INTRODUCTION

There is a great deal of social protest in the eighteenth-century English novel but very little revolution. English novelists as early as Defoe see much that needs to be changed in English society, but they advocate the reform of existing structures rather than the destruction of basic institutions. Underlying almost every one of what I call the novels of social protest is a commitment to the traditional forms and institutions of English life; much of the protest, in fact, is protest against the corruption and debasement of sound institutions. Thus I speak of novelists as diverse in social and political orientation as Henry Fielding, Henry Brooke, Elizabeth Inchbald, and William Godwin as novelists of social protest, for each is disturbed at the shortcomings of what should be a felicitous social structure. The anger against corruption that each novelist expresses manifests an underlying faith in the institutions being criticized. One of the most striking examples of this impulse is Thomas Holcroft, who in successive novels writes first, in Anna St. Ives, of the virtually limitless potential for human development and happiness that English society affords her members, and then, in Hugh Trevor, of the impossibly corrupt and corrupting machinery of that same society. The other novelists I treat are not quite so ambivalent, but the same impulse to approve the basic structure of society while reproving its corruptions is basic to each work's strain of protest.

I define social protest in the novel as the author's delineation of social injustices, inequities, and failings, usually accompanied by explicit statements regarding the need for reform. The statements of protest are straightforward and often anything
but subtle. Fielding takes a major portion of the first volume of *Amelia* to detail the evils of the penal system and the legal system that supports it. Henry Brooke begins *The Fool of Quality* with a series of uncomplimentary portraits of the aristocracy and never lets up on his criticism; Thomas Day, whose *Sandford and Merton* follows Brooke's novel in almost all respects, is even harsher in his criticism than his model. Bage satirizes, Inchbald criticizes, Holcroft laments, and Godwin denounces the injustices of society. The degree of anger changes, the tone of outrage is more or less shrill, but the underlying assumption is the same: men must note social evils and must attempt to redress them.

As the century wears on, the belief that action by benevolent men can indeed ameliorate bad situations grows less pervasive, and as early as midcentury the foreboding that good men may not have the power to change evil institutions already manifests itself. In *Amelia* Fielding draws so bleak a picture of men victimized by unequal social forces and corrupt social institutions that even he, as creator of a fictional world, can find no way out of misery for his protagonists within the given outlines of the novel. In order to supply the happy ending, Fielding must introduce a fortuitous but irrelevant fall into unexpected good fortune for his characters. By the end of the century, even the fortuitous happy ending is no longer possible: the young peasant girl seduced and abandoned by an unfeeling aristocrat dies of her disgrace in Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art*, and in Godwin's *Caleb Williams* every turn of the social chain produces more agony until Caleb's retribution turns, at the moment of triumph, into a corruption worse than any he had yet suffered.

There is much faith in benevolence and social progress in the novels of the mid and late eighteenth century, but there is also much pessimism. All of these novelists of protest share a desire to see English society and her institutions made better; the more optimistic of them see such amelioration as being within reach—the novels of Brooke and Day simply call for benevolent efforts by individual men of educated good will—but those of bleaker view protest only, in the end, to admit despair.
The eighteenth century, like our own, was a period of immense dislocations in the ways men viewed themselves and society, but perhaps because of the difference in modes of communication, these dislocations were slower to be recognized and even slower to be publicly discussed than such upheavals are in our time. In the novel of the later eighteenth century, pervasive rather than specific discomfort with social institutions emerges. Although society seems healthy on the surface, the foundations of the social structure have somehow developed disparate cracks. Indeed, almost every one of these later novelists touches on the idea that security is fragile, and that a false step may send a respectable, responsible man to destruction. Many of these novels, in one context or another, mention that a man, often through no fault of his own, may find himself in prison for debt (for example, he may have cosigned a note for a relative who then defaulted); the very idea of prison is enough to evoke terror. John Howard in *The State of the Prisons*, writing in 1777, reminds his readers that prison reform should be very much their concern, for no man knows when he may suddenly find himself confined.

