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Mary Wollstonecraft

A Literary Life

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For Mike

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Preface

Fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.

(Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*)

This literary life aims to give a detailed description of the intellectual, publishing and political coteries with which Mary Wollstonecraft was connected during the ten years she was a woman of letters. Although she was hailed by contemporary admirers as an original thinker and an intuitive Romantic 'genius', with the hindsight of history it is possible to detect those threads attaching her works to their material and cultural contexts, forming webs of correspondences between writers, which shaped language and literary genres.

The underlying theme of the book is just how emancipatory print culture was seen to be at the time, especially by an autodidact like Wollstonecraft. An aspiring female intellectual such as Wollstonecraft could take advantage of the clubs, salons and meeting-places the Enlightenment public sphere had opened up to women, where social barriers were broken down so that books and ideas could be discussed. Communicating with a network of like-minded friends also entailed writing and reading letters, and it was the letter in the form of polemical epistle, advice book, travelogue and conversational story which would remain central to her published works. The influence of the wealthy Dissenters made publication available to the women in their circles at this exciting period when their campaign for religious toleration was turning into an argument based on rights.

A latitudinarian Anglican with much in common with Rational Dissenters, Wollstonecraft joined these outsiders in the suburbs North of

London. Their geographical location indicated the history of such oppositional thinkers: for a hundred years they had criticized the Establishment. Though numerically small, the Dissenters were well-connected in the world of publishing and education, and hospitable to women intellectuals. Disenfranchised like them, Wollstonecraft was inspired to spread Enlightenment thinking through the power of print. Passing on literacy had traditionally been the Protestant mother's business, and Wollstonecraft was one of many women who professionalized the role of educationalist by becoming a children's author and moralist.

When she became a full-time woman of letters, Wollstonecraft worked for Unitarian publisher Joseph Johnson, the most important distributor of late Enlightenment scientific, philosophical, and religious publications, and also a pioneer publisher of early German and British Romanticist writing. A reviewer in the most prestigious oppositional periodical of the day, *The Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft became politicized by the French Revolution and one of the most prominent contributors to the most important pamphlet war since the civil war period. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was a reasoned yet passionate defence of female intellectual equality, which repudiated the false dichotomies now arising between the public world of action and the private world of conscience.

In republican France she joined the Girondin salon society, where writers predominated and whose belief in the power of print to achieve reform was messianic in its fervour. However, when the influence of newspapers began to unsettle the authority of the National Convention itself, her belief in the ideal of an unregulated press was shaken. Wollstonecraft experienced the Terror: she learned the hard way that public opinion could be manipulated by those controlling the media; that idealists became corrupted by power and money. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft continued to believe that the role of print culture was to question the authority of all hierarchies and argue for a community of equals. Still impelled by this ideal, she travelled to Scandinavia, viewing the progressive regime as promising some hope for social reform without the bloodshed she had witnessed in the Terror in France. The fact that she was writing a 'feminist' novel when she died shows that she hoped, even in the darkest days of reaction and anti-Jacobinism, to spread her ideas to the reading public at large through popular culture.

This study hopes to problematize the assumption of critics such as Gary Kelly and Isaac Kramnick that Wollstonecraft can be grouped together with all those 'Bourgeois' writers who criticized feudalism and court culture and distanced themselves from the lower classes. Though

her grandfather had been a merchant, Wollstonecraft's father became indigent and had to be supported by his children. Wollstonecraft herself had no property or income, except what she earned, and belonged to a heterogeneous social group of artists, intellectuals and bohemian writers living by the pen. Wollstonecraft's arguments against gender distinctions were only part of her thoroughgoing egalitarianism. Wollstonecraft's occasionally snobbish remarks about servants should not blind us to the fact that her criticisms of landed property and suggestions for land reform put her at the most radical end of the political spectrum.

Feminist critics such as Anne Mellor and Mitzi Myers, in order to trace a specifically female literary tradition, have also sought to homogenize all women writers at the cost of eroding the ideological differences between them. It is important to situate an intellectual like Wollstonecraft amongst the whole range of writers and thinkers, male and female, with whom her texts engaged, for she played her part in the public sphere and not in a separate women's arena. Close scrutiny of the intellectual scene shows that differences of religious opinions split women writers and shaped the way they saw their role, and that this healthy debate and rivalry demonstrated their confidence in their right to write.

