Representations of Riot:
The Transformation of the Gordon Riots from History into Cultural Myth

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Introduction

The day was Wednesday, June 7th, 1780 and London was on fire.1 In the neighborhood of Holborn, near the grounds of Thomas Langdale’s distillery, men, women and children knelt on the ground and lowered their mouths to pools of burning alcohol that had collected in the streets and ran down the gutters, licking up whatever they could salvage. Around them, houses burned and Langdale’s distillery, which had covered a two block stretch of land and had contained an estimated 120,000 gallons of gin, lay in ruins from the shots that had been fired at it by an unruly crowd, igniting the great vats of liquor stored inside and throwing into the air ‘a pinnicle of flame resembling a volcano’2. In the East End of London, members of the mob raided pubs in Golden Lane and Whitechapel and destroyed them while drinking whatever spirits they could get their hands on. Elsewhere, in Broad Street, the Honourable Artillery Company and the London Military Association fired on the mob, killing several. Chaos reigned across the city; both the King’s Bench prison and the Fleet prison were set on fire and its inhabitants set loose on the city, and throughout the afternoon, groups of rioters attempted to make two assaults on the Bank of England. All throughout the city, houses, shops and offices that were occupied by Catholic merchants, businessmen and shopkeepers were attacked and either destroyed completely or damaged. Meanwhile, Hyde Park had the appearance of an armed camp. Due to a shortage of barrack accommodation for the troops who had marched into the capital in the preceding week, now numbering in the several thousands, many were forced to make a temporary camp in the

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largest and most famous of London’s royal parks. All throughout the city, these regiments worked to quell the riots, resulting in a death toll of at least two hundred and eighty five people by the riots’ conclusion. This day, known as “Black Wednesday”, marked the culmination of the Gordon Riots, one of the largest and deadliest civil disturbances in British history.

Seven days previously, on May 31st, Lord George Gordon stood before the House of Lords during a session of Parliament and announced to the House that the following Friday, June 2nd, he would present for their consideration a petition of the Protestant Association of London, pushing for the repeal of “late Act in Favour of Popery in England”, the Catholic Relief Act of 1778. He also informed the House that the whole Association proposed to assemble in St. George’s Fields on the morning of June 2nd and to accompany their petition to the House in “the most humble, decent and respectable manner”. Indeed, Gordon had been posting advertisements in London newspapers for the previous several days, calling all members of the Protestant Association, of which he was the president, to gather at St. George’s Fields to support their petition, which opposed the Act that had granted Catholics living in England some minor relief from discrimination. On June 2nd, a crowd of 60,000 supporters of the Protestant Association showed up at St. George’s Fields to oppose the small measure of Catholic relief.

While awaiting the arrival of Gordon, the crowd, wearing the blue cockades on their heads which were the symbol of the Protestant Association, paraded with flags, chanted hymns and psalms, and arranged themselves into the prearranged four divisions for the march on Parliament. They then listened to a harangue from Lord George Gordon and paraded three or four times around the Field before marching out into the streets, singing hymns and heralded by blue banners. Using separate bridges, the sections of the Association moved to Palace Yard, outside the doors to the Houses of Parliament. The section that crossed Westminster Bridge was
preceded by a man carrying on his shoulder the great parchment roll containing upwards of 40,000 signatures. One of the sections, which passed over London Bridge and had the longest route, a three mile journey through the city, interrogated passers-by who were not wearing blue cockades and was apparently swollen by people recruited en route.

Between two thirty and three o'clock in the afternoon, the crowd reassembled itself in Palace Yard. Some crowded into Westminster Hall, and seeing Dunning, the seconder of the Bill for Catholic Relief, addressing the Court of Kings' Bench, they interrupted his speech. They then blocked up the avenues to the Lords, from which they were rebuffed by the door-keepers. By now the crowd was getting boisterously unruly: Members of Parliament attending the House of Lords or Commons were forced to join in cries of 'No Popery'; known supporters of the Protestant Association had their coaches drawn to the doors of the House, while opponents were pelted with mud, insulted and mistreated, usually to chaotic cries of 'No Popery' by the crowd. George Savile, the proposer of the Catholic Relief Bill, had his coach demolished; Lord Mansfield, the Chief Justice, had his coach windows smashed; and Lord Ashburnham was dragged into the House over the heads of the crowd, while other Members of Parliament had their wigs ripped off their heads, were covered with mud, and had their property stolen or damaged in various ways.

Inside the House of Lords, Lord George Gordon informed members that he had a petition with 120,000 signatures and moved for it to be brought up. During the debate that ensued on the House floor, Gordon frequently left the chamber and addressed the crowd waiting outside from the gallery stairs, giving them news of how events were progressing and offering up the names of those who opposed the petition. Meanwhile, the crowd could be heard outside, thundering on the
doors and harassing members who were trying to make their way in. Several members of Parliament threatened Gordon with retribution if he did not get his followers under control.

Eventually, Gordon reported that the debate was adjourned until Tuesday, but that he expected the repeal of the Act and therefore urged the crowd to depart. The Lords adjourned at eight thirty and Lord Stormont, the Minister of State, called for military assistance to free the Commons. By this point, some of the more respectable members of the crowd had departed, but a section of the crowd moved off to attack Catholic property; they targeted the chapel attached to the Sardinian embassy in Duke Street, which they burned to the ground, and the chapel attached to the Bavarian embassy in Warwick Street, which they ransacked and whose contents they burned in the street. Several rioters were arrested elsewhere in the city, where they had tried to attack a Portuguese chapel but were prevented from doing so by an attachment of troops.

The next day, a Saturday, was relatively quiet; crowds gathered outside a Catholic chapel in the Little Moorfields, but no major disturbances took place. However, the next morning at nine o’clock, the crowd returned to the chapel and broke its windows; later in the evening, the building was pillaged and the contents burned in the street.

The following Monday a crowd paraded in front of Gordon's house bearing a pulpit and other trophies taken from the various chapels, before burning them in the nearby fields. Gordon did not participate in any of these activities, and refused to come out and see the crowd. In the evening groups of rioters moved into the eastern parishes, heading for the Catholic districts in the neighborhoods of Wapping and Spitalfields. A Catholic chapel in Nightingale Street was set on fire and the priests' house was ransacked. Troops were reported to have been present with a justice of the peace, but not to have done anything to intervene. Houses and schools were also attacked in Moorfields and another school demolished in Hoxton. The mob also turned its
attention to the justices involved in arresting men for the attacks on the Sardinian chapel on June 2nd; the houses of Mr. Rainsforth in Clare Street and of Mr. Maberly, in Little Queen Street were attacked and demolished. At midnight a group of rioters attacked George Savile's house in Leicester Square, damaging the windows, railings and some of the furniture before the Guards intervened. Edmund Burke's house was also threatened, but a party of troops arrived and prevented any attack.

When Parliament met again on June 6th, large crowds, all wearing blue cockades, assembled outside. Outside the Houses of Parliament, Foot and Horse Guards provided avenues for members to pass through safely, although the crowd continued to parade about with flags, music, and assorted weaponry. Meanwhile the Commons had again put off the debate about Catholic relief and concentrated on a series of resolutions to deal with the rioters of the previous day. At about five o'clock Justice Hyde read the Riot Act and ordered the Horse Guards to disperse the crowds outside parliament. One of the crowd hoisted a red and black flag and shouted 'To Hyde's house a-hoy', and the crowd moved off to St. Martin's Street where Hyde's house was located and turned its furniture into the street, where it was destroyed by half a dozen bonfires. Following this, the crowd dispersed throughout the city, wreaking various kinds of havoc on places owned or occupied by Catholics; however, the majority of the rioters had moved to Newgate prison, where the rioters from June 2nd were being kept. On the way, a group destroyed the Bow Street police office of Sir John Fielding. Once they arrived at Newgate, the keeper's house was set on fire, the prison gates broken open, and the ten-year-old building set on fire after all its prisoners had been released. A party of a hundred constables who attempted to interfere were encircled by the crowd, beaten up, disarmed, and their staves used as extra
firebrands. That same evening the crowd attacked Clerkenwell, Bridewell and the New Prison, releasing the captives.

The destruction of Newgate Prison marked a decisive climax in the riots; at this stage, they reached a new level of lawlessness and chaos than had previously been witnessed. However, the worst was yet to come. The next and effectively final day of rioting was “black Wednesday”, described in the opening paragraph of this chapter. More prisons were broken into and prisoners set loose, fires raged all throughout London, immense amounts of property were destroyed, and the Bank of England was targeted, as well as the toll-booth on Blackfriars Bridge, which was robbed and then destroyed. Fortunately, that morning the ground had been cleared for freer use of the troops against the rioters by the Attorney-General, who had delivered the crucial ruling that the troops could fire on rioters without the Riot Act having been read.

Throughout Thursday, rioting continued in Southwark, Bermondsey, and the City of London, but they were dying down, with an estimated 10,000 troops now in the capital as well as several militia regiments and groups of armed volunteers. By the riots’ end, about two hundred and eighty five people were shot dead, with another two hundred wounded; troops went about removing blue flags and cockades from people, and arrested four hundred and fifty civilians who had participated in the mob. The next morning, the Lord of the Council issued a warrant for the arrest of Gordon, who was taken from his house in Welbeck Street and lodged in the Tower of London for his supposed role in orchestrating and encouraging the riots. The Gordon riots were effectively over, and the goals of the Protestant Association remained unfulfilled.

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How are these riots, arguably one of the largest civil commotion in England’s history, remembered today? The truth is that most people have never heard of the Gordon Riots. This fact
is surprising, considering the violent and extreme forms in which they were described by contemporaries. Based on some of the accounts of those who had been there, including the famous Dr. Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, and Horace Walpole, it was clear that the events of June 1780 had visibly shaken Londoners and the English people in general to their core. The violence and destruction of the Gordon Riots was unprecedented; the Annual Register called the night of June 7\(^{th}\) “one of the most dreadful spectacles this country ever beheld…every thing served to impress the mind with ideas of universal anarchy and approaching desolation.”

Contemporary historian John Stevenson wrote that

The Gordon Riots of 1780 stand out as the largest civil commotion in England since the Monmouth Rebellion. No civil disorder since, in England, has led to greater bloodshed or more widespread destruction of property; more people were killed or executed than during the Luddite outbreaks, the Reform struggle, or the various Chartist episodes.\(^3\)

While the Gordon Riots did not have any immediate political effects, they took a severe emotional toll on the populace, as well as engendered numerous questions about the riots’ causes and motivations. Among these were rumors of French and American conspiracy plots, the overthrow of the current political system, and other spectacular theories. The question remained: how did a protest against a relatively harmless piece of religious legislation turn into one of the most violent, destructive and memorable riots in England’s history?

Though the Gordon Riots were memorialized in pamphlets, poems and novels over the next century or so, including a novel by one of the greatest English novelists of all time, Charles Dickens, it is nevertheless surprising how little scholarly work was devoted to the topic of the Gordon Riots until recent decades. To date, they have garnered attention in a smattering of chapters in books dealing with rioting and crowd culture in England, but to date only one scholarly monograph has been published dealing exclusively with the Gordon Riots, and that is J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England*, 94.

\(^3\) Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England*, 94.
Paul de Castro’s *The Gordon Riots*, which was published over eighty years ago, in 1926. The question of why so little scholarly attention has been paid to the Gordon Riots is an interesting question in itself, though it will not be dealt in great depth within the scope of this study.

What I propose to do instead is to examine the existing representations of the Gordon riots - both popular and scholarly- that are available for study, from the period immediately following the riots until the present day, in order to understand how riots have been portrayed throughout time, and how that has affected our understanding of them. In his recent book, *The Art of Riot in England and America*, Ronald Paulson studies “literary riots”, which are representations of riots that essentially form a parallel universe to the actual riot, although the reality and the representation do intersect with one another at points.⁴ These literary representations of riots offer the discerning reader or viewer many insights into the effects of riots, not just on politics or social order, but on the emotional and ideological consciousness of the people who witnessed them, as well as those who study them.

Paulson notes that riots, on the whole, tend to have more affect than effect. Rioters do not usually succeed in achieving their political goals; the Gordon riots certainly did not. They failed to secure the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act, and resulted in lasting damage to popular liberty and action in England. However, their representation in contemporary reports, letters, prints, paintings and writings, were extremely affective. These representations played a crucial role in constructing the cultural identity of the riots; and they likewise had an enormous impact on the way the Gordon riots were remembered in the years, and even centuries, to come.

Many contemporaries of the Gordon riots recalled seeing “well-dressed men” in the crowds that abused Members of Parliament and inflicted violence on property. Some of these

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assumed that the presence of these men indicated some sort of elite conspiracy behind the riots; however, it seems far more likely that these men included “sight-seers, the curious witnesses and aestheticizers” of the Gordon riots. While many contemporaries of the Gordon riots tried to understand the causes and motives of the riots, others observed them and appreciated their effects, and they recorded their reactions in their journals and letters to friends; some even published them in pamphlets and poems following the conclusion of the riots. Here we can apply another of Paulson’s ideas- that of the artist as rioter. Riots produce emotional affects in spectators; the spectator who records the emotions the riot affected in them through a personal representation of the riot in turn produces an aesthetic or emotional response in the receiver of their representation. In this process, the aesthetic or emotional response affected by the riot in one individual becomes transmitted onto another individual, or groups of individuals. These kinds of responses, besides affecting an emotional or aesthetic response to riot, also have the power to change people’s perceptions of the riot. It is this power of the artist- the painter, the memoirist, the pamphleteer, or the novelist- that Paulson deems equivalent to the power of the rioter himself- at least in a literary sense. Artists have the power to contribute to the overall effectiveness of a riot- not its physical, immediate effectiveness, but on people’s perceptions and understanding of what the riot meant.

The Gordon riots of 1780 are a prime example of this relationship between the historical reality of a riot and its representation. Historians like Paulson and Ian Haywood argue that it was the Gordon riots, and not, like many people suppose, the French revolution, which established

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6 Ibid., 8-9.
“the paradigmatic British riot of the Romantic period and beyond.” Haywood coins a term for this paradigm of British riot, which, he argues, influenced the cultural construction of many other nineteenth century popular disturbances in Britain: he calls it the “spectacular” mob. In Haywood’s definition, “spectacular” violence is designed to represent two defining aspects of the violence under discussion: “its visual nature, extreme public scale and public impact” and “its sensational mode of representation.” The Gordon riots and the various representations of them discussed in this study definitely embody all the different aspects of this definition. Though the representations discussed in this study will be mainly literary, while both Haywood and Paulson give precedence to visual representations of riot, the representations discussed here are nonetheless all “visual” in nature. The Gordon riots left such a vivid impression on spectators that their descriptions of them are filled with extremely dramatic, visceral and visually stimulating rhetoric.

Finally, we come to the question of how it is that the Gordon riots are represented. In most cases, the violence of the crowd was nearly always represented as ‘savage’: “recidivist, mindless, instinctual, depraved.” Haywood posits that this resort to such tropes of primitive behavior co-existed with the underlying fear of the enlightened elite of the eighteenth century that the “mob” might represent revolutionary politics. The stirrings of a parliamentary reform movement were just beginning in England around the time that the Gordon riots broke out, as the country slowly inched towards greater acceptance of the idea of popular liberty. However, the Gordon riots changed all that. They confirmed the greatest fears of the conservatives: that popular liberty would lead to crowd violence and possibly revolution. The specter of the

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8 Ibid., 2, 7.
9 Ibid., 181.
“spectacular” mob created during the Gordon riots would haunt British culture into the nineteenth century. This study will look at how this cultural legend was constructed and the different ways in which this effect was achieved through various representations of the Gordon riots.

In examining how the cultural representation of the Gordon riots was constructed, I draw on many different primary and secondary sources. Among them are contemporary letters, journal entries, memoirs, and pamphlets, and trial records. Also essential to the popular understand of the Gordon riots is Charles Dickens’ fictionalized representation of the riots in his novel *Barnaby Rudge*, published sixty years after the events of the riots took place. Finally, I will discuss modern historians’ interpretations of the riots in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. In this manner, I hope to avoid the traditional cause-and-effect approach to history, and instead help the reader gain a better understanding of the effect the Gordon Riots had on our perception of history, riot, and British consciousness.
Chapter 1

Prologue to Riot

“\textit{It is much to be lamented that in the Cause of Religion, which should ever be conducted with Meekness and Lenity, such extreme Acts of Violence should have been committed. Though the Appearance of the Associators in general was such as only bespoke them Mechanicks, and working People, yet was their Behaviour at first, and during all their March thro’ the City, such as would have done any Cause, or any Rank, the highest Honour. How they came afterwards to forget themselves, and the Mildness of those Tenets they were then going to support, is much to be wondered at and lamented. This Circumstance, however, so much to be regretted in its Effects, may serve as a Lesson to those who would make Use of popular Fury, that it is a Demon of the most outrageous Kind, which, like other Spirits of an evil Nature, is much sooner raised than allayed.”}

\textit{St. James’s or British Evening Post, June 3, 1780, issue 2999}

\textit{“…You know how dangerous an engine religion is, when employed upon the minds of the ignorant.”}

\textit{Samuel Romilly to the Reverend John Roget, June 6, 1780}

The above quotations raise many fascinating issues and problems surrounding the Gordon Riots of 1780. How, for instance, did what started out as an obstinately peaceful protest movement for a religious cause escalate into one of the most destructive, memorable riots in English history? Who, in fact, were these rioters? Were they, like most contemporaries assumed, mostly poor workers who joined the movement out of a desire for revelry and violence? Did they share any of the beliefs of the Protestant Association? Was the nature of the Riots in fact religious, or were there other, deeper social causes or even political machinations at work?

The Gordon Riots are in many ways an anomaly in the history of rioting and crowd violence. Operating under the banner of religion, they occurred at a time in English history when religious riots were out of vogue. The religious riot was already being thought of as a relic of the seventeenth century, when religious rioting and disturbances were far more common and
religious persecution more widespread. However, by the eighteenth century, religious riots had
taken a backseat to more practical concerns, manifested outwardly in frequent food rioting and
labor disputes. In general, the eighteenth century is not associated with religious tumult in the
same way that the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries were. According to many scholars, the
years of the Georgian period in England were “lacking the fanaticism of the Stuart period and the
earnest Protestant religiosity of Victorian times. The age was cool about its religion, and realist
politicians and port-soaked parsons were not the men to rekindle unnecessary harassment and
suffering.”10 In general, England was thought to have achieved political stability throughout
much of the eighteenth century—particularly between the years 1714 to 1750, and “religious
commitment was seen as tepid.”11 It was for this reason that many scholars glossed over the
eighteenth century in regard to religious issues. Professor Raymond Tumbleson wrote that
"protestant prejudice against Catholicism in the England of the late seventeenth and early
eighteenth centuries has suffered from the purloined letter syndrome: everyone can see that it is
there, and assumes that what is so obvious can contain no mystery to explore or significance to
expound.”12 Furthermore, from the 1950s to the early 80’s, “Georgian anti-Catholicism was not
much researched: it did not seem worth investigating, since it seemed at odds with the general
views then held of Georgian England. In an age which had found political stability, were
religious issues likely to be seriously divisive?”13

The Gordon Riots proved that not only could religious issues still be seriously divisive in
the eighteenth century, but they could be seriously destructive as well. However, because they

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11 Ibid., 19.
did not seem to fit into the overarching pattern of popular violence during the eighteenth century, they are largely either overlooked or misinterpreted by historians. Their anomalous nature has caused many historians to question whether the Gordon Riots were actually fundamentally religious in nature, or whether religion was merely a pretext for larger, underlying causes for the sudden outburst of violence in the capital. Many argue that once the rioters turned their attention to the prisons of London and the Bank of England, the course of the riots changed from a primarily religious one into a more broad social and political protest. One such important scholar who gave credence to such a claim was the influential riot historian George Rudé, who attributed the motives of the latter days of the riots more to social and economic tensions in British society than to fanatical religiosity. However, other scholars such as Colin Haydon, rebuff these claims and argue for a fundamentally religious course throughout, excepting certain anomalies in the actions of the rioters as simply that – anomalies.

More attention will be devoted to these important questions of motives and the overall nature of the Gordon Riots in later chapters of this thesis; in the meantime, it is necessary to turn to some of the more immediate aspects of the riots. In this chapter I will provide a historical background to the Gordon riots. I will discuss the religious, social and political climate of the time, as well as the origins of and issues surrounding the piece of legislation which initially prompted the Protestant Association into action, causing the chain of events which would eventually lead to the Gordon riots to unfold.

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The Gordon Riots in London were preceded by the anti-Catholic riots in Scotland. These riots, which occurred a year and a half prior to the Gordon Riots, had chiefly the same guiding motives – the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act, which had not yet taken effect in Scotland as it
had in England – but were not nearly as destructive, chaotic or long lasting as the Gordon Riots proved to be. Beginning in Edinburgh on January 30, 1779, a crowd broke some windows of Bishop Hay’s house and did further damage to it the next day. Several days later, this violence was followed up by the burning of a mass house and attacks on other Catholics’ homes, threatening to ‘complet the destruction of every Catholic in the place, and of all others who had in any respect appeared favourable to their Bill’.

Though the authorities failed to take immediate and adequate measures to stop the violence, dragoons were eventually brought into the streets to restore order; however, the riots in Scotland had taken their toll on government. On February 6th, the Lord Provost issued a proclamation stating that the Catholic Relief bill for Scotland would be abandoned. Because the alarm of the riots had already spread, however, February 9th witnessed more attacks on Catholic property in Glasgow, though the frenzy died away relatively quickly, the Protestant protesters having already achieved their objective.

Though the extent and scope of the Scottish riots would be greatly overshadowed by the destruction of the Gordon Riots in the following year, they were an ominous prelude to the events of June 1780, and provide a good index of popular opinions in the two years leading up to the Gordon Riots. Moreover, the Scottish example provided inspiration to English Protestants who were hoping to repeal the same irksome Act, which had already been passed through Parliament right under their noses and against their will. When Lord George Gordon was haranguing his crowd of supporters that had crowded their way into the lobby of the House of Commons, he repeatedly urged them to remember the Scottish example and to persevere in their cause. He meant, perhaps, to call attention specifically to the Scottish success in achieving their aims through their persistent petitioning against the Repeal Act, but as the prosecution against

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him later argued, in reminding his rowdy supporters of the Scottish example, he was also inciting them to violence.

What was this hated Act, which had inspired so much popular agitation, and which culminated in so much violence and destruction? The Catholic Relief Act, in reality, was a fairly modest political measure that overturned some of the more outdated and restrictive laws against Roman Catholics living in England. Most of these laws had been in effect since 1698, established by William III’s Act against Popery, and were considered at this time to be relics of an earlier age, and currently obsolete in the context of an enlightened society. Among the restrictions that the Catholic Relief Act overturned were the restriction on Roman Catholics purchasing land legally, the threat of imprisonment to Catholic priests and schoolmasters for teaching the tenets of Catholicism, and the requirement for Catholics to take an oath of allegiance to the Protestant religion in order to join the British army. Many of these laws had gone ignored and neglected over the past half century or so, because religious toleration had become the vogue amongst the elite class, and it seemed that in an enlightened age, such obsolete and unsympathetic laws should not be enforced or tolerated. It was with this reasoning that the Catholic Relief Act of 1778 was introduced to the government by Sir George Savile, a respected and likeable independent Whig member of the House of Commons.

However, more complicated motives lay behind the conception and execution of this Act. The idea for this measure was born at a time when the government badly needed more men to join in the fight against the American colonies. At the beginning of 1778, the military operations in America were not going well, and it seemed likely that Spain and France might enter into the war on the American side. The government was eager to convince Catholics to volunteer for the army, but it had historically had trouble recruiting amongst Catholics, due to the latter’s
reluctance to swear the attestation oath, declaring themselves Protestant when they were actually proud Catholics. It was with this in mind that the Catholic Relief Act was drafted by John Dunning, a skilled and popular lawyer, who, like Savile, was independent in his views and therefore not a controversial figure. It was important that this bill be introduced and recognized as being extremely harmless and uncontroversial, to gain the support of the Members of Parliament in both Houses and to avoid the wrath of the populace. To this end, an important caveat was attached to the measure: the Act stipulated that Catholics would have to take an oath of allegiance to the Crown in order to profit from the measures of relief included within. On top of this, it should be noted that these measures in themselves did not amount to a drastic change in the legal position of Catholics within England. Catholics still could not participate in posts in public life, nor could they enter the University of Oxford or receive a degree from Cambridge; they still could not vote, and could still, at least in theory, be prosecuted for not attending Anglican services. Thus, the Catholic Relief Act contained very little, in actuality, to offend the Protestant community of England, who had in general grown used to the Catholics living in their midst and were complicit in the national policies to ignore some of the strictest restrictions against them.

What was it then, about this Act, that angered the Protestant community so much as to cause the agitation that led to the Gordon Riots? One popular complaint concerned the way in which the Act was made into legislation. The Act was deliberately introduced in May, at the end of a Parliamentary session when the House of Commons was poorly attended; from that point, it passed rapidly through both Houses without any opposition, and shortly thereafter, on June 3rd, it received the royal assent. This was done deliberately by the Act’s creators, who knew that although “enlightened” opinion on the subject of Catholic rights was in favor of toleration and
that they were not likely to encounter much opposition from Parliament, public opinion was a different story. The public, sensing the underhandedness with which the Act passed so rapidly through a late session of an unrepresentative group of men in Parliament, was justly suspicious of the government’s motives for passing it.

Though their suspicions about the government’s motives were not unfounded, popular suspicions arose out of prejudice against Roman Catholics. Catholicism had long been associated in the English consciousness with tyranny and oppression. In his book, *Catholicism in the English Protestant Imagination*, Raymond Tumbleson writes that “Protestant hostility towards Catholicism functioned as a constitutive element in the emergence of nationalist and imperialist ideology in seventeenth and eighteenth century England…as England's pre-Reformation history receded into myth and Protestantism became identified with the English nation, Catholicism became doubly stigmatized as both alien, what the vain French and wicked Italians practiced, and frighteningly familiar as the accompaniment of absolutism.” Anti-Catholicism was used as a tool to mobilize public opinion into the service of the centralized British state by situating Catholics as the malign ed “other”. It was British authorities like the King, politicians and the press themselves, who had for more than a century been feeding the masses tales of Catholic malice abroad and Catholic treachery among their own people. Now that the ruling elites were becoming more tolerant and enlightened, it was the lower classes who retained a hatred of Popery, which they aligned in their minds with tyranny, sedition, and treachery.

In their minds, the Catholic Repeal Act seemed to violate the tenets of the Protestant constitution, established in 1689, which had been long represented to them as “the most perfect

The Act seemed to them a direct assault on Protestantism, and since the Anglican Church was so intricately intertwined with the State, they viewed an assault on Protestantism as an assault on the State. Furthermore, because the new Act abolished former restrictions on Catholic priests’ right to preach their religion openly, they feared that this might allow Catholics to gain more converts and thus swell their ranks in a Protestant state. These fears were exacerbated by the timing of the Act; with France and Spain apparently entering the war against Britain on the American side, British fears of a Catholic confederacy plotting against them were revived with refreshed vigor. These fears grew and escalated amongst the populace in both England and Scotland with help from the Protestant Association, whose efforts to add fuel to the fire and fan these fears proved to be overwhelmingly successful.

