Introduction
Mary Wollstonecraft and Eighteenth-Century Political Economy

to commerce every thing must give way[1]

When Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was first published in 1792, it was classified by Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review* (a periodical to which she herself contributed regularly) as a work of political economy.[2] This book takes its cue from this original – and overlooked – categorisation, to explore the relationship between Wollstonecraft and the political economic thought of her time, both in the *Vindication* and throughout the varied body of writing produced by her over the course of an extraordinary, if brief, writing career which lasted from the late 1780s to her untimely death, ten days after childbirth, aged 38 in 1797. Since then, the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft's most well-known work, has been read in many ways – as a piece of political theory, as moral philosophical and religious writing, as a tract on education – and it is certainly all of these, and more. Little attempt has been made, however, to read it as a work of political economy, or to think seriously both about why it was so categorised, and what such a categorisation might mean for our understanding of Wollstonecraft's thinking and writing, both in this text and beyond. Relatively little attention has been paid to Wollstonecraft's relationship to the shifting and diverse body of thought named as 'political economy', even though Wollstonecraft was writing at a time when political economy and the nature and problems of commercial society were at the forefront of many radical writers' minds, and even though Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), was, along with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Catharine Macaulay, and the conduct writer John Gregory, one of the authorities with whom Wollstonecraft engages in the course of her work. Equally, Wollstonecraft's work as a whole has been approached through many of the disciplinary frames of the modern academy: literary criticism, intellectual history, the history of political thought, philosophy, feminist

theory, and gender studies. Yet none of these fits her perfectly, able to do justice to the extraordinary range of her thinking and writing, or to provide an account of the recurring intellectual interests which, even across a markedly brief writing career, link Enlightenment philosophy and revolutionary politics, travel-writing and fiction, history writing, literary reviews, and an important essay on poetry. In particular, no existing monograph study on Wollstonecraft fully addresses what I argue in this book to be a crucial aspect of her intellectual formation: her persistent engagement, over the course of her career, with the emergent discourse of political economy, whose means of understanding and modelling human nature and human behaviour, as well as the relation of individuals to society and to morality, was becoming increasingly influential in the last decade of the eighteenth century, precisely the time of her writing.

What exactly was political economy in the last decade of the eighteenth century? Sylvana Tomaselli has observed that political economy in this period might address any of the following: money, bullion, national wealth, manufacturing, balance of trade, agriculture, consumption, population, war, taxation, tariffs, and levies. But equally, many of these were recurring concerns in policy debates which might be traced back to earlier periods: Tomaselli notes that the term 'political economy' was first coined in 1615 by Antoine de Montchrétien.[3] For Michel Foucault, eighteenth-century political economy was distinguished from an earlier 'classical analysis of wealth' by virtue of its innovative account of production, and the roles of the division of labour, capital, and the market.[4] Certainly, this period was one of self-consciously innovative thought addressing the area of human behaviour which we now identify as economic activity, but we need to be wary of retrospectively identifying eighteenth-century political economy through the language of present-day economics, a practice whose 'teleological straightjacket' can obscure the nature and specificity of the political economy of another time.[5] Descriptions of their endeavours by prominent thinkers in the field of eighteenth-century political economy are notable both for the capaciousness and ambition of what political economy might encompass and for the difference of its language from that of economics of today. At its heart was nothing less than understanding the shape and operation of society in its modern commercial form (and potentially also its reformation), and specifically how it met the needs, comforts, and even happiness of the population.[6] Here, then, was a project likely to interest Wollstonecraft, concerned as she is with the shape of human lives, and the limits on happiness, under the social conditions of commercial modernity.