The specter of such fearful reversals of fortune is both firmly grounded in reality and hauntingly symbolic. The perception that the orderly patterns of society may barely conceal deep flaws is evident even in a book such as Henry Brooke's *The Fool of Quality*, traditionally viewed as a cheerful sentimental novel. For example, in the rather long interpolated tale of Mr. Clement, Brooke presents a man who, starting life respectably well-off, falls so far as to commit a highway robbery to try to save his starving wife and child. But Brooke, writing relatively early (1770), firmly believes that a bit of benevolent tinkering can correct the failings of society. Mr. Clement, instructive as is his fall, is in the book to teach us how not to fail; having shown us Mr. Clement's mistakes, Brooke brings him back into society. As the century goes on, the sense that institutions and the men in them are not functioning properly becomes stronger, and characters like Mr. Clement who have missed their footing do not manage to get back in step. For Godwin, Holcroft, and
Bage there are, finally, no easy answers. Writers who try to posit easy answers fail miserably, as Inchbald does when, at the end of *Nature and Art*, she suggests that all the social problems would be solved if everyone would just go back to the simple life of the farm. Inchbald’s ending does not fit her book or her time; Godwin’s horror at the end of *Caleb Williams*, in contrast, seems inevitable.

The institutions of society, particularly economic institutions, changed markedly during the eighteenth century, and the novelists had not yet had time to put these changes into perspective. The novelists of the Victorian period would later analyze these changes. The novelists of the eighteenth century could only chronicle them. By the 1790s the agricultural, the industrial, the American, and the French revolutions had cast new light on British society. To these we may add a social revolution—the restructuring of traditional class lines caused by the others. The implications of the changes for British society that these movements set in motion were not immediately perceived by those living through them, as we would expect. But the cumulative effect of so many major dislocations produced that sense of uneasiness, of not being in control, that I have noted.

The agricultural revolution, whatever its benefits, displaced large numbers of workers and freeholders from the land to the city as small tracts were enclosed into the larger areas more suitable for mechanized farming. The industrial revolution changed society still more, moving even light industry out of the home into the impersonal and often brutal mill or factory. As a result of both of these basic movements, the lives of relatively large numbers of people were changed in ways over which they had not even minimal control.

On the other hand, the merchants themselves were seen as a positive force in society. England became fascinated with commerce, and manufacturing took on something of a moral as well as an economic impetus. The good people are those who produce, Brooke tells us in *The Fool of Quality*, as opposed to the aristocrats, who, of course, only consume. Industry created a class of monied families who sought political power and social
recognition to go with their new wealth. Fanny Burney's *Evelina* chronicles the acculturation of a young middle class girl as she learns her way into "society." The integration of these newly powerful families into what had hitherto been a hereditary aristocracy provided yet another strain on the social order. One reflection of this tension is the frequent advocacy of middle-class values in the novels, but in almost every case, such advocacy comes along with a fascination with traditional aristocracy. In Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives*, Frank is of the lower classes—but Anna is an aristocrat. In Burney's *Evelina*, Evelina seems to be middle class—but before the end of the novel we learn that she is of aristocratic lineage. And even in Bage's *Hermsprong*, a book which strongly caricatures and satirizes aristocratic values, Hermsprong himself, we learn, is the rightful heir to the estate Lord Grondale holds. Class structures, like the other structures of society, begin to lack the definite demarcations that could earlier have been taken for granted.