The Protestant Association was a loose confederation of Associations throughout England and Scotland that banded together at this time to fight for the repeal of the Relief Act in England, and against its implementation in Scotland, respectively. The London Association was headed by a man called Lord George Gordon, a young and irrepressible Member of Parliament from Scotland. He was chosen as the most likely hero for the Protestant cause because of his sympathies towards the people of Scotland and to the cause of Protestantism, as well as his reputation for outspokenness in Parliament. The role he played in creating the conditions for the Gordon Riots was an instrumental one, which will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter; for the time being, it is sufficient to describe his leadership of the Protestant Association as strong willed and forceful; he was a powerful, personable and well liked leader who the people trusted and willingly followed. The direction in which he led them appeared at first to be

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harmless and entirely legal. The Protestant Association, under his leadership, hoped to pressure Parliament into meeting their demand to repeal the Relief Act through the use of petitions. Throughout April, May and June of 1780, petitions for the repeal of the Relief Act poured in from different parts of England and Scotland and were presented before Parliament by Lord George Gordon. Some of these petitions contained an impressive number of signatures for cities with relatively small populations; the petition from Newcastle, for instance, contained no less than 7,661 names.\textsuperscript{17} This, of course, did not compare with the London petition, eventually presented on that fateful day, June 2\textsuperscript{nd}, which contained an estimated 44,000 signatures; however, it does provide an index of the rising popular feeling at this time concerned by the Catholic Relief Act. In the two years between the passing of the Act and the circumstances of the Gordon Riots, the Protestant Association was busy at work gaining supporters for their cause among the various social groups in England through a variety of propagandistic means.

The propaganda campaign was two-fold, meant to spread fear and anxiety about Popery amongst both the literate and illiterate classes of society, and thus gain widespread support for the Association’s cause through all levels of society. The press provided one important outlet for reaching literate members of society. The Protestant Association published an \textit{Appeal from the Protestant Association to the People of Great Britain} on November 5\textsuperscript{th} 1779; it was so popular that it was reprinted soon after. This pamphlet contained a lot of the usual vitriolic rhetoric against the cruelties and evils of Popery, dwelling on abuses of power in previous centuries, “seemingly oblivious of the small number of Roman Catholics in Britain and of the changes in the character of their religion abroad in recent times.”\textsuperscript{18} It concluded on the implication that the Protestant religion and the British constitution would not be secure so long as the current

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 208.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 210.
\end{footnotesize}
Catholic Repeal Act was in effect, urging citizens to do their utmost to join in the Protestant Association’s cause and to fight for the repeal of the dangerous Act. Other pamphlets defaming Catholicism included the Methodist leader John Wesley’s auspiciously titled *Popery Calmly Considered* of 1779, which was so popular that was reprinted in three different editions that year, as well as large quantities of handbills, cards, and broadsheets that were distributed in the streets throughout these two years. The latter category of popular media propaganda was aimed at appealing towards the lower ranks of society, both literate and illiterate. The common Londoner would see these handbills and broadsheets, and understand either through their ever-present anti-Catholic rhetoric or graphic illustrations, the message that they were meant to convey. Aside from this use of the press for propagandistic purposes, the Protestant Association depended a lot on the powers of word-of-mouth to spread word of their campaign. They organized numerous public meetings to rally support and discuss their strategies for success, and the issues they were raising found their ways into the streets, the public houses, and the numerous religious debating societies that existed in London at the time. These were all public forums that were available to wide cross-section of society, so it is not surprising that the Protestant Association’s London petition was able to gain upwards of 60,000 signatures by the time Gordon presented it to Parliament on June 2nd.

It was in this atmosphere of alarm and popular agitation that Lord George Gordon prepared to present the Protestant Association’s mammoth petition in Parliament on June 2nd, 1780. Although he was not completely unaware of the danger of a huge group of people assembling before the Houses of Parliament to support their petition, he remained confident that his supporters would behave in a respectable and orderly manner, and that the strength of their convictions were on their side. Thus the groundwork was laid for the riots which were to occur
as a consequence of these months of planning, which would ravage the capital for nearly a week to follow in unprecedented and destructive ways.

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On May 31st, 1780, the London Courant and Westminster Chronicle reported the following about the proceedings of the meeting of the Protestant Association on the previous Monday, May 29th:

"...his Lordship [Lord George Gordon, president of the Association] bid the people form an idea of the rapid and alarming progress that Popery was making in this kingdom; and the only way to stop it was by going in a firm, manly and resolute manner to the House, and shew their representatives that they were determined to preserve their religious freedom with their lives. That, for his part, he would run all the hazards with the people; and if the people were too lukewarm to run all hazards with him, when their conscience and their country call them forth, they might get another president, for he would tell them candidly, that he was not a lukewarm man himself, and that if they meant to spend their time in mock debate and idle opposition, they might get another leader... The speech was received with the loudest acclamations of applause, and his Lordship then moved the following resolution..."19

This passage is rife with an irony almost too good to be true, in light of the events that were to unfold in the following eight days as a result of the plans made at this very meeting. The resolution Gordon proposed to a unanimous consensus at this meeting involved his plan for the members of the Protestant organization to gather with him in St. Georges’ Fields on the morning of June 2nd, and march after him to Parliament to present the petition before the House of Lords. The following day, Gordon stood before the House of Lords during a session of Parliament and announced to the House that the following Friday, June 2nd, he would present for their consideration a petition of the Protestant Association of London, pushing for the repeal of “late Act in Favour of Popery in England”, the Catholic Relief Act of 1778. He also informed the House that the whole Association proposed to assemble in St. George’s Fields on the morning of

19 London Courant and Westminster Chronicle; Wednesday May 31 (no issue number available)
June 2\textsuperscript{nd} and to accompany their petition to the House in “the most humble, decent and respectable manner”.\textsuperscript{20}

The irony in these statements derives from the fact that what emerged as a result of these relatively innocent displays of public opinion were a series of riots that began shortly after Parliament adjourned on June 2\textsuperscript{nd}, and lasted for almost an entire week, until they were finally quelled by brute force on June 8\textsuperscript{th}. These riots were among the worst civil disturbances in English history, and resulted in severe costs both to human life and property. It is interesting, retrospectively, to see evidence of Gordon’s spoken intentions at the start of this debacle. To his followers he spoke of going in a “firm, manly and resolute manner to the House [of Lords]”, while to the House itself he said that they would accompany their petition in “the most humble, decent and respectable manner”. He cautioned his followers against being lukewarm, when in the end it was they who proved to be anything but lukewarm, inciting and enacting what was arguably the largest civil disturbance since the Monmouth rebellion up till this time.

It is important to note, however, that Gordon was pursuing a legitimate, if dangerous, plan to exert extra-parliamentary pressure in support of his cause. Adrien Randall noted that “this process of lobbying in support of a petition was well established and emphasized the ‘rights’ of the free-born Englishman to make his views known to his representative,” although mass lobbies did carry “more than a hint of forcible coercion of government.”\textsuperscript{21} It is possible, and very likely, that Gordon expected his assembly of followers to fulfill the role of “opposition without doors” by showing the strength of his ranks of followers and rallying the support of sympathetic Members of Parliament with their good manners, exemplary behavior and sheer size. It was also

\textsuperscript{20} Public Advertiser; May 31 1780; issue 14241
likely that the enormous size of the assembly was meant to intimidate the administration into repealing the Catholic Relief Act. That he anticipated the violence and severe rioting that his assembly would produce is doubtful; nevertheless, the results of his policies as president of the Protestant Association were just that. They incited what contemporaries like Samuel Johnson would refer to as “a time of terrour.” In the next chapter, we will turn to a narrative of the riots constructed out of contemporary eyewitness accounts, in order to examine the effects the riots had on the popular consciousness of contemporaries.
Chapter 2
“A Time of Terour”: Contemporary Witnesses’ Representations of the Riots

Looking back on the events of June 1780 in his memoirs, the legal reformer Samuel Romilly wrote: “In the beginning of June broke out that most extraordinary insurrection, excited by Lord George Gordon, which has hardly any parallel in our history. In a moment of profound peace and of perfect security, the metropolis found itself on a sudden abandoned, as it were, to the plunder and fury of a bigoted and frantic populace.” In these two sentences, Romilly voices many of the concerns and sentiments of his contemporaries regarding the riots which occurred between the second of June and the ninth, when for a week London was ravaged by crowds of people who plundered, burned and destroyed many buildings throughout the capital and paralyzed the general populace in a state of fear and confusion. James Boswell, Johnson’s famous biographer, echoed Romilly’s thoughts when he recounted the episode, in his Life of Johnson, writing that “the tranquility of the metropolis of Great Britain was unexpectedly disturbed by the most horrid series of outrages that ever disgraced a civilized country.” The two points that Romilly and Boswell both stress are the “peace and perfect security” and the “tranquility” of the metropolis at the moment when chaos struck, and the unparalleled nature of the outrages committed throughout the course of the rioting. Boswell goes on to note that “such daring violence” was “unexampled in history.”

24 Ibid.
Dr. Johnson concurred that the circumstances of the Gordon riots were extraordinary, though he tempered his assessment with more moderation than Boswell when he wrote in a letter to Mrs. Thrale, "the history of the last week would fill You with amazement, it is without any modern example." Nathaniel Wraxall, the British author, was more specific, writing in his *Historical Memoirs* that "no event in our annals, bears any analogy with the scene then exhibited in the capital, except the fire of London under Charles the Second." So strongly did he feel about the singular nature of the outrages committed during the Gordon riots, that he went so far as to compare the events of June 1780 in London to those of the French Revolution, which occurred nine years later in Paris. "Even the French Revolution,” he wrote, “…did not produce in the capital of France, any similar outrages…neither Robespierre, nor Bonaparte…ever directed their destructive efforts against the public and private edifices of Paris.” For the purposes of this comparison, he singles out the outrages committed by the rioters specifically against the buildings of London, both private and public; however, when one considers the difference in the cost of human life between the Gordon riots and the French Revolution, the comparison strikes one as hyperbolic, and even inappropriate.

It is for rhetoric such as this that Ian Haywood coined the term “hyperbolic realism”, which assists the reader in understanding a central, often contradictory quality in much of the writing studied at in this thesis. Often, the events that the witnesses in this chapter describe, and those that future novelists and artists will imitate, seemed to them atrocious and frightening beyond reasonable description. Many of them had not witnessed violence and destruction on such a widespread scale before in their lives, and the fact that it seemed to be occurring freely

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26 Wraxall, *Historical Memoirs of My Own Time*, 133.
27 Ibid., 133-134.
and without any visible bounds in the midst of their capital, terrified contemporaries beyond reason. It seemed to them almost ineffable. Thus, Haywood’s term “hyperbolic realism” is useful because it “incorporates ineffability as one of the rhetorical devices which writers used to dramatize the ‘evil’ nature of their material.” This kind of rhetoric is essential to the cultural construction of the Gordon riots as a “spectacular” riot, and will be seen in many of the different representations of riot under discussion here.

In this chapter, I will reconstruct a narrative of the riots based on the testimony of contemporary witnesses, in order to see how the riots affected contemporaries psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually. These testimonies are taken from contemporary letters and journal entries published as the riots were occurring, and also from the later memoirs of people who witnessed the riots in their youth, published many years after the fact. It is important to bear in mind is that however exaggerated or biased some of the portrayals discussed in this chapter may appear from the retrospective point of view of history, these were the terms that the Londoners who had lived through the riots firsthand themselves chose to use to describe their experiences. Some of these accounts were recorded in letters or journals as the riots were occurring, and might therefore be interpreted as hasty or emotional gut reactions, or on the other hand, as the most accurate barometer of popular feelings at the time; others were written as parts of memoirs, further removed from the events themselves, which might either have had the effect of tempering with the writer’s memory of events, or conversely, to have given the writer the benefit of time and space to ruminate on the events that had occurred and choose carefully how they represented their own interpretations of their personal history.

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Above all, it is important to keep in mind that all were written from the unique point of view of the individual writers themselves, whose opinions were inevitably colored by their own prejudices and biases. The backgrounds, personal biases and historical perspectives of the historical witnesses discussed in this chapter undoubtedly played a vital role in how they interpreted the scenes they saw and heard about, and how they recorded them for posterity’s sake. The biographical backgrounds of these individuals that might have had some bearing on their interpretations of the riots will be noted in footnotes throughout this chapter, in the order that their testimonies appear in building a contemporary narrative of the riots.

All these historical considerations and caveats aside, however, it is worth it to mention that it does not seem coincidental that so many contemporaries who were present in London during that week of June 1780 should describe the Gordon riots in such vivid and similar, and even hyperbolic, terms. Most modern historians agree with their assessment of the Gordon riots as spectacular, singular, and extraordinary, especially given their unique place in the political landscape of eighteenth century Britain.29 The riots shook London with fear and wracked it with uncertainty and confusion for a week, amidst a struggling war effort in America and relative political stability at home. Not only London, but the entire nation was in fear, not knowing the full extent or cause of the riots until they were over, almost as quickly as they had begun. Rumours flew about wildly, and many did not know whether to cheer for the mob or to fight them. However, amidst all the confusion, differing opinions and violence, by the middle of the week there was a general consensus that the capital was in severe danger from an unruly mob. Frederick Reynolds, only sixteen at the time of the riots, echoed the universal feeling of the time

when he wrote in his memoirs that "a scene of universal plunder, and anarchy, was exhibited in every part of London."  

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Lord George Gordon showed up at St. George’s Fields on the appointed day, June 2nd, expecting no less than twenty thousand petitioners assembled to support him and their petition. Contemporary accounts vary regarding how many people were actually there that morning, and estimates fluctuated since the crowd’s ranks were swelled along their march to Parliament by people they recruited off the streets, and those who joined them of their own volition, out of desire for amusement or sympathy with the cause, or for other reasons entirely. Samuel Romilly wrote to his brother-in-law that "the concourse of people on the appointed day…was astonishing….By the largest computation I have heard, and which is certainly very much exaggerated, there were 100,000 in the fields; but, by the most moderate accounts, no less than 14,000 accompanied Lord George to the House of Commons."  

31 Romilly, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly*, 115. Samuel Romilly, the great British legal reformer and politician, was a twenty three year old law student studying at Gray’s Inn when the Gordon riots broke out in 1780. Already attracted to politics and modern political history, Romilly regularly attended debates in the House of Commons and studied the works of Cesare Beccaria and Jean Jacques Rousseau, as well as John Howard’s *State of Prisons*, indicating that his liberal tendencies towards legal and prison reform later on in his life were already in place at the time of the riots. In fact, he was on his way to listen to Lord Richmond’s address to the House of Commons concerning annual parliaments on the afternoon of June 2nd, when he was accosted by the sight of Lord George Gordon’s supporters crowded in Palace Yard. His subsequent reactions to the riots, parts of which he witnessed himself and parts of which he heard about through hearsay, were recorded in detailed letters to his brother-in-law, the Reverend John Roget, and published in his memoirs. Romilly spent several hours standing sentinel at the gates of Gray’s Inn and was up a whole night “under arms”, as part of the effort by the students and barristers of the Inns of Court to defend themselves against the rioters, who had threatened the Inns of Court. Romilly’s experiences left him shaken and bitter towards the excesses of popular action, though he did support the French Revolution on principle during its beginnings nine years later.
computed, with a petition as long as the procession…” Though Walpole’s characteristic wit betrays his sentiments towards the petitioners, whom he sarcastically terms the “conservators of the Church of England”, and he himself exaggerates the purported length of the petition, it is interesting to note that in the four days that passed since the events of June 2nd, the estimates of the crowd had actually reduced. Modern historians’ estimates about the size of the crowd at St. George’s Fields tend to stray towards the higher end of the spectrum, approximating the size of the crowd at around 60,000 people, and in Nicholas Rogers’ case, 50,000.

At any rate, many who heard these rumors or saw the crowd on its way to Parliament joined in or followed their progress as spectators. Henry Angelo, the young fencing master, “heard that above five thousand of the rabble had gone over London Bridge” and ran towards Parliament Street to see what was happening. Frederick Reynolds, also a young man at this time, entered Palace Yard with his schoolboy friends from Westminster, because they were, he claimed, “eager for the fray”. There they witnessed what he called the “most novel and

32 Horace Walpole, *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann and Sir Horace Mann the Younger*, ed. W.S. Lewis, Warren Hunting Smith and George L. Lam, vol. 25 of *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971), 53. The great man of letters, Horace Walpole, was not sympathetic to the Gordon rioters, despite his dislike of Roman Catholics and his Whig political leanings. His letters to various friends and acquaintances, composed as the riots were occurring, are scathing in their contempt for the rioters and for Lord George Gordon, a man who he considered ridiculous at best and dangerously insane at worst. He wrote: “I always, as you know, disliked and condemned the repeal of the popish statutes, and am steadfast in that opinion, but I abhor such Protestantism as breaths the soul of popery, and commences a reformation by attempting a massacre.” Walpole, *Correspondence with William Mason*, 52.


34 Henry Angelo, *The Reminiscences of Henry Angelo* (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1969) 2:111-112. Henry Angelo, the fencing master, was aged 24 when the riots broke out. His interest in the riots appears to have arisen purely out of fascination and curiosity at the excessive violence he witnessed. In his memoirs, he recalls how he rushed from one site of destruction to the next, as he heard news of them occurring all over town. His memoirs, however, where he recorded his reminiscences, are considered “entertaining, if often unreliable, accounts of his exploits and acquaintances,” a fact that should be taken into account when reading his representations of the scenes he claims to have borne witness to.

35 Reynolds, *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, 124. Frederick Reynolds, the playwright, was a sixteen year old boy studying at the Westminster School in London when the riots broke out. Because of his proximity to Westminster, he was able to witness first-hand the events that occurred in Palace Yard on
extraordinary proceedings”, as the crowd assaulted and insulted the Members of Parliament arriving in Palace Yard, blocking the avenues to both Houses, vandalizing their carriages, pelting them with mud and tearing off their wigs, and inflicting actual harmful violence on some of the more unfortunate members, amidst frequent shouts of “No Popery!” Reynolds acknowledged that at first, he and the other boys “enjoyed the scene, voting it fun; but soon, in spite of all our boyish love of mischief, we found the joke was carried much too far.” He described the crowd in the following terms:

The mob, shortly received the addition of many thousands of disorderly persons, occupying every avenue to the Houses of Parliament…the greatest part of it, however, was composed of persons decently dressed, who appeared to be incited to extravagance, by a species of fanatical phrenzy. They talked of dying in the good cause, and manifested all the violence of the disposition, imbibed under the banners of Presbyterianism. They had long lank heads of hair, meagre countenances, fiery eyes, and they uttered deep ejaculations; in short, displaying all the outward and visible signs of hypocrisy and starvation.

Reynolds’ description of the rioters on this occasion is a complex one, but consistent with the interpretation of the riots that attributes the violent and unruly actions of the well-intentioned Protestant petitioners to “a species of fanatical phrenzy”; the well known mass mentality that inspires innocent crowds of people to commit acts violence and dissolve into chaos. Though he maintains that the majority of the crowd was composed of “persons decently dressed”- in other words, a “decent” type of person- he remarks that they were “imbibed under the banners of Presbyterianism”, and that they displayed “all the outward and visible signs of hypocrisy and

June 2nd. However, as he recorded his reminiscences as an older man in his memoirs, it is possible that his memories of the riots were colored by biases he might have acquired later in life. It is also significant that his father, despite his Whig sympathies, was so alarmed at the turn of the riots that he removed his family to the safety of their country estate at Southbarrow on June 7th and spoke disparagingly of the “mob”, which might have influenced the impressionable young Reynold’s opinion of them.

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 124-125.
starvation‖, suggesting that the ―banners‖ of Protestantism were really just a pretext for other concerns of the crowd.

Samuel Romilly, who was at Westminster that day to hear a debate in the House of Lords, firmly held the belief that religion was merely a pretext for the crowd’s violent nature. In a letter to his brother in law dated June 6th, he described his experiences of the crowd in Palace Yard in the following manner:

When I arrived at Westminster…I found the large opening...between the Parliament House and Westminster Abbey, all the avenues of the House, thronged with people wearing blue cockades. They seemed to consist, in a great measure, of the lowest rabble; men who, without doubt, not only had never heard any of the arguments for or against toleration, but how were utterly ignorant of the very purport of the petition.\(^\text{38}\)

Unlike Reynolds, who deemed the majority of the crowd “decent”, Romilly deems the majority consisting of the “lowest rabble”; furthermore, he insists that most of them were completely ignorant as to the purpose of the Protestant Association’s petition, and had absolutely no intellectual or spiritual stake in Gordon’s rally. As an example of the “rabble”’s ignorance, he describes how one “miserable fanatic who accosted me…told me that the reign of the Romans had lasted too long.” Romilly reminds his brother-in-law that “the object of the petition, you know, is only to repeal an Act that had been passed the year before last.”\(^\text{39}\)

Reports thus conflicted as to the nature of the crowd of that first day of rioting, in regards to its social make up and its motivations. What is certain is that its constituents were by no means a homogenous group of people and that rabble rousers most likely did join their ranks at some point.

As to what occurred inside Parliament that day, there is little confusion. After things had calmed down enough to resume the usual proceedings of Parliament as much as possible, Lord George Gordon presented his petition to the House of Commons. There was some debate about

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\(^\text{39}\) Ibid., 115-116.
it, but it was often interrupted by the clamor going on outside, by reports of members who had just walked in, barely escaping the wrath of the crowd, and by the desire to discuss what was happening outside, and what was to be done about it. Lord George Gordon was acting erratically, to say the least. Apparently unconcerned about the violent and threatening behavior of his followers outside, he made a habit of coming out to the top of the gallery stairs at intervals in the ensuing debate and addressing those of his followers who had forced their way into the lobby below. Romilly, who managed to make it into the House of Lords, reported the following events which were occurring in the adjacent House of Commons:

Lord George then came into the gallery over the lobby, and harangued the populace: he told them their petition was as good as rejected, that if they expected redress they must keep in a body, or meet day after day till the Catholic Act was repealed. Some of his friends, who stood behind him, besought him…not to excite the people to measures which could be destructive to themselves; but nothing could deter this frantic incendiary, till he was by violence forced back into the House.\(^{40}\)

Many of the other members tried to reason with him, while others threatened him with physical violence if he did not control his unruly followers. Paying no heed to these warnings, Lord George continued to harangue his supporters, keeping them up to date about the progress of the petition, and if not exactly inciting them to violence, then certainly not discouraging their behavior. When the House decided to adjourn the debate and the fate of the petition until the following Tuesday, Gordon again went out to his followers and told them of this, telling them to go home, but urged them to continue in their enthusiasm or support for the cause.

In the days that followed, the accounts of Lord George’s erratic behavior in Parliament circulated around the city, cultivating an image of him as a madman and lunatic. Horace Walpole, writing to Mann on June 5\(^{th}\), recounted how Gordon “demanded immediate repeal of

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 118.
toleration…and running every minute to the door or windows, bawled to the populace that Lord North would give them no redress, and that now this member, now that, was speaking against them.”\textsuperscript{41} Walpole’s exaggerated language would become the standard way to discuss Gordon, coloring all future accounts of his conduct on this occasion, and turning public opinion entirely against him. Despite his conciliatory actions throughout the remaining week, his image was forever tarnished by his behavior on this day, and would not be resuscitated again for as long as he lived.

Henry Angelo, who had been so eager to witness the rally outside of Parliament, did not get a chance to see the action up close, since the crowd blocked his passage. However, he walked away from the events of the afternoon with a memorable souvenir: a piece of Lord North’s hat. In his memoirs, he described how one of the rioters flung open the door of North’s carriage as it drove furiously towards Palace Yard, and seized his hat right off his head. Angelo was one of the lucky onlookers who bought a piece of the hat for a shilling, after the man who stole it cut it into pieces to sell "as a memento of the day."\textsuperscript{42} Angelo did, however, get to witness up close the destruction of the Catholic chapel attached to the Sardinian embassy at Lincoln’s Inn Fields later that night. By the time he arrived at the scene on Duke Street, the furniture of the altar had already been burned on the ground, and the chapel itself was to follow. As to the identity of the rioters, Angelo confessed that “the greater part of the rabble were boys, not above the age of fifteen, throwing the hassocks, dead cats, and other missiles at each other.”\textsuperscript{43}

Though the following day, Saturday, was relatively quiet and many thought that the tumults had passed, on Sunday the rioting began anew, with crowds assembling at a Catholic

\textsuperscript{41} Walpole, \textit{Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann}, 53.
\textsuperscript{42} Angelo, \textit{Reminiscences of Henry Angelo}, 112.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
chapel in Little Moorfields and smashing its windows, only to return later that evening and burn all its contents in the street. By Monday, June 5th, the city was in chaos again. Chapels and houses were burned to the ground, Catholic schools and public houses were assaulted and demolished, and the houses of two justices of the peace, involved in arresting rioters at the Sardinian chapel on Friday night, were targeted and likewise destroyed. “The mob,” wrote Frederick Reynolds, “now entire masters of London, every hour proceeded to some new act of audacity and depredation.”

Rumours flew around town as wildly as the crowds did. "Every tale of horror to which the fears and the credulity of the people could give birth and strength, was circulated with astonishing rapidity throughout every part of the town," wrote Samuel Romilly. Among the rumors he lists are accounts that the rioters had broken into the Bank of England, another that they had attempted to seize the Tower of London, and that various country homes of aristocrats had been destroyed, and the men themselves murdered. Other rumors included reports of Gordon’s associates outside of London marching to the capitol to join the ranks of rioters, and of rioting occurring in other parts of the country, most of which were unfounded. One popular theory was that there were greater forces at work leading the mob with a hidden hand. Frederick Reynolds relates that on Monday, June 5th, “it was reported, that several great oppositionists were aiding, and leading, the mob, in disguise; and, strange as it may now appear, many, and I among them, believed this wild rumor.” If not the Whig oppositionists, than it was French or American agents secretly controlling the mob, determined to undermine British power at a crucial point in international politics. The populace had a difficult time believing that such

44 Reynolds, *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, 130.
46 Reynolds, *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, 129.
violent crowd action should have seized the capital so unexpectedly, and have shaken it so forcefully; at the same time as they tried to protect themselves, they also sought explanations for the tumults.

Around midnight on the evening of June 5th, a crowd made its way over to Sir George Savile’s house in Leicester Square with the intention of destroying it. Savile, the man who had introduced the Catholic Relief Act into Parliament two years previously, was a natural target for their anger. Susan Burney, who was living at the time in her family’s home on St. Martin’s Street just off Leicester Square, saw the Square illuminated by the fire of Savile’s burning property from the observatory at top of their house, which afforded the family spectacular views of what was going on in the vicinity. She described the scene in her journal: "the populace had broken into Sir George Saville's house, and were then emptying it of its furniture. They had piled up the furniture in the midst of the Square, and had forced Sir George's servant to bring them a candle to set fire to it…The flames [seen from] our Observatory illuminated the whole square."47

Eventually the Horse and Foot Guards showed up at the scene and intervened, though not before the crowd had managed to damage the windows and railings to his house, and burned his furniture in the streets. Burney wrote: “They would doubtless have set the house itself on fire [also] had not the Horse and Foot Guards prevented [their doing so]…”48

47 Constance Hill, The House in St. Martin's Street: Being Chronicles of the Burney Family, (London and New York: John Lane Company, 1907), 255. Susan Burney, the third daughter of composer and author Charles Burney, was twenty five years old at the time of the Gordon riots in 1780. She was living in her father’s house on St. Martin’s Street, just off of Leicester Square, where the rioting at George Savile’s house took place on the night of June 5th. The Burney’s home had previously belonged to Sir Isaac Newton, which is why they had an observatory at the top of their house, which afforded them spectacular views of the crowd’s actions below, and the conflagrations that filled the sky on the nights of June 5th, 6th and 7th. Susan recorded her own observations and the hearsay she heard from friends and family members over those days in letters to her sister, Fanny, who was in Bath at the time. Her letters are filled with a sense of awe and fear, as well as valuable personal testimony about the actions of the crowd during the rioting at Savile’s house.

