because it was indiscriminating, unable to distinguish between that literature that was safe or even useful, and that which, either by an author's malicious design or through simple irresponsibility, was hazardous. Fiction in particular was supposed to be guilty of conjuring up a chimerical vision of life, as full of heroes, heroines and easily acquired fortunes as it was empty of the harsh realities of life, a utopian no-place in which a naïve reader



might erroneously place his or her faith. Such consternation, although couched, as it often was, in the more specific ridicule of the gothic novel, is familiar to us from *Northanger Abbey* and other such 'anti-novels'. Whatever the specific and immediate targets of these satires, the principal lesson to be learned was that vouchsafed by the sensible Mr Mordaunt at the close of Mary Charlton's satire on novels, *Rosella, or Modern Occurrences* (1799). He hopes, he says, Rosella's 'past danger will henceforth teach her to pay a little more deference to the established usages of society than I hear she has lately done'.<sup>16</sup> The novel, in other words, was impeached principally because it putatively encouraged readers to disregard customary practices and values.

Crucially, the new philosophy of French and British Jacobins was, according to both its own proponents' definitions and those dispensed by its antagonists, a system which likewise deliberately clashed with established usages. It can be no surprise then that attacks on new philosophy followed the pattern of attacks on novels. Directly out of the traditional concern about novels' effect on naïve readers and about their fabrication of a chimerical, parallel system of values, a more overtly political concern about the chimerical delusions of the new philosophers evolved in the 1790s. Naturally, no conservative could ever accept the veracity of the apologies made for Revolutionary France, nor the logic of the stance taken by Price or Paine, Godwin or Wollstonecraft, so in assessing the threat of the Jacobin position, they were forced to conclude that its danger stemmed only from its plausibility. Since its principles were obviously and necessarily false, its charisma was its threat, and thus, its propagation its crime. Whilst those able to discern its fallacies would dismiss it, the indiscriminating reader might fall under its spell. This was especially true if it were placed before them in the captivating terms of a novel, decked out in the bewitching forms and debonair language which fiction could deliver. A new, more political reprehension of fiction fitted snugly into the tradition of criticism already well established. So while fiction had been consistently censured for 'painting vice and folly in their most gaudy colours' to 'allure the innocent and seduce the unwary', 1790s conservatives simply elaborated on the theme by condemning 'those seditious, yet dangerous *because plausible*, publications with which the press at this period groaned'.<sup>17</sup> Jacobinism added a new urgency to the incrimination of the novel, but built upon already existing structures, without, as it were, the necessity of any new legislation being added to the statute book.

But did Jacobin novels actually exist? In fact, despite some manifestly Jacobin productions, the most obvious testimony of their existence is

provided by its opponents rather than exponents. Whether this often hysterical identification of the inexorable menace of Jacobin fiction is accurate is questionable. As we shall see, it could be used as the perfect apology for an apprehensive novelist's own authorial endeavours. Prefaces from the early 1790s and for the next fifteen or twenty years abounded in lamentations, like this one from 1805, that 'Novels and Romances have, of late years, been too frequently rendered the vehicles of revolutionary and infidel principles', the threat being alarming enough for some anti-Jacobin zealots to dedicate years of their life and thousands of pages, to exposing it.<sup>18</sup> Most vigorous of those who diagnosed this Jacobin disease was T. J. Mathias. In the first part of his *Pursuits of Literature* he could not restrain himself. 'The time for discrimination seems to be come,' he said, and offered a series of stark warnings against Jacobin novelists: 'Mrs Charlotte Smith, Mrs Inchbald, Mrs Mary Robinson, Mrs &c., &c.,' he cautioned, are all 'too frequently whining or frisking in novels, till our girls' heads turn wild with impossible adventures', – and departing from this very conventional criticism – 'and now and then are tainted with democracy.'<sup>19</sup> This was a charge taken up, as one would expect, by Robert Bisset, whose novel, *Modern Literature* (1804), was fundamentally another careful, and calculatedly horrific, dissection of Jacobinism's cancerous growth within the literary body. Fictionalising many of Mathias' concerns, Bisset had his heroine rencounter with 'Jemima', evidently Mary Wollstonecraft, who reveals her plans for a hierarchy of women to disseminate her principles. With herself as primate and one 'Mary' – Hays by her description – as her 'archbishop', it only remained to pick, from the many available candidates, twenty-four 'bishops'. When those selected are 'chiefly the writers of sentimental and loving novels', and yet are largely composed of authors who, both to posterity and their contemporaries, have appeared lacking in any genuinely radical credentials, we can see anti-Jacobin literary paranoia at its height. Relying on Bisset to identify Jacobins is rather like asking Senator McCarthy to point out communists.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever the reality of the Jacobin novel it is the panic endemic in its reception that is most significant. It seems never to have occurred to those berating the Jacobin novel that the reading public might not have actually wanted to read radical literature, something that, as the 1790s progressed, seems increasingly likely to have been the case. The 'widened circle' of readers was regarded as purely passive in the eyes of the anti-Jacobins, a body without a volition of its own, and who were so indiscriminating as to be won over by whoever produced the most alluring

