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William Godwin

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In this paper I examine Mary Wollstonecraft's relationship with William Godwin. Her death in September 1797, after giving birth to their daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Shelley), came less than six months after their marriage in March 1797. Godwin's heartfelt but imprudent *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was written in distress and haste and were published in January 1798. Many commentators have seen the book as damning Wollstonecraft's reputation for several generations and for that reason, they have taken a dim view of Godwin and thereby of the relationship. Nonetheless, I want to argue that their relationship was significant and transformative in various ways for both, that others also recognised it as breaking the mould, and that it epitomises a deeper, ongoing struggle to achieve equal, deliberative partnerships in personal relationships. Doing so was also often painfully difficult, and its impact on Godwin over the long term after Wollstonecraft's death was perhaps less than we might have hoped. Nonetheless, the couple represent a distinctive and extraordinary moment in the febrile political atmosphere of London in the 1790s which has wider significance for our reflections on gender equality.

Godwin's relationship with Wollstonecraft began in dialogue, but it was not a dialogue from which he gained much satisfaction. His account of their first encounter at a dinner for Thomas Paine, held by the publisher Joseph Johnson on 13 November 1791, appears in his *Memoirs... of Wollstonecraft*. 'The interview was not fortunate.' (Godwin, *Memoirs*, 112) Godwin confessed to a certain ignorance in relation to Wollstonecraft's work. He had 'barely looked into' her reply to Burke and what he had seen he had found to be deficient in aspects of 'grammar and other minute points of composition.' Godwin was keen to see and hear Paine, but the principal conversation evolved between Godwin and Wollstonecraft. Godwin, whose version of perfectibility favoured recognising the claims and contributions of geniuses of the past in the development of the progress found himself pressed by a

more critical and censorious Wollstonecraft, who displayed less 'propensity to favourable construction' and was somehow less prepared to link genius with 'generous and manly virtue.' (*Memoirs*, 113) She told him that praise lavished on past minds added neither to their standing, nor to his. They argued about religion, where he congratulated himself on being further from received opinion, and the discussion then veered between topics 'without treating forcibly and connectedly [upon] any.' Godwin claimed to have accounted her a 'person of active and independent thinking' when he related the encounter to his friend, the playwright and novelist Thomas Holcroft, with whom he had supper that evening, but he thought that 'on her side, she did me no part of what perhaps I considered as justice.' (Godwin, *Memoirs*, 113)¹ They met again briefly in March and September 1792 (both times at home of the American radical, Joel Barlow), without making much progress towards cordiality, and they did not re-encounter each other until brought together at a tea (that included Holcroft), by the novelist Mary Hays in January 1796.

When they first met in November 1791 Godwin had rather little in the way of literary credentials – a number of pamphlets and minor novels, a job writing the British and Foreign history section of the *New Annual Register*, and a contract for his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), which he had just embarked upon. He was not far advanced and his opinions crystalized only rather slowly in the first few months of the autumn of 1791, which produced a discarded first draft of the opening. Indeed, it is not extravagant to suggest that Wollstonecraft's chiding over what we might think of as the pantheonizing of dead white males had some effect in pushing him to abandon that draft's deference towards his predecessors, and to turn what had been intended as a summary and compendium of the progress made in political and moral philosophy, into something more distinctive and original.

There is nothing to suggest that Godwin re-read the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* until after Wollstonecraft's death. The first reading was not recorded in his Diary but that is largely because he began recording his reading systematically only in September 1791, when he began writing the

Enquiry. The *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) Godwin read unusually quickly on 13 and 14 June 1792, several months after it was published. Wollstonecraft had clearly made some impression on him but his reading of her second *Vindication* did not follow, nor was it a prelude to any further meeting. He turned to it when he was locked into the writing of Book Three of the *Enquiry*, examining political associations and doctrines of obedience, but he spent the vast proportion of both days on Wollstonecraft's work and there seems no apparent reason why he took up the text then. It is possible that the discussion at Holcroft's on June 10 of Burke and Paine prompted a memory of his meeting the previous November, and it is also possible that he borrowed the book from Holcroft.