48 Ibid.
The next morning, June 6th, crowds again assembled outside of Parliament with an aim of intimidating the Members who attended to continue the debate on the Protestant Association’s petition. Susan Burney relates an episode witnessed by her mother that morning, as Edmund Burke passed through their street on his way to Parliament, when “he was beset by a number of wretches, who wanted to extort from him a promise for repealing the Act in favour of the Catholics. My mother saw him and heard him say, ‘I beseech you, gentleman; gentlemen, I beg—‘ However, he was obliged to draw his sword ere he could get rid of these terrific attendants.”49 However, the authorities were far more prepared on this day to handle the crowds, sending both Horse and Foot guards to clear the avenues to both Houses for the Members to go through undisturbed. Though they could not stop to taunts and insults of the unruly crowd, their presence did generally prevent violence against the Members from occurring as it had on the previous Friday. The poet George Crabbe witnessed the events of the afternoon while he was wandering through Westminster and recorded them in his journal:

I was at Westminster at about three o'clock in the afternoon, and saw the members go to the House. The mob stopped many persons, but let all whom I saw pass, excepting Lord Sandwich, whom they treated roughly, broke his coach windows, cut his face, and turned him back. A guard of horse and foot were immediately sent for, who did no particular service, the mob increasing and defeating them. I left Westminster when all the members, that were permitted, had entered the House…”50

49 Ibid., 259.
50 George Crabbe Jr., The Life of George Crabbe, by His Son (London: Cresset Press Ltd., 1947), 71-72. George Crabbe, a twenty-six year old failed apothecary, had arrived in London in April 1780 to seek his fortune as an author. By June 1780, he had received several rejection letters for poems that he had submitted to publishers and his privately published poem, The Candidate, received mixed reviews. Poor and indebted, he was desperately trying to obtain a patronage when the Gordon riots broke out in June. Eager for inspiration, Crabbe spent most of June 6th wandering around the streets of London, bearing witness to the scenes outside of Parliament and the destruction of Newgate and Mr. Akerman’s house. He recorded his impressions in his journal, which was published after his death by his son as part of his memoirs. Soon afterwards, he would obtain a patronage from Edmund Burke and go on to become a clergyman and successful poet, but as far as his memories of the rioting of June 6th are concerned, his interest in the riots seems to have stemmed purely from fascination and poetic inspiration.
Crabbe does not portray the Guards in a very positive light, opining that they “did no particular service”, and implying that they were “defeated” by the crowd, when in reality their presence did ensure the safety of all the Members on that day, with the unfortunate exception of Lord Sandwich, who was mistreated, but escaped relatively unharmed. Samuel Romilly corroborated this version of events in a letter to his brother in law dated June 9th:

Prodigious multitudes, wearing blue cockades, assembled as before, in Palace Yard; but, on the first appearance of a crowd, guards, both foot and horse, were drawn up, and formed an avenue for the Members to pass to the House. But this martial appearance, far from intimidating the mob, only rendered them more insolent: they boldly paraded the streets with colours and music… The Lords, however, were suffered to go on to the House with no outrage, though they were followed by the hisses and reproaches of the people…”

In other words, it seems that although the Guards’ presence was effective in preventing actual violence, it did not deter the people from openly disrespecting the Members and the Guards’ authority. Despite all this, the session of Parliament passed without much incident, except for the crowd of people parading menacingly around outside. However, the crowds were not to get their relief this day, because the Commons again put off the debate on Catholic relief in order to deal with a series of resolutions to deal with the rioting of the previous few days.

As it approached five o’clock, the House of Commons was ready to adjourn for the day, but exiting the House seemed a difficult task with the crowd getting more and more unruly outside. Justice Hyde took it upon himself to read the Riot Act before the masses, a statute that gives the right to fire upon a crowd if they do not disperse within an hour of reading it. The Horse Guard was also ordered to disperse the crowd by charging at them to clear the avenues for the Members to exit. “Upon this,” Romilly wrote, “a great part of the rioters quitted Palace Yard;

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51 Romilly, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, 122.
but they only quitted it with an intention to wreak their fury upon the objects of their resentment in other parts of town.\textsuperscript{52}

One of the first of these so-called “objects of resentment” was Justice Hyde’s house. Enraged at his audacity against them, the crowd rushed to St. Martin’s Street, where Hyde’s house stood. Susan Burney, observing the events below from the windows of her house nearby, described the scene vividly:

We saw them throw chairs, tables, cloathes, in short everything the house contained, into the street, and as there was too much furniture for one fire, they made several. I counted six of these fires, which reached from the bottom of the street up to the crossing which separates Orange and Blue Cross Streets. Such a scene I never before beheld! As it grew dusk, the wretches who were involved in smoak and covered in dust, with the flames glaring upon them…seemed like so many infernals…\textsuperscript{53}

Burney also remarks on the ineffectiveness of the law enforcement agents in this particular instance; her observations are echoed by many eyewitnesses to the events in almost all the other incidences of rioting in these first few days. She describes the interactions between the crowd and the Guards as follows:

Early in the evening about 30 Foot Guards, with an Ensign at their head, marched into the street, but the daring populace appeared not the least alarmed, on the contrary, they welcomed them with loud shouts and huzzas. The Ensign made some speech to them, but as I suppose he dared not oppose so many hundred people…he [soon] turned round and marched out of the street as he came into it, the mob shouting and clapping the soldiers on their backs as they passed…\textsuperscript{54}

As was the case at so many other scenes of rioting, the soldiers found themselves helpless against the mob; the formers’ numbers were intimidating, and often no magistrate could be found, or found willing, to order them to fire on the perpetrators, rendering the ensigns powerless to do anything but watch as the people committed acts of destruction.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{53} Hill, \textit{The House in St. Martin’s Street}, 257.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 258.
Finally, the people were satisfied with the job they had done at Hyde’s house. “When Hyde’s house was emptied of all it’s furniture,” Burney continued, “the mob tore away the windows and window-frames and began to pull up the floors and the panels of the rooms…[At last], the Ringleaders gave the word and away they all ran past our windows to the bottom of the Leicester Fields with lighted fire-brands in their hands like so many Furies, [where] they made one great bonfire.”55 The fires in Leicester Square continued burning, kindled regularly with fresh plunder by the crowd, until two or three in the morning.

While this one crowd had left Palace Yard to attack Justice Hyde’s house, an “object of their resentment”, Samuel Romilly tells us that “another, and a much stronger body, marched to Newgate, demand[ing] the release of the persons who were confined there for burning the ambassador's chapels”.56 However, when Mr. Akerman, the Keeper of Newgate, refused to accede to their demands, they “broke open the doors, set at liberty all the felons and debtors, and set fire to the prison and to the keeper’s house, which were both presently consumed.”57

George Crabbe, who had left Palace Yard earlier that day, went out again at around seven o’clock, but finding the crowd at Westminster dispersed, he headed towards home by Blackfriars Bridge. On his way, he happened to pass by the Old Bailey, where he was accosted by “the first scene of terror and riot ever presented to [him].”58 He described what he witnessed in his journal in the following manner:

The new prison was a very large, strong and beautiful building, having two wings…Akerman had in his custody four prisoners, taken in the riot; these the mob went to his house and demanded. He begged he might send to the sheriff, but this was not permitted. …they set fire to his house, broke in, and threw every piece of furniture they

55 Ibid., 257-258.
56 Romilly, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, 123.
57 Ibid., 123-124.
58 Crabbe, The Life of George Crabbe, 72.
could find into the street, firing them also in an instant. The engines came, but were only suffered to preserve the private houses near the prison…

By eight o’clock, Akerman’s house was in flames. I went close to it, and never saw anything so dreadful. The prison was, as I said, a remarkably strong building; but, determined to force it, they broke the gates with crows and other instruments, and climbed up the outside of the cell part, which joins the two great wings of the building, where the felons were confined; and I stood where I plainly saw their operations. They broke the roof, tore away the rafters, and having got ladders they descended. Not Orpheus himself had more courage or better luck; flames all around them, and a body of soldiers expected, they defied and laughed at all opposition. 59

The scene was unlike anything that anyone had ever witnessed before in the metropolis. Crabbe resorted to mythological allusions in order to adequately describe the visions he witnessed that night, likening the rioters to the mythological figure Orpheus, who was able to charm even stones with his music. Contemporaries were particularly shaken by the destruction of Newgate because of its implication to the idea of order in the capital: if the supposedly impenetrable stone fortifications of Newgate were vulnerable to the rioters’ wrath, then it seemed to them that nothing was safe. Furthermore, the thought of thousands of criminals, delinquents and murderers loose in the streets of London was particularly terrifying to them. Frederick Reynolds described the atmosphere on this occasion:

The wild gestures of the mob without, and the shrieks of the prisoners within, expecting an instantaneous death from the flames; the thundering descent of huge pieces of building; the deafening clangor of red hot iron bars, striking in terrible concussion, the pavement below; and the loud triumphant yells and shouts of the demoniac assailants, on each new success, formed an awful and terrific scene. 60

Finally, the prisoners of Newgate were freed. “Forth came the prisoners,” Reynolds recalled, “blaspheming, and jumping in their chains.” 61 Crabbe recalled how he “stood and saw about twelve women and eight men ascend from their confinement to the open air, and they were

59 Ibid., 72-73.
60 Reynolds, The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds, 127.
61 Ibid.
conducted through the street in their chains,” noting that three of these prisoners were supposed to have been hanged that Friday. “You have no conception of the phrensy of the multitude,” he wrote.\footnote{Crabbe, \textit{The Life of George Crabbe}, 73.} Henry Angelo, who had arrived on the scene to see what the crowd would do next, had been offered to pay sixpence in order to get a good view at a garret window, which he readily agreed to. There, he witnessed what he called “a new species of gaol delivery.” The prisoners, he recalled, “marched out with all the honours of war, accompanied by a musical band of rattling fetters.”\footnote{Angelo, \textit{Reminiscences of Henry Angelo}, 113.}

Crabbe continued his narrative: “This being done, and Akerman's house now a mere shell of brickwork, they kept a store of flame there for other purposes. It became red-hot, and the doors and windows appeared like the entrance to so many volcanoes. With some difficulty they then fired the debtor's prison- broke the doors- and they, too, all made their escape.”\footnote{Crabbe, \textit{The Life of George Crabbe, by His Son}, 73.} With a poetic flourish, the poet expressed with vivid imagery what struck him most about the scene he bore witness to: “About ten or twelve of the mob getting to the top of the debtors' prison, whilst it was burning, to halloo, they appeared rolled in black smoke mixed with sudden bursts of fire-like Milton's infernals, who were as familiar with flame as with each other.\footnote{Ibid., 73-74.} Tired of the violence and anarchy playing out before his eyes, Crabbe went home, but returned again at eleven o’clock to survey the damage. “Newgate was at this time open to all; any one might get in, and what was never the case before, any one might get out. I did both; for the people were now chiefly lookers on. The mischief was done, and the doers of it gone to another part of town.”\footnote{Ibid., 73.} Among the “other parts of town” that the mischief doers visited that night were the
Clerkenwell, Bridewell and the New Prison, all of which were also assaulted and its prisoners released.

At about one o’clock in the morning a crowd arrived in Bloomsbury Square to attack the house of Lord Mansfield, the Chief Justice. Luckily, Mansfield was able to escape through a back door just before the people broke into his house, but his house and property unfortunately fell victim to the crowd. Nathaniel Wraxall writes in his memoirs that he witnessed this scene, having taken a coach in the direction of Mansfield’s home with several other men because they had heard rumours that Mansfield’s home was targeted for destruction, and desiring to “view the scene”. On their way, they passed several streets containing “large fires composed of furniture taken from the houses of magistrates, or other obnoxious individuals.” Upon getting off the coach, they crossed Bloomsbury Square and had “scarcely got under the wall of Bedford House, when we heard the door of lord Mansfield’s house burst open with violence. In a few minutes, all the contents of the apartments being precipitated from the windows, were piled up, and wrapt in flames.” Several days later, Samuel Romilly wrote of this incident to his brother-in-law, saying, “A bonfire was immediately made, in the street, of [Mansfield’s] furniture; and with merciless fury they threw into it all his books, and, among others, many manuscripts of inestimable value. At last, they set fire to the house, which was presently burned down to the

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67 Wraxall, *Historical Memoirs of My Own Time*, 134. Nathaniel Wraxall, the great traveller and memoirist, was in London when the Gordon riots occurred in 1780. He recorded his extremely colorful and forceful impressions of the Gordon riots in his “Historical Memoirs.” It should be noted that many of the events he portrayed in these memoirs were often hotly contested by contemporaries; however, it is also important to take these protests with a grain of salt, since what they objected to was mainly Wraxall’s unapologetically scurrilous manner of describing many of the fascinating details of the political world and the London social scene.

68 Ibid., 134.
The loss of Mansfield’s manuscripts and his sizeable library was an especial loss, since they were the only copies in existence, and were thus lost forever.

Wraxall described the arrival of soldiers on the scene: “A file of foot-soldiers arriving, drew up near the blazing pile; but, without either attempting to quench the fire, or to impede the mob, who were indeed far too numerous to admit of their being dispersed, or even intimidated, by a small detachment of infantry. The populace remained masters…” After observing “the spectacle” for a short time, Wraxall and his companions moved on. The picture he painted of the soldiers in this instance was an exceedingly negative one; he implies that they had no intention of doing anything to stop the people’s destructiveness, or to put out the fires that were destroying private property. However, because Wraxall left relatively on, he did not witness the events that eventually took place; Romilly fills in the gaps in his letters: “The soldiers,” he wrote on June 9th, “after having for a long time endured the insults of the populace, were at last obliged to fire. Eight or nine persons were killed, and several wounded.” These were the first recorded casualties of the Gordon riots, and one of the first instances recorded when the authorities took decisive measures to prevent the rioting.

Altogether, Tuesday evening was remembered as one of the most memorable nights of rioting. In his letters, Romilly described the events of Tuesday evening as being “attended with the most violent outrages and excesses that can be imagined,” and “the terror which these acts of violence spread through the town…not easy to be conceived.” Many described the

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72 Ibid., 122.  
73 Ibid., 124.
impressive effect that all the fires raging throughout the town had on the skyline of the capital.

At the end of the night, Susan Burney went up to the observatory at the top of her house and saw, such a scene as I shall never forget, or think of but with horror. Our own Square was rendered as light as day by the bonfire made from [the contents of Justice Hyde's house], which received fresh fuel every moment, and on the other side we saw the flames ascending from Newgate- a fire in Covent Garden which proved to be Justice Fielding's house- and another in Bloomsbury Square which was at Lord Mansfield's."

Romilly described “the sky glowing on every side with the light of different conflagrations, as if the city had been taken by an enemy”74, while Doctor Johnson wrote in a letter to Mrs. Thrale, "You might see the glare of conflagration fill the sky from many parts. The sight was dreadful…Such a time of terrour you have been happy in not seeing."75 Frederick Reynolds, whose father had taken the family away to the country earlier that day for their own safety, wrote that at around midnight, the family walked out on the lawn, and “looking towards London, saw by the red appearance of the sky, that probably half the metropolis was in flames…”76

“The next day, Wednesday,” reported Samuel Romilly, “it was reported every where that, that night, the houses of the Secretaries of State, of every Bishop, of every Catholic, of every justice of the peace, and of all the King’s tradesmen, were marked out for destruction. The Catholics, and many other persons, moved all their effects; their neighbours as well as themselves, fled into the country, or waited, in the utmost horror, the approach of evening.”77

74 Johnson, *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 269. Samuel Johnson, unlike many of the other witnesses whose testimony constitutes this narrative of the Gordon riots, was nearing the end of his life when the riots broke out. Throughout his long life (he was seventy one in 1780), the famous writer and lexicographer’s views on politics changed fluidly with the times, though he was generally regarded as a staunch Tory by the time of King George III’s ascension to the throne in 1760. Indeed, his thoughts on the Gordon riots give much credit to the King for his decisive actions in ending the disturbances. Johnson’s thoughts and impressions of the riots are recorded in letters to his close friends Mrs. Thrale and James Boswell, which he composed as the riots were occurring.
75 Reynolds, *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, 132.
Frederick Reynold’s family was not the only one to flee the capital during the tumults. Many people fled to the country for safety, and others, like the Burneys, sent all their most valuable possessions to safer places, in the hopes of saving them should their houses be destroyed by the rioters’ fires or by theft, for the prisoners of Newgate were on the loose all over town.79

A sense of lawlessness and anarchy pervaded London on this day, which Walpole termed “Black Wednesday”.80 Doctor Johnson described scene in London that morning to Mrs. Thrale in a letter dated June 9th: "On Wednesday I walked with Dr. Scot to look at Newgate, and found it in ruins, with the fire yet glowing. As I went by, the protestants were plundering the Sessions-house at the Old-Bailey. There were not, I believe, a hundred; but they did their work at leisure, in full security, without Sentinels, without trepidation, as Men lawfully employed, in full day."81 Susan Burney’s father went out also early that morning to survey the damage done by the rioters the previous night, and saw "the ruins of Newgate, where everybody went in and out as freely as they walk under the Piazzas in Covent Garden."82 All over London, houses, stores and pubs belonging to Roman Catholics were vandalized and torn down throughout the day. In the afternoon, two attempts were made on the Bank of England, but troops were present on this occasion to protect it. The toll-keepers’ houses on Blackfriars Bridge were also attacked; they were burned to the ground and the money they contained was taken by the crowd, many of whom were killed by troops on the scene. Towards the nighttime, the King’s Bench and Fleet Prisons were set alight and their prisoners set loose upon the town as well. However, the worst of the destruction was to happen later that night.

79 Johnson, Letters of Samuel Johnson, 303; Hill, The House in St. Martin's Street, 265-266.
80 Walpole, Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann, 63.
81 Johnson, Letters of Samuel Johnson, 268.
82 Hill, The House in St. Martin's Street, 266-267.
Thomas Langdale was a Catholic distiller who had a large warehouse adjacent to his home in Holborn, in central London, containing an estimated 120,000 gallons of gin. Whether it was the fact that he was a Roman Catholic in general, or based on the alleged rumor that there was a private chapel hidden in his home, or simply due to the attraction of all that liquor, the rioters marked Langdale’s property out for destruction that day. He had been trying to buy time all day by offering the crowd money and alcohol in order to spare his premises, but as night fell, his house and distillery were set on fire, igniting the great vats storing the liquor in his warehouse. Nathaniel Wraxall was one of the many spectators to this tremendous event. On approaching Landgale’s distillery, he described how “[Langdale’s home and warehouses] were altogether enveloped in smoke and flame…The kennel of the street ran down with spirituous liquour, and numbers of the populace were already intoxicated with this beverage.” The “mob”, he said, “completely blocked up the whole street in every part, prevented our approaching within fifty or sixty yard of the building…The other house and magazines of Mr. Langdale, who, as a Catholic, had been selected for the blind vengeance of the mob…threw up into the air a pinnacle of flame resembling a volcano.”

The effects of this explosion were tremendous. Over twenty nearby houses were destroyed in the fire, and numerous rioters were killed while attempting to loot the gin out of the burning buildings or from drinking the burning alcohol as it ran down the streets and pooled by the gutters. By the early morning, many lay dead or unconscious from drinking in the streets around the remains of Langdale’s property. Henry Angelo went around to inspect the damage the following morning, where he was greeted by “one shocking sight follow[ing] another.” He

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85 Ibid., 135.
described how “the inside of the house was consumed, and several dead bodies were lying near; the greater part those who had made themselves drunk in his premises…I saw several bodies on each side of the street, whether dead or drunk, I did not stop to inquire, the crowd behind pushing all before them.”

Wraxall and Angelo were both present at King’s Bench prison when it was already in flames. Wraxall described the chaos of the scene effectively: "On approaching [the prison], we beheld the King’s Bench Prison completely wrapt in flames. It exhibited a sublime sight, and we might be said there to stand in a central point, from whence London offered on every side, before, as well as behind us, the picture of a city sacked and abandoned to a ferocious enemy.”

Angelo contributed his own personal experience of seeing the building on encumbered in flames: “On seeing the flames and smoke from the windows, along the high wall, it appeared to me like the huge hulk of a man-of-war, dismasted, on fire.” Wraxall summed up the confusion in the following terms:

The shouts of the populace, the cries of women, the crackling of the fires, the blaze reflected in the stream of the Thames, and the irregular firing which was kept up…all these sounds, or images combined, left scarcely anything for the imagination to supply; presenting to the view every recollection, which the classic descriptions in Virgil, or in Tacitus, have impressed on the mind in youth, but which I so little expected to see exemplified in the capital of Great Britain.

Many other eyewitnesses were equally awed with the impression that “black Wednesday” left on their senses. Walpole’s printer, Kirgate, was out all night and saw “many houses set on fire, women and children screaming, running out of doors with what they could save, and

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knocking one another down with their loads in the confusion.”

It was said that as many as thirty-six fires blazed on London at once during the night, and could be seen from London Bridge.

Susan Burney recorded in her journal:

On going to the Observatory we saw a yet more lamentable and shocking appearance than that of the preceding evening. Such a fire I never beheld as one of the four that were burning with violence at the time. We afterwards found it was the house of a great distiller on Holborn Hill, which, as he was a Papist, was set on fire, and that the flames communicated very quickly to a prodigious number of small houses adjoining…Another great fire was the Fleet Prison. [while] the King’s Bench was in flames on the other side of us. We could hear the huzzas, shouts and firing, and shrieks from some of these terrible scenes of fury and riot.

Walpole, who had witnessed the conflagrations from the top of Gloucester House that night, told Lady Ossory in a letter, "I remember the Excise, and the Gin Act, and the rebels at Derby, and Wilkes's interlude, and the French at Plymouth- or I should have a very bad memory- but I never till last night saw London and Southwark in flames!"

By this point, however, the authorities had mobilized troops into the city, and there were several thousand in the capital by Wednesday, with more on the way. Johnson wrote to Mrs. Thrale on June 9th: “The King said in Council that the Magistrates had not done their duty, but that he would do his own, and a proclamation was published directing us to keep our servants within doors, as the peace was now to be preserved by force. The Soldiers were sent out to different parts, and the town is now at quiet.” The troops were fairly effective at getting the rioting under control in a relatively quick amount of time, though some rioting did still occur on Thursday, the 8th. On June 9th, Samuel Romilly wrote to his brother-in-law: “Last night, and to-

93 Walpole, *Correspondence with the Countess of Upper Ossory*, 190.
day, everything has been at peace: we have two encampments, one in St. James’s Park, and another in Hyde Park; no man is suffered to wear a blue cockade in the streets, and we have no doubt that the rioters are entirely quelled. I have just received news that Lord George Gordon is taken...95 Indeed, Lord George Gordon was arrested that Friday morning, and taken from his house on Welbeck Street to be lodged in the Tower.

At the riots’ conclusion, much property had been damaged or destroyed, many individuals arrested, and many lives lost. Wraxall discusses the contemporary conceptions of the death toll at the end of the riots in his memoirs:

Various were the opinions and assertions hazarded, relative to the numbers that perished in the riots between the third and the seventh of June, 1780...Probably, it far exceeded the computation commonly made; and from the concurring testimony of those persons who were most competent to form a sound judgment, I believe it would not be overrated at seven hundred individuals, killed and wounded.96

Modern scholars’ estimates, however, are more modest, estimating at least two hundred and ten people killed outright, and about seventy five more who died in the hospital later as a result of injuries sustained during the rioting.97 It is interesting to note, that none of these casualties were victims of the rioters’ violence; in essentially every case they were the rioters themselves who perished at the hands of soldiers trying to maintain order, or from accident related causes, such as those in the fire at Landgale’s distillery. Four hundred and fifty rioters were arrested; sixty two of these were sentenced to death, and only twenty five of these were eventually hung, while twelve others were imprisoned.98 The damage to public property was estimated at over 30,000 pounds, and individuals received compensations of over 70,000 pounds.99

95 Romilly, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, 126.
96 Wraxall, Historical Memoirs of My Own Time, 138.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 276.
In the days immediately following the end of the riots, while peace was restored to the capital, Londoners continued to grappling with the questions concerning the riots and the consequences which they produced. Among these were the effects of the military mobilization that was effected in order the quell the riots; hundreds of troops were still bivouacked throughout the open spaces of London, giving the town the appearance of a “garrison”, giving Londoners cause to fear the prospect of continued martial law and the impingement of their liberties.100

Another popular subject of speculation was the cause of the riots themselves, which had erupted seemingly out of nowhere and caused so much fear and destruction. Samuel Romilly, writing to Roget on June 13th, expressed the feelings of many Londoners upon the restoration of peace to their city, amidst daily reminders of the ravages of the recent riots:

Such a profound tranquility reigns in London, that the late scenes of riot and confusion seem nothing but a dream. Indeed, the outrages which have been committed this week past were so unexpected and so unaccountable, that one would be incline to believe one's senses had deceived one, did not the ruins of houses and other vestiges of the fury of the populace in all parts of the town make it evident that these calamities are but too real.101

Doctor Johnson, writing to assure Mrs. Thrale of his safety the following day, also expressed the sense of fear and discomfort that lingered throughout London, even while the riots had ended with characteristic humor: "Do not be disturbed: all danger here is apparently over, but a little agitation still continues. We frighten one another with seventy thousand Scots to come hither with the dukes of Gordon and Argile, and eat us, and hang us, or down us, but we are all at quiet."102

On July 6th, exactly a month after the destruction of Newgate, Walpole wrote bitterly to in a letter to Mann:

100 Wraxall, Historical Memoirs of My Own Time, 140.
101 Romilly, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, 127.
these Catalines [referring to the rioters], without plan, plot, connection or object, three a
million of inhabitants into consternation, burnt their houses about their ears, besieged the
Parliament, drove it to adjourn for ten days, and have saddled the capital with ten
thousand men; and still terrify us so dreadfully, that we dare not dismiss two camps at our
gates, lest a negro miss and her regiment of street-walkers should overturn the state.¹⁰³

By this time rioters who had been arrested had begun their trials, and it was becoming clear that
these men and women were not the ringleaders or masterminds behind the riots, but merely
common men who had gotten caught up in the mass frenzy. Yet the ravages of the Gordon riots
had so shaken the people of London and the government both, that the troops of soldiers
remained stationed in the capital a month after the riots had been effectively quenched, to allay
the still-present fears of the people. And, after all this time, the exact causes of the riots were still
unclear.