The political revolutions in America and in France partly reflected these other upheavals and underlined for many thinkers at the end of the century the mutability of institutions. As in the other movements, much seemed positive and exciting, but a sense of insecurity inevitably accompanied the new awareness of flux. The political reaction in England to the French Revolution culminated in the repressive measures the government tried to put into effect in the 1790s, measures that directly affected several members of the Godwin circle when Holcroft and others were put on trial in 1794 for sedition. Bage's jibes at the political paranoia of the time (Hermsprong is accused not only of reading the *Rights of Man* but of lending it to at least one friend—which must be conspiracy) records, however humorously, a real concern.²

The books in this study range broadly in their criticisms of society, and even the most conservative of them have some forceful criticisms to make. Institutional and personal corruption concerns not only, as we would expect, the more radical novelists of the nineties but the earlier writers as well. Fielding in *Amelia* exposes the abuses of the legal and penal systems;
Godwin, Holcroft, Inchbald and Bage all return to this theme. Political corruption is dissected repeatedly, and side by side with the corrupt politician stands the corrupt clergyman as an object of scorn. In *Hugh Trevor* Holcroft presents the two professions as sides of the same coin, and several of the novelists, Holcroft, Inchbald and Bage particularly, insist that corruption ties the two professions together; Dr. Blick's relationship with Lord Grondale in *Hermsprong* is perhaps the clearest example of this connection. Along with an awareness of institutional corruption comes a questioning of social function; how should a clergyman, an aristocrat, even a parent behave to those over whom he has power? Five of the nine novels I discuss criticize the traditional role of the parent; even that most basic social structure, the family, undergoes reexamination during this period, and the very relationship of parent to child is presented as being in need of major reforms. Finally, the novels of the nineties also criticize the traditional role of women.

But the most frequent social criticism in novels during the fifty years with which I am concerned is that the powerful (that is, the aristocrats and the clerics), individually and as a class, not only fail to take responsibility for improving society but are too often uncaring, selfish, and callous to the sufferings of those less fortunate than themselves. In novels such as *The Fool of Quality* and *Sandford and Merton*, the individual responsibility of the powerful for the less powerful is distinguished from larger social movements and made a theme in itself. This focus is not merely a function of the discussion occurring within the context of the sentimental novel, for even in a novel such as Bage's *Hermsprong* a major concern is the responsibility that individuals must assume in specific instances. These novels recurrently criticize aristocrats for consuming far more than they need while others lack bare necessities.

Brooke and Day believe that educating aristocrats to a humane outlook will cure most social problems; the later eighteenth-century novelists are not nearly so optimistic. All make the distinction between true benevolence and calculated charity; Inchbald, for example, sarcastically notes that it is prudent
for the rich to give a little, lest the poor revolt and take all. Viewed in this context, the theme of benevolence, which critics have taken for granted as an aspect of the earlier sentimental novel, takes on a new dimension. None of these novelists suggests a radical redistribution of goods, but they insist on the immorality of a social system that so callously gives superfluous wealth to one small group and leaves the rest of the people in poverty. This social protest is as sharp in the sentimental novels as in those later novels that have traditionally been examined for social comment. When we recognize that novels such as The Fool of Quality have far more social content than has been acknowledged, we gain new insights into the development of the novel in the eighteenth century.

Social criticism in the English novel has usually been associated with nineteenth-century writers, but criticism of corrupt institutions and pleas for reform emerge virtually with the appearance of the novel itself. That this tradition begins in the eighteenth century, and indeed extends back to Smollett and even Defoe, has been largely unremarked until now. I have chosen to begin with Fielding’s Amelia because social protest is already a major aspect of the work: Fielding’s lengthy early description of the corruptions of the legal and penal systems sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Fielding’s is a dark vision; already by 1751, he portrays social and economic forces buffeting individuals so violently that they are largely helpless. The book has been referred to as Fielding’s “problem novel,” but it is a problem only insofar as it is a different kind of novel from any of his earlier ones. Within its own terms, it presents a coherent picture of contemporary society.

Henry Brooke’s The Fool of Quality criticizes many of the traditional assumptions rather than the institutions of English society, and Brooke, unlike Fielding (and unlike many of the novelists of the nineties), presents a new set of values to replace those against which he is protesting. The book celebrates the middle-class values of hard work, self-reliance, and benevolence. Brooke believes that these values can be inculcated into every class and that such proper education (or reeducation) will
bring society to a state of happiness and security. Thomas Day’s *The History of Sandford and Merton* was intended to spread these important lessons yet further. The books are interesting as novels of protest because of the amount of criticism of contemporary values (especially but not limited to aristocratic values) that they include within seemingly innocuous limits: the novels were essentially for children, after all.

