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.

NANCY E. JOHNSON is Professor of English and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She is the author of *The English Jacobin Novel on Rights Property and the Law* (2004), editor of *Impassioned Jurisprudence* (2015), and scholarly editor of *The Court Journals of Frances Burney 1790–1, Vol. VI* (2019). She has published widely on literature of the 1790s and the intersections of literature and legal thought in the eighteenth century.

PAUL KEEN is Professor of English at Carleton University, Canada. He is the author and editor of several books, including *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (1999), *Literature, Commerce, and the Spectacle of Modernity, 1750–1800* (2012), and *The Humanities in a Utilitarian Age: Imagining What We Know, 1800–1850* (forthcoming).

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EDITED BY

NANCY E. JOHNSON

State University of New York, New Paltz

and

PAUL KEEN

Carleton University, Canada

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EILEEN HUNT BOTTING is Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame (USA). Her books include *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family* (2006), *Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights* (2016), and *Mary Shelley and the Rights of the Child: Political Philosophy in "Frankenstein"* (2017).

JULIE CARLSON is Professor of English at University of California Santa Barbara. She is the author of *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), *England's First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley* (2007), and co-editor with Elisabeth Weber of *Speaking About Torture* (2012). Her articles focus on the cultural politics of British Romantic-era writing and mind studies. She is co-editor with Aranye Fradenburg of Brainstorm Books, an imprint of punctum books. Currently she is writing a book on "Creativity and Friendship: A Radical Legacy of British Romanticism."

KATE CHISHOLM is the author of *Wits and Wives: Dr Johnson in the Company of Women* (2011) and *Fanny Burney: Her Life* (1998). She has also written *Hungry Hell: What It's Really Like to Be Anorexic* (2002). A former fellow of the Royal Literary Fund and the Hawthornden Fund, she has taught on the MA course in creative writing (non-fiction) at City University in London. She was the radio critic of *The Spectator* magazine and reviews occasionally for *The Times Literary Supplement.*

PAMELA CLEMIT is Professor of English at Queen Mary University of London and a Supernumerary Fellow at Wolfson College, University of Oxford. She is the author of *The Godwinian Novel* (1993) and has published many essays on William Godwin and his intellectual circle. She has published a dozen or so scholarly and critical editions of William Godwin's and Mary Shelley's writings, including (with Gina

Luria Walker) *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (2001), and *Caleb Williams* (2009). She is the General Editor of *The Letters of William Godwin*, 6 vols. (in progress): *Volume I: 1778–1797*, edited by her, appeared in 2011; *Volume II: 1798–1805*, also edited by her, appeared in 2014. She is currently editing *Volume IV: 1816–1828*.

FRANS DE BRUYN is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Ottawa. He has written extensively on Edmund Burke, including the monograph *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke* (1996). He has also authored numerous publications on other subjects in eighteenth-century studies: georgic and agricultural writing, the reception of *Don Quixote*, the cultural impact of financial speculation (the South Sea Bubble), and Shakespeare in the eighteenth century. With Shaun Regan, he recently co-edited *The Culture of the Seven Years' War* (2014).

KATIE DONINGTON is a Lecturer in History at London South Bank University. Her research focuses on the history, legacies, and representation of British transatlantic slavery. In particular, she is interested in the ways in which slavery impacted on the familial and cultural world of the planter–merchant elites in Jamaica and Britain. Her doctoral and post-doctoral work was conducted with the *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* project at University College London between 2009 and 2015. She is a co-author of *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). She is the co-editor of *Britain's History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery: The Local Nuances of a "National Sin"* (2016). Her monograph *The Bonds of Family: Slavery, Commerce and Culture in the British Atlantic World* will be published in 2019.

MARY FAIRCLOUGH is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Related Literature and Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of York, United Kingdom. She is the author of *The Romantic Crowd: Sympathy, Controversy and Print Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), *Literature, Electricity and Politics 1740–1840: Electrick Communication Every Where* (2017), and several journal articles and essays which investigate the intersection of literature, science, and politics in the eighteenth-century and Romantic period.

DAVID FALLON is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Roehampton, London. He is the author of *Blake, Myth, and Enlightenment: The Politics of Apotheosis* (2017) and co-editor, with Jon Mee, of

Romanticism and Revolution: A Reader (2011). He has published essays on Blake, including "Homelands: Blake, Albion, and the French Revolution" in *Home and Nation in British Literature from the English to the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and on eighteenth-century book culture, including "Piccadilly Booksellers and Conservative Sociability" in *Sociable Places: Locating Culture in Romantic-Period Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). He is currently writing a monograph on "London Booksellers and Literary Sociability, 1740–1840."

