

I

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Introduction

Even though Mary Wollstonecraft had little to no presence in history or literature curricula as recently as a generation ago, she has never exactly been a minor figure. Some, certainly, have wished her so. A dauntless advocate of political reform, Wollstonecraft was one of the first to vindicate the “rights of man,” but in her own – brief – lifetime and ever since, she achieved notoriety principally for her championship of women’s rights. And while some of this notoriety took the particular form of scandal of the sort that often attends women directly involved in public affairs, some of it she directly sought in her writing and in her conduct. Controversy always inspired Wollstonecraft, always sharpened her sense of purpose. Whether writing about education, history, fiction, or politics itself, she was always arguing – even her travelogue, written as a series of letters to her faithless lover, is an ongoing argument. And in turn, Wollstonecraft always inspired controversy. A revolutionary figure in a revolutionary time, she took up and lived out not only the liberal call for women’s educational and moral equality, but also virtually all of the other related, violently contested questions of the 1790s – questions pertaining to the principles of political authority, tyranny, liberty, class, sex, marriage, childrearing, property, prejudice, reason, sentimentality, promises, suicide, to mention only a few. Clearly, she struck many a raw nerve. Although her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), for example, at first received fairly respectful reviews as a tract on female education,¹ after England and France declared war, it was increasingly (and correctly) read against the backdrop of its broader progressive agendas on behalf of liberty. Thereafter, efforts to vilify Wollstonecraft, though sometimes marked by an air of puerile jocularly, were hysterically intense. Horace Walpole famously called the champion of women’s rights a *hyena in petticoats*; Richard Polwhele arraigned her as the foremost among modern-day *unsexed females*; and the *Anti-Jacobin Review* of 1798 went so far as to index her under “P” for *Prostitute*, presumably because no woman could conceivably wish to criticize standards and practices of female modesty unless she wanted to

CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON

breach them with impunity.² No one could possibly arouse this sort of animus unless she is perceived to have posed an urgent, an important threat indeed. Vindications of this great vindicator are marked by a comparable intensity. When Blake invokes a “Mary” persecuted by “foul Fiends,” or later in the nineteenth century when Elizabeth Robins Pennell likens her to Saint Vincent de Paul and to Joan of Arc, it is clear that Wollstonecraft was regarded as a formidable figure who challenged the sexual and moral norms of her society in radical ways and who was martyred as a result.³

But assailed, revered, or lamented – anything but actually forgotten, even when her memory seemed to go underground – Wollstonecraft’s celebrity rested principally on the narrative that makes up her life, particularly as it was first related in Godwin’s *Memoirs of* in 1798. As Cora Kaplan observes here in her compelling essay on Wollstonecraft’s legacies, Ralph Wardle concludes his path-breaking 1951 biography by fully acceding to the assumption that it has not been her writing but rather her “personality” that “has kept her memory alive,” opining that for every “one” person who plodded her or his way through *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, “dozens” thrilled to the story of her courage and idealism.⁴ There is no denying that ever since her death in 1797, Wollstonecraft endured as a story whose outlines are both highly charged and highly conventional – a story about a passionate but difficult woman’s idealism in love (her daring affair with Gilbert Imlay) as well as in politics (her hope for the French Revolution); about her struggles with crushing disappointment in both (Imlay abandoned her and their infant daughter; the French Revolution degenerated into the Terror); about her daring efforts to be independent and original in a world that demonized feminine independence and would not tolerate deviations from the commonplace; about her discovery of “true” love and happiness with William Godwin later in life, only to be cut short by her death in childbirth, of all deaths the one that confirms (as detractors observed) the “wrongs” to women she attempted to ameliorate. Only in the late 1960s and 1970s, when feminist studies began to make an impact on literary and historical studies in the academy, and when the *Rights of Woman* was issued in several paper-bound editions – in the twentieth century, it had previously been available only in a 1929 Everyman Classic version alongside John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* – did attention begin to turn from Wollstonecraft’s life to Wollstonecraft’s works. Today, at the outset of the twenty-first century, as “feminism” is now acknowledged only to be part of Wollstonecraft’s project, *The Rights of Woman* itself, though surely still her popular work, is read with *Mary*, *The Wrongs of Woman; or Maria*, and *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, all readily available in paper-bound editions. And with the complete *Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* issued

Introduction

for the first time, we can now say, contra Wardle, that “dozens” of readers are familiar with Wollstonecraft as a writer for every “one” who has ever read Godwin’s first biography of her, *Memoirs of the Author of The Rights of Woman* (1798), or pondered her remarkable afterlife as a personal story.