When Godwin met Wollstonecraft again in January 1796, he could hardly be described as enthusiastic about the prospect of re-acquaintance, describing Wollstonecraft as one 'who has frequently amused herself with depreciating me', and himself laying claim to the habit of speaking 'of the qualities of others uninfluenced by personal considerations' and 'as prompt to do justice to an enemy as a friend.' (*Hays Correspondence*, 421) They met at Hays's for tea, and then both attended a dinner at the home of the vegetarian and Zoroastrian, John Frank Newton, a few days later. A month later Godwin called, but Wollstonecraft was not at home. Another month after that, Wollstonecraft called on Godwin, he returned the call the following day, and a week later he organized a dinner for Wollstonecraft and a number of his friends – '3 Parrs, 4 Mackintoshs, Inchbald, Imlay, Dealtry and H(olcrof)t.' Wollstonecraft is recorded here as 'Imlay.' Indeed, he recorded her as this twice on April 22 and twice again on April 23, when he called on her and they went together to visit Thomas and Rebecca Christie (friends Wollstonecraft made in France) – but he did not use that name again either before or subsequently. Doing so at this point clearly signalled his understanding of the way in which she was then known in London, and shows his concern not to challenge that self-representation. Thereafter, they saw a great deal of each other. In the middle of June he truncated his entries to Wt., and in the middle of August the entries in the evening take a more intimate form – *chez moi*, or *chez elle* – as they became lovers.

This was a pretty extraordinary relationship. If it was a meeting of minds, they were certainly not identical. Their radicalism may have drawn on similar sources, but while Godwin's inheritance from his rigorous education in Dissent provided both a very powerful set of intellectual influences and a philosophical style and self-construction that was deeply rationalist in form. Wollstonecraft's education was less academic and rigorous, and many of her later ideas were profoundly shaped by her encounters and experiences. Both their major works stand out as contributions to the political debates of the 1790s, but they were significantly different in character. Modern readers of the *Rights of Woman* are often struck by how modest Wollstonecraft's demands were. There was not even a fully explicit case made for universal suffrage, even as she insisted in the dedication to Talleyrand that the sexes should share equal "civil and political rights". In contrast, Godwin's final book of the *Enquiry* contains a condemnation of the institution of marriage and a vision of a community marked by distribution on the basis of need and increasing rationality and longevity, stretching into immortality. It is perhaps not surprising that Godwin's *Enquiry* should be so much more visionary than Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. In sound philosophical style, Godwin was undisturbed by practical exigencies; whereas Wollstonecraft was more of a realist - attacking practices and institutions that could be different and should be reformed; insisting on the importance of education to counter-act the ignorance that men tolerated and were willing to promote in those they chose to marry; and neatly turning the rhetoric of slavery to the purposes of women's emancipation. Her text was also an acute and seemingly unforgiving denunciation of the behaviour of many of her female and male contemporaries. Above all, it was a powerful rhetorical performance that sought to discomfit many of the practices and principles of the world that Wollstonecraft experienced. If Godwin's account was visionary and inspiring, it seems plausible that many would have found Wollstonecraft's much more disconcerting.

This is not to say that they differed wholly. A certain amount has been made by commentators of their different attitudes towards sentiment, emotion and theology, but we can see strong evidence of Dissenting influence in Wollstonecraft (Eileen Hunt Botting (2002); Barbara Taylor (2003), they

both have a complicated relationship to Burke (Hunt, 2002; Philp, 2014), and we can equally recognize that Godwin was already re-working his dismissal of the private affections and the role of sentiment for the second edition of in the *Enquiry*, before his relationship with Wollstonecraft developed (the second edition was revised between May 1794 and October 1795 (Philp, 1986)). Nonetheless, the admission of the personal affections and sentiment was further increased in the third edition, which Godwin prepared in the first 7 months of 1797, and it is difficult to believe that his relationship with Wollstonecraft had no influence here. Exactly what sort of influence is difficult question to answer.