Of all the individuals who had been present in London during the riots, Wraxall offers
one of the most interesting epilogues to the story in his memoirs. He notes, like many of his
contemporaries mentioned above, the nearly instantaneous quelling of the riots by the troops, and
the marked difference produced in the capital in a mere matter of a couple of days. “This awful
convulsion,” he wrote, “which, on Wednesday, the seventh of June, seemed to menace the
destruction of everything; was so completely quelled, and so suddenly extinguished, that on the
eighth, hardly a spark survived of the popular effervescence….Never was a contrast exhibited
more striking, than between those two evenings, in the same city!”¹⁰⁴ Many others remarked on
this, like Samuel Romilly on the previous page. It seemed as if the rioting had ceased as quickly
and as inexplicably as it had begun, and no trace of the rioters themselves remained, except the
relatively few who had been arrested. Wraxall explains that many of those who had sustained
injuries during the rioting attempted to hide this fact, so as not to be accused of the crimes

¹⁰³ Walpole, Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann, 67.
¹⁰⁴ Wraxall, Historical Memoirs of My Own Time, 140.
associated with the riots, and not let their names be sullied by association with them. He also explains that the bodies of many of the rioters who had died on Blackfriars Bridge were thrown over into the Thames “by their companions”, though they might just have likely have fallen into the river. However, Wraxall goes on to describe other curious incidence related to the dead bodies of other rioters throughout the town, and presents what amounts to a sort of conspiracy theory:

The carnage which took place at the Bank likewise was great, though not of very long duration; and in order to conceal as much as possible, the magnitude of the number, as well as the names of the persons who perished, similar precautions were taken. All the dead bodies being carried away during the night, were precipitated into the river. Even the impressions made by the musket balls, on the houses opposite to the Bank, were as much as possible erased next morning, and the buildings whitewashed. Government and the rioters seem to have felt an equal disposition, by drawing a veil over the extent of the calamity, to bury it in profound darkness.106

As haunting as Wraxall’s words may seem, they are both logical and prophetic. They are logical because, as mentioned earlier, the rioters themselves were eager to put their actions behind them, what with troops stationed all over London and the government cracking down the perpetrators of the outrages. As for the government, it also had a strong incentive to gloss over the events of June 1780. For one thing, they were still in the middle of a costly and embarrassing war with the American colonies, and they did not want to shine further light on their incompetency in dealing with the rioting in a quick and decisive manner, nor draw attention to the glaring flaws in the British law enforcement system, which was part of the reason the riots were able to go on for as long as they did before the authorities finally declared martial law.

However, as we will see, the government did not succeed in “drawing a veil” over the riots and burying them in darkness completely. Over the next few centuries, the Gordon Riots

105 Ibid.
106 Wraxall, Historical Memoirs of My Own Time, 139.
did attract some popular and scholarly attention, although not nearly as much as one might expect from a historical episode that had as sizeable an impact on Londoners as is implied by the accounts in this chapter. It is to these that I will now turn, in order to examine how the interpretations of the Gordon riots changed with the passage of time and the impact that they had on British popular consciousness.
Chapter 3
The Making of a Myth of Riot: the Transition from History to Cultural Legend

As tends to be the case with many sensational events that capture public attention, the Gordon riots generated an abundance of gossip, speculation and debate in the national media in the weeks and months following their conclusion. The months and years to come would produce a sizeable collection of written documents relating the riots, their causes and their consequences. Many questions remained unanswered. Who were the rioters? Even though 450 of their ranks had been arrested and 160 of those eventually tried, countless others remained unaccounted for, and the identity of many of those killed remained unknown. What were their motivations? Though at first it had been plain enough that the targets of their fury had been sites of Roman Catholic activity, many of their later targets, such as the houses of aristocrats, prisons and the Bank, raised serious and frightening questions about the mob’s underlying purposes in the mind of the general populace. Was there a hidden hand leading the rioters’ actions, or were they acting on their own accord, subject to the whims and furies of a dangerous crowd mentality? At the core of these questions lay the frightening knowledge that, for almost an entire week in June, the government had come dangerously close to losing control of its subjects, and that the capital had been in dangerous of total ruin and destruction.

Naturally, many British subjects feared for their safety and the safety of their country. Often, these fears led to the propagation of wild rumors amongst the populace, especially in regards to the alleged origins of the riots. Conspiracy theories abounded around the capital; among these were the spectacular suspicions that either French or American agents were secretly behind the riots; others supposed, more plausibly, that members of the Opposition goaded the
rioters’ movements, so as to bring an end to the disastrous war in America; still others took the opposite view in supposing that it was the Government itself that had allowed the riots to develop as a pretext for calling in the army and imposing martial law upon its citizens.^{107} Finally, among the most popular and plausible theories running rampant at the time was the idea that the riots were instigated by Lord George Gordon and the Protestant Association, in an attempt to either achieve the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act, or perhaps even, on a more sinister note, to overthrow the administration. Spectacular conjectures such as these could be found in every corner of British popular culture following the events of June 1780. Newspapers were filled with false reports of rioting in the countryside; contemporary letters and journal entries offered all manner of speculation about the causes of the riots; a variety of inflammatory pamphlets published after the riots flung accusations around at the various parties involved; and, it can subsequently be safely assumed that public meeting houses and taverns were likewise full of discussion and debate about the recent rioting. It was in this public arena of popular discourse, media culture and vivid representation that the Gordon riots began their transformation from a historical episode into a cultural legend.

In this chapter, I will focus my attention on three categories of popular discourse that contributed to the transformation of the Gordon riots into something that might be termed a “cultural legend”. This process of transformation occurred rather swiftly in the months and years directly following the riots, as information, both true and false, was disseminated quickly across the empire and Europe via newspaper reports, letters and word of mouth. In each new retelling of this tale, information was most likely recycled and subsequently distorted; in this manner, a myth of the Gordon riots began to emerge. The areas of popular discourse relating to the riots

discussed in this chapter will be the following: contemporary speculation on various aspects of the riots, as reflected in letters and diary entries; narratives of the riots, distributed in the form of pamphlets; and the dissemination of the transcripts of the trial of Lord George Gordon for treason. What this documentary evidence makes apparent is that in the weeks and months following the events of June 1780, the Gordon riots became somewhat mythologized by contemporaries. Their effects on spectators’ imaginations and on the national consciousness as a whole seems often to have been exaggerated or distorted in various ways in these sources, to the point where the riots began to acquire characteristics of epic proportions. Contemporaries tended described the degradations of the rioters in heroic or romanticized terms, such as those discussed in the previous chapter. Part of the reason for this phenomenon was due to the admittedly spectacular nature of the riots themselves. Modern scholars agree that no other popular disturbance in the eighteenth century rivaled the Gordon riots in size or scope; and, after all, at the height of the violence, it did seem to observers that the riots had assumed an “insurrectionary and apocalyptic character.” 108 In addition to this, however, the transition from history to cultural legend occurred because of all the gaps of information present in the historical narrative of the Gordon riots, especially as it stood in 1780. Because there was so much unknown about the exact identities of the rioters, their underlying motivations, and the overall causes of the tumults, speculation about the Gordon riots took on a kind of mythic quality. In many instances, this mythic quality gave way to stereotypes and exaggerated or extremely biased versions of accounts. In this chapter, we will closely follow this process of transformation and trace the origins of some of the misconceptions that exist about the riots.

108 Haywood, Bloody Romanticism, 185.
Popular Speculation

One of the most disputed and misunderstood aspects about the Gordon riots concerns the identities and overall social make up of the rioters who committed the acts of violence which would make the Gordon riots famous. Witnesses’ descriptions of the rioters are ambiguous, alternating between descriptions of decently dressed men, and the vilest rabble. Frederick Reynolds claimed that the “mob” in Palace Yard on June 2nd was largely composed of “persons decently dressed, who appeared to be incited to extravagance, by a species of fanatical phrenzy”; included in this number were also “many thousands of disorderly persons”\(^\text{109}\). Later on in the course of the riots, however, he claimed that “a new species of mob presented itself. All the lank and puritanical faces had disappeared, and rogues and robbery were the order of the day.”\(^\text{110}\) Samuel Romilly, on the other hand, spared no sympathy for the rioters at any point in his letters, not even in the early stage of the riots that Reynolds described in the first instance. The people crowded in Palace Yard, he said, “seemed to consist, in a great measure, of the lowest rabble; men who, without doubt, not only had never heard any of the arguments for or against toleration, but how were utterly ignorant of the very purport of the petition.”\(^\text{111}\) Later on, he refers to the rioters as “delirious wretches” and displays absolutely no sympathy for their destructive and lawless ways.\(^\text{112}\)

Horace Walpole took a different approach to the rioters in his letters to friends outside of London, in which Gordon’s supporters bore the brunt of his signature scathing humor. In one letter, he refers to them sarcastically as a “noble army of martyrs,” “the conservators of the


\(^{110}\) Ibid., 126.


\(^{112}\) Ibid., 126.
Church of England,” and “the pious ragamuffins.”

Although Walpole’s descriptions reveal little about the actual identities of the rioters, they disclose multitudes about the derisive attitudes of some of the populace, and especially the enlightened elite, towards the rioters, widely believed to be the Protestant Association’s supporters.

Other witnesses were more discerning in their depictions. On one of the worst days of rioting, June 6th, the poet George Crabbe encountered “a resolute band of vile-looking fellows, ragged, dirty, and insolent, armed with clubs,” outside of Westminster, on their way to join their “companions”. However, when he returned to Westminster later that evening to see what remained of the crowd who assembled there, he described the “mob” as “few, and those quiet, and decent in appearance.”

It is evident from Crabbe’s two different accounts of the rioters that they were not the homogenous group that many made them out to be; in reality, the rioters were likely composed of heterogeneous groups of people and probably did operate in small “bands” simultaneously in separate parts of London, as Crabbe’s account suggests. Yet it is the image of the “mob” as “vile-looking fellows”, ragged, dirty, insolent and armed with clubs, which has survived as a negative stereotype of the rioters in the years, and even centuries, to follow. Admittedly, it is a much more memorable and impressive one than the image of a few pious stragglers, “quiet and decent” in appearance. Indeed, almost sixty years later, Nathaniel Wraxall, another witness to the depredations of the rioters in 1780, wrote in his “Historical Memoir”: "the flames were originally kindled, as well as rendered far more destructive, by a

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113 Walpole, Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann, 52, 53, 54.
114 Crabbe, The Life of George Crabbe, 72.
populace of the lowest and vilest description, who carried with them, wherever they moved, the materials of universal ruin."\textsuperscript{116}

It is in descriptions such as these that the myth of the spectacular mob was born. As Ian Haywood writes in his chapter on the spectacular riot in \textit{Bloody Romanticism}, "the infantile, spectacular mob is a much more useful ideological tool” than is the image of a band of like-minded and purposeful individuals using violence to achieve specific means.\textsuperscript{117} A one-dimensional, infantile, spectacular “mob” might be manipulated to act on behalf of a scheming demagogue, and also could be repelled by an organized police force. The alternative-a crowd with some form of complex political or ideological consciousness- was a much more frightening and unthinkable thought for both the enlightened elite and the general public of the eighteenth century.

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The identities of the rioters were not the only aspect of the riots that left contemporaries mystified. The most popular subject of contemporary debate concerned the motivations of the rioters, and the underlying causes of the riots themselves. Samuel Romilly expressed the frightened and mystified feelings of his contemporaries when he wrote of the riots that "this rage of mistaken zeal is the more extraordinary, and the more to be dreaded, because it has no visible cause."\textsuperscript{118} After the rioters’ attention turned from targets symbolic of Catholicism to targets symbolic of State power and authority, many discounted religion as the only, or even primary, motivating force behind the riots. Walpole wrote: "Whatever Lord G. Gordon meant, anti-

\textsuperscript{116} Wraxall, \textit{Historical Memoirs of My Own Time}, 133.
\textsuperscript{117} Haywood, \textit{Bloody Romanticism}, 188.
\textsuperscript{118} Romilly, \textit{Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly}, 120.
Catholicism seems not only to have had little, but even only a momentary hand in the riots.”

What, then, were the actual causes of the riots, and what exactly were the rioters’ motivations? Ian Haywood writes that "the issue of 'direction' or leadership is an important factor in the discursive construction of the spectacular riot" because “conspiratorial theories concerning the motivation of the rioters provided a degree of mystique which aided the transition from fact to myth.” Indeed, the conspiracy theories which flew around in the weeks and months following the riots added an air of mystery and romance to the speculation about the riots’ origins, and lent them an almost mythic quality.

These sensational theories, however, were entertained mostly in the popular press, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section of this chapter. The witnesses I deal with in this section belonged to the educated elite of society, and their conjectures about the motivations of the rioters, as well as their attitudes towards the rioters, were colored not just a little by their class prejudices towards the “rabble.” Initially, there were some like Romilly who thought that Gordon had hoped to pressure Parliament with violence to secure the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act: "Lord George Gordon, that he might give it greater weight, or rather, that he might by violence force it upon the House, advertised in the papers as president…the day on which he proposed presenting the petition to the House, at the same time desiring the attendance of all the petitioners…” Walpole echoed similar strains of thought when he described the procession of Gordon’s followers on June 2nd: "Early on Friday morning the conservators of the Church of England…marched in lines of six and six- about thirteen thousand only, as they were computed,

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with a petition as long as the procession, which the apostle himself presented—though he had given out most Christian injunctions for peaceable behaviour, he did everything in his power to promote a massacre.”

Soon enough, however, it became apparent to most of the educated elite observers of the riots that religion provided a mere cloak for the degradations of the “rabble”, which they saw as chiefly motivated by drunkenness and a desire for plunder. Writing on June 5th, Horace Walpole recalled how, when the horse and foot guards arrived to disperse the crowds in Palace Yard on June 2nd, “the pious ragamuffins soon fled, so little enthusiasm fortunately had inspired them”, and, noting the number of gentlemen who had their pockets picked in the confusion, concluded that “at least all their religion consisted in outrage and plunder…I trust we have not much holy fury left— I am persuaded that there was far more dissoluteness than enthusiasm in the mob.”

After the riots were over, Walpole wrote to Horace Mann, informing him of his latest conclusions: "The Pope needs not be alarmed: the rioters thought much more of plundering those of their own communion, than his Holiness's flock. To demolish law and prisons was their next great object; and to release prisoners, the only gospel-work they performed.” Johnson corroborates this view in his summary of events to Mrs. Thrale: "Several chapels have been destroyed, and several inoffensive Papists have been plundered; but the high sport was to burn the Jayls. This was a good rabble trick.” Looking back on the riots in an attempt to explain their depredations, Romilly ruled out the possibility of a conspiracy to overturn the Government. He preferred, instead, the theory of the mob as an infantile, destructive, inexplicable and malleable force:

122 Walpole, Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann, 53.
123 Ibid., 54-55.
124 Ibid., 61.
There seems no probability that these monstrous excesses were concerted beforehand, or that they formed part of any regular plan to overturn the Government. They appear to me to have been only the accidental effects of the ungovernable fury and licentiousness of a mob, who gathered courage from their numbers, and who, having ventured on one daring act, found their only safety to lie in universal havoc and devastation...once the rioters had gone so far as to burn down Newgate, one cannot be surprised at their entering on any enterprise, however daring; for, besides that they thought they might go on with impunity when they had left no prisons wherein to confine them, they gained as an accession to, or rather as leaders of their party, a set of criminals whose lives were already forfeited to their country.  

He conceded that religion was certainly used “as an instrument to excite these feuds,” which worked the rioters up to “a pitch of fury, which made them capable of any acts of violence against the Catholics, and ripe for any mischief that could be represented as serviceable to their religion.” Thus, Romilly and other intellectuals like Walpole and Johnson were active participants in constructing the myth of the infantile, spectacular mob, which is itself a victim to demagogues such as Gordon, and driven by nothing except its own “ungovernable fury and licentiousness”.

Walpole provides an interesting caveat to this representation of the rioters and their actions. He notes with interest an inexplicable paradox in the rioters’ actions:

One strange circumstance in the late delirium was, the mixture of rage and consideration in the mob. In most of the fires they threw furniture into the street, did not burn it in the houses—nay, made small bonfires, lest a large one should spread to buildings. They would not suffer engines to play on the devoted edifices, yet the moment the objects were consumed, played the engines on contiguous houses on each side!

Here Walpole noted a critical and subtle phenomenon which most contemporaries like Romilly chose to ignore in their accounts of the mob’s “ungovernable fury”. Susan Burney recounted a similar incident at the destruction of Justice Hyde’s house, where she noted that the “mob” brought a fire engine to the scene with them, and while they put all of Hyde’s belongings to burn

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126 Romilly, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly*, 127-128
127 Ibid., 128.
128 Walpole, *Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann*, 63.
in the middle of the street, they ordered the engine to take care that the neighboring houses did not catch fire too. To Burney, this instance of the mob’s circumspection signified that they were directed by “somebody above themselves”; she couldn’t dream that the “mob” could have any consciousness or agency of its own.\textsuperscript{129} These small but important details were ignored by most of the enlightened observers of the riots, because they detracted from the myth of the Gordon rioters that was rapidly gaining currency throughout all classes of British society: the image of a reckless, senseless mob, driven by drink and licentiousness to commit further acts of depredation. Walpole himself admitted that he didn’t quite know what to make of these subtleties. He continued in his letter to Mann:

\begin{quote}
It is all unaccountable, and I can yet send you no consistent narrative. Much appears to have been sudden fury, and in many places the act of few. In other lights it looks like plan and deep premeditation- whether it will ever be unraveled I know not; or whether, like the history of darker ages, falsehood will become history, and then distant periods conjecture that we have transmitted very blundered relations- but when I know so little of what has passed before my own eyes, I shall not guess how posterity will form their opinions.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

Walpole, fortunately, had no qualms about admitting to the many confusing and contradictory aspects of the Gordon riots. The truth was, that being so close to the events themselves and having so little reliable information available at their disposal, none of the witnesses to the events that proceeded were able to form any sort of clear, unbiased and dispassionate conclusions about the nature of the riots. It would be up posterity to try to fill in the gaps in the narrative and form their own opinions. However, as Walpole might have guessed, history works in circuitous and mysterious ways. Many of the opinions about the Gordon riots formed by later generations were

\textsuperscript{129} Hill, \textit{The House in St. Martin's Street}, 257. Describing the incident on the same page, Burney wrote: “One thing was remarkable and convinced me that the mob was secretly directed by somebody above themselves: they brought an engine with them, and while they pulled Hyde's house to pieces and threw everything they found into the flames, they ordered the engine to play on the neighboring houses to prevent their catching fire.”

\textsuperscript{130} Walpole, \textit{Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann}, 63-64.
influenced by the myth of the Gordon riots that had begun to take shape even at this early stage in the riots’ immediate aftermath. It is possible that some falsehoods have become history along the way, and even more likely that the contemporaries of the Gordon riots have transmitted, in Walpole’s phrase, “very blundered relations.” Future interpretations of the Gordon riots were very much influenced by these “relations”- the representations of the riots created and mythologized by the popular discourse of the day.

**Popular Media**

Popular media played as important a role in mythologizing the riots as did debate between individuals, if not a more important one. Such media, especially in the form of pamphlets published following the riots, were extremely popular amongst the people, and had the advantage of being able to reach a very wide audience. This is evident from the multiple editions that such pamphlets went through in their publication histories, indicating the heightened demand for them in a society thirsty for information. The three pamphlets I will discuss here, all initially published in 1780, represent different political and social perspectives which could be found in these kinds of publications in the years following the Gordon riots; each one offers a unique variation on the representation of the riots, which contributed to the overall picture of them formed in the public consciousness.

**Political Pamphlets**
Two of these pamphlets, *Fanaticism and Treason: or, a Dispassionate History of the Rise, Progress, and Suppression, of the Rebellious Insurrectionists in June 1780*, and *Considerations on the Late Disturbances, By a Consistent Whig*, contain distinct political biases and agendas. The former is written anonymously “by a Real Friend to Religion and to Britain”, while the latter is penned by “a Consistent Whig” (identified as Thomas Lewis O’Beirne, a prolific pamphleteer who wrote in defense of the Whigs.  

Based on this biographical information alone, it is possible to form a clear picture of the political biases inherent in each of these accounts of the riots. Interestingly, however, both authors make an attempt to assert the impartiality of their accounts at the outsets of their respective narratives; however, these statements prove to be nothing more than pretexts for politically motivated and biased narratives of the riots.

An example of one such introduction is taken from *Fanaticism and Treason*, as follows:

> These are not times, nor is this the place, for parade of introduction or pomposity of reflection. The reader is beginning to peruse a plain, unadorned, dispassionate account of such scenes as are not at present to be found in any history of any country. That they may be recorded, and faithfully recorded, in the history of this country, the subsequent incredible narrative is put together-- as well as that the present spectators of these convulsions, and those who shall hereafter shudder while they read the account of them, may learn what barbarities a body of men, professing the most peaceable intentions, may commit; and how the mildest religion, in certain hands, may become an engine wherewith to shake to its foundations the mildest government.

The author of this pamphlet, a self professed “real friend to religion and to Britain”, reveals several biases in this passage alone, which professes to introduce the “plain, unadorned, dispassionate” account of the riots which is to follow (which is ironic, since the pamphlet’s primary title is “*Fanaticism and Treason*”, a forceful and telling foreshadowing of the author’s

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actual political intentions). First, he reveals his prejudice towards other popular publications, such as the *Annual Register*, in a footnote to this passage, where he implies that they have a tendency to skew their reportage of historical events to further their political motives. He claims that his own account is written in order to “faithfully record” the events of June 1780 for the historical record, in a dispassionate manner. However, he goes on to say that he does this so that both the spectators to the riots and those who “shall hereafter shudder while the read the account of them” would know what “barbarities” men may commit under the banner of the “mildest” religion, and what assaults they might commit to the “mildest” government. It is not surprising that this self-professed friend to religion and to Britain would seek to minimize the problematic issues with both the Protestant religion, as practiced by the Protestant Association, and the British government, by labeling them both the “mildest” forms of religion and government. What is more interesting is that his target audience is not only those who might read his account of the rioters “barbarity” and “shudder” at it in the future, but also those who witnessed the “convulsions” themselves. The author is thus consciously, but subtly, building a myth of the riots, motivated by his Tory political beliefs, not just for future generations to read about, but also in order to influence the interpretations of his own contemporaries, many of whom had witnessed the riots themselves and probably already had their own interpretations of them.

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133 He refers in particular to an incident in 1778 when the *Annual Register* failed to report on the British disgrace in the Battle of Ushant and the subsequent resignation of Admiral Keppel, implying that the journal glossed over instances of British defeat in the war to keep up appearances. He was wrong, however, in his implied assumption that the *Annual Register* would not provide ample coverage for the events of June 1780. In describing the riots, and particularly the night of June 7th, the *Annual Register* noted that “every thing served to impress the mind with ideas of universal anarchy and approaching desolation.” *Annual Register* (1780), Appendix to the Chronicle, 260-261.
Indeed, in the pages of this lengthy pamphlet, the author goes on to repeatedly attack the Opposition and blames them for the civil authority’s initial inaction in quelling the riots. In regards to the question of why the government did not take more precautions against the crowd that had assembled in St. George’s Fields on June 2\textsuperscript{nd}, the author writes: “Government had no doubts...about the possibility, the facility of preventing any meeting in St. George’s Fields; but they had apprehensions and fears of opposition, for the sake of their country; and, as opposition have themselves shown, just fears and just apprehensions. Had this country not been blessed with such an opposition, it would not have been lately cursed with such convulsions.”\textsuperscript{134} In other words, he places the blame of the government’s inaction entirely on the shoulders of the Opposition, whose protests to any incursion on popular liberty he claimed the government feared so much it stilled its hand against the rioters initially. He goes on to praise government for its “singular moderation” in finally suppressing the riots, and intimates that the opposition, “these movers of mischief, and stirrers of faction”, were actually “the promoters of these riots”.\textsuperscript{135} Finally, he excoriates the idea of “appeal to the people”, implying that the only results of such appeals are fanaticism, treason and rebellious insurrections, such as those witnessed in June 1780. In summary, he describes how "in little more than a night and a day, one of the first cities of the universe was almost destroyed; and the envied nation, of which it is the capital, only not reduced to universal bankruptcy and ruin, but to either democratical or foreign slavery."\textsuperscript{136} The author equates “democratical” slavery with foreign slavery; this myth of the Gordon riots sought not only to equate them with fanaticism, treason and insurrection, but also with make a significant connection between the riots and the politics of popular representation. In his view of

\textsuperscript{134} Fanaticism and Treason, 29-20
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 49.
history, the riots represented the very worst possible conclusion, and perhaps the only conclusion, to an “appeal to the people”. In seeking to demonize the rioters, he also sought to demonize issues of popular representation in government and democratic notions.

It is likely that the *Fanaticism and Treason* was one of the first of such pamphlets to be published after the Gordon riots, because its postscript is dated June 22, 1780, not even a month after the conclusion of the riots. This pamphlet was so popular that it went through at least three editions in the course of less than two years; the pamphlet I cite was the third edition, published in 1781. In response to the claims of many ministerialists and the author of *Fanaticism and Treason* that suggested the Opposition was behind the riots in some way, a pamphleteer named Thomas Lewis O’Beirne published a pamphlet entitled *Considerations of the Late Disturbances, By a Consistent Whig*, also in 1780, though the exact month of publication is unknown. In his introduction, O’Beirne laments that "the destructive flame that has been kindled, and the equally dangerous remedy that has been applied to extinguish it, awake all our fears, and in our anxiety to guard against them, we admit facts without proof, we take up conclusions without examinations, we throw aside all reason, reflection, justice, every principle of sound policy and genuine religion.”¹³⁷ He pleads with his readers to “think a little coolly and dispassionately on the subject.”