While committed to investigating Wollstonecraft’s crucial and distinctive stature as a figure, the present volume of essays is also inspired by this relatively newfound sense of Wollstonecraft’s breadth as a writer. Wollstonecraft is well suited for a volume in the Cambridge Companion series because her career encompasses writing of so many different kinds. As the late Carol Kay has observed, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft writes as a “philosopher” and a “moralist,” as an authority on the education of women, a book reviewer, a non-sexual voice of intuitive reason and ecstatic religious contemplation, and as political projector whose ideas should change the French Constitution and the entire course of the French Revolution. This multiplicity of rhetorical voices has at times been read as Wollstonecraft’s personal failure of intellectual control or as her noble effort to sustain a female critique of male discursive forms, when in fact, in Kay’s words, the “miscellaneous” forms Wollstonecraft employed are “symptoms of the diversity of literature and philosophy of [her] time.” The novels, essays, sermons, or pamphlets of writers demonstrably important to Wollstonecraft – take, for example, Rousseau, Burke, Richard Price, or Samuel Johnson – display similar traits of miscellaneousness and a similar decision to eschew being methodical in favor of being accessible to wide ranges of topics and sudden fluctuations of tone and mood.⁵ In Wollstonecraft’s case, such diversity has proved quite confounding, for working across the tidy disciplinary boundaries we have since constructed to organize disciplines within the academy as well as within the literary marketplace itself, she has seemed to elude our efforts to categorize or even to name her. Do we call her a novelist? An educationist? A political theorist? A moral philosopher? An historian? A memoirist? A woman of letters? A feminist? Wollstonecraft was all of these things, of course, but to describe her as any single one of them would not only diminish the range as well as the wholeness of her achievement, but also impose decidedly anachronistic territorial distinctions on her literary endeavor.

Because thinking about the miscellaneous appearance of Wollstonecraft’s career as a writer entails rethinking the way we map out fields of knowledge, putting together a volume of this nature is a compelling venture. But, considered more narrowly, it also poses something of a challenge. To be sure, Wollstonecraft’s contributions to specific genres are important, and this collection does not neglect them. As Janet Todd’s essay shows, for example, Wollstonecraft excels as a writer of familiar letters, and any student or

CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON

scholar interested in understanding her profound originality could do no better than to start here. Moreover, the recent availability of the complete *Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* makes Wollstonecraft's wide-ranging work as a reviewer for the *Analytical Review* readily available to readers for the first time. Mitzi Myers's essay demonstrates how Wollstonecraft's literary reviews enabled her not only to educate herself but also to develop her own voice as novelist, a subject I in turn take up in my essay on Wollstonecraft's fiction and its efforts to disrupt customary assumptions about the relations of gender and genre. Nevertheless, the sorts of discrete thematic and generic demarcations that describe other writers' careers do not always offer us the most productive way of conceiving of Wollstonecraft's. She does not, in other words, treat religion in one work, education in another, politics and the French Revolution somewhere else, and fiction in a separate place altogether. On the contrary, her works are always re-visiting and re-thinking the same questions – pertaining to moral improvement, liberty, sensibility, reason, duty. Accordingly many of the essays here recur to these same sets of issues in Wollstonecraft's works, albeit from different angles. Thus, Tom Furniss's essay on Wollstonecraft and the French Revolution not only examines less well-known works like *Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* but also traces surprising changes of her attitude towards monarchy in such later and very different works as *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, a work which Mary Favret on the other hand elucidates by uncovering the tension between mobility and confinement as it marks Wollstonecraft's entire career. Similarly, Alan Richardson and Vivien Jones each agree that everything Wollstonecraft wrote was essentially and urgently about education, but Jones illuminates *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a species of advice and conduct literature, and Richardson assesses it vis-à-vis the pedagogical theory of the time. For Barbara Taylor, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is rooted in Wollstonecraft's deepest convictions about religion, while for Chris Jones it is rooted in related, but quite distinct, political traditions of the period. It is hoped that these overlapping discussions, differing in their objectives and emphases and sometimes in their conclusions, promote an expansive as well as an intensified appreciation of Wollstonecraft's work.