Their relationship was also unconventional. Their friendship segued into an affair, the affair resulted in Wollstonecraft's pregnancy, and they eventually married when it became difficult to disguise that fact. When they married they were acting against Godwin's declared hopes for futurity, which had a firm, principled base in the importance of independence of mind and freedom of action in accordance with private judgment²; and Wollstonecraft was not herself an enthusiast for the ways of Georgian marriage. After their marriage, they kept to separate circles to a considerable extent (although that would also have been true for many of the nobility, it was less common among their acquaintance); and although they set up home together, Godwin also rented a room to work in. That had one clear benefit, in the notes they sent back and forth; but their marriage ended our access to a good deal of the detail of their movements, since Godwin stopped recording Wollstonecraft in his diary except when she was present with him at another person's venue. We therefore know rather little about exactly how much time they spent together, and what they did in that time. Moreover, one striking feature of the diary is that, although Godwin continued to record the topics of his discussions with others, if at a less intense rate than in the early years of working on the *Enquiry*, there is no record of any topic discussed when Wollstonecraft was present – save at their first meeting in 1791 and, tragically, when he talks to her of Fanny and Mary in her last days. Some of the topics he discusses in 1797 seem to bear some relation to his developing affair with Wollstonecraft. In January, at Holcroft's, he discusses marriage and children; and in July 1797

George Dyson calls and he registers their talking about pleasure and natural society; on the latter occasion it is possible that Wollstonecraft was present – but we have no way of being certain.

Moreover, this fits into a larger pattern of discussion in Godwin's world, in which women were only very rarely acknowledged, where it is often ambiguous whether they were present at a discussion, and in which the evidence we have of women's (especially younger women's) strategies of communication with Godwin can sometimes (as we will see) look very odd to later readers.

It is this latter feature of their relationship that I want to explore. Ideas of 'influence' often carry implicit assumptions about authority and equality, but these become doubly complex where the ideas themselves engage with practical issues of authority and equality. In Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's imperfectly aligned worlds, the intellectual concerns they shared were not merely speculative; they were also responses to inequalities written deep into the social and political culture of their world, and their developing relationship had to navigate theory alongside custom and practice, in a context where patriarchy was the default position. It was a default position that some of their friends and associates challenged in various ways – but few did so blatantly. Above all, few women did so blatantly, and men who did so tended not to be penalised unless they sought to force their companion on their associates. Above all, navigating and sustaining deep intellectual relationships that were also sexual relationships and domestic relationships, in a society structured by hierarchy and inequality, posed a major, potentially insurmountable, challenge.

Godwin's Diary and his correspondence suggest that prior to his success with the *Enquiry* and *Caleb Williams* he had a largely male circle of acquaintance, with the major exception of his participation in the salon of Helen Maria Williams, prior to her departure to France in the spring of 1791, and his less frequent contact with the poet Anna Letitia Barbauld (from 1788) and the novelist Eliza Fenwick (probably from 1790). There is correspondence with his sister Hannah Godwin from the 1780s in which she suggests likely partners, but nothing seems to have come of that. It was probably not until he was 37 and began to achieve something of a reputation, that he gained entry to a literary and

cultural world in which he encountered a much wider group of clever women. These include, Elizabeth Inchbald (from October 1792), Maria Reveley (from 1793), Charlotte Fawcett (from 1793), Amelia Alderson (from June 1794), Sarah Anne Parr (from July 1794), Mary Hays (November 1794), and later Charlotte Smith (May 1797). We can link him 'romantically' with Maria Reveley both during her marriage and immediately after on the basis of correspondence after her husband died in 1799 (see *LWG*, ii, 87-91), and his connections with Sara Parr, Inchbald, and Alderson have all been questioned as to whether there was some romantic attachment (although there seems to be no evidence other than gossip in the case of Inchbald, and the suggestion is doubtful given her hidden but long-standing affair with Sir (Thomas) Charles Bunbury (see *Inchbald Diaries*, 378)

The relationship with Alderson, I want to suggest, is especially helpful in understanding Godwin's deliberative *modus operandi*, and how women might have experienced him. In the course of their friendship, Godwin said a number of somewhat surprising things to Alderson – describing her as 'more of the woman' than when they last met, as a coquette, a flirt, having no heart and, indeed, as a reprobate and a villain – and she accused him of calling her a 'bitch'. The 'reprobate and villain' appeared in a brief note he sent her after reading her comedy – both the tone and the content are instructive:

Amelia, Are you in a hurry? No. Well then, I will criticise at my leisure. I could not refrain however from a first rapid reading the morning after I saw you. I can no longer withhold from you the general information that your comedy has, in my opinion, no inconsiderable merit, & that it agreeably surprised me.