and available fiction. It was without their knowing it that these guileless readers would be drawn into iniquity, which made not Jacobinism itself, however reprehensible, the primary object of reproach, but its transmission through fiction. Nowhere is this made clearer than in *Modern Literature*, the hero of which, William Hamilton, reads the philosophical treatise of one 'St Leon' – that is to say Godwin's *Political Justice* – and, being an educated and sensible man, immediately spots its many errors. The danger only arises when a narrative – *Caleb Williams* – appears in its support:

Subtle sophistry alone could hardly establish the inutility of criminal justice, but an affecting fable, setting forth the punishment of innocence and escape of guilt, strongly interests the feelings; *and the emotions of the heart are mistaken for the conclusions of the head*. A fictitious tale of an individual case is so skilfully managed, as, to many, to appear a fair and general exhibition of penal law, and its operation.<sup>21</sup>

Fiction was dangerous because it was able to engage the reader and to appear to prove a point without requiring any recourse to reason. If it was well written, by an author of talent like Godwin, so much the worse, for it would be that much more proficient in its aims. But also, Bisset implies, the danger arose because novels were read by those who would not read philosophical treatises. Jane West even appeared to remember with fondness the long gone days when 'Deistical tenets' were 'enveloped in the thick pages of some metaphysical treatise', before they became routinely 'insinuated into novels' and 'lowered to every capacity, or degree of leisure and information'.<sup>22</sup>

The idea that the novel was being enlisted by Godwin and his fellow Jacobins for the furtherance of their principles did have some basis in fact. Godwin had admitted his tactical use of fiction in the 'Preface' to *Caleb Williams* and in his letter to the *British Critic* of July 1795.<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Imlay acknowledged that he had chosen the novel form as the most effectual way of drawing his readers into his radical views.<sup>24</sup> It was this deliberate strategic deployment of the novel that most incensed Jacobinism's opponents, and provoked a response. Mixed with the angry denunciation of Jacobin novels, a determination to reply *in kind* quickly became evident, just as Hannah More had done with her Cheap Repository Tracts. For them to have spontaneously politicised their novels would have been an unthinkable dissemination of an ideological debate to many whom they considered unequipped to participate in it. Indeed, many held that novels had a particularly unfitted constituency for political disputation. So it was only when this constituency was assailed by Jacobinism, contaminated

by debate, that a conservative political novel could be contemplated. Anti-Jacobin fiction, for the great majority of its exponents, existed only as an antidote, never as spontaneous and self-contained propaganda.

Certainly, by the middle of the decade, several novelists were asserting how morally and politically incumbent upon them it was that they should rush to aid their country in its distress. Not only did they produce anti-Jacobin texts, but, usefully to the historian (although it in fact reflected their anxiety about pursuing this course), they frequently depicted or dramatised their own conversion to this actively anti-Jacobin literary campaign. Typical was Ann Thomas, who excused her anti-Jacobin novel by having one character, the wise Mr Stanley, explain that, 'When turbulent Men are so industrious in disseminating Sedition through the Land, every good Subject, and every true Patriot ought to be as vigilant to incite in himself, and in his Neighbour, that Obedience to the Laws, and Respect to the chief Magistrate, which may secure and promote Concord and Quiet.'<sup>25</sup> Her novel was her answer to her own call to arms. For many, such writing by women, possessed of a political tendency, would previously have constituted a glaring transgression against the very strictest codes of gender propriety.<sup>26</sup> But so powerful was the anti-Jacobin rationale – that it was incumbent on each individual to do their utmost in support of Church and King – that it could exonerate not merely fiction, but also political fiction, and even its production by women. Thomas was attempting to vindicate her literary endeavours by declaring their necessity, or rather having a trustworthy character affirm it for her. Without the benefit of the distancing device, she had felt obliged to be rather more reticent, articulating only the trepidation about producing political fiction which would prompt the subsequent attempted justification: 'If an Apology be necessary for the political Part of the Novel,' she ventured nervously, 'permit me to declare, that I could not lose the Opportunity of expressing my Gratitude for that Protection which every Individual enjoys under the BRITISH CONSTITUTION.'<sup>27</sup> In claiming only a rather passive rectitude, instead of the very active anti-Jacobinism that she was actually to produce, Thomas demonstrates what a pivotal position she occupies. In 1795, a few anti-Jacobin novels had already been published, but they had been characterised either by a diffidence which still appreciated the temerity and danger of any political fiction or a defiance which set at nought the tradition of criticism of fiction. It was not until the later 1790s that anti-Jacobin fiction began to feel comfortable with its rôle. Before turning to its zenith, however, its origins, which literary history has altogether passed by, merit some investigation.