As these essays explore Wollstonecraft's affiliations with specific religious, political, and social traditions, others develop still other new ways of apprehending Wollstonecraft's achievement. For Susan Wolfson, Wollstonecraft works and thinks foremost as a close, critical, and often highly resistant reader of the high canonical texts of English poetry – Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, among others – and was in a sense the first practicing cultural critic,

Introduction

one who ironically, however, subsequently came herself to constitute a text for the Romantic poets of her own generation, who reinscribed her into the poetic traditions she attempted so incisively to intervene in and transform. Foregrounding the issue of sexuality, a vexed one since Wollstonecraft's own time, Andrew Elfenbein argues that Wollstonecraft saw herself in terms of an emerging discourse of *genius* which encouraged and licensed her to upset, among other things, conventional indices of sexuality. As many scholars have noted, the late eighteenth century witnessed an exponential rise of women's activity in the literary marketplace,⁶ and Ann Mellor's essay suggests how Wollstonecraft directly or indirectly inspired traditions and counter-traditions among her female contemporaries. Finally, pondering the question of Wollstonecraft's presence not in her own time, but in ours, Cora Kaplan's essay finds that, much as Wollstonecraft herself recurs to the problem of female sensibility and the construction of feminine erotic imagination through literature, so too does Wollstonecraft's life and work exemplify for modern feminist theory and practice the vexed status of affect and its relation to gender.

If Wollstonecraft only recently had the peculiar status of being a major figure who was nevertheless typically unread, today students are likely to read Wollstonecraft's works in a wide variety of contexts – in eighteenth-century as well as Romantic studies, in courses on the history of feminism and the emergence of women writers, and in classes about the history of sensibility or of English radical thought. This collection of essays is designed to help students encounter this powerful, daring, and often difficult writer whose career and whose example and whose work continue to inspire and to haunt us.

NOTES

1. For a fine discussion of Wollstonecraft's early treatment at the hands of reviewers, see Regina M. Janes, "On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (1978), 293–302.
2. See *Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1905), 15:337–8; Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females* (London, 1798), pp. 13–15.
3. See William Blake's "Mary," lines 41ff; Elizabeth Robins Pennell, *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Boston, 1884), 1, 32–3. Countering the still common assumption that Wollstonecraft had no discernible influence on women writers until the late twentieth century, Roxanne Eberle demonstrates Wollstonecraft's impact on nineteenth-century fictional representations of women in general and fallen women in particular throughout *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing, 1792–1897: Interrupting the Harlot's Progress* (Palgrave, 2001), and especially in "Concluding Coda: Writing the New Wollstonecraft." I am much indebted to Eberle's study.

CLAUDIA L. JOHNSON

4. Ralph M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft: a Critical Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 341. This book was first published in 1951.
5. See “Canon, Ideology, and Gender: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Critique of Adam Smith,” *New Political Science* 15 (Summer 1986), 69.
6. For the most important recent studies on this score, see Harriet Guest’s splendid, “The Dream of a Common Language: Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Textual-Practice* 9:2 (Summer 1995), 303–23; and *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790–1827* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) and *Revolutionary Feminism: the Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin’s, 1992).

