By the end of the eighteenth century, rationalism had not made men reasonable, commerce had not redistributed enough of the wealth, and the French Revolution had not created the awaited political égalité. If it had seemed for a while that it was only necessary to point the way toward progress, by the 1790s, especially after the Treason Trials, it was difficult so much as to decide on a direction. Holcroft in *Hugh Trevor* and Godwin in *Caleb Williams* give up even the suggestion that things can be made better, and Inchbald opts for nature, with the absurd results we have seen. Robert Bage in *Hermsprong* manages to leave us with a cheerful catalog of all the faults in his society. Like his contemporaries, he has no broad social program to propose, and like them he presents an impressive list of problems. But his tone, finally, is different from theirs because he scrupulously balances good and bad points. On an individual level, the ridiculous Lord Grondale is an aristocrat, but so is the admirable Hermsprong; Dr. Blick is a cleric, but so is Mr. Woodcock. The institutions of society have very serious faults, yet they still often manage to function appropriately, as in Hermsprong’s jury trial. Bage, like Inchbald, uses wit to attack corruption, but unlike her he never diminishes the ironic perspective between his view of society and its own perception of itself. Tragedy is potential in *Hermsprong*, but it never actually develops as it does in *Nature and Art* and in *Caleb Williams*. Caroline does escape marriage to the odious Sir Philip, and she even lives happily ever after; Hermsprong does incur the enmity of the powerful Lord Grondale, but he lives happily ever after too. Bage puts a fairy tale ending on a very critical book
and it fits, for the book all along has told us to regard the issues with Bage's detachment—to keep in mind "man as he is not."

"Man as he is," Bage suggests, is unfortunately often closer to Lord Grondale than to Hermsprong. Lord Grondale is ridiculous not because he is an aristocrat but because he conducts himself like a caricature of an aristocrat at his worst: a man with no responsibility except to amuse himself. He is morally and physically corrupt, but that corruption is not an inevitable concomitant of his rank. He is an evil person—the pity of it is that his position in society allows him so much leeway to gorge his corruption. The major complaint of *Hermsprong*, as it is of the majority of these novels, is that too much power is given to men who, except for their accidental (i.e., hereditary) position, should be the least likely to wield it. Lord Grondale is conceited, arrogant, vain, selfish, and stupid; he is part of the government; he has vast power at home.

From his youth, Lord Grondale has been readying himself for a life of uselessness. As Bage ironically tells us, the young Lord Grondale had "acknowledged no superior in matters of gallantry," and by forty he had already drunk himself into gout. With this preparation, Lord Grondale briefly but effectively applies himself to the traditional political career. Politics has nothing to do with ethical positions, philosophy, or benevolence but is simply the means to a title. "He beg[ins] with opposition," but does not get much response; on the other hand, "he was not addicted to scruples, and had, besides, several Cornish boroughs." He finds, therefore, that the incumbent government can offer him an office and is "like many of his predecessors, instantly illumined, and [feels] the error of his former perceptions."¹ But he does not get the preferment he wants, and he reverts to the opposition, finally managing to barter his boroughs for a title and become Lord Grondale.² Principle plays no part in any of these dealings. Holcroft in *Hugh Trevor* remarks on precisely the same corruption in the political process: remember how shocked Hugh had been when Lord Idford changed sides after being offered government preferment, leaving poor Hugh with a stack of unwanted op-
position pamphlets. Similarly, I have already noted several complaints against the custom of owning boroughs. Lord Grondale’s success in politics has nothing to do with his personal characteristics—unless we count the lack of scruple as a plus. One of the repeated laments in this and other novels is that the English political system is geared to power without capability. The most ridiculous character in the book, Sir Philip Chestrum, insists to Miss Campinet that he too would be a welcome addition to government; he adds (without understanding the implication of his own statement) that no one is interested in his personal attributes: “I have been amongst the courtiers, I assure you; but they never asked after my learning; but whether I was church and king; and if I had any boroughs? And why not? Every man to his trade. I should have been amongst them before now, for my talents lie that way . . .” (vol. II, p. 145). And Bage makes it clear that Sir Philip, despite a temperament and a lack of education that make him clearly unsuited to hold any sort of power ("he found himself possessed of great wealth . . . of unbounded pride, without the necessary judgment to correct it; of literature, not quite none; and of the smallest possible quantity of human kindness" [vol. II, p. 138]), could indeed be part of the power structure if he chose to be.

The church is equally corrupt; there, too, merit plays little role although hypocrisy, lack of morals, and a broadly sycophantic nature are of use. Bage juxtaposes his portrait of clerical corruption, Dr. Blick, with that of Lord Grondale. The two are variations on a single theme. Dr. Blick’s most important clerical attribute is his “agreeable art of assentation” (vol. I, p. 42). He knows how to make himself useful to Lord Grondale, “whose peculiar merit he conceived to be such, that even a bishopric, could he be induced to ask it for a friend, would scarce be refused him by administration” (vol. I, p. 42). Dr. Blick perceives advancement to be tied solely to patronage rather than to performance of any religious duties, and a man like Lord Grondale is presumed to have the power to secure such a bishopric—such a favor “would scarce be refused him by administration.” The threads of corruption are tightly woven;
because Dr. Blick wants advancement from Lord Grondale, he is willing to do whatever Lord Grondale asks. Lord Grondale, who as we have seen is in no way suited for power, covets more of it, so he has his agent Dr. Blick become justice of the peace. Later in the novel, when Lord Grondale wants to get rid of Hermsprong, he turns to Dr. Blick in his role of justice to find a trumped up charge he can apply. Thus the corruption seeps from institution to institution.

Bage analyzes Dr. Blick's shortcomings in some detail. Dr. Blick "united pride with meanness; . . . he was as haughty to his inferiors, as cringing to superiors. An eternal flatterer of Lord Grondale, he did not even presume to preach against a vice, if it happened to be a vice of his patron" (vol. I, p. 107). Dr. Blick even justifies Lord Grondale's living with a woman to whom he is not married: "the learned divine, having . . . explained how marriage and consuetudinage existed together in patriarchal times, proved that what was right then could not be wrong now; and that it was scarce possible a lord should be wrong at any time" (vol. II, p. 9).

