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The Cambridge Companion to
British Romanticism

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forms of anticanonical criticism. But even these novels are not generally thought to equal the intense, transcendent, and reflexive subjectivity, “supernatural naturalism,” and discursive self-consciousness widely seen as the central characteristics and achievement of Romantic poetry.

Thus, Romantic fiction seems largely confined to the historical issues and commercialized culture of its own time. Prose fiction was one of the most widely consumed forms of print during the period, equalled or surpassed only by newspapers, closely associated with a new social and cultural phenomenon known as “the rise of the reading public,” and considered a major form of ideological communication, for better or worse – usually the latter. Throughout the Romantic period prose fiction of any kind was regarded as ideologically dangerous and morally, artistically, and intellectually deficient. Yet it was central to cultural politics: cheap fiction served an independent urban working-class culture of novelty and commercialized consumption; evangelical fiction disseminated a diminutive version of bourgeois culture and values; and the “modern novel” was used in the struggle for ideological self-definition within the professional middle classes and to project their domination of other classes. The most widely read form of imaginative writing, prose fiction could be made to address various classes comprising the “nation,” as poetry, belles-lettres, and even drama, popular as it was, could not.

Accordingly, prose fiction of all kinds was reformed in relation to the unfolding political and social conflicts of the time. Outside the domain of print, the lower-class oral fiction of folktales was regarded by social reformers of all classes as a vestige of superstition and pre-modern consciousness. Yet middle-class inventors of tradition such as Walter Scott collected it and later incorporated it into novels of national origins, history, and culture. The traditional chapbook fiction of the common people was relegated to the middle-class nursery and discarded even by lower-class readers, who wanted cheap versions of the fashionable sentimental and gothic novels being read by their betters. Middle-class moral reformers such as Hannah More saw traditional chapbook literature as a seedbed of popular culture and thus of


lower-class political disaffection during the 1790s. Accordingly, she, and later the Religious Tract Society, tried to supplant this "sans-culotte library" with fiction "of the right sort." Later still, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, artisans' educational institutes and magazines, lower-class religious sects such as Methodists, and working-class radicals tried to eradicate the people's appetite for both the old chapbook fiction and the fashionable novels.

Even fiction for children was reconstructed and, like pseudopopular chapbook fiction, used to intervene in social conflict. Children, like women, plebeians, and "primitive" peoples, were widely considered to have a "natural" love of fictitious narrative. Educationists treated this love as both a danger and opportunity. Social reformers like Sarah Trimmer argued that if middle-class children were not carefully supervised and segregated from lower-class servants they would be seduced by the false consciousness embodied in the common folk's ghost stories, fairy tales, and adventure stories. A taste for such "fables" would also unfit these children for "solid" and "useful" reading. Thus, many writers turned to fiction, though reluctantly, both to preserve the middle-class child from the wrong kinds of fiction and to sweeten the pill of instruction. By no accident many of these writers were women, including Trimmer herself, Lady Eleanor Penn, Dorothy Kilner, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Lamb, "Arabella Argus," Alicia Catherine Mant, Mary Robson Hughes, Mary Sherwood, her sister Martha Mary Butt, Mary Pilkington, Barbara Hofland, and Mary Belson Elliott. These writers capitalized on the supposed expertise of their sex in child rearing so as to enter a profession and to discourse on issues of the day otherwise closed to them, on behalf of the general interests of their class but also in the interest of feminizing culture and civil society.

Fiction for the middle and upper classes—usually called the "modern novel," "novels of the day," or "fashionable novels"—was as widely read and widely condemned as the fiction of the lower orders. In 1799 the Rev. Vicesimus Knox declared, "If it is true, that the present age is more corrupt than the preceding, the great multiplication of Novels probably contributes to its degeneracy." As late as 1826 a writer in the Monthly Magazine attributed the French Revolution to the influence of novels by Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, and D'Alembert, noting that a similar attempt had failed in Britain. Novels were supposed to distract young middle-class readers from the solid and useful reading necessary to accumulate moral and intellectual capital for later life, especially in the professions. Women in particular were supposed to be rendered unfit by novel reading for their domestic character and duties. As the New Lady's Magazine put it in 1799, novels "not

only poison the mind from relishing well-written authors, but render it less firm to resist those temptations they themselves inculcate." These temptations were supposed to stem from decadent court culture, for modern novels were seen as descendants of seventeenth-century courtly novelas and secret court histories and as cousins of contemporary French libertine novels.