Suggestions for further reading

For those who would like a fuller account of Wollstonecraft's life, which concentrates more on her personal and family relationships, see Janet Todd's recent well-researched *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000). A shorter and livelier general biography is Claire Tomalin's *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974). Gary Kelly's *Revolutionary Feminism: the Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Macmillan – now Palgrave Macmillan, 1991) is a meticulous and scholarly account of Wollstonecraft's intellectual development, in which she is perceived as typifying the temporarily radicalized bourgeois professional classes.

Wollstonecraft did not write her vigorous and informal letters with an eye to posterity, but even in her own day they were admired and published as literary productions in their own right. Janet Todd has edited a new edition of *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Penguin, 2003), which came out just as this book was being revised for the press.

The standard edition of *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 7 vols (London: Pickering, 1989), used here, is lightly annotated, but for fuller textual commentary, I would recommend an edition of *Vindication of*

the Rights of Woman edited by D.L. Macdonald (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997); see also Carol H. Poston's edition of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York and London: Norton, 1988); *A Short Residence in Sweden* and William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of "The Rights of Woman"*, edited by Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), and *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* edited by Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

For a clear-sighted exposition of Wollstonecraft's political thought, see Virginia Sapiro's *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1992, Chicago: Chicago University Press). The historical context is explicated in Jane Rendall's *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860* (London: Macmillan – now Palgrave Macmillan, 1985). The centrality of religion to Wollstonecraft's idealist blend of reason and passion is explored in Barbara Taylor's important study, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Good introductory books on Wollstonecraft from the literary point of view are Jane Moore, *Writers and Their Work Series, Mary Wollstonecraft* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999) and Harriet Devine Jump, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Writer* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994). *Women's Writing* 4 (1997) was a special issue on Wollstonecraft. *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) offers a stimulating collection of essays by the foremost scholars on Wollstonecraft, covering most genres in which she wrote. Two recent specialist studies are Ashley Tauchert, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Accent of the Feminine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), which uses the theories of Luce Irigaray to examine Wollstonecraft's representation of female subjectivity; and Saba Bahar, *Mary Wollstonecraft's Social and Aesthetic Philosophy: An Eve to Please Me* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), which examines Wollstonecraft's aesthetic strategies in figuring female virtue.

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List of Abbreviations

- WMW* *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 7 vols., ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989).
- MAVRW* *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Pamela Clemit and Gina Luria Walker (Ontario and Letchworth, Herts: Broadview Press, 2001).
- CLMW* *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Ralph M. Wardle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

Chronology

Life

27 April, 1759 Birth in Primrose Street, Spitalfields

20 May 1759 Christened at St Botolph's Church.

1763 Family moved to Epping Forest, Essex.

1765 Grandfather, Edward Wollstonecraft, died; leaving bulk of his estate to Mary's father, and an inheritance to her brother Ned.

October 1768 Family moved to a farm near Beverley, Yorkshire. MW attended a day school there.

1773 First extant letter to Jane Arden.

1774 Family moved to Hoxton, London. Elder brother Ned articulated to a lawyer. MW befriended by Revd and Mrs. Clare. Friendship with Fanny Blood.

1776 Family moved to Laugharne, West Wales.

1777 Family moved to Walworth, London, lodging with Thomas Taylor 'the Platonist'.

1778 MW took post as paid companion to Mrs Dawson of Bath. Visits Bath, Windsor and Southampton.

1780 Wollstonecraft family moved to Enfield.

1781 MW summoned to Enfield, Middlesex, to nurse mother.

1782 19 April Mother died. Father remarried and moved to Laugharne. Sisters Eliza and Everina went to live with Ned and his wife and MW lodged with the Blood family.

20 October Eliza married Meredith Bishop.

1783 10 August birth of Eliza's baby.

1784 MW helped Eliza to leave her husband and baby who subsequently died. MW set up school at Newington Green, North of London, with Fanny, Eliza and Everina. Friendship with Dr Richard Price and his circle. Death of Eliza's daughter.