It is not only Dr. Blick's pandering that diminishes his morality, for even on issues in which there is no question of advancement he takes a worldly, even an immoral, point of view. The closest he comes to the morality we would expect from a clergyman is a kind of knee-jerk proclamation that is merely half-digested dogma. For example, in a discussion about man's perception of death, Dr. Blick says that "the love of life is so strong, that scarcely any calamity can weaken it" (vol. I, p. 122). Hermsprong insists that "death is privation of sense," an attitude that appeared to the Doctor to border on infidelity; a thing so execrable, root and branch, that it ought to be burnt out of the world by fire and faggot.

"Sir," said he, "are you an atheist? Death, privation of sensation! . . . It is renovation—it is the gate of life—it is a passport to eternal joys."

"Then surely," said Hermsprong, "it is not an evil." (vol. I, p. 125)

Thus the spiritual reminder comes not from the clergyman but
from Hermsprong. Dr. Blick is full of speeches on what constitutes morality, but in fact he shows little understanding of even the positions he defends. His practice of his duties as a clergyman is as slipshod as his understanding of them. On the morning after a disastrous storm, for example, Hermsprong and Miss Campinet go among the villagers as early as possible to lend what assistance they can. However, "The Reverend Dr. Blick, having been disturbed in the night, lay an hour longer than usual" (vol. I, p. 209), so that by the time he goes out Hermsprong and Miss Campinet have already long been at work. Dr. Blick is not impressed with Hermsprong's efforts, for he assures Miss Campinet that Hermsprong

"is an infidel; and ... without faith, our best works are splendid sins."

"So this profusion of benevolence is with you, Doctor, only a splendid sin?"

"Nothing more, Miss Campinet. A pure stream cannot flow from a corrupt fountain."

"You prefer faith, then, to charity."

"Certainly, Miss Campinet,—to every thing: So, I hope, do you?"

"I hope I believe as I ought; but I own, Doctor, I feel a bias in favour of such splendid sins." (vol. I, p. 210)

Dr. Blick, in charge of three parishes, with ambition to be a bishop, has no spiritual, benevolent, or humane instincts and cannot recognize such qualities in others. Dr. Blick, the successful clergyman, is clearly unfit to be a clergyman at all. He is to be contrasted with Mr. Woodcock, his curate,

a man of learning; of high probity; simple in his manners; attentive to his duties; and so attached to his studies, that he may be said to be almost unacquainted with mankind. . . . and from the bountiful rector of Grondale [Dr. Blick] has forty-five pounds per annum, for doing half the duties of Grondale, and the whole of Sithin. . . . (vol. I, p. 108)

Dr. Blick, on the other hand,

has furnished himself with a prudent quantity of adulation, which
has answered his purpose well; he has church preferment to near 1000\(\text{£}\) per annum.... (vol. I, p. 132)

(Dr. Blick earned his lucrative position, Bage assures us, by throwing a contested political election to Lord Grondale's candidate—although the means “trenched a little upon moral honesty” [vol. I, p. 135].) Mr. Woodcock, for his forty pounds, does almost all of Dr. Blick's duties, and he does them, as befits a clergyman, with sensitivity and generosity. Bage contrasts Mr. Woodcock's ways with his parishioners with Dr. Blick's:

taking care not to lose any thing of his dues, by a foolish lenity, or by a love of peace, the Doctor knows it his duty rather to govern than to teach his flock; and he governs à la royale, with imperious airs, and imperious commands. Woodcock, on the contrary, is one of the mildest of the sons of men. It is true, he preaches humility, but he practices it also; and takes pains, by example, as well as precept, to make his parishioners good, in all their offices, their duties, and relations. To the poor, he is indeed a blessing; for he gives comfort, when he has nothing else to give. To him they apply when sick; he gives them simple medicines; when they are in doubt, he gives them wholesome counsels.... (vol. I, pp. 132–33)

Mr. Woodcock considers himself a teacher rather than a governor, and he practices the virtues he teaches. He functions in relation to Dr. Blick, as Hermsprong does to Lord Grondale, as the example of what man should and can be when he is not corrupted by society.

The simplicity, sincerity, and honesty that Hermsprong and Mr. Woodcock manifest are unfortunately not the rule in civilized lands, and Hermsprong repeatedly points out that he learned his strange manners from the savages among whom he was educated. Bage does not suggest that Englishmen adopt the customs he describes, but rather he uses savage customs as a contrast to civilized life. Bage's emphasis is not on the ideal of the noble savage but on the degeneracy of the European concepts of civilization and pleasure. Hermsprong finds that the progress of human civilization has not resulted in the overall improvement of human happiness, but that, on the contrary,
civilization has created unnatural desires that leave civilized men forever dissatisfied. He argues against the assumption "that we have been in a progressive state of improvement for some centuries," insisting that "you have built cities, no doubt, and filled them full of improvement, if magnificence be improvement; and of poverty also, if poverty be improvement. But our question . . . is happiness, comparative happiness, and until you can trace its dependence upon wealth, it will be in vain for you to boast your riches" (vol. II, pp. 19–20).

Hermsprong points out that those supposed boons of civilization, science and art, really mean very little even to Western man in terms of his happiness: the common people, when not oppressed by poverty or labor, seem happy with little knowledge of them. It is the rich who are always unhappy, who are oppressed by boredom that they unsuccessfully try to appease with useless belongings. The Indians, on the other hand, having satisfied their material and security needs, "can rest in peace." Hermsprong finds their happiness "more continued, and more uninterrupted."