The novel was the major reading-matter of the middle and upper classes, along with newspapers and magazines, and thus all three were sources of continuing anxiety as threats to social order and stability. Newspapers and magazines were taxed to restrict their circulation and prosecuted to intimidate their editors; novels were attacked by moralists, critics, reformers, and artistic innovators. Most of these attacks were based on moral more than aesthetic grounds, but the obvious power of the novel in particular to disseminate ideology through a wide and national readership among the political classes made it a focus for both moral and artistic reform. Certainly the novel had to be raised from its subliterary status in order to validate with the transcendent power of art whatever ideological burden it might be made to bear. Distinctions between art and entertainment, edification and pastime were already deeply inscribed in culture and being re-fashioned to serve emergent social differences. The aesthetic was being remade in a form of knowledge as power that could be controlled by professional writers, critics, and other middle-class gatekeepers rather than by upper-class patrons. This could best be accomplished by a form of writing able to reach a wide readership, beyond the largest of the genteel salons and coteries. Yet this fact introduced new anxieties about commercialization, mere popularity, and undisciplined and untrained readers, and these anxieties in turn produced new or newly strengthened institutions of cultural surveillance and policing, such as literary criticism and a canon of the national literature, in which, significantly, the novel was installed during the Romantic period.

This process is seen in the development of the novel's dominant form throughout the period—the novel of manners, or more properly the novel of manners, sentiment, and emulation.6 "Manners" encompassed social conduct as codes of social differentiation and power with moral and ethical overtones, which were applied to the culture and conduct of the nation as a
whole and treated novelistically in terms of the moral, ethical, cultural, and social options (sentiment and emulation) exercised in private life by individuals. Earlier novels of manners represent upper-class life for the instruction and emulation of readers lower down the social scale, but after the “Richardsonian revolution” of mid-century, novels incorporated Enlightenment and sentimental social critiques of this relationship, representing subjectivity or inward merit oppressed by a society dominated by mere manners, or courtly conduct. Yet the same novels continue to depict the manners of the dominant classes as vital interests to middle-class readers who had increasing expectations of upward social mobility but were increasingly conscious of separate identity and power. This form of the novel was inspired by Richardson’s novels, Rousseau’s *La nouvelle Héloïse*, and the sentimental novels of Henry Mackenzie and others. But women novelists in particular, such as Frances Burney, Frances Sheridan, Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Ann Radcliffe, and Charlotte Smith, exploited their conventionally accepted expertise in silent suffering to advance bourgeois values and practices by representing the inward self as authentic and the external social world, controlled by aristocracy and gentry, as divided, relative, and hostile to authentic selfhood. Accordingly, many a fictional heroine or hero relies on subjectivity as a professional middle-class discourse of merit to negotiate access to the gentry.

This social process acquires the character of fable or myth, enacted however through a realistic plot and characterization rather than through the allegorical, ceremonial action characteristic of earlier courtly romance. Structures of language and narrative mode reinforce this emergent myth. The late eighteenth century saw consolidation of a national dialect, spoken and written, based on the writing culture of the elite learned professions. Novels of manners, sentiment, and emulation contain a linguistic universe centered by standard written English as the language of thought or the associational and (therefore) authentic subjective self, whereas the social self, like speech, is artificial and merely relative. Thus protagonists speak and think in standard written English whereas merely social characters, of any class, speak in sociolect, dialect, and idiolect and usually have little if any subjectivity.

