

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT IN CONTEXT

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was one of the most influential and controversial women of her age. No writer, except perhaps her political foe, Edmund Burke, and her fellow reformer, Thomas Paine, inspired more intense reactions. In her brief literary career before her untimely death in 1797, Wollstonecraft achieved remarkable success in an unusually wide range of genres: from education tracts and political polemics, to novels and travel writing. Just as impressive as her expansive range was the profound evolution of her thinking in the decade when she flourished as an author. In this collection of essays, leading international scholars reveal the intricate biographical, critical, cultural, and historical context crucial for understanding Mary Wollstonecraft's oeuvre. Chapters on British radicalism and conservatism, French *philosophes* and English Dissenters, constitutional law and domestic law, sentimental literature, eighteenth-century periodicals, and more elucidate Wollstonecraft's social and political thought, historical writings, moral tales for children, and novels.

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Preface

An article that appeared in the April 1797 edition of the *Monthly Magazine* entitled “On Artificial Taste” offered readers a meditation on two of the most widely noted dimensions of this popular theme: “a taste for rural scenes” and the more “natural” quality of poetry that had been “written in the infancy of society.” In some ways, both of these were standard topics, frequently discussed in the literary magazines of the day, though the article addressed them with compelling rigor and clarity, and with a refreshing impatience for empty poses and cultural double standards. It was curious, the author suggested, given people’s widely professed love of nature, “how few people seem to contemplate nature with their own eyes. I have ‘brushed the dew away’ in the morning; but, pacing over the printless grass, I have wondered that, in such delightful situations, the sun was allowed to rise in solitary majesty, whilst my eyes alone hailed its beautifying beams.”¹ Having offered a no-nonsense reflection on the state of people’s real interest in nature beyond the sort of “romantic kind of declamation” that was so much in vogue, the author moved on to offer a fairly standard list of the age’s assumptions: poetry is a “transcript of immediate emotions” transfigured by the effects of those “happy moment[s]” in which the poet is enriched by images “spontaneously bursting on him” without the need for any recourse to “understanding or memory.”² This account of creativity, like the article’s definition of the poet as “a man of strong feelings” giving “us a picture of his mind when he was actually alone, conversing with himself, and marking the impression which nature made on his own heart” seemed to converge with William Wordsworth’s ideas about poetry in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Its related insistence on the higher spiritual worth of those moments when the poet worshipped “in a temple not made with hands, and the world seems to contain only the mind that formed and contemplates it” seemed to echo Psyche’s declaration of sublime internalization in Keats’s ode.³ Except, of course, that the article was published in April 1797, well ahead of

Wordsworth's account in the Preface to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* and a full generation before Keats's work.

Published anonymously (it was addressed to the editor and signed W. Q.) in the correspondence section of the *Monthly*, immediately following a letter championing the role of "country banks" in promoting "internal trade and manufactures," the article was only publicly attributed to Wollstonecraft when William Godwin included it in his edition of her *Posthumous Works* a year later.⁴ In many ways, it is classic Wollstonecraft, absolutely in step with the themes of her day but a full step ahead of many of the writers who would weigh in on them, intellectually searching but wonderfully critical of empty posturing, philosophically expansive yet grounded in a shrewd sense of the age. But in its original format as an anonymous "letter" (these were often commissioned and paid articles that were included in a letter format) it also highlighted the side of Wollstonecraft that can be easy to forget, the professional writer contributing to a range of periodicals in a number of guises (including her frequent role as a reviewer of the *Analytical Review*), preoccupied not just with groundbreaking questions about democracy and the rights of men and women but also with standard topics that would have struck a chord with mainstream reading audiences.

Five months later she was dead. The "Marriages and Obituaries" section of the October edition of the *Gentleman's Magazine* contained a notice that "Mrs. Godwin, wife of Mr. Wm. G. of Somers-town; a woman of uncommon talents and considerable knowledge, and well known throughout Europe by her literary works, under her original name of Wollstonecraft" had died "in childbed."⁵ Having provided a cursory list of her main publications, the *Gentleman's* offered a gracious person tribute. "Her manners were gentle, easy, and elegant; her conversation intelligent and amusing, without the least trait of literary pride, or the apparent consciousness of powers above the level of her sex; and, for soundness of understanding, and sensibility of heart, she was, perhaps, never equalled."⁶ Then, having ushered Wollstonecraft gently back into the feminine sphere of duties by insisting that "her practical skill in education was even superior to her speculations upon that subject," it concluded by emphasizing its aversion "to the system she supported in politics and morals, both by her writings and practice."⁷ As an obituary, it was balanced and polite, if far less enthusiastic than an obituary three pages earlier for "Elizabeth Neale, better known by the name of *Betty*," who had run a fruit shop at her "house in-St. James's-Street," where "her company was ever sought for by the highest of our men of rank and fortune . . . She was a woman of

pleasing manners and conversation, and abounding with anecdote and entertainment.”⁸ Readers of the two obituaries could be forgiven for assuming that the “Queen of Apple women” had the bigger impact on her age.⁹