Hermsprong has not much more trouble explaining away the pleasures derived from intellectual pursuits. First of all, the Indians do have intellectual outlet in their daily lives, in pursuing their hunting and their defense, not to mention the composing of their songs. And beyond that, he implies, the Western pleasure in sedentary, solitary pursuits is not as wholesome as the savage's pleasures. While Hermsprong spent his evenings in reading, the savages spent theirs in sport. Hermsprong ended with a headache, the savage, "with a salutary weariness" (vol. II, p. 22). Reading, Hermsprong suggests, is often just another outlet for that boredom he sees in the upper classes.

Bage argues that the artificiality of upper class life affects the basic structure of society itself. Commerce largely has been developed to satisfy wants that are artificial rather than natural. The limited needs of the savages show how necessity can take a definition different from the European's. When Hermsprong is asked if he has ever been in any country where happiness is more widespread than in England, he suggests that En-
Englishmen confuse money with happiness. His banker, Mr. Sumelin, counters that:

“Money produces the conveniencies of life, and its comforts; these produce happiness.”

“It produces also the pride, the vanity, the parade of life; and these, if I mistake not, produce in their consequences, a tolerable quantity of the anxieties; and anxiety is not happiness.”

“To depreciate money, is to depreciate commerce, its mother; this the English will not bear.”

“I know it well; but I suppose there may be too much even of good things.”

“We say, the more commerce, the more prosperity.”

“This is changing the idea. Individual happiness was the question; not national prosperity. Your debts and other blessings flowing from the best of all possible governments, impose upon you the necessity of being the first workshop of the world. You labor incessantly for happiness . . .

“[T]hose [savages] I . . . know, have not seemed too abundant in felicity. . . .”

“They have . . . no inconsiderable portion of positive happiness; and a still greater of what may be called negative; they want the far greater part of your moral causes of misery.”

“And one physical—food.”

“There are improvident characters among them . . . but they have in general enough, though not what you would call plenty. . . . Keep your splendid abundance, and its diseases. Give them simple plenty, strength, and health. Give them to multiply the objects of their reflection; and to extend the powers of their mind. That, to me, should seem the happiest state of society. . . .” (vol. II, pp. 161–63)

A new complaint has entered the list of those with which we have by now become familiar, for while almost all of these novels have complained of corrupt social institutions and frivolous aristocrats, these faults in the social system were not tied to the basic economic motive of trade. Commerce was the positive value against which these frivolities could be seen in all their emptiness. We remember Brooke’s praise of the merchant, or producer, and his denigration of the aristocrat, or consumer. When the issue of trade has been raised at all, it has been discussed in a positive context; otherwise, it simply has not
come up—which is to say that commerce and its abuses has not been seen as a problem in society. Even in *Hugh Trevor*, where Holcroft seems to take every occupation to task for its corruptions, the professions associated with trade are not satirized. Partially this is so because Hugh essentially is trying out the various possibilities open to a "gentleman." but, remember, the merchant brother of Richard Moreland in *The Fool of Quality* was also a gentleman.

So coming upon this complaint here in *Hermsprong* we may note, for these protest novels at least, the beginning of an awareness that commerce may not be worthy of quite so much approval as eighteenth-century Englishmen had been in the habit of giving it. When Mr. Sumelin insists that "to depreciate money, is to depreciate commerce, its mother; this the English will not bear," he expresses, albeit perhaps with some irony, a common view of the matter. Certainly for the eighteenth-century English, the prevailing opinion seemed to be, as Mr. Sumelin suggests, "the more commerce, the more prosperity." Bage questions this view, which to him seems to force man into a continuing cycle of working to produce ever more goods to satisfy ever growing demands. It leads, as well, to an increasingly powerful, and therefore corrupting, government. English society provokes its members into elevating to necessity that which is mere vanity.

The English have become "a people who will do nothing til they are bought... Which of [its] patriots would prefer a civic crown, to a bank note or a purse of guineas?" *Hermsprong*’s indictment is severe: "I impute to you nothing worse than the having followed the usual course of things. You are rich; and addicted to pleasure, to luxury... a consequence... of this addiction [is] political carelessness; the immediate precursor of political corruption" (vol. II,164–65). The corruption is basic and pervasive: it cannot be reformed because it is not a growth from the political system but is part of the system itself. *Hermsprong*’s analysis of political corruption is typical of the response to corruption at the end of the century: a clear vision of a fault with no vision of a reform. This is partially so because,
Bage notes, in England "at the moment," with regard to politics "the order of the day . . . [is] determined ignorance" (vol. I, p. 150). The corrupt government the English have is only what they deserve because no serious efforts are made to improve it. Lord Grondale, corrupt in every personal and professional aspect, is not the exception but the rule of the politician. Convenience, Bage charges, is the central motivation of rich Englishmen; the addiction to luxury produces carelessness that leads to corruption.

Bage shows us from several angles that self-gratification is the consuming passion of such men as Lord Grondale and that it misshapes not only the politics of the nation but, through the politics, the law as well. Law exists to satisfy the desires of the rich, or so it seems to Lord Grondale. That "purse of guineas" Hermsprong mentions buys not only a seat in Parliament but a legal proceeding as well. When Lord Grondale wants to get rid of Hermsprong, he calls in Dr. Blick and tells him to find some legal pretense for forcing Hermsprong from the country. Bage's view is not so negative that he assumes such a proceeding will be successful, but his point is that Lord Grondale (like Godwin's Falkland or Inchbald's Dean William) would assume that the law was at his disposal. Bage remarks that at Grondale-hall "it was not of justice they talked; it was of law" (vol. III, p. 174). Lord Grondale decides that "Hermsprong should be summoned by Dr. Blick and another justice, before the whole bench, at the next quarter sessions; that the most able counsel should be retained, and amply paid for his utmost exertion. That the whole force of their artillery should be brought down at once, to obtain a commitment to prison. Once there, they might easily find means to retain him, till he would be sick of his confinement, and consent to exchange it for another kingdom" (vol. III, pp. 176–77).

