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Mary Robinson’s THE NATURAL DAUGHTER

This article examines the imagery of the French Revolution in Mary Robinson’s *The Natural Daughter* (1799) and seeks to elucidate its counter-Enlightenment ethos, revealed through the experience of the author’s anti-heroine, Julia Bradford. Diverging from the rigid rationalism that characterized early British support for the Revolution, Robinson cautions against a convulsive detachment from the empirical knowledge afforded by history, the results of which are discernible in the author’s condemnatory depiction of events in France. By placing Julia within this context, Robinson establishes a natural correlation between the constructed British feminine ideal and French revolutionary excess. Ultimately, Julia’s trials and transgressions reveal a nuanced and progressive reformism, at once appealing to deep suspicions of revolutionary redress and investigating the hierarchical gender codes to which its attendant excess could be linked.

Julia ultimately takes on the symbolic form of a nation personified, not only possessing what had become French characteristics of the feminine ideal, but also serving as a reminder of the incalculable cost to the nation of the continued subjugation of British women. Indeed, her affiliation with France throughout the novel, from her tutelage at the hands of a French governess to her looming presence in revolutionary Paris, is an adept literary maneuver. Adopting a seemingly cosmopolitan persona, Julia becomes a “woman of fashion” (124), her frivolous education having “prepared [her] for the great world” (93). Her entrance into society and her unrivaled success as the quintessence of desirable womanhood place her at the forefront of the ongoing cultural clash created by the promulgation of Enlightenment thought. We are told that “Julia was small in stature; fair, delicately formed, humble, obedient, complacent, and accommodating” (92), a description worthy of her status as “a model of feminine excellence” (93). Yet these very characteristics will also make Julia vulnerable to the appeal of a radical revolution—or, more precisely, the much-feared transgressions of sexual propriety and the revered British family-politic. The family-politic trope, grounded in the customary link between social order and the nuclear family, is employed here to interrogate a system that exalts the mother while failing to educate the daughter. Its structure mandates prudence and propriety, a slight concession to traditional mores, but its presence in the text betokens a certain incompatibility between gendered domesticity and the natural advancement of the British nation.

For Robinson, Julia’s cosseted adolescence has engendered the oft-maligned “excessive” sensibility, but her degeneration into the depraved mistress of the radical Revolution suggests a more palliative advocacy of women’s education. While not forwarded under the auspices of Enlightenment theory and

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global citizenship, situations like hers nonetheless reinforce the natural union between a pejorative “sensibility” and the causes of the French Revolution, which was rooted since its inception in the British consciousness. Robinson appeals to the heightened British aversion to anything French through the literalization of French “femininity”: Julia, the essence of the female ideal, is governed by principles propounded by those pejoratively defined as Other. Thus, the tripartite link between idealistic feminine sensibility, sexual passion, and revolution is clear, and Robinson is able to effectively forswear any affiliation with the radical Revolution while yet identifying that event’s root causes as by-products of an unbalanced socio-political landscape, like that found in Britain. Indeed, revolution is prevented, not prompted, by progressive reform.

The latter part of the novel sees Julia, exiled from the fashionable world following her brief imprisonment for gambling improprieties, “depart[ing], with her Gallic lover, for the land of liberty” (278). The placement of heroines outside the geographic boundaries of England is a common trope in numerous eighteenth-century works that represent the cosmopolitan ideal. However, Julia’s escape to the dissipated French capital, here derided mockingly, adds a tinge of irony and hints at a reworking of the topos of exile and the image of displacement. Julia, as the embodiment of both the radical French Revolution and the standard of British femininity, at once reveals the congruity of two idealist constructions and symbolizes the destructive nature of each.

The point is later reinforced as Julia literally comes to embrace the perverse Revolution, becoming the lover of the Terror’s chief architect (289). That repeated sexual transgressions are enacted in the context of revolutionary France suggests a certain level of didacticism within the text. While Julia’s association with the French Revolution is clearly a negative one, Robinson uses this link to critique not only the atrocities of post-1792 France, but also the similarity between their causes and the modes of Julia’s flawed education.

The Natural Daughter’s denouement becomes an image of revolutionary excess, depicting the depraved Julia’s suicide in the bed of her lover, the recently executed Robespierre. Yet Robinson vilifies Julia for her “unnatural” violations of sexual propriety to draw attention to their source and dissociate such behavior from a more moderate British reform movement. The subsequent link to the horrors of the Revolution allows Robinson to at once denounce both its inherent radicalism and the way in which women were raised to embody its excesses. Any condemnation of Julia occurs not simply in response to her detailed sexual voracity, but more significantly to her “unnatural” abandonment of both sister (281) and mother (248) and her own ignominious “self-murder” (290).
For Robinson, a woman’s sexual license, distinct from a reasonably progressive acknowledgment of sexuality, undermines national progress toward a more equitable society. Once established, that newly inclusive nation may actually prove more amenable to sexual freedom and public autonomy. The Natural Daughter’s Julia thereby allows Robinson to renounce a revolution that had become pernicious to the British reform movement while still strongly arguing for a transformation of domestic gender paradigms.

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KEYWORDS

constructions of gender, nationalism, The Natural Daughter, revolution, Mary Robinson

NOTES

1. The causal relationship between “feminine sensibility” and the French Revolution was somewhat misconstrued by the British establishment and is explored in detail by Markman Ellis.

2. Anne Mellor astutely notes that even those works strongly influenced by British modes of discourse or the doctrines of the Christian Bible often shrugged off limitations of geography. She argues that the placement of the cosmopolitan woman has the potential to “produce a liminal contact zone that can function politically as an utopian imperative, a cosmopolitan, transnational boundary crossing that constructs a new form of subjectivity” (297).

WORKS CITED