This 'science' of public happiness, as Anne Robert Jacques Turgot described it in a letter to Wollstonecraft's early mentor, Richard Price, included what we would recognise as economic concerns, but these were located within a broader field of political, moral, psychological, and historical study.[7] Tomaselli notes that Adam Smith's achievement, as the most notable political economic thinker of the age, took place within a set of questions which addressed 'substantial moral, political, historical, theological, psychological and epistemic issues' from which it should not be severed.[8] The context for such questions was the on-going attempt to understand what was perceived as the relatively novel, or emergent commercial society of the age, identified as quite distinct from older feudal models, or the slave-owning classical past. Commerce defined and shaped this modern present in ways which went far beyond its role in previous times: its growth was, Smith claimed in *The Wealth of Nations*, a 'revolution of the greatest importance to the publick happiness'.[9] Recognising this brought with it questions as to the best mode of political organisation for commercially oriented societies. Understanding commercial society also involved theorising human nature, its desires, motivations, and patterns of behaviour, and their cumulative expression and effects. It is for this reason that, above and beyond its particular modes of modelling economic activity, eighteenth-century political economy is understood as offering what Saree Makdisi describes as a 'narrative of organization': it was, as Clifford Siskin has noted, 'a primary site for the totalizing and rationalizing of the social', or (in James Thompson's words) 'the discourse that imagines or describes civil society and publicity'.[10] This perception that political economy provided the means for describing the lived conditions of commercial modernity is also present in words used by one of Smith's most astute contemporary readers, Thomas Pownall, former governor of Massachusetts, who welcomed *The Wealth of Nations* as offering above all else a 'system, that might fix some first principles in the most important of sciences, the knowledge of the human community'.[11] More than attending to matters of wealth production and financial administration, political economy can thus also be understood as the means by which the very nature of social existence and civil society in late eighteenth-century Britain was addressed and theorised. Here, this book claims, is the political economy with which Wollstonecraft engaged throughout her writing, in a struggle which included too, we shall see, an insistence that the very link between the organisation of wealth and its consequences for human lives was always in view.

If eighteenth-century political economy was a 'site for rationalizing the social', offering 'knowledge of the human community', our understanding

of Wollstonecraft's engagement with it must recognise that she is involved in more than a critique of commerce or property ideology – although such moments in her writing are not difficult to identify. Equally, it is to do more than assert that her widely recognised political radicalism needs to be recognised as economic radicalism too. Certainly, such claims are part of what follows in the remaining chapters, but I am equally concerned to explore Wollstonecraft's engagement with late eighteenth-century political economic thought in its largest sense. I argue that Wollstonecraft's remarkably diverse body of work can be read as an ongoing effort to think through – and critique – the connected material, economic, moral, psychological, and social conditions of modern commercial contemporaneity. It thus constituted an early point of resistance to what political economy would very shortly become: a formalised, technical, and specialised science of wealth and finance detached from larger moral and political questions of human improvement and happiness. Engaging as she does with the writings and thought of Smith, Edmund Burke and others, precisely at the moment when certain political economic orthodoxies were forming, Wollstonecraft parries, counters, and debates, to offer political and moral critique of the world that commerce threatens to build, showing its human cost (not least to female lives), and arguing fiercely for alternative means of arriving at improvement, both at the individual and societal level, offering, further, an alternative vision of what improvement might indeed be.

Central to my argument is the recognition that, at the very time of Wollstonecraft's writing, during the political ferment of the revolutionary decade of the 1790s, political economy was itself in flux, as object of both political and discursive struggle. A 'protean' discourse, it was undergoing the various processes of organisation and systematisation by which a disciplinary field might be formed, but such processes took place under, and were marked by, all the pressures of a revolutionary age.[12] Thus, Dugald Stewart's heralding of Smith's achievement in this new 'science of politics' sought to defuse a charge of intellectual association with French revolutionaries by separating any potential political import of Smith's work from its economic doctrine.[13] This was a time of, on the one hand, increasing acceptance of Smith's work by a range of prominent politicians and thinkers, from Burke and William Pitt to Thomas Paine: evident, for instance, in its invocation in mid-1790s Parliamentary debates over poor relief. On the other hand, however, radical and revolutionary thinkers from many different perspectives were exploring ways of critiquing the increasing dominance of commerce in the 'marketplace' of society, and challenging political economy's accounts of human nature and behaviour, and

of society and value. Such open debate was enabled by the lack of what Matthew Sangster has described as the 'professionalising discourses' which funnel texts to distinct, specialised audiences; yet, as he also notes, the state moved from the mid-1790s to close down sites of open, radical debate and dissent, a process which coincided with the increasing specialisation, and professionalisation, of political economic discussion.[14] One such site of non-disciplinary critique and dissent was Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*, which ceased publishing in December 1798, following Johnson's prosecution for treason. The *Analytical Review* reviewed a remarkably wide range of publications under the heading of 'political economy', as we shall see in the next chapter, and as already noted, described Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication* as one such work of political economy.