Actually, the books were intended to educate children and their parents to an appreciation of sound social interactions, and both Brooke and Day believe fervently that education is a powerful, positive tool. Education and its potential for good or evil is a theme common to many of these novels, not only to works like Brooke’s and Day’s, which we may term educational novels, but to novels that seem occupied with quite other things. For example, in Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk* (certainly, one hopes, not an educational novel), the monk’s evil is directly attributed to his faulty education. Throughout the century, novelists return to the theme of education as a shaping force; each of the novels I discuss talks about education in these terms.

Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* is the only novel I include which is not basically critical of the institutions of society; on the contrary, Evelina’s main concern is learning her way into society. Burney focuses on a conflict not in morals but in manners; her heroine wishes only to correct her own manners so that she can approximate the behavior of the upper classes—and enter their social circles. In Evelina’s predicament, Burney portrays an important social problem of her time: in an age when new money demands social as well as economic prerogatives, how do the traditional upper classes assimilate the newly rich? The problem was an immediate one for Burney’s contemporaries and, as I have noted, an additional source of pressure in the social structure. Burney’s novel, in part because it is not doctrinaire and is not interested in taking a critical stance, allows us to see these social pressures at work from another view. I include the novel also because it provides a control on the novels
of protest. Here from a much more tolerant perspective is the society that the other novelists view so critically.

This difference in perspective does not change the picture of society a reader gets from the novels: some of Inchbald’s sharpest satire in Nature and Art is directed at the emptiness of social customs, while Burney, describing the same customs, has much less criticism to make. The similarity of the descriptions in the two novels suggests that the specifics are generally accurate, regardless of the interpretation a particular author gives to certain circumstances. Indeed, one of the conclusions to be drawn from a close study of these novels, critical and uncritical, is that their descriptions of eighteenth-century British life and institutions tally almost exactly. If I may take consistency of description to be a proof, the novelists I discuss seem to be attempting as much as possible to present “things as they are.”

Although the strain of protest should be recognized as a major aspect of the eighteenth century, we must also remember that much of the contemporary literature, like Evelina, was essentially accepting of the status quo. Holcroft’s Anna St. Ives partakes to some degree of such acceptance, for although Holcroft sees a great deal in English society and its institutions that needs to be corrected, he sees even more that is resoundingly positive. As in Brooke’s The Fool of Quality, any imperfections can be remedied through a process of reeducation; even the most hardened villain (i.e., the most badly educated person) can be redeemed and made a contributing member of society. “We live in an age of light,” the hero exclaims, and Holcroft’s novel gives us no leave to doubt him. But in the years between Anna St. Ives (1792) and Hugh Trevor (1794–97), Holcroft himself had clearly begun to doubt. In Hugh Trevor Holcroft shows corruption in every institution of society, and the only way he can find to keep the honest Hugh from himself becoming corrupted is to have him retire on inherited money—hardly an optimistic ending! The views of society are so different from one Holcroft novel to the next that juxtaposing them gives us a good sense of the change in perspective manifested by the nov-
elists as the century progressed. The position taken in the earlier novels is that of Anna St. Ives: although there are many areas of society that need to be improved, man can make his world better through his own efforts, particularly through the application of his reason; it is an age of light. But by the end of the century, as imperfectly understood social traumas take hold in people’s minds, this position no longer seems tenable. The application of reason, the impulse to reform, seems at best insufficient and at worst destructive. Godwin, like Holcroft, reflects this change in successive works, for in Political Justice (1793) reason is seen as the prime mover in the perfecting of society; while in Caleb Williams, only a year later, Godwin is forced to admit that so much is wrong, so much is corrupt in the institutions of his society that even the process of revolt implies only further breakdown in the social structure. As Caleb realizes at the end of the novel, his triumph over Falkland dooms them both.

