On 27 August 1794, Lydia Hardy – the wife of the founder of the London Corresponding Society (LCS), Thomas Hardy – died within hours of giving birth to a stillborn baby. Two days later, when the impending funeral of Mrs Hardy was discussed at a meeting of a central committee of the LCS, one prominent member – James Parkinson, a physician probably best remembered for first describing what is now known as Parkinson’s disease – raised the question of whether or not the LCS should make an effort to be represented en masse at the mournful event. Another member opposed the idea, arguing that it gave ‘an opportunity to our Enemies to observe upon our calling together so great a Number of people as would attend that it indicated the Society’s inclination upon every occasion offer’d, to collect a Mob, and to renew the tumults and riots which had so lately prevailed’. This apprehension about the potential for the LCS to be publicly perceived as a mob ultimately informed and shaped the LCS’s official instructions for the funeral of Lydia Hardy. There was no call for a collective gathering of the LCS, and it was ‘recommended to each Member who knew Citizens that meant to attend the funeral earnestly to recommend to them to behave peaceably and becoming the solemnity of the occasion’. When it was all over, the LCS wanted to avoid any risk of a disturbance and recommended those members who did attend should ‘disperse each to his own home immediately after the funeral’.

This episode clearly demonstrates the concern – perhaps even the obsession – of British radicals in the 1790s with cultivating a consciousness of civility and distancing themselves from an association with a mob identity. There is also something of an ironic subtext to the tragic narrative of Lydia Hardy’s death. While the LCS avoided the potential for being viewed as a mob by not gathering as a group at Mrs Hardy’s funeral, her death and that of her unborn child was allegedly caused by the enraged actions of a loyalist crowd. It is difficult to determine how far this account was real or constructed, especially since Lydia Hardy had five previous stillbirths and the risk of maternal mortality in this...
period was very real, but it was nevertheless deliberately positioned by radicals as a powerful and emotive anecdote. Thomas Hardy recalled how ‘his innocent and unprotected family was persecuted with the most dastardly and unmanly rancour’ following his arrest in May 1794 on charges of high treason, ultimately leading to the death of his wife. The fateful moment came not long after Admiral Howe had been victorious over the French fleet off Brest in June 1794, which inspired what has been described as ‘ecstatic demonstrations of loyalism in the south of England and the Midlands’. On 11 June 1794, Hardy’s house was to be one focus of this loyalist ecstasy even though it was illuminated as part of the patriotic ritual:

On that night, a large mob of ruffians assembled before his house, No. 9, Piccadilly, and without any ceremony began to assail the windows with stones and brick-bats. These were very soon demolished, although there had been lights up as in the adjoining houses. They next attempted to break open the shop door, and swore, with the most horrid oaths, that they would either burn or pull down the house. The unfortunate Mrs Hardy was within, with no other protector than an old woman who attended her as nurse. Weak and enfeebled as she was, from her personal situation, and from what she must have suffered on account of her husband, it is no wonder that she should have been terrified by the threats and assaults of such a crowd of infuriated desperadoes.... Mrs Hardy called to the neighbours who lived at the back of the house, and who were in a state of great anxiety for her safety, in case the villains should have effected their purpose of breaking into the premises. They advised her to make her way through a small back window, on the ground floor, which she accordingly attempted, but being very large round the waist, she stuck fast in it, and it was only by main force that she could be dragged through, much injured by the bruises she received.... On the 27th of August, 1794, she was taken in labour, and delivered of a dead child.... About two o’clock of the same day she had parted with her husband, in as good spirits as was possible in her situation – took her last farewell – it was her last – for they were doomed never to see each other again in this vale of tears.

As melancholic as this story was, for British radicals it was part of a strategic narration. On the one level, it allowed them to construct a martyrdom discourse and use it for political leverage at a time when many leaders of the reform movement – including Hardy himself – were being detained under the suspension of habeas corpus ahead of their trials for treason. Richard Lee, on the cover page of his sentimental poem On the Death of Mrs Hardy, declares ‘she died a martyr to the sufferings of her husband’. Some newspapers also followed this line of thought. The Morning Post, for instance, reported that