However, despite all his precautions to readers, O’Beirne’s own version of the riots is far from cool and dispassionate. He defends the Catholic Relief Act on multiple grounds, and vigorously attacks the Protestant Association and Gordon’s petition, blaming them as the cause for all the unrest and violence. He suggests that the “very principle of the petitions itself is…repugnant to the very first principles of Protestantism”, and that it owed its rise and progress

¹³⁷ Thomas Lewis O’Beirne, *Considerations on the Late Disturbances, By a Consistent Whig*, 2nd ed. (London: Almon, 1780), 4-5.
to a “spirit of persecution” that was fostered by the Protestant Association.\textsuperscript{138} An example of such a “spirit of persecution” fostered by Gordon and his follower was related by Samuel Romilly, who recorded the following impressions, upon reading the Protestant Association’s pamphlet, \textit{An Appeal to the People of Great Britain}, published in 1779:

It is extremely ill written; the reasoning such as refutes itself; but the author addresses himself to the passions of his readers in a strain of furious declamation, well calculated to work up enthusiasts to very madness. He professes to favor toleration; but his book is such an exhortation to revenge and persecution, as the days of Charles the Ninth never, perhaps, produced…So that, according to the arguments of this wretch, persecution is a religious duty!\textsuperscript{139}

It is interesting to note, in fact, how closely O’Beirne’s rhetoric in \textit{Considerations of the Late Disturbances} follows Samuel Romilly’s in his private letters to his brother-in-law, quoted frequently in previous parts of this chapter and the last. The Protestant Association’s petition, O’Beirne claims, was “founded upon imaginary terrors, resting its proofs on falsehood, and condemning in the strongest terms its own principles, and the conduct of its supporters.” These, supporters, he thinks, were “taken from the very dregs of the people, from the frequenters of tabernacles, and nightly conventicles, from the fanatic followers of Westley and others like him, and from the scum of the Scotch fanatics”, along with “a vast number of deluded wretches, who could not even write their names, and who, consequently, must have been ignorant of the purport or meaning of the instrument they were prevailed on to sign with their marks.”\textsuperscript{140} This echoes of Romilly’s impressions of the petitioners as “the lowest rabble; men who, without doubt, not only had never heard any of the arguments for or against toleration, but who were utterly ignorant of the very purport of the petition.”\textsuperscript{141} Also similarly to Romilly, O’Beirne describes the petition

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{139} Romilly, \textit{Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly}, 137.
\textsuperscript{140} O’Beirne, \textit{Considerations on the Late Disturbances}, 12.
\textsuperscript{141} Romilly, \textit{Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly}, 115.
being “forced on parliament, at the head of thirty thousand of the scum of the city”. Describing the progress of the riots, he relates how at length the rioters “wrought themselves up to that pitch of frenzy” that they attacked the prisons, destroyed the houses of magistrates and other “virtuous and distinguished characters of all parties”, made attempts on the bank, and “threatened the inhabitants with general indiscriminate destruction.” These descriptions, in particular, resemble very closely to the exact language of Romilly, who described the rioters as being “wrought up to a pitch of fury” such that they wreaked “universal havoc and devastation” upon the city. What these correlations in tone and language between private contemporary letters and popular media make evident is that both private and public debate had a profound impact on popular ideas about the riots and shaped the way that people perceived the rioters, their actions, and the underlying causes of the riots.

**Thomas Holcroft’s *Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances***

Though the two pamphlets discussed thus far provided concrete political and social interpretations for the Gordon riots, they did not discuss the riots themselves in any great depths, choosing instead to build a myth surrounding their causes and their perpetrators. Thomas Holcroft’s *Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances* was a much more neutral narrative of the riots, focusing almost exclusively on relating the events of the actual riots and on providing the public with a “clear and succinct narrative” in order to satisfy public curiosity and attempt to appease the “apprehensions of all ranks of people”, excited by the

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142 O’Beirne, *Considerations on the Late Disturbances*, 15.
143 Ibid.
Holcroft’s biographers maintain that he undertook the writing of this pamphlet not out of any political leanings on his part, but on the commission of the booksellers, Fielding and Walker, who had published his first novel, *Alwyn*, earlier that year. Like many of the narrative pamphlets of the day, this venture was undertaken for profit, knowing as the booksellers did that the Gordon riots were the most “sensational event of the year”.\textsuperscript{146}

In an advertisement to the second edition of this popular pamphlet, published in 1780, Holcroft admitted to the shortcomings of such popular narratives, written by witnesses to the events it describes, especially so close in time after those events took place:

> Great care has been taken relative to the authenticity of facts. Some have unavoidably been selected from the *public papers*, but such as nobody contradicts, some the *author* can attest, and others were collected from *spectators* of undoubted veracity.

> A strong and lasting impression was fixed upon the mind of the Narrator, by being present at many of those scenes of horror he has undertaken to describe: an effort has been made to convey them as they were universally felt, but that is next to impossible.

> A person who, in the midst of uproar and distraction, composes a Narrative, and gives it in the form of a small pamphlet, cannot be supposed to write for fame; but he may be strongly affected by private and public distress: he may sigh with a weak and sickly mother, driven from her habitation at midnight, with all her little ones, terrified and crying, around her: he may groan for a mad, misguided multitude; tossing the brands of destruction on the head of innocence, and exposing themselves to present, or to future death: he may weep over the ruins of a city, and at the desolation of its innocent inhabitants.

> The subject is worthy the talents of the ablest historian: the dignity and care of one is little expected in this kind of publication.

> If the Author has communicated ideas, so as to impress a *faint* image of that horror and detestation which every good citizen experienced, who was present at the perpetration of these lawless acts, he has effected more than he hoped. Such hope is now only inspired by the favourable reception the Public gave to the first Edition.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{145} Holcroft, *Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances*, 7.


We can learn many things from this advertisement. One is that the sources of Holcroft’s information were newspapers and other sources of popular media, as well as the accounts of spectators, such as those that we have reviewed, and his own impressions. Holcroft admits that his own impressions of “those scenes of horror” were “strong and lasting”, but that he made an effort to “convey them as they were universally felt”, though this is technically impossible. He claimed that he wrote not for fame, but more likely for financial benefit; at this point in his life, Holcroft was still struggling to find success as a writer, since his first novel, recently published, had not a financial success. Holcroft’s self professed task is not that of the historian; he does not profess to treat the subject with the “dignity and care” that it deserves; instead, he hopes to impress upon his readers a “faint image of that horror and detestation which every good citizen experienced, who was present at the perpetration of these lawless acts”. He embraces the writer’s task to affect an emotional response in his readers, and his hope is to achieve this task in this Narrative. The favorable reception his reading public gave to the first edition was an indicator that he had succeeded in affecting the desired response; another indicator, sixty years later, would be Charles Dickens’ reliance on Holcroft’s Narrative in reconstructing the details and the atmosphere of the Gordon riots for his historical novel, Barnaby Rudge. As will be pointed out in the next chapter, Dickens borrowed many of Holcroft’s concepts from this pamphlet, not to mention entire phrases from his passages.

Haywood points out that, from a literary point of view, by the late eighteenth century, writers who wanted to portray spectacular violence were in an advantageous position: they were able to draw on the achievements of both “novelistic verisimilitude and the discourse of on-the-spot reportage, which was a hallmark of the construction of ‘news’ in the press.” Holcroft’s

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148 Haywood, Bloody Romanticism, 8.
narrative is a good example of the marriage of these two styles in a popular historical narrative; the author utilizes both aspects of both eyewitness, on-the-spot type reportage, and a literary, novelistic style that resembles the reality of events as they probably occurred, while romanticizing it at the same time. Overall, however, Holcroft does an admirable job at maintaining a balanced representation of the rioters, though the “strong and lasting” impressions that the riots made on him tend to shine through in key moments in the narrative.

His descriptions of the Protestant Association supporters gathered at St. George’s Fields is in many ways more impartial than previous authors’. He describes how "an immense concourse assembled at the place appointed, some with serious intentions, some with wicked, and others out of curiosity." He writes that "they proceeded with great decorum and decency on their route." This is a very different image than O’Beirne’s description of the same event, in which he writes of the “riotous assembly, that…marched in military parade through the principal streets of the city, with banners flying and practicing every inflammatory act of sedition." However, continues Holcroft, "it was very evident, from the habit and appearance of numbers among them, that order and regularity were not long to be expected from such an assembly; on the contrary, they soon began to exercise the most arbitrary and dictatorial power over both Lords and Commons."

After the guards began dispersing the unruly crowd in Palace yard, Holcroft wrote that "the Mob had paraded off in different divisions…and (whether initiated by religious phrenzy or designing men, time alone can tell) as a prelude to the horrid devastations which were to follow went some of them to the Romish Chapel in Duke-street, Lincoln's Inn-fields, and others to that
in Warwick-street, Golden Square, both of which they in a great measure demolished."\textsuperscript{153} At this scene, Holcroft is cautious not to place too much blame on the military for their inaction, perhaps out of a desire to not incur the wrath of the authorities upon the publication of his \textit{Narrative}. In regards to the actions of the civil authorities, he writes that "those who had the command of the military were very cautious of proceeding to extremities, much scuffling ensued, and some few were slightly wounded with the bayonets."\textsuperscript{154} Later, while describing the scene of the destruction of Lord Mansfield’s house, Holcroft employs a similar tactic. He writes that "the military was sent for, but arrived too late; they were obliged, however, to fire in their own defence…"\textsuperscript{155} In that instance in particular, there was no excuse for the military to arrive too late, because the attack on Lord Mansfield’s house had been widely publicized by the rioters, and troops had been sent for earlier in the evening. Holcroft also portrays their firing on the rioters as a defensive act, although they should have been on the offensive side of the skirmish, fighting the rioters to protect private property, and not resorting to action only as a last resort. Holcroft, however, glosses over these actions in his narrative.

However, after describing the facts of the incidents which took place on June 2\textsuperscript{nd}, Holcroft inserts his own editorial opinion: "The conclusion of this evening’s disturbance may be said, to be only the beginning of those dreadful scenes of desolation which have since ensued; and which when the perpetrators are long sunk into oblivion, shall be recorded as some of the most unparalleled and daring outrages history can furnish."\textsuperscript{156} Whether he knew it or not, is \textit{Narrative} would play an important role in contributing to the memory of the Gordon riots as “those dreadful scenes of desolation” and “the most unparalleled and daring outrages” in years to

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 22-23.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 23.
come. In describing the outrages of Monday, June 5th, Holcroft related his impression that groups of rioters “seemed to have been marshalled out, and different bodies dispatched on these infernal errands,” which included destroying Catholic chapels in various neighborhoods around London as well as the houses of magistrates who had arrested rioters on previous nights and those witnesses who had spoken out against them.\textsuperscript{157} In his recreation of this scene sixty years later, Charles Dickens would use Holcroft’s ideas and imagery to suit his own plot, in which these bands of rioters were, quite literally, marshaled out on their “infernal errands” by Gashford, the scheming villain in Dickens’ work who was behind most of the tumults in the early stages of the riots.

Before continuing on to the memorable acts of rioting at Newgate prison and at Thomas Langdale’s premises, Holcroft offers a brief and apocalyptical introduction to these events: ”We now come to that period of desolation and destruction, when every man began to tremble, not only for the safety of the city, but for the constitution, for the kingdom, for property, liberty and life, for every thing that is dear to society, or to Englishmen.”\textsuperscript{158} As we have already seen, the events of June 6\textsuperscript{th} and 7\textsuperscript{th} shook many British subjects to their core. Haywood point out that many of these events, and in particular, the burning of Newgate and the wild orgy-like destruction at Langdale’s distillery, bear elements of the carnivalesque and feature many Saturnalian features, such as inverted power (particularly at Newgate), transgression, taboo, and the grotesque body.\textsuperscript{159} A lot of the popular discourse of the Gordon riots emphasized these carnivalesque elements of the riots, which lent a mock-epic quality to the riots and contributed in the transformation of the riots from history into myth. Holcroft’s \textit{Narrative} is a good example of

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 24-25.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{159} Haywood, \textit{Bloody Romanticism}, 185.
an early narrative of that gives precedence to the carnivalesque and Saturnalian features of the riots. "Everything which could impress the mind with ideas of universal anarchy, and approaching desolation, seemed to be accumulating," wrote Holcroft, “…the streets were swarming with people, and uproar, confusion, and terror reigned in every part.  

In his descriptions of the rioters’ destruction of Newgate prison, Holcroft emphasized the ideas of inverted power that the rioters reveled in and their transgression of societal rules:

The activity of the Mob was in this instance, as well as every other, amazing. They dragged out the prisoners, many of them, by the hair of the head, by the arms or legs, or whatever part they could lay hold of: They broke open the doors of the different entrances, as easily as if they had all their lives been acquainted with the intricacies of the place, to let the confined escape.  

In Holcroft’s narrative, the rioters transgress all acceptable notions of conduct when they break down the largest symbol of state power and the law and release the prisoners. Power is inverted: the dregs of society, its criminals and debtors, are set at liberty as the lawless mob breaks open all the doors of the gaol’s confines. Many contemporaries had been most terrified at the rioters’ audacity in destroying this powerful symbol, as well as the practical concern of hundreds of convicts running loose in the streets. Dickens would seize on this episode as the centerpiece of his novel as well, fascinated by the “mob”’s lawlessness and grotesque power. Another aspect of Holcroft’s description that Dickens picked up on was his suggestion that the riots had been carefully planned beforehand. Holcroft wrote: "so well planned were all the manoeuvres of these desperate ruffians, that they had placed centinels at their avenues, to prevent any of the prisoners from being conveyed to other jails.  

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160 Holcroft, *Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances*, 33.  
161 Ibid., 28.  
162 Ibid.
riots were part of a larger scheme to undermine the law and order of the capital; furthermore, it adds a sense of mystery and myth to the events at Newgate.

The most grotesque, mythologized aspect of the Gordon riots was without a doubt the destruction surrounding the premises of Thomas Langdale in Holborn. Holcroft gives the episode due credit, referring to it as "the most awful and dreadful spectacles this country every beheld," describing the conflagrations there as "horrible beyond description."\textsuperscript{163} Ian Haywood proposes this scene as the climax to the carnivalesque, mythic version of the riots, because this is the point when the "recidivist, infantilist ‘mob’ auto-destructs in a drunken orgy."\textsuperscript{164} Holcroft illustrates the self-destructiveness of the ‘mob’ in the following passage:

But powder and ball do not seem to have been so fatal to them as their own inordinate appetites. Numbers, it is said, and at various places, died with inebriation, especially at the distilleries of the unfortunate Mr. Langdale, from whose vessels the liquor ran down the middle of the street, was taken up by pailfuls, and held to the mouths of the besotted multitude; many of whom killed themselves with drinking non-rectified spirits, and were burnt or buried in the ruins... at Newgate likewise many of them had made so free with the liquor that they could not get away, and were burnt in the cells. In the streets men lying upon bulks and stalls, and at the doors of empty houses, drunk to a state of insensibility, and to a contempt of danger: boys and women were in the same condition, and many of the latter with infants in their arms.\textsuperscript{165}

Ian Haywood suggests that such scenes encoded bourgeois society’s worst fears about the plebeian underclass, without straying too far from the historical facts. In this case, Haywood sees "the ideological function of the quasi-anthropological discourse of recidivism" as both registering and containing the primitive violence of the crowd by turning it against itself.\textsuperscript{166} In portraying the rioters as self-destructive, recidivist and primitive in this manner, Holcroft upholds a tradition of representing the “mob” in these negative terms. The effect of this tradition

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 31-32.
\textsuperscript{164} Haywood, \textit{Bloody Romanticism}, 187.
\textsuperscript{165} Holcroft, \textit{Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances}, 36.
\textsuperscript{166} Haywood, \textit{Bloody Romanticism}, 187.
is to deny any sense of higher purpose or political consciousness that the rioters may have possessed, which is what the enlightened society feared above all else. In reality, we know from sources such as Horace Walpole and Susan Burney, as well as many others, that the rioters’ actions were not always so straightforward. Even here, at the drunken episode at Langdale’s distillery, the rioters showed an impressive modicum of “discipline”, allowing fire engines to put out fires in nearby buildings.\textsuperscript{167} Despite these subtleties of behavior, the rioters’ actions were simplified, demonized and mythologized over and over again in literature and popular discourse.

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After relating all the documentary incidences in the riots’ history, Holcroft devotes a section of his narrative to the matter of conspiracy theories regarding the riots. "It is now time,” he writes, “to relate another part of the business, which has claimed the attention of some politicians who pretend to see farther into latent causes than the bulk of the people.”\textsuperscript{168} Being too close to the riots themselves, Holcroft is willing to give credit to rumors about conspiracy theories. In particular, he cites a handbill distributed around London which claimed that the riots had been promoted by French money. This handbill, Holcroft wrote, “might take its rise from the general opinion; but…however, tended to give that opinion strength.”\textsuperscript{169} This was usually the pattern with rumors such as these; once one person intimated a possible cause for the riots, however spectacular it might be, others usually flocked to the idea and spread it via various media sources and word-of-mouth. Later in the same week that the handbill was posted, Holcroft relates that the newspapers gave accounts of French coins being found on the bodies of the rioters who had been killed or taken into custody, which seemed to further confirm the

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{168} Holcroft, \textit{Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances}, 43.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 44.
conjunctures. Finally, the arrest and committal of Lord George Gordon to the Tower, “under a remarkably strong guard, said to be far the most numerous that ever escorted a State Prisoner”, definitively confirmed the suspicions of a conspiracy behind the riots in the eyes of many observers and contemporaries.\textsuperscript{170} When this entourage walked paraded through London, Gordon was “so entirely…deemed the original Author, and promoter of the Riots” that few pitied or condoned him. Walpole wrote of this development, “the monster, that conjured up this tempest, is now manacled in the Tower.”\textsuperscript{171} Consequently, “a thousand surmises were circulated, such as, whether religion, avarice, or ambition, was the motive that had prompted him in the action, whether France, or any foreign powers had been abettors; and others of the like nature, equally, at present, vague and indeterminate.”\textsuperscript{172} Thus, Gordon’s arrest seemed to contemporaries a confirmation of their suspicions: a higher power was behind the rioters’ actions; though what the motives of this higher power were remained uncertain and gave rise to more rumors and speculation, each more wild than the next. The people would have to wait until the trial of Lord George Gordon to get any sort of closure on these questions.

**The Trials of Lord George Gordon**

The trial of Lord George Gordon on the count of treason was pushed off twice before a final date was settled upon, in order so that the prosecution would have more time to build their case against him. The finalized date of the trial was set for February 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1781, when Lord

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 45. According to Holcroft, this “remarkably strong guard” supposedly consisted of a large party of infantry in the front, Lord George in a coach with two officers following them, two soldiers riding behind the coach and followed immediately by a regiment of dragoons. After this was a Colonel’s guard of the Foot Guards, and a strong party of Militia marched on each side of the carriage.

\textsuperscript{171} Walpole, *Correspondence with Sir Horace Mann*, 62.

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
George would appear before the Court of the King’s Bench to stand trial for High Treason against his King and country. However, in the time that passed between his arrest and the trial, Gordon passed through many unofficial trials at the hands of his contemporaries, many of whom judged his actions and debated them amongst themselves. Speculation and slanderous statements about Lord George were rampant in the capital, creating a kind of myth around him as well as his followers.

Those who had known Lord George before the riots described an enthusiastic young man whose actions in Parliament were often erratic, but who had seemed to them essentially harmless. Samuel Romilly recalled that, from what he know of Lord George Gordon before the riots broke out, he “never thought him a man from whom his country had much to dread”:

He spoke, indeed, upon all occasions; but his speeches were incoherent and ridiculous…He seemed the less dangerous as he had not the support of either party; one day he attacked the Ministry, the next the Opposition, and sometimes both the one and the other. It has happened to him to divide the House, when he alone voted for a question, to which every other member gave his negative. Yet what dreadful effects may not a mistaken zeal produce even in such hands as these?173

Though, upon further reflection, he did admit that Lord George was not lacking in those qualities which, “in an age when religion had greater influence upon the minds of men that it has at present, might have raised him to be the scourge of his country.” He possessed a “spirit of enthusiasm” and the “most determined resolution”; added to this, his conversational manner of speaking was deemed “most capable of working an effect upon an ignorant audience.”174

While describing how Lord George harangued his followers in the lobby of Parliament, Romilly, who was present in the House of Lords that day, noted that “nothing could deter this

173 Romilly, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, 130.
174 Ibid., 130-131.
frantic incendiary, till he was by violence forced back into the House.”  "From that point onwards, in letters to Roget, he referred to Gordon in passing as “that madman, Lord George Gordon.”  Walpole, also, in relation to this incident, called him a “mad dog” and claimed that every man who heard him that day could “convict him of the worst kind of sedition.” However, he cautioned, “it is dangerous to create a rascal a martyr.”  As for his sense of Gordon’s religious enthusiasm, Walpole wrote that “besides being very debauched, he has more knavery than mission, and that “no saint was ever more diabolic than Lord Geo. Gordon.”  Crabbe, who witnessed Lord George being pulled by the mob in a coach as he passed by the fires at Newgate, recalled “a lively-looking young man in appearance, and nothing more, though just now the reigning hero.”

Holcroft, in his *Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances*, referred also to Gordon’s "eccentric and desultory character", and his tendency, both in and out of Parliament, “to place those objects, which, as it proved, well deserved the most serious attention, in a ludicrous than a serious point of view.”  He summarized the overall impression of Gordon’s person saying, "He has the manners and air of a modern Puritan; his figure is meagre, his hair strait and his dress plain."  Dickens would pick up on this imagery in *Barnaby Rudge*, describing Gordon in similar terms, though in his version, the fictionalized version of Gordon was endowed with a complex personality not witnessed in any contemporary accounts, most of which dismissed him as simply mad or incendiary. To be fair, they had plenty of reason to. After citing one of Gordon’s inflammatory advertisements on behalf of the Protestant Association, Holcroft

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175 Ibid., 118.
176 Ibid., 119.
177 Walpole vol. 25, p. 55
178 Walpole vol 25, 55; vol 33, 179.
180 Holcroft, *Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances*, 11.
181 Ibid.
commented that "Lord George had frequently spoken in terms which seemed intended to
intimidate the House of Commons; and, in order to shew that he was more in earnest, and had
more power than they believed, he took every method to incite the public attention." 182

Inciting the public attention is something that Gordon undoubtedly succeeded in doing. When the Morning Herald newspaper covered Gordon’s trial on February 6th, 1781, the article took up more space than was usually allotted for news articles, and the space normally allocated to advertising was greatly reduced. This is something that usually happened when particular news items were considered to be of great importance; on this particular occasion, the advertisements were so greatly reduced that the Herald was prompted to publish an apology to its advertisers the following day. 183

The trial itself lasted for over twenty continuous hours, beginning early in the morning of February 5th, 1781, and not adjourning until a quarter past five o’clock of the following morning. 184 The Crown aimed to prove that Gordon was guilty of what was legally known as “constructive treason,” which was considered “something equivalent to treason, though not intended or realized as such.” 185 The witnesses they brought were meant to show that the riots had been the planned results of the demonstration connected with the Protestant Association’s petition, which Gordon had so forcefully assembled together on June 2nd. Gordon’s defense, however, led by the experienced lawyer Lord Kenyon and the young Thomas Erskine, skillfully cast doubt on the reliability of the Crown’s witnesses and the quality of their testimony. Erskine’s impressive and lengthy concluding remarks pointed out that neither Gordon nor the

\[\text{References:}\]
\[182\] Ibid., 15.
\[183\] Barker, Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth Century England, 34.
Protestant Association had any part in the riots themselves. In fact, he pointed out that “out of 44,000 persons, who signed the Petition of the Protestants, not one was to be found among those who were convicted, tried, or even apprehended on suspicion.”\textsuperscript{186} At worst, Erskine implied, Lord George Gordon was guilty of a lack of foresight in predicting how violently his assembly might have turned out; however, he argued, his client was not guilty of maliciously or intentionally planning the violence that ensued as a result of his petition. When the jury returned from their deliberations past five o’clock in the morning, they agreed: their verdict was “Not Guilty”. This verdict, according to Erskine’s editor, James Ridgway, was “repeated from mouth to mouth to the uttermost extremities of London, by the multitudes which filled the streets.”\textsuperscript{187} Doctor Johnson expressed his relief that Gordon “escaped”, for he feared that a precedent should not be set for hanging men for constructive treason; Burke agreed on similar grounds, and, surprisingly, so did Walpole.

Though the official trial was now over, one of the most interesting aspects about it was the afterlife it enjoyed in the popular press. Joseph Gurney’s official transcription of it was published in a total of five editions during 1781 alone, in addition to numerous condensed and expanded versions published by independent publishers and individuals. Thomas Holcroft was again recruited by Fielding and Walker to publish his short hand version of the trial transcripts, along with “an account of the manner of conducting the trial” and other assorted addenda. This condensed version of the trial appealed to a popular audience, and was reprinted in the same year by different publishers across the country, including Fisher in Rochester, England, and Simmons,

\textsuperscript{186} Joseph Gurney, transcriber, “‘The Proceedings at Large on the Trial of Lord George Gordon, for High Treason, in the Court of King’s Bench, Westminster’”, in \textit{A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason and Other Crimes and Misdemeanours, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time}, ed. T.B. Howell (London: Hansard, 1814), 620.
Kirby, and Smith and Son in Canterbury, England.\(^{188}\) It was also reprinted in the *Westminster Magazine* and may have been a source for the version published in *Gentleman’s Magazine*.\(^{189}\) Another accessible, condensed version appeared in the *Annual Register* for that year; additionally, Lord George Gordon’s friends published a version of it in Edinburgh, to which they attached a brief history of the Protestant Association and four letters in Gordon’s defense. People were fascinated by this sensational trial, a fact which the many editions and versions of the published transcripts can attest to. Gordon was undoubtedly the celebrity of the moment, just as during the riots he had been the “reigning hero.” But how is he remembered today?

Like the Gordon riots themselves, Lord George Gordon all but faded from the history books after this initial period of his momentary but spectacular fame, with a few exceptions. Austin Dobson, writing in his essay about the Gordon riots in the beginning of the twentieth century, meditated on his historical personality, as he perceived it:

> Lord George Gordon is one of those ambiguous historical personages who, for a brief period, flash into sudden significance, and then, having contrived to do incalculable harm, fade away again as suddenly. Their intentions may have been good, though their methods were mistaken; but as individuals they lie so much on the border line that it is difficult to determine whether they are more sane than mad—more fanatic than lunatic.\(^{190}\)

Both “fanatic” and “lunatic” seem like apt ways to describe Gordon, as he is represented to us in contemporary accounts, and even in the trial records. Dickens would seize on the “mad” streak in Gordon’s personality to build a sophisticated theory of British riot and revolution, as we will see in the next chapter. Modern historians either dismiss Gordon completely, or excuse him on similar grounds as Erskine did, though some do contend that he was “a revolutionary of the first

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\(^{189}\) Ibid.

\(^{190}\) Dobson, “The Gordon Riots,” 82.
Regardless of their opinion of him, however, there is no doubt that the period between the riots in 1780 and Gordon’s trial in 1781 saw him transformed from a brash young Member of Parliament into a caricaturized, ridiculed and defamed leader of riot. To borrow Haywood’s terms, Gordon became a “mock-leader” in the context of the “spectacular” riot.

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We have seen in this chapter how the Gordon riots began to take on a mythic, carnivalesque quality in the eyes of contemporaries. The heightened atmosphere of fear surrounding the riots, combined with the scarcity of reliable information about their true purpose and origins, as well as the spectacular scale of destruction and disorder that they engendered in the capital, all combined to create a mystique around them that assisted in their transformation from historical episode into cultural legend. Ian Haywood has argued that out of the Gordon riots, there emerged “a new force in British cultural history - the spectacular mob.” The function of the Gordon riots as a cultural legend would heavily influence the cultural construction of popular disturbances throughout the nineteenth century; Haywood writes that it was “this mythic carnivalesque crowd which haunted the bourgeois imagination until well into the nineteenth century”. The spectacular violence and imagery of the Gordon riots provided a lens through which future generations of British subjects would perceive later disturbances, such as the Priestly riots, the Luddite movement, the Peterloo Massacre, the Cato Street conspiracy, and the Bristol Reform Bill riots, to name a few nineteenth century popular disturbances. The significance of these events were interpreted through the British subjects apprehensions, born out of the violence and destructiveness of the Gordon riots and the popular discourse surrounding them. In the next chapter we will turn to a detailed examination of how the popular discourse

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191 de Castro.
surrounding the Gordon riots helped to construct one author’s interpretation of later, nineteenth century popular disturbances.
Chapter 4

Romantic Riot: Dickens’ Barnaby Rudge

In 1836, the young journalist and aspiring novelist Charles Dickens made an agreement with the publisher of his collection of short stories to have his first novel published by the end of the year. That novel, originally titled Gabriel Vardon, the Locksmith of London, would eventually become Barnaby Rudge, a tale of the Riots of ’80, and would not be published until 1841, as the fifth of Dickens’s novels. What interfered was a series of logistical and strategic setbacks for Barnaby Rudge, though the five year period of its incubation nonetheless proved to be a fruitful time for Dickens, for it was during this time that he began to establish himself as a wildly popular and successful novelist. However, it is apparent that Dickens’s “persistence in his plan for ‘a tale of the Riots of ’80’ is evidence of his tenacity of purpose and the grip of the original idea on his imagination.”

