

Prologue: The servant's dream

Eighteenth-century employers knew that thinking about the servants was an ancient activity. Myth, history and the Holy Scriptures demonstrated that elite masters and mistresses had always embodied questions of state and society, of personhood and identity, in their domestics. In Genesis for example, Joseph interprets the dreams of Pharaoh's servants. He has been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Bought by Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's captains of the guard, he is imprisoned after a false charge of rape made by Potiphar's wife. Incarcerated, he is accorded the same trust he enjoyed as Potiphar's house-steward, and is put in charge of the other prisoners. When the Pharaoh's butler and baker arrive – they have offended their master – they are given into his care. The two servants have a dream, one each, both on the same night. Joseph's magisterial interpretation predicts that one of the servants will live and find himself in service and in favour again; and that the other – the baker – will not be forgiven, and will be hanged. The swift fulfilment of these prophecies – both are realised within three days – is the reason for Joseph's release to interpret a dream of the Pharaoh himself. As Joseph reads it, Pharaoh's dream is about organisation of the food supply during famine to come. (Genesis, xxxvii–xli) The meaning he gives to the kingly dream is resolutely social, to do with economy and society; it is by way of marked contrast with his earlier interpretation of the servants' dreams, as merely individual fates.

Joseph is both house slave and superior servant in Potiphar's establishment. Incarcerated, he is still enslaved, but also warden of the other prisoners, whom he serves. (Genesis, xl, 4) He is prophet and seer whose labour in interpreting the servants' dreams appears to be for no purpose other than to demonstrate his fitness to perform the same service for a king, for which he is rewarded with governorship of Egypt, much wealth, and a wife. Eighteenth-century legal theorists and philosophers explained some of these shifts in status and persona in their discussions of Ancient World and Old Testament slavery. Paramount was the message of history and anthropology, that slavery and servitude were conditions

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from which modern commercial society had arisen. ‘In the Infancy of our Constitution, the Common People of England were little better than Slaves’ said one legal guidebook; ‘But since the abolition of Vassalage . . . the Tyranny of Nobility is restrained; the Commonality are upon the same Footing as to Liberty and Property as the Gentry; and Servants of the lowest Class, being under the Protection of the Laws, if mal-treated, have the same Remedy and Redress as their Masters.’¹

The legal philosopher’s aim might be to point up the differences between English common law and Roman law; then the contrast between the house slave of classical antiquity and the modern domestic servant was highly useful. In his *Elements of Civil Law* (1767) the Reverend Taylor provided a sociology of Roman slavery in relation to ‘the customs and manners of the Roman people’.² Modern English people did not need to be reminded that here and now, in the 1760s, ‘Hired or Domestic servants . . . is the true, proper and natural Contemplation, and prevails with us at this Day’. In the great, inequitable world that God had made, there was certainly ‘an inferiority’ attached to the servant, ‘but not such an Inferiority, as includes a Civil Subjection. And the terms of the Covenant [contract] convey to the Master a right over the Offices of his servant, but I think, not over his Person.’³ There were many sources like this for understanding the great differences between present times and the legal and social organisation of the historically remote, the strange shifts in the Biblical Joseph’s status and identity, and for noting the unimportance of the servants’ dreams. Comparison between the slave (ancient and modern, Biblical, Classical and New World) and the contracted girl dusting the parlour and mopping the floor, provided the insistent base note to these discussions.

A servant’s dreams were unimportant to eighteenth-century employers – except when it concerned them or their family.⁴ One morning in 1781, Margaret Rice told her mistress Hester Thrale that she had

¹ Anon., *The Laws Relating to Masters and Servants: With Brief Notes and Explanations to Render them easy and intelligible to the meanest Capacity. Necessary to be had in all Families*, Henry Lintot, London, 1755, Preface. Also John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks; or, An Inquiry into the Circumstances which give Rise to Influence and Authority in the Different Members of Society*, 3rd edn, John Murray, London, 1781, pp. 302, 323–9.

² John Taylor, *Elements of the Civil Law*, privately printed, Cambridge, 1767, pp. v, 407–47.

³ Taylor, *Elements*, p. 413.