No more strident anti-Jacobin novel would be published than Edward Sayer's 1791 *Lindor and Adelaïde*, but in some respects this is little more than one of the author's political tracts and, for a novel of so early a date, its unembarrassed anti-Jacobin assault was exceptional. Two novels of 1793 exhibit a much more typical trepidation. For the author of *The Minstrel*, a conviction that politics in a novel is dangerous, because of fiction's likely readership, is still very apparent. In her preface she insisted that 'though necessarily led, by the personages of her drama, cursorily to introduce some subjects lately much agitated', she had no intention whatsoever of joining 'her feeble voice to either of those parties which, at present, divide a large proportion of Europe'. And yet, as well as offering some distinctly political opinions on the Revolution in France (a general sympathy with the French typical amongst those observing developments in France in early 1792), she also proffered a lucid, and almost prescient, warning to British Jacobins, so confident that it seems almost anachronistic. That a native of Britain, she wrote, 'should wish to throw off the mild government of its king, free himself from the salutary restraint of its laws, subvert all order, annihilate all subordination,' only to see the nation ruled by 'the caprice of a lawless mob' must, she went on, 'be deemed the most glaring insanity. Far be it from the author of THE MINSTREL,' she concluded, 'to spread such a detestable mania, or contribute to its baleful effects.'<sup>28</sup> Only in this last sentence do we return from the obvious anti-Jacobinism to the apology from which we started out. Clara Reeve's *Memoirs of Sir Roger de Clarendon* also evinces a degree of reluctance about brazenly introducing political concerns into her fiction, but it tilts the balance further in favour of a positive political didacticism. Reeve's preface defines the purpose of her tale in orthodox terms, speaking of her wish to inculcate wisdom, encourage reform and to discourage complacency about the present day, comparing it with Britain's half-legendary past – certainly a political statement in itself, of course, in the light of what Burke had said in the *Reflections*. But she shatters any vestige of ideological neutrality by proposing that her fiction might be of service in demolishing British radicalism. Her chief stimulus in writing the novel, she admitted, was 'to give a faithful picture of a well-governed kingdom, wherein a true subordination of ranks and degrees was observed, and of a great prince at the head of it'. For, she added,

The new philosophy of the present day avows a levelling principle, and declares that a state of anarchy is more beautiful than that of order and regularity. There is nothing more likely to convince mankind of the errors of these men, than to

set before them examples of good government, and warnings of the mischievous consequences of their own principles.

In the novel itself Reeve still sheltered behind her allegory, apparently unwilling to labour a political point, but the possibility of a positive conservative agenda for fiction had been established and, most momentarily, by a female, popular, novelist, with a well-founded reputation for absolute propriety, and whose novels and treatises had done much, in her own words, ‘to point out the boundaries’ of the form.<sup>29</sup>