MARY A. FAVRET teaches English and Women and Gender Studies at Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* and *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge University Press) as well as various essays on topics in the field of Romanticism. With Nicola Watson, she edited *At the Limits of Romanticism* (1994), and with Donald Gray, a critical edition of *Pride and Prejudice* (2016).

FRANCES FERGUSON teaches in the English Department at the University of Chicago, where she is Ann L. and Lawrence B. Buttenwieser Professor. She is the author of *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit*; *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (1997); and *Pornography, The Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (2004), along with essays on various topics in eighteenth-century and Romantic studies and literary theory.

MICHAEL GAMER is Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Romanticism and the Gothic* (Cambridge University Press, 2000) and *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). As a member of the Multigraph Collective, he helped to produce *Interacting with Print: Modes of Reading in the Age of Print Saturation* (2018). He is currently at work on several projects relating to women writers, the gothic, and melodrama.

JACQUELINE GEORGE is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She has published articles about Romantic reading practices and relationships between books and people, including "Confessions of a Mass Public: Reflexive Formations of Subjectivity in Early Nineteenth-Century British Fiction" (*Studies in the Novel* [2014]) and "Avatars in Edinburgh: *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and the Second Life of Hogg's Ettrick Shepherd" (*Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* [2012]). She is

currently at work on a monograph about genre, the history of reading, and late-Romantic prose fiction.

CLAIRE GROGAN is a full professor in the English Department of Bishop's University, Quebec, Canada. Her research focuses on the politics of British writing in the 1790s and the early nineteenth century. She is editor of scholarly editions – Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1994/2002), Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (2000), and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man, Parts I and II* (2011) – book chapters and articles, and a book-length study entitled *Politics and Genre in the Work of Elizabeth Hamilton, 1756–1816* (2012).

LENA HALLDENIUS is Professor of Human Rights Studies at Lund University in Sweden. With a Ph.D. in Philosophy, she is working in political philosophy and the history of modern political thought. Her research focus is on conceptions of freedom and rights, particularly but not exclusively in the republican tradition. Halldenius is the author of *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism: Independence, Rights and the Experience of Unfreedom* (2015) and several articles and book chapters on Wollstonecraft's political philosophy.

ALESSA JOHNS is Professor of English at the University of California, Davis. She has published *Bluestocking Feminism and British–German Cultural Transfer, 1750–1837* (2014) and *Women's Utopias of the Eighteenth Century* (2003). She has also edited *Dreadful Visitations: Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment* (1999) and *Reflections on Sentiment: Essays in Honor of George Starr* (2016). Her current research is on the spread of English Studies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany.

NANCY E. JOHNSON is Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Professor of English at the State University of New York, New Paltz. She is the author of *The English Jacobin Novel on Rights, Property and the Law: Critiquing the Contract* (2004); editor of *Impassioned Jurisprudence: Law, Literature and Emotion, 1760–1848* (2015); and scholarly editor of *The Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney, 1790–June 1791, Vol. VI* (2019). She is currently working on a volume of Charles Burney's letters and a study of women's concepts of justice in the eighteenth century.

VIVIEN JONES during her academic career as Professor of Eighteenth-Century Gender and Culture in the School of English at the University

of Leeds published widely on writing by and about women in the period, with particular interests in instructional literature, Wollstonecraft, and Austen. She contributed the chapter on Austen to the recent *Oxford History of the Novel in English* (2015). From 2006 to 2016 she was Pro Vice-Chancellor for Student Education and now, partly retired, chairs the University's Cultural Institute.

PAUL KEEN is Professor of English at Carleton University. He is the author of *Literature, Commerce, and the Spectacle of Modernity, 1750–1800* (2012), and *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (1999). His edited books include *The Radical Popular Press in Britain, 1817–1821* (2003), *Revolutions in Romantic Literature: An Anthology of Print Culture, 1780–1832* (2004), *Bookish Histories: Books, Literature, and Commercial Modernity, 1700–1900* (co-edited with Ina Ferris, 2009), and *The Age of Authors: An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Print Culture* (2014). His forthcoming book is entitled *A Defense of the Humanities in a Utilitarian Age: Imagining What We Know, 1800–1850*.

GARY KELLY is a Distinguished University Professor at the University of Alberta and author of essays, monographs, and editions on British Romantic literature, especially the novel and women's writing from the Bluestockings to the Revolutionary aftermath. These include an edition of Wollstonecraft's novels; *Revolutionary Feminism: A Literary and Political Biography of Wollstonecraft* (1992); and *Women, Writing, and Revolution* (1993), on several of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries. Other contributions include multi-volume editions of *Bluestocking Feminism* (1999), *Varieties of Female Gothic* (2002), and *Newgate Narratives* (2008), editions of Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1995), poems of Felicia Hemans, and poems and prose of Lydia Sigourney. He is the General Editor of the ongoing *Oxford History of Popular Print Culture* (2012). Current projects include *Cheap Print* (2012) and a history of *Modern Fun*.