⁴ Joseph’s story was referred to in much godly advice to servants in the early century. Rather than his prophetic abilities or his skill in dream analysis, the dangers of predatory mistresses were emphasised. Thomas Broughton, *Serious Advice and Warning to Servants, More Especially Those of the Nobility and Gentry*, 4th edn, J. Rivington for the SPCK, London, 1743, p. 11. Broughton recommended the Revd Mr Jenks’s, *The Glorious Victory of Chastity, in Joseph’s Hard Conflict, and His Happy Escape, while he was a Servant unto Potiphar, an Officer of Pharaoh’s, in Egypt*, W. Rogers, B. Tooke, London, 1707, to young

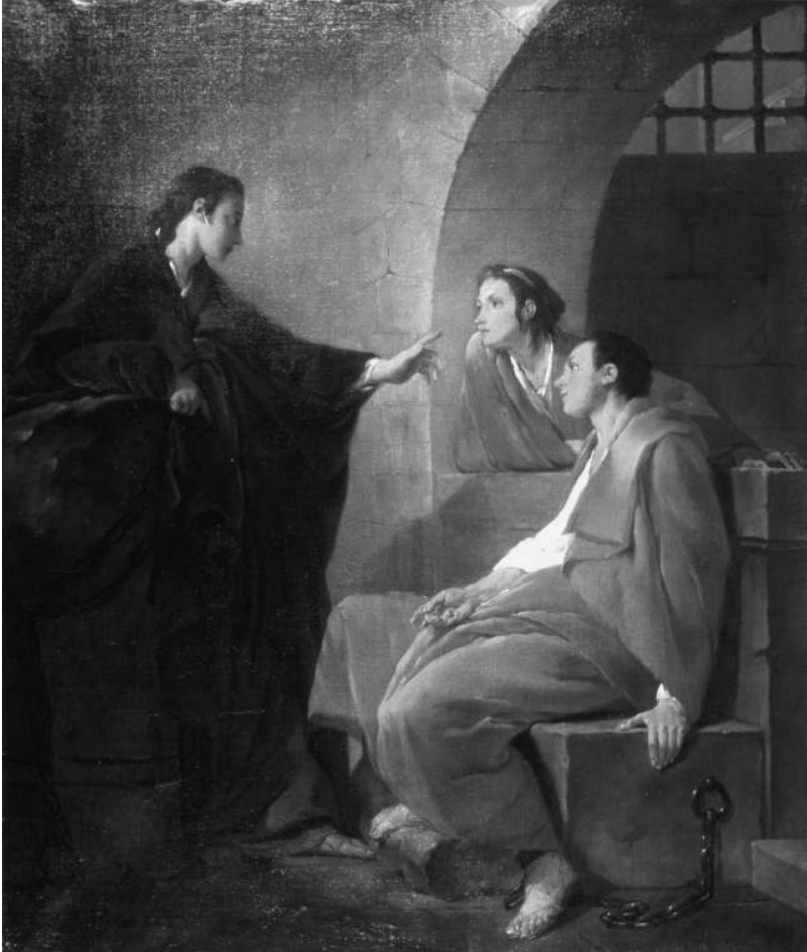


Figure 1. A shift in gender as well as in status and persona for the baker? Yet all authorities agree that the servant to whom Joseph announces death, *is* a man.

dreamed last night ‘that my [Thrale’s] eldest Daughter was going to be married to Mr Crutchley, but that Mr Thrale *himself* prevented her. – an odd thing to me, who think Mr Crutchley to be his Son’.⁵ Peggy

men pursuing the question. They could have read a much more amusing expiation: Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (1742).

⁵ Katharine C. Balderson (ed.), *The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs Piozzi) 1778–1809* (1941), 2 vols., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1951, vol. 1, p. 515.

