

1982

Mary Wollstonecraft: An Eighteenth-Century Romantic

Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt
Georgia Southern College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Shurbutt, Sylvia Bailey (1982) "Mary Wollstonecraft: An Eighteenth-Century Romantic," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 3 : No. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol3/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

Mary Wollstonecraft: An Eighteenth-Century Romantic

Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt

When thinking of the great experimenters of the romantic age, we seldom consider Mary Wollstonecraft. We are well aware of her as wife of political philosopher William Godwin, mother of Mary Shelley, creator of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and preceptor to the cause for women's rights, but she does not loom large in our minds in any literary sense. And perhaps anyone who has read her novels *Cave of Fancy*; *Mary, A Fiction*; or *Maria: The Wrongs of Woman* can be well pleased that she has never been so honored. However, merely to cast her aside as a colorful figure in an age of revolution or relegate her to the realm of propaganda or write her off as soulful propagator of a prodigious daughter who never saw her famous mother but certainly carried the fire of her genes in her spirit—to do so would be an injustice both to Wollstonecraft and to the great literary figures who felt her influence. As a literary critic and as one of the brilliant conversationalists of her day, Wollstonecraft made an important contribution to turning the literary tide and ushering in the new poetic sensibility and diction. She was never reticent about sharing her avant-garde literary views, and those who heard these views would indeed be labeled the innovators of the romantic age.

Mary Wollstonecraft's was a personality Manfred could have understood, if Mr. Podsnap could not. In 1789 when she was writing and translating for publisher Joseph Johnson, whose illustrious circle included Tom Paine, William Blake, Thomas Holcroft, and Horne Tooke, she suffered through a platonic affair with Swiss artist Henri Fuseli. When her emotions began to call for something other than Plato, the strikingly beautiful Wollstonecraft suggested that she, Fuseli, and his wife live as one family, sharing all the conjugal joys of three enlightened, thoroughly modern free spirits. However, as Mrs. Fuseli felt neither enlightened nor sharing, the proposal was rejected, and Wollstonecraft retreated to Paris to heal her disconcerted heart. It was before a backdrop of revolution

that she experienced her turbulent affair with the American Gilbert Imlay, an affair painfully recorded in the famous Imlay letters. Some years later, after Wollstonecraft's Girondist friends were all dead, Tom Paine imprisoned, and the affair with Imlay ended, Wollstonecraft's life would settle to a measured and quiet (though still scandalous) relationship with William Godwin. Theirs was a courtship of mutual respect and complementation of personality, and Godwin always thought of these years with Wollstonecraft as his happiest. Despite strong negative feelings against the institution of marriage, with the approaching birth of a child, the two were wed at the Old St. Pancras Church in London on 19 March 1797. Some seventeen years later, Godwin would forget all his protestations against the institution of marriage, his passionate and delightfully illicit affair with Mary Wollstonecraft, and the social conventions he had snuffed at so confidently—as his own daughter Mary allowed free rein to her young passion and with her poet Shelley followed in the illustrious footsteps of her profligate parents.

The romantic nature of Wollstonecraft extended beyond the unconventionality of the life she led. In an age less noted for its appreciation of the beauties of nature, she found great solace and inspiration from natural settings. Whether the rugged grandeur of Norwegian cliffs or the pastoral lushness of her own English countryside, she was always affected by the bucolic setting. Finding a kind of sentience in natural objects, she speaks of the Scandinavian mountains breathing life and knowledge: "I did, as it were, homage to their venerable shadows. Not nymphs, but philosophers, seemed to inhabit them—ever musing; I could scarcely conceive that they were without some consciousness of existence."¹ Then as if the spirit of Wordsworth had invaded her thoughts, she replaces her pantheism with an expression which might foreshadow "recollections in tranquillity":

In solitude, the imagination bodies forth its conceptions unrestrained, and stops enraptured to adore the beings of its own creation. These are moments of bliss; and the memory recalls them with delight.²

Letters from Norway, one of the most romantic books she would write—certainly the most beautifully written—better belongs to the next generation of English writers. Struck with the majestic beauty

of stark cliffs against the shore near Tønsberg, Wollstonecraft writes: "With what ineffable pleasure have I not gazed—and gazed again, losing my breath through my eyes—my very soul diffused itself in the scene."³