The *Gentleman’s* had not always been so polite. Seven years earlier, it had responded to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* with “a horse-laugh,” reducing her intervention in political debate to the parodic image of a woman riding to the defense of Richard Price “armed *cap-à-pie*,” pathetically unaware that jousting was no place for ladies. It mocked her critique of the effects of inequalities in property, scorned the misguided tendency of “our new philosophers” to encourage “millions of people, both of the *great* and *little* vulgar” to use “the free exercise of their reason, whether they wish it or are capable of it or not,” and denounced the “stale and shameful tricks” of these “malcontents,” who, having “nothing to lose, may lend their names and offer their hands, for any mischief.”¹⁰ Then it retreated into disapproving silence, declining to review any of Wollstonecraft’s subsequent publications. The review would not be the last example of hostile attention that Wollstonecraft faced, much of which lapsed into personal attacks; nor was she lacking in responses that were equally enthusiastic about the important nature of her interventions, many of which saw in Wollstonecraft’s work a vision of a social order that would help to foster genuine moral integrity in both the private and public domains. Whether writers agreed with her ideas or not, she had everyone’s attention.

As the *Gentleman’s* obituary came close to acknowledging, Wollstonecraft was one of the most influential women of her day in an age that would turn out to be a crucial one in the history of modernity, whether as a revolutionary turning point or (for reformers) a missed opportunity, an extraordinary literary flourishing or a philosophical reconsideration of the most fundamental aspects of the Enlightenment. Wollstonecraft played a central role in all these dynamics. She began writing in the later 1780s, in the wake of the American Revolution, and she came of age intellectually in the early 1790s, in the midst of the French Revolution. In Britain, reform movements were in full force as they debated liberty, rights, and governance; counterrevolutionary sentiments also ran high, and fears that the foundations of British liberty could be destroyed began to spread. Ideas circulated through Britain, America, and France as the political, legal, and economic subject of the monarchy was transformed into the citizen of a social contract. In some ways, though, the sheer intensity of these developments and the high stakes that were involved have helped to overshadow

the extraordinary magnitude of Wollstonecraft's achievements in the few years that she worked as a professional author, in terms of the quantity of what she produced, the ambitious scale of the questions she was wrestling with, and, just as impressively, the profound development of her thinking over that decade.

No writer, except perhaps her political foe, Edmund Burke, and her fellow reformer, Thomas Paine, inspired more intense reactions. In her brief literary career before her untimely death in 1797, Wollstonecraft achieved remarkable success in an unusually wide range of genres, from education tracts and political polemics, to novels and travel writing. Just as impressive as her expansive range was the profound evolution of her thinking in the decade that she flourished as an author. Few readers of her 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* would have anticipated the comment that "[i]f ever there was a book calculated to make a man fall in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book," as William Godwin wrote about her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. However, Wollstonecraft's *Letters* marked an important extension rather than a departure from her feminist commitments. Her relatively brief but intense career as an author was marked by a constant development in her thinking about the major issues of her day. Running through all of this was the remarkable cultural achievement of a woman with few connections and little formal education who, within a few short years, rose to the pinnacle of the English literary community. In 1787, having traveled to London with almost nothing, like so many aspiring authors before her, Wollstonecraft quickly became a prominent member of the intellectual circle that had formed around the publisher and editor, Joseph Johnson, with whom she found employment as a reviewer and translator.