January: 1785 Fanny Blood sailed to Lisbon and married Hugh Skeys. Autumn, MW journeyed to Lisbon to nurse Fanny in childbirth.

November: Death of Fanny and MW returned to London by December.

Events

1759 George III succeeded to the throne.

Published: Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*; Sarah Fielding, *The Countess of Dellwyn*.

1768 Sir Joshua Reynolds is elected first President of the Royal Academy.

Published: Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*.

1774 Louis XVI succeeded to the throne of France.

Published: Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

1776 Declaration of Independence of American colonies. Cook's third voyage to the Pacific.

Published: Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*; Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*.

Richard Price, *On Civil Liberty*

1780 Gordon riots.

Published: Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland*.

1782 Negotiation of peace between Britain and America

Published: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*; Frances Burney, *Cecilia*; William Cowper, *Poems*; William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*; Joseph Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*. Henri Fuseli, 'The Nightmare' shown at the Royal Academy.

1783 First ministry of William Pitt the Younger.

Published: Catharine Macaulay, vol.8, *A History of England, from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line*; George Crabbe, *The Village*.

1784 Pitt's India Act puts East India Company under parliamentary control.

Published: Charlotte Smith, *Elegiac Sonnets*. William Blake, *An Island in the Moon*.

1785 Founding of the Sunday School Society.

Published: William Cowper, *The Task*; James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*.

Life

1786 MW closed school and in August took up post of governess with Viscount and Lady Kingsborough's family in Mitchelstown, County Cork, Ireland.

September: visits Eton on way to Dublin. Winter in Dublin.

1787 January or February: *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* published by Joseph Johnson, and MW gave her payment of 10 guineas to Blood family. Excerpts published in *Lady's Magazine*.

June: travelled to Bristol Hot Wells with the Kingsboroughs and wrote *Mary: a Fiction* and 'Cave of Fancy'.

August: MW began work in London for publisher Joseph Johnson, having been dismissed from governess post.

September: moved to 49 George Street, Blackfriars.

1788 Began translating Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* but overtaken by Thomas Holcroft. Organized Everina's trip to Paris. Summer: launch of the *Analytical Review* and MW helped editor Thomas Christie run it and wrote reviews. *Mary: A Fiction, Original Stories from Real Life* and MW's translation of Necker's *Of the Importance of Religious Opinions* published. Refused an acquaintance's offer of marriage. Took in seven-year-old orphan, Ann.

1789 Compiled *The Female Reader*, published under name of Mr Cresswick.

1790 Translated Maria van de Werken de Cambon's *Young Grandison* and Salzmann's *Elements of Morality*, illustrated by William Blake.

29 November published anonymously *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in answer to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

18 December second edition published with author's name. Became a regular member of Johnson's circle including Henry Fuseli, Anna Barbauld, Thomas Paine, William Godwin, Thomas Holcroft.

1791 Second edition *Original Stories* published with illustrations by William Blake.

April: Death of Dr Price. William Roscoe commissioned a portrait of MW. MW moved to Store Street.

November: MW met Godwin at Johnson's dinner party. Everina refused marriage proposal of George Blood.

Events

1786 Published: William Beckford, *Vathek*; Robert Burns, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*; William Gilpin, *Observations of Picturesque Beauty in Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland*; Helen Maria Williams, *Poems in Two Volumes*.

1787 United States Constitution ratified.

Published: Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance*; Ann Yearsley, *Poems on Various Subjects*.

1788 Mental illness of George III; impeachment of Warren Hastings.

Published: Final volume of Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*; Hannah More, *Thoughts on the Importance of the Manners of the Great to General Society*; Charlotte Smith, *Emmeline*.

1789 Recovery of George III.

14 July: Storming of the Bastille and outbreak of French Revolution.

August: Declaration of the Rights of Man approved by French National Assembly.

Dr Richard Price's sermon 'Discourse on the Love of Our Country'.

Published: W. Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Book of Thel*; Charlotte Smith, *Ethelinda*; Sir William Jones, translation of *Sacontala, or the Fatal Ring*; Erasmus Darwin, *The Loves of the Plants*.