It seems they had encountered each other the previous night at supper at Thelwall's and he read her play the following morning. He explains that it surprised him because he had thus far read only her tragedy; because comedy and tragedy are autumnal fruits of the human understanding and 'Thirdly, because, reprobate and villain as you are, you will not be persuaded to cultivate the art of arts, The

Art par eminence, the art of conversation: how therefore is it possible to suppose you have any thing in you?' (Godwin, *LWG*, i. 165)

Her immediate response did not pick up that comment- but ten days later she did, if obliquely:

I am now fully convinced of the existence of a Devil but ...society is his dwelling place + his name on earth is Ill humour- various are his shapes. Sometimes he assumes the form of serious discussion, close argument – at others the more lively shape of agreeable railing – verily, verily, he delighteth not in contradiction, but at its approach, he summons up all his force + attacks even philosophy herself – Is this not true O Philosopher? (Abinger ms c.607)

This teasing banter about contending with Godwin in conversation is of a piece with the way that Alderson dealt with him. And while we might treat 'the woman in you' as referring to her emphasis on sentiment and family affections – it is also about a certain style of communication. Alderson reports that on her first visit to Godwin in the Metropolis in August 1794, having previously dined with him in June 1794 at Norwich with friends, he attacked her for indulging her sentiments and affections by staying outside the city with the Boddington family (distant relatives), and said she had 'more of the woman' about her than when they had last met – implying it seems that she was behaving in a more conformist, less inquiring, less animated, more conventionally female way. The comment stuck with Alderson (as well it might) who took it as implying that she was capricious (rather than merely sentimental and conventional). When she wrote to him for the second time in a week in February 1796, after a long period of silence, she remarked 'But you well know that there is no accounting for the caprices of woman - & that I alas, have a great deal of the woman still hanging about me – you know too well.' (Abinger ms b.210/5-6). But that sense of caprice was coupled with his other criticism - that she resists 'The Art': that is - conversation. We might think Godwin's expectations are rather exacting, since the discussion that Alderson has in Eaton's bookshop, to which Harriet Guest (2013) has drawn our attention, clearly indicates that she has 'conversations' – in that case, Eaton and his wife close their shop, pull up chairs for their guests, and sit talking for a

number of hours with Charles Sinclair. Does Godwin mean something more? Certainly, I think she takes his dismissive phrase 'more of the woman' to be demanding something more.

Is he expecting more than she would have been raised to expect – direct, candid communication? It is certainly possible. When the historian Sharon Turner's enamourata described Godwin's deliberative engagements with Holcroft we get a glimpse of quite how demanding deliberative ambitions might be:

When I mentioned Holcroft's visits, she said they must be formidable things. He did not mean to be disagreeable but he often was so, though he was very civil to her she could not avoid being in some awe of him. She knew his daughters were. When he meant to be most gracious it seemed awkward and unnatural to him to be so. Even Godwin, his chief associate, sometimes was afraid of him. At times when she was visiting his daughters, she had seen the two friends sit for a quarter of an hour together with their arms folded looking first at the floor, then at each other without speaking a word as if afraid to begin their arguing battle. When it took place both were sturdy – for both had their peculiar opinions; but Godwin was so cool and wary as to have great advantage. (Turner, *Diary*)

Did Godwin expect this of his female interlocutors? There is much in his letters to suggest that he was sufficiently egalitarian to aspire to something like that with some – but also a good deal also to suggest that he did not assume that everyone could be addressed in this way. Moreover, with his commitment to cultivation of mind, and his inexperience with women discussants, he tended to assume the role of preceptor and guardian to the younger women he met. There is also evidence that he dealt in a similarly patronising way with Maria Reveley, and with Hays, and his relationship with Inchbald also has much of the didactic about it.