His idea was to write a historical novel based on the Gordon riots of 1780, of which he said that “no account…have been to my knowledge introduced into any Work of Fiction, and the subject presenting very extraordinary and remarkable features.” Among these very extraordinary and remarkable features were the spectacular nature of the riots themselves, excellent fodder for an aspiring writer- the burning of Newgate prison in particular, which was a subject close to Dickens’ heart- and the subject’s relevance to Dickens’ own time. The 1830’s and 1840’s, characterized by the Luddite and Chartist movements amongst many others, were decades rife with civil unrest and popular protest, and “the revolution that never

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193 Kathleen Tillotson, “Introduction” in Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of ’Eighty (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), v; In fact, a fictional novel about the Gordon riots, Thomas Gaspey’s The Mystery, had been published in 1820, but Dickens did not seem to be aware of its existence.
happened always seemed imminent.” However, the five years delay between Dickens’ conception of the novel and its publication actually increased its topicality.

The years between 1836 and 1841 were witness to the Poor Law riots, the Chartist risings at Devies, Birmingham, and Sheffield, the mass meetings on Kersal Moor and Kennington Common, and the famed Newport rising of 1839, as well as their aftermath of trials, convictions and petitions against the death penalty. Some modern historians have identified the years between 1839 and 1842 as “the potential flashpoint for a British revolution that might have been”, and the Dickens’s readers certainly appreciated the similarities between their own troubled times and the tumults of forty years previously. However, the historical parallel between this period and the period in which the Gordon riots took place is nowhere near perfect, and many critics argued that Dickens’s portrayal of the riots was less than accurate. Kathleen Tillotson thinks that Dickens was responding not to “enlightened historical analysis, but to the average man’s horror of looted chapels and distilleries, armed robbery in the streets, prisons and mansions set ablaze—sights imprinted ineffaceably upon the memories of many living individuals, and the family memories of thousands more.” However, Dickens was doing much more than that. In a letter to his friend Charles Ollier dated June 3, 1841, while discussing his ongoing research the novel in regards to Lord George Gordon, Dickens wrote, "As to the Riot, I am going to try if I can't make a better one than he did." In this statement, though written half in jest, in what was perhaps a fit of indulgent fancy, Dickens provides a reverberant echo of Ronald Paulson’s concept of the artist as rioter. Sixty one years after the Gordon riots took place,

Charles Dickens wrote a fictional representation of them, coloured in many ways with his own personal biases and with the cadences of his own time. In creating a fictional representation of the Gordon riots, Dickens affected a certain type of response from his readers, which in turn affected the way the riots were remembered and interpreted.

Dickens’s version of the Gordon riots was very much shaped by the politics of his own day and his own personal biases. Writing a review of the novel in 1842, Thomas Hood wrote that *Barnaby Rudge* was "interesting, and particularly well-timed. It is a matter of pride with some of our old citizens, to remember the Great Riots of ’80…looking round at the present day, they would recognize some of the same elements at work; the same, nay- a worse fanatical demon abroad, ready to burn, not merely Catholic Chapels and Distilleries, but Picture Galleries, Museums, Literary Institutions, Her Majesty's Theatres, and the people's Punch and Judy…"¹⁹⁹ Hood was referring probably to the Luddites in this particular instance, members of a movement that was opposed to the changes produced by the Industrial Revolution, who often destroyed the means of mechanized production as a means of social protest. However, it is important to note that the social and political protests of the 1830’s were on the whole, not nearly as violent as the Gordon riots had been. The Chartist movement, in particular, amounted to an impressively orderly political movement for working class rights and representation. In light of this, there are critics argue that in comparing the these sophisticated political movements with the Gordon riots, Dickens was undermining the credibility of the popular movements of his day. Many critics believed that he was using the moral and historical lessons of the Gordon riots to “de politicize, demonize and defuse the social unrest of the 1830's.”²⁰⁰

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Indeed, Dickens appears to frame to Gordon riots as a moral story in response to the civil unrest of this day. In the preface to *Barnaby Rudge*, he wrote:

It is unnecessary to say, that those shameful tumults, while they reflect indelible disgrace upon the time in which they occurred, and all who had act or part in them, teach a good lesson. That what we falsely call a religious cry is easily raised by men who have no religion, and who in their daily practice set at nought the commonest principles of right and wrong; that it is begotten of intolerance and persecution; that it is senseless, besotted, inveterate and unmerciful; all History teaches us. But perhaps we do not know it in our hearts too well, to profit by even so humble an example as the 'No Popery' riots of Seventeen Hundred and Eighty.\(^{201}\)

By the novel’s end, Dickens definitely comes down heavily on the side of loyalism and order. All the evil characters are punished, and the “good” characters triumph. Therefore, on the surface, *Barnaby Rudge* represents the Gordon riots as a moral story of good versus evil. On the other hand, there are those like Iain McCalman, who argue that *Barnaby Rudge*, for all its literary and historical faults, “mounts a profound and sustained analysis of the peculiarities of British revolution, particularly in its relation to romanticism.”\(^{202}\) This chapter will examine the often complex ways in which Dickens explored the anatomy of British riot through his literary interpretation of the Gordon riots.

**Representation of the Rioters**

Dickens’ representation of the rioters and their actions is fairly straightforward, though imaginative. In his scheme of things, the riots themselves “are powered by no political or social motive: they are the product of a mindless, bestial mob manipulated by evil conspirators and

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\(^{202}\) McCalman, “Controlling the riots: Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* and romantic revolution”, 210-211.
psychological misfits, all actuated by personal grievances." In the first half of the novel, Dickens focuses on the residents of the London suburb of Chigwell, all of whom eventually play some part in the riots which ensue, and all of whom are representative of a particular type of character, driven to join the rioters as a result of their own personal motivations. There is no overarching theme or cause behind Dickens’ riots, though they are carefully planned and manipulated by “evil conspirators” such as Gashford, Lord George Gordon’s rogue secretary, and John Chester, a self serving Protestant, both of whom serve as vice characters in the novel.

Lord George Gordon, on the other hand, commonly remembered as the instigator of the Gordon riots, Dickens chose to paint in a more sympathetic light. In Barnaby, he is a righteous minded and well-meaning man, though somewhat oblivious to the results of his own actions and easily misled.

The following passage encapsulates both Dickens’ representation of the rioters and of Lord George Gordon. It describes the crowd of supporters who had gathered at St. Georges’ Fields on June 2\textsuperscript{nd} to follow Lord George to Parliament to present the Protestant Association’s petition as they wait their leader to address them:

They had by this time taken to their singing again, and as their leader passed between their ranks, they raised their voices to their utmost. Many of those who were banded together to support the religion of their country, even unto death, had never heard a hymn or psalm in all their lives. But these fellows having for the most part strong lungs, and being naturally fond of singing, chanted any ribaldry or nonsense that occurred to them, feeling pretty certain that it would not be detected in the general chorus, and not caring much if it were. Many of these voluntaries were sung under the very nose of Lord George Gordon, who quite unconscious of their burden, passed on with his usual stiff and solemn deportment, very much edified and delighted by the pious conduct of his followers.\textsuperscript{204}

Here Lord George is represented as oblivious at best, and as dangerously ignorant at worst. He does not realize that his followers are not all the pious men they profess to be; in fact, many of

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{204} Dickens, \textit{Barnaby Rudge}, 368.
them do not so much as profess it, as he believes they do because that is what he wants to believe. In reality, many of his “followers” who have gathered as part of this mass of people have little knowledge or interest in his Protestant cause; they have just joined the crowd for the fun of it, though at this point they are not yet dangerous.

Yet, on the march to Westminster, Dickens characterizes his protagonist Barnaby, a simpleton to has gotten in with the crowd for the wrong reasons, as “the only light-hearted, undesigning creature in the whole assembly,” implying that the vast majority of the throng had darker, sinister plans in mind.205 By the time Gordon’s procession reaches Palace Yard, having picked up many new members on its way, Dickens characterizes the crowd in much more explicit terms: “this vast throng, sprinkled doubtless here and there with honest zealots, but composed for the most part of the very scum and refuse of London, whose growth was fostered by bad criminal laws, bad prison regulations, and the worst conceivable police…”206 While he favors the interpretation that supposes that even at this early stage of the riots, the crowd was mainly composed of the criminal element, he wastes no opportunity to lambast the criminal justice system that created them. It is at moments such as these that Dickens’ personal prejudices and radical side shines through, complicating his representation of the rioters and the riots.

Overall, however, Dickens’s descriptions of the rioters are characterized by bestial, savage, animal imagery. In his book *Dickens and Crime*, Phillip Collins wrote that “the recurrent imagery by which the mob [in *Barnaby Rudge*] is described is…that of devils, savages, animals, the sea, and of irrational, insane, diseased, and feverish creatures.”207 Dickens’s imagines the rioters as part of Ian Haywood’s concept of the “spectacular mob”, representing them in the

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205 Ibid., 372.
206 Ibid., 374.
descriptive terms of Romantic poetry and sensibilities. Depicting the scene in Palace Yard as the day of June 2nd wore on, Dickens wrote: "The noise and uproar were on the increase every moment. The air was filled with execrations, hoots, and howlings. The mob raged and roared, like a mad monster as it was, unceasingly, and each new outrage served to swell its fury." Here the “mob” is personified as a “mad monster”, howling and hooting in uncontrollable fury and rage. He continued:

So sure as any member…came struggling through the crowd in the lobby, it yelled and screamed in triumph; and when the door of the House, partially and cautiously opened by those within for his admission, gave them a momentary glimpse of the interior, they grew more wild and savage, like beasts at the sight of prey, and made a rush against the portal which strained its locks and bolts in their staples, and shook the very beams.

In this passage, he refers to the crowd as “it”, emphasizing the idea of the mass of people as an animal, a beast preying on innocent prey, rather than a conglomerate of individual human beings gathered together in a crowd.

Though the crowd is portrayed a beast, it is nonetheless weak, being deprived of the strength of moral convictions. It turns cowardly at the threats of General Conway and Colonel Gordon, the Members of Parliament who threatened Lord George with his life if he did not tell his followers to disperse before their very eyes. They start to retreat, but the manipulations of Gashford contrive to make them stay put, and attempt to force open the door to the chambers of the House of Commons with their sheer brute force. However, having gotten this close, all it takes is a rumor that the military is in the street to make them run and scatter outside. Later, the narrative finds the ringleaders of the mob, Dennis, Hugh and Simon, resting in a local pub, contented with the day’s activities. Gashford comes in and skillfully manipulates them into

\[208\] Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, 375.
\[209\] Ibid.
\[210\] Ibid., 377.
action, sending them out to commit the first acts of destruction that sparked the rioting on the evening of June 2\textsuperscript{nd} - the burning of the Sardinian and Bavarian chapels.

Gashford is Dickens’s answer to the éminence grise that many contemporaries of the Gordon riots thought were behind the tumults, operating in secret and guiding the rioters’ actions. He paints the relationship between the scheming Gashford and the hapless rioters in this powerful passage, in which Gashford watches the crowd’s doing at the Sardinian chapel at Lincoln’s Inn Field from the rooftop of a nearby house:

They had torches among them, and the chief faces were distinctly visible...Covered with soot, and dirt, and dust, and lime; their garments torn to rags; their hair hanging wildly about them; their hands and faces jagged and bleeding with the wounds of rusty nails; Barnaby, Hugh, and Dennis hurried on before them all, like hideous madmen. After them, the dense throng came fighting on: some singing, some shouting in triumph; some quarrelling among themselves; some menacing the spectators as they passed; some with great wooden fragments, on which they spent their rage as if they had been alive, rending them limb from limb, and hurling the scattered morsels up in the air; some in a drunken state, unconscious of the hurts they had received from falling bricks, and stones, and beams; one borne upon a shutter, in the very midst, covered with a dingy cloth, a senseless, ghastly heap. Thus- a vision of coarse faces, with here and there a blot of flaring, smoky light; a dream of demon heads and savage eyes, and sticks and iron bars uplifted in the air, and whirled about; a bewildering horror, in which so much was seen, and yet so little, which seemed so long, and yet so short, in which there were so many phantoms, not to be forgotten all through life, and yet so many things that could not be observed in one distracting glimpse- it flitted onward, and was gone.\textsuperscript{211}

This nightmarish vision is full of “hideous madmen”, “coarse faces”, “demon heads and savage eyes”, “bewildering horror”, and “phantoms”. It is the personification of Ian Haywood’s spectacular mob, described in the terms of hyperbolic realism, in which the reality of the situation was so indescribable and unbelievable, that the only terms available to describe it adequately were those of the visceral and sublime. When the beast threatens to cross into his own threshold, the honorouble locksmith Gabriel Varden asks of his treacherous apprentice, Sim

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 385-386.
Tappertit, “What devil is abroad?” to which Sim answers, “A fiery devil…a flaming, furious devil. Don’t put yourself in its way, or you’re done for my buck.”

Dickens’s sublime did not stop at devils and phantoms. He made ample use of heroic imagery of to describe the rough and uncontrollable nature of the mob; in particular, the sea proved to be a useful metaphor to suit his purposes. “A mob,” the author muses, “is usually a creature of very mysterious existence, particularly in a large city. Where it comes from or whither it goes, few men can tell. Assembling and dispersing with equal suddenness, it is as difficult to follow its various sources as the sea itself; nor does the parallel stop here, for the ocean is not more fickle and uncertain, more terrible when roused, more unreasonable, or more cruel.” Although originally, the actions of the crowd had been carefully planned, Dickens stresses that the “mob” took on a life of its own, as unpredictable and uncontrollable as the sea, drawing innocent people in and drowning them in the flood of the multitude. He wrote:

From the moment of their first outbreak at Westminster, every symptom of order or preconcert arrangement among them vanished. When they divided into parties and ran to different quarters of town, it was on the spontaneous suggestion of the moment. Each party swelled as it went along, like rivers as they roll towards the sea; new leaders sprang up as they were wanted, disappeared when the necessity was over, and reappeared at the next crisis. Each tumult took shape and form from the circumstances of the moment; sober workmen, going home from their day's labor, were seen to cast down their baskets of tools and become rioters in an instant; mere boys on errands did the like. In a word, a moral plague ran through the city. The noise, and hurry, and excitement, had for hundreds and hundreds an attraction they had no firmness to resist. The contagion spread like a dread fever: an infectious madness, as yet not near its height, seized on new victims every hour, and society began to tremble at their ravings.

Thus, though a hidden hand did incite it, once the mob was formed, it acted of its own accord in unaccountable and unpredictable ways. It swept in its wake “sober workmen” and “mere boys on errands”, and turned them into monstrous rioters. “In a word,” Dickens concludes, “a moral

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212 Ibid., 392.
213 Ibid., 396.
214 Ibid., 403.
plague ran through the city.” It is here that he begins to unite the heroic, sensational and ineffable aspects of this mob with the reality of his own times. His references to “sober workmen” and “mere boys”, while equally as applicable to the Gordon rioters, as we have seen from contemporary accounts, seems to have been geared more to the civil protesters of his own day, including the Luddite weavers and the Chartist working class reformers. Their civil protests he deemed an “infectious madness” and a “moral plague” not only on the city of London and its inhabitants, but on society as a whole.

Many critics have condemned *Barnaby Rudge* as a novel due to the author’s supposed failure to integrate the two distinct parts of the novel; the first, which takes place in a pastoral suburb and concerns the petty doings of its small town folk, and the second, which shifts rather suddenly to the sensational historical focus of the novel, the Gordon riots. However, Dickens does integrate them, and his focus in the first half of the novel is building up the foundation of his theory of riot. As Iain McCalman has observed, all of Dickens’s characters are motivated by personal grievances. Dickens himself wrote that "the great mass never reasoned or thought at all, but were stimulated by their own headlong passions, by poverty, by ignorance, by the love of mischief, and the hope of plunder."\(^{215}\) In the first half of the novel, he constructs his characters personalities and personal motivations. Sim Tappertit stands for organized labor, and as a character is “as rabid as he is ridiculous”\(^ {216}\); both he and Hugh are also motivated by sexual lusts, as both of them are in love and hope to carry off the objects of their unrequited affections in the confusion of the rioting. Barnaby is an imbecile, but he is also motivated by megalomania; he is under the delusion that he will find gold by joining the crowd, and thus unwittingly gets caught up in the crowd violence. Others, like Dennis the public hangman, are

\(^{215}\) Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, 403.  
depicted as innately brutish and are motivated by a desire for gratuitous violence. In the second half of the novel, Dickens intertwines the private details of his characters’ lives, established in the first half, with historical events that were symptomatic of his own time. His message was that it is individuals- his so-called “sober workmen”- who form a crowd; a silent hand directs that crowd to commit acts of violence, and those acts of violence transform a crowd into a mob, which takes on a life of its own and becomes something otherworldly; something ineffable; something sublime.

**Lord George Gordon, Barnaby and Madness in *Barnaby Rudge***

*Barnaby Rudge*’s earliest commentators, including Dickens’s best friend John Forster, could not understand why Dickens had presented the “mad and incendiary Lord George Gordon” in such a charitable light.\(^{217}\) In a letter to Forster dated June 3rd, 1841, Dickens wrote on the subject: "Say what you please of Gordon, he must have been at heart a kind man, and a lover of the despised and rejected, after his own fashion.\(^{218}\) Dickens’s understanding of Gordon’s character was most certainly colored by John Watson’s sympathetic portrayal of him in a biography published in 1795, which Dickens relied on heavily for source material. However, Dickens’s portrayal of Gordon is much more complex than Watson’s, and contributes heavily to Dickens’s analysis of the British riot.

The Lord George Gordon who appears in *Barnaby Rudge*- a man who “dressed in a plain suit of black, wore long lank hair, and carried a great cane”- is portrayed as eccentric and

\(^{217}\) Ibid., 208.

melancholy, yet ultimately kind and sincere. His judgment is not sound; he places his trust in the wrong people, like Gashford, who ultimately misleads and abandons him, and rejects those most loyal to him, like his honest servant John Grueby, who sticks up for him throughout the course of the whole novel. Ultimately, Iain McCalman sees Gordon as typologically closer to Barnaby the idiot than anyone else in the novel; both well meaning but easily misled, Barnaby and Gordon share one more crucial similarity, which informs Dickens’s analysis of riot: they are both touched with more than a tinge of madness.

Barnaby’s madness is more explicit than Gordon’s. Barnaby is a simpleton, and his madness derives from his flights of fancy, and his intellectual inability to distinguish between reality and fiction. Gordon, on the other hand, is considered mad because society deems him so. It is his sincere religious zeal and his single-mindedness in pursuing what he believes is a legitimate and righteous course of action that earns him the societal label “mad”- a label which followed historical Gordon around for the rest of his life. Dickens explores this relationship between religious enthusiasm and madness in the following passage from *Barnaby Rudge*. It is a scene in which Lord George Gordon and Gashford come across Barnaby and his mother on their way to St. George’s Fields on the morning of June 2nd. Barnaby desperately wants to join Gordon’s crowd of supporters, believing that he will find gold among them, and therefore entirely won over to Gordon’s “cause”, though he knows not what it is. His mother, however, senses that no good can come of Gordon’s crowd and pleads with Gordon to leave Barnaby alone, fearing for her son’s safety. She pleads:

"This is my son, my poor afflicted son…In mercy’s name, my lord, go your way alone, and do not tempt him into danger!...He is not in his right senses, he is not, indeed!"

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"It is a bad sign of the wickedness of these times," said Lord George, evading her touch, and colouring deeply, “that those who cling to the truth and support the right cause, are set down as mad. Have you the heart to say this of your own son, unnatural mother!"

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“He has no appearance," said Lord George, glancing at Barnaby, and whispering in his secretary's ear, “of being deranged? And even if he had, we must not construe any trifling peculiarity into madness. Which of us” - and here he turned red again- “would be safe, if that were made the law!”

“Not one,” replied the secretary; "in that case, the greater the zeal, the truth, and talent; the more direct the call from above; the clearer would be the madness. With regard to this young man, my lord,’ he added, with a lip that slightly curled as he looked at Barnaby, who stood twirling his hat, and stealthily beckoning them to come away, “he is as sensible and self-possessed as any one I ever saw."

Dickens’s examination of the societal view of madness in these passages is reflective of the changes that had been developing in British society over the previous two centuries. The eighteenth century in particular was known as the “Age of Enlightenment”, or the “Age of Reason”; the progress of the natural sciences and the achievements in philosophy that occurred during this period persuaded many members of British society, from the top down, that extremes of religious enthusiasm were unnatural and subversive. The governing elite, concerned with the rise of religious sects with politically subversive doctrines “sought to discredit enthusiasm by representing it as a kind of mental disease…by the middle of the eighteenth century the idea that religious zeal was a mental disease had become the ruling-class shibboleth.” Religious leaders’ “inspired faith” was called equated with “mad delusion” and their followers’ “pious emotionalism” was labeled “religious melancholy”. In his Dictionary, Samuel Johnson defined enthusiasm by quoting John Locke, the great Enlightenment thinker: “a vain belief in private revelation” that “arises from the conceits of a warmed or overweeing imagination”.

220 Ibid., 366.
222 Ibid., 120.
MacDonald quotes a colloquial proverb of the day, which claimed that “Enthusiasm and Madness are but the same thing in different words.”\textsuperscript{223} Dickens revisits with this theme of madness at many points throughout the novel, especially in regards to both Barnaby and Gordon’s characters.

In another scene, Gordon and Barnaby meet again, and Gordon asks his servant John Grueby if he's seen Barnaby before; when he answers in the affirmative, the following scene ensues:

“Did-did it seem to you that his manner was at all wild or strange?” Lord George demanded, faltering.
“My lord,” said John, with emphatic brevity.
“And why do you think him mad, sir?” said his master, speaking in a peevish tone. “Don't use that word too freely. Why do you think him mad?”
“My lord,” John Grueby answered, “look at his dress, look at his eyes, look at his restless way, hear him cry ‘No Popery!’ Mad, my lord.”
“So because one man dresses unlike another,” returned his angry master, glancing at himself, “and happens to differ from other men in his carriage and manner, and to advocate a great cause which the corrupt and irreligious desert, he is to be accounted mad, is he?”
“Stark, staring, raving, roaring mad, my lord,” returned the unmoved John.\textsuperscript{224}

Here John Grueby is the voice of both popular and enlightened society, but he is also the voice of reason; unlike Gordon, who is so stubbornly single minded in his pursuit of the righteous path, he can discriminate between Barnaby’s madness and Gordon’s enthusiasm. He does believe in his master and his master’s intentions, but he will not tell him what he wants to hear like Gashford does. Lord George, angered by his servant’s implications, dismisses John and says that he is proud to be the leader of such righteous men as Barnaby. Though unceremoniously dismissed from his master’s service for his honesty, John remains loyal to him and later, when the riots have reached their apex, calls Gordon “a misled man- a kind-hearted man…My lord

\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 119-120.
\textsuperscript{224} Dickens, \textit{Barnaby Rudge}, 436.
never intended this.”

Indeed, when Gordon sits in his prison cell in the Tower towards the end of the novel, “remorseful for every act that had been done by every man among the cruel crowd; feeling for the time their guilt his own, and their lives put in peril by himself; and finding, amidst such reflections, little comfort in fanaticism, or in his fancied call”, none of his followers are there to stand by him except for John.

Both Gordon’s and Barnaby’s madness is contrasted with the general madness of the riots themselves. To further drive this point home, Dickens gave voice to a rumor that might have been circulated during the riots, that the rioters meant to throw open the gates of Bedlam, and let all the madmen loose, similar to how they let all the prisoners out of Newgate and the other prisons around town. Dickens wrote that this idea “suggested such dreadful images to the people’s minds, and was indeed an act so fraught with new and unimaginable horrors in the contemplation, that it best them more than any loss or cruelty of which they could foresee the worst, and drove many sane men nearly mad themselves.”

The threat of the madmen of Bedlam on the loose across London scared Dickens’s citizens more than the explicit threats to the Bank of England, the Inns of Court, the prisons and the Royal Palaces combined. Dickens original intention was to make three escapees from Bedlam the masterminds behind the riots, but later changed his mind, opting instead for a more subtle approach to his theme. Kathleen Tillotson thinks that Dickens recognized that “in the popular mind madness, crime and revolutionary agitation ran into and coloured each other; but he saw the need for discrimination, and suggests it by his emphasis on Gordon’s abnormality and the reprieve of Barnaby.”

Gordon’s “abnormality” is his faith in the conviction of his beliefs and his enthusiasm, mistaken

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225 Ibid., 508.
226 Ibid., 566.
227 Ibid., 514.
228 Tillotson, “Introduction”, viii.
for madness by his society; Dickens portrays him sympathetically because he believes that Gordon was sincere and his intentions were innocent enough, but that society and history had judged him harshly. Barnaby is excused for his madness for similar reasons. The rioters, on the other hand, those “sober workmen” who got caught up in the mischief, Dickens does not let off so easily. Within the constructs of his moral tale, evil-doers like Hugh, Dennis and Sim Tappertit are punished either by death or by serious debilitating injury, respectively.

**The Destruction of Newgate and the End of the Riots**

Although for the most part Dickens condemns the rioters, there is one instance of rioting that he seems almost to delight in, which he portrays with a mixture of fascination and repulsion, and for which he has more than a little personal sympathy. The specter of Newgate prison haunted Charles Dickens his whole life, since he passed by its walls regularly as a child, fending for himself while his family was imprisoned in another London debtors’ prison. Newgate was a powerful symbol for Dickens, of the social and economic oppression he felt as a boy in London, of the harsh criminal justice system he did not approve of, and the abuses of power that he knew occurred within its thick walls. According to Edmund Wilson, the literary critic, the “satisfaction [Dickens] obviously feels in demolishing the sinister old prison, which, rebuilt, had oppressed him in childhood, completely obliterates the effect of his right-minded references in his preface to 'those shameful tumults.’”\(^{229}\) Indeed, Dickens’s descriptions of the crowd at Newgate and its actions borders on exultation, as will be seen shortly; however, this does not take away from his “moral” point, so much as it enriches the texture of his analysis.