The year after Wollstonecraft's premature death, in 1797, the publication of Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* marked a new phase of political economic thinking, which brought to the fore anxieties of resource capacity and population growth. Resistance to Malthus's perceivedly miserabilist arguments galvanised the opposition of many Romantic thinkers (including Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle) to political economy's 'dead science'; the imagination, the aesthetic, and culture were mobilised to counter political economy's apparently spiritless utilitarianism in a schism fundamental to modern thought.[15] But Wollstonecraft, from whom later Romantic thinkers learned so much, was already insisting on the role and value of imagination, sympathy, taste, and feeling before that later moment. She mobilised their associated literary forms (as well as political and philosophical writing) to closely track and critique a 'science of politics and finance' which, unlike her Romantic successors, she also recognised as among the most important of contemporary knowledge endeavours, concerned as it was, in her words, with the 'most important end of society, the comfort and independence of the people'.[16] In this sense, Wollstonecraft can be seen as an early resistor of the separation of the 'political' from the 'economic', and of economic from aesthetic value.[17] This book argues that Wollstonecraft's writings offer a unique perspective on the radical dialogue with political economic thought in the early and mid-1790s, one which recognised the power and importance of its analysis of commercial society whilst insisting that virtue, reason, and liberty should be central to improvement in the modern age. Political economy's failures on these fronts drew her strongest critique. The following chapters thus illuminate the discursive contests between opposing moral, cultural, economic, and political positions in the period immediately prior to both the formalising

of political economy as a technical and disciplinary practice, and the hardening of Romantic opposition to it.

This study considers the major writings in Wollstonecraft's oeuvre, published from 1788 to 1798, within this context, presenting her as a radical thinker and writer who engaged and critiqued political economic thought at this crucial moment of political and intellectual flux. Approaching Wollstonecraft from the direction of the political economy of her time offers new insights into her writing and thinking, illuminating how her work has been informed by areas of thought whose relationship to Wollstonecraft is currently under considered, and showing how she contributes, in ways not previously noted, to the debates of her time. Wollstonecraft is shown drawing from, but also critiquing, key elements of Scottish philosophy and yoking that into radical thought on education, gender, morality, human nature, and the property system of modern society. I read her as engaging both explicitly and implicitly with the writings on such topics by Smith, Rousseau, Burke, and others, and show how concern with the problems and corruptions of commercial society, and the effects of wealth on the human personality and relations, and a restless search for some alternative, recurs across her career in writings of varying genres.

Such a perspective offers a new way of understanding the arc of Wollstonecraft's writing career, as it moves from fiction, through philosophical, political, and historical writing, to meditative travel letters and a return to the novel form. In each genre, I show Wollstonecraft repeatedly revisiting and recasting her overriding preoccupations and testing the potential of the new perspective offered by changed literary form. In this, writing itself is shown to be a crucial resource for engaging with the rise of a new discursive formation or knowledge practice. At the same time, I show how we can avoid choosing between Wollstonecraft the Enlightenment philosopher and Wollstonecraft the Romantic writer, by demonstrating how she may be approached as a crucial bridging figure between these two historical moments, who, by the time of her premature death, was increasingly confidently exploiting the resources of literary writing to counter the depredations of the commercial age, and the political economic thought that accompanied it.

The account of eighteenth-century political economy outlined above – a science of politics, happiness, and community – encompassed political and social thought which addressed society as a whole. Alongside such areas as education, morality, and personal behaviour, then, gender concerns might be understood to be within its remit. This was certainly the case in Wollstonecraft's revolutionary approach. If this book seeks to trouble

the disciplinary boundaries of our own day, by attending to the historical emergence of the knowledge practices which gave rise to modern disciplinarity, it also offers a new take on Wollstonecraft's feminism by situating it within the larger project addressed by the book. Wollstonecraft's thinking about the situation of women is thus consistently approached as an aspect of her analysis of commercial modernity, within which women occupy a particular place. Whilst the 'miserable state' of her sex exemplifies the problems and failings of commercial society, for Wollstonecraft, their very abject status also means that they are uniquely placed to enact the very revolution of manners against property and history to which she urges them. Her return to the question of the 'wrongs of woman' in her final, unfinished novel, which combines close attention to the material, economic, affective, and psychological conditions of female lives, illustrates her perception of the connection between female lives, literary fiction, and the economic wrongs of her age.