That there was no outpouring of conservative novels between 1793 and the last one or two years of the century is a matter requiring attention. The mid 1790s were, after all, the years of the most vituperative debate and conflict, or rather the years when an ecumenical anti-Jacobinism established itself as the dominant ideology and did not shrink from pushing home its advantage through tracts, sermons and associations, as well as legislation. A few anti-Jacobin novels made their appearance in the middle of the decade, but in nothing like the numbers in which they would be published after about 1798. Probably the most important factor in delaying the rise of the anti-Jacobin novel was the fact that Jacobin fiction, from which it drew its *raison d'être*, did not reach its apogee before the mid 1790s at the earliest. Essentially, it was only these Jacobin novels, and not Jacobinism *per se*, that allowed the anti-Jacobin novel to flourish. The Jacobin fictions which appeared most menacing, and for most conservatives symbolised all Jacobin novels, were Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) and *St Leon* (1799), both of which launched flotillas of rejoinders and allowed the anti-Jacobin novel to define itself in terms of what it was not. This is conspicuous in the attempts of Sophia King and Henry Pye to continue to attempt to exonerate their political fiction with reference to Godwin’s novels even after they had both already produced successful anti-Jacobin novels.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the clearest statement of what almost all the anti-Jacobin novelists were doing is to be found in the dedication to George Walker’s *The Vagabond* (1799). He wrote his political novel, he said, as ‘an attempt to parry the Enemy with their own weapons; for no channel is deemed improper by them, which can introduce their sentiments’.<sup>31</sup> It is from this determination to fight fire with fire that the unanimity of anti-Jacobin fiction derives. Jane West even employed the same metaphor as Walker, expressing a similar slightly ersatz hesitation about entering the fray in 1799. Since ‘the most fashionable, and perhaps the most successful, way of vending pernicious sentiments has been through the medium of books

of entertainment,' she wrote, then it must be 'not only allowable, but necessary, to repel the enemy's insidious attacks with similar weapons'.<sup>32</sup> She was still using the same formula in 1802, presenting herself (falsely) as having *recently* been converted to this opinion. Her apology to the public forms such a comprehensive summary of the anti-Jacobin approach that it is worth quoting in full:

The rage for novels does not decrease; and, though I by no means think them the best vehicles for 'the words of sound doctrine'; yet while the enemies of our church and state continue to pour their poison into unwary ears through this channel, it behoves the friends of our establishments to convey an antidote by the same course; especially as those who are most likely to be infected by false principles, will not search for a refutation of them in profound and scientific compositions.<sup>33</sup>

This last phrase provides what was the clinching, and continually recurring, argument.<sup>34</sup> It was an argument of surprising sophistication, since not only did it encompass the notion that all new philosophy was necessarily fallacious, ready to be dispelled by the first puff of genuine reason, but by justifying their fiction as having popular appeal, conservative novelists had managed to appropriate a well-rehearsed and long-standing criticism of novels and turn it into a justification for their own fictional sallies. What is more, the potency of fiction which had been so thoroughly execrated because of its alliance with vice, infidelity and sedition, could now not merely be rehabilitated, but extolled as a positive virtue. Not only would anti-Jacobin fiction provide a prophylactic against the evils contained in radical novels, reaching an audience not likely to turn to treatises for the illumination that could dispel the Jacobin fantasy, but it could proselytise, obtaining converts to a proactive conservatism with its own fascinating language and without having to engage the reader in a debate on the matter which might prove both off-putting and ill-advised. This realisation was fiction's reprieve.

Seen retrospectively then, the flowering of the anti-Jacobin novel seems to have proved Charlotte Smith correct in her assertion of 1792, that only 'those who object to the matter' of novels would 'arraign the manner, and exclaim against the impropriety of making a book of entertainment the vehicle of political discussion'.<sup>35</sup> Once conservatives had realised the potential boost the novel could give their cause, they were content to cease attacking it and even to endorse it. As we shall see in chapter six, many reviewers changed their opinion of the genre. Even Hannah More, the form's greatest foe, came round, producing *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*

in 1809.<sup>36</sup> But what is suspicious is that prefaces continued to testify to the grave threat posed by radical fiction, and the need to retaliate in kind, well into the nineteenth century, after both the Revolution crisis and the production of Jacobin novels had largely subsided. The preface to a novel was also the traditional site for an author's sycophantic attempts to propitiate the critics, and there must be a suspicion that some authors were emphasising the political mission of their fiction merely in the attempt to acquire a degree of respectability in excess of what they might otherwise have been able to hope for. So manifest was their deep ideological commitment, that it would be outrageous to suppose that the likes of More, West or Hamilton were jumping on an anti-Jacobin bandwagon merely for the chance it offered them to absolve their fiction's entrance into a public sphere. But as women, who felt they had an urgent political message to impart to the public but few opportunities to do so without violating their own, and others', sense of gender propriety, the Jacobin novel was an invaluable invitation into the literary mêlée. For novelists such as Smith and Walker, and perhaps Mary Robinson, all of whom had once produced basically Jacobin novels, the prospect of expiating their past crimes by the production of conservative fiction must have been tempting indeed. It might not have wiped their slates entirely clean, but at least it made them less vulnerable to renewed criticism of their politicisation of fiction. But it is with authors possessed of a very clear and pre-formed personal agenda that one cannot help feeling that the Jacobin novel was an excuse, and soon a cliché, frequently commandeered merely as a serviceable horse on which to ride into their own private battles. Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges, for instance, prefaced the second edition of his novel *Arthur Fitz-Albini* (1799) with talk of a crisis in which 'the circulating libraries have inundated the kingdom with a flood of novels, by half-witted writers', and a resolution that 'it seemed no useless task to attempt to stem this torrent of seduction', but, not put off his stride in the slightest, he then got on with dealing with the same concerns that had dominated his life and works until then, and would continue to do so, that is to say his veneration for rank and loathing of new wealth.<sup>37</sup>