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The following passage is Dickens’s description of the crowd that went to break open Newgate:

It comprehended all the rioters who had been conspicuous in any of their former proceedings; all those whom they recommended as daring hands and fit for work; all those whose companions had been taken in the riots; and a great number of people who were relatives or friends of felons in the jail. This last class included, not only the most desperate and utterly abandoned villains in London, but some who were comparatively innocent. There was more than one woman there, disguised in man's attire, and bent upon the rescue of a child or brother. There were the two sons of a man who lay under sentence of death, and who was to be executed along with three others, on the next day but one. There was a great party of boys whose fellow-pickpockets were in the prison; and at the skirts of all, a score of miserable women, outcasts from the world, seeking to release some other fallen creature as miserable as themselves, or moved by a general sympathy perhaps- God knows- with all who were without hope, and wretched. This crowd, a composite of all the others who came before it, consisted of the wretches of society: criminals set on revenge, relatives and friends of inmates, innocent sisters or mothers, sons of murderers, young pickpockets and prostitutes. With the exception of the criminals and villains, Dickens reserves a lot of sympathy for the remainder of this crowd which he had not allowed until now. In this particular scene, he himself is “moved by a general sympathy…with all those who were without hope, and wretched.” To him it is not so much a general sympathy, however, but a personal one, for he was once himself one of those poor wretches, waiting outside the walls of the prison where his family was confined, and helpless to do anything about it. Through this personal connection and bias, Dickens is able to paint the rioters with a measure of sympathy, thus complicating his representation of them. They are not, after all, all madmen, beasts and villains; not all can be condemned on equal moral charges. He acknowledges here that there were those who participated in the riots who did so out of desperation, for reasons that no court of law would ever be able to understand or sympathize with.

230 Dickens, Barnaby Rudge, 480-481.
In contemporary accounts, the destruction of Newgate was described as a feat that was accomplished with surprising dexterity and skill, in what seemed like very little time at all. In *Barnaby Rudge*, however, the episode is described in a frenzied torrent of prose over many pages, the particulars of the spectacular scene etched out in vivid detail and effect. In Dickens’s account, the mighty prison does not yield easily; it is a measure of the prison’s power and hold over the author’s imagination that he personifies it with human qualities while describing its resistance to the rioters’ blows:

And now the strokes began to fall like hail upon the gate, and on the strong building; for those who could not reach the door, spend their fierce rage on anything - even on the great blocks of stone, which shivered their weapons into fragments, and made their hands and arms to tingle as if the walls were active in their stout resistance, and dealt them back their blows. The clash of iron ringing upon iron, mingled with the deafening tumult and sounded high above it, as the great sledge-hammers rattled on the nailed and plated door: the sparks flew off in showers; men worked in gangs, and at short intervals relieved each other, that all their strength might be devoted to the work; but there stood the portal still, as grim and dark and, strong as ever, and, saving for the dints upon its battered surface, quite unchanged.231

The Newgate of Dickens’s imagination was a powerful opponent; more powerful, perhaps, than even the rioters. Finally, however, the rioters manage to tear down some of the mighty fortresses’ defense by stacking the Keeper’s possessions against the gates and setting them on fire. Another passage highlights the ecstatic frenzy of the crowd upon witnessing the beginnings of their campaign’s success:

At first they crowded round the blaze, and vented their exultation only in their looks: but when it grew hotter and fiercer- when it crackled, leaped, and roared, like a great furnace- when it shone upon the opposite houses, and lighten up not only the pale and wondering faces at the windows, but the inmost corners of each habitation- when through the deep red heat and glow, the fire was seen sporting and toying with the door, now clinging to its obdurate surface, now gliding off with fierce inconstancy and soaring high into the sky, anon returning to fold it in its burning grasp and lure it to its ruin- when it shone and gleamed so brightly that the church clock of St. Sepulchre's so often pointed to the hour of death, was legible as in broad day, and the vane upon its steeple-top glittered in the

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231 Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, 491.
unwonted light like something richly jeweled- when blackened stone and sombre brick grew ruddy in the deep reflection, and windows shone like burnished gold, dotting the longest distance in the fiery vista with their specks of brightness- when wall and tower, and roof and chimney-stack, seemed drunk, and in the flickering glare appeared to reel and stagger- when stores of object, never seen before, burst out upon the view, and things the most familiar put on some new aspect- then the mob began to join the whirl, and with loud yells, and shouts, and clamour, such as happily is seldom heard, bestirred themselves to feed the fire, and keep it at its height.\textsuperscript{232}

In a letter to Forster dated September 11\textsuperscript{th} 1841, Dickens wrote, "I have just burnt into Newgate, and am going in the next number to tear the prisoners out by the hair of their heads."\textsuperscript{233} He was considerably pleased and excited by his progress in this part of the narrative. After he has the rioters release the prisoners, he described the impact that that event had on the people who lived through it. A lot of this narrative was built around eyewitness accounts discussed in the previous chapter, which were available to him at the time, such as the memoirs of Frederick Reynolds and Henry Angelo. Dickens noted that in many contemporary accounts, the burning of Newgate and the release of the prisoners seemed more terrifying than all the attacks on Catholic chapels and property, since it expressed the absolute lawlessness of the mob:

At the bidding of the mob, the houses were all illuminated that night- lighted up from top to bottom as at a time of public gaiety and joy. Many years afterwards, old people who lived in their youth near this part of the city, remembered bin gin a great glare of light, within doors and without, and as they looked, timid and frightened children, from the windows, seeing a face go by. Though the whole great crowd and all its other terrors had faded from their recollection, this one object remained; alone, distinct, and well remembered. Even in the unpractised minds of infants, one of these doomed men darting past, and but an instant seen, was an image of force enough to dim the whole concourse; to find itself an all-absorbing place, and hold it ever after.\textsuperscript{234}

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 492.
\textsuperscript{233} Charles Dickens, The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 2:377. Coincidentally, that expression, “by the hair of their heads”, was taken directly from Holcroft’s Narrative of the riots, which Dickens relied on heavily for an account of the riots, and whose vivid imagery he often borrowed.
\textsuperscript{234} Dickens, Barnaby Rudge, 504-505.
After he finished this segment of the novel, he wrote to John Forster: "I have let all the prisoners out of Newgate, burnt down Lord Mansfield's, and played the very devil. Another number will finish the fires, and help us on towards the end. I feel quite smoky when I am at work." 235

Dickens concluded his narrative of the riots themselves at their natural climactic conclusion: the scene of the fire at Landale’s distillery. This scene sums up what Ian Haywood calls the “carnivalesque or Saturnalian features of the narrative”; as in Holcroft’s narrative, this is the point at which “the recidivist, infantilist ‘mob’ auto-destructs in a drunken orgy.” 236

Dickens paints the scene in the language of anarchy and chaos:

One after another, new fires blazed up in every quarter of the town, as though it were the intention of the insurgents to wrap the city in a circle of flames, which, contracting by degrees, should burn the whole to ashes; the crowd swarmed and roared in every street; and none but the rioters and soldiers being out of doors, it seemed to the latter as if all London was arrayed against them, and they stood alone against the storm. 237

Continuing in this anarchic, almost apocalyptic vein, he sums up all the different aspects of the scene at Langdale’s as “such a sum of dreariness and ruin, that it seemed as if the face of Heaven were blotted out, and night, in its rest and quiet, and softened light, never could look upon the earth again.” 238

However, for Dickens, the worst part of this spectacle wasn’t the physical destruction that was rampant all over Langdale’s properly and the surrounding neighborhood; it was the self-destructive behavior of the rioters themselves, who killed themselves in the act of riot and lawlessness, by drinking the burning, unrectified spirits from Langdale’s distillery, or by burning in the fires trying to get at the liquor in his cellars. Dickens describes this horrific, grotesque scene:

235 Dickens, The Letters of Charles Dickens, 385.
236 Haywood, Bloody Romanticism, 185, 187.
237 Dickens, Barnaby Rudge, 516.
238 Ibid., 525.
The gutters of the street, and every crack and fissure in the stones, ran with scorching spirit, which having dammed up by busy hands, overflowed the road and pavement, and formed a great pool, into which the people dropped down dead by dozens. They lay in heaps all around this fearful pond, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, women with children in their arms and babies at their breasts, and drank until they died. While some stopped with their lips to the brink and never raised their heads again, others sprang up from their fiery draught, and danced, half in a mad triumph, and half in the agony of suffocation, until they fell, and steeped their corpses in the liquor that had killed them…From the burning cellars, where they drank out of hats, pails, buckets, tubs, and shoes, some men were drawn, alive, but all alight from head to foot; who, in their unendurable anguish and suffering, making for anything that had the look of water, rolled, hissing, in this hideous lake, and splashed up liquid fire which lapped in all it met with as it ran along the surface, and neither spared the living nor the dead. On this last night of the riots- for the last night it was- the wretched victims of a senseless outcry, became themselves the dust and ashes of the flames they had kindled, and strewed the public streets of London.239

The illustration by George Cruikshank depicting this scene is entitled “The Rabble’s Orgy” and depicts a grotesque body of people, bawdy, drunken and insensible, lying in what Haywood called a “Miltonic ‘hideous lake’ of burning alcohol.”240 According to Haywood, this scene is “confirmation of the irrationality of the mob, the abnegation of any higher purpose behind the violence.”241

* * *

Ultimately, Dickens’s mob has no higher purpose. Dickens’s failure in Barnaby Rudge, argues Iain McCalman, is his failure to understand the historical process. “He tried to realize major historical events and movements through the fictional lives of isolated individuals divested of larger social contexts. Dickens could not acknowledge…that human collectivities, even including rioters, generally possessed a coherent political, social or cultural consciousness.”242 However, despite his limited understanding of the inner-workings of crowds, McCalman

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239 Ibid., 525-526.
240 Haywood, Bloody Romanticism, 187. See Appendix A for image.
241 Ibid.
contends that Dickens was not, like many critics like to argue, a reactionary; nor does he portray the Gordon rioters as merely a reactionary crowd, as many suppose they were. McCalman, who argues for a “profound and sustained analysis of the peculiarities of British revolution” in *Barnaby Rudge*, thinks that Dickens, like Burke, saw enthusiasm and its inevitable consequences, “personal and collective mania”, as the main components of British revolution.\textsuperscript{243}

Enthusiasm and madness are evident everywhere throughout the pages of *Barnaby Rudge*; they are evident in the first half of the novel, in personal quirks and irregularities of the residents of Chigwell, and they are dominate in large measure in the second half of the novel, dealing with the historical events of the Gordon riots. “While sketching the personal histories of the riot's future leaders in the first half of the novel,” writes McCalman, “Dickens is at the same time constructing a sophisticated typology of enthusiasm and madness, or perhaps we might better call it, a typology of romanticism and revolution.”\textsuperscript{244} This typology is personified by the spectacular riot, which Dickens paints so vividly and memorably in the pages of *Barnaby Rudge*. Many of his readers certainly appreciated the effect of what Dickens was doing; in his diary entry from September 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1841, written as he was reading *Rudge* in its serial weekly form, Henry Crabb Robinson recorded: “The picture of the riots of Lord George Gordon's mob is excellent and *has poetical truth, whether it be historical or not.*”\textsuperscript{245}

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\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 220-221.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 221.
\textsuperscript{245} Collins, *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, 102; emphasis added.
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Chapter 5

Scholarly Interpretations of the Gordon Riots

“It is perhaps not surprising,” wrote George Rudé in 1952, “that later writers should have felt something of the awe and fascination which the [Gordon] riots aroused in those who witnessed them. Dickens gave a vivid, though romanticised, account in Barnaby Rudge, and the origins and significance of the riots have become a favourite theme of historical speculation.”246

However, before Rudé- the pioneer historian of crowd action- turned his attention to the Gordon riots, relatively little formal scholarly work had dealt with the riots in any great depth. J.Paul de Castro’s monograph was the only full-length study of the riots that had been published to that date, and it appeared in the press in 1926. It remains, to this day, the only full-length scholarly treatment of the riots. In 1958, Christopher Hibbert wrote a popular history of the Gordon riots, which met with some success and helped put the riots back in the public eye, though Hibbert’s account tended to spectacularize the riots and did little to add to or advance our understanding of them. However, in recent decades, the Gordon riots seem to have resurfaced on academics’ radars, as several scholars have responded to Rudé’s influential interpretation and contributed their own ideas about the origins, significance, and nature of the Gordon riots. It remains, as Rudé suggested, a favorite theme of historical speculation, especially because the records remain silent on some aspects of the riots, such as the motivations and reasons behind the rioters’ actions, to name a few. Historians have had to reconstruct these and other features of the riots, and determine their significance as best they can based on the records that do exist, the

eyewitness accounts that remain, and the representations of the riots which have subsequently followed.

**King Mob**

Before turning to scholarly interpretations of the Gordon riots, it is illuminating to look at the representation of the riots in the only popular history of the Gordon riots to be produced in the twentieth century, Christopher Hibbert’s *King Mob: The Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780*. Unlike Dickens’ novel, this book is a work of history, not of fiction; but, similarly to Dickens’ novel, it does tend to sensationalize the riots, perhaps in an attempt to make the story appeal to a larger audience. This is apparent even from the title, *King Mob*, a phrase which ascribes negative connotations to the Gordon rioters and serves to sensationalize their impact on history, all before the reader has even a chance to open the book. Typologically, however, Hibbert’s work may be closest to Holcroft’s *Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances*, albeit with the benefit of almost two centuries’ worth of hindsight and additional historical material to draw from. On top of that, Hibbert’s account is a loosely psychological reading of the riots, making use of the theories about crowd mentality of modern psychologists such as Gustave Le Bon and Sigmund Freud to portray the actions of the rioters. Hibbert reconstructs his history of the Gordon riots from contemporary pamphlets, newspapers, trial reports, and eyewitness accounts, though he also has access to records, published letters and memoirs, and scholarly work that were not available to Holcroft and Dickens. His representation of the riots, however, one century after Dickens’ and almost two centuries after Holcroft’s, does
not differ too dramatically in terms of its understanding of the larger significance of the disturbances.

Hibbert divides the rioters into three distinct categories of people: the Protestant “fanatics”, the convicts released from Newgate and the other prisons, and the “ordinary, poor working men and women and children” who were drawn into the crowd as spectators and unwitting participants. His characterization of these groups and their motivations vacillates between blatant stereotypes and sympathetic and sometimes insightful portrayals of this vast cross-section of society. Gordon’s supporters, in his version of events, get the short end of the stick. He characterizes them as “fanatical Protestants whose pathological hatred of Roman Catholics was fanned into new life by the heady, thrilling atmosphere of violence and vengeance.” He describes them in the terms of Edward Gibbons, who likened them to Cromwellian puritans, the despised religious fanatics of a previous century, who wreaked havoc and fear among the citizens of England. Thus, to Hibbert, the anti-Catholic rhetoric that reemerged during the Gordon riots is a type of pathological disease, resurfaced from a previous century by the “thrilling atmosphere of violence and vengeance”, reminiscent of an earlier, uncivil time.

In regards to the prisoners released by the crowd from the London gaols, Hibbert’s attitude is less categorical. He is careful, like Dickens, not to group them all into one lump sum, and is quite discerning in his description of them; he writes: “Some of them were debtors and innocent enough, others were poor helpless and harmless creatures who had fallen foul of the harsh bewildering criminal code, but there were many who were hardened ruffians…now

248 Ibid., 81.
released into a town at their mercy and open to their vengeance.” 249 In fact, Hibbert seems to take Dickens’ cue in his liberal description of the convict, blaming the “harsh bewildering criminal code” for the incarceration of many; in this case, however, this is not necessarily a result of personal bias so much as a historically accurate reflection of the facts of the London criminal justice system of that time. Hibbert’s characterization of this group’s motivations, on the other hand, is decisive:

To men such as these and their hangers-on and companions, Popery meant nothing. They were those who, in Defoe’s phrase, did not know whether indeed it was a man or a horse and did not care. They joined in the rioting, not because it was said to be against the Papists but because it offered them a chance to get free food and drink, free women perhaps, and an opportunity to get their own back on society in a wild, exciting, satisfying orgy of destruction. They attacked the houses of Justices not because these men were anti-Papists or had attempted to quell the riots…but because they represented the law which had put them and their friends in those stinking prisons….more than a few of them did not even know what the riots were meant to be about… 250

Thus, these men, newly released from prison, joined in the riots for fun and plunder; also, significantly, to “get their own back on society”. Hibbert interprets these individuals’ attack on the homes of Justices not for reasons pertaining to anti-Catholicism or the Relief Act, but because they represented the criminal justice system which put them in “those stinking prisons”. There is a strain of social protest present in this explanation, but as Hibbert frames it, it pertains only to the personal motivations of a very specific stratum of rioters- those prisoners who had personal reasons to tear into the establishment, and did so as an act of personal vengeance, not as part of a larger social protest movement.

As far as the “ordinary, poor working men and women and children” who constituted the rest of the rioters go, they act as helpless pawns in Hibbert’s scheme of things. Reminiscent of Dickens’s “sober workmen”, they are easily led and easily persuaded to join in the ranks of the

249 Ibid., 80-81.
250 Ibid., 81.
rioters, out of a sense of nothing to lose and anything to gain. In the following evocative passage, Hibbert employs romantic imagery to describe their pathetic plight and position in society, to emphasize how these weak and pitiable creatures were drawn in to the violence of the riots:

In alliance with these criminals and fanatics were the thousands upon thousands of ordinary, poor working men and women and children, flowing out of the slums of Shoreditch, Spitalfields and St. Giles's and the unpaved, unlit, decaying warrens of streets and courtyards down by the river. Pale and forgotten people, ill, hollow-cheeked and hungry they poured from doss-houses, brothels, crowded cellars and workshops to watch the houses burning; to run forward to grab a leg of mutton from a larder, a bottle from a cellar, a scorched blanket from a bonfire. Sometimes getting drunk and joining in the fun; easily led, easily persuaded, having nothing to lose, with generations of hardship, indifference and bitterness behind them, they wandered about in large groups and in small, converging like a sea upon any place where excitement seemed to be offered and there joined with the others and became a mob. And thus spontaneously created a mob, they were urged to violence by that sensual, reactive impulse which brings a mob together and which forces it on to devastation, losing their identities in a fusing welter of destruction.251

Like Dickens, Hibbert uses metaphors of the sea to highlight the romanticized, spectacular version of the “mob”. Groups of helpless people “converged like a sea” and spontaneously created a mob. They were urged to violence by nothing more than “that sensual, reactive impulse which brings a mob together and which forces it on to destruction”, causing the participants to lose their identities in a “fusing welter of destruction.” Aside from the influence of romanticism, however, there is also a clear echo of Freudian psychology present in these descriptions of the crowd.252 Hibbert’s emphasis on the herding mentality of the “mob” reduces any sense of agency or complex motivations which may have driven the individuals to violence.

In his final analysis of the Gordon rioters’ actions, Hibbert summarizes the crowd’s motivations as follows:

They shouted 'No Popery!' but it was no more than a war cry now. At first it had been only the Catholics, the Irish and a few unfortunate public figures who had suffered; but

251 Ibid., 81-82.
now it was to be anyone in authority, anyone who might be held responsible for their poverty and discontent, their dangerous malaise. They struck out in irrational, unthinking desperation, unconsciously hoping to release in their uproar the frustrations and irritations of years of neglect. Any reason for violence would have done. Only the spark was needed. Popery was as good an excuse as any other.253

In his final analysis, then, Hibbert subscribes to the popular theory that anti-Catholicism was merely a pretext for the rioters’ violent actions. He characterizes the rioters overall as consisting of the lower classes of society— the working men and women and the convicts, with some archaic religious zealots thrown into the mix—and holds their “poverty and discontent, their dangerous malaise” as their motivation to commit acts of violence against “anyone in authority”, who might be responsible for the social ills of their society. What started out as an anti-Catholic protest, initiated by a number of “fanatical Protestants” proved to be as good an excuse as any for the rabble of society to rise and strike out violently, desperately and irrationally against the civil order, hoping to release the “frustrations and irritations of years of neglect.”

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George Rudé was the first scholar to challenge the popular conception of the Gordon rioters as a nameless, faceless “mob”, lashing out blindly and indiscriminately at any symbols of authority which presented themselves to them. In his seminal essay, "The Gordon Riots: A Study of the Rioters and Their Victims," he set out to identify the rioters and their victims, hoping that a close look at the identities of the two sides of the conflict would shed some fresh light on the patterns of the riots and the motives of their participants. Rudé was forced to rely almost entirely on the relatively small sample of the 160 arrested rioters who appeared for trial, but based on this sample he determined that the majority of these men were “working men” of the middling sort; included in their numbers were an apothecary, a public executioner (the inspiration for Dickens’s

253 Hibbert, *King Mob*, 82.
hangman, Ned Dennis), small employers, shopkeepers, peddlers and independent craftsmen, a handful of sailors and soldiers; about seventy percent of the 160 were wage-earners: journeymen and apprentices, waiters and domestic servants, along with laborers of various kinds. Rudé noted that few appear to have been unemployed and that, on the whole, the majority do not seem to have belonged to the “very poorest sections of the working populations.”

In general, Rudé worked hard to emphasize the overall respectability of the Gordon rioters, as he had earlier, in his work on the Wilkes rioters. He sought to rescue them, so to speak, from their historical reputation as mere “hooligans” and “criminal elements” by providing data that supported their respectability, humble origins and independent agency. However, there are those like E.P. Thompson, who believed that in protesting the “prejudice” of historians against the “mob”, Rudé protested too much. Nicholas Rogers agrees on this point, noting that we “should not exaggerate, as does Rudé, the sobriety and respectability of the participants.” The riots were often carried out in a revelrous mode, and alcohol consumption played a conspicuous and often destructive role in encouraging and spurring the rioters on. Moreover, Rudé’s data is derived from an admittedly small sample of the population of rioters; we have no knowledge of the identities of the hundreds of men and women who were killed during the riots, and know little to nothing about those who escaped arrest and prosecution. It is likely the actual composition of the Gordon rioters consisted of a generally wide cross-section of London society, including young boys, some petty criminals, wage-earners and working men and women, the criminals and debtors released from the London prisons in the later stages (although Rudé points

256 Rogers, Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain, 164.
out that the number of debtors released far outnumbered the criminals), and perhaps even some noblemen and aristocrats who managed to escape prosecution.

Regardless of the issues with Rudé’s characterization of the rioters, however, his essay was instrumental in bringing the Gordon riots to the attention of a wider range of scholars, and served as an important vehicle for widening the range of discussion concerning the riots. One popular topic of debate that Rudé’s interpretations engendered concerned the pattern of the riots and questions about the rioters’ motivations. Rudé dismissed the idea that the riots underwent a change of character around June 6th, after the destruction of Newgate prison and other attacks on establishment institutions, and that religious enthusiasm then gave way to other concerns. He argues that the release of the prisoners and the attacks on the houses of certain magistrates and public figures marked no departure from the original character of the riots, which were initiated by a desire to secure the repeal of the Catholic Relief act, and incited by the refusal of Parliament to consider the Protestant Association’s petition. In fact, Rudé argues that the attacks on the prisons and the houses of magistrates were the logical consequences of the crowd’s failure to secure the repeal of the hated Act either by peaceful demonstration or by the burning of Catholic mass house and property. They attacked the houses of public figures who supported Catholic relief, the magistrates and constables who played a role in appending and arresting rioters of the previous days, and the prisons, because the rioters who were arrested were lodged there. As far as the attack on Langdale’s distillery went, Rudé thinks it possible that the rioters attacked it because they believed there was a Catholic chapel inside his premises, in addition to the fact that Langdale was a wealthy and well-known manufacturer.257

In fact, Rudé noted that most of the Catholics whom the rioters attacked were, in fact, on the wealthier side of the economic spectrum. On examining the victims of the rioters in detail, he determined that there were at most sixty Catholic houses destroyed or damaged in the course of a full week’s relatively unrestricted rioting, and that hardly any of these lay in the areas with the largest concentration of working class Catholics, such as Whitechapel, Wapping, St. Giles, and St. George in the East. It was based on evidence such as this that Rudé built a thesis in which the Gordon riots were not directed against the Roman Catholic community as a whole, but on the wealthier elements of the Catholic community. The primary targets of the rioters appear to have been the priests and the schoolmasters, followed by the Catholic gentleman, the manufacturer, the merchant or the publican, and not the poorer elements of the Catholic community. In general, Rudé found a “distinct class bias” in the direction of the attacks made by the rioters on the Roman Catholic community; their rage was directed at “persons of substance”, and not the average working class Roman Catholic, or even poor Irish Catholic.\(^\text{258}\)

Rudé’s final analysis proposed an added social dimension behind the Gordon rioters’ actions. His evidence suggested that “behind the slogan of ‘No Popery' and the other outward forms of religious fanaticism there lay a deeper social purpose: a “groping desire to settle accounts with the rich, if only for a day, and to achieve some kind rough kind of social justice.”\(^\text{259}\) His theory might also have explained the destruction of the toll-house on Blackfriars Bridge and attacks on the Bank of England, both powerful symbols of the economic inequality and oppression faced by many working class Londoners, and certainly by the lower orders.\(^\text{260}\) However, Rudé is careful not to imply that religion was merely a “cloak” for a deeper form of

\(^{258}\) Ibid., 284-287.  
\(^{259}\) Ibid., 289.  
\(^{260}\) Ibid.
social protest shared not just between Protestant supporters but between the general working class population of London; rather, he insists that the religious and social causes of the Gordon riots operated side by side. In the complex political atmosphere of the time, religious, social and political grievances went hand in hand, with many believing that Catholicism posed a serious threat to English liberty, and these fears being heightened by the atmosphere of wartime and the encroachment of the Catholic powers of France and Spain. In such a moment of “national emergency”, the Protestant Association was able to manipulate the people’s fear of Popery to further their own cause; however, once launched by the Protestant Association, Rudé believed that the riots “began to assume, however confusedly, a social complexion which its original promoters had not intended and with which they had little sympathy.”

Although Rudé’s theories about the social complexion of the Gordon riots did not go unchallenged, for many years they were regarded as standard by many historians. Echoes of it can be found in general accounts of eighteenth century England, such as Marshall’s *Eighteenth Century England* (1962), works on ecclesiastical history like E. Duffy’s work on Bishop Challoner, “Richard Challoner 1691-1781: A Memoir”, and other studies of popular action in the eighteenth century, such as Ian Gilmour’s *Riot, Risings and Revolution* (1992). In his chapter on the Gordon riots, Gilmour wrote: “It was not the Catholic population as a whole that was singled out, but Catholics of substance. That differentiation, added to the assault on those engines of oppression of the poor- the prisons- and on the Bank of England make plain a substantial ‘class’ element in the riots. Religious feeling directed the violence at Roman

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261 Ibid., 289- 291.
262 Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England*, 218. Colin Haydon pointed out the traces of Rudé’s theory present in these subsequent works.
Catholics; social feeling excluded poor Roman Catholics from that violence.”\footnote{Gilmour, \textit{Riot, Risings and Revolution}, 360-361.} Just as contemporary accounts and Dickens’s novel influenced the popular understanding of the Gordon riots, so too did Rudé’s influential interpretation influence many scholars’ understanding of the riots. In perpetuating and publishing these interpretations, they likely influenced other scholars and students of the religio-social interpretations of the Gordon riots through their scholarly representations. In this sense, it is not only the artist who functions as “rioter” in Paulson’s model, but the scholar also; in dissecting and interpreting the causes and effects of the riots, they produce different responses to these events in other scholars and students.