LAURA KIRKLEY is a comparativist with expertise in both English and French literature. She was a College Lecturer in French at The Queen's College, Oxford and a Research Fellow at Trinity Hall, Cambridge before joining the School of English at Newcastle University in 2013 as a Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Literature. She has research interests in the literature of the French Revolution, literary and cultural translation, cosmopolitanism, and women writers, particularly Mary Wollstonecraft. Her edition of *Caroline of Lichtfield,* Thomas Holcroft's translation of

Isabelle de Montolieu's novel, was published in 2014, and she is currently completing a monograph, *The Cosmopolitanism of Mary Wollstonecraft.*

MICHELLE LEVY is a Professor in the Department of English and Co-Director of the Digital Humanities Innovation Lab at Simon Fraser University. She is a co-author (with Tom Mole) of the *Broadview Introduction to Book History* (2017); co-editor (with Tom Mole) of the *Broadview Reader in Book History* (2014); author of *Family Authorship and Romantic Print Culture* (2008); and co-editor (with Anne Mellor) of a Broadview edition of Lucy Aikin's *Epistles on Women* (2010). She has published extensively on women writers, print and manuscript culture, and digital humanities, and has recently completed a book, entitled *Literary Manuscript Culture in Romantic Britain*. She directs the *Women's Print History Project, 1750–1830*, a comprehensive bibliographical database of women's books.

APRIL LONDON is Emeritus Professor at the University of Ottawa and editor of *The Cambridge Guide to the Eighteenth-Century Novel, 1660–1820* (forthcoming). Her publications include *The Cambridge Introduction to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (2012), *Literary History Writing, 1770–1820* (2010), and *Women and Property in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (1999).

ANDREW MCINNES is Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader in English Literature at Edge Hill University. He researches Romantic-period women's writing, Gothic fiction, and children's literature, and has published on authors including Mary Hays, Charlotte Dacre, and Arthur Ransome. His first book, *Wollstonecraft's Ghost: The Fate of the Female Philosopher in the Romantic Period*, was published in 2016. He recently published "'English Verdure, English Culture, English Comfort': Ireland and the Gothic Elsewhere in Jane Austen's *Emma*" in *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840* (Spring 2017) and co-edited "Edgy Romanticism," a special issue of *Romanticism* (July 2018).

ANDREW MCKENDRY is Associate Professor of English at Nord University. His most recent work has appeared in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and *Studies in Romanticism*, and he has also published essays on eighteenth-century politics and education. His current book project examines the conceptual history of toleration, in particular how seventeenth-century attitudes toward religious difference were inflected by shifting paradigms of disability.

JON MEE is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of York. He edited Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* with Tone Brekke. His most recent monographs are *Conversable Worlds Literature, Contention, and Community 1762–1830* (2011) and *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

JANE MOORE is Reader in English Literature in the School of English, Communication and Philosophy at Cardiff University. She is the author and editor of several articles and books on Wollstonecraft and women's writing, including *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, co-edited with Catherine Belsey (second edition, 1997). She is also the author of *Mary Wollstonecraft* (1999) and editor of *Mary Wollstonecraft* (2012).

JULIE MURRAY is Associate Professor of English at Carleton University. She has published widely on British women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Joanna Baillie, Mary Hays, and Elizabeth Hamilton in journals such as *Women's Writing*, *ELH*, *European Romantic Review*, *Studies in Romanticism*, and *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*. She is currently completing a book-length study entitled *Mary Wollstonecraft, Modernity, and Feminist Historiography.*

ELIZA O'BRIEN is a Teaching Fellow at Newcastle University. She has published articles on William Godwin, Thomas Holcroft, and sentimental fiction, and is a contributor to *The Cambridge Guide to the Eighteenth-Century Novel, 1660–1820*, edited by April London. She is a co-editor of and contributor to *New Approaches to William Godwin: Forms, Fears, Futures* (forthcoming).

ANDREW O'MALLEY is Associate Professor in the English Department at Ryerson University in Toronto, where his teaching and research focus on children's literature and culture, both historical and current, popular cultures, and comics and child readers. He is the author of *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century* (2003) and *Children's Literature, Popular Culture, and "Robinson Crusoe"* (2012). He is also editor of *Literary Cultures and Eighteenth-Century Childhoods* (2018), and is working on a digital archive and exhibit entitled "A Crisis of Innocence: Comic Books and Children's Culture, 1940–1954."