Earlier, Lord Grondale had suggested that Hermsprong be committed by Dr. Blick for assault and battery on Sir Philip Chestrum. Lord Grondale is sure that "[his] interest, joined to Lady Chestrum's, [will] make this county no longer a desirable residence for the fellow" (vol. III, p. 45). Lord Grondale's con-
viction that the laws operate for his convenience is reinforced by the sycophants with whom he surrounds himself, like Mr. Corrow, his lawyer, who suggests that Hermsprong be prosecuted for sedition. Hermsprong and several friends once had discussed the possibility that if things could not be worked out in England, they might simply retire to Hermsprong’s land in America and essentially form their own society (a scheme Coleridge and Southey seriously considered in real life under the name of Pantisocracy). Lord Grondale’s lawyer turns this into proof that Hermsprong had endeavored to entice Wigley to America, which in the present temper of the times, might be made something of (vol. III, p. 124). Then he gets to the really damning evidence against Hermsprong:

“He has read the Rights of Man; this I can almost prove; and also that he has lent it to one friend, if not more; which you know, my lord, is circulation, though to no great extent. I know also where he said that the French constitution, though not perfect, had good things in it, and that ours was not so good, but it might be mended. Now, you know, my lord, the bench of justices will not bear such things now; and if your lordship will exert your influence, I dare say they will make the country too hot to hold him.” (vol. III, p. 125)

To have “almost” been proven to have read the Rights of Man, to have lent it to one friend, and—even—to have suggested that there are good things in the French constitution as well as things that could be improved in the English one—these are silly accusations indeed. And yet, given the paranoia that raged in England at the time, this list of complaints could have been used to cast suspicion on a man. Bage, for example, might have been familiar with the events of the trial of Thomas Muir in August 1793 for treason. There was no evidence of conspiracy or preparations for violence, but that was not important to the Lord Justice Clerk, Robert M’Queen, Lord Braxfield, who told the jury that “two things must be attended to that require no proof. First, that the British Constitution is the best that ever was since the creation of the world and it is not possible to make it better.” He apparently never got to the second thing.
Finally, in addition to his dangerous reading, Hermsprong is also observed engaged in questionable enterprises. Dr. Blick and Mr. Corrow, reasoning ingeniously from the fact that Hermsprong had been seen among rioting miners, even had been observed to give them money, decide that Hermsprong must be a French spy. Given the English hysteria against the French, which had been mounting steadily in the years after the French Revolution and which had peaked after February 1793 when Britain and France had gone to war, such an allegation would not have been so unusual. All of these goings-on are added together, along with some other suspicious actions of Hermsprong (he has never shown the proper respect to Lord Grondale’s rank, for example), and Hermsprong is put on trial.

Bage has made it obvious that the charges against Hermsprong are ridiculous, but the trial itself, rather uncharacteristically for this book, is presented in a serious tone. Bage has made light of all society’s failings, but when he comes to grips with evaluating the judicial system of England, which he presents as the real safeguard of individual liberty, he is serious in proportion to the gravity of his subject. In the face of whatever else is corrupt in society, the judicial system is the final safeguard. Bage pronounces in a long and triumphant scene that that safeguard still stands. Lord Grondale and his friends can bring Hermsprong to a hearing, but justice still is more powerful than their corruption. In this very important area, at least, the system still works. The trial is in marked contrast to the trial scenes in Caleb Williams, where Caleb is at the mercy of Falkland. The scene in Hermsprong runs for twenty-three pages (vol. III, pp. 182–204) and is central to the novel.

Lord Grondale’s advocate begins by trying to stir up the justices and the crowd:

“At a time when the nation is so greatly, excessively, and alarmingly alarmed, agitated, and convulsed; when danger is so clearly and evidently to be feared, dreaded, and apprehended, from enemies both exterior and interior, it behoves the magistrates of the several counties to be wakeful and vigilant in detecting, discover-
ing, and bringing to condign punishment, all traitors who are
working and hatching their wicked and diabolical plans in secret.”

He notes that in these “alarming” times an “alarming” riot has
taken place and presents the court with the “alarming” news
that this Hermsprong not only has been seen in the crowd but
was seen dispursing money among them. Also,

“this person is not well disposed towards this government, in
church and state . . . ”

and has “counselled and advised” people on going to America,
so that

“although there may be other particulars of a public nature, tend­
ing to criminate this person, I do not think a larger and more
copious catalogue is necessary. . . . ”

Then he gets to the second series of suspicious actions:

“the whole tenor of his conduct to Lord Grondale, a nobleman of
the first consequence, whose numerous virtues it is not in my
power to praise as they deserve.”

Hermsprong, against this noble lord’s express wishes, had
bought at auction a piece of property Lord Grondale had want­
ed; it was well known that no one was to bid against his lord­
ship. And even worse, in this house Hermsprong had installed
Mrs. Garnet, Lord Grondale’s innocent but rejected sister. And
beyond that—Hermsprong had seduced Lord Grondale’s
daughter. . . .

Hermsprong, quiet until now, cannot allow this allegation to
go unanswered:

“Seduction, Sir!” said Hermsprong. But recovering himself, and
bowing to the bench, he said, “I ask pardon of the court,” then
casting an indignant glance at the advocate, sat down.

Dr. Blick attempts to make Hermsprong’s outcry into a major
issue, and in the court’s reaction to this attempt, Bage makes his
first suggestion that the judicial process has not joined the list of social corruptions. Dr. Blick jumps up to demand that

"to interrupt a gentleman in the midst of his pleading, is a high contempt of this court, and ought to be punished by commitment."

Hermsprong

looked full in the worthy magistrate's face. It was a look which seemed to say, can this be possible? and it ended with a smile of such superlative contempt, that the doctor felt his cholor rise to an invincible height.

The justices seem about to go along with Dr. Blick, when the respected justice Mr. Saxby protests.