Not all scholars agreed with Rudé’s interpretation of the riots, however. Colin Haydon, writing in 1993, was the first major challenger of Rudé’s theories, rejecting the view that the Gordon riots were an instance of social protest by the lower orders against the Catholic upper classes. He points out that Rudé’s sources concerning the identities of the rioters’ victims—claims for damaged property—were likely to bias his interpretation in the direction of a social bias theory, since these “weighted” sources did not account for physical violence done to poorer Roman Catholics that did not necessarily get brought up in court or appear in the records because they were not worth going to court over.\footnote{Haydon, \textit{Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England}, 219.} Instead, Haydon argues for a more conservative interpretation of the Gordon riots. He admits that the principal targets of the rioters’ violence were the wealthy Roman Catholics, but argues that this was because they were the most prominent members of the Catholic community, and were attacked as the chief representatives of the Catholic minority, not because of any class bias on the part of the rioters.

Moreover, Haydon sees the Gordon riots as part of a larger tradition of anti-Catholicism in the eighteenth century. In reconstructing popular ideas of anti-Catholicism in his book, \textit{Anti-
Catholicism in Eighteenth Century England, Haywood provides a compelling argument that there was a strong tradition of hatred and violence against Roman Catholics continuing through the “enlightened” eighteenth century, which is often overlooked or dismissed by most scholars. For two and a half centuries, the lower orders of Londoners had been indoctrinated in the belief that “Popery” was an enemy to the state and to the liberty of Englishmen; it was associated with tyranny and oppressive power; thus, they continued to equate anyone who stood for concessions to Catholics with tyranny and treachery. Haydon shows that this belief could be extended even to the highest figures of authority, such as Members of Parliament and even the King. Multiple sources indicate that many Londoners believed that the King himself had been converted to Catholicism, and that the established regime had been infiltrated by Catholics in disguise, intent on overturning the kingdom.

Haydon highlights the gulf that existed between the enlightened elite and Parliament on the one hand, and the Protestant Association and its plebeian supporters on the other; when the former group sought to bring a small measure of relief to the Catholic minority, they raised the traditional specter of “Popish conspiracy” in the minds of the latter group. "Locked in its self-confirming belief system,” wrote Haydon, “popular Protestantism interpreted the Relief Act and other actions on the part of the government in accordance with old ideas of Popish plots, planned by Catholics and Papists in disguise. For the Gordon rioters, the decision to aid the nation's traditional enemies- especially at a time when the kingdom was engaged in a war with France- was genuinely terrifying.”265 Thus, Haydon interprets the attacks as a conservative and reactionary measure on the part of the rioters to oppose any attempt by those in authority to alter the laws of the English constitution in any way. He agrees with Rudé that there was a “pattern of

265 Ibid., 238.
purpose, even of order, underlying the surface chaos” of the riots, but insists that this pattern was purpose was built around a strong and inculcated feeling of anti-Catholicism, and not on any other social, economic or political grounds. He views the conservative pattern of Gordon riots to be entirely in step with other religious disturbances during the eighteenth century, and cautions against interpreting the Gordon riots in isolation, outside of the context of other eighteenth century popular disturbances.

Nicholas Rogers disagrees. Haydon’s view of the rioters and their motivations seems to him to be too categorical, and does not take fully into account many of the singular features of the Gordon riots, such as the attacks on the Bank, the toll-houses of Blackfriars Bridge, and other isolated targets of attack. In fact, Rogers finds that on the whole, the symbolism of the Gordon riots was noticeably less traditional than in earlier anti-Catholic riots. Instead, he finds that the principal symbolism of the Gordon riots were “altogether more secular and political, framed by the divisive politics of the American war.” Rogers argues for a more political interpretation of the Gordon riots than had been offered by previous authors, such as Rudé and Haydon, while also giving prominence to the religious and social causes of the riots.

Above all, he insists on the political consciousness of the Gordon rioters. He sees the riots’ primary ideological roots to be popular hostility to Roman Catholics; however, he explains this sudden upsurge of popular hostility to be the result of the political circumstances surrounding the Catholic Relief Act of 1778, as well as the pressures of the war with the American colonies. In the eyes of many Protestant “zealots”, the 1778 Act abetted the Catholic cause and “purposefully reserved the surveillance of Catholicism to the urbane, cosmopolitan

266 Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 173.
social elite who dominated parliament, the bench, and the corridors of power.”

In sanctioning the enlightened aristocracy’s right to control the future of English Catholicism and denying ordinary citizens the right to challenge Catholicism in the courts, the Act signaled, to them, the victory of “religious urbanity over religious evangelism.” Such an Act, enacted at a crucial period in the war between America and the Catholic powers, seemed to the supporters of the Protestant Association an act of national treachery. Rogers thinks that the Protestant Association’s campaign for the repeal of the Relief Act was “projected as part of the larger struggle against ministerial oppression” going on around this time. Thus, the move to petition Parliament en masse was as much a political move as it was a religiously motivated one. When this peaceful method of petitioning failed to achieve the Protestant Association’s political aims, the “anger of the crowd swung dramatically against the political establishment…what is more, the crowd wreaked vengeance on the law.”

As for the social aspects of the riots, Rogers provides an alternative to Rudé’s interpretation, which he sees as misleading. Like Haydon, Rogers thinks that the rioters focused their attention on the most visible and influential members of the Catholic community, who also happened to be its wealthier elements. Their primary targets were the owners of alehouses (which were often sites for religious meetings), priests and mass-houses, Catholic schools, and gentlemen and tradesmen who were likely to give some sort of financial support to the Catholic community, funding new schools and chapels, and thus allowing for the spread of Catholicism. In other words, it was not the wealth or gentility of the victims per se which provides an interesting social context for the Gordon rioters’ actions, so much as the “intermediary status” of

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267 Ibid., 156.
268 Ibid.
269 Ibid., 157.
270 Ibid., 161.
the victims in the Catholic community, “as sources of information, sociability, and credit.” In other words, the Gordon rioters sought to cut off the resources of the Catholic community, in a symbolic and literal effort to stem the growth of Catholicism within their midst.

Some of the assaults on other targets, such as the crimping and sponging houses and the toll-booth at Blackfriars Bridge, might also be explained as a form of social protest, albeit a “concrete and specific” one, not the general “groping desire” to achieve some sort of social leveling which Rudé proposed. All these aforementioned institutions had been unpopular and hated by local Londoners over the previous few decades. The crimping houses, where young men were lured to be conscripted into the army, were repugnant to sailors, and the sponging houses, temporary lock-ups for debtors who would try to raise bail before their suit came to trial, were an old grievance among London debtors. As for the toll-booth at Blackfriars Bridge, that had been long resented by the small traders south of the river who had to regularly cross the bridge and pay the toll. Thus, the social grievances which emerged during the final phase of the riot “addressed the petty exactions and humiliations that might oppress the small traders, artisans, and mariners in their everyday lives, ones which had been given considerable publicity since the 1770s as part of an informal radical agenda.”

As far as the attacks on public institutions like the Pay and Excise offices and the Bank of England, Rogers concedes that these were more symbolic in meaning. He sees them as “the culmination of the dialogue between crowd and authority, the last outburst of anger at a perfidious establishment.” At its most frustrated, seeing its political aims unresolved and its logical methods of achieving them unsuccessful, the crowd attacked the bank out of desperation. Rogers sees the attack on the Bank in particular as the spontaneous action of a frustrated, though

271 Ibid., 166-167.
272 Ibid., 169.
politically conscious, mob—more an act of transgression than subversion. Overall, Rogers sees the popular Protestant agitation of 1780 to be “more self confident and libertarian than its earliest manifestations.” Drawing on a tradition of anti-Catholic hostility, Rogers sees the Gordon riots as largely a product of the political atmosphere of their day; the rioters were protesting not just relief to Catholics, but also the ministerial oppression that the lower orders faced at the hands of the enlightened elite. The Catholic Relief Act of 1778 highlighted these political grievances, which were exploited by the Protestant Association, and exacerbated by the alarming state of the war with America, as well as the apparent encroachment of the Catholic powers.

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Aside from the issue of motivation, the other popular area of debate between scholars in regards to the Gordon riots concerns the nature and classification of the riots in the context of other popular protest movements of the eighteenth century. This issue has a lot of bearing on how the riots are represented and interpreted, and is therefore essential to the argument laid out in this study.

As we have seen, there are those scholars of the Gordon riots like Colin Haydon, who see the riots as purely reactionary and conservative in nature. Viewing the riots as strictly religious in nature as he does, Haydon sees "the opposition of the lower orders to the first Catholic Relief Act…as essentially reactionary and defensive, supportive of the pre-1778 status quo." Haydon also takes great pains to downplay the chaotic nature of the riots, described in great detail by contemporaries and perpetuated by Dickens’s portrayal of the riots in Barnaby Rudge. He chooses instead of emphasize instances in which the rioters displayed great restraint and order,

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273 Ibid., 169.
274 Ibid., 173.
such as when they took care to determine whether the owners of certain houses were truly Catholic or not, and when they instructed fire engines to protect the houses of Protestants from catching fire, but not those of Catholics. Haydon’s final analysis suggests that the crowd in 1780 was “acting in a consistent manner”, and that the prime motivating force behind the Gordon rioters’ actions was a retrogressive hatred and fear of the Catholics, festering from an earlier century.276 Essentially, Haydon sees the riots of 1780 as being in line with “the old ‘moral economy’ riots of pre-industrial England, intended to preserve the long-established state of things.”277 In the coming decades, a new, radical mentality would be forged in the heat of ideas speeding from the French Revolution and the industrial revolution, which would be directed against the old order and aimed at changing it, rather than preserving it. However, Haydon does not believe that this shift in popular consciousness had yet begun by 1780. He sees no similarities between the Gordon riots and many of the more radical disturbances of the early nineteenth century, maintaining that the Gordon riots’ chief characteristics were old-fashioned: “the symbolism; the xenophobia in wartime; and, above all, the old mythology of Popery,” were the attributes of a reactionary popular disturbance, not a revolutionary one.278

However, contrary to this view, historians such as George Rudé and E.P. Thompson have suggested that the years between 1715 and 1780 “witnessed the earliest stirring of an independent plebian political consciousness.”279 Rudé, in his later work, would define the Gordon riots in radical terms. “For all the illiberal forms they assumed,” wrote Rudé, the Gordon riots were “basically cast in a radical mould, drew on a long radical-Protestant tradition and were

276 Ibid., 232, 241.
277 Ibid., 242.
278 Ibid., 242-243.
279 Randall, Riotous Assemblies, 206-207.
inspired (if not promoted) by the most radical elements in the city.” The Gordon riots grew out of the Protestant Associations’ quasi-radical methods of pressing for repeal of the Catholic Relief Act, which included holding monthly general meetings, distributing handbills, advocating instructions to Members of Parliament, and embarking upon mass petitioning. Furthermore, the rioters were given a certain degree of license by influential radicals in Parliament, like Frederick Bull, and by the magistrates who refused to take decisive steps to quell the riots during the first few days.

E.P. Thompson, however, thought that Rudé put too much emphasis on the rioters’ consciousness of what they were doing. Thompson sees the Gordon riots, like the Wilkes riots before them, as “a half-way house in the emergence of popular political consciousness.”

Though the Gordon rioters, like the Wilkes rioters, were motivated by a definite political goal— in this case, the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act— many of its members were highly volatile and might equally well loot and plunder Catholic premises for personal gain or smash the windows of those who failed to illuminate them in celebration of the crowd’s accomplishments. Thompson saw the riots progressing swiftly through three phases. In the first phase, the “revolutionary crowd” marched to Parliament hoping to exert extra-Parliamentary pressure on them to repeal the act; when this failed, they channeled their anger into violence against symbols of Catholicism and pro-Catholic supporters— Thompson refers to this second phase as one of “licensed spontaneity”, because of the conspicuous inactivity of the city authorities in putting a stop to the crowd’s violent excesses, thus effectively “licensing” and overseeing their depredations. In the third phase, the riots descended into anarchy and indiscriminate plunder,

281 Rogers, Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain, 158.
283 Ibid., 71-72.
concluding with the scenes at Langdale’s distillery and the rash attacks on the Bank. At this point the license was withdrawn, and the riots were quelled by the authorities. "We have here, then," Thompson concluded, “something of a mixture of manipulated mob and revolutionary crowd.”

Their inspiration may have been radical or libertarian in nature, but with no help from weak or nonexistent leadership, the riots collapsed under the weight of their own momentum and degenerated into looting and arson.

Nicholas Rogers disagrees with both Rudé and Thompson in their assertions that the Gordon riots followed some sort of “radical-libertarian vector”. Although the Protestant Association’s repeal campaign drew on radical support and used “radical” extra-parliamentary modes of organization to get their message across, Rogers cautions that one should not place too much emphasis on the radical lineaments of the Gordon riots. Though some radicals did lend their support initially, virtually all of them withdrew it once to riots disintegrated into what they viewed as a “paradigm of plebian degeneracy: headless, lawless, and politically counter-productive.”

Many radicals distanced themselves from the Protestant Association’s actions from the very outset, fearing that Scotland’s violent resistance to the Relief Act was a forerunner of what the London petition might accomplish, and fearing that “Lord George Gordon's fanaticism would throw all popular associations into disrepute at a crucial moment in the campaign for parliamentary reform.” Thus, the Gordon riots cannot be seen as the logical outcome of radical ideals, since most radicals themselves were divided on the issues of repeal, and many of them sought to pointedly distance themselves from the Protestant Association’s activities. Thus, Rogers defines the Protestant Association’s movement not as a radical

284 Ibid., 72.
285 Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 172.
286 Ibid., 158.
campaign, but as a “protean, populist movement, rooted in the evangelism of the metropolis, which cross-cut orthodox politician alignments.”²⁸⁷ At its core, he saw the crowd’s protest directed against the “religious uranity of the cosmopolitan establishment which arrogated to itself the right to determine the future growth of British Catholicism.”²⁸⁸ First and foremost, this was a populist and nationalist movement, not a radical one. Rogers maintains that the crowd adhered to the original political objectives of the Protestant Association to a great extent throughout the riots, though it retained some of its own autonomy, apart from its political leaders. After all, the Protestant Association sought to distance itself from the rioters’ actions once they had passed all acceptable forms of civil conduct, condemning the crowd’s actions in an open letter printed in the newspapers during the height of the riots. The crowd, Rogers asserts, “operated within well-established conventions of popular politics which had allowed it a crucial, though subaltern, role” in the context of eighteenth century political agitation.²⁸⁹

There are many theories about the nature of the Gordon riots in the context of other eighteenth century riots; some claim they were purely reactionary, while other see in them strains of an early radical movement, and still others, the symptoms of a populist, nationalist movement. There is one more theory about the nature of the Gordon riots that is worth entertaining, however unlikely it may seem to us now. Ian Gilmour entertains the idea, popular at the time of the riots, that there were revolutionary designs behind the Gordon riots. While he does not dismiss the idea that the riots were, at their core, largely motivated by anti-Catholicism and the repeal of the Relief Act, he does not think that this precludes any revolutionary intents that may also have been present behind the religious tumults.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 158.
²⁸⁸ Ibid., 172.
²⁸⁹ Ibid., 170.
Many of those in government, especially the Opposition, disapproved of Lord North’s administration, and were especially opposed to the continued and costly failing war in America. Many of the opposition leaders, such as the MP Sir James Lowther, used the language of threat and violence to make their positions clear in Parliament, and Gordon was no different in his speeches advocating for the repeal of the Relief Act, than he was in other addresses opposing the war in America. “Political language was violent because the times were so bad and the government so weak”, writes Gilmour.\(^{290}\) Thus, when the riots broke out, “revolution…was far from unthinkable.”\(^{291}\) It is therefore not surprising that many contemporaries expressed fears that the riots were motivated by some sort of revolutionary drive. Their fears were heightened when the rioters moved from attacking Catholic chapels and property to attacking the houses of justices of the peace, the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and even the house of the Prime Minister- in other words, the whole spectrum of authority except the King. "Whatever the war cries that were used,” writes Gilmour, “the targets were more appropriate to insurgents bent on revolution and peace with America than to drunken mobs intent on loot and mindless destruction and allegedly defending Protestant England from the danger of Popery.”\(^{292}\)

The fact that the authorities’ inaction seemed to goad the rioters to further acts of violence affirmed the belief that there was a revolutionary conspiracy abroad. The inaction of the magistrates and other City authorities might have been the result of fear of retaliation, or of sympathy to the rioters’ cause. In 1780, the City was even more opposed to the government than

\(^{290}\) Gilmour, *Riot, Risings and Revolution*, 365.
\(^{291}\) Ibid.
\(^{292}\) Ibid., 366.
it had been for most of the rest of the century.\textsuperscript{293} The ministry, on the other hand, was considered weak and unpopular and was clearly losing the American war.\textsuperscript{294} It is a sign of the weakness of government, and the lawlessness that the riots produced, that Doctor Johnson recorded in 1780: "It is agreed that if they had seized the Bank on Tuesday, at the height of the panick, when no resistance had been prepared, they might have carried irrecoverably away whatever they had found."\textsuperscript{295} Gilmour concludes that, "had matters been left to the King's ministers, they would probably have gone on doing nothing until London had been burned down and the 'rebellious insurrections' had sprouted into revolution."\textsuperscript{296}

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What is interesting to note about the scholarly representations of the riots in this chapter is how closely they tend to follow the general historiographic trends in the study of crowd violence. Hibbert’s twentieth century popular history presented a loosely psychological, though rather stereotypical, of the “spectacular” mob, much like the earlier depictions by Dickens and Holcroft did. Next, Rudé presented a rather Marxist interpretation of the rioters’ motives, which was in line with the trend that began in the 1960’s to study crowds and riots more sympathetically and less categorically. A second phase of analysis, which grew out of the 1960’s scholarship of the crowd, was one in which historians began to question overly simplified materialistic or class struggle interpretations of crowd action, such as Rudé’s interpretation of the Gordon riots; meanwhile, another historiographic phase privileged religious and political over social or class analysis. Colin Haydon and Nicholas Roger’s respective work on the Gordon riots

\textsuperscript{293} In several ways, City officials even encouraged the rioters. As late as June 7\textsuperscript{th}, the City’s Common Council agreed to petition the House of Commons against the Relief Act, during the very height of the rioters’ violence.\textsuperscript{293} This was a highly provocative step, which reinforced the idea that there was some collusion going on between the rioters and the authorities. Gilmour, *Riot, Risings and Revolution*, 358.
\textsuperscript{294} Ibid., 356.
\textsuperscript{296} Gilmour, *Riot, Risings and Revolution*, 368.
both fall into these latter categories, as they each of them favor a more ideological or political explanation for the riots rather a class or material one, respectively.

The Gordon riots are by no means the only historical episode that has been subjected to this process of historical debate based on shifting historiographic patterns. Yet it is nonetheless interesting within the context of this study of representation to see how strongly scholarly accounts are influenced by scholarly discourse, just as popular accounts are influenced by popular discourse. Presumably, as the Gordon riots garner more attention in the scholarly world, historians’ interpretations of them will continue to change and develop with the scholarly patterns that will emerge in the future.
Conclusion

The Effects of the Gordon Riots

In building his interpretation of the Gordon riots as a conservative movement guided by a concrete and specific purpose and an underlying sense of order, Colin Haydon wrote:

[The attacks on the Bank and other establishment institutions] came late in a week of violence, and could be seen as a departure from the rioters' original intentions. For, in fact, if one ignores the hysteria of contemporary letters, the flames of Langdale's brewery, and the picture of anarchy and senseless violence painted in *Barnaby Rudge*, what emerges is a pattern of purpose, even of order, underlying the surface chaos.297

What is remarkable about this statement is Haydon’s assumption that it is possible, or appropriate, to “ignore” the horrific scenes at Langdale’s brewery and the attacks on the Bank and other establishment institutions, any more than it is possible to ignore the hysteria of contemporary letters and the picture of “anarchy and senseless violence” presented in *Barnaby Rudge*. After the Gordon riots, wrote Robert Shoemaker, “attitudes towards the mob would never be the same again.”298 This was not due to the actual damage inflicted by the riots, which, in reality, was limited only to buildings, and not to human lives. It certainly did not have anything to do with any underlying “pattern of purpose” or of order that might have existed behind the riots. What it did have to do with was the cultural myth of the riots that emerged after 1780: the myth of the “spectacular” riot; the “anarchic” riot; the potentially revolutionary riot.

However, before we turn to the greater implications of this cultural legend, let us examine first the concrete political effects of the Gordon riots. In the end, the riots were effectively quelled, and any threat of revolution, avoided. In his final analysis, Gilmour concluded that “the

near-revolutionary opportunity that had arisen by the Wednesday (June 7th) was probably created by Gordon’s revolutionary hopes, a disastrous war, the activities of the rioters, religious prejudice and the paralysis of the government rather than by a carefully premeditated programme of revolution.”

However, whether the threat of revolution was premeditated or not, it was foremost in most contemporaries’ minds immediately after the conclusion of the riots, as well as in the minds of the authorities. Although the rioters’ projected political means were not themselves successful, the political impact of the riots was significant, and it was felt at all levels of society.

The Gordon riots realized many of the worst fears of the conservatives and the propertied classes in England; they showed just how easily popular agitation could spark mob violence, and how close such violence could come to toppling the government, especially when that government was as fragile as the British government in 1780. It was as a result of these fears that one of the most immediate impacts of the riots was the unexpected strengthening of Lord North’s administration. Although the government had been slow to act in the beginning of the riots, the restoration of order “vindicated the authority of government and raised the prestige of the king.”

This, in turn, helped to ensure the permanent strengthening of the executive power by the compelling arguments the Gordon riots provided in favor of a professional police force. The troops that converged in London to quell the riots would remain stationed there for many months to come, for the maintenance of order and to prevent any further insurrections which might have

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occurred, causing unease and discomfort for many Londoners, and especially to radical elements, who feared military rule above all. 301

Aside from burdening Londoners with the presence of the military in their midst, the Gordon riots had other negative effects on popular liberty. Ironically, the riots, which some refer to as “the most notoriously reactionary of all popular political disorders”, decisively undermined the tentative moves some radicals had been making towards parliamentary reform. 302 Even before the riots had occurred, the Protestant Association’s county petitions had overshadowed the campaign being waged by the Yorkshire Association for reform, the petitions against Catholic Relief completely outnumbering those in favor of economic or parliamentary reform by 1780. Later, the riots themselves reinforced the antagonism that many moderates felt towards petitioning, association, and the whole process of extra-parliamentary agitation. 303 The Gordon riots showed many people the potential disastrous consequences of allowing the populace too much liberty; as a result, they determined to take a firmer stance regarding popular protests. In the counties, where the Association movement had been increasingly gaining strength, support for reform rapidly faded. 304 Adrien Randall writes of this unfortunate consequence: "In a very real sense…the Gordon riots did more than set back the cause of parliamentary reform and serve as a dreadful warning to the authorities of the dangers of the mob allowed to run riot. They marked the start of a changing attitude towards the license previously allowed to militant

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301 In connection with this incident, Charles James Fox was famously quoted as saying that he would “much rather be governed by a mob than a standing army.” Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, 72.
302 Randall, Riotous Assemblies, 207.
304 Randall, Riotous Assemblies, 207.
manifestations of the free-born Englishman and towards a clear rejection of the moral economy of the crowd."\textsuperscript{305}

As far as longer term political impacts of the Gordon riots go, the riots went a long way in severing many of the links between City radicalism and the "mob". For politicians in the City of London, the specter of mob violence would make them more hesitant about using popular agitation as a means to achieve their ends in the future. John Stevenson writes that "the deliberate incitement of a mob was something which after 1780 would only be embarked on by the most desperate or the most foolish."\textsuperscript{306} The Gordon riots helped to realize many of the worst fears of conservatives and the propertied classes of the consequences of allowing the populace too much liberty. After the riots, these classes, as well as the average Londoner and Englishman, became suspicious of all extra-parliamentary agitation. These fears and anxieties which were realized in the Gordon riots would be emphasized in the following years, leading up to the French Revolution, and would prepare the ground for the famously negative reaction that greeted that infamous insurrection in England.\textsuperscript{307}

Ian Haywood, Ronald Paulson, and many other scholars have argued that it was the Gordon riots which provided the context in which many English people saw and interpreted the events of July 1789 in France.\textsuperscript{308} According to Stevenson, the Gordon riots "formed part of the consciousness which people carried into the revolutionary era."\textsuperscript{309} Art historian David Bindman has shown that, in graphic representations of the French revolutionaries prior to 1793, "though

\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., 208.  
\textsuperscript{307} Ibid., 109-110; Gilmour, \textit{Riot, Risings and Revolution}, 370.  
the sans-culottes are presented in British caricature as uniquely and essentially French, the typological origins of their representation, with a few refinements, are to be found in contemporary perceptions of the London rather than the Paris mob.\textsuperscript{310} Most of these images ignore the “chilly righteousness” of Robespierre and the prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville, opting instead to represent them as “seeking only the bases physical pleasures and motivated by envy” of the aristocratic French lifestyle.\textsuperscript{311} This imagery can be traced back to the cultural myths surrounding the Gordon riots, which presumed that when the lower classes rose against authority, they were motivated only by base and primitive desires, or by a desire to get even with the elite classes of society, an interesting echo of Rudé’s “social leveling” interpretation.

Furthermore, the relationship between the Gordon riots and the French revolution is an interesting one, because while the Gordon riots both influenced and anticipated British reactions to the French revolution before it occurred, the French revolution, after it occurred, tended to overshadow the effects of the Gordon riots in the English popular imagination. This might even have contributed to the sparse historical attention that was paid to the Gordon riots after the eighteenth century. However, this historical slip is beginning to be reversed. Ian Haywood argues that it was the Gordon riots of 1780, and not the French revolution, which established the paradigmatic British riot of the nineteenth century and beyond- what he calls the “spectacular” riot. We have seen how some examples of how the riots had a significant impact on the ways that British subjects understood their own popular uprisings and disturbances in the nineteenth century. Dickens’ depiction of the riots in \textit{Barnaby Rudge} bears witness to the cultural function of the Gordon riots; they served as an ideological tool that had the power to demonize popular


\textsuperscript{311} Ibid.
disturbances, regardless of how different they were in nature from the Gordon riots. The relatively orderly civil disturbances of the nineteenth century, such as the Reform Act riots and the Luddite uprisings- which may have originated from religio-political disagreement, but were increasingly about representation- were demonized as a result of their association with the Gordon riots in popular literature.\textsuperscript{312} As Haywood noted, “the significance of these events did not only derive from their ‘real’ historical agency but from the way they were moulded by a mythologized and demonized discourse of popular violence.”\textsuperscript{313} The cultural stereotype of the “spectacular” riot emerged as a result of the spectacular violence and subsequent public discourse connected with the Gordon riots; this potent cultural stereotype continued to influence popular attitudes towards crowd action into the nineteenth century and beyond.

To this day, the Gordon riots continue to impress scholars with their ambiguities and complexities. For historians, it is scholarly trends, and not necessarily aesthetic ones, which influence their interpretations of riots, although the aesthetic representations offered by historical witnesses and artists often serve as evidence for their interpretations. Aesthetic representations of riot are inevitably colored by the author’s inherent biases and prejudices, and it is these aspects of the historical record, along with historiographic trends, which will continue to effect how the riots are understood and interpreted in the future.

\textsuperscript{312} Paulson, \textit{The Art of Riot in England and America}, 62.
\textsuperscript{313} Haywood, \textit{Bloody Romanticism}, 182.
Appendix A

“The Rabble’s Orgy”

From *Barnaby Rudge*.

* Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, 520.
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