In return, Alderson, Sarah Anne Parr, and others, presented a more volatile, coquettish, behaviour. There is something surprising about this in Alderson's case, since her first novel, the *Dangers of Coquetry* (1790), was a critique of precisely the kind of behaviour that Godwin might be accusing her

of. Indeed, her heroine's good upright husband, Mortimer, dies fighting a duel as a result of his wife's coquettishness (and she follows him swiftly to the grave stricken by remorse). And Mortimer is also someone who asks of his wife that she rise above this. So Alderson was clearly aware of the dangers. Yet her mode with Godwin was often not deliberative. And she shared this with Sarah Ann Parr – whom Godwin describes as 'a seducer': 'It was her & her mother's maxim, that the wisest thing a young woman could do, was to marry a fool.' (Godwin, *GMW*, 85). He also told Wollstonecraft 'You do not know, But I do, that Sarah has an uncommon understanding, & an exquisite sensibility, which grows in her complexion and flashes in her eyes.' (Godwin, *GMW*, 103-4). And Sarah's 1796 letters to Godwin are very teasing – 'Oh thou ungrateful, unfeeling, cruel, insulting, barbarous man, or to sum up thy iniquities in one word, though philosopher.' (see Abinger dep.b. 227/2, dep c. 512, 513).

These young women successfully resisted Godwin's interpolation of them as intellects to be brought on and thereby subverted his self-construction as a disinterested inquirer after truth and merit. He was serious in seeing in them this kind of intellectual 'promise'; they were serious in suborning his construction because of the inequality it implied.

The result troubled Godwin. We need to take seriously his comment 'Coquetry trifles with the peace of the unwary, in the catalogue of whom may sometimes be found the most eminent of mankind.' He knew that he was not adept at this kind of exchange. And he had powerful philosophical grounds for thinking that it was inappropriate among the more serious minded. Yet these women (and a few others, probably including Inchbald, but not the unconfident Mary Hays, and less so the more mature and intellectual Wollstonecraft or (later) the more established Harriet Lee, or the more experienced Sarah Elwes or Mary Jane Clairmont) disconcerted Godwin. His natural mode of communication with the younger women was didactic and, in effect, patronizing: he recognised their special qualities and appealed to their minds, - as he put it to Miss Emily Kinsman in 1798: 'I ought to have said to myself when a spirited conduct on your part so extraordinarily introduced you

to me this morning, accident has thrown this lovely girl in my way, I ought to use the moment she affords me, in encouraging her virtue, in blowing the flame of her spirit, & endeavouring to render, as far as my powers may extend, the excellencies she now possesses as lasting as her life.' (Godwin, *LWG*, ii, 56-7)

Such an approach assumed a passive and dutiful response on the part of the female protégé – and it was clearly condescending, if not downright unsettling. Alderson sensed and resented this – and did so while being attracted to Godwin as an intellect, as someone who could help her literary activity, and possibly as a man. But in place of the unequal and rather subservient relationship that Godwin's discourse imposed on her and others, by flirtatiousness and something like coquetry, a certain forthrightness in her letters, a teasing and unpredictable quality to her behaviour, she unsettled him. And she did so intentionally because she was looking for something better and more equal than the role of a pupil. That was something the decade appeared to promise, and something in particular the literary and extra-parliamentary political culture of London in this decade was taken to be promising. There may have been some attraction but that didn't trump their instinctive resistance to taking everything on his terms – which he understood as rational and intellectual, rather than merely masculine; whereas they may have begged to differ. Nonetheless, Alderson could see positives in some aspects of his style:

'To have a talent for silence, [is] in my opinion a most desirable thing & I know no one who has this talent in such perfection as yourself – By silence I mean the power of listening, patiently, & attentively – even to bad arguments, badly delivered – Were this talent cultivated as it ought to be, I should not the other evening have had the pain of hearing one person rudely interrupting another; that other exalting his voice to make himself hear in spite of the interruptions, till confusion & noise were the order of the day, and I thought myself in the national convention, but alas! There was no president & the bell was not rung.'