"I blush," said he, "when I see this court attend to the passions of any of its members, or of its own. What may be the nature of the particular offence given to our reverend brother, I know not; it was contained in a look; and this court, I think, has not cognizance of looks. As to the offence against the court itself, it was the smallest possible. It was an instant, perhaps a laudable impulse, and instantly and genteelly atoned for. I request there may be no farther delay of our proper business."

Mr. Saxby's dismissal of Dr. Blick's protest sets the tone of the proceedings: this is to be a fair attempt to judge the truth and importance of the allegations against Hermsprong, and he will get an unprejudiced hearing. Lord Grondale's power, then, will not carry the day.

Hermsprong answers each charge separately, explaining in each instance that the acts of which he is accused were indeed committed but that the interpretations put on them are inaccurate. He bid for the house in order to have an appropriate place for the worthy Mrs. Garnet; he possesses the affections of Lord Grondale's daughter, but this hardly constitutes seduction. As to his disrespect for Lord Grondale's person, he says that

"to this I plead guilty, and freely confess I have no respect for his person. If this be a crime in the English jurisprudence, I must be content to suffer the penalty."
Hermsprong answers the public charges with equal ease and forthrightness. He indeed gave advice about America—in response to a request for such information. With regard to being a spy, he simply notes that no suggestion of proof has been made; the lack of evidence of incriminating behavior is also his defense to the charge of giving money to the rioters. A junior justice who had been at the riots, finding that Hermsprong is not about to give more details, fills in the information. Hermsprong, he tells the court, had incited the mob only to reason and moderation and had dispensed money among them in the hope of quelling some of their most pressing hungers. He did, however, strike one of the rioters—when the king’s name was insulted. Hermsprong is acquitted.

The seriousness with which Bage treats the legal process and the outcome that he draws underscore the gravity of the issues at stake. Bage would have been well aware of the Treason Trials of 1793 and 1794 that had brought Thomas Hardy, Horne Tooke, John Thelwall, and Thomas Holcroft to trial. After a series of trials in 1793 and early 1794 a “spotty record of prosecutions” in the English courts had been achieved, as Carl B. Cone notes in his excellent account of the events. But as 1794 went on, the government became, to use Cone’s word, more “extreme,” and on October 6 a Middlesex grand jury returned indictments against twelve men—this was the charge William Godwin answered in his Cursory Strictures. Thomas Hardy, the first man to be tried, was acquitted after nine incredibly long days (usually from eight in the morning to after midnight) of proceedings. G. D. H. Cole tells the story so well: “The trial was an obstinate and long-drawn-out struggle; it lasted nine days, and the evidence fills four printed volumes. When at last the jury retired, to be absent three hours, there was ‘an awful silence and suspense.’ The tension so affected the foreman of the jury, a Mr. Buck of Acton, that on their return he delivered the verdict in a whisper scarcely to be heard in court, and fell down in a faint the moment he had spoken. But stronger voices than his were there to pick up his ‘Not Guilty’ and shout it tri-
umphantly through the court and to the waiting crowd outside.”

The relief that the legal system could stand against even governmental attempts at repression would have been as profound for Bage and his friends as it was for those in the courtroom, but it also would have been measured in an awareness that these attempts at repression were in no way a closed affair. Following the trials, in 1795 and 1796, the government passed the “Two Acts” which “made writing and speaking as much treason as overt acts, made inciting to hatred of the government a ‘high misdemeanor,’ and made public meetings illegal except when licensed...” Thus the court scene in Hermsprong is both an affirmation of the value of the English legal system and a reminder of the active need for the safeguards it represents. The obvious innocence of Hermsprong makes the attempt to prosecute him all the more sinister. Hermsprong’s triumph is complete, but although his innocence of any wrongdoing should have made his acquittal a foregone conclusion, that result was not inevitable. If Justice Saxby had not been among the justices, if the junior justice who spoke for Hermsprong had not done so, the outcome could well have been different. The system does work, but the safety afforded by it is in fact tenuous, as recent events had demonstrated.

Hermsprong is totally exonerated from any wrongdoing, and further it becomes known that he is the real Lord Grondale; all of Lord Grondale’s wealth rightfully belongs to him. It is a delicious denouement that the unpretentious, simple-mannered, decent Hermsprong should be the true aristocrat, and the blustering and gross Lord Grondale the pretender. But if Hermsprong is himself an aristocrat, then the customs of society which he has been mocking are not aristocratic only, but are more broadly current. A large area of the social criticism in the book in fact relates to what we might call vice by assumption, that is, vices that the middle classes take on because they think that such pretensions will make them aristocratic. When Hermsprong remarks that he never dines because he finds it rather melancholy to sit at table for several hours making inane
conversation while unhealthily stuffing himself ("if to dine . . . were only to eat, twenty minutes would be ample" [vol. II, p. 155]), he remarks not simply on an aristocratic vice but on a middle-class one as well. The most wonderful put-down of the assumption of aristocratic vices by the middle classes must be, however, Hermsprong's refusal to duel with the ridiculous young Fillygrove: "'I think, Mr. Fillygrove,' said Hermsprong with a smile, 'we had better leave this species of folly to gentlemen born; if it gets among gentlemen by assumption, where will it stop?"' (vol. I, p. 182).