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Rice's dream certainly got to the heart of Thrale's anxieties about her dislocated, dysfunctional family, about the (first) husband she did not love, and her disastrous relationship with her daughters.⁶ The dream was also a measure of how much the servant knew – was forced to know – about the affective and sexual life of her employers, though the incest signalled here belonged to the realm of Thrale's imagination – it was *her* dream work – rather than Margaret Rice's.⁷ Sometimes Thrale dreamed about the servants. In 1778 she remembered her sixteen-year-old self living 'at Dean Street with My Father and Mother'. They kept 'two Maids and a Man: a Person whose name was Susan Verity was our under Servant, cleaned the House & cook'd the Victuals, she came from Mr Bird the Ribbon Weaver's, answered her Character perfectly, and had lived with us three Years & been a great favourite'. Young Hester had dreamed about going down to the kitchen to find 'six ill looking Fellows sitting round a Table on which was a bowl of Rum Punch . . . a Brace of Pistols with Bottles Glasses &c: & Susan appearing as their Servant – waiting on them'. She woke up terrified, decided not to go down, turned over, went back to sleep. In the morning she told Susan about the dream; she 'trembled and seem'd in great Confusion'. Alarmed that a good maid might think herself under suspicion (all over the country, girls would up and leave at such an imputation) Thrale 'made a Laugh of it, & assured her that I had no such Thoughts in my Head'. Some months later, her dream turned out to have been predictive. Susan's husband was taken as a thief, and 'she confessed to my Mother, that . . . [he] would frequently come to our house when all were a bed; bring his riotous Companions with him & drink themselves drunk . . . they threatened her Life if She did not let them in . . .'. Twenty years on, Thrale concluded 'How providential then was my uncommon dream!'⁸ In the generality of stories like this, taken from histories ancient, modern and sacred, the servant's dream work was to alert employers to housebreaking, theft, and general predation.⁹

⁶ Carolyn Steedman, 'Servants and their relationship to the unconscious', *Journal of British Studies*, 42 (2003), 316–50.

⁷ For the servant's sexual knowledge as legal testimony, Lawrence Stone, *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England 1660–1753*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992; *Road to Divorce: England 1530–1987*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990.

⁸ Balderson, *Thraliana*, vol. 1, p. 339.

⁹ John Boswell, *A Method of Study: or, an useful Library. In two Parts. Part I. Containing short Directions and a Catalogue of Books for the Study of several valuable Parts of Learning, viz. Geography, Chronology, History, Classical Learning, Natural Philosophy, &c. Part II. Containing some Directions for the Study of Divinity*, printed for the author, London, 1738–43, Part II, pp. 272–3; David Simpson, *A Discourse on Dreams and Night Visions, with numerous Examples Ancient and Modern*, Edward Bayley, Macclesfield, 1791, pp. 52–3.

But there is the servant's dream in its other meaning: 'dream' as the endless longing of the underprivileged that history (and life) be different from what it has been, and what it still is. This book will suggest that this kind of dream was more available to eighteenth-century domestic servants than other categories of labouring people, because of the work they did, the material objects on which they exercised their labour and the interpellation of both by a legal system. In the period covered by this book, older dreams were given social and economic substance, and the hope of a future for proletarian men and women was – according to their historians – first itemised as: the possibility of entering the polity, of possessing civil rights and (for men) enfranchisement. Discussing the revolutions in manners, thought and politics (and the social, economic and philosophical revolutions) through which she was living, Hester Thrale (now Piozzi) told a friend that she wanted to rewrite the servant's dream for modern times; for 'if the World does not come to an End, tis at least turned upside down.' Apropos she continued –

Do you remember a Print so called? when you were a child – Kitchens &c with Compartments: in one The Baby beating the Nurse, in another the Fowl roasting the Cook &c. . . . Peasants sitting with their Hats on, and the King bowing before them and pulling off his Crown. Two Footmen riding in a Chariot and the Noblemen stuck up behind.

If I could find that foolish old Thing I'd give a new Edition of it *with proper* Comments – that I would . . . make good Sport out of it these Democratic Days.¹⁰

These Days were October 1793. Robespierre had entered the Committee of Public Safety in July; the reign of Terror had begun, the *levée en masse* declared and Marie Antoinette guillotined two weeks since (the King of the French had lost his head as well as his crown in January).