Abinger ms dep b 210/5-6

Nonetheless, Alderson resisted his 'conversation', turning it into something both more charged and evanescent. His accusation that she won't perfect the Art, is a reproach for resisting what he had assiduously cultivated. When he reproached her for coquetry on the grounds that it trifled with the peace of the unwary he was also indicating that the serious conversationalist and the philosopher was necessarily unwary because candid communication must be unwary. But what was he make of communication that operated at several registers – teasing, flirting, sometimes engaging intellectually and sometimes not?

Alderson's most enduring work is her novel *Adeline Mowbray* (1805). It is the story of a young woman with a defective education, who falls in love with a sickly Godwinian philosopher (Glenmurray), who rejects marriage and acts in accordance with the full and free exercise of private judgment. Adeline is convinced by his ideas and they live together, only to find that she is shunned by respectable society – even by her own servants – and after Glenmurray's death, is treated as a fallen woman (indeed, Glenmurray insistently tries to persuade her to marry him, but she won't let him violate his principles). Although the novel is commonly lumped together with anti-Jacobin fiction, Adeline, while flawed, nevertheless comes across as rather heroic. Indeed, it is the patriarchal order and its members' assumptions that fare worst. And Alderson clearly sides with her heroine.

Alderson was close to the couple for a brief period before Wollstonecraft's death: she did not snub Wollstonecraft on her marriage (as some did) or behave towards her as so many of those who populate her novel behaved towards Adeline. She regarded Godwin and Wollstonecraft as 'extraordinary characters' (Brightwell, 62), and her novel seems to reflect on that – with respect to her sense that Adeline (and Godwin and Wollstonecraft) were doing something courageous and principled which the rest of society failed to appreciate but which she respected but would not herself hazard.

Adeline Mowbray conveys women's intellectual potential alongside their vulnerability to the societal hypocrisy and predatory masculinity they had to navigate. Adeline is devoted to 'the Art', and to following through deliberation with action, treating intellectual life as the core of virtue and utility as the basis for decisions. She may be partly modelled on Wollstonecraft; but she was also drawn as being what Alderson had refused to be with Godwin.

After Godwin's bumpy experience with Wollstonecraft in 1791, Alderson gave Godwin a different kind of experience of a clever woman who was prepared to disagree with him but who did so in part by disconcerting him. In many respects Alderson and others prepared the ground for his subsequent relationship with Wollstonecraft, by breaking up his hitherto overwhelmingly male coterie and by making demands on him in a series of different registers, for which his education had ill-prepared him. His intellectualism was an extremely dominating style of discourse – indeed, it involved an emphasis on the intellectual that largely eliminated the space for any other type of relationship! Having constructed a self-representation as a philosopher and man of mind, Godwin rather suddenly found that this was a discursive strategy with rather restricted scope. What Alderson helped prepare him for, and what Wollstonecraft came to insist on as their relationship developed, was a more open deliberative and communicative style that acknowledged the validity of a more plural range of concerns than did Godwin's earlier insistence on mind and its perfectibility and that made much greater concessions to full equality. Wollstonecraft persuaded Godwin that there was another mode of communication and he became less didactic with her. He did not wholly learn that lesson – but his aspirations become broader, more responsive to different modes of communicating, and in that sense potentially more egalitarian. And he took these concerns to heart in relation to his work. One feature of Godwin's thinking in the 1790s was a concern with how to bridge the gap between the enlightened and those less so. At one (uncertain) point, he reflected on the potential of drama as a medium; and his collection of essays, *The Enquirer*, was an attempt at a different mode of communicating his principles to a wider public than he had adopted in his *Enquiry*. Written between