Perhaps Hermsprong's most salient attribute is his passion for truth. He will not, to borrow a phrase, say the thing which is not. English society, as Bage draws it, is dominated by a constant necessity to do just that in the name of good manners, in the hope of gaining advancement, and, eventually, simply from habit. This politeness, hypocrisy, and artificiality is the opening for corruption. Hermsprong feels it a duty to speak the truth:

"It was imposed on me as a duty by my father... to speak... with the spirit of conscious truth; and to act... with the spirit of conscious justice. I have obeyed my father; and hope I have been rewarded, as he promised me I should, by a proper portion of firmness and intrepidity. If this... has the appearance of boasting, I answer, that to the weak and enervating humility of thinking, or pretending to think, worse of myself than I deserve, I am, and desire to be, a stranger. That I am not the first of men, I know. I know also that I am not the last. I see not the difficulty of man's becoming a judge, tolerably just, of the temper of his mind... and learning the lesson, conceived so hard to be learned, of thinking himself, what he is. I have energies and I feel them; as a man, I have rights, and will support them; and in acting according to principles I believe to be just, I have not yet learned to fear." (vol. II, pp. 53–54)

He has been taught, he later adds, "to attend to the truth of things only, and to reject all prejudices that lead to injustice" (vol. II, p. 62). Truth, understanding, realization for the self, and justice for others are intimately related. Only by the reactions of the other characters in the book do we remark the eccentricity of such guiding principles.
The application of this standard to the relations among men has an important corollary in its implication for women. Women, like men, have the duty to uphold the measure of truth, but they first must be allowed the education that will allow them to use their minds. Bage finds, with Mary Wollstonecraft, that English society is far from giving women that freedom. Miss Fluart (who is close to Bage's ideal of a thinking woman), Mr. Sumelin, and Miss Campinet discuss the issue of women's education at some length. Their conversation grows out of a discussion on politics in which the ladies have taken little part. Hermsprong notes that he has been told it is a breach of politeness to talk politics in front of ladies, but that he thinks "no subject improper for ladies, which ladies are qualified to discuss; nor any subject they would not be qualified to discuss, if their fathers first, and then themselves, so pleased" (vol. II, pp. 165–66). Hermsprong finds that English ladies have "too little liberty of mind;" they have "minds imprisoned,—which, instead of ranging the worlds of physics and metaphysics, are confined to the ideas of... routs and Ranelaghs...." Fittingly, since Bage takes all his essential arguments in this section from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Hermsprong refers to Mrs. Wollstonecraft who "in two octavo volumes... affirms that the mode of [women's] education turns the energies of their minds on trifles." Mrs. Wollstonecraft "has presumed to say... that the homage men pay to youth and beauty is insidious; that women for the sake of this... permit themselves... to submit to this inferiority of character...." He insists that women should be educated to use their minds as fully as their mental endowments permit, and he would encourage them to attempt any endeavors for which they feel capable. But "the change, if change there can be, must begin with men. Lovers must mix a little more wisdom with their adoration. Parents, in their modes of education, must make less distinction of sex" (vol. II, p. 167 ff.).

These are serious censures of the ways in which society educates women, and quoting Mrs. Wollstonecraft would have emphasized further their radical nature. We have already seen a
more detailed exposition of these same arguments in Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives*. Both Holcroft and Bage have an ideal of human beings as they should be, and women in this vision have the same responsibility and right in the furthering of the social order as men. It is as an individual, rather than as a member of a group, that a man or woman assumes personal and social responsibility. Bage draws the same corollary from this premise that Holcroft does: if the responsibility for spreading truth and enlightenment is individual, no authority, not even that of the family, supersedes the individual's duty to govern himself by truth. A person must make his own moral judgments, and duty to a parent does not excuse the grown child from carrying out his own moral imperatives. Frank Henley in *Anna St. Ives* owed no particular allegiance to the dishonest and selfish Abimelech, and in Bage's novel, Caroline Campinet owes no respect to her gross father Lord Grondale.

But Hermsprong has to work hard to make Caroline understand that. She feels that no matter what her father demands, she must obey him. Lord Grondale is a tyrant, and Caroline as child and daughter makes an easy object for his tyranny. Lord Grondale rejects Hermsprong as a suitor for his daughter, and Caroline accepts his decision because such obedience seems to her a duty. If she meets Hermsprong even by accident, Lord Grondale rages; Caroline is treated much like a prisoner, being told with whom she may speak, when she may go out, and even when she must stay in her room. Lord Grondale demands complete power over her, and Caroline, because of her own misunderstanding of what she owes him as a father, allows herself to be tyrannized—almost but not quite to the point of allowing him to choose the ridiculous Sir Philip Chestrum (whose rent-roll is sufficient, Lord Grondale himself remarks, even if his wit isn't) for her husband. We have seen this particular form of intimidation before in *Caleb Williams*, where Tyrrel tortures his ward Emily with the prospect of a forced marriage to an unsuitable mate. Gary Kelly's observation that Bage "treats parental oppression of romantic lovers as a domestic variety of the same tyranny that led to [political persecution]" is accurate, and
parental oppression as a form of social tyranny is examined by several of the protest novelists. Their conclusion, whether we think of Godwin, Holcroft, or Bage, is that the guardian role does not bring with it the right to limit another's freedom. The rule of reason should extend to all relationships, including that between parent and child. I have examined the arguments of Holcroft and Godwin; Bage devotes even more of his novel to an analysis of the limits of parental power. Note that this is a different concern from education; here we speak specifically of the limits of power itself.

Caroline's initial assumption is that "he is my father; I say every thing in that... I refer to the duty I owe; a duty which forbids my giving him offence" (vol. II, p. 12). She ignores Miss Fluart's suggestion that such duties imply reciprocity. Miss Fluart insists that Lord Grondale essentially keeps Caroline shut out from larger society—only to have Caroline retort that that too is his right, if he so wishes. Lord Grondale's restrictions extend not only to Caroline's social life but to her family life as well. He has decided to ignore her aunt Garnet and insists that she ignore that worthy woman as well. Here the matter becomes one of morality, for it is clearly Caroline's duty to visit her aunt and it is also a duty to obey her father's commands. In response to Hermsprong's remonstrance on her error, Caroline in some dismay wonders that

"filial obedience [can] ever be error? ..."
"An illegal act you must not do, even by the command of a father; and ought you to do a wrong one?"
"But surely it may be wrong to do a right thing, when prohibited by a father."
"What, if that right thing be a duty also, and the prohibition pride, prejudice, or caprice?"
"And ought a child to erect herself into a judge of her father's motives?" (vol. II, pp. 62-63)

Bage answers yes. The parent's opinions are worth no less, but no more, than any other person's, and each individual must choose for himself his moral path. In this case, it is wrong for Caroline to hurt her aunt by refusing to see her, and it is irrele-
viant that such a visit would be against the wishes of her father. Caroline finally decides that she will, indeed, meet with Mrs. Garnet.