Reversals of fortune and the servant's ascendancy were a feature of the social narrative Thrale/Piozzi had told since her girlhood. 'Laura Carter has become a very fine Lady, & very rich, her name is Rush now – I could not guess who the Wench was when She addressed me', she wrote in 1777; 'I kept her in my Nursery & about my Person for Charity a Maid servant thirteen Years ago – & here is Laura the finest of the fine at every Publick Show.'¹¹ In 1764 she had promised the girl's father to get her a place 'but finding she could neither read, nor write, nor work, nor wash, I found no body would be plagued with her but myself; I took her home therefore – taught her to read myself and taught her

¹⁰ Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, *The Piozzi Letters: Correspondence of Hester Lynch Piozzi, 1784–1821 (formerly Mrs Thrale)*, 3 vols., University of Delaware Press, Associated University Press, Cranbery NJ, 1989–93, vol. 2, p. 147.

¹¹ Balderson, *Thraliana*, vol. 1, p. 682.

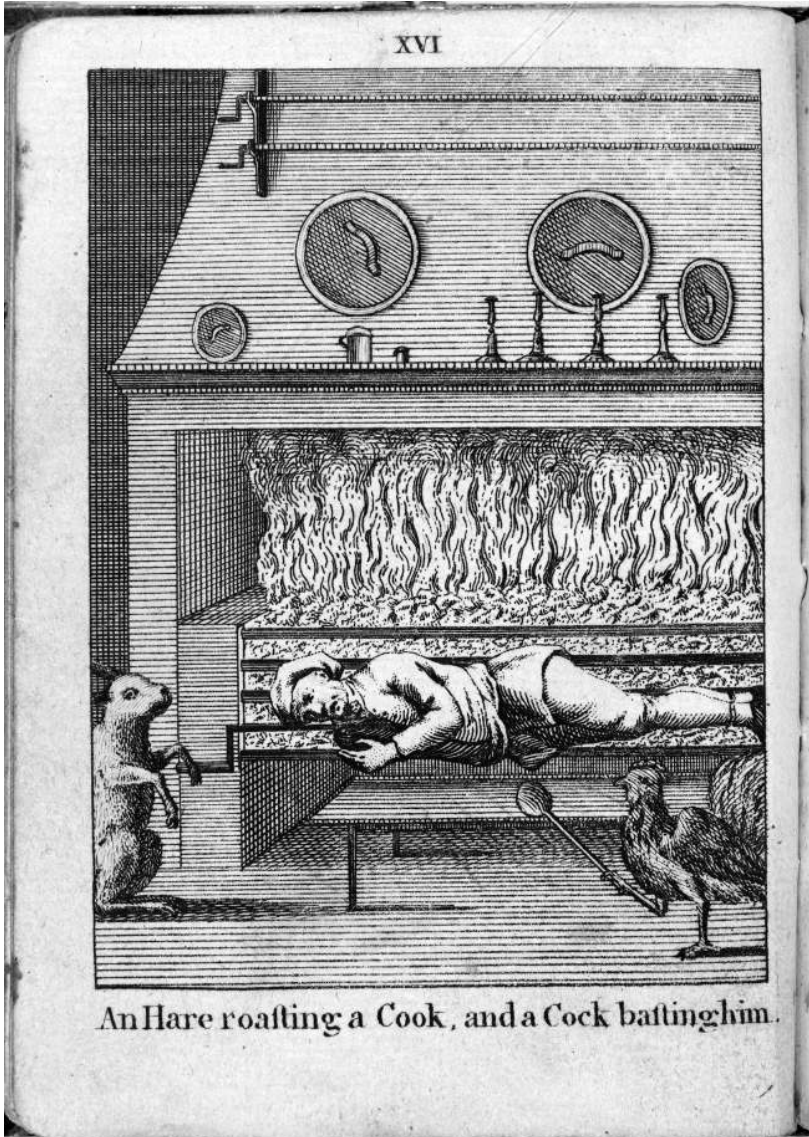


Figure 2. The Roasted Cook. Not the print Hester Thrale remembered from her childhood, but rather a contemporary image of the world gone topsy-turvy.