2

JANET TODD

Mary Wollstonecraft's letters

Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the most distinctive letter writers of the eighteenth century. Her works from her juvenile productions as a young girl in the Yorkshire town of Beverley to her final notes to her husband and future biographer William Godwin are instantly recognizable. Indeed Wollstonecraft's value is as much in letter writing as in public authorship; often she seems almost to live through her correspondence, expressing within it her numerous roles: child, daughter, companion, friend, teacher, governess, sister, literary hack, woman of letters, lover, wife, rationalist, and romantic. She wrote incessantly throughout her life, priding herself on her frank expression and often berating her correspondents for not rising to her expansive standards. She might have said with Amelia Opie, a friend from her final years, "If writing were an effort to me I should not now be alive . . . and it might have been inserted in the bills of mortality – 'dead of letter writing A. Opie.'"¹

Wollstonecraft's letters were self-aware certainly but they were also dashed off as the overflow sometimes of joy, more often of bitterness, ennui, and self pity. They are occasionally funny, often engaging, but most frequently moving in their self-centered vulnerability. In them Wollstonecraft grows from the awkward child of fourteen to the woman of thirty-eight facing her death in childbirth. One can see where she matured and where she remained entangled in childhood emotions, noting in the swift reading of a lifetime's writing the unity in temperament from beginning to end, the eerie consistency of tone. At different times the letters reveal her wanting to reconcile different irreconcilables – integrity and sexual longing, the needs and duties of a woman, motherhood and intellectual life, fame and domesticity, reason and passion – but all are marked by similar strenuousness, a wish to be true to the complexity she felt. As a result she never seems quite to have said the last word: there are numerous PSs in her letters, mentions of the paper or letter itself and her need to write to its end, to fill in, to dominate her pages. No space should be left empty, no mood untouched by expression: "I can hardly bid you adieu, till I come to the bottom of my paper," she wrote.

JANET TODD

A letter will conclude by promising silence, only to be followed by another begun a few hours later.

Wollstonecraft's letters were not written with half a glance at the public in the manner of some of the Romantic poets like Lord Byron, who expected a place in literary history. At the same time no letter writer of the time assumed complete one-to-one privacy. Runs of letters were kept, handed around among coteries or colleague groups. When Wollstonecraft asked for her letters back from a correspondent, she was confident that she would receive them intact. Yet inevitably for the modern reader there is a sense of intrusion in reading private writing, even after so long. Those anxious about the tastelessness of the act might look at the words of another friend of her latter years, Mary Hays. Unlike Wollstonecraft, Hays lived long enough to collect her own correspondence, and she wrote, "Should this book fall into the hands of those who make the human heart their study, they may, it is possible, find some entertainment, should the papers continue legible, in tracing the train of circumstances which have contributed to form a character, in some respects it may be singular and whimsical, yet affording I trust something to imitate, though more to warn and pity."²

Wollstonecraft, like Hays, was aware that she was expressing an inner reality. Inevitably there were outside influences: some letters mentioned reading, usually of improving books, but mostly the modern reader grasps little of the world around – much more appears in her sister Eliza's letters. For Wollstonecraft's response to the great events of her time, the French Revolution and the English reaction, or the deaths of literary and political figures we must turn to the published writings, to her three polemical works: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* or to her journalism with *The Analytical Review*. But she does not, by contrast in her letters, describe a domestic private world outside the public political one; unlike most eighteenth-century letter writers, especially women, she did not give immense detail of interiors, gardens, consumer objects, dresses, and materials. The letters of Jane Austen and Frances Burney are full of muslins, gauzes, and hats, as well as of shops and streets they have entered and walked down. Wollstonecraft's letters, often sent from the same fashionable locations, reveal mostly her thoughts, sensations and emotions. In many respects offending the canons of good letter writing, she was rarely concise, graphic, direct, realistically detailed, or detached.

Good letter writing of the time was described by the Scottish literary critic Hugh Blair, whose popular *Letters on Rhetoric* Wollstonecraft discovered when she was a governess in Ireland in 1786 and 1787. She valued the work