20 January 1796 and 27 February 1797 it can be read as a marker of the influence of Wollstonecraft on Godwin's thinking. In their correspondence, there are references to them reading parts of the manuscript on 11 August 1796, and subsequently in September, October and December 1796. And the subject matter of several of the essays seem to reflect concerns that arose for Godwin in his relationship with Wollstonecraft – such as that on Posthumous Fame (a topic of their first disagreement in 1792), (II, VIII), but equally that on 'Of Reasoning and Contention' (I, XI), in which the challenges of ascribing a 'real and *bona fide* equality' to children are addressed – a challenge that we could see wholly in the light of the book's declared intention to discuss education, or in the wider sense of any relationship in which inequality is assumed. As Wollstonecraft put it in the second *Vindication*: 'To render mankind more virtuous, and happier of course, both sexes must act from the same principle; but how can that be expected when only one is allowed to see the reasonableness of it? To render also the social compact truly equitable...women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge.' (Wollstonecraft 259). Over and over again, *The Enquirer* reflects on the conditions for equal treatment, as against the presumption of equality – so much so that it provides a leitmotif of the volume as a whole. And as Godwin works out the difficulties and implications of inequality for the passing on of knowledge and moral principles, he and Wollstonecraft seem simultaneously to be working out how their equality was to be made manifest and preserved, given that they brought very different experiences to the relationship. Godwin's description of their first meeting suggests that he found her claim to equality as a deliberator simply annoying. When they reconnected, he had had more experience with women and was less inclined to assume authority and the role of progenitor, but he remained uncertain about how to proceed. And, as their relationship developed, this issue became a central matter than they had to resolve.

One central challenge to its resolution was precisely the developing sexual character of their relationship – indeed the very terms in which Godwin later acknowledged this implies difference – 'Mary rested her head on the shoulder of her lover ...' (Godwin, *Memoirs*, 129). The challenge for both of them was *not* to establish their relationship as one of her dependency on him. This was a

challenge, given her experience, their relative financial positions³, their different educational and philosophical backgrounds, and, above all, given the deep structures of inequality that pervaded Georgian society in general, but equally in the apparently more tolerant and open literary and cultural circles of the 1790s. Wollstonecraft, by accepting (probably initiating) a sexual relationship, was opening herself up to a dramatically more precarious position than was Godwin – indeed, it was probably an even more precarious one that she had had with Imlay while in France. Their correspondence has to be read against that background and against the background of Godwin’s experience with Alderson and others – which challenged his assumption of intellectual authority. Indeed, given the deep inequality in their respective vulnerabilities, and given their differently motivated resistances to marriage, we might see them as responding to these challenges precisely by diversifying their interaction, multiplying the registers they use, and moving away from the direct deliberative exchange that Godwin seems to have favoured earlier in the decade. We might see this as Godwin aping (perhaps, more generously, ‘learning’) the language of love, but it is striking how far he emphasises the language of equality and friendship, and disdains that of authority – although he does fall into exhortation when he feels at an impasse (Godwin, *GMW*, 17, 23), and it seems clear that his assumption of the role of ‘philosopher’ was sometimes an issue (Godwin, *GMW*, 37). Wollstonecraft herself comments on the importance of his recognising her different registers – to ‘distinguish between jest and earnest’ – even though this was hardly his forte and he admitted to not knowing ‘when your satire means too much & when it means nothing.’ (Godwin, *GMW*, 49-50). Nonetheless, she clearly recognised that to sustain their equality she had to resist a solely philosophical register and had to persuade him that ‘There are other pleasures in the world, you perceive, beside those know[n] to your philosophy.’⁴ The couple had their difficulties: her vulnerability is evident at the end of December 1796, when she was pregnant and low spirited and when financial difficulties prompted her to fear Godwin’s indifference and the necessity of relying on her own resources: ‘I am, however, prepared for anything. I can abide by the consequences of my own conduct, and do not wish to involve any one in my difficulties.’ (*GMW*, 60) And as others have

pointed out, there are different moments where Wollstonecraft feared that Godwin would be transformed into Imlay.⁵