Mary, *A Fiction* was Wollstonecraft's first published novel. Though its faults are many, the sentiments it expresses make it more a precursor to the next generation of literature. The novel's heroine allows the author to comment on the female plight in society, on the status of contemporary education, but important to this study, to make a statement for the romantic principle. In the book we have an expression of Platonism,⁴ her contrast between city and country life, to the latter's advantage,⁵ and, of course, the overwhelming importance of nature. The character Mary retreats to her "Temple of Solitude," a magical twilight spot of rock, shrub, and stream, where heroine and her setting are infused with the same spirit. Here she reads Thomson's *Seasons* and Young's *Night Thoughts*.⁶ The "grand and solemn features of nature" she "delighted to contemplate. She would stand and behold the waves rolling, and think of the voice that could still the tumultuous deep."⁷ Nature echoes the heroine's moods, as Wollstonecraft stylistically employs a technique to become popular in the gothic novels of Radcliffe and Lewis: the natural elements complement the turmoil within the heart of the young heroine.⁸

Perhaps there is no more positive romantic statement than in Wollstonecraft's essay "On Poetry," published April 1797, in *Monthly Magazine*⁹ and later in her *Posthumous Works* edited by Godwin. "On Poetry, and Our Relish for the Beauties of Nature" might easily have been the herald for the new spirit of poetry about to commence in English literature; Wordsworth's "Preface" was given that distinction in 1800—Emerson's essay "Nature" was regarded as the romantic herald for American literature some thirty-six years later. Wollstonecraft's essay, three years before Wordsworth's, also caught the essence of this philosophic and artistic experiment called romanticism. "On Poetry" is first an indictment against the stilted, artificial neoclassical poetry.¹⁰ Encumbered by rules of diction, eighteenth-century verse, she felt, was removed from nature and lacked spontaneity and passion. Wollstonecraft remarked how "few people seem to contemplate nature with their own eyes."¹¹ Rather, they looked second-handedly through the artificial poets of the day, who in turn viewed nature vicariously through the ancients' eyes; the great poets were the

ancients, who "naturally . . . borrowed from surrounding objects." Contemporary poets borrowed from the ancients, hence twice removing themselves from the natural world. This debilitation of the poet Wollstonecraft felt to be characteristic of the more advanced states of civilization. Modern poets were "rather the creatures of art, than of nature."¹² She adeptly criticized her age: "The silken wings of fancy [imagination] are shrivelled by rules; and a desire of attaining elegance of diction [overshadows] . . . sublime, impassioned thoughts."¹³ Art which fails to touch the human spirit, becoming void of emotion, fails as art.

The side of Wollstonecraft's nature that Godwin relegated to "intuition," the extraordinary knowledge she had which he could not quite fathom and certainly not identify with, was simply her romantic notion of the higher knowledge one possesses unexplained by reason. Coleridge, Wordsworth, and later Emerson regarded this higher knowledge as a purer, more direct and absolute knowledge than mental reason, what they called "Pure Reason." In a comment on Kant, Wollstonecraft notes:

Mr. Kant has observed, that the understanding is sublime, the imagination beautiful. . . . it is evident, that poets, and men who undoubtedly possess the liveliest imagination, are most touched by the sublime, while men who have cold, enquiring minds, have not this exquisite feeling in any degree, and indeed seem to lose it as they cultivate their reason.¹⁴

What better preface to Wordsworth?

Indeed, the young Wordsworth was surely well aware of many of the avant-garde ideas which Wollstonecraft held. Leslie Chard in his discussion of the early life and thoughts of Wordsworth speaks of the influence which the Joseph Johnson circle had on Wordsworth: the ideas of Godwin, Paine, and Wollstonecraft would have been well known to him.¹⁵ Also, Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft had many mutual friends. For example, when Wordsworth went to France in 1791, he carried with him a letter of introduction to Helen Maria Williams,¹⁶ poet, novelist, ardent Girondist supporter, and close friend of Mary Wollstonecraft. George M. Harper writes of Wordsworth's connection with the English "revolutionaries":

It is not without significance that "An Evening Walk" and

"Descriptive Sketches" should have been printed for Joseph Johnson. He was the publisher of Dr. Priestley, Horne Tooke, and Mary Wollstonecraft. His shop was a favorite meeting-place of republicans and free-thinkers. . . . He was hospitable and generous, a man of broad literary culture and philanthropic views. Wordsworth almost certainly met Godwin and Horne Tooke at Johnson's table or in his shop.¹⁷