DAVID O'SHAUGHNESSY is Associate Professor of eighteenth-century studies at the School of English, Trinity College Dublin. He is the author of *William Godwin and the Theatre*, editor of *The Plays of William Godwin*, and co-editor of *The Diary of William Godwin* (2010). He has published widely on Godwin and on eighteenth-century theatre studies, with essays in journals such as *Eighteenth-Century Life*, *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, and *Huntington Library Quarterly*, as well as in a number of essay collections. Most recently, he edited a volume of essays on *Ireland, Enlightenment and the English Stage, 1740–1820* (2019) and is currently working on Oliver Goldsmith.

CATHERINE PACKHAM is Reader in English and Head of English Literature at the University of Sussex. She is author of *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism* (2012) and co-editor of *Political Economy, Literature, and the Formation of Knowledge, 1720–1850* (2018), and she has written many articles on eighteenth-century literature, philosophy, and political economy. She is currently at work on a study of the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft in the context of late eighteenth-century debates over political economy, a project for which she has been the recipient of a Leverhulme Research Fellowship. Her work on Wollstonecraft has appeared in the following journals: *ELH*, *Women's Writing*, and *European Romantic Review*.

PAMELA PERKINS is a Professor in the Department of English, Film, Theatre and Media at the University of Manitoba, where she teaches eighteenth-century and Romantic-era literature. Her publications include a monograph on early nineteenth-century Edinburgh women writers and editions of works by a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors including Elizabeth Hamilton, Robert Bage, Anne Grant, Elizabeth Isabella Spence, John Moore, and Margaret Oliphant. She is currently working on a study of British travelers in the North Atlantic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

REBECCA PROBERT is Professor of Law at the University of Exeter. Her research focuses on the law and history of marriage, bigamy, divorce, and cohabitation, and she is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century:*

A Reassessment (2009) and *The Legal Regulation of Cohabitation: From Fornicators to Family, 1600–2010* (2012), both published by Cambridge University Press. She has also published a number of guides for family historians, including *Marriage Law for Genealogists (2012) and Divorced, Bigamist, Bereaved? (2015)*, and has appeared numerous times on TV and radio programs, including *Harlots, Heroines and Housewives, A House Through Time*, and *Who Do You Think You Are?*

JONATHAN SACHS is the author of *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), *Romantic Antiquity: Rome in the British Imagination, 1789–1832* (2010), and co-author, with the Multigraph Collective, of *Interacting with Print: Elements of Reading in the Era of Print Saturation* (2018). He is Professor of English at Concordia University, Montreal, where he also directs the inter-institutional Interacting with Print Research Group. Sachs has held a fellowship at the National Humanities Center (2014–15) and a membership at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (2017–18).

BETTY A. SCHELLENBERG is a Professor of English at Simon Fraser University. Her interests in the Bluestocking movement, authorship, the print trade, and scribal cultures inform her most recent monograph, *Literary Coteries and the Making of Modern Print Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). Other publications include *Samuel Richardson in Context*, co-edited with Peter Sabor (Cambridge University Press, 2017), *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), and *Reconsidering the Bluestockings*, co-edited with Nicole Pohl (2003). She is currently researching the eighteenth-century manuscript verse miscellany.

SYLVANA TOMASELLI is Sir Harry Hinsley Lecturer in History at St. John's College, University of Cambridge. Her recent publications on Wollstonecraft include "Reflections on Inequality, Respect and Love in the Political Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft" in *The Social and Political Thought of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Sandrine Berge and Alan Coffee (2016); "Mary Wollstonecraft" in *Oxford Bibliographies in Philosophy*, edited by Duncan Pritchard (2016); "Mary Wollstonecraft" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* edited by Edward N. Zalta (2012); and "*Mary Wollstonecraft: Civil Society, Revolution, Economic Equality" in Encyclopedia of Concise Concepts by Women Philosophers*, edited by Mary Ellen Waithe and Ruth Hagengruber (2018).

IAN WARD is Professor of Law at Newcastle University. His teaching and research interests are concentrated on the interdisciplinary relation of law, literature, and history. Among his more recent books can be counted *Law and the Brontes* (2011), *Sex, Crime and Literature in Victorian England* (2014), and *Writing the Victorian Constitution*, (2018). He has also edited the fifth volume in the forthcoming *Cultural Histories of Law* series, entitled *A Cultural History of Law in the Age of Reform*. At present he is completing a major new study of English legal history since the Reformation, to be published in spring 2020.

ALEX WETMORE is an Assistant Professor in the English department at the University of the Fraser Valley in Canada. He is the author of *Men of Feeling in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (2013), and his current research focuses on, among other things, intersections of the mechanical and the sentimental in the literature and culture of the 1700s.

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 Pysche'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,

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.

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).