This linguistic structure is supported by the handling of narrative mode, especially by a line of women novelists from Frances Burney through Elizabeth Inchbald, Charlotte Smith, and Maria Edgeworth to Jane Austen, and beyond to Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf. While earlier eighteenth-century novels of manners are often in first-person epistolary or confessional form, many novelists — especially men — soon turned decisively to third-person authoritative narration. The democratic polyvocalism of the novel in letters or the personal immediacy of the confessional tale was displaced by the hierarchical structure of authoritative narration in standard written English, subordinating all other forms of English in the text, often reinforced by a genteel irony, allusiveness, and literariness that embodied a transcendentally moral perspective above the social and subjective experience represented in the text. This is implicitly the reader’s viewpoint. But with the rise of the culture and literature of sensibility in the last few decades of the century, novelists, and especially women, began modifying this authoritative form.

Through use of “free indirect discourse,” or reported inward thought and speech, novelists from Burney on, construct protagonists resembling the author’s master-consciousness in the text. The reader may also identify with this viewpoint and thereby live the world of the novel doubly from within. The protagonist is uncertain how to traverse the social world but is seen by the reader to be on a course toward the moral and intellectual plane on which the narrator is situated from the outset, above or beyond the social world of the story. Through this narrative irony the reader vicariously experiences both the movement or transformation of the moral-intellectual self and its goal. Thus both narrative voice and plot closure are figures for a resolution of social conflict enacted on the level of local, quotidian, domestic relations and internalized in the subjective self. Within England (and Britain) this is a conflict between gentry and upper middle classes; and within the upper middle classes the conflict is an ambivalence toward the hegemonic classes, the desired and feared social “other.” The larger question is whether this formalized resolution of social conflict is meant to be carried from novel reading to real life or becomes an end in itself, an alternative to confronting social conflict — reading rather than revolution. Such escape or relief from reality was and is a characteristic often assigned to prose fiction, whether the eighteenth-century circulating-library novel or the twentieth-century Harlequin and Mills and Boon romances.

The political character of this mediated subjectivity in Romantic fiction merges gender difference with class conflict. The widely held (though mistaken) opinion that novels were mainly read and written by women was enforced by the conventional view of women as more subjective and less public beings than men, the limited education and range of domestic and social duties allowed to women, and conventional and practical restrictions on women as professionals, intellectuals, and writers. This image of woman
was itself an appropriation of the upper-class lady, designed to contrast with woman in the courtly “mistress system” of intertwined sexual and political intrigue and with woman corrupted morally and emotionally by courtly manners, luxury, and power and seduced sexually by the courtly gallant, to the ruin of herself, her family, or her husband and his estate. In a society already patriarchal and antifeminist at all levels, woman is seen as the weak link in every class confronting a superior male-dominated class. Woman is doubly the potential enemy within when she is the exclusively domestic creature of idealized gentry and upper-middle-class culture. Thus male readers could find the vicissitudes of novel heroines as interesting as the adventures of novel heroes because the woman tempted or threatened by a more powerful man could be read as the professional man or any subordinate group tempted and threatened by social superiors.

This point applies especially to the gothic romance, a variant of the novel of manners, sentiment, and emulation and a major force in the novel market from the 1790s to the early 1820s. This commercially successful form was developed by Ann Radcliffe and M. G. Lewis in the 1790s, followed by Francis Lathom, Charlotte Dacre, Regina Maria Roche, C. R. Maturin, and a host of others in the next two decades. The form quickly descended the market to become cheap sixpenny shockers by hacks such as Sarah Wilkinson and Isaac Crookenden, although most of their authors are unknown.

Significantly, these chapbook gothics tend to be shorter on the representation of oppressed subjectivity and longer on action and incident. For like the novel of manners, sentiment, and emulation from which it sprang, the triple-decker, circulating-library gothic romance celebrates subjectivity in the face of social conventions, institutions, values, and individuals threatening to overwhelm the virtuous individual self, and this plot was of interest mainly to the novel-reading classes rather than the chabook-reading classes. The woman lacking worldly experience, unmarried, orphaned, or otherwise unprotected by a man enables a display of subjectivity afflicted by the evils of the paternalist, patriarchal, merely social, and above all worldly values and practices of the dominant classes, figured as an older male villain.