As Maria Fluart tells Caroline, it is fine to keep the commandment about honoring your father “when it is possible to be performed. Where it is not, children must do as well as they can” (vol. II, p. 112). Bage presents an entirely new perspective for the relationship: to make parent and child equal is, after all, to deny much of a parent’s accustomed power. Even further, Bage insists that in those issues preeminently affecting the child (marriage in particular) the parent’s say is negligible. Thus to Caroline’s complaint that although Hermsprong seeks her affection, “upon no occasion [do] you take the trouble to conceal your contempt of my father” (vol. II, p. 221), his response is that he loves her, not her father. Her father’s feelings about Hermsprong, or Hermsprong’s about Lord Grondale, are irrelevant. Like Holcroft in Anna St. Ives, Bage argues that “father’s ought to be known by their cares, their affections” (vol. III, pp. 32–33). They do not have the right to make other people miserable simply because traditionally they have held so much power. Caroline finally brings herself to tell Lord Grondale that she will not accept his choice of Sir Philip Cheslum as her husband: “it is no part of my duty to make myself miserable for life” (vol. III, p. 73). For this rebellion, Lord Grondale threatens to disinherit her and confines her to her room. He tells Miss Fluart, when she protests on her friend’s behalf, that this is “prudence,” not “cruelty.” Miss Fluart, however, finds that such “protection” is really a guise, used by “father, or brother, or guardian, or husband” to “protect [women] from liberty” (vol. III, p. 90). It is unacceptable repression, not made any the more palatable because it has been sanctioned by custom.

Bage, like Holcroft, recognizes the filial tie, but as a tie of respect and help, not of repression. In almost exactly the same words used by Frank to explain why he feels bound to Mr. Trenchard rather than to Abimelech, his natural father, Hermsprong explains that “merely for existence ... I owe nothing. It is for rendering that existence a blessing, my filial
gratitude is due. . . . Suppose me preserved and educated by a stranger, whose compassion would not permit me to perish. Is it to the author of my existence, or of the happiness of that existence, to whom I am in debt?” (vol. III, pp. 173–74). Such statements have radical implications. If authority, even parental authority, is to be accepted only after rational analysis, then any form of authority must justify itself. Power may no longer be based on tradition. The redefinition of parental privilege is another aspect of the attack on corrupt institutions, no matter how sacred.

Caroline is convinced; with the help of her friends, she escapes from the incarceration she has endured at Lord Grondale’s hands and joins Hermsprong. Just as reason triumphed in the public sector at Hermsprong’s trial, it triumphs here on a personal level. And they all, with the exception of Lord Grondale, live happily ever after. He dies, but not without having first blessed the union of his daughter and Hermsprong. Bage takes a last chapter to tie up all the ends: the good people are happily provided for, and the unpleasant ones, Dr. Blick in particular, are mildly punished. For a book that has made so many basic criticisms of society and its institutions, it is a very happy ending indeed. And like Inchbald’s ending, it is a withdrawal from the issues raised.

Bage has exposed a society in which institutional and personal corruption is rampant. Advancement in politics is a matter of rank and money; advancement in the church is a matter of pandering to that rank and money. The rich are for the most part interested only in themselves, but even their selfishness does not keep them happy or healthy. Women are repressed, children helpless. The laws are frequently bent to the will of the rich, and when they are not, justice is often due to a fortunate fall of circumstances, as when Hermsprong intercedes for a man Lord Grondale had tried to have jailed for a trumped-up debt (vol. III, p. 102) or when Hermsprong is fortunate enough to have at his own trial one judge who is a defender of truth. Individual morality and benevolence are set against institutional corruption; Hermsprong, as his banker Mr. Sumelin
reports to Miss Fluart, is “engaged in the oddest business . . . [one that] many a gentleman would be ashamed of . . . It is the condescending to notice poor objects in distress, and taking the trouble to relieve them” (vol. II, p. 153). That is admirable but not tremendously reassuring, for Hermsprong is clearly the exception, and whatever efforts he makes can only haphazardly relieve misery. Thus he helps Mrs. Garnet, or Lord Grondale’s other would-be victims, but if Hermsprong himself were not on hand, what recourse might these people find? Like Falkland in the early part of Caleb Williams, Hermsprong is available to help, but when he is not available—as when Falkland was away while Tyrrel victimized the Hawkinses—then what? Bage suggests no more reliable social safety net than the goodness of individuals like Hermsprong. In fact, although Bage makes so many basic criticisms of his society, he posits no very definite or detailed reforms. Even education, which is such a central concern in the majority of these novels, receives relatively little attention here: it is true that the savage system of education seems to have much to recommend it over the European, but Bage does not go on to draw any conclusions from that. Certainly he is not suggesting that Europeans give up reading and learn to hunt, so that contrast, too, rests finally as a criticism without a program for reform.