1790 Parliament retains Test and Corporation Acts.

Published: Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*; Helen Maria Williams, *Julia*; and *Letters written in France*; Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance*. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporate and Test Acts*.

1791 Rejection of William Wilberforce's motion to abolish the slave trade. Anti-Jacobin riots in Birmingham. Louis XVI captured attempting to leave France.

Published: Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story*; Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, Part 1; Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*; Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *An Epistle to William Wilberforce*; James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*; Charlotte Smith, *Celestina*.

Life

1792 January: *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published. MW met Talleyrand. Second revised edition *Rights of Woman* published. MW in love with Henry Fuseli. Summer MW met Mary Hays. August MW, Johnson and Fuselis departed for Paris but turned back on hearing the King's palace stormed. Crisis with Fuseli.

December: departed for Paris alone. Joined Girondin circle including English supporters Helen Maria Williams and Tom Paine.

1793 MW fell in love with Gilbert Imlay.

June: MW moved to Neuilly. August: MW pregnant.

September: returned to Paris. GI registered MW as his wife at the American Embassy.

1794 MW moved to Le Havre.

May: Fanny born. GI returned to Britain.

December: *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* published.

1795 April: MW returned to London. Suicide attempt on learning of GI's infidelity.

June: MW travelled to Scandinavia with Fanny and maid to attempt business negotiations for GI.

Sept: MW returned to London via Hamburg.

October: Attempted suicide by jumping off Putney Bridge but saved by passer-by. Lived in Finsbury Square.

1796 January: *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* published. Third edition *Rights of Woman*. Moved to Cumming Street.

March: final meeting with GI.

April: met WG again at Mary Hays' home. Began *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*.

Summer: relationship with WG began. Death of Christie.

December: MW pregnant.

1797 Portrait painted by John Opie.

29 March: MW married WG at St. Pancras Church. MW moved to the Polygon, Somers Town.

30 August: birth of daughter Mary.

10 September: death of complications following childbirth. Buried at St Pancras Churchyard.

1798 *Posthumous Works* published as well as WG's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Events

1792 Louis XVI and family imprisoned. September massacres. Abolition of the French monarchy. April: France declared war on Austria and Prussia.

Published: T. Paine, *The Rights of Man*, Part 2; Thomas Holcroft, *Anna St. Ives*; Charlotte Smith, *Desmond*; Mary Robinson, *Vancenza, or, The Dangers of Credulity*; Samuel Rogers, *The Pleasures of Memory*.

1793 January: Execution Louis XVI. War between Britain and France. Assassination of Marat. September: 'Terror' in Paris. Execution of Marie Antoinette. Execution of Girondins.

Published: William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*; William Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell, America, Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*; C. Smith, *The Emigrants*; and *The Old Manor House*; Hannah More, *Village Politics*.

1794 Habeas Corpus suspended. State trials of leaders of London Corresponding Society end in jury's refusal to convict. July: Execution of Robespierre, Danton, St Just.

Published: W. Blake, *Songs of Experience, Book of Urizen, Europe*; A. Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; W. Godwin, *Caleb Williams*; T. Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Part 1; R. Southey, *Wat Tyler*; William Paley, *Evidences of Christianity*; C. Smith, *The Banished Man*; Mary Robinson, *Poems*.

1795 'Two Acts' passed against seditious meetings and treasonable practices. Speenhamland system of poor relief introduced.

Published: Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies*; H. More, *Cheap Repository Tracts*; T. Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Part 2; Robert Southey, *Poems*; W. Blake, *The Book of Los, The Book of Ahania*; C. Smith, *Montalbert*.

1796 Threat of French invasion; French occupy Northern Italy.

Published: Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, F. Burney, *Camilla*; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems on Various Subjects*, Robert Southey, *Joan of Arc*; M.G. Lewis, *The Monk*; Robert Bage, *Hermsprong, or Man as He Is Not*; Elizabeth Inchbald, *Nature and Art*; Jane West, *A Gossip's Story*.

1797 Peace between France and Austria..

Published: A. Radcliffe, *The Italian*; W. Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, M. Robinson, *Walsingham*; R. Southey, *Poems*; Harriet and Sophia Lee, *The Canterbury Tales*; Thomas Spence, *The Rights of Infants*.