Gothic romance also aims to demystify the sublime obscurity by which, according to Enlightenment sociology, court culture overawes the whole of society, thereby maintaining the power of court government. In order to do this gothic romances often describe historical and social settings in terms of Enlightenment philosophical history and use novelistic and devices and figures to constitute a critical sociology of power operating in several ways: through

Not surprisingly, then, gothic elements turn up in overtly political novels, or philosophical romances as they were called. “Philosophical” here signifies the work of Enlightenment social, political, and cultural critique as applied by French revolutionaries and British reformers in the 1790s. Such philosophical romances include English Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novels of the 1790s and “silver-fork” and “Newgate” novels of the 1820s and 1830s. These often follow earlier philosophical dialogues, oriental tales, fables, and allegories in which social criticism is framed by fiction to achieve a wider readership. English Jacobin novelists develop an Enlightenment sociology of knowledge to argue that individuals, and social groups are constructed by the political and cultural system under which they live. Accordingly, the English Jacobin rhetoric of fiction requires detailed representation of social conventions, institutions, and structures of power and a new particularity and authenticity in representing individual psychology. Yet, this particularity also has to seem socially typical, the consequence of systemic injustice rather than the accidents of individual destiny or moral character. Although several English Jacobin novelists adapted the picaresque form, they give it and other appropriated forms a rigorous connection between character, plot, and setting in order to show how the individual is first constructed by social conditions and then necessarily responds to these conditions by ethical action of certain kinds.

To serve this “necessitarian” plot, English Jacobin novelists prefer first-person confessional narration showing how self-reflection and its resultant political consciousness can break the cycle of institutional reproduction of evil or error. The individual internalizes false consciousness and social difference, thereby becomes self-divided, searches for reunitifying self-understanding, and discovers the cause of his or her self-conflict and social alienation in the actual injustice and oppression of society. But this new consciousness must then be expressed socially, as a confessional self-vindication or warning to others—the text of the novel itself or an inset narrative within it. This complex of philosophically motivated techniques embracing political autobiography is reinforced by historical allusions and contemporary parallels that generalize the condition of the novel’s protagonist to other people, entire classes, and other societies, either in the past or in contemporary but exotic locations. This is the structure of novels such as Thomas Holcroft’s Anna St. Ives (1792), William Godwin’s Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams (1794), Mary Hays’s The Memoirs of Emma Courtney (1796), and Mary Wollstonecraft’s The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria (1798). Some English Jacobin novelists adapted the picaresque form as in Robert Bage’s Man As He Is (1792) and Hermosprom; or, Man As He Is Not (1796) and the sentimental tale as in Elizabeth Inchbald’s Nature and Art (1796).

Anti-Jacobin fiction became prominent in the second half of the 1790s with such novels as Elizabeth Hamilton’s Letters of a Hindoo Rajah (1796), Isaac D’Israeli’s Vaurien (1797), Charles Lloyd’s Edmund Oliver (1798), Jane West’s A Tale of the Times (1799), and Elizabeth Hamilton’s Memoirs of Modern Philosophers (1800). After the revolutionary violence of 1792 and Jacobin Terror of 1793–4 in France and the plebeian political protests of 1792–5 in Britain, many middle-class writers and readers began to fear the effects of their own reformist zeal. Anti-Jacobin novelists came from the same social backgrounds as their literary foes and shared their criticism of court politics and plebeian unreason and insubordination, but they were more inclined towards a coalition with the dominant classes. Accordingly, they draw on more genteel and learned, less “democratic” literary traditions than their rivals and rely on parody and burlesque. Like satirists going back through Cervantes to Lucian and Aristophanes, they purport to expose a gap between theory and practice, speculation and experience, “philosophy” and “reality.” They often use bathos to show the comic consequences of theory in practice. They base characters on figures such as Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and Hays and use footnotes to link absurd utterances to English Jacobin writings, thus countering the English Jacobins’ fictionalized autobiography and use of footnotes to document systemic and historical injustice. They adapt the novel of education to show how a protagonist infatuated with “philosophy” or seduced by a “new philosopher” is either ruined or re-educated to social “reality.” Significantly, the Jacobin villain is either an amoral aristocrat or a plebeian masquerading as one and using revolutionary politics to serve his own greed and ambition; his victim is often a naive young woman, representing the element in middle-class individuals (men or women) and in the class as a whole that is susceptible to seduction by the upper class or contamination by the lower class, especially when it is disguised as middle-class revolutionary principle.