Whether genuinely felt, or designedly constructed, however, enmity towards Jacobin novels remained an essential component of the anti-Jacobin novel long after its dominance had been established. It was its *raison d'être* and its vindication, and it never forgot it. Indeed, this same enmity also continued to be extended to fiction in general. Except in the case of their own work, anti-Jacobin authors clung to the notion



that all modern novel-writing was intrinsically Jacobin. Henry James Pye, for instance, thought all contemporary novelists guilty of what he called ‘*novellism*’, a crime possessed of a distinctly Jacobin tendency even though it did not advance an overtly radical agenda. Echoing Burke, he explained that ‘In fiction as well as reality, the age of chivalry is past’, meaning that in modern novels ‘the sentimental philosopher takes the place of the warrior’ as hero, and that he ‘must be always deprecating the glories of the field, and must brand with infamy the sword of patriotism, though it glows with the blood of those who draw theirs against everything most dear to him’. Heroines were just as bad – they had turned ‘manly’, and were so determined to get whatever they wanted that they curse ‘All laws but those which love has made’. Worst of all, if such a wife finds her husband ‘disagreeable, inattentive, or absent though on service of his country, or in acquiring wealth for her, she is allowed to solace herself with some gentle youth, whom the hand of sensibility dresses out in the most bewitching garb, while insidious lust in the specious form of refined delicacy strews his false roses over the violated marriage-bed’.<sup>38</sup>

In Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) novel-reading is likewise represented as the sure road to Jacobinism. She portrays two novel-addicts, representatives of the reading public Hamilton wished to warn. Bridgetina Botherim, having selected only novels and metaphysics for her entertainment, has, as a result, lapsed into new philosophy before the novel opens, but Hamilton does depict the fall of Julia Delmond for our instruction. Her seduction by Vallaton is designed to demonstrate that Jacobinism and all the traditional errors arising from the reading of fiction are inextricably intertwined. Vallaton woos Julia by appealing to her love of novels, convincing her that he is a foundling, a hidden aristocrat in all probability, and then undermining her piety, filial duty and chastity with his talk of reason, enlightenment and necessity. He unites these two techniques perfectly, simultaneously drawing on Godwin and Wollstonecraft, and the tradition of *Clarissa*, when telling Julia that it is a ‘*tyrannical prejudice*’ that her father will not countenance their marriage and wants her to marry the respectable Major Minden. ‘Thus was she on the eve of one of those cruel persecutions with which so many heroines have been tormented,’ she muses. She beholds Minden as ‘the hateful Solmes’ and her father as acting ‘with all the cruelty of all the Harlowes’. ‘But never, (she resolved) never would she disgrace the principles she had adopted, by a base submission to the will of an arbitrary tyrant.’<sup>39</sup> The consequences are salutary. Julia is beguiled from her home, left to penury, imprisonment, attempted suicide and

prostitution in London, followed by a contrite death. For Hamilton, novels and new philosophy had the same effect, and when combined together proved all too lethal. Even in 1800 Hamilton, along with many other anti-Jacobins, saw herself as writing in opposition to both Jacobinism and the main current of modern fiction. This leads to an important paradox. Anti-Jacobinism had done much to rehabilitate the novel in the eyes of many of its former critics. In part, the new respect which the nineteenth-century novel commanded was earned, like the spurs of an aspiring knight, through its service during the Revolutionary crisis. But the anti-Jacobin novel was itself the product of the traditional contempt for novels every bit as much as of a more historically specific contempt for Jacobinism. By the late 1790s, in fact, they had become tantamount to the same thing.