Recent scholarship is more positive concerning the Wordsworth-Godwin-Wollstonecraft connection. Mary Moorman writes:

We now know that in this spring and summer of 1795 Wordsworth was indeed under Godwin's influence in a far more direct manner than simply by reading *Political Justice*. He was having frequent personal contact with him. . . . Godwin, who was living in Somers Town, records no less than nine meetings with Wordsworth between February and August 1795. All except two of these were unaccompanied calls on Godwin by Wordsworth, sometimes for breakfast, and must have been for the purpose of tête-à-tête conversations.¹⁸

Indeed, this personal association did not cease after the summer of 1795. Moorman continues: "This acquaintance with Godwin was never relinquished by Wordsworth. On most occasions when he was in London throughout the following years, down to Godwin's death in 1836, Wordsworth called on him or was visited by him."¹⁹

The closest connection Wordsworth would have with the Godwin household was through his and Godwin's mutual friend Basil Montagu. Basil was with Godwin during the ordeal of Mary's delivery and death on 10 September 1797, actually making the funeral arrangements in the place of the grief-stricken Godwin. Mark Reed records Wordsworth's notation in the Dove Cottage Papers in early September 1797—"advanced Mr. Tweddall for Mrs. Godwin."²⁰ The advance was for £5, perhaps to defray funeral expenses. Wordsworth surely had an interest in Wollstonecraft at this time, for in a letter to James Webbe Tobin dated 6 March 1798, he writes: "I have not yet seen the life of Mrs. Godwyn." A month later, 14 April, a notation in Dorothy Wordsworth's journal indicates that they had finally received a copy of this book—Godwin's *Memoirs* of his wife.

That Mary Wollstonecraft was a revolutionary spirit in her age cannot be disputed. That her professed literary views were advanced and outspoken also seems apparent. Once the topic of a dinner conversation between Samuel Taylor Coleridge and young Hazlitt some years after her death, Wollstonecraft inspired another vivid conversationalist to sing her praises. Hazlitt reports part of the content of that dinner conversation:

He [Coleridge] asked me if I had ever seen Mary Wolstonecraft, and I said, I had once for a few moments, and that she seemed to me to turn off Godwin's objections to something she advanced with quite a playful, easy air. He replied, that "this was only one instance of the ascendancy which people of imagination exercised over those of mere intellect." He did not rate Godwin very high (this was caprice or prejudice, real or affected), but he had a great idea of Mrs. Wolstonecraft's powers of conversation.²¹

Whether as a literary experimenter herself or as an inspirer of experimenters, Wollstonecraft's influence on the young romantics was certainly a real one.

NOTES

¹Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (Sussex: Centaur Press, 1970), p. 110.

²Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, p. 110.

³Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, p. 94.

⁴Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction* (New York: Garland, 1974), p. 108.

⁵Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, p. 132.

⁶Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, p. 25.

⁷Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, p. 27.

⁸Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, pp. 101, 118, 121, 168.

⁹Eleanor Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biography* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1972), p. 246.

¹⁰Years before her essay, Mary recognized in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* the need for a less stilted and formal prose, which had characterized her century (and at times her own writing): "A florid style mostly passes with the ignorant for fine writing, many sentences are admired that have no meaning in them, though they contain 'words of thundering sound' [or have but] sweet and musical terminations." Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (Clifton, N.J.):

Augustus M. Kelley, 1972), p. 116.

¹¹Mary Wollstonecraft, "On Poetry, and Our Relish for the Beauties of Nature," *Posthumous Works* (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1972), IV, 160.

¹²Wollstonecraft, "On Poetry," p. 167.

¹³Wollstonecraft, "On Poetry," p. 168.

¹⁴Wollstonecraft, "Hints," *Posthumous Works*, IV, 192.

¹⁵Leslie Chard, *Dissenting Republican: Wordsworth's Early Life and Thought in Their Political Context* (The Hague: Mouton Press, 1972), p. 133.

¹⁶Earl Leslie Griggs, editor, *Wordsworth and Coleridge* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1939), p. 89.

¹⁷George M. Harper, *William Wordsworth* (London: John Murray, 1929), pp. 153-54.

¹⁸Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I, 262.

¹⁹Moorman, I, 265.

²⁰Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years 1770-1799* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 206.

²¹Geoffrey Keynes, editor, *Selected Essays of William Hazlitt* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1970), pp. 507-08.