For literary political reasons anti-Jacobin novels often lack a central interest in subjectivity and avoid first-person expressive or confessional narration. During the 1790s sensibility became strongly associated with the French Revolution, partly through the revolutionary appropriation of Rousseau and partly through English Jacobin interest in subjectivity as the site of ideological struggle. In reaction, anti-Jacobin novelists emphasize sociability and the individual’s duty to social convention and laws, satirize sensibility, avoid identification of reader with protagonist through immediate first-person narration, and prefer the detached, intrusive, authoritative, witty, learned,
worldly wise narrator—a model professional-genteel consciousness representing a dialectic between the professional middle class and the landed gentry, rather than the overthrow of the latter by the former. This fictional structure, which thus formalizes the modified paternalist social order advocated in the novels’ thematic material, left an important legacy for Jane Austen, Walter Scott, and their Victorian successors in the “great tradition,” who developed the form into a major vehicle for imagining and promoting a coalition of gentry and professionals to dominate Britain and its empire.

In the aftermath of the 1790s Britain faced increasing class conflict at home and military challenge abroad. In response, middle-class writers intensified their attacks on the moral and political failings of the ruling class, increased their efforts to replace the lower ranks’ lottery mentality with a form of bourgeois investment mentality, and aimed to reconcile the differences created within the nation and their own class by the Revolution debate. Continuing concern over lower-class rebelliousness led to increased production of pseudopopular fiction for the common people, modeled on Hannah More’s “Cheap Repository” (1795–8, reprinted in the 1810s and 1820s) and extended by the Religious Tract Society (1799 on) and other local, national, and imperial agencies. But this concern also produced new ways of depicting the common people in fiction for middle-class readers, a project that merged with a concern to represent a dialectic and coalition between the hegemonic classes and the professional middle class. Novelist represented a new social diversity-in-unity by inventing a national history, culture, literature, and destiny for Britain. This task required new social-descriptive matter, which in turn required new formal practices that were developed from the early 1800s to the 1830s by Maria Edgeworth, Jane and Anna Maria Porter, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Walter Scott, Bulwer Lytton, and others.

Edgeworth was the first of many novelists to model a “British” ruling class of professionalized gentry and gentrified professionals for the postrevolutionary age. In her Burneyesque novels such as Belinda (1801) and Patronage (1814) and tales such as Castle Rackrent (1800), Moral Tales (1801), Popular Tales (1804), Tales of Fashionable Life (1809–12), and Harrington and Ormond (1817), Edgeworth portrays this ruling coalition as both local and national in a way neither the merely local common people and petty bourgeoisie nor the urbanized and cosmopolitan court aristocracy could be. Edgeworth was the most widely respected novelist between the revolutionary decade and the success of Scott, and her influential novels portray heroes with gentry status and professional middle-class subjectivity, supported by women practicing a domestic version of this discourse of merit, and followed by a populace that is naturally loyal and docile, needing only proper leadership and replacement of their “traditional” culture and customary moral economy. Yet in Edgeworth’s “Irish tales” as in Porter’s and Morgan’s “national tales” and Scott’s “Waverley Novels” the common people and certain women characters remain the wellspring of the national culture of folksong, folksay, folksale, and the mother tongue against the alien and “not British.” But once inscribed in writing, this largely oral culture of the people became the cultural property and ideological instrument of those who commanded the culture of print.