The last two novels, Inchbald’s Nature and Art and Bage’s Hermsprong, reflect this disillusionment in different ways. Inchbald vigorously attacks corruption in society, particularly (but by no means solely) striking at the corruptions of a worldly and highly political clergy. She theorizes about the best ways to educate the young; she explores the dichotomy of nature versus art in life and education. The satire is witty and biting—until the end of the book, when her social vision collapses and she retreats into the simplistic and utterly unbelievable explanation that if the poor would not covet riches, all social problems would disappear. Having exposed so much corruption in society, she can supply no new models to replace the faulty structures, and her book simply comes up short in its own failed vision. Bage, a more consistent thinker than Inchbald and perhaps a better writer as well, does not attempt to supply a structure to replace the social institutions he has exposed. Having satirized corrupt politicians, an equally corrupt clergy, and an aristocracy whose degeneration manifests itself in the fleshly metaphor of crippling gout, he marries off his protagonist, blesses his good characters with a fond happily ever after, and
ends the book. By the end of the century, it had become easy to see what was wrong in society but very difficult indeed to posit workable reforms.

1. Isaac Kramnick has argued persuasively that the “manufacturing spirit” was central to much of the most vital thought of the time, informing science, industry, social and family relations, and literature. See “Children’s Literature and Bourgeois Ideology: Observations on Culture and Industrial Capitalism in the Later Eighteenth Century,” in Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment, ed. Perez Zagorin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 203–40.

2. Each of these movements has been examined in detail in numerous books; among the best introductory discussions are L. B. Namier’s England in the Age of the American Revolution and Donald Greene’s The Age of Exuberance.

3. The content of these novels is often ignored. For instance, in his respected book, Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development, A. Walton Litz talks about the “debased standards in current fiction” against which we are to measure Jane Austen’s genius. One of the examples of that debased fiction which he cites is The Fool of Quality, from which Professor Litz draws examples only of passages that he finds “burlesques” of emotion. He makes no suggestion that Brooke’s novel is of any further interest. Such a simplified view of midcentury fiction—that it all presented merely a “debased” standard—distorts literary history, as a closer look at these novels shows. Marilyn Butler, in Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, notes the need for such a reassessment; see particularly her discussion of Henry MacKenzie. It is interesting that contemporary writers could be aware of the social value inherent in such fiction: Mary Wollstonecraft, in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, twice refers to the educational theories in Thomas Day’s The History of Sandford and Merton.

4. One of the earliest and certainly one of the sharpest novelists of social criticism, Defoe targets for his skeptical inspection assumptions about social position, social responsibility, the nature of criminality, and the fairness and effectiveness of the criminal justice system. The most remarkable area of his criticism, it seems to me, is his analysis of the place of women in society. Defoe’s women enjoy a wider sphere of movement than any other female characters in eighteenth-century novels, even those in works such as Anna St. Ives and Hermsprong that concern themselves so specifically with the issues of women’s rights and responsibilities in society.

5. Lewis describes the effect of education on the Monk: “It was by no means his nature to be timid; but his education had impressed his mind with fear so strongly, that apprehension was now become part of his character. Had his youth been passed in the world, he would have shown himself possessed of many brilliant and manly qualities. He was naturally enterprising, firm and fearless; he had a warrior’s heart, and he might have shown with splendour at the head of an army. There was no want of generosity in his nature: the
wretched never failed to find in him a compassionate auditor: his abilities were quick and decisive. With such qualities he would have been an ornament to his country: that he possessed them he had given proofs in his earliest infancy, and his parents had beheld his dawning virtues with the fondest delight and admiration." The Monk (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 237.

6. Many of these novels are available in good modern editions, and I have used these whenever possible; for the novels that have not recently been reprinted, I have cited the eighteenth-century texts. Regrettably, Martin Battestin's new edition of Amelia in the Wesleyan series was not published in time for me to use it, and therefore I have used the first edition of the novel.