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One way to trace Wollstonecraft's relationship with the political economic thought of her day is to examine the few moments in her writing where she references Smith, the most prominent political economic authority in the 1790s.[18] Wollstonecraft was undoubtedly familiar with Smith's work, referencing both *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *The Wealth of Nations* in a number of her writings. She was also familiar with Rousseau, the leading counter-critic of European commercial modernity, and admired Montesquieu, an early theorist of commercial society. As this book shows in detail, Wollstonecraft's understanding of contemporary modernity stemmed from the theorisation of commercial society provided by the Scottish Enlightenment tradition of moral philosophy and conjectural history in which Smith worked. This combined two important elements: a post-Lockean, post-Newtonian empirical science of man and society, which, through David Hume and Smith, offered a theory of moral sensibility and sociality via sympathy; and a stadial history of the progress of human civilisation, which attended to the material and economic conditions of human society from early society onwards, and understood contemporary commercial modernity as civilisation's culminating stage.

Smith is most explicitly present in Wollstonecraft's work in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, where he is quoted, at times at considerable length, on four separate occasions. Described as a 'cool reasoner', Smith figures in the *Vindication* as a moral and philosophical authority whose thinking can both shore up Wollstonecraft's own arguments,

but also be critiqued and extended. Thus, in perhaps Wollstonecraft's most famous use of Smith, his observation (from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*), that wealthy or great men do not require virtue to receive public admiration, but rather attract it through the display of more superficial appearances and accomplishments, is extended by Wollstonecraft to women, in an analysis of the morally corrosive politics of display and self-objectification in 'the female world'.[19] But Wollstonecraft far from passively accepts Smith: she points to personal or cultural prejudice to question Smith's central theoretical construct of the impartial spectator, which grounds his account of moral judgement produced through multiple acts of social observation. She considers the implications of his thought for women, suggesting that 'it is not sufficient to view ourselves as we suppose that we are viewed by others': women are expected to surpass, not conform to, existing societal moral and behavioural ideals.[20] Rhetorically, the presence in her work of 'Dr. Smith', as she respectfully names him, helps to buttress Wollstonecraft's authority, but her ability to critique and extend his thinking signals a critical independence from him.

It is Smith the moralist, rather than Smith the theorist of commerce, with whom the *Vindication* engages most explicitly. As a guide to the complexity of her engagement with political economic thought then, these moments are something of a red herring. Smith is in fact a more complex, if less overt, presence elsewhere in Wollstonecraft's writing, including in her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794) and her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796). Both works address, in markedly different ways, the problems and possible futures of modern European commercial society. *Short Residence*, as Chapter 5 further shows, draws extensively, although not uncritically, on a Smithian vocabulary and analysis, identifying 'improvements' of industry whilst also attacking the 'principle of convenience' imputed as the cause motivating economic activity. But the *Historical and Moral View*, the most understudied of Wollstonecraft's works, is probably the place where these issues are given the most comprehensive treatment. As Chapter 4 explores, this work – a philosophical or moral history in the Scottish Enlightenment tradition – weighs the progress and possibility of improvement and liberty against the early events of the French Revolution; and it also gives prominent space to the granting by the National Assembly of a free trade in grain. Liberating the grain trade was a key policy of the Girondin faction with whom Wollstonecraft associated during her stay in France between late 1792 and 1795; it was also a prominent measure in a Smithian enactment of 'natural liberty' in economic matters. Attention to the grain trade

within her history shows how Wollstonecraft folds questions of economic liberty into a larger narrative of political liberty and improvement which, whilst anticipated in the early events of the Revolution, looked increasingly less likely by the time of her writing.