Regional and historical novels, as further variants of the novel of manners, sentiment, and emulation, became the major forms of this instrument, using a particular representation of the national language. In both her regional tales and Burneyesque novels, for example, Edgeworth uses dialect or idiolect and sociolect in a hierarchy dominated by standard written English, the dialect of the professional middle class, implicitly national and British because it belongs to no particular place. This linguistic structure is reinforced by an authoritative third-person narrative voice using standard English, by morally correct and intellectually developed characters using the same dialect, and by detailed and energetic description of regional and class-based social life and customs. As standard languages were being developed from written vernaculars used by professionals into the model for correct written and spoken language, the novel representing the linguistically differentiated yet ordered nation became a major vehicle for Romantic nationalism in Europe and elsewhere, into the twentieth century.

The fact that women led the way in developing this form is significant. The novel was gendered feminine and therefore ranked relatively low in the cultural and literary hierarchy of the time, yet because of this fact women writers could use the novel to participate in national issues of the greatest importance, otherwise conducted by men. But while Edgeworth, the Porter sisters, and Lady Morgan addressed issues of national social reconstruction, other women novelists such as Amelia Opie, Elizabeth LeNoir, and Mary Brunton continued to specialize in conventionally feminine domains of sentiment, the domestic affections, and local, quotidian, and domestic life. These subjects, too, were political, however, and such novelists tried to avoid the political implications given to sensibility and subjectivity by English Jacobin novelists. For example Edgeworth and Austen resisted the culture of sensibility while representing women’s subjectivity in moral, intellectual, and socially integrative terms, rather than as emotional excess, cultural transgression, and social alienation. In the revolutionary aftermath, transgressive
subjectivity became an increasingly complex theme, associated with “avant-garde” Romantic culture yet rooted in Enlightenment and English Jacobin materialist epistemology and taken up by Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, the utilitarians, and early empirical psychologists. Furthermore, transgressive selfhood could be a powerful if ambiguous cultural figure for transcendence of the “merely” social and political sphere in a variety of novels by women and men, including Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne* (1807), which was widely read and influential in Britain, young Percy Shelley’s *Zastrozzi* (1810), Opie’s *Temper* (1812), Lady Caroline Lamb’s *Glenarvon* (1816), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), C. R. Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), J. G. Lockhart’s *Adam Blair* (1822), Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris* (1823), James Hogg’s *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Benjamin Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey* (1826–7), and Bulwer Lytton’s *Pelham* (1828). Central to these texts is a Romantic irony of excessive selfhood thwarted by social convention, oppressive institutions, or cosmic indifference.

Thus, representation of excessive selfhood was a major way of redefining the social, often converging with representation of the social in regional and historical novels so as to redefine the nation in terms of the values held by readers of such fiction. Edgeworth’s tales created a politically influential image of Ireland; Scott’s novels invented Scotland as our culture (or the tourist industry) still knows it; and in *Our Village* (1824–32), one of the few surviving popular classics from the period, Mary Mitford invokes Gilbert White of Selborne and Jane Austen to recreate rural England in the image of the leisureed intellectual middle class. Together these novels created a powerful and lasting cultural myth that the real Britain was to be found in a rural middle-class cottage culture. Meanwhile the urban scene, with its politically volatile lower classes, places of fashionable but immoral resort, criminal haunts such as London’s St. Giles, and increasingly separate working-class cultural life, was accommodated in the imaginary topography of the nation by being treated as alien ground, in Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* (1820–1), “Newgate novels” such as Bulwer Lytton’s *Paul Clifford* (1830), and Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837–8). Such novels did direct criticism of the “old order” toward criminal law reform, the Reform Bill of 1832, the Poor Law reform of 1834, and improvement of urban administration and policing. Yet these novels also depict urban lower-class life as exotic and glamorous but beyond reform and redemption, except in the individual case or by middle-class philanthropic societies.