They survived these moments. Godwin genuinely cared for her, even if he was sometimes also confused and unsure with respect to how he should act. But his earlier experiences seem to have been somewhat fortifying and to have been sufficient to get him to recognise that neither the philosophical mode nor conventional societal norms were the way forward, leaving him to try to enjoin registers in which both could find some solidity and comfort. He often got things wrong – In April, after their marriage, when they went to the theatre together with a larger company, including Inchbald and Alderson, and when the former was ‘base, cruel, and insulting’ to Wollstonecraft, precipitating a quarrel in the household, Godwin took the high (dominant) ground: ‘The sole principle of conduct of which I am conscious in my behaviour to you, has been in every thing to study your happiness. I found a wounded heart, &, as that heart cast itself upon me, it was my ambition to heal it. Do not let me be wholly disappointed.’ (Godwin, *GMW*, 75) But Wollstonecraft too recognised the difficulties of effecting equality. In May she wrote: ‘I am sorry we entered on an altercation this morning, which has probably led us both to justify ourselves at the expense of the other. Perfect confidence, and sincerity of action is, I am persuaded, incompatible with the present state of reason.’ And she went on to underline that it can be difficult to be certain whether he always acted for the right motives, or for those he professed to be moved by. And against that nice philosophical distinction she asked instead for a little ‘romantic tenderness.’ (*GMW*, 77). But Godwin did also get it right, as in his letter while touring in the Midlands, when he says that, ‘after all one’s philosophy, it must be confessed that the knowledge, that there is someone that takes an interest in our happiness something like that which each man feels in his own, is extremely gratifying. We love, as it were, to , multiply our consciousness & our existence, even at the hazard of what Montagu described so pathetically one night upon the New Road, of opening new avenues of pain and misery to attack us.’ (Godwin, *LWG*, i, 215).

The central challenge that Wollstonecraft posed to Godwin was to recognise her as an equal, in a society in which there was nothing to support that, in a literary culture that in parts shared that aspiration but found little success in achieving it, and where their emotional and sexual relationship inevitably made it still harder to achieve and maintain. Godwin was not on the face of it promising material: he was forty years old and wholly inexperienced in relation to the opposite sex; he was a product of a highly masculine intellectual and cultural environment and had a very cerebral approach to the world; and he was dismissive of many women writers. But their relationship altered him, at least for a time. It forced him to reflect again and again on the problem of enabling equality in an unequal society, without patronising and infantilizing his interlocutors. Their relationship became a stab at achieving deliberative equality and mutual respect in a deeply inegalitarian and gendered society. Godwin's candour about Wollstonecraft in his *Memoirs* of her was clearly meant to celebrate in part the equality they achieved. But he systematically underestimated how damaging that candour would be: others might have done similar things behind closed doors, but openly to celebrate her life and conduct in the febrile political atmosphere of 1797-8 was a grave mistake. A very few other women saw their attempt for the extraordinary thing that it tried to be – Alderson was one, and Mary Shelley another. But the central lesson of the couple's time together must surely be, that only in a society deeply committed to equality across the board can such relationships wholly flourish. We can, of course, read their correspondence with a critical and anachronistic eye – and have no difficulty in finding Godwin wanting. But if we do them the justice of trying to understand the context they inhabited, we can recognise the challenges they faced and their courage in working out their relationship. We might also understand somewhat better how Godwin's own sense of loss might have led him to insist on being wholly candid in commemorating Wollstonecraft.

¹ Dates and details are to be found in *The Diary of William Godwin*, (eds) Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010). <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.

² But see the Letter on 3 May 1797 by Godwin defending his decision, written to an unidentified correspondent. Godwin, *LWG: The Letters of William Godwin*, v.i 1778-1797 ed., Pamela Clemit, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 205-6.

³ Godwin writes to Wedgwood to borrow money to settle Wollstonecraft's debts before their marriage *LWG* i, 194-5.

⁴ *GMW: Letters of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft* ed., Ralph M., Wardle, (London: Constable, 1967) p. 57. Letter dated 23 December 1796. They had seen Hamlet together on 31 October 1796.

⁵ See for example, Lyndall Gordon, *Vindication: A life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London, Virago, 2006) pp. 350-1; and Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 446-7.