Given the attention to a prominent measure of economic liberty in this work, it is a surprise to find in its final pages a number of overt jibes at famous Smithian tenets, which articulate concerns over the 'destructive influence of commerce'.[21] The 'Dr Smith' whom the *Vindication* was happy to name becomes in *View* a pointedly anonymised 'celebrated writer', whose identity as the famous theorist of the division of labour nevertheless becomes clear as Wollstonecraft attacks his account (from the first chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*) of time being 'sauntered away, in going from one part of an employment to another', asserting instead that this is 'the very time that preserves the man from degenerating into a brute'.[22] The division of labour, indeed, 'renders the mind entirely inactive', she claims, and turns 'whole knots of men' into 'machines, to enable a keen speculator to become wealthy', and there is a further tilt at Smith in her claim that 'every noble principle of nature is eradicated by making a man pass his life in stretching wire, pointing a pin, heading a nail, or spreading a sheet of paper on a plain surface'.[23] Ironically, however, whilst such criticisms can clearly be read as criticisms of Smithian political economy, they not only reveal Wollstonecraft's thorough knowledge of Smith's work, but also repeat concerns which Smith himself had already articulated, and often in more powerful terms than Wollstonecraft. Smith's observation that the 'man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations … generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become', and that 'this is the state into which the labouring poor … the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it', is arguably as powerful and disturbing as Wollstonecraft's own.[24] Similarly, Wollstonecraft's attack on the merchant who 'enters into speculations so closely bordering on fraudulency, that common straight forward minds can scarcely distinguish the devious art of selling any thing (*sic*) for a price far beyond that necessary to ensure a just profit, from sheer dishonesty, aggravated by hard-heartedness' recalls Smith's equally unflattering account of mercantile behaviour: 'People of the same trade seldom meet together […] but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices'.[25] Emma Rothschild has suggested that it was the 'most subversive parts of *The Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments* … which inspired Wollstonecraft'.[26] But whilst Wollstonecraft repeats elements of Smith's critique – such as his worries about the social

implications of the economic world he helped to bring into being – she does not, as he does, look to law and government for redress. For her, the remedy for the ills of the commercial world lay not in institutional reform or government action, but in the collective effects of individual moral reform. There exists no starker picture of the inadequacy of existing institutions to understand the oppressions suffered by, in this instance, women, from the legal and property systems of her day, than the judge's heartless response to Maria in the final pages of *The Wrongs of Woman*.[27] In Wollstonecraft's vision, the intersecting injustices produced by the emerging worlds of money, property, and labour are not easily remedied, the flaws of the new commercial world held starkly in relief.

Closing the *Historical and Moral View* with observations on commerce's 'destructive effects', Wollstonecraft's ostensible attack on Smithian principles repeats and at times reframes points originally made by Smith himself. A number of observations might be made here, beyond the immediate evidence of the extent to which Wollstonecraft was familiar with Smith's writing. Contextually, the tussle over Smith's reputation in the 1790s may help to explain why Wollstonecraft found it easier to conclude her work in cadences ostensibly critical of Smith. But arguably, a larger picture is suggested, both through the phrasings used, and in the omissions and silences which make up Wollstonecraft's depiction of Smith and her relation to it: a picture describing the mutual orientation of moral-critical discourses and political economic ones at a time of not only radical debate and political ferment, but marked discursive flux. Wollstonecraft's silent borrowing from Smith's own statements of the problematic consequences of the division of labour – her turning of his criticisms of the commercial system against him – occludes, to her rhetorical benefit, the extent to which theorists of political economy themselves worried about the social and moral implications of commercial society's pursuit of productive efficiency and wealth. Such an occlusion bolsters her own position as social and moral critic, but it also works to embed or bring into being a separation of political economic thought from moral, aesthetic, and literary critique, a separation later entrenched in Romantic characterisations of political economy as the 'Dismal Science'.[28] In 1794, we are not yet at that moment of full separation, but it is not far off, and Wollstonecraft's writing arguably anticipates its arrival. In her final paragraph, there is another unacknowledged debt to Smith's work, as Wollstonecraft deploys two crucially important metaphors which, if not deriving directly from Smith, are certainly used by him: the self-healing potential of the body politic, capable of working its own cure without intervention, and the capacity of the