her prayers, her Catechisme &c'. She sent her out 'to learn washing – ironing Lacemending, clearstarching and such like, paid a Master to instruct her in Writing & then took her into my Nursery – to complete her Education'. It did not work. Laura 'was encouraged by her Mother . . . to be saucy'; she insisted on the other servants calling her 'miss forsooth', would not eat with them, provoked general dislike ('made them all abhor' her).¹² Laura evidently had rather different ideas from Thrale about her social status and the education appropriate for it. These stories, of rise and fall through social space, were the way of the world. 'Ainsi va le Monde', Thrale wrote in March 1798; 'there are Vicissitudes upon this Little Globe among Little Folks – my Handsome Maid that was with me in Italy . . . came to our Door . . . this morning a poor Woman asking Charity'.¹³

All Thrale's servant-stories were individualised in this way. She contemplated their personalities, liked some of them ('Grosset is a nice Man' she wrote after recruiting him in 1788), and disparaged others.¹⁴ She spent much time analysing their purported folk-beliefs, once trying to explain to her maid how the Itch (all the servants had what was probably scabies in the winter of 1778) was transmitted, showing her 'the Animal magnified; & told her how it burrowed under the Cuticle, how it was catching as Lice were catching &c'.¹⁵ This educational session with the microscope had no effect at all, she noted ruefully: 'when I had done my harangue – I think however Madam says She that the Girl should have some Physick given her – to *strike it out*. So little could I make myself comprehended'. She needed the servant's obduracy, and her own self-deprecation in the face of it. She could amuse by telling of their little lives. She and her friends exchanged chillingly comic vignettes about their servants' sexual life, the joke always being that they, the servants, did not understand what stock-type they were playing. 'My maid Beckwith is married to our Welsh Gardiner', she reported in 1799. And then, a few days later, 'Mrs Beckwith's Conduct amazes even *me* who am not easily astonished at Proofs of human Depravity. She married . . . just in Time it seems, and is ready to lye in at 3 Months End. A poor, meek, mortified, unhealthy, unhappy, but completely *ladylike* Person as She appeared to me . . . but too much Opium, and too many Novels were the Cause . . .'. And then, recycled, to someone else: 'You are . . . very comical about the

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 116–17. ¹³ Bloom, *Piozzi Letters*, vol. 2, p. 483.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 277. For disparagement of the cold-hearted Eleanor Allen, see Steedman, 'Servants and . . . the unconscious'.

¹⁵ Balderson, *Thraliana*, vol. 1, pp. 13, 251, 347.

Gardener; he and his Lady's Conduct seem indeed as if they both had been deep read in Boccacio . . .'.¹⁶

The servants were constantly on her mind; they were a means to understanding the relationship between her and her husband and children; they provided her with psychological perception. She analysed Mr Thrale thus: 'the easiness of his Temper and slowness to take Offence add greatly to his Value as a domestic Man: yet I think his Servants do not much love him, and I am not sure that his Children feel much Affection for him: low People almost all indeed agree to abhor him, as he has none of that officious & cordial Manner which is universally required by them – nor any Skill to dissemble his dislike of their Coarseness –'.¹⁷ The servants' function – apart from dusting, dinner and dressing Hester Thrale's hair – was to provide the content of her anecdotes and jokes, the shrill laughter of social disdain, and her work of cultural commentary. They were means to celebrate her own perceptiveness, social and psychological. In 1778 she had positively encouraged Sally Bean 'who always nurses me in Lying In' to bring her little boy with her for yet another confinement, for they 'were all so fond of the Child, & I like an Ideot let him come . . . because they said he fretted so at being from his Mother'. It was he who brought scabies to the household – another means to a good story – 'so I suppose we are all to begin & scratch speedily . . .'.¹⁸

Historians pondering the structural reordering of social relations at the century's end, have dwelled on workers' resistance to 'an ever encroaching capitalism to fuel the development of class consciousness'.¹⁹ Roger Wells says that we should remember the harvest failures and hungers of these war years; we have forgotten the state, its intrusive actions in enforcing, by law, changes in the diet of a people in a condition of famine-induced trauma coming at the end of a long-term decline in living standards for key sections of the working population.²⁰ Domestic servants are not often included in these assessments, even though E. P. Thompson once noted that 'it is exactly in servant–master relations of dependency, in which personal contacts are frequent and personal injustices are suffered against which protest is futile, that feelings of resentment

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 991; Bloom, *Piozzi Letters*, vol. 3, pp. 75, 81.