This vision of national reconstruction was extended to the empire by orientalists, missionary organizations, utilitarians, and administrative reformers. Elizabeth Hamilton, sister of an orientalist, novelized the group’s cultural and political interests in *Memoirs of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), published in the midst of the Revolution debate. Mary Sherwood fictionalized the missionary campaign in such stories as *Little Henry and His Bearer* (1814). Charlotte Dacre’s gothic novel *Zofloya; or, The Moor* (1806) defined the “not British” as Catholic and Mediterranean or Islamic and Moorish—in either case autocratic, courtly, and sublimely mysterious, implying that such elements within Britain were alien. The threat from French Revolutionary and Napoleonic imperialism gave new energy to these themes, especially during the Peninsular war, in poems by Byron, Moore, and Felicia Hemans and novels such as Thomas Hope’s *Anastasia; or, Memoirs of a Greek* (1819), James Morier’s *The Adventures of Hajji Baba* (1824), and Scott’s *The Talisman* (1825). These texts develop the Enlightenment critique of court culture into criticism of Britain’s governing classes at a time of national crisis and link Britain’s imperial mission to modernize the East with a domestic mission to purge Britain of oriental elements.

Engagement with these major cultural and political issues of the Revolutionary aftermath gained increasing respect for the modern novel, but intellectuals, avant-garde writers, evangelicals, and political radicals—most of them men—continued to associate prose fiction with subcultures of unenlightened plebeians, under-educated women, and uneducated children. Nevertheless, some of these critics attempted to disseminate their ideas by appropriating prose fiction in experimental hybrid texts, or quasi-novels, including John Thelwall’s *The Peripatetic* (1793), Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Agrippina, Wife of Germanicus* (1804), Thomas Frognall Dibdin’s *Bibionomania* (1809), Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* (1817), Thomas Love Peacock’s *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), “Notices Ambrosianae” in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1822–35), Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris* (1823), and Southey’s *The Doctor*, etc. (1834–47). These texts combine fictional narrative with some other genre or discourse, such as philosophy, poetry, social criticism, history, topical commentary, criticism, or autobiography, to which the fiction is subordinate.

A similar critical relation to the “mere” novel also characterizes the fiction of Austen and Scott, thought by contemporary readers (in the case of Scott) or modern critics (Austen) to have transcended the ephemeral “novel of the day” and become literary classics, or rereadable texts. Yet Austen is centrally a novelist of her time in dealing with the major concern of the novel-reading classes during her lifetime—the relation of the professional middle class and landed gentry. She focuses this concern around familiar themes in late eighteenth-century fiction of social criticism. First there is the problem of passing on the landed estate and the culture it sustains, seen most critically
family and the nation. Rather than deny she was writing novels, as many contemporaries did, Austen subjoined “A Novel” to each of her titles: what, she implies, could be of more interest to the novel-reading classes than the problem of reading posed in and by her novels?

Accordingly, these novels deliberately aim to be literature, or rereadable texts transcending their particular historical and social conditions of production. Novels of the day exploited fashionable novelty, were rented from circulating libraries rather than owned by their readers, and were thus rereadable texts in several senses. By contrast, rereadable texts require critical reflection on the literary conventions they exploit. This kind of reflection is similar to that required by men in their professional work and is required by the novels’ heroines in order to negotiate through social conventions and gain an “establishment” in life, thereby contributing to social stability. Thus the aims of Austen’s novels resemble both those of feminists in the 1790s and women writers of national reconstruction in the revolutionary aftermath.

Austen’s novels not only rework the commercialized “trash of the circulating library” but also exclude thematic and formal topicalities of much writing in the revolutionary decade and its aftermath. In this way Austen pretends to deal with central and universal human “nature” rather than the partial “realities” of one party or another of political and cultural revolutionaries. Yet Austen is political. As a clergyman’s daughter and sister of professional men, she affirms the relevance of Anglican values, culture, and institutions in a long and successful coalition of gentry and professions leading local society and thus the nation from the past through the present crisis and into the future. Contemporary challenges to this culture were intertwined with religious Dissent and avant-garde Romanticism; to refute them and bring about the hegemonic coalition she represents and advocates, Austen deliberately makes her novels seem old-fashioned in form and technique. Paradoxically, one of Austen’s early admirers was the Prince Regent, leader of the commercialized culture of emulation that she and most writers of her time, Jacobin or anti-Jacobin, Romantic or anti-Romantic, attack. Appropriately, Austen’s novels were not widely recognized as classics, or as literature, until near the end of the Romantic period.