More than any writer of her generation, Wollstonecraft insisted that the emancipatory efforts associated with the French Revolution be extended to a thorough reconsideration of the rights of women as well. For Wollstonecraft, as for so many Enlightenment thinkers, reformist ideals were bound up with questions of education, but her interest in women's education grew out of personal experience. As an early proponent of female education, she opened a school for girls with her sister Eliza and her friend Frances Blood in Newington Green. She also published an educational treatise, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), and compiled an anthology for young women, *The Female Reader* (1789). As a British radical and political theorist, she wrote one of the first responses to Edmund Burke's widely read condemnation of the French Revolution,

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Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790). Her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) is not only a persuasive endorsement of human rights but also the first comprehensive articulation of political theory by a woman in British history. As a feminist (before the term was in use), she wrote what is often hailed as the first extensive study of women in patriarchal culture, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and advocated for the advancement of women. Recognizing the power of fiction to integrate political arguments into the practice of everyday life, she wrote two novels that contributed to the development of the novel at the end of the eighteenth century: *Mary: A Fiction* (1788), a sentimental and somewhat autobiographical bildungsroman, and *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), a narrative study of the legal and political “wrongs” engendered against women. In 1796, she extended her literary talents in a radically new direction in her travelogue, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, a text whose fusion of haunting interiority, evocative accounts of her surroundings, and sturdy Enlightenment rationalism enabled her to break new ground in her efforts to articulate the problems and possibilities facing women.

Like the 1790s generally, Wollstonecraft’s greatest strengths were in some ways her biggest liability. The uncompromising courage of her arguments and the urgency of the topics involved had a polarizing effect that tended, almost immediately, to eclipse the highly nuanced character of her thinking. Whether critics embraced her ideas or denounced them, the popular impression of her work tended to circulate in simplified, sometimes caricatured ways that often failed to appreciate the subtlety of her engagement with the many contending political and intellectual currents of her day. Recent decades, however, have seen a marked shift toward a more sympathetic understanding of these complexities. This volume will contribute to this critical reappraisal in three valuable ways: by emphasizing the sophistication of Wollstonecraft’s intellectual preoccupations and influences; by focusing on the material realities of her work as a professional author; and by stressing the remarkable breadth and evolution of her work.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, on the heels of the second wave of feminism, scholars of the eighteenth century made a concerted effort to publish updated editions of Mary Wollstonecraft’s works.¹¹ Recent years have also seen the publication of several valuable works of criticism.¹² However, there are no book-length studies of the wide and very rich context in which Mary Wollstonecraft lived and wrote. This collection is designed to fill that gap. The first eight essays of the

volume will provide the reader with biographical information on Wollstonecraft's vibrant and tumultuous life, as well as the publishing and reception history of her controversial work. The thirty essays that follow, under "Historical and Cultural Contexts," are designed to provide the reader with background on the political events to which Mary Wollstonecraft was responding in her work, such as the French Revolution and radical movements in Great Britain, and the intellectual and cultural thought that informed Wollstonecraft's writing and activism. Notably, this includes essays on education, travel writing, fiction, and periodical writing, to provide context for the many genres that Wollstonecraft did so much to shape. Our hope is that these essays will help to provide readers with a broader and more nuanced sense, both of the pressures and opportunities of the age in which Wollstonecraft worked and to which she offered such memorable responses, and of the many different sides of Wollstonecraft herself, as a political activist and a professional writer at a time when this career path remained an uphill battle for women. Wollstonecraft was a polemicist but also a novelist, reviewer, and translator, and most memorably, a pioneering feminist whose groundbreaking work excited powerful responses, the intensity of which has both ensured an enduring appreciation of her unique historical importance and, sometimes, made it difficult to appreciate her work in the nuanced ways that it deserves.

Notes

- 1 *Monthly Magazine*, 3 (1797), 279.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 279–80.
- 4 Ibid., 278.
- 5 *Gentleman's Magazine*, 67:2 (1797), 894.
- 6 Ibid., 894.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 891.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 *Gentleman's Magazine*, 61:1 (1791), 151–54.
- 11 The most important of these is the seven-volume *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1989) edited by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler; but see also the *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1979), edited by Ralph Wardle, and a later edition (2003), edited by Janet Todd, as well as multiple biographies including those written by Todd, Claire Tomalin, and most recently Lyndall Gordon.

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- 12 Significant examples include Gary Kelly's examination of Wollstonecraft's radicalism, *Revolutionary Feminism* (1992); Virginia Sapiro's study of Wollstonecraft's political theory, *A Vindication of Political Virtue* (1992); Barbara Taylor's inquiry into Wollstonecraft's feminist theory in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (2003); Claudia L. Johnson's *Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (2002); Lena Halldenius' *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism* (2015); and Sandrine Bergès' and Alan Coffee's *The Social and Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft* (2016).