Mary Wollstonecraft's letters

but the remarks on letter writing had little influence on her practice. Blair had expressed the Augustan notion of correspondence as good conversation, sprightly, witty, and seemingly natural, above all entertaining, with a constant eye to the recipient. Although she tended to be more open about her feelings with some correspondents than others, these were not always especially appropriate for confidence or especially close in family or friendship. Indeed she seems to have had little concern for the particular effect of her writing on her correspondent; for example, she remarked to an old friend, George Blood, that he might dread hearing from her if she continued moaning; yet this fear did not inhibit further complaint. She simply did not accept the Augustan advice to calibrate tone and detail according to the recipient. Great letter writers in this tradition such as Horace Walpole took a single event and reported it in different ways for different correspondents. Wollstonecraft was not a leisured and literary letter writer like this; she did not have Walpole's temperament nor his time and space; she was writing on the hoof, in cramped lodgings, on swaying boats, in the wilds of Scandinavia or in freezing Paris before queuing for bread, or between reviews in London, or indeed before plunging into the Thames in an attempt to end her life. In such circumstances she was concerned with expressing her emotions as she felt them, not entertaining or worrying about her effect. So she could reveal herself fully to men such as her future publisher Joseph Johnson when she hardly knew him or display her melancholy to a chance acquaintance like the clergyman Henry Gabell.

Perhaps her secret determination to become a writer gave all her communications value in her eyes, however self-obsessed and repetitive they might sound to her correspondent. Just occasionally she sought to entertain – when she replied to her sister Eliza, whom she knew to be gloomy, she tried “fabricat[ing] a lively epistle” – but this was a rare aim and, if her letters to her other sister are anything to judge by, she soon fell back on her preachy homiletic style or her habit of detailing her moods almost as if conversing with herself rather than another. She was concerned to get herself across to herself as well as to both private recipients and public readership, whatever the cost. As a result of this self-concern there was less distinction than one might have expected between her letters to her lover and those to her sisters or distant friends.

The main impression given by her letters, then, is of self-absorption but not lack of self-awareness; often, they seem more like a diary than correspondence, a communion with the self or perhaps a self-created other. Wollstonecraft talked and thought on paper. The strengths of the letters were that, while they were not witty entertainments, they were also not sentimental or exaggeratedly exclamatory in the contemporary feminine

JANET TODD

mode – letters from Mary Hays or Mary Robinson are examples – nor did they use prepackaged phrases. Instead they sought to dramatize feelings, tease out the meaning from sensations, enacting moods on paper rather than simply describing them. Indeed the letters themselves often formed a large part of the drama of her life. Wollstonecraft would begin to write in one state and end in another or write herself into dramatic misery. She portrayed herself awaiting the post, then hearing that nothing had arrived; her fiery brain burnt and she rushed from the room for air. All was captured on paper.

Wollstonecraft's letters create a distinctive world, a sense of inner vitality, revealing a consistent character. Unhappy in Scandinavia, she told her forsaking lover Gilbert Imlay,

there is such a thing as a broken heart! There are characters whose very energy preys upon them; and who, ever inclined to cherish by reflection some passion, cannot rest satisfied with the common comforts of life. I have endeavoured to fly from myself, and launched into all the dissipation possible here, only to feel keener anguish, when alone with my child.³

Her huge sense of the “I” is always believable and fully present. It is quite unlike the self image of, for example, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu or the bluestocking writers such as Elizabeth Carter and Catherine Talbot. The bluestockings wrote to each other as friends, but their letters, which seem designed to be passed around among a coterie, have a public quality lacking in Wollstonecraft. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had a very different temperament from Wollstonecraft, as she disclosed when she wrote her wonderfully sharp and witty letters earlier in the century. Although both struggled for self-mastery – Wollstonecraft through religion in the beginning, then through rationalism – unlike Lady Mary she was not concerned in her letters to discipline her sorrows or to distance her subject matter from herself. She did not try to express herself stoically.⁴ Part of the difference lay in their different circumstances. Montagu had her aristocratic status to uphold where Wollstonecraft had little social status but a great deal of valued identity to express.

As her letters indicate, Wollstonecraft believed in getting to truth through investigating her own experience; so her mode of writing was in the main intensely personal. She argued the value of her expression with Godwin, who had been critical of her raw careless style,

I am compelled to think that there is some thing in my writings more valuable, than in the productions of some people on whom you bestow warm eulogiums – I mean more mind – denominate it as you will – more of the observations of my own senses, more of the combining of my own imagination – the effusions