The writer who established the novel as literature during the period itself was Walter Scott. Austen and Scott seem very different, as each noted. She wrote novels of generalized contemporary life; he wrote historical romances.

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nineteenth century but the Romantic period's most comprehensive fictional
meditation on the social divisions and changes revealed in the 1790s and
exacerbated in the revolutionary aftermath.

Thus it is in being novelists of their time that Austen and Scott helped to
make the novel into literature and to refund literature as class property, the
new national institution of verbal art, which became the defining center for
the evolving practices of writing controlled by the professional class and used
to dominate society and remake it in their own image. That Austen and Scott,
however different, are central to Romantic novel readers' interests,
artistic and political, is seen in the fate of a novel only now becoming a classic
— James Hogg's Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, Written
by Himself (1824). It takes on the social-historical novel, the novel of passion
and intense subjectivity, and a variety of other emergent modes of Romantic
fiction and writing, and by representing social divisions of self, class, gender,
language, culture, and history in an irredeemably divided text, it exposes the
assumptions underlying Romantic literature's imagined community of the
nation.

Hogg's novel contains two texts — the autobiography of an early
eighteenth-century Scottish antinomian and "The Editor's Narrative" of the
same events. These texts, one confessional and self-justifying, the other
authoritative, seem to present the story of a Scottish landed gentleman's
second son, who grows up in a divided house, quarrels with his older brother
at the time of the Union of England and Scotland — conventionally the origin
of modern Scotland — is encouraged by his double, Gil-Martin, who may be
the devil, to commit various crimes out of self-righteousness, tries to publish
his self-vindicating autobiography, becomes a social outcast, and commits
suicide. But the Editor confesses that he doesn't understand the Sinner's
narrative. There is no final explanation of the Sinner's life, no closing of the
book on the past, only an unbridgeable abyss between Sinner and Editor,
past and present, premodern and modern consciousness, superstition and
Enlightenment, speech and writing. The present cannot accommodate or
domesticate the past; the Sinner's confessions, his self-writing, do not
"justify" himself, but lapse into a narrative irony as the reader understands
him and his actions more fully than he (or the Editor) does, through a
sociology of fanaticism, or self-obsession, familiar enough in Romantic
fiction and part of a widely understood sociology of rebellion and revolution at
the time. Furthermore, the only truth apparent to the reader is offered by
dialect speakers, not the two principal narrators who use standard written
English. In this novel speech, not writing, bears truth. Significantly, the
contradictors are social outcasts — women or working people — whose speech
undoes the writing of the professional middle-class men who weave a web of
words to encompass reality. Hogg subverts the new discourse of combined
history and romance being used to invent the Romantic nation and thereby
reconcile social divisions of class, gender, and region under the aegis of the
professional middle class. 11

Not surprisingly, Hogg's novel was greeted with incomprehension, anger,
and derision in its time, mutilated in later editions, forgotten, and only
rediscovered in the twentieth century. Most Romantic fiction fared as ill, or
worse — soon forgotten, appropriated by "street literature" or cut down for
the nursery or schoolroom, barely canonical now, and only canonized at the
cost of being stripped of its politics. It is often assumed (and occasionally
argued) that, while Romantic fiction deals with the merely social, Romantic
poetry best embodies the period's "discoveries" about the self and nature,
and even that it had more influence on the Victorian and model novel. 12 Yet
Romantic novelists attempted as much or more than the poets in writing
about the self, celebrating the domestic affections and local quotidian life,
creating a national imagined community, and establishing a national
language and literature commanded by the classes who read and wrote this
literature and fiction whose interests they served — and still serve.