As the century drew to its close, it became harder and harder to posit reforms; too much that had seemed promising had turned out in the end to hold horror rather than hope. Bage at one point talks about the Birmingham riots, “where a quantity of pious makers of buttons, inspired by our holy mother, had pulled down the dissenting meeting houses, together with the dwelling houses of the most distinguished of that . . . sect” (vol. II, p. 34). Dr. Blick in fact preaches a sermon on this very subject, and although he does not “say this was exactly right,” he does note that

“Now, when the atheistical lawgivers of a neighboring country, have laid their sacrilegious hands upon the sacred property of the church; now, when the whole body of dissenters here have dared to imagine the same thing. These people, to manifest their gratitude
for the indulgent, too indulgent toleration shewn them, have been filling the nation with inflammatory complaints against a constitution, the best the world ever saw, or will ever see; against a government, the wisest, mildest, freest from corruption, that the purest page of history has ever yet exhibited.” (vol. II, p. 35)

Dr. Blick, in short, is delighted to take the pillaging of that mob as a text not against lawlessness but against the dissenters, the French, and any who would dare to criticize the institutions of society as they stand at that moment. It was indeed, this Birmingham mob's action, such as would make a most enjoyable text for the likes of Dr. Blick, and it would certainly have been a most depressing spectacle for a man like Bage.16

The premise of *Hermsprong* is that reason must shape all human relationships and institutions, and Bage defines reason not in terms of complex philosophizing but of common sense. It does not make sense to dine for hours to the point of sickness; it makes sense to eat. It is not reasonable to submit to lifelong misery because one's parent chooses an unfitting mate; one must make a rational choice oneself. But although Bage would like to believe that applying reason to human affairs will improve the state of society, it must have been difficult in the light of recent events to assume that that would happen. Not only must the enlightened man contend with a corrupt government and clergy, but with a people who would turn on those who tried to help them, as Bage suggests they had in the Birmingham riots. Bage makes a number of positive statements in the book—the outcome of Hermsprong's trial, Hermsprong's successful reeducation of Caroline—to balance some of his criticisms, but he provides no system for reform. The corruptions he has detailed throughout the book are not cleaned up because Lord Grondale dies at the end or because on his deathbed he blesses dear Caroline. Bage can only arrive at his happy ending by ignoring the larger issues he has raised. The reader does not even have to resolve the question of whether Caroline should marry beneath her; Hermsprong, as the heir, is of course a most fitting husband. Like Holcroft in *Hugh Trevor* and Inchbald in *Nature and Art*, Bage at the end of *Hermsprong*
retreats from his position as critic to leave us with a sunny image, indeed, of man as he is not.


2. Stuart Tave notes that "Cornwall was the most notoriously over-represented county in the unreformed Parliament and its saleable boroughs a center of corruption and of Crown influence." *Intro., Hermsprong, or Man as He Is Not*, by Robert Bage (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), p. 3.

3. John Sekora's incisive analysis of the concept of luxury in the eighteenth century is relevant to this passage. Sekora shows that many in England, especially in the early part of the century, were extremely suspicious of consumption as a means to happiness; they saw in the increasing desire for goods a sinister fascination with consumption for its own sake—that is, as luxury. See especially Sekora's second and third chapters in *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

4. The positive view of commerce that I have noted in these novels of the mid and late 1700s is in marked contrast to much of the comment earlier in the century, when commerce and trade were seen as contributors to display and an ever-increasing need for goods. The view that commerce serves largely to contribute to the development of artificial needs is, as I noted, less prominent as the century wears on. Of the novelists of the last half of the century, only Smollett espouses this view of luxury, and one of Sekora's main points about Smollett is that his view of luxury and commerce was already old fashioned in his own time. Thus, when at the very end of the century Bage makes his complaint about the relation between commerce and "the parade of life," he is renewing an argument that had lain dormant for a good many years.


7. However, this statement must be qualified by noting that by the time Hermsprong is brought to his hearing, which will determine if he goes to
trial, he has established his reputation in the community and thus stands in some measure as Lord Grondale's social equal, while Caleb is Falkland's social inferior.


10. Cole and Postgate, pp. 147–48; see also Cone, pp. 218–24.

11. Bage follows quite closely the arguments and emphases of the early part of the Vindication. Wollstonecraft's main concern is that the education of women forces them into a subservient and socially harmful role. Until the modes of education are changed, women will not be able to turn their energies to the betterment of themselves, their families, and society but will continue to expend them on the "trifles" that their faulty educations have convinced them are the proper sphere of women's interests. Hermsprong's argument that men's homage to women is destructive also is taken from Wollstonecraft, as is the remark about esteem versus love. See particularly the introduction and the first three chapters of the Vindication, most conveniently available in the critical edition edited by Carol Poston (New York: Norton, 1975). It is interesting to note that although Bage alludes to "two octavo volumes," apparently only one volume was published; Wollstonecraft had promised a second volume in her "advertisement," but as Poston tells us, "so far as is known from Wollstonecraft's papers, she never began the other volume."

12. Holcroft and Wollstonecraft both enthusiastically reviewed Hermsprong; Godwin on his tour through the midlands in the summer of 1797 went out of his way to make the personal acquaintance of its author. See also Tave, pp. 3–5, and Peter Faulkner, Robert Bage (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 31.

13. It had been well over a century since parental choice of a child's mate had been the rule; by the time Bage was writing the decision-making power belonged to those directly involved. Lawrence Stone notes that "between 1660 and 1800 . . . the children [were] normally making their own choices, and the parents [were] left with no more than the right of veto over socially or economically unsuitable candidates." The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800 (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 272.


15. Bage's long-time friend (and customer for the entire production of his paper mill) William Hutton was one of those who were forced to flee from the mob. Bage wrote to Hutton that "in this country, it is better to be a churchman, with just as much common sense as heaven has been pleased to give on average to Esquimaux, than a dissenter with the understanding of a Priestley or a Locke. I hope Dear Will, experience will teach thee this great truth and convey thee to peace and orthodoxy, pudding and stupidity." Quoted by Faulkner, p. 26.
16. Cole and Postgate suggest that it was "highly amusing to the 'Church and King' party that the defenders of 'the people' should be harassed by the people itself" (p. 138). The incident had started with a hotel dinner celebrating the storming of the Bastille held by the Birmingham "Friends of Freedom." A mob collected that night to burn down dissenting chapels (the church was against the revolution; enemies of the church were presumed to be revolutionaries). The mob then went to Fair Hill and destroyed Priestley's laboratory, wrecking and finally setting his house aflame. The next day the mob went on to destroy the homes of lesser known reformers. The authorities did not interfere; Faulkner (p. 25) suggests that the magistrates probably did not have the means to control the rioters.