¹⁷ Balderson, *Thraliana*, vol. 1, p. 53.

¹⁸ Mary Hyde, *The Thrales of Streatham Park*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1977, p. 207.

¹⁹ John Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth-century Industry*, Croom Helm, London, 1981, p. 209.

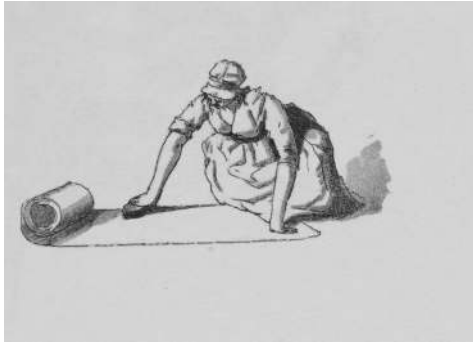
²⁰ Roger Wells, *Wretched Faces: Famine in wartime England, 1798–1801*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester, 1988, p. 335.

or of hatred can be most violent and most personal'.²¹ He thought that we could do away with 'deference' as a means of understanding these feelings, for they had 'no inwardness'; servants and other employees 'do not love their masters, but in the end . . . must be reconciled to the fact that for the duration of their lives these are likely to remain their masters'. And yet most eighteenth-century service careers were short; they did not last a lifetime. This book will present evidence that young women, doing their time in order to gain a settlement, flitting as soon as a mistress shouted at them, or failed to provide tea to their breakfast, were not at all fatalistic about their future, but rather, with the means available to them in a profoundly inequitable society, expressed their resentments in inventive and sometimes terrifying ways. Thompson found his sites of class feeling among servants in grand establishments like Potiphar's and Hester Thrale's: in the army ('the NCO may despise or hate his officers'), the Oxbridge college, and the great house, where the footman may 'despise those whom he serves'. This book will move out of the big house to restore such feelings, and the waged domestic workers who articulated them, to our social histories of England, 1760–1830, and to accounts of modern social structure more generally, that have been derived from this time and place. It will not assume that there is a fight to be had – following Karl Marx – over who can represent him- or herself, and who must be represented.²² Eighteenth-century domestic servants represented themselves – spoke their subjectivity, their dreams and desires – to an astonishing degree, and in sophisticated ways. If, by the end, we come to understand what the servant's dream may have been, then we already know that they did dream-*work* for others, who had purchased their energies (including the energies of their imagination) to do what the law said really belonged to them, the employers.

²¹ E. P. Thompson, 'The crime of anonymity' in Douglas Hay *et al.* (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Tree*, Allen Lane, London, 1976, pp. 255–344.

²² Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' (1858) in David McLellan (ed.), *Selected Writings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 318.

1 Introduction: A new view of society



Sometime in 1796, when he was working on the series of essays that would become *The Enquirer*, William Godwin visited (in imagination only; let us be clear about this) the servants' quarters of a rich man's mansion. He had started to write about servants for educational purposes: he was as much troubled by the question of how parents were to manage the relationship between children and domestics as his lover Mary Wollstonecraft had been ten years before, in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*.¹ Or maybe she was his wife by the time he made his imaginary journey downstairs, and he a prospective father. Wollstonecraft and Godwin married in March 1797 and joined households, to avoid the obloquy of her bearing a second bastard child. Godwin conjured a grand establishment out of Wollstonecraft's much more typical and modest one, which in 1796 consisted of Margeurite the child-maid, Mary in the kitchen, and the Boy (Mary's child and Wollstonecraft's Boy) who had run errands between their separate households during the six months before they married. In neither of these did Godwin experience the kind of domestic labour force that was big enough to provide the 'riot in the kitchen' that he thought so corrupting of small children's manners and morals.²

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the more important Duties of Life*, Joseph Johnson, London, 1787.

² Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A revolutionary life*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 2000, pp. 379–457; Ralph M. Wardle (ed.), *Godwin and